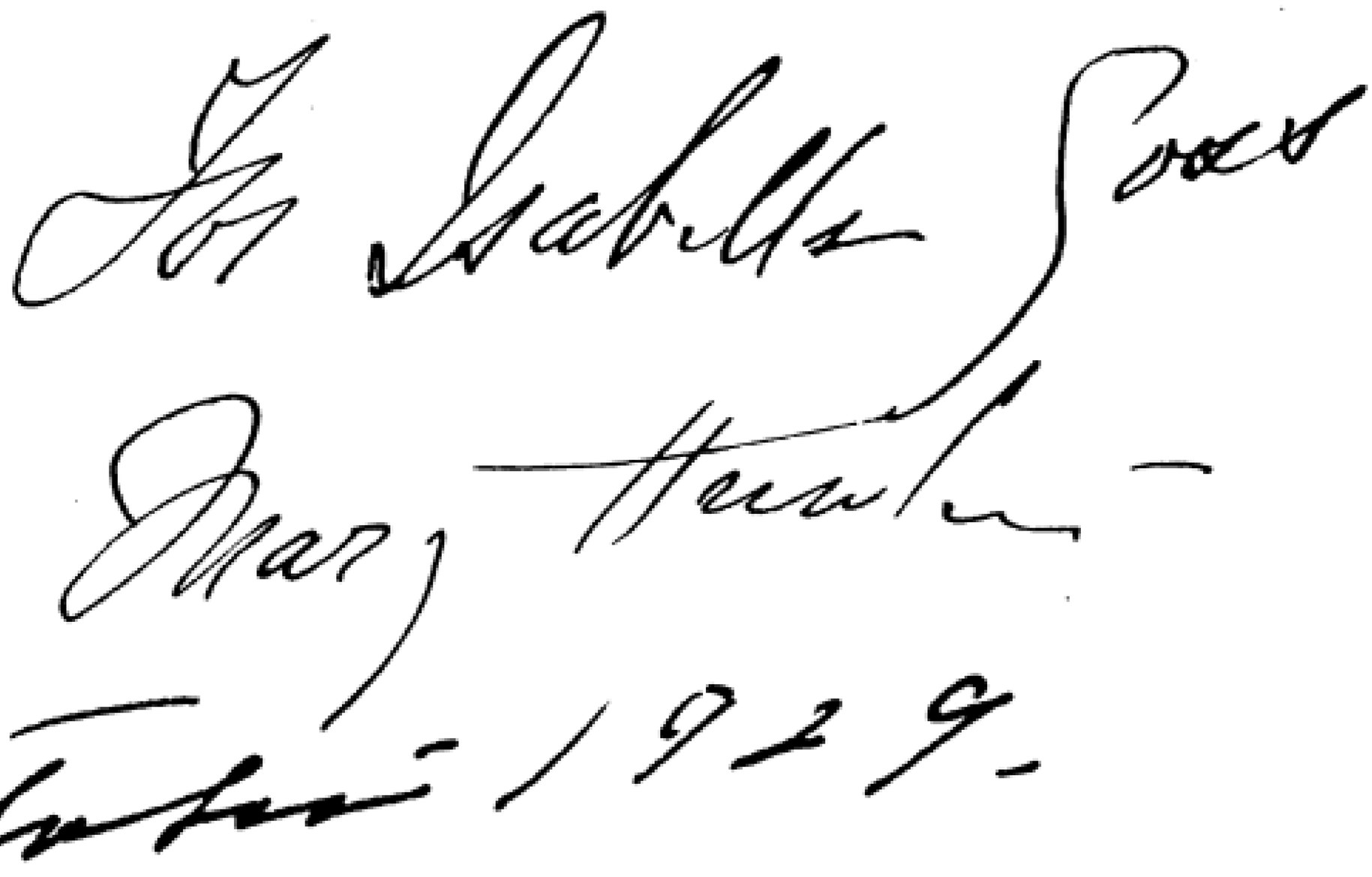

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THE MYSTERY ROAD

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Gerald looked him over for a moment, unmoved but intensely curious. FRONTISPIECE. *See page* 82.

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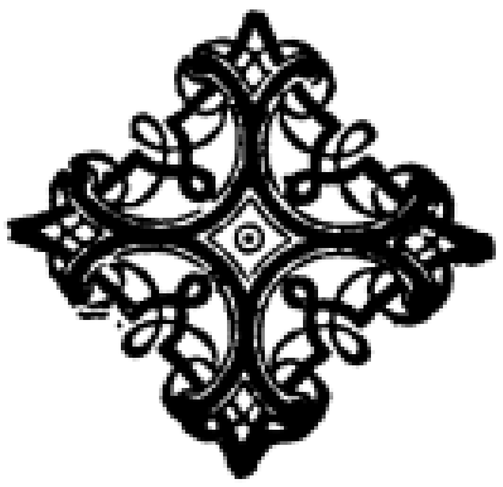
The Mystery Road

By E. Phillips Oppenheim

Author of

"The Evil Shepherd," "Nobody's Man," "The Box With Broken Seals," "The Great Impersonation," "The Pawn's Count," "Jacob's Ladder," "The Profiteers," "The Zeppelin's Passenger," "The Great Prince Shan," "Michael's Evil Deeds," etc.



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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

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BOOK ONE

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THE MYSTERY ROAD

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 his 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

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which, to any one 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

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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 are 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

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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, là, là!" 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

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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

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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!

