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# Grapes of War

John Steinbeck

Darius and Parysatis had two sons born to them, of whom the elder was Artaxerxes and the younger Cyrus. Now, when Darius lay sick and suspected the end of his life was near, he wished to have both his sons with him.

As simple as that begins the "Up-Country March," and remains so throughout. Written by the first man of letters to march with an army, the taut lines of Xenophon's Anabasis have baffled, then awed, generations of Greek students. Xenophon fought for Cyrus in Asia Minor, and did the first—some think the finest—war reporting.

Last week, 2,344 years later, another ranking man of letters had gone to the wars. At first glance the comparison looked strange, for John Steinbeck, under contract to The New York Herald Tribune, was hardly Xenophon. Yet the first Steinbeck prose from England, the often-written story of a trip by convoy, was baffling to part of the American Fourth Estate, wordy and corny in the judgment of others, and deathless prose to the rest. As uninhibited as the harsh old Greek, with no tremolo of names or addresses, Steinbeck led off with:

The troops in their thousands sit on their equipment on the dock. It is evening, and the first of the dimout lights come on. The men wear their helmets, which make them all look alike, make them look like long rows of mushrooms. Their rifles are leaning against their knees.

War reporting was Steinbeck's own idea. Several months ago, as dinner guests in his East 50s Manhattan apartment, he had Lewis Gannett, Herald Tribune literary critic and friend, and Gannett's wife, who illustrated his "Tortilla Flat." Restless after the Army refused to enlist him on finishing "Bombs Away" for the Air Forces, Steinbeck asked help in doing the next best.

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Gannett interceded with Wilbur Forrest, The Tribune's assistant editor, who lost no time getting Steinbeck's proposal down in black and white. An admirer of Steinbeck prose, he was equally taken by the man. (At 42 Steinbeck is hickory-tough, weighs a lean 200, and without his mustache looks more than ever like any one of his own hard-bitten Western working stiffs.) To Forrest he offered his services for a nominal sum, and with no fuss agreed to syndication of 500 to 1,000 words a day (he actually writes from 2,000 to 3,000), and in return was given carte blanche to write as he pleased and to move around at will. Steinbeck had come a long way from the time, seventeen years ago, when he was fired from The New York American, and next helped build the present Madison Square Garden by carrying a bricklayer's hod.

It took The Herald Tribune two frantic months to clear him with the Army for crossing to England on a transport. In London he settled in the Savoy but found the place "a madhouse, with people drinking and talking too much," and moved to a small apartment in Athenaeum Court. After the flurry of being met by Brendan Bracken, British Minister of Information who started him on his way getting his credentials checked, his first week was spent evading magazine editors hunting interviews.

In the midst of planning hopefully for future operational plane flights and submarine trips ("I'm no braver than the next man, but I figure I've got to know things firsthand"), he was invited to the opening of his play, "The Moon Is Down," also to the same in movie form with King Haakon of Norway in attendance. The first was news to him, and he didn't go. As for the second, he declined to commit himself, saying there was no telling where he would be one day from the next. His fellow correspondents, like his new bosses, were impressed. They found that Steinbeck's cold gray eyes didn't miss a trick, that with scarcely any note-taking he soaked up information like a sponge, wrote very on a portable typewriter, and became h~ wire if interrupted.

Harry Staton, in charge of The Hearld Tribune's syndicated matter, was jubilant over his paper's find. Sight unseen 40 leading newspapers, including a Hearst Group covering Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Seattle, and San Antonio, had signed up. The Australian Consolidated Press tied in for Australia and New Zealand, and five Central and South American papers followed suit. Wide British Isles distribution was in the works, with Beaverbrook's 3,000,000-circulation Daily Express already printing Steinbeck. In the United States only Oklahoma, still indignant about "Grapes of Wrath" notoriety, had hedged.

Steinbeck announced he would stick to

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war as it bears down on submarine cook and plain dogface in the slit trench. So far he had consorted but seldom with anyone higher than staff-sergeant rank. This at once evoked comparison with the Scripps-Howard ace, Ernie Pyle (NEWSWEEK, Feb. 15), who by setting the same precedent in less than a year had jumped his clientele from 41 to 133 newspapers.

But after a week it became apparent that Steinbeck's and Pyle's ideas of human interest could not honestly be set off against each other. The author showed no sign of laying aside his rich 'cello for a grab at Ernie's concertina. Writing anything but chattily in the third person, present tense, with much detail he drove home the soldier's loss of personality, the monotony of war life, the grim strain of challenging death on a systematic basis. Where Pyle sketched with swift, random strokes, Steinbeck used a careful buildup:

> An odor rises from the men, the characteristic odor of an army. It is the smell of wool and the bitter smell of fatigue and the smell of gun oil and leather. Troops always have this odor. The men lie sprawled, some with their mouths open, but they do not snore. Perhaps they are too tired to snore, but their breathing is an audible, pulsing thing.

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