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Plantation Realities

And in this society in which the infant son of the planter was commonly suckled by a black mammy, in which gray old black men were his most loved story-tellers, in which black stalwarts were among the chiefest heroes and mentors of his boyhood, and in which his usual, often practically his only, companions until he was past the age of puberty were the black boys (and girls) of the plantation, in this society in which by far the greater number of white boys of whatever degree were more or less shaped by such companionship and in which nearly the whole body of whites, young and old, had constantly before their eyes the example, had constantly in their ears the accent, of the Negro, the relationship between the two groups was, by the second generation at least, nothing less than organic. Negro entered into white man as profoundly as white man entered into Negro—subtly influencing every gesture, every word, every emotion and idea, every attitude.

Wilbur J. Cash

The behavior of the black slave was intimately bound up with the nature of the antebellum plantation, the behavior of masters, the white man's perceptions and misperceptions, and a multitude of factors which influenced personal relations. In the final analysis, the character of the antebellum plantation was one of the major determinants of the attitudes, perceptions, and behavior of the slave. There was so much variation in plantations, overseers, and masters, however, that the slave had much more freedom from restraint and more independence and autonomy than his institutionally defined role allowed. Consequently, the slave did not have to be infantile or abjectly docile in order to remain alive. It was primarily because of the variegated pattern of plantation

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life that Sambo did not emerge as the dominant slave personality in the quarters.¹

The plantation did, however, give a certain uniform pattern to the slave's life, especially in terms of labor requirements. According to the black autobiographers, most field hands rose before dawn, prepared their meals, fed the livestock, and then rushed to the fields before sunrise. Failure to reach the field on time often brought the overseer's lash into play. Depending upon the season or the crop, the laborer would grub and hoe the field, pick worms off the plants, build fences, cut down trees, construct dikes, pull fodder, clear new land, plant rice, sugar, tobacco, cotton, and corn, and then harvest the crop.

Frequently, after working from dawn to sunset, the weary slaves then had to care for the livestock, put away tools, and cook their meals before the horn sounded bedtime in the quarters. During the cotton-picking season, the men sometimes ginned cotton until nine o'clock at night. For the hapless slaves on the sugar plantation, the work of boiling the sugar cane continued far into the night: they often worked eighteen hours a day during the harvest season; some sugar factories ran in shifts seven days and nights each week. The work, while varying in tempo, seemed almost endless. Cotton-planting started the last of March or first of April, cotton-picking lasted from August to Christmas and frequently until January or February. The corn was harvested after cotton-picking ended. During slack periods, the slaves cleared forest land, built fences, repaired the slave cabins, killed hogs, and engaged in a multitude of other tasks.

While the mass of slaves followed this routine, the domestic servants formed part of the plantation elite. They usually ate

1. John Q. Anderson, "Dr. James Green Carson, Ante-Bellum Planter of Mississippi and Louisiana," *Journal of Mississippi History* XVIII (Oct. 1956), 243-67; Winthrop M. Daniels, "The Slave Plantation in Retrospect," *Atlantic Monthly* CVII (March 1911), 363-69; Edwin A. Davis, "Bennett H. Barrow, Ante-Bellum Planter of the Felicianas," *Journal of Southern History* V (Nov. 1939), 431-46; Rosser H. Taylor, "The Gentry of Antebellum South Carolina," *North Carolina Historical Review* XVII (April 1940), 114-31; George C. Osborne, "Plantation Life in Central Mississippi as Revealed in the Clay Sharkey Papers," *Journal of Mississippi History* III (Oct. 1941), 277-88.

better food and wore better clothes than the field slaves because they received leftovers from the planter's larder and hand-me-downs from his wardrobe. In spite of this, their position was no sinecure. They ran errands, worked as part-time gardeners, cooked, served meals, cared for the horses, milked the cows, sewed simple clothes, cared for the master's infant, wove, carded and spun wool, did the marketing, churned the milk, dusted the house, swept the yard, arranged the dining room, cut the shrubbery, and performed numerous other tasks. With the exception of the plantation cook, each domestic servant was responsible not for one but for several of these tasks.²

At the beck and call of his master day and night, the domestic servant had no regular hours. Added to the long hours was the discomfiture of constantly being under the watchful eyes of the whites and being subject to their every capricious, vengeful, or sadistic whim. Domestic servants frequently had their ears boxed or were flogged for trifling mistakes, ignorance, delinquent work, "insolent" behavior, or simply for being within striking distance when the master was disgruntled. Lewis Clarke, who felt the domestic servants' lot was worse than that of the field slaves, described the problems which beset them:

We were constantly exposed to the whims and passions of every member of the family; from the least to the greatest their anger was wreaked upon us. Nor was our life an easy one, in the hours of our toil or in the amount of labor performed. We were always required to sit up until all the family had retired; then we must be up at early dawn in summer, and before day in winter.³

The quantity, quality, and variety of food, clothing, housing, and medical care the slave received rarely satisfied him. The fact that another man determined how much and what kind of food,

2. Charles Ball, *Slavery in the United States . . .* (New York, 1849), 156-68, 245-300; Lewis G. Clarke, *Narrative of the Sufferings of Lewis Clarke . . .* (Boston, 1845), 10-22; Henry Watson, *Narrative of Henry Watson, a Fugitive Slave* (Boston, 1848), 5-17; Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (New York, 1868), 17-28.

3. Clarke, *Sufferings*, 17.



Figure 45. Field Hand



Figure 46. Domestic Servant

clothing, and shelter he needed to survive posed a serious problem for him. Equally serious was his dependence on the "average" amount of food and clothing his master decided was sufficient for *all* slaves. Obviously, an allotment of food or clothing sufficient for one man was not necessarily enough for another man. Most of the black autobiographers complained that they had at least one owner who did not give them enough food. Sometimes, even when slaves generally received enough food, provisions ran low. When the slaves did not receive enough to eat, they stole food. James Watkins, Annie L. Burton, Andrew Jackson, Josiah Henson, and Peter Randolph reported that, in spite of the risks involved, the slaves on their plantations stole food when it was denied them. Other slaves trapped animals and fished at night and on Sundays in order to augment their meager diet.⁴

The slaves often complained bitterly about what their masters described as "adequate" housing. Most of the autobiographers reported that they lived in crudely built one-room log cabins with dirt floors and too many cracks in them to permit much comfort during the winter months. John Brown complained that in the log cabins: "The wind and rain will come in and the smoke will not go out." Austin Steward felt that the slave cabins were "not as good as many of our stables at the north."⁵ Not only were the slave cabins uncomfortable, they were often crowded. Most of the cabins contained at least two families. The 260 slaves on Charles Ball's plantation shared 38 cabins, an average of 6.8 slaves per cabin. The 160 slaves on Louis Hughes's plantation lived in 18 cabins or an average of 8.8 slaves per cabin. Josiah Henson declared that from 10 to 12 people shared each cabin on his plantation. Some lived not in cabins but in sheds. William

4. James L. Smith, *Autobiography of James L. Smith* (Norwich, Conn., 1881), 1-9; John Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia* (London, 1855), 170-80; Austin Steward, *Twenty-two Years a Slave, and Forty Years a Freeman* (Rochester, N.Y., 1861), 13-19; Annie L. Burton, *Memories of Childhood's Slavery Days* (Boston, 1909), 3-9; Josiah Henson, *The Life of Josiah Henson* (Boston, 1849), 6-7.

