

Two Men and a Bargain

by

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Two Men and a Bargain

A Parable of the Solid South

We are reprinting TWO MEN AND A BARGAIN because of the constant demand for it. It first appeared in the Spring 1943 issue of SOUTH TODAY, and was published again in the Winter 1945 number.

ONCE upon a time, down South, a rich white made a bargain with a poor white. He studied about it a long time before he made it for it had to be a bargain the poor white would want to keep forever. It's not easy to make a bargain another man will want to keep forever, and the rich white knew this. So he looked around for something to put in it that the poor white would never want to take out.

He looked around . . . and his eyes fell on the Negro. I've got it, he whispered.

He called in the poor white and said "I've been thinking a lot about you and me lately; how hard it is for us to make a living down here with no money and the rest of the country against us. To keep my farm and mill going way I want them to go, making big profit off of little capital, I have to keep wages low, you can see that. It's the only way I can make as much as I want to make as quickly as I want to make it. And folks coming in have to keep wages low for that's our southern tradition.

"It's a good way for us rich folks and it's not bad for you either, for you're smart enough to see that any job's better than no job at all. And you know too that whatever's wrong with the South isn't my fault or your fault but is bound to be the yankee's fault or the fault of those freight rates . . .

"For instance, the nigger. You don't need me to tell you that ever since the damyankee freed him, the nigger's been scrounging you, pushing you off your land, out of your job, jostling you on the sidewalks, all time biggety. If he hadn't been freed, he'd never bothered you, for I could have kept him on the farm and bossed him like I bossed him for 200 years. But the damyankees

always know better, don't they! Here I am busy at my mill with no time to boss him, and here he is in your way, scrouging you, causing lot of trouble. Thing I can't forget is your skin's the color of my skin and we're both made in God's image, we're white men and white men can't let a nigger scrouge 'em.

"There's two big jobs down here that need doing: somebody's got to tend to the living and somebody's got to tend to the nigger. Now, I've learned a few things about making a living you're too no-count to learn (else you'd be making money same way I make it): things about jobs and credit, prices, hours, wages, votes and so on. But one thing you can learn easy, any white man can, is how to handle the black man. Suppose now you take over the thing you can do and let me take over the thing I can do. What I mean is, you boss the nigger, and I'll boss the money. How about it?

"Anything you want to do to show folks you're boss you're free to do it. You can run the schools and the churches any way you want to. You can make the customs and set the manners and write the laws (long as you don't touch my business). You can throw books out of libraries if you don't like what's in them and you can decide pretty much what kind of learning, if any, you want southern children to have. If science scares you and you don't like the notion of messing around with it, remember you don't have to, this is God's country and a free one. Anyway it'll tell you things you can't believe and still believe what you believe now so it's better maybe not to take much stock in it.

"If you ever get restless when you don't have a job or your roof leaks, or the children look puny and shoulder blades stick out more than natural, all you need do is remember you're a sight better off and better than the black man. And remember this too: there's nothing so good for folks as to go to church on Sundays. To show you I believe this, I'll build you all the churches down at the mill and on the farm you want—just say the word.

"But if you get nervous sometimes anyway, and don't have much to do, and begin to get worried-up inside and mad with folks, and you think it'll make you feel a little better to lynch a nigger occasionally, that's OK by me too; and I'll fix it with the sheriff and the judge and the court and our newspapers so you won't have any trouble afterwards; but **don't expect me to come to the lynching, for I won't be there.**

"Now if folks are fool enough to forget they're white men, if they forget that, I'm willing to put out plenty money to keep the politicians talking, and I don't mind supporting a real first-class demagogue or two, to say what you want him to say—just so he

does what I want about my business. And I promise you this: long as you keep the Negro out of your unions, we'll keep him out of our mills; we'll give you the pick of what jobs there are, and if things get too tight you can take over his jobs also, for any job's better than no job at all. Now that's a bargain. Except, of course, if you're ever crazy enough to strike or stir up labor legislation, or let the niggers into your unions, or mess around with the vote, then we'll have to use the black folks, every goddam one of them maybe, to teach you a lesson. We'll tell folks you're mongrelizing the white race with your unions, we'll tell em you're so lowdown you're begging the nigger to be your social equal, and if that won't work, we'll tell them the black man is after your women. We have ways and we'll use them.

