Disaster
Sheila Tidmarsh
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DISASTER

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Pollution threat to the world

Within the next two decades, life on our planet will be showing the first signs of succumbing to industrial pollution. The atmosphere will become unbreathable for men and animals; all life will cease in rivers and lakes; plants will wither from poisoning.

From the Guardian, 15 September 1968

This may sound like an imagined newspaper report in a science fiction novel, but it is in fact a warning, given by a group of scientists meeting in Paris in September 1968.

Already, these scientists say, the world’s natural resources are dwindling at an alarming rate. Forests are cut down, and not given time to re-grow; cities have grown to immense sizes so that the waste from their homes and factories is poisoning fresh water and the atmosphere. The speed of this process of pollution has grown enormously in the last twenty years, with the increased rate of building and with new developments in industry.

The article goes on to give examples of the fantastic distances at which the harmful effects of pollution can be found. ‘Even in Antarctica, scientists have found traces of insecticides in the bloodstream of penguins – insecticides which had never even been carried by man to the Antarctic continent.’

It could be, then, that unless effective counter-measures are taken soon, we are faced, in the near future, with the disaster to end all disasters.

But we have advanced, in some directions, in our ability to control disasters. Medicine has brought under control some of the diseases which used to kill people in large numbers. Bubonic plague, of which more will be written later, carried off 75,000,000 people between the years 1347 and 1351. This figure exceeds by some twenty million the 1968 population of the British Isles. Nowadays the disease is almost unknown.

The disasters which still happen include not only natural disasters, which recur in spite of man’s scientific progress, but those which happen because of it, such as the dangerous side-effects of life-saving drugs, or the process of pollution described in the extract you have just read.

For the purposes of this book, a disaster means a catastrophe which, although it may not necessarily happen suddenly and swiftly, has an adverse effect on a considerable number of people. To include the disasters of individual tragic lives would require a much larger book, although the effect of large-scale disasters on individuals is within the scope of this one. I have deliberately excluded the disasters of war which, although relevant, raise large and complex issues which deserve a book of their own.

Is disaster inevitable, and if it is, what can we do to minimize its effects on our minds, bodies and surroundings? How can we recognize the causes of disaster that are within our control? Perhaps the consideration of some disasters that have already happened, and their effects on communities and individuals, may help us to some kind of constructive attitude.

We might, too, learn a little more about the forces which hold together human communities. Disasters, because of their unexpected and drastic effects, can bring out the worst – and the best – in people, and the shortcomings of the societies in which they live.
This is really just a convenient label for a disaster of which the origins were natural. Earthquakes or volcanic eruptions are not in themselves disasters; they occurred before there was animal life on this planet. The disaster is the effect that the natural event has on people, and perhaps on other animals: loss of life, damage to physical or mental health, or to property. How far abnormal movement of nature becomes a disaster depends partly on conditions already existing in a community.

Most disasters have probably a mixture of natural and man-made causes, but 'natural disasters' are distinguished from others by the fact that we cannot prevent the original movement in nature from happening. What we can sometimes do is predict what its effects will be, and take preventive measures, in the way in which we construct buildings, for instance.

The distinction between natural and man-made disasters was even less simple in more religious and superstitious ages. It is interesting that many of the examples in the Old Testament of God's wrath at the wickedness of men, can be interpreted as natural disasters. In *From Earthquake, Fire and Flood*, R. Hewitt explains how the Flood coincides with descriptions of a universal flood from other religious and cultural sources. He also comments on other disasters:

Then the Lord rained down upon Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven.

And he overthrew those cities and all the plain and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground. But his [Lot's] wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt.

The author suggests that Lot's wife, following her husband, found her feet trapped by the volcanic ashes and could move no further.

continued on page 8
20 KILLED BY HURRICANE
IN SCOTLAND
16 Jan '68

HUNDREDS MADE HOMELESS

DAILY TELEGRAPH REPORTER

At least 22 people were killed yesterday in the hurricane that swept across the north of the British Isles, 20 of them in Scotland and two in Ulster, and hundreds of people were made homeless.

Gusts which reached 120 m.p.h cut a swathe of devastation in Scotland 17 miles long and 15 miles deep. Winds touched 134 m.p.h, the highest confirmed wind speed since records began, at Great Dun Fell, Westmorland. [Pictures—P18.]
Earthquake! The remarkable photograph on the right was taken only seconds before the swaying building collapsed. Earthquakes make tens of thousands homeless each year. The photograph below shows a tent city erected in Sicily for the victims of the 1968 quakes.
Natural disasters

It is not difficult to imagine how, in a case like that of the seven disasters which afflicted Egypt after the departure of the captive Jews, an unusual run of catastrophes could have been interpreted as God's punishment of one nation, although it took place in an area prone to several of these plagues. This was probably genuine opinion, not propaganda.

Scientific investigations of the causes of natural disaster have produced much more impersonal, if not very comforting, explanations. The process by which the world was created, and is still being created, is probably far beyond the scale of space and time which our minds can grasp. Earthquakes, volcanoes, tornados, etc., are part of a process of upheaval and settling down which has not yet been completed . . . 'the dying bubbles of this first great cataclysmic event in the history of the earth' . . . (R. Hewitt).

What can it be like to live in an area where there are constant natural hazards? Is the possibility of disaster always in people's minds? In Britain we are lucky to be away from the areas where tornados, hurricanes and earthquakes can be expected, although earthquakes are not unknown here, and there has been serious flooding on a number of fairly recent occasions.

If you lived in one of these areas, would you adopt the view that you might as well give up worrying, as fate was bound to get you in the end? Perhaps the present and the immediate future would be the only important things, especially if some of the basic materials of life, like food and shelter, were hard to come by, as they often seem to be in disaster-prone areas.

Of all recorded earthquakes, 90 per cent have occurred in one of two areas, a belt surrounding the Pacific Ocean, and another stretching from the Alps to the Himalayas; most volcanic eruptions have taken place in these areas, too.
Are DISASTERS ever accidental?

In a book called *A Doctor’s Odyssey* Victor Heiser describes the effects of earth tremors in the Philippines after a major eruption of the Taal volcano in 1911. The tremors occur at regular intervals of twelve minutes, and as the doctor and his companions rescue and treat the wounded, they notice that the survivors carry on with their work as though nothing has happened. An old man ploughing a field continues his work, even when one side of the field subsides by about three feet. Is this indifference, fearlessness, or what?

It is interesting that many of the areas where volcanoes erupt and earthquakes happen are also those where people live in another kind of insecurity, due to poverty, ignorance, unemployment and poor housing conditions. This could mean that people are more resigned to their fate and do not think it worthwhile to try and improve their lives; on the other hand, they may feel that what they have is the more precious for having been hard-earned.

There was a recent example of disaster in an area where conditions were already bad, in Sicily, in January 1968. This is the poorest part of Italy, with a standard of living well below that of the prosperous north, and in parts of which violence is, frighteningly, an accepted part of life. The activities of the Mafia, a powerful secret society which commits crimes of vengeance connected with both private and public issues, are too involved to go into here. But their influence on Sicilian life is enough to make people reluctant to become noticeable by any kind of protest. Read this account of the earthquake’s effects by someone who was there.

Partinico, 14 January 1968. The earth shakes. People pause a moment, bewildered. Then, as nothing more happens, they go back to work again.

The night of 15 January. The bed shudders. We get up quickly and drag the sleeping children into the street. Nobody knows what to do, there’s no warning or advice from authorities. The houses have withstood the shock, but by the light of day we see there are long cracks in the older buildings, such as the schools. By afternoon we have heard the news that a few miles away hundreds are dead, thousands wounded, whole villages destroyed, tens of thousands of families without shelter. If it rains, they’ll be swimming in mud. I leave immediately.

Village by village, I find the damage to buildings more severe, and slides more frequent. Mules wander aimlessly about. Men, women and children huddle round improvised fires by the roadside, their flimsy houses flattened to heaps of rubble around them. In contrast, houses of sound concrete structure are still standing, often with no damage at all, or very little.

Then the disaster zone: Montevago, Santa Margherita Belice, Salaparuta, Gibellina, Poggioreale. The skimpy houses have collapsed like a set of children’s bricks, whole districts are reduced to rubble, the roads blocked by fallen debris. Entire facades have
Are disasters ever accidental?

collapsed to reveal the beds within where, under the
gaze of yellowed photographs and painted saints,
generation after generation has been born and died.
We are haunted by unseen cries, mutilated corpses,
hands that scrabble in the wreckage for some beloved
object miraculously preserved. The odd roof or wall is
eerily frozen at the moment of fall. Sometimes we have
the impression that the ground still trembles beneath
us. A dog barks to defend its ruins.

All this is not accidental: only the houses of the
poorest, the most exploited, have been destroyed: old
buildings nobody has bothered to maintain properly. If
the earthquake had struck just a little further to the
north-east, the ruins of the old quarters of Palermo
would have buried more than a hundred thousand
lives.

From what I could observe, going through nearly the
whole of the disaster zone and speaking with
associates, friends, thousands of families, technicians,
soldiers and local officials, the disaster is due almost
entirely to the poverty of the zone. If all the houses
had been as solidly built as those still standing: if, that
is, the stricken houses had really been habitable, there
would probably not have been even one victim.

From Help

The eye-witness is Danilo Dolci, who has prob-
ably done more than anyone to publicize the
poverty of Sicily and to try to improve the situa-
tion. A qualified architect, he gave up his work
to live among and work with the poor, adopting
such methods as hunger strikes and the organiz-
ing of voluntary work by unemployed men to
draw attention to his cause.

He goes on to protest emotionally and bitterly
about the indifference of the rich, and of the
newspapers which represent their interests.

Indifference is concealed, he says, by phrases
like ‘cruel destiny’ and ‘the pitiless earth’, while
refusing to face the issue of poverty. (Notice that
the phrases quoted emphasize the inevitability of
fate, and thus discourage constructive thinking
about the effects of the earthquake.)

The poor of Sicily have in fact become apath-
etic, he thinks, and they feel that their fate is
outside their own control. He sees long-term
solutions as the only effective ones for disasters
like the Sicilian earthquake. People must be
educated to understand their situation and to
participate in improving their conditions.

He sees this in relation to the poor of the whole
world. Perhaps you can think of other situations
to which Dolci’s criticisms can be applied?

Since Dolci’s article was published in Britain,
tens of thousands of Peruvians have been
made homeless by the earthquakes of May
1970.