5. J. Brown, *Slave Life*, 191; Steward, *Twenty-two Years*, 19.

Green, for example, lived in a long low shed with 29 others. Some slaves, of course, lived in more spacious and comfortable cabins. Henry Watson's owner, for instance, had 27 cabins for his 100 slaves, an average of 3.7 slaves per cabin. Few slaves were as fortunate as Sam Aleckson whose master's slave cabins were not only neat and commodious, but also had flower gardens in front of them. Usually the slaves had to make what furniture and utensils they used. They built tables, beds, and benches and sometimes carved wooden spoons. Generally the cabins contained beds made of straw covered boards, and tables of packing boxes. Some slaves slept on the ground or on mattresses of corn shucks without blankets.⁶

The physical condition of the slaves has often been compared to that of other laborers and members of other total institutions. Southern propagandists generally argued that slaves were better fed, housed, and clothed than European peasants or factory operatives. Abolitionists drew the opposite conclusion and produced statistics showing that the inmates of Northern prisons, sailors, and soldiers received greater quantities of and more nutritious food than slaves. Twentieth-century economists and cliometricians, using mathematical models, theorized that slaves not only received a relatively adequate return on their labor, but also were well fed, clothed, and housed when compared to Northern free laborers.⁷ Despite contrary theories, the return the slave received for his work was in no wise comparable to that received by free laborers. The planters admitted the distinctions. In a carefully reasoned economic treatise written in 1844, for instance, Nathaniel Ware observed:

6. J. Smith, *Autobiography*, 1-9; J. H. Banks, *A Narrative of Events of the Life of J. H. Banks* (Liverpool, 1861), 42-63; Allen Parker, *Recollections of Slavery Times* (Worcester, Mass., 1895), 7-20; James W. C. Pennington, *The Fugitive Blacksmith* (London, 1849), 66.

7. Theodore Dwight Weld, ed., *American Slavery as It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (New York, 1839), 28-35; Robert W. Fogel and Stanley Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (2 vols., Boston, 1974), I, 109-26. The best discussion of slave diet, clothing, and housing appears in Todd L. Savitt, *Medicine and Slavery* (Urbana, 1978), 57-110.

the free laborers are in families, and useless mouths are to be fed, houses, rents, furniture, taxes, doctors' bills, all amounting to some style and a considerable amount, have to be sustained. The slaves live without beds or houses worth so calling, or family cares, or luxuries, or parade, or show; have no relaxations, or whims, or frolics, or dissipations; instead of sun to sun in their hours, are worked from daylight till nine o'clock at night. Where the free man or laborer would require one hundred dollars a year for food and clothing alone, the slave can be supported for twenty dollars a year, and often is. This makes the wages of the one forty cents a day, of the other six cents only. . . . A slave consumes in meat two hundred pounds of bacon or pork, costing, in Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, Tennessee, and Western Virginia, \$8; thirteen bushels of Indian corn, costing \$2; this makes up his food. Now for salt and medicines add \$1, and it runs thus: a year's food is \$11. Their clothing is of cottons—fifteen yards of Lowell, \$1.50; ten yards linsey, \$4; one blanket, \$2; one pair of shoes, \$1—making \$7.50. Now this sum of \$18.50, say \$20, divided among the working days, is six cents. This is not fancy, but every day's practice. So the wages of a slave is one-sixth part of the wages of free laborers.⁸

Whatever their treatment of slaves, most planters worked consistently to make them submissive and deferential. While the lash was the linchpin of his regime, the slaveholder adopted several practices to assure the slave's submissiveness. A master started early trying to impress upon the mind of the young black the awesome power of whiteness: he made the slave bow upon meeting him, stand in his presence, and accept floggings from his young children; he flogged the slave for fighting with young whites. The ritual of deference was required at every turn: the slave was flogged for disputing a white man's word, kicked for walking between two whites on a street, and not allowed to call his wife or mother "Mrs."⁹ He had to approach the overseer or

8. [Nathaniel Ware], *Notes on Political Economy, As Applicable to the United States, by a Southern Planter* (New York, 1844), 201-2.

9. Ball, *Slavery*, 40-74; Watson, *Narrative*, 28-38; John Thompson, *The Life of John Thompson, a Fugitive Slave* (Worcester, Mass., 1856), 10-26;

master with great humility. For example, on Charles Ball's plantation the slaves "were always obliged to approach the door of the mansion, in the most humble and supplicating manner, with our hats in our hands, and the most subdued and beseeching language in our mouths. . . ."¹⁰

Many masters tried first to demonstrate their own authority over the slave and then the superiority of all whites over blacks. They continually told the slave he was unfit for freedom, that every slave who attempted to escape was captured and sold further South, and that the black man must conform to the white man's every wish. The penalties for non-conformity were severe; the lessons uniformly pointed to one idea: the slave was a thing to be used by the "superior" race. Jermain Loguen, for instance, wrote that he "had been taught, in the severest school, that he was a thing for others' uses, and that he must bend his head, body and mind in conformity to that idea, in the presence of a superior race. . . . Likewise, Austin Steward had since his childhood "been taught to cower beneath the white man's frown, and bow at his bidding, or suffer all the rigor of the slave laws."¹¹

Planters insisted that their slaves show no signs of dissatisfaction. Instead, they were to demonstrate their humility by cheerful performance of their tasks. Elizabeth Keckley's master, for instance, "never liked to see one of his slaves wear a sorrowful face, and those who offended in this particular way were always punished." Anxiously scanning the faces of his slaves, the master made them reflect, in their countenances, what he wanted rather than what they felt. Henry Watson asserted that "the slaveholder watches every move of the slave, and if he is downcast or sad,—in fact, if they are in any mood but laughing and singing, and manifesting symptoms of perfect content at heart,—they are said to have the devil in them. . . ."¹²

Sam Aleckson, *Before the War and After the Union* (Boston, 1929), 51-65; William Wells Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave* (Boston, 1847), 95-98.

10. Ball, *Slavery*, 41.

11. Jermain Wesley Loguen, *The Rev. J. W. Loguen, as a Slave and as a Freedman* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1859), 165; Steward, *Twenty-two Years*, 97-98.

12. Keckley, *Scenes*, 29; Watson, *Narrative*, 32.

Lest the edifice he was building should fall, the master enlisted the aid of some black men to help him control the others. The most diligent slaves were rewarded and pointed to as models for the others to emulate. Black drivers were forced, on pain of punishment themselves, to keep the slaves at their tasks and to flog them for breaking the plantation rules.

