

***In Dubious Battle* (1936)**

John Steinbeck

OVERVIEW

In Dubious Battle is set in the fictional Torgas Valley, California, during the Great Depression. The storyline revolves around young Jim Nolan's political apprenticeship with Mac McLeod, an experienced member of the Party (whose affiliation is not specified in the novel) that organizes various social unrest movements all over the country against the low pay and precarious living conditions of the working class. Mac and Jim travel to the Torgas Valley to organize the apple pickers in a union to protest against the pay cuts. Foreseeing the authorities' ruthless retaliation against their action, Mac convinces Anderson, an old farm owner, to allow the strikers to set camp on his private property. The conflict gradually escalates, and Jim is shot dead in an ambush.

LITERARY/HISTORICAL NOTES

In Dubious Battle is regarded as Steinbeck's first major novel. The social and political themes addressed in it aroused controversy, and made some critics describe it as "proletarian" and even suggest that the author used his fictional work to express his sympathy with the Communist Party. The time when the novel was published was one of social unrest, with social campaigns such as novelist Upton Sinclair's EPIC (End Poverty in California) and brutal interventions by the police to break up strikes. As American industries struggled to recover, large numbers of workers had to move to rural areas in order to support their families.

In his correspondence with one of his friends in the 1930s, Steinbeck objected to his being associated with the Communists, and explained that he had no interest in "strikes as a means of raising men's wages", or "in ranting about justice and oppression", but that his aim was "to be merely a recording consciousness". He insisted that his predilection was for "fantasy" and "the metaphysical". He became extremely interested in the theory of "the phalanxes", about which he had heard in a lecture at Stanford. In a letter to George Albee in 1933, Steinbeck remarks that the human race "has qualities which the individual lacks entirely", in other words, once an individual becomes part of "a moving phalanx, his nature changes, his habits and desires". As the author has it, the novel has three layers: "surface story, group-psychological structure and philosophical conclusion". The "battle" is "dubious" not because of the uncertainty of its outcome, but rather because that kind of "struggle should never have occurred at all".

In Dubious Battle was adapted for the big screen in 2016.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Jim Nolan	Jim is a young man who joins the Party and becomes Mac's mentee.
Mac McLeod	Mac is a senior member of the Party, and the brain behind strikers' union and actions.
London	London is one of the two leading figures who lead their groups in the protests.
Dakin	Dakin is the second leading figure, who gathers his people in a union to join the pickers' protest.
Joy	Joy is a veteran protestor, who has been beaten up severely and arrested several times during protests.

Dick Dick is a good-looking young man, who charms women for money and food to support the Party's cause.

Doctor Burton Doc Burton has no political affiliation but joins the strikers' camp for humanitarian reasons.

Lisa Lisa is London's daughter-in-law.

Bolter A rich land owner who negotiates a strike agreement with London.

PLOT

The membership application Jim Nolan goes to meet Harry Nilson who explains to him that his Party membership application will be considered carefully by the committee. Jim feels the Party will give him a purpose to live.

Meeting Mac Harry writes a long report about Jim for the party's committee. Harry takes Jim to a cottage in a district of old houses and introduces him to Mac, and then leaves. Jim gets to meet the other men present there, Dick and Joy.

The plan Mac makes a plan of picketing the orchards in the Torgas Valley, and gets excited as he talks about what may happen if the incidents between the strikers and the "vigilantes" escalate. Mac tells Jim that his field work for the Party will begin in the orchard.

Getting to the Torgas Valley Jim and Mac take a train to the Torgas valley. Mac has a list of all the people in town who are willing to help the cause. As Jim is hungry, they go looking for Al's Lunch Wagon. Al is a sympathizer and offers Jim and Mac coffee and food for free. Mac finds out from Al that one of the groups of workers has set up camp by the river. Mac and Jim head towards the place.

