

TAKEN FROM THE GUINEA COAST AS A CHILD

Venture Smith / A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture

When this narrative was composed, Venture Smith was an old man, living in East Haddam, Connecticut. He had taken his surname from Colonel Oliver Smith, his last owner, who had permitted him to work evenings in order to buy his freedom. After freeing himself, he had bought his wife and children from their master and settled in Connecticut.

The events Smith describes here took place in Africa, the home that he left at the age of six. Although he certainly did not have total recall of his life in Africa, his memory is probably quite accurate. Perhaps the most important aspect of this narrative is its description of the warfare between the states of the coast and those of the interior, where Smith was born. This commercial warfare, waged for the slave trade, brought about great changes in the political life of Africa.

I WAS BORN at Dukandarra, in Guinea, about the year 1729. My father's name was Saungm Furro, Prince of the tribe of Dukandarra. My father had three wives. Polygamy was not uncommon in that country, especially among the rich, as every man was allowed to keep as many wives as he could maintain. By his first wife he had three children. The eldest of them was myself, named by my father, Broteer. The other two were named Cundazo and Soozaduka. My father had two children by his second wife, and one by his third. I descended from a very large, tall and stout race of beings, much larger than the generality of people in other parts of the globe, being commonly considered above six feet in height, and every way well proportioned.

The first thing worthy of notice which I remember was, a contention between my father and mother, on account of my father marrying his third wife without the consent of his first and eldest, which was contrary to the

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custom generally observed among my countrymen. In consequence of this rupture, my mother left her husband and country, and travelled away with her three children to the eastward. I was then five years old. She took not the least sustenance along with her, to support either herself or children. I was able to travel along by her side; the other two of her offspring she carried one on her back, and the other being a sucking child, in her arms. When we became hungry, our mother used to set us down on the ground, and gather some of the fruits which grew spontaneously in that climate. These served us for food on the way. At night we all lay down together in the most secure place we could find, and reposed ourselves until morning. Though there were many noxious animals there; yet so kind was our Almighty protector, that none of them were ever permitted to hurt or molest us. Thus we went on our journey until the second day after our departure from Dukandarra, when we came to the entrance of a great desert. During our travel in that we were often affrighted with the doleful howlings and yellings of wolves, lions, and other animals. After five days' travel we came to the end of this desert, and immediately entered into a beautiful and extensive interval country. Here my mother was pleased to stop and seek a refuge for me. She left me at the house of a very rich farmer. I was then, as I should judge, not less than one hundred and forty miles from my native place, separated from all my relations and acquaintance. At this place my mother took her farewell of me, and set out for my own country. My new guardian, as I shall call the man with whom I was left, put me into the business of tending sheep, immediately after I was left with him. The flock which I kept with the assistance of a boy, consisted of about forty. We drove them every morning between two and three miles to pasture, into the wide and delightful plains. When night drew on, we drove them home and secured them in the cote. In this round I continued during my stay here. One incident which befel me when I was driving my flock from pasture, was so dreadful to me in that age, and is to this time so fresh in my memory, that I cannot help noticing it in this place. Two large dogs sallied out of a certain house and set upon me. One of them took me by the arm, and the other by the thigh, and before their master could come and relieve me, they lacerated my flesh to such a degree, that the scars are very visible to the present day. My master was immediately sent for. He came and carried me home, as I was unable to go myself on account of my wounds. Nothing remarkable happened afterwards until my father sent for me to return home.

Before I dismiss this country, I must just inform my reader what I remember concerning this place. A large river runs through this country in a westerly course. The land for a great way on each side is flat and level, hedged in by a considerable rise in the country at a great distance from it. It scarce ever rains there, yet the land is fertile; great dews fall in the night which refresh the soil. About the latter end of June or first of July, the river begins to rise, and gradually increases until it has inundated the coun-

try for a great distance, to the height of seven or eight feet. This brings on a slime which enriches the land surprisingly. When the river has subsided, the natives begin to sow and plant, and the vegetation is exceeding rapid. Near this rich river my guardian's land lay. He possessed, I cannot exactly tell how much, yet this I am certain of respecting it, that he owned an immense tract. He possessed likewise a great many cattle and goats. During my stay with him I was kindly used, and with as much tenderness, for what I saw, as his only son, although I was an entire stranger to him, remote from friends and relations. The principal occupations of the inhabitants there, were the cultivation of the soil and the care of their flocks. They were a people pretty similar in every respect to that of mine, except in their persons, which were not so tall and stout. They appeared to be very kind and friendly. I will now return to my departure from that place.

