

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.