

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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Juan Gomez had found an unoccupied bunk on the orlop deck and put his mat and blanket there. The room was divided by a wooden partition, and in each stall were a dozen crudely constructed bunks. To get into the passenger berths on the orlop deck one had to go through the big crew's cabin, where there were bunks on all sides and canvas hammocks stretched out criss-cross. There were only a couple of narrow passages past the long tables in the middle of the room.

The orlop deck was illuminated by horn lanterns, which cast a weak, reddish glimmer. The heat was stifling and there was a rank odor of sweat and urine, rancid oil, garlic, and dried fish. When one came down the ladder, the stench hit one like a fist in the chest; one had to stop and take a deep breath a couple of times before groping on in the red half-dark. In one of the stalls a bunch of black sailors and negro slaves were packed together like sheep in a pen. Some had flung themselves into the bunks, while others sat in a circle around a broad-nosed Negro, who was playing on a stringed instrument. Over their head dangled a lantern, which emitted turbulent shadows into the room when the ship yawed. The Negroes rocked rhythmically with their upper bodies and sang in deep, wailing guttural sounds, their faces shiny with sweat were like spots of dark—only their teeth and the whites of their eyeballs shone.

In Juan's enclosure some travelers were already lying and sleeping in their bunks—a couple of brothers of a religious order who were traveling home to their monasteries in the cheapest accommodations. A shabbily dressed, thin man with a week-old beard stubble and an ugly, red rash on his domed forehead was spreading out his blanket in his bunk, and when he was done, he took out an earthenware bottle, took off the cork and smiled broadly to Juan.

— To your health, honored señor, he said and politely bowed his tall body. Would you do me the honor of enjoying a swig of wine together with me since we shall be traveling companions. My name is Pablo Avarano, the wine is not the worst and the

name not the best, so it all cancels out.

Don Pablo handed Juan the bottle and nodded in a friendly way.

Your livelihood is unmistakable, señor, he said. You are a soldier, a faithful soldier, a brave soldier, who has killed countless Indians and robbed them of their possessions for the advantage of the most Christian king and the true faith in which alone salvation is to be found. Am I wrong?

— I have been a soldier, Juan said and drank.

Don Pablo again raised the bottle and took a swig. He was pretty drunk, his bulging eyes were made pale by drinking, and the rash on his forehead glowed.

— The country we're now leaving, he said, is in its way an excellent country. I'm certain the Indians at one time felt splendidly in it. Now their satisfaction is possibly a tad circumscribed. But on the other hand, what happened later has been an El Dorado for soldiers, and that is a sign for me of providence's inscrutable wisdom. In his wisdom the good Lord has decided to make a gift to all that lumpen-aristocratic rabble we have in Spain of a good, fat morsel, and since our own country is rather impoverished, he opened the new world for them, and they really succeeded in making it into a thieves' nest, where plundering has ingeniously been systematized, where one finds rascals and robbers in the highest offices, and where the bishops' letter of appointment shall preferably be signed by Satan himself.

— Your words are just as strong as your wine, señor, Juan said. It's a bit dangerous to speak such angry words when you're not sure whether someone is listening. But why have you yourself visited this place of sin?

— My evil fate, don Pablo said, has never granted me anything but lice in my shirt. That comes from the fact that I have always made one demand of myself and others: unconditional intellectual honesty, señor. When I see a cat, I wish to call it a cat, and no one is going to get me to address it as lion. It's an unlucky trait, and its consequence was that I was expelled from the university. For a time I managed as a private tutor for petty-aristocratic families, who got me cheap and in exchange re-

frained from making inquiries. But it always turned into a mess. In one place I was so unlucky as to bed the mistress of the master of the house and was chased out of the house with a riding crop. In another place I got involved in a discussion with the parish priest about the character of the trinity and had to depart quickly. One of the big difficulties here in life, señor, is to hold one's tongue when one has a good, clear head.

— A sharp file and a sharp tongue should be used cautiously, according to the proverb.