My father sent a man and horse after me. After settling with my guardian for keeping me, he took me away and went for home. It was then about one year since my mother brought me here. Nothing remarkable occurred to us on our journey until we arrived safe home.

I found then that the difference between my parents had been made up previous to their sending for me. On my return, I was received both by my father and mother with great joy and affection, and was once more restored to my paternal dwelling in peace and happiness. I was then about six years old.

Not more than six weeks had passed after my return, before a message was brought by an inhabitant of the place where I lived the preceding year to my father, that the place had been invaded by a numerous army, from a nation not far distant, furnished with musical instruments, and all kinds of arms then in use; that they were instigated by some white nation who equipped and sent them to subdue and possess the country; that his nation had made no preparation for war, having been for a long time in profound peace; that they could not defend themselves against such a formidable train of invaders, and must therefore necessarily evacuate their lands to the fierce enemy, and fly to the protection of some chief; and that if he would permit them they would come under his rule and protection when they had to retreat from their own possessions. He was a kind and merciful prince, and therefore consented to these proposals.

He had scarcely returned to his nation with the message, before the whole of his people were obliged to retreat from their country, and come to my father's dominions.

He gave them every privilege and all the protection his government could afford. But they had not been there longer than four days before news came to them that the invaders had laid waste their country, and were coming speedily to destroy them in my father's territories. This affrighted them, and therefore they immediately pushed off to the southward, into the

Two days after their retreat, the report turned out to be but too true. A detachment from the enemy came to my father and informed him, that the whole army was encamped not far out of his dominions, and would invade the territory and deprive his people of their liberties and rights, if he did not comply with the following terms. These were to pay them a large sum of money, three hundred fat cattle, and a great number of goats, sheep, asses, &c.

My father told the messenger he would comply rather than that his subjects should be deprived of their rights and privileges, which he was not then in circumstances to defend from so sudden an invasion. Upon turning out those articles, the enemy pledged their faith and honor that they would not attack him. On these he relied and therefore thought it unnecessary to be on his guard against the enemy. But their pledges of faith and honor proved no better than those of other unprincipled hostile nations; for a few days after a certain relation of the king came and informed him, that the enemy who sent terms of accommodation to him and received tribute to their satisfaction, yet meditated an attack upon his subjects by surprise, and that probably they would commence their attack in less than one day, and concluded with advising him, as he was not prepared for war, to order a speedy retreat of his family and subjects. He complied with this advice.

The same night which was fixed upon to retreat, my father and his family set off about the break of day. The king and his two younger wives went in one company, and my mother and her children in another. We left our dwellings in succession, and my father's company went on first. We directed our course for a large shrub plain, some distance off, where we intended to conceal ourselves from the approaching enemy, until we could refresh ourselves a little. But we presently found that our retreat was not secure. For having struck up a little fire for the purpose of cooking victuals, the enemy who happened to be encamped a little distance off, had sent out a scouting party who discovered us by the smoke of the fire, just as we were extinguishing it, and about to eat. As soon as we had finished eating, my father discovered the party, and immediately began to discharge arrows at them. This was what I first saw, and it alarmed both me and the women, who being unable to make any resistance, immediately betook ourselves to the tall thick reeds not far off, and left the old king to fight alone. For some time I beheld him from the reeds defending himself with great courage and firmness, till at last he was obliged to surrender himself into their hands.

They then came to us in the reeds, and the very first salute I had from them was a violent blow on the back part of the head with the fore part of a gun, and at the same time a grasp round the neck. I then had a rope put about my neck, as had all the women in the thicket with me, and was immediately led to my father, who was likewise pinioned and haltered for leading. In this condition we were all led to the camp. The women and

top of the dens directly into the air. Their weight brought them back, point downwards on their enemies' heads, whilst they were smoking the inhabitants out. The points of their arrows were poisoned, but their enemy had an antidote for it, which they instantly applied to the wounded part. The smoke at last obliged the people to give themselves up. They came out of their caves, first spitting the palms of their hands together, and immediately after extended their arms, crossed at their wrists, ready to be bound and pinioned. I should judge that the dens above mentioned were extended about eight feet horizontally into the earth, six feet in height and as many wide. They were arched over head and lined with earth, which was of the clay kind, and made the surface of their walls firm and smooth.

