

LBRIS

We know
books

John Steinbeck

East of Eden

PENGUIN BOOKS — GREAT STEINBECK

LBRIS

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books

Part One

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[I]

The Salinas Valley is in Northern California. It is a long narrow swale between two ranges of mountains, and the Salinas River winds and twists up the center until it falls at last into Monterey Bay.

I remember my childhood names for grasses and secret flowers. I remember where a toad may live and what time the birds awaken in the summer—and what trees and seasons smelled like—how people looked and walked and smelled even. The memory of odors is very rich.

I remember that the Gabilan Mountains to the east of the valley were light gay mountains full of sun and loveliness and a kind of invitation, so that you wanted to climb into their warm foothills almost as you want to climb into the lap of a beloved mother. They were beckoning mountains with a brown grass love. The Santa Lucias stood up against the sky to the west and kept the valley from the open sea, and they were dark and brooding—unfriendly and dangerous. I always found in myself a dread of west and a love of east. Where I ever got such an idea I cannot say, unless it could be that the morning came over the peaks of the Gabilans and the night drifted back from the ridges of the Santa Lucias. It may be that the birth and death of the day had some part in my feeling about the two ranges of mountains.

From both sides of the valley little streams slipped out of the hill canyons and fell into the bed of the Salinas River. In the

winter of wet years the streams ran full and fresh, and they swelled the river until sometimes it raged and boiled, bank full, and then it was a destroyer. The river tore the edges of the farm lands and washed whole acres down; it toppled barns and houses into itself, to go floating and bobbing away. It trapped cows and pigs and sheep and drowned them in its muddy brown water and carried them to the sea. Then when the late spring came, the river drew in from its edges and the sand banks appeared. And in the summer the river didn't run at all above ground. Some pools would be left in the deep swirl places under a high bank. The tules and grasses grew back, and willows straightened up with the flood debris in their upper branches. The Salinas was only a part-time river. The summer sun drove it underground. It was not a fine river at all, but it was the only one we had and so we boasted about it—how dangerous it was in a wet winter and how dry it was in a dry summer. You can boast about anything if it's all you have. Maybe the less you have, the more you are required to boast.

The floor of the Salinas Valley, between the ranges and below the foothills, is level because this valley used to be the bottom of a hundred-mile inlet from the sea. The river mouth at Moss Landing was centuries ago the entrance to this long inland water. Once, fifty miles down the valley, my father bored a well. The drill came up first with topsoil and then with gravel and then with white sea sand full of shells and even pieces of whale-bone. There were twenty feet of sand and then black earth again, and even a piece of redwood, that imperishable wood that does not rot. Before the inland sea the valley must have been a forest. And those things had happened right under our feet. And it seemed to me sometimes at night that I could feel both the sea and the redwood forest before it.

On the wide level acres of the valley the topsoil lay deep and fertile. It required only a rich winter of rain to make it break forth in grass and flowers. The spring flowers in a wet year were unbelievable. The whole valley floor, and the foothills too, would be carpeted with lupins and poppies. Once a woman told

me that colored flowers would seem more bright if you added a few white flowers to give the colors definition. Every petal of blue lupin is edged with white, so that a field of lupins is more blue than you can imagine. And mixed with these were splashes of California poppies. These too are of a burning color—not orange, not gold, but if pure gold were liquid and could raise a cream, that golden cream might be like the color of the poppies. When their season was over the yellow mustard came up and grew to a great height. When my grandfather came into the valley the mustard was so tall that a man on horseback showed only his head above the yellow flowers. On the uplands the grass would be strewn with buttercups, with hen-and-chickens, with black-centered yellow violets. And a little later in the season there would be red and yellow stands of Indian paint-brush. These were the flowers of the open places exposed to the sun.

Under the live oaks, shaded and dusky, the maidenhair flourished and gave a good smell, and under the mossy banks of the water courses whole clumps of five-fingered ferns and goldy-backs hung down. Then there were harebells, tiny lanterns, cream white and almost sinful looking, and these were so rare and magical that a child, finding one, felt singled out and special all day long.

When June came the grasses headed out and turned brown, and the hills turned a brown which was not brown but a gold and saffron and red—an indescribable color. And from then on until the next rains the earth dried and the streams stopped. Cracks appeared on the level ground. The Salinas River sank under its sand. The wind blew down the valley, picking up dust and straws, and grew stronger and harsher as it went south. It stopped in the evening. It was a rasping nervous wind, and the dust particles cut into a man's skin and burned his eyes. Men working in the fields wore goggles and tied handkerchiefs around their noses to keep the dirt out.

The valley land was deep and rich, but the foothills wore only a skin of topsoil no deeper than the grass roots; and the farther up the hills you went, the thinner grew the soil, with flints

sticking through, until at the brush line it was a kind of dry flinty gravel that reflected the hot sun blindingly.

