

THIS SPECIES OF PROPERTY

Slave Life and Culture in the Old South

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scribed bondsmen as far more complex people than the stereotypes that subsequently were substituted. Yet these stereotypes stubbornly survived. Partly responsible is the researcher's tendency simply to mirror popular clichés about slaves rather than to base his interpretations on hard evidence that exposes misconceptions.

My investigation will focus on the personality and behavior of the slave within the context of what it meant to be a slave. Most of the primary sources useful in getting inside the slave's experience were written between the years 1770 and 1865 and include a vast variety of plantation records, diaries, slave narratives, travelers' accounts, and other items bearing on the slave's experiences in his relationships to slaveholders. Even today the rich material in these sources has not been adequately explored.

When I have thought it important to do so, I have made references to the bondsman's African past in the text and footnotes. Some of my own explorations into the patterns of thought and behavior linking black Africans and black Americans suggest that until both experiences are better understood statements made about the connection must be advanced with care. Yet, to be sure, the African influence on American slaves was profound and deserves full-scale treatment from a number of approaches.

Though slavery is gone one of the most apparent vestiges of its American history, the dark complexion, remains an echoing reminder of the past. Throughout the years of bondage and after, American society labored long and hard to make this badge of servitude virtually synonymous with inferiority, carefully refining the rationale its guilt required.¹¹ The fact that the process of justifying the color line is still ongoing is very important to understanding the history of black people in the United States.

1 *Drawing the Color Line*

The Old South, a region of great geographic diversity,¹ may well be understood best when viewed as a society of masters and slaves. Yet in 1619, when a Dutch ship loaded with a cargo of twenty Africans arrived in Jamestown, Virginia, it hardly suggested the extent of slavery's future development in North America during the next 250 years. Scholars have written, in fact, that the social and economic characteristics of what subsequently became the Old South differed little from those of the North down to the time of the American Revolution.² In the early years of the American colonial period there was every indication that the South, like the North, would have an agrarian economy worked by yeoman farmers rather than by hundreds, thousands, and then millions of slaves.³ But the emerging Old South was to fix a place in history in its own way, a way that would become defined by the white South's relationship to a growing number of black slaves on its plantations and farms.

Slavery existed legally in the North, in New Jersey, until 1846. But by comparison with the Old South the number of northern bondsmen in nineteenth-century America was not large. In 1830 the North had 3,568 slaves, two-thirds of these living in New Jersey,

while the Old South had 2,005,475.⁴ A survey of the U.S. census returns illustrates slavery's hold. In 1790, the time of the first national census, more than 600,000 of the 697,624 slaves in what has become the continental United States resided in the southern states. By 1820 slave numbers had increased to 1,538,022, with only a small fraction of these either residing in or even visiting the northern states. The Census of 1850 reported 3,204,313 slaves, and by 1860 there were nearly 4,000,000, all but a small number living within the political boundaries of the southern slavery system.*

One may obtain an even clearer picture of the population density of slaves in this period by selecting random figures of their numbers in specific areas. In 1790, their lowest level in any southern region, slaves made up 9.6 per cent of the inhabitants of Tennessee. In Virginia, slaves comprised 39.1 per cent of the population in 1790, 39.9 per cent in 1820, and 33.3 per cent in 1850. In South Carolina by 1850, 57.6 per cent of the total population was slave. By the same date in Georgia, 55 per cent of the slave and in Mississippi 51 per cent. Throughout the antebellum years slaves comprised roughly one-fourth to one-third of the entire southern population. And from 1820 down to the time of the Civil War nearly one out of every two people in the Black Belt—Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, Louisiana—was a slave. For slaveholding Southerners, being surrounded by black faces was a constant, if occasionally discomforting, fact of life.⁶

In the seventy-year span covered by the census, rural as opposed to urban slaves accounted for more than 95 per cent of the black population. This was a consequence of requirements of slaveholders. The bulk of slaves worked in the cultivation of cotton, sugar cane, tobacco, and rice. A much smaller number produced such products as hemp and turpentine. Less than 5 per cent were employed in industry. From colonial times most bonded blacks lived on plantations whose masters' holdings counted more than twenty slaves. This was particularly true of the Black Belt in

* Interestingly, in 1860, New Jersey still permitted the enslavement of eighteen blacks within its borders despite its abolition law.⁵

the nineteenth century. By 1860, one-tenth of the planter community of 385,000 slaveholders held half of the existing human property.

The population figures of slavery reveal not only that a relatively small number of planters controlled most of the investment in slave property but that this same group was able to shape, far out of proportion to its size, much of the social development and many of the attitudes of a region and to a great extent a nation. Only 3000 individuals throughout the period owned 100 or more—sometimes many more—bondsmen. And only 10,000 owned 50 or more slaves. It is perhaps worth noting in contrast that 72 per cent of the estimated 385,000 slaveholders in 1860 owned 10 slaves or less, although 25,000 persons identifiable as planters owned nearly 50 per cent of all bondsmen in holdings of 20 or more, while one quarter of all slaves worked on plantations having 50 or more laborers.

At their highest numbers in 1860, masters and their relatives made up no more than a quarter of the southern white population, which totaled a little more than 12 million.⁷ Yet nonslaveholders acquiesced in slavery's subjugation of the black man. Indeed, this was one of those matters about which southern society had little difficulty in agreeing.⁸

The relatively large gatherings of slaves in the Old South had a direct impact on both white and black behavior. Try though they might, Southerners—or, more accurately, Americans—could not shake loose from the notion that the color of the slave's skin, as well as the swelling ranks of these captive people, seemed a most fitting reminder of black inferiority and, therefore, of white superiority. Blacks' degradation was somehow appropriate; but why?

Thomas Jefferson, priding himself on being a careful observer of the characteristics distinguishing races, wrote in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1781) that the "first difference which strikes us is that of color."⁹ "This unfortunate difference of color and perhaps of faculty," he further noted, "is a powerful obstacle to emancipation of these people. . . ." Benjamin Banneker,

the most noted black scientist and intellectual of the day, sent a biting letter to the Virginia Sage in which he ridiculed Jefferson's racial theories while holding himself and his accomplishments up as proof contrary to the "prepossession which is so prevalent in the world against those of my complexion."¹¹

Though latent with ambiguity, as Winthrop Jordan has shown, Jefferson's racial attitudes were in many respects quite typical of eighteenth-century white feelings about blacks. Jefferson and his contemporaries, as heirs to a long-established colonial fascination with Africans, were curious about the meaning of the African's color. It had a "powerful impact" on their senses and system of values.¹² In addition, recognition of this color contrast at the visual and, subsequently, social and moral levels was a fundamental lesson of Bible study. In Amos 9:7 the Lord expressed his anger to the Israelites by comparing them to the darker-skinned Ethiopians and admonishing, "You are no more to Me than these Cushites. . . ."¹³ In the book of Lamentations, while suffering from the wrath of God and from famine, the princes of Jerusalem, whose complexions "were purer than snow" and "whiter than milk," undergo a transformation, after which they appear physically as "blacker than darkness; they are not recognized in the streets."¹⁴ Thus, in some of the earliest biblical literature wrongdoing is brushed in strokes of black.

The devil played a prominent role in these attitudes too. Some of the great colonial ministers—Thomas Hooker, George Whitefield, and Jonathan Edwards—sermonized at length on his habits, sprinkling their jeremiads with the color of sin—black. Churchgoing colonists, like American society in general, were thus amply indoctrinated with physical descriptions of the color of evil.¹⁵ A minister could draw upon centuries of Western tradition. A flashback to a first century A.D. account of the devil (Satan) gives us a graphic picture of him and his misdeeds:

. . . the Way of the Black One is crooked and full of cursing, for it is the way of death eternal with punishment, and in it are the things that destroy their soul: idolatry, forwardness, arro-

gance of power, hypocrisy, double-heartedness, adultery, murder, robbery, pride, transgression, fraud, malice, self-sufficiency, enchantments magic, covetousness. . . .¹⁶

In eleventh-century France, authorities accused ten formerly devout Christians of heresy. At their trial, the prosecutor charged them with adoring the "devil, who appeared to them first as an Ethiopian. . . ."¹⁷

Still, there was another aspect of the color question in the European experience that ran alongside suspicions about blackness. Its antecedents are not clear, but it received careful expression in the twelfth-century sermons of St. Bernard of Clairvaux entitled "On the Blackness and the Beauty of the Bride Groom and the Bride." St. Bernard, a Frenchman, reminded his communicants that "colour, such as blackness, belongs only to the superficies." He added, "Countless are the times, which, looking to their colour alone you would pronounce [some persons] unpossessing, but which appear really beautiful in form."¹⁸ In an effort to explain further what he meant, St. Bernard pointed out that sometimes circumstances of penitence altered one in complexion and aspect, as in the case of St. Paul, who became a darkish color from fasting. The color change, he insisted, should not be scorned but admired. Yet, though he defended some features of blackness, his need to devote two celebrated sermons to the issue in part demonstrates the extent to which the problem penetrated the white man's psyche.¹⁹

In the late eighteenth century, the African Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) seems to have captured the meaning of St. Bernard's sermons. In an African twist of the color phenomenon he wrote,

. . . in regard to complexion, ideas of beauty are wholly relative. I remember while in Africa to have seen three negro children who were tawny, and another quite white, who were universally regarded by myself and the natives in general, as far as related to their complexions, as deformed.²⁰

Equiano spent only a short time as a slave in the plantation South, but black slaves there skillfully pursued and expanded his argument. An ex-slave commented in 1863 that she knew "what whas [sic] white folks was like, and what white folks wanted, if she had got a black skin."²¹ Other bondsmen made comments on what whites were like in their folklore. In some of these accounts the Devil is depicted as a silk-hatted white gentleman with wavy hair, an image easily fashioned from the myths and realities of the southern scene.

With regard to masters and slaves in the Old South, the fundamental distinction between whites and blacks from which others appeared to flow was physical appearance. Black was the slave's mark, at all times burdensome and, from necessity, internalized in his consciousness. Commenting on the widespread attention paid to complexion the poet James Russell Lowell once wrote, "There is nothing more sadly and pitifully ludicrous in the motley face of our social system than the prejudice of color." In the United States, he believed, "color is made the most prominent feature."²² Novelist James Fenimore Cooper made a similar observation in the 1820's by drawing a comparison between the vulgarity associated with a black face in the United States and the gentlemanly status associated with rank, stars, and ribbons in Europe.²³ In 1839 the writer and jurist Beverly Tucker of Virginia suggested the effects that color distinction might have on the average white man's ego: "It is certainly well calculated to inspire the humblest white man with a high sense of his own comparative dignity and importance, to see a whole class below him in the scale of society."²⁴

The Northerner Frederick Law Olmsted, traveling through the South in the 1850's, observed a curious bend in the color line in New Orleans, where he noticed that some mulatto slaves received special treatment. The law prohibited them, even after they were legally freed, from marrying whites, but planters "frequently sent" mulatto females "to Paris to be educated."²⁵ These slaves were light-complexioned and possessed physical appearances often

belying their African ancestry. Many times they were the planter's illicit children.

The preoccupation with color determined the Old South's race relations. Color provided an easy and practical way to protect the legal distinction between slave and master and enforced the conveniently contrived differences between them as humans. Among southern whites, a contemporary explained, "materials have been in great demand by some, for improving the complexion, so as to render it if possible, the very opposite of black."²⁶ Slaveholders, backed by southern medical opinion, said that the healthiest slaves were also the blackest.²⁷ The mulatto bondsman became the subject of many misleading rumors, with some masters saying that though he was more intelligent by virtue of his white blood, he had less stamina for physical labor and was the parent of weaker offspring. In some quarters it was an occasional practice, as corollary to the above, to darken slaves' skins with the pigmentation agent aquafortis (nitric acid) before showing them to a prospective buyer.²⁸

But slaveholders who otherwise "felt no scruples about black negro slavery" on occasion admitted that "these yellow people [mulattoes] ought to have their freedom, on account of their superior intelligence, compared with the genuine negro—."²⁹ From another viewpoint, Francis Fedric, a mulatto slave, wrote that "slavery is bad enough for the black" but mulattoes had it much harder because they "know it is their own fathers who are treating them as brutes."³⁰

For both slave and freedman, blackness was a catchall. In testimony taken from a co-conspirator of the insurrectionist Denmark Vesey in 1822, Vesey, a freedman, was said to have "read frequently in a Book about the complexion of people" and to have remarked that "it was the climate of Africa made them Black but [they] were not inferior to whites on that account."³¹ The statement of the abolitionist sympathizer Fanny Kemble that "the faintest admixture of white blood" in slaves "appears at once, by common consent of their own race, to raise them in the scale of

humanity" stands in curious contrast to Vesey's beliefs,³² though it finds support in the observation of the slave William Wells Brown that the "nearer the negro or mulatto approaches to white, the more he seems to feel the superiority over those of darker hue."³³ To be sure, Fanny Kemble's was the accepted interpretation among whites; when held by blacks, it is more the logical extension of the slaveholder's bias than an opinion that grew out of the experiences of most slaves in their daily lives.

Needless to say, the problem of color created countless difficulties impeding a broader perception of slaves by their masters. One planter, perhaps trying to transcend his biases, noted that "some of the whitest souls I have ever known dwelt in the blackest of skins! . . . certainly, if color, as well as servitude, was a part of the curse denounced upon Canaan for the sin of Ham, it will be changed."³⁴ Another master engraved this hope on the tombstone of a deceased slave:³⁵

Here lies the best of slaves,

Now turning into dust.

Cesar, the Ethiopian, craves

A place among the just.

His faithful soul is fled

To realms of heavenly light,

And, by the blood, that Jesus shed,

Is changed from black to white.

January 15, he quitted the stage

In the 77 years of his age.

Nonetheless, not all comments were so innocent-sounding. A Georgia physician raged at his sister: "We must now stand by our 'Color.' We can out-think and out-work the black. The poor Devil! . . . He is himself but a monument of the white man's power, and is now the most helpless of all God's creatures face to face with the most aggressive animal that ever rivalled or shocked Omnipotence."³⁶

The black-white racial divisions of the Old South fixed what one meant in speaking of slave character. When someone had a

black face his behavior took on meaning from that fact. Southern law did much to refine this definition. A petition presented before the Mississippi General Assembly requesting the release of William Johnson of Natchez from bondage in 1820 recognized the dilemma. It requested that the Assembly "extend the hand of humanity to a rational Creature, on whom unfortunately Compulsion, Custom and even Law in This Land of freedom, has conspired to rivet the fetters of Slavery."³⁷ In June 1847 the state court of North Carolina ruled that "in this state a black person is presumed to be a slave."³⁸ The decision adjudged the selling of liquor to a freedman, not known to be free at the time of sale, to be an illegal act since the freedman had not provided proof of his status before the transaction and thus should have been "presumed" a slave.

