

## THE ROLE OF THE BLACK MAMMY IN THE PLANTATION HOUSEHOLD

The present generation of Americans, both white and Negro, are acquainted with the "Black Mammy" as she has been handed down in tradition. They are acquainted with her as she is represented on the legitimate stage, in the moving pictures, and in fiction. Newspapers and periodicals from time to time print stories about this character, and people living who came under her influence relate their experiences with the "Mammy" to their children, friends, and acquaintances.

Negroes and whites in the South held different attitudes toward what came out of slavery. To the majority of Negroes anything that savored of the period of slavery was objectionable. Even the spirituals once came under the ban. To whites the period of slavery has been sentimentalized and glorified. Because the "Black Mammy" originated in and came out of the period of bondage she is an acceptable symbol to whites and an unacceptable one to Negroes.

Never was this made more evident than it was by the controversy which was kept up for many months through the press by the suggestion made in 1923 by the Daughters of the Confederacy that Congress set aside in the National Capital a site upon which they would erect a monument to the memory of this group of Negro women. The monument proposal was generally opposed by Negroes, who said a better memorial would be to extend the full rights of American citizenship to the descendants of these Mammies.<sup>1</sup> The proposals made by the Negroes included the discontinuation of lynching, the inequality in educa-

<sup>1</sup> *Washington Tribune*, Washington, D. C., 2-3-23; *National Baptist Union Review*, Nashville, Tenn., 5-4-23; *Christian Index*, Jackson, Tenn., 2-22-23; *Birmingham Reporter*, Birmingham, Ala., 3-17-23; *New York Age*, New York City, 1-6-23.

tional facilities, all practices of discrimination, the humiliation of Negroes in public conveyances, and the denial to them of the rights of suffrage.

White people of the South generally thought that this memorial was an excellent way to perpetuate what was to them tender memories. Monuments to the old Negro had been erected in the South before<sup>2</sup> and monuments to the "Black Mammy" of the South also had been proposed before;<sup>3</sup> the National Capital had been one of the places proposed by Lucian Lamar Knight in 1910.<sup>4</sup> The bitterness of expression called out by this controversy illustrated the depth of feeling on both sides of the racial lines about this traditional character. So great, however, was the pressure brought to bear against the erection of the monument that the bill was finally killed in the House of Representatives. The purpose of this paper is to go back of the tradition and to show the actual rôle of the "Mammy" in the plantation household of the Old South.

The rôle of the "Mammy" in the plantation household grew out of the rôle of the Negro slaves on the plantation. Negro servants played an important rôle throughout the period of slavery. The washerwoman, the cook, the maid, the seamstress, the butler, the porter, the gardener, and the coachman functioned in the home life of the South. Early in the establishment of the plantation in America they became fixtures in the plantation economy. The work of the plantation called for a division of labor on the basis of work to be done within the house and without. The plantation was the economic unit in the South, and the division of labor there was as important as it is in any industrial plant today. The two main divisions into which slaves were divided were household servants and field hands.

<sup>2</sup> Brewton, Ala., *Standard*, June 10, 1937; F. J. M. Murray, *The Emancipated and Freed in American Sculpture*, p. 129.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Polk Branch, *Memoirs of a Southern Woman Within the Lines*, pp. 46-47.

<sup>4</sup> Lucian Lamar Knight, *Memorials of Dixie-land*, p. 374.

Within the house the division of work to be done was on the basis of duties to be performed. The mistress was the central figure. Her rôle within the house was similar to that of the master without. The supervision of the household servants was her part of the job, and a strenuous job it was.<sup>5</sup>

The "Black Mammy" was a household servant who generally had specific duties to perform. These were mainly connected with the care of the children of the family, thus relieving the mistress of all the drudgery work connected with child care. When these duties were not pressing, which meant that the children were large enough to be able to help take care of themselves, she assisted the mistress with the household tasks. Her sphere of influence widened with the years of her service. She was next to the mistress in authority<sup>6</sup> and "bossed" everyone and everything in the household.<sup>7</sup>

The "Black Mammy" tradition in the Southern household became a plantation tradition, for it arose on the plantation, bloomed when the plantation was in its glory and so took hold of the imagination of the people of the South that the "Black Mammy" eventually entered the homes of the middle class and the poorer farmer. Here she was oftentimes the only slave and became the maid of all work, caring for the children, washing, ironing, cooking, cleaning and helping in the fields as well. Eventually she became an imaginary figure created in the minds of those who had never possessed a "Mammy," for in order to be recognized as belonging to the aristocracy of the Old South it was necessary to be able to say that one had been tended by a "Black Mammy" in youth.

