

THE HOUSEKEEPER

by ROBERT FROST

adapted for the stage by WALTER WYKES

CHARACTERS

RUTH

CHARLES

JOHN

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THE HOUSEKEEPER

[Evening. A small farmhouse. A gray-haired woman sits sewing in her rocker. When she hears a sound at the kitchen door, she stops, places her work in her lap, and waits. A few moments later, a man enters and pauses in the doorway.]

RUTH

Oh. It's you.

[She returns to her sewing.]

CHARLES

I let myself in the kitchen door.

RUTH

I can't get up. Forgive me not answering your knock.

CHARLES

It's all right.

RUTH

I can no more let people in than I can keep them out. I'm getting too old for my size. My fingers are all I've got left. I can still sew, thank god.

CHARLES

That's a smart pair of pumps you're beading there.

[Pause.]

Who are they for?

RUTH

Oh, for some miss. I can't keep track of other people's daughters.

CHARLES

Where's John?

RUTH

Haven't you seen him?

CHARLES

No. Not since this morning.

RUTH

Strange what set you off to come to his house when he's gone to yours.

CHARLES

Has he?

[She nods.]

Don't see how we could've missed each other on the road.

RUTH

He must have changed his mind and gone to Garlands.

CHARLES

He won't be long in that case.

RUTH

You can wait.

[He sits.]

Though what good you can be, or anyone—

[Pause. She lowers her sewing.]

It's gone so far.

[Pause.]

You've heard?

CHARLES

Yeah.

RUTH

Estelle's run off.

CHARLES

What's it all about? When did she go?

RUTH

Two weeks since.

CHARLES

Two weeks?

[RUTH nods. He whistles.]

She really means it, I guess.

RUTH

She won't come back. She's hiding somewhere.

CHARLES

Any idea where?

RUTH

I don't know. John thinks I do. He thinks I only have to say the word, and she'll come running home. But, bless you, I'm her mother—I can't talk to her about this, and, Lord, if I could! What would I say?

CHARLES

It'll go hard with John.

RUTH

It will.

CHARLES

What will he do?

[RUTH shrugs.]

He can't find anyone to take her place.

RUTH

He gets some sort of bakeshop meals together, with me to sit and tell him everything, what's wanted and how much and which cupboard. But when I'm gone—

CHARLES

You're not going too?

RUTH

I can't stay here. Not anymore.

CHARLES

But ... how ... I mean, where would you—

RUTH

Estelle's to take me when she's settled down. He and I only hinder one another.

CHARLES

But if you don't know where she's at ...

[Silence.]

RUTH

You know, I tell them they can't get me through the door. I've been built in here like a big church organ. We've been here fifteen years.

CHARLES

That's a long time to live together and then pull apart.

[Pause.]

How do you see him living when you're gone?

RUTH

I don't know.

CHARLES

With two of you out, this house will feel awful empty.

RUTH

I don't see him living many years at all, left here with nothing but the furniture. I hate to think of the old place when we're gone, with the brook going by below the yard, and no one here but hens blowing about.

CHARLES

If he could sell the place—

RUTH

[Laughs.]
Who'd want to live here?

CHARLES

I'm sure there's someone.

RUTH

Would you?
[Pause.]

CHARLES

I guess not.

RUTH

No, it's too run down.
[Pause.]
No one will ever live here again.
[Pause.]

What I think he'll do is let things smash. He'll sort of swear the time away. He's awful! I never saw a man let family troubles make so much difference in his man's affairs. He just drops everything. He's like a child. I blame it on his being brought up by his mother. He's got hay down that's been rained on three times.

CHARLES

He hoed a little yesterday.

RUTH

Only because I forced him outdoors. I thought growing things would do him good, but something went wrong. I saw him throw the hoe sky-high with both hands! I can see it now—come here—I'll show you—in that apple tree. That's no way for a man to do at his age.

CHARLES

Are you ... are you afraid of him? I mean, does he ever—

RUTH

John? No, he's not that kind.

CHARLES

What's that gun for?

RUTH

Oh, that's been there for hawks since chicken-time. Violence isn't his problem. I'd lick him in a fair fight. He's just made up his mind not to stand what he's got to stand, that's all.

CHARLES

You mean the girl leaving.

RUTH

That's what I mean.

CHARLES

Ruth ... where is she? Where's Estelle? You can tell me.

[Pause.]

Maybe I could talk some sense into her—get her to come home.

RUTH

She thinks if it was bad to live with him, then it must be right to leave him. That makes sense—don't it? Anyway, she's made up her mind.

CHARLES

You know this is going to break John's heart.

RUTH

Then he should have married her.

[Pause.]

That girl ... all these years ... the strain she's been under ... all the secret feelings and the shame ... having to pretend there's nothing when there is ... not being able to look the neighbors in the eye.... It's different with a man, at least with John. Better than married ought to be as good as married—that's what he always said.

CHARLES

I always wondered why he didn't just marry her and put an end to it.

RUTH

Well, it's too late now. She wouldn't have him.

CHARLES

You sure?

RUTH

He gave her too much time to think of something else. That was his mistake. Estelle knows my interest has always been to keep things from breaking up. This was a good home. I didn't ask for better. But when I've said why shouldn't they be married, he'd say why should they? No more words than that.

CHARLES

Well, why should they? John's been fair—hasn't he? What's his was always hers. There was no quarrel about property.

RUTH

That's easy enough when there is no property. A friend or two as good as own the farm, such as it is. It isn't worth the mortgage.

CHARLES

But Estelle has always held the purse.

RUTH

I guess Estelle and I have filled the purse, too. We let him have money, not he us.

