

Happy Slaves
By Geoffrey Allan Plauché
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One night around midnight Shara found herself alone in the main hall of the castle. The fire in the large hearth burned low. She sat curled up on a couch near its waning warmth, clad in her normal professional attire. A candle sat at her elbow on a table-stand, providing enough scant light to illuminate the small book, a journal, propped on the armrest, in which she was furiously writing. Sleep eluded her this night. Her mood was foul, evidenced by furrowed brows, the tight set of her jaw, and the storm brewing in dark emerald eyes.

At times such as these, she was often given to writing down her thoughts in her journal. She was uncommonly well educated for a mere middle class merchant's daughter, much less one who had been orphaned and consigned to a life on the streets prior to the age of ten. Her adopted father had seen to that. If their movement were to succeed, it would need more than mere warriors able to wield a blade and a bow.

The sublimating process of writing served to sooth frayed nerves and a flashfire temper. Yet this night it was not proving adequate to the task. A peculiar problem troubled the sometime assassin. Perhaps the answer to it, or just the problem itself, led her to cry out in muted frustration and, ripping a page out of her journal, to crumple it up and hurl it angrily into the hearth. Scarcely had it left her hand than did she snap the journal shut, spring up from the couch, and stalk out of the castle into the frigid night air. She did not notice that her forceful and unaimed throw had resulted in the crumpled piece of paper passing through the low flames unharmed to bounce off the walls of the hearth and roll to relative safety near the front edge. To any who might discover it, the paper was unsigned though the handwriting would be unmistakable to some: precise, smooth curves and straight lines, except when one neared the end of the entry where the writing grew more forceful and choppy.

The journal entry:

Happy slaves. Is such a thing possible? It seems scarcely imaginable to those who have not seen it. How could a human being prefer to be a slave over being free? Yet I have witnessed, no, lived among, those who were content in their slavery, taking no action to procure their liberty. Most of my people do not realize they are slaves, but no few of them see it and yet do nothing. On some level, deep in my heart, I will never understand why so many people can so readily give themselves voluntarily into servitude, for that is what they do. No tyrant anywhere has ever ruled without the consent, or at least, the acquiescence, of most of his subjects. Why would so many people, in countless times and places throughout history, not merely in my homeland, suffer under the oppressive rule of one man when the only power he has is the power that they give him? They have but to refuse to serve and the tyrant will be toppled like a house of cards.

This, I think, is the perennial and fundamental problem of politics. What could possibly explain such a spectacle as thousands, no, millions, voluntarily subjecting themselves to slavery? It cannot be cowardice. Cowardice is not strong enough a word. If one man or ten obeyed a tyrant out of fear, it could reasonably be called cowardice. But a thousand? A hundred thousand? Millions? I can think of no word vile enough for a vice sunk to such depths...

But is it merely fear that keeps the people in shackles of their own making? If that were so, then why have so many tyrants not merely contented themselves with violence and the threat of it? The tyrant himself must necessarily fear his own subjects, for he recognizes that his rule is precarious...

Anywhere one finds a tyrant who has kept his reign for any length of time one finds ever increasing layers of sycophants, each layer supporting a larger layer beneath it. What a life these lead! these most wicked dregs of the kingdom, bowing and scraping to curry favor, always afraid of their master's wrath and paranoia. Yet they covet the splendor and riches to be had by attaching themselves to their master's coattails, and this despite the ignominious end their predecessors have met at the very hands of the master they seek to benefit from. These servants, in their wretched existence, wield the power granted them to abuse the weaker populace below them. Thus does the tyrant shift some of the blame away from him and

cleave the population in two, tying many to his side whom he might otherwise need to guard against and whom can now protect him from the rest of the population.

The rest of the people... these the tyrant dupes. The means by which he does this are many and varied. Myths of divine right or blood. The spectacles of gladiatorial games and races. Successful wars against dehumanized enemies. The creation of vast monuments praising himself and his reign. Songs. Plays. Parades. Public feasts. And other such opiates. The people praise the tyrant for his largess and they do not realize that he is merely returning a small portion of the property that was stolen from them!!!

[Inspired by Étienne de La Boétie's *The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*, with an introduction by Murray Rothbard. Written not long after I read it. -G]