



Where did American slaves live?

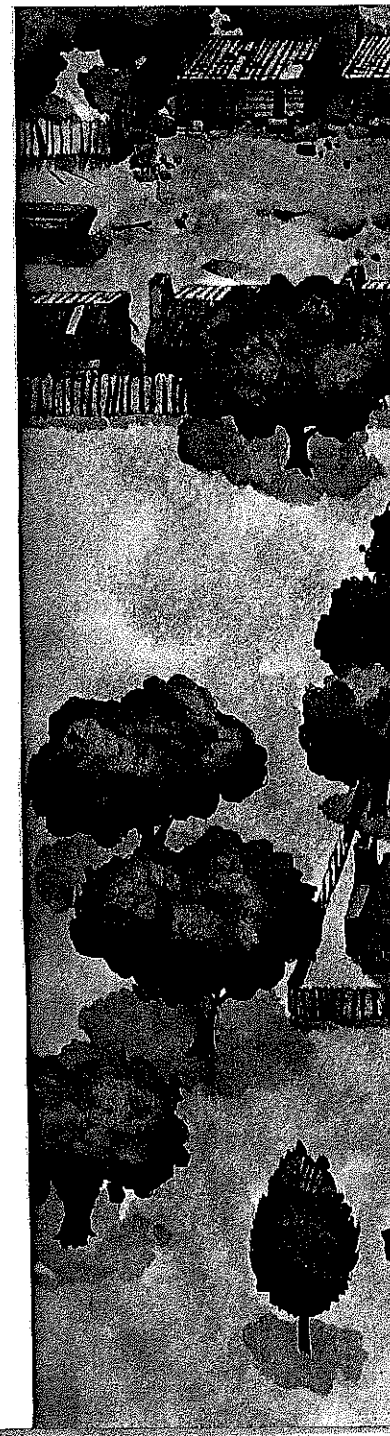
Most lived on farms called plantations.

Some plantations were small farms with only a few slaves. Others were very big, with hundreds of slaves. Most were in between. Crops such as cotton, tobacco, rice, or sugar were grown on the plantations. Owners could make a lot of money from these kinds of crops.

On the bigger plantations, the owner often lived in a fancy house called the Big House. Slaves lived in cabins in a section called the Quarters.

A big plantation was like a small village. Around the Big House were lots of little houses. In each house, special work was done — such as weaving cloth, sewing clothes, or making candles, soap, or shoes. Slaves made almost everything that was needed right there. There were also carpentry shops and blacksmith shops, all run by the slaves.

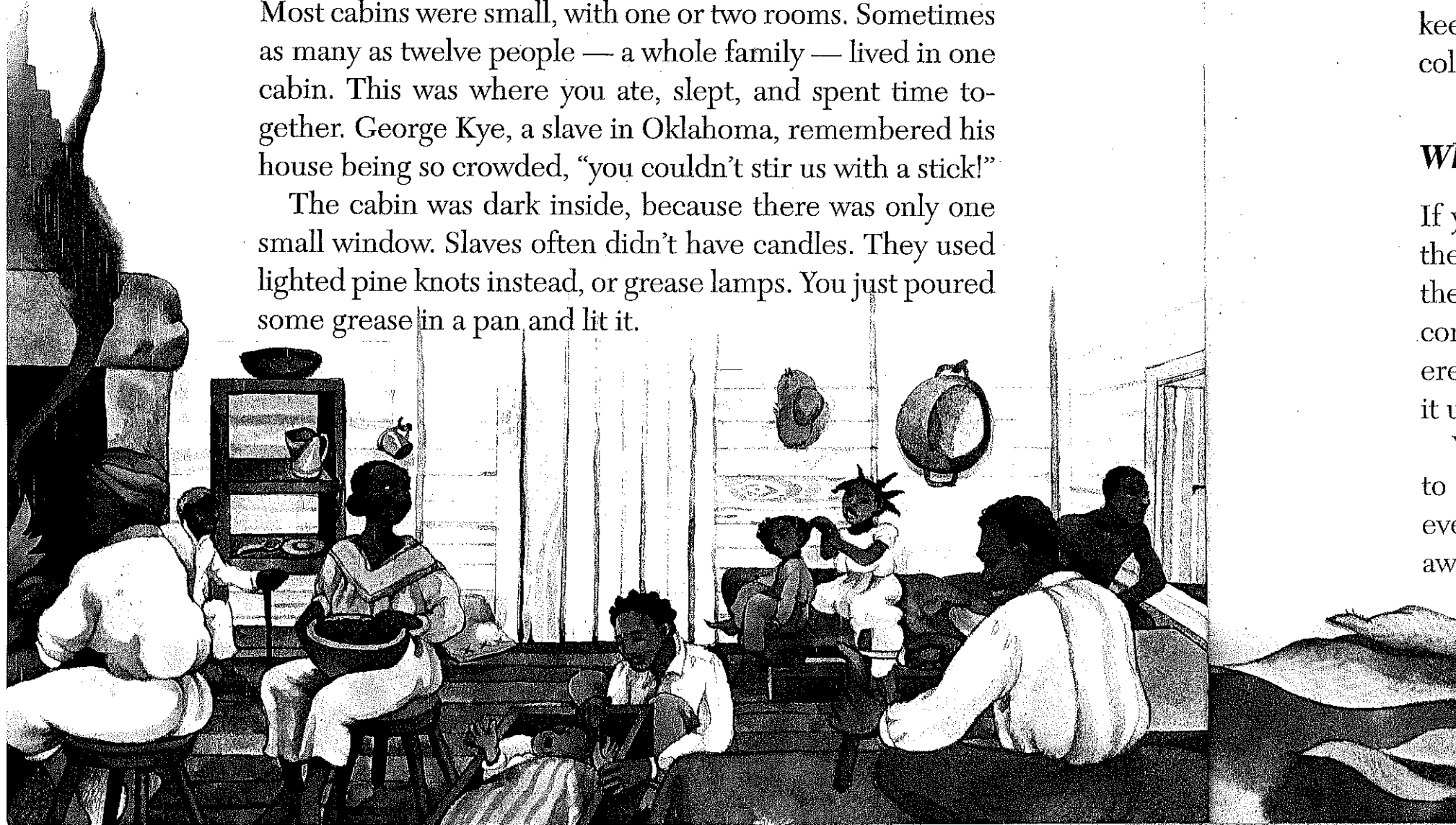
Some slaves lived in towns and big cities. They worked in factories and people's homes.