CHARLES

You don't really mean to say—

RUTH

John's a bad farmer, Charles. I'm not blaming him. Take it year in, year out, he doesn't make much. That's not what we came for. We came for a home for me, you know, Estelle to do the housework for the board of both of us. But look how it turns out—she seems to have the housework, and besides, half of the outdoor work, not to mention other duties she didn't know she was taking on. He'd say she does it more because she likes it. And there's something to that. All our pretty things were always outdoors. Our hens and cows and pigs are always better than folk like us have any business with. Farmers around twice as well off don't have any as good. They don't go with the farm. One thing you can't help liking about John, he's fond of nice things—too fond, some might say. But Estelle don't complain. She's like him there. She wants our hens to be the best there are. You never saw this room before a show—did you? Full of lank, shivery, half-drowned birds in separate coops, having their plumage done. The smell of wet feathers in the heat! You spoke of John's not being safe to stay with.

CHARLES

I didn't—

RUTH

You don't know what a gentle lot we are. We wouldn't hurt a hen! You ought to see us moving a flock of hens from place to place. We're not allowed to take them upside down, all we can hold together by the legs. Two at a time's the rule, one on each arm, no matter how far and how many times we have to go.

CHARLES

That's John's idea?

RUTH

And we live up to it, or I don't know what childishness he'd give way to. He manages to keep the upper hand on his own farm. He's boss. But as to hens, we fence our flowers in and the hens range. Nothing's too good for them. We say it pays. John likes to tell the offers he's had, twenty for this cock, twenty-five for that. He never takes the money. If they're worth that much to sell, they're worth as much to keep. It's all expense, though. Reach me down the little tin box on the cupboard shelf, the upper shelf, the tin box.

[He does.]

That's the one. I'll show you. Here you are.

[She hands him a small slip of paper.]

CHARLES

What's this?

RUTH

A bill—fifty dollars for one Langshang cock—receipted. And the cock is in the yard.

CHARLES

Not in a glass case, then?

RUTH

He'd need a tall one. He can eat off a barrel from the ground. He's been in a glass case, as you say—the Crystal Palace, London. He's imported. John bought him, and we paid the bill with beads—Wampum, I call it. Mind, we don't complain. But you see, don't you, we take care of him.

CHARLES

And like it, too. It makes it all the worse.

RUTH

It seems as if. And that's not all. He's helpless in ways that I can hardly tell you of. Sometimes he gets possessed to keep accounts to see where all the money goes so fast. You know how men will be ridiculous. But it's just fun the way he gets all worked up and confused.

[Pause.]

If he's untidy now, what will he be—?

CHARLES

It makes it all the worse. You must be blind.

RUTH

Estelle's the one. You needn't talk to me.

CHARLES

Can't we go to her, you and I, and ... I don't know, maybe get to the root of it? What's the real trouble? What would it take to bring her back?

RUTH

It's like I said, she's turned from him, that's all.

CHARLES

But why? Is it the neighbors? Being cut off from friends?

RUTH

We have our friends.

CHARLES

So it's ... what? Just the strain of it, after all these years? But you stood the strain, and you're her mother.

RUTH

I didn't always. At first, I didn't like it at all. I just got used to it by degrees, you know, 'til it didn't seem so bad. And besides—John always said I was too old to have grandchildren, so.... But what's the use of talking when it's done? She won't come back. It's worse than that—she can't.

CHARLES

Why do you say it like that?

[Pause.]

What do you know? Has she done some sort of harm to herself?

RUTH

No.

CHARLES

What then?

RUTH

She's married.

CHARLES

Married? What do you mean—to someone else?

[RUTH nods. Pause.]

RUTH

You don't believe me?

CHARLES

No, I believe you. I knew there had to be something else. So that's what's behind it! She's gone bad, that's all.

RUTH

Bad? To get married when she had the chance?

CHARLES

Look at all the trouble she's caused! Look what she's done to John! But who, who—

RUTH

Who'd marry her straight out of such a mess? Say it right out—no matter if I'm her mother.

CHARLES

That's what I'm asking.

RUTH

The man was found.

CHARLES

Who?

RUTH

I'd better name no names. John himself won't imagine who he is.

CHARLES

You know John won't just give up. He thinks she's his by right.

RUTH

He can think what he likes. He won't find her.

CHARLES

Then it's all up.

RUTH

Looks to be.

[Pause.]

CHARLES

I think I'll get away. You'll be expecting John soon.

[Pause.]

I pity Estelle.

RUTH

That's very Christian of you.

CHARLES

I suppose you deserve some pity, too.

[Pause.]

You ought to have the kitchen to yourself to break it to him.

RUTH

You won't get away that easy. He's almost here.

CHARLES

John?

RUTH

I've had my eye on someone coming down Ryan's Hill. I thought it was him. Here he is now. This box! Put it away. And this bill.

CHARLES

What's the hurry? He'll unhitch.

RUTH

No, he won't either. He'll just drop the reins and turn Doll out to pasture, rig and all. She won't get far before the wheels hang up on something—there's no harm. See, there he is! My, but he looks as if he must have heard!

[There is the sound of someone throwing open the kitchen door. A moment later, JOHN enters.]

CHARLES

How are you, neighbor?

JOHN

Just the man I'm after. Come outside—we need to talk. I'll talk to you, old woman, afterward. I've got some news that maybe isn't news. I tell you, they'll be the death of me, these two!

[JOHN exits.]

RUTH

Go with him and stop his shouting—would you?

[CHARLES turns and follows JOHN outside.]

Who wants to hear your news, you crazy old fool?!

[Slow fade to black.]

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