In each southern state blackness was accompanied by a score of legal restrictions (black codes). In 1838 the North Carolina legislature passed a law forbidding "marriage between colored and white persons. . . ."³⁹ Five years later a North Carolina court, presumably acting under that law, dissolved the marriage of a free black man to a white woman. The court did "admit that the defendant's grand-father was white, and the grand-mother only half African—of which last there is no evidence," but held that "still the defendant would have been within the degree prohibited from contracting marriage with a white woman. . . ."⁴⁰

Southerners with black ancestors in their backgrounds kept this a secret and passed for white, a practice well known to continue down to the present. The reasons for their doing so are obvious. Louis A. Bringer of Virginia suspected a "colonel"—anyone might use the title—of passing. In a reply to a friend he wrote, with a trace of amusement, "How was the Virginia Colonel Come on! If you watch him you will discover some 'lard jumping' He is one of them; merely look at his nose. There can be no mistake about it. . . . All the dark gals must rejoice at his advent. 'I want it all for massa' will be the song again."⁴¹

Who, then, did southern authorities consider officially black? An answer was forthcoming. To keep the master class as pure as

possible was a foremost concern of institutional slavery. Any person who had any or as much or as little—depending on one's perspective—as one sixty-fourth proportion of known Negro blood flowing in his veins was classified black.⁴²

Other laws, using skin color as "evidence of incompetency,"⁴³ sought to modify the concept of personality in its application to bondsmen. Bondage's designation of slaves as both men and property was always perplexing. John C. Hurd, a publicist and judicial expert, accurately recorded much of the confusion. In his compilation of slave laws he wrote, in a frequently cited passage, that in "slavery . . . the supreme power of the state, in ignoring the personality of the slave, ignores his capacity for moral action. . . ." This was but one side of the law as he saw it; as he concluded, "So far as it may hold the master and slave, as individuals, morally responsible to the state in their mutual relation, it so far recognizes the personality of the slave, and changes the property into a relation between persons."⁴⁴ Various interpretations of these principles were worked out by masters as the occasion arose. The process was not easy, and debate over whether slaves were more men or more property continued throughout the antebellum years. Some masters did not bother with debate, however. One observed that slaves "are as much, his right and property as the teeth in his mouth or the fingers on his hands. . . ."⁴⁵ Many other slaveholders, a little more wordy but hardly less direct, discussed slave property in casual business terms to relatives and friends. In 1818 James Steer of Louisiana gave this advice. "For a young man, just commencing life," he wrote to an uncle, "the best stock, in which he can invest Capital, is, I think, negro Stock.—while cotton can command from 20 to 30 cts pr lb: negroes will yield a much larger income than any Bank dividend."⁴⁶

So simple could slavery seem in the Old South, "where people grow up with notions of associating everything that is low and degraded with persons of a dark complexion."⁴⁷ But in 1846 a North Carolina state court showed how easily this simplicity could be undermined. It recognized the slave's mental powers and the immortal nature of his soul and suggested that these

"constitute him equal to his owner, but for the accidental position in which fortune has placed him. . . ."⁴⁸

Yet slaveholders were less concerned than southern politicians and later historians have been with understanding precisely worded legal manifestos. For them, bondsmen possessed the identities of the ones they owned. In a sense, the comments of George Washington to an acquaintance are a good example of how many thought. His letter reflects the slaveholder's ability to cut through an excess of thinking about bondsmen. "With respect to the other species of property [slaves]," he wrote, "I shall frankly declare to you that I do not like even to think, much less talk, of it."⁴⁹

But masters did, quite naturally, talk about slaves; they also kept some detailed records. From these sources it is apparent that none of the burdens attached to color were as weighty for slaves as the chores they performed and the lives they led in their working hours. Since the rules regulating the form of adult slave laborers were usually strict, obedience to the master's authority became an acute concern. He set down the guidelines for his plantation's operations. And it was in the fields on each and every plantation that the meaning of being black was brought forcefully home.

The bondsman's work routine had aspects common throughout the Old South. Often, just before sunrise, the overseer sounded a horn or bell, signaling slaves to awaken and rise.⁵⁰ He would sound it again in a short while, but in the meantime slaves had approximately thirty minutes to get dressed. Most had the routine down to a trot. "It was the rule for the slaves to rise and be ready for their tasks by sun-rise . . . and woe be to the unfortunate, who was not in the field at the time appointed."⁵¹ Many had fallen asleep in their work clothes, helping to wear those garments out at an alarming rate. Often their only other clothes were those lively colored "Sunday best," which they had carefully tucked away. Once dressed, the slave's thoughts might turn to food. Some had saved a few bites of the previous night's dinner; they gulped these down on the way to their work gang. Others

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went without food till midday or maybe took a few sips of hard cider before stepping out the doors of their cabins. A usual practice, however, had bondsmen work until eight or eight-thirty when the horn sounded to summon them to the "morning's bit," perhaps no more than bread brought out to the fields.

This work equation was an easy one, though it sometimes balanced more towards work than rest: twelve hours or more of work a day and the remaining hours at rest, five or six days a week. At noon the overseer blew the horn again. In the summer slaves normally received the two-hour lunch break they needed to recover partially from the intense humidity and heat. During the remainder of the year they received one hour. In spite of this, J. R. Brock, an Alabama overseer, observed in June of 1840 that "... the sun appears to have a peculiar effect on many of the old hands." It made their feet swell and "3 of the women complain of violent pains in the breast since they first come. . . ."⁵² The work schedule was demanding on physical and emotional energies. Few but the slave understood the extent of his exhaustion after just an average day's labor in the southern climate. But this was what being a black slave meant.

The American South is a perplexing region, and its complicated past tempts interpreters to overstate or oversimplify particular events and those particular meanings these events seem partially to conceal. With added emphasis, this observation holds true for slavery and the color line it helped draw so indelibly. It appears that the possessor of a black face was netted in the age's negative symbolism and could not shake loose. Seeing him but not his netting, many contemporaries and later scholars, sometimes without realizing it, made no distinctions between blackness, circumstance, and slave behavior. Nor could they have done so with any ease. Since whites legally could never become slaves themselves, they did not need to grapple with some of the problems slavery posed.⁵³

In the Old South they had a saying, almost a slogan. They said that slaveholders lived life to the fullest on the spacious plantations of the southern terrain. Travelers below the Mason-Dixon line frequently endorsed this claim and told how they too had shared in the hospitality that accompanied the full life. An observer wrote, not without regard to exceptions, that "a comfortable living can be found here by the most indolent."⁵¹ But these travelers also noted that disease, death, and sorrow were prominent features of southern existence, and that things would have been even better if masters could only control the sicknesses that so plagued them and their slave labor forces. One slaveholder remarked in disgust about conditions near the Red River in Louisiana that "... the Doctors reap the largest portion of the profits in the above mentioned places."⁵²

Many farm journals kept by plantation owners or their overseers carefully chronicled the number of slave workers in the fields each day or week and the number sick. Planters paid close attention to the time lost by the bondsman because of illness, and occasionally even commented on a change in a particular slave's current and potential worth to the labor force. Diary entries also re-

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appropriate and those that were not. But this, after all, is a cardinal rule of subjugation. With reference to his bondsmen, a North Carolina planter reminded his father that "a feeling of independence alters the relations of individuals marvelously."⁴ To deprive the slave of that feeling seemed often the slaveholder's main purpose—to impose upon him, in part at least, what the slave system held to be the proper habits and conduct of slaves.⁵ Bondsman James L. Smith recognized this early, and without relinquishing his identity "strove," he said, "by my prudence and correctness of demeanor to avoid exciting his [master's] evil passions."⁶ This, he believed, was simply a careful reading of his predicament, not capitulation to it.

Past analyses of slave resistance have regularly recognized only a few possible responses to the condition of bondage. If the slave was not a Nat Turner, they appear to say, then he was submissive—a typical slave type (Sambo). But if we want a fuller explanation of slave behavior we must reach it by raising more questions about bondsmen's motivations. For instance, why did slaves conduct themselves as they did when resisting the laws of slavery? And what roles did they play in shaping the nature of their own enslavement?

The circumstances prompting masters' attempts to regulate slaves' movements were complex. Most feared that bondsmen would seize the most innocent opportunity to revolt.⁷ There is a great deal of evidence supportive of the notion that the planter class felt a general unrest about their own physical safety in the presence of so many slaves, despite assertions then and later that a white man could control a score of blacks.⁸ To assist them in coping with these feelings of unrest slaveholders relied on various helpers. Chief among these was the plantation overseer, whose primary duties were to supervise bondsmen's work and to police their behavior.⁹

Slaves, in turn, closely watched the behavior of their managers, obtaining a fund of useful information about the peculiarities of a master's character. They pieced their conception of him together from such diverse sources as the bragging of haughty house slaves

The patterns of resistance and non-resistance that characterized the slave's adjustment to bondage have been more disputed by scholars than almost any other issue relating to slaves. Yet such disputes have frequently been rather narrowly focused, treating bondsmen as members of an oppressed group who accommodated to their fortunes as best they could, manifesting a high level of docility and lack of initiative. In this view, slaveholders are of primary importance because they held the reins of authority and thus could greatly influence behavior. But how much influence could they exert? Mrs. Isaac H. Hilliard of Arkansas had some ideas. "I believe it . . . to be my duty," she wrote, "so long as I own slaves, to keep them in proper subjection and well employed."¹ The bondsman Henry Bibb was to observe later that this meant the frequent use of that well-known enforcer, the lash, which was intended "to degrade and keep me in subordination."² His observation had much to back it up, and, as a contemporary sociologist points out, "the use of violence (or what is known as 'power')—by masters, in this case—"is an indispensable condition for attaining the condition of accommodation. . . ."³

Slave society tried to dictate those actions by slaves that were

about idiosyncracies they had witnessed in the Big House and the pointed-finger warnings of old slaves. Slaves "found the 'management of whites' as complex a matter as their masters found the 'management of Negroes,'" writes Kenneth Stampp.¹⁰ The difficulties multiplied since masters, even on the same plantation, did not treat slaves uniformly. Charles Ball was a favorite slave of one of his masters, though he was greatly abused by his mistress.¹¹ Other slaves never gained favor. Sometimes, if a master suspected them of possible troublemaking, he locked them in a work house before they could act. One small slaveholding farmer, however, relied less on anticipation than on discipline after the fact to prevent misdeeds. "The first negro that steals," he wrote, "or runs away, or fights, or who is hard to manage in order to get a day's work, must be locked up every night as soon as he comes in from work, and turned out next morning; kept up every Sunday."¹² Southern politician John C. Calhoun followed a similar course. He had one of his slaves disciplined by lodging him "in jail for one wee[k], to be fed on bread and water" and to have administered "30 lashes well laid on. . . ." Why such severe measures? In this case Calhoun interpreted the slave's offenses—running off and an inflated ego—as a threat to his handling of other bondsmen in his plantation's labor force.¹³

Calhoun's remedy for unwanted behavior calls to mind the analogies scholars have made between slavery's plantation system and what are today known as total institutions: prisons and concentration camps are the two favorite examples.¹⁴ Because of his disciplinary techniques it is easy to view Calhoun as a jailer or prison guard, keeping unwanted outside influences away from his slaves while physically restraining their movements within the plantation's "walls." Yet the plantation actually bore little real resemblance to today's total institutions. On the contrary, it possessed qualities that permitted many slaves enough leeway within the setting of bondage to work out a variety of personally beneficial responses to the demands of their existences.¹⁵ At times, perhaps, some masters probably wished they did have adequate facilities to restrain all their bondsmen. One slaveholder raged

under a heavy burden of irritation, "I am nearly worried to death with them [my slaves] if I had a jail I should lock them up every night."¹⁶

Southern jails were in fact filled with slaves who struck out against bondage. Some had killed their masters or inflicted bodily injuries on whites or fellow blacks. Others had been convicted of lesser crimes; but still others were jailed briefly by slaveholders who sought merely to control their disobedience. The frequency of this kind of discipline is not known, but even in jails slaves' survival methods are revealing. One story is of special interest. It comes to us from a bondsman who was imprisoned in a New Orleans jail for ten months. He wrote,

I soon demonstrated that a man with a plan always had the advantage. . . . There were certain positions which were blind spots to my [jail] captors. If I occupied one of these blind spots, if I timed my next movement correctly I could do anything up to murder without my victim knowing of my presence. It became a sort of a play with me, which I enjoyed, because I made the white man helpless against me.¹⁷

Masters kept the behavior of their slaves under close watch when they could, relying on southern society at large to help keep bondsmen in their place. But the heart of the official network of surveillance was the patrol system. Sometimes financed by a small tax on slaves above the age of twelve, and sometimes voluntary, it was an obvious way for whites to guard against slave resistance while making sure that slaves remained careful of their moves.¹⁸ During periods of special alarm, slaveholders also formed groups of concerned citizens (vigilantes). The bondsman John Parker recalled that "the woods were patrolled nightly by constables and any man black or white had to give a good account of himself, especially if he was a stranger. . . ."¹⁹ Nevertheless, the inefficiency of this method was considerable and planters knew it. An Alabama master expressed his discontent with the situation: "Three of my Cloverdale hands ran off a short time ago at the same time, but returned after spending a few days in the woods. Our police

regulations are very defective."²⁰ Yet, on the other side, patrols ran the risk of giving offence to planters themselves by needlessly abusing and whipping slaves. Consequently, patrols were constantly near the heart of ill-feelings between blacks (bonded and free) and whites. Many slave conspiracies were, in fact, directed against patrollers, who often went out of their way to abuse slaves in the slaves' leisure moments, simply for the sport of it. They barged into slave social gatherings. They disrupted some religious meetings and even sexually assaulted some of the slave women. Slaves' derogatory remarks about the patrollers abound. Both free and bonded blacks sometimes killed particularly bothersome patrol members, but they might, more typically, hurl rocks from the shelter of the woods or "stretch clothes lines across the street, high enough to let the horses pass, but not the rider. . . ."²¹ The patrollers, naturally, subsequently went about their work with added caution, fully conscious that they too were being patrolled.

The life of a patrol was usually short. Its members worked in rotations of two to three weeks in order to spread the responsibility for policing bondsmen evenly among slaveholders. The patrol's make-up and efficiency therefore could not be guaranteed. Some southern counties levied small fines upon individuals who failed to take a turn on duty, but many preferred to pay the penalty rather than serve. Numerous communities, in an effort to bypass these problems, hired men who served regularly, though their professionalism was generally not of a high grade. One slave was not at all friendly to the patrols he knew in bondage. They "are poor white men," he said, "who live by plundering and stealing, getting rewards from runaways, and setting up little shops on the public roads" to capture the illicit trade with slaves.²² If a patrol caught a bondsman off his plantation without a written pass from his master, the consequence was thus not always dire. Many slaves persuaded patrol members not to whip them or turn them over to the jailers. They struck a deal, which could mean that the patrollers agreed to "take whatever the slaves steal paying in money, whiskey, or whatever the slaves want."²³ Policing

of bondsmen therefore ran the gamut from strict control to collusion between established authorities and Africans. Slaves prompted much of the latter sort of activity.²⁴

Because of the weaknesses easily detectable in these methods of slave control, it appears that the Old South utilized its police system as much for its ability to create the illusion of security as for its actual ability to restrain slaves physically at every juncture. This outlook betrayed the thinly veiled feeling that bondsmen were not quite as submissive and contented as pro-slavery spokesmen often insisted. There are also some indications that those bondsmen who were pushed into cautious submissiveness by stern slaveholders were the ones most easily bullied by their own fellow bondsmen. The care with which other bondsmen took notice of submissive behavior, critically disapproving it, has been largely overlooked. The slave's sense of kinship with his fellows was strengthened by common overlapping personal successes and failures.²⁵ A too-submissive slave could not easily share in these. Bondsmen who were courageous but not foolish commanded respect in slave circles, especially when their fellows saw their behavior as just.²⁶ Bondsmen broken by discipline were pitied by other slaves in a manner that seemed easily to broaden into antagonism. Experience taught many that these bondsmen were often the first to confess the details of the group's activities when pressured by masters.

The practice of hiring slaves out to work for neighbors on nearby plantations or in towns forced a further modification in the effectiveness of slave controls. Necessitated by the economics of bondage, this practice allowed and stimulated bondsmen to refine their work skills to make themselves more marketable; many times it gave them an opportunity to escape the tight personal confinement that could develop when a slave worked for only one master.²⁷

Contracts of hire were not difficult to arrange. The Dismal Swamp Company of Virginia, a lumbering enterprise, employed the slave George for thirty dollars "for the year 1835." The company was to furnish him "with two Suits of good clothes, two

pairs of Shoes, Stockings, Hat, and blanket. . . ."²⁸ Transactions of this kind frequently occurred with the active consent of the slave. Moses Grandy's master gave him permission to hire his own time, and Moses was able to pay "him out of my earnings . . ." while "I maintained myself on the rest, and saved what I could. In this way I was not liable to be flogged and ill-used."²⁹ The arrangements some slaves set up during these hirings considerably modified their dependence on slaveholders.