Many of them will have to spend this
winter in a cold, mountainous region with-
out adequate food, clothes or shelter. The
Peruvian government will help, and so will
organizations like Oxfam outside Peru, by
sending in some of the supplies people
need. Many children, however, are orphaned
and homeless.

Thinking point

Can you recall any other phrases like ‘cruel
destiny’ by which people avoid taking any
responsibility for disasters on to their own
shoulders.
It always happens to someone else

Indeed, even after Dr Rieux had admitted in his friends’ company that a handful of persons scattered about the town, had without warning died of plague, the danger still remained fantastically unreal. For the simple reason that, when a man is a doctor, he comes to have his own ideas of physical suffering, and to acquire somewhat more imagination than the average. Looking from his window at the town, outwardly quite unchanged, the doctor felt little more than a faint qualm for the future, a vague unease.

In a novel called *The Plague*, the French novelist Albert Camus describes the effect on the town of Oran in French Algeria in the 1940s of an outbreak of bubonic plague. This was the Black Death of the history books, that had affected London in the seventeenth century, most of Europe in the fourteenth, and had killed off people in their thousands in various less famous outbreaks.

Albert Camus used the disease as a symbol of something else – the German occupation of France (the book was published in 1947). Nevertheless, the account he gives of the effect on people’s minds and bodies, of the physical disaster, is so detailed and thoughtful that we can probably learn something from it.

Dr Rieux goes on trying, willing himself to imagine what it can be like to live in a plague-stricken city, and, although his worst fears are justified, he finds the effort almost too much for his imagination.

Figures floated across his memory, and he recalled that some thirty or so great plagues known to history had accounted for nearly a hundred million deaths. But what are a hundred million deaths? When one has served in a war, one hardly knows what a dead man is after a while. And since a dead man has no substance unless one has actually seen him dead, a hundred million corpses broadcast through history are no more than a puff of smoke in the imagination. The doctor remembered the plague at Constantinople, which, according to Procopius, caused ten thousand deaths in a single day. Ten thousand dead made about five times the audience in a biggie cinema. Yes, that was how it should be done. You should collect the people at the exits of five picture houses, you should lead them to a city square and make them die in heaps, if you wanted to get a clear notion of what that means. Then at least you could add some familiar faces to the anonymous mass.

From *The Plague* by Albert Camus
Ring-a-ring o' roses,
A pocket full of posies,
A-tishoo! A-tishoo!
We all fall down.
Typhoid seals off Aberdeen: ‘Don’t come, don’t leave’

from ROY PERROTT: Aberdeen, May 30

THE GROWING typhoid outbreak made Aberdeen a beleaguered city today. Holidaymakers and visitors were warned not to come to the city and the inhabitants themselves were warned not to leave in case they were carriers of the disease. And British Railways cancelled several party outings from the city. About 1,000 people—mostly schoolchildren—will be affected.

With the casualty toll now 155 confirmed and 44 suspected—an increase of 28 in 24 hours—all schools will close on Monday. Youth clubs, dancing and bingo halls have been advised to close, too, and a soccer cup-tie, due this Wednesday, will almost certainly be put off. Tonight there was no dancing in the three principal ballrooms and cinemas had their quietest Saturday in years.

The city’s shopkeepers have suffered a drop of up to 50 per cent in business and hundreds of people had already cancelled holiday visits before today’s warning—by the Medical Officer of Health, Dr I. MacQueen. Even people from outlying villages are now shunning Aberdeen.

It was Dr MacQueen who
The fear of DISASTERS

An American psychologist, Martha Wolfenstein, has written a book entitled Disaster based on research into people's reactions to the threat of a disaster, to the event itself, when it happens, and into the after-effects of the experience. Her findings will be referred to several times in this book.

Before disasters, she says, many people take an attitude of denial: that is, a refusal to accept the idea that a disaster can happen, and a feeling that it is within the power of others, the Government perhaps, to take responsibility for it. A mysterious 'they' will handle it, and the individual citizen is helpless.

But some people may be very worried by the threat of disaster. The important point is made that how frightened we are is much more related to our own mental well-being, than to the realities of the actual danger.

Past experiences, it seems, can have extraordinary effects on people's attitudes to precautions. Martha Wolfenstein gives a striking example of a woman from Texas who refused to take cover in one of the storm shelters built to withstand hurricanes and tornadoes, which are not uncommon there. The woman described how her mother used to drag her, an unwilling, frightened child, to the shelter. The child was aware of the discomfort and disruption of going to the shelter, and was not convinced that she would be safe.

... I never shall forget going to the storm house one time when it was covered over with logs . . . and I looked up and saw a great big snake up over us, you know . . . I was even afraid to say anything about it . . . but it frightened me to lie there and look at the thing.

So it seems that the grown woman still sees the act of taking shelter through the eyes of herself as a child, and that the feelings she re-experiences are more powerful than her adult awareness of the dangers of not taking shelter.

Most of us have probably only to remember a few of our escapades as children to be reminded that children often avoid danger because they are frightened of the anger of parents, teachers or some other adult, and not frightened of the actual danger. Who cannot remember at some time playing on the railway lines, the cliffs, in a rickety, condemned building, or some similar situation? See if you can remember doing something of this kind yourself.

But is this only a child's attitude? The dramatic drop in road accident figures after the introduction of the breathalyser test, and the widespread resistance to the test's introduction, may perhaps show that adults, too, are more frightened of punishment than of the danger from which the law tries to protect them.

Nervous?

LEO

Matters of partnership and matrimonial problems are to the fore in the first week of the month. Until the 18th, when the Sun changes signs, the other party in any dispute has the luck. Though the Sun's position has a basic undertone of good fortune for you, on the days when it is badly aspected, problems are accentuated.

ON THE 7TH you will not profit from travel, letters written, or decisions made. The 13th, too, could be a dangerous day for travel and on that date you will also need to guard against fire and accidents in the home.

On the 17th, the Sun in bad aspect to Neptune could bring into your home someone who does not wish you will. Take warning that deals suggested to you then may not be what they seem. Don't fall for a confidence trick, invite strangers into your home or neglect to lock up securely. It is a day when you could be deceived or burgled, so take all precautions. The 7th-9th is also a period when security precautions should be taken with your home and property.

On the 9th itself, however, you might find that a long-awaited settlement of
If we are capable of ignoring immediate dangers, we are probably even more likely to ignore disasters which could happen, but seem improbable because they have never happened yet. Do we take enough practical precautions for disasters of the future? Is it a waste of public money to install emergency equipment for disasters that may never happen?

In its colour supplement of 19 November 1967, the Observer printed pictures of an imaginary edition, reporting the swamping of Central London by floods.

After a first reaction that the Observer must be running short of newsworthy material, I read a bit more and discovered that London is slowly sinking, at the rate of about thirteen inches a century, and that surge tides from the Atlantic are getting bigger. The effect of this, in brief, could be to force a great head of water into the narrow North Sea, and raise the level of the rivers by several feet.

The diagram below and the following extract explain what might happen in the Underground.

London Transport’s flood-danger drill is like this: When the standard police warning of an ‘exceptional high tide’ is received a man is sent to look over the wall at Charing Cross. He watches the river coming up and any steps taken depend on his judgement. If he thought the water looked like coming up over the top (which has never happened yet) he would inform the Controller.

Diagram showing how flood water might pour into a London tube station near Shell’s offices. In contrast to London Transport precautions, which involve a glance over the Embankment, and some boards and clay, Shell’s include teleprinter contact with Scotland Yard, 114 self-sealing aluminium barriers, 1000 sandbags, two Land-Rovers, two Thames vans, ten diesel pumps and an annual rehearsal.
Precautions

The Controller, after consulting chief engineers, would take the decision whether the floodgates should be closed. These floodgates, installed against wartime emergencies, merely form a seal between stations and sections of tunnel. A surge flood would come in by the sewers, or front doors of stations, and to meet this only plank barriers and puddled clay are provided. In any case, the floodgates could not be shut until all trains had been cleared out of the area they enclose.

No procedure is laid down for this unprecedented step. Drivers would have to be told to keep going, and passengers asked, over the stations’ loudspeakers, to stay put. In the time taken to vacate the area, the flood could reach its peak flow. If anyone pulled the communication handle, one stopped train would halt all those behind it, and the floodgates could not be closed.

A London Transport engineer said, ‘Water in a cast-iron tunnel can be pumped out. We wouldn’t be worried if water was lapping on the tracks.’ But it wouldn’t lap — it would surge — and the rails might be short-circuited and the trains immobilized. Passengers, even if this happened conveniently at a station, would then have to leave via escalators down which floodwater was rushing. Escalators, lifts and lighting are supplied by a separate current to that of the rails, supplied by Lots Road Power Station, itself liable to flood. Ducting is damp-proof, not proof against water under pressure, and even seepage water could fuse this system.

From the Observer, 19 November 1967

When relatively minor disasters occur in this country, minor in terms of loss of human life anyway, there is always a great surge of indignation, arising from the public’s anger at the breakdown of transport services, the faultiness of buildings, and so on. Before we grow too indignant, it is perhaps worth considering the likelihood of the disaster (a flood, for instance) happening, in relation to what would be the cost of effective protection against the disaster.

In the case of the possible flooding of London, there is evidence that the tidal and weather conditions are changing slightly, and that the risk is greater than it used to be: the Metropolitan Police and the Public Health Services Committee of the Greater London Council issued warnings about this in January 1968: so the Observer article was not a mere flight of fancy.

After the flooding in south-east England in September 1968, the damage from which is estimated at around £5,000,000, officials of Thames Conservancy revealed that pressure is put upon local councils and the Ministry of Housing and Local Government by developers who wish to build upon the ‘flood plains’, areas which easily become flooded and where Thames Conservancy advises against building. The effect of nibbling away at the edges of these areas, as public inquiries have shown, can be to increase the level of the water when floods do take place. Here is a case where safety measures and the Government’s estimated need to build 400,000 new homes a year come into conflict.

It has, however, recently been announced that the Government will spend a quarter of a million pounds on the study of floods and that the Institute of Hydrology at Wallingford is developing new instruments for the measurement of current.

There have to be priorities in the spending of public money, and it is quite difficult to decide how much we can afford to devote to possible emergencies, in comparison with such constant necessities as housing, education, drainage, roads, etc.
The following extracts are just random examples from newspaper articles published during the years 1967-8, about cases where the dangers of disaster have been ignored, or where they have been noticed, and precautions taken.

Vast quantities of timber being used in British coal mines have been found to be below the standard required for controlling outbreaks of fire underground.

