

# Straw Man; by Steve Bates

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## Straw Man

By Steve Bates

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Bonnie Clark tended a garden, and she tended it well. “Compost to make the plants sweet,” she was fond of saying when asked her secrets. “Bone meal to make them strong.”

For Bonnie, gardening was a solemn ceremony. When she entrusted a seed to the soil, it was as if she were investing a measure of her soul into the glad earth. She sang the garden’s secret litany of root growth and bud formation, bore its stigmata when insects and drought assailed it. After she harvested a luscious summer melon or a gaudy yellow dahlia flower, she found it profane to part with her creation for mere coins.

One fine autumn day, which proved cool enough to keep the fall crops tender yet mild enough to turn fruit into gold upon the trees, a hawk came to visit. Its familiar shadow caressed the pale green surfaces of plump cabbages, eased across the wide rows where Bonnie pushed her wooden wheelbarrow, and toyed with gnarled limbs in the orchard. In near silence, the proud bird settled upon the shoulder of a scarecrow, not ten paces from Bonnie.

Bonnie’s mother had advised her that hawks rarely appear close to humans, other than to take advantage of cultivated land that makes field mice such easy prey. Hawks often hunt in clusters of three or four, riding the thermals in a timeless dance above the earth. *This solitary bird, with its snowy breast, has been here before*, Bonnie thought. *It is much too smart to be scared by my scarecrow, for sure.*

“Have you ever seen a prettier spot?” Bonnie said, as if addressing a neighbor at a holiday picnic. The hawk deigned not to notice. It tilted its sharp head in short, jerky motions, assessing threats and opportunities instant by instant. Bonnie joined it in surveying their surroundings, relishing the patterns of cicada conversations, inhaling the rich odor of recently tilled earth, and contemplating the serenity of the rolling hills beyond.

The view was unchanged from the day so many years past when Bonnie’s mother dispatched the young maiden to town on an errand. It was there that she chanced to meet Frederick Thompson, an apprentice carpenter with a promising future. Bonnie’s father put an end to their brief courtship. Bonnie confronted her father in anger once; he struck her and forbade her to broach the matter henceforth. The Thompson boy wed Bonnie’s nearest neighbor, Sylvia-- though he, like Bonnie’s father, died much too young.

## Straw Man; by Steve Bates

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The scars from losing Frederick remained fresh and raw within Bonnie, even in her fifty-fourth year. Night after night, she stared into her fireplace, recalling the drizzly afternoon they met, longing for one more glance at his easy smile, and wondering how fate could be so cruel as to propel him into her neighbor's arms. But Bonnie forever loved the land more than any man.

Many were the sun-drenched days when young Bonnie toiled at her mother's side in the garden. They spoke little as they planted, thinned and watered, her mother imparting but two essential lessons season after season: One, "Waste nothing; whatever you cannot eat or use in your home, return to the soil." And two, "Suffer not a weed to live, but do not cut it above the soil. Remove it head, body and feet."

As a dark cloud occluded the sun, Bonnie noticed the hawk shift its position on the shoulder of the scarecrow, sinking its talons deep. "Take care now," Bonnie said. "My straw man is not a sturdy one." Bonnie knew these birds well, having watched them operate with ruthless efficiency many a season. They betrayed not the faintest hint of guilt at killing. Then again, they likely experienced not the slightest taste of joy in it, either.

"We are not all that different, you and I," Bonnie said at length. "We cannot always say where our next meal will come from. But we make do, don't we?"

Without warning, the hawk leapt into the sky, executed two graceful turns and became one with the woods. Fragments of straw cascaded from the scarecrow's sleeve. Bonnie knelt to gather the pieces. "That won't do now, will it?" she said to the figure as she hastened to repair the damage.

