

Harriet Jacobs

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861)

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl—originally published under the pseudonym Linda Brent—is perhaps the definitive work describing women’s experiences under bondage. Jacobs was born into slavery in North Carolina and would eventually escape North after a difficult journey that involved a seven-year residency in a tiny attic.

The following excerpts from *Incidents* are poignant and heartbreaking. They detail the disturbing advances of a white master on his female “property,” the utter powerlessness and vulnerability of slave girls, and the complications that those realities created for relations within African-American (as well as white) families.

Chapter V: The Trials of Girlhood

DURING the first years of my service in Dr. Flint's family, I was accustomed to share some indulgences with the children of my mistress. Though this seemed to me no more than right, I was grateful for it, and tried to merit the kindness by the faithful discharge of my duties. But I now entered on my fifteenth year—a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl. My master began to whisper foul words in my ear. Young as I was, I could not remain ignorant of their import. I tried to treat them with indifference or contempt. The master's age, my extreme youth, and the fear that his conduct would be reported to my grandmother¹, made him bear this treatment for many months. He was a crafty man, and resorted to many means to accomplish his purposes. Sometimes he had stormy, terrific ways, that made his victims tremble; sometimes he assumed a gentleness that he thought must surely subdue. Of the two, I preferred his stormy moods, although they left me trembling. He tried his utmost to corrupt the pure principles my grandmother had instilled. He peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of. I turned from him with disgust and hatred. But he was my master. I was compelled to live under the same roof with him—where I saw a man forty years my senior daily violating the most sacred commandments of nature. He told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things. My soul revolted against the mean tyranny. But where could I turn for protection? No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death; all these are inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men. The mistress, who ought to protect the helpless victim, has no other feelings towards her but those of jealousy and rage. The degradation, the wrongs, the vices, that grow out of slavery, are more than I can describe. ...

Every where the years bring to all enough of sin and sorrow; but in slavery the very dawn of life is darkened by these shadows. Even the little child, who is accustomed to wait on her mistress and her children, will learn, before she is twelve years old, why it is that her mistress hates such and such a one among the slaves. Perhaps the child's own mother is among those hated ones. She listens to violent outbreaks of jealous passion, and cannot help understanding what is the cause. She will become prematurely knowing in evil things. Soon she will learn to tremble when she

¹ Jacobs’s grandmother was a free black woman.

45 hears her master's footfall. She will be compelled to realize that she is no longer a child. If God
has bestowed beauty upon her, it will prove her greatest curse. That which commands admiration
in the white woman only hastens the degradation of the female slave. I know that some are too
much brutalized by slavery to feel the humiliation of their position; but many slaves feel it most
50 acutely, and shrink from the memory of it. I cannot tell how much I suffered in the presence of
these wrongs, nor how I am still pained by the retrospect. My master met me at every turn,
reminding me that I belonged to him, and swearing by heaven and earth that he would compel
me to submit to him. ...

I longed for some one to confide in. I would have given the world to have laid my head on my
55 grandmother's faithful bosom, and told her all my troubles. But Dr. Flint swore he would kill me,
if I was not as silent as the grave. Then, although my grandmother was all in all to me, I feared
her as well as loved her. I had been accustomed to look up to her with a respect bordering upon
awe. I was very young, and felt shamefaced about telling her such impure things, especially as I
knew her to be very strict on such subjects. Moreover, she was a woman of a high spirit. She was
60 usually very quiet in her demeanor; but if her indignation was once roused, it was not very easily
quelled. I had been told that she once chased a white gentleman with a loaded pistol, because he
insulted one of her daughters. I dreaded the consequences of a violent outbreak; and both pride
and fear kept me silent. But though I did not confide in my grandmother, and even evaded her
vigilant watchfulness and inquiry, her presence in the neighborhood was some protection to me.
65 Though she had been a slave, Dr. Flint was afraid of her. He dreaded her scorching rebukes.
Moreover, she was known and patronized by many people; and he did not wish to have his
villany [sic] made public. It was lucky for me that I did not live on a distant plantation, but in a
town not so large that the inhabitants were ignorant of each other's affairs. Bad as are the laws
and customs in a slaveholding community, the doctor, as a professional man, deemed it prudent
70 to keep up some outward show of decency. ...

