

## Chapter Eight

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### RUNAWAYS AND REBELS

THE ELABORATE machinery for controlling slaves in the cities was more the measure of a felt need than a gauge of success. Despite constant surveillance, a complex system of restraints and punishments, and the presence of overwhelming force, many Negroes refused to become accustomed to their bondage. Unlike those isolated on plantations, "where no visions visit him to remind him of his servitude,"<sup>1</sup> they saw all around them every day the possibilities of what they considered a better life. The free blacks in their midst, for all their hardships, enjoyed greater independence; colored sailors might have trouble in Southern ports, but beyond the sea in Northern and foreign cities things were different; newspapers and tracts, the gossip around town, even the conversation in the master's house, indicated that many Americans believed slavery to be evil, or at least unjust. This perception resulted in constant unrest among a significant number of urban slaves, an unrest that manifested itself not only in persistent pressure to widen the latitude within slavery but also in sporadic attempts to get outside it by escape or mutiny. "The cities," a Southerner told a visitor, "is no place for niggers! They get strange notions into their heads and grow discontented. They ought, everyone of them, be sent back onto the plantations."<sup>2</sup>

Whites felt this restlessness, and municipal officials recog-

nized its existence. Yet it could never be generally admitted, for Dixie's official position was that blacks were contented in bondage. The image of the happy slave filled the writing of its advocates; any difficulties could be explained by outside tampering. From the standpoint of the cities, however, the usual picture of the blacks, surrounded by cotton, warmed by the sun, gaily singing while they picked, seemed inappropriate. It even suggested that the soil and agricultural pursuits were the natural environment of colored chattels. Hence town spokesmen developed a series of portraits which depicted the slave at his urban tasks, living in comfort, without care, fashionably dressed, and devoted to a kind master.

"If the negroes on our *plantations* live in the manner we have shown," a Charlestonian explained, "those immediately around our persons have still greater facilities of rendering themselves more happy and contented. Most of the latter are fed from the same table at which their masters dine, or are daily supplied with the greatest abundance of both animal and vegetable food—clothed in a superior manner—occupying rooms in the outbuildings, as nearly as good as those in the family mansion itself—and in every respect treated more like children than servants." It was nearly perfect. "They have no wants that are not immediately supplied." Even their spiritual needs were fulfilled, since "they are allowed privileges of moral and religious instruction, and every church has a portion of its galleries set apart for their accommodations. Here they may resort and listen to the word of God, and partake, with their masters and mistresses, and under the same benedictions, of the Holy Sacrament."<sup>3</sup>

"If the colored people of Savannah, Columbia, and Richmond are not, as a whole, a happy people, I have never seen any," another defender asserted. The idyll was now given an urban setting. "The city of Savannah abounds in parks, as they are called—squares fenced in, with trees," Nehe-

miah Adams wrote with satisfaction. "Young children and infants were there, with very respectable colored nurses— young women with bandanna and plaid cambric turbans, and superior in genteel appearance to any similar class, as a whole, in any of our [northern] cities. They could not be slaves. Are they slaves? 'Certainly,' says the friend at your side: 'they belong to some master or mistress.'" Though the author had not yet visited a plantation, he could say "a load was lifted from my mind. . . . A better-looking, happier, more courteous set of people, I had never seen, than those colored men, women and children whom I met the first few days of my stay in Savannah."<sup>4</sup>

Sometimes the slave was seen contentedly working at his particular tasks. Asserting that "there is no office, which the negro or mulatto covets more than that of being a body servant to a real gentleman," Samuel Cartwright found them delighted "to be at the elbow, behind the table, in hotels and steamboats, ever ready, brush in hand, to brush the coat or black the shoes, or to perform any menial service which may be required, and to hold out the open palm for a dime." This "innate love to act as a body-servant or lacquey, is too strongly developed in the negro race to be concealed," he concluded.<sup>5</sup>

The *New Orleans Daily Picayune* came to the same belief after watching the waiters in Hewlett's restaurant. Before customers arrived, they gathered opposite the entrance where "they frisk, and play, and sport like young colts in a meadow," completely oblivious of the troubles in the world. "They care not the 'first red cent' whether Van Buren be re-elected or not. . . . They feel indifferent about the state of the cotton crops . . . or the settlement of the boundary question." Occasionally they "shake the glass roof of the Arcade over their heads with laughter, and whistle the Stars Spangled Banner and Yankee Doodle just as currently, note for note,

variations and all, as Carey plays them on his fife." In short, they formed "a little commonwealth . . . and the youngest as well as the oldest appear to enjoy the same immunities and privileges, and to speak, to sit, and to laugh just as he had 'a mind to.'" "Happier mortals," the editor wrote confidently, "do not exist on this earth of ours."<sup>6</sup>

Such sketches of happy city slaves were not necessarily vague. Indeed, they often detailed the physical and psychic attributes of slavery: "Bob was accustomed to live like a gentleman, in his own room, well furnished,—to smoke his own cigars, to take his own meals from the same dishes which were prepared for his master, to take his stroll of afternoons through Lafayette Square,—now and then attending a soiree, and illuminating the upper circles of opera, with his shining molars," ran one description. "Of work, Bob did just enough to keep his mind and body active, and prevent his faculties from rusting," and his master demanded only "fidelity and promptitude, politeness and cleanliness, and Bob was happy as a prince." But, unlike the prince, he had "no notes to pay, no debtors to look after,—no cares or troubles for the future." It was true, of course, that this "body servant" was "sometimes troubled to get a catfish for Sunday's chowder, and his cabanas sometimes ran short—but as to the main comforts, necessaries and luxuries of life, Bob was relieved of all care and anxiety."<sup>7</sup>

A Charleston visitor to Savannah could enthusiastically report the annual parade of colored firemen on the Fourth of July: "Never have I seen a finer body of well dressed and happy looking human beings, proud of their office, and zealous in its execution." The broader significance of the event was clear. "It was a spectacle to confound the evil spirit of abolitionism—the negro and colored population of Savannah organized to extinguish, not to kindle conflagration—the arm of safety in the hour of peril!"<sup>8</sup>

And the young were as happy as the old. "For hours, every morning," a New Orleans reporter noted, "we hear this 'little nig' whistling and whistling away the time, the perfect picture of contentment." As he made his daily errands, his serenity was almost contagious. "He must enjoy the full measure of happiness," the account continued enviously, "or he could never pour out such a flood of unalloyed contentment with no other gamut than cheerfulness, no other law for his guide than the fact of his being debarred all cares, no other to take up than those he makes as he goes along . . . if you want to see real happiness, look at our whistling negro while he is making all the streets, lanes, alleys, backyards, etc., etc., within two squares of 72 Camp Street." The inevitable query followed: "Wonder what his master asks for him?"<sup>9</sup>

