In Dubious Battle Study Guide

In Dubious Battle by John Steinbeck

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Published in 1936, In Dubious Battle is considered the first major work of Pulitzer Prize-winning author John Steinbeck. Set in a fictionalized valley in California, the story explores themes Steinbeck would continue to develop in later works: group behavior, social injustice, man's inhumanity to man—themes which continue to be relevant to today's readers. A labor conflict between migrant apple pickers and the local growers' association is the backdrop against which Jim Nolan becomes involved in the labor movement and rapidly matures as he learns what it means to do organizational fieldwork for the Party before meeting an early and violent death.

After being accepted as a Party member, Jim is mentored by Mac McLeod, an experienced field worker, who the Party sends to take advantage of a wage conflict between apple pickers and their bosses in the Torgas Valley. Mac takes Jim along to give him hands-on training in fieldwork.

From the beginning, Mac tells Jim they have to be alert and take advantage of any opportunity given them to get the men to accept them and allow themselves to be organized, and Mac has a genius for recognizing opportunities. When he learns the daughter-in-law of London, the unofficial leader of one group of men, is about to give birth at the pickers' primitive camp, he risks the girl's life to exploit the situation and ingratiate himself with London. Using that relationship, Mac convinces the workers on three ranches to go out on strike against the growers, then secures private land for the strikers to camp on and brings in a doctor who sometimes works for the Party to set up the camp and oversee sanitary conditions.

Although Jim is eager to get involved in the strike, for the most part Mac uses him only to mix in with the men and find out how they feel about what is going on. After Jim goes out with a group of pickets and is wounded, Mac keeps him closer than ever, but all the time Jim is watching and learning how Mac manipulates men, and he is becoming as single-minded about putting the Party's needs above the needs of individual men as Mac himself is.

Finally, an act of vigilantism against the man who has let the strikers camp on his land ends their welcome, and without a place for the men to stay, the strike is doomed. The only questions are whether the strikers will stay and fight as long as they are able or whether they will just quietly break up and go away.

Mac and Jim are tricked into going out alone into the orchard, where a vigilante ambush awaits them. Mac realizes their danger too late, and Jim pays with his life. Seeing another opportunity to revive the faltering strike, Mac brushes his emotions about his friend's death aside and takes Jim's body back to the camp, placing it on a platform where the strikers can see it and using it to rally them to remain united.

Chapters 1-2

Summary

Chapter 1. Jim Nolan checks out of the rooming house where he has been staying and walks to a shabby three-story building where Harry Nilson is going to interview him for membership in “the Party.” Impressed with Jim, Harry agrees to recommend him for Party membership.

Chapter 2. Harry turns Jim over to Mac McLeod to begin his new life as a Party member. Mac introduces Jim to Dick Halsing and Joy, two other Party members, and puts Jim to work immediately typing copies of a letter.

Mac explains the cause of Joy’s almost deranged behavior and tells Jim the others take care of Joy and try to keep him out of trouble. Jim and Mac talk about why Jim wanted to join the Party, and Jim expresses a desire to do field work and “get into the action” rather than just typing letters.

Analysis

Chapters 1 and 2 serve as the novel’s exposition. Through the third person narrator, readers meet Jim and Mac, the two characters whose actions will dominate the rest of the story, as well as Dick and Joy, minor characters who will play significant roles later.

From the moment Jim is introduced, alone in his rooming house with the thin paper bag that holds all of his possessions except what he is wearing, readers begin to understand the sense of hopelessness he later tells Mac is one of the reasons he wants to join the Party. This impression is reinforced by details from his former life Jim shares with Harry and Mac.

Jim is obviously intelligent, for he has read extensively: utopian authors such as Plato and Bellamy, historians such as Herodotus and Macaulay, philosophers such as Hegel and Nietzsche, and even Marx’s Das Kapital. These clues about his intellect help to prepare readers for the ease with which he will internalize the lessons Mac teaches him about man’s nature and using it to achieve the Party’s goals.

Mac is somewhat older than Jim, although his exact age is never revealed. Steinbeck describes him as “a large man with the face of a scholarly prizefighter,” a testimony to the physical abuses he has experienced as a Party worker. Harry says Mac “knows more about field work than anybody in the state.” Although Mac denies having official authority over the other men who live at the house, it is clear from the easy way he directs their activities and the way they accept his direction that Mac is a natural leader of men.

The future roles Dick and Joy will play in the story are suggested in Mac's description of Dick as a ladies' man who is skillful at getting Party sympathizers to donate money and supplies and in the erratic behavior of Joy, who at every opportunity noisily proclaims how an oppressive economic system hasn't been able to silence his protests against it.

Although the Party to which Jim is applying for membership is never identified more fully than that, it is obviously meant to be the Communist party. This becomes apparent from such details as its identification with "radical" ideas and from a reference to Joy as a "red." Likewise the city in which the story opens is never named, but it is located somewhere in central California. The labor unrest alluded to by Mac, Harry, and Jim suggests a time setting sometime in the 1930s.

Vocabulary

advance, drummer, vain, spatulate, punch-drunk, vagrancy, radical, perplexity, chiseling, restive, flat, wizened, retire, frock coat, mongrel, mimeograph, genial, romance, incendiarism, subvert

Chapters 3-4

Summary

Chapter 3. Dick tells Mac Joy has been arrested. Mac immediately gives him instructions for getting Joy out of jail, a job he cannot do himself because he has to make preparations to leave the next day for the Torgas Valley to try to organize a strike among the apple pickers there. He has been given permission to take Jim along and train him to do field work.

Chapter 4. When they reach Torgas, Mac and Jim get a free meal at Al's Lunch Wagon, a diner owned by a local sympathizer. Then they walk to the apple pickers' "jungle" and join a group around the campfire, where they find out the men travel with an unofficial leader named London and his daughter-in-law, Lisa, is about to give birth in a nearby tent. Mac immediately sees an opportunity to establish a rapport with the men he intends to organize.

Convincing London he is qualified to assist at the birth, Mac organizes the men to help, and around dawn he safely delivers Lisa's baby. Alone with Jim later, Mac confesses he had known nothing about delivering babies except it was important to have sanitary conditions. He admits they were fortunate the birth did not have any complications but reminds Jim they have to use whatever material comes to them and says the risk Lisa might have died was worth taking to gain acceptance from London and the men.

Analysis

Mac's announcement about the labor situation in the Torgas Valley is the inciting incident introducing the plot's central conflict: the Valley's large Growers' Association has waited until most of the "crop tramps" have arrived to pick the apples before announcing a wage cut; now the pickers have already spent most of their money to get to Torgas, and they cannot afford to leave until they have earned more. Mac intends to use the dispute to convince the workers to organize and strike against the growers. Soon after this situation is introduced, the rising action begins with Jim and Mac's departure for Torgas.

Dick's return to the house with twenty dollars corroborates what Mac had said earlier about Dick's talent for getting donations and supplies to support the Party's work. Joy's erratic, almost childlike behavior in Chapter 2 and Mac's comments about the others taking care of Joy and trying to keep him out of trouble have foreshadowed Dick's revelation in Chapter 3 that Joy has been arrested for stabbing a policeman who was trying to arrest him for making a crazy speech on a street corner.

Readers begin to gain insight into Mac's character, both through things he says to Jim and through his actions. Mac is passionate in his dedication to the Party's cause and takes a ruthlessly pragmatic view of individual humans as pawns to be used as

necessary to achieve the Party's goal of freeing the workers from oppression by those with invested capital. For example, he says if one of the workers is shot by vigilantes, a public funeral could be used to inflame the passions of the others, possibly—hopefully, from Mac's point of view—even causing a confrontation with National Guard troops that would win numerous sympathizers to the workers' cause. In Mac's opinion, the chance to win the confidence of the workers justifies the risk he took in delivering Lisa's baby. Overall, the things Mac tells Jim create the impression of a man who, while genuinely sympathetic to the oppressed little guy, is intellectually capable of cold-bloodedly using that same little guy to achieve the Party's ends.

