

E
X
H
I
B
I
T

85

The Slave Community

*Plantation Life
in the Antebellum South*

REVISED AND ENLARGED EDITION

JOHN W. BLASSINGAME

New York Oxford
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
1979

Copyright © 1972, 1979 by Oxford University Press, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Blassingame, John W 1940-
The slave community.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Slavery in the United States--Southern States.
2. Plantation life--Southern States. I. Title.

E443.B55 1979 975'.004'96073 78-26890

ISBN 0-19-502562-8

ISBN 0-19-502563-6 pbk.

Printed in the United States of America

4

The Slave Family

O, where has mother gone, papa?
What makes you look so sad?
Why sit you here alone, papa?
Has anyone made you mad?
O, tell me, dear papa.
Has master punished you again?
Shall I go bring the salt, papa,
To rub your back and cure the pain?

W. H. Robinson

The Southern plantation was unique in the New World because it permitted the development of a monogamous slave family. In sharp contrast to the South, the general imbalance in the sex ratio among Latin American slaves severely restricted the development of monogamous mating arrangements. For example, in 1860 there were 156 males for every 100 female slaves in Cuba. The German traveler Alexander von Humboldt found that there was only one female to every four male slaves on most Cuban sugar estates, and in the San Juan de los Remedios region there was only one female to every 19 males. One Cuban plantation that Humboldt visited had 700 males and no female slaves. According to the Cuban Census of 1857, there were 164 males for every 100 females between the ages of 12 and 60. In the countryside the situation was even worse; there were 191 males for every 100 females between the ages of 12 and 60. The imbalance in the sex ratio among Latin American slaves was partly a result of the planter's initial lack of interest in reproducing the slave population and his preference for importing more males than females from Africa. For instance, in the Brazilian coffee-growing county of Vassouras, Stanley Stein found that between 1820 and

1880 70 per cent of the African-born slaves were males. Robert Conrad's analysis of ship manifests in the 1830s and 1840s showed that four out of every five Africans imported into Brazil were males. Whatever the cause, the great disparity in the sex ratio restricted the development of monogamous family patterns among Latin American slaves.¹

The physical basis for the monogamous slave family appears clearly in the sex ratio among slaves in the Southern states. The number of females to every 100 male slaves in the United States was 95.1 in 1820, 98.3 in 1830, 99.5 in 1840, 99.9 in 1850, and 99.3 in 1860. When the sex ratio is broken down by ages, there were 99.8 and 99.1 females for every 100 male slaves over 15 years of age in 1850 and 1860 respectively. The excess of male over female slaves was very slight in the South in comparison with the disparity in Latin America. For example, in 1860 only one Southern state, Missouri, had as many as 109 male to every 100 female slaves. Actually, the sex ratio among slaves was more nearly equal in most Southern states than among whites. In 1860, in the Southern states, there were 106 white males for every 100 white females; in six states there were more than 110 white males for every 100 white females.²

1. Philip D. Curtin, "Epidemiology and the Slave Trade," *Political Science Quarterly* LXXXIII (June 1968), 190-216; Stanley J. Stein, *Vassouras: A Brazilian Coffee County: 1850-1900* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957); Alexander von Humboldt, *Personal Narratives of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent, During the Years 1799-1804* (7 vols., London, 1829), VII, 276-79; Alexander von Humboldt, *The Island of Cuba* (New York, 1856), 189, 203-16, 249; Carl Degler, *Neither Black nor White* (New York, 1971), 36-39; Franklin W. Knight, *Slave Society in Cuba During the Nineteenth Century* (Madison, 1970), 79.

2. *Eighth Census of the United States*, I, 594-95; *Compendium of the Seventh Census* (Washington, D.C., 1854), 87, 91. For earlier surveys of the slave family, see: Bobby F. Jones, "A Cultural Middle Passage: Slave Marriage and Family in the Ante-Bellum South" (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina, 1965); Orville W. Taylor, *Negro Slavery in Arkansas* (Durham, 1958), 189-202; J. Winston Coleman, *Slavery Times in Kentucky* (Chapel Hill, 1940), 57-61; E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago, 1948); E. Franklin Frazier, "The Negro Slave Family," *Journal of Negro History* XV (April 1930), 198-259; Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York, 1976).

Since childhood is the most crucial era in the development of personality, and parents play so large a role in determining behavioral patterns, attitudes, ideals, and values, the slave family must be analyzed in order to understand slave life. The family, while it had no legal existence in slavery, was in actuality one of the most important survival mechanisms for the slave. In his family he found companionship, love, sexual gratification, sympathetic understanding of his sufferings; he learned how to avoid punishment, to cooperate with other blacks, and to maintain his self-esteem. However frequently the family was broken, it was primarily responsible for the slave's ability to survive on the plantation without becoming totally dependent on and submissive to his master. The important thing was not that the family was not recognized legally or that masters frequently encouraged monogamous mating arrangements in the quarters only when it was convenient to do so, but rather that some form of family life did exist among slaves.

While the form of family life in the quarters differed radically from that among free Negroes and whites, this does not mean that it failed to perform many of the traditional functions of the family—the rearing of children being one of the most important of these functions. Since slave parents were primarily responsible for training their children, they could cushion the shock of bondage for them, help them to understand their situation, teach them values different from those their masters tried to instil in them, and give them a referent for self-esteem other than the master.

If he was lucky, the slave belonged to a master who tried to foster the development of strong family ties in the quarters. Although the slaveholders sometimes encouraged monogamous mating arrangements because of their religious views, they generally did so to make it easier to discipline their slaves. A black man, they reasoned, who loved his wife and his children was less likely to be rebellious or to run away than would a “single” slave. The simple threat of being separated from his family was generally sufficient to subdue the most rebellious “married” slave. Besides,



Figure 29. Home

there was less likelihood of fights between slaves when monogamous mating arrangements existed.³

A number of planters attempted to promote sexual morality in the quarters, punished slaves for licentiousness and adultery, and recognized the male as the head of the family. On William J. Minor's plantations, slaves had to give a month's notice before their "marriage" or "divorce."⁴ One planter asserted in 1836 that

3. William Wells Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave* (Boston, 1847), 21-26, 80-90; James Watkins, *Narrative of the Life of James Watkins* (Bolton, Eng., 1852), 18-21; I. E. Lowery, *Life on the Old Plantation in Ante-Bellum Days: Or a Story Based on Facts* (Columbia, S.C., 1911), 42; William O'Neal, *Life and History of William O'Neal* (St. Louis, 1896), 33-41; James L. Smith, *Autobiography of James L. Smith* (Norwich, Conn., 1881), 1-9.

4. J. Carlyle Sitterson, "The William J. Minor Plantations: a Study in Ante-Bellum Absentee Ownership," *Journal of Southern History* IX (Feb. 1943), 59-74; L. Tibbetts to "Sister," Jan. 23, 1853, John C. Tibbetts Cor-

he particularly enjoined upon his slaves, "the observance of their marriage contracts. In no instance do I suffer any of them to violate these ties; except where I would consider myself justified in doing so."⁵ Hugh Davis of Alabama also sought to promote morality on his plantation. He informed his overseer that "all violations of the right of husband and wife and such other immorality will meet with chastisement[.] From 10 to 50 stripes is the general measure of punishment for stated offenses according to their grade."⁶

Most planters were far less successful or interested in promoting morality in the quarters than Hugh Davis. The typical experience was related by a Mississippi planter: "As to their habits of amalgamation and intercourse, I know of no means whereby to regulate them, or to restrain them; I attempted it for many years by preaching virtue and decency, encouraging marriages, and by punishing, with some severity, departures from marital obligations; but it was all in vain."⁷ It is obvious that most slaveholders did not care about the sexual customs of their slaves as long as there was no bickering and fighting. As a result, planters were generally more interested in encouraging monogamy because it was conducive to discipline than because of any interest in encouraging morality in the quarters. According to one planter, "the general rule of the plantation recognized the relation of man and wife and compelled not virtue perhaps, but monogamy."⁸ Many of the plantations were so large that it was impossible for masters to supervise both the labor and the sex life of their slaves. Sexual morality, often imperfectly taught (or violated by whites

respondence; Jan. 4, 1862, Priscilla Bond Diary, Memoranda Book No. 9, Alexandre DeClouet Papers, Louisiana State University Archives; Philip H. Jones, "Reminiscences of Days Before and After the Civil War," Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina; Mathilda Houston, *Hesperos* (2 vols., London, 1850), II, 157-59.

5. *Southern Agriculturalist* IX (Dec. 1836), 626.

6. Weymouth T. Jordan, "The Management Rules of an Alabama Black Belt Plantation, 1848-1862," *Agricultural History* XVIII (Jan. 1944), 64.

7. *DeBow's Review* X (June 1851), 623.

8. John W. DuBose, "Recollections of the Plantations," *Alabama Historical Quarterly* I (Spring 1930), 66.

with impunity), drifted down through a heavy veil of ignorance to the quarters. Consequently, for many slaves, sex was a natural urge frequently fulfilled in casual liaisons. William Wells Brown's mother, for example, had seven children fathered by seven different men, black and white.⁹

The white man's lust for black women was one of the most serious impediments to the development of morality. The white man's pursuit of black women frequently destroyed any possibility that comely black girls could remain chaste for long. Few slave parents could protect their pretty daughters from the sexual advances of white men. This was particularly true when the slaves belonged to a white bachelor or lived near white bachelors. Lucius Holsey's white father, for instance, never married but instead chose successive lovers from among the female slaves on his plantation.¹⁰

The black autobiographers testified that many white men considered every slave cabin as a house of ill-fame. Often through "gifts," but usually through force, white overseers and planters obtained the sexual favors of black women. Generally speaking, the women were literally forced to offer themselves "willingly" and receive a trinket for their compliance rather than a flogging for their refusal and resistance. Frederick Douglass declared that the "slave woman is at the mercy of the fathers, sons or brothers of her master."¹¹ Many of the black autobiographers recounted stories of slave women being forced to submit to white men: Henry Bibb's master forced one slave girl to be his son's concu-

9. Brown, *Narrative*, 1-15; William Grimes, *Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave, Brought Down to the Present Time* (New Haven, 1855), 5-14.

