

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 San Salvador was a three-masted galleon of five hundred tons with a crew of ninety-two men, Spanish and Portuguese sailors and Negro slaves and about a dozen Spanish cannoneers.

The ship was owned by a shipping company in Barcelona and was regularly engaged in the new world trade. It was a fast-sailing gold transport ship, strong and well built. It had a dozen small passenger cabins, which could hold twenty prominent passengers, but on this voyage forty passengers were squeezed together in them. Moreover, reasons of etiquette had necessitated giving three of them private cabins: the viceroy don Pedro de Carajaval, the inquisitor don Jesus, and doña Inez Escobedo.

Don Pedro was viceroy in one of the western states and had received an official summons to put in an appearance at court. He was a small, gaunt man with small, cold coal-black eyes and a yellowish, immovable face. An invitation to the court was synonymous with an order, and despite his liver disease don Pedro had immediately embarked on the long voyage with his retinue of functionaries and officers. It was part of good form to bring gifts along to the royal house and the most influential courtiers, and don Pedro during his entire tenure in office collected precious things in order to be able to make his appearance with splendor appropriate to his station when he was sent for one day. When the invitation finally came, he imposed on the Indians in his provinces a head tax and had it collected with an iron hand, half for the crown, half for himself, and a little bit of life came into his sad face when he thought about the recognition he would receive at the very highest level for the taxes he brought along.

His boxes with gold and silver bars, with expensive gold ornaments and precious stones, were carried on the backs of mules and slaves over mountains and through the jungle, in the sun, which made the earth burn under the soles of their feet, and in the high mountains' thin air, which made every burden twice as heavy. If a mule stumbled, the cases were loaded onto the Indians they fetched from the closest village, and many had fallen

on the way and were left behind in the mountains when the whip was unable to get them on their feet. Besides the gifts for the court, he brought along his whole private fortune in heavy gold bars, and it was his hope that the king would give him an office at home which corresponded to his rank and deserts. He had enough gold—he wanted to be one of Spain's richest men. Don Pedro had spent a generation building the foundation for the existence he now wanted to enjoy.

Don Pedro and his retinue were escorted on board by the governor accompanied by displays of military honors, while don Jesus had stolen on board without anyone's having taken notice and immediately locked the door to his cabin. Doña Inez was not accompanied by any large retinue either. She had only a chambermaid along and an Indian slave, whom the aging mate José Nuñez showed down to the orlop deck, where the ordinary passengers put on board with the crew.

— Make sure that he gets the best food here on board, doña Inez said. I bought him to use as a gift. I don't want to have him wind up looking totally wretched on the voyage.

And with the chambermaid in tow she went to arrange things in her cabin.

The San Salvador pitched while dragging its anchors in the evening breeze as the last passengers boarded. The deck was swarming with people, and José Nuñez looked at them pensively, while they found the places they belonged. Some in the fashionable cabins, others on the orlop deck, which lay right over the cargo hold and under the water line, so there was no more air than could escape down through the cabin stairwell.

José Nuñez had seen many people travel out and about as many return home. Ship after ship had made the dangerous voyage across the ocean, heavily laden with silver and gold from Peru, Colombia, Ecuador, and Mexico. And thousands of young adventurers had sailed toward the west lured by the old tales of silver temples where all four walls were covered with gold plates from the floor to the roof and where over the altar blazed a mighty sun of gold with rays like fire of emeralds and precious stones. Who had not heard with a palpitating heart of Manico

Serra de Leguizano, who got the sun-painting in Cuzco as booty and gambled it away in one night?

If the gold plates had existed, they weren't there any more, and if the Indians had hidden their gold, they also knew how to guard it. Not just anybody got hold of it, and as a rule the stupid adventurers from Spain returned home empty-handed. José Nuñez cautiously looked around and took a bite of the tobacco plant he had secretly become addicted to chewing. After all, he had known someone, a reprobate Franciscan, Huanuco, who asserted that he had seen the Indians' secret treasure. He was a gambler and drunkard, but the Indians loved him. Lord knows why. One night he was playing cards at a bordello and was cleaned out down to his shirt. He rushed home and fetched some money that he had lying around and that belonged to the church. He also lost that, and when the last penny had gone into the others' pockets, he knocked his head against the floor in his cell and uttered a shriek of despair mixed with burning prayers. He noticed a hand touch his shoulder—it was one of his Indian parish children.

— Don't cry, pious father, the Indian said. We'll give you more gold than you can use.

And the next night the Indians led the monk with his eyes blindfolded on a long, laborious route to a rocky cave. Here they took the blindfold from his eyes, and by the glimmering of the torch he saw the gold lying in heaps.

— Take as much as you can carry, the Indians said, and Huanuco took his cowl off, filled it like a sack with gold and put it on his neck. Once in a while he had to rest, and each time he loosened a bead in his rosary and let it fall to the ground. Maybe then he'd be able to find his way to the cave again. But the next morning an Indian put all the beads in front of him in his cell.

— You lost them in the night, pious father, he said gently.

