

“SHE MEANT TO CHEAT ME OUT OF A DAY’S WORK...”

By FREDERICK LAW
OLMSTED

Excerpted from *A Journey in
the Back Country*
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***[Ed. note: All spelling and
punctuation are exactly as
printed in the original 1860
edition, which is in the
possession of the editor.]***

The severest corporeal punishment of a negro that I witnessed at the South, occurred while I was visiting this estate. I suppose however, that punishment equally severe is common - in fact, it must be necessary to the maintenance of adequate discipline on every large plantation [...] The manner of the overseer who inflicted the punishment, and his subsequent conversation with me about it, indicated that it was by no means an unusual occurrence with him. I had accidentally encountered him, and he was showing me his plantation. In going from one side of it to the other, we had twice crossed a deep gully, at the bottom of which was a thick covert of brushwood. We were crossing it a third time, and had nearly passed through the brush, when the overseer suddenly stopped his horse exclaiming, “What’s that? Hallo! who are you there?”

It was a girl lying at full length on the ground at the bottom of the gully, evidently intending to hide herself from us in the bushes.

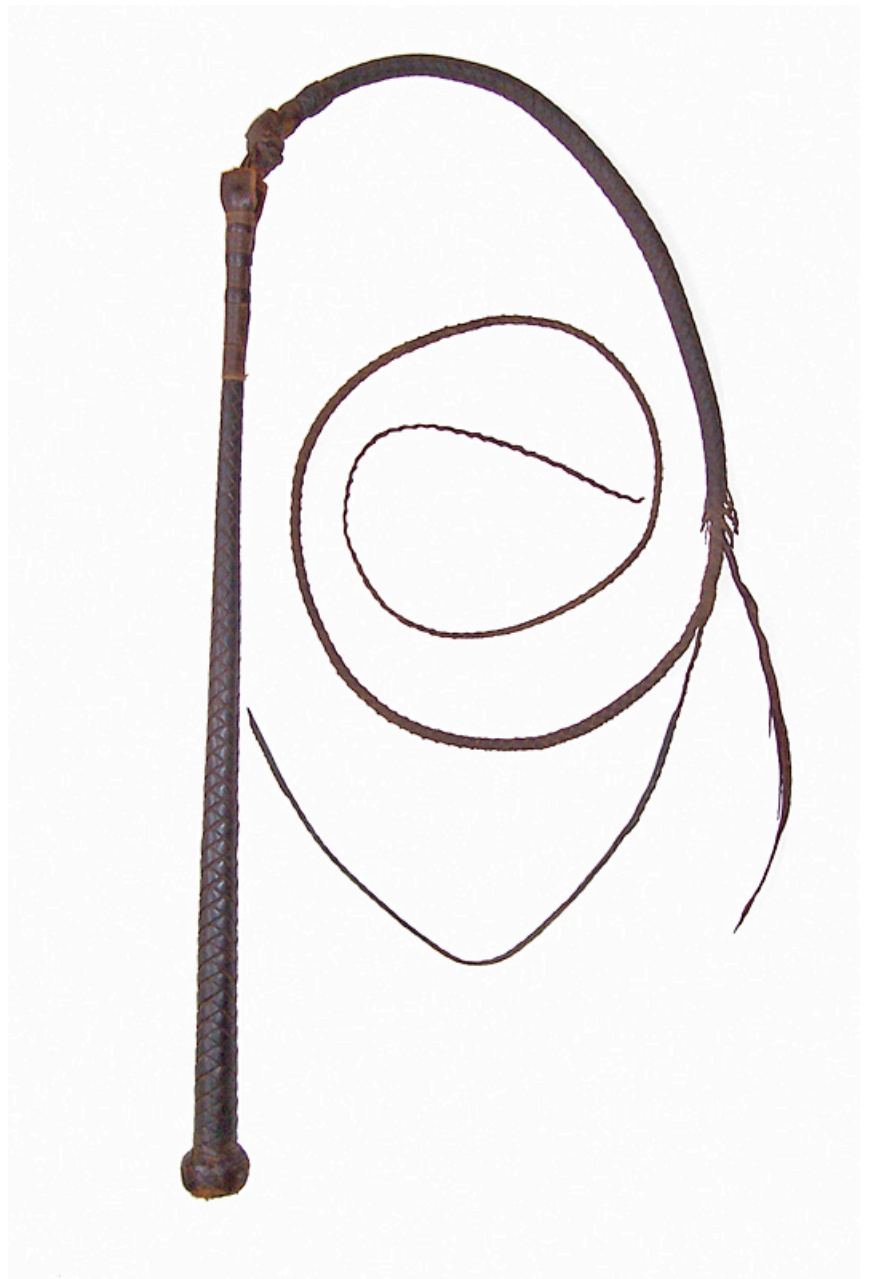
“Who are you there!”

