

John Steinbeck

A Portrait

BY JOSEPH HENRY JACKSON



JOHN STEINBECK

Photos on pages 11 and 12 by Peter Stackpole, courtesy Life Magazine.

PUT John Steinbeck on a street corner with three or four other men, talking. Then bring along a panhandler: a workingman down on his luck, or one of the wise boys that know how to pick them, or just a wine-bum. Any of the three will choose Steinbeck every time. The workingman recognizes a fellow worker. The wise boy knows the signs of the man who would rather shell out to a faker than take a chance on turning down one who really needs a handout. The wine-bum, in spite of his fuddlement, instinctively understands that here is kindness, simplicity, tenderness of heart. And each is right. Steinbeck has worked with his hands early and often, on ranches, with cattle, up in the heights of the California Sierra. Because he has been one of them he can never bring himself to risk letting a workingman go hungry while he has anything in his own pocket. As for his essential gentleness, his sympathy, his ready understanding of any kind of human being, those things are as natural to him as breathing.

Salinas, center of California's lettuce industry and lettuce strikes, and by way of being a meeting place for cattlemen as well as ranchers, lies up near the northern end of the Salinas River Valley, eighty miles south of San Francisco. John Ernest Steinbeck was born in Salinas thirty-five years ago. There is German blood in him, and a large admixture of Irish. Tall—an inch or so over six feet—and massively put together, he suggests the Teuton until you look at this face. Then the inquiring blue eye under its perpetually raised eyebrow flatly contradicts the hint of stolidity in his proportions; it is as Irish as his sense of humor, which is enormous. You could probably go a little fey yourself trying to pin down the curiously Celtic quality in a man so solidly and ruddily German-

seeming. That is, you could if he didn't happen to be there to cock an eyebrow at you and stop you with a bunkhouse word. He knows plenty of bunkhouse words. He should, since he has a large acquaintance with bunkhouses and the men who live in them.

His association with bunkhouses and working men began while he was in school. A lot of boys down in the Valley work while they are getting their education; it's a matter of course with most of them. Young Steinbeck was running cultivators, bucking grain-bags, doing odd jobs around cattle all through his Salinas High School days. Later, when he had learned enough chemistry, he worked for a while in the laboratory of the big Spreckels sugar refinery near by. Once he was a straw-boss on a Valley ranch. Cattle, farming, chemistry, it was all the same to him. Even as a kid he was interested in everything. That characteristic has been enlarged and developed by the years.

He doesn't remember now why he decided to go to college or why, having made up his mind, he chose Stanford. Some of his family had gone to Stanford; perhaps that had something to do with it. At any rate, he went up to Palo Alto, made it plain to the faculty that he had no intention of taking a degree, watched the pained expression on the face of the registrar with some interest, repeated that he wanted to study certain subjects but not others, and, having been accepted somewhat skeptically as a student, moved in. That was in the autumn of 1919. Steinbeck is reticent about the details of his college career but the records at Stanford show that he withdrew in the spring of 1920, entered again in the fall and withdrew almost at once, was in residence throughout the academic year, 1922-23, and again in 1924-25. In between times he was working here and there,

down on Salinas Valley ranches, in the sugar refinery again, digesting what he had got out of his courses in English and history as taught in Palo Alto, reading widely in such fields as happened to attract him, learning to roll the brown-paper cigarettes he still prefers to the machine-made article, and making up his mind about writing fiction. He did not take a degree. The next step in writing was to write.

In the middle 1920's, as before and since, New York was the place for all ambitious young writers who didn't want to go the whole hog and wind up at the Dôme. Anyway, Paris was more for the Lost Generation, and Steinbeck had just missed the war. So he chose his freight boat and departed for New York by way of the Panama Canal. On the way he learned to his astonishment that plain, ordinary, unloaded dice could be controlled if one knew how. The discovery came to him through the medium of a large and very black sailor and was slightly expensive, but at least it was something to know. He stayed over at Panama, too, picking up another boat later, in order to absorb color there for a book he had in mind, the romanticized life of the pirate, Henry Morgan, which appeared as his first book, "Cup of Gold." But that was afterward. The net result of the dice lessons and the research was that he arrived in New York broke. The thing was to get work.

