

SHALLA

The Story of a Colonial New England Girl

Chapter One of
an e-book original
for young people

by

Kathy Lynn Emerson
©2010

CHAPTER ONE THE THINKING PLACE

Shalla sat hugging her knees in the warm midday sun, content and sleepy. Words washed over her in waves of sound as she watched a crab scurry sideways across the coarse sand. She heard her father's fervor as he read aloud, but did not take in his meaning. *'Tis but another letter from the Massachusetts Bay*, she thought . . . until Isabel Potter gasped in horror.

Shalla still had no idea what the letter said, but its effect was stunning. Goodwife Weston wept quietly against her husband's shoulder. Randall Holden fondled his musket.

"We will look upon you as men prepared for slaughter," Samuel Gorton repeated. Eyes Shalla had inherited—bright and blue as sapphires—blazed. With one abrupt motion he held the letter aloft and crumpled it in his strong, work-roughened fist.

The very air seemed to quiver, tense and fearful as the small band of settlers gathered in its salty embrace. Shalla looked about her in growing confusion. Something was wrong, terribly wrong, and she had not the slightest idea what it was.

"This letter is dated four days past, the third day of October in this year of our Lord sixteen hundred and forty-three." Her father's resonant voice soothed but the words were frightening. "Doubtless troops were dispatched soon after. We have little time left and much to do, for we are *not* prepared to be slaughtered. Neither are we prepared to go meekly to Boston at the will of those who would take away our liberty. Flee, my friends. Save what you can. We few shall remain here in Shawomet to defend our homes."

When Samuel Gorton gave an order, he was obeyed. As their neighbors streamed past them, faces grim but determined, Shalla's sister Molly poked her hard in the ribs. "Hurry, Shalla."

"Why?" Shalla asked.

"Have you porridge for brains?" The older girl's voice was sharp as a wasp's sting. "Did you not hear what Father said? Soldiers are coming!"

"Why?" Shalla repeated, but no one answered her. She followed Molly into their one room house.

Within the rough hewn walls, Shalla's mother was in command. With her fair complexion and her slender, long-fingered hands, she appeared fragile at first glance. In fact she was as tireless as her husband. She set Shalla to work at once. "Bundle all the good pewter into this blanket."

The tankards and dishes clanked together as Shalla piled them onto the thick wool surface. Almost before she'd let go of the last piece, her older brother, known as Young Sam to distinguish him from their father, tied up the corners and hauled it away. He carried off a basket full of pots and pans as well.

"If anything happens to me," he said, "these will be hidden at our thinking place." His tanned face wore as serious an expression as Shalla had ever seen on it. His pale blue eyes were narrowed with worry and a lock of light brown hair, the exact same shade as Shalla's, rose from his forehead as if he'd been pulling at it with fretful fingers.

"What do you—?" He was gone before she could complete the question. "Mother," she wailed, "what did he mean? What could happen to Young Sam?"

Mary Gorton ignored her. She and Molly were too busy pulling a heavy blanket box to the center of the room. From the back they looked like twins, for at fifteen Molly was the same height as their mother and shared her coloring and delicate bone structure. Shalla was almost as tall, but it was because she took after her father.

"Put our extra shoes into a basket, Shalla," Mother said, turning. "Then help Ellen." She rounded up seven-year-old Sarah and five-year-old Johnny and hurried the younger children outside, leaving her middle daughter's question unanswered.

Shalla tried to obey, all the while struggling to convince herself that Young Sam was in no danger, but memories had her fingers curling into fists. Soldiers. Men with guns. They kept coming because her father stood for what he believed. They called him a firebrand, attracting trouble, when all he really wanted was to be left alone.

Her hands trembled as she packed her mother's clogs. One eluded her grip to sail across the room. Its thick wooden sole struck a cluster of leeks hanging from the roof beam.

"Clumsy!" Molly's pale face looked as sour and disapproving as any Bay Colony Puritan's.

Heat rushed into Shalla's cheeks. Molly was forever pointing out her shortcomings, as if *she* were Mistress Perfect. "Clumsy? A fine word from one who cannot walk two steps outside the door without sounding like a herd of frightened deer!"

"Would you have me wear moccasins as you do and sneak up behind people?" Scorn dripping from every word, Molly drew herself up to her full height and fixed Shalla with a wilting gaze.

This must be how a netted fish feels, Shalla thought, and pictured herself flopping awkwardly and gasping for air. Then she rallied. Although her voice trembled and her eyes threatened to imitate the banks of a stream at spring melt-off, she snapped back at Molly. "Even barefoot you would step on every twig and like as not trip over a root and crash to the ground!"

