



Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

Harriet Jacobs

(Events described: 1830s)

Harriet Jacobs grew up in slavery in North Carolina. As a child, she was taught to read and write by the white woman to whom, at that time, she was enslaved. Later, she became enslaved to white physician James Norcom, a married man who, for years, tried unsuccessfully to pressure Jacobs into a sexual relationship with him. (Jacobs alludes to Norcom's sexual advances in the final excerpt from her memoir, below.) At close to age 30, Jacobs escaped north, where she became connected to the abolitionist movement. She published this memoir of her experiences in slavery two decades after her escape, in the same year the Civil War began. Most of the excerpts presented here come from a chapter titled "The Church and Slavery." Throughout her memoir, Jacobs refers to people by pseudonyms: she calls herself "Linda Brent," and James Norcom "Dr. Flint."

[“Fear of insurrection”]

Not far from this time, Nat Turner's insurrection broke out, and the news threw our town into great commotion. Strange that they should be alarmed, when their slaves were so “contented and happy”! But so it was. [...]

Visiting was strictly forbidden on the plantations. The slaves begged the privilege of again meeting at their little church in the woods, with their burying ground around it. It was built by the colored people, and they had no higher happiness than to meet there, and sing hymns together, and pour out their hearts in spontaneous prayer. Their request was denied, and the church was demolished. They were permitted to attend the white churches, a certain portion of the galleries being appropriated to their use. There, when everybody else had partaken of the communion and the benediction had been pronounced, the minister said, “Come down now, my colored friends.” They obeyed the summons and partook of the bread and wine in commemoration of the meek and lowly Jesus, who said, “God is your Father, and all ye are brethren.”

[“Brother Pike's gospel teaching”]

After the alarm caused by Nat Turner's insurrection had subsided, 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. The Episcopal clergyman offered to hold a separate service on Sundays for their benefit. [...] The difficulty was to decide on a suitable place for them to worship. [...] 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 could read. [...] When the Rev. Mr. Pike came, there were some twenty persons present. 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, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ." Pious Mr. Pike brushed up his hair till it stood upright and, in deep, solemn tones, began:

"Hearken, ye servants! Give strict heed unto my words. You are rebellious sinners. Your hearts are filled with all manner of evil. 'Tis the devil who tempts you. God is angry with you and will surely punish you if you don't forsake your wicked ways. You that live in town are eye-servants behind your master's back. Instead of serving your masters faithfully, which is pleasing in the sight of your heavenly Master, you are idle and shirk your work. God sees you. You tell lies. God hears you. Instead of being engaged in worshipping him, you are hidden away somewhere, feasting on your master's substance, tossing coffee grounds with some wicked fortuneteller, or cutting cards with another old hag. Your masters may not find you out, but God sees you and will punish you. Oh, the depravity of your hearts! When your master's work is done, are you quietly together, thinking of the goodness of God to such sinful creatures? No; you are quarrelling and tying up little bags of roots to bury under the doorsteps to poison each other with. God sees you. You men steal away to every grog shop to sell your master's corn, that you may buy rum to drink. God sees you. You sneak into the back streets, or among the bushes, to pitch coppers. Although your masters may not find you out, God sees you, and he will punish you. You must forsake your sinful ways and be faithful servants. Obey your old master and your young master—your old mistress and your young mistress. If you disobey your earthly master, you offend your heavenly Master. You must obey God's commandments. When you go from here, don't stop at the corners of the streets to talk, but go directly home, and let your master and mistress see that you have come."

The benediction was pronounced. We went home, highly amused at Brother Pike's gospel teaching, and we determined to hear him again. I went the next Sabbath evening and heard pretty much a repetition of the last discourse. At the close of the meeting, Mr. Pike informed us that he found it very inconvenient to meet at the friend's house, and he should be glad to see us, every Sunday evening, at his own kitchen.

I went home with the feeling that I had heard the Reverend Mr. Pike for the last time. Some of his members repaired to his house and found that the kitchen sported two tallow candles—the first time, I am sure, since its present occupant owned it, for the servants never had anything but pine knots. It was so long before the reverend gentleman descended from his comfortable parlor, that the slaves left and went to enjoy a Methodist shout. They never seem so happy as when shouting and singing at religious meetings. Many of them are sincere and nearer to the gate of heaven than sanctimonious Mr. Pike and other long-faced Christians, who see wounded Samaritans and pass by on the other side. [...]

