

Stunt!

by G. Maslen



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- 1 They fall out of planes, trains, cars, and stagecoaches. They tumble off cliffs, window ledges, and horses. They get blown up, knocked down, trampled, and run over. They fight tigers, gorillas, and crocodiles. They get smashed, bashed, and battered. And they come back for more.
- 2 They are the stunt performers—men and women who do the action scenes for films and television. Skillful and daring, stunt people have been around for as long as films have been made. In early films the big stars often performed their own stunts, but nowadays most dangerous scenes are acted out by stand-ins—professional stunt people who fill in for the film stars when the action gets rough.
- 3 The earliest films made were often just one long string of thrills: car chases, cliff falls, train crashes, and toppling buildings. The most famous example was producer Mack Sennett's Keystone Cops series. The Keystone Cops were a group of baggy-uniformed police, mostly former circus clowns, who seemed to spend a lot of their time being dragged on the ground behind their "cop-wagon." Trailing cops like a string of sausages, the "cop-wagon" tore through the suburbs of Los Angeles, weaving around telephone poles and across railway crossings, and doing terrifying skids at street corners. Later, more complicated cars were built for the cops, cars designed to fall apart when key pins holding them together were removed.
- 4 To reduce the risk of serious injury, the studios devised "breakaway" properties that would shatter easily without really hurting people. The walls that the cars or comedians crashed through were built of soft, light-

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weight balsa wood. Chairs and tables, held together with glue or toothpicks, were also made of balsa. Bottles and lamps were baked from bread dough that would easily break over a comedian's head. The first breakaway windows were made from murky sheets of hardened sugar syrup. Today foam plastic is the basic material of most breakaways, from collapsing violins to artificial boulders.

- 5 But even with painless fake props, the Keystone Cops still had to take terrific punishment. One reported, "I guess I've bathed in tons of wet cement. I've caught fourteen thousand pies in my face, and I have been hit by over six hundred cars and two trains. Once I was even kicked by a giraffe."
- 6 Many of the great early comics of the screen, like Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, started their careers with the Keystone Cops. Keaton usually found himself threatened by dangers of all kinds. In the film *Steamboat Bill Junior*, Buster Keaton is caught in a town that is being ripped apart by a cyclone. He stands helplessly in the middle of the street as a large house crumbles behind him and its entire front wall collapses over him. But he is unhurt because an open window frame falls just where he is standing.
- 7 This extraordinary stunt was carefully planned down to the smallest detail. The window in the front wall was so placed that its frame would just barely miss the actor on all sides as the wall fell around him. Keaton recalled that "it was a one-take scene. You don't do these things twice."
- 8 Many early actors managed to survive because the risks they took were carefully calculated to eliminate much of the danger, but there were plenty of accidents anyway. Between 1925 and 1930 over ten thousand people were injured in Hollywood film productions. Fifty-five of them, mostly stunt men and women, were killed.
- 9 One actor, Richard Talmage, made a specialty of the high jump. He leapt from buildings, ships, and towers into cars, water, or sometimes (accidentally) onto the hard ground. Once a car in which he was jumping a ditch turned over in the air, flinging him ten meters (more than thirty feet). He was on crutches for three weeks. Then a studio wanted him for a high-jump stunt, so he was hoisted up twelve meters (about forty feet) onto a little ledge on a tower. "I threw the crutches away," he said. "I was supposed to jump and land on a bunch of mattresses in a dry riverbed. I jumped, but the property man had decided that I would land farther away and had moved the mattresses. I landed in the riverbed with a terrific thump. They thought I would be dead. But the fall straightened out my bad back. I got up and walked away. The imprint of my body was clearly visible in the riverbed."
- 10 Many of the most exciting and dangerous stunts ever filmed took place in the air. Former air force pilots competed with each other for jobs in daredevil flying. A thousand meters above the ground (more than half a mile up) on the wings of old biplanes, stunt actors would walk blindfolded, hang upside down, drop from one plane to another, or fly the plane into the ground. Unless the stunt pilots knew exactly what they were doing, they rarely came out of these jobs without injury.
- 11 Today, as in the early days, stunt performers must be expert athletes with lightning-fast reactions and nerves of steel. An expert says that good stunt people should be able to handle their bodies well and should have had experience in boxing, acrobatics, wrestling, judo, karate, archery, and unarmed combat. They should be able to drive anything and able to crash a car. They should be able to swim underwater, climb a rope, and dive. They should be able to fall fifteen meters (close to fifty feet) on dry land and twenty-five meters (more than eighty feet) into water. Oh yes—they should, of course, be able to ride a horse.
- 12 A stunt person's earnings depend on the stunts he or she is required to do and the risks that they involve. Rolling a car is worth more than being dragged by a horse; being dragged by a horse is worth more than being involved in an explosion. Does it make sense to earn your living by risking your neck this way? Some people evidently think so, or there wouldn't be any stunt performers.