Even if freed and allowed to go North, the slave would want to return to Dixie and his master's care. John Jones, for example, who left Charleston in 1832, petitioned the South Carolina legislature from Philadelphia for the right to come back "to mingle with and embrace the friends and associates of my youth" and bring his wife with him, since "she cannot adopt the manners and habbets of the North." The request was granted in the expectation that the Joneses would be living symbols of the contented slave theme and "the dissemination of their opinion and experience, among the colored population, . . . would be salutary, and calculated to do much good."<sup>10</sup> A St. Louis black, presumably whisked away by abolitionists, returned so frightened by his sojourn in freedom that when the boat brought him home "he could not be induced to go on shore until his master came for him; his dread of falling into the hands of another set of abolitionists was so great, that he would not trust himself unprotected even in a slave state."<sup>11</sup>

The stereotype of the smiling slave thus acquired an urban twist. Unlike his rural brother, he was not confined to pick-

ing and planting, his leisure time to lolling in a sun-drenched field, or his amusements to group singing at nightfall. He emerged as a full-blown city slicker, appearing in a wide range of employments, dressing in snappy fashion, taking in cultural events, and enjoying the varied delights of the metropolis. This image not only described the actual condition of slaves to some Southerners, but seemed to preclude a servile uprising. "There is greater necessity of many of the masters rising against their slaves, who have been corrupted and degraded by the indulgencies allowed them," one editor suggested. "They are allowed more liberty, indeed license, than any other class of our population. Their work is light; they are well fed—cared for in sickness . . . —and do pretty much as they like." What more could they want? "They must, indeed, indulge in views, as wild as those as Plato and Sir Thomas More, if they desire any more freedom than they now enjoy." <sup>12</sup>

## II

The facts of urban slavery, however, every day belied this comforting portrait. Far from shunning freedom, Buckingham observed, "the slaves constantly take their liberty without it being offered them, by running away from their masters." <sup>13</sup> Though this problem was a plague everywhere, cities found it particularly vexing. In seaports, almost daily traffic with the outside world afforded a constant inducement to the discontented; in the interior, the river presented a similar opportunity; in border towns, the proximity of free soil offered even greater allure. The urban environment moreover permitted many runaways to find a sanctuary within municipal boundaries, either by hiding out in some obscure place or with the connivance of other blacks. They came in "great num-

bers," a New Orleans mayor lamented in 1834, "crowd in the city, hide, and make of our City a den." <sup>14</sup>

Towns always attracted more fugitives than they lost. Rural runaways headed for the nearest cities and quickly lost themselves in the congestion, protected as much by the anonymity of urban life as the collusion of other Negroes. Despite the extent of this movement, it never received the same attention as the attempt to close the escape valves which permitted bondsmen to slip out of Dixie altogether. A Charleston group, for example, warned that the port afforded "the greatest facilities" for hostile elements to "inveigle away our slaves," and the introduction of packets from Boston and New York magnified the evil. <sup>15</sup> A grand jury in Savannah, worried about the leakage there, urged the establishment of a "Marine Police" which would remedy the "want of proper vigilance on the part of the officers of ships in the harbor" and break up the "connivance of the crews" which had resulted in the flight of slaves to the North or Europe. <sup>16</sup>

Inland cities did not furnish slaves with a convenient ocean exit, but there were other means. In Richmond they used hackney coaches and the railroads; in the river towns steamboats provided handy escapes; and everywhere bondsmen, feigning errands, took wagons and drays as getaway vehicles. <sup>17</sup> Officials found that even more prosaic means needed watching. In New Orleans slaves "professing to be fishermen" went into the bayous and Lake Pontchartrain in "pirogues and other craft" and were "thenceforth lost to their owners." <sup>18</sup> At Louisville and St. Louis skiffs, rafts, and canoes got the blacks to the other side of the river; a good pair of legs and a little time did the rest.

Still other runaways left their masters without actually skipping town. They either fled the enclosure or simply did not come back at night. Finding lodging with friends or sleeping in sheds, lofts, or outbuildings, these slaves cut their connec-

tion with their owner, avoided him on the streets, and tried to put together a tolerable existence outside the law. The line between a black who was at large without papers and one opting for independence was never clear. The courts and police decided quite capriciously in individual cases, and no doubt the slave himself was often not certain what he intended, like Fortune, "an old limpy Negro . . . who for two months has been looking out for a lost turkey."<sup>19</sup> Yet their number was always sizable, and attempts to halt this internal leakage was a continuing concern of local authorities.

"John has absconded from my service," ran a typical advertisement of a Louisville master, "he is lurking somewhere in the city." John had been seen by "several in the streets on Sunday last, and very probably is in the employment of some one during the working days of the week."<sup>20</sup> Nor was this situation unusual. A few weeks before in the same city, Priscilla, who was more conspicuous because she "expects shortly to be confined," disappeared. She had taken all her clothes with her, but her owner suspected that "she has concealed herself in some free negro's house in this city."<sup>21</sup> In New Orleans, Sam, a twenty-five-year-old laborer, who had worked in stores along the main streets, stopped coming home nights or bringing his wages back; "it is supposed," his master conjectured, "that he keeps himself in the lower and back parts of the city."<sup>22</sup> Nancy, too, left her enclosure. Soon she was seen "frequently . . . in the company of Harrison, a slave, who works at bricklaying and plastering."<sup>23</sup>

A Charleston slave who was "so well known that further description" was "unnecessary" kept himself employed on the wharves for a long time while his owner desperately advertised for his capture. And while he looked for that one, another "took advantage of a badge" and also disappeared into the congestion of town life.<sup>24</sup> Even Stephen, also "well known

about the city," who had worked as a storeman for sixteen years, slipped away from his master's place and lived with a free Negro woman for at least two years without detection.<sup>25</sup> An owner in the same town once illustrated, no doubt unknowingly, the irony of the familiar slave everyone knew and saw but no one could quite locate. Advertising for his bondsman, he observed that "he is pretty extremely acquainted in Charleston, particularly with the Ostlers, at the several Livery Stables, and the servants at the Hotels, and with many free persons of colour, and has been seen about the Planters Hotel and Frances' Stables, during the races." Despite this visibility neither master nor police could find him.<sup>26</sup>

The case of Scipio, a slave of Captain William Simms of Charleston, suggests something of the difficulty of detecting runaways. He had been sold out of the state "to atone for" his connection with the Vesey "insurrection." He soon reappeared in the city. Despite his notoriety, Scipio was hard to find. He escaped a net thrown by the patrol at one time and was only captured after the mayor, sheriff, "several of the ward constables, many public spirited citizens," and a "detachment of the city guard" surrounded an outbuilding and closed in on him.<sup>27</sup> Less famous runaways usually fared better.

