Hilda Strafford

A California Story

By
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HILDA STRAFFORD

Yours very truly,
Beatrice Harraden

CHAPTER I
WOULD IT SMILE TO HER?

THE day had come at last.

Robert Strafford glanced around at the isolated spot which he had chosen for his ranch, and was seized with more terrible misgivings than had ever before overwhelmed him in moments of doubt.

Scores of times he had tried to put himself in her place, and to look at the country with her eyes. Would it, could it, smile to her? He had put off her coming until the early spring, so that she might see this new strange land at its best, when the rains had begun to fall, and the grass was springing up, and plain and slope were donning a faint green garment toning each day to a richer hue, when tiny ferns were thrusting out their heads from the dry ground, and here and there a wild-flower arose, welcome herald of the bounty which Nature would soon be dispensing with generous hand, but after a long delay. Such a long delay, indeed, that a new-comer to Southern California might well think that Nature, so liberal in her gifts to other lands, had shown only scant favor to this child of hers, clothing her in dusty and unattractive attire, and refusing her many of the most usual graces. But when the long months of summer heat are over, she begins to work her miracle, and those who have eyes to see and hearts to understand, will learn how dearly she loves this land of sunshine, and how, in her own good time, she showers her jewels upon it.

So just now, when this wonderful change was stealing over the country, Robert Strafford looked eagerly for the arrival of Hilda Lester, who had been engaged to him for more than three years, and who was at length able to break away from her home-ties and marry him; when there was a mystic glamour in the air, and a most caressing softness; when the lemon-trees were full of promise, and some of them full of plenty; when the little ranch, so carefully worked and so faithfully nursed, seemed at its very best, and well repaid Robert Strafford for his untiring labor.

He sat on the bench in front of his barn, smoking his pipe and glancing with pride at his little estate on the slope of the hill. He loved it so much, that he had learnt to think it even beautiful, and it was only now and then that he had any serious misgivings about the impression it would produce on any one unaccustomed to the South Californian scenery. But now he was seized with overwhelming doubt, and he took his pipe from his mouth, and covered his tired-looking face with his hands. Nellie, the white pointer, stirred uneasily, and then got up and rubbed herself against him.

“Dear old girl,” he said, caressing her. “You have such a faithful heart. I’m all right, old girl; I’m only down in the dumps a little.”

Suddenly the sound of horse’s hoofs was heard, and Nellie, barking loudly, darted down the hill, and then returned in triumph, now and again making jumps of greeting to Ben Overleigh’s pretty little chestnut mare Fanny.

Ben Overleigh swung off his horse, hitched her to the post, and turned quietly to his friend, who had not risen from the bench, but sat in the same listless position as before.

“Well, now,” said Ben Overleigh, sinking down beside him, “and I tell you, Bob, you’ve made a deucèd pretty little garden for her. That deaf old woman with the ear-trumpet has not grown finer violets than those yonder; and as for your roses, you could not find any better in Santa Barbara itself. I can’t say much for the grass-plot at present. It reminds me rather of a man’s bald head. But the creepers are just first rate, especially the ones I planted. And there isn’t a bonnier little ranch than yours in the whole neighbourhood. If my lemons were coming on as well as yours, nothing on earth should prevent me from stepping over to the dear old country for a few weeks.”

Robert Strafford looked up and smiled.

“The trees certainly are doing splendidly,” he said, with some pride. “I know I’ve given them the best part of my strength and time these last three years. There ought to be some return for that, oughtn’t there, Ben?”

Ben made no answer, but puffed at his pipe, and Robert Strafford continued:

“You see, Hilda and I had been engaged for some time, and things did not go well with me in the old country,—I couldn’t make my niche for myself like other fellows seem able to do,—and then there came that wretched illness of mine, which crippled all my best abilities for the time. So when at last I set to work again, I felt I must leave no stone unturned to grasp some kind of a success: here was a new life and a new material, and I vowed I would contrive something out of it for Hilda and myself.”

He paused a moment, and came closer to Ben Overleigh.

“But I don’t know how I ever dared hope that she would come out here,” he said, half-dreamily. “I’ve longed for it and dreaded it, and longed for it and dreaded it. If I were to have a message now to say she had thrown it up, I don’t suppose I should ever want to smile again. But that is not the worst thing that would happen to one. I dread something far more—her disappointment, her scorn; for, when all is done and said, it is a wretched land, barren and bereft, and you know yourself how many of the women suffer here. They nearly all hate it. Something dies down in them. You have only got to look at them to know. They have lost the power of caring. I’ve seen it over and over again, and then I have cursed my lemon-trees. And I tell you, Ben, I feel so played out by work and doubt, and so over-shadowed, that if Hilda hates the whole thing, it will just be the death of me. It will kill me outright.”