He got very little. For a while he held down a reporter's job, but that didn't last long. A metropolitan newspaper will hire young men who intend to be great writers some day, but only if the said young men are successful in feigning a consuming passion for the dirty details of a reporter's job. Steinbeck couldn't. A good deal of it seemed like out-and-out nonsense to him, and he wasn't used to being horsed around by a city editor he

could break in two without half trying. So he found himself out in the street in short order. Still, he had to eat, and when a friend offered to get him a job on the new Madison Square Garden building, he took it and carried bricks as long as there were bricks to carry. Then that job folded up and Steinbeck joined the ranks of bright young fellows who poke around for ideas and try to free-lance them as pieces for the paper. That is one of the best ways to starve in all New York; eventually he saw the point, and headed back for California.

His "Cup of Gold" was written some six or seven thousand feet up in the High Sierra during a winter job as watchman in a house on the rim of Tahoe's Emerald Bay. Once a week Steinbeck snowshoed down to the frozen brink to meet the mail boat and get supplies. The rest of the time he chopped wood to keep himself warm, concluded that not even the most conscientious watchman could have done anything about the giant sugar-pine that crashed through the roof of the big house one night when he was snug in one of the guest-cabins, and went on writing. "Cup of Gold" was his first published novel, but it was his fourth; of the others, two were never shown to any publisher, one was very thoroughly turned down, and all three are now destroyed. He wrote short stories, too, but no one wanted them. Steinbeck went on chopping wood, burning up his stories, writing others until summer came and the owners of the Tahoe house fired him for letting the pine tree fall through their roof. He got a job next day in a trout hatchery only a few miles away. He liked that work, though when you ask him why he only says vaguely, "Oh, all the little fishes!"

Then McBride took "Cup of Gold." That was the year the boom collapsed, but anyway Steinbeck had a new status. The book wasn't making any money at all, but at least he was a published author. He married Carol Henning of San José, California, whose parents had come from the old mining country (her grandfather built the Leland Stanford house, up in the Sierra foothills at Michigan Bluff) and went to live in a tiny house his parents gave the couple in Pacific Grove, a stone's throw from arty Carmel.

The next two years saw publication of "Pastures of Heaven" and "To a God Unknown," both highly praised by the critics and both completely neglected by the book-buying public. Reviewers used fine strong words like "virile" and "magnificent," and referred to the author's "simple, indelible power," which was very good of them. But the Steinbecks could not live on their royalties because there were no royalties to live on. Out in Chicago Ben Abramson, the bookseller, went into a conniption about Steinbeck and bought up all the copies he could find of all his books, including the stock that the publishers had sadly remain-



"NO MYSTERY ABOUT HIM"

dered. But there they stayed, on Abramson's shelves. Nobody else, apparently, felt at all sanguine about Steinbeck. All that most people could see was a new kind of novelist who never wrote two books that were anything like each other. How can you place a fellow like that?

However, it was Pacific Grove, on the shore of Monterey Bay, that gave Steinbeck his key to the public's heart at last, even to its pocketbook. For when he wanted relaxation, in between periods of writing and morose reflection on where the next meal was coming from, Steinbeck developed the habit of wandering up to the little settlement of *paisanos* on a small hilltop overlooking the bay. Some of them were fishermen, but most were just loafers, enjoying life however they could, always able to postpone thinking about tomorrow as long as there was a jug of rough California wine to be had and a chance to sing, tell stories, or just talk. Somehow they always managed to find the wine, even in those dry days. And Steinbeck had plenty of time to talk and tell stories of his own and drink with them. Out of those *paisanos* came "Tortilla Flat," and for the first time in their joint lives the Steinbecks had a little spare cash. In fact, they had more than a little, for in the first flush of public enthusiasm for the book, the motion-picture people bought "Tortilla Flat." There was some talk of Steinbeck's going down to Hollywood to work on the picture, but the merest whisper of such a thing was enough to frighten him. He loaded his wife and some clothes into a second-hand Chevrolet and hit for the Mexican border. The new Pan-American highway was open, and Mexico City was a far cry from the film city. Let Hollywood try to find him.

Before he went to Mexico, he had finished "In Dubious Battle," which many people have called the best strike novel ever written. He didn't return until that book was ready to come out. By that time, he figured, Hollywood would probably have forgotten all about asking him

to come down to work on "Tortilla Flat." He was right, too. Not only had the film executives dismissed that idea, but they had apparently dismissed the idea of making the picture at all. In fact, nothing has been done with it yet. There is a rumor that one well known actor was offered the part of Danny but turned it down as being beneath his dignity. Maybe it is just a rumor.

