

One Gin a Day Keeps the Doctor Away:

The Medicinal Origin of the G&T

Student Reader, I expect you need no introduction to the wonderful drink that is the Gin and Tonic. Simple to prepare, delicious to taste, Winston Churchill once claimed “The Gin and Tonic drink has saved more Englishmen’s lives, and minds, than all the doctors in the Empire.” Already I imagine you scoffing at this remark, imagining it the mere rambling of a deluded alcoholic not unlike your flatmate’s theory that beer is better for the liver than shots. However, there is more truth to Churchill’s statement than you might think.

Let us look back at India, two centuries ago, and the Presidency Armies of the East India Company. In this tropical climate, Malaria was a significant problem, causing at best shivers and vomiting, and at worse death. Simultaneously, on the other side of the world, the Quechua people of South America were mixing the bark of cinchona trees with sweet water as a cure against shivering. This practice was observed by Jesuit missionaries who brought back some of this miraculous bark to Europe. The bark was studied and eventually a chemical was isolated from it, quinine. At this point, you might think “I recognise this word from somewhere”, let me save you some time. Quinine is in fact one of the crucial ingredients for tonic. Very quickly, this chemical was noticed to be an efficient cure against Malaria, and the Scottish Doctor George Cleghorn recommended its use to the East India Company.

But no doubt, you’ll now be wondering, concerned with tonight’s pres and frightened by the prospect of going to Klute sober, where on earth does the most important ingredient of the G&T – gin - appear in this whole story? Rest assured; I’m getting to it. Whilst this whole medical adventure was going on, Gin had become a staple of British drinking, spurred on by a hatred of the French, and consequential refusal to drink wine, as well as very cheap means of production. It thus happened that in those Indian Military Camps were present simultaneously bitter, quinine-based, tonic water, which soldiers needed to drink but did not want to, and Gin, which soldiers wanted to drink but had no excuse to do. Some bright mind, who doubtless would have gone to Durham had it existed at the time, thus mixed the two, creating what would eventually evolve into the Gin & Tonic.

As such, I suppose in some way, the G&T did in fact save multiple British lives, and though I rejoice at the idea of a sudden increase in Gin consumption, I must sadly warn that the “healthy” component that is quinine is nowadays very reduced in modern tonic water, judged too bitter by its producers. Nonetheless, a lovely G&T with a slice of cucumber or lemon garnish, is certainly healthier than the Steamo, and, I find, of great psychological help in the gloomy second term.

*By Pierre-Louis Pestre*