

NANTUCKET LEGACY
BOOK ONE

*PHOEBE'S
LIGHT*

SUZANNE
WOODS
FISHER



a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2018 by Suzanne Woods Fisher

Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Fisher, Suzanne Woods, author.

Title: *Phoebe's light* / Suzanne Woods Fisher.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group,

[2018] | Series: Nantucket legacy ; 1

Identifiers: LCCN 2017044853 | ISBN 9780800721626 (softcover)

Subjects: LCSH: Young women—Fiction. | Quakers—Fiction. | GSAFD: Christian fiction. | Love stories.

Classification: LCC PS3606.178 P48 2018 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017044853>

Scripture used in this book, whether quoted or paraphrased by the characters, is taken from the King James Version.

This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Published in association with Joyce Hart of the Hartline Literary Agency, LLC

18 19 20 21 22 23 24 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Mary Coffin Starbuck (1645–1717),
a Weighty Friend to all Nantucketers.
A woman far ahead of her times,
who did indeed build something that endured.

Author's Note

The story of Nantucket Island, nearly thirty miles out to sea off the sharp elbow of Cape Cod, begins long before *Phoebe's Light* picks up. Native Americans farmed this crescent-shaped island in relative peace and quiet, able to avoid many of the problems with English colonists that mainland Natives could not. In 1660, a group of white settlers moved to Nantucket, including fifteen-year-old Mary Coffin, hoping to build something that would endure.

Sheepherding became a natural industry for these new settlers, far from predators like wolves. In fact, sheep gave Nantucket its economic base until whaling overshadowed it. Whaling became such a great source of revenue, through the late eighteenth century and into the middle of the nineteenth century, that Nantucket Island was considered the wealthiest port in the world.

And that is when this story begins . . .

Cast of Characters

17th century

Mary Coffin: daughter of one of the first proprietors of Nantucket Island—highly revered; considered to be like Deborah the judge of the Old Testament

Tristram Coffin: proprietor of Nantucket Island, father of Mary, husband of Dionis

Nathaniel Starbuck: son of proprietor Edward Starbuck

Peter Foulger: surveyor, missionary to the Wampanoag Indians of Nantucket Island, joined the proprietors

Eleazer Foulger: son of Peter Foulger

18th century

Phoebe Starbuck: great-granddaughter of Mary Coffin

Barnabas Starbuck: father of Phoebe

Matthew Macy: cooper on Nantucket Island

Phineas Foulger: whaling captain of *Fortuna*

Silence Foulger (Silo): cabin boy

Sarah Foulger: daughter of Captain Phineas Foulger

Hiram Hoyt: first mate of *Fortuna*

Libby Macy: mother of Matthew

Jeremiah Macy: brother of Matthew

Zacchaeus Coleman: constable of Nantucket

Glossary

Language of 18th-Century Nantucket

ambergris: a waxy, grayish substance found in the stomachs of sperm whales and once used in perfume to make the scent last longer

baleen: the comblike plates of cartilage in a whale's mouth to strain plankton and other food from the water; very valuable for its strength and flexibility

boatsteerer/harpooner: crew at the bow of the whaling boat whose job is to spear the whale

broken voyage: a whaling ship that returns home with less than a full load of oil

cat-o'-nine (or *cat-o'-nine-tails*): a multi-tailed whip used to flog sailors

cooper: barrel maker

cooperage: workplace of the cooper

crosstree or *crow's nest*: the part of the ship, near the top of the mast, where the sailor on lookout duty watches for whales

cuddy: a small room or compartment on a boat

disowned: under church discipline

elders: historically, those appointed to foster the vocal ministry of the meeting for worship and the spiritual condition of its members

Facing Benches: the benches or seats in the front of the meeting room, facing the body of the meeting, on which Friends' ministers and elders generally sat

fin up: dead

First Day: Sunday (Quakers did not use names for days of the week, nor for the months, as these had pagan origins)

