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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She had sat alone for a long time and stared out into the night while her thoughts struggled in her mind. She clenched her fists in anger when she thought about a slave's having defied her as no other man had dared, and she felt a melancholy which was about to make her cry until she remembered his back bloodied under the whip's lashes. She could still hear his song with its savage and indomitable pride and hatred, and she realized that today she had experienced something she had never known before. She had loved men and learned to have contempt for them, she had given birth to her children and seen them die as infants, and she had hardened her heart against grief and suffering until she believed that nothing could befall her. She had surrounded herself with an armor of wilful power and she had subjugated her own world to herself, and now she didn't know whether she felt like a woman or like a mother to a half-savage Indian. Whether she most felt like killing him in an embrace or laying his head to rest at her breast as if he were a child who merely needed to sleep. She heard the ocean roar against the side of the ship and the tramp of the sailors' feet, and it seemed to her remote and unreal. Only one thing existed—the scorching pain in her own heart.

She got up and stamped impatiently as if an enemy were standing in front of her. Something had to happen that could make her forget the pain and despair and give her back her proud contempt for people and life.

— I can have him killed, she thought. He's mine, and I rule over his life. Or I can throw myself at his feet and beg him to forgive not just what I've done to him, but everything I've lived and thought. I can treat him like an obstinate animal, which is punished by death, or like a young god I beg for mercy. I don't know what he is, and I don't know anything about myself. Am I rich and mighty like a queen, or am I merely a beggar who begs for a miserable alms and is rejected with scorn?

She determined she would see him and talk to him, although she didn't know what she had to say. And she was seized by a torpid tranquility as she went down the ladder to the orlop deck. She didn't notice the heavy close air, she didn't see the sailors staring in surprise at the noblewoman.

- Pancuiaco, my Indian, is he here? she asked out into the room, and when no one answered, she shouted angrily:
- I'm inquiring about my slave. Tell me where he's sleeping.

Old Alberto slowly got up from his bunk, where he had flung himself with all his clothes on after his watch. He went over to her, bowed awkwardly and growled:

- He was sleeping in there, gracious señora. Inside the partition with the poor passengers.
- You say slept—is he not there any more? she asked and suddenly felt so dizzy that she had to lean against the long, dirty table.
- No, he's not there, Alberto said, looking severely at her. He wasn't there when they came to get him a little while ago.
 - Who came to get him?
- The skipper and a couple of cannoneers. They didn't find him in the bunk where he was supposed to be, and they searched for him in all the nooks and crannies. They thought he had hidden, and maybe he has. In a place where only God can find him.
 - You mean he's dead? she screamed.
- I mean he's been killed, Alberto said. But nobody can kill the soul. If one whips a horse till it jumps into the abyss, is that then its own fault? And if one tortures a human being till, being crazed, he seeks his death, did he take his own life or is it merciful God who has shown the way to peace? You're smart, señora, and I'm only an ignorant seaman, with gross sins on his conscience to boot. You can explain to me how he who forces another to take his own life is judged, gracious señora.

For a moment she felt as if the room with all the wild faces and curiously staring eyes were wheeling round and round. Then she pulled herself together, her figure straightened itself up, and she forced herself to be completely calm.

- Ask your father-confessor, she said. I didn't come here



to discuss questions of conscience occasioned by an insubordinate Indian.

- The conscience will awake one day if the Lord will, Alberto said. All of us will be held accountable one day if we dare believe the Lord's own word. Even those who rule over people have their consciences, gracious señora.
- Are you out of your mind—do you dare preach to *me!* Do you want to tell me how I should treat my own slave? Have you gotten yourself drunk, or have you escaped from a madhouse, foolish old man?

She looked angrily at Alberto, and he tried to meet her gaze, but before long he had to lower his eyes. Oh, the mighty could commit any act of injustice, and who was allowed to reproach them? Their hearts were hard and wicked, but God had given them power and set them to ruling over the earth and its people. The Lord alone could call them to account; He alone could punish this arrogant woman who forced others to lower their eyes because her power was from God, even if she used it for evil. Alberto felt the same impotence as when the mulatto's ghost wouldn't retreat, and he mumbled humbly:

— Your slave is gone, gracious señora. That's all we know. Maybe he jumped overboard. What doesn't the soul do in its torment? God will judge us all.

The sailors stared at her as she hurried through the dirty stuffy room and climbed up the ladder. She was beautiful and full-blooded, but for them she wasn't a woman. They hated her, as they hated all the rich and mighty people who slept securely in their cabins while they themselves worked hard, but they dared not show their hatred. A word might have terrible consequences, a look might mean ruin.

- You claim you slept with a harpy—then why did you become so afraid of her, old man? one of the sailors shouted from his bunk.
- Don't talk about things you don't understand, Alberto said obscurely. God will judge her, but it's his will that we be subservient. Stick to the scripture and yield to evil when it comes from God. Everyone has his own sins to repent and his



trials to endure. Maybe she'll burn in purgatory while the rest of us will be reposing in Abraham's bosom. Don't forget it's God who rules.