"Best thing you can do, seems to me, is to Jim Crow everything. It'll be easier for us that way to keep the niggers out of the unions, and down on the farm where they belong, and it ought to make you feel better for a lot of reasons. For one thing, you can ride with us in the front of the street car and bus and shove the colored folks plumb onto the back seat. You'll like that and we won't mind much either—though God knows you can stink as bad as any of em when you go round dirty; but we'll put up with it for we don't ride the street cars much anyway, and we can see how it makes you feel a lot better to know you can sit up with us and the black man can't sit there, even if he's a college professor, he can't sit there, remember! So fix that up any way you say. And you can do the same about trains and waiting rooms and toilets and movies and schools and churches and so on. And you can make rules about restaurants and hotels too if it'll make you feel better. And I reckon it will, though you aren't likely ever to go into one of the hotels or restaurants you put your Jim Crow rule on. But even if you don't have money to go inside one of them, it'll make you feel good to know you're sort of bossing things there . . . So go on and fix all the Jim Crow you want. When you don't have meat to eat and milk for the younguns, you can eat Jim Crow and if you don't think too much about it, you'll never know the difference, for you don't seem to have much sense, anyway."

And the rich white and poor white thought they'd made a good bargain.

It never occurred to the rich white that with a bargain the Negro could help him make money. It never occurred to the poor white that with a bargain the Negro could help him raise wages. For neither ever thought about the Negro as somebody who could help folks make money. Neither ever thought about him as somebody who could make a real bargain. Always the Negro was somebody who took things away, scraps and taxes, prestige, shoddy and second-hand things, but things away from you. Always he was something you had to prove you were better than,

and you couldn't prove it, no you couldn't prove it. And always he was something you had to hate and be afraid of. It was sometimes like this: if he wasn't human like you said, if he wasn't, you'd never know what he might do, you couldn't count on him; he might do all the things you had wanted to do or dreamed about doing that you knew were not human, all the kinds of things you know other folks would want to do if they were not human. And sometimes it was like this: if you once let yourself believe he is human, then you'd have to admit you'd done things to him you can't admit you've done to a human. You'd have to know you'd done things that God would send you to hell for doing . . . And sometimes it was like this: you just hated him. Hated and feared and dreaded him, for you could never forget, there was no way to forget what you'd done to his women and to those women's children; there was no way of forgetting your dreams of those women . . . No way of forgetting . . .

Yes . . . they thought they had a good bargain.

They felt pretty easy about things for a while for it seemed that this would fix anything. They proudly told the world that the South had no Negro problem, it was all settled. They bragged that nobody understood the Negro like the South did, nobody understood the South's business like the South did, nobody understood southern labor like the South did, and the South had fixed things up. It had fixed things up for the rich white and the poor white and the Negro . . .

(And the rich white from the North went home and told folks about it. Those southerners may be touchy, but they know how to fix things. There's nothing that would help us more up here than to fix things way they've fixed them. With the Negroes coming up now, we can do it, if we bring Jim Crow up with them. And the North listened, and it wasn't long before they too began to fix things . . .)

Down South, folks began keeping their bargain. They began keeping their bargain to segregate southern living. They segregated southern money from the poor white and they segregated southern manners from the rich white and they segregated southern churches from Christianity, and they segregated southern minds from honest thinking, and they segregated the Negro from everything. And it wasn't long before everybody knew about Jim Crow and talked about Jim Crow and thought about Jim Crow and Jim Crow took on a great importance.

Jim Crow was the rich white's idea but the poor white got it working. The poor white put his mind on it and his time, for he had plenty of time when he didn't have a job, and he made it

work. He had ways. Lynching was a good way, and so was flogging. Burning folks' houses was another way. And all these ways eased something inside the poor white, eased the feeling he had that he'd lost something, made him almost believe he had found it . . . And sometimes it eased things in the rich white's heart also.

