

DOWN TO EARTH

BY ALAN DEVOE

The Bounty of the Land

THERE was a suggestion, made a year or two ago, by certain bleak and possibly not altogether non-political prophets, that there might come upon the inhabitants of this country the hideous calamity of famine. Because of ruinous botch and bungle in administration, according to these prognosticators, we might expect a perilously

tiny farm-yield, inadequate to nourish us. We might look forward to a time, within a year or two of the forecast, when mismanagement would have caused so many breakdowns all along the complicated line which links us with the nutrient earth that we should find ourselves ravenous and hopeless.

The time for fulfillment of these



Jack-in-the-Pulpit

Frank Utpatel

dire expectations expired some time ago; and we are not emaciated. A few, however, of the more diehard doom-sayers, have simply revised their dates somewhat, as the Millerites used blandly to revise their prophetic dates when the world disappointingly failed to come to an end on schedule as predicted; and we continue to be told, in a few quarters, that the famine is only postponed, but coming.

How many people may have been seriously persuaded of approaching famine is impossible to guess. Likely there have not been many. But at least a good many have perforce had a nebulous notion of famine thrust into their minds; and it remains there. Just suppose . . . suppose . . . the machinery of our society *did* sufficiently break down? Imagine . . . just imagine . . . a sufficient fall in the farm-yield, and disruptions in transportation, and failures in all the many-linked chain of processing and distributing and merchandising . . . wherewith then should we feed our mouths?

The question would surely have made any aboriginal Indian of this land gawk in mistrust of his senses. Could it be put to a fox or a coon or a rabbit or a squirrel, it must surely elicit an incredulous animal surprise. For the forest tribes of Indians had no farm, no machinery, not even the elementary mechanics of the wheel; but they found the land so bounteous that it occurred to them as a natural image to regard the earth as their inexhaustibly generous mother. A fox

cannot even set a simple snare; but who has seen a fox with his ribs showing? Raccoons die of many causes: old age, disease, attacks by predatory enemies. But has any naturalist found one dead of thinness, lying cold upon an earth that had refused to nourish?

The fact is that reference to starvation has been made with irresponsible recklessness. Starvation is a word of terrible seriousness. It means what it says. It means having nothing to eat. Having to make alterations in accustomed diet is not starvation; having to make reductions in a diet of habitual surfeit is not starvation; having to devote labor and ingenuity and concentrated attention to securing a diet is not starvation. Famine is something very much more than this. We shall face starvation when all the leaves have been stripped from all the trees. We shall be up against famine when all the bark is gone, and no weed grows by any wayside, and upon the surface of a shaven countryside no wild animal makes its way. We shall know when true famine confronts us. No crickets will sing.

To reckon on such possible starvation is to reckon on a specter. In the matter of food, as in most others, we have come to have such reliance upon our technology that we confuse a breakdown in its apparatus with a breakdown of the underlying essentials.

If all our edifice of ecclesiasticism falls apart tomorrow, does it mean that the substance of faith perishes? If the smooth, familiar machinery of

bottles and tins collapses, is there then nothing to eat? If the farmers, in a wonderful catastrophe, have ceased to raise any vegetable or any meat, has the wild dock ceased to grow on the stony uplands, the milkweed to flower and produce its succulent pods, the acorns to cluster on white oak trees, and the excellent and hitherto overlooked musquash and woodchuck to offer themselves by millions for our stew-pot?

II

We shall not come to that, of course. But it is an entertaining thing, and a soundly down-to-earth thing, to reflect that even if worse came to unimaginable worst — if our whole mechanism of food production broke down with a thoroughness beyond the most wildly calamitous prophesying — we should be under no more dire necessity than to revive a little our skill and application as natural animals. The New Yorker might have to betake himself to the outskirts of his steel and concrete city to hunt his sustenance. The Chicagoan might have to bestir himself at least as busily as a bear to fill his belly. But a handful of miles from the city center there is enough hawthorn for a legion. There are shadbush berries in the spring to feed a populace. Even leaving aside the hordes of kinds of game which our over-abundance has hitherto made it possible for us finically to disdain, there are enough leaves and stems and nuts and roots and pods

and berries to keep us sleek as woodchucks in a pinch. Much perishes and passes; much is precarious. But the earth remains, and we can stake our creaturely dependence on it.

The tea grows short? We have thousands or millions of wild acres of sweet goldenrod. We may think (being conditioned by habit and advertisement) that this were a poorish substitute. It is a forgotten matter of history, amusingly enough, that American goldenrod tea made such an impression upon the Chinese that that nation of expert tea-cultists used to import the stuff from us.

A similar ironic inversion concerns the estimable green, prized for salads, which we used until lately to import under the name of German rampion. We were as pleased to have this European rarity as to acquire a European title. The German rampion is actually our own wild evening primrose, which thrives as a wildflower — indeed a weed — from Labrador to Florida. We had exported it to Germany so long ago we had forgotten it.