The birth Mac asks for permission to sit with the men and throws around some hints to check out their feelings about the pay cuts. Mac hears a cry coming from the tent and the men tell him that London's daughter-in-law is in labor. Mac claims he has medical training in birth assistance and offers his help. Mac instructs London to call everyone to help. When the birth is successful, Mac and Jim retire in a "little cave" to rest. Mac admits to an excited Jim that he has never done that before and goes to sleep feeling good that "one night's work" got London's confidence.

The orchard meeting Jim is picking apples in the orchard when he meets Dan, an old picker. Dan reminisces about the times he was young and thought "something could be done", but how throughout the years, the leaders have betrayed the workers. Later on, Mac advises Jim not to waste his time talking to old men because he "will get converted to hopelessness".

Another leader London introduces Mac and Jim to Dakin. London has a private conversation with Dakin and suggests they organize some action. Dakin is a little reluctant thinking about his family but also about the police's reacting violently against the protesters. London eventually convinces him to talk to his people while he is going to do the same.

Rumors of strike Mac has a safety plan for the strike participants if they are kicked off the farms: they will camp on a private property that belongs to Al's father. Jim meets old Dan again while picking apples, and at some point, Dan falls off the ladder and breaks a hip. Seeing the broken old ladder, one of the men points and shouts "that's what they make us work on", which infuriates the people gathered around. Mac sees this as the right opportunity to "take charge".

Camp setting Mac instructs Sam, one of the strikers, to call everyone to a meeting and nominate London for chairman. Mac and Jim drive to town to convince to Al's father, old Anderson, to allow the strikers to camp on his plot. Dick and Doc Burton also arrive in Torgas. Mac asks Doc Burton to make sure that the camp is well-organized and sanitized to avoid any contagion. The superintendent of the orchard offers London a steady job and more money on condition that no further trouble is caused,

but without success. Later on, Jim gets shot in the shoulder as he and Mac have a narrow escape from being forcefully taken to the Vigilance Committee.

The strikebreakers' arrival Mac, London and Dakin decide to meet the strike breakers arriving the following day and convince them to join the strike. Joy gets killed as he gets off the train. After a clash between his men and the vigilantes, Dakin is arrested for assaulting a cop.

The funeral procession Joy's funeral is organized for the next day. Mac is worried about the looming rain which he sees as a threat to the men's morale. Mac and Doc go to Anderson's house to see Al, who is recovering after an attack by the vigilantes. When they return to the camp, they find Joy's coffin in London's tent, and Mac suggests London should use Joy's death in his speech to "steam up" his men. Meanwhile, the funeral procession starts. After a short speech, London invites Mac to tell the men more about Joy. Mac gives a passionate speech about Joy's sacrifice, which makes the crowd react "hungrily" for action.

Food to the camp On receiving Dick's note, Mac sends some men to collect livestock from a ranch. Mac is content that they now have food supplies to feed the campers. Doc Burton brings some food to Jim, puts on a new bandage and advises him to rest for the day.

Bolter's offer Bolter, the new president of the Fruit Growers' Association of the Torgas Valley, arrives at the camp in order to talk to London. Bolter tries to convince London to make his men return to work, but without success. Bolter leaves the camp saying that troops will be called, if necessary. After Bolter's departure, London speaks to the people. Doc Burton sees the entire situation as "meaningless" and "brutal", whereas Jim thinks that "all great things have violent beginnings". The sanitary supplies on camp are also running low.

The fire Old Anderson's barn is deliberately set on fire, which causes the loss of the entire crop. Sam decides to take revenge against a rich owner called Hunter, by setting his big white house on fire. Mac is worried about Doc, who has gone to see young Al and has not returned.

The interrogation One of the guards at Anderson's place brings a young but armed prisoner. Mac starts interrogating and then torturing the boy until he breaks down and admits to his participation, along with other friends, in the burning Anderson's place. London watches the entire scene "with horror" while Jim shows no sympathy, which he considers "as bad as fear".

