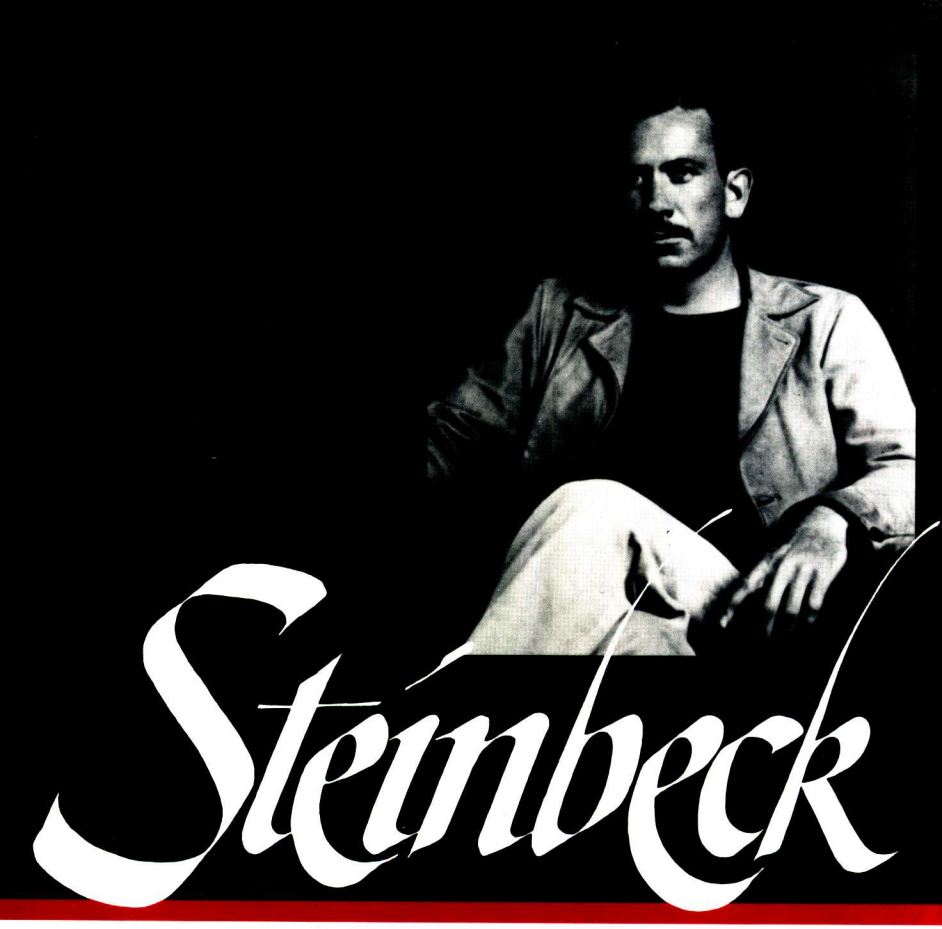

Steinbeck

Novels and Stories 1932–1937

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To a God Unknown
Tortilla Flat
In Dubious Battle
Of Mice and Men

JOHN STEINBECK

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Contents

THE PASTURES OF HEAVEN

TO MY FATHER AND MOTHER

I

WHEN the Carmelo Mission of Alta California was being built, some time around 1776, a group of twenty converted Indians abandoned religion during a night, and in the morning they were gone from their huts. Besides being a bad precedent, this minor schism crippled the work in the clay pits where adobe bricks were being moulded.

After a short council of the religious and civil authorities, a Spanish corporal with a squad of horsemen set out to restore these erring children to the bosom of Mother Church. The troop made a difficult journey up the Carmel Valley and into the mountains beyond, a trip not the less bewildering because the fleeing dissenters had proved themselves masters of a diabolic guile in concealing traces of their journey. It was a week before the soldiery found them, but they were discovered at last practising abominations in the bottom of a ferny canyon in which a stream flowed; that is, the twenty heretics were fast asleep in attitudes of abandon.

The outraged military seized them and in spite of their howlings attached them to a long slender chain. Then the column turned about and headed for Carmel again to give the poor neophytes a chance at repentance in the clay pits.

In the late afternoon of the second day a small deer started up before the troop and popped out of sight over a ridge. The corporal disengaged himself from his column and rode in its pursuit. His heavy horse scrambled and floundered up the steep slope; the manzanita reached sharp claws for the corporal's face, but he plunged on after his dinner. In a few minutes he arrived at the top of the ridge, and there he stopped, stricken with wonder at what he saw—a long valley floored with green pasturage on which a herd of deer browsed. Perfect live oaks grew in the meadow of the lovely place, and the hills hugged it jealously against the fog and the wind.

