

# The Substitute

By Georgia Wood Pangborn

The day's heat, for a time made endurable by a small breeze, had been weighed down toward evening by a thunderous humidity. Only along the line of the beach it was tolerable.

Miss Marston had sat so long over her coffee that the room was now in twilight, but she had intercepted by a fretful gesture the maid who would have turned on the light. Her dining-room windows overlooked the water. Fifty feet below she could see the blurred figures of people on the beach, and could hear their voices at intervals, among them the piping staccato of Mrs. Van Duyne's convalescent children, allowed to stay up and be active in the cool of the evening to atone for the languor of the afternoon. Now and then the fretful cry of an ailing baby over-rode the other voices. But the babies that were sent to Mrs. Van Duyne always got well. That was her very wonderful business—making them well.

The heat was like a presence—a thing of definite substance that could be touched. Like a drug, too, making the senses strange, distorting distance and time. Although her eyes were upon the ocean, where the foam appeared and vanished dimly in long lines, lit only a little way out by the lights at the pier-head, it was the dark campus of her college town that Anna Marston's vision beheld, and the unsteady foam-crests of the waves were girls in white dresses, long rows of them coming and going within the obscurity of the trees.

"I am thirty-two," said Miss Marston aloud, and for that reason thought more keenly about when she was twenty-two. The same heavy air had folded in the evening of her Commencement Day, yet the girls had not seemed to mind.

"I suppose we had plenty of other things to think about," said she.

For a while she had gone about the campus with them, singing and laughing, and then, like this, had come to her window-seat to think; to decide, finally, not to marry Willis.

"And Mary Hannaford came in—Mary Hannaford—to show me her ring. I told her she was silly!"

Miss Marston moved restlessly.

Matters long ago forgotten will upon occasion freakishly insist upon remembrance, approaching suddenly, like the surprise of a familiar face in a crowded street. A dream plucks us by the sleeve, and we turn to see a childish countenance which has no more right than our own to inextinguishable youth. Or again, a word or a bar of music causes the barrier of years to fall as though it had never been, and we are in gardens that were dust years and years ago. Having once returned, these revenants keep us company for a while.

"I don't see why I should keep on thinking of Mary Hannaford," said Miss Marston, and went on thinking about Mary Hannaford—that perhaps she had not been silly, after all, but rather sensible to marry instead of keeping sulkily to something she called an "ideal," as Anna Marston had done.

"I wish—" said Miss Marston, vaguely, then frowned as the cry of the sick baby came up from the beach.

"Children—" said she; yet her tone, though troubled, was not exactly that of annoyance. Annoyance does not make the eyes wet.

She struck her clenched hand into her open palm, then lay back, drowsily inert in attitude, except that her underlip was caught between her teeth and her forehead was wrinkled with discontent.

She knew that the maids had slipped out for their walk on the beach. They had passed in their black-and-white, giggling, to the bluff stairs, and their squeals of joy at their release had reached her as soon as they were out of sight. She was alone, therefore. Yet she did not feel as if she were alone; not that there seemed to be another presence in the house, but the house itself had changed. Girls—so many!—went in light-footed haste through the halls. The room in which she sat was no longer a conventional dining-room. The walls, hidden in shadow, were garishly sprinkled with photographs and college pennants; the cushions of the window-seats were bright with college colors, and in a moment more Mary Hannaford would come in, wanting to talk under cover of the darkness about how happy she was, how fortunate above all other girls in the world. Mary Hannaford again!

Some one spoke her name. She sat up quickly and was aware of the indistinct pallor of a face.

It was by the voice, however, rather than by anything she saw that she recognized her visitor.

“Why, Mary Hannaford!” said she. “I haven’t seen you for ten years! And I’ve been thinking of you all day.”

The figure came forward swiftly and seated itself at the other end of the window-seat. Anna sank back, her sudden rousing having caused that odd vertigo which is common enough in times of great heat. She could not have said whether for an instant her hand touched that of her guest or not.

When the dizziness had passed, Mary was speaking. She sat with her knees drawn up and her hands clasped about them in the attitude Anna so well remembered.

“It’s ever so long since I stopped being Mary Hannaford. I’m Mary Barclay, you know.”

“Of course. You were the first of our set to go. How romantic we all felt about it! But you stopped writing after the babies came. All girls do. That’s what turns us old maids so sour—at least, partly. But do tell me! Have you a cottage here? And how did you find me?”

