

THE DEATH OF THE HIRED MAN

by ROBERT FROST

adapted for the stage by WALTER WYKES

CHARACTERS

MARY

WARREN

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THE DEATH OF THE HIRED MAN

[Evening. A porch. MARY sits musing on the moon. When she hears steps, she rises quickly. Enter WARREN, carrying groceries.]

MARY

Warren!

WARREN

What is it? What's wrong?

MARY

[Looking back towards the door.]

Shhh!

WARREN

What's going on?

MARY

He's back.

WARREN

Who?

MARY

Silas.

WARREN

Silas?

MARY

Yes.

WARREN

He's back?

MARY

Yes.

WARREN

Godammit.

MARY

Be kind.

WARREN

When was I ever anything but kind to him?

[She takes the market things from Warren's arms and sets them on the porch, then draws him down to sit beside her on the wooden steps.]

MARY

I know. It's just that—

WARREN

I won't have him back. I told him so last haying, didn't I?

MARY

You did.

WARREN

If he left then, I said, that ended it.

MARY

I know, but—

WARREN

I can't keep ... I mean, what good is he? At his age—

MARY

Who else will harbor him?

WARREN

That's not our problem. What help he is there's no depending on. And when I need him most, off he goes every time!

MARY

He thinks he ought to earn a little pay.

WARREN

Oh, does he?

MARY

Just a little. Enough at least to buy tobacco, so he won't have to beg and be beholden.

[Warren sighs and lowers his head. MARY puts a hand on his arm.]

It doesn't have to be much.

[Pause.]

WARREN

All right. But I can't afford to pay any fixed wages.

MARY

I don't think he expects that this time.

WARREN

I wouldn't mind his bettering himself if that's what it was. But you can bet when he starts off like that it's just someone trying to coax him off with a little pocket-change. Then every winter he comes back. I'm done, I tell you. This is the last—

MARY

Shhh! Not so loud. He'll hear you.

WARREN

Good. I want him to hear. He'll have to sooner or later.

MARY

Not now. He's worn out.

WARREN

Where is he?

MARY

Asleep by the stove.

WARREN

By the stove?

MARY

When I came up from Rowe's I found him here, huddled against the barn-door. He was a miserable sight. It scared me. Don't smile like that—I didn't recognize him. I wasn't looking for him, and he's changed. Wait till you see.

WARREN

Where did you say he'd been?

MARY

He didn't say. I practically dragged him to the house, gave him tea and tried to make him smoke. I tried to make him talk about his travels, but nothing would do—he just kept nodding off.

WARREN

Probably drunk.

MARY

No.

WARREN

No?

MARY

I've seen him drunk. This was different.

WARREN

And he didn't say anything?

MARY

Not much.

WARREN

Not much?

MARY

Hardly a word.

WARREN

There's something you're not telling me. What is it?

[Pause.]

Mary, confess. He said he'd come to ditch the meadow for me—didn't he?

MARY

Warren!

WARREN

Did he or didn't he? I just want to know.

MARY

Of course he did.

[WARREN laughs.]

What would you have him say? Surely you wouldn't grudge the poor old man some humble way to save his self-respect.

WARREN

I just thought maybe he'd come up with something new this time.

MARY

He added, if you really care to know, he meant to clear the upper pasture.

WARREN

I've heard that one too.

MARY

Warren, I wish you could have heard the way he jumbled everything. It shook me up. I stopped to look two or three times to see if he was talking in his sleep. He ran on and on about Harold Wilson—you remember Harold? The boy you had haying about four years ago?

WARREN

Sure. I remember.

MARY

He's finished school and now he's teaching in some college somewhere.

WARREN

Good for him.

MARY

Silas says you'll have to have him back.

WARREN

I guess Silas is running the place now.

MARY

He says the two of them will make a fine team for work—says they'll lay this farm smooth! The way he mixed that in with other things ... he seemed so confused.

WARREN

A little rest will cure that.

MARY

He liked young Wilson, I guess.