What was a cabin in the Quarters like?

Most cabins were small, with one or two rooms. Sometimes as many as twelve people — a whole family — lived in one cabin. This was where you ate, slept, and spent time together. George Kye, a slave in Oklahoma, remembered his house being so crowded, “you couldn’t stir us with a stick!”

The cabin was dark inside, because there was only one small window. Slaves often didn’t have candles. They used lighted pine knots instead, or grease lamps. You just poured some grease in a pan and lit it.



It v
har
kee
col

Wi

If y
the
the
cor
ere
it u
y
to
eve
aw

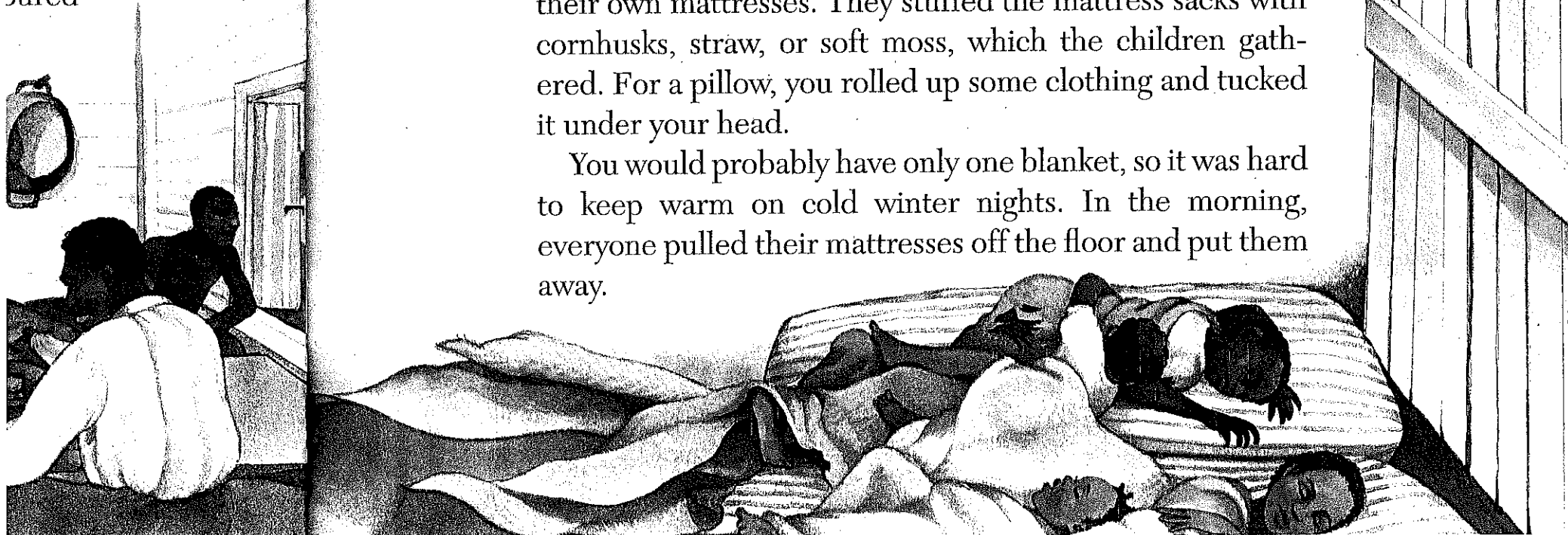
It was smoky in the cabins. The women cooked in pots hanging in an open fireplace. On winter nights, you had to keep the fire going to stay warm. To keep out the rain and cold, you stuffed cracks in the walls with rags and mud.

Where would you sleep?

If you were lucky, you slept in a bed. If not, you slept on the dirt floor on a mattress, or on some rags. People made their own mattresses. They stuffed the mattress sacks with cornhusks, straw, or soft moss, which the children gathered. For a pillow, you rolled up some clothing and tucked it under your head.

You would probably have only one blanket, so it was hard to keep warm on cold winter nights. In the morning, everyone pulled their mattresses off the floor and put them away.

