

Thrown Away

By Rudyard Kipling

Directions: Read the short story and answer the questions that follow. Refer to the text to check your answers.

To rear a boy under what parents call the "sheltered life system" is, if the boy must go into the world and fend for himself, not wise. Unless he be one in a thousand he has certainly to pass through many unnecessary troubles; and may, possibly, come to extreme grief simply from ignorance of the proper proportions of things.

Let a puppy eat the soap in the bathroom or chew a newly-blacked boot. He chews and chuckles until, by and by, he finds out that blacking and **Old Brown Windsor**¹ make him very sick; so he argues that soap and boots are not wholesome. Any old dog about the house will soon show him the unwisdom of biting big dogs' ears. Being young, he remembers and goes abroad, at six months, a well-mannered little beast with a chastened appetite. If he had been kept away from boots, and soap, and big dogs till he came to the trinity full-grown and with developed teeth, just consider how fearfully sick and thrashed he would be! Apply that motion to the "sheltered life," and see how it works. It does not sound pretty, but it is the better of two evils.

There was a Boy once who had been brought up under the "sheltered life" theory; and the theory killed him dead. He stayed with his people all his days, from the hour he was born till the hour he went into **Sandhurst**² nearly at the top of the list. He was beautifully taught in all that wins marks by a private tutor, and carried the extra weight of "never having given his parents an hour's anxiety in his life." What he learnt at Sandhurst beyond the regular routine is of no great consequence. He looked about him, and he found soap and blacking, so to speak, very good. He ate a little, and came out of Sandhurst not so high as he went in. Then there was an interval and a scene with his people, who expected much from him. Next a year of living "unspotted from the world" in a third-rate depot battalion where all the juniors were children, and all the seniors old women; and lastly he came out to India, where he was cut off from the support of his parents, and had no one to fall back on in time of trouble except himself.

Now India is a place beyond all others where one must not take things too seriously--the midday sun always excepted. Too much work and too much energy kill a man just as effectively as too much assorted vice or too much drink. Flirtation does not matter because every one is being transferred and either you or she leave the Station, and never return. Good work does not matter, because a man is judged by his worst output and another man takes all the credit of his best as a rule. Bad work does not matter, because other men do worse, and incompetents hang on longer in India than anywhere else. Amusements do not matter, because you must repeat them as soon as you have accomplished them once, and most amusements only mean trying to win another person's money. Sickness does not matter, because it's all in the day's work, and if you die another man takes over your place and your office in the eight hours between death and burial. Nothing matters except Home furlough and acting allowances, and these only because they are scarce. This is a

slack, **kutch**³ country where all men work with imperfect instruments; and the wisest thing is to take no one and nothing in earnest, but to escape as soon as ever you can to some place where amusement is amusement and a reputation worth the having.

But this Boy--the tale is as old as the Hills--came out, and took all things seriously. He was pretty and was petted. He took the pettings seriously, and fretted over women not worth saddling a pony to call upon. He found his new free life in India very good. It DOES look attractive in the beginning, from a Subaltern's point of view--all ponies, partners, dancing, and so on. He tasted it as the puppy tastes the soap. Only he came late to the eating, with a growing set of teeth. He had no sense of balance--just like the puppy--and could not understand why he was not treated with the consideration he received under his father's roof. This hurt his feelings.

He quarrelled with other boys, and, being sensitive to the marrow, remembered these quarrels, and they excited him. He found **whist, and gymkhanas**⁴, and things of that kind (meant to amuse one after office) good; but he took them seriously too, just as he took the "head" that followed after drink. He lost his money over whist and gymkhanas because they were new to him.

He took his losses seriously, and wasted as much energy and interest over a two-**goldmohur**⁵ race for maiden **ekka**⁶-ponies with their manes hogged, as if it had been the Derby. One-half of this came from inexperience--much as the puppy squabbles with the corner of the hearth-rug--and the other half from the dizziness bred by stumbling out of his quiet life into the glare and excitement of a livelier one. No one told him about the soap and the blacking because an average man takes it for granted that an average man is ordinarily careful in regard to them. It was pitiful to watch The Boy knocking himself to pieces, as an over-handled colt falls down and cuts himself when he gets away from the groom.

