

# *The Raid*

**John Steinbeck**

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# The Raid

BY JOHN STEINBECK

*A Story*

It was dark in the little California town when the two men stepped from the lunch car and strode arrogantly through the back streets. The air was full of the sweet smell of fermenting fruit from the packing plants. High over the corners, blue arc lights swung in the wind and put moving shadows of telephone wires on the ground. The old wooden buildings were silent and resting. The dirty windows dismally reflected the street lights.

The two men were about the same size, but one was much older than the other. Their hair was cropped, they wore blue jeans. The older man had on a peajacket, while the younger wore a blue turtle-neck sweater. As they swung down the dark street, footsteps echoed back loudly from the wooden buildings. The younger man began to whistle *Come to Me My Melancholy Baby*. He stopped abruptly. "I wish that damn tune would get out of my head. It's been going all day. It's an old tune, too."

His companion turned toward him. "You're scared, Root. Tell the truth. You're scared as hell."

They were passing under one of the blue street lights. Root's face put on its toughest look, the eyes squinted, the mouth went crooked and bitter. "No, I ain't scared." They were out of the light. His face relaxed again. "I wish I knew the ropes better. You been out before, Dick. You know what to expect. But I ain't ever been out."

"The way to learn is to do," Dick quoted sententiously. "You never really learn nothing from books."

They crossed a railroad track. A block tower up the line a little was starred with green lights. "It's awful dark," said Root. "I wonder if the moon will come up later. Usually does when it's so dark. You going to make the first speech, Dick?"

"No, you make it. I had more experience than you. I'll watch them while you talk and then I can smack them where I know they bite. Know what you're going to say?"

“Sure I do. I got it all in my head, every word. I wrote it out and learned it. I heard guys tell how they got up and couldn’t think of a thing to say, and then all of a sudden they just started in like it was somebody else, and the words came out like water out of a hydrant. Big Mike Sheane said it was like that with him. But I wasn’t taking no chances, so I wrote it out.”

A train hooted mournfully, and in a moment it rounded a bend and pushed its terrible light down the track. The lighted coaches rattled past. Dick turned to watch it go by. “Not many people on that one,” he said with satisfaction. “Didn’t you say your old man worked on the railroad?”

Root tried to keep the bitterness out of his voice. “Sure, he works on the road. He’s a brakeman. He kicked me out when he found out what I was doing. He was scared he’d lose his job. He couldn’t see. I talked to him, but he just couldn’t see. He kicked me right out.” Root’s voice was lonely. Suddenly he realized how he had weakened and how he sounded homesick. “That’s the trouble with them,” he went on harshly. “They can’t see beyond their jobs. They can’t see what’s happening to them. They hang on to their chains.”

“Save it,” said Dick. “That’s good stuff. Is that part of your speech?”

“No, but I guess I’ll put it in if you say it’s good.”

The street lights were fewer now. A line of locust trees grew along the road, for the town was beginning to thin and the country took control. Along the unpaved road there were a few little houses with ill-kept gardens.

“Jesus! It’s dark,” Root said again. “I wonder if there’ll be any trouble. It’s a good night to get away if anything happens.”

Dick snorted into the collar of his peajacket. They walked along in silence for awhile.

“Do you think you’d try to get away, Dick?” Root asked.

“No, by God! It’s against orders. If anything happens we got to stick. You’re just a kid. I guess you’d run if I let you!”

Root blustered: “You think you’re hell on wheels just because you been out a few times. You’d think you was a hundred to hear you talk.”

“I’m dry behind the ears, anyway,” said Dick.

Root walked with his head down. He said softly, “Dick, are you sure you wouldn’t run? Are you sure you could just stand there and take it?”

“Of course I’m sure. I’ve done it before. It’s the orders, ain’t it? Why, it’s good publicity.” He peered through the darkness at Root. “What makes you ask, kid? You scared you’ll run? If you’re scared you got no business here.”

Root shivered. “Listen, Dick, you’re a good guy. You won’t tell nobody what I say, will you? I never been tried. How do I know what I’ll do if somebody smacks me in the face with a club? How can anybody tell what he’d do? I don’t think I’d run. I’d try not to run.”

“All right, kid. Let it go at that. But you try running, and I’ll turn your name in. We got no place for yellow bastards. You remember that, kid.”

“Oh, lay off that kid stuff. You’re running that in the ground.”

The locust trees grew closer together as they went. The wind rustled gently in the leaves. A dog growled in one of the yards as the men went by. A light fog began to drift down through the air, and the stars were swallowed in it. “You sure you got everything ready?” Dick asked. “Got the lamps? Got the lit’ature? I left all that to you.”

