NEW LONGMAN LITERATURE

Of Mice and Men

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Readers are asked to note that this educational version has been divided into six sections to reflect the structure of the original novel.

One

A few miles south of Soledad, the Salinas River drops in close to the hillside bank and runs deep and green. The water is warm too, for it has slipped twinkling over the yellow sands in the sunlight before reaching the narrow pool. On one side of the river the golden foothill slopes curve up to the strong and rocky Gabilan mountains, but on the valley side the water is lined with trees – willows fresh and green with every spring, carrying in their lower leaf junctures the debris of the winter's flooding; and sycamores with mottled, white, recumbent limbs and branches that arch over the pool. On the sandy bank under the trees the leaves lie deep and so crisp that a lizard makes a great skittering if he runs among them. Rabbits come out of the brush to sit on the sand in the evening, and the damp flats are covered with the night tracks of 'coons, and with the spread pads of dogs from the ranches, and with the split-wedge tracks of deer that come to drink in the dark.

There is a path through the willows and among the sycamores, a path beaten hard by boys coming down from the ranches to swim in the deep pool, and beaten hard by tramps who come wearily down from the highway in the evening to jungle-up near water. In front of the low horizontal limb of a giant sycamore there is an ash pile made by many fires; the limb is worn smooth by men who have sat on it.

Evening of a hot day started the little wind to moving among the leaves. The shade climbed up the hills toward the top. On the sand banks the rabbits sat as quietly as little gray, sculptured stones. And then from the direction of the state highway came the sound of footsteps on crisp sycamore leaves. The rabbits hurried noiselessly for cover. A stilted heron labored up into the air and pounded down river. For a moment the place was lifeless, and then two men emerged from the path and came into the opening by the green pool.

They had walked in single file down the path, and even in the open one stayed behind the other. Both were dressed in denim trousers and in denim coats with brass buttons. Both wore black, shapeless hats and both carried tight blanket rolls slung over their shoulders. The first man was small and quick, dark of face, with restless eyes and sharp, strong features. Every part of him was defined: small, strong hands, slender arms, a thin and bony nose. Behind him walked his opposite, a huge man, shapeless of face, with large, pale eyes, with wide, sloping shoulders; and he walked heavily, dragging his feet a little, the way a bear drags his paws. His arms did not swing at his sides, but hung loosely.

The first man stopped short in the clearing, and the follower nearly ran over him. He took off his hat and wiped the sweat-band with his forefinger and snapped the moisture off. His huge companion dropped his blankets and flung himself down and drank from the

surface of the green pool; drank with long gulps, snorting into the water like a horse. The small man stepped nervously beside him.

'Lennie!' he said sharply. 'Lennie, for God' sakes don't drink so much.' Lennie continued to snort into the pool. The small man leaned over and shook him by the shoulder. 'Lennie. You gonna be sick like you was last night.'

Lennie dipped his whole head under, hat and all, and then he sat up on the bank and his hat dripped down on his blue coat and ran down his back. 'Tha's good,' he said. 'You drink some, George. You take a good big drink.' He smiled happily.

George unslung his bindle and dropped it gently on the bank. 'I ain't sure it's good water,' he said. 'Looks kinda scummy.'

Lennie dabbled his big paw in the water and wiggled his fingers so the water arose in little splashes; rings widened across the pool to the other side and came back again. Lennie watched them go. 'Look, George. Look what I done.'

George knelt beside the pool and drank from his hand with quick scoops. 'Tastes all right,' he admitted. 'Don't really seem to be running, though. You never oughta drink water when it ain't running, Lennie,' he said hopelessly. 'You'd drink out of a gutter if you was thirsty.' He threw a scoop of water into his face and rubbed it about with his hand, under his chin and around the back of his neck. Then he replaced his hat, pushed himself back

from the river, drew up his knees, and embraced them. Lennie, who had been watching, imitated George exactly. He pushed himself back, drew up his knees, embraced them, looked over to George to see whether he had it just right. He pulled his hat down a little more over his eyes, the way George's hat was.

