The Daring Escape of Henry Box Brown
Characters

Circle the character you will play.

*Indicates large speaking role

*Mr. McKim: an abolitionist

*Box Brown: our narrator, Henry Brown as an older man

*Henry Brown: a slave

Nancy Brown: Henry’s wife

Mr. Cottrell: Nancy’s master

*Mr. Elliott: a storekeeper

Mr. Smith: a conductor on the Underground Railroad

Postman

Drivers 1 and 2

Shipman

*Passengers 1 and 2

Trainman

Mr. Davis and Mr. Miller: abolitionists

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Prologue

An antislavery meeting in the North

Mr. McKim: I want to introduce you to a most extraordinary man. He came to me in a wooden box. That’s right, he arrived by express mail in a box! It was marked “THIS SIDE UP WITH CARE” and came from Virginia—no doubt at great danger to its occupant. He will tell you the whole story.

Box Brown: Although I was a slave, I earned a small salary at the tobacco factory where I worked 15 hours a day. My wife Nancy and I were able to rent a small house. I gave money to Nancy’s owner so he wouldn’t sell her and split our family apart. My mind groaned under the tortures of slavery. How I longed for my wife and children and myself to be free. My story begins one morning in 1848.

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Scene 1

Henry’s house

Henry Brown: Let us give thanks for this fine breakfast.

Box Brown: Suddenly, there came a knock at the door. It was Mr. Cottrell, Nancy’s owner.

Henry: Why, good morning, Mr. Cottrell. What can we do for you?

Mr. Cottrell: I’ll be frank, Henry. I want some money today.

Nancy: But my Henry paid you just yesterday!
Mr. Cottrell: You keep out of this, Nancy, 'less you want to feel the sting of my whip.

Henry: No reason to get upset, Mr. Cottrell. I'd be happy to give you some money, but after paying rent and paying you for the privilege of marrying Nancy, I haven't any left.

Mr. Cottrell: Don't be holdin' out on me, Henry.

Henry: What more can I do, Mr. Cottrell?

Mr. Cottrell (angrily): I want money, and money I will have! Good day!

Henry: Now I wonder what he means by that?

Nancy (bursting into tears): What if he means to sell one of the children?


Box Brown: They were gone . . . all of them.

**Scene 2**

**Mr. Elliott’s store**

Box Brown: Many schemes for saving my wife and children passed through my mind, but there seemed no hope. My owner, Mr. Allen, refused to help me buy my family's freedom.

Mr. Elliott: What can I do for you, Henry?

Henry (sadly): My master sent me for supplies.

Mr. Elliott: You don’t sound your usual self. Something wrong?

Henry: They've sold my wife, Mr. Elliott. And the children too. They're gone.

Mr. Elliott: What’s this? Didn't that Mr. Cottrell have an agreement with you?

Henry: Yes, sir. Every week I paid him, but every week he came back wanting more.

Mr. Elliott: I can’t blame you for being vexed.

Henry: I am vexed, Mr. Elliott. It makes me want to escape to the North.

Mr. Elliott: You’re not afraid to tell me that?

Henry: No, sir. I figure you for an honorable man.

Mr. Elliott: Do you understand the risks? If you're caught, the punishment will be severe.

Henry: I'll know freedom—or I'll die trying.

**Scene 3**

**Mr. Elliott’s store, March 1849**

Box Brown: Mr. Elliott came up with several plans, but none seemed right. He introduced me to Mr. Smith, a conductor on the Underground Railroad, a group of people who helped slaves escape.

Mr. Smith: It’s risky, Henry. We must be careful.

Box Brown: I feasted upon the thought of freedom. One day, while I was at work, an idea suddenly flashed across my mind. I would shut myself up in a box and get myself mailed to a free state.

Mr. Elliott: I don’t think you’ll survive inside a box. Certainly
not all the way to Philadelphia.

**Henry:** I’ll drill small airholes in the box.

**Mr. Elliott:** It will be hot. You’ll die of thirst.

**Henry:** I’ll take a container of water to sip.

**Mr. Elliott:** I think it’s dangerous, but I’m willing to help. What do you want me to do?

**Mr. Smith:** We’ll need you to take the box to the express office. Send it to William Johnson at this address in Philadelphia.