This discovery by the National Coal Board follows information submitted by the Sunday Times concerning one of the Board’s leading timber suppliers, . . . virtually all inspection of cover boards has depended on the competence of low-paid workmen.

From the Sunday Times, 1 October 1967

Ford Detrick Microbiological Research Establishment is at the centre of the new American nightmare. It specializes in such potential germ warfare agents as anthrax, dysentery, plague and yellow fever. Only 15 per cent of the scientific findings there are published through conventional scientific channels. The rest belong exclusively to the Defence Department.

From the Sunday Times, 28 April 1968

Vandalism against trains, throwing stones at them or leaving objects on the line, tends to be worse in school holidays. But engine drivers, according to a spokesman for the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen who described Sunday’s death of a fireman as ‘regrettable’ have now got to the stage where they treat vandalism as an occupational hazard.

From the Guardian

Southern Region admitted last night that a broken fish-plate at Whitten Station, Twickenham, which was not repaired for more than a week after being reported to the station-master at Waterloo, should have been put right immediately . . . Southern Region said that after investigation ‘it appears that the incident was not passed on to the appropriate department and disciplinary action might be taken’.

From the Guardian, 2 December 1967

Britain’s biggest-ever air disaster drill will go into action in the City of London next Wednesday.

The massive manoeuvre, devised to simulate a major air disaster in a densely populated area, like the tragic Empire State Building crash in 1945 in New York, will call on the resources of police, fire brigade, welfare, ambulance and hospital services.

From the Evening Standard, 9 August 1968

Ice has been the cause of many shipping disasters. There are methods by which it can be removed, but so far these have only been adopted on a few British trawlers.
Our civilization has not yet worked out any effective way of protecting us from floods. The cars in suburban Kent are as helpless as the cattle in Essex. At Lynmouth (left), a quiet stream became a raging torrent and houses were cut through by the force of flood water.
What is it like when a disaster really happens? The difficulty of imagining its effect on oneself has already been mentioned. The psychologist, Martha Wolfenstein, says that there is a widespread fear of mass panic, of being in competition with human beings for survival. She makes the interesting point that the spectacular scenes of human stampede in various Hollywood epics may be partly to blame for this fear.

In fact, this does not often happen, although the cases where there has been a panic situation have been much publicized. Perhaps disaster is enjoyed by spectators as a kind of drama (a possibility that we shall return to later) and that therefore panic has a kind of entertainment value. The sinking of the Titanic is a case in point, a disaster in which people actually fought to take places in the lifeboats, and to keep others out of them. Books and a film have been based on this awful event, and much is also made of the ironical situation that the ship was regarded as a symbol of national pride, and as being unsinkable.

It is worth noticing that often the selfish 'every man for himself' reaction takes place when people are confronted with a straight alternative between saving themselves or saving others, and that this alternative often does not arise. Some of the worst cases of selfishness in a time of disaster are recorded in connexion with the plague. Particularly during its worst outbreak, in the fourteenth century, horrifying cases of neglect and abandonment of victims, sometimes by members of their own families, are recorded, and sometimes doctors and priests refused to attend the dying for fear of infection.

Was this as wrong as it seems at first sight? Imagine yourself confronted with the straight choice of whether to voluntarily, and almost certainly, be infected (when the victim was almost certain to die anyway), or to stand a slight chance of escape. The following account of the symptoms of the plague, by a Franciscan friar, Michael of Piazza, at the time when it reached Sicily in 1347, gives some idea of what the unselfish were risking.

Those infected felt themselves penetrated by a pain throughout their whole bodies, and, so to say, undermined. Then there developed on the thighs or upper arms a boil about the size of a lentil which the people called 'burn boil' (antrachi). This infected the whole body, and penetrated it so that the patient violently vomited blood. The vomiting of blood continued without intermission for three days, there being no means of healing it, and then the patient expired. Not only all those who had intercourse with them died, but also those who had touched or used any of their things.

From The Black Death by Johannes Nohl

In spite of the horror and incurability of the disease, there are records of incredible self-sacrifice. Another chronicler of those times describes how a priest was passing a heap of corpses of plague victims, which were awaiting burial, when a dying man who had been laid with the corpses raised himself on his knees and called out, imploring the priest to give him the Holy Sacrament. The priest went to the man and did as he was asked (presumably at the eventual cost of his own life).

Doctors, too, however misguided some of their treatments were, gave their lives for their patients.

In the case of sudden disasters, causing
devastation and injury, people seem capable of incredible physical effort and endurance, and it is not uncommon for them to work for lengths of time, or show an indifference to their own discomfort, that would be almost impossible under normal conditions.

In 1950, at Knockshinnoch in Scotland, water from a flooded peat field inundated a colliery, trapping 129 miners. Rescuers worked at fantastic speed to shore up the mine and to drain off the water and rescue the miners, so that 116 of the 129 lives were saved. A woman in the pithead canteen collapsed after serving tea to rescue workers for thirty-six hours without stopping, and not having realized how tired she was.

After a tornado overturned a bus in Worcester, Massachusetts, the bus driver recalled how, while helping to dig out passengers, he was only aware that a dangling piece of his own almost severed thumb was getting in his way. When he took some of the passengers to hospital, a nurse suddenly took hold of the thumb, and the bus driver instantly fainted, as if he had only just become aware of the injury.

How do people find it possible to do the almost impossible during a disaster? Presumably compassion for other people has something to do with it. But violent or difficult physical circumstances may also be a positive relief, and an antidote to the horror that standing back and seeing the situation as a whole might produce. You could consider your own likely reactions to an emergency.

The following is an extract from an interview with a miner, after another Scottish disaster, in 1967 at Michael Colliery.

We had a warning by telephone from the pithead at 3 a.m., but the man who took the call couldn’t make out what was being said.

I took the receiver from him, heard the dread word ‘Fire’, and shouted a warning to other men nearby.

When I turned round, I saw thick smoke closing in on me. I told John to tell the gaffer to call the men out. You would have needed only two breaths and you’d have been on the floor, a goner.

I saw John coming back with others on the coal conveyor belt. I called to them to jump. They were heading for the smoke.

John got off. The others were unconscious. They were found later by rescue workers. We made our way up a steep slope.

We could see the smoke rising behind us. I knew that if it caught up with us, we were done. I was crawling up two steps and slipping back five.

After an age of this, my legs gave way and I felt my senses reeling. I told McNeany to carry on. I thought I was done.

But somehow he half dragged, half carried me the last fifty yards to an air vent. ‘Come on, don’t let me down now,’ he kept saying. ‘Hurry up, or we’ll miss tea in the canteen.’ By a miracle, fresh air was pouring from the vent.

The men spent eleven hours taking turns to suck air from the vent and banging with an iron bar they had found, to attract attention.

Through the smoke, we could catch glimpses of the main shaft. We heard the cage going up and down, and then our hammering was answered by blasts on a hooter. Still, we had to wait. Then through the reek we saw lights. I said: ‘Thank Christ, somebody’s coming. They’ve saved us.’

From the News of the World, 10 September 1967
Ships, because of their size and complexity, cause special problems on the rare occasions they are wrecked. In March 1967, the massive tanker Torrey Canyon broke in two off Britain's south coast and discharged millions of gallons of oil into the sea. Over seventy miles of beach were contaminated, and many thousands of sea birds killed and maimed – not just by the oil itself but also by the shortsighted use of detergent, which was meant to disperse it.
Road Accidents

Two killed in Kent crashes
Two death crashes on a two-mile stretch of the A225, the main road between Rochester and Gravesend, made a black weekend on Kent roads.

At Bigham, on the A239, car driver David Gladstane, 20, of Pear Tree Lane, Shorham, was involved in a collision with another car and died later from his injuries.

Last night, again on the A239, a pedestrian whom police are still trying to identify—he is believed to be a Londoner—was knocked down and killed while crossing the road at Shorne.

Children die at Sedlescombe
David Withers, six months, and his sister Carol, four, died at the weekend after a Morris 1100 car driven by their mother, Mrs. Elizabeth Withers, of Gillian's Park Road, St. Leonards, collided with another Morris on the A21 London Road at Sedlescombe, near Hastings. Eight were injured.

Road Accidents

Baby in pram killed at Rogate
A two-year-old girl died after a grocery van collided with her pram in the driveway to Home Farm Cottages, Rogate, Sussex. Another child escaped serious injury.

14 die in crash
KARACHI, Tuesday — Fourteen people were killed and 39 others injured when a bus hit a bridge and plunged into a brook near Rawalpindi yesterday, according to the Pakistan Press International news agency. — Associated Press.

Man killed in A505 pile-up
A man was killed and several other people were injured in a multiple accident involving a Volkswagen, a coach and a lorry on the A505, the Hitchin-to-Luton road, today. Police named the dead man as Mr. Colin Cattell, of Hitchin.

Crash on M1 orphans baby
A 12-month-old boy survived a four-death crash on the M1 near Newport Pagnell, Buckinghamshire, yesterday when a Ford Consilair careered across the central reservation and plunged into a lorry going the opposite way.

The four who died were the parents and grandparents of the boy, David Lamb.
Plane crashes, though relatively infrequent compared to train and car accidents, are invariably more serious (though the disaster on the left only involved the loss of life of five people, compared to eighty-two below). Investigation tries to find out the causes of a crash from parts which have survived.
RESCUER

Whatever people's reactions may be, there is a good chance that many of them are going to be physically injured, and that many others are going to be shocked, worried or in some abnormal state of mind, particularly in the case of a very sudden and unexpected catastrophe. In order to run rescue operations as smoothly as possible, and to reduce mental stress by telling people, for instance, whether members of their families have survived and where they have been taken, it is very important to have good information services. What follows is an extract from instructions for the Information Service of the Swiss Civil Defence.

Phase one
**From the onset of the disaster to + 24 hours**

The Information Service is set up: the Chief appointed; the communications centre checks to see what media are available and establishes forward communication to the disaster area; first reports arrive and are distributed by any means available; the disaster area is prohibited to all who are NOT duly authorized. This includes reporters, etc., who will only have access to the area via the Information Centre, where permits will be made available.

At this Information Centre first reports will be distributed to reporters, giving them what information is already available – on the numbers involved, etc., of victims, extent of damage, state of communications and matters of general interest.

During this phase of operations information should be given on what actual rescue operations are taking place, instructions to the population and appeals for help, ensuring that the right sort of help is asked for, e.g., special skills or equipment, and where this help should report to. Detailed instructions should be given to the public with a clear definition of the disaster area boundaries. The public should be asked to reduce traffic on roads; on the telephone system and so on as far as possible. Appeals for help, money, clothes, etc., can be made as needed. Close contact should be kept with the intervention forces – Civil Defence, Fire Brigades, Voluntary Aid Services, Police, etc.

