
The Witch of Blackbird Pond

Elizabeth George Speare

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INTRODUCTION

In 1958 I was in high school. Elvis was in the army in Germany, there was a new pope in Rome, and the so-called cold war against communist Russia was a bewildering and fearsome threat. These were the things on my mind in 1958. I didn't notice that someone named Elizabeth George Speare had written a book called *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*—and that's regrettable, for I likely would have read Kit Tyler's story and said, as many millions did then and have since, "It's about me!"

I was a bit of an outsider growing up, a reader and a loner, yearning to fit in but unwilling to shed my own fragile identity in order to do so. I could not see myself in the perky, fearless Nancy Drew or the wholesome, do-gooding Nan Bobbsey, or pretty and popular Sue Barton, student nurse. But Kit Tyler was like me, an ordinary girl, scared and lonely, stubborn and independent and a bit rebellious, trying to figure out a new world and make a place for herself in it. Yes, that was me.

In 1685 Kit Tyler comes from sunny Barbados to her aunt's family in the Puritan town of Wethersfield, Connecticut, with its hard, cold, restrictive life. What Kit learns throughout the book is just what I needed to learn as a young person—the value of being yourself, fighting for what you believe in, taking care of those who need care, seeing the beauty in things that might ordinarily seem plain, building friendships and community, and the importance of hard work. In a year in the Connecticut colony, Kit matures from anger and resistance to appreciate what she found without losing what she had, so that at the end she has two places to call home.

Kit Tyler's relatives and the rest of the people of Wetherfield are Puritans, English Protestants who left England in search of religious freedom but in their new land refused to extend that freedom to other faiths. Speare created many characters who embody the strength and dedication of the Puritans, but she did not shrink from illustrating as well the superstition, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness that led to the mob violence of the New England witch trials and troubles for Kit and the gentle Quaker Hannah Tupper.

Unfortunately, I didn't discover *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* in 1958. I read it first in a children's literature class as a twenty-something adult. But I grew up in the 1950s and lived through the suspicion and fear and the anti-communist hysteria. When I finally read the book, I realized that the same bigotry, intolerance, and damaging gossip that led to the early witch trials also informed the so-called witch hunts of the 1950s. The House Un-American Activities Committee and, later, Senator Joseph McCarthy accused many people of being communists or communist sympathizers. Although communism was not illegal, those named were placed on a "blacklist" and denied employment. Many lives were ruined during this shameful time in American history. We do not know how Elizabeth Speare felt about this "witch hunt"; we only know what she wrote, and *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* stands squarely against bigotry and intolerance and in favor of acceptance, justice, and respect.

I read the book as an adult, but in order to write this introduction, I wanted to know how those who came to the book as young women responded to the character and the themes. Did they see themselves in Kit? What did they find important or memorable about the book? So I asked some of them.

Some women loved it for its vivid, realistic picture of a Colonial New England beyond the romantic images of the *Mayflower*, Pocahontas, and the first Thanksgiving. Others remembered

enjoying a literary crush on the fiery, vexatious seaman Nat Eaton. Cynthia Leitich Smith, a writer, identified with Kit's love of reading and her courage. My daughter found the romance charming, the witch trial exciting, and the values her own, but said, "For me that book is all about the image of that little cottage, filled with herbs and good smells and a cat and loved ones."

And countless young women cherished the story for the model it offered readers tired of books in which teen girls were, as my friend the Reverend Robbie Cranch put it, "portrayed as deferential flirt or swooning idiots." Kit is neither an idiot nor a flirt. She is lonely and confused but is also brave, compassionate, determined, and resilient.

And that character was not only me. She was Alyce of *The Midwife's Apprentice*. And Rodzina and Matilda Bone and Catherine and any of the girls I have written about. I found myself wondering how much of the Kit Tyler I encountered in my twenties stayed with me and reappeared thirty years later when I myself began to write.

Elizabeth Speare and I both wrote as children, but, busy with home and family and work, neither of us attempted a novel until we were nearly fifty. My first novel was *Catherine, Called Birdy*. Elizabeth Speare's was *Calico Captive*, based on a diary of 1807 that told of the four-year Indian captivity of Susanna Johnson and her family. Speare fully intended, she said, to do something similar for her next book, this time set where she lived in Connecticut, but she found nothing that inspired her until she realized that people were waiting, not in the pages of a diary but in her own mind: "There was a girl," she related in her Newbery acceptance speech, "lonely and insecure, a child who needed friendship, a wise and gentle old woman, and two young men, one shy and uncertain, the other self-confident and merry."

The Witch of Blackbird Pond was awarded the Newbery Medal for 1959, the only time, according to the editor and literary critic Anita Silvey, that a book was chosen unanimously on the first ballot. It's a marvel of a book. The writing is clear, the atmosphere is vivid and convincing, and the characters are well drawn and fully human. Speare wrote only four novels for children, for which she was awarded two Newbery Medals and a Newbery Honor. Were she a baseball player, she would have by far the highest batting average in the history of the sport.

Elizabeth Speare presents contradictions and dualities that make her as three-dimensional and real as the rest of us. Writing in conservative, conformist 1950s America, she nonetheless tackled themes of bigotry, gossip, intolerance, and guilt by association. A Sunday school teacher and author of a Newbery-winning book about Jesus, she wrote, too, of the downside of religious faith. A homebody dedicated to her family, she always said home came first, but her creation, Kit, is a spunky, determined, outspoken girl who follows her own path.

