

The Free Press Short Story

SUBSTITUTE TEACHER

MARGARET E. SANGSTER

SARA BRENT, sitting in the train that was rapidly whirling her toward the future, was acutely miserable. She was so miserable that the passing scenery held no interest for her, no interest whatsoever. She who had dreamed such grand achievements was at the beginning of a prosaic reality, and so what did scenery matter? She was going out not to conquer the world, but to take her place in the everyday life of a dull industrial city that was far from glamorous. She was going to the city to take up the drab business of teaching a class in a mission school.

A school teacher, and a substitute teacher at that! Sara had always said that she would never be one. When she was a little girl and had played with other little girls—when they had sat together in a huddle, mapping out their futures—she had been the one who exclaimed, "I want to do something fine, I want to have travel and excitement, I want to be a heroine." Other little girls could plan to be dressmakers or stenographers or yes, even teachers, but she had hitched her wagon to the star of fame. Big plans, important achievements—they were the goals that looked attractive to her.

Force of circumstances had sent her to normal school—and that the insistence of her maiden aunt, who supported her. Sara had never ceased to expect that before she was graduated, some broad avenue leading to adventure would open. Opportunistically, she felt, lay in wait just around the corner, some day it would knock at her door.

Opportunity had not done any such thing; opportunity was wasp in the case of Sara Brent. So it came about that, once she had won her normal school diploma, she had been turned upon the world.

It's time you find your proper niche," her aunt had said gently, and Sara had admitted the truth of her aunt's statement. She had applied for several positions in vain. Finally she had heard of a position in the mission school, unexpectedly vacant because of illness, but she had hoped that her application would not be accepted. When she received a letter accepting it, she wept bitter tears into her pillow.

Sitting in the train, Sara Brent was almost on the point of weeping a few more of the bitter tears. She could picture her teaching days—an endless chain of them—stretching out across the years; they would be fairly plastered with reading and writing and arithmetic. Oh, well, why think of them now—during her last hours of respite? She dabbed at her eyes and nose with a wet handkerchief, and after fingering a magazine that she had brought upon the station platform while waiting for her train. The magazine alighted through her listless hands and fell to the floor. A young man across the aisle stooped to pick it up.

Sara Brent, glancing up to murmur her thanks encountered a pair of the bluest eyes she had ever seen. They were set in a tanned, lean face.

"You're very kind," she murmured. "Oh, that's all right." The young man would have tipped his hat if he had had one on, but his hat lay beside him on the car seat.

Sara Brent smiled vaguely and opened the magazine at random and began to read the first article that came beneath her gaze. It was an article about a young woman who had done a deed that was both courageous and exciting. This young woman had flown an ocean quibic alone, in a tiny airplane. The article described her experiences simply and sympathetically, but with a glowing wealth of detail. The first paragraph of the article fairly gripped Sara. She read through to the end of it with breathless interest. In spite of the fact that airplane as it set out upon its mad flight, she, with the girl peered down through the darkness toward waves that could not be seen. She, with the girl, sighted land and received the screams of a continental cheering crowd. When she finally closed the magazine her eyes were sparkling and her cheeks were flushed. A young man across the aisle spoke.

"That must have been a very thrilling story," he said. "I never saw anything so described."

"It was interesting," Sara told him. "I was thinking of the young woman who flew the Atlantic. What a brave person she must have been—I should say—let me give anything to have such a chance."

"Maybe you'll fly some day," the young man said. "You're the type of person who will do fine things. I'm quite a judge of character. You know, I can tell!"

"You're not much of a judge of character," Sara's face had all at once lost its sparkle. "If you think I'm a type to do gallant deeds, I'll never get anywhere or do anything, if you must know."

"I'll never accomplish heroic feats. I'm the sort of person that'll fit into a commonplace niche and stay there—world without end—until I'm ninety. Look at me, now; I'm on my way to be a mission school teacher, a substitute teacher at that, in an ugly factory town that's full of smoke, oil burners and foreigners."

"Do you mind if I move over and sit opposite you? Your point of view is very interesting, and I want to hear more about it." Sara said, a trifle tartly. "Well, I'm glad you find my ideas interesting!" She added, more graciously, "Yes, I'd like you to move over. It will keep me from thinking about the things I'm not going to do." So the young man moved over to the seat opposite Sara and began to talk.