In the plantation household the "Black Mammy" was

<sup>5</sup> Belle Kearney, *A Slaveholder's Daughter*, p. 3; Thomas Nelson Page, *Social Life in Old Virginia before the War*, pp. 59-60.

<sup>6</sup> Myrta Lockett Avary, *Dixie after the War*, pp. 196-197; Eliza F. Andrews, *The War-Time Journal of a Georgia Girl*, p. 32.

<sup>7</sup> Lucian Lamar Knight, *Memorials of Dixie-land*, p. 374.

considered as much a part of the family as the blood members were.<sup>8</sup> She occupied a lower status, but was included in the inner circle. She has often been referred to as a "unique type of foster motherhood."<sup>9</sup>

#### THE "BLACK MAMMY'S" POSITION IN THE HOUSEHOLD

The "Black Mammy" was in intimate contact with the members of the family of her owner and reflected the ideals of the family to which she belonged. Her interests and those of her owner were so inextricably one that she is associated in the public mind more with the members of the white group than with those of her own race. She is referred to as the "Black Mammy," a name probably given to distinguish her from the real mother and also from the "Mammy" of the slave children. Actually, she ranged all the way from black to an indistinguishable white,<sup>10</sup> for household servants were selected for their personal appearance as well as for their general adaptability for the duties to be performed.<sup>11</sup>

What we know of the "Black Mammy" has been recorded mainly by those whom she nursed as children. To the planter class of the Old South we are indebted for an insight into what she meant in Southern society. She was associated with the earliest recollections of the children and sentiments similar to those surrounding "home," "mother," and "country," have been built up around her.

The qualities and characteristics attributed to the "Black Mammy" indicate a first hand and personal knowledge of her, which became standardized and institutionalized by sentiment. The following are examples of the traits which were generally denied to slave women as a group but which were attributed to her. She was considered

<sup>8</sup> Myrta Lockett Avary, *Dixie after the War*, pp. 391-392.

<sup>9</sup> Sally McCarty Pleasants, *Old Virginia Days and Ways*, p. 43.

<sup>10</sup> T. P. O'Connor, *My Beloved South*, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> F. D. Syrgley, *Seventy Years in Dixie*, pp. 293-294.

self-respecting, independent, loyal, forward, gentle, capacious, affectionate, true, strong, just, warm-hearted, compassionate-hearted, fearless, popular, brave, good, pious, quick-witted, capable, thrifty, proud, regal, courageous, superior, skilful, tender, queenly, dignified, neat, quick, tender, competent, possessed with a temper, trustworthy, faithful, patient, tyrannical, sensible, discreet, efficient, careful, harsh, devoted, truthful, neither apish nor servile.

In dress and in deportment the "Black Mammy" reflected the status of her owner. Generally she was neat and clean, wearing the type of dress best suited for her duties. When she considered herself "dressed up" she might be seen wearing "a bonnet and silk velvet mantle" which formerly belonged to her mistress,<sup>12</sup> and she might even possess a "Sunday black silk."<sup>13</sup>

Like most slaves the "Black Mammy" was unlettered, but she was intelligent. As among the slaves also, there could be found a mammy here and there who could read and write, having been taught by the young children or some member of the family. But most of her lessons were learned through contact and experience. These brought to her a certain dignity which was noticeable in manner and bearing. The "Black Mammy" of an aristocratic family could readily be distinguished by her air of refinement.

She was a diplomat and knew how to handle delicate situations with such a fine sense of appropriateness that her purpose was usually accomplished. If there was difficulty with the household servants, the "Black Mammy" could generally straighten out the matter. With children, master, mistress and slaves her methods were often equally efficacious. From being a confidential servant she grew into being a kind of prime minister. It was well known that if she espoused a cause and took it to the master it

<sup>12</sup> Sally McCarty Pleasants, *Old Virginia Days and Ways*, p. 128.

<sup>13</sup> Eliza M. Ripley, *Social Life in Old New Orleans*, p. 210.

was sure to be attended to at once, and according to her advice.<sup>14</sup>

When the "Black Mammy" did not stay within the house of her master, sleeping in the room with her master's children, she lived with her husband and children in a cabin, distinguished in some way from those of the other servants either in size or structure.<sup>15</sup> Her home stood near the "big house" where the cabins of the house servants were located, and away from the "quarters" of the other slaves which were some distance from the master's house.<sup>16</sup>

Her work was less strenuous than the physical labor of the other slave women, but her hours were long, and there was little time for leisure. Servants outside of the household were almost always given Sunday as a day of rest, except in the harvest season when crops had to be gathered or in some other emergency, and many had Saturday afternoons off to care for their own needs. It was not until the "Black Mammy" became too old for active duties that she could be said to enjoy any home life of her own. She was too closely bound up with the home life of her master.

