

Southern Mother

EMMETT GOWEN

SAM was driving because this was his home territory and he knew the way out of the city, out the Dixie Highway to the place to turn off. The car whispered, humming into the cavern shapes of its lights ahead. When he turned it into the dirt road between the rail fences it bounced violently until he could slow down. "Nearly there, now," he said.

"A real country road," Helen said at his shoulder. He heard Bob say something to Leon in the rumble seat. "What?" he yelled. "I guess you've been up and down this road plenty of times," Bob shouted from the rumble seat. "I'll say," he said, and he felt a knot of emotion dissolve in him, nearly weeping, thinking: My feet even now remember the individual rocks, barefoot too late in the fall, with my feet aching with the cold of the road.

They passed the dark houses, the old houses in their bouquets of trees such as they had been passing for hundreds of miles through the South, except that in these he knew the owners. He thought of the weather-beaten men sleeping in their ragged long drawers, the pious unlaughing women beside them, their bodies perhaps sweating like human beings in the summer heat, but their hearts cold in the desperation and squalor of small ownership. He thought of the sad, thin children, who played without smiling and slept with their fists clenched.

Then, after all the speed and hurry, which had made the earth seem a highway bordered by endless impersonal scenery, they come to a stop before a dilapidated gate in the weeds, and suddenly sensed the vast quiet of country night, and suddenly by becoming still were intimate with the earth.

The house was dark, a dim bulk against the stars. "Somebody will have to open the gate," Sam said. "I'll do it," Bob said, and stumbled, scattering the stones as he got out. "It's a shame for all of us to descend on them like this in the middle of the night," Helen said. "That's all right," Sam said. He guided the car slowly through the gate, remembering the way he had driven wagons and buggies through it, remembering a saddle mare he had taught to open the latch with her nose. He drove down the lot, by habit recurring after fifteen years, to a place under a walnut tree, where he had used to unhitch the horses.

He got out to go and wake them. The others waited in the car as if uncertain of welcome. He was thinking, but in a moment my mother will warm them with hospitality. He ran to the back porch in the dark and jerked at the screen door. It was fastened. "Mother," he shouted. He heard a murmur inside and then his father's surprised voice. "It's Sam," his father said. Then his mother's

bare feet thumped across the kitchen in the dark.

"Hello, mother," he said. "Hidy, son," she said. He saw her dimly with a mixture of the old habitual emotions, with a memory of guilt swamping him now, as when he had used to come in late and feel her anger, the silent and furious antagonism that had always been between them, the cold, hard thing remembered even now in the warmth of homecoming and the eager jerk in his voice of love. "I've got three friends out here; we've come to stay all night," he said. "Is it all right?" he asked. "Why, of course, son," she said; "of course." "I'll go out and get them," he said. "I'll go light a lamp," she said.

He ran around the corner of the house and toward the headlights. "Okay?" Bob asked. "Sure," he said, and began taking the baggage out of the rack. In dim bending outlines under the stars they got out of the car. They turned off the headlights. "This way," he said, walking ahead, feeling with his feet for the path in the dark. He carried a suitcase and a typewriter. "They're lighting up," he said, speaking in order to lead the way in the dark with his voice.

Then they were in the kitchen in the shadowy light of the oil lamp. His father came in undershirt and pants, barefooted, through the door. "Hello, papa," he said. He began introducing them, choking with a feeling of ridiculous formality. He was aware that his mother went into the front room carrying a lamp. His tall young brother—seventeen and six-foot three—came in, wearing overalls with his naked arms folded under the bib. He felt himself warm with affection at the sight of his brother's small, shy face, grinning and blinking sleepily. "Hello, Tommy," he said. Again he went through the feeling of ridiculous absurdity in formal introductions.

"You all come in the front room and set down," his mother said. It was stiff and formal. They sat in the front room, sitting formally in embarrassment in the middle of the night like strangers visiting. "We were in Nashville all day," Sam said with difficulty, trying to lead to an explanation of their arrival. "But we were so busy with reporters we couldn't get out any earlier. We've been down in Alabama, as a delegation of writers investigating civil liberties"; forcing himself to talk, feeling desperate as he had in street corner speaking in the moments before any audience begins to gather.

Then he was silent, and they all were silent, he knowing again the old sense of his mother's disapproval and his old anger at this. He knew that she was thinking that whoever these people were and whatever they represented that she disapproved of them in ad-

vance, although she didn't yet know what for. This made him feel bleak and suddenly alone, lonely, with a sense of his comrades withdrawn from him in deference to him with his mother, and yet he knew nothing between himself and her except the sense of her powerful will against him and himself coldly stronger.

