

the little horse mystery

Chapter Six by Kay Hively

Nathan had never seen black people before. He could think of nothing to say to the strangers who stood quietly in the crowded hallway.

Mr. Curtis reminded everyone to be very quiet. Then he handed the lamp to Nathan and asked him to go to the kitchen and help his mother with food.

Nathan walked slowly to the kitchen. By the light of the lamp, he saw his mother putting food on a plate. When the plate was full, Mrs. Curtis picked it up and whispered for Nathan to lead the way back down the hall.

Mr. Curtis and the four runaways were seated on the floor at the end of the hall. Mrs. Curtis handed the plate to the old woman. She took food and then handed the plate to the other woman. In turn, the plate was passed around, with each one taking food.

When the plate was empty, Nathan's mother took it back down the dark, windowless hall to the kitchen.

Unsure what he should do, Nathan slid down on the floor beside the little slave boy. The boy was poorly dressed and barefoot. There was a white bandage on his right foot. Nathan could not resist talking. Very quietly, he asked the boy if his foot hurt. The boy nodded his head yes. Then Nathan asked the boy if he had shoes. Willie shook his head no.

Nathan sat quietly for a moment then asked Willie how old he was. The boy whispered that he was 9 years old. Then Nathan asked about the little horse. Willie said it was his only toy. He said his father had carved it out of a tree branch. He said the horse was named Liberty.

In the dim light of the lamp, Nathan looked at the old clothes he had put on after church. They were nearly worn out, but they were better than the clothes Willie was wearing.

Nathan asked what it was like, traveling at night. Willie said it was scary and it made his bare feet hurt. But, he said, things would be better when they all got to Canada. They would be free there and life would be better. Just as Nathan was about to speak again, there was a loud knocking on the front door. Nathan froze, as did everyone else in the hallway.

Slowly, Mr. Curtis rose from the floor, urging everyone to be totally silent. Then, taking the lamp, he moved into the parlor to open the front door.

In the darkness, Nathan could feel Willie's arm. It was shaking. Nathan moved closer to his new friend and held the boy's arm. Instantly, the shaking stopped.

As Nathan listened he could hear his father's voice in the parlor. He could not understand what was being said. And in the distance, he could hear a dog bark. Nathan prayed that his father would not be taken to jail.



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Classroom Extensions

Things to Think About and Do –

- Look at an atlas and pick a route from Springfield, Illinois, to Canada. How far will Willie have to walk to get to Canada? How long do you think it will take to go that far?
- How do you think Willie and his family find their way at night? Learn how to locate the North Star, and learn how a compass works.

Next Week: Chapter Seven – A Gift for a Gift