



ALABASTER LAMPS by Margaret Turnbull.

There was nothing especially romantic to contemplate about Claude Melnotte Dabbs, village grocer, unless it were the first two-thirds of his name. When his dotting parents picked the name of Bulwer Lytton's hero in the drama, "The Lady of Lyons," to his family name, it may have been an augury or at least an influence, for his career as a tradesman, nevertheless had romantic yearnings—desires to see existence through "the mists of alabaster lamps."

Ned had arrived in town at an hour too late for a casual acquaintance to call or telephone, and this morning the hotel operator had called Mrs. Johnston instead of Miss Johnston. Mrs. Johnston was very gracious when she understood who was speaking. She was glad that he was in town, and quite willing to take any message for Mrs. Johnston, who had gone out. No, Mrs. Johnston could not tell when her daughter would return to the hotel. Mary was with some dear friends, who might only part with her when they brought her to the steamer in time for sailing. Mr. Carter was disappointed and alarmed, though he endeavored not to let the latter fact become apparent. "Are you sailing today?" Ned had asked.

THE STORY

CHAPTER I—With a stranger, whom he introduces as his nephew, Ned Carter, Claude Melnotte Dabbs returns to New York to his general grocery at Peace Valley, Pa. His housekeeper, he explains that Carter is a chance acquaintance, a veteran of the World War, whom he had met and taken a liking to.

CHAPTER II—Carter tells Aunt Lydia he has broken up with his sweetheart because of his family's disapproval of their ultra pacific tendencies. With Ned, the "Auntie" cleverly adds the picture of a "collection of good-natured characters" according to the grocer. They almost run over a dog belonging to a girl whom Carter had ordered and in his absence the girl, Dorothy Selden, reveals that she knows him to be Ned Carter Rangleley, son of Loren Rangleley, New York banker.

CHAPTER III—Next day Ned commences work as a "White House" delivery man. He is highly interested in the girl who meets a girl who tells him there are other girls in the village. He promises to try to procure housekeeping articles for Dorothy Selden, his erstwhile sweetheart, he battles her attempts to discover the reason for his presence in Peace Valley. Arrangement is made for a cook to go to the Johnsons.

CHAPTER IV—The cook being unable to begin work at once, Ned visits the White House to inform Miss Johnson of the fact. Explaining the situation to her mother, the girl, "Mary," is astonished by the girl's emotion at the mention of the cook. The cook arrives, and Mary, with Ned, goes to the village of the Johnsons. They are seen by Dorothy Selden, who warns that she is bothered by Dorothy, who warns that there is something suspicious about Ned Carter.

CHAPTER V—There is something about Mary vaguely familiar to Dabbs, and he is highly interested in the girl. Mrs. Johnston, who is the mother and daughter, Mary and Ned, are both perturbed. He informs Ned he has something on his mind that he would like to tell him.

CHAPTER VI—Claude reveals to Ned a romance of his early life. He had married, while at college, and under peculiar circumstances, and his wife left him the day after the ceremony. He is convinced that the girl is his wife, "Polly," and naturally wants to know, who is Mary?

CHAPTER VII—Mrs. Johnston tells Mary they are practically penniless. She plans an appeal to Loren Rangleley, her banker, and Mary endeavors to dissuade her. While at Ned's, Mary falls into a pool. Ned gets her out, and while the incident reveals to him the real nature of his feelings toward the girl.

CHAPTER VIII—In an attempt to clear up the situation, Dabbs sends Mrs. Johnston home, which he had from the money, satisfying Dabbs she is his wife, but who is Mary? Mrs. Johnston and her daughter go to New York on Dabbs' money. Mrs. Johnston Ned knows he is Rangleley's son and the two men arrange to follow the boy she and Mary are going to Europe.

CHAPTER IX—Mrs. Johnston tells her daughter something of her early life and poverty, and acknowledges that Dabbs is Mary's father. The girl is pleased, declaring she likes Dabbs.

CHAPTER X—Claude, at a meeting with Mary, is overjoyed when the girl he had for some time been convinced she and her mother are sailing to Europe. She tells him her mother offers pecuniary assistance, believing him a comparatively poor man.

It was morning Polly Johnston looked like a princess in exile, but she acted like a weary, bored woman, and she had no time for anything but the necessary words required to start them on their work of packing and last-minute shopping. Mary was to attend to the shopping. Mary had that morning ventured to open the subject, discussed so freely last night, only to find herself snubbed for her pains, as her mother absolutely refused to answer questions.

What Mary did not know was that her mother's attitude had been aggravated by an early morning message to the effect that a Mr. Carter wished to speak to her on the telephone.

He turned to the girl, and said: "Mary, will your mother be in when we get to your hotel?" "I think so." "Then do you think you could come to my hotel, and talk to me for a few minutes. I've got a sitting room. We could be quite private." Now Mary knew she was in for it, but she loved the nice, simple way he was taking it. Absolutely direct. What was Mother running away from? "If I don't stay too long," she answered. "Mother will be anxious, if I am not back in half an hour." "Then we'll do it." He spoke to the driver. They said nothing more, except to remark on the weather.

