

# READING COMPREHENSION PASSAGES

ROLAND JOHN



5

COLLINS

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BOOK 5

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COLLINS: LONDON AND GLASGOW

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The first passage 'Mr Bunter's Fall' was written by the novelist Joseph Conrad.

## To the Teacher

These passages and exercises have been selected or prepared at the 'structure' level of Collins English Library, Level 6. That has not been very difficult. Much modern or fairly modern written English, including unedited writing, is no more complex than Level 6. If you allow that a comma with *and* or a semi-colon with *but* often replaces a full-stop, Nevil Shute, for example, wrote full-length novels at about the structure level of Level 4.

The vocabulary of Level 6 contains some 2500 headwords. These are sufficient for many purposes; a student who knows most of them will get far more than a general idea of meaning from these passages. Part of the purpose of this collection is to give students practice in reading selected pieces of unedited English with fair understanding. It is the vocabulary, not the structural complexity, that may need extra effort. But after five or six years of English study, students should not be frightened off by a few unfamiliar words, provided the passages are kept short, as these are. Any word that is not known or cannot be recalled should be explained at once, as simply as possible. Give one meaning only—the one relevant to the context, e.g. *Commissioner*, chief officer.

## To the Student

Half the passages in this book are exactly as their authors wrote them; they have not been made easy for you. So you will be doing well if you find you have a good idea of what they are about. When you read a passage for the first time, read it fairly quickly and try to understand its general meaning. On a second reading, be more careful, especially at sections that seem more difficult. If there are some words you do not know, do not spend a long time puzzling over them; instead, look through the exercises. You may find that a particular word does not occur in the exercises. In that case it is not essential that you understand it and remember it. Words that do help to explain important ideas are dealt with in the exercises.



# 1 Mr Bunter's Fall

For three days Mr Bunter, half-conscious, did not say a word. He looked at people sensibly enough but seemed unable to hear any questions put to him. The second officer remarked to the captain, in connection with the affair: 'Those brass plates on the steps of the bridge-ladder are beastly dangerous things.'

'Are they?' replied Captain Johns, sourly. 'It takes more than a brass plate to account for an able-bodied man crashing down in that fashion. And the weather fine, everything dry, and the ship going along as steady as a church!'

On the fourth day the chief officer looked decidedly better. He could hear and understand and could even speak in a feeble voice.

'Well, Mr Bunter,' said Captain Johns, going in to see him, 'can you give us your account of this accident?'

Bunter moved his bandaged head slightly and fixed his cold blue stare on the captain's puzzled face. 'No accident,' he breathed.

'Well, what made you have that fall, then?'

Bunter raised himself a little, looked straight into the captain's eyes and said in a distinct whisper, 'You—were—right!'

'Bless my soul!' exclaimed Captain Johns. 'Do you mean you had a supernatural experience that night? You saw a ghost on my ship?'

Unwillingness, shame, disgust, would have been visible on poor Bunter's face if a good part of it had not been wrapped in bandages. He made a great effort and answered, 'Yes, I have seen.'

'And did it—did it knock you down the bridge-ladder?'

'Come! Am I the sort of man to be knocked down by a ghost?'

Captain Johns pointed a finger at Bunter. 'You've been terrified,' he said. 'That's what's the matter. Even the man at the wheel was scared, though he couldn't see anything. He *felt* the supernatural. You've been punished because you wouldn't believe, Mr Bunter.'

'Suppose I have,' said Bunter. 'You don't know what I saw. And I can't tell you what it was like. Every man has his own ghosts. I stepped back. I don't remember anything else.'

'The man at the wheel said you went backwards as if something had hit you.'

'It was a sort of inward blow,' Bunter explained. 'Aren't you satisfied now that I believe?'

## A

Choose the part that answers the question or completes the sentence in the best way.

