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MRS. ANNA J. COOPER

By Zita E. Dyson

Intellectual, full, clean, strong, and serviceful has been the life of the quiet and forceful woman of whom it is my joyous task to write.

Entered at six years of age into the St. Augustine's Normal and Collegiate Institute in her natal city, Raleigh, North Carolina, she was taken to the heart of the kindly, energetic, broad-visioned president, Dr. Smith, the founder, and started on the delightful, if not royal, road to knowledge, which she continues to tread. At eight years of age, she was given certain classes to teach or coach, for which service she received at the year's end the sum of one hundred dollars. The following year she was designated "pupil teacher."

The sudden death of Dr. Smith and the advent of the new president, Dr. Smedes, changed to some degree the established procedure. This was not to her liking, tho she now remembers gratefully the meticulous, exacting discipline imposed by Dr. Smedes, especially upon her study of Greek. Yet he did not encourage her in her desire to study further and to graduate.

It was at this time, in the intellectual and religious atmosphere of the Institute, that she formed the acquaintance of the Rev. George Christopher Cooper, then a teacher of Greek, whom she subsequently married. The simple ceremony was performed at the end of the school year at the regular

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religious chapel exercise. They continued to live and teach at the school during the two years of Mr. Cooper's married life.

At the close of this short, but perfect chapter of her life, Mrs. Cooper resolutely turned toward the goal for which she had so long yearned, i. e., to continue her intellectual work in the higher realms of the college. Thus she went to Oberlin.

She was graduated from Oberlin in 1884. The following year she taught Greek, French, and German at Wilberforce; and in 1886-87, she returned to St. Augustine's to teach Latin, Greek, and mathematics. Three years after graduating she received her master's degree from her Alma Mater, in mathematics.

In 1887 Dr. John R. Francis, at the time trustee of the Board of Education of Washington, wrote to President Fairchild, of Oberlin, asking him to recommend a graduate to fill the position of mathematics in the Washington High School. President Fairchild recommended Mrs. Cooper. The result was that Mr. Geo. F. T. Cook, Superintendent of Colored Schools, wrote her, asking if she were free to accept the position. She came to Washington and began her work of teaching mathematics and giving lectures on science in the building situated at the corner of Seventeenth and Church Streets, under the principalship of Dr. Francis J. Cardoza. Later she was made head of the Latin Department.

In 1892 Mrs. Cooper published her book, "A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South." In the report of the

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Columbia Exposition at Chicago (1893-94) is to be found one of Mrs. Cooper's outstanding articles on the "Negro Woman," a masterful treatise on the status, position, and spirituality of our women. This address was delivered before the Congress of Religions. Another notable address was "The Ethics of the Negro Question," delivered before the Society of Friends in session at Asbury Park.

In 1900 Mrs. Cooper made her first trip to Europe, to attend the Pan-African Congress in London. The itinerary led through the cathedral towns of Scotland and England, thence to Paris to the World Exposition, at which there had been installed a Negro department in charge of Dr. W. E. B. DuBois and the late Mr. T. J. Calloway. After a week at the exposition she went to Oberammergau to see the Passion Play, thence to Munich and other German towns and then to Italy through Rome, Naples, Venice, Pompeii, Mt. Vesuvius, and Florence.

In 1901 she was appointed principal of the M Street High School, Washington, D. C., which position she held until 1906, when she left Washington and went to teach in Lincoln Institute, Jefferson City, Mo. In 1906 she was made supervisor of the Colored Social Settlement. It was also in the summer of 1906 that she visited the Island of Nassau.

In 1911 she returned to Washington as teacher of Latin in the Dunbar High School. This position she still holds, having requested retirement for the end of the present year.

In 1912 Mrs. Cooper returned to Paris for study at the "Guilde Internationale," stressing "La Phonetique" and al-

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lied subjects. The following summer, 1913, found her again in Paris, completing her work at "La Guilde" and laying the foundation for her illustrious, self-imposed task, i. e., to gain the degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of France.