I have spoken of the rich years when the rainfall was plentiful. But there were dry years too, and they put a terror on the valley. The water came in a thirty-year cycle. There would be five or six wet and wonderful years when there might be nineteen to twenty-five inches of rain, and the land would shout with grass. Then would come six or seven pretty good years of twelve to sixteen inches of rain. And then the dry years would come, and sometimes there would be only seven or eight inches of rain. The land dried up and the grasses headed out miserably a few inches high and great bare scabby places appeared in the valley. The live oaks got a crusty look and the sagebrush was gray. The land cracked and the springs dried up and the cattle listlessly nibbled dry twigs. Then the farmers and the ranchers would be filled with disgust for the Salinas Valley. The cows would grow thin and sometimes starve to death. People would have to haul water in barrels to their farms just for drinking. Some families would sell out for nearly nothing and move away. And it never failed that during the dry years the people forgot about the rich years, and during the wet years they lost all memory of the dry years. It was always that way.

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And that was the long Salinas Valley. Its history was like that of the rest of the state. First there were Indians, an inferior breed without energy, inventiveness, or culture, a people that lived on grubs and grasshoppers and shellfish, too lazy to hunt or fish. They ate what they could pick up and planted nothing. They pounded bitter acorns for flour. Even their warfare was a weary pantomime.

Then the hard, dry Spaniards came exploring through, greedy and realistic, and their greed was for gold or God. They collected souls as they collected jewels. They gathered mountains and

valleys, rivers and whole horizons, the way a man might now gain title to building lots. These tough, dried-up men moved restlessly up the coast and down. Some of them stayed on grants as large as principalities, given to them by Spanish kings who had not the faintest idea of the gift. These first owners lived in poor feudal settlements, and their cattle ranged freely and multiplied. Periodically the owners killed the cattle for their hides and tallow and left the meat to the vultures and coyotes.

When the Spaniards came they had to give everything they saw a name. This is the first duty of any explorer—a duty and a privilege. You must name a thing before you can note it on your hand-drawn map. Of course they were religious people, and the men who could read and write, who kept the records and drew the maps, were the tough untiring priests who traveled with the soldiers. Thus the first names of places were saints' names or religious holidays celebrated at stopping places. There are many saints, but they are not inexhaustible, so that we find repetitions in the first namings. We have San Miguel, St. Michael, San Ardo, San Bernardo, San Benito, San Lorenzo, San Carlos, San Francisquito. And then the holidays—Natividad, the Nativity; Nacimiento, the Birth; Soledad, the Solitude. But places were also named from the way the expedition felt at the time: Buena Esperanza, good hope; Buena Vista because the view was beautiful; and Chualar because it was pretty. The descriptive names followed: Paso de los Robles because of the oak trees; Los Laureles for the laurels; Tularcitos because of the reeds in the swamp; and Salinas for the alkali which was white as salt.

Then places were named for animals and birds seen—Gabilanes for the hawks which flew in those mountains; Topo for the mole; Los Gatos for the wild cats. The suggestions sometimes came from the nature of the place itself: Tassajara, a cup and saucer; Laguna Seca, a dry lake; Corral de Tierra for a fence of earth; Paraiso because it was like Heaven.

Then the Americans came—more greedy because there were more of them. They took the lands, remade the laws to make their titles good. And farmholds spread over the land, first

in the valleys and then up the foothill slopes, small wooden houses roofed with redwood shakes, corrals of split poles. Wherever a trickle of water came out of the ground a house sprang up and a family began to grow and multiply. Cuttings of red geraniums and rosebushes were planted in the dooryards. Wheel tracks of buckboards replaced the trails, and fields of corn and barley and wheat squared out of the yellow mustard. Every ten miles along the traveled routes a general store and blacksmith shop happened, and these became the nuclei of little towns, Bradley, King City, Greenfield.

The Americans had a greater tendency to name places for people than had the Spanish. After the valleys were settled the names of places refer more to things which happened there, and these to me are the most fascinating of all names because each name suggests a story that has been forgotten. I think of Bolsa Nueva, a new purse; Morocojo, a lame Moor (who was he and how did he get there?); Wild Horse Canyon and Mustang Grade and Shirt Tail Canyon. The names of places carry a charge of the people who named them, reverent or irreverent, descriptive, either poetic or disparaging. You can name anything San Lorenzo, but Shirt Tail Canyon or the Lame Moor is something quite different.

The wind whistled over the settlements in the afternoon, and the farmers began to set out mile-long windbreaks of eucalyptus to keep the plowed topsoil from blowing away. And this is about the way the Salinas Valley was when my grandfather brought his wife and settled in the foothills to the east of King City.

