

BETSY'S FLAG
By Walt Vail

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AUDITION- 2 m, 2 w

In this scene, Besty's mother visits while John and George go to guard a warehouse in the night.

(LIGHTS crossfade to BETSY'S parlor on Arch Street on a cold January night, about two years later. She is mending a man's shirt. SFX: A knock at the door.)

BETSY: *(Calls upstairs.)* John! Are you ready? That must be Uncle George at the door!

JOHN R: *(Offstage.)* He's early. Talk to him, Betsy. I'll be down in a moment.

BETSY: I'll give him my opinion of dragging you out at night, after a long day's work!

JOHN R: Good. Just what George wants to hear!

(BETSY opens the door. REBECCA enters.)

BETSY: Mother, what a surprise! Come in!

REBECCA: I made apple pie today, and brought some for you and John.

BETSY: I'm so glad to see you! Thank you! *(Takes pie, then hugs HER.)* Where were you last Thursday? You didn't come. I missed you.

REBECCA: I have four excluded daughters, you know. It keeps me busy slipping out to see each of them. I have to be careful of your father.

BETSY: How can he still be angry? It's been almost two years.

REBECCA: Not anger, habit. He has a habit of avoiding you, and he can't break it.

BETSY: Then I'll try again to visit him. Even though he refused me entrance two months past.

REBECCA: There's nothing like a stubborn old man.

BETSY: He has his principles.

REBECCA: Well, I have mine, too, and my principle is never to lose a daughter, not even the disobedient ones. In fact, I rather admire you independent young ladies.

BETSY: I think we might owe that quality to you, Mother.

REBECCA: Oh, no. It's the times, Betsy. You are living in a dreadful period. Can you imagine the Boston Colonials shooting it out with the British Regulars last April? Lexington and Concord, indeed!

BETSY: I think your daughters were independent creatures before the hostilities, Mama.

REBECCA: Perhaps. But Governor John Penn, the proprietor, the son of the founder, in prison! And those awful Green Mountain Boys at Ticonderoga, and ragtag soldiers all over Philadelphia. It's really a total disgrace!

BETSY: Try not to be upset, Mother. Let's talk about my sisters. How are Deborah, and Sarah and Susannah? Have you seen all of them?

REBECCA: Yes, I ran all over the city last month, in the cold of December. They're all fine. But that General Washington! Can you imagine him, leading armies of ruffians against the Crown? What is the man thinking?

BETSY: You're sounding a bit like Father.

REBECCA: War and politics. He's in a perpetual snit over it all, and I have to listen to it.

BETSY: I'll make you a pair of ear plugs as pink as your ears. Now tell me you love me.

REBECCA: Of course I love you. And you're right, I have to close my ears to it. (*Notices the shirt Betsy is mending.*) That is a beautiful shirt. Imported from England?

BETSY: No, Mama. I made this shirt. Although the fabric is from England.

REBECCA: We'll all be wearing homespun before this war is over.

BETSY: Would you like to know for whom I made this shirt?

REBECCA: Not a Quaker.

BETSY: You won't be upset if I tell you?

REBECCA: Should I be?

BETSY: Say you won't be upset, no matter who.

REBECCA: Betsy, tell me!

BETSY: General George Washington.

REBECCA: Oh, no! You should've made it of burlap!

BETSY: You're upset?

REBECCA: No. It's your work, your beautiful work. I'm proud of it, even if you waste your talent on a rebel.

BETSY: I'm the best seamstress in the city, if I do say so myself! And my reputation is spreading. Good for business!

REBECCA: Betsy. I taught you humility.

BETSY: There's pleasure in a little pride, just a little.

REBECCA: Pleasure! Pride! What is the world coming to? We never dared utter such thoughts a generation ago.

(JOHN R. enters, dressed for guard duty.)

JOHN R: Mother Griscom! I thought I heard your voice.

REBECCA: Good evening, John. Are you going out?

JOHN R: I'm afraid so. Don't want to, but...

REBECCA: If you're going my way, you can walk with me.

JOHN R: Of course. You're not afraid to be...

REBECCA: ...seen with you? You are my son-in-law. Samuel won't see us. You won't take me that far.

BETSY: Mother brought her apple pie, John.

JOHN R: Oh, wonderful! You're the best mother-in-law in Philadelphia.

REBECCA: You're only saying that because you love my apple pie.

JOHN R: I love you for making it. And for your wonderful daughter. I'm indebted to you.

REBECCA: Then you don't love me at all. No one loves a creditor.

JOHN R: I love to be your debtor, because I can never repay you, and you don't ask me to try.

REBECCA: Why weren't you born a Quaker? Other than that, you're quite loveable.

BETSY: I'll wrap a slice of pie to take with you, John.

JOHN R: That will relieve the burden of a long watch. Thank you!

REBECCA: Watch?

JOHN R: I'm afraid so. Three nights a week, six until midnight.

REBECCA: What are you watching?

JOHN R: I'm not allowed to say. Sorry.

REBECCA: Oh, a secret. I see.

BETSY: It's nothing, Mother.

REBECCA: It's the war, isn't it? Do I look like a Tory spy?

BETSY: Of course not. Don't fret. We're all being careful these days.

(SFX: A knock on the door.)

JOHN R: That's George. I'll get it.

(JOHN R. opens the door. GEORGE ROSS enters.)

JOHN R: *(Cont'd.)* I'm ready, Uncle George. You remember Betsy's mother, Dame Rebecca Griscom.

GEORGE R: Oh, yes. Good to see you, Dame Griscom. How's your good husband?

REBECCA: George Ross! I might have known. So now you've recruited my daughter's husband for your ragtag rebels!