**Box Brown:** Our plan set, we agreed to meet a few days later.

**Scene 4**

*A secret meeting place, 4:00 a.m.*

**Box Brown:** The box was three feet long, two-and-a-half feet high, and two feet wide.

**Mr. Elliott:** Here’s your water, Henry. Wet your face when you feel faint.

**Mr. Smith:** The box will be claimed at the depot in Philadelphia. Then you’ll be taken to the Anti-Slavery Society.

**Henry:** Thank you, friends. Thank you. I probably won’t see you again, will I?

**Mr. Smith:** Let’s hope not.

**Mr. Elliott:** Good luck.

**Box Brown:** My friends nailed down the lid. I was sealed inside a pit of darkness.

**Scene 5**

*The express office*

**Box Brown:** Hours later, I arrived at the office and was turned heels up.

**Mr. Elliott:** Please be careful. It’s very fragile.

**Postman:** If all goes well, it’ll arrive in Philadelphia by late tomorrow.

**Mr. Elliott:** Tomorrow? I need it sent express.

**Postman:** That is express.

**Mr. Elliott:** Are you sure it will get there by tomorrow?

**Postman:** Could be the day after.

**Box Brown:** I was put upon a wagon upside down and taken to the train depot. The man who drove the wagon tumbled me roughly into the baggage car. The train carried me to the port, and a wagon took me to the shipyard. Each transfer seemed more painful than the last. I wondered if I was heading to freedom—or to my destruction.

**Driver 1:** I’ve got an express package for Philadelphia.

**Shipman:** Throw it in with the cargo, but you’d better hurry. The steamer’s ready to depart.

**Box Brown:** Here again I found myself standing on my head. In this dreadful position I had to remain nearly two hours. It seemed like ages, but even in this horrible condition I was better off than were I still a slave.

**Passenger 1:** Good weather today.

**Passenger 2:** I suppose it is—if you
enjoy sailing.

Passenger 1: It’s true, steamships aren’t the most comfortable way to travel.

Passenger 2: You’d think the steamer company would provide seats! It seems like I’ve been standing for days.

Box Brown: I felt my eyes swelling as if they would burst from their sockets.

Passenger 1: Where are you going?

Box Brown: I attempted to lift my hand to my face, but I had no power to move it. I felt a cold sweat coming over me. It seemed that death was about to end my earthly miseries.

Passenger 1: Are you on a business trip?
Passenger 2: I’m trying to get into the newspaper trade. People tell me I have a nose for sniffing out a good story.

Box Brown: Though I feared death less than slavery, I lifted up my soul in prayer.

Passenger 1: How my feet ache! There must be somewhere on this dreadful boat to sit!
Passenger 2: Look, this crate will do for a seat.

Passenger 1: I suppose it beats standing another two hours. Throw it on its side.

Box Brown: I was thus relieved from my agony—no doubt just in time.

Passenger 2: This is quite a box. What do you suppose is in it?
Passenger 1: It could be anything. All I care about is that it makes a decent seat.

Scene 6

Washington, D.C.

Box Brown: At last I was handled with care. In Washington, they took my box from the steamboat and placed it right side up on a wagon. But my little bit of comfort lasted only as long as it took to get to the depot.

Driver 2: You there, help me with this crate.
Trainman: Just shove it off.

Driver 2: But it’s marked “THIS SIDE UP WITH CARE.” If I shove it, I might break something.

Trainman: What’s it matter? If it breaks, the railway company will pay for it.

Driver 2: Come on, man. Help me with this!

Trainman: If you want that box on this train, you best just shove it off yourself. You won’t get any help from me!

Box Brown: Suddenly I tumbled from the wagon. I landed on the end where my head was! I’m sure my neck gave a crack, and I was knocked senseless. My agony quickly worsened.

Trainman: There’s no room for that box anyway. It will have to sit here until the luggage train comes through tomorrow.

Driver 2: What? This box came express. I demand you send it on immediately!

Trainman (angrily): All right, already!

Box Brown: In an instant, I was heaved up into the train car. If that trainman only knew what pain and suffering he’d caused his fellow man.

Scene 7

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Passenger 2: Philadelphia—just as I pictured it!

Passenger 1: Such a busy station. I had no idea.

Box Brown: My heart leaped for joy. I wondered if anyone knew such a box was in their midst.

Mr. McKim: Excuse me, do you have a package for Johnson? It’s a box—a wooden crate.

Trainman: Yeah, it’s right here. Heavy thing. Made my day pretty miserable. What’s in it?

Mr. McKim: You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.

Box Brown: Nor could I believe it! I’d traveled 350 miles, but still I needed to be taken to the safety of the Anti-Slavery Society. I was afraid I’d die before my box could be pried open. Surely I would have ceased to breathe were it not for the hope that freedom lay just around the corner.

Mr. McKim: Gentlemen, this is the package I told you about.
Why did Henry Box Brown take a great risk to escape from slavery? What does his way of escaping tell you about him? Answer in a well-written essay and send it to "Box Brown Contest" by February 15, 2016. Ten winners will each receive a copy of Elijah of Buxton by Christopher Paul Curtis. See page 2 for details.

WRITE TO WIN