The disciplinarian corporal felt weak in the face of so serene a beauty. He who had whipped brown backs to tatters, he whose rapacious manhood was building a new race for Cali-

fornia, this bearded, savage bearer of civilization slipped from his saddle and took off his steel hat.

"Holy Mother!" he whispered. "Here are the green pastures of Heaven to which our Lord leadeth us."

His descendants are almost white now. We can only reconstruct his holy emotion of discovery, but the name he gave to the sweet valley in the hills remains there. It is known to this day as *Las Pasturas del Cielo.*

By some regal accident the section came under no great land grant. No Spanish nobleman became its possessor through the loan of his money or his wife. For a long time it lay forgotten in its embracing hills. The Spanish corporal, the discoverer, always intended to go back. Like most violent men he looked forward with sentimental wistfulness to a little time of peace before he died, to an adobe house beside a stream, and cattle nuzzling the walls at night.

An Indian woman presented him with the pox, and, when his face began to fall away, good friends locked him in an old barn to prevent the infection of others, and there he died peacefully, for the pox, although horrible to look at, is no bad friend to its host.

After a long time a few families of squatters moved into the Pastures of Heaven and built fences and planted fruit trees. Since no one owned the land, they squabbled a great deal over its possession. After a hundred years there were twenty families on twenty little farms in the Pastures of Heaven. Near the centre of the valley stood a general store and post office, and half a mile above, beside the stream, a hacked and much initialed school house.

The families at last lived prosperously and at peace. Their land was rich and easy to work. The fruits of their gardens were the finest produced in central California.

II

TO THE PEOPLE of the Pastures of Heaven the Battle farm was cursed, and to their children it was haunted. Good land although it was, well watered and fertile, no one in the valley coveted the place, no one would live in the house, for land and houses that have been tended, loved and labored with and finally deserted, seem always sodden with gloom and with threatening. The trees which grow up around a deserted house are dark trees, and the shadows they throw on the ground have suggestive shapes.

For five years now the old Battle farm had stood vacant. The weeds, with a holiday energy, free of fear of the hoe, grew as large as small trees. In the orchard the fruit trees were knotty and strong and tangled. They increased the quantity of their fruit, and diminished its size. The brambles grew about their roots and swallowed up the windfalls.

The house itself, a square, well-built, two-story place, had been dignified and handsome when its white paint was fresh, but a singular latter history had left about it an air unbearably lonely. Weeds warped up the boards of the porches, the walls were grey with weathering. Small boys, those lieutenants of time in its warfare against the works of man, had broken out all the windows and carted away every movable thing. Boys believe that all kinds of portable articles which have no obvious owner, if taken home, can be put to some joyous use. The boys had gutted the house, had filled the wells with various kinds of refuse, and, quite by accident, while secretly smoking real tobacco in the hayloft, had burned the old barn to the ground. The fire was universally attributed to tramps.

The deserted farm was situated not far from the middle of the narrow valley. On both sides it was bounded by the best and most prosperous farms in the Pastures of Heaven. It was a weedy blot between two finely cultivated, contented pieces of land. The people of the valley considered it a place of curious evil, for one horrible event and one impenetrable mystery had taken place there.

Two generations of Battles had lived on the farm. George

Battle came west in 1863 from upper New York State; he was quite young when he arrived, just draft age. His mother supplied the money to buy the farm and to build the big square house upon it. When the house was completed, George Battle sent for his mother to come to live with him. She tried to come, that old woman who thought that space stopped ten miles from her village. She saw mythological places, New York and Rio and Buenos Aires. Off Patagonia she died, and a ship's watch buried her in a grey ocean with a piece of canvas for her coffin and three links of anchor chain sewn in between her feet; and she had wanted the crowded company of her home graveyard.

George Battle looked about for a good investment in a woman. In Salinas he found Miss Myrtle Cameron, a spinster of thirty-five, with a small fortune. Miss Myrtle had been neglected because of a mild tendency to epilepsy, a disease then called "fits" and generally ascribed to animosity on the part of the deity. George did not mind the epilepsy. He knew he couldn't have everything he wanted. Myrtle became his wife and bore him a son, and, after twice trying to burn the house, was confined in a little private prison called the Lippman Sanitarium, in San Jose. She spent the rest of her existence crocheting a symbolic life of Christ in cotton thread.