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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 his 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 trees, 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 back-

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ground, 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.

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"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

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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 the 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 I 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 Les-

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champs, 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 hills.

"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.

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"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?"

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"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?"

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"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

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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 some one 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 his 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

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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 housekeepers, 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

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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 lips. Then she dragged Annette off, without looking behind. Gerald laughed a little consciously.

"Our village maiden is somewhat demonstrative," he remarked lightly. "Come on, Chris. A cocktail whilst they unpack our clothes. I've telephoned to the Villa. We must do a duty dinner there first, but afterwards I will show you the land where the pleasure-seekers of the world have built their Temple."

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CHAPTER III

LADY MARY DOMBEY was a young woman of very pleasing appearance, but there were occasions upon which she could look stern. This was one of them.

"I am never surprised at anything that Gerald does," she told Christopher, who was seated next her at the dinner table, "but I must say that I should never have expected you to have been mixed up in one of his escapades. What are you going to do with the girl?"

"We rather hoped for some advice from you," was the somewhat rueful reply.

"You are welcome to it. Send her home."

"You wouldn't talk like that if you'd seen the state of terror she was in when we found her, Mary," Gerald remarked from the other side of the table.

"Is she very beautiful?" his sister enquired.

"Wonderfully," Christopher pronounced.

Gerald shrugged his shoulders.

"She is of an age when all girls are beautiful," he observed. "Perfectly filthy time she seems to have been having, though."

"We hoped," Christopher ventured, a little doubtfully, "that you might be able to make use of her as a kind of under sewing maid, or something of that sort."

"Thank you," Lady Mary replied, without enthusiasm, "I am perfectly satisfied with the services of my own maid. Besides, the servants' quarters here are ridiculously cramped. They are all complaining, as it is."

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Lord Hinterleys, who had taken only a languid interest in the conversation, intervened for the first time.

"Where is the young person now?" he enquired.

"In some rooms one of the housekeepers at the hotel found for me, sir," Gerald replied.

"Perhaps the housekeeper can find her some employment," his father suggested.

"We'll dispose of her all right," Gerald declared confidently. "She may wake up in the morning and feel homesick, and, if so, we'll send her back."

"You know very well that she won't do anything of the sort," Christopher protested.

Lady Mary rose to her feet.

"I can't quite decide," she said, "which of you two has lost his heart to this paragon of village loveliness. However, I feel sure that my advice is the best. Send her back to her people."

Gerald strolled to the door with his sister and returned to his place, fingering his cigarette case irritably.

"I have always thought," he remarked, with mild sarcasm, "that a barrister should be a person of infinite tact and perceptions. It appears that I was wrong. I never dreamed that any one could be such a blithering ass as you, Chris."

"Thank you, Gerald," his friend replied, helping himself from the decanter which Lord Hinterleys had passed around. "In what respect have I merited this severe criticism?"

"Why, by talking about the girl as though she were something unusual! Mary's a good sort, and all that, but no girl likes the man who is sitting next her at dinner time to rave about his latest discovery of violet eyes. You'd probably have had those violet eyes to

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look at every time you came down to stay at Hinterleys, if you hadn't made such an ass of yourself."

Lord Hinterleys sipped his wine thoughtfully. Gerald, who was longing to smoke, watched its leisurely disappearance with impatience.

"I am not suggesting for a single moment," the former observed, "that your attitude towards this young woman is not and will not always be entirely irreproachable, but at the same time you must remember that we are in a country where such adventures are likely to be misunderstood. I feel inclined, therefore, to endorse your sister's advice. It is very possible that the young woman, at the time you discovered her, was indulging in a passing fit of petulance. I should do all that I could to encourage her to return to her people."

"We'll talk to her in the morning, sir," Gerald promised. "Wonderfully this port has travelled."

"We brought it out six years ago," his father remarked. "Martin laid it down himself, and it has not been disturbed since. — There, I have finished my two glasses. I shall retire to the drawing-room and persuade Mary to sing to me, and you two young fellows can smoke to your hearts' content. Give me your arm, Gerald."

"Don't think we shall stop long, if you'll excuse us, sir," Gerald confided, as he rose to his feet. "It's Christopher's first night in Monte Carlo and I want to show him the ropes. Come along, old chap, and make your adieux," he added, turning to his friend.

Lord Hinterleys nodded as he leaned on his ivory-topped stick.

"You young men choose weird games at which to lose your money, nowadays," he observed. "Filthy places, all Casinos — no ventilation, foul atmosphere, reeking

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of scent and tobacco, and, to say the least of it, a very dubious company. Still, if I were your age I suppose I shouldn't notice these things. — Did you do any good with those two hunters you bought from Loxley, Gerald? One of them I thought was good enough for some of these country steeplechases."

Father and son became temporarily absorbed in a subject of common interest. Lady Mary made room for Christopher by her side. She was scarcely possessed of her brother's good looks, but her complexion was good, her features unexceptionable, her eyes clear and as a rule sympathetic, her tone and manner attractive. Her figure, especially in a riding habit, was undeniable, her skill at golf and tennis far above the ordinary amateur. It was not for lack of offers that, at twenty-four years of age, she was still unmarried.

"Must you rush off so soon on your first evening?" she asked reproachfully.

"Not so far as I am concerned," he assured her. "I would rather stay here and listen to you sing. It's Gerald who is dying to lose his money."