Bolder fugitives, rather than hiding out, tried to pass as free. For instance, J. D. Digg's young coachman in New Orleans changed his name, forged some papers, and then claimed he had never been a slave. Though caught once, he succeeded for some time on the next try.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Cato, a Richmond black who could both read and write, left his owner; the newspaper notice observed that he would "attempt to pass as a free man and possibly may have fabricated a certificate to that effect."<sup>29</sup> A Charleston runaway, described by his master as "very intelligent" and a "tailor by trade," used bogus papers for many years.<sup>30</sup>

Not all were so lucky, for the Mayor's Courts continually imposed penalties on those picked up trying to pass as free or for harboring runaways. Indeed, the frequency of the cases indicated how widespread the practice became. "Rosa Gozat, sporting as a free woman of color, but having no evidence of her freedom," ran a common notice, "was arrested on Liberty street, yesterday morning and committed till she can prove that she is not a runaway."<sup>31</sup> The same reporter had watched "Marie Claire, Jane and Rosine, free women of color, . . . sent to prison on a charge of concealing and harboring for the last four months, the slave Brosine, belonging to S.F. Hezeam."<sup>32</sup> Jacob, a Richmond bondsman, met the same fate for "harboring a runaway female slave, the property of Mr. Henry Johnson." Found guilty, he got punished "with stripes."<sup>33</sup> "A couple of slaves," the *Enquirer* related from another routine meeting at the Mayor's Court, "were treated to a whipping for infringing on our city laws with wrong papers."<sup>34</sup>

The cities, then, offered some slaves an uneasy sanctuary from the master, as well as a springboard to freedom beyond. For rural slaves these inducements were even more alluring. Once off the plantation, they headed for town, where other blacks could conceal them while they sought means for further flight. At any moment probably most runaways in every city came from this source. A portion were former residents who had been sold into the country and returned at the first opportunity; a larger part were fresh refugees who felt vaguely that they could find some safety in the nearby metropolis. No doubt, most fugitives expected to stay only briefly; yet to many the new town became as fixed a home as they would ever know.

In any case they comprised a significant fraction of the colored population of every urban center. Of course, no exact figures are available at any time, and even estimates would be

misleading. But whenever statistics do appear the numbers are strikingly high. For instance, police records in New Orleans for fifteen months in 1858-59 list 913 arrests of "runaway slaves."<sup>35</sup> Since no special crackdown had been ordered and newspapers noticed no increase in the problem, it is reasonable to assume that this was a routine catch. Indeed, in the following month officials picked up 69 more, and this figure did not include blacks who claimed free status but could not prove it.<sup>36</sup>

Even border cities with many fewer Negroes brought in some each week. A jailer's account for 1837 in Baltimore revealed that 149 blacks had been arrested as runaways and 148 more for not having papers; some of the latter were subsequently declared fugitives.<sup>37</sup> Two decades later, despite a precipitous drop in the number of slaves there, 62 were charged with escaping and 421 "without proper security."<sup>38</sup> Those living illegally in the city must have been several times as numerous as those who were discovered.

Certainly contemporaries viewed the towns as infested with refugees who mingled easily with local slaves and free blacks. And when bondsmen disappeared it was usually assumed that they had sought concealment in the closest city. A Georgia master who purchased four Charleston Negroes soon found them missing; he immediately advertised in the metropolitan newspapers on the grounds that they had "certainly gone back where they were brought from."<sup>39</sup> Amos, owned by an upcountry planter, presumably headed there, too, because, as his owner declared, "he has a number of free acquaintances in Charleston."<sup>40</sup> And Caesar, "country born" and hitherto always faithful, fled a South Carolina plantation and was sought as a matter of course in the port town.<sup>41</sup> When John escaped in the Marlborough District, "he was pursued for two days, on his route to Charleston, where he probably now is," another notice reported.<sup>42</sup>

In the same way, Louisiana runaways headed for New Orleans. "He is also a Sugar maker at Vacuum Pan process, and a full Field hand," one owner advertised, expecting his slave to be in the city, where he would be "found at negro meetings" because he fancied himself a "Singer and Preacher."<sup>43</sup> Another said his bondsman, "having many acquaintances in New Orleans," would "probably go there, as he has done when he ran away before."<sup>44</sup> An Arkansas planter got only one day's work from four blacks fresh from the city's auction block; he presumed their instincts would take them back to their familiar haunts.<sup>45</sup> Solomon, too, sold into the country was presumed "to make his way to New Orleans, as he lived there several years," while a cotton master asserted that Henry, "an old runaway" at the age of twenty-five, "will make his way to New Orleans if possible. . . ." <sup>46</sup> In short, owners and officials assumed this to be the pattern of flight by fugitives.

This urban undertow was so strong that in border areas runaways left outwardly free soil for towns within the slave regime. Thus St. Louis not only attracted bondsmen escaping Missouri masters but refugees from across the Mississippi as well. Legally, the "peculiar institution" did not exist in Illinois, but a thinly disguised system of indenture imposed many of the same restraints on blacks. In 1828 the Illinois governor wrote to Mayor William Carr Lane complaining of "the encouragement our negroes have received to run to St. Louis." One of his own had recently found safety there, and, though he might retrieve her, he considered it too "troublesome . . . as she would doubtless run back again." Still, he contended, if "our negroes are to find refuge in your state," some systematic way ought to be devised for their capture and return."<sup>47</sup> Louisville had the same experience, with the objections filed from Jeffersonville and New Albany in Indiana.<sup>48</sup>

## III

The runaway problem mounted despite every attempt of municipal officers to solve it. The slaveholders' fear of fugitives was understandable. For one thing, the traffic usually involved many of the best bondsmen—those with the highest skills, the most literate, the most energetic. Some were also the most obstreperous and ungovernable. Yet an examination of contemporary notices discloses that owners were usually losing valuable property. "Brought up a weaver; he is also a good brick moulder," Nice's master wrote to a local newspaper. "I am unable to describe his clothing; and think it more than likely that he will frequently change his dress, as he is very well off for clothing; he is, in every respect, a very sensible, cunning shrewd negro."<sup>49</sup> When a hack driver made off with Nice's wife and two daughters, all slaves, another owner noted that "the whole of them [are] well dressed, and all of them [are] unusually smart and intelligent."<sup>50</sup>

"As he is very intelligent," a Charleston master reported about his runaway, "he may attempt to pass by forged papers as free."<sup>51</sup> Another began his advertisement for Lucy by noting that she was "sensible, smart and active in the house at any kind of business," adding that she "probably has altered her name . . . for she is very artful."<sup>52</sup> Mobile notices emphasized the same thing; the refugee was skilled in some trade or service, knew reading and writing, "speaks quick and with much confidence," assumes "a degree of boldness," or "is a smooth tongue fellow."<sup>53</sup> Whether a fugitive from the countryside or one who jumped bondage in the city, the description, carefully drawn by an owner anxious to recover his property, usually conveyed the notion that it was no ordinary Negro at large.

