"Even if it had a twenty percent correction," von NotHaus said of the silver market, "it would probably touch twenty percent and spike back up again."

"How do we make the best of what little money we have left in order to be able to buy bread?" Dr. Ned asked, once he'd settled in.

Here was the question of the hour, for which we had traveled, some of us hundreds of miles, to the back office at Boss's Outlet. Von NotHaus didn't hesitate—silver was the answer.

"I've got several bags of the dimes and quarters," Dr. Ned said hopefully.

"Junk silver, right."

"But that's not gonna last long." Dr. Ned laughed. His great eyebrows leapt skyward.

Pete Hallock leaned back in his seat, a delphic half-smile dawning on his face. "Oh, I think it'll be amazing what an old silver dime is gonna buy before we're finished."

Eventually, as all such discussions must, conversation turned to conspiracy.

"My wife tells me that Kennedy passed a bill to stop the Federal Reserve System. I don't know if that's true or not."

A man in a natty blue suit perked up in his seat. "John Kennedy. He issued an executive order, John Kennedy did."

"Executive order! Some of the stuff was printed, wasn't it?" Dr. Ned asked, referring to the silver certificates whose authorization, some hard-money men claimed, provoked JFK's assassination by central bankers.

"I'm sorry," von NotHaus said, "I'm not buying that one."

"Wasn't some of the money? Some of the new different money was printed?"

"Well, LBJ rescinded that executive order as soon as he got into office," the man in the blue suit interjected.

"I don't think that executive order has been rescinded!"

Snow gusted past the window. The meeting was collapsing into hearsay and gossip. "This is all wives' tales," von NotHaus said, somewhat regretfully.

As for the problem of the FBI, Hallock addressed the future himself. Around 80 percent of the extant Liberty currency took the form of specie already circulated by the time of the raid. The genie was out of the bottle. If von NotHaus were to die or disappear tomorrow, Hallock told us, the money would survive. The business plan was open-source; the others could soldier on in his absence, and soldier on they would. Hallock gazed around the office at the ragtag band of patriots. They looked relieved. "That's all it's about is saving this country," Hallock said.

"Hell, you might even miss me for a moment," von NotHaus added. "But I'm sure you can continue on without me."

Skepticism toward paper money predates the advent of the banknote in the Western Hemisphere by three hundred years. In his thirteenth-century travelogue of the Orient, Marco Polo strikes a tone of amazement in describing the fiat economy of Kublai Khan's empire. "Tell it how I might," he warns, "you never would be satisfied that I was keeping within truth and reason!" Paper money had circulated in China since the "flying cash" of the Tang dynasty (618–907), named for its tendency to blow away in a high wind. In Europe, it would not exist until 1661, and Polo relates the substitution of mulberry notes for gold coinage as though it were a feat of black magic: "the secret of alchemy in perfection."

The popular resurgence of such fears in our own era owes a debt to Howard Ruff, a Mormon alumnus of the U.S. Air Force's Singing Sergeants and the proprietor of a failed speed-reading business. In 1974, Ruff published *Famine and Survival in America*, a doomsday handbook that predicted near-term economic ruin, the gutting and burning of supermarkets, and the onset of mass starvation. Against these ills he recommended the prophylaxis of massive food storage, with an emphasis on protein shakes. When the famine failed to materialize, Ruff disavowed the book, and in his 1978 effort, *How to Prosper During the Coming Bad Years*, he assumed a fractionally sunnier outlook: "I know of some who have a ten-year supply of food hidden in the mountains and are prepared to live there forever in a shattered anarchistic world of total collapse." He adds that his own plan is to "take my chances in a small town and assume that America can come staggering back like Rasputin." The book was a bestseller for years and set the standard for the past three decades of economic millenarianism. Always the rod of doom is attended by the carrot of enrichment; often a monthly newsletter is dangled, furnishing up-to-the-minute counsel for a modest three-figure sum (Ruff's is entitled *The Ruff Times*). As for the date and hour of the crisis, they must be hazy, swathed in the evasive language of the tabloid astrologer, subject to endless revision and midnight stays of execution. The apocalypse, like Aesop's golden goose, is more valuable alive than dead.

