FOLKLORE

NEW YORK

Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A

Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Dorothy West

ADDRESS 228 W. 22nd St. New York City

DATE November 28, 1938

SUBJECT A TALE - "PLUTO"

1. Date and time of interview

Reported by Dorothy West (Staff Writer)

2. Place of interview

3. Name and address of informant

4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.

5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

(Use as many additional sheets as necessary, for any of the forms, each bearing the proper heading and the number to which the material refers.)

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NEW YORK

FORM C

Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Dorothy West

ADDRESS 228 W. 22nd St. New York City

DATE November 28, 1938

SUBJECT A TALE --"PLUTO"

Prominent on my bookcase stands a collapsible wooden image of the long-eared, sad-eyed hound known as Pluto, and immortalized by Mr. Walt Disney. There is no child, and almost never an adult, who does not, upon entering my house, immediately pick Pluto up, pull the strings that make him flop, and play happily for at least five minutes or at most to the end of the visit.

Today though, a child came to my house who did not run straightaway to Pluto. Maybe it was because he was a hungry child. And when is a child not a child? When he's hungry. This one had hollows under his eyes, and his body was too thin, and his clothing was not much comfort against the wind.

My apartment house has a prosperous exterior. Several times a week somebody comes to your door with a hard luck story. Generally it's a man, and so because I'm a woman, I simply say I'm sorry through a crack in the door, and shut the door quickly. In New York you have to be on the look-out for stick-up men.

But today it was a woman who answered my "Who is it?" There was something about her plaintive, "Me, lady," that made me open the

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the door wider than I usually do when the voice is unknown.

I saw them both then, the thin little black boy and the thin black woman, both staring anxiously, and neither looking as if they had the strength or will to harm the most helpless female.

"Yes?" I said.

The woman swallowed hard and said, "Could you give me a quarter, missus, to buy something to eat for the boy?"

"Why aren't you on relief?" I asked suspiciously, although in my heart I was disarmed by her southern accent.

"They said I'd get a check next week," she said helpfully. "They was nice to me," she added.

My neighbor opened her door. She was smartly dressed. Her little boy ran across the hall and stared up at the ill-clad child. I was ashamed of all of us.

"Come inside," I said coldly.

The boy and his mother entered and stood awkwardly in the center of my floor, the boy clinging to his mother's hand as if my sunny room were a dungeon.

"Sit down," I said.

They sat down together on the couch and Pluto was plainly visible. I saw the little boy look at it, and then he looked at me.

For a moment I started to urge him to pick it up and play with it. But then I remembered he had come begging for bread and I could not offer him a toy.

The boy's grave eyes turned back to Pluto. I wanted him to get up and go to it. It made me mad that he recognized the place of his poverty. And then I remembered again that he had come for a quarter and not for a plaything.

I didn't have a quarter to spare. I had only sufficient

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carfare until payday.

"I don't have a penny in the house," I lied. "But I'll be glad to give you something to eat. You like bacon and eggs?"

"Yes, missus,"she said, and then reluctantly, "ButI hates to put you to that bother."

"Not at all," I said shortly, because it was a bother. She had interrupted me in the middle of an excellent story. It was about poor people, too; a good proletarian short story.

I banged about the kitchenette, and after awhile the living room was fragrant with steaming coffee and sizzling bacon. I found some cold potatoes and fried them. I sliced my last tomato. I piled some slices of bread on a plate and then I felt guilty and toasted them.

All the while I was humming to myself because I did not want that woman to tell me her story. I could have told it to her myself. It would be no different from a hundred others.

It wasn't I could not hum at the table. I spooned a cup of coffee while they ate. Inevitably, the woman in return for the meal told me the facts that led up to it.

Widowed when the boy was a baby, knocking about with him from pillar to post, coming North so that he could go to a northern school, sleeping-in and sleeping-out for a string of slave-driving tyrants, farming the boy out to one indifferent slattern after another, never earning much, never saving anything, keeping body and soul together through sheer determination to survive. Now two weeks out of the hospital after a major operation, she was still too frail for domestic work, and her cousin by marriage, who was on relief, was letting her sleep in the living-room and forage for food as best as she could. The slattern who had been keeping the boy gave him back to her yesterday. She had put him to bed without any supper.

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She had brought him out this morning without any breakfast. She was on her way to the relief people now to ask them if they could hurry. As for herself, she could wait, but a boy gets hungry.

The boy had already eaten more than his share of the platter, and was draining his second cup of diluted coffee. He had not said a word. He had simply looked from his mother to me during his intervals of swallowing, throughout her drab recital. It was not surprising that what she was saying evoked no response in him. He knew all about it. It was as much his life as it was hers. His life in fact was harder, for there was no way for him to know with certainty that she would come once weekly to see him, or that the slattern who beat and neglected him would be replaced by one who only neglected him.

They finished their meal, or rather the platter was clean and the coffee pot empty. Light had come into the woman's face, and the boy did not look quite so much like a wizened old man.

I got up, and the woman understood the signal. She jumped up and thanked me profusely. She prodded the boy. He did not speak, but he smiled, and suddenly he looked seven and no longer an undersized seventy.

I made a package of the odds and ends in my ice-box , and after a little struggle with myself, slipped my half-dollar into the woman's hand. I could borrow carfare from a friend. Obviously she could not.

I led them to the door, but the boy broke away and ran across the room to Pluto and lovingly touched him. Pluto fell over and the boy laughed aloud. He gave him a final affectionate pat, and trotted back to his mother. He looked up at her with a face full of eager confidence.

He pronounced solemnly, "I'm gonna ask Sandy for one of them

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dawgs."

She looked at me almost apologetically. "He believes in Sandy Claus," she said. She hurried on proudly, defensively, "He ain't failed him yet."

"That's fine," I said and shut the door. I could hear them going down the hall, and the boy was talking volubly. I guess he was telling his mother what else he was going to ask "Sandy" for.

For a moment I wanted to believe that I had been taken in, for I am perhaps the poorest tenant in my fine apartment house. I Live on the fifth floor in a tiny rear apartment, and why should she have come first to me. And then I realized that in all probability she had not.

I turned back into my room and crossed the floor to put Pluto back on his feet. It has become an automatic act when my door closes after a visitor.

The sad-eyed hound looked up at me, and his tail drooped wistfully. He did not look funny, and I did not want to laugh at him, and he is supposed to make you laugh.

I moved away and cleared the table. I was thinking that it is not right to take a child's joy away and give him hunger. I was thinking that a child's faith is too fine and precious for the dumpheap of poverty. I was thinking that bread should not be bigger than a boy.

I though about those things a lot.

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