New Orleans, always a little more sophisticated than other

cities, had a superior brand of runaway. Jim, who left the Louisiana Bakery, spoke "both French and English" and was "very intelligent."<sup>54</sup> Another claimed "a knowledge of Italian, Spanish and Latin languages," could read and write, and was "very vain of his accomplishments."<sup>55</sup> Almira's credentials matched these, since he managed German along with three other languages.<sup>56</sup> Another, besides being literate, boasted "some knowledge of the carpenter's trade, printers, white washers, &c," while Harry was more versatile, "a carpenter by trade, and . . . a very good fiddler."<sup>57</sup> The conclusion was inescapable: some of the best slaves opted for freedom.

The damage to owners could not be calculated only by the disappearance of valuable chattels, however, for successful runaways left a deposit for discontent among former associates. Whenever a slave escaped, the word got around quickly, often emboldening others who had dreamed vaguely of making a break. A rash of flights invariably led to demands for tighter patrolling and immediate steps to halt the seepage. "Do you not see its mischief," an alarmed Richmond master asked, "not only in the loss of property, but in the effects it perceptibly has on those who remain behind?"<sup>58</sup> The fact that some had managed to shed their bondage increased the restlessness of those still enslaved.

The persistence of this problem created a singular difficulty for the contented-slave thesis. Some, like Samuel Cartwright, argued that the urge to run away was a peculiar Negro disease which could be early diagnosed and usually cured. When the slave appeared dissatisfied, the master ought to find out why. If the cause was not apparent or justified, then "whipping the devil out of them" was the proper remedy.<sup>59</sup> Yet most fugitives concealed their intentions before leaving; indeed, many masters were surprised to find among the missing the most coddled, pampered, and spoiled, who had always seemed happy enough.

Hence Southerners increasingly found an explanation of the sizable number of runaways in the enemies of slavery—abolitionists from the North or emancipated Negroes in Dixie. These were the serpents who had crept into the garden and subverted paradise. Insinuating themselves into the slaves' affairs, they created the discontents, stirred up the disaffected, and intrigued in their escape. They used every weapon, corrupted every church, stooped to every ruse to carry on their warfare against slavery. Nor was it a spontaneous, unorganized campaign, for the abolitionist power had established an intricate and widespread network of agents and agitators who busily plotted the overthrow of the regime.

Any increase in the number of fugitives brought this suspicion to the surface. Thus a Richmond editor concluded an examination of the problem in 1855 on a characteristic note: "There is little doubt that there are agents in this city who are in communication with the North and have every facility for running off slaves." The slave was "doubtless the instrument in the hands of designing white men, who have been carrying on the business so extensively in this City of late."<sup>60</sup> This complaint, of course, was not new. Two decades earlier, in a single weekend, more than a score of blacks disappeared; Virginians found the explanation easy: "there is a regular system for removing them. Depend on it, some infamous whites are concerned in it."<sup>61</sup>

A grand jury in Savannah, investigating "several instances" when blacks got away, leveled the blame on "the seductive misrepresentations of secret enemies" as well as the "facilities offered by the connivance of the crew" in the harbor.<sup>62</sup> Nor were the "enemies" hard to identify. A New Orleans resident traveling in New York claimed in 1854 to have discovered there "the source of the heavy losses which are usually sustained in this city by the escape of slaves." The culprits were "some of our Northern BRETHREN and SISTERS" who



"think it very cute to come here in the winter, drive a prosperous trade, and when summer approaches, lend their names and countenances to some negro, to enable him to obtain passage on some ship or steamboat."<sup>63</sup> Chicago, too, "that negro-worshipping city," was leagued in "a scheme for running off slaves from this city" and part of "an organization existing in New Orleans, of which but a few persons are aware."<sup>64</sup>

By the mid-'thirties Dixie's spokesmen placed the main responsibility for runaways on the abolitionist movement. This interpretation permitted a definition of the fugitive problem without upsetting the conception of the happy slave enjoying his work and status. It also provided a concrete explanation lacking in the vaguer assertions, since abolitionists, or presumed ones, actually appeared in Southern cities. Arrests of these agents always set off great excitement and occasionally mob action. When two itinerant preachers addressed street crowds in New Orleans with "doctrines . . . not precisely of the character calculated to advance the well-being of the colored population," Corporal Delarue "at once" took them in. A room search turned up writings asserting "the equality of races—a theme by no means suited to this latitude, and which of itself must produce discontent amongst the colored population." The editor of the *Bee* applauded this swift action, because "it requires but the very feintest penetration to discover that these itinerant and psalm singing chaps are Abolitionists in disguise, and of the most dangerous kind." Slaves, it contended, always come home from these churches "discontented with their position, happier by far though it is than that of the labouring classes of other countries."<sup>65</sup>

Border towns confronted this question more directly, for across the river lay at least nominally free territory from which abolitionists could operate without surveillance. By 1835 a prominent St. Louis resident could warn against "the foolish, reckless and wicked interference of the Abolition-

ists" who "have been among our slaves and have infected them with a spirit of insubordination."<sup>66</sup> A few months later, in the midst of the city's turbulent racial crisis, a judge found the greatest mischief in "those incendiary publications" which "deeply injured the slave population" by encouraging its restless spirit.<sup>67</sup> And in Louisville, the constant trickle of fugitives across the Ohio brought a similar reaction. In sum, Negro discontent was early equated with outside agitation in Dixie.

