

*The
Witch
of
Blackbird
Pond*

ELIZABETH GEORGE SPEARE

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT
Boston New York

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CHAPTER I

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 fore-castle 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, any-

way. 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 long-boat in to shore. That means I'd better look to 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 is coming home in the springtime."

Kit glanced again at the forbidding shore. She

could see nothing about it to put such a twinkle of 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