First Month: January

flensing: butchering of the whale

Friends and Society of Friends: Quaker church members

gam: to visit or talk with the crew of another whaling ship while at sea

gangplank: a movable bridge used to board or leave a ship

greenhand or *greenie*: an inexperienced sailor making his first whaling voyage

hold in the Light: to ask for God's presence to illuminate a situation or problem or person

idler: a crewman whose tasks require daylight hours (cook, cooper, cabin boy)

lay: the percentage of a ship's profit that each crew member receives; a sailor's lay usually depends upon his experience and rank

lookout: the sailor stationed in the crosstree to watch for whales

Meeting: church

minding the Light: an expression used to remind Quakers that there is an Inward Light in each of them that can reveal God's will if its direction is listened to and followed

mortgage button: a Nantucket tradition of drilling a hole in the newel post of a household's banister, filling it with the ashes of the paid-off mortgage, and capping the hole with a button made of scrimshaw (called a Brag Button in the South)

moved to speak: an experience, in the quietness of the meeting, of feeling led by God to speak

mutiny: an uprising or rebellion of a ship's crew against the captain

Nantucket sleigh ride: a term used to describe the pulling of a whaleboat by a whale that has been harpooned and is "running"

Quaker: the unofficial name of a member of the Religious Society of Friends; originally the use was pejorative, but the word was reclaimed by Friends in recognition of the physical sensation that many feel when being moved by the Spirit

quarterboard: a wooden sign with carved name displayed on each ship

rigging: the ropes and chain used to control a ship's sails

saltbox: traditional New England-style wooden frame house with a long, pitched roof that slopes down to the back; a saltbox has just one story in the back and two stories in the front

scrimshaw: whalebone adorned with carvings

seasoning: a process to ensure that decisions are truly grounded in God's will

seize: to tie up a sailor in the rigging as a form of punishment

slops: sailors' clothing (a ship's captain will charge his crew for any clothes he supplied)

syndicate: a group of businessmen who own a whaling ship or ships

tryworks: a brick furnace in which try-pots (a metallic pot used on a whaler or on shore to render blubber) are placed

Weighty Friend: a Friend who is informally recognized as having special experience and wisdom

worldly: having to do with secular values

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8TH DAY OF THE NINTH MONTH IN THE YEAR 1767

Phoebe Starbuck flung back the worn quilt, leapt out of bed, and hurried to the window. She swung open the sash of the window and took in a deep breath of the brisk island air tinged with a musky scent of the flats at low tide. It was how she started each morning, elbows on the windowsill, scanning the water to see which, if any, whaling ships might have returned to port in the night. It was how most every Nantucket woman greeted the day.

Drat! She couldn't see the flags among the jumble of bobbing masts.

Phoebe grabbed the spyglass off the candlestand and peered through it, frantically focusing and refocusing on each mast that dotted the harbor, counting each one. And then her heart stopped when she saw its flag: the *Fortuna*, captained by Phineas Foulger, the most-admired man on all the island, in her opinion. And the ship sat low in the water—indicating a greasy voyage, not a broken one.

Today Phoebe was eighteen years old, a woman by all

rights. Would the captain notice the vast changes in her? She felt but a girl when he sailed away two years ago, though her heart had felt differently. What a day, what a day!

"Make haste, Phoebe dear," her father called up the stairs. "Something special awaits thee."

The morning sun brightened the room as Phoebe scooped up her clothes. She tugged on a brown homespun dress and combed her hair until it crackled. She wound her thick hair into a flattering topknot, pinned it against the back of her head, then covered it with a lace cap. She gave her bedroom a quick tidy-up, plumping a goosefeather pillow and smoothing the last wrinkle from the bed.

Downstairs, Phoebe smiled as she entered the warm keeping room, its fire crackling. Father, the old dear, a small and gentle man, sat at the head of the table with a wrapped bundle in his hands and a cat-that-swallowed-the-canary look on his weathered face, seamed with lines.

"There she is, my daughter, my one and only. Happy birthday, Phoebe." He rose and held the seat out for her. When he stood, she noticed the patches on his overcoat, the sheen at the elbows, the fraying threads at his sleeve cuffs. *Not today*, she thought. *Not on this day. I will not worry today.*

Barnabas Starbuck was considered the black sheep of the Starbuck line—oddly enough, because of sheep. Her father had continued to raise sheep for profit, providing a very modest income at best, despite the fact that all his kinsmen were deeply enmeshed in the whaling industry and growing wealthy for it. The gap between Barnabas Starbuck and all other Starbucks had widened enormously in the last decade.

Phoebe loved her father, but she was not blind to his shortcomings. He was a kind and generous man but lacked the

business acumen common to his relations. Barnabas Starbuck always had a venture brewing. New enterprises, he called them, always, always, always with disastrous results. He would start an enterprise with a big dream, great enthusiasm, and when the idea failed or fizzled, he would move on to something else.