Huanuco died of drink, and maybe his story was pure invention, for truth is a rare commodity, José knew. Now on this trip he had heard of a young Indian girl who had fallen in love with a Spaniard and promised him a gold treasure if he'd be true to her. One morning the two of them were found in bed with

their throats slit. The girl's parents and siblings were jailed, but no one succeeded in squeezing out of them where the gold was hidden. Maybe they didn't know. Maybe they preferred to die rather than give the king what was his. They were buried in unconsecrated ground.

José stood peacefully and chewed his tobacco, enjoying the last minutes until the anchor was to be hoisted and the sails set. He had nothing to do with the elite passengers—he was just a simple seaman and not some courtier. They walked around there and resembled turkey-cocks, the rich and elite gentlemen, but how much were they worth in a brisk breeze, not to mention a real hurricane? Not so terribly much, according to his experience. But he had seen the heavy boxes, cases, and barrels being loaded, and the good ship San Salvador had never held more gold.

Oh, if one just had a right to a couple of handfuls of it as wages for all those many and dangerous voyages. It seemed to him suddenly he could sense the warm smell of wood-smoke and garlic, which he knew so well at home from his own room, even though he sat in it only at half-yearly intervals. Just a few handfuls, and he could stop working, sit with the fishermen and skippers down by the dock in the evening or go out in his boat and catch a couple of fish, which his wife would grill in oil and prepare with blue olives and pepper.

— But it's their gold and not mine, he thought. Who gave them the right to it, I don't know, but it's not mine. I should have been smarter—then I'd surely also have gotten my share. *She's* smart—maybe she's the richest of them all.

He saw doña Inez go over to the railing and look out over the town, whose church bells were now ringing for evening mass. None of the other passengers dared approach her. They all knew her name and knew that she was an unusual woman. She came from a distinguished family, had been married twice, the last time to a relative of the duke of Alba, and in her mid-thirties had become a widow for the second time. She had good connections at the court and could easily have entered into a new and rich marriage, but doña Inez didn't have the slightest desire to get

married again. She managed her large fortune herself, which she had doubled a couple of times since she herself had gotten control over it.

Doña Inez had been on a business trip to the new empire to attend to her significant economic interests over here. She didn't search for Indian treasures and didn't have the least desire to finance adventurers who set out to find gold in El Dorado. Her attitude was businesslike, cold and sober, without the slightest sense for romance. She had invested a part of her capital in mines and operating plantations in the western countries, and her properties were exploited with systematic efficiency. She had acquired a concession on large, previously unoccupied stretches of land and had personally defrayed the expenses for a military expedition, which pacified the land by burning down the Indians' villages and forcing them to pay rents on their land.

She had a gold mine, which threw off an excellent profit, and had set up large sugar plantations, which were already promising enterprises. She ruled over an army of slaves, functionaries, and overseers, which could easily stand comparison with the population of a principality in Europe. She had large estates at home, olive groves, vineyards, huge flocks of sheep, and the bulls from her stalls were in demand at every bullfight in Spain. She owned a couple of streets with rental houses in Madrid and a silk weaving manufactory near Valencia, had a share in a lead mine, and was the main shareholder in the shipping company that owned the San Salvador and a fleet of other overseas ships, and to his annoyance the viceroy had to make do with the ship's next-best cabin. The best was assigned to doña Inez, and she viewed it as a matter of course.

Doña Inez stood and looked out over the town, but her thoughts were far off. Once again she summarily went through the arrangements she had made and the orders she had given. Her head worked quickly, and she was used to operating with big numbers. But everything was in order, like one side in an able bookkeeper's ledger, and she made up her mind that she had not committed any mistakes, and that in any case it was now too late to correct them.

With a sigh she thought about the long, boring trip, which was now at hand. She hated to be unoccupied, she loved to give orders and to rule over men. The day before she had looked through the passenger list and said to herself that there was no prospect of much fun. It was the usual collection of boring provincial officials, priests and adventurers, of whom she had met so many on her trips to the new lands. She had contempt for these gold-seekers and aristocratic fortune hunters, who didn't understand at all the wealth they were surrounded by. The ones with brains didn't look for gold treasure or put the Indians on the rack to get them to scream out where they had hidden the rest of their treasures. They sent out engineers or geologists to find the gold veins, where the gold was gotten; they put the Indians to work and exploited the fertile earth. The conquistadors' time was past.

Doña Inez turned and gave a cool and appraising look at the passengers, who were standing at a respectful distance from her and staring in toward the town, the crowd of people on the beach, and the many small boats swarming around the ship. Then a whistle shrieked and the ship's officers shouted their orders. The sails were set and the San Salvador pulled impatiently at its cables. From the capstans one could hear the crew's husky song as the anchors were being raised:

O, holy mother of God,
let our enemies die,
and give us a successful voyage
across the salty sea.

A cannon salute barked from Veracruz's forts, and the cannoneers on board answered it. As the San Salvador glided out into the bay, the church bells could be heard like a sorrowful little melody from the land.