Northern anti-slavery forces bore no exclusive blame; for free Negroes in the South were also considered an unsettling factor. As residents of the city, exempt from many of the restrictions slavery imposed on other blacks, the freedmen excited envy among the slaves and contributed to their disquiet. "Abolitionists and free negroes," wrote a Louisville editor, "are among the greatest curses of the land. The first are fanatical, devilish, unprincipled; the latter are ignorant, lazy and thriftless . . . they both act as promoters of discontent among the slaves." Without them, he concluded, bondsmen would be "as well satisfied, as happy, as well provided for, as their conditions would admit of."<sup>68</sup> "They are a plague and a pest in the community," the *New Orleans Daily Picayune* asserted plainly, "besides containing the elements of mischief to the slave population."<sup>69</sup>

#### IV

This explanation of runaways was more comforting than accurate. No doubt both abolitionist activity and the presence of free blacks transformed some unhappy slaves into fugitives; perhaps, too, by suggesting an alternative life, they changed an accommodating slave into an unadjusted one. Yet the causes of unrest lay deeper and would not have been removed by the expulsion of both abrasive elements. In fact,

the Negroes expressed their resistance to the compulsions of slavery in a variety of ways. Occasional sabotage, self-maiming, and inadequate workmanship were common enough to bring complaints from owners and employers. More frequent still was the slow-down. Masters could never be certain how much of this was a vote against the system itself and how much simply reflected the low incentives that characterized slavery. In any case there were "so many aches and pains, so much imaginary suffering of the keenest kind to be assuaged by pills and plasters and cataplasms and embrocations—so much rheumatism and pleurisy, so many 'delicate situations,' and all-overish feelings" that masters could detect a lack of enthusiasm that bordered on passive resistance.<sup>70</sup>

In some cases, the alienation ran so deep that they sought a more radical remedy than flight. They hoped to shed their chains and rid the whole country of the "peculiar institution" by armed rebellion. To be sure, such action was only occasional, usually unco-ordinated, and always unsuccessful. But that it appeared at all is significant. And the white community's constant fear of racial violence represents an important commentary on the nature of slavery whether in town or country.

In point of fact, no actual significant uprising took place in any Southern city. The Gabriel mutiny in 1803 and the Turner rebellion in 1831 started on the Virginia countryside, though they may have hoped to use Richmond as a base. Denmark Vesey's conspiracy in 1822 never reached the climactic stage, if indeed it actually existed in the first place. Sporadic jail breaks, some of which inflicted casualties on whites, never possessed any broad anti-slavery intent. Despite the record, however, white anxieties never really diminished. "We should always act," a group of leading Charleston residents asserted, "as if we had an enemy in the very bosom of the State, prepared to rise upon and surprise the whites, when-

ever an opportunity be afforded."<sup>71</sup> The papers continued to demand increased police vigilance; municipal officials sought wider powers and additional arms from state governments; vigilante committees stood ready to quash the colored rebels. Yet no insurrection occurred. The blood bath feared by so many was never drawn.

"Christmas is passed and we are not yet annihilated," the *New Orleans Daily Crescent* noted with relief in 1856. "Whether there was any preconcerted plan or not among our servile population, we do not know, but so far, although the strictest watch has been kept over them, nothing has occurred to cause suspicion to the most timid."<sup>72</sup> In 1835 Mobile bubbled with rumors of a rebellion, some believing that the police had "detected a conspiracy"; others heard that a white man or free Negro had been hanged for complicity, still others believed that the blacks were ready to strike. "We feel assured," one editor wrote after consulting local officials; he added that no one should be "unnecessarily excited by the thousand tales . . . which are now a days afloat." Most reassuring, however, was the revelation that "the well regulated system of espionage we have now established" precluded any serious difficulty.<sup>73</sup>

Times of particular stress stirred latent uneasiness in every city. Nat Turner's uprising in 1831 left a trail of fear and anxiety through urban communities everywhere. In this instance Baltimore's mayor received news of a gigantic plot to culminate in an invasion of the city. A secret document, somewhat mysteriously intercepted, spun out the details "for our violent deed and act . . . which will end in the overthrow of the whites and our freedom." The instructions told the accomplices to "distribute yourselves about the houses where our female people of color live" and wait. "As soon as you hear the signal which is known to all our colour," the confederates were "to rise and murder our masters." A foot-

note added that "Brother John told me that there was eight hundred people in town that are going to help murder the damnd white people."<sup>74</sup> To increase the mayor's apprehension, an anonymous letter claimed that "a number of Blacks have been in the habit . . . of assembling in military uniform toward the west of Saratoga street" around midnight for "military exercises."<sup>75</sup> The alarm, of course, was false and was not unusual, except perhaps for its precision. In other places, patrols were strengthened, while civic leaders counseled against undue panic.

A discussion of slave unrest in the cities invariably turns to the Denmark Vesey plot of 1822. Like a sharp knife, its memory cut into the conscience of Dixie's town dwellers. More than Nat Turner's rebellion, more than any rumor of a country uprising, it embodied the fullest range of terror, raised the most awesome possibilities, and disturbed even the most complacent residents. What happened in those sultry summer months in Charleston was never very clear, but it was generally believed at the time that the blacks had hatched a plot on the grandest scale to overthrow white rule by force, butcher masters and mistresses, sack the city, and then escape into the Caribbean. The numbers involved presumably ran into thousands, and only a last minute betrayal scotched its successful execution.

The real facts are still obscure. Charleston newspapers imposed a nearly perfect blackout on the details and confined themselves to a simple reporting of sentences and executions. Months later, the city printed an official version of the plot with testimonies and confessions which claimed to be as "originally taken, without even changing the phraseology, which was generally in the very words and by the witnesses." The court, in ordering publication of the record, instructed the editors "*not to suppress any part of it.*"<sup>76</sup> Out of such spare

materials contemporaries and historians pieced together a design of hair-raising proportions.

It all began on May 25, 1822, with the casual meeting of two slaves on the fish wharf in Charleston harbor. They had been chatting idly about the ships that lay at anchor before them when William Paul asked Devany Prioleau if he knew that "something serious is about to take place." Then, more precisely, he said that "many of us are determined to right ourselves" and "shake off our bondage." Devany had not heard of the plot. "Astonished and horror struck," he quickly broke off the conversation and hurried away.<sup>77</sup> After a few agitated days he confided the news to a free Negro, George Pencil, and asked what to do. His friend told him to tell his owner. On May 30 at three o'clock Devany gave the fateful information to Mrs. Prioleau.<sup>78</sup>

Two hours later, the mayor called the city council into extraordinary session. The police picked up both Devany and William; officials began an intensive inquiry. They kept William in solitary confinement in the "black hole of the Work-House" for a week and interrogated him every day.<sup>79</sup> Finally he gave them the names of Mingo Harth and Peter Poyas. Yet these men disclosed nothing. In fact, they "behaved with so much composure and coolness, and treated the charges . . . with so much levity" that the wardens were "completely deceived" and released them both.<sup>80</sup> Later William implicated others, but they too claimed no knowledge. The authorities were further baffled when Ned Bennett, a slave of the governor of South Carolina, came in voluntarily to clear himself of suspicion.<sup>81</sup>

Having turned up nothing—but suspicious of everything—the mayor strengthened his patrols, armed his men for extensive action, and waited. On June 14 the break came. Another slave corroborated William Paul's testimony by disclosing that the strike originally set for July 2 was now moved for-

ward to June 16. For the first time the public knew something was up. A strong guard surrounded the city; the police appeared in force. Still nothing happened. Two days later, ten slaves were arrested; on the 21st they brought in Denmark Vesey. But even before this, on the 18th, a hastily assembled court of freeholders began hearing secret testimony. On July 2 the bodies of six Negroes swung from the gallows at the edge of town.

