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STEINBECK

THE MOON IS DOWN



**THE
MOON IS DOWN**

BY JOHN STEINBECK



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TO PAT COVICI
A GREAT EDITOR AND A GREAT FRIEND

CHAPTER I

By ten-forty-five it was all over. The town was occupied, the defenders defeated, and the war finished. The invader had prepared for this campaign as carefully as he had for larger ones. On this Sunday morning the postman and the policeman had gone fishing in the boat of Mr. Corell, the popular storekeeper. He had lent them his trim sailboat for the day. The postman and the policeman were several miles at sea when they saw the small, dark transport, loaded with soldiers, go quietly past them. As officials of the town, this was definitely their business, and these two put about, but of course the battalion was in possession by the time they could make port. The policeman and the postman could not even get into their own offices in the Town Hall, and when they insisted on their rights they were taken prisoners of war and locked up in the town jail.

The local troops, all twelve of them, had been away, too, on this Sunday morning, for Mr. Corell, the popular storekeeper, had donated lunch, targets, cartridges, and prizes for a shooting-competition to take place six miles back in the hills, in a lovely glade Mr. Corell owned. The local troops, big, loose-hung boys, heard the planes and in the distance saw the parachutes, and they came back to town at double-quick step. When they arrived, the invader had flanked the road with machine guns. The loose-hung soldiers, having very little experience in war and none at all in defeat,

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opened fire with their rifles. The machine guns clattered for a moment and six of the soldiers became dead riddled bundles and three half-dead riddled bundles, and three of the soldiers escaped into the hills with their rifles.

By ten-thirty the brass band of the invader was playing beautiful and sentimental music in the town square while the townsmen, their mouths a little open and their eyes astonished, stood about listening to the music and staring at the gray-helmeted men who carried sub-machine guns in their arms.

By ten-thirty-eight the riddled six were buried, the parachutes were folded, and the battalion was billeted in Mr. Corell's warehouse by the pier, which had on its shelves blankets and cots for a battalion.

By ten-forty-five old Mayor Orden had received the formal request that he grant an audience to Colonel Lanser of the invaders, an audience which was set for eleven sharp at the Mayor's five-room palace.

The drawing-room of the palace was very sweet and comfortable. The gilded chairs covered with their worn tapestry were set about stiffly like too many servants with nothing to do. An arched marble fireplace held its little basket of red flameless heat, and a hand-painted coal scuttle stood on the hearth. On the mantel, flanked by fat vases, stood a large, curly porcelain clock which swarmed with tumbling cherubs. The wallpaper of the room was dark red with gold figures, and the woodwork was white, pretty, and clean. The paintings on the wall were largely preoccupied with the amazing heroism of large dogs faced with imperiled children. Nor water nor fire nor earthquake could do in a child so long as a big dog was available.

Beside the fireplace old Doctor Winter sat, bearded and simple and benign, historian and physician to the town. He watched in amazement while his thumbs rolled over and over on his lap. Doctor Winter was a

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man so simple that only a profound man would know him as profound. He looked up at Joseph, the Mayor's servingman, to see whether Joseph had observed the rolling wonders of his thumbs.

"Eleven o'clock?" Doctor Winter asked.

And Joseph answered abstractedly, "Yes, sir. The note said eleven."

"You read the note?"

"No, sir, His Excellency read the note to me."

And Joseph went about testing each of the gilded chairs to see whether it had moved since he had last placed it. Joseph habitually scowled at furniture, expecting it to be impertinent, mischievous, or dusty. In a world where Mayor Orden was the leader of men, Joseph was the leader of furniture, silver, and dishes. Joseph was elderly and lean and serious, and his life was so complicated that only a profound man would know him to be simple. He saw nothing amazing about Doctor Winter's rolling thumbs; in fact he found them irritating. Joseph suspected that something pretty important was happening, what with foreign soldiers in the town and the local army killed or captured. Sooner or later Joseph would have to get an opinion about it all. He wanted no levity, no rolling thumbs, no nonsense from furniture. Doctor Winter moved his chair a few inches from its appointed place and Joseph waited impatiently for the moment when he could put it back again.

Doctor Winter repeated, "Eleven o'clock, and they'll be here then, too. A time-minded people, Joseph."

And Joseph said, without listening, "Yes, sir."

"A time-minded people," the doctor repeated.

"Yes, sir," said Joseph.

"Time and machines."

"Yes, sir."

"They hurry toward their destiny as though it

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would not wait. They push the rolling world along with their shoulders."

And Joseph said, "Quite right, sir," simply because he was getting tired of saying, "Yes, sir."

Joseph did not approve of this line of conversation, since it did not help him to have an opinion about anything. If Joseph remarked to the cook later in the day, "A time-minded people, Annie," it would not make any sense. Annie would ask, "Who?" and then "Why?" and finally say, "That's nonsense, Joseph." Joseph had tried carrying Doctor Winter's remarks below-stairs before and it had always ended the same: Annie always discovered them to be nonsense.