[“A poor, bereaved mother”]

I well remember one occasion when I attended a Methodist class meeting. I went with a burdened spirit and happened to sit next a poor, bereaved mother, whose heart was still heavier than mine. The class leader was the town constable—a man who bought and sold slaves, who whipped his brethren and sisters of the church at the public whipping post, in jail or out of jail. He was ready to perform that Christian office anywhere for fifty cents. This white-faced, black-

hearted brother came near us and said to the stricken woman, "Sister, can't you tell us how the Lord deals with your soul? Do you love him as you did formerly?"

She rose to her feet, and said, in piteous tones, "My Lord and Master, help me! My load is more than I can bear. God has hid himself from me, and I am left in darkness and misery." Then, striking her breast, she continued, "I can't tell you what is in here! They've got all my children. Last week they took the last one. God only knows where they've sold her. They let me have her sixteen years, and then— Oh! Oh! Pray for her, brothers and sisters! I've got nothing to live for now. God, make my time short!"

She sat down, quivering in every limb. I saw that constable class leader become crimson in the face with suppressed laughter, while he held up his handkerchief [so] that those who were weeping for the poor woman's calamity might not see his merriment. Then, with assumed gravity, he said to the bereaved mother, "Sister, pray to the Lord that every dispensation of his divine will may be sanctified to the good of your poor, needy soul!" [...]

["God has sent us a good man this time"]

The Episcopal clergyman—who, ever since my earliest recollection, had been a sort of god among the slaveholders—concluded, as his family was large, that he must go where money was more abundant. A very different clergyman took his place. The change was very agreeable to the colored people, who said, "God has sent us a good man this time." They loved him, and their children followed him for a smile or a kind word. Even the slaveholders felt his influence. He brought to the rectory five slaves. His wife taught them to read and write and to be useful to her and themselves.

As soon as he was settled, he turned his attention to the needy slaves around him. He urged upon his parishioners the duty of having a meeting expressly for them every Sunday, with a sermon adapted to their comprehension. After much argument and importunity, it was finally agreed that they might occupy the gallery of the church on Sunday evenings. Many colored people, hitherto unaccustomed to attend church, now gladly went to hear the gospel preached. The sermons were simple, and they understood them. Moreover, it was the first time they had ever been addressed as human beings. It was not long before his white parishioners began to be dissatisfied. He was accused of preaching better sermons to the negroes than he did to them. He honestly confessed that he bestowed more pains upon those sermons than upon any others, for the slaves were reared in such ignorance that it was a difficult task to adapt himself to their comprehension. Dissensions arose in the parish. Some wanted he should preach to them in the evening and to the slaves in the afternoon.

In the midst of these disputings, his wife died after a very short illness. Her slaves gathered round her dying bed in great sorrow. She said, "I have tried to do you good and promote your happiness; and if I have failed, it has not been for want of interest in your welfare. Do not weep for me, but prepare for the new duties that lie before you. I leave you all free. May we meet in a better world." Her liberated slaves were sent away with funds to establish them comfortably. The colored people will long bless the memory of that truly Christian woman. Soon after her death, her husband preached his farewell sermon, and many tears were shed at his departure.

Several years after, he passed through our town and preached to his former congregation. In his afternoon sermon, he addressed the colored people. "My friends," said he, "it affords me great happiness to have an opportunity of speaking to you again. For two years, I have been striving to do something for the colored people of my own parish; but nothing is yet accomplished. I have not even preached a sermon to them. Try to live according to the word of God, my friends. Your skin is darker than mine; but God judges men by their hearts, not by the color of their skins." This was strange doctrine from a southern pulpit. It was very offensive to slaveholders. They said he and his wife had made fools of their slaves, and that he preached like a fool to the negroes.

