

Hans Kirk

The Slave

O, holy mother of God,
let our enemies die,
and give us a successful voyage
across the salty sea.

Old Spanish seaman's song.

Translated and with an Introduction by

Marc Linder

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Endless days consisting of hours as long as eternity. In the morning the sun rose like a bonfire from the sea, in the evening it set in a blaze. It was best to sleep. Sleep while the San Salvador pounded the seas, or rocked one gently, sleep, until one reached a beach where there were trees and clouds, grazing oxen and leaves that fluttered in the cool wind. One was tired of all these people in such intimate proximity, and who nevertheless hadn't the slightest to do with one, tired of the ship's perpetual pitching in the ocean, of the boom from the sail, the rudder's creaking, the crew's heavy steps on the deck at night, the shouting of commands, oaths, the dry, salted food, the horizon, constantly swaying, and the smoking horn lanterns, which it swayed in tandem with.

Doña Inez was full of disgust for this voyage, which was never-ending. She was sitting under the awning with her eyes half closed and following the foaming seas, hoping that none of the passengers would talk to her. She was tired of them. She yearned for her usual life, which was full of restless bustle, of people who came and went and carried out her orders.

Suddenly it occurred to her that she could have her Indian slave fetched. She waved to a ship servant and gave him instructions. It took a long time before he returned with the slave, and in the meantime doña Inez had fallen asleep. She awoke with the two men standing next to her.

— What is it? What do you want? she asked grumpily.

— You told me to fetch the Indian, gracious señora.

— That's right. I want to talk to him, and you can go.

She sat a bit and sleepily looked at the Indian, who was standing next to her. He had turned his head and stared out over the ocean as if doña Inez didn't concern him in the least.

— Do you speak our language? she asked.

— Yes. I speak it even if burns like fire on my tongue.

— What's your name?

— Pancuiaco.

— Tell me about your life. I want to know what you've

experienced.

— A slave doesn't have a life, but what he has experienced belongs to him alone.

— How did you become a slave?

— Your people's warriors came and surrounded our village. We swung our machetes, the arrows sang in the air, and many men were killed. We survivors drew misfortune's lot, for your people is without mercy.

— And what would you people have done had you won?

— Killed.

— But the Spanish soldiers didn't kill, doña Inez said. They let their prisoners live, and isn't life worth most of all?

— No.

— What is more precious?

— Freedom.

Doña Inez smiled. One could laugh and cry at hearing a slave, a primitive Indian, use this word. What freedom could he presumably have had? A wretched life in poverty and ignorance, more bestial than any serf's. And still there was a pride in his appearance, a sound in his voice, which made her look at him and listen. He was like a man from another world and another time, and doña Inez suddenly had the strange thought that she had never seen a man before.

He was erect with lean, strong limbs, and he looked freely at her as if at his equal and not like a slave at his master. There wasn't a grain of fear in his look. She racked her brain about what had been said about him when she bought him, but back then it hadn't greatly interested her. She had taken a fancy to buying a young slave as a gift for her brother, who was governor in the Canary islands. Of course, it was forbidden to bring Indian slaves to Europe, but the law wasn't enforced, nor, last but not least, were the Canaries Spain.

She had gotten him from a slave trader who bought up young Indian prisoners of war in order to break the men in as efficient house slaves or the women as servant girls, lovers for the young Spanish officials and officers or as girls in the bordellos. The merchant had shown her a selection of his commodities, but she

wasn't satisfied until she chose Pancuiaco.

— He isn't among the best, he said. I dare not recommend him to the gracious señora.

— Why not? doña Inez had asked.

— He's not tamed yet, and perhaps he can't be tamed at all. Some of them are like horses who can't be weaned of biting and kicking. I'll be glad to show the gracious señora others I can recommend.

— I'll take him, doña Inez said curtly, and gave instructions as to where and when the slave was to be delivered.

Now she wasn't certain she wanted to make her brother a present of the slave, and if she knew him well, he would surely also prize more highly some of the precious things she had brought home with her.

— I mean you no harm, she said gently. You'll have it good with me. Perhaps I'll grant you your freedom.

— Can you give me my machete, which they robbed me of, my hut, which they burned, my violated and murdered wife, and my gold ornaments, which I wore to honor our gods at the festivals? Or my brothers, whom they have made into slaves and who must eat the bread of degradation?

— The evil that has happened can't be undone, doña Inez said. What has happened no living person can change. But I can show you a world you can't imagine that contains magnificent things you have no inkling of.

The slave shook his head and looked out over the ocean.

Your world isn't my world, and your life isn't my life, he said. If you are my master, good, then do with me as you will. But I will never obey you—either you or anyone else. I have only one thing left and I won't let that go.

