

Trouble at Reading Railroad

W.M. Akers

“Those aren’t the rules!” said Mario.

“This is my house! I’ll tell you what the rules are!” said Nicky.

The two cousins stared at each other, both refusing to blink. They were warriors about to leap at each other’s throats and settle their argument with violence. The battlefield lay between them, their armies strewn across it. It was not an ordinary battlefield covered with tanks and cannons and soldiers. It was a rectangle, covered in colorful squares, some guarded by green and red plastic fortresses. But although the war wasn’t real, the fight between Nicky and Mario was. They were playing Monopoly and prepared to do anything to win.

It had started that afternoon when Mario’s mom dropped him off at Nicky’s house. They were cousins, nearly the same age, and had been playing together since they were born. They had played pirates and action figures, video games and tag, and had always had a good time. But whenever they made the mistake of playing Monopoly, the same thing always happened. It started with an argument over who got to be which piece. Obviously, both of them wanted to be the car.

“This is my house,” Nicky would say. “I get to be the car.”

“You were the car last time.”

"This is my house," Nicky would repeat, not quite shouting yet. The shouting would come later.

They would argue about who would be the banker and who the realtor. Managing the properties was preferable, of course, because it involved less counting. Counting is never fun.

"I'm the realtor," Mario would say.

"No," Nicky would reply.

"I called it."

"My house."

"I called it," Mario would repeat, a little bit closer to shouting this time.

"Fine."

And so, the Monopoly war started quietly, but got a little bit louder after each turn around the board. For the first few rolls, there was little conflict. Mario would buy Vermont Avenue; Nicky would buy St. Charles. But then one of them would get a property the other wanted.

"You can't buy Connecticut Avenue," Mario would say. "I need that one for my monopoly."

"Well I don't want you to get a monopoly," Nicky would say, "but I'll sell it to you."

"Okay."

"Ten thousand dollars."

“There aren’t even ten thousand dollars in the game,” Mario would say, very nearly shouting this time.

“Okay. How about twenty thousand?”

“No deal.”

No trades would ever be made. The game would stalemate and go on forever, unless one of them got a monopoly by sheer chance. Then the taunting would begin.

“Oh wow,” Mario would say. “You have Baltic Avenue, Connecticut and St. Charles. Those are *really* great properties.”

“Oh, so what? So you’ve got all the yellows. Everyone knows the yellows are the worst. Who is a Marvin Gardens, anyway?”

“I don’t know, but as soon as I get a hotel on him, it’s gonna cost you \$1,200 to find out.”

Their voices would get louder. Their sentences would get shorter. Their faces would get red as they counted out each move, slamming their pieces down with greater and greater fury. But they would not yell, no matter who landed on Free Parking, no matter how many hotels were built, no matter what monopolies were acquired. They would not yell...until one of them drew The Card.

Every time they landed on Chance, the room grew quiet. They lifted the flimsy red cards slowly, knowing it could be the match that lit the flame. And finally, as it always happened, The Card appeared.

“Take a ride on the Reading Railroad,” Mario read. “If you pass Go, collect \$200.”

They both looked at the board. Mario’s piece—the hat, the stupid, boring, awful hat—was on the Chance space two spots past Reading Railroad. If he went forward around the board, he would pass Go. He would get \$200. He would be able to afford the railroad—one of his favorite properties—and the game would shift in his favor. But he knew Nicky wouldn’t let that happen.

Nicky picked up Mario’s piece.

“Put that down,” Mario said.

Nicky moved it back two squares and put it on Reading Railroad.

“You know it goes forward,” said Mario. “You know it does!”

“The card doesn’t say anything about that.”

“The pieces always go forward. *Always.*”

“Only on the cards that say ‘Advance.’ This doesn’t say anything about it, so you take the most direct route. That means you go backwards. That means you don’t get \$200. My turn.”

“Those aren’t the rules!”

“This is my house! I’ll tell you what the rules are!”

