



## *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (Events described: prior to 1808; 1827)

*Sojourner Truth was an African American abolitionist and women's rights advocate. Born into slavery in New York, she grew up with the name Isabella but began calling herself Sojourner Truth in her 40s. "Isabella" (also shortened to "Isabel" or "Bell") is the name used in her authorized biography, written for her by white abolitionist Olive Gilbert. Two excerpts from that biography are presented here.*

*The first excerpt describes Isabella's religious upbringing at the hand of her mother. This would have been prior to 1808, by which time Isabella had been sold away from her parents, sometime between the ages of 9 and 11.*

*The second excerpt describes a confrontation that occurred in 1827 between Isabella, then around 30 years old and recently emancipated, and her former master's wife, Elizabeth Dumont, over the sale of Isabella's 5-year-old son Peter. The story leading up to that confrontation is a little complicated. Until 1827, Isabella was enslaved to white New Yorker John Dumont, as were her four children. Under the terms of New York's gradual emancipation laws, Isabella became free on July 4, 1827. Her children, by contrast, didn't have to be freed until they reached adulthood; but the law said that they couldn't be sold out of the state before then, thus assuring that they would eventually be freed. Nevertheless, in violation of the law, Peter was sold out of the state. It took some time for Isabella to discover that Peter was no longer in New York, because friction between her and John Dumont had resulted in Isabella finishing her term of servitude working for a different family, the Van Wageners, in another town, while most of her children remained with the Dumonts. With the aid of sympathetic whites, Isabella was able to get the courts to return Peter to her.*

### Her Religious Instruction

Isabella and Peter, her youngest brother, remained, with their parents, the legal property of Charles Ardinburgh till his decease, which took place when Isabella was near nine years old.

[...S]he was often surprised to find her mother in tears; and when, in her simplicity, she inquired, "Mau-mau, what makes you cry?" she would answer, "Oh, my child, I am thinking of your brothers and sisters that have been sold away from me." [...]

In the evening, when her mother's work was done, she would sit down under the sparkling vault of heaven and, calling her children to her, would talk to them of the only Being that could effectually aid or protect them. Her teachings were delivered in Low Dutch, her only language, and, translated into English, ran nearly as follows:

"My children, there is a God, who hears and sees you."

"A *God*, mau-mau! Where does he live?" asked the children.

"He lives in the sky," she replied; "and when you are beaten, or cruelly treated, or fall into any trouble, you must ask help of him, and he will always hear and help you."

She taught them to kneel and say the Lord's Prayer. She entreated them to refrain from lying and stealing, and to strive to obey their masters.

At times, a groan would escape her, and she would break out in the language of the Psalmist—"Oh Lord, how long? Oh Lord, how long?" And in reply to Isabella's question, "What ails you, mau-mau?" her only answer was, "Oh, a good deal ails me. Enough ails me." Then again, she would point them to the stars and say, in her peculiar language, "Those are the same stars, and that is the same moon, that look down upon your brothers and sisters, and which they see as they look up to them, though they are ever so far away from us and each other."

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### Illegal Sale of Her Son

A little previous to Isabel's leaving her old master [John Dumont], he had sold her child, a boy of five years, to a Dr. Gedney, who took him with him as far as New York City, on his way to England; but finding the boy too small for his service, he sent him back to his brother, Solomon Gedney. This man disposed of him to his sister's husband, a wealthy planter by the name of Fowler, who took him to his own home in Alabama.

This illegal and fraudulent transaction had been perpetrated some months before Isabella knew of it, as she was now living at Mr. Van Wagener's. The law expressly prohibited the sale of any slave out of the state, and all minors were to be free at twenty-one years of age; and Mr. Dumont had sold Peter with the express understanding that he was soon to return to the state of New York and be emancipated at the specified time.

When Isabel heard that her son had been sold south, she immediately started, on foot and alone, to find the man who had thus dared, in the face of all law, human and divine, to sell her child out of the state and, if possible, to bring him to account for the deed.

Arriving at New Paltz, she went directly to her former mistress, Dumont, complaining bitterly of the removal of her son. Her mistress heard her through and then replied: "*Ugh! a fine* fuss to make about a little *nigger!* Why, haven't you as many of 'em left as you can see to and take care of? A pity 'tis, the niggers are not all in Guinea!! Making such a halloo-balloo about the neighborhood, and all for a paltry nigger!!!"

Isabella heard her through and, after a moment's hesitation, answered in tones of deep determination: "*I'll have my child again.*"

"Have *your child* again!" repeated her mistress—her tone big with contempt and scorning the absurd idea of her getting him. "How can you get him? And what have you to support him with, if you could? Have you any money?"

"No," answered Bell, "I have no money, but God has enough, or what's better! And I'll have my child again."

These words were pronounced in the most slow, solemn, and determined measure and manner.

And in speaking of it, she says, “Oh my God! I know’d I’d have him agin. I was sure God would help me to get him. Why, I felt so *tall within*—I felt as if the *power of a nation* was with me!”

**Source:** *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Northern Slave* (Boston: Printed for the author, 1850), 17-18, 44-45, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015071140118>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

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