

Alabaster Lamps

By Margaret Turnbull

Copyright, 1925, by Margaret Turnbull, WNU Service

CHAPTER IX

Not for long now could Polly count on blind obedience. It was not in the nature of things, nor the nature of a grown-up daughter. Polly decided the time had come for a frank confession.

While Mary brushed her hair, Polly announced that she meant to go to Venice and look about for a place to spend several months, cheaply and comfortably.

Mary said it sounded interesting, but did not commit herself further. She was tired and hurt by these half-confidences.

Frankness was impossible, until her mother was frank with her. She would not degrade her mother's intelligence, or her own, by playing the hypocrite. Mary said she was sleepy and went to bed. But not to sleep.

Mrs. Johnston stayed in her own room, the door slightly open between them. She disrobed and stood in her dressing gown before the long mirror, a wonderful color study in a soft, clinging chiffon robe of blue, with her red hair flaming against white shoulders. Polly did not take her usual nightly delight in the spectacle. She braided her hair with no eyes for the vision in the mirror.

"Got to do it, Polly. Come," she said to herself and put down the comb. She went to the door and softly opened it.

"Mary, want to sleep?"

Mary shook her head, turned on the reading light, threw a rose-colored dressing gown over her shoulders and patted the bed beside her. She recognized from her mother's face that the time had come.

"I'd like immensely to have you come and talk yourself out to me. It's been—quite a while," she announced with a sly look up at her mother.

Mrs. Johnston sighed. There was no doubt she was in for it. She sat down, looked at Mary, shut her eyes and took the plunge.

"Mary, I'd like to talk about your father."

Mary sat up. Of all the unlikely things, talk about her father! Blue-beard's door was about to be opened. From her earliest youth she could remember her mother saying: "Mustn't ask mother questions about father, Mary. It only makes Mummy unhappy and miserable." What could it mean?

Mrs. Johnston settled herself back on Mary's bed.

"How much do you know about me, Mary?"

"Only that you're the nicest mother ever invented," Mary told her, honestly. "The best looking and the best friend a girl ever had."

Mrs. Johnston leaned over impulsively and kissed the girl.

"I only hope you'll think exactly the same when I get through."

"Hurry up, Mother, and tell. You sound like a 'best seller.'"

"I have known some less interesting plots. Well, we'll begin with the fact that I was born of poor people, in Limekilns, N. J. My mother and father both died when I was a little thing, about twelve, and a kind woman brought me up. She took me to New Brunswick, and sent me to school. I helped about the house after school hours. She kept a boarding house. I had only one relative in the whole world, my Uncle Michael, my mother's brother, and he was as crabbed an old bachelor as ever drew breath. He was supposed to be in Pennsylvania somewhere, working in the iron mines, when my people died. But nobody could find him, so Mrs. Bradley took me in.

"Mrs. Bradley died, and her sister came and took the house and ran it as a students' boarding house. I was inherited with the house, and kept right on working there. Mrs. Thomas, the sister, took no interest whatever in me. All she cared about was keeping the house clean and getting the work done. She didn't keep enough servants to do that comfortably, so I had to work from morning to night. It was ghastly."

She paused, looked at Mary shyly and began to describe the men at the boarding house. Mary listened, fascinated. To think that her mother was capable of keeping this odd past to herself all these years. It was most romantic. She waited eagerly for the first mention of her father. Her mother hadn't mentioned any Johnston yet, most of her talk was about some man named Dabbs. Her mind wandered off, thinking about the name and the man it suggested to her.

"It must be painful to have a name like that."

"Do you think so?" asked her mother, a little uncertainly. "Well, anyway, this young man lived in the house, but he never looked at me—"

"Mother!" scolded Mary. "A lovely red-headed girl like you! I don't believe it."

"But you must, darling. There's a lot of difference between red-headed Mrs. Johnston, with lots of money and pretty clothes to set off her locks and hair, and a big, overworked, red-headed chambermaid in a boarding house."

"I hated nearly all men. I had a mind and hopes above my station. I was paid so little that I could only save money slowly. I wanted to get enough to nerve myself to leave that house. My ambition at that time was to be a school teacher."

She smiled at the girl and Mary smiled back.

"Mother, how brave you were. My heart just aches to think of you, with



"Mother, How Brave You Were."

all your brilliant ideas, tied down that way."

"Bless you, Baby!" her mother exclaimed. "My lost uncle turned up just about then, and found me out. He was a terrible creature; six feet tall, very dry and brittle and had a bad cough, and a vile temper. What was left of his curly hair had turned a yellow-gray. The poor thing hadn't long to live."

"He had worked too hard, and lived too roughly, to know how to take care of himself. He had plenty of money, I discovered, and while he knew how to take care of it, he didn't know how to spend it. He didn't want to leave it to any one, especially to a girl. But I was all he had—poor soul." For a moment, Mary's mother caressed the toe of her slipper in silence.

"But Mother, please," urged Mary, "how can I wait until you get to me?" Her mother came back from some long unlit cavern of her mind.

"Of course," she admitted, "that would naturally interest you most. Though Uncle found me and told me of his money, he swore me to secrecy as far as Mrs. Thomas' boarding house was concerned. He was like a lot of unmarried people, tremendously keen about marrying off the rest of the world. Mrs. Thomas had had a bad first and a wretched second husband, and hated men even worse than I did. She assured Uncle that I was a good girl and kept myself to myself and was perfectly safe."

"Uncle went away without committing himself in any way, but two days later a letter came, saying I was to come to a certain address to see him. I went. It was a private sanitarium, and Uncle was very ill indeed."