Elvis is dead, there is yet another new pope, and the cold war is long over. Elizabeth George Speare died in 1994, but Kit Tyler will live on, as long as girls look to find themselves—their ordinary, brave, compassionate, outspoken, independent selves—in a book. May they, like Kit Tyler, also find home.

Karen Cushma

CHAPTER 1

ON A MORNING in mid-April, 1687, the brigantine *Dolphin* left the open sea, sailed briskly across the Sound to the wide mouth of the Connecticut River and into Saybrook harbor. Kit Tyler had been on the forecastle deck since daybreak, standing close to the rail, staring hungrily at the first sight of land for five weeks.

"There's Connecticut Colony," a voice spoke in her ear. "You've come a long way to see it."

She looked up, surprised and flattered. On the whole long voyage the captain's son had spoken scarcely a dozen words to her. She had noticed him often, his thin wiry figure swinging easily hand over hand up the rigging, his sandy, sun-bleached head bent over a coil of rope. Nathaniel Eaton, first mate, but his mother called him Nat. Now, seeing him so close beside her, she was surprised that, for all he looked so slight, the top of her head barely reached his shoulder.

"How does it look to you?" he questioned.

Kit hesitated. She didn't want to admit how disappointing she found this first glimpse of America. The bleak line of shore surrounding the gray harbor was a disheartening contrast to the shimmering green and white that fringed the turquoise bay of Barbados which was her home. The earthen wall of the fortification that faced the river was bare and ugly, and the houses beyond were no more than plain wooden boxes.

"Is that Wethersfield?" she inquired instead.

"Oh, no, Wethersfield is some way up the river. This is the port of Saybrook. Home to us Eatons. There's my father's shipyard, just beyond the dock."

She could just make out the row of unimpressive shacks and the flash of raw new lumber. Her smile was admiring from pure relief. At least this grim place was not her destination, and surely the colony at Wethersfield would prove more inviting.

"We've made good time this year," Nat went on. "It's been a fair passage, hasn't it?"

"Oh, yes," she sparkled. "Though I'm glad now 'tis over."

"Aye," he agreed. "I never know myself which is best, the setting out or the coming back to harbor. Ever been on a ship before?"

"Just the little pinnaces in the islands. I've sailed on those all my life."

He nodded. "That's where you learned to keep your balance."

So he had noticed! To her pride, she had proved to be a natural sailor. Certainly she had not spent the voyage groaning and retching like some of the passengers.

"You're not afraid of the wind and the salt, anyway. At least, you haven't spent much time below."

"Not if I could help it," she laughed. Did he think anyone would stay in that stuffy cabin by choice? ~~Would she ever have had the courage to sail at all had she known, before she booked passage~~ that the sugar and molasses in the hold had been paid for by a load of Connecticut horses, and that all the winds of the Atlantic could never blow the ship clean of that unbearable stench? "That's what I minded most about the storm," she added, "four days shut away down there with the deadlights up."

"Were you scared?"

"Scared to death. Especially when the ship stood right on end, and the water leaked under the cabin door. But now I wouldn't have missed it for anything. 'Twas the most exciting thing I ever knew."

His face lighted with admiration, but all for the ship. "She's a stout one, the *Dolphin*" he said. "She's come through many a worse blow than that." His eyes dwelt fondly on the topsails.

"What is happening?" Kit asked, noting the sudden activity along the deck. Four husky sailors in blue jackets and bright kerchiefs had hurried forward to man the capstan bars. Captain Eaton, in his good blue coat, was shouting orders from the quarterdeck. "Are we stopping here?"

"There are passengers to go ashore/' Nat explained. "And we need food and water for the trip upriver. But we've missed the tide, and the wind is blowing too hard from the west for us to make the landing. We're going to anchor out here and take the longboat in to shore. That means I'd better look the oars." He swung away, moving lightly and confidently; there was a bounce in his step that matched the laughter in his eyes.

With dismay, Kit saw the captain's wife among the passengers preparing to disembark. Must she say good-bye so soon to Mistress Eaton? They had shared the bond of being the only two women aboard the *Dolphin* and the older woman had been sociable and kindly. Now, catching Kit's eye, she came hurrying along the deck.

"Are you leaving the ship, Mistress Eaton?" Kit greeted her wistfully.

"Aye, didn't I tell you I'd be leaving you at Saybrook? But don't look so sad, child. 'Tis not far to Wethersfield, and we'll be meeting again."

"But I thought the *Dolphin* was your home!"

"In the wintertime it is, when we sail to the West Indies. But I was born in Saybrook, and in the spring I get to hankering for my house and garden. Besides, I'd never let on to my husband, but the summer trips are tedious, just back and forth up and down the river. I stay at home and tend my vegetables and my spinning like a proper housewife. Then, come November, when he sails for Barbados again, I'm ready enough to go with him. 'Tis a good life, and one of the best things about it coming home in the springtime."

Kit glanced again at the forbidding shore. She could see nothing about it to put such a twinkle or anticipation in anyone's eye. Could there be some charm that was not visible from out here in the harbor? She spoke on a sudden impulse.

"Would there be room in the boat for me to ride to shore with you?" she begged. "I know it's silly, but there is America so close to me for the first time in my life—I can't bear not to set my foot upon it!"

"What a child you are, Kit," smiled Mrs. Eaton. "Sometimes 'tis hard to believe you are sixteen. She appealed to her husband. The captain scowled at the girl's wind-reddened cheeks and shining eyes and then shrugged consent. As Kit gathered her heavy skirts about her and clambered down the swaying rope ladder, the men in the longboat good-naturedly shoved their bundles closer to make room for her. Her spirits bobbed like the whitecaps in the harbor as the boat pulled away from the black hull of the *Dolphin*.