In Chapters 3 and 4 readers begin to see why Harry Nilson had said Mac "knows more about field work than anybody in the state." Mac knows people, how they think and how to manipulate them. When a tramp in a boxcar challenges him for some paper Mac has used to make a cushion, Mac intimidates him by claiming to be a prizefighter, a claim he later admits to Jim was a bluff: "Mostly a guy that tries to scare you is a guy that can be scared," he tells Jim. At one point Mac advises Jim to take up smoking because it is a useful social habit: "I don't know any quicker way to soften a stranger down than to offer him a smoke, or even to ask him for one." Mac begins his campaign to establish rapport with the pickers by rolling a cigarette and then passing his tobacco pouch around for the men to share the contents.

Although knowing the answer perfectly well, Mac asks Lean-face why London had not taken Lisa to the county hospital. He realizes explaining to Mac the county hospital never has room for "crop tramps" will fan the flames of resentment that Lean-face feels against the social injustice of the system and increase his readiness to become involved in a protest against it.

Learning the other men regard London as a leader, Mac seizes the opportunity to ingratiate himself with London by delivering Lisa's baby. When Jim asks Mac why he had had London burn all the cloths, including the unused ones after the birth, Mac explains every man who had contributed a piece of cloth had felt himself a part of the delivery; to have returned the unused cloths would have cut those men out. "There's no better way to make men part of a movement than to have them give something to it," he tells Jim.

Mac makes advance preparations when he can—for example, he arrives in Torgas with a list of almost 50 local sympathizers he can contact for help—but he tells Jim there are things that just have to be improvised: "… the details have to be worked out with any materials we can find. We use everything we can get hold of." He illustrates the lesson by using the delivery of Lisa's baby as a means of gaining London's confidence and, through London, the confidence of the other pickers.

Although Jim is largely a bystander in Chapters 3 and 4, his role as an audience for Mac helps Steinbeck develop Mac's character. In addition, Jim shows himself to be a quick and receptive learner when he seamlessly joins in an improvised scenario Mac creates to allay a policeman's suspicion of them as they hang around outside of Al's Lunch Wagon.

Al, though a symbol of the capitalist system through his ownership of the diner, sympathizes with the workers and the Party. Although he cautiously avoids open association with the Party, he always has a free cup of coffee and a couple of doughnuts for anyone in need, and he generously offers Jim and Mac a place to sleep in a shed on his father's farm. Readers are left to wonder about this apparent paradox.

Vocabulary

sympathizer, vigilante, soapbox, converge, disarming, monotone, loiter, proprietor, ruminate, voracious, precede, stooge, dilapidated, abrupt, capitalist, prolonged, apathetic, scoff, slough/slew of, tonsure, midwife, vacant, corroborate, listless, profound

Chapters 5-6

Summary

Chapter 5. Jim meets Dan and introduces him to Mac. After Dan leaves them, Mac says London will advise his men to strike and is going to introduce Jim and Mac to a friend of his on a neighboring ranch who can probably persuade his men to strike as well.

London's friend Dakin is not anxious to get involved with radicals, but Mac and Jim manage to convince him the only choice the workers have is to organize, and reluctantly Dakin agrees to talk to his men about joining a protest.

Chapter 6. While Jim and Mac are eating lunch, an undercover detective working for the growers tries to trap them into revealing they are Party members, but Mac is not fooled by the trick.

As old Dan starts down the ladder in a tree where he and Jim are picking, he falls when two of the rungs strip out. Someone in the crowd of workers notices the broken ladder, and the crowd begins to seethe with anger at the injustice of being required to work with such unsafe equipment.

Taking advantage of the mood among the pickers, Mac immediately sends telegrams requesting more help and asking for Doc Burton to come and take over the sanitation arrangements for the strikers' camp. Mac receives a letter from Dick informing him Joy has escaped from jail and no one knows where he is.

After pressuring Al into taking Jim and him to talk to his father, Mac offers the small farmer a proposition: If Anderson will let the strikers camp on his land, they will pick his crop for free. It takes all of Mac's persuasive skills, but finally Anderson agrees to the deal.

London, who has been elected chairman of the workers, brings Jim and Mac up to date on the strike plans that have been made while they were in town, and Mac tells the men about the arrangements he has made for a place for them to stay. He tells London about vigilantes who had stopped Jim and him on their way home and tried to run them out of the Valley and warns London to be careful of what he says to anyone, telling him it would be easy for the growers to bribe some of the men to betray them

It is dawn before Jim and Mac finish their long day and get to sleep.

Analysis

Several new characters are introduced in Chapters 5 and 6. The first of these, old Dan, is proud of having once been a top-faller. He still prides himself on outworking the younger men among the pickers and bristles at Jim's suggestion he should take it easy

and find a charity to take care of him. Dan recalls the Wobblies from his days as a lumberman and confesses an admiration for the improvements in working conditions they had accomplished; nevertheless, his own experience with union membership has left him skeptical about unions and their activities. Perhaps ironically (for Mac tells Jim old guys like Dan are useless to them), Dan's accident is the spark that finally ignites the protest when the already stirred up men see the rickety ladder that caused the accident.

Dakin, a friend of London's who is picking at another orchard, occupies a position similar to London's, i.e., the men there accept him as an unofficial leader. A man with a sharp, monotonous voice and cold eyes, Dakin is suspicious of Mac. He has a light truck he uses to do some hauling jobs as well as to move his possessions when the workers migrate from place to place. The truck, his wife, and his children represent status to Dakin, and although he says he has nothing against radicals, he has no intention of jeopardizing what he has by getting involved with any radical organization. In the end, though, Dakin concedes helping to organize the protest is his best option.

Mr. Anderson, whose son Al owns the diner in Torgas, is introduced in Chapter 6. He is a proud, hard-working man whose farm is small but pleasant and meticulously maintained. Jim comments its appearance "makes a man want to live in a place like this." Anderson himself is a small, energetic man. As the owner of an orchard, Anderson is not initially inclined to help the strikers. It takes all of Mac's persuasive skills to get him to agree to let the workers camp on his land, but what finally wins is a combination of pragmatism and emotional appeal. If Anderson lets the men stay on his farm, he will get his apples picked for free and, since his apples will be the only ones to reach market, he will get an excellent price for them. The money would allow him to pay off the mortgage on his land and get out from under the oppression of the Torgas Finance Company, to which he may well lose his land in a few years. The finance company is controlled by the three big growers in the Valley, so ironically Anderson is as oppressed by them as the more obviously powerless pickers are. Mac promises Anderson protection from any reprisals his cooperation with the strikers might cause, and in the end Anderson is swayed by the opportunity to gain economic independence while at the same time evening the score with his oppressors.

Anderson's situation also helps explain the paradox of Al's support for the Party even though he is a businessman. Al has grown up seeing the oppression inflicted on his father by a capitalist system that benefits the big growers at the expense of the small ones. There is an irony in the fact that Al's attempt to escape that injustice has led him to become a businessman himself, but Anderson's situation helps to explain Al's innate sympathy with those who suffer under economic oppression.