Bonnie Clark was fair-haired, stout, and sturdy as a fence post, with a round face, a weather-lined forehead and large gray eyes. Most townsfolk would describe her as ordinary, and Bonnie would not argue with that representation. But she would abide no ordinary scarecrow. Not like the ones her neighbors displayed, designed to frighten only small children and each other with their carved pumpkin heads or ghoulish faces painted crudely on burlap. More often than not, the neighbors' scarecrows could be found stretched out in mock crucifixion. Bonnie's straw man displayed its arms at odd angles, like a live man. Its clothes were a live man's, though degraded by age and weather. One could surmise that its topcoat was once black; its buttons had long ago abandoned their posts. A ragged plaid vest covered a faded red shirt. Beneath a rope belt, it wore frayed trousers and animal skin boots. Gloves provided lifelike hands. Its straw hat covered a pink gourd that Bonnie had decorated fastidiously with steely eyes, narrow eyebrows, a tiny nose and a tight grin.

## Straw Man; by Steve Bates

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“Now, my fine sentinel,” Bonnie said, wiping her hands on her gardening apron, “wish me luck on the morrow when I go to market, will you? I must sell our crops for silver coins lest let the taxman take all this away.”

# # #

Bonnie returned the borrowed mule and cart to Sylvia and completed her journey home on foot with a sack on her back and dread in her heart. Instead of the coins she needed to pay the taxman, she navigated the muddy ruts in the lane bearing only used clothing and winter supplies. The market attracted many sellers but few buyers this day, so she had been forced to barter to avoid returning home empty-handed. As she approached her cottage, crafted from the very stones that her grandfather had cleared from the field that became her garden, the home seemed like a mirage that could vanish under the influence of a single malevolent cloud.

*What shall I do when the taxman comes,* she wondered. She had always believed that the land would provide for her, that it would feed her body and soul and would produce enough income to pay her taxes and obtain necessary goods. Her mother had promised her as much. *Maybe the taxman can wait for spring,* Bonnie hoped.

She sought solace in her garden, thinning her lettuce plants. The variety she favored emerged as pale green seedlings in late summer, and with each day the tender tissues expanded ravenously. They borrowed color from the autumn sunsets until they displayed a fiery red hue. Bonnie would harvest single leaves or entire plants as her dinner and the market required.

Bonnie spotted a weed hiding amid the plants; she reached into her apron and withdrew a long, sharp knife. Recalling her mother’s lesson about weeds—“head, body and feet”—Bonnie plunged the blade into the soil, not once but several times, describing a circle around the offender. She upended the weed, roots and all, and tossed it into the undergrowth at the edge of the woods.

In the fading daylight, Bonnie walked the perimeter of her garden. The orchard occupied the north end, the tallest trees taking the brunt of the coldest winds. At the south edge, soaring, heat-loving sunflowers and tomatoes sheltered more sensitive plants amid summer’s wrath. Raised beds with tightly packed leaf crops captured the morning light to the east, while rows of wide-ranging plants such as potato vines were a fixture of the western side. At the center, where the land crested slightly, the scarecrow reigned. At its side, Bonnie observed the last slice of sun dissolving upon the nearly cloudless horizon.

*This is a bad sign,* she thought. *The frost will come soon.*

## Straw Man; by Steve Bates

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Sure enough, morning's first light revealed a blanket of sparkling crystals, each one melting the moment it was kissed by the sun's rays. Many of her plants survived; by their nature they were resilient in the onslaught of the season: spinach greens, lettuce, and root crops enveloped by comforting soil. Other plants perished, as was their fate at this hour: warm-weather melon vines and thin-skinned peppers among them.

Having washed her pans and spoons after a breakfast of gruel and tea, Bonnie examined the clothes that her prized cabbages, pears, and cut flowers had earned at the market: a homespun brown shirt, a broad-brimmed hat, rugged trousers, and tall boots. Suitable for a plain woman like herself. But Bonnie had clothes enough. She carried these items into the garden and displayed them to her scarecrow.

“Look what I bring to you, as a reward for safekeeping my garden,” she said to the straw man. With no breeze yet upon the land, the scarecrow remained motionless. “But it would be a shame to dress you in such fine apparel, only for winter to come calling so soon with cruel intent.”

