

# The Other Maumer

By Virginia Frazer Boyle

The great bell was sounding the dinner hour, for it was twelve o'clock, and the long line of negroes threw aside the gunny-sacks as they came from the field and wiped their perspiring faces, for it was yet warm, even though October had already touched the trees upon the hill.

The ringing of the bell was a welcome sound to Cely, one that she had been longing to hear for a whole hour, as her fingers fluttered restlessly over the bolls. She had not been working well; Susan and Rachel, reckoned with Cely the fastest pickers on the place, were many pounds ahead; but Cely did not care; her heart was not in her work to-day.

Silently she made her way by the side of the hill to the long cabin called the "Nursery," where Maumer, weazen and bent, and long emeritus as to field duties, tended the twenty little wooden cradles.

Maumer was sitting on the door-step holding one of her little charges. "My Cindy's Paul got dat thrash ergin mighty bad. Calamus, catnip, and groun'-ivy hain't no good fur hit sometimes," said Maumer, as Cely drew nearer. "I tole Cindy dat, but she des want 'em, 'case Ole Miss gib 'em ter Little Miss when she er baby. Cindy want Paul lack whi' ehillen, but Ole Miss don' tek no notice uv 'im, when she see yo' baby, Cely," said Maumer, with a frown. "Allus sayin' what er fine chile he am, an' uebber gib Cindy's chile nuffin but er blue chany mug.

Cely was not listening; swiftly she glided by nineteen of the little cradles, and lifted, with many soft tones and caresses, a tiny brown and blue bundle from the twentieth, for Cely's was the very newest baby in the Nursery.

"Mammy little pickaninny! Mammy putty nigger!" cooed Cely, tossing up the little bundle.

Maumer still mumbled on the doorstep. "You looks lack er Matnmy!—an' hain't got yo' coat ter yo' ankles yit! Er settled man lack Henry in mighty po' business takin' er chile hack yo' is. Yo's er nice Mammy!" But Cely was used to Maurner's moods, for she had been cross ever since Henry married Cely instead of Cindy, Maumer's stupid daughter, and had grumbled continuously from the day the little new baby was put under her charge.

"Wake up! wakeup! hit yo' Mammy, boy!" and the girl lifted the tiny lids with her long slender fingers, but the baby only pressed his lips hazily against the mother's breast.

"What de matter wid him, Maumer? He haiu't eben hongry! He allus wake up an' play wid me."

"Hush, yo' fool; yo' wake 'em all up! Hain't nuffin de matter wid him. He been yehhin' er hour, an' dey hatter sheep some time."

The other mothers were now coming in; for they had regular times to go to the Nursery, especially those with very young infants.

"Hi, Judy!" said Maumer to a comfortable, rather elderly mother, who had just taken her latest born, her fifteenth, from the cradle, "Cely think dar sumpen de matter wid her baby, and ready ter 'cuse me wid hit, 'case hit want ter go ter sleep. Think she got one er dem jumpiu' dolls hack Little Miss. Her an' Henry keep hit wake all night er playin' wid

hit, an' hit gotter sleep some. Here, gimme dat chile, gal! Yo' dun'no' nuffin 'bout babies!" There was a general laugh at Cely's expense. "Nuffin de matter wid de chile!" and Maumer tossed and tickled him until he crowed.

But Cely looked at Maumer distrustfully.

"Yo' sho' dar hain't nuffin de matter wid my baby, Judy?" Cely asked, wistfully, as she put her forefinger into the brown, waxen fist that belonged to the tiny bundle Maumer held.

"Naw, gal, naw!" laughed Judy, putting number fifteen, who began to yell vigorously, back into its cradle. "Hain't nuffin de matter wid him, 'cep'in' he so mighty little; fur yo' sho' does look lack er gal er-totin' er doll. Dar hain't nuffin de matter wid him; he des sleepy."

"Do er baby allus breave dat way?" Cely was twisting her apron nervously. "Does dey alms 'beat, beat,' in de top er de head an' in de chist dat er way? Tek off his elo'es an' look, Judy."

Maumer frowned and turned on her heel when Judy, good-naturedly took the little bundle from her arms and stripped the blue checked slip from Cely's latest doll.

