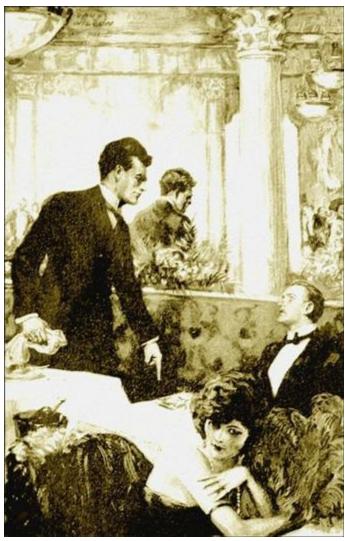


The Mystery Road

by E. Phillips <u>Oppenheim</u>

Frontispiece by F. Vaux Wilson

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Gerald looked him over for a moment, unmoved but intensely curious.

DEDICATION

TO

THE MEMORY OF WINIFRED TOLTON THE MOST WONDERFUL SECRETARY AND DEAREST FRIEND OF MY LIFE I DEDICATE THIS STORY, WHICH I DICTATED TO HER AND WHICH SHE LOVED.

BOOK ONE.

CHAPTER I.

MYRTILE stood upon the crazy verandah, her eyes shaded by her hand, gazing down the straight, narrow footpath, a sundering line across the freshly-ploughed field, which led to the village in the hollow below. The mouldering white stone cottage from which she had issued was set in a cleft of the pine-covered hills; it seemed to struggle against its inborn ugliness and to succeed only because of the beauty of its setting,—in the foreground the brown earth, with its neatly-trained vines and its quarter of an acre of fragrant violets; the orchard, pink and white with masses of cherry blossom; beyond, a level stretch of freshly-turned brown earth, soon to become a delicate carpet of tender green, and, by the time the vines should sprout, a sea of deep gold. It was the typical homestead of the small French peasant proprietor. Even the goat was not absent, the goat which came at that moment with clanking chain to rub its nose against the girl's knee.

Myrtile's hand dropped to her side. The three figures were plainly visible now. She remained quiescent, watching them with a mute tragedy in her face which, to anyone ignorant of the inner significance of this approaching procession, must have seemed a little puzzling. For there was nothing tragic about Jean Sargot—middle-aged, a typical peasant of the district, with coarsened face and weather-beaten skin—or about the companion who hung on his arm,—a plump, dark woman, with black hair and eyes, vociferous and fluent of gesture, with a high-pitched voice and apparently much to say. The third person, who walked in the rear, seemed even less likely to incite apprehension. He was more corpulent than his neighbour Jean Sargot, and he wore clothes of a holiday type, ill-suited to this quiet country promenade. His coat was black and long, a garment, it appeared, of earlier years, for it left a very broad gap to display a fancy waistcoat adorned by a heavy gold chain. He wore a silk hat which had done duty at every christening, marriage and funeral in the neighbourhood for the last twenty years, and his whole appearance was one of discomfort. Yet the

girl's eyes, as they rested upon him, were filled with terror.

They were near enough now for speech, and her stepfather, waving his hand, called out to her:

"It is the Widow Dumay, little one, and our friend and neighbour, Pierre Leschamps, who come to drink a glass of wine with us. Hurry with the table and some chairs, and bring one—two bottles of last year's vintage. It is not so bad, that wine, neighbour Pierre, I can promise you."

"Any wine will be good after such a walk," the widow declared, panting. "Either the village lies too low, friend Jean, or your house too high. It will be good to rest."

They sank into the chairs which Myrtile had already placed upon the verandah, Pierre Leschamps laying his hat upon a handkerchief in a safe corner. There were beads of perspiration upon his forehead, for, unlike his friend and host, he was unused to exercise. He kept the little café in the village, and the strip of land which went with it he let to others. His pale cheeks and flabby limbs told their own story. Jean Sargot looked about him with the pride of the proprietor.

"Not so bad, this little dwelling, eh?" he exclaimed. "Four rooms, all well-furnished, a bed such as one seldom sees, and a wardrobe made by my own grandfather, Jacques Sargot, the carpenter. It pleases thee, Marie?"

The widow looked around her with a little sniff.

"It might be worse," she conceded, "but there are the children."

"Three only," Sargot replied, "and in a year or so they will all be in the fields. Think what that may mean. We can sell the timber from the strip behind and plant more vines. Children arc not so bad when they are strong."

