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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On the orlop deck the Indian girl was sitting in the furthest corner of the bunk and staring ahead vacantly. In the room next door a Negro was strumming in a melancholy fashion on his stringed instrument, and in the forecastle a couple of off-duty sailors were squabbling over a game of dice. People came and went, watches changed; here was a perpetual uneasiness round the clock, but she had calmed down. She hadn't cried or complained when she came down and saw the empty bunk, but had merely burrowed deeply into the darkness of the bunk.

— Why didn't you people prevent them from taking the child, Juan Gomez asked bitterly. She resembled the Madonna herself when she put the little one to her breast. Damn it—are we men or old women?

Don Pablo shook his head.

- Nobody saw it, he said. It was right during siesta, and we were sleeping. Some believe a Negro fetched the little one, but they're not sure they're right. The Indian was on deck—otherwise it wouldn't have happened. It looks as though her lover sold her, but the buyer didn't want to have the child along. So the matter was taken care of the way lords over life and death have a right to take care of that kind of trifle. Before she was a frail little person, now she has become a thing. She no longer thinks and feels, and they can do with her what they will. It's best that way.
 - Surely they're human beings?
- No, they're not human beings, don Pablo said. They're masters, they're more than human beings. They have the right to extinguish life, to kill and torment. And if you ask where they get it from, they'll answer that God has given it to them. They have built mighty churches for him, and in exchange he has beneficently laid his hand on their shoulders and given them a share in his omnipotence. What they do is God's will, and whoever rebels against them has been misled by Satan. That's the way it is, amigo, and you ought to have learned it long ago, you who have been one of the instruments of their power.

- When I return home, I want to live on my own land and live by my own work, Juan Gomez said. Their actions are disgusting, but they're none of my business.
- And one fine day you'll discover that everything is your business, don Pablo said. And if you don't discover it, your son or grandson will. Some day we'll burn their churches and kill those who want to kill. But first we have to become men. It's not enough that we curse the rich, who have subdued the earth; we ourselves must stop being subdued. You'll understand that, even if it takes time, because you have a peasant's heart.

A child's death was only a trifling thing, and not many noticed that the little life had been extinguished. But the mulatto Christobal also had to leave. Inflammation had infected the hand which had been nailed to the mast, and his arm swelled up and turned red and blue. He groaned and screamed in his bunk, and the others cursed him because he was disturbing their sleep, but one morning Christobal was quiet. He had died during the night.

He was sewn into a leftover piece of sailcloth and, after the mass for the dead, sent overboard. Everyone knew the sea had now claimed its victim. For every voyage the ship had to give the sea a man. That was the price of crossing the ocean, and the old sailors asserted that it never failed. The ocean took its due.

But Christobal didn't want to remain in the deep; already the next night he was standing by his bunk with water dripping from his clothes. His face was white, and his eyes were begging for permission to be there and complete the voyage. Alberto, whose bunk was next to the one the mulatto had left, saw him standing there and said gently:

— May God's peace be with you, Christobal, and may all saints help your soul. But you can't be here—you must go back out there where you belong.

The mulatto sighed, but didn't move. It was clear enough that he wouldn't go amicably. He had never been any kind of good comrade while alive, Alberto was thinking, why should he be better now that he was dead. But if his ghost didn't go back into the sea, the ship would be doomed to go under with all hands aboard, so mercy was of no use.



— Go, Christobal, Alberto said. Go out there where you belong. It's cold and dark out there, but on judgment day God will surely know how to find you even in the deep of the sea, and you will be resurrected to his glory. Go, Christobal, and don't lead us all into misfortune.

But the mulatto remained standing stiff by his bunk, and Alberto couldn't get him to yield, despite uttering his prayers. A gleam of phosphorous surrounded his deathly pale face, and the phosphorescence shone through his wet clothes. He already belonged to the ocean, although only a few days ago he had been like one of the others, taken his turn on watch, squabbled, and drunk with them.

It was in the middle of the middle watch, and the other sailors were sound asleep in their bunks. Alberto got up and woke an old sailor.

- Christobal has come, he said.
- Where is he? the old man asked sleepily.
- He's standing by his bunk and wants to get up into it, and he won't yield even though I've used the words of the prayer and sacred invocations.

The old man rose and looked over at the bunk where the mulatto had slept.