As the prow scraped the landing piles, Nat leaped ashore and caught the hawser. He reached to help his mother, then stretched a sure hand to swing Kit over the boat's edge.

With a bound she was over the side and had set foot on America. She stood taking deep breaths of the salt, fish-tainted air, and looked about for someone to share her excitement. She was quite forgotten. A throng of men and boys on the wharf had noisily closed in on the three Eatons, and she could hear a busy catching up of the past months' news. The other passengers had hurried along the wharf to the dirt road beyond. Only three shabbily-dressed women lingered near her, and because she could not contain her eagerness, Kit smiled and would have spoken, but she was abruptly repulsed by their sharply curious eyes. One hand moved guiltily to her tangled brown curls. She must look a sight! No gloves, no cover for her hair, and her face rough and red from weeks of salt wind. But how ill-mannered of them to stare so! She pulled up the hood of her scarlet cloak and turned away. Embarrassment was a new sensation for Kit. No one on the island had ever presumed to stare like that at Sir Francis Tyler's granddaughter.

To make matters worse, America was behaving strangely underfoot. As she stepped forward, the wharf tilted upward, and she felt curiously lightheaded. Just in time a hand grasped her elbow.

"Steady there!" a voice warned. "You haven't got your land legs yet." Nat's blue eyes laughed down at her.

"It will wear off in a short time," his mother assured her. "Katherine, dear, I do hate to let you go on alone. You're sure your aunt will be waiting for you at Wethersfield? They say there's a Goodwife Gruff going aboard, and I'll tell her to keep an eye on you." With a quick clasp of Kit's hand she was gone and Nat, shouldering her trunk in one easy motion, followed her along the narrow dirt road. Which one of those queer little boxlike houses did they call home? Kit wondered.

She turned to watch the sailors stowing provisions into the longboat. She already regretted this impulsive trip ashore. There was no welcome for her at this chill Saybrook landing. She was grateful when at last the captain assembled the return group and she could climb back into the longboat. Four new passengers were embarking for the trip up the river, a shabby, dour-looking man and wife and their scrawny little girl clutching a wooden toy, and a tall, angular young man with a pale narrow face and shoulder-length fair hair under a wide-brimmed black hat. Captain Eaton took his place aft without attempting any introduction. The men readied their oars. Then Nathaniel, coming back down the road on a run, slipped the rope from the mooring and as they pulled away from the wharf leaped nimbly to his place with the crew.

They were halfway across the harbor when a wail of anguish broke from the child. Before anyone could stop her the little girl had flung herself to her knees and teetered dangerously over the edge of the boat. Her mother leaned forward, grasped the woolen jumper and jerked her back, smacking her down with a sharp cuff.

"Ma! The dolly's gone!" the child wailed. "The dolly Grandpa made for me!"

Kit could see the little wooden doll, its arms sticking stiffly into the air, bobbing helplessly in the water a few feet away.

"Shame on you!" the woman scolded. "After the work he went to. All that fuss for a toy, and the minute you get one you throw it away!"

"I was holding her up to see the ship! Please get her back. Ma! Please! I'll never drop it again!"

The toy was drifting farther and farther from the boat, like a useless twig in the current. No one in the boat made a move, or paid the slightest attention. Kit could not keep silent.

"Turn back, Captain," she ordered impulsively. "It will be an easy thing to catch."

The captain did not even glance in her direction. Kit was not used to being ignored, and her temper flared. When a thin whimper from the child was silenced by a vicious cuff, her anger boiled over. Without a second's deliberation she acted. Kicking off her buckled shoes and dropping the woolen cloak, she plunged headlong over the side of the boat.

The shock of cold, totally unexpected, almost knocked her senseless. As her head came to the surface she could not catch her breath at all. But after a dazed second she sighted the bobbing piece of wood and instinctively struck out after it in vigorous strokes that set her blood moving again. She had the doll in her hand before her numbed mind realized that there had been a second splash, and as she turned back she saw that Nathaniel was in the water beside her, thrashing with a clumsy paddling motion. She could not help laughing as she passed him, and with a feeling of triumph she beat him to the boat. The captain leaned to drag her back over the side, and Nathaniel scrambled in behind her without any assistance.

"Such water!" she gasped. "I never dreamed water could be so cold!"

She shook back her wet hair, her cheeks glowing. But her laughter died away at sight of all their faces. Shock and horror and unmistakable anger stared back at her. Even Nathaniel's young face was dark with rage.

"You must be daft," the woman hissed. "To jump into the river and ruin those clothes!"

Kit tossed her head. "Bother the clothes! They'll dry. Besides, I have plenty of others."

"Then you might have a thought for somebody else!" snapped Nat, slapping the water out of his dripping breeches. "These are the only clothes I have."

Kit's eyes flashed. "Why did you jump in anyway? You needn't have bothered."

"You can be sure I wouldn't have," he retorted, "had I any idea you could swim."

Her eyes widened. "Swim?" she echoed scornfully. "Why my grandfather taught me to swim as soon as I could walk."

The others stared at her in suspicion. As though she had sprouted a tail and fins right before their eyes. What was the matter with these people? Not another word was uttered as the men pulled harder on their oars. A solid cloud of disapproval settled over the dripping girl, more chilling than the April breeze. Her high spirits plunged. She had made herself ridiculous. How many times had her grandfather cautioned her to think before she flew off the handle? She drew her knees and elbows tight under the red cloak and clenched her teeth to keep them from chattering. Water dripped off her matted hair and ran in icy trickles down her neck. Then, glancing defiantly from one hostile face to another, Kit found a small measure of comfort. The young man in the black hat was looking at her gravely, and all at once his lips twisted in spite of himself. A smile filled his eyes with such warmth and sympathy that a lump rose in Kit's throat, and she glanced away. Then she saw that the child, silently clutching her sodden doll, was staring at her with a gaze of pure worship.

