

## “Blessing in Disguise” By Rebekah Lee

*Bang! Bang! Bang!* What was that noise? Blessing stirred and rolled over. It would cease soon anyway, and then she could get back to sleep...

*Bang! Bang! Bang!* What was that noise? Blessing moved around in bed again, waking her sister Clementine. But Clementine only yawned softly and fell back to sleep. If only Blessing could!

*Bang! Bang! Bang!* What was that noise?! Irritated that she could no longer doze off, Blessing sat up briskly. She hastily crawled out of bed, slipped on her shoes, and stumbled for the window.

It was the middle of August, and even after nightfall the heat was crucial. Summer had hit hard that year in 1775. Blessing leaned over the windowsill in disgust, both for the heat, and the perpetual banging.

*Bang! Bang! Bang!* Someone was beating on the door. But who? Blessing leaned out farther.

“Please!” she heard a woman frantically cry. “Please let us in!”

Oh! Blessing thought irritably. It’s just those stupid Rices again!

Mrs. Rice banged again on the door. “Oh, please! Would you please let us in?!”

Blessing heard running footsteps embark the staircase. She heard her mother open the door quietly and let the Rices in.

Blessing, so far forward she resting her stomach on the windowsill, pushed herself back inside. She hurried down the stairs, despite how much she hated the Rices.

They sat in the parlor, the small children huddled on the sofa and Mrs. Rice anxiously seated in a horsehair chair with her baby brat, Robert. (At least, in Blessing’s opinion, he was a brat.)

Blessing’s mother lit a candle quickly and set it on the small round table in the middle of the room. Blessing stayed in the darkness at the bottom of the stairs.

“Dear Mrs. Baker,” said Mrs. Rice slowly and gratefully. “Dear, dear Mrs. Baker! I knew you would let us in, you kind-hearted soul. You don’t know how much this means to me!”

“Shh,” whispered Mrs. Baker. “We won’t speak of it now. Let us worry later.”

Mrs. Rice began weeping. Blessing frowned deprecatingly. She's such a baby, she thought in great disapproval. She cries as much as Robert!

"There, there," Mrs. Baker said soothingly. "Tell me everything if it will make you feel better."

"Well," Mrs. Rice sobbed, "the men were drunk, and they came with stones and broke our windows. My husband was out chopping firewood before nightfall. Oh! They- they beat him, and then dragged him away. I fear they t-t-tarred and feathered him! Caroline and I decided..."

Blessing turned a wrathful eye at Caroline, a tall, dark figure sitting on a plush stool, staring out the window. She was a year older than Blessing, and beautiful, too, Blessing thought. She figured if Caroline were not so willful and stingy, and most of all, not a Tory, she would be courting far more often.

Of a sudden Caroline turned her sleepy gaze from the window, and Blessing's and her eyes met. Caroline turned quickly away and flushed, while Blessing stealthily and embarrassedly climbed back upstairs. She silently crawled back in bed by the motionless Clementine, but her mind was racing.

Blessing hated the American Revolution. People in her town were becoming bitter. The Patriots hated the Tories; and vice versa. The Bakers were staunch Patriots, though she longed for tea, for peaceful conversations at Lessons, and most of all, her friend Sarah, who was a Tory. Blessing's father had forbidden her to speak to Sarah. She could not even say hello to her in the General Store or at Lessons. It wasn't fair! The war had driven them apart. Why did this have to happen anyway? They had lived civilly in the past; why not now?

Sarah was the only one Blessing felt sympathy for. The Rices, for instance, were a Tory family. Blessing had never liked them anyway, but now they seemed so full of complaints and laments and stupidity even more. It served them right that their father was tarred and feathered! Maybe they could learn a lesson from that. Maybe, just maybe, everyone could learn a lesson from this war. Then everyone would shake hands heartily, forgive one another for needless disputes, and Blessing could hold hands and chat regularly with Sarah again.

Weeks later, the weather became more tolerable. The Bakers' apple orchard would ripen soon, oh, so soon! Blessing could hardly wait until she would gather her skirts, climb up a tree, and pluck a round, red apple. To sink her teeth into the ripe, juicy, crisp fruit was paradise in a tree. And then there would be buckets and pails and sagging aprons full of apples to deliver to the kitchen, where they become pies, dumplings, fritters, turnovers, and spicy, warm applesauce!

