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#TL06 - DISCOURSE ON VOLUNTARY SERVITUDE

by Frederick Mann

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ÉTTIENE DE LA BOÈCE

I serve you not, if you I follow,
Shadowlike, o'er hill and hollow;
And bend my fancy to your leading,
All too nimble for my treading.
When the pilgrimage is done,
And we've the landscape overrun,
I am bitter, vacant, thwarted,
And your heart is unsupported.
Vainly valiant, you have missed
The manhood that should yours resist, -
Its complement; but if I could,
In severe or cordial mood,
Lead you rightly to my altar,
Where the wisest Muses falter,
And worship that world-warming spark,
Which dazzles me in midnight dark,
Equalising small and large,
While the soul it doth surcharge,
Till the poor is wealthy grown,
And the hermit is never alone, -
The traveller and the road seem one
With the errand to be done, -
That were a man and lover's part,
That were Freedom's whitest chart.

- Ralph Waldo Emerson (c. 1833)

Brief Biography of Étienne de la Boétie

(The modern French pronunciation of "La Boétie" is "La Bo-ay-see." However, in the local dialect of the area where La Boétie lived his name was pronounced "La Bwettie.")

Étienne de la Boétie was born in the southwest of France in Sarlat (near Bordeaux) on November 1, 1530. He died in 1563 at the age of thirty-two (probably from dysentery). La Boétie was orphaned at an early age, and raised by his uncle and namesake, the curate of Bouillonas. La Boétie wrote *Discours de la Servitude Volontaire* while a law student at the University of Orléans, probably in 1552 or 1553, at the age of 22. His main teacher at the university was Anne du Bourg, who later became a Huguenot (French Protestant) martyr, burned at the stake in 1559 for "heresy."

La Boétie's *Discourse of Voluntary Servitude* is particularly remarkable in that he was born into a family of "terrocrats" (coercive government agents or terrorist bureaucrats), and he himself - after graduating with a law degree in 1553 at the University of Orléans - received a royal appointment to the Bordeaux Parlement, where he pursued a career as a judge, a censor, and a diplomatic negotiator, until his death in 1563. In 1562 La Boétie reputedly wrote an unpublished manuscript (discovered in 1913), in which he recommended that Catholicism be enforced upon France, and that Protestant leaders (Huguenots) be persecuted as rebels. (I have no idea why La Boétie, after having written - in my opinion - the most advanced essay on politics became such a depraved terrocrat.)

The *Discourse* was originally circulated in manuscript form and was never published by La Boétie. Nevertheless its influence became widespread. La Boétie was a close friend of the famous essayist, Montaigne (Michel Eyquem), whom he met around 1557. La Boétie undoubtedly had a considerable influence on Montaigne, who was born in 1533. In a letter to Henri de Mesmes in 1570, Montaigne wrote:

"So that having loved monsieur de la Boétie more than anything in this world, the greatest man in my opinion of this age, I thought I should grossly fail in my duty, if, knowingly, I should suffer so great a name, and a memory so worthy of esteem, to vanish and be lost, if I did not endeavor, by these pieces [later to become known as the *Mesmes Copy* of the *Discourse*] of his, to raise him up and bring him to life."

Many Huguenot pamphleteers were strongly influenced by the *Discourse*, and some even claimed it as their own. It was first published in 1574 (anonymously and incompletely) in a Huguenot pamphlet. In 1576 the first complete version of the *Discourse* was published by Simon Goulart in Holland and Switzerland in a collection of radical Huguenot essays. La Boétie may have indirectly influenced Shakespeare (born around the time of La Boétie's death) via Montaigne. Some critics have identified Hamlet with Montaigne and Horatio with La Boétie. Francis Bacon was influenced by Montaigne. Bacon's elder brother spent twelve years near Bordeaux and later corresponded with Montaigne.

Between 1700 and 1939 several editions of the *Discourse* were published in France, sometimes as supplements to Montaigne's *Essays*. It was reprinted twice during the French Revolution. In 1735 an English translation of the *Discourse*, probably translated by "T[homas?]. Smith" was published in London. Around 1833 Emerson wrote his poem, *Étienne de la Boèce*. Between 1906 and 1908 Tolstoy used extracts from the *Discourse* in three of his books. In 1907 Gustave Landauer made the *Discourse* central to his German anarchist book, *Die Revolution*. In 1933 a Dutch translation by Barthelemy de

Ligt was published in The Hague under the title *Vrijwillige Slavernij* ("Voluntary Slavery"). In 1942 an English translation by Harry Kurz was published in New York under the title *Anti-Dictator*. In 1947 an edition in modern French was published in Brussels by Hem Day. In 1952 a Russian translation was published in Moscow. In 1974 an edition of the *Discourse* was published in Colorado Springs under the title *The Will to Bondage* (Ralph Myles Publisher, Colorado Springs; 1974), containing both the original French text, and the 1735 English translation, with an Introduction by James J. Martin. In 1975 the Harry Kurz translation was republished with an Introduction by Murray N. Rothbard, under the title *The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude* (Free Life Editions, NY; 1975). In addition, several books have been written about La Boétie.

Étienne de la Boétie can certainly be regarded as the father of non-violent (or pacifist) anarchism and civil disobedience. The central question he addresses is: **Why do people consent to their own enslavement?** One of his central insights is that, to topple a tyranny, the victims only need to withdraw their consent and support. Directly and indirectly La Boétie had a profound influence on the Huguenots, the French Revolutionists, and such notable pacifist anarchists as Tolstoy, Gandhi, Thoreau, and Tucker.

La Boétie also had Rose Wilder Lane's central insight that **humans are free by nature**.

Possibly, the most important lesson we can learn from La Boétie's *Discourse* is **leverage**. A student (La Boétie) writes a forty-page essay. An author (Tolstoy) reads the essay and incorporates its main ideas in his *Letter to a Hindu*. A pacifist rebel (Gandhi) applies the ideas to defeat the British Empire and drive the British out of India.

