

The Substitute

By WILL N. HARBEN.

Author of "Abner Daniel," "The Land of the Changing Sun," "The North Walk Mystery," Etc.

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[CONTINUED.]

Half an hour later Hanks slouched in and set down in his accustomed place at the stove. Kenner was eyeing him curiously, a quizzical smile playing on his face. Hanks swung his foot to and fro, his unlighted cigar in his hand, till he caught Hillyer's glance, then he grunted.

"Thought you was powerful smart, didn't you?" he said dryly.

"I don't know as I did," replied Hillyer, flushing a little.

"There was silence for a moment, then Hanks said, 'Well, you'll see what your money's gone of you'll keep a watch on it.'"

"I'll be gone clean to the Indian Territory as soon as Sandford's packed up his effects."

Hanks grunted again. "You never 'd done it of you hadn't loved 'im. I'd make it good, but I'll tell you now you'll never get a cent on that dratted note from me."

"I never expect to," said Hillyer, smiling agreeably.

"Oh, that'll do to talk," answered Hanks. "You think, though, that I'd never stand by an' see a body lose by a child of mine; but this is different. I was fitchin' up that boy according to my lights, an' you come in an' interfered."

"He told me he was twenty-one," said Hillyer, still amused, "and I saw a chance to lend 'im some money. That's all there is to it."

"Oh, well, you kin afford a little loss like that," retorted Hanks, "an' who's Bob's run through with the pile I kin show everybody I was right in the stand. As I tucked with 'im,"

As it was a busy hour, nothing more was said on the subject. A ragged farmer in a slouched hat came in to talk to Hanks about mortgaging a mule and a milk cow for his next year's supplies, and Hanks went out to see the mule and hear a minute description of the cow—her age, weight, progeny and habits.

That afternoon, as George and the merchant were closing the warehouse to go to supper, Kenner came along on the way to his boarding house. "They say old Lib's been hangin' round Bob's store all day watchin' 'im like a hawk," he informed them, with a laugh. "He can't hide his interest. As soon as Bub ud make a sale the old man ud run up to the cash drawer an' count the change an' ask the cost of the article. He's neglectin' his own matters. I'll swear it's funny. If he's talked with one man today he has with forty about Bob's venture. He wanted to find out what folks thinks, an' he's literally astonished to find so many believe Bob knows what he's doin'."

"I need 'in-standin' in Bob's door watchin' Bob an' Heneker Brothers' biddin' agin one another to buy a load of mountain chickens. I spoke to Lib, but he just kept chawin' his tobacco, so much absorbed he didn't hear me. Then we see the feller start to drive up to Bob's door, an' old Lib clapped his hands together an' said: 'By gum, Bob got 'em.' But he sorter looked down when the chickens was unloaded an' he heard Bob had bid 15 cents apiece all round. He grabbed Bob as he was passin' an' said: 'Say, don't you think you went too steep on that load?' Bob was purty red, an' away from liftin' at the coops—he was so anxious to get 'em in his shebang—an' he got redder, but he pulled the side of his face down, an' looked to see that the feller wasn't no spy. 'Say, I've got 'em already sold in Atlanta at 20 cents apiece, an' that gins'ergin' to take his pay in coffee at 15 cents a pound—coffee that cost 10 in New Orleans. You see what I come in, don't you?"

"You better go it sorter slow at the start," Lib said, but he was simply tickled to death. "I'll swear it was fun to watch 'im. He'd rather see fink how he learn how to handle money than for 'im to be elected governor of this state."

Old Hanks seldom left his home after supper, but that evening he dropped in at Hillyer's, finding the merchant and his wife before a cheerful fire by the sitting room. He came in awkwardly, but his self-possession was a thing he always had with him. Kenner had once said that Hanks could well scrap iron in a picaon tail coat and white vest and never realize the oddity of his appearance. His brown shoes were untied as if he had stepped to go to bed and changed his mind.

"I see Bob's got that store to go in," he said dryly. "I've been sorter watchin' 'im in 'im. I hardly know what to make of 'im."

Hillyer looked knowingly at his smiling wife and replied:

"So he's not opened up, has he?"

"Opened up? I reckon he has; tuck in ninety odd dollars today, an' the Lord only knows what profit he'll average. I don't reckon Bob does, from what I observed, though he isn't losin' no fur."

"Oh, he'll hold Sandford's trade," said Hillyer. "You kin count on that."

"Well, I reckon he will," said Mrs. Hillyer. "I've changed my account to him from Waters & Co. An' why shouldn't I? Do you reckon I'm not goin' to encourage rail enterprises? Jest the minute he told me he was agoin' to run a free delivery wagon to take orders an' deliver goods twice a day I put my name down. The idea o' them old fogies waitin' for young Bob Hanks to start a free delivery!"

Why, the minute I told Mrs. Hillyer about it she mightn't have said a word before supper. She'd been down an' ordered a whole raft of stuff she didn't need jest to see 'em come up like they do in cities. She's been trampin' from one end o' town to 'tother tellin' folks they won't have to make a step either way to get what they want for the table. Bob's boy'll sell the first thing

enough to me," rambled the major.

