

6-The Bear Of All Time

John sold “Baby” in Los Angeles, and we travelled back to New York by train. We had a stateroom, and we would not have dear Willie with us at the beginning because of the law about pets walking on trains. John and my stepfather hunted around and found a cage; the largest they could find was adequate for a miniature poodle but not for a ninety-pound sheepdog! Four days before we left, we taught Willie how to back into his cage. Poor Willie went to the luggage car, but when we were moving John had the porter bring Willie to our room. He wasn’t about to make his dog’s life uncomfortable. The journey was without any of the incidents that followed John, and we arrived back in New York. His agent, Elizabeth Otis, suggested an apartment hotel on the East side facing the Hudson River. We moved in. It had a small kitchen where John could make his morning coffee without having to get dressed. In that small apartment John started on *Lifeboat*, the story of survivors from a torpedoed ship.

Lifeboat was the result of World War I pilot-hero Eddie Rickenbacker’s experience of being shot down and spending three weeks in a life raft in the Pacific Ocean, before he was rescued in November, 1942. John was absolutely intrigued by the story. After the rescue, he interviewed Eddie Rickenbacker and another survivor Hans Christian Adamson in hospital. The more he thought about it, the more he wanted to write something about it. At first, he thought he would write an article, for a magazine, but the idea grew and grew in his mind until he decided he would really write something, tell the story as a piece of literature. He did, but was dissatisfied with it. It wasn’t full enough for him. He discussed it with Annie Laurie Williams, his trusted theatrical agent who took care of all his movie and play sales. From his discussions with Annie there evolved the idea for the movie, *Lifeboat*. Once that was decided John could, as a fictionalist, insert various characters and build the story.

Alfred Hitchcock heard about it and came to see John. They discussed the idea of a movie; the outcome was to be a joint venture. John was used to working alone all his life, and he found it very difficult to write a movie script with another person. John had his own ideas, and they were very definite ones. He was a determined man while Alfred Hitchcock was a powerful man, in his way. They made quite a combination. John did like the casting of the film, yet they were far from comfortable days to live with. I used to get out of the apartment and walk Willie or visit a friend, or just do something, anything, because the tension between John and Hitchcock was great. At the end of a workday, John was really depleted, very nervous and usually very, very cranky.

During the writing of the *Lifeboat* script, John decided he wanted to live in New York City again, and told me to start looking for a larger apartment. While out walking Willie I saw a “For Rent” sign not too far from Katharine Cornell, the actress’ house, and not too far from William Shirer’s, the author of “Berlin Diary.” John liked to visit Shirer when he wasn’t working. The apartment was two blocks from our apartment hotel; it was a duplex with a garden. It was quite run down, but I took John to see it. “I love it. Let’s do it all over, take it, and when I get through work I can fix up the garden so it will be beautiful,” he said. We took the apartment at 330 East 51st Street, and I began furnishing it while John continued with Hitchcock and *Lifeboat*.

When the script was finished naturally there was no problem in placing it, and *Lifeboat* was filmed in North Hollywood, California. John did fly out to see part of the shooting, but, according to John, Hitchcock had taken out his little pen and began rewriting. John was madder than hell; it turned him into the bear of all time. He would not go to see the film, and didn’t attend the premiere. I saw *Lifeboat* and liked it, but in my time I don’t believe John saw it.

John was very impressed with John Hodiak; that was the movie that made him. Originally, John wanted Constance Bennett to play the part that Tallulah Bankhead did. He wanted the woman to be hard and sophisticated, and he thought Constance was the answer. I thought Tallulah did a fantastic job. John later saw Tallulah and told her he'd seen some of the rushes, and he praised her for her performance. *Lifeboat* received mixed reviews, but as time went on, of course, it has become a classic. For its' time, in the early forties, it was a tremendous motion picture. Now it's one of those late, late shows on television, badly cut up so that it doesn't resemble anything like the *Lifeboat* John wrote and I saw. It could be Doris Day up the river for what was done with it.

John didn't particularly like writing for movies. He did enjoy working with Elia Kazan on *Zapata* which was after we divorced. For John, the only thing that ever really came close to what he had in mind on the screen was *Of Mice and Men* with Burgess Meredith, his friend, and Lon Chaney, Jr, and he liked *Medal for Benny* too.

He did not go to the opening of another of his classics, *Tortilla Flat*, but when he finally did see it he told me had to get up and walk out, especially when he saw the scene with Akim Tamiroff down on his knees in the forest with the heavenly shafts of light coming through the trees. He told me, "I had to leave or else I would have thrown up!" That was what he disliked about writing for the movies – people changing his creativity, pulling out all the stops and releasing the doves. That was one of the reasons he delayed for so long before he gave his permission to Raoul Levy to do *Cannery Row* in France in 1954. It was never made in his lifetime. So many people approached John to film *Cannery Row*," but he always turned them down. "I can't go through the same thing again," he told me, "I know what they'll do with the frog hunt, they'll wreck it!"

Yet John did like *Grapes of Wrath*. He had a tremendous respect for Henry Fonda as an actor and thought he did such a magnificent job in the film, which of course he did. Nobody could read Steinbeck the way Fonda could read it. He read him with such feeling, beautifully.

It drove John absolutely crazy when people took his work and sliced it up. He just could not stand it. He worked so hard, so damned hard; everything he had in him was poured into the work he was doing at the time, and when he finished he was mentally and physically and completely depleted because he simply worked like a thundering machine.