She, however, escaped many of the rigors of slavery, for generally she was exempt from sale.<sup>17</sup> It was only through some disaster that she passed into other hands. She and her descendants were kept as far as it was possible in the same family; that is, the sons and daughters of the master and those of the "Black Mammy" continued the relationship begun in the previous generation.<sup>18</sup> The "Black Mammy's" position represented more than the price as a piece of property which she might bring. Old

<sup>14</sup> Susan Dabney Smedes, *A Southern Planter*, p. 38.

<sup>15</sup> Fannie A. Beers, *Memories*, pp. 250-253.

<sup>16</sup> Nicholas Ware Eppes, *The Negro of the Old South*, p. 26; Fannie A. Beers, *Memories*, pp. 250-253; Victoria V. Clayton, *White and Black Under the Old Regime*, p. 23

<sup>17</sup> F. W. Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*, p. 58.

<sup>18</sup> *South Carolina Women in the Confederacy*, Vol. II, p. 122; Susan Dabney Smedes, *A Southern Planter*, p. 8.

ties and associations were very often the background of the intimate relations.

The "Black Mammy" was exempt from corporal punishment, and what in another slave might have been considered impertinence was thought of as her privilege. Mrs. Meade in her book, *When I Was a Little Girl*, tells of an overseer who complained to her uncle that the insolence of one of the old women slaves was becoming so unbearable that he needed advice about punishing her. When told that the old woman's name was "Mammy" her uncle replied, "What! What! Why I would as soon think of punishing my own mother! Why man you'd have four of the biggest men in Mississippi down on you if you even dare suggest such a thing, and she knows it! All you can do is to knuckle down to Mammy."<sup>19</sup>

There was a flexibility about the "Black Mammy's" duties that distinguished her from the ordinary nurse or the wet nurse, though she might perform either or both of these functions. In the wealthy households there were assistants to the "Black Mammy" or nurses who were "the children's guardian and companion when they went out for exercises, on visits, or to seek diversion and recreation" and were much younger than the "Mammy" was:

A young woman, however, might become a "Black Mammy" at an early age, even before she married. Mrs. Eppes in her volume, *The Negro of the Old South*, relates how the little slave girl whom the mistress had taken into the house to play with her two small daughters, became at the age of eighteen the "Black Mammy" of the youngest baby who refused her mother's breast, the bottle, and every other effort to feed her. When it began to be feared she would starve to death the young girl "bethought her of a small pitcher belonging to a doll's tea set" and from this the child allowed herself to be fed, and thus a new "Mammy" came into existence.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Anne H. Meade, *When I was a Little Girl*. Quoted from Dorothy Scarborough, *On Trail of Negro Folk-Songs*, p. 144.

<sup>20</sup> Nicholas Ware Eppes, *The Negro of the Old South*, pp. 77-79.

But the "Black Mammy" was usually of mature years and had established a fine reputation for responsibility and reliability. She is hardly remembered as being young or youthful, but as mature and experienced. She was usually the child of a favorite servant, perhaps of a "Black Mammy" herself, who had entered the house at an early age as playmate for the children, later became the maid and then the "Black Mammy"; or, a playmate for one generation, maid for the next and "Black Mammy" for the third."<sup>21</sup> The "Black Mammy" was at the top of the social hierarchy of slaves and occupied a position to be envied as well as to be striven for.

In the early days when there were no trained nurses these Negro women as practical nurses were of invaluable aid in the sick room. Not only did they nurse the children in their illness, but any other member of the family who became ill. They were in constant attendance and ready to grant any wish that the patient might express. Some of them became famous as nurses and were loaned to other families in cases of severe illness. One of the leading families of the South relates that there was among its members before the Civil War a physician who was noted for his success as an obstetrician, and that he always took the "Black Mammy" with him as an assistant.<sup>22</sup>

When the master and mistress travelled the "Black Mammy" went with them and by her care of the children and her own distinctive manner attracted much attention. Most often her real name was not known, it was a matter of no significance. She was known by all simply as "Mammy."<sup>23</sup>

Upon the death of the master or mistress or before the master remarried the "Black Mammy" might assume the responsibility of the children and the household. Srygley relates that for him a "Black Mammy" was a necessity

<sup>21</sup> Nicholas Ware Eppes, *The Negro of the Old South*, pp. 77-79.

<sup>22</sup> Case related to the writer.