She made a little grimace.

"Every one goes to the Casino or the Sporting Club at night," she said, "and for the first few times it is amusing enough. I hope you won't spend all your time there. When shall we play golf?"

"To-morrow afternoon?" he asked.

She nodded.

"I'm taking father out to lunch at the Club," she said. "We'll play directly afterwards, if that suits you. Tell me, have you had any interesting cases lately? I saw that you won the libel suit you were telling me about."

They talked for some time with interest. Lady

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Mary's wit was keen and her insight unusual. During a pause in their conversation, Lord Hinterleys looked across the room through his horn-rimmed eyeglass.

"Your friend seems to get on very well with Mary," he remarked.

"They've always been pals," Gerald acquiesced.

"Doing pretty well at the Bar, isn't he?"

"Thundering well. They say he's certain to be one of our youngest K. C's."

"I knew his father," Lord Hinterleys reflected. "He was at Eton with me. Very good stock, though not remarkably prosperous."

"Christopher isn't well off," Gerald admitted. "You don't make a lot of money at the Bar your first few years."

Lord Hinterleys said nothing for several moments.

"Mary has her aunt's hundred thousand pounds," he said at length. "She is a difficult young person to marry. Knows her own mind, though. I should never interfere."

"Chris is a good fellow, but I don't fancy he has any thought of marrying just yet," Gerald remarked. "You won't mind if I take him off now, sir? We shall meet for lunch at the Golf Club to-morrow."

Christopher obeyed his friend's summons without enthusiasm. Gerald, however, was both insistent and impatient, and the two young men took their leave a few minutes later.

Christopher, quickly impressed with the charm of the place, would have willingly spent the remainder of the evening seated outside the Café de Paris, watching the passers-by, listening to the music, and marvelling at the amphitheatre of lights which fringed the bay and dotted the whole background of hills with little specks of yellow

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fire. Gerald, however, was too anxious to do the whole honours of the place. He dragged his friend into the bureau of the Casino, where they obtained their tickets for the Cercle Privé, and afterwards on to the Sporting Club, the Mecca of Gerald's desires for the evening, at any rate. Christopher breathed a little more freely here than in the Casino; the atmosphere was less pernicious, the crowd by which he was surrounded far more attractive. After Gerald had taken a seat at the baccarat table, he wandered around for some time, fascinated by this strange, cosmopolitan gathering, their diversity in class, manners and dress. Presently he found a seat in the little bar, ordered a whisky and soda and leaned back to watch the never-ceasing stream of pleasure-seeking loiterers. Suddenly, without any warning, his thoughts played him a queer trick. The walls of the thronged room fell away; its murmur of silvery voices, its tangle of exotic perfumes, were nonexistent. He was back on the cool, sunlit hillside, with the odour of the violets and the pines in his nostrils, and the girl looking over the gate. She turned her head and he saw her face, — her beautiful eyes, with their passionate, terrified appeal; her quivering lips, her child's figure; the tender appeal of her, the soul and sweetness of her innocent youth clinging like some fresh, sweet perfume to her trembling body.

Gerald stood suddenly before him, his face aflame, his eyes brilliant. His voice quivered with excitement.

"Christopher, you moonstruck old dodderer," he cried, "wake up! I have seen the most wonderful creature on earth. I won't leave this place until I find out who she is."

"What, another adventure?" Christopher exclaimed. "Sit down and have a whisky and soda."

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"Don't talk to me about whiskies and sodas," Gerald replied, sinking into the vacant chair, however, and calling a waiter. "I tell you she's the most amazing person I ever saw — a revelation!"

"You're not thinking about Myrtile?"

"That child? No!" was the impatient rejoinder. "I tell you it's some one here to-night. She's either French or Russian or Italian — I can't make up my mind which. She is with an older woman, who seems to be a sort of attendant. Every one's talking about her, but no one seems to know who she is."

"This place is full of that sort of people, isn't it?" Christopher asked, not greatly impressed.

"That sort of people!" Gerald repeated contemptuously. "Wait till you see her! I'm not easily led away. I've seen the most beautiful women in most of the capitals of the world. I was at Vienna and Rome before the war, you know, but I never —— Don't move, Chris. Don't look as though I've been talking about them. Here they come!"

Christopher watched the approach of the two women with an interest casual at first but real enough as they drew nearer. The younger of the two walked slightly in advance. She was rather over the medium height, and her carriage, although she was not in the least assertive, was full of the simple dignity of one who has been accustomed to command respect. She was slim, yet the outlines of her figure were so soft as to become almost voluptuous. She wore a dress of perfectly plain black lace, against which the skin of her neck and shoulders seemed of almost alabaster whiteness. Her only ornament was a long, double string of pearls of unusual size. Her hair, glossy and absolutely jet black, was brushed from her forehead and around her ears so that

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it seemed almost like a sheath. Her complexion was absolutely pallid, her lips a natural scarlet. Her eyes were of a deep shade of brown, inclined to be half closed, as though she were short-sighted. Her eyelashes were long and silky; her eyebrows looked as though they had been pencilled, and yet left a conviction of entire naturalness. Such details as remained of her toilette were unique yet simple. The woman who followed her possessed also an air of distinction, but she was middle-aged, with grey hair and somewhat unwieldy figure. She carried herself with an air of deference towards her companion.

"Well?" Gerald whispered excitedly.

