

Student Handout 3-Joe Magarac Tall-Tale Synopsis

Long ago in a part of Pittsburgh called Hunkietown where Hungarian steelworkers lived and worked, a man named Big Steve Mestrovich was preparing to throw a party. He invited everyone from steel mill towns all around the region. Big Steve needed to find a husband for his beautiful daughter Mary. Looking at her face, a man could see fields of Hungarian flowers, her eyes the brightest cornflower blue, her lips more red than the poppies. Not just any man would do, so he devised a plan to hold a contest at his party to find the strongest man in all of the mill towns to be his daughter's groom.

The day of the party arrived and people traveled from all around. They came by foot, boat, and horse to see who would be declared the strongest steelworker and wed Big Steve's daughter. They gathered around a platform Big Steve had set up for the contest. Young men were seen flexing their muscles and twirling their mustaches. Dressed in a bright red and green silk, Mary Mestrovich sat quietly on the platform watching her suitors quarrel over who would win her hand in marriage. One man from Hunkietown named Pete Pussick shouted to another fellow, "I'm the best for Mary." Mary heard this and looked down at Pete and smiled. Others shouted too, but Mary paid no attention. A stranger from Johnstown tried to woo her with candy, but Mary continued to only gaze at Pete.

Finally, Big Steve stood up and began to explain the rules of the contest to the gathered crowd. "I have two iron bars brought here from the mill. The first bar is for little, weak fellows--it weighs only three hundred and fifty pounds. The second bar weighs five hundred. The third will make somebody sweat, maybe, for it weighs as much as the other two together."

The men walked to the first iron bar and stood behind it. Pete Pussick was the first to go. He glanced up at Mary and smiled and quickly picked the bar up without any difficulty. The other men from Hunkietown also picked up the bar with little effort. Two steelworkers from Homestead tried lifting the bar and failed. Finally, the man from Johnstown lifted the bar as if it was a feather.

They all moved to the second, heavier bar. Pete was the first to go again. He stooped over the bar and managed to lift it, this time using much more strength. A few other men from Hunkietown grunted and sweated as they barely were able to pick up the heavier bar. Again, the strong man from Johnstown leaned over the bar and lifted it with ease.

Big Steve and the others looked on, worried that the Johnstown man was stronger than all the others and he would win the contest and take precious Mary away with him.

Pete walked up to the third and final bar shrugged his shoulders, cracked his knuckles and took at deep breath as he bent over the iron. Pete's face turned bright red and he groaned and struggled to pick it up. The bar didn't budge off the ground. Pete stood up and moved away with his head down in shame.

It was the stranger from Johnstown's turn again. He looked at the bar as if it were only a broom handle lying there. He planted his feet and began to tug at the bar. He pulled and pulled but nothing happened. Suddenly, a "Ho! Ho! Ho!" came from the crowd. The Johnstown man looked up from the bar angrily and said, "Who's laughing at me? If somebody here thinks he's so strong, let him pick up this bar! I'll lift him up and break him in two!"

A big, black-haired man walked forward that nobody had seen before because they were only paying attention to the contest. His back was as broad as an ore car, and his wrists were as big around as Mary's waist. He plucked up the Johnstown man in one hand and the iron bar in the other. Big Steve ran to him shouting, "You don't need to hurt the fellow." The stranger set the Johnstown man back on the ground and told the crowd that he wasn't planning to hurt anyone, he was just having a little fun. Big Steve asked the stranger his name and he replied, "I'm Joe Magarac." Everyone broke out in roars of laughter as the word *magarac* means jackass in Hungarian. "Joe Jackass" the people in the crowd began to shout. The stranger seemed unfazed as he began to laugh right along with them. He told the crowd, "All I do is eat and work, like a donkey. I came here out of the ore pit to be the best steelman in the whole world. I tell you the truth. Look, I'll show you something!"

Joe pulled off his shirt and revealed bright shiny iron, not a man's chest. Alarmed, Big Steve walked up to Joe and tapped gently on the metal. It made a ringing sound. Shaking his head in disbelief, Big Steve shouted to the crowd, "he's not lying, he is a true steelman." He turned to his daughter and announced that he had found her the biggest and strongest man to be her husband. Mary looked at Joe Magarac and then at Pete Pussick and began to cry.

Joe stared at Mary for a few moments and said, "You'll be a fine wife to somebody. But, me, I only have time to work and eat. I have no time for a wife. I think that man [pointing to Peter Pussick] will make you a better husband. He's the strongest man here, next to me."

Mary and Pete smiled as their wedding was underway. Joe stayed long enough to eat all the food at the party and then headed off. He stopped at a boardinghouse by the iron mill and knocked on the door. A short, plump woman appeared. Joe explained to the lady that he didn't want a room, just five big meals each day to eat. The woman agreed and Joe headed off to the iron mill.

Pete Pussick had always been the best worker at the mill. When Joe Magarac showed up that changed, and Pete was no longer number one. This angered him, but he felt better when he thought of his sweet, new bride.

Pete watched Joe at work. He was faster than anyone else Pete had ever seen. As he glanced over, he noticed that Joe Magarac was stirring the boiling steel with his bare hands!

Pete got the attention of the other men and soon they were all watching Joe Magarac's unusual behavior. After stirring the melted iron, Joe poured the hot liquid into his hands and then dumping it into the rail molds. The men continued to watch as Joe then raced to the other end of the mill grabbing the fresh steel in his hands and began squeezing the metal through his fingers like dough. It spouted out in perfect, straight, glistening rails.

The men were in shock. Pete told the others, "Joe will work us out of jobs. He makes more steel than all the furnaces in America put together."

Joe continued working and eating and working and eating. One Thursday the mill boss told Joe and the other steelworkers that there were too many rails and not enough buyers so the mill would have to close down for three days. The men were angry because they would not be paid if they didn't work. One said, "It's Joe Jackasses fault."

The men began yelling at Joe telling him to stop working so hard or they'd all lose their jobs for good. Joe replied, "America needs plenty of steel. What we need is a bigger mill, the biggest in the whole Monongahela Valley. We'll build the new mill out of the best steel anywhere."

On Monday the mill reopened and the men headed back to work. Pete noticed that Joe Magarac was not at his usual post. He asked the boss if Joe was there, and the boss told Pete that he had not seen him.

All at once a sound came from nearby. It was Joe, "Ho! Ho! It is me, Joe. I am inside this bucket ladle". The men ran to the bucket and peered inside. Sure enough, there was Joe sitting in the bucket ladle floating on the hot, melting metal. The boss told him to crawl out of there before he melted, but Joe refused.

"I am sick of a mill that won't work for three whole days. I'm made of the best steel anywhere" Joe told the men. "You wait while I melt down and pour me into the mold. Next, take that steel with me mixed in and roll it out into beams and girders to build the new mill. That new mill will make more jobs and turn out the best steel in America."

Before the men could argue, Joe Magarac disappeared into the boiling steel.

The men did exactly as Joe instructed. As the men built the new mill they thought of the strongest steelman there was, Joe Magarac. To this day the mill still stands, the finest, and strongest ever built.