IN DUBIOUS BATTLE

by John Steinbeck

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JOHN STEINBECK

(1900-)

A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR OF *In Dubious Battle*

JOHN STEINBECK was born in Salinas, California. His father was active in local politics and had been county treasurer. His mother had been a school teacher in the Big Sur country. The world beyond the rugged mountains held little attraction for young Steinbeck. His first foray into it was when he attended Leland Stanford University, where he confined his studies entirely to whatever happened to interest him. Subsequently he went to New York City and worked at casual jobs as a newspaperman, a brick carrier during the construction of Madison Square Garden, a chemist, a painter's apprentice, and day laborer. His first book, *Cup of Gold*, was published in 1929. It was followed, in 1932, by *The Pastures of Heaven* and *To a God Unknown*. The public's indifference to these early works may have been discouraging, but its response to *Tortilla Flat* was immediate and positive. Steinbeck could now feel free to write with some assurance of economic security. In 1936, his *In Dubious Battle* won the unstinted praise of critics and rallied thousands of enthusiastic readers under his banner. His sixth book, *Of Mice and Men*, became overnight a best-seller and later, as a play, proved to be the season's theatrical sensation. There followed a book of short stories, *The Long Valley*. And, in 1939, Steinbeck achieved his full stature as an artist with what is now generally conceded to be the most significant novel of our time, *The Grapes of Wrath*. Everyone who has been stirred by its genuine nobility must turn to *In Dubious Battle* to find the source from which *The Grapes of Wrath* drew its strength and its deep humanity. John Steinbeck now lives in Los Gatos, California, where he pursues the major objective of his life—the writing of novels.

Innumerable force of Spirits armed,
That durst dislike his reign, and, me preferring,
His utmost power with adverse power opposed
In dubious battle on the plains of Heaven
And shook his throne. What though the field be lost?
All is not lost—the unconquerable will,
And study of revenge, immortal hate,
And courage never to submit or yield:
And what is else not to be overcome?

PARADISE LOST

IN DUBIOUS BATTLE

1

AT last it was evening. The lights in the street outside came on, and the Neon restaurant sign on the corner jerked on and off, exploding its hard red light in the air. Into Jim Nolan's room the sign threw a soft red light. For two hours Jim had been sitting in a small, hard rocking-chair, his feet up on the white bedspread. Now that it was quite dark, he brought his feet down to the floor and slapped the sleeping legs. For a moment he sat quietly while waves of itching rolled up and down his calves; then he stood up and reached for the unshaded light. The furnished room lighted up—the big white bed with its chalk-white spread, the golden-oak bureau, the clean red carpet worn through to a brown warp.

Jim stepped to the washstand in the corner and washed his hands and combed water through his hair with his fingers. Looking into the mirror fastened across the corner of the room above the washstand, he peered into his own small grey eyes for a moment. From an inside pocket he took a comb fitted with a pocket clip and combed his straight brown hair, and parted it neatly on the side. He wore a dark suit and a grey flannel shirt, open at the throat. With a towel he dried the soap and dropped the thin bar into a paper bag that stood open on the bed. A Gillette razor was in the bag, four pairs of new socks and another grey flannel shirt. He glanced about the room and then twisted the mouth of the bag closed. For a

moment more he looked casually into the mirror, then turned off the light and went out the door.

He walked down narrow, uncarpeted stairs and knocked at a door beside the front entrance. It opened a little. A woman looked at him and then opened the door wider—a large blonde woman with a dark mole beside her mouth.

She smiled at him. "*Mis*-ter Nolan," she said.

"I'm going away," said Jim.

"But you'll be back, you'll want me to hold your room?"

"No. I've got to go away for good. I got a letter telling me."

"You didn't get no letters here," said the woman suspiciously.

"No, where I work. I won't be back. I'm paid a week in advance."

Her smile faded slowly. Her expression seemed to slip toward anger without any great change. "You should of give me a week's notice," she said sharply. "That's the rule. I got to keep that advance because you didn't give me no notice."

"I know," Jim said. "That's all right. I didn't know how long I could stay."

The smile was back on the landlady's face. "You been a good quiet roomer," she said, "even if you ain't been here long. If you're ever around again, come right straight here. I'll find a place for you. I got sailors that come to me every time they're in port. And I find room for them. They wouldn't go no place else."