For a brief time Barnabas fancied himself a trader of imports. There were the iron cook pots he had ordered from a smooth-talking Boston land shark, far more pots than there were island housewives, so many that the lean-to still had pots stacked floor to ceiling. Oversupply, he had discovered, was a pitfall. Thus the pots remained unsold and unwanted, rusting away in the moist island air.

And then Barnabas had an idea to start a salt works factory in an empty warehouse on Straight Wharf but once again neglected to take into account the high humidity of the island. The drying process needed for salt production was so greatly hindered by the summer's humidity that the salt clumped and caused condensation on all the warehouse's windows.

Her father was quite tolerant of his business failures. "Just taking soundings!" he would tell Phoebe with a dismissive wave of the hand. "Part and parcel of the road to success."

What her father refused to accept was that all roads on Nantucket Island led to the harbor. Nearly every islander understood that truth and was involved, to some degree or another, in the making of tools necessary to outfit whaling and fishing vessels. Phoebe had tried to encourage her father to consider investing in sail making, blacksmithing, ironworks, rope manufacturing. Anything that would tie his enterprise to the sea. But he was convinced whaling was a short-term industry, soon to fizzle out.

Phoebe had a dread, and not an unfounded one, that her father would soon be declared Town Poor by the selectman. The Starbuck kin had made it abundantly clear that they had reached the end of their tether to bail Barnabas out of another financial failure.

And what would become of them then? The Town Poor were miserably provided for.

Not today, she reminded herself as she poured herself a cup of tea. *I am not going to worry today. Today is a special day.*

Leaning across the table, her father handed her a brown parcel, tied with twine.

"A gift? I thought we had agreed no gifts this year." And here was another sweet but conflicting characteristic to her father—he was a generous gift giver, despite a steady shortage of disposable income.

"This is an *inheritance*," he said, beaming from ear to ear. "It has been waiting for thee until the time was right."

Carefully, Phoebe untied the twine and unfolded the paper, both items to use again. Inside the package was a weathered book, bound in tan sheepskin. When she opened it, she had to squint to read the faint ink. "What could it be?" She looked up at him curiously.

"What could it be? Why, none other than the journal of Great Mary!"

Great Mary? Phoebe's great-grandmother, her father's grandmother. Great Mary's father, Tristram Coffin, was one of the first proprietors to settle the island. Mary was his youngest daughter, regarded as a wise and noble woman, a Weighty Friend to all, oft likened to Deborah in the Old Testament. "I thought the existence of Great Mary's journal was naught but rumor."

“Nay! Nay, ’tis truly hers. Passed along to me from my father and given to him by his father. ’Tis meant to be passed from generation to generation, to whomever would most benefit from the wisdom of Great Mary. For some reason, my father felt I needed it the most.”

Reverently, Phoebe stroked the smooth brown sheepskin covering. “And thee has read it?”

He was silent for some time, staring into his teacup. “Truth be told, I always intended to but never found the time.” His smile disappeared and he looked uncharacteristically chagrined. “The script is faint, my eyes are weak . . . Ink is so vulnerable to humid conditions.” He put down his fork and wiped his mouth with his napkin. “And then . . . I have been so busy with my enterprises.”

Phoebe had to bite on her lip not to point out the irony of this conversation. “I thank thee, Father. I will take good care of it, and when the time is right, I will take care to pass it on to the person who most needs Great Mary’s wisdom.”

It was only after breakfast, as Phoebe knotted the strings of her black bonnet under her chin, swift and taut, eager to hurry to the harbor and catch a glimpse of the *Fortuna*’s captain, that she realized the sharp point of irony was jabbed not only at her father but also at her. For she was the one in this generation, amongst dozens and dozens of Starbuck cousins, to whom the journal of wisdom had been passed.



A fine, fair morning it was, with the air washed fresh by the rain. The countryside was soft, shades of green, hints of yellows and reds with the coming autumn. Matthew Macy tipped his hat to bid goodbye to the constable and left the gaol,

tucked away on Vestal Street, heading toward the wharf where his cooperage was located. A second-generation cooper, Matthew was, with the knowledge of barrel making passed down from his late father. Late . . . but not forgotten. Never that.

