

4-John, Ed Ricketts and Me

Millions of words have been penned and spoken of Ed Ricketts and John; some true and some false. I do not profess to know all, but I know much, since I was there and lived through an important part of their life. Ed Ricketts was possibly one of the greatest marine zoologists the world has ever seen, or will see, and his untimely death in an accident was a great tragedy. He was one of the most magnificent, benign men I have ever met, and to me he became the best friend I ever had. He was one of those wonderful people who continuously give you strength while they lack the strength for their own emotional problems, their own involvement with others, men and women.

John and Ed had a tremendous bond of friendship between them. I never experienced anything from Ed except sheer goodness. He opened my mind to philosophy which I had never really skirmished with, since school days. To me, Ed was a kind of Jesus. I believe John thought that way, too. Ed wore a beard, this man of middle stature. Everything he did had the essence of kindness to it. If he did not really like you he would not display it with unkind words or tempers; he just looked at you, smiled and said, 'Oh yes, really.' He did not say, 'Get out of my life, you're a pain.' He said, 'It's nice meeting you.'

He had this great essence for life, and you could not help but admire it, whatever his faults. And he was, in a way, enamored by sex, which perhaps isn't too bad a fault. Perhaps John loved Ed's love of life; perhaps it was the qualities that Ed displayed all the time that John wished to have but could not show, or would not allow himself to have. With Ed, they were built in, solid.

In our correspondence Ed would write: 'My dear girl - never be ashamed of using the word 'good.'" And there is much behind that, if you think about it. There is 'good' everywhere in life; sometimes it takes people months, even years to discover it through mistakes, and God knows I have made them, and, anyway, who hasn't? Ed used to say, 'Don't be bothered about hyperbole; simply say you like it - because it is good.' It was that simple, a beauty in that simplicity.

Ed was simple, too, in that he never cared much about material things. Life was his work. And music. He would listen to music from the moment he got up (if he was alone he went around the house naked), throughout the day when he dissected a starfish or an anemone, or when he cooked. He would try to cook anything. He was a gourmet. Once he said, 'You can eat from the world if you know how to preserve.'

Ed Ricketts never wavered in his loyalties (John didn't, either), and he would never lower himself to jealousy like so many. Even when some of the women he loved and who loved him, even when they left him he continued to be their friend. Many times he even saved their life.

There was such a special magic about Ed Ricketts, and, in many ways he was John's offspring; he was the source of the Steinbeck Nile.

It is a well-known fact that Ed and John's correspondence was one of the most prolific between two human beings, other than writers, in the eighteenth century. Whenever John discussed anything with him, Ed had a way of saying something was not right without saying it, and that is an art. Times he would sip a beer and look skywards to the ceiling and say, 'Hmm, hmm John, but that's not quite right.' Never did he say, 'No, don't quit.'

For John, sharing moments with Ed (and they shared many, many moments) was like going to an analyst. After their conversations John would tell me, 'I'm all right.' There was not any problem that he ever took to Ed that Ed could not solve where John was at a loss.

I first met Ed in the early forties. John wanted me to meet him to see whether Ed approved of his 'choice.'

Ed Ricketts was a man who watched all life go by, everything. There was nothing in the passing parade that escaped his eye that he could not laugh about or at or cackle about or at. He was a slow speaker, exceedingly slow; everything, every word he spoke was a saga. Actually, the way he spoke was somewhat like a Max Beerbohm drawing.

Another side of Ed's character was that you never knew what you were going to eat at his house. God knows, John loved good food. One day, while the rain poured a monsoon, Ed called and asked us over for chicken soup. It was one of those cold, raw Monterey days. We went, and he served the soup in vast bowls, complete with his wonderful homemade bread. The soup was delicious, and I do know how to make chicken soup. But Ed's 'chicken soup' was made out of sea cucumbers, which are part of the slug and worm family. He had collected his 'chicken' that day, and chopped it up. 'I simply wanted to try it,' he said nonchalantly. It was delicious. 'You can always live off the land or the sea,' he said, smiling.

'Goddam it, Ed, I wouldn't be surprised if you went and made a ground-up clam milk shake!' said John.

'Wait a minute, I have to write that down and try it,' Ed answered.

'With malt in it,' added John.

'What else?' Ed replied.

Ed should have published a book of recipes from the sea and elsewhere. It would have made him a fortune.

No matter what you said to Ed Ricketts you could not go into shock with him. Take the time he told us about a woman he had picked up some place (and there were many women), when he had been drinking his usual rum or beer. He always drank rum or beer. He had been in no hurry. He said he felt the woman had been suffering all her life, and he helped her. John and I listened to him unmoved. Ed always expressed himself freely about his sex life. 'Yes,' he said, 'We made love and if it hadn't been for me, she would have never discovered that she had a double vagina.' 'What?' said John. 'Yes, after the first time I discovered it,' he said in a very low tone of voice, but yet completely natural.

Perhaps, in a way, Ed was over idolised, but maybe John made him that way.

