

DOVER · THRIFT · EDITIONS

HARRIET JACOBS
INCIDENTS IN THE
LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL

UNABRIDGED



DOVER · THRIFT · EDITIONS

**Incidents
in the
Life of a Slave Girl**
HARRIET JACOBS



DOVER PUBLICATIONS, INC.
Mineola, New York

DOVER THRIFT EDITIONS

GENERAL EDITOR: PAUL NEGRI

EDITOR OF THIS VOLUME: JOSLYN T. PINE

Copyright

Note copyright © 2001 by Dover Publications, Inc.

All rights reserved under Pan American and International Copyright Conventions.

Bibliographical Note

This Dover edition, first published in 2001, is an unabridged republication of a standard text of the work originally published in 1861 in Boston. A new introductory Note has been specially prepared for this edition.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Jacobs, Harriet A. (Harriet Ann), 1813–1897.

Incidents in the life of a slave girl / Harriet Jacobs.

p. cm. — (Dover thrift editions)

Originally published: Boston, 1861.

ISBN 0-486-41931-2 (pbk.)

1. Jacobs, Harriet A. (Harriet Ann), 1813–1897. 2. Slaves—United States—Biography. 3. Women slaves—United States—Biography. 4. Slaves—United States—Social conditions. I. Title. II. Series.

E444 .J17 A3 2001d

305.5'67'092—dc21

B

2001032350

Manufactured in the United States of America
Dover Publications, Inc., 31 East 2nd Street, Mineola, N.Y. 11501

DOVER THRIFT EDITIONS

GENERAL EDITOR: PAUL NEGRI

EDITOR OF THIS VOLUME: JOSLYN T. PINE

Copyright

Note copyright © 2001 by Dover Publications, Inc.

All rights reserved under Pan American and International Copyright Conventions.

Bibliographical Note

This Dover edition, first published in 2001, is an unabridged republication of a standard text of the work originally published in 1861 in Boston. A new introductory Note has been specially prepared for this edition.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Jacobs, Harriet A. (Harriet Ann), 1813–1897.

Incidents in the life of a slave girl / Harriet Jacobs.

p. cm. — (Dover thrift editions)

Originally published: Boston, 1861.

ISBN 0-486-41931-2 (pbk.)

1. Jacobs, Harriet A. (Harriet Ann), 1813–1897. 2. Slaves—United States—Biography. 3. Women slaves—United States—Biography. 4. Slaves—United States—Social conditions. I. Title. II. Series.

E444 .J17 A3 2001d

305.5'67'092—dc21

B

2001032350

Manufactured in the United States of America
Dover Publications, Inc., 31 East 2nd Street, Mineola, N.Y. 11501

Note

IN 1619 IN Jamestown, Virginia, an observer of the times remarked matter-of-factly in his diary, “There came in a Dutch man-of-warre that sold us 20 negars.” With no more fanfare than this, American slavery had begun. By 1860, a greatly distressed Abraham Lincoln felt compelled to note that nearly one-sixth of the total population of the so-called “land of the free” consisted of slaves. In America, the institution of slavery was based solely on race—not religion, not class. Thus from the very start it defined one of the dominant themes in our nation’s history.

Writing about the abolitionist movement in the 1840s, one northern editor commented, “Argument provokes argument, reason is met by sophistry; but narratives of slaves go right to the heart of men.” A genre that first appeared in 1760, the slave narrative helped persuade much of antebellum America that slavery was a great blight upon the nation’s integrity as a system totally irreconcilable with moral and spiritual values. As the narratives opened up a dialogue between blacks and whites, they enlightened white audiences about the shared humanity of the black people, and thus their equal entitlement to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Further, their legacy endures to this day as contemporary writers such as Richard Wright (*Black Boy*), William Styron (*The Confessions of Nat Turner*), and Toni Morrison (*Beloved*), to name just a few, continue to find relevance in the form.

In 1861, the same year the Civil War began, Harriet Jacobs published her remarkable account of one black female slave’s escape to freedom. Using the pseudonym Linda Brent to protect the identities of those dear to her, she penned what was in fact her own story: an eye-witness account of the dehumanizing process by which human beings are reduced to mere personal property, focusing in particular on the

sexual and moral ramifications for its female victims. Starting at the age of fifteen, Jacobs battles relentlessly against a destiny, justified by the notion that she was “made for his use, made to obey his command in every thing,” that would make her the sexual object of her master, the slave owner Flint (Dr. James Norcom in real life). Ultimately, she outwits him by taking control of her own fate: choosing a white male neighbor, Mr. Sands (Samuel Treadwell Sawyer), to be her lover and the father of her two children; hiding for seven years in her grandmother’s attic—a place of virtual entombment which she prefers to her “lot as a slave”; and finally, escaping to the North where she eventually finds a career as an antislavery activist and worker among black refugees, supplying them with medical care and relief supplies, as well as establishing the Jacobs Free School.

