

A Fable for Our Times

By One of the Unreconstructed

by Murray N. Rothbard

I.

Once Upon a Time there was a peaceful valley. The people were happy in this valley; they worked, they traded, and they laughed together. No man exerted force upon his neighbor, and all lived and prospered.

One day there came to this valley a roaming band of marauders, led by a gang leader, whom we shall call Hector. This band came with machine guns, and, as was their custom, raped and looted at will among the people of the valley. As they were preparing, as usual, to put the whole valley to the torch ("for kicks," as one of Hector's Gang put it, succinctly), one of their number, a brilliant young intellectual whom we shall call Iago, stopped them. "Look, chief," said Iago, "Why don't we change our *modus operandi*? I'm getting pretty sick of all this roaming around, looking always for the next mark, the next victims, always on the run. This is an isolated spot, a beautiful spot. Let's settle down here, and run these people's lives. Then, we can milk them all the time, instead of killing them all and moving on." Hector was a shrewd gang chief, and he saw the wisdom of the idea. The gang settled down.

And so the robbery and the pillage became chronic instead of acute. Annual tribute was levied on the people, the Gang exercised power and dictation over them, and the Gang strutted about in uniforms, issuing orders. There was a great deal of resentment at first; the valley people muttered, and they began to form a People's Resistance.

Iago, the chief theoretician of Hector's Gang, explained to the chief that another great change in their methods was due, to fit the changed conditions. "These people outnumber us, chief. Eventually, even though they have no guns now, these people could throw us out, and we'd lose the best deal we ever had. What we've got to do is *to make them like it*." Making them like it was the great task of Iago and his group of fellow-theoreticians, and Hector and his boys marvelled at the results. Iago fed to the people arguments like the following: "This

isn't tribute, it's 'protection.' We have to protect you for your own good. Otherwise, you'd start killing and looting each other."

"That's right, he's right," the people muttered. Hector and his gang may be a bunch of rowdies, but at least he's protecting us from ourselves." For the memories of the people are short.

And Iago went on: "This isn't tribute, it's 'protection.' We must protect you from those butcher-birds on the other side of the mountain." And these words took on a plausibility, for Hector's Gang, ever eager for loot, began to send probing parties on the other side of the mountain, and fighting periodically ensued. The people listened, and they agreed. "That's right. Hector and his boys might be a bad lot. But at least they're *ours*. They're not a bunch of foreigners like those people on the other side of the mountain. We need protection from them." The people forgot that there had been no trouble with the people on the other side of the mountain before. For the memories of the people are short.

"This is great, chief, but we need more measures and more theories to keep these suckers contented," said Iago. And Hector and Iago began to propagandize that all the people's children must be educated in schools owned by and operated by Hector, Iago, and their Gang. They called these schools "Valley Schools"; the "people's schools." "Anyone who doesn't educate his kid in a Valley School is undemocratic. He's anti-social and hates the people. In fact, he's Un-Valley." Iago's scholarly-inclined henchmen, calling themselves "economists" ("It's got a good Greek sound, chief"), preached that "everyone really benefits from being forced to pay for and attend Hector's Valley Schools because if A is educated, then B is better off, and therefore B should be forced to be educated, and A too...." And the people listened, and nodded their heads; and the scholarly-inclined among them listened and nodded their heads, too; and pretty soon they became members of Hector's Gang, Scholarly Division.

What wonders were achieved by Making Them Like It! Hector and his original gang sent for all their relatives for hundreds of miles around; and they all came and joined Hector's gang, and lived off the fat of the land. The rate of tribute kept increasing, and so did the numbers of the Gang. As the "take" kept going up, the People began to grumble again. Iago and his men exhorted and admonished the grumblers: "You are all selfish," they said, "because you don't want to contribute and serve your brothers." (The "brothers" were, of course, largely members of Hector's Gang.) And the people, especially the moralists among them, nodded their heads and agreed. They agreed that anyone who kept opposing Hector and his Gang was "selfish, anti-social, and out for his own gain and greed."

And Hector and his Gang conscripted much of the valley people into a giant labor force to build the Gang a gigantic palace on top of the Valley's leading hill. It was a beautiful and imposing palace, so everyone said. A few people grumbled at this coercion and waste. Iago and his men thundered: "You miserable creatures! Here is a great

monument that we have built, a monument to the glory and destiny and grandeur of Our Valley. And you, slackers and penny-pinchers, would deny Our Valley its monument." "He's right," the people said, glaring angrily at the grumblers. "This valley has the biggest palace of any valley in the land."