“I did it all this afternoon,” said Root. “I didn’t put the posters up yet, but I got them in a box out there.”

“Got oil in the lamps?”

“They had plenty in. Say, Dick, I guess some bastard has squealed, don’t you?”

“Sure. Somebody always squeals.”

“Well you didn’t hear nothing about no raid, did you?”

“How the hell would I hear. You think they’d come and tell me they was going to knock my can off? Get hold of yourself, Root. You got the pants scared off you. You’re going to make me nervous if you don’t cut it out.”

## II

They approached a low, square building, black and heavy in the darkness. Their feet pounded on a wooden sidewalk. “Nobody here, yet,” said Dick. “Let’s open her up and get some light.” They had come to a deserted store. The old show windows were obscure with dirt. A Lucky Strike poster was stuck to the glass on one side while a big cardboard Coca-Cola lady stood like a ghost in the other. Dick threw open the double doors and walked in. He struck a match and lighted a kerosene lamp, got the

chimney back in place, and set the lamp on an up-ended apple box. “Come on, Root, we got to get things ready.”

The walls of the building were scabrous with streaked whitewash. A pile of dusty newspapers had been kicked into a corner. The two back windows were laced with cobwebs. Except for three apple boxes, there was nothing at all in the store.

Root walked to one of the boxes and took out a large poster bearing a portrait of a man done in harsh reds and blacks. He tacked the portrait to the whitewashed wall behind the lamp. Then he tacked another poster beside it, a large red symbol on a white background. Last he up-ended another apple box and piled leaflets and little paper-bound books on it. His footsteps were loud on the bare wooden floor. “Light the other lamp, Dick! It’s too damned dark in here.”

“Scared of the dark, too, kid?”

“No. The men will be here pretty soon. We want to have more light when they come. What time is it?”

Dick looked at his watch. “Quarter to eight. Some of the guys ought to be here pretty soon now.” He put his hands in the breast pockets of his peajacket and stood loosely by the box of pamphlets. There was nothing to sit on. The black and red portrait stared harshly out at the room. Root leaned against the wall.

The light from one of the lamps yellowed, and the flame sank slowly down. Dick stepped over to it. “I thought you said there was plenty of oil. This one’s dry.”

“I thought there was plenty. Look! The other one’s nearly full. We can pour some of that oil in this lamp.”

“How we going to do that? We got to put them both out to pour the oil. You got any matches?”

Root felt through his pockets. “Only two.”

“Now, you see? We got to hold this meeting with only one lamp. I should of looked things over this afternoon. I was busy in town, though. I thought I could leave it to you.”

“Maybe we could quick pour some of this oil in a can and then pour it into the other lamp.”

“Yeah, and then set the joint on fire. You’re a hell of a helper.”

Root leaned back against the wall again. "I wish they'd come. What time is it, Dick?"

"Five after eight."

"Well, what's keeping them? What are they waiting for? Did you tell them eight o'clock?"

"Oh! Shut up, kid. You'll get my goat pretty soon. I don't know what's keeping them. Maybe they got cold feet. Now shut up for a little while." He dug his hands into the pockets of his jacket again. "Got a cigarette, Root?"

"No."

It was very still. Nearer the centre of the town, automobiles were moving; the mutter of their engines and an occasional horn sounded. A dog barked unexcitedly at one of the houses nearby. The wind ruffled the locust trees in whishing gusts.

"Listen, Dick! Do you hear voices? I think they're coming." They turned their heads and strained to listen.

"I don't hear nothing. You just thought you heard it."

Root walked to one of the dirty windows and looked out. Coming back, he paused at the pile of pamphlets and straightened them neatly. "What time is it now, Dick?"

"Keep still, will you? You'll drive me nuts. You got to have guts for this job. For God's sake show some guts."

"Well, I never been out before, Dick."

"Do you think anybody couldn't tell that? You sure make it plain enough."

The wind gusted sharply in the locust trees. The front doors clicked and one of them opened slowly, squeaking a little at the hinges. The breeze came in, ruffled the pile of dusty newspapers in the corner and sailed the posters out from the wall like curtains.

"Shut that door, Root!—No, leave it open. Then we can hear them coming better." He looked at his watch. "It's nearly half-past eight."

"Do you think they'll come? How long we going to wait, if they don't show up?"

The older man stared at the open door. "We ain't going to leave here before nine-thirty at the earliest. We got orders to hold this meeting."

