



The Dictatorship of the Dull

By ALEXANDER BLACK, *Author of "THE GREAT DESIRE," etc.*



THE biographer of Philip II described the Inquisition as a "heavenly remedy, a guardian angel of Paradise." No despotism can be so galling as to quench every apologist. Naturally, the despot has a good word for himself, and it is a part of his business to prod his press agent. Quite as naturally, the press agent completes the calamity. On one of those days when we feel the presence of Mr. Conrad's two veiled figures, Doubt and Melancholy, "pacing endlessly in the sunshine of the world," the press agent does the trick. The right rhapsody finishes that which oppression began. We bear an oppression because it may have enveloped us gradually with the seeming unavoidable of a changed temperature; or, if it comes a bit suddenly, like the contact of a shrinking shoe, we may try adjusting ourselves as to an inevitable annoyance; but when some one drives in the nail of the enabling adjective, philosophy fails.

We should, of course, cultivate with regard to life what Montaigne cultivated with regard to books, "a skipping wit." But one can't skip a despotism unless it is distant enough. We can be academic about those that are far enough off. We can look at Russia and decide that the dictatorship of a proletariat is good or bad, according to our ideals, and especially, perhaps, according to our information. Perhaps, too, we may decide with regard to a dicta-

torship in Russia that it gets a good deal of attention not because it is a dictatorship, but because it is different.

All of us who are governed live under some sort of dictatorship. The benevolent despotism of democracy can be like a padded cell in which one is supposed not to be able to hurt oneself. Mostly, radicalism expresses consolations equivalent to a hunger strike. And all dictatorship is not political. The doctrine of supply and demand sets up a mighty dictatorship. So does all dogma for all who accept. So do fashion and family. There is dictatorship in science's word "normal." The prefix "ab" builds an inquisitorial spiked chair for rebel or genius.

There are moments when a sense of individual security may reach so nearly the dimensions of an individual serenity as to remind us that it takes two to make a dictatorship. There are other moments when we feel sharply impelled to go out and look for the dictators and have the thing done with. In our evenest mood, one in which we feel most assured of being balanced, and reasonably, if not fanatically, forbearing, we can scarcely hope to escape consciousness of that widest and most permeative of all dictatorships, the dictatorship of the dull.

The dull; not the frail who have never begun, but the free who have finished; not the stupid who cannot think, but the dull who object to thinking; not the submerged, the thwarted

who have never had a chance, but the mediocre who admire themselves, the complacent who have fixed the final mold—all who make up the legion of self-halted men and the sisterhoods of smugness. These have an immensity of numbers. They swarm to the horizon, though they never seem to recognize that there is an horizon. There is no thinkable situation in which they do not impinge. In our arrogant moments we think of them all as barrier. In our weak moments we may wonder, in the matter of the vast, sticky obstacle, whether we ourselves are not entangled and have not begun to belong to the hopelessly finished.

§ 2

Of course only a mood in which we can quite securely feel that we do not belong can be effective for attack. A plunge into the past is a great help in affecting a sense of detachment. History makes it plain enough that sinister cleverness could not have succeeded without the support of the dull, but it seldom shows how steadfastly dullness itself has stabilized the uncomfortable, how its sheer pervasiveness has affected the eternal conflict between idealism and the forces supporting inertia. Inertia is often confused with dullness. Inertia is, in fact, merely dullness's operating weight. It gives it the formidable displacement that helps block the way. Inertia does not intrude. It has no passion to prohibit, for example. It lets everything alone, good and bad. It giggles or whimpers, and subsides. But dullness can be both obstinate and aggressive. It can assert. Intrusion is indispensable to certain of its moods, because it has its pride, its sense of responsibility, its recognition of a common enemy—the creative.