"I'll remember, Mrs. Meer. I left the key in the door."

"Light turned out?"

"Yes."

"Well, I won't go up till tomorrow morning. Will you come in and have a little nip?"

"No, thank you. I've got to be going."

Her eyes narrowed wisely. "You ain't in trouble? I could maybe help you."

"No," Jim said. "Nobody's after me. I'm just taking a new job. Well, good night, Mrs. Meer."

She held out a powdered hand. Jim shifted his paper bag and took her hand for a moment, and felt the soft flesh give under his fingers.

"Don't forget," she said. "I can always find room. People come back to me year after year, sailors and drummers."

"I'll remember. Good night."

She looked after him until he was out the front door and down the cement steps to the sidewalk.

He walked to the corner and looked at the clock in a jeweller's window—seven-thirty. He set out walking rapidly eastward, through a district of department stores and specialty shops, and then through the wholesale produce district, quiet now in the evening, the narrow streets deserted, the depot entrances closed with wooden bars and wire netting. He came at last to an old street of three-storey brick buildings. Pawn-shops and second-hand tool dealers occupied the ground floors, while failing dentists and lawyers had offices in the upper two flights. Jim looked at each doorway until he found the number he wanted. He went in a dark entrance and climbed the narrow stairs, rubber-treaded, the edges guarded with strips of brass. A little night light burned at the head of the steps, but only one door in the long hall showed a light through its frosted glass. Jim walked to

it, looked at the "Sixteen" on the glass, and knocked.

A sharp voice called, "Come in."

Jim opened the door and stepped into a small, bare office containing a desk, a metal filing cabinet, an army cot and two straight chairs. On the desk sat an electric cooking plate, on which a little tin coffee-pot bubbled and steamed. A man looked solemnly over the desk at Jim. He glanced at a card in front of him. "Jim Nolan?" he asked.

"Yes." Jim looked closely at him, a small man, neatly dressed in a dark suit. His thick hair was combed straight down on each side from the top in a vain attempt to cover a white scar half an inch wide that lay horizontally over the right ear. The eyes were sharp and black, quick nervous eyes that moved constantly about—from Jim to the card, and up to a wall calendar, and to an alarm clock, and back to Jim. The nose was large, thick at the bridge and narrow at the point. The mouth might at one time have been full and soft, but habitual muscular tension had drawn it close and made a deep line on each lip. Although the man could not have been over forty, his face bore heavy parenthetical lines of resistance to attack. His hands were as nervous as his eyes, large hands, almost too big for his body, long fingers with spatulate ends and flat, thick nails. The hands moved about on the desk like the exploring hands of a blind man, feeling the edges of paper, following the corner of the desk, touching in turn each button on his vest. The right hand went to the electric plate and pulled out the plug.

Jim closed the door quietly and stepped to the desk. "I was told to come here," he said.

Suddenly the man stood up and pushed his right hand

across. "I'm Harry Nilson. I have your application here." Jim shook hands. "Sit down, Jim." The nervous voice was soft, but made soft by an effort.

Jim pulled the extra chair close and sat down by the desk. Harry opened a desk-drawer, took out an open can of milk, the holes plugged with matches, a cup of sugar and two thick mugs. "Will you have a cup of coffee?"

"Sure," said Jim.

Nilson poured the black coffee into the mugs. He said, "Now here's the way we work on applications, Jim. Your card went in to the membership committee. I have to talk to you and make a report. The committee passes on the report and then the membership votes on you. So you see, if I question you pretty deep, I just have to." He poured milk into his coffee, and then he looked up, and his eyes smiled for a second.

"Sure, I know," said Jim. "I've heard you're more select than the Union League Club."

"By God, we have to be!" He shoved the sugar bowl at Jim, then suddenly, "Why do you want to join the Party?"

Jim stirred his coffee. His face wrinkled up in concentration. He looked down into his lap. "Well—I could give you a lot of little reasons. Mainly, it's this: My whole family has been ruined by this system. My old man, my father, was slugged so much in labor trouble that he went punch-drunk. He got an idea that he'd like to dynamite a slaughter-house where he used to work. Well, he caught a charge of buckshot in the chest from a riot gun."

Harry interrupted, "Was your father Roy Nolan?"

