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my  
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So.22

## SHORT STORY

# Farmer's Wife

Written for "The Listener"  
by AUDREY KING

IT was during prayers in the Central Hall when Esther realised she must leave school. She was seventeen and it was time, long past time, that she was away from all this. She raised her head and looked over the rows of girls, their faces hidden, who bowed with apparent reverence whilst the Head repeated a prayer "... as to God and not unto men..."

There were so many of them, and they all looked alike in navy gym dresses and white blouses, their hair

miss again. You'll get it and you're younger than I am. I can't explain really why I'm leaving, but..."

The form mistress swept past them, her black gown streaming behind her. "Esther. Paula."

Once the idea had taken possession of her mind, there seemed a finality to everything. The last time I do this... The last time I do that. Convincing



"This old tree . . . and the mountain, still here"

restricted by black ribbon bows . . . and she was one of them. A schoolgirl, moulded to pattern; a unit in this sprawling school life, controlled by bells; an automaton whose main ideas centred round geometry theorems and French verbs. But they didn't.

This alarming realisation had come to Esther with the Head's words and she had known that it wasn't good enough to be a schoolgirl, and that she wanted to be a person working "as to God." She felt a peculiar coldness that was just stupid fear, because it was safer, less terrifying, to go on with lessons.

As they trailed slowly from the Hall and wound their reluctant way up the broad, worn stairs, Esther looked down over the banisters at the dangling bell-rope and wondered how she could have found it fun to give the rope a tug. Becoming an adult was going to be a serious business, but she'd made up her mind.

"Tell you something," she said to Paula, her friend.

"What?"

"I'm leaving."

Paula's eyes flew open. "You can't. You're sitting for matric."

Esther paused at the door of their classroom. "No, I'm not. I'll never get it. This is my third try and I'll only

Mum and Dad. . . I'm going to get a job and it'll be a good job, not just pushing a typewriter. I'm going to do something worth while . . . nation-building . . . perhaps a missionary or a teacher. No, I haven't got matric. . . Well, a . . . a . . .

At interval she and Paula wandered down across the playing field their arms round one another, towards the see-saw which, laden with girls, cried dismally like a group of tired magpies.

"How they can," Esther said in her new voice.

Paula sighed and drew away from her friend. "You're funny to-day."

"Am I?"

"Yes. Tell me what happened to make you, sort of older."

Esther hesitated. I'm seventeen. When Mum was a girl lots of people were married by the time they were seventeen and had families."

"I know. That doesn't mean you should be married."

"But don't you see, it's time I stopped being just a schoolgirl. It's time I became grown-up."

"A woman," Paula said with a giggle.

"I mean it. I'm not clever like you . . . but I'm not dull. And to-day in prayers . . . Oh, I don't know . . . sort of feel useless."

(continued on next page)

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