How Well Did You Read?

Write *T* if a statement is true according to the story. Write *F* if a statement is false.

- 1 Review paragraph 1. The main purpose of that paragraph is to introduce the idea that stunt performers repeatedly perform many dangerous actions.
- 2 Nowadays a stunt performer usually takes the place of the star when the action gets rough.
- 3 Review paragraph 3. The main purpose of that paragraph is to suggest that the early films did not contain much dangerous action.
- 4 "Breakaway" properties reduce the risk of serious injury during stunts.
- 5 Suppose you are watching a recently made film. You see a car crash through a wall that appears to be made of brick. The wall is probably made of plastic foam.
- 6 Review paragraphs 6 and 7. The main purpose of those paragraphs is to describe one of the extraordinary stunts that an early comic had to perform.
- 7 Because of the care taken to eliminate danger, very few stunt performers have ever been hurt.
- 8 Review paragraph 9. The main purpose of that paragraph is to prove that the high jump is the least risky of all the stunts.
- 9 Suppose one stunt performer has to jump out of a moving car. Another has to leap from the wing of one plane to the wing of another plane without a parachute. The latter will probably be paid more.

Learn about Words

Vocabulary

A You can often tell the meaning of a word by reading the words around it.

Look at each number in parentheses. Find the paragraph in the story with the same number. Then find the word that fits the given meaning. Write the word.

- 1 falling down; collapsing (3)
- 2 complex (3)
- 3 lessen (4)
- 4 hazy; very dark (4)
- 5 violent windstorm (6)
- 6 very unusual (7)
- 7 do away with; remove (8)
- 8 recklessly bold (10)

B A word may have more than one meaning.

Look at each number in parentheses. Find the paragraph in the story with the same number. See how the word in **heavy type** below is used in the paragraph. Decide whether it has meaning *a*, *b*, or *c*. Write *a*, *b*, or *c*.

- 9 **planes** (1)
 - a carpenter's tools
 - b aircraft
 - c flat, level surfaces
- 10 **frame** (6)
 - a body
 - b wooden case or structure surrounding a window
 - c structural system

Word Study

- C** Joe knows May and May knows Joe.
Joe knows May and **she** knows him.

The words *she* and *him* are pronouns. Pronouns are words that are used in place of nouns. In the example above, notice how *she* takes the place of *May*. Notice how *him* takes the place of *Joe*. Some other common pronouns are *you*, *he*, *it*, *her*, and *them*. Each sentence below has a noun in **heavy type**. Later in the sentence there is a pronoun that takes the noun's place. Find that pronoun and write it.

- 11 **Val**, why don't you follow the main highway?
- 12 **Ellen** says she isn't ready yet.
- 13 If the **pictures** belong to you, please take them.
- 14 **Byron** will come to the zoo if he can take the pictures.
- 15 Here is the **book**; read it to Paula.
- 16 **Damon**, you and Sandy lead the group.
- 17 **Steve** wants to go, but he doesn't want to walk.
- 18 Glenda caught **fish** for dinner, but Ernie didn't want to cook them.

- D** Jill hopes **she** will score six points.
If the cap belongs to Joe, give it to **him**.

In these examples, *she* is a pronoun that stands for *Jill*; *it* is a pronoun that stands for *cap*; *him* is a pronoun that stands for *Joe*. To understand what you read, you must be able to tell what nouns the pronouns stand for. Each sentence below has a pronoun in **heavy type**. Find the noun that it stands for. Write the noun.

- 19 Don't look at the map; **it** isn't clear.
- 20 If Harry wants those records, bring **them** with you.
- 21 Alberta left before **she** could talk to Carl.
- 22 Ron left for the country, but I don't know which road **he** took.
- 23 Allan ate two sausages, but **they** were both cold.

- 24 Marlene likes the book, but it is too expensive to buy.
- 25 Those biscuits are so hard that Joan couldn't bite into **them**.
- 26 Alvin helped make the parade float, but **he** wouldn't ride in the parade.

- E** **Large cats have big paws.**

Words that have the same or almost the same meaning are called synonyms. *Large* is a synonym of *big*. In each row of words below, there is one word that means the same as the word in **heavy type**. Write that word.

- | | | |
|---------------------|-----------|-------------|
| 27 harm | damage | benefit |
| 28 assist | hinder | aid |
| 29 humorous | amusing | serious |
| 30 extensive | vast | slight |
| 31 dwell | visit | reside |
| 32 loyal | devoted | treacherous |
| 33 misery | suffering | happiness |