Steinbeck

Sweet Thursday

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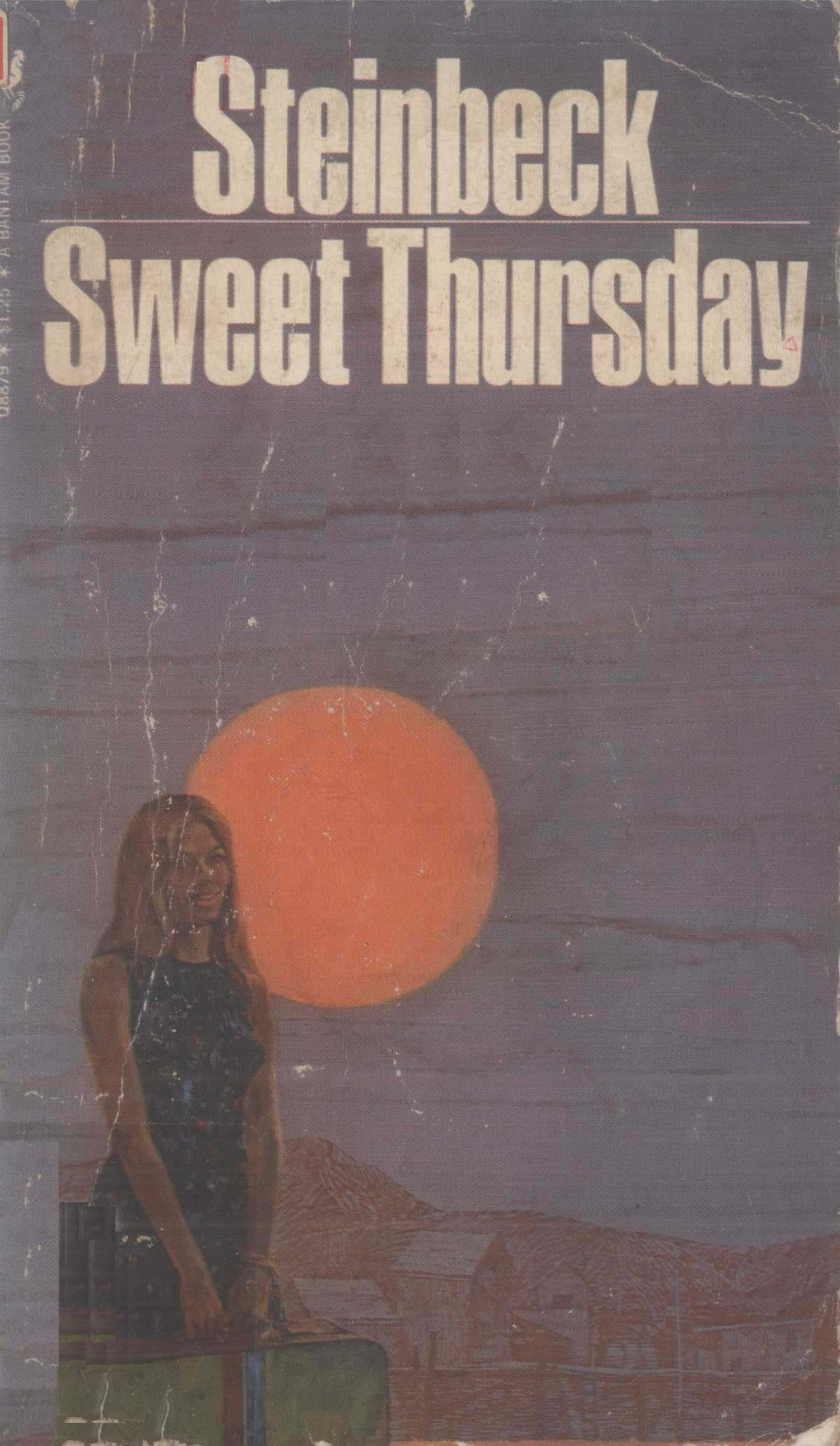

JOHN STEINBECK

is one of America's major writers. His work is closely identified with his native home, Salinas, California, and reveals his deep concern and love for humanity.

