

LAURA: AN UNFORGETTABLE WOMAN

by Earl Hedden

In a little log cabin down in the Kentucky hills, come cotton pickin' time in the year when "Mr. Linkum" was elected President, there was born to a slave couple a pick-a-ninny daughter. They called her name Laura. That pick-a-ninny was destined to become in later years a wonderful mother and to have an influence over many people. When she was but a few years old her "Pap" and "Ma", as did so many other liberated slaves at that time, brought the family across the Ohio river into Indiana. They settled down on Vincennes street near the river. Pap got himself a job gardening for old man Marschel, and Ma and Laura did the cooking for the family of Davey Hedden. When Laura grew old enough she married John Woods, and in the years following she gave birth to six children – Mayme – Jack – Horace – Estella – June and "Little 'Phrony".

Old John was not a man to stand up to his responsibilities and he was not of a mind to look after a family of that size. So one summer evening, when the B&O slowed up for the Vincennes street crossing, he told the corner loafers goodbye and hopped a freight car; and, so far as his family was concerned, he was gone forever. He left Laura with the family to care, and though through the years she forgave him she never could quite forget him. Occasionally, in the newspapers she would read "Unidentified Negro found dead beside the railroad tracks" – maybe down in Tennessee – maybe near Pittsburg – she would always sigh and wonder if that was her John.

To support the children she had to work. At first she took in washing. Later that proved too heavy for her and she had to give that up as she had "misery" in her back. It was then she came to our house as our cook. She was a familiar figure along Vincennes street for years – helping every one that called on her for help. Rising before daylight, she would feed her own brood, and then, traipsing through snow or slush, in fair weather or foul, she would wend her way toward our house, and by the time we, who were more favored than

others, came down to breakfast she would have a warm fire going in the kitchen range and have batter-cakes and bacon ready for us. After our noon meal she would be going home to gather her own children in after school, get their supper, and then back to prepare our evening meal. Never did anything seem too much trouble for her to do for us. One might have thought we were her own children. If we were late to an evening meal she would wait for hours in order to keep our dinner warm, and our own mother could not discourage her in doing it.

Shortly after she came to cook for us, her brother's wife died and left an orphaned girl – no other woman to look after her. Laura gathered the child in and from that time on Corabelle was one of her own children. A little later a lewd “nigger” woman, (I do not apologize for using that word), a bar-fly frequenting the dives and saloons in that section of our town, died and left homeless a nameless waif scarcely four years old. Laura insisted that the saloonkeepers who had brought the woman to that sad state should bury her. No one wanted the girl child, and so Laura's wonderful instinct of motherhood asserted itself again, and Buzetta was gathered under her wings with her other chicks.

As the children grew older, sorrow came to the mother-heart. Mayme, the oldest daughter, took down with “consumption” and died, and Laura mourned her first-born. Yet her trust in the Lord was not shaken. “The Lord give her to me, and He took her, and I bless His name.” One day they called our house and told Laura to come home right away – June had been in a fight with another Negro and was killed. “He wasn't a bad boy” was all that she would say. Horace had run away from home some years before, when he was scarcely full grown. “Gone to find his Pap I guess”, she would say as she turned away to hide a grief that was almost unbearable. For fifteen years she heard nothing from him.

We always gave her our cast-off clothing for her children to wear - this week it might be a coat – next time probably a pair of shoes or a hat. I well remember a morning, as she served us batter-cakes and bacon, a knock came

at the dining-room door and the Probation Officer appeared in the doorway. He held in his hand a hat which we could not but recognize. With a twinkle in his eye he said, "Mr. Hedden! Where were you last night about ten o'clock? Do you recognize this hat?" The Officer went on, "The man who wore that hat last night assaulted two white women and one of them grabbed his hat when he ran". We heard a dish of batter-cakes fall to the floor. "It must-a-been my boy Jack", Laura sobbed as she covered her face with her apron. Because he was already on "probation" they sent him to the penitentiary that time, and Laura's cup of grief was full almost to overflowing.

Some days afterward I sat at the piano strumming an accompaniment and singing "My Old Kentucky Home". As I finished the last stanza I realized that Laura was standing nearby. "Will you say them last words again, for me", she said. And so I repeated:

"The head must bow and the back will have to bend
Wherever the darky may go:
A few more days and the troubles all will end
In the field where the sugar-canes grow.

A few more days for to tote the weary load
No matter, 'twill never be light,
A few more days till we totter on the road
Then My Old Kentucky Home, good night."

As I wiped a tear from my own eye she turned away without a word, filled to the brim with emotion. But just as Job, that old servant of God, was not tried to the breaking point, so with this servant mother. From that time on the clouds seemed to rift and brighter days soon followed. A letter came from Jack saying that he hoped they would let him stay in the prison. "It is so easy to be good here," he said. "At home there is no place to find recreation for us colored boys except on the river bank or in the saloons on 'Nigger Hill'. Here in the

Penitentiary we always have the Chaplain to help us.” “Little Phrony” married a “good” man and they held highly respectable jobs in a northern city. Buzetta, the nameless waif, grown into a fine woman, married well. And these two vied with each other in caring for Laura – taking her for months-on-end in their own home and showing appreciation for the care she had given them when there was no one else to care for them. Corabelle raised a family of boys who ran errands and did chores for Grandma. Estella, always dependable, looked well after “Mom”.

Then came the crowning joy that filled Laura’s soul with thankfulness. Horace, the run-a-way boy, wrote that he was coming home. He had been in the Army and had “got religion” and he was coming home to be a preacher. He was ordained a minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church and made his mother truly happy in her old age.

Her work was over. Her mission as a mother had been fulfilled and the Lord had been good to her. When she was called to her reward she asked that “her white folks”, as she had called us for so many years, sing at her funeral; and so we joined the throng of people who had loved her and who gathered at the church to pay their last respects to a wonderful mother, and sang there a parting hymn.

When Gabriel’s trumpet shall wake me at that last morning I am sure who I will meet on that Beautiful Shore – My own mother will be waiting for me there, and just a little way behind her will stand Laura – she may even have ready a breakfast of batter-cakes and bacon.

THE END.