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Why Is Slavery Possible?

Leonard E. Read

IT IS easy enough to see how a man who has once known freedom might be forced — against his will and despite his struggles — into captivity. It is no puzzle, for example, to understand how a man could be forced — at gunpoint — into a Siberian salt mine.

But what is the explanation when freedom declines among men who had known its blessings and yet put up no scrap to stay free? Why the lethargy all about us while American citizens submit to one control after another? Where are the scrappers — the defenders of individuality who might forestall this trend toward slavery? Surely, slavery could never succeed in the face of determined and continuing resistance.

FOR EXAMPLE, there wouldn't be a tiger in any zoo were the tiger to remain as ferocious as when first captured. Man simply would not put up with such a beast. The caged tiger, however, does not retain his ferocity. The wild beast soon becomes docile and as grateful for its food and other attentions as a house cat.

Why? The tiger was at liberty in

its native habitat, had experienced freedom, but ferocity attends only the initial stages of captivity. Docility comes quickly and certainly with imprisonment. Could the reason be that the tiger has no understanding of the distinctions between liberty and serfdom? Knows no definitions? If the tiger has no knowledge or awareness of his liberty, he cannot remember a knowledge he has never possessed. His cage becomes the only habitat he knows, and he eats and sleeps, contentedly.

There never would have been any Negro slavery in America had the Negroes remained as intractable as when first taken in hand by the slave traders. They rebelled at first but soon became docile. They, too, had been at liberty in their African habitat. However, they were primitive men. They lacked the power of articulate expression in the field of ideas. They were not in possession of definitions and the distinctions between freedom and slavery. They lacked awareness; nor could they remember that which had never been known to them. They soon accepted as normal the slavery which became their lot.

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