How definitely dullness represents a mental condition rather than a class, yet quite surely assembles its class in all ages and in all places, is echoed in every creative adventure, whether the adventure be political, industrial, social, educational, or artistic. It mingles in every group. It hates the radical more than it hates the reactionary, but it shadows both. If liberality cannot be trusted to respect dullness, neither can conservatism. When dullness can see nothing else, it can see its duty. It is the most active censor.

Of course all criticism is a form of censorship. When it is creative criticism, we are in the habit of saying that it fills a high office. When it is dullness in action, we ought to have no trouble in recognizing the source, yet furies of resentment often lead us to forget that dullness did not invent criticism or introduce censorship. Doing away with criticism because it is frequently stupid would be like abandoning any other useful implement because the foolish or vicious may misuse it.

But dullness's worst offense is not giving any good implement a bad name. Its worst offense is the benumbing influence of its presence. It casts a pall over the creative. It perverts the acoustics of the world. It tramples the gardens of invention, not always by any wish to destroy, as exasperation is ever ready to conclude, yet with all the destructive effects of its weight and pervasiveness. The odd thing is that, with so much of mass, it is frequently and violently contemptuous of "the masses." It is willing to be the public, but never willing to be a crowd. It is as glib about "mobs" as about morality.

Thus all creative effort encounters

dullness as the foreground obstacle; and since creative effort can have its bigotries, deadlocks are repeated. One sees this again and again in the matter of audiences. It is to be read in myths like that of the tired business man. Dullness's dislike of thinking leads it to use all sorts of evasions to escape admitting the trait; such, for example, as the familiar plea as to having thought so much that it wants a rest. People who are annoyed by intelligent plays or intelligent books do not turn away because they are tired, but because they care more for something else. They may not always be dull. They may only have been dulled. Life has extraordinarily diverse effects on people who live through it. Some people learn to want life to be livelier. Others want it to be quieter; it hurts their eyes and ears. Some people are sharpened by life; others are blunted by it. Dislike of thinking can emerge from all experience with its prejudice unimpaired; it is a sturdy growth. By an effort it can "set and think," but it can "just set" with a more normal facility. And it can "just set" in a legislature quite as definitely as in a dooryard.

§ 3

So that to ask thinking is in many situations to ask a sacrifice. It is true that audiences which protest against being asked to think are often able to make out a fairly plausible case against art. Artists are sometimes caught in the act of maintaining that art must not think, but must only feel. If, as Mr. Max Eastman has reminded us again, art must be "playful" to be successfully creative, if it must be "very free and irresponsible," it is hard to see how audiences can be denied the right

to be playful and to watch or to listen or to read in a very free and irresponsible mood. The paradox is, of course, that a playful thing, representing pure response to emotion, is often saturated with thought, and that a joyous response is not denied the right to be intelligent. We have to remember, too, that an audience in a given place is handicapped in thinking where it is not handicapped in feeling. Mass accentuates emotion where it retards thought. With a reader the case is different. Except for the infectious influence of ballyhooing about a book, the reader is left to be kindled by the writer's direct action. Maybe there is for the writer some advantage in this. Yet without the help of spectacle the writer must begin with a larger assumption as to thinking, or at least with a larger assumption as to attention, and the total must count as a handicap in the earning of response. Demanding attention is the beginning of a demand for thinking, and the writer who asks for prolonged concentration asks for something that narrows his audience automatically. He must first lose all who cannot think or who object to thinking, then all who are good only for a spurt. In time he may come to have the pathetic satisfaction of sharply recognizing the dividing-line between people who really read and people who only own sets.

The motion-picture hall has been called a haven for the dull. Certain complaints against the motion-picture have been grotesquely severe. Though it begins at zero and can entertain without asking more than mere consciousness, the cinema has an almost unlimited range so far as its possibilities go. I have seen the "Odyssey" and "Macbeth" on the screen. Both

were admirably done, but they had a short life. The cinema, by the conditions of its present distribution, cannot appeal to special groups, and always to appeal to general groups is to pass under the censorship of the dull. No official censorship could be so relentless. An official censorship can be diagrammed, because it starts with a diagram. The censorship of the dull is immeasurable. One arouses shrieks of protest. The other is accepted as a phenomenon of sale. The strong probability that the preferences of dullness will be translated by another dullness, or by a bewildered producer who is pretty well dulled by the pressure, accounts for the feeble average of merit and repeated failure to please even the dull.