The silence he knew to be painful for the others, also, knowing their sympathy for his embarrassment, knowing their pity for the poor, bleak household, decorated with the clap-trap symbols of the dupery of the poor—the natural human sense of beauty corrupted into sleazy taste for ugliness, the cheap, foolish pictures on the walls, the motto (at which Helen was staring)—"Jesus Saves."

"Well, I reckon you all want to get back to bed," he said. "We're tired, too, and—" "I'll fix the beds," his mother said. For a moment she kept looking at Helen, wanting to know, she asked it finally: "Which is your husband?" "Neither," Helen said, and they all laughed. "Well, you can take that room yonder," she said. "And the three men can sleep in here. The davenport opens out and we can put a mattress on the floor." "That will be fine," they all said. "Well, I'll fix the beds," she said.

Then they were all standing, and his mother said, "What is it you were up to in Alabama?" "We were a writers' delegation investigating civil liberties," he said. Then her voice lost the high pitch of Southern accent trying to sound sweet and became stentorian and she said: "Now, son, we've got a good government."

Then he realized that instead of answering, he had turned his back on her. He was not thinking anything in words, but was remembering in images and emotions what had happened the day before, the nightmarish insight into the nature of *our government*. With despair in her lack of understanding, he remembered the sensation of cold murderousness and incarnate viciousness, like a snake's, that had emanated from the thug who had shot at their tires, trying to stop them and catch them alive for the blood lust and savage blood sacrifice of lynchers. For daring to press forward the rights of starved workers, the rights also of poor, duped farmers such as his mother and father and his helpless and bright-faced young brother, they had been in this danger. And the high representative of *our government* had refused them any protection, and had even issued statements in the newspapers inviting violence to them as "Reds," the Klansman governor with lynch in his heart, whom they had known in the psychic intensification of people in extreme danger to be waiting in his mansion for his pervert joy in hearing that the boys had taken the Reds for a ride. This

was *our government*, the greedy rich maintaining power by a brutal legal system and mopping up any theoretical liberties with company-employed thugs, the idiot super-patriots and the lynchers, and she (he thought) was duped into siding with them against her own sons, unaware. And how, he wondered painfully, can I make her understand?

They had escaped, and had come here full of intensified joy in being alive after the likelihood of death, for even in the impersonality of devotion to a cause, human beings do not relish dying. In the shared experience they had known each other deeply, and for Sam the people he had brought to his mother's house were good, *good*, full of valiance, completely brave in that he had seen them unwavering with their lives at stake. *But* (he thought) *my mother disapproves*.

He thought, Look at them mother, look at them. See their strong, intelligent faces. Look at them, mother, and see by their faces that by becoming like Communists they have inherited human dignity.

Look at Bob, the solid dark son of a rich man who left his inept world to become strong and good, his face firm in pain; see him looking at you even now with pity because you were deprived of ever finding a union with the world, pity because you must be tragic in your narrow corner, alone even from your sons, with no salvation except the savage hypnosis of religion.

Look at Helen, mother, and see through the surface of respectability that she puts on in your presence, and see her as she is—a good grown woman, beyond the uncertainty of her manner, admirable for her bravery and her determination against corruption.

Look at Leon, mother. Can't you see the qualities of manhood and fine character that you used to preach to me; look at his lean cheeks and see his eyes behind his spectacles, the kindly twinkling eyes? Can't you see the enthusiasm and fervor that makes him a true man, a true writer?

Look at your son, mother? Do I look like the scapegoat and culprit that you are making me feel you imagine me to be?

Mother, mother!

It was as if voicelessly but with the intensity of crying out, he called to her. And, as if she heard this, she relented for a moment. She did not smile, but she looked bewildered and relenting. "Well, we're ignorant here, and you're smart, son; maybe you know what you are doing," she said.

He heard the others sigh. He went out of the room. Bob followed him. "Where's the backhouse," Bob whispered as they went out on the back porch. "Do it on the ground," Sam said. They went out into the yard, and he saw Bob's face lifted to the stars, and heard him sigh.

Bob walked off into the dark. Tommy came onto the back porch, his bare feet whispering on the boards, and rattled the dipper in the water bucket, taking a drink.

"Did you read the literature I sent you?" Sam asked. "Yes," Tommy said. "Do you



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want more; are you interested?" Sam asked. "It's real interesting," Tommy said shyly. He came down from the porch onto the ground and they stood in silence. Tommy stood twisted with shyness, a child more than six feet tall. Then Bob came back out of the darkness into the lamplight from the kitchen. He stood with them, none saying anything.

