


AN  MAJOR MOTION PICTURE WORLD PREMIERE

# Sounder

WILLIAM H. ARMSTRONG



# I

THE TALL MAN stood at the edge of the porch. The roof sagged from the two rough posts which held it, almost closing the gap between his head and the rafters. The dim light from the cabin window cast long equal shadows from man and posts. A boy stood nearby shivering in the cold October wind. He ran his fingers back and forth over the broad crown of the head of a coon dog named Sounder.

“Where did you first get Sounder?” the boy asked.

“I never got him. He came to me along the road when he wasn’t more’n a pup.”

The father turned to the cabin door. It was ajar. Three small children, none as high as the level of the latch, were peering out into the dark. “We just want to pet Sounder,” the three all said at once.

“It’s too cold. Shut the door.”

“Sounder and me must be about the same age,” the boy said, tugging gently at one of the coon dog’s ears, and then the other. He felt the importance of the years—as a child measures age—which separated him from the younger children. He was old enough to stand out in the cold and run his fingers over Sounder’s head.

No dim lights from other cabins punctuated the night. The white man who owned the vast endless fields had scattered the cabins of his Negro sharecroppers far apart, like flyspecks on a whitewashed ceiling. Sometimes on Sundays the boy walked with his parents to set awhile at one of the distant cabins. Sometimes they went to the meetin’ house. And there was school too. But it was far away at the edge of town. Its term began after harvest and ended before planting time.

Two successive Octobers the boy had started, walking the eight miles morning and evening. But after a few weeks when cold winds and winter sickness came, his mother had said, "Give it up, child. It's too long and too cold." And the boy, remembering how he was always laughed at for getting to school so late, had agreed. Besides, he thought, next year he would be bigger and could walk faster and get to school before it started and wouldn't be laughed at. And when he wasn't dead-tired from walking home from school, his father would let him hunt with Sounder. Having both school and Sounder would be mighty good, but if he couldn't have school, he could always have Sounder.

"There ain't no dog like Sounder," the boy said. But his father did not take up the conversation. The boy wished he would. His father stood silent and motionless. He was looking past the rim of half-light that came from the cabin window and pushed back the darkness in a circle that lost itself around the ends of the cabin. The man seemed to be listening. But no sounds came to the boy.

Sounder was well named. When he treed a coon or possum in a persimmon tree or on a wild-grape vine, his voice would roll across the flat-

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