WARREN

You never would have known it the way they fought all through July in the blazing sun, Silas up on the cart to build the load, and Harold alongside to pitch it on. I took care to keep well out of earshot.

MARY

Well, those days trouble Silas like a dream.

WARREN

Strange how some things linger.

MARY

Harold's young college-boy assurance, you know, it got under his skin. After so many years, he still keeps finding good arguments he might have used.

WARREN

I sympathize. I know just how it feels to think of the right thing to say too late. Happens every time I argue with you.

MARY

It's more than that.

WARREN

What do you mean?

MARY

He asked me what I thought of Harold's saying he studied Latin like the violin because he liked it.

WARREN

Good a reason as any.

MARY

He said he couldn't make the boy believe he could find water with a hazel prong—said that proved how much good school had ever done him. He thinks if he could have one more chance to teach him how to build a load of hay—

WARREN

I know, that's Silas' one accomplishment. He bundles every forkful in its place, then tags and numbers it for future reference, so he can find and easily dislodge it in the unloading. Silas does that well. He takes it out in bunches like big birds' nests. And you never see him standing on the hay when he's trying to lift, straining to lift himself.

MARY

He thinks if he could teach him that, he'd be some good perhaps to someone in the world—says he hates to see a boy the fool of books. He's so concerned for other folk, and nothing to look backward to with pride.

WARREN

Nothing to look forward to with hope, either.

MARY

His whole life like that. Then, and now, and never any different.

[Silence. MARY stares up at the moon.]

Warren, I think ... I think he's come home to die. You needn't be afraid he'll leave you this time.

WARREN

[Gently mocking.]

Home?

MARY

Yes. What else but home?

WARREN

It all depends on what you mean by home, I guess.

MARY

Of course he's nothing to us, any more than the old hound that came a stranger to us out of the woods, all broken and worn out from the trail. I think home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.

[WARREN leans out and takes a step or two—picks up a little stick and brings it back. He breaks it in his hand and tosses it aside.]

WARREN

Silas has a better claim on us, you think, than on his brother? Just thirteen miles up the road. You can bet he's walked that far today. Why didn't he go there? His brother's rich, director in the bank or something.

MARY

He never told us that.

WARREN

We know it though.

MARY

His brother ought to help, of course. I'll talk to him if we can't keep things going.

WARREN

By right, he ought to take him in.

MARY

And he might be willing to—he may be better than appearances. But have some pity on Silas. Do you think if he had any pride in claiming kin or anything he looked for from his brother, he'd keep so still about him all this time?

WARREN

I wonder what's between them.

MARY

I can tell you. Silas is what he is—we wouldn't mind him—but he's just the kind that kinsfolk can't abide. He never did anything so very bad. And he don't know why he isn't quite as good as anyone else. He can't be made ashamed to please his brother, worthless though he is. He's got that much pride.

WARREN

You're right. That's probably all there is to it. I can't think Si ever hurt anyone.

MARY

No, but it hurt my heart tonight the way he lay and rolled his old head on that sharp-edged chair-back.

WARREN

He wouldn't let you put him on the lounge?

MARY

No. Go and see what you can do—would you?

WARREN

All right.

MARY

I made the bed up for him there tonight.

[WARREN rises.]

You'll be surprised—how much he's broken. His working days are done, I think.

WARREN

Don't be so quick to say that.

MARY

I haven't been.

WARREN

He's a tough old goat.

MARY

Go, look—see for yourself. But, Warren ...

[WARREN pauses.]

Please remember how it is. He's come to help you ditch the meadow. He has a plan. You mustn't laugh at him.

WARREN

I won't.

MARY

He may not speak of it, and then he may.

[WARREN nods, holding the door.]

WARREN

You coming in?

MARY

No. Not yet. I'll sit here a while and see if that small sailing cloud will hit or miss the moon.

[Exit WARREN. Silence. He returns too soon—sits next to MARY, takes her hand and waits.]

MARY

Warren?

WARREN

Dead.

[Slow fade to black.]

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