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The moon is down, 1942.

WRHS

THE MOON IS DOWN

Thoughts on John Steinbeck's Important and Moving Book

By Dr. Abba Hillel Silver

> At The Temple

On Sunday morning, April 19, 1942 "By 10:45 it was all over. The town was occupied, the defenders defeated, and the war finished." That is how in his opening paragraph, John Steinbeck, leads us right into the heart of his timely and moving play-novel called "The Moon is Down."

The little book is concerned with what happened to the people of this town after 10:45 in all the days and months which follow. What happens to the conquered? What happens to the conqueror? No theme, of course, could be more timely than this one, more opportune. Our earth today is full of conquerors and conquered, and of a few remaining peoples :who are fighting the conquerors in behalf of the conquered.

So that, mirrored in this volume of Mr. Steinbeck is the dominant political experience of mankind today, and in his amazingly quiet, restrained, simple and deeply revealing story he has dramatized the universal tragedy of our day — in fact the universal tragedy of all people of all time, anywhere where force is employed to break the free spirit of man.

The locale of this story is purposely not identified in this book — it might be anywhere. It is not hard to infer that Norway is intended. The conquerors are also not identified by name. Only here again it is quite clear that it is the Nazis who are meant. A peaceful vi lage in Norway is suddenly invaded by the Nazis after the ground had been adequately prepared by a local Quisling, Mr. Corell, a popular storekeeper in the town. To give point to the moral which the author is trying to drive home in the story, he does not represent the invaders as inhuman beasts, brutal, sadistic in their treatment of the conquered population as the Nazis have revealed themselves time and again in relation to the peoples actually conquered — Poland, Czechoslovakia and elsewhere. Quite the contrary. The authory represents the Commander of the invading forces — Col. Lanser as a rather sympathetic individual, a veteran of the First World War, a middle aged man, gray-haired and tired looking, who had seen all there was to be seen of war, of conquest and of defeat and who was quite disillusioned about it all, but who nevertheless is a soldier and has to perform his duty distasteful sometimes as that duty is. His fellow officers on the

staff are also not ogres, cruel people, but quite ordinary human beings - neither saints nor devils — men who are caught in the grip of the military machine and a military discipline who would personally like to have themselves liked by the people of the town, whose chief concern is how and when they can get back home, but who are forced, nevertheless to do cruel and bloody deeds in the attempt to regiment the people whom they have invaded. It is only the younger members of the staff, the Lieutenants Praekle and Tonder who are actually the products of a Nazi political ideology, who are trained in the polities of the day, believing in the great new system which was invented by their Fuhrer. One or two of them long to die on the battlefield lighted by a fair setting sun while Wagnerian thunder crashed in the background. But by and large the members of the staff are just men who are made soldiers and who are compelled to do soldiers! work.

The conquerors actually seek amicable relationships with the local people. They solicit their collaboration in the same way as Hitler tried to collaborate with those he conquered. They wanted the people of the town to go about producing coal which they needed.

So Col. Lanser says to the Mayor of the town: "We want to get along as well as we can. You see, this is more like a business venture than anything else. We need the coal mine here and the fishing. We will try to get along with just as little friction as possible."

But in spite of this official reasonableness — and this is the point of the story — disaster follows on the heels of disaster for conquest and reasonableness are not and never can be compatible. The outraged free spirit of man will burst forth here or there at some provocation or other in some act of defiance. This act of defiance must be punished by the conqueror. This punishment arouses still deeper hatred and resentment. There follow acts of sabotage and passive or active resistance to the authority of the occupying power which the occuping power

must suppress by all the well-known punative and terrorizing measures — the taking of hostages, starvation, the firing squad. So the situation gets worse day by day, week by week until the conquered town becomes completely aroused and consolidated in its relentless opposition to the invader. And the invader, in turn finds himself shunned, ostracized by the people whom he has conquered. He feels himself trapped in his own alienating and destroying authority. He becomes tense, over-wrought, nerve-wracked. The fly has conquered miles and miles of fly-paper.

The first to be attacked in this little town is of course the Quisling, Mr. Corell. The town is out to get him for his treachery. They didn't quite get him. His store is boycotted. No one would speak to him. He comes to the commanding officer of the invading forces and asks that the local Mayor be ousted from office and that he be put in as administrator of the town. The Colonel refuses because Mr. Corell does not have the confidence of the people, and dismisses him with the admonition: "Wear a helmet, keep indoors and do not go out at night."

