

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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The soldier Juan Gomez's head was heavy from drinking and the heat when he got up from his empty glass in the tavern to go on board. His gaunt face with its suntanned skin and drooping, gray mustache remained impassive as he flung the money on the counter for the last time.

It was in the middle of the hot afternoon, and the sun sparkled from the sky. A broiling brimstone-colored haze lay over the land. The sunlight shone like a flash of fire from the white-caulked walls, and the apple-green and blue shutters were shut in front of the windows. The palms in front of the inquisition building on the square cast a shadow. It was like a cool sea in the noon heat.

In the broad warehouses in Veracruz's harbor square all the doors and hatches were wide open. Negroes hauled cases and boxes down to the lighters, which ferried the freight out to the San Salvador. Once in a while an overseer jumped into the line and with his leather whip thrashed the black bodies, which were shiny with sweat.

The bells of The Sacred Heart Church began to chime—worship services were being held for the San Salvador's successful voyage. A procession moved slowly across the harbor square and the work stopped. While the priests in white and violet attire and the altar boys with swinging censers passed by, the Negroes bent in the dust, and the overseers knelt with their hands folded over their whips. The sweet odor of the incense mingled with the rotten stench of seaweed from the beach. A heavily ornamented gilt painting of the Madonna was respectfully lifted down into a pram and with its procession of priests and choir-boys rowed out to the ship, which pitched gently at anchor.

Juan Gomez ran straight into the arms of his old comrade, the overseer Pablillo. He was heavy and red-blazed with a heaving belly as round as a ball and an iron-bound wooden leg, which resounded on the sun-baked earth. He slapped Juan heartily with his whip.

— Are you there, you son of a bull, he shouted. Has the day

come? The great day of your stupidity?

— The day has come, Juan said. And the hour too.

— Nobody's gone on board yet, Pablillo said. She doesn't weigh anchor until the tide turns, and it's all too early. Come, you son of a bull, I have a keg sitting in the shade.

He raised the whip, bolted in long hops over to the line of slaves, and laid a blow on a slave's back.

— Speed it up, you heathen dogs, or I'll whip the living day-lights out of you. Move it or by the Madonna's nipples I'll flay your skin off.

The line turned faster than a snake trying to escape. One heard the slaves' heavy moaning and the Negro Pablillo had hit shrieking with pain.

They're lazy to the very bottom of their black souls, Pablillo said. If you look away for a second, the work stops. But let's go, little brother, I've stashed a keg to bid you farewell.

Pablillo had hidden the wine keg behind the warehouse. They sat down on the ground under a palm tree—here in the shade it felt as if in a well of coolness. Pablillo took the first swig from the leather keg and handed it over to his friend. Juan put his head back and took a deep swig.

— You're stupid, Pablillo said, looking at him earnestly. Why are you going home? What's there for you to do there? You think they're going to receive you like a nobleman? No, in a few months you'll smarten up and attest to the truth of my words.

— Maybe I'll buy a vineyard, Juan replied.

— To toil and drudge like a peasant and cultivate wine you can't even afford to drink yourself. You'll take a young wife into bed and in ten years she'll be a shrewish sow who'll cheat on you with every tramp who comes along. Isn't the land here good enough for us? Back home they toil harder than mules, and get no thanks for it. Here we're the ones who crack the whip, and others have to do the dirty work.

— I think I'll buy myself a vineyard, Juan Gomez said and looked coolly at his gnarled hands with their broad, square nails. One can sit down on the bench in the inn next to the *alcalde*. I

can get a good piece of property, and there'll still be money left over.

— And still you're nothing but a beggar. You've lived our life and aren't a peasant any more. I'll be damned if I ever travel home.

Pablillo took a deep swig from the keg and lay down comfortably while he talked on.