"She is very beautiful and very unusual," Christopher admitted. "Have you no idea who she is?"

"If I had found any one who knew who they were, I should have been introduced before now," was the blunt reply. "Freddie Carruthers has gone down to ask the Superintendent."

The two women subsided on to a couch. The elder one gave an order to a waiter, the younger one glanced indifferently around. Her eyes rested for a moment upon Gerald. There was nothing personal in their regard — her manner was, indeed, if anything, austere — but Christopher was conscious of a sudden indrawn breath, almost a sob, which escaped from his companion's lips.

"I wish Carruthers would come," the latter muttered impatiently. "I didn't exaggerate, did I, Chris?"

"No," the latter admitted, "I can't say that you did. She is very wonderful and very interesting. It is quite your day for adventures."

Gerald laughed scornfully.

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"You're not comparing our little protégée from the hills with — with her, are you?" he demanded.

"Each has her charm," Christopher replied.

Gerald leaned back in his chair and laughed long and heartily.

"Our little wild rose," he said, "is like a thousand others — a pretty face, a fascinating age, confiding manners. In twenty-four hours she would have taught you all that she could know of love and life. She is as much a yokel intellectually as this girl is a mystery. Are there any queens or royal princesses wandering about the world nowadays, Chris? I swear that she looks as though she had stepped down from a throne. Thank heavens, here comes Carruthers!"

A young man who had been staring in at the doorway recognised Gerald and came across to them.

"No go, old thing," he confided, leaning down. "They are registered here as Madame and Mademoiselle de Ponière — aunt and niece. The old buffer downstairs, however, admitted that he believed that to be an assumed name."

"Couldn't you bribe him, or something?" Gerald asked eagerly.

"Old Johnny fairly cornered me," Carruthers explained. "The two ladies, he told me, had declared their desire to remain incognito. It was not, therefore, the business of a gentleman to be inquisitive. Whereupon I came away with my tail between my legs. All the same, I don't believe he has the least idea who they are."

"They can't possibly escape for more than a few days, in a place like this, without being recognised," Gerald declared.

Carruthers stroked an incipient moustache.

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"One gets nasty knocks sometimes," he observed. "There was a milliner and her head mannequin who fairly knocked them all silly at Biarritz last season."

"Don't be a blatant ass, Freddy!" Gerald exclaimed contemptuously. "Mannequins can learn to strut but not to walk. That habit of walking into a crowded room as though you were the only person in it isn't picked up in Bond Street or the Rue de la Paix. I ——"

Gerald was suddenly on his feet. The younger of the two women, in turning towards her companion, had swept a small lace handkerchief, which she had laid upon the table in front of them, to the floor. She made no effort herself to regain possession of it, but glanced towards the waiter. Gerald, however, already held it in his fingers.

"I believe this is your hankerchief, mademoiselle," he ventured.

She accepted it with a very slight but sufficiently gracious smile.

"I thank you very much, sir," she said, speaking in English, with a slight foreign accent.

Some casual remark was already framing itself upon Gerald's lips, but it remained unuttered. The girl had turned and resumed her conversation with her companion. She had the air of not realising that there was another person in the room. The young man, with a little bow, returned to his place. He hid his feelings perfectly, but his two companions could guess at his discomfiture.

"It's no good, old chap," Carruthers assured him confidentially. "They simply aren't taking any. That Italian Prince with the swivel eye, whom all the women are raving about, tried his best to get into conversation.

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Managed to get one of his pals to address him by name, so that they knew who he was, but there was nothing doing. Dicky Gordon tried to get a word in edgeways at the roulette table, but it didn't come off. One of the croupiers, whom he knew, went out of his way to whisper to him that the ladies did not desire acquaintances."

Gerald sighed.

"I shall know her sooner or later," he muttered, "but it's such a waste of precious time."

The woman and the girl rose presently to their feet and turned towards the door. Gerald, for the first time in his life, felt himself guilty of an impertinence. He watched them descend the stairs, watched a bowing servant run and fetch a waiting automobile. He even, from his position at the top of the steps, leaned forward to hear if any word of address was spoken. He was unrewarded. A footman opened the door of the car, closed it and mounted to the side of the chauffeur. The car drove rapidly away in the direction of Nice. Gerald waited for the porter to remount the steps and slipped a ten franc note in his hand.

"Do you know who those two ladies were?" he asked.

"They call themselves Madame and Mademoiselle de Ponière," the man replied, after a moment's hesitation.

"Call themselves?" Gerald repeated. "What do you mean by that?"

The man shrugged his shoulders.

"There are many who come here who do not desire their presence to be known, monsieur," he said cautiously.

"Criminals, perhaps, — or royalty?" Gerald ventured.

The man looked imperturbably through the revolving doors.

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"Many of all sorts, monsieur," he assented. "Monsieur will excuse."

He hastened off on some excuse connected with a waiting automobile. Gerald had no alternative but to rejoin Carruthers and Christopher, whom he found watching the play at one of the roulette tables.

"Any luck?" the former asked eagerly.

"Not an iota," Gerald confessed. "I tipped the man who saw them off, but he either knew nothing or would tell me nothing. — I shall have a plunge at baccarat," he added. "I feel like gambling this evening."

"You won't forget that we promised to go and see Myrtile early?" Christopher reminded him.

Gerald stared at his friend.

"Myrtile? Who the devil —— Why, the child from the violet farm, of course! I'd forgotten all about her."