— And that old proverb is right. If one is silent, one can go far, but I've carried my heart on my tongue. You asked why I emigrated, and the answer is simple: the inquisition began to become a bit interested in me, not much, but sufficiently for me to have found it wise to disappear—because I've never been a brave man; my intellectual honesty compels me to admit that to you, amigo. I got a modest position as a scribe in a provincial governor's office, and there I vegetated for five years and tried to bite my tongue on various occasions, but my tongue was too strong. And in the end I found it would be wisest to return home because these sons of conquistadors aren't to be joked with when they get angry, and there's a rather short road to the scaffold in these blessed lands. The only thing I'm bringing home with me is the *corona veneris* that adorns my head. I got it right at the last minute in a bordello. And what did you get in exchange for your exertions, señor soldier?

Juan grinned and looked askance at the bottle that don Pablo readily handed him.

— Not much, he answered. But always something better than a greeting from a whorehouse.

— I know how it is, amigo, don Pablo said. You people plunder a village and amuse yourselves in all good-naturedness with a little murder and rape, and you are by my word so lucky to find gold. An image of the sun hidden at a *cacique*'s or something along those lines, and since that's pure paganism, you confiscate it of course. And even if it doesn't turn out to be an image of an idol, it is in and of itself blasphemous for a lousy Indian to own anything. So you take the picture and entrust your

good fortune to your best friend, who also has a few friends to entrust it to, and before twelve hours have gone by, you are called to the colonel, who praises you a great deal because you have taken care of the gold and assures you that our gracious king will certainly compensate you richly for your find. You get a few gold coins as a finder's fee, and you can take comfort from knowing that the king won't get so much. Isn't that right?

— It's not wrong. But Perez Rico was in luck's way. He found a gold picture, and he knew how to hold his tongue. He managed to sell the picture without any of the officers' getting to know anything about it. Then he bought a share in a gold mine and earned money by the bucket. Now he's a commissioner and married to the daughter of a bishop. He's a big man.

— But it's less amusing to be hanged, and Perez Rico was very close to it, wasn't he? But it vanishes in the bottle, and starting from tomorrow we have to sustain life with dry mutton, cassava cakes, and lukewarm water. No money, no wine. I learned only a single Indian word, which I picked up already in the Caribbean: *nacrabatina*, I'm thirsty.

— And you know the reply, don't you, señor: *chalalaali*, he's drunk.

— I am drunk, gloriously drunk, don Pablo said. The sacred wine's blessings are flowing in my veins. She's very beautiful, the little Indian girl over there; see, her legs are slender like cedars of Lebanon, her breasts are love's heights, and her teeth are white doves, which coo about love. Amigo, my categorical demand for unconditional intellectual honesty compels me to admit that female beauty makes an impression on me that is completely absurd in consideration of my age, my experiences, and my whole appearance.

The passenger cabins had gradually been filled, and sleeping and snoring people were lying in all the bunks. Once in a while someone complained while seasick, because the ship was rolling in the ocean's swells, and an old soldier, whose nose had been chopped off, was standing over by the empty water bucket and throwing up in a welter of half-smothered oaths and curses. Big black beetles scurried over the sleepers, whose faces were

swollen by warmth and vermin. In the neighboring room the Negroes had stopped singing and were bent over moaning from seasickness. From the crew's cabin hoarse roars and laughter could be heard; the watch below was drinking the whiskey the sailors had brought with them on board.

An Indian girl was sitting in a corner with her infant child at her breast and staring at the swinging lantern. Next to her a young Indian had spread out his blanket on the floor. He was sitting with his legs curled up under him and followed every movement in the room with vigilant eyes. His face with its broad cheekbones and sensitive, well-shaped mouth was as if carved in mahogany. His shiny black hair reached down to his shoulders and lay close to his head.

There was a guileless seriousness about the little group which seized Juan Gomez strangely to the core. He began to think about the altar piece in the poor village church in the parish where he was born. It showed Joseph and the holy mother with the Christ child in flight to Egypt. The mother of God sat there with the child at her breast, while Joseph watched over them, and Juan's boyish heart had trembled at the thought of their loneliness, without house or home, in flight from cruel enemies to a foreign land.

The little brown woman, who pressed her child so tenderly against herself, and the earnest young Indian resembled the holy family and it was as if the light from the lantern put a halo around the Indian girl's hair. He stared at them while he heard don Pablo's voice, which by and by was becoming somewhat throaty.

