

The Daily Disaster Diet

H. A. OVERSTREET



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LYING on the desk before me as I write is a copy of this morning's edition of a leading San Francisco newspaper. "Tyrone, Linda Wed as Police Fight Mobs," screams one of the headlines. "Gambling Clean-up Balked in San

Mateo," runs another. "Key Suspect in Red Ring Seized by FBI" . . . "Dixiecrats Would Send Negroes North" . . . "Tulsa Group Stands Pat—Tenant Ousters to Continue" . . . "President Assails Rent Control Revolt" . . . "Taxi Drivers Vote to Continue Strike." The major portion of the first page is taken up with news of life that has run off its track!

The smaller—very much smaller—portion of that same first page contains items of life proceeding more normally: "More Cold Forecast" . . . "Cost of Living Down for Third Month" . . . "Self-Service Gas Hearing Ordered" . . . "Muni [Municipal] Railroad Receipts Jump on First Day of New Fare." It is conflict and catastrophe that are chiefly in the headlines.

On the day that untouchability was outlawed in India, a prominent morning newspaper featured on its first page in spread-eagle headlines and with columns of detail a murder that had been in the forefront of the news for a number of days. On that same first page, the outlawing of untouchability was presented as a small box item about two inches square. Here again catastrophe was emphasized and the humanly constructive played down.

During the General Motors strike several years ago I was asked to sit with a number of other citizens on a committee to listen to a transcript of the negotiations between General Motors and UAW-CIO. After our com-

mittee had heard the full transcript, we asked Walter Reuther and a representative of General Motors to help clarify for us a number of points. Reuther was at the moment attending a convention of his union in a distant city; but he immediately flew to Detroit and gave the committee an hour or more of his time. Then he left to fly back to his convention. The reporters naturally flocked around him and asked the reason for his swift coming and going. He explained to them the request of the committee and told them of his session with us. Nonetheless, within a few hours one of the prominent dailies flared forth in a headline: "Reuther Mystery Flight Halts Talks." Thus were Detroit readers made to feel that something ominous and devious was impending.

The newspapers do this because they have discovered that most people most of the time are interested in some form of catastrophe: a plane crash, a railroad wreck, a murder, a flood, a scandal, a fight of some sort. Planes

that fly safely, trains that reach their destination, individuals who live together without murdering each other, rivers that stay within their banks, and men and nations that transact their affairs and resolve their differences without fighting are not news. Not one of these would yank a man out of his own preoccupations as he passed a newsstand. Not one of them would make him prop up his paper at the breakfast table and become absorbed in reading, to the neglect of his family. In order to induce that same breakfaster to buy a second paper in the afternoon or evening—or, if possible, even a third—headlines must again shrill the unusual and the catastrophic.

NEWs, in short, must be as different as possible from the average daily routine; for otherwise it will not pull the mind of man out of that routine. The mind of man is, of course, capable of escaping routine through an intensification of awareness; through a deepened sense of values; through becoming sensitized to the subsurface drama of life. But this type of escape cannot be reduced to a formula. It requires the growth of the individual toward the unique fulfilment of his powers. It is not only useless, therefore, but actually detrimental, so far as mass production of news is concerned. The newspaper formula calls for the constant playing up of the only "escape-from-routine" news that has mass appeal—news about some event sufficiently out of the ordinary to give people a thrill without requiring that they have any unusual sensitivity or subtlety of insight.

Between accounts of catastrophe, newspapers do carry a good many items that lie outside the formula and that have their own constant appeal because of certain sustained human interests: weather reports, stock-market reports, household suggestions, real-estate news, educational, religious, and scientific news, and so on. But the primary appeal of a news-



—From "Art in Federal Buildings."

"Printing in Springfield, Ohio."

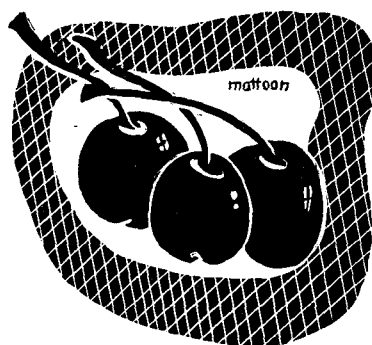
paper is the news it brings of happenings that bode ill to someone. Most political news is cast as "fight" news. Most foreign news is similarly cast. Most domestic news that makes the headlines is catastrophic news: someone has been killed, robbed, or assaulted; someone has called a strike; someone has been putting over a raw deal; someone has been arrested; some criminal has escaped; someone is denouncing someone.

Newspapers, in short, have developed what might be called a *vested interest in catastrophe*.

This point of view has a profound effect upon our becoming mature human beings. It means that day by day, year in and year out, all of us, young and old, are being moved to accept a one-sided, distorted view of life. We get life in its hostile and catastrophic patterns more often than in its friendly and constructive patterns. Ours is a culture in which newspapers have influenced most people, from their childhood on, to suppose that "eventfulness" is mostly conflict and catastrophe.

To take one example, our "public opinion" in regard to the world situation is chiefly shaped by what we read in the newspapers. If what we read is consistently and sharply slanted away from the constructive and peace-seeking activities of men and nations to those that are destructive and belligerent, the opinion we form will be not only one-sided and often erroneous, but will be fraught with terrible danger to our own future and that of mankind. Our own "hostility potential" will be raised. Our attitudes toward peace-seeking activities will be skeptical and pessimistic. We will be wary and quick to suspect someone of trying to put something over on us. Our major emotional readiness will be for belligerent action—or for such belligerent verbalizing as makes peaceful action more difficult to achieve. Our pride will tingle more when our nation "tells off" another nation than when we effect a mutual agreement with that nation. When we lay our nickels and dimes on the line for our daily dose of vicarious catastrophe and conflict, it is almost as though we were paying the newspapers for getting us ready to commit suicide.

A striking example of the power of the newspapers' formula occurred at the time of the formation of the United Nations in San Francisco. It will be remembered that the State Department had ventured a remarkable innovation: it had invited the leading non-partisan voluntary associations of the country to send representatives to the conference to serve as "consultants." These consultants



were privileged to sit in on all major sessions; to confer among themselves about moot problems; to meet with various experts and put their questions and suggestions to these experts; to make recommendations to the appropriate bodies; and, last but not least, to send regular reports back to their organizations. Before long, as it was reported to me, anxious letters began coming to them from members back home. "We don't understand," these letters said in effect. "You keep sending us word that everything is going well and that a world organization will surely be formed; but our newspapers keep telling us that fights and disagreements among the delegates are so constant that there is little hope of success for the conference. Are you sure you know the score? We don't want to be fed on false hope."

The situation was a typical one. Newspapers, with their vested interest in catastrophe, were playing up every cross word spoken; magnifying every squabble of orators until it seemed a major crisis.

In one vital respect, however, the situation was atypical. Normally, we of the public have no representatives on hand to give a picture different from the one the newspapers give; at San Francisco we had such representatives—the consultants. As worried letters kept coming from the home people, these consultants, I am told, went to the correspondents and asked why they were persistently trying to make the conference appear to be a failure. Actually, of course, the correspondents—as individuals and as citizens—did not want it to fail. But as *correspondents* they wanted news that would make the old "formula" appeal. Called to account by the consultants—who represented, through their combined organizations, a significant slice of the reading public—the newspapers were persuaded to believe that even good news might be rated as news. A gradual change became evident in the reporting of the conference.

At the time I write we are in the midst of a cold war. Newspapers are ominous with reports of the appar-

ently irreconcilable quarrels of diplomats. Every day Russia and America seem to be at the point of exploding into the most terrible of all wars. How much of this is a distorted reporting of the actual situation? How much is a deliberate selecting out of the catastrophic and near-catastrophic to the exclusion of what is constructive and hopeful?

The average person is in no position to know. He is at the mercy of newspapers that have found it highly profitable to excite him with headlines of near-disaster. So day after day the average person reads what is in all likelihood a distorted, or at least a disproportioned, account of the international situation.

This may be good business for the newspapers but it is bad business for the maturing of the human mind. It is bad business for the development among men of a rational wish to understand one another across national boundaries and to cooperate in the enterprise of living together.

The situation is equally bad within domestic boundaries. It is the fights of labor and management that are highlighted in the newspapers, not the many efforts to work out a living relationship. Reading, day in and day out, of strikes and threats of strikes, of accusations and recriminations, the average person sees the whole industrial enterprise as in the fight image. Whether he belongs to the side of labor or of management, his hostility toward the side he opposes is given its daily work-out. He comes to think in terms of beating down and overcoming rather than of reasonable give and take. Thus even before any controversy arises that affects him personally, he has a mind conditioned to expect conflict. Life may not yet be for him a "tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing," but it is at least a tale of an industrial world

Swept with confused alarms of struggle and fight
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Politics, when it is newspaper-reported, is chiefly a fight. One party-partisan is laboring another partisan. One party-partisan wins while the other loses. What happens, as a result, to the civic education of the average citizen is obvious. If he "goes into politics," he is likely to go not with a mind geared to the service of the common good but all set for beating the other party. If he does not go into politics, he is nevertheless as likely as not to be proud of belonging to one party and detesting the other. In either event, he remains on the immature level of a mind that sees the great enterprise of politics as

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Fiction. *Three of the leading reviews this week are essentially novels in which dramatic conflict emerges from the development of character rather than from external situation. Elizabeth Bowen's "The Heat of the Day" and Storm Jameson's "The Moment of Truth" are centered in the political dilemma of one day. The first deals also with Miss Jameson's favorite subject, the traitor in our midst. In the second, Russia has conquered all Europe and eleven people are waiting to escape from a remote British airport in a plane that will only hold five passengers. In Frederic Wakeman's "The Wastrel" a man rebuilds his shattered ego during a single night of terrifying suspense. For relief, the reader should turn to Jerome Weidman's story of the conflict for ownership of a newspaper syndicate and William McFee's love story.*

Love for a Traitor

THE HEAT OF THE DAY. By Elizabeth Bowen. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1949. 372 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by GLENWAY WESCOTT

THIS is an admirable novel, which it is gratifying to have offered to the reading public under that kind of commercial auspice—it is a Literary Guild selection—which, in this country at present, best guarantees success. It is the story of a widowed woman of more than ordinary beauty and goodness, and of a man of strong but wrongly developed character: each is the great love of the other's life, but the war is raging and he is a traitor and she cannot excuse him or save him. And of another man who attaches himself to her, a patriot and indeed by specific employment in the war a counter-traitor: he tries to coerce her to love him, but by nature or by fate he is unlovable. And of a boy in uniform, her dear son, coming into his inheritances, first unexpected ancestral property in Ireland, then gradually the difficult lesson of her life and the other elder lives.

Also notable, in the foreground, a wonderful pair of female clowns, Louie and Connie—the one young and so to speak subnormal, the other oldish and mannish—pathetic and problematical as is all our clowning nowadays, in the century of the common humanity. And in the middle distance, in several scenes of brilliant and chilling comedy, two detestable women: exactly the kind of mother and daughter who would have a traitor son, a traitor brother. And in the background, an old lady who is Hamlet-like, sane and pretending to be insane or possibly vice versa; and some supernumeraries not to be forgotten.

Miss Bowen has great mastery of characterization; and though she

somewhat elaborates, she works so quickly and quietly—and femininely, as with her fingertips—that nothing of the mystery of character is lost in the presentation, nothing is revealed prematurely. As she brings life to the surface it does not result in superficiality. In very few pages the reader is enabled to say that, yes, he knows these people, they are of consequence to him; but almost to the last chapter

he is obliged to admit that, no, he does not understand them, not yet. Neither do these people understand one another, not until they have lived through all the circumstances of the book.

Thus our experience of the narration as a whole as we read it, our position relative to the narrated persons, is much the same as the relationship they have with one another: a gradual intimacy more and more intensely troubled, more and more fraught with emotion and with opinion. The suspense is in this as well as the plot. It is like watching a daybreak, a daybreak lasting months and months for them, six or seven hours for us. Page by page the strangeness of everyone and everything progressively lightens, but there is always some left. Miss Bowen never rationalizes too much. She does not indulge in optimism; yet on the other hand she seems not at all subject to any of the defeatist philosophies in fashion now, existentialism and reactionary neo-Catholicism and so on. Her thought is no more cut and dry than her style.

Even at the very end of the book, in the unmasking and the melodrama, she keeps and respects the essential element of the obscurity she has led

THE AUTHOR: In 1600—something a Colonel Bowen in Cromwell's army was granted a parcel of land in County Cork, Ireland. To Dublin-born Elizabeth Bowen the Italianate villa built there in 1775 has been both totem and summer retreat from her London home—one of the famous Nash, Regency Park, Terraces. The book "Bowen's Court" is a history of the ancestral manse and Erin as well, but, she says, "I would not have missed being in London throughout the war for anything. I was writing continuously—the

only interruption being the necessity to clean up my house from time to time when it had been blasted. Nobody who has not cleaned up a house in which every ceiling has come down and every window has been blown in knows what cleaning-up can be like!" "The Heat of the Day" was sandwiched between days with the Ministry of Information and nights as air-raid warden. The war's relation to the novel is like a painting of "one of the Dutch interiors where, although there are central figures, the character of the whole picture comes as much from the background as from the figures themselves." In her teens she wanted to be an artist: "But, actually, my powers of drawing stopped short when I was about fourteen." Encouraged to write at school in England, she started shyly aged nineteen with poetry. Her first book, "Encounters," came out when she was twenty-three. Now more than a quarter of a century later, she has had five additional collections of short stories published, six novels (including "To the North," "The House in Paris," and "The Death of the Heart"), as well as the autobiographical "Seven Winters." She has done scripts for BBC, articles for *The New Statesman*, *The Listener*, *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and, since 1941, a weekly book page for *The Tatler*. "I do not really consider myself a critic," she protests. "I do not think, really, that a novelist should be a critic; but, by some sort of irresistible force, criticism seems to come almost every novelist's way."

—R. G.