A number of incidents in Chapters 5 and 6 suggest Jim is learning and maturing from watching Mac. Upon first meeting Dan in Chapter 5, Jim lances the old man's pride "as he had heard Mac do to other men." When Jim catches himself letting a checker's criticism get under his skin, he quickly defuses a potential confrontation just as he had seen Mac do with the policeman outside Al's Lunch Wagon. Conversely, when the checker tries to intimidate him, Jim's belligerent response suggests he is applying a

lesson Mac had taught him in the boxcar: “A guy that tries to scare you is a guy that can be scared.”

Likewise, Jim draws out the sullen boy after the boy’s run-in with the checker by using a method he has seen Mac use. He pretends not to know what the boy is talking about, with the result the boy feels empowered by his knowledge and is eager to show it off. The boy gets mad when Jim says he cannot commit to the protest until he knows more about what is going on, and Jim responds by winking at him “the way he’d seen Mac do” and assuring him he will be with them when the trouble starts.

Further proof that Jim is internalizing lessons from Mac comes after old Dan falls off the defective ladder. Jim quickly realizes the accident is an opportunity to show the men they can accomplish something if they work together and organizes them to get sticks and use their coats to make a stretcher for Dan.

Most of all, evidence of Jim’s developing skill and maturation shows in the unrehearsed argument he presents to Dakin that if the pickers do not protest the wage cut imposed by the apple growers, they will face an even deeper cut from the cotton growers. It is Jim’s argument finally persuading Dakin he has no choice but to support a protest. The next day Jim hears the idea repeated by other workers, and Mac compliments Jim because he himself has heard the idea picked up by half a dozen men.

As for Mac, Chapters 5 and 6 offer more proof of his ability to establish a rapport with people. Mac easily charms Dan by the respect he shows upon learning Dan had worked in the north woods when the Wobblies were there. At the diner, he is quick to ingratiate himself with Al by saying he had been telling the men what a good meal Al provides. Learning how important Anderson’s dogs are to him, Mac moves to the kennel to pet the dogs when he sees Anderson approaching, and he opens their conversation by praising the dogs, immediately winning the farmer’s acceptance.

On several occasions, Mac exhibits a pragmatism bordering on ruthlessness. For example, when he hears Jim has talked to few people besides Dan on their first day in the orchard, Mac scolds Jim for wasting time on someone who is useless to them. When Jim says he likes Anderson, Mac tells him they cannot waste time liking people. He tells Jim they have to use whatever material they can find, and that is exactly what Mac himself coldly does; when he begins to pet Anderson’s pointers, Jim asks him if he likes dogs, and Mac replies, “I like anything.”

Foreshadowing plays a role several times in Chapters 5 and 6. The effect Dan’s accident has on the workers is foreshadowed when Mac tells Jim earlier in the day the workers are so steamed up something might set them off even before the meeting the next night. Dan’s warning to Jim about the rickety ladder as Jim starts to climb into the tree foreshadows the accident as Dan starts to climb down soon after. Finally, the way Jim organizes the men and gets them to make a personal investment in helping after Dan’s accident has been foreshadowed by the way Mac had organized the men to prepare for the delivery of Lisa’s baby.

BOOKRAGS

Vocabulary

baldric, pippin, virtuoso, taut, pulp, bridge, piecework, ordinance, sullen, satiric, reminiscence, perplexed, writhe, ominous, trough, reservoir, disconsolate, prim, emerge

Chapters 7-8

Summary

Chapter 7. Dick and Doc Burton arrive the next morning. Mac immediately sends Dick off to town to contact sympathizers and collect supplies for the strikers, then gives Burton directions for setting up a camp on Anderson's land.

The orchard superintendent arrives with an offer to let the men go back to work if London will get rid of the "reds" who are creating trouble among the pickers. After offering bribes to London, Jim, and Mac for their cooperation, he threatens reprisals if his offers are refused. Informing the superintendent the men have been invited to camp on some private land, Mac counters with his own threat: If anything happens to either Anderson or his ranch, every house and barn on every ranch in the Valley will burn to the ground.

Chapter 8. The strikers hold their big meeting at the new camp on Anderson's land and elect Dakin to be strike chairman. Once Burton has finished setting up the camp, the men go to work picking Anderson's apples, and by nightfall the crop has been picked and the boxes of apples have been stored in Anderson's barn.

After Mac and Dakin make plans for meeting a trainload of between four and five hundred scabs due to arrive the next morning, he and Jim accompany Burton on a walk in the orchard. Mac and Burton discuss their differing views about the Party and its goals and talk about why Burton works for the Party even though he does not believe in the cause.

When Jim and Mac go to talk to the deputies to see if they might be persuaded to switch sides and support the strikers, they are taken prisoner. The deputies not only know who Jim and Mac are, but they also know about the strikers' plan to sneak out of camp before daylight to meet the trainload of scabs. Escaping when Jim tricks his guard, Mac and Jim return to camp, and Mac tells Dakin someone has double-crossed the strikers. Dakin and Mac argue about whether Jim and Mac are really doing the strikers any good. Later, Mac expresses concern to Jim over Dakin's increasing resistance to taking orders.

Analysis

The overwhelming power of the big growers is emphasized when the orchard superintendent reminds London the judge in the Valley is named "Hunter," the family name of one of the three big growers, and the law will be anything that the growers want it to be. Likewise, when Mac asks Burton if he has done anything for which the authorities can charge him with malpractice, Burton replies no, then adds cynically, " 'Course they can do anything if they want to bad enough."

The strikers readily accept both London and Dakin as leaders. The authority in London's voice is enough to disperse the group of men who have been throwing rocks at the deputies. As for Dakin, he easily controls the hotheaded Burke when Burke wants to take a poke at the policemen who have arrived to watch the camp.

However, the two leaders have very different personalities. Mac's assessment that Dakin is much less likely than London to lose his temper seems borne out by events in Chapters 7 and 8. In the scene with the orchard superintendent, Mac has to intervene because he can tell from London's body language he is about to attack the superintendent physically; even then London cannot keep himself from threatening to kill the man if he does not leave. In contrast, Dakin's level-headedness is evidenced in his comment to Burke about leaving the policemen alone because they are not hurting anything. Time and again the word "cold," or variants of it, is used to describe Dakin.

London lives the way the other workers live: His tent is ordinary; his car has frayed seats, and the engine jerks along because two of the cylinders sometimes stop firing. Dakin, on the other hand, takes pride in maintaining a lifestyle far better than that of the other pickers. His tent is large and luxurious, and, among all the vehicles owned by the pickers, Dakin's shining green Chevy truck is the only one in good condition. Dakin has no vices, and every cent he and his wife make goes "to his living, to his truck, and to providing new equipment for his camp."

Mac is a chameleon. Burton comments Mac is like an actor, able to imitate the speech of any group with which he is associating. Sometimes readers cannot be certain whether Mac is acting or whether he is sincere. For example, his voice grows cold as he calmly and rationally explains to the superintendent the men are going to camp on Anderson's land and what he anticipates the growers' reaction to that will be. But moments later he has tears of fury in his eyes when he tells the superintendent what will happen if Anderson or his ranch is harmed in any way. Readers cannot be certain if the fury is real or if it is an act, similar to Mac's belligerent bluff when the tramp on the train had tried to threaten him.

On the other hand, there is no question Mac's passion is genuine when he is talking about the injustice of how laborers are treated. He gets more and more agitated as he tells Burton how the same authorities who are perfectly willing to let the men live like pigs in their jungle become concerned about public health as soon as the men strike. Mac shows the same kind of passion later in the orchard when he debates with Burton about what motivation drives the Party to want to organize the workers, and he is vehement in his insistence to Burton that "revolution and communism will cure social injustice."

Mac's skill in organizing the protest, in using whatever materials he finds, in anticipating how people will react and manipulating them for his own purposes makes him seem nearly superhuman, yet his almost fatal misjudgment when he goes out with Jim to talk to the deputies makes the reader realize that Mac is not infallible.

