

DOWN TO EARTH

By
Alan Devoe



AN INSECT SUMMER

THE VIEW of Nature as a Benign Intelligence has been immemorial and substantially universal. It has been held in the varying terms of many different religions, mythologies, poetries and philosophies; but under these differences it has amounted to what used, classically, to be called the universal religion of universal man.

Since our first forefather lifted his shaggy face to the sky and entertained the initial surmises born of love and awe, the number of people who have supposed that no Mind superintends creation, or that the existence of such Mind is an uncertain and unnecessary hypothesis, or that God if existent is less than All-Wise, has been a tiny minority. Its tininess may sometimes be obscured by its vociferousness, for the faithless have a famous compulsion to keep crying, "Look, Ma, no religion!" as loud and often as possible, while the faithful may hold to their opinions in a serene quiet; but tiny it has been and remains.

A recent extensive survey of the mental climate of America these

days reveals that while a good many citizens may not belong to a particular church, and many may never attend formal services, well over ninety per cent hold fast to religious fundamentals. Atom Age men continue as sure of God as was *Anthropus erectus* in the dawn of his considerings. Here lies the creation, as in the beginning (if a little pocked by cities, a little scratched and pinpricked here and there by human enterprises); and men look at these skies and waters, this blooming and withering of flowers, this moil of creatures, and are as sure as ever that these are terms in which Mind is thinking. Nature is still to be spelled with a capital; for over the earth's woods and fields, over the far-flung stars, over all there is, there broods in loving conservancy the Eternal; and it is good.

This elemental religiousness, this sturdy faith that what keeps the seasons on their rounds is Intelligence and what makes the rain fall and the seed sprout is Love, has the indestructibility, as it were, of an instinct. It is foundationed in im-

mediacies of conviction, so sure that contrary conjectures can scarcely be entertained. It rests in the instantaneity of a First Principle. It has the strength, not of a conclusion, but of native premise.

One may observe, without intending flippancy or irreverence, that God knows it needs it.

For Nature, contemplated with a faithless eye and in a mood of wary misgiving, can easily look like an idiot dance of meaninglessness. Worse, it can look to have a quality almost of crazy malice. It can appear to be all shot through with capricious catastrophe, with senseless evil, as though, beyond the stars, a venomous child were playing. The human spirit falls back, perennially, upon a subliminal "I know" that enables it to confront this with faith. It is as well. Saint Theresa is said to have remarked, in one of her fits of exalted hilarity, that it was small wonder God had so few devoted friends since He treated them so shabbily. Look on Nature without faith, and the shabbiness can appear nearly demonic.

WHEN we speak of "nature," we may think, likely enough, of a cool green forest, a sunny field, a dappled fawn, a bluebird singing. These are refreshing references; and it is a happy thing that they are the sort that come to mind. When we permit ourselves to think of nature in anything like a fuller sense, we have to think also of things im-

measurably dismaying. The brotherhood of creatures contains not just little spotted fawns, not just melodic birds. Tapeworms are also creatures. Lice, rats, bedbugs and bacteria are creatures all. "The sky" — that over-arching blue benevolence — is likewise the vault that unaccountably turns murderously black, hurls hurricanes and twisters, visits impersonal destruction upon the just and the unjust. "Rain," that blessed thing, is also the thing sometimes withheld; so that the land parches in drought and blows away in dust. Look intently at nature whole, with the mind faithless and the heart mistrusting, and it can appear that life and death are random, good and evil are random, and what rules is not merciful wisdom but sinister caprice.

Against this nightmare, the universal certainties of universal religion continually oppose themselves. They needed all their transcendent sureness, in a good many places, this past summer. For Nature had presented herself — the Mind thought — in stunning terms of army worms, webworms, tent caterpillars and cicadas.

Crawling surges of caterpillars stalled trains in several localities, the hordes of hairy little bodies making an impassable sludge under the slipping wheels. Armies of caterpillars, in some places, flowed in rippling engulfment across fields, orchards, pastures, and left the normally fruitful earth bare as a

skull. Shade trees were stripped, forests stripped, gardens stripped, whole stretches of landscapes festooned with webs of caterpillars resistant against the most powerful insecticides. As an accompanying music for all this — a suitably senseless drone, meaningless as the whir of mindless machinery — there had been in many sections the interminable and nearly intolerable *bzzzzz* of cicadas in the dust-whitened summer trees. Nature had been rearing them, as with infinite pains, for seventeen years, in a long hidden infancy under the soil; and then this summer they were loosed in their millions to play their idiot tune.

IT WAS FORCED upon us, this past summer, to take note of how enormously fond, it must seem, Nature is of insects. The Mind delights to think, it looks, in insect-terms. Eternal Intelligence hatches forth insects as with a crooning enthusiasm, cossets and fosters them as with a specially devoted delight. The Creator, on performance, may be taken to love with a great love chinch bugs, weevils, flies, fleas, gnats, and all the rest of a buzzing, creeping, humming, crawling, ravaging horde that embraces more than a million species.

