

The Southerner, Part VII

Jean Renoir, Dir. (1945)

At the river, Granny is fetching water. She mutters, "Milk and greens... I'd like to see some of them damn vegetables to grow. Where he figure we're gonna get that there milk from? Out of the sky just like that?"

Wrapped in a quilt, Jotty whimpers quietly in the arms of Sam's mother. Sam and Nona are hoeing furiously, trying to raise the vegetables that would cure their son of the spring sickness.

Listening to him cry, Nona stops and looks desperately at Sam, who says, "I'm gonna get that milk." He climbs over the fence and heads out.

Over at Devers' farm, Becky stops from milking the cow and stands. We see the metal pail in her hand. Off-screen, Devers is speaking: "No, sir, it's just like I told you, Tucker. I don't need no extra help. I got Finlay and my girl Becky."

As he wields a pole to mix grain in a tub, Devers continues, "Too bad about your boy. I know how that is. Sick kid is pretty sorrowful." To his daughter, he says, "Pitch it in, Becky!"

Becky pours the precious milk into the tub: Devers is making pig feed. Sam watches, downcast.

"But I told you before, it's wrong for a man to get too big for his britches. When you got no money, you work for them what's got it. That there's the rule. Why don't you go back to Ruston?"

He continues, "About the milk, like you see, I can't rightly spare a drop. I got no milk for myself. It's all for the pigs. Pour the rest in, Becky!" Becky does as she's told, then looks up wistfully at Sam. She walks off past him, barefoot. Finlay takes her place at the tub.

"You're a good worker all right, Tucker. If I was you, I wouldn't think twice. I'd go back to work for Ruston."

"I already done told you. I want to grow my own crop and I aim to do it." Sam stares at Devers with fierce determination.

"Well, if you're so sure of yourself, why are you always coming around askin' the neighbors for help?"

"I don't know why I ever asked you for anything. Likely, some old-fashioned idea I had about neighborliness." He glances back over the wire fence behind him. "Take good care of them pigs." "That's sure what I'm gonna do!"

As Sam walks off, there's a cry from off-screen: "Sam! Sam!" It's Becky. He turns around, framed between a tractor and a pair of cows.

She runs over with a small bucket of milk. "Here, take this. It's for Jotty."

"Thanks, Becky."

"I can get you some more every once in a while. My daddy won't have to see."

"I'm much obliged, Becky, and I'll take it, 'cause my boy's really bad off. But I'll pay you for it."

Just then, Finlay appears, furious. “Becky! I seen ya! I seen what ya done!”

Sam warns, “I feel just like breakin’ somebody’s neck today.”

Ignoring him, Finlay says, “I’m gonna tell your pa you was stealin’ his milk! I knowed you was hankerin’ after this fella. I saw you lookin’ at him, before. I’m gonna tell your pa!” Then he reaches over and knocks the bucket to the ground.

“What did you do that for?!” Becky is horrified. “I’m never going to speak to you again!”

“If I see you talkin’ to him again, you’ll be sorry!” He runs off.

“Don’t fret, Becky,” Sam comforts her. “You’re a good gal. Thanks just the same.” He heads off through the woods, leaving Becky with the empty bucket in her hand.

Sam walks briskly home, but slows down when he gets to the yard. On the porch, he hangs his hat on a nail. He’s about to go in, but the sound of his son’s moans pulls him up short.

Hands in his back pockets, he looks out at his field.

Nona comes out of the house, stops for a moment, then walks straight past Sam. He watches her go, concerned. Behind him, wet clothing hangs on a line.

Sam walks to the edge of the porch. “Honey...” Nona is far away, in the newly plowed field.

He takes off after her. “Nona! Nona!” In a long shot, the two figures are tiny in a great expanse of land and sky.

As Sam takes her in his arms, Nona says, “I can’t listen to him cry no more!” We can hear Jotty moaning in the distance.

She falls down to the ground sobbing, her face hidden in her arm. Then, stretching out her arms, she buries her hands in the earth.

Sam looks down at her, pained and helpless. Finally, he turns and walks away.

It’s a sparse and sadly beautiful shot: Nona’s body horizontal at the bottom, Sam a vertical line at the left. The rest is dirt, a few trees, and sky.

After walking a spell, he stops, hands in his back pockets, and looks up at the heavens. “Oh Lord,” he prays, “how come you put the sky up there and this old mud down here? Made it so pretty if you didn’t want us to work it and to love it?” Tears fill his eyes. “Do you want me to give all this up? Move in town with Tim and work with him in a factory, under a roof that hides your sky and puts out your light? Tell me Lord... help me to know.”

Kicking up dust, a truck drives up towards the farm, as lively music plays. In the back, we see Tim, who’s holding onto a cow!

As the truck pulls up to Sam's house, Harmie runs out with Daisy.
He asks, "Did you have a good trip, Timmy?"
"You know, Harmie, the cow's the only thing that I miss in the city."

As Nona milks the cow, Harmie and Sam's mother watch. He's still wearing his bow tie and straw hat.
Nona turns and beams at them.

Standing beside Tim, Sam has Jotty in his arms. The boy is still wrapped in the quilt; we see the sore on his face. From high up on a fence, Daisy watches the milking.

On the porch, happy at last, Sam and Nona embrace.

They are fast asleep on their patchwork quilt in the summer heat. A dissolve brings us into their dream: hand in hand, they walk through a cotton field – their field – as soothing music plays.
They've gotten through yet another crisis. Will life be easier on them now?