**Lesson: Rikki-Tikki-Tavi**

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# Rikki-Tikki-Tavi

By Rudyard Kipling



*This is an excerpt from Rudyard Kipling's* The Jungle Book*, a book of fables that uses animals to relay important moral messages.*

This is the story of the great war that Rikki-tikki-tavi fought single-handed, through the bath-rooms of the big bungalow in Segowlee cantonment. Darzee, the tailor-bird, helped him, and Chuchundra, the musk-rat, who never comes out into the middle of the floor, but always

creeps round by the wall, gave him advice; but Rikki-tikki did the real fighting.

He was a mongoose, rather like a little cat in his fur and his tail, but quite like a weasel in his head and his habits. His eyes and the end of

his restless nose were pink. He could scratch himself anywhere he pleased with any leg, front or back, that he chose to use. He could fluff up

his tail till it looked like a bottle brush, and his war cry as he scuttled through the long grass was: “Rikk-tikk-tikki-tikki-tchk!”

One day, a high summer flood washed him out of the burrow where he lived with his father and mother, and carried him, kicking and

clucking, down a roadside ditch. He found a little wisp of grass floating there, and clung to it till he lost his senses. When he revived, he was

lying in the hot sun on the middle of a garden path, very draggled indeed, and a small boy was saying, “Here’s a dead mongoose. Let’s have a

funeral.”

“No,” said his mother, “let’s take him in and dry him. Perhaps he isn’t really dead.”

They took him into the house, and a big man picked him up between his finger and thumb and said he was not dead but half choked. So

they wrapped him in cotton wool, and warmed him over a little fire, and he opened his eyes and sneezed.

"Now," said the big man (he was an Englishman\* who had just moved into the bungalow), "don't frighten him, and we'll see what he'll do."

It is the hardest thing in the world to frighten a mongoose, because he is eaten up from nose to tail with curiosity. The motto of all the

mongoose family is "Run and find out," and Rikki-tikki was a true mongoose. He looked at the cotton wool, decided that it was not good to eat,

ran all round the table, sat up and put his fur in order, scratched himself, and jumped on the small boy's shoulder.

*\*In the 1800s, many Englishmen and women moved to India after the country was colonized by Great Britain.*

“Don’t be frightened, Teddy,” said his father. “That’s his way of making friends.” “Ouch! He’s tickling under my chin,” said Teddy.

Rikki-tikki looked down between the boy’s collar and neck, snuffed at his ear, and climbed down to the floor,

where he sat rubbing his nose.

“Good gracious,” said Teddy’s mother, “and that’s a wild creature! I suppose he’s so tame because we’ve

been kind to him.”

“All mongooses are like that,” said her husband. “If Teddy doesn’t pick him up by the tail, or try to put him in a

cage, he’ll run in and out of the house all day long. Let’s give him something to eat.”

They gave him a little piece of raw meat. Rikki-tikki liked it immensely, and when it was finished he went out into the veranda and sat in the

sunshine and fluffed up his fur to make it dry to the roots. Then he felt better. “There are more things to find out about in this house,” he said to

himself, “than all my family could find out in all their lives. I shall certainly stay and find out.”

He spent all that day roaming over the house. He nearly drowned himself in the bath-tubs, put his nose into the ink on a writing table, and

burned it on the end of the big man’s cigar, for he climbed up in the big man’s lap to see how writing was done.



At nightfall he ran into Teddy’s nursery to watch how kerosene lamps were lighted, and when Teddy went to bed, Rikki-tikki climbed up too. But he was a restless companion, because he had to

get up and attend to every noise all through the night, and find out what made it.

Teddy’s mother and father came in, the last thing, to look at their boy, and Rikki-tikki was awake

on the pillow. “I don’t like that,” said Teddy’s mother. "He may bite the child.”

“He’ll do no such thing,” said the father. “Teddy’s safer with that little beast than if he had a

bloodhound to watch him. If a snake came into the nursery now–”

But Teddy’s mother wouldn’t think of anything so awful.

