

ELEANOR H. PORTER

JUST DAVID

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About this eBook

JUST DAVID
Eleanor H. Porter

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Table of Content

CHAPTER I:	THE MOUNTAIN HOME	6
CHAPTER II:	THE TRAIL	11
CHAPTER III:	THE VALLEY	16
CHAPTER IV:	TWO LETTERS	21
CHAPTER V:	DISCORDS	27
CHAPTER VI:	NUISANCES, NECESSARY AND OTHERWISE	32
CHAPTER VII:	„YOU‘RE WANTED – YOU‘RE WANTED!“	38
CHAPTER VIII:	THE PUZZLING „DOS“ AND „DON‘TS“	43
CHAPTER IX:	JOE	48
CHAPTER X:	THE LADY OF THE ROSES	53
CHAPTER XI:	JACK AND JILL	58
CHAPTER XII:	ANSWERS THAT DID NOT ANSWER	62
CHAPTER XIII:	A SURPRISE FOR MR. JACK	65
CHAPTER XIV:	THE TOWER WINDOW	70
CHAPTER XV:	SECRETS	74
CHAPTER XVI:	DAVID‘S CASTLE IN SPAIN	79
CHAPTER XVII:	„THE PRINCESS AND THE PAUPER“	83
CHAPTER XVIII:	DAVID TO THE RESCUE	88
CHAPTER XIX:	THE UNBEAUTIFUL WORLD	94
CHAPTER XX:	THE UNFAMILIAR WAY	98
CHAPTER XXI:	HEAVY HEARTS	102
CHAPTER XXII:	AS PERRY SAW IT	106
CHAPTER XXIII:	PUZZLES	109
CHAPTER XXIV:	A STORY REMODELED	114
CHAPTER XXV:	THE BEAUTIFUL WORLD	118

CHAPTER I

THE MOUNTAIN HOME

Far up on the mountain-side stood alone in the clearing. It was roughly yet warmly built. Behind it jagged cliffs broke the north wind, and towered gray-white in the sunshine. Before it a tiny expanse of green sloped gently away to a point where the mountain dropped in another sharp descent, wooded with scrubby firs and pines. At the left a footpath led into the cool depths of the forest. But at the right the mountain fell away again and disclosed to view the picture David loved the best of all: the far-reaching valley; the silver pool of the lake with its ribbon of a river flung far out; and above it the grays and greens and purples of the mountains that climbed one upon another's shoulders until the topmost thrust their heads into the wide dome of the sky itself.

There was no road, apparently, leading away from the cabin. There was only the footpath that disappeared into the forest. Neither, anywhere, was there a house in sight nearer than the white specks far down in the valley by the river.

Within the shack a wide fireplace dominated one side of the main room. It was June now, and the ashes lay cold on the hearth; but from the tiny lean-to in the rear came the smell and the sputter of bacon sizzling over a blaze. The furnishings of the room were simple, yet, in a way, out of the common. There were two bunks, a few rude but comfortable chairs, a table, two music-racks, two violins with their cases, and everywhere books, and scattered sheets of music. Nowhere was there cushion, curtain, or knickknack that told of a woman's taste or touch. On the other hand, neither was there anywhere gun, pelt, or antlered head that spoke of a man's strength and skill. For decoration there were a beautiful copy of the Sistine Madonna, several photographs signed with names well known out in the great world beyond the mountains, and a festoon of pine cones such as a child might gather and hang.

From the little lean-to kitchen the sound of the sputtering suddenly ceased, and at the door appeared a pair of dark, wistful eyes.

„Daddy!“ called the owner of the eyes.

There was no answer.

„Father, are you there?“ called the voice, more insistently.

From one of the bunks came a slight stir and a murmured word. At the sound the boy at the door leaped softly into the room and hurried to the bunk in the corner. He was a slender lad with short, crisp curls at his ears, and the red of perfect health in his cheeks. His hands, slim, long, and with tapering fingers like a girl's, reached forward eagerly.