"T[homas?] Smith", the probable translator of the 1735 English edition concluded his preface (edited):

"These sentiments, which inspired the heroes of old, and of later times, and were productive of such noble actions, that time shall never obliterate, having inflamed the breast of the translator with an ardor for liberty inferior to no one's, and being conscious to himself that he was not able from his own stores to produce anything worthy of the attention of the public, he was ambitious of contributing at least his mite [small contribution] to this glorious cause, by publishing the labors of others, and in a country of liberty, where so many admirable treatises have been written, for support of it, that this zealous advocate [of liberty] might be brought to take his part, and appear in our language as one of its illustrious defenders."

The La Boétie Analysis

Grasping the "La Boétie analysis" is a key to understanding the Build Freedom strategy. La Boétie approached his subject like an outsider observing the strange phenomenon of political behavior. He wrote like someone who had jumped out of the system and viewed it without preconceptions. He somehow unbrainwashed himself so he could adopt a "Martian viewpoint."

What is so remarkable is that La Boétie did this in 1552 or 1553 - four-hundred-and-forty years ago! It is also interesting that modern tyrants use the same formula today to subjugate and dominate their victims. Here are the main elements of the La Boétie analysis as I see it:

- The only power tyrants have is the power relinquished to them by their victims.
- The tyrant is often a weak little man. He has no special qualities that set him apart from anyone else - yet the gullible idolize him.

- The victims bring about their own subjection - the "win their enslavement."
- If without violence the tyrant is simply not obeyed, he becomes "naked and undone and as nothing."
- Once you resolve to serve no more, you are free.
- We are all born free and naturally free.
- Grown-up adults should adopt reason as their guide and never become slaves of anybody.
- People can be enslaved through either force or deception.
- When people lose their freedom through deceit, it is because they mislead themselves.
- People born into slavery regard it as a natural condition.
- In general, people are shaped more by their environment than by their natural capacities - if they allow it.
- Habit and custom are powerful forces that keep people enslaved.
- There are always some people who cannot be tamed, subjected, or enslaved. Even if freedom were to be entirely extinguished, these people would re-invent it.
- Lovers of freedom tend to be ineffective because they are not known to one another.
- People who lose their freedom also lose their valor (strength of mind, bravery).
- Among free people there is competition to do good for humanity.
- People seem to be most gullible towards those who deliberately set out to fool them. It is as if people have a need to be deceived.
- Tyrants stupefy their victims with "pastimes and vain pleasures flashed before their eyes."
- Tyrants parade like "workers of magic."
- Tyrants can only give back part of what they first took from their victims.
- Tyrants attain their positions through: (a) Force; (b) Birth; or (c) Election.
- Tyrants create a power structure, consisting of a multi-layered hierarchy, staffed by a conspiracy of accomplices. Accomplices receive their positions as a favor from the tyrant.
- The worst dregs of society gather around the tyrant - they are people of weak character who trade servility for unearned wealth.
- Accomplices can profit greatly from their positions in the hierarchy.
- If people withdraw their support, the tyrant topples over from his own corrupted weight.

The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude (abridged and edited from the Harry Kurz translation)

Part I

For the present I should like merely to understand how it happens that so many men, so many villages, so many cities, so many nations, sometimes suffer under a single **tyrant who has no other power than the power they give him**; who is able to harm them only to the extent to which they have the willingness to bear with him; who could do them absolutely no injury unless they preferred to put up with him rather than contradict him. Surely a striking situation! Yet it is so common that one must grieve the more and wonder the less at the spectacle of a million men serving in wretchedness, their necks under the yoke, not constrained by a greater multitude than they, but simply, it would seem, delighted and charmed by the name of one man alone whose power they need not fear, for he is evidently the one person whose qualities they cannot admire because of his inhumanity and brutality toward them. A weakness characteristic of humankind is that we often have to obey force; we have to make concessions; we ourselves cannot always be the stronger. Therefore, when a nation is constrained by the fortune of war to serve as a clique, as happened when the city of Athens served the thirty

Tyrants, one should not be amazed that the nation obeys, but simply be grieved by the situation; or rather, instead of being amazed or saddened, consider patiently the evil and look forward hopefully toward a happier future.

Our nature is such that the common duties of human relationship occupy a great part of the course of our life. It is reasonable to love virtue, to esteem good deeds, to be grateful for good from whatever source we may receive it, and, often, to give up some of our comfort in order to increase the honor and advantage of some man whom we love and who deserves it. Therefore, if the inhabitants of a country have found some great personage who has shown rare foresight in protecting them in an emergency, rare boldness in defending them, rare solicitude in governing them, and if, from that point on, they contract the habit of obeying him and depending on him to such an extent that they grant him certain prerogatives, I fear that such a procedure is not prudent, inasmuch as they remove him from a position in which he may do evil. Certainly while he continues to manifest good will one need fear no harm from a man who seems to be generally well disposed.

But - in the pursuit of understanding - I ask you! What strange phenomenon is this? What name shall we give it? What is the nature of this misfortune? What vice is it, or, rather, what degradation? To see an endless multitude of people not merely obeying, but driven to servility? Not ruled, but tyrannized over? These wretches have no wealth, no kin, nor wife nor children, not even life itself that they can call their own. They suffer plundering, wantonness, cruelty, not from an army, not from a barbarian horde, on account of whom they must shed their blood and sacrifice their lives, but from a single man; not from a Hercules nor from a Sampson, but from a single little man. Too frequently this same little man is the most cowardly and effeminate in the nation, a stranger to the powder of battle and hesitant on the sands of the tournament; not only without energy to direct men by force, but with hardly enough virility to bed with a common woman! Shall we call subjection to such a leader cowardice? **Shall we say that those who serve him are cowardly and faint-hearted?** If two, if three, if four, do not defend themselves from the one, we might call that circumstance surprising but nevertheless conceivable. In such a case one might be justified in suspecting a lack of courage. But if a hundred, if a thousand endure the caprice of a single man, should we not rather say that they lack not the courage but the desire to rise against him, and that such an attitude indicates indifference rather than cowardice? When not a hundred, not a thousand men, but a hundred provinces, a thousand cities, a million men, refuse to assail a single man from whom the kindest treatment received is the infliction of serfdom and slavery, what shall we call that? Is it cowardice? Of course there is in every vice inevitably some limit beyond which one cannot go. Two, possibly ten, may fear one; but when a thousand, a million men, a thousand cities, fail to protect themselves against the domination of one man, this cannot be called cowardly, for cowardice does not sink to such a depth, any more than valor can be termed the effort of one individual to scale a fortress, to attack an army, or to conquer a kingdom. What monstrous vice, then, is this which does not even deserve to be called cowardice, a vice for which no term can be found vile enough, which nature herself disavows and our tongues refuse to name?

