

Two Women

Sojourner Truth



Two women who had been born slaves devoted all their energies to freeing others. Both were deeply religious. One Sojourner Truth, was termed a mystic. The other, Harriet Tubman, was a woman of action, but in times of stress her favorite prayer was, "Lord, you have been with me through six troubles. Be with me in the seventh." Both women were so famous while they lived that books were written about them although neither could read or write. Both women had married, but most of their lives each walked alone, and each covered wide areas in her travels. Each faced danger and possible death, one at mob-threatened meetings where abolitionists were stoned and the other at state boundary lines dividing freedom and slavery.

One day in 1843 Isabella decided to leave her job as a domestic servant to travel. "The Spirit calls me," she said, "I must go." With only a few coins in her purse, Isabella departed, feeling the call, although free herself, to preach and teach against slavery, under a symbolic new name. She declared, "The Lord gave me Sojourner because I was to travel up and down the land showin' the people their sins and bein' a sign unto them. Afterwards I told the Lord I wanted another name, 'cause everybody else had two names: and the Lord gave me Truth, because I was to declare truth unto people."

Sojourner Truth became a famous figure at anti-slavery meetings. Once she said about her work, "I think of the great things of God, not the little things." A very tall, very dark woman, with a deep voice like a man's, she electrified many audiences and irritated those who did not agree with her. When a man told her that he cared no about her speeches than he would about a fleabite, "Maybe not," Sojourner replied, "but the Lord willing, I'll keep you scratchin'."

Sojourner Truth was born Isabella Baumfree about 1797, the property of a Dutch master in New York, and she spoke English with a Dutch accent all her life. Her childhood home was a hotel cellar where her parents and a number of other slaves quartered. While still a child, Isabella's parents died, and she was sold and resold, finally becoming the property of one John Dumont in whose service she remained until New York State freed all its slaves in 1827. But Isabella's master did not want to let her go, so she ran away, leaving her children behind. When her five-year-old son Peter was sold to an Alabama owner Isabella went to court and succeeded in getting Peter back. Another time, accused of the murder of an employer by a white man who had no proof, Isabella again went to court, sued for libel and won a judgement of \$125, an unusual vindication for a Black then.

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Harriet Tubman

Harriet Tubman was an even greater irritant to the slave owners than Sojourner Truth, for not only did she make speeches in the North but time after time she went into the South and brought slaves out to freedom. At one time \$40,000 was offered for her capture. When she was about twenty-five she ran away herself from a Maryland plantation, leaving her husband, parents, brothers and sisters behind. Two brothers started out with her, but became frightened and went back. Perhaps to prevent this from ever happening again Harriet Tubman carried a pistol on her freedom forays and if a slave heading North in her parties faltered, she drew her gun and said, "You'll be free or die!" Strength to go on was always forthcoming.

Up creek beds, through swamps, over hills in the dark of night, on nineteen secret tips into the dangerous South, Harriet Tubman guided more than 300 slaves to freedom, including her aged parents. Once in 1851 she took a party of eleven all the way to Canada, since the Fugitive Slave Law had, by then, made it dangerous to stop short of the border.

Once slave in the party, on whose head was a \$1,500 reward, was so frightened he would not say a word nor, on the train crossing from Buffalo, even look out the window at the scenery. But when he found himself on free soil, he sang and shouted so much no one could shut him up. Harriet Tubman said, "You old fool you! You might at least have looked at Niagara Falls on the way to freedom!"

Friendless and without work in Canada, Harriet herself prayed, cooked and begged for these refugees all winter. Then, in the spring she went back South to free more. She went alone, but once she got her slaves started, Harriet had help. There were secret stations of the Underground railroad from Wilmington, Delaware, to the Great Lakes-hiding places in barns, cellars, churches, woodsheds, caves- and white friends to help with food and warm clothing and wagons with false bottoms for long trips in harsh weather. Harriet Tubman one of the most famous "conductors" on the Underground Railroad, once said, "I nebber run my train of de track, and I nebber lost a passenger."