The invaders then pinioned the prisoners of all ages and sexes indiscriminately, took their flocks and all their effects, and moved on their way towards the sea. On the march the prisoners were treated with clemency, on account of their being submissive and humble. Having come to the next tribe, the enemy laid siege and immediately took men, women, children, flocks and all their valuable effects. They then went on to the next district which was contiguous to the sea, called in Africa, Anamaboo. The enemies' provisions were then almost spent, as well as their strength. The inhabitants knowing what conduct they had pursued, and what were their present intentions, improved the favorable opportunity, attacked them, and took enemy, prisoners, flocks and all their effects. I was then taken a second time. All of us were then put into the castle, and kept for market. On a certain time I and other prisoners were put on board a canoe, under our master, and rowed away to a vessel belonging to Rhode Island, commanded by Captain Collingwood, and the mate Thomas Mumford. While we were going to the vessel, our master told us all to appear to the best possible advantage for sale. I was bought on board by one Robertson Mumford, steward of said vessel, for four gallons of rum, and a piece of calico, and called VENTURE, on account of his having purchased me with his own private venture. Thus I came by my name. All the slaves that were bought for that vessel's cargo, were two hundred and sixty.

INTERPRETING THE DOCUMENTS

1. What does this selection reveal about African civilization in the 1700's?
2. What kind of conspiracy existed between some Africans and Europeans for the enslavement of other Africans? Why, in your opinion, did Africans enslave Africans?
3. How do you think the renaming of enslaved Africans affected their feelings about themselves and their culture?

... being pretty submissive, had tolerable treatment from the enemy, while my father was closely interrogated respecting his money which they knew he must have. But as he gave them no account of it, he was instantly it and pounded on his body with great inhumanity, that he might be incited by the torture he suffered to make the discovery. All this availed not the least to make him give up his money, but he despised all the tortures which they inflicted, until the continued exercise and increase of torment obliged him to sink and expire. He thus died without informing his enemies here his money lay. I saw him while he was thus tortured to death. The shocking scene is to this day fresh in my mind, and I have often been overcome while thinking on it. He was a man of remarkable stature: I should judge as much as six feet and six or seven inches high, two feet across his shoulders, and every way well proportioned. He was a man of remarkable strength and resolution, affable, kind and gentle, ruling with equity and moderation.

The army of the enemy was large, I should suppose consisting of about a thousand men. Their leader was called Baukurre. After destroying the prince, they decamped and immediately marched towards the sea, lying to the west, taking with them myself and the women prisoners. In the march scouting party was detached from the main army. To the leader of this party I was made waiter, having to carry his gun, &c. As we were a-scouting we came across a herd of fat cattle, consisting of about thirty in number. These we set upon, and immediately wrested from their keepers, and afterwards converted them into food for the army. The enemy had remarkable success in destroying the country wherever they went. For as far as they had penetrated, they laid the habitations waste and captured the people. The distance they had now brought me was about four hundred miles. All the march I had very hard tasks imposed on me, which I must perform on pain of punishment. I was obliged to carry on my head a large flat stone used for grinding our corn, weighing as I should suppose, as much as twenty-five pounds; besides victuals, mat and cooking utensils. Though I was pretty large and stout of my age, yet these burdens were very grievous to me, being only six years and a half old.

We were then come to a place called Melagasco. When we entered the place we could not see the least appearance of either houses or inhabitants, but upon stricter search found, that instead of houses above ground they had dens in the sides of hillocks, contiguous to pounds and streams of water. In these we perceived they had all hid themselves, as I suppose they usually did on such occasions. In order to compel them to surrender, the enemy contrived to smoke them out with faggots. These they put to the entrance of the caves and set them on fire. While they were engaged in this business, to their great surprise some of them were desperately wounded with arrows which fell from above on them. This mystery they soon found out. They perceived that the enemy discharged these arrows through holes on the

never completed the trip. They died in bondage aboard ship and were thrown overboard.

From the fifteenth century, when this wellspring of flesh on Africa's western shores was first tapped, to a century ago when it was finally capped, the flow of slaves ran strong. Slaves were nearly always cheap in Africa and dear in the Caribbean islands. A captain could afford to pack his holds with black men and women, like so many spoons. He knew a certain number would die but that the price the rest would bring would more than make up for the loss of the dead.

As with the purchase, transport and sale of any commodity, economic gain was the prime reason for the trade from its beginning to its end. The New World needed labor and plenty of it, especially in the hot climes of the Caribbean. After Europeans had started settlements in the newly discovered lands across the Atlantic, they soon found that they were physically incapable of profitably working the soil in the tropical islands. The native Indians likewise were unable to do the arduous forced labor which the Europeans demanded. They died by the thousand in their unaccustomed bondage, or, seeing no reason to give up their independence to the white invader, they ran away. This proved a troublesome trait with which the Europeans found it difficult to cope since the Indians could take refuge in the forests they had grown up in.

