

A Block in Harlem—Flimsy, Disease-Festering, Common Toilets, Robber Landlords

Blind Negro Worker Making Only \$10 a Week Pays \$35 for Rooms

By SOL AUERBACH.

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THERE is a Fifth Avenue in Harlem, too. It is not a broad sweeping street, oily with traffic nor stretching skyward in stories of luxurious business offices and high class apartment stores.

This Fifth Avenue is bumpy and cobbled in some places. It extends towards the sky in five or six story buildings, which offer a menacing front, for they look as tho they might give up aspiring toward the sky and crumble. Fire-escapes zigzag their fronts, and dingy stores line the pavement. There are corner fruit stands and some peddlars carts buzzing with flies.

Cross this Harlem Fifth Avenue and walk east along 134th Street. Beware of the slop and muddy puddles on the sidewalk, as you turn to look at the gloomy candy factory across the street and at the row of dark warehouses at your side. It had been raining and the brick sidewalks ooze water into revulets and baby lakes. Refuse cans and garbage pails line the street. Here and there a bundle of slop has broken open and coughed out its contents on the pavement.

This slough-tray which is called a street has been turned into a playground by Negro children. A group of girls with jumping ropes, shouting and laughing, plats flying, jump past you. You catch a glimpse of black stockings torn at the knee, turned over shoes, and coats coming out at the elbows.

Slapped in beside the warehouses there is a row of red-brick house fronts. A brick extends its jagged edge here and there. There is a gaping hole where bricks once rested. The mortar has become so decayed that it looks like ridges of bed-rock. The windows are lopsided; sashes all out of joint; corners of glass missing; window ledges are weather-beaten and worm-eaten.

On the Fifth Avenue, of the rich, fronts rise smooth and straight as the glistening roadway itself. Here, off the Fifth Avenue of Harlem, the sloppy street is continued into the house fronts.

Doors, hanging loose on their hinges, are wide open. You step up two wobbly steps, past a vestibule door with glass missing and you are in No. 16 East 134th Street.

IF you had come here to find anyone in particular you would have to knock at every one of the eight "apartments" in the four story house, for there are no door-bells and the mail boxes look like pigeon's nests. And if there were mail boxes and bells with names on them you would not be able to see them for lack of light.

You enter a gloomy hallway. There is a gas jet jerked away in the corner but no light. You have a sense of walls which were once painted green. You know that, not because you can see the actual color of the paint thru the grime, but because you see patches of plaster with the edges of peeling paint sticking out into the dim light from the doorway.

On the hall floor you scrape pieces of paper along as you walk. You grope your way up a narrow wooden stairway. The steps creak painfully, and their edges are worn smooth and round.

You see the hint of a light thru the glass panes of a door at the end of the hall on the second floor. As you walk towards it the stench which you have just caught as you entered becomes more pronounced. You trace it unmistakably to a door half open at the end of the hall, between two closed doors which lead to apartments.

It is the community toilet.

There are no windows to this cubby-hole. The floor is slimy and scattered with paper which has been used. The seat of the toilet is broken. The drain does not work right and water rises to the very brim when you pull the string. This has apparently not been cleaned for some time and not repaired for years.

You knock at the door to your right.

You are introduced into the home of a Negro worker in Harlem, in the largest city of the most "prosperous" country in the world.

You enter the kitchen in the home of Mrs. Ethel Williams, the wife of a Negro worker.

Mrs. Williams is a tall lanky woman, and you get to know her and her surrounding better when she lights the small oil lamp on the table.

"We have gas," she says, pointing to an iron-pipe fixture dropping into the room from the ceiling. "But I only use the gas when I want to warm up some milk quickly for my baby."

Gas is too expensive when the coal stove burns.

The walls of the kitchen are no different than the walls in the hall. She points out places on the wall and ceiling near the water pipes, where the dirt-green paint has come off and the plaster is crumbling. On the floor, propped up on some pillows is an infant playing with his brother who is only a few years older. An older girl is pottering around over the coal stove which takes up the most part of a wall.

Mrs. Williams knows that she lives in no place and is indignant at the condition of this hovel of five rooms for which she pays a rental of \$33 per month.

She, her husband and four children have lived here for three years. She sublets a part of her "apartment" to a couple. Eight people live in this five-roomed coop.