"The little ones are well enough," Madame Dumay admitted, "but thy eldest—Myrtile—she has not the air of health."

They all looked up at the girl, who was approaching them at this moment with wine and glasses. She was of medium height and slim. Her complexion was creamily pale; even the skin about her neck and arms had little of the peasant's brown. Her neatly-braided hair was of the darkest shade of brown, with here and there some glints of a lighter colour. Her eyes, silkily fringed, were of a wonderful shade of deep blue, her mouth tremulous and beautiful. There was something a little exotic about her appearance, although no actual indication of ill health. The widow looked at her critically; Pierre, the innkeeper, with unpleasant things in his black, beady eyes.

"Pooh! she is well enough," her stepfather declared. "Never a doctor has crossed this threshold since her mother died many years ago."

Myrtile welcomed her father's guests pleasantly but timidly. Then, after she had filled the glasses, she would have slipped back into the house but Jean Sargot grasped her by the arm.

"To-night, my child," he insisted, "you must leave your books alone. You must drink a glass of wine with us. It is an occasion, this."

Myrtile looked from one to the other of the two visitors. She had for a moment the air of a trapped animal. Madame Dumay made a little grimace, but Pierre only laughed. She was a flower, this Myrtile, not like other girls, Even the young men complained of her aloofness. He knew well how to deal with such modesty.

"Behold," her stepfather continued, "our two best friends! Here is good Madame Dumay. A nice little income she makes at the shop, and a tidy sum in her stocking."

"Oh, la, la!" the widow interrupted. "What has that to do with thee, my friend?"

"And also," Jean Sargot went on, without taking heed of the interruption, "the brave Pierre Leschamps. Oh, a gay dog, that Leschamps! A man of property, mark you, child. And listen! Why do you think these friends of mine are here?"

"I cannot tell," Myrtile faltered.

"Madame Dumay will become my wife. It is what we need here, And Pierre Leschamps—hear this, little one—he seeks a wife. He has chosen you. I have given my consent."

Leschamps had risen to his feet. Myrtile shrank back against the wall. The terror had leaped now into life.

"I will not marry Monsieur Leschamps," she declared. "The other—is your affair. But as for me, I will not marry!"

Jean Sargot leaned back in his chair and drank his wine. His two guests followed his example.

"Ho, ho!" he laughed. "Come, that is good! You were always a shy child, Myrtile. Pierre shall woo you into a different humour."

"Ay, indeed!" the innkeeper assented, leering across at the girl with covetous eyes. "We shall understand one another presently, little one. You need have no fear. Marriage is a pleasant thing. You will find it so like all the others."

"It is an institution to be toasted," Jean Sargot declared, filling the glasses and glancing amorously towards the widow. "Trouble not about Myrtile, my friend Pierre. She is thine. We shall drink this glass of wine to Marriage. It will be a festival, that, eh, Marie?"

Myrtile slipped through the open doorway. Her prospective husband looked after her for a moment and half rose. Then he looked back at the wine, flowing into his glass. Myrtile would keep,—wine by the side of Jean Sargot, never! He resumed his seat. In a minute or two he would follow her,—as soon as the second bottle was empty.

Across the stone-flagged floor, out through the little garden and along the cypress avenue to the road, Myrtile fled. She was like a terrified young fawn in

the half-light, her hair flying behind her, her large eyes filled with fear. Her feet seemed scarcely to touch the grass-grown track. She fled as one who leaves behind evil things. Only once she looked over her shoulder. No one was stirring, no one seemed to have thought of pursuit. She reached the gate which led out on to the road and clung to it for a moment, as though for protection. On the other side was freedom. Her eyes filled with passionate desire. If only she knew how to gain it!

They were singing now down at the cottage. She heard Jean Sargot's strident voice in some country song of harvest and vintage and what they called love. As she stood there in the quiet of the evening, there seemed suddenly to leap into life a very furnace of revolt. She was weary of her monotonous tasks,—the abuse of her stepfather, generally at night the worse for sour wine and fiery brandy; the care of those motherless children, not of her own stock yet dependent upon her; the grey tedium of a life unbeautiful and hopeless. And now this fresh terror! Her fingers tore at the rough splinters of the gate. Her eyes travelled hungrily along that great stretch of road, passing here and there through the forests, rising in the far distance to the top of the brown hillside, and disappearing in mystery. At the other end of the road one might find happiness!