10. Grimes, *Life*, 5-14; Annie L. Burton, *Memories of Childhood's Slavery Days* (Boston, 1909), 3-9; Harriet Martineau, *Retrospect of Western Travel* (3 vols., London, 1838), II, 146-48; Thomas Anburey, *Travels Through the Interior Parts of America* (London, 1789), 385; John Davis, *Travels in the United States of America 1798 to 1802* (2 vols., Boston, 1910), I, 70, II, 141; Robert Sutcliff, *Travels in Some Parts of North America in the Years 1804, 1805 and 1806* (York, Eng., 1811), 53, 101; Victor Tixier, *Travels on the Osage Prairies* (Norman, Okla., 1940), 97.

11. Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York, 1968 [1855]), 60.

bine; M. F. Jamison's overseer raped a pretty slave girl; and Solomon Northup's owner forced one slave, "Patsey," to be his sexual partner. Slave traders frequently engaged in the same kind of practices. Moses Roper, who once helped a slave trader, declared that the traders often had intercourse with the most beautiful black women they purchased. When Henry Bibb and his wife were sold to a trader in Louisville, Kentucky, the trader forced Bibb's wife to become a prostitute.¹²

A number of white men sought more than fleeting relationships with black women. Frequently they purchased comely black women for their concubines. In many cases the master loved his black concubine and treated her as his wife. Jacob Stroyer declared that the white groom on his master's plantation shared his cabin with his black lover and their two daughters. (One of the girls married a white man after the Civil War.) Two of the black autobiographers, Jermain Loguen and John Mercer Langston, lived in such households. Langston's father was a wealthy Virginia planter, Ralph Quarles, who wanted to abolish slavery. Ostracized by his neighbors because of his abolitionist views, Quarles restricted himself almost solely to the company of his slaves. He took Langston's mother, Lucy, as his concubine, made her mistress of his household, and had four children by her. Eventually he freed her and the children. Langston declared that his father treated him "tenderly and affectionately." Early each morning he would rise and tutor his children, and when the boys reached a certain age, he sent them to school in Ohio. Upon the marriage of his daughter to a slave, Quarles purchased and freed her husband and gave them a plantation and some slaves. At his death in 1834, Quarles freed some of his slaves and willed all of his property to his three sons.¹³

12. Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave* (New York, 1849), 98-99, 112-16; Moses Roper, *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper from American Slavery* (London, 1840), 24, 63-66; Bethany Veney, *The Narrative of Bethany Veney, a Slave Woman* (Worcester, Mass., 1889), 26.

13. Israel Campbell, *An Autobiography* (Philadelphia, 1861), 228-35; John Mercer Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation to the National Capital* (Hartford, 1894), 1-36; Jermain Wesley Loguen, *The Rev. J. W. Loguen, as a*

Miscegenation often led to complications in the South. Sometimes, white men loved their black concubines more than they did their white wives. Consequently, the white women sued for, and obtained, divorce. Henry Watson asserted that the wife of a Natchez, Mississippi, slave trader divorced him because of his concubine. White women were frequently infuriated by their husbands' infidelities in the quarters and took revenge on the black women involved. When Moses Roper was born, for example, his mistress tried to kill him when she discovered that her husband was Roper's father. To prevent this, the man sold Roper and his mother.

On innumerable occasions white women also had assignations with black slaves. The evidence from Virginia divorce petitions is conclusive on this point: a Norfolk white man asserted in 1835 that his wife had "lived for the last six or seven years and continues to live in open adultery with a negro man. . . ." A Nansemond County white man declared in 1840 that his wife had given birth to a mulatto child and that she had "recently been engaged in illicit intercourse with a negro man at my own house and on my own bed." In many cases the sexual relations between Negro men and white women went undetected because the children resulting from such unions were light enough to pass for white. For example, one Virginian testified that when his white wife gave birth to a mulatto he "did not at first doubt [it] to be his, notwithstanding its darkness of color, and its unusual appearance." One white woman in eighteenth-century Virginia who had a mulatto child convinced her husband that the child was dark because someone had cast a spell on her. (He believed the story for eighteen years.)¹⁴

Regardless of the actions of the planters, the courtship pattern in the quarters differed, in many respects, from that of whites. An imperfect understanding of the unnatural puritanical code of their masters freed blacks from the insuperable guilt complexes

Slave and as a Freedman (Syracuse, N.Y., 1859), 19-37; Jacob Stroyer, *My Life in the South* (Salem, 1890), 30-37.

14. James H. Johnston, *Race Relations in Virginia and Miscegenation in the South, 1776-1860* (Amherst, Mass., 1970), 253-56.

that enslaved nineteenth-century white Americans in regard to sex. Besides, they argued, they could gain nothing from observing this part of the American creed when whites considered them outside the rest of it. Consequently, freed from social restraints, young slave men pursued their black paramours with a reckless abandon which was often the envy of their white masters.

Viewing the courting of their young masters, the slaves imitated their language and then transformed the American ritual by adding elements from African courtship and betrothal practices. Traditionally, Africans resorted to metaphor, indirection, story-telling, poems, songs, riddles, and symbolic language in their courtship and betrothal rituals. During courtship among the Ewe, for example,

Whether the girl is interested or not, tradition and good form demand that at first she simulate indifference and even dislike. . . . A youth must not only be witty and ready to flatter the girl effusively, he must also be ready to answer and counter any questions she may ask. Girls are never willing to succumb without testing the ability of the youth as a person well versed in wooing tactics. . . . Some girls say they try to be impossible only to pull the legs of youths they find to be inexperienced. Others say they would be considered cheap if they gave in readily, but they also consider that should they become too difficult their suitors might leave them and look for other girls, so that although they are neither easy with their virtue nor give straight answers to proposals, they can do their best to make it known to a youth that they are not altogether averse to him. This is usually done by polite prevarications and tricky evasions. Both words and actions are needed during the period of wooing.¹⁵

15. G. K. Nukunya, *Kinship and Marriage Among the Anlo Ewe* (London, 1969), 79-80; see also: John W. Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony* (Baton Rouge, 1977), 643; Heli Chatelain, "Folklore in an African's Life," *Southern Workman* XXV (Aug. 1896), 164-66; Marie-André du Sacre-Cœur, *The House Stands Firm: Family Life in West Africa* (Milwaukee, 1962), 74-75; George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (31 vols., Westport, Conn., 1972-77), XIII, pt. 4:124; Orland Kay Armstrong, ed., *Old Massa's People: The Old Slaves Tell Their Story* (Indianapolis, 1931), 153-57, 159-63; Ronnie C. Tyler and Lawrence R. Murphy, eds., *The Slave*

The combination of African and American elements led to the evolution of unique courtship practices in the slave quarters.

Courtship in the quarters was based on a highly formalized ritual involving the propounding of a series of questions to determine one's availability as a sexual partner. A verbal duel, the ritual varied slightly from state to state and was taught to the young by old men and women. The slaves believed that in order to win a mate, a young man or woman had to "know how to talk."¹⁶ The courtship ritual consisted of riddles, poetic boasting, sexual innuendos, figurative speech, circumlocution, and was a test of wit. A major preoccupation in the ritual was the asking of metaphorical questions to determine whether a young man or woman was free to go courting and whether an individual would be accepted as a suitor. In a characteristic wooing of a maiden, the following conversation ensued:

HE. My dear kin' miss, has you any objections to me drawing my cher to yer side, and revolvin' de wheel of my conversation around de axle of your understanding?

SHE. I has no objection to a gentleman addressin' me in a proper manner, kin' sir.

HE. My dear miss, de worl' is a howlin' wilderness full of devourin' animals, and you has got to walk through hit. Has you made up yer min' to walk through hit by yerself, or wid some bol' wahyer?¹⁷

Narratives of Texas (Austin, 1974), 75; Charles L. Perdue *et al.*, *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves* (Charlottesville, 1976), 96; R. C. Abraham, *The Tiv People* (Lagos, 1933), 211; Ulli Beier, ed., *Yoruba Poetry* (Cambridge, Eng., 1970), 24, 67-72, 122-23; Francis M. Deng, ed., *The Dinka and Their Songs* (Oxford, Eng., 1973), 20-22, 43-46, 79-83.

16. "Old Time Courtship," *Southern Workman* XXIV (Jan. 1895), 14-15; "Courtship," *ibid.*, XXIV (May 1895), 78; "Courtship Customs," *ibid.*, XXV (Jan. 1896), 15-16; "Courtship in Old Virginia," *ibid.*, XXV (Feb. 1896), 38; Daniel Webster Davis, "Echoes from a Plantation Party," *ibid.*, XXVIII (Feb. 1899), 54-59; Rawick, *American Slave*, V, pt. 4:49-50, VI (Alabama), 307; (Supplement), IV, 630-31.

17. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are from material gathered by the Hampton Folklore Society and published in the articles in the *Southern Workman* cited in note 16.

For the most part, the young man initiated the courting. As in many courtship rituals, flattery was a constant; young men wasted little time demonstrating how they regarded the young women. Interjected with flattery was almost always a question about the young woman's availability as a partner: "Kin' lady, since I have been trav' lin up hill, vally an mountain, I nebber seed a lady dat suit my fancy mo' so den you does. Now is you a towel dat had been spun, or a towel dat had been woven. (Answer—if spun, single.)"

Having found a towel that was spun, the young man would begin boasting of his prowess and proclaiming, through poetic allusions, his love for her: "I love you, kind Miss, harder dan a mule can kick up de hill backwards." The poetry of love resonated through the quarters. Similar in structure to African ones, the poetic effusions of young slaves were promises and pledges. Young men spent a great deal of time creating or memorizing the poems in an effort to win the maidens of their choice. Seeking to widen the province of his pleasures, a young man would ask a young woman:

If you was passin' by
And seed me hangin' high
Would you cut me down and lie
Or would you let me hang there an die?

