

a breakfast serials story

Janko and the Giant: A Tale of Old Slovakia

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Chapter 1 Long Ago in Dedina

Long ago, in Dedina, a village so small that even those who lived there sometimes forgot its name, there lived a bright lad named Janko. He did his best to help his parents on their small farm. Life was not easy there, close to the High Tatra Mountains, where the soil seemed unwilling to grow much of anything but stones.

"Bad luck," said the people of Dedina. They said that a lot.

Janko, though, tried not to lose hope. After all, as the old Slovak saying goes: *The wind that brings bad weather to one person clears the clouds from another's sky.*

Janko had heard that from his grandmother, who had never been known to utter a single word that was not part of a proverb. (Legend has it that her first words were not *Matca* or *Otec*, but *One must crawl before one can walk.*) So, not surprisingly, Janko came to cringe at

anything even hinting at words of wisdom.

Each morning when he went to help his babicka with her chores, Janko would pray that just once his grandmother would simply say "Good morning," instead of "*Birds with no feathers cannot fly,*" or "*Too much wood smothers the fire.*" But alas, that day never came.

What did come, however, was a great storm that rumbled down from the High Tatras. It blew away his grandmother's cottage--with his grandmother in it.

Janko thought she was smiling as she waved to him from her window. Perhaps she believed that wherever she landed would be better than Dedina.

"*Babicka,*" Janko shouted, "*Zelam vam dobru Cestu.* I wish you a good journey!" Then he heard his grandmother's cheerful voice calling down one last proverb before she vanished into the clouds.

"Better a safe landing than a calm voyage, *Vnuk.*"

Clinging to the trunk of a beech tree to keep from being blown away himself, Janko called up to her before she vanished from sight, "*Babicka,* I'll try to remember that."

Little did he know how true his words would come to be.

You must understand that, although his grandmother's sayings grated on his nerves, Janko never let on that he feared he would burst if he heard one more proverb issue forth from her lips. Nor did he say that he could not imagine how his *babicka* could claim to have so much knowledge, having never ventured outside of Dedina, and finally, that his one goal in life was to venture as far away from their unfortunate little village as possible.

Janko had spent his childhood waiting for the day when he could see the world. He had read of far-away places, magic, monsters, giants, and the heroes who defeated them. The more he read, the more he longed for adventure. It seemed that exciting and wonderful things happened everywhere--except in Dedina. All that ever came to his village was boredom and ill fortune.

"Why don't we go somewhere else?" Janko asked his parents on a lovely summer day that was spoiled only by the sound of hailstones flattening their crops.

"Ah," said his mother, *"an egg in Trnava is still an egg in Bratislava."* She was truly her mother's daughter.

"That is true," said Janko's father, using his three favorite words.

Janko might have taken his parents' advice to accept things as they were. Instead, to his great surprise, one of his grandmother's proverbs came to mind.

"One can travel much further on a twisting road," he said to himself. He was not quite sure how this related, but somehow it felt right. Life in Dedina was certainly not a twisting road.

So, when word came to Dedina that a giant had moved into the castle on Hora Mountain and demanded tribute from all the surrounding villages, Janko was the only one who smiled. This could be his chance! A real challenge at last. Best of all, to take it on, he would need to leave Dedina.

Janko went to Cierny, the blacksmith.

"May I borrow the sword?" Janko asked.

The sword, the only weapon in Dedina, was old and dull. It had been left for repair by a knight who, having been digested by a dragon, never returned to reclaim it.

"It has been useful to prop open my door, Janko," Cierny said. "But you helped me rebuild my barn after it was struck by lightning. So I give it to you. After all, *good neighbors are better than fences.*" (Cierny had known Janko's grandmother well.)

Next, Janko went to the farm of Gazda, a family friend.

"May I use your old mule?" Janko asked.

Gazda scratched his head. "Why ask, Janko?" he said. "You know you can take it any time. After all, you helped me drain my fields last spring after the flood. As your grandmother always said, *"True friends are those who work beside you, not those who greet you at the dance."* Then Gazda pointed at the rusty sword Janko had tucked under his belt. "However, if you are going to chop trees, you would do better to take my ax."

"Thank you," Janko said, "but this blade should be right for the work I must do."

Then, with Cierny's sword and Gazda's mule, Janko rode down the valley, across the river, and over one hill after another until he had climbed at last to the giant's rough stone castle.

Next Week: The Giant

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