

# *Paper Lanterns*

Beatrice Redpath

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# PAPER LANTERNS

By Beatrice Redpath

They were lighting the paper lanterns in the garden. Spots of bright yellow, of pink and red and blue were scattered among the dark, still trees. The lanterns trembled on their thin wires. Some of the candles flickered and went out. Figures passed up and down the paths, carrying lighted tapers. Meta caught David's arm, pressing against him.

"Oh, look dear! The little blue lantern!"

She could feel more than see the amused smile that came into his face. She knew what he was thinking; that she was being rather silly getting so excited just because a few people were coming in to dance, and they were having paper lanterns lighted in the garden. Of course it wasn't because of that at all. It was because it was so splendid to be home again after being away for a whole month; to be able to squeeze David's arm and look up into his dear, dear face. That was why she was so excited. Didn't he know?

She glanced happily down at her new blue dress; frills, crisp as though they were made of tissue paper; blue satin slippers with a tiny diamond rosette winking up at her. She put her face against David's sleeve. She felt just as though she were a blue paper lantern, all burning with brightness inside.

"Dear," she whispered, "it's so good to be back."

He moved restlessly and pulled a cigarette case out of his pocket. Meta looked over her shoulder at the nursery window.

"I wonder if Betty has seen the lanterns," she exclaimed. "I must run up and tell her to look out of the window before she goes to sleep. You wait here, David, in case someone comes."

She turned indoors and ran up the stairs. The nursery door was half open. Betty was lying curled up in a little ball under the bed clothes.

"Sleepy, precious? Mum wants you to see the lanterns in the garden. They are so pretty. Betty, sit up and look!"

Betty sat up sleepily, rubbing her eyes with the back of one fat hand. She gave a crow of delight as she peered out of the window. So many lanterns

were lighted now. Every tree had a bright hanging spot of color. The leaves on the trees looked as though they were made of silver; the grass was quite gray in the soft, diffused light. Meta sat down on the side of the bed and looked out into the garden.

“Do you see that little blue lantern? No—that one over there. Well, perhaps when you’re grown up, and married to a man you love very, very much, you may have a party, and wear a blue dress, and you’ll feel just like that blue lantern, all burning brightness inside.”

Betty stared with round inquiring eyes. Meta gave her a tight hug.

“Oh, what rubbish Mum’s talking. Go to sleep now. Take your nice glass of milk, darling.”

Miss Carlisle was in the hall just outside the nursery. Meta stopped impetuously. She wanted the nursery governess to have some of the fun.

“Come downstairs as soon as Betty is asleep, Miss Carlisle. The garden looks so pretty. Have you seen the lanterns?”

Miss Carlisle responded that she had seen them, her mouth drawn into a tight red knot. Then the governess passed on into the nursery with a slight inclination of her head. Meta stood looking after her. What an oyster of a person! Never a bit friendly, no matter how hard she tried to be nice to her. Always making her feel as though she had been rather condescending in her manner. She didn’t mean to be; she tried so hard to be nice to Miss Carlisle. But the governess shut herself quickly into her close gray shell every time. It worried her—more than ever it worried her tonight when she was so happy herself. She did want everyone to be happy. How funny it was that she should feel so excited just to be back with David again; and they had been married four years. That didn’t seem to make any difference. She did feel so like that blue lantern.

She smiled to herself as she went along the hall. She could hear voices downstairs and laughter. David was down there. Women always liked David, but he never cared for them. She loved him to be like that. Oh, just thinking of him tonight made her feel as though the little flame inside her was burning so brightly that it made her tremble all over. It was silly of course, awfully silly!

She came around the turn in the stairs and saw them all standing in the hall. They had tossed off their wraps just anyhow. The black chest in the hall was piled high with colored wraps. How smooth Adine’s hair was! It looked as though it had been polished. And her dress—lovely! David was talking to

her. She was sure that he wasn't noticing at all how pretty Adine was with her polished hair, and her flying eyebrows, her tip-tilted nose. Adine always looked as though she were ready to take an adventurous flight through life. If she were a man she would want to hold Adine back.

David never seemed to see how sweet Adine was to look at. He looked quite relieved now when she reached the bottom step and Adine turned round from him to speak to her.

"My dear—the garden—all the lanterns—they're simply lovely. Whose idea was it?" she cried turning back to David.

Adine's voice always came in gasps.

Everyone was talking at once; everyone laughing and saying rather silly things with so much emphasis that they sounded almost clever. Then the music started in the room where the floor looked like pale yellow ice. Through the windows as she danced she could see the lanterns, gay spots of color bobbing about there in the dark, still night, she was so happy; it was so gay.

She wondered if that oyster of a person had come downstairs. She didn't like to think of her shut up in Betty's dark, quiet nursery. Oh, there was David. She loved to see his head bent slightly forward, listening to what his partner was saying. His hair looked like a blackbird's wing. She flashed him a smile as she went past, but he didn't notice.

She grew tired of dancing, her face seemed to feel as though it were fixed into a stiff, stiff smile. Her throat ached with trying to talk so as to be heard above the music. It would be ever so much nicer in the garden, out there alone; or she might find David. She slipped through a long window and the music became fainter, was just a throb—a rhythmic beat. Out here it was so quiet and big and restful. Lots of the lanterns had gone out. She wondered if she would bother lighting them again, then decided it was too much trouble.

She crossed the cool gray-colored grass. The paths were like strips of silver. The moon looked rather pale in comparison to the bright bobbing lanterns. The shadows were deep and thick. How delicious the night was!—so much nicer than the day. During the day all your feelings ran around and dipped into so many things; but at night everything seemed to sharpen down to a small bright point—like the point of a star—just David.