In 1914 she matriculated at Columbia University, and, during the summers 1915-16-17, she studied systematically there, laying the foundations and doing the preliminary work for her "Doctorat." As a part of this preliminary work, Mrs. Cooper completed a task of notable importance. She edited a text in Old French, "Le Pelerinage de Charlemagne," for use in colleges.

In November, 1923, she returned to Paris, and was assigned to Abbe Klein who was a sort of director and sponsor for her work. At this time she presented to the university her credits, thirty-three in number, which were accepted as was the subject for her thesis, "The Attitude of France in Regard to Slavery During the Revolution." Then began the last and most important part of the work on her "Doctorat." The three "docteurs" to whom she was assigned were M. Philip Sagnac, chairman, M. Cestre, and M. Bougle. She worked incessantly endeavoring to complete the entire thesis before leaving, but was compelled to leave and return to her duties because of the approaching end of the leave of absence granted to her. Her "doyen," or dean, secured for her permission to use the time which she must spend in this country in continuing her work at the Library of Congress. This she did until November, 1924, when she again returned to Paris for the last interviews, examinations, and conferences attendant upon the awarding of

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the degree.

Now, it is customary for a candidate for the doctor's degree at the Sorbonne to be called upon to discuss certain questions allied to the subject of their thesis by the professor or doctor under whom the candidate is working. In accordance with this tradition, Mrs. Cooper was asked by M. Cestre to discuss the "Legal Measures Concerning Slavery in the United States from 1787 to 1850;" and for M. Bougle, "Ideas of Equality and the Democratic Movement." Both questions were satisfactorily sustained and ably discussed. As all requirements had then been met, on March 23, 1925, came the climax and reward of a life devoted to the highest that mental discipline and intellectual culture can attain, the award by the faculty of the Sorbonne of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the University of Paris. This was the first of its kind to be awarded a woman of the District of Columbia. At this time M. Bougle announced that the University did not deal directly with individuals in making the award and that the "diplome" would have to be presented through her mayor. As Washington does not enjoy the prestige of such an official, it was necessary that the formal presentation be made through the Commissioners. In Washington the Xi Omega Phi Chapter of the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority requested and secured permission to sponsor the event. Thus it was that, under the auspices of this group, in Rankin Chapel, Howard University, the presentation was made by Dr. Tyndall, representing the Commissioners of the District of Columbia.

Running parallel with this intellectual aim of having France

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award her the honor of the "Doctorat," there was a deeper, more spiritual purpose which she accomplished some years before the completion of the other. She wished to give of the fulness of her life to others, to help in a more personal manner than was permitted in the classroom. She wished to provide a home for the family of a relative, and to bring them into the radius of broader educational advantages. With this in view, she purchased in 1915 the former home of General Le Fevre, ex-member of Congress. To this home, roomy, inviting, and appropriate for her purpose, she brought the little family of five nephews and nieces, thus manifesting a spirit as deep and comprehensive as her intellect.

The most significant fact, perhaps, in Mrs. Cooper's contribution to education in Washington--certainly the most directly promotive of the cause of higher education in her own segregated group--is the courageous revolt she waged against a special "colored" curriculum for the M Street High School. The proposal was already in Congress to give the pupils of this school a course of study commensurate with their alleged "inferior" abilities. The proposal looked innocent and benevolent, but Mrs. Cooper, at the risk of insubordination, stoutly maintained that her pupils should have equal opportunity to choose whatever subjects might be chosen if they were in one of the other high schools. In this contention she was unwa veringly supported by Mr. Bundy and Mrs. Francis, the two colored members of the Board of Education; and while the discussion was at white heat, Mrs. Cooper, herself, actually prepared pupils who passed with honor the entrance examina-

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tions for Harvard, Yale, Brown, and Oberlin, thus winning for the first time a place on the list of accredited high schools for the Washington High School for colored children, then known as the M Street High School.

Mrs. Cooper has recently been elected President of Frelinghuysen University, a night school founded by Mr. Jesse Lawson for advanced study in Law, Theology, and collegiate subjects for students compelled to work by day, and therefore unable to avail themselves of the advantages at Howard University.