



Born into nobility in West Africa, Aina was orphaned and enslaved as a child before being freed during a daring rescue mission. Her journey took her from Africa to England, where she formed a close bond with Queen Victoria. This remarkable story of faith will captivate and inspire young readers.

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A NEW HOME

London, England, 1850

7 years old

The door creaked open, revealing a dimly lit hallway. Sarah hesitated, waiting for someone to guide her forward. Back at the missionary school in Badagry in Africa, part of what is now Nigeria, she'd had plenty of time to prepare for this moment—to create a mental map of what to expect of her new home from the conversations she'd had with Captain Forbes—but still, nothing prepared her for actually standing here, in the doorway, ready to step inside.

The carriage driver set down the remaining bags on the doorstep of the Forbes house, closed the carriage door, and wished them farewell. Captain Forbes had been away from home for some time, and Mrs. Forbes had already prepared the children. She reminded them not to overwhelm their father or their new guest when they first arrived.

Sarah looked up at Captain Forbes, feeling a mix of awe and comfort. He seemed so tall from where she stood, his dark wool coat and polished brass buttons making him look important, but in a softer

way than when he wore his formal uniform. Beneath his coat, he wore a high-collared white shirt with a neatly tied cravat, giving him a gentle, almost fatherly appearance.

To Sarah, he was the closest thing to a father she had, and even though everything around her felt strange and new, his presence brought a small feeling of safety. She didn't fully understand his world, but as he gave her a reassuring nod, she felt her heart steady just a bit.

The door opened. "Welcome home, my love," said Mrs. Forbes to her husband, tears welling up in her eyes. They embraced in the doorway.

"Sarah, dear, come inside," she said, her voice kind and welcoming. She swiped her eyes and stepped back a few paces, clasping her hands neatly in front of her. Around the corner behind Mrs. Forbes, two children—a boy and a girl—peered curiously, their eyes fixed on the newcomer.

Sarah's heart thudded in her chest. Everything here felt different already, strange and stiff. With a deep breath, she stepped inside, feeling the cold stone floor of the hallway beneath the thin soles of her shoes. Sarah plunged her hand into her pocket and pulled out the small, carved wooden bird that Captain Forbes had given her as a gift before they boarded the ship to England. It had become important to her over the many weeks they had been at sea. She held on to the bird but handed her coat to Mrs. Forbes, who hung it up on a hook in the hallway.

"Father!" shouted Frederick, finally breaking the formality as he ran towards his father, wrapping his arms around the captain's

legs. “I’ve missed you!” Young Mary followed suit, and before long, the brave and weary captain had both children (who looked a little younger than Sarah) clinging to him. His wife, also called Mary, looked on with love and affection.

Sarah felt comforted by this scene. She had only ever seen the captain at work; he was consumed by his mission to help the West African people in whatever way he could. In Africa, it was rare to see him relax, let alone smile. But he had always been kind.

Mrs. Forbes led the family into the kitchen and dining area where she had been preparing supper. The warmth from the hot oven made Sarah’s skin tingle.

Though still clinging to their father, the children’s faces were now fixed on Sarah, full of curiosity—and perhaps a little uncertainty. Mary Forbes had told her children about Sarah, sharing stories of the country she had travelled from and the possibility that she might stay with them for a long time, perhaps even becoming like a sister. But just like Sarah, they would all need time to adjust, no matter how well-prepared they thought they were.

Sarah had taken off her bonnet with her coat when she’d entered the Forbes household, just as she’d been taught. The bonnet sat in her hands, its ribbon trailing between her fingers. The clothes she wore felt heavy, layers of fabric chosen by someone else and draped over her small frame. Though they covered her completely, they left her feeling strangely exposed—vulnerable in a way she couldn’t quite understand.

Mrs. Forbes gestured for her to come closer, seeing that she was feeling uneasy. “This will be your home now, Sarah. We hope you’ll feel comfortable.”

Sarah nodded but couldn't find the words to respond. She had learned English quickly at the missionary school, but the words still felt clumsy. She wasn't sure what to say, or even what was expected of her at this moment.

Frederick now stood near his mother, tugging at Mrs. Forbes's skirt, his eyes fixed on Sarah. Mrs. Forbes turned to him and encouraged both children. "Why don't you say hello?"

