

# The Jewel Fish

(From *King Solomon's Ring* by Konrad Z. Lorenz  
as translated by Marjorie Kerr Wilson)

The iridescent, brilliant blue spots in the red darkness of the dorsal fin play a special role when the female jewel fish is putting her babies to bed. She jerks her fin rapidly up and down, making the jewels flash like a heliograph. At this, the young congregate under the mother and obediently descend into the nesting hole. The father, in the meantime, searches the whole tank for stragglers. He does not coax them along but simply inhales them into his roomy mouth, swims to the nest, and blows them into the hollow. The baby sinks at once heavily to the bottom and remains lying there. By an ingenious arrangement of reflexes, the swim-bladders of young "sleeping" cichlids contract so strongly that the tiny fish become much heavier than water and remain, like little stones, lying in the hollow, just as they did in their earliest childhood before their swim-bladder was filled with gas. The same reaction of "becoming heavy" is also elicited when a parent fish takes a young one in its mouth. Without this reflex mechanism it would be impossible for the father, when he gathers up his children in the evening, to keep them together.

I once saw a jewel fish, during such an evening transport of strayed children, perform a deed which absolutely astonished me. I came, late one evening, into the laboratory. It was already dusk and I wished hurriedly to feed a few fish which had not received anything to eat that day; amongst them was a pair of jewel fish who were tending their young. As I approached the container, I saw that most of the young were already in the nesting hollow over which the mother was hovering. She refused to come for the food when I threw pieces of earthworm into the tank. The father, however, who in great excitement, was dashing backwards and forwards searching for truants, allowed himself to be diverted from his duty by a nice hind end of earthworm (for some unknown reason this end is preferred by all worm-eaters to the front one). He swam up and seized the worm, but, owing to its size, was unable to swallow it. As he was in the act of chewing this mouthful, he saw a baby fish swimming by itself across the tank; he started as though stung, raced after the baby and took it into his already filled mouth. It was a thrilling moment. The fish had in its mouth two different things of which one must go into the stomach and the other into the nest. What would he do? I must confess that, at that moment, I would not have given two pence for the life of that tiny jewel fish. But wonderful what really happened! The fish stood stock still with full cheeks, but did not chew. If ever I have seen a fish think, it was at that moment! What a truly

remarkable thing that a fish can find itself in a genuine conflicting situation and, in this case, behave exactly as a human being would; that is to say, it stops, blocked in all directions, and can go neither forward nor backward. For many seconds the father jewel fish stood riveted and one could almost see how his feelings were working. Then he solved the conflict in a way for which one was bound to feel admiration: he spat out the whole contents of his mouth: the worm fell to the bottom, and the little jewel fish, becoming heavy in the way described above, did the same. Then the father turned resolutely to the worm and ate it up, without haste but all the time with one eye on the child which "obediently" lay on the bottom beneath him. When he had finished, he inhaled the baby and carried it home to its mother. Some students, who had witnessed the whole scene, started as one man to applaud.

### A Meaning in context

1. Pick out words from the passage which mean the following.

- (a) back (para 1)
- (b) gather (para 1)
- (c) strays or loiterers (para 1)
- (d) persuade (para 1)
- (e) capacious (para 1)
- (f) cleverly contrived (para 1)
- (g) response (para 1)
- (h) evoked or drawn out (para 1)
- (i) conveyance (para 2)
- (j) distracted (para 2)
- (k) admit (para 2)
- (l) noteworthy or exceptional (para 2)
- (m) engrossed (para 2)
- (n) obliged or forced (para 2)
- (o) determinedly (para 2)
- (p) clap in approval (para 3)

2. Choose the best synonym for each word as it is used in the passage.

- (a) brilliant (l. 1)  
A sparkling    B glorious    C talented    D showy
- (b) obediently (l. 4)  
A willingly    B quietly    C dutifully    D loyally
- (c) perform (l. 18)  
A act    B do    C fulfil    D function
- (d) wished (l. 19)  
A aspired    B wanted    C cursed    D greeted

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|------------------------|----------------|-------------|-------------|-----------------|
| (e) refused (l. 23)    | A repulsed     | B withheld  | C denied    | D declined      |
| (f) thrilling (l. 32)  | A exciting     | B moving    | C vibrating | D awesome       |
| (g) genuine (l. 38)    | A natural      | B real      | C sincere   | D unadulterated |
| (h) exactly (l. 39)    | A precisely    | B correctly | C properly  | D definitely    |
| (i) admiration (l. 43) | A satisfaction | B pleasure  | C respect   | D surprise      |
| (j) scene (l. 49)      | A view         | B place     | C act       | D incident      |

