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Cupid's Understudy

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CUPID'S UNDERSTUDY

by

Edward Salisbury Field

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Chapter One

If Dad had been a coal baron, like Mr. Tudor Carstairs, or a stock-watering captain of industry, like Mrs. Sanderson-Spear's husband, or descended from a long line of whisky distillers, like Mrs. Carmichael Porter, why, then his little Elizabeth would have been allowed the to sit in seat of the scornful with the rest of the Four Hundred, and this story would never have been written. But Dad wasn't any of these things; he was just an old love who had made seven million dollars by the luckiest fluke in the world.

Everybody in southern California knew it was a fluke, too, so the seven millions came in for all the respect that would otherwise have fallen to Dad. Of course we were celebrities, in a way, but in a very horrid way. Dad was Old Tom Middleton, who used to keep a livery-stable in San Bernardino, and I was Old Tom Middleton's girl, "who actually used to live over a livery-stable, my dear!" It sounds fearfully sordid, doesn't it?

But it wasn't sordid, really, for I never actually lived over a stable. Indeed, we had the sweetest cottage in all San Bernardino. I remember it so well: the long, cool porch, the wonderful gold-of-Ophir roses, the honeysuckle where the linnets nested, the mocking birds that sang all night long; the perfume of the jasmine, of the orange-blossoms, the pink flame of the peach trees in April, the ever-changing color of the mountains. And I remember Ninette, my little Creole mother, gay as a butterfly, carefree as a meadow-lark. 'Twas she who planted the jasmine.

My little mother died when I was seven years old. Dad and I and my old black mammy, Rachel, stayed on in the cottage. The mocking-birds still sang, and the linnets still nested in the honeysuckle, but nothing was ever quite the same again. It was like a different world; it was a different world. There were gold-of-Ophir roses, and, peach blossoms in April, but there was no more jasmine; Dad had it all dug up. To this day he turns pale at the sight of it—poor Dad!

When I was twelve years old, Dad sold out his hardware business, intending to put his money in an orange grove at Riverside,

but the nicest livery-stable in San Bernardino happened to be for sale just then, so he bought that instead, for he was always crazy about horses.

To see me trotting about in Paquin gowns and Doucet models, you'd never think I owed them to three owlish little burros, would you? But it's a fact. When Dad took over the livery-stable, he found he was the proud possessor of three donkeys, as well as some twenty-odd horses, and a dozen or so buggies, buckboards and surries. The burros ate their solemn heads off all winter, but in May it had been the custom to send them to Strawberry Valley in charge of a Mexican who hired them out to the boarders at the summer hotel there. Luckily for us, when Fortune came stalking down the main street of San Bernardino to knock at the door of the Golden Eagle Stables, both dad and the burros were at home. If either had been out, we might be poor this very minute.

It is generally understood that when Fortune goes a-visiting, she goes disguised, so it's small wonder Dad didn't recognize her at first. She wasn't even a "her"; she was a he, a great, awkward Swede with mouse-colored hair and a Yon Yonsen accent—you know the kind—slow to anger; slow to everything, without "j" in his alphabet—by the name of Olaf Knutsen.

Now Olaf was a dreamer. Not the conventional sort of a dreamer, who sees beauty in everything but an honest day's work, but a brawny, pick-swinging dreamer who had dug holes in the ground at the end of many rainbows. That he had never yet uncovered the elusive pot of gold didn't seem to bother him in the least; for him, that tender plant called Hope flowered perennially. And now he was bent on following another rainbow; a rainbow which, arching over the mountains, ended in that arid, pitiless waste known in the south country as Death Valley.

He wouldn't fail this time. No, by Yimminy! With Dad's three burros, and plenty of bacon and beans and water—it was to be a grub-stake, of course—he would make both their fortunes. And the beautiful part about it was, he did.

No doubt you have heard of the famous Golden Eagle mine. Well, that's what Olaf and the three burros found in Death Valley. Good old Olaf! He named the mine after Dad's livery-stable in San Ber-

nardino, and he insisted on keeping only a half interest, even though Dad fought him about it. You see, Dad didn't have the reputation of being the squarest man in San Bernardino for nothing.