CHAPTER II.

THE two young men adopted characteristic attitudes when confronted with the slight misadventure of a burst tyre and a delay of half an hour. Christopher Bent deliberately filled and lit a pipe, and, seating himself on the top of a low, grey, stone wall, gave himself up to the joy of a wonderful view and the pleasure of unusual surroundings. His companion, Gerald Dombey, stood peevishly in the middle of the road, with his hands in his pockets, cursing the flint-strewn road, the rottenness of all motor tyres, and the evil chance which led to this mishap in the last lap of their journey.

"We'll be on the road again in twenty minutes, your lordship," the chauffeur promised, as he paused for a moment to wipe the perspiration from hie forehead. "It's been cruel going all the way from Brignolles, and you've kept her at well past the forty, all the time."

His master nodded with some signs of returning equanimity.

"Don't distress yourself, John," he said. "There's no real hurry so long as we get into Monte Carlo before dark. Come on, Christopher," he added, turning to his companion. "Get off that wall and let us explore."

The two young men strolled off together. On their right was a thickly planted forest, of pine frees, fragrantly aromatic after the warm sunshine of the April day. On their left was a stretch of very wonderful country, a country of vineyards and pastures, of wooded knolls and fruitful valleys. And in the background, the sombre outline of the mountains. Gerald paused to point to the little, discoloured house of Jean Sargot.

"Are they real people who live in these quaint cottages?" he speculated. "That place, for instance, looks like a toy farm, with its patch of violets, its tiny vineyard, its belt of ploughed land and this little grove of cypresses. It is just as though some child had taken them all from his play-box and laid them out there."

Christopher withdrew the pipe from his mouth for a moment. He was looking at the opening in the little grove of cypresses.

"And there," he murmured, "must be the child to whom they all belong. I think you are right, Gerald. There is something unreal about the place."

Gerald, too, was suddenly conscious of the girl who stood clutching the top of the wooden gate, her face turned a little away from them, absorbed in the contemplation of that distant spot where the road vanished in a faint haze of blue mist.

"We will talk to her," he declared. "You shall practise your French upon this little rustic, Chris. She probably won't be able to understand a word you say."

At the sound of their voices, Myrtile turned her head, and, at the things which

they saw in her face, there was no longer any thought of frivolous conversation on the part of the two young men. They stood for a moment indeed, speechless, Christopher spellbound, Gerald, of quicker sensibility, carried for a moment into the world from which she seemed to have fallen. Then his old habits asserted themselves. She was as beautiful as an angel, but her feet were on the ground, and she was obviously in distress.

"Are you alive, mademoiselle?" he asked, raising his cap.

"But certainly, monsieur," she answered gravely. "I am alive but very unhappy."

"You can tell us, perhaps, the way to Cannes?" Christopher enquired.

She pointed to where the thin ribbon of road in the distance seemed to melt into the bosom of the clouds.

"Cannes is over there, monsieur," she said, "and there is no other road save this one."

"You go there often, perhaps?" Christopher ventured.

"I have never been there, monsieur," she answered, with her eyes fixed upon Gerald. "Night after night, when my work is done, I come here and I watch the road just where it fades away, but I have never travelled along it, I have never been further than the first village, down in the hollow."

Gerald came a step nearer to her. He leaned against the gate post, His tone and manner became unconsciously caressing. It was generally so when he spoke with women.

"You are In trouble, mademoiselle," he said. "Sometimes even a stranger may help,"

She looked down the road towards where the automobile was jacked, up.

"Yes," she admitted, "I am in great trouble. No one but a stranger could help

me because I have no friends."

"Be brave, then, and speak on," Gerald enjoined.

There had been no previous time in her life when Myrtile had been required to marshal her thoughts and speak unaccustomed words, yet, at that moment, clearly and unfalteringly she told her story. She pointed to the weather-stained cottage behind.

"I live there," she said, "with three half-brothers and sisters and a stepfather. My mother was the village schoolmistress. She married for the second time a bad man, and she died. I have taken care of those children. I have kept the house clean and tidy. I have done what the curé told me was my duty, and all the time I have hated it."

"Why?" Christopher asked simply.

She looked across as though surprised at his intervention.