Thereafter the big house on the Battle farm was governed by a series of evil-tempered housekeepers of that kind who advertise: "Widow, 45, wants position housekeeper on farm. Good cook. Obj. Mat." One by one they came and were sweet and sad for a few days until they found out about Myrtle. After that they tramped through the house with flashing eyes, feeling that they had been abstractly raped.

George Battle was old at fifty, bent with work, pleasureless and dour. His eyes never left the ground he worked with so patiently. His hands were hard and black and covered with little crevices, like the pads of a bear. And his farm was beautiful. The trees in the orchard were trim and groomed, each one a counterpart of its fellows. The vegetables grew crisp and green in their line-straight rows. George cared for his house and kept a flower garden in front of it. The upper story of the house had never been lived in. This farm was a poem by the inarticulate man. Patiently he built his scene and waited

for a Sylvia. No Sylvia ever came, but he kept the garden waiting for her just the same. In all the years when his son was growing up, George Battle paid very little attention to him. Only the fruit trees and the fresh green rows of vegetables were vital. When John, his son, went missionarying in a caravan, George didn't even miss him. He went on with the work, yearly bending his body lower over his earth. His neighbours never talked to him because he did not listen to talk. His hands were permanently hooked, had become sockets into which the handles of tools fitted tightly. At sixty-five he died of old age and a cough.

John Battle came home in his caravan to claim the farm. From his mother he had inherited both the epilepsy and the mad knowledge of God. John's life was devoted to a struggle with devils. From camp meeting to camp meeting he had gone, hurling his hands about, invoking devils and then confounding them, exorcising and flaying incarnate evil. When he arrived at home the devils still claimed attention. The lines of vegetables went to seed, volunteered a few times, and succumbed to the weeds. The farm slipped back to nature, but the devils grew stronger and more importunate.

As a protection John Battle covered his clothes and his hat with tiny cross-stitches in white thread, and, thus armoured, made war on the dark legions. In the grey dusk he sneaked about the farm armed with a heavy stick. He charged into the underbrush, thrashed about with his stick and shouted maledictions until the devils were driven from cover. At night he crept through the thickets upon a congregation of the demons, then fearlessly rushed forward, striking viciously with his weapon. In the daytime he went into his house and slept, for the devils did not work in the light.

One day in the deepening twilight John crept carefully upon a lilac bush in his own yard. He knew the bush sheltered a secret gathering of fiends. When he was so close that they could not escape, he jumped to his feet and lunged toward the lilac, flailing his stick and screaming. Aroused by the slashing blows, a snake rattled sleepily and raised its flat, hard head. John dropped his stick and shuddered, for the dry sharp warning of a snake is a terrifying sound. He fell upon his knees and prayed for a moment. Suddenly he shouted, "This

is the damned serpent. Out, devil," and sprang forward with clutching fingers. The snake struck him three times in the throat where there were no crosses to protect him. He struggled very little, and died in a few minutes.

His neighbours only found him when the buzzards began to drop out of the sky, and the thing they found made them dread the Battle farm after that.

For ten years the farm lay fallow. The children said the house was haunted and made night excursions to it to frighten themselves. There was something fearsome about the gaunt old house with its staring vacant windows. The white paint fell off in long scales; the shingles curled up shaggily. The farm itself went completely wild. It was owned by a distant cousin of George Battle's, who had never seen it.

In 1921 the Mustrovics took possession of the Battle farm. Their coming was sudden and mysterious. One morning they were there, an old man and his old wife, skeleton people with tight yellow skin stretched and shiny over their high cheek bones. Neither of them spoke English. Communication with the valley was carried on by their son, a tall man with the same high cheek bones, with coarse-cropped black hair growing half way down his forehead, and with soft, sullen black eyes. He spoke English with an accent, and he only spoke his wants.

At the store the people gently questioned him, but they received no information.

"We always thought that place was haunted. Seen any ghosts yet?" T. B. Allen, the storekeeper, asked.

"No," said young Mustrovic.

"It's a good farm all right when you get the weeds off."

Mustrovic turned and walked out of the store.

"There's something about that place," said Allen. "Everybody who lives there hates to talk."

The old Mustrovics were rarely seen, but the young man worked every daylight hour on the farm. All by himself he cleared the land and planted it, pruned the trees and sprayed them. At any hour he could be seen working feverishly, half running about his tasks, with a look on his face as though he expected time to stop before a crop was in.

The family lived and slept in the kitchen of the big house.