Then his mother came out. "Son, tell me about this. Maybe I'm too ignorant to understand, but your papa wants to know about it. Tell me what it is you are trying to do," she said.

He felt himself frantic for words, with an old inhibition holding him speechless. In despair he said: "You tell her, Bob." "You better tell her," Bob said.

"Did you read in the papers what happened to us in Alabama?" he asked. "No," she said. "Fatty Gamble read it in the Tennessean and told papa," Tommy explained, "but he thought he better not tell mother."

"What happened?" she asked.

"Well, for just so much as showing interest in the rights of workers, in their rights to organize and have free speech, we were shot at and nearly lynched; for being even concerned with human rights, our lives were in danger." He was stammering.

"But, son, this is a fine country," she said. "Is it that you-all are against our form of government?"

He could feel her fury, a furious blind chauvinism. In the wedge of lamplight across the porch, she sat in a slatternly old dress. It seemed bitterly tragic to see his mother, the lean woman worn out by toil and denial, sitting on the porch of her house and defending the causes of the human frustration in her that

she probably would not even admit to herself.

"Them that works can make out," she said. "Well," he said, "ain't people all around here practically starving; they were before I left and there must be more of them now." "There is shiftless folks around here that is starving," she said, "but it's their own fault they won't work and make and save."

"Work?" he said. "And where? You know them, and you know that there is no work of any sort. And speaking of work," he said, "this whole family has always worked from dawn to dark, and what has it ever meant beyond the bare, grim keeping alive? Why do you think you have to work so hard and yet are so poor?"

"And you little four," she said sarcastically, "do you think you-all can form a little secret society and hold meetings and change everything?"

He heard Bob groan not quite secretly in his throat and saw him turn aside. Nobody answered her.

"But, son," she said on a new tack, "let other people do these things. You'll only get in trouble, or get killed."

"You taught me honesty," he said. "You taught me to tell the truth and stand by it, and told me to love my fellow man. I am fulfilling the pattern you laid down in my brain and heart, and if this makes a Red of me—well?"

"Well, maybe I'm just too ignorant to understand," she said. She got up and went inside.

Sam went onto the porch and took a drink of water. Bob walked off into the dark again. Tommy came onto the porch.

In the dim lamplight the two brothers stood looking at each other, the raw-boned strong young farmer and the older ex-farmer intellectual, brothers and suddenly brothers in a sense deeper even than the family relationship. With total unexpectedness something untrue had vanished, and there was no longer the poet's lie of the great loneliness, in which no man can know his brother. They did not say anything. But Sam knew his brother, deeply in his own tissues, knowing the baffled yearnings and the terrible frustrations of the exploited boy, deeply knowing by the same mother the desperation by which the Communist idea, unspoken as yet between them, became as flagrantly beautiful to his brother's youth as a bright red flag.

Their mother came toward them again, her mouth pursed with some antagonistic thought. She stopped in the kitchen door. Her mouth opened, but she did not say it. She looked at her sons, and was held silent by a wisdom people have which is more than they can ever say or even think. She, too, knew something that was unspoken, for she folded her arms and it was an unaware gesture of cessation, or perhaps immolation of the past in her before the sense of the living present which had leapt into being on the porch.

"You-all's beds is fixed. Good night, sons," she said, her voice slow, weary, gentle.

Doctor's Dilemma, 1935

NELSON L. BARNETT

IN 1929 a group of 4,084 physicians answering a questionnaire circulated by Medical Economics showed an average net income of \$4,188 and a median net income of \$3,660. In that year my net income was \$4,000. In view of the fact that my gross income for the first seven months of 1935 was exactly \$1,070, I am anticipating a gross income for the entire year of \$1,800.

It is apparent from these facts that some perceptible changes must have occurred to me and to the service which I am able to render to my patients. The changes made necessary in my own family, while drastic and unexpected, such as the giving up of my equity in a home, the loss of \$20,000 in insurance except for enough to assure the allotted six feet of earth for myself and family and moving back into the slum area in which I have maintained my office for the past eleven years are incidental. More interesting and fundamental are the necessary changes in the service which I may render and the new and imperative methods of adding a little more to a poor income.

Since the poor and the destitute make up the vast majority of this country as well as any other, it is undeniable that the majority of physicians render most of their services to them. If every practising physician in this country should tell his tale, the vast preponderance would parallel mine in the main. Unfortunately for the group its spokesmen are not the average but the eminent. Physicians are no more handicapped by this arrangement than other groups, however, as the recent government code-making shows. "Fair Practice" for the various industries was decided by the eminent.