Only a few years before the discovery of the New World, European venturers had discovered the west coast of Africa. On lands facing the Gulf of Guinea they found a country teeming with people. At first, the white men who wanted slaves sought to seize those blacks they wanted. Of course the blacks fought back or retreated into the forests. Then the Europeans discovered that there were Africans who were not averse to selling other Africans as slaves. Primitive tribal society existed in many areas of the continent, and many a victorious tribal chief willingly sold away

INTRODUCTION

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE

UNTIL just a few decades ago a voyage across the Atlantic Ocean was an experience of suffering and peril for passenger and crew alike. One historian, thinking of the immense loss of life, especially among those who traveled to work the new lands in the early years of the western Atlantic colonies, conjectured that if the sea could be drained between Europe and Africa and the New World, the paths of the ships would be easily traced by the bones of those who died in the ocean crossing. By far the clearest trace of these old searoads would likely be found along the route of the slave ships from Africa's west coast to the West Indies.

There is no accurate count of the number of African black men who made that fearful journey in chains, but it was in the millions. By assessing the records of various slave shipping firms, the head fees paid to port officials in the New World and similar documentary evidence, historians believe that from 10 to 20 million slaves were brought westward across the Atlantic during the four centuries the trade prevailed. And it is estimated that as many as one third — from 3.3 million to nearly 7 million —

Excerpts from Bullwhip Days (Interviews of Former Slaves)

The slaves are put in stalls like the pens they use for cattle—a man and his wife with a child on each arm. And there's a curtain, sometimes just a sheet over the front of the stall, so the bidders can't see the "stock" too soon. The overseer's standin' just outside with a big blacksnake whip and a pepperbox pistol in his belt. Across the square a little piece, there's a big platform with steps leadin' to it.

Then, they pulls up the curtain, and the bidders is crowdin' around. Them in back can't see, so the overseer drives the slaves out to the platform, and he tells the ages of the slaves and what they can do. They have white gloves there, and one of the bidders takes a pair of gloves and rubs his fingers over a man's teeth, and he says to the overseer, "You call this buck twenty years old? Why there's cup worms in his teeth. He's forty years old, if he's a day." So they knock this buck down for a thousand dollars. They calls the men "bucks" and the women "wenches."

When the slaves is on the platform—what they calls the "block"—the overseer yells, "Tom or Jason, show the bidders how you walk." Then, the slaves step across the platform, and the biddin' starts.

At these slave auctions, the overseer yells, "Say, you bucks and wenches, get in your hole. Come out here." Then, he makes 'em hop, makes 'em trot, he makes 'em jump. "How much," he yells, "for this buck? A thousand? Eleven hundred? Twelve hundred dollars?" Then, the bidders makes offers accordin' to size and build.

—JAMES MARTIN

'Bout de middle of de evenin', up rid my young marster on his hoss, an' up driv' two strange white mens in a buggy. Dey hitch deir hosses an' come in de house, which skeered me. Den, one o' de strangers said, "Git yo' clothers, Mary. We has bought yo' from Mr. Shorter." I c'menced cryin' an' beggin' Mr. Shorter not to let 'em take me away. But he said, "Yes, Mary, I has sole yer, an' yer must go wid 'em."

Den, dose strange mens, whose names I ain't never knowed, tuk me an' put me in de buggy an' driv' off wid me, me hollerin' at de top o' my voice an' callin' my ma. Den, dem speculataws begin to sing loud, jes' to drown out my hollerin'.

Us passed de very fiel' whar Paw an' all my folks wuz wukkin', an' I calt out as loud as I could an' as long as I could see 'em, "Good-bye, Ma! Good-bye, Ma!" But she never heard me. Naw sah, dem white mens wuz singin' so loud, Ma couldn' hear me. An' she couldn' see me, 'cause dey had me pushed down out o' sight on de flo' o' de buggy.

I ain't never seed nor heard tell o' my ma an' paw, an' brothers, an' sisters, from dat day to dis.

—MARY FERGUSON

I had a brother, Jim, who wuz sold ter dress young Missus fer her weddin'. De tree am still standin' whar I set under an' watch 'em sell Jim. I set dar an' I cry an' cry, specially when dey puts de chains on him an' carries him off. An' I ain't neber felt so lonesome in my whole life. I ain't neber hyar from Jim since, an' I wonder now, sometimes, iffen he's still livin'.

—BEN JOHNSON