This unbridled license in amusements not worth the trouble of breaking line for, much less rioting over, endured for six months--all through one cold weather--and then we thought that the heat and the knowledge of having lost his money and health and lamed his horses would sober The Boy down, and he would stand steady. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred this would have happened. You can see the principle working in any Indian Station. But this particular case fell through because The Boy was sensitive and took things seriously--as I may have said some seven times before. Of course, we couldn't tell how his excesses struck him personally. They were nothing very heart-breaking or above

Vocabulary

1. **Old Brown Windsor**: a brand of soap
2. **Sandhurst**: the British Army's initial officer training center
3. **kutch**: imperfect, makeshift; ramshackle, second-rate
4. **whist / gymkhana**: a card game / a horse-riding competition
5. **goldmohur**: a low-value coin of British India
6. **ekka**: a small vehicle used in India, pulled by a single horse

the average. He might be crippled for life financially, and want a little nursing. Still the memory of his performances would wither away in one hot weather, and the **shroff**⁷ would help him to tide over the money troubles. But he must have taken another view altogether and have believed himself ruined beyond redemption. His Colonel talked to him severely when the cold weather ended. That made him more wretched than ever; and it was only an ordinary "Colonel's **wigging**"⁸!

What follows is a curious instance of the fashion in which we are all linked together and made responsible for one another. THE thing that kicked the beam in The Boy's mind was a remark that a woman made when he was talking to her. There is no use in repeating it, for it was only a cruel little sentence, rapped out before thinking, that made him flush to the roots of his hair. He kept himself to himself for three days, and then put in for two days' leave to go shooting near a Canal Engineer's Rest House about thirty miles out. He got his leave, and that night at Mess was noisier and more offensive than ever. He said that he was "going to shoot big game", and left at half-past ten o'clock in an ekka. Partridge--which was the only thing a man could get near the Rest House--is not big game; so every one laughed.

Next morning one of the Majors came in from short leave, and heard that The Boy had gone out to shoot "big game." The Major had taken an interest in The Boy, and had, more than once, tried to check him in the cold weather. The Major put up his eyebrows when he heard of the expedition and went to The Boy's room, where he rummaged.

Presently he came out and found me leaving cards on the Mess. There was no one else in the **ante-room**⁹.

He said: "The Boy has gone out shooting. DOES a man shoot tetur with a revolver and a writing-case?"

I said: "Nonsense, Major!" for I saw what was in his mind.

He said: "Nonsense or nonsense, I'm going to the Canal now--at once. I don't feel easy."

Then he thought for a minute, and said: "Can you lie?"

"You know best," I answered. "It's my profession."

"Very well," said the Major; "you must come out with me now-at once-in an ekka to the Canal to shoot black-buck. Go and put on **shikar**¹⁰-kit, quick, and drive here with a gun."

The Major was a masterful man; and I knew that he would not give orders for nothing. So I obeyed, and on return found the Major packed up in an ekka--gun-cases and food slung below--all ready for a shooting-trip.

He dismissed the driver and drove himself. We jogged along quietly while in the station; but as soon as we got to the dusty road across the plains, he made that pony fly. A country-bred can do nearly anything at a pinch. We covered the thirty miles in under three hours, but the poor brute was nearly dead.

Once I said: "What's the blazing hurry, Major?"

He said, quietly: "The Boy has been alone, by himself, for--one, two, five--fourteen hours now! I tell you, I don't feel easy."

This uneasiness spread itself to me, and I helped to beat the pony.

When we came to the Canal Engineer's Rest House the Major called for The Boy's servant; but there was no answer. Then we went up to the house, calling for The Boy by name; but there was no answer.

"Oh, he's out shooting," said I.

Just then I saw through one of the windows a little hurricane-lamp burning. This was at four in the afternoon. We both stopped dead in the **verandah**¹¹, holding our breath to catch every sound; and we heard, inside the room, the "brr--brr--brr" of a multitude of flies. The Major said nothing, but he took off his helmet and we entered very softly.

The Boy was dead on the **charpoy**¹² in the centre of the bare, lime-washed room. He had shot his head nearly to pieces with his revolver. The gun-cases were still strapped, so was the bedding, and on the table lay The Boy's writing-case with photographs. He had gone away to die like a poisoned rat!

The Major said to himself softly: "Poor Boy! Poor, POOR devil!" Then he turned away from the bed and said: "I want your help in this business."

Knowing The Boy was dead by his own hand, I saw exactly what that help would be, so I passed over to the table, took a chair, lit a **cheroot**¹³, and began to go through the writing-case; the Major looking over my shoulder and repeating to himself: "We came too late!--Like a rat in a hole!--Poor, POOR devil!"

The Boy must have spent half the night in writing to his people, and to his Colonel, and to a girl at Home; and as soon as he had finished, must have shot himself, for he had been dead a long time when we came in.

