The Insulted and Injured

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The Catholic Worker, April 1955, 1, 6.

Summary: The tale of Felicia, a young Puerto Rican woman struggling to survive in the city living in a tenement with her husband and three children. Discovers they are being exploited to over pay for furniture which is already nearly worn out. Decries the exploitation of the poor, especially by other poor people. Concludes by pointing out the beauty of the spring and says "..God is not mocked." (DDLW #684).

Last week as I passed the second hand book stores on Fourth Avenue, I stopped to look and there was a torn and battered old Dostoievsky, "The Insulted and Injured," a story which I had not read for many years. It was only twenty-five cents. I got it, and started reading it that very evening. It is the story of a young author, it might be Dostoievsky himself. He tells of the success of his first book, and how he read it aloud to his foster father, and how the father says, "It's simply a little story, but it wrings your heart, and what's happening all around one grows easier to understand and to remember, and one learns that the most down-trodden, humblest man is a man, too, and a brother." And I thought as I read these words, – "That is why I write, and that is the purpose of the story I am going to tell now, the story of Felicia."

She came in the other afternoon to St. Joseph's House to see if we had any extra clothes, a coat for herself, and something for her children. Felicia is twenty-two, and her husband is also twenty-two. She had her first baby just before she was fifteen, and he was not his father. She was grown up, then, when she was fifteen. When she found she was pregnant, she knew it wasn't playing for fun any more, it was playing for keeps, having babies. Now she was grown up. She lied about her age, of course, and when she came out of the hospital she had friends to go to who would take her and the baby in, and she could nurse it, so she kept him with her for two years. Then she lost the job she had, where she could keep the baby, and she had to board him out, and it wasn't until after she was married again and had two children that she was able to get him back. He was seven now. The others were one and a half and two and a half, and both walking. The apartment she had was four blocks away and across the park. You could see she had some sense of dignity, now that she was a householder, with a place of her own. She had come through a lot. There was that time when she had the second baby with her and her young husband had lost a couple of fingers in the machine shop. His mother would take him in and the baby too, but not her. She had never wanted the marriage and her house was full of eight people already. They had only four rooms. So Felicia slept in the hall. That was when we first met her, and she was pregnant again too. She came to Peter Maurin Farm for a while, and then when her husband got better, he'd found another

job and they got a two-room place on Eldridge street. It was a hideous scabrous place, with the plaster falling off the walls, and the toilet out of order in the halls, and cold water, and the halls smelled of rats and cats. The place she had now was much better.

She talked on that afternoon, and stayed for supper, and we had meat balls and spaghetti, and afterwards she got sick and could scarcely walk home. "Food doesn't seem to do me any good,"she complained. "I just feel so heavy after eating, I can't walk."

"But your husband has been taking care of the children these last few hours ... you'd better be getting home!"

But it was the little seven-year-old boy, who was doing the baby sitting, taking care of the little ones, the year and a half and two and a half one. Somebody added, "And her gas and electricity is turned off, and there is an oilstove in the house. That's all the heat they have."

Aghast, we packed her off home, with someone to carry her package of clothes. When I had asked her if there was anything else she needed, she did not say food or money, or more clothes, but she looked wistfully at the radio which was playing in the room, and said that if ever an extra one comes in, she'd love to have it. "You gotta stay in the house so much with the kids. I'd like to help my husband. He gets only thirty-five a week as a messenger, but there are no nurseries to take the babies. Not until they are three years old. Tony goes to school."

A radio did come in that week, and one bright cold sunny day we brought it over to her. She and the children were keeping warm on the floor below where the janitress lived, and the janitress didn't mind two extra kids because she had had twelve of her own, eight of them still at home. A lot of them were in school of course, so it wasn't too crowded with half a dozen kids around the kitchen and living room. Every now and then one of them would fall asleep on the floor or bed ... there were beds all over the place of course ... and the others would play around them. Maybe they didn't make too much noise because they didn't eat too much. But anyway, the poor are like that. Always room, always enough for one more ... everyone just takes a little less.

The children stayed downstairs, while we went up to her apartment and set up the radio. We had forgotten that there was no electricity, but there again we saw the generosity of the janitress. Her husband had put an extension wire up the air shaft from his own apartment to her kitchen, and with a double socket we were able to connect the set and see that it played.

We sat down to talk a little, and in the quiet of her bare little apartment, she told me the history of her furniture.

"How I got this place," she began, "it was this way. You know people don't like to rent to Puerto Ricans, so they have to hunt and hunt to find a place to live. This house has Italians and Jews, and the place is all run down anyway, and nobody cares as long as the rent is paid, and each apartment brings in twenty-eight dollars a month and there are four on a floor and seven floors walk-up to the house. I'm lucky I'm on the third floor with the kids. There was an Italian woman living in the building and she told me about this place when I was over at Eldridge St. in that two room place, and we were desperate, the water frozen, the toilet stopped up, so we had to move. She said,"There's an empty place in the house where I live,

where some friends of mine moved out, and it is my furniture in it, and if you will buy the furniture you can get the apartment. It will be twenty-three dollars a week."

My husband was getting thirty-five, and here we were going to have to pay twenty-three a week. Well, we had to move, that's all, so we signed a paper, that was last June, and moved in, and then from June to December 17th we paid her twenty-three dollars a week. And she paid the rent."