Caught in the no-man's-land between management and labor, the driver suffered the consequences: he was almost literally shot at from all sides. When he earned praise from the master for a job well done, he earned the undying hatred of the slaves for pushing them too hard. Demotion and flogging greeted the driver who allowed the slaves to dawdle at their work, who failed to keep order in the quarters, or who could not account for plantation equipment. While drivers tried to walk the tightrope between the masters who gave them material rewards (money, passes, presents) and the slaves who gave them social rewards (love, respect, companionship), most of them failed. Because masters correctly perceived them as being the most loyal of slaves, the bondsmen treated the drivers as spies and collaborators. The driver was the best example in the quarters of the oppressed identifying with the enemy. The ambiguities some scholars have seen in the driver's role were similar to those of foremen and non-commissioned officers. Like his industrial and military counterparts, the driver was ground relentlessly between the upper (masters) and nether (slaves) millstones. From the perspective of the bondsmen, however, whenever there was a conflict in loyalties the driver acted out his primary role as the master's man. Using the self-serving testimony of a few remarkable drivers, historians have tried to demonstrate that he was the classic man caught in the middle who went to unusual lengths to protect his fellows, that he ranked high in the social order of the quarters, and that he was as rebellious as other slaves.¹³ The

13. Leslie Howard Owens, *This Species of Property* (New York, 1976), 121-35; Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (New York, 1974), 365-88; Thomas H. Patten, Jr., *The Foreman: Forgotten Man of Management* (n.p., 1968), 17-33, 106-8, 123-47; Alan Fox, *A Sociology of Work in Industry* (London, 1971), 84-89; David Dunkerley, *The Foreman: Aspects of Task and Structure* (London, 1975), 28-39, 53-58, 85-87, 120-29; Samuel A.

evidence from the blacks themselves contradicts this portrait.

Since most plantations were small, slave owners did not employ enough drivers for them to represent significant personages in the community of the slaves.¹⁴ Called whipping man, overlooker, whipping boss, foreman, and overseer by the slaves, the driver was generally described by bondsmen as being as "mean as the devil." Significantly, the more sympathetic (or neutral) assessments of the drivers come from the drivers themselves, their relatives, or their owners. Rare indeed is the testimony of a field hand that drivers tried in any way to protect the bondsmen or hide their indiscretions from owners.¹⁵ The slaves complained instead of the driver's sexual exploitation of black women, his alacrity in meting out punishment, and his favoritism in giving rewards. In slave interviews and autobiographies, the driver appears as the embodiment of cruelty. Henry Cheatam of Mississippi gave a typical description:

Old Miss had a nigger overseer and dat was de meanest devil dat ever lived on de Lord's green earth. I promise myself when I growed up dat I was a-goin' to kill dat nigger if it was de last thing I ever done. Lots of times I'se seen him beat my mammy, and one day I seen him beat my auntie who was big with a

Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier: Adjustment During Army Life* (4 vols., Princeton, 1949), I, 401-10.

14. Even when one discounts the comments of those too young to remember much about slavery, the driver is an extremely rare figure compared with the ubiquitous overseer in the WPA interviews.

15. John W. Blasingame, ed., *Slave Testimony* (Baton Rouge, 1977), 405, 498, 640; Randall Miller, ed., "Dear Master": *Letters of a Slave Family* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1978), 139-82; Owens, *Species*, 121-35; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 365-88; George P. Rawick, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (31 vols., Westport, Conn., 1972-77), VI (Alabama), 63, 155, 169, 426, (Indiana), 199, VII (Oklahoma), 67-70, 98-101, 124, 129, 192, 224, 227, 251-53, 288, 292, 303 (Mississippi), 69, 78, VII, pt. 1:301, IX pt. 3:139, pt. 4:298, X pt. 5:35, 120, 339, pt. 6:49, 82; (Supplement), I, 87, 156-59, 167, 305, 450, II, 11, 106, IV, 471, XII, 13, 82, 111, 361; Charles L. Perdue et al., eds., *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves* (Charlottesville, 1976), 26-27, 110, 290; Ronnie C. Tyler and Lawrence R. Murphy, eds., *The Slave Narratives of Texas* (Austin, 1974), 63; Orland K. Armstrong, ed., *Old Massa's People: The Old Slaves Tell Their Story* (Indianapolis, 1931), 98-99, 217-19.

child, and dat man dug a round hole in de ground and put her stomach in it, and beat and beat her for a half hour straight till de baby come out right dere in de hole.

Mistis allow such treatment only 'cause a heap of times she didn't know nothin' about it, and de slaves better not tell her, 'cause dat overseer whip 'em if he finds out dat dey done gone and told. . . . When de slaves would try to run away our overseer would put chains on deir legs with big long spikes between deir feets, so dey couldn't get away.¹⁶

The key to the slaves' assessment of the driver was whether or not he had the power to flog them. When masters prohibited drivers from flogging, they had to work out a number of compromises in order to get slaves to labor. Without the whip, the driver spurred his fellows on by example and threats to tell the master when they did not labor conscientiously. Though the size of the plantation, the number of slaves, the crop, the presence or absence of owners, managerial style of masters, and the resort to the task system or gang labor all affected the role of the driver in a variety of ways, the presence or absence of the whip in his hands largely determined his relationship with other slaves and his standing in the quarters.

While the drivers provided part of the coercion necessary to keep the plantation machinery humming, the domestic servants often represented an extension of the master's eyes and ears: the plantation's secret police. Flattered and materially rewarded, the domestic servant kept the master informed of activities in the slave quarters. Trained to speak of his good treatment to Northern visitors and sometimes forced to spy on his fellows, the domestic servant was a valuable adjunct to the slaveholder's security and public relations staff.

Ritual deference and obedience to plantation rules could only

16. Norman R. Yetman, ed., *Voices from Slavery* (New York, 1970), 55; see also: Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 65-73, 219-20, 277-79, 359, 524, 586; Rawick, *American Slave*, VI (Alabama), 2, 52, 66, 158, 181, 212, 224, 416, (Indiana), 156, 199-200, VII (Oklahoma), 21, 50-51, 77-78, 216, 233, 296 (Mississippi), 4, 13, VIII, pt. 1:34, IX, pt. 4:85; (Supplement), I, 89-92, III, 261, XII, 29, 37, 142, 369; Perdue, *Weevils*, 156, 266-67, 274; Tyler and Murphy, *Slave Narratives*, 53-55; Armstrong, *Old Massa's People*, 218.

be enforced by most planters by constant floggings. William Wells Brown spoke for many slaves when he wrote that on his plantation the whip was used "very frequently and freely, and a small offence on the part of a slave furnished an occasion for its use."¹⁷ The slaves were flogged most frequently for running away and for failure to complete the tasks assigned them. Slaveholders often punished them for visiting their mates, learning to read, arguing or fighting with whites, working too slowly, stealing, fighting or quarreling with other slaves, drunkenness, or for trying to prevent the sale of their relatives. They were occasionally punished for impudence, asking their masters to sell them, claiming they were free men, breaking household articles, or for giving sexual favors to persons other than their masters.¹⁸