<sup>23</sup> Eliza M. Ripley, *Social Life in Old New Orleans*, p. 210.



as his own mother died not long after his birth. This woman cared for him as a mother would and did not give up her tender care until he was eighteen years old at which time she died.<sup>24</sup>

The "Black Mammy" was always busy in her master's house, and she helped to keep her master's home comfortable and happy.<sup>25</sup> As a housekeeper she was dependable and could be relied upon to care for the supplies and give them out in their proper proportion. The "Black Mammy" filled any gap that occurred in the southern household. If she were needed in the parlor she could fill that place. If the cook "flared up and refused to do her duty in the way in which she was expected the 'Black Mammy' descended into the deserted kitchen."<sup>26</sup>

When she grew too old for active service visitors to the plantation came to see the old nurse who had been so active in the life of the family group. In fact, it would have been an insult both to the "Black Mammy" and to the family if they did not pay their respects to her. She was a personage not to be overlooked, however old she might become.<sup>27</sup>

The husband of the "Black Mammy" if he lived on the same plantation might be a person of importance in some capacity, such as butler, the driver, the gardener, a mechanic or a foreman. To his own worth was added the sentiment of good feeling that was attached to the "Black Mammy." The children were also fond of him, and he in turn was never happier than when granting some of their whims or those of the mistress. He was at everybody's service.<sup>28</sup>

If he belonged to another owner on a distant plantation his visits were looked forward to, and he was a wel-

<sup>24</sup> F. D. Syrgley, *Seventy Years in Dixie*, pp. 41-42.

<sup>25</sup> Eliza Ripley, *Social Life in Old New Orleans*, pp. 212-214; T. P. O'Connor, *My Beloved South*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>26</sup> Eliza M. Ripley, *Social Life in Old New Orleans*, pp. 209-210.

<sup>27</sup> Porte Crayon, *Virginia Illustrated*, p. 257.

<sup>28</sup> F. D. Srygley, *Seventy Years in Dixie*, pp. 42-44.

comed visitor. Restrictions concerning visits were set aside and the difficulties which slaves usually had in seeing their wives who lived upon distant plantations were made less so in his case. As he grew older he was given lighter tasks and was placed in a sort of supervisory position with younger slaves to do the work. In severe sickness the "Black Mammy" herself might be excused from her duties to care for him.<sup>29</sup>

The "Black Mammy" often nursed her master's child at one breast and her own at the other. When old enough her children along with those of other plantation women were kept under the care of the plantation nurse while their mothers were at work. When the mothers came home they took their children to their own cabins. These plantation nurseries were in charge of a woman who was too old for work, or some of the young girls who were not yet old enough for work in the fields. They were the forerunners of the present-day nurseries where children of working mothers are cared for while the mother is away from home. And the wholesale precipitation of the plantation women from their cabins into house and field foretold the large numbers of American women who leave their homes daily for factory, office, classroom and other occupations. The plantation children were communally reared while the parents worked. Any grown person on the plantation could correct them.

A little later the "Black Mammy's" children might be brought to the "big house" as playmates, then as maids or houseboys, and in this way they benefited by their mother's position.<sup>30</sup> A kind mistress would often teach the "Black Mammy's" children certain skills along with her own, such as sewing and embroidering; and despite laws against it some were taught to read and write.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Susan Bradford Eppes, *Through some Eventful Years*, p. 87.

<sup>30</sup> Eliza Frances Andrews, *The War-Time Journal of a Georgia Girl, 1864-1865*, pp. 293-294.

<sup>31</sup> Joseph B. Cobb, *Mississippi Scenes or Sketches of Southern and Western Life*, pp. 83-86.

Though the children of the "Black Mammy" were not exempt from sale, the master was very hard pressed when he sold one of her children. It was either through debt, because of insolvency or because of property complications that such a sale took place. S. C. Rankin tells how his playmate, the son of his "Black Mammy," was sold for debt, a blow from which she never recovered and of which she died of a broken heart.<sup>32</sup> And Mrs. Smedes whose father was noted for his kindness to his slaves reveals that the son of his favorite slave was sold.<sup>33</sup>

Though not able to prevent her children from being sold, by her tact and prestige she could and did save them from punishment. The story is related by Mrs. Pleasants that "Mammy Lily," "six feet tall and possessed of a vigor of mind in keeping with the size of her body," hid in the closet under the mistress' staircase for a week her twin sons, who had been hired in the coal pits, and who, not liking it, had run away. Here they stayed until discovered, but they were not sent back to the pits.