If a young lady seemed to doubt the young man's professions of interest and sincerity, he might say:

O, when I first saw you lovely face,
Laugh at me if you will,
My heart jumped clean out of its place.
I could not keep it still.

While men were clearly the initiators during courtship in the quarters, women controlled, by their answers to the questions propounded by the men, the pace, the length, and determined the success or failure of the wooing. Initially, the woman's reactions might vary from indifference to slight interest. Thus, she challenged the young man to arouse her interest, to earn her love. A

young man's initial queries might elicit a *promise* of a response as soon as he proved "dat it is not for er form and er fashion dat you put de question." Further claims of sincerity might lead the young lady to respond: "I has knowed many a gentleman to talk wid wise words and flatterin' looks, and at de same time he may have a deceivin' heart." While this was the general pattern, the young slave girl did not hesitate when she met a man who was attractive to her. Instead, she answered the man's questions unambiguously in ways to indicate her desire for him. In the courtship ritual she became the initiator. To a simple greeting a young lady might respond: "Honorable mister, at dis time presen' my ears is a waitin' an' a listenin' to hear from your sweet little lips some words. Thirty years I's been looking to de eas' an' lookin' to de wes' to see some one to suit my fancies mo' so dan you has." Sometimes young women initiated the ritual by trying to determine if the young men preferred them. Attempting to fathom a suitor's intentions, a young lady might say: "'Suppose you was walkin' by de side o' de river an dere was three ladies in a boat, an' dat boat was overturned, which lady would you save, a tall lady or a short lady or a middle-sized lady?'" If the young man asserted that he would save a lady corresponding in height to his questioner, it signified he was interested in her.

The young slaves did much of their courting at plantation parties on Saturday and Sunday nights, at molasses stews (similar to taffy pullings), watermelon feasts, corn-shuckings, and dances. A favorite pastime at the parties was ring games enabling young men to kiss the ladies.¹⁸ Daniel Webster Davis gave a clear portrait of plantation parties when he wrote:

The party would start off with a general greeting and conversation. Telling tales, some of them calculated to "freeze the young blood, and cause each particular hair to stand on end like quills upon the fretful porcupine," was a common mode of entertaining. Next would come the guessing of riddles propounded by the more erudite portion of the company or "pulling handkerchiefs" for kisses. "Fruit in the Basket," "Walking

18. Rawick, *American Slave*, II, pt. 1:171, 222, 302, 304, pt. 2:89, XII, pt. 1:81, 163, 170, pt. 2:6, 151, 216, 348.

the Lonesome Road," "I'm in the Well," and "Fishing," were devices for getting a kiss from some fair one. In the play "I'm in the Well," a gentleman would make the startling announcement that he was in the well. Some sympathizing friend would ask, "How many feet deep?" and it is surprising how many feet a fellow could get in the well, if some pretty girl asked the question. He would then be asked, "Who will you have to pull you out?" He would answer, "Miss so and so," and the lady mentioned would be expected to kiss him as many times as he was feet deep in the well. This was certainly a most pleasant way to be rescued from drowning. By this effort the lady would get into the well herself and have to be rescued in like manner.

The cakewalk was a perennial at such parties. So was the singing of those secular songs which were the precursors of the blues. Lusty songs about courting and love, they were filled with metaphoric references to sexual intercourse.

The slaves' attitude toward sex and procreation was an amalgam of European and African beliefs. Determined largely by extended kinship networks and religious obligations, the sexual attitudes of traditional African societies differed greatly from those current in Europe and antebellum America. Premarital sex among some African peoples was institutionalized soon after the onset of puberty and among others accepted as a normal part of the courtship process. Some African peoples, however, such as the Hausa and Nupe of Nigeria, required premarital virginity. Africans viewed sex as fundamental to procreation, and procreation as a religious duty to ensure the continuation of the family line established by one's ancestors. Barrenness was a calamity in Africa.¹⁹ While providing socially sanctioned forms for engaging

19. Felix Bryk, *Dark Rapture: The Sex-Life of the African Negro* (New York, 1975), 74-98, 127-43; E. Franklin Frazier, "Negro, Sex Life of the African and American," *The Encyclopedia of Sexual Behavior* (New York, 1961), 769-75; Arthur Phillips, ed., *Survey of African Marriage and Family Life* (London, 1953); Daryll Forde and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, eds., *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage* (London, 1950), 46-85, 252-84; K. A. Busia, *Report on a Social Survey of Sekondi-Takoradi* (London, 1950), 30-33; A. W. Cardinall, *The Natives of the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast* (London, 1920), 75-81; Abraham, *The Tiv People*, 149-50; M. J. Field, *Social Organization of the Gá People* (London, 1940), 37-44; Daryll Forde,

in premarital sex, African societies generally forbade extramarital sex, punishing adulterers with heavy fines, divorce, slavery, and sometimes death.²⁰

Because Africans so highly valued children, they could neither conceive of the European concept of celibacy nor, like the European, regard sexual intercourse as dirty, evil, or sinful. Puberty rites in West Africa, for instance, were either preceded or followed by training of the young in their sexual responsibilities. Some societies concluded puberty rites of young girls with defloration.²¹

As he was gradually transformed into an Afro-American, the Southern slave lost the African religious significance of sex and procreation. What he retained was the belief that sex was a natural act largely unconnected with sin. The christianization of the slave, however, brought ambivalence toward sex to the quarters in the nineteenth century. White ministers, for example, repeatedly railed against the continuation of the African tradition of polygamy in the quarters. They called upon the slaves to adopt Christian monogamy and to cleave to one mate throughout their lives. In numerous sermons and catechisms prepared especially for the slaves the ministers stressed Biblical prohibitions against premarital sexual intercourse, adultery, fornication, and the separation of mates. Typical of the lessons thousands of slaves learned was the section in the 1837 catechism published by South Carolina Episcopalians, where young blacks memorized such passages as "Thou shalt not commit adultery. . . . Our

Paula Brown, and Robert G. Armstrong, *Peoples of the Niger-Benue Confluence* (London, 1955), 42-44, 60-61, 67-68; Gladwyn M. Childs, *Kinship & Character of the Ovimbundu* (London, 1969), 111-18.

20. Robert F. Gray and P. H. Gulliver, eds., *The Family Estate in Africa* (London, 1964), 97, 102-3; Meyer Fortes, *Kinship and the Social Order* (London, 1969), 146, 155-57; A. B. Ellis, *The Ewe-Speaking Peoples of the Slave Coast of West Africa* (London, 1890), 199-207; Adrian C. Edwards, *The Ovimbundu Under Two Sovereignties* (London, 1962), 115, 122.

21. G. T. Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria* (Philadelphia 1921), 75; C. M. N. White, *Tradition and Change in Luvale Marriage* (London, 1962), 2-8, 11.

Saviour saith, He who looketh on a woman, to lust after her, hath committed adultery with her already in his heart. . . . St. Paul saith, Fornication and all uncleanness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints; neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient. . . . St. Paul saith, Let every man have his own wife, and every woman her own husband." The catechumens also learned they should avoid "impure thoughts," "lewd and filthy words," that fornication was "a great sin," a disgrace, "a sin against God," leading to "falsehoods, and jealousies, and murders, and loss of health." God would punish adulterers in "everlasting Hell" or, like the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, destroy them.²²

Although the link between sin and sex was not as pervasive among slaves as among whites, it was an inevitable concomitant of the christianization of the blacks. Christian slaves often taught their children, for instance, that "shame" and premarital sex were the same. The children of such slaves learned little about sex except Christian injunctions against it before marriage. Minnie Folkes, a former Virginia slave, typified the impact of such practices when she recalled: "I married when I wuz 14 years old. So help me God, I didn't know what marriage meant. . . . I slept in bed—he on his side an' I on mine fer three months an dis ain't no lie . . . he never got close to me 'cause my muma sed 'Don't let nobody bothev yo' principle'; 'cause dat wuz all yo' had. I 'bey my muma, an' tol' him so, and I said to go an' ask muma an ef she sed he could get close to me hit waz alright." A South Carolina slave, Harry Macmillan, asserted in 1863, that, though many slave women engaged in premarital sexual intercourse, "They regard it as a disgrace and the laws of the Church are against it." When unmarried women became pregnant, Macmillan testified, "they are thought less of among their companions,

22. Protestant Episcopal Church, South Carolina, *A Catechism, To Be Used by Teachers in the Religious Instruction of Persons of Color* (Charleston, 1837); see also: *Southern Episcopalian*, I (1854), 5-8, VI (1859), 369-75; Charles C. Jones, *A Catechism for Colored Persons* (Charleston, 1834); *Instruction from the Book of Common Prayer, for Plantations by a Clergyman* (Charleston, 1854).

unless they get a husband and before the child is born, and if they cannot the shame grows until they do get a husband."²³

Sexual conquest became a highly respected avenue to status in the quarters. The slave caroused with black damsels on his own plantation and slipped away, with or without a pass, to other estates until he was smitten by love. He persistently pursued the one of his choice often over a long period of courtship. He flattered her, exaggerated his prowess, and tried to demonstrate his ambition and especially his ability to provide for her. If he won her affections, he often had to obtain the consent of her parents. This was almost always required in the few cases where slave men married free women. In some cases the slaves were engaged for as much as a year before their union was consummated. In the interim, the prospective husband prepared a cabin and furniture for his family, and the prospective wife collected utensils she would need to establish a household.²⁴

Love is no small matter for any man; for a slave it represented one of the major crises in his life. Many slaves vowed early in life never to marry and face separation from loved ones. If they had to marry, the slave men were practically unanimous in their desire to marry women from another plantation. They did not want to marry a woman from their own and be forced to watch as she was beaten, insulted, raped, overworked, or starved without being able to protect her. John Anderson declared that when he was contemplating marriage: "I did not want to marry a girl belonging to my own place, because I knew I could not bear to see her ill-treated."²⁵ Henry Bibb felt the same way. He contended: "If my wife must be exposed to the insults and licentious passions of wicked slavedrivers and overseers; if she must bear the stripes of the lash laid on by an unmerciful tyrant; if this is to be done with impunity, which is frequently done by slave-

23. Perdue, *Weevils*, 95-96; Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 382; Gutman, *Black Family*, 60-86; Todd L. Savitt, *Medicine and Slavery* (Urbana, 1978), 128.