But, until then, there would be endless warm afternoons full of sewing new clothes and

mending old ones for Lessons. Darning socks, raising hems, ripping off buttons and sewing new ones on, and patching knees of breeches was not Blessing's favorite chore. Why did girls have to do it? Why couldn't boys mend their own clothes? They had fingers! If only she could just lie in the sun with Sarah and wonder aloud with her...

No, she could not think of Sarah now. She had to concentrate. Otherwise she would drop her needle, daydream, and be reprimanded by her mother.

"Oh, I do declare," Mrs. Baker said, sitting in her chair. "I believe I shall swoon with this hot weather! Blessing, be a dear and go to the well with a pitcher. And don't tarry long, child!"

"Yes'm," Blessing obeyed, finding it hard not to conceal her joy from rising from her hard chair.

As soon as she was out of the house, she ran wildly through the grass, barely caring she had forgotten her shoes. She swung the china pitcher through the air, to which her mother would have swooned sooner. But that did not matter, for her mother was not there, now was she? Ha!

She dawdled to pick buttercups and chase a butterfly. But of a sudden, a man came racing toward her. He was dressed in a white cotton shirt, black breeches, and no overcoat or hat.

Blessing hesitated a minute, unable to move. But when she came to her senses and started, the man stopped her arm. She screamed.

"Hush, child!" He cried frantically. "Hush! For Heaven's sake; do you want them finding us?"

"Let go of me, or I swear I'll scream again!" she demanded loudly, pulling loose from his trembling grip. With a little more concern, she asked, "By the way, sir, who is chasing you?"

"Come now, child! Don't ask questions at a time like this! Just hide me!"

"Where?"

"Oh, anywhere but here!"

"But first I must get the -"

"Whatever you were going to get can wait! Just hide me fast!"

Blessing grudgingly told the man to follow her. She knew her mother would be displeased to find the pitcher empty, and a stranger following her dawdling daughter

home. But surely she would understand. Surely, Mrs. Baker had never turned a stranger or Tory out yet.

The stranger and Blessing ran home quickly. Mrs. Blessing was standing impatiently on the threshold.

“Blessing, you naughty child! I thought you had- oh! Goodness, who in the world is this?!”

Blessing halted, empty pitcher in hand, to breathe. Her stay was too tight for running.

“Madam,” said the man, bowing, “I do humbly beg your pardon, but would you mind hiding me quickly? The British regulars are hot on my tail, and I -”

“Say no more, sir,” said Mrs. Baker, leading the man inside. “Any Patriot is a friend of mine.”

Blessing caught her breath and followed them to the parlor. Her three sisters, stockings in laps, stared in bewilderment.

“If you would, sir,” Mrs. Baker said, kneeling on the floor, “there is a door under this rug.”

“Allow me, madam,” he said getting down and rolling the heavy rug up. He unlatched a door and descended a small staircase.

“When all is safe, I will let you out,” she said assuredly, gently closing and latching the door. She and Blessing rolled the rug back over it and sat down with their sewing.

Blessing had forgotten to close the door on her way in, and now five British regulars marched in arrogantly. Mrs. Baker rose calmly to greet them.

“Can I help you, gentlemen-”

“We are looking for a man in a white shirt and black breeches. Have you seen him?”

“May I ask why-”

“That is our own business, madam”

“Of course, sir.”

“Well, have you seen him?”

“I-”

“We shall search, nevertheless. Come, men. Search every corner.

The five lobster backs searched in vain. They could not find another person in the house excepting the woman and the girls. They left the house grumbling, and Blessing heard the last one curse the house.

Mrs. Baker watched the regulars ride away on their mighty steeds. When they were out of sight, she let the man out of hiding.

In the pink of the evening, Mr. Baker and his five sons returned home. The stranger ate supper with them as he told of how he was running from the British army because he carried an important message for General Washington. But the man was sorely tired. He needed rest badly and should he come in contact with regulars again he would not be able to outrun them. Also, he seemed to be coming down with something. Mrs. Baker put him to bed in the guestroom and dosed him with chamomile tea. No, he certainly could not go anywhere in his condition.

He weakly beckoned to Blessing. “Come here, child.”

Blessing went forward. “Yes, sir?”

He took a small rolled-up piece of paper. “Here,” he said raspily, handing it to her. “It must be delivered to Washington.” He told her of where to go to avoid the British, how to get there, and where approximately Washington’s troops were.

“I think you can do it easily,” he said, smiling. “I can tell you are the kind of girl who doesn’t like being a girl. But now you must. ‘Twill benefit you now.”

“You have a cloak?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You have a horse?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Then go, child. Go quickly and quietly. The country’s fate rests in your hands!”

