## 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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As soon as don Luis had obtained the money for the girl, he sat down at the card table. He had made a good deal and gotten rid of the slave and the child, who would only have been a millstone around his neck when he got home to Spain. In addition, he had gained the viceroy's good graces. After the purchase price had been paid out, don Pedro had made inquiries about the young officer's family connections and in parting dropped a hint that if he could be of any use to don Luis in the future, he would be glad to.

He was amused to see colonel Gonzales's surprised look when he put a little pile of gold pieces on the table before him. The old idiot presumably believed he'd been completely knocked out of action and wouldn't appear at the card table anymore during the voyage. But now it was a matter of playing smartly and carefully because all hell would break loose if this money also wound up in the damned colonel's pocket.

Don Luis ordered a decanter of wine and sat down comfortably in the chair. He wasn't in a hurry, but had an eternity of time. Calmly and deliberately, he wanted to win the others' money, take gold piece after gold piece from them, and one fine day the colonel would come and ask for a loan, and don Luis would reply:

— If you have no money, then you can't play either. And who cares about a bond from a retired old colonel. If it had been a matter of a caballero. . .

Don Luis followed the game attentively, and at last put down his stake and won. He raked in the winnings without batting an eye, and for a long time he played intelligently and appraised every chance painstakingly. The little pile of coins in front of him grew steadily, and don Luis ordered a new decanter of wine.

— I was lucky with that girl, he thought. I have no reason to regret that I took her along. I got more for her than I paid for her back then, and in the meantime I got pleasure from her.

He drank a lot of the sour wine, and his cheeks burned. It was suffocatingly hot in the state-room, which was packed tight



with men gambling and drinking. Once in a while the cool puff of night air swept in through the open door like a greeting from salvation. Don Luis increased his stakes, and was constantly lucky. Soon he had won just as much as he had lost during the whole voyage, and he looked smitten at the gold pile, which was constantly getting bigger. His eyes had a feverish luster, and Gonzales smiled at him:

— You've turned your horse, señor, he said. Now make sure you're sitting firmly in the saddle.

Don Luis looked at him in astonishment. The friendly tone surprised him. So the old boor could be polite when he felt like it. But maybe he had gotten scent of the fact that don Luis had had a rather long talk with the viceroy today. There were rumors about everything on board this damn ship.

- I've merely conquered your luck, he said. I took it by the collar and pulled it over to myself. And I'll firmly hold on to it and won't let go.
- Luck is like a snake, Gonzales blustered. There's no use holding tight—sooner or later it will cut one's hand. No, one has to fondle it and tame it so that it sticks to one voluntarily. But the evening is late—shall we raise the stakes?
- As far as I'm concerned, gladly, don Luis nodded. Maybe he could manage to double his pile of gold once more before the game ended. Seldom had he had such a fantastically spectacular run of good luck.

The stakes were doubled, and they played in complete silence. One heard only the men's heavy breathing and the sound of the coins tossed onto the table. But his luck had turned, and don Luis now lost game after game. He swore softly, while the colonel's red face shone contentedly.

The golden pile in front of don Luis dwindled away. When he had lost his last gold piece, he searched feverishly in his pockets, but they were hopelessly empty.

— Luck slashed your hand, señor, the colonel said, who as usual was sitting with a constantly growing heap of money in front of him. It's good that you have your inheritance awaiting you at home.

- In any event I won't be living on gambling in the taverns, don Luis said, flashing with anger. There are certain skills a nobleman should preferably be without.
  - What do you mean? the colonel jumped up in a rage.
- That you have a quite astonishing ability to tame snakes, don Luis said. And otherwise, I don't mean anything.
  - Are you completely certain of that?
  - Entirely certain, don Luis said nervously.
- Excellent, the colonel said. But if you wish to express some personal opinion, you are free to do so. I am completely at your disposal.
- You wholly misunderstand me, don Luis said. I don't entertain any wish other than to go to bed.
- That's surely also the smartest thing you could do, the colonel said, and don Luis got up, bowed stiffly, and left. Though he knew the game had been honest enough, he felt like hurling in the damned lout of a colonel's face that he was a thief and a cheat. Or perhaps he had one or another Indian amulet on him which gave him luck in the game. That kind of thing had been heard of before. In any event, he was a confounded old scoundrel who had systematically emptied don Luis's pockets from the first day, and if he didn't fence so devilishly well, he would have gotten to know the truth.
- Thanks for the game, gentlemen, don Luis said, and went out to his death.

The game went on for about an hour until the colonel got up.