The night sounds came in more clearly through the open door—the dance of dry locust leaves on the road, the slow steady barking of the dog. On the wall the red and black portrait was menacing in the dim light. It floated out at the bottom again. Dick looked around at it. “Listen, kid,” he said quietly. “I know you’re scared. When you’re scared, just take a look at him.” He indicated the picture with his thumb. “He wasn’t scared. Just remember about what he did.”

The boy considered the portrait. “You suppose he wasn’t ever scared?”

Dick reprimanded him sharply. “If he was, nobody ever found out about it. You take that for a lesson and don’t go opening up for everybody to show them how you feel.”

“You’re a good guy, Dick. I don’t know what I’ll do when I get sent out alone.”

“You’ll be all right, kid. You got stuff in you. I can tell that. You just never been under fire.”

Root glanced quickly at the door. “Listen! You hear somebody coming?”

“Lay off that stuff! When they get here, they’ll get here.”

“Well—let’s close the door. It’s kind of cold in here. Listen! There is somebody coming.”

Quick footsteps sounded on the road, broke into a run and crossed the wooden sidewalk. A man in overalls and a painter’s cap ran into the room. He was panting and winded. “You guys better scram,” he said. “There’s a raiding party coming. None of the guys is coming to the meeting. They was going to let you take it, but I wouldn’t do that. Come on! Get your stuff together and get out. That party’s on the way.”

Root’s face was pale and tight. He looked nervously at Dick. The older man shivered. He thrust his hands into his breast pockets and slumped his shoulders. “Thanks,” he said. “Thanks for telling us. You run along. We’ll be all right.”

“The others was just going to leave you take it,” the man said.

Dick nodded. “Sure, they can’t see the future. They can’t see beyond their nose. Run along now before you get caught.”

“Well, ain’t you guys coming? I’ll help carry some of your stuff.”

“We’re going to stay,” Dick said woodenly. “We got orders to stay. We got to take it.”



The man was moving toward the door. He turned back. “Want me to stay with you?”

“No, you’re a good guy. No need for you to stay. We could maybe use you some other time.”

“Well, I did what I could.”

### III

Dick and Root heard him cross the wooden sidewalk and trot off into the darkness. The night resumed its sounds. The dead leaves scraped along the ground. The motors hummed from the centre of the town.

Root looked at Dick. He could see that the man’s fists were doubled up in his breast pockets. The face muscles were stiff, but he smiled at the boy. The posters drifted out from the wall and settled back again.

“Scared, kid?”

Root bristled to deny it, and then gave it up. “Yes, I’m scared. Maybe I won’t be no good at this.”

“Take hold, kid!” Dick said fiercely. “You take hold!”

“Well, tell me why we got to take it, Dick. I know, but I want to hear again. I want to hear you say it.”

Dick quoted to him, “‘The men of little spirit must have an example of stead—steadfastness. The people at large must have an example of injustice.’ There it is, Root. That’s orders.” He relapsed to silence. The barking dog increased his tempo.

“I guess that’s them,” said Root. “Will they kill us, do you think?”

“No, they don’t very often kill anybody.”

“But they’ll hit us and kick us, won’t they? They’ll hit us in the face with sticks and break our nose. Big Mike, they broke his jaw in three places.”

“Take hold, kid! You take hold! And listen to me; if some one busts you, it isn’t him that’s doing it, it’s the System. And it isn’t you he’s busting. He’s taking a crack at the Principle. Can you remember that?”

“I don’t want to run, Dick. Honest to God I don’t. If I start to run, you hold me, will you?”

Dick walked near and touched him on the shoulder. “You’ll be all right. I can tell a guy that will stick.”

“Well, hadn’t we better hide the lit’ature so it won’t all get burned?”

“No—somebody might put a book in his pocket and read it later. Then it would be doing some good. Leave the books there. And shut up now! Talking only makes it worse.”

The dog had gone back to his slow, spiritless barking. A rush of wind brought a scurry of dead leaves in the open door. The portrait poster blew out and came loose at one corner. Root walked over and pinned it back. Somewhere in the town, an automobile squealed its brakes.

“Hear anything, Dick? Hear them coming yet?”

“No.”

“Listen, Dick. Big Mike lay two days with his jaw broke before anybody’d help him.”

The older man turned angrily on him. One doubled fist came out of his peajacket pocket. His eyes narrowed as he looked at the boy. He walked close and put an arm about his shoulders. “Listen to me close, kid,” he said. “I don’t know much, but I been through this mill before. I can tell you this for sure. When it comes—it won’t hurt. I don’t know why, but it won’t. Even if they kill you it won’t hurt.” He dropped his arm and moved toward the front door. He looked out and listened in two directions before he came back into the room.

“Hear anything?”

“No. Not a thing.”