"Well, enough? She's the picture of health. But are you blind? Can't you see an inch before your nose? Don't you remember how she cried when we moved away from Richmond, and all the visits she promised Kitty Cosby and the other girls back there? Then you remember how she moaned about the first month she was in the pen, and how she made of this place and the people. But now look at her. She's fixed to death over everything there. What do you think it means, s'p?"

"Oh, she was sick and tired of that silly social set my darlin' said the major, and this simple healthy life here in the mountains agrees with her, as it has with me and you. I never knew what a good appetite or a pleasant night's sleep was till 'im."

"Oh, do dry up," Mrs. Cranston said to him. "You are as blind as I am."

Hanks looked at the fire. His eyes usually a dead thing, held a twinkle or was it only the reflection of the flames in the chimney?

"I sorter like his start," he admitted. "I was always afraid of the influence of that triflin' set o' boys bein' runnin' with, but today Bill Hanks the wint of the lot—drawed up a chair in front of the door what Sandford used to sit in an' whittin' an' started to take a seat. But bless you, Bob called 'im to taw-taw. 'Im he wasn't agoin' to have his friends settin' round the front of the stage that a way—said it didn't look brass-like, an' he was goin' to start right an' sorter hew to the line. Then, agin, one o' the clerks that Sandford used to let do purty much as he liked was startin' to light a cigar behind the show case, an' Bob yanked 'im up, an' 'cayn't have no smokin' in the house. Jim," he said politely, "we sell fire-crackers an' gunpowder, an' have to be careful. Besides, it don't look right, darlin' business hours, an' if we was to catch fire an' burn out we'd want to collect our insurance without bein' accused o' carelessness."

"Yes," Hillyer said, his amused glance on the face of his wife. "I believe Bob's goin' to do all right. My darlin' used to think I was dead lazy because I didn't like to chop sprouts in the middle o' August as well as I did to play ball twice as hard, but the sprouts was his fan an' the ball game mine. This here's Bob's fan, an' the only way to amount to a kill o' beans is to enjoy what you're at. You think you're a model business man, Hanks, but that's as much fun at the job you have as I playin' poker with a full hand on time for anybody but myself, but you're wide awake as it is. The truth is, you never tried to find out what Bob's talent is."

"Hanks drew himself up. He had not smiled during his visit, and he rarely made concessions. He did both now rather sheepishly.

"Well, I've come over to tell you that I'm goin' to take up that note," he said.

"What note is that?"

"Why, the one Bob give you. I reckon I'm able to stand the risk as well as you are."

"Well," and Hillyer smiled again at his wife, "I think you've got a lot o' call to come tell me a thing like that. When did I ever ask you to give up a good loan to me?"

"I think so myself," joined in Mrs. Hillyer, who had caught her husband's drift. "Why, Mr. Hillyer was jest sayin' 'tother day that it was mighty high impossible to put money out where it'd be safe an' draw any sort of interest, an' Bob's got a good payin' cash business."

Hanks shrugged his shoulders. His small smile had vanished; he looked shrewd.

"I reckon I'll have to give Bob the money, then, an' tell 'im to pay it off. I don't want 'im to be own' anybody."

"Oh, that's entirely a different matter," smiled the merchant. "But you kin bet I ain't agoin' to transfer any money without knowin' how it would suit my customer."

"An' that's nothin' more'n fair," said the lawyer as Hanks rose and started to leave.

The next morning at the warehouse Hanks seemed somewhat preoccupied. Presently in a full business and conversation he turned to Hillyer. "I mentioned that note to Bob this mornin' at breakfast, an' what you reckon he said? Huh?"

"How do I know?" replied the merchant.

"Hanks opened the door of the stove, a cigar in his hand, and began to look for a coal of fire. "It sorter bustled 'im, but he finally said that he believed he'd rather not take 'my offer, that he wanted to sorter work out his own sal' region." "What do you think of that?"

Hillyer shook his head, a pained expression on his face. He made no reply, but Kenner spoke up. "The boy don't intend to say no odds, Lib," he said, "an' I glory in his spunk."

CHAPTER XI

MAJOR CRANSTON lived in an old-fashioned, roomy house at the end of the widest and longest street Darby afforded. The exterior of the house was not very attractive, though it stood on a spacious lot kept lawn, but it was equipped throughout with the old furniture the Cranstons had brought from Virginia. There were rare pieces of solid mahogany in the big parlor, a piano which was a relic of the days of Washington, and sofas and chairs quite as ancient in appearance. On the white plastered walls hung family portraits in massive gilt frames.

It was one Sunday night about the middle of November. Lydia had retired to her room and the major was reading a newspaper in the lamp-light before a cheerful fire in the sitting room when Mrs. Cranston came in from the parlor.

"Well, you may be satisfied, Major Cranston," she said, "but I'm not."

"Oh, you are not! What's wrong now?" He put his paper down and looked up at her inquiringly.

"Well, I don't like the way Lydia is doing at all," replied the lady.

"What's she doing now?" The major spoke with just a little irritation, for he was interested in the political news he had been reading.

