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author of
GOD'S LITTLE ACRE



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Georgia Boy

by
Erskine Caldwell



A SIGNET BOOK

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1.

My Old Man's Baling Machine

THERE WAS a big commotion in front of the house, sounding as though somebody had dumped a load of rocks on our steps. The building shook a little on its foundations, and then everything was quiet. Ma and I were on the back porch when we heard the noise, and we didn't know what to make of it. Ma said she was afraid it was the crack of doom, and she told me to hurry and turn the wringer handle faster so she could get Mrs. Dudley's laundry wrung and pinned on the clothes-line before something terrible happened.

"I want to go see what it was, Ma," I said, turning the wringer handle with all my might. "Can't I, Ma? Can't I go see what it was?"

"You turn that handle, William," she said, shaking her head and feeding a pair of Mr. Dudley's overalls into the wringer.





"Whatever it was can wait until I get this laundry hung on the line."

I cranked the wringer as fast as I could, listening at the same time. I heard somebody talking in a loud voice in front of the house, but I could not make out anything that was said.

Just then my old man came running around the corner.

"What on earth's the matter, Morris?" Ma asked.

"Where's Handsome?" my old man said, short of breath.

"Where's Handsome at?"

Handsome Brown was our Negro yardboy who had worked for us ever since I could remember.

"Handsome's cleaning up in the kitchen, like he should be." Ma said. "What do you want with him?"

"I need him right away to give me a lift," Pa said. "I need Handsome in a big hurry."

"I'll help, Pa," I said, backing away from the wringer. "Let me help, Pa."

"William," Ma said, catching me by the arm and pulling me back, "you turn that wringer handle like I told you."

Just then Handsome stuck his head out the kitchen door. My old man saw him right away.

"Handsome," Pa said, "drop everything and come around to the front of the house. I need you to give me a lift right away."

Handsome looked at Ma before he made a move, waiting to hear what she had to say about his leaving the kitchen work. Ma didn't say anything then, because she was busy feeding one of Mrs. Dudley's faded old calico mother-hubbards into the wringer. My old man grabbed Handsome by the sleeve and pulled him down the steps and across the yard. They were out of sight around the house in another minute.

I wanted to go with them, but every time I looked up at Ma I knew better than to ask again. I turned the wringer with all my might, trying to get the wringing finished as soon as possible.

It wasn't long until he heard the front door open, and soon afterward there was a heavy thud in the hall. It sounded exactly as though the roof had caved in.

Ma and I both ran inside to find out what had happened. When we reached the hall, my old man and Handsome were tugging and pulling at a heavy big box that was painted bright red like a freight car and had a big iron wheel on top. The box was as big as an old-fashioned melodeon and just as curi-

ous-looking. Handsome gave it a mighty shove, and the whole thing went through the door and came down on the parlor floor so heavily that it shook the pictures hanging on the walls. Ma and I squeezed through the door at the same time. My old man was standing there beside the big red box, patting it with his hand and panting like a dog that had been running rabbits all morning.

"What on earth, Morris?" Ma said, walking around the box and trying to figure out what it was.

"Ain't it a beauty, Martha?" he said, panting between each word. He sat down in a rocking chair and looked at the box admiringly. "Ain't it a beauty, though?"

"Where did it come from, Pa?" I asked him, but he was so busy looking at it he did not hear me.

Handsome walked around it, peeping through the cracks to see if he could see anything inside.

"Did somebody give it to you, Morris?" Ma asked, standing back and doing her best to size it up. "Where in the world did you get it?"

"I bought it," Pa said. "I just a little while ago made the deal. The fellow who makes a habit of selling them came through town this morning and I bought one off him."

"What did you pay for it?" Ma asked, concerned.

"Fifty cents down, and fifty cents a week," Pa said.

"For how many weeks?" Ma asked.

"For all the weeks in a year," he said. "That ain't much. Shucks, when you come to think about it, it's hardly nothing to speak of. The year'll go by in no time. It won't be a strain at all."

"What's it for?" Ma said. "What does it do?"

"It's a baling machine," he said. "It bales paper. You put in a lot of old paper, like old wornout newspapers, and such, and then you wind the wheel down tight on top, and it comes out at the bottom in a hard bale, all tied with wire. It's a mighty invention."

"What is you going to do with it after it comes out at the bottom, Mr. Morris?" Handsome asked.

"Sell it, of course," Pa said. "The fellow comes around once a week and buys up all the paper I've baled. He takes out his fifty cents, and hands me the balance due me."

"Well, I declare," Handsome said. "It sure is a fine thing, all right."

"Where are you going to get all the paper to put into the machine?" Ma asked.



"Shucks," my old man said, "that's the easiest part of it all. Old paper is always lying around everywhere. Things like old wornout newspapers, and such. Even the wrapping paper from the stores goes right into it. When the wind blows a piece of paper down the street, that goes into it, too. It's a money-making machine if there ever was one."

Ma went up closer and looked down inside. Then she gave the wheel on top a whirl and walked to the door.

"The parlor's no place for it," she said. "Take that contraption out of my best room, Morris Stroup."

Pa ran after her.

"But Martha, there ain't no better place fit for it. You wouldn't have me set it out in the weather to rust and rot, would you? It's a valuable machine."