times
n one
ie to-
ed his
tick!"
y one
used
oured



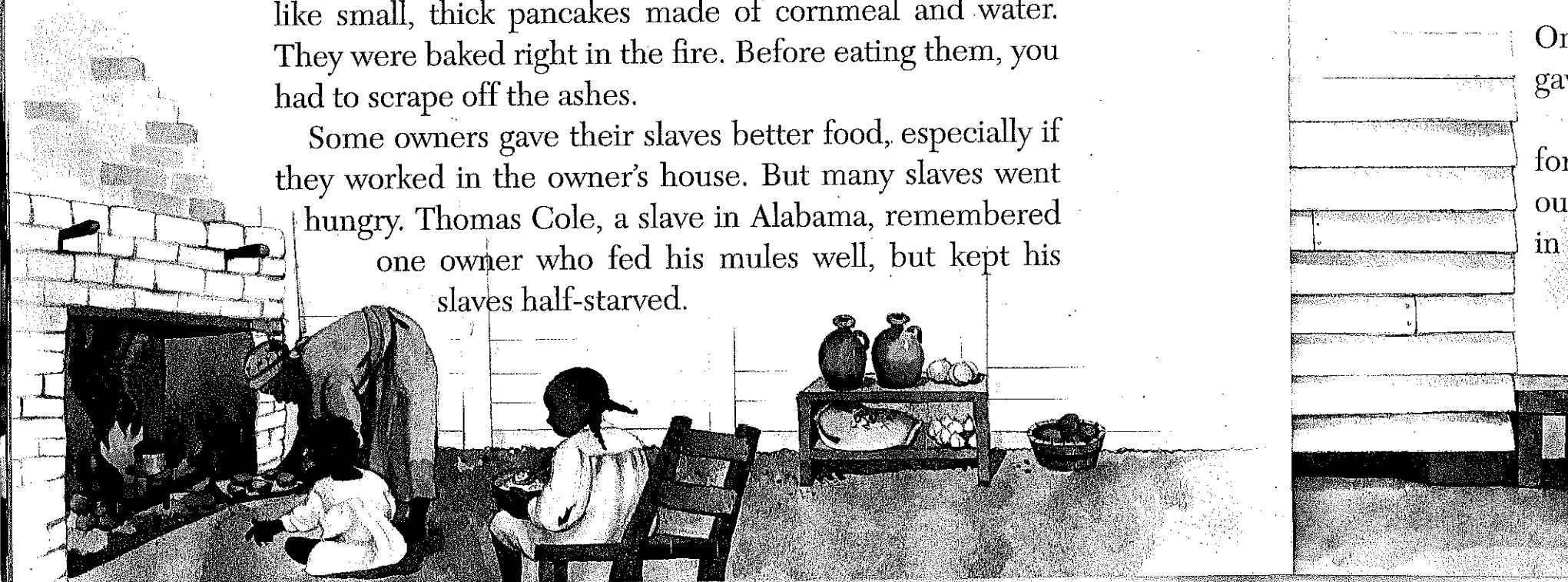


What would you eat?

Every Sunday, you got some food from the plantation owner. It was the same food every week — bacon, cornmeal, and molasses. If you were a child, you got half of what an adult got until you were ready to work in the fields. This food had to last you a whole week.

Most of the time you ate hot cornmeal mush with molasses and bacon. You also ate ash cakes. These were like small, thick pancakes made of cornmeal and water. They were baked right in the fire. Before eating them, you had to scrape off the ashes.

Some owners gave their slaves better food, especially if they worked in the owner's house. But many slaves went hungry. Thomas Cole, a slave in Alabama, remembered one owner who fed his mules well, but kept his slaves half-starved.



He

Th

it a

and

Slav

and

an

'po

l

On

gav

s

for

out

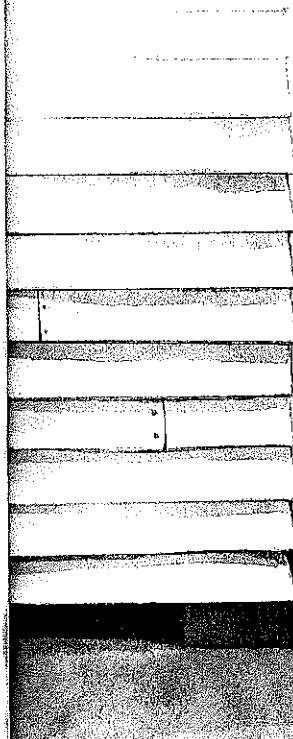
in

How did people get extra food?

There were many ways to get extra food. But you had to do it at night and on Sundays — if you weren't too tired. Men and boys hunted for opossum and raccoons in the woods. Slaves weren't allowed to carry guns, so they used clubs and dogs. You always hoped your father would bring back an opossum, because then you could have delicious roasted 'possum and sweet potatoes.

Many slaves went fishing in nearby rivers and creeks. One man invented a fish trap that caught so many fish, he gave fish to all his friends.

Some owners let their slaves have a little piece of land for vegetables. And many raised chickens. Children helped out by trapping rabbits and picking wild nuts and berries in the woods.



Would you live with your father and mother?

Most young slave children lived with their parents. But sometimes parents had to live in two different places because they had two different owners. Then you would live with your mother.

After age ten, children were often sold away from their families. Younger children weren't usually sold. In some states, it was against the law to sell a young child away from his or her mother.

Slave parents loved their children and watched over them. During the day, slaves who were too old to go out into the fields looked after babies and the youngest children. Everyone else worked. You'd see your parents mostly in the mornings, late in the evenings, and on Sundays. Henry Barnes remembered staying awake at night, waiting for his mother to come home and tuck him in.

That little white gal was born rich and free,
She's the sap from out a sugar tree;
But you are just as sweet to me,
My little colored child.
— *from a slave mother's lullaby*



W
sl
If
he
so
gc
ha
th
to
da
he
wo
fa

What if your father belonged to another slave owner?

If he lived nearby, your father could come and see you. But he might have to walk many miles at night to get there, sometimes through rivers and dark woods.

Perhaps he'd bring you food or blankets. Perhaps he'd go hunting or fishing with you on Sundays, so you would have opossum and fish for supper. One slave remembered that her dad chopped enough wood on Saturday evenings to last until Wednesday, when he came back.

If the slave owner didn't give permission, though, your dad could be in big trouble when he visited you. If caught, he could be whipped. But many slaves went anyway. They were willing to risk beatings so they could be with their families.

"My father was sold away from us when I was small. . . . He would often slip back to our cottage at night. We would gather around him and crawl up in his lap, tickled slap to death, but he gave us these pleasures at a painful risk. When his Master missed him, he would beat him all the way home. We could track him the next day by the blood stains."

— *Hannah Chapman, a slave in Mississippi*

Would you go to school?

No, slave children weren't allowed to go to school.

That's why most slaves couldn't read and write, or count and do arithmetic. Most had never seen a map of the United States, or of the world.

If you were lucky, you could go to a secret school. You'd sneak out of the Quarters at night and go far into the woods. Here a fellow slave would teach you and other slaves whatever he knew. Or you might try and find someone to teach you alone.

Slave children also learned by listening to songs and stories told in the Quarters. You might hear a story about an African ancestor brought here long ago, or what life was like in Africa. Stories about Brer Rabbit were popular because he always outsmarted the powerful fox, just as slaves sometimes found ways to outsmart their owners.





Did some owners teach their slaves to read?

Yes, a few. Some owners wanted their slaves to read the Bible. Others wanted their slaves to be able to read so they could do their jobs better. Still others just believed slaves should know how to read. An owner who taught his own slave to read wasn't punished, even if that was against the law. In many states, a white person could go to jail if he or she taught someone else's slave to read.

Phillis Wheatley, a seven-year-old slave girl from Africa, was taught more than just reading. Her Boston owners also taught her history, geography, astronomy, and English and Latin literature before they freed her.

When Phillis was about sixteen, a book of her poems was published in England. Many people didn't believe that a black person could have written such a great book, but she proved them all wrong. She became world-famous.



