

## 8-Entrance of The Gladiators

The day of my marriage to John Steinbeck arrived. It was a foggy, chilly morning when I awoke. I had a crashing hangover, as did most of our friends. My mother – “Birdeyes,” as John called her, arrived in New Orleans and we moved into the hold Monteleone Hotel. We had taken a double suite, Mother and I in one room, John in the other. It was really silly having a double suite but it was going to be a very old fashioned marriage.

The groomsmen arrived for John about six forty-five and started feeding him Ramos Fizzes. John went to the bar with his pals Paul de Kruif, Clark Salmon and Howard Hunter, and they duly revived their spirits. In fact, they were overserved. About ten-thirty, John came to my room as I was trying to do my hair. Mother had my clothes laid out on the bed, including my trousseau, a simple little brown and white dress. “You better take care of things,” he said and put two ring boxes on the edge of the bed. I took them and put them in my purse. I was very nervous and shaking, why I don’t know. John went back to the bar. After he left, mother snapped at me, “For God’s sake stop crying and being nervous. You’ll get used to these marriages. I’m on my third!” I still cried. Maybe I cried because I was just so happy. Brides are supposed to be happy, anyway.

We took a taxi to a department store to pick up a wedding cake, and then we bought a record of Wagner’s *Lohengrin* the wedding march. Mother and Marge Hunter did the picking up, I stayed in the cab. We continued to Lyle Saxon’s home where twenty or so guests were waiting, absolutely pie-eyed. John was stoned, too. By now, the judge arrived, (he was tipsy), and I went to Marge’s bedroom to retouch my makeup. John came in and said, “You better give me the rings.” I opened my purse. His ring was there. Mine was gone.

“Oh my God!” I exclaimed, and went into hysterics. During my outburst and gushing of tears John remarked, “Well, I guess we weren’t supposed to be married.” The judge said he could still marry us; we simply would use one ring. John would put it on my finger, then I would take it off and put it on his. I was so nervous and upset that I sat on the toilet crying my heart out. My great day had finally arrived - and I had lost the ring.

Time for the ceremony. I didn’t want a bouquet but mother insisted, and so I carried a bouquet of yellow Calla lilies. After the “tragedy” of the rings came the comedy of the wedding march. Joe, the colored butler shared by the Hunters and Saxons, was supposed to play **the Lohengrin record when** John and I entered into the courtyard where the wedding took place. We made our entrance. Poor Joe put the record on Marge’s beautiful record player, the finest money could buy in those days. We did not hear the *Lohengrin* march. We heard the other side, twenty-eight bars of *The Entrance of the Gladiators*. That’s the music used in circuses. That was quite some scene. The guests sure straightened up as we walked to the makeshift altar. John broke up.

The music went through twenty-eight bars before Marge Hunter left my side and turned the record over. But then the damned needle broke! She dashed back, terribly embarrassed, and changed the needle.

Our first ceremony was in French, yet before the dear judge stopped to pause, I burst forth with “Oui.” The second ceremony was in English. Finally, it seemed like ages passed, the judge pronounced us man and wife. We kissed. I was now, legally, Mrs John Steinbeck on March 29, 1943.

The press was then allowed in. They asked me my age in between the picture taking. I said I was twenty-seven. Mother was upset at that. So what? I said I was twenty-seven because I was

trying to look older. You see, John had this phobia about our ages. He never said it outright, but I knew it. I was just trying to protect him because I knew many people thought, "Oh, for Christ's sake, what the hell, the old man marrying the young chick." I didn't care. John was then forty-one. Age meant nothing to me because I was so in love with the man, not his years. Age should never mean anything.

The ceremony over, the drinking resumed. It was, to say the least, a very drunken wedding. John and I were in the middle of cutting the cake when there was a great banging. All heads turned. What the hell was that? In burst several squads of police. They rushed over to John and handed him a summons for statutory rape! He God near fainted! He took it seriously. He turned deathly pale and began to splutter. That should have given me some indication as to his past! I think everyone has a little extra curricular activity in their life at some time or other, well, perhaps many do. I knew certainly John had. We recovered from the scare of the summons and continued to serve drinks. The gag had been beautifully timed. Paul de Kruif and Howard Hunter (witnesses to our marriage) had arranged that little piece through an old school pal of Howard's - the Sheriff.

By now, John was plastered and mad at me for losing the ring. I could understand that, but I had forgotten about it and thought the rape charge incident was hilarious.

Around four in the afternoon, everyone was just one side of passing out, and all the photographs had been taken and we were supposed to freshen up and take a siesta before the wedding dinner party at Antoine's. However, Mother and were stone cold sober, me because I had only had a couple of glasses of champagne and subconsciously guess I was still in a state of shock over losing the ring. John was by now in a sulking mood (he could get that way sometimes), and when we were back in our hotel he went to his room, and Mother and I went to ours. I took off my wedding dress and those awful war rayon stockings and took a bath. I lay down on the bed and cried my heart out. Suddenly, I said, "Mother, get Marge on the 'phone. I know where my wedding ring is."

"Marge, I know where my ring is. Go out the door, take five paces left and look in the gutter. That's where it is."

"Hang on," she said, "You're drunk." She went, and when she came back on the line, she said "I have your ring."

In those days whenever there was any kind of celebration in New Orleans, especially in the Old Quarter, there was always dozens of piccanninies around. The streets were unwashed and the gutters were dirty. When I had paid the cab driver on our shopping trip, the ring had fallen from my purse. The box had sprung open, and my ring had fallen in the gutter. Call it what you will, but I did have a vision of my ring lying in the gutter.

So, my wedding day nightmare turned into sunshine that beautiful Spring day, and John allowed me to sleep with him that night. I had been forgiven by the Great One. And he was a Great One.

That night, we continued the celebration at Antoine's where the de Kriufs gave us a dinner party. It was supposed to be a wedding supper, but, again, it turned out to be nothing but crepe suzettes and champagne. I just cannot eat that kind of food. All kinds of toasts were made. It's a Southern custom at a wedding that you buy a drink for anyone who comes in off the street. We had one of Antoine's private back rooms, but people kept coming in, and we kept giving them drinks. It just went on and on, and Marge kept telling the story of how I found my ring. Finally, it ended. John and I were back at our hotel around eleven o'clock.

We had hardly climbed into bed when the telephone rang. It was a lady, a lady called "M" calling from New York. John talked to her for an hour and a half. Lady "M" was a part of the office force of McIntosh and Otis, his agents. Obviously he knew her very well. After we moved back to New York I think John and Lady "M" had a "matinee" about three times a week, and I was still his wife. Let's put it this way, they were terribly cousiney. His conversation with Lady "M" finally ended and we made love. It is common knowledge that a man who has been drinking too much is not exactly the best thing in bed, and if I did not respond properly that night, it was not my fault. And that night it wasn't. But other nights and days were passionate as a couple coupling should have. And, as I had learned before my marriage, John did what he wanted to do.

We stayed in New Orleans for seven days, then went back to begin married life in New York. John, Mother and I went back to New York by train. John insisted that my mother come with us, why, I don't know, since he didn't like her.

And so, my wedding day was one to remember. It might not have appeared as the ideal wedding a girl dreams about, but I accepted it. At that time of my life, I was a very mild person, and I was so in love with John and he was in love with me. Everything was perfect as the three of us walked into the apartment on East 51<sup>st</sup> Street, but I did not know then that soon there would be packing again - only this time I would be left behind.

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