Real trouble in the town begins with the killing of one of the afficers,
Captain Bentick. A miner in the coal mine wanted to quit work. Lieutenant Loft
ordered him back to work. Whereupon the miner shouted he was a free man and would
not be ordered back. The miner rushed at him with a pick and Capt. Betick tried
to interfere and is killed. The miner of course is arrested and when the commanding
officer is informed of it, he quickly understands what is coming. "So it starts
again. We will shoot this man and make twenty new enemies. It's the only thing
we know now, the only thing we know."

The trial of the miner, Alexander Morden, is set. It must be dramatized and his crime must be punished as an act of violence. The Mayor of the City is asked to preside at this trial in order to give it an air of sanction and legality. The Mayor refuses. He will not sentence Morden to death. Morden has committed no crime against his people. The Mayor says to the Colonel:

""You wish me to pass sentence of death on Alexander Morden after a trial here?"

""Yes, and you will prevent much bloodshed later if you will do it."

"Orden went to the table and pulled out the big chair at/head and sat down. And suddenly he seemed to be the judge, with Lanser the culprit. He drummed with his fingers on the table. He said, "You and your government do not understand. In all the world yours is the only government and people with a record of defeat after defeat for centuries and every time because you did not understand people." He paused. "This principle does not work. First, I am the Mayor. I have no right to pass sentence of death. There is no one in this community with that right. If I should do it, I would be breaking thelaw as much as you."

""Breaking the law?" said Lanser.

""You killed six men when you came in. Under our law you are guilty of murder, all of you. Why do you go into this nonsense of law, Colonel? There is no law between you and us. This is war. Don't you know you will have to kill all of us or we in time will kill all of you? You destroyed the law when you came in, and a new law took its place. Don't you know that?"

"Lanser said, "May I sit down?"

""Why do you ask? That is another lie. You could make me stand if you wished."

"Banser said, "No; it is true whether you believe it or not: personally, I have respect for you and your office, and" — he put his forehead in his hand for a moment — "you see, what I think, sir, I, a man of a certain age and certain memories, os of no importance. I might agree with you, but that would change nothing. The military, the political pattern I work in has certain tendencies and practices which are invariable."

"Orden said, "And these tendencies and practices have been proven wrong in every single case since the beginning of the world."

"Lanser laughed bitterly. "I, an individual man with certain memories, might

agree with you, might even add that one of the tendencies of the military mind and pattern is an inability to learn, an inability to see beyond the killing which is its job. But I am not a man subject to memories. The coal miner must be shot publicly, because the theory is that others will then restrain themselves from killing our men."

"Orden said, "We need not talk any more, then."

""Yes, we must talk. We want you to help."

"Orden sat quietly for a while and then he said, "I'll tell you what I'll do. How many men were on the machine guns which killed our soldiers?"

""Oh, not more than twenty, I guess," said Lanswer.

""Very well. If you will shoot them, I will dondemn Morden."

""You're not serious!" said the colonel.

""But I am serious."

""This can't be done. You know it."

""I know it," said Orden. "And what you ask cannot be done."

"Lanser said, "I suppose I knew. Corell will have to be Mayor after all."
He looked up quickly. "You will stay for the trial?"

""Yes, I'll stay. Then Alex won't be so lonely."

"Lanser looked at him and smiled a little sadly. "We have taken on a job, haven't we?"

""Yes," said the Mayor, "The one impossible job in the world, the one thing that can't be done."

""And that is?"

""To break man's spirit permanently.""

So the miner is tried and shot. The town settles down to a slow to a slow silent, waiting revenge, to sabotage. Suddenly machiery broke down, accidents happen, coal does not come easily out of the ground. Accidents on the railroads take place. Rails were spread. People were shot in reprisal but it didn't help. Young men escaped to England. Food was withheld from the disobedient. The whole

The whole town turned coldly obedient. Still sabotage goes on.

The effect, passive and active resistance of the town begins to show.

"Now it was that the conqueror was surrounded, the men of the battalion alone among silent enemies, and no man might relax his guard for even a moment. If he did, he disappeared, and some snowdrift received his body. If he drank, he disappeared. The men of the battalion could sing only together, cound dance only together, and dancing gradually stopped and the singing expressed a long for home. Their talk was of friends and relatives who loved them and their longings were for warmth and love.

"And the men thought always of home. The men of the battallion came to dest the place they had conquered, and they were curt with the people and the people were curt with them, and gradually a little fear began to grow in the conquerors, a fear that it would never be over, that they could never relax or go home, a fear that one day they would crack and be hunted through the mountains like rabbits, for the conquered never relaxed their hatred. The patrols, seeing lights, hearing laughter, would be drawn as to a fire, and when they came near, the laughter stopped, the warmth went out, and the people were cold and obedient. And the soldiers, smelling w rm food from the little restrurants, went in and ordered the warm food and found that it was oversalted or overpeppered.

