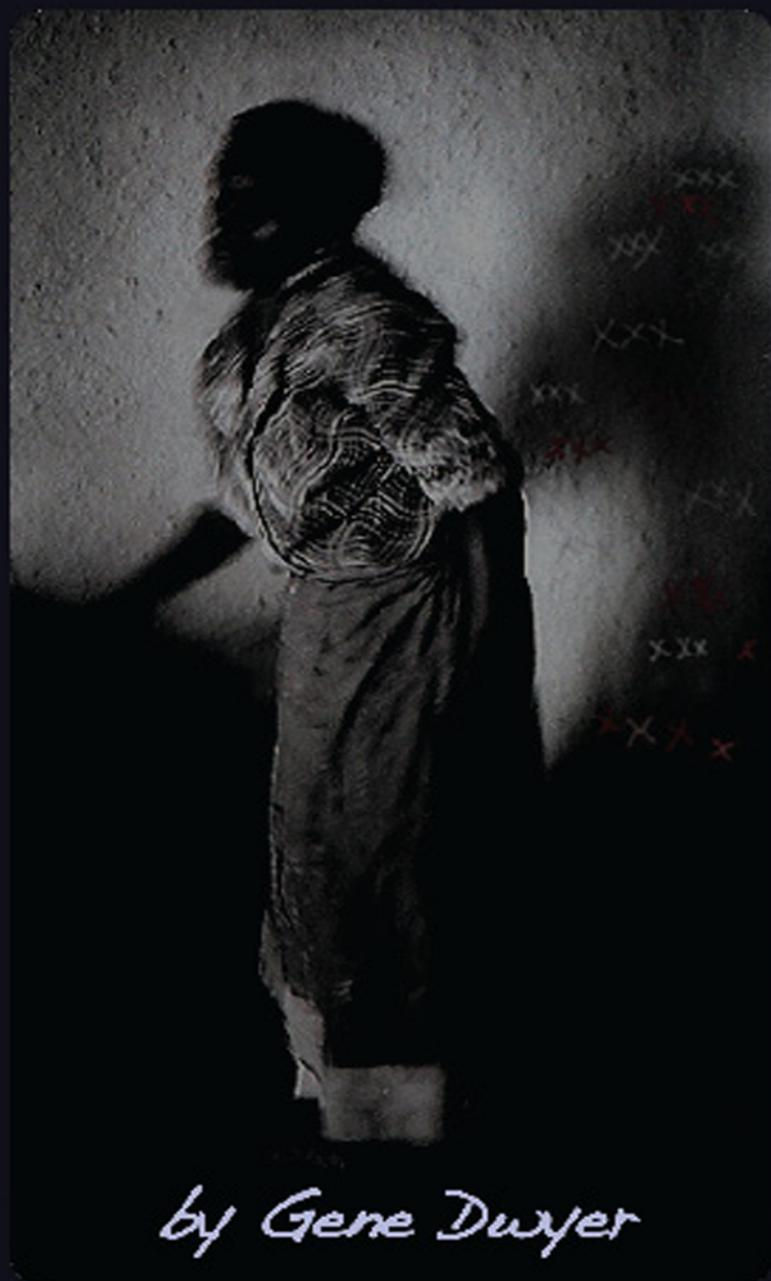


She Walks on Gilded Splinters



by Gene Dwyer

SHE WALKS ON
GILDED SPLINTERS

by
Gene Dwyer

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*Ye are of your father the devil, and
the lusts of your father ye will do. He
was a murderer from the beginning,
and abode not in the truth because
there is no truth in him.*

St. John

For Mamzelle

X X X

29° 57' 56.3" N

90° 04' 28" W

Selma, Alabama
Sunday
7 March 1965

A deep, grinding drone penetrated the air six feet directly over Marie Laveau's head. The four leathery demons hovered above her, unseen, vigilantly circling, churning the air, watching for any sign that could mean danger for their beloved Mistress.