Phase two
**From + 24 hours to + 48 hours**

Communications are reinforced forwards into the disaster area and to the outside world. Close collaboration should be ensured with the press, television, etc. A Press Conference should be held daily and further instructions given to the public as needed.

A collection of photographs of the disaster should be compiled at this stage for future use at any inquiry, etc., as it is much easier to collect these now than later. A bulletin should be issued on the progress of rescue work, and situation reports should be sent to all involved in the rescue operation. Appeals may be needed for special help and the special interests of relatives and friends of the victims should be considered.

Phase three
**From + 48 hours to + 72 hours**

Selected members of the public and press should be admitted to the site of the disaster so that they may give unbiased reports on the state of affairs to counteract any rumours of mishandling that by this time may well have arisen. The Information Centre should be used to intensify co-operation with the public and to promulgate the special wishes of the Senior Staff.

Those instructions were published in a report on the First International Symposium on Disaster Rescue, which was held in Geneva, in May 1968, under the auspices of the International Civil Defence Organization.

Whatever our view of war-time Civil Defence, most of us would agree that there ought to be
definite responsibilities given to properly prepared and trained people, to enable them to cope with rescue work in peacetime disasters. Apparently such organization is the responsibility of different institutions in different countries—for instance, the fire service in Morocco, the police in Egypt, the Red Cross in Belgium and the army in Switzerland. The report tells of the various experiences of success or difficulty in organization after disasters in different countries.

Yugoslavia
(after the Skopje earthquake)

... first aid was under way within ten minutes of the shock. The hospitals were badly damaged, but, although alternative centres for medical treatment had been set up, this was not generally known or understood and victims were carried to the damaged hospitals. The Yugoslavs now say that, initially, alternative centres should be located at or very close to damaged hospitals, even if these are damaged beyond further use, and that staff should remain at the site, as that is where the casualties will be taken, at least on the first day of the disaster.

Germany

In Germany a technique has been evolved at Mainz University for dealing with the increasing number of serious road accidents. A 'crash waggon', a specially equipped ambulance that has a stretcher that will swivel to a central position, allowing all round access for a crew that consists of a doctor (anaesthetist) and a nurse, who are thus able to administer the latest treatments to save life, including resuscitation and transfusions while on the return journey to hospital. In the case of large-scale accidents, this unit can remain at the scene of the disaster and act as an intensive care and support unit for sorting casualties.

Looting

An unheroic and sinister aspect of disaster is the looting, particularly of shops, which appears to take place; another is the way in which spectators, as though morbidly fascinated, converge upon the scene of a disaster.

The report of the International Symposium on Disaster Rescue refers to the difficulties which these sightseers present, and recommends keeping them away. Morally, they don’t seem to be superior to looters; but is there, in fact, as much looting as people imagine? There appeared to be an extraordinary outbreak of it during the recent Bristol floods.

Two American psychologists, Russell Dynes and E. I. Quarantelli, in a report published recently, claimed that statistics show that while a good deal of looting occurs during civil disturbances, such as riots, people appear not to steal when a disaster has occurred. Many of those observed as looters, they say, are people returning to salvage possessions from their own homes or trying to obtain essentials to help other people from the only available source of supply once normal services have broken down.

One important difficulty in organizing rescue work is, of course, the breakdown of public communication systems like the telephone, and it seems that most countries have made use of amateur radio. In Britain, a Radio Amateur Emergency Network came into being after the serious East Coast flooding of 1953.

It certainly seems that disasters are almost bound to go on happening, and that an efficient series of practical measures, in which people know the part they are to play, will decrease some of the physical and mental suffering. How much time and money, thought and energy, we should put into preparing for potential disasters, while stopping short of over-cautionousness and morbid pessimism, is a question worth considering.
Accidents are disasters in miniature. They can result from the same sorts of carelessness, and can be prevented by the same sorts of precautions. Look carefully at this picture. What possible accident situations are portrayed in it, and what could be done to avert them?
Even more important than what happens at the time of a disaster, is the effect it has on people’s lives afterwards. This can be complicated and far-reaching.

The most serious losses are usually to the survivors of a disaster: the loss of their homes, and the loss of loved people, possibly members of their own families. But the effects can be more complicated than that. Everyone is made aware, even if he or she loses nothing of real importance, that the whole secure framework of life is threatened, that familiar surroundings have become unfamiliar. This is how people were living in the Moroccan town of Agadir, in spring 1962, shortly after an earthquake had destroyed most of the city:

They lived now in tented villages outside the boundaries, sleeping on salvaged mattresses or blankets that had come in from a score of countries. But they were camped all along the road, two and a half miles long, between Agadir and the French naval airport, in a location where the weaker-spirited could beg from the foreigners.

(Because the breakdown of the water supply, and the existence of decomposing bodies which it had been impossible to rescue, endangered everyone’s health, the Moroccan authorities ordered total evacuation of Agadir, and the destruction of the rest of the city.)

Rescue squads and demolition teams were now joined by disinfection crews. . . . For the deadly peril was now disease. Rats had been seen scurrying in the sun, from the second day of the disaster. Buzzards had gathered from the desert and glided back, sensing carrion. . . .

As a move against typhoid the city was posted with warning notices forbidding anyone to touch water that had not been handled officially – water that had been shipped into the area. The rest of the problem was to be solved with bulldozers, 800 tons of quicklime to be scattered over the dead and the ruins in which more than half of them still lay, and the heavy spraying of DDT from helicopters.

(After further demolition and disinfection, people who had been given up for dead were still being found in the ruins.)

The population was not transported from Agadir. It stayed, as all refugees tend to stay when the enthusiasm and the cash of the rest of the world fades. It stayed round Agadir in tents, short of food, short of milk, and not too elegantly clothed Red Cross workers continued to organize them.

From Earthquake by Allen Andrews

Reports like this give some idea of the misery of a community uprooted, and of the attempts to relieve suffering, but very little of what is really experienced by the individual when his home or family disappears.

People who survive, psychologists’ investigations tell us, react in many different ways, but a common reaction is to want to live near the scene of the disaster, as if to purge oneself of the awful experiences with which the familiar place has been associated. This is not universal; some people want to get away.

When someone dear to them has died, it seems, people get a feeling that they are deserting by going away from the scene of the disaster.

One of the most recent and dreadful cases of people losing members of their families and living on in the same community, was, of course, Aberfan. Because children’s lives were lost – and because human beings could be blamed, the tragedy of Aberfan looms large in proportion to other disasters involving severe loss of life. Its
effects on people's behaviour were serious and far-reaching, and have been more publicized than the reactions which follow many disasters.

For anyone who has not heard, or cannot remember what happened: on 21 October 1966, a 'tip' of waste material from a coal-mine, deposited at the top of a valley in Aberfan, South Wales, suddenly became dislodged and poured down into the valley, completely burying Pantglas Junior School. 144 people, of whom 116 were children, were killed or buried alive. In a small community, this was almost the loss of a generation.

Psychiatric social workers have reported mental disturbance in some of the remaining children, and the tragedy, not surprisingly, had some peculiar effects on the parents who lost children. A controversial television interview with some of these parents showed that distress had led, in several cases, to a near-refusal to believe in the death of the child; parents were almost aware of the child's presence in the house. Some parents had become intensely religious, others had turned away from their former religion, because a god who could destroy innocent children had no meaning for them.

A good deal of activity to bring people together and to give them some sense of activity and purpose had been started — meetings, lectures, socials; but film of such an occasion showed that when the people came together, there was an awful, irresistible urge to talk over what had happened, to cry together over it. Whether there is a real need, which must be fulfilled, for people to re-live their suffering, it is hard to say. Who has the right to criticize?

But Martha Wolfenstein, writing about disasters in general, says that people do often react with a compulsive talking about the disaster, once it is over.

This may be relevant, too, in considering whether people ought to be involved in press or television interviews, after a disaster, especially if they have lost close relatives.

An anonymous letter written to the mother of an eleven-year-old survivor of the Aberfan disaster. What sort of pressure might cause someone to write a letter like this?

You will not have your son Steven for long. The first time I see him on the road I will push him under a bus or car. Why should he live and mine die.
Aberfan On 21 October 1966 a tip of coal waste became dislodged and slid down on the Welsh mining village of Aberfan, completely burying Pantglas Junior School. A hundred and forty-four people were killed or buried alive including 116 children. In this tiny village this was almost the loss of a whole generation.
Many Welsh villages still live under the shadow of these tips...
Report casts doubt on safety of six Welsh tip complexes

BY OUR OWN REPORTER

Serious doubt exists about the long term safety of six coal tip complexes overlooking villages in South Wales. A three-month-old report, which is being considered in secret by Glamorgan County Council, suggests that decisions about stabilising four of them must be taken within the next six months or the latest—but precautions at the other two must be introduced “much sooner.”

Names of five of the tip complexes remain secret, but the sixth is at the village of Clyddegold, six miles south of Aberfan. Although the National Coal Board is keeping a 24-hour watch on them, the report’s author, Mr Cyril Trigg, lecturer in soil mechanics at University College, Cardiff, the Coal Board, and local authority experts all agree that none of them is in immediate danger of sliding.
People uprooted

1 Ireland, 1840s

One tragic result of disasters is that people often lose their homes, either because the homes are destroyed or because circumstances force them to leave.

In 1846, potatoes were attacked by a mysterious and rotting disease, about which more is known now, and which is commonly called ‘potato blight’. It affected the whole Irish population, who were dependent on the potato as their staple food.

The people who left Ireland during and after the famine also suffered disillusionment. The conditions on boats going to America were often subhuman, and many people transferred themselves from starvation at home, to near-starvation in congested slums in American and British cities.

The estimated population of Ireland at the time of the famine was nine million, of which over a quarter died or emigrated.

The village of Moveen in Ireland, deserted because of the potato famine, 1849.
2 America, 1930s

In the 1930s many American farmers and smallholders from the Mid-Western states of America, who found their living gone because of drought and soil erosion, made for California, making the long and laborious journey with their whole families. In California, they hoped to find work on the fruit farms, and a better standard of living. California was the ‘Old Peach Bowl’ to some, imagined as a kind of paradise compared with their home conditions. The novel The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck is about what happens to some of these people; it was made into a very good film which John Ford directed.

The folk songs of Woody Guthrie also give some idea of the suffering of these people, and the Talking Dust Blues shows, too, that there was some relief in making a joke of the situation.