This morning I am relieved of one of those periodic headaches which every conscientious physician must carry at some time. Two nights ago I was called in a confinement case which I had expected and found immediately that the position of the baby was not normal. I am well acquainted with what the text books say of the preparation for delivery in a case where the baby presents his feet rather than the normal head. The minimum preparation in the home should be at least one competent assistant capable of administering an anesthetic, a sterile field of operation, sterile instruments including forceps and all methods of resuscitation for the infant, which may be born nearly if not quite dead. My preparations were not quite so adequate. I had no assistant, no resuscitation methods except hot and cold water, no absolutely sterile instruments—although I did have a pair of borrowed forceps—and no sterile field. In approximately 200 confinement cases which I have attended I have been blessed with a sterile field on one occasion;

still I have never seen a case of infection. Lady Luck was on my side this time and delivery was completed without anesthetic or instruments, the infant resuscitated and with no injury to the mother.

The question will naturally arise as to why a physician in a community with plenty of hospitals and physicians should undertake such a risk. This family has employed me as their physician for the past eight years. The father is a laborer for a national organization whose president was recently in the headlines as drawing a salary in excess of \$100,000 annually. The father's earnings for the past three years have averaged \$15 weekly and he had four children, five now. I informed the wife of the exact location of the birth-control clinic before the pregnancy recently terminated was begun and advised her that she already had as much family as there was any promise of her husband's ability to support. In spite of the advice a pregnancy did occur. Should I send her to a free maternity ward, knowing that instruments will be used at the slightest provocation by the house doctor anxious for the experience? I elect the home risk and it ends happily and now I may collect my fee of \$25 in installments of \$2 over a period of about the next year.

In the same family about ten months ago the little girl about twelve broke both the bones in her leg. For such an injury the State Industrial Commission pays \$75 if uncomplicated. This case was complicated with an indolent ulceration which required my care for three months after removal of the cast. Fifty dollars would have been a modest fee for the additional services. My total fee was \$25, five of which I paid for an X-ray picture. On alternate pay days for the past ten months the head of this family has brought me \$2 and there is still \$2 due on the original bill. If he lives and holds his job he will pay the recent bill just as he did the old one. It is true that fifty cents weekly is a small payment but to a family of six with a weekly income of \$15 it is a great hardship.

Today I bought a bushel of beans at the farmers' market for fifty cents and took them to Hattie to can for me. Hattie is a character that an entire story could be woven around. She is an adventuress who began life on her own at the age of twelve. She has seen the bright lights, gone places and done things. Fortune smiled on her until she made so much money selling dope that she had to split her profits with the government and the \$2,500 that they fined her broke her up so completely that she has never rallied. Since then she has worked and sold

whiskey and beer—extra-legally of course—until three years ago when heart disease, high blood pressure and syphilis overtook her. But at heart she is just as truly a racketeer as ever. She will prepare the beans I took her and take them to the canning center for the poor and can them, presumably for herself. Total cost for the seventeen cans of beans to me is fifty cents. She will prepare and can anything I take her. On several occasions I have given her a quarter, her fare to the clinic for her anti-syphilitic treatment. If she "hits the numbers" for a penny or two she gives me a dollar or two. When she calls for me I always go. Her allowance from the county relief is \$3.54 every other week.

On my rounds this morning I met two of my old patients who until four years ago were as good as any. The family consists of two middle-aged sisters and their husbands, all unskilled workers. One sister has diabetes, the other one of the most persistent and severe cases of asthma I have ever seen. All have been too poor to pay for any services for the past three years. They stretch curtains and gladly do mine for me at any time at no cost, but the cost of the services they required so far exceeded the cost of stretching the curtains that I purposely omitted giving them my new phone number. But I had to tell them today and now I'll have to lose on their work again.

At last Viola is able to pay for her "shots" and she just called to tell me that she would be in tomorrow. Two years ago I diagnosed Viola's malady as syphilis and she was anxious to take treatment but she was broke. I persuaded her to visit the free clinic but treatment there was so inhuman that she refused to return. She has had considerable training on the piano and sings sweetly. Her common-law husband is a skilled cement worker who has had charge of some of the most technical parts of the construction on one of the city's show places. I attended his wife about six years ago in her fatal illness and I rarely left his house without my pay. For four years he has been unemployed. His first venture was bootlegging at which he did fairly well for about two years. When the police raided him several times and found no whiskey he told the judge that he was a bootlegger and would continue at it until he could find a job. He would not accept charity. The judge told the cops to let him alone and they did but business got so very poor that he quit voluntarily. He and Viola keep a few roomers. He gambles a little and now that Viola has a job singing in a night club things are looking up for them.