

Meet Maybeth

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A Confederate Girl

by
D.W. GOATES



Two Goats Press
Tallahassee

Meet Maybeth: A Confederate Girl.

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The author can be reached online at DWGOATES.COM

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*For Lois, Phyllis, and Virginia,
The constellations in my sky.*

CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| Chapter One - A Whole New World | 1 |
| Chapter Two - Tallahassee | 11 |
| Chapter Three - Back on the Farm..... | 25 |
| Chapter Four - Ain't Askin', Ain't Gettin'..... | 36 |
| Chapter Five - Sisterhood | 46 |
| Chapter Six - Adventure | 60 |
| Chapter Seven - Monticello | 73 |
| Chapter Eight - A Different Party..... | 85 |
| Chapter Nine - Dog Days..... | 95 |
| Chapter Ten - The Union's Bank..... | 108 |
| Chapter Eleven - Prove It | 117 |
| Chapter Twelve - A Midnight Foray | 126 |
| Chapter Thirteen - Garden Party | 137 |
| Epilogue | 145 |
| Author's Note..... | 150 |
| Acknowledgments..... | 154 |
| Select Bibliography & Other Interesting Reading | 155 |
| About The Author | 156 |
| Praise For Author | 157 |

*It's better for you to find out while you are young
how much more other people know than you do. Anything
is better than the awful self-complacency of the modern
American girl.*

—Mary Boykin Chesnut

CHAPTER
ONE

A WHOLE
NEW WORLD

SPRING, 1867.

VERBENA PLANTATION. JEFFERSON COUNTY, FLORIDA.

“*L*ittle Jack, have you seen Maybeth?”

The diminutive negro, caught alone behind the kitchen, shook his head slowly and solemnly. Indeed, he hadn't seen the leader of his gang for an entire minute, maybe two.

“*Hmph!*” Katherine, the heavy-set Irish housekeeper, knew what was what but tucked back inside nonetheless to finish the rest of her cakes. The big barbecue they were having at Verbena Plantation was well underway, but the rest of the strawberry shortcakes she was assembling wouldn't be needed until later.

Back behind the shed, the pastry thief proudly displayed her haul: two square sandwiches of yellow sponge oozing strawberries and cream. “I got two,” said Eunice, for that was her name, though she hated it and went by her middles: Eunice Mary Elisabeth Stancil. Though she almost never behaved like it, at age ten, “Maybeth” was, in fact, the young mistress of the place.

Verbena had a young master as well, almost three years shy of his older sister. Frederick, known as “Fred,” was also present and as eager as the others to learn about his share.

“Audrey and I get this one,” Maybeth said to the other girl. “Y’all can have the other.” But her decree didn’t go over well.

Fred looked at Davis, and Davis looked at Conor, and they were still workin’ the math when Little Jack arrived.

“But that ain’t fair,” said Conor. He was the housekeeper’s son.

With a four-way split now facing him, Fred, the youngest, was on the verge of tears.

Davis, the oldest, carefully took possession of the boys’ common portion as Maybeth and Audrey tore into the remainder. Little Jack, Conor, and Fred watched as he expertly divided their cake into *petit fours* with his pocket knife.

Nary a crumb was spared amid the thirty-second feast that ensued, and, when it was over, Maybeth sprang her next idea. “Let’s go swimmin’.”

“Where?” asked Conor, who hadn’t been before. The prior year, in which he had arrived, had been rife with hardship. In fact, none of the others had swum together since the summer of 1865.

“Burnt Mill Creek here on the plantation, up at the property line.”

“Is the rope still there?” Davis asked.

“I sure hope so,” said Audrey with a smile. “That’s half the fun.”

Fred spoke to his sister. “Momma ain’t gonna let us go in the midst of this picnic.”

“He’s right,” said Conor, glancing at Little Jack. “We still have to work.”

When Little Jack nodded, Maybeth scowled. “Doin’ what? Y’all been workin’ all mornin’. There ain’t nothin’ left to do.”

“There isn’t anything,” corrected Audrey, though her best friend ignored her. For years, Audrey had marveled at Maybeth’s chameleonic nature—adapting to her audience in both manner and dialect.

