Chapter 13

Village Life

Mary Allerton Cushman, Plymouth, September 1699

I still have some recollections of my days as a young child in Plymouth, during our first years there – of the constant hunger, a house crowded with strangers, the frequent absence of my father, the calming presence of John Alden, and Remember's attempts to make us a home – all these I can still see and feel.

There were but five goodwives in our settlement at that time. With six older girls, they took on the tasks of cooking, cleaning, and washing laundry for all of us, fifty or more in number. They also cared for their own families, of course, as well as nursing any of us who fell sick. Looking back, I cannot imagine how these women sustained us. But they did.

The women pressed me into duty, although I was only four, but more often than I can freely admit, I escaped to play – only to be reprimanded by the sharp tongues of the goodwives when I reappeared. Of these, Goodwife Billington's was most harsh.

I can still hear her voice. "Mary Allerton, where have you been? You were to weed our gardens this morning. Look at you! Your skirt has a new rent."

Of the older girls, Priscilla Mullins was my sole friend. Being courted by John Alden, who lived with us, she visited our home frequently. Her kindness was evident in her patient explanations of each task assigned me, such as planting seeds and leaving room for their growth, and she often stood between me and the barbed comments. It was Mistress Mullin who combed the tangles and lice from my hair and turned up the bottoms of the clothes given me from others, so I would not trip on them.

The boys, even those near to me in age like Resolved White and Richard Moore, with whom I'd played on the *Mayflower*, now worked by their fathers' sides in the fields or joined in hunting. There were no girls near my age, my sister being closest, at six. But she usually stayed with the goodwives and young women, being schooled in the preparation of our food, washing clothes, the uses of plants for medicine, all tasks for the keeper of a home. I think secretly she liked that, working with the older girls, rather than minding me, the baby. I tended to be ignored and would wander here and there in the village when nothing but make-work existed for me.

I remember that fences were everywhere. Made with split wood rails, they enclosed many of our small plots of land and the houses within. They bordered our main street, the one leading up the hill from the harbor to our cannon. Another street crossed the main street part the way up, running to the north and south gates in our palisade. Our governor's house stood at the intersection.

I was often tasked with weeding the gardens the women had planted, behind or beside each of the houses. Remember, with the help of the goodwives, had subdivided ours into small beds, with paths between them just wide enough for us to weed the plants. I disliked all the weeding.

At first, I weeded under the careful direction of Mistress Mullins, who gently admonished me when I pulled up something not a weed. I quickly learned edible from intruder and then moved on to the other gardens. To kill what she called cutworms, Mistress Mullins threw cinders from the hearth on the plants and she also dumped water from the washing of dishes on them to keep the ground moist. She told me this kept down other vermin.

At first, the women mainly grew squash and pumpkins, along with onions, garlic and herbs. They'd learned to grow the squash and pumpkin from the Indians. Mistress Mullins

helped me plant beds of parsley, lettuce, spinach, white things called carrots, cabbage and turnips, along with some herbs, all grown with seeds the goodwives had brought. Later, with the arrival of more seed, we grew beans and a large, long, green vegetable called a cowcumber. These beds provided food for our families and were added to that doled out from common stores.

I liked to chase the chickens. There were but a few chickens at first, wandering freely in the village, and the women fed them worms, so they often asked me to dig for worms. This was something I liked to do, and it was one of the few tasks Resolved and Richard would do with me.

Remember soon had me helping to wash our clothes and then hang them over fencing and bushes to dry. She hated this chore, mainly because she had to bring large amounts of water from the creek to heat in a kettle, and she burned her hands with the harshness of the lye soap. Bartholomew and I walked several times to the brook each day to fill our buckets with water for drinking and washing. We always took our shoes off to wiggle our toes in the brook, until some goodwife in a shrewish temper caught us and told us to stop dawdling.

I loved those splashes in the brook because work in the gardens during the summer had everyone running with sweat in their heavy clothes. All the women wore a shift and over it a skirt of wool or linen, a waistcoat and an apron, and they told me frequently that first year it was never so hot in England. I wore Remember's outgrown clothes and each day I suffered as she tied the strings of my biggen tightly under my chin. It didn't matter how snugly she fitted it, my curls escaped from the cap and eventually the biggen would slip from my head and dangle down my back. Richard and Resolved had been breeched the past winter and now, instead of a shift, wore shirt, breeches and a jacket. They could take off the jacket while working, and I often thought how much cooler it would be to dress like them.

Usually I didn't dare to venture into the woods, although sometimes a frog or a butterfly would lead me there. After the palisade went up, my father made me stay inside it, unless he was going out to work in the fields. Each day groups of people would head for the fields – mostly men and boys, but during planting women and girls also worked. I went out with them one day to pull weeds from around the corn but soon became hot, tired and bored. The shady woods surrounding our fields beckoned me. Looking around, I could see everyone was either chatting with their neighbor or intent on their work, so I walked into the woods.