Place on one side fifty thousand armed men, and on the other the same number; let them join in battle, one side fighting to retain its liberty, the other to take it away; to which would you, at a guess, promise victory? Which men do you think would march more gallantly to combat - those who anticipate as a reward for their suffering the maintenance of their freedom, or those who cannot expect any other prize for the blows exchanged than the enslavement of others? One side will have before its eyes the blessings of the past and the hope of similar joy in the future; their thoughts will dwell less on the comparatively brief pain of battle than on what they may have to endure forever, they, their children, and all their posterity. The other side has nothing to inspire it with courage except the weak urge of greed, which fades before danger and which can never be so keen, it seems to me, that it will not be

dismayed by the least drop of blood from wounds. Consider the justly famous battles of Miltiades, Leonidas, Themistocles, still fresh today in recorded history and in the minds of men as if they had occurred but yesterday, battles fought in Greece for the welfare of the Greeks and as an example to the world. What power do you think gave to a mere handful of men not the strength but the courage to withstand the attack of a fleet so vast that even the seas were burdened, and to defeat the armies of so many nations, armies so immense that their officers alone outnumbered the entire Greek force? What was it but the fact that in those glorious days this struggle represented not so much a fight of Greeks against Persians as a victory of liberty over domination, of freedom over greed?

It amazes us to hear accounts of the valor that liberty arouses in the hearts of those who defend it; but who could believe reports of what goes on every day among the inhabitants of some countries, who could really believe that one man alone may mistreat a hundred thousand and deprive them of their liberty? Who would credit such a report if he merely heard it, without being present to witness the event? And if this condition occurred only in distant lands and were reported to us, which one among us would not assume the tale to be imagined or invented, and not really true? Obviously there is no need of fighting to overcome this single tyrant, for he is automatically defeated if the country refuses consent to its own enslavement: it is not necessary to deprive him of anything, but simply to give him nothing; there is no need that the country make an effort to do anything for itself provided it does nothing against itself. **It is therefore the inhabitants themselves who permit, or, rather, bring about, their own subjection, since by ceasing to submit they would put an end to their servitude. A people enslaves itself, cuts its own throat, when, having a choice between being vassals and being free men, it deserts its liberties and takes on the yoke, gives consent to its own misery, or, rather, apparently welcomes it.** If it costs the people anything to recover its freedom, I should not urge action to this end, although there is nothing a human should hold more dear than the restoration of his own natural right, to change himself from a beast of burden back to a man, so to speak. I do not demand of him so much boldness; let him prefer the doubtful security of living wretchedly to the uncertain hope of living as he pleases. What then? If in order to have liberty nothing more is needed than to long for it, if only a simple act of the will is necessary, is there any nation in the world that considers a single wish too high a price to pay in order to recover rights which it ought to be ready to redeem at the cost of its blood, rights such that their loss must bring all men of honor to the point of feeling life to be unendurable and death itself a deliverance?

Everyone knows that the fire from a little spark will increase and blaze ever higher as long as it finds wood to burn; yet without being quenched by water, but merely by finding no more fuel to feed on, it consumes itself, dies down, and is no longer a flame. Similarly, the more tyrants pillage, the more they crave, the more they ruin and destroy; **the more one yields to them, and obeys them, by that much do they become mightier and more formidable, the readier to annihilate and destroy. But if not one thing is yielded to them, if, without any violence they are simply not obeyed, they become naked and undone and as nothing, just as, when the root receives no nourishment, the branch withers and dies.**

To achieve the good that they desire, the bold do not fear danger; the intelligent do not refuse to undergo suffering. It is the stupid and cowardly who are neither able to endure hardship nor to vindicate their rights; they stop at merely longing for them, and lose through timidity the valor roused by the effort to claim their rights, although the desire to enjoy them still remains as part of their nature. A longing common to both the wise and the foolish, to brave men and to cowards, is this longing for all those things which, when acquired, would make them happy and contented. Yet one element appears to be lacking. I do not know how it happens that nature fails to place within the hearts of men a burning desire for liberty, a blessing so great and so desirable that when it is lost all evils follow thereafter, and

even the blessings that remain lose taste and savor because of their corruption by servitude. **Liberty is the only joy upon which men do not seem to insist; for surely if they really wanted it they would claim it. Apparently they refuse this wonderful privilege because it is so easily acquired.**