— What were we when we came here thirty years ago, half-dead from seasickness and scurvy? A flock of damn greenhorns who had just let go of the nipple. We were dumb as snot, and they could do anything they wanted with us. They hauled us through wilderness and deserts, over mountains and damned plains, and we dropped dead like flies. They made us believe that if we just starved and thirsted long enough, in the end we'd get more gold than we could haul. Of course, their officers got their *repartimientos*, large estates with Indian slaves, and we got a bare ass. The big people have the big mouths, and we have only a little mouth, and most of us got it full of dirt.

— You're right, Juan said. For most of us it wasn't a good country. And that's why I'm going home.

— You're as dumb as the day you got here, little brother, Pablillo said. What are we supposed to do here on earth if we don't learn from our mistakes? There are two kinds of people, those over there—he got half up and pointed to the slaves with the whip—and those who own them. They're made to be slaves, to drudge away, till one fine day the devil comes to fetch them. They're made to starve and be beaten, they have an immortal soul, you say, but I say no, where's it supposed to be? They're flesh and nothing but flesh, and when they die, they fly right to hell, where the devil perhaps can use them for something or other. There are two kinds of people, I'll tell you once again, those who own everything and those who are in debt right to the marrow of their bones, and you yourself have to choose where you want to belong. Drink the wine, you son of a bull.

— When I buy my farm, I'll own it, and nobody will have any say over me, Juan said calmly. And I have my belt full, gold all around my waist.

— And you'll take a young woman into your bed, you goat, and get a house full of lousy kids. And the harvest fails, or you get sick, and your money was used up long ago. You try to scrape by, but one fine day you have to borrow money, and then the game has begun. Before you know what hit you, you've become a poor wretch who has to toil for others, and you yourself eat moldy bread and drink sour wine, and the *alcalde* asks you to beat it if you sit down next to him in the inn with lice crawling on you. No, look at me. I'm a man who's served a long time, who has lost a leg, but gotten a good mind instead, and I have my connections on the right side. I expect to become harbor bailiff when old Rodrigo kicks the bucket. It's a good position and doesn't require much work. But if I had both legs and weren't so fat, I'd prefer to be a *calpixqui* on an estate. Son, why don't you become *calpixqui* instead of going home and spending your old age rooting around in sheep dung?

Juan shrugged his shoulders without answering, and Pablillo continued:

— What's a poor wine-grower compared to a *calpixqui*, indeed, what's a famished grandee compared to him? No more than a flea you can snap between your nails. He doesn't own the estate, but the owner is far away, and he who is closest is master. It must be a helluvan idiot of a *calpixqui* who doesn't know how to administer a *repartimiento* so he gets his ample share. And in extras he has everything his heart can desire. If he sees a fat hen, it ends up in his pot. If he feels like having a woman, he takes her. It's his right, and if the Indians don't know it, he can quickly teach them. Have you ever thought about what rules the world, you son of a mad bull?

Juan shook his head.

— It's the whip. It's the whip that keeps everything going. What do you think they'd get out of the whole deal if they didn't know how to crack it? What do you think would become of the grandees, bishops, cardinals, yes even the king himself, if people like me didn't know how to get the most pain out of an ox-hide whip? Think a bit about things, son. The monks say we've conquered the country to teach the Indians the true faith and to save

their souls. But do I slaughter a hen perhaps to save its soul, or do I preach to the ox I turn on the spit? No, I eat the ox with a hearty appetite and without the slightest thought of its immortal soul, and I crack the whip simply because it's needed. I crack the whip, and it's the whip that governs. Look at the blacks over there. If I say to one of them: go, you black bastard, and beat your own brother to death because I can't stand his face, he'll obey. He knows that otherwise I'll whip him till his guts gush out of his black belly. God has the kingdom, the power, and the glory in heaven, they preach, but here it's people like us who have the power if we ourselves want to have it. What's a hand without a knife? You and I have been knives, and I want to remain being a knife.

— Your wine is strong, Juan Gomez said.

— Strong and good, you won't get any better in Castille, Pablillo nodded.