I once saw two beautiful children playing together. One was a fair white child; the other was her
slave, and also her sister. When I saw them embracing each other, and heard their joyous
laughter, I turned sadly away from the lovely sight. I foresaw the inevitable blight that would fall
75 on the little slave's heart. I knew how soon her laughter would be changed to sighs. The fair child
grew up to be a still fairer woman. From childhood to womanhood her pathway was blooming
with flowers, and overarched by a sunny sky. Scarcely one day of her life had been clouded
when the sun rose on her happy bridal morning.

80 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. She drank the cup of
sin, and shame, and misery, whereof her persecuted race are compelled to drink. ...

Chapter VI: The Jealous Mistress

85 I WOULD ten thousand times rather that my children should be the half-starved paupers of
Ireland than to be the most pampered among the slaves of America. I would rather drudge out
my life on a cotton plantation, till the grave opened to give me rest, than to live with an
unprincipled master and a jealous mistress. The felon's home in a penitentiary is preferable. He
90 may repent, and turn from the error of his ways, and so find peace; but it is not so with a favorite

slave. She is not allowed to have any pride of character. It is deemed a crime in her to wish to be virtuous. ...

95 I had entered my sixteenth year, and every day it became more apparent that my presence was
intolerable to Mrs. Flint. Angry words frequently passed between her and her husband. He had
never punished me himself, and he would not allow any body else to punish me. In that respect,
she was never satisfied; but, in her angry moods, no terms were too vile for her to bestow upon
me. Yet I, whom she detested so bitterly, had far more pity for her than he had, whose duty it
was to make her life happy. I never wronged her, or wished to wrong her; and one word of
100 kindness from her would have brought me to her feet.

After repeated quarrels between the doctor and his wife, he announced his intention to take his
youngest daughter, then four years old, to sleep in his apartment. It was necessary that a servant
should sleep in the same room, to be on hand if the child stirred. I was selected for that office,
105 and informed for what purpose that arrangement had been made. By managing to keep within
sight of people, as much as possible during the day time, I had hitherto succeeded in eluding my
master, though a razor was often held to my throat to force me to change this line of policy. At
night I slept by the side of my great aunt, where I felt safe. He was too prudent to come into her
room. She was an old woman, and had been in the family many years. Moreover, as a married
110 man, and a professional man, he deemed it necessary to save appearances in some degree. But he
resolved to remove the obstacle in the way of his scheme; and he thought he had planned it so
that he should evade suspicion. He was well aware how much I prized my refuge by the side of
my old aunt, and he determined to dispossess me of it. The first night the doctor had the little
child in his room alone. The next morning, I was ordered to take my station as nurse the
115 following night. A kind Providence interposed in my favor. During the day Mrs. Flint heard of
this new arrangement, and a storm followed. I rejoiced to hear it rage. ...

The secrets of slavery are concealed like those of the Inquisition. My master was, to my
knowledge, the father of eleven slaves. But did the mothers dare to tell who was the father of
120 their children? Did the other slaves dare to allude to it, except in whispers among themselves?
No, indeed! They knew too well the terrible consequences. ...

Southern women often marry a man knowing that he is the father of many little slaves. They do
not trouble themselves about it. They regard such children as property, as marketable as the pigs
125 on the plantation; and it is seldom that they do not make them aware of this by passing them into
the slave-trader's hands as soon as possible, and thus getting them out of their sight. I am glad to
say there are some honorable exceptions.

I have myself known two southern wives who exhorted their husbands to free those slaves
130 towards whom they stood in a "parental relation;" and their request was granted. These husbands
blushed before the superior nobleness of their wives' natures. Though they had only counselled
them to do that which it was their duty to do, it commanded their respect, and rendered their
conduct more exemplary. Concealment was at an end, and confidence took the place of distrust.