George stared morosely at the water. The rims of his eyes were red with sun glare. He said angrily, 'We could just as well of rode clear to the ranch if that bastard bus driver knew what he was talkin' about. "Jes' a little stretch down the highway," he says. "Jes' a little stretch." God damn near four miles, that's what it was! Didn't wanta stop at the ranch gate, that's what. Too God damn lazy to pull up. Wonder he isn't too damn good to stop in Soledad at all. Kicks us out and says, "Jes' a little stretch down the road." I bet it was *more* than four miles. Damn hot day.'

Lennie looked timidly over to him. 'George?'

'Yeah, what ya want?'

'Where we goin', George?'

The little man jerked down the brim of his hat and scowled over at Lennie. 'So you forgot that awready, did you? I gotta tell you again, do I? Jesus Christ, you're a crazy bastard!'

'I forgot,' Lennie said softly. 'I tried not to forget. Honest to God I did, George.'

'OK – OK. I'll tell ya again. I ain't got nothing to do. Might jus' as well spen' all my time tellin' you things and then you forget 'em, and I tell you again.'

'Tried and tried,' said Lennie, 'but it didn't do no good. I remember about the rabbits, George.'

'The hell with the rabbits. That's all you ever can remember is them rabbits. OK! Now you listen and this time you got to remember so we don't get in no trouble. You remember settin' in that gutter on Howard street and watchin' that blackboard?'

Lennie's face broke into a delighted smile. 'Why sure, George, I remember that ... but ... what'd we do then? I remember some girls come by and you says … you say …'

'The hell with what I says. You remember about us goin' into Murray and Ready's, and they give us work cards and bus tickets?'

'Oh, sure, George. I remember that now.' His hands went quickly into his side coat pockets. He said gently, 'George … I ain't got mine. I musta lost it.' He looked down at the ground in despair.

'You never had none, you crazy bastard. I got both of 'em here. Think I'd let you carry your own work card?'

Lennie grinned with relief. 'I … I thought I put it in my side pocket.' His hand went into the pocket again.

George looked sharply at him. 'What'd you take outta that pocket?'

'Ain't a thing in my pocket,' Lennie said cleverly.

'I know there ain't. You got it in your hand. What you got in your hand – hidin' it?'

'I ain't got nothin', George. Honest.'

'Come on, give it here.'

Lennie held his closed hand away from George's direction. 'It's on'y a mouse, George.'

'A mouse? A live mouse?'

'Uh-uh. Jus' a dead mouse, George. I didn' kill it. Honest! I found it. I found it dead.'

'Give it here!' said George.

'Aw, leave me have it, George.'

'*Give it here!*'

Lennie's closed hand slowly obeyed. George took the mouse and threw it across the pool to the other side, among the brush. 'What you want of a dead mouse, anyways?'

'I could pet it with my thumb while we walked along,' said Lennie.

'Well, you ain't petting no mice while you walk with me. You remember where we're goin' now?'

Lennie looked startled and then in embarrassment hid his face against his knees. 'I forgot again.'

'Jesus Christ,' George said resignedly. 'Well – look, we're gonna work on a ranch like the one we come from up north.'

'Up north?'

'In Weed.'

'Oh, sure. I remember. In Weed.'

'That ranch we're goin' to is right down there about a quarter mile. We're gonna go in an' see the boss. Now, look – I'll give him the work tickets, but you ain't gonna say a word. You jus' stand there and don't say nothing. If he finds out what a crazy bastard you are, we won't get no

job, but if he sees ya work before he hears ya talk, we're set. Ya got that?'

'Sure, George. Sure I got it.'

'OK. Now when we go in to see the boss, what you gonna do?'

'I … I,' Lennie thought. His face grew tight with thought. 'I … ain't gonna say nothin'. Jus' gonna stan' there.'

'Good boy. That's swell. You say that over two, three times so you sure won't forget it.'

Lennie droned to himself softly, 'I ain't gonna say nothin' … I ain't gonna say nothin' … I ain't gonna say nothin'.'

'OK,' said George. 'An' you ain't gonna do no bad things like you done in Weed, neither.'