Library of Congress

M
their
Man
bere
and
learr

"[The
Once i
educat
secretl
could
withot
— Rob

12

ad the
so they
slaves
is own
nst the
f he or

Africa,
ers also
ish and

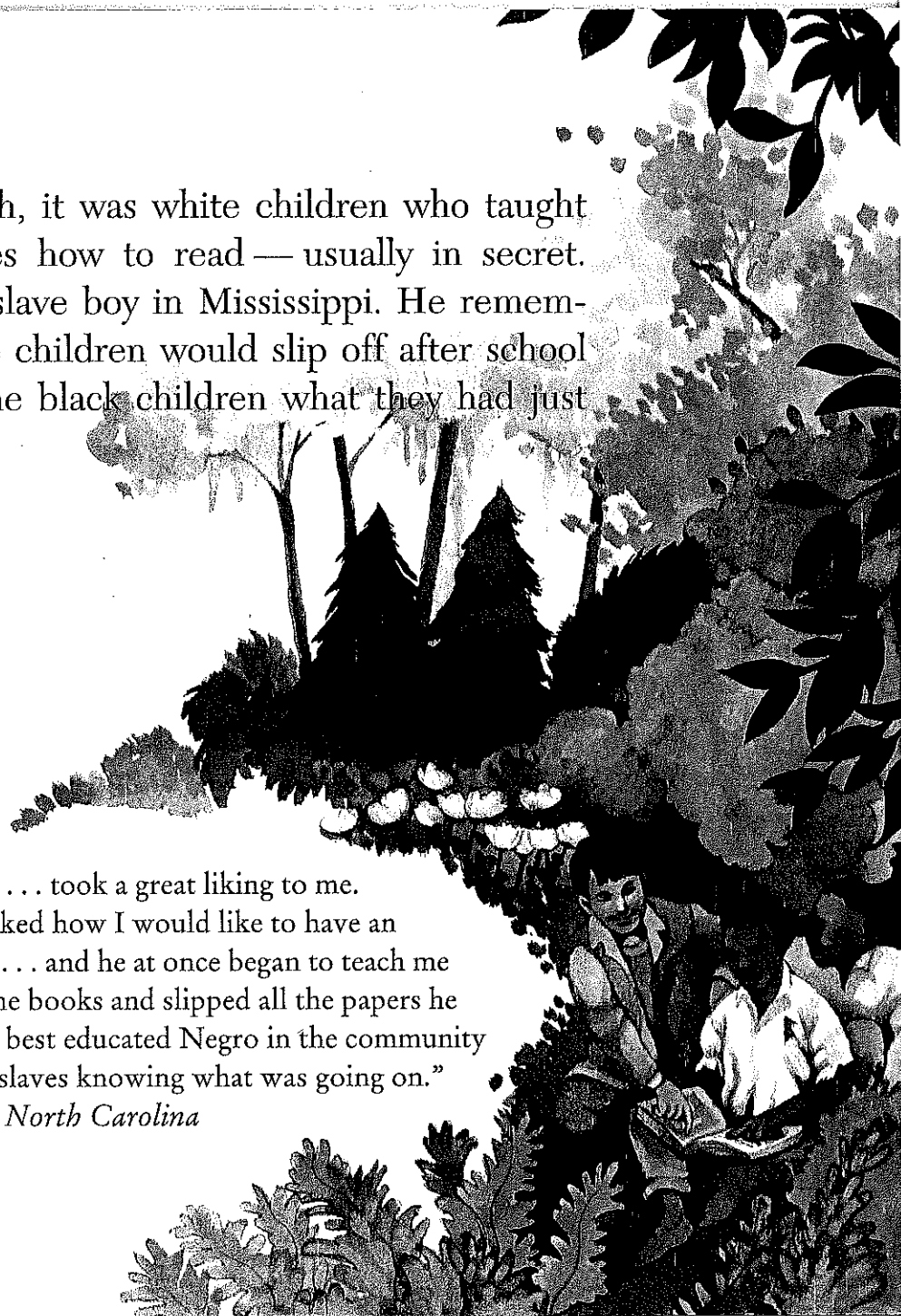


Library of Congress

Most often, though, it was white children who taught their black playmates how to read — usually in secret. Mandy Jones was a slave boy in Mississippi. He remembered how the white children would slip off after school and secretly teach the black children what they had just learned.

“[The owner’s son Crosby] . . . took a great liking to me. Once in an undertone he asked how I would like to have an education. I was overjoyed . . . and he at once began to teach me secretly. . . . He furnished me books and slipped all the papers he could get me, and I was the best educated Negro in the community without anyone except the slaves knowing what was going on.”

— Robert Glenn, a slave in North Carolina





Why weren't slaves allowed to read and write?

Owners were afraid that if slaves could read and write, they would write fake passes.

If you had a fake pass, you could fool the patrollers. They wouldn't know if you were visiting someone without permission — or if you were running away.

Most owners also thought learning to read and write gave slaves a bad attitude. Owners wanted slaves who obeyed and didn't complain. They didn't want slaves who were "too smart and harder to manage," as one ex-slave said.

In 1831, Nat Turner led a slave revolt that killed fifty-seven whites. Turner was caught and killed, but whites knew that he had been a preacher who knew how to read and write. They decided that slaves who could read and write were dangerous. So they passed strict new laws to punish anyone who tried to teach slaves.



W

Ye

so

in

be

m

to

ar

W

Al

lik

bu

th

se

Ba

rite?

te, they

rollers.
without

te gave
obeyed
re "too

d fifty-
whites
to read
ad and
laws to

Were slaves punished for knowing how to read?

Yes, many slaves were whipped cruelly. Some were sold as soon as the owner found out they could read.

You could be punished for just holding a book, or looking in one. Elijah Green, a slave in South Carolina, remembered that being caught with pencil and paper "was a major crime."

Owners tried hard to keep young children from learning to read. One little boy was given a whipping because he and some white children were playing with ABC blocks.

What kind of work did slaves do?