Although Steinbeck studied science at Stanford University and was an expert in marine biology, he never received a college degree. He preferred to travel widely and support himself at a variety of jobs while he continued to write.

John Steinbeck's books have received both popular and critical acclaim. He was one of the very few authors ever to win worldwide recognition during his own lifetime.

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SWEET THURSDAY
A Bantam Book / published by arrangement with The Viking Press, Inc.

PRINTING HISTORY
Viking edition published June 1954
2nd printing ..... June 1954
Book-of-the-Month Club edition published August 1954
Sears Readers Club edition published January 1955
Books Abridged edition published February 1955
Bantam edition published January 1956
2nd printing ..... January 1956 *3rd printing ... September 1956*
Bantam Classic edition published July 1961
5th printing ... September 1961 *9th printing .... January 1965*
6th printing ... December 1962 *10th printing ..... August 1966*
7th printing ..... March 1963 *11th printing .. September 1967*
8th printing ... September 1963 *12th printing ..... June 1968*
13th printing ..... May 1969
New Bantam Classic edition published March 1970
2nd printing ..... January 1971
Bantam edition published April 1972

4th printing
5th printing
6th printing
7th printing

Published simultaneously in the United States and Canada

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

for Elizabeth with love

Prologue

One night Mack lay back on his bed in the Palace Flophouse and he said, "I ain't never been satisfied with that book Cannery Row. *I would of went about it different."*

And after a while he rolled over and raised his head on his hand and he said, "I guess I'm just a critic. But if I ever come across the guy that wrote that book I could tell him a few things."

"Like what?" said Whitey No. 1.

"Well," said Mack, "like this here. Suppose there's chapter one, chapter two, chapter three. That's all right, as far as it goes, but I'd like to have a couple of words at the top so it tells me what the chapter's going to be about. Sometimes maybe I want to go back, and chapter five don't mean nothing to me. If there was just a couple of words I'd know that was the chapter I wanted to go back to."

"Go on," said Whitey No. 1.

"Well, I like a lot of talk in a book, and I don't like to have nobody tell me what the guy that's talking looks like. I want to figure out what he looks like from the way he talks. And another thing—I kind of like to figure out what the guy's thinking by what he says. I like some description too," he went on. "I like to know what color a thing is, how it smells and maybe how it looks, and maybe how a guy feels about it—but not too much of that."

"You sure are a critic," said Whitey No. 2. "Mack, I never give you credit before. Is that all?"

"No," said Mack. "Sometimes I want a book to break loose with a bunch of hooptedoodle. The guy's writing it, give him a chance to do a little hootedoodle. Spin up some pretty words maybe, or sing a little song with language. That's nice. But I wish it was set aside so I don't have to read it. I don't want hooptedoodle to get mixed up in the story. So if the guy that's writing it wants hooptedoodle, he ought to put it right at first. Then I can skip it if I want to, or maybe go back to it after I know how the story come out."

Eddie said, "Mack, if the guy that wrote Cannery Row *comes in, you going to tell him all that?"*

Whitey No. 2 said, "Hell, Mack can tell anybody anything. Why, Mack could tell a ghost how to haunt a house."

"You're damn right I could," said Mack, "and there wouldn't be no table-rapping or chains. There hasn't been no improvement in house-haunting in years. You're damn right I could, Whitey!" And he lay back and stared up at the canopy over his bed.

"I can see it now," said Mack.

"Ghosts?" Eddie asked.

"Hell, no," said Mack, "chapters. . . ."

Contents

1/ *What Happened in Between*

When the war came to Monterey and to Cannery Row everybody fought it more or less, in one way or another. When hostilities ceased everyone had his wounds.

The canneries themselves fought the war by getting the limit taken off fish and catching them all. It was done for patriotic reasons, but that didn't bring the fish back. As with the oysters in *Alice*, "They'd eaten every one." It was the same noble impulse that stripped the forests of the West and right now is pumping water out of California's earth faster than it can rain back in. When the desert comes, people will be sad; just as Cannery Row was sad when all the pilchards were caught and canned and eaten. The pearl-gray canneries of corrugated iron were silent and a pacing watchman was their only life. The street that once roared with trucks was quiet and empty.