Early in the morning Rikki-tikki came to early breakfast in the veranda riding on Teddy’s shoulder, and they gave him banana and some

boiled egg. He sat on all their laps one after the other, because every well-brought-up mongoose always hopes to be a house mongoose some

day and have rooms to run about in; and Rikki-tikki’s mother (she used to live in the general’s house at Segowlee) had carefully told Rikki what

to do if ever he came across men.

Then Rikki-tikki went out into the garden to see what was to be seen. It was a large garden, only half cultivated, with bushes, as big as

summer-houses, of Marshal Niel roses, lime and orange trees, clumps of bamboos, and thickets of high grass.

Rikki-tikki licked his lips. “This is a splendid hunting-ground," he said, and his tail grew bottle-brushy at the thought of it, and he scuttled up

and down the garden, snuffing here and there till he heard very sorrowful voices in a thorn-bush.

It was Darzee, the Tailorbird, and his wife. They had made a beautiful nest by pulling two big leaves

together and stitching them up the edges with fibers, and had filled the hollow with cotton and downy

fluff. The nest swayed to and fro, as they sat on the rim and cried.

“What is the matter?” asked Rikki-tikki.

“We are very miserable,” said Darzee. “One of our babies fell out of the nest yesterday and Nag

ate him.”

“H’m!” said Rikki-tikki, “that is very sad–but I am a stranger here. Who is Nag?”

Darzee and his wife only cowered down in the nest without answering, for from the thick grass

at the foot of the bush there came a low hiss-a horrid cold sound that made Rikki-tikki jump back

two clear feet. Then inch by inch out of the grass rose up the head and spread hood of Nag, the big

black cobra, and he was five feet long from tongue to tail. When he had lifted one-third of himself

clear of the ground, he stayed balancing to and fro exactly as a dandelion tuft balances in the wind,

and he looked at Rikki-tikki with the wicked snake's eyes that never change their expression,

whatever the snake may be thinking of.

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"Who is Nag?" said he. "I am Nag. The great god Brahm put his mark upon all our people, when the first cobra spread his hood to keep the

sun off Brahm as he slept. Look, and be afraid!"

**\***Brahm is one of the major Hindu deities

He spread out his hood more than ever, and Rikki-tikki saw the spectacle-mark on the back of it that looks exactly like the eye part of a

hook-and-eye fastening. He was afraid for the minute, but it is impossible for a mongoose to stay frightened for any length of time, and though Rikki-tikki had never met a live cobra before, his mother had fed him on dead ones, and he knew that all a grown mongoose’s business in life

was to fight and eat snakes. Nag knew that too and, at the bottom of his cold heart, he was afraid.

“Well,” said Rikki-tikki, and his tail began to fluff up again, “marks or no marks, do you think it is right for you to eat fledglings out of a nest?”

Nag was thinking to himself, and watching the least little movement in the grass behind Rikki-tikki. He knew that mongooses in the garden

meant death sooner or later for him and his family, but he wanted to get Rikki-tikki off his guard. So he dropped his head a little, and put it on

one side.

“Let us talk,” he said. “You eat eggs. Why should not I eat birds?” “Behind you! Look behind you!” sang Darzee.

Rikki-tikki knew better than to waste time in staring. He jumped up in the air as high as he could go, and just under him whizzed by the head

of Nagaina, Nag’s wicked wife. She had crept up behind him as he was talking, to make an end of him. He heard her savage hiss as the stroke

missed. He came down almost across her back, and if he had been an old mongoose he would have known that then was the time to break her

back with one bite; but he was afraid of the terrible lashing return stroke of the cobra. He bit, indeed, but did not bite long enough, and he

jumped clear of the whisking tail, leaving Nagaina torn and angry.



“Wicked, wicked Darzee!” said Nag, lashing up as high as he could reach toward the nest in the thorn-bush. But Darzee had built it out of

reach of snakes, and it only swayed to and fro.

