

# 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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In the mess the gaming took on a more heated character day by day. The stakes were raised, and instead of dice, the cards had now come onto the table. Most of the passengers were involved; only the clerics were content playing chess in their cabins.

But whether dice or cards, don Luis had a steady run of bad luck. Once in a while he flung his cards down in a rage and went for a walk on the deck, but it was as if he was drawn back to the game. A moment later he was again sitting and sweating and muttering curses with the cards in his hands. He had long since lost the money he had gotten for the gold ring, and now he was in full swing losing the loan he had received on a bill of exchange from an unsuspecting plantation owner. His cheeks got fired up, and he drank a lot of the sour, bad wine, which was poured for the players.

He had only some small coins left, and when they took a break to eat, he drew colonel Gonzales aside.

— Be so friendly as to lend me a hundred escudos, colonel, he said. You'll get them back as soon as we reach port.

The colonel looked at him stiffly and replied that out of principle he didn't lend money, and especially not to people he wasn't more closely acquainted with.

— You needn't harbor any anxiety about not getting the money back, don Luis said. I'm expecting an inheritance; I'll get it paid out as soon as we get home. Moreover, my family is well situated, indeed rich.

The colonel shook his head, stern like an old grey wolf. In the political domain Gonzales may have been a dreamer, but he knew what money was worth. He had known many young noblemen who were expecting an inheritance, and he knew enough about young good-for-nothings from good families who were exported across the ocean and weren't good at anything, not even playing cards.

— If you don't have money, then you must stop playing cards, señor, he said dismissively. One gambles, makes debts, borrows and cheats and ends up in prison—it's an old tune. Stay

away from cards, señor.

— That's my business, don Luis answered angrily.

— In any event, you're not going to gamble with my money, Gonzales said, and turned his back to him.

— I thought I was dealing with a caballero, don Luis sneered after him.

— Watch your mouth, little coyote, the colonel replied, and without turning around, went into his cabin to take a dram of *taatsch* before mealtime. Don Luis considered whether he should go after him and hit him in the face. But the old idiot was presumably an expert fencer, and don Luis didn't have the slightest desire to squander his life for his honor. He made do with spitting contemptuously on the deck.

Oh, this miserable, rotten tub—how it stank of Negroes, of rancid meat and prayers, and how one had to be roasted alive for yet another forty days. Don Luis didn't comprehend for the moment what business he'd had in the new world. He hated these countries with their stinking swamps, dry plains, and trackless mountains, and still more he hated the miserable upstarts who owned mines and haciendas and were stuffed to the gills with gold. He'd had a dream about getting rich quickly and returning home like a Croesus, but not even at the playing table did he have a bit of luck. For a moment the thought crossed his mind that perhaps he could borrow money from doña Inez, but he immediately abandoned it again. It was all too humiliating to ask her for money—yet.

Suddenly he happened to remember the Indian girl he had taken along on the voyage. Like other young officers in the garrison, he had bought a pretty young native girl, and had quickly fallen in love with her gentle gracefulness. She had gotten a child and he had decided to take her and the child along to Spain. It was a foolish whim, and he had regretted it as soon as he had come on board. What was he supposed to do with the girl and the child back home?

— Maybe I can sell her here on board, he thought. After all, she is my property, and it's my right clear as the noonday sun. I like her a lot, but a caballero can also be compelled to sell a

horse or a dog he loves dearly. And an Indian girl is nothing but a horse—one buys her and sells her and that's the whole of it. Moreover, it may be that she'll be much better off with her new master.

But the child—who would buy a girl with a child? It wasn't likely he could get a decent price for her if the buyer was forced to take the child into the bargain. If he wanted to sell the girl, the child had to go. He saw before him the soft, round body and the small, earnest brown face, and thought sadly:

— What fate awaits such a child? A life in slavery and misery. It will never get any joy out of life, but will be spared many tears if it dies now. It has gotten a little glimpse of this mournful world and goes its way again. And after all it is baptized, salvation awaits it, and it can walk right into heaven without burning in purgatory.

He was interrupted in his thoughts by the violent tolling of the ship's bell. Sailors stormed past, the order shouted from the bridge resounded, and the passengers staggered out of their rooms. The sailor in the main-mast's lookout had reported sail ahead, and all hands were called to the deck. Captain van Laahr, a stout and taciturn Fleming, himself went aloft in the rigging to see what kind of ship was approaching.

— What is the meaning of this? asked the viceroy, who had immediately staggered out of his cabin.

— It's too soon to know yet, excellency, the *oidor* said. But these are dangerous seas and it's best to be prepared for all manner of things.

The cannoneers made the ship's guns ready to fire, balls and powder were brought up from the powder-room. In the meantime all sails were set. If it was a pirate ship, they would have to try to get away or cut through the enemy.

— Yes, these freebooters, the *oidor* said. They are a pestilence of the ocean and a plague from hell. They cost both the state and the mine owners immense sums. In the past seasons the Valenciana mine at Guanajunto alone has lost over a million doubloons a year on plundered transport ships. That's a great deal of money.

And one surely ought to think of the human lives, too, in any event in the present case, don Vargas said.

— Would they really lay hands on us if we are taken? don Pedro asked.

— Quite without regard to a person's status, excellency, the *oidor* replied. They're rather crude fellows, and for them it's an exquisite pleasure to hang folk of rank. I've also heard of cases where they played a bit with the victims beforehand, and the playing was not particularly fun for one of the parties. Cruelty is a strange form of lust.