Periodically, Hector and his Gang would go fight the people on the other side of the mountain, to extend their territory and their area of loot. At these times, they needed more men to fight, and so they would again conscript valley people into their Gang. The conscripts, and all the people, were taught that any resistance to this conscription would not only be met with stern measures, but was also dire "treason" against the Valley and its rightful government, Hector's Gang. The old battle standard that Hector and his men used to raise before going into the next town, Hector and Iago transformed into the "Valley's Sacred Flag"; anyone who did not bow down to that flag – or sing the old chanty that Hector and his Gang had always sung before going off for a fight – was also branded a "traitor" and dealt with accordingly.

Brilliant indeed were some of the theories that Iago and his men wove in the service of Hector and his Gang. For example, when an isolated Resister would point to the process of theft that was now organized and continuing, Iago's men said: "You know, you may have been right for the previous historical era. Nowadays, times have changed, and our thinking must change to suit the modern age. In the pre-Hector Era, this process was indeed robbery. Nowadays, it is cooperation for the common good and the welfare of the people of the Valley. And one of the more brilliant of Iago's Economists said: "You people don't realize that the moneys taken from you by Hector and his men benefit you all enormously. For Hector and his men spend their money – do they not? – in your shops and your markets. By this spending they give you employment, they circulate the money supply, they keep up mass purchasing-power, which is vital to the Valley Economy, and they provide 'built-in stability' for the economic system of the Valley." The people listened, and they marvelled at the wisdom. And Iago's men put the theory into complex mathematical symbols; and the people marvelled, and Hector was overjoyed, and the more scholarly among the people listened, and they soon joined Iago's Division of Scholars.

We could go on indefinitely to delineate the fascinating social structure of this remarkable and surely unique valley. But the important point to note is that, by the marvel wrought by Iago's propaganda, the status of Hector and his Gang had completely changed from the old and almost-forgotten days. Where once Hector and his Gang skulked like criminals, were regarded by everyone with great contempt and hatred as criminals, and were perpetually on the run, now a revolution had truly occurred. Hector, Iago, and the rest were not criminals but the Most Respected people in the land. Not only were they rich from their chronic annual loot; they were feted by all, loved and feared and honored by the people of the valley. Honors were heaped upon them all. And all because their theft had become regularized, openly proclaimed, and sweetly defended. Lolling on their divans, Hector contentedly said to Iago, "Boy, we never had it so

good." Clapping Hector on the back, Iago said, "There's a sucker born every minute." And, in the meanwhile, Iago's men were speaking on the hustings before the people: "Our times call for great sacrifices, for the willingness to give." And the people listened, and they nodded their heads.

II.

Generally, people agreed, or resigned themselves, to the rule of Hector. Those few people, here and there, not swayed by Iagoan propaganda, were taken care of by the Gang. If they became too adamant, they were politely taken out and shot... as traitors to the Valley. "It's too bad," said the people, "and I thought I knew Jim. Of course, who could know that he was a traitor?" Everyone agreed that stern times called for stern measures.

Meanwhile, what had happened to the remnants of the People's Resistance? They had no guns, the Resisters, but they fought on in the realm of ideas. "The spirit, the idea, of liberty must be kept alive," they said. And so they circulated among themselves their love for liberty and their recognition of who Hector and Iago and their men were and what they were doing. And the thing that gave them most sustenance was their shared credo: "Never forget. Hector is a thief. Hector is a murderer. Hector and his gang are crooks and tyrants, and, one day, they shall be kicked out of this Valley. Hector is a thief and murderer." And what is Iago? Iago the Resisters held in greater horror even than Hector. For Iago, they pointed out, "is a man of intellect; his is a uniquely moral failure. And Iago is keeping the regime alive by prostituting his intellect in the service of himself and Hector, by duping the people into acceptance."

"Never forget about Hector and Iago," they told each other. "Never forget."

One day there arose among the Resisters a leader; he was young and strong and highly intelligent – a man of the truly heroic virtues. Affectionately, the Resisters called him The Leader. The Leader scorned the counsel of the Old Ones among the Resisters: the Old Ones had advised the Resisters to write and speak against tyranny only in the abstract; never to "get specific," never to mention Hector or Iago or any of their deeds. "The Hell with that," the Leader thundered before a meeting of the Resisters. "No wonder the old ones are getting nowhere. We must write on the walls: Hector is a thief; Hector is a murderer; Iago is a prostitute and a consort of thieves and murderers. We shall drive them out!" The Resisters cheered this young man in a thunderous ovation. Their hearts were joyful; they had found their Leader.

I have said before that Hector and Iago had effected a social revolution in the Valley. Before they had been criminals; now they were the most respectable and honored men of the valley. Now, on the contrary, it was the Resisters who were the social outcasts, who were branded criminals and traitors, who achieved no respectability at all. Now it

was the Resistors who had to lead a furtive existence.

III.

