THE DEATH OF THE HIRED MAN

by ROBERT FROST

adapted for the stage by WALTER WYKES

CHARACTERS
MARY
WARREN

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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.]

WARREN

It doesn't have to be much.

[Pause.]

MARY

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.

Not now. He’s worn out.

MARY
Where is he?

WARREN
Asleep by the stove.

MARY
By the stove?

WARREN
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.

MARY
Where did you say he’d been?

WARREN
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.

MARY
Probably drunk.

WARREN
No.
No?

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

Of course he did.

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

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

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.

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.

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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