The four *loas* had been with her since birth; her mother claimed the creatures had protected the girl from the moment of her conception. Her mother had the *power* too, but never to the extent of the daughter. The twisted gargoyle faces of the demons were grotesque, familiar faces on African totems. Their strange heads rested thickly on short, compact bodies. Sunken yellow eyes almost matched the wide, cragged teeth. They hissed when their nervous eyes darted.

Now, centuries later in a different land, she watched the freedom marchers gathering.

Marie Laveau stood alone, distancing herself from all the others, a hundred feet from the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. The river below ran murky and without reflection of daylight, more like dark molasses than moving water. The coolness of the morning air was giving way to a humid warmth.

She wore a full-length coat, forest green, which flowed about her ankles. A deep hood with a subtle gold lining deliberately hid her face and the green and pale gold tignon on her head. There were news correspondents everywhere, but it was much different from the hundreds of years before. The news reporters had special

equipment, dangerous devices which could reveal Marie's secrets.

Centuries ago, in the African bush, she learned there was a limit to her immortality. As a young child exploring the edges of the jungle near her village, she fell into an animal trap. A frenzied cheetah, trapped for two days, mauled her arms as she tried to climb away. Only slight traces of the deep scars remained, but she learned she could die. Time or disease would not kill her, but she had to be careful.

There were cameras that permanently captured the present so the curious of the future could carefully scrutinize the past. Every movement preserved forever, every gesture, every look.

The cameras were far enough away so the drone above Marie could not be easily recorded. The first time she saw a camera was in 1815 in New Orleans. It was large and clumsy and took time to set up. The photographer she saw had to wrestle with its heavy body, silver-coated copper plates and thick, wooden tripod legs.

But even the days of the past had held peril. The old cameras caused trouble for Marie once it became clear they were more than a novelty and the surest way to preserve the past. For centuries her image had never been captured, but the new invention changed that. She never forgot that young photographer at the slave market in 1815 New Orleans who, decades later, followed Lee's Army throughout the South in the American Civil War. He preserved cold, detached images of bodies shattered by cannon, and Negroes laboring in the cotton fields.

She caught her breath for an instant as the obscenity of the slave auction in New Orleans flashed behind her eyes. The rattle of the chains of the old South ricocheted through her.

Selma Sheriff Jim Clark paced, watching the protestors calling out to each other to form lines of marchers, mumbling to himself, and nodding to his obedient officers, who he knew truly appreciated his courage against these so-called *Freedom Marchers*.

Sheriff Jim Clark had an oiliness about him; he looked as if he smelled very bad. Marie looked above at her demons as Clark spat near the shoe of a black Baptist minister trying to persuade through non-violence. The minister attempted to reach Clark by calling on the spirit of brotherhood.

“Sheriff, good morning to you and your men. I want us all to appreciate this Sunday morning, with the promise of peace and good will. I wish we were all in our houses of worship, rather than gathering here.”

Clark forced a belch. The officers behind him laughed at the Sheriff’s grit. The minister ignored the rush of stale air pumping out of Clark’s mouth. He showed the proper respect by his demeanor, but not by his pointed words to Clark.

“Sheriff Clark, you protect and serve all of the citizens of Selma. Won’t you permit your Negro citizens to gather and celebrate the heritage of this country and let them exercise the rights you are sworn to protect?”

Clark adjusted the shifting flesh over his navel.

“Disperse, nigra.”

Marie lowered her eyes, the shadow of her cowl covering her face. Things were not much different in Selma now than in the rest of the world. And it was not much different today than it had been the past centuries. The slave traders of Africa separated families and killed those too weak to work. These men would do the same if they could on this Sunday.

Marie rubbed her palms together and over the tops of her whitening knuckles.

A Posse member pushed a young black man to his knees for not dispersing. Another officer pushed the young man's sister into a waiting police van with its tightly wound metal mesh to hold its criminals. The girl wept bitterly, calling out for her brother.

"Get me out. I should not be in here," she cried. "It was not supposed to be like this."

