

Harriet Tubman

- African American 1820 - 1913

- by Beth Sutton

This story is told in seven sections. Still, we recommend completing it in two to two and a half weeks. To do this, one can simplify the written work (suggestions for doing this are found in the Grade Two Instruction Manuals).

The Brer Rabbit stories figure prominently in this sage story and, though any of these stories will suffice, it is important that some of these are heard before beginning this story.

The speech in this story is written in the dialect of slaves at that time and we recommend looking at it as a dialect and not as incorrect English, anymore than one would view a Scottish dialect as "incorrect."

Chapter I

The blare of the overseer's horn echoed off the rough, wood-plank walls, and Daddy Ben hurried Harriet out of the shack. "Mama's already up at the big house. Quick, quick, chile," Daddy Ben said as he bade Harriet goodbye. "You be mindin' old Lucinda today, and don't be runnin' off in the woods. Listen to what the animals has ta tell ya, but you stay put, and when I done finish my work in the fields, we'll go off and talk wit' dhem together. You be waitin' for me, chile. Hear now? Don't you be goin' off by yerself!"

Harriet rushed out the door. All around her, the legs of the men and women of the quarter raced by - nobody wanted to be the last one out to the fields. Harriet didn't want Daddy Ben to be the last one out either, so she hurried along as fast as she could. She watched Daddy Ben run ahead of the others. She listened to the pounding of feet all around her. And she shivered as she heard the crack of the overseer's whip; she knew the last of the field hands had arrived.

Harriet glanced over to where old Lucinda was gathering all the children of the quarter at the edge of the creek. Harriet looked around. All the grown-ups had gone out into the fields or off to the big house for their day's work, so Harriet started skipping over to the big old woman who would watch the children all day long. But before Harriet could skip very far, she saw a squirrel dart across the path and sit up tall to nibble on the nut he had found. Without ever meaning to, Harriet changed her direction and headed right over to Brer Squirrel. Harriet squatted down right beside him and nodded her head in greeting. "Top of the mornin' to you, Brer Squirrel," she said. "Looks like you gots yerself some good eatins today."

Brer Squirrel stopped eating a minute to nod his head to Harriet, and he began chattering out the news of the woods. Listening to his whispered clicks, Harriet was sure Brer Rabbit had found a heap o' trouble again. Brer Squirrel's clicking got faster and faster and louder

and louder, and Harriet was sure Brer Bear and Brer Fox had finally given Brer Rabbit his due. Harriet's eyes opened wide as she leaned forward to listen. Suddenly, a gravely, loud voice rolled over her shoulder. "Chile, stop your silly carryin' on with them critters," hollered old Lucinda, "and git over here where I can see you."

Harriet hopped right up, trying to mind old Lucinda, just as Daddy Ben had told her to do. She headed right toward the old woman, meaning to do nothing more than join the other children. But as she walked, a mockingbird swooped down beside her, carrying on about something very important, and Harriet ran along right behind him, trying to hear every word he had to say.

Mockingbird flew quickly up onto a high tree branch where the others were waiting. Harriet put her hand on the wide tree trunk and stretched up as tall as she could to hear what Mr. Mockingbird was carrying on about. Overhead Mockingbird and Blue Jay, Cardinal and Crow, were all shouting from one tree to the next. She could hear the chanting and chattering loud and clear, but everyone seemed to be talking at once. Harriet cocked her head from side to side. Mockingbird was chanting about something very important - of this she was sure. Harriet listened closely: "Clip-clop, clip-clop," he chanted rhythmically, like a horse trotting down a dirt road. "Clickety-clack, clickety clack," Blue Jay responded, sounding just like the wheels of a fine carriage rolling down the dirt roads. The more Mockingbird repeated what he had seen and Blue Jay answered back, the more Harriet felt as though she was riding along in the carriage, listening to the horses' feet carry her on. She leaned back against the tree and sighed. While Mockingbird chanted and Blue Jay chattered, Harriet closed her eyes and pictured the handsome prince and beautiful princess they must have seen riding along, all the way to the great dance hall.

Harriet pictured the young man with the silver buttons on his jacket sparkling in the moonlight. She pictured the young lady in a long dress that flowed down as though she had caught all the stars in the sky and woven them together into a gown. The chickadees began twittering and Harriet could almost hear the laughter of the prince and princess as they rode along to the great dance. She could feel the young man hold the beautiful princess tight, as they gently bounced from side to side with the clip-clop, clip-clop of the horses and the clickety-clack, clickety-clack of the wagon wheels rolling along beneath them.

As Harriet rested there, bouncing along with the chanting and chattering of the birds, a small voice sang out from the bushes. Harriet opened her eyes for just a moment. Hopping from branch to branch, almost hidden in the bush, Goldfinch twittered and twilled her sweet song. Harriet watched her golden belly hopping from branch to branch, and as she listened to Goldfinch's sweet song, she pictured the princess's golden crown twirling round as she danced to the music.

Just then, a streak of red flashed through the wood, and a high-pitched screech rang out. Scarlet Tanager swooped down by Harriet, and zipped off, calling out her warning. All the birds spread their wings and took flight behind her. Harriet hopped up and ran behind them, hoping to hear what danger had threatened the prince and princess. But no sooner had she gotten to her feet than she felt a great yank at the back of her smock, and she couldn't move another inch.