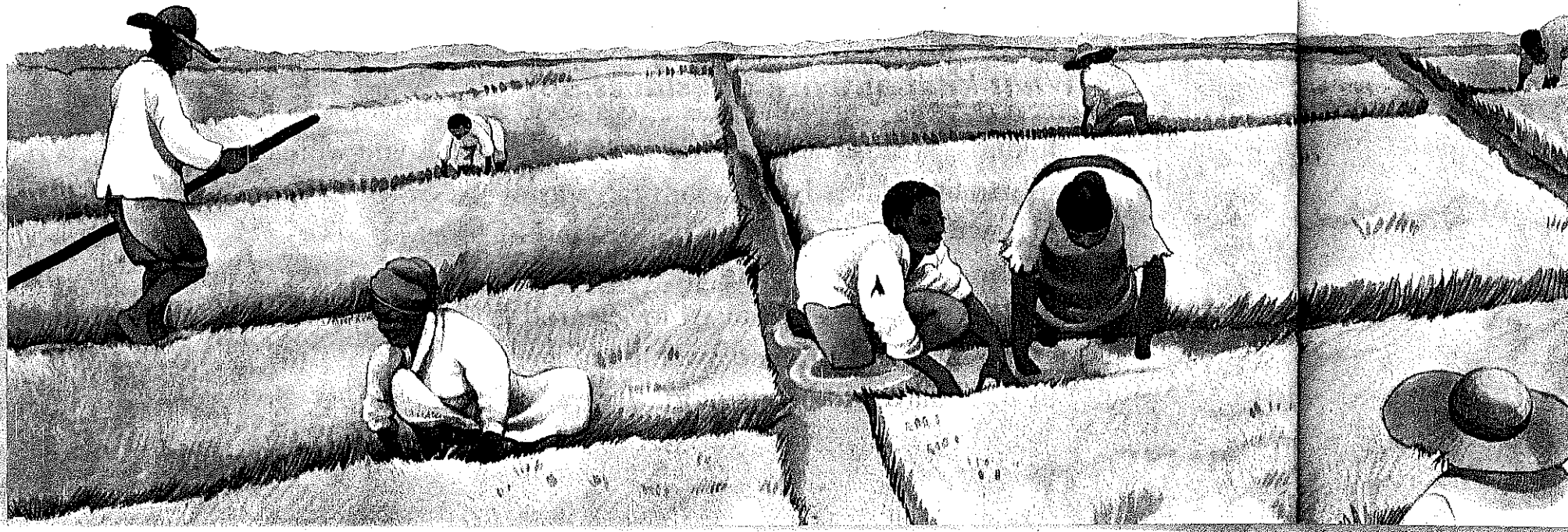
All kinds. Wherever there was work to be done, you were likely to find slaves.

They worked in people's houses and in factories. They built bridges and railroads, and dug canals. In many places, they were pioneers, because they cleared wild land for new settlements, and drained swamps to make rice fields. But most slaves did farm work. If you worked on a big



plantation, you'd plant and harvest tobacco or sugar. Every slave feared working in the flooded rice fields. It was very hot, and you had to stand in water all day long. You could get bitten by water bugs and snakes. Many workers got sick and died.

Slaves who had special skills, such as carpenters and mechanics, could make money if they had time off. Carpenters made furniture and sold it, and shoemakers made shoes. If you saved enough money, you might even buy yourself and be free.



D

Ye

tio

car

wo

jus

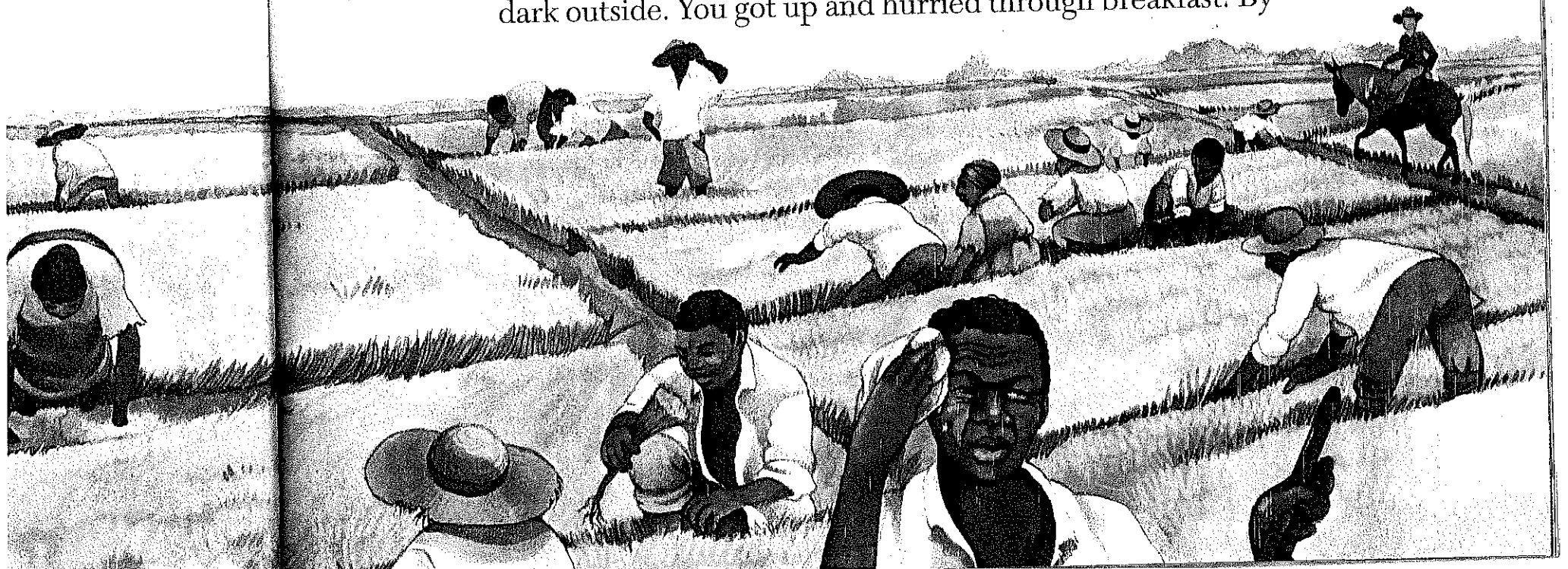
dar

Did slaves have to work very hard?

