

ELEANOR H. PORTER

THE ROAD TO UNDERSTANDING

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About this eBook

THE ROAD TO UNDERSTANDING

Eleanor H. Porter

Eleanor H. Porter, 1917

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CHAPTER I

FROSTED CAKES AND SHOTGUNS

If Burke Denby had not been given all the frosted cakes and toy shotguns he wanted at the age of ten, it might not have been so difficult to convince him at the age of twenty that he did not want to marry Helen Barnet.

Mabel, the beautiful and adored wife of John Denby, had died when Burke was four years old; and since that time, life, for Burke, had been victory unseasoned with defeat. A succession of „anything-for-peace“ rulers of the nursery, and a father who could not bring himself to be the cause of the slightest shadow on the face of one who was the breathing image of his lost wife, had all contributed to these victories.

Nor had even school-days brought the usual wholesome discipline and democratic leveling; for a pocketful of money and a naturally generous disposition made a combination not to be lightly overlooked by boys and girls ever alert for „fun“; and an influential father and the scarcity of desirable positions made another combination not to be lightly overlooked by impecunious teachers anxious to hold their „jobs.“ It was easy to ignore minor faults, especially as the lad had really a brilliant mind, and (when not crossed) a most amiable disposition.

Between the boy and his father all during the years of childhood and youth, the relationship was very beautiful – so beautiful that the entire town saw it and expressed its approval: in public by nods and admiring adjectives; in private by frequent admonitions to wayward sons and thoughtless fathers to follow the pattern so gloriously set for them.

Of all this John Denby saw nothing; nor would he have given it a thought if he had seen it. John Denby gave little thought to anything, after his wife died, except to business and his boy, Burke. Business, under his skillful management and carefully selected assistants, soon almost ran itself. There was left then only the boy, Burke.

From the first they were comrades, even when comradeship meant the poring over a Mother Goose story-book, or mastering the intricacies of a game of tiddledywinks. Later, together, they explored the world of music, literature, science, and art, spending the long summer playtimes, still together, traveling in both well-known and little-known lands.

Toward everything fine and beautiful and luxurious the boy turned as a flower turns toward the light, which pleased the man greatly. And as the boy had but to express a wish to have it instantly find an echo in his father's heart, it is not strange, perhaps, that John Denby did not realize that, notwithstanding all his „training,“ self-control and self-sacrifice were unknown words to his son.

One word always, however, was held before the boy from the very first – mother; yet it was not as a word, either, but as a living presence. Always he was taught that she was with them, a bright, beautiful, gracious being, loving, tender, perfect. Whatever they saw was seen through her eyes. Whatever they did was done as with her. Stories of her beauty, charm, and goodness filled many

an hour of intimate talk. She was the one flawless woman born into the world – so said Burke's father to his son.

Burke was nearly twenty-one, and half through college, when he saw Helen Barnet. She was sitting in the big west window in the library, with the afternoon sun turning her wonderful hair to gold. In her arms she held a sleeping two-year-old boy. With the marvelous light on her face, and the crimson velvet draperies behind her, she looked not unlike a pictured Madonna. It was not, indeed, until a very lifelike red swept to the roots of the girl's hair that the young man, staring at her from the doorway, realized that she was not, in truth, a masterpiece on an old-time wall, but a very much alive, very much embarrassed young woman in his father's library.

With a blush that rivaled hers, and an incoherent apology, he backed hastily from the room. He went then in search of his father. He had returned from college an hour before to find his father's youngest sister, Eunice, and her family, guests in the house. But this stranger – this bewilderingly beautiful girl –

In the upper hall he came face to face with his father.

„Dad, who in Heaven's name is she?“ he demanded without preamble.

„She?“

„That exquisitely beautiful girl in the library. Who is she?“

„In the library? Girl? Nonsense! You're dreaming, Burke. There's no one here but your aunt.“

„But I just came from there. I saw her. She held a child in her arms.“

„Ho!“ John Denby gave a gesture as if tossing a trivial something aside. „You're dreaming again, Burke. The nursemaid, probably. Your aunt brought one with her. But, see here, son. I was looking for you. Come into my room. I wanted to know –“ And he plunged into a subject far removed from nursemaids and their charges.

Burke, however, was not to be so lightly diverted. True, he remained for ten minutes at his father's side, and he listened dutifully to what his father said; but the day was not an hour older before he had sought and found the girl he had seen in the library.

She was not in the library now. She was on the wide veranda, swinging the cherubic boy in the hammock. To Burke she looked even more bewitching than she had before. As a pictured saint, hung about with the aloofness of the intangible and the unreal, she had been beautiful and alluring enough; but now, as a breathing, moving creature treading his own familiar veranda and touching with her white hands his own common hammock, she was bewilderingly entralling.

Combating again an almost overwhelming desire to stand in awed worship, he advanced hastily, speaking with a diffidence and an incoherence utterly foreign to his usual blithe boyishness.

„Oh, I hope – I didn't, did I? Did I wake – the baby up?“

With a start the girl turned, her blue eyes wide.