Although Doc Burton has been mentioned earlier in the story, readers meet him for the first time in Chapter 7. His young, somewhat effeminate appearance contrasts sharply with his competent professionalism in setting up the strikers' camp and tending to their medical needs. Despite Burton's differences from the men he is charged with organizing and caring for, they like and respect him. Burton's scientific detachment in analyzing mankind, his theory that group-man is a unique creature fundamentally different from the individuals who make up the group, serves as a foil to Mac's idealistic belief in the Party and its motives. Burton explains his involvement with the Party as being a result of his desire to see "the whole picture" of humanity without limiting his vision by judging things as "good" or "bad." His observations have convinced him a group is motivated not by belief in a cause (as Mac argues), but simply by the group's desire to move or to fight, and he thinks the cause they say they are supporting is really just an excuse "to reassure the brains of individual men" that it is moral to do what they are doing.

Foreshadowing continues to underpin the narrative. The deputies' knowledge of the strikers' plan to sneak out of camp before daylight is foreshadowed by Mac's insistence Dakin not tell the men about the plan in advance because there are probably spies among them. Jim and Mac's "capture" by the deputies is foreshadowed by Mac's cautioning Jim to be ready to "cut for the camp and yell like hell" if anything seems suspicious. Near the end of Chapter 8, Mac admits to Jim he does not think they will win the strike because of the organized power of the opposition. That power has made itself apparent in events such as the vigilantes' interception of Mac and Jim and attempt to drive them out of the Valley and the deputies' advance knowledge of the strikers' plan, but it was first hinted at as far back as Chapter 3 when Mac had told Jim he had heard the growers in the Torgas Valley were well-organized.

Vocabulary

sentinel, olive branch, blacklist, roadster, eddy, commotion, portentous, ravage, transform, gaping, lowering, reprove, commune, flux, collectivization, endow, wax, wane, mystic, metaphysician, medium, apprehension, retort

Chapters 9-10

Summary

Chapter 9. Leaving a hundred men behind to guard the camp, the strikers go into town to meet the arriving trainload of scabs. As London steps forward and begins to talk to the scabs, Joy suddenly squirms his way out of one of the boxcars and jumps to the ground, gesturing energetically to the scabs to follow him. Three shots ring out from the windows across the street, and Joy falls lifeless to the ground.

Against Dakin's wishes, Mac takes Joy's body back to the camp, but Burton says they will have to turn the corpse over to the coroner. Mac and Dakin disagree over Mac's plans to hold a public funeral for Joy as a means of gaining sympathy for the strikers, but London supports Mac and says he will send a group of his own men to stay in town and make sure the coroner returns Joy's body.

Anderson brings news that Al has been viciously attacked and his lunch wagon burned down. Now Anderson fears for the safety of his own property. He blames Mac for his and Al's problems, and they argue.

The coroner arrives to claim Joy's corpse.

Chapter 10. With Mac's grudging permission, Jim joins a group of pickets led by the lean-faced Sam. The group spots some scabs picking apples, and Sam approaches and encourages them to switch sides. A fight ensues, but suddenly a rifle shot rings out. One striker is hit, and as the pickets dash to escape, another shot hits Jim in the shoulder. When Mac learns Jim has been injured, he regrets having let him go out with the pickets.

Driving back from town after picking up blankets Dick had collected, Dakin and six men were ambushed by a dozen vigilantes who smashed Dakin's truck and set it on fire. Dakin went crazy and attacked them. When some traffic policemen arrived, Dakin attacked them too before they subdued him and took him to jail.

The camp's food supply is dangerously low, and Mac is worried the men will abandon the strike if the food runs out. He tells Jim they need to hold Joy's funeral the next day to keep the men unified.

Analysis

Dakin is becoming increasingly hostile toward Mac. After Jim and Mac's run-in with the deputies the previous night, Dakin had questioned whether having the reds with them was really helping the strikers. Now he eyes him suspiciously as Mac is cautioning Burke not to start a fight with the scabs. He pointedly leaves Jim and Mac out of the people who will travel into town in his truck, and after Joy is shot, Dakin accuses Mac

and Jim of being cold-blooded for proposing to use their friend's death to rally the strikers. Mac recognizes the change in Dakin's attitude toward them, even commenting to London that Dakin does not listen to him anymore.

As Dakin becomes a less reliable ally for Mac to depend on, London becomes increasingly more valuable. It is he who suggests to Mac picketing would give the apathetic men something to do. At the railroad station, it is London who steps out in front of the line of strikers and begins to talk to the scabs to convince them to switch sides; it is London who, without being told to, picks up Joy's body and carries it to Dakin's truck; and it is London who volunteers to speak at Joy's funeral when Dakin refuses to participate.

Mac continues to show his passionate devotion to achieving the goals of the Party. Any sadness he may feel at Joy's death is subordinated to what he sees as an opportunity to solidify the resolve of the strikers, and he mutters to Jim that Joy has "done the first real, useful thing in his life. … He'd be so glad." He accuses Dakin of not giving Joy a chance to influence men the way he would have wanted to.

Mac's contemptuous comment after Joy's death that the owners' encouragement of the vigilantes just gives the vigilantes an excuse to do what they want to do anyway ironically echoes Burton's earlier analysis of group-man.

Jim continues to change and mature. In some ways, he is beginning to resemble Mac. He has pragmatically accepted the reality that sometimes people are going to be hurt in the Party's battle against injustice. He looks "coldly" at the checker who is writhing in pain after Sam's attack and regards the scabs without emotion as they lie moaning on the ground after the pickets have beaten them. There are even moments when Jim seems to have learned Mac's lessons so well he is beginning to surpass his teacher. Mac expresses regret that they may not win the strike, but Jim reminds him Mac himself had said it did not matter if this strike was broken because it would still have solidified the laborers' unrest. Mac comments that although he had brought Jim along to teach him things, Jim has begun to teach Mac things.

Sam has appeared intermittently in the story since he was first introduced as Lean-face the night Jim and Mac arrived in Torgas. Several times London has put Sam in charge of carrying out Mac's ideas, and it was Sam London had assigned to be Burton's right-hand man in setting up the camp. Readers get to know more about Sam in Chapter 10 when he leads the group of pickets with whom Jim goes out. Sam has been involved in labor disputes before—as a longshoreman he had participated in the workers' rebellion in San Francisco on Bloody Thursday, with the result he has been blacklisted at every port in the country and reduced to working as a crop picker—and he shows contempt for the untested men he is leading now, mocking the picket who overconfidently thinks they have the strike won already. Yet, although Sam belittles the men he is leading and they do not like him, they respect him and follow his orders. Sam handles the checker's threat to shoot him with the same kind of ruthless confidence the reader might expect to see from Mac, and he even sounds like Mac when he explains to Jim why it was necessary to beat the scabs.

In Chapters 9 and 10, readers see the realization of several outcomes that have been foreshadowed in the narrative. Joy's presence among the scabs when they arrive in Torgas would seem like a convenient contrivance were it not for what the reader has already learned about Joy's character combined with Dick's earlier letter telling about Joy's disappearance after his escape from jail. On the march into town, Mac's comment to Jim that he hopes something happens soon to get the men excited and keep the protest going and his observation that there are no women's faces among the people watching from the windows across the street prepare the way for Joy's shooting. The description of the engine moving toward the station "puffing out bursts of steam from under its wheels" subtly foretells the burst of steam that drowns out London's voice as he tries to talk to the scabs. And the reader readily accepts the always cool and controlled Dakin's uncharacteristically extreme reaction to his truck's being smashed and burned because Dakin has repeatedly mentioned the truck with pride and had rarely let it get out of his sight as he walked around camp with the men when they first arrived.