Rikki-tikki felt his eyes growing red and hot (when a mongoose’s eyes grow red, he is angry), and he sat back on his tail and hind legs like a

little kangaroo, and looked all round him, and chattered with rage. But Nag and Nagaina had disappeared into the grass. When a snake misses

its stroke, it never says anything or gives any sign of what it means to do next. Rikki-tikki did not care to follow them, for he did not feel sure

that he could manage two snakes at once. So he trotted off to the gravel path near the house, and sat down to think. It was a serious matter for

him.

If you read the old books of natural history, you will find they say that when the mongoose fights the snake and happens to get bitten, he

runs off and eats some herb that cures him. That is not true. The victory is only a matter of quickness of eye and quickness of foot–snake’s

blow against mongoose’s jump–and as no eye can follow the motion of a snake’s head when it strikes, this makes things much more wonderful

than any magic herb. Rikki-tikki knew he was a young mongoose, and it made him all the more pleased to think that he had managed to

escape a blow from behind. It gave him confidence in himself, and when Teddy came running down the path, Rikki-tikki was ready to be

petted.

But just as Teddy was stooping, something wriggled a little in the dust, and a tiny voice said: “Be careful. I am Death!” It was Karait, the

dusty brown snakeling that lies for choice on the dusty earth; and his bite is as dangerous as the cobra’s. But he is so small that nobody thinks

of him, and so he does the more harm to people.

Rikki-tikki’s eyes grew red again, and he danced up to Karait with the peculiar rocking, swaying motion that he had inherited from his family. It looks very funny, but it is so perfectly balanced a gait that you can fly off from it at any angle you please, and in dealing with snakes this is an

advantage. If Rikki-tikki had only known, he was doing a much more dangerous thing than fighting Nag, for Karait is so small, and can turn so

quickly, that unless Rikki bit him close to the back of the head, he would get the return stroke in his eye or his lip. But Rikki did not know. His

eyes were all red, and he rocked back and forth, looking for a good place to hold. Karait struck out. Rikki jumped sideways and tried to run in,

but the wicked little dusty gray head lashed within a fraction of his shoulder, and he had to jump over the body, and the head followed his heels

close.

Teddy shouted to the house: "Oh, look here! Our mongoose is killing a snake."

And Rikki-tikki heard a scream from Teddy's mother. His father ran out with a stick, but by the time he came up, Karait had lunged out once

too far, and Rikki-tikki had sprung, jumped on the snake's back, dropped his head far between his forelegs, bitten as high up the back as he

could get hold, and rolled away. That bite paralyzed Karait, and Rikki-tikki was just going to eat him up from the tail, after the custom of his

family at dinner, when he remembered that a full meal makes a slow mongoose, and if he wanted all his strength and quickness ready, he must

keep himself thin.

He went away for a dust bath under the castor-oil bushes, while Teddy's father beat the dead Karait. "What is the use of that?" thought Rikki-tikki. "I have settled it all;" and then Teddy's mother picked him up from the dust and hugged him, crying that he had saved Teddy from

death, and Teddy's father said that he was a providence,**\*** and Teddy looked on with big, scared eyes.

**\*divine intervention; act of God**

Rikki-tikki was rather amused at all the fuss, which, of course, he did not understand. Teddy’s mother might just as well have petted Teddy

for playing in the dust. Rikki was thoroughly enjoying himself.

That night at dinner, walking to and fro among the wine-glasses on the table, he might have stuffed himself three times over with nice

things. But he remembered Nag and Nagaina, and though it was very pleasant to be patted and petted by Teddy’s mother, and to sit on

Teddy’s shoulder, his eyes would get red from time to time, and he would go off into his long war cry of "Rikk-tikk-tikki-tikki-tchk!”

Teddy carried him off to bed, and insisted on Rikki-tikki sleeping under his chin. Rikki-tikki was too

well bred to bite or scratch, but as soon as Teddy was asleep he went off for his nightly walk round

the house, and in the dark he ran up against Chuchundra, the musk-rat, creeping around by the wall. Chuchundra is a broken-hearted little beast. He whimpers and cheeps all the night, trying to make up

his mind to run into the middle of the room. But he never gets there.

