

No.26

CAN YOU HEAR THEIR VOICES?

A Short Story

by
Whittaker Chambers

10c

INTERNATIONAL PAMPHLETS
799 Broadway New York

500 FARMERS STORM ARKANSAS TOWN DEMANDING FOOD FOR THEIR CHILDREN

DROUGHT SUFFERERS CLAMOR FOR AID FOR HUNGRY FAMILIES AND THREATEN TO RAID LOCAL STORES, BUT ARE APPEASED BY RED CROSS HELP—ORGANIZATION FEEDS 100,000 IN THE STATE

By The Associated Press.

ENGLAND, Ark., Jan. 3.—Farm-such as: “Our children are crying ers estimated to number 500 or morefor food and we are going to get stormed the business section of Eng-it.”

land late today, demanding food “We are not going to let our chil- and threatening to take it forciblydren starve.”

from merchants before a hurried “We want food and we want it call to the Red Cross produced au-now.” . . .

thorization of food distribution. Mr. Morris said he considered the More than 250 were provided withsituation “very serious,” adding that food, but sixty-six still stood in linethe men would storm the town tonight.

again as soon as their present food supplies were exhausted. He also spoke to the farmers, practically allsaid that virtually all merchants of whom were white men, but hishere were “broke” as a result of the speech was interrupted time anddrought situation in the countryside. again by those in the crowd, from Financial difficulties were further which shouts of “We want food”increased a short time ago by the and “Give us food for our starvingclosing of the Citizens Bank and families” were heard. Trust Company. . . .

Merchants, whose stores swarmed Mr. Morris, when asked if he with the hungry men, called a hur-thought the situation would be re-ried conference and then obtainedpeated, said:

from the Red Cross headquarters in “The merchants of England either Little Rock authorization to givemust move their goods or mount the men food. machine guns on their stores.

Allowances of \$2.75 for each fam- “We depend here on cotton for ily were authorized, and C. E. Han-our money crop and, as is well kins, Red Cross local chairman, saidknown, the price is low, and besides 265 had obtained the food allotmentthe drought cut production. Then at 6 P. M. . . . came a bank failure, and any one

Mr. Morris’ address was metwho knows a cotton country knows with many other interrupting shoutsthe fix we are in.” . . .

CAN YOU HEAR THEIR VOICES?

The Arkansas Farmers' Fight for Food

BY WHITTAKER CHAMBERS

"It's like a fire," said the young dirt farmer, Frank Frances, who had been on the prairie only a year. "Everything burns up. Now my cow's sick, and if *she* dies! Why is it? Why is it?"

"Oh, it's—on account of the sun," said the dirt farmer, Davis, whose smile seemed a part of his drawl. "Ever notice it up there, Frances? Warms the earth, makes the farmer's crops grow, ripens the apple on the bough! Just now it looks like a red hot silver cartwheel. Better take a long look at it, it's about the only 'cart-wheel' you'll see this year. The drought won't stop with your cow, Frances. First *all* the water'll go, then the corn and the alfalfa. If there's anything left, that'll go, too. Then winter'll come—"

"And then?"

"Then," with a mock in his drawl as he looked the younger man over, "well, then—I don't know about you—but some folks ain't going to starve. Not so long as they have guns."

"Oh, you mean hunting."

"Yeah—I mean hunting all right."

Davis was right: the water went first in the shallow holes in the range-lot. The bottoms blistered in blunt diamond shapes of dry mud, peeled, and the edges rolled up till they met in the middle.

The grass dried, the alfalfa burnt to stalks. The corn was stunted and never developed ears. What wheat there was never developed in the heads. The vegetables in the kitchen-garden died.

You could see the bottom of the wind-mill shaft, though it stood surrounded by aspens at the back of the farm-house: the

leaves were thinned out as if it were autumn. And as less and less water was pumped up, it was cloudier and cloudier and tasted sickeningly of alkali. The poor farmer, Wardell, his wife and two boys, began to envy the aspen roots that went down and sucked up whatever water there was: they ended by hating them.

Animals overcame their fear to seek water near the houses. The Wardell boys found a gopher, a pair of jack-rabbits, dead. A red-headed woodpecker lay on the front path, its wings spread out. The boys took it into the house. In the shade it revived. They gave it a drop of their water; it uttered its single sharp scream; batting itself against the windows that were always shut now, to keep out the hot wind that blew the length of the prairie, and dried the saliva out of your mouth.

In front of the house the eldest boy killed a four foot rattler that put up no fight. The boys wanted to see if it would die before sundown; it hardly twitched after its skull was crushed.

Hearing the blows and the boys' shouts, their father came out. "The drought killed it, like everything else," he said, "no insult to your courage, John."

The two boys stood at either side of their father, looking at the snake. In their overalls both were lean, bony and tall, but shorter than the man. Like his, their hair was burned white by the sun and wind, but his had turned sandy. Their faces were tanned, but smooth and unwrinkled. His had three deep lines on either side. One where the ends of his mouth went down. Two, curving parallel, on either side, ran to his smooth, long jaw-bone whose end was part of the rough angle of his chin. His long curved nose ended almost on a line with his mouth, the nostrils running back sharply, almost parallel with the bridge, and lying close to his face.

His brown eyes had seldom been afraid. They had never been dismayed except by death. Both boys' eyes were blue.

"That shows what the drought has done," he said. "They never come out of the hills. I remember when Purcell started his mines there, the men drove the snakes down, but when he closed the mines, they went back again. There hasn't been one killed around

here since I was your age. It's dead all right. If the drought hadn't weakened it, it'd twitch. Of course, it's all superstition that they don't die till after sundown. It's their nerves keep them twitching. They die hard, but this one's too weak."

By afternoon a crowd in dungarees had collected to see the snake. It was a pretext. There was no work for the men to do in the heat, with the crops burnt. They wanted to talk in a body.

They stood around the dead snake in a rough circle, mostly keeping their eyes on the ground.