— They are slaves on this ship, whose cargo is gold and cruelty. Astern in the ship a couple of score people are sleeping who own the two natives and the Negroes in there next door and us poor whites, a certain brave soldier Juan Gomez not excepted. They own the ship and all the gold it holds, they own the drunken crew and every living soul from the oldest sailor to the child there at its mother's breast, yes even the unborn child in the mothers' womb. They own us and determine our fate, and they can sentence us to frightful horrors and forget it five minutes

later in a lover's bed or with a glass of good wine. Or they can most mercifully let us live and amuse themselves about our antics. And do you know why they can do it, highly esteemed señor? Because there are brave soldiers like Juan Gomez and the worthy, old warrior over there who would rather let their ears and nose be chopped off than abandon their duty, which is to serve the strong against the weak. Oh, amigo, give me dry bread, a little sour country wine and a hard bed to lie in, and I'll write an immortal treatise about the philosophy of power . . .

He had placed his sweaty hand on Juan's shoulder, but Juan shook it off and got up. He went over to the Indian couple and sat down on the floor next to them.

— Whom do you belong to? he asked the Indian. He didn't get an answer, just a calm look, and he therefore assumed the man didn't understand Spanish and directed the same question to the woman.

— I'm accompanying my master, she whispered in bad Spanish.

— Is that his child?

— Yes, she nodded, humiliated.

— Why does he let you sleep down here among the sailors? Who's to defend you when we've been at sea for a week?

She didn't answer, but cast a frightened glance at the Indian, who nodded as if he had understood the conversation.

— You can sleep in my bunk with your child, Juan said, and I myself will find another place. Your friend can lie down in front of the bunk, and tomorrow you must say to your master that you can't be here if he wants to have you for himself. There's a cabin where only women sleep, and there must be room for you.

He helped the girl into the bunk and laid the blanket over her. The Indian got up and spread out his blanket in front of the bunk.

— Why are you doing that, señor? don Pablo asked. What business are these two Indians of yours? Do you also want to put the sheep in the field in your bed? And where will you sleep tonight?

— I'll find a place, Juan said. You can hardly breathe here

anyway, and I'm used to sleeping in the open air.

He walked through the crew's room up onto the deck, and a little later don Pablo followed him. They sat down far forward in the bow and stared out over the sea, which was moving calmly in long swells.

— There's still a last swig in the bottle, don Pablo said. Drink, señor, the wine does not know about masters or slaves. It fills our hearts with joy and gets us to forget our indelible shame. Listen how the ship's frame is creaking. It's all the old sins it's carrying, which wail like a ghost in the night.

It was as if he became sober up here in the cool night, where the sails flapped over their heads like mighty birds. He sat there a bit and listened pensively to the waves, which were breaking against the San Salvador's prow.

— This ship is filled with gold and slaves, he said. Look at the sinewy muscular Spanish fellows, at the little Portuguese men, who always have their knives ready to be able to stab one other while playing dice, at the Negroes, whose muscles swell under their skin, at you veterans, who are returning home with a couple of pieces of gold under your belt, but know how to fight. The others rest securely under their silk blankets aft, while you people sleep on the hard boards. If you wanted it, all the world's glory would be yours.

— Once I saw a soldier whipped to death because he hit an officer, Juan answered. I've seen many hanged. One was buried alive in the middle of the desert because he had incited to mutiny. Only his head protruded, and I can still remember his blue-black tongue and eyes, which were about to fall out of his head. We marched on, señor, and we never talked about him. His name was forgotten.

— And who buried him down in the sand? You yourselves are the whip that gives your back stripes, the executioner who strips the skin.

— I'm not a scholar, Juan said helplessly. One has to forget a lot because it hurts too much to think about.

— Maybe it would be better if we remembered the evil, don Pablo said. God would love us if we did that. It would be better

if we knew how to hate. But we are like dogs, who sometimes receive kicks and sometimes the scraps of food thrown to us in the corner. But let's try to sleep on this ship, which is laden with gold and a curse, with blood and tears, with untold people's suffering and pain. Sleep well, amigo.

He got up with difficulty and staggered on his long legs toward the passage down to the orlop deck.

— There are many strange people, Juan Gomez thought. And what does God have in mind with them?

He pulled his coarse cloak tighter and rolled himself into a ball to sleep.