Ben Overleigh got up and shook himself, and then relieved his feelings in a succession of ranch-life expletives, given forth with calm deliberation and in a particularly musical voice, which was one of Ben’s most charming characteristics. He had many others too: his strong manly presence, his innate chivalry to every one and everything, and his quiet loyalty, made him an attractive personality in the valley; and his most original and courteous manner of swearing would have propitiated the very sternest of tract-distributors. He was a good friend, too, and had long ago attached himself to Robert Strafford, and looked after him—mothering him up in his own manly tender fashion; and now he glanced at the young fellow who was going to bring his bride home on the morrow, and he wondered what words of encouragement he could speak, so that his comrade might take heart and throw off this overwhelming depression.

“That’s enough of this nonsense,” he said cheerily, as he stood and faced his friend. “Come and show me what you’ve done to make the house look pretty. And see here, old man, I’ve brought two or three odd things along with me. I saw them in town the other day, and thought they might please her ladyship when she arrives. I stake my reputation particularly on this lamp-shade. And here’s a table-cloth from the Chinese shop, and here’s a vase for flowers, and here’s a toasting-fork!”

They had gone into the house, and Ben Overleigh had laid his treasures one by one on the table. He looked around, and realised for the first time that Robert Strafford was offering but a desolate home to his bride. Outside at least there were flowers and creepers, and ranges of splendid mountains, and beautiful soft lights and shades changing constantly, and fragrances in the air born of spring; but inside this dreary little house, there was nothing to cast a glamour of cheerfulness. Nothing. For the moment Ben’s heart sank, but when he glanced at his friend, he forced himself to smile approvingly.

“You’ve bought a capital little coal-oil stove, Bob,” he said. “That is the best kind, undoubtedly. I’m going to have scores of cosy meals off that, I can tell you. I think you could have done with two or three more saucepans, old man. But that is as nice a little stove as you’ll see anywhere. A rocking-chair! Good. And a cushion too, by Jove! And a book-shelf, with six brand-new books on it, including George Meredith’s last novel and Ibsen’s new play.”

“Hilda is fond of reading,” said Robert Strafford, gaining courage from his friend’s approval.

“And some curtains,” continued Ben. “And a deucèd pretty pattern too.”

“I chose them myself,” said the other, smiling proudly,—“and, what’s more, I stitched them myself!”

So they went on, Ben giving comfort and Bob taking it; and then they made a few alterations in the arrangement of the furniture, and they tried the effect of the table-cloth and the lamp-shade, and Bob put a few flowers in the vase, and stood at the door to see how everything looked.

“Will it smile to her, will it smile to her, I wonder?” he said, anxiously.

“Of course it will,” said Ben, also stepping back to see the whole effect.

“That lamp-shade and that table-cloth and that vase and that toasting-fork settle the whole matter, in my mind!”

“If there were only some nice neighbours,” said Robert Strafford. “But there isn’t a soul within six miles.”

“You are surely forgetting the deaf lady with the ear-trumpet,” remarked Ben, mischievously.

“Don’t be a fool, Ben,” said Robert Strafford, shortly.

“She is not exactly a stimulating companion,” continued Ben, composedly, “but she is better than no one at all. And then there’s myself. I also am better than no one at all. I don’t think you do so badly after all, in spite of your grumblings. Then eight miles off live Lauderdale and Holles and Graham. Since Jesse Holles

returned from his travels, they are as merry a little company as you would wish to see anywhere."

"Hilda is so fond of music," said Robert Strafford, sadly, "and I have no piano for her as yet."

"That is soon remedied," answered Ben. "But why didn't you tell me these things before? The ear-trumpet lady has a piano, and I daresay with a little coaxing she would lend it to you. I'm rather clever at coaxing through a trumpet; moreover, she rather likes me. I have such a gentle voice, you know, and I believe my moustache is the exact reproduction of one owned by her dead nephew! Her dead nephew certainly must have had an uncommonly fine moustache! Well, about the piano. I'll see what I can do; and meanwhile, for pity's sake, cheer up."

He put his hand kindly on his friend's shoulders.

"Yes, Bob, I mean what I say," he continued; "for pity's sake, cheer up, and don't be receiving her ladyship with the countenance of a boiled ghost. That will depress her far more than anything in poor old California. Be your old bright self again, and throw off all these misgivings. You've just worked yourself out, and you ought to have taken a month's holiday down the coast. You would have come back as strong as a jack-rabbit and as chirpy as a little horned toad."