The sun blazed just as mercilessly in the sky, going west, as it had at noon.

They talked about the dry spell.

"How long will it last?"

"Do you think there's any chance of rain?"

"The papers don't tell you, they say there's *hope*."

"They've been saying that a long time," said Wardell. "Besides, it don't make any difference if it does rain. The corn's done for."

"My cow died this morning," said the young farmer, Frances. He was considered a newcomer in the district, having been there only a year. They thought him a bad farmer, and unsteady, and they didn't like his whine.

So Davis turned and said drily, over his shoulder, "Mine died a month ago."

"Your wife hasn't got a baby," said Frances.

They ignored it. "What do you think, Wardell?" they said partly to shut off the young man's personal plaint—(Hell, you're no worse off than us!)—"will the government help us?"

Wardell smiled. It was the first time any of them had ever asked *his* advice.

"What do you think the government'll do for you? Think you're the only poor farmer in the country?"

"They'll have to make the banks give us some kind of loans," said glum Davis.

"They'll have to give us some kind of credit to live."

"If the cows keep on dying, they'll have to do something about milk."

"They'll have to make banks give us some kind of loans, but before they do that it'll have to be worse! Much worse!" A Bohemian named Drdla spoke. Round, smooth face, and full lips smiling while he added his drop of gloom.

"What about winter coming? What are we going to do if there ain't any food? How are we going to feed the babies?" asked Frances, panicky.

"Anyway, *you've* got one less mouth to feed," said Davis, again over his shoulder.

Everybody laughed.

"A dead cow ain't no joke," said Frances.

Everybody laughed again.

"Well, the government ain't going to do anything, if you want to know," said Wardell. "At least, I'm not counting on it handing me anything. Of course you can look at thinks like Mort Davis: we don't have to feed the cows that die. On the other hand, they might feed the babies."

"They're stopping credit at the stores in Paris."

"Think they'd give it through the winter? To all of us? They've got to make a living, too."

"You mean there ain't going to be nothing to eat?"

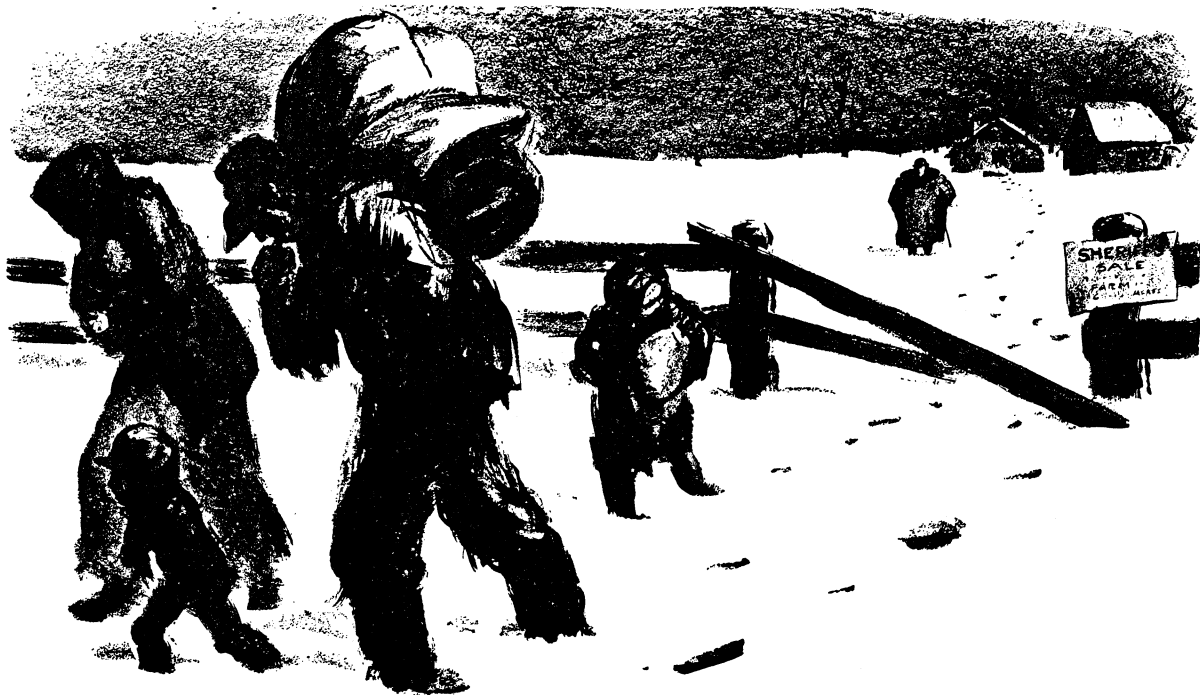
"There's plenty to eat in the stores in Paris. All you've got to have is the money to buy it. In fact, you can eat like a hog—if you're a storekeeper," said Wardell. "We only *grow* the food—when we can: they *sell* it. But as I haven't got the money to buy and neither have you, I guess we'll take it or starve."

They understood only slowly.

"You mean you'd steal it?" asked an alarmed voice.

"I mean that when I'm hungry I like to eat. And when my wife and children are hungry, I'm likely to take food where I can get it. If that's stealing, then you can say I like to steal. Does that hurt your feelings?"