But sometimes the rich white's sons and daughters, or his kinfolks or his friends' children who worked for him, or the poor white's children who somehow or other got to college and into good jobs, would forget that Jim Crow is important; and others among them whose hearts refused to go along with southern custom, would try not to practice it; and sometimes a newspaper man who wrote for the rich man would raise questions; and sometimes a preacher who was supported by the rich man would preach about Jesus and love and brotherhood. But not for long. No, not for long. For the poor white would show them. The poor white would remind the rich white of their bargain. Sometimes he did it by coming to the office and talking. But most times he did it more simply by going out and lynching a Negro, or burning a house down, or burning crosses before other folks' houses, or starting a riot, or smearing nasty lies on a man's name until he was sickened to silence . . .

And the rich white, seeing these things, would remember. He would remember that Jim Crow is important to everybody. And he'd tell his newspaper man and his preacher and his teacher and his children and the poor white's children who worked for him and all the others that they must remember. They must remember the bargain and hush . . . hush their talking, hush their mind from its questions, hush their hearts from feeling human.

If the poor white broke the bargain, if he talked too much about unions or tried to organize new unions where there hadn't been unions, or tried to get Negroes into unions, then the other poor whites fixed him. Most times it was the rich white's idea; sometimes the poor white's, but they fixed him. They flogged him, or feathered and tarred him, or ran him out of town, or shot him down like you would a hound dog. And they knew they could do it and nothing would happen. They knew they were free to lynch and flog, to burn and threaten and nothing would happen, for they had a bargain. They had a bargain with the rich white and he'd fix the police and the papers and the court and the judge and the jury and the preacher so nothing would happen.

The poor white felt his power and he used it. He raised hell with Negroes on buses and street cars and day coaches whenever he wanted to. He threw books out of libraries and tore up mag-

azines whenever he wanted to. He decided when something could or couldn't be taught, whenever he wanted to. He decided on folks' morals, whenever he wanted to; when they could drink liquor and when they couldn't, how they must treat their wives, what they could say about sex and God and science and country and the Negro—and how they could say it; and the manners they could use toward other people. He said when you could and when you couldn't use the word 'mister'; when you could and when you couldn't tip your hat to a lady; who could come in your front door and who must go to your back door; who your friends could be and who your friends couldn't be. He told the newspapers what they could say and how they could say it—except about money. (The rich white told them about money.) He told the preachers what they could preach and how they must preach it—except about money. (The rich white told them about money.) He told the teachers what they could teach and how they must teach it—except about money. He was boss and he knew it. Boss of the Negro and boss of the white, boss of your home though you might never invite him in it; boss of your church though he might not worship with you; boss of everything in Dixie but the money. Boss of everything but the rich white's way of making money . . . boss of everything but wages and hours and prices and jobs and credit and the vote—and his own living.

Sometimes the newspaper man or the preacher or the professor or the social worker, sometimes a group of churchwomen, or his own children, went to the rich white. "This thing can't go on" they'd say, for they were worried. Worried and troubled and dismayed though it was hard to find words for their feelings. Worried at the poor white's starving and towering and terrible stature; worried when they remembered colored friends, old playmates and beloved childhood nurses: worried about that poor, frayed 'democracy' which some still believed in: and heart-sick, for some would have liked to be decent and some cherished truth and freedom, and some still hungered to be loyal to Jesus.

Mostly they called their worry 'the Negro problem' and sometimes it was 'civil liberties' or 'the recent lynching' or 'the flogging incident' or 'our school system' or 'increasing crime' or 'the health of the underprivileged' or 'bad housing'; and sometimes those more brave talked simply of hungry people, hungry and jobless and homeless and ignorant and bewildered black and white people. But none dared talk of segregation; none dared question the bargain.

All wanting the rich white to do something. All wanting things to be different.