"In Dubious Battle" had a curious reception. Again readers noted that Steinbeck had written a book that was totally unlike any other he had done. Most of them had read none of Steinbeck excepting "Tortilla Flat," but at least this was nothing like that.

The leftist reviewers were disappointed because there wasn't enough propaganda in Steinbeck's account of the strike. Reactionary readers were also annoyed; Steinbeck told too much about the technique of breaking strikes. Perhaps he was some kind of Red. In California the least suspicion of such a thing is enough; the public in Steinbeck's own part of the country dropped "In Dubious Battle" like a hot potato. That is, most of them did. To its credit, the Commonwealth Club of California saw the quality in the book and awarded it the Club's gold medal given annually for the best novel by a California writer during the previous year. Steinbeck was properly grateful, though he upset the Club members by declining to come and get his medal at the official medal-giving dinner. Wild horses could not have dragged him to a platform anywhere, let alone set him upright and persuade him to go through the gestures of polite acceptance. He regards speeches with horror, his own or others'. Even the Thomas Mann dinner in New York last spring, to which he was unwillingly carried by his publisher, proved too much for him. He managed to sit through the first two or three addresses, but that was all. Friends found him afterward in the hotel bar, staring fixedly into a double brandy-and-soda, still embarrassed and ashamed that men and women who could write so well could stand up in front of an audience and talk such stuff.

The point is that John Steinbeck is a simple, natural individual, not given to pose of any kind, impatient—his only impatience—of pretense anywhere. There is no mystery at all about him, which is why he has been made to seem mysterious by those who cannot understand his simplicity. He does not like publicity, does not feel that it helps him to write, helps his books, does him or anyone else any good whatever. He doesn't go to dinners for the best of reasons; he doesn't like them. He turns down cameramen because he hates being photographed. For years, Sonia Noskowiak, out on the Coast, and Peter Stackpole of *Life* were the only photographers who had taken his picture. He and his wife live very

(Continued on page 18)

The BOWLING GREEN by Christopher Morley

The Trojan Horse

IX. Exhibition Number

THE music is on again, lights are dimmed, partners take the floor. The white stripe across the shiny wood is a reminder, not an actual frontier; couples from both sides use the whole area for gyration; but the accepted etiquette is that both Greeks and Trojans, even in the turn or tangency of the dance, disregard each other and make no attempt to mix.

Boy, that's a pair of lulus old Pandarus has with him. (It's Paris speaking, craning out from the corner alcove.) That must be Cressida, isn't it? I'm glad she's back in circulation, she hasn't been around in ages. Maybe she'll give me a whirl. Somebody's got to butt in: Pan can't dance with them both.

Troilus, keeping well back on the settee, watches Paris approach Pan's table, make his bows with courtly ease, draw up an extra chair and start a triple jugglery of conversation. An expert practitioner! He sits just long enough for manners and then accompanies Cressida to the dancing. That planished space, symbolic of the slippery poise of the whole occasion, is a pretty show, spangled now in shifting stains of colored light poured from above. In the jumbled hazards of rotation the weaving pairs approach and reverse, gracefully veer and pass, asymptote and recede. At the successive cusps of an irregular epicycloid swings agile old Pandarus, gallantly duetting with Antigone. Deiphobus and Antenor swirl Chryseis-Briseis through the latest turbines of choreography: just enough elixir has percolated their ankles to foster an admirable brio. Aeneas and Creusa are more consciously decorous. The bronzed faces of the Greeks, with their fierce and glossy horse-chestnut eyes, are seen above Sanskrit coiffures which show signs of rumple. Menelaus, plodding but not hopeful, is marching a soldierly pattern with some Turkish doxy. Agamemnon, whose shanks are a bit haggard, is sitting it out with Diomedes. Both are neglecting their roxanas to study the dancing. The General notes Chryseis-Briseis in the stringent clasp of Deiphobus-Antenor, and has his own reasons for remembering them severally. As the old canteen joke had it, he knows bitch from t'other. Diomedes, who looks dangerous, follows Paris and Cressida with his gaze. The muted glucose melody moves this human ocean in a smooth surface swing; but underneath, little corals of anger build and build.

