

Elizabeth George Speare



The **WITCH** of
Blackbird Pond

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ELIZABETH GEORGE SPEARE

Calico Captive

The Witch of Blackbird Pond

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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

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 Cruff 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 then 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. "Twill 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 all 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