For many decades, Marie and her followers had to watch carefully for the presence of portable, still-picture cameras. But all had changed in the last fifty years. The cameras captured motion, and on this day in 1965, television captured images at every hour, and any place. Marie hated the cameras. She could smell them when she came to a place where violence would soon be erupting.

Clark chided a cameraman who got too close to him.

"Don't worry about me so much, son. Get some pictures of these outside agitators trying to disrupt this community's law and order."

Clark was shifting his weight back and forth. He wanted a physical confrontation and the niggers were not openly defying him. He ran up to a fifteen-year old male, carrying a sign that would be the theme of protest in Memphis a few years ahead.

I AM A MAN

"You ain't no fucking man, boy."

Clark sprayed spittle from the bottom of his canine teeth.

“I’m a man, and you disperse your black ass or I’ll beat the living shit out of you.”

The young man did not move. His eyes began to water with fear. A crawling sensation that he *should* hate this son-of-a-bitch in front of him spread all over. He put his head down and, as he had been taught, remained silent.

“Look at me, goddamnit, when I talk to you, boy. You fucking hear me? A real man looks another man in the eyes when he is talking.”

The young man did not move. Clark stumbled awkwardly in his anger and bumped him with his protruding belly. The young man could not hold back a small nervous laugh.

Clark shuddered and struck the young man on the neck with his billy club, then kicked at him as one knee hit the ground. John Lewis and Andrew Young ran toward Clark as the Sheriff raised his club again.

“Get the cameras on the Sheriff. My God, get the cameras on him,” Lewis demanded.

Clark shook his jowls and tried to compose himself by twisting a toothy smile. Andrew Young reached Clark first. He helped the young man to his feet, never taking his eyes off the Sheriff. Young’s eyes were defiant, angry. Clark saw a cameramen moving toward him.

He hissed. “Pick him up and move away with your Jew friends.”

Marie knew there would now be more violence. There was no stopping it, no stopping what Clark had now created. She had seen this before. For centuries she had learned how violence sparked up. She saw it in her native Africa, on the islands of the

West Indies, wherever she went. Violence was easy to find when hatred had the opportunity to hide behind laws and customs.

She watched the freedom marchers begin to gather in uneven formation as Sheriff Jim Clark's Posse got ready for them. The marchers were tentative, nervous and breathy in their talk with one another, hoping that Jim Clark wouldn't now signal the Posse to flail and pound their billy clubs into the entire crowd.

On the other side of the Edmund Pettus Bridge stood a hundred Alabama State Troopers, ordered there by Governor George Wallace.

The Troopers had just heard a captain relay a personal message to the Troopers from the Governor. Wallace wanted the Troopers to know that they must be firm in the face of the storm before them. Outside agitators had made the normally peaceful niggers excited and unreasonable and now Martin *Lucifer* King had got them riled up even more.

The Posse flanked the marchers as they looked to their leaders for the sign to walk across the Edmund Pettus Bridge and begin the long march to Montgomery. The march was reported by the news to be about voting rights. Marie Laveau knew better.

The Reverend Martin Luther King was in Atlanta on this Sunday, not anticipating such paranoia to spring from the bowels of Sheriff Jim Clark and Governor George Wallace. King had been in Selma only a few days earlier to address the people. He had spoken of the "stale bread of hatred and spoiled meat of racism." These words of nonviolence had been encouraging to those who had gathered to march from Selma to Montgomery.

Marie Laveau had stood aside from the crowd to hear Reverend King's words. She shook her head. She had lived over

five hundred years and knew there could be only one efficient and fair method to deal with Sheriff Jim Clark and all who shared his views.

The marchers began to move. Albert Turner looked toward the Posse and saw Jim Clark begin to bellow and adjust his great belly. Hosea Williams turned to a white comrade and reassured the frightened man. Williams took his hand and the hand of the woman to his left as the marchers moved forward.

Marie continued to take inventory of names. She had learned the value of one's name in Africa. The name is the essence of each human, her parents taught. She saw other leaders in the ranks of the marchers and blessed them. That night she would create a *veve* of colored sand for John Lewis, F. D. Reese and Andrew Young, along with Turner and Williams.