- 1 What had happened to Mr Bunter?
  - a He had slipped on a brass plate on the bridge-ladder.
  - b He had been punished because he didn't believe in ghosts.
  - c He had somehow fallen down the bridge-ladder.
  - d The ghost had hit him and he had fallen backwards.
- 2 The captain wished to believe that Bunter had fallen
  - a as a supernatural punishment for his disbelief.
  - b when using the bridge-ladder carelessly at night.
  - c because he was the sort of man to be attacked by a ghost.
  - d because of some fault in the brass plates on the steps.
- 3 'You—were—right!' said Bunter. He was referring to
  - a the fact that every seaman has his own ghosts.
  - b the captain's belief in supernatural things, such as ghosts.
  - c the captain's idea that a ghost had caused the accident.
  - d the need for every seaman to treat the supernatural with respect.
- 4 Unwillingness, shame, disgust—what gave these feelings to Bunter?
  - a It was his dislike of Captain Johns.
  - b They came from the fact that Johns had been proved right.
  - c They were mainly the result of his injuries.
  - d His intention to lie about what he had seen.
- 5 Bunter half agreed that he had been punished because
  - a the ghost had also scared the man at the wheel.
  - b that explanation would satisfy the captain.
  - c it was obvious from the details he gave about the ghost.
  - d his injuries showed he had been beaten.

## B

Answer the following:

- 1 *Choose the correct word to go in the space.*  
The captain discounted the idea that the brass plates could .... Bunter's fall. (explain/answer/prove/blame/serve)
- 2 What connection, if any, did the weather have with the accident?
- 3 What does the phrase 'cold blue stare' tell us about Bunter's relations with Captain Johns?
- 4 *Complete.* The captain was unaware of the expression on Bunter's face because ....
- 5 Bunter had to make a great effort to say 'Yes, I have seen'. Perhaps his injuries account for this effort. What else might account for it?
- 6 '... did it knock you down the bridge-ladder?' What does this question tell us about Captain Johns?
- 7 What did the seaman at the wheel actually see?
- 8 If Bunter's injuries were caused by his falling down the bridge-ladder, how does he account for the blow struck by the ghost?

## 2 The Colours of Peace

Until 1904 the border between the two states was ill defined. For centuries it had been an unhealing sore of jealousy and conflict.

Then came Prince Igor to command the troops of the north. Handsome and well-mannered, Igor Tarpaulin was also, for a soldier, unusually clear-headed. But no sooner had he assumed his command than the news floated southwards over the border.

The south's reaction was swift—and resulted in the prompt arrival of General Ovid Wynding ('Wynding the Hammer'). Should the north try any of their tricks, he would be a match for them!

But there was no trouble. On the contrary, Tarpaulin met Wynding and gave him a large scale map of the border zone, on which the border was shown by a thin red line. 'Take it, my dear General,' said the Prince in friendly fashion. 'I shall be surprised and disappointed if you cannot accept it completely.'

Back at his headquarters, 'Hammer' Wynding studied the map. The red line, he saw, was a mile inside his own territory. He ordered his officers to make a copy of the map. 'An exact copy,' he said, 'except for the border: move the red line two miles to the north at all points.'

A week later Wynding wrote as follows: 'My dear Prince, I am in complete agreement. All past misunderstandings are over. My army will mark out the actual border according to the red line. White posts and heavy fencing material will be used . . .'

Tarpaulin replied gratefully, saying that his engineers would build a similar line of posts, blue in colour. 'The border thus defined,' he added, 'in colours of peace will be a memorial to our wisdom.'

And so, indeed, the border was marked: by a white-posted fence a mile inside Prince Igor's command and by wire-linked blue posts two miles to the south of them. The work done, Wynding's men retreated hastily southwards, for fear of being cut off. At the same time, the Prince's troops fled northwards in fear for their lives.

The border region remains so to this day. A hundred miles long and two miles wide, it is the home of ten thousand ungoverned people, who live in happiness and freedom. To the north, the area is proudly known as 'The Tarpaulin Strip' in memory of its beloved maker; while to the south, 'The Wynding Passage' honours for ever a great soldier-statesman. Nothing has disturbed the peace of the zone for over seventy years.

## A

Choose the correct or the best answer to each question.

