



Incidentsⁱⁿ the Life of a Slave Girl

BY HARRIET JACOBS



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Incidents in the of a Slave Girl

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Notes

What is a literary classic and why are these classic works important to the world?

A literary classic is a work of the highest excellence that has something important to say about life and/or the human condition and says it with great artistry. A classic, through its enduring presence, has withstood the test of time and is not bound by time, place, or customs. It speaks to us today as forcefully as it spoke to people one hundred or more years ago, and as forcefully as it will speak to people of future generations. For this reason, a classic is said to have universality.

Harriet Ann Jacobs, born into slavery in North Carolina sometime in the fall of 1813, never knew the exact date of her birth; in fact, she was unaware that she was a slave until the death of her mother, when Harriet was six. Her owner, Margaret Horniblow, taught Jacobs how to read, but this in itself did very little to improve the young girl's life, especially after she was sold to a vicious, cruel, and predatory slaveholder, Dr. James Norcom—"Dr. Flint" in the book.

When Jacobs was a teenager, she tried desperately to avoid being sexually assaulted by Norcom, and she also conceived of a plan by which she could escape to the North. The girl hid in her grandmother's attic for seven years, from 1835-1842, in an attempt to convince Norcom that she had run away successfully.

In 1842, Jacobs was actually able to escape by boat and went to Brooklyn, New York, where her daughter lived. They were eventually reunited, and by 1853, Jacobs began to write letters to newspapers about the conditions of women sold into slavery. She joined the abolitionist movement and also worked for Frederick Douglass's newspaper, *The North Star*.

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl appeared in 1861, under the pseudonym of "Linda Brent," but because of the Civil War, the book remained obscure and was not republished until the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement. Jacobs spent the Civil War in Washington, D.C., aiding the

Pointers

READING POINTERS

Reading Pointers for Sharper Insights

1. To better appreciate *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, consider some of the following themes that the book introduces:
 - Knowledge can be the key to power and to freedom.
 - Just because a practice is legal does not mean that it is morally correct.
 - Faith can be a great comfort in times of distress, but people also tend to question their faith during these times.
 - A society can be judged by how it treats its poorest or weakest members.
 - People often fail to recognize it when their moral choices are in conflict with the religion or philosophy they propose to uphold.
 - Mental and emotional pain and suffering are sometimes even worse than physical suffering.
 - Family loyalty and a sense of community are of great significance, especially during times of extreme hardship.
 - When people are forced to live under deplorable conditions, the range of moral choices available to them can be restricted.
 - Slavery is harmful to both slaves and slave owners.

2. It is important to consider the historical context in which the book was written. Harriet Jacobs began writing *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in 1853 and published the book in 1861. The following are some helpful things to know about that time:
 - Slavery was legal throughout the American South and was a large and important part of the South's economy.
 - Slavery was prohibited in many of the northern states, and many slaves attempted to escape to the North in hopes of gaining freedom.
 - The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 had recently passed. This law mandated that all states, even free ones, must aid in the capture and return of fugitive slaves. It was illegal to help or harbor a runaway slave.



P R E F A C E

PREFACE BY THE AUTHOR.

READER BE ASSURED this narrative is no fiction. I am aware that some of my adventures may seem incredible; but they are, nevertheless, strictly true. I have not exaggerated the wrongs inflicted by Slavery; on the contrary, my descriptions fall far short of the facts. I have concealed the names of places, and given persons fictitious names. I had no motive for secrecy on my own account, but I deemed it kind and considerate towards others to pursue this course.

I wish I were more competent to the task I have undertaken. But I trust my readers will excuse deficiencies in consideration of circumstances. I was born and reared in Slavery; and I remained in a Slave State twenty-seven years. Since I have been at the North, it has been necessary for me to work diligently for my own support, and the education of my children. This has not left me much leisure to make up for the loss of early opportunities to improve myself; and it has compelled me to write these pages at irregular intervals, whenever I could snatch an hour from household duties.

When I first arrived in Philadelphia, Bishop Paine advised me to publish a sketch of my life, but I told him I was altogether incompetent to such an undertaking. Though I have improved my mind somewhat since that time, I still remain of the same opinion; but I trust my motives will excuse what might otherwise seem presumptuous. I have not written my experiences in order to attract attention to myself; on the contrary, it would have been more pleasant to me to have been silent about my own history. Neither do I care to excite sympathy for my own sufferings. But I do earnestly desire



I N T R O D U C T I O N

INTRODUCTION BY THE EDITOR.

THE AUTHOR OF the following autobiography is personally known to me, and her conversation and manners inspire me with confidence. During the last seventeen years, she has lived the greater part of the time with a distinguished family in New York, and has so deported herself as to be highly esteemed by them. This fact is sufficient, without further credentials of her character. I believe those who know her will not be disposed to doubt her veracity, though some incidents in her story are more romantic than fiction.