Talking Dust Blues by Woody Guthrie

Back in Nineteen-twenty-seven,
I had a little farm and I called that heaven.
The price is up and the rain come down,
And I hauled my crops all into town.
I got the money,
Bought clothes and groceries,
Fed the kids and raised a family.

Rain quit and the wind got high
And a black old dust storm filled the sky,
And I swapped my farm for a Ford machine
And I poured it full of gasolene.
I started rocking and rolling
Over the mountains out towards
The Old Peach Bowl.

Way up yonder on the mountain road
I had a hot motor and a heavy load,
I was going pretty fast,
I wasn’t even stopping.
A-bouncing up and down like a pop-corn popping.
I had a breakdown.
Sort of nervous bustdown of some kind
And was a fellow there, a mechanical fellow
Said it was engine trouble.

Way up yonder on a mountain curve
It was way up yonder in the piney woods,
I gave that rolling Ford a shove,
And was going to coast as far as I could.
Commence coasting,
Picked up speed with half-in turn . . .
I did not make it.

Man alive I’m telling you the fiddles
And the guitars really flew.
That Ford took off like a flying squirrel
And it flew halfway around the world.
Scattered wife and children all over
The sides of that mountain.

We got out to the West Coast broke,
I was hungry I thought I would croak.
And I bummed up a spud or two,
My wife fixed up a ‘tater stew
Filled three of the kids full of it.
Mighty thin stew, though; you could read
A magazine right through it.

Always have figured that if it had been
Just a little bit thinner,
Some of these politicians could have
Seen through it.
Dust drives settlers from Virgin Lands

Moscow, December 13

Swirling black clouds of dust have driven settlers from their homes in the Virgin Lands of Central Asia, turning once-fertile farms into dust according to the Kazakhstan literary magazine, “Prostot.”

Winds of up to 67 miles an hour are removing the top layers of soil, leaving parts of the Virgin Lands, a sandy desert, the magazine said.

“The black storms also affect people’s health, with dust-caused illness.”

Mr. Khrushchev, it has been pointed out, was the chief proponent of developing the Virgin Lands for farming. At the same time, he rejected the Stalinist programme of creating forest belts to stop winds and of alternating grass belts to bind the soil.

“Prostot” quoted an agronomist as saying: “Imagine a farmstead has just been built on a State farm, and around it there is already a sandy wasteland—the black drifts are blowing down the streets.”

The magazine declared:
Dust bowls are often caused by man's thoughtless use of the land, but heat, drought and wind can all play a part. Here are three examples from Russia, Oklahoma, U.S.A. in the 1930s, and India (right).
Keeping death at a distance

Two extremes of behaviour during disasters or after them, but while there is still danger, are presumably part of the feeling of helplessness that the large-scale tragedy creates in people.

A devil-may-care attitude, a feeling that one may as well eat, drink and be merry as tomorrow there is a strong possibility that one may die is not uncommon. On the other hand, people may feel that the disaster is a punishment, and that they can somehow propitiate the gods, God, fate, or whatever power they obscurely believe to be responsible, by sober living and abstention from luxury. During the fourteenth-century plague, people actually appear to have believed that one form of behaviour or the other had something to do with one’s physical ability to withstand infection. The famous Italian writer, Giovanni Boccaccio, whose own father died in the 1348 plague described their reactions:

Some there were who considered with themselves, that living soberly, with abstinence from all superfluity, it would be sufficient resistance against all hurtful accidents. So combining themselves in a sociable manner, they lived as separatists from other company, being shut up in houses where no sick body should be near them. And there, for their more security, they used delicate viands and excellent wines, avoiding luxury, and refusing speech to one another, not looking forth at the windows, to hear no cries of dying people, or see any corpses carried to burial: but having musical instruments, lived there in all possible pleasure. Others were of a contrary opinion, who avouched that there was no other physic more certain, for a disease so desperate, than to drink hard, be merry among themselves, singing continually, walking everywhere, and satisfying their appetites with whatever they desired, laughing and mocking at every mournful accident, and so they vowed to spend day and night, for now they would go to one tavern, then to another, living without any rule or measure; which they might very easily do, because every one of them (as if he were no longer in this world) had even forsaken all things that he had. By means whereof the most part of the houses were become common, and all strangers might do the like (if they pleased to adventure it) even as boldly as the Lord or owner, without any let or contradiction.

Giovanni Boccaccio quoted in The Black Death by Johannes Nohl

One does not hear much about this kind of reaction to disaster nowadays. Perhaps this has something to do with the fact that disasters consisting of prolonged misery, such as serious diseases, nowadays affect the most impoverished members of the world’s population, who are likely to be so weakened already by poor feeding or war conditions (as in Biafra or Vietnam) that they have not the energy to live riotously.

The bombed-out villages, ruined cities, crowded refugee camps, and Vietcong caches of rice are all ideal breeding grounds for rats.

The American army medical services plague expert, Dr John Rust, is touring South Vietnam at the moment supervising the systematic flea count of dead rats which is conducted by the American firm, Pacific Contractors and Engineers. It has been observed that when the count of the flea Xenopsylla Cheopis exceeds an average of 2-5 fleas a rat, the fleas migrate from the rats and start biting people, carrying the plague with them. Flea counts as high as fifteen per rat have been reported recently.

American servicemen and civilians here are heavily immunized against plague – Dr Rust insisted on giving me a plague shot before showing me round his laboratory – and no American has so far died of the disease.

From the Sunday Times, 31 March 1968
Figures for deaths among the Vietnamese people are not given in this article.

The records of the Black Death must, naturally, have been written by fairly prosperous, and therefore literate, people, although it must be admitted that many of the most prosperous fled away from the cities.

At the other extreme from those who abandoned morality were the flagellants, people who did penance for men’s sins by walking in procession from town to town, whipping themselves with ‘scourges’ (three-tailed whips with a series of knots, through which little iron spikes were driven), and imploring the mercy of God. However high their motives, the flagellants spread disease and whipped up a righteous hatred of certain scapegoats, especially the Jews, who were held responsible for the plague.

There was also a strange craze for dancing: bands of people would travel about performing frenzied dances, often in graveyards. This was somehow felt to be a charm against death.

It is worth remembering that death must have seemed more familiar in those days, for the absence of nuclear weapons, aeroplanes, fast cars and chemical pollution was outweighed by the presence of dirt, malnutrition and disease, and a much more severe and yet haphazard system of legal punishment. After death, you might go to Hell, where you believed, unless you were part of a very tiny and secret minority who may have questioned this belief, that you would suffer dreadful physical torture.

Yet the accounts of Boccaccio and other writers indicate that as the danger and misery increased, and as the normal routines and restrictions of civilized life collapsed, there was a general decrease in morality, particularly as regards treatment of people’s lives and property.

Rats beat poison and the Ministry’s safety cordon

A strain of poison-resistant rats in Shropshire and mid-Wales has broken through a Ministry of Agriculture cordon to within 20 miles of Wolverhampton. This could become their base for nation-wide expansion, a Farmers’ Union official claimed yesterday.

Farmers in the area feel that the only way to stop the rats is by a “blitz” with the object of total extermination. Mr. David Lloyd, a regional N.P.U. official for Wales, said: “If they get to Wolverhampton, that’s it. We’ll never get them out and they could move from there to the rest of the country.”

By our own Reporter

But the Ministry of Agriculture’s regional pest control office in Wolverhampton yesterday denied that there had been any breakthrough, although there had been a number of “isolated cases” of resistant rats found outside the Ministry ring.

“The Ministry’s cordon, encircling about 1,000 square miles of farmland, mainly in Shropshire and Montgomeryshire, was set up three years ago after a strain of rats immune to the standard anticoagulant poisons had developed in the area.

“The advantage of the anticoagulants, which turn rats and other rodents into haemophiliacs so that they bleed to death, is that they are not dangerous to other animals, including humans. The poison-resistant rats can still be killed, but only with ‘acute poisons’ which can also kill livestock and children.

Mr. Lloyd said: “We want to see a pincer movement by which the area occupied by these rats is progressively reduced until we can mount a final offensive to destroy them. On the present scale of effort victory is not in sight. The rats are multiplying.”

Farmers were ready to enrol in a “virtual army” under Ministry leadership to mount such a blitz. “There must be action now before what is still a
DUE TO FOOT & MOUTH IN BRITAIN

IT IS NOW
ILLEGAL

to visit
IRISH FARMS
FOR 21 DAYS AFTER ARRIVAL.

VISITS TO IRISH FARMS ILLEGAL

Due to Foot & Mouth and in line with current legislation, it is illegal for the period of at least 21 days after arrival to visit Irish farms. This includes all travelers from mainland Britain.

RIGOROUS DISINFECTION

Upon arrival at an Irish airport or port, travelers must undergo rigorous disinfection procedures. This includes washing and disinfecting shoes and clothing, as well as a thorough check of all luggage and personal belongings.

NO EXTRA SALES OR AIR FLIGHTS

Sales of meat, dairy products, and other agricultural goods from Ireland should be avoided. Air flights should be canceled or delayed if possible, to minimize the risk of spreading the disease.

PARCELS RETURNED

Any parcels or goods declared or sent to Ireland will be subject to quarantine and disinfection. This includes all mail and courier services.

THIS IS A NATIONAL EMERGENCY

Irish Department of Agriculture & Fisheries
City Hall, Dublin 2

44
Amongst the most ancient causes of disaster are the diseases and plagues of insects that can attack our sources of food. Foot and mouth virus attacks cattle. Locusts eat almost anything.
Failure to relieve SUFFERING

Measures taken after a disaster to remedy it or to alleviate suffering may not always be the wisest or most effective. The remedies may fail because they arise from ignorance or lack of imagination, or because of a breakdown in carrying them out.

In her account of the Irish potato famine, Cecil Woodham-Smith summarizes some of the well-meant advice of the scientific commissioners who were sent to investigate the disaster:

To deal with diseased potatoes the Irish peasant was to provide himself with a rasp or grater, a linen cloth, a hair sieve or a cloth strainer, a pail or tub or two for water, and a griddle. He was then to rasp the bad potatoes, very finely, into one of the tubs, wash the pulp, strain, repeat the process, then dry the pulp on the griddle over a slack fire. In the water used for washing the pulp would be found a milky substance, which was starch. Good, wholesome bread could be made by mixing the starch with dried potato pulp, peas-meal, bean-meal, oatmeal or flour.

From The Great Hunger

Apparently the Commissioners’ advice ended with the following: ‘If you do not understand this, ask your landlord or clergyman to explain its meaning.’