Nowhere does the irrationality of slavery appear as clearly as in the way that slaves were punished. While generally speaking a slaveholder had no desire to punish his slave so severely as to endanger his life, the master was only a man, subject, like most men, to miscalculations, to anger, to sadism, and to drink. When angry, masters frequently kicked, slapped, cuffed, or boxed the ears of domestic servants, sometimes flogged pregnant women, and often punished slaves so cruelly that it took them weeks to recover.¹⁹ Many slaves reported that they were flogged severely, had iron weights with bells on them placed on their necks, or were shackled. Recalcitrant slaves received more stripes and were treated more cruelly by exasperated planters than were any other blacks. Moses Roper, an incorrigible runaway, regularly received 100 to 200 lashes from his owner. Once his master poured tar on his head and set it afire. On another occasion, after Roper had escaped from leg irons, his master had the nails of his fingers and toes beaten off. Since every white man considered himself

17. W. W. Brown, *Narrative*, 15.

18. Ball, *Slavery*, 160-68, 372-480; Thomas Jones, *The Experience of Thomas Jones, Who Was a Slave for Forty-three Years* (Boston, 1850), 16-20; J. Brown, *Slave Life*, 21-30, 62-68, 127-36.

19. Steward, *Twenty-two Years*, 22-30; W. W. Brown, *Narrative*, 37-41; Clarke, *Sufferings*, 14-20; J. Brown, *Slave Life*, 127-36; Watkins, *Narrative*, 9-10; Loguen, *Freedman*, 78-98; *New Orleans True Delta*, Dec. 7, 1845; *New Orleans Daily Delta*, Sept. 28, Oct. 7, 1858, Jan. 14, April 20, 1859.

the slave's policeman, the black also suffered at the hands of non-slaveholders. Josiah Henson, for example, accidentally pushed a white man who later broke his arm and shoulder blades.²⁰

Uncompromisingly harsh, the portrait which the slaves drew of cruel masters was filled with brutality and horror. On the plantations of these masters, strong black men suffered from overwork, abuse, and starvation; and the overseer's horn usually sounded before sleep could chase the fatigue of the last day's labor. Characteristically, stocks closed on hapless women and children, mothers cried for the infants torn cruelly from their arms, and whimpering black women fought vainly to preserve their virtue in the face of the lash or pleaded for mercy while blood flowed from their bare buttocks. A cacophony of horrendous sounds constantly reverberated throughout such plantations: nauseated black men vomited while strung up over slowly burning tobacco leaves, vicious dogs tore black flesh, black men moaned as they were hung up by the thumbs with the whip raising deep welts on their backs and as they were bent over barrels or tied down to stakes while paddles with holes in them broke blisters on their rumps. Frequently, blacks called God's name in vain as they fainted from their master's hundredth stroke or as they had their brains blown out. The slaves described masters of this stripe as besotted, vicious, deceitful, coarse, licentious, bloodthirsty, heartless, and hypocritical Christians who were pitiless fiends.²¹

The first impulse of the historian is to reject the slave's portrait as too harsh. There is, however, a great deal of evidence in antebellum court records, newspapers, memoirs, and plantation diaries which suggests that this is not the case. However much it is denied by Southern romantics, there were many slaveholders who were moral degenerates and sadists. Quite frequently, even the most cultured of planters were so inured to brutality that they thought little about the punishment meted out to slaves.

20. W. W. Brown, *Narrative*, 21-30; J. Brown, *Slave Life*, 21-30, 82-109; Loguen, *Freedman*, 122-36; Clarke, *Sufferings*, 22-30; Henson, *Life*, 15-18.

21. W. W. Brown, *Narrative*, 21-26; Clarke, *Sufferings*, 11-12; Steward, *Twenty-two Years*, 91-93; Henson, *Life*, 15-18.

Floggings of 50 to 75 lashes were not uncommon. On numerous occasions, planters branded, stabbed, tarred and feathered, burned, shackled, tortured, maimed, crippled, mutilated, and castrated their slaves. Thousands of slaves were flogged so severely that they were permanently scarred. In Mississippi a fiendish planter once administered 1000 lashes to a slave.²²

At the opposite extreme from the fiend was Dr. James Green Carson of Mississippi. Carson, although he inherited 200 slaves, early in life expressed an abhorrence of slavery on religious grounds. Unable to free his slaves because of Mississippi law, Carson felt a moral responsibility to treat them humanely. Consequently, he hired a plantation physician, paid white missionaries to preach to his slaves every Sunday, conducted prayer meetings in the quarters during the week, purchased labor-saving machinery to lighten the slaves' work, punished his children for being discourteous to blacks, and never used the lash. James Carson was a rare man among Southern planters. Still, there were many others who were enough like him to be described as generally kind and humane in their treatment of slaves.²³

According to antebellum whites, there were many planters who dealt with their slaves in a humane fashion. Walter Peterson, for example, recalled that in Alabama "many slaveholders were kind masters."²⁴ Philip H. Jones of Louisiana asserted that "Many owners were humane and kind and provided well for them [slaves]."²⁵ According to Amanda Washington, among the planters "*Noblesse oblige* was recognized everywhere, and we felt bound to treat kindly the class dependent on us."²⁶

22. Charles S. Sydnor, *Slavery in Mississippi* (Baton Rouge, 1966), 86-94; Kenneth Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution* (New York, 1956), 171-91.

23. Fletcher M. Green, ed., *Ferry Hill Plantation Journal, January 4, 1838-January 15, 1839* (Chapel Hill, 1961), vii-xxi; Osborne, "Plantation," 277-88; Anderson, "Carson," 243-67; Mary W. Highsaw, "A History of Zion Community in Maury County, 1806-1860," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* V (June 1946), 111-40.

24. Walter F. Peterson, "Slavery in the 1850's: Recollections of an Alabama Unionist," *Alabama Historical Quarterly* XXX (Fall and Winter 1968), 221.