- 1 What used to happen along the border, until 1904?
  - a People suffered strange illnesses from which they did not recover.
  - b There was much envy and frequent fighting between north and south.
  - c The area was not clearly shown on maps.
  - d No one lived there, so no one knew what happened.
- 2 Where did both commanders show the border on the maps they made?
  - a Both borders were two miles from where they ought to have been.
  - b Tarpaulin's border gained a mile for his country, but Wynding's gained two miles for his.
  - c The red lines were, in fact, in the same place.
  - d Each commander showed it a mile inside the other's territory.
- 3 Why was it necessary for both armies to retreat hastily?
  - a Because they were on each other's land—and they knew it.
  - b Because they had finished the work.
  - c Because soldiers must never remain to guard a border.
  - d Because it had been agreed between the commanders.
- 4 Why did the zone become a peaceful place?
  - a Because only the south had gained, and Wynding was content.
  - b Because the inhabitants wished to belong to the south.
  - c Because after so much deceit both sides were exhausted.
  - d Because neither side defended the fence it had built.

## B

Answer the following:

- 1 According to this passage, what are the colours of peace?
- 2 The Prince is described as 'clear-headed', 'friendly', 'beloved', etc. Do you think these words proved true, or was he beaten by a better man?
- 3 Why is General Wynding honoured in the south as a 'great soldier-statesman'?
- 4 Did either, neither or both of these men show wisdom?
- 5 What sort of man might earn the nickname 'Hammer'?
- 6 On the map, Prince Igor showed the border by a red line. What did he use to mark the actual border?
- 7 *Choose the best way of completing this sentence:* Past misunderstandings have never recurred because ....
  - a wars are now generally forbidden.
  - b the opposing sides are effectively separated.
  - c there is no government in the central strip.
  - d the rival leaders—Tarpaulin and Wynding—have long been dead.
- 8 *Memorial* (noun) comes from *memory*. Give three examples of things that might serve as memorials to famous people.
- 9 Find the words 'cut off' in paragraph 8. Choose the most likely meaning from these: discontinued / defeated by the enemy / taken prisoner / surrounded by the enemy
- 10 The inhabitants of the border zone are said to be 'ungoverned'. Does this mean they are *a* lawless *b* independent *c* uncivilized?

### 3 To Retire or not to Retire . . .

*News item*

TEA-BOY, 94, NOT TO RETIRE

Mr James Flower, a 94-year-old tea-boy at the offices of Dimple Bright & Co., Seed Merchants, of Crowfoot Magna, is not to retire, the firm announced yesterday.

Making the statement, Mr Frank Dimple, Managing Director, said, 'I have made it clear to Mr Flower that he can work until he is a hundred. Then we will take him outside and plant him in one of our experimental gardens for long-living varieties.'

Contrary to what you may think, this is far from being a record, regarding either age or capability. What, after all, does a tea-boy do? He makes tea for the office staff—a woman's job, it seems to me.

On a walking tour of the Borders in 1966, I was carried across the river Skall on the back of Peter Coxwell, 88, whose part-time job it was to get people to the other side with their feet dry. He charged fourpence per 'passenger-load' (as he described it) for the eight-metre crossing; the round trip was sevenpence.

Imagine my surprise and delight, then, on a second visit in 1977, to find the same Mr Coxwell still offering his services. With the growth of tourism, the business had developed, and he now also served tea or coffee on both banks of the stream. Naturally, the fares have gone up: a return is now 20p, twice the one-way charge, refreshment included.

By 1977 I was a married man. My wife was with me there, on the bank of the Skall; and she, the dear girl, weighs a little under 85 kilos. I was unwilling to put upon the old man, if you know what I mean. Shakespeare's lines crept into my mind—

*Some men are born great, some achieve greatness,  
And some have greatness pressed upon them.\**

But what could I do? Our transport was ready, waiting. The kettle was boiling on the far side. I whispered something to Mr Coxwell about the lady being a fine agricultural sort of woman. He smiled at my anxiety.

'It's covered by my insurance, sir,' he said in a low voice. 'Occupational risks and all that. I think, by the look of her, your missis will be classified as a Dangerous Load, but that's all right.'

He carried me across first, and I found him, if anything, surer of foot than I remembered. For my wife, the real test, he took off his jacket; and in a few minutes she was with me again, safe and dry. Over a cup of coffee I asked Mr Coxwell when he was going to retire—it's a question of great interest to social scientists, including myself.

'Oh, not yet,' he said simply. 'My three youngest children are still at school—a man must think of his family. Life might be hard for them.'

\* from *Twelfth Night* Act 2 Scene 5

## A

Give a *short* answer to each question.