At the desk, when he received his key, Mary noticed that, as she stood a little apart, Dabbs was evidently telling the clerk, shortly, that this morning she knew at once that this was his careful thought for her, and did not mind in the least the manner of his doing it. Indeed, it was a good manner.

As they went up in the elevator, Claude had a sudden dread that Ned might come back and find them, and he did not want that. Plenty of time for Ned, when he, Claude, found out where they stood. He opened the door of the sitting room and ushered Mary in. She had time to think, swiftly and confusedly, that this was doing it rather well for a country grocer. He seemed unable to speak. She felt like "inability lie upon her own tongue. She sat down and waited.

Claude crossed to the door and closed it. Mary instinctively felt the struggle and difficulty going on in his mind. He did not yet know how much she knew or did not know. She felt sorry for him, and quite involuntarily tried to help.

"Father—" C. M. Dabbs shot out a strong arm. Mary was lifted out of the chair and held firmly. She heard a voice above her, but implored: "Say that again, my girl, and say it slow."

"What?" asked the startled Mary, rather faintly. There was not much space to speak in. "What you called me then. Oh, my God, girl, do you know that it's true?"

Mary drew back and looked up at him. "Heavens!" she gasped. "Did I say it out loud? I was afraid I would." "Say it!" commanded C. M., and shook her a little.

"Don't! Dad, you frighten me." She was clasped in C. M.'s embrace. He held her closely and she found it not in the least alarming or uncomfortable.

He was murmuring to himself: "My little girl! My Mary!" Then he held her off, as she had him, and looked at her. Mary looked into a pair of blue eyes marvelously like her own. There was a softness of tears behind them, but none fell.

"Don't be frightened. Your father doesn't mean to be rough. Only—"

"Say That Again, My Girl, and Say it Slow."

My God! All the years I've wanted you. I'll never forgive Polly for that. "Not a word against Mother!" C. M.'s grasp upon her tightened again. "Not a word. Only that she should have told me, long ago."

"Yes, I think so, too, Dad," Mary agreed, "but I can't make her see it." C. M. looked down at her sternly. "How long have you known?" "Since last night. I haven't been able to think about anything else, but Mother won't talk about it, and she meant me not to tell. I didn't tell, did I?"

"Not strictly speaking," C. M. assured her. "You just said 'Father,' to your mother, and I heard you." "Dear, dear," and Mary tried to sound distressed and repentant, "what will become of me when Mother knows?"

C. M.'s arm tightened about her, as though for protection. Mary leaned on it. "The thing that's got to be understood between us at once, is that my mother is the sweetest, best-looking, most wonderful mother a girl ever had. Father, what were you thinking about to let her get away from you?"

Claude frowned. He led Mary back to her chair and sat down beside her. "See here," he said, looking at his daughter in alarm, "I don't know how much Polly has told you."

Can we get round her?" Mary shook her head. Claude looked at her moodily. "I know Polly," he looked down at the carpet, busy with his feet. Mary came to him quietly, perched herself on his knee, and put her arms about his neck. He did not want to get so badly. "Mother will simply have to take notice of my father."

C. M. promptly kissed her. It was a nice kiss, on the cheek, and C. M. wasn't clumsy about it either. Mary's appreciation of him rose. He had a certain deftness, this big man. He wasn't clumsy nor was he vulgar. Mother might have—but Claude interrupted her train of thought.

For the thing I can't forgive is keeping you from me. I can hardly keep from squeezing the life out of you, Mary. I'm so glad to have you within reach, and know you're my girl. But the little Mary! By Jiminy! How sweet you must have been with your downy hair, or maybe tied with a little bow of ribbon, and little feet. Polly cheated me, my dear. Why, look, you're a great big girl, and I'm a strange man to you, and you may be engaged to some hulking fellow for all I know, and no room in your life for a father."

Despite the fact that he tried to treat it lightly, Mary felt that regret in his tone, and her heart ached for her father. What could she do to make him know that he had not only a place in her life but her heart?

"I'm not engaged," she assured him, as she put up her hands to her smart little hat and jerked it off, and slipped from his knee. "Maybe no one will ever ask me." Claude made a little noise of scornful unbelief, but Mary stopped him. "Stare hard at that picture and don't look around until I tell you."

Dabbs obeyed her, wondering a little, and Mary slipped the hairpins from her head. "Now!" C. M. felt something soft and silky touching his hand. He looked at Mary. Her hair down her back as a child would wear it, she was standing beside him, smiling, fearlessly. The years seemed to have slipped away from her.

"There, poor old Dad. Pretend I'm little Mary." Dabbs laid his big hand caressingly on the silky head, but shook his own. "You're a dear, Mary, but put it up, my girl. It isn't the same thing. Not but what I'd be content enough if I could have you running in and out of my house now, but there's Polly. I'll have to take you back to her, and then when Mary could not answer him, she went to the mirror over the little writing desk and began pulling up her hair. "Shall I tell her I've seen you?" she asked.