#### RELATIONS BETWEEN THE "BLACK MAMMY" AND THE CHILDREN

The "Black Mammy" was the white children's nurse in the sense that they were placed in her charge, with general supervision from the mistress. She bathed them, dressed them, fed them, put them to bed, cared for their clothing, and added more than simply the satisfaction of all physical needs. She assisted the mistress in everything pertaining to the training of the children.<sup>34</sup>

She was the first person to whom children visiting the

<sup>32</sup> S. C. Rankin, *The Story of My Life*, p. 15.

<sup>33</sup> Susan Dabney Smedes, *A Southern Planter*, Chap. III.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Nelson Page, *Social Life in Old Virginia before the War*, pp. 59-60; *The Old South*, pp. 165-166; F. D. Syrgley, *Seventy Years in Dixie*, pp. 41-42.

plantation ran to see, for she was amiable in her greeting, and it was she who saw to all their wants. She showered the children with attention and could be kind and indulgent or stern and exacting as the occasion demanded. "Such a thing as rebellion against her was almost undreamt of, for she was high in authority."<sup>35</sup>

The intimacy between the "Black Mammy" and the children of her owner was the closest of all the relationships that existed between her and the other persons in the household. Subsequent relationships found their origin here. It was during this period that the future master and mistress formed attachments to their "Black Mammy" which they retained all during their lives. She was usually with them at birth; she cared for them through childhood and early manhood and womanhood, and in turn became the "Black Mammy" for the second generation and perhaps the third. In a few cases she was known to live to see the fifth generation. Beginning thus early in its contact with this slave woman, the child had opportunity to acquire nothing but favorable attitudes toward the woman who nursed it.

Mrs. Ripley states that they loved their "Black Mammy" "right along all the week until Saturday night" when with the big tub upstairs, two pails of hot water, a heavy hand, a searching eye and a rough wash rag full of soap suds she reached every fold and crease in their bodies—"then we hated her and were glad when we outgrew the need of her assistance at those dreaded Saturday night baths and she went to other little lambs in pastures new."<sup>36</sup>

One of the roles of the "Black Mammy" was definitely that of orienting the children into the culture of their group. At no time did she depart from the mores in her

<sup>35</sup> Minnie W. Myers, *Romance and Realism of the South Gulf Coast*, pp. 55-56.

<sup>36</sup> Eliza M. Ripley, *Social Life in Old New Orleans*, p. 212.

relations with them. So persistent was this that she has been charged with having a far greater affection for them than she had for her own children. And of the children she nursed that they looked upon her as a mother and in their very early years hardly knew the difference between her and their real mother. Some have thought that they cared for her more than they did for their own mother.

When the child began to become aware of its surroundings and the difference between white and black became apparent the color of the "Black Mammy" might be a matter of curiosity. As for example, the question of the child who asked, "Mammy, who made you black?" And the answer, "Child, who been puttin' notions in your curly haid? Gawd made mammy black and He made you and your ma white, for the reason that when Noah came out'n de Ark, Ham was disrespectful to his pa and laughed at him, and Gawd told Ham he and his children should be always servants; so He made him black, and dat's where we all black people come from."<sup>37</sup>

Here one finds in the "Black Mammy's" "reply the orthodox answer as if it had come from the mouth of the mother herself. There is given also one of the chief arguments put forth by the slaveholders for keeping the Negro in bondage; no other reply could have been more in keeping with the accepted popular thought. There need be no fear that from her the child would not receive the sense of its status in the social world.

The myths of Harris' *Uncle Remus* were known and told by Negro nurses to white children all over the Southern States long before his artistry gave them to the public.<sup>38</sup> Through the "Black Mammy" the white children became acquainted with the same superstitions possessed by the Negroes. Such sayings as, "Don' yer neber lay

<sup>37</sup> Mathew Page Andrews, *The Women of the South in War Times*, pp. 190-191.

<sup>38</sup> Jerome Dowd, *The Negro in American Life*, p. 283.

down on de flo, and let nobody step over yer, kase ef yer do yer won't gro' no mo',"<sup>39</sup> or "You must always burn and not throw away your hair, because the birds will pick it up to make their nests, and that will make you crazy"<sup>40</sup> were not likely to be forgotten.