- 1 How old was Mr Coxwell when the writer met him the second time?
- 2 How wide is the Skall?
- 3 How much was the single fare in 1977?
- 4 How, in one word, would you describe the writer's wife?
- 5 How did Mr Coxwell describe her?
- 6 How, in two or three words, would you describe Mr Coxwell?

## B

Give a complete answer to each question.

- 1 What can you say about the respective capabilities of Mr Flower and Mr Coxwell?
- 2 What exactly was Mr Coxwell's job?
- 3 How do you account for the writer's 'surprise' in 1977?
- 4 How much extra, if any, did a passenger pay for a drink?
- 5 Why did the two men talk to each other for a time in low voices?
- 6 What effect had the eleven years had on Mr Coxwell's performance?
- 7 Why did he go on working?

## C

Choose the part that completes the sentence correctly or best.

- 1 The **long-living varieties** that Mr Dimple mentioned were .... (certain plants/elderly employees/kinds of tea/those who wanted to go on working).
- 2 A **round trip**, for example to Paris, is .... (a trip booked in advance/the journey there, plus a sight-seeing tour/a trip there and back/a trip there but without actually landing).
- 3 A **part-time** job is one that .... (you try to keep secret/is paid by the hour or by minutes/is reserved for the old or the sick/takes only part of your time).
- 4 The writer's wife was an **agricultural** sort of woman, probably because .... (she was well-grown, well-developed/ she was a farmer's daughter/ she wanted to work on a farm/she was related to the seed merchant).
- 5 The **occupational risks** that Mr Coxwell mentioned were .... (his rights to a state pension/the dangers of his job/his passengers' responsibility/free of charge).

## D

Answer the following:

- 1 'I was unwilling to put upon the old man, if you know what I mean.' Well, what did he mean? Choose the best ending:  
I was unwilling to .... (lift her on to his back/take his strength for granted/ let him carry her at all/advise him).
- 2 Which part of the Shakespeare quotation fits the situation?
- 3 In what sense was the writer's wife a 'real test'? What preparations, if any, were made for it? Was the test passed or failed?

## 4 As Some May One Day See . . .

In his book, published in 2270, the author writes: 'It is hard for us to understand the mentality of those curious people. Their ideas were almost the exact opposite of ours, and they went to extremes.

'Where our object is to expand a man's opportunities, theirs was to limit them. While we seek to lengthen the normal working life, they struggled to shorten it. We spend most of our wealth on the young and the healthy; they spent most of theirs on the old and the sick.

'In those days, education and training were so short, so fixed, that most people knew only one kind of job. Office workers worked in offices for thirty or forty years. Machine operators spent a lifetime at their machines. The only variety came in off-duty hours, in holidays and, best of all, on "retirement".

'In the twentieth century, the word seems to have meant the formal ending of gainful occupation—by law. There was a constant demand for earlier and earlier retirement. During the century's second half, the "retirement age" dropped by stages from 65 years to an incredibly young 45, which is, oddly enough, about the age at which most of our young people today begin their chosen career.

'Retirement, then, was obligatory—and welcomed. After it, millions of people lived more or less in idleness, paid by the state. Among men, naturally, this sudden end to the pleasure and reward of work often led to early death. To women it brought feverish activity in groups and herds. By the end of the century, women over 70 years old outnumbered men by nearly four to one, half the total population were in retirement, and children of 15 were allowed to decide everything for themselves.

'The social services of that period were concerned almost entirely with the sick, the old and the handicapped. Vast amounts of money were spent on keeping people alive. Hardly anything was done about mental ill-health, so the roots of most physical problems were left untouched. The fear of ill-health grew to imbalance, affecting man's foods, his habits and his normal way of life.

'From the medical profession, which enjoyed a god-like reputation, flowed an endless stream of research "findings", some obvious, some sensible, some groundless, some mistaken. All were attended by great publicity that encouraged fear and despair. Healthy bodily organs were removed—in case these should become diseased. Drugs were freely used to calm troubled minds as well as to excite dull ones, to overcome weariness as much as to ensure sleep. By degrees, nations changed from being young and energetic to being old and feeble. Twentieth century social history presents a strange and sorry picture.'