As with happy hour, it's always Armageddon somewhere; preparation for the last days is a venerable American pastime. But as the Patriots deliberated in Chambersburg, an alarming concatenation of signposts seemed to point toward inferno. China's fastest-rising currency was the "QQ coin," virtual money that had been designed for the trade of ringtones and digital knickknacks but had acquired real-world value. Zimbabwe announced inflation rates of 165,000 percent, then quit reporting data altogether. In India, smugglers learned that the one-rupee piece could be melted into thirty-five rupees' worth of razor blades. Some businesses in the state of Assam took to paying their employees with cardboard IOUs.

In America, inflation hit a seventeen-year high. The U.S. Mint was running out of 24-karat American Buffalo gold coins, and the National Debt Clock in Times Square was running out of digits. There were frenzied sales of metal detectors in Florida and of prospecting equipment in California. The Gold Anti-Trust Action Committee accused the Federal Reserve of secretly looting Fort Knox; and, according to the FBI, copper pirates' looting of substations, cell towers, telephone lines, railroads, water wells, construction sites, and vacant houses posed a threat to national security. In Mississippi, five warning sirens failed to announce a tornado because their wiring had been plundered. A seven-foot copper-laden statue of the Buddha disappeared from a shrine in Minnesota, a bronze statue of Sacagawea disappeared from Lewis and Clark National Historical Park in Oregon, and the Connecticut Gravestone Network proclaimed the mass disappearance of metal urns, flag-holders, and ornaments from American cemeteries a "crisis of the times." Across the country dozens of wire thieves died while shearing through high-voltage lines. The pure metal value of the penny and the nickel climbed to 1.67 and 9.5 cents, respectively, and the U.S. Mint established penalties of up to $10,000 and five years in prison for their melting or export. The *Chicago Tribune* reported nationwide shortages of flour, the *Wall Street Journal* urged its readership to stockpile food, and Sam's Club limited rice sales to four bags per customer. Ed McMahon, avatar of eight-figure publishing sweepstakes, was fighting the foreclosure of his home. (He would find work, some months later, as a spokesman for an online pawnbroker, Cash4Gold.com.) Were these not the hoofbeats of monetary apocalypse?

Then there was the account of a friend of a friend, a Wall Street financier (we'll call him Donald) with a wife and a town house and a professional interest in the management of risk. Bubbles and corrections were routine in the life of an economy, but for months Donald had been watching his computer screen like a neckried haruspex, first with curiosity, then disquiet, then alarm. As an insurance policy against collapse, he decided to invest in some gold Krugerrands, the troy-ounce South African coins favored by survivalists and militiamen—enough, in a crisis, for safe passage to a farm or retreat, a place where you could drink well water and raise avocados while the social contract burned. With checkbook in hand, Donald took a cab to New York's Diamond District, where frowning Hasidim pore over jewels and precious metals in fluorescent-lit storefronts. At every door he stopped to ask for Krugerrands, and at every door he was rebuffed. Finally, a barker stationed outside one of the shops nodded vigorously. "Yes, Krugerrands, yes," he said, ushering Donald toward his doorway. It was quickly apparent that both men were mistaken. The shopkeeper was not selling—he was desperate to buy. Donald was too late. Other bankers had already cornered the market.

On the Saturday morning of Patriot Days weekend, Hallock and von NotHaus set up a currency exchange in the back room of Jim's Farmers Market, a high-ceilinged bazaar of foodstuffs, trinkets, and locally grown produce. Business was brisk. Friends and strangers alike filed past the counter in a steady rush, wallets extended. Every thirty seconds or so, von NotHaus's hammer came down on the Chambersburg hallmark with a decisive *thwack*, as of an auctioneer's gavel. Capitalizing on the libertarian-friendly turnout, a candidate for state senate roved the floor with a clipboard for signatures and one of the longest beards I had seen outside of a daguerreotype, a look belonging either to the distant past or to our post-apocalyptic future. In the front room, bonneted women tied pretzels.

