

THE SHORT AND SIMPLE ANNALS OF THE POOR ARE SLOW STARVATION

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The Story of a Civil War Veteran Who Starved to Death and of His Widow, Who is Starving,
Told Over Leaden Cheese Cake

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The woman in the gingham apron that looked as though she had mopped her face with it said glumly:

“Flour that used to cost only \$3 a barrel has now went up to \$9 and \$11. So what do yuh expect a roll will be like when yu have to dope up the flour? That cheese cake there, that you don’t seem to be enjoying much, I used to get three cents for an now I ask five. The people won’t buy off you if you raise things a cent on them, so there they stay in the window and get soggy. I don’t make any money on them, even if I do have to raise the price.”

We had stepped into a room down on Grand street that had a “Café” sign in the front.

“These Eytalians around here ain’t suffering from the high cost of things,” she continued. “It’s me and the American shopkeepers and families. We can’t go down on Mulberry street and pick up a fish for a dime and some rotten fruit for a few pennies; and that’s all that they live on down there. Eggs has gone up, and sugar. There is the ‘three for a dime’ eggs on the stands, but who wants to eat them. I have to put them in my baking. I might as well tell you, seeing as you ain’t eating the cheese cake.”

Times Never So Bad.

“I’ve been keeping this store for the last twelve years, and times has never been so bad. I used to make some money at it, but now it’s just pinch and pinch. No use being cheerful about it. It’s these cheerful ones what are always hollering about how good times are - about how much work there is, and how high the pay is: it’s these that keep the prices up. The people don’t complain. They think. ‘What good will it do?’ and don’t say a word.”

A lean old woman, who walked as though ghostly fingers and baby hands were still clutching at her skirts, although her days of child-bearing were over, came in and wandered to one of the back tables.

“See her,” the shopkeeper went on. “She’s American, same as me. Her old man died last winter. He was in Libby Prison – one of those old soldiers that never got a pension. Or maybe he got it and the lawyers got it away from him. There’s always them lawyers to butt into your business and take what yuh got.”

Went Hungry Herself

“Well, her man got some kind of disease while he was in jail, and nothin’ would ever cure it. The doctors only made it worse. It was in his throat and he couldn’t talk above a whisper. All he could eat was egg and milk, with a dash of brandy in it. But with things going up all the time, what could she do? She usta come down here and beg the stuff from me, and she’d go hungry herself to give it to him.

“It was enough to make any one cry to see her come down to get just a little milk or a little sugar for him. And then she’d mix it herself – she wouldn’t let me – although half the time she was too weak to beat up the egg. And then she’d take a little sip on the way up stairs, now and then, because she was so hungry herself.

“Now, if he’d only been one of these foreigners what can eat anything – but he was an American. There were some children, but most of them died: all but one, I think, and no one knows where he’s gone to. He says to me once: ‘When I’m old I don’t expect no one to take care of me.’ So I guess he thought that it was the same way with them.

“The children all dwindled away, and the old man dwindled away, and now she’s going. I’m going, too, just the same as them. And we’re Americans being robbed by our own.”