The marchers were a hundred feet from the ramp of the bridge. Sheriff Jim Clark opened his mouth, his tongue lapping thickly at his dry lips. Almost in harmony with the screech of his voice, his jowls vibrated around the mouth of the bullhorn.

“Disperse. This march will not continue.”

He smiled to a teenage Posse member beside him and put down the bullhorn. He put up his thick fingers to hide his lips from any camera.

“Fucking niggers and the nigger-loving Jews with them.”

The teenage Posse member hardly fit his uniform. He smiled at Clark, admiring the courage to stand up to the niggers. Clark and the boy stood shoulder to shoulder, two generations of Selma, Alabama fighting back the agitators.

The Edmund Pettus Bridge was rusty and its structure was weakening over the years. The city fathers were trying to find

money to repair the structure; some said it was not worth the trouble and cost.

Edmund Pettus had been a Confederate Civil War general. And now it was almost a hundred years to the day since the Civil War ended and the niggers started to try to take over, Clark told the boy. Then he turned toward three officers on his right.

“Almost one hundred years to the goddamned day, a hundred years, since men like Edmund Pettus were dishonored by niggers and Jews.”

From the shadows of her dark green hood, Marie’s eyes followed every movement of Jim Clark. She recalled the manner the fattest jackals would slink at night in her native Africa. Sheriff Jim Clark was constantly adjusting the extra eighty pounds he carried directly over his thick, black leather belt.

Clark tugged his belly straight from under his navel, then patted the holster of his pistol, as if to remove it. He glared at the marchers, again putting the bullhorn to his shiny lips.

“Disperse. This march will not continue.”

The droning above Marie began to rattle. The sound was drowned by the swelling voices of the marchers.

“We shall overcome. We shall overcome. We shall overcome, some day. Deep in my heart, I do believe, we shall overcome some day.”

The voices rose, the sopranos soaring.

Marie considered unleashing the demons that hovered above her, invisible to all humans except a select few of her Voodoo followers and some breeds of dogs and cats. The demons were poised to dart toward the Posse and the Troopers, just as they had done countless times at Marie’s command.

As the marchers reached the bridge, Clark chased the cameras with his billy club, jamming the club into anyone in his way before he struck the cameras. His Posse moved forward, forcing the marchers to run toward Wallace's Troopers.

"Move, nigras, I said move your asses."

The Posse waded through the marchers, kicking them and pounding flesh and bone frantically with their clubs. The marchers fell. They had expected to be arrested, but not attacked as a whole. The attack was more than punishment for their insolence this time; the blows were vicious, swirling, cruelly deliberate.

Screams and thuds of wood breaking flesh and bone resounded. The creaking of the officers' leather jackets added a staccato rhythm to the beatings.

The marchers knew they were vulnerable alone or in small groups. Still they did not want to believe Jim Clark would order this unprovoked attack on them, in public, a group who was asking to register to vote.

The plan was passive resistance, nonviolence. Marie watched carefully, remembering names of the Posse members and the Troopers as they called out to each other.

The Troopers fired canisters of tear gas into the group, causing more panic. They were trapped on the bridge, nowhere to run, neither to the tear gas or the waving clubs. A Posse member began to chase a terrified black girl, about sixteen. After falling to her knees and crawling between the legs of some of the other Posse members, she managed to get up and run. He chased her toward Marie, who signaled the largest demon by raising her right hand slightly, from her waist to an inch under her heart.

The demon swooped twenty feet and down toward the man's

right ankle. As the girl stumbled and fell on her knees again, the Posse member raised his club to strike her. The demon's leathery lips opened and the jagged teeth sank deep into the Achilles tendon, sending sinew and blood behind the collapsing attacker.

The demon was deliberate. It made sure this white man would walk with a pronounced, dragging limp the rest of his life, a mild rebuff. The demon twisted its head, shaking its prey. It released its jaws, spitting out half of the ankle bone, reveling in its duty. On that never-forgotten day at the animal trap, the same demon had ripped the cheetah's head out by the roots before it hurt its Mistress again. No person or animal had been able to harm Marie since then, the servants learned well that day.