A North Carolina bondsman, diplomatically pressuring his master to see things his way, tried to negotiate the hiring of his time in this fashion. He was a literate slave, and in a letter to his mistress he confided, "I am not willing to live with Mr. White and I hope that you will not make me live where I don't want to live for I do every thing to obay you that is in my power." He bargained from the record of his past obedience to get what he wanted: "I will pay you any way that you want me to pay you if it is by the month or by the Year . . . I wish you would answer it [my letter] as quick as you can make it convenient. . . . His was a kind of obedient resistance."

The occasional compliments good slave workers earned pleased their masters much, though slaveholders sometimes neglected to give the slave full credit for a job skillfully done. This was, there is little doubt, very frustrating for bondsmen. One expressed his annoyance succinctly: ". . . I hated the injustices and restraints against my own initiative more than it is possible for words to express. To me that was the great curse of slavery."³¹ Subsequently, this same slave worked for a while in a New Orleans foundry where "I was put to work under a [white] foreman who did not know his job. I knew then that my position was hopeless, because I knew I was a good workman."³² His knowledge led to his extreme discontentment and eventually to open confrontation between himself and his superiors.

Other bondsmen were even more offended when their masters pocketed most of the wages they earned. Many resented this intrusion on their earning power. A little-explored area of the hiring out of slaves concerns salary arrangements. The usual practice,

it seems, was to pay the hired slave's wages directly to his master, who then gave the slave a share he deemed fit. Perhaps one notable reason for this was that bondsmen who received their money directly might not turn it over to their masters, and for this were placed in jails "for not giving their masters the wages they had earned."³³ Money these slaves gained from their own labors they believed to be theirs.

Clearly then, the slave possessed the potential for unsettling the Old South's tranquility.³⁴ John Mills, from his home in Bayou Sarah, Louisiana, reminded his cousin, "you must know, that unless there is order and subordination kept up, amongst negroes, they would soon be masters, instead of Slaves. . . ."³⁵ Most masters were only too aware of this possibility.³⁶ The situations that arose could be quite compromising. Linton Stephens, brother of Alexander Stephens, vice-president of the Confederacy, sought his brother's sympathetic ear about the serious problems he confronted in his slaves. "I have got a big row on hand with about 8 or 10 of my negroes for killing my hogs and sheep. . . . I have one of them in jail on bread and water. He tried to cut two of my negroes. . . ." This slave posed some special disciplinary challenges, for "he is the worst negro I have and has drawn his knife several times before on the overseer." Then why not get rid of him? Linton had the answer: "He was brought to me at the camp and the first thing I did . . . was to knock him down and choke him. . . . I would sell him if I could."³⁷ Alexander Stephens himself had a slave Pierce about whom his overseer raged after Pierce's brief imprisonment, "I am satisfied that his imprisonment has only tended to harden him. . . . I don't think he will ever reform. . . ." Southern newspapers further reveal how concerned slaveholders were about blacks gaining the upper hand, not necessarily by insurrectionary means but by masters' failure to enforce firm rules of conduct.³⁸

The short account of still another planter's difficulties with his slaves is illustrative. He had particular trouble with his bondsman John about whom he had "given up all hope of ever being able to make him an honest and obedient boy; whipping does no good

and advice is nearly thrown away—" John's recent activities as a runaway had caused his master's current irritation. He determined that when John was apprehended he should be "heavily ironed and put to work."⁴⁰ Yet he did not really believe that even this would correct John's disobedient ways.

The management problems on the above plantation assumed many forms. During one weekend bondsmen belonging to the Hamiltons, the owners, and their neighbors "gave a supper party" without formal permission. According to one of the Hamiltons, "just about the time they were ready to set down to tea I waked them up with the Contents of my Gun—such scampers you never did see, running over cordwood, tree tops, in ditches, & c." The sight was, no doubt, comical to the rifleman. All but one of the slaves managed to scramble to safety. He was the property of a Dr. Smith and during the shooting was "very badly wounded and may in all probability [be] disabled for life."⁴¹

It is surprising that such a gathering occurred at all in view of the Hamilton's past record of harsh discipline. The bondsmen's behavior was a direct affront to plantation guidelines. And gatherings of this sort required careful planning well in advance in order that all guests might be present and the proper victuals prepared. The need for such extensive pre-arrangements were what many masters could not understand, but more revealing is the fact that bondsmen believed they could engage in these forms of activities at all. They were fully aware that such momentary enjoyments would not go unpunished if found out, but nonetheless they went ahead, throughout the Old South. Dr. Smith's slave—reminiscent of the slave John—had been shot previously by a Hamilton who explained, "this same boy has been shot twice this year."⁴²

That slaves were discontented with their bondage is overwhelmingly documented by manuscript and narrative materials. In some measure their uneasiness probably stemmed from being the least of the Old South's sons. They were not always forgiving of such inconsideration, and retaliated when they could. The Reverend Charles Elliott, a northern minister, was among many who wrote of "eye-servant[s]" who "do as little as they can."⁴³

Illogic and bias mar his two-volume study, *Sinfulness of American Slavery*, published in 1857, but his conclusion that some slave laborers in retaliation for the "injustices exercised on them become the most expensive laborers" seems quite accurate.⁴⁴

The bondsman Henry C. Bruce once commented haughtily that many of the companions he had known in slavery "took no interest in their master's work . . . and went no further than forced by the lash. . . ."⁴⁵ He referred to slaves who plowed furrows too shallow for proper planting of crops or deliberately overworked field animals. Overseers constantly encountered this kind of field hand. In the cotton country during harvest, many bondsmen might work through a cotton patch leaving some of the cotton bolls purposefully untouched. It was easy for them to do so and blame their seeming inefficiency on an overseer or driver who pressed the work gang too hard. They did, of course, get whipped if they pushed such behavior too far, but not as often as one might suppose. "I have punished all the negroes very severely," was the remark of a Louisiana planter to his father. And it "would not surprise me, if they all left."⁴⁶

An entire gang of slaves could agree privately to slow the work pace for a variety of reasons. Landon Carter of Virginia complained of this practice by his field hands. He noted that "the pretence is Nanny was sick one day. But even with overseers this is a constant excuse, if any one person the most trifling hand is ill but a day or a piece of a day, it generally excuses the loss of a whole days work of the gang."⁴⁷

With lash in hand overseers threatened and disciplined slaves for working poorly or breaking badly made tools, but there were few acceptable alternatives to bent hoes, broken plows, and toothless rakes other than a slowed work pace, a fact which all too few slave managers appeared willing to allow. An overseer's salary and job security often fluctuated with the abundance of the year's harvest, and he occasionally worked bondsmen unduly hard to insure that his share of the take would be as large as possible. Some bondsmen died from overwork or abuse.⁴⁸ But in the range of contacts between overseers and slaves many overseers found them-

selves buffeted about in ways that compelled them to work harder themselves to insure their own salaries. On the large estates where overseers were usually employed, they could not make daily checks on the various slave gangs' work efforts in all of the widely separated fields. If one of their concerns was deliberately broken tools, an equal one was misplaced tools, for bondsmen would frequently disrupt the work schedule by leaving "plows and tools of all kinds, just where the[y] use them, no matter where, so that they have to be hunted all over the place when wanted."⁴⁹ Plantation managers tried vigorously to suppress such manifestations.

A relative of General John A. Quitman of Mississippi wrote him that the General's overseer was "getting to be, too sever[e] with the negroes—Too fond of his whip and the use of the 'Stocks. . . ." Fearing what the slaves might do he warned, "the negroes complain almost every day and many would have been run away, were I not at home."⁵⁰

This apprehension had a much broader implication, however. The news of extraordinary disciplinary measures handed out to bondsmen spread quickly to slaves on neighboring plantations. Masters generally knew that such punishment made bondsmen uneasy, and many feared that disgruntled slaves might feel justified in seeking retribution, maybe by setting fire to crops, or, even worse, harming members of local planters' families. In Georgia one traveler observed, "Fires are continually occurring in this country."⁵¹

When they could, many slaves pooled their assaults upon the slave regime. In a cooperative venture dreaded by masters, some bondsmen gave food and furnished aid to runaways in their neighborhoods. Sometimes the runaways themselves raided plantation food storehouses. Two were hunted by the authorities in North Carolina after they "broke into Beaven's pantry . . . stole all his edibles, took a horse and departed. . . ."⁵² Several more runaways committed a somewhat daring theft in the 1840's at the Magruder plantation in Louisiana. While the Magruders were away, slaves "rode in the yard and went into Fred's house made up and baked biscuit, made up a bundle to carry off when the bread was

done, then went to bed to wait for. . . ."⁵³ They accomplished all this before the plantation's bondsmen seized and imprisoned at least one of them.

The action of the Magruder slaves in apprehending one of the runaways points up some of the intricacies of slave resistance behavior. By their thefts the runaways were, in part, jeopardizing the trust the Magruders placed in their own bondsmen. This trust is everywhere evident in Eliza Magruder's diary. Perhaps too, since these runaways were committing disturbances throughout the neighborhood, the slaves may have seen them as a possible threat to their own privileges. While at times slaves closely cooperated in thefts with those who "resisted" slavery, when the activities of a small contingency of resisting bondsmen threatened to give rise to general repression by whites, non-resisting bondsmen often chose to expose the offenders. Usually the ousted slaves had performed acts that endangered the security of the slave community itself before this happened.

Some slaves even occasionally captured runaways and turned them in to their masters or the authorities for rewards. A. C. W. Knott sent his slave Jim to a neighbor's "to get pay for ketching you Boy Oston. . . ." He recommended five dollars as a just reward and added, "I wil always like to incourage negroes in betraying runaways."⁵⁴ Yet this appears to have been rare. The tendency was more to assist a resisting slave or leave him alone rather than betray him. Bondsmen were well aware that there was also the possibility that a runaway they turned in might escape his captors and return to punish them. This was another variable to consider.

For the planter, the runaway slave epitomized alienation from bondage.⁵⁵ The slave's theft was of his person, and whatever reason explained his departure the fact remained that his time away from work meant money lost and more: his absence spawned the master's fear that he "will spoil the rest of my people by his bad example. . . ."⁵⁶ The majority of runaways were temporary and were motivated, significantly, by slave efforts to force a change or compromise in their master's or overseer's treatment of them. In 1815 John Mc Donogh of New Orleans told a neighbor that he

had at first believed that a slave of his who disappeared had been stolen by traders, but that later the slave got word to him by a friend that "he will give himself up on condition that his master will promise to forgive him for his past offence."⁵⁷ There is no record of a settlement being worked out. Such an arrangement would clearly have abridged Mc Donogh's authority while making the slave a minor hero among his fellows; other alternatives were often as unappealing. The slave Robin ran away from Landon Carter's Virginia plantation in 1773. "Robin has been out these three months," a notation in Carter's journal reads. "To be sure he is doing mischief about by destroying corn in the fields."⁵⁸ It is doubtful that Robin could have carried on his campaign without the knowledge of at least a few of the plantation's slaves, which raises the likelihood that ties between bondsmen on Carter's plantation were strong.

Several decades later a relative of Carter's commented on the collusion she suspected among her slaves: "... it is out of my power to discover which of the men introduced a runaway negro woman to my New Carriage as a sleeping apartment."⁵⁹ But South Carolina slaveholder John L. Bourquin dreaded a much more serious cooperative venture. Fearing an uprising by runaways, he solicited official help to prevent having to "quietly submit our Families to be sacrificed by them and probably by our indoor Domestic—."⁶⁰

Landon Carter had considerable trouble with his slaves, largely because of his inflexible managerial practices. A bondsman came to him in the autumn complaining of the treatment he had received at the hands of the overseer. Carter's response was swift: "... I drubbed him and sent him down again." Carter nevertheless seemed resigned to the manner in which the slave would react to this treatment: "I suppose he will go off."⁶¹ Carter's troubles mushroomed in many directions. He accused the slave Sarah of feigning illness. When he forced her to work she ran away. When she was captured he locked her in a storage shed, but during the evening another slave freed her.

Throughout the antebellum period southern newspapers ran

advertisements on runaway slaves. Some of these ads dot front pages, and a single ad soliciting the whereabouts of a missing bondsman might appear in a local paper for many months. During the peak of the abolitionist movement anti-slavery agitators utilized these capsulized expressions of slave unrest as evidence of slaves' widespread dissatisfaction with their lot. But, in turn, many slaveholders saw running away as a natural, though troublesome, part of the slave's life in bondage. A few masters even turned the occasion into a literary event, perhaps to mask real alarm. "Charity Is Gone!" was the title of an ad in a Charleston newspaper in 1793. This was the third time that Charity had absconded. "It is supposed she has left the busy city in disgust, and retired to rural quiet on the banks of Stono, to enjoy the company of Sable nymphs and swains who there cultivate the luxuriant pearly grain."⁶²

A few successful slave runaways produced their own literary pieces. Some time after escaping from the Joseph Long plantation in Stephensburg, Virginia, Joseph Taper, a literate bondsman, wrote Long a lengthy letter, extolling the conditions of his newfound freedom in Canada. He emphasized, "I have been well contented, Yes well contented for Sure, man is as God intended he should be, That is, all are born free and equal. This is a whole some law, not like the Southern laws which puts man made in the image of God, on level with brutes." He clearly wanted his former owner to know that he was succeeding as a free man, having been successful in resisting Long's efforts to return him to slavery. He mentioned that in one town "there was an advertisement put up there for me, 200, dolls reward while I was there." And later "I was in Pittsburg at the time that George Gremer was in pursuit of runaway servants." He summed up his feelings, appropriately, in a closing sentence: "My wife and self are sitting by a good comfortable fire happy, knowing that there are none to molest or make afraid."⁶³

In the plantation South, however, specific means of resisting slaves varied enormously. Many masters pointed out earlier, was simply to install security measures

The Household Slave

"naturally form a separate Caste from the common herd of slaves. . . ." And if their descendants prove "worthy [they] are the successors to the standing & privileges of their parents in the House or fill the most confidential stations in the outdoor work of the plantation or are instructed in the plainest mechanics arts."⁴ Second, it is said that since many domestics were mulatto slaves—very often illegitimate children of a master or his relatives—they chose to identify more closely with their white than their black relatives. Linked with both of these claims is the image of domestic slaves obedient to their owners and lovingly bossy to young masters and mistresses.

Certainly, a high percentage of house slaves were mulattoes, but there were many more who were blacks of pure African ancestry. Among both groups there were those who were loyal and loving and those who were not. It was, indeed, not their parentage but the status domestics believed they held and the duties they performed that most influenced the development of their personalities.⁵ As members of the slave aristocracy they were considered to possess, theoretically, the finest behavioral norms to be found among slaves. Correspondingly, those frequently commented upon character weaknesses that typified blacks—thievery, lying, some laziness—supposedly appeared more often and in a more pronounced degree among less cultivated field workers. Therefore, although field bondsmen, masters, and historians all have accused domestics of putting on airs while in the presence of less-privileged blacks (and, in truth, domestics were guilty at times of very high-handed actions), they did not reserve their high-handedness just for other bondsmen; slaveholders, as well, came in for their share of jostling from domestics. Domestics supposedly lacked that troop-like quality so often described by observers of field hands. On the economically anemic but palatial estates of Virginia tobacco planters, and on the disease-ridden cotton and sugar plantations of Mississippi and Louisiana, the domestics rivaled the masters as topics of conversations among field slaves.

