

"This—is—a—book," said Mary Wheatley slowly. She held up a book for the small black girl to see. The little girl looked at the book. She had never seen anything like it. But she wanted to learn about everything in her strange new life. "Book," she said carefully. "Book."

Only a few days before, the child had been hungry, cold, and frightened. She had been sitting on the Boston wharf along with many other black people who had been kidnaped from their homes in Africa just as she had been. For weeks they had suffered through a terrible ocean voyage. They could see nothing ahead but more suffering. They were slaves to be sold and ordered about and treated in any way that their masters chose.

And then, for the little girl, the miracle had happened. John Wheatley, a Boston merchant, saw the child. He took pity on her and bought her from the slave trader. Soon the little girl was in the Wheatley home. Mrs. Wheatley and the two Wheatley children, Mary and Nathaniel, were as kind as Mr. Wheatley. Soon the child was warm, fed, and clothed, and then asleep in a comfortable bed. She woke up to more loving care.

The Wheatleys named her Phillis, for they could not understand anything that she tried to tell them in her African speech. But the little girl did not mind being Phillis. If these kind and loving people could not understand her words, she would learn to understand theirs.

"Book," she repeated after Mary. Then she held the book in her hands and leafed through the pages, looking at the pictures. Mary said, "Soon I will start teaching you to read." And indeed, before long, Phillis was

learning *a* and *b* and *c*. Soon after she was reading words and sentences. Then Mary was helping her to read the Bible.

The days and weeks went by and Phillis was part of the Wheatley family. Along with Mary, she helped Mrs. Wheatley. She learned to cook and spin and weave and do all the things girls and women had to do in those days. She went to church with the family. And all the while she was racing ahead in her studies. She read the Bible through; then she was reading the works of English poets. She was learning Latin. The Wheatleys were very proud of her.

One day, Mary came to her mother. "Mother, Phillis is only thirteen and she has written a wonderful poem." Mrs. Wheatley read the poem. It was very good. The Wheatleys were so proud of Phillis that they had the poem printed and showed it to their friends.

"A *black* girl wrote that?" people said. "An African?" "A slave?" "A *girl*?" they said.

"Yes," said the Wheatleys. "A little black girl. But not a slave." They had given Phillis her freedom months before.

"Well," said everyone, wondering. "Think of that. A black girl."

Phillis went on to write more poems and the Wheatleys had them printed too. Phillis Wheatley was becoming famous as the first black poet in America.

She was invited to England, and Nathaniel, who had business there, took her across the ocean and was proud to see how she was honored everywhere. They came back to America just as the first battles of the Revolution were being fought. Phillis wrote a poem to George Washington and sent it to him. He wrote back

thanking her and inviting her to visit him. One day in 1776, Phillis did meet and talk with America's general, George Washington.

But after that life became sadder for Phillis. Mr. and Mrs. Wheatley, who had been like father and mother to her, both died. Phillis

married a man who was not a good husband. She had to work very hard as a teacher to support them and their children. Then Phillis herself became ill and died when she was still very young. But the fame she had won lived on, and her poems did too.

## CHECK YOUR READING

- 1. At the beginning of this story May Wheatley was teaching the small black girl**
  - A to speak English
  - B to read
  - C to pay attention
- 2. The girl had been taken captive in Africa and brought to**
  - A New York City
  - B Plymouth, Massachusetts
  - C Boston, Massachusetts
- 3. Mr. Wheatley bought the little girl because**
  - A he thought she'd make a good servant
  - B he felt sorry for her
  - C she was very pretty
- 4. In the Wheatley household Phillis was treated as a**
  - A member of the family
  - B favorite servant
  - C well-trained savage
- 5. One of the first books Phillis read was**
  - A *The New England Cookbook*
  - B the Bible
  - C *McGuffey's First Reader*
- 6. In addition to learning English, Phillis learned to read**
  - A her native African language
  - B Portuguese
  - C Latin
- 7. Friends of the Wheatleys were very surprised that a little African girl had**
  - A learned to read
  - B written a very good poem
  - C been given her freedom
- 8. Phillis traveled with Nathaniel Wheatley to**
  - A Philadelphia
  - B New York City
  - C England
- 9. At the beginning of the Revolution Phillis wrote a poem about**
  - A George Washington
  - B Crispus Attucks
  - C the Battle of Bunker Hill
- 10. In the last years of her life, after she married, Phillis was**
  - A rich and famous
  - B poor and overworked
  - C well known as an educator

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