“Pickin’ up plates, washin’ dishes, and runnin’ stuff around. . . They’re prolly lookin’ for us now. We better head back.”

Conor and Little Jack started back to the house before Maybeth passed them, frills and bows flyin’; she was on a new mission.

It wasn’t that Maybeth disliked parties—just that she was already bored. Up at the crack of dawn and scrubbed from head to toe, it was bad enough she’d been confined in her finery. But then, as the guests arrived, she’d had to visit with everyone—each and every person, even the ones that never amused her.

Now, before the pig was ready for supper, would come the worst part of all—adults talking about this and that, and not any of it in any way excitin’. Two years ago, when they’d done this before, she and Audrey’d been sent to nap. They were older now, so why couldn’t they go swimmin’ instead? The weather on this warm spring day couldn’t be more perfect!

Audrey, Davis, and Fred caught up as Maybeth arrived under the oak. There sat Ma, Pa, and Audrey’s folks, along with a whole bunch of others. Chairs had been set out in a neat semi-circle, and everyone was in high spirits.

“Maybeth, dear, don’t run in that dress.”

“Well, that’s what I’m here to talk about.” At the scolded daughter’s earnest reply, the adults began chuckling.

Maybeth’s mother, Virginia, exhibited a wry grin. “Don’t you think you’re a little too old to be runnin’ round naked like you used to?”

Maybeth colored and snorted her displeasure, enhanced by the presence of her peers. “Ma, we’re goin’ swimmin’—the weather’s perfect—and Little Jack and Conor are comin’ too. Y’all are just sittin’ here makin’ fun a’ people, and ya don’t need ’ny help doin’ that.”

This elicited a roar of laughter. Audrey's father, Charles, almost dropped his drink.

"And the war is over, and Lincoln is dead. Do you have any other declarations?"

"No, ma'am; that's about it."

"Well, you're not goin' in that dress. And the rest'll have to get permission." Virginia turned to Susan, Audrey's mother, who nodded her assent. "I assume you're goin' to the branch and not all the way down to the gulf. Your father's horses have the day off; it'd be a mighty long walk." Her joke won another round of laughter from the happy pickling company.

"Davis, are you going?" asked the undertaker of his son.

"I'd like to, Father."

"Then you may. Just be back before supper."

"Take Jasper too," said Maybeth's pa, Arthur. "We had to tie him up. He's over there pitchin' a fit." Indeed, the family's Bluetick Coonhound had had to have his people-lovin' enthusiasm forcibly curbed.

"We will!" Maybeth flashed a toothy grin and took off toward the house.

"Don't forget to give Audrey something to wear!"



The girls came back down in a couple of shabby rambling dresses and found the boys and an equally eager Jasper ready to go.

They took the "nigh cut", for it was the fastest way, with no need for the road. Virginia had told them to stay away from it anyway. It was a pleasant walk that began through the cotton field and ended at the verdant greenery that marked the northern edge of the property. Only

a few miles further north beyond the creek was La Altura plantation, where Audrey's family, the Stancils' closest neighbors, lived.

This day was such a wonderful treat—a rare chance for Maybeth to play with all of her friends. Davis lived in Capitola, also miles away; it was why Maybeth'd gone to bat rather than see the chance squandered.

Burnt Mill Creek wasn't usually much to look at and only rarely deep enough to swim in, but for years like this, when the early months' rain had been so torrential. In fact, it had been so bad this year, even the crops had been threatened, adding to the lingering injuries still being suffered from the late, horrible war.

And sure enough, there the stream was now, with a remarkable swollen pond, right where the children had left it two years ago, beneath the big oak on a bend. The rope was there, too, and Davis was first to his britches to test it.

“Wahoo!” *Splash.*

The water was just right—deep enough to land, but not enough to drown. The eleven-year-old and tallest of the gang found his feet with shoulders to spare.

“Is it cold?” asked Audrey, tugging Maybeth almost out of her dress.

“A little,” Davis replied, as Little Jack flew in high above him.

“Fred, you wade in; I don't want you on that rope,” Maybeth said. The boy had been looking askance at it but seemed content to do as he was told.

