



MANG BALDO'S DEBUT

(Short Story)

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At forty Mang Baldo enjoyed the love and confidence of all the children in Malinao, a beautiful lake town of Albay. Malinao was quite a big town, but when it came to giving the children a good time, Mang Baldo had no equal. He was very fond of children and the children were very much attached to him.

Children went to him just to tell him their worries and problems. Mang Baldo would listen patiently and would try to help them with their problems. He had prevented many children from running away from home, from stealing, from fighting, and from many other seemingly trivial problems which children consider very serious.

Most fathers were grateful to him, but there were others who resented this attachment. They just could not understand why Mang Baldo should enjoy more their children's confidence than theirs. At times they wanted to tell him, but the fact that Mang Baldo was simply motivated by the desire to help their children constrained them from doing so.

Mang Baldo was a widower and was living with his only son. His son although motherless did not feel so much the loss of his mother. Mang Baldo not only fathered him but also mothered him in the literal sense of the word. Mang Baldo loved his child so much that his son seemed to be a part of his life.

It was not surprising then that the death of his only child, a year later,

should alter the course of his life. This loss weighed heavily upon him. He seemed to have grown older in age. No longer was he the man with a ready smile for everybody. He was bitter about the world and this bitterness he nursed within him. He cursed his fate and blamed God for his sufferings, but the sight of a child—any child—seemed to erase all traces of bitterness in him. The touch of a child seemed to make him tender again. Now and then, some children would visit him in his house, and during those moments he seemed to be his old self again.

His actions of late made the parents wary about their children's safety. At times his neighbors could not stand his acts. He would wake up in the middle of the night and wake them only to inquire if his son was staying in their houses for the night. To humour him, his neighbors would allow him to search their rooms. If he sees a child, he would stop searching and quietly go back to his house, but if not, he would create such a rumpus that they were forced to drive him away. They knew he was harmless, but somehow they feared that their children were no longer safe in Mang Baldo's hands.

As a precaution, they instructed their children to stop visiting him. They told them stories designed to make them fear him, but these stories instead of producing the desired effect just served to kindle more the children's desire to see him. They could not believe the

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stories circulated about him. The children in spite of their age believed that it was but just and proper that they visit him.

Children who were afraid of their parents managed to visit him secretly. The parents were worried. They felt that something should be done about it. They became more worried when they learned that a boy who was seen last following Mang Baldo had mysteriously disappeared. They capitalized this and although no proofs could be found to attribute the loss of the boy to him, still they were determined to keep him somewhere, where he would not be a menace to the safety of their children.

Knowing that they could drive him out of the town, they approached Mang Ingo, Mang Baldo's rich brother, and presented the whole case before him.

Mang Ingo realizing the predicament his brother was in, decided to do something about it. He furnished one of the rooms in his house and invited Mang Baldo, his brother, to live with him. Mang Baldo at first refused the invitation, but was prevailed upon later on. Mang Ingo hired somebody to watch his brother and to see to it that he does not leave his room.

For several months the familiar figure of Mang Baldo walking silently along the streets was missed. His house, once a haven of children, was now deserted. The parents of the town seemed to like the change, but the children missed him very much.

The town was beginning to forget him. Then one day all the children received an invitation to attend the birthday party to be given in honor of Mang Ingo's youngest child. The parents of the children invited were at first hesitant to accept the invitation, but when Mang Ingo assured them that Mang Baldo would not be there, they immediately accepted the invitation.

The day of the party came. Mang Ingo's house was filled with children. The air was filled with shouting and merry making. Everybody was having a good time. In the midst of the celebration, Mang Baldo suddenly appeared in the midst of the children. He seemed to be the same Mang Baldo again. He greeted everybody with a smile and in a very loud and clear voice he said, "My children, I have missed you so much. If you will follow me to the garden, I will give you the surprise of your lives."

After so saying, he ran downstairs and headed for the garden. The sight of Mang Baldo made the children forget the party. Surprise or no surprise they were eager to follow him. As one they scrambled for the stairs and ran after him.

The parents who accompanied their children began cursing Mang Baldo. They never thought Mang Ingo would deliberately lie to them. They were assured Mang Baldo would not be there, but there he was taking all the children with him. They looked out of the window. What they saw made them madder. Mang Baldo did not stop at the garden, but instead opened the gate and crossed the street. When they saw their children still following him, they ran after them.

When they reached the gate, they heard shouts of "FIRE! FIRE!" coming from the house. When they looked back, they saw smoke coming out of Mang Ingo's kitchen. In two minutes the whole house was on fire.

The parents were dumbfounded. They just looked at each other and in that brief moment, their eyes spoke volumes of understanding.

The Filipino Expert

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