25. Philip H. Jones, "Reminiscences of Philip H. Jones," 4, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina.

26. Amanda Washington, *How Beauty Was Saved* (New York, 1907), 64.

The testimony of the white witnesses is borne out by that of former slaves. A majority of the slaves, at one time, had one or two masters whom they considered kindly men. Josiah Henson described his master as a "kind-hearted, liberal, and jovial" man. Grimes felt that Dr. Collock of Savannah "was the best and most humane man I ever lived with, or worked under." Sam Aleckson's South Carolina master was "kind and generous." Isaac Jefferson recalled that his master, Thomas Jefferson, was of a similar stripe: "Old master [was] kind to servants." Elijah Marrs declared: "Our master was not hard on us." The slaveholders earned these encomiums in various ways. Sparing use of the lash, provision of adequate shelter, clothing, and food, and maintenance of the family unit all led the slaves to think of their masters as kindly men.²⁷

However kind his master, the slave had no guarantee of benevolent treatment. The kindest masters were sometimes crotchety, often wreaking their anger on their slaves.²⁸ Austin Steward reported that his owner "was not a very hard master; but generally was kind and pleasant. Indulgent when in good humor, but like many of the southerners, terrible when in a passion." Grimes's master was of the same temperament. He was, according to Grimes, "a very kind master, but exceedingly severe when angry."²⁹

Most masters were neither pitiless fiends nor saints in their relationships with slaves. Whenever possible, planters hired physicians for slaves when they were ill, gave them what the planter defined as "adequate" food, clothing, and shelter, and flogged them for lying, stealing, fighting, breaking tools, and numerous other "offenses." While ready to give the slave from 10 to 50 lashes for most offenses, the typical planter preferred to punish slaves in other ways (withholding passes, demotion, extra work, humiliation, solitary confinement, etc.). Less violent means of

27. Henson, *Life*, 2; Grimes, *Life*, 36-48; Aleckson, *Union*, 35; Isaac Jefferson, *Life of Isaac Jefferson of Petersburg, Virginia, Blacksmith* (Charlottesville, 1951), 23; Elijah P. Marrs, *Life and History* (Louisville, 1885), 11.

28. Leonard Black, *The Life and Sufferings of Leonard Black, a Fugitive from Slavery* (New Bedford, 1847), 11; Pennington, *Blacksmith*, 9.

29. Steward, *Twenty-two Years*, 33; Grimes, *Life*, 33.

punishment were preferred because they were not morally reprehensible, involved no physical harm to valuable property, and were often more effective in preserving discipline than floggings.³⁰

In spite of the institutionally defined roles, the treatment of slaves varied from plantation to plantation. Differences in family life, childhood experiences, and religious beliefs caused the planters to treat their slaves in a great variety of ways. A few masters were so brutal and sadistic that they could crush the slave's every manly instinct. Others were too humane, too lazy, or too stupid to make child-like dependents of their slaves. While the normal planter extracted all of the labor he could from blacks, there were several conflicting forces which made him at the same time callous toward the slaves' sufferings and impelled him to recognize their humanity.

One of the most important institutions which influenced the planter's treatment of the slave was the white family. The white child grew up in a society which stressed formalized courtship, romanticized women as angelic, made a fetish of the family, frowned on public displays of affection, encouraged prolific child-bearing, and promoted early marriages. The planter's family was patriarchal, deeply religious, and filio-pietistic. Males were given religious and moral lessons as well as being taught to be aggressive, proud, independent, courteous, courageous, chivalrous, honorable, and intelligent.³¹

Although fathers were venerated and children were frequently dependent on them until adulthood, rural isolation sometimes promoted spontaneous and affectionate family relations. Disci-

30. J. Carlyle Sitterson, "The McCollams: A Planter Family of the Old and New South," *Journal of Southern History* VI (Aug. 1940), 347-67; Noah Davis, *A Narrative of the Life of Rev. Noah Davis, a Colored Man* (Baltimore, 1859), 1-14.

31. Susan Dabney Smedes, *Memorials of a Southern Planter* (Baltimore, 1887), 29, 108-15, 135-38; Edmund S. Morgan, *Virginians at Home* (Williamsburg, 1952), 5-8, 36, 45-48; Julia Cherry Spruill, *Women's Life and Work in the Southern Colonies* (Chapel Hill, 1938), 43-50; Rosser H. Taylor, *Ante-Bellum South Carolina: A Social History* (Chapel Hill, 1942), 59-73; Arthur W. Calhoun, *A Social History of the American Family* (New York, 1960), II, 311-55.

pline was unsystematic, and parents overindulged their children. In spite of this, the formalized manners often militated against parents displaying deep affection for their children. Susan Dabney Smedes, for example, reported that her father "did not readily express his affections for his children . . ." ³² The child's relations with his mother were hedged in by his almost religious veneration of her as a genteel, delicate, saintly being. His father's circumspection in his contacts with white women reinforced the picture of her as an untouchable. The situation was complicated even more by the frequent remarriages of widows and widowers and the subsequent strains on their children.

One of the key figures in the white child's socialization was the ubiquitous black mammy to whom he frequently turned for love and security. It was the black mammy who often ran the household, interceded with his parents to protect him, punished him for misbehavior, nursed him, rocked him to sleep, told him fascinating stories, and in general served as his second, more attentive, more loving mother. The mammy's influence on her white charge's thought, behavior, language, and personality is inestimable. ³³ One Englishman wrote that in the Carolinas: "Each child has its *Momma*, whose gestures and accent it will necessarily copy, for children, we all know, are imitative beings. It is not unusual to hear an elegant lady say, *Richard always grieves when Quasheehan is whipped, because she suckled him.*" ³⁴ Often the child formed a deep and abiding love for his mammy and as an adult deferred to her demands and wishes.

Black childhood playmates had only a little less influence on the white child than the mammy. As a result of enduring friendships formed during their impressionable childhood, many white youngsters intervened to prevent the punishment or sale of their black favorites, demanded of them far less conformity to the slave role, or preferred the company of slaves to that of their

32. Smedes, *Memorials*, 115.

33. Smedes, *Memorials*, 20, 32-33, 116; Virginia Clay-Clopton, *A Belle of the Fifties* (New York, 1905), 4; Taylor, *South Carolina*, 22-34; Morgan, *Virginians*, 63-65; Calhoun, *Family*, II, 311-55.

34. Quoted in Spruill, *Women*, 56.

white neighbors.³⁵ William Wells Brown's master held Brown's father in such high esteem that he refused to sell the boy to New Orleans even after he had tried to escape. Similarly, William Green's mother prevented his separation from her by appealing to his young master whom she had nursed. Jacob Stroyer wrote that one intemperate white man terrorized his white neighbors but never abused his forty slaves because of the control his old mammy exercised over him. Rarely could a planter punish a slave with impunity if he were the favorite of his wife and children. The son of John Thompson's master, for instance, threatened to shoot an overseer for flogging the slave fiddler. The regard in which Andrew Jackson was held by his master's sons was so great that they refused to tell their father where he went when he escaped from Kentucky. Even if the slave were not a favorite, a member of the master's family might prevent unusually cruel treatment.³⁶

The early association with blacks, and especially his black mammy, had a profound influence on the white Southerner. His constant exposure to the cruelties perpetrated upon slaves led to a sense of detachment which conflicted with his love and respect for his close black associates. Similarly, the demeanor of all slaves toward his parents and his parents' insistence that he demand deference from blacks taught the child to exercise authority. He soon observed that his strict moral code conflicted with the apparently more desirable loose morality, irresponsibility, and happiness of his black associates. He envied the slave his apparent freedom from social restraints and projected all of his own desires to break through these restraints onto the black. Often he internalized the love ideal of the black mammy but later learned that she was a hated, black thing. His intimate relation with the mammy, his observation of the casual sexual contacts among slaves, the idealization of white women and the pur-