The Posse member howled, baying at the pain. He rolled into a heap as the girl ran directly into Marie's comforting arms.

"You are safe, child."

Several officers ran to the fallen man, who was unable to explain the injury.

The distraction created an opening for many of the marchers to escape. Marie turned and moved into an alley as the news cameras turned in her direction. The screams of the wounded and gassed marchers pounded in her ears as she gently reassured the girl with a touch to her cheek, then nudged her to move with her towards safety.

Only minutes earlier the girl had learned of this woman who now helped her. She understood the special presence and her young mind became filled with thoughts of revenge, a new sensation for her.

A few days before, Johnny Lee Jackson, a young black man, had been shot dead by an Alabama State Trooper. Jackson had been attempting to defend his mother from a vicious beating by

the Trooper. The Trooper had shot him at point-blank range. Preliminary investigation by the Alabama State Patrol Review Committee had found that the Trooper had acted well within the scope of his duty under adverse circumstances.

Marie Laveau would go to Jackson's mother that night to comfort her. The mother had learned of Marie's *power* years ago. Marie was confident Jackson's mother and the girl beside her could be trusted.

Marie knew the police riot was caused by hatred and fear of retaliation for Johnny Lee Jackson's cold-blooded murder. The Sunday march was much more than a demand for freedom and voting rights to Clark and the Alabama State Patrol.

As Marie walked away, the girl kept up with her, favoring her bruised knees. Marie touched the girl's shoulder gently.

"Come, child, hurry."

"Yes, Mamzelle."

Minutes before, an old black woman from Selma, who encouraged the marchers from the sidelines, told the girl the stranger who stood and watched in the shadows was Marie Laveau.

As Marie and the girl stepped away from the chaos, a strange young woman, with a dark African complexion, only very dry, caught up with them. The young woman had been watching Marie and the demons from a safe distance, as not to be noticed. Marie smiled at her and reached out her hand to guide the young woman to her side as the three disappeared into the back streets of Selma, away from the Edmund Pettus Bridge and toward the old section of town where the white steeples of old wooden churches towered over the hovels with dirt floors and no plumbing.

West Africa
Monday
21 May 1590

The Arab slave herder grumbled under his breath as the exhausted tribesman stumbled to his knees, under the dulling weight of the wooden yoke and the fierce sun. The tribesman's long legs, supporting his seven feet of height, collapsed. The Arab turned his horse and muttered.

“That black animal, damn him.”

The fall gouged the bleeding shoulders a bit more and the ragged flesh over the bones became engorged with wooden splinters.

The tribesman was the fourth slave to fall in the intense afternoon sun. He had fallen three times in less than an hour and he knew the Arabs would now kill him. He dropped his head down, his chin pulsing on his chest, accepting the inevitability of the sword, almost welcoming it. The tribesman tried to move his legs to stand at his full height at the moment of death, in vain.

The Arab adjusted his long dark robes, saturated with perspiration. The indigo dyes in the garment had stained his skin dark, greyish blue.

Raising the horse's reins high, he brought his elbows down with a scythe's motion and trotted toward the black body, shimmering in the dust.

Stepping down from the stirrups, he wasted no time. He adjusted his drenched robes again and withdrew a short thick sword from a well-worn leather sheath on his belt. The Arab

plunged the sword to the hilt in the slave's left side. Too weak to writhe, the tribesman's long body collapsed forward, his legs straightened and he died without a sound.

A dust devil swirled toward the dead man, gradually burying his jaw and cheeks, along with the yoke in the chafing, dry soil. The whirlwind filled the killer's eyes with dirt, causing him to curse.

The intricately carved tattooing on the slave's face, from hours of ritual ceremony, disappeared in the accumulating dust. Twenty slaves in the line in front of the dead man and ten slaves behind watched emotionless.