24. Brown, *Narrative*, 88-90; Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave* (London, 1853), 191-222; Stroyer, *My Life*, 15-20.

25. John Anderson, *The Story of the Life of John Anderson, a Fugitive Slave* (London, 1863), 129.

holders and their abettors, Heaven forbid that I should be compelled to witness the sight."²⁶ Most of the slaves tried every stratagem to avoid being placed in this position. Moses Grandy summed up the general view when he wrote: "no colored man wishes to live at the house where his wife lives, for he has to endure the continual misery of seeing her flogged and abused, without daring to say a word in her defence."²⁷

Unfortunately for most slaves, the master had the final word in regard to their marriage partners. Most slaveholders, feeling that the children their male slaves had by women belonging to other planters was so much seed spewed on the ground, insisted that they marry women on their own estates. Such a practice placed all of the slave's interests under the control of the master and gave the slave fewer excuses to leave the estate. Some masters brought both of the prospective mates together and inquired if they understood the seriousness of their undertaking. If they belonged to different masters it was often more difficult for them to obtain the consent of either one. But, if both the lovers persistently spurned prospective partners on their own plantations, the planters, by mutual agreement, might resolve the controversy. Wealthy masters frequently purchased the female slave and thereby won the loyalty of the male. If the matter could not be resolved by the planters, the love might be consummated in spite of their objections. The marriage ceremony in most cases consisted of the slaves' simply getting the master's permission and moving into a cabin together. The masters of domestic servants either had the local white minister or the black plantation preacher perform the marriage ceremony and then gave a sumptuous feast in their own parlors to the slave guests. Afterwards, the slaves had long dances in the quarters in honor of the couple.²⁸

26. Bibb, *Adventures*, 42.

27. Moses Grandy, *Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy* (London, 1843), 25.

28. John Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia* (London, 1855), 31-44; Lunsford Lane, *The Narrative of Lunsford Lane* (Boston, 1848), 9-16; Thomas Jones, *The Experiences of Thomas Jones, Who Was a Slave for Forty-three Years* (Boston, 1850), 29-36; W. H. Robinson, *From Log Cabin to the Pulpit* (Eau

One aspect of slave nuptials confused their descendants and later historians. On many plantations masters and slaves developed a humorous test to determine who would exercise the most authority in a union. As part of the post-nuptial revelries, the couple was required to jump over a broom stick. The partner jumping over first, highest, or without falling was recognized by the wedding party as the one who would "wear the pants" or rule the family. Tempie Herndon, over a hundred years old when interviewed in the 1930s, had a vivid recollection of the pre- and post-nuptial revelries when she married:

When I growed up I married Exter Durham. . . . We had a big weddin'. We was married on de front porch of de Big House. Marse George killed a shoat and Mis' Betsy had Georgianna, de cook, to bake a big weddin' cake all iced up white as snow with a bride and groom standin' in de middle holdin' hands. . . . I had on a white dress, white shoes, and long white gloves dat come to my elbow, and Mis' Betsy done made me a weddin' veil out of a white net window curtain. When she played de weddin' march on de piano, me and Exter marched down de walk and up on de porch to de altar Mis' Betsy done fixed. Dat de prettiest altar I ever seed. Back 'against de rose vine dat was full of red roses, Mis' Betsy done put tables filled with flowers and white candles. She done spread down a bed sheet, a sure 'nough linen sheet, for us to stand on, and dey was a white pillow to kneel down on. . . . Uncle Edmond Kirby married us. He was de nigger preacher dat preached at de plantation church. After Uncle Edmond said de last words over me and Exter, Marse George got to have his little fun. He say, "Come on, Exter, you and Tempie got to jump over de broom stick backwards. You got to do dat to see which one gwine be boss of your household." Everybody come stand round to watch. Marse George hold de broom about a foot high off de floor. De one dat jump over it backwards, and neve touch handle, gwine boss de house. If both of dem jump ove without touchin' it, dey won't gwine be no bossin', dey jus

Claire, Wis., 1913), 152-63; Charles Sealsfield, *The Americans as They Are* (London, 1828), 133; Tixier, *Travels*, 47; Amelia Murray, *Letters from the United States, Cuba and Canada* (New York, 1856), 224, 351.

gwine be congenial. I jumped first, and you ought to seed me. I sailed right over dat broom stick same as a cricket. But when Exter jump he done had a big dram and his feets was so big and clumsy dat dey got all tangled up in dat broom and he fell headlong. Marse George he laugh and laugh, and told Exter he gwine be bossed 'twell he scared to speak lessen I told him to speak.²⁹

Looking back on bondage from the 1930s, blacks who had been children watching such ceremonies often conflated the wedding ritual and the post-nuptial jumping of the broom. Either they had not seen or had forgotten the wedding ceremony. Often children were misled because their parents used the metaphor "jumping the broom" when discussing weddings of any sort. Consequently, when asked by the WPA interviewers how slaves got married, the informants reported that the bondsmen literally jumped over the broom. Historians did not closely examine what the slaves told the WPA interviewers and were misled about the character of wedding ceremonies in the quarters. Significantly, black informants who had been adults in 1860, who were interviewed before the 1930s or who wrote nineteenth-century autobiographies rarely mentioned jumping the broom stick except *after* a more formal ceremony.³⁰

Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, and Episcopalians all devoted a great deal of attention to the wedding ceremony in the quarters.³¹ Concerned about the impact of sexual immorality on

29. Norman R. Yetman, ed., *Voices from Slavery* (New York, 1970), 164; see also: Rawick, *American Slave*, V, pt. 5:329-30; Ronald Killion and Charles Waller, eds., *Slavery Time When I Was Chillun down on Marster's Plantation: Interviews with Georgia Slaves* (Savannah, 1973), 45-46.

30. Gutman, *Black Family*, 275-81; George Rawick, *From Sunup to Sundown* (Westport, Conn., 1972), 86-87; Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (New York, 1974), 475; Armstrong, *Old Massa's People*, 166; Perdue, *Weevils*, 36, 134, 245; Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 23, 262, 525, 591-92, 639; James Redpath, *The Roving Editor: Or, Talks with Slaves in the Southern States* (New York, 1859), 40, 66, 164-65, 173, 313-14.

31. For the spirited but largely undocumented debate over the role of whites in shaping the slave family, see Frazier, *The Negro Family* and Gutman, *The Black Family*. Donald Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago, 1977), presents a good brief analysis of the Southern churches' concern with the slave family.

both blacks and whites, the clergymen earnestly worked to guarantee that slaves were united in Christian ceremonies. The Georgia clergy had one of the longest traditions in this regard, for when the Board of Trustees governing the colony authorized the introduction of slavery in 1749, it ordered that Christian ceremonies be employed when slaves married and made ministers responsible for this task. The pronouncements of Southern associations, synods, presbyteries, and conferences on slave weddings constitute a monotonous refrain in their annual proceedings after 1840. First, many of the denominations required their ministers and missionaries to perform slave weddings.³² The resolution of the Presbytery of Lexington, Kentucky, was typical: "That our coloured people be taught the sacredness and perpetuity of the marriage relation; and it is further recommended that proper efforts should be made to have the rites of matrimony celebrated, in all cases among them, with due solemnity and in accordance with the word of God."³³ Second, most Southern ministers also repeatedly urged masters to promote morality in the quarters by requiring slaves to be married by regularly ordained ministers and to observe the obligations of marriage. Between 1830 and 1860 many denominations required all slave members to take their marriage vows in the church.³⁴ While it is relatively easy to document the desire of the white clergy to have ministers perform slave weddings, it is difficult to determine with

32. Charles C. Jones, *Suggestions on the Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the Southern States* (Philadelphia, 1847), 47-48; Henry T. Malone, *The Episcopal Church in Georgia, 1733-1957* (Atlanta, 1960), 29; Charles F. Deems, ed., *Annals of Southern Methodism for 1855* (Nashville, 1856), 223; James B. Sellers, *Slavery in Alabama* (University, Ala., 1950), 322-23.