"You said," he began, "that you're on your way to be a school teacher in a factory town, and you said it as if the thought were very distasteful. I wonder if you'd mind telling me why you feel that way. Certainly you must have wanted to be a teacher or you wouldn't have studied to be one. Teaching's not a career that a girl leaps into lightly. Nor a man, either, for that matter," he added.

"I didn't leap into it lightly; I was pushed into teaching," Sara replied. "My aunt—I'm an orphan and she's taken care of me since I was a baby—wanted me to be a teacher, and I didn't have any choice. When you depend on a person for everything, you do what that person thinks best."

"Probably," said the young man. "It was best!" "It's all right for you to talk," said Sara, "you're a man and a man has more opportunities to do wonderful things than a woman. A woman seldom has opportunities to break away from the beaten track and blaze new trails. For instance, once I'm a school teacher I'll never break away. I'm going to dislike the work it's going to be drudgery, every minute of it—and yet I'll have to stick it out. When the youngsters are fighting their sums and scribbling things on the blackboard, my soul may be flying oceans, but it won't do me a speck of good!"

"Were you disappointed in your plans? Was there anything special you wanted to do?" Sara answered, "I hadn't planned to do anything special with my life. Perhaps that's the trouble," she added honestly. "I never actually concentrated on what I wanted to do. I'm a false alarm, I guess, because nothing ever seemed important enough to go after."

"Why don't you make teaching seem important to go after?" said the young man. "Really, you know, teaching isn't so bad, and it isn't so unheroic either. Of course, you won't be flying, but you will be doing a task that's pretty uplifting."

Sara ruffled through the pages of the magazine in her lap. She said, "I don't exactly understand."

"It's because you haven't tried to understand," said the young man. "You have weakly—I'm being very frank with you, and you mustn't dislike me for it—accepted the dictates of fate and made up your mind that you'd despise them even while you daintily obeyed. Let me tell you this: teaching, especially teaching in a mission school, in an industrial city, is a God-given privilege. You're a chance that's more important than flying an ocean. You're a chance to be a builder, if you come right down to it. You can bring brightness and hope into the life of every child who sits in your classroom. You can give them ideals that will carry them along forever. Why, many of those factory people—"

"he shrugged, "you must know the type of alien workers that I mean—haven't any ideas of either citizenship or right living! It will be your job to give them ideas through their children. As for the children themselves," he laughed pleasantly, "I'm sure you're making a future present out of what might have been a nameless anarchist."

"Sara was watching his interesting face. The young man had the athletic alert look of an explorer or a football player. He's the type of man I could tell in love with," she told herself, and felt a warm flush creeping into her cheeks at the thought. "But it's all right for him to talk," she added to herself, still repressed, "he's the kind who goes everywhere and stays everywhere. His very presence shows that he's got a great deal of sense and a very strong character."

"I don't know what you're thinking," said the young man, "but you probably lived out of doors and did a great many thrilling things." "I lived out of doors last summer," the young man said. "I've been at a camp. But my work during the winter isn't outdoors work; it's as confining as yours will be." So there, Miss Brent, he hesitated. "My name's Sara Brent," Sara told him. "And mine," said the young man, "is Lawrence Temple. People who know me, call me Larry."

"I'll probably never know you that well," Sara laughed, "because, after all, we're merely train-acquaintances. Our paths will divide when I get off at my station."

"How do you know?" asked Larry Temple, "that we won't get off at the same station? Stranger things have happened. My work lies in an industrial city, too—and there aren't many industrial cities at the end of this line."

"It couldn't be," said Sara, "that you are going to Steelton?" She shuddered a little as she spoke the name. It was so suggestive of the city that she dreaded. "It certainly could," Larry Temple told her. "That's exactly where I'm going—my job is in Steelton, and I consider it a very big job!"

"Then," said Sara, "you're a construction engineer or something, and you've a chance to get somewhere. You'll have some opportunities to reach high places, while I—"

"Think you," said Larry Temple, "are also reaching the high places. Oh, don't try to deny the future that's been given you, Miss Brent. Don't try to tell yourself that you are going firmly to a drab, unimportant work. I mean, everything that I've said, you're going to do a fine work—and you'll do it nicely."

Sara said, "You seem to know everything about everything. But wait until you've been shut up in a schoolroom for eternity, with a lot of stupid little brats."