35. Smedes, *Memorials*, 116, 162; Taylor, *South Carolina*, 22-34.

36. Henry Box Brown, *Narrative of Henry Box Brown* (Boston, 1851), 1-21, 23-38; Samuel Hall, *47 Years a Slave* (Washington, Iowa, 1912), n.p.; Monroe F. Jamison, *Autobiography and Work of Bishop M. F. Jamison, D.D.* (Nashville, 1912), 17-23; Andrew Jackson, *Narrative and Writings of Andrew Jackson* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1847), 20-23.

suit of black women by white males, convinced him that sexual joy lay in the arms of a black paramour. The white male frequently resolved his love-hate complex by pursuing the allegedly passionate black woman. At the same time, he exaggerated the sexual prowess and desire of the black male for liaisons with angelic white women and reacted with extreme cruelty to any challenge to his monopoly of white women.³⁷

The slaveholder's sadistic impulses were frequently restrained by the fear of public disapproval. Sympathetic whites often prevented the cruel punishment of slaves. An innkeeper once prevented Moses Roper's drunken master from flogging him. One of Charles Ball's masters never flogged him because he wanted to retain his public reputation as a benevolent slaveholder. Much to his embarrassment, Memphis city officials upbraided Louis Hughes's master when his overseer almost flogged a slave to death.³⁸ Frederick Douglass felt that public opinion was "an un-failing restraint upon the cruelty and barbarity of masters, overseers, and slave-drivers, whenever and wherever it can reach them . . ."³⁹

One of the strongest forces operating against cruel treatment of slaves was religion. Although it is impossible to determine how many slaveholders were deeply religious, it is obvious from the sources that a number of them tried to apply Christian principles in their relations with slaves. The important thing, however, is that ministers continually reminded masters of their duties to their slaves. One example of the interest in this subject was the response to an essay contest sponsored by the Baptist State Convention in Alabama. In 1849 forty men submitted essays on "The Duties of Christian Masters" in an effort to win the \$200 prize the convention offered. Some of the essays went through several editions.

The relationship of the minister to the planter was a complex

37. Grimes, *Life*, 15; Watson, *Narrative*, 5-17; Loguen, *Freedman*, 19-25; Ball, *Slavery*, 238-300.

38. Ball, *Slavery*, 23-40; W. W. Brown, *Narrative*, 21-26.

39. Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York, 1968 [1855]), 61.

one. Frequently dependent on wealthy planters for his livelihood, the white minister almost never questioned the morality of the master-slave relationship. In fact, a majority of the ministers insisted on slavery's divine origin and encouraged slaves to be obedient to their masters. Even so, in spite of the role the minister played in preserving the peculiar institution and his refusal to castigate the planters for their treatment of slaves, he often preached about an ideal master-slave relationship and the duties and responsibilities planters had toward their slaves.

The first duty of the Christian master was to recognize the slave's humanity. This recognition entailed a respect for the feelings of the slave. Southern divines argued that the slave was also created in God's image. The Reverend J. H. Thornwell testified that

the Negro is of one blood with ourselves—that he has sinned as we have, and that he has an equal interest with us in the great redemption. Science, falsely so called, may attempt to exclude him from the brotherhood of humanity . . . but the instinctive impulses of our nature, combined with the plainest declarations of the word of God, lead us to recognize in his form and lineaments—his moral, religious and intellectual nature—the same humanity in which we glory as the image of God. We are not ashamed to call him our brother.⁴⁰

While the Reverend George W. Freeman was not as certain of the link between master and slave, he was more insistent on the necessity of respecting the black's feelings. Freeman exhorted masters, in their relations with slaves, "never forget that, as low as they are in the scale of humanity, they are yet *human beings, and have the feelings of human beings*—feelings too with many of them, as delicate and sensitive as your own, and which demand to be respected, and carefully preserved from outrage."⁴¹

Ministers quoted the Bible freely to prove the obligations masters had to their slaves. They reminded them that Paul had ad-

40. J. H. Thornwell, *The Rights and Duties of Masters, A Sermon Preached at the Dedication of a Church* (Charleston, 1850), 11.

41. George W. Freeman, *The Rights and Duties of Slave-Holders* (Charleston, 1837), 27.

vised masters to forbear threatening slaves "knowing that your Master also is in Heaven; neither is there respect of persons with him" (Ephesians 6:9). The most frequently quoted Biblical admonition was Colossians 4:1: "Masters, give unto *your* servants that which is just and equal; knowing that ye also have a Master in heaven." How was the master to determine justice and equity? Most Southern divines translated the terms into the Golden Rule. The Reverend T. A. Holmes summed up the general view when he observed: "Equity pleads the right of humanity. . . . and, in the conscientious discharge of duty, prompts the master to such treatment of his servant as would be desired on his part, were their positions reversed."⁴² Ministers asserted that cruel treatment of slaves would lead to Divine censure. The Reverend H. N. McTyeire of New Orleans declared, "As you treat your servants on earth, so will your Master in heaven treat you."⁴³ The Reverend T. A. Holmes was more direct. He cautioned slaveholders that "the exercise of right and authority on the part of the master, with reference only to his interest, uninfluenced by kindness to his servant, must incur the displeasure of Him with whom there is no respect of persons."⁴⁴

According to the ministers, Christian masters had several duties to their slaves. They had to maintain the slaves properly, care for them in old age, require no more than a reasonable amount of labor from them, give them adequate leisure time, and respect their humanity. Many ministers repeated the question John Wesley asked slaveholders in 1774: "Have you tried what mildness and gentleness would do?" Holmes told planters that "the master should be the friend of his servant, and the servant should know it. Friendship implies good will, Kindness, a desire for the welfare of him for whom it is entertained." Freeman was just as insistent on mild treatment. He declared: "It is the duty of mas-

42. H. N. McTyeire et al., *Duties of Masters of Servants: Three Premium Essays* (Charleston, 1851), 136.

43. H. N. McTyeire, *Duties of Christian Masters* (Nashville, 1859), 125-26.

44. McTyeire et al., *Essays*, 133.

ters not only to be merciful to their servants, but to do everything in their power to make their situation comfortable, and to put forth all reasonable effort to render them contented and happy."⁴⁵

In addition to several personal and social forces which prevented planters from practicing the kind of cruelty necessary for the systematic extinction of every trace of manhood in the slave, there were certain features of the plantation that militated against abject docility on the part of the slaves. Although legally the planter had absolute authority over the slave, there were many restraints on his use of that authority. Dependent on the slave's labor for his economic survival, the planter ordinarily could not afford to starve, torture, or work him to death. Whatever the regimen on the plantation, the planter never had a supervisory staff which was large enough to extract the kind of labor that killed men in a few months. Consequently, in spite of the slave's constant labor, there was an absolute limit beyond which he was not pushed. The most important factor in this limitation was the size of most plantations and the consequent insurance of a low level of surveillance of many of the slave's activities. Since more than half of the slaves in 1860 lived on plantations containing twenty or more slaves, it is obvious that only a small minority of planters could personally supervise every detail of the work. Besides, many masters were too lazy, too stupid, or away too often visiting spas during the summer to maintain a strict surveillance over their slaves. The editor of the *Southern Quarterly Review* recognized this when he wrote that as a result of "the apathy of the master; his love of repose; his absence from his estates . . . the slave . . . acquires a thousand habits and desires all inconsistent with subordination, labour, decency, sobriety, and all virtues of regularity, humility and temperance."⁴⁶