33. Jones, *Suggestions*, 48.

34. Jones, *Suggestions*, 23; *Southern Literary Messenger* X (1844), 329-39; Charles C. Jones, *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes. A Sermon, Delivered Before Associations of Planters in Liberty and McIntosh Counties, Georgia* (Princeton, 1832), 7; *Southern Episcopalian* V (1858), 487; *Southern Presbyterian Review* VIII (1854), 275; *Seventh Annual Report of the Association for the Religious Instruction of the Negroes in Liberty County, Ga.* (Savannah, 1842), 4-5; Lewis M. Purifoy, "Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and Slavery, 1844-1865" (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina, 1965), 172-73; *Journal, Protestant Episcopal Church of South Carolina, 1839* (Charleston, 1839), 29.

any certainty how many slave weddings the ministers actually performed. Planter letters and journals, the diaries and autobiographies of ministers, the manuscript records of specific churches and slave interviews do, however, contain frequent notations of white clergymen performing slave weddings.³⁵

"Even in the observance of 'Holy Matrimony,' the slaves seem to have been more scrupulous than their masters," an abolitionist wrote incredulously when reviewing a Southern church publication in 1854.³⁶ Abolition doubts notwithstanding, thousands of slaves were married in Southern churches between 1800 and 1860. For example, out of a total of 1228 marriages performed in Episcopal churches in South Carolina, Alabama, North Carolina, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Virginia in 1860, at least 469, or 38.1 per cent, were slave weddings. At many times between 1830 and 1860 more slaves were married in the Episcopal churches in some states than were whites. Between 1841 and 1860 Episcopal ministers performed 3225 weddings in South Carolina; 1705, or 52 per cent, of these were slave marriages. In practically every state for which statistics exist for the years 1841 to 1860, slaves accounted for a larger percentage of the marriages than they did of the members of the Episcopal church. While Alabama slaves, for instance, accounted for between 14.5 and 32.9 per cent of the marriages performed in the Episcopal

slaves
outnumber
whites

35. R. Q. Mallard, *Plantation Life Before Emancipation* (Richmond, 1892), 49; Alfred M. Pierce, *A History of Methodism in Georgia* (Atlanta, 1956), 132; William H. Milburn, *Ten Years of Preacher Life: Chapters from an Autobiography* (New York, 1859), 337-38; Joseph D. Cushman, Jr., *A Goodly Heritage: The Episcopal Church in Florida, 1821-1892* (Gainesville, Fla., 1965), 36; *Journal, P. E. Church, Virginia, 1844* (Richmond, 1844), 58; "The Slave Wedding," *Maryland Colonization Journal* VI (July 1851), 31-32; "Letter from a Mississippi Slaveholder," *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, Sept. 9, 1854; H. B. B. to the Editor, *ibid.*, Oct. 4, 1849; Rawick, *American Slave*, II, pt. 1:300, VI (Alabama), 307, pt. 5:57, pt. 1:79, 244, pt. 2:95, 296, XIII, pt. 3:125, pt. 4:70, 118; (Supplement), II, 73-74, III, 251, 273, IV, 396, 442, XI, 136; Henry W. Ravenel, "Recollections of Southern Plantation Life," *Yale Review* XXV (Summer 1936) 756; Stiles B. Lines, "Slaves and Churchmen: The Work of the Episcopal Church Among Southern Negroes, 1830-1860" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1960), 228-29.

36. J. W. Simmons to the editor (n.d.), *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, Aug. 19, 1854.

Church between 1848 and 1860, they never represented more than 7.9 per cent of the total membership. Scattered and irregular reports of other denominations indicate that a sizable number of slaves were married in Southern churches.³⁷

White churches continued to exercise moral oversight over the slaves after their weddings. Frequently investigating charges of adultery and fornication, the churches tried to promote the development of Christian moral precepts in the quarters. Consequently, they often excommunicated or publicly criticized slaves for abandoning their mates, having premarital pregnancies, and engaging in extramarital sex. Since an overwhelming majority of the cases were brought to the attention of the church by the slave members, the increase in the charges of moral lapses between 1830 and 1860 represented the spread of Christian moral precepts in the quarters.³⁸

separation One of the first great issues confronting Southern churches with black members was the impact of the forcible separation of mates upon a slave union. (When a slave whose mate had been sold wanted to have a wedding or continue in fellowship with the church after taking a new mate, the clergy had to reconsider the meaning of marriage. Southern churches struggled with this issue throughout the antebellum period. Strict constructionists, reading Biblical injunctions literally, argued that the forcible separation of mates did not dissolve a slave union. North Caro-

37. See Appendix III, tables 10 and 11, for statistics on marriages and communicants.

38. Mary W. Highsaw, "A History of Zion Community in Maury County, 1806-1860," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* V (June 1946), 111-40; William H. Gehrke, "Negro Slavery Among the Germans in North Carolina," *North Carolina Historical Review* XIV (Oct. 1937), 304-24; Leah Townsend, *South Carolina Baptists, 1670-1805* (Florence, S.C., 1935), 241, 259; Walter Brownlow Posey, *The Presbyterian Church in the Old Southwest, 1778-1838* (Richmond, 1952), 88; *Journal, P. E. Church, South Carolina, 1848* (Charleston, 1848), 48; Jones, "Cultural Middle Passage," 156-57; John D. Long, *Pictures of Slavery in Church and State* (Philadelphia, 1857), 85-86; Annie H. Mallard, "Religious Work of South Carolina Baptists Among the Slaves from 1781 to 1830" (M.A. thesis, University of South Carolina, 1946), 34, 67-75; Robert O. Fife, "Alexander Campbell and the Christian Church in the Slavery Controversy" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1960), 115-20; Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion* (New York, 1978), 184-85.

lina's Broad River Baptist Association typified the strict constructionists in its 1820 answer to a query from one of its churches: "How shall a church proceed with a member in slavery whose companion was taken away out of the country and sold, and the member left has married another?" Answer, 'Agreeably to the Scriptures, the church could not hold such an one in fellowship.' " Recognizing the practical hardships involved in the strict constructionist's position, many ministers contended that a forcible separation was tantamount to the death of one's mate or equivalent to divorce by the state (since permitted by its laws) and allowed remarriage. Whatever the positions adopted, Southern churches never rested easy with "double marriages" among slaves. It appeared to many clergymen that masters were forcing their slaves into polygamy by separating mates.³⁹

In spite of the fact that some men had two wives simultaneously, there was a great deal of respect for the monogamous family. Whether the result of religious teachings, the requirements of the master, or the deep affection between mates, many slaves had only one partner. Henry Box Brown, for instance, refused his master's order to take another mate after his wife was sold because he felt marriage "was a sacred institution binding upon me." Affection was apparently the most important factor which kept partners together. This emerges most clearly in the lamentations and resentments which pervade the autobiographies over the separation of family members. Frequently when their mates were sold, slaves ran away in an effort to find them. The fear of causing disaffection forced planters to recognize the strength of the monogamous family; they frequently sold a slave in the neighborhood of his mate when they moved their slaves farther South. Because they were denied all the protection which the law afforded, slaves had an almost mythological respect for legal marriage. Henry Bibb believed that "there are no class of people in the United States who so highly appreciate the legality of marriage as those persons who have been held and treated as

39. John R. Logan, *Sketches, Historical and Biographical, of the Broad River and King's Mountain Baptist Associations, from 1800 to 1882* (Shelby, N.C., 1887), 38.

property."⁴⁰ In no class of American autobiographies is more stress laid upon the importance of stable family life than in the autobiographies of former slaves.

After marriage, the slave faced almost insurmountable odds in his efforts to build a strong stable family. First, and most important of all, his authority was restricted by his master. Any decision of his regarding his family could be countermanded by his master. The master determined when both he and his wife would go to work, when or whether his wife cooked his meals, and was often the final arbiter in family disputes. In enforcing discipline, some masters whipped both man and wife when they had loud arguments or fights. Some planters punished males by refusing to let them visit their mates when they lived on other plantations. In any event, these slaves could only visit their mates with their master's permission. When the slave lived on the same plantation with his mate, he could rarely escape frequent demonstrations of his powerlessness. The master, and not the slave, furnished the cabin, clothes, and the minimal food for his wife and children. Under such a regime slave fathers often had little or no authority.⁴¹

The most serious impediment to the man's acquisition of status in his family was his inability to protect his wife from the sexual advances of whites and the physical abuse of his master. Instead, according to Austin Steward, slave husbands had to "submit without a murmur" when their wives were flogged.⁴² Sometimes, in spite of the odds, the men tried to protect their mates. W. H. Robinson's father once told him that he "lay in the woods eleven months for trying to prevent your mother from being whipped."⁴³ The black male frequently could do little to protect his wife from the sexual advances of whites. Most whites, however, realized that a liaison with a slave's wife could be dangerous. Occasionally, slaves killed white men for such acts. Gen-

40. Henry Box Brown, *Narrative of Henry Box Brown* (Boston, 1851), 57; Bibb, *Adventures*, 152.

41. Douglass, *Bondage*, 51.

42. Austin Steward, *Twenty-two Years a Slave, and Forty Years a Freeman* (Rochester, N.Y., 1861), 18.

43. Robinson, *Pulpit*, 25.

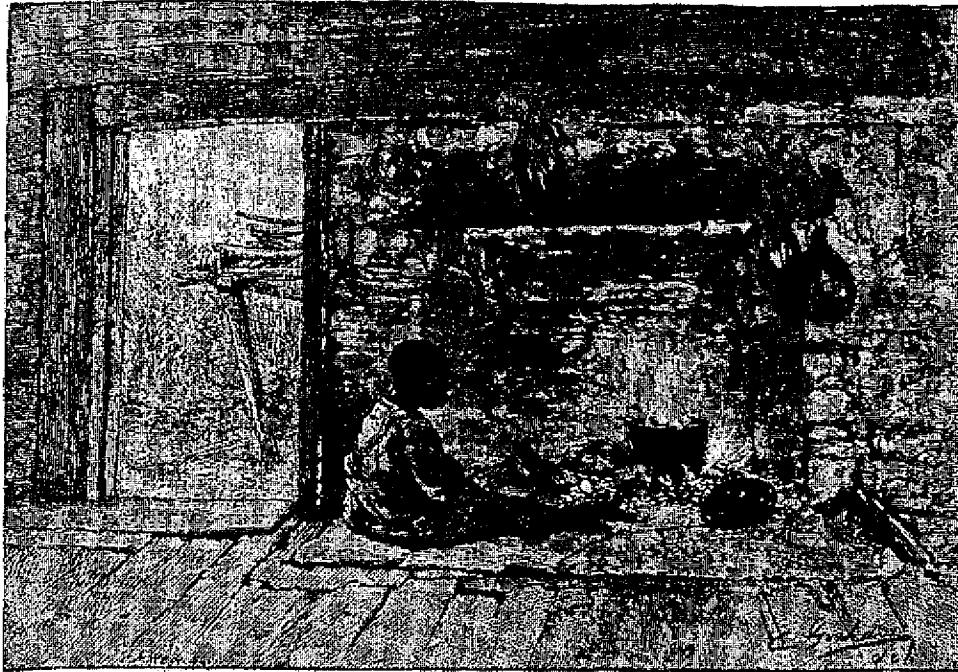


Figure 30. The Lonely Hearth

erally, however, the women had no choice but to submit to the sexual advances of white men.⁴⁴ Henry Bibb wrote that “a poor slave’s wife can never be . . . true to her husband contrary to the will of her master. She can neither be pure nor virtuous, contrary to the will of her master. She dare not refuse to be reduced to a state of adultery at the will of her master. . . .”⁴⁵

By all odds, the most brutal aspect of slavery was the separation of families. This was a haunting fear which made all of the slave’s days miserable. In spite of the fact that probably a majority of the planters tried to prevent family separations in order to maintain plantation discipline, practically all of the black autobiographers were touched by the tragedy. Death occurred too frequently in the master’s house, creditors were too relentless in collecting their debts, the planter’s reserves ran out too often,

44. Northup, *Twelve Years*, 176-90, 223-62; Loguen, *Freedman*, 19-25, 38-52; Henry Watson, *Narrative of Henry Watson, a Fugitive Slave* (Boston, 1848), 5-17; Bibb, *Adventures*, 112-18.