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CHAPTER IV

MYRTILE came flying to the door. Christopher saw her eyes travel over his shoulder, he saw the sudden cloud upon her face. A queer little stab of pain startled him by its very poignancy.

"Monsieur Gerald, he is not with you?" she asked disconsolately.

Christopher shook his head.

"He was up late last night," he explained. "I went to his room but he was fast asleep. I dare say he will come on presently."

The girl looked at the clock — a brazen, loudly ticking affair of bright gilt.

"He promised to be here early," she said. "Has he spoken of me? Has he said anything about sending me back?"

"Nothing," Christopher assured her. "Do you still feel that you don't want to go back?"

She stood quite still in the middle of the little apartment and looked at him. Something about her was altered. It seemed almost as though she had passed from girlhood to womanhood in the night.

"I will not go back," she declared fiercely. "It is not that I mind poverty or hard work. It is Pierre Leschamps. I could not bear him near me. He shall never come near me, otherwise I shall die. Even you, Monsieur Christopher, you do not wish me to die."

Her eyes were swimming with tears. She leaned a little towards him and Christopher patted her encourag-

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ingly. Her lips were very close to his, fresh and sweet and quivering. Christopher, conscious of a rare and almost overmastering temptation, turned away brusquely.

"Come outside," he invited. "I will take you on the Terrace, and we will sit in the sunshine."

She clapped her hands, herself again almost immediately.

"Oh, I am so anxious to go down to the edge of the sea!" she cried. "It is so wonderful. You will not mind, monsieur, that I have no hat and that my clothes are very poor? If you should meet your friends, they will wonder what place I have with you."

"I have no friends here," Christopher assured her, "and if I had, it would not matter. Presently I will try to find Gerald again, and we will make up our minds what to do with you."

"Monsieur Gerald will arrange everything," Myrtile said confidently, as they walked out into the sunshine. "He will find me some work — I am sure of that — only I hope that it will not take me far away. I should like to be near him."

They wandered down from the fashionable part of the promenade to the pebbly beach and along the sands. Myrtile was never tired of the wonder of it all. Often, however, she cast an anxious look backwards.

"You do not think Monsieur Gerald will be searching for us?" she asked timidly.

Christopher was conscious of a curious sense of annoyance which he could not altogether explain. He led the way up the steps and on to the Terrace.

"We will take a seat here," he suggested. "We can see the hotel and the turning to your lodgings, and you can watch for him."

She acquiesced willingly, and for the next half-hour

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she divided her attention between the entrance to the hotel and the passers-by. At the end of that time she became a little self-conscious.

"It is not right, Monsieur Christopher," she said, "that I sit here with you in these clothes and without a hat. People look at us so strangely."

"You look very nice," Christopher assured her, "and besides, it is no one else's business but our own."

"Then why do they look at me so strangely?" she persisted. "It must be because I have no toilette, no hat, my shoes are ugly. Indeed, monsieur, it is no place for me. Here are friends of yours coming, I am sure — the beautifully dressed young lady who looks at me so curiously."

"It is Gerald's father and sister," he whispered.

She was suddenly very white and frightened. Christopher rose to his feet. Lady Mary nodded a little coldly, Lord Hinterleys acknowledged his greeting with some surprise.

"Where is Gerald this morning?" his sister asked.

"A little lazy, I am afraid," Christopher replied. "When he got your message that there was to be no golf to-day, he went to sleep again."

"And this is your little protégée, I suppose?" Mary remarked, looking at Myrtile.

"This is Myrtile," Christopher assented. "We are waiting for Gerald now to decide what to do with her."

"You wish to leave home, I understand?" Mary asked, turning to the girl, who had risen to her feet.

"I will never return there," Myrtile replied, — "no, not even if Monsieur Gerald himself commanded me to. I would sooner throw myself into the sea."

"Isn't that a little extreme?" her questioner rejoined coldly.

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"The misery I should have to face if I returned would also be extreme," Myrtile declared. "I am hoping to find some work here."

"That should not be difficult," Mary observed. "Give Gerald our love, Christopher. I was sorry to have to put off the golf, but dad didn't feel equal to Mont Agel this morning."

"Nothing serious, I hope, sir?" Christopher enquired.

"Nothing at all," Lord Hinterleys replied. "I was a little tired, and I always feel the air up there rather strong. Tell Gerald I hope we shall see him some time during the day."

He raised his hat and they passed on, Mary with a nod to Christopher which lacked much of its usual cordiality. Myrtile looked after them and there was trouble in her face.

"They do not like me," she said. "They do not think that I ought to be here with you. They are right, of course. I am just a little peasant girl in peasant girl's clothes. Let us go."

Christopher's remonstrances were in vain. She turned and walked away, and he was obliged to follow. Just as they were leaving the promenade, however, they came face to face with Gerald, issuing from the hotel. He gave a little start as he recognised Myrtile. Except for a careless thought when he had first awakened, he had forgotten all about her. It was characteristic of him, however, to behave during the next few minutes as though he had been thinking of no one else.

"So Christopher has been stealing a march on me!" he exclaimed. "Has he shown you all the sights, Myrtile?"

"I waited a long time for you," she replied. "We

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have been sitting on the Terrace. Monsieur Christopher thought that you would come there."

"And Myrtile has been a little troublesome," Christopher said. "She is going back to her rooms to hide because of her clothes."