Locusts are stated to have been the provender of John the Baptist. It is not necessarily to be understood that he ate grasshoppers or cicadas (though he may have done so, for both are eminently edible). What he ate, probably, were the fleshy pods of the tree *Ceratonia siliqua*. We have our own locust trees, black locusts and honey locusts; and the Indians found their seeds to be an admirable dish, a little acid and a little oily, and fine for consumption in the manner of peas and

beans. We have a hundred other kinds of food-giving trees. Out of the leaves of the black alder there is to be made a tea that is tonic and sustaining. Out of maples is to be drawn sugar and strength. The acorns of the white oak are a bitterish nut when raw; but let them be boiled and the acidity goes out and they make a cake that could sustain an Iroquois for a day's journey. By hundreds of thousands of tons, we let our wild nuts fall and rot. Is a hickory to be despised? Or the black walnuts that Audubon loved?

Every wild hedgerow, copse and clearing teems with good edibles. We have just neglected them. Having an over-plenty from which to choose, we have restricted ourselves to a few special choices which have become traditions; and being shut off from the earth by our technological processes, we forget that that Great Mother is still our source. We do not remember, buying a neat pill of codeine, that it is only the processed juice out of a poppy. Taking a complex prescription for our ailing bladder, it hardly enters our head that we are quaffing a distillate from watermelon seeds. It is still the earth that gives us our bounty. Take away the technology and the raw materials yet remain . . . and more of them than we remember.

Out of asparagus seeds there is to be had a good species of coffee. Lacking alder leaves or goldenrod, we need not despair for tea. An infusion of sweet fern, which was our popular native tea during the American Revolution, will excellently supply it to us; and

we are not hard put to find the stag-horn sumac wherewith our bronzed forerunners in this land made a cold tonic with which to fortify their strength on the summer trail. We cannot, like the ruminants, eat sharp-bladed grass; but we can eat the tubers of chufa or nut-grass with pleasure and advantage, and our stomachs take excellently, after a little adjustment of digestion, to the wild red clover. Chickweed is a rather better thing than spinach; the burdock which we ignore is good enough to be earnestly cultivated for the tables of Japan; a diet of our riotously proliferant wild onions served robustly for many months as the chief food of Père Marquette. Very few, indeed, of the produces of the measureless wild garden of the land cannot serve us. Jack-in-the-pulpit was the Indians' native turnip. Of milkweed the Plattes made sugar and a good dish of pods. The roots of rue anemone are a wild potato. Lupine seeds are peas, early blue violets a kind of wild okra, roasted roots of goose-tansy a nutrition-packed variant of parsnip.

There is not the faintest chance, of course, that we shall ever have to go out and root and forage for our food. We shall never have to become a nation of Nebuchadnezzars. But there is a certain value in reflecting that, should such fanciful worst happen, even then, unless we cannot summon as much animal proficiency as a chipmunk, as much woods-wit as a coon, we are hardly lost. We shall have only to get down to earth.

WAS NIETZSCHE A NAZI?

BY LUDWIG MARCUSE

It is reported that Mrs. Gladys Rockmore Davis, an artist, owns a dachshund named Nietzsche. We may safely assume that the idea was not to honor the dog but to insult the philosopher. The current legend places Nietzsche beside the aggressive Hitler, not beside the suffering Christ, though Nietzsche's autobiography is called, not *Mein Kampf*, but *Ecce Homo*.

A number of circumstances have contributed to this superficial identification of Nietzsche with the Hitler gang. His phrases, "the superman" and "the blond beast," happen to fit perfectly into Hitler's vocabulary. Nietzsche's call to build houses on Vesuvius seems to jibe with the Nazi romantics about the dangerous life. Most unfortunate of all for the philosopher's reputation, many German Nietzscheans became prominent Nazi professors; they celebrated Nietzsche's "Siegfried-like assault on the urbanism of the West" and, alluding to Nietzsche's book *The Gay Science*, called their philosophical schools "guardrooms of the gay science."

As if that were not enough, a publicity-fed world learned that Nie-

tzsche's sister had presented her brother's walking stick to the Führer. It learned that the collapsing Führer had presented a set of Nietzsche's works as a birthday present to the collapsed Duce. There is also the fact that the German philosopher glorified the Renaissance prototype of Hitler, the bloody Cesare Borgia. Everything taken together, who could doubt that Nietzsche and Hitler were cut from the same timber, especially when the Pope and many American professors proclaim this?

It is likely, however, that the Germans are less certain about the similarity between the Austrian and their famous philosopher. A few months ago the New York Public Library organized an exhibition of books prohibited by the Nazis. Works of Nietzsche were in that exhibition. While Nazi propaganda is not averse to being credited with such a great intellectual progenitor, it is sensibly averse to having some of his writings read by Germans.

It would take more space than any magazine can afford to demonstrate that Nietzsche was no Nazi by a thor-

LUDWIG MARCUSE is a former German newspaperman, author and dramatic critic. His books include *Heine and Soldier of the Church*, a biography of Loyola.