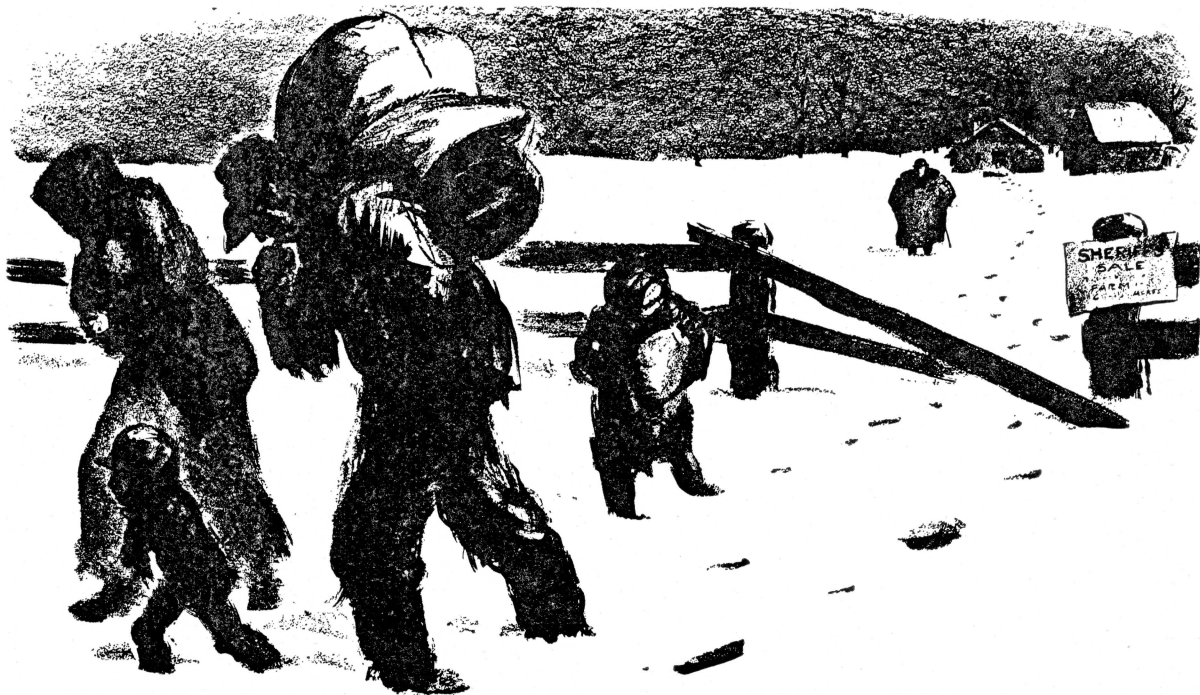
Most of the men had driven over in flivvers. A heavier car drew up. A heavier man got out and came over.



THE EVOLUTION OF THE AMERICAN PEASANT

Robert Minor

—Robert Minor, 1924.



THE EVOLUTION OF THE AMERICAN PEASANT

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Purcell had been a colonel in the war. "Talking about the drought?" he asked, eyeing each face in turn.

"Wardell's John killed a rattler in front of the house," said Davis. "The folks came over to find out just what a dead snake looks like. Would *you* like to see?"

A voice as vibrant and deep as Purcell's was a surprise, issuing from the small slit of his lips, while his full angular jaws worked up and down. He spoke deliberately, with his own emphasis.

"This 'drowt', or 'drooth' as Wardell calls it, has been a lucky break for you, Wardell. You were running pretty low in your line of knocks when this bad luck came along." Little gray eyes glared gleefully on either side of his small, fighty wedge of turned-up nose.

"The 'general' 's got his chip on his shoulder," one of the Wardell boys whispered to the other.

"On his face, you mean, to keep his eyes from running together," John Wardell said aloud, staring at Purcell's nose.

"Some of us call it 'drowt' and some of us call it 'drooth'," said Wardell, "but they both mean that the crops are done for, water and forage are dried up, the cattle are dying, and we'll be needing food when our credit gives out at the stores in town. Unless, of course, the banks want to make us long term loans."

Purcell, the richest farmer in the district, had a finger in the Bank of Paris, of which his son-in-law was cashier.

"The trouble with Wardell is," Purcell said, preserving his good temper, but talking rather to the gathering than to Wardell, "the trouble with him is that he spends too much time nights reading those books he has in the house, and looking up the long words in the dictionary. So he gets sleepy and sore at the world, don't you, Jim?" The men smiled, being let in on the joke by the big boss. "What was that book, in that package of yours that came undone in the post office that time?" Purcell was also post-master. "'Socialism Yewtopian and Scientific'!" He laughed. "Well, every man's got a right to read what he wants to in his own house, I guess, if he don't try to force others to think

his crazy ways, too. But I went to school with Jim Wardell, didn't we, Jim, and I know he's still the same wild Jim, wild ideas, but a heart of gold. So if you get hungry, and he tries to feed you Socialism *Yew*topian and Scientific, if you don't feel full, and I guess you won't, I think the Red Cross will do more for you all. I got to go. So long, Jim. So long, boys."

"The Red Cross!"

"The Red Cross!"

"They did fine work in the Mississippi flood!"

"The Red Cross!"

They began to drift away from Wardell's to town or home.

"So it's the Red Cross next," thought Wardell. "I know you dirt farmers! You've got to find out for yourselves. So it's the Red Cross you'll find out about now! And when you have, and I guess you'll get your chance this time, you'll be ready to show them a few things—"

"Say, Frances," he said when they were the last two left, "we can spare some of our milk for a baby, I guess. While the cow's still giving any. Drop in after milking. Throw that snake off the path, boys," he called from the porch, not to hear the young man's thanks.

Two days later the snake was a length of shrivelled skin and spinal bones. The sun had dried it up.

It dried up the last "pot-hole" in that stretch of prairie, too, and the alkali sparkled thick on the bared bottom, with a likeness to snow strange under the red hot sun.

The "yellow-heads" from the "pot-hole" gathered in great flocks, and the farm people would stop to watch them escaping through the sky, deserting the country, as in the fall when they feel the cold coming.

"Say, Lil," said Purcell to his daughter at supper one night, "I thought Frances' cow died. I thought he'd be buying milk from us now. He's got a baby, ain't he?"

Purcell had been one of the first farmers to turn to dairy-

ing when the borers gnawed away the margin of profit the banks and railroads left on corn in that section. He had a fine herd of Holsteins and, as he could afford to ship in ensilage and water by the tank, had preserved them through the drought, leaving it to the dry spell to carry off the few heads owned by his small competitors.