"Yeah. Killed three years ago."

"Jesus!" Harry said. "He had a reputation for being the toughest mug in the country. I've heard he could lick five cops with his bare hands."

Jim grinned. "I guess he could, but every time he went out he met six. He always got the hell beat out of him. He used to come home all covered with blood. He'd sit beside the cook stove. We had to let him alone then. Couldn't even speak to him or he'd cry. When my mother washed him later, he'd whine like a dog." He paused. "You know he was a sticker in the slaughter-house. Used to drink warm blood to keep up his strength."

Nilson looked quickly at him, and then away. He bent the corner of the application card and creased it down with his thumb nail. "Your mother is alive?" he asked softly.

Jim's eyes narrowed. "She died a month ago," he said. "I was in jail. Thirty days for vagrancy. Word came in she was dying. They let me go home with a cop. There wasn't anything the matter with her. She wouldn't talk at all. She was a Catholic, only my old man wouldn't let her go to church. He hated churches. She just stared at me. I asked her if she wanted a priest, but she didn't answer me, just stared. 'Bout four o'clock in the morning she died. Didn't seem like dying at all. I didn't go to the funeral. I guess they would've let me. I didn't want to. I guess she just didn't want to live. I guess she didn't care if she went to hell, either."

Harry started nervously. "Drink your coffee and have some more. You act half asleep. You don't take anything, do you?"

"You mean dope? No, I don't even drink."

Nilson pulled out a piece of paper and made a few notes on it. "How'd you happen to get vagged?"

Jim said fiercely, "I worked in Tulman's Department Store. Head of the wrapping department. I was out to a picture show one night, and coming home I saw a crowd in Lincoln Square. I stopped to see what it was all about. There was a guy in the middle of the park talking. I climbed up on the pedestal of that statue of Senator Morgan so I could see better. And then I heard the sirens. I was watching the riot squad come in from the other side. Well, a squad came up from behind, too. Cop slugged me from behind, right in the back of the neck. When I came to I was already booked for vagrancy. I was rumdum for a long time. Got hit right here." Jim put his fingers on the back of his neck at the base of his skull. "Well, I told 'em I wasn't a vagrant and had a job, and told 'em to call up Mr. Webb, he's manager at Tulman's. So they did. Webb asked where I was picked up, and the sergeant said 'at a radical meeting,' and then Webb said he never heard of me. So I got the rap."

Nilson plugged in the hot plate again. The coffee started rumbling in the pot. "You look half drunk, Jim. What's the matter with you?"

"I don't know. I feel dead. Everything in the past is gone. I checked out of my rooming house before I came here. I still had a week paid for. I don't want to go back to any of it again. I want to be finished with it."

Nilson poured the coffee cups full. "Look, Jim, I want to give you a picture of what it's like to be a Party member. You'll get a chance to vote on every decision, but once the vote's in, you'll have to obey. When we have money we try to give field workers twenty dollars a month to eat on. I don't remember a time when we ever had the money. Now listen to the work: In the field

you'll have to work alongside the men, and you'll have to do the Party work after that, sometimes sixteen, eighteen hours a day. You'll have to get your food where you can. Do you think you could do that?"

"Yes."

Nilson touched the desk here and there with his fingertips. "Even the people you're trying to help will hate you most of the time. Do you know that?"

"Yes."

"Well, why do you want to join, then?"

Jim's grey eyes half closed in perplexity. At last he said, "In the jail there were some Party men. They talked to me. Everything's been a mess, all my life. Their lives weren't messes. They were working toward something. I want to work toward something. I feel dead. I thought I might get alive again."

Nilson nodded. "I see. You're God-damn right I see. How long did you go to school?"

"Second year in high-school. Then I went to work."

"But you talk as though you had more school than that."

Jim smiled. "I've read a lot. My old man didn't want me to read. He said I'd desert my own people. But I read anyway. One day I met a man in the park. He made lists of things for me to read. Oh, I've read a hell of a lot. He made lists like Plato's Republic, and the Utopia, and Bellamy, and like Herodotus and Gibbon and Macaulay and Carlyle and Prescott, and like Spinoza and Hegel and Kant and Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. He even made me read *Das Kapital*. He was a crank, he said. He said he wanted to know things without believing them. He liked to group books that all aimed in the same direction."