The apartment runs the length of the house. There are two

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windows in the kitchen and two in the front room. The intervening rooms must be illuminated by a flickering gas jet or an oil lamp since there are no windows in them. The condition of the walls are the same thruout. There is hardly any ventilation at all. It is easy to understand how there are so many deaths from coal gas and illuminating gas in the tenements when it is bitter cold outside and the wind roars through the flimsy walls.

The kitchen window overlooks a desolate back yard which is spotted with papers and dirt. An old rusty and very narrow fire escape runs along the back of the house. This is about the only attempted compliance with the law in the whole building.

Garbage? There are no dumbwaiters here. The garbage must be tied up in bundles and carried out into the street by the tenants themselves.

Baths? Mrs. Williams laughs. No, there are no baths here.

Have there been any renovations lately? Three years ago the landlord repainted the kitchen by smearing dark green paint over the cracky walls. It didn't make any difference, said Mrs. Williams, for instead of painting it in light colors, the room remained as dark and gloomy as before. The walls are actually crumbling.

"The landlord won't do anything. He says that if we want repairs we will have to take a rent raise."

We were to hear that repeated again and again.

WILLIAMS has not had steady employment for the last three months.

"He worked at the Knickerbocker Cement and Supply Company for five years," Mrs. Williams said. "Then they decided to cut hands so he lost his job about three months ago. Since then he has been working at the docks, but not steady. He leaves about four or five o'clock every morning to look for a job, and if he



Williams, his wife, four children and two lodgers in the kitchen of their "apartment" of five cubby-holes at 18 E. 134th Street.
—Photo by Nippon Camera Club.

finds one he makes about \$5 a day. He has to get re-hired every day. Many days he doesn't find any work."

It was already after six o'clock and Williams had not yet returned.

Williams has to go rustling for a job every morning at about four or five and if he is lucky enough to find work he doesn't return until late in the evening.

When he returns he comes home through a slough-tray which is called a street, walks up a smelly and crumbling hallway, into his hovel for which he pays \$33 per month.

Here is a fellow worker who slaves thru the day—when he is given a chance to—for a meagre pay, comes to that section of the city where his employer and others like him have told him he must live, to a hovel which is called a home and for which he pays a high rent to persons in the same class as his employer.

There are many other workers like him.

The same conditions prevail in the whole row of eight houses on East 134th Street. Holmes and his wife and three others live in an apartment at No. 18. Although the apartment is even worse than the one we just described he pays \$35 for five rooms.

Both Holmes and his wife are blind. He works at a broom and mop shop downtown and works piece-work. The brooms are made by machine and there is much speed-up.

Holmes makes on the average of from \$10 to \$12 a week.

The ceiling is coming down, there are large holes in the walls near the plumbing, gas light, coal stove, no baths, community toilet, no garbage disposal, dark, unventilated.

In an apartment in the next house lives D. W. Heddleston, lamed Negro veteran of the Spanish-American war. He pays \$30 for his five rooms, and has gotten the few dollars grace over the other tenants because he lived there for the last 11 years. When he first moved in in 1917 he paid \$15. His rent has been doubled since then. In these eleven years there had been no improvements to speak of in any of these houses. They were allowed to go from awful to worse while the landlord raised the rent.

Heddleston sits in one place and moves his legs with difficulty. He served in the quartermasters department which was located at Tampa, Florida, until a severe epidemic of yellow fever forced the headquarters to move. He was lamed in an accident. He does not get a pension because the army department reported they could not find his name on the roll.

"The more I think of that war," said Heddleston, "the more I think it was a big money making proposition."

The department houses we have just described are known as "double-decker dumbell tenements." The clever architect who designed them obtained first prize for planning such an inexpensive cage back in 1879. The tenement law of 1901 condemned this type of building. Now, in 1929, they are still being used for housing Negro workers.

The lodgings we have just described are not isolated instances but are fairly numerous. Nor are they the worse. If you continue following the Daily Worker investigator into other sections of Harlem, you will see almost unbelievable conditions.

Tomorrow we will go to a "higher-class" apartment, and see what terrible crowding the Negro workers must suffer for the privilege of having a dumbwaiter which does not work, and a hot-water supply which is only present in the lease.