Doctor Winter looked up from his thumbs and watched Joseph disciplining the chairs. "What's the Mayor doing?"

"Dressing to receive the colonel, sir."

"And you aren't helping him? He will be ill dressed by himself."

"Madame is helping him. Madame wants him to look his best. She"—Joseph blushed a little—"Madame is trimming the hair out of his ears, sir. It tickles. He won't let me do it."

"Of course it tickles," said Doctor Winter.

"Madame insists," said Joseph.

Doctor Winter laughed suddenly. He stood up and held his hands to the fire and Joseph skillfully darted behind him and replaced the chair where it should be.

"We are so wonderful," the doctor said. "Our country is falling, our town is conquered, the Mayor is about to receive the conqueror, and Madame is holding the struggling Mayor by the neck and trimming the hair out of his ears."

"He was getting very shaggy," said Joseph. "His eyebrows, too. His Excellency is even more upset about having his eyebrows trimmed than his ears. He says it hurts. I doubt if even Madame can do it."

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"She will try," Doctor Winter said.

"She wants him to look his best, sir."

Through the glass window of the entrance door a helmeted face looked in and there was a rapping on the door. It seemed that some warm light went out of the room and a little grayness took its place.

Doctor Winter looked up at the clock and said, "They are early. Let them in, Joseph."

Joseph went to the door and opened it. A soldier stepped in, dressed in a long coat. He was helmeted and he carried a sub-machine gun over his arm. He glanced quickly about and then stepped aside. Behind him an officer stood in the doorway. The officer's uniform was common and it had rank showing only on the shoulders.

The officer stepped inside and looked at Doctor Winter. He was rather like an overdrawn picture of an English gentleman. He had a slouch, his face was red, his nose long but rather pleasing; he seemed about as unhappy in his uniform as most British general officers are. He stood in the doorway, staring at Doctor Winter, and he said, "Are you Mayor Orden, sir?"

Doctor Winter smiled. "No, no, I am not."

"You are an official, then?"

"No, I am the town doctor and I am a friend of the Mayor."

The officer said, "Where is Mayor Orden?"

"Dressing to receive you. You are the colonel?"

"No, I am not. I am Captain Bentick." He bowed and Doctor Winter returned the bow slightly. Captain Bentick continued, as though a little embarrassed at what he had to say. "Our military regulations, sir, prescribe that we search for weapons before the commanding officer enters a room. We mean no disrespect, sir." And he called over his shoulder, "Sergeant!"

The sergeant moved quickly to Joseph, ran his hands over his pockets, and said, "Nothing, sir."

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Captain Bentick said to Doctor Winter, "I hope you will pardon us." And the sergeant went to Doctor Winter and patted his pockets. His hands stopped at the inside coat pocket. He reached quickly in, brought out a little, flat, black leather case, and took it to Captain Bentick. Captain Bentick opened the case and found there a few simple surgical instruments—two scalpels, some surgical needles, some clamps, a hypodermic needle. He closed the case again and handed it back to Doctor Winter.

Doctor Winter said, "You see, I am a country doctor. One time I had to perform an appendectomy with a kitchen knife. I have always carried these with me since then."

Captain Bentick said, "I believe there are some fire-arms here?" He opened a little leather book that he carried in his pocket.

Doctor Winter said, "You are thorough."

"Yes, our local man has been working here for some time."

Doctor Winter said, "I don't suppose you would tell who that man is?"

Bentick said, "His work is all done now. I don't suppose there would be any harm in telling. His name is Corell."

And Doctor Winter said in astonishment, "George Corell? Why, that seems impossible! He's done a lot for this town. Why, he even gave prizes for the shooting-match in the hills this morning." And as he said it his eyes began to understand what had happened and his mouth closed slowly, and he said, "I see; that is why he gave the shooting-match. Yes, I see. But George Corell—that sounds impossible!"

The door to the left opened and Mayor Orden came in; he was digging in his right ear with his little finger. He was dressed in his official morning coat, with his chain of office about his neck. He had a large,

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white, spraying mustache and two smaller ones, one over each eye. His white hair was so recently brushed that only now were the hairs struggling to be free, to stand up again. He had been Mayor so long that he was the Idea-Mayor in the town. Even grown people when they saw the word "mayor," printed or written, saw Mayor Orden in their minds. He and his office were one. It had given him dignity and he had given it warmth.

From behind him Madame emerged, small and wrinkled and fierce. She considered that she had created this man out of whole cloth, had thought him up, and she was sure that she could do a better job if she had it to do again. Only once or twice in her life had she ever understood all of him, but the part of him which she knew, she knew intricately and well. No little appetite or pain, no carelessness or meanness in him escaped her; no thought or dream or longing in him ever reached her. And yet several times in her life she had seen the stars.