- I don't see him, he said.
- But he's there, Alberto said. I see him, and you know I have the gift for seeing. Christobal was a bad person, and he's an evil soul. What are we going to do?
- Try to fetch him in there, the old man said, nodding over toward the partition where don Pablo was sleeping. He knows more than his Lord's prayer.

Alberto went in and tugged at don Pablo, who drowsily opened his eyes.

— It's Christobal—he's come and wants to get into his bunk, Alberto said. I can't get him to retreat. You're a learned man—maybe you can use strong words that will send him back into the ocean.

Don Pablo was immediately wide awake and jumped out of his bunk. The others had awakened and many eyes stared over



toward the mulatto's empty bunk. No one dared go over to it.

- Not everyone has the gift for seeing the dead when they come, Alberto said. But if it is granted to you, you can see him standing there, and he doesn't want to leave, the unfortunate one, although he knows that if he gets permission to stay, every last one of us will go down. If you know strong words, use them now.
- I see him, don Pablo said. Christobal, nobody here is to blame for your death, go your way as you came.
- You see, he won't yield, Alberto whispered. He was a bad person.
- If you have something to avenge, avenge yourself on the right ones, don Pablo said, raising his voice. Avenge yourself on the rich and powerful, who had your hand nailed to the mast. Avenge yourself on those who took your life, not on your own brothers. If we have sinned against you, it is from ignorance and not from wickedness, but the wickedness of the powerful is like the depths of hell.
- That's not strong enough, Alberto whispered. Words can't gain the upper hand over him. Conjuring is also necessary. Conjure him into the ocean if you have the strength to do it.
- Thy will be done, don Pablo said, and stretched both hands in the air. While he spoke several incomprehensible sentences in a deep voice, he slowly walked over toward the mulatto's empty bunk.
- He's yielding, he's yielding now, Alberto said. Chase him up on deck and over the railing. Keep it up—you have power over him.

With uplifted arms don Pablo drove the dead mulatto before him to the foot of the ladder. At the same moment Juan Gomez appeared in the raised frame around the hatchway.

— Turn around, brother, Alberto shouted in terror to him. Don't get in the way here, turn around! If you get in his way, he'll take your soul along.

Juan Gomez quickly jumped back, and don Pablo, constantly conjuring in a loud and threatening voice, followed the ghost up the ladder and across the deck. Alberto followed, and after don



Pablo had spoken the last invocation at the railing, they stood together silently for a moment and stared down into the foaming water. The ocean glittered in the moonlight and shone and gleamed of phosphorescence as if the water crackled and burned.

- Your words were strong, Alberto said, laying his hand heavily on don Pablo's shoulder. His life wasn't worth much, but nevertheless he really didn't want to lose it. That's the way it is: they always come back. We don't yearn for salvation even if we try to imagine that we do.
 - Did you see him crawl over the railing? don Pablo asked.
- I did, Alberto nodded. He turned his head and looked at me, and his eyes were full of anger. It's rough for them, the poor devils, but one fine day it will be our turn. I've seen many come from the ocean, and some I've been able to reason with and help with a prayer, but all of them went back into the ocean with grief.

They went back down into the crew quarters, followed by Juan Gomez. Alberto rooted around a bit in his kit-bag and pulled out a little clay bottle with *taatsch*.

— Go to bed now, brothers, he said to the other sailors. You can sleep calmly now—he won't come back. But this man spoke such strong words that they singed his tongue like fire and brimstone. That's why I'm pouring some for him and not for any of you.

Alberto let don Pablo drink first and then took a swig himself, for he too after all had fought with the mulatto. Then he invited Juan Gomez, who had crossed paths with the ghost and was in need of fortifying himself after the danger. Outside the ocean rose and sank in perpetual swells, and it washed against the side of the ship as if something was knocking and wanted in. Now Christobal was once again lying out there and bobbing on his miles-long voyage till some day he drifted up onto a desolate beach. He had tried once again to find his place here in the room, where weary men turned heavily in their sleep, and where they woke up to hard labor with the fatigue still burdening their body.

— Maybe it's the loneliness they fear, Alberto said. The



ocean is big and a human being's soul is very weak. Nobody cared about Christobal, but nevertheless it was here that he belonged. He had no other places to return to than his bunk here, where he was a part of us. Now he has to sigh and wail in his loneliness in the cold nights until some day the Lord takes pity on him. Drink, whiskey warms the soul, and some day we no longer feel the warmth.