There was a moment of hesitation before young Mary, just a little younger than Sarah, offered a shy smile. "Hello," she said softly. Frederick followed, his greeting quiet and unsure.

Sarah clutched the wooden bird in her hands a little tighter. She wanted to say something in return, but the words wouldn't come.

Her thoughts drifted back to the missionary school in Badagry. New faces, strange routines, and a baptism she hadn't fully understood. The cold water had splashed on her forehead, and the missionaries had given her the new name that the captain had chosen—Sarah Forbes Bonetta. Captain Forbes chose Sarah's English name, Sarah Forbes Bonetta, combining a simple but beautiful English name with his family name and the ship he commanded, the HMS *Bonetta*, which brought her to England.

Didn't they know her name was Aina?

A sudden bark startled her. A small terrier rushed into the room, wagging its tail and sniffing at her shoes.

Frederick giggled, breaking the tension.

Sarah smiled a little as the dog nudged her hand, crossing the invisible barrier between her and this strange new world.

"Oh, Dash," said Mrs. Forbes, suddenly looking quite flustered. "How did you get in here?"

Sarah crouched down, her hand hovering for a moment before gently stroking the dog's smooth coat.

The little dog wagged his tail and leaned into her touch, his ears flicking forward as if in approval.

Mrs. Forbes, standing nearby, reached towards the dog but paused, her hand falling to her side. The room seemed to settle as Sarah's touch grew more certain, and the terrier gave a soft, contented huff.

Mrs. Forbes's expression softened. "You must be tired from your journey, Sarah. Let's get you settled; you can rest before supper."

Sarah stood up and nodded at Mrs. Forbes. Then she looked around the room at the strangers and suddenly felt dizzy. A tightness squeezed her chest, making her want to gasp, but she held it in, her heart pounding. She squeezed the wooden bird, still in her hand. Her throat felt tight as she swallowed, the lump refusing to go away. Her eyes stung with tears. But she couldn't cry, not now, not here.

Sarah followed Mrs. Forbes up the narrow staircase, her footsteps light on the creaking wood. They each carried a bag. The house had an interesting smell—a mix of wood polish, clean clothes, and home-cooked food. As they climbed the stairs, Sarah breathed it in, letting the scents help settle her fears.

They reached a small room at the end of the corridor. It was simple, with a narrow bed, a wooden chest of drawers, and a window that looked out onto the streets of Windsor. The rain, which hadn't stopped since they arrived in England, pattered softly against the glass; a steady sound that made the room feel cosy.

"This will be your room," Mrs. Forbes said kindly. "If you need anything, just ask. I'll help you unpack your things after supper."

Sarah stepped inside. She walked to the bed, and her feet sank into

the softness of a worn rag rug by the bed. The feeling was odd through her stockings, which clung to her legs in a way she wasn't yet used to. She set her bag on the floor and immediately noticed the doll on the bed. Her eyes lingered on its painted face and neatly sewn dress before moving around the room: white bed covers, blue curtains, a small bowl and jug on a wooden stand, a picture on the wall, and framed words. This was more than she had ever had; she couldn't imagine needing anything else. Mrs. Forbes gave her a final smile before leaving Sarah alone in the room. The door clicked shut, softening the sounds from downstairs, though they were still faintly there. For the first time in what felt like forever, Sarah was truly alone.

She walked over to the window, setting the little bird on the sill, and leaned in close to peer outside. Her breath fogged the glass as she looked down at the rainy streets below.

Sarah closed her eyes and rested her head against the window. The cold startled her, and she pulled back, looking around the room again. She wasn't sure how to feel, what to think, or what to say, so she pressed her feet more firmly into the ground, as if it might steady her, just for a moment.

SUPPER AND A LESSON

Mrs. Forbes let Sarah rest briefly before knocking gently on the door. "Supper will be ready soon," she said. "When you're ready, will you come down and join us?"

Sarah smiled and, for the first time, found her voice. She whispered, "Thank you," then followed Mrs. Forbes back downstairs to join the family. The smell of roasted meat filled the air—rich, savoury,

with a hint of sweetness, perhaps apples. As she entered the dining room, she saw the table set with fine plates and silverware. Captain Forbes sat at the head of the table, his tired face still wearing a smile as his children gathered around him.

“Ah, Sarah!” he said warmly. “Come, sit with us.”