Lennie looked puzzled. 'Like I done in Weed?'

'Oh, so ya forgot that too, did ya? Well, I ain't gonna remind ya, fear ya do it again.'

A light of understanding broke on Lennie's face. 'They run us outta Weed,' he exploded triumphantly.

'Run us out, hell,' said George disgustedly. 'We run. They was lookin' for us, but they didn't catch us.'

Lennie giggled happily. 'I didn't forget that, you bet.'

George lay back on the sand and crossed his hands under his head, and Lennie imitated him, raising his head to see whether he were doing it right. 'God, you're a lot of trouble,' said George. 'I could get along so easy and so nice if I didn't have you on my tail. I could live so easy and maybe have a girl.'

For a moment Lennie lay quiet, and then he said hopefully, 'We gonna work on a ranch, George.'

'Awright. You got that. But we're gonna sleep here because I got a reason.'

The day was going fast now. Only the tops of the Gabilan mountains flamed with the light of the sun that had gone from the valley. A water snake slipped along on the pool, its head held up like a little periscope. The reeds jerked slightly in the current. Far off toward the highway a man shouted something, and another man shouted back. The sycamore limbs rustled under a little wind that died immediately.

'George – why ain't we goin' on to the ranch and get some supper? They got supper at the ranch.'

George rolled on his side. 'No reason at all for you. I like it here. Tomorra we're gonna go to work. I seen thrashin' machines on the way down. That means we'll be bucking grain bags, bustin' a gut. Tonight I'm gonna lay right here and look up. I like it.'

Lennie got up on his knees and looked down at George. 'Ain't we gonna have no supper?'

'Sure we are, if you gather up some dead willow sticks. I got three cans of beans in my bindle. You get a fire ready. I'll give you a match when you get the sticks together. Then we'll heat the beans and have supper.'

Lennie said, 'I like beans with ketchup.'

'Well, we ain't got no ketchup. You go get wood. An' don't you fool around. It'll be dark before long.'

Lennie lumbered to his feet and disappeared in the brush. George lay where he was and whistled softly to himself. There were sounds of splashings down the river in the direction Lennie had taken. George stopped whistling and listened.

'Poor bastard,' he said softly, and then went on whistling again.

In a moment Lennie came crashing back through the brush. He carried one small willow stick in his hand. George sat up. 'Awright,' he said brusquely. 'Gi'me that mouse!'

But Lennie made an elaborate pantomime of innocence. 'What mouse, George? I ain't got no mouse.'

George held out his hand. 'Come on. Give it to me. You ain't puttin' nothing over.'

Lennie hesitated, backed away, looked wildly at the brush line as though he contemplated running for his freedom. George said coldly, 'You gonna give me that mouse or do I have to sock you?'

'Give you what, George?'

'You know God damn well what. I want that mouse.'

Lennie reluctantly reached into his pocket. His voice broke a little. 'I don't know why I can't keep it. It ain't nobody's mouse. I didn't steal it. I found it lyin' right beside the road.'

George's hand remained outstretched imperiously. Slowly, like a terrier who doesn't want to bring a ball to its master, Lennie approached, drew back, approached again. George snapped his fingers sharply, and at the sound Lennie laid the mouse in his hand.

'I wasn't doin' nothing bad with it, George. Jus' strokin' it.'

George stood up and threw the mouse as far as he could into the darkening brush, and then he stepped to the pool and washed his hands. 'You crazy fool. Don't you think I could see your feet was wet where you went acrost the river to get it?' He heard Lennie's whimpering cry and wheeled about. 'Blubberin' like a baby! Jesus Christ! A big guy like you.' Lennie's lip quivered and tears started in his eyes. 'Aw, Lennie!' George put his hand on Lennie's shoulder. 'I ain't takin' it away jus' for meanness. That mouse ain't fresh, Lennie; and besides, you've broke it pettin' it. You get another mouse that's fresh and I'll let you keep it a little while.'

Lennie sat down on the ground and hung his head dejectedly. 'I don't know where there is no other mouse. I remember a lady used to give 'em to me – ever' one she got. But that lady ain't here.'

