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ALABASTER LAMPS

by Margaret Turnbull.

CHAPTER X—Continued

—17—

Claude Dabbs looked at her, saw that she was leaving it to him, and though he had planned this meeting a hundred times, did not know which beginning to make. He could think of nothing but how blind he had been. "Good God! Why didn't I see it the first time?" he thought to himself. "She's so like my mother."

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 she was his daughter. 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 a like disability 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 hat, imploring:

"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 engulfed 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—My God! All the years I've wanted you. I'll never forgive Polly for that."

Mary raised her head warningly. "Not a word against Mother!"

C. M.'s grasp upon her tightened again. "Not a word. Only 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 to me, and she meant me not to tell. I didn't tell, did I?"

"Not strictly speaking," C. M. assured her. "You just said 'Father,' all to yourself, 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."

"Everything."

"Everything!" C. M. started from his chair, changed his mind and sat down heavily. "Then that saves me something. We're not going to discuss it."

Mary nodded. "Let's take everything for granted, and go right on from now. That will be the best thing."

"How can we?"

"We must," Mary announced with decision. "There's got to be certain references."

"Oh, Lord!" groaned Claude. "You don't think I want to talk over these 'certain references' with you?"

He breathed heavily. "No, it's Polly." He looked at Mary as though they had been in league for years. "How 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 problem.

Mary came to him quietly, perched herself on his knee, and put her arm about his neck. He did want petting 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.

"One 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 hair down your back, or maybe tied with a big bow of ribbon, and little strapped slippers on your cute little feet. Polly cheated me out of that. Why, look, you're a great big girl, and I'm a strange man to you, and you must 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 the poignant regret in his tone, and her heart ached for her father. What could she do to make him know that he had

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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. Now 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 what?"

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; do you think?"

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 I 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?"