There is a story a professor told me that John and Ed treated each other like Greek sisters, and I think in a way they did, if walking arm in arm on a beach makes you a Greek sister.

They did have this so-called gypsy pact, and they were brothers. Anyone can do that - if they're rotten drunk.

It is open to conjecture, but I believe that although John, with his absolutely brilliant mind, gave so much to Ed, and in turn Ed was a complete father figure to John.

We had so many good times together the three of us, and you always came out of them learning something from two great minds. In my mind's eye, Ed was nine feet tall, but he actually was only five feet six. But he had this aura. When he entered the room everyone stopped, turned their head, and asked, 'Who is that?' John once told me Ed would make one hell of a politician because he went around patting babies' heads. He listened to everyone. He wanted to know what everyone else was thinking.

About a year after I first met Ed he had been carrying out a great deal of research and, since he lived on Cannery Row, he said to me, 'You know, before I die the Cannery will be dead, and we'll fish out our waters. Every day we're going out farther, and I've made a study of the waves and tides and fish schools. Every year when I go down to the wharf, I notice the fishermen tell me they had to go out six miles while the year before it was only five.' He predicted the canneries would die and we would fish out 'the beautiful waters,' as he always referred to them.

The Cannery was dead before he died.

When John and I were married Ed wrote us that the canneries were closing because we had taken so much from the sea and had given nothing back in return. He felt about the sea in the way that Jacques Cousteau feels, although Ed pre-empted Cousteau by some twenty years.

It was an experience to be with a man who took us out in a dune buggy and said, casually, 'Oh, there's a paleolithic rock over there and we'll find some seashells.' We would look at the rock and he would turn and say, 'All this was under the sea once.' There wasn't anything you could discuss with Ed Ricketts that he did not have a knowledge of; he had a great understanding of archaeology and geology as well, of course, but his great knowledge was of marine biology and the sea.

Ed cared little about money. John financed him. Ed's laboratory did become a sagging enterprise. He did not have the driving desire for fame as John did; he was a philosopher and a scholar, and there was not one single thing that passed him by that he did not look at or study.

In his whole makeup he did not have time to stop and fight. Occasionally he might get tight and then would say, if it were a lady, 'Lady, you're full of shit!' When he spoke it was as if Jesus had said it.

Ed was happy for John and I, although he never visited us in New York. Once, he felt let down because John was not allowed to go with him on an excursion to the Aleutian chain.

I do believe that John was, unbeknown to himself, highly possessive, and this sometimes showed in his relationship with Ed. In many ways, Ed was a man's man as well as a woman's man. I never saw him without a drink, yet I only saw him drunk twice. From the moment he arose and started the day, he started on beer, and by two in the afternoon he was on rum. John liked that about him, too. And for breakfast, Ed used to go across the street from the Lab to Wing Chong's and get six cans of beer, a large hunk of cheese and a pineapple pie. Some breakfast.

Ed was what he was, and my life was vastly enriched for knowing him. He never spoke much about his family. He loved animals, although he put them to sleep and cut them up; that was his living. 'You can't make anybody like you who doesn't like you,' he once said. How true.

He told John and I the story of when he was a young boy and he had a cat that liked to jump on the mantelpiece in his home in Chicago. His father didn't like the cat, and the cat knew it. His father had a high wing chair with a lamp beside it, and he would sit and read the evening paper. Each night the cat would get up, turn around and wet all over his father.

'Every night my father would say he was going to kill that cat tomorrow. I used to hide the cat. He didn't kill it. You see,' said Ed, 'if you give bad feeling you're going to get bad feeling back.'

If something went wrong and someone tried to start a fight when the three of us were together, Ed would simply look up to the ceiling and say, 'Well, I guess the cat's about to piss.' That was the signal - don't fight, just get out.

But Ed had problems, he always had problems with women or his love life or his wife or his children. He knew how to solve others emotional problems or simply problems, but not his own. He watched the world go by. He read constantly, and never have I seen such a magnificent library as his. He had this desire for knowledge, a tremendous constant thirst for knowledge.

I am proud that once he said he liked me, because when he was talking about something I didn't know about I would say, "I don't know what you are talking about." Said Ed, "Most people say 'Oh yes, uh uh I think I know what you're talking about.' Gwyn never does." That was a great compliment coming from a man I admired so much. And he never was insulting. If I would tire, or be busy he would politely ask forgiveness; never would he say, "Get lost, you bother me." Sometimes he got angry, but I never saw such control in a man as I did in him, and he always, always refused to argue; he always wanted to discuss a problem. "You have your point of view, and I have mine," was his answer.

When Ed died a horrible death from injuries after being hit and dragged by a train, John went to pieces. He flew from New York to Monterey. After the funeral, he went to Ed's house and destroyed diaries and letters, and their letters. Why? I believe there is a beauty in the world you just don't want others to pore over.

Ed Ricketts, John and I shared a special relationship, the kind that comes along once in a lifetime. John left a legacy of great writings to the world. His beloved friend left himself.

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