Out from the San Salvador one heard the choirboys' high, silver-clear voices, while the picture of the Madonna was being carried from fore to aft and the deck and the masts sprinkled with holy water. The last load was stowed, and the Negro slaves sat tired by the warehouse walls in a narrow strip of shade. It smelled of heat, sweat, rotten seaweed and dust deep down in the lungs. But in the air was a hint of evening cooling, which in a bit would ripple in over the coast out from the lazily foaming surf.

The passengers began to come, on foot or in sedan chairs, high officials, clerics, estate owners, officers, and merchants. And little by little the wharf was filled to overflowing with people who came to say farewell to those who were to go on the long voyage, and curious people who wanted to see the San Salvador weigh anchor. Right near where Juan Gomez and Pablillo were sitting four Negroes came across the harbor square's reddish-yellow encrusted earth with a sedan chair in tow. Behind the white curtains a little bald-headed man sat on soft pillows in the tropical heat. His face protruded like an inquisitive monkey's, yellow and bony with a thin beard, resembling withered grass. His eyes lay deep in his cranium, and his hand, which hung flaccid out over the sedan chair with horny, bluish-black

nails, resembled the claw on a dead bird.

— It's don Guilemo, Pablillo said, and instinctively whispered. They say he's a hundred years old if he isn't even older. Who knows? Satan holds his hand over him. Last week he condemned a mestizo because he drunkenly went by a procession without taking his hat off, and now he's sitting and waiting to be roasted. But don Guilemo is engaged in sorcery with the native magicians and everybody knows it, but nobody does anything to him. So you see yourself it's a matter of choosing where you want to belong. Think about it, son, now we have to empty the keg before you go on board.

Pablillo shook himself grudgingly as if compelled to say something he actually didn't feel like saying.

— This is a good country, he said. My father was the executioner's helper in Córdoba. He knew his trade, people were never hanged or decapitated, burned or broken on the wheel as well or as punctually as when he took care of it. But he had his own mug in the inn, and people moved out of the way when he went to mass. And strangers seldom came to our house. But although he was the ablest of the executioner's helpers, he never became executioner when the old man died. They chose another who had connections—see, that's the way it went. I ran away from home when I was twelve and starved and had a helluva time. It was a damned life, but here I am, white man and *hidalgo*. I have to bow to some people, but most have to bow to me. I don't want to return home to sit at the end of the table and drink the wine others have spat in. If somebody exasperates me, I use the whip, and it sprouts bloody streaks. Maybe it's not on the back I hate, but on somebody else's back. But the anger is quenched in me, and I can enjoy life again.

—You can also get tired of being a knife, Juan said. And a hand can be used for something else than wielding a knife. I'm not young, and I yearn for peace and quiet. I'll get married and have children, and when you come home some time, you'll taste my wine.

— The heart has two halves, Pablillo said. The one yearns, the other wants to stay. And the one wants good, the other evil.

Maybe my father shed tears in his soul when he whipped a thief at the whipping post. Maybe he was taking revenge for all the injuries that had been inflicted on him. Who knows? Holy Madonna, who knows another human being? But others' weakness makes us strong, and our weakness gives others strength. Which is it better to be, strong or weak?

— I don't know anything about that, Juan said. My desire isn't to feel my own strength or to sense how hard I can crack a whip. I came here because I was poor just like you. They paid me my wages to march through the country and keep conquering new land and new cities, to get them more goods. I don't know whether they had a right to it. I got my wages. I did what they demanded of me. Now the time has come when I want to live my own life.

— A lousy peasant's life, Pablillo objected.

— Maybe some of my family are still alive. We were many brothers and sisters, and we were very poor.

— And now you want to sire children into the same poverty. I wonder how many children you have here.

— How can I know that?

— The tree casts its fruit and doesn't know where it sprouts, Pablillo said. This country is a gift of god to people like us, and you want to reject it. I'll donate a candle for you, little brother, for your sin is great. In fact, maybe I'll have a mass read for your soul. But by all the saints I'll come to miss you for all the years we've known each other. And what kind of people are they sending over here these days? They come with noble names as long as hunger years and with bottomless pockets they want filled before the next ship sails back.