Two hours later, dressed in a fresh green silk, Kit was spreading the wet dress and the woolen cloak to dry on the sun-warmed planking of the deck when her glance was caught by the wide black hat, and she looked up to see the new passenger coming toward her.

"If you will give me leave," he said, with stiff courtesy, removing the hat to reveal a high fine forehead, "I would like to introduce myself. I am John Holbrook, bound for Wethersfield, which I learn is your destination as well."

Kit had not forgotten that comforting smile. "I am Katherine Tyler," she answered forthrightly. "I am on the way to Wethersfield to live with my aunt. Mistress Wood."

"Is Matthew Wood your uncle then? His name is well known along the river."

"Yes, but I have never seen him, nor my aunt either. I do not even know very much about her, just that she was my mother's sister back in England, and that she was very beautiful."

The young man looked puzzled. "I have never met your aunt," he said politely. "I came to look for you now because I felt I should ask your pardon for the way we all behaved toward you this morning. After all, it was only a kind thing you meant to do, to get the toy back for the child."

"'Twas a very foolish thing, I realize now," she admitted. "I am forever doing foolish things. Even so, I can't understand why it should make everyone so angry."

He considered this gravely. "You took us aback, that is all. We were all sure you would drown before our eyes. It was astonishing to see you swimming."

"But can't you swim?"

He flushed. "I cannot swim a stroke, nor could anyone else on this ship, I warrant, except Nat who was born on the water. Where in England could they have taught you a thing like that?"

"Not England. I was born on Barbados."

~~"Barbados!" He stared. "The heathen island in the West Indies?"~~

"'Tis no heathen island. 'Tis as civilized as England, with a famous town and fine streets and shops My grandfather was one of the first plantation owners, with a grant from the King."

"You are not a Puritan then?"

"Puritan? You mean a Roundhead? One of those traitors who murdered King Charles?"

A spark of protest flashed across his mild gray eyes. He started to speak, then thought better of it and asked gently, "You are going to stay here in Connecticut?"

Under his serious gaze Kit was suddenly uneasy. She had had enough questioning. "Do you live in Wethersfield yourself?" she turned the tables. The young man shook his head.

"My home is in Saybrook, but I am going to Wethersfield to study under the Reverend Bulkeley. In another year I hope to be ready to take a church of my own."

A clergyman! She might have guessed it. His very smile had a touch of solemnness. But even as she thought it, she was surprised by the humor that quirked his fine straight lips.

"I mistrust you will be a surprise to the good people of Wethersfield," he said mildly. "What will they make of you, I wonder?"

Kit started. Had he guessed? There was no one who could possibly have told him. She had kept her secret even from the captain's wife. Before she could ask what he meant, she was diverted by the sight of Nat Eaton swinging along the deck in their direction. His thin clothing had dried on him, but the friendly grin of that morning had been replaced by an aloof and mocking smile that showed only too well that his morning's ducking had not been forgotten.

"My father sent me to find you, Mistress Tyler." One couldn't have guessed, by his tone, that he had ever addressed her before. "Since my mother has left the ship he thinks it best that you eat at board with Goodwife Cruff and her family."

Kit wrinkled up her nose. "Ugh," she exclaimed, "that sour face of hers will curdle my food."

Nat laughed shortly. "'Tis certain she expects you will curdle hers," he answered. "She has been insisting to my father that you are a witch. She says no respectable woman could keep afloat in the water like that."

"How dare she!" Kit flared, indignant as much at his tone as at the dread word he uttered so carelessly.

"Don't you know about the water trial?" Nat's eyes deliberately taunted her. "'Tis a sure test. I've seen it myself. A true witch will always float. The innocent ones just sink like a stone."

He was obviously paying her back for the morning's humiliation. But she was surprised to see that John Holbrook was not at all amused. His solemn young face was even more grave than before.

"That is not a thing to be laughed at," he said. "Is the woman serious, Nat?"

Nat shrugged. "She'd worked up quite a gale," he admitted. "But my father has smoothed her down. He knows Barbados. He explained that the sea is always warm and that even respectable people sometimes swim in it. All the same, Mistress Katherine," he added, with a quizzical look, "now that you're in Connecticut I'd advise you to forget that you ever learned."

"No danger," Kit shuddered. "I wouldn't go near your freezing river again for the world."

She had made them both laugh, but underneath her nonchalance, Kit felt uneasy. In spite of his mocking tone, Nat had unmistakably warned her, just as she knew now that John Holbrook had been about to warn her. There was something strange about this country of America, something that they seemed to share and understand and she did not. She was only partially reassured when John said, with another of those surprising flashes of gentle humor, "I shall sit with you at supper, if I may. Just to make sure that no one's food gets curdled."

CHAPTER 2

IT TOOK nine days for the *Dolphin* to make the forty-three mile voyage from Saybrook to Wethersfield. As though the ship were bewitched, from the moment they left Saybrook everything went wrong. With the narrowing of the river the fresh sea breeze dropped behind, and by sunset it died away altogether. The sails sagged limp and soundless, and the *Dolphin* rolled sickeningly in midstream. On one or two evenings a temporary breeze raised their hopes and sent the ship ahead a few miles, only to die away again. In the morning Kit could scarcely tell that they had moved. The dense brown forest on either side never seemed to vary, and ahead there was only a new bend in the river to tantalize her.