Bonnie lifted the scarecrow off of the pole by which it was anchored in place. She carried it into her cottage and sat it upon a simply made wooden chair in front of a solid oak table. For as long as she could remember, Bonnie had set the table with two handmade placemats and two chairs, despite the fact that it was rare for a guest to share a meal. Two other chairs were fixed at the far end of the room, facing the broad stone fireplace and hearth. Her small bed was pushed up against the south wall, opposite a modest kitchen and privy. Two homespun rugs covered portions of the rough wood floor—one by her bed, the other above the trap door to her root cellar. Six windows allowed pale light to grace the home from various angles, lending an illusion of generous size. The smell of homemade bread and fresh apple cider lent a joyous atmosphere.

Bonnie stripped off the scarecrow's tattered clothes and proceeded to fit it with its new ones. She employed additional straw and other items at hand to fill out its figure to that of a strapping young man. Finally, she affixed black buttons to replace the hand-drawn eyes that the straw man had displayed through the gardening season. Stepping back, she admired her handiwork.

“You need a name, don't you now?” she said. It took but a moment.

“Mister. I shall call you Mister.”

No sooner had the name had left her lips than the line that indicated scarecrow's mouth began to thicken, stretch, and open. “I thank you,” he said, plain as day.

## Straw Man; by Steve Bates

---

Bonnie squinted at the straw man. She lifted a hand to her forehead but detected no fever. She felt chill air creeping around the windowpanes, smelled the sweet aroma of the morning fire, sensed warm blood coursing through her body. Yet still she wondered: *Is this a dream?*

“Did you say ‘thank you,’ Mister? Did I hear you speak, pray tell?”

“Yes, I did speak,” said the straw man. “Did I speak ... properly?”

Not a woman accustomed to denying what she found to be true, Bonnie replied warmly: “You spoke fine indeed, Mister. Fine indeed.”

“Good,” the straw man continued. “It be good that I spoke to you properly, lady.”

The scarecrow turned his head ever so slowly, one way, then the other, as if testing his mobility or examining his surroundings. He began to stretch his arms, and next his legs, though it appeared for a time as if his limbs were asleep or all but disconnected from his torso.

“Please indulge an old woman, if you would, Mister,” Bonnie said. “How is it that you appear as a live man, after I fashioned you from straw and needle and thread?”

“I know not,” said the scarecrow in a gentle and unassuming voice.

“Well now. I do not know either,” Bonnie said as the straw man raised himself to a standing position. “But I welcome you to my humble home. And I bid you make yourself comfortable.”

# # #

Soon the snows came. The scarecrow named Mister ate little, and at times Bonnie wondered if he were only pretending to take meals. Still, she undertook to teach him chores, such as cooking and cleaning. He was slow to grasp the lessons and even slower to accomplish them. But he conducted his duties without complaint, carrying wood in small bundles so that he would not place too much stress upon his straw body, and taking care not to allow his face to come close to the fire lest a stray spark ruin him. Many evenings Bonnie would order him to sit after hours of unabated labor. “The dust will still be waiting for you tomorrow,” she would say.

As the days advanced, Mister’s face gained a smoother, softer appearance, as if spending time in Bonnie’s presence had accustomed his features to those of his hostess. His limbs, so stiff at first, gained flexibility as he moved about the cottage. His typical facial expression, which to the casual witness might appear to indicate an absolute absence of thought, could be interpreted by a more astute bystander as that of a being full of wonder.

## Straw Man; by Steve Bates

---

Often in the hours after dinner, while the evening's fire still blazed brightly, Bonnie read to Mister. He seemed to listen dispassionately, but on occasion he would ask a question that demonstrated commendable attention.

"Lady, why did the girl and boy in the story push the witch into the oven so that she would burn to death?"

"The children in the story had no choice," said Bonnie, amused by the scarecrow's inquisitiveness. "Either the witch would die, or they would die. Sometimes, that is the way of the world."

Bonnie believed that the straw man would never gain sophistication, but she was glad for a companion, particularly in the dead of winter, when snow and ice made traveling the lane arduous and her neighbor Sylvia might not attempt a visit for weeks at a time.