"Wait until I have," said Larry Temple. "I won't call them stupid little brats, either—I'll call them my pupils. Do you know the meaning of pupil? It means, according to Mr. Webster's dictionary, a boy or girl under the age of twelve placed in charge of a tutor or guardian. You are going to be a guardian of these children who sit in your room, Miss Brent. You are going to guard them against unpleasant thoughts and unproductive futures. That's one of the biggest jobs in the world! And now let's stop talking seriously. It's lunch time, and I wonder if you'd let me take you into the dining car for a bite to eat. By the time we're finished we'll probably have reached Steelton."

Sara was gazing into the eyes of the young man. What she saw in them made her feel for the first time in her life that perhaps she had not missed her vocation. "You are making me ashamed of myself," she said. "Yes, maybe it would be better if we didn't talk any more about teaching. After all, with you teaching is like old maid's children; you haven't any, and so you can talk! Anyway, I'd adore having luncheon with you and as you say—we'll be at our destination with the dessert."

So they went into the dining car and had luncheon.

Over their soup the two young people talked lightly, and over the lamb chops and green peas that followed they talked even more lightly. But when they came to the ice cream Sara spoke from the bottom of her heart.

"If I hadn't met you, Mr. Temple," she said, "I'd have gone to the mission school in a horrid temper. I'd have been ready to give up before I had started. Now I have a desire to do something worth while. I may not fly oceans, but I'll at least keep myself—and my charges—above the steel mills. I may not receive the applause of the crowd but, believe me, I'll win the applause and affection of the children!"

Larry Temple reached across the table and lightly touched Sara's hand. "You're a sweet child yourself," he said gently, "and I think we were brought together for a purpose. Perhaps," he added, "for more than one purpose!"

The train was beginning to rumble through the smoke-filled country. The conductor, standing in the doorway said, "Steelton, next stop."

Larry Temple reached in his pocket for a bill and paid for the luncheon. With Sara, he raced back to the possession coach where they gathered up their bags. The porter helped them carry those bags to the front of the car, and then they were in the vestibule waiting for the train to slow down to the grimy station—that was their destination. For one last moment, as she left the train—and after all, it was the last link to her home and her pleasant life and to her friends and to her aunt and to her dreams—Sara felt as if cold fingers were clutching at her heart.

Larry Temple's warm hand was reaching up and was helping her down the steps. And they were crossing the platform followed by the porter. At the edge of the platform Larry bathed a taxicab.

"I'll take you right to your door," he said. "That's the kind of sport I am!" Lurching forward he gave an address to the driver. As he gave the address, the car's eyes and mouth were wide with astonishment.

"Why," Sara exclaimed, "why, you show exactly where I'm going—don't you?" "That's my school, the only one in Steelton."

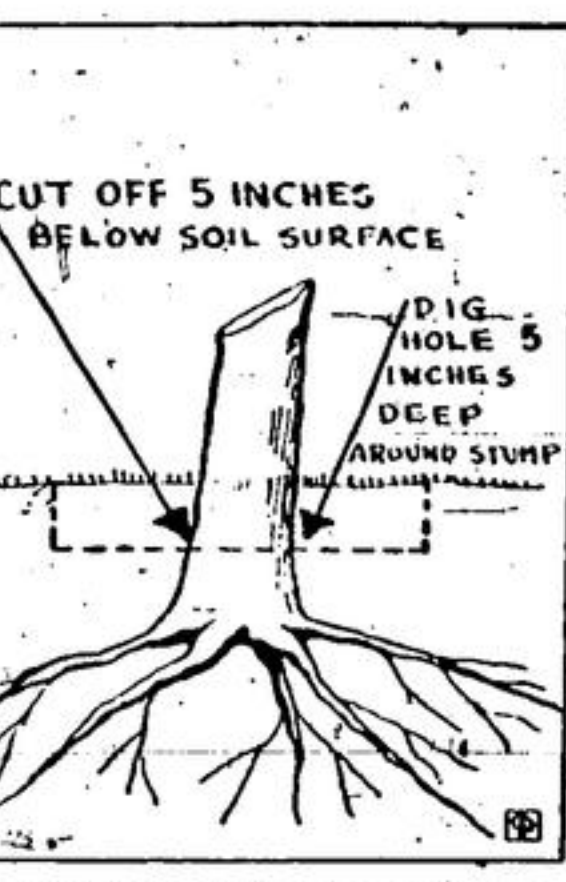
"Certainly not," laughed Larry Temple. "I'm not going after Miss Brent! The moment you told me your name I knew where you were going."