He filled his lungs with crystalline air, happy to be outside on this lovely morning and far away from the wretched gaol, at least for the next ten hours. After that, sadly, he was due to return.

He strode down Milk Street, turned the corner, and paused to stop and look down toward the harbor. It was a view that always affected him. How he loved this little island. Thirty miles away from the mainland—not too far but far enough. The rain last evening had chased away the usual lingering fog, and even cleansed the air of the pervasive stink of rendering whales. At the moment the sea was calm, shimmering in the morning sun, but it could change in the blink of an eye, with nary much warning, into a deadly tempest. How well he knew.

Main Street was slick from last night's rain. The markets were setting up for the day, and he had to move deftly to avoid the clusters of townspeople, horses and boxcars, wheelbarrows and wagons. Every corner swarmed with people: seamen and merchants, black-cloaked Quaker matrons holding tightly to their children's hands, somber men in their broad-brimmed hats, rat catchers and peddlers, all going about their lives.

In front of him, he saw a bonneted Quaker maid step right into the path of a fast-moving horse. He veered around two old salts and leaped into the street to swiftly rescue the woman. As he yanked her toward him and away from imminent danger, he heard her gasp.

“Matthew Macy, take thy hands off me!”

Bother. Of all the Quaker girls on the island to rescue, *this* one had to be Phoebe Starbuck. He lifted his hands in the air to show her that he heard and obeyed. “’Tis you, Phoebe? Hard to discern who is under that enormous coal scuttle. But then, that is what the Friends prefer, is it not? To wear blinders to life going on around them.”

Ignoring him, Phoebe tugged at her bonnet, straightened her skirts, and dusted herself off.

“Do I not deserve a thank-you for saving your life?”

She frowned. “Saving my life might be an overstatement.” Another horse and cart thundered by, its wheels splashing her skirts, and she added, “But I am grateful for thy quick thinking.”

“Had I known it was you . . .”

She glared at him. “Thee might have let the horse run me down, no doubt.”

“I was going to say . . . I might have let the Quaker brethren come to your rescue. But then . . . they all seem far more interested to hurry and greet the *Fortuna* than to notice a damsel in distress.”

As he looked around the street, he realized he had unwittingly spoken truth—a crowd was growing near the harbor—though he had meant only to sting Phoebe. Being around her brought out a streak of malice in Matthew that he could not restrain. He seldom left her company without cutting her, or the Friends, with some small criticisms.

As she recovered her composure, her dark brown eyes started snapping. She glanced up Main Street. “How did thee sleep last night? Was the stiff wooden plank comfortable enough for thee? And was a breakfast of gruel fully satisfying?”

"Happily, I am a man with simple needs. I can sleep anywhere and eat anything."

"How delightful. The Nantucket gaol sounds like a suitable arrangement for thee."

And then her attention was diverted by the sight of someone she spotted, and Matthew used the opportunity to excuse himself. As he rounded the corner to Water Street, he turned his head and stopped abruptly. The sun was shining down on Phoebe, lighting her like a beam. Her bonnet brim was turned up and she was smiling as Phineas Foulger, captain of the newly arrived *Fortuna* whale ship, and his abominable daughter, Sarah, approached her.

Why was Captain Foulger so soon off the ship? Most captains waited until the ship's cargo was unloaded, anxious to overlook every barrel of precious oil and ensure it was accounted for in the warehouse.

Then he saw the look on Captain Foulger's face as he caught sight of Phoebe.

A sick feeling lurched through Matthew. His mouth went dry, his palms damp.

Why should he let himself be bothered? Many a night in gaol he had reminded himself that apart from his brother and mother, he cared for no one and nothing.



It was hard to control the smile that strained to burst over Phoebe's face at the sight of Captain Phineas Foulger advancing in her direction among the crowds of shoppers, sailors, and vendors, his elbow guiding his daughter, Sarah. Phoebe had to suppress the impulse to call out and wave, and the even greater one to rush toward the captain. When he

did draw close, he took notice of her and stopped abruptly. The corners of his hazel eyes lifted, crinkling, and she took that as solid evidence of his approval, but she could also see he clearly did not recall her. Had she changed so very much?

Suddenly seeming to remember the presence of his daughter, the captain took a step back. Sarah's cold gaze swept over Phoebe's homespun dress, and she said with a thin-lipped smile, "Hello. How pleasant to see thee."