Education knows the dictatorship. It knows how often education bleeds between the two millstones. It knows how completely prodigious dullness in school committees and university trustees may reflect the dullness that sentinels and selects. It knows the penalty of offending dullness. It learns to prefer the lock-step of conformity to the strait-jacket in solitary. It knows why, among all the things that are taught, early or late, thinking is taboo. To teach thinking is to teach individuality, and the original is the enemy of the curriculum and the committee. The efficiency theory of education is of a machine with standardized parts. If any teacher breaks, it is convenient to be able to pick up a machine-punched duplicate at any service station. The theory makes a profound appeal to dullness, because it avoids contact with originality, because it does n't disturb the finished. When dullness starts out to buy an education for its boy it wants the efficiency kind.

It wants standard goods, not the sort that puts ideas into his head.

A *liberal* education! Suppose it *should* happen! Suppose the boy came home with new notions about Rome or the Pilgrims; suppose he came home not with the proper impress of machine-made parts, but with a new *feeling* about history and life, a new sense of personal privilege, a new impulse as to what he was going to do with himself and the world. What is dullness then to conclude about the system? What is it to conclude as to that bunch of "dangerous radicals" down there? Are the trustees asleep? Somebody ought to be disciplined. Dullness did n't raise its boy to be a Bolshevik.

§ 4

To dullness thinking is a radicalism. If you begin by being disrespectful as to your grandfather, everybody knows that you are likely to end by being seditious as to your congressman. If you use your pulpit for talk about life and growth instead of sticking to Jeremiah; if you preach about poverty as a living fact instead of being content to quote it as a literary illustration of a strictly theological compassion; if you forget that revelation is historic, that religion is finished; if you turn from the labor in a biblical vineyard to the labor in your own town factories, dullness will find a way of reminding you that it is no part of a preacher's business to meddle in "politics."

When I wrangled with Emma Goldman about "social pressure," we reached no disagreement as to the reality of that phenomenon. The anarchist thought such pressure was all-sufficing. I thought it needed its written wishes and its committee. But

there was no escape by either logic from the enormous, enveloping, and unconquerable reality of the pressure itself. I emerged with an impression that the anarchist saw the great force as reaching a kind of unity, like gravitation, and she could call to her support the formidable philosophy of monism. Yet I saw groups rather than a group; I saw oneness as a destination or an ideal rather than as a working fact, and felt that the anarchism which wanted no law, and any antipodal theory which wanted more law, both were ignoring the persistent diversity that disturbs the oneness of the world. I saw the inert (in all "classes") who go after nothing; the "winged creatures without feet," their eyes fixed on infinity; the real creators and pathfinders; the mothering people who ask least and give most; the herders, the procurers, and the leeches; and I saw the dull who dominate the middle and think they are stability because they are a weight.

As a stablizer dullness always feels itself to be the appointed custodian of respectability. It finds war respectable and a boxing-match an infamy. It is not the sole supporter of war or the sole objector to the boxing-match, but it is a mainstay to both contentions. It is the mainstay of jails. Plenty of jails here and hereafter becomes a concomitant of the dull brand of righteousness. The comfort of being out of jail assumes the presence of a substantial proportion of the duly padlocked. A dull heaven is predicated on a populous hell. Of all the arguments used to keep a dreamer like Eugene Debs in a cell there has been, naturally, none that could stress the disappointment to dullness that must result from letting him out.

Yet dullness loves to save if it may discriminate. It saves cats, but is inclined to find the saving of babies as rather messy. In fact, it indicates that babies, by and large, are an indelicacy. Babies suggest sex, and sex—well, you know what sex is. Dullness has n't been able effectively to rebuke nature's invention of sex, but it has done all it can. It is still respectable to belong to one sex or the other. Beyond that you are in danger.