**B In each case, choose the best answer.**

- Young jewel fish know it is time for bed
  - when they see their mother hovering over the nesting hole.
  - when they see their mother changing colour as she swims.
  - when they see the blue spots on their mother's dorsal fin flashing in signal.
  - when they see their father dashing about the tank in search of them.
- When their swim-bladders contract, young jewel fish
  - begin to feel sleepy.
  - increase in weight.
  - become hard like little stones.
  - lose buoyancy.
- What was the father jewel fish doing when the writer dropped food into the tank?
  - He was hovering over the nesting hole with the mother fish.
  - He was swimming about looking for stray baby fish.
  - He was pursuing a baby fish across the tank.
  - He was waiting to be fed.
- Which stage in the incident described in Paragraph 2 did the writer find "thrilling"?
  - It was when the father fish was distracted from looking for stray baby fish by a bit of food.
  - It was when the father fish caught sight of a baby fish as he was chewing the food.
  - It was when the father fish dashed after the baby fish with the food still in his mouth.

D It was when the father fish caught the baby fish in his already filled mouth.

5. How did the father fish solve the conflict that faced him?
- A He expelled the baby fish and ate the worm.
  - B He expelled the worm but retained the baby fish.
  - C He expelled the baby fish and the worm from his mouth.
  - D He kept the worm and the baby fish in his mouth.

**C Answer these questions in your own words.**

1. How does the mother jewel fish signal to her babies that it is time for bed? What do they do when they see the signal?
2. Explain how the reflex mechanism of a young cichlid works. Why would it be impossible for the father fish to keep his children together if they had no such mechanism?
3. Besides the division of labour in getting their young to bed, how did the mother fish differ from the father fish? Base your answer on the passage and give a good reason for it.
4. In what way was the situation in which the father fish found himself conflicting?
5. Why was the way the father fish solved the conflict admirable?
6. With regard to the conflicting situation the father fish found himself in, the writer confesses that "at that moment, I would not have given two-pence for the life of that tiny jewel fish". What does he mean by that? How much faith would you have in what he says if the life of a human child were involved? Why?
7. Break up the incident into different stages. At each stage, what did the writer and the other witnesses feel? How did they give expression to their feelings at the end?
8. Why are the words "sleeping" (l. 10), "becoming heavy" (l. 13) and "obediently" (l. 47) placed within quotation marks in the passage? Give a reason for each.

## A Crash

(From *A Rabbit in the Air*, by David Garnett)

On Thursday I was gossiping on the aerodrome after lunch when a cry went up, and the medical officer on duty, to whom I had been talking, dashed off leaving me his dog to hold.

A crash — but where? I peered in all directions, but soon heard that the damaged machine was still in the air. The pilot, practising landing on a mark, had smashed his undercarriage and had taken off again at once. When he came round next time he found the ambulance and the fire-engine had been rushed out into conspicuous positions, and that the ground officer was waving him on; so he flew off to consider it. As he passed by, six metres above the ground, I saw the undercarriage wobbling like a loose tooth. The pilot's feelings when he realized the significance of the fire-engine I know nothing of, but on the ground our feelings were acute. Every man in the camp, every scullion and cook, fitter and rigger, appeared suddenly on the aerodrome, and nothing could have made any one of us turn our heads away.

The dog strained at his leash, and I stood motionless and paralysed. I suppose that mixture of disgust, curiosity and fear was the emotion called dread. But whatever was its name it was unwholesome and ignoble — a revelation of indecency. The dog strained and jumped at his leash, throttling himself to join his master, and I stood straining my eyes, watching and waiting to see men burn.

Lie down, you brute! The office clerks of the aerodrome had joined the cooks and scullions. The amphitheatre was packed. The show was free.

Meanwhile, the pilot had climbed up to 2 000 metres or so to think things out and we had lost sight of him. And while they were making up their minds I held the dog and exorcized the indecency of waiting by making up my mind. What should I do? I did not remember that the Air Force all wear parachutes, or the problem would have been solved. I should without hesitation have joined the caterpillar club. But not knowing of the parachutes, my decision was to fly off to the sea-shore and alight in the sea where it was about one metre deep. One might turn upside down and drown, but one wouldn't burn. But presently the machine came gliding down silently from a great height, and on the aerodrome we became aware that this machine was the one for which we were all waiting. Emotion grew intense, saliva flowed in some mouths, while others' throats were parched and dry. And over the trees floated the machine inexorably while we twitched and the infernal dog whined and pulled. What a lovely show glide! My God, the machine had touched the earth and was running forward. But when it had gone ten metres, it skidded and, as we stared, it reared up slowly on its nose. Have you

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watched and listened while the last cracks tear through the heartwood and the vast tree shivers and plunges slowly to its doom?