"Because the children are coarse and greedy and ill-mannered," she explained. "I wear myself out trying to make them different, but it is useless. It is in their blood, because my stepfather—is worse. Often he drinks too much brandy, he is quarrelsome, he is never kind. There is not one little joy in life, only when I escape for a little time and come here, and look down he road which leads to liberty, and wonder what may lie at the other side of the hills there. You see, I have read books—many books. My mother and father were both well-educated. I know and feel that the life am leading is terrible."

"There is something beyond all this," Gerald said. "There is something of instant trouble in your face."

Again for a moment she was voiceless, a white, dumb thing stricken nerveless with horror. It was that look which had surprised the two men. Her breath, as she spoke, seemed choked with unuttered sobs.

"My stepfather brought home from the village to-night—the Widow Dumay. He

is to marry her—to bring her to the farm. He brought, too, Pierre Leschamps, the keeper of the Café.—Horrible!—horrible!"

"Pierre Leschamps," Gerald murmured softly. "Go on."

The girl opened her lips but the words seemed to stick in her throat.

"They propose, perhaps, to betroth you?" he asked, with quick understanding.

Her assent was mirrored in the agony of her eyes.

"He is fat and old and he drinks," she cried. "I would sooner die than have him come near me!"

The two young men turned their heads and looked down at the little farmhouse. The very abode of peace, it seemed, with its thin thread of smoke curling up to the sky, its thatched roof, its reposeful atmosphere. Just then, however, they caught the murmur of discordant voices, a shrill shriek of laughter. The men were singing.

"Look upon us as two friends," Gerald begged. "What would you have us do?"

The girl pointed once more to where the road disappeared amongst the hill.

"If you leave me here," she declared, "I shall walk and run and crawl until I pass out of sight there, and perhaps they may borrow the widow's cart and catch me, and then I shall kill myself. Take me with you as far as you are going somewhere where I can hide."

The car glided slowly up to where they were standing. Gerald did not hesitate for a moment. He stepped into his place at the driving wheel and motioned to the seat by his side.

"Agreed," he said. "We will start you, little one—tell me, how are you called?"

"Myrtile," she murmured.

"We will start you off on the great adventure of life. It seems to me that there can be nothing worse in store for you than what you leave behind."

The girl pushed open the gate and sprang into the car like a frightened thing. Gerald turned his head. Around the corner of the farm three unsteady figures showed themselves; three voices—two raucous and one shrill—called for Myrtile. There were threats, gesticulations. The girl cowered by Gerald's side.

"Start!" she implored. "Start, please!"

Christopher, however, still hesitated.

"I think," he said, "we should first hear what these people have to say. They have, after all, some claim upon the girl. It might be possible to aid her without bringing her away from home."

Myrtile clung to Gerald. Her eyes were swimming pools of passionate entreaty.

"Start, monsieur," she pleaded. "There is nothing for me but escape. Why does the other gentleman mind?"

"Get in, there's a good fellow," Gerald begged impatiently. "We don't want to have a row with these yokels."

The chauffeur was already in the dickey behind. Myrtile's eyes implored Christopher to take the place by her side. With his feet still on the road, however, he leaned across her to Gerald.

"Gerald," he said, "this is a more serious affair than you seem to think. Who is going to look after the child when we get to Monte Carlo?"

"You can, if you like," was the careless reply. "I'm not thinking of playing the Lothario, if that is what you mean."

"Word of honour?"

"Word of honour. Don't be an ass, old chap. It's up to us to give the girl a chance."

Christopher stripped off his coat and wrapped it around Myrtile. Then he took the place by her side. Gerald slipped in the clutch and they glided off.

The twilight overtook them swiftly. The lights of Monte Carlo, as they commenced the long descent, were like pin-pricks of fire thrust through a deep blue carpet. Out in the bay, the yacht of an American millionaire was illuminated from bow to stern. From the back of the twin range of hills on their left, the golden horn of the moon was beginning to show itself. Myrtile, whose eyes had been fixed upon the flying milestones, leaned forward now with a little exclamation of wonder.

"It is fairyland!" she cried.

Gerald looked down at her indulgently.

"You live so near and you have never been even as far as this?" he asked.

"It is as I have told you," she answered. "I have never travelled ten kilometres from the farm in my life."

Christopher was almost incredulous. Gerald, however, nodded sympathetically. Both young men had taken it for granted from the first that their charge understood no English.