"How can you stand it?" she fumed to a redheaded sailor who was taking advantage of the windless hours to give the carved dolphin at the prow a fresh coat of paint. "Doesn't the wind ever blow on this river?"

"Mighty seldom, ma'am," he responded with indifferent good humor. "You get used to it. We'll spend most of the summer waiting for a breeze, going or coming."

"How often do you go up this river?"

"Every few weeks. We make a run, say to Boston or New Orleans, fill up the hold, and then back to Hartford."

She could see why Mistress Eaton chose to stay at home in Saybrook. "Does it always take as long as this?"

"Call this long?" the sailor replied, swinging far out to daub the curving tail of the dolphin. "Why, ma'am, I've known it to take as many days to get from here to Hartford as to go all the way to Jamaica. But I'm in no hurry. The *Dolphin's* home to me, and I'm satisfied, wind or no wind."

Kit was ready to fly to pieces with frustration. How could she eke out the patience that had been scarcely enough to see her through a few remaining hours? And how could she force herself to endure another meal at the same board with Goodwife Cruff and her cowed shadow of a husband? Never a civil word had been spoken by either one of them. Plainly they considered the becalmed ship all her doing. And it spoiled her appetite just to watch that miserable little wraith of a child Prudence, not even allowed to sit at board with them, but kept behind her mother where she had to eat standing up the stingy portion they handed back to her. Once or twice she had seen the father furtively slip the child an extra morsel from his plate, but he was plainly too spineless to stand up for her against his shrew of a wife.

A more unpromising child she had never seen. Kit thought, yet she couldn't get Prudence out of her mind. There was some spark in that small frame that refused to be quenched. Late one afternoon Kit had come upon the little girl standing alone by the rail, and seeing the child's wistful, adoring gaze, had moved closer. As they stood side by side a crane rose slowly from the beach, with a graceful lift of its great wings, and they followed its flight, a leisurely line of white against the dark trees. The child had gasped, tilting back her head, her peaked little face aglow with wonder and delight. But in that instant a harsh call from the hatchway sent her scurrying. With a pang Kit realized that not once since they boarded the ship had she glimpsed the wooden doll. Had her own rash performance only

served to cheat the child of the one toy she possessed?

They were certainly not good at forgetting, these New Englanders. Captain Eaton treated her with punctilious caution. Nat remained aloof, absorbed in a totally male world of rigging and canvas. On such a small ship it was remarkable how he managed to avoid her. The few times she happened to be directly in his path he tossed her an indifferent grin and his quizzical blue eyes flicked past and dismissed her.

If it weren't for John Holbrook I couldn't bear it, she thought. He's the only one on this ship who doesn't seem to begrudge my existence. He doesn't mind the delay, either. I believe he's actually grateful for it.

She looked with envy at where he sat, propped against a bulkhead, lost in a bulky brown volume. What could there be in those books of his? There he sat, hour after hour, so intent that often his lips moved, and two spots of color burned in his pale cheeks, as though some secret excitement sprang from the pages. Sometimes he forgot meals entirely. Only when he had wrung the last dregs of light from the sunset, and the shadows reached across the water and fell upon his book, would he reluctantly raise his head and become aware of the ship again.

When that moment came, Kit made sure that his eyes, blinking half blindly from his book, would focus on her gay, silk-clad figure nearby. John would smile, mark his place with deliberation, and come to join her. In the soft half-darkness his stiff manners gradually relaxed into a boyish eagerness. Slowly Kit pieced together the details of what seemed to her an appallingly dull history.

"I suppose it was foolish for a tanner's son even to think about Harvard," John told her. "It was six miles to the school, and my father never could spare me for more than a month or so out of the year. He wanted me to learn, though. He never minded how long I burned the candles at night."

"You mean you worked all day and studied at night? Was it worth it?"

"Of course it was worth it," he answered, surprised at her question. "I was set on college. I finished all the requirements in Latin. I know the *Accidence* almost by heart."

"But you're not going to Harvard?"

He shook his head. "Up till this spring I kept hoping I could save money enough. I planned to walk over the foot trails through Connecticut and across Massachusetts. Well, the Lord didn't see fit to provide the money, but now He has opened another way for me. Reverend Bulkeley of Wethersfield has agreed to take me as a pupil. He is a very famous scholar, in medicine as well as theology. I couldn't have found a more learned teacher, even at Harvard."

Such frank talk about money embarrassed Kit. Her grandfather had seldom mentioned such a thing. She herself had rarely so much as held a coin in her hand, and for sixteen years she had never questioned the costly and beautiful things that surrounded her. In the last few months, to be sure, she had had a terrifying glimpse of what it might mean to live without money, but it seemed shameful to speak of it. Instead she tried to tell him of her own childhood, and it was as though they each spoke a totally different language. She saw that John was scandalized at the way she had grown up on the island, running free as the wind in a world filled with sunshine. The green palms, the warm turquoise

ocean rolling in to white beaches meant nothing to him. Didn't her parents give her work to do? he insisted.

"I don't remember my parents at all," she told him. "My father was born on the island and was sent to England to school. He met my mother there and brought her back to Barbados with him. They had only three years together. They were both drowned on a pleasure trip to Antigua, and Grandfather and I were left alone."

"Were there no women to care for you?"

"Oh, slaves of course. I had a black nursemaid. But I never needed anyone but Grandfather. He was—" There were no words to explain Grandfather. In the twilight the memory of him was very sharp, the soft pink skin aging on his fine cheekbones, the thin aristocratic nose, the eyes, so shrewd and yet so loving. She dared not trust her voice.