"See, you don't know everything down at the bank," said his daughter, a fair, fat girl with big breasts, glasses and a gold incisor. "I happen to know that Jim Wardell is *giving* Frances milk."

"*Giving* it to him? I wonder if Frances has ever seen the way Wardell keeps his cow? I wouldn't give any baby of mine that milk. I guess Jim's got to give it away. He couldn't sell it. Well, it's only a few cents anyway."

Frances used to come a little early and sit in the kitchen a few minutes in the evening while Wardell was milking the cow.

"And how's the baby and how is Hilda today?" Mrs. Wardell would ask.

"It's very bad up there. Since she lost her milk, it's terrible. And then the cow dying. Yours is the only cow left around here, except Purcell's."

"Take this home to them," she would say when he went, his milk-can full. Wardell never asked her what was in the nameless parcels. But even the boys were going oftener to bed hungry, after eating everything there was. Sometimes there was no milk on the Wardells' table.

"The cow won't last much longer at this rate," said Wardell to his wife one night. Such a ridiculous sentence to make her heart almost stop beating!

One evening Ann Wardell thought Frances looked as if he hadn't eaten for two days, so she set some boiled dried beans, part of supper's only dish, before him. Wardell came in without the dribble of milk, and sat down.

"Don't you think the time is coming, Frank," he said, "when the poor farmers, people like you and me and the Davises and

Wiggins and Drdla, will have to go and take the food out of the store-windows in Paris? There's always plenty of it there."

"You're a Socialist, ain't you?" Frank asked, ever so slyly, over his spoonful of beans.

("The branding reproach of Communism!")

"I'm a Communist, Frank."

"What does that mean?"—the beans suspended midway to the mouth.

"In this case, it means that I'm for unlimited free groceries and meat to all poor farmers. No rent for two years. Free seed. Free milk for babies."

"I guess you Reds want everything free," said Frank.

"I guess you will, too, before the baby's dead." Hard and bitter to hammer it home.

"Jim!"

"I know what I'm telling him, Ann. We're both dirt farmers, poor men, both come from the same class, so there's no reproach in your taking something from me when you need it, Frances. And there's no reproach meant, in my telling you that your kid would be dead but for your getting the milk from my cow. You couldn't buy it. Not from me, I wouldn't sell it to you. And you couldn't buy it from Purcell because he *would* sell it to you, and you haven't got the money to buy it. Well, my cow's dying. Now what do you think about having milk *free*?"

"Dying? Your cow's dying?" Frances was the color of milk himself.

"She'll be dead by morning. Now I'm going out to see what I can do for her. There won't be any milk tonight or from now on. But don't forget that it was the dirty Communist, the Red, the Bolshevik who wants everything free for every poor farmer, who kept the kid alive till now."

Frances stumbled, with the empty milk-can, out the door Wardell had left open, past the barn where he saw a light, and the cow lying on her side, and Wardell bending over her.

"Jim's cruel, but Jim's right," said Mrs. Wardell. Her husband did not come back into the house, and she waited half an hour

before she slipped out and across the field paths, with another milk-can.

Lily Purcell came to the door. "Oh, hello, Mrs. Wardell." The gold tooth haloed in a golden smile.

"Our cow's died," said Ann, holding out the can.

"Oh, she died, huh? Mr. Frances said she was going to."

"Did Frank get some milk?"

"Well, we milked early, Mrs. Wardell, and we had only enough for ourselves. Mr. Frances didn't have no money. There's so many like that now."

"I've got some money," Ann said.

"Well, I'll see if mother could spare a little. Give me the can."

Ann walked in the open door where it was plain to see the chickens also walked.

They didn't hear her come.

Hilda Frances was not crying. She was walking the bare floor, saying, "Baby, baby, baby, baby!" When she reached the wall she would stop. When she paced back, she would begin again, "Baby, baby, baby!" It was Frank, with his head in his arms, on the table, who was crying.

"We did get some milk, after all," said Ann Wardell.

Hilda stopped. "Milk! God bless you, Mrs. Wardell, God bless you! Oh, God bless you!"

"A funny God that brings babies into the world, and takes away their mother's milk, and kills the cows that feed them, Mrs. Frances. But let me have a look at the baby before I go."

"You got milk for them at Purcell's!" Jim said when she came in.

"Yes."

He frowned but said nothing.

"You've got to stop," he told her a week later. "You can't do it. The cold's coming. We've only got so much. You're taking the food from John and Robert."

"You can't let a baby die."

"Worse things will happen before this winter's over. What good does it do? Keep it alive another week. You'll *have* to stop then. And you're only taking it away from the boys. They'll be up against it soon enough. That's the trouble with your charity. You can't keep it up, and it only makes Frank and his wife hope it's forever. It makes them content. And they can't be. When he sees the baby's going to die, he'll cry for milk and food along with the rest of us. He's got to. It's coming. It's coming soon."

"Say, are you really a Socialist?" asked Davis, driving his Ford up to the house.

"What do you want to know for?" asked Wardell with his foot on the running board. "Bunch of the boys want to lynch me?"

"Not yet, Jim," grudging a lop-sided smile since his face was lop-sided. "Hell *is* going to break loose around here soon, if things don't get any better, and they may be wanting you then. But this here I came about, is personal business. There's a family of greasers squatting on my land, and they won't get off. They've got four kids, and the woman just had twins last night. No doctor! They haven't got no food, and the man says they ain't got no gasoline so they can't go on, they've just got to stop on my place. Well, they ain't going to. We can't feed the white men up there now, let alone greasers. Of course, I can have them run in down in Paris. But on account of the woman having those kids last night, I thought maybe—some of your Socialist ideas—you'd let them stay on your place."

"I'm not a Socialist," said Wardell.

"What the hell are you then?"

"I'm a Communist."

"What's that?"

"Well, just now it means I want free food for every farmer that can't pay for it, free milk for the babies, free rent, and if we can't get free food, I'm for going and taking it."

"What did you say you called yourself?"

"A Communist."

"That's like a Red, Russians, huh?"