The shade of the trees surrounding the fields offered respite from the heat, and there I found a brooklet, which I followed to find its source. It was a long walk, and I drank thirstily from a little pool deep in the woods from which the brooklet meandered. Then I cooled my feet. I never wore shoes in the summer and my feet were used to hard ground, but the woods had things that spiked my feet, so after a while they hurt. I built a house of twigs and mud on the side of the pool and imagined it to be my house.

There were bugs in the pool, so I poked them for a while for fun. It was so lovely and shady there, with dapples of sunlight shifting with the leaves in the trees. I could hear birds and lay down by the pool to listen to them. I fell asleep, only waking up when the sun had gone down, and insects had formed noisy clouds. I decided to follow the brook back, but it went another way and I couldn't see the field. I remember becoming more and more fearful and finally stopped moving because I had often been told by Father and Mother that devils lived in the deep woods. I sat down and waited, wrapping my arms around my legs, shaking at the thought of a devil getting me. *Surely Father will find me*.

After a long while, sitting quietly, I heard movement in some nearby bushes and made myself as small as possible, holding my breath but unable to stop shaking. *Mayhap it's a devil?*

Or a wild animal? We'd all heard the cry of the lions before. *Would I be eaten?* I shook as I heard skittering amongst the leaves and tried hard not to cry out in panic.

"I see you, Mary." The deep and resonant voice startled me.

I had heard that voice before – Squanto!

"How fare you?"

I took a deep breath of relief and wiped away tears that came unbidden. "Well, I think, thank you, but I seem to have lost my way. Did Father send you?"

I heard a deep chuckle. "You are a big trouble. Everyone looks for you. Come with me."

"How did you find me?"

"Not difficult. Follow your trail."

He took my hand since I was having difficulty following him in the dark, and with that simple gesture came a sensation of complete safety. It had been this kindly and caring Indian who had brought me a new poppet made from corn husks when my Charity had finally fallen apart. I thought of him as almost a father.

A horn sounded my return, and all those who had gone looking for me came back to the settlement. I heard a lot of muttering as Father first offered thanks to Squanto for finding me and then turned to me with a hard face. "Don't give me any meal-mouthed excuses, daughter. You have caused grief to many of us. All children are born wicked, but I thought you had changed. Your good mother and I tried mightily to bring you up in the ways of God, but I can see you persist in a stubbornness and contrariness of mind. This must be corrected."

I received a sound beating with a rod that night and was made to pray endlessly on my knees, petitioning God to forgive my transgressions. The strangers in our house grumbled loudly as they tried to sleep. I didn't sit well for almost a week, and thereafter, I was less attracted by

adventures. Resolved and Richard were angry, since their fathers were more strict with their freedom as a result, and they mocked me, pretending to swat each other's buttocks. My father also worked me like a turnspit for months, but Remember didn't escape punishment either, since she had been charged with minding me in the fields. That made me feel better.

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Everyone had worked on the building of our home. Father and Uncle Degory, before he'd died, had dug the post holes and built the framework, then Master Alden helped nail clapboards over the frame to enclose the house. Bartholomew had gathered grasses and reeds from the nearby marsh and bundled them, so they could be fastened to the rafters as a roof. A stray spark could set the roof on fire as the reeds and grasses dried out, so we kept a bucket of water handy, alongside a wooden ladder. There were constant leaks in our roof, particularly at the top, and rain dripped down on us or ran down the walls. Repairs to the roof were constant.

Master Alden and Father had built the chimney, lining the firebox with rocks they had gathered, and they filled the spaces between the stones with clay. It seemed to me they called often upon the Lord when these rocks would not stay in place. The chimney above was made of sticks, mud and clay, covered with clapboards on the outside.

Remember and I had created the inside walls, gathering small sticks to make a framework called wattle between the posts. Father showed us how to make daub out of clay, soil, grasses and water. I liked mixing the daub– it felt squishy and soft in my fingers – but Remember criticized me constantly for getting it all over my clothes, creating more washing for her. Then we pushed the daub in between the sticks and made a smooth surface with our hands or straight pieces of wood. Despite our best efforts, cold wind found passage into our house in winter, pushing its way around the door and stealing through the grasses of the roof.

Aside from that door, made of planks, we had but one source of outside light – a small window – so the inside of the house was quite dark. Father covered the window with parchment in the winter, which he soaked in linseed oil to keep out the cold. Our floor was just bare earth, dampened with water, then tamped and smoothed. Drying herbs, corn and onions hung from the rafters. We had two chairs and two stools, which John Alden had fashioned, along with a table made of boards. A small cupboard my parents had brought sat to one side of the room – this held our wooden plates, called trenchers, and four wooden spoons. Father had a knife, as did Mister Alden, who had carved the trenchers while teaching Bartholomew how to work with wood.

