

**JOHN  
STEINBECK  
THE LOG FROM  
THE SEA OF  
CORTEZ**



## The Log from the Sea of Cortez

John Steinbeck was born in Salinas, California, in 1902. After studying science at Stanford University he worked successively as labourer, druggist, caretaker, fruit-picker and surveyor. His first novel, *Cup of Gold* (1929), was about Morgan the pirate. *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), his most popular book, tells of a migratory family seeking work in California; it was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, and has been compared in its influence to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. His other novels include *East of Eden*, *Of Mice and Men*, *The Pearl*, *Sweet Thursday* and *Cannery Row*, all published by Pan Books. Also available in Pan are several collections of his short stories, and *Journal of a Novel*, *The East of Eden Letters*. In 1962 Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. He died in 1968.



Also by John Steinbeck in Pan Books

Of Mice and Men

Cannery Row

Sweet Thursday

The Moon Is Down

The Pearl

Burning Bright

The Winter of Our Discontent

East of Eden

The Short Reign of Pippin IV

To a God Unknown

The Long Valley

Tortilla Flat

Journal of a Novel

Travels with Charley

Once There Was a War

The Grapes of Wrath

John Steinbeck

# The Log from the Sea of Cortez

The narrative portion of the book  
*Sea of Cortez* with a profile  
'About Ed Ricketts'

**Pan Books** in association with  
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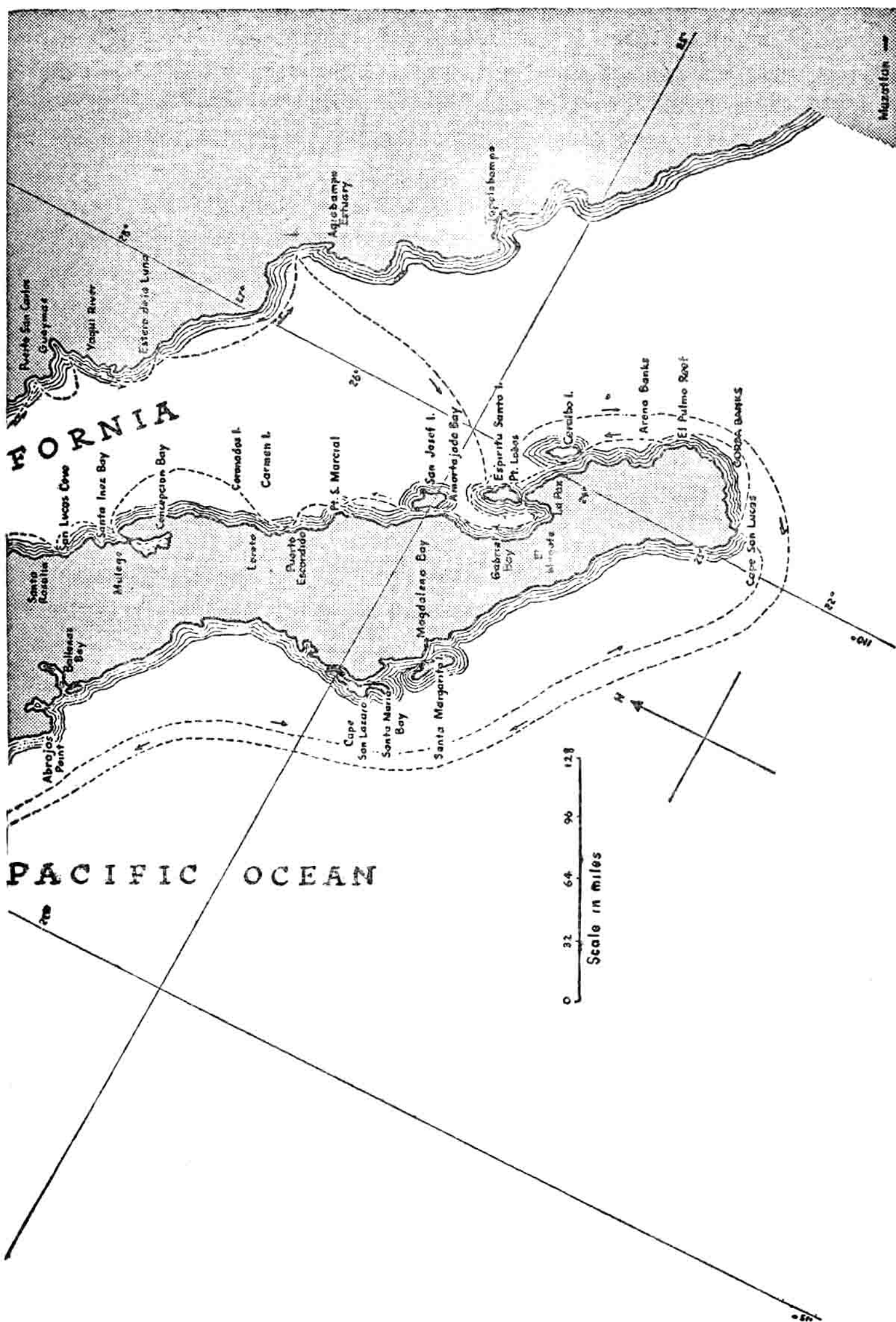
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## ABOUT ED RICKETTS