Mary Barclay appeared to be looking down at the beach. She did not answer her friend’s eager queries.

Anna Marston leaned forward and regarded her anxiously.

“Aren’t you feeling fit? You seem so pale.”

“Oh, quite!”

Anna reached toward the electric button, but Mary Barclay’s hand intervened, protesting.

“We don’t want lights, do we? Don’t you remember how we always liked to talk in the dark like this?”

“Well,” laughed Anna, “I’d just as soon you didn’t see my wrinkles yet. *You* look just the same, except that you haven’t any color. You had the reddest cheeks in the class.”

“And you didn’t marry, after all,” said Mary Barclay, slowly.

“No,” admitted Anna, rather fretfully. “The right man wouldn’t have me.”

“That is like you. You’d never make a second choice. Not that I think it’s wise of you.”

From the beach the baby’s cry rose again, weak, fretful, insistent. Anna Marston fidgeted.

“One of Mrs. Van Duyne’s patients. Of course I know the children there are all right, but sometimes I wish they weren’t quite so near. That’s a marasmus baby that came to-day. Its parents are very rich people. She’s keeping the children on the beach late this evening for the coolness. Think,” she broke out suddenly—“think what this day has been for the babies in the tenements! If it has been bad here, what must it have been there!”

“Yes,” said Mary Barclay. “It is very bad in the city just now.” She was looking steadily down toward the beach.

Anna waited for a moment, then asked timidly, “Aren’t you going to tell me something about yourself and your family?”

Ten years is a long time in which to know nothing of a friend—time enough for tragedies which will not bear discussing.

“Calvin died three years ago,” said Mary Barclay, after a silence.

“I didn’t know,” said Anna, softly.

“Three years ago. Benny was a year old then. There—wasn’t anything. We had been living on his salary. Death—we had forgotten there was such a thing. I found work. You know I had a sort of cleverness about clothes. I found fashion work that paid pretty well, only . . . they weren’t very strong babies. They had to have the best, or—or they wouldn’t stay, you know. Until now—they’ve stayed.”

“They are well now, then?”

“They are well now.”

Anna rose with an exclamation and walked up and down.

“Then I envy you. What a full life! Working—and for your own children. Lucky woman! In spite of your sorrow, lucky, lucky woman! Look at me. What good am I? I started out being my father’s companion and secretary. It did very well for a time. Then he married again, and I took my mother’s fortune and went my own way—clubs, municipal reform, every galvanic imitation of life I could find. I’ve been so desperate at times—”

“I know,” said Mary Barclay.

“How can you know?”

Anna halted in her pacing to stare at her friend through the obscurity. “That was partly why I came over here,” said Mary Barclay, in an odd, still voice. “I had to come, anyway, to see my babies. I had to do that,” she repeated.

“Your babies? At Mrs. Van Duyne’s? But you said they were well now.

“Yes,” said Mary Barclay. “She knows how to keep them well. The right air and food. There is so much to know. It isn’t simple. If I’d tried to keep them in the city—” She shook her head. “Calvin and I always agreed that if we could only bring them safely through the first five years they would be as strong as anybody’s children. Their brains are ahead of their bodies. But they aren’t weaklings! If they had been—weaklings don’t get anything out of life worth staying for. I—shouldn’t have been able to come here to-night if they hadn’t been worth while. But, you see, I know now—better than I did before—what they are.”

She broke off with a cry, yet when Anna would have drawn her arms about her she evaded her like a mist.

“Envy me,” moaned Mary Barclay, “but pity me, too!”

Recovering herself quickly, she leaned forward and spoke rapidly:

“What becomes of children when fathers and mothers die? Sometimes things turn out all right, I know. It isn’t always the same as when parent birds are shot and the nestlings starve. But sometimes it’s like that. When there are no relatives to take them, and no money has been left for their support—

“What happens when a little girl is left without a mother to tell her about growing up? And then children are always so—themselves. One child is never like another, yet people who don’t know try to treat them all alike.

