

Title: School of freedom
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Full Text:

ARAMAY PULLED HER thin blue shawl tighter around her shoulders, but it couldn't keep out the chill of the cold wind blowing off the water this gray October morning of 1861. Her friend Barcie and two other children waited on the riverbank with her.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

Aramay felt her heart pumping fast, not with the cold but with the excitement of the day ahead. Even though this wasn't her first journey to the steamboat, she still felt as thrilled as she had the first time.

She patted the lunch sack she carried, her fingers curling over the round bulge of an apple and the soft square of cornbread inside.

"Got everything?" asked Barcie. "In case they come. I get jitters every day."

Aramay felt the bottom of the bag. Yes, her fabric and thimble were there, but where were...?

"I don't have my needle and thread," she blurted, a sharp spurt of fear rising.

"Oh no! What are you gonna do?"

"I can't do anything right now," Aramay said, as she glanced out at the river. "Look, he's coming."

Pulling on the oars, Mr. Jackson guided the flat-bottomed boat toward the bank where Aramay and the other children waited. As the boat scraped the sand, Aramay and the other children scrambled on board.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

"Ready for another day of learning?" Mr. Jackson asked brightly. "You know education will mean success for all our people."

Aramay smiled at Barcie. Mr. Jackson said the same thing every time he picked them up. But she knew how important his words were. Mr. Jackson, himself, had been a slave years before, but he had become educated, bought his **freedom**, and was now a successful businessman. Aramay wanted as much for herself, too.

When they reached the steamboat anchored in the middle of the river, everyone climbed aboard, waving at Mr. Cal in the pilothouse. He was their lookout; if the authorities came, he would sound the warning.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

Seven children were already seated on benches when Aramay and the others hurried in. She noticed little Leroy was there, too. He was the youngest student and couldn't always come because of his coughing spells.

"Good morning," greeted Miss Canton. "Glad to see everyone." She straightened the long apron over her skirt, then passed out five books for them to share.

Aramay sat at her place on a back bench and opened the book to the story they had been reading. Words! Books! Reading was her favorite subject, and even though some of the longer words stumped her, she was getting better every

day. Someday she would own not just one book but many books, maybe even a library!

When it was her turn to read, she stood up and confidently read the page, only missing one word. Too soon, reading was over. Aramay always felt disappointed, for if she had her way, she'd read all day. But now it was time for numbers. She wasn't as good with numbers, but she'd keep practicing every day, because if she wanted to be a teacher someday ...

Suddenly three sharp raps sounded overhead. Mr. Cal's warning!

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

"Quickly, children!" Miss Canton snapped. "You know what to do."

Aramay and the others thrust their books at Miss Canton, who shoved them into sewn-on pockets in her long skirt. She adjusted her wide apron over her skirt and yanked her own fabric and needle and thread from her bag.

Aramay's heart raced as she pulled out her fabric and thimble. She'd have to pretend to have her needle and thread and hope that no one would look too closely. The boys took out hammers and nails and gathered pieces of wood from the barrel at the back of the boat. Mr. Jackson grabbed a hammer as well. They were ready.

Footsteps. Miss Canton began to speak. "Now, girls, always knot the end of your thread securely. ..." Aramay held her breath.

Three men barged into the room. Aramay gasped in spite of herself, and she felt Barcie clutch her arm.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

"What's going on in here?" asked one of the men. He was a burly man with a dark beard.

Miss Canton answered calmly, "I'm teaching the girls to sew, and Mr. Jackson here is teaching the boys carpentry. Valuable skills, don't you agree?"

"Listen, Missy, I'm Mayor Yorkman, and I know for a fact that you're teaching **school**. Reading and writing. Illegal activities. Where are the books?"

"Do you see any books?" answered Miss Canton.

Please, please, Aramay said to herself, don't let them see the outlines of books in Miss Canton's skirt. She stole a look and was relieved to see that the books were well-hidden.

The mayor and the other two men stormed through the cabin, overturning cabinets and tables, looking into barrels and boxes, but they found nothing to prove a **school** was in session.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

As they strode past little Leroy sitting on the floor, Mayor Yorkman purposely kicked at the boy's wood. The pieces slid away and slammed against the side of the boat with a loud whap. Leroy squealed and covered his ears. Aramay could see him trembling with fear.

They had no cause to scare him, Aramay thought, feeling suddenly angry. He's only six. She moved toward him before she could stop herself.

The mayor pointed at Aramay. "You! Get back in place! Don't you know, you could be in big trouble for being here?"

Aramay felt her face burn, but she said evenly, "We're free now, Mr. Mayor. We have rights."

Mayor Yorkman glared at her for a moment, then turned and snarled, "We'll be watching this boat every day. Let's go,

men."

After the men were gone, Aramay sagged in her seat with relief, but she also knew there would be no more **school** on the steamboat. Afraid of the answer, yet hopeful, too, she raised her hand. "Will there be another **school**?"

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

Miss Canton smiled. "Not here, of course, but yes. Every day more and more secret **schools** are getting started. We'll find another place to meet."

Aramay felt a rush of excitement. "I'll be there, wherever it is!"

By 1860, even though 4 million Negro slaves lived in the United States, about 488,000 had been able to buy their **freedom** and had become legally free people. Yet **freedom** brought the Negroes few privileges. They were still looked down upon and treated unfairly by many. Some states didn't allow free Negroes to attend **school**.

Believing in the importance of education for their people, Negro leaders had to resort to establishing secret **schools**, hidden away in fields, basements, or barns. This story was inspired by reports of one such "**School of Freedom**" that was started on a steamboat owned by Reverend Jon Berry Meachum, a successful businessman and the founder of the First African Baptist Church in St. Louis, Missouri.

CALL THE AUTHORITIES, PERSONS IN CHARGE OF MAKING SURE LAWS ARE OBEYED!

SPIDER HAS PLANTED A WHOOPEE CUSHION BETWEEN THE PAGES!

DON'T WORRY, SEE HOW CONFIDENTLY, IN A WAY THAT SHOWS HE IS SURE AND HE WILL DO WELL, THE BLACK-CAPPED WONDER HAS TWISTED THE WHOOPE CUSHION INTO A CALLOON ANIMAL.

TWIST TWIST

DRAT! FOILED AGAIN!

H'M I WONDER, WHO HAS THAT MASKED WONDER?

I SHALL SNARE THE BLACK-CAPPED WONDER IN MY WEB OF EVIL!

WA HA HA HA HA HA!

OF NO! THE BURLY, STRONG AND HEAVILY BUILT BLACK-CAPPED WONDER IS TRAPPED IN A BURLY, STRONG AND HEAVILY BUILT, WEB OF EVIL!

NO HE'S GOT A BURLY, STRONG AND HEAVILY BUILT, PAIR OF SCISSORS!

HEY! THAT'S ILLEGAL, AGAINST THE LAW. NO SCISSORS ! DRAT! FOILED AGAIN!

WHO WAS THAT MASKED WONDER?

Art by jada rowland

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