A lean boy with bluish-black hair came running, snatched Pablillo's ox-hide whip and darted over to a Negro, who had gone and stood near the warehouse to relieve himself. With his thin muscular arms he cracked the whip, while his boyish voice resounded:

— You swine, you son of a black whore. You think you can stand there where people can see you? And in a little while the procession is going to pass by. You intend to piss right in the

Madonna's face? I'll whip you till your skin is hanging in shreds, you swine, you black dog.

The slave rushed off with the boy after him, and Pablillo's face sparkled with delight.

— That rascal's got guts, he said. He's got the knack—see how well he places the blows—they strike just where they hurt most. He knows what a whip's for.

— The boy gives you satisfaction, Juan said. He resembles you.

— More my father, Pablillo smiled. He had it in his fingers—I don't. I can whip all right so they fall down on the ground and give up the ghost, these devil's animals, but it's not good, little brother, because a black devil is worth money. But the rascal can play with them, the way my father could, like a cat with a mouse. He torments them half to death, but no more than that. Give the rascal a whip, and he can manage a whole slave gang. And I have four of that kind at home in the hut. They're half-bloods, but it's my blood that rules.

— Now it's time to go on board, Juan said. Farewell, Pablillo, and thanks for good and bad days.

They embraced, and Pablillo had tears in his eyes.

— My son, you damn bull, you're the last of the old ones, he complained. It's going to get damned dreary here when you're gone. Nobody to talk to about the past. Now one can sit alone with one's wine in the inn because the young people have their own lives to live. Sometimes one feels like asking the devil to take the whole thing, wife and children and house and slaves, but cheer up. Some time I'll visit you in your wretchedness in Spain and donate a cask of wine for you and buy you a beautiful girl, you goat.

— So let's look forward to seeing each other again, and blessed be your future, Juan said and walked down to the pram, which was waiting to take the last passengers aboard. He stood and looked in toward land, while the pram ferried out to the San Salvador. He had drunk much wine that day, said farewell to his few friends, and now was on his way. In his hand he had a parcel, and around his waist inside his jacket he was wearing a

strong leather belt, which was full of heavy gold pieces. That was for thirty years' sweat and toil in the new country.

He didn't notice the other passengers on the boat. He stood and stared in toward the sun-scorched land behind the town with its churches and patrician houses, its miserable Indian huts, gambling houses, convents, whorehouses, and merchants' stalls, and in his sluggish, hazy brain a series of confused images formed. A hard life, he mumbled, a damned hard life, and for what pleasure?

In thirty sun-scorched years he had eaten soldiers' bread. He had marched through jungles, where you gasped for breath in the hot, damp vapor and chopped your way through the tough garlands of creepers with machete in hand. He had wandered through deserts where the only vegetation was cactus plants with yellow and flaming-red flowers. He had seen the moon shine over valleys where silver-white streams twisted their way through bamboo woods so green your eyes didn't want to believe it. He had conquered new lands and towns, mines, plantations, and mighty estates. He had drunk *ouieo*, the intoxicating beer of cassava meal, poured himself full of palm-wine, enjoyed the brown women, and confessed his sins like a Christian.

A joyless life, he thought. A paltry life. I wonder how many people I've killed. Once I had a count on that. What's a life all told worth today?

He brooded a bit about that and said to himself that in any case the price of human life in this new country was not high. And nevertheless life grew, like the wilderness in the hot swamp land, which put down roots and unfolded, it twisted like green liana around withered trunks; everywhere it teemed with life, with poisonous snakes, which hissed in the grass, with graceful gazelles and motley birds. It was a life that grew hectically and poisonously and breathed death and putrefaction.

Then he caught sight of Pablillo standing in the harbor square and cracking the whip goodbye. He raised both arms and waved back.