

The Southerner, Part VI

Jean Renoir, Dir. (1945)

According to the calendar, it's spring: March. As the camera pulls back, we see Sam's hands fashioning huge fish hooks, much like those of Devers. He must be aiming to try for Lead Pencil himself!

A dissolve brings us to the riverside, where Sam hands a coil of fishing line to Daisy. Jotty sits next to her on the bough of a tree, looking out at the water.

"Old Lead is a pretty smart old guy," Sam explains. "Wouldn't hardly live to be as old as he is, if he wasn't. I'll bet you old Lead waits for his dinner right over yonder." He stretches out his arm, indicating the direction. "It's like a trap, on the river bottom."

Sam stands up. "Gimme that, Honey," he says, taking the coil of line. He wades into the water, holding the line over his shoulder to cast it in. Daisy watches in her white dress, while Jotty pets the dog.

But what's this?! Peering out from behind some brush, we see Devers' nephew Finlay, who's spying on them! Remember, Devers wants Lead Pencil all for himself! Suspenseful music tells us that Sam had better look out!

The shot of Sam up to his waist in the water, as his kids look on, is another beautiful pastoral scene, carefully balanced and composed.

Smoke puffs out of the Tuckers' chimney. We see new tile patches on the shingled roof. Out in the field, Sam sits behind the mules as they pull the plow.

When Nona approaches with a sack of seed, he takes it and refills a bucket. Sitting at his feet, the bucket will distribute seed into the newly made furrow.

She puts her arm around him, then rests her head on his shoulder, contented.

Back at the house, Granny steps out onto the porch. "Sam! Nony!" she yells. "You all come here quick! Jot's ailin'... I reckon he's got the spring sickness!"

That evening, Sam and Nona are sitting out on the porch. The camera moves in close on Nona's troubled face. "Sam... I'm afraid!" He folds her in his arms.

Nona, in a straw hat, has taken Jotty into town. "I didn't see no reason to bother you, Doctor. It was just that little sore. Jotty ain't ever been sick. Then it grew and grew. It's like some evil crawlin' worm eatin' up my baby! I can't stand to watch it no longer, Doctor! You gotta do somethin' to stop it!" She sobs.

The doctor, a burly, white-haired man, examines the large sore on Jotty's cheek.

Handing Jotty over to Nona, the doctor asks, "You don't have a cow, do you?"
"No, Sir."

“Well, you better tell Sam to get one.”

“How do we get a cow?”

“Borrow one! Let Sam raise a heifer for somebody.”

“Or borrow some milk, anyway. A pint a day... or better still, a quart. Any neighbor with a cow could spare you that.”

“I'll try, Doctor. What medicine should I give him?”

“Undress the boy.” The doctor points to the table. He asks Jotty, “What vegetables you been eatin' lately?”

“Vegetables?!” replies Nona. “Couldn't grow vegetables in winter.”

“You got any money?”

“Yes, Doctor. I got your two dollars. Sam's got a dollar and thirty five cents more.”

“Keep it. Take your money and spend it all for vegetables. And get some lemons. Give him a glass of lemonade, twice a day. And get that milk! Do you hear? If you don't give him milk and vegetables, anything that I can do will be just plum wasted.”

“And with the milk and vegetables?”

“I think he's got a chance.”

Down the street, Sam goes into Harmie's General Store.

A man sitting on the counter says, “Well, if it ain't Sam Tucker!” A burly man, he's wearing a white shirt and tie and a peaked cap. He's the first man we've seen who isn't wearing a cowboy hat.

Sam goes and shakes his hand. “Tim! When did you get in town?” Behind them, we see hand-lettered signs for some of the store's offerings: blueberries, pickles, sardines.

Harmie explains, “Tim just came back to show off his city clothes.”

“Take a look at that fancy tie!” says one of the fellows in the store, flicking it with his fingers.

Harmie himself is wearing a bow tie and a dapper straw hat and munching cheerfully on a cookie.

Tim hops down off the counter. “Sam, I been lookin' all over for you. Let's go over to Seamen's and I'll buy us a beer and tell you all about it.”

“Brother, I'm with you any time you'll buy me a beer!” He turns to Harmie. “Nona and Jotty are over at Doc White's. When they come over, tell them I'll be back in a minute, will you?”

The two men head out.

In the doorway, Tim asks, “You said Nona and Jotty's over at Doc White's? What's wrong, Sam?”

“Jotty's ailin'. He's got the spring sickness. Poor Nona. With a sick kid, she don't hardly get a wink of sleep.”

“That's tough, man.”

“My ma came to my place yesterday to help. Harmie brought her out in his truck. That's kind of a relief,” said Sam.

In the street, on the way to the bar, the two men greet the people they know.

Then Tim stops and turns to Sam: “Would you be interested in coming to work in the factory with me?”

“Are you crazy? What would I do in a factory? I'm a farmer.”

As they continue walking, Tim makes his pitch. “Well, they just opened a new plant and they're just cryin' for men. Don't even have to be skilled. I know the foreman. I can get you in in a minute.”

“Do they pay much?”

“Seven bucks a day!”

“Seven bucks a day!?” Sam is astonished.

In the bar, they get two bottles of beer and head to the back. The long line of the counter and the bar stools draws the eye across the scene from the barman to the two friends, who sit down at a table.

“Seven bucks a day, eh?” Sam can't get that figure out of his mind.

“So, it's yes – you'll come?”

“Don't rightly see how I can, Tim. I made a deal with Ruston. I already got some credit from his commissary.”

“At \$7 a day it wouldn't take you long to pay him back.”

“Yeah, but I'm tellin' you, Tim, this is the first time I been able to farm my own crop, just like I always wanted to. Ain't somethin' I can give up, just like that.”

“I'd rather work in my field,” Sam goes on. “I feel better that way... I feel more free.” In close up, he has an earnest, longing look.

“Free? Free? Man, with money in your pocket, you're as free as the wind. With this” – he takes out some bills – “you want a good meal, you go to a restaurant. Good room, you go to a hotel. All you gotta do is flash your greenback. You get anything you want.”

“You call that free?” Tim asks. “Sweatin' from mornin' 'til night in the bakin' hot sun, workin' in them fields!”

“Oh, I'll allow as how it's sometimes pretty hard. What I mean is, I like being able to decide things for myself. To know I can choose my own time about plantin' and plowin' and harvestin' the crop.” Sam looks down, examining his hands. “That I can do it all in my own way and don't have to answer to nobody. I mean for me alone being accountable for it.”

“That means no?”

“Afraid so, Tim.” Sam is staying on his farm.