“My little Martha! She never tells when her heart is broken or she has a pain and is really sick. She just gets cross, and you have to guess. She is apt to be rather naughty anyway. I’ve had to be patient—very. And, oh, such strange big thoughts as she thinks! And she can suffer, too! And then Benny; I suppose it was his sickness that—It was too much. Mrs. Van Duyne saved him. He was dying when I took him there. She saved him, but—I didn’t take care of Martha right when Benny was sick, and so she began to be sick, too. What could I do? So I’ve let her have them. Anything less than the best wouldn’t do, you see. I sold things—all I could—and went to work to earn money to pay her. Perhaps I worked a little too hard. I thought, I suppose, that so long as I was doing it for them nothing could beat me. Well, what’s done is done. They laugh and have red cheeks. But—”

She rose and looked down at her friend, then out of the window.

“The nurses are bringing them in from the beach to go to bed. They are very sweet when they are going to bed. Shall we meet them?”

They stepped from the window to the porch, Mary Barclay going lightly ahead. Her dress, of some indefinite color which mingled with that of the sand, made her almost invisible.

There was a long flight of steps leading from the bluff down to the beach. From its summit the slow footsteps of the nurses and children and their mingled voices were audible before their heads came into sight.

One rather fat and sleepy voice counted the steps incorrectly: “One, two, free, seventeen, a hundred—I got up first!”

The pioneer appeared abruptly on all-fours—something of a wounded veteran by his bandaged head, but cheerful. Terrible warfare he had been through, coming out of it with flags flying and glory rebounding to the surgeon first, but to Mrs. Van Duyne with even honor. He bore the proud title of Double Mastoid. Death had been close at his heels; Pain unispeakable had held him very tight in her terrible arms for a long time. Silence had threatened, too: no more kind voices, no music—but all those ogres had been sent to the right-about, far away now from a fat little boy. Already he was forgetting that anything had been wrong.

“I got up quicker’n anybody,” he crowed.

Then appeared a white cap, somewhat awry, and strong, kerchiefed shoulders. A young face bent over a tiny sleeping creature on an air-cushion carried steadily and lightly. This was little Marasmus, the latest recruit, and his attendant.

Then came just a plain feeding-case, whose mother didn’t dare take him back for fear that she and he would go and do the same wicked things over again just as soon as his Auntie Van Duyne’s back was turned. He was sleeping like a cherub. Nothing whatever the matter with *him!* He was one of Mrs. Van Duyne’s “Results,” said to have been once the duplicate of little Marasmus, but now the kind of person that tired-eyed physicians wag their heads over gloatingly and poke in the ribs—not with a stethoscope—and call “Old Top” in a companionable way, as if they respected him for having done something rather fine all on his own responsibility. He had had about a year of it, and Mrs. Van Duyne was going to hang on to him as long as she could, for she had her own opinion of mothers. Often and often they had undone her fine work just as she had everything going nicely. They never knew anything whatever of their children’s inwardness; clothes and hair were as far as they could go. She had all that wonderful hidden territory mapped out. She didn’t believe in raw milk very much, for one thing, and she did believe in a few other things which—well, she got results, anyway. Look at “Old Top”!

After him came two children, hand—in-hand; and these, Anna knew at once, were Mary’s two. She would have known even without the long trembling sigh that breathed past her ear. The little

girl looked so like Mary! She was about six, Anna judged, and her hair was twisted in a little knob on top of her head for coolness' sake—a fashion of hairdressing for very little girls which, more than another, perhaps, brings a lump into the throat. Is it because of its sweet caricature of maturity, as though both the promise and the menace of the years were revealed in those lines? Or is it that the curve of the back of the neck shown in this way is so lovely that it has a spiritual significance, like the odor of the first grass in spring or the color of evening sky through trees?

She walked with a rather conceited air, her gait indicating a lofty scorn of the Double Mastoid's claim to be a pioneer. She made it very evident that *she* could come up one foot after another, just like all other grown-ups, and she did it with a swagger, to render as obvious as possible her superiority in age, strength, and wisdom over the little boy at her side, who could do no better than one step at a time, and even so had to touch his hand to the tread now and then.

They were thin children, but thin like elves—not with the sadness and languor of sickness. And their faces in the twilight had a lambent quality, their eyes a liquid brightness. One felt that if the whim took them they might easily thrust forth gauzy wings and suddenly sail away with other night creatures.

In their conversation there was a pleasing breadth of impossibility that showed them to be as yet little acquainted with the restrictions of mortal life.

"I'm going to be an engineer when I grow up," stated the boy, "but I'm not going to be a man. I'm going to be a mother. My name isn't Benny."