— And what's that?

— Myself, the slave said, and looked at her.

There was such strength, without anger, in his look that doña Inez had to look away. She felt confused and realized she was having heart palpitations, which annoyed her, because even if he was a beautiful young man, he was still a native, and it had been a great many years since men had given her heart palpitations.

He wasn't tamed, and how was she to tame this wild horse? She saw fray Ramon coming with a book in his hand to find a quiet corner under the awning, and she waved to him.

— Oh, padre, she gave a forced laugh. Won't you help me make myself understood to this young Indian. We are literally talking past each other.

Don Ramon came over to her chair and with his friendly, nearsighted eyes looked with curiosity at the slave.

— His name is Pancuiaco, and he's a prisoner of war who was sold as a slave, doña Inez said. He's bitter about his fate, though I've tried to explain to him that I'll make sure that he has it good. He says straight out that he won't obey me. What shall I do with him?

She noticed the slave's eyes dwelling on her and she blushed. She added in a harsh tone:

— Shall I have him whipped?

— One accomplishes more with gentleness, señora, don Ramon said and turned toward the Indian.

— We understand your bitterness well, Pancuiaco, he said. But you know the law of war and know that bondage is the vanquished's fate. Take comfort that you have a prominent and noble lady for a master, and that you perhaps won't always have to continue being a slave. Perhaps the almighty has selected you as an instrument that shall bring happiness and blessings to your people. You will see much that is new and learn many things on the other side of the great ocean. All of that you ought to profit from as others have done. Believe me, Pancuiaco, many have been obstinate like you, but later have become friends with the whites.

— You mean they have submitted to the yoke, the Indian said.

— We are all under the yoke that God has placed on us, don Ramon said. We are all in God's bonds and chains. No living human can withdraw from God's will.

— He's not my God. I don't know him.

— But you will get to know him and praise his works. Is the white man not powerful, and who after all can be greater than his

God? You will learn to submit in awe of him and comprehend that the white man is your master, to whom you owe obedience, while he owes you love and care.

— You have taken our land, our women, our children and made us into slaves—is that a brother's love? You didn't come to us as guests, who asked to share our bread, but as enemies, who took our life and all our property. Is that a brother's love?

— It is difficult to talk about these things, don Ramon said, distressed. Not everything in our world is perfect, and not all whites are animated by a spirit of brotherhood.

— But what is your God's commandment?

— You shall render unto God what is God's, and unto Caesar what is Caesar's. That means you shall honor and worship God and serve your earthly masters willingly and obediently bear the burdens that are placed on your shoulders. Then God will help you and all his holy men.

— Our gods were frightful when they became angry. Then they shook the earth the way the storm shakes the corn plant. We trembled before them, but they could be appeased, and they never took away our freedom. Your god is a god of bondage whom I will not worship.

— But surely you are baptized?

— They read words over me and sang witchcraft, but no new spirit entered me. Oh, you whites are stupid and ignorant, you believe in the power of dead words, but the gods don't live in words, they are in living things.

— Take care not to mock the holy baptism, don Ramon said sternly. If someone reported your words, you would fare ill. But go now where you belong, and don't forget that this noble lady wants only your true welfare. We'll talk later, Pancuiaco.

The Indian turned and walked calmly down toward the ladder to the orlop deck. Doña Inez looked pensively at his straight back, which radiated pride and defiance.

— What am I going to do with him? she asked.

— Let him reflect on it a bit, don Ramon said. Remember how confusing it is for a primitive native suddenly to be confronted with our modern civilization. And it surely can't be as-

serted that his experiences up till now have given him the best impression of it. But sometimes it can be psychologically prudent to give an obstinate native a powerful lesson so that he learns for his own good what he has to gain by humility and willingness. Too bad, because he resembles a young Greek god.

— I'm not fond of these violent punishments, doña Inez said irritatedly. Maybe it was stupid of me to have bought him. I think I'll give him as a gift to my brother after all.

But she knew she wouldn't do that. She shrugged her shoulders impatiently and closed her eyes. Don Ramon slipped off with his book.

Doña Inez was not allowed to be alone for long with her anger and agitated thoughts. Samuel Rayburn had long wanted a conversation with the rich widow, and seeing her sitting alone, he found the opportunity appropriate. He approached politely with a greeting:

— Am I disturbing you, gracious señora?

— On such a voyage one is glad for every disturbance, señor, doña Inez said, and invited him to sit down.

— Yes, sea voyages are tiring, Rayburn said. But with a ship like the San Salvador it's hardly so bad. I have traveled on ships where I had to share quarters with the crew. Here, however, there are modern accommodations.

— If only there were no vermin, doña Inez said. Every evening I have to get undressed stark naked and catch fleas in my gown.