From the available records it appears that unrest in a master's

The class of slaves who occupied positions near the pinnacle of the slave labor system were the domestics. Theirs was the proud position, according to one Virginia planter, to which proper slaves might aspire. Domestics were the "aristocrats" of bondage, a title they wore with varying degrees of pride.¹ In their jobs they usually wore laundered dresses and pants, at least on larger plantations, in contrast to the tattered garments worn by many field hands. "Upon every Estate," wrote John Cocke of Virginia, "the young heir, or heirs finds a number of old domestic servants who have been raised about the persons & in the confidential service of the former owners . . . [and] by a long course of faithful service have established their claim to the character of humble Friends of the Family."²

Popular lore has sometimes labeled house servants "Uncle Toms," pawns of the slaveholders and betrayers of their slave brothers.³ Such descriptions derive in part from two sources. First, it is claimed that domestics serving directly under a master's tutelage became nominal members of white families, generally received milder treatment, and thus were reluctant to relinquish the "good" life. John Cocke observed that domestics

household was at least as common as tranquility. It was apparently no easy task finding compatible slaves for the household. One important reason was that some slaves did not want to become domestics, despite the fact that "domestic slaves," as one planter noted, "... were better fed and clothed, and generally better treated than those employed out of doors. . . ."⁶ Domestic slaves were often "liable to every call, early or late . . . , and because of this, Hall discovered, . . . everywhere the slaves preferred the fieldwork, chiefly, as I could learn, from its being definite in amount, which left them a certain portion of the day entirely to themselves. . . ."⁸ The close scrutiny a domestic might receive from his master was another objection for some. A female slave noted: "... I liked the field work better than I did the house work. We could talk and do anything we wanted to, just so we picked the cotton. . . ."⁹ Others felt torn between naturally developing affection for the planter's family and alienation, especially when the planter's treatment of them varied with each mood. Slavery shadowed and crippled the simplest and sincerest of relationships in the Big House.

A house slave's work routine was similar to a field hand's in its basic repetitiveness. Most learned their chores readily enough, though they usually found that their masters' behavior took a lifetime to adapt to. Often up before dawn, a few slept off to one corner in the same room with masters when the latter were sick or when ordered to do so, supplying nightly needs as they arose. More often, they occupied huts immediately adjacent to the Big House, or returned to the clustered security of the slave quarters.

There were few, if any, ways for a master to assure perfect casting of the domestic, for even the best house servants occasionally displeased their owners. In search of a cook for his household, C. Garrett confided to his wife, "it will be very hard to get a negro whose qualities are all good but my object is to come as close as possible. . . ." He was therefore not only seeking a good cook but someone with a "good disposition" who "will give you as little trouble as possible. . . ."¹⁰ There was ample cause for such scrutiny. Bondage itself marred the domestic-slaveholder relationship.

ship. The day-to-day familiarity of master and slave was regularly offset by a lack of truly intimate knowledge of each other.¹¹

A domestic might serve in a single household for years and never really confide in a master. "Almost every white woman feels," writes an anthropologist, "that she knows all about her cook's personality and life, but she seldom does."¹² It was not hard for the slave, with a little caution, to retain a certain amount of anonymity even while at work in the planter's house. A cook or a butler could perform his duties well and simply not volunteer information about personal matters. This was hard to do when he was kindly treated, however. Many won the genuine respect of a master and his children whom they might serve for decades. The Englishman Adam Hodgson complimented the house servants that he encountered, revealing his surprise at their intelligence and capabilities.¹³ A large number of masters in every part of the Old South would have concurred with him. A mistress in North Carolina privately admitted to an aunt her good fortune "in getting ma's old cook, who knows a great deal more about her business than I do, but I try to prevent her from finding it out."¹⁴

Another slaveholder was a little more uncertain about his fortunes. He admitted in a letter to his mother that Ellen, his cook, "continues to try my patience." And then he attacked one of our nation's outstanding beliefs about blacks: "It is very difficult to get a negro who understands good cooking." Why? "If they do ten to one they have some bad habits or bad temper & are not fit to be about. . . ." But then his uncertainty raised its head. He explained, "Yet at times I think I can never be as well suited—Ellen is a good *milker*, a negro rarely is. She makes good *bread*, few can do it, or do do it. She makes Excellent *coffee*. . . . She cooks meats and vegetables well, but I might find others to do the same."¹⁵ His complaints were thus mostly about her behavior or rather his inability to mold her behavior to what he desired. In this, he was, as he well knew, not alone.

In an effort to obtain a rounded view of domestics' behavior it is necessary to pursue numerous leads. The stories of house slaves who fell asleep while standing by their masters' sides at the din-

ner table, only to be suddenly awakened by a loud voice bellowing commands, have a quaint sound of hyperbole. And the tales of domestics who in the constant company of owners were totally oblivious to private conversations—which were none of their business anyway—take us back to a time which, except for literary imaginings, never was. Other leads are more fruitful.

It happened, on occasion, that the planter's household became a battleground for slaves and an irate master. During these times, if the master did not resort to extreme measures, the advantage frequently fell to the slave, for good domestics were hard to replace. Such a confrontation occurred on a Maryland plantation in the mid-1840's. Susanna Warfield, the young mistress who helped manage her parents' home, entered in her diary for October 28, 1846: "Elisa . . . in the Sulks made a mistake in the white hangings [drapes]—got mad—because I told her of it—abused me much—I left her abusing—She made a worse mistake. I made her take them down."¹⁶ The struggle was not one-sided by any means. At times, when Elisa was criticized for the performance of her tasks, she retaliated by making life in the Warfield home unpleasant for weeks. When threatened with replacement she confronted the situation openly, flaunting her various skills in domestic affairs.

Elisa's difficulties in her role as a house slave continued through the years. She was constantly antagonistic to Susanna, and was adept at selecting the right words and tone of voice to deflate the girl's spirits. She made constant and effective assaults upon Susanna's character with but few recorded reprisals, and among these never a whipping. Her dominance, and this seems the proper expression, was nearly complete, yet disputed at every turn.

We often imagine that when domestic bondsmen were awakened by a master's request for anything from a glass of water to more wood for the fire in the early morning hours, they simply and uniformly responded to the summons promptly, and perhaps without question. It was after all an inconvenience they learned to cope with. Elisa, disturbed from her rest at eleven one eve-

ning, begrudgingly answered the call, performed the needed chores, and then returned to her hut. Yet this was not the end of the episode. The next morning she proceeded to make life miserable around the Warfield home, and continued for a succession of days. Susanna explained that Elisa was mad "all because the fire in Papa's Stove went down, and in passing a bucket to kindle it up—I upset it—and it went on the carpet—I wiped it up but Papa [who was sick] insisted on calling Elisa up from the quarters—"¹⁷

Susanna's diary also relates this incident: "Elisa has been in the tantrums this morning and has told me that I am no lady—that Miss Annal and Miss Lucretia Van Bibber are ladies, but I am no lady." Susanna was very upset by this. At another point, when she was about to reprimand Elisa for apparent negligence at her chores, Elisa successfully turned the encounter to her own advantage. She demanded that the Warfields sell her away "where she will never See any of us."¹⁸ Despite their differences, Susanna was deeply hurt by this request and, it seems, gave in to some of Elisa's previous wishes.

Elisa attempted repeatedly to gain pre-eminence in the Warfield home, but her activities did not go unquestioned, even by other domestics. One challenger, in a limited sense, was the child Mag, whose habit it was to tell lies about Elisa, the slave Jane, and Susanna herself. "Little black Mag," complained Susanna, "has made mischief between mamma and myself this morning—She is a great story teller—and mischief maker— . . . She is always telling lies on the Servants and Papa and unfortunately Mamma credits her."¹⁹ Sometimes Mag's behavior backfired and she received what appears to have been a well-deserved spanking. Once, however, when Susanna paddled her, Mag got a bloody nose and won the sympathy of Susanna's mother so completely that Susanna determined never again to lay a hand on her.

Nor was it unusual for domestics to be at odds with one another. They jockeyed for positions of favor with slaveholders and for positions of authority that might perhaps enhance them in the eyes of the quarters community. One master commented to

his sister, "It was not very discreet to leave such incongruous materials together as Pet & Ebony [the cook and butler]. They are very sure to come into collision without a stronger power to hold them in check." He then added a not infrequent observation about domestics: "I take for granted that liquor was the chief motive power [in] the controversy between butler & cook."²⁰

Naturally, most house slaves did not play as dominant a role as did Elisa; nor were they as pampered as Mag. But Elisa's stature in the Warfield household was fully acknowledged by the domestic Jane. One day Susanna overheard Jane tell Elisa, "you are a philosopher but I am an ignorant negro."²¹ Susanna was curious about the meaning of Jane's statement, if only during the moment that she wrote it down in her diary. But the observation does not appear so puzzling when taken within the context of how Elisa molded the conditions of her bondage. Elsewhere domestics held sway over planters' children, and had them jumping to orders more readily than did their own parents. A raised eyebrow, a hand signal, and youngsters scampered hurriedly out of sight.

There is no way to measure, on the average, exactly how busy masters kept their domestics. On large plantations where work tasks stretched before them in an endless procession, domestics were quite busy. The cook's chores on the McCorkle plantation in Alabama provide an illustration of the demands placed on some: "Rise at five breakfast prayers—milking kitchen breakfast—dishes—lamps . . . stove & kitchen cleaning. Arrange for The four o'clock meal—Two meals a day are ample for ordinary habits—children twelve o'clock lunch." Lucilla McCorkle suggested further that the "mistress should herself know how to perform these & if she occasionally chooses to do herself cheerfully." Why should she? "It will have an excellent effect upon the house servants' behavior and probably show them that their duties are not so menial."²²

A domestic slave belonging to Henry Watson, Jr., also of Alabama, completely managed the Watson home affairs, by no means an unusual practice. In a letter to his cousin Watson noted

that an "intelligent faithful & house & man servant is our home keeper . . . I have put him at the head of affairs & he attends to Every thing, decides what we shall have to Eat at our different meals, provides, gives out & directs."²³ Still, to counterbalance those domestics who performed their duties efficiently in the household were those who had difficulty adjusting to the regimen. "Old Daniel," wrote a Louisiana slaveholder, "has disgraced himself and has become a field Negro again which has sunk his spirits very low."²⁴ The cycle by which house slaves were returned to the fields for misconduct and then later returned to house labor was a familiar one, though it seems seldom to have effected the desired change in behavior. Apparently, some domestics regularly doubled as field hands, so the punishment was no great hardship. "Nancy . . . an excellent house servant—a tolerable good seamstress . . . She is also an excellent hand in the fields."²⁵ This tandem work arrangement increased and nurtured contacts between domestics and field workers, closing the personal gaps that could otherwise have developed between them.

The distance between the harsh arena of the fields and the steps of the plantation house was often not very great in terms of the disgruntled interaction of slaves and masters. In the Big House domestic slaves displayed a corresponding degree of restlessness. Some masters complained that they continually had to scold and whip their domestics to get them to do their chores. But such methods often backfired because bondsmen worked sloppily under these pressures and had to redo tasks. One mistress, accordingly, wondered why "my cousin's wife, Mrs. Judge Sprage . . . gets twice as much work out of three female servants as I do out of six . . ."²⁶ A successfully managed home appears to have required an owner who was sensitive, if not sympathetic, to the emotional needs and habits of his domestics. This did not mean that he had to recognize the slave as an equal, but it did require an attempt to understand the circumstances involved when a domestic failed to perform a deed to the slaveholder's satisfaction or behaved in a fashion not in accord with household harmony. If the master did not weigh these factors his

home could become a battleground of unending pitched struggles. For the slave, like anyone else, responded to constant scolding by working poorly and showing defiance. In such times, slaves often conducted themselves so as to make very clear their contributions to the running of masters' domestic affairs. They were not easily put off by derogatory comments directed their way. "I suppose it must be my own fault," observed the sister of the planter J. B. Bailey of Florida, "that they seldom do as I want it unless I am looking at them not that I think them inferior to other negroes."²⁷

A single unruly slave in the Big House could shatter its quietude. If the planter prided himself on being a good master—most did—then the news of a disorderly home spreading to neighbors might be somewhat embarrassing for him. It was perhaps a feeling akin to his attitudes relative to wealth. Advice in this regard often ran, as one father told his son, "don't talk to much about your poverty, it will bring You & the Plantation unto[ld] redicule."²⁸ Under this curtain of secrecy, bondsmen continually garnered privileges that ameliorated a variety of slave-master contacts and affected the nature of their bondage. The appearance of an orderly household was, by some standards, more the goal than was the actual realization of such order.

In New Orleans a planter who was renting a house from the philanthropist John Mc Donogh warned him that if "negress Sophia remains her[e] I cannot engage to continue—." Among her many faults, she "keeps in the yard and kitchen a constant disturbance quarrelling with this one & that one. . . ." Sophia's indiscretions continued to mount, but there is no report of disciplinary efforts to curtail her behavior. The warning continued, "and there is at all times especially on Sundays & at evening a constant running to & from through the gate of men who[sc] appearance to say the best of it affords no very favourable impression & keeps me in continual fear of theft et., etc." It is somewhat amazing that Sophia's conduct went uncorrected for so long, in fact, until finally the gravity of her deeds began to tear apart the fabric of domestic life. The final annoyance was a full day of dis-

turbances near the house, peppered with "such conversation as in addition to its extreme vulgarity & obscenity was calculated to carry a very unfavourable impression to all who heard it from the street and neighboring houses."²⁹

In trying to understand how its bastions withstood each instrument of erosion, there is little need to pay tribute to slavery's great flexibility. It remains, rather, that to explain these developments one must expand his appreciation of slavery's meaning for the slave—must, if he can, fairly weigh the slave's own impact on the institution. Nevertheless, this is not to exaggerate the freedom and initiative possessed by domestics in general. Examples abound where masters forced them to toe the line, to work without questioning though not without complaint, and to suffer the lash.

What we generally find, in any case, is an almost astonishing physical closeness between domestics and masters. The situation was hardly avoidable. Each saw the other at his worst. Insensitivity on either's part in this setting was not the norm, but frequently did occur. Sometimes contacts were close but impersonal, bordering on intimate burlesque. The slave Henry Bruce remembered being called as a boy to the side of his unclad mistress in her bedroom merely to pour additional water for a bath. She seemed, he recalled, aloof, almost unaware of his presence, though he clearly was not of hers.