Now they were shouting. Now Mario didn’t care about Reading Railroad anymore. Now all he wanted was to be right.

Nicky stood up, sore from so many hours sitting cross-legged. “Give me the dice,” he said.

“It’s my turn.”

“I move forward. I get \$200.”

“Give me the dice!”

Mario dropped the dice on the board, and Nicky bent down to pick them up. Mario bent down too, but he didn’t reach for the dice. Without shouting at all, he slipped one finger under the board and flipped it as high as it would go. Money fluttered down from the ceiling like a very colorful snowstorm, as houses and hotels fell with all the clatter of plastic hail.

Nicky opened his mouth like he wanted to scream, but no words came out.

“I don’t think this game works with two people,” Mario said softly.

Nicky nodded. They cleaned up the game together, silently.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What game do Mario and Nicky play in the story?

- A tag
- B pirates
- C a video game
- D Monopoly

2. What is the climax of the action in the story?

- A Nicky agrees that Mario can be the realtor.
- B Nicky buys St. Charles.
- C Mario flips the board into the air.
- D Mario's mom drops him off at Nicky's house.

3. Mario and Nicky are angry at each other.

What evidence from the passage supports this statement?

- A "They were cousins, nearly the same age, and had been playing together since they were born."
- B "Their faces would get red as they counted out each move, slamming their pieces down with greater and greater fury."
- C "Mario's piece—the hat, the stupid, boring, awful hat—was on the Chance space two spots past Reading Railroad. If he went forward around the board, he would pass Go."
- D "They had played pirates and action figures, video games and tag, and had always had a good time."

4. What does Nicky believe about the rules of Monopoly?

- A Nicky believes that the rules of Monopoly are too complicated for anyone to understand completely.
- B Nicky believes that even though the card Mario draws does not say "Advance," Mario should still move his piece forward.
- C Nicky believes that he gets to decide what the rules are because the game of Monopoly is being played at his house.
- D Nicky believes that the rules of Monopoly are always the same, no matter where the game is being played.

5. What is this passage mostly about?

- A how much fun playing pirates can be
- B the reasons that some people dislike counting
- C buying hotels and riding a railroad
- D two boys fighting over a game

6. Read this sentence about Nicky and Mario: "They were **warriors about to leap at each other's throats** and settle their argument with violence."

Why does the author write that Nicky and Mario are "**warriors about to leap at each other's throats**"?

- A to help the reader understand how angry at each other Nicky and Mario are
- B to explain to the reader why Nicky and Mario have decided to play Monopoly instead of tag
- C to persuade the reader that playing Monopoly is more fun than playing video games
- D to prove that Mario is right about the direction in which his piece should move

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

Mario wants to move forward to Reading Railroad; _____, Nicky wants him to move backward.

- A earlier
- B consequently
- C in contrast
- D for instance

8. What would Mario be able to do if he collected \$200 on his way to Reading Railroad?

9. What do Nicky and Mario do with the game after Mario flips the board into the air?

10. How are Nicky and Mario feeling at the very end of the story? Support your answer with evidence from the passage.

Teacher Guide & Answers

Passage Reading Level: Lexile 600

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8. What would Mario be able to do if he collected \$200 on his way to Reading Railroad?

Suggested answer: Mario would be able to afford Reading Railroad.

9. What do Nicky and Mario do with the game after Mario flips the board into the air?

Suggested answer: Nicky and Mario silently clean up the game together.

10. How are Nicky and Mario feeling at the very end of the story? Support your answer with evidence from the passage.

Suggested answer: Answers may vary, as long as they are supported by the passage. For example, students may respond that Nicky and Mario are still furious at each other over the Reading Railroad argument. That is why they do not speak while cleaning up the game. Conversely, students may argue that Nicky and Mario's silence indicates a thawing of hostility. After their big fight over the Reading Railroad card, they are quietly working together to clean up the game.