


*John Steinbeck,
the Good Companion*

HIS FRIEND DOOK'S MEMOIR

Carlton A. Sheffield

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There are beautiful things ahead. I wonder if you know why I address this manuscript to you. You are the only person in the world who believes I can do what I set out to do. Not even I believe that all the time. And so, in a kind of gratitude I address all my writings to you, whether or not you know it.

—John Steinbeck to Carlton (“Dook”) Sheffield
Dedication of *To a God Unknown* from Dook’s *Ledger*, 1933

Part 1:

Roommates at Stanford

Sometime in the late fall of 1919, during the beginning of my freshman year at Stanford University, I became aware of a large, quiet freshman classmate. We were enrolled in a class in elementary French, and beyond the fact that I knew his name was Steinbeck and that he seemed unhappy when called upon to recite, I knew nothing about him. We nodded when we met, and once in a while exchanged pungent views on the absurdities of French grammar and pronunciation, but that was about the extent of our acquaintanceship, though we both lived in Encina Hall, the huge old dormitory now almost exclusively occupied by administration.

He was seventeen years old, almost eighteen, then, and looked a little older. His hair was dark and curly, and the way it was clipped high and close around his temples emphasized the height of his forehead, the breadth of this face at the cheekbones and its length down to the heavy, bluntly tapering chin. He had thick lips; his ears seemed to stick out at a slight angle; his nose was large, broad, and rather shapeless. In general, his expression was serious and

Where the shack once stood, along with the large late-Victorian house to which it belonged, now rises a huge apartment house—Palo Alto's first multi-story building, and the hovel in which genius was germinating is long gone.)

While he was living there, a girl came down from San Francisco to spend the weekend with him, heedless of the cramped quarters. But, as they were lustily fornicating during the second afternoon, a knock sounded at the door. Quickly, John peered through a crack and then hurried his scantily clad visitor into the dust and cobwebs beneath the cot, tossing her clothes and other signs of her presence after her. Then he opened the door.

The caller was Mrs. Price of Palo Alto, owner and operator of Fallen Leaf Lodge near Lake Tahoe, for whom John had worked during a previous summer. She wanted to discuss his possible employment there during the coming vacation, as well as certain personal matters relating to the prospective marriage of her daughter Frances to John's friend, Toby Street. Mrs. Price liked Toby, as did everyone, but she was not quite sure that he was possessed of the high moral character that she would have wished, and that Frances, with her careful training, would expect and deserve. He was frequently very unconventional in behavior and attitudes, his language was often unrestrained, and there was reason to believe that he sometimes drank. What did John think about it?

John had quite a few things to think about as he sat on his chair and she on the cot, beneath which lay the half-dressed Girl, shrinking from the spider webs and covering her nose to keep herself from sneezing as dust showered down with every movement above her. It was warm, and perspiration trickled down her face and shoulders. John was perspiring too, for Mrs. Price was a rigid moralist, particularly with regard to relationships between young men and women. Almost as many employees had been discharged from the Lodge for sexual reasons as for liquor, which, beside being wrong, was illegal. Even a suspicion of the hidden guest might have permanently eliminated John as a future worker at Mrs. Price's pleasant summer resort. It might also have constituted another black

mark against Toby, whose contamination by association would have been held against him.

The discussion went on for almost an hour, and by the time Mrs. Price had gathered her skirts and gone, the girl was almost dead. Streaked with the mud of dust plus perspiration, wreathed in cobwebs, and matted with dirt and floor debris where she had lain prone for so long, she emerged painfully from her hiding place. She was a spirited lass who was proud of the way she had gone through the ordeal without a revealing sneeze or cough, without a gasp at the heat or the crawling things, and her chief indignation was at Mrs. Price, at whose conversation and questions she had been hard put to restrain chuckles. The most painful part, was that every time Mrs. Price changed position, the weight of her posterior pressed the springs into the tender back below.

Mrs. Price never learned that she had perched for an hour only an inch or two over the body of an abandoned woman—*flagrante interruptu*—though she later came to the unhappy conclusion that Steinbeck was not a person of the highest moral standards.



I have no accurate information about the number of summers that John spent at Fallen leaf and nearby Tahoe. He worked at the Lodge during parts of one or two years, and at other times for several other people in the lake area—mending fences, cutting wood, making roads, clearing brush, performing minor carpentry and painting, and such other tasks as are requisite to summer resorts and mountain estates. One of his principal employers was Mrs. Alice Brigham, who owned a huge area with a long stretch of Tahoe lake front at the south end, and a mountain acreage which included at least two smaller lakes. It was here that John came to spend the winter of 1927-28 as custodian and to start serious writing on his first published book, *The Cup of Gold*.