All the other rooms were shut up and vacant, the broken windows unmended. They had stuck fly-paper over the holes in the kitchen windows to keep out the air. They did not paint the house nor take care of it in any way, but under the frantic efforts of the young man, the land began to grow beautiful again. For two years he slaved on the soil. In the grey of the dawn he emerged from the house, and the last of the dusk was gone before he went back into it.

One morning, Pat Humbert, driving to the store, noticed that no smoke came from the Mustrovic chimney. "The place looks deserted again," he said to Allen. " 'Course we never saw anybody but that young fellow around there, but something's wrong. What I mean is, the place kind of *feels* deserted."

For three days the neighbours watched the chimney apprehensively. They hated to investigate and make fools of themselves. On the fourth day Pat Humbert and T. B. Allen and John Whiteside walked up to the house. It was rustlingly still. It really did seem deserted. John Whiteside knocked at the kitchen door. When there was no answer and no movement, he turned the knob. The door swung open. The kitchen was immaculately clean, and the table set; there were dishes on the table, saucers of porridge, and fried eggs and sliced bread. On the food a little mould was forming. A few flies wandered aimlessly about in the sunshine that came through the open door. Pat Humbert shouted, "Anybody here?" He knew he was silly to do it.

They searched the house thoroughly, but it was vacant. There was no furniture in any rooms except the kitchen. The farm was completely deserted—had been deserted at a moment's notice.

Later, when the sheriff was informed, he found out nothing revealing. The Mustrovics had paid cash for the farm, and in going away had left no trace. No one saw them go, and no one ever saw them again. There was not even any crime in that part of the country that they might have taken part in. Suddenly, just as they were about to sit down to breakfast one morning, the Mustrovics had disappeared. Many, many times the case was discussed at the store, but no one could advance a tenable solution.

The weeds sprang up on the land again, and the wild berry vines climbed into the branches of the fruit trees. As though practice had made it adept, the farm fell quickly back to wildness. It was sold for taxes to a Monterey realty company, and the people of the Pastures of Heaven, whether they admitted it or not, were convinced that the Battle farm bore a curse. "It's good land," they said, "but I wouldn't own it if you gave it to me. I don't know what's the matter, but there's sure something funny about that place, almost creepy. Wouldn't be hard for a fellow to believe in haunts."

A pleasant shudder went through the people of the Pastures of Heaven when they heard that the old Battle farm was again to be occupied. The rumour was brought in to the General Store by Pat Humbert who had seen automobiles in front of the old house, and T. B. Allen, the store proprietor, widely circulated the story. Allen imagined all the circumstances surrounding the new ownership and told them to his customers, beginning all his confidences with "They say." "They say the fellow who's bought the Battle place is one of those people that goes about looking for ghosts and writing about them." T. B. Allen's "they say" was his protection. He used it as newspapers use the word "alleged."

Before Bert Munroe took possession of his new property, there were a dozen stories about him circulating through the Pastures of Heaven. He knew that the people who were to be his new neighbours were staring at him although he could never catch them at it. This secret staring is developed to a high art among country people. They have seen every uncovered bit on you, have tabulated and memorized the clothes you are wearing, have noticed the colour of your eyes and the shape of your nose, and, finally, have reduced your figure and personality to three or four adjectives, and all the time you thought they were oblivious to your presence.

After he had bought the old place, Bert Munroe went to work in the overgrown yard while a crew of carpenters made over the house. Every stick of furniture was taken out and burned in the yard. Partitions were torn down and other partitions put in. The walls were repapered and the house re-

roofed with asbestos shingles. Finally a new coat of pale yellow paint was applied to the outside.

Bert himself cut down all the vines, and all the trees in the yard, to let in the light. Within three weeks the old house had lost every vestige of its deserted, haunted look. By stroke after stroke of genius it had been made to look like a hundred thousand other country houses in the west.

As soon as the paint inside and out was dry, the new furniture arrived, overstuffed chairs and a davenport, an enameled stove, steel beds painted to look like wood and guaranteed to provide a mathematical comfort. There were mirrors with scalloped frames, Wilton rugs and prints of pictures by a modern artist who has made blue popular.

With the furniture came Mrs. Munroe and the three younger Munroes. Mrs. Munroe was a plump woman who wore a rimless pince nez on a ribbon. She was a good house manager. Again and again she had the new furniture moved about until she was satisfied, but once satisfied, once she had regarded the piece with a concentrated gaze and then nodded and smiled, that piece was fixed forever, only to be moved for cleaning.

