

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF SOJOURNER TRUTH

By Madelyn Porter

(SONG: Sojourner enters from audience. She has an African/Dutch accent.)

No more peck of corn for me  
No more, no more  
No more peck of corn for me  
Many thousand go

No more pint of salt for me  
No more  
No more  
No more pint of salt for me  
Many thousand go

No more hundred lash for me  
No more  
No more  
No more hundred lash for me  
Many thousand go

No more missus callin' me  
Come here, Come here  
Hurry up, and come here!  
Many thousand go

I'm so glad that trouble don't last always  
I'm so glad that trouble don't last always  
I'm so glad that trouble don't last always  
Oh, my Lord  
Oh, my Lord  
What shall I do?  
Hush, hush  
Somebody callin' my name

(END OF SONG)

My name! Which one is that I wonder? Oh, I've had a bunch of them in my day, and a bunch of days for each one of them. What if there is no heaven...a fella once said to me? What if you never get there? What'll you do then? Bless the Lord, I told him. I had a good time thinking I would!

I was born a slave in Ulster County, New York. Oh, yeah! They had slaves in New York, too. ..Not as many as in the south, and not as profitable. So, there was talk goin' on about changin' the law. Took it's time doin' me any good, though. Must have been seventeen-ninety...somethin'...I was born in a slave cellar on a bed of straw. We were part of the livestock...Mama, Papa, my brother, Peter and me. Oh, there were other children, too, but I never knew them. They were all sold away. Mama called me Isabelle, but that got shortened to Belle. Later on in life, **I** changed my name to Sojourner, which means, a wanderer among the people. Lord, I cried, thy name is truth. So, I took for my last name that of my greatest and my only Master. My name. My own name. My free name...Sojourner Truth!

Children, I come here today, like most of you, to hear what I got to say. You see, I talk to God, and God talks to me. I talk to God in the field...in the woods. This mornin' I got up, and looked outside, and saw the wheat holding its head up looking mighty big. So, I went outside to take hold of that wheat. Would you believe it? There was no wheat there! I said God, what ails this wheat? He said, "Sojourner, there's a little weevil in it." Now, I hear talk about this here constitution, and the rights of man. So, I reach out to take hold of this constitution...to feel for my rights, but there aren't any there. So I ask God, "What's wrong with this here constitution?" ...And **SHE** said, "Sojourner, there's a little weevil in it. Well, now don't you know these weevils are just gonna eat up this countries crops.

I spoke Dutch until I was 21 years of age. Now, I can't read a book, but I can read the people. The law is for everybody. I took two arrogant men to court in my day, and I won my cases against the both of them. One of them tried to shove me off a streetcar he said I didn't belong on. And the other one accused me of murder...all the while looking very guilty himself. Now, no one believed I'd done it, of

course, but I wanted the law to clear my name. “Ahhh, lady!”...a fella once said to me. We don’t care no more for your talk then a flea bite. “Oh! A flea bite!” I said. “Well, God willing, I guess I’m gonna half to just keep you scratchin.”

### **AIN’T I A WOMAN (SPEECH)**

But what’s all this here talk about? Where there’s so much racket there must be something out of kilter. You know, I think that with the Black folks of the south and the women of the north all talkin’ about rights...the White men are gonna be in a fix pretty soon. But what’s all this here talk about? That man over there says that women need to be lifted over ditches, and helped into carriages, and to have the best place everywhere. Well, nobody ever helped me into a carriage, or over a mud puddle, or gives me any best place. And ain’t I a woman? I have ploughed and planted and gathered into barns, and can’t no man head me. I can work as hard as any man...and eat as much too, when I can get a hold to it, and bear the lash as well. And ain’t I a woman. I have born thirteen children, and seen most all of ‘em sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me. And ain’t I a woman?

Then they talk about this thing in the head. What’s this they call it? Intellect!! What has that got to do with a woman’s rights? If my cup hold but a pint, and your’n hold a quart, wouldn’t you be mean not to let me have my little half-measure full?

Then that *“little”* man in black over there says, that a woman can’t have the same rights as a man, cuz Christ wasn’t a woman. Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from?...from God and a woman. Man ain’t had nothin’ to do with it. If the first woman God ever made was strong enuf to turn the world upside down all alone...we women together ought to be able to get it back, and turn it right-side up again. And now, we’s asking to do it! The men better let us!!!

**END OF SPEECH**

I spent the last years of my life in Battle Creek, MI. I like Michigan...It's unpredictable. I've been called a tall, strong, Black woman with a great sense of humor. I remember one day at a rally a group of men stood up, and heckled, pointed, made fun of me, and accused me of being a man. I simply lifted up my top and showed them that I was indeed a woman. Needless to say they shut up. OH, I've lived a life...I have.

What I'm most proud of is getting my son Peter back from Alabama. You see, I had **almost** 5 masters in my lifetime. My 4<sup>th</sup> master Dumont promised me my freedom one year early, if I worked extra hard. Well, I worked my butt off, I worked as hard as 3 men. Well, the year came and went, and master Dumont changed his mind. I guess I worked too hard! Well, I didn't change my mind. I ran...I walked away. In the meantime, I left my young son, Peter, behind. Master Dumont sold my son. He was eventually taken across state lines to Alabama where he would remain a slave for the rest of his days. You see in New York, slavery was to be abolished soon. But in Alabama, he would remain a slave for the rest of his days. Well, I took master Dumont to court...won my case, and became the first Black woman to win a case against a white man in the state of Alabama...give me a hand!

