

A favorable wind was blowing, and the San Salvador had set all sails. The ocean foamed around the gilt angel on the ship's prow, but right now the noon sun was shining, and there was a smell of tar and sun-scorched wood. Not a sail was to be seen on the horizon; only seabirds shrieked hoarsely over the top of the mast.

José Nuñez had just relieved the captain on the bridge and was trotting back and forth on the deck planks, which sweated small blisters of warmth. At the vertical tiller a Portuguese stood by the helm; his brown face stared vacantly out over the ocean, while his body sluggishly followed the ship's movements. At this time of day only a few people were on deck, the upper-class passengers were resting in their cabins, and José Nuñez had an agreeable feeling of having the ship to himself.

The old mate didn't care much about people, and especially not the turkey cocks strutting on deck. Every time he was in port, he talked about retiring, but he knew he'd never do it. As long as he could remember, he'd had a deck under his feet, and even if he dreamt of an old age in his little house by the coast, he knew that some day he'd be let down into the sea from a ship's deck, sewn into a sailcloth with a cannonball as ballast, if indeed Our Lord himself didn't take charge of the burial, and he had nothing against the thought. He had seen so many of his friends buried in the cold sea.

Once in a while he strolled over to the compass to check that the vessel was holding course. Out on the horizon lay a few banks of clouds hinting at a breeze, and before long it would probably become necessary to shorten sail. Then the boatswain, Chaparrito, the little bush, came up onto the bridge. He was a bearded and bow-legged manikin whose real name everyone had forgotten, and maybe he himself didn't remember it. He was wont to say:

— If I'm a bush, it's a briar and not a rosebush for my enemies.

José Nuñez and Chaparrito had sailed together for many

years and were close friends. When they were in port, they drank together and accompanied each other to the same bordellos, where over many years they had seen the girls age and come and go. They were equally stubborn and equally superstitious and nourished a common love for the San Salvador, whose planks meant more to them than any home, and whose figure-head they loved more than any woman.

— She's lying too low in the sea, Chaparrito said.

— You should instead tell me something I don't know, José Nuñez growled. Certain people don't know the difference between a pack-ass and a ship. Confound it—if it blows up into really heavy seas, we'll go to the bottom like a stone.

— It's all the same to me, Chaparrito grinned. I've been shipwrecked six times, but the harpies don't get their claws in me. I have a hair of the Virgin of Guadalupe in a bag on my chest, a nail of the *señor de los milagros*, and, in addition, God's eye. Look here. He pulled his jacket to the side and showed a little square sewn firmly onto the coarse shirt. It resembled an ace of spades embroidered with various colored yarns.

— Where did you get the *sikuli*?

— The Indian wench sewed it on. God's eye looks at you and keeps you alive. She'd like to have me come back.

— Uh huh, that's what you think, you old goat. But if the ship's priest discovers it, he'll scream to high heaven about Indian witchcraft. Why do they load us down so heavily—can't they get enough gold, these insatiable people?

— Some want gold for their palates, others want whiskey. They have quite a lot on board this time.

— Let them drink till it runs out of their pants—just as long as they take care on their watch.

— But there's a tramp drinking with them. He chatters too much, and no good comes from chattering picaros. Go down and take a look at him—you can pretend you're looking for me.

— Make sure the guy over there holds the course in the meantime, the mate nodded.

Calmly, José Nuñez went down into the forecastle. If Chaparrito thought there was good reason to take a look at the

tramp, then there was good reason. It had happened before that the freebooters, that miserable pack of thieves, had sent a man aboard the gold ships to demoralize the crew so it wouldn't resist if the ship was attacked and plundered.

A group of sailors, who were off duty and drinking *taatsch*, agave whiskey, from dented mugs, were sitting about one of the long tables. In the middle of the circle were Pablo Avarano, Juan Gomez, and the veteran who had lost his nose.

— Has anybody seen Chaparrito? the mate asked. Are you filling yourselves again with that poisonous trash? You'd think you guys had drunk and whored enough in port, but you never get enough. Just wait till you're sitting in purgatory: then you'll have to go thirsty; if you've drunk too much here, you'll atone for it there.

He cast a quick look at Juan Gomez and the old man: there was no mistaking that they were discharged soldiers on the way home, and they couldn't be the ones Chaparrito meant. So it was the third one, who looked suspicious.

— Who are you? he asked.

— My mother was very beautiful, señor, even if you wouldn't think it looking at me, don Pablo answered. When she was young she was famous for her beauty in our whole district, and the *patron* did her the honor of sending for her and blessing her with a child, even though she was already married. One wouldn't believe it possible, but the bastard looked down on us other brothers and sisters. He regarded himself as half-noble, and he did become a distinguished man, too, and now he's a procurator. As far as I'm concerned, I don't make any big demands, but it's my view that when someone talks to me, it ought to take place politely.

