

Dictators Don't Drink

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The Lion's Mouth



Dictators Don't Drink

BY CHARLES W. FERGUSON

IT is a matter of record that those weird firebrands who guide the destiny of peoples to-day, and the lesser fanatics who would follow in their train if opportunity allowed, are without exception men of exemplary personal habits. Stalin, Hitler, and Mussolini are models of sobriety, not to mention the sour Trotsky, alienated by circumstance and exiled by rivals but not by ineligibility, or the lamented Lenin. In a word, the men who symbolize tyranny in the modern manner, who are up-to-date rulers of men, are fellows worthy of emulation by any ambitious young man who earnestly wants to get ahead. Every one of the lot would make a good son-in-law and husband. They represent an evangelist's ideal of moral rectitude.

The degree of variation from the severe standard of almost monastic self-abnegation is the only fluctuating factor in this strange international Sunday-school class. Hitler eats no meat, does not drink, does not smoke. To these suffocating virtues he adds the further and more notable virtue of continence. Trotsky in the fastness of his Mexican holdout allows himself meat twice a week and is content with a hurried business man's lunch of fruit, macaroni, a single vegetable, and a light dessert. He does not drink. Mussolini is more of a horse in his eating, but he abstains with grim fortitude from spirituous liquors, now and then taking only a tantalizing glass of light wine—but nothing which might seriously interfere with such high matters as the subjugation of an inferior people. Stalin lives frugally in a three-room apartment, dresses inconspicuously and in self-effacing taste,

eats frightfully simple meals, and sips brandy like a connoisseur.

The average salary of European dictators is \$426 a month. Hitler will accept no pay, and Mussolini and Stalin get along on annual stipends of \$5250 and \$3000 respectively. The whole lot exemplify that noble thrift which is identified with clean living.

Now what, for us wayfaring men, is the significance of these ironic facts? Do they simply serve to show that we too should make our lives sublime? Or do they indicate that we are to-day in the grip of a coterie of men essentially smug, disastrously self-righteous, grimly aware of their tremendous rectitude, and hence so dangerous that the world at large would be better off if it could entice them on a roaring drunk?

I incline to the latter view, both from a study of the facts and a good deal of personal observation of men and women who might—if their conduct could be the sign by which they conquer—be dictators. It is true of course that in part the sober and disciplined life goes along with the routine of managing any great enterprise. The more power these fellows have, the less freedom. They are corporation presidents twenty-four hours of the day. A hiccup at a diplomatic conference, an unchaste remark dropped to a subaltern, a silly elision in a public address, a foggy decision about a minor war or a tariff might easily throw the whole regime of any one of them in the ash can.

From this point of view their lack of self-indulgence is admirable if inevitable. What is more, they are charged with the high and uncomfortable duty of re-creating a national ideal. The youth of the lands under their domain must be trained in principles of fanatic devotion. Hence

the biceps of the dictator are always on display; he lives in a glorified show-case, a wax model of his contemporaries, one whom the passing throng instinctively and inwardly salutes—not only for his position but for the collective moral and ethnological grandeur which he represents.

These explanations, however forcible they may seem at first glance, are in my opinion quite piffing when compared with the real truth which lies back of the starched crinoline morals of our lords and masters. The real truth is that the very moral man is a potentially dangerous man because he is likely to be totally unaware of the common ills and emotions to which the ordinary flesh of the governed is heir.

It is in no small sense this grievous moral exaltation which makes the dictators dangerous. Their morality is at once the concomitant and source of their power. By living more austere than other men they hedge themselves away from the common lot and arrogate to themselves a purity of motive too sublime for a mortal. Both to themselves and their followers they appear through these petty abstinences to be free from considerations of self and singly devoted to the cause which is greater than man.

The fact which looms behind all the towering and publicized excellences of character among these fellows is the fact that by and large they do not drink. Now there is much to be said against alcohol. It has been responsible for murder and for rape and for other heinous crimes. I hold no brief for drinking—indeed, I have myself been forced by manners to stop it lest I end all the hopes of a rosy youth. It is, however, perhaps because of the new sense of superiority which I have acquired since stopping that I am able now to see that abstemiousness too may have its dangers.

It is undeniable that alcohol gives one a sense of human kinship. Even the raucous singing of "Sweet Adeline" in a public drunken debauch signals the strong desire of men for harmony—not of

notes and varied parts altogether but of the spirit and of varied interests. After a few rounds of drinks even the stiffest of men finds himself on friendly terms with strangers. He is genial. Someone strikes up "Sweet Adeline." He joins in, hating himself a bit, but driven by some compulsion to be at one with his fellows.