Conor just took it all in for a while, as if in some big happy dream.

When Maybeth was finally down to her old chemise and drawers, Audrey had to remind her that she needed help too. This gave Conor, the houseboy, a chance to catch up, putting the girls in last as Jasper took off after a butterfly.

The kids spent over an hour swimmin' themselves silly until all the swingin' and splashin' set their stomachs to gnawin'.

“We should probably head back,” said Davis; he’d been drying in the sun for a while.

Maybeth came out looking like a drowned rabbit, her loose, chestnut-colored hair clinging to her back. “Has anyone seen Jasper?”

“He wuz over year,” said Little Jack, also out of the water.

This got Fred out as well, for Jasper was his buddy—a buddy not forgotten, but put aside for a swim. “Jasper! Jasper!” he called, wondering where the dog had gone.

Only Audrey and Conor were left in the pool when Little Jack spotted someone.

Following Little Jack’s eyeline, Maybeth saw the man too, a runaway standing and glaring at them from the woods across the creek. He had apparently been watching them swim for at least the last little bit, and though none of them actually knew him, that he was a runaway was patently obvious. The Yankees had freed the slaves, but Southern men still controlled the legislature, and they had answered the federals’ diktat by passing new vagrancy laws. Ex-slaves like this one, wandering the land unemployed, were illegal and could be picked up on sight and even pressed into service.

Seeing Maybeth and Little Jack frozen on the bank, Conor finally figured it out, but he didn’t tell Audrey, who remained in the water as the man began to approach.

Maybeth yelled, “Audrey, get out of the water!” and pointed at what was happening. The man was now wading in slowly toward the girl from the opposite side.

Audrey screamed and made for the bank, and the boys, ’cept for Fred, were drawn to the scene.

This man who beset them was big and strong, in his late twenties, perhaps early thirties. He had a wild look in his eyes that almost certainly spelled trouble.

The bend in the creek where they'd swam was a peaceful little pool, off from the current further out that was on this day far from insignificant. The rush of the water gave the man pause when he was up over his knees and about halfway across. Stopping, he addressed Little Jack, who'd been staring a hole right through him. "W'at you doin', li'l nigga, swimmin' wid dem white folks?"

For a moment, everyone was speechless, including Audrey, still swimmin' for her life. Then Maybeth felt compelled to answer, in spite of whom the negro had addressed. "There's only one nigger that I can see from here!"

The man continued toward Audrey as she flailed in the water. She would probably beat him to the bank, but one wouldn't know it from all of her screaming.

Just then, responding to the noise, Jasper emerged from the scrub. The sudden sight of the dog startled the menacing man. Audrey scrambled out of the water just as Jasper started barking and acting as if he would jump in. This sudden turn of events caused the man to reconsider; stepping backward without looking, he tripped and fell awkwardly into the current.

Fred intercepted Jasper just before he could pursue, and they all watched the man struggling to find his feet. It was touch-and-go for a moment or two as the current threatened to carry him away, and none said a word as they watched the drama play to its mundane anti-mortal conclusion. In the end, the negro managed to keep from drowning, but if he desired another engagement, it didn't show in how he slunk back into the forest.

"C'mon, let's go!" said Maybeth. "There may be more of'em around."



The children returned to the house in stony silence—their high spirits from before had been utterly dampened. Their foul humor spread immediately to the adults the moment they finished relating the news.

The party was forgotten, the horses summoned, and the men rode off in search of the vagabond.

Later in the house, where they'd been sent to bathe, Maybeth and Audrey held a postmortem.

"I still can't believe he spoke to Little Jack like that," said Maybeth from behind a screen, toweling herself dry.

Audrey looked over from inside the tub, where she was almost finished—the suds in her sandy hair were the last step of her own wash-up. "Well, my father always says that it's a little strange. . ."

"It's not strange to treat people with respect, Audrey. You don't seem to have any trouble." Audrey leaned back to get the soap out of her hair—just enough time for Maybeth to finish donning her underclothes. By the time she appeared with another towel from behind her screen, she hadn't yet received an answer. "Well. . .?"

