

BALAAM'S BABY

A Complete Story by WINIFRED BOGGS

BALAAM—his Christian name was lost in obscurity—was the type of man on whom others laid their burdens. He invariably took them up cheerfully, and "did his best." It was well his shoulders were broad and his pluck invincible.

And one day it came to pass that the strangest of all burdens was laid upon him.

He burst into the smoking-room of his club, where his three friends were sitting, with a face that caused them to lay down their pipes with gasps of amazement.

"He's got a brief, and doesn't know what to do with it!" cried a slight, fair youth.

"I think," wailed Balaam, "I could manage a brief, but a baby—!" His voice trailed off miserably.

The mouths of the three smokers opened wide.

"A distant connection has left it to me," explained Balaam; "and it's coming round to our chambers to-day. It's a—a—legacy. I spoke to Mrs. Burt about it, and she is very angry. She says I shall have to wash it (fancy Mrs. Burt thinking about washing!) dress it, and feed it, for she won't. If only I could afford a nurse—"

Then the three listeners doubled up and yelled with laughter.

"Balaam's going to dress and wash babies!" they spluttered.

Balaam did not laugh.

"I shall do my best," he said simply.

He was a handsome youth of two-and-twenty, with keen grey eyes and a kindly, resolute mouth. People always trusted Balaam; they also loved him. Fate had not been over-kind to him hitherto, but it was said among those who knew a likely thing when they saw it that some day Balaam would go far. He had made up his mind to succeed at the Bar, though he was without influence or money, and kept body and soul together indifferently well by doing hack press-work—which he hated. He was entirely alone in the world, the mother of the baby having been his only relative. Hers was a sad story; a late, ill-advised marriage, a bad husband, and then privation and the approach of death. As she lay dying the thought of Balaam came to her, and it was to him she left her baby, happy in the thought that the helpless little mortal would have a strong arm between her and the world.

The coming of this odd penniless legacy would mean more hack work, but it never occurred to Balaam to refuse. His cousin had left to him her greatest treasure, and he meant to prove worthy of the trust.

"Coming to our chambers!" burst out Tom Carstairs suddenly, and they all stopped laughing. This was no laughing matter. The four young men lived together in one of the Grey's Inn squares, where they inhabited an attic floor of somewhat rickety nature.

"It jolly well isn't!" cried Jim Burton and Kenneth Earle, with heat. "A baby in the chambers! What next?"

"It's got to," sighed Balaam. "We must make the best of it. The woman who is bringing it over leaves it and hooks—"

"Then let us do ditto," said Carstairs, callously.

"How are we to work with squalling going on?" demanded Earle, angrily, of his friend.

"You can't work less than you do, that I see," retorted Balaam. "And there's that little room Legget used to have, quite out of the way. It's got to be looked after properly."

"Don't expect us to help—that's all!" said the three young men quickly.

"I don't," sighed Balaam, and he marched away as if preparing for execution.

They looked after him uneasily, conscious of having failed "old Balaam" in his hour of need. They glanced furtively at each other, half-rose, and then sat down blushing. They were all very young—mere boys, beginning their fight with the world, and they all secretly thought an inordinate amount of Balaam, who was slightly their senior and had been their school captain.

Carstairs was the first to rise; he angrily knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and strode towards the door.

"Going to help Balaam act nurse," he said defiantly.

Earle and Burton rose with relief and followed him, and the three young men dashed through the Strand and up to their attic floor in Gray's Inn. They felt fully repaid when Balaam turned towards them with a glad flash in his eyes. He was hanging

out of the window, waiting for the momentous arrival. Carstairs went and hung out of the other; it could not be said they any of them looked cheerful, for at the most they were merely resigned, and signs of acute nervousness were not lacking.

"There's a cab now," said Carstairs in a hoarse whisper, "and—and—a rummy sort of bundle inside."

Balaam turned very white, and an awful silence settled on the room.

"The woman will give it to Mrs. Burt," he said at length; "she promised me she would carry it up—this time. I—I could not trust myself all at once. I've heard they squirm out of your arms if you're not careful and hurt themselves; if they fall on their heads they grow up idiots."

Carstairs came away from the window, though not before he had seen a minute bundle handed to Mrs. Burt. "It's a very little 'un," he tried to say consolingly.

"The little 'uns are the worst," muttered Earle. "You have to wrap them in cotton-wool, and then they die—" he broke off suddenly, conscious that his remark was scarcely encouraging.

Balaam shivered with fright and wiped his forehead. Stumbling steps ascended the stairs, and once more Earle acted the part of Job's comforter.

"Mrs. Burt is drunk," he said, horror-struck. "She will drop it and break it."

Balaam gave a gasp and plunged towards the door, prepared to rescue the hapless infant; then, as a shrill scream fell on his ear, he wavered. The door was flung open suddenly, and Mrs. Burt, very red and dishevelled, appeared, dragging by the hand a small sprite with a piquant face alit with two great velvet brown eyes, and a golden mane of hair curling round her head. The little lady was plainly in a violent rage.

"Will have it—will have it!" she screamed, making snatches at the bundle Mrs. Burt carried, where a tiny waxen face was clearly visible.

Balaam stretched out his arms towards the bundle.

"Give me the baby," he said, commandingly, "and take this child away. What is she doing here?"