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I must depend on hearsay, on old photographs, on stories told, and on memories which are hazy and mixed with fable in trying to tell you about the Hamiltons. They were not eminent people, and there are few records concerning them except for the usual papers on birth, marriage, land ownership, and death.

Young Samuel Hamilton came from the north of Ireland and so did his wife. He was the son of small farmers, neither rich nor poor, who had lived on one landhold and in one stone house for many hundreds of years. The Hamiltons managed to be remarkably well educated and well read; and, as is so often true in that green country, they were connected and related to very great people and very small people, so that one cousin might be a baronet and another cousin a beggar. And of course they were descended from the ancient kings of Ireland, as every Irishman is.

Why Samuel left the stone house and the green acres of his ancestors I do not know. He was never a political man, so it is not likely a charge of rebellion drove him out, and he was scrupulously honest, which eliminates the police as prime movers. There was a whisper—not even a rumor but rather an unsaid feeling—in my family that it was love drove him out, and not love of the wife he married. But whether it was too successful love or whether he left in pique at unsuccessful love, I do not know. We always preferred to think it was the former. Samuel

had good looks and charm and gaiety. It is hard to imagine that any country Irish girl refused him.

He came to the Salinas Valley full-blown and hearty, full of inventions and energy. His eyes were very blue, and when he was tired one of them wandered outward a little. He was a big man but delicate in a way. In the dusty business of ranching he seemed always immaculate. His hands were clever. He was a good blacksmith and carpenter and woodcarver, and he could improvise anything with bits of wood and metal. He was forever inventing a new way of doing an old thing and doing it better and quicker, but he never in his whole life had any talent for making money. Other men who had the talent took Samuel's tricks and sold them and grew rich, but Samuel barely made wages all his life.

I don't know what directed his steps toward the Salinas Valley. It was an unlikely place for a man from a green country to come to, but he came about thirty years before the turn of the century and he brought with him his tiny Irish wife, a tight hard little woman humorless as a chicken. She had a dour Presbyterian mind and a code of morals that pinned down and beat the brains out of nearly everything that was pleasant to do.

I do not know where Samuel met her, how he wooed her, married. I think there must have been some other girl printed somewhere in his heart, for he was a man of love and his wife was not a woman to show her feelings. And in spite of this, in all the years from his youth to his death in the Salinas Valley, there was no hint that Samuel ever went to any other woman.

When Samuel and Liza came to the Salinas Valley all the level land was taken, the rich bottoms, the little fertile creases in the hills, the forests, but there was still marginal land to be homesteaded, and in the barren hills, to the east of what is now King City, Samuel Hamilton homesteaded.

He followed the usual practice. He took a quarter-section for himself and a quarter-section for his wife, and since she was pregnant he took a quarter-section for the child. Over the years nine children were born, four boys and five girls, and with each birth

another quarter-section was added to the ranch, and that makes eleven quarter-sections, or seventeen hundred and sixty acres.

If the land had been any good the Hamiltons would have been rich people. But the acres were harsh and dry. There were no springs, and the crust of topsoil was so thin that the flinty bones stuck through. Even the sagebrush struggled to exist, and the oaks were dwarfed from lack of moisture. Even in reasonably good years there was so little feed that the cattle kept thin running about looking for enough to eat. From their barren hills the Hamiltons could look down to the west and see the richness of the bottom land and the greenness around the Salinas River.

Samuel built his house with his own hands, and he built a barn and a blacksmith shop. He found quite soon that even if he had ten thousand acres of hill country he could not make a living on the bony soil without water. His clever hands built a well-boring rig, and he bored wells on the lands of luckier men. He invented and built a threshing machine and moved through the bottom farms in harvest time, threshing the grain his own farm would not raise. And in his shop he sharpened plows and mended harrows and welded broken axles and shod horses. Men from all over the district brought him tools to mend and to improve. Besides, they loved to hear Samuel talk of the world and its thinking, of the poetry and philosophy that were going on outside the Salinas Valley. He had a rich deep voice, good both in song and in speech, and while he had no brogue there was a rise and a lilt and a cadence to his talk that made it sound sweet in the ears of the taciturn farmers from the valley bottom. They brought whisky too, and out of sight of the kitchen window and the disapproving eye of Mrs. Hamilton they took hot nips from the bottle and nibbled cuds of green wild anise to cover the whisky breath. It was a bad day when three or four men were not standing around the forge, listening to Samuel's hammer and his talk. They called him a comical genius and carried his stories carefully home, and they wondered at how the stories spilled out on the way, for they never sounded the same repeated in their own kitchens.

Samuel should have been rich from his well rig and his threshing machine and his shop, but he had no gift for business. His customers, always pressed for money, promised payment after harvest, and then after Christmas, and then after—until at last they forgot it. Samuel had no gift for reminding them. And so the Hamiltons stayed poor.