## A

Give a *short* answer to each question.

- 1 Who were the 'curious people' mentioned in paragraph 1?
- 2 What did this future writer consider to be 'an extreme'? (Give one example from the passage.)
- 3 Which people sought to 'lengthen the normal working life'?
- 4 How old do you suppose these people would be when—or if—they retired from work?
- 5 Consider the 23rd century: at what age, roughly, did 'children' become young adults?
- 6 What did the writer think to be the cause of most ill-health?
- 7 What do you understand by the word 'groundless', when used to describe an idea?

## B

Answer the following:

- 1 Which one (or more) of these would 'expand a man's opportunities'?
  - a training him at school to do a particular job.
  - b letting him learn several jobs before deciding on his career.
  - c replacing theory by practical work at all stages.
  - d spreading his education over thirty or more years.
- 2 *Complete, using one word only:* The author's criticism of 20th century work may be summed up in the phrase 'lack of ....'.
- 3 'We spend most of our wealth on the young and the healthy ....' What does the passage imply—about *how* the money was spent?
- 4 What was the 23rd century attitude to retirement? Is there any evidence (in the passage) that they were unfamiliar with it?
- 5 What conditions would have to be satisfied before we could abandon the idea of retirement at a certain age?
- 6 What connection, if any, do you think there is between a long life and enjoyable, rewarding work?
- 7 Give one reason for the fact that most women live longer than their husbands.
- 8 What do you understand by 'a handicapped person'. Give a few examples of handicaps.
- 9 Quote from the passage an example of 'preventive' medicine.
- 10 What did the writer think of our medical profession?

## C

Put one suitable word in each space.

A person's choice of occupation is probably the .... important one that ever has to be .... Many people today decide .... their careers when they are very young; when they have little or no .... of the work. As things are today, it is a once-in-a-lifetime .... And it is just bad luck if, after five or .... years, you find you don't like your .... Future generations may handle the matter differently. The .... choice may be postponed until a person has had a .... to know a number of .... occupations. He will then be justified in advising himself and—who knows?—continuing to work .... he is a hundred.



## 5 Gazelle Boy—1

*First day.* Suddenly my young guide points a finger towards the rising sun. I see nothing in particular. I strain my eyes—and at last, strangely as in a dream, I see advancing towards me a naked human form. It is slender and with long black hair, and it is racing in gigantic leaps among a herd of white gazelles. It is gone suddenly.

Approaching the place, I soon discover traces of tiny and obviously human feet, sometimes several metres apart, the weight resting on the front part of the foot and hardly making any impression on the sand. Among the leaping prints of the gazelles, they show a rare lightness.

After several hours' march, the prints lead me to a tiny oasis of thorn- and flowering-bushes and a few tall trees around a pool. From one of the bushes a slender white form springs, a gazelle, which immediately begins to pull up roots of *dhanoun*—the desert's principal survival food. A large male gazelle, holding his horns high, comes forward in his turn. Some little ones play about.

Suddenly I see blue flashes against black hair, as a child with a brown and slender body springs from the same bush, throws himself at the unearthed roots, teeth first, and eats them madly.

*Third day.* The child appears again, his hair over his shoulders. He catches sight of me—and stares in amazement, perhaps even terror.

*Fifth day.* As I play my pipe, a young gazelle advances and dares to smell my toe, then licks it. The child watches from a distance. Then a female comes towards me while the little one licks my hands. It seems that this licking is some kind of acknowledgment, contact and almost recognition. Why, 'in reply', should I not imitate these creatures?

So I decide to lick the first little animal. There is immediate progress. A large female comes towards me, throws her head twice in the air. Almost at once the child comes out of his hiding-place while the young gazelle continues to lick my hands.

The child, now clearly visible, shows his lively, dark eyes and a pleasant, open expression. He appears to be about ten years old. His ankles are unnaturally thick and obviously powerful, his muscles firm. As I continue to play on my pipe, he draws nearer, stopping and moving back, then coming forward again. I have to remain quite still.

### A

Give a *short* answer to each question.

- 1 Where was the writer when he saw the gazelle boy?
- 2 What time of day was it?
- 3 How did the boy manage to keep up with the gazelles?
- 4 In the passage what things are associated with the oasis?