Mrs. Burt collapsed suddenly, and began to laugh shrilly, while a distinct odour of whiskey filled the room.

"Oh! bless you for an innercent!" she gasped. "Ere's the babby, then." And, to the young man's horror, she flung it carelessly on the couch.

The little girl sprang towards it with a shriek of rage, but Balaam was before her, and tenderly lifted up in his arms—a *wax doll*!

"Want dollie! Give me my dollie!" demanded the little maid imperiously.

Balaam handed it limply to her, while the three young men roared with laughter. He then assisted Mrs. Burt outside, and held out his hand to the small visitor.

"So you are not a baby," he said—and oh! the relief in his tones—"but quite old."

"I am eight," said the damsel, quite self-possessed. "You are Balaam, I suppose. I've come to live with you, Balaam, till mother comes and fetches me. I like you. You are very good-looking."

Balaam blushed, while the others laughed again. He lifted the beautiful little girl on his knee, where she sat contentedly, telling him her name was Pixie, while the young man stroked her curls and told her he felt sure it could be nothing else. Then she said she was hungry, and wanted jam and cakes for tea, and the three lads departed to buy recklessly the good things, while Balaam and his ward chatted happily together.

"I like you," she said, resting her head against him.

The young man put his arm round her in silence, and from that moment the odd baby crept into his heart.

The four lads showed themselves excellent tea-makers, and it was a very merry party that sat round the shabby old table. A clean cloth was unearthed in honour of the small princess. All the sunshine seemed to linger round the golden head as if loth to leave, and Pixie herself was like some shining star in the dull, dingy old room. Everybody pressed good things upon the child, enough to make her ill, if the truth must be told; but Balaam suddenly found wisdom, and made his charge eat chiefly of bread-and-butter, with a little jam at the conclusion of the feast.

"That was a very good tea," said Pixie gravely, when she had finished. "I think I shall like bein'

Balaam's little girl very much." And Balaam beamed all over his handsome face.

So Pixie came into the lives of those four lads, taking possession of their hearts, their home, and all that they had, and giving love to them all, but adoration to Balaam, who worshipped the child. And who shall say what they owed to the unconscious influence of the child, what snares avoided for her sake, what temptations overcome? It is at least certain they gave themselves ridiculous airs on account of her.

"Oh, no," they would say with elaborate carelessness to a friend, "can't stop just now. Balaam's Baby will be expecting us." And off they would go to amuse the maid, and assist with clumsy but willing fingers at the unfastening of strings that *would* get into a knot.

Never was a child so thought of, never were parents as proud as Pixie's adopted ones. The care, the thought, the sacrifice expended on her! The exquisite presents they bought for her! Balaam sat up writing till dawn half the week, that the baby might have some new gift, or a day in the country. The others might give her presents, but none but he might feed and clothe her; that was his proud prerogative, and one over which many a hot argument ensued, for Earle was getting on well as a black-and-white artist, and Burton and Carstairs had allowances from home. Perhaps it was because he had to work so hard for her, because she cost so much in many ways, that she became more and more precious. Balaam's love for the child was a blind, worshipping adoration that became almost painful to witness when one thought of the future.

Some day the child would be a woman—what then?

Married women living close would have made a pet of the lovely child, but Pixie declined their offers.

"It is very kind," she would say gravely, "but I have no time to come and play with your little girl and drive in the park with you. I must look after the boys and mend their things, and get the tea, and buy some supper."

And all this, and more, the quaint, old-fashioned little thing performed by the time she was twelve. She was still small and fragile, but growing fast—too fast, a woman warningly told Balaam, frightening him badly. Well-meaning friends told him other things, showed him the serpent in his Garden of Eden, informed him matters could not go on like that! the child must be sent to school, properly educated, put under the charge of women.

"She is being educated; we educate her," said Balaam, almost fiercely. "We each give her an hour a day, and she is wonderfully clever. I'm sure she knows twice as much as most children of her age."

And so she did, but it was boy's knowledge, not girl's, she learnt from her proud masters, and her quick, clever brain developed rapidly. Balaam tried to put a great dread from him—the thought of losing her, for some day he knew she must go to school, grow up, and perhaps leave them for months.

She was fifteen, very tall for her age, like a slender lily, when that terrible day dawned, Balaam, a rising young barrister of thirty, looking old and over-grave for his years—strenuous years they had been.

Pixie wept wildly as she said good-bye to the three young men, who all blew their noses violently, and told her time would soon pass and she must be quick and "get finished," and come back grown-up to live with them for ever after. In a few years Balaam was going to have ever such a grand house for her.

Balaam said nothing. He felt it was the parting of the ways—perhaps a lifelong parting. Things could never be the same again. When she was grown-up, even if she lived with him, people said they would have to have some lady as companion, which would spoil everything. He would be a dull old fogey, and she—it would be youth to youth, as it should be. He was losing her, and he knew it.

He went with her to the school, and after a long conversation with the principal, to which she listened amazed at his wisdom (for love had given him much wisdom), and promised to fulfil his many injunctions for the happiness of the new school-girl, he went to say good-bye to Pixie—the hardest task of his life. She did not make it any easier, for she clung to him, gazing imploringly in his face, her eyes wide with anguish, begging him to take her back.

"I can't live here away from you, Balaam," she sobbed.