— I beg your pardon, señor, José Nuñez said and turned to go. He had heard enough to know that Chaparrito was wrong after all. On deck José Nuñez would certainly get the crew to obey, but in the forecabin he had no say whatsoever. Here was the sailors' sanctuary, and he who didn't respect it very easily risked ending his life rather abruptly with a knife between the ribs. As soon as the crew began to drink, nobody knew what

might happen.

The *taatsch* scratched their throats, and some of the crew were already pretty drunk. It was half-dark in the room, even now in broad daylight. On the middle of the table stood a large barrel with salted mutton and trays with cassava bread which was already so dry it had to be softened up in water before one could get it down.

— There's no point to a party without whiskey, don Pablo said. The people up there have the good wine, and for them there's a party around the clock. They own all the gold the ship holds, and why isn't it yours?

— Because the gold doesn't want to be with us, the old sailor Alberto answered. The skin on our fingers is too thick. It only wants to be with people with white hands. Gold is like a woman who wants to be caressed by a pretty hand and not by a coarse fist.

— But the pirates don't have fine hands, somebody said.

— They've made a pact with the Devil, Alberto said. He reveals the gold ships' course to them, but in exchange they have to shed blood. And in the end he takes them when the time has come. The Devil comes as a raven or a black dog and fetches the soul because the gold is the Devil's snare, and you have to pay for the pleasures it brings you in hell's torment.

They instinctively muted their voices while they were talking about evil. Here in the ocean his power was great and dreadful, and they had all seen sea-spirits and ghosts and at times the Devil himself. On one voyage Alberto had seen him as a screeching bird which kept circling around the ship as if it had some business on board. It was big and ugly, and no one had ever seen its match. Finally it sat down on the head of the main-mast and sat there and waited for a soul whose time had come and who now had to travel the dark road.

— We tried to scare it away, he recounted. And the mate shot at it with a bullet that was dipped in holy water. It flew away and flapped around the ship a few times and sat down again. The mate loaded and shot the next round, but this time the bullet wasn't blessed and it hit a sailor right in the heart. At the

same moment the bird uttered an ugly shriek and plunged down into the air as if it wanted to catch something. Then it flew away, but it carried the man's soul in its beak, and it knew the way to hell.

That's the way they talk about odd experiences, about devils and sea-spirits and adventures on far-away coasts. Alberto, who was gnarled with wild-growing hair and beard, had seen women who had six breasts like animals, indeed he had slept with one of them, and she knew how to love him like a perfect devil-woman. And on desolate skerries and islands live the harpies, who have claws instead of hands, and if a ship with seamen is stranded, the harpies take them as prisoners and keep them as husbands, and they never return.

— Then the Indian girl in there is better, the mulatto Christobal says.

— You can get enough of that kind when you're in port, one of the others says. But it would be smartest if you kept away from her. You know, she belongs to one of the grandees up there.

— Then why does he let her sleep down here?

— You may come to regret it.

— If he lets her lie down here, then he'll surely have to put up with our taking a bit of a peek at her. And I don't expect she's going to die from it. If he's not going to take care of her, she doesn't have to lie and miss menfolk. We don't have to wear her out.

— Have you lost your mind, man, Pablo Avarano calls out and gets up from the bench. Juan Gomez also gets up circumspectly and loosens his long knife in its sheath. It now looks as though there's going to be a row, and Juan has a notion as to what that will mean among a group of half-drunk sailors in a fore-castle.

The mulatto is on the way into the room where the Indian girl has her bunk, and the others follow after. Christobal doesn't look especially pleasant: he had one eye lacerated in a fight and his front teeth knocked out.

— Leave her alone, a hotheaded little Portuguese screams.

If one of us begins, we'll whore her to death, and then all hell will break loose afterwards. And there isn't even any flesh on those Indian girls. You can feel their skeleton when you sleep with them. Leave her in peace, you son of a black bitch.

— What are we going to do? don Pablo whispers to Juan Gomez. He can't be allowed to touch her. We're humans and not animals.

— Let's see what happens, Juan says calmly. There's time enough for the knife to be used.

— I want to have her, the mulatto hisses, proceeding into the girl's berth. Undisturbed by the noise, she's lying with her child in her arms, her fine breast rising and sinking calmly in her sleep. Christobal stops in front of the bunk. The Indian is standing in front of it, and it looks as though he has understood what's going on.

— Move, the mulatto says, and the Indian gives him a piercing look.

In the background the sailors are pushing their way into the doorway. Juan Gomez still has his hand on the handle of his knife.

— Maybe she's yours? Christobal shouts in a rage. You're a damn slave yourself. Why don't you answer?

The Indian doesn't take his eyes off him, and not a muscle moves in his face. He's standing motionless and looks at the drunk and crazy man, and slowly the mulatto retreats a few steps. Then he turns around, shoves his way past the other sailors, goes to his bunk, stretches out, and yawns.