"Hain't he putty 'dout any clo'es?" cried Cely, beguiled from her fear by her admiration of the brown, bow-legged Cupid squirming on Judy's knee.

"Cely proud fitten ter bus'; she des wanten show her baby off," said the mother of the ugliest baby in the Nursery.

"Hain't nuffin wrong wid him, Cely, 'cep'in' he little, an' if he hib, he'll grow," said Judy, oracularly, as she relinquished the child. "All de young things—birds, an' rabbits, an' babies—beat dat er way in de head an' in de chist. Dar de bell now!" and Judy folded her sun-bonnet and laid it, slats sidewise, on the top of her head.

Cely sighed as the teasing laugh of the women rang back to her; then, with a parting caress, she laid her baby in the cradle and followed.

Old Maumer, bent and sullen, stood in the doorway until the last figure had turned the hill-path.

"Think I dun'no' nuffin 'bout babies, when I nussed dat berry Cely, wid all de airs she gibbs herse'f, right here in dis cradle. Heap er use she got wid er baby, an' she hain't hardly er 'oman yit, an' Ole Miss an' Little Miss myratin' so.

"Cely got some putty whi' clo'es wid lace on, an' some blue beads too, dat Little Miss tek off er her big doll fur de baby; an' Cindy got nuffin but er blue chany mug, an' sumpen ter eat fum de Big House. Cindy sech er hog; allus ax Ole Miss fur sumpen ter eat when she down. If hit wa'n't fur Cely, Cindy'd er got all dem beads an' things, 'case dey's de two littlest babies, but dey's des lack es two peas." Maumer had taken Cindy's feverish child in her arms again; then moving with a sudden impulse, she laid it in the cradle beside Cely's baby. "Es lack es peas in one pod," she whispered. "If hit wa'n't fur Cely's, Ole Miss would mighty much dis'n, 'case he de putties' in de Nursery, 'cep'in' Cely's, an' he de onlies' gran'chihe dat I got." Cindy's baby moaned as if in pain, and Maumer took him up again.

"I dun'no' what ail him—hain't time fur 'is teef ter mek trouble, but his mouf pester me mightily. I's tired er de whi' folkses' physic; I gwine fix my own truck. If he do git worsen—if he do—" Maumer hooked at the blue beads around the neck of Cely's sleeping baby, and then into the face of the little sufferer before her, with a leer of latent cunning.

In the olden time of slavery days, the mother of a new baby was the subject of especial envy.

As a consequence, there were many privileges that attached, many immunities, both before and after it came. Ole Miss always went to the Quarters personally upon such occasions; the children followed with gifts, and put in their claims to the little black baby with many excited arguments.

Upon the self-same day, the two little new faces peeped into the Quarters; the one, the child of stalwart Henry's girl-wife, had been chosen to be fought over and cried over; the other had been accorded only ordinary honors, for Cindy was not a favorite among the children, and hence old Maumer's jealousy was aroused.

Through the long day Maumer sat and brooded, neglecting the toddlers who had strayed onto forbidden ground; and stirring the cradles roughly with her foot,—Old Maumer, who had been trusted and revered for so long,—but she had not a grandchild then.

Ma'y Ann, the young assistant, played with acorn cups and bits of china under the old oak, unmolested, for Maumer was wrestling with a problem, and all of the latent, unsuspected savagery was rising.

Then by-and-by the little wooden cradles were empty, for the work-day was done; the mothers had taken their babies to their own cabins, and Maumer laid Cindy's child on her shoulder and closed the door.

All night the candle glimmered through the cracks in Maumer's cabin; all night she physicked and the baby cried; while Cindy, heavy-eyed and stupid, slept soundly until day. The door was closed; Maumer knew that she was disobeying orders, for Ole Miss had peremptorily commanded that she was to be notified in case of serious illness. But Maumer was sly and cunning; Ole Miss should not be told.

Convulsion after convulsion shook the tiny frame, all of the remedies were used without effect, and towards daybreak she tried the baby's fortune, "come life er come death"; then Maumer made up her mind.