Troilus watches too. He is happy to see Paris pay deference to Cressida. Not

for anything would he himself wish to be introduced here, in this muddle of noise and color. He is glad with looking, humble to confirm his revelation. Never does woman seem so exquisite to her lover as when she dances with someone else. He measures her loveliness as he could never know it were he closer. Cressida, with her great gift for doing one thing at a time, is surrendered to float and pause; creating the very rhythm she seems to follow. She says little; even Paris is less glib than usual. In a luminous web of star-colored fabric she holds the wide surplus of the dress lifted to one wrist. So slender in that broad fan of stuff her light and tender drift is like a yacht in lazy sail, like a butterfly's idle wing. Given completely to the moment, treading on sheens of broken color, you might think her someone from Elsewhere, ignorant of our clumsy language and our barren ways. But wise beyond any warrant of experience Troilus now guesses her not goddess unapproachable. She is human woman; desirable and desired. And all round that prismatic center the will to live, creation's only integral, sharpens, brightens, focusses more close.

When nerves are trimmed so tight, almost any casualty will serve. The specialty of the menu tonight is Sarpedoni's famed Chicken with Noodles, which many of the guests have been enjoying. But Deiphobus, in alcohol's unfortunate habit of insisting on the accidental jape, has found something continuously amusing in the phrase. He and Antenor, in the final eddy of the dance, are slowed up alongside the table where Agamemnon and Diomedes are glowering with one abandoned Sanskrit neglected between them. Deiphobus, in the worst of taste and judgment, thinks it funny to ejaculate to his friend *Chicken with Noodles!* Which the Greeks not unnaturally regard as a personal comment.

The sequel to this appears at the next dance number. Diomedes does the unheard-of. When the music begins he strides briskly across the floor, bows curtly to Pandarus, and ignoring Cressida claims a dance from Antigone. This guileless wench, who indeed scarcely knows Greek from Trojan, is swept onto the floor before she realizes what is happening. So astonished, or indignant, are all others that the two have the space to themselves. The Greeks with a roar of applause shout "Exhibition Number!" The orchestra plays brilliantly, and Diomedes, a magnificent performer, spins the girl into a tango with strong emphasis on all its sinuous and pantomime elements. Antigone, lissom little piece, enters vividly into the spirit of the thing;

the skill and speed of their movement are so infectious that even on the Trojan side there is scattered clapping.

But this breach of custom is too flagrant to be overlooked. A murmur of growling protest rises from the Trojan tables. Several armed men appear on the Greek wing of the terrace, in answer to some gesture from their General. As the dance ends Diomedes, with a graceful obeisance to the flush and flattered Antigone, walks back with her to her chair. There is a moment's threatening hush, then the Greeks shout for an encore.

But Troilus, whose head is cooler than most, sees what Diomedes intends. The dance with Antigone was only a subterfuge, an insolent preliminary, intended to impress Cressida. The Spartan bravo, hot with success, will not ask the latter to dance with him, counting on her reluctance to cause a scene.

Paris, standing rigid with anger, accepts Antigone from Diomedes with a stiff nod. Old Pandarus, rising from his chair, is too bewildered for initiative. There is a general movement forward from the Greek side, as though the enemy, a little jaded with Sanskrit, are all about to seek Trojan partners. Sarpedoni, in alarm, and thinking music the best remedy, hurries the band into action.

Things move fast. In the very instant that Diomedes begins to salute Cressida, Troilus has come up from behind. As though Diomedes did not exist, he takes Pandarus firmly and pushes him at Cressida. Your dance I think, he says quietly; and Cressida finds herself rising to take her uncle's arm, while her eyes are caught by this boy with pale brown face and metal eyes. Dance with her, you fool! he whispers fiercely in Pan's ear. This, he knows, is the only recourse. With Pandarus, a civilian and an older man, she will be safe from insult. Paris, coming to his senses, takes Antigone forward. The two couples are out on the floor; Diomedes and Troilus are left face to face.

That dance was taken, says Troilus, quivering a little with anger, but holding himself in. You know the rules here.

Oh really? Diomedes retorts. When did you get so scrupulous?

The Trojans don't use women as weapons.

I suppose you were afraid to let her make her own choice. Some of her family seem to prefer Sparta.

I think you'd better go back to your own side.

Diomedes laughs. She'll dance with me yet.

They might well have been at blows, but by now they are surrounded by a knot of angry men from both armies, in-