The Arab cleaned the bloody blade by wiping it on the dirt caked on the tribesman's shoulder. The Arab's horse kicked at the flaky, dry soil, snorting and swaying. The Arab nudged the body with his foot, idly checking for life. The sword slid back in the sheath.

The big black cat had been watching, hidden in the dense bush at the side of the dry trail. Angry sounds gurgled from the bottom of its throat. The shining black of its hide became hidden in the moving shadows of the growth of the dark green leaves and branches. The cat made no sound at all as its thick paws stepped on the carpet of a thousand seasons of leaves.

Half of the thirty blacks had deeply carved designs sculptured on their faces—strange, aboriginal scarring. The Arabs believed the tattooed blacks were sullen and potential troublemakers so a closer watch was kept on them.

Be wary of the mutilated ones. They offend the eyes of Allah.

But the mutants would bring a good price. They were always ogled by curious bidders at the auction block. The Arabs told potential buyers that the facial carving indicated sexual prowess. This story was believed, especially by white men who coveted a

dark concubine. It was never proper to kiss the blacks on the lips during sex, so the scarring was tolerable to their sensitivities.

All of the thirty slaves were naked. All were bound around the neck and shoulders by ill-fitting wooden yokes. The crude yokes had been used for many years by Arab slavers who traveled down from the northwestern section of the African continent. The slavers had always been reluctant to leave the relative security of their Mediterranean seaports.

The thick African bush land was teeming with strange animals and dreadful diseases. Allah had forsaken this land of godless men whose dark skin shimmered purple in the sun.

The frequent excursions into the deep bush land to capture two or three small villages each time was very profitable now that the Europeans who were colonizing the West Indies needed slaves who could withstand hard labor under a tropical sun.

The ancient Egyptians had employed the ancestors of these same Arabs over three thousand years ago to kidnap the Nubians to toil as slaves in the shadow of the pyramids.

The followers of the god Isis also knew that the black races had no right to an opportunity to redeem their soulless existences. The Dutchmen who were now trading in slaves knew the same.

The tribesmen were no match for the Arabs. The blacks were disorganized. The only advantage the blacks may have had was their hidden villages in the midst of overgrown brush and lush, billowing vegetation. Bizarre creatures and tormenting insects made the hunting and capturing of the tribesmen an ordeal.

The black cat stared intently at the slavers as it glided silently in the darkened bush, stifling a killing growl. The animal turned and moved quickly when it caught Marie Laveau's intoxicating scent

coming up on the breeze. The big cat rumbled a purr as it moved obediently toward Marie.

In a fifty-square-mile area the Arabs would find perhaps forty small villages with twenty-five different languages. If one language was similar to another, then the dialects would be so diverse that those tribes could barely communicate.

So the blacks fought and bickered among themselves. The Arabs and the Dutchmen understood this weakness. While the black population of the bush to the south and west of the Sahara wasteland was raided unmercifully by the Arabs and the Dutchmen, the rival tribes living deeper in the bush watched without doing anything.

The Arabs killed the blacks who became too weak to keep up the pace. Under the ever-present wooden yokes, the slaves plodded over one hundred miles to the western African coast where the sea-going vessels would moor, waiting for the valuable human cargo.

For years the villages closest to the ocean were raided, but after season after season of uncontrolled harvesting, the Arabs were now forced to go further inland to find the quarry.

Every twenty-five days these Arabs began a new trek with a different group of captured villagers. The Arabs harvested the blacks with strict regularity. As long as the heathens were available and the weather cooperative, the tribesmen would be made slaves and sold.

Bondage was inevitable; there was no place to run. Each village was its own world and the tribesmen would live and die in that world. The Arabs knew that well. Seven to ten days would be necessary to march the hundred or so miles, depending upon the health of the blacks.

Their tedious work made the Arabs temperamental and they

killed the weak readily. No sense in feeding the infidels or wasting time. No one will buy the frail ones anyway. Keep them moving. They must be kept moving.

The blacks were forced to keep pace, day and night. The Arabs would stop to rest their horses for a few hours. That was the only time when things were still. The blacks were prodded to move by sticks and whips.