"No, workingmen and poor farmers, like you and me."

"Do you have a secret society?"

"The Communists are a political party, called the Communist Party of the United States."

"And they believe in free food?"

"Yes."

"I'll be over tonight," said Davis, "I've got to go to Paris now. Goodbye, Jim. I'll tell those Mexicans to come down here."

"If you won't let them on your own place."

That day it began to snow, suddenly, before dark.

"Ann, I think Davis will come over to us," he said as he sat down to the boiled beans.

"Come over?"

"To us. He's coming here tonight."

"Jim, be careful."

"I'll be as careful as I can. The time is past when we can afford to be too careful. Stay up tonight, boys, and listen to what Mort Davis and I talk about."

The deep snow separated the farms, but it made starvation general.

At first they burned the fence-posts, those who had them; the others, the floor boards in the barns. Those who had no barns burned their hen-coops. But after charcoal, what?

The men took out their guns, the pretext being to hunt jack-rabbits, though most of them had died in the drought. But the women had no pretext and no will to escape the wailing of the babies, for whom there was no milk, and the whimpering and gaunt eyes of the older children.

The men made an honest search for game, but by afternoon most of them drifted into Paris, with their guns under their arms.

Many of them passed the bank windows, never suspecting what was going on within. Purcell saw them as he leaped to his

feet in the fury of wrangling with his son-in-law, the cashier, and old Dr. Jespersen, the president, and walked to the front window of the Bank of Paris.

"They're walking around the streets with guns now, and you talk about closing the bank! I knew you'd do this," he screamed, shaking his fist at his son-in-law, the heavy jaws turkey red. "I knew you'd do this, I knew you would! You and your damn fool farm mortgages! And now the bank will crash, and so will you, and so will the Doc! But I won't! I took care of that!"

The main road entered Paris after turning a right angle, around an osage hedge, and crossing a creek, dried up in the drought, on a wooden bridge. It passed the double row of storefronts, and returned to the prairie on the other side. Two tracks led south and north to scattered farms. The latter had once been busy when Purcell worked his ground-level mines in the hills, twenty miles to the north. They had been closed down for years.

Wardell and Davis found about thirty armed men on the main street.

"I don't know what to do," said a little man named Shays, "my baby's dying. He's dying all right, dying. And we haven't got milk."

"Neither have we!"

"We haven't had any for two days. My baby's dying."

"We got some but my credit's gone. We can't even get any food. But milk comes first."

"There's only one place you can get milk around here," said Wardell.

"Where's that?"

"At Purcell's."

"We know that! Where are we going to get the money? He's not giving it away, and he don't trust now."

"Did you say your kid was dying, Dan?" Wardell asked Shays.

"Yes, he'll die if I don't get him milk."



—Jacob Burck in the *Daily Worker*

“I’m glad you got your rifle with you. Will you come with me to Purcell’s and make them give you milk?”

The little man blenched. “Take it from Purcell, you mean?”

“That’s what I mean. Will anyone else come with us? Will you, Doscher?”

“No, I won’t. I know your Socialist ideas! What do you think I am, a thief?”

“Will you lend me your gun, Doscher?” asked Davis. “I’d like to go with Jim and Shays. You know, our farms are too near together, and I can’t stand listening to your baby scream itself to death, even if you can.”

“I’ll go!”

“I’ll go!”

“I’ll go!”

In the end, Doscher went, too.

They tramped out the western side of the town, fighting their way through the snow, and, in half an hour, were at Purcell’s.

Wardell led them to the back door.

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"Lilian," he said, "some of these men have babies, and all of

us have children. None of us have any money. If those babies don't get their milk tonight, some of them will die. They'll all die in a week or two. Will you give us milk?"

"Give it to you? How can I give it to you, Jim Wardell? You're crazy!"

"You've got to give it to us."

"How can I give it to you? To *all* of you?"

"You've got to give it to us. We know how to milk cows just as well as you do. If you don't give it to us, we'll go down to the barn and take it."

She screamed. "I won't."

"In other words, you want us to take it. All right, we'll take it!"

"Wait, wait a minute, wait!" She flew into the house.

All three men sat stiff and terrified as the phone rang in the bank.

"Well, then, I'll answer it," said Purcell.

"They want you to *give* it to them?" he shouted. "*Guns?* Oh, I see," he said, "Wardell! I see. Well, give it to them! Give it to them! *Give it to them!*" He missed the hook as he slammed the receiver against the case.

"There's only enough here to last two days at most," said Wardell as they broke up.

"We'll make it last five," they said, laughing.

The night the bank failed Frank's baby died.

He had not been out of the house for three days. He knew nothing of the milk seizure at Purcell's. The wailing of the baby and his own hunger kept him awake, but at last exhaustion stretched him out. He awoke with a start to see Hilda bending over the drawer where they kept the child in some dirty blankets. It seemed to him as if someone had screamed.

"What is it, Hil?" She had a blanket in her hand.

"I think baby's dead."

"No." He leaped up. He looked at it and listened for breathing.

"I'll get the doctor."

"Oh, what's the use of the doctor, he won't come now."

"He will!"

"You can't get him in time, you know there's no gas in the Ford."

"I'll go. I'll run. I'll get him. I'll get him."

He did not tie his shoes. He stumbled where he broke through the snow. He felt the ice-crust under his hands as he fell, and its edges cut his ankles. But he kept running.

"How can I get two miles through this snow?" asked old Dr. Jesperson, the bank president, who for some reason was up alone at that hour, with a bottle of whiskey on the table.

"You can make it in the car. You must try to save her, Doctor, you must."

"Oh, don't plead, don't plead, I know I've got to go! God damned Hippocratic oath!"

"Of course, it's dead," said the old man, standing well back from the drawer which smelt of wet as he of whiskey. "Been dead a couple of hours! What do you mean bringing a baby into this world when you can't take care of it! What do you get married for? I don't suppose there's a crumb of bread in the house," he said, looking at the walls. "Damndest profession in the world! Damndest profession in the world! Now there'll be an epidemic of dying. There ought to be."