Yes, terribly hard—especially if they worked on plantations. Slaves used to say that they worked “from can see, to can’t.” As long as there was daylight to see by, they had to work.

It didn’t matter if it was freezing cold or pouring rain, or just plain hot. Work didn’t stop.

When the wake-up horn blew in the morning, it was still dark outside. You got up and hurried through breakfast. By

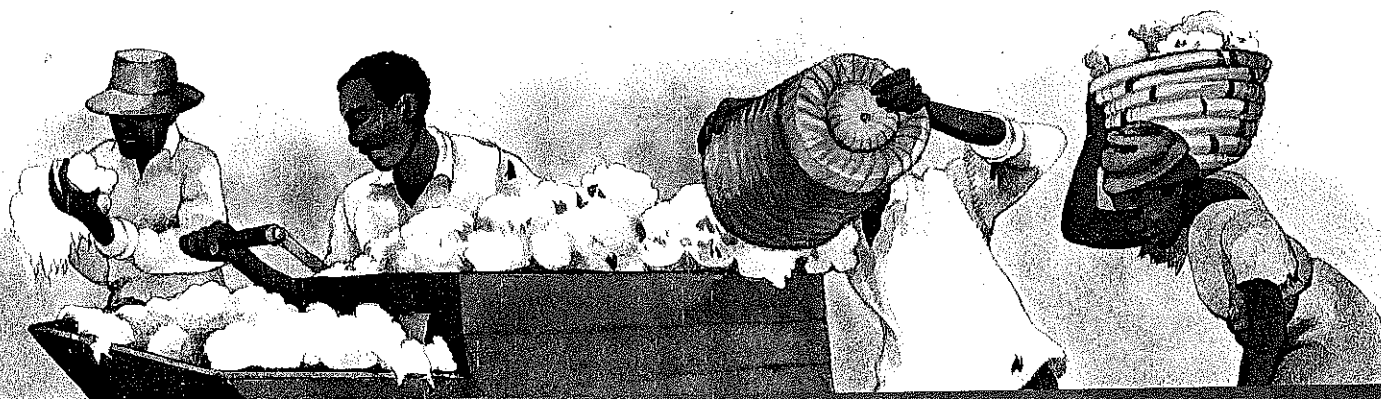


the time the second horn blew, you'd better be standing in the field ready to work. Otherwise the slave driver gave you a bad whipping.

After you worked hard for six or seven hours, the lunch horn blew. That's when you finally had a short rest and ate your corn cakes and bacon. When it was too dark to see, everyone headed home to cook dinner and do their chores. But you had to be in bed by nine o'clock. The slave driver came around to check on you. He wanted to make sure you were getting enough sleep, so that you could work hard the next day, too.

"If I had my life to live over, I would die fighting rather than be a slave again. . . . All we knew was work, and hard work. We were taught to say 'yes, sir!' and scrape down and bow, and to do just exactly what we were told to do, made no difference if we wanted to or not."

— Robert Falls, a slave in Tennessee

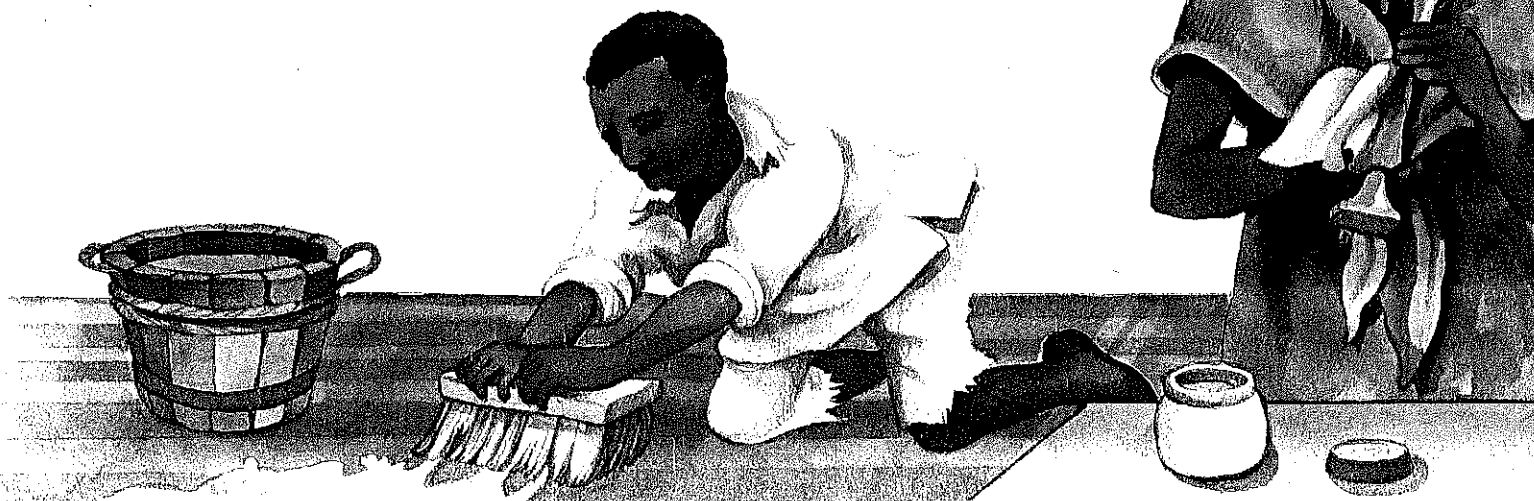


Did the children have to work?

Yes. Young children had chores — like feeding the chickens and sweeping the yard. As you got older, you might drive the cows to pasture, or bring water and wood to the kitchen.

Booker T. Washington was only seven when he rode a horse carrying heavy bags of corn to the mill. If the bags fell off on the way, he had to wait until an adult came by and helped him put the bags back on the horse.