The dull get themselves divorced, but they dislike divorce as too frequently noisy. They take here the same position they occupy in an apartment-house. It is n't the landlord who dislikes children. His discomfort is occasioned not by the children, but by the complaints of the dull tenants who resent the ill-advised fecundity of those who have yet to learn that it is bad form to breed in captivity.

Moreover, to the dull, children are likely to seem an economic error, frightfully expensive as well as complicating. Perhaps this is why dullness, after its first violent attack on birth-control propaganda, attained an equally violent silence. The offense of reproducing seems to be mitigated by avoidance of the plural. If one child expresses the idea, why be tautological? Theory, in this instance, is illustrated by the story of the practical man whose wife first had twins, then triplets. When, on a third adventure, she produced a single baby, the husband remarked that he was glad she had at last got down to a good business basis.

The dull are profound believers in "prosperity." They believe in holding the thought. To face toward prosperity one must turn his back on the opposite. It is well enough to see a slum from a sight-seeing bus, but if

you contact it too closely, if you admit it fully, you are letting it influence you, and if you let it influence you, how can you give single-minded attention to prosperity? How can you "get on" if you stop to listen to all the blind or maimed or sick that line the path? There was a Galilean who stopped repeatedly. Dullness crucified him.

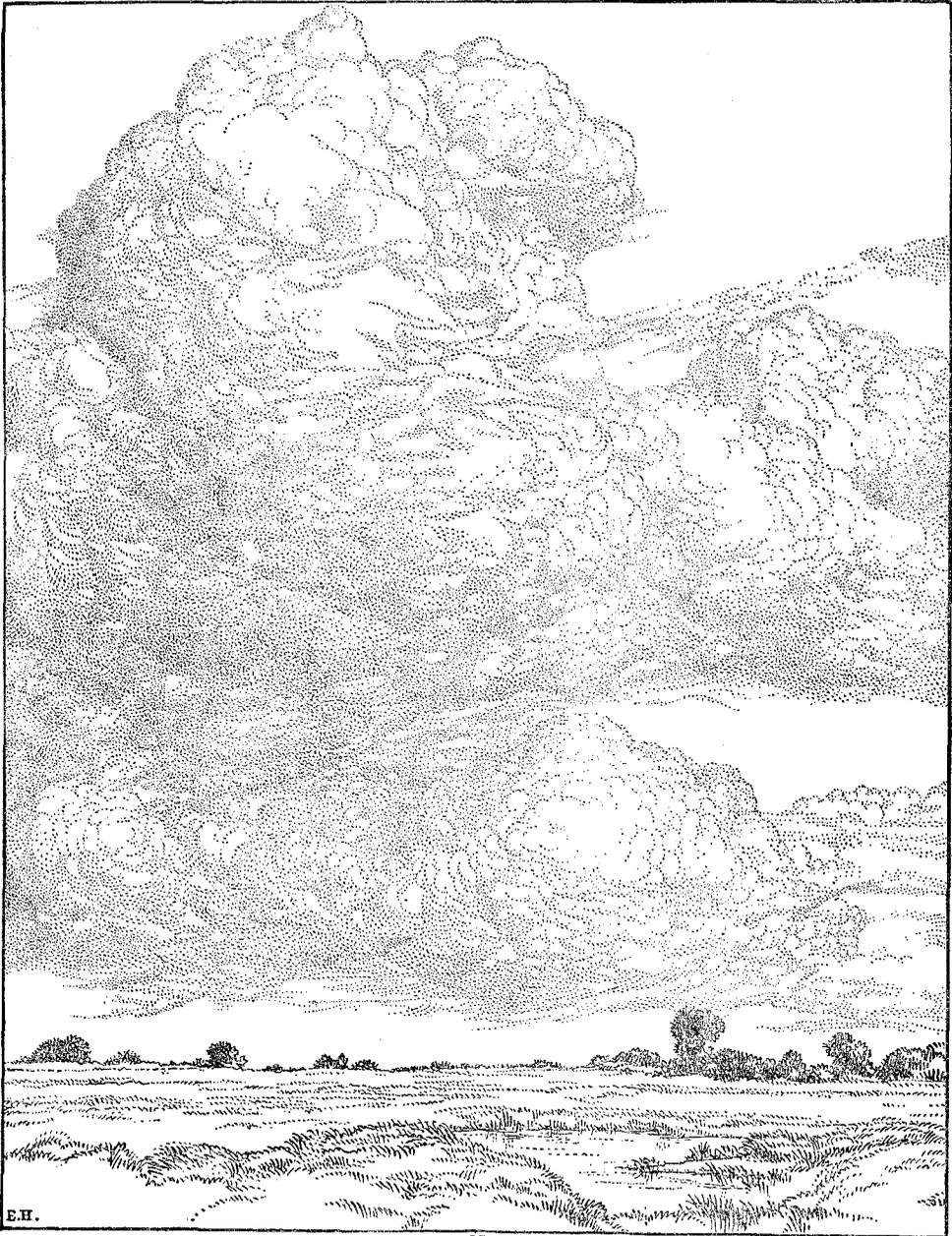
§ 5

Where "Society" has a capital S, dullness is in charge. American "Society" is accused of being the dullest in the world because it alone leaves out the intellectuals. We cannot deny that it omits certain elements indispensable to a European social group, but it might be inaccurate to contend that it has not tried to get these elements in. It is possible that American intellectuals are less perfectly housebroken than the European sort. And it would be foolish to assume that scientists, writers, and political pretenders cannot, when rightly chosen, add a harmonious dullness to a society anywhere. It is sufficient to note that the organized emptiness called "Society" is utterly congenial to dullness. To be free of any of these people with ideas, to dodge books and paintings, to dismiss with a stale adjective some play dullness has interrupted by coming in late, to shake off the horror of "labor troubles," to talk a jargon, dance nakedly, devour filigrees of food, and fatten in limousines, appeal to dullness as an inexhaustible resource.

