

The Swan's Gift

Anton was a farmer who lived with his wife Rubina and their seven children at the edge of the forest. He worked hard and they were happy for many years. Then one spring the rains didn't fall and Anton's wheat died in the fields.

As winter came on, their food supply grew smaller and smaller.

Soon Anton's shoulders were stooped with worry. Rubina's plump apple cheeks withered. The children no longer sang or laughed or danced, for they were all too hungry.

Every day Anton went out to hunt for food but returned without firing a shot. And every day Rubina added water to the onion soup until there was nothing in the pot but water.

When Anton saw his family crying with hunger he wanted to cry too. But instead he took his gun and went out again into the cold, cold night.

He had to find something for them to eat: a bird or a rabbit. But the black branches were empty of birds and no rabbits crouched in the frozen shrub.

The only tracks Anton saw were his own.



He came to a small hill and knew it was the last one he would be able to climb before his strength was gone.

His feet were numb and his breath rasped in the freezing air. At the top of the rise he stopped to rest, scanning the snow for tracks.

In despair Anton turned to go.

Just then he saw below him a lake that not yet frozen over. Its edge was lacy with ice and at its centre floated a swan of such dazzling beauty that Anton could not look away. Its stark white feathers gleamed against the dark water and as Anton watched, the swan seemed to grow larger until its image filled his eyes.



Suddenly juices flowed into Anton's mouth.



He could taste succulent roast swan and see his children's faces glowing as his family sat at the table eating again.

He raised his gun and sighted down the long barrel.

Anton put his finger on the trigger.

The swan seemed to be looking at him, listening for the shot that would kill it.

He lowered the gun.

The swan was the most beautiful creature Anton had ever seen. As he watched, the swan fanned its magnificent wings.

Anton closed his eyes and thought of his family.

Again he raised his gun.



Hours seemed to pass. The feathers on the swan's breast moved gently with each beat of its heart, and Anton could feel his own heart beating. He lifted his heavy wet feet, walked a few steps, and then dropped to his knees.

"I can't do it," he said.

"Why not?" asked a voice as soft as snow or feathers ruffling in a gentle wind.

"I cannot kill beauty. If I kill this swan my family will have food for one or two meals. And then what? We will be hungry again and it will have been for nothing."

Anton was too tired to be surprised that he was speaking to the swan or the wind or the night. He was too tired to walk back home. He bowed his head with sadness for his family.

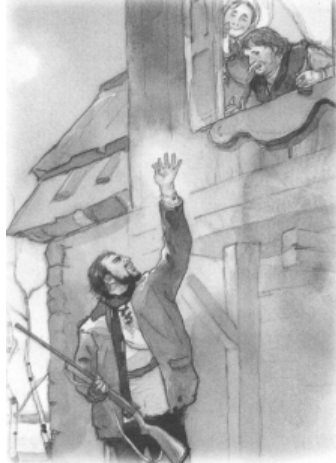


With a cry the swan lifted its wings, rose from the lake, and circled Anton, water dropping from its wing feathers. As the water hit the snow it froze into crystals that sparkled in the moonlight. Anton reached out and touched one. It was hard, harder than ice, and did not melt in the warmth of his hand.

“A diamond!” Anton said.

Quickly he scooped up the diamonds that lay in a glittering circle around him. He filled his pockets with them and set off through the snow to a nearby village.

Anton was no longer tired. He no longer felt the cold. He woke up the innkeeper, calling, “I need food.”



“Your crops failed,” said the innkeeper. “Everyone knows you have no money.”

“I have a diamond,” said Anton.

“Where would the likes of you get a diamond?” the man scoffed.

“Let me in and I will explain.”

The innkeeper fed Anton cold venison and sweet dumplings while Anton told his story, and the innkeeper’s wife packed a sledge for him with roast chickens and cheeses and onions and turnips.

Then they sent Anton on his way so that they could begin looking for the magic swan themselves.

Rubina met him at the door. “Did you find any food? Mischa has fainted.”

“No. But look what I have brought.” Anton showed her the sledge.

“But how did you get it?” she asked.

For answer, he spilled the diamonds onto the table.

“Oh,” cried Rubina, “you have turned to robbery!”

“No,” said Anton. And he told her all about the swan, and how it had circled him with the diamonds falling from its wings.



Anton and Rubina woke the children even though it was the middle of the night, and they all sat at the table eating slowly, enjoying the flavour of the food and wonderful feeling in their stomachs.



Rubina's black eyes sparkled as she filled her children's bowls. Anton felt his strength returning. Several of the children hummed as they were put to bed.

Anton and Rubina and their children were never hungry again, for they used their diamonds wisely and well.

News of the magic swan spread throughout the land and many people searched for it. But the swan was never found.

Sometimes when Anton was alone in the forest the image of the swan rose before him.

He saw again the gleam of its feathers, the coral glow of its beak, and the magnificent reach of its wings as it glided silently across the sky.



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6. The Swan's Gift

Practice questions

A Why did Anton's wheat die?

There were no seeds.

It was near a village.

It was on the edge of the forest.

There was no rain.

B Who lived with Anton?

.....

.....

1 What did Anton look for in the snow?

a magic swan

a small hill

animal footprints

vegetables to eat

2 When he **first** saw the swan, what did Anton imagine?

Write **2** things.

a)

b)

- 3 Find these words in the story. Draw a line to match them to their meaning.

The first one has been done for you.

rasped	looking across
scanning	made a rough noise
dazzling	superb
succulent	shining brightly
magnificent	juicy

- 4 The voice Anton heard was as quiet as –

.....

or

- 5 Anton wanted to kill the swan because it would be food for his family. What stopped him?

.....

.....

6 What happened to the water that dropped from the swan's feathers?

It turned into silver.

It turned into diamonds.

It turned into snowflakes.

It turned into ice.

7 Why did the innkeeper decide to send Anton on his way?

He wanted to eat his dinner.

He did not like diamonds.

He thought Anton was poor.

He wanted to search for the swan.

8 What made Rubina think that Anton had become a robber?

.....
.

9 Why did Anton and Rubina wake the children?

.....
.....

10 What is the setting of *The Swan's Gift*?

the countryside, today

the countryside, a long time ago

the city, a long time ago

the city, today

11 Put these sentences in the right order by numbering them from **1** to **5**.

The first one has been done for you.

..... Jewels fell from the bird's wings.

..... A magical swan appeared.

.....1..... Anton went hunting at night.

..... The family feasted on delicious food.

..... Anton thought about shooting the swan.

12 Choose a character from the story who was kind.

a) What is the character's name?

.....

b) How was the character kind in the story?

.....

.....

.....

13 What is the message of *The Swan's Gift*?

Greed is the way to success.

Bravery leads to disaster.

Beauty leads to sadness.

Kindness brings its own prize.