



Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

Harriet Jacobs

BACKGROUND At this point in the narrative, Linda has spent six weeks at the plantation of old Dr. Flint's son, Mr. Flint, making the house ready for his new bride, who is now at the house. Mr. Flint has said openly that he plans to break Linda's willful spirit, as his father had not been able to do. In addition, Linda has learned that the next day, her children are to be brought from their grandmother's house, where they are loved, to the plantation, where they will be put to work and used to keep Linda in line. Be warned that this selection contains a racial slur.

The Flight

MRS. FLINT was hard pushed for house servants, and rather than lose me he had restrained his malice. I did my work faithfully, though not, of course, with a willing mind. They were evidently afraid I should leave them. Mr. Flint wished that I should sleep in the great house instead of the servants' quarters. His wife agreed to the proposition, but said I mustn't bring my bed into the house, because it would scatter feathers on her carpet. I knew when I went there that they would never think of such a thing as furnishing a bed of any kind for me and my little one. I therefore carried my own bed, and now I was forbidden to use it. I did as I was ordered. But now that I was certain my children were to be put in their power, in order to give them a stronger hold on me, I resolved to leave them that night. I remembered the grief this step would bring upon my dear old grandmother; and nothing less than the freedom of my children would have induced me to disregard her advice. I went about my evening work with trembling steps. Mr. Flint twice called from his chamber door to inquire why the house was not locked up. I replied that I had not done my work. "You have had time enough to do it," said he. "Take care how you answer me!"

Analyze Visuals ▶

What can you infer about the enslaved family pictured in this photograph from South Carolina?

NARRATIVE ELEMENTS

Notice how the details in lines 1–8 build the characterization of the Flints. What kind of people are they?



I shut all the windows, locked all the doors, and went up to the third story, to wait till midnight. How long those hours seemed, and how fervently I prayed that God would not forsake me in this hour of utmost need! I was about to risk
 20 everything on the throw of a die; and if I failed, O what would become of me and my poor children? They would be made to suffer for my fault. ☹

At half past twelve I stole softly down stairs. I stopped on the second floor, thinking I heard a noise. 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 bewildered me. I dropped on my knees, and breathed a short prayer to God for guidance and protection. I groped my way to the road, and rushed towards the town with almost lightning speed. I arrived at my grandmother's house, but dared not see her. She would say, "Linda, you are killing me;" and I
 30 knew that would unnerve me. I tapped softly at the window of a room, occupied by a woman, who had lived in the house 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. Your grandmother is trying to buy you and de chillern. Mr. Sands was here last week. He tole her he was going away on business, but he wanted her to go ahead about buying you and de chillern, and he would help her all he could. Don't run away, Linda. Your grandmother is all bowed down wid trouble now." |

I replied, "Sally, they are going to carry my children to the plantation to-
 40 morrow; and they will never sell them to any body so long as they have me in their power. Now, would you advise me to go back?"

"No, chile, no," answered she. "When dey finds you is gone, dey won't want de plague¹ ob 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. I asked her to go into my room as soon as it was light, and take all my clothes out of my trunk, and pack them in hers; for I knew Mr. Flint and the constable would be there early to search my room. I feared the sight of my children would be too much for my full heart; but I could not go out into the uncertain future without
 50 one last look. I bent over the bed where lay my little Benny and baby Ellen. Poor little ones! fatherless and motherless! Memories of their father came over me. He wanted to be kind to them; but they were not all to him, as they were to my womanly heart. I knelt and prayed for the innocent little sleepers. I kissed them lightly, and turned away. ☺

As I was about to open the street door, Sally laid her hand on my shoulder, and said, "Linda, is you gwine all alone? Let me call your uncle."

"No, Sally," I replied, "I want no one to be brought into trouble on my account."

☹ NARRATIVE ELEMENTS

Describe the **conflicts** presented in lines 9–21. Which lines build **suspense**?

📖 READING A NARRATIVE

Reread lines 28–38. Who are Sally and Mr. Sands? How does Linda interact with them? Refer to Jacobs's biography on page 572 if necessary.

☺ GRAMMAR AND STYLE

Examine lines 50–54. Notice how the writer uses **emotionally charged adjectives** to express the depth of her despair.

1. **plague**: nuisance.



I went forth into the darkness and rain. I ran on till I came to the house of the friend who was to conceal me.

60 Early the next morning Mr. Flint was at my grandmother's inquiring for me. She told him she had not seen me, and supposed I was at the plantation. He watched her face narrowly, and said, "Don't you know any thing about her running off?" She assured him that she did not. He went on to say, "Last night she ran off without the least provocation. We had treated her very kindly. My wife liked her. She will soon be found and brought back. Are her children with you?" When told that they were, he said, "I am very glad to hear that. If they are here, she cannot be far off. If I find out that any of my niggers have had any thing to do with this damned business, I'll give 'em five hundred lashes." As he started to go to his father's, he turned round and added, persuasively, "Let her be brought back,
70 and she shall have her children to live with her."