Yes, the war got into everybody. Doc was drafted. He put a friend known as Old Jingleballicks in charge of Western Biological Laboratories and served out his time as a tech sergeant in a V. D. section.

Doc was philosophical about it. He whiled away his free hours with an unlimited supply of government alcohol, made many friends, and resisted promotion. When the war was over, Doc was kept on by a grateful government to straighten out certain inventory problems, a job he was fitted for since he had

contributed largely to the muck-up. Doc was honorably discharged two years after our victory.

He went back to Western Biological and forced open the water-logged door. Old Jingleballicks hadn't been there for years. Dust and mildew covered everything. There were dirty pots and pans in the sink. Instruments were rusted. The live-animal cages were empty.

Doc sat down in his old chair and a weight descended on him. He cursed Old Jingleballicks, savoring his quiet poisonous words, and then automatically he got up and walked across the silent street to Lee Chong's grocery for beer. A well-dressed man of Mexican appearance stood behind the counter, and only then did Doc remember that Lee Chong was gone.

"Beer," said Doc. "Two quarts."

"Coming up," said the Patrón.

"Is Mack around?"

"Sure. I guess so."

"Tell him I want to see him."

"Tell him who wants to see him?"

"Tell him Doc is back."

"Okay, Doc," said the Patrón. "This kind of beer all right?"

"Any kind of beer's all right," said Doc.

Doc and Mack sat late together in the laboratory. The beer lost its edge and a quart of Old Tennis Shoes took its place while Mack filled in the lost years.

Change was everywhere. People were gone, or changed, and that was almost like being gone. Names were mentioned sadly, even the names of the living. Gay was dead, killed by a piece of anti-aircraft fallback in London. He couldn't keep his nose out of the sky during a bombing. His wife easily remarried on his insurance, but at the Palace Flophouse they kept Gay's bed just as it was, before he went—a little shrine to Gay. No one was permitted to sit on Gay's bed.

And Mack told Doc how Whitey No. 1 took a job in a war plant in Oakland and broke his leg the sec-

ond day and spent three months in luxury. In his white hospital bed he learned to play rhythm harmonica, an accomplishment he enjoyed all the rest of his life.

Then there was the new Whitey, Whitey No. 2, and Mack was proud of him, for Whitey No. 2 had joined First Marines and gone out as a replacement. Someone, not Whitey No. 2, said he had won a Bronze Star, but if he had he'd lost it, so there was no proof. But he never forgave the Marine Corps for taking his prize away from him—a quart jar of ears pickled in brandy. He'd wanted to put that jar on the shelf over his bed, a memento of his service to his country.

Eddie had stayed on his job with Wide Ida at the Café La Ida. The medical examiner, when he looked at his check sheet and saw what was wrong with Eddie, came to the conclusion that Eddie had been technically dead for twelve years. But Eddie got around just the same, and what with the draft taking everybody away he very nearly became a permanent bartender for Wide Ida. Out of sentiment he emptied the wining jug into a series of little kegs, and when each keg was full he bunged it and buried it. Right now the Palace is the best-endowed flophouse in Monterey County.

Down about the middle of the first quart of Old Tennis Shoes, Mack told how Dora Flood had died in her sleep, leaving the Bear Flag bereft. Her girls were broken-hearted. They put on a lady-drunk that lasted three days, stuck a "Not Open for Business" sign on the door, but through the walls you could hear them doing honor to Dora in three-part harmony—"Rock of Ages," "Asleep in the Deep," and "St. James Infirmary." Those girls really mourned—they mourned like coyotes.

The Bear Flag was taken over by Dora's next of kin, an older sister who came down from San Francisco, where for some years she had been running a Midnight Mission on Howard Street, running it at a profit. She had been a silent partner all along and had dictated its unique practices and policies. For instance, Dora had wanted to name her place the Lone Star, because once in her youth she had spent a won-

derful weekend in Fort Worth. But her sister insisted that it be called the Bear Flag, in honor of California. She said if you were hustling a state you should do honor to that state. She didn't find her new profession very different from her old, and she thought of both as a public service. She read horoscopes and continued, after hours at least, to transform the Bear Flag into a kind of finishing school for girls. She was named Flora, but one time in the Mission a gentleman bum finished his soup and said, "Flora, you seem more a fauna-type to me."