That gave Rayburn a start. But that's the way these barbarian women were. When very young they were cut off from the world, but when they got older, they claimed a license in speaking that grated badly on decent people's ears. That was connected of course to the whole papist depravity.

— I would like to have permission to talk with you about Indians, señora, Rayburn said.

— About Indians? doña Inez said. Then the time is rather badly chosen. At the moment I'm tired of everything that has to do with Indians.

— So much the better if the gracious señora will bestow a

moment's patience on me. I have inspected various mines and haciendas, and it is appalling to observe how poorly these Indians work. They are weak physically and lazy and unreliable by nature, without aptitude for moral training, and there is not the slightest doubt that one can raise the yield significantly if one introduces Negroes as labor. The Negro is strong as an ox, endures even the most difficult climate excellently, and works steadily and surely as long as one provides for sharp discipline.

— But the price difference is also significant, said doña Inez, whose business sense had suddenly awoken. Negro slaves are very expensive, while Indian slaves don't cost us anything to procure.

— That is true, Rayburn nodded, and he added: I must first tell you, señora, that I represent a concern which is engaged in extensive trade in Negroes, and which until now has had its principal sales in the West Indies. I have been in New Spain to procure new business connections since we intend to expand our trade territory to the continent. I concede that the purchase price for negro labor is rather high, but one must keep in mind the considerable costs. We have to outfit expensive expeditions for procuring the commodity. The voyage across the ocean is protracted and the percentage lost is large since the Negroes unfortunately cannot endure the ocean—that's the only thing they cannot endure. On the other hand, they have great procreative powers. Just a reasonable stock, and a mine or plantation will become self-sustaining. And the children can be employed, so to speak, right from the time they can walk.

— Nevertheless, I'm not entirely certain it isn't more profitable to use the Indians.

— May I show you a couple of figures, gracious señora, Rayburn said, and took a book out of his pocket.

— That's a prayer book, doña Inez laughed. It has a cross on the binding. But perhaps English merchants use their prayer books for accounts?

Annoyed, Rayburn stuck the prayer book back in his pocket and pulled out the right one. He felt like replying that her thought wasn't completely wrong. English merchants bring God

along even in business. English merchants had nothing to hide from the almighty, and they shunned everything having to do with sin and papistry.

— I have here some calculations from the el Roy mine, which a few years ago switched to using black labor, he said. The pit previously employed two hundred Indians—it is a small mine—and one reckoned on every Indian's lasting on average four years. Now it is operated with a hundred Negroes, and production has risen by fifty percent. As far as one can tentatively estimate, mortality has declined to a minimum. Naturally, that does not say much since we are dealing with fresh, newly imported Negroes, but the experiences from the West Indies demonstrate that a Negro on average lasts sixteen years. Of course, the fact that one does not need to be constantly putting new and untrained people to work results in quite a different labor efficiency. It is a fact that el Roy, which previously was a quite unprofitable enterprise, has been paying off excellently after the shift to Negroes.

— Possibly you're right, señor, doña Inez said pensively. Perhaps it does pay.

Again she saw in front of her the worn-out Indians who worked in her gold mine, the gaunt women, the dying children, and once more her mind was filled with a vague compassion.

— Perhaps you're right, señor, she repeated.

— I believe I am, graciosa señora, Rayburn said. I can promise that you will be satisfied with Negro slaves. You cannot imagine how much work a Negro is capable of performing on a couple of handfuls of rice or cornmeal.

— I can very well imagine trying Negroes in my mine, where the work is rather hard, doña Inez said. But it is of course somewhat unusual to buy people sight unseen.

— You need not harbor any anxiety whatsoever, señora, we deal only with Negroes of the highest quality. And it is the right time to buy. The prices are rising because one must obtain the Negroes farther and farther from the coast, and for that reason the transportation costs are becoming higher every year.

— Good, doña Inez said. For the time being I can imagine

giving it a try with a hundred strong, healthy Negroes who can stand hard mine work.

— I would advise you at the same time to take fifty women, Rayburn said. That means fifty children a year, and even with rather high child mortality, you can not only maintain the stock, but also substantially increase it. I will go down to my cabin now to calculate the price for delivery to the closest port. And tomorrow I will have the pleasure of submitting proposals to you for a contract.

Samuel Rayburn closed his little account book, stuck it in his pocket, and bowed respectfully and earnestly before doña Inez. None of his fellow passengers was in the cabin, and before he began to work out the details of the contract, he bent his knee and thanked God, who this time too had stood by him. And when he got up to get to work, he thought with singular pride:

— She should only know how right she was, the arrogant lady. We humble ourselves before God, and we have him with us in our whole lives, in our sorrows and joys and indeed also in our business.