Mrs. Pickett remembers that it was the "Black Mammy" who tended her who pointed out the advantage of being "sociable with one's self."<sup>41</sup> Srygley was proud of the fact that his "Black Mammy" taught him how to count up to ten in an African dialect. This was the only recollection she had of her native language.<sup>42</sup>

If asked by the child which of two dresses it would be better to wear the "Black Mammy" likely as not would answer after this fashion: "Well, honey, let it be dis way. Dat plaid is mostly bright; ef de sun is a-shining, you wear de blue, an' ef it's cloudy you wear de plaid; so we'll all have suppin-nuther to mak' us feel warm an' good even ef it's raining."<sup>43</sup>

The "Black Mammy" taught the children the proper forms of etiquette,<sup>44</sup> of deportment to all of the people of the plantation, the proper forms of address and the proper distances to maintain. They knew that it was correct to address the older women on the plantation as "aunt" or "mammy" or "mauma"; and the older men as "uncle" or "daddy." No one was stronger for "yes, ma'am," and "no, ma'am," or for "yes, sir," and "no, sir," than she was.

In the Old South where much was made of chivalry and where great emphasis was placed upon form, manners in the life of the child meant much. The "Black Mammy" knew just what these manners were<sup>45</sup>—when to speak and

<sup>39</sup> Minnie W. Myers, *Romance and Realism of the South Gulf Coast*, p. 6.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 56-58.

<sup>41</sup> La Salle Corbell Pickett, *What Happened to Me*, p. 34.

<sup>42</sup> F. D. Srygley, *Seventy Years in Dixie*, pp. 44-50.

<sup>43</sup> Nicholas Ware Eppes, *The Negro of the Old South*, p. 24.

<sup>44</sup> Caroline Couper Lovell, *The Golden Isles of Georgia*, pp. 192-193.

<sup>45</sup> Minnie W. Myers, *Woman and Realism of the South Gulf Coast*, pp.

when not to speak; what was best to say on the proper occasion and what was not; the proper deportment of boy and girl, of young men and young women. Says Mrs. Eppes, "Her child was taught all the points of good breeding, the polite salutations, the modest answer when spoken to, the quiet demeanor. When the child remained unnoticed was the rule not as now the exception. The reason for this is readily to be perceived; "Black Mammy" was there, looking on, and woe be to the unlucky one who dared to be pert, or forward, or as she would express it, "fergit yer manners."<sup>46</sup>

And to the "Black Mammy" herself the children did not put their orders in the form of demands but in the form of requests. This was a part of their training. It was a means of maintaining pleasant family relationships with each other and with the servants. A Southerner of the upper class delighted in saying that he was taught his manners by his "Black Mammy."

"The mammy disciplined the children<sup>47</sup> and maintained her attitude of authority toward them even after they were grown. They were always children to her even after they took their places as heads of households. When the mammy thought that the master or mistress was overstepping bounds or reprimanded her unjustly, or when she became offended that her infallibility was questioned she was not above letting them know it in such a naive manner that it could not be called insubordination."<sup>48</sup>

No one was more solicitous about the child when it was ill than was the "Black Mammy." She rested neither day nor night in her care and attention. Here as in other matters of the child's life, the master and mistress allowed her complete sway. In fact, she knew more about the care of children than they did, and the child responded to her care as to that of no one else. Mrs. O'Conner tells an in-

<sup>46</sup> Susan Bradford Eppes, *Through Some Eventful Years*, p. 38.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>48</sup> Lily Young Cohen, *Lost Spirituals*, pp. 21-37.

teresting story of how the "Black Mammy" saved the life of her master's child. The weather was so hot that the physician stated nothing but a change in temperature held any hope for its recovery. By means of a wide palm-leaf fan dipped from time to time in a bucket of fresh water she "evenly and continuously made a cool moist breeze" from the baby's head to his feet for thirty-six hours without stopping. When she finished the muscles of her arms "stood out swollen and rigid," but she had saved the child's life.<sup>49</sup>

She rendered the young girls of the family all kinds of services and went out of her way to show them attention. She sat up at night and waited for them to return from social functions in order to help them undress, even when the mistress did not require it. On such occasions the "Black Mammy" became the confidant of love affairs, and was not above suggesting which young man would make the better husband; as for example, "Young missis should marry her cousin Marse Tom, and keep our family likeness in our family."<sup>50</sup>

When the boys and girls went off to school they often took the "Black Mammy's" picture along with those of the rest of the family to put on their bureaus and to show to their schoolmates.<sup>51</sup> She was often sent with the girls "to sew and wash for them and take motherly care of their health and playful exercises."<sup>52</sup> As little children they were accustomed to hanging on to her skirts and throwing their arms around her neck and kissing her. When they grew up the intimacy of contact was little changed. When departing from and upon being reunited with her they embraced her. Page makes note of a young lieutenant in a volunteer company who kissed his old "Black Mammy"

<sup>49</sup> T. P. O'Connor, *My Beloved South*, pp. 122-123.

