ROBERT GRAVES

DITCHING IN A FISHLESS SEA

-- PABLO, THE DIRECTORS desire this office to supply a little folder of simple recommendations for English-speaking passengers in the Espanish Air Service, that they may not drown. You have studied English with a professor for two years; I for one only. It is your duty to compose the text, no?

-- Well, it is certain that I am better qualified than you; but why should English-speaking passengers fear to drown?

-- In case that an Espanish plane should accidentally land in the sea.

-- It is illogical that such a plane should thus land (as you call it) in the sea, our Service having a 100 per cent record of absolute safety.

-- No one can deny it, Pablo; yet the Directors point out that planes of other lines often fall into the sea, so that, for solidarity, they say, we must pretend that extraordinary precautions are needful also for us. The foolish passengers expect it.

-- I cannot see why they should expect that our safety is less absolute than 100 per cent, just because we feel chivalrously inclined to our foreign competitors.

-- Enough, this comes as an order from the Directors. We must accept it. Come, scribble out those simple recommendations. Start perhaps with a little philosophy. Improvise, man! Your imagination was never unfertile.

-- If it is an order, I obey. Here we go now!

Provision and an elementary knowledge of the ambient protect the man in his activities; ignorance on the contrary, attracts, makes or increases danger inherent to all existing. In communities and regarding transportation, shows, sports, etc., rules leading to a better result are published by their representative organizations, always that these rules are kept wholly. Today this is a must in the air services. In the most improbable case of ditching, passenger's life depends upon his conduct as the crew know quite well what they have to do in such cases not only for their own reputation but for the Company's and in first place for the life of the passenger.

How is that for philosophy?.

-- Not so bad. As for the practical side, let us presuppose some sort of life-saving

waistcoat and one or two boats of the sort one blows up. We shall need to provide them, I suppose (what a nuisance), in case the passengers demand tactile confirmation of this fantasy.

-- Remember that with a few exceptions, there is time enough to get ready in case of ditching and that the life waistcoats may keep afloat any person without danger even in the state of unconsciousness and dinghies are fit to hold overweight as well; they are inflated with great rapidity and revised carefully periodically.

How is that?

-- Not so bad. Now for the reassurance that there is no danger.

-- Oh, this accursed solidarity that breeds fears on the pretext of smothering them! In case of sinking passengers should know that the radio listening station on duty does not even miss the lack of reports and therefore the aid is immediate taking only a short time to come to the spot; furthermore the water the plane is flying over is not dangerous either by large fish or by extreme temperatures. Therefore the passenger, if following the instructions below and those supplementary given him from the cockpit with order and confidence, he will succeed in his own safety.

How is that?

-- Not so bad. Now for the detailed recommendations. Improvise boldly, man!

-- Should a ditching have to be faced the following instructions will be given to passengers. Take off your spectacles. Loose your tie and collar as well as belts, braces, etc. Empty your pockets of all pointed articles as pens, pencils, etc. Wear light clothes.

-- But, Pablo, if they are already wearing heavy clothes and their light ones are packed in the hold ?

-- So much the worse for them. Are you criticizing me, Pepe? Do you perhaps wish to write the rest yourself?

-- No, no, I have no literary talent. How could I criticize you? Please continue.

-- Very well, do not interrupt me further:

Put on the life waistcoat. Place the bulks under the legs and adopt the position according to the number of seat. Fix up your belt. Passengers before an imminent ditching should have to do the following. To contract hardly their muscles. To breathe deeply. To keep motionless and quiet until the plane is absolutely stop still. Soon after this, they will loose the belts and shoes to leave the plane by the nearest exit. When

head and body have gone complete through the door or the window, passengers will pull from the inflation string of the waistcoat throwing themselves into the water without fear being sure they are safe.

Passengers should not worry if the transfer is difficult directly into the dinghy because the string with reel will be thrown to take them on board bearing in mind that this is an easy operation.

Do not disinflate your waistcoat until you are on the boat that will take you to the harbour; passengers must avoid slippering on the stairs rubber or wet wood to prevent falling again into the water.

-- That is a very thoughtful warning, Pablo. Recommend them also to procure sandwiches in water-proof boxes, also cough pastilles and hot-water bottles, from the air-hostess, lest rescue be unaccountably delayed.

-- No, no, Pepe. That would be less than reassuring. In theory rescue will come in two or three minutes, since in practice no accident can occur.

-- Very well. Now only the question of priority troubles me. It is clear that all passengers have equal priority since the fares are paid equal. But do the men go out first, or do the women go first? If we recommend the men, it will seem unchivalrous; if the women, it will seem as though they were sacrificed as test-victims. Better then say nothing, perhaps, and let chance, quickness and mobility of spirit decide the precedence!

-- Naturally, the pilot and crew go out first, to blow up the boats and fish the passengers into them. But better not mention even this, lest our Espanish employees be accused of putting their own lives before those of the beloved passengers.

-- You will leave that question also open, then ? Now what of children travelling separately?

-- Children in their life waistcoat (not the breast-fed ones) should be left to persons keeping a better spirit and nearest the exit.

Is that well put?

-- Magisterially. And a word perhaps about invalids and the fat.

-- Fat persons as well as invalids should leave the plane by the main exit but always letting the others to come out first.

How's that?

-- I am doubtful, Pablo. Both illness and fatness are relative conditions. Fat people love life as much as the thin and think themselves robust while calling the thin 'emaciated'. Can you imagine an ugly great cathedral of a capitalist's wife telling a slender gipsy dancer: 'You go first, you will not block the door so much as I'? And the invalids -- who will admit that he is such if the admission gives him less chance of life?

-- Very well, there will be no invalids. But fat people must have a low priority, I insist. If the sea were rough, they might overturn the boat while trying to struggle aboard.

-- But the sea is, in theory, not rough nor cold nor full of large fish. Nevertheless, have it your way! Imagine having to give precedence to my Aunt Curra, that calamity of fatness! Not only would a waistcoat of enormous girth be needed for her, but she would be sure to put it on upside down and back to front.

-- Your Aunt Curra, Pepe, would float like a buoy even without a waistcoat, and we could anchor the boats to her to keep them from drifting. What more shall I write?

-- Let each passenger sing his individual national anthem to encourage himself and show defiance of danger.

-- Might that not rather encourage international hatreds and cause confusion?

-- It is possible. Let us rather, then, recommend strict silence.

-- Very well. And for a finish, a little propaganda, eh?

Passengers should also know that Espanish Air Service whose results without accidents is so wonderful and yet so natural is trying to better everything regarding transportation and specially in connection with safety.

-- Very lucent and cogent, Pablo! The Directors should promote you for this. But oh, that the fantastic and impossible might come to pass! That an Espanish plane might accidentally land on the sea and that I might watch you, with your braces undone and your spectacles gone, holding one non-breast-fed baby on either arm, keeping a better spirit in your heart and breathing deeply as you throw a string with a reel to my Aunt Curra where she floats in strict silence, perhaps upside down, in the warm, fishless Mediterranean Sea!