Don Pedro became a little pale and turned toward the inquisitor.

— Would it not be reasonable, most reverend don Jesus, that a mass be read, he said. This ship is swarming with priests, but not a single one is thinking about invoking providence.

— You are completely correct, don Jesus nodded, and had the ship's priest sent for. A moment later all the passengers were kneeling while the mass was being celebrated. Only Samuel Rayburn had stolen down to his cabin and knelt there in prayer to his own God.

The vessel came so near that it could be clearly seen with the naked eye. It was a brigantine, which was tacking forward against the wind. The gun-ports were closed, and nothing indicated that the ship was bent upon mischief.

— One of the king's ships, señores, the captain shouted. For once we got off easy. But the devil take all shipowners who don't take into account what we seamen say. We are all too heavily loaded, and a boy in a fish-chest and with his mother's gown as a sail could overtake us.

The depressed atmosphere was succeeded by a nervous cheerfulness. Doña Inez had wine brought, and the greater part of the company gathered under the awning, while the San Salvador flew over the waves like a great white bird in the fresh wind.

But don Luis didn't join this lively company. He went down to his cabin to brood over whom he should get to buy the Indian girl. Rayburn was sitting there on the edge of his bed, with the

prayer book still in his hand.

— The danger is past, señor, don Luis said. It was a peaceful merchantman.

— Praised be the Lord, Rayburn said and mutely moved his lips in thanks to God.

— I've heard that you carry on trade with Negroes, don Luis said. Perhaps you are also interested in Indians? I have an unusually beautiful girl for sale.

— I trade only en gros, and Indian women do not interest me in the least, Rayburn said stiffly.

— But couldn't you think about buying her for your private use? don Luis said. I find myself in a momentary embarrassment and would dispose of her cheaply. When the voyage is over, you can easily get her sold off to a bordello.

— Señor, your proposal is shameless, Rayburn jumped to his feet. You are talking to an honest Christian Englishman.

Don Luis looked at him in astonishment . Why did the man become angry about this in all respects acceptable proposal? But these foreigners were strange, which of course was due to their bad ancestry and complete lack of culture.

— It was not my purpose to offend you, señor, he said politely. She's really an unusually beautiful girl and gentle and compliant in character.

He went on deck, and when the viceroy withdrew to his cabin, followed him. He asked him respectfully for permission to state his business, and don Pedro nodded graciously.

— I have brought along a brown girl here on the ship, don Luis said. I have taken her along to make a present of her to a noble patron, who is to a very special degree a connoisseur of women. But circumstances force me to sell her, and I find it appropriate to offer her first to your excellency.

— What am I supposed to do with an Indian girl? don Pedro asked, wrinkling his brows.

— Of course I was not thinking about your excellency's personal requirements, but the girl would be eminently suited as a gift. And there are people who prize this kind of attentiveness.

The viceroy looked at him with annoyance. Here was some-

thing that hadn't occurred to him. He had brought along expensive gifts in gold and precious stones, but hadn't thought at all about the possibility that a courtier fond of women or a minister might be more easily won over with a living present.

— Is the girl beautiful? he asked.

— Very beautiful.

— And untouched?

— That of course is rare for these Indian women.

— I want to see her before I buy her.

— I shall fetch her immediately if it suits your excellency to see her now, don Luis said delighted.

Now the point was to act quickly. He got hold of one of don Guilemo's Negroes and gave him instructions. Then he went down to the orlop deck to fetch the girl. She was sitting on her blanket next to the bunk where her child was calmly sleeping.

— Come along, he said, and avoided looking at her.

— Where to, master? she asked.

— A noble white man wants to talk to you, don Luis said. You needn't trouble about the child—the whole thing will take only a moment.

She followed him obediently up to the viceroy's cabin, where don Pedro inspected her critically.

— She is nice, he said. But I have seen prettier Indian girls before. I do not know whether she is beautiful enough to give away as a present.

— One cannot demand the world here under the awkward conditions, don Luis said. But let her get on land, and she will recover and bloom like a rose.

— Yes, yes, don Pedro said. She is indeed in any case quite pretty. And I am willing to buy her, but can I be certain that she will not suffer molestation on the orlop deck?

— There is no great danger of that, don Luis said. Moreover, these Indian girls scratch like cats. And the girl is well trained; she knows she must not have anything to do with anyone except her master. But now I will accompany the girl down there, and I shall return to arrange the particulars with your excellency.

— A nice young man, don Pedro thought. He has polite and correct manners, which is rare among the youth in our day. Naturally, the girl was his lover. But it is certainly a good idea to buy her if I can show attentiveness to someone or other.

Don Luis accompanied the Indian girl to the orlop deck and ordered her to go down. Then he hurried out to the stem, where the Negro was standing with a little bundle pressed tightly against himself.

— Quickly, throw it in the ocean, he whispered.

The Negro looked darkly at him, but don Luis stuck a coin in his hand, and the bundle slipped quietly over the side of the ship.

— So you'll keep quiet, otherwise it'll be the whip, don Luis said, and the Negro nodded mutely.

The bundle rocked for a moment on a foam-clad wave; then it was sucked into the ocean. For a moment don Luis thought about the little brown body, which had been so soft and warm to touch, but he put the thought out of mind. The burden of life had been taken from a miserable little being, an innocent soul had gone home to his savior—and he had gotten a good round sum so he could once more try his luck at the card table.