„Daddy, come! I've done the bacon all myself, and the potatoes and the coffee, too. Quick, it's all getting cold!“

Slowly, with the aid of the boy's firm hands, the man pulled himself half to a sitting posture. His cheeks, like the boy's, were red – but not with health. His eyes were a little wild, but his voice was low and very tender, like a caress.

„David – it’s my little son David!“

„Of course it’s David! Who else should it be?“ laughed the boy. „Come!“ And he tugged at the man’s hands.

The man rose then, unsteadily, and by sheer will forced himself to stand upright. The wild look left his eyes, and the flush his cheeks. His face looked suddenly old and haggard. Yet with fairly sure steps he crossed the room and entered the little kitchen.

Half of the bacon was black; the other half was transparent and like tough jelly. The potatoes were soggy, and had the unmistakable taste that comes from a dish that has boiled dry. The coffee was lukewarm and muddy. Even the milk was sour.

David laughed a little ruefully.

„Things aren’t so nice as yours, father,“ he apologized. „I’m afraid I’m nothing but a discord in that orchestra to-day! Somehow, some of the stove was hotter than the rest, and burnt up the bacon in spots; and all the water got out of the potatoes, too, – though THAT didn’t matter, for I just put more cold in. I forgot and left the milk in the sun, and it tastes bad now; but I’m sure next time it’ll be better – all of it.“

The man smiled, but he shook his head sadly.

„But there ought not to be any ‚next time,‘ David.“

„Why not? What do you mean? Aren’t you ever going to let me try again, father?“ There was real distress in the boy’s voice.

The man hesitated. His lips parted with an indrawn breath, as if behind them lay a rush of words. But they closed abruptly, the words still unsaid. Then, very lightly, came these others: –

„Well, son, this isn’t a very nice way to treat your supper, is it? Now, if you please, I’ll take some of that bacon. I think I feel my appetite coming back.“

If the truant appetite „came back,“ however, it could not have stayed; for the man ate but little. He frowned, too, as he saw how little the boy ate. He sat silent while his son cleared the food and dishes away, and he was still silent when, with the boy, he passed out of the house and walked to the little bench facing the west.

Unless it stormed very hard, David never went to bed without this last look at his „Silver Lake,“ as he called the little sheet of water far down in the valley.

„Daddy, it’s gold to-night – all gold with the sun!“ he cried rapturously, as his eyes fell upon his treasure. „Oh, daddy!“

It was a long-drawn cry of ecstasy, and hearing it, the man winced, as with sudden pain.

„Daddy, I’m going to play it – I’ve got to play it!“ cried the boy, bounding toward the cabin. In a moment he had returned, violin at his chin.

The man watched and listened; and as he watched and listened, his face became a battleground whereon pride and fear, hope and despair, joy and sorrow, fought for the mastery.

It was no new thing for David to „play“ the sunset. Always, when he was moved, David turned to his violin. Always in its quivering strings he found the means to say that which his tongue could not express.

Across the valley the grays and blues of the mountains had become all purples now. Above, the sky in one vast flame of crimson and gold, was a molten sea on which floated rose-pink

cloud-boats. Below, the valley with its lake and river picked out in rose and gold against the shadowy greens of field and forest, seemed like some enchanted fairyland of loveliness.

And all this was in David's violin, and all this, too, was on David's uplifted, rapturous face.

As the last rose-glow turned to gray and the last strain quivered into silence, the man spoke. His voice was almost harsh with self-control.

„David, the time has come. We'll have to give it up – you and I.“

The boy turned wonderingly, his face still softly luminous.

„Give what up?“

„This – all this.“

„This! Why, father, what do you mean? This is home!“

The man nodded wearily.

„I know. It has been home; but, David, you didn't think we could always live here, like this, did you?“

David laughed softly, and turned his eyes once more to the distant sky-line.