The old oak was casting its soft shade across the lawn, where the Nursery toddlers sat sedately munching the sweet corn pone that it was one of old Maumer's duties to provide, while Ma'y Ann was just starting to the spring for a bucket of cool water.

"An' min', yo' fetch me my gourd yo' lef' on de battlin'-bench 'side de branch, an min yo' herries, 'fore I beat de life outen yo'!"

Ma'y Ann's eyes widened and "bucked" at Maumer's unwonted proposition, as she idly swung the bucket along the hill-path, singing an irrelevant, foolish little song.

The great bell would ring in a moment; Maumer knew it by the shadow of the oak, as well as by the old dial just across the lawn.

Should she do it? Up and down, both ways she looked; there was nobody even in sight, save Ma'y Ann, dawdling far down the spring-path; then the great bell clanged through the Quarters. A spasm stiffened the form of Cindy's baby, and Maumer, with a stern face and trembling hands, stripped the long shirt and blue beads from Cely's boy, and throwing them hastily upon her daughter's child, she laid it in the twentieth cradle, changing Cely's baby to the cradle just vacated.

Old Maumer, with shaking limbs, was raking up the smouldering coals upon the hearth when the lively throng of mothers came filing in to nurse their little ones.

“Hi! What ail Maumer? What de matter?” asked Judy, always foremost.

“Chill,” grunted Maumer, as she knelt to woo the fickle blaze. “Go fetch in some chips, Ma’y Ann!” for Ma’y Ann had returned.

Dancing, skipping, like a child let loose for a holiday, came Cely; she had even “hop-scotched” with Ma’y Ann that very morning. Nothing was the matter with her baby—Judy said so, Maumer said so—even old Maumer, who was so jealous; he was still her doll, and how he cooed and kicked for her just before she heft him

Down the long row of cradles she leaped rather than walked, in the fulness and exuberance of life.

“Yo’ Mammy’s comin’, boy, yo’ Mammy’s comin’!” and snatching the baby from the cradle, she tossed it gleefully above her head.

Then a shriek, that startled even the laborers who had not left the field—a shriek of agony, of fear, of a wild thing wounded in the heart, for the little cold mouth turned away from the warm breast so full of life and strength, and the tiny limbs convulsed, and then relaxed forever with the breathing of a sigh.

Holding the dead baby close, and rocking in her woe, the face of Cely seemed hardened and ashened in a moment, like that of an old woman, while, shrill and high, her voice carried even to the clearing.

“Maumer! yo’ pizened my boy! Yo’ kilt him, Maumer!”

But Maumer, with closed eyes, only mumbled over the coals and shivered, though the noon was warm.

Smiles came through Cely’s tears, smiles of gratification when Little Miss, with eyes and nose all red, refused to be comforted for the loss of her “little nigger,” and brought from the Big House more pretty baby things than Cely had ever seen; while Ole Miss put them on with her own hands; and smoothing down the dainty folds, laid in the brown, doll-like fingers the tiniest, whitest rose-bud that the early frost had spared. Then emotion was stirred to its depths again, and the wild blood of two continents ran riot in her veins, even to the verge of madness, when Cely came to know the meaning of a grave. And Ole Miss had her brought to the Big House, by way of comfort to Henry, who was Ole Marse’s foreman at that time.

Ole Miss tried to teach her to sew and to spin, but restraint was galling, the Big House with its civilization had no attraction after the novelty had worn off, and suddenly the wheel burred, the thread snapped, and Cely would leap like a tiger-eat through the doorway and beyond the wood-lot, where later they would find her, tenderly nursing in her arms a doll made of a folded towel.

But time was kinder even than Ole Miss, and after a while the laugh and smile came back, Henry’s cabin was cheery again, and before the picking was over, Cely was rivalling Susan and Rachel in the field.

Down in a little cabin by the cane-brake, old Maumer, now “the Other Maumer,” lived alone, weaving shuck mats, mending nets for the fishermen, and “hooking” mittens for the negroes against the coming of the winter; for Maumer was deposed, another Maumer

reigned over the little wooden cradles, and *her* foot was not permitted to cross the threshold; for Maumer had been tried and convicted of murder by a jury of her peers.