— Yeah, you're a hero, the Portuguese sneers. You let yourself be frightened by an unarmed Indian slave.

— Don't talk about unarmed, Christobal says. I saw what I saw, and you won't catch me fighting with that kind.

— What did you see?

— Was it the Devil?

— So you think you can get away with it that way, you cowardly black dog. But that's what you black bloods are like, you curs.

The Portuguese got a fist in his face and went backwards

with a roar. He was immediately up on his feet again, and the two men danced around each other like two fighting cocks. The mulatto was the stronger, but the Portuguese adroitly avoided his mighty fists, and at the same time he was heaping blows on the mulatto, his shrill voice resounded:

— You cur, you cowardly black dog, your mother begot you with a boar. You can rape womenfolk, but if a man steps in your way, it's all over with your courage, you black wretch. Now I've got you.

He struck Christobal under the chin, and the mulatto collapsed like a sack on the floor.

— So you're lying there, you dirty black swine—going into a girl's bed is something else again. It would serve you right if I took a knife and cut you—you know, you're not worth anything to begin with anyway.

— Here's a knife, one of the sailors called. Fling him on the table and let's castrate him.

Willing hands were immediately ready; the screaming mulatto was lifted up and flung ungently on the table, and the Portuguese pulled his clothing aside and bared his sex.

— Now bring the knife, he shouted. And a bowl for the blood—then I'll soon make him into a capon.

That was one of the usual gross jokes that went on in the crew room when the crew had had something to drink. But a wildness lurked underneath. It was as if the atmosphere itself, the heavy, glowing air in the room demanded release. Something had to happen—murder, mutilation, a manhood had to be sacrificed. The Portuguese was standing with bloodshot eyes; his wild, bearded face jutted out over the victim.

— Bring the knife, his shrill voice resounded. Give me a knife, and I'll geld him. He won't play bull any more, the black ox!

The mulatto's scream was thin with terror; he screamed like a pig in the slaughterhouse. Don Pablo grabbed Juan Gomez by the arm.

— What are we going to do? he asked, at his wit's end. We can't just stand there calmly and watch a man get mutilated.

— If they want to carve one another to pieces, just let them, Juan replied. But it won't get that far. Rabble quarrel and rabble reconcile.

The Portuguese was handed a knife and pretended to be ready to use it. With a murderous howl the mulatto succeeded in sweeping aside the men who were holding him down and getting free. Then he snatched the knife out of the Portuguese's hand and thrust it in him. The broad blade glanced off his clothing and struck him in the shoulder instead of in the chest.

— He got me, the black swine, the Portuguese howled and slid down on to the floor.

The ones standing closest grabbed the mulatto and wrested the knife from him. The Portuguese wailed as if he were near death.

— He got me in the lung—may all the saints stand by me. Go get a priest.

— So you see what happens and you only got a scratch.

— Go get the priest so I can confess, the Portuguese howled. I have mortal sins on my conscience—are you people going to let me die without absolution? If you do that, I'll damn you in my last hour. My life is as full of sins as a strainer is full of holes. Be merciful—you hear me.

The men stood silently and looked at him.

— It's not a dangerous wound, one of them said.

— But if he croaks, he'll fly right into the puddle.

— He'll do that anyway.

— There can be wound-fever, and I saw a man die of less. If he wants extreme unction, we can't deny it to him. Why did you stab him, fool?

— You know, he wanted to geld me, the damned guy. He was about to destroy me, the mulatto said. Let him just burn in hell.

— And what do you think will happen with you yourself the day you'll have to be held to account. Don't you know it's the greatest sin to deny a sinner a priest at death?

Go call José Nuñez, Alberto said.

That'll mean the mast, one of the others said.

— Then let it be the mast, Alberto said. It's his own fault. He was justified in defending himself, but not in using a knife. We're not animals, are we, who have to slaughter one another. He used a knife, and he has to atone for it.

An hour later the mulatto was standing by the fore-spanker. His right hand was nailed to the mast with the same knife he had used. The blood trickled down over his brown arm in a slow stream from the wound. His head was bowed, his face distorted with pain.

— Man is wolf to man, don Pablo said with a little sigh. But for the grandees it seems to be an interesting *divertissement* during a boring sea voyage.

The passengers viewed the sailor who was nailed fast and discussed how long he could hold himself erect.

— There's Negro blood in him, he's tough, Samuel Rayburn said. I'd bet he's still standing there at sunrise tomorrow.

— He'll be finished before sunset, colonel Gonzales said.

The colonel won. Later in the afternoon Christobal fell down, and the knife tore his hand. He was bandaged and flung into his bunk. Presumably he's now been broken of the habit of using a knife on board a ship, the colonel said.