All sorts of impracticable remedies were suggested in letters to the Press, presumably coming from well-educated, well-housed and fairly prosperous correspondents. Most of them recommended processes that it would have been impossible to carry out in the cabins inhabited by the people who were starving, and which would not have succeeded in making the potatoes edible, in any case.

Later, after much delay, Indian corn was imported as a substitute, but this was such an unfamiliar food that many people did not know how to prepare it.

The mismanagement of the famine relief had only just begun when these gems of advice were published. A good many of the English officials, landlords and government members, were indifferent to the suffering in Ireland, and those who did make some effort to help also made some disastrous mistakes. Attempts were made to create employment by schemes of public works, but these were started too late and discontinued too early. The British government did not keep up its full financial support. Imports of foreign corn were mismanaged, and valuable cereals continued to be exported from Ireland. The Poor Law replaced specially created employment with the opening of soup kitchens, the renewed use of workhouses, and similar measures, but nothing ran efficiently, and people continued to starve.

Many of the peasants were already completely impoverished, neglected and taken advantage of by their landlords, and their grievances were increased by British rule. They were forced into a position of complete dependence, for work or charity, on external help.

The man in command of a ship which delivered meal to one parish described how he saw, among other horrors, skeleton-like people living in rooms still occupied by dead people, and who were too weakened by hunger to move the bodies.

This is a folk song that emerged from the sufferings of 1846–8:

O, the pratties they grow small, over here, over here,
O, the pratties they grow small
And they grow from spring to fall.
And we eat them skins and all, over here, over here.
O, I wish that we were geese, night and morn, night and morn.
O, I wish that we were geese
For they fly and take their ease,
And they live and die in peace, over here, over here.

O, we're trampled in the dust, over here, over here,
O, we're trampled in the dust,
But the Lord in whom we trust
Will give us crumb for crust, over here, over here.

A funeral in an Irish village during the potato famine.

In more recent years, we have heard occasionally of faulty administration of relief, and breakdown or corruption in the distribution of supplies to famine-stricken areas of India or Africa, for example.

Distance from areas where suffering is a permanent condition makes it easier to be indifferent. Can we claim that these are foreign countries and have nothing to do with us, and therefore need not concern us? Or does easier communication, more knowledge, and the fact that we are comparatively prosperous, make us responsible to the human race in general?
The Great Fire of London in 1666 was news right across Europe. Below is a German map of the area destroyed by the fire. Right is an eighteenth-century fire mark, which was placed on those buildings insured against fire, so that the fire engines—which in those days were operated by the insurance companies—could identify the burning houses on which they were supposed to concentrate!
22 die ‘like rats caught in a trap’

FIRE HORROR:

‘CRIMINAL NEGLIGENCE?’

A SEARCHING public inquiry was ordered last night into the warehouse fire in which at least 22 people died “trapped like rats” behind iron barred windows.

Baillie James Anderson, convener of Glasgow’s Police and Fire Committee said: “At this stage I am certainly not prepared to apportion blame but there would seem to be criminal negligence on someone’s part.”

He called for the removal of all iron bars on the windows of bounded warehouse.

“With modern methods of burglar protection, it is simply an anachronism of the 19th century,” he said.

“The dead were trapped like rats when they were just a step away from safety. A child could have got out if it had not been for those damnable bars.”

“It is sheer madness to have a building like this. Who can deny that these bars would never have been there?”

BAILEE ANDERSON

PRIME MINISTER OF SCOTLAND

The trapped women and men clawed, screaming at the bars... then suddenly all was quiet.

NOEL BOTHAM

STREET, GLASGOW, LATE YESTERDAY

The search was called off when darkness fell.

At least 12 of the dead were lying near a steel door leading to a fire escape.

CLAWING

Warehouse foreman John McKerrow, one of many who stood helplessly in the street watching people in the building clawing at the iron barred windows, said:

“Most of those who died appeared to be trying to reach the fire escape.

“But they seemed to be unable to open the door leading to it.”

When the firemen arrived they appeared to have to break open the fire escape door.

“But I don’t know if it was...”

Back Page
The public as spectators

When we hear about a catastrophe in which thousands of people have been killed, how do we react? The difficulty of attaching any meaning in one's mind to huge numbers of people killed or injured has already been mentioned. Some of the headlines just quote the numbers of those killed or injured, but others convey some particular emotional attitude.

The people most affected by the publicity given to a disaster are those involved in it: by being injured, by being relatives or friends of the dead or injured, or by having been eyewitnesses. We have all seen the distressed and strained survivors of aeroplane or train crashes, or shipwrecks, interviewed in front of the television cameras, or have read their personal statements in newspaper interviews.

Some people are going to enjoy talking about their experiences more than others, but we may have doubts about whether such a personal tragedy should be relived before an audience of millions.

On the other hand, because the statistics of disaster have little meaning, perhaps this is the only way of projecting into people's imagination the sufferings of others.

One wonders, too, about the effect on the reporters themselves. They work under tremendous pressure to get their work done within a certain time. Perhaps it is almost inevitable that however compassionate the person reporting may be, his immediate concern must be to get the job done efficiently. And if reporting disasters is necessary and right, then he has scarcely more time for sentiment than the rescue worker.

The real danger is of disaster becoming a rather exciting entertainment, in the way that war can be. The popularity of films about war is relevant here, and of films or reports about crime, particularly those concerning the details of murder. Or is it puritanical to speak of this as a 'danger'? Perhaps there is nothing wrong with a desire to know about the worst things that are likely to happen to a human being.

The stirrings of people's sympathy may be an excellent thing, although the results may be questionable. For instance: the publicity given to the Aberfan disaster, although it provoked a much-needed inquiry, also led to some undignified quibbling over the use of the money brought in by an overwhelming response to the appeal fund.

Incidentally, disaster as entertainment is nothing new. The Scottish poet, William McGonagall, who died in 1902, liked to write about public events such as state funerals and Queen Victoria's jubilee celebrations, but his real speciality was disaster: Calamity in London, and The Wreck of the Steamer 'Stella' are typical titles.

Perhaps there is some similarity between William McGonagall's mechanical technique of writing about a disaster, and that of certain modern journalists and television commentators!
An extract from *The Disastrous Fire at Scarborough* by William McGonagall

’Twas in the year of 1898, and on the 8th of June,
A mother and six children met with a cruel doom
In one of the most fearful fires for some years past –
And as the spectators gazed upon them they stood aghast.

The fire broke out in a hairdresser’s, in the town of Scarborough,
And as the fire spread it filled the people’s hearts with sorrow;
But the police and the fire brigade were soon on the ground,
Then the hose and reel were quickly sent round.

Oh! it was horrible to see the flames leaping up all around.
While amongst the spectators the silence was profound,
As they saw a man climb out to the parapet high.
Resolved to save his life, or in the attempt to die!

And he gave one half frantic leap, with his heart full of woe,
And came down upon the roof of a public-house 20 feet below;
But, alas! he slipped and fell through the skylight,
And received cuts and bruises; oh, what a horrible sight!

The firemen wrought with might and main,
But still the fire did on them gain,
That it was two hours before they could reach the second floor,
The heat being so intense they could scarcely it endure.

And inside all the time a woman and six children were there.
And when the firemen saw them, in amazement they did stare;
The sight that met their eyes made them for to start –
Oh, Heaven! the sight was sufficient to rend the strongest heart.

For there was Mrs Brookes stretched dead on the floor,
Who had fallen in trying her escape for to procure.
She was lying with one arm over her ten months old child,
And her cries for help, no doubt, were frantic and wild:
And part of her arm was burned off as it lay above The child she was trying to shield, which shows a mother’s love.

For the baby’s flesh was partly uninjured by the flames,
Which shows that the loving mother had endured great pains;
It, however, met its death by suffocation,
And as the spectators gazed thereon, it filled their hearts with consternation. . . .

The firemen acted heroically, without any dread,
And when they entered the back premises they found the six children dead;
But Mr Brookes, ‘tis said, is still alive,
And I hope for many years he will survive.
Laughin’ just to keep from cryin’
(line from old Negro blues)

The extraordinary and unprecedented events that can be triggered off by a disaster often bring a breath of light relief with them as people see themselves being thrust willy-nilly into comic and absurd situations. Perhaps, too, there is some comfort to be obtained by laughing at one’s misfortunes. ‘Sick’ humour has become familiar, there have been comedies about murder, and some of the best clowns have portrayed the tragic victims of stronger or more competent people’s cruelty or indifference. The famous American film comedian, Buster Keaton, did make use of natural disaster, and according to his biographer, Rudi Blesh, had experienced it. The extract which follows describes a real incident, although it sounds like a Buster Keaton film. It is worth knowing, before reading it, that Keaton was incredibly accident-prone as a child, and that he had already, on this particular day, had the fingers of one hand squashed in a mangle during the morning, and during the afternoon he had thrown a sharp stone with his uninjured hand, meaning to knock down peaches from a tree, and had gashed his face with the descending stone. Buster was two years old.

Reluctantly, his parents allowed the doctor to give the child a sleeping draught and went off, leaving him in the landlady’s care, to perform at a local (Kansas) theatre. Buster’s mother was singing:

... when the auditorium door burst open and a voice yelled in, ‘Cyclone! Cyclone! Hit for cover!’

The theatre emptied in seconds, the well-trained locals homing straight for their own backyard storm cellars, the trouper hightailing it down the street. Just as Joe and Myra scrambled up the front-porch steps, there was a splintering crash as the tornado lowered its funnel, ripped off half the roof, and veered away. They pounded up the stairs. The door would not open.

‘Joe! The key! The key!’ Myra shouted.

Joe found it, turned it in the lock. Still the door would not open. ‘Something’s holding it!’ Joe shouted.

The something was air suction. As the storm moved on, it released its hold. The door opened, they raced in.

The room was empty. ‘Quick!’ said Joe. ‘He’s in the storm cellar with the landlady.’ They ran downstairs and out the back door. Leaning into the wind, Joe half-carrying Myra, they made it to the cellar. Joe yanked the slanting wooden hatch open, and while it tore loose from its hinges and sailed away, they fell headlong down the steep steps.

There was the landlady, alone, shivering with fright.

‘Where’s Buster?’ Joe yelled. She looked at him blankly.

At that moment, Buster was sitting in his nightgown, in the dusty middle of unpaved Main Street, four blocks away. Only a few minutes before, he had been awakened by the noise: the low, ominous hum of the approaching cyclone, the rending crash of frame houses tearing apart, the eerie carillon of shattering window glass, the shouts of townspeople sprinting for their cellars.

