



Mary—A Farmer's Wife

Bless the Lord who crowns you with tender mercies (Psalm 103, NKJV).

Mary was a farmer's wife. Such a designation might offend gender-sensitive folks today. But when I was growing up on a farm in northern Wisconsin, the term was taken for granted.

Jennie, my mother, was a farmer's wife. So also Ruby and Ethel and Rachel and Freda and Tina. These women often worked twelve-hour days, never imagining they would somehow be better off if they had *equality* with their husbands—whatever that would mean.

Most of these women I knew primarily for their good deeds. Part of their duties as a farmer's wife was to keep a watchful eye on the neighborhood—to be there for the birth of a baby and the burial of the dearly departed.

My mother was one of them. She was generous and quick to act in times of need. So was my father, but as the *farmer* he often had what he perceived to be far bigger concerns—like hiring the threshing crew or making sure the hay was mowed and raked and in the barn before a sudden summer storm.

"Mary sat musing on the lamp-flame at the table."

This is the first line of Robert Frost's poem, "The Death of the Hired Man." Mary is waiting for her husband, Warren, to return home from the market.

He had probably "gone into town," as we used to say, and picked up a few items that Mary had forgotten when she had done the weekly shopping. At any rate, it was poetically providential that Mary, not Warren, was left behind at home.

When Warren returns, Mary meets him at the doorway to tell him the news—"Silas is back."

Her next words are telling. "Be kind." But Warren had been kind to him. He had

always treated Silas well. He responds adamantly, "I'll not have the fellow back."

Silas was old and did not pull his weight. But that was not the critical issue for Warren. Silas had left him in the lurch—"Off he goes always when I need him most."

Farm work can't wait. Silas had been warned that if he left, "that ended it." He was never to darken the door of this farm house again.

"Shh!...not so loud—he'll hear you.... He's worn out. He's asleep beside the stove.... Warren, he has come home to die—you needn't be afraid he'll leave you this time."

"Home?"

This is not home for Silas. He's a hired man, for heaven's sake—and an unreliable hired man at that. How could this be home?

But then what is home?

"Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in."

"I should have called it something you somehow haven't to deserve."

Warren is not so easily taken in. If Silas is sick, he reasons, why can't he go live with his brother who has plenty of money to take care of him. Why does he have to come here?

They talk on, remembering Silas' odd ways. Mary knows, as does her husband, that Silas was just trying to save face when he had told her he had come back "to help ditch the meadow" and "to clear the upper pasture, too."

She urges Warren to go inside and talk to Silas.

Warren returned—too soon, it seemed to her, slipped to her side, caught up her hand and waited.

"Warren?" she questioned.

"Dead," was all he answered.

Mary was a farmer's wife. That's all we really know about her—except for the tender mercies she offered the hired man, Silas, in the fading moments of his life. □

—Ruth A. Tucker

"Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in."