

## From: Street children Antek flees from the Count's mansion

By: Janosz Korczak

When evening fell, Antek got up from his bed, looked all around the room, went close to the door to check if someone was peeking through the keyhole. Then he put on his coat, opened the window and with one leap he was in the garden. He quickly covered the distance between the house and the wall; A wide top pear tree sent its branches over the wall. Antek had already climbed onto a bench, holding on to the first branch when he felt someone's hand on his shoulder.

- What you want? Let go of me.

Zarutsky gently sat him on his lap and began to speak. He spoke fluently for a long time. Antek did not stop him, not even once. Zarutsky increased the pace of his speech. The tree made rustling noises in its bare branches. A cold wind was blowing. When the count finished talking, Antek asked, after a long moment of silence:

- Why are you blabbering about things in which you have no understanding, sir?

Now Antek began to speak.

The topic of their conversation was the "street children".

- No, we are not bad and not stupid at all, we just have a different goodness and a different wisdom, because you learn from the books and our learning is completely different. Our teacher is... I myself do not know...

- Life, people – Zarutsky said

Right. You have one teacher and we have a hundred. But what is there to talk about? Only I can tell you, sir, that you don't know anything about us and that's it.

This conversation went on for a long time and the tree continued to rustle its bare branches.

- We have a beggar and a thief. We call him "bro", although now he is already drunk. But once he was terribly strong. They paid him twenty-five rubles at the circus to wrestle with one of the circus boxers and let him beat him. The ads announced, that anyone from the audience who will subdue the wrestler, will receive five hundred rubles. He let the wrestler knock him down several times, until he got tired of it, and once he knocked down the wrestler. And you think, sir, that you took the five hundred rubles? "No," he said, "the agreement was that I would let him knock me down; I broke the agreement and I don't want the money." And on top of that he apologized. And the next day they caught him because he stole a watch from someone. Or, for example, we have petty thieves. One of them steals something and the other returns the theft to the owner of the stolen in exchange for compensation. "Give so and so - he says - and your object will be placed in this and that place." And there never was a case of cheating, because – sir, we are people of honor.

The count listened and felt that this child was opening his eyes to a whole world that he didn't know that existed, neither he nor all those book authors from which he tried to learn about the soul of a "street child" - and hence all those mistakes in the approach to such children and in the activity of philanthropists for their sake.

Antek spoke now with glowing eyes; He felt that he had impressed the foreign count and that now he had the upper hand, and this feeling caused him great pleasure.

- We know how to be good and polite, but you need to be gentle with us, because we know how to protect our dignity. Even when one of us is completely drunk and angry as hell, if



someone happens to bump into him and asks for forgiveness, he will not say anything to him; But if he does not apologize, woe to him. We do not steal from anyone. We have one doctor who never locks the door to his apartment. But if someone tries to touch something there, we already know what to do to him, since this doctor is good to us and knows us and knows that we are not as bad and not as stupid as you think. And if someone wants to be good to us, but doesn't know us, then we "set him up", cheat him. I know that Mania liked your living pictures and now she is surely wining and she will learn and be good. But I know that these pictures are nonsense and a lie. Do you think that if this beggar gets drunk and dances and says all kinds of rubbish, she is really happy? Sure, happy. She knows that once it was better for her and now it is bad for her and she will die in a little while, so intentionally she sings and dances so that no one knows how bad it really is for her. Because it is not respectable for us to be sorry and be sad and that's it. Why should others know my hardship?!... Well, I am talking and talking and I have to go.

- Stay Antek, at least learn to read,

- What do I need to read for? If I learn to read, someone will have to teach me. But I don't want anyone to teach me; Because I always want to be the teacher. We are terribly proud, sir.

- And what do you beg for?

- We do don't beg, we only cheat. If I tell you the truth and you give me a tenner, this is called begging. But if I lie to you and you give me something, we say that I "set you up" and I didn't beg. If I receive something from one of our own, it means that he did me a favor. Do you understand?...

Antek burst out laughing at the bewildered expression on the Count's face.

- We are proud people...

- And introversive - added the Count thoughtfully.

- This is true. We have a ragwoman with us. If you call her "Miss Zosiah" – she will stone you. We always nag her this way, because she is a terribly funny woman. She wants to be called "Madam Michalova" and she is Madam Michalova just like I am Mr. Michal. And she is so proud of her work at garbage. I know that you do not understand these things, but you are always bowing before someone, and we are not. And you know why, sir? Because you are afraid of being poor, and we are not afraid of poverty at all. Well, I'm going...