Dr. Ned arrived early, accompanied by his wife, Ruth. The couple shared an easy sociability learned from a lifetime of professional small talk. For decades, as a dentist in Rockefeller Center, Ned had probed the bicuspids of history. His patients had included diplomats and captains of industry, the Duke of Windsor, and the head of British Steel. The chairman of CBS had given him a fireplace grille. The previous night, Ned had offered me his card, adding that his particular domain of interest, besides money, was health and well-being. "If you know somebody that's got cancer or coronary disease," he confided, "we know the cure. It's a relatively inexpensive cure too." Years earlier, he had undergone a course of intravenous chelation, at a cost of $100 per session. ("Chelation is the Roto-Rooter of the veins," Ruth clarified.) He received forty treatments and then suffered a heart attack. "It was minor," he assured me, and credited this fact to the chemicals with which he had flushed his system. "Now my arteries are clean as a whistle."

Since the 1970s, Ned had hitched his train to a succession of maverick economists and doomsday prophets. He had once made a pilgrimage to Jekyll Island, cradle of the Federal Reserve, and in the late Nineties spent his savings retrofitting his house in New York's Hudson Valley to survive the Y2K computer bug. He installed a diesel generator and a cistern for fuel; in case of an oil shortage, he rigged the place for solar; he stockpiled bullets and guns, precious metals, and a year's supply of food, which arrived one day, to Ruth's amazement, in a tractor-trailer. "We expected the world to come to an end, you know," she told me. "You name it, he did it."

Lately they had spent some of their gold and silver survival cache on more quotidian needs, and they were slowly eating through their rations. Whatever these measures cost him, Ned retained a good-natured regard for his past obsessions, as if they were old flames who had run off with his wallet but whom he still remembered fondly. Now he hoped a quorum of survival-minded Americans would stock up on Liberty Dollars so that a Weimar-style hyperinflationary crash could be avoided here at home. ("They had paper currency with a thousand zeroes on 'em!" he said.) When the Monetary Architect got around to the couple's order, eight troy-ounce Libertys, Ned accepted the silver gingerly, as if handling a chunk of uranium.

After the sale, I followed Pete Hallock back to his house, where we sat in the kitchen eating a lunch of grilled cheese sandwiches and discussing the prospects for survival. Hallock's wife scanned neighboring lawns through a pair of field glasses. Frenchie, their ragged seventeen-year-old parrot, watched us from a cage against the wall. "God, I think back to the passage in the Bible when they talk about Noah's day," Hallock told me. "And he was given the commission, so to speak, to build the ark, and people were marrying and spending and going about their lives, and disaster was on the way, and everyone was oblivious."

Once the dollar crashed, razing the towers of illusory wealth, anyone without a cache of hard money would be ruined. It seemed to pain Hallock to think of all the dupes he couldn't save. "Maybe they're thinking the government will save them," he mused. Then again, he suggested, maybe we would be forced to adopt a new fiat currency, "like the amero."[4]

The parrot coughed or laughed, I couldn't tell which. The silver sale had energized Hallock. Gradually, though, his mood seemed to darken. The amero was small change beside the coming storm of which the REAL ID Act, with its national standards for identification, was the first sinister wind. If the bankers had their way, we would live to see the rise of a purely digital currency transacted via subcutaneous implants. Revelation 13:17 describes a world in which "no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name" (a veiled reference, most scholars agree, to Nero, whose face adorned the Roman denarius in the first century A.D.). Those who accepted the mark would taste the "wine of the wrath of God." It would not be easy drinking. "What the mark is, we can only speculate," Hallock told me. "But the Bible does talk about 'on the forehead' or 'on the back of the hand.' And it's interesting to note that the RFID chips that have been developed are most practical on the back of the hand or in the forehead." Here the fiscal apocalypse gave way to the Apocalypse proper. The platform for a cashless society already existed, Hallock warned. "We'll see. We might be closer than what we think."

The Liberty Dollar website boasts a long list of "Success Stories" spanning the continent, from Florida to Vancouver. Collectively, they give the impression of America's liberation from the yoke of fiat serfdom as a series of happy social experiments.

