

David Wagoner

an excerpt of

Mr. Thoreau Tonight

(A Play in One Act)

THE year is 1857. The setting is Henry David Thoreau's attic room in his parents' house in Concord, Massachusetts. A clutter of books, papers, and plant, bird, and animal specimens; a few laboratory instruments; and a table with a box full of books on it. At stage left, a pulpit-like lectern with two straight chairs behind it, in one of which MASTER GOODMAN is seated. Middle-aged, he is dressed and acts like the vice president of a bank, or the chairman of a sub-committee, or a private-school principal. MISTRESS KALLY sits in the other chair. She is in her twenties, very attractive, and dressed as if for a party. THOREAU is asleep on a cot. He is forty and still apparently in good health, though he will die fewer than five years later of tuberculosis. A rooster crows. MISTRESS KALLY goes to the lectern. The rooster crows again. MISTRESS KALLY speaks with a calm authority.

MISTRESS KALLY: The first rooster of the morning only half-wakened him, and he lay in bed, imagining the roosters in India and then in Arabia and Greece and Italy and France and England having crowed in turn hours earlier, and how the earth itself had turned its oceans eastward under the rising sun, and suddenly the first rooster in Concord, Massachusetts, had perched on some barnyard railing to make his important announcement.

MISTRESS KALLY sits down and is replaced at the lectern by MASTER GOODMAN. The rooster crows again.

MASTER GOODMAN: Henry? (*pause, then more sternly*) Henry David? (*pause, then severely*) Henry David Thoreau!

THOREAU *makes an inarticulate questioning sound.*

MASTER GOODMAN: It's dawn. It's time to get up.

THOREAU (*groans*): A few minutes more. I'm dreaming.

MASTER GOODMAN: You've done much too much of that already.

THOREAU: But I've already been up once.

MASTER GOODMAN: This is a different call of nature. You're giving a lecture tonight on the subject.

THOREAU (*sits up abruptly*): Yes. Yes, of course. I have it all prepared. It's all written down.

MASTER GOODMAN: That's all very well, but you're not prepared to deliver it. You need instruction and correction.

THOREAU (*meekly*): Yes. Yes, I'm sure that's true.

MASTER GOODMAN: We mustn't allow tardiness to hinder the little we *are* able to improve.

THOREAU: Of course not.

MASTER GOODMAN: You must be up and about.

During the following, THOREAU, who is wearing long underwear, puts on his baggy moleskin trousers, a work shirt, and calf-length boots.

MASTER GOODMAN: It's time for you to be useful to your community.

THOREAU: Do I belong to a community?

MASTER GOODMAN: Yes, the goodmen of your village and their women. I'm sure at least a few of each will come and listen to you. They heard an excellent sermon last week from the Reverend Channing.

THOREAU: Then they won't feel I'm being repetitious. I don't intend to mention Jesus or God.

MASTER GOODMAN: That's the kind of remark I trust you'll refrain from making tonight.

THOREAU: I intend to speak freely.

MASTER GOODMAN: I most certainly hope not. (*sees THOREAU putting on boots*) I don't believe it will be necessary to wade into the lecture hall.

THOREAU: I have much to do outdoors before then. And it's raining.

MASTER GOODMAN (*sighs, shakes his head*): Now we're going to rehearse, though it's probably too late to make much difference.

THOREAU *gets behind the box full of books on his table and uses it as a kind of lectern. He consults a sheaf of papers on which his lecture is written.*

THOREAU (*quietly, almost apologetically*): Ladies and gentlemen—

MASTER GOODMAN: I'm sure they'll wish you to be audible.

THOREAU (*louder and more crisply*): Ladies and gentlemen, tonight I would like to speak to you on the subject of—

MASTER GOODMAN: Windy and wasteful.

THOREAU (*not offended*): Quite right. Goodmen and goodwomen, what role were we meant to play in what is called "The Natural World"?

MASTER GOODMAN: Your posture is acceptable. One of your few good inborn attributes. But you mustn't fidget or keep your eyes fastened on the page. Look at your audience *most* of the time.

THOREAU: Yes, all right, all right. But if I catch people's eyes, they begin catching mine.

MASTER GOODMAN: Then look over their heads. That's probably where your lecture will be going anyway.

THOREAU (*trying to follow his instructions*): What role were we meant to play in what is called "The Natural World"?

MASTER GOODMAN: Every working day and every Sunday they're all firmly told and shown what their role is. Do you intend to modify or contradict the teachings of the church and the marketplace?

THOREAU (*smiles*): Yes. Yes, I do.

MASTER GOODMAN: I forbid it.

THOREAU: I'll take your advice—and keep it in mind. (*resumes lecturing*) The word *nature* has its root in the Latin word for "that which is born," to differentiate it from "that which merely exists," and of course the root implies its corollary, "that which can die."

MASTER GOODMAN: It's all right to sound learned, but you're not, in spite of Harvard, old enough or respectable enough to be pompous.

THOREAU (*with surprised respect*): You're right.

MASTER GOODMAN: I always am.

THOREAU: No one is. Not even you.

MASTER GOODMAN: Your opinion on the matter is of no consequence. Go on.

THOREAU (*lecturing again*): We share birth and death with microscopic creatures all the way through the vegetable and animal kingdoms to the end, where humankind stands, looking both backward and forward, wondering how it arrived there, what its role is, and what comes next.

MASTER GOODMAN: Point one: we know what comes next. Either heaven or hell or perhaps limbo, depending on your denomination. Point two: we look backward as leaders making sure their followers, their subjects, are following in good order and behaving themselves.

THOREAU (*trying to ignore him*): We are constantly dying in one world and being born into another. Unless the humming of a gnat is like the music of the spheres, and the music of the spheres is like the humming of a gnat, both will be lost on you.

MASTER GOODMAN: Absurd. If one pesters you while you lecture, won't you swat it?

THOREAU (*trying to ignore him*): Probably no man knows whether he's dead or not. Our thoughts are the epochs of our lives, and everything else is a journal of the winds that blew while we were here.

MASTER GOODMAN (*shocked*): If you say that, every churchgoer in your audience will get up and leave.

THOREAU (*trying to ignore him*): Come with me into the woods now.

MASTER GOODMAN: They'll have no desire to follow you into the woods this evening. As you said, it's raining.

THOREAU: I'll tell them it's morning.

MASTER GOODMAN: They'll know it isn't. Many good citizens would be too frightened even to dream of following you. The Germans have a wise saying: "You will meet no friend in a forest."

THOREAU: This is what I'll say to them: (*lecturing*) What shall we do with someone who's afraid in the woods, whether it's day or night? Afraid of darkness, afraid even of solitude? What salvation is there for him in church on Sunday, or any other day of the week, trying to make joyful noises? We need to recognize our share, our full share, in all the kingdoms of the earth. And of all above it and under it too. Perhaps even minerals are born and live and die.

MASTER GOODMAN: You should delay being ridiculous as long as possible. Though, in your case, that may not be long enough to hold an audience.

THOREAU (*less bothered than before*): We have responsibility for the care and keeping of those other kingdoms. We have been given or have achieved (whichever it may be) powers over them. And those powers must not be abused.