

Mistress Brent's Bluff

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SHORT STORY CONTEST

FOR an infant settlement St. Mary's was precarious. It soon learned to talk, and the first thing it said was, "The Governor is in love with Mistress Margaret Brent."

To be sure, Leonard Calvert, the brother of the Proprietary, "Deputy Governor of the Province, Lieutenant-General, Chancellor, Admiral, Chief, Captain, Magistrate and Commander as well by sea as by land," fenced in by his many titles and wrapped in his unapproachable dignity, never for an instant supposed that the public made grist of his private affairs.

Yet by 1643 the report was so common that when the Governor one bright April day stepped down to the landing to take a seat in his pinnace two men standing by wagered that when he reached the river he would turn south as far as the "Sister's Freehold," and a certain bright-eyed maiden peering over the bluff went home and made this entry in her diary:

The Governour is gone a-wooing. Mistress is not so young as she onet was. Warm daies she waits his Cuming under St. Adauctus Tree, where there be a Bench and they do take Council together concerning the businesse of the Province. The Idea!

Whether or not St. Adauctus was the special patron of spinsters the calendar fails to announce, but true it is that at the southeastern extremity of the lands allotted to her sister and herself at a point overlooking the river there rose a great tree marked "St. Adauctus," and beneath its shelter Mistress Brent sat and waited. Nor had she long to wait.

The Governor came and brought with him a letter he had received that morning from England.

As Mistress Brent held out her hand for the letter she asked: "Does Lord Baltimore fix the date of his coming?"

"On the contrary, he writes for me to return to England."

"England!"

The Governor was completely taken aback. Her exclamation was short and sharp, while the hand she held out for the letter trembled. He had never known her to betray any emotion. Now he watched the blood flood into her cheeks, then fade away again, and he felt the effort she made to regain her self-control.

Mistress Brent read the letter; then her hands dropped into her lap and her eyes wandered out over the water to where a ship rode at anchor.

She took in the whole sweep of the harbor. Nothing escaped her. Neither grassy slope nor jutting headland, the little town as it nestled for protection between the two arms of the river or the forest which stood a menace in the background. Finally she spoke:

"We evidently miscalculated. From Lord Balti-

more's last letter we thought he was making preparations to come to the province."

"Others seem to have thought so too," replied the Governor. "The master of that ship tells me that the day he sailed it was rumored in England that Lord Baltimore was to be cited before the Lords and bonded not to leave the kingdom."

"How soon do you go?" she asked.

"Go?" said he. "It is out of the question. Cecilius does not understand the situation over here or he would not suggest my return."

"The situation over here is evidently worse than he is willing to admit. Who will help him?"

Her question pricked. The Governor became irritated. "My going is not to be considered. I could not leave the province in its present plight. You know that the Indians have risen, Virginia refuses to join us against them, Claiborne is at his old game, the Assembly is divided"—He stopped short. He had a queer feeling that he was talking to himself.

Mistress Brent was silent. She knew him too well to argue with him.

The Governor lowered his voice and said in a more persuasive tone: "What I want you to do is to advise me about tomorrow. You have heard that the Assembly has been called for tomorrow and, knowing the temper of the crowd as I do, I am afraid that the recommendations the Proprietary makes in this letter will not be allowed to pass."

"But they must pass," proclaimed Mistress Brent with vehemence. "It would ruin Lord Baltimore's chances at this crisis if the news reached Parliament that he had lost the confidence of his own province."

"Exactly," agreed the Governor. "But what can we do?"

Mistress Brent thought for a minute. "Pack the Assembly," she suggested.

The Governor shook his head. "I have no majority to work upon."

"Then unpack it."

"What!"

"Get rid of the opposition," she explained.

"Impossible," he argued. "If you were a man now, you would understand!"

Mistress Brent interrupted him. "Would you rather I were a man?"

The way in which the question was put brought the conversation back upon a personal basis.

The Governor laughed. "You are delicious! At the very height of the argument you always drop back upon your femininity."

"Femininity or not, I am tempted to show you how to run an Assembly."

Such a speech from another might have been considered as *lese majeste*, but the Governor was far too enamored to take exception to the audacity of Mistress Brent. He simply smiled and demanded: "Where would you begin?"

"Whom do you fear?" she inquired.

"Your brother Giles, with his 73 proxies, and Cornwallis, whose eloquence sways ever Burgess in the House from the Sheriff down to Tom Tottle."

"Leave them to me," said Mistress Brent coolly.

"What do you mean to do with them?"

Instead of answering his question, Mistress Brent made this proposition: "If I hold the opposition in hand for a couple of hours tomorrow morning, could you convene the Assembly at the usual time, read the

Proprietary's letter and have the unthinking multitude pass upon those few recommendations before the mischief-makers have a chance to do harm?"

"It is well worth trying," he responded.

"And if I succeed," she continued, "will you do what I ask?"

"Certainly," he granted. "provided, if you fail, you will do what I ask."

Mistress Brent hesitated.

The Governor rose to leave. "It is a fair compact," said he. "Win all, lose all."



She turned her horse and dashed along another trail.

Still Mistress Brent stood irresolute. Once again her eyes wandered over the water to where the ship rode at anchor.

"It is a fair compact," she repeated mechanically.

The Governor made his adieu, but he looked back and asked with a laugh: "Would I rather you were a man?"

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Just before the Assembly convened the next morning Mr. Secretary Lewger said to the Governor: "Mistress Brent came to me half an hour ago and asked me to make her brother's excuses. He has been

unexpectedly called to Kent Manor, but he has left these proxies, which she asks that I hand to Cornwallis."