The uprising now seemed quashed. But as word of its scope spread, public shock turned into hysteria. No master could be sure his slaves were not involved; whites who owned no slaves had little more assurance. Every Negro became a possible enemy, indeed assassin; every action by a black could be construed as a prelude to violence. Since the slaves lived in the same yard, it was not even possible to lock out the intruder.

As the terror spread, so too did the presumed magnitude of the conspiracy. "Their plans were simply these," wrote a daughter of a respected judge and a niece of the governor, during the trial: "They were to set fire to the town and while the whites were endeavoring to put it out they were to commence their horrid depredations." Then in more detail: "It seems that the Governor, Intendant [Mayor], and my poor father were to have been the first victims—the men and Black women were to have been indiscriminately murdered—& we poor devils were to have been removed to fill their—Harams—horrible—I have a very beautiful cousin who was set apart for the wife or more properly, the 'light of the Haram' of one of their chiefs."<sup>82</sup>

Panic gripped the colored community too. As more and more blacks disappeared into prison, as rumors widened, and as the newspapers announced arrests and executions, the alarm deepened. Was someone putting the finger on his neighbor? Had the police picked up so many that some had to be housed in a nearby county? Were white irregulars about to take

things in their own hands because the court was too slow? In the awful uncertainty the Negroes found an uneasy unity. Most of those questioned by municipal officials professed no knowledge of any plot; others wore armbands of crepe in mourning for the dead, until officials forbade demonstrations of sympathy.<sup>83</sup>

Outwardly, the normal deference to whites increased. "There was a wonderful degree of politeness shown to us," a white recalled, "bows and politeness, and—give way for the gentlemen and ladies, met you at every turn and corner."<sup>84</sup> In a few weeks the crisis waned. The handful of executions seemed to have ripped the heart out of the rebellion. "We thought it was ended," a Charlestonian wrote to her friend, "the court had been dismissed and the town was again sinking into its wonted security when information was given that another attempt would be made." The tip came from a Negro who later became a key witness. The council quickly set up a new court; the patrol returned to its stations. "There are now between 50 and 60 of the leaders in our jail," Ana Hayes Johnson wrote on July 18.<sup>85</sup>

A new excitement swept the city. "In all probability the executed will not end under 100," Miss Johnson estimated, and others asserted that "even should there be 500 executed there would still be enough" conspirators to pull off the scheme. "How far the mischief has extended heaven only knows," she lamented fearfully.<sup>86</sup> Her next letter contained the morbid mathematics: "22 unfortunate wretches were at one fatal moment sent to render their account 29 had been sentenced but 7 had their sentences commuted to perpetual banishment—but on Tuesday 6 more are to be executed . . . gracious heavens to what will all this lead . . . and I am told that there are an awful number yet to be tried." Miss Johnson had more knowledge than most, but she could observe on the street that "there is a look of horror in every countenance." "I wish

I could act for myself," she added, "I would not stay in this city another day . . . my feelings have been so lacerated of late that I can hardly speak or act."<sup>87</sup>

From the beginning municipal authorities were no less frightened but they also had to act. On June 18 the council appointed the first court of five freeholders, chosen because they possessed "in an eminent degree the confidence of the community." The tribunal quickly drew up the rules: no slave could be tried without the presence of his owner or the owner's counsel; "the testimony of one witness unsupported by additional evidence, or by circumstances, should lead to no conviction of a *capital* nature"; witnesses would confront the accused except "where testimony was given under a solemn pledge that the name . . . would not be divulged" because the judges feared the informant might be "murdered by the blacks"; a master or free Negro could have counsel if asked, and "the statements of defenses of the accused should be heard, in every case, and they be permitted themselves to examine any witness they thought proper."<sup>88</sup> The freeholders worked in complete secrecy because of the "peculiar nature of the investigations" and because "it was also morally certain that no coloured witness would have ventured to incur the resentment of his comrades, by voluntarily disclosing his testimony in a public court."<sup>89</sup>

The court divided the conspirators into two groups. The first comprised those "who exhibited energy and activity"; they were executed. The other included those "who did little (if any more) than yield their acquiescence to the proposal to enter the plot"; they were deported. The judges later confided to the governor that the distinction did not wholly meet the facts, but "the terror of example we thought would be sufficiently operative by the number of criminals sentenced to death" that "without any injury to the community . . . a

measure might be adopted . . . which would save the necessity of more numerous executions than policy required."<sup>90</sup>

The court found it difficult to get hard evidence. Vesey and the first five went to the gallows without confessing—indeed asserting their innocence. In the second group, however, three men under the sentence of death with the promise of leniency implicated scores of other blacks in the plot. In asking the governor to pardon Monday Gell, Charles Drayton, and Harry Haig, the judges described the conditions of their testimony: "Under the impression that they could ultimately have their lives spared they made . . . disclosures not only important in the detection of the general plan of the conspiracy but enabling the court to convict a number of principle offenders." Like "the terror of example," the officials wanted deportation in place of the hangman so that "negroes should know that even their principle advisers and ring-leaders cannot be confided in and that under the temptations of exemption from capital punishment they will betray the common cause."<sup>91</sup>

Despite the problems of establishing evidence, the court moved energetically and decisively. Of the 131 picked up, 35 were executed, 31 transported, 27 tried and acquitted, and 38 questioned but discharged.<sup>92</sup> Throughout July the gallows was kept busy. On "the Line" which separated the city from the Neck, the neighborhood numbly watched the public display.

Most of the condemned died without admitting any guilt, and some with almost defiant contempt. Bacchus Hammett, who had "confessed," "went to the gallows *laughing and bidding his acquaintances in the streets 'good bye,'* on being hung, owing to some mismanagement in the fall of the trap, he was not thrown off, but the board canted, he slipped; yet he was so hardened that he *threw himself forward, and as he swung back he lifted his feet, so that he might not touch the Board.*"<sup>93</sup> Others were dispatched more expertly, and the

bodies left to dangle for hours to make certain that no colored resident could mistake the point of the punishment.