Chapter Two

My mother's family had never approved of her marriage with Dad, but Dad, poor and running a hardware shop or a livery-stable, and Dad with a fortune in his hands were two very different people—from their standpoint, at least; so as soon as Olaf and the three burros struck it rich, Dad sold his livery-stable, and mammy Rachel and I were bundled off to Ninette's relations in New Orleans. I didn't like it a bit at first, but one can get used to anything in time. Ninette's maiden sister, Miss Marie Madeline Antoinette Hortense Prevost, was awfully nice to me; so was grandmere Prevost. I lived with them till I was sixteen, when I was sent to France.

If I wanted to (and you would let me) I could personally conduct you to Paris, where if you were ten feet tall and not averse to staring, you could look over a certain gray stone wall on the Boulevard des Invalides, and see me pacing sedately up and down the gravel walks in the garden of the Convent of the Sacred Heart. That is, you could have seen me three years ago. I'm not there now, thank goodness! I'm in California.

And just one word before we go any further any further. I don't want you to think for a minute that I came back from Paris a little Frenchified miss. No, indeed! I'm as American as they make them. When I boasted to the other girls, whether in Paris or New Orleans, I always boasted about two things: Dad and California. And I've an idea I'll go on boasting about them till my dying day.

Of course, when I returned from Paris, Dad met me in New York. It was a good thing he was rich, for it took a lot of money to get me and my seven trunks through the custom-house. It might have taken more, though, if it hadn't been for a young man who came over on the same boat.

He was such a good-looking young man; tall and broad-shouldered and fair, with light-brown hair, and the nicest eyes you ever saw. It wasn't their color so much (his eyes were blue) as the way they looked at you that made them so attractive. He was awfully well bred, too! He noticed me a lot on the boat (I had a perfect love of a Redfern coat to wear on deck), but he didn't try to scrape

acquaintance with me. He worshipped from afar (a woman can always tell when a man's thinking about her), and while I wouldn't have had him act otherwise for the world, I was crazy to have him speak to me.

Our boat docked at Hoboken, and by tipping right and left I managed to be the very first passenger down the gangway. I half ran, half slid, but I landed in Dad's arms.

My boxes and bags passed through the custom-house with flying colors. But my trunks—I couldn't even find them all. Five of them were stacked in the "M" division, but the other two... Then there was my maid's trunk to look for under the "V's" (her name is Valentine). Dad and I were commencing at "A," prepared to go through the whole alphabet, if necessary, when the nice young man stepped up and, raising his hat, asked if he might be of any service. He asked Dad, but he looked at me.

"Oh, If you please!" I said "I've lost two trunks. My brand is a white, 'M' in a red circle."

"I noticed them in the 'R' pile" he replied. "I'll have them moved to the 'M's' right away."

"Now that's what I call being decent," said Dad, as soon as the young man had left us. "Did you notice, he didn't wear a uniform? Probably an inspector, or something of the sort, eh, Elizabeth?"

"Well—er—not exactly," I managed to say. "The fact is, Dad, he came over on the boat with me, and—"

Dad looked thoughtful.

"He never spoke to me once the whole trip," I added hastily.

Dad looked less thoughtful.

"It was nice of him to wait till I had you with me, wasn't it?"

Dad smiled. "If you think it was, it probably was, my dear," he said.

Chapter Three

The nice young man did more than find my missing trunks; he found a custom-house officer, and, after asking me privately which trunks contained my most valuable possessions and how much I had thought of declaring, he succeeded in having them passed through on my own valuation without any undue exposure of their contents.

By this time Dad had grown very respectful. To see his little Elizabeth treated like a queen, while on all sides angry women were having their best gowns pawed over and mussed; was a most wholesome lesson. He paid the thousand and odd dollars duty like a little man.