A few moments of rest came for putrid meals, a watery slop devoid of protein. The slaves were not allowed to pause in their steps to relieve themselves. They had to pass their wastes while walking, like the horses of the Arabs. They were covered with their own filth and stepped in the filth of their comrades.

The culture of the tribesmen demanded a strict adherence to cleanliness. Rituals for disposal of body wastes and proper washing were practiced in their villages while the cities of Europe poured human waste into the same water used for drinking. Typhoid and chronic diarrhea raged on the civilized continent and no one had discovered why.

The Arabs practiced similar rituals of cleanliness, but the customs of the captives were not tolerated. The Arabs knew it was important to strip the blacks of any dignity.

The blacks were infidels and their dark skin was a physical manifestation of their soulless lives. *They don't have souls*. Whenever a young Arab was reluctant to maim or kill a tribesman, he remembered, *they don't have souls*. This assurance made the brutal tasks easier.

None of the members of the captured band was over thirty-three years old. There had been fifty-three people in the village at the time of the raid. Thirteen were too old or sick, so the Arabs

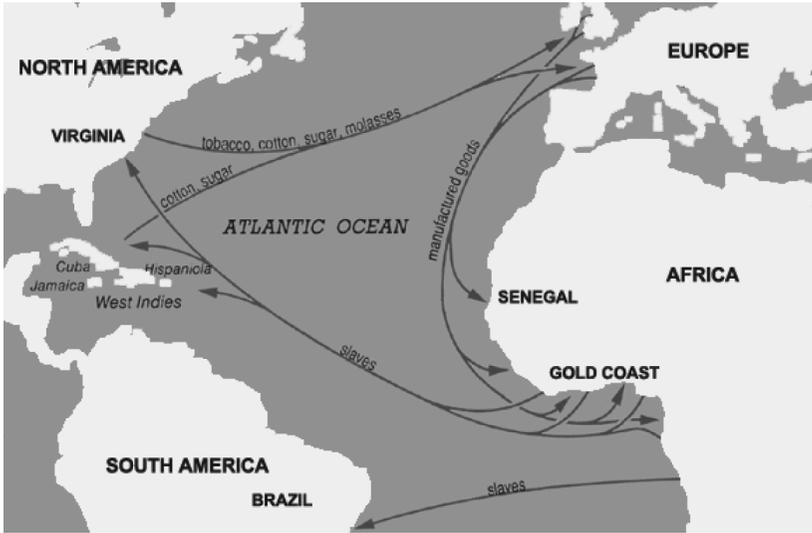
either killed them or left them to die in the bush. Many of the women deliberately rushed their children off into the undergrowth, hiding the youngsters from the menacing eyes of the marauders during the raid. The children must live. They must be saved. The bush did not kill as quickly as the Arabs.

As a rule, ten more would die before reaching the western coast of the continent. That would leave twenty for sale. The Arabs routinely planned to arrive two days before a slave ship was scheduled to arrive. Arriving sometime early allowed the Dutchmen to feed, water and wash the tribesmen. A better price would be assured from the efficient Europeans; the Arabs learned that in this work first impressions are important when trading with the Europeans. The Arabs would deliver only the strongest for sale. They thrived on this reputation.

Slaves would be sold for the first time by the Arabs to the Europeans and, after a second sale, loaded on a vessel to be taken to the West Indies, the fertile islands of the New World. The second sale was usually made to another European.

The voyage was a foul journey. A quarter of the shackled blacks would die from hunger, dehydration and diseases contracted from the white overseers. The profit was still good; the Arabs and the Dutchmen were shrewd traders. Profit from the soulless bodies of heathens was honorable work.

Multiple sales were inevitable and necessary. More profit could be made and less rebellion encountered by constantly separating family members. It was a business rule the Dutchmen practiced. *Those tattooed pagans can't be trusted. They will always be godless.* The Dutchmen decided even the fanatic Spanish monks could not bring the Lord to the tattooed heathens.



Slave and Trade Routes

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