The rich white would listen and smile to hide his own worry. Smile and say easy if ladies were present "You've let the yankee papers upset you. You've let the communists get you confused. Thing we must remember, folks, is the poor white's feeling. No use to make him mad about little things. No use to do that, is there? You keep talking about calling Negroes 'mister', using words like that in the papers, you'll make him mighty mad, won't you? You'll make him mad if you say things about Negro schooling. You'll make him mad talking about equal salaries for colored and white teachers. He won't like it. You'll make him mighty mad talking about the poll tax for you know he'd rather not vote himself than have Negroes voting. You know that don't you? You'll make him crazy mad talking about jobs for Negroes, jobs in the mills for colored folks. You'll hurt his morale talking about Jim Crow in the army, you can't do it! You'll get him upset talking about science books and that freedom of thinking. He don't want his children doubting God or thinking too much about anything. I'm not so sure myself but it's science and too much thinking that's wrong with all of us—the whole world maybe, thinks too much—about everything!

"And you can't write about lynchings and riots after they've happened. Maybe when there hasn't been one in a long time, you might say a little something. Something about lynching being a disgrace, bad as a principle. But not right after there's been one close to you. You'll only stir up trouble if you do it. You've got to keep things like that out of the papers. Thing we got to do folks, is to keep **everything** out of the papers. Way to make things better is for everybody to hush talking.

And after the folks had left, the rich white would sit a while thinking; then he'd call in his newspaper boys and he'd tell em. "Better keep off of all those problems. Better write a piece about southern tradition. Better write a piece about segregation—say it's here and nothing can change it, nothing can change it, nothing, not even Godamighty! Here wait—leave out that about God, just say **nothing can change it!** Better write something against union leaders, be easy on the workers but hard on their leaders. Say something about CIO being nigger-lover and communist. Better write something about yankees meddling with our poll tax and something against FEPC bureaucrats and the New Deal, better write plenty about unfair freight rates, and wait a minute boys—write something good about folks needing to read their Bible and go to church on Sunday, folks needing the old-time religion."

Lord yes, the rich white whispered as he sat there thinking and worrying, got to make em know everybody had better keep to his bargain.

Sometimes the Negro would tap on the rich white's back door, ease in, hat in hand, and say howdy. Sometimes he'd tell the rich white what a fine man his father was and how he is just like him. And then he'd ask a little favor. The favor might be to borrow five dollars, or maybe it would seem just as measly as that when the Negro said it, but it might be about school books for the colored folks, or a new roof on the church or the schoolhouse, or a raise for the teacher, or it might even be about paving a street through colored town or fixing a sewer line, or a playground, or a clinic for Negro babies. But the way the Negro said it, it'd sound nothing much, and the rich white would think it's the least I can do to do it, and he'd say "I don't see why we can't manage that, Sam, glad you came in to see me", and the Negro would leave, hat in hand, saying thank you Mr. Rich White, thank you. And nobody would know but the Negro that Mr. Rich White had broken his bargain with Mr. Poor White. Nobody would catch on but the Negro. But the Negro knew. He knew too from three centuries of learning that if you want something from the rich white or his sons and his daughters you ask it as a favor and not something due you, for the rich white made his bargain with the poor white and nobody's made a bargain with the Negro.

That's right. Nobody made a bargain with the Negro. He just kept on living without one. Kept gnawing the bones from the rich white's beefsteak, drinking the potlikker from the poor white's turnip greens, taking the rich white's favors, wearing his second-hand clothes, picking up the jobs the poor white threw him, riding the back seat, going in the back door, but going . . .

And nobody thought anything due him, for the Negro never had had a bargain. All he did was keep going . . . singing, dancing, working, lying and stealing, fighting himself . . . and thinking . . . studying about things till he knew them, studying about ways till he found them, making things with his mind and his hand and his heart that the world knew were important, dreaming his dreams . . . and yes, bowing, bowing and scraping and laughing, laughing easy at the white man, laughing easy at Mr. Poor White and Mr. Rich White, laughing loud at Mr. Negro, laughing belly laughs at Mr. Negro to hide his sorrow and his fear and his anger and his shame that nothing was due him.