Many a scholar has noted that in general, the slaves who learned to read and write were the first to run away, and Harriet Jacobs is an inspiring example of the truth of that observation. She learned to read at the age of six, and during the seven years of her self-imposed imprisonment, did nothing but read and sew. In 1849, Jacobs spent the better part of a year working in the Anti-Slavery Reading Room in Rochester, New York, where she read a great deal of abolitionist literature. It was in Rochester too that Jacobs met the noted Quaker abolitionist Amy Post, who encouraged her to tell her story. It is worthy of note that Post was also involved in the early women’s movement, and attended the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848. The other “whole-souled woman” (in Jacobs’ words) who was instrumental in bringing *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* to fruition was Lydia Maria Child, herself a writer and editor for some thirty years at the time of her involvement. Child edited the book and supplied the requisite Introduction. (The inclusion of one or more authenticating documents by prominent white people was a conventional device for making slave narratives credible to a white readership.)

Harriet Jacobs introduced a new dimension to the slave narrative when she combined into its traditional form elements from the so-called sentimental novel (sometimes known as the novel of seduction) in order to dramatize her theme of virtue under siege. In effect, she was writing primarily in terms of gender issues for an audience of free white women in the hope of galvanizing them into action against slavery. Her story focused on the plight of enslaved black women who, as material possessions, were subject to routine rape by their masters. To satisfy the sexual desires of these men and to increase their wealth by producing more slaves, these hapless women were deprived of any semblance of family, as well as denied a place in the Victorian “cult of true womanhood” wherein piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity would

affirm their proper place in the moral and social order. Jacobs' book enlisted the sympathies of the reader by making it impossible to ignore the dual nature of the brutality and injustice inflicted on female slaves that trampled on their humanity and their gender at once. Her words at the end of the book therefore resound with special meaning when she writes, "my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage. I and my children are now free!"

“Northerners know nothing at all about Slavery. They think it is perpetual bondage only. They have no conception of the depth of *degradation* involved in that word, SLAVERY; if they had, they would never cease their efforts until so horrible a system was overthrown.”

A WOMAN OF NORTH CAROLINA.

“Rise up, ye women that are at ease! Hear my voice, ye careless daughters! Give ear unto my speech.”

ISAIAH xxxii. 9.

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 to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at

the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse. I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens to convince the people of the Free States what Slavery really is. Only by experience can any one realize how deep, and dark, and foul is that pit of abominations. May the blessing of God rest on this imperfect effort in behalf of my persecuted people!

LINDA BRENT.

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 disposed to give her opportunities for self-improvement.

I am well aware that many will accuse me of indecorum for presenting these pages to the public; for the experiences of this intelligent

and much-injured woman belong to a class which some call delicate subjects, and others indelicate. This peculiar phase of Slavery has generally been kept veiled; but the public ought to be made acquainted with its monstrous features, and I willingly take the responsibility of presenting them with the veil withdrawn. I do this for the sake of my sisters in bondage, who are suffering wrongs so foul, that our ears are too delicate to listen to them. I do it with the hope of arousing conscientious and reflecting women at the North to a sense of their duty in the exertion of moral influence on the question of Slavery, on all possible occasions. I do it with the hope that every man who reads this narrative will swear solemnly before God that, so far as he has power to prevent it, no fugitive from Slavery shall ever be sent back to suffer in that loathsome den of corruption and cruelty.

L. MARIA CHILD.

CONTENTS.

CHILDHOOD.	8
THE NEW MASTER AND MISTRESS.	11
THE SLAVES' NEW YEAR'S DAY.	16
THE SLAVE WHO DARED TO FEEL LIKE A MAN.	17
THE TRIALS OF GIRLHOOD.	26
THE JEALOUS MISTRESS.	28
THE LOVER.	33
WHAT SLAVES ARE TAUGHT TO THINK OF THE NORTH.	39
SKETCHES OF NEIGHBORING SLAVEHOLDERS.	41
A PERILOUS PASSAGE IN THE SLAVE GIRL'S LIFE.	47
THE NEW TIE TO LIFE.	51
FEAR OF INSURRECTION.	55
THE CHURCH AND SLAVERY.	59
ANOTHER LINK TO LIFE.	65
CONTINUED PERSECUTIONS.	68
SCENES AT THE PLANTATION.	73
THE FLIGHT.	80
MONTHS OF PERIL.	83
THE CHILDREN SOLD.	88
NEW PERILS.	92
THE LOOPHOLE OF RETREAT.	95

CHRISTMAS FESTIVITIES.	98
STILL IN PRISON.	100
THE CANDIDATE FOR CONGRESS.	103
COMPETITION IN CUNNING.	105
IMPORTANT ERA IN MY BROTHER'S LIFE.	109
NEW DESTINATION FOR THE CHILDREN.	113
AUNT NANCY.	118
PREPARATIONS FOR ESCAPE.	122
NORTHWARD BOUND.	129
INCIDENTS IN PHILADELPHIA.	132
THE MEETING OF MOTHER AND DAUGHTER.	135
A HOME FOUND.	138
THE OLD ENEMY AGAIN.	140
PREJUDICE AGAINST COLOR.	143
THE HAIRBREADTH ESCAPE.	145
A VISIT TO ENGLAND.	149
RENEWED INVITATIONS TO GO SOUTH.	151
THE CONFESSION.	153
THE FUGITIVE SLAVE LAW.	154
FREE AT LAST.	159
<hr/>	
APPENDIX.	165

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

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 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 deathbed 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 upon 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 five years old. So vanished our hopes. My mistress had taught me the