"Oh, I shall be all right," said Robert Strafford; "and you're such a brick, Ben. You've always been good to me. I've been such a sullen cur lately. But for all that—"

"But for all that, you're not a bad fellow at your best," said Ben, smiling; "and now come back with me. I can't have you mooning

here by yourself to-night. Come back with me, and I'll cook you a splendid piece of steak, and I'll send you off in excellent form to meet and marry her ladyship to-morrow morning. Then whilst you are off on that errand, I'll turn in here and make the place as trim as a ship's cabin, and serve up a nice little dinner fit for a king and queen. Come on, old man. I half think there may be rain to-night."

"I must just water the horses," said Robert Strafford, "and then I'm ready for you."

The two friends sauntered down to the stables, the pointer Nellie following close upon their heels.

It was the hour of sunset, that hour when the barren scenery can hold its own for beauty with the loveliest land on earth. The lights changed and deepened, and faded away and gave place to other colours, until at last that tender rosy tint so dear to those who watch the Californian sky, jewelled the mountains and the stones, holding everything, indeed, in a passing splendour.

"Her ladyship won't see anything like that in England," said Ben; and he stooped down and picked some wild-flowers which were growing over the ranch: Mexican primroses and yellow violets.

"The ear-trumpet lady says this is going to be a splendid year for the wild-flowers," he added, "so her ladyship will see California at its best. But I believe we are in for some rain. I rather wish it would keep off until she has happily settled down in her new home."

"It won't rain yet," said Robert Strafford, leading out one of the horses to the water-trough. Then Ben fetched the other one out; but he broke loose and hurried up on the hill, and Ben followed after

him, swearing in his usual patent manner in a gentle and musical monotone, as though he were reciting prayers kneeling by his mother's side. At last the horse was caught, and the chickens were fed, and Nellie was chained up to keep guard over the Californian estate. Robert mounted his little mare Jinny and said some words of comfort and apology to the pointer.

"Poor old Nellie, woman," he said; "I hate to leave you by yourself. But you must keep the house and ranch safe for your mistress. And I've given you an extra supply of bones. And we'll go hunting soon, old girl, I promise you."

Nellie went the full length of her chain, and watched the two men canter off.

When she could no longer watch, she listened, every nerve intent; and when at last the sounds of the horses' hoofs had died away in the distance, she heaved a deep sigh, and after the manner of all philosophers, resigned herself to an extra supply of bones.

CHAPTER II
HILDA COMES

THE next morning after Robert Strafford had gone off to town to meet Hilda, Ben Overleigh went to his friend's house and put everything in order, and after having paid special attention to the arrangement of his moustache, he set out to visit Miss Dewsbury, the deaf lady, intending, if possible, to coax her piano out of her. He was a great favourite of hers, and he was indeed the only person who was not thoroughly frightened of her. She was quite seventy years of age, but she had unending strength and vitality,[33] and worked like a navvy on her ranch, only employing a man when she absolutely must. And when she did employ any one, she mounted to the top of the house, and kept watch over him with an opera-glass, so that she might be quite sure she was having the advantage of every moment of his time. The boys in the neighbourhood often refused to work for her; for, as Jesse Holles said, it was bad enough to be watched through an opera-glass, but to have to put up with all her scoldings, and not be able to say a word of defence which could reach her, except through a trumpet—no, by Jove, that wasn't the job for him! Also there were other complaints against her: she never gave any one a decent meal, and she never dreamed of offering anything else but skimmed[34] milk which people did not seem able to swallow. They swallowed the opera-glass and the trumpet and the scoldings and the tough beef, but when it came to the skimmed milk, they felt that they had already endured enough. So the best people in the valley would not work for Miss Dewsbury—as least, not willingly; and it had

sometimes happened that Ben Overleigh had used his powers of persuasion to induce some of the young fellows to give her a few days' help when she was in special need of it; and on more than one occasion, when he could not make any one else go to her, he had himself offered her his services. Thus she owed him some kindness; and moreover his courtliness and his gentle voice were pleasing to her. He was the only person, so she said,[35] who did not shout down the trumpet. And yet she could hear every word he uttered.

This morning when he arrived at her house, she was vainly trying to hear what the butcher said, and the butcher was vainly trying to make himself understood. She was in a state of feverish excitement, and the butcher looked in the last stage of nervous exhaustion.

"You've just come in time to save my life," he said to Ben. "For the love of heaven, tell her through the trumpet, that beef has gone up two cents a pound, that she can't have her salted tongue till next week, and that she has given me seven cents too little."

