How Much Land does a Man Need?

An elder sister from the city visits her younger sister, the wife of a peasant farmer in the village. In the midst of their visit, the two of them get into an argument about whether the city or the peasant lifestyle is preferable. The elder sister suggests that city life boasts better clothes, good things to eat and drink, and various entertainments, such as the theater. The younger sister replies that though peasant life may be rough, she and her husband are free, will always have enough to eat, and are not tempted by the devil to indulge in such worldly pursuits.

Pahom, the husband of the younger sister, enters the debate and suggests that the charm of the peasant life is that the peasant has no time to let nonsense settle in his head. The one drawback of peasant life, he declares, is that the peasant does not have enough land: “If I had plenty of land, I shouldn’t fear the Devil himself!” The devil, overhearing this boast, decides to give Pahom his wish, seducing him with the extra land that Pahom thinks will give him security.

Pahom’s first opportunity to gain extra land comes when a lady in the village decides to sell her three hundred acres. His fellow peasants try to arrange the purchase for themselves as part of a commune, but the devil sows discord among them and individual peasants begin to buy land. Pahom obtains forty acres of his own. This pleases him initially, but soon neighboring peasants allow their cows to stray into his meadows and their horses among his corn, and he must seek justice from the district court. Not only does he fail to receive recompense for the damages but also ruins his reputation among his former friends and neighbors; his extra land does not bring him security.

Hearing a rumor about more and better farmland elsewhere, he decides to sell his land and move his family to a new location. There he obtains 125 acres and is ten times better off than he was before, and he is very pleased. However, he soon realizes that he could make a better profit with more land on which to sow wheat. He makes a deal to obtain thirteen hundred acres from a peasant in financial difficulty for one thousand rubles and has all but clinched it when he hears a rumor about the land of the Bashkirs. There, a tradesman tells him, a man can obtain land for less than a penny an acre, simply by making friends with the chiefs.

Fueled by the desire for more, cheaper, and better land, Pahom seeks directions for the land of the Bashkirs and leaves on a journey to obtain the land that he thinks he needs. On arrival, he distributes gifts to the Bashkir leaders and finds them courteous and friendly. He explains his reasons for being there and, after some deliberation, they offer him whatever land he wants for one thousand rubles. Pahom is pleased but concerned; he wants boundaries, deeds, and “official sanction” to give him the assurance he needs that they or their children will never reverse their decision.

The Bashkirs agree to this arrangement, and a deal is struck. Pahom can have all the land that he can walk around in a day for one thousand rubles. The one condition is that if he does not return on the same day to the spot at which he began, the money will be lost. The night before his fateful walk, Pahom plans his strategy; he will try to encircle thirty-five miles of land and then sell the poorer land to peasants at a profit. When he awakes the next day, he is met by the man whom he thought was the chief of the Bashkirs, but whom he recognizes as the peasant who had come to his old home to tell him of lucrative land deals available elsewhere. He looks again, and realizes that he is speaking with the devil himself. He dismisses this meeting as merely a dream and goes about his walk.

Pahom starts well, but he tries to encircle too much land, and by midday he realizes that he has tried to create too big a circuit. Though afraid of death, he knows that his only chance is to complete the circuit. “There is plenty of land,” he says to himself, “but will God let me live on it?” As the sun comes down, Pahom runs with all his remaining strength to the spot where he began. Reaching it, he sees the chief laughing and holding his sides; he remembers his dream and breathes his last breath. Pahom’s servant picks up the spade with which Pahom had been marking his land and digs a grave in which to bury him: “Six feet from his head to his heels was all he needed.”