- But the child they killed, won't it come back? Juan Gomez asked.
- No, it won't come back, Alberto shook his head. Its soul was all too tiny—it can't find its way back. But if you have good ears, you can hear it cry at night. In there she can hear it. All the time she hears the child's crying, whether she's sleeping or awake. There's no use in your talking to her because she hears the child's crying in her ears.
- But those who killed the child don't hear it, don Pablo said.
- Nobody knows what they'll be hearing some day, Alberto said.
- But while they're alive, they're so powerful that the dead can't reach them?
- We're ill advised to talk about them. Their hearts don't possess gentleness, but God surely has his plans for them. When God created the earth, he created rich and poor, and the rich he set to ruling, while the poor are near to his heart. Therefore let's not talk about those we don't love, but do what is our duty.
 - And what is your duty?
- To obey. That's the burden God has imposed on us. We must obey from the time we begin walking until the mass for the dead is read over us. That's the price we pay for salvation. Our fathers taught us that, and we shall teach it to our children. God wants there to be rich and poor, and the rich to rule, and how he will later judge those who misuse their power, we must let him decide. It's not good if we interfere with the Lord's judgment.
 - Always the gospel of bondage, don Pablo sighed.
- We must take life as the Lord gave it to us. And we have his promise of eternal salvation to stick to.



— Oh, this salvation has been sold to us rather dearly, don Pablo said. I'm afraid the rich also take first there and get the real salvation, while only the tatters are left for us. If God has given them everything on earth, why shouldn't he then also give them everything in his heaven. I don't think anything good is in store for us, amigo.

The bottle was empty, and Alberto crawled back into his bunk. Don Pablo went along with Juan Gomez up on deck, and they sat down in the prow and listened to the roar of the waves.

- Did you see him? Juan Gomez asked.
- No, I saw nothing, and there was nothing, don Pablo said. Whatever happens with the dead, they're not alive any more. But I gave the old fellow a night's rest, and if I hadn't driven the ghost into the ocean, it would have come every night, and the others would also see it. So great is the fear of death, but it's worse that we're afraid of life. Man is a jackrabbit, my good soldier Juan Gomez.
 - Didn't you hear something? Juan said and listened.

They were silent for a bit, but only the roaring of the sea and the creaking of the ship could be heard.

— I think it sounded as if someone were rattling in his throat, Juan said. But maybe it's all that stuff about ghosts.

He was silent and it gave him a start when a dark figure approached. But the man didn't come out into the prow to them; he quickly climbed down the ladder to the orlop deck.

— It's the Indian slave, don Pablo said. The proudest and loneliest man on board. They still haven't cowed him, but wait. Look at the Negro slaves; once they were also free and proud men. They lived in their jungles, where it smelled hot and aromatic, by a river bank they'll never see again. But the slave-hunters found them, and they were chained together and led down to the coast and sold. People who are judges of these matters can tell you exactly what each pound of flesh on their bodies is worth in cash. They are black like ebony and their muscles shift and turn like snakes under their skin, and they have white teeth like hungry animals, but look at their backs—they're striped with scars. The whip has spoken to their flesh and ex-

horted them to obedience. It has sung its song to them so they'll never forget it. The priests tell us about the soul, but it's the flesh that teaches us to think, and the whip is the best teacher. When pain drives its awl into us, where is the soul then? Where is our will, our pride, our manful desire? We believe we are ourselves, but our tormentors know better. We are nothing but a body of suffering, and with the whip they can create a new soul that obeys and doesn't desire anything but to carry out their will and avoid new pain. And one day this Indian, whose face shines so beautifully with obstinacy and anger, will yield to the pain and kiss the foot that kicks him.

- There are Indian tribes, Juan Gomez said, that carve the flesh out of their prisoners alive and eat it while the victims watch. But it's regarded as a disgrace if a prisoner screams when the flesh is cut off his bones. He sings a song, a song of death, in which he mocks the enemies who are about to devour him.
- Oh, if this proud custom became common, what hymn would ascend toward God, don Pablo said mournfully. A song of anger, which would drown out all hymns and sacred choruses and make heaven's pillars shake.