The Governor's only comment was: "Do I understand that Mistress Brent brought them herself? Which way did she go?"

Had he but known, Mistress Brent at that early hour threaded an Indian trail through the Proprietary's forest. She rode cautiously—not that she was afraid.

Danger served as a tonic to a nature such as

lifted its ears. Soon she heard voices; then Cornwallis approached, followed by two other riders in Indian file, while the Sheriff brought up the rear.

Cornwallis pressed forward. "Mistress Brent," said he, "alone in the forest?"

"I am on the warpath," she explained. "Can you direct me to the lands owned by one Thomas Tottle?"

His lands lie back by the creek, but here is Tottle himself."

As he spoke Cornwallis moved aside and a heavy, square-jawed man doffed his cap and faced Mistress Brent. She looked at him. Then she looked over his shoulder and recognized the next who rode in file was a man known in the community as "Miser Smith."

"My good man," Mistress deigned to address Tottle, "a white bull of mine, one of the Lord Proprietary's stock, is missing, and I understand it is on your place."

"I have never seen it," was the blunt reply.

"Then allow me to show it to you." And Mistress Brent made a movement as though she would pass on.

Tottle grew very red. "I am no Indian to steal cattle."

"Had I believed you had stolen it, sir, I would have had the Sheriff here to put you in prison."

"Oh, Mistress Brent!" exclaimed the Sheriff. "There is no prison but my hands."

"Then come, Mr. Sheriff, and take my 'bull by the horns.'"

Cornwallis thought it was time to intervene. "Do not stop us, Mistress Brent. We are on our way to the Assembly. This little matter can be adjusted later. As for my friend Tottle, I would be willing to wager a hundred pounds of tobacco that he has no cattle on his place but his own."

Mistress Brent was too true a sport to bet on a surety. However, Cronwallis had to be punished. She turned to the miser.

"Mr. Smith," she said in a dulcet tone, "I am sure you will champion my cause. Take up this bet"—

"Lady! Lady!" cried the miser in alarm, "a hundred pounds of tobacco!"

"Thank you, Mr. Smith."

"But, lady! lady! I did not!"

The Sheriff interrupted him. "There is the third drumbeat. The Assembly meets. We will be late."

"We will be fined," groaned Smith.

"Pay your fine out of your hundred pounds," suggested Mistress Brent, as she again moved forward.

But Cornwallis barred her way. He spoke with authority. "Mistress Brent, you must return with us to St. Mary's. The Indians have risen and the forest is unsafe. I cannot allow you to proceed alone."

"Then," quoth Mistress Brent, "I will hunt me a knight in war paint and feathers." And quick as a flash she turned her horse and dashed along another trail into the very heart of the forest.

Cornwallis, taken completely by surprise, swore he would never be outwitted by a woman and, turning to the others, gave the command:

"Follow!"

It was a reckless chase. Mistress Brent had the best horse. Swift and sure-footed, the little steed sped over the tracks beaten by red men's feet. Primeval trees arched overhead, occasionally a fallen

timber served as a hurdle across the narrow path; tiny rills made the way slippery and the possibility of an arrow shot by an unseen hand added zest to the adventure. Mistress Brent was willful enough to make many a detour to prolong the ride until she reached the edge of the woods where the creek spread before her and she drew rein on Tottle's ground.

As they were at his very door, Tottle insisted that they should search for the white bull. They dismounted and he led them over his pastures. Sheep and kine he had in plenty. Bulls black, dun and spotted, but none that was white. Cornwallis laughed. He felt himself a hundred pounds richer. The miser wrung his hands in despair, while the Sheriff asked in official tone:

"Has this ox of yours any mark by which we may know it?"

"On its left hind hoof," Mistress Brent assured him.

The search was fruitless. They were about to return to their horses when a low bellow came to them from over a fallow field. They hurried in that direction, and there stood the white bull a prisoner—tied by a long halter to a tree which grew near the banks of a deep pool.

"White, but not innocent," commented Cornwallis, as he eyed the animal standing with lowered horns.

Meanwhile the Sheriff, unobserved by the others, had stolen behind the bull to examine its hoof. The animal, conscious that it was approached, veered suddenly and with a loud roar raised its front feet ready to charge.

The Sheriff had to choose between the bull and the pond, and he took to the water. But the water was deep, the water was cold and the Sheriff, being a man of considerable weight in the community, sank from sight.

Cornwallis tore off his coat and plunged in to the rescue. Tottle swore, the miser trembled and Mistress Brent, conscience-stricken, shrieked aloud.

Midst the general excitement the bull tore loose from its halter and at the very moment that Cornwallis and the Sheriff rose like dripping Naiads from the stream the bull, with a parting roar, shook the dust of Tottle's field from off its hoofs.

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"What I do not understand," said the Governor to Mistress Brent that afternoon, "is who tied that bull in Tottle's field?"

"That," replied she, "is a leading question and not admitted in the testimony."

The Governor smiled. "You have done all you undertook to do. And," said he, "I have come to redeem my promise."

Mistress Brent grew suddenly pale.

He observed her agitation. "Don't be afraid," he urged gently. "Had I won, you know very well what I meant to claim."

Still the words refused to come.

The Governor tried to take her hand. "Do you think," he asked tenderly, "that I could refuse you anything?"

Her white lips faltered. "Go back to England and help Lord Baltimore."

"Margaret!"

Staggered, hurt, humiliated, Leonard Calvert awoke to the realization that he stood only as a younger brother in the eyes of the woman he loved.