In such a summer as this, our attention was drawn to statistics compiled by the United States Department of Agriculture upon the damage done to our human economy by the insects with which, in the

scheme of Nature, we are set to sharing, in creaturely brotherhood, this planet:

Mosquitoes cost us (in money; there is no reckoning the value of lives) rather more than \$145,000,000 a year. This is not just flying guesswork by the Department. Its expert analysts have carefully determined the components of the price. For example, working-hours lost because of malaria, mosquito-borne, run to a cost of very nearly a hundred million per annum. (Even so obscure an affliction as encephalomyelitis — a horse-disease, mosquito-carried — costs over \$25,000). Dengue fever costs half a million more. Property-value losses, resort losses and the like, caused by mosquito invasion, come to nearly \$25,000,000 annually. For mosquito nettings, mosquito repellents, mosquito-bite anodynes, and such paraphernalia, we have to spend \$5,000,000 a year. We must spend about \$25,000,000 a year for screens. Even if ten millions of this are for fly-protection, fifteen millions are still chargeable to mosquitoes. Tot up the bill and it comes comfortably to almost a hundred and fifty million dollars each year.

Mosquitoes are one species of insect. There are thousands of species, hundreds of thousands, spilling from their Source as coinhabitants with us of this teeming creation. The Department of Agriculture has computed full reckonings on many:

Annual cost of boll weevils, in

round figures, \$121,000,000. Of houseflies, \$66,000,000. Of corn-ear worms, \$98,000,000. Of termites, \$40,000,000. Of cattle grubs, \$65,000,000. Of grasshoppers, \$26,000,000. Of wireworms, \$40,000,000. Of chinch bugs, \$15,000,000. Of clothes moths, \$23,000,000. And so it goes, in sets of statistics involving such immense figures as to become almost unmeaning. Totaling the control-cost and damage-cost of just eighteen of the commonest sorts of insects installed by Nature as brother-creatures to us, the Department presents a figure of eight hundred fourteen million dollars annually.

OVER two thousand years ago in Jerusalem a son of Pethuel, named Joel, composed a blood-chilling account of a locust visitation. It survives for us as the Book of Joel, the Prophet. It is full of as roaring a terror as can be found:

That which the palmerworm hath left hath the locust eaten; and that which the locust hath left hath the cankerworm eaten; and that which the cankerworm hath left hath the caterpillar eaten . . . The field is wasted, the land mourneth; for the corn is wasted: . . . The new wine is dried up, the oil languisheth. . . . The seed is rotten under their clods, the garners are laid desolate, the

barns are broken down; for the corn is withered. . . . How do the beasts groan! the herds of cattle are perplexed, because they have no pasture; yea, the flocks of sheep are made desolate. . . .

The Book of Joel is strong, wild stuff, in the most full-blown manner of the Old Testament prophets. ("Awake, ye drunkards, and weep. . . . Howl, ye ministers of the altar.") Its fundamental intention is understood by Bible scholars to be to "address those under visitations of evil with a call for humility."

By humility, says the mind of old and universal faith, we may know that Wisdom superintends the palmerworm, however inscrutably. By indestructible certainty we may be sure that chinch bugs proceed out of Reason, the grasshopper-horde out of Love.

How do we know? We know. It was only partly in jest, partly in wry piety, that a French entomologist ventured the suggestion that if this faith survives, strong as an instinct, sure as a tropism, the fact is itself perhaps the most imposing argument for what the faith believes. For it is ultimate benevolence, surely, that man is granted, amid all the gnawings of all the cankerworms, this eerie power to retain his confidence.

» Our Lord has written the promise of the resurrection, not in books alone, but in every leaf in spring-time. — *Martin Luther*

Atlas, the Next Generation

By VIRGINIA ROLLER BATDORFF



IT HAS always been the fashion to deplore the manners and morals of each generation. This coming generation will be no exception to the long-established custom.

Augmenting the natural gregariousness of humans, we are intent on encouraging a constant state of sociability in our children under a system of group study and play, and we are appalled because they do not want to think as individuals but must consult with the gang when making decisions.

We give them dollars which they do not earn. We complain because they do not know the value of a dime.

We educate them under a theory which is socialistic in nature because it assumes that learning must be made as painless as possible. We are shocked to find that 125,000 of our boys and girls who reach the age of eighteen each year cannot read or write.

We teach our children that success is the only worth-while goal in life, but we do not define this goal as successful *living*. Yet we are terribly worried because our children are developing such a materialistic viewpoint about *things*.

We encourage them to admire the brilliance of generals but forget to mention that war is stupid.

We impress our young with achievements of people of the past who *did* things, and we cannot understand why they have the vague impression that a philosopher is a man who is essentially lazy and sits around doing nothing.

We insist that our children spend years learning and working toward a definite job or career, but we give little thought to teaching them that before they can become really good doctors, lawyers, bricklayers or chemists they must learn to be good people. We cannot understand why so many of them are making such a botch of marriage and parenthood.

We propagate with little thought to the kind of children we will produce; we are alarmed that the rate of our national intelligence is dwindling yearly.

We worship the modern god called Intelligence and we hate to admit that the next generation will have less intelligence than we because we confused it and then substituted intelligence for a faithful old standby — Wisdom.