She stepped around the Mayor and she took his hand and pulled his finger out of his outraged ear and pushed his hand to his side, the way she would take a baby's thumb away from his mouth.

"I don't believe for a moment it hurts as much as you say," she said, and to Doctor Winter, "He won't let me fix his eyebrows."

"It hurts," said Mayor Orden.

"Very well, if you want to look like that there is nothing I can do about it." She straightened his already straight tie. "I'm glad you're here, Doctor," she said. "How many do you think will come?" And then she looked up and saw Captain Bentick. "Oh," she said, "the colonel!"

Captain Bentick said, "No, ma'am, I'm only preparing for the colonel. Sergeant!"

The sergeant, who had been turning over pil-

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lows, looking behind pictures, came quickly to Mayor Orden and ran his hands over his pockets.

Captain Bentick said, "Excuse him, sir, it's regulations."

He glanced again at the little book in his hand. "Your Excellency, I think you have firearms here. Two items, I believe?"

Mayor Orden said, "Firearms? Guns, you mean, I guess. Yes, I have a shotgun and a sporting-rifle." He said deprecatingly, "You know, I don't hunt very much any more. I always think I'm going to, and then the season opens and I don't get out. I don't take the pleasure in it I used to."

Captain Bentick insisted. "Where are these guns, Your Excellency?"

The Mayor rubbed his cheek and tried to think. "Why, I think—" He turned to Madame. "Weren't they in the back of that cabinet in the bedroom with the walking sticks?"

Madame said, "Yes, and every stitch of clothing in that cabinet smells of oil. I wish you'd put them somewhere else."

Captain Bentick said, "Sergeant!" and the sergeant went quickly into the bedroom.

"It's an unpleasant duty. I'm sorry," said the captain.

The sergeant came back, carrying a double-barrelled shotgun and a rather nice sporting-rifle with a shoulder strap. He leaned them against the side of the entrance door.

Captain Bentick said, "That's all, thank you, Your Excellency. Thank you, Madame."

He turned and bowed slightly to Doctor Winter. "Thank you, Doctor. Colonel Lanser will be here directly. Good morning!"

And he went out of the front door, followed by the sergeant with the two guns in one hand and the sub-machine gun over his right arm.

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Madame said, "For a moment I thought he was the colonel. He was a rather nice-looking young man."

Doctor Winter said sardonically, "No, he was just protecting the colonel."

Madame was thinking, "I wonder how many officers will come?" And she looked at Joseph and saw that he was shamelessly eavesdropping. She shook her head at him and frowned and he went back to the little things he had been doing. He began dusting all over again.

And Madame said, "How many do you think will come?"

Doctor Winter pulled out a chair outrageously and sat down again. "I don't know," he said.

"Well"—she frowned at Joseph—"we've been talking it over. Should we offer them tea or a glass of wine? If we do, I don't know how many there will be, and if we don't, what are we to do?"

Doctor Winter shook his head and smiled. "I don't know. It's been so long since we conquered anybody or anybody conquered us. I don't know what is proper."

Mayor Orden had his finger back in his itching ear. He said, "Well, I don't think we should. I don't think the people would like it. I don't want to drink wine with them. I don't know why."

Madame appealed to the doctor then. "Didn't people in the old days—the leaders, that is—compliment each other and take a glass of wine?"

Doctor Winter nodded. "Yes, indeed they did." He shook his head slowly. "Maybe that was different. Kings and princes played at war the way Englishmen play at hunting. When the fox was dead they gathered at a hunt breakfast. But Mayor Orden is probably right: the people might not like him to drink wine with the invader."

Madame said, "The people are down listening to

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the music. Annie told me. If they can do that, why shouldn't we keep civilized procedure alive?"

The Mayor looked steadily at her for a moment and his voice was sharp. "Madame, I think with your permission we will not have wine. The people are confused now. They have lived at peace so long that they do not quite believe in war. They will learn and then they will not be confused any more. They elected me not to be confused. Six town boys were murdered this morning. I think we will have no hunt breakfast. The people do not fight wars for sport."

Madame bowed slightly. There had been a number of times in her life when her husband had become the Mayor. She had learned not to confuse the Mayor with her husband.

Mayor Orden looked at his watch and when Joseph came in, carrying a small cup of black coffee, he took it absent-mindedly. "Thank you," he said, and he sipped it. "I should be clear," he said apologetically to Doctor Winter. "I should be—do you know how many men the invader has?"

"Not many," the doctor said. "I don't think over two hundred and fifty; but all with those little machine guns."

The Mayor sipped his coffee again and made a new start. "What about the rest of the country?"

The doctor raised his shoulders and dropped them again.

"Was there no resistance anywhere?" the Mayor went on hopelessly.