Constable Belknap, the executioner, later complained that the frequency of the hangings had caused him great "personal inconvenience" and had "deranged" his "private business." At the height of the crisis he had spent "all his time and services" in the "call of the public, both by night and by day, in assisting at the preparation of the Gallows, the digging of the graves and various other offices connected with the execution."<sup>94</sup> The city's budget too felt the strain. In December the council asked the state to reimburse it for the unusual expenses surrounding the plot and trial. The bill came to \$2,284.84¼, including costs of confinement, a payment of \$200 to "Col. Prioleau's man Peter for secret services rendered," the price of "erecting a Gallows," and for "carts to carry the criminals to the place of execution."<sup>95</sup>

As the court wound up its grim business, the city tried to recover something of its old composure. The *Courier* closed the books on the episode: "The legal investigations of crime have ceased. The melancholy requisitions of Justice, as painful to those who afflicted, as to those who suffered them, have been complied with; and an awful but necessary, and, it is hoped, an effectual example has been afforded to deter from further occasions to offense and punishment."<sup>96</sup> The editor then called on the council for a day of thanksgiving to God for "his preserving care" and because "He has watched and guarded the tranquility of our City" and "endowed our magistrates with firmness and wisdom, rendered necessary by an alarming crisis."<sup>97</sup>

Not all, however, considered the matter finished. Some demanded new safeguards against a future rebellion. Writing under the pseudonym of "Experience," one argued for a drastic "revision of our present code of police and the formation of new regulations for the government of our servants." This

meant not only state and municipal laws but also the "regulations of private families" whose laxity had emboldened the slaves. He warned further that if no action were taken immediately apathy would again smother the chance of reform. "The moral material is now hot, and may be moulded to good shapes and ends: let us strike before it is suffered to cool."<sup>98</sup>

The city council went even further. In a memorial to the South Carolina Senate it argued that "by some wise enactment" the number of male slaves "be greatly diminished" within "your metropolis." The thinning process should be uniform "comprehending . . . the Domestic, handicraft persons and all those who hire themselves out or are hired by their owners." In addition, to protect the town against "another sudden attack," a "citadel ought to be constructed within the Lines for securing the arms, and capable of continuing a competent force for its defence." On a permanent basis this fort should be supplemented by "a military force of not less than two hundred men under Martial Law . . . organized and commanded by experienced officers." And more immediately those blacks who had disclosed the plot be "liberally remunerated" and this reward be given "the most distinguished notoriety."<sup>99</sup>

In an extended analysis a leading citizen, Thomas Pinckney, supported the policy of reducing the town's black population. He had no criticism of the handling of the Vesey revolt. Indeed, he liked the "vigor and decision which marked the conduct of the City Authorities" and "the patient investigation, sagacious conduct, and inflexible justice of the Court," because "the example made of those infatuated miscreants who have rendered themselves obnoxious to the severity of the law, will, probably, for sometime, preclude the danger of similar conspiracies." Furthermore, he was confident that state and local governments would "adopt such measures as their wisdom and patriotism can devise, to prevent forever the recur-

rence of such enormities.”<sup>100</sup> Yet the urgent need was to “reduce the proportion of blacks in the city so that our families shall be safe from the horrors” and “may retire to our repose at night, with the certain knowledge of our immunity from the dagger of the treacherous internal assassin.”<sup>101</sup>

Though this remedy was not adopted and even more modest proposals won only partial success, Charlestonians could not easily forget the terror of those summer days of 1822. Indeed, if anything, the event became more vivid and bloody in the retelling than it had been in fact. “From what I could glean of that fearful drama,” wrote a visitor many years later, “the slaves in the surrounding districts, on a concerted signal from their confederates in Charleston, made a descent upon the city, . . . proceeded to fire it and massacre the inhabitants.” Finally, “the tocsin was sounded,” and the whites rallied “and after much hard fighting, the rebellion was crushed, and large numbers of the insurgents were slain or arrested.”<sup>102</sup>

Other accounts stopped short of street fighting, but all spun out an extensive plot which was providentially uncovered. “In 1822 a project of insurrection was discovered in South Carolina,” another traveler remembered from a planter’s version, “according to which 10,000 negroes were to have risen, sacked Charleston, murdered all the whites, and sailed to Santo Domingo.” After the trial, “twenty-four of the ring leaders were hanged, and such precautions are now taken as to render an outbreak improbable.”<sup>103</sup> Stuart, hearing it from a source hostile to bondage, referred to the episode as “the most horrible butchery of slaves which has ever taken place in America,”<sup>35</sup> executed “on account of an alleged conspiracy against their masters.”<sup>104</sup>

Even Negro commentators assumed the existence and ripeness of the plot. “A Colored American,” writing nearly three decades after the event but presumably on the testimony of a witness, placed the blame on the whites for passing “uncivi-

lized laws” prohibiting manumission which “cut off entirely all hopes” for liberation. “Justly incensed,” the blacks “conspired to free themselves from the yoke of the most unholy bondage ever invented by man” and “to become owners of their own sacred persons over the bodies of their masters.” When “a traitor to their supposed righteous cause” leaked the information, the city was “saved from a bloody servile contest.” The “mock and summary trial of these brave men” was “upon the plan of Judge Lynch.” It resulted in “sending thirty six brave men to a premature, but honorable grave.” In this perspective a justifiable plot failed because of the treachery of a single black and the “unchristian ferocity” of slaveholders.<sup>105</sup>

Contemporaries and historians alike thus assumed the broad validity of this narrative. Yet there is persuasive evidence that no conspiracy in fact existed, or at most that it was a vague and unformulated plan in the minds or on the tongues of a few colored townsmen. No elaborate network had been established on the countryside; no cache of arms lay hidden about the city; no date for an uprising had been set; no underground apparatus, carefully organized and secretly maintained, awaited a signal to fire Charleston and murder the whites. What did exist were strong grievances on one side and deep fears on the other. When combined with a conjunction of somewhat unrelated circumstances it was possible for many people, both white and Negro, to believe in the existence of a widespread scheme to overturn the institution of slavery.