One particularly cold night, Bonnie ambled to the chair where the scarecrow sat with a contented smile.

"Come and warm my bed," she said. He followed her innocently. When they were under her thick down blankets, she embraced him and placed her lips to his ears. She instructed him in the ways of lovemaking, and he responded.

Bonnie woke late the next morning. Mister had built up the fire and had gruel and tea waiting for her.

"Be of great care. This gruel be hot, lady," he said.

"Thank you. Thank you, Mister." While yet avoiding his eyes, she inquired, "Did you sleep well?"

"I cannot say for certain if I sleep, or rest, or do neither. I do find myself able to conduct all the chores you require. I hope that pleases you."

"Oh, everything you do pleases me," said Bonnie. "Everything, indeed."

# # #

After a time, there came a mild thaw in the winter. A sharp knock upon her door could only be that of a stranger; Sylvia and her few other neighbors would let themselves in.

"John Palmer. Tax collector," the visitor announced brusquely, removing a shiny, store-bought hat. "You must pay me five silver coins today, Mrs. Clark."

## Straw Man; by Steve Bates

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“Good day, Mr. Palmer. Nice of you to venture so far in a grim season,” said Bonnie, wondering what to say, what to do. “Are you sure about those five coins, now? That’s quite a lot to ask of a poor old woman, with only her garden, and so far away from the town. Is there no delay to be allowed, or no other form of payment I might offer?”

“There is no doubt about it,” said Palmer, who wore a fine dark coat and fancy breeches but appeared so pale and gaunt that a vigorous breeze might whisk him into the next county. He withdrew a document from his vest pocket. “It says right here, on this paper signed by the magistrate himself: ‘Clark; five silver coins.’ Now, will you kindly present them so that I may continue on my rounds?” The taxman appeared not to notice the seated figure of the scarecrow, yet he maintained an undisguised expression of disdain.

“Yes. Yes, of course,” said Bonnie. She struggled to contrive a plan. She had no silver coins. And there was something about this man, this tax collector, that repulsed her. He seemed odious and heartless, almost as severe as her father when he forbade her to see Frederick Thompson. This visitor was a nuisance to be excised, like a vile weed threatening to overtake her precious garden seedlings. Bonnie thought of her mother and drew confidence and resolve from that memory.

“Mr. Palmer, I keep my coins hidden in my root cellar. Would you please accompany me down the stairs so that your young eyes can help me tell silver from copper?”

“If I must,” said the taxman in a weary voice. “Pray, show me the way.”

Bonnie lit a candle, opened the door to the root cellar and started down the stairs. *Head, body and feet*, she recited silently. *Head, body and feet*.

When the two of them stood in the tiny chamber, Bonnie withdrew the gardening knife from her apron. The blade did its work effectively and with little noise, the taxman’s blood mixing with the red earth of the floor. After a time, Bonnie emerged. The scarecrow watched as she located a bigger knife and a sturdy sack and returned to the cellar.

“Come, help me, Mister, if you please,” Bonnie said from the root cellar as evening approached. “This is a heavy load.”

Mister peered into the dim cavern. “Where be Mr. Palmer?” he asked.

“Mr. Palmer has died,” said Bonnie matter-of-factly.

“He appeared quite alive when he descended these stairs,” said the straw man. “What misfortune befell him?”

## Straw Man; by Steve Bates

---

Bonnie thought for a moment. “Remember the story I told you about the children and the witch? This is like that story.”

The scarecrow was silent for a while. “Lady, did this man not have a purpose? Was it truly his fate to die today?”

“Yes, Mister, it was his fate. I have lived a long time, and I can tell you that it is so.”

The scarecrow asked no more questions. He watched as Bonnie salvaged buttons and buckles and then shredded and burned the remainder of Palmer’s clothes. Mister turned his attention to the evening meal, but upon its completion he nearly spilled Bonnie’s plate upon the floor. The following morning, he forgot to commence his chores until Bonnie snapped at him. And whenever Bonnie ventured close to him, the straw man stepped back from her with trepidation.