Poor, wretched, and stupid peoples, nations determined on your own misfortune and blind to your own good! **You let yourselves be deprived before your own eyes of the best part of your revenues; your fields are plundered, your homes robbed, your family heirlooms taken away. You live in such a way that you cannot claim a single thing as your own; and it would seem that you consider yourselves lucky to be loaned your property, your families, and your very lives.** All this havoc, this misfortune, this ruin, descends upon you not from alien foes, but from the one enemy whom you yourselves render as powerful as he is, for whom you go bravely to war, for whose "greatness" you do not refuse to offer your own bodies unto death. **He who thus domineers over you has only two eyes, only two hands, only one body, no more than is possessed by the least man among the infinite numbers dwelling in your cities; he has indeed nothing more than the power that you confer upon him to destroy you.** Where has he acquired enough eyes to spy upon you, if you do not provide them yourselves? How can he have so many arms to beat you with, if he does not borrow them from you? The feet that trample down your cities, where does he get them if they are not your own? How does he have any power over you except through you? How would he dare assail you if he had no cooperation from you? What could he do to you if you yourselves did not connive with the thief who plunders you, if you were not accomplices of the murderer who kills you, if you were not traitors to yourselves? You sow your crops in order that he may ravage them, you install and furnish your homes to give him goods to pillage; you rear your daughters that he may gratify his lust; you bring up your children in order that he may confer upon them the greatest "privilege" he knows - to be led into his battles, to be delivered to butchery, to be made the servants of his greed and the instruments of his vengeance; you yield your bodies unto hard labor in order that he may indulge in his delights and wallow in his filthy pleasures; you weaken yourselves in order to make him the stronger and the mightier to hold you in check. From all these indignities, such as the very beasts of the field would not endure, you can deliver yourselves if you try, not by taking action, but merely by willing to be free. **Resolve to serve no more, and you are at once freed. I do not ask that you place hands upon the tyrant to topple him over, but simply that you support him no longer; then you will behold him, like a great Colossus whose pedestal has been pulled away, fall of his own weight and break into pieces.**

Part II

Doctors are no doubt correct in warning us not to touch incurable wounds; and I am presumably taking chances in preaching as I do to a people which has lost all sensitivity and, no longer conscious of its infirmity, is plainly suffering from mortal illness. Let us therefore understand by logic, if we can, how it happens that this obstinate willingness to submit has become so deeply rooted that the very love of liberty now seems no longer natural.

In the first place, all would agree that, if we led our lives according to the ways intended by nature and the lessons taught by her, **we should be intuitively obedient to our parents; later we should adopt reason as our guide and become slaves to nobody.** Concerning the obedience given instinctively to one's father and mother, we are in agreement, each one admitting himself to be a model. As to whether reason is born with us or not, that is a question loudly discussed by academicians and treated by all schools of philosophers. For the present I think I do not err in stating that there is in our souls some native seed of reason, which, if nourished by good counsel and training, flowers into virtue, but which on the other hand, if unable to resist the vices surrounding it, is stifled and blighted. Yet surely if there

is anything in this world clear and obvious, to which one cannot close one's eyes, it is the fact that nature has cast us all in the same mold in order that we may behold in one another companions, or rather brothers. If in distributing her gifts nature has favored some more than others with respect to body or spirit, she has nevertheless not planned to place us within this world as if it were a field of battle, and has not endowed the stronger or the clever in order that they may act like armed brigands in a forest and attack the weaker. One should rather conclude that in distributing larger shares to some and smaller shares to others, nature has intended to give occasion for brotherly love to become manifest, some of us having the strength to give help to others who are in need of it. Hence, since this kind mother has given us the whole world as a dwelling place, has lodged us in the same house, has fashioned us according to the same model so that in beholding one another we might almost recognize ourselves; since she has bestowed upon us all the great gift of voice and speech for fraternal relationship, thus achieving by the common and mutual statement of our thoughts a communion of our wills; and since she has tried in every way to narrow and tighten the bond of our union and kinship; since she has revealed in every possible manner her intention, not so much to associate us as to make us one organic whole, there can be no further doubt that **we are all naturally free**, inasmuch as we are all comrades. Accordingly it should not enter the mind of anyone that nature has placed some of us in slavery, since she has actually created us all in one likeness.

Therefore it is fruitless to argue whether or not liberty is natural, since none can be held in slavery without being wronged, and in a world governed by a nature, which is reasonable, there is nothing so contrary as an injustice. **Since freedom is our natural state, we are not only in possession of it but have the urge to defend it.** Now, if perchance some cast a doubt on this conclusion and are so corrupted that they are not able to recognize their rights and inborn tendencies, I shall have to do them the honor that is properly theirs and place, so to speak, brute beasts in the pulpit to throw light on their nature and condition. The very beasts, if men are not too deaf, cry out to them, "Long live Liberty!" Many among them die as soon as captured: just as the fish loses life as soon as he leaves the water, so do these creatures close their eyes upon the light and have no desire to survive the loss of their natural freedom. If the animals were to constitute their kingdom by rank, their nobility would be chosen from this type. Others, from the largest to the smallest, when captured put up such a strong resistance by means of claws, horns, beak, and paws, that they show clearly enough how they cling to what they are losing; afterwards in captivity they manifest by so many evident signs their awareness of their misfortune, that it is easy to see they are languishing rather than living, and continue their existence more in lamentation of their lost freedom than in enjoyment of their servitude. What else can explain the behavior of the elephant who, after defending himself to the last ounce of his strength and knowing himself on the point of being taken, dashes his jaws against the trees and breaks his tusks, thus manifesting his longing to remain free as he has been and proving his wit and ability to buy off the huntsmen in the hope that through the sacrifice of his tusks he will be permitted to offer his ivory as a ransom for his liberty? We feed the horse from birth in order to train him to do our bidding. Yet he is tamed with such difficulty that when we begin to break him in he bites the bit, he rears at the touch of the spur, as if to reveal his instinct and show by his actions that, if he obeys, he does not of his own free will but under constraint. What more can we say? And now, since all beings, because they feel, suffer misery in subjection and long for liberty; since the very beasts, although made for the service of man, cannot become accustomed to control without protest, **what evil chance has so denatured man that he, the only creature really born to be free, lacks the memory of his original condition and the desire to return to it?**