From time to time, Steinbeck relieves the tension of the story with humor that grows out of the characters themselves. One instance occurs as Dakin, grinning, tells the squad leaders if any of the men want to pick up a few rocks along the way and stuff them in their pockets, "I can't see no harm in that." Another such moment comes when Mac describes how Dakin had gone after both the vigilantes who had smashed his truck and the police whose arrival had scattered them. Hearing how Dakin had had to be pried loose from the officer whose hand he had bitten, Jim comments he is glad he did not lay a finger on Dakin's truck.

Vocabulary

detail, flank, assent, procession, dense, imperceptible, grimace, plaintive, deploy, apathy, longshoreman, assertion, subjugate, derisive, passionless, disperse, deft, probe, mutton, slavering

Chapter 11-12

Summary

Chapter 11. The camp's food supply has dried up because the Board of Supervisors in Torgas has announced they have voted to feed the strikers. Dick comes to get a letter signed by the strike chairman saying they are not getting any food so he can show it to sympathizers and try to reverse the damage.

When Jim, Mac, and Burton go to see Al, Mac is dismayed to find the men who are supposed to be guarding the house have left their posts and are smoking cigarettes in the barn. Anderson is sullen, and Al scolds his father for berating Mac about the destruction of the diner and asks if Mac thinks he could get into the Party. During the walk back to the camp, Mac and Burton again talk about the goals of the Party and how individuals sometimes are sacrificed for the achievement of those goals.

The coroner has returned Joy's body. Disappointed at how peaceful Joy looks, Mac says it will not do any good to let the crowd view him at the funeral.

Chapter 12. After talking with Burton about whether old Dan should be allowed to go to Joy's funeral, Jim and Mac have a pitiful breakfast of mush, the last of the camp's food supply.

Jim pacifies Dan by telling him they are going to put him on a truck and take him to the funeral, then attempts to feel out the mood among the strikers.

Joy's coffin is placed on a platform built for the occasion, and after London makes a short speech, Mac takes over and inflames the crowd's emotions, leaving the men angry and ready to challenge anyone who tries to interfere with the burial. The funeral procession leaves for the cemetery.

Analysis

Mac's character is a mass of contradictions, as Burton puts it, "… the craziest mess of cruelty and haus-frau sentimentality, … clear vision and rose-colored glasses I ever saw." One moment he is talking sentimentally about what "a good little guy" Joy was, wondering why they keep calling him "poor little guy" when "he was greater than himself" and had "a kind of ecstasy in him." The next he is dispassionately telling Burton it is necessary to sacrifice one man for the good of everyone else; he is too busy with groups of men to feel sorry for one man; and the real end they are working for is about people having enough to eat, not about anyone losing respect.

Although readers have occasionally seen Mac miscalculate, overall he has an uncanny understanding of people and a masterful ability to manipulate them for his own ends. Nowhere is this shown better than in his speech at Joy's funeral. Like Marc Antony in

his funeral oration in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, Mac begins by using irony, pointing out how "dangerous" Joy was to society because "he wanted guys like you to have enough to eat and a place to sleep where you wouldn't get wet." Then he lets his voice grow soft, watching the crowd as they lean forward to catch his words before shouting at them to ask if they are just going to bury Joy and forget about him and the sacrifice he made for them. Finally he uses a series of questions to whip the crowd into a frenzy. When he finishes, Burton says wonderingly no preacher ever aroused a congregation better than Mac had inflamed his audience.

Jim's maturation and progress as a field worker continue. He earns an approving glance from Mac when he tells Burton they have to use whatever weapons they can find, even Joy's corpse. When he sits down to talk with the men and try to find out what the mood is among them, he begins by asking someone to roll a cigarette for him and then passes his tobacco pouch around for the men to share. He has watched Mac unmask the growers' tricks often enough so on his own he figures out White-forehead is a spy who has been sent by the bosses to stir up trouble in the camp.

Jim is also beginning to show the same kind of passion for his work that Mac shows. Burton comments he sees "something religious" in Jim's eyes, and those eyes glow as Jim echoes Mac's hope the vigilantes will try to stop the funeral because the men will be ready to fight. When Mac is feeling discouraged because he is sure the rain will dampen the men's spirits and cause them to start deserting, it is Jim who rallies him, saying sometimes "when a guy gets miserable enough, he'll fight all the harder."

Like the Chorus in a classical Greek drama, Burton plays the role of objective observer, commenting on what he sees without taking sides. He tells Mac he does not believe in the Party's cause but he does believe in men and just cannot keep from helping them when they need help. Burton feels sorry for Anderson because he is losing everything that mattered to him, but he admits that Joy's death was different because Joy "liked what he did" and "wouldn't have had it any other way."

One of the few instances of foreshadowing in Chapters 11 and 12 is London's comment to Mac the men had not wanted to go guard Anderson's house, which makes it no surprise when they are found to have abandoned their posts. Still, Steinbeck has used the technique so frequently that when Jim and Mac find the men smoking cigarettes in the bed of hay in the barn, suspense is created because readers are forced to wonder if this suggests there is to be a fire.

Vocabulary

proffer, coquettish, repeal, brusque, variance, rouse, maul, muse, sentimental, morose, formaldehyde, interpose, ecstasy, haus-frau, rose-colored, gingerly, encase, threadbare, sodden, placate, gesticulate, solemnity, surreptitious

Chapter 13

Summary

Chapter 13. After Dick resupplies the strikers with food just in time to prevent starvation from ending the strike, Bolter, the new president of the Fruit Growers' Association in the Valley, arrives to talk to London about settling their dispute. Bolter's friendly manner masks an empty offer, and when London refuses to end the strike until the pickers get the pay raise they are asking for, Bolter warns him not to be influenced by radicals who just want to make trouble.

When vigilantes burn Anderson's barn, also destroying the apple crop stored inside it, Anderson feels betrayed and is furious at Mac and the strikers. A further problem is no one has seen Burton since he left camp to go see Al, and Mac is growing concerned about him.

Sam wants to retaliate for what the growers have done to Anderson and leaves on his own to set fire to the house of Hunter, one of the Valley's three large growers. After he has gone, a guard arrives from Anderson's with an armed boy whom they have caught. Mac gets the boy to confess vigilantes in the town had encouraged him and some classmates to burn the barn. With London's permission, Mac beats the boy savagely, leaving his face a mess, and sends him back to warn his friends the next one who is caught will not be so lucky.

Alone with Jim, Mac expresses revulsion at what he has done. As they talk, Jim seems to become possessed by a new strength and sense of authority and tells Mac to bring London to him. Taking command, Jim gives London orders for how they are going to run the strike.

After Jim falls into a restless sleep, Mac writes a letter to Harry Nilson. When London returns from setting out guards around the camp, he asks Mac about joining the Party, and the two of them discuss the probable outcome of the strike. They are interrupted by Sam's return. Although he was successful in burning Hunter's house, he had been caught and, in escaping, had badly beaten the man who had captured him. Telling London and Mac to deny all knowledge of him if anyone asks about his association with the strikers, he leaves. Mac tells London to take care of Jim while he is gone and slips away to mail his letter to Harry.

Analysis

The plot reaches its climax in Chapter 13 with the torching of Anderson's barn. Having private land for the strikers to stay on has been the foundation for the strike; everything else Mac has achieved has been possible only because the strikers have had a place where they could camp outside the reach of the authorities' power to disperse them.

Now that Anderson is sure to kick them off of his land, there is little hope the strike can be held together.