There he was now! She could always tell his shoulders. Who was he with? Not Adine? Oh—Oh!

She put her hands up to her cheeks. They burned as though—oh! as though she were ashamed. She shrank back against the hedge, her eyes staring so hard that she felt that they must feel them like gimlets boring into them. Who was it? Oh, who had David kissed? They were walking away now slowly in the direction of the vegetable garden where it was very dark. Who was it? She couldn't make out at all. They passed in front of a lantern. It was—Miss Carlisle!

It couldn't be, oh! it couldn't be. If he had kissed Adine it would only have been because she looked so pretty; that would have been quite different. But you wouldn't kiss someone like Miss Carlisle unless, oh! unless it was something much more than just a kiss.

What was she to do? Tell David that she knew all about it? She couldn't do that, for that would end everything. What was she to do? All the burning brightness had died down inside her; the blue lantern had gone out.

She couldn't wait outside here either. She would have to go in and dance again. People would think it queer of her to wander away by herself. David—David was down in the vegetable garden where it was so very dark.

She walked quickly across the grass, ran up the steps, and went through the lighted hall. The music seemed like great bright waves, splashing all over her. Someone asked her to dance, and she whirled into the room not noticing whom she was with. Just a black sleeve and a white shirt front. David was in the vegetable garden where it was so very dark and still.

She wondered what would happen. Would Miss Carlisle go away? Or, would she stay and walk in the vegetable garden with David every evening? He couldn't do that. She didn't suppose he loved her, cared about her, wanted to marry her—it wasn't that. They had been together all the time that she had been away. She wondered what Miss Carlisle was like when she was with David. The same oyster or quite different?

Different, she supposed, with horrid swimmy eyes and that red mouth that was always twisted so tightly whenever she spoke to her. Now she knew why. And all the time that she had been burning so brightly for David, he hadn't been giving her a thought.

The music stopped and the black arm slipped away from her waist. She was so tired of them all, she wished so much that they would all go home; and yet she didn't want to be left alone with David. There was the music starting again, here was another black arm slipping around her waist. Her feet moved mechanically in time to the music. There was David now, standing in the doorway. Where was Miss Carlisle?

They were all coming up to her to say what a b-e-a-u-t-i-f-u-l time they had had. She stood feeling as though her face was made of wax. David was to drive Adine home. There was so much fuss, everyone arranging who was to go with whom. She wondered what Adine and David would talk about. She wouldn't be able to talk to him when they were alone any more.

At last they were all gone. The house looked upset and strange as she passed through the hall. Chairs where chairs shouldn't be, rugs pulled any way; she felt just as strange herself.

She went slowly upstairs and switched on the light in her room. Then she switched it off again and went over to the open window, sat down on the window seat, staring out into the quiet, still garden.

The lanterns were going out. The evening was finished; oh! everything was finished. Pointed shadows from the trees stretched across the silky grass. The moon seemed brighter now that the lanterns had gone out, so round and bright and indifferent. She shrank back behind the window frame to avoid the placid face of the moon.

She hated David. Oh! hated him. How could he, how could he? That woman with her tight red mouth! How could he? Yes, she hated him.

The moon seemed to be slipping across the window so as to look at her. It was staring right at her, smiling—yes, smiling all over its wide bright face. The moon—laughing at her—staring into her window with that wise, placid smile.

Another lantern flickered out. A thin film of cloud drifted across the face of the moon, hiding its smile. It was growing very dark in the garden. She leaned her head against the window. She was too tired to think any more.

There were voices downstairs and people running. She started up quickly just as a knock came on her door. The door was pushed ajar and she could see Miss Carlisle outlined against the light in the hall.

“Mr. Dale has had an accident.”

“An accident! How—What?”

She was already at the door, flying down the hall. Some men were helping David into his room. She saw that he had a bandage around his head and that his face was terribly white. Her heart was like a hammer beating—beating—until it hurt.

“It's not serious, Mrs. Dale.” It was the young doctor who lived next door who was speaking. “At first we were afraid it was a good deal worse.”

He had a bad smash coming through the gate. The lanterns confused him. We'll just keep him quiet for a few days and he'll be all right. Nothing for you to worry about."

**M**orning. A pale gray light filled the windows. Meta got out of her chair and stretched her arms above her head. She felt so stiff, so tired. David had had a good night, but she wouldn't leave him. He opened his eyes now, and she bent and patted the creases out of his pillows.

"Have this nice glass of milk, darling."

She started. That was the tone she used when she spoke to Betty. Funny! She had never spoken to David in just that tone before. Poor David. What a long, long time it seemed since last night. David did such silly things. She felt as though she wanted to take him into her arms, just as she took Betty in her arms when she had done something silly.

She hadn't seen Miss Carlisle. Stupid woman. She didn't seem to mind her any more. She and David—both so silly.

She went over to the window and stood looking down into the garden. A drizzling rain was falling, wetting the gray slates outside the window, making them quite black and shining. Some of the lanterns were still hanging from the trees, wet and bedraggled. The blue lantern was still there. She smiled a little crooked smile. It would never burn with that same brightness again. Somehow, everything was different since last night. David! Such a child, and so silly.

She turned away from the window. She didn't want to look at the blue lantern hanging in the gray, gray garden. Her eyes felt wet. She went over towards the bed.

"Take your nice glass of milk, darling," she repeated in the same, strange tone.

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Paper Lanterns* by Beatrice Redpath]