Harry Nilson was quiet for a while. Then he said, "You see why we have to be so careful. We only have two punishments, reprimand and expulsion. You've got to want to belong to the Party pretty badly. I'm going to recommend you, 'cause I think you're a good man; you might get voted down, though."

"Thanks," said Jim.

"Now listen, have you any relatives who might suffer if you use your right name?"

"I've an uncle, Theodore Nolan. He's a mechanic. Nolan's an awful common name."

"Yeah, I guess it is common. Have you any money?"

"About three dollars. I had some, but I spent it for the funeral."

"Well, where you going to stay?"

"I don't know. I cut off from everything. I wanted to start new. I didn't want to have anything hanging over."

Nilson looked around at the cot. "I live in this office," he said. "I eat and sleep and work here. If you want to sleep on the floor, you can stay here for a few days."

Jim smiled with pleasure. "I'd like that. The bunks in jail weren't any softer than your floor."

"Well, have you had any dinner?"

"No. I forgot it."

Nilson spoke irritably. "If you think I'm chiseling, go ahead," he said. "I haven't any money. You have three dollars."

Jim laughed. "Come on, we'll get dried herrings and cheese and bread. And we'll get stuff for a stew tomorrow. I can make a pretty good stew."

Harry Nilson poured the last of the coffee into the mugs. "You're waking up, Jim. You're looking better.

But you don't know what you're getting into. I can tell you about it, but it won't mean anything until you go through it."

Jim looked evenly at him. "Did you ever work at a job where, when you got enough skill to get a raise in pay, you were fired and a new man put in? Did you ever work in a place where they talked about loyalty to the firm, and loyalty meant spying on the people around you? Hell, I've got nothing to lose."

"Nothing except hatred," Harry said quietly. "You're going to be surprised when you see that you stop hating people. I don't know why it is, but that's what usually happens."

2

ALL during the day Jim had been restive. Harry Nilson, working on a long report, had turned on him several times in exasperation. "Look," he said finally, "you can go down to the spot alone if you want. There's no reason why you can't. But in an hour I'll go down with you. I've got to finish this thing."

"I wonder if I ought to change my name," said Jim. "I wonder if changing your name would have any effect on you."

Nilson turned back to his report. "You get some tough assignments and go to jail enough and change your name a few times, and a name won't mean any more to you than a number."

Jim stood by the window and looked out. A brick wall was opposite, bounding the other side of a narrow vacant lot between two buildings. A crowd of boys played handball against the building. Their yells came faintly through the closed window.

"I used to play in lots when I was a kid," Jim said. "Seems to me we fought most of the time. I wonder if the kids fight as much as they used to."

Harry did not pause in his writing. "Sure they do," he said. "I look out and see 'em down there. Sure they fight."

"I used to have a sister," Jim went on. "She could lick nearly everybody in the lot. She was the best marble shot

I ever saw. Honest, Harry, I've seen her split an agate at ten feet, with her knuckles down, too."

Harry looked up. "I didn't know you had a sister. What happened to her?"

"I don't know," said Jim.

"You don't know?"

"No. It was funny—I don't mean funny. It was one of those things that happen."

"What do you mean, you don't know what happened to her?" Harry laid his pencil down.

"Well, I can tell you about it," said Jim. "Her name was May. She was a year older than I was. We always slept in the kitchen. Each had a cot. When May was about fourteen and I was thirteen, she hung a sheet across the corner to make a kind of a little closet to dress and undress behind. She got giggly, too. Used to sit on the steps downstairs with a lot of other girls, and giggle when boys went by. She had yellow hair. She was kind of pretty, I guess. Well, one evening I came home from playing ball over on Twenty-third and Fulton—used to be a vacant lot, there's a bank there now. I climbed up to our flat. My mother said, 'Did you see May down on the steps?' I said I hadn't. Pretty soon my old man came home from work. He said, 'Where's May?' My mother said, 'She hasn't come in yet.'

"It's funny how this whole thing stands out, Harry. I remember every bit of it, what everybody said, and how everybody looked.

"We waited dinner a while, but pretty soon my old man stuck out his chin and got mad. 'Put on the food,' he said. 'May's getting too smart. She thinks she's too big to get licked.'