

Class: B.Sc. Home Science

Semester: II

Subject: English Language and Communication Skills

Unit: I (Prose/Stories)

THE BEST INVESTMENT I EVER MADE

A.J. CRONIN

About the Author:

A.J. Cronin, in full Archibald Joseph Cronin, (1896-1981) a Scottish novelist and physician was one of the most renowned storytellers of the twentieth century. Cronin was educated at the University of Glasgow and served as a surgeon in the Royal Navy during World War I. He practised in South Wales (1921–24) and then, as medical inspector of mines, investigated occupational diseases in the coal industry. He opened a medical practice in London in 1926 but quit because of ill health, using his leisure to write his first novel, *Hatter's Castle* (1931; filmed 1941), the story of a Scottish hat-maker obsessed with the idea of the possibility of his noble birth. This book was an immediate success in Britain.

Cronin's novel, *The Stars Look Down* (1935; filmed 1939), which chronicles various social injustices in a North England mining community from 1903 to 1933, gained him an international readership. It was followed by *The Citadel* (1937; filmed 1938), which showed how private physicians' greed can distort good medical practice. *The Keys of the Kingdom* (1942; filmed 1944), about a Roman Catholic missionary in China, was one of his most popular books. Cronin's subsequent novels include *The Green Years* (1944; filmed 1946), *Shannon's Way* (1948), *The Judas Tree* (1961), and *A Song of Sixpence* (1964). One of his more interesting late works is *A Thing of Beauty* (1956), a study of a gifted young painter who must break free of middle-class conventions to realize his potential. Cronin's strengths were his narrative skill and his powers of acute observation and graphic description. Though labelled a successful middlebrow novelist, he managed to create in *The Stars Look Down* a classic work of 20th-century British fiction.

Synopsis of the Story:

The Best Investment I Ever Made is a creative outcome from the personal experience of the author's life as a doctor in London. The word investment used in the title of the story is not related to any monetary gain. Rather, it is about the social investment of the author into the life of a misguided youth who tried to commit suicide on the prospect of stealing a small amount of money from his office. The narrator, as a doctor, completely changes the life of the boy and turns him into a good Samaritan and helps the youth to replace the money. After a long time, the doctor was contented to see the young man, along with his wife, working tirelessly for the rehabilitation of the child offenders. Recalling the episode, when he helped the young man with seven-pound during his moment of crisis, he realized that it was the best investment that he had ever made in his life. The episode gives immense pleasure to the doctor as the young man turns out to be a social reformer who works for the welfare of the misled people in society.

Rather than using the linear trajectory, the story starts from the end wherein the narrator seems quite surprised as one of the other passengers on the ship was constantly staring at him. After giving the outer persona of that strange man and his wife, the story moves further with the same person watching the doctor earnestly from his deck chair. Intrigued by the situation, the doctor started digging out some information about the couple. Soon, he discovered that they are Mr. and Mrs. John S from the small suburb of London. The situation remained the same as they were shy enough to approach the doctor directly. Afterwards, Mr. John decided to break the ice and initiated a conversation with me. After talking to them, the doctor learned that the couple is working for the marginalized people of the society and working as the director of an organization devoted to the care of the boys and girls from the city slums. The doctor realized that the couple was trying to change the life of derelict adolescents from the juvenile courts by turning them into the responsible and worthy members of the community.

The doctor was totally impressed with their work and curiously asked "what had directed his life into this channel. He took a sharp breath and exclaimed: "So you still do not remember me?". The doctor was perplexed and tried to recall his meeting with the stranger. But he could not recall or register anything substantial. The man provided some information about their meeting a long ago and the doctor started recalling the same. Moving backwards, the doctor remembered his early years as a young practitioner in a working-class district of London. One day at an unearthly hour, the doctor was awakened by the loud banging on the door. The doctor was surprised to find a sergeant of police at his door who requested him to come along with him to see a young man who tried to commit suicide. With the help of the sergeant, he started the process of resuscitation to rejuvenate the young lad from the state of unconsciousness. After struggling for half an hour, youth was able to gain some consciousness and started gazing at them dazedly.

Afterwards, the young lad started narrating about his deplorable conditions and confessed about his involvement in betting practices for the material gains. Under the influence of the bad company, he immersed himself into certain socially unacceptable practices and lost all his small

savings and owed the bookmaker a disastrous amount. In order to settle his debts, he stole some money from the official sale for the final gamble but failed utterly. Terrified by the consequences, he decided to end his life. After listening to his narrative, the sergeant straightaway enquired from him “how much had he stolen?” In a terrified and meek voice, the boy replied, “seven pounds ten shillings”. Considering the self-confession and the defenceless nature of the boy, the sole witnesses of the tragedy the sergeant, doctor and the landlady unanimously decided not to report the case and give the boy a fresh start. The landlady offered to waive the rent for a month and the doctor provided him with seven pounds ten shillings to put back in the office sale.

Sitting with the couple on that ship, the doctor feels contented and elated as the seven pounds given to the hapless lad turns out to be the best investment he had ever made in his life. So, rather than expecting monetary and financial gains for every investment, sometimes the best investments include people and the returns can be priceless. Overwhelmed with the emotions, the doctor could not say much to the couple and realized the worth of his investment.

Expected Questions

1. Comment on the appropriateness of the title of the story.
2. How did the doctor change the young man’s life?
3. What are the normal investments? How is the author’s investment different?
4. Write a detailed summary of the story.
5. The sergeant decides not to report the suicide case. Do you think his decision is right? Is it legal? Give your reasons.