What has happened? In a sense he is getting rid not so much of his inhibitions as of his emotions. He is getting them out of his system, giving them exercise and godspeed. And the next morning—if he has consumed alcohol in any quantity—he is dreadfully and stupidly aware of the fact that he has made a ghastly ass of himself the night before. Or at least that he has been indiscreet. He has debauched his health. He has squandered his money. He has thrown away his armor of dignity.

No man could be a dangerous dictator with a hangover. His sense of god-almightiness would be wrecked. He would feel himself to have been gross and humiliated in the presence of his subjects. He would have become one of the masses—one of the lowest of them—and the experience would have done something to his insufferable conceit.

Any duffer who has ever had one too many—who has felt the magic which liquor works in the veins—knows that it gives, among other things, an extraordinary sense of power; that it speeds up unconscionably the processes of the body and the mind; liberates, not to say licenses, the imagination; mows down obstacles or obscures them. Yet anyone who has ever recovered from the effects of too much alcohol knows that this sense of power which ignores difficulties, which sings its way over hazards and leaps gazellelike from achievement to achievement, is a completely false sense of power.

Now a fanatic is a person who, cold sober, believes what the average person believes when drunk. Add to the fact that he is deprived of the best of all opportunities to know he is absurd the further fact that his abstinence gives him an inescapable feeling of righteousness, and

you have doubly built up in him that terrifying sense of importance which is the *sine qua non* of a dictator.

With a large part of the world to-day under the domination of moralists, the end cannot but be slaughter. Through these fellows we are led to place our trust in high moral principles and to allow ourselves to be killed for the sentiments of others.

I have, therefore, a modest proposal to make. Instead of a disarmament conference or a session of potentates and functionaries to discuss moot matters of commerce and colonies and territories and raw materials (such conferences would be in vain because they attack perplexing problems without the change of heart and attitude which must be the prelude of civilized action), I propose instead an international cocktail party, attended only by chosen leaders and not by their emissaries.

The setting is not important, though I should vote for London or Geneva. The time would be the first available Friday afternoon at five-thirty. The drinks would seem innocent and harmless, but would be cunningly administered to the worthy end of getting every great ego in the world to-day wholly pifflicated. Knock-out drops would be barred and the selection of drinks left to a committee of barflies. There might be a choice of black velvet (champagne and stout in equal parts), London fog (made of absinthe, vermouth, and brandy in equal portions), and dyna. This last drink would be very efficacious. It is a festive concoction of miners in Southern Nevada and is compounded of equal parts of straight alcohol and water—in which is playfully dissolved a pea of dynamite. The effect, through some frightful distension of the muscles, is a weird feeling that the head is eight times its normal size.

The main object would merely be to fry the dignitaries as smoothly and quickly as possible. We would grant the lot diplomatic immunity, as the phrase is—nothing said or done in the course of the evening would be binding. All re-

marks would be off the record and no visitors would be allowed save those charged with the mixing of the drinks and a sufficient constabulary to prevent violence.

From the informality engendered we might expect certain desirable by-products. At the stage where everyone was calling Mussolini simply *Ben* and Stalin *Joe* and Hitler *Addie*, where Hitler was telling Stalin with uproarious laughter what he would like to do with the Ukraine, it is possible that some of these fellows might conclude that the others were, after all, not as bad as they had been painted.

But even if everyone really let go and simply tons of ice were broken, I should expect the greatest good from this noble experiment to result on Saturday morning. Every one of the world's great leaders would have suddenly and harmlessly made himself ridiculous *in his own eyes* and in the eyes of his fellow-immortals. Everything that had been said the night before would seem preposterous and, more ghastly still, the haunting wonder of what it was after all one had said to Ben and Addie would rack the mind and agonize the spirit. Far from being the irreproachable supermen of to-day, the world's best would have become ordinary fellows, afflicted like their meanest followers, and perhaps in a frame of mind to grapple with matters as men and not as demigods.

I submit the plan for whatever it is worth to those who are concerned with the future of the race. Whether we should follow up the hangover with a disarmament conference the next afternoon I cannot say. This matter could be decided later. At least we can get the boys together and let them be boys again.

YOUTH MUST BE SERVED

BY CHARLOTTE MOODY

RECENTLY Miss Hemming had begun to wonder whether she didn't need new, fresh interests. She had been quite contented before, reading a good deal,