Just so slowly the machine balanced, plunged and went over on to its back, shivered and lay still. It did not catch fire. Neither of the occupants was seriously hurt, and a quarter of an hour after the ambulance and the fire-engine had raced up to the wreckage, the pilot went up again in another machine.

### A Meaning in context

1. A **scullion** assists a cook and does the rough work in the kitchen. What does each of the following people do for a living?

- |                     |            |
|---------------------|------------|
| (a) medical officer | (c) fitter |
| (b) ground officer  | (d) rigger |

2. Give the meaning of each word as it is used in the passage.

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|--------------------------|------------------------|
| (a) undercarriage (l. 6) | (h) exorcized (l. 25)  |
| (b) conspicuous (l. 8)   | (i) hesitation (l. 27) |
| (c) wobbling (l. 10)     | (j) inexorably (l. 35) |
| (d) paralysed (l. 15)    | (k) infernal (l. 35)   |
| (e) revelation (l. 18)   | (l) skidded (l. 38)    |
| (f) indecency (l. 18)    | (m) heartwood (l. 39)  |
| (g) amphitheatre (l. 22) | (n) wreckage (l. 44)   |

3. Give a synonym for each word and make sentences with both words.

EXAMPLE

dashed (l. 2) — rushed

He **dashed** past me without any sign of recognition.

We **rushed** out to see the procession when we heard trumpets blaring.

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|------------------------|-------------------------|
| (a) realized (l. 11)   | (f) emotion (l. 16)     |
| (b) acute (l. 12)      | (g) unwholesome (l. 17) |
| (c) motionless (l. 15) | (h) ignoble (l. 17)     |
| (d) mixture (l. 16)    | (i) throttling (l. 18)  |
| (e) disgust (l. 16)    | (j) doom (l. 40)        |

### B In each case, choose the best answer.

1. What made the medical officer dash off while talking to the writer?  
A He heard the alert of an impending crash.

- B He heard that a damaged plane was coming in to land.
- C He heard that a plane crash had happened.
- D He heard the pilot of the damaged plane calling for help.

2. Instead of landing the second time he came round, the pilot of the damaged aircraft flew off because

- A he had lost his courage.
- B the ground officer was waving him on.
- C he wanted to think how to land the plane safely.
- D he realized the significance of the fire-engine on the aerodrome.

3. How did the writer feel as he stood watching and waiting on the aerodrome?

- A He was curious about, and fearful of, the outcome of the incident.
- B He was disgusted with his morbid interest in the incident.
- C He was angry with the dog for wanting to go to its master.
- D He experienced all the above feelings.

4. What did the writer decide he would do if he were in the same situation as the pilot of the damaged aircraft?

- A He would bale out of the plane and come down by parachute.
- B He would fly the plane to the sea-shore and come down in a shallow part of the sea.
- C He would fly the plane to a great height and glide down from there.
- D He would leave everything to fate and hope for the best.

5. Which statement is true?

- A The pilot damaged the plane the first time he tried to land it.
- B The pilot smashed the undercarriage of the plane even more the second time he came round.
- C The pilot drove the plane into some trees the third time he came round.
- D In his last attempt to land, the pilot lost control of the plane and it hit the ground nose on.

6. Which statement is false?

- A After touching ground, the plane ran for ten metres before it skidded.
- B As the plane skidded, its rear end slowly rose.
- C The plane stood on its nose for a little while before it crashed into a tree.
- D The plane went over on its back but did not catch fire.

**C Answer these questions in your own words.**

1. Why did the medical officer leave his dog with the writer when he rushed off?
2. What was the significance of the fire-engine and the ambulance on the aerodrome? What do you think the pilot's feelings would be if he realized it?
3. What does "amphitheatre" refer to in the passage? Why does the writer draw the analogy? Give all the reasons you can infer from the passage.
4. How did the writer "exorcize the indecency of waiting"?
5. What does the writer liken the distressed plane to? Describe how the machine ended a complete wreck.
6. What can you infer about the character of the pilot from the passage? Try to substantiate your answer.