"In France they are like that," Gerald remarked. "It is the sous that count. But this child—isn't she amazing, Christopher? Except for her clothes, there isn't a thing about her that suggests the peasant. She is like a child Madonna—an angel—who has stolen into the clothes of a girl gone for her first communion."

"I should still like to know what you are going to do with her when we arrive?" Christopher asked bluntly. "Are you going to take her to the Villa?"

"Later on, perhaps," was the careless reply. "Certainly not this evening."

"Why not?" Christopher persisted. "Your sister is very kind-hearted. It seems to me, as long as we have the girl on our hands, that she is the proper person to look after her."

Gerald smiled slightly.

"My dear Chris," he said, "you and Mary are pals, I know, but I am not sure that you altogether understand her. She doesn't like surprises. We must pave the way a little before we ask for her help."

"And in the meantime?"

Gerald yawned.

"What a persistent fellow you are!" he observed. "You can't imagine that they will take her in at the hotel without any luggage and in our company?"

Myrtile had been looking from one to the other of her two companions with a sense of growing trouble in her eyes.

"Messieurs," she interrupted, "it was wrong of me not to tell you before. I speak a little English. I understand very well."

"You are a most amazing child!" Gerald exclaimed, looking down at her in genuine astonishment. "You have never been ten kilometres from your homestead, and you speak a foreign language! That comes of having a schoolmistress for a mother, I suppose. However, have no fear. We shall dispose of you pleasantly."

"To-morrow," she said timidly, "I can find work."

"To-morrow be hanged!" Gerald replied. "Look about you, little one. We are entering the town. If your story is true—and we know that it is," he added hastily, "you see for the first time shops, villas, hotels. The building in front of

us is the Casino. Now you see the lights that fringe the bay."

"It is amazing," Myrtile murmured.

They drew up at the side door of the hotel where the two young men were to stay. Gerald descended.

"Take care of the child for a few minutes, Chris," he begged. "I am going to interview one of the housekeepers."

He disappeared into the hotel. Myrtile watched his tall, slim figure until he was lost to sight. Then the fear seemed to return. She shivered.

"I am a trouble to him," she faltered. "He will hate me for it. I only meant that you should drive me somewhere where I could lose myself. Perhaps I had better go, monsieur. Can I not slip away before he returns?"

"He would be very angry if you did," Christopher assured her. "He has gone to arrange for someone to look after you for the night. To-morrow I think you will do well if you try to find some work. If you wish it, I will help you."

Her eyes still devoured the door through which Gerald had passed.

"Tell me hie name!" she begged.

"His name," Christopher replied, "is Gerald Annesley Dombey."

She repeated it after him, a little hesitatingly.

"I shall always think of him as Gerald," she said. "It is a very pretty name. Tell me, why did the chauffeur say 'your lordship'?"

"Because he is the eldest son of an earl and he is entitled to be called Lord Dombey."

"He is noble, then, I am not surprised. He seemed like that to me.—And you,

monsieur? May I know your name?"

"My name is Christopher Bent," he replied, "plain Christopher Bent."

"' Christopher' is a very nice name," she said, with a trifle of unconscious condescension, "but of course it is not like 'Gerald.""

She looked longingly back towards the crowded doorway, and the young man who stood by her side was aware of a curious and altogether inexplicable sensation. He suddenly found himself envying Gerald's careless but fascinating manners, his good looks, his light, debonair manner of speech. Even this little waif picked up at the roadside was already under his spell. Then Christopher remembered other things about his friend, and his face grew stern.

Gerald returned presently with a neatly-dressed young woman. He held out his hands to Myrtile and assisted her to alight.

"It is all arranged, child," he announced. "Annette is a chambermaid here, and the niece of one of the house-keepers, whom I know well. She will take you to some rooms close at hand, where you will be made comfortable. To-morrow morning early, Christopher and I will come and see you."

"Mademoiselle will be entirely well suited," the young woman declared. "It is but a few yards away."

Myrtile, still wrapped in Christopher's coat, looked a little pathetic as she stood upon the pavement by Annette's side.

"I shall not see you again to-night, then, Monsieur Lord Dombey?" she asked shyly.

"Not to-night," he laughed. "And 'Monsieur Gerald' is quite enough from you, petite. To-morrow we will have a long talk. Have no fear—you shall not return to the farm unless it is your wish."

Myrtile stooped and with a sudden, passionate gesture raised his hand to her