"What is your name?" the girl asked, without surprise.

"I'm Nelly."

"Well, then, I won't be Martha. I'll be Rosie, and you're my little sister." She was in a kindly mood, which might not last. Only so long as the current of her dream flowed smoothly would Martha be good. The interruption came quickly.

"No, I'm your big sister. I'm not little at all. Auntie Van Duyne says I'm getting bigger every day."

"All right, then; I sha'n't play with you," quoth Martha, crisply, and stalked ahead, as naughty as her mother had described. And then Anna saw Mary, who had silently left her side, stoop over and apparently whisper softly to the cross little face surmounted by its wisp of topknot. Martha stopped, finger in mouth, to kick the sand with her toe and look with sidelong friendliness at Benny as he arrived, panting. Then they went on, once more in amity, their short arms stretched about each other's waists. And the mother kept beside them, still whispering in their ears and kissing them. Yet—they did not turn to her or answer.

"I hope mother'll bring us some paints," Martha was saying as they passed beyond hearing.

"If she does, I'll make her a picture of an engine," Benny joyfully planned.

"Mary!" called Anna. She was surprised to feel that she was trembling, not that she was in any way afraid. She could not have said what had so shaken her. No longer seeing her friend, she laughed and said aloud, "Oh, she must have gone into the house ahead of them."

A slower step was now coming up the bluff stairs, and there appeared a figure in professional white, strong and purposeful, but for the moment rather weary and thoughtful.

Miss Marston stepped forward.

"Good evening, Mrs. Van Duyne. I was coming over to see the Barclay children."

The troubled face was crossed by a flash of joyful surprise and relief.

"Oh, do you know them? I'm so thankful. I wish I'd known before. I've been nearly frantic. Of course, then, you know—"

She took a twist of yellow paper from her belt and handed it to Anna Marston, who did not open it, but trembled very much as she looked at Mrs. Van Duyne, in whose fine, wise eyes the tears glittered and brimmed over, unheeded. Tears were something which in Mrs. Van Duyne's code were a matter to be disregarded, like any other physical weakness in a person who never allowed herself to be sick.

"I haven't told them, of course. I shall put it off—as long as I possibly can. She worked herself to death—" She broke off with a burst of that kindly anger to which the very good and just are so easily stirred. "Her heart wasn't strong, and the heat finished her. The telegram came this afternoon. I can't tell you how glad I am to find out you are her friend. So far as I can make out she had no relatives. I"—she spread out her hands with a sort of desperation—"I do what I can."

Anna had heard tales enough to know that "what I can" meant an amazing amount of work without return in money, that it meant great kindness, of which advantage was often taken by weak and selfish people. Not that Mrs. Van Duyne ever told. Nevertheless, it had got about that one of the babies had never paid its board since it was a month old, yet you could not have guessed which was the delinquent by any difference between its care and that of "Old Top" or little Marasmus, for example, whose parents came and went in limousines loaded down with all sorts of toys, whose wardrobes were all silken-fine, and who, when they grew up, would be very high and mighty folk indeed. Old Top, certainly; Marasmus, in all probability—though that was going to be pretty brisk and delicate work for a while.

"Since you are a friend," went on Mrs. Van Duyne, "perhaps you can tell me what to do. I'm not talking about the immediate present. They—well, they are here, and they are dear children, though that little Martha is certainly a handful." She half laughed through her tears. "But there is so much future. . . . What about the years and years?"

Anna Marston was still shaking as though through the heat an icy wind had blown upon her. Once more she was aware of Mary Barclay—vividly aware—but this time it was not with her physical eyes that she seemed to see her. There was no further illusion—if it had been illusion—of that indistinct figure bending above those little, unconscious heads, touching them, kissing them, enveloping them, like a bird hovering over its nest.

Instead there was, as it were, an inward vision. She and Mary Barclay were again face to face, but it was not in any way a pitiful entreaty for charity which she read in her friend's eyes. Rather it was a command.

"Dear Mrs. Van Duyne," said Anna, trying to bring her voice under control, "Mary Barclay knows that I am ready to take her place. She knows I—I want them—both of them—more than anything else in the world."

The first sigh of the coming coolness breathed past them from the sea. It was like the long breath of one who, after great restlessness, turns at last to sleep.