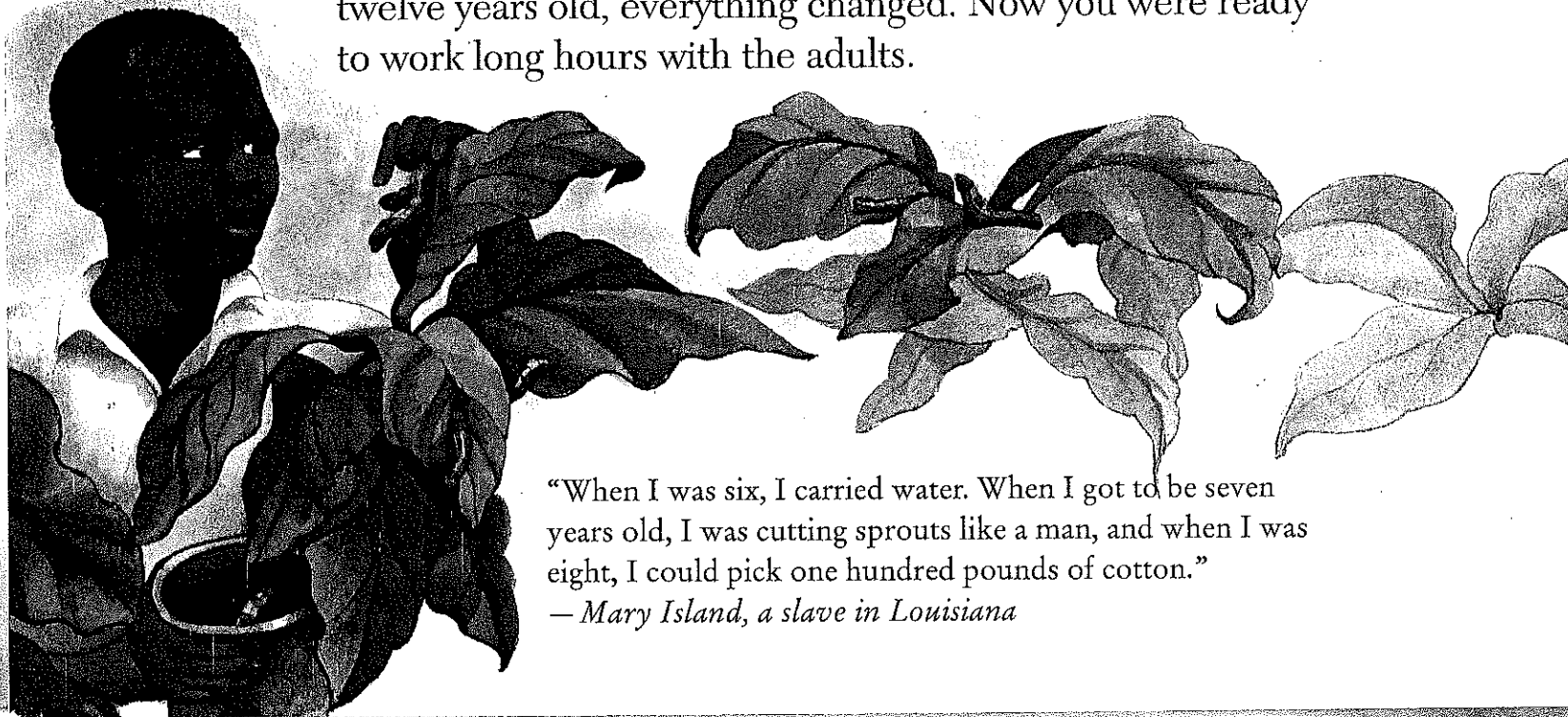
Many children worked in the owner's house. You'd help scrub the floors, polish the brass, and fan the flies away while the owner's family ate dinner. Girls, sometimes as



young as four, took care of the owner's small children. One little slave girl had her own way of stopping the babies' screaming in the middle of the night. She just started screaming right along with them until they finally stopped!

In the fields, it was the children's job to pick all the worms off the tobacco plants. The overseer watched everyone, and if you missed some, he made you bite each worm in half as a punishment.

When you had grown enough, usually between ten and twelve years old, everything changed. Now you were ready to work long hours with the adults.



“When I was six, I carried water. When I got to be seven years old, I was cutting sprouts like a man, and when I was eight, I could pick one hundred pounds of cotton.”

— *Mary Island, a slave in Louisiana*

V
S
li
tl
p

w
b
c
a
n
sl

“J
fu
of
ck
sl
do
—

What rule did every slave child learn?

Every slave child was taught this rule: Never tell the owner, or any white person, what goes on in the Quarters.

You could cause great harm without meaning to. You might talk about a slave who was planning to run away. If the owner knew, he would beat the slave, or even sell him.

Or you might talk about a slave who was making secret trips to see his family at another plantation. That could get the person whipped.