"Well, like you, I've known Little Jack most of my life." Audrey squeezed out her hair and stepped out of the tub, allowing her friend to wrap the towel snugly around her from behind.

"But that shouldn't matter is my whole point; Pa says common Christian respect should always apply, even to strangers."

Audrey turned as she dried herself to look Maybeth in the eye. "I don't think that negro back there is a Christian, Maybeth."

Maybeth's mouth pinched in tacit agreement. "Well, I expect you're right about that."



Outside on the road near the northeast corner of the plantation, Maybeth's father, Arthur, was having a similar conversation.

"Arthur, we could use you in the Knights of the White Camelia. It's now quite clear that you're having the same problems as the rest of us." This wasn't the first time that Otis had broached this particular subject, but it was the first time in months in light of Arthur's prior angry refusals. Otis owned a much older plantation further east of Verbena in the county.

Charles, Audrey's father, was the one who knew Arthur best, and so he knew from his silence that this time the headstrong moralist was considering it. "Otis," he said with a wink, advocating his friend's old, tired stock position, "secret orders aren't necessary, only the enforcement of our current laws."

However, Otis knew what Arthur didn't—that even Charles had already joined. Like the Ku Klux Klan, the Knights of the White Camelia had been established after the war as a way of restoring a measure of justice. In the throes of Reconstruction, Southerners remained under attack from all sides. The Yankee military occupation forces regularly seized property by decree, and taxes were being raised on what was left by rapacious carpetbaggers. For the fortunate few who still had anything after the war, the threat loomed of it being stolen outright. And it wasn't just ex-slaves out there roamin' and lootin', but poor whites, too, with nothing left to lose. Naturally, the Florida legislature still struggled mightily against the tyranny, but with each passing day, their efforts became more and more unenforceable. And next year's election in '68 was promising to be a nightmare; the Loyal League and Freedmen's Bureau were already signing up blocs of ex-slaves to vote, this notwithstanding the proposed Fourteenth Amendment that was slithering its way through the corrupted halls of D.C. Concurrent with

its other con-constitutional clauses, it promised the further insult of disenfranchising whites who'd fought for the South.

Arthur spoke up at last, apparently arguing with himself. "We never rode patrol. We never had to on Verbena. And now, here I am, ridin' to protect my family. . ."

"The Yankees ain't gonna do it, Arthur. We're a conquered nation. And state laws haven't mattered since they clipped the wings of our sheriffs." The man who'd said this was a cotton trader from Newport, on the St. Marks River, not far from the coast in neighboring Wakulla County.

The dozen of them on horseback reached the bridge over the creek, where further on lay Charles's La Altura. Turning west, they followed the bank and picked up the pace as they carefully scanned the area.

They never did find that runaway or any other, and by late afternoon, it was time to finally head back. The pig would be ready even as its purpose, the long-delayed party, had been thoroughly spoiled.

Walking away from the barn, where Wilson the negro stableman was watering their horses, Arthur had only two words for Otis: "I'll join."

CHAPTER TWO

TALLAHASSEE

In the days that followed, Maybeth was “confined to the cotton,” imprisoned just like any slave had been before the war. She could venture as far as the quarters or to the barn on the other side, but she wasn’t to touch the drive or a single tree beyond the fields. Had the feral child had some time to meditate on this, she would have found it insufferable if it weren’t for the fact that her mother had also assigned her so much schooling.

Taught at home as she was in Verbena’s spacious library, Maybeth never minded it much when it was raining or cold. But now, amid the peak season for fun out of doors, dusty books had started to become for her a little old, even the ones she liked the most—the ones with adventure stories.

One humid afternoon, once she was finally allowed her pleasure reading, Maybeth took her adventure novel outside to the mansion’s expansive porch. There, ensconced in a rocker and enjoying the cooling cross breeze, she was just tucking back into the story when Little Jack arrived.

“Oh, Little Jack! Look—look at this part here! Redfeather’s almost been shot!” Maybeth leaned forward and indicated the paragraph with her finger—an event from Chapter Sixteen of R.M. Ballantyne’s *The Young Fur Traders*.