

Charles Ball was one of many former slaves who escaped slavery, but one of the comparatively few of these individuals who could or did write about his experiences in bondage. Here Ball describes what he experienced as a typical day at work on a large Southern slave plantation during the mid-nineteenth century. From Charles Ball, Fifty Years in Chains or, the Life of an American Slave (NY: 1859) 117-122

As I HAVE BEFORE stated, there were altogether on this plantation, two hundred and sixty slaves; but the number was seldom stationary for a single week. Births were numerous and frequent, and deaths were not uncommon. When I joined them I believe we counted in all two hundred and sixty-three; but of these only one hundred and seventy went to the field to work. The others were children, too small to be of any service as laborers; old and blind persons, or incurably diseased. Ten or twelve were kept about the mansion-house and garden, chosen from the most handsome and sprightly of the gang.

I think about one hundred and sixty-eight assembled this morning, at the sound of the horn-two or three being sick, sent word to the overseer that they could not come. The overseer wrote something on a piece of paper, and gave it to his little son. This I was told was a note to be sent to our master, to inform him that some of the hands were sick-it not being any part of the duty of the overseer to attend to a sick negro.

The overseer then led off to the field, with his horn in one hand and his whip in the other; we following-men, women, and children, promiscuously-and a wretched looking troop we were. There was not an entire garment amongst us.

More than half of the gang were entirely naked. Several young girls, who had arrived at puberty, wearing only the livery with which nature had ornamented them, and a great number of lads, of an equal or superior age, appeared in the same costume. There was neither bonnet, cap, nor head dress of any kind amongst us, except the old straw hat that I wore, and which my wife had made for me in Maryland. This I soon laid aside to avoid the appearance of singularity, and, as owing to the severe treatment I had endured whilst traveling in chains, and being compelled to sleep on the naked floor, without undressing myself, my clothes were quite worn out, I did not make a much better figure than my companions; though still I preserved the semblance of clothing so far, that it could be seen that my shirt and trowsers had once been distinct and separate garments. Not one of the others had on even the remains of two pieces of apparel. - Some of the men had old shirts, and some ragged trowsers, but no one wore both. Amongst the women, several wore petticoats, and many had shifts. Not one of the whole number wore both of these vestments.

We walked nearly a mile through one vast cotton field, before we arrived at the place of our intended day's labor. At last the overseer stopped at the side of the field of his company, and those under his command had to keep up with him. Each of the men and women had to take one row; and two, and in some cases where they were very small, three of the children had one. The first captain, whose name was Simon, took the first row-and the other captains were compelled to keep up with him. By this means the overseer had nothing to do but to keep Simon hard at work, and he was certain that all the others must work equally hard. Simon was a stout, strong man, apparently about thirty-five years of age; and for some reason unknown to me, I was ordered to take a row next to his. The overseer with his whip in his hand walked about the field after us, to see that our work was well done. As we worked with hoes, I had no difficulty in learning how the work was to be performed.

The fields of cotton at this season of the year are very beautiful. The plants, among which we worked this day, were about three feet high, and in full bloom, with branches so numerous that they nearly covered the whole ground -leaving scarcely space enough between them to permit us to move about, and work with our hoes. . . .

When we could no longer see to work, the horn was again sounded, and we returned home. I had now lived through one of the days-a succession of which make up the life of a slave -on a cotton plantation.