Dabbs watched her, fascinated. It was wonderful to think that slender lovely thing was his daughter. "Would that be a good thing to do, my girl?" Mary thought for a moment, then shook her head. As she slowly put a shell pin in, she had made up her mind to tell him about Mother. It was the best thing, to be absolutely frank. She couldn't juggle things the way Mother did: "You'd better know about Mother," she announced. "We're sailing for Venice tomorrow."

"Tomorrow! Venice!" Mary nodded as she drove home the last two pins and reached for her hat. "Mother's running away. We're running away from you and my instinct tells me Mother will run far."

Dabbs sat down on the arm of the chair, thinking. "And if I tell her I've seen you—why, she'll move again, and it won't be Venice, and you won't be able to tell you where we are going."

"You're not to tell her," Dabbs said, decidedly, "and it will be Venice. Do you know your hotel?" "The Royal Danelli." "Well, say nothing. I'll meet you there."

"You'll meet us! Oh, Father! Can you leave the grocery store?" Dabbs nodded, smiling. "Easy I can, when it's you."

Mary settled her hat with a slightly saucy tilt. "Then you'll tell Mother there. My! It's romantic!" Dearly would she love to see the meeting.

C. M. crossed the room, took her by the dimpled chin and tilted her face so that he could look into the eyes that she tried to hide with her long lashes. "It's last romantic," he said. "And much as it would please you to manage the affair, young lady, you can't. Polly Johnston and I will manage that part of it by ourselves."

"Oh Father, how could you?" "I'm not so slow as I look, daughter, and I know Polly. She was never to be driven, or coaxed either. Polly will have to see it herself, and that's the only safe way."

Mary gave him a squeeze. "Oh, C. M. Dabbs, you're a wonder. If the angels had asked me, I couldn't have picked any father I'd like better."

Claude looked at her gravely. "I'm rough, in some ways, girl, but if you like me I haven't wasted my life." "I only wish I was a boy, Father. How we would develop your grocery business together, and make money!"

so that Mother would admire us!" Dabbs frowned. "I don't want you a boy. The angels suited me, too, when they picked you." He held Mary's hand tightly in his. "Mary, is Polly like that still? Does she care as much about money, I mean?"

Mary studied her father as she answered: "She does and she doesn't. Mother isn't easy to explain. She likes the things money brings with it—and she hasn't much left."

Dabbs explained, "How's that?" "Dad, you're right about the absent-mindedness, and Dabbs frowned as she mentioned the borrowing from Loren Rangleley.

"Mary, shall we give her money?" Mary shook her head. "Not now. It wouldn't be quite safe. Mother would use it to run further away from us."

Dabbs looked pleased at the "us" but he frowned a moment afterward, and when Mary touched his arm gently, looked down at her warily. "I'm trying to figure out, daughter, how you're right about the money. I guess you are, but you say Polly'd only use it to get further away from me, and that would keep us apart. Besides, it mustn't be money that brings Polly to me. It must be—you. You can see that."

"Of course, I can Mother's point of view, too," Mary admitted, wishing to be absolutely fair to the absent-mindedness, which is always so difficult a task when sympathies are mostly with those present. "But I somehow feel on your side, Dad, and when the pinch comes, I'll have admitted, wishing to be absolutely fair to the absent-mindedness. Then we will see what Mother does. She's—well, surprising. You can never tell about Mother."

She moved toward the door. Mother would be waiting, and that was beginning to trouble her. "Oh, hurry hurry us to Venice, Father. We've got to say to each other, and there's no time left for us today. And," she paused to make this emphatic, "you must not come further than the elevator with me. If Mother saw me with you, she wouldn't say a word, but it would be Venice."

"Just as you say, dear, and I suppose it's safer, but I hate it," Claude moved to the door with her, and as they reached it he said, hesitatingly: "Mary, do you need any money? I've plenty."

"Generous old dear," Mary thought, but what she said was: "Oh, I'm quite all right, as long as Mother's holds out. The question is, how long will you stand the pace Mother's setting?"

Claude started to speak and stopped himself. "Oh, I can hold out for some time," he told her cheerfully, "and there's always the grocery business."

Mary patted his arm. "Of course, and if it wasn't for Mother, I'd go back with you now like a shot and keep books or sell things behind the counter. Wouldn't it be fun? It's Mother who keeps me from doing it. Mother can't be left alone, you see."

"But Dabbs put his arm about his daughter. "I know it, I know it, I know you're all right, Mary. I won't come to leaving Polly. We'll try and arrange it so we can each have a share of you—sort of share and share alike."

Mary patted his hand, but looked a little dubious. She put an arm about his neck and drew his head down and kissed him. "I may have to lie a little for you," she warned him, "but surely in such a good cause, I'll be forgiven. At least I'll chance it."

The elevator came and she was gone, and he knew that the better part of valor should keep him from watching from his windows. But all the fears and cares of a family man, which begin with the child's birth and spread gradually and with decreasing force through the long years of the child's growth and maturity, had suddenly assailed Claude Dabbs, and he wondered, fiercely, what Polly could be thinking of to allow such a girl as his Mary to go about alone.

(Continued Next Week)

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