"Thus it came about that the conquerors grew afraid of the conquered and their nerves were thin and they shot at shadows in the night. The cold, sullen silence in a week and cried all night and all day until they were sent away home. And others was with them always. Then three soldiers went insane/might have gone insane if they had not heard that mercy deaths awaited the insame at home, and a mercy death is a terrible thing to think of. Fear crept in on the men in their billets and it made them sad, and it crept into the patrols and it made them cruel."

Even the officers came also to feel the affect of this, the affects of the environment about them. Their nerves were on edge, especially those of Lt. Tonder who almust cracked up from loneliness and lack of companionship and he cried out:

"Conquest after conquest, deeper and deeper into molasses. Maybe the Leader is crazy. Flies conquer the fly-paper. Flies capture 200 miles of new flypaper!"

In his longing for companionship, longing to the point of illness, Lt.

Tonder comes to the m lovely Molly Morden, the widow of the executed miner. He wants someone to talk to. He wants to hear someone talk. He wants to forget the war. He needs companionship. He is desperately lonely. She is lonely too. For a moment shee too forgets war, hatred, memories of death. They both have the same right to life in all this death. But only for a moment. Soon the ghost of her husband who had been killed comes between her and Lt. Tonder. That hate can not be driven out, can not be excorcised. No m feeling of compassion must be permitted to dull resistance of the conquered against the conqueror. When next Lt. Tonder comes to the home of Molly Morden she picks up a big pair of scissors the coming of and with the long sharp blades like a knife she awaits/Lt. Tonder whom she kills.

The British come over in their planes and bomb this town and drop little packages of dynamite with instructions to the townspeople how to use them.

Mr. Corell now even more beaten up than at first, no longer jovial and smiling, now sharp and bitter goes over the head of Col. Lanser and receives instructions to hold the Mayor as hostage. His life will depend on the peacefulness of the community. If a high fuse of dynamite is ignited, his life will be forefeited.

"Kill the leaders and break the rebellion".

The Mayor is arrested. The Col. advises him to tell the oeople not to use the dynamite which has been parachuted down to them by the British planes.

Lanswer says to the Mayor: ""suppose you ask them not to?"

""Orden seemed half asleep; his eyes were drooped, and he tried to think.

He said, "I am not a very brave man, sir, I think they will light it, anyway." He struggled with his speech. "I hope they will, but if I ask them not to, they will be sorry."

""But you think they will light it?" Lanser insisted.

""The Mayor spoke proudly. "Yes, they will light it. If I tell them to fight, they will be glad, and I who am not a very brave man will have made them a little braver." He smiled apologetically. "You see, it is an easy thing to do, since the end for me is the same."

"Orden fingered his gold medallion. He said quietly, "You see, sir, nothing can change it. You will be destroyed and driven out." His voice was very soft.

"The people don't like to be conquered, sir, and so they will not be. Free men cannot start a war, but once it is started, they can fight on in defeat. Herd men, followers of a leaders, cannot do that, and so it is always the herd men who win battles and the free men who win wars. You will find that is so, Sir."

"Lanser was erect and stiff. "My orders are clear. Eleven o'clock was the deadline. I have taken hostages. If there is violence, the hostages will be executed."

"And Doctor Winter said to the colonel, "Will you carry out the orders, knowing they will fail?"

"Lanser's face was tight. "I will carry out my orders no matter what they are, but I do think sir, a proclamation from you might save many lives."

"Madame broke in plaintively, "I wish you would tell me what all this nonsense is."

""It is nonsense, dear,"

""But they can't arrest the Mayor, " she explained to him.

"Orden smiled at her. "No," he said," they can't arrest the Mayor. The Mayor is an idea conceived by free men. It will escape arrest."

"From the distance there was a sound of an explosion. And the echo of it rolled to the hills and back agaih. The whistle at the mit coal mine tooted a shrill, sharp warning. Orden stood very tensely for a moment and then he smiled. A second explosion roared — this time and heavier — and its mit echo rolled back from the

mountains. Orden looked at his watch and then he took his watch and chain and put them in Doctor Winter's hand."

The last you see of the Mayor is when you see him escorted out to his execution. He bravely laughs. He turns to the Doctor and the book closes with that memorable phrase of Socrates. He said to him "Crito, I owe a cock to Asclepius. Will x you remember to pay the debt?"