"And thee as well." *In a pig's eye*, Phoebe thought, all the while she returned as warm a smile at Sarah as she could muster. She hoped Sarah Foulger could not tell the way her heart suddenly flew to her throat at the sight of her father, Captain Foulger, so tall and handsome. Salt-and-pepper hair, trimmed beard framing his chiseled cheekbones, sun-bronzed skin.

Behind Sarah stood a fine-boned half-Indian boy, small and thin for his years, with large sad eyes that were almost too big for his face. His knitted sailor's cap covered a head of thick brown curls. His arms were full of packages. Phoebe turned her attention toward him, mindful that she was "oversmiling" at the captain—and the sweet boy beamed in return.

Suddenly the captain's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "Well, I'll be blowed—'tis Phoebe Starbuck?"

His smile was so warm, so open, her heart leapt, capturing her devotion all over again. "Welcome home, Captain Foulger," she answered. *Oh, welcome, welcome home! You take my breath away.* "A greasy voyage, I trust?"

"Extraordinarily successful," he said. "God blessed the voyage beyond measure." His eyes appraised her. "Thee is looking . . ."

Thee's looking right womanly, Phoebe hoped were the words to come.

"... quite contented," the captain said.

Contented? How does one look contented? 'Twas a compliment, she decided, though she would have preferred that he noticed how she had matured in his absence. "Today happens to be my birthday," she said. Why on earth was she telling him that? She supposed she wanted him to know that she was no longer a girl, no longer just Sarah's peer. Just Sarah's *seamstress*.

Phoebe rushed on. "My eighteenth birthday."

Rather than impressed, he seemed amused. "Is that right?" Sarah made a slight social cough signaling impatience and the captain glanced at her. "Sarah, did thee know it was thy friend Phoebe's birthday?"

Sarah gave her a thin smile, barely disguising her lack of interest.

The captain turned his attention back to Phoebe, hazel eyes twinkling. Oh, how they twinkled! "And what has thou received today?"

She dropped her head and lifted her drawstring purse. "My great-grandmother's journal."

The captain's face, alit with good-natured amusement only seconds ago, suddenly lost its smile and was replaced by a quizzical expression. His eyes riveted to her drawstring. "Great Mary's journal? I thought its existence was a legend."

"Nay, 'tis no legend. My father said 'tis filled with revelations of her wisdom." Of course, that was only his presumption. He hadn't read it. How could he *not* have read it? It was a baffling thought.

"As I was saying, Father"—Sarah's attention was fixed on

her father as if Phoebe were not there—"we ought to host a gathering. Friends would enjoy a gam with thee, hear of thy whale hunts, news of thy travels."

"A lovely idea," the captain said, his eyes fixed on Phoebe.

There was a pregnant pause, in which Phoebe expected Sarah to extend an invitation to her, but none was forthcoming.

"We must not delay Phoebe from her . . . shopping," Sarah put in.

Feeling the bite of Sarah's words—a dig at the fact that Phoebe did the shopping for the Starbuck household—she looked away. For all of Sarah's Quaker airs, she made full use of servants.

"Sarah, my dear," the captain said, "I see my first mate over there by the apple cart, with his eyes fixed on us."

Sarah spun toward the direction of the apple cart so quickly she nearly toppled the packages in the boy's arms. Phoebe reached out to steady the packages and the boy gave her a shy smile. Something about him touched Phoebe's heart. "Is thee part Indian?"

"His mother is a Lucayan-Arawak princess," the captain said, his gaze still on the first mate.

"And the other part?"

"Ah, who knows? A bit of this, a bit of that." The boy gave him a hard look as the captain turned to his daughter. "Sarah, dear, would thee please find out what it is Hiram Hoyt needs?" He spoke gruffly to the boy. "Silo, go along with her."

The first mate was indeed staring at the captain. Hiram Hoyt had always struck Phoebe as a mournful man, though she wasn't sure whether it was due to his scarred face, or the

perpetual pipe sticking out of the left corner of his mouth that made one eye squinty, or mayhap it was his Nantucket Island heritage. His mother was a Wampanoag.

Sarah excused herself with a nod so curt to Phoebe that it was chilling, but no sooner was she out of earshot—Silo obediently trotting behind her—than the captain caught Phoebe's eyes. "I found the boy in the Bahamas and made him my cabin boy as a favor for his mother. Teaching him the ropes of life at sea, but 'tis no easy task. Silo, short for Silence. Deaf and dumb."