Her daughter Mae was a pretty girl with round smooth cheeks and ripe lips. She was voluptuous of figure, but under her chin there was a soft, pretty curve which indicated a future plumpness like her mother's. Mae's eyes were friendly and candid, not intelligent, but by no means stupid. Imperceptibly she would grow to be her mother's double, a good manager, a mother of healthy children, a good wife with no regrets.

In her own new room, Mae stuck dance programs between the glass and the frame of the mirror. On the walls she hung framed photographs of her friends in Monterey, and laid out her photograph album and her locked diary on the little bedside table. In the diary she concealed from prying eyes a completely uninteresting record of dances, of parties, of recipes for candy and of mild preferences for certain boys. Mae bought and made her own room curtains, pale pink theatrical gauze to strain the light, and a valance of flowered cretonne. On her bedspread of gathered satin, she arranged five boudoir pillows in positions of abandon, and against them leaned a

long-legged French doll with clipped blonde hair and with a cloth cigarette dangling from languid lips. Mae considered that this doll proved her openness of mind, her tolerance of things she did not quite approve. She liked to have friends who had pasts, for, having such friends and listening to them, destroyed in her any regret that her own life had been blameless. She was nineteen; she thought of marriage most of the time. When she was out with boys she talked of ideals with some emotion. Mae had very little conception of what ideals were except that in some manner they governed the kind of kisses one received while driving home from dances.

Jimmie Munroe was seventeen, just out of high school and enormously cynical. In the presence of his parents, Jimmie's manner was usually sullen and secretive. He knew he couldn't trust them with his knowledge of the world, for they would not understand. They belonged to a generation which had no knowledge of sin nor of heroism. A firm intention to give over one's life to science after gutting it of emotional possibilities would not be tenderly received by his parents. By science, Jimmie meant radios, archeology and airplanes. He pictured himself digging up golden vases in Peru. He dreamed of shutting himself up in a cell-like workshop, and, after years of agony and ridicule, of emerging with an airplane new in design and devastating in speed.

Jimmie's room in the new house became a clutter of small machines as soon as he was settled. There was a radio crystal set with ear phones, a hand-powered magneto which operated a telegraph key, a brass telescope and innumerable machines partly taken to pieces. Jimmie, too, had a secret repository, an oaken box fastened with a heavy padlock. In the box were: half a can of dynamite caps, an old revolver, a package of Melachrino cigarettes, three contraptions known as Merry Widows, a small flask of peach brandy, a paper knife shaped like a dagger, four bundles of letters from four different girls, sixteen lipsticks pilfered from dance partners, a box containing mementos of current loves—dried flowers, handkerchiefs and buttons, and most prized of all, a round garter covered with black lace. Jimmie had forgotten how he really got the garter. What he *did* remember was far more satis-

factory anyway. He always locked his bedroom door before he unlocked the box.

In high school Jimmie's score of sinfulness had been equalled by many of his friends and easily passed by some. Soon after moving to the Pastures of Heaven, he found that his iniquities were unique. He came to regard himself as a reformed rake, but one not reformed beyond possible outbreak. It gave him a powerful advantage with the younger girls of the valley to have lived so fully. Jimmie was rather a handsome boy, lean and well made, dark of hair and eyes.

Manfred, the youngest boy, ordinarily called Manny, was a serious child of seven, whose face was pinched and drawn by adenoids. His parents knew about the adenoids; they had even talked of having them removed. Manny became terrified of the operation, and his mother, seeing this, had used it as a deterrent threat when he was bad. Now, a mention of having his adenoids removed made Manny hysterical with terror. Mr. and Mrs. Munroe considered him a thoughtful child, perhaps a genius. He played usually by himself, or sat for hours staring into space, "dreaming," his mother said. They would not know for some years that he was subnormal, his brain development arrested by his adenoidal condition. Ordinarily Manny was a good child, tractable and easily terrified into obedience, but, if he were terrified a little too much, an hysteria resulted that robbed him of his self-control and even of a sense of self-preservation. He had been known to beat his forehead on the floor until the blood ran into his eyes.

Bert Munroe came to the Pastures of Heaven because he was tired of battling with a force which invariably defeated him. He had engaged in many enterprises and every one had failed, not through any shortcoming on Bert's part, but through mishaps, which, if taken alone, were accidents. Bert saw all the accidents together and they seemed to him the acts of a Fate malignant to his success. He was tired of fighting the nameless thing that stopped every avenue to success. Bert was only fifty-five, but he wanted to rest; he was half convinced that a curse rested upon him.

Years ago he opened a garage on the edge of a town. Business was good; money began to roll in. When he considered himself safe, the state highway came through on another