The children came along as regularly as the years. The few overworked doctors of the county did not often get to the ranches for a birth unless the joy turned nightmare and went on for several days. Samuel Hamilton delivered all his own children and tied the cords neatly, spanked the bottoms and cleaned up the mess. When his youngest was born with some small obstruction and began to turn black, Samuel put his mouth against the baby's mouth and blew air in and sucked it out until the baby could take over for himself. Samuel's hands were so good and gentle that neighbors from twenty miles away would call on him to help with a birth. And he was equally good with mare, cow, or woman.

Samuel had a great black book on an available shelf and it had gold letters on the cover—*Dr. Gunn's Family Medicine*. Some pages were bent and beat up from use, and others were never opened to the light. To look through *Dr. Gunn* is to know the Hamiltons' medical history. These are the used sections—broken bones, cuts, bruises, mumps, measles, backache, scarlet fever, diphtheria, rheumatism, female complaints, hernia, and of course everything to do with pregnancy and the birth of children. The Hamiltons must have been either lucky or moral for the sections on gonorrhea and syphilis were never opened.

Samuel had no equal for soothing hysteria and bringing quiet to a frightened child. It was the sweetness of his tongue and the tenderness of his soul. And just as there was a cleanness about his body, so there was a cleanness in his thinking. Men coming to his blacksmith shop to talk and listen dropped their cursing for a while, not from any kind of restraint but automatically, as though this were not the place for it.

Samuel kept always a foreignness. Perhaps it was in the

cadence of his speech, and this had the effect of making men, and women too, tell him things they would not tell to relatives or close friends. His slight strangeness set him apart and made him safe as a repository.

Liza Hamilton was a very different kettle of Irish. Her head was small and round and it held small round convictions. She had a button nose and a hard little set-back chin, a gripping jaw set on its course even though the angels of God argued against it.

Liza was a good plain cook, and her house—it was always her house—was brushed and pummeled and washed. Bearing her children did not hold her back very much—two weeks at the most she had to be careful. She must have had a pelvic arch of whalebone, for she had big children one after the other.

Liza had a finely developed sense of sin. Idleness was a sin, and card playing, which was a kind of idleness to her. She was suspicious of fun whether it involved dancing or singing or even laughter. She felt that people having a good time were wide open to the devil. And this was a shame, for Samuel was a laughing man, but I guess Samuel was wide open to the devil. His wife protected him whenever she could.

She wore her hair always pulled tight back and bunned behind in a hard knot. And since I can't remember how she dressed, it must have been that she wore clothes that matched herself exactly. She had no spark of humor and only occasionally a blade of cutting wit. She frightened her grandchildren because she had no weakness. She suffered bravely and uncomplainingly through life, convinced that that was the way her God wanted everyone to live. She felt that rewards came later.

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When people first came to the West, particularly from the owned and fought-over farmlets of Europe, and saw so much land to be had for the signing of a paper and the building of a

foundation, an itching land-greed seemed to come over them. They wanted more and more land—good land if possible, but land anyway. Perhaps they had filaments of memory of feudal Europe where great families became and remained great because they owned things. The early settlers took up land they didn't need and couldn't use; they took up worthless land just to own it. And all proportions changed. A man who might have been well-to-do on ten acres in Europe was rat-poor on two thousand in California.

It wasn't very long until all the land in the barren hills near King City and San Ardo was taken up, and ragged families were scattered through the hills, trying their best to scratch a living from the thin flinty soil. They and the coyotes lived clever, despairing, submarginal lives. They landed with no money, no equipment, no tools, no credit, and particularly with no knowledge of the new country and no technique for using it. I don't know whether it was a divine stupidity or a great faith that let them do it. Surely such venture is nearly gone from the world. And the families did survive and grow. They had a tool or a weapon that is also nearly gone, or perhaps it is only dormant for a while. It is argued that because they believed thoroughly in a just, moral God they could put their faith there and let the smaller securities take care of themselves. But I think that because they trusted themselves and respected themselves as individuals, because they knew beyond doubt that they were valuable and potentially moral units—because of this they could give God their own courage and dignity and then receive it back. Such things have disappeared perhaps because men do not trust themselves any more, and when that happens there is nothing left except perhaps to find some strong sure man, even though he may be wrong, and to dangle from his coattails.

While many people came to the Salinas Valley penniless, there were others who, having sold out somewhere else, arrived with money to start a new life. These usually bought land, but good land, and built their houses of planed lumber and had carpets and colored-glass diamond panes in their windows. There

were numbers of these families and they got the good land of the valley and cleared the yellow mustard away and planted wheat.

Such a man was Adam Trask.