

The Good Peasant's Son

Long ago, in a faraway czardom,* an old peasant lived with his wife and his son, Martin. Time passed and the peasant became very sick. He eventually died, leaving his wife and son alone.

“Oh, my poor husband!” cried his wife. “He was such a good man. How could this happen?”

She cried for days and days. Her son tried to make her feel better, but he couldn't.

Then her sadness changed to worry. At night she looked up into the sky and asked, “What are we going to do? How are we going to live?”

After many weeks like this, she began to take control of herself again and make plans for herself and her poor son.

Her husband had left them some money, 200 roubles. When they had finished almost all the food they had in the house, she gave Martin half the money and told him, “Go into town, my son, and use this money to buy flour, salt, and bread. Hopefully, these supplies will last until the spring. Then we can look for work.”

Martin did as his mother asked. He put the money in his pocket and walked into town. As he passed a butcher's store, he saw that a crowd of people had gathered. The butcher had tied an old, sad-eyed hunting dog to a tree. He was beating the dog and the dog was crying with pain.

Martin pushed through the crowd and shouted, “Butcher! Why are you beating this poor dog?”

“Because this ‘poor’ dog ate some of my best beef this morning! That's why! How can I make a living when this stupid animal eats my best meat?”

*czar, czarevna, czardom: the words for a Russian ruler in former times, his daughter, and his country

“Oh, but I’m sure he was only hungry. And he looks so sad. Listen. I could use a dog. Why don’t I buy him from you? I’ll give you 100 roubles for your dog.”

The butcher laughed. “You can’t be serious! You want to spend 100 roubles on this dog?”

“Yes, I’m serious,” replied Martin.

“Then you must be crazy. But you’ve made me happy even if you are a madman, so give me the 100 roubles and I’ll give you the dog.”

“Certainly,” said Martin and he took the poor, frightened dog away and began to walk back along the road, out of the town, and toward his home.

They walked slowly along until they came to a tree which had fallen by the road. Martin sat down, brought the dog close to him, and looked into his eyes.

“Jourka. That’s what I’ll name you. And you’ll have a safe and happy home with my mother and me.”

The grateful dog jumped up and kissed Martin’s face with his big pink tongue. He knew that Martin had saved his life and was a kind and gentle person. The two friends then continued walking slowly home, side by side.

When Martin arrived home and told his mother he had spent all their money on an old dog, she was very angry.

“What? You took our money and spent it on this dog? What good can this do us? You know we have nothing. I’ve made one small cake with the last of the flour we had left. That’s our dinner tonight! And there’s nothing else! Do you understand? Oh, what would your father do if he could see us now?”

“But mother, this dog is our good luck!” Martin tried to say.

His mother wasn’t listening. Without speaking, she gave Martin half of the small cake she had made and left him alone to eat it. Martin shared his small meal with Jourka, the dog.

The next day Martin’s mother sent him into town again. But before he left, she sat him down and spoke to him in a serious voice.

“These are our last 100 roubles. You mustn’t waste them this time. You must buy supplies so we can eat. Do you hear me?”

“Yes, mother,” answered Martin.

He left their house and walked along the road into town, with the 100 roubles in his pocket.

On his way into town Martin passed a small boy who had tied a rope around the neck of an old cat with a bent tail and was dragging her along the road. Martin couldn’t bear to see this treatment of a poor animal and asked the boy why he was doing it.

“Because this cat stole one of my mother’s special cakes. I’m going to show her what happens to a cat that steals. I’m taking her to the river and I’m going to throw her in!”

“Don’t do that,” said Martin. “I’ve been thinking that I would very much like a cat. I’ll buy her from you for 100 roubles.”

“One hundred roubles! For this old thing with the funny tail! You’re joking, aren’t you?” laughed the boy.

“Oh no. I’m very serious. And here are the 100 roubles to prove it,” said Martin.

The boy couldn’t believe it when Martin handed him the money. He happily untied the cat, which jumped into Martin’s waiting arms. Martin turned and started walking home with his new friend. He decided to name her Vaska.

When Martin arrived home this time carrying an old cat with a bent tail instead of the food they needed, his mother was very, very angry.

Martin tried to calm her anger. “Mother, this is our second piece of good luck!”

But she threw him out of their house and shouted at him to make his own way in the world and to take the dog and the cat with him.

So Martin left home to look for work and a place to live. His friends, the cat and the dog, never left his side.

One evening, after several days of searching, Martin came into a small village and passed a priest who was just closing the door of his church. The priest was curious about this young man with the dog and the cat, and started a conversation with him to find out more.

“Hello, young man. Where are you going with your two friends?”

“I’m looking for work and a place to live.”

“Well, if you work for me for three years, you won’t have a contract but you’ll have a roof over your head and food for you and your friends. And at the end of that time you’ll be paid well.”

So Martin accepted the priest’s offer and proved to be a good and honest worker.

At the end of the three years the priest came to Martin. “You’ve been a good worker and now your three years with me have ended. I said that you would be paid well, and you will be. You may choose one of these three payments.”

He then put in front of Martin a bag of gold, a bag of silver, and a bag of sand. Martin thought about it. If he chose the gold, he could buy whatever he needed for a long time. He could be almost as wealthy with the silver. But the sand? Why was the priest offering him a bag of sand?

“This must be some kind of test,” thought Martin. “And in this simple test I think there is some kind of deeper meaning.”

So he stepped forward and said, “I’m going to choose the bag of sand.”

“Well, if you don’t like silver and gold, of course take the sand,” the priest answered, and he handed Martin his bag of sand.

Martin then left the priest to search for more work, taking his bag of sand, Jourka, and Vaska with him. The bag of sand was very heavy and sometimes Martin wanted to leave it behind, but he never did.

After wandering for days he came to a thick, dark forest which was so silent that it seemed no one had ever stepped inside. He eventually came to an open space in the forest. In the center of this area a fire was burning, and a beautiful young woman was tied to a tree in the middle of the fire. The flames were almost touching her and she would soon be burned alive.

When the young woman saw Martin, she cried out, “Oh sir, please put out this fire! I’ll bring you good fortune for the rest of your days if you do.”

Martin didn’t care about the good fortune she promised. He only wanted to help the poor girl, so he quickly took his bag of sand and threw it on the fire to put it out.

“Thank you! Thank you! You’ve saved my life!” cried the girl as Martin untied her.

When she was free, the girl told Martin that she was the daughter of the czar of the Snake Czarland, and that a cruel czar who was at war with her father had done this to her. She then asked Martin where he had gotten his bag of sand. Martin told her he had chosen the sand, instead of gold and silver, for his three years’ work for the priest.

“Well, if you chose that sand, and not silver or gold, it must be very important to you,” she said to Martin. “I will always be grateful for your wonderful kindness, and to prove it I want you to have this ring.”

As she said this, the girl gave Martin a beautiful gold ring with shining jewels in it.

“This ring is very special,” she told him. “It’s a magic ring, which will give you anything you desire, even if your desire is to marry a czar’s daughter! To unlock its power, just take it off your finger and throw it from one hand to the other. But be careful. You must guard the secret of the ring. If you tell others about its magic, it will bring you great unhappiness.”