One day, the Leader had a Revelation. He was struck by a New Concept. He was still young, but he now felt he had Matured. He called the Resistance together to explain: "I want you to know," he proclaimed, "that I will never abandon the Resistance. Our end – complete liberty – shall always remain unchanged. [Cheers.] But these are new times and they require new concepts and new methods to achieve our common goal. [Puzzled Murmurings.] We have been repeating, again and again, the old slogans: Hector is a thief, Hector is a tyrant, and so forth. These slogans have become tired clichés: everybody knows them. [Murmurings: Everybody? Who but the Resistors have listened to them?] Furthermore, we can never convince anyone by remaining negative and always appearing to oppose change. Hector and Iago were in a sense right when they accused us of being sour and negative. From now on we must accent the positive! What we must do is show them: to show Hector and Iago and all the rest that our way is better than theirs. That we can achieve more good more efficiently by voluntary methods than they can by coercion. Let us abandon sterile and negative slogans, and let us show them by our actions and our deeds that the voluntary way is the better way."

The Leader was, as always, eloquent, and it was easy to sway the bulk of the Resistors. "Let's at least give it a try," said the bulk of these hungry, weary, and embattled men. And so the Leader went up and down the valley, preaching the new gospel of the Positive.

Soon he found that, where once he was treated as an outcast among the Best People, he now found doors flung open wide in greeting. "You're right," said more and more of the wealthy and respected. "In the old days, when you and the others were going around denouncing Hector and Iago, you were just a bunch of radical crackpots. Now, by God, you're doing something constructive. And you're not making people mad by attacking folks and institutions that they respect."

Funds and support poured into the Leader's New Resistance movement. The emphasis of the New Resistance was on the positive, voluntary way. "Hector and Iago claim that theirs is the best way to promote social welfare," the Leader thundered in a speech. "Hector and Iago claim that compulsion is needed, for example, for the worthy goal of feeding and housing Hector's relatives. But we know that the voluntary methods of private people can do that job better and more efficiently. Let us show them!" The crowd cheered, and soon funds poured in for such projects as the voluntary care and feeding of the relatives of Hector. "Never attack the high rates of tribute," the Leader warned his men of the New Resistance; "if we show the whole valley that we can do the job by voluntary means, if we feed and clothe and house Hector's relatives, for example, then Hector will eventually lower the rates of tribute. Let us be up and moving!"

"Besides," the Leader warned his men, "if we engage in negative

thinking, if we attack Hector and the others, we will lose the exemption from tribute which they have kindly granted us. Let us always be practical!" "Yes, let us always be practical," the men agreed

And so the money poured in... from Resistance men and others, voluntarily swelling the coffers of Hector and his Gang. The old Resistance men abandoned their old negative preaching, and got down to the hard, practical task of raising voluntary gifts for Hector's pet projects – to show Hector and all the rest the superiority of the Voluntary Way. And what was the reaction of Hector and Iago and the rest? They sat at their periodic board meeting of the Gang, reviewing the new stance of the Leader and the Resistance, and they did only one thing: they laughed, and they laughed, and they laughed. And finally Iago recovered a bit, and he said: "So, the sheep themselves have supplied us with their own Judas goat!", and they roared again with laughter.

It was not long before the Leader was wined and dined by Hector, Iago, and the rest, was asked to serve on consulting committees, was asked to demonstrate ever more in action how the voluntary way could add to the Gang's coffers. At a great annual convention of the Gang, with many Resistance men this time invited, Iago, in his speech, turned to the Leader, now seated also at the dais, and he said: "Let us never forget, my friend, that our *ends* remain always the same. It is only our *means* that differ. Let us employ both yours and our means, and then let us achieve our common goal in the best way." [Resounding cheers from everyone.]

And so, what even Iago, with all his wiles, had been unable to quite achieve, was now achieved; and peace and harmony had been fully restored to the valley. The Resistors were now loyal, positive, generous, and their former bitterness and hatred had been transmuted into friendly and willing cooperation with Hector and his Gang.

Of course, there are always a few malcontents in every society, a few rotten apples in every barrel. A couple of the Resistors began to mutter: "The Leader said tribute would go down, if we voluntarily supplied the rest; but, instead, tribute has gone up." ("There are new needs for a troubled time," said Iago's men; "Patience, we shall demonstrate," said the Leader's men.) One malcontent Resister said to another: "At least in the time of the Old Ones we could attack robbery and tyranny in the abstract; now we can't even do that." And, secretly, covertly, in the dead of night, tiny groups of dissenting Resistors met, and told one another: "Hector is a thief. Hector is a murderer...."

And one day a wondrous thing came to pass. As the Leader strode confidently to a meeting with Hector and the others in Hector's splendid palace, he chanced to look into one of the fine mirrors in the hall. Truly, a miracle had been wrought; for when the Leader looked into the mirror, the face he saw was the face of Hector.