

Speaking Out

From The New South

By ROBERT DURR

FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF HER RACE

GERTRUDE Schurgast in a feature article in **WORLD ORDER**, official organ of the American Bahai Community writes:

"My best friend is a lady belonging to the colored race. She holds her head up proudly and looks into your eyes. Her brown, unwrinkled face is crowned by beautiful silvery hair. She is one of those rare persons who combines strength of character with kindness.

The other day I discovered a little picture on her mantle. It was a picture of a white woman in an old-fashioned, high-necked dress. Her hair, which was parted in the middle, was combed straight back and made her look rather severe. This was accentuated by her eyes, the most remarkable eyes I have ever seen, piercing, fearless, betraying an indomitable character.

"Who is that?" I asked her in surprise.

"That was my mother," she answered gently, and seeing my puzzled look, she added: "Her father was a white man, a slave-holder of Scotch-Irish stock. Her mother was a slave, mostly American-Indian blood. In those days slaves had to obey their masters. My grandfather must have loved his little white daughter who had inherited his looks and also his character. She was high-spirited and quick tempered. She was allowed to grow up together with the other children of family. Nobody was to touch her. Whenever her stepmother demanded that she call her stepbrothers 'Master,' she refused, saying, that they all had the same father!"

"Tell me more about her," I asked.

SERFDOM UNBEARABLE

"From early childhood the idea of serfdom must have been unbearable to her," she continued. "She and her mother spent hours and hours in their little cabin making candles, which she later sold. As soon as she had learned to sew, she began to make corsets for the town people. She had a large clientele and soon had saved up enough money to buy her mother's and her own freedom. She married a Negro who was a member of the legislature in Alabama. My father," continued my friend, "was sometimes hunted by the Ku Klux Klan, but they never hurt him, as they were afraid of 'the little woman.' Although she was only five feet tall, she soon represented a power in that little town of Livingston, Alabama. Even today, when you ask the people there about Louisa Dotson, they will remember her. The white farmer especially remember her, for she often went to them demanding that they give better treatment to the poor Negroes whom they employed as sharecroppers. Those landowners always managed to settle the account with these workers in such a way that,

at the end of the summer, there were no earnings left, only debts. Louisa Dotson made it her business to change this condition. Throughout the years her sole purpose in life was to work for the advancement of her race. All her life she fought oppression and demonstrated to black and white alike, by her own conduct, the pride and dignity of human beings."

"Was she still a young woman at the time of the Emancipation?" I asked.

"Yes, by then the family had saved up enough money to buy a home. It was only a four room house and much too small for the large family—there were fourteen children—but they had an enormous back yard. That's where my mother built a schoolhouse for Negro children. She, herself, acted as the teacher."

"How did she manage with all those children? Were they all as dark as you?"

"No. Have you heard of Mendel's law of heredity? Well we proved it. Some of us were white. (There is a brother I have never seen. He went to California and passed into the white race.) Some of us were dark, and some had the character traits of both races. But you asked me how she managed. That was not all my mother did. She by and by became well known as a dressmaker. All the prominent people in town used to get their clothes from her.

"In spite of all her other duties and interests she took her job as mother very seriously. One day a neighbor came rushing in. I, the youngest, was sitting at her feet, playing with some buttons. 'Oh Louisa,' the woman exclaimed, 'your daughter, Naomi, is at my house, crying. She went with my girl to pick a dress at the store and there was that lanky Joe, you know, the owner's son. He made eyes at Naomi, put the dress into her hands and said: 'You don't have to pay for that dress beautiful, but I'll be over to see you tonight.'

"My mother, when she heard that, got up from her sewing, shoved her spectacles back to her forehead, and, without saying a word, grimly marched out of the room, out of the house. I was tagging behind her. She never noticed it. She walked straight up to the store where lanky Joe was slouching over the counter. When he saw my mother, he tried to slink away. But she confronted him. 'Joe,' she said with a voice which I had never heard her use before, 'If anything would happen to my child, I would shoot you, but I don't want to soil my hands with your dirty blood. Don't ever let me see you again. By tomorrow you will have left town.' The next day he was gone..."