<sup>50</sup> Mary Polk Branch, *Memoirs of a Southern Woman within the Lines*, p. 12.

<sup>51</sup> Eliza M. Ripley, *Social Life in Old New Orleans*, p. 210.

<sup>52</sup> Henry R. Schoolcraft, *The Black Gauntlet*, p. 182.



on the parade ground in sight of the whole company.<sup>53</sup>

To the slave boys and girls with whom the whites played as children the attitudes of the young men and women changed when they grew up, but to the "Black Mammy" their attitudes were always the same. To the "black sheep" especially did she extend her protection, helped him out of his difficulties and often saved him from the anger of an irate parent.

When a son of the family married and brought home his bride, the first thing that he did after he had introduced her to his parents and other relatives was to go through the same ceremony with the servants and especially with his old "Black Mammy."<sup>54</sup> The bride's wedding was not complete unless the "Black Mammy" was present. She was given a place of honor at the ceremony. Miss Bremer tells of a wedding at which the "Black Mammy" sat "black and silent by the altar." This foster mother of the bride could not bear the thought of parting from her.<sup>55</sup> Thomas Nelson Page gives the story of a wedding in the executive mansion at Richmond, Virginia. At the last minute when the bride was about to appear it was discovered that the bride's "Black Mammy" had not come in. The Governor himself went out and brought her in on his arm to take the place beside the mother of the bride.<sup>56</sup>

#### RELATIONS BETWEEN THE MAMMY AND THE MISTRESS

Frequently the best friend the mistress on the plantation had was the "Black Mammy." The overseer's wife, when there was one, was often the only other white woman on the plantation outside of the immediate household, but between her and the mistress there was the widest gulf. The mistress was as exclusive in her relationships with the overseer's wife as George Washington advised the

<sup>53</sup> Thomas Nelson Page, *The Negro, the Southerner's Problem*, pp. 202-203.

<sup>54</sup> T. D. Ozanne, *The South as It Is*, p. 75.

<sup>55</sup> A. W. Calhoun, *A Social History of the American Family*, Vol. II, p. 284.

<sup>56</sup> Thomas Nelson Page, *The Negro, the Southerner's Problem*, pp. 202-203.

steward who was placed in charge of his several plantations to be with the overseers. Said he, "To treat them kindly is no more than what all men are entitled to; but my advice to you is, keep them at a proper distance, for they grow upon familiarity and you will sink in authority if you do not."<sup>57</sup> Nor was there any association but those that were necessary between the mistress and the other poor whites that may have lived near. As a benefactress in times of crises she would assist the poor man's wife, but as an associate she received none of the benefits from the constant association which the "Black Mammy" received.

The "Black Mammy" was to the mistress in the household what the overseer was to the master in the fields, with the difference that in general the overseer could never enter into the life of the master as the "Black Mammy" did that of the mistress.

Besides taking complete charge of the children, the "Black Mammy" was the mistress' assistant in all that pertained to the household.<sup>58</sup> "Nothing but the presence of that 'gift of the Gods,' the Southern 'Mauma,' could render life less than a burden for the mistress," says Caroline C. Lowell.<sup>59</sup>

When guests arrived unexpectedly it was the "Black Mammy" who was called into consultation as to the best means of caring for them. In many instances some technique was required when too many came at the same time. Her homely but adequate advice was usually equal to any situation. Every guest and acquaintance of the family knew her. In cases she even had a state-wide reputation.<sup>60</sup> Mrs. Ripley states that as a child she often visited the plantation of her cousin. Here if anything was required everyone knew that "all applications were to be made to mammy."<sup>61</sup> Mrs. Smedes notes that on rainy days when

<sup>57</sup> Sarah A. Rice Pryor, *My Day, Reminiscences of a Long Life*, pp. 60-61.

<sup>58</sup> Myrta Lockett Avery, *Dixie after the War*, p. 181.

<sup>59</sup> Caroline C. Lovell, *The Golden Isles of Georgia*, p. 109.

<sup>60</sup> Sarah A. Rice Pryor, *My Day, Reminiscences of a Long Life*, pp. 60-61.