In the years before the “plot,” several developments had worsened what were always uneasy relations between the races. The census figures conveniently summed up white fears. Officially Negroes outnumbered whites 14,127 to 10,653.<sup>106</sup> During the summer, when many families left the city to escape the heat, there was an even greater proportion of colored people. Thomas Pinckney, in an extended post-mortem on the grim event, expressed the consequent anxiety. He

called the imbalance "the principal encouragement to the late attempt, for without it, mad and wild as they appear to have been, they would not have dared to venture on a contest of force." In a word, numerical superiority was the "*sine qua non* of insurrection."<sup>107</sup>

Numbers alone, however, would not have produced panic. Some rural areas had a higher percentage of slaves than the city without the same alarm. It was the kind of colored population, not its mere predominance, that frightened white leaders. Charleston's Negroes, like urban blacks elsewhere, were quite different from their country brothers. They were more advanced, engaged in higher tasks, more literate, more independent, and less servile than those on plantations. Even the domestics who comprised the bulk of urban slaves afforded slight comfort, though they were popularly believed to be loyally attached to their owner's family.<sup>108</sup> In fact, Pinckney thought them "certainly the most dangerous," because they had an "intimate acquaintance with all circumstances relating to the interior of the dwellings," because of "the confidence reposed in them," and because of "information they unavoidably obtain, from hearing the conversation, and observing the habitual transactions of their owners." Having "the amplest means for treacherous bloodshed and devastation," this group would comprise the core of the conspiracy. Yet these slaves, he complained, had been "so pampered" by "indulgencies," even "being taught to read and write," that the "considerable control" embodied in ordinances and state laws had been frustrated by the "weakness of many proprietors."<sup>109</sup>

Nearly all those believed to be ringleaders by the court came from these areas of Negro life. Denmark Vesey, the only free black in the group, was a successful carpenter who enjoyed widespread confidence in the white community. Obviously intelligent, an avid reader of the Bible, facile in languages, he fit no stereotype of the happy, ignorant Negro.

His presumed associates were no less impressive. Peter Poyas was a "first-rate ship carpenter" of excellent reputation and had his master's implicit confidence. Monday Gell not only hired his own time but kept a shop on Meeting Street where he made harness; his owner entrusted arms as well as money to him. He read and wrote "with great and equal facility," the court observed, "and obviously seems to have been the individual who held the pen, at all the meetings."<sup>110</sup> Two others belonged to the governor of the state, one of whom tended the family's business when his owner was at the capital. Only Gullah Jack, who claimed to be a sorcerer with mysterious powers, seemed irregular.

White fears fixed on this urban elite, on those who managed to "succeed" a little in bondage. To the whites the character of the Negro population made an uprising seem possible, indeed reasonable. The extent of literacy brought the "powerful operation of the Press" on "their uninformed and easily deluded minds," and, more precisely, made them privy to events outside the city and the South. The example of Santo Domingo, where the blacks had risen successfully against the whites, and the debate over the Missouri Compromise were thought to have "directly or indirectly" heightened the unrest and encouraged insurrectionary activity.<sup>111</sup> At any rate, both the quality and the quantity of Charleston slaves rendered the whites uneasy.

The Negroes, too, were edgy, for things had not gone well for them in the preceding months. New state legislation had made manumission more difficult, nearly closing the door on those who hoped to get their freedom either by purchase or the generosity of their masters.<sup>112</sup> "The uncivilized laws" were "a great and intolerable hindrance" to the slaves' "peace and happiness," "A Colored American" recalled, since some had already made arrangements to buy their liberty.<sup>113</sup>

In addition, a protracted controversy had arisen over the



establishment of an independent Methodist church for colored people. When it was closed down in 1821, the Negro community became embittered. Bible-class leaders, especially, felt aggrieved because it deprived them of one of the few positions of modest status open to slaves. The resentment of this articulate group was scarcely a secret. In fact, the city later charged that almost all the ringleaders were connected with this church.

The atmosphere, then, was charged with fears and grievances. No doubt conversations among whites turned often, if hesitantly, to the topic; and certainly in the grog shops, in Negro houses, and on the job, the slaves talked about their difficulties. But the gap between the races was great, calculatedly so. The void between was quickly occupied by gossip and rumor. Blacks heard the whites were going to "thin out" the colored population; that a false alarm would bring out the militia and volunteers to butcher the slaves on the spot; that new restraints were under consideration in city hall and the state legislature. Circulating among the whites were equally harrowing notions: a servile uprising, the seizure of the city, the carrying off of women after all males had been exterminated.

Under these circumstances, anything specific—names, places, target dates, etc.—seemed to give substance to a rumor, suggesting a plot not only existed but was ripe. Prudence dictated preventive action and a withering show of force by the city. Not only the ringleaders but even the remotely connected had to be swiftly seized, tried, and punished. Hence, the chance encounter of Devany Prioleau with William Paul on the wharf on May 25, 1822, with its garbled but ominous portent set off a chain of events which did not end until 35 had been executed, still more deported, and a town frozen in terror for almost a summer.

Thus Charleston stumbled into tragedy. The "plot" was

probably never more than loose talk by aggrieved and embittered men. Curiously, its reputation as a full-scale revolt has endured because both sides of the slavery controversy believed insurrections to be essential to their broader argument. Apologists for the "peculiar institution" contended that the stringent laws against Negroes in the South were needed to protect whites from violence; opponents asserted that the urge for freedom was so embedded in human nature that none would passively remain enchained. In either case the Denmark Vesey uprising became a convenient illustration of a larger view of slavery. No closer examination seemed necessary.

## V

What happened in Charleston nonetheless illuminates significant aspects of urban slavery. For a concerted revolt against slavery was actually less likely in a city than in the countryside. The chances for success anywhere, of course, were never very good, but ordinary circumstances favored a Nat Turner over a Denmark Vesey. And the reasons for this were clear. Nowhere, not even in Charleston, did the blacks have the great numerical superiority that was present on many plantations. Police forces in the towns, large and well-organized, moreover constituted a more powerful deterrent than the irregular vigilante-patrol system characteristic of places with scattered populations. And ironically, the urban environment proved inhospitable to conspiracies because it provided a wider latitude to the slave, a measure of independence within bondage, and some relief from the constant surveillance of the master. Hiring out, living out, church activities—whether authorized or makeshift—grog and tipping shops, wharves and stables, in a word, the innumerable crevices in the city environment, offered enough latitude to frustrate, absorb, or deflect any serious insurrectionary movement.

Successful rebellion would also have required a greater stability than the institution ever achieved in urban areas. The personnel changed too often; numbers fluctuated; no permanent leadership could be assured among slaves. The shortage of men, characteristic of nearly every city, further deprived any ambitious group of the necessary muscle. "The greater portion are women and children," wrote the *New Orleans Daily Crescent* in 1853, after rumors of a slave uprising had excited the townsfolk, "they are not strong enough to make any movement that could not be crushed by our police alone, without calling on the military."<sup>114</sup> These conditions made a massive assault on slavery very unlikely, and, if attempted, doomed to quick failure.

These facts, however, never removed the fear. Rumors of plots and imminent uprising marked the ordinary routine of every city. If whites learned to live with this anxiety, they could not long forget it. Just as the patrols, whipping posts, and auction blocks reminded Negroes of their servitude, so these symbols made the townspeople aware of their own insecurity. The incidence of slave insurrections was actually low in the cities, but even the possibility was enough to make the metropolis uneasy.