"He had his lawyer with him, and then and there I was ordered to get married. Uncle wanted to know that his money was going to some properly married woman with a man to look after her. I think some woman had treated him badly when he was young and poor. He wanted me to get married before any one knew I had any chance of getting money. He wanted me tied up to a hard-working lad who would expect to work for me, and would start honest, as he said, and have a family at once, and as large a family as possible."

"I was shocked and angry, furiously angry. But oh, how I wanted that money! There it was, dangling in front of me, a chance to learn all the things I longed to know, a chance to travel, to have pretty clothes, all the things I'd sworn to have. My dearest day dreams could be realities now, but would be lost to me unless I had a man to hang them on. I, who hated men, who hadn't wanted, and never had had a young man."

"Oh Mother, what did you do?" "I didn't know what to do. I came home simply beside myself. I couldn't confide in the cook or Mrs. Thomas. I knew what would happen. They would laugh at me—and despise me. It's odd, isn't it? It's always the women who've made the worst matrimonial blunders who laugh the hardest."

"I found Mrs. Thomas in a fine rage. I'd forgotten to do the third floor before I went out. That was the floor young De Harms, Woods and Dabbs occupied. I went up there as quickly as I could get my things off

and began slipping things together. Young Dabbs' room I left to the last, because—well, because he was a decent young fellow and wasn't so fault-finding as the others."

"I thought you hated all men," commented Mary, slyly.

Her mother ignored her. "I went to his room. There he was, sitting all huddled up by the window. I asked him if he minded my doing up the room while he was there, and he said he didn't. He had a telegram clutched in his hand. I could see that he was troubled. By and by I couldn't stand it any longer. I forgot my own troubles. I'd never been so sorry for anyone in my life. I went up to him, and quite forgetting I was a servant, said:

"Mr. Dabbs—Claude—what's wrong?"

"Claude!" Mary exclaimed. "Claude Dabbs? What a funny name! Why, it's the same as—"

Her mother stopped her with a quick: "It was funnier than that. I discovered afterward it was Claude Melnotte Dabbs."

Mary's soft laugh rang out, and then she checked it.

"Oh Mother, I'm sorry. I'm so interested. Hurry and tell."

Her daughter's mirth was not the pleasantest sound in Mrs. Johnston's ears just then. "I discovered that this young man, with the funny name, was in great trouble. His father was dying and the boy had no money to go home with, and his mother was quite too poor to send him any."

"Oh, poor thing! Of course you loaned him your savings."

"I didn't. I told him my troubles, and offered him five hundred dollars—if he would marry me."

"Mother! You didn't!"

"Sorry dear, but I can't stop to make this romantic. I'm telling you the plain, unvarnished truth. I thought his troubles and mine showed me a way out. I said if he would marry me and show himself, to my uncle, I would give him five hundred dollars. He was to promise to go away and never try to see me again. He was to leave me to go my way alone, while he went his."

"But Mother! What a cold-blooded thing to do!"

"Wasn't it?" agreed Mrs. Johnston, much embarrassed. "But you see it didn't seem like that to me, Mary. Please remember that he was only my door of escape and it was absolutely a business proposition."

"Oh Mother!" "I can't help it, Mary. That's what I offered him, and after the first moment of astonishment, and when he was convinced that I was not fooling him, and would actually have the money—I had two hundred and fifty dollars of my own savings to show him—he agreed."

"Oh dear," groaned Mary, "then he was just as bad!"

"I don't know," Mrs. Johnston said thoughtfully. "I've often wondered. You see, his father was dying."

"That's so, I'd forgotten."

Mrs. Johnston looked as though she was about to say something in her own defense, thought better of it, and went on, doggedly: "Uncle wasn't told anything about the agreement. Both my uncle and his lawyer were favorably impressed with Claude."

"Uncle insisted that we have the ceremony performed at once, and that suited both of us. Claude looked sick with anxiety, and was eager to get it over and start home. We were married before a justice of the peace, who knew neither of us. Right after the ceremony Claude went home with half of the five hundred in his pocket. The other half was to be his when he signed the papers agreeing to leave me alone, and not to block any petition I might make for divorce, on the grounds of desertion, later. The lawyer had to have time to draw the documents up."

"Mother, I simply can't recognize you as the calculating girl who married that way!"

"You'll have to, Mary. I did it. Just in time, too, for my uncle died that night. I was free and the money was mine. I left the boarding house and went to a quiet little hotel. I never told the people at the boarding house anything about the money, or the marriage."

"The lawyer was kind. He made arrangements for me to go to France and live with some friends of his sister who would finish my education. I was supposed to be a young widow."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Occasions Which Make Silence a Sacrament

There was a whole world of wisdom in the words of a wise man of old, in the ages of faith ascribed to his Creator: "Be still then and know that I am God!" A later philosopher has remarked that no two men can be said to be truly friends unless they are content to bask in each other's company without expression of words. There are occasions when silence is the sacrament of faith and reverent joy, the seal and sign of a living union with the infinite and confident fellowship with our fellow man. It is in the practice of this silence that we learn how to discipline life, and recognize the profanity of the glib commonplaces of mere passing companionship, of formal religion and the useless volubility of controversy. We refrain from words because they are inadequate to express our experience, and

the certitude of faith and confidence surpasses the powers of speech. "The truth is best spoken not by us, but through us," says a philosopher writing to another big journal. "The witness of true discipleship has its own silent testimony to the truth."

Suggest New Towns

British housing experts, sensing danger in indiscriminate building and the enlargement of towns, suggest that new towns be built and that additions to the centers of population should cease.

Good and Evil

He who imitates what is evil always goes beyond the example that is set; on the contrary, he who imitates what is good always falls short.—Gale clardinal.

OUR COMIC SECTION

Along the Concrete



THE FEATHERHEADS

And So, "On the Third or Fourth—"



FINNEY OF THE FORCE

Now Everybody Scream