Scholars have been quick to accuse domestics of upholding bondage, and even of being Sambos. No bondsman, one reads, in such close contact with planters could stay loyal to both his fellows and the master class. But the choice, when it came to that, was rarely so easily delimited.³⁰ The number of house slaves historians may label willing informants does not appear to have been large in proportion to the number of such slaves; Uncle Toms and Aunt Minnies were not in the majority. Putting on airs and feeling oneself better than field hands was a far cry from disclosing their secrets and deeds.³¹ In the Big House planters discovered all too recurringly that talk about the sale of slaves, runaways, and resistance was communicated to the bondsmen in question by domestics. Charles Manigault believed that even

small house boys and girls "communicate all that they hear to others, who convey it to the spies of the runaways. . . ." ³² It is doubtful that house servants, child and adult, acted simply out of fear of field hands in conveying this information. It is more likely, in view of other sources of evidence, that they acted on the basis of personal identification with other bondsmen, knowing full well that their own positions would be jeopardized if their masters found out what they were doing. ³³ One diary account reveals that a slaveholder had his personal servant Esther "whipped for not telling that she heard Flit (who has run away) talking in the yard" about his plans. ³⁴

Many domestics, to be sure, were nominally members of the planter's family, a position by its nature confidential. This was the relationship that the slave Bush had with her Virginia master William Massie. He described her as "a valuable servant, & I at one time thought We would be able to confide in her to any extent. . . ." The association did not last in this form, however. Massie wrote with some regret in the same letter that "within the last year or two Foggyism has peeped through her skin in various directions." ³⁵ By Foggyism he meant that Bush had begun to drift beyond his influence, disobeying his orders and neglecting her duties. She was, he suggested, falling increasingly under the baneful sway of her black companions. If this was true Foggyism had captured many slaves throughout the South. He added, "We do not want to sell Bush & never will, unless old Foggy should burst her open." ³⁶

The affection that masters and domestics showed one another took many forms. At the death of Jinny, a "faithful servant," one of her owners, whom she had suckled in his infancy, experienced her loss deeply. He lamented that she "always felt more like a mother than a servant to me and was a kind mother to all my children." ³⁷ Masters' feelings at these times seem to strip the slave's personality of any resemblance to stereotypes. Jinny's master continued his tribute as follows: she "was a kind mother to all my Children I frequently left them entirely in her care & all ways found her faithful in nursing & taking care of them & they

all loved her as a mother & she loved them. . . ." ³⁸ In other cases masters compared their domestics to relatives and friends: "True sister he was a servant, and you may be vexed or ashamed, that I should in any manner compare him with yourself . . . [but] altho his skin was black his heart was always in the right place." ³⁹

A favorite bondsman, domestic or otherwise, could cast a lengthy shadow of privilege and authority on occasion; and a few were well aware of the possibilities. Some body servants accompanied slaveholders to various vacation spots and later to the war. They were attentive; they had to be to maintain their jobs. Often there were many body servants at vacation spots and there were planters. The time slaves spent at such places could be rather pleasant in some respects. In 1831 at the Red Sulphur Springs in Virginia, guests dined on venison, jelly, mutton, veal, beef, and ice cream: "every thing that can tempt the most fastidious appetite." We can make no one generalization about the treatment accorded body servants at these vacation spots. Some servants joined with white vacationers within limits, eating the same food. Others kept lower profiles, doing little more than was expected to please those slaveholders in hand. Slaveholders and nonslaveholders frequented such places to regain or maintain their health. An occasional favored slave might gain permission to accompany his master for the same reason. "It is no wonder," reflected a planter, "that persons in common circumstances so soon get well here, as the living is so much better than they have at home—I believe, they make it a practice to come here once a year to fatten. . . ." ⁴⁰ Shortly after the presidential election of 1848, the slaveholder John Quarles, though not formally vacationing, wrote his wife Cornelia that the "only excitement we have . . . is occasionally a supper given by Some old favorite Negro who invites all the gentlemen old and young and leave it to the generosity of the guest to pay what they please." ⁴¹ A competition took place in this neighborhood, near Jackson, Tennessee, between favored slaves. It centered around who could give the "best fling" for the local gentlemen. Such rivalries could last for months or years, with weeks devoted to the preparation of a

wardly we played."¹ Nightly, music emanated from the quarters; and daily, it accompanied many slaves at work in the fields where, one slave claimed, "We used to sing and have lots of fun."² Forty-one years after the close of the Civil War, the historian Albert Bushnell Hart, reflecting upon the condition of the slaves of old, wrote, "The only art in which the negroes excelled was music. . . ." Music in general, he believed, and "their songs" in particular "were their chief intellectual efforts. . . ." Dr. Samuel Cartwright, probably after hearing some of the same melodies, argued to the contrary. "There is nothing in his [the slave's] music addressing the understanding; it has melody but no harmony; his songs are mere sounds without sense or meaning," he said.⁴ But he had not been listening very attentively.

Planters themselves made many uses of the slave's musical talents. Fiddlers and songsters whose skills had been sharpened by practice in the quarters were in demand at social gatherings; playing at these events gained them privileges they might otherwise not have had. Some visitors to Virginia from the Carolinas were alarmed by one such spectacle: "they were so shocked by this exhibition—a Black man in a slave county singing love songs in the presence of their wives & daughters, that they, and with them, all the other Carolinians, marched out of the room."⁵

The talented bondsman often used his position to stretch his bonds. The slave Ben, who belonged to a Louisiana family, "got himself into trouble" in this way. He "was allowed to go to Mr. Archer's last night to play the fiddle, and did not get back till to night."⁶ It is unfortunate that slave sources leave out many of the details about the extent and form of this kind of slave activity.

Disobedience resulting from his special status as an excellent fiddler precipitated an interesting encounter between the slave Lewie and his master, Colonel Garnett Andrews of Georgia, in the early 1860's. Colonel Andrews hired Lewie out to play in saloons and at neighbors' social outings. So great was Lewie's popularity that in "consequence . . . his pockets were full of quarters and his head of the fumes of drink. . . ." According to Colonel Andrews, Lewie lived the high life as a slave, and "he was a man

While the seclusion of the slave quarters provided some sanctuary from life's harshest realities, it is readily apparent that the bondsmen's creative energies took them beyond folktales, religion, and childhood games into other forms of expression. As we look at the various cultural avenues along which the slave trod, what stands out are the rhythmically musical elements that helped express so many of the bondsman's hopes of triumph and fears of despair. We need not be concerned that this observation will stereotype the slave or the black experience once we observe how much music and other cultural expressions helped bondsmen survive and even transcend the cruellest aspects of their bondage. These expressions may be seen as that marriage of great necessity and native talent which become the parents of creativity.

Without doubt interpretations of slave music are important approaches to understanding the bondsman's sense of life's worth, for music was nearly inseparable from his identity. His existence was built around repetitive work and rest rhythms which, through music, he translated into poignant expressions of life's direction and meaning. Through music he expressed the depths of his frustrations and the heights of his joys: "Outwardly we sung, in-

of talents, and soon understood his importance and the high respect in which he was held on account of his broadcloth and accomplishments."⁷ Admitting his great affection for Lewie, Colonel Andrews allowed these activities to go on for a while, but eventually, angered by his conduct, sold Lewie in haste to a slave-trader who in turn sold him to a planter in Mississippi.⁸ Colonel Andrews later regretted this decision, for he never overcame his fondness for Lewie. Growing lonely with advancing age, he tried to retrieve him after the Civil War, pleading in newspaper advertisements for Lewie to return to him of his own choice, "if you will forgive me my anger. . . ." The evidence does not reveal the outcome.⁹

It was the slave's gift for entertainment that helped provide solidarity to the ranks of bondsmen when long hours of work and discipline made life agonizingly uncomfortable. Instrumental music and songs of all kinds were vitally important in these periods. To relieve their tensions bondsmen might join together in song and dance and conversation.

Harold Courlander, a leading scholar of Haitian affairs and black folklore, has written about "songs and dances in the Americas which parallel or have almost the same form as songs and dances in Africa."¹⁰ Many southern slave songs and dances are ample proof of this. They were slaves' surviving link with a past their masters did not deny. Taking us still further in this direction is the interesting observation of one white Southerner:

During my childhood my observations upon a few very old negroes, whose grandparents were African born, and early came to the conclusion, based upon negro authority, that the greater part of their music, their methods, their scales, their type of thought, their dancing, their patting of their feet, their clapping of hands, their grimaces and pantomime, and their gross superstitions came straight from Africa.¹¹

To entertain one another and to pass on the latest news or gossip were the motives for holding numerous musical gatherings.

Bondsmen from neighboring plantations showed up at both sanctioned and unsanctioned events within the quarters or at some predetermined rendezvous in the woods. A few women came abundantly draped in several layers of garments intended for bartering. An exchange might be made for a conjurer's secret about how to keep from being whipped. Bragging was the habit of many, who took special delight in telling how they had outsmarted "ole massa."

The ranks of slave musicians and songsters were never thin. Bondsmen saw that vocal and instrumental ability captured the fancy of both whites and blacks. At some slave and planter parties, musicians played competitively, catering to the whims of those in attendance. Members of the audience called out tunes for them to perform. The slave who played the best at white parties received additional money for his few hours' work plus his share of appreciative glances. Slave musicians regularly entertained in the quarters spontaneously, and some of the better ones practiced diligently for weeks, preparing themselves for an anticipated slave outing. In the evening, whatever the season, the night air floated varying qualities of sound from the quarters up to the Big House.¹² It did not, however, always fall upon appreciative ears. We know from slaves, travelers and masters that a few planters tried to ban musical instruments. On one plantation alone the master had confiscated twenty fiddles within the past year. He could not, fortunately, do the same to slaves' voices.

If one searches for patterns in the bondsman's cultural-musical life, perhaps what appears most revealing is the high degree of both group and individual expression. In an area of achievement where bondsmen are conceded by researchers to have excelled, one encounters a sharp divergence from the slumbering docility slaves have been accused of. Strikingly, their musical performances were distinguished by efforts to attain peak levels of proficiency as individual entertainers. There was also a great amount of improvisation. This was due in part to the fact that since most slaves could not write, many of their tunes were never noted down. Thus the same tune might have a few lines added, dropped,

or changed from plantation to plantation. It is a tribute to the survival potential of human personality that when left to their own devices slaves developed so personally revealing an art form.¹³

With reference to one talented quartet of bondsmen, a master reasoned that their skills were "a Confirmation of the views of intelligent slaveholders, that Slavery itself is the most effective mode, as far as it Concerns the African race of creating among them the most effective civilization."¹⁴ But he reasoned too well. His slaves' merits spoke persuasively in their own behalf.

Expressing his reluctance to extoll the quartet's achievements for fear of appearing "egotistical," planter Manning did so anyway while trying to hire out the "services of my musicians for your annual exhibition of the 'Institute Fair.' . . ." He praised the slave Robin "who is the leader of this Lilliputian band of Musicians . . ." and who had begun his musical career playing with bows made out of twigs on horses' hairs strung across pieces of wood. Other slaves made their own instruments as well. Some made drums, banned in many parts of the South because of their message transmitting qualities, beat on gourds and metal pots, with sticks or clicked bones together. Some slaves even created "trumpets" out of bulls' horns simply by cutting off the tip of the horn and blowing into it.¹⁵ Robin made such rapid progress on his own that after a time his master engaged the services of a friend, Dr. Frampton, "authorizing him to procure for him [Robin] the best masters upon the violin." Meanwhile Robin continued to improve: "At home without a teacher, & without any knowledge of music on my part his progress astonished myself & those of my friends who watched his improvement."¹⁶

Seeking to refine further Robin's talents, his master later employed a Mr. Dauer who, during the course of two summers, helped to advance Robin's musical education. Mr. Dauer also instructed Robin's brothers—Sanders, Edward, and Henry—who later joined the quartet. But before this happened "the three lat[te]r were taught chiefly by Robin without assistance from a superior teacher untill Mr. Dauer tooke charge of them under whose care they have arrived at the excellence which they now ex-

hibit."¹⁷ No doubt sounds from the practicing quartet provided many enjoyable hours for the plantation's slaves.

As performers at local functions the quartet brought themselves and their master widespread acclaim as well as money. To reward Robin his owner decided finally to leave the quartet in his sole management, "and to give him such remunerative returns as they may make by their skill, untill he shall be more than compensated in addition to the regular Salary which I have paid him."¹⁸ There was no mention of freedom. Robin's bondage seemed light. His abilities and circumstance lifted him to a plane that not only accorded him special treatment but also compelled others to acknowledge and respect his humanity. In a passage of his letter which he tried to cross out, Robin's master concluded: "I will venture to say without a design to boast my, good Sir, that Robin who has been taught three years, Sanders by Mr. Dauer & Robin two, and Henry & Edward about eight months, can play together in a quartette with more precision upon the flute violin"¹⁹—perhaps than most white orchestral groups who had received similar or better training. The end of the sentence is conjectural; that portion of the letter has been torn away.

Although Robin's players were not a minstrel group *per se*,²⁰ slave minstrels were used by the slave regime. Slave musicians and singers performed regularly together, mixing their performances with dancing. Other slave entertainers performed throughout the slave period in cities and on the plantation as the chief entertainment on many occasions. On plantations, to be sure, though some masters played the fiddle or other instruments at some of the slave functions, it was the bondsmen who provided much of the social and cultural life for everybody. Some of the minstrel groups spontaneously toured plantations during the holiday seasons. Especially at Christmastime they expected gifts as tokens of thanks for the entertainments they provided. They were not always rewarded, and when they were not they frequently sang very biting tunes as an expression of their displeasure. Some were run off plantations they visited for this behavior, but it daunted their spirits little.

The slave's self-expression spread beyond the limits of musical instruments into song. But even on "light" occasions, when a span of holidays stretched out before slaves, their songs might have a somber quality. "They depressed my spirits and filled my heart with ineffable sadness,"²¹ wrote Frederick Douglass. For him, the lyrics were reminders of the dehumanizing features of slavery. Some plantation owners may have also recognized this. Fanny Kemble, an anti-slavery sympathizer, commented in 1839 "that many of the masters and overseers on these plantations prohibit melancholy tunes or words. . . ."²² But this would have been most hard to do. Still others believed that certain songs might lead to unwanted slave behavior, for these songs constantly called to mind the suffering bondsmen endured.²³

A historian of songs has written that before 1832 "slaves sang that their warnings against militancy came from the devil . . ." but after that date modified their views.²⁴ Another writer has remarked that slave songs "speak with convincing finality against the legend of the contented slave."²⁵ It appears ironic that many of these songs were composed more or less under the planter's nose—in the fields and in the quarters.

In 1895 the famous European composer Antonín Dvořák paid high praise to slave musical efforts in an article in *Harper's Magazine*. He suggested that black melodies could serve as the foundation for a serious American school of music, explaining:

I was led to take this view partly by the fact that the so-called plantation songs are indeed the most striking and appealing melodies that have been found on this side of the water. There is nothing in the whole range of composition that cannot be supplied with themes from this source. Among my pupils I have discovered a young colored man of talent upon whom I am building strong expectations.²⁶

Dvořák's "New World Symphony" takes its lead from the black melodies.

In the Negro melodies of America I discover all that is needed for a great and noble school of music. They are pathetic, tender,

passionate, melancholy, solemn, religious, bold, merry, gay, gracious, or what you will. It is music that suits itself to any mood or purpose.²⁷

Indeed, songs accompanied bondsmen at worship, work, and play, tapping all their moods. Joseph Jones of Georgia used a "Colored quire" in his sabbath school teaching. "The African are very fond of music & I think that the cooperation of the Colored quire will be valuable to the school."²⁸

The slave's spiritual efforts were more of a help to themselves, however. They often took the traditional "call and response chant form" whose roots go back to West Africa and whose reach extends into our times. Its pattern was simple. A class leader—often but not necessarily a preacher—chanted an evocative expression, spoken or sung, to which the congregation or audience chanted an answer. The preacher then moved to another expression. In many of these folk spiritual songs the words are of little importance. The rhythmic intensity of the music shaped and reshaped by emotion provides us with a better approach to understanding the message conveyed. Such moments tapped a well of emotion that blossomed into a beautifully cathartic experience. Slaves in various parts of the Old South fashioned different words to fit familiar music, and, as victims of the slave trade, carried these versions from place to place. Some have testified about the sense of brotherhood and community they experienced upon arrival in a strange area when the slaves there broke forth with familiar music. The scene was frequently an agitated one accompanied by handclapping and shouting.

Several capable researchers have accurately pointed out that the predominant body of allusion in the spirituals is to slaves themselves as the chosen people, the children of God, a captive people. Other peoples have, of course, similarly described themselves, with notable fervor. But this should not detract from the slave's claim. Many of the spirituals also directly protested against bondage: "I'm a-Rolling Through an Unfriendly World," "Go Down, Moses," "Steal Away to Jesus," "Nobody Knows the

Trouble I See, Glory Hallelujah!" "Before I'd Be a Slave I'd Be Buried in My Grave," "Nobody Knows Who I Am," "Who Will Deliver Po' Me," "Walk Together Children," "Do You Get Weary," "Children We Shall Be Free," "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel?" "Many Thousand Gone," "Keep Me from Sinking Down," "My Way's Cloudy," "Don't You Grieve after Me." Many slaves' songs are thus virtual blueprints of slaves' values and guides to their most safely guarded fears and desires. Perhaps they sought to explore the question of their identities in "Nobody Knows Who I Am."