Hilda watched him drive away.

Frank was sobbing with his head on the table. Suddenly he straightened up. "Wardell killed her," he shouted. "He stopped the milk on her, I know he did. The dirty lousy Red. He did it. He killed her, God curse him!"

"Don't be a fool," said Hilda quietly, "I killed her myself. Do you think I wanted to see her tortured to death by inches? I killed her with the blanket.—God?"

He sprang at her, but she ran away from him and out the door, slamming it. She ran farther, thinking he would follow, but he stopped beside the baby.

She saw the big square outlines of Purcell's house and barns against the white snow. Milk! She had barely passed it when it seemed to her as if an army were pursuing her, crunching through the snow, with bells and sounds like faint horns snorting. She was overwrought. Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord. Might He find pleasure in taking vengeance on a mother who had smothered her baby? Was He after her? She ran, wilder and wilder, mad with a desire to scream, but terrified to silence. Finally she just began to laugh. It was much simpler, and it was all funny, and she just laughed and laughed and laughed.

What she had taken for God was Purcell's blooded Holsteins. He was removing the whole herd, in the dead of night, to the livery stable in Paris where there was law and order. There would be no more free milk.

When the snow fell, they moved the Mexicans into the upstairs room. The Wardell boys slept in the remnants of hay in the barn loft. It was bitter cold, and they were grateful for the meetings that postponed till late the necessity of trying to sleep.

Wardell and his wife, Davis, and the two boys would sit around the table, with the five sheets of paper and pens before them, and the bottle of ink in the middle. Carrillo, the Mexican, sat to one side. He spoke only broken English, but his black eyes gazed fixedly from either side of his nose, with its coarse pores, in an undefeated effort to grasp by chance word and gesture what the others were discussing.

There was no hectograph, no mimeograph, no typewriter. Everything had to be written by hand. There were five right hands. At the top of their first handbill they printed:

"YOUR MILK GIVES OUT TODAY!
WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO NOW?"

The bills were tacked to the front porches of houses on each of the four roads into Paris, east and west, north and south. Drdla had one, and Doscher, Davis and Wardell. One of the boys took

one to Ryder's, a farmer who lived ten miles farther to the south where the men seldom came to town.

"Are you going to the meeting at Wardell's?" Doscher asked Shays, who was reading the tacked up bill.

"Of course, I'm going. Who got us the milk?"

"He got it for us all right last time, it might not be so easy now. Jim's a queer bird. He's a Socialist."

"Well, what of it? Anyway, I hear he ain't a Socialist."

"Ain't a Socialist?"

"No, they've got some other name for it. They call it a Communist."

"What's that make him?"

"It makes him for us, I guess. That's all I know about it. I'll see you at Wardell's."

"Why should I go to Wardell's?" Frances answered Davis. "Don't you think I know what Wardell's up to? He'll be running for something next. Anyway, the Red Cross is going to help us, ain't it? The paper says so."

"You'll find out what a whole lot of good the Red Cross is going to do you, when they get here—if they get here."

"I guess I'll be there," Wiggins, a heavy-set farmer, who had just began to feel the pinch, told Drdla. Drdla objected to tacking up the handbill, so the men simply came to his house and read it. Wiggins stood reading it with his wife, a tall spare woman whose black eyes looked in a perfectly level line out of the bones of her face.

"I'll be there," she said. "Look at them!" The five children sat in the back of the Ford. They made no effort to get out.

"But I see the Red Cross is going to help us," her husband objected. "They won't like this." He rapped the handbill with the back of his hand.

"We may need them both," said his wife.

Purcell's frantic wires to the Governor, and Senator Bagheot in Washington, described the seizure of milk at a local farm by

one hundred armed farmers, led by loafers. A supplementary wire described the leader, one Wardell, a chronic trouble-maker.

The Senator was handed both wires at breakfast by his young wife, who continued to act as his secretary.

"I did not want to disturb you with them last night, Senator," she said.

Bagheot read them through with a concentration that was partly the difficulty that he had in seeing; at seventy he would not hear of glasses.

"A cheap demagogue!" the old man exploded when he had finished the characterization of Wardell. "A cheap demagogue! Trading on the sufferings of those poor farmers! They always come to the front in times like these."

He acted with promptness and efficiency. Talking over long distance with the Governor of the State, he made sure that the Red Cross would be operating in Paris the next day.



CAPITALIST: "DON'T PLANT ANY MORE, WE HAVE ENOUGH."

—Jacob Burck in the *Daily Worker*

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"Even a very little relief . . ."

"I can't hear you," said the Governor.

"Well, why the Devil can't you hear me! What's the matter with your connection? I said even a very little relief will quiet the mob. Unless you take some such measures, the merchants must either put their stocks in the streets, or machine-guns in their windows."

"Yes, yes. Everything of that sort will be seen to. How is it in Washington, as cold as it is here?"

"Well, we've had a little snow," the voice quavered.

Senator Bagheot then dictated to his wife his statement to the press. "Conditions in my State, brought to my attention today by the newspapers, show extreme suffering in the country districts. I shall move for Federal aid tomorrow. Congress has not treated the suffering resulting from this winter sympathetically, but I believe that when the members of Congress return, after facing their constituents, their action will be a little different."

"That's good, eh, huh?" he chuckled to his wife. "I guess that will show them who lives in a glass house, politically speaking!"

"Remember, Dr. Styres said you were to have no undue excitement."

The State organization of the Red Cross proved itself equal to the situation which it was called upon by the Governor to control. Over night, it completed plans for immediate relief for all who could furnish evidence of bona fide suffering.

In this work it was planned to cooperate with local community leaders, since they were assumed to be better informed as to local persons, cases and needs, rather than to "foist an alien organization on the town from without."

They simply sent a supervisor, who sat beside Lily Purcell, the local head of the Red Cross, in the little relief station they had rented in her brother's empty store.