"You take it out, or I'll have Handsome chop it up for stovewood," she said, going down the hall and out to the back porch.

My old man came back and looked at the baling machine, running his hands over the smooth wooden sides. He didn't say anything, but after a minute he reached down and got a grip on it and lifted. Handsome and I got at the other end and lifted it up. We carried it through the parlor door and out to the front porch. Pa set down his end, and we dropped ours.

"This'll do," Pa said. "It'll be out of the sun and rain here on the porch."

He began unwinding the big wheel on top.

"Handsome," he said, "you go get me all the old paper you can lay your hands on. We're going to start in right away."

Handsome and I went through the house, gathering up all the paper we could find. There was a stack of old newspapers in one of the closets, and I carried those out and Pa dumped them into the hopper. Handsome came back with a big armful of wrapping paper he had found somewhere. My old man took it and stuffed it down into the machine.

"We'll have a hundred-pound bale in no time at all," Pa said. "Then after that first one, everything else will be pure profit. We'll have more money than we'll know what to do with. It might be a good idea to buy three or four more of the machines off the fellow when he comes back to Sycamore next week, because we can bale paper faster than one machine can handle it. We'll have so much money in no time at all that





I'll have to trust some of it to the bank. It's a shame I didn't know about this way of making money before, because it's the easiest way I ever heard of. I'll bale me so much paper at this rate that it won't be no time at all before I can quit and retire."

He stopped and shoved Handsome towards the door.

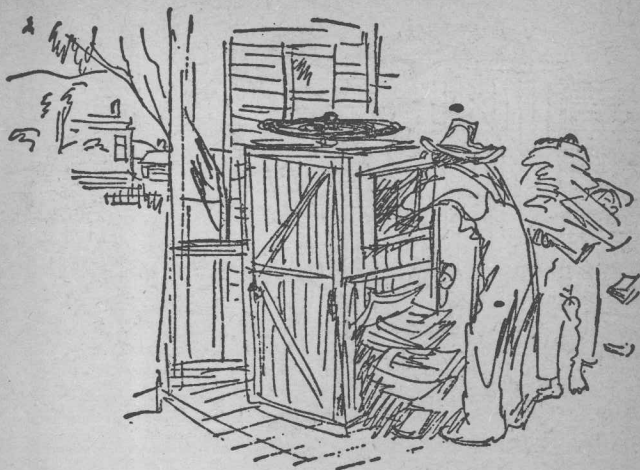
"Handsome, get a hustle on and bring out more of that old waste paper."

Handsome went inside and began looking through the dresser drawers and in the closets and behind the washstand. I found some old magazines on the parlor table and took them out to Pa.

"That's right, son," he said. "Old magazines are just as worthless as old newspapers and they weigh a heap more. Go get all the magazines you can find."

By the time I got back with another load my old man said we had enough for a second bale. We got to work and pressed it down tight and Handsome tied it with baling wire. Pa dumped it on the floor and told Handsome to stack it up on top of the first bale.

We worked away for another hour, and it wasn't long until we had three bales stacked up in the corner of the porch. Handsome told us he couldn't find any more paper anywhere in the whole house, and my old man said he would go look himself. He was gone a long time, but when he came back



he had a big armful of song books that Ma had ordered for her Sunday School class. We tore the backs off them, because the backs were covered with cloth, and my old man said it wouldn't be honest to try to pass off cloth for paper. After that he went back inside for a while and came out with an armful of letters tied up with ribbons. He tore off the ribbons and dumped them into the hopper. When everything had been baled, it was close to noon, and Pa said we could knock off for an hour.

We started in again right after dinner. We looked all over the house several times, but couldn't find anything more made of paper, except some loose wallpaper in one of the rooms, which Pa said ought to come down anyway, because it was so old and shabby-looking on the walls. After that he sent Handsome and me down the street to Mrs. Price's house to ask her if she had any old paper she had no more use for. We made two trips to Mrs. Price's. By then all of us were tired out, and Pa said he thought we had done enough work for the day. We all sat down on the front steps and counted the number of bales stacked in the corner. There were seven of them. Pa said that was a good start, and that if we did as well every day, we would soon be as rich as anybody in town.

We sat there a long time thinking about all the paper we had baled, and my old man said we'd all get up early the next morning and that maybe by night we'd be able to count twelve



bales instead of seven for the day's work. Ma came out in a little while and looked at the big stack of baled paper. My old man turned around and waited for her to say how pleased she was that we had done so much work the first day.

"Where did all this paper come from, Morris?" she asked, walking over to the bales and pulling at them.

"From all over the place, Martha," Pa said. "We got rid of all the old paper lying around the place that was just getting in the way. We found a lot of it stuffed away in places that would have been rat nests before long. It's a good thing I happened to get hold of this machine. The cleaning up has made the house look better already."

Ma poked her finger into one of the bales and pulled out something. It was one of the magazines.

"What's this, Morris?" she said, looking around.

She pulled out another magazine.

"Do you know what you've gone and done, Morris Stroup!" she said. "You've taken all my recipes and dress patterns I've been saving ever since I started housekeeping with you!"

"But it's all so old it's not worth anything," Pa said.

Handsome started backing through the hall door. Ma looked around.

"Handsome, untie every one of those bales," she said. "I want to see what else you've gone and taken of mine. Do like I tell you, Handsome!"