O, no-body knows a who I am, a who I am, till the judgment morn-ing! Hear'n bells a-ring-ing, the saints all a-singing, Hear'n bells a-ring-ing in my soul, O, the soul.²⁹

Edward Pollard, the southern journalist, observed that most of the songs "relate to the moment of death and in some of them are simple and poetic images which are often touching."³⁰ Thomas Wentworth Higginson would have agreed with Pollard and tells us that the favorite tune among the blacks he commanded for the Union at the outbreak of the Civil War was "Hold Your Light":

Hold your light, Brudder Robert,—
Hold your light,
Hold your light on Canaan's shore.
What make ole Satan for follow me so?
Satan ain't got nothin' for do wid me
Hold your light
Hold your light
Hold your light on Canaan's shore.³¹

No single explanation serves adequately to illuminate the whys surrounding the sadness of slave melodies of all kinds, so many sung with heavy hearts and troubled spirits. Evaluation of the accumulated evidence needs the skills of thoughtful interpreters. But there are many clues embodied in their lyrics, reminders of suffering that slaves lived with: "I'm a Rollin' Through an Un-

friendly Worl'." All these suggest a distinctive view of life's meaning for the bondsman.³²

Slave spirituals are replete with references to Canaan, the ship of Zion, redemption, and the last Judgment:

Oh Canaan, sweet Canaan
I am bound for the land of Canaan.

Masters criticized bondsmen for dwelling too often on things beyond, for finding little satisfaction in the present. But indeed these songs assisted the slave in coping with the present. Still others revealed a lasting discontentment. A favorite, according to one ex-slave was "Oh the keys, oh the keys, Lord." It referred to loosing the chains of bondage: "somebody would holler 'Steady yourselves children. My God! The keys! Let's find them tonight.'"³³

Outside religious settings, singing was sure to accompany bondsmen at their labors. "Wherever negroes may be, if in tolerable spirits, they always sing as the[y] work."³⁴ Slaves composed some of their tunes on the spot, the presence of onlookers suggesting the theme. While watching some bondsmen at work in the fields, the traveler Abigail Mott was witness herself to one of these improvisations. The field hands caroled:

Go, white man, go
but with thee bear
The negro's wish, the negro's prayer
Remembrance of the negro's care.³⁵

The end of the harvest season brought a flood of new songs in celebration. It "really does me good to hear them" singing, remarked a North Carolina mistress.³⁶ A noted spectacle during the harvest was "the husking and the gathering into barns of the yellow maize or corn."³⁷ Here was a signal for general celebration. Slaves came from nearby plantations to husk and socialize, to sing into the early morning hours. "The tunes they sing are always slow," wrote the planter Henry Watson. He also observed that

they refer to themselves as "the down-trodden; slaves" and added:

They make a great deal of noise. . . . They then keep time with their song & do not feel their fatigue, & in fact are not fatigued as they otherwise would be. The[y] work more cheerfully. As all keep time, the lazy ones keep it without being sensible of their exertion, besides they might otherwise, and often do, fall asleep at their work.³⁸

Martin R. Delany, the black separatist leader of the 1850's, made a worthwhile observation about working slaves and singing in Louisiana:

In the distance on the levee and in the harbor among the steamers, the songs of the boatmen were incessant. Every few hours landing, loading and unloading, the glee of these men of sorrow was touchingly appropriate and impressive. . . . If there is any class of men anywhere to be found whose sentiments of songs and words of lament are made to reach the sympathies of others, the black slave-boatmen on the Mississippi River are that class. . . . they are seemingly contented by soothing their sorrows with songs apparently cheerful, but in reality wailing lamentations. . . . In the capacity of leader, as is their custom, one poor fellow is pitiful tones led off the song of the evening. . . .³⁹

Many of the slaves' songs obviously had much meaning hidden even to some slaves, though they continually stressed the basic discord in the bondsman's life. They were his "articulate" expressions of what it was to be a slave.⁴⁰

Although some planters happily believed that melodies coming from the quarters meant subdued and peaceful slaves, the tunes of songsters occasionally concealed night visits to other local plantations. To say in this connection that the slaves' songs and music often communicated their activities to slaves on other plantations is barely to scratch the surface. "We boys," the slave Silas Jackson claimed, "used to take the home of dead cow or bull, cut the end off of it, we could blow it, some having different notes. We could tell who was blowing and from what plantation."⁴¹ Music was

used to communicate such things as warnings to runaways and the movements of the slave patrols. From the earliest years of slavery in the New World this pattern—if it can be called that—is readily observable.

In their speech and songs slaves spoke several languages within the English they had learned in America. Their split syllables and fuzzy intonations are well known. Bondsmen shifted syntax with ease, created a vast variety of additional words (neologisms) blended with Africanisms, and gave new meaning to old words.⁴² Their assimilation into the American scene was fragile and imperfect.

Most important, the language of the slave's speech and song was the embodiment of his community. His broken English protected his communal feelings exceedingly well, even in the presence of whites. He could understand them, their use of large words aside, but the same could not always be claimed by them. Slaveholders repeatedly complained that their slaves might speak better if only they put their minds to it, but slaves often had other interests. They sometimes even called each other different names than those used by their masters. An employee of two South Carolina planters tried to make an inventory of their slave holdings according to age and skills. But finding his task a hard one, he wrote to them, ". . . I find it somewhat difficult to get a satisfactory list of them [the bondsmen] owing to their being called by so many different names among themselves. . . ."⁴³

Slaves' songs mirror their perception of the expansion and restriction of their bondage at various times. Quite naturally, an individual seeks first to manage successfully his immediate surroundings. To accomplish this, an accurate assessment of the realities of one's life is essential.⁴⁴ Slave songs clearly reveal a mature and accurate assessment of their woes and needs. Their songs were highly selective in this respect, attempting to place in perspective those features of bondage that troubled them most.

Bondsmen sold to the Deep South or out of their immediate neighborhood did not expect to see friends and relatives again. They might chant:

You may beat upon my body
But you cannot harm my soul;
I shall join the forty thousand by and by.

You may sell my children to Georgy,
But you cannot harm their soul;
They will join the forty thousand by and by.

Come, slave-trader, come in too;
The Lord's got a pardon here for you;
You shall join the forty thousand by and by.⁴⁵

A slave claimed, too, that he heard the following lyrics:

See wives and children sold apart
Their children screams will break
my heart
There's a better day a coming,
.....
Go sound the jubilee.⁴⁶

If the songs themselves did not immediately infuse the slave's existence with the "satisfying meaning" he wanted, they did represent his attempt to move in that direction.⁴⁷ In great measure they tell us how slaves inveighed against efforts to stigmatize them as inferior, and they also demonstrate that most bondsmen were extraordinarily sensitive to slavery's meaning. "What is of pivotal import [too] . . . is that the esthetic realm was the one area in which slaves knew they were not inferior to whites."⁴⁸ To be sure, there is no longer any need to limit this generalization to esthetics.

Historians have written of the happy-go-lucky slave, but he was rarely the slave who appeared in song. "Perception," a psychologist observes, "is profoundly influenced by two additional factors: social and cultural custom, and the personality of the perceiver."⁴⁹ Just what part each factor plays is difficult to determine, for their effects would seem to join hands. The personality can be judged by the evidence it leaves of its perceptions, and the songs reveal the

slave's personality to have been mature. The songs were at least palliative, and large numbers were somber attacks on slavery and slaveholders. They add to persuasive evidence calling for rejection of the infantilism-of-slaves thesis. Though most slave tunes were simple and melodic, the words lay bare much of the slave's vindictiveness.

What these songs best disclose, considering the setting that inspired them, is that bondsmen did not see one another as passive agents in a prestaged drama. Many were astute participants in and critics of southern civilization. The slave fitted his musical tendencies to immediate needs in the quarters and in the fields in a remarkable display of resiliency. This resiliency is reminiscent of what Frederick Law Olmsted wrote about slaves' music: their "power of . . . improvising . . . is most marked and constant."⁵⁰

The slaves' cultural expressions spread forcefully beyond the slaves' ranks into southern culture at large. The important influence of their spiritual and work music is undeniable. In fact much of the cultural flavor attributed to the Old South owes a debt to the black presence. The sources occasionally disclose a slave artist or sculptor. The cultural art forms slaves created for themselves added dimension and substance to their work-wearied lives. But as in other things, life in bondage never allowed the slave totally to divorce his cultural forms from the mechanical arts the slave system nurtured and needed to help it function properly. Some bondsmen even designed their own huts and made clever innovations in both slaves' and masters' homes.

In the broadest cultural terms the slaves' ranks were filled with persons to whose talents and skills the slave regime reacted ambigiously. Certainly in the eighteenth century, and perhaps down to 1830, the slave's dominance in the mechanical arts in the Old South was not challenged.⁵¹ But after this date, some have argued, skilled slaves came under attack from competing white workers and thus declined in number. This interpretation is certainly supported by much evidence, but it cannot be convincingly substantiated. A careful observer of the southern scene, the industrialist

C. G. Memminger, made this interesting comment to James Henry Hammond in 1849:

I find an opinion gaining ground that slaves ought to be excluded from mechanical pursuits, and everything but agriculture, so as to have these places filled with whites. . . . The planters do not perceive how it effects their interest, and very frequently chime in with this cry . . . which is in truth, the only party [cry] from which danger to our Institutions is to be apprehended among us. Drive our negro mechanics and all sorts of operatives from our cities, and who must take their place[?]"⁵²

Hammond ignored his warning and began to support legislation in his home state outlawing the employment of most skilled slaves.

Skilled slaves' contribution to the southern culture and economy throughout the antebellum period is easy to document, though many find it difficult to accept. In 1777 R. Carter observed to a friend, "John Holt, Stocking Loom maker, is my Servant & has long to serve, who will always have my favor and protection, so long as he continues faithful and diligent." While slaveowners' journals have references to whites hired to do skilled labor on plantations, this seems not to have been the norm, and the manuscripts themselves do not give this impression. Frederick Law Olmsted's observation in the 1850's, while it cannot be taken generally, provides a valuable lead. A Mississippi overseer told him that

he once employed a white man from the North, who professed to be a first class workman, but he soon found he could not do nearly as good work as the negro mechanics on the estate, and the[y] despised him so much, and got such high opinions of themselves in consequence of his inferiority, that he had been obliged to discharge him. . . .⁵³

This was the risk any planter might run, for the slaves were proud of their talents. A number of planters expressed the belief that it

was best to let slaves do all of the plantation's work if possible. Captain Eggleston of Holmes County, Mississippi, according to agriculturalist Solon Robinson, had "all of his mechanical work . . . done by his negroes upon his plantation."⁵⁴ He even owned two slave carpenters who were so accomplished at their trade that he could hire them out at \$40 each per month. This was in 1845. Nor do I cite these examples because they were exceptional; they are not. William Pettigrew of North Carolina was engaged in quite a bit of building on his plantations, Belgrade and Magnolia, in 1849. He noted that slaves did the work and that "Jim is the foreman of the carpenters, being quite efficient in that capacity."⁵⁵ A Maryland slave, born in 1844, remembered that her father was a carpenter whose "services were much in demand. This gave him an opportunity to save money." She spoke with pride, indicating that he did repair and building work for both whites and free blacks and was able to save more than half his income.⁵⁶ All this he did in a state where work competition from whites was keen. Among the exceptional slaves to be sold to a planter in 1845 were "a superior Blacksmith, a wheelwright, a shoemaker who understanding tanning, a weaver, a plain cook, and a pastry cook."⁵⁷ These slaves could not but know the contributions they made.

Proportionally, southern towns and cities were dotted even more than the countryside with slave men and women of skill. Southern civilization with its emphasis on service, demanded it, and these bondsmen contributed much to the Old South's genteel tradition. A writer in the *Southern Literary Messenger* in 1837, reviewing Harriet Martineau's *Society in America*, was quick to point out that "some of the best tailors and mantuamakers in the southern states are slaves. In the cities, all of the hair-dressers and barbers, many of the butchers, and sundry of the tavern-keepers, are slaves or free negroes."⁵⁸ Conditions did not change that much down to the war years.

Many of the skills possessed by slaves related to more routine tasks. These slaves cannot all be classed as artisans, but the slave did not find it easy to separate art from work, and thus in many cases, sometimes with planter prompting, blended the two. A

9 *A Family Folk*

Few aspects of the slave's bondage have come in for as much speculative writing as the impact of slavery upon the slave family. Researchers in many disciplines have argued that bondage rent asunder this most basic of American institutions, injured black identity, and left scars to haunt black Americans down to our day.¹ But all this needs further examination.

Planters usually evidenced concern and not a little ambivalence, as several historians have preferred to put it, when reaching the decision to split up a black household. The practice was in sharp contrast to what many felt to be right, though planters consistently overcame nagging doubts. An agent representing John Mc Donogh of Louisiana complained to him that a slave trader "refused to give me a little negro boy and girl from belonging to the Mulattresses, claiming that he could not separate the families. . . ." He added bluntly, "It was a poor reason. . . ." It cannot be denied that the slave family took a tremendous beating; its members were sold to satisfy creditors and purchased to increase personal wealth. Yet the historian U. B. Phillips has written that the "domestic slave trade was merely a readjustment of population within the United States. . . ." ² From the slave's point of view his observation more than missed the mark.

"I seen better times in slavery than I've seen since," confided an ex-slave, "but I don't believe in slave traffic—that being sold."⁴ For bondsmen the slave trade was a too-frequent reminder of near helplessness in bondage. The overseas trade had bothered the conscience of the nation—both South and North—forcing its shutdown nationally by 1807 and long before that in most southern states.⁵ But despite the termination of the overseas trade its domestic counterpart continued to flourish legally. Slaves constantly experienced—directly and indirectly—its pernicious influence, and would no doubt have abolished it as a first step in ameliorating their bondage.

Activities associated with the slave trade gave many planters a bad name, both among disapproving friends close at hand and among many more than just abolitionists in western society at large. Still many acted as they personally saw fit. "My plan in selling a negro that I want to get rid of is to take a price under his real valuation," wrote a Louisianian.⁶ Most masters were not so open in their admission; and a substantial minority sincerely tried to sell slaves, as one wrote to his mother, to a "man said to be a most excellent master" since "it will be most gratifying to my feelings. . . ." ⁷ One slaveholder expressed a "desire to make their [slaves'] situation as Comfortable, & happy as in my power, and am sure they could not be more so than with you. . . ." ⁸

To avoid the public disapproval that increasingly attached to putting slaves on the auction block, some masters sold their bondsmen privately. For the slave, however, the impact remained the same, and scenes of mothers crying because they would never see their children again are more than products of historical imagination. George Tucker, a nineteenth-century Virginia novelist, offended many of his southern readers by writing, "One not accustomed to this spectacle [an auction] is extremely shocked to see beings, of the same species with himself, set up for sale to the highest bidder, like horses or cattle; and even to those who have become accustomed to it, it is disagreeable."⁹

Historically, the auction block has both real and symbolic importance. The lyrics from a slave melody, "No more auction

block! No more, no more," capture both meanings. For slaves it meant a parting—often final—from relatives and friends. Unable to face such doubtful futures some ran off or mutilated or killed themselves. To curb such occurrences planters sometimes gave only a day's or even just a few hours' notice to bondsmen selected for selling and then guarded them closely or locked them up. One master, no doubt guilty of understatement, conceded that his " . . . Negroes will probably be somewhat distressed at being sold." He therefore advised his son, "you must say what you can to reconcile them."¹⁰

Slave traders held auctions, advertised well in advance, several times during each year in local towns and cities.¹¹ A great throng of slaveholders or potential slaveholders attended each session, accompanied sometimes by their wives, who might be clad in stylish dresses. It was, at the larger slave auctions, a time of gala social functions running through the day into late evening. The traders sponsored most of these events and invited planters up to their hotel rooms for pre-auction drinks and casual conversation. There was much imbibing and not a little carousing. Gangs of youths roamed the streets shouting names at free blacks, perhaps indicating a desire to see them returned to bondage. All had a good time except members of the black community—slave and free.