Back of the counter, at which they sat, were cans of milk, bags of flour, sugar, etc.

"We ought to spread some bags of flour on the counter.

There's nothing like it for psychological effect, for raising the spirits of hungry people," said the Red Cross supervisor, who, like Miss Purcell, wore glasses. "It's unfortunate, though, that you had this thaw last night. It's opened the roads, and of course it would have been better if we had had a few days to get things firmly in hand. It will probably let more of them through to that meeting at Wardell's, too. But I calculate that our opening at the same hour as the meeting will also have its psychological effect. I guess they'll here, rather than there."

That morning the Mexicans left Wardell. He heard them talking all night, Carrillo urging, his wife opposing, but at last her opposition growing fainter, perhaps tired out.

In the morning they all came down into the lower room. The children stood in a ragged line, mute, and stared. The wife, looking much like the children, but with a twin on either arm, also stared.

"Companero Ooardell," said Carrillo, "we are going away. You have no food for yourselves. The roads opened last night. Companero Ooardell, you are a good man. Your wife, she is a good woman. Your sons, they are good young men. If I go east or if I go west, if I go north or if I go south, I will always come back here. Sometimes I will come to take, sometimes to bring. But I will always remember that you saved our lives. I thank you, my wife thanks you, and my children thank you. Goodbye, companeros."

His wife smiled and nodded, and they all went away, having somehow gotten their Ford to start.

"So the Carrillos have left you?" said Davis. "I guess that Mex figured there was going to be shooting, and a fight's a poor place for a greaser."

"Think so? I wouldn't be too hopeful about the shooting, Mort. In the first place, what are we going to get by shooting—yet? In the second place, though that crowd learned some kind of a lesson when they took the milk from Purcell, they've had

time to think it over. You'll see, those that come here today are a little scared of themselves."

"You forget their kids are still crying."

"I don't forget it at all."

Before noon the little house was so packed with men and women's bodies, you couldn't walk a foot. The heat rose perceptibly and with the smell of cow and horse manure and humans.

"We can't talk in here," Wardell called out. "Everybody outside!"

"Line up those cars in a half dozen rows," he said, "and sit in them." His own car was standing in front of the house. It was open and the top was down. His wife got in, and Davis. Wardell stood on the front seat and talked.

"I'm glad to see that there are so few of us here," he said. "It means that only the most reliable and the most needy are here. It means we can move together easier, and have more confidence in each other. And we need that."

"I'm glad to see, too, that you women have brought your babies with you. It's another sign that you're not afraid, and it means that we'll never lose sight of why we're going to Paris.

"And we're going down to Paris. We're starving, and we're going to Paris to get food. I hear that the Red Cross is going to give it to us. Now I want to tell you *how* they're going to give to us.

"First of all, before they give us anything, we've got to prove that we're not 'imposters'. That's what they're calling some of us now. In other words, we've got to prove that we really are starving to death. Can you prove it?"

Growls.

"Then, when we've proved that we're starving, I want to tell you *what* they'll give us."

"How do you know what they're going to do?" asked a voice. Other voices: "Ssh! Ssh!"

"Never mind, Ar Crocker, just remember that we *did* tell you, when the time comes," Davis bawled back.

"They're going to give us *one* loaf of bread! Not one apiece, but one to each family! One bag of flour—the same! Maybe some bacon!"

"How much milk?" called a woman.

"Enough for two days."

"What good does two days do? We had a day's before, and we made it last three. Now if they give us two day's, and we make it last five, what'll we do when it's gone?"

"It's the same with all the rest of the relief. It will last two days. What are you going to do when it's gone? There's food enough in the stores of Paris to last us for weeks. But they won't give it to us, because the Red Cross will only give a little money for a place like Paris, and most of that went to buying Purcell's milk for today's relief. Never mind how I know!

"The thing for us to do now, is to force them to give some food today. And to do that, we've got to all go down together. If we go in one by one, they'll cheat us, or they'll say we're not starving, and we won't get any relief at all.

"Now before we go, I want to ask you something. How many of you have guns in your cars? Nine, ten, eleven. You, too, Doscher? Good! Every man who brought his gun today, was with us when we forced Purcell to give us milk. Those men learned something. But you've got to be doubly careful today not to use your guns unless somebody starts shooting at you first, I'll tell you why. We're starving. But they don't want to give us food. They give us food only to keep us quiet. You men with guns are the leaders in forcing them to give us food. Because they're afraid of guns. But they'll kill you if some of you keep on fighting. They'll kill you, because you're out-numbered. And when you're dead, Purcell and the rest will be boss here, and your babies will go just as hungry, but there'll be nobody to get them food. The time is not quite ripe for shooting. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"We can threaten them today, we can force them, we may even *have to* shoot, but don't fire a gun if you can help it. Not today!

"Now, the cars with guns in the lead! Let's go!"

The grating of thirty gears, slipping from first to second, to high.

"I don't see how he can possibly claim to be starving," said Lily Purcell to the Red Cross supervisor: (The milk Frances did not buy!) "His baby died two days ago, and nobody knows where his wife is!"

"Well, at least he can't have any milk. That settles that right off!"

Frank Frances had not gone to the meeting. He was one of the first outside the relief store doors when they opened. For fifteen minutes he had been attempting to establish his status as a starving man. Meanwhile the line grew behind him, at first grumbling, then shouting, "Give him something!"

"This is no way to begin!" The supervisor scanned their heads disapprovingly. "Too many eye sockets!" he thought. He was unwilling to cede ground at once, and would not give Lily Purcell the order, "Let him have some bread."

Suddenly there was a shout from the edge of the crowd. "They're coming! They're coming!"

From the west the line of thirty cars swept into the town, two abreast. They stopped in the middle of the street. The men and women got out, the men with their guns, the women with their babies.

The crowd opened for thirteen men with guns. "Now we'll get some food!"