In this little volume, friends, which is really pieced to gether from newspaper accounts which you and I have read about Norway. Belgium. Holland. Poland and other lands you find a fierce hunger of men to be free, a hunger which only freedom can appease. Free men do not like to be conquered. Free men can not be conquered. That is the lesson of this book. That is the lesson which Hitler is learning today in all the lands which he has conquered. The resistance to these invaders of Steinbeck's story is bitter and relentless. How much greater must be the resistance of the conquered peoples of today. The Nazis of 1942, drunk with conquest look on the conquered people as ones to trampled on. They are contemptuous of them. They are determined to destroy those people, to destroy their souls so that they will never arise again as free peoples. The Nazis in Poland perpetrated acts of sadistic character to arouse the conquered people of other lands to a pitch of active resitance. They have dotted Europe with concentration camps, ghettoes, etc. No wonder the people of Jugoslavia, Greece, the conquered people of Holland, Belgium, Norway, Poland are doing all they can be active or passive resistance, by scorching the earth to destroy the conquerors of free them.

The lesson of this volume, of course, is that no defeat is possible for men as long as the spirit remains unshackled. The weak man can say I am strong in the midst of defeat. The weak man, physically weak, but spiritually strong can say, I am strong. I will win.

The lesson of this book is also reflected in the book of Ecclesiastes.

"I returned and saw all that was under the sun. Among other things I saw that
the war does not always go to the strong, or the race to the swift." It takes
more than strength, more than physical force to win. The ultimate victories of
life, for the ultimate victories require the eternal spiritual inner strength of
free men.

There is one thing in the thesis of this book which ought not to be over-looked the fact that wrong will always right itself in the long run, that wrong will right
itself in the long run, to tolerate wrong, that in the last analysis evil will
destroy itself. The conquered will destroy the conqueror. If you take a long view
of evil, you often take a false view. How long is a long view? There have been
any number of tragic in tances in the annals of mankind when people who refused or
were unable to resist invaders and conquerors were destroyed, civilization blotted
out, reduced to slavery for centuries. You can turn the pages of history and you
will find examples of conquerors who did succeed in destroying the people.

The other day I came across the story of the Spanish conquerors in some of the islands of the Carribean - Hispaniola. Columbus came to Hispaniola - at that time there were some 300,000 Indians peacefully going about their business. Columbus and a few men because they had superior weapons were able to conquer there them. Within sixteen years/were only 60,000 Tainos. Within fifty years a Spanish explorer reporting back stated that he could find no more than 500 Tainos on the island. Murder - slavery - broke the bodies and the spirits of these people made some escape to other lands, practically destroying them. That is the same story of Ghengis Khan and all the ruthless conquerors of history. Rome was destroyed by the self-same Nazis 1500 years ago. The great culture and civilization which was Rome, the Pax Romanie which covered the whole world and in which men lived in peace and security - that was destroyed, and mankind was

plunged into a thousand years of what we call the Dark Ages. It was not until a thousand years later that the human spirit was able to arouse itself again to a new age of Freedom in the Renaissance.

No, the doctrine of resist not evil because evil will in the long run destroy itself can not be practiced by any people that is mindful of its role in history, that has precious values to defend, that does not want to go down to defeat. "For him who makes of himself a lamb there is always a wolf to destroy him." By all means resist evil! By all means be prepared to resist evil. It is well for all free people to stand together in some form of collective power so that oppressors will be discouraged or crushed before they have a chance to carry out their inents. Peace does not come about by wishing for it, by inaction, are by laying down arms because there/always those who are not peacefully minded who are determined to attack the unarmed. Peace can only come about by international organization implemented by force. That was attempted in the last war. That was the basic idea of the League of Nations. It failed because those nations which should have held themselves responsible for carrying out these ideas betrayed themselves and we were plunged into a second world war.

It is heartening to read this little volume of Steinbeck. You see in this hour of darkness when the conqueror seems to winning that there is inherent in man a dynamic, a craving to be free that will never submit itself permanently and for all time to the shackles of conquerors. There is a flaming testament of the indomitable spirit of man which is the guarantee for all of us for ultimate victory in this war. "The Moon is Down". When the dawn comes brave men hope and pray for the coming of the spiritual dawn.

If By 10:95" it was all over. The four was occupied, the defenders defeated, and I the war finished". that is how in his opening paragraph, John steinheit, leads got right with the heart of his timely and worry play- world or fall The turn is sour! What happens to the form fits people after 10:45? and in the days and months which follow? What heiffen to the conSerend people and to the congress?

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