“Don’t kill me,” said Chuchundra, almost weeping. "Rikki-tikki, don’t kill me!”

“Do you think a snake-killer kills muskrats?” said Rikki-tikki scornfully.

“Those who kill snakes get killed by snakes,” said Chuchundra, more sorrowfully than ever. “And how am I to be sure that Nag won’t

mistake me for you some dark night?”

“There’s not the least danger,” said Rikki-tikki. “But Nag is in the garden, and I know you don’t go there.” “My cousin Chua, the rat, told me–” said Chuchundra, and then he stopped.

“Told you what?”

“H’sh! Nag is everywhere, Rikki-tikki. You should have talked to Chua in the garden.”

“I didn’t–so you must tell me. Quick, Chuchundra, or I’ll bite you!”

Chuchundra sat down and cried till the tears rolled off his whiskers. “I am a very poor man,” he sobbed. “I never had spirit enough to run out

into the middle of the room. H’sh! I mustn’t tell you anything. Can’t you hear, Rikki-tikki?”

Rikki-tikki listened. The house was as still as still, but he thought he could just catch the faintest scratch-scratch in the world–a noise as faint

as that of a wasp walking on a window-pane–the dry scratch of a snake’s scales on brick-work. “That’s Nag or Nagaina,” he said to himself,

“and he is crawling into the bath-room sluice. You’re right, Chuchundra; I should have talked to Chua.”

He stole off to Teddy’s bath-room, but there was nothing there, and then to Teddy’s mother’s bathroom. At the bottom of the smooth plaster

wall there was a brick pulled out to make a sluice for the bath water, and as Rikki-tikki stole in by the masonry curb where the bath is put, he

heard Nag and Nagaina whispering together outside in the moonlight.

“When the house is emptied of people,” said Nagaina to her husband, “he will have to go away, and then the garden will be our own again. Go in quietly, and remember that the big man who killed Karait is the first one to bite. Then come out and tell me, and we will hunt for Rikki-tikki

together.”

“But are you sure that there is anything to be gained by killing the people?” said Nag.

“Everything. When there were no people in the bungalow, did we have any mongoose in the garden? So long as the bungalow is empty, we

are king and queen of the garden; and remember that as soon as our eggs in the melon bed hatch (as they may tomorrow), our children will

need room and quiet.”

“I had not thought of that,” said Nag. “I will go, but there is no need that we should hunt for Rikki-tikki afterward. I will kill the big man and his

wife, and the child if I can, and come away quietly. Then the bungalow will be empty, and Rikki-tikki will go.”

Rikki-tikki tingled all over with rage and hatred at this, and then Nag’s head came through the sluice, and his five feet of cold body followed

it. Angry as he was, Rikki-tikki was very frightened as he saw the size of the big cobra. Nag coiled himself up, raised his head, and looked into

the bathroom in the dark, and Rikki could see his eyes glitter. “Now, if I kill him here, Nagaina will know; and if I fight him on the open floor, the

odds are in his favor. What am I to do?” said Rikki-tikki-tavi.

Nag waved to and fro, and then Rikki-tikki heard him drinking from the biggest water-jar that was used to fill the bath. “That is good,” said

the snake. “Now, when Karait was killed, the big man had a stick. He may have that stick still, but when he comes in to bathe in the morning he

will not have a stick. I shall wait here till he comes. Nagaina–do you hear me?–I shall wait here in the cool till daytime.”

There was no answer from outside, so Rikki-tikki knew Nagaina had gone away. Nag coiled himself down, coil by coil, round the bulge at

the bottom of the water jar, and Rikki-tikki stayed still as death. After an hour he began to move, muscle by muscle, toward the jar. Nag was

asleep, and Rikki-tikki looked at his big back, wondering which would be the best place for a good hold. "If I don’t break his back at the first

jump,” said Rikki, “he can still fight. And if he fights–O Rikki!” He looked at the thickness of the neck below the hood, but that was too much for

him; and a bite near the tail would only make Nag savage.

“It must be the head," he said at last; “the head above the hood. And, when I am once there, I

must not let go.”