Buster had run to his window and, just as his parents were scrambling in the front door, the vast vacuum at the tornado’s eye had sucked him bodily right out at the second-storey window. Before Joe and Myra were halfway up the stairs, their son was sailing high over trees and houses, too amazed to be afraid, and then coasting down a slow-relaxing ramp of air to land gently in the very centre of an empty street...

(Buster’s parents were in despair, when)

... There were loud footsteps on the stairs. A stranger burst into the room. Buster was in his arms, solemn-faced as always, but with eyes unusually bright.
Need we blame anyone?

Someone nearly always is blamed for a disaster, or for the gravity of its effects, and the amount of publicity the scapegoat receives differs considerably. These days, a fair proportion of disasters are likely to have causes which can be traced quite easily to people’s negligence or wrong decisions. In the case of natural disasters, as the example of Sicily shows, men may be to blame for the conditions which create the disaster: although the destructive power itself is natural and inevitable (the effect of a flood or earthquake depending on the condition of buildings, people’s health, etc.).

Is it useful to blame someone after the event? Doing so doesn’t restore the lost lives and property. On the other hand, drawing attention to someone’s lack of interest in their job, or to the way an important decision has been postponed, may prevent the same thing happening again.

It does seem likely, nevertheless, that finding someone to blame also satisfies a rather primitive wish for revenge, or simply a desire to relieve our feelings: not quite ‘an eye for an eye’, but a more restrained form of the same principle.

As usual, the Black Death at its various outbreaks provides interesting examples. The majority were ignorant about the connexion between dirt and disease, but there were all sorts of minorities who could be blamed, the doctors, the unfaithful, some of the priests, the wealthy.

At the beginning of the plague the people, particularly in Italy, were frequently of the opinion that the doctors themselves caused the rumour of the outbreak to be circulated so as to induce the population to resort to them — a conception to which the aged, venerable Ludovico Settala, one of the leading philosophers and physicians of Milan, nearly fell victim in 1630. On his return from his patients, he was suddenly surrounded by hordes of porters and market women, who howled at him that he was the principal physician and instigator of those who with stick and beard were spreading terror through the town. Only the courage of the litter-bearers who were devoted to him, and carried him to the house of a friend, saved him from being lynched by the raving rabble.

From The Black Death by Johannes Nohl

As conditions during the various plagues grew really horrific, there was a growth of resentment against the rich, who could afford to escape from the overcrowded towns and to protect themselves, as they supposed, with good food and wine. They were also considered, with justification, to be responsible for the plight of the poor. Terrible cruelty and revenge sometimes resulted, with the breakdown of law and order, when perhaps two-thirds of a town’s population were dying of the disease. Cases of cannibalism, often with rich people as victims, were recorded during the famine which followed the plague in the fourteenth century.

The newspapers are quick to publicize any known or suspected causes of a modern disaster, and careful inquiries are conducted and seen to be conducted after an air-crash, mine disaster, or similar catastrophe. This may happen without loss of human life — a memorable example is the Torrey Canyon incident, when oil from a wrecked tanker spread on to and polluted an extensive part of the coast, and thousands of sea birds were killed or clogged with oil.

The Aberfan inquiry, especially because the victims were children — a fact which gave every aspect of the disaster an extra emotional impact — revealed some disturbing facts about the
dangers of coal tips themselves, and about the
dangers of responsibility being passed from one
person to the next and more or less forgotten.

The report of the tribunal said that the site of
the Aberfan tip had been chosen carelessly and
without provision being made for drainage (this
is important, as a dangerously mobile liquid
sludge is formed). In spite of a recommended
maximum height of 20 feet for tips, the one at
Aberfan was allowed to grow to 111 feet, be-
tween 1958 and 1966, when the disaster hap-
pened. Before and during that period various
other tips slid, without fatal results, in the same
area of South Wales.

The apparent negligence and unconcern are
frightening, and it would be impudent to question
the bitterness of people who lost their children.
But is this negligence so unusual? Presumably
we all defer decisions and ‘pass the buck’ at
times, and is it only when this kind of laziness
has a tragic result that we really notice it? Does
a job carrying immense responsibility become
routine like any other? It seems that the people
of Aberfan themselves foresaw disaster, but not
in the way it came.

The curious fact is that everyone saw it coming and
yet no one did. Real disaster seemed unimaginable;
predicted a limited slide, a gradual slide, a slide
that would wreck buildings, but allow time to save
lives. Protests were mainly about recurrent flooding.
The strange lack of urgency persisted until the final
hours when, as the slide began, the engineer halted
the tipping and said something would have to be done
on Monday, and the tipping gang adjourned for a cup
of tea. These men were very close to the miners, and
danger to miners had always meant danger in the pit.

Mervyn Jones in the *New Statesman*, 4 August 1967

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**Inquiry**

Read through the following account
(from an official inquiry) of a level crossing
accident, and try to work out how much
responsibility each of the people involved
had towards what happened. What could
each of them have done to have avoided
the accident?

20th May. — The gates at Yapton PLC between
Ford and Barnham (S. Region) had been
removed to allow work to be carried out in
preparation for the installation of automatic
half-barriers. Temporary protection was pro-
vided by attendants stretching ropes with red
flags across the road on either side, sup-
plemented by 3 red lamps on either side by
night. The signalman had however decided
without authority to dispense with the rope and
flags by night on the grounds that they could
not be seen and had so told the attendants.
Road construction work was also being
carried out about 30 yards north of the crossing
and this was also protected by red lights.

At about 21.45, after measures had been
taken to close the crossing to road traffic, two
cars stopped on the south side of the crossing,
but a car approaching from the north side
passed the red lights and crashed into the
leading coach of an E.M.U. which was travel-
ling over the crossing at about 35 m.p.h. The
driver of the car was killed but her husband
and two children escaped with injuries.
The deceased’s husband who was a railway-
man said that he and his wife misinterpreted
the red lights across the road and thought that
they were connected with the road construction
works. He did not see the rope across the road
which he would have expected and therefore
did not check the deceased as she drove on to
the crossing.

*From Railway Accidents*, H.M.S.O., 1968
19. The London Borough of Newham came into being in April, 1965. It comprises the two former County Boroughs of East Ham and West Ham, together with the North Woolwich area of the former Metropolitan Borough of Woolwich. The new London Borough inherited a formidable housing problem. Over a quarter of the dwellings in West Ham were demolished by enemy action in the Second World War, and the great majority of the remaining houses were built before the First World War, and are not satisfactory by modern standards. Since 1945 the local authorities have built 16,687 new dwellings, 14,412 within the Borough. This is a larger number than in any other London Borough. Despite this, there are still 9,000 slums to be cleared in Newham, and there are about 8,000 names on the Council’s waiting list.

20. After the war, until the mid-1950’s, both the former County Borough Councils built mainly two-storey houses and three-storey flats at relatively low densities of about 70 persons per acre. But there was then a radical change of policy and schemes were designed at densities of up to 140-150 persons per acre. This resulted in about 75% of dwellings being provided in high blocks of flats ranging from 8 to 23 storeys and 25% in 3- or 4-bedroom houses, suitable for large families.

21. In common with other local authorities, Newham found that one of the factors which limited the expansion of their housing programme was the shortage...
RECONSTRUCTION...

After a disaster, it is quite common for a rash of newspaper columns to appear during the next few weeks or months reporting cases of similar potential dangers. For instance, after the terrible Hither Green train crash of autumn 1967, faulty rails seemed to be discovered in many parts of the country, before the official inquiry was even completed. It may be comforting to the rest of us to think that the loss of the victims’ lives may at least have contributed to the safety of future travel. But it is also disturbing to think that the press are likely to be alert to potential disasters only at such a time, and that dangerous conditions probably go unnoticed when no dramatic and tragic event has brought them to the surface.

Obviously inquiries must be made about disasters, and sometimes they may have important practical results. There was, for instance, the case of Ronan Point, a twenty-two-storey block of flats in Poplar, East London, a corner of which suddenly collapsed when a gas explosion took place on the eighteenth floor. The sitting rooms of all twenty-two floors gave way, and three people were killed. If it had been later than 6.45 a.m., or if the bedrooms had been on that corner, there would probably have been many more deaths.

The people whose flats were uninhabitable were temporarily accommodated in the local primary school. Some of them declared that they would not live in Ronan Point, even rent free. The inquiry which followed brought out the interesting point that in some countries, gas is banned above a certain floor in multi-storey buildings; in France, for instance, it is not allowed above the fourth floor.

The inquiry is supposed to have ensured that some such provision will be made in this country, although there has been some controversy in recent months about the installation in tall flats built since the disaster. Also, the concrete joints of such buildings are to be stiffened. But the disaster led to the questioning of far more than the actual physical safety of such flats. People are questioning whether those rehoused from congested but sociable and busy life in streets of old houses should be placed in the isolation of flats piled on top of each other, where there is no opportunity to watch or meet other people in the street, and thus to feel that you are part of the neighbourhood. As can often happen, a disaster has perhaps helped to draw attention to a neglected human problem.

London smog.
...and improvements

Life has got to go on for the people who survive a disaster. Their own feelings and way of life have to return to some semblance of normality, and their surroundings, too, must be restored.

Rebuilding after a disaster may consist of building what is virtually a new city of modern architecture, bearing little or no relation to what was there before, (as happened at Hiroshima, after the atomic explosion), or of painstakingly reconstructing the type of building that was there before, as happened in Warsaw, a city almost entirely destroyed in the Second World War.

It can happen that destruction achieves some good results.

When the Great Fire destroyed London in 1666, it cleared many of the insanitary buildings which had been breeding-grounds for the plague of the previous year. Accidents involving trains and aeroplanes travelling at speed usually lead to an improvement in safety regulations.

The Ljubljana air crash in Yugoslavia, in 1966, killed ninety-two passengers. For some reason, the aircraft was approaching the runway 1,250 feet lower than it should have been, possibly because the pilot failed to reset his altimeter, or possibly because he was relying on his own eyesight, the night being clear, and failed to see a dark forest below him. The report of the Yugoslav Commission recommends the following rules:

1 All crew instructions in the flight manual – such as those governing the altimeter settings and their cross-checking between pilot and co-pilot – must be ‘precise and fully defined’.

2 Visual approaches at night by passenger transport aircraft should be forbidden unless all ground navigational aids available are used.