<sup>61</sup> Eliza M. Ripley, *Social Life in Old New Orleans*, pp. 211-212.

all the plantation women were brought into the house, her "Mammy Maria" was a Field Marshall in the way she gave out work and taught them to sew. "By word and action she stimulated and urged them on, until there was not on the Burleigh plantation a woman who could not make and mend neatly her own and her husband's clothes."<sup>62</sup>

There was a freedom of intercourse between the "Black Mammy" and the mistress who had grown old together. This was a result of a comradeship born of spending many years under the same shelter and participating in a common life, so much so that there was no need for the "Black Mammy" to obey an order strictly or to obey it at all, if she saw a better way.<sup>63</sup> Each depended on the other. Says U. B. Phillips, "No prophet in early times could have told that kindness would grow as a flower from a soil so foul, that slaves would come to be cherished not only as property of high value but as loving if lowly friends."<sup>64</sup> It was the "Black Mammy" who tactfully broke the news of some sad event to the mistress, attempting to soften the blow before it fell.<sup>65</sup>

At no period during slavery did the attachment between mistress and slave undergo a greater strain than that which was brought about by the Civil War. Here was a crisis such as neither had been called upon to face before. The mistress represented the group which was fighting to keep the slaves in bondage. The "Black Mammy" was a member of this enslaved group. But as history records the old bonds held the slaves faithful to their masters and to their masters' families.

The Civil War brought many perplexing problems to the southern household. Not the least important of which was what disposition was to be made of wives and children

<sup>62</sup> Susan Dabney Smedes, *A Southern Planter*, p. 38.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>64</sup> U. B. Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South*, p. 214.

<sup>65</sup> Joseph B. Cobb, *Mississippi Scenes or Sketches of the Southern and Western Life*, p. 162.

of departing soldiers. They had to be left at home, and some provision had to be made for them and other dependents. The "Black Mammy" was one of the answers to this question. Children could be left in her care with the utmost confidence that they would be well cared for. The young mistress could see her husband depart and feel reassured by the presence of the "Black Mammy." Here was always one source of reliance.

The "Black Mammy" helped to keep up the morale of the women and children during the war. Cut off from many of the luxuries to which they had been accustomed by the need to conserve for the troops the best of everything, and inconvenienced in that the markets which formerly furnished them with necessities were now closed by reason of the blockade, these people needed much inventiveness to keep themselves in clothing and other commodities. Many of the old fashioned ways of doing things had to be revived. Manufactured goods to which they had been accustomed, such as shoes and hosiery, were impossibilities. Old spinning wheels and looms were brought out and the Negro women spun, dyed and wove the thread into cloth.<sup>66</sup> The "Black Mammy" was skilful in making old home remedies, and upon them the family had to depend when medicines gave out and no more were to be had. She knew the cure for many aches and pains, and her knowledge was of value.

In other ways she aided in keeping up the spirit of the mistress. She it was who told her mistress whether or not the federal officers who came to the house were "gentlemen" and whether she had anything to fear from them. Believing in the efficacy of a good meal, Mrs. Branch states that her "Black Mammy," who was a famous cook, did her many a good turn by serving to the invading soldiers a good lunch, ably assisted by the other servants. This sense of identification with the group who owned her made

<sup>66</sup> United Daughters of the Confederacy, *South Carolina Women in the Confederacy*, Vol. II, p. 37.

the "Black Mammy" loyal to the point of sacrificing her own interests. Changed conditions brought no change in her behavior. Those whom she served marvelled at her steadfastness. She went about her duties as usual.

When anxious wives went forth to seek and to care for their wounded husbands it was the "Black Mammy" whom they took with them to help nurse them back to health.<sup>67</sup> Many a Confederate soldier was nursed by these "mammies" and by other Negro women who had been trained and taught thus to function.<sup>68</sup>

The "Black Mammy" was usually at the bedside of her mistress when her last hour came. And the mistress was the first person called when the "Black Mammy" was passing to the Beyond. In death the "Black Mammy" might be given a "respectable" burial. The services might even be conducted by the master himself, and instead of the home-made box provided for the ordinary slave, there might be a neat coffin, with interment in the family burial ground and a marker of some kind indicating her service to her owner.

There was hardly a person of importance or one who belonged to the old aristocracy of the South who did not come under the influence of one of these slave women, and they were proud of the fact. One of the boasts of the "old gentlemen of the South" was that they were reared by a "Black Mammy," and they attributed certain of their good qualities to this influence. Says Lucian Lamar Knight, "Nor can it be said that her influence was unfelt in the councils of the government when she held the hand of him who wrote the Declaration of Independence and rocked 'the forest-born Demosthenes' who kindled the fires of the Revolution."<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Fannie A. Beers, *Memories*, pp. 254-274; United Daughters of the Confederacy, *South Carolina Women in the Confederacy*, pp. 212-216.

<sup>68</sup> Francis Hewitt Fearn, *Diary of a Refugee*, p. 3.

<sup>69</sup> Lucian Lamar Knight, *Memorials of Dixie-land*, p. 372.