Bonnie seemed not to notice the scarecrow’s change in behavior, being focused on the disposition of the taxman’s remains. Over the next three days, she stripped all flesh from bone and reduced it to such a consistency that it would be consumed by her compost pile over time. The bones could be ground into bone meal in the spring.

*Whatever you cannot eat or use in your home, return to the soil.*

# # #

Over the ensuing days, Bonnie started to experience an odd numbness in her hands and unusual stiffness in both feet. It was as if her extremities had minds of their own and had declared a holiday from their duties. *Maybe it’s the weather or my advancing age*, she thought. *Or the exertion of dealing with that taxman. He was a tough one to cut down to size, he was.*

Just after breakfast one morning, Sylvia arrived with brown eggs and fresh milk. During periods of winter when the lane was passable, the neighbor would journey out with her mule and cart to obtain provisions for both women. Sylvia was a nervous woman, not fully accustomed to the tribulations of living in the country, even after these many years. She was dark featured, with a sharp nose and large ears. But Sylvia had a kind heart, and she remained cognizant of the fact that Bonnie’s only beau had become Sylvia’s husband, if only for a time.

“Welcome, neighbor,” said Mister. In a gesture that Bonnie had taught him, the straw man removed his hat and bowed.

“Isn’t he marvelous?” Bonnie said. “He can cook and clean, and much more.”

## Straw Man; by Steve Bates

---

Sylvia recognized the scarecrow that Bonnie had employed in her garden this past season. “What--? How--?”

“My dear friend, do not think about it much,” said Bonnie. “Life is short and hard, and we must accept the few gifts we receive, mustn’t we?”

Sylvia approached the straw man. “May I?” she asked.

“You may touch me as you like,” Mister responded. Sylvia laid a gentle hand on the side of his face.

“This—this truly is a gift,” said Sylvia. Turning, her tone drew grave. “I came to warn you, Bonnie. I heard in town that the tax collector will come to our valley any day, and he will accept no excuses.”

“Do not worry, dear friend, we will manage,” said Bonnie.

“Manage? How will you manage?” said Sylvia.

“Perhaps we will strike a bargain,” said Bonnie.

The scarecrow spoke. “Friend Sylvia,” he began. “Mr. Palmer was here. He went into the root cellar. He did not come back up. At least, not as a whole man.”

Both women turned to the scarecrow, taken aback by his honesty and directness. Mister displayed no change in countenance, as if he had merely commented upon the weather or the quantity of salted meat in the pantry.

“Bonnie, what have you done?” said Sylvia. “Please tell me you did not kill this man.”

“Ah, I would rather you not know,” said Bonnie, eyes to the floor. “But what’s done is done. Can you find it in your heart to forget what you have just heard, to go on as good neighbors and friends?”

“I do not know, Bonnie. Truly, I do not know.”

The straw man examined Sylvia’s expression, recognizing surprise, horror, and sadness. Only once—as Sylvia departed—did he look at Bonnie’s face, but he could interpret no emotion upon her.

# # #

## Straw Man; by Steve Bates

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In the days and nights that followed, the scarecrow grew quiet and withdrawn, if such a mood could be discerned in the expressions and movements of a man constructed of straw. Bonnie read to him less frequently, slept with him not at all, and took to pacing the floor of her cottage, occasionally speaking harshly to him.

“There is no need to tell my business to the world,” she would say. Or, “Be grateful that you have a warm house, rather than freezing in the garden.”

What bothered Bonnie was not a troubled conscience, she told herself. She did what she had to do. What bothered her was the numbness and stiffness, which had spread throughout her arms and legs, and an absent-mindedness that she had not encountered before.

When Sylvia next visited, Bonnie begged her to fetch the doctor from town.

“It likely is just the cold in my bones. It is so very cold this winter; I have never felt anything like it,” said Bonnie. “But it also troubles me that I cannot always remember what day it is, and whether I have eaten my lunch and such,” she continued.

Sylvia, who had always envied Bonnie’s fortitude, pledged to travel to town on the next clear, dry day. But the winter would not oblige. Thick ice, then deep snow, blanketed the county all around.