135 Though this bad institution deadens the moral sense, even in white women, to a fearful extent, it
is not altogether extinct. I have heard southern ladies say of Mr. Such a one, "He not only thinks

it no disgrace to be the father of those little niggers, but he is not ashamed to call himself their master. I declare, such things ought not to be tolerated in any decent society!"

140 Chapter X: A Perilous Passage in the Slave Girl's Life

... Dr. Flint contrived a new plan. He seemed to have an idea that my fear of my mistress was his greatest obstacle. In the blindest tones, he told me that he was going to build a small house for me, in a secluded place, four miles away from the town. I shuddered; but I was constrained to
145 listen, while he talked of his intention to give me a home of my own, and to make a lady of me. Hitherto, I had escaped my dreaded fate, by being in the midst of people. My grandmother had already had high words with my master about me. She had told him pretty plainly what she thought of his character, and there was considerable gossip in the neighborhood about our affairs, to which the open-mouthed jealousy of Mrs. Flint contributed not a little. When my master said
150 he was going to build a house for me, and that he could do it with little trouble and expense, I was in hopes something would happen to frustrate his scheme; but I soon heard that the house was actually begun. I vowed before my Maker that I would never enter it. ... What *could* I do? I thought and thought, till I became desperate, and made a plunge into the abyss.

155 And now, reader, I come to a period in my unhappy life, which I would gladly forget if I could. The remembrance fills me with sorrow and shame. It pains me to tell you of it; but I have promised to tell you the truth, and I will do it honestly, let it cost me what it may. I will not try to screen myself behind the plea of compulsion from a master; for it was not so. Neither can I plead ignorance or thoughtlessness. For years, my master had done his utmost to pollute my mind with
160 foul images, and to destroy the pure principles inculcated by my grandmother, and the good mistress of my childhood. The influences of slavery had had the same effect on me that they had on other young girls; they had made me prematurely knowing, concerning the evil ways of the world. I know what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation.

165 But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely! If slavery had been abolished, I, also, could have married the man of my choice; I could have had a home shielded by the laws; and I should have been spared the painful task of confessing what I am now about to relate; but all my prospects had been
170 blighted by slavery. I wanted to keep myself pure; and, under the most adverse circumstances, I tried hard to preserve my self-respect; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery; and the monster proved too strong for me. I felt as if I was forsaken by God and man; as if all my efforts must be frustrated; and I became reckless in my despair.

175 I have told you that Dr. Flint's persecutions and his wife's jealousy had given rise to some gossip in the neighborhood. Among others, it chanced that a white unmarried gentleman had obtained some knowledge of the circumstances in which I was placed. He knew my grandmother, and often spoke to me in the street. He became interested for me, and asked questions about my master, which I answered in part. He expressed a great deal of sympathy, and a wish to aid me.
180 He constantly sought opportunities to see me, and wrote to me frequently. I was a poor slave girl, only fifteen years old.

So much attention from a superior person was, of course, flattering; for human nature is the same in all. I also felt grateful for his sympathy, and encouraged by his kind words. It seemed to me a great thing to have such a friend. By degrees, a more tender feeling crept into my heart. He was an educated and eloquent gentleman; too eloquent, alas, for the poor slave girl who trusted in him. Of course I saw whither all this was tending. I knew the impassable gulf between us; but to be an object of interest to a man who is not married, and who is not her master, is agreeable to the pride and feelings of a slave, if her miserable situation has left her any pride or sentiment. It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment. A master may treat you as rudely as he pleases, and you dare not speak; moreover, the wrong does not seem so great with an unmarried man, as with one who has a wife to be made unhappy. There may be sophistry in all this; but the condition of a slave confuses all principles of morality, and, in fact, renders the practice of them impossible.