A moment of radical change in Jim's behavior Jim has a sudden revelation of his inner strength and orders Mac to fetch London and tell him that he is in charge now. London rushes into the tent to give Jim and Mac the news of Sam's setting Hunter's house on fire. Jim talks to London in a very authoritative way and asks him to organize his men even against their will. Both London and Mac are confused by Jim's "screwy" attitude, but agree. Mac goes to town to post a cry-for-help letter for Harry.

Morale weakening Mac returns with the local newspaper, which has published an article that condemns the strikers and blames them for the latest burnings and violence. There is a growing feeling of exhaustion and discontent among the strikers. In town, a barricade has been set up and a group of men armed with guns and tear gas guard it. London's men are disheartened as they have but their bare hands "to fight with". Mac gets angry at "the hopelessness" that "hung in the air like a gas itself". Outside the tent, one of the workers menaces London with a hand rail and lays the blame on him for their situation, saying that it is time they had a new leader. In a fit of anger, London smashes the man to the ground.

The ambush Mac and Jim head very carefully towards Al's house. Al tells them that his father has called the sheriff to kick the strikers off his land for trespassing. Up the road, a huge truck pulls up in front of the camp and the sheriff gets out. The sheriff threatens London, saying that the police will intervene in force unless his men leave Anderson's property by daylight. London asks Mac for advice as he is afraid that a lot of innocent people will get shot, but Mac replies that "in a war a general knows he's going to lose men". Mac tells Jim to go away since he is one of the best members that the Party has had, but Jim refuses. The three men sit together thinking about what to do.

The set-up A young boy runs into the tent and says that there is an injured man who says he is a doctor and has been lying in the orchard all day. They follow him into the orchard where they suddenly hear a “roar”. Mac realizes it is an ambush and tells Jim to drop down, but Jim is shot dead. Mac carries the body to the camp, places the lantern nearby and starts talking to the people, referring to Jim’s death as a reason for them not to give up the fight.

THEMES

Violence A recurrent theme in the novel is violence. The characters’ lives are marred by violence, and they are either victims or witnesses of brutal acts, such as beatings, burnings, torture and lynching. From a very young age, Jim has experienced a home “always filled with...beaten, vicious anger”, which eventually ruins his family. His father, a well-known protester gets killed by the police, and his mum dies while Jim himself is mistaken for a protestor during a riot in Lincoln Square and sent to prison. In consequence, Jim will come to see violence as the only solution for the poor workers to fight for their social rights. In a polemical discussion with Doc Burton, Jim argues that “all great things have violent beginnings”. Jim’s mentor, Mac, shares a similar view when he says that “there’s nothing like a fight to cement the men together”.

Poverty Another major theme that is a trigger for the characters’ decision-making and belligerent action is poverty. The story events revolve around the time of the Great Depression, and poverty deeply affects all aspects of family and community life on both personal and social levels. It is the cause that underlies the fighting on both sides of the barricade: on the one side, the strikers want better wages and living/ working conditions, and, on the other side, the landowners are mainly interested in keeping their profits up. For example, Jim recollects the constant “fighting something – hunger mostly” at home, whereas in Mac’s view, the Torgas Valley strikers’ protest is actually “a revolution against hunger and cold”.

Hopelessness A sense of disheartenment regarding the futility of action pervades the entire world presented in the novel. There are instances when Jim gives voice to how “loneliness” has affected him as an individual, while Mac looks at it from a social standpoint and points to “millions of people with just that”. Mac pins his hope, however, on the very moments of loss and civilian casualties that will remain imprinted in the collective memory and will keep the fight for their rights going. He believes that the fight for the cause can be successful only if taken to a social level. When Jim tells him about his meeting old Dan, who no longer sees any point in protesting, Mac advises him to keep away from him as he regards Old Dan’s loss of hope as an individual attitude which [that] must be ignored for the social good to prevail.