"Clothes?" Gerald repeated. "Why, of course she must have clothes. We ought to have thought of that when we brought her away."

"But, monsieur," she began timidly, "even the clothes which I have at home — my communion gown ——"

Gerald waved his arm.

"Come along," he invited. "We will transform you. What a joke!"

"Oh, monsieur!" Myrtile cried, with glistening eyes.

"I suggest," Christopher intervened, "that if we are going to buy her a frock we go to one of those shops higher up in the town."

Gerald waved aside the suggestion.

"We will go to Lénore's," he said. "Madame Lénore is a great pal of mine. Myrtile, you shall have clothes fit for a duchess."

"Then they would not be fit for me," Myrtile objected doubtfully.

"Nor, I should think," Christopher added, "would they help her to obtain a situation."

Gerald, however, would listen to no remonstrances. He ushered them into a quiet but sumptuous-looking little establishment, only a few doors from the Hôtel de Paris. A Frenchwoman, dark and attractive, came forward to welcome them. As soon as she recognised Gerald, the conventional smile became one of real welcome.

"Ah, monsieur — milord!" she exclaimed. "It is

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good to see you again! Her ladyship was here only three days ago. I ventured to ask if you were to be expected. Milord does me a great honour by this visit. Will you please to sit down?"

"Madame," Gerald declared, "I am here on business. We have with us a princess — the Princess Myrtile."

"A princess?" Madame repeated, with a wondering glance at the girl.

"A princess in everything but clothes," Gerald explained. "That is your part. We hand her over to you. Dress her, Madame. We will return in an hour."

Madame's eyes sparkled. To the real Frenchwoman, every feeling gives way when it becomes a question of profit. She looked at Myrtile appraisingly.

"Mademoiselle will be worth dressing," she assured them joyfully. "Return, as you say, in an hour, milord, and I can promise that mademoiselle shall be all that you would desire."

Christopher for the first time intervened.

"Look here, Gerald," he said, "I don't think that you are giving Madame quite the right idea."

"In what respect?"

"Mademoiselle is the daughter of working folk," Christopher explained. "She requires clothes of good quality, if you will, but clothes in which she can seek a situation. That is so, is it not, Myrtile?"

The girl's eyes were fixed anxiously upon Gerald.

"I should like to have what Monsieur Gerald would wish me to have," she replied.

"Mademoiselle has a figure so fashionable," Madame Lénore murmured, "so slim yet so elegant, and an expression altogether spirituelle. I have some frocks only this morning arrived from Paris, in which she would seem a dream."

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"We do not desire mademoiselle to become a dream," Christopher said stoutly. "We have the charge of her for a short time only, and the sort of toilette which you have in your mind, I think, Madame Lénore, would be highly unsuitable. Am I not right, Gerald?"

"Oh, I suppose so," the young man agreed. "I'd rather like to see her in one of Madame Lénore's creations, though."

"Milord and monsieur," Madame said, "leave it to me. Return in an hour. There shall be two costumes ready. You shall take your choice. If mademoiselle will have the goodness to step this way ——"

The two young men wandered out. They made their way back to the Terrace, where Lord Hinterleys walked for a time, leaning on Gerald's arm. Mary drew Christopher on one side.

"So that is your little protégée," she remarked.

"That is she," Christopher admitted.

"I do not wish to seem a prude," Mary continued, "or anything else disagreeable, but do you really think that you are doing the right thing, Christopher, in sitting about on the Terrace with a peasant girl dressed — er — according to her position? The whole escapade, I think, is ridiculous. I am not so surprised at Gerald but I am surprised at you."

Christopher was conscious of some irritation. He liked and admired Lady Mary, but it seemed to him that her attitude was a little unsympathetic.

"I can quite understand the whole incident seeming ill-advised," he admitted, "but, looking back at it, I honestly cannot see what else we could have done."

"You could have left the girl where she was," Mary insisted.

Christopher shook his head.

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"You didn't see her," he replied. "No one could have left her. When I think of what we saw in her face, even now I am inclined to shiver."

"Is she different, then, from other girls faced with an uncomfortable home situation?"

"I think that what I am going to say may sound absurd," Christopher admitted, "but she is different. She may be only a peasant by birth, but she has a soul."

"Really!" his companion murmured.

"No actress could have simulated the horror we saw shining out of her face," he persisted. "I don't think that I should ever have thought of bringing her away — it was Gerald who did that — but I think that he was right, and I should never consent to sending her back unless she were willing to go."

"And exactly what do you two young men propose to do with her, then?" Mary enquired. "The girl is very attractive. You are aware, I suppose, that the situation lends itself to misconstruction?"

He looked at her reproachfully.

"I suppose there are very few of our actions which might not be misinterpreted in one way or another," he replied.

She accepted the challenge of his eyes, looking him squarely in the face.

"It is not you I am so much afraid of," she said. "It is Gerald."

"But you don't believe ——" he began.

"I believe that Gerald's intentions are always good," she interrupted; "he is capable, even, of idealism. On the other hand, he is fatally weak, especially where women are concerned. I fancy," she went on, "you will find that you have assumed a dual responsibility, and I fancy, too, that some day you will be sorry for it."