"It must have been hard to lose him," said John gently. "I am so glad you have an aunt to come to."

"She was my mother's only sister," said Kit, the tight pain easing a little. "Grandfather says my mother talked about her the livelong day and never got over being homesick for her. Her name is Rachel, and she was charming and gay, and they said she could have had her pick of any man in her father's regiment. But instead she fell in love with a Puritan and ran away to America without her father's blessing. She wrote to my mother from Wethersfield, and she has written a letter to me every year of my life."

"She is going to be very happy to see you."

"I've tried so hard to imagine Aunt Rachel," mused Kit. "Grandfather said that my mother was thin and plain, like me. But Aunt Rachel was beautiful. Her hair and eyes will be dark, I suppose, like mine. But what will her voice be like? My mother remembered that she was always laughing."

John Holbrook looked earnestly at the girl beside him. "That was a great many years ago," he reminded her. "Don't forget, your aunt has been away from England for a long time."

Kit was aware again of that intangible warning that she could not interpret. Every day of this delay made it harder for her to shake off her uneasiness.

On the seventh morning Captain Eaton resorted to a curious device which John Holbrook called "walking up the river." Two sailors in a small boat went some distance ahead bearing a long rope fastened to a small anchor. Rowing as far as the rope would stretch, they dropped the anchor. On the deck of the ship the crew lined up, ten hearty men bared to the waist, each grasping the rope, and began a rhythmical march from one end of the ship to the other. As one man reached the end, he dropped the rope, and raced back to grasp it again at the end of the line. Painfully, almost imperceptibly, the *Dolphin* inched forward through the water. In an hour's time they had reached the anchor and the rowboat went ahead a second time. Over and over, hour after hour, the men moved, hauling the ship by the sheer force of straining muscle and gasping breath. Sweat poured down their arms and shoulders.

The agonizing slowness was harder to endure than no motion at all. Kit shuddered away from the sight of those lunging bodies. A hot spring sun beat down without relief. She twitched her own shoulders fretfully under the silk that stuck clammily against her skin. In the heat the stench of horses steamed up from the depths of the hold as though the animals were still there. This morning the cook had refused to spare her enough water even for a decent bath. It was almost too much to bear when she heard a splash directly below her and saw that Nat and two of the other young men had taken advantage of a wait for the rowboat and were thrashing about like porpoises in the river.

Nat looked up and caught her wistful eye. "Jump in, why don't you?" he taunted.

"You warned me never to do it again," Kit replied incautiously.

"Do you need an excuse? I'll shout for help and go under. You couldn't just stand there and watch me drown, could you?"

"Yes, I could," Kit laughed in spite of herself, "and I would, too."

"Then you can stay there and frizzle," responded Nat. As he paddled toward the ladder Kit watched him with both envy and relief. He had sounded as friendly and easy as on that first morning at Saybrook harbor.

As though to prove that the constraint between them was broken, in the next wait for the rowboat Nat strolled over to join her where she stood watching.

"I'll wager you're wishing you'd never left Barbados," he said. "'Twas unfair of me to tease you."

"How I envied you," she exclaimed. "To get into that water and away from this filthy ship even for a moment!"

In a split second a squall darkened Nat's blue eyes. "Filthy—the *Dolphin*?"

"Oh," she laughed impatiently, "I know you're forever scrubbing. But that stable smell! I'll never get it out of my hair as long as I live!"

Nat's indignation found vent in scorn. "Maybe you think it would smell prettier with a hold full of human bodies, half of them rotting in their chains before anyone knew they were dead!"

Kit recoiled, as much from his angry tone as from the repulsive words. "What are you talking about? People—down in the hold?"

"I suppose you never knew about slaves on Barbados?"

"Of course I knew. We own—we used to own—more than a hundred. How else could you work a plantation?"

"How did you think they got there? Did you fancy they traveled from Africa in private cabins like yours?"

She had never thought about it at all. "But don't you have slaves in America?"

"Yes, to our shame! Mostly down Virginia way. But there are plenty of fine folk like you here in New England who'll pay a fat price for black flesh without asking any questions how it got here. If my father would consent to bring back just one load of slaves we would have had our new ketch by this summer. But we Eatons, we're almighty proud that our ship has a good honest stink of horses!"

Nat was gone again. What a touchy temper he had! She hadn't meant to insult his precious ship. Why did he deliberately turn everything to her disadvantage? He had been just on the point of making friends. Now the trip would probably be over before she could speak to him again. And why should she care—a rude, freckle faced sailor who took more notice of a strip of canvas than of a brocaded gown? At least John Holbrook knew how to speak with respect.

But even John Holbrook did not approve of her completely. She was forever astonishing him. Last night, for instance, she had reached impulsively for the volume he held, opened it at the marked page, and squinting curiously at the words in the wan light, had read aloud:

"We are in the first place to apprehend that there is a time fixed and stated by God for the Devil to enjoy a dominion over our sinful and therefore woful world. Toward the end of his time the descent of the Devil in Wrath upon the World will produce more woful effects than what have been in former Ages. The death pangs of the Devil will make him to be more of a Devil than ever he was—"

"Goodness!" Kit wrinkled up her nose. "Is this what you read all day long?" She looked up to find John staring at her.

"You can read that?" he questioned, with the same amazement he had shown when she had proved she could swim. "How did you learn to read when you say you just ran wild like a savage and never did any work?"

"Do you call reading work? I don't even remember how I learned. When it was too hot to play, Grandfather would take me into his library where it was dark and cool, and read to me out loud from his books, and later I would sit beside him and read to myself while he studied."