I read all that he had written, and passed over each sheet to the Major as I finished it.

We saw from his accounts how very seriously he had taken everything. He wrote about "disgrace which he was unable to bear"--"**indelible** shame"--"criminal folly"--"wasted life," and so on; besides a lot of private things to his Father and Mother much too sacred to put into print. The letter to the girl at Home was the most pitiful of all; and I choked as I read it. The Major made no attempt to keep dry-eyed. I respected him for that. He read and rocked himself to and fro, and simply cried like a woman without caring to hide it. The letters were so dreary and hopeless and touching. We forgot all about The Boy's follies, and only thought of the poor Thing on the charpoy and the scrawled sheets in our hands. It was utterly impossible to let the letters go Home. They would have broken his Father's heart and killed his Mother after killing her belief in her son.

Vocabulary

7. **shroff**: a money-changer or banker

8. **wigging**: a telling-off or reprimanding

9. **anteroom**: a room before another; a waiting room

10. **shikar**: a hunting expedition; a hunting guide

11. **veranda**: platform or balcony along the outside of a building

12. **cheroot**: a cigar with square-cut ends

13. **indelible**: incapable of being canceled, lost, or forgotten

At last the Major dried his eyes openly, and said: "Nice sort of thing to spring on an English family! What shall we do?"

I said, knowing what the Major had brought me but for: "The Boy died of **cholera**¹⁴. We were with him at the time. We can't commit ourselves to half-measures. Come along."

Then began one of the most grimy comic scenes I have ever taken part in--the concoction of a big, written lie, bolstered with evidence, to soothe The Boy's people at Home. I began the rough draft of a letter, the Major throwing in hints here and there while he gathered up all the stuff that The Boy had written and burnt it in the fireplace. It was a hot, still evening when we began, and the lamp burned very badly. In due course I got the draft to my satisfaction, setting forth how The Boy was the pattern of all virtues, beloved by his regiment, with every promise of a great career before him, and so on; how we had helped him through the sickness--it was no time for little lies, you will understand--and how he had died without pain. I choked while I was putting down these things and thinking of the poor people who would read them. Then I laughed at the **grotesqueness**¹⁵ of the affair, and the laughter mixed itself up with the choke--and the Major said that we both wanted drinks.

I am afraid to say how much whiskey we drank before the letter was finished. It had not the least effect on us. Then we took off The Boy's watch, locket, and rings.

Lastly, the Major said: "We must send a lock of hair too. A woman values that."

But there were reasons why we could not find a lock fit to send. The Boy was black-haired, and so was the Major, luckily. I cut off a piece of the Major's hair above the temple with a knife, and put it into the packet we were making. The laughing-fit and the chokes got hold of me again, and I had to stop. The Major was nearly as bad; and we both knew that the worst part of the work was to come.

We sealed up the packet, photographs, locket, seals, ring, letter, and lock of hair with The Boy's sealing-wax and The Boy's seal.

Then the Major said: "For God's sake let's get outside--away from the room--and think!"

We went outside, and walked on the banks of the Canal for an hour, eating and drinking what we had with us, until the moon rose. I know now exactly how a murderer feels. Finally, we forced ourselves back to the room with the lamp and the Other Thing in it, and began to take up the next piece of work. I am not going to write about this. It was too horrible. We burned the bedstead and dropped the ashes into the Canal; we took up the matting of the room and treated that in the same way. I went off to a village and borrowed two big hoes--I did not want the villagers to help--while the Major arranged--the other matters. It took us four hours' hard work to make the grave. As we worked, we argued out whether it was right to say as much as we remembered of the Burial of the Dead. We compromised things by saying the Lord's Prayer with a private unofficial prayer for the peace of the soul of The Boy. Then we filled in the grave and went into the verandah--not the house--to lie down to sleep. We were dead-tired.

When we woke the Major said, wearily: "We can't go back till tomorrow. We must give him a decent time to die in. He died early **THIS** morning, remember. That seems more natural." So the Major must have been lying awake all the time, thinking.

I said: "Then why didn't we bring the body back to the **cantonments**¹⁶?"

The Major thought for a minute:--"Because the people bolted when they heard of the cholera. And the ekka has gone!"

That was strictly true. We had forgotten all about the ekka-pony, and he had gone home.