"Say, I like that," she said. "Mind if I keep it?" And she did. She was Fauna ever afterward.

Now all this was sad enough, but there was a greater sadness that Mack kept putting off. He didn't want to get to it. And so he told Doc about Henri the painter.

Mack kind of blamed himself for Henri. Henri had built a boat, a perfect little boat with a nice stateroom. But he'd built it up in the woods, because he was afraid of the ocean. His boat sat on concrete blocks and Henri was happy there. One time, when there wasn't much else to do, Mack and the boys played a trick on him. They were bored. They went down to the sea rocks and chiseled off a sack of barnacles and took them up and glued them on the bottom of Henri's boat with quick-drying cement. Henri was pretty upset, particularly since he couldn't tell anybody about it. Doc could have reassured him, but Doc was in the Army. Henri scraped the bottom and painted it, but no sooner was the paint dry than the boys did it again, and stuck a little seaweed on too. They were terribly ashamed when they saw what happened. Henri sold his boat and left town within twenty-four hours. He could not shake the persistent and horrifying notion that the boat was going to sea while he was asleep.

And Mack told how Hazel had been in the Army too, although you couldn't get anybody to believe it. Hazel was in the Army long enough to qualify for the G.I. bill, and he enrolled at the University of Califor-

nia for training in astrophysics by making a check mark on an application. Three months later, when some of the confusion had died down, the college authorities discovered him. The Department of Psychology wanted to keep him, but it was against the law.

Hazel often wondered what it was that he had gone to study. He intended to ask Doc, but by the time Doc got back it had slipped his mind.

Doc poured out the last of the first bottle of Old Tennis Shoes, and he said, "You've talked about everything else. What happened to you, Mack?"

Mack said, "I just kind of stayed around and kept things in order."

Well, Mack had kept things in order, and he had discussed war with everybody he'd met. He called his war the Big War. That was the first one. After the war the atom-bomb tests interested him, in a Fourth-of-July kind of way. The huge reward the government offered for the discovery of new uranium deposits set off a chain reaction in Mack, and he bought a secondhand Geiger counter.

At the Monterey bus station the Geiger counter started buzzing and Mack went along with it—first to San Francisco, then to Marysville, Sacramento, Portland. Mack was so scientifically interested that he didn't notice the girl on the same bus. That is, he didn't notice her much. Well, one thing led to another, which was not unique in Mack's experience. The girl was taking the long way to Jacksonville, Florida. Mack would have left her in Tacoma if his Geiger counter hadn't throbbed him eastward. He got clear to Salina, Kansas, with the girl. On a hot muggy day the girl lunged at a fly on the bus and broke her watch, and only then did Mack discover that he had been following a radium dial. Romance alone was not enough for Mack at his age. He arrived back in Monterey on a flatcar, under a tarpaulin that covered a medium-sized tank destined for Fort Ord. Mack was very glad to get home. He had won a few dollars from a guard on the flatcar. He scrubbed out the Palace Flophouse and planted a row of morning glories

along the front, and he and Eddie got it ready for the returning heroes. They had quite a time when the heroes straggled back.

Over Doc and Mack a golden melancholy settled like autumn leaves, melancholy concocted equally of Old Tennis Shoes and old times, of friends lost and friends changed. And both of them knew they were avoiding one subject, telling minor stories to avoid a major one. But at last they were dry, and their subject confronted them.

Doc opened with considerable bravery. "What do you think of the new owner over at the grocery?"

"Oh, he's all right," said Mack. "King of interesting. The only trouble is he can't never take Lee Chong's place. There was never a friend like Lee Chong," Mack said brokenly.

"Yes, he was wise and good," said Doc.

"And tricky," said Mack.

"And smart," said Doc.

"He took care of a lot of people," said Mack.

"And he took a few," said Doc.

They volleyed Lee Chong back and forth, and their memories built virtues that would have surprised him, and cleverness and beauty too. While one told a fine tale of that mercantile Chinaman the other waited impatiently to top the story. Out of their memories there emerged a being scarcely human, a dragon of goodness and an angel of guile. In such a way are the gods created.

But the bottle was empty now, and its emptiness irritated Mack, and his irritation oozed toward Lee Chong's memory.