Then he jumped. The head was lying a little clear of the water jar, under the curve of it; and, as

his teeth met, Rikki braced his back against the bulge of the red earthenware to hold down the head. This gave him just one second’s purchase, and he made the most of it. Then he was battered to and

fro as a rat is shaken by a dog–to and fro on the floor, up and down, and around in great circles, but

his eyes were red and he held on as the body cart-whipped over the floor, upsetting the tin dipper

and the soap dish and the flesh brush, and banged against the tin side of the bath. As he held he

closed his jaws tighter and tighter, for he made sure he would be banged to death, and, for the honor of his family, he preferred to be found

with his teeth locked.

He was dizzy, aching, and felt shaken to pieces when something went off like a thunderclap just behind him. A hot wind knocked him

senseless and red fire singed his fur. The big man had been wakened by the noise, and had fired both barrels of a shotgun into Nag just

behind the hood.

Rikki-tikki held on with his eyes shut, for now he was quite sure he was dead. But the head did not move, and the big man picked him up

and said, “It’s the mongoose again, Alice. The little chap has saved our lives now.”

Then Teddy’s mother came in with a very white face, and saw what was left of Nag, and Rikki-tikki dragged himself to Teddy’s bedroom and

spent half the rest of the night shaking himself tenderly to find out whether he really was broken into forty pieces, as he fancied.

Rikki-tikki had a right to be proud of himself; but he did not grow too proud, and he kept that garden as a mongoose should keep it, with

tooth and jump and spring and bit, till never a cobra dared show its head inside the walls.

**Question 1:**

Why did Rikki act so tame when he first met the human family that rescued him?

He wanted them to let him stay so that he could eat the snakes in their garden.

His mother had taught him how to behave if he encountered man.

His family had died in a flood and he was lonely for company.

He was grateful that they had saved him and wished to repay them.

**Question 2:**

What best describes the theme of this story? a mother's undying love

the test of time

man versus nature

courage in the face of danger

**Question 3:**

Read the ending passage of the story below.

*Rikki-tikki had a right to be proud of himself; but he did not grow too proud, and he kept that garden as a mongoose should*

*keep it, with tooth and jump and spring and bit, till never a cobra dared show its head inside the walls.*

Based on the passage, what can you infer about what happened to Nagaina and her babies?

They continued to harass the creatures of the garden.

They succeeded in hurting Rikki's family.

They left the garden or were killed by Rikki.

They made peace with Rikki and became his friend.

**Question 4:**

Read the passage below.

*Then Rikki-tikki went out into the garden to see what was to be seen. It was a large garden, only half* ***cultivated****, with bushes,*

*as big as summer-houses, of Marshal Niel roses, lime and orange trees, clumps of bamboos, and thickets of high grass.*

What is the most likely meaning of the word **cultivated**? prepared for planting

meant for show

colorful and fragrant

used for entertaining

**Question 5:**

Read the passage below.

*"...and then Teddy’s mother picked him up from the dust and hugged him, crying that he had saved Teddy from death, and Teddy’s father said that he was a providence, and Teddy looked on with big scared eyes. Rikki-tikki was rather amused at all*

*the fuss, which, of course, he did not understand. Teddy’s mother might just as well have petted Teddy for playing in the dust.*

*Rikki was thoroughly enjoying himself."*

What is the *most important* contribution this passage makes to the story?

It shows that Teddy's mother is very emotional.

It shows the difference between nature and man.

It shows British belief systems during that time period.

It shows that Teddy enjoys playing in the dust.

**Question 6:**

How would this story be different if told from Teddy's father's point of view?

We would know more about why the snakes had chosen the garden as their home.

We would not know the real reason why Rikki acted so tame with the family.

We would not know how much danger Teddy had been in with the small snake.

We would know why Nag had come into the house.

**Question 7:**

How would the narration of this story need to change if it were told in cartoon form?

The animals would need to talk with animal noises rather than words.

We would need to know more about what the humans were thinking.

The characters would need to say more of their thoughts aloud.

The humans would need to be able to understand the animals' speech.

Story summary: