

"It's only three years, and I shall see you often," he managed to say, "and I am going to work hard, and there will be a nice house for you to choose and furnish—"

"You are not to over-work. Do you hear? I will not have it, Balaam," the half-child, half-woman cried quickly. "And oh! do remember to change your socks when they are wet! Promise, Balaam!" And Balaam, a great lump in his throat, promised huskily.

Then he tore himself away and went back to his empty life and hard work.

II.

If the first coming of Balaam's baby had been a surprise, the second was a whirlwind.

One dreary winter day Balaam sat in the same old chambers in Grey's Inn, busily engaged on a brief—an occupation which was no longer a novelty. He raised himself at length, stretching his arms wearily, and sighed. He worked so hard, and somehow to-day things seemed extra cheerless and lonely. As the light fell on his face, it was clear that the last five years had not been altogether years of plenty; hard work—too hard work—struggle and endeavour, were deeply scored upon it; there were lines round the firm kindly mouth, and more than a little grey in the dark hair. He looked older than his thirty-five years. It all spelt one word—Pixie.

First, that illness of hers at school, when he had been with her day and night through endless hours of anxiety and danger. Then the second parting two years later, when she, as lanky as one so dainty could possibly be, had seemed cold and constrained. The doctor insisted on a sunny climate for a couple of years, and so Balaam had arranged she should finish her education and build up strength at the same time in foreign places.

She had gone and stayed away not two, but three years, and though she was nearly twenty, she showed no wish to return, though she might have guessed he was living cheaply and working hard, so that when she came it would be to a home worthy of a young girl's dream. But lately he had felt that home would never be; that the fruit of his endeavour was to be ashes. Her letters were few and far between, full of constraint, and she never mentioned her return. He ceased to mention it in the end. All the rest was satisfactory. She won golden opinions wherever she went; she was not only lovely, but clever and charming, and—so her chaperone told him, proudly—surrounded by devoted young men everywhere.

The young barrister sighed again, and looked dully into the dying fire.

"Youth to youth, gaiety to gaiety," he muttered. "What right have I to selfishly condemn her to make sunshine for an old fogey like me?"

He did not look much like an old fogey; if extremely grave, he was, and always must be, an unusually handsome man, with a tall, strong figure, an alert carriage; but perhaps his responsibilities made him feel old, and his friends had long gone their several ways, and somehow he had never seemed to have time to make new ones. His energies had been spent in preparing for the coming of Pixie, yet they were wasted years—she would never come now. He read Mademoiselle's last letter only too plainly. There was someone out there, young, gay, handsome, entirely eligible. Pixie evidently liked him greatly. The fire was going out, dying like his own youth and happiness, but it did not seem worth while to shout for more coal; probably Mrs. Burt would take no notice. The whole room looked cheerless, miserable, but he had grown accustomed to lack of brightness since Pixie had gone.

Suddenly a noise startled him—a light, flying tread, the rustle of a dress. The next moment the door burst open, the room became illuminated by a whirlwind of fleecy skirts, a mass of golden hair piled on a small, lovely head, and Pixie—the old Pixie—leapt at him through the dimness and was clinging to him in a state half-laughter, half-tears. "Oh, Balaam! to be back at last!" she cried. "How long the time has been!"

"A lifetime!" he returned, his arms round her. "Did you really want to come back? I thought—"

"I was counting the days. I wanted to do you credit, to learn enough to make me a companion to you. How sick I got of the blue skies and the sunshine with my heart in these dear old chambers all the time! And so the boys have gone, and you are all alone. It's time I came. You and I are left, Balaam; you and I are left."

"Thank God!" he echoed. "You and I are left!" He bent and kissed her—his own little loving Pixie! As their lips met a strange emotion seized him. This was not the old Pixie, but a new Pixie—a woman. As when he had put his arm round her at that first coming, so now, when she nestled within it, she crept into his heart all over again—but in a new way, an even dearer way. He did not realise what it

meant; he only knew he had never dreamt such joy as this. Then she pulled herself suddenly away, and a sense of shyness fell upon them for a moment.

"So you are still pigging it," she exclaimed indignantly at length. "You always told me you had lots of money, that I was to deny myself nothing, and all the time you've been living in this discomfort, denying yourself. Oh! what a selfish, blind little beast I've been!"

"No, don't, dear. I waited for you to come and choose your home. We will see about it at once. Where is Mademoiselle?"

"In France," she retorted. "I ran away from her. I am quite capable of looking after myself, and it's all nonsense about a chaperone. I won't have a third, so there, Balaam! Besides, I am your ward, your adopted daughter—" She broke off, laughing nervously.

"Yes," he agreed quietly, "that is it—my adopted daughter." And the life went out of his voice.

"Light the lamp," Pixie commanded. "I have not seen you yet, and I want to know if you like my frock, and think I have grown up a—credit." As the lamp was lit she uttered a startled exclamation. "Oh!" she cried. "How old you look! And your hair is grey!"

"Oh, I am quite suitable for a father," he attempted to say, lightly, though he had winced at the careless words. "But let me look at you. Ah!" It was no wonder he broke off with an exclamation, for Pixie had more than fulfilled the promise of her lovely childhood.

"I am glad you like my frock," she said, demurely. "It was made in Vienna, and cost—oh, you poor Balaam!—crowds. And I kept it for our meeting."

"It's not altogether the frock, child," he said, smiling. "You have grown up quite terribly lovely, my dear, and you will be a shocking responsibility, and I fear I shan't remain in undisputed possession very long."

"Why not?" she cried, growing very pink.

He only smiled and sighed in answer.

Then she went round the flat and scolded Balaam about the dust and disorder she found everywhere. "It really is time you had someone to look after you, you helpless old bachelor!" she exclaimed. "We will look for the ideal flat or house at once, and say good-bye to Mrs. Burt and whiskey. Do you hear?"

"I hear and obey," returned Balaam, radiant. He determined to live in the present; he would not think of that third parting which must come some day.

She got the tea, though he insisted on helping, and a more delicious tea, in spite of stale bread and salt butter, neither had ever tasted. Then she unpacked some of her possessions to make him admire her frocks and the useless presents she had bought for him. After that, she went into his room and brought out an armful of garments sadly in need of repair, and while she plied a nimble needle and chatted gaily, Balaam sat smoking in contented silence by her side.

When at length she rose to go to her own room, she did not kiss him as in the old days, but shyly offered her hand, and Balaam's face unmistakably fell. He held her fingers tightly for a moment, only too conscious of what had happened—he had fallen in love with his ward and adopted daughter. Was there ever anything more ridiculous? He dropped her hand and turned away with a sharp sigh.

"Good-night," said Pixie radiant, dropping him a demure curtsy.

A few days later they were established in a furnished flat, while Pixie sought and found the ideal home and furniture. At the end of a month they were settled in a delightful home, and people began to call and ask the lovely orphan to numerous entertainments. Most of them took it for granted that Balaam, who never had gone out, did not care for society. "He is quite past that sort of thing—a regular old fogey," they said. At first they had looked upon the *menage* as a queer one, till they remembered that Balaam had always been so old for his age, and had never seemed like other young men.

Fifteen years between such a pair is equivalent to a lifetime," they said. "Besides, she's his adopted daughter." And so the matter dropped.

As time went on, Balaam grew even quieter, and was seldom at home. He pleaded an excess of business. There were days when he could not trust himself alone with Pixie without betraying some of the great love surging in his heart, and to let her guess was to end everything. It was his wish that she accepted all the invitations, showed off her brilliant accomplishments, was courted and fêted and admired. Once or twice she had made him accompany her, and he stood aside while men thronged round her, pride and agony in his heart. Some day, soon, one of them would claim her, and everything would be over. Yet because her happiness must come first he told himself he wished her to

find it early, and he was prepared to make large settlements upon her. At last the blow fell; he knew it was coming when he saw her face, and braced himself up to meet it, though he had felt the colour leave his very lips.

"Come and tell me all about it," he said with a smile, trying to put her at her ease. "I know he is a good sort, or you would not care for him. Who is it?"

She sat on the arm of his chair, her eyes down-cast, her cheeks bright pink.

"He is the best man in all the world," she said fervently.

"Of course," agreed poor Balaam cheerfully.

"And the handsomest," she went on, defiantly.

"He ought to be."

"And the bravest and cleverest, and most unselfish and devoted," she insisted.

He also agreed to that.

"You see, I've got tired of always going out alone," she explained shyly, "and I thought a—husband would be the nicest sort of companion and chaperone—"

"But you are not marrying just because of that, dear?" he asked very anxiously. "You love this man, Pixie?"

"I could not help it," she returned; "no one could. I love him awfully."

"You have not told me his name."

"Well, you see, he has not asked me—yet." And she laughed nervously.

Balaam looked his amazement.

"But he's only waiting for encouragement, of course?"

"I hope so," she assented; "that's why I'm giving it him. Oh, Balaam, how dull you are!"

He turned to her trembling.

"You cannot mean—?" he gasped, trying to look into her eyes.

She met his gaze bravely for a moment, then she slipped into his arms and nestled contentedly against his shoulder.

"At last," she sighed. "How backward you have been, sir! I have practically had to ask *you*, and you fell badly in love with me when I came back—you know you did! I've always meant to marry you Balaam. That was why I let you send me away for such ages; I wanted to improve myself to be worthy. Sometimes I got frightened in case someone might take you away; that's why I hurried back without any notice, and so—"

Balaam was too happy for words, but as he drew her closer and kissed her, the sunshine came back into the room, never to desert it again.

There is someone else now—a Very Great Personage, with the true right to the title of "Balaam's Baby," and Balaam is no longer an old fogey.

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enough. His teeth would stick together until the taffy melted. He ate taffy till he fairly loathed it, and vowed that he would never come near the sugar camp again; but strange to say, next day there was nothing he craved for so much as taffy.

When at school the "fellows" told how they put chunks of soft taffy into the dog's mouth and closed his teeth tight upon it. The boy did not forget to try this trick on Towser, and fairly doubled up with laughter at the antics of the dog as he rolled on the ground and clawed at his mouth to get his jaws apart; but open they would not until the taffy was ready.

I have often wondered if the boys of to-day have as much real fun as we had in those jolly times. How far back it seems, and yet how vivid is the recollection as though but yesterday! I can see again in my mind's eye the old sugar camp with the tall trees reflecting the cheerful blaze with a background of dark woods beyond, as plainly as when a boy I sat beside the fire, ate taffy, and listened to the stories of the men who told of their boyhood days—days that brought as pleasant memories to them as the old sugar camp does now to me.

IN APRIL.

When spring unbound comes o'er us like a flood
My spirit slips its bars,
And thrills to see the trees break into bud
As skies break into stars;

And joys that earth is green with eager grass,
The heavens gray with rain,
And quickens when the spirit breezes pass,
And turn and pass again;

And dreams upon frog melodies at night,
Bird ecstasies at dawn,
And wakes to find sweet April at her height
And May still beckoning on.

—Ethelwyn Wetherald.