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The Mystery Road

By E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

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CHAPTER IX—Continued

—27—

"But what made her want to leave?" Gerald persisted.

Christopher did not hesitate for a moment. He meant to take every possible advantage of this, the first sign of any real interest in life which Gerald had shown for months.

"Because she is very finely strung," he said, "and the situation was becoming impossible for her. She was very much in love with you, and you were crazy about her, so she was very much in love with her."

"I always had, and I was as much as enough to try and persuade her to marry me. Of course," he went on, "I ought to have realized the one element of a nature like hers."

"An ordinary woman," he went on, leaning back in his corner and discussing the matter very much as he would have done a legal point presented for his opinion, "might select and prefer one man to all others, but for some reason or other, he did not return her affection, she would be able to course in time, and eventually the same thing for another man. Myrtle could never do that. She was that saint-like fidelity which is the joy and the curse of the best women. You are a very dear fellow, Gerald, and I am very fond of you, but I sometimes get fed up with your nerves, your blindness, your grand duchesses and your stark idleness."

Gerald sat up in his place and stared at his friend in amazement.

"How long have you been keeping that bottled up, Chris?" he asked.

"Ever since Myrtle turned me down," was the prompt reply. "She was as kind as she could be about it, but she did her job like a surgeon. She hurt, but I knew it was no use ever thinking about her again that way. I am a dispassionate observer now and I can see the truth."

"I suppose I have been rather an ass," Gerald admitted, "but you must remember, Chris, I didn't quite know what I was in for when I took on that visit to Russia, and I don't think any one could go through without being bowled over. Fancy being taken care of like a baby by that amazing woman, Elsa Franks! Having to over her your life half-a-dozen times over! Seeing that great, coarse creature, with her bank of yellow hair, and her breath smelling of drink and peticholi, standing up one moment and defying death, and lying the next without a tremor to guards who would have set us up against the wall and shot us on sight if they had known the truth!"

"She was an epic figure," Christopher declared. "I wonder what has become of her."

"Heaven knows!" Gerald answered. "We may meet her queening it at Monte Carlo, or she may have married a respectable German tradesman and buried the past. She is wealthy enough. She got that fellow Krasney's share of the money I took out, as well as her own. How these pine trees smell, Chris! And what sunshine! One could sleep here."

Gerald leaned back in his place with half-closed eyes and Christopher with well-content to leave him alone. This was the first time he had spoken naturally of his journey to Russia and the terrible experience through which he had passed. All through the summer months he had lain about the gardens at Hintersley, accepting life as an inevitable burden, gaining no strength, sleeping little, all the time engaged in a morbid struggle with the tyranny of his nerves. Nothing had moved or interested him. These last few sentences of his were the first evidence of his return to a normal outlook. Physically he had shrunk almost to a shadow. There was very little left of the gay and debauch young man who had passed his arm round Myrtle's waist and drawn her into the car, mocked at Christopher's remonstrances, and, with a few careless words, built up to Myrtle's heart the fairyland at the end of the road. Yet, as they drew near the little grove where they had found her, he seemed to shake off some of his torpor. He sat up and looked about him with reminiscent eyes. One more bend and they would see the gate.

"Would you like to stop for a moment?" Christopher asked. "Myrtle is almost certain to be here."

This was most assuredly a changed Gerald. He was almost diffident when he said, "If you think she would like to see me," he hesitated.

He sat upright now, leaning a little forward. They were near the corner, in sight of the little grove of cypresses. And there at the gate—Myrtle!—Gerald gave a little exclamation which sounded almost like a sob. His incredulous stare had something in it, alike of pain and fear.

"I wrote her days ago and said that we should be passing," Christopher hastily explained.

She stepped out into the road to greet them. Even to Christopher her coming was almost like a vision. The small differences of clothing and circumstance seemed scarcely to exist. It was Myrtle who welcomed them, shyly but joyfully. Her eyes were fixed upon Gerald, and there was a

touch of sublime pity in them as she realized the change. But from her face shone the same things.

"You will come in and see me home?" she begged. "The car can turn in here. The road is better than it used to be to me."

"I am tired of the car," Gerald said. "I would rather walk."

They moved slowly down through the cypress avenue, Gerald leaning a little on Myrtle's arm, Christopher following behind them.

"It is the most restful and the most beautiful place I have ever been in," Gerald murmured. "Tell me, Myrtle, he asked, "do you know all that has happened to me?"

"Everything!" Christopher has written and I had a long letter, too, from your father. Please do not speak of those things which are finished. You are here to forget."

Involutionally he looked away toward the road and turned back with a shiver. Whatever his thoughts might have been, he said nothing. A little French maid, in spotless white cap and apron, came out on the veranda in reply to Myrtle's call.

"A bottle of our own wine and glasses," Myrtle ordered, "some fruit and the sandwiches I told you to have ready. Marie. Come, we have another half-hour of sunshine. Gerald, you must take the sofa chair."