„Why not?“ he asked dreamily. „What better place could there be? I like it, daddy.“

The man drew a troubled breath, and stirred restlessly. The teasing pain in his side was very bad to-night, and no change of position eased it. He was ill, very ill; and he knew it. Yet he also knew that, to David, sickness, pain, and death meant nothing – or, at most, words that had always been lightly, almost unconsciously passed over. For the first time he wondered if, after all, his training – some of it – had been wise.

For six years he had had the boy under his exclusive care and guidance. For six years the boy had eaten the food, worn the clothing, and studied the books of his father's choosing. For six years that father had thought, planned, breathed, moved, lived for his son. There had been no others in the little cabin. There had been only the occasional trips through the woods to the little town on the mountain-side for food and clothing, to break the days of close companionship.

All this the man had planned carefully. He had meant that only the good and beautiful should have place in David's youth. It was not that he intended that evil, unhappiness, and death should lack definition, only definiteness, in the boy's mind. It should be a case where the good and the beautiful should so fill the thoughts that there would be no room for anything else. This had been his plan. And thus far he had succeeded – succeeded so wonderfully that he began now, in the face of his own illness, and of what he feared would come of it, to doubt the wisdom of that planning.

As he looked at the boy's rapt face, he remembered David's surprised questioning at the first dead squirrel he had found in the woods. David was six then.

„Why, daddy, he's asleep, and he won't wake up!“ he had cried. Then, after a gentle touch: „And he's cold – oh, so cold!“

The father had hurried his son away at the time, and had evaded his questions; and David had seemed content. But the next day the boy had gone back to the subject. His eyes were wide then, and a little frightened.

„Father, what is it to be – dead?“

„What do you mean, David?“

„The boy who brings the milk – he had the squirrel this morning. He said it was not asleep. It was – dead.“

„It means that the squirrel, the real squirrel under the fur, has gone away, David.“

„Where?“

„To a far country, perhaps.“

„Will he come back?“

„No.“

„Did he want to go?“

„We'll hope so.“

„But he left his – his fur coat behind him. Didn't he need – that?“

„No, or he'd have taken it with him.“

David had fallen silent at this. He had remained strangely silent indeed for some days; then, out in the woods with his father one morning, he gave a joyous shout. He was standing by the ice-covered brook, and looking at a little black hole through which the hurrying water could be plainly seen.

„Daddy, oh, daddy, I know now how it is, about being – dead.“

„Why – David!“

„It's like the water in the brook, you know; THAT'S going to a far country, and it isn't coming back. And it leaves its little cold ice-coat behind it just as the squirrel did, too. It does n't need it. It can go without it. Don't you see? And it's singing – listen! – it's singing as it goes. It WANTS to go!“

„Yes, David.“ And David's father had sighed with relief that his son had found his own explanation of the mystery, and one that satisfied.

Later, in his books, David found death again. It was a man, this time. The boy had looked up with startled eyes.

„Do people, real people, like you and me, be dead, father? Do they go to a far country?“

„Yes, son in time – to a far country ruled over by a great and good King they tell us.“

David's father had trembled as he said it, and had waited fearfully for the result. But David had only smiled happily as he answered:

„But they go singing, father, like the little brook. You know I heard it!“

And there the matter had ended. David was ten now, and not yet for him did death spell terror. Because of this David's father was relieved; and yet – still because of this – he was afraid.

„David,“ he said gently. „Listen to me.“

The boy turned with a long sigh.

„Yes, father.“

„We must go away. Out in the great world there are men and women and children waiting for you. You've a beautiful work to do; and one can't do one's work on a mountain-top.“

„Why not? I like it here, and I’ve always been here.“

„Not always, David; six years. You were four when I brought you here. You don’t remember, perhaps.“

David shook his head. His eyes were again dreamily fixed on the sky.

„I think I’d like it – to go – if I could sail away on that little cloud-boat up there,“ he murmured.

The man sighed and shook his head.