At her request, I have revised her manuscript; but such changes as I have made have been mainly for purposes of condensation and orderly arrangement. I have not added any thing to the incidents, or changed the import of her very pertinent remarks. With trifling exceptions, both the ideas and the language are her own. I pruned excrescences a little, but otherwise I had no reason for changing her lively and dramatic way of telling her own story. The names of both persons and places are known to me; but for good reasons I suppress them.

It will naturally excite surprise that a woman reared in Slavery should be able to write so well. But circumstances will explain this. In the first place, nature endowed her with quick perceptions. Secondly, the mistress, with whom she lived till she was twelve years old, was a kind, considerate friend, who taught her to read and spell. Thirdly, she was placed in favorable circumstances after she came to the North; having frequent intercourse with intelligent persons, who felt a friendly interest in her welfare, and were



INCIDENTS
IN THE
LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL,
SEVEN YEARS CONCEALED.

C H A P T E R I

CHILDHOOD.

I WAS BORN a slave; but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away. My father was a carpenter, and considered so intelligent and skilful in his trade, that, when buildings out of the common line were to be erected, he was sent for from long distances, to be head workman. On condition of paying his mistress two hundred dollars a year, and supporting himself, he was allowed to work at his trade, and manage his own affairs. His strongest wish was to purchase his children; but, though he several times offered his hard earnings for that purpose, he never succeeded. In complexion my parents were a light shade of brownish yellow, and were termed mulattoes.† They lived together in a comfortable home; and, though we were all slaves, I was so fondly shielded that I never dreamed I was a piece of merchandise, trusted to them for safe keeping, and liable to be demanded of them at any moment. I had one brother, William, who was two years younger than myself—a bright, affectionate child. I had also a great treasure in my maternal grandmother, who was a

†Terms marked in the text with (†) can be looked up in the Glossary for additional information.

remarkable woman in many respects. She was the daughter of a planter in South Carolina, who, at his death, left her mother and his three children free, with money to go to St. Augustine,[†] where they had relatives. It was during the Revolutionary War; and they were captured on their passage, carried back, and sold to different purchasers. Such was the story my grandmother used to tell me; but I do not remember all the particulars. She was a little girl when she was captured and sold to the keeper of a large hotel. I have often heard her tell how hard she fared during childhood. But as she grew older she evinced so much intelligence, and was so faithful, that her master and mistress could not help seeing it was for their interest to take care of such a valuable piece of property. She became an indispensable personage in the household, officiating in all capacities, from cook and wet nurse to seamstress. She was much praised for her cooking; and her nice crackers became so famous in the neighborhood that many people were desirous of obtaining them. In consequence of numerous requests of this kind, she asked permission of her mistress to bake crackers at night, after all the household work was done; and she obtained leave to do it, provided she would clothe herself and her children from the profits. Upon these terms, after working hard all day for her mistress, she began her midnight bakings, assisted by her two oldest children. The business proved profitable; and each year she laid by a little, which was saved for a fund to purchase her children. Her master died, and the property was divided among his heirs. The widow had her dower in the hotel which she continued to keep open. My grandmother remained in her service as a slave; but her children were divided among her master's children. As she had five, Benjamin, the youngest one, was sold, in order that each heir might have an equal portion of dollars and cents. There was so little difference in our ages that he seemed more like my brother than my uncle. He was a bright, handsome lad, nearly white; for he inherited the complexion my grandmother had derived from Anglo-Saxon ancestors. Though only ten years old, seven hundred and twenty dollars were paid for him. His sale was a terrible blow to my grandmother, but she was naturally hopeful, and she went to work with renewed energy, trusting in time to be able to purchase some of her children. She had laid up three hundred dollars, which her mistress one day begged as a loan, promising to pay her soon. The reader probably knows that no promise or writing given to a slave is legally binding; for, according to Southern laws, a slave, *being* property, can *hold* no property. When my grandmother lent her hard earnings to her mistress, she trusted solely to her honor. The honor of a slaveholder to a slave!

To this good grandmother I was indebted for many comforts. My brother Willie and I often received portions of the crackers, cakes, and preserves, she made to sell; and after we ceased to be children we were indebted to her for many more important services.