And again the doctor raised his shoulders. "I don't know. The wires are cut or captured. There is no news."

"And our boys, our soldiers?"

"I don't know," said the doctor.

Joseph interrupted. "I heard—that is, Annie heard—"

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"Six men were killed, sir, by the machine guns. Annie heard three were wounded and captured."

"But there were twelve."

"Annie heard that three escaped."

The Mayor turned sharply. "Which ones escaped?" he demanded.

"I don't know, sir. Annie didn't hear."

Madame inspected a table for dust with her finger. She said, "Joseph, when they come, stay close to your bell. We might want some little thing. And put on your other coat, Joseph, the one with the buttons." She thought for a moment. "And, Joseph, when you finish what you are told to do, go out of the room. It makes a bad impression when you just stand around listening. It's provincial, that's what it is."

"Yes, Madame," Joseph said.

"We won't serve wine, Joseph, but you might have some cigarettes handy in that little silver conserve box. And don't strike the match to light the colonel's cigarette on your shoe. Strike it on the match-box."

"Yes, Madame."

Mayor Orden unbuttoned his coat and took out his watch and looked at it and put it back and buttoned his coat again, one button too high. Madame went to him and rebuttoned it correctly.

Doctor Winter asked, "What time is it?"

"Five of eleven."

"A time-minded people," the doctor said. "They will be here on time. Do you want me to go away?"

Mayor Orden looked startled. "Go? No—no, stay." He laughed softly. "I'm a little afraid," he said apologetically. "Well, not afraid, but I'm nervous." And he said helplessly, "We have never been conquered, for a long time—" He stopped to listen. In the distance there was a sound of band music, a march. They all turned in its direction and listened.

Madame said, "Here they come. I hope not too

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many try to crowd in here at once. It isn't a very big room."

Doctor Winter said sardonically, "Madame would prefer the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles?"

She pinched her lips and looked about, already placing the conquerors with her mind. "It is a very small room," she said.

The band music swelled a little and then grew fainter. There came a gentle tap on the door.

"Now, who can that be? Joseph, if it is anyone, tell him to come back later. We are very busy."

The tap came again. Joseph went to the door and opened it a crack and then a little wider. A gray figure, helmeted and gantleted, appeared.

"Colonel Lanser's compliments," the head said. "Colonel Lanser requests an audience with Your Excellency."

Joseph opened the door wide. The helmeted orderly stepped inside and looked quickly about the room and then stood aside. "Colonel Lanser!" he announced.

A second helmeted figure walked into the room, and his rank showed only on his shoulders. Behind him came a rather short man in a black business suit. The colonel was a middle-aged man, gray and hard and tired-looking. He had the square shoulders of a soldier, but his eyes lacked the blank look of the ordinary soldier. The little man beside him was bold and rosy-cheeked, with small black eyes and a sensual mouth.

Colonel Lanser took off his helmet. With a quick bow, he said, "Your Excellency!" He bowed to Madame. "Madame!" And he said, "Close the door, please, Corporal." Joseph quickly shut the door and stared in small triumph at the soldier.

Lanser looked questioningly at the doctor, and Mayor Orden said, "This is Doctor Winter."

"An official?" the colonel asked.

"A doctor, sir, and, I might say, the local historian."

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Lanser bowed slightly. He said, "Doctor Winter, I do not mean to be impertinent, but there will be a page in your history, perhaps—"

And Doctor Winter smiled. "Many pages, perhaps."

Colonel Lanser turned slightly toward his companion. "I think you know Mr. Corell," he said.

The Mayor said, "George Corell? Of course I know him. How are you, George?"

Doctor Winter cut in sharply. He said, very formally, "Your Excellency, our friend, George Corell, prepared this town for the invasion. Our benefactor, George Corell, sent our soldiers into the hills. Our dinner guest, George Corell, has made a list of every firearm in the town. Our friend, George Corell!"

Corell said angrily, "I work for what I believe in! That is an honorable thing."

Orden's mouth hung a little open. He was bewildered. He looked helplessly from Winter to Corell. "This isn't true," he said. "George, this isn't true! You have sat at my table, you have drunk port with me. Why, you helped me plan the hospital! This isn't true!"

He was looking very steadily at Corell and Corell looked belligerently back at him. There was a long silence. Then the Mayor's face grew slowly tight and very formal and his whole body was rigid. He turned to Colonel Lanser and he said, "I do not wish to speak in this gentleman's company."

Corell said, "I have a right to be here! I am a soldier like the rest. I simply do not wear a uniform."

The Mayor repeated, "I do not wish to speak in this gentleman's presence."

Colonel Lanser said, "Will you leave us now, Mr. Corell?"

And Corell said, "I have a right to be here!"

Lanser repeated sharply, "Will you leave us now, Mr. Corell? Do you outrank me?"