JUST ABOUT dusk one day in April 1948, Ed Ricketts stopped work in the laboratory in Cannery Row. He covered his instruments and put away his papers and filing cards. He rolled down the sleeves of his wool shirt and put on the brown coat which was slightly small for him and frayed at the elbows.

He wanted a steak for dinner and he knew just the market in New Monterey where he could get a fine one, well hung and tender.

He went out into the street that is officially named Ocean View Avenue and is known as Cannery Row. His old car stood at the gutter, a beat-up sedan. The car was tricky and hard to start. He needed a new one but could not afford it at the expense of other things.

Ed tinkered away at the primer until the ancient rusty motor coughed and broke into a bronchial chatter which indicated that it was running. Ed meshed the jagged gears and moved away up the street.

He turned up the hill where the road crosses the Southern Pacific Railways track. It was almost dark, or rather that kind of mixed light and dark which makes it very difficult to see. Just before the crossing the road takes a sharp climb. Ed shifted to second gear, the noisiest gear, to get up the hill. The sound of his motor and gears blotted out every other sound. A corrugated iron warehouse was on his left, obscuring any sight of the right of way.

The Del Monte Express, the evening train from San Francisco, slipped around from behind the warehouse and crashed into the old car. The cow-catcher buckled in the side of the automobile and pushed and ground and mangled it a hundred yards up the track before the train stopped.

Ed was conscious when they got him out of the car and

laid him on the grass. A crowd had collected of course—people from the train and more from the little houses that hug the track.

In almost no time a doctor was there. Ed's skull had a crooked look and his eyes were crossed. There was blood around his mouth, and his body was twisted, distorted—wrong, as though seen under an untrue lens.

The doctor got down on one knee and leaned over. The ring of people was silent.

Ed asked, "How bad is it?"

"I don't know," the doctor said. "How do you feel?"

"I don't feel much of anything," Ed said.

Because the doctor knew him and knew what kind of a man he was, he said, "That's shock, of course."

"Of course!" Ed said, and his eyes began to glaze.

They edged him onto a stretcher and took him to the hospital. Section hands pried his old car off the cow-catcher and pushed it aside, and the Del Monte Express moved slowly into the station at Pacific Grove, which is the end of the line.

Several doctors had come in and more were phoning, wanting to help because they all loved him. The doctors knew it was very serious, so they gave him ether and opened him up to see how bad it was. When they finished they knew it was hopeless. Ed was all messed up—spleen broken, ribs shattered, lungs punctured, concussion of the skull. It might have been better to let him go out under the ether, but the doctors could not give up, any more than could the people gathered in the waiting room of the hospital. Men who knew better began talking about miracles and how anything could happen. They reminded each other of cases of people who had got well when there was no reason to suppose they could. The surgeons cleaned Ed's insides as well as possible and closed him up. Every now and then one of the doctors would go out to the waiting room, and it was like facing a jury. There were lots of people out there, sitting waiting, and their eyes all held a stone question.

The doctors said things like, "Doing as well as can be expected" and "We won't be able to tell for some time but he seems to be making progress". They talked more than was necessary, and the people sitting there didn't talk at all. They just stared, trying to get adjusted.

The switchboard was loaded with calls from people who wanted to give blood.

The next morning Ed was conscious but very tired and groggy from ether and morphine. His eyes were washed out and he spoke with great difficulty. But he did repeat his first question.

"How bad is it?"

The doctor who was in the room caught himself just as he was going to say some soothing nonsense, remembering that Ed was his friend and that Ed loved true things and knew a lot of true things too, so the doctor said, "Very bad".

