

Harriet Ann Jacobs: Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

Harriet Ann Jacobs was an astonishing slave woman whom over came many great obstacles in life. Harriet wrote an autobiography about her life called Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, under the pseudo name of Linda Brent. Her story talks about her struggles and achievements as a slave. Harriet used different names in the story to hide the identity of her fellow slaves and her masters.

Being born into slavery in 1813, she was destined for a life of slavery. Harriet's life started just like any other slave born in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but it soon changed. At age six Harriet's dear mother died, leaving her and her siblings (Jacobs, 14). Since slave father were not given right to their children, Harriet was never able to live with her father. Upon Harriet's mother's death bed, her mistress promised her that her children would never have to ender the hardships of being a slave (Jacobs, 14). Her Grandmother took great care of Harriet during the remainder of her life in the South. Harriet's mistress taught her to read and write, which was very uncommon for slave of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and it was often forbidden. During the next six years of Harriet's life she was treated very well by her mistress, but at age twelve her kind mistress died (Jacobs, 15). Shortly after her mistress death, he father also died. Harriet was sure that she would be set free, but she was wrong. Harriet was now the slave of her mistress's young niece who was only three years old.

Her new mistress was too young to make decisions about her, so the father of her mistress "Dr. Flint" took control of her. Harriet was treated very well for a slave, but she soon realized that everything was about to change. "Dr. Flint" started to make sexual advances toward Harriet, but she refused to acknowledge them (Jacobs, 44). It was not

uncommon for slave girls to be sexual assaulted and given sexual advances by their master. Harriet's grandmother played a major role in not allowing the sexual advances go any farther.

As Harriet matured into a woman her desire to get married increased greatly. Since it was forbidden for slave to legally get married Harriet was never able to marry her love of her life a free black man. She became angry at "Dr. Flint" that he would not allow her love to purchase her and marry her. Harriet then thought having sexual relations with "Mr. Sands", a fellow friend of "Dr. Flint", would get back at him for not allowing her to marry. "Mr. Sands" was a white man and when Harriet's grandmother found out about the relations she wanted nothing to do with Harriet, but she soon accepted it. At age sixteen Harriet had her first child a son named "Benny" (Jacobs, 94). He was born premature and sick like many other slave babies. Four years later Harriet would have another child by "Mr. Sands", a girl names "Ellen" (Jacobs, 119).

As time went on the sexual advance of "Dr. Flint" increased. He then promised that he would free her and her children if you moved to a cabin that he would build for her. Harriet knew better that there was something wrong with this and she refused. "Dr. Flint" then sent Harriet to the big plantation to work in the fields (Jacobs, 131). Harriet was not happy with his decision, but she knew that it was the best thing to do instead of being his sexual slave. Harriet worked on the plantation for months planning for her escape to freedom.

When Harriet was 21 she finalized her plan to run away. Harriet hid in her Grandmother's house under the front porch for six years. During that time Harriet did many great things for her children, even though her children and brother were sent to jail.

Harriet had convinced “Mr. Sands” the father of her children to purchase her children and brother and make them free (Jacobs, 160). “Mr. Sands” bought her children and brother and sent them away to different relatives to be taken care of and treated kindly.

During Harriet’s hiding “Dr. Flint” took many trips to the North in search of Harriet. He was convinced that he would eventually find her in the North. On one occasion Harriet devised a plan to send her Grandmother and “Dr. Flint” letters from the north. It worked as planned and “Dr. Flint” was convinced that Harriet was in the North. “Dr. Flint” never gave up on the search for Harriet.

In 1842, Harriet was finally northward bound. She traveled by boat with a friend named “Fanny” to Philadelphia. This was a great turning point in Harriet’s life. Not long after arriving in Philadelphia Harriet traveled to New York to see her daughter “Ellen”. There she learned that “Mr. Sands” had not kept his promise in freeing her children. She was extremely upset and was determined to set her daughter and son free. Harriet then became determined to find a job and support herself. She found a very caring lady named “Mrs. Bruce” who needed a nurse for her baby and Harriet soon began her employment there taking care of the baby. It was uncommon for black’s to find a job so easily as Harriet did.

Harriet started to thrive in the north and was happy with her life. She had a couple of close encounters of being caught by “Dr. Flint”. He had even visited the same house where Harriet’s daughter lived. After the close encounter with “Dr. Flint”, Harriet did not feel safe in New York anymore (Jacobs, 274). Harriet was no longer working for “Mrs. Bruce” and she soon news came to her of “Mrs. Bruce’s” death. “Mr. Bruce” offered Harriet a chance to go to England with him and his daughter. Harriet took the

opportunity and left her son and daughter at home to tend to school. In England, Harriet felt that she was not looked down upon by the color of her skin. “She felt as if a great milestone had been lifted off of her breast.” (Jacobs, 275) This was a great turning point in Harriet’s life. Shortly after returning to America, Harriet and her children were bought and set free by “Mr. Bruce’s” second wife.

Harriet’s story does not end there. She has many struggles being a free black woman. The year after she was set free she started to write her autobiography the Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. She had a hard time getting it published, but with the help of Lydia Maria Child she was able to get it published. For the remainder of Harriet’s life she did many great things. She lived in Washington, D.C. nursing black troop and educating the blacks on how to read and write (“Biography”). Harriet and her daughter eventually traveled to London to raise money for orphanage in Savannah, Georgia where she did relief work (“Biography”). Harriet also established The Jacobs Free School in Alexandria, providing black teachers for the refugees. Harriet also became actively involved in the National Association of Colored Women in Washington, D.C. shortly before her death. Harriet died 1897 and was buried in Mount Auburn Cemetery, Cambridge.

Harriet Ann Jacobs was a great African American woman. She did not lead an ordinary life as a woman born into slavery. She overcame many great obstacles that made her an outstanding woman. From avoiding sexual advances from her master to becoming a free woman with her children, everything in her life shaped her into what she was. Harriet Ann Jacobs will also be remembered through her autobiography and her work to make life better for other African Americans.

## References

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