With a haughty sniff, Molly turned her back. Using deft, economical movements, she rolled their clothing into tight balls and bundled them into blankets for carrying. Anything made of cloth, since it had to be imported from England, was too valuable to leave behind.

Frustrated, Shalla stuck out her tongue. It was wasted effort. Molly did not notice. Without looking up she added, "You have mud on the back of your skirt."

Shalla brushed furiously at several dark spots on the muted red cloth. Her linen cuffs were dirty, too, and the matching apron was ripped in at least two places. She had no idea where her cap was. Her hair, pushed behind her ears to get it out of her face, hung to the middle of her back in tangled clumps.

Molly's clothes rarely needed repair, and when they did her stitches were so careful that no one could tell there had been a tear. Such things had never seemed

important to Shalla, but as she glared at her sister, she could not help but remember the hushed conversation she had overheard between her parents only two days earlier.

Let her enjoy her childhood, Father had said.

That is nearing an end, Mother had reminded him. *She is almost at the age when a girl becomes a woman, and I would she could be more like her sister.*

"I'd rather be more like my brother," Shalla muttered under her breath.

Across the room the Gorton maidservant, Ellen Aldridge, reared up behind the trestle table with a snort. She'd been on her knees on the hard packed dirt floor, going through the contents of the oak chest. Strands of gray hair stuck out at odd angles underneath her white linen cap, and her apron was twisted sideways. She left a dirty streak across her nose and cheek as she wiped away beads of perspiration with a dusty hand.

"Come here, Shalla," she called. "Take these down to the canoe and tell young Peter Greene to ferry them out to the shallop as quick as he can." She began to fill Shalla's outstretched arms with warm cloaks.

"Why can we not stay, too? Stay and fight?" The pile was heavy, all wool and fur, and spilled over onto the floor. "Why do we have to run away again?"

"Twill be too dangerous here for women and children. Only the men will remain behind. Go on now—down to the shore. The shallop will take us across the bay to your Uncle Thomas on Aquidneck Island. We will be safe there."

"Does 'men' mean Young Sam too?" He was scarce thirteen, but well grown and nearly as tall as their father.

"Not if I have my way!" Ellen would have said more, but just as she opened her mouth a shadow fell on the two of them. The sunlight streaming in through the cabin door was blocked out by the figure of a man in armor.

Shalla spun around, dropping everything Ellen had piled into her arms. She breathed a sigh of relief when she saw it was only her father silhouetted in the doorway. The light behind him turned his golden hair into a halo around his head.

"Time to leave," he said.

Shalla flung herself toward him. Effortlessly, he lifted her off her feet and hugged her; but there was less comfort in his arms than she'd hoped for. As she pressed against him, Shalla felt the cold hard surface of the corselet of his pikeman's armor, and the lumps of the bandolier that held ammunition for his musket. The scent of the gunpowder made her nose twitch. She liked it better when he only smelled of leather and tobacco.

"Peter has taken Johnny and Sarah out to the shallop," Father said as he set Shalla back on her feet. "It is time for the rest of you to board."

"You cannot mean to leave all this," Ellen protested.

Shalla's gaze followed the sweep of Ellen's hand. Ladles and skimmers and forks still hung suspended from the lug pole at the mouth of the wide stone hearth. Stools, the trestle table, and the bedsteads remained as well.

"Those soldiers from Massachusetts Bay will steal or destroy everything they get their hands on," Ellen predicted in gloomy tones.

Molly said nothing, but as she watched her father and sister, her lower lip trembled.

Samuel Gorton's voice was firm and frighteningly intense. "Better to leave it all than lose your lives. Shalla, I have a task for you. Fetch the papers hidden under the feather bed."

She hesitated. He meant the colony's records, including the deed to Shawomet. No one ever touched those documents but Father.

"I entrust their safekeeping to you," he said. "You must take them aboard the shallop and guard them until I ask for their return." His eyes, an intense and steady blue above a long straight nose and a neatly trimmed moustache and beard, held Shalla's gaze.

"I will keep them safe, Father," she promised.

He squeezed her shoulder. "Get them. Now, Molly—into your keeping I give the family Bible."

Shalla glanced back in time to see Molly's triumphant smile. She abandoned the piles of clothing to fetch the small, heavy box that held the leather bound book.

Shalla winced as her toe struck the corner of the trundle-bed. At night it was pulled out for Johnny to sleep in. She squeezed past the small bedstead she and Molly shared with Sarah. Sam's old gray cat, Humility, lay curled at its center, blissfully asleep. *Fortunate creature*, Shalla thought. Surely it was better to know nothing at all than to have a hundred half-formed suspicions.