Felicia got up from the chair by the handsome kitchen table, it was the only whole thing in the house, that table and four chairs, and fetched a box from the kitchen shelf full of papers and odds and ends, and began sorting through them. "These are the receipts for the statue of the Blessed Mother . . . you pay every week until you pay thirteen dollars and thirty-four cents and it takes twenty-five weeks to pay. Langan Bros. down on Chambers Street. And here are the receipts for the rent."

True enough, there were the evidences of man's inhumanity to man, the exploitation of the poor by the poor. One set of immigrants, exploiting the newest set of immigrants!

"I got sick in December," Felicia said, "and my husband had to stay home from work to take care of me and the children, so he didn't get any pay, and she changed it then, this Italian woman. She said I could pay her ten dollars a week, and then pay my own rent to the landlord when he came around, so since then, that is the way we do it. And here are those receipts," and she tumbled more pieces of paper out on the table, each dated seven days apart and each testifying to the fact that Felicia had paid ten dollars a week on the scrubby set of furnishings I saw around me.

In the front room there was a dresser, two over-stuffed chairs, and there had been plastic curtains, and a davenport which had since fallen apart. It had been replaced by a smaller davenport bed that another tenant had given her. There was a crib which belonged to Felicia which they had bought at a second hand store. There was an ice-box, the old fashioned kind in which you put a cake of ice when you the money to buy it, there was a stove which was a combination of coal and gas, but the gas was turned off and the coal stove was full of holes, and the pipe to the chimney in back had fallen away. I didn't look in the bedrooms, the two of them, but there was room for little else than the beds. There were two rear ones, off the kitchen, with air and light from an airshaft. Windows looked in on other windows and only by peering out and looking far up to the sky, four stories above, could one tell whether it rained or shone. The rear room could be closed off from the other three, and there was a door into the hall, and since there were toilets in the hall, one could rent such a room to another tenant. My first home in Manhattan, when I worked on the east side for the New York Call, had been just such a rear room. But there it was warm with a white-covered feather bed and there was always the good smell of cooking in the house. Here, there was no fire to cook by, and fire is twice bread, the Arabs say.

I sat there with Felicia at her kitchen table, pondering over the slips before me. For seven months she had paid $93 a month, rent and furniture payment. Since then she had paid $40 a month to the avaricious widow and $28 to the landlord, $68 in all, instead of $93. That had been a generous reduction indeed!

"But this is terrible," I told her, frowning over the arithmetic before me. "The furniture was

quite good when we moved in," Felicia said, trying to account for having been exploited and taken in. "It looked wonderful. You can't imagine how good it looked after Eldridge street."

Well, perhaps it did. Having lived in Italian slums for many years, I knew how the housewives scrubbed and cleaned, and how they made everything shine with elbow grease and detergents. But Felicia had neither elbow grease or money for soaps and cleansers. She probably wasn't very efficient about keeping a place up. After all, her experience was not long, either.

"How long are you supposed to pay?" I asked her, thinking of the papers she said she signed, she and her husband. Maybe it was all quite legal.

"We'll be finished a year from this June." Over a thousand dollars paid for junk, and nothing left of it by the time it's paid for. Enough money for a down payment almost, on a house in the country. Enough money, if ever one had that much all at once, to buy a prefabricated house to put on our twenty-eight acres in Staten Island where the children could run in the fields instead of being cooped in a city slum.

While we were looking over the receipts, the gas and electric bill fell out, $38.64. And how would that ever be paid? I thought of a remark which Louis Murphy, head of the Detroit Houses of Hospitality was very fond of making, "It is expensive to be poor."

For some time as we talked I had been looking at an object hanging on the wall by the useless stove, and suddenly I saw what it was, a nylon shopping bag, the kind that bears heavy loads of groceries for shopping mothers without ripping at the seams, giving way in the handles, or tearing with the damp of leafy vegetables and peppers. Oh, the irony of that shopping bag, and no money to go shopping with. No wonder she was sick, little Felicia, after eating meat balls and spaghetti on an empty stomach. She might well have felt heavy.

Never mind, Felicia. Spring is here, and it won't be necessary to heat that apartment, and there won't any longer be the stinking smell of oil stoves. Soon it will be a hot sun pouring into the dank canyons of the New York streets, and the park benches will be crowded, and the children can absorb through their pores the bright sun and fresh air after the long winter.

Out in the park they sycamore trees are turning golden green, and the buds are bursting out. There is a veil of green on the bushes around the housing projects you can't live in. Even the grass is brightening and starting under the brown city soil. The earth is alive, the trees are alive again. Oh, mysterious life and beauty of a tree.

Out in the woods of Staten Island (it is a nickel on the ferry and fifteen cents on the bus) there are birches, and beeches with their round grey bolls, the willows yellow-twigged, the bright green of pines, the maples rosy even on a grey day. There is green moss in the swamps, and the spring peepers have started their haunting call. Skunk cabbage in all their glory of striped green and maroon start up out of the marshes and line the little brook at the foot of Peter Maurin Farm. Oh love, oh joy, oh spring stirring in the heart. Things can't be so bad, if the sun shines. How soft the ground is now, there is good dirt for the children to dig, and plenty of room for them to leap like the young goats on the farm next door. But in the country there are no houses and in the city there are houses, shelters, such as they are ... there is human warmth ... but the pavements are as hard as the greed of men, and there is no dirt for the children, only men's filth. The country now is oh, oh, and joyfulness, and

the city where Felicia lives, is woe, woe, and want. Never mind, Felicia, God is not mocked. He is our Father, and all men are brothers, so lift up your heart.