“Um, of course, sir. I will try to do my best.”

Blessing donned her sister Abigail’s heavy, black cloak. Her mother hastily kissed her and sent her on her way, riding her black mare, Ebony. The message was secured safely in her gold locket around her neck. She was on a horse, on her way to find General Washington in the middle of the night!

Blessing was thankful it was finally a moonless night. The dark sky and dense foliage of

the forest helped conceal her, as well as her black garb and mare.

She did her best to remember where the man had told her to go. 'Twas all in her head, for carrying more papers than necessary would surely end in hanging from a tree. Blessing gulped. How could they hang her? What a horrible thing to do to a thirteen-year-old girl! But she wouldn't hang unless she was caught...

She clutched the locket closely to her pounding chest as she rode swiftly through the wood. Ebony was a good horse. She seemed to understand the plight of the nation.

Of a sudden, Ebony stopped.

"What's wrong, girl?" Blessing whispered fretfully. "Do you hear someth-?"

Blessing stopped short when she heard voices coming closer. The adrenalin began to flow rapidly throughout her quivering body.

"I heard something over there," she heard someone say.

"What was it?" asked another.

"I do not know, but it sounded like a running horse. It was over yonder. Come. Light a lantern."

"Shut up, you bloats!" cried a new voice. "Whatever 'twas, it's gone by now."

"But Colonel-"

"Shut up! It's nothing! Get back to your posts, immediately!"

All this time Blessing had sat still as a stone, pressing the locket even closer to her wild heart. Regulars! What if they disobeyed the Colonel and came snooping around anyway?

Her fears were fulfilled. The two sentries came out farther to investigate with a lantern.

Panic gripped Blessing. She stopped breathing, and then breathed hard and fast. She slid off the horse and crept into the bushes; every movement she feared would be her last.

She squatted there in the bushes, uncomfortably. Blessing heard the regulars tramping over to Ebony. The girl sucked in her breath in terror. They were going to take her horse! Ebony! Oh, how could a lobster back ever ride on her beloved black mare? Blessing squeezed her eyes shut so she wouldn't have to witness the taking.

If Blessing had wanted to, she could have touched the British soldiers, they were so close. But they finally went back to camp with Ebony, satisfied with their bountiful search.

When she could no longer see the light of the lantern, Blessing crept out of hiding and darted noiselessly through the dark- that is, until she came to a river.

It was *the* river. All she had to do was cross and she would be at Washington's troops soon.

Blessing felt uneasy. The river churned, and so did her stomach. How could she cross? She was not a good swimmer; especially in five petticoats, stockings, and shoes. It was too fast, anyway. But what could she do? She leaned against a tree to mull.

Of a sudden, it came to her. She could climb a tree and jump to the next.

Blessing looked upward. The trees were close together; it would be easy to climb from one to the next. The long, sturdy branches extended over the river. If it would only work!

Blessing took a deep breath and began to climb with ease. Much to her mother's despair, she could climb trees easily. Wouldn't her mother be proud to see her now!

At the end of the limb, Blessing carefully crept to the next tree. She hugged the branch and slowly scooted to the end. Then she swallowed and alighted to the next branch.

She was directly above the river now. But Blessing couldn't hear the rushing water, for her heart was in her ears. If she could only pass from this limb to the next, she would be able to climb down to the ground and run to Washington. But one wrong move and she would go tumbling into the river. Blessing shuddered at the cruel thought that might become reality.

Just as she was reaching for the desired branch, the one she was on cracked and fell in the water. Blessing screamed but was quick enough to grab the limb in front of her. She hung on desperately, as her body swayed below.

Hoisting herself up on the branch was out of the question. But perhaps she could inch to the trunk slowly. Very slowly.

Blessing crept her fingers cautiously over the limb as she scooted through the air. Finally, she was as close as she could get to the trunk.

She swung herself to and fro slowly. After she was swinging her body with enough force, Blessing let go of the tree as she lunged forward to the bank of the river, but lost her balance and fell backwards into the water.

Fortunately she grabbed a large root, just in time and pulled herself back on the bank. She was cold and soaking wet, one of her shoes was gone, the hem of the cloak was muddy and ragged, and wisps of damp hair were falling out of her cap. But the locket was still there. It was safe around her neck with the message inside.

As she walked drudgingly through the dark, shivering to the bone and listening to the rhythmic squish of water in her shoe, Blessing was suddenly frozen at the loud “Halt!” yards away.

“Who goes there?” boomed the voice.

“A friend,” Blessing said barely above a whisper.

