

Phillis Is A Pretty Name

“**W**hat am I bid for this strong, healthy girl?” the auctioneer asked.

The crowd on the Boston wharf on this June morning in 1761 laughed. The small black girl actually looked very frail. She was wrapped in a piece of ragged carpet, but she shivered and coughed in a cool breeze.

“Surely somebody could use this good helper in the kitchen,” the auctioneer coaxed.

“I’ll take her,” a soft voice spoke. One of two well-dressed white women standing at the edge of the crowd pushed her way forward slowly. The auctioneer took the money she held out and shoved the child toward her.

“You must be out of your mind, Susannah Wheatley,” the woman’s friend said. “When John told you to buy a girl to help Sukey in the kitchen, he meant a strong

girl. This girl will just be a burden to Sukey.”

“She looked so little and frightened that I had to take her,” Mrs. Wheatley said. “You know how I feel about slavery.”

“What about Sukey and Prince?”

“Sukey’s been with us all her life, and she wouldn’t be happy anywhere else. Prince was given to Mr. Wheatley by a man who owed him a large bill. He is working out his freedom .”

“Well,” her friend responded, “it’s odd that you’re here in a slave market when you don’t believe in slavery.”

Soon they reached their carriage, where a tall black man waited. He opened the carriage door. Mrs. Wheatley motioned for the little girl to enter, but the child shrank back and started to cry softly.

“Put her in the carriage if she won’t enter herself, Prince,” said Mrs. Wentworth.

“Yes, Mrs. Wentworth,” Prince replied, but he looked at Mrs. Wheatley.

“Just a minute, Prince,” Mrs. Wheatley said. “The poor child is frightened.”

Mrs. Wheatley put her hand under the little girl’s chin and looked down into her watery eyes. “We are your friends, child,” she said softly. “Don’t be afraid.”

Mrs. Wentworth sniffed. “As if she could understand a word you say!” she laughed.

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“She looked so little and frightened that I had to take her,” Mrs. Wheatley said. “You know how I feel about slavery.”

“Of course she doesn’t, but she can understand the way I say it.” Mrs. Wheatley held out her hand to the child and they climbed into the carriage. The little girl sat close beside Mrs. Wheatley and closed her eyes. She was still shivering.

Mrs. Wentworth stared at the child. “How old do you think she is, Susannah?”

“I would say she is about seven. She has some front teeth missing, and that’s the age when Nat and Mary lost theirs.”



Prince stopped to let Mrs. Wentworth out at her home. A few minutes later the carriage came to a big brick house, where the Wheatleys lived. Mrs. Wheatley and the girl got out, went up the front steps, and on through the door.

A tall girl came racing down from upstairs. She was running so fast that she had to stop herself by bumping into the wall. “Mary, are you six or sixteen?” her mother asked, smiling.

“Gracious, Mother, is that Sukey’s new helper?”

“She’ll grow. I had to bring her home. She looked so little and afraid.”

“Yes, Mother, she’s even afraid of me.” Mary got down on her knees and put her arms around the little girl. “Doesn’t she know we wouldn’t hurt her?”

What are we going to do with her? How will we teach her to talk?"

"I don't know," Mrs. Wheatley said. "You'll have to help me. The first thing is to wash her and find her some clothes. Go help Sukey fill a tub by the fire in the kitchen."

Sukey was sleeping in her chair by the fire. When she saw the girl with Mrs. Wheatley and Mary, she shook her head. "Where'd that mite come from?" she asked. "I reckon that's not the help you were going to bring me."

"Never mind about help," Mrs. Wheatley said. "Right now the girl needs a bath."

"I guess she does," Sukey sniffed. "And she needs some food and she needs her hair untangled. We need to burn that filthy old carpet she's wearing for a dress."

Sukey helped Mary fill a big wooden tub with water from a kettle hanging in the fireplace.

"I reckon I'll need help to hold her in here," Sukey said. "She'll die scared if she gets wet all over at the same time."

To their surprise, the child enjoyed being in the tub. She filled her hands with water and let it trickle out between her fingers. She made little excited noises.

"Perhaps she lived near a river and played in the water," Mary said.

When Mr. Wheatley came home that evening, Sukey had cooked his favorite dinner, baked ham and cornbread. Usually everyone saved news to tell at the table. Tonight Mrs. Wheatley asked Mr. Wheatley what had happened at his tailoring shop during the day. She asked Mary's twin, Nat, what he had done at Latin School, but she hardly listened to their answers.

Mary said nothing. Once in a while she looked at her mother, and her mother shook her head. At last the strawberries and cake were brought in. Mrs. Wheatley nodded at Mary.

Mary dashed to the kitchen and came back, leading the little girl. The child's small, thin face seemed to float over a long white petticoat which completely covered her feet and trailed on the floor. They had cut her dark hair close to her head.

"Doesn't she look nice, Father?" Mary asked proudly. "We combed her hair and found some clean clothes for her to wear."

"Goodness!" Mr. Wheatley laid down his spoon. "Is this supposed to be the new helper for old Sukey?"

Mrs. Wheatley nodded her head. She looked at him anxiously. Mr. Wheatley merely shook his head and started to laugh. The little girl broke loose from Mary's hand and ran to the kitchen.

Then Mrs. Wheatley explained what had happened

in the market that morning. “Well, I might have known you’d bring me home a helpless creature,” Mr. Wheatley said. But he said it as if he were proud of her.

Mary went to the kitchen and soon came back with the child so close behind her that Mr. Wheatley could see only the ruffle of the white petticoat. Finally Mary coaxed her to come and sit on her lap. She sat there stiffly, her bright eyes wide open.

“Her bones almost show through her skin,” Mr. Wheatley said. “Has she had anything to eat?”

“Sukey tried to feed her, but she wouldn’t eat anything,” Mary said.

“Wouldn’t eat? The child’s starving. Of course she’ll eat.” He held out a strawberry. The child looked at it but did not reach for it.

“Try this.” Nat gave up half a slice of his pound cake. Mary held it to the child’s mouth, but she turned her head away.

“She’s certainly not used to our food,” Mary said. “If only we knew what she used to eat.”

Mrs. Wheatley smiled. “You may be right, but she’ll soon learn to like baked beans and codfish cakes instead. Now she needs a good night’s sleep.”

“Can’t we name her first, Mother?” Mary asked. “Let’s give her a pretty name.”

“How’s Aphrodite?” Nat asked. “Or maybe Penelope?”

“Don’t be silly, Nat,” Mary said. “She’s too little for a long name.”

“Phillis is a pretty name,” Mrs. Wheatley suggested thoughtfully.

“Phillis,” Mary repeated softly. “Phillis. I like that name.” The child looked up at Mary and, for the first time, smiled.

“She likes it, too,” Mr. Wheatley said. “Her name will be Phillis.”