There are three kinds of tyrants; some receive their proud position through elections by the people, others by force of arms, others by inheritance. Those who have acquired power by means of war, act in such wise that it is evident they rule over a conquered country. Those who are born to kingship are

scarcely any better, because they are nourished on the breast of tyranny, suck in with their milk the instincts of the tyrant, and consider the people under them their inherited serfs; and according to their individual disposition, miserly or prodigal, they treat their kingdom as their property. He who has received his position from the people, however, ought to be, it seems to me, more bearable and would be so, I think, were it not for the fact that as soon as he sees himself higher than the others, flattered by that quality which we call grandeur, he plans never to relinquish his position. Such a man usually determines to pass on to his children the authority that the people have conferred upon him; and once his heirs have taken this attitude, strange it is how far they surpass other tyrants in all sorts of vices, and especially in cruelty, because they find no other means to impose this new tyranny than by tightening control and removing their subjects so far from any notion of liberty that even if the memory of it is fresh it will soon be eradicated. Yet, to speak accurately, I do perceive that there is some difference among these three types of tyranny, but as for stating a preference, I cannot grant there is any. For although the means of coming into power differ, still the method of ruling is practically the same; those who are elected act as if they were breaking in bullocks; those who are conquerors make the people their prey; those who are heirs plan to treat them as if they were their natural slaves.

In connection with this, let us imagine some newborn individuals, neither acquainted with slavery nor desirous of liberty, ignorant indeed of the very words. If they were permitted to choose between being slaves and free men, to which would they give their vote? There can be no doubt that they would much prefer to be guided by reason itself than to be ordered about by the whims of a single man. **Certainly all men, as long as they remain men, before letting themselves become enslaved must either be driven by force or led into it by deception;** conquered by foreign armies, as were Sparta and Athens by the forces of Alexander or by political factions, as when at an earlier period the control of Athens had passed into the hands of Pisistrates. **When they lose their liberty through deceit they are not so often betrayed by others as misled by themselves.** This was the case with the people of Syracuse, chief city of Sicily when, in the throes of war and heedlessly planning only for the present danger, they promoted Denis, their first tyrant, by entrusting to him the command of the army, without realizing that they had given him such power that on his victorious return this "worthy" man would behave as if he had vanquished not his enemies but his compatriots, transforming himself from captain to tyrant.

It is incredible how as soon as a people becomes subject, it promptly falls into such complete forgetfulness of its freedom that it can hardly be roused to the point of regaining it, obeying so easily and so willingly that one is led to say, on beholding such a situation, that this people has not so much lost its liberty as won its enslavement. It is true that in the beginning men submit under constraint and by force; but those who come after them obey without regret and perform willingly what their predecessors had done because they had to. This is why **men born under the yoke and then nourished and reared in slavery are content, without further effort, to live in their native circumstance, unaware of any other state or right, and considering as quite natural the condition into which they were born.** There is, however, no heir so spendthrift or indifferent that he does not sometimes scan the account books of his father in order to see if he is enjoying all the privileges of his legacy or whether, perchance, his rights and those of his predecessor have not been encroached upon. Nevertheless it is clear enough that the powerful influence of custom is in no respect more compelling than in this, namely, **habituation to subjection.** It is said that Mithridates trained himself to drink poison. Like him **we learn to swallow, and not to find bitter, the venom of servitude.** It cannot be denied that nature is influential in shaping us to her will and making us reveal our rich or meager endowment; yet it must be admitted that she has less power over us than custom, for the reason that native endowment, no matter how good, is dissipated unless encouraged, whereas environment always shapes us in its own way, whatever that may be, in spite of nature's gifts. The good seed that nature plants in us is so slight and so slippery that it cannot withstand the least harm from wrong nourishment;

it flourishes less easily, becomes spoiled, withers, and comes to nothing. Fruit trees retain their own particular quality if permitted to grow undisturbed, but lose it promptly and bear strange fruit not their own when ingrafted. Every herb has its peculiar characteristics, its virtues and properties; yet frost, weather, soil, or the gardener's hand increase or diminish its strength; the plant seen in one spot cannot be recognized in another.

Whoever could have observed the early Venetians, a handful of people living so freely that the most wicked among them would not wish to be king over them, so born and trained that they would not vie with one another except as to which one could give the best counsel and nurture their liberty most carefully, so instructed and developed from their cradles that they would not exchange for all the other delights of the world an iota of their freedom; who, I say, familiar with the original nature of such a people, could visit today the territories of the man known as the Great Doge, and there contemplate with composure a people unwilling to live except to serve him, and maintaining his power at the cost of their lives? Who would believe that these two groups of people had an identical origin? Would one not rather conclude that upon leaving a city of men he had chanced upon a menagerie of beasts? Lycurgus, the lawgiver of Sparta, is reported to have reared two dogs of the same litter by fattening one in the kitchen and training the other in the fields to the sound of the bugle and the horn, thereby to demonstrate to the Lacedaemonians that men, too, develop according to their early habits. He set the two dogs in the open market place, and between them he placed a bowl of soup and a hare. One ran to the bowl of soup, the other to the hare; yet they were, as he maintained, born brothers of the same parents. In such manner did this leader, by his laws and customs, shape and instruct the Spartans so well that any one of them would sooner have died than acknowledge any sovereign other than law and reason.

I am of the opinion that one should pity those who, at birth, arrive with the yoke upon their necks. We should exonerate and forgive them, since they have not seen even the shadow of liberty, and, being quite unaware of it, cannot perceive the evil endured through their own slavery. **It is truly the nature of man to be free and to wish to be so, yet his character is such that he instinctively follows the tendencies that his training gives him.**

Let us therefore admit that all those things to which he is trained and accustomed seem natural to man and that only that is truly native to him which he receives with his primitive, untrained individuality. Thus **custom becomes the first reason for voluntary servitude.** Men are like handsome racehorses who first bite the bit and later like it, and rearing under the saddle a while soon learn to enjoy displaying their harness and prance proudly beneath their trappings. Similarly men will grow accustomed to the idea that they have always been in subjection, that their fathers lived in the same way; they will think that they are obliged to suffer this evil, and will persuade themselves by example and imitation of others, finally investing those who order them around with proprietary rights, based on the idea that it has always been that way.

