

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## The Good Master

by  
Kate Seredy

### Book Information

Kate Seredy, The Good Master

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Interest Level: MG

Two cousins spend an adventurous year on a ranch in the Hungarian plains.

**Award:** Newbery Honor

**Topics:** Countries/Regions, Hungary; Family Life, Cousins; Places, Farms; Places, Ranches; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 6-8; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 6-8

### Main Characters

Árpád the horse herder who objects to Kate and Jancsi helping with the round-up because he thinks it is too dangerous; he is impressed when the children control a stampede, and he rewards them with the telling of a folk tale

Jancsi Nagy Kate's country cousin, who is an expert horse rider; he and Kate become friends after a rather unpleasant introduction to one another

Kate Nagy the unruly and spoiled little girl who is sent to stay with her uncle to learn to behave; she learns good manners but never loses her taste for adventure

Márton Nagy known as the "Good Master," Márton is uncle to Kate and father to Jancsi; he helps Kate learn to behave when his brother sends Kate to live on his farm

Mother Nagy Jancsi's kind mother, who teaches Kate traditional Hungarian skills and helps turn Kate into a loving child

Pista the kind old shepherd who enjoys his simple life; he asks Kate to teach him to read so he can carve his name on his intricate and beautiful carvings

Sándor Nagy Kate's father, who lives in the city and sends Kate to stay with his brother in the country; Sándor decides to move back to the country when he sees how good country life has been for Kate

the carnival man the man who runs the sideshow and is outraged when Kate proves that the bodiless lady is a fake

the gypsies a band of wandering gypsies who are hired to work at the Nagy farm; they steal some livestock and abduct Kate while Márton and Jancsi are away getting sheep

### Vocabulary

**contemplate** to think or consider

**flax** a plant with blue flowers; the fibers of the stems are used to make a cloth called linen

**harrowing** frightening

**illuminated** filled with bright light

**imp** a naughty child

**laconic** using as few words as possible

### Synopsis

When Jancsi and his father, Márton Nagy, pick up Jancsi's supposedly sickly cousin Kate from the train station, they are shocked by Kate's mischievous nature. On the way home, Kate pushes Jancsi out of the wagon. When Jancsi's father stops to help him, Kate takes off with the horses. Back at the farm, Father finds out that Uncle Sándor has asked him to teach Kate to behave. That evening when Kate climbs into the rafters to eat the hanging sausages, Father forbids anyone to help her get down.

A few days later, Kate sews her skirt so it will be similar to the pants Jancsi wears. She does this with the hope that Jancsi will teach her to ride a horse. Jancsi agrees to teach her but warns her not to ride too much on the first day. Kate is headstrong, though, and when she demands to ride Jancsi's horse, Jancsi agrees, knowing that Kate will collapse as soon as she tries to get off her horse.

As Easter approaches, Kate is excited about dyeing eggs, but she is leery of the Hungarian country

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custom of boys sprinkling water on the girls. She insists on making her own eggs and teases Jancsi by smearing red dye on his face. On Easter, Kate enjoys herself and delights Jancsi and Father with the eggs she dyed just for them.

In May, Kate is given permission to go to the sheep pastures with Jancsi and Father, but Father makes Kate drink all her hated milk before he will bring her horse. When she finally complies, he gives Kate a beautiful white horse. In the pasture, Kate meets Pista, the shepherd, and then helps Jancsi catch crawfish. When she gets her fingers pinched, Pista takes her inside his hut and lets her select one of his carvings as a gift. In return, Kate shows Pista how to write his name on the things he makes and promises to teach him how to read during the winter. That evening Pista tells a folk tale about a mirage of a city that lures a cruel rich man to his death.

Later that spring, Kate and Jancsi join Father for a round-up of the wild horses. Árpád, the horse herder, is concerned about Kate participating, but Jancsi promises to watch Kate. When the horses stampede, Kate and Jancsi skillfully herd them into the corral. Árpád is amazed and tells the children a tale about the hero of the Huns who comes from the sky to protect the Hungarian people.

On the day of the great County Fair, Kate and Jancsi surprise Father by getting up early and doing all the chores. Father rewards them each with a coin. Jancsi spends his coin on a gypsy dance for his mother, but when Jancsi wants to buy a honeycake for Kate, Father slips him another coin. Kate uses her coin to buy Jancsi a knife. After making all their purchases, Father takes the children to the circus. Jancsi argues with Kate about the "bodiless" lady, so Kate proves that it is a trick by breaking the mirror. Father cannot punish Kate after she gets him to laugh at the fact that he also was tricked.

As summer progresses, Father worries about the dry weather. Mother tries to break the tension by telling a tale about a rooster outsmarting a sultan. When it suddenly starts raining, the Nagys are so

relieved they run out into the storm to enjoy the rain. Some days later, Father takes the children to play by the river while Géza, the ferry man, watches them. Kate decides to swim in the water, and Jancsi has to save her on his horse when the current nearly drowns her. Géza is upset when Kate insists on telling the truth, but Father quickly forgives her.