How sad. And yet the boy did not seem to be deaf.

The captain smiled his charming smile and Phoebe nearly melted in its warmth. "Perhaps I will see more of thee while the *Fortuna* is in harbor."

"What is the plan for the *Fortuna*?" *Please, please, please say the ship needs to be overhauled. Please stay in Nantucket for an extended period.*

But before the captain could respond, the first mate appeared at his side with Sarah and Silo and gave a nod to Phoebe. "I'm sorry to interrupt, sir, but I have a letter for thee." Hiram Hoyt slid his hand into his coat pocket. "'Twas given me by another sailor who had just returned from the Bahamas."

The captain scowled at him, and glanced at Sarah, then Phoebe. "Excuse me," he said while he slit it open and read it. His scowl deepened.

"Bad tidings?" Sarah said.

He slipped the letter into the pocket of his waistcoat. "Just a bit of ship's business to take care of."

Sarah put a hand on her father's arm. "Can it not wait? Thee has just arrived."

The captain hesitated, then warmth returned to his beautiful face. “Of course.” He glanced in the direction of the harbor and Phoebe knew that something in the letter made him distracted.

Sarah tugged at his sleeve. “We must be on our way to Orange Street. I invited thy first mate to sup with us. To celebrate thy homecoming. Lunch awaits us.”

Another awkward silence as Phoebe waited, hopefully, for an invitation. None was forthcoming.

“Thus we must,” the captain said with a tolerant smile, “make haste.” He reached out for Phoebe’s hand and squeezed it, whispering, “But before the *Fortuna* sets sail, I do hope to see thee again.” He reached behind her to pull a long red rose out of a vendor’s bucket of flowers and handed it to her. “Happy birthday, my sweet Phoebe.” In one smooth motion, he tossed a copper to the vendor. She nearly swooned.

A long motionless moment passed before Phoebe looked up to find his eyes upon her, full of her, taking their fill now. Reluctantly, it seemed, he turned away to join his daughter.

As she watched him cross the street, she felt something powerful swell her heart. *Sweet*. He had given her a rose and called her his “sweet Phoebe.” She spun around, swinging Great Mary’s journal in her drawstring purse, giddy as a bee in a summer garden.

Mary Coffin

15 September 1658

Tristram Jr. saw a Quaker today! I asked him how he knew, because he is the brother prone to tell outlandish tales. He said he could tell by the way the man was dressed and the peculiar way he talked.

It is against the law to have much to do with Quakers. They are supposed to be terrible! Tristram Jr. said the man didn't seem as bad as they are thought to be.

It is all most confusing. Father says that the Quakers started in England only a few years ago. They claim to be Christians, but the General Court insists they are heretics, and accuses them of uttering blasphemies. These Quakers are said to despise government and to be disrespectful to magistrates and ministers. They say they are sent direct from God, like the prophets of the Old Testament. Sent to warn others of the path they are on, but Reverend Rodgers says they try to turn people from the faith.

Father says the constable has warned everyone that they should have nothing to do with Quakers, and if a Quaker is found out, he is supposed to be whipped and locked in the house of correction until he can be sent back where he came from. Anyone found bringing Quakers here on a ship is supposed to be severely punished.

What causes these peculiar people to cross the sea and come to our Massachusetts Bay? They are not wanted here.

3 October 1658

I had a dreadful scare today. It was early in the morning and I had gone down to the pond to fill a bucket with water. We'd had a storm last night, and the pond had filled up, and even the meadow near the pond was soggy. I slipped down the bank and twisted my ankle sorely, too sore to walk on it. I tried calling out, but the pond is a long way from the house and no one could hear me. I would have to wait until someone noticed I went missing. That could take a very, very long time, especially because Tristram Jr. talks a blue streak at breakfast and wouldn't even notice I was absent. Then it started raining again, so here I was, stuck by the pond with a twisted ankle, getting soaked in the rain.

Lo and behold, who should appear at the top of the pond but Nathaniel Starbuck! He tied his horse to a tree and made his way down to the water. He checked my ankle ever so tenderly and asked me if I hurt anywhere else. Then he lifted me in his arms like I was made of cotton and carried me home, as if I was a royal princess.

It's settled. I am in love with Nathaniel Starbuck.