45. Bibb, *Adventures*, 191-92.

and the master longed too much for expensive items for the slave to escape the clutches of the slave trader. Nothing demonstrated his powerlessness as much as the slave's inability to prevent the forcible sale of his wife and children.⁴⁶

Slaves received the greatest protection for their families from white churches and ministers. Occasionally, the churches testified "against the inhumane and unfeeling practice" of separating slave families and censured or excommunicated guilty masters. By the 1840s ministers and laymen had begun suggesting the passage of laws prohibiting the separation of slave families.⁴⁷ The Reverend William H. Milburn, for example, contended in 1859 that the "first and most imperative demand which justice makes of the people of the southern States is the passage of laws forbidding the separation of man and wife, of parents and children. Such rending asunder of the holiest bonds of our nature should not be allowed, cannot without incurring the dread anathema of a Christian civilization and the righteous indignation of God."⁴⁸

Most clergymen appealed not to the law but to the conscience of masters to ensure the inviolability of slave marriages. The Reverend Charles C. Jones stated bluntly in an 1848 sermon that masters "should *not separate, nor allow the separation of husband and wife, unless for causes lawful before God.*" Since marriage was a "divine institution" a master was not to "separate husband and wife either by sale or purchase. On the contrary, he should consider the parties as *united for life*, and so far as Providence puts it in his power, he should endeavour to keep them together and their children around them." South Carolina Presbyterians went further. In 1854 the Charleston Presbytery called upon its

46. Charles Ball, *Slavery in the United States: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball* (Lewiston, Pa., 1836), 15-22, 258-300; Elkanah Watson, *Men and Times of the Revolution* (New York, 1857), 69; Henry B. Whipple, *Bishop Whipple's Southern Diary* (Minneapolis, 1937), 69, 88-89; John O'Connor, *Wanderings of a Vagabond* (New York, 1873), 110.

47. Posey, *Presbyterian Church*, 76-77; R. Fuller to Elon Galusha [1840] *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, Nov. 12, 1840; Purifoy, "Methodist Episcopal Church, South," 172-73; *Maryland Colonization Journal* VI (Aug. 1852), 238; Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 183-85.

48. Milburn, *Ten Years*, 350; *Southern Presbyterian Review* VIII (1854), 276.

ministers and church courts to protect slaves "by enforcing on *Masters* themselves, the obligation to adhere more rigidly to the Saviour's command, and refrain from separating their married servants, except in cases of criminal offence which would justly subject the offending party to a legal sentence involving separation." Similarly, in 1859 a committee of the South Carolina Episcopal Church asserted that "every Christian master should so regulate the sale or disposal of a married slave, as not to infringe the Divine injunction forbidding the separation of husband and wife."⁴⁹ Though the convention delegates never voted on the resolutions, the Committee had expressed the sentiments of a majority of nineteenth-century Southern ministers.⁵⁰ Biblical injunctions were not, however, efficacious restraints on masters bent on maximizing profits and minimizing losses when selling slaves.

The best objective evidence available concerning the separation of mates by planters appears in the marriage certificates of former slaves preserved by the Union army and the Freedmen's Bureau in Tennessee (Dyer, Gibson, Wilson, and Shelby counties), Louisiana (Concordia Parish), and Mississippi (Adams County) from 1864 to 1866. (Although these records contain the best material available on the actions of masters in regard to the slave family, they must be used with caution. In the first place, the number of unbroken unions may be exaggerated: those blacks who had retained the strongest sense of family would be most likely to come to the posts to be married. Second, multiple separations by masters were apparently understated (often old slaves simply noted how they were separated from their *last* mate). Third, it was sometimes impossible to determine from the army records whether a childless couple had been united in slavery.) Despite their shortcomings, the marriage certificates con-

49. *Thirteenth Annual Report of the Association for the Religious Instruction of the Negroes, in Liberty County, Georgia* (Savannah, 1848), 16-17; *Southern Presbyterian Review* VIII (1854), 17; *Journal, P. E. Church of South Carolina*, 1859 (Charleston, 1859), 34-35.

50. *Southern Presbyterian Review* IX (1856), 359, XII (1859), 358-59; *Southern Episcopalian* V (1858), 487; Purifoy, "Methodist Episcopal Church, South," 172-73.

tain revealing data on 2888 slave unions in three states; 1225 in Mississippi, 1123 in Tennessee, and 540 in Louisiana.⁵¹

The most difficult problem involved in analyzing the slave family is defining the term "unbroken." Since the most important characteristics of the slave union which differentiated it from legal marriage was the right the master had to separate mates, this factor must be isolated, and separations caused by death, war-related activities, and personal choice treated as unions "unbroken by masters." Through this technique, we can arrive at an approximation of the role of masters in dissolving slave families. This is not to argue, of course, that casual separations and high mortality rates did not lead to instability in these families. In fact, the dissolution of 1557, or 53.7 per cent, of the unions was directly attributable to these causes. However intimately related they are to family instability, neither of these factors involved the deliberate intervention of the master for the purpose of separating mates.

It seems logical to treat couples separated by war and death as unbroken unions, since many of them had cohabited together for decades before impersonal forces caused their dissolution. If the 1153 couples separated by death are dropped from the total, 66 per cent of the remaining unions were dissolved by masters in Mississippi, 50 per cent in Louisiana, and 43 per cent in Tennessee. This, however, would seem unfair, because it penalizes the planters for events over which they had little control. The issue here is not family stability (which involves an analysis of a number of complex factors) but the extent to which masters deliberately separated their "married" slaves. It is obvious, when all of the factors contributing to dissolution are added together, that

51. Unbound "Marriage Certificates," Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, Record Group 105, National Archives; Appendix III, table 17. Herbert Gutman, *Black Family*, 145-51 utilized a different source on slave marriages, "Bound Volumes of Marriage Registers, 1864-1865," for Warren and Adams counties Mississippi and analyzed his data in a different fashion than employed in the following pages. According to Gutman, 42 per cent of the slave families in Mississippi were broken and masters dissolved 17 per cent of them.

the slave family was an extremely precarious institution. Even so, the high mortality rate among slaves was apparently more important in this than any other single factor. In a strict sociological sense, only 394, or 13.6 per cent, of the unions were unbroken.

The callous attitudes frequently held by planters toward slave unions are revealed clearly in the statistics: 937, or 32.4 per cent, of the unions were dissolved by masters. An overwhelming majority of the couples were separated before they reached their sixth anniversary. The heartlessness of the planters is revealed more clearly in their separation of slaves who had lived together for decades. Several instances of this appeared in Louisiana: Hosea Bidell was separated from his mate of twenty-five years; Valentine Miner from his after thirty years; and, in the most horrifying case of them all, Lucy Robinson was separated from her mate after living with him for forty-three years. Although such separations made the slave family one of the most unstable institutions imaginable, it should be emphasized that there were numerous unions which lasted for several decades. Those enduring for twenty or thirty years were not uncommon, and a few recorded in Tennessee lasted for more than forty years. If only the actions of masters are considered, 67.6 per cent of the slave unions were unbroken. In other words, in spite of their callous attitudes, masters did not separate a majority of the slave couples.

Initially, familial roles in the quarters were determined by African concepts. Women in most traditional West African societies were subordinate to men. In their proverbs the Africans emphasized woman's inferiority. "Woman never reigns," say the Ibo. At the same time, Africans recognized woman's independence. "Woman has no chief," the Tonga declare. While a man ruled his household, he had to listen to his mate: "If you want peace, give ear to your wives' proposals," advise the Fan. Africans required children to respect their parents (especially the father) and the young to pay deference to the elders. Proverbs reinforced societal rules: "He who goes to the father need not go to the mother. The young cannot teach the elders tradition. Children

sing the song which they hear from their father and mother. Even though you may be taller than your father you still are not his equal."⁵²

By the 1830s, the traditional African family the blacks remembered had been transformed. Still, white churches reinforced in the quarters family patterns inherited from Africa. Episcopalians, for example, by requiring that all children have godparents before being baptized, strengthened the extended family in the quarters. While building on African traditions of marital fidelity and respect for elders, white churches gave wide currency to Biblical pronouncements against adultery and fornication, urging the submission of wives to husbands and children to parents and elders in the quarters. As slaves, however, black men could no longer exercise the same power over their families as they had in Africa. Instead, they struggled to gain and retain status. The transformation of African familial roles led to the creation of America's first democratic family in the quarters, where men and women shared authority and responsibility.

children Many slaves were lucky enough to have masters who refused to intercede in family affairs. In order to relieve themselves of responsibility, many planters gave slave parents complete control of their children. Some masters did not punish slave children but instead asked their parents to do so. On Charles Ball's plantation the overseer did nothing to undermine the authority black males had in their families even when they beat their wives.⁵³ On large plantations and in cities the slaves were so rarely under the constant surveillance of their masters that there the black male faced no obstacle (other than his mate) in exercising au-

52. Ellis, *The Ewe-Speaking Peoples*, 259-68; Harold Courlander, ed., *A Treasury of African Folklore* (New York, 1975), 35, 37, 66, 117; H. A. S. Johnston, *A Selection of Hausa Stories* (Oxford, Eng., 1966), 105-9; Arthur G. Leonard, *The Lower Niger and Its Tribes* (London, 1906), 75; A. B. Ellis, *The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples of the Slave Coast of West Africa* (London, 1894), 225, 237-40; Richard S. Fletcher, *Hausa Sayings & Folk-Lore* (New York, 1912), 9-34; Merlin Ennis, *Umbundu* (Boston, 1962), 313; Alta Jablow, ed., *An Anthology of West African Folklore* (London, 1961), 127; *African Repository* XXXI (Aug. 1855), 246-47.