And nobody told him that up in Washington he still had a bargain. Nobody told him up there were still nine men who could read it. Had to find that out for himself. Even then . . . even then . . . it's a long way to Washington and it takes money, takes powerful money and time and courage to knock on the door of Nine Judges and ask them to read you your bargain, ask them to read it out loud, so everybody in the world can hear it . . .

After a time, the poor white got to studying. Seemed like things ought to be different. Mighty fine to sit in the front seat by the rich white, mighty fine to turn 'round now and then and see the nigger right there on the back seat where you shoved him. But still, you ain't driving. The rich white's driving, and you get restless for it looks like he's driving down a road that goes nowhere, when you need to stop at the store to do some buying. Need to get flour and meat and milk for the younguns and shoes for the family and a new roof over your head and medicine for the baby, and a job that won't wear out tomorrow. But the rich white says, Can't stop now, better keep watching that nigger!—is he still on the back seat, still there where you shoved him? Yeah, you say, he's still there. Well what's the matter, don't you like sitting up here on the front seat by me, don't you like that? Yeah, I like that, you say, but folks got to have things, folks can't keep on making out with what they have forever, seems like I oughta stop at the store and do some buying, seems like maybe you've taken a road that don't stop at stores! the poor white said suddenly. Listen, said the rich white, you want me to let that stinking nigger come up here and sit with you? you want that? and he slowed down as he said it. No, said the poor white, reckon that ain't what I want, I couldn't stand that. Didn't think you could, said the rich white, speeding up a little as he drove on down the road that went nowhere.

The poor white kept studying. Wonder if he **was** up here, could the two of us turn that wheel a little way in my direction?

I've heard tell, said the rich white as he drove on to nowhere, of communist folks and cross-eyed liberals so low-down they'd associate with niggers just to get em into their unions. Ever know a white man low-down as that?

No, said the poor white, never knew a white man low-down as that.

Brother, said that man in the back seat (easy-like), don't you think we could do it? together we could do it?

Maybe, said the poor white (voice mighty easy), maybe; but you couldn't come near me except in the union, you hear that?

Yessir, said the Negro, I hear that.

The bargain was breaking. The rich white's and poor white's bargain was breaking. Nobody knew how it happened, but they knew it. Breaking in slivers, sloughing in dry rot, and sometimes cracking with a terrible scream as of deep-rooted trees split by lightning.

Folks said it had to break, you ought to see that, times are changing, ways of making money are changing, things can't keep on forever in the old way.

But the rich white blamed it on the damyankee and the New Deal and the communist and Mrs. Roosevelt and the Negro press and the social scientist and that little fellow in India and Jap saboteurs and a crazy world that won't stop shrinking! And sometimes on his own sons and daughters and their mothers, who didn't seem to know that if you keep talking about the poll tax, keep talking about equal education, keep talking about Negro health, keep talking about housing, keep talking about equal jobs and pay, keep talking about fourth-grade sardine-and-cracker culture, keep talking Christian brotherhood, the poor white will keep on filling his unions with niggers, keep right on filling them, making them bigger and stronger, and first thing you know he may not even **care** whether he's better than niggers . . . and then what about money and wages and jobs and hours and things like that! What about the thing you lost long time ago so long ago you can't remember even what it was but you keep on hunting it, hunting in your dreams, hunting day and night . . . don't they know you got to have **money** to find it!

Let em talk, Something whispered, long as you have segregation none of these things can happen! Just keep saying **nothing can change it, nothing!** The poor white will say it with you.

You still want to be better than the nigger? asked the rich white.

Yes, said the poor white, I still want to be better than the nigger.

See? Something said.

Yes, but why are they against us! Everybody's against us . . . even some of our own children, said the rich white.

I'm for you, Something said, I'm for you, I'm for the guy who wants to be first. I'm for the guy who loves his own image. I'm for the guy who rides the front seat always the front seat and won't let others ride with him.

Who are you?

You know me . . . every man from the womb knows me until death stops the knowledge. But some won't make me a bargain. You did. Yes . . . you did and I'm for you. Who am I? Listen, I'll tell you. I'm that which splits a mind from its reason, a soul from its conscience, a heart from its loving, a people from humanity. I'm the seed of hate and fear and guilt. You are its strange fruit which I feed on . . .