Ole Marse, upon careful investigation, could find nothing culpable in Maumer save the failure to report the illness, which was made the cause of removal. The charge, made by Cely and the other negroes, of poisoning could not be substantiated; though the attack appeared to have been very sudden, it could not be proved that the child had died from other than a dreaded infantile trouble.

Throughout the trial and investigation Manmer preserved a sullen silence. She neither appealed to Ole Marse nor to any of the negroes. She did not plead her long life of usefulness, and she denied none of the charges, that grew each day with the rapidity of Jonah's gourd.

Now and again she smiled grimly as she looked upon the thriving child in sleepy Cindy's arms and heard that Little Miss had taken him for her own. That was glory enough; that was honor, immortality. He would grow up a house nigger—"high quality"—*her* grandchild, in the eyes of the world, in the eyes of even Cindy, for she could not trust Cindy with her secret, and Cindy was too stupid to know the difference.

Her eyes greedily took in the splendor of Little Miss's gifts on each successive visit, carefully hooking them over, clothes and beads and toys, like a miser counting gold, and it was enough. This sufficed for days alone in the cane-brake, for nights when the wind was high, even though she was now the Other Maumer and had been set apart.

The spring-time came around, but weeks and months were long, and the winter of loneliness was telling upon the Other Maumer.

She missed the spring-time crop of babies, the wooden cradles with their worn rockers—worn by *her* foot; she missed the little toddlers that had outgrown the cradles, but more than all, she missed her dignity of position. In the brief time, so long to youth and age, the old back became more bowed, and childishness grew apace.

The butterflies possessed a wonderful fascination—the white and yellow—and the reed mats would drop from her hands in forgetful admiration. But when the brown ones hovered near her, poising on gorgeous velvety wings, the Other Maumer would shiver and cover up her head—"De soul er Cindy's baby, oh, my Gord! kim back ter claim his place, er cusin me er de lie! Oh, my Gord!"

How she would fight the brown butterflies away, if they alighted on her doorstep! And carefully she gathered and crushed every wild flower that grew around her cabin, fearful lest they should prove to be an attraction. But the brown butterflies came and came; in swarms they filled and circled the Other Maumer's cabin, by morning, noon, and evening. Then the nets hung on the racks unmended, the reeds dried unwoven, and the hands of the Other Maumer fluttered over the little heaps of red clay that she brought from beside the new well, to fashion into rude butterflies with outstretched wings. Scores and scores were drying in the sun, and yet the busy fingers worked nervously.

"Fly, fly," she whispered, "an' fetch de soul er Cindy's baby!"

The cold moon shone through the cracks of the Other Maumer's cabin; the Other Maumer did not like the moon; even in her sleep she was always hiding something from it, deep and dark, but the moon could always find it.

To-night it was the clay butterflies, and she woke with a start to search for them.

Not one could she find in the cabin, and with a cry of rage she wrung her hands; “Dey tryin’ ter steal de soul er Cindy’s baby! Dey done stole ’em fum me; dey done stole ’em!”

Then she remembered that she had carried her apron full to the river-bank, and had left them on the cotton bales to dry. “Lef’ ’em ter fetch de soul er Cindy’s baby!” she assured herself; “but I cain’t lose none uv ’em!” and with her knotted hickory stick in one hand and a bunch of river reeds in the other, the Other Maumer hobbled slowly down the road.

It wanted but little to the holiday season, though Ole Marse had held his cotton back for a great “deal.” But now that he had sent word from New Orleans to ship it on, the old storehouse was full to overflowing, and it was piled all along the levee waiting for the boat, for Ole Marse had never made a better crop.

Perched upon one of the bales that lined the levee, conjuring with the recovered butterflies in the full of the moon sat the Other Maumer, happy in the abandonment of the moment.

All her world was asleep; even the guards stationed around the storehouse had gone off duty; and where was the need of them? People did not steal cotton, and then the boat was coming in the morning.

Tenderly the Other Maumer nursed her butterflies, careful of their frail, sun-baked wings—hiding them in her apron, her bosom, and now in her faded turban.