Such were the unusually fortunate circumstances of my early childhood. When I was six years old, my mother died; and then, for the first time, I learned, by the talk around me, that I was a slave. My mother's mistress was the daughter of my grandmother's mistress. She was the foster sister of my mother; they were both nourished at my grandmother's breast. In fact, my mother had been weaned at three months old, that the babe of the mistress might obtain sufficient food.[†] They played together as children; and, when they became women, my mother was a most faithful servant to her whiter foster sister. On her death-bed her mistress promised that her children should never suffer for any thing; and during her lifetime she kept her word. They all spoke kindly of my dead mother, who had been a slave merely in name, but in nature was noble and womanly. I grieved for her, and my young mind was troubled with the thought who would now take care of me and my little brother. I was told that my home was now to be with her mistress; and I found it a happy one. No toilsome or disagreeable duties were imposed on me. My mistress was so kind to me that I was always glad to do her bidding, and proud to labor for her as much as my young years would permit. I would sit by her side for hours, sewing diligently, with a heart as free from care as that of any free-born white child. When she thought I was tired, she would send me out to run and jump; and away I bounded, to gather berries or flowers to decorate her room. Those were happy days—too happy to last. The slave child had no thought for the morrow; but there came that blight, which too surely waits on every human being born to be a chattel.

When I was nearly twelve years old, my kind mistress sickened and died. As I saw the cheek grow paler, and the eye more glassy, how earnestly I prayed in my heart that she might live! I loved her; for she had been almost like a mother to me. My prayers were not answered. She died, and they buried her in the little churchyard, where, day after day, my tears fell upon her grave.

I was sent to spend a week with my grandmother. I was now old enough to begin to think of the future; and again and again I asked myself what they would do with me. I felt sure I should never find another mistress so kind as the one who was gone. She had promised my dying mother that her children should never suffer for any thing; and when I remembered that, and recalled her many proofs of attachment to me, I could not help having some hopes that she had left me free. My friends were almost certain it would be so. They thought she would be sure to do it, on account of my mother's love and faithful service. But, alas! we all know that the memory of a faithful slave does not avail much to save her children from the auction block.

After a brief period of suspense, the will of my mistress was read, and we learned that she had bequeathed me to her sister's daughter, a child of

Glossary

Epigraph.

“Rise up...careless daughters!” – This quotation from the book of Isaiah in the Old Testament calls on the women of Jerusalem to set an example of repentance for the many social injustices that had been allowed to occur in their land. Harriet Jacobs, in writing *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, is doing a similar thing. She is calling on women, especially the middle-class white women of the North, to awaken from their ignorance and complacency regarding the unjust institution of slavery.

Preface and Introduction.

Linda Brent – Linda Brent is the pseudonym under which Harriet Jacobs (1813-1897) wrote *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. The character of Linda is based on Harriet Jacobs herself, and the incidents in Linda’s life are based on real incidents in Ms. Jacobs’s life. All the other characters in the book are also based upon real people. In most cases, only the names have been changed.

L. Maria Child – (1802-1880) Child was an author and abolitionist who became Jacobs’s friend and editor. Interestingly, many critics thought that Child may have been the real author of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. When the book was first published, much controversy surrounded its authenticity. Many people believed that the writing was too sophisticated to be that of a former slave. They also believed that the style of writing was too formal and emulated the style of 19th century romantic novels such as *Jane Eyre*. Critics put forth the idea that someone else must have written the book. However, the fact that Ms. Jacobs was the real author has been proven through the evidence of countless letters and other papers she wrote, which are in the same style as that of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. It is commonly accepted that Jacobs derived her style from popular white women writers simply because she had no other role models to follow.

Chapter I.

mulattoes – people having one white parent and one black parent; more commonly, it refers to any people who have mixed black and white ancestry

St. Augustine – a city in northeast Florida

“my mother...sufficient food” – Many slave women were forced to act as “wet nurses” to the infants of their white mistresses. Wet nurses were responsible for breast-feeding infants. As with Jacobs’s grandmother, many slave women were forced to nurse the infants of the master

Vocabulary

Preface and Introduction.

abominations – hateful or loathsome things or acts
conscientious – hard-working, thorough
deficiencies – things lacking; imperfections
degradation – disgrace, shame
diligently – industriously, conscientiously
excrescences – enlargements, outgrowths
exertion – an effort; application
indecorum – impropriety, unseemliness
narrative – a sequence of events; an account
perpetual – continuous, everlasting
persecuted – wronged, mistreated, victimized
pertinent – relevant, important
presumptuous – arrogant, conceited; displaying unjustified confidence
trifling – trivial, insignificant
veracity – truthfulness, authenticity

Chapter I.

bequeathed – handed down, inherited
blight – a disease, stain, affliction
chattel – a piece of personal property
desirous – wanting, eager
dower – the part of a man's property which his wife inherits and continues to own after the man's death
evinced – showed, demonstrated
precepts – rules, principles

Chapter II.

blasphemous – profane, sacrilegious
conjectures – guesses, speculations, assumptions
defrauded – cheated, swindled
desolate – deserted, bleak
detested – hated
epicure – a connoisseur of food and drink
executor – the person responsible for executing the conditions of a will
festoons – garlands; wreaths of flowers
incarnate – in the flesh; personified
insolvent – bankrupt, broke
joist – a type of beam
reproved – scolded, criticized