The tidings made the old doctor rave and storm at a furious rate. It was a busy day for them. My grandmother's house was searched from top to bottom. As my trunk was empty, they concluded I had taken my clothes with me. Before

COMMON CORE L4, L4d

Language Coach

Multiple-Meaning Words
Narrowly (line 62) is a multiple-meaning word, a word with more than one meaning. Look up *narrow* in a dictionary, and select the meaning that fits the context of the sentence.





ten o'clock every vessel northward bound was thoroughly examined, and the law against harboring² fugitives was read to all on board. At night a watch was set over the town. Knowing how distressed my grandmother would be, I wanted to send her a message; but it could not be done. Every one who went in or out of her house was closely watched. The doctor said he would take my children, unless she became responsible for them; which of course she willingly did. The next day was spent in searching. Before night, the following advertisement was posted at every corner, and in every public place for miles round:—

\$300 REWARD! Ran away from the subscriber,³ an intelligent, bright, mulatto⁴ girl, named Linda, 21 years of 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 harbor 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 lodged in jail. DR. FLINT.

For a week, Linda hides in the house of an unnamed friend. Her pursuers come so close to finding her that she rushes from the house into the bushes, where she is bitten by a poisonous snake or lizard. She suffers greatly until an old woman treats her with a folk remedy. Vowing "give me liberty or death," she refuses to return to the Flints. Then a sympathetic white woman, an old friend of her grandmother's, offers to conceal Linda in a small storage room in her house. The woman makes them promise never to tell, as she is the wife of a prominent slaveholder. The woman sends her cook, Linda's friend Betty, to meet Linda and take her to the house.

Months of Peril

96 I went to sleep that night with the feeling that I was for the present the most fortunate slave in town. Morning came and filled my little cell with light. I thanked the heavenly Father for this safe retreat. Opposite my window was a pile of feather beds. On the top of these I could lie perfectly concealed, and command a view of the street through which Dr. Flint passed to his office. Anxious as I was, I felt a gleam of satisfaction when I saw him. Thus far I had outwitted him, and I triumphed over it. Who can blame slaves for being cunning? They are constantly compelled to resort to it. It is the only weapon of the weak and oppressed against the strength of their tyrants. 🍷

NARRATIVE: ELEMENTS
Consider how Jacobs develops the characterization of Linda in this paragraph. How are readers likely to feel toward her?

2. **harboring:** sheltering or protecting.

3. **the subscriber:** the person placing the notice, Dr. Flint.

4. **mulatto:** of mixed black and white ancestry.



I was daily hoping to hear that my master had sold my children; for I knew
 100 who was on the watch to buy them. But Dr. Flint cared even more for revenge
 than he did for money. My brother William, and the good aunt who had served
 in his family twenty years, and my little Benny, and Ellen, who was a little over
 two years old, were thrust into jail, as a means of compelling my relatives to give
 some information about me. He swore my grandmother should never see one of
 them again till I was brought back. They kept these facts from me for several days.
 When I heard that my little ones were in a loathsome jail, my first impulse was to
 go to them. I was encountering dangers for the sake of freeing them, and must I
 be the cause of their death? The thought was agonizing. My benefactress⁵ tried to
 soothe me by telling me that my aunt would take good care of the children while
 110 they remained in jail. But it added to my pain to think that the good old aunt,
 who had always been so kind to her sister's orphan children, should be shut up in
 prison for no other crime than loving them. I suppose my friends feared a reckless
 movement on my part, knowing, as they did, that my life was bound up in my
 children. I received a note from my brother William. It was scarcely legible, and
 ran thus: "Wherever you are, dear sister, I beg of you not to come here. We are all
 much better off than you are. If you come, you will ruin us all. They would force
 you to tell where you had been, or they would kill you. Take the advice of your
 friends; if not for the sake of me and your children, at least for the sake of those
 you would ruin." ❧

120 Poor William! He also must suffer for being my brother. I took his advice and
 kept quiet. My aunt was taken out of jail at the end of a month, because Mrs.
 Flint could not spare her any longer. She was tired of being her own housekeeper.
 It was quite too fatiguing to order her dinner and eat it too. My children remained
 in jail, where brother William did all he could for their comfort. Betty went to see
 them sometimes, and brought me tidings. She was not permitted to enter the jail;
 but William would hold them up to the grated window while she chatted with
 them. When she repeated their prattle, and told me how they wanted to see their
 ma, my tears would flow. Old Betty would exclaim, "Lors, chile! what's you crying
 'bout? Dem young uns vil kill you dead. Don't be so chick'n hearted! If you does,
 130 you vil nebber git thro' dis world." ❧

Language Coach

Antonyms An **antonym** is a word with a meaning opposite that of another word. *Reckless* (line 112) and *careful* are antonyms. Read lines 112–121. What reckless action might Linda take? What advice is Linda given?

NARRATIVE ELEMENTS

What new **conflict** is presented in this paragraph?

READING A NARRATIVE

Review the paragraph that begins "For a week ..." on page 578. Who is Betty, mentioned in lines 124–130?

5. **benefactress**: a woman who gives aid.