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They slackened their pace. Just ahead, Gerald and his father had met two women, old friends, with whom they were exchanging greetings. Lord Hinterleys was talking with the elder; Gerald to her daughter. The slight air of boredom, which the latter so often wore, had completely disappeared. He was leaning towards the girl tenderly, almost affectionately. His eyes were holding hers, he was talking earnestly and apparently with conviction. Lady Mary touched her companion's arm.

"That is the Gerald whom you have to fear," she said. "You might trust him in any other walk of life, but, although he is my own brother, I don't believe that he has a grain of conscience where women are concerned. He doesn't care about that girl, she is not the sort of person he ever would care for, yet she will go back to lunch to-day convinced that she has made a conquest, thinking of what he has said to her, and finding every one else's manner and words ordinary. Gerald has the spirit of the philanderer in his blood. If the girl attracts him sufficiently, you, at any rate — and probably he — will be sorry you did not leave her to her village lover."

"You have described Gerald correctly when you called him a philanderer," Christopher admitted. "I put myself in court, and on his behalf I plead guilty to the charge. On the other hand, I have greater faith in his kindness of heart and his sense of honour than you seem to have. This child is helpless and innocent. For that reason I believe that she will be as safe with Gerald as with me."

Lady Mary sighed. The look of trouble still lingered in her eyes.

"I hope that you may be right," she said. "I am

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not a superstitious person, but I have some sort of foreboding about that child. I feel that she is going to bring trouble, somehow or other. — In any case, let us change the subject. The Rushmores have arrived and want some tennis. Shall we play — say — Wednesday afternoon?"

"Delighted!" Christopher assented, already pleasantly conscious of a changing atmosphere.

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CHAPTER V

It is a fact that when the two young men reëntered the establishment of Madame Lénore, they both failed utterly to recognise the girl who was standing in a distant corner, talking to the proprietress. It was not until she detached herself and came hesitatingly up to them that they realised, with varying sensations, who she was. Gerald laughed with pleasure and held out both his hands. Christopher's admiration was tempered with a certain amount of distinct disapprobation.

"Well, what does milord think?" Madame demanded.

"My congratulations!" Gerald replied enthusiastically. "My dear Myrtile, I wonder if you realise how charming you are?"

The girl looked shyly up at Gerald, her face soft and eloquent with pleasure.

"Mademoiselle, like that, can go anywhere," Madame continued. "She can lunch, if you will, with a prince at the Hôtel de Paris, spend the afternoon at the Sporting Club, or attend the reception which the Spanish Ambassador is giving this afternoon. She is absolutely correct and in the latest môde."

The two young men still contemplated their charge. She was clad in a fine white serge costume, trimmed with silver braid. Her lace blouse was delicately filmy and transparent, the cut of her skirt as scanty as the last word from Paris had decreed; her white silk stockings and suède shoes, procured from a neighbouring es-

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tablishment, irreproachable; her large hat, a gossamer-like confection of tulle and lace. Of the charm of her appearance there could be no possible question, but, in exact proportion with Gerald's satisfaction, Christopher's disapproval seemed to grow.

"I do not criticise your clothes, Madame, or your taste," he said, "but we have given you the wrong idea. Mademoiselle is in search of a situation. She is a working girl for whose future as a working girl my friend and I are anxious to provide. Those clothes are entirely unsuitable."

Christopher's words fell like a bombshell in the little establishment. Myrtile's eyes slowly filled with tears. Gerald was frankly angry. Madame shrugged her shoulders.

"I did not understand that the position of mademoiselle debarred her from being dressed becomingly," she said, a little drily. "In any case, it is a great waste not to give mademoiselle the advantage of charming clothes. Her figure — why, it is adorable; of her complexion and carriage you can judge for yourselves. Mademoiselle, dressed as she is now, and with one or two evening gowns which I have in my mind, would make the sensation of the season in Monte Carlo."

"And what good would that be to her?" Christopher demanded. "Mademoiselle has need to earn her living, and to earn it honourably."

"Look here, Chris," Gerald interrupted, "you're taking this thing too seriously. We know very well that Myrtile must be found something to do later on, but in the meantime she may as well have a little fun. Can't you see for yourself how wonderful she is? She will puzzle the whole of Monte Carlo for a week."

"And after then?" Christopher asked.

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Gerald turned impatiently away. Madame held up a wonderful confection of white lace and silk.

"This is what I figure to myself for mademoiselle's first evening frock," she said, — "this and a hat of black lace, with a string of pearls which I could perhaps borrow. I promise you that she would make a sensation you do not dream of."

"It is not our wish that she make a sensation of this sort," Christopher persisted harshly. "It appears to me that you both wish to provide the child ——"

He stopped short. Gerald's eyes were filled with sudden fire; the girl was trembling.

"You're talking like an ass, Christopher," Gerald declared. "This is my affair."

"It is nothing of the sort," Christopher rejoined stubbornly. "It is our affair. I claim an equal right in disposing of Myrtile, and I will not have her decked out in these clothes. What we need for her is a plain blue serge suit and a small hat. She will always look charming, she will always be attractive, but nothing in her future walk of life justifies our arraying her in clothes like these."

Madame shrugged her shoulders more disparagingly than ever.

"It is as milord and monsieur desire, of course," she said. "I can provide such garments as monsieur describes."

Gerald looked at Myrtile once more. The admiration in his eyes this time, at any rate, was absolutely genuine.

"I can't see the harm in having the child properly turned out for, say, one week," he protested, turning to Christopher.

"And at the end of that week, what?"