So, we were left there alone, all that stifling day, in the Canal Rest House, testing and re-testing our story of The Boy's death to see if it was weak at any point. A native turned up in the afternoon, but we said that a **Sahib**¹⁷ was dead of cholera, and he ran away. As the dusk gathered, the Major told me all his fears about The Boy, and awful stories of suicide or nearly-carried-out suicide--tales that made one's hair crisp. He said that he himself had once gone into the same Valley of the Shadow as the Boy, when he was young and new to the country; so he understood how things fought together in The Boy's poor jumbled head. He also said that youngsters, in their repentant moments, consider their sins much more serious and **ineffaceable**¹⁸ than they really are. We talked together all through the evening, and rehearsed the story of the death of The Boy. As soon as the moon was up, and The Boy, theoretically, just buried, we struck across country for the Station. We walked from eight till six o'clock in the morning; but though we were dead-tired, we did not forget to go to The Boy's room and put away his revolver with the proper amount of cartridges in the pouch. Also to set his writing-case on the table. We found the Colonel and reported the death, feeling more like murderers than ever. Then we went to bed and slept the clock round; for there was no more in us.

The tale had **credence**¹⁹ as long as was necessary, for every one forgot about The Boy before a **fortnight**²⁰ was over. Many people, however, found time to say that the Major had behaved scandalously in not bringing in the body for a regimental funeral. The saddest thing of all was a letter from The Boy's mother to the Major and me--with big inky blisters all over the sheet. She wrote the sweetest possible things about our great kindness, and the obligation she would be under to us as long as she lived.

All things considered, she **WAS** under an obligation; but not exactly as she meant.

Vocabulary

- 14. **cholera**: a disease that causes severe dehydration
- 15. **grotesqueness**: the quality of being abnormal and hideous
- 16. **cantonments**: town used by a body of troops for quarter
- 17. **Sahib**: a term of respect for a European in colonial India
- 18. **ineffaceable**: unable to be erased or forgotten
- 19. **credence**: acceptance of a belief or claim as true
- 20. **fortnight**: two weeks; fourteen days

Thrown Away | Reading Quiz

1. Which of the following is **NOT** one of the narrator's opinions regarding India?
 - a. The sun in India is hot and dangerous.
 - b. India is a great place to raise a family.
 - c. Many things are dysfunctional in India.
 - d. People are generally disposable in India.

2. Which character trait applies to The Boy?
 - a. Serious
 - b. Callous
 - c. Resilient
 - d. Disciplined

3. With which statement would the narrator of this text most likely **AGREE**?
 - a. Good parents protect their children from all types of harm.
 - b. Good parents put their young children into great danger often.
 - c. Good parents let their children take their lumps early.
 - d. Good parents should keep their children locked up and safe at home.

4. Which event pushes The Boy over the edge?
 - a. The other men laugh at him.
 - b. A girl makes a mean comment to him.
 - c. He gambles away all of his money.
 - d. His Colonel reprimands him.

5. Which best describes how the Fir Tree responds to being decorated?
 - a. Impeccably honest
 - b. Generally respected
 - c. Incredibly intuitive
 - d. Well meaning

6. Which best explains why the Major asks the narrator if he can lie?
 - a. The Major wants him to lie to The Boy to help make him feel better.
 - b. The Major wants to sneak off the base and have a fun time.
 - c. The Major is preparing for the worst-case scenario with The Boy.
 - d. The Major only wants honest men to accompany him on his mission.

7. Which figurative language technique is used in the following sentence?
"It was utterly impossible to let the letters go Home."
 - a. Simile
 - b. Metaphor
 - c. Personification
 - d. Hyperbole

8. Why does the narrator laugh when he cuts a lock of the Major's hair?
 - a. He is laughing because he is ticklish.
 - b. He is laughing at how they survived the attack.
 - c. He is laughing because he heard a funny joke.
 - d. He is laughing at the absurdity of their actions.

9. Which best explains why the narrator and the Major conceal the circumstances of The Boy's death?
 - a. They are trying to make themselves look good.
 - b. They want to collect the reward money.
 - c. They are trying to protect The Boy's family.
 - d. They do not want to be punished for The Boy's death.

10. What is the effect of the narrator making the following sentence?
"Finally, we forced ourselves back to the room with the lamp and the Other Thing."
 - a. The narrator is worried that someone will find the gun.
 - b. The narrator reduces The Boy to an object.
 - c. The narrator wants to avoid repetitious descriptions.
 - d. The narrator is afraid to tell readers the whole truth.

Extended Response: On a separate sheet of paper, answer the following question using at least two quotes.

Did the narrator and the Major do the right thing or not? Use evidence from the text to support your response.