

## Valiant Is The Word

By Dorothy Day

*The Catholic Worker*, March 1938, 2.

*Summary: Admires the heroic sacrifice and hard work of Iola Ellis in helping her sister's daughters get an education. Advocates educational rights for Negroes so they can become leaders. (DDLW #332).*

This is the story of Iola Ellis. Mrs. Ellis lives and works in Cleveland, Ohio. She was born down in Greensboro, Alabama, and went to public school until she was fourteen. Then she went to Tuskegee Institute. Her father, a self-educated man, was private secretary to Governor Slay on a big plantation. When he left the employment of the Governor he became editor of "The Cotton Farmer," which was published by the colored tenants of the Delta-Pineland Company in Bolivar County, Mississippi. Mrs. Ellis assisted her father at his work when she left school.

When she was eighteen their work was destroyed by the flood. She then became supervisor of the colored schools of Shelby County, Memphis, Tenn., and worked there for nine years. She married at the age of twenty after leaving school.

## Lynching

Then there was a lynching in Memphis.

"They cut off the head of the poor dead body and dragged it down Beale Street," she told me. "The fingers and toes were displayed in the windows of shops. That was in 1923. My husband could not stand it. He could not stand the sight of a white man for a while. The horror was too much for him. We decided to go North."

## Determined

After every lynching there is an exodus toward the North.

"So we went north to Cleveland. . . . My mother and father were with us, too. We had no children and I was helping my sister educate hers. These two girls came up from the South to live with us. I was determined that they go through Catholic schools. But I needed employment to help support them and I kept trying to find a job. I had become a Catholic by then, and I was praying hard, every day, making novenas and asking our Lord to help me.

## Refused

“But the only job I got was pushing a mop in a police station. I stood first in the Civil Service examinations for Social Service work in the City Hospital but I was refused on account of color. So I had to go on pushing a mop. That is the kind of work that I have continued to do now for many years.”

## Prayer

"I thought to myself, ‘Well, if the Lord answers my prayer that way, that is probably the work He wants me to do.’ So I’ve been doing it...But I must confess that every now and then I go and pull a sit-down on the Lord, when I’m in trouble or out of work, and I say, ‘Lord, I’m just going to sit here until you come and help me.’ And He usually does.

“Anyway, when I prayed for a job, I didn’t say what kind. So if the Lord sends me jobs, night work, scrubbing, working at the end of a mop,—it’s a job anyway, and I’ll take it.”

## Hard Time

Dora Bessie and Iona Somerville were the nieces Mrs. Ellis has educated. She had a hard time getting them into a high school after they had finished with the parochial school.

But Bishop Schrembs came to her aid; found a school for them and helped them through it. He didn’t stop at the high school, but got them on to college, too, and now one of them has already graduated from the Notre Dame Ursuline College and is a substitute teacher in a Cleveland Public School.

One of the girls is twenty-three and the other nineteen.

## New Members

As I write this story a press release from Communist Party headquarters has just come through the mail. They speak of the twenty-three thousand new members which have been enrolled in the Party, fifteen per cent of them Negroes. I think of the interview I wrote for the **Catholic Worker**, January issue: an interview with a young Negro girl in New Orleans who told of Communist recruiting in the little towns in Louisiana.

## **Brave Struggle**

Although this little story of Mrs. Ellis, and her brave struggle to educate her nieces needs no editorial comment, it leads one to meditate on the necessity of raising up leaders—Negro Catholic leaders.

If, as the Holy Father points out, leaders of working men must be workers themselves, then most assuredly the leaders of the Negro and the converters, if one may use that word of the Negro, must be Negroes. And how many of our Catholic higher schools are opened to the Negro?

## **Uncompromising**

Mrs. Ellis had to go to the Bishop to get a higher education for her sister's children. But how many women have the strong spirit, the uncompromising spirit, of Mrs. Ellis? God love her, valiant champion that she is of Negro educational rights.