> *Today I spent 17 dollars in Liberty Dollars. I put gas in my wifes car, I bought a Subway Sandwich, I bought ice cream from the Ice cream man in the little buggy.*
>
> *Gave a waitress a silver Liberty for a tip, and she's a friend for life.*
>
> *I went into Old San Juan (I live in the Puerto Rican Mountains) on Sunday with the family and had a great time spending my Liberty Dollars and educating the local populous about it's value over American greenbacks. My wife grew impatient as I was treated like a King who brought a new gift to the Island.*
>
> *PetsMart—$10 on several occasions for cockatiel supplies. (I have 5—they are great pets!)*
>
> *Even waiters at upscale Mexican food restaurants know the value of silver!!*
>
> *Got my Starter Kit today, also visited a restaurant and they want 10 Libertys in a week. I'm very nearly out. It's a great life.*
>
> *Today, I showed $1 ALC* [American Liberty Currency] *to a teller at Bank of America. She examined both sides and said, "That's weird!" (She's clueless!) I said, "That's the way money is supposed to be!"*

In Chambersburg, I decided to buy my own silver Liberty Dollar. Sitting cross-legged on the floor of Pete Hallock's den, von NotHaus brought his hammer down on the steel Chambersburg stamp and held the silver disc aloft, squinting contentedly at the results. It cost me $25, and the two crisp $20 FRNs I fished from my wallet were changed with colorful paper Libertys.

Back in my motel room, I arranged my inflation-proof currency on the bedspread. Under the forensic glare of a reading lamp, it looked like play money, but no more so than most foreign banknotes, with their local fauna, tourist attractions, and obscure frowning statesmen. The Monetary Architect had thrown in a canceled $1,000 paper Liberty, embossed with a glinting hologram, and I held this nervously, although it was basically worthless. Then there was the silver Liberty Dollar, which I weighed on my palm. When I factored in the newly unbacked paper Libertys tendered in change, I had just spent $40 on a troy ounce of silver worth less than $20. But in its tangibility, it offered an antidote to the convolutions of an economy that had become so ethereal as to defy comprehension. Entombed in an acrylic capsule, the disc had a gratifying heft. It was like a cyanide pill or bullet, a last resort to be deployed in a crisis. In case of emergency, break glass.

That summer, von NotHaus passed through New York City. The previous Aloha Friday, IndyMac had been placed into conservatorship by the FDIC, and talk of collapse had migrated from libertarian newsletters to the front page of the *New York Times*. As expected, the Liberty Dollar had graduated to its $50 base amid the usual fanfares of salesmanship. "Get out of the US Dollar while you still can," implored Liberty Alert #13. "Sell asap and buy silver." Coasting down Broadway in his Cadillac DeVille, von NotHaus waxed ominous over the deaths of Fannie and Freddie, smiling out the window with the air of a man on a parade float. We parked in a garage in the Financial District, just off Gold Street. Our destination was the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, a palazzo-like fortress of limestone and sandstone policed by its own vaguely paramilitary security corps.[5] For all his philippics

[4] *It is a recent idée fixe among some hard-money advocates that globalists in the federal government intend to lasso the United States with Canada and Mexico in a North American Union backed by the amero, a westerly cousin to the euro. Such is the pitch of NAU anxiety that when the coin designer Daniel Carr added a gag amero to his stock of parody state quarters (Maine terrorized by a Brobdingnagian lobster, Manhattan's skyline recast as a fist with a defiant middle finger, etc.), reactionary bloggers mistook it for a Treasury prototype, and news of the looming retirement of the dollar made CNBC. Months later, the self-proclaimed white nationalist radio talk-show host Hal Turner still maintained that Carr's website was a sham concocted by the federal government to "spin this story out of existence."*

[5] *This squad alone, it seemed to me, was enough to launch a thousand conspiracy theories. The impression did not diminish several months later when I returned to the bank and was waylaid outside by a stocky, armed trooper I swear I'd never laid eyes on. Hadn't I been there before? he asked, in a not altogether friendly tone. I admitted that I had. "With another guy, older," he said, gesturing to approximate Bernard von NotHaus's height. This, I will confess, freaked me out. I was not allowed in the building, ostensibly because my driver's license had expired—by that point, a huge relief.*

against the fiat empire, von NotHaus was in a cheerful mood, mugging at the security cameras and flirting with the pretty armed guard at the front desk.