Days would pass without the scarecrow uttering a word. Soon, Bonnie ceased speaking to him, other than to order him to stoke the fire. If she harbored even the slightest remorse for killing the taxman, she was determined not to divulge it to a mere figure of straw. She would stare at fireplace embers for hours on end, but she found it increasingly difficult to recall Frederick Thompson’s face.

Eventually, Mister broke the heavy silence: “Our firewood be almost depleted, lady. It be my purpose to keep you warm. What shall I do?”

“Get the ax next to the woodpile,” she replied. “Take it to the woods. Cut down a tree and chop the trunk and limbs down to firewood. And be quick about it.”

“I will do as you wish,” responded Mister, “though plentiful snow and strong winds may damage the lovely clothes you brought to me.”

“I have rags enough to replace them, if need be,” said Bonnie.

As the scarecrow approached the door, he turned to Bonnie. “Lady, forgive me for asking, but what will happen to me if I am overcome by foul weather or attacked by some

## Straw Man; by Steve Bates

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fearsome animal? Would it be my fate to die, like the witch in the story?” He hesitated before adding: “Or like the taxman?”

“That is no concern of mine,” said Bonnie. “I created you. And no doubt I can create another, or many others, from straw and string I have about the cottage. Now, out with you!” she ordered the scarecrow. “Go to your work.”

Mister found the ax and trudged toward the woods to commence his labor. He felled a substantial tree, chopped it as Bonnie had demanded, and stacked the wood. The task consumed nearly two days and two nights.

Mister reentered the cottage carrying a small bundle of wood.

“Careful you don’t catch a spark,” said Bonnie in a faint voice, as if spoken from great distance and requiring significant effort. “That would be the end ... of both of us.”

Mister retreated from the fire and resumed his chores. Bonnie did not venture from her chair the rest of the evening.

# # #

The days passed, the snows receded, and the spring made a grand entrance. As the sun’s rays crested the treetops and poured through a window onto Bonnie’s face, she woke from her slumber. But she remained still, as if in a trance. She attempted to rise to start a fire, but she found it too much trouble, as if her muscles had been frozen into immobility by deep winter. *I recall asking for a doctor, she thought. No matter. I will make do, as always.*

In time, she struggled to her feet and hobbled about her cottage in short, stiff strides, calling out Mister’s name, but he did not respond. She peeked into the root cellar and spied out of every window, but she could not detect his whereabouts.

By the chair where the scarecrow would sit when he had completed his chores, Bonnie discovered scattered straw and a few strands of clothing.

*Ah, Mister, where have you gone? This is a sad day, for sure,* she thought.

Bonnie longed for the familiar comforts of her garden. She padded slowly toward the front door, removing her favorite hat from a peg. She pushed open the door and encountered a scene that seemed to burst from the pages of a storybook, with a cavalcade of glorious scents, birds chirping enthusiastically, and sunlight reflecting brilliantly on dissipating dewdrops. Yet her body remained maddeningly sluggish, and her mind tended to drift from the task at hand.

## Straw Man; by Steve Bates

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Focusing all the energy she could muster, she inched toward her garden, passing the bright green tips of daffodils breaking the soil's surface while breezes as soft as lovers' whispers swept the newborn season across the land.

It was late afternoon when Bonnie attained the center of her garden and placed a weary hand upon the tall metal pole that had supported her scarecrow in seasons past. With supreme effort, she turned, straightened her body and leaned upon the pole just so. The hook gripped the back of her shirt.

She turned her head slightly to her left, then just to her right. Finally, she gazed straight ahead at her handsome garden and the unspoiled lands to the west. Presently, the familiar silhouette of the snowy-crested hawk appeared before her. The bird circled the garden before descending and sinking its talons into Bonnie's shoulder. It rested there for a substantial interval before returning to its vigil in the skies. Bonnie remained motionless, a thin smile fixed upon her face. The minutes passed. Then hours. And days.

In truth, it was the prettiest spot in the county.

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