“What? Speak up now!”

“A friend,” she said again, grasping the heart-shaped locket. “I-I have...a message f-for the G-General.”

The sentry walked closer. Blessing could now see his face, for he held a lantern. He inspected her with his darting brown eyes a moment and said “Give the message to me. I shall give it to General Washington.” He held out his hand.

“No,” Blessing answered, finding courage somewhat. “No, I must give it to him myself.”

When the guard eyed her, she continued, “It is a very urgent matter. You must let me see him once!”

The suspicious sentry looked at her oddly for a moment, and then said, “Very well. Follow me.” and Blessing did.

As they approached the camp, the sentry instructed her, “Now don’t waste the General’s time. He’s very busy trying to decided what we shall do. The country is in a dilemma. You see- well, I’ve told you too much already.”

They came to a white tent a little larger than the others. There was a light illuminating it. The sentry talked to another who was guarding the tent. They frequently glanced at Blessing but said nothing to her.

Finally the tent guard went into the tent and spoke with somebody. Blessing could occasionally hear their whispers expanding higher in volume.

When the guard came back out, he looked at Blessing. “Go in,” he said gruffly. “But don’t take too long.”

She went into the tent quickly. There, sitting in a chair, was a brawny, handsome man in deep thought. “Washington!” thought she excitedly.

The man looked up suddenly. “You needn’t be afraid, child,” he said smiling. “Come closer.”

Blessing took two steps forward. “Uh...”- she didn’t know what to say! And after all

she'd gone through! "General Washington, I presume?"

"Yes," came the answer. "What do you want?"

"I have a message for you. I have been trying to get here all night. Here," she snapped open her golden locket, took out the tiny piece of paper, and handed it to the general.

"Ah!" he said, his eyes lighting up. "I have long been waiting for this. It was expected two evenings ago."

After General Washington had finished reading it, he looked up at Blessing kindly. "You have risked your life for your country. Thank you."

Blessing smiled. "You're welcome," was all she said.

General Washington sent her home on a horse. He thanked her very graciously over and over, but half the time she didn't know where she was or who he was.

The horse got back to the Bakers' house in due time. 'Twas an hour before dawn. As Mr. Baker put the horse in the stable to rest, Mrs. Baker carried her already asleep daughter up the stairs and into her bed beside Clementine.

The next day (or should we say later that morning) Blessing was bursting to go to Lessons and brag about her previous nocturnal adventure. But Mrs. Baker wouldn't hear of it; Blessing would have to rest all day. Blessing was quite bored, for all her siblings were attending school, and there was nothing to do but knit all day on the sofa.

In the afternoon there was a rap on the front door. A servant answered it and led the caller into the parlor where mother and daughter were. It was Caroline Rice. She wore a brown frock and crisp white apron, a plain bonnet adorned with flowers, and her blond hair was pulled up in a bun under her bonnet.

"I came to call on Blessing," she said. "I wondered what was wrong when she was absent from Lessons."

"What a sniveling Tory," Blessing thought as she clawed a pillow. Aloud she said, "Mother, may Caroline and I talk on the porch?"

"All right, but don't be out too long," Mrs. Baker replied. "Take a shawl with you."

Blessing put on her shawl and went outside with her visitor. "Well?" she began, looking at Caroline.

"I-I," started she, "Blessing, you're a nice girl. I admire you. I like to watch you talk with the other Patriot girls. You move so gracefully and smoothly."

“What’s your point?” Blessing asked flatly, yet very flattered at these comments.

Caroline wrung her hands. “I was wondering, well, if you’d like to be my …friend?”

Blessing’s eyebrows rose sky high, and her eyes bugged out like saucers. But she smiled a big, fake smile. “I don’t see why not!” she said.

Caroline let out a breath. “Really?” she asked in disbelief. “Even though I’m a- a Tory?”

Blessing smiled bigger. “Why not?” she shrugged.

“Oh!” Caroline went over to her newly found “friend” and hugged her. “I’m so happy! Let’s go for a walk together!” So the two of them walked away from the house hand in hand.

Now the only word I can use to describe Blessing is: smug. Her mouth twisted smugly to suppress a smug smile, which would no doubt turn into a laughter full of smug. The laughter escaped her throat and she cackled loudly toward the sky. Caroline, taking it as a laugh of joy and pleasure, joined in and gave a laugh for the fun of it.

Blessing looked at her smugly and thought with smug and delight, “I bet she wouldn’t be laughing if she knew what I did last night.” And for good measure, she gave another loud burst of laughter.