There are always a few, better endowed than others, who feel the weight of the yoke and cannot restrain themselves from attempting to shake it off: these are **the men who never become tamed under subjection.** These are in fact the men who, possessed of clear minds and far-sighted spirit, are not satisfied, like the brutish mass, to see only what is at their feet, but rather look about them, behind and before, and even recall the things of the past in order to judge those of the future, and compare both with their present condition. These are the ones who, having good minds of their own, have further trained them by study and learning. **Even if liberty had entirely perished from the earth, such men would invent it. For them slavery has no satisfactions, no matter how well disguised.**

The Grand Turk was well aware that books and teaching more than anything else give men the sense to comprehend their own nature and to detest tyranny. I understand that in his territory there are few educated people, for he does not want many. On account of this restriction, **men of strong zeal and devotion, who in spite of the passing of time have preserved their love of freedom, still remain ineffective because, however numerous they may be, they are not known to one another**; under the tyrant they have lost freedom of action, of speech, and almost of thought; they are alone in their aspiration.

The essential reason why men take orders willingly is that they are born serfs and are reared as such. From this cause there follows another result, namely that **people easily become cowardly and submissive under tyrants**. For this observation I am deeply grateful to Hippocrates, the renowned father of medicine, who noted and reported it in a treatise of his entitled *Concerning Diseases*. This famous man was certainly endowed with a great heart and proved it clearly by his reply to the "Great King," who wanted to attach him to his person by means of special privileges and large gifts. Hippocrates answered frankly that it would be a weight on his conscience to make use of his science for the cure of barbarians who wished to slay his fellow Greeks, or to serve faithfully by his skill anyone who undertook to enslave Greece. The letter he sent this tyrant can still be read among his other works and will forever testify to his great heart and noble character.

By this time it should be evident that **liberty once lost, valor [strength of mind, bravery] also perishes**. A subject people shows neither gladness nor eagerness in combat: its men march sullenly to danger almost as if in bonds, and stultified; they do not feel throbbing within them that eagerness for liberty which engenders scorn of peril and imparts readiness to acquire honor and glory by a brave death amidst one's comrades. **Among free men there is competition as to who will do most, each for the common good, each by himself, all expecting to share in the misfortunes of defeat, or in the benefits of victory**; but an enslaved people loses in addition to this warlike courage, all signs of enthusiasm, for their hearts are degraded, submissive, and incapable of any great deed. Tyrants are well aware of this, and, in order to degrade their subjects further, encourage them to assume this attitude and make it instinctive.

It is indeed the nature of the populace, whose density is always greater in the cities, to be suspicious toward one who claims to have their welfare at heart, and **gullible toward one who fools them**. Do not imagine that there is any bird more easily caught by decoy, nor any fish sooner fixed on the hook by wormy bait, than are **all these poor fools neatly tricked into servitude by the slightest feather passed, so to speak, before their mouths**. Truly it is a marvelous thing that they let themselves be caught so quickly at the slightest tickling of their fancy. Plays, farces, spectacles, gladiators, strange beasts, medals, pictures, and other such opiates, these were for ancient peoples the bait toward slavery, the price of their liberty, the instruments of tyranny. By these practices and enticements the ancient dictators so successfully lulled their subjects under the yokes, that the **stupefied peoples, fascinated by the pastimes and vain pleasures flashed before their eyes**, learned subservience as naively, but not so creditably, as little children learn to read by looking at bright picture books. Roman tyrants invented a further refinement. They often provided the city wards with feasts to cajole the rabble, always more readily tempted by the pleasure of eating than by anything else. The most intelligent and understanding amongst them would not have quit his soup bowl to recover the liberty of the Republic of Plato. Tyrants would distribute largess, a bushel of wheat, a gallon of wine, and a sesterce: and then everybody would shamelessly cry, "Long live the King!" **The fools did not realize that they were merely recovering a portion of their own property, and that their ruler could not have given them what they were receiving without having first taken it from them**. A man might one day be presented with a sesterce [Roman coin] and gorge himself at the public feast, lauding Tiberius and

Nero for handsome liberality, who on the morrow, would be forced to abandon his property to their avarice, his children to their lust, his very blood to the cruelty of these magnificent Emperors without offering any more resistance than a stone or a tree stump. The mob has always behaved in this way - eagerly open to bribes that cannot be honorably accepted, and disolutely callous to degradation and insult that cannot be honorably endured.

They didn't even neglect, these "Roman Emperors," to assume generally the title of "Tribune of the People," partly because this office was held sacred and inviolable and also because it had been founded for the defense and protection of the people. By this means they made sure that the populace would trust them completely, as if they merely used the title and did not abuse it. Today there are some who do not behave very differently; they never undertake an unjust policy, even one of some importance, without prefacing it with some pretty speech concerning "public welfare" and "common good." The earliest Kings of Egypt rarely showed themselves without carrying a cat, or sometimes a branch, or appearing with fire on their heads, masking themselves with these objects and **parading like workers of magic**. By doing this they inspired their subjects with reverence and admiration, whereas with people neither too stupid nor too slavish they would merely have aroused, it seems to me, amusement and laughter. **It is pitiful to review the list of devices that despots have used to establish their tyranny; to discover how many little tricks they employed, always finding the populace conveniently gullible, readily caught in the net as soon as it was spread.** Indeed they always fooled their victims so easily that while mocking them they enslaved them the more.

What comment can I make concerning another fine counterfeit that ancient peoples accepted as true money? They believed firmly that the great toe of Pyrrhus, tyrant of Epirus, performed miracles and cured diseases of the spleen; they even enhanced the tale further with the legend that his toe, after the corpse had been burned, was found among the ashes, untouched by the fire. In this wise a foolish people itself invents lies and then believes them. Many men have recounted such things, but in such a way that it is easy to see that the parts were pieced together from idle gossip of the city and silly reports from the rabble. When Vespasian, returning from Assyria, passes through Alexandria on his way to Rome to take possession of the empire, he performs wonders: he makes the crippled straight, restores sight to the blind, and does many other fine things, concerning which the credulous and indiscriminating were, in my opinion, more blind than those cured. Tyrants themselves have wondered that men could endure the persecution of a single man; they have insisted on using religion for their own protection and, where possible, have borrowed a stray bit of "divinity" to bolster up their evil ways.

