

AGNES SMITH, DEBTOR – 1934

REALISTIC DRAMA

Suitable Years: 5 to 10

Number of Students: 3

Cast:

Narrator/ Clerk

Magistrate

Agnes Smith

Venue:

York Courthouse Complex, 1874 Courtroom

Synopsis:

By the nineteen thirties, the York Courthouse was only dealing with minor cases. Many of these cases were related to debt. Agnes Smith is a mother of four whose husband has abandoned his boot making business and gone off to seek work leaving his wife to deal with their debts.

Costume:

Agnes Smith is a worn out and poorly dressed mother of four. While her calf-length dress with sleeves might look well worn, her appearance would be neat. Although poor, she would still wear a hat and gloves to court. Her hair would be neatly in a bun if her hair were long, or carefully combed and neat if short. Agnes would wear very little or no makeup. She might wear a little lipstick.

York Courthouse Complex has some costumes available for student use. Ask at time of booking.



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NARRATOR The nineteen thirties were called the Depression years. Many businesses had to close. People lost their jobs and, had to sell their homes and possessions when they couldn't pay their bills or bank loans.

The government helped the unemployed with a Sustenance payment. This was a small amount of money that was only just enough to live on. People were very ashamed to be on Sustenance.

A large number of court cases in these years were about debt money that was owed and could not be re-paid.

CLERK The court will consider the case of Mr John Moore against Mrs Agnes Smith. Claim for Debt to be paid.

AGNES SMITH *Mrs Smith moves into the witness box, escorted by the clerk. They mime the action of her swearing in with one hand on the bible. That done, she faces the magistrate.*

My name is Agnes Smith. I am married with four children and have been living in York for four years. My husband had a boot making and repairing business but is now on Sustenance.

MAGISTRATE Mrs Smith, what happened to his boot repair business?

AGNES SMITH He gave up his business twelve months ago and has been on Sustenance ever since.

MAGISTRATE How do you support your four children Mrs Smith?

AGNES SMITH I live with my mother. My brother owns the house. He was left everything when my father died.

MAGISTRATE You received nothing from your father's will?

AGNES SMITH My father left me one hundred pounds. I put it all in the bank and didn't spend any of it. But then, things got bad. We needed that money for bills. I took out a bit at a time to keep my husband's business going. It was no use. No one has money for new boots these days.

In the end I had no money left to pay the instalments on his machinery. We did our best but we had to close the business anyway.



MAGISTRATE How did you come to have this debt for machinery?

AGNES SMITH My husband put the debt in my name.

MAGISTRATE What money do you have?

AGNES SMITH None. All I have is the furniture and some curtains. They are mine, I bought them out of my housekeeping money.

MAGISTRATE Is your husband earning any money at all?

AGNES SMITH No. Not now. He got four weeks work and then he was stood down for two weeks. We don't know when he will work again. There are so many men looking for work and not many jobs. I am very grateful that the children and I can live with my mother. At least on a farm we can still eat.

MAGISTRATE Thank you Mrs Smith. *(He pauses thinking carefully about his decision)* I believe that you have done your best to keep up the payments on this debt. I understand how difficult it has been for you to be here today.

(To the clerk and court) I am dismissing this case on the grounds that the defendant does not have the means to pay this debt and there is nothing to be gained by pursuing this case any further.

Next Case!