„You? Oh, in the library –“

„Yes; an hour ago. I do hope I didn't – wake him up!“

Before the ardent admiration in the young man's eyes, the girl's fell.

„Oh, no, sir. He just – woke himself.“

„Oh, I'm so glad! And – and I want you to forgive me for – for staring at you so rudely. You see, I was so surprised to – to see you there like – like a picture, and – You will forgive me – er – I don't know your name.“

„Barnet – Helen Barnet.“ She blushed prettily; then she laughed, throwing him a mischievous glance. „Oh, yes, I'll forgive you; but – I don't know your name, either.“

„Thank you. I knew you'd – understand. I'm Denby – Burke Denby.“

„Mr. Denby's son?“

„Yes.“

„Oh-h!“

At the admiration in her eyes and voice he unconsciously straightened himself.

„And do you live – here?“ breathed the girl.

To hide the inexplicable emotion that seemed suddenly to be swelling within him, the young man laughed lightly.

„Of course – when I'm not away!“ His eyes challenged her, and she met the sally with a gurgle of laughter.

„Oh, I meant – when you're not away,“ she bridled.

He watched the wild-rose color sweep to her temples – and stepped nearer.

„But you haven't told me a thing of yourself – yet,“ he complained.

She sighed – and at the sigh an unreasoning wrath against an unknown something rose within him.

„There's nothing to tell,“ she murmured. „I'm just here – a nurse to Master Paul and his brother.“ Denby's wrath became reasoning and definite. It was directed against the world in general, and his aunt in particular, that they should permit for one instant this glorious creature to sacrifice her charm and sweetness on the altar of menial services to a couple of unappreciative infants.

„Oh, I'm so sorry!“ he breathed, plainly aglow at the intimate nearness of this heart-to-heart talk. „But I'm glad – you're here!“

Once more, before he turned reluctantly away, he gazed straight into her blue eyes – and the game was on.

It was a pretty game. The young man was hard hit, and it was his first wound from Cupid's dart. Heretofore in his curriculum girls had not been included; and the closeness of his association with his father had not been conducive to incipient love affairs. Perhaps, for these reasons, he was all the more ardent a wooer. Certainly an ardent wooer he was. There was no gainsaying that – though the boy himself, at first, did not recognize it as wooing at all.

It began with pity.

He was so sorry for her – doomed to slave all day for those two rascally small boys. He could not keep her out of his mind. As he tramped the hills the next morning the very blue of the sky and the softness of the air against his cheek became a pain to him – she was tied to a stuffy nursery. His own freedom of will and movement became a source of actual vexation – she was bound to a „do this“ and a „do that“ all day. He wondered then, suddenly, if he could not in some way help. He sought her as soon as possible.

„Come, I want you to go to walk with me. I want to show you the view from Pike’s Hill,“ he urged.

„Me? To walk? Why, Mr. Denby, I can’t!“

Again the wild-rose flush came and went – and again Burke Denby stepped nearer.

„Why not?“

„Why, I couldn’t leave the children; besides – it’s Master Paul’s nap hour.“

„What a pity – when it’s so beautiful out! To-morrow, then, in the morning?“

She shook her head.

„I couldn’t, Mr. Denby.“

„The afternoon, then?“

„No.“

„Is it because you don’t want to?“

„Want to!“

At the look of longing that leaped to her face, the thwarted youth felt again the fierce wrath he had known the first day of their meeting.

„Then, by Jove, you shall!“ he vowed. „Don’t they ever give you any time to yourself?“

She dimpled into shy laughter.

„I shall have a few hours Thursday – after three.“

„Good! I’ll remember. We’ll go then.“

And they went.

To Burke Denby it was a wonderful and a brand-new experience. Never had the sky been so blue, the air so soft, the woods so enchantingly beautiful. And he was so glad that they were thus – for her. She was enjoying it so much, and he was so glad that he could give this happiness to her! Enthusiastically he pointed out here a bird and there a flower; carefully he helped her over every stick and stone; determinedly he set himself to making her forget her dreary daily tasks. And when she lifted her wondering eyes to his face, or placed her half-reluctant fingers in his extended hand, how he thrilled and tingled through his whole being – he had not supposed that unselfish service to a fellow-being could bring to one such a warm sense of gratification.

At the top of the hill they sat down to rest, before them the wonderful panorama of grandeur – the green valley, the silvery river, the far-reaching mauve and purple mountains.

„My, isn’t this real pretty!“ exclaimed the girl.

HE WAS LOOKING AT HER LOVELY, GLORIFIED FACE

The young man scarcely heard the words, else he would have frowned unconsciously at the „real pretty.“ He was looking at her lovely, glorified face.

„I thought you’d like it,“ he breathed.

„Oh, I do.“

„I know another just as fine. We’ll go there next.“

A shadow like a cloud crossed her face.

„But I have so little time!“

The cloud leaped to his face now and became thunderous.

„Shucks! I forgot. What a nuisance! Oh, I say, you know, I don't think you ought to be doing – such work. Do you – forgive me, but do you really – have to?“

„Yes, I have to.“

She had turned her face half away, but he thought he could see tears in her eyes.

„Are you – all alone, then? Haven't you any – people?“ His voice had grown very tender.