3 It is desirable all turbo-prop aircraft be fitted with flight recorders.

4 The crew should acknowledge the receipt of the altimeter setting on which the approach is to be made by reading it back to the air traffic controller (in this case it is not clear whether or not the captain thought his altimeter had been reset).

From the Guardian, 6 September 1968

What are the risks that these rules are meant to cover? The more you know about aircraft, the more precisely you will be able to explain.

After a disaster affecting a whole community, many people are going to be in an abnormal state of mind, and need special psychiatric treatment. Sometimes the whole community needs helping, and in a poverty-stricken area, where the people have begun to lose hope, practical improvements are probably inseparable from psychological ones.

Between 1965 and 1967, the state of Bihar in India was affected with a terrible drought and famine. A volunteer who went out to help with the emergency feeding programme wrote a series of letters to Oxfam News, the journal of the British charity organization.

Here are two extracts from John Shiels’ letters:

The fields ought to be full with the winter wheat crop, but those that I’ve seen are dusty, dry, cracked, barren, brown, and the earth is as hard as concrete. The kutcha wells are drying up, though most of those that I’ve seen still have a little water; the irrigation canals are dry and so are the rivers, and these are, or were, big wide rivers. It’s uncanny to drive over a series of twenty span bridges seeing nothing but sand below.

He describes the people at one of the centres where dried milk is being distributed as a temporary feeding measure:
Long disorderly queues of people — women, women with babies, babies, children, children, children, apathetic yet quick to surge forward and surround and engulf the bin from which the milk is served. Carrying empty pots, jugs, tins, pans, every conceivable type of container, all surprisingly clean. A few old tea-pots, an ICI paint-pot. Queue jumpers, disputes, squabbles. Old clothes, dirty clothes, torn clothes, no clothes. Shouting, clanging, babies crying. Some carry buckets, and a glass of milk looks very small when you pour it into a bucket.

Little girls with thin wispy brownning hair, and the inevitable pot bellies. Clever ones trying every trick in the book to get more than their share, but the hospital staff are one step ahead every time. The most pathetic and thoroughly awful sight in the world must be a long line of Indian children, empty bowls in grubby little hands, straggly matted hair, thin limbs sticking out of tattered clothes, great big brown eyes. A child wanders past with an empty one-quart Caltex oil can which he hopes will be filled, but he’s lost his place in the queue.

From Oxfam News, April 1967

A later and more hopeful stage in the attempt at famine relief was the decision to start a series of long-term plans for irrigation and the improvement of farming in various districts of Bihar, plans made by Oxfam in conjunction with an Indian nation-wide organization. If enough money is raised, the plans could probably raise the whole standard of living, and prevent such a disaster from ever happening again.

Here is a typical plan:

**Bodhgaya Project**

Project No. 2 is to be in four villages in Barachati and Mohanpur blocks in the district of Bodhgaya. There are 385 families in the villages.

Forty wells will be dug here. A pump fund will be set up to provide twenty pumps or Persian Wheels and it’s hoped that half the cost of these will be returned to the fund in instalments so that it can be lent out again. A similar fund for seeds and fertilizers will be set up.

A small fund is required for village maintenance and repairs in a simple workshop. A jeep and trailer are required for the programme and also a motor-cycle for the volunteers, of whom there will be two.

The cost, over two years, will be £8,994.

From Oxfam News, November 1967

This must seem hopeful, but perhaps remote to the villagers. To return to the writer of the letters:

Long-term thinking is, however, a luxury that few people here can afford. For the unfortunate majority, poverty brings apathy, hunger, and annihilates all thoughts of the future, the body becomes just a belly with a few accessory organs, all sorts of illnesses accrue from malnutrition, which conveniently means that nobody dies of starvation as such. These are the people who must have food today rather than tomorrow.

From Oxfam News, April 1967

And yet the long-term thinking must be done.

**Some of the organizations through which you could help:**

Concordia (Youth Service Volunteers) Ltd,
11a Albemarle Street, London W1.

International Voluntary Service,
72 Oakley Square, London NW1.

Voluntary Service Overseas,
3 Hanover Street, London W1.
Disasters go on and on happening, and as we learn to cope with one kind of disaster, another kind is created by the ever more complicated nature of our society. There is obviously no point in shrugging the whole subject off in despair, but do we need to do so anyway?

It is worth looking at a few examples of the advances that have been made in foreseeing and preventing disasters.

**They claim to have found earthquake pattern**

Scientists have been looking for centuries for some sort of global pattern to explain earthquakes. A Colorado School of Mines professor and a former graduate student say they have found one.

Dr Ramon E. Bisque, a thirty-six-year-old geochemist, says his former student, George E. Rouse, has discovered sixteen 'weakness belts' which trace full circles around the globe.

The reality of seismic (earthquake) chains - like the San Andreas fault in California - has been realized for years, Bisque said.

Rouse, a thirty-three-year-old geochemist primarily interested in the chemical make-up of rocks and soil, linked these chains with other, seemingly unrelated surface features - mountain ranges, ocean bottom ridges and island chains.

Tracing these surface phenomena around a globe he bought in a toyshop, Rouse found weakness belts that form full circles around the earth.

*From the Evening Standard, 9 August 1968*

Almost a month after this report appeared in the press and two major earthquakes having occurred within three days, another newspaper published an article about the increase in the recording of earthquakes, saying that the very sensitive seismographs now in use record about a million earthquakes (some of them very slight tremors) per year. Less hopefully, people have apparently been slow to put into practice the known techniques for constructing earthquake-proof buildings. The Aztecs of Mexico knew how to build with this danger in mind, and effective techniques have been used recently in Japan, but not elsewhere.

The big national and international organizations, like the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, and the conferences of hard-working scientists and other experts make what progress they can in foreseeing and preventing disasters, and minimizing their effects when they take place.

But is there anything that we, as individuals, can do? Occasionally we foresee, through the eyes of some expert whose opinions we read, that we are heading for some disaster that seems too remote to be real. We should take more notice, perhaps, and not just dismiss the matter as too irrelevant or too horrible to think about.

If an inquiry that follows a disaster makes recommendations to prevent the disaster recurring, and there is reason to think that the recommendations are not being followed up, then ideally, members of the public should be asking in public what is being done about it. This, of course, is asking for an unusually responsible attitude to life. We have to draw the line somewhere; but perhaps there is a happy medium between being a professional writer of indignant letters, and being a person who just couldn’t care less.

Sometimes the means of preventing disaster lie more directly in our control, as private citizens. For instance, people were urged for continued on page 64
The irony of progress. Whilst the poor nations are battling against drought, famine and unfruitful land, the rich nations are gradually poisoning what little fertile land they have left.

For despite our best efforts, we are releasing into the environment substances and processes never before encountered by the living organisms of the planet, including ourselves. A great many subtle balances, with millennia of evolution behind them, are being changed with quite unprecedented speed.

Some of the effects we understand. Detergents have fouled our waterways with foam, and are still liable to block the bacterial digestive processes in sewage works. "Soft" detergents, which can be attacked by bacteria, are solving the first problem, and a solution has also been found to the second. But many effects we do not fully understand.

People in towns get more lung cancer than people in the country, irrespective of how much they smoke. Air pollution may be involved, but the details are obscure.

Rainfall over parts of Europe has become increasingly acid, almost certainly because of pollution by sulphur gases from oil burning. Acid rain appears to be depressing the yield of Scandinavian forests. It may be having other effects. We don’t know. Observer 10 Nov 1968
The future

years to use smokeless fuels because of air pollution, which caused many deaths from asthma, bronchitis and other respiratory diseases. Eventually, it took the loss of thousands of lives, particularly in the London 'smog' of December 1952 which caused 4,000 deaths, to bring about more active campaigning for clean air. Compulsory smokeless zones were introduced in the Clean Air Act of 1958.

We go on creating our own problems. The American biologist, Rachel Carson, describes in her famous book *The Silent Spring* how use of insecticides, particularly in the dusting of crops, is threatening all animal life. Countless animals and birds, including harmless ones, have been killed, she says, and asks if we can put 'such a barrage of poisons on the surface of the earth, without making it unfit for all life?'

This brings us almost back to where this book began, with the conference of scientists, in 1968, discussing the gradual destruction of life on this planet, by pollution of the earth's substance and atmosphere. (Rachel Carson says in her book that even the cells governing heredity in human beings could be affected by chemical sprays.) Much of the damage is already irretrievable, but, says the report of the scientists' views:

Educating mankind about its dangers should be started at once - beginning, they say, with primary school children the world over.

A certain civic spirit with regard to nature should be inculcated. It would also help to hasten research into the workings and interactions of the biosphere, i.e. living things and the milieu in which they exist.

They go on to recommend that an international study should be made, in order to conserve the biosphere. Rachel Carson suggests the use of nature, rather than the control of nature, which she considers is arrogant presumption on the part of mankind. For instance, she explains how masked shrews (not native animals of the island) were introduced into Newfoundland in 1958 to destroy the pest of sawflies, which are the natural prey of shrews. The use of chemicals could be avoided by methods like this.

The Americans had declared war on nature, and had come away with many spoils and triumphs. Then nature declared war on them: already by 1936 when red snow fell in New England, it could be calculated that the dust offensive and the water offensive had taken away one-half of the original fertility of the continent; and in 1948 we are assured by the Soil Association that its annual loss of production soil by erosion is three million million tons - enough to fill a train of freight cars girdling the earth eighteen times, and the equivalent of 73,000 forty-acre farms washed or blown away.

From *The Triumph of the Tree* by John Stewart Collis

**Trees Could Double the World's Food**

The above headline recently introduced an article explaining a method, pioneered in Japan, by which crops could be grown in areas where they had never been grown before, by planting trees which create 'their own protective micro-climate'. In strips separated by blocks of planted forest, crops could be grown, and meat and milk-producing livestock could feed. If followed up, this plan could help to prevent another imminent disaster, starvation, in more parts of the world as the population grows.

The warnings have been issued and, perhaps, we shall prevent the ultimate disaster, after all.
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Disaster
Shella Tidmarsh

Every step we take towards improving the conditions under which we live opens up one more potential pathway to disaster. It means one more giant lever (e.g., reef, pole, more black oil) liable to collapse, one more poison to pollute the atmosphere.

Can we break this vicious cycle, or is disaster inevitable in a society as complicated as ours? How do disasters affect people? Do we, in a curious way, welcome them—when they happen to other people? Disaster looks at a wide range of human satisfactions and at what they can tell us about the human animal under stress.

Shella Tidmarsh has taught in a number of different sorts of secondary schools. She is currently teaching English in a large co-educational comprehensive school in south-east London.

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