"What sort of books?" John's voice was incredulous.

"Oh, history, and poetry, and plays."

"*Plays!*"

"Yes, the plays were the best. Wonderful ones by Dryden and Shakespeare and Otway."

"Your grandfather allowed a girl to read such things?"

"They were beautiful, those plays! Have you never read them?"

John's pale cheeks reddened. "There are no such books in Saybrook. In Boston, perhaps. But the proper use of reading is to improve our sinful nature, and to fill our minds with God's holy word."

Kit stared at him. She pictured Grandfather, the blue-veined hands caressing the leather binding and she knew that he had not cherished his books with any thought of improving his sinful nature. She could imagine the twinkle that would have danced in his eyes at those solemn words. All the same, th

reproof in John Holbrook's voice left her discomfited. Somehow she felt that John was always drawing back, uneasy at this friendship that was growing between them. And she herself was often repelled by the hard uprightness that lay just under his gentle voice and looks. She saw now that she could not tell him about the books she had loved any more than she could make him see the palm tree swaying under a brilliant blue sky.

Early the next morning a contrary breeze came whistling along the river. The *Dolphin* sprang to life, scudded the last few miles, and bumped against the wharf at Wethersfield landing. The shore, muffled in thick scarves of drifting mist, looked scarcely different from the miles of unbroken forest that they had seen for the past week.

Sailors began vigorously to roll out the great casks of molasses and pile them along the wharf. Two of the men lowered over the side the seven small leather trunks that held all of Kit's belongings and piled them, one beside the other, on the wet planking. Kit clambered down the ladder and stood for the second time on the alien shore that was to be her home.

Her heart sank. This was Wethersfield! Just a narrow sandy stretch of shoreline, a few piles sunk in the river with rough planking for a platform. Out of the mist jutted a row of cavernous wooden structures that must be warehouses, and beyond that the dense, dripping green of fields and woods. Not a town, not a house, only a few men and boys and two yapping dogs who had come to meet the boat. With something like panic Kit watched Goodwife Cruff descend the ladder and stride ahead of her husband along the wharf. Prudence, dragging at her mother's hand, gazed back imploringly as they passed.

"Ma," she ventured timidly, "the pretty lady got off here at Wethersfield!"

Kit summoned the boldness to speak to her. "Yes, Prudence," she called clearly. "And I hope that I will see you often."

Goodwife Cruff halted and glared at Kit. "I'll thank you to let my child alone!" she spat out. "We do not welcome strangers in this town, and you be the kind we like least." Jerking Prudence nearly off her feet, she marched firmly up the dirt road and disappeared in the fog.

Even John Holbrook's farewells were abstracted. A formal bow, a polite wish for her pleasant arrival, and he, too, strode eagerly into the fog in quest of his new teacher. Then Kit saw Captain Eaton approaching and knew that the moment had come when the truth would have to be told.

"There must be some mistake," the captain began. "We signaled yesterday that we would reach Wethersfield at dawn. I expected that your aunt and uncle would be here to meet you no matter how early it might be."

Kit swallowed and gathered her courage. "Captain Eaton," she said boldly, "my uncle and aunt can hardly be blamed for not meeting me. You see—well, to be honest, they do not even know that I am coming."

The captain's jaw tightened. "You gave me to understand that they had sent for you to come."

Kit lifted her head proudly. "I told you that they wanted me," she corrected him. "Mistress Woo

is my mother's sister. Naturally she would always want me to come."

"Even assuming that to be true, how could you be sure they were still in Connecticut?"

"My Aunt Rachel's last letter came only six months ago."

He scowled with annoyance. "You know very well that I should never have taken you on board had I known this. Now I shall have to take the time to find where your uncle lives and deliver you. But understand, I take no responsibility for your coming."

Kit's head went higher. "I am entirely responsible for my own coming," she assured him haughtily.

"Fair enough," the captain responded grimly. "Look here, Nat," he turned back. "See if two hands can be spared to carry this baggage."

Kit's cheeks went scarlet. Why should Nat, who had carefully been somewhere else during the whole of the last nine days, have to be so handy at just this moment? Now whatever befell he was going to be there to witness it, with those mocking blue eyes and that maddening cool amusement. What if Aunt Rachel—but there was no time for doubt now. Between trying to hold up her head confidently and at the same time find a place to set down her dainty kid shoes between the slimy ruts and the mud puddles, Kit had all she could tend to.

CHAPTER 3

ALONG WITH her pretty shoes, Kit's spirits sank lower at each step. She had clutched at a hope that the dark fringe of dripping trees might somehow be concealing the town she had anticipated. But as they plodded along the dirt road past wide stumpy fields, her last hopes died. There was no fine town of Wethersfield. There was a mere settlement, far more lonely and dreary than Saybrook.

A man in a leather coat and breeches led a cow along the road. He stopped to stare at them, and even the cow looked astonished. Captain Eaton took advantage of the meeting to ask directions.

"High Street," the man said, pointing his jagged stick. "Matthew Wood's place is the third house beyond the Common."

High Street indeed! No more than a cow path! Kit's shoes were wet through, and the soaked ruffles of her gown slapped against her ankles. She would naturally have lifted her skirts free of the uncut grass, but a new self-consciousness restrained her. She was aware at every step of the young man who strode behind her with a trunk balanced easily on each shoulder.

She relaxed slightly at the first glimpse of her uncle's house. At least it looked solid and respectable, compared to the cabins they had passed. Two and a half stories it stood, gracefully proportioned, with leaded glass windows and clapboards weathered to a silvery gray.