Doña Inez groped her way across the deck in the dark. The moon was hidden behind clouds, and only a couple of lanterns shone sleepily. Finally she found the captain's cabin and opened the door. She stood for a while and breathed heavily while the four men, silent and bewildered, looked at her pale face.

- Where is my slave? she finally asked.
- Won't you sit down, doña Inez, the viceroy said. Captain van Laahr was just on his way to ask you to come, although we found it extraordinarily deplorable to disturb you at this time of night. It is precisely this Indian, your slave, it is all about.
 - Where is he?
- The trouble is that we do not know, señora. But let me submit the whole matter to you. An old soldier approached captain van Laahr and informed him that he knew who don Luis's murderer was. We interrogated the man, and everything points to the Indian's having killed the young officer, for whom I have the most profound sympathy despite certain flaws in his character.
 - But in heaven's name, why did he do it?
- The Indian was of course wild and insubordinate—you yourself know that best, gracious señora. You had to have him whipped. It appears to be an act of revenge, something to do with an Indian slave woman whom don Luis disposed of—by the way, to me. According to the information we have gotten, the girl had a child whom don Luis had drowned in order to get her sold. That fired up the Indian, and he attacked don Luis, as he was coming out of the card-party, strangled him and ran him through his chest with a sword.
- But where is he? doña Inez shouted. What business of mine is don Luis's death? Where is the slave?
- Doubtless one must assume that one way or another he got news that his crime had been discovered and jumped overboard. The captain has looked for him but he's nowhere to be found.

- I don't believe he's dead! I don't believe it! He was brave, he would never take his own life for fear of punishment. Why, you heard how he sang while he was being whipped, how he mocked his own suffering. He must have hidden some place or other like a wounded animal. Captain, I demand that you find him; a search must be set in motion at once.
- But is it not best if he is dead? the viceroy said. After all, a terrible punishment awaits him. He murdered a white man, and you know what that means, gracious señora.
- Of what importance was that absurd hothead don Luis? doña Inez said. I'm certain the Indian didn't do it. What soldier did you talk to? Of course an old scoundrel who merely wanted to earn a reward. And he got one, didn't he? But I'll procure ten witnesses who will swear they were in the company of the Indian at the time don Luis met his death. He's my slave, and I have the right to conduct his defense, and I'd like to see the one who will dare lay hands on my property. By all the saints, señores, I, too, know how to act toward my enemies!

She had gained color in her cheeks, and her eyes flashed. A wild splendor attended this large, fully mature woman whose anger made her forget her grief and anxiety. She was transformed into a dangerous predator whose path humans shouldn't cross, a lioness who whips the sand with her tail before it jumps and brings death with her terrible claw.

The men didn't dare look at one another, but the *oidor* said softly:

- What was it you wanted to say, colonel Gonzales?
- Nothing, the colonel said, his voice a bit hoarse.
- Before you were urging a series of principled observations, and perhaps it would interest doña Inez to hear them.
- Let us keep to the subject, the viceroy said. I'm compelled to admit that doña Inez is right. The testimony the veteran gave must naturally be tested more closely; of course, it cannot be denied that he was very eager to get paid for informing. One also ought to pay attention to the two other persons he informed on. Perhaps in the final analysis the theory of robbery-murder is the most likely. And besides, we cannot regard it as wholly pre-



cluded that the old scoundrel himself murdered don Luis and is now trying to throw the guilt onto the Indian slave.

- A new and highly interesting theory, the *oidor* said. And of course the most important thing at all events is to make an example. Out of regard for discipline—wasn't that what you meant, colonel?
- Yes, precisely, the colonel said. At all events the harshest possible punishment must take place.
- All true statesmanship consists of compromises, and I believe we are about to find the path to a very happy compromise, the *oidor* said. Juridically, of course, the point is merely that someone or other is broken on the wheel in order to frighten and admonish, and from the point of view of general deterrence it's rather a subordinate matter who that is.
- Completely correct, colonel Gonzales nodded. It's necessary to strike hard, to strike really hard. Our entire civilizing work depends on it.
- But the Indian has to be found, doña Inez said. He must be found, and that must happen yet tonight. He's lying sick and suffering some place or other, and maybe he'll die because no one is taking care of his wounds. He is to be brought up to my cabin—I will take care of him myself.
- Listen, this is about to develop into a public scandal, the *oidor* whispered to the viceroy. Can't you intervene and reason with her?
- No, God forbid, don Pedro mumbled. What is it, van Laahr?

The captain had opened the door and listened, strained. And now the others heard a dull noise like blows of an ax against a tree trunk. It came quite regularly, and for every blow, it was as if the ship trembled with pain.

— All hell's broken loose, the captain said, and lurched out into the dark.