GEORGE R: All volunteers, Dame Griscom. Even John. And how is your husband?

REBECCA: Stay away from Samuel Griscom. Try recruiting him, and you'll get a piece of his mind. As to your inquiry, he's doing fine. As loyal to the king as your own brother--as you should be.

BETSY: Now, Mother. Mr. Ross is a gentleman, no need to lose our sense of propriety.

REBECCA: John's father is a gentleman. Even if he is an Anglican. He's the king's man, Attorney General of the Province.

GEORGE R: I'm surprised you're so fond of my brother. After all, he was in favor of revoking Penn's Charter--and the Charter was your protection, wasn't it? For Quakers, and all else, freedom of conscience, freedom from arbitrary taxes, freedom from an oath of loyalty?

GEORGE R: *(Cont'd.)* By revoking Penn's Charter, your British king has taken those freedoms from you. We want to replace the Charter with new guarantees of all those freedoms. Honestly, Dame Griscom, I don't understand why all of the Quakers aren't rebelling along with us.

JOHN R: We should be going, Uncle George.

REBECCA: It's not for me to understand politics. All I know is that war and killing and rebellion are wrong. Crimes against God as well as the king. Differences can be settled peacefully.

GEORGE R: I wish they could be, Dame Griscom. With all my heart. I've had to turn against my own brother with what Britain does against us, their own people. That was not an easy thing to do. Think of Bunker Hill. Some 366 men dead, 1325 wounded. Because the British want to tax our tea.

REBECCA: You should not have fought back.

GEORGE R: Yes, but we did. Ready, John? Good evening, Betsy. We'll return him safe to you at midnight. Good evening, Dame Griscom.

JOHN R: Good evening, Betsy. Thank you for the pie, Mother Griscom.

BETSY: I'll wait up. I'll keep the fire going.

(JOHN hugs BETSY, then hugs REBECCA.)

REBECCA: I know you're the soul of goodness, John. Be careful.

(Exit JOHN R and GEORGE R.)

REBECCA: *(Cont'd. To BETSY.)* Is he going into any danger?

BETSY: *(Sitting and returning to the mending.)* Not especially. He'll be somewhere on the waterfront, guarding a warehouse. Not far from here. I'm not worried about him.

REBECCA: Thank the Lord that man hasn't drawn him into Washington's army, tramping all over the countryside, out to kill his fellow man.

BETSY: That's not John. And do you think I'd allow a brand-new husband of only two years to do that?

REBECCA: I don't know you, Betsy. I thought I'd raised an honest Quaker girl, but you've surprised me at every turn.

BETSY: Oh no, I haven't. There's a fighting heart inside you, Mama. Don't deny it.

REBECCA: Yes, for my faith. I am strong for that.

BETSY: And you're the most loving woman. Why, you love all these rebels, that's why you're so concerned about them.

REBECCA: Love rebels? Don't upset me, Betsy. I am charitable, and I don't want to see their bodies pile up in the square, that's all.

BETSY: And what is charity, really? Isn't it love?

REBECCA: What's happening to our world, our lovely new world, Betsy? Why must it be like this? Brother against brother, all the way back to the beginning of paradise.

BETSY: We'll get it settled again, Mama.

REBECCA: Last week there was news of that Benedict Arnold, attacking Canada. Why are we attacking Canada? Your father was beside himself when he heard of it.

BETSY: Uncle George said it was the threat of cutting us off from New England, of dividing the colonies.

REBECCA: It seems almost a blessing to be cut off from those mad Bostonians.

BETSY: Well, it may yet happen.

REBECCA: Yes, and can you imagine this? Father says we now have a Continental Navy. Five whole ships! Five whole ships against the thousand ships of the British Navy!

BETSY: It's a beginning.

REBECCA: Sounds like the beginning of the ending to me.

BETSY: Did you see the *Alfred* before she left port? Flying the new Grand Union Flag, designed by Mr. Franklin himself. Red and white stripes, with the Grand Union Cross in the corner. A beautiful sight.

REBECCA: Especially when they have to pull it down in surrender.

BETSY: The stripes are the Colonies, and the Union Cross says we want a settlement of differences with Britain. Leave it to Mr. Franklin to think of that.

REBECCA: The man has some sense in his head, I'll give him that. Well, I'd better be on my way.

BETSY: Thank you for coming, Mother. Shall I walk with you?
REBECCA: No, thank you. I am only— *(SFX: A muffled explosion. The room trembles just a little.)* What was that?
BETSY: A tremor. We do have small earthquakes...
REBECCA: Sounded like a cannon. Are the British attacking, do you think?
BETSY: I haven't heard of them this far south.
REBECCA: Is that what a cannon sounds like?
BETSY: I've never heard one.
REBECCA: Perhaps it's on the river. Sound carries over water.
BETSY: If there were British ships, wouldn't there have been a warning?
REBECCA: Perhaps it was a stove exploding. We'll hear the fire warning, and the fire brigade will be on their way.

(THEY pause expectantly.)

BETSY: Nothing but silence. Strange. Hold my hand a moment, Mother. I have an odd presentiment.
REBECCA: Are you all right? *(SHE takes BETSY'S hand.)*
Your hand is ice cold!
BETSY: And yours is warm, so warm and comforting. Thank you.
REBECCA: Do you want to lie down a moment?
BETSY: No, I'm all right. Your touch has calmed me.

(Suddenly, the door is opened. Enter GEORGE R., covered with soot, exhausted from running. BETSY jumps up.)

GEORGE R: Betsy! Betsy, I'm sorry! I'm sorry! *(Catches HIS breath.)* They're bringing John in.

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