



# HOW THE PEASANTS BOUGHT WISDOM

*Serbian folktale as told by  
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The peasants in a certain little village by the sea found life rather hard and tried to discover why it should be so. The head of the village and the elder men sat talking about it one day, and one of them said, “The reason for this state of things must be in our lack of wise men. Look, in all the other villages there is at least one wise man among the peasants, but we haven’t a single one.”

They all agreed that this might be the reason for their wretchedness and started thinking what to do about it. At last the man who was considered to have the best brains among them spoke, “I think I know what we should do, brothers. Let’s collect fifty ducats among us and send three of our men to Venice to buy wisdom; for I’ve always heard that Venetians are the wisest people in the world and that they so brim over with wisdom that they have a surplus to sell to other people. Of course, this rare commodity will be very dear.”

All of the peasants thought this a very good plan and acted accordingly; and within three days the golden ducats were collected and three men dispatched to Venice to bring wisdom to their little village.

The three arrived in Venice safely and started at once to look for wisdom and to inquire about its price. They soon came across a cunning man who thought this too good a chance to be missed.

“I can’t sell you a stone of wisdom for the amount of money you’ve brought,” he said, “but I’ll let you have a quarter.”

The peasants agreed to the bargain, happy to have found the right man so soon. The Venetian, however, caught a mouse, shut it in a little box, wrapped the box tightly, and said to his customers, “Here is wisdom for you. You’d better hurry home with it, but don’t open the box before you reach your village.”

The happy villagers returned on board their boat and started on their way home. As they drew near, one of them said, “Listen, brothers, I don’t think it right to share this wisdom in equal parts with the whole village. We’ve taken more trouble over it than all the others together, and I believe we’re entitled to have one half of it among the three of us. Let the village have the other half.”

His two friends nodded approvingly, and he took the box and unwrapped it. The moment he opened it, the mouse escaped—as any mouse would do. It hid somewhere in the hull, and the three peasants were left to moan and lament the loss of their dearly purchased wisdom. However, when their hunt proved unsuccessful and when their lamenting came to an end, one of them was struck by a bright idea.

“Listen, brothers! There’s really nothing to worry about, for our wisdom is still on board this boat—it hasn’t run away.”

Soon afterward they reached their own shore. The whole village was at the little harbor to welcome them, waving bright handkerchiefs and cheering. But when the elder peasants wanted to look at wisdom, the three men confessed—though somewhat reluctantly—to having let it go loose. Their friends on the shore were grieved for a while, but, as they all agreed that wisdom must still be hiding in the boat, they decided to pull the boat ashore and to keep watch over it day and night. So every day from that time on a man would stand sentinel by the boat; and the peasants, whenever there was a serious matter to be solved, or a wise letter to be written, would come into the boat, sit there for a while to absorb as much wisdom as possible, and then do their task with confidence.

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### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

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#### **Do the peasants succeed at bringing wisdom back to their village?**

- Why do the peasants decide that the reason for their wretchedness is a lack of wise men?
- Why do the peasants still think they have bought wisdom even after they see the mouse?
- Why do all the peasants decide to pull the boat ashore and watch over it day and night?
- Why do the peasants who sit by the boat go away and do their tasks “with confidence”? (3)