A climax is also reached in Jim's maturation. Initially his relationship to Mac had been that of novice to master; Mac had requested permission to take Jim along to Torgas to give him hands-on training in field work. As the story has progressed, the reader has seen Jim not only absorb his lessons and begin to apply them skillfully, but also become increasingly eager to take on more responsibility. Time and again he has asked Mac to let him do something or to use him more, and always Mac has been cautious in what he has allowed Jim to do, at first out of concern with Jim's inexperience and then, increasingly, because he likes Jim and wants to protect him.

But Jim's devotion to the Party's cause has continued to grow along with his developing skill in fieldwork, and on more than one occasion Mac has remarked he had brought Jim along to teach him and instead he is learning from Jim. The balance in their relationship changes in Chapter 13 when Jim shows a capacity even greater than Mac's for being controlled and ruthless; it is Jim, not Mac, who coldly and intellectually analyzes the necessity for beating the boy who had helped torch Anderson's barn. With Mac's admission he sees Jim changing and is becoming scared of him, Jim asserts his newly realized strength, declaring he intends to use both Mac and himself to further the Party's cause. It is the perfect embodiment of Mac's rule the Party has to use everything it can get its hands on to achieve its goals. Mac has let sentiment inhibit his actions; Jim has no such inhibitions. The novice has become the equal of the master.

Sprinkled throughout the tension in Chapter 13 are moments of character-driven humor. For example, Sam tells Bolter that in reporting on the Bloody Thursday riots in San Francisco, the newspapers had said a striker died when he threw himself on a bayonet. Moments later when London slugs Sam to cool him off, Mac jokes "a striker just threw himself on a fist." When Lisa is too dull-witted to understand what Mac means when he says she would have him in her hair if she had not just had a baby, Mac nods solemnly and tells Jim, "I like a girl who doesn't talk much." And finally, there is something unintentionally but grimly humorous about Jim's declaration he is stronger than Mac or any of the others because he is "going in a straight line," not distracted by considerations like "women and tobacco and liquor and keeping warm and fed."

Vocabulary

constrain, galvanize, jubilant, wary, interminable, carmine, nobility, sententious, haunches, petition, implore, coupe, flail, efface, exploit, counter-revolutionary, sheathe, caper, rampart, reprisal

Chapters 14-15

Summary

Chapter 14. The newspaper Mac has brought back from town makes it clear the strike is falling apart, and Mac, Jim, and London discuss what will probably happen and what they should do.

The pickets set out for the day but quickly return; deputies armed with guns and tear gas have the road effectively barricaded. After Mac is unsuccessful at rallying the men to return and storm the barricade, he accuses them of cowardice. He tells Jim again the men need another taste of blood to get them stirred up.

When Burke accuses London of having a private hoard of food and eating better than the others, London breaks his jaw with one blow. As the crowd stares at the bleeding man, London understands a signal from Jim and rallies the mob to attack the barricade again. This time the men return drunk on their success at overwhelming the barricade's defenders and intent on making Mac pay for accusing them of cowardice, but London manages to disperse them before they do any harm.

Jim and Mac discuss what, if anything, the strike has accomplished. Mac is pleased with what the men have achieved so far by working together, but he says they will probably need seeing someone else's blood spilled to ignite their anger again.

Chapter 15. Mac tells Al that vigilantes had burned the barn after tricking the guards into leaving their posts. Al says he is still on their side but his father has gone into town to get the sheriff to kick the strikers off his land for trespassing.

The sheriff arrives at the camp and tells the strikers it will be destroyed if they are still there the next morning. Mac thinks the strikers should stay and fight, and London agrees but is not sure they will be able to convince the men. After hearing the men want to call a meeting and vote to end the strike, Mac is pleased because at least it means they are still acting as a group.

Suddenly a boy runs into London's tent with news there is an injured man in the orchard who says he is a doctor. Jim and Mac sprint out behind him, and as they reach the orchard, Mac suddenly yells for Jim to drop just as there is a roar and two flashes of light. When Mac reaches out to raise Jim's head, he discovers his face has been blown away.

Carrying Jim's body back to camp, Mac leans it up against a corner post on the platform used for Joy's funeral. He places a lantern so it shines on Jim's head and begins to speak: "This guy didn't want nothing for himself. … Comrades! He didn't want nothing for himself—"

Analysis

As the plot's falling action progresses, the situation for the strikers becomes progressively more precarious. The local newspaper is blaming the strikers for the fires at both Anderson's and Hunter's and is urging citizens to look into who among themselves is supplying the strikers. With the disappearance of Burton, sanitary conditions in the camp are deteriorating. The food supply is dwindling rapidly, and rumors have been circulating among the men to stir them up against London.

Anderson's decision to have the men kicked off of his land seems to seal the fate of the strike; it cannot continue if the men do not have a private place to camp, just as it could not really start until they had such a place. The only questions are how long the strikers can hang on and whether they will just quietly fade away or go down fighting.

After Jim's outburst in Chapter 13, he and Mac settle into a more balanced relationship. Mac even remarks at one point he and Jim keep switching sides in regard to who remains coldly rational and who succumbs to the influence of sentiment.

Ironically, it is a trick similar to the one that lured the guards to leave Anderson's place unprotected that lures Mac and Jim into the orchard and leads to Jim's death. Mac's use of Jim's body to arouse the strikers yet another time has been foreshadowed in his comments about the men needing a taste of blood to stir their anger and his use of Joy's body to rally them in the same way. The story ends with Mac saying to the strikers of Jim, as he had said earlier to them of Joy, "He didn't want nothing for himself—"

The book's title, In Dubious Battle, alludes to a phrase in John Milton's epic poem Paradise Lost. In the poem, Satan says his supporters have engaged in dubious battle against the forces of Heaven but even though they have lost the battle, they have shown their spirit and proven their courage "never to submit or yield." Mac would say the same of the battle between laborers and those with invested capital: Though the strikers may lose a battle that is hopeless to begin with, they win the knowledge of their own united power and the fight, hopeless though it may be, will continue on. By leaving Mac's final sentence unfinished, Steinbeck seems to suggest the strike itself and the movement of which it is a part are themselves unfinished too.

Vocabulary

malice, transient, agitator, firebrand, flout, malcontent, incendiary, inaudible, calamity, subdued, rueful, bungle, rancid, languor, harangue, meridian, plaster, resigned, pungent, gaunt, emissary, transfigure

Characters

Jim Nolan

The novel's protagonist, Jim is a young man from a working class family that has been destroyed by the economic and social oppression of the capitalist system. Jim joins the Party searching for a sense of hopefulness and purpose and an end to the loneliness in his life. Under Mac's tutelage, he comes to accept the Party philosophy embracing a love of mankind while viewing individual men as expendable if necessary for the achievement of the group's goals. From Mac, Jim learns how to unite people and how to work toward a goal. He achieves a sense of fulfillment, and near the end of the novel he tells another character, "…I'm not lonely any more, and I can't be licked, because I'm more than myself."

Mac McLeod

Described as "a large man with the face of a scholarly prizefighter," Mac has a reputation as a skilled field worker, good at influencing men and using them to advance the Party's cause. Mac is good at his work because he understands what motivates people and because he is able to distance himself emotionally from them and use them dispassionately to achieve a goal. He is Jim's mentor in the Party and becomes Jim's friend.

Dick Halsing

Mac calls Dick a "bedroom radical." Dick is a pale, dark-haired young man, known for his success with the ladies and his extraordinary ability to get donations of money and supplies from Party sympathizers. Jim meets Dick at the house where he stays when he first joins the Party, and later Dick comes to Torgas and raises donations from local sympathizers to keep the strikers supplied with food and other necessities.