On the first floor, an exhibit on the history of money was open to the public. Except for a party of nuns watching a video in ecclesiastic silence, we had the room to ourselves. Von NotHaus glided through three millennia of monetary history. It was the arc of human civilization glimpsed from the vantage point of a wallet. Here were Spanish doubloons, Chinese knife money, Swedish plate money, obols, dirhams, and bezants. We stopped in front of a display of colonial paper notes. The Monetary Architect kept one of these in his attaché case. During the Revolutionary period, he told me, the colonies had seen 5,000 percent inflation. Most people didn't know that. It took a wagonful of money to buy a wagonful of supplies. "America had homelessness, ride-by-shootings, kidnappings." He shook his head. Eighty feet below us, in an air- and watertight bunker, lay the world's largest store of gold, some 266 million troy ounces.

After the tour, we stood outside in the shadow of the great citadel of money and talked about the future. In Chambersburg, I had heard him reassure Dr. Ned that the collapse would not arrive for a couple of years at least. Now he was less sanguine. The hour was late. "It's gonna be dangerous," he warned. He encouraged me to stock up on precious metals and ammunition. "You know the old saying." He smiled grimly. "If the gold standard doesn't work, the lead standard will."

In October 2008, Bernard von NotHaus attempted to remint himself. After a decade as the Monetary Architect of the Liberty Dollar, he had decided to devote his life "to that age old quest of Higher Consciousness," as High Priest of the Free Marijuana Church of Honolulu. Congregants eighteen and older with "a good mental presence" were cordially invited to visit the temple and commune with their chemical god, Sundays 8:00 A.M. to noon, free of charge. Naturally, "donations of value" would be accepted. The national media, so attentive at the time of the raid, paid little attention to all this. The news was dominated by a different Bernard, he of Madoff Investment Securities, LLC.

Von NotHaus entrusted the torch of Liberty Numismatics to a former Microsoft executive named Dan Priest, who maintained, in his newsletters, a tone of buoyant, if not quite NotHausian, salesmanship. It was undiminished in the statement he issued a few months after his arrival. "Happy New Year!" he began. "And welcome to a changing world!" The world had changed in ways that von NotHaus had not foreseen. For nineteen weeks, the thirty-day moving average of silver had hovered below $15, and so the Liberty Dollar was forced to return to the $20 base, the first such reversal in its ten-year history. Patriots who had bought silver or eLiberty Dollars during the prior ten months saw their inflation-proof cache lose half its trade value overnight.

The stock market had fared no better. It was headed for a twelve-year low. An economy runs on confidence, and ours had been shaken. From the lofty to the cloddish, our oracles had failed us: Warren Buffett and Jim Cramer and the SEC all had been humbled. If paper notes were mere shadows cast by specie, mortgage-backed securities and credit default swaps were shadows cast by shadows. What had appeared to be blue-chip titans—Bear Stearns, Lehman Brothers, Merrill Lynch—dissolved like ghosts in the hot light of panic. CNBC had begun to sound like one of von NotHaus's Liberty Alerts.

In another startling reversal, Dan Priest left Liberty Dollar just months after his appointment, under hazy circumstances, and von NotHaus resumed the reins of America's second-most popular currency. "Was Dan Priest a government agent?" he wondered in a newsletter. "I don't think so, but he certainly was a totally incompetent, literate pretender that nearly destroyed the Liberty Dollar, which makes him seem like a government agent!"

As it happens, when the papers of indictment were at last filed, Dan Priest was not among those charged. By June 3, FBI agents had arrested three of Bernard von NotHaus's associates, and the following day the Monetary Architect surrendered to U.S. marshals. "And so it came to pass," he announced via email, "2009 years after the birth of Christ, that four regular Americans have taken a stand to defend the People's right to protect themselves from a government currency that has a long and unforgiving history of stealing the people's purchasing power."

Silver was rallying again. The $50 base lay just around the corner. As for the United States dollar, it would soon be worthless. Some of von NotHaus's readers had been patiently anticipating this moment for decades. When it finally arrived, they would be ready. ■

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