George scoffed. 'Lady, huh? Don't even remember who that lady was. That was your own Aunt Clara. An' she stopped givin' 'em to ya. You always killed 'em.'

Lennie looked sadly up at him. 'They was so little,' he said, apologetically. 'I'd pet 'em, and pretty soon they bit my fingers and I pinched their heads a little and then they was dead – because they was so little.

'I wish't we'd get the rabbits pretty soon, George. They ain't so little.'

'The hell with the rabbits. An' you ain't to be trusted with no live mice. Your Aunt Clara give you a

rubber mouse and you wouldn't have nothing to do with it.'

'It wasn't no good to pet,' said Lennie.

The flame of the sunset lifted from the mountaintops and dusk came into the valley, and a half darkness came in among the willows and the sycamores. A big carp rose to the surface of the pool, gulped air and then sank mysteriously into the dark water again, leaving widening rings on the water. Overhead the leaves whisked again and little puffs of willow cotton blew down and landed on the pool's surface.

'You gonna get that wood?' George demanded. 'There's plenty right up against the back of that sycamore. Flood-water wood. Now you get it.'

Lennie went behind the tree and brought out a litter of dried leaves and twigs. He threw them in a heap on the old ash pile and went back for more and more. It was almost night now. A dove's wings whistled over the water. George walked to the fire pile and lighted the dry leaves. The flame cracked up among the twigs and fell to work. George undid his bindle and brought out three cans of beans. He stood them about the fire, close in against the blaze, but not quite touching the flame.

'There's enough beans for four men,' George said.

Lennie watched him from over the fire. He said patiently, 'I like 'em with ketchup.'

'Well, we ain't got any,' George exploded. 'Whatever we ain't got, that's what you want. God a'mighty, if I was alone I could live so easy. I could go get a job an' work, an'

no trouble. No mess at all, and when the end of the month come I could take my fifty bucks and go into town and get whatever I want. Why, I could stay in a cat house all night. I could eat any place I want, hotel or any place, and order any damn thing I could think of. An' I could do all that every damn month. Get a gallon of whisky, or set in a pool room and play cards or shoot pool.' Lennie knelt and looked over the fire at the angry George. And Lennie's face was drawn with terror. 'An' whatta I got,' George went on furiously. 'I got you! You can't keep a job and you lose me ever' job I get. Jus' keep me shovin' all over the country all the time. An' that ain't the worst. You get in trouble. You do bad things and I got to get you out.' His voice rose nearly to a shout. 'You crazy son-of-a-bitch. You keep me in hot water all the time.' He took on the elaborate manner of little girls when they are mimicking one another. 'Jus' wanted to feel that girl's dress – jus' wanted to pet it like it was a mouse — Well, how the hell did she know you jus' wanted to feel her dress? She jerks back and you hold on like it was a mouse. She yells and we got to hide in a irrigation ditch all day with guys lookin' for us, and we got to sneak out in the dark and get outta the country. All the time somethin' like that – all the time. I wisht I could put you in a cage with about a million mice an' let you have fun.' His anger left him suddenly. He looked across the fire at Lennie's anguished face, and then he looked ashamedly at the flames.

It was quite dark now, but the fire lighted the trunks of the trees and the curving branches overhead. Lennie

crawled slowly and cautiously around the fire until he was close to George. He sat back on his heels. George turned the bean cans so that another side faced the fire. He pretended to be unaware of Lennie so close beside him.

'George,' very softly. No answer. 'George!'

'Whatta you want?'

'I was only foolin', George. I don't want no ketchup. I wouldn't eat no ketchup if it was right here beside me.'

'If it was here, you could have some.'

'But I wouldn't eat none, George. I'd leave it all for you. You could cover your beans with it and I wouldn't touch none of it.'

George still stared morosely at the fire. 'When I think of the swell time I could have without you, I go nuts. I never get no peace.'

Lennie still knelt. He looked off into the darkness across the river. 'George, you want I should go away and leave you alone?'

'Where the hell could you go?'

'Well, I could. I could go off in the hills there. Some place I'd find a cave.'