Joy

An old man, Joy is mentally unstable, the result of beatings he has taken because of his vocal expression of Party ideas, and the others now take care of him as they might take care of a child. Mac uses Joy's death at the hands of vigilantes to inspire the striking apple pickers.

Doc Burton

Although not a Party member, Burton, a young medical doctor, has often worked for the Party. At Mac's request, he efficiently organizes the strikers' camp and oversees setting

it up. His presence on site is essential to keeping the health authorities from finding an excuse to shut the camp down. Burton explains his involvement with the Party as a desire to observe human behavior and see “the whole picture.” He maintains a scientific detachment from his environment because judging what he sees as “good” or “bad” would limit his ability to observe objectively.

London

Although London isn’t actually a boss, many of the other pickers travel with him and look to him as a leader. He gives the impression of being someone who leads men as naturally as he breathes. Once Mac gains his confidence, London becomes a valuable ally in helping to promote the strike and organize the men, and eventually he is elected strike chairman. In many ways London learns as much from Mac as Jim does, and near the end of the story London asks Mac if he can join the Party.

Dakin

“A thin-faced man with veiled, watchful eyes and an immobile mouth,” Dakin is a friend of London’s and occupies a position similar to London’s with his own group of pickers. Because Dakin is more cool-headed than London, Mac initially influences the men to elect Dakin as strike chairman, but Dakin is more concerned about his personal possessions and security than he is about the success of the strike and becomes increasingly resistant to Mac’s guidance. When vigilantes destroy his truck, Dakin goes berserk and ends up in jail, leading to London’s becoming chairman of the strikers.

Sam

Also known as Lean-face, Sam travels with London. He had been a longshoreman in San Francisco during the Bloody Thursday riots and for his participation had been blacklisted in every port in the country. Now Sam is one of the apple pickers, but the Bloody Thursday experience has radicalized him and creates a distance between him and the other pickers; they respect him, but they do not like him.

Dan

A lean old man with black eyes and a sparse, chewed beard, Dan is proud of having once been a top-faller but now works as a picker. At 71, he prides himself on still being able to outwork any of the younger pickers. When Dan is injured in the orchard because of faulty equipment, the accident focuses the workers’ anger and provides the spark that ignites the strike.

Alfred Anderson

Owner of a small diner in Torgas, Al is a Party sympathizer who secretly helps the Party when he can. He does not want anyone to know of his involvement because he fears retaliation against his business, and after his father gives the strikers land on which to camp, vigilantes in the town burn his diner.

Mr. Anderson

Al's father, Anderson owns a small, well-kept orchard. He agrees to let the strikers camp on a five-acre field on his property only because he sees an opportunity to get a good price for his crop while the other growers are shut down by the strike. This would enable him to pay off his mortgage and get out from under the oppression of the Torgas Finance Company, which is controlled by the big growers. When vigilantes burn his barn, Anderson loses not only his crop, which had been stored in the barn, but also his two prized English pointers, who were kenneled adjacent to the building. Furious, Anderson orders the strikers off of his land.

Lisa

Lisa is married to London's son, Joey. When Jim and Mac first arrive at the pickers' jungle, she is giving birth to her first child, and Mac uses the situation to build a rapport with London. Lisa takes things at face value and is lost in any conversation that explores more deeply than that.

Burke

A hothead, Burke is the unofficial leader of another group of pickers. When he publicly accuses London of selling the strikers out and of having a private hoard of food, London breaks his jaw with one blow.

Bolter

A chunky, comfortable-looking man, Bolter is the newly elected president of the Fruit Growers' Association. He is all friendliness when he comes to try to persuade London to convince the men to abandon the strike and return to work, but his manner changes when London refuses his terms, and he makes threats about what will happen to the strikers if they do not accept the growers' offer.

Objects/Places

New Masses

Dick refers to New Masses, an American Marxist magazine published from 1926-1948.

Jungle

“Jungle” is a term used to refer to the place where hobos camp. These camps lack any permanent residences or sanitary facilities. The pickers’ camp by the Torgas River is such a jungle.

Top-faller

The member of a logging crew who climbs to the top of the tree and cuts it off is called the top-faller. This was considered the most prestigious job on the crew. Old Dan had been a top-faller before he got too old to do the work.

Wobblies

Wobblies was a nickname for the Industrial Workers of the World, a labor organization especially active in the early 1900s. They had been agitating for workers’ rights when Dan was a top-faller.

Bloody Thursday

Sam had participated in Bloody Thursday, a day of rioting on July 5, 1934, during a dockworkers' strike in San Francisco. Strikers armed with rocks battled police armed with guns and tear gas. Eventually the National Guard was called in to assist in quelling the disturbance.

Torgas Valley

The Torgas Valley is the fictionalized central California location of the apple pickers’ strike. Steinbeck probably modeled it on Tulare County, where there was a peach strike in 1933.

Block

Steinbeck mentions trains entering the block, a length of railroad track controlled by signals.

Semaphore

On railroads, semaphore refers to a system of visual signals used to communicate track conditions to the engineer.

Gallinas Road

The farm where the strikers go in Albert Johnson's truck to pick up the food Dick has gotten for them is located on Gallinas Road.

Bolshevik

A Bolshevik was a member of the Russian radical group that followed Lenin. They eventually became the Russian communist party.

I.L.D.

The International Labor Defense, or I.L.D., was a legal defense organization affiliated with the American Communist Party. Mac says that were the authorities to try to charge Sam with murder of the deputy he had beaten, the I.L.D. would publicize how Joy had been shot by vigilantes from an upstairs window.

Mills bombs

Mills bombs were the first modern fragmentation hand grenades. The sheriff tells the strikers his men will be armed with Mills bombs when they return to close the camp in the morning.

Bindle-stiffs

Dakin and Sam both refer to the strikers as bindle-stiffs, a slang term for migrant workers or hoboes.

Bulls

Mac says that "bulls," a slang term for police officers, may be looking for Jim and him. The term is also used to refer to the orchard superintendent's bodyguards.

Carbolic

Carbolic, particularly known for its strong odor, is used as an antiseptic and a disinfectant. Burton tells Mac that with five gallons of crude carbolic he can perfume the country for miles.

Deus vult

Burton comments “Deus vult,” Latin for “God wills it,” when Mac tells him that the strikers have to whip a bunch of scabs in the morning.

Themes

Group Behavior

Mac's success in field work is due to his understanding of how to motivate men and get them to work as a group for a common goal. When Lisa is giving birth in London's tent at the pickers' jungle, Mac deliberately gets all of the men involved in preparations for the birth, not only giving each man a sense of individual ownership in the outcome of the endeavor, but also giving the group a sense of accomplishment from having achieved something by working together. Throughout the story Mac talks to Jim about the effect that incidents of violence have on the men and about using the anger generated by those incidents to unite the men and stir them into responding as a group.

In the conversation between Mac and Burton in the orchard, Burton expresses his belief that a mob is a unique creature, fundamentally different from the individuals who make up the group, and Mac later reiterates that view in a conversation with Jim. Mac and Burton disagree, however, on what motivates group man. Burton believes that mobs are motivated not by the individuals' belief in a cause (as Mac argues), but simply by the group's desire to move or to fight. He thinks that the cause they say they are supporting is really just an excuse "to reassure the brains of individual men" that it is moral to do what they are doing.

Social Injustice

Time and again the novel points out the inequality between working class men and men with invested capital. Jim's family had been destroyed by the economic oppression against which they struggled daily. He himself had served a 30-day jail term for vagrancy when he was indiscriminately arrested because he was near a crowd in the park and his boss denied any knowledge of him when he heard that Jim had been taken in with a group that was listening to a "radical" speaker. During that time in jail Jim had met some Party men, and the sense of hopefulness and purpose he had seen in them was what led him to join the Party and its fight against social injustice.