We'd been saved a lot of bother, and nobody hates a lot of bother more than Dad. So when the trunks were locked and strapped and ready to be sent to our hotel, Dad went up to the nice young man and said: "I'm Tom Middleton, from California, and this is my daughter Elizabeth. We're both very grateful to you, and if you should ever happen to come to California, I hope you'll look us up."

That's Dad all over!

I never saw anybody look so pleased as the young man: "My name's Porter," he said, "Blakely Porter. If my mother were in New York I would ask if she might call on Miss Middleton, but, as it happens, she's in California, where I intend to join her, so I shall look forward to seeing you there."

Then Dad did just the right thing. "What's the use of waiting till we get to California?" he said. "Why not dine with us to-night!"

There are people, merely conventional people, who could never appreciate the fine directness and simplicity, of Dad's nature—not if they lived to be a thousand years old. But Mr. Blakely Porter understood perfectly; I know he did, for he told me so afterwards. "It was the greatest compliment I ever had paid me in my life," he said. "Your father knew nothing about me, absolutely nothing, yet he invited me to dine with him—and you. It was splendid, splendid!"

The dear boy didn't know, perhaps, that honesty shone in his eyes, that one could not look at him and deny he was a gentleman. And, of course, I didn't enlighten him, for it is well for men, particularly, young men, to feel grateful, and the least bit humble; it keeps them from being spoiled.

But to return to the dinner invitation: Mr. Porter accepted it eagerly. "It is more than kind of you," he said. "My mother is away, and her house is closed. It is my first home-coming in four years, and I should have been lonely to-night."

And poor Dad, who has been lonely—oh, so lonely!—ever since Ninette died, shook hands with him, and said: "If my daughter and I can keep you from feeling lonely, we shall be so glad. We are stopping at The Plaza, and we dine at half past seven."

Then Mr. Porter found us a taxi-cab, and away we went.

It was good to be in America again. I made Dad stop the car, and have the top put back, even though it was freezing cold, for I had never been in New York before (when I'd gone to France, I had sailed from New Orleans) and I wanted to see everything. The tall buildings, the elevated, even the bad paving till we got to Fifth Avenue, interested me immensely, as they would any one to whom. Paris had been home, and New York a foreign city. Not that I had ever thought of Paris as my real home; home was, where my heart was—with Dad. I tried to make him understand how, happy I was to be with him, how I had missed him, and California.

"So you missed your old father; did you, girlie?"

"Yes, Dad."

"And you'll be glad to go to California?"

"Oh, so glad!"

"Then," said Dad, "we'll start tomorrow."

Our rooms at the hotel were perfect; there was a bed room and bath for me a bed room and bath for Dad, with a sitting room between, all facing the Park. And there were roses everywhere; huge American Beauties, dear, wee, pink roses, roses of flaming red. I turned to Dad, who was standing in the middle of the sitting room, beaming at me. "You delightful old spendthrift!" I cried. "What do

you mean by buying millions of roses? And in the middle of January too! You deserve to be disciplined, and you shall be."

"Discipline is an excellent thing; even if it does disturb the set of one's tie," Dad remarked thoughtfully, a moment later.

"I couldn't help hugging you, Daddy."

"My dear, that hug of yours was the sweetest thing that has happened to your dad in many a long year."

And then, of course, I had to hug him again.

After luncheon (we had it in our sitting room) Dad asked if I would enjoy a drive through the Park.

"I should enjoy it immensely," I said, "but I can't possibly go."

You see, there was a trunk to unpack, the one holding my prettiest dinner gown. Of course Valentine was quite capable of attending to the unpacking. Still, one likes to inspect everything one is to wear, especially when one is expecting a guest to dinner. "Then," said Dad, "I think I'll order dinner, and go for a walk, shall we have dinner here?"

"Oh, by all means! This is so much more homelike than a public dining room."

"I'll not be gone more than an hour or two... Hullo! Come in."

A small boy entered, carrying a box quite as big as himself. "For Miss Middleton," he said.

"Another present from you, Dad?"

"Open it, my dear."

