

The Southerner, Part IV

Jean Renoir, Dir. (1945)

Carrying his huge fish, Sam walks along the river's edge toward the neighbor's place.

When he arrives, Sam sees a young man washing clothes in a metal tub out in the yard.

"Mighty fine place you got around here," comments Sam. "You the owner? You Henry Devers?"

"No, folks call me Finlay."

"Howdy!"

"Howdy. He's my uncle. He's over yonder in the shed."

"Much obliged, Finlay." Sam heads over to the shed with the fish, as Finlay watches.

Noticing Sam approach, a young woman pulls off her apron and smooths her dress. She wants to look pretty for the handsome stranger!

Sam stands at the entrance to the shed. "Howdy!" It's a cluttered space. Light leaks in through gaps in the wooden walls.

Devers, in overalls, with shirtsleeves rolled up, a battered hat on his head, is working at his vise. "What do you want?" He turns his head slightly, but doesn't turn to greet Sam.

"I'm your neighbor. My name's Sam Tucker. I brought you a fish." He goes over to the man.

"Mean do I want to buy it?" Pliers in hand, Devers is focused on his work. He still doesn't look up.

"Oh, no! It's a present!"

"Well, leave it if you got no use for it," he says gruffly, gesturing over to the side.

"Where'll I put it?" Sam's face reveals his disappointment.

"Any place... on the bench."

"Say, that's a mighty queer-lookin' fishhook you're fixin'."

"I ain't no grabber. I fish hook and line." Sure enough, Devers has fashioned two very big fishing hooks that he is tying up with wire.

"Aim to use it in this river?"

"Aim to use it any place I feel like it," he snarls.

Devers turns and yells out to his nephew, "Finlay!" The young man looks up from the river bank, where he's skipping stones like a kid.

Finlay appears in the doorway, and his uncle tells him, "Take this here fish, and give it to Becky to cook for dinner." Finlay grabs the big fish greedily.

Now the young woman – apronless, dress smoothed out – approaches. "Are you the new neighbor? I'm Becky Devers."

"Yes'm. We're the Tuckers."

"Be nice havin' folks next door," she says. "It's lonesome here."

Devers turns to her angrily. "What are you doin' here? I didn't send for ya!"

“Well, I thought, Pop –”

He cuts her off, “You don't have to think. Get that fish and go back to the house!” Becky and Finlay start to leave when Devers yells at his nephew, with a pointing finger, “And you get your washin' finished!”

Sam stands awkwardly for a moment, hat in hand. Then he walks over to the far wall, and looks back at his new neighbor.

Finally, he speaks up. “My wife will likely be over soon to borrow some of your well water.”

“So that's what you come for!”

“That's right. My well ain't no good.”

“I coulda told you that.”

“So can I, now. What about that water?”

“Why don't you get your water at the river?”

“Cause river water ain't no good for kids to drink.”

“All right,” concedes Devers. “As long as there's plenty of water.”

At last, Devers looks up from his hooks. “You'll have to make other arrangements, though, when summer comes. Gets pretty weak when the weather's dry. We'll take turns about replacin' the wore-out rope.” He gestures over his shoulder.

Sam looks grim. “Seems pretty wore-out already.”

“Well, if you don't like it, next well's five miles down the road.”

“Suits me.”

Sam puts his hat back on. “All right... so long Devers.” He heads out.

“Just a minute!” Sam stops and looks back. “You're likely gonna fix your own well, ain't you? If you're rentin' you must have some savings put aside.”

“I got two good arms. It's worth more than savings.”

“To hear folks talk, you think you can be farmers just like that with your bare hands. Got any tools or a tractor?”

“No, I ain't got no tractor. But I got two mules and a good old plow and a friend o' mine's lendin' the seed.”

“And Ruston furnishes the fertilizer,” interjects Devers. “Don't need much for good muddy land like that. And if you get by the year, he generously lets you take your share of the crop. Ain't that right?”

“Why ask me? It seems you know it already.”

“Oh, but I know Ruston. Ain't the first time he's gettin' a piece of land cleaned off for nothin'. Until you get your plowin' started, how do you aim to eat?”

“I aim to fish and hunt varmints and sell a few skins. Lots of folks live like that around here. Plenty more done it before.” Then Sam asks, “How about you? How'd you get started?”

Devers turns slowly and, for the first time, looks Sam in the eye. “Sharecrop. First year I lost my whole crop. It was ruined by the hail. Next year black leg disease got my cow and pig that I'd spent all my savings fer. My wife caught cold and she died. Two years later, one of my kids, the boy, he died from spring sickness. Maybe I lost them both – my woman and my kid – because I didn't have no money for

doctoring. And here I am with a farm, a good one, belongs all to me and worth lots of money. Only, I can't forget what it cost me.”

“So when I see young folk like you with their proudness, noses stuck in the air, just makes me laugh!”
“Well, much obliged for the water,” Sam says simply. “And good luck with your fishhook.” He walks away.

Shoulders hunched, gazing into the far distance, Devers has the look of a man reviewing his losses.

As he leaves, Sam runs into Finlay, who’s about to hang the wash on the line.

“Hey, Finlay! What's that big old fish hook your uncle's fixing up there? Is there a whale in this river?”

“That's for Lead Pencil.” Finlay looks at Sam with a simpleton grin.

“Lead Pencil? What's that?”

“A catfish. He's got two whiskers like lead pencils. Biggest durned catfish you ever seen in the river.”

Devers steps out of the shed. “Finlay! Get that washing done!” The young man scrambles away.

Just as Sam is leaving, Becky comes by, leading a cow. She calls out, “Come over again!”

“Thank you, Ma’am!” Sam replies.

Sam walks home along the river. He pauses and looks back toward Devers’ place, shaking his head. After a few more steps, he stops again and gazes at the water, perhaps thinking about Lead Pencil. It’s a beautiful scene, a man in thought by a river, calm and tranquil. But there’s trouble ahead.