"The son-of-a-bitch was sneaky," said Mack. "He should of told us he was going to sell out and go away. It wasn't friendly, doing all that alone without his friends to help."

"Maybe that's what he was afraid of," said Doc. "Lee wrote to me about it. I couldn't advise him—I was too far away—so he was safe."

"You can't never find out what a Chink's got on his mind," said Mack. "Doc, who would of thought he was what you might say—plotting?"

Oh, it had been a shocking thing. Lee Chong had operated his emporium for so long that no one could possibly have foreseen that he would sell out. He was so mixed up in the feeding and clothing of Cannery Row that he was considered permanent. Who could have suspected the secret turnings of his paradoxical Oriental mind, which seems to have paralleled the paradoxical Occidental mind?

It is customary to think of a sea captain sitting in his cabin, planning a future grocery store not subject to wind or bottom-fouling. Lee Chong dreamed while he worked his abacus and passed out pints of Old Tennis Shoes and delicately sliced bacon with his big knife. He dreamed all right—he dreamed of the sea. He did not share his plans or ask advice. He would have got lots of advice.

One day Lee Chong sold out and bought a schooner. He wanted to go trading in the South Seas. He dreamed of palms and Polynesians. In the hold of his schooner he loaded the entire stock of his store—all the canned goods, the rubber boots, the caps and needles and small tools, the fireworks and calendars, even the glass-fronted showcases where he kept gold-plated collarbuttons and cigarette lighters. He took it all with him. And the last anyone saw of him, he was waving his blue naval cap from the flying bridge of his dream ship as he passed the whistle buoy at Point Pinos into the sunset. And if he didn't go down on the way over, that's where he is now—probably lying in a hammock under an awning on the rear deck, while beautiful Polynesian girls in very scanty clothes pick over his stock of canned tomatoes and striped mechanics' caps.

"Why do you suppose he done it?" Mack asked.

"Who knows?" said Doc. "Who knows what lies deep in any man's mind? Who knows what any man wants?"

"He won't be happy there," said Mack. "He'll be lonely out among them foreigners. You know, Doc, I figured it out. It was them goddam movies done it. You remember, he used to close up every Thursday night. That's because there was a change of bill at the

movie house. He never missed a movie. That's what done it, the movies. I and you, Doc, we know what liars the movies are. He won't be happy out there. He'll just be miserable to come back."

Doc gazed at his run-down laboratory. "I wish I were out there with him," he said.

"Who don't?" said Mack. "Why, them South Sea Island girls will kill him. He ain't as young as he used to be."

"I know," said Doc. "You and I should be out there, Mack, to help protect him from himself. I'm wondering, Mack, should I step across the street and get another pint or should I go to bed?"

"Why don't you flip a coin?"

"You flip the coin," said Doc. "I don't really want to go to bed. If you flip it I'll know how it's going to come out."

Mack flipped, and he was right. Mack said, "I'd just as lief step over for you, Doc. You just set here comfortable—I'll be right back." And he was.

2/ *The Troubled Life of Joseph and Mary*

Mack came back with a pint of Old Tennis Shoes and he poured some in Doc's glass and some in his own.

Doc said, "What kind of a fellow is the new owner over there—Mexican, isn't he?"

"Nice fellow," said Mack. "Classy dresser. Name of Joseph and Mary Rivas. Smart as a whip, but kind of unfortunate, Doc—unfortunate and funny. You know how it is, when a pimp falls in love it don't make any difference how much he suffers—it's funny. And Joseph and Mary's kind of like that."

"Tell me about him," said Doc.

"I been studying him," said Mack. "He told me some stuff and I put two and two together. He's smart. You know, Doc, there's a kind of smartness that cuts its own throat. Haven't you knew people that was so busy being smart they never had time to do nothing else? Well, Joseph and Mary is kind of like that."

"Tell me," said Doc.

"I guess you couldn't find no two people oppositer than what you and him is," Mack began. "You're nice, Doc, nice and egg-heady, but a guy would have to be nuts to think you was smart. Everybody takes care of you because you're wide open. Anybody is like to throw a sneak-punch at Joseph and Mary just because he's in there dancing and feinting all the time. And he's nice too, in a way."