Of course the bondsman's participation in the auction began much earlier than these social functions. His psychological preparation started at the moment his master told him that he was to be put on the market. Parents gathered children too young to understand their fate around them and told stories of going on a long trip and not seeing one another for a great while. It could easily be the infants and adolescents who were being put up for sale, for nearly "all traders dealt in those from 10 or 12 years of age and many advertised for those from 6, 7, 8, and 9. . . ."¹² A Virginia agent wrote to a prospective buyer in 1850, "Boys and Girls are selling best."¹³ For this reason Harriet Tubman, the underground railroad heroine, recalled that while she was in bondage, "every time I saw a white man I was afraid of being carried away."¹⁴ The domestic trade, few would deny, was a basic reason for some

bondsmen having only faint memories of their parents and of children growing up under the adoptive care of childless slaves and other foster parents. Frederick Douglass's well-known confession is emblematic: "I never saw my mother to know her as such, more than four or five times in my life. . . . I received the tidings of her death with much the same emotions I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger."¹⁵

Some bondsmen, waiting to be sold, abandoned their work duties, trusting that masters probably would not whip them, for the lash marks might not heal before the auction arrived and would raise potential buyers' suspicions about the slave's rascality. Slave owners did, of course, cut the rations of some disobedient bondsmen and physically restrain others, but there was always the possibility that discipline so close to the time of sale would leave a tell-tale sign and affect a slave's value adversely.

A few bondsmen became angered that after faithful years of service to a master he was about to sell them away for no apparent reason other than negro speculation.¹⁶ Some bondsmen were indeed bred primarily for the auction. Southern newspapers ran ads expounding the "prolific . . . generating qualities" of slave females. Most informative is a letter from a North Carolina slaveholder to his grandfather in 1835:

There is one fact generally admitted in support of the view I have taken which is that negroes are unprofitable in this country except for their increase and I believe there are few persons having as many or half as many negroes as Father has, that would be willing to take your negroes or an equal number from any one else and keep them on a farm and use them well, for *all* the profits arising from them.¹⁷

To soothe those slaves intended for auction planters sometimes explained their reasons for selling them, hoping to win their confidence. Dr. James Marion Sims of Alabama wrote to his wife about an impending sale: "Let them understand that it is impossible for us to keep them . . . already are there mortgages on some of them and there is no telling when they may be fore-

closed. . . . Let them know too that it lacerates our hearts as much as it does theirs to be compelled to the course we suggest."¹⁸ Masters also promised not to allow reputedly cruel planters to purchase aggrieved bondsmen. Was this merely deception? In many cases it undoubtedly was. Yet there was not always cause to view a master's promises suspiciously, for some tried to keep their word. On a Georgia plantation the mistress, Lysie, noted that her slaves were very disturbed at the prospect of being sold. She further observed, "Most are family negroes that never knew what it was to be sold. I have cried with some that come to me with their troubles about going."¹⁹ Occasionally a favorite slave got caught in the web of contradictions slavery created. John W. Abraham of Virginia claimed that his slave "Harriet is the best Servant we own & when gone I never expect to get her place filled." But he faced, he told his wife, an agonizing dilemma: "she [Harriet] is worth too much for us to keep and the balance of our negroes are in families which I hate to part."²⁰

The time finally came for slaves to travel to the auction. In preparation, masters plucked out some of the older slaves' gray hairs or painted them over with a blacking brush. This was an illegal practice, but nonetheless widely engaged in, and traders delighted in outsmarting one another and uncovering the hucksters' deceptions.²¹ Masters also had some slaves grease their bodies to make their muscles or a smiling face shine, but also to cover up recent or old marks of abuse. At the larger slave markets such as Richmond, Natchez, New Orleans, and Wilmington, North Carolina, bondsmen were placed in slave pens to await the arrival of auction day. The abolitionist James Redpath visited the one in Wilmington in the 1850's and reported it filled with slaves of both sexes.²²

In accord with their interests, shortly before the auction was to begin, some planters visited local clothing shops and purchased new garments for slaves being put on the block that day. "I dressed up your Negroes," wrote a trader to the slaveowner he represented, "and made them look their best but could not screw them up [in price] any higher."²³ A few slaves on the block often

rivalled their purchasers in neatness of appearance. Masters literally dressed some females in silks and satins and fitted men in neatly pressed, though inexpensive, suits. In New Orleans a traveler characterized some mulatto girls put up for auction as elegantly adorned and not at all like slaves. John Parker confided in his autobiographical account, "If I do say it myself I was very much better dressed and more intelligent looking than the white men, which pleased my vanity and modified my anger against my inveterate and hated enemies."²⁴ Less prized slaves, out of self-pride, tidied their own appearances. At one auction,

the women, true to the feminine instinct, had made, in almost every case, some attempt at finery. All wore gorgeous turbans, generally manufactured in an instant out of a gay-colored handkerchief. . . . The little children were always better and more carefully dressed than the older ones, the parental pride coming out in the shape of a yellow cap pointed like a mitre, or a jacket with a strip of red broadcloth round the bottom.²⁵

The auction block could be a peculiar spectacle indeed.

The sale began as the auctioneer's voice boomed out over the crowd's noise: "Now gentlemen, who bids for Tom? . . . His only fault is that he has a great idea of his own reserved rights, to the neglect of those of his master."²⁶ Several slaves were on the platform. The auctioneer commented on each one's relative value and merits, "and when the hammer at length falls, protests, in the usual phrase, that poor Sambo has been absolutely thrown away."²⁷

An historian has written that many slaves were apparently unaffected by the auction experience "and were proud of the high prices that they brought."²⁸ This would seem to be an oversimplification of how slaves actually felt. Many, though colorfully dressed, wore somber expressions on their faces. At the Charleston market Captain Basil Hall noted a puzzling air of indifference in the slaves' manner.²⁹ And another observer, on a different occasion, remarked that "the poor victims did not seem to think hard of this matter, but regarded it as a matter of

course . . .³⁰ In reality, some slaves had simply resigned themselves to being sold, and saw little need for a display of emotion that might later bring them punishment.

But it seems that many slaves determined ahead of time to take an active part in the direction of the bargaining. They looked over the buyers, as the buyers did them, and selected several preferable ones. Often their decision hinged upon a knowledge of the planter's wealth and the living conditions and work load he would subject them to. They learned the needed information by keeping alert, quizzing other slaves, and sometimes confronting purchasers directly with rather blunt questions. Some were deliberately offensive to small planters, believing that slaves owned by them lacked social status and also life's necessities.³¹ The slave John Parker explained: ". . . I made up my mind I was going to select my owner so when any one came to inspect me I did not like, I answered all questions with a 'yes' and made myself disagreeable. So far as I was concerned the game was on, and I began to play it. . . ."³² William Hayden claimed that because of his "utter indifference and apparent independence" to the events around him when he was on sale at an auction in Natchez, Mississippi, many prospective "purchasers were at a loss to know if, in reality, I were a slave, and subject to the hammer."³³ Slaves not as well attuned as Parker or Hayden to fine points of bargaining were less subtle. They might even kick or spit on buyers they did not like, and, according to the traveler E. S. Abdy, even shouted, "You may buy me . . . but I will never work for you."³⁴ Such threats turned many buyers away, but others were willing to accept the risk, confident in their ability to handle any bondsman.

Another method employed by slaves was simply to complain of imaginary ailments to every buyer except the desired one. Prospective purchasers often believed these stories because of those real instances of doctored-up slaves whose masters sought to dupe the unsuspecting buyer. Female slaves acted the coquette, offending planters and the sensibilities of accompanying wives.³⁵ They bickered and nagged at masters, convincing many that they would be a disruptive force in any work gang. They also made

threats not to bear any children while owned by an undesirable master, and even to put infants that might be born to death. Only planters somewhat unfamiliar with slave management took these warnings lightly. For most, there was always a faint memory of a time on one's plantation or on a neighbor's when a slave had carried out an unheeded threat.

Occasionally, entire families stood on the auction block together. Attempts to separate them did succeed, of course, but the assault might meet with a volley of the foulest language from the slave, or with crying, hysterics, and threats of searching for the separated members and stealing them away. Some women, frantic, held tightly to their children, insisting they would not part with them. Other slaves consented to the sale when assured that husband, wife or child would only be a few plantations away. In a private sale one planter left instructions to tell the slave Davy that "the judge will make him a good master and that he not be far from his wife."³⁶ Basil Hall wrote about a slave awaiting his sale, "What struck me most was an occasional touch of anxiety about his eye as it glanced from bidder to bidder. . . . It seemed to imply a perfect acquaintance with the character of the different parties competing for him. . . ."³⁷ It is easy to see why purchase by a chosen master could bring a sigh of relief, and, at moments, joy.

But before a buyer sealed his purchase of a slave, he usually wanted to examine him physically. He looked at his teeth, limbs, and back, felt and poked muscles. Often buyers touched female slaves in most familiar ways, and the auctioneer and members of the crowd told obscene jokes. An English observer at Richmond noted, "I beheld with my own eyes a man . . . go and examine a poor African girl . . . grasping her arms and placing his course hand on her bosom!"³⁸ Many domestic slaves were unprepared emotionally for such examinations, and when they occurred many broke into tears, almost as if for the first time the full weight of their bondage pressed down upon them.

For more intimate examinations, a small yard was set aside. Slaves carried back there, according to the ex-slave Solomon

Northrup, were "stripped and inspected more minutely."³⁹ Buyers looked for scars or signs of syphilitic ailments, for example, and examined the pelvic areas of females for purposes of speculation on their future as childbearers. The ordeal was especially difficult for husbands who were powerless to assist weeping wives. Yet bondsmen submitted reluctantly to such examinations if they provided the chance of being purchased by a preferred owner. Prospective buyers also compelled slaves to jump and dance as further proof that their limbs were operative.

With the auction over, buyers sometimes marched bewildered slaves on foot for several days or weeks to another auction and placed them on sale again, hoping to make a profit on a first investment. William Waller of Virginia wrote his son David that his slaves had "greatly improved in appearance although they have been walking for twenty five days."⁴⁰

It was these marches, especially into the lower South, that often increased slaves' fears of never seeing loved ones again. They knew that some of them would die on the trip, and this knowledge fired those rumors of exceedingly harsh treatment down below. The rumors take on credibility, however, from the slave traders' correspondence about such events. In business-like fashion they simply estimated the percentage of slaves that would be lost in transit.⁴¹

Slaveholders boarded other bondsmen in local prisons or jails while they made additional purchases and then marched them off towards home. A member of the abolitionist-oriented National Liberal Club of London, arriving at the close of an auction in St. Louis, Missouri, observed "slaves that had just before been sold, who were then being bullied and threatened with punishment if they did not cease fretting and crying at being parted from their relations and friends."⁴² Planters were quite aware of their feelings and often chained several or all of them together to prevent their running away, which happened often.⁴³ In one of these groups John Parker, "as a child of eight, [was] chained to an old man" and marched in a gang from Norfolk to Richmond, Virginia. "This old man was kind to me," he wrote, and "made

my weight of the chain as light as he could. He talked to me kindly, because I was broken hearted at leaving my mother."⁴⁴ The favors slaves bestowed on one another at such times served to strengthen the bonds between them. Some perhaps reminded themselves that all was not lost; they would weather these hardships.

However, despair was not the only mood expressed on these occasions. Slaves purchased by a chosen master were sometimes cheerful, as were husbands, wives, and children who remained together. Some boasted that they had chosen their master, not he them. Masters watched all members of the gang closely, nonetheless, and cautioned them not to speak with blacks they met along the roadside, for if given a chance, "the negroes living along the route would gladly harbor refugees."⁴⁵

News of the amounts that slaves sold for spread rapidly among planters and bondsmen. Slaves prided themselves on being sold at a high price, but not for the reasons that some researchers have almost casually advanced. A high price merely recognized the slave's special skills or potential as a good hand. For many it served to confirm the considerable opinion they already held of themselves and their abilities, and often secured better treatment from the planter interested in protecting his investment. Shortly after the purchase of the slave Polly in Baltimore, slaves stopped her and her new master on the road and asked if they knew of the slave lady in Baltimore who had been sold for a thousand dollars. Polly responded that it was she and that the purchase price was much larger than a thousand, whereupon "they gased upon her with *amazement* and collected all the per[sons] about the house to come and *look at her!*"⁴⁶

Because of the frequency of auction block scenes, the composition and stability of the slave family has been the subject of much confusion. Was the family in a state of constant disruption? And if this was commonly so, what impact did such disruption have upon the development of its members' identities and general mode of being?

The primacy of one's family relationships in shaping one's

character is axiomatic among today's social theorists.⁴⁷ Family members gain personal strength from being loved and trusted by one another, and the family unit serves as a shield against outside attacks and the feeling of emptiness that often comes from being alone. The principles are easy to understand, but the elusive nature of the slave family makes them difficult to apply. Even the concept "family" as it applies to slaves needs reconsideration. With regard to them we might view it as several overlapping concepts. Slavery made it essential that the slave family be a great deal more inclusive than its white counterpart. Its ranks included not only blood relatives but also "adopted" relatives. Few slaves seemed lacking in aunts or uncles, real or otherwise.⁴⁸

The odds against survival of the slave family intact were formidable. To begin with, marriage was not legally binding between slaves in any of the southern states. As late as 1855 there was a petition before the North Carolina Legislature requesting "that the parental relation . . . be acknowledged and protected by law; and that the separation of parents from their young children, say of twelve years and under, be strictly forbidden, under heavy pains and penalties."⁴⁹ Though such memorials were frequent, legislators never heeded them, for their implementation would merely have served to increase the moral questions that bothered many slaveholders, as well as greatly restrict the domestic slave trade. In the main, masters dictated the rules governing slave unions. What they were not able to dictate, however, was the seriousness with which bondsmen took their vows.⁵⁰ These a sizeable majority stood by steadfastly.

Slave marriage ceremonies varied from the symbolic jumping over the broomstick to the official-looking gatherings conducted by a white minister. Interestingly, a twist in the broomstick ceremony in some regions of the South was that if the couple did not jump over the broomstick at the same moment, they had to begin courting all over. We hardly need doubt that deliberate sabotage of the ceremony was at times tempting. Other bondsmen told of rather sordid marriage ceremonies in which they became husbands and wives after being forced to have sexual intercourse

in a master's or overseer's presence.⁵¹ Slaves, however, usually requested marriage by the planter, the ceremony followed by some festivities. One ex-slave remarked about still another possibility: "The field hands are seldom married by a clergyman. They simply invite their friends together, and have a wedding party."⁵² Masters often encouraged or even insisted that slaves marry. Many offered a bounty of several dollars to the newlyweds, while others compelled slaves to marry individuals whom they were not interested in. But in most cases bondsmen selected their partners and went to great lengths to have the marriage solemnized "officially." One mistress wrote of a group of slaves coming through "mud, rain, and darkness to be married. . . . The bride and bride's maid were dressed in white swiss with wreaths of snow drops and evergreen on their heads."⁵³

Once married, separations were usually not a matter of impulse on the slave's part. The domestic trade annulled an inestimable number of unions, but in the instance of voluntary separations some planters wanted to know the causes for the disunion and, in the case of James Henry Hammond of South Carolina, believed in disciplining the offenders. Slaves, nevertheless, have gained a reputation for licentiousness and immorality that is out of proportion, considering the circumstances under which they lived. There were, of course, slaves who had several wives or husbands. But ulterior motives of both slave and master often spawned these arrangements.⁵⁴ One planter thus discouraged his slave Peter from marrying a woman on another plantation because of "temptations to get into the rascality or meanness."⁵⁵ He perhaps suspected that such a marriage would lead to eventual disobedience by Peter should their judgments differ on when Peter might visit his proposed wife. And he probably feared Peter's performing some unauthorized errands. Yet other slaveholders sometimes reasoned that preventing a slave from taking a wife of his choice could lead to serious managerial problems with him. At any rate, slaves whose spouses died often remarried as soon as they could. The practice was not uncommon among planters and overseers as well. It was "very common among slaves themselves to talk of"

marriage, wrote ex-slave William Wells Brown. What bothered him was that after marriage, "some masters, when they have sold the husband from the wife, compel her to take another" almost immediately, ignoring her personal feelings.⁵⁶

At the center of the controversy over the slave family is the bondswoman. Her image usually stands in direct contrast to that of the plantation mistress. While her mistress was pure and dignified, she was tainted and uncouth. The mistress was ethereal and supposedly "begins from the earliest years to think herself a lady,"⁵⁷ whereas the slave woman was all too earthy.⁵⁸ One mistress listed desired behavior for southern women in "A marriage Platform." Rule two called for virtue and discreetness, and rule seven emphasized "setting a right example of the cardinal virtues—meekness, temperance, faith, and love with an eye to Heavens reward her chief end."⁵⁹ All this and more—except heaven's reward—seemed lacking in work-weary female slaves. Capping the entire contrast was the sensuality supposedly characteristic of slaves. Mysterious in its workings, it was thought to make them excellent breeders.