"I thought so," he remarked, as the removal of the cover displayed more American Beauties. (There were five dozen;) I counted them after Dad had gone. Another million roses and in the middle of January! "Who's the spendthrift this time, Elizabeth?"

"His name," I said, slipping a card: from the envelope that lay on a huge bow of red ribbon, "is Mr. Blakely Porter."

Although I know, now, there are many things more beautiful, I believed, then, that nothing more beautiful had ever happened; for it was the first time a man had ever sent me roses. Nineteen years

old, and my first roses! They made me so happy. Paris seemed very far away; the convent was a mythical place I had seen in a dream; nothing was real but Dad, and America, and the roses somebody, had sent. Somebody!

Chapter Four

Mr. Porter arrived on time to the minute, looking perfectly splendid in a wonderful furlined coat. And if his eyes were anxious, and his manner a bit constrained at first, it didn't last long; Dad's greeting was too cordial, not to make him feel at home. Indeed, he talked delightfully all through dinner, and with the coffee, half laughingly, half apologizingly told us the story of his life. "For," said he, "although I feel as if I'd known you always," (he looked at Dad, but I was sure he meant me, too) "you may not feel the same in regard to me—and I want you to."

It was sweet to see Dad grow almost boyish in his insistence that he felt as Mr. Porter did. "Nonsense!" he said. "It seems the most natural thing in the world to have you here. Doesn't it Elizabeth!"

It was rather embarrassing to be asked such a question in Mr. Porter's presence, but I managed to murmur a weak "Yes, indeed!" Inside, though, I felt just as Dad did, and I was fearfully interested in Mr. Porter's account of himself. I could see, too, that he belittled the real things, and magnified the unimportant. According to his narrative, the unimportant things were that he was a civil engineer, that he had been in Peru building a railroad for an English syndicate, and that the railroad was now practically completed; he seemed, however, to attach great importance to the cable that had called him to London to appear before a board of directors, for that had been the indirect means of his taking passage on the same ship with me. Then there was the wonderful fact that he was to see us in California. He had been in harness now for four years, he said, and he felt as if he'd earned a vacation. At all events, he meant to take one.

As neither he nor Dad would hear of my leaving them to their cigars, I sat by and listened, and loved it all, every minute of it. I didn't know, then (I don't know to this day) whether I liked Mr. Porter best for being so boyish, or so manly. But manly men who retain all the enthusiasms of youth have a certain charm one likes instinctively, I think.

There is no doubt that Mr. Porter quite captivated Dad. "You make me feel like a boy," he said, after listening to a delightfully whimsical account of conditions in Peru. "By George, that's a country for you! And Ecuador, I've always thought that must be an interesting place. Have you ever been there?"

Yes, Mr. Porter had been to Ecuador. And there was a certain railroad in India he had helped put through. India! Now that WAS a place! Had Dad ever been to India?

No, Dad had never been to India, but... "Good Lord, boy, how old are you, anyway?"

"Thirty-two."

"Well, I never would have guessed it. Would you, Elizabeth?"

This, too, was rather embarrassing, but I managed to say I thought Mr. Porter didn't look a day over twenty-eight.

"It's the life he leads," Dad declared with an air of proprietorship— "out of doors all day long. It must be great!"

"It IS interesting. But I think I like it best for what it has done for one; you see, I was supposed to have lungs once, long ago. Now I'm as sound as a dollar."

"He looks it, doesn't he, Elizabeth!"

If Dad hadn't been such a dear, I should have been annoyed by his constant requests for my opinion where it was so obviously unnecessary. But Dad is such a dear. To make it worse, Mr. Porter seemed to consider that whether he was, or was not, as sound as a dollar, depended entirely on my answer.

"One would think I was a sort of supreme court from the way Dad refers all questions to me. But I warn you, Mr. Porter; my 'yes' or 'no' makes little difference in his opinions."

"You are my supreme court, and they do," declared Dad.

"I'm sure they do," said Mr. Porter,

"When the novelty of having me with you has worn off, you'll be your same old domineering self, Daddy dear."