Gerald sank into a sea of cushions. Myrtle, bending over him, arranged them most comfortably. Her eyes were soft with the shadow of tears. Gerald, more weary than he had confessed, seemed for a moment almost to doze.

"Life is very weak," Myrtle whispered, looking anxiously across towards Christopher.

Christopher nodded.

"It is the journey," he answered. "I wish that it were over."

The wine was brought, but Gerald was now in a deep sleep. Christopher and Myrtle sat at the other end of the veranda and talked in an undertone.

As they reached the house, the old cure-shedding out, beaming with smiles, delighted to find every one spoke his own language and that he could talk to them about Myrtle. Luncheon was spread out on the veranda, and Marie and a young friend from the village, with great bunches of white carnations fastened to their frocks, were waiting to serve. Gerald himself uncorked the wine.

"I propose to make a speech," Lord Hintersley announced, holding out his fountain glass.

"It must be a short one," Gerald insisted. "The omelette won't wait."

"Then as an omelette is my favorite dish and that one appears to be a chef-d'oeuvre I drop the speech," his father asserted. "I will only say, Gerald, that you have made Mary and me very happy, and that no bride in the world was ever more welcome than Myrtle to our home and lives."

Every one began to talk at once. By and by, that curious sense of unreality, the feeling that the whole thing was a scene out of an old-fashioned comedy, passed away. Gerald, who was shamelessly holding Myrtle's hand under the tablecloth, raised his glass and looked into her eyes.

"It was I, after all," he whispered, "who had no idea what lay at the end of the road. You were the wise lady and I the fool."

All through the afternoon the villagers came and went, and the young people danced in the field at the back of the farm. Many toasts were exchanged. Every one was extraordinarily happy. Then the time came for Christopher, who was on his way back to England, to leave. Mary, who was spending the night with her father at Cannes, walked with him to the road. They paused for a moment at the gate.

"And it was really here that you found Myrtle?" Mary remarked, looking around her with interest.

"Yes, found her on this very spot," Christopher answered, "gazing along the road to the hills. All her life she had wondered what lay on the other side. Many of us never find out. I think that Gerald has been very fortunate."

"I am glad that you are happy about it," she said, with quiet but tactful significance.

"It is because I am happy about it," Christopher rejoined, turning towards her, "that I am going to venture—that, Mary—well, I think, I feel a little like the man who walked for a few minutes of his life in the moonlight and fancied that it was a day. I honestly thought that I was in love with Myrtle. I know now that there is no one I ever really cared for but you, Mary."

She raised her head and looked at him, yielding unresistingly to the arm which was drawn around her.

"I am quite sure," she murmured, "that this is an enchanted land."

(THE END)

Chapter X.

"And now," Christopher said, as their car crawled up the last ascent, "see if Myrtle has kept her word!"

"Personally," Lord Hintersley declared, "I am confident that young woman has powers beyond the ordinary human being. Besides, our telegram every day have assured us that she is well."

"It seems curious to me that Gerald should have been so content, Mary remarked. "Is this the place, Christopher?"

Christopher nodded. The car was slowing up. On their right was the little grove of cypress trees and the gate.

"Here they are!" Mary exclaimed. "Why, just look at Gerald!"

The two young people came down the cypress grove, arm in arm. Gerald was walking with much of his old swagger. Once more his head was thrown back; once more there was all the joy of wild spirits in the abandon of his enthusiastic greeting. Myrtle, on the other hand, seemed quieter than usual.

"Gerald, what have you been up to?" his father demanded.

Gerald laughed.

"Listening to that, dad," he said, "and see if you can't guess."

The bell from the little white church was tinkling away crazily. Gerald passed his arm around Myrtle.

"She's terrified to death," he declared. "Please every one tell her that they're glad."

Myrtle was easily persuaded. Her father-in-law dispossessed Gerald as they turned towards the house. Mary walked on the other side.

"You have now arrived in time for the celebrations," Gerald continued. "The feasting tenantry are in view on the far side of the house. You will presently have the opportunity of hearing me make a little speech in my most perfect French, which I have just learnt by heart."

"So you are really married?" Mary exclaimed, incredulously. "Gerald, Myrtle—how wonderful! It all seems so amazing!" Gerald agreed. "Matrimony was evidently my predestined place. I am no longer ill. I have never been so happy in my life. I was planning for four hours yesterday, and practicing approach shots over the road to get rid of a little superfluous energy after tea. What I really covet is the job of Hintersley, the head man, but Myrtle won't listen to it. She says I don't understand the soil."

As they reached the house, the old cure-shedding out, beaming with smiles, delighted to find every one spoke his own language and that he could talk to them about Myrtle. Luncheon was spread out on the veranda, and Marie and a young friend from the village, with great bunches of white carnations fastened to their frocks, were waiting to serve. Gerald himself uncorked the wine.

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(THE END)

No Longer Serviceable

Plot-A tool employed by authors in the old days before sex was discovered.—Duluth Herald.

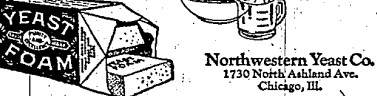
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