Capitalism versus Socialism The capitalist views versus socialist ones represent another ever-present theme in the novel. The extreme conflict between these political ideologies is reflected in the often blood-soaked clashes between the workers and “the vigilantes” and the police force, but also in the characters’ beliefs. Mac’s actions, for example, reflect the Party’s politics. He always refers to the wider picture and sees any property or human loss as a stepping stone in winning the war. In his opinion, the capitalist system is “the beast” assaulting “the noble Party”. When London asks him if he is a radical “red”, Mac replies that radicalism is a matter of perspective. As he explains, the power in the valley belongs to a few people who would define any form of protest as radical and would do everything to maintain their wealth. As for “a working stiff” like London, Mac goes on to argue, the “reds” represent an opportunity to a decent life, “like a man, and not like a pig”. Conversely, from the rich owners’ perceptive, the strike is a radical action. Bolter describes it as an attack on “American ideals”. As he views it, “the American nation has become great because everyone pitched in and helped”. He cynically argues that they are all “in the same boat” and they have “to help each other”.

Group behavior Another major theme is group behavior. Doc Burton thinks that the group acts as a “new individual” rather than a collective of single men. In his words, “a man in a group” loses his identity and becomes “a cell in an organism that isn’t like him anymore”. The most vivid description of the gargantuan proportions that the group reaches is given by Jim after London’s smashing Burke to the ground. London’s impressive strength turns the curious crowd “into a quick, silent and deadly efficient machine”. Jim excitedly compares the crowd to “just one big animal”, which is “different from the men in it” and “stronger than all the men put together”, with a wish of its own.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Jim Jim is a quick-witted young man from a poor background. He has grown up in a brutal environment in which he has witnessed a lot of violence, poverty and loss. Jim is a philosophy aficionado in spite of his father's fears that reading is an intellectual activity that may alienate him from his people. As soon as he becomes a Party member, he commits himself entirely to supporting his mentor Mac and the cause.

Quick-witted Understanding how things go very quickly, Jim makes some shrewd observations that not only contribute to the cause effectively, but also impress his mentor, Mac. One notable example of this is when Mac has some trouble convincing Dakin to gather his men under his leadership and join the cause. Dakin is suspicious of Mac's plan of getting him involved in the strike and doubts the success of such action since his men will stand no chance against the armed forces guarding the newly arrived strike breakers. Eager to be helpful, Jim intervenes in the discussion and asks Dakin where he intends to go after the apple-picking season is over, to which the reply is "cotton". Jim confidently remarks that similar "cuts" will be made there, too, which inflames Dakin and makes him conclude that action should be taken. A little later, Mac praises Jim for being smart to bring up "that thing about that cotton".

Fearless During one of the clashes, Jim gets shot in the shoulder, but this neither scares him nor makes him reconsider his position despite Mac's later insisting on his leaving the camp as soon as things get out of control. Right after Mac has brutally beaten up a teenage prisoner, a member of the gang who has set old Anderson's barn on fire, Jim reveals his most fearless attitude based on his absolute commitment to the cause. He suddenly takes an authoritarian tone and orders Mac to bring London in as he has now taken over the leadership. With "his young face... carved" and "his eyes motionless", Jim urges London to accept that "he'll put the orders through him" since he has lacked the skills to manage the situation properly. Confused by Jim's "screw" attitude, London, however, proceeds as instructed.

Unsympathetic Growing up in an extremely violent environment, Jim shows no sympathy for those who oppose the cause. After the teenage prisoner beating, Mac himself is troubled by Jim's cruelty. At the same time, he acknowledges that he has been terrified by his mentee's lack of sympathy and inhuman "cold thought": "You're hard-boiled. You just looked. You didn't give a damn, Jim". Jim calmly responds that "sympathy is as bad as fear" and depersonalizes the young prisoner as "a danger to the cause" and not a "scared kid". He reassures Mac that he just did "a job" that involved "no hate, no feeling".

Mac A long-serving and loyal member of the Party, Mac is a leading figure whose only aim is to serve the cause regardless of the consequences on individual lives. Mac skillfully orchestrates the entire plot in the Torgas Valley strike, and spots the right people to help him with that. When his plan goes awry, he continues to be blinded by political ideology and shows little sympathy or understanding for individual weaknesses. He insists on the strikers' fighting till the end even if they are not at all equipped in the face of an armed opposition.

