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Editor's Note

Harriet Jacobs **was born** in Edenton, North Carolina, **in 1813**. **As a young woman** she **ran away from** her master. As she **was hiding out** in a small space above a storeroom in her grandmother's house **for seven years** she **collected** memories. **In 1842**, she **escaped** to the North and **lived** as a fugitive **while** she **was working** to reunite herself with her two children. In these extracts from her autobiography, her childhood, her years in her hiding space, her escape to the North, and her experiences as a free woman **are all described** in details. Harriet **used** a pseudonym fearing for her life even **after slavery was abolished in 1865**.

Source : From Harriet A. Jacobs (Harriet Ann), 1813-1897 and Lydia Maria Francis Child, 1802-1880, [editor]. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Written by Herself. Boston: Published for the Author, 1861, c1860.

2 - 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 and her white mistress played together as children; and, when they became women, my mother was a most faithful servant to her whiter sister. On her deathbed her mistress promised that her children should never suffer for anything; and during her lifetime she kept her word. But ignoring my mother's long and faithful service to her owners, not one of her children escaped the slave market. Slaves are no more to their masters, than the cotton they plant, or the horses they tend.

3 - The Church and Slavery. After the alarm caused by Nat Turner's insurrection had stopped **around 1832**, the slaveholders came to the conclusion that it would be well to give the slaves enough of religious instruction to keep them from* murdering their masters. It was at last decided that they should meet at the house of a free colored man, who was a member. I was invited to attend, **because I was in my twenties and I was a slave yet I knew how to read and write. My master Dr Flint though usually strict, allowed me to go.** Sunday evening came, and, trusting to the cover of night, I ventured out. The reverend gentleman knelt in prayer, then seated himself, and requested all present, who could read, to open their books, while he gave out the portions he wished them to repeat or respond to. His text was, "Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling as unto Christ." Pious Mr. Pike brushed up his hair till it stood upright, and, in deep, solemn tones, began: "You are rebellious sinners. Your hearts are filled with all manner of evil! Repent and obey your master!"

*to hold a service: dire la messe

*to keep so. from +ing: empêcher qq'un de

4- "**\$300 REWARD!** Ran away from the subscriber, an intelligent, bright, mulatto girl, named Linda, 21 years age. Five feet four inches high. Dark eyes, and black hair inclined to curl; but it can be made straight. Has a decayed spot on a front tooth. She can read and write, and in all probability will try to get to the Free States. All persons are forbidden, under penalty of the law, to host or employ said slave. \$150 will be given to whoever takes her in the state, and \$300 if taken out of the state and delivered to me, or put in jail.

Dr. Flint."

5- The Escape. I went about my evening work with trembling steps. I shut all the windows, locked all the doors, and went up to the third story, to wait till midnight. At half past twelve I stepped softly down stairs. I stopped on the second floor, thinking I heard a noise **coming from Dr Flint's room**. I felt my way down into the parlor, and looked out of the window. The night was so intensely dark that I could see nothing. I raised the window very softly and jumped out. Large drops of rain were falling, and the darkness frightened me. I tapped softly at the window of a room, occupied by a woman, who had lived in the house for several years. I knew she was a faithful friend, and could be trusted with my secret. I tapped several times before she heard me. At last she raised the window, and I whispered, "Sally, I have run away. Let me in, quick." She opened the door softly, and said in low tones, "For God's sake, don't. Don't run away, Linda."

I replied, "Sally, they are going to carry my children to the plantation to-morrow; now, would you advise me to go back?"

"No, chile, no," answered she. "When dey finds you is gone, dey won't want de chillern; but where is you going to hide? Dey knows ebery inch ob dis house."

I told her I had a hiding-place, and that was all it was best for her to know.

6 - A free prisoner - A small shed* had been added to my grandmother's house years ago. Between these boards and the roof was a very small *garret, never occupied by anything but rats and mice. The air was *stifling; the darkness total. The rats and mice ran over my bed. Morning came. I knew it only by the noises I heard; for in my small den* day and night were all the same. I suffered for air even more than for light. Yet I could hear the voices of my children. There I was never cruelly over-worked; never lacerated with the whip* from head to foot; I was never so beaten and bruised that I could not turn from one side to the other; I never had my heel-strings* cut to prevent my running away; I was never chained to a log and forced to drag it about, while I *toiled in the fields from morning till night; I was never branded* with hot iron, or torn by bloodhounds*. That's why I would have chosen this hiding place, rather than my lot as a slave, though white people considered it an easy one; and it was so compared with the *fate of other slaves.

*shed: cabanon *garret: mansarde / minuscule grenier *swamp: marécage *stifling: étouffant *weary: extremely tired *wretched: misérables *den: tanière **whip: fouet *Heel-string: tendon d'Achille *to toil: trimer *branded: marquée au fer rouge *bloodhounds: limier (chien de chasse dressés pour chasser les esclaves en fuite.)fate: sort / destin

7- Away and Free at last ! The vessel* was soon under way, but we made slow progress. The wind was against us. Until there were miles of water between us and our enemies, we were filled with constant apprehension that the *constables would come on board. Now that the captain was paid for our passage, might he not be tempted to make more money by giving us up to those who claimed us as property? Slavery had made me suspicious of every body. He told us he was a Southerner by birth, and had spent the greater part of his life in the Slave States, and that he had recently lost a brother who traded in slaves. "But," said he, "it is a pitiable and degrading business, and I always felt ashamed to acknowledge my brother in connection with it." I shall never forget that night. The air of spring was so refreshing! And how shall I describe my sensations when we were sailing on Chesapeake Bay? O, the beautiful sunshine! the exhilarating breeze! and I could enjoy them without fear or restraint. I had never realized what grand things air and sunlight are till I had been deprived* of them.

*vessel: boat *constables: police officer *dismal: lugubre * To be deprived of : être privé de

8 - Unequal girls I once saw two beautiful children playing together. One was a white child; the other was her slave, and also her sister. When I saw them embracing each other, and heard their joyous laughter, I knew how soon her laughter would be changed to sadness. The white child grew up to be a woman. From childhood to womanhood her life bloomed with flowers under a sunny sky. How had those years dealt with her slave sister, the little playmate of her childhood? She, also, was very beautiful; but the flowers and sunshine of love were not for her. Today I remember these two girls and I wonder: what if they had lived as friends and not enemies ?

In view of these things, why are ye silent, ye free men and women of the north? God bless those, every where, who are laboring to advance the cause of humanity! My old heart is so full, and my trembling pen is so weak!