Nor do I remember the steps that led up to his decision in 1925 to go to New York. An uncle, Joe Hamilton, had an advertising

concentrating on something he was writing or preparing to write, and was not pleased by the interruption. Nor were the girl's opening questions well chosen—things like “How do you get your ideas?” and “What have you written so far?”

Carol went in the house to get her a cup of coffee while John started doing a magnificent con job. “Blood sacrifice,” he told her, “that's what the world needs to purify and rededicate itself.” While the girl listened and scribbled on her pad, he embroidered the subject with mystical and pseudo-religious overtones, doubtless tintured with some of the concepts in the newly published book. The world is full of sin, he said, and expiation can be gained only by purging it with a flow of redeeming blood. He quoted from what he said was the Bible and from *The Golden Bough*. Carol reported that it was a superior performance.

I regret that I never got to see the story when it appeared in the paper. But again, according to Carol, it pulled out all the stops and was impressive. An earthquake kept me from reading it. My wife and I had started on March 10 for Laguna to visit the Steinbecks, but as we stopped briefly at my mother's apartment in Long Beach, the severe quake struck, wrecking buildings, killing numbers of people, and blocking roads, so we returned to Eagle Rock to see if our house was still standing. It was undamaged.

In the ledger which contains the holographic text of *God Unknown* and *The Pastures of Heaven* there are many notes squeezed into the margins, for the most part directed to me.¹⁴ They at least reveal some of the things he was thinking as he wrote, as well as one entertaining bit of jubilant humor that deserves to be salvaged. Just when he gave me the ledger I do not remember. It was probably in 1933 or 1934, but the notes reveal that he had been planning the gift for some time. When Maryon and I separated in June, 1933, I may already have received it, for at some time after that, I took it for safe-keeping to my mother's apartment in Long Beach, where it stayed, almost forgotten, until Mother's death in 1945, when my sister found it and returned it to me.

The book consists of 300 numbered pages with 38 lines per page; and the writing, ranging from small to minute, averages from

ten to more than twenty words per line. Written on the fly page is a rough index of the contents, listing the eleven narratives of *The Pastures* in the order in which they were written: *Helen Van Deventer and Daughter*, *The Maltby*, *The Lopez Sisters*, *The Deserted Farm*, *Miss Morgan*, *Discovery*, *Tularecito*, *Shark Wicks*, *Raymond Banks*, *John White-side and House*, and *Pat Humbert*.¹⁵

At the foot of the fly leaf is a faint, penciled line: "With foot-notes to Dook," which was probably the last thing written in the volume, since the idea of giving it to me and of including progressive notes as the work proceeded apparently came just before John made the beginning of the *God Unknown*.

Immediately after the Pat Humbert story on page 114 is a long penciled note occupying most of page 115:

To Dook

When I bought this book and began to fill it with words it occurred to me that you might like to have it when it was full. You have that instinct so highly developed in magpies, pack rats, and collectors. If this were a blank book, you would probably like it better. I can imagine you keeping a book blank because of your hatred of change. In spite of all this, I should like you to have this book and my reasons are all sentimental, and therefore, of course unmentionable. I love you very much. I have never been able to give you a present that cost any money. It occurs to me that you might accept a present that cost me a hell of a lot of work. For I do not write easily. Three hours of writing requires twenty hours of preparation. Luckily I have learned to dream about the work, which saves me some working time.

What I wanted to say was this. Up to this page the stories are the best I can do at the present time. Now the series is through and I am going to take two months vacation. In that time I shall try six or seven short stories, light, amusing, restful. I may even try to sell some of them, and if I do, it will be under a mom [sic] de plume. So I'm asking you to keep quiet and mouselike about the stories which follow this. I'll make a note when the ban is off.

Steinbeck was immensely important to Sheffield as well: the latter "in many ways defined his self-worth by virtue of that friendship." Blum is strangely perhaps even inappropriately critical of Sheffield, suggesting he is "flat," emotionless and even envious of Steinbeck's success, while "bitter" about his own failures. In the memoir itself, however, Sheffield successfully sublimates any alleged bitterness, instead providing us with a lively, honest account of an important, influential friendship that lasted, on and off, for close to 50 year. Sheffield's