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There was a deadly directness about Christopher's gaze. Gerald, although there was no definitely formed thought of evil in his mind, avoided it.

"If you are proposing to marry Myrtile," Christopher continued, "then the clothes you have selected are suitable. Unless you have made up your mind to do that, I beg that Madame will show us something different."

There was a somewhat hectic silence for several moments. Frenchwoman though she was, and full of tact, Madame Lénore could scarcely conceal her contempt for the crudeness of this puritanical Englishman. Myrtile herself felt as though a dream of Paradise were fading away. Gerald, because he was good fellow enough at heart, felt further insistence impossible. He was quite content to drift into danger; he was not casuist enough to evade a plain warning.

"Well, I suppose we shall have to let this disagreeable fellow have his way," he declared. "Take her along, Madame, and see what you can do. You hear my friend's idea — plain blue serge buttoned up to the throat, cashmere stockings and square-toed shoes."

"There will be a compromise," Madame declared firmly. — "And for the rest, little one, do not trouble too much," she whispered, as she led Myrtile away. "I shall keep these clothes just as they are, until the other gentleman has made up his mind to meddle no longer. Come to me when you are ready. I can make you look so that milord will take notice of no other woman."

Myrtile's eyes were swimming with tears.

"It was just for him that I wanted to keep these clothes," she said. "I wanted him to take me out and to feel that I looked like other girls. As for Monsieur Christopher, I detest him!"

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"Mademoiselle has reason," the woman murmured. "He has not the chic of milord. It is a pity that he should interfere. Perhaps later on milord will bring you here without him."

Myrtile's eyes shone. Reluctantly she stretched out her arms and felt the dress slip away from her.

In the showroom outside, neither of the two young men was particularly disposed for conversation. Christopher felt a distinct return of his first apprehension concerning Gerald's attitude towards Myrtile, whilst Gerald himself was conscious of a vague sense of resentment at his friend's interference, the more poignant, perhaps, because of its wisdom. Anything in the nature of an explanation between the two was rendered impossible by the smallness of the room and the presence of the shop assistants. So Gerald contented himself with lighting a cigarette, while Christopher studied a book of fashions. Suddenly an event happened which created a new atmosphere in the little place. Gerald relinquished his cigarette, Christopher laid down his volume of fashions, the shop assistants and mannequins, figuratively speaking, stood to attention. The manageress came hastening forward. An automobile had stopped outside, a footman had thrown open the door, Madame and Mademoiselle de Ponière entered. The latter was simply enough, though richly dressed, and she entered the shop with the air of one conferring a peculiar honour upon the establishment. She carried a little Pekinese dog under her arm; the footman remained standing outside as though on guard. The greeting of the manageress was almost reverential.

"Mademoiselle desires to see our new models?"

The newcomer glanced half unconsciously towards

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the two young men, who had risen to their feet. Then she passed on, followed by the older woman, to the most distant corner of the room. It appeared that she wished to look at hats, and the whole establishment seemed at once infected with an eager desire to serve her. Hats were produced on every side, and passed from hand to hand with an air of deep anxiety. Mademoiselle, however, it transpired was not easy to please. She sat watching the various confections which were produced for her inspection, with an air of tolerant indifference. Gerald moved to the side of the bookkeeper, who alone remained at her place behind the little desk.

"Tell me," he whispered, "who is that young lady?"

"She appears in our books, milord, under the name of Mademoiselle de Ponière," was the discreet reply.

"But what is her real name?" Gerald persisted. "Who are her friends? Is it possible to make her acquaintance?"

The woman looked at him with a slight smile. She had a tired and rather faded face, and her hair was lined with grey.

"One hears only rumours as to whom she may be," she answered. "For the rest, milord should apply to Madame herself."

Gerald waited for Madame's reappearance with a new impatience. Presently Myrtile came out to them once more. The transformation was still amazing, but the blue serge costume was absolutely plain except for its thick edging of braid, and the little toque, with its dark blue quill, absolutely free from ornamentation. Yet it seemed almost incredible that this graceful girl who came towards them a little shyly but with perfect self-possession should indeed be the peasant child who

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had been under their care for rather less than twenty-four hours.

"Mademoiselle is transformed," Madame Lénore declared. "She has natural elegance. In the simplest clothes I could give her, she would still create an impression. I have done my best, milord and monsieur. I trust that you are satisfied?"

"Entirely," Gerald assented. "But, Madame Lénore, I want a word with you."

"If milord would excuse me for one moment," Madame begged, with a glance towards the further end of the shop. "One of my most valued clients has arrived."

Gerald drew her on one side. Myrtile glanced a little anxiously into Christopher's face.

"Monsieur Gerald does not seem satisfied," she complained. "He has no longer any pleasure in looking at me. He does not like me in these clothes."

"Nonsense!" Christopher replied. "Believe me, they are far more suitable than the others."

Myrtile was still not altogether satisfied.

"They are very wonderful," she acknowledged, looking at herself in the glass, "and I am very, very grateful, but when I came before, his whole face seemed alight with pleasure, and this time he scarcely took any notice of me at all."

"There is something else on his mind," Christopher assured her. "I am certain that he is satisfied."

Gerald found Madame Lénore quite obdurate.

"It is impossible, milord," she declared firmly. "With many of my clients, yes. There would be no cause for hesitation. But to present you to mademoiselle would be impossible. She would not respond. She would never pardon the liberty."

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