Our own leaders have employed in France certain similar devices, such as toads, fleurs-de-lys, sacred vessels, and standards with flames of gold. However that may be, I do not wish, for my part, to be incredulous, since neither we nor our ancestors have had any occasion up to now for skepticism.

It has always happened that tyrants, in order to strengthen their power, have made every effort to train their people not only in obedience and servility toward themselves, but also in adoration. Therefore all that I have said up to the present concerning the means by which a more willing submission has been obtained applies to dictators in their relationship with the inferior and common classes.

Part III

I come now to a point which is, in my opinion, the mainspring and the secret of domination, the support and foundation of tyranny. Whoever thinks that halberds [battle-axes], sentries, the placing of the

watch, serve to protect and shield tyrants is, in my judgment, completely mistaken. These are used, it seems to me, more for ceremony and a show of force than for any reliance placed in them. It is not the troops on horseback, it is not the companies afoot, it is not arms that defend the tyrant. This does not seem credible on first thought, but it is nevertheless true that there are only **four or five who maintain the dictator**, four or five who keep the country in bondage to him. Five or six have always had access to his ear, and have either gone to him of their own accord, or else have been summoned by him, to be accomplices in his cruelties, companions in his pleasures, panders to his lusts, and sharers in his plunders. These six manage their chief so successfully that he comes to be held accountable not only for his own misdeeds but even for theirs. **The six have six hundred who profit under them**, and with the six hundred they do what they have accomplished with their tyrant. **The six hundred maintain under them six thousand**, whom they promote in rank, upon whom they confer the government of provinces or the direction of finances, in order that they may serve as instruments of avarice and cruelty, executing orders at the proper time and working such havoc all around that they could not last except under the shadow of the six hundred, nor be exempt from law and punishment except through their influence.

The consequence of all this is fatal indeed. And whoever is pleased to unwind the skein [reel of yarn or thread] will observe that **not the six thousand but a hundred thousand, and even millions, cling to the tyrant by this cord to which they are tied**. According to Homer, Jupiter boasts of being able to draw to himself all the gods when he pulls a chain. Such a scheme caused the increase in the senate under Julius, the formation of new ranks, the creation of offices; not really, if properly considered, to reform justice, but to provide new supporters of despotism. In short, when the point is reached, **through big favors or little ones, that large profits or small are obtained under a tyrant**, there are found almost as many people to whom tyranny seems advantageous as those to whom liberty would seem desirable. **Whenever a ruler makes himself a dictator, all the wicked dregs who are corrupted by burning ambition or extraordinary avarice, these gather around him and support him in order to have a share in the booty and to constitute themselves petty chiefs under the big tyrant**. This is the practice among notorious robbers and famous pirates: some scour the country, others pursue voyagers; some lie in ambush, others keep a lookout; some commit murder, others robbery; and although there are among them differences in rank, some being only underlings while others are chieftains of gangs, yet is there not a single one among them who does not feel himself to be a sharer, if not of the main booty, at least in the pursuit of it.

Thus the despot subdues his subjects, some of them by means of others, and thus is he protected by those from whom, if they were decent men, he would have to guard himself; just as, in order to split wood, one has to use a wedge of the wood itself. Such are his archers, his guards, his halberdiers [soldiers with battle-axes]; not that they themselves do not suffer occasionally at his hands, but this riff-raff, can be led to endure evil if permitted to commit it, not against him who exploits them, but against those who like themselves submit, but are helpless. Nevertheless, observing those men who painfully serve the tyrant in order to win some profit from his tyranny and from the subjection of the populace, I am often overcome with amazement at their wickedness and sometimes by pity for their folly. For, in all honesty, can it be in any way except in folly that you approach a tyrant, withdrawing further from your liberty and, so to speak, embracing with both hands your servitude? Let such men lay aside briefly their ambition, or let them forget for a moment their avarice, and look at themselves as they really are. Then they will realize clearly that the townspeople, the peasants whom they trample underfoot and treat worse than convicts or slaves, they will realize, I say, that these people, mistreated as they may be, are nevertheless, in comparison with themselves, better off and fairly free. The tiller of the soil and the artisan, no matter how enslaved, discharge their obligation when they do what they are told to do; but the dictator sees men about him wooing and begging his favor, and doing much more than he tells them

to do. Such men must not only obey orders; they must anticipate his wishes; to satisfy him they must foresee his desires; they must wear themselves out, torment themselves, kill themselves with work in his interest, and accept his pleasure as their own, neglecting their preference for his, distorting their character and corrupting their nature; they must pay heed to his words, to his intonation, to his gestures, and to his glance. Let them have no eye, nor foot, nor hand that is not alert to respond to his wishes or to seek out his thoughts.

Can that be called a happy life? Can it be called living? Is there anything more intolerable than that situation, I won't say for a man of mettle nor even for a man of high birth, but simply for a man of common sense or, to go even further, for anyone having the face of a man? What condition is more wretched than to live thus, with nothing to call one's own, receiving from someone else one's sustenance, one's power to act, one's body, one's very life?

Still **men accept servility in order to acquire wealth**; as if they could acquire anything of their own when they cannot even assert that they belong to themselves, or as if anyone could possess under a tyrant a single thing in his own name. Yet they act as if their wealth really belonged to them, and forget that it is they themselves who give the ruler the power to deprive everybody of everything, leaving nothing that anyone can identify as belonging to somebody. They notice that nothing makes men so subservient to a tyrant's cruelty as property; that the possession of wealth is the worst of crimes against him, punishable even by death; that he loves nothing quite so much as money and ruins only the rich, who come before him as before a butcher, offering themselves so stuffed and bulging that they make his mouth water.