When I found that my master had actually begun to build the lonely cottage, other feelings mixed with those I have described. Revenge, and calculations of interest, were added to flattered vanity and sincere gratitude for kindness. I knew nothing would enrage Dr. Flint so much as to know that I favored another; and it was something to triumph over my tyrant even in that small way. I thought he would revenge himself by selling me, and I was sure my friend, Mr. Sands, would buy me. He was a man of more generosity and feeling than my master, and I thought my freedom could be easily obtained from him. The crisis of my fate now came so near that I was desperate. I shuddered to think of being the mother of children that should be owned by my old tyrant. I knew that as soon as a new fancy took him, his victims were sold far off to get rid of them; especially if they had children. I had seen several women sold, with his babies at the breast. He never allowed his offspring by slaves to remain long in sight of himself and his wife. Of a man who was not my master I could ask to have my children well supported; and in this case, I felt confident I should obtain the boon. I also felt quite sure that they would be made free. With all these thoughts revolving in my mind, and seeing no other way of escaping the doom I so much dreaded, I made a headlong plunge. Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another. ...

The months passed on. I had many unhappy hours. I secretly mourned over the sorrow I was bringing on my grandmother, who had so tried to shield me from harm. I knew that I was the greatest comfort of her old age, and that it was a source of pride to her that I had not degraded myself, like most of the slaves. I wanted to confess to her that I was no longer worthy of her love; but I could not utter the dreaded words.

As for Dr. Flint, I had a feeling of satisfaction and triumph in the thought of telling *him*. From time to time he told me of his intended arrangements, and I was silent. At last, he came and told me the cottage was completed, and ordered me to go to it. I told him I would never enter it. He said, "I have heard enough of such talk as that. You shall go, if you are carried by force; and you shall remain there." I replied, "I will never go there. In a few months I shall be a mother." He stood and looked at me in dumb amazement, and left the house without a word. I thought I should be happy in my triumph over him. But now that the truth was out, and my relatives would hear of it, I felt wretched. Humble as were their circumstances, they had pride in my good

230 character. Now, how could I look them in the face? My self-respect was gone! I had resolved that I would be virtuous, though I was a slave. I had said, "Let the storm beat! I will brave it till I die." And now, how humiliated I felt!

I went to my grandmother. My lips moved to make confession, but the words stuck in my throat. I sat down in the shade of a tree at her door and began to sew. I think she saw something unusual
235 was the matter with me. ... Presently, in came my mistress, like a mad woman, and accused me concerning her husband. My grandmother, whose suspicions had been previously awakened, believed what she said. She exclaimed, "O Linda! has it come to this? I had rather see you dead than to see you as you now are. You are a disgrace to your dead mother." She tore from my fingers my mother's wedding ring and her silver thimble. "Go away!" she exclaimed, "and never
240 come to my house, again." ... How I longed to throw myself at her feet, and tell her all the truth! But she had ordered me to go, and never to come there again. After a few minutes, I mustered strength, and started to obey her. With what feelings did I now close that little gate, which I used to open with such an eager hand in my childhood! It closed upon me with a sound I never heard before.

245 Where could I go? I was afraid to return to my master's. I walked on recklessly, not caring where I went, or what would become of me. When I had gone four or five miles, fatigue compelled me to stop. ... At last, with great effort I roused myself, and walked some distance further, to the house of a woman who had been a friend of my mother. When I told her why I was there, she
250 spoke soothingly to me; but I could not be comforted. I thought I could bear my shame if I could only be reconciled to my grandmother. I longed to open my heart to her. I thought if she could know the real state of the case, and all I had been bearing for years, she would perhaps judge me less harshly. My friend advised me to send for her. I did so; but days of agonizing suspense passed before she came. Had she utterly forsaken me? No. She came at last. I knelt before her,
255 and told her the things that had poisoned my life; how long I had been persecuted; that I saw no way of escape; and in an hour of extremity I had become desperate. She listened in silence. I told her I would bear any thing and do any thing, if in time I had hopes of obtaining her forgiveness. I begged of her to pity me, for my dead mother's sake. And she did pity me. She did not say, "I forgive you;" but she looked at me lovingly, with her eyes full of tears. She laid her old hand
260 gently on my head, and murmured, "Poor child! Poor child!"

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