When I went to court to get my son Peter back. The judge asked him was I his mother. He denied me once. He denied me twice. He denied me three times. And when I went to hold him to let him know that everything would be alright...he cringed. The judge asked me to pull up his shirt. He had so many welts on his back that you could not see his natural flesh...A CHILD!!! It reminded me of when I was a young girl, and I was sold to my second master...the Neely's. The cruelest masters you could ever imagine. You see, the Neely's spoke English. I spoke Dutch. One day Mrs. Neeley sent me to the smokehouse to get a ham. I didn't know what she was talking about, so I brought backher a frying pan. Ohhhh, she was mad! She beat me. She kicked me. She spit on me, and when the master came home, he took me out to the barn, tied my hands to the post, and he beat me 'til the blood run down my legs...10 years old! I still have the scars today. The Neeley's were not just cruel, but they were child

molesters. I was beaten and raped on a regular basis, and there was absolutely nothing anyone would or could do about it, because slaves had no rights.

I was not only molested by the master, but by the missus. Yes...the missus. You see, I realized a long time ago that women had no rights either. The missus had to endure the humiliation of knowing that her husband had fathered many a slave child on the plantation, and they oftentimes took their frustration out on slave girls. The master had no idea how helpful he was on the Underground Railroad by fathering these mulatto children. Many of these slave children came out looking as white as the master. They would dress up like the master or the missus, load up a wagon full of slaves, and take them to **“auction,”** but they were really taking them to freedom on the Underground Railroad.

You know slaves weren't allowed to read or write, so we taught our children through stories. These stories taught the children the difference between right and wrong and good and evil, and they also taught that even though we weren't as strong or as powerful as the master, that we could still get by if we used our wits. One of my favorite stories was always about Buhr Rabbit.

### **(BUHR RABBIT STORY)**

When I heard that story I knew I could do anything I wanted to do, if I just used my **(pointing to head/audience response)**. That's right, by using my head! And you can do the same if you use your head.

Now, remember I told you I had **almost** five masters in my lifetime, Master Hardenburgh, Master Neely, Master Schryver, Master Dumont, and **almost** Master Van Wagener. You see slaves were always given the last name of their master. The children of a slave belonged to their master, and could be sold away at any time...because a slave was not considered a person, but property. In fact, when a slave was married, or jumped the broom, it was not a legal marriage. The vows of the preacher would read...“until death or distance do you part. I was born on the Hardenburgh plantation. When Mr.

Hardenburgh died, I was eventually sold away from my family. My mother and father were getting old and could not be sold for a good price...so they were set free and allowed to live in a cottage on the plantation. They were put out to pasture.

You see, when I walked away from master Dumont, I came upon the Van Wagners, descendants of Quakers, who took me in. Quakers were against the buying and selling of human beings. Master Dumont found out where I was, and came to reclaim his property...ME! The Van Wagners bought me from Master Dumont. When I tried to thank my new master, who had treated me as his equal, Mr. Van Wagner explained to me that he was not my Master, and that I only had one Master...God, and he set me free.

I worshipped God with the Van Wagner's, but Quakers are a humble people and didn't believe in singing praises to God. One day I was walking down the road, and I heard the most glorious sound coming from a church. I looked in the window, and the congregation was singing praises to God. I knew I wanted to worship with them. So, I joined the Methodist church. However, eventually, some of the members of the congregation started treating me like a slave. So, I joined the African Methodist Episcopalian church, and worshipped with them for the rest of my days.

I met such wonderful people as Frederick Douglas; a runaway slave, a great...great orator, a dear... friend, and whose father was his master. Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of "Uncle Tom's Cabin." Susan B. Anthony, a women's rights activist, whose face you can see on a silver dollar. And William Lloyd Garrison, a brave abolitionist. I had the honor of having several audiences with the great President Abraham Lincoln, and spoke to him about the plight of the Black soldier. They were not only fighting in the Civil War, but for their own civil rights. You see, the Black soldiers were treated differently than the White soldiers. They weren't given proper clothing, the same food, and were not allowed to carry weapons. President Lincoln tried his best to make sure that the Black Soldiers were treated with dignity. I worked with the Colored Troops in Detroit, and wrote a song called THE VALIANT

SOILDERS to inspire these Black men to continue to fight for their freedom no matter how they were treated by their fellow White Soldiers. Now, some folks say I didn't write this song, but I'm here to tell you that I DID! I want to share some of the lyrics with you. Repeat after me:

**SONG: "Valiant Soldiers" (Excerpt) – SUNG TO THE TUNE OF "Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory")**

Many people mistake me for Harriet Tubman, the most famous conductor on the Underground Railroad. Tubman was called "The Black Moses" and was at least twenty years my junior. She had the highest bounty on her head of any person during her lifetime (\$40,000). So she was unable to walk freely in any town. But, I was able to sojourn, and speak out against man's inhumanity to man...and woman.

Well, ol' Sojourner has said enuf...she ain't got no more to say!

**(SONG)**

**Goodbye brother.  
Goodbye sister.  
If I don't see you more,  
Now God bless you,  
Now God bless you.  
If I don't see you more.**

**(END OF STORY)**