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**The good
people
of Palocz**

 Publio

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ANNIE BEDE'S DEBT

It was a thick, foggy morning; the fog seemed densest in the precincts of the Court House. It had enveloped completely this gloomy building, making it look more repellent than ever. It had settled there as if with a fixed determination to remain.

The very air in the hall smelt of this damp fog, and even the whisky whose odour permeated the entire place was giving way to it. The circular ventilator in the highest window-pane was choked by it, and revolved but slowly.

The judges leaned wearily back in their comfortable chairs; one closed his eyes, and sleepily listened to the scratching of the clerk's pen; another yawningly drummed with his pencil on the green table, whilst the president, balancing his glasses on the tip of his nose, was mopping his perspiring brow with his handkerchief. In the interval of rest this noble gentleman perspired freely he scrutinized fixedly the door, through which but a few moments previous those people interested in the case just tried had passed.

There is a silence in the court, which is broken by his harsh and bored voice demanding „If there is any one still there?”

„Only a girl,” was the reply.

„Show that girl in, then.”

The door slowly opening, she entered. It seemed as if all of a sudden the fog had partially cleared; the faces of the judges appeared to have emerged from the gloom, whilst their eyes were no longer shut. Surely a ray of sunshine had brightened up the scene. She was a pretty creature, this girl. She had an erect and well-proportioned figure, dressed simply in a flower-embroidered bodice; her eyes modestly cast down hid for the time their beautiful colour, whilst the perfect roundness of her forehead was slightly marred by the furrows which played thereon. Her appearance revealed a charm, her very movement grace, and in the rustling of her skirt lurked witchcraft.

The indifferent voice of the Chief Justice is heard saying,

„What can I do for you?” (Creatures of his like have no feeling.)

The poor child murmurs sadly,

„I have great trouble, very great sorrow, my kind sir.”

Her voice is mellow and mournful. It touches the heart like the music which, even when it dies away, seems to be still hovering in the air, changing everybody, everything!

The sternness of the judge's face is melting. The picture of the king, and over there that of the Chief of the county, seem gently to encourage her.

In the writ everything would be stated. She had placed it thoughtlessly in the bosom of her dress; she must unfasten her brooch to get at it. How could she, and before all these prying eyes, too! Ah, poor child, even her clasp proved treacherous. It fell to the ground, and, catching the eye of the sun, seemed to laugh at her! How lovely she looked as, stooping modestly, she regained both that and the writ, which also had fallen to the floor.

The stern, hoary head of the presiding justice is turned away; only his big, fat hand reaches out for the parchment.

„It is a judgment,” he mumbles, as his piercing eyes scan its pages. „Annie Bede is cited to appear, and to begin to-day the six months' imprisonment to which she has been sentenced.”

The girl's eyes fill with tears, and as she raises her handkerchief to them the mourning hood which conceals her black hair slips and allows a heavy braid to unloosen and fall, covering her face, white as a lily before, but now burning with a crimson hue.

„A week ago we received this writ,” she stammered, tearfully. „The judge himself brought and explained it. I have come to fulfil the sentence. Law is law!”

The judge glances towards his colleagues, seeks the windows, the floor, the door, and then unconsciously murmurs, „Law is law!” Again he reads the judgment, this time carefully, slowly. No; there it is: „Annie Bede is to be imprisoned during six months of the year for receiving stolen goods.”

A dismal moaning is heard without; the fog deepens, and the wind, whistling through the cracks of the door, and turning furiously the leaden circle in the window-pane, shrieks, „Law is law!”

The stern head of the president is seen to nod; his big, fat hand stretches to the bell and rings it, whilst his voice says, in mournful tones, to the court attendant.

„Take Annie Bede to the warder of the prison.”

He receives the writ; the girl mutely turns round staggers, and endeavours to speak; her lips only move, but no sound comes forth.

„Has the prisoner anything to say?”

„No, nothing only that I am Lizzie Lizzie Bede. Annie was my sister; she was buried a week ago, poor soul!”

„But you you are not sentenced?“