

The Southerner, Part V

Jean Renoir, Dir. (1945)

The calendar shows that it's winter. On the kitchen shelves, the jars of provisions – sugar, lentils and pears – are almost empty. The camera pans up to sagging bags of cornmeal and flour, with nothing to hold them in shape.

In the old house, as mournful violin music plays, Granny gathers the shawl around her shoulders; Nona paces, her arms tight around herself, shivering. At the sound of someone outside the door, Nona rushes to open it. It's Sam, huddled against the cold. He's carrying his rifle.

Nona leans against the door. "Nothin'?"
Sam shakes his head. His hunting trip was unsuccessful.
Nona says, "Daisy, honey, why don't you and Sonny get into bed?"

"It's nice and warm there." She brings the children over to the bed, lifts them in and covers them up. Sam walks to the stove and warms his hands. "Did you have a nice day at school, Sister?"

Daisy sits up to answer, but Nona puts her hand over the girl's mouth. She looks up at Sam with a grim expression, then stands and walks across the room. "She didn't go, Sam," she says. "Why not?"

"It's too cold. She ain't got no coat. She'll catch her death of cold." She sobs.
"But they just gotta go to school." Sam smiles tenderly. "Just 'cause we're having hard times right now don't mean we gotta stop nothing. We gotta keep going. Once we give up, we won't have the courage to get ourselves back to good times."

Sam makes a decision. He takes the blanket that Granny has on her lap: that will make a coat for Daisy to wear to school.

Before you know it, Daisy has her new woolen coat! She beams with happiness.

Sam is out in the woods with Zoom the dog. He's built a small fire in the hollow of a tree to drive out a critter that might make a nice dinner. Crouched down, he puts more leaves in and fans the fire with his hat, looking up at the top of the tree.

Sure enough, a possum pokes his head out, wrapped in billowing smoke.

Sam can hardly believe his eyes. Putting his hat back on, he reaches for his rifle. He stands, takes aim, and shoots. Clunk! He smiles as the dead possum strikes the ground.

Zoom is snarling at the possum. Sam kneels to retrieve it, exclaiming, "Yessir, that carcass of yours is sure gonna make four Tuckers happy!"

He calls out, "C'mon, Zoom!" Then he throws the carcass over his shoulder and takes off for home.

At home, the family hears the barking and stands, expectantly, looking towards the door.

Sam bursts in, holding up the fat possum, as triumphant music swells in the background.

Nona steps over to the cupboard and takes the carving knife, which she hones on a sharpening stone.
“Reckon we can eat now, folks!”

We see her carry the cooked possum from the stove over to the table.

With heads bowed, the family prays. Sam says, “Much obliged, Lord. Looks like the Tuckers are gonna make the grade after all. Amen.”

Serving the food, Nona announces, “Granny gets the first, because she's the eldest.” Granny picks up her portion with her fingers and eagerly starts chewing.

“Then comes Jotty, 'cause he's the littlest.” Both Jotty and Sam seem mesmerized by the fragrant meat. Jotty digs right in, just like Granny.

“Then comes Papa, 'cause he caught this possum. And this one's for Zoomy because he helped him!” Sam puts a plate on the floor.

“And last of all, Daisy and me, 'cause we're the womenfolk.” Daisy says, “At school they say this kinda food is bad for you all the time.” She takes a big bite, then goes on: “They say you gotta eat vegetables. Too much meat's bad.”

“Vegetables in winter?”
“If you don't, they say you get pellagra.”

“That must be the spring sickness, Sam,” Nona comments.
“Why, it's vegetables that causes spring sickness!” he replies. “That's when you get it. 'Long about the time you start eating vegetables.”

“I oughta know,” says Granny, her possum bone almost stripped clean. “I lost three o' mine from it. And not one was over six years old!”

“Shucks, look at them,” says Sam, indicating the kids. “Anything a body likes as good as that, couldn't be bad for 'em.”

It's time for the Tuckers to work on their farm! Sam cuts down brush and weeds, slashing with vigor.

He harnesses the mules and walks behind, steadying the plow as they go, while Nona burns the weeds in the distance. They work outside all day.

In a beautifully framed shot, the house is centered in the background, under a cloudless sky. The furrows curve forward from the house past Nona to Sam, who stands, legs braced, behind the mules. A cloud of dust rises from their hooves.

Exhausted, Sam and Nona walk back to the house, where Granny and the children are sitting on the porch.

The family sits in an untidy row on the edge of the porch. Nona puts her arm through Sam's and he covers it with his hand.

"We done all that ourselves," he says. "We kept workin' and pluggin' away... By gosh, we done good. Before long now we can start plantin' our cotton. Then that crop will really get started!" Sleeves rolled up, face dusty, he gazes off into the distance, where his dreams are waiting.