"She hasn't done anything—that's the trouble," answered Mrs. Cranston. "If she only would do and be like she was in Richmond I wouldn't care, but she's as different as can be."

"Why, I'm sure the child seems yell

enough to me," rambled the major.

"Well, enough? She's the picture of health. But are you blind? Can't you see an inch before your nose? Don't you remember how she cried when we moved away from Richmond, and all the visits she promised Kitty Cosby and the other girls back there? Then you remember how she moaned about the first month she was in the pen, and how she made of this place and the people. But now look at her. She's fixed to death over everything there. What do you think it means, s'p?"

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"What's not me is Hillyer's quar excitement all along. Why, he is as nervous as he can be. It don't look like he'd be that a-way with all that profit on his side. An' then, whenever there'd be a sale an' anybody advised 'im to sell, he'd always turn to George and say: 'I'm not agoin' to—never know 'im that way before—' an' whatever George would say next, but the old man is rattled but this mornin'."

"You say he is?"

"Yes, I was in the office just here when he got the reports. Two brothers wined that the top notch price was \$12, and that nobody could predict whether she'd advance or decline. The old man was as white as a sheet as he handed the telegrams to George an' washed his face. That boy is simply wonderful. He's as cool as a cucumber in a barrel of frozen blizzard. He's read every newspaper bearin' on wheat all over the country an' knows the thing from a to Z. He's on to every grain that's exported, every flour mill that's shut down on account of the rise—in fact, every detail concernin' wheat in American an' every-where else. I acknowledge I was excited just now watchin' the two. George didn't change countenance one bit; he just sorter laughed an' said: 'Well, that's one thing certain, Mr. Hillyer, that's certain ain't a doin' any more good, an', as far as I'm concerned, I reckon we'd better try to unload.'"

"Good Lord, he said that did he?"

"You bet, an' the old man got whiter an' more excited of anything. 'Remember it is just with you, George,' he said. 'Tell me positive, would you sell right now if it was your own? George hung his head a minute an' then he said: 'Yes, Mr. Hillyer, since you ask me I'm willin' to. It may climb to \$15.00 or even higher, but I don't want to risk it.' Then the old man shut around the office like a dog after his tail, wavin' for cash offers. I never seed the like. I tell you, old man, that's somethin' at the bottom o' this."

"What are they now?" asked Hanks.

"They wasn't in the office when I come through."

"Both of 'em struck off uptown for the telegraph office likely spilt. They was too anxious to wait for a messenger to bring the reports. Ha, that comes George now, long by Bob's store—see 'im—'an' right behind 'im is the old man. Did you ever see Hillyer walk like that? Let's go over to the office an' meet 'em."

Kenner and Hanks stood under the awning in front of the warehouse when George and the merchant arrived. They all went into the office together.

"You think Jacobs & Co. are the best to deal with, then?" the old man was saying eagerly. "Lord, my boy, if we slipped up now I couldn't stand it. We must trade with solid parties."

"Jacobs & Co. is all right," put in Kenner. "They are as good as the bank."

"Some banks ain't worth shucks," said Hillyer. "Look 'em up, George. See what their commercial rating is." George opened an enormous green-covered book on the desk, ran over the pages for a moment and turned. "They are quoted from three hundred to five hundred thousand; credit A," he said.

"Oh, yes, they are all right," said Kenner. "You'll get every cent they agree to pay. Don't you think so, Hanks?"

Hanks shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know a thing about 'em," he responded slowly, "but if it was my deal I would."

"Yes, you would," laughed Kenner, who never met an occasion too serious for a stab at Hanks. "You'd know the sort o' socks they were an' how their teeth was filled before they saw your money."

"If I had any doubts about it at all," said Hanks, "I'd attach a sight draft to the bill o' ladin'."

"Bill o' ladin', you dried moker," said Kenner. "This ain't no case o' saw from they are a shippin'. It's far worse, because full of wheat all over the south an' west. They've got to trust some body long enough to get the stuff transferred."

There was silence for a moment. Hillyer looked as if he were on the verge of a nervous collapse. "I don't know what to do," he said in a plaintive voice, "and we're jest got to act."

"Oh, if you feel uncertain about it," said Buckley, "why not simply lack your bankers in New Orleans to make a cash transfer and wire you when it is closed?"

"Of course," gasped Hillyer. "That's the very thing. I'll run up to the telegraph office."

George followed him to the door and detained him in the sunshine on the sidewalk. "Is there anything wrong, Mr. Hillyer?" he questioned in much concern.

For a moment the old man gave him an almost frantic stare.

"I know you think I'm crazy," he said, "but I can't be calm when so much is at stake. It seems to me, George, that of this thing falls through without gain I'm lost forever, and I don't stop me. I'll tell you every-thing after awhile. Put them better off the track; tell 'em anything, it ain't none o' their business."

"I actually believe the old man's got his nut a little loose," said Kenner. "Don't you think so, Lib?"

"How do I know?" said Hanks, rousing himself from the contemplation of some matter of his own.

"That's a fact," retorted the cotton buyer. "Couldn't expect one cracked man to judge the case of another."

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