'Yeah? How'd you eat. You ain't got sense enough to find nothing to eat.'

'I'd find things, George. I don't need no nice food with ketchup. I'd lay out in the sun and nobody'd hurt me. An' if I foun' a mouse, I could keep it. Nobody'd take it away from me.'

George looked quickly and searchingly at him. 'I been mean, ain't I?'

'If you don' want me I can go off in the hills an' find a cave. I can go away any time.'

'No – look! I was jus' foolin', Lennie. 'Cause I want you to stay with me. Trouble with mice is you always kill 'em.' He paused. 'Tell you what I'll do, Lennie. First chance I get I'll give you a pup. Maybe you wouldn't kill *it.* That'd be better than mice. And you could pet it harder.'

Lennie avoided the bait. He had sensed his advantage. 'If you don't want me, you only jus' got to say so, and I'll go off in those hills right there – right up in those hills and live by myself. An' I won't get no mice stole from me.'

George said, 'I want you to stay with me, Lennie. Jesus Christ, somebody'd shoot you for a coyote if you was by yourself. No, you stay with me. Your Aunt Clara wouldn't like you running off by yourself, even if she is dead.'

Lennie spoke craftily, 'Tell me – like you done before.'

'Tell you what?'

'About the rabbits.'

George snapped, 'You ain't gonna put nothing over on me.'

Lennie pleaded, 'Come on, George. Tell me. Please, George. Like you done before.'

'You get a kick outta that, don't you? Awright, I'll tell you, and then we'll eat our supper …'

George's voice became deeper. He repeated his words rhythmically as though he had said them many times before. 'Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the

loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don't belong no place. They come to a ranch an' work up a stake and then they go inta town and blow their stake, and the first thing you know they're poundin' their tail on some other ranch. They ain't got nothing to look ahead to.'

Lennie was delighted. 'That's it – that's it. Now tell how it is with us.'

George went on. 'With us it ain't like that. We got a future. We got somebody to talk to that gives a damn about us. We don't have to sit in no bar room blowin' in our jack jus' because we got no place else to go. If them other guys gets in jail they can rot for all anybody gives a damn. But not us.'

Lennie broke in. '*But not us! An' why? Because … because I got you to look after me, and you got me to look after you, and that's why.*' He laughed delightedly. 'Go on now, George!'

'You got it by heart. You can do it yourself.'

'No, you. I forget some a' the things. Tell about how it's gonna be.'

'OK. Someday – we're gonna get the jack together and we're gonna have a little house and a couple of acres an' a cow and some pigs and …'

'*An' live off the fatta the lan'*,' Lennie shouted. 'An' have *rabbits.* Go on, George! Tell about what we're gonna have in the garden and about the rabbits in the cages and about the rain in the winter and the stove, and how thick the cream is on the milk like you can hardly cut it. Tell about that, George.'

'Why'n't you do it yourself? You know all of it.'

'No … you tell it. It ain't the same if I tell it. Go on … George. How I get to tend the rabbits.'

'Well,' said George, 'we'll have a big vegetable patch and a rabbit hutch and chickens. And when it rains in the winter, we'll just say the hell with goin' to work, and we'll build up a fire in the stove and set around it an' listen to the rain comin' down on the roof – Nuts!' He took out his pocket knife. 'I ain't got time for no more.' He drove his knife through the top of one of the bean cans, sawed out the top and passed the can to Lennie. Then he opened a second can. From his side pocket he brought out two spoons and passed one of them to Lennie.

They sat by the fire and filled their mouths with beans and chewed mightily. A few beans slipped out of the side of Lennie's mouth. George gestured with his spoon. 'What you gonna say tomorrow when the boss asks you questions?'

Lennie stopped chewing and swallowed. His face was concentrated. 'I … I ain't gonna … say a word.'

'Good boy! That's fine, Lennie! Maybe you're gettin' better. When we get the coupla acres I can let you tend the rabbits all right. 'Specially if you remember as good as that.'

Lennie choked with pride. 'I can remember,' he said.

George motioned with his spoon again. 'Look, Lennie. I want you to look around here. You can remember this place, can't you? The ranch is about a quarter mile up that way. Just follow the river?'