Ed didn't ask again. He hung on for a couple of days because his vitality was very great. In fact he hung on so long that some of the doctors began to believe the things they had said about miracles when they knew such a chance to be nonsense. They noted a stronger heartbeat. They saw improved color in his cheeks below the bandages. Ed hung on so long that some people from the waiting room dared to go home to get some sleep.

And then, as happens so often with men of large vitality, the energy and the color and the pulse and the breathing went away silently and quickly, and he died.

By that time the shock in Monterey had turned to dullness. He was dead and had to be got rid of. People wanted to get rid of him quickly and with dignity so they could think about him and restore him again.

On a small rise not far from the Great Tide Pool near Lighthouse Point there is a small chapel and crematory. Ed's closed coffin was put in that chapel for part of an afternoon.

Naturally no one wanted flowers, but the greatest fear was that someone might say a speech or make a remark about

him—good or bad. Luckily it was all over so quickly that the people who ordinarily make speeches were caught unprepared.

A large number of people drifted into the chapel, looked for a few moments at the coffin, and then walked away. No one wanted company. Everyone wanted to be alone. Some went to the beach by the Great Tide Pool and sat in the coarse sand and blindly watched the incoming tide creeping around the rocks and tumbling in over the seaweed.

A kind of anesthesia settled on the people who knew Ed Ricketts. There was not sorrow really but rather puzzled questions—what are we going to do? how can we rearrange our lives now? Everyone who knew him turned inward. It was a strange thing—quiet and strange. We were lost and could not find ourselves.

It is going to be difficult to write down the things about Ed Ricketts that must be written, hard to separate entities. And anyone who knew him would find it difficult. Maybe some of the events are imagined. And perhaps some very small happenings may have grown out of all proportion in the mind. And then there is the personal impact. I am sure that many people, seeing this account, will be sure to say, "Why, that's not true. That's not the way he was at all. He was this way and this." And the speaker may go on to describe a person this writer did not know at all. But no one who knew him will deny the force and influence of Ed Ricketts. Everyone near him was influenced by him, deeply and permanently. Some he taught how to think, others how to see or hear. Children on the beach he taught how to look for and find beautiful animals in worlds they had not suspected were there at all. He taught everyone without seeming to.

Nearly everyone who knew him has tried to define him. Such things were said of him as, "He was half Christ and half goat". He was a great teacher and a great lecher—an immortal who loved women. Surely he was an original and his character was unique, but in such a way that everyone



was related to him, one in this way and another in some different way. He was gentle but capable of ferocity, small and slight but strong as an ox, loyal and yet untrustworthy, generous but gave little and received much. His thinking was as paradoxical as his life. He thought in mystical terms and hated and distrusted mysticism. He was an individualist who studied colonial animals with satisfaction.

We have all tried to define Ed Ricketts with little success. Perhaps it would be better to put down the mass of material from our memories, anecdotes, quotations, events. Of course some of the things will cancel others, but that is the way he was. The essence lies somewhere. There must be some way of finding it.

Finally there is another reason to put Ed Ricketts down on paper. He will not die. He haunts the people who knew him. He is always present even in the moments when we feel his loss the most.

One night soon after his death a number of us were drinking beer in the laboratory. We laughed and told stories about Ed, and suddenly one of us said in pain, "We'll have to let him go! We'll have to release him and let him go." And that was true not for Ed but for ourselves. We can't keep him, and still he will not go away.

Maybe if I write down everything I can remember about him, that will lay the ghost. It is worth trying anyway. It will have to be true or it can't work. It must be no celebration of his virtues, because, as was said of another man, he had the faults of his virtues. There can be no formula. The simplest and best way will be just to remember—as much as I can.

The statistics on Ed Ricketts would read: Born in Chicago, played in the streets, went to public school, studied biology at the University of Chicago. Opened a small commercial laboratory in Pacific Grove, California. Moved to Cannery Row in Monterey. Degrees—Bachelor of Science only; clubs, none; honors, none. Army service—both World Wars. Killed by a train at the age of fifty-two. Within that frame he went a long way and burned a deep scar.

I was sitting in a dentist's waiting room in New Monterey, hoping that dentist had died. I had a badly aching tooth and not enough money to have a good job done on it. My main hope was that the dentist could stop the ache without charging too much and without finding too many other things wrong.