["If he could only read the Bible"]

I knew an old black man, whose piety and childlike trust in God were beautiful to witness. At fifty-three years old, he joined the Baptist church. He had a most earnest desire to learn to read. He thought he should know how to serve God better if he could only read the Bible. He came to me and begged me to teach him. He said he could not pay me, for he had no money; but he would bring me nice fruit when the season for it came. I asked him if he didn't know it was contrary to law and that slaves were whipped and imprisoned for teaching each other to read. This brought the tears into his eyes. "Don't be troubled, Uncle Fred," said I. "I have no thoughts of refusing to teach you. I only told you of the law, that you might know the danger and be on your guard." He thought he could plan to come three times a week without its being suspected. I selected a quiet nook, where no intruder was likely to penetrate, and there I taught him his A, B, C. Considering his age, his progress was astonishing. As soon as he could spell in two syllables, he wanted to spell out words in the Bible. The happy smile that illuminated his face put joy into my heart. [...]

There are thousands who, like good Uncle Fred, are thirsting for the water of life; but the law forbids it, and the churches withhold it. They send the Bible to heathen abroad and neglect the heathen at home. I am glad that missionaries go out to the dark corners of the earth, but I ask them not to overlook the dark corners at home. Talk to American slaveholders as you talk to savages in Africa. Tell *them* it is wrong to traffic in men. Tell them it is sinful to sell their own children and atrocious to violate their own daughters. Tell them that all men are brethren and that man has no right to shut out the light of knowledge from his brother. Tell them they are answerable to God for sealing up the fountain of life from souls that are thirsting for it. [...]

["A woman not his wife"]

There is a great difference between Christianity and religion at the South. If a man goes to the communion table and pays money into the treasury of the church, no matter if it be the price of blood, he is called religious. If a pastor has offspring by a woman not his wife, the church dismiss him if she is a white woman; but if she is colored, it does not hinder his continuing to be their good shepherd.

When I was told that Dr. Flint had joined the Episcopal church, I was much surprised. I supposed that religion had a purifying effect on the character of men, but the worst persecutions I endured from him were after he was a communicant. The conversation of the doctor, the day after he had

been confirmed, certainly gave *me* no indication that he had “renounced the devil and all his works.” In answer to some of his usual talk, I reminded him that he had just joined the church.

“Yes, Linda,” said he. “It was proper for me to do so. I am getting on in years, and my position in society requires it, and it puts an end to all the damned slang. You would do well to join the church too, Linda.”

“There are sinners enough in it already,” rejoined I. “If I could be allowed to live like a Christian, I should be glad.”

“You can do what I require; and if you are faithful to me, you will be as virtuous as my wife,” he replied.

I answered that the Bible didn’t say so.

His voice became hoarse with rage. “How dare you preach to me about your infernal Bible!” he exclaimed. “What right have you, who are my negro, to talk to me about what you would like and what you wouldn’t like? I am your master, and you shall obey me.”

No wonder the slaves sing—

Ole Satan’s church is here below;
up to God’s free church I hope to go.

Source: [Harriet Jacobs], *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, ed. L. Maria Child (Boston: Published for the author, 1861), 97, 103-116 (chaps. 12-13), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc2.ark:/13960/t7dr2rd9m>. Public domain.

Excerpts edited by John-Charles Duffy. Italicized section headings added by Duffy, in one case borrowed from a chapter title. Paragraph breaks adjusted for readability. An idiomatic expression emended (*getting in years* → *getting on in years*). Spelling, punctuation, and the formatting of a block quotation emended in line with modern American conventions. Exclamatory (not vocative) *O* converted to *oh*. A capital letter following a mid-sentence poetic line break converted to lowercase.

The use of lowercase for the racial labels *white*, *colored*, *negro*, and *black* reproduces the usage of the source publication. So too does the lowercasing of the word *church* in what are presumed to be references to local congregations of particular denominations or traditions (*Baptist church*, *Episcopal church*). The titles *Brother* and *Uncle* and the regional designation *the South*, all lowercase in the source publication, have been capitalized here. The expression *fountain of life*, capitalized in the source, has been converted here to lowercase to match the source’s lowercasing of the similar expression *water of life*.

These edited excerpts from Jacobs’s autobiography are intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



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