„No – no one. Father died, then mother. There was no one else – to care; and no – money.“

„Oh, I'm so – so sorry!“

He spoke awkwardly, with obvious restraint. He wanted suddenly to take her in his arms – to soothe and comfort her as one would a child. But she was not a child, and it would not do, of course. But she looked so forlorn, so appealing, so sweet, so absolutely dear –

He got abruptly to his feet.

„Come, come, this will never do!“ he exclaimed blithely. „Here I am – making you talk of your work and your troubles, when I took you up here with the express intention of making you forget them. Suppose we go through this little path here. There's a dandy spring of cold water farther on. And – and forgive me, please. I won't make you – talk any more.“

And he would not, indeed, he vowed to himself. She was no child. She was a young woman grown, and a very beautiful one, at that. He could not console her with a kiss and a caress, and a bonbon, of course. But he could give her a bit of playtime, now and then – and he would, too. He would see to it that, for the rest of her stay under his father's roof, she should not want for the companionship of some one who – who „cared.“ He would be her kind and thoughtful good friend. Indeed, he would!

Burke Denby began the very next morning to be a friend to Miss Barnet. Accepting as irrevocable the fact that she could not be separated from her work, he made no plans that did not include Masters Paul and Percy Allen.

„I'm going to take your sons for a drive this morning, if you don't mind,“ he said briskly to his aunt at the breakfast table.

„Mind? Of course I don't, you dear boy,“ answered the pleased mother, fondly. „You're the one that will mind – as you'll discover, I fear, when you find yourself with a couple of mischievous small boys on your hands!“

„I'm not worrying,“ laughed the youth. „I shall take Miss Barnet along, too.“

„Oh – Helen? That's all right, then. You'll do nicely with her,“ smiled Mrs. Allen, as she rose from the table. „If you'll excuse me, I'll go and see that the boys are made ready for their treat.“

Burke Denby took the boys for a drive almost every day after that. He discovered that Miss Barnet greatly enjoyed driving. There were picnics, too, in the cool green of the woods, on two or three fine days. Miss Barnet also liked picnics. Still pursuant of his plan to give the forlorn little nursemaid „one good time in her life,“ Burke Denby contrived to be with her not a little in between drives and picnics. Ostensibly he was putting up swings, building toy houses, playing ball

with Masters Paul and Percy Allen; but in reality he was trying to put a little „interest“ into Miss Helen Barnet’s daily task. He was so sorry for her! It was such a shame that so gloriously beautiful a girl should be doomed to a slavery like that! He was so glad that for a time he might bring some brightness into her life!

„And do you see how perfectly devoted Burke is to Paul and Percy?“ cried Mrs. Allen, one day, to her brother. „I had no idea the dear boy was so fond of children!“

„Hm-m. Is he really, indeed,“ murmured John Denby. „No, I had not noticed.“

John Denby spoke vaguely, yet with a shade of irritation. Fond as he was of his sister and of his small nephews, he was finding it difficult to accustom himself to the revolutionary changes in his daily routine that their presence made necessary. He was learning to absent himself more and more from the house.

For a week, therefore, unchallenged, and cheerfully intent on his benevolent mission, Burke Denby continued his drives and picnics and ball-playing with Masters Paul and Percy Allen; then, very suddenly, four little words from the lips of Helen Barnet changed for him the earth and the sky above.

„When I go away –“ she began.

„When you – go – away!“ he interrupted.

„Yes. Why, Mr. Denby, what makes you look so – queer?“

„Nothing. I was thinking – that is, I had forgotten – I –“ He rose to his feet abruptly, and crossed the room. At the window, for a full minute, he stood motionless, looking out at the falling rain. When he turned back into the room there was a new expression on his face. With a quick glance at the children playing on the rug before the fireplace, he crossed straight to the plainly surprised young woman and dropped himself in a chair at her side.

„Helen Barnet, will you – marry me?“ he asked softly.

„Mr. Denby!“

With a boyish laugh Burke Denby drew his chair nearer. His face was alight with the confident happiness of one who has never known rebuff.

„You are surprised – and so was I, a minute ago. You see, it came to me all in a flash – what it would be to live – without you.“ His voice grew tender. „Helen, you will stay, and be my wife?“

„Oh, no, no – I mustn’t, I can’t! Why, of course I can’t, Mr. Denby,“ fluttered the girl, in a panic of startled embarrassment. „I’m sure you – you don’t want me to.“

„But I do. Listen!“ He threw another quick glance at the absorbed children as he reached out and took possession of her hand. „It all came to me, back there at the window – the dreariness, the emptiness of – everything, without you. And I saw then what you’ve been to me every day this past week. How I’ve watched for you and waited for you, and how everything I did and said and had was just – something for you. And I knew then that I – I loved you. You see, I – I never loved any one before,“ – the boyish red swept to his forehead as he laughed whimsically, – “and so I – I didn’t recognize the symptoms!“ With the lightness of his words he was plainly trying to hide the shake in his voice. „Helen, you – will?“

„Oh, but I – I – !“ Her eyes were frightened and pleading.

„Don’t you care at all?“