Film Review

# HOLLYWOOD TAKES A CHANCE AGAIN

## *Steinbeck's "Of Mice And Men"*

*"Mae's hair was so soft . . . and Lennie loved the feel of satin." The scene shows Betty Field, as Mae, the girl who wanted someone to talk to, and Burgess Meredith ("Winterset"), as George, who laid his plans for Lennie*

UPTON SINCLAIR publicly announced early this year that any laurel crown he had he would cheerfully see passed on to John Steinbeck. For those who have not read his books, and who are not familiar especially with the book from which the United Artists picture, "Of Mice and Men" takes its story, that should be sufficient introduction to Steinbeck. He is another American writer who applies the restraint of literary form to a passionate feeling for a great body of men and women gyrating hopelessly through the maze of industrialised social organisation.

Lennie, a pathetic character, but horrible in his pathos, is huge in body, lacking in brain. With no intelligence of his own to guide him in his encounters with more fragile fellow creatures, Lennie has to rely on George, a small man with a big heart who tramps the roads, sharing with Lennie the loneliness of all the outcasts spewed out by the machine age.

Dramatic as the possibilities of these two characters may be, Steinbeck had to be more than sympathetic in his portrayal of them. He had to avoid bathos and plain horror. He had to make this unusual situation typical of a case history for the class to which his book was dedicated. Sufficient to say that his art and his technique justified his conception.

But what would Hollywood do to a theme requiring such strong treatment as this, but such delicacy? Usually, the artificial perfection of the Hollywood technique automatically distorts anything it touches out of the true perspective of reality. Occasionally some director turns up game enough to forget about the star system and the love affairs of his leading lady — game enough to take a handful of people and make them forget to act, make them feel what they are doing, so that the audiences in their turn must feel the realism of their story. Often, this happens only because Hollywood has been trying to do something on the cheap. Success comes by accident, and is seldom properly appreciated, for the palates of movie fans are as dulled as the palates of radio listeners.

But this picture is throughout completely sincere and completely competent. It is shockingly realistic, but not blatantly horrific. Director Lewis Milestone had to tone down Steinbeck's sometimes crude use of the language of the lower depths to keep sweet with Will Hays, bogy of all enterprising producers. To replace this source of realism he has concentrated on action. His characters talk, but it is what they do that matters, and how the camera sees them.

It is George's best laid plan that he can control Lennie. But Lennie, simple, lovable almost, cannot be controlled. His instincts are animal instincts, and they are too much for him, although he breaks his heart to please George. When George's plans at last go finally astray, the climax comes naturally out of the situation so carefully built up.

Lennie's part, as a piece of acting, gives the picture to Lon Chaney junior. George, by Burgess Meredith, is good, and seems just right. Mae, the small town girl whose body is such an embarrassment to her jealous husband in an isolated community of men, is played by Betty Field, who does her job competently.

But the big jobs for this picture were the jobs of writing the book and directing the players and the camera. If readers like to be shaken out of the ordinary run of unreality, they should see what two men have been able to do when they know their jobs and when they work, for once, with people instead of names in neon lights.