53. J. Brown, *Slave Life*, 62-68; J. Anderson, *Story*, 8-20; Northup, *Twelve Years*, 176-90.

thority in his family. While living in Baltimore, for instance, Noah Davis declared that he had "the entire control" of his family.⁵⁴

There were several avenues open to the slave in his effort to gain status in his family. Whenever possible, men added delicacies to their family's monotonous fare of corn meal, fat pork, and molasses by hunting and fishing. If the planter permitted the family to cultivate a garden plot or to raise hogs, the husband led his wife in this family undertaking. The husband could also demonstrate his importance in the family unit by making furniture for the cabin or building partitions between cabins which contained more than one family. The slave who did such things for his family gained not only the approbation of his wife, but he also gained status in the quarters.⁵⁵ According to William Green, in the view of the slaves when one tried to provide for his family in this manner: "the man who does this is a great man amongst them."⁵⁶ Sometimes, by extra work, slave men earned enough money to buy sugar and coffee for the family or to surprise their wives with scarves or dresses. Often, when masters did not provide adequate clothing for their slaves, black men bought clothes for their children and wives.

X Masters, not the black men, determined how much care and attention slave women received when they were pregnant and the treatment that infants received. During her pregnancy a slave wife usually continued her back-breaking labor until a few weeks before her child was born. Solicitous of the health of the new child, the slave owners generally freed the mother of labor for a few days and often for weeks to nurse the infant. If he were especially interested in rearing slave children (and most masters were), he established a definite routine for nursing the child. The mother either carried the infant to the field with her or returned to the cabin at intervals during the day to nurse it.

54. Noah Davis, *A Narrative of the Life of Rev. Noah Davis, a Colored Man* (Baltimore, 1859), n.p.

55. Ball, *Slavery*, 168-205; Grandy, *Narrative*, 52-64.

56. William Green, *Narrative of Events in the Life of William Green* (Springfield, O., 1853), 9.

Pregnant

or left it w/ nurse



Figure 31. A Father's Love

The routine of the plantation prevented the lavishing of care upon the infant. In this regard, Frederick Douglass, who did not remember seeing his mother until he was seven years old, asserted: "The domestic hearth, with its holy lessons and precious endearments, is abolished in the case of a slave-mother and her children."⁵⁷ On many plantations women did not have enough time to prepare breakfast in the morning and were generally too

57. Douglas, *Bondage*, 48.

tired to make much of a meal or to give much attention to their children after a long day's labor. Booker T. Washington's experience was typical: "My mother . . . had little time to give to the training of her children during the day. She snatched a few moments for our care in the early morning before her work began, and at night after the day's work was done."⁵⁸ At a very early stage the child was placed in the plantation nursery under the care of old women or placed in the hands of his elder siblings. In either case, he was neglected. Fed irregularly or improperly, young black children suffered from a variety of ills. Treated by densely ignorant mothers or little more enlightened planters, they died in droves.⁵⁹

If he survived infancy, the slave child partook, in bountiful measure for a while, of many of the joys of childhood. One important reason for this was the large size of most slave families. Some of the black autobiographers enjoyed the exquisite pleasure of being the youngest child. Sibling rivalry was apparently minimal. Slave parents, in spite of their own sufferings, lavished love on their children. Fathers regaled their children with fascinating stories and songs and won their affection with little gifts. These were all the more important if the father lived on another plantation. The two weekly visits of the father then took on all the aspects of minor celebrations. They were truly this for Elizabeth Keckley, for her father was only allowed to visit his family at Easter and Christmas time. Grandparents, as for all children, loomed large in the life of the slave child. Grandmothers frequently prepared little tidbits for the children, and grandfathers often told them stories about their lives in Africa.⁶⁰

Memories of Africa were important in the development of self-awareness in slave children. In the seventeenth and eighteenth

58. Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* (Boston, 1928), 4.

59. John Thompson, *The Life of John Thompson, a Fugitive Slave* (Worcester, Mass., 1856), 13-19; J. Smith, *Autobiography*, 33; Allen Parker, *Recollections of Slavery Times* (Worcester, Mass., 1895), 32-40; Yetman, *Voices*, 64, 71, 104, 168, 264; Armstrong, *Old Massa's People*, 64-66, 68-70, 181-83.

60. Yetman, *Voices*, 45, 50, 104-5, 140-41, 192, 228; Armstrong, *Old Massa's People*, 44-47, 52, 93, 141.



Figure 32. The Auction

centuries, the slaves drew on these memories for their naming practices. Consequently, until the nineteenth century, African cognomens were prominent in any list of slaves. From around 1750 to the 1830s masters steadily encroached on slave naming practices, and by the latter date the bondsmen's cognomens had been anglicized and they exercised less autonomy in this area. Reviewing his enslavement in South Carolina, Lorenzo Ezell recalled in the 1930s: "In dem days cullud people just like mules and hosses. Dey didn't have no last name." Slaves struggled to gain those elemental marks of identity, a first and a last name. While most nineteenth-century slave children were named by their parents, many were named by their masters and mistresses. However much a slave valued his first name, masters placed a low valuation on it. For example, David Holmes testified in 1853 on how fragile was the link between a slave's name, his kinship network, and his identity: "Slaves never have any name. I'm called David, now; I used to be called Tom, sometimes; but I'm not, I'm Jack. It didn't much matter what name I was called by. If master

was looking at one of us, and call us, Tom, or Jack, or anything else, whoever he looked at was forced to answer." While answering to one name when called by his master, the slave used his actual name in conversations in the quarters and adopted it officially when he was freed. Before emancipation, the slave had to go beyond naming practices to maintain his self-esteem and identity.⁶¹

Mothers tried in many ways to bolster the self-esteem of their children. The lessons began early as the women crooned lullabies to their infants. Commenting on the white child born "rich and free" in "ole massa's big fine house," a black mother sang:

To a cabin in woodland drear
You've come a mammy's heart to cheer,
In this ole slave cabin,
Your hands my heart strings grabbin,
Jes lay your head upon my bres,
An snuggle close an res an res,
My little colored chile.

Yo daddy ploughs ole massa's corn,
Yo mammy does the cooking,
She'll give dinner to her hungry chile
When nobody is a lookin'
Don't be ashamed my chile, I beg,
Ca[u]se you was hatched from a buzzard's egg;
My little colored chile.⁶²

The love and affection blacks received in infancy and early childhood initially determined how much self-esteem and sense of security they would have as young adults.

Another important factor in the evolution of self-consciousness in the quarters was the extent and character of the young slave's interaction with whites, especially children. Often assigned as playmates to their young masters, black children played in pro-

61. Yetman, *Voices*, 112; Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 297; Armstrong, *Old Massa's People*, 58-62; Gutman, *Black Family*, 185-201; Redpath, *Roving Editor*, 56.

62. Rawick, *American Slave*, VI, 195, VII, 35; Armstrong, *Old Massa's People*, 58.

miscuous equality with white children. Together they roamed the plantation or went hunting, fishing, berry picking, or raiding watermelon and potato patches. Indeed, at first, bondage weighed lightly on the shoulders of the black child.⁶³ Lunsford Lane, in reflecting on his childhood on a North Carolina plantation, wrote: "I knew no difference between myself and the white children, nor did they seem to know any in turn. Sometime my master would come out and give a biscuit to me and another to one of his white boys; but I did not perceive the difference between us."⁶⁴

The pleasures of early childhood and the equality of playmates which transcended color sometimes obscured the young slave's vision of bondage. During this period many of the young blacks had no idea they were slaves. J. Vance Lewis wrote that on a Louisiana plantation during his early childhood: "As a bare-foot boy my stay upon the farm had been pleasant. I played among the wild flowers and wandered, in high glee, over hill and hollow, enchanted with the beauty of nature, and knew not that I was a slave, and son of a slave." Sam Aleckson, though in less lyrical terms, declared the same thing. Until he was ten years old, he asserted, "it had never dawned on me that my condition was not as good as that of any boy in the country." Frederick Douglass reported that during his childhood, "it was a long time before I knew myself to be a *slave*." This was true, he said, because "the first seven or eight years of the slave-boy's life are about as full of sweet content as those of the most favored and petted *white* children of the slaveholder . . . freed from all restraint, the slave-boy can be, in his life and conduct, a genuine boy, doing whatever his boyish nature suggests. . . ."⁶⁵

63. R. Anderson, *From Slavery*, 3-8; Stroyer, *My Life*, 15-20; Lucy Ann Delaney, *From the Darkness Cometh the Light: Or Struggles for Freedom* (St. Louis, n.d.), 13; Thomas L. Johnson, *Twenty-eight Years a Slave: Or the Story of My Life in Three Continents* (London, 1909), 2; Yetman, *Voices*, 200; Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 130, 132, 465, 512, 632, 641, 710; Armstrong, *Old Massa's People*, 69, 73-78; Tyler and Murphy, *Slave Narratives*, 24, 87; Perdue, *Weevils*, 84.