Mrs. Forbes pulled out a chair for her, and Sarah quietly took her seat. The children were visibly excited to have their father home, eager to hear his stories after his long trip.

“We made your favourite, Father!” the children exclaimed proudly. Mrs. Forbes carefully brought the dishes to the table announcing, “Roast beef, with apples, and suet pudding for dessert!” she said, winking at her husband, both loving their children’s enthusiasm.

Captain Forbes chuckled, rubbing his hands together. “Ah, yes, nothing like a proper meal after weeks at sea.”

Sarah looked at the food placed onto the plate in front of her—roast beef, potatoes, and green vegetables. It smelled delicious, and though she was hungry, she held back, wanting to be polite and not dig in too quickly.

Captain Forbes held out his hands to his left and right, and the family joined hands. “Let’s bless the food.”

Sarah was familiar with saying grace; they prayed at the missionary school in Badagry before meals. But holding hands was new to her. The family clasped hands and Captain Forbes began to pray.

“Heavenly Father, we give You thanks for our safe passage home. We thank You for Sarah and for the privilege of having such a wonderful girl in our home.”

Sarah felt a blush rising in her cheeks and peeked at the captain.

“We pray for Your protection over the school in Badagry, for the

Yoruba people You care for, and I ask for wisdom and guidance as we work toward their safety and deliverance. We thank You for the meal my dear wife, Mary, has prepared. Bless her hands for making it and bless the food to our bodies. May we never take what we have for granted. In Your name we pray, amen.”

“Amen,” echoed the whole table.

“So, how was that long journey by ship, Sarah?” Mrs. Forbes asked as everyone began to tuck into the meal.

“The sailors were kind,” Sarah began, her gaze lowering as she remembered the long days on the ship. “At first, they called me Sally. I thought it was strange, but Captain Forbes told them to use my new name. They spoke English to me from the start and taught me words bit by bit. I tried hard to learn quickly. They seemed happy every time I got a word right.” She smiled, recalling their laughter and nods of encouragement.

“The food was different, though,” she added, glancing at her plate and comparing it to the meals on board. “I’d never tasted anything like it, and they’d watch me, laughing whenever I made a face at something new.” She looked up at Captain Forbes, her voice growing softer. “Sometimes, when the ship was quiet, I’d hum songs. It helped me feel less homesick.”

“Oh, yes, I’ll never forget that familiar sound around the ship—little Sarah humming to herself,” Captain Forbes commented.

As they continued eating, Frederick couldn’t seem to contain his curiosity any longer. After staying quiet for so long, he blurted out, “Father, what’s Africa like? Is it very hot? Did you see wild animals?”

Sarah’s fork froze midair.

Mrs. Forbes gave Frederick a gentle look. “Let’s not overwhelm Sarah on her first night.”

But Captain Forbes smiled at his curious son and answered, “Africa is indeed very different from England. It’s big and full of life—many different people, languages, and traditions.”

Frederick and young Mary both listened intently. Mary asked, “What about the people? What were they like?”

Captain Forbes paused, his gaze shifting to Sarah. He smiled, but there was sadness in his eyes. “Well, I met many good, kind people. But there were also . . . difficulties.”

He chose his words carefully, glancing at Sarah again before continuing. “You see, children, part of my work in Africa was to help stop something very wrong and cruel—something called slavery.”

Frederick wrinkled his nose. “What’s that?”

Captain Forbes set his fork down gently. He sat up in his chair as if to make sure his words were simple and clear. “Slavery is a terrible thing. It’s when people are taken from their homes and forced to work for others without pay or the choice to decide what they do. These individuals are treated as if they are not human, but like objects that belong to someone else. They cannot leave when they wish and often suffer harsh treatment. This has happened and continues to happen in many countries around the world. It’s important for us to be kind and to stand up for those who are enslaved or oppressed by evil people.”

“That’s why you’re an ab-o-lish-uh-nist, isn’t it?” Mary asked, sounding proud to use the new word she’d learned.

“That’s right,” Captain Forbes replied with a nod. “An abolitionist works to end slavery. Many people in England are part of this movement, working together to ensure that no one, no matter where they’re from, has to live in such horrible conditions.”

Frederick and Mary exchanged glances, their young faces serious. Even with their limited understanding, they grasped the importance of what he was saying.