But the rich white and the poor white did not understand the words and turned from them.

Listen, Something said, nothing can change me, nothing! Don't you remember?

And now they felt the old familiar shadow of great wings pressing upon them.

None but the weak, said a Voice, crave to be **better than**. None but the weak crave that. Strong men are satisfied with their own strength and their freedom. There is another way to make bargains . . .

Who are you?

You've known me too, but you lost me. I am that which holds a mind together, which keeps a spirit from breaking, which makes a people human. I am the key that opens a locked door. I am the stone rolled away from a tomb. I'm just the guy who sits on the front seat and wants everybody to sit there with him. I'm that which you lost . . . and keep hunting. Why don't you find me?

Everybody hush talking!

But the Voice would not hush. And sometimes it sounded as quiet and simple as Jesus; and sometimes as plain-written as the Bill of Rights; and sometimes it sounded like rain after a dry spell; and sometimes like your mother's step when you call her; and sometimes like a mind that has found itself; and sometimes like the Word that is God. And sometimes it sounded like a new song, made of all of these, of brotherhood and freedom and the Bill of Rights, yes, and sanity and science and love and laughter, a fine new hymn to the living the whole world is learning to sing.

Come, sing it with us!

The rich white and the poor white turned away. We can't learn it, they whimpered, we can't even carry its tune!

Don't listen, Something said, don't listen, remember your bargain, remember nothing can change it, nothing!

They remembered. For they knew that this thing which held then so tightly in its beak and its claws and its shadow was not their bargain with each other, for that was already breaking, they knew that; but a bargain with the great death-bird of self-destruction—and nothing could change it, nothing! Yes, they remembered. And the shadow fell closer and the claws and the beak sank deeper . . . and they were sore afraid.

They say about SOUTH TODAY

"I want to thank you for scraping the smugness off my liberalism." M. M. D., Washington, D. C.

"I enclosing \$5.00, but it is not for new subscriptions. It is just my weak, rather more hopeful than useful, attempt to help you do the fighting from which the war is barring me. Each time I get the Congressional knife in my back, a thicker cloak of futility wraps around me. For that reason **South Today** and its few comrades in the field have become, to me, important morale factors. I am sure there are many more in the army who suffer from the same sense of frustration, and who are dependent on the same sources for relief. Without at all losing sight of the larger issues at stake, I feel that any assistance I can give you is just as much an investment in the future as a War Bond would be."—Sgt. M. P. K., Ala.

"I myself am a southerner by birth, a country preacher by choice. This matter of race is now and will be for me in the years to come a fundamental struggle with myself . . . To be allowed to catch a flash of the vision you have is a rare privilege."—G. C., Ohio.

"I wish to express my utter endorsement of your **There are things to do**. When such a courageous and sensible document can be printed and circulated in this our Southland, one must be optimistic, however dark the local scene may be."—J. H. B. Miss.

"This is the sort of purchase I just can't let go through on a strictly business basis. As a one-time Georgian I want very much to say that it's a beautiful thing to hear a southern voice raised to cry the truth right there in the South." H. A. B., Ohio.

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"Since becoming an Army Chaplain, I have been more intimately thrown with the Negro than ever before. As I see it, the denial of human brotherhood in any aspect throws the whole structure of society into tension. That tension must be compensated for. You and I wish to create a readjustment that is gradual and peaceful. For if it is not done peacefully, it will be done bloodily . . . I shall continue to do everything in my power to let Negroes feel my goodwill. I will eat with them in their mess hall, invite them to my services, and minister as best I can to their needs. I can't abrogate the segregation as enforced on the Post. But as an individual I will not be a party to it. I can't change the system, but I can, as you suggest, change it as far as I am concerned—in the area that I can influence."—W. W., Ariz.

"I marvel that among so many religious groups the ideal of brotherhood is scarcely and idea . . . We little imagine the implications of our faith."—J. G. C., Ga.

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