The door to the slaughterhouse opened and a slight man with a beard came out. I didn't look at him closely because of what he held in his hand, a bloody molar with a surprisingly large piece of jawbone sticking to it. He was cursing gently as he came through the door. He held the reeking relic out to me and said, "Look at that god-damned thing." I was already looking at it. "That came out of me," he said.

"Seems to be more jaw than tooth," I said.

"He got impatient, I guess. I'm Ed Ricketts."

"I'm John Steinbeck. Does it hurt?"

"Not much. I've heard of you."

"I've heard of you, too. Let's have a drink."

That was the first time I ever saw him. I had heard that there was an interesting man in town who ran a commercial laboratory, had a library of good music, and interests wider than invertebratology. I had wanted to come across him for some time.

We did not think of ourselves as poor then. We simply had no money. Our food was fairly plentiful, what with fishing and planning and a minimum of theft. Entertainment had to be improvised without benefit of currency. Our pleasures consisted of conversation, walks, games, and parties with people of our own financial nonexistence. A real party was dressed with a gallon of thirty-nine-cent wine, and we could have a hell of a time on that. We did not know any rich people, and for that reason we did not like them and were proud and glad we didn't live *that* way.

We had been timid about meeting Ed Ricketts because he was rich people by our standards. This meant that he could depend on a hundred to a hundred and fifty dollars a month and he had an automobile. To us this was fancy, and we

didn't see how anyone could go through that kind of money. But we learned.

Knowing Ed Ricketts was instant. After the first moment I knew him, and for the next eighteen years I knew him better than I knew anyone, and perhaps I did not know him at all. Maybe it was that way with all of his friends. He was different from anyone and yet so like that everyone found himself in Ed, and that might be one of the reasons his death had such an impact. It wasn't Ed who had died but a large and important part of oneself.

When I first knew him, his laboratory was an old house in Cannery Row which he had bought and transformed to his purposes. The entrance was a kind of showroom with mounted marine specimens in glass jars on shelves around the walls. Next to this room was a small office, where for some reason the rattlesnakes were kept in cages between the safe and the filing cabinets. The top of the safe was piled high with stationery and filing cards. Ed loved paper and cards. He never ordered small amounts but huge supplies of it.

On the side of the building toward the ocean were two more rooms, one with cages for white rats—hundreds of white rats, and reproducing furiously. This room used to get pretty smelly if it was not cleaned with great regularity—which it never was. The other rear room was set up with microscopes and slides and the equipment for making and mounting and baking the delicate microorganisms which were so much a part of the laboratory income. In the basement there was a big stockroom with jars and tanks for preserving larger animals, and also the equipment for embalming and injecting the cats, dogfish, frogs, and other animals that were used by dissection classes.

This little house was called Pacific Biological Laboratories, Inc., as strange an operation as ever outraged the corporate laws of California. When, after Ed's death, the corporation had to be liquidated, it was impossible to find out who owned the stock, how much of it there was, or what it was worth. Ed kept the most careful collecting notes on record,



but sometimes he would not open a business letter for weeks.

How the business ran for twenty years no one knows, but it did run even though it staggered a little sometimes. At times it would spurt ahead with system and efficiency and then wearily collapse for several months. Orders would pile up on the desk. Once during a weary period someone sent Ed a cheesecake by parcel post. He thought it was preserved material of some kind, and when he finally opened it three months later we could not have identified it had it not been that a note was enclosed which said, 'Eat this cheesecake at once. It's very delicate.'

Often the desk was piled so high with unopened letters that they slid tiredly to the floor. Ed believed completely in the theory that a letter unanswered for a week usually requires no answer, but he went even farther. A letter unopened for a month does not require opening.

Every time some definite statement like that above is set down I think of exceptions. Ed carried on a large and varied correspondence with a number of people. He answered letters quickly and at length, using a typewriter with elite type to save space. The purchase of a typewriter was a long process with him, for much of the type had to be changed from business signs to biologic signs, and he also liked to have some foreign-language signs on his typewriter, tilde for Spanish, accents and cedilla for French, umlaut for German. He rarely used them but he liked to have them.

The days of the laboratory can be split into two periods. The era before the fire and that afterwards. The fire was interesting in many respects.

One night something went wrong with the electric current on the whole water front. Where 220 volts were expected and prepared for, something like two thousand volts suddenly came through. Since in the subsequent suits the electric company was found blameless by the courts, this must be set down to an act of God. What happened was that a large part of Cannery Row burst into flames in a moment. By the time Ed awakened, the laboratory was a sheet of fire. He