Yet dullness is so sensitive as to any frivolity in which it may not happen to join that one of its most persistent activities of intrusion is in demonstrating that an indecent levity is the

other fellow's amusement. In avoiding an issue that might be convicting to itself it is fertile in devices of segregation, and is equally fertile in ways of breaking in upon situations its own cowardice has invented. Wicked gambling is the kind it does not practise or has not agreed to overlook. Naturally, it seeks to hold the copyright on all definitions of sin, and particularly to guarantee that no sinners shall be amused. Macaulay supplied the classic characterization when he said of the Puritans that they objected to bear-baiting not so much because it hurt the bear as because the spectators got too much fun out of it.

It is equally plain that the dull do not deserve the distinction implicit in the cries of savage irritation that are always being wrung from those who feel challenged. A thousand confessions prove that this rage can become a preoccupation. "We begin to live," says Mr. Yeats, "when we have conceived life as a tragedy." Who shall say how much this sense of the woeful may be due to that overlaid irritant of dullness? One of the ablest of American literary artists turned to me, in the midst of a social adventure of an eminent pleasantness, and quite as if the thing had flashed to him out of nowhere, to remark that all great art is created in a state of acute exasperation toward life. I was reminded afterward, when we are reminded of most things, that a conspicuous absence of dullness in the occasion had doubtless given twist to the thought. Perhaps Flaubert and others who have flung out parallel acerbities have reached incandescence at times when relief from pressure reminded them of its essential unendurableness.



Wonder

By CHARLES HANSON TOWNE

Three things there be that seem to me
The loveliest, as life runs by:
The endless legend of the grass,
The sunlight on the green morass,
And the great silence of the sky.