When the harvest comes, the gypsies arrive to make bricks and do repair work. When the work is done, the gypsies ask to be paid with sheep. Father and Jancsi ride to the pasture to get the sheep, but when they come back, the gypsies have taken Kate and their only pig, as well as many chickens. Father and Jancsi quickly ride after them and find Kate hiding in some bushes. Kate had hoped to save the pig's life by offering to go with the gypsies. However, the gypsies had kidnapped her, and she had to run away as soon as she got the chance.

In the fall, Father tells Kate that her father is coming for Christmas. The shepherds come to take writing lessons from Kate, and Father takes the grain to the Old Miller. The Old Miller amuses the children by exaggerating his strength and mocking the strength of his younger assistant. He then tells the children a tale about a selfish prince who learns that true immortality comes from being a good king.

On the sixth of December, Father tells the children they are going to spend the evening with Mikulás, the Hungarian version of Santa Claus. The children are overjoyed to help Mikulás distribute his gifts to the village children, and when there are not enough gifts, Kate and Jancsi give up their own presents. Throughout the evening, Kate feels that Mikulás is strangely familiar. When they get back to the farm, Kate realizes that Mikulás is actually her father, Sándor Nagy. Uncle Sándor is delighted with the changes in Kate.

One morning, Uncle Sándor cannot resist helping Father build some furniture. Suddenly, Kate begins begging her father to stay in the country. After a beautiful Christmas, Uncle Sándor announces that they are not returning to the city.

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### Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

#### Initial Understanding

Why does Jancsi agree to let Kate ride his horse after she has practiced riding on Old Armchair?

*Jancsi agrees to let Kate ride his horse because he knows it is the best way to teach her a valuable lesson. Kate is known to get very aggressive when she is not given her own way. Jancsi also knows in advance that Kate has overexerted herself. As soon as Kate gets off Old Armchair, she finds her legs too weak to move, and she crumples to the ground. Jancsi has a silent victory, as his demanding cousin finds herself incapacitated because she refused to listen to his suggestion that she ride less the first day.*

#### Literary Analysis

Describe the setting of the story, focusing on the Nagy farm.

*The setting of the story is the Hungarian plains. The majority of the story takes place on the Nagy farm, which is very large, productive, and prosperous. It has many pastures and a brook. There are large numbers of livestock, including several herds of sheep, many horses, lots of chickens, some pigs, and some ducks. There are also fields of grain and a vegetable garden. Kate and Mother each have a small flower garden. The farm seems to be very isolated, and it gets a lot of snow in the winter. During the summer Kate is with the Nagys, however, there is a severe dry spell that threatens the success of the farm.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

How are Jancsi's parents different from each other?  
How are they alike?

*Mother and Father are different in several ways. For example, Father is a bit more strict than Mother, as shown by his insistence that Kate be left in the rafters. Mother feels sorry for her, cuddles her as soon as she arrives, and is more inclined to help her. Also, Father is less worried about the children getting hurt or sick than Mother. When the children go in the river, Father warns them not to tell Mother or she will make them stay in bed for a week. Mother and Father have different responsibilities as well. For example, Father tends to the livestock and fields, while Mother spends most of her time working around the house and trying to teach Kate cooking and sewing. Jancsi's parents are alike in that they are very loving with the children and are a little shocked by Kate's behavior when Kate first comes to the farm. Both parents also enjoy country life and work hard to make the farm a success.*

#### Constructing Meaning

How can the reader tell that Uncle Márton has grown very attached to Kate during her stay with them?

*At first Uncle Márton is rather appalled by Kate's wild behavior, but even on Kate's first night, the two seem to make a connection when Kate is finally saved from the rafters. Later, Uncle Márton is impressed when Kate helps control the stampede, and he is touched when Kate gives him an Easter egg. He rewards Kate's progress by giving her a horse. He even gives up punishing Kate when Kate breaks the mirror at the carnival. Most of all, Uncle Márton seems very determined to persuade Uncle Sándor to stay in the country instead of taking Kate back to the city.*

### Teachable Skills

**Comparing and Contrasting** Mikulás seems very different from the traditional Santa Claus. Have the students draw a poster showing the two versions of St. Nicholas. Have them list the similarities and differences between Mikulás and

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Santa Claus on their poster.

**Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning** Jancsi and Kate delight in getting people to tell them Hungarian folk tales. Each of these tales has its own motif and distinctive language. Have the students take one of Kate and Jancsi's adventures and rewrite it as a folk tale using language similar to that of the folk tales in this story.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** Although the date is not specifically mentioned in this story, several clues are given as to the time period. For example, trains, telephones, and automobiles are mentioned. Have the students read a brief summary of the history of Hungary and then discuss the most likely time frame for this story. Have the students use details from the book and their research to support their arguments.

**Responding to Literature** Kate has great fun helping with the Easter eggs. Have the students read the description of this process in the book and then see if they, too, can create beautiful Easter eggs in class. They may want to see pictures of Hungarian Easter eggs to help them with creating the patterns. They could also investigate this tradition in other countries such as Russia, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. Perhaps there is a member of the local community that could come in and demonstrate this technique for the class.