„We can’t go on cloud-boats. We must walk, David, for a way – and we must go soon – soon,“ he added feverishly. „I must get you back – back among friends, before – “

He rose unsteadily, and tried to walk erect. His limbs shook, and the blood throbbed at his temples. He was appalled at his weakness. With a fierceness born of his terror he turned sharply to the boy at his side.

„David, we’ve got to go! We’ve got to go – TO-MORROW!“

„Father!“

„Yes, yes, come!“ He stumbled blindly, yet in some way he reached the cabin door.

Behind him David still sat, inert, staring. The next minute the boy had sprung to his feet and was hurrying after his father.

CHAPTER II

THE TRAIL

A curious strength seemed to have come to the man. With almost steady hands he took down the photographs and the Sistine Madonna, packing them neatly away in a box to be left. From beneath his bunk he dragged a large, dusty traveling-bag, and in this he stowed a little food, a few garments, and a great deal of the music scattered about the room.

David, in the doorway, stared in dazed wonder. Gradually into his eyes crept a look never seen there before.

„Father, where are we going?“ he asked at last in a shaking voice, as he came slowly into the room.

„Back, son; we're going back.“

„To the village, where we get our eggs and bacon?“

„No, no, lad, not there. The other way. We go down into the valley this time.“

„The valley – MY valley, with the Silver Lake?“

„Yes, my son; and beyond – far beyond.“ The man spoke dreamily. He was looking at a photograph in his hand. It had slipped in among the loose sheets of music, and had not been put away with the others. It was the likeness of a beautiful woman.

For a moment David eyed him uncertainly; then he spoke.

„Daddy, who is that? Who are all these people in the pictures? You've never told me about any of them except the little round one that you wear in your pocket. Who are they?“

Instead of answering, the man turned faraway eyes on the boy and smiled wistfully.

„Ah, David, lad, how they'll love you! How they will love you! But you mustn't let them spoil you, son. You must remember – remember all I've told you.“

Once again David asked his question, but this time the man only turned back to the photograph, muttering something the boy could not understand.

After that David did not question any more. He was too amazed, too distressed. He had never before seen his father like this. With nervous haste the man was setting the little room to rights, crowding things into the bag, and packing other things away in an old trunk. His cheeks were very red, and his eyes very bright. He talked, too, almost constantly, though David could understand scarcely a word of what was said. Later, the man caught up his violin and played; and never before had David heard his father play like that. The boy's eyes filled, and his heart ached with a pain that choked and numbed – though why, David could not have told. Still later, the man dropped his violin and sank exhausted into a chair; and then David, worn and frightened with it all, crept to his bunk and fell asleep.

In the gray dawn of the morning David awoke to a different world. His father, white-faced and gentle, was calling him to get ready for breakfast. The little room, dismantled of its decorations,

was bare and cold. The bag, closed and strapped, rested on the floor by the door, together with the two violins in their cases, ready to carry.

„We must hurry, son. It’s a long tramp before we take the cars.“

„The cars – the real cars? Do we go in those?“ David was fully awake now.

„Yes.“

„And is that all we’re to carry?“

„Yes. Hurry, son.“

„But we come back – sometime?“

There was no answer.

„Father, we’re coming back – sometime?“ David’s voice was insistent now.

The man stooped and tightened a strap that was already quite tight enough. Then he laughed lightly.

„Why, of course you’re coming back sometime, David. Only think of all these things we’re leaving!“

When the last dish was put away, the last garment adjusted, and the last look given to the little room, the travelers picked up the bag and the violins, and went out into the sweet freshness of the morning. As he fastened the door the man sighed profoundly; but David did not notice this. His face was turned toward the east – always David looked toward the sun.

„Daddy, let’s not go, after all! Let’s stay here,“ he cried ardently, drinking in the beauty of the morning.

„We must go, David. Come, son.“ And the man led the way across the green slope to the west.