Then Ben of the magic voice spoke these mystic words through the trumpet, and the butcher went off comforted, and Miss Dewsbury smiled at her favourite; and when he told her that he had come to ask a special favour of her, she was so gracious that Ben felt he would have no difficulty in carrying out his project. But when she understood what he wanted, things did not go so easily. To be sure, she did not use the piano, she said, but then that was no reason why any one else should use it for her. Ben stood waiting patiently until she should have exhausted all her eloquence, and then he stooped down, and quietly picked one or two suckers off a lemon-tree, and took his pruning-knife from his pocket, and snipped off a faded

branch. After this, with quiet deliberation, he twirled his great moustaches. That settled the matter.

“You may have the piano,” she said, “but you must fetch it yourself.”

Ben did not think it necessary to add that he had already arranged for it to be fetched at once, and he lingered a little while with her, listening to her complaint about the men she employed and about their laziness, which she observed through the opera-glass. Ben was just going to suggest that perhaps the opera-glass made the men lazy, when he remembered that he must be circumspect, and so he contrived some beautiful speech about the immorality of laziness; he even asked for a glass of skimmed milk, and off he cantered, raising his hat and bowing chivalrously to the old lady rancher. Before very long, her piano stood in Robert Strafford’s little house, and Ben spent a long time in cleaning and dusting it.

After he had finished this task, he became very restless, and finally went down to the workshop and made a rough letter-box, which he fixed on to a post and placed at the corner of the road leading up to his friend’s ranch. Two hours were left. He did a little gardening and watered the tiny grass-plot. He looked at the sky. Blue-black clouds were hovering over the mountains, obscuring some and trying to envelop others.

“We are in for a storm,” he said. “It is making straight for this part from Grevilles Mountain. But I hope it won’t come to-night. It will be a poor welcome to Bob’s wife, though it’s about time now for the land to have a thorough good drenching.”

He looked at the pretty valley with its belt of trees, seen at its best from the hill where Robert’s house was built. At all times of the

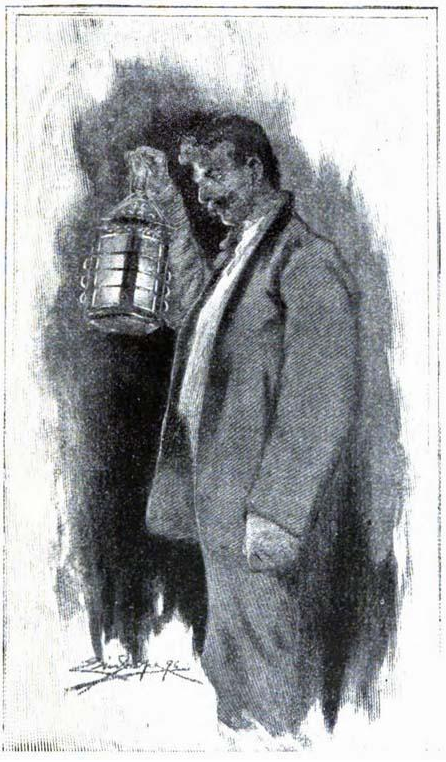
year, there was that green stretch yonder of clustering trees, nestling near the foothills, which in their turn seemed to nestle up to the rugged mountains.

“Yes,” he said, as he turned away, “those trees make one home-sick for a wooded country. These wonderful ranges of mountains and these hills are all very well in their way, and one learns to love them tremendously, but one longs for the trees. And yet when Jesse Holles went north and came back again, he said he was glad to see the barren mountains once more. I wonder what the girl will think of it all, and how she will take to the life. The women suffer miseries of home-sickness.”

He stood thinking a while, and there was an expression of great sadness on his face.

“My own little sweetheart would have pined out here,” he said softly; “I can bear the loneliness, but I could not have borne hers. Poor old Bob,” he said regretfully, “I almost wish he had not sent for her: it is such a risk in this land. I don’t wonder he is anxious.”

He glanced again at the threatening clouds, and went back to the house, took off his coat, turned up his sleeves, and began the preparations for the evening meal. He laid the cloth, changed the flowers several times before they smiled to his satisfaction, and polished the knives and forks. He brought in some logs of wood and some sumac-roots, made a fire, and blew it up with the bellows.



“BEN LIT THE LANTERN, AND STATIONED HIMSELF OUTSIDE WITH IT.”

Suddenly the frail little frame-house was shaken by a heavy gust of wind; and when the shock had passed, every board creaked and quivered. Nellie got up from her warm place near the fire, and stalked about uneasily.

“Damnation!” said Ben. “The storm is working up. If they’d only come before it is any worse.”