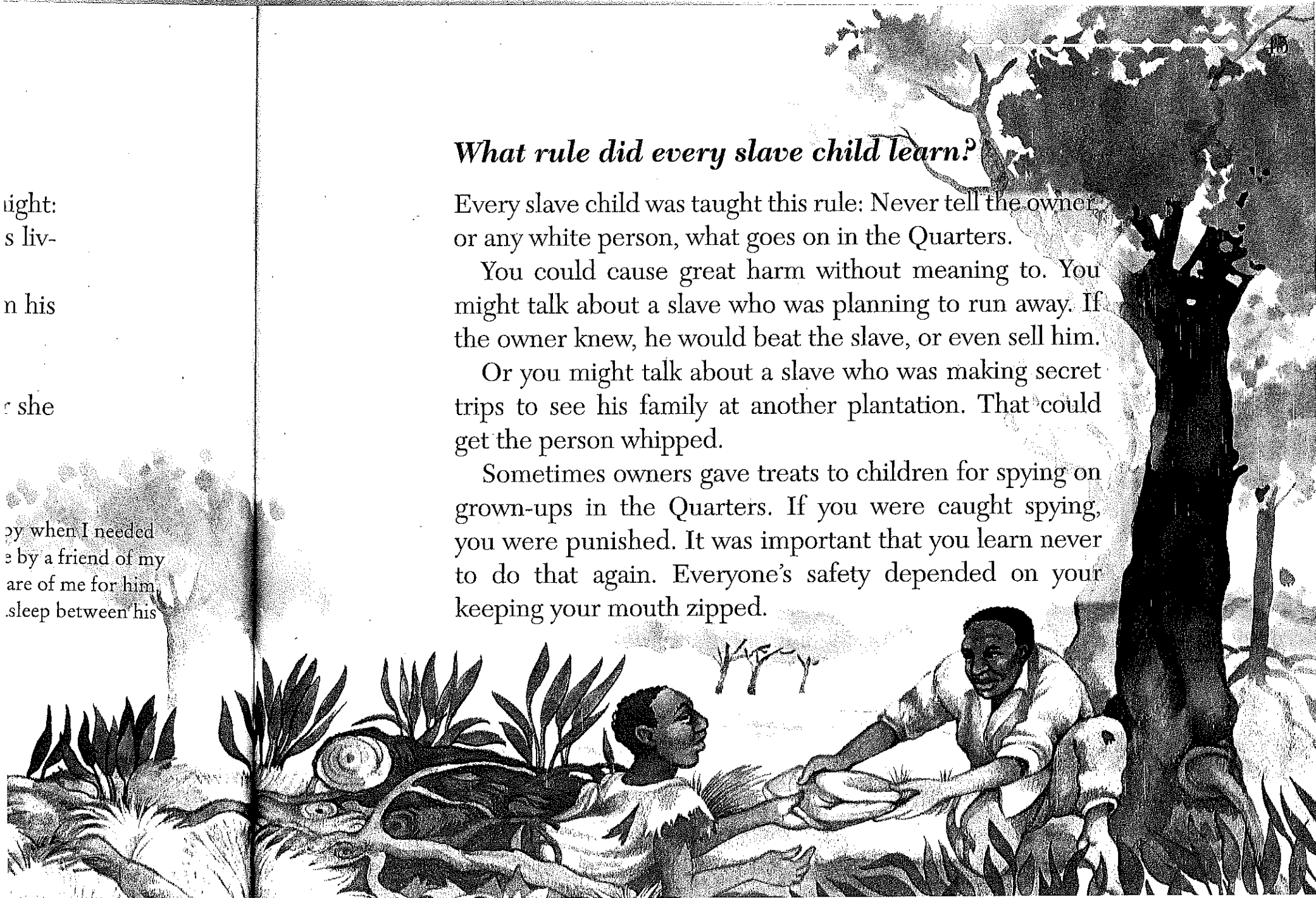
Sometimes owners gave treats to children for spying on grown-ups in the Quarters. If you were caught spying, you were punished. It was important that you learn never to do that again. Everyone's safety depended on your keeping your mouth zipped.

ight:
s liv-

n his

r she

py when I needed
e by a friend of my
are of me for him,
sleep between his



Were slaves allowed to get married?

When a man and woman fell in love, they had to go to their owners to get permission to marry. Usually the owners gave them permission. But sometimes they didn't — especially if the slaves had two different owners. Then the slaves might decide to have a secret marriage in the Quarters.

But there were no laws to protect a slave marriage. An owner could break up a marriage any time he wanted. At slave weddings, the bride and groom weren't allowed to promise that they'd stay together "until death do us part."

Most of the time, though, owners liked having their slaves marry. They thought married slaves didn't run away as often. And the more children the slaves had, the richer the owners became. Some owners made more money selling their slaves than they did selling their crops.

A wedding was a happy time in the Quarters, with lots of food and dancing.

"Exter made me a wedding ring . . . out of a big red button with his pocketknife . . . It was so smooth that it looked like a red satin ribbon tied around my finger. That sure was a pretty ring. I wore it about fifty years, then it got so thin that I lost it one day in the washtub when I was washing clothes."

— *Tempie Herndon Durham, a slave in North Carolina*

Wh

Slav

"jun

"the

join

So

mad

broc

you



What was “jumping the broom”?

Slaves had a special way to celebrate a marriage — they “jumped the broom.” One former slave remembered that “they just laid down the broom on the floor, and the couple joined hands and jumped backward over the broomstick.”

Sometimes the broom was raised off the ground. That made it harder, because you weren’t supposed to touch the broom as you jumped. Touching it was thought to bring you bad luck.





Were any black people free?

Yes, many. Most blacks were still slaves, but by 1860 there were about 488,000 free blacks living in America. Nearly half lived in the slave states in the South.

Most free blacks were not wealthy, but April Ellison was. After he bought his freedom, he opened a successful cotton gin repair shop in South Carolina. He also became a planter, owning more than three hundred acres of good farmland.

If you were free, you had a chance to go to school, even if you lived in the South.

Many free blacks, like the great leader Frederick Douglass, who escaped from slavery on a Maryland plantation, worked to end slavery.

William Still was a free black man living in Philadelphia. One of the runaway slaves he helped turned out to be his long-lost brother, Peter!

H

Th

yo

yo

ov

W

ar

sl

ov

w

ar

S

h

fa

cl

fr

How could you become free?

The easiest way was if your mother was free, because then you would be born free. Even if your father was a slave, you'd still be free. You could also be freed by the slave owner. He might reward you for serving him. George Washington arranged to have all his slaves freed after he and his wife died. Most owners, though, didn't free their slaves.

Venture Smith did what some slaves did — he bought his own freedom with money saved doing extra work. Slaves who had special skills, like carpenters and machinists, had an easier time making extra money. As soon as Venture Smith was free, he started saving again. This time he bought his wife, Meg, and their three children. Now the whole family was free.

This didn't always work out because some owners cheated. They took your money but then never set you free.



Could you be made a slave even if you were free?

If you were a free black, there was always a chance that you might be kidnapped. Kidnappers could grab you and sell you to someone far away. Then you'd be a slave.

Kidnappers were criminals. It was against the law to kidnap a free black person. But they did it anyway, because they made a lot of money. As soon as they caught you, the kidnappers changed your name. That made it harder for your family to find you. If you tried to tell the new slave owner that you were free, you were whipped and told never to talk about it again.

That's what happened to Solomon Northup of New York. He had been free all his life, but he was kidnapped and sold to a Louisiana slave owner. After a long time, he finally got word to friends and New York officials and was released. When he returned home to his joyful family, his daughter didn't even recognize him as he walked in the door. He had been away for twelve years.

"It's bad to belong to folks that own you soul and body."

— *Delia Garlic, a slave in Alabama*



W

It

ba

in

ca

st

at

ru

of

cc