

***JAMES LANE
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***THE KENTUCKY
WARBLER***

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The Kentucky Warbler

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THE HOME

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Webster, along with thousands of other lusty forward-looking Kentucky children, went to the crowded public schools.

There every morning against his will but with the connivance of his parents he was made a prisoner, as it seemed to him, and for long hours held as such while many things disagreeable or unnecessary, some by one teacher and some by another, were forced into his head. Soon after they were forced in most of the things disappeared from the head. What became of them nobody knew: Webster didn't know and he didn't care. During the forcing-in process month by month and year by year he now and then picked up a pleasant idea for himself, some wonderful idea about great things on ahead in life or about the tempting world just outside school. He picked up such ideas with ease and eagerness and held on to them.

He lived in a small white-frame cottage which was rather new but already looked rather old. It stood in a small green yard, which was naturally very old but still looked young. The still-young yard and the already-ageing cottage were to be found—should anybody have tried to find them—on the rim of the city. If the architectural plan of the city had been

mapped out as an open-air theatre, the cottage would have been a rear seat in the very last row at the very lowest price. The block was made up of such cottages—rear seats. They faced the city but couldn't see the city, couldn't see anything worth seeing, and might as well have looked in some other direction or not looked at all.

If Webster stepped out of the front door, he was within five yards of the outmost thoroughfare—native dirt-road for milk wagons, butchers' wagons, coal carts, and fruit-and-berry wagons. Webster's father kept an especial eye on the coal carts: they weighed heavily on his salary. Webster's mother kept her eye on the fruit-and-berry wagons: they tantalised her passion for preserves. Everybody kept uneasy eyes on milk and butchers' and vegetable wagons, which brought expensive satisfaction to appetites for three meals a day. The edges of the thoroughfare were paths for the cottagers, all of whom walked and were glad and grateful even to be able to walk. The visitors of the cottagers walked. Everybody walked but the drivers. The French would have called the street The Avenue of Soles.

One wet winter morning as Webster, walking beside his father, lifted his feet out of the mud and felt sorry about their shoes, he complained because there was no pavement.

"My son," replied his father, whose remarks on any subject appeared to come out of a clear sky, so unclouded were they by uncertainty, "my son, your father's salary is not a paved-sidewalk salary. The mud on your shoes is in an inverse ratio to the funds in his pockets. I believe you have

learned in your arithmetic at school by this time what ratio is."

One dry summer morning as Webster walked beside his father, a butcher's wagon whirled past and covered them quickly with dust. He considered this injury to their best clothes and complained because there was no watering-cart.

"My son," replied his father out of his daily clear sky, "my salary is not a watering-cart salary. The presence of the earth's dust in your eyes exactly equals the lack of gold-dust in your father's earthly account. I believe by this time you have studied equations."

But if Webster had stepped out of the back door of the cottage and passed under the clothes-line which was held up at its middle point by a forked pole, if he had crossed their very small vegetable garden and then had crossed a wide deep cow-lot where some rich man of the city pastured his fat milk cows, he would have been on the edge of the country. It was possible for one standing on the rear porch to see all summer thick, softly waving woods.

Within the past two or three years, as summer had come again and the world turned green, a change had taken place in Webster, a growth. More and more he began to look from the porch or windows at those distant massed trees. Something from them seemed to cross over to him, an influence powerful and compelling; it drew him out of the house back with it into the mystery of the forest and he never returned.

In truth, almost as soon as he could go anywhere he had started toward the forest without asking permission. They

had overtaken him then and dragged him back. When he was old enough to understand, they had explained: he was too young, he would get lost, the bull would hook him.

"But why?" Webster had asked, complaining of this new injustice in the world. He was perpetually being surprised that so many things in the world were bent on getting one into trouble; all around him things seemed to be waiting to make trouble. "Why should the bull hook *me*? *I've* done nothing to *the bull*."

They were about finishing breakfast. He was eating in his slow ruminant way—he ate enormously but never hungrily. His father, whose custom it was to divide the last half of his breakfast with the first half of his newspaper, lowered the paper and looked over the top.

"My son," he said, "the bull has horns. Every living creature is bound to use everything it has. Use what you have or lose what you have—that is the terrible law in this world. Therefore the bull is obliged to hook what he can to keep his horns going. If you give him the chance, he will practise them on you. Otherwise his great-great-grandson might not have any horns when he really needed them. Do you understand?"

"No," said Webster.

"I'll explain again when you are mature enough to comprehend," said his father, returning to his paper.

Webster returned to the subject.

"If I ever have any money in my pocket, you always tell me not to spend it: now you say I ought to use whatever I have."

His father quickly lowered his paper and raised his voice:

"I have never said that you must use everything all at once, my son. You must learn to use it at the right time."

"When *is* the right time to use a thing?" asked Webster, eating quietly on.

"I'll answer that question when it is necessary," his father replied grumbly from behind his paper, putting an end to the disturbance.

A few weeks prior to this breakfast-scene Webster one day at recess had laid bare a trouble in himself, confiding it to one of his intimate school-mates. He did so with a tone of uncertainty, for he was not sure but he was not being disloyal.

"Can *your* father answer all the questions *you* ask *him*?"

"Not half of them!" exclaimed the comrade with splendid candour—"Not half!"

"My father answers very few *I* ask *him*," interposed a fragile little white-faced fellow who had strolled up in time to catch the drift of the confidential talk. He did not appear strong enough even to put a question: he nursed a ragged ball, had lost a front tooth, and gave off the general skim-milk look which some children carry about with them.

Webster, without inquiring further, began to feel a new respect for himself as not being worse off than other boys as to fathers; also a new respect for his father as not being worse than his class: fathers were deficient!

Remembering this discovery at school—one of the big pleasant ideas he picked up outside lessons—he did not on the morning in question press his father more closely as to using horns when you have them and not using money when you have it. In fact, he was already beginning to shield

his father and had quite ceased to interrogate him in company, lest he expose some ignorance. He therefore credited this incident where it belonged: as a part of his growing knowledge that he couldn't look to his father for any great help on things that puzzled him—fathers, as had been said, being deficient, though always contriving to look so proficient that from merely surveying them you would never suspect the truth.

Webster's father was a minor bookkeeper in one of the city's minor banks. Like his bankbooks, he was always perfectly balanced, perfectly behaved; and he was also perfectly bald. Even his baldness might have been credited to him as one of the triumphs of exact calculation: the baldness of one side being exactly equal to the baldness of the other: hardly a hair on either exposure stood out as an unaccounted-for remainder.

Webster thought of his father as having worked at nothing but arithmetic for nearly forty years. Sometimes it became a kind of disgust to him to remember this: as was his custom when displeased at anything he grew contemptuous. In one of his contemptuous moments he one day asked:

"How many times have you made the figure 2?"

"Three quadrillion times, my son," replied his father with perfect accuracy and a spirit of hourly freshness. His father went on:

"The same number of times for all of them. When you're in the thousands, you may think one or the other figure is ahead, but when you get well on into the millions, there isn't any difference: they are neck and neck."