"Where is Young Sam?" Father asked as Shalla reached her destination and felt under the feather bed for his oilskin wrapped papers. His brilliant gaze searched the shadows of the small house.

"Here, Father. Behind you. If Shalla is to take the papers and Molly the Bible, does that mean I may stay and fight?"

From the curtained bedstead where her parents slept, Shalla listened hard. Even when Father dropped his voice low, she could overhear some of what he said. She breathed again when he told Young Sam he must leave Shawomet.

"But John Anthony remains," Young Sam argued. John, their servant, was Molly's age.

"John Anthony is not my son and heir. We are in for a siege. I will be better able to last it out if I have no fears for my family. You must take care of the others, Young Sam, especially your mother, until it is safe to return."

He lingered, once again framed by the shape of the door, until he saw that Shalla had obeyed him and that Molly held the Bible box clutched to her bosom. Then he spoke in the soothing, clearly audible voice of a polished orator.

"Guard your hearts against worry and fear, no matter what you may hear of our fate. We have provisions aplenty in the blockhouse. Enough to withstand many weeks. We will wear the Massachusetts Bay men out with waiting, and when they are gone it will be safe for everyone to return."

Ellen waited only until Shalla's father was out of earshot before she began to complain. "He should have built a fort. Did I not say so from the first? There was a fine palisade in Plimoth. But no, your father said only the Narragansetts were nearby, and they were our friends. 'We'll have no need of it,' he said. Hah! And I'm not so sure about those Narragansetts either. Heathen savages. Some night they'll slaughter us in our beds, the way they slaughtered poor Anne Hutchinson!"

Shalla's stomach tightened painfully at the reminder. The fate of Goodwife Hutchinson's daughters, her own constant companions when they'd all lived on

Aquidneck Island, had haunted her nightmares in the weeks since the terrible news arrived in Shawomet. Almost the entire Hutchinson family had been massacred. But not by the Narragansetts. It had been some other aberginian tribe.

"We must hurry." When Young Sam pitched his voice low, he sounded much like his father and managed to convey an echo of the senior Samuel Gorton's authority.

Shalla bumped against the bed where Humility slept. Waking with a howl of protest, the cat bounded up, fur bristling, then streaked toward the door.

"Humility! Stop!" Young Sam sounded like a small boy again, one who was fretful and afraid.

"Clumsy, Shalla," Molly said. "Because of you, Humility will be left behind."

Thrusting the precious packet of papers into the deep placket of her skirt, Shalla ran after the cat. "I will fetch her back," she called to Young Sam over her shoulder. If she did not, he would never forgive her! When she caught a fleeting glimpse of gray fur among the trees to the southwest, she pursued it without hesitation.

The chorus of objections in Ellen's voice and Young Sam's and Molly's followed after her. They faded away, muffled by the forest, as Shalla shortened the distance between the shore, where their home stood, and the "thinking place" in the woods. She had lost sight of her quarry, but she thought she could guess where Humility would go. A few minutes later, she burst into a small clearing, scrambled rapidly up the side of a giant boulder, and flung herself flat on the cold, gray surface.

The rock was surrounded by ancient, bright leafed elms whose branches dipped down close to the great stone to cast flickering shadows. If Shalla had not known it was there, they'd have concealed the narrow, deep crevasse where her brother had hidden Mother's pewter and other valuables. There, atop the heavy blanket full of pewter, her fur blending with the stone around her, sat Humility. She gave Shalla a bored glance, then calmly resumed washing her wedge shaped face.

"Foolish cat," Shalla murmured, inching closer. "Do you want to be left behind?" She swooped suddenly to scoop Humility into her arms.

Shalla rolled over and sat up without losing her grip on the squirming animal. She let her legs dangle over the side and kick against its lichen-covered surface as she caught her breath. She was not surprised no one had followed. Young Sam trusted her to catch the cat. Ellen was afraid of the forest. And Molly was afraid of everything, especially getting lost.

With a practiced maneuver, Shalla slid down the rough rock face to land lightly on her feet, knees bent. Eight months earlier, when they'd first settled at Shawomet, she and Young Sam made a game of it, competing to see which of them could make the six foot drop with more agility.

Holding Humility tightly against her bosom, Shalla picked her way through the underbrush toward the path. She did not expect sounds to reach her from Shawomet, but she was surprised not to hear animal and bird noises from within the forest. She paused to listen and frowned. It was much too quiet.

Running lightly and swiftly, following the curve of the narrow path, Shalla reached the edge of the trees at a ridge overlooking the village. Her first glimpse of the scene below had her skidding to a stop. Her breath caught in horror. From this vantage point, she had a clear view of the soldiers on the far side of the swamp.