"May I ask how?" inquired Sara, she managed a laugh.

Larry Temple smiled in the taxicab. "I've an admission to make," he said. "It goes all the way back to your application for the job. You see, Miss Brent, I was I who checked your application. In Steelton the ones who don't call me Larry call me Doctor Temple. I'm a minister, and the superintendent of the school. Even the camp where I spent last summer is a camp sponsored by the mission. And young lady," he was laughing, but a note of seriousness lay beneath his laughter, "if you don't let me, the mark you'll have to answer to me."

Sara's eyes smiled into the vivid blue ones that were smiling down at her. "I'll like answering to you."

Weekly Garden-Graph Written by DEAN HALLIDAY for Central Press-Canadian



Vanishing act for tree stumps After a tree has been cut down in a lawn area, the stump protruding above ground presents a problem because of its unsightliness, for one hesitates to blow it out with an explosive or to use chemicals which will cause the stump to rot away.

A vanishing act that will cause the stump to disappear is illustrated in the above Garden-Graph. It is fairly simple: just dig a circular hole about five inches deep around the stump. When this has been accomplished, saw off the stump below the ground, and then fill up the hole with the soil. What remains of the stump and its roots will be effectively buried out of sight.

Grass seed can then be sown in the soil above the buried stump, and in a short time the grass will hide evidence of a filled-in hole.

JUST ASKING

Clegyman: "Well, Jock, how do you like married life?" "Well enough, but my wife's always asking for money!" "What does she do with it?" "I dunno ken. I ha'vna given her any yet!"

TESTS NEW DIVING SUIT



His wife lights a cigarette for Cyril Von Baumann, traveller, lecturer, and writer, as he completes an experimental dive in a New Jersey river, in which he used a new diving suit that requires no surface aid other than to be lowered and raised. A breathing mixture of oxygen and helium is used, precluding the use of an air line from the surface, while the special suit has been tested to withstand an external water pressure equal to that at a 2,000 foot level. Von Baumann hopes his experiments will make it possible to explore the seas at greater depths and with more comfort and safety than is now possible.

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W. H. Lashbrook 1111 Street ONTARIO

TAKING ADVANTAGE

At a recent bazaar in the Granite City a native was seen prowling about from stall to stall holding something under his overcoat. Finally he put his burden in the braai tub. "Do you want a penny dip?" asked the attendant. "No, me!" was the reply. "I was just giving my rabbit a feed."

THE EARTH CONQUERED

The golf novice had not made much progress, but he was a man of iron determination. "I'll move heaven and earth to play this game properly," he said, as for the fifth stroke in succession he pulled up the turf. The caddy smiled. "Well," he said, "you haven't moved further to go. You have only heaven to move now."

GRIZZLIES PLENTIFUL IN ROCKIES

"Good grizzly shooting will be possible in the Spring season, in an area south and west of Jasper National Park," said Fred Brewster, out-of-door authority when discussing big game conditions in the Rockies during a visit to Montreal. "It is an area that was 'shot out' years ago when the railways were building and with the disappearance of the bear the section was no longer attractive to hunters," explained Mr. Brewster, and he added: "As sometimes happens in 'forgotten' country of this character, the game being undisturbed over a period of years—found sanctuary there and multiplied until to-day the grizzlies are so plentiful that the place will soon become a magnet to big game hunters."

MAKING THEM PAY

"So Hilda's broken it off with Tommy, I wonder if she still keeps his love letters?" "Well, as a matter of fact, they're keeping her now."

HAIR-DO WANTED

"Hair cut, sir?" inquired a barber of a customer whose head was almost bereft of hair. "No," was the sarcastic retort. "I want it done up in a bun and fastened with a pluk ribbon."

TRUE ENOUGH

"The time will come," shouted the speaker, "when women will get men's letters!" "Yes," said the little man in the corner, "next Friday night."

THERE AREN'T MANY

Explorer: "I have made a remarkable discovery—a tribe of human beings that possess no weapon of warfare." Listener: "Is that so? Didn't think there was any part of the world that was civilized."

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