“What—do you think is keeping them?”

“How do you suppose I’d know?”

Root swallowed thickly. “Maybe they won’t come. Maybe it was all a lie that fella told us, just a joke.”

“Maybe.”

“Well, are—we going to wait all night to get our cans knocked off?”

Dick mimicked him. “Yes, we’re going to wait all night to get our cans knocked off.”

The wind sounded in one big fierce gust and then dropped away completely. The dog stopped barking. A train screamed for the crossing and went crashing by, leaving the night more silent than before. In a house nearby, an alarm clock went off. Dick said, "Somebody goes to work early. Night watchman, maybe." His voice was too loud in the stillness. The front door squeaked slowly shut.

"What time is it now, Dick?"

"Quarter past nine."

"Jesus! Only that? I thought it was about morning.—Don't you wish they'd come and get it over, Dick? Listen, Dick!—I thought I heard voices."

They stood stiffly, listening. Their heads were bent forward. "You hear voices, Dick?"

"I think so. Like they're talking low."

The dog barked again, fiercely this time. A little quiet murmur of voices could be heard. "Look, Dick! I thought I saw somebody out the back window."

The older man chuckled uneasily. "That's so we can't get away. They got the place surrounded. Take hold, kid! They're coming now. Remember about it's not them, it's the System."

There came a rushing clatter of footsteps. The doors burst open. A crowd of men thronged in, roughly dressed men, wearing black hats. They carried clubs and sticks in their hands. Dick and Root stood erect, their chins out, their eyes drooped and nearly closed.

Once inside, the raiders were uneasy. They stood in a half-circle about the two men, scowling, waiting for some one to move.

Young Root glanced sidewise at Dick and saw that the older man was looking at him coldly, critically, as though he judged his deportment. Root shoved his trembling hands in his pockets. He forced himself forward. His voice was shrill with fright. "Comrades," he shouted. "You're just men like we are. We're all brothers—" A piece of two-by-four lashed out and struck him on the side of the head with a fleshy thump. Root went down to his knees and steadied himself with his hands.

The men stood still, glaring.

Root climbed slowly to his feet. His split ear spilled a red stream down his neck. The side of his face was mushy and purple. He got himself erect

again. His breath burst passionately. His hands were steady now, his voice sure and strong. His eyes were hot with an ecstasy. "Can't you see?" he shouted. "It's all for you. We're doing it for you. All of it. You don't know what you're doing."

"Kill the red rats!"

Some one giggled hysterically. And then the wave came.

As he went down, Root caught a moment's glimpse of Dick's face smiling a tight, hard smile.

#### IV

He came near the surface several times, but didn't quite make it into consciousness. At last he opened his eyes and knew things. His face and head were heavy with bandages. He could only see a line of light between his puffed eyelids. For a time he lay, trying to think his way out. Then he heard Dick's voice near to him.

"You awake, kid?"

Root tried his voice and found that it croaked pretty badly. "I guess so."

"They sure worked out on your head. I thought you was gone. You was right about your nose. It ain't going to be very pretty."

"What'd they do to you, Dick?"

"Oh, they bust my arm and a couple of ribs. You got to learn to turn your face down to the ground. That saves your eyes." He paused and drew a careful breath. "Hurts some to breathe when you got a rib bust. We was lucky. The cops picked us up and took us in."

"Are we in jail, Dick?"

"Yeah! Hospital cell."

"What they got on the book?"

He heard Dick try to chuckle, and gasp when it hurt him. "Inciting to riot. We'll get six months I guess. The cops got the lit'ature."

"You won't tell them I'm under age, will you, Dick?"

"No. I won't. You better shut up. Your voice don't sound so hot. Take it easy."

Root lay silent, muffled in a coat of dull pain. But in a moment he spoke again. "It didn't hurt, Dick. It was funny. I felt all full up—and good."

“You done fine, kid. You done as good as anybody I ever seen. I’ll give you a blow to the committee. You just done fine.”

Root struggled to get something straight in his head. “When they was busting me I wanted to tell them I didn’t care.”

“Sure, kid. That’s what I told you. It wasn’t them. It was the System. You don’t want to hate them. They don’t know no better.”

Root spoke drowsily. The pain was muffling him under. “You remember in the Bible, Dick, how it says something like ‘Forgive them because they don’t know what they’re doing’?”

Dick’s reply was stern. “You lay off that religion stuff, kid.” He quoted, “ ‘Religion is the opium of the people.’ ”

“Sure, I know,” said Root. “But there wasn’t no religion to it. It was just—I felt like saying that. It was just kind of the way I felt.”

THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Raid* by John Steinbeck]