The captain lifted the iron knocker and let it fall with a thud that echoed in the pit of the girl's stomach. For a moment she could not breathe at all. Then the door opened and a thin, gray-haired woman stood on the threshold. She was quite plainly a servant, and Kit was impatient when the captain removed his hat and spoke with courtesy.

"Do I have the honor of addressing—?"

The woman did not even hear him. Her look had flashed past to the girl who stood just behind, and her face had suddenly gone white. One hand reached to clutch the doorpost.

"Margaret!" The word was no more than a whisper. For a moment the two women stared at each other. Then realization swept over Kit.

"No, Aunt Rachel!" she cried. "Don't look like that! It is Kit! I am Margaret's daughter."

"Kit? You mean—can it possibly be Katherine Tyler? For a moment I thought—oh, my dear child, how wonderful!"

All at once such a warmth and happiness swept over her pale face that Kit too was startled. Yes, this strange woman was indeed Aunt Rachel, and once, a long time ago, she must have been very beautiful.

Captain Eaton cleared his throat. "Well," he observed, "I am relieved that this has turned out well after all. What will you have me do with the baggage, ma'am?"

Rachel Wood's eyes focused for the first time on the three trunk bearers. "Goodness," she gasped

"do all these belong to you, child? You can just set them there, I suppose, and I'll ask my husband about them. Can I offer you and your men some breakfast, sir?"

"Thank you, we can't spare any more time. Good day, young lady. I'll tell my wife I saw you safely here."

"I'm sorry to have caused you trouble," Kit said sincerely. "And I do thank you, all of you."

Two of the three sailors had already started back along the road, but Nat still stood beside the trunks and looked down at her. As their eyes met, something flashed between them, a question that was suddenly weighted with regret. But the instant was gone before she could grasp it, and the mocking light had sprung again into his eyes.

"Remember," he said softly. "Only the guilty ones stay afloat." And then he was gone.

The doorway of Matthew Wood's house led into a shallow hallway from which a narrow flight of stairs climbed steeply. Through a second door Kit stepped into the welcome of the great kitchen. In a fireplace that filled half one side of the room a bright fire crackled, throwing glancing patterns of light on creamy plaster walls. There was a gleam of rubbed wood and burnished pewter.

"Matthew! Girls!" cried her aunt. "Something wonderful has happened! Here is Katherine Tyler, my sister Margaret's girl, come all the way from Barbados!"

Three people stared up at her from the plain board table. Then, from his place at the head, a man unfolded his tall angular body and came toward her.

"You are welcome, Katherine," he said gravely, and took her hand in his bony fingers. She could not read the faintest sign of welcome in his thin stern lips or in the dark eyes that glowered fiercely at her from under heavy grizzled eyebrows.

Behind him a girl sprang up from the table and came forward. "This is your cousin Judith," her aunt said, and Kit gasped with pleasure. Judith's face fulfilled in every exquisite detail the picture she had treasured of her imagined aunt. The clear white skin, the blue eyes under a dark fringe of lashes, the black hair that curled against her shoulders, and the haughty lift of her perfect small chin—this girl could have been the toast of a regiment!

"And your other cousin, Mercy." The second girl had risen more slowly, and at first Kit was only aware of the most extraordinary eyes she had ever seen, gray as rain at sea, wide and clear and filled with light. Then, as Mercy stepped forward, one shoulder dipped and jerked back grotesquely, and Kit realized that she leaned on crutches.

"How lovely," breathed Mercy, her voice as arresting as her eyes, "to see you after all these years, Katherine!"

"Will you call me Kit?" The question sounded abrupt. Kit had been her grandfather's name for her, and something in Mercy's smile had reached straight across the gulf so that suddenly she wanted to hear the name spoken again.

"Have you had breakfast?"

~~"I guess not. I hadn't even thought of it."~~

"Then 'tis lucky we are eating late this morning," said her aunt. "Take her cloak, Judith. Come close to the fire, my dear, your skirt is soaking."

As Kit threw back the woolen cloak, Judith's reaching hand fell back. "My goodness!" she exclaimed. "You wore a dress like that to *travel* in?"

In her eagerness to make a good impression Kit had selected this dress with care, but here in the plain room it seemed overelegant. The three other women were all wearing some nondescript sort of coarse gray stuff. Judith laid the cloak thoughtfully on a bench and reached to touch Kit's glove.

"What beautiful embroidery," she said admiringly.

"Do you like them? I'll give you some just like them if you like. I have several pairs in my trunk."

Judith's eyes narrowed. Rachel Wood was setting out a pewter mug and spoon and a crude wooden plate.

"Sit here, Katherine, where the fire will warm your back. Tell us how you happened to come so far. Did your grandfather come with you?"

"My grandfather died four months ago," Kit explained.

"Why, you poor child! All alone there on that island! Who did come with you, then?"

"I came alone."

"Praise be!" her aunt marveled. "Well, you're here safe and sound. Have some corn bread, my dear. 'Twas baked fresh yesterday, and there is new butter."

Surprisingly, the bread tasted delicious, though of a coarse texture like nothing she had ever tasted before. Kit lifted the pewter mug thirstily, and abruptly set it down. "Is that *water*?" she asked politely.

"Of course, drawn fresh from the spring this morning."

Water! For breakfast! But the corn bread was good, and she managed a second piece in spite of her dry tongue.

Rachel Wood could not seem to look away from the young face across the table, and every few moments her eyes brimmed over with tears.

"I declare, you look so like her it takes my breath away. But all the same, there is a hint of your father there, too. I can see it if I look closely."

"You remember my father?" Kit asked eagerly.

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