'Sure,' said Lennie. 'I can remember this. Di'n't I remember about not gonna say a word?'

''Course you did. Well, look. Lennie – if you jus' happen to get in trouble like you always done before, I want you to come right here an' hide in the brush.'

'Hide in the brush,' said Lennie slowly.

'Hide in the brush till I come for you. Can you remember that?'

'Sure I can, George. Hide in the brush till you come.'

'But you ain't gonna get in no trouble, because if you do, I won't let you tend the rabbits.' He threw his empty bean can off into the brush.

'I won't get in no trouble, George. I ain't gonna say a word.'

'OK. Bring your bindle over here by the fire. It's gonna be nice sleepin' here. Lookin' up, and the leaves. Don't build up no more fire. We'll let her die down.'

They made their beds on the sand, and as the blaze dropped from the fire the sphere of light grew smaller; the curling branches disappeared and only a faint glimmer showed where the tree trunks were. From the darkness Lennie called, 'George – you asleep?'

'No. Whatta you want?'

'Let's have different color rabbits, George.'

'Sure we will,' George said sleepily. 'Red and blue and green rabbits, Lennie. Millions of 'em.'

'Furry ones, George, like I seen in the fair in Sacramento.'

'Sure, furry ones.'

''Cause I can jus' as well go away, George, an' live in a cave.'

'You can jus' as well go to hell,' said George. 'Shut up now.'

The red light dimmed on the coals. Up the hill from the river a coyote yammered, and a dog answered from the other side of the stream. The sycamore leaves whispered in a little night breeze.

Two

The bunk house was a long, rectangular building. Inside, the walls were whitewashed and the floor unpainted. In three walls there were small, square windows, and in the fourth, a solid door with a wooden latch. Against the walls were eight bunks, five of them made up with blankets and the other three showing their burlap ticking. Over each bunk there was nailed an apple box with the opening forward so that it made two shelves for the personal belongings of the occupant of the bunk. And these shelves were loaded with little articles, soap and talcum powder, razors and those Western magazines ranch men love to read and scoff at and secretly believe. And there were medicines on the shelves, and little vials, combs; and from nails on the box sides, a few neckties. Near one wall there was a black cast-iron stove, its stove-pipe going straight up through the ceiling. In the middle of the room stood a big square table littered with playing cards, and around it were grouped boxes for the players to sit on.

At about ten o'clock in the morning the sun threw a bright dust-laden bar through one of the side windows, and in and out of the beam flies shot like rushing stars.

The wooden latch raised. The door opened and a tall, stoop-shouldered old man came in. He was dressed in blue jeans and he carried a big push-broom in his left hand. Behind him came George, and behind George, Lennie.

'The boss was expectin' you last night,' the old man said. 'He was sore as hell when you wasn't here to go out this morning.' He pointed with his right arm, and out of the sleeve came a round stick-like wrist, but no hand. 'You can have them two beds there,' he said, indicating two bunks near the stove.

George stepped over and threw his blankets down on the burlap sack of straw that was a mattress. He looked into the box shelf and then picked a small yellow can from it. 'Say. What the hell's this?'

'I don't know,' said the old man.

'Says "positively kills lice, roaches, and other scourges". What the hell kind of bed you giving us, anyways. We don't want no pants rabbits.'

The old swamper shifted his broom and held it between his elbow and his side while he held out his hand for the can. He studied the label carefully. 'Tell you what …' he said finally, 'last guy that had this bed was a blacksmith – hell of a nice fella and as clean a guy as you want to meet. Used to wash his hands even *after* he ate.'

'Then how come he got graybacks?' George was working up a slow anger. Lennie put his bindle on the neighboring bunk and sat down. He watched George with open mouth.

'Tell you what,' said the old swamper. 'This here blacksmith – name of Whitey – was the kind of guy that would put that stuff around even if there wasn't no bugs – just to make sure, see? Tell you what he used to do – At meals he'd peel his boil' potatoes, an' he'd take out ever' little spot, no matter what kind, before he'd eat