

the little horse mystery

Chapter Five by Kay Hively

Nathan's father reached into the pocket of his coat and brought out the toy that had been found on the back steps. Nathan watched as his father rubbed his thumb over the sides of the little horse that had become such a mystery.

Then Mr. Curtis began telling Nathan about black slaves who ran away from their owners. He said most of the slaves were going to Canada in search of freedom. It was dangerous for them to run away. People with dogs hunted them. Many of the runaway slaves were caught and sent back to their owners. Mr. Curtis said that some of the people who didn't approve of slavery were helping the runaways. These people were called "abolitionists," he said. Nathan asked his father what this story about runaway slaves had to do with the little horse. Mr. Curtis didn't answer Nathan's question. He just went on with his story.

He said runaway slaves usually traveled at night and hid in the daytime. Abolitionists helped the runaways by giving them food and clothing. They also hid them in their houses and barns. This was dangerous, he said. Abolitionists could be put in jail for hiding a slave.

Nathan listened closely to the story of the runaway slaves. But he still didn't know what it had to do with the little wooden horse. So once again, Nathan asked his father about the horse.

Mr. Curtis rose from his seat and picked up the lamp that sat on a table by the sofa. He motioned for Nathan to come with him. Together they walked down the narrow hallway of their house.

The house was dark except for the light from the lamp that Mr. Curtis carried.

When they reached the staircase, Nathan's father held the lamp down low so its light fell on a small door under the stairs.

"I want you to meet someone," Mr. Curtis said. "His name is Willie." Nathan's father opened the door under the stairs and a small boy crawled out into the hallway. Nathan could hardly believe his own eyes as the little black boy stood up beside him.

Before Nathan could say anything, a man and two women came out of the tiny closet under the stairs. The man and one of the women looked about the same age as his parents, Nathan thought. The third person under the stairs was a very old woman.

Nathan watched as his father handed the little horse to the boy. Willie smiled and took the toy. The mystery of the little horse was solved. Nathan now realized that his father was an abolitionist. He knew that his father could be arrested for hiding runaway slaves. Just thinking about that sent a chill down Nathan's back.



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Classroom Extensions

Things to Think About and Do –

- A. The trail that runaway slaves took is called the "Underground Railroad." Why do you think this term is used to describe the escape route? In an encyclopedia or on the internet, read about Sojourner Truth. What did she have to do with the Underground Railroad?
- B. What do you think would be the scariest part of trying to escape? Write a story about what you think it was like for slaves running away from their masters. What caused the "bump in the night?"

Next Week: Chapter Six – A Boy Like Nathan