Sarah looked down at her plate, her thoughts swirling. She didn’t remember much of the raid on her village—it was all a blur of noise, fire, and fear. But she knew that people in her village had been taken away, and now she was here, in England, in this house, because of it.

The word “abolitionist” repeated in Sarah’s mind. Was it Captain Forbes’s job to bring her here? Why just her? She wondered how long she would stay at the Forbes house, in England, so far from the warmth, sounds, and smells of Africa. Mrs. Forbes placed a hand on Sarah’s shoulder. Sarah looked up, and they smiled at one another.

As Sarah sat, listening to Frederick and Mary ask their questions and tell their father about what Dash the dog had been up to while he was gone, a thought came to her. Maybe one day she would tell them her story. Not now—it still felt too hard to think about. But maybe, when the time felt right, she would start with what she could remember of her family—the warmth and wonder of walking barefoot on hot soil in the summer, the taste of a fresh mango dripping down her chin, and the ache in her heart whenever those memories came back to her.

The conversation drifted to other topics as supper went on. Captain Forbes told stories of his adventures at sea, and Frederick and Mary laughed, asking questions about the animals he’d seen

and the foods he'd tasted. Sarah began to feel at ease and enjoyed her first meal in England.

FIRST NIGHT AT THE FORBES HOUSE

Later that night, Sarah lay in bed, sinking into the soft mattress, the covers pulled tightly up to her chin. The bed was the most comfortable thing she had ever slept in, its softness perfectly wrapping around her like a hug. Sarah listened to the faint voices drifting up from downstairs. Mr. and Mrs. Forbes were talking in low, serious tones. Although their voices were quiet, there was a heaviness to them, a mix of frustration and sadness she could feel even from where she lay.

"King Ghezo . . . the slave trade . . ." Mr. Forbes's voice sounded worn, and Sarah listened, straining to catch more of the words that felt somehow tied to her.

"I tried, Mary," he continued. "I went to Dahomey hoping to change his mind, to make him see that these practices—this trade in human lives—had to end. I tried to make him understand, but he only handed her to me as a 'gift' for the Queen. He called her 'the African Child,' as though she were some token of exchange."

There was a pause before Mrs. Forbes's reply, "And yet you brought her with you?"

"I had to." Mr. Forbes's voice was quiet but edged with resignation. "I thought of leaving her in Badagry, where the missionaries might look after her. She had friends there—a small place where she could perhaps settle, away from the British Empire's reach. But I knew she wouldn't be safe, not with King Ghezo's influence so close by. I couldn't just leave her."

Sarah's fingers brushed the faint markings on her face, symbols she had been told marked her as royal, connecting her to a heritage nearly lost when she had been taken. She remembered missionaries baptising her in Badagry, giving her the name "Sarah Forbes Bonetta." But these marks on her face would always be a reminder of family.

Mr. Forbes's voice strengthened. "She is a remarkable child, Mary. Bright, eager to learn . . . there's something about her that feels . . . enduring, as if she sees far more than we know."

Mary sighed. "Well, she's with us now, and we will do all we can for her. She deserves the chance to find her way."

Their voices faded, but Sarah's mind lingered on the captain's words. The journey to this place had been a whirlwind, filled with names and faces, new customs and new hopes. She was Sarah Forbes Bonetta now, a girl of two worlds: one that lay behind her but was marked on her skin, and another opening before her, full of possibilities yet to be discovered.

Though Sarah was tired, she wasn't quite ready to close her eyes and drift off to sleep. She glanced around the dim room, searching for pockets of light—from under the door, the streetlight outside, and the bright moon shining through the window. The sounds of the night felt different here compared to Africa and the ship. There were no chirping crickets or katydids, nor the soothing rhythm of waves lapping against the hull. Instead, she could hear the distant clatter of a horse-drawn carriage passing by and the soft chatter of people walking home, their voices a comforting murmur in the quiet night.

Turning her head toward the wall, she noticed a small piece of paper pinned near her bed. By the light of the moon filtering in

through the window, she could just make out the words written in neat, flowing script:

*“So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be
dismayed, for I am your God.”³*

Sarah remembered hearing those words at the missionary school where they memorised verses from the Christian Bible by heart. Back then, she hadn't fully grasped their meaning, only that they were meant to bring hope.

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