“Gwine ter fetch de soul er Cindy’s baby; yas, Lord, gwine ter fetch hit back—hain’t yo’, honey? Gwine ter lif’ dem putty wings an’ fly away!” The moon rose high and waned, but still the Other Maumer, shivering with the cold and damp, sat on the river-bank. The big brown butterflies had been gone so long; she was waiting for them to return. She had fought them and driven them away, but now she wanted them to come back and bring the soul of Cindy’s baby.

The cry of a child or a eat somewhere in the Quarters startled her, and she raised her head; suddenly she was conscious of the smell of something burning, and a tiny spark leaped through a crack in the storehouse. Then a shower of little sparks came through, and the Other Maumer rubbed her cold hands together gleefully. “Dey’s done come back—dey’s done come back; fly an’ fetch de soul er Cindy’s baby!”

But the odor of the burning cotton was stirring something else in the disordered brain.

Away back in the Other Maumer’s girlhood there had been a great conflagration. Big House, gin-house, cotton, everything was destroyed, and horror had fallen upon the plantation, for there had been loss of life as well. The Other Maumer was trying to remember. Slowly she drew her hand across her eyes, then shook her head.

“Ole Marse?” she queried; then, as the scorching smell grew stronger, she shouted, “De soul er Cindy’s baby!” and crushing her butterflies in her palm, she leaped on her knotted stick into the narrow road leading to the Quarters.

No one knew exactly how the Other Maumer roused the Quarters that night. Some said that she came on bat wings and fluttered against the chimney as she cried. Others said that she came on a great horse that struck fire with his hoofs as she beat upon each door with her hickory stick. Though to all the message was the same: “Fly, fly ter de ribber an’ fetch de soul er Cindy’s baby!” But the latter part of the admonition was lost in the weirdness of the command, and the frightened negroes tumbled out of their warm beds, wide awake for once.

Under the guidance of Henry, in the dark hour before the dawn, full fifty negroes had been rolling the outside cotton to a place of safety; and now the overseer, in the absence of Ole Marse, hesitated, for the opening of the storehouse would result in a bursting out of the flames; that moment would require coolness, courage, and rapid handling; and the negro, always obedient, shrank from taking the responsibility alone.

Then a peremptory command came from somewhere, and twenty strong men leaped back as the flames licked through the open doors like tongues.

“Strip, men! Git ter wuk lack debils!” called the impelling voice. “Roll ’em out! Roll ’em out! H— is hotter’n dis! Roll ’em out!” and Henry, awe-struck and thrilled, following the leading, dropped into line with the others.

Swiftly the work went on, and higher and higher rose the mysterious voice, urging to quicker action by prayer and execration, until the negroes, nerved to the limits of human endurance by superstitious fear, pushed forward until they felt their sinews crack.

“One mo’ time, heave ahead, boys!” continued the voice; then the work was discontinued, for the white flame heaped up hike a hiving torch, lighting even the river with its weird splendor.

“Wuk, men, wuk, fur de soul er Cindy’s baby!” cried the voice, now rising in a wail. Then a horror seized upon the negroes, and the men rushed forward to the rescue, for on the roof of the burning storehouse, now revealed through the sickening glare, stood the Other Maumer, waving a bunch of river reeds.

“Look! look!” she shouted, reaching for the scurrying sparks; “de butterflies done come back—dey done come back!” Then folding her arms and smiling, as though she held a child, “De soul er Cindy’s baby!” The picture of the past had been photographed for an instant upon the disordered brain.

It was useless to try to save her; again and again the willing hands were driven back by the heat. Higher and higher crept the flames around her, but, oblivious of life or death, the bent figure swayed and hugged in ecstasy the dream of the recovered soul.

Then a gust swept through the rifled storehouse, the beams quivered, and the cumbersome roof fell in, smothering the flame, and leaving the levee in utter darkness.

It was from Henry’s throat, deep and tremulous, that the death-song rose, joined in by the treble of the women. The wondering Cindy knelt in the sand and hid her face. Then, as the truth broke in upon her consciousness, Cely snatched a sleeping child from the arms of the kneeling Cindy, and a wild note of joy rose high above the dirge.