Wardell and Davis stopped where Frances stood suspended in an act of appeal. Lily Purcell and her supervisor stared.

Shays, Doscher, Drdla, staring back over the ends of their guns, which they rested on the floor.

Mrs. Wiggins with a baby in her arms had pressed to the front.



—Ryan Walker in the *Daily Worker*

“Yes, what are you going to give us?” asked Mrs. Wiggins.

“What are you going to give us?” said Davis.

“I don’t know that we’re going to give you anything. At least until you put those guns down,” he said, tonguing his lips that were like earthworms that have been out too long in the rain.

“Give that man some bread,” said Wardell.

“I don’t think he deserves any. And I’m not taking orders here, I’m giving them!”

Several men laughed.

“And you, Lily, give Mrs. Wiggins some flour.”

“She *certainly* don’t need any. I know her well. She’s a regular trouble-maker.” She appealed to the Red Cross knight.

“Give her some flour!”

“Don’t give her flour!” said the supervisor. “These people are not ready for relief. They don’t know how to take it. *This place is closed! Get out!*”

“Take it, men,” said Wardell. “Don’t hurt anybody. See that everybody gets a bag, Mrs. Wiggins.”

“Oh! Oh! They’re stealing our flour! They’re stealing our flour!” Lily continued to scream until the store was stripped and empty. Mrs. Wiggins, who had been passing out the bags, was

the last to leave. As she took up her own bag, Lily tried to stop her.

"You can't have that, you *can't* steal it!" She hung on to the bag with the grip of a kind of death she felt freezing her. Finally Mrs. Wiggins wrenched it loose. The girl's nails had torn the bag.

"Sow!" cried Mrs. Wiggins, seeing the waste. She struck Lily Purcell across the lower face with the bag. The flour whited her face like a clown's. Her glasses fell off and smashed. She screamed.

"She's killing me! She's killing me! She's stealing! She's killing me! She's stealing!" She was sobbing, a gulping blubber that shook her breasts.

"Shut up!" Mrs. Wiggins herself screamed. "Shut up! I'm sorry I hurt you!"

Picking up the baby, she ran out of the store.

"Into the stores, men!" cried Davis and Wardell at opposite ends of the street. Some of the storekeepers tried locking up.

"If you don't open that door, we'll come in through the window," shouted Drdla.

The doors opened.

It was dark before all the milk had been taken from Purcell's cows, and the food apportioned and piled in the cars.

They started on a signal from Wardell, moving more consciously together as a mass than ever before. As they left the village, they were grim, still. Once outside it they began to laugh. They felt strong. They also felt afraid.

By then it had begun to snow again, fat, heavy flakes.

"How long do you think this lot will last?" asked Davis in the head car with Wardell.

"The food about two weeks, the milk, of course, only a few days."

"Then?" asked Davis.

"Well, they'll never *let* us do this again."

"You mean—shooting?"

"I suppose so. Everything depends on quick organization now, Mort. Shays and Doscher and Drdla and Mrs. Wiggins, and Frances, and any others we're sure about. You can be sure Purcell sent the SOS over the wires by now. Tomorrow or the day after, they'll have the troops here."

"I've been wondering about Purcell's old mine shafts in the hill."

"Oh, you have?"

Later Davis said, "I think you're wrong about Frances, Jim. I don't trust him."

"Of course, you may be right. It's true he's weak. It takes a lot to bring him over, and a lot to keep him going. But he's been through a lot by now. We've got to make the most of what we've got."

The cars moved slowly, so close together that the lights, many of them dim or missing, cast a blurred glare from the rear-ends on the snow.

A car appeared, moving in the other direction. It stopped. They came abreast and stopped also.

"Mister Ooardel?"

"It's your Mex," said Davis. Wardell got out.

"I hear in the town ten miles away, there is fighting in Paris. Everybody is much excited." He was excited himself. "Everybody says he will take food, too. So I came back, Companero, I thought you need men."

"Them greasers have a long nose for food," said Shays. "They can smell a jumping bean no matter where it hops."

"Go get your own, Mex," said Drdla, "there ain't any here for you."

"He ain't asking you for food!" Drdla's eyes blinked before Davis turned away. "He's asking you if you'll allow him to shoot a gun shoulder to shoulder with you. I suppose you know you may be needing him. You come up to my place, Carrillo. You and your *retinoo*." He looked at the battered Ford.

It stopped the laughter. The cars dropped away one by one.

"I'm sending my boys away tomorrow, Mort," said Wardell.

"Where to?"

"East, to the comrades. I want them to be gone before the troops come. I'm driving them to the main road, at Tyrone, in the morning."

"Yes, I suppose you're right. Though I guess I couldn't do it."

"Anyway, out there they'll be learning something. What is there for them here—shooting, lynching? That's our business yet. Theirs is to learn more about Communism first."

"Tell the comrades what we are doing," Wardell said as he stopped the car at the cross-roads the next morning. "Tell them we're organizing. Tell them that already there are many of us. Tell them we've got the dirt farmers here in motion. And make them understand that what we need above everything else, what we must have, is a hectograph.

"Try to get jobs and stick together.

"Now go along. I think you can hitch; if you can't, be careful on the freights. We've got no use for dead men or cripples. Come back alive in the spring, there's nothing here for you now but hunger."

The snow was fine and dry, and blew in little lifting spirals on the asphalt of the highway, which was comparatively open.

The boys got out and walked off together toward the east. The road followed the roll of the prairie. Coming to the top of the first rise, they turned and, standing together, waved.

They shouted. The cold wind preserved the ring of their voices that the snow might have muffled, blowing their words to the silent man and woman beside the Ford.

"We'll be back in the spring!"

"Could you make out both their voices?" she asked.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This story was first published in the New Masses, March, 1931. It was rendered into a play by Hallie Flanagan and Margaret Clifford and produced at Vassar College and by a number of workers' dramatic groups.

For a general discussion of the conditions of the farmers today read The American Farmer, by George Anstrom, pamphlet No. 23 in this series.

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