Callous Mac often shows little concern for the human casualties and property destruction that his strike in the Torgas Valley generates. When old Anderson's barn is set on fire as punishment for his supporting the strikers, Mac views it as yet another opportunity to boost the strikers' morale and show them how far the "vigilantes" can go unless they remain united. One of the most illustrative examples of Mac's callous disregard for the dramatic consequences of the strike on people's lives occurs right after the sheriff comes to announce that the police will intervene in force if they do not leave Anderson's property by daylight. London turns to Mac for advice as he is afraid that a lot of innocent people will get shot. Mac, however, insists on London's mobilizing his men despite the fact that they have to fight the armed forces with their bare hands.

Opportunistic Mac loses no occasion to take advantage of any situation that may serve the cause in good stead. As soon as he arrives at the Torgas Valley, he judges the situation and people's character very quickly and takes immediate action. For example, sensing that London is the leader of the group, Mac claims that he has medical training and assists his daughter-in-law in giving birth in order to gain his trust. He then takes advantage of Al's sympathy with the party to get close to his father, old Anderson, whose property he has in mind for setting up the camp. He even makes use of the deaths of his friends, Joy and Jim, in his speeches to the strikers as a way of inspiring them to continue the

protest.

Allegiant Mac remains faithful to the Party's cause and beliefs at all costs throughout the whole story. During events when material damage or human losses occur, Mac keeps approaching matters from a larger perspective as he cannot "take time to think about the feelings of one man". Mac's unswerving faith in the cause, for instance, is most evident towards the end of the story when the strikers are summoned to leave old Anderson's plot and the police's response to any sign of insubordination is imminent. When Jim worries that the police will come through with guns and kill a lot of people, Mac's eyes grow "slitted and cold". Mac believes that the killings will help their side. He sees the immediate trouble as benefitting the cause on a national scale as his belief is that "for every man they kill ten new ones come over...The news goes creeping around the country and men all over hear it and get mad".

London London is "a large man" with "immense shoulders", who inspires respect and devotion from others without having officially been elected the leader of the group. Quite impulsive and with a mind of his own, he intervenes forcefully to tackle insubordination or denigration, gaining people's admiration for his strength. However, without realizing it, London gradually becomes Mac's bullhorn and makes the hard decisions by taking Mac's advice rather than following his own instincts.

Authoritative There is "a power of authority" about London, which makes his men follow him everywhere. London's commanding presence and ability to lead as "naturally as he breathed" make him a well-respected and trusted figure among his men. He is the one who also finds arguments to convince a reluctant Dakin to join and lead his group of men in the protest action. When some of the strikers start doubting his authority and actions, or when dealing with Bolter or the sheriff, London takes a dignified and imperturbable stance.

Level-headed Despite his quite impulsive nature, London remains sensible and brave even in the hardest moments when his men's safety is in danger. As the food supplies are running low, and the strikers are unarmed in their confrontations with the police, London realizes that, under such circumstances, the strike will bring about grave repercussions for his men. He starts doubting the decision to continue the protest. For instance, when Mac encourages him to make use of Joy's death to boost his men's morale, London feels that would be duplicitous as he did not know Joy, so he asks Mac to do it instead. Later, when the sheriff comes with Old Anderson's trespassing complaint, London insists on having the people vote if they want to continue to fight.

Suggestible In spite of his physical strength, innate leadership skills and flair, London lets himself be easily convinced by Mac's arguments for the dire necessity to organize his men to take action, and then he goes on with the strike irrespective of the consequences. He confronts Mac for being a "red radical" several times, but yet again Mac's skillful twist of words and subtle flattery make him believe that their action is justified. All throughout the events, London appears to make his own decisions and speak for himself, but, whenever in doubt or in very difficult times, he turns to Mac and Jim for advice.