Seeking to ensure regular labor and humility, most planters

45. McTyeire, *Duties*, 84; McTyeire *et al.*, *Essays*, 143; Freeman, *Rights*, 25.

46. N.P.B., "The Treatment of Slaves in the Southern States," *Southern Quarterly Review* XXI (Jan. 1852), 212.

hired overseers to manage their slaves. The job of the overseer was unbelievably difficult.⁴⁷ One overseer indicated this plainly when he complained:

If there ever was or ever will be a calling in life as mean and contemptible as that of an overseer—I would be right down glad to know what it is, and where to be found. . . . If there be . . . a favorable crop, the *master* makes a splendid crop; if any circumstances be unpropitious and an inferior crop is made, it is the overseer's fault, and if he flogs [the slaves] to keep them at home, or locked up . . . he is a brute and a tyrant. If no meat is made, the overseer *would* plant too much cotton. . . . If hogs are taken good care of the overseer is wasting corn, and "the most careless and thriftless creature alive." If he does not "turn out" hands in time, he is *lazy*; if he "rousts" them out as your dad and mine had to do, why he is a brute. . . .⁴⁸

Planters insisted that the overseer spend all of his time on the plantation, especially if the owner himself did not reside there. George Washington was characteristic in this regard. He informed one of his overseers:

I do in explicit terms, enjoin it upon you to remain constantly at home, unless called off by unavoidable business, or to attend divine worship, and to be constantly with your people when there. There is no other sure way of getting work well done, and quietly, by negroes; for when an overlooker's back is turned, the most of them will slight their work, or be idle altogether; in which case correction cannot retrieve either, but often produces evils which are worse than the disease. Nor is there any other mode than this to prevent thieving and other disorders, the consequence of opportunities.⁴⁹

47. John E. Moore, ed., "Two Documents Relating to Plantation Overseers of the Vicksburg Region, 1831-1832," *Journal of Mississippi History* XVI (Jan. 1954), 31-36; Lucille Griffith, ed., "The Plantation Record Book of Brookdale Farm, Amite County, 1856-57," *Journal of Mississippi History* VII (Jan. 1945), 25-31.

48. James C. Bonner, "The Plantation Overseer and Southern Nationalism as Revealed in the Career of Garland D. Harmon," *Agricultural History* XIX (Jan. 1945), 2.

49. William K. Scarborough, *The Overseer* (Baton Rouge, 1966), 73.

While constant surveillance of slaves was mandatory for successful management, this was one of the most onerous of the overseer's duties. One overseer complained in May 1858 that his work was so time consuming that "I don't get time scarcely to eat or sleep. I have not been off the plantation since the 3rd of Oct[.] . . . The truth is no man can begin to attend to such a business with any set of negros, without the strictest vigilance on his part."⁵⁰

The disciplining of slaves was the major factor in the success or failure of an overseer. Expected to make a large crop while guarding the welfare of the slaves, the overseer often came into conflict with the planter. If the overseer used unusual force in driving the slaves, he incurred the wrath of the owner for damaging his property. On the other hand, if he were easygoing, the planter might dismiss him for making a small crop. In fact, planters often dismissed overseers for cruelty, drunkenness, absenteeism, and lax discipline.

In order for the overseer to retain his job he had to be adept at managing slaves. There were many pitfalls in the endeavor. If on the one hand the overseer became too familiar with the slaves or had sexual relations with the black women, the slaves extracted favors from him and did little work. On the other hand, if the overseer was too cruel and hard driving, the slaves did everything they could to discredit him. It was often impossible for the overseer to find a happy medium between these two extremes. Whenever the slaves were dissatisfied with the overseer, they informed the owner of his transgressions, or ran away to escape heavy work or to avoid punishment. Often the slaves refused to return to work until they had spoken to their masters about their treatment. One harried overseer indicated the impact of this tactic when he complained that "if I donte please every negro on the place they run away rite strate."⁵¹ If the overseer somehow managed to please the master *and* the slaves, he was guaranteed a long tenure on the plantation. For example, John

50. Quoted in Scarborough, *Overseer*, 46.

51. John S. Bassett, *The Southern Plantation Overseer* (Northampton, Mass., 1925), 64.



Figures 47, 48, 49, 50. Cotton Plantation





B. Lamar wrote in 1844 that he was anxious to retain his overseer because "the negroes like him too."⁵²

As the visible symbol of authority, the overseer was the most frequent target of rebellious slaves disgruntled over their work load, food allotment, or punishment. According to one observer, "An over-seer has to plan all the business and be with the negroes all the time. The negroes have great spite and hatred towards them and frequently fight them, when the over-seer pretends to whip them. The negroes think as meanly of the poor white people, as the rich white people do themselves and think anybody that is so poor as to be an overseer mean enough."⁵³ Hundreds of overseers were beaten, poisoned, stabbed, and shot by rebellious slaves.⁵⁴

The overseer was the weakest link in the chain of plantation management. Whatever his character, it was impossible for the overseer to supervise every detail of the slave's life. Most men were unwilling to lead the kind of solitary life that plantation management demanded. Consequently, most overseers left the plantations periodically at night or on the weekends in order to find some recreation for themselves. Overwhelmed by a multitude of duties, the overseer could not be everywhere at once and consequently could not keep the slaves under constant surveillance. If he happened to be lazy, the level of surveillance was even lower.⁵⁵

As a result of the differences in the characters of overseers and masters, many plantations deviated strikingly from the ideal outlined in the rules of management. According to the investigations of H. Herbemont of South Carolina, "there are very few planters who have anything like a regular system for either the moral

52. Ulrich B. Phillips, ed., *Plantation and Frontier* (2 vols., Cleveland, 1910), I, 170.

53. Martha Van Briesen, ed., *The Letters of Elijah Fletcher* (Charlottesville, 1965), 23.

54. Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York, 1943); Phillips, *Plantation*, II, 117-25.