64. Lane, *Narrative*, 6.

65. J. Vance Lewis, *Out of the Ditch* (Houston, 1910), 8; Sam Aleckson,

the child's
regret
at 12

The planters frequently contributed directly to the idyllic existence of the young slaves. Many of the black autobiographers were the favorites of their masters, who, in a number of cases, were their fathers. In such an event, the child would be fondled, taken on horseback rides, or rewarded with numerous gifts and acts of kindness. William Grimes recalled that his master "was very fond of me, and always treated me kindly." Other slaves declared that their masters were indulgent and often gave them sweets and sometimes protected them from parental wrath. Amanda Smith's childhood was typical of this experience. She declared: "I was a good deal spoiled for a little darkey. If I wanted a piece of bread, and it was not buttered, and sugared on both sides, I wouldn't have it; and when mother would get out of patience with me, and go for a switch, I would run to my old mistress and wrap myself up in her apron, and I was safe. And oh! how I loved her for that."⁶⁶

Most of the slaves, of course, did not have such idyllic childhoods. While J. Vance Lewis recalled that his master's son "was as true a friend as I ever had," the memories of many slaves were clouded with tales of brutal treatment from their little white playmates who were often spurred on by their masters. Others were cuffed about by the planters and flogged for daring to visit the plantation house. Thomas Jones summed up the experience of many slaves when he declared: "I was born a slave. . . . I was made to feel, in my boyhood's first experience, that I was inferior and degraded, and that I must pass through life in a dependent and suffering condition."⁶⁷

Those who were lucky enough to avoid Jones's experience in early childhood knew what he felt by the time they reached their teens. Many began working irregularly at light tasks before they were ten. After that age they usually started working in the fields. Such labor was the first, and irreparable, break in the

Before the War and After the Union (Boston, 1929), 113; Douglass, *Bondage*, 38, 40-41; Armstrong, *Old Massa's People*, 58, 67-68, 78-80.

66. Grimes, *Life*, 8; Amanda Smith, *An Autobiography* (Chicago, 1893), 22.

67. Lewis, *Ditch*, 9; Jones, *Experiences*, 5.

childhood equality in black-white relations. Lunsford Lane's reaction illustrates the impact of this change:

When I began to work, I discovered the difference between myself and my master's white children. They began to order me about, and were told to do so by my master and mistress. . . . Indeed all things now made me *feel*, what I had before known only in words, that *I was a slave*. Deep was this feeling, and it preyed upon my heart like a never dying worm. I saw no prospect that my condition would ever be changed.⁶⁸

★ Most black children learned vicariously what slavery was long before this point. They were often terrified by the violent punishment meted out to the black men around them. The beginning of Jermain Loguen's sense of insecurity and brutal awareness of what he was, for example, occurred when he saw a vicious white planter murder a slave and was cautioned to silence by his mother. The shock of seeing their parents flogged was an early reminder to many black children of what slavery was.⁶⁹ When young William Wells Brown saw his mother flogged for being late going to the fields, he recalled that "the cold chills ran over me, and I wept aloud."⁷⁰ The flogging Charles Ball's mother received when he was four years old still retained its "painful vividness" to him forty-seven years later.

In the face of all of the restrictions, slave parents made every effort humanly possible to shield their children from abuse and teach them how to survive in bondage. One of the most important lessons for the child was learning to hold his tongue around white folks. This was especially true on those plantations where the masters tried to get the children to spy on their parents.⁷¹ Sam Aleckson pointed out that as a child he "was taught to say nothing" about the conversations in the quarters. Frequently mothers had to be severe with their children to prevent them

68. Lane, *Narrative*, 7-8; see also: Yetman, *Voices*, 40, 72, 124, 191-92, 264, 288, 316, 322; Armstrong, *Old Massa's People*, 80-81, 86-97; Tyler and Murphy, *Slave Narratives*, 50, 53, 56-57, 59-61.

69. Loguen, *Freedman*, 38-52, 109-22; Watson, *Narrative*, 5-17; Thompson, *Life*, 13-19; Douglass, *Bondage*, 91.

70. W. W. Brown, *Narrative*, 16.

71. Grandy, *Narrative*, 7-18; Ball, *Slavery*, 74-94; Stroyer, *My Life*, 9-14.

from breaking this important rule. Elijah P. Marrs, for example, declared: "Mothers were necessarily compelled to be severe on their children to keep them from talking too much. Many a poor mother has been whipped nearly to death on account of their children telling white children things. . . ."72

Many of the slave parents tried to inculcate a sense of morality in their children. The children were taught to be honest and to lead Christian lives.73 The Reverend Lucius Holsey gave his "intensely religious" mother credit for the moral lessons he had learned as a boy. Henry Box Brown's mother taught him "not to steal, and not to lie, and to behave myself in other respects." Strict and pious parents not only taught religious principles to their children, they also taught them not to rebel against their masters. William Webb asserted that his mother "taught me there was a Supreme Being, that would take care of me in all my trials; she taught me not to rebel against the men that were treating me like some dumb brute, making me work and refusing to let me learn."74 Learning to accept personal abuse and the punishment of loved ones passively was one of the most difficult lessons for the slave child. Young Austin Steward indicated this when he recounted how he felt upon observing a white man flogging his sister:

The God of heaven only knows the conflict of feeling I then endured; He alone witnessed the tumult of my heart, at this outrage of manhood and kindred affection. God knows that my will was good enough to have wrung his neck; or to have drained from his heartless system its last drop of blood! And yet I was obliged to turn a deaf ear to her cries for assistance, which to this day ring in my ears. Strong and athletic as I was, no hand of mine could be raised in her defence, but at the peril of both our lives.75

72. Aleckson, *Union*, 67; Elijah P. Marrs, *Life and History* (Louisville, 1855), 11.

73. Aleckson, *Union*, 17-21; Davis, *Colored Man*, 9-17; Stroyer, *My Life*, 24-29; Veney, *Woman*, 7-13.

74. H. B. Brown, *Narrative*, 16; William Webb, *The History of William Webb* (Detroit, 1873), 3.

75. Steward, *Twenty-two Years*, 97.

The lessons the slave child learned about conformity were complex and contradictory. Recognizing the overwhelming power of the whites, parents taught children obedience as a means of avoiding pain, suffering, and death. At the same time, they did not teach unconditional submission. Instead, children were often taught to fight their masters and overseers to protect their relatives. For instance, W. H. Robinson's father once told him: "I want you to die in defense of your mother. . . ."⁷⁶ On many occasions the children saw their parents disobey and sometimes fight their master. Listening to stories of runaways and seeing slaves interact in the quarters, the slave child had many models of behavior. In fact, he saw his parents playing two con-

76. Robinson, *Pulpit*, 25.





Figures 33, 34, 35. Going South
(Figure 34 Courtesy Chicago Historical Society)



tradictory roles. In the quarters, for example, where he saw his parents most often, his father acted like a man, castigating whites for their mistreatment of him, being a leader, protector, and provider. On the few occasions when the child saw him at work the father was obedient and submissive to his master. Sometimes children internalized both the true personality traits and the contradictory behavioral patterns of their parents. Since, however, their parents' submission was on a shallow level of convenience directed toward avoiding pain, it was less important as a model of behavior than the personality traits they exhibited in the quarters.

When a young slave received his first flogging he was usually so angry that he either wanted to run away or to seek revenge. His parents, upon learning this, tried to dissuade him, advised him of ways to avoid future punishment, or attempted to raise his hopes.⁷⁷ After receiving his first flogging, for example, Jacob Stroyer vowed to fight the next time he was attacked. His father argued against such action, saying: "the best thing for us to do is to pray much over it, for I believe that the time will come when this boy with the rest of the children will be free, though we may not live to see it." His father's comments on freedom, according to Stroyer, "were of great comfort to me, and my heart swelled with the hope of the future, which made every moment seem an hour to me."⁷⁸

The degree to which slaves were able to give their children hope in the midst of adversity is reflected in the attitudes the black autobiographers held toward their parents. Fathers were loved and respected because of their physical strength, courage, and compassion. Austin Steward described his father as "a kind, affectionate husband and a fond, indulgent parent." James Watkins admired his father because he was "a clever, Shrewd man." James Mars stood in awe of his father, who "was a man of considerable muscular strength, and was not easily frightened into obedience." Although they were not always perfect male models,

77. J. H. Banks, *A Narrative of Events of the Life of J. H. Banks* (Liverpool, 1861), 20.

78. Stroyer, *My Life*, 23.

most slave fathers had the respect of their children. Viewing the little things that they did to make life more pleasant for their children, Charles Ball asserted: "Poor as the slave is, and dependent at all times upon the arbitrary will of his master, or yet more fickle caprice of the overseer, his children look up to him in his little cabin, as their protector and supporter."⁷⁹

Slave mothers, were, of course, held in even greater esteem by their children. Frequently small children fought overseers who were flogging their mothers. Even when they had an opportunity to escape from bondage, many slaves refused to leave their mothers. As a young slave, William Wells Brown did not run away because he "could not bear the idea" of leaving his mother. He felt that he, "after she had undergone and suffered so much for me would be proving recreant to the duty which I owed to her."⁸⁰

The love the slaves had for their parents reveals clearly the importance of the family. Although it was weak, although it was frequently broken, the slave family provided an important buffer, a refuge from the rigors of slavery. While the slave father could rarely protect the members of his family from abuse, he could often gain their love and respect in other ways. In his family, the slave not only learned how to avoid the blows of the master, but also drew on the love and sympathy of its members to raise his spirits. The family was, in short, an important survival mechanism.

79. Steward, *Twenty-two Years*, 126; Watkins, *Narrative*, 7; James Mars, *Life of James Mars, a Slave Born and Sold in Connecticut* (Hartford, 1864), 3; Ball, *Slavery*, 211.

80. W. W. Brown, *Narrative*, 31-32.