Mac purposely plays on Sam's resentment of social injustice when he maneuvers Sam into explaining that Lisa cannot go to the county hospital to deliver her child because, "They won't have no crop tramps in the county hospital. … They got no room. Always full-up."

The oppression of the workingman by the capitalist system is dramatized further in the orchard superintendent's confident declaration to Mac that he will have "a dozen witnesses to anything I want." It is also suggested in the orchard store's virtual monopoly as a supplier of food for the pickers. Charging inflated prices, the store lets the men buy on credit until the next payday, but paying off the debt eats up almost their entire paycheck, trapping them in a vicious cycle of indebtedness. The growers snare

them in a similar trap by waiting until the men have spent almost all their money to get to the orchards before cutting their wages.

Man’s Inhumanity to Man

Closely related to the idea of social injustice is the theme of man’s inhumanity to man. Mac comments to Burton that the authorities “let us live like pigs in the jungle, but just the minute we start a strike, they get awful concerned about the public health.” Al is beaten and his diner is burned by people who are angry because his father has let the strikers stay on his land. Mac often expresses the view that the suffering of individual men is acceptable if it furthers the Party’s cause, and he gives concrete expression to his belief when he savagely beats the boy who participated in burning Anderson’s barn because he wants “a billboard” to warn other would-be vigilantes what is in store for them if they try to retaliate against the strikers.

Style

Point of View

Steinbeck uses an omniscient third person narrator to tell the story. This technique allows him to explore the story's underlying ideas from varying perspectives and present a relatively unbiased account of the struggle between workers and invested capital, an exploration of communism that tries neither to champion nor condemn it, but simply to understand it. Readers are left to form their own opinions of the merits of the arguments for each side in the struggle, but the lack of emotional identification with a first person narrator often leaves readers feeling somewhat distanced from the characters.

Setting

The exposition of the novel takes place in the unnamed California city where Jim joins the Communist party, but with the rising action, the setting switches to the fictional Torgas Valley, an apple-growing region in central California.

The description of Jim's hotel room in the opening paragraph immediately establishes the harshness and emptiness of the life Jim is leaving behind. Jim's almost childlike wonderment at setting details such as the beauty of the land and the star-filled night sky help contrast with his maturation as he becomes experienced in managing the strike and increasingly committed to the harsh realities of how the Party's goals are achieved.

Steinbeck's choice to locate the strike in a region of apple orchards reminds readers of the allusion to Milton's Paradise Lost in the novel's title.

Language and Meaning

Steinbeck relies heavily on dialogue as a technique for both plot development and indirect characterization. What the reader knows of Jim's background before he joins the Party comes out in his conversations with Harry Nilson and Mac, and this background information helps the reader understand the motivation behind Jim's ready embrace of service to the Party. The opinions Mac shares with Jim at various points in the story about what direction he thinks the strike will take not only give insight into Mac's character but also foreshadow events and create tension in the narrative. The alternating use of dialogue and narration helps to pace the story and keep it flowing smoothly.

Steinbeck's choices in regard to diction serve both to create a sense of realism in setting and characters and to develop character. The imagery in his language, for example, makes it easy for readers to feel what it is like to be in the nighttime orchard with Jim and Mac and Burton as they talk. Mac's chameleon-like nature is reflected in his language; "You imitate any speech you're taking part in," Burton tells him.

Structure

Although the strike and its progress seem to drive the plot, the true focus of the novel from beginning to end is Jim and his maturation from boy to man. The story starts in the rooming house with Jim preparing to abandon his old life and start a new one, and it ends on the platform in the strikers' camp where Mac has propped up Jim's corpse and is about to use it to rally the workers for still one more round of resistance. Within that framework, Jim changes from a young man drowning in hopelessness and loneliness to a man committed to a purpose and confident in his own power. "… I'm not lonely any more, and I can't be licked," he tells Burton, "because I'm more than myself."

The climaxes of the strike itself and of Jim's transformation are reached almost simultaneously. With the burning of Anderson's barn and the inevitable eviction of the strikers from his land that is to follow, all realistic hope of success for the strike comes to an end. Jim's assertion of his newfound strength occurs several pages later in the same chapter.

By ending the novel with Mac's unfinished sentence as he attempts to rally the workers yet again, Steinbeck seems symbolically to echo both the ultimate unattainability of final victory and the unfinished nature of the battle to win it nonetheless.

Quotes

I feel dead. Everything in the past is gone. I checked out of my rooming house before I came here. ... I don't want to go back to any of it again. I want to be finished with it. (Chapter 1)

I don't mind getting smacked on the chin. I just don't want to get nibbled to death. There's a difference. (Chapter 4)

… there's just one rule—use whatever material you've got. (Chapter 4)

Don't you go liking people, Jim. We can't waste time liking people. (Chapter 6)

People have said, 'mobs are crazy, you can't tell what they'll do.' Why don't people look at mobs not as men, but as mobs? A mob nearly always seems to act reasonable, for a mob. (Chapter 8)

The thing will carry on and on. It'll spread, and some day—it'll work. Some day we'll win. We've got to believe that. (Chapter 8)

Don't feel sorry for Joy. If he could know what he did, he'd be cocky. Joy always wanted to lead people, and now he's going to do it, even if he's in a box. (Chapter 9)

Guy after guy gets knocked into our side by a cop's night stick. Every time they maul hell out of a bunch of men, we get a flock of applications. Why, there's a Red Squad cop in Los Angeles that sends us more members than a dozen of our organizers. (Chapter 11)

Y'ought to think only of the end, Doc. Out of all this struggle a good thing is going to grow. That makes it worthwhile. (Chapter 13)

… In my little experience the end is never very different in its nature from the means. … you can only build a violent thing with violence. (Chapter 13)

It's an important job. You get a hell of a drive out of something that has some meaning to it …. The thing that takes the heart out of a man is work that doesn't lead any place. (Chapter 13)

Comrades! He didn't want nothing for himself— (Chapter 15)

Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

In a letter to a friend, quoted in the introduction to some editions of the novel, Steinbeck said that he did not want to champion any particular viewpoint in the book, but rather that he “wanted to be merely a recording consciousness, judging nothing, simply putting down the thing.” Discuss how successful you think he was in maintaining this kind of objectivity toward his subject matter.

Topic 2

Some critics have argued that the characters of In Dubious Battle are flat and lack complexity. Discuss whether you agree or disagree with this assessment. Which characters would you classify as flat and which as round? What techniques does Steinbeck use to develop the characters?

Topic 3

One of the themes developed in the novel is the idea of group man. Jim longs to be part of a group and eventually finds purpose and power in being a member of the Party. Discuss the role of group man versus the role of the individual in society. Is one more important than the other? Are both needed for society to be functional? Is conflict between the group and the individual inevitable?

Topic 4

Primarily through the characters of Jim, Mac, and Burton, Steinbeck presents opposing opinions about the Communist party and its role in the labor movement. Discuss the views expressed by each of these characters. Which of them do you think most probably represents the view of Steinbeck himself?

Topic 5

Discuss the role of Doc Burton in the story. If there were no doctor to oversee sanitary conditions, the health officials would have an excuse for closing down the camp, but what other functions does Burton also serve in the novel?

Topic 6

Discuss how Jim’s character changes throughout the course of the novel. What is he like in the beginning of the story? What events influence his growth as the story progresses? At the end of the novel, how is he different?

Topic 7

Interspersed within the narrative and dialogue are occasional passages of almost lyrical beauty, such as the long paragraph in Chapter 4 in which Jim watches the countryside rolling by beyond the door of the boxcar before the train reaches Wilson. What effect do you think these passages have on the book?