55. Charles S. Sydnor, "A Slave Owner and His Overseers," *North Carolina Historical Review* XIV (Jan. 1937), 31-38.

or physical government of their slaves." A writer in the *American Farmer* agreed: "There is in fact little or no 'system' of management in regard to our slaves—they are insubordinate and *unmanageable*."⁵⁶

Even when attempts were made to govern the slaves in some systematic fashion, the planters realized that since the slaves had not internalized their ideals they had to make several compromises in order to maintain the facade of absolute control.⁵⁷ First, they recognized that their slaves differed in temperament and intelligence. For instance, one planter asserted: "In every servants' quarters there are the strong and the weak, the sagacious and the simple." Second, since they differed so much in character, all slaves could not be treated in the same manner. The most strong-willed and shrewdest slaves received better treatment than most others and were given positions of power in the plantation hierarchy. The intractable slave was either sold or never molested. Planters spotted him quickly, and, inevitably, they were forced by him to be wary. There were certainly many masters who were cautious with slaves like Louis Manigault's Jack Savage. According to Manigault, Jack "was the only negro ever in our possession who I considered capable of murdering me or burning my dwelling at night or capable of committing any act."⁵⁸

Planters often maintained the appearance of strict obedience by making it relatively easy for the slave to obey. Regardless of their desires, most masters realized that the slaves, like soldiers, were adept at "goldbricking." Once the slaves decided how much labor they were going to perform, they refused to work any harder. One slaveholder observed: "Experience has long since taught masters, that every attempt to force a slave beyond the limits that he fixes as a sufficient amount of labor to render his

56. *Southern Agriculturalist* IX (Feb. 1836), 71; *American Farmer*, II (March 16, 1821), 402.

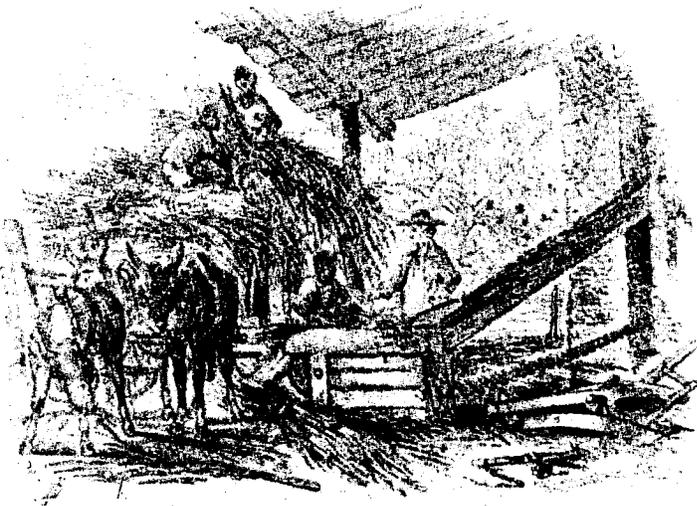
57. J. Brown, *Slave Life*, 82-109; William Green, *Narrative of Events in the Life of William Green* (Springfield, O., 1863), 13.

58. *DeBow's Review* XXIX (Sept. 1860), 362; Manigault quoted in Taylor, *South Carolina*, 177.





Figures 51, 52, 53, 54. Sugar Plantation



master, instead of extorting more work, only tends to make him unprofitable, unmanageable, a vexation and a curse."⁵⁹

It was primarily because the planters recognized that slaves voluntarily limited their work that many of them set the standard of labor so low that every slave could meet it. Even when every allowance is made for different strains of certain crops, it is impossible to explain the variations in labor performed from plantation to plantation without recognition of the slave's role in restricting his output. Examine, for instance, the average amount of cotton picked per day by an adult slave. Between 1825 and 1860 slaves in Mississippi generally picked between 130 and 150 pounds of cotton per day. On Charles Whitmore's delta plantation, however, few slaves picked more than 100 pounds of cotton daily. The slave's limitation on the labor he performed appears clearly in the results of races arranged by planters. In a race on a Mississippi plantation in 1830 fourteen slaves picked an average of 323 pounds of cotton, twice their normal average.⁶⁰ Many planters gave prizes to the best cotton pickers in an effort to speed up the work. While this was often effective, many slaves still refused to exert themselves.⁶¹

The slaveholder also kept up the pretense of absolute control by refusing to take note of every deviation from the rules. In effect, each planter had to learn to be selectively inattentive to rules infractions. A group of Alabama planters gave sound advice on this point: "Negroes lack the motive of self interest to make them careful and diligent, hence the necessity of great patience in the management of them. Do not, therefore, notice too many small omissions of duty."⁶²

The personal relations between master and slave were strained. Rarely did their interests coincide. Because of this, the master

59. "Negro Slavery at the South," *DeBow's Review* VII (Sept. 1849), 220.

60. Mark Swearingen, "Thirty Years of a Mississippi Plantation: Charles Whitmore of Montpelier," *Journal of Southern History* I (May 1935), 198-211; Davis, "Barrow," 431-46; Kathryn T. Abbey, ed., "Documents Relating to El Destino and Chemonie Plantations, Middle Florida, 1828-1868," *Florida Historical Quarterly* VII (Jan. 1929), 179-213.

61. *American Farmer* VII (Jan. 13, 1826), 338.

62. *DeBow's Review* XVIII (June 1855), 718.



Figures 55, 56. Rice Plantation



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used physical force to make the slave obedient. The personal relations on the plantation, however, were much more complicated than a simple relationship between subordinate and superordinate. In the first place, all masters did not demand ritual deference at all times to bolster their self-esteem. Second, the same obsequious behavior was not demanded of ordinary slaves and those in positions of trust. Sir Charles Lyell observed that the latter group of slaves were "involuntarily treated more as equals by the whites." Even when all slaves had to be deferential, whites did not require them to go through the ritual at all times. For example, Susan Dabney Smedes wrote that during Christmas "there was an affectionate throwing off of the reserve and decorum of every-day life."⁶³

While a planter could demand obedience, he could not always obtain the slave's respect. Samuel Meredith complained in 1774 that one of his slaves had told a group of whites that "I am not worthy to be his Master." Sir Charles Lyell reported that frequently in conversing with an intelligent black driver, "This personage, conscious of his importance, would begin by enlarging, with much self-complacency, on the ignorance of his master. . . ." Such slaves gave deference only as a result of fear. They refused to identify with the planter's interest or to work unless they were watched. One of John B. Lamar's carpenters, Ned, was typical of this class. Lamar refused to send Ned off the plantation to construct buildings because of "his general character for intemperance, & disobedience, & quarrelsomeness. . . . He is an eye servant. If I was with him I could have the work done soon and cheap, but I am afraid to trust him off where there is no one he fears."⁶⁴

The Southern white man's perceptions of slave behavior make one point quite clear: the planter recognized the variability of slave personality in his day-to-day relationships. In reality, he had to make several compromises in order to maintain the facade of absolute control. He often "bought off" the strongest slaves by

63. Charles Lyell, *A Second Visit to the United States of North America* (2 vols., New York, 1850), II, 19-20; Smedes, *Memorials*, 162.

64. Quoted in Phillips, *Plantation*, II, 82; Lyell, *Second Visit*, II, 19.

placing them in the plantation hierarchy, was selectively inattentive to rules infractions, and accepted the slave's definition of how much labor he would perform. There was so little identification with the master's interest in the quarters that he frequently had to resort to coercion and to more and more oppressive laws. There were so many differences among slaveholders and the legal sanctions of slavery were applied in so many different ways that the regimen to which the slave was subjected varied considerably. If the masters' portrait of actual slave behavior is any guide, there was considerable variation in slave personalities.