“Sam’s Sall, sir.”

“What are you skulking there for?”

The girl half rose, but gave no answer.

“Have you been here all day?”



“No sir.”

“How did you get here?”

The girl made no reply.

“Where have you been all day?”

The answer was unintelligible.

After some further questioning, she said her father accidentally locked her in, when he went out in the morning.

“How did you manage to get out?”

“Pushed a plank off, sir, and crawled out.”

The overseer was silent for a moment, looking at the girl, and then said, “That won’t do - come out here.” The girl arose at once, and walked towards him; she was about eighteen years of age. A bunch of keys hung at her waist, which the overseer espied, and he said, “Ah, your father locked you in; but you have got the keys.” After a little hesitation, the girl replied that these were the keys of some other locks; her father had the door-key.



Frederick Law Olmsted – New York journalist

Whether her story were true or false, could have been ascertained in two minutes by riding on to the gang with which her father was at work, but the overseer had made up his mind as to the facts of the case.

"That won't do," said he, "get down on your knees." The girl knelt on the ground; he got off his horse, and holding her with his left hand, struck her thirty or forty blows across the shoulders with his tough, flexible, "raw-hide" whip. They were well laid on, as a boatswain would thrash a skulking sailor, or as some people flog a baulking horse, but with no appearance of angry excitement on the part of the overseer. At every stroke the girl winced, and exclaimed, "Yes, sir!" or "Ah, sir!" or "Please, sir!" not groaning or screaming. At length he stopped and said, "Now tell me the truth." The girl repeated the same story. "You have not got enough yet," said he, "pull up your clothes - lie down." The girl without any hesitation, without a word or look of remonstrance or entreaty, drew closely all her garments under her shoulders, and lay down upon the ground with her face toward the overseer, who continued to flog her with the rawhide, across her naked loins and thigh, with as much strength as before. She now shrunk away from him, not rising, but writhing, groveling, and screaming, "Oh do n't sir! oh please stop, master! please, sir! please, sir! oh, that's enough, master! oh, Lord! oh, master, master! oh, God, master, do stop! oh, God, master! oh, God, master!"

A young gentleman of fifteen was with us; he had ridden in front, and now, turning on his horse looked back with an expression only of impatience at the delay. It was the first time I had ever seen a woman flogged. I had seen a man cudgelled and beaten, in the heat of passion, before, but never flogged with a hundredth part of the severity used in this case. I glanced again at the perfectly passionless but rather grim business-like face of the overseer, and again at the young gentleman, who had turned away; if not indifferent he had evidently not the faintest sympathy with my emotion. Only my horse chafed with excitement. I gave him rein and spur and we plunged into the bushes and scrambled fiercely up the steep acclivity. The screaming yells and the whip strokes had ceased when I reached the top of the bank. Choking, sobbing, spasmodic groans only were heard. I rode on to where the road coming diagonally up the ravine ran out upon the cotton-field. My young companion met me there, and immediately afterward the overseer. He laughed as he joined us, and said,

"She meant to cheat me out of a day's work - and she has done it, too."

"Did you succeed in getting another story from her?"

"No; she stuck to it."

"Was it not perhaps true?"

"Oh no, sir, she slipped out of the gang when they were going to work, and she's been dodging about all day, going from one place to another as she saw me coming. She saw us crossing there a little while ago, and thought we had gone to the quarters, but we turned back so quick, we came into the gully before she knew it, and she could do nothing but lie down in the bushes."

"I suppose they often slip off so."

"No, sir; I never had one do so before - not like this; they often run away to the woods and are gone some time, but I never had a dodge-off like this before."

"Was it necessary to punish her so severely?"

"Oh yes, sir," (laughing again.) "If I had n't punished her so hard she would have done the same thing again to-morrow, and half the people on the plantation would have followed her example.....They'd never do any work at all if they were not afraid of being whipped."