I have tried to capture an argument presented all too frequently, trusting it is clear that the portrayal misrepresents both mistress and slave. The image of slave women as somewhat less than what a woman should be immediately puts in doubt their role as effective members of a family. In fact, the entire slave marriage relationship calls into question the interaction of wife and husband and parent and child in slave culture.⁶⁰

Many past and present researchers have assumed that the slave family was a very loosely organized group whose primary cohesion was provided by women. The black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier capsulized this interpretation in his 1939 study when he characterized the slave mother "as the mistress of the cabin and as the head of the family." Frazier also mentioned that the mother had a "more fundamental interest in her children" and was able to develop "a spirit of independence and a keen sense of her personal rights."⁶¹ His canonization of slave women catapulted them to the forefront of modern discussions about the slave family.

Was he correct in his conclusion about the matriarchal structure of the family? His picture seems somehow too inflexible, for the slave family developed in ways which Frazier seems not to have imagined.

Under some conditions—when slave children were infants—southern laws provided that masters could not divide slave families. What these laws sought primarily to prevent was the separation of child from mother; the father might still be sold.⁶² Indeed, when planters spoke of slave families they often referred to husbandless women and their children. The logic rings familiar even today, in that when a husband and wife legally separate the wife normally obtains custody of the children. We seldom assume, however, that the husband has been a passive agent in the family. Why then should we assume this to be so in the case of the slave, when there is no significant precedent for such an assumption in the slave's African past or in many of his American associations? Of course, this is not to deny that a slave father was a great deal more helpless than a free father today.

A variety of circumstances determined the position of the slave mother as well as the father. If women were the heads of the households, they rarely gained that dominant status among slaves at large. Women worked side by side with men at nearly every task on the plantation, but there were certain duties considered women's work that men declined to do. Some male slaves refused to do washing for this reason. Cooking was usually the task of women, as was sewing and some forms of child care. Sometimes masters punished males by forcing them to work with women labor gangs in the fields or compelling them to wash the family's clothes and attend to house-cleaning. So great was their shame before their fellows that many ran off and suffered the lash on their backs rather than submit to the discipline.⁶³ Men clearly viewed certain chores as women's tasks, and female slaves largely respected the distinction.

In the evening, back at the slave quarters, women gathered in sewing groups to make quilts and small items of clothing. Single

females flirted, but the slave community generally deemed it improper for them to be too aggressive.⁶⁴ Yet the whims of lovers were fully displayed:

We would just sit and talk with each other. I told him one time I didn't love him; I hated him, and then I told him again that I loved him so much I just loved to see him walk. You had to court right there on the place 'cause they had paddlerollers and if you went out without a pass they would whip you.⁶⁵

The interplay often disturbed the quietude of the plantation and quarters settings.

Love potions were a major sales item of local conjurers, whose clientele included married as well as unmarried slaves.⁶⁶ Planters and their wives experimented with potions as well in order to enrich the content of their love lives, too often rent asunder by adversity. Emotional relationships took place at a frantic pace at times; the relationships of slaves particularly must appear unduly hurried to observers who do not reflect upon the uncertain features of their existence. Often females went to great lengths to beautify themselves. When courting ran its full course without intervention by the master, male slaves went all out as well to impress females with their strength and daring. Males showed their bravery by leaving the plantation without passes to hunt or run errands for the current "flame." The women enjoyed the attention paid them. Some of their more robust sisters, nevertheless, had difficulty attracting men, whom they daily embarrassed with outstanding work records.

A family's welfare sometimes compelled fatherless young women to assume male duties at an early age, in order to raise the family's standard of living. Many hunted with great success, for example. Their behavior may have contributed to some general uneasiness male slaves experienced when having their own accomplishments belittled by a comparison with a female's. The contrast might stimulate the male slave to work harder but also gave rise to a good deal of bitterness. At such times, the behavior of the female was vital. If she worked hard because it was her na-

ture, and not to gain any special favors from a master or overseer, bondsmen might not seriously question her conduct.⁶⁷ Some females worked hard to attract the attention of men, perhaps to persuade them that they would continue to be industrious in marriage. This was particularly true of duties they performed for their families. The word passed quickly that they did their share.

The often peculiar marriage and dating relations of bondsmen have caused many scholars to doubt their morality. Females have borne the brunt of unfavorable conjectures. Scores of mulatto children fathered by masters have been used to support arguments that bondswomen were indiscriminate in their selection of male sex partners. Added to this was the fact that in the "southern states the prostitutes of the communities are usually slaves, unless they are imported from the free states. . . ."⁶⁸

Motherhood in bondage provided extremely difficult tests of a slave's energies and identity. The slave had to play the role of wife and mother under circumstances that married her effectiveness at each. Her plantation duties eroded the time she had to spend with husband and children. Distractions were infinite. This was akin to the condition that some planters' wives found themselves in, trapped in a continuous cycle of chores.

Slavery struck most directly at bonds of affection joining husband and wife. The slave trade occasionally separated slaves married only a few weeks. We may suppose that some slaves were reluctant to love anyone deeply under these circumstances. Yet most spent several years with one owner and one husband or wife, and came to know their fellow bondsmen well. Thus when slaves married it was often the consequence of courtship extending over some time. The resultant marriage was steeped in emotional attachment. "Our affection for each other was strong," wrote a slave of his marriage, "and this made us always apprehensive of a cruel parting."⁶⁹ The slave Sam, like so many others, ran away from his Virginia master because he thought "it a hard case to be separated from his wife. . . ."⁷⁰

Planters understood such affections. "You have a woman hired in the neighborhood whose husband we own," began a letter to

Colonel Barksdale of Virginia. His "name is Israel, he is our Blacksmith, and he seems to be so much attached to her we [would] like very much for her to be hired near him . . . would you sell the woman?"⁷¹ A sound marriage meant a better worker for the planter and often a sense of purpose for the slave.

But slavery compelled an uneven husband-wife relationship. A master could physically discipline either while the other stood by helpless, at least for the moment. Slaveowners worked both hard, and they often had little time left to enjoy each other's company in the evening. The relationship nonetheless had many interesting potentials. "A slave possessing nothing . . . except a wife and children, has all his affections concentrated upon them," wrote Francis Fedric.⁷² Occasionally, the marriage partners focused so much attention on each other that the slightest change in the routine of one tended to disrupt the other's habits. Sickness is a good example. Wives and husbands often insisted that they nurse each other back to health, fighting bitterly against efforts to force them into the fields when the possibility of a loved one dying existed. Slaveholders severely punished many and accused them of merely trying to escape duties—but discipline was seldom an effective deterrent. A planter could, of course, make arrangements for such times; expecting that wives and husbands might be off work briefly or difficult to manage during days when important personal matters came up. Sometimes a sick husband would prolong his sickness by refusing to take medicine from any but the hands of his wife, whom he could also trust to find out if someone had "hexed" him.

The marriage and family bond endured an additional hardship when masters hired out either partner, though often slaves saw being hired out as a means of bettering the quality of their lives. The slave Noah Davis was a preacher in Virginia. His master allowed him to travel and deliver sermons to raise money for his freedom. Davis' initial reaction was, "how can I leave my wife and seven children, to go to Baltimore . . . I thought my children would need my watchful care. . . ."⁷³ Other slaves hired

their time to earn money for purchasing additional clothing and articles for the home.

The arrival of children served in large measure to solidify the slave marriage. Yet some parents feared that slaveholders would mistreat offspring or sell them away. A few adults also refused to assume parental responsibilities. They married and had children, but declined or allowed others to take care of them, and were occasionally abusive parents. Still, most assumed parental ties eagerly and were, according to a Mississippi mistress, "all so proud of showing their children."⁷⁴ While discussing the possible sale of a slave to an Annapolis slaveholder, Charles Ridgely wrote that she "is married in the neighborhood and has a family of young children, and would I think now be extremely unwilling to be separated from them. . . ."⁷⁵

In Africa "tribal customs and taboos tended to fix the mother's attitude toward her child before it was born," making children greatly appreciated, and such tendencies were not absent in American slaves.⁷⁶ Few women probably did not devote the attention to them that would be required. The emotional outbursts of mothers following the deaths of infants and their resistance to being parted from offspring, indicated that female slave attitudes in this regard were not markedly distinct from those of mothers world-wide.

In fact, many disruptions of the workday stemmed from slave parents' requests to tend their children. Masters set aside a period during the day for the nursing of babies, but there was also frequent disciplining of bondswomen when they failed to return to their duties on schedule. Yet mothers repeatedly risked the lash in order to allow their body temperatures to cool down enough for effective milk nourishment. Still Moses Grandy observed that overseers forced many to work in the field carrying full breasts of milk. "They therefore could not keep up with the other hands," and when this happened overseers whipped them "so that blood and milk flew mingled from their breasts."⁷⁷ It

yond. An example appears in the opening pages of the fugitive blacksmith's narrative. Following the whipping of his father, J. W. C. Pennington remembered, "an open rupture" developed in his family [against their master]. Each member felt deeply offended by the deed, for they had always believed their conduct and faithfulness was exemplary. They talked of their humiliation in the "nightly gatherings, and showed it in . . . family melancholy aspect."¹²²

Planters' ill-handling of slaves was only one of many factors that brought out family consciousness. Bondsmen's misdeeds against other bondsmen sometimes marked families for harassment and shame. A serious offense, such as stealing another's hunting catches, might lead to brief periods of social isolation, with members of the offending family finding themselves excluded from slave gatherings or nightly ramblings. Bondsmen saw themselves as having their primary identification with a distinct family unit to which they had responsibility and which had responsibility to them.

However, the slave family was ~~confronted~~ with extensions. Quite frequently it seems to have consisted of more than just parents and their natural children.¹²³ It would include a number of blood or adopted relations—uncles, aunts, and cousins—who lived on the same plantation or on nearby estates. Adults "claimed" parentless children, and the slave community seldom neglected old slaves. Local bondsmen usually absorbed new arrivals on a plantation into a family setting and expected them to make a full contribution immediately. But can such a group really be called a family? Slaves considered it as such and treated adopted relatives with real affection.

The extended slave family frequently arose to augment or replace the regular family unit split up by slavery's misfortunes. There were deaths resulting from disease, accidents, and natural causes that left wives husbandless and children without parents. Then there were the family breakups caused by the slave trade. In an important, though not typical, exception, however, Robert Carter of Virginia agreed to sell his slaves to the Baltimore Com-

pany only " . . . if the Company will purchase men their wives & children [ten families]. . . ."¹²⁴

Into the extended family too were taken black mothers with mulatto children. The white father of a black woman's offspring was often known only to herself, sometimes because she feared reprisals if she revealed his name.¹²⁵ Although planters publicly expressed an abhorrence for such unions, and their deepest fears about resistance included visions of slaves taking brides among their wives and daughters, it was their desires, not those of slaves, which were responsible for the rise in the mulatto population. Their own behavior thus seems the source of many of their fears. Traveler Sir Charles Lyell, curious about race mixing, wrote that if slaveholders so abhorred white-black unions, as they professed, "we should not meet with a numerous mixed breed springing up every where from the union of the races." But he did meet with such a breed. His remedy for this was "negro reservations or large territories set apart for free blacks where they might form independent states or communities."¹²⁶

Though slaves had many black children in and out of "official" wedlock, slaveholders and slaves placed a far different interpretation upon having the master's child. Some females willingly mixed their blood with that of planters, and did not try to disguise the fact. But such behavior was greatly frowned upon in the slave quarters, where it was the topic of considerable conversation and malicious gossip. Yet often the offspring of master-slave relationships gained an elevated status—additional privileges in later life. The reverse, however, was just as likely to happen, with mother and child the objects of the planter's wrath. A number of the slave narrators, who had white fathers, write of times when they experienced the scorn of both masters and slaves.

When they were victims of additional mistreatment, these black mothers sometimes blamed their mulatto children for their woes and abused them. But usually they blamed the master. Certainly, mulatto children were taken into the extended family, where they primarily identified with bondsmen, though their light color did inflate some with false pride.¹²⁷ Many black moth-

ers of mulatto children went on to have offspring by slave husbands, and usually treated all their sons and daughters, light and dark, similarly. However the intrusion of masters in such a direct way into the slave family—by mixing their blood in it—intensified animosities between the races. Male slaves resented such intermixture as much as white males did.

In 1800 the slave Ben shot and killed Joseph Gooding, a white man, for consorting with his wife. Ben's wife had been living on a plantation owned by a Mr. Bass, and Ben had "continued to live with her for two or three years when without having done anything to give offence he was ordered by Bass to discontinue coming to his plantation." Ben obeyed the order so as to avoid punishment, but a short time later "he heard that Joe Gooding . . . was very much in favor with Mr. and Mrs. Bass and had taken up with [Ben's] wife. . . ." Two years followed during which Ben was not allowed to visit his wife, and then Bass and Gooding had a falling out. Ben next asked Bass if he might visit his wife again, his love for her having remained strong. Bass agreed. During his trial Ben testified that he had several conversations in which Bass advised him to put Gooding "out of the way," intimating that Ben had justification—since Gooding had had sexual relations with Ben's wife—for killing him. Ben first tried to poison Gooding but accidentally killed his own wife instead. Tormented by "having poisoned the last person in the world he wished to injure," he determined to take his "master's gun out of the house where it generally stood loaded and to go in pursuit of Joe Gooding and shoot him, which he did."¹²⁸

This tragic attempt to reestablish a relationship of husband and wife is a good example of how frantic the slave could become in trying to protect the intimate features of his life. A personal drama, similar to the preceding, in which a slave killed his overseer, occurred in 1859. The slave's lawyer tried to prove "that about nine or ten o'clock in the morning of the day in which the killing took place . . . Coleman, the overseer, had forced her [the slave's wife], the witness[,] to submit to sexual intercourse with him, and . . . she had communicated that fact to the pris-

oner before the killing took place."¹²⁹ The court, reflecting southern mores, ruled that an act of adultery with a slave was not just grounds for such drastic action. But in this type of instance, and in a broader sense as well, slaves might resort to violence when they desired to protect wives, husbands, and children—the family's sanctity.¹³⁰

In slave families wives seldom possessed greater financial stability than husbands, a circumstance that often gives rise to psychological problems in men of minority households in our day. Both worked at tasks that the slave culture did not stigmatize as menial, so there was no need for the male to feel a lack of importance in his family on that score. The power of masters to disrupt families at any time weakened male slaves' sense of responsibility and dignity, but they did not invariably see this as a slight to their manhood. Yet for the slave who experienced the breakup of his household there remained that indelible hurt, as perhaps exemplified by Charles Ball's father, who "never recovered from the effects of the shock" of losing a portion of his family and became "gloomy and morose."¹³¹ Whenever the slave family—natural or extended—was intact, however, and slave males were reliably performing their duties, they most likely did symbolize authority within the family structure.

Except for sales of its members, much of the time slaveholders left the slave family to its own devices. And though the slave trade drove blood relatives apart, bondsmen's common persecution brought many of them back together in extended family groupings which provided for many of the emotional needs whose satisfaction the regular family, had it remained untouched, might have rendered less vexatious. Under these conditions the personalities of bondsmen were certain to gain much strength.