The room's sparse furnishings proved fortunate since with the arrival of more people needing to be housed, our one room became crowded. Father and Master Alden built a small area above, under the rafters and accessible by ladder, where Remember, Bartholomew and I slept. Food stores and Mother's trunk, containing what spare clothing we owned, were also kept there. We all slept on canvas sacks filled with corn husks and shared the blankets that had survived the voyage. Later we had deer skins for warmth. Father and Mister Alden slept in a small bed at one end of the room. When Weston's men arrived and were assigned to our house, they slept on the floor with whatever coverings they had brought with them.

Our home, being only one room, was crowded, dark and smoky most of the time, and although we Separatists washed hands and faces regularly and bathed twice a year, Weston's men avoided water and smelled horribly. Their rank odor filled our room, overpowering the smoke.

Once Father, on returning home for his mid-day meal, found one of these men, not one living with us, rummaging inside our cupboard. Father took him to the governor for judgment, and right after that, moved the cupboard and its contents to our loft. I worried about the weight

placed on the floor planks each night, when my brother and sister climbed up there to sleep beside me. The flooring groaned with each toss and turn. We were all happy when Weston's men left our settlement and we could take the cupboard back down.

Set at one end of our room, our hearth was a place of warmth and the always enticing smell of food. In the fireplace were lug poles, pot hooks and kettles my parents had brought, with a fry pan and pots on the hearth. One of my tasks was to keep a close eye on the hearth because of the ever-present danger of fire. This was not a hard task, since it enabled me to snitch small bits of food when Remember's attention went elsewhere.

The strangers eating in our house ate from plain wooden planks rather than trenchers. When we finally had bread made from corn flour, we would put the food on rounds of stale or fried bread. We ate with just our fingers, using such knives and spoons as we had.

Eating a meal became fraught with tension with the accommodation of these strangers in our home. The increased number of mouths to feed led to smaller portions for everyone. Father would dole out the food, so we all received a fair portion. This did not prevent complaints and demands for more. One evening, Father and one of Weston's men nearly came to blows.

"Why does your youngest child get nearly as much pottage as me? I'm a grown man and need food to fuel my labors." I heard mutterings of agreement from the other man housed with us.

"Because she is still growing and needs the nourishment," my father replied. "My other daughter prepared the food for you and washes your clothes, and you sleep in our house. You have little to complain of."

"I shall speak with Bradford about this," he replied, his face growing red with anger.

"You are free to discuss this with him, but remember that everyone in the colony

goes hungry. I doubt he will offer you anything but words of comfort.

Until the time when the goodwives could make cornbread from ground corn, we ate mainly pottages or sops of vegetables, and dried or fresh fish, eels, some clams and mussels, or occasionally game if Father or Mister Alden were successful at hunting. During the warm months, we had salads of fresh greens. We were hungry, but for the most part, we were healthy.

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One thing I dreaded most in those early days were our services on Sunday. Although Sunday meant a rest from our labors, I experienced only the boredom of the unending prayers until I was old enough to appreciate the word of God. There were two services on Sunday, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. To my child's mind, they differed little in wearisome sameness.

Before the fort was built, a drum called us to our meeting in the common house. Inside it was dark and dank, with benches facing the pulpit in long rows. I had to sit on the left side with the women, servants, and all the children. Resolved and Richard were looking forward to becoming sixteen, when they could move to the other side of the room with the men, who wore their hats, carried their arms with them, and were allowed to speak during the meeting.

Everyone on our side of the meeting room was expected to keep quiet, except for singing psalms and saying "amen" at the end of a prayer. We all had to stand for the long prayers given by Elder Brewster. We stayed standing while he preached on this theme or that until at last, we could say "Amen" again and collapse down on the benches. Our leaders would then expound on readings of the scripture, during which we could also sit, a blessing because they droned on and on. This was when eyes drooped.

Our goodwives did their best to control the children, but the youngest – Oceanus Hopkins and Peregrine White – would cry, and Samuel Eaton often tried to escape the hands holding him, wiggling and twisting until swatted hardily on his buttocks. Richard More and Resolved White squirmed constantly, as did I, as I recall. A thunderous "Quiet!" from Elder Brewster often shook the walls, which only caused the babies to startle and scream anew.

The only true joy for me was the singing of psalms, our only music, when we all joined in. These could be lively, and the children would sing at the top of their lungs. In the afternoon, something called 'prophesies' occurred. Elder Brewster would read from the Bible and one after another of the men would rise and speak for a long time, with questions coming from others. I amused myself by staring at each speaker to see how many times he would blink or by looking around to see who had fallen asleep. I confess I often did myself, until nudged awake by Remember's sharp elbow. After Elder Brewster gave the final blessing in the afternoon, the women and children could leave – with dire warnings not to run – while the men stayed behind. I didn't know at the time, but later learned, that the men discussed things large and small about our settlement and gossiped about various members of our community.

I'm thankful our services have changed over the years, as have I, and they are interesting and uplifting to me now.

Thinking about those first years of the Plymouth Colony, it seems like a far-away place where we lived most crudely. At that time, survival and the laws of God were all anyone thought about.