These favorites should not recall so much the memory of those who have won great wealth from tyrants as of those who, after they had for some time amassed it, have lost to him their property as well as their lives; they should consider not how many others have gained a fortune, but rather how few of them have kept it. Whether we examine ancient history or simply the times in which we live, we shall see clearly **how great is the number of those who, having by shameful means won the ear of tyrants - who either profit from their villainies or take advantage of their naivete - were in the end reduced to nothing by these very tyrants**; and although at first such servitors were met by a ready willingness to promote their interests, they later found an equally obvious inconstancy which brought them to ruin. Certainly among so large a number of people who have at one time or another had some relationship with bad rulers, there have been few or practically none at all who have not felt applied to themselves the tyrant's animosity, which they had formerly stirred against others. Most often, after becoming rich by despoiling others, under the favor of his protection, they find themselves at last enriching him with their own spoils.

Quite generally known is the striking phrase of that other tyrant who, gazing at the throat of his wife, a woman he dearly loved and without whom it seemed he could not live, caressed her with this charming comment: "This lovely throat would be cut at once if I but gave the order." That is why **the majority of the dictators of former days were commonly slain by their closest favorites** who, observing the nature of tyranny, could not be so confident of the whim of the tyrant as they were distrustful of his power. Thus was Domitian killed by Stephen, Commodus by one of his mistresses, Antoninus by Macrinus, and practically all the others in similar violent fashion.

The fact is that **the tyrant is never truly loved, nor does he love**. Friendship is a sacred word, a holy thing; it is never developed except between persons of character, and never takes root except through mutual respect; it flourishes not so much by kindness as by sincerity. **What makes one friend sure of another is the knowledge of his integrity**: as guarantees he has his friend's fine nature, his honor, and

his constancy. There can be no friendship where there is cruelty, where there is disloyalty, where there is injustice. And in places where the wicked gather there is **conspiracy only, not companionship**: these have no affection for one another; fear alone holds them together; they are not friends, they are merely accomplices.

Although it might not be impossible, yet it would be difficult to find true friendship in a tyrant; elevated above others and having no companions, he finds himself already beyond the pale of friendship, which receives its real sustenance from an equality that, to proceed without a limp, must have its two limbs equal. That is why there is honor among thieves (or so it is reported) in the sharing of the booty; they are peers and comrades; if they are not fond of one another they at least respect one another and do not seek to lessen their strength by squabbling. But the favorites of a tyrant can never feel entirely secure, and the less so because he has learned from them that he is all powerful and unlimited by any law or obligation. Thus it becomes his wont to consider his own will as reason enough, and to be master of all with never an equal. Therefore it seems a pity that with so many examples at hand, with the danger always present, no one is anxious to act the wise man at the expense of the others, and that among so many persons fawning upon their ruler there is not a single one who has the wisdom and the boldness to say to him what, according to the fable, the fox said to the lion who feigned illness: "I should be glad to enter your lair to pay my respects; but I see many tracks of beasts that have gone toward you, yet not a single trace of any who have come back."

These wretches see the glint of the despot's treasures and are bedazzled by the radiance of his splendor. Drawn by this brilliance they come near, without realizing they are approaching a flame that cannot fail to scorch them. Similarly attracted, the indiscreet satyr of the old fables, on seeing the bright fire brought down by Prometheus, found it so beautiful that he went and kissed it, and was burned; so, as the Tuscan poet reminds us, the moth, intent upon desire, seeks the flame because it shines, and also experiences its other quality, the burning. Moreover, even admitting that favorites may at times escape from the hands of him they serve, they are never safe from the ruler who comes after him. If he is good, they must render an account of their past and recognize at last that justice exists; if he is bad and resembles their late master, he will certainly have his own favorites, who are not usually satisfied to occupy in their turn merely the posts of their predecessors, but will more often insist on their wealth and their lives. Can anyone be found, then, who under such perilous circumstances and with so little security will still be ambitious to fill such an ill-fated position and serve, despite such perils, so dangerous a master? What suffering, what martyrdom all this involves! To be occupied night and day in planning to please one person, and yet to fear him more than anyone else in the world; to be always on the watch, ears open, wondering whence the blow will come; to search out conspiracy, to be on guard against snares, to scan the faces of companions for signs of treachery, to smile at everybody and be mortally afraid of all, to be sure of nobody, either as an open enemy or as a reliable friend; showing always a gay countenance despite an apprehensive heart, unable to be joyous yet not daring to be sad!

However, there is satisfaction in examining what they get out of all this torment, what advantage they derive from all the trouble of their wretched existence. Actually, the people never blame the tyrant for the evils they suffer, but they do place responsibility on those who influence him; peoples, nations, all compete with one another, even the peasants, even the tillers of the soil, in mentioning the names of the favorites, in analyzing their vices, and heaping upon them a thousand maledictions. All their prayers, all their vows are directed against these persons; they hold them accountable for all their misfortunes, their pestilences; and if at times they show them outward respect, at those very moments they are fuming in their hearts and hold them in greater horror than wild beasts. This is the glory and honor heaped upon influential favorites for their services by people who, if they could tear apart their living bodies, would still clamor for more, only half satiated by the agony they might behold. For even when

the favorites are dead those who live after are never too lazy to blacken the names of these man-eaters with the ink of a thousand pens, tear their reputations into bits in a thousand books, and drag, so to speak, their bones past posterity, forever punishing them after their death for their wicked lives.

Let us therefore learn while there is yet time, let us learn to claim our liberty. Let us open our eyes to our natural freedom for the sake of our honor, for the very love of virtue. As for me, I truly believe I am right, since there is nothing so contrary to reason as self-imposed tyranny. I believe the time will come when support will be withdrawn from tyrants and their accomplices. Then let us watch them all fall from their own corrupted weight.

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