It was a scarcely perceptible trail, but the man found it, and followed it with evident confidence. There was only the pause now and then to steady his none-too-sure step, or to ease the burden of the bag. Very soon the forest lay all about them, with the birds singing over their heads, and with numberless tiny feet scurrying through the underbrush on all sides. Just out of sight a brook babbled noisily of its delight in being alive; and away up in the treetops the morning sun played hide-and-seek among the dancing leaves.

And David leaped, and laughed, and loved it all, nor was any of it strange to him. The birds, the trees, the sun, the brook, the scurrying little creatures of the forest, all were friends of his. But the man – the man did not leap or laugh, though he, too, loved it all. The man was afraid.

He knew now that he had undertaken more than he could carry out. Step by step the bag had grown heavier, and hour by hour the insistent, teasing pain in his side had increased until now it was a torture. He had forgotten that the way to the valley was so long; he had not realized how nearly spent was his strength before he even started down the trail. Throbbing through his brain was the question, what if, after all, he could not – but even to himself he would not say the words.

At noon they paused for luncheon, and at night they camped where the chattering brook had stopped to rest in a still, black pool. The next morning the man and the boy picked up the trail again, but without the bag. Under some leaves in a little hollow, the man had hidden the bag, and had then said, as if casually: –

„I believe, after all, I won’t carry this along. There’s nothing in it that we really need, you know, now that I’ve taken out the luncheon box, and by night we’ll be down in the valley.“

„Of course!“ laughed David. „We don't need that.“ And he laughed again, for pure joy. Little use had David for bags or baggage!

They were more than halfway down the mountain now, and soon they reached a grass-grown road, little traveled, but yet a road. Still later they came to where four ways crossed, and two of them bore the marks of many wheels. By sundown the little brook at their side murmured softly of quiet fields and meadows, and David knew that the valley was reached.

David was not laughing now. He was watching his father with startled eyes. David had not known what anxiety was. He was finding out now – though he but vaguely realized that something was not right. For some time his father had said but little, and that little had been in a voice that was thick and unnatural-sounding. He was walking fast, yet David noticed that every step seemed an effort, and that every breath came in short gasps. His eyes were very bright, and were fixedly bent on the road ahead, as if even the haste he was making was not haste enough. Twice David spoke to him, but he did not answer; and the boy could only trudge along on his weary little feet and sigh for the dear home on the mountain-top which they had left behind them the morning before.

They met few fellow travelers, and those they did meet paid scant attention to the man and the boy carrying the violins. As it chanced, there was no one in sight when the man, walking in the grass at the side of the road, stumbled and fell heavily to the ground.

David sprang quickly forward.

„Father, what is it? WHAT IS IT?“

There was no answer.

„Daddy, why don't you speak to me? See, it's David!“

With a painful effort the man roused himself and sat up. For a moment he gazed dully into the boy's face; then a half-forgotten something seemed to stir him into feverish action. With shaking fingers he handed David his watch and a small ivory miniature. Then he searched his pockets until on the ground before him lay a shining pile of gold-pieces – to David there seemed to be a hundred of them.

„Take them – hide them – keep them. David, until you – need them,“ panted the man. „Then go – go on. I can't.“

„Alone? Without you?“ demurred the boy, aghast. „Why, father, I couldn't! I don't know the way. Besides, I'd rather stay with you,“ he added soothingly, as he slipped the watch and the miniature into his pocket; „then we can both go.“ And he dropped himself down at his father's side.

The man shook his head feebly, and pointed again to the gold-pieces.

„Take them, David, – hide them,“ he chattered with pale lips.

Almost impatiently the boy began picking up the money and tucking it into his pockets.

„But, father, I'm not going without you,“ he declared stoutly, as the last bit of gold slipped out of sight, and a horse and wagon rattled around the turn of the road above.

The driver of the horse glanced disapprovingly at the man and the boy by the roadside; but he did not stop. After he had passed, the boy turned again to his father. The man was fumbling once more in his pockets. This time from his coat he produced a pencil and a small notebook from which he tore a page, and began to write, laboriously, painfully.