- Enough for this evening, señores, he said. I'm prepared to offer you a return match tomorrow. He packed up the playing cards, stuck the money he had won loose in his pockets, and proceeded out of the mess without troubling himself about the meek objections. But a moment later he came back with an agitated and nonplussed expression in his wrinkled and sun-tanned face.
- Come! he shouted. Don Luis de Zuniga is lying out here with a sword through his chest.

The others ran out, and a short distance from the door they saw don Luis lying stretched out on the deck in the moonlight. His chest had been run through by a sword, his face was hideous-



ly distorted, and his open eyes stared vacantly up toward heaven. They lifted him up carefully and carried him into the mess, where they laid him on the large table. For a moment they stood silently and stared at the pale face, which such a short time ago had been young and alive and angry.

- It's a strange coincidence that you of all people should find him, colonel, the *oidor* said, who had been among the players in the evening. The exchange of words earlier didn't exactly suggest any heartfelt friendship.
- I was totally indifferent to the callous opportunist, Gonzales said snappishly. Moreover, I'm not in the habit of assassinating people with their own swords. He was assaulted, knocked to the floor, and impaled to the deck-planks like an insect on a nail.

The oidor nodded, don Luis's sheath was empty, and it was his own weapon that had pierced through his chest. Then he bent over the corpse and looked at it carefully.

— He wasn't knocked to the ground, but strangled, he said. There are strangulation marks around his throat. Presumably he was already dead when he got the sword through his heart. That also explains why we didn't hear anything, although it happened right outside here. The murderer strangled him, carefully laid his corpse down on the deck and ran him through to make quite certain that he was dead. I propose to you, señores, that you repair to your quarters, and colonel Gonzales and I will summon the ship's captain and together with him consider what ought to be done.

The startled gamblers went to their cabins, while the colonel and the *oidor* stayed behind with the dead man. The *oidor* sent the mess-man for the captain and turned to the colonel.

- I am of two minds about whether we ought to summon don Pedro, he said. On the one hand it is of course late at night, and on the other we run the risk that his excellency will take offense that he was not informed of such an incident. I truly don't know...
- I'd like to know what use he'll actually be to us, the colonel replied. But if his high position demands that he be imme-



diately informed of the fact that one of the passengers has been so foolish as to let himself be murdered, then better go to his cabin at once and ask him whether he has anything against our trying to find the murderer.

— I'll go to him personally, the oidor said.

The colonel was then alone with the dead man and, tired, sat down in a chair with his hands in his pants pockets and looked at the young face, which had stiffened into a grimace of surprise and horror. His hands played with the gold coins in his pockets while he thought about having come within a hair's breadth of challenging don Luis and killing him. The world wouldn't have lost much by this young good-for-nothing's death; there were so many of that kind of fellow that one could feed swine with them. And still he thought with pity about the dead man, whose life had been so brief and confused.

— Foolish rascal, he mumbled. But maybe you would have become a man at some point.

The captain came together with the mate José Nuñez and immediately afterwards the *oidor* returned with don Pedro, who had gotten out of his bunk and thrown on a nightgown. Don Pedro looked at the dead man for a moment; then he turned toward the captain and asked crossly:

— How could this kind of thing happen?

The stocky little Fleming didn't answer and the *oidor* spoke up:

- It was presumably murder with intent to rob, excellency, he said. The door was open the whole evening, and some person or other saw the unfortunate don Luis sitting with a significant sum of money before him on the table. Then he watched for his chance, and when don Luis comes out onto the deck, he hurls himself upon him and strangles him without suspecting that don Luis has gambled away every last shilling. So the murderer finds no money, and in bestial fury he rips don Luis's sword out of its sheath and nails his victim to the deck.
- That may have been the way it happened, don Pedro said. But it may also have been a revenge murder.
  - But is it also conceivable that the young man had enemies



on board? the oidor said doubtfully. And notice the way the murder was committed. No man of good family and decent upbringing would ever think of strangling his victim and afterwards mistreating the corpse. The brutality of the outrage itself suggests that it was committed by a crude sailor or some bandit among the common passengers on the orlop deck.

- I am inclined to grant that you are right, the viceroy said broodingly. And what do you intend to do, captain?
- We'll hold an inquiry in the crew cabin, captain van Laahr said. But it won't be easy to find out who was on deck tonight. The watches change, and no one notices whether a man leaves his bunk.
- And there's no one there's a special reason to suspect?

  The captain shook his head, and José Nuñez said with embarrassment:
- They're all good seamen, and I wouldn't believe it of any of them. But gold confuses the soul, and who really knows anybody? Not even the priest we confess to knows anything about us.
- And the passengers on the orlop deck? the *oidor* asked. Are there suspicious individuals among them?
- It's the same people as always, the mate said. Soldiers returning home, and fortune hunters for whom things went awry. No, nobody there could be singled out either.
- Probably there isn't a single one of them who wouldn't stick a knife in his own brother for a gold piece, the *oidor* said. If the murderer had gotten some booty, we could have searched the ship with a fine-toothed comb and found the money, but now we have to start from scratch. What use would it be to ask the collection of rabble who was on deck at night. The murderer in any event isn't going to report himself.
- I held the young man in high esteem, the viceroy said, and cast a sidelong glance at the corpse. He belonged to a respectable lineage, and his family will value being informed that everything humanly possible was done to find his murderer. I must ask you, captain, if you find anything at all that gives cause for suspicion, to submit it immediately to don Francisco,

the colonel, and me. In other words, we are taking charge of the investigation and will later make a report to don Luis's survivors. According to what he told me this afternoon, his mother's uncle is a cardinal bishop and his father's brother a government minister.

- Foolish rascal, the colonel thought, and shook his head. To the very end you were full of empty boasting and lies. It wouldn't surprise me if you were the son of a swineherd.
- You wanted to say something, colonel Gonzales? the viceroy said.
- No, the colonel said. I didn't know anything about the unfortunate young man. But he was of course without doubt a promising young man, and I'm certain that it will alleviate his survivors' grief to learn that your excellency took personal charge of the investigation.
- I bought an Indian girl from him this afternoon, a slave, whom I intend to use as a gift, don Pedro said. Surely it is not conceivable that she did it—in anger over his having relieved himself of her. To be sure, she made a very apathetic impression, but even an Indian girl can feel jealousy.
- Surely we can disregard that, the *oidor* said. A slender girl doesn't have the strength to strangle a strong young man like don Luis with her bare hands. The murderer was a strong limber man, and for the time being I think the smartest thing for us to do is to work from the theory of murder with intent to rob.

They stood for a bit in silence and looked at don Luis, whose features had already taken on death's remoteness, as if the soul had forgotten life and all its toil and vanity. Something lonely and eerie hovered over this dead body with its distorted face, which death without warning had put its cat's claw in, and at the same time something gripping and sorrowful. The strong young body lay so useless and unusable on the table planks, one hand still clenched in a death cramp, and the eyes staring vacantly up into the lantern, while the head moved quite slightly every time the ship pitched in the ocean. As if don Luis was shaking his head and denying that he no longer existed.

— Death is strange, the oidor said softly. Only a moment,



and we have gone over into another form of existence whose nature we don't comprehend. I wonder what don Luis's soul looks like. How can one imagine it other than in connection with this arrogant young face, which shone with youth's impure lust for life? How his soul must feel cold and freezing without its body, like a chicken that has come out of the egg on an all too cold winter day. How impotent man is, and at the same time so mighty that he can kill.

- But that power belongs only to the authorities, whom God has given the sword of justice, don Pedro said, a bit reprovingly.
- Nevertheless someone or other has arrogated to himself the power to dispatch don Luis's soul into eternity from its snug shelter, excellency, the *oidor* said. And who knows whether his soul was ready to fly, and whether it will reach its goal, which is said to be that of all souls, or whether it is hopelessly flapping around and in the end must perish of thirst and fatigue on the mighty sea. I'm afraid our souls are very small and very weak, and that at times it can be very hard for the Lord and his cherubs to keep an eye on them in eternity's infinite space.
- That is why, after all, we have the church's means of grace and its intercession, don Pedro said. But, for the rest, it hardly pays to discuss theology. A shameful outrage has been perpetrated here. A promising favorite of noble Spanish blood has been murdered in the most hideous manner, and it is our duty to make sure the guilty person is found and duly punished.
- As always, I must admire your excellency's uncommon ability to find the kernel of a matter where less trained brains are all too easily lost in unnecessary speculations, the *oidor* said with a polite bow. And still one can't help asking oneself whether it will be of any particular help to don Luis's soul for the murderer to be caught and punished.
- It is late, don Pedro said and looked with a little concealed shudder at the silent figure with its calmly rocking pale head on the cabin table. We shall go to bed now and leave it to the captain and mate to undertake what is necessary with regard to this unfortunate's soulless body.

The oidor and the colonel accompanied the viceroy to his



cabin and wished him restful sleep. They walked together a few times back and forth on deck and stood at the railing and looked out across the moonlit sea. Neither felt like going to bed immediately.

- A glass of *taatsch*? the colonel asked. I have a bottle in my cabin.
  - Not a bad idea at all, the oidor said.
- He was a foolish boy, the colonel said. And you're right, his soul was very small, if he had one at all. Altogether, you're right, our souls are very small and can't accomplish much. And now I'll go get the bottle and a couple of glasses.