

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 wretched mulatto was lying and chattering deliriously in his bunk while the drinking bout continued. Once in a while José Nuñez found some pretext for going down to the orlop deck to see how things were going. He shook his head peevishly—if only that damn drinking would go to the devil! They weren't God's best children, and if they got whiskey, the wildness could suddenly well up in them. But for the time being they still turned out readily enough for their watches.

Chaparrito, the little bush, had settled down in the middle of the drinking crowd and got his share of the bottle too. He drank deeply and steadily without its being noticeable, and if a couple of them were about to start quarreling with each other, he was immediately on the spot with a few admonishing words. And as the hot day ebbed away, it was as if peace fell over the crew. A bit of an evening coolness filtered down through the hatch—one noticed the ocean's cool breathing; over one's head the guards' heavy steps could be heard.

And now the talk came round to the mighty ocean, which had become their life and their fate, and which some time would become their death. It was great and merciless, and in its depths ruled evil spirits which rose up out of the waves to seize people and drag them down into the deep. At night they rushed howling over the foaming seas, and there were people who could summon them. Chaparrito had once sailed with a Negro who had power over the sea-spirits. He had a drum, and with it he crawled out to the furthest point on the bowsprit and drummed the spirits up out of the ocean. He could turn the wind, and for weeks the vessel fought with head wind until the Negro fell overboard. The spirits had taken the power from him and pulled him down.

— Yes, yes, Alberto said, some sea-spirits were devils from hell, but others were drowned mens' souls. They hooked on to the ship with their bony hands, and it couldn't move on even if a sweeping tail wind was blowing. They wanted to get on board, they wanted to be among the living again, or perhaps they just wanted to get on land and be buried in consecrated ground so

their souls could find peace. Alberto had once found a soul from the sea in his bunk.

— He was lying there and sleeping when I came back from the middle watch. The fish had eaten his face right into the bone, and he was lying there and staring at me with bloody eye sockets, saltwater dripping from the bedding.

— Brother, I said to him. Your place isn't here. In the name of God and all the saints, go back where you came from.

— He didn't move, but kept looking at me, and never has any human being looked so mournful as his face. At last I had to turn my head away so I wouldn't start crying, but I couldn't let him lie there, because otherwise we'd all have ended up in the ocean before sunrise. I took my cross from my chest, and it was a strong cross, cast in lead from a church window, and he had to yield to it. He got up from the bed, sighed so that my heart was scorched, and a streak of water followed him on the deck. But he had to go up onto the ladder and into the ocean again, and when he went into the waves, there was howling and wailing in the rigging.

— Couldn't you have granted him a little rest in your bunk? don Pablo asked. The ocean is cold.

— Now there's a bright idea, little brother, Alberto said. If you let the sea-spirits come on board, the ship must sink. The ocean doesn't want to get rid of its dead. It was better for him to stay out there than for all of us to end there.

The others nodded. That's the way it was. There, beyond the ship's planks, in the immense, desolate ocean, spirits ruled, the eternally homeless, who hadn't gotten a grave to repose in. But here in the forecastle were warmth and fellowship. Most of them were men without family or permanent abode. Evil fate had driven them to sea: they had fled from a murder in an inn or from a jail, or were simply driven by a yearning for a new and free life, which they had never found and now had forgotten. They sailed for months, slept and drank and went on land into a port where they caroused their wages away, and before they themselves knew it, they tumbled back into the sea.

But here was fellowship, their real home. They were no

longer Andalusians or Catalonians, Portuguese or Negroes, but sailors. They could sneer at one another or fight till blood flowed, but they knew they belonged together. They had no one else to rely on but one another, while the whole rest of the living or dead world consisted of enemies who would only exploit them, kill them, or cause their ruin. These coarse and apathetic men, these vagabonds and brawlers owned only one thing: solidarity. That was their only good on the voyage through life, the feeling of belonging together, the law that they stood one for all and all for one.

They came and went in shifting watches, flung themselves dead tired on their bunks after having struggled with the stubborn sails or taken their turn at the heavy rudder. Or they sat down on the bench, took a couple of mouthfuls of the salted mutton and reached out for the nearest bottle with a swig of *taatsch* left. Some smoked tobacco from small black clay pipes, although it was forbidden. A fire could start, or heaven could get angry about this vice; a smoking man is a hell of a fire. The smoke undulated under the horn lanterns and spiced the heavy, stuffy air, and the tobacco produced peace in the soul and gentle thoughts.

On every single voyage they had to conquer the new world over again and sail the heavily laden vessels across the mighty ocean. They were the new era's conquistadors, but others owned the gold that they conveyed safely into port. They had to fight their way through hurricanes, be thirsty when there was dead calm and the water became stagnant in the tanks, starve when the mutton and biscuits were used up, and at times fight for their lives with freebooters who lurked along the gold ships' route. Rarely did any of them become old, and it never happened that somebody amassed so much that he could enjoy the peace of his old age on land. An old seaman had to beg for bread like a beggar. That's why it was best if the sea conferred on him a merciful death.

The skin on their hands was too coarse, gold didn't want to be with them, and nevertheless the San Salvador was fully loaded with gold ingots and precious treasures. They were lying

right under their feet, and they couldn't help talking about the inconceivable wealth that was so close to them. Some told tales about what they would do if they had merely a small part of this immense wealth. They would drink the finest wine and own the most beautiful women.

— Oh, you fools, don Pablo butted into the conversation over the whiskey bottle. Why do you people think about such things you know you'll never dare do? You've grown accustomed to being slaves, and you'll never be masters. What are you but a flock of shepherds who guard the rich people's lambs.

— And you, so what are you? Alberto asked.

— Truly not one of the righteous. But I know a little about life. In order to get gold, you have to have the will to take it, and to take it, you have to be able to kill. Have you killed a person?

— Yeah, in a fight, but I was drunk then.

— What did you feel?

— At that moment I felt joy. But afterwards I regretted it and didn't understand why I had done it. It's a serious thing to take another person's life. And he who lives by the sword dies by the sword.

— They've given you the doctrine that's best for you, