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The Habit of Safety

AS WITH many virtues — morals and courtesy for example — everyone agrees that safety is a good thing. Too often, however, we think of the other fellow and don't apply the rules to our own behaviour. For some unaccountable reason we keep thinking "it won't happen to me."

Statistics bore us, but we can't ignore the statistical fact given in an address by Dr. W. W. McKay of the Department of National Health and Welfare, that accidents are the leading cause of death in Canada today among persons between the ages of five and forty-five. This death toll is a national disgrace. In 1953 we lost 3,121 lives in motor vehicle accidents and 5,521 in other accidents, a total of 8,642.

In the midst of machines, poisons, fires, forces partly mastered but always ready to rise in revolt if we give them a chance, we risk our lives many times oftener than did our forefathers. We can, nevertheless, consciously reduce the odds against us by making safe thinking a habit.

Safety can be attained by education, by cultivating an attitude of enlightened self-interest, and by forming the ingrained habit of acting safely.

It is difficult to understand why a man should be indifferent to getting hurt. Why doesn't the fear of personal pain make him concentrate upon the dangers? Many accidents occur because of utter disregard for the possible consequences of a careless act.

There are some whose indifference goes far beyond mere carelessness: they seem to thrive on throwing dares in the face of death. They are like the young men on a raft who relieved the tedium of their drifting by kicking sharks on the nose. They gamble with whirling machinery, with rickety ladders, with swiftly-approaching trains. They wager that what happens to other people will not happen to them, forgetting Nietzsche's warning: "He who is not a bird should not encamp above abysses."

Both indifference and recklessness are to be condemned because they fly in the face of instinct and nature, and depreciate the dignity of human intelligence. A man may have the courage to encounter danger without going to seek it.

Automobile accidents

Probably no other activity of life reveals better than does automobile driving the disparity between the potential use of that crowning glory of human beings — the grey matter above their ears — and the use they make of it.

In an uncultured hill village in India, if a tiger carries off a half dozen people, the whole population will go out to round it up and shoot it. In cultured Canada, automobiles kill 3,000 people a year.

With all due allowance for human frailty, ninety per cent of the accidents simply should not happen.

Speeding is one of the bad practices in which we indulge. To gain fifteen minutes on a two-hour drive we increase our chances of an accident by as much as fifty per cent.

Speed in itself is not necessarily dangerous. It may be quite safe for a man in tip-top physical condition, well rested, sober, without worries, to drive a good car in first class condition at 70 miles an hour for a stretch on a clear highway. But interject something that causes the driver to be less alert, or add intersecting roads, or put other drivers on the highway, and even 40 miles an hour may be dangerously excessive speed.

Not enough drivers realize that the nose of the car is as long as its braking distance added to the driver's reaction distance. At 30 miles an hour the front bumper is 83 feet ahead of where the driver is sitting.

Carelessness

The carelessness of others is a prime menace on the highway. Many a careful driver — the sort who moves over and gives narrow minds a wide road — is exasper-

ated by the knowledge that any accident likely to befall him will be the result of the reckless driving of other motorists. A truck driver summed it up when he said: "I always drive as if everyone else on the road was crazy."

Dangerous drivers are not always those who break rules laid down in the Highway Traffic Act. Some of them keep far away from a fixed object on their right, like a bridge abutment, but they cling to within six inches of the centre white line where the danger is much greater. There is some mental quirk that seems to compel the driver to toy with death out there.

Rules of the road and common courtesy are alike debauched at the intersections of "stop" and "through" streets. Once a car has stopped, it is entitled to proceed, but we see trucks and cars stampeding up and down the through street with no regard for cross traffic.

Breaches of safety are due in great measure to the trusting of irresponsible and uneducated people with the guidance of trucks and cars. Stricter law enforcement, more rigid tests repeated periodically, and removal of dangerous cars and drivers would go some way toward eliminating the disgraceful conditions that now prevail.

The solution is well known and widely admitted: these corrective measures were discussed in September by the Ontario Legislature Select Committee on Highway Safety. A booklet published by the Junior Chamber of Commerce of Canada said: "The number of convictions is the only measure of effective enforcement. If the accident problem is a large one, there ought to be a large amount of convictions, i.e., effective enforcement."

One out of every three persons killed or injured in traffic is a pedestrian, and, says the booklet referred to, the fault usually lies as much with the pedestrian as with the operator of the vehicle.

Nevertheless, the pedestrian has preference under the law. What motorists will not get into their heads is that the pedestrian lawfully crossing at an intersection has the right of way over a motor also crossing lawfully. "Some motorists," said the judge in a Montreal court, "metaphorically speaking, try with their horns to blow pedestrians out of their way."

Discourtesy, of which horn-blowing is only one example, is one of the chief causes of automobile accidents. When Mr. W. W. Owen of the Canadian Underwriters' Association was discussing how the ratio of accidents had caused Quebec's insurance rates to be higher than those of any other province he remarked: "It is a strange anomaly that many people who are

normally polite in their own homes go out on the road and act like heathen from the jungle."

Other accidents

While traffic accidents steal the spotlight because they are spectacular and numerous, there are many other sorts of preventable accidents.

Stairs and steps account for nearly as many fatalities as all other types of falls combined, although many accidents are sustained by men and women merely walking about a room. Loose rugs, highly polished floors, and objects left carelessly around, are responsible for many deaths.

Prevention is simple: good housekeeping. There should be adequate lighting everywhere, and no trailing extension cords. Holes in floor coverings should be patched, small mats should be anchored, spilled grease should be wiped up thoroughly and at once. Non-skid paint should be used on stairs that are not covered. Foot stools, magazine racks, ash tray stands, and other small pieces of furniture should be placed and kept where they will not be tripped over. Stairs should not become the depository of things that we plan to take up or down on some future trip. Strict rules should be enforced against leaving particularly dangerous toys, such as skates and other things with wheels, on the floor at any time when not in use. There should be a white strip along the edge of both top and bottom steps in the basement.

A tour of the home with these suggestions in hand, followed by a periodical check-up to see that the dangers attending tripping, slipping and falling are under control so far as it lies in our power to control danger, will prevent many a strained back and gashed head.

Fire is a prolific cause of death and injury. By far the greater number of fire accidents occur in and around the home. Leading causes are: careless smoking, particularly smoking in bed, clothing catching fire from stove or grate, children playing with matches, upsetting vessels containing grease, and the foolhardy practice of pouring gasoline or kerosene on fires to kindle or hasten them.

Scalds, too, take their toll. Children are fatally scalded when they bring down upon themselves a pot of tea, a plate of soup, or some other hot substance being served on the table, or clutch the handle of a pot on the stove. These dangers are easy to avoid, if grown-ups will form a few simple safety habits, like turning the pot handles away from the front.

Poisoning

Drinking or eating poisonous substances kills many adults as well as children. There is no other danger

more closely allied with sheer carelessness than is this. Dr. Rustin McIntosh, professor of pediatrics at Columbia University put it with brutal frankness when he told a national safety congress: "When a child is killed by a dose of phosphorus-containing poison which was intended for a rat, the real question is: 'What ignorant or thoughtless person left poison where a child could get hold of it?'"

Peace of mind about poisons can easily be obtained. We need only to provide a special container, thus avoiding the bathroom cabinet folly of mixing killer drugs with harmless cosmetics. A box of any sort, placed out of reach of children, will serve not only to protect the children but also to warn adults to be careful.

No one should ever take pills or potions without turning on the light and reading the name on the label. All poisonous substances, such as disinfectants, should be kept out of the kitchen and pantry. Not only may the containers leak, allowing the poisonous compounds to sift into food, but roach powders, rat poisons, and others, may be mistakenly used for flour or baking powder.

Though relatively small in number, deaths from firearms are just as sorrowful individually as are deaths from any other cause. Most firearm deaths in the home result from the dangerous practice of playing with a gun, and from accidental discharge of firearms while they are being cleaned or demonstrated. No exception should be allowed to the rule: never handle a loaded weapon except when you are going to fire it. No exception should be allowed to the rule enforced upon children that they must never point a toy weapon at another person or at themselves. Only thus can be built up the danger feeling that should permeate everyone touching a firearm.

Perhaps the greatest danger in life arises from the simplicity of the measures needed to avoid accidental death. If more were required, more might be done. This is particularly true when we contemplate accidents in water and on ice. Elementary precautions in swimming, bathing, fishing and boating, and in skating on ponds and rivers, would save many of the lives now lost. To swim alone, to dive into unexplored water, to linger long in cold water, to disregard weather warnings, to sail in small craft when one is unable to swim: these are flagrant breaches of simple common-sense precautions.

Electricity and tools

Electricity is a potential danger too often brushed aside in a spirit of "it won't happen to me". In industry, most deaths caused by electricity are due to faulty

grounding systems, to carelessness in crossing lines, to inattention when working in equipment or circuit centres.

To disregard simple safety measures is no evidence of courage, but rather of stupidity. It may seem to some to be an excess of caution, but the man-of-the-house changing a fuse who throws off the main switch before venturing into the fuse box will not be killed by an electric shock: of that he can be sure. Even when handling minor adjustments in a lamp or in an appliance, the careful man will stand on something dry. Electrical cords, such as those serving floor lamps, washing machines, and all other appliances, need checking periodically to see that they are not frayed or tied in knots.

It is a good rule never to talk to anyone, nor to allow yourself to be talked to by anyone, when you are using a power tool such as a circular saw, a lathe or a drill press. A man's eyes should be on the job, his fingers sensitive to the feel of it, his ears attuned to changes in the tone of the motor, and his mind alert to pick up signals from all his senses. The worker on power tools will avoid wearing ragged or loose fitting clothing. He will not wear gloves around the moving parts of a machine. Ties, however decorative, can easily catch in a revolving shaft and drag down a head for decapitation.

Don't take chances

The best way to avoid accidents is to take no chances. H. M. Tomlinson says in *The Sea and the Jungle*: "In this land it is wise to assume that everything bites or stings, and that when a creature looks dead it is only carefully watching you."

People don't stay out of the jungle because of this state of affairs, but they tread warily and are always ready. The same care and readiness for the unexpected will preserve men and women in factories and on farms, on the highway and in the home.

Walk warily and be prepared: how far this is from the negative attitude that a certain number of accidents are bound to occur! People who are fatalistic about accidents should look at the records made in many industries where carefulness has saved thousands of lives. That a hundred thousand are killed and ten million injured every year in the United States is not due to some perversity of nature or some decree from heaven, but to an extent of eighty-five per cent it is due to human carelessness, inattention and mulishness.

Industrial accidents

During the past few years industrial accidents have increased steadily, says *Teamwork in Industry*, a publication of the Department of Labour, Ottawa. An in-

crease of 9.1 per cent was recorded from 1950 to 1951; a 4 per cent increase in 1951-1952, and the rise in 1952-53 was 5 per cent. This disgraceful record has resulted in a sizable death toll, an impossible-to-calculate amount of human suffering, and formidable loss of income for employees and production dollars for the employer.

Safety needs to be made an integral part of the operating procedure of every factory and of every individual.

A neat, orderly plant, with clean floors devoid of obstacles stimulates carefulness and encourages efficiency. Passage ways are clear, tools are arranged in an orderly way, sharp tools are kept in proper containers, moving machinery is adequately guarded, floors are in good repair, rubbish is promptly disposed of.

Safe practices used in industry may be applied on farms also, and there is no place where safety is more needed. The average farm is a small enterprise depending on the active participation of every member of the group. When accident strikes, it may bring production to a standstill for many days.

Operating a tractor on rough or sloping ground is exceedingly dangerous, because the operator thrown from his seat may be caught in the machine being hauled. Some operators snap a rope to their belts and attach it to the main ignition wire of the tractor: if the driver is toppled from his seat the tractor is stopped at once. These men recognize that when a tractor rears and bucks and loses its balance it is only obeying the law of gravity, and there's no use in arguing with either tractor or law.

Foremen's responsibility

Safety is, economically, an integral part of good operating practice, and, therefore, a supervisory function. The accident figure in his department, plus or minus, scores in the foreman's record.

It is not enough, although necessary, for the foreman to make sure that machines are as safe as engineering ingenuity can make them, and that they are kept in that condition by good housekeeping. He must go further, and wage a ceaseless campaign of safe-habit development among his men.

This demands a knowledge of men, resourcefulness, tact, and careful guidance. It requires not alone instruction of new workers but continual reminding of old timers who are likely to become so accustomed to the dangers around them that they allow themselves to be

careless. Unless safety is habitual with men they are not safe workers.

The foreman or supervisor is nearer to having some justification for being "hard-boiled" when it comes to dealing with a careless worker than at almost any other time. The worker who will not work safely, and flagrantly breaks safety rules, cannot be tolerated. He endangers not only his own life and limbs, but the lives of fellow-workers.

Personal responsibility

Safety is a personal responsibility. Science observes that nature holds man accountable for his involuntary as well as his voluntary behaviour: the poison he takes by mistake kills him just as certainly as that he takes deliberately.

Under many circumstances instinct, if given rein, will protect us, and instinct aided by intelligence will avoid catastrophe.

Maurice Maeterlinck, the great Belgian writer, put this in his picturesque way in *Life and Flowers*. After saying that the too-logical person, torn between this and that response to danger, often ends in disaster, he went on: "Luckily, warned by the nerves, which whirl, lose their heads and bawl like terrified children, another figure bounds upon the stage, a rugged, brutal, naked, muscular figure, elbowing its way and seizing with an irresistible gesture such remnants of authority and chances of safety as come within its reach." That is instinct, or the subconscious; it has long ancestral experience to explain its skill.

Combining intelligence and instinct, we may reach a way of life that avoids situations out of which accidents emerge. That, surely, should be the goal of all safety teaching. Safety is not something in itself, detached from the job, separate from skill in driving a car, a thing added to good housekeeping. It is part of the job, deep in the finger skill and brain work of it.

We cannot gain safety merely by talking about it, by "tut-tutting" when we read about an accident or see wreckage by the roadside, any more than we can avoid danger by ignoring it.

The way seems to be to face the fact that life is full of dangers. They abound in factories and offices, in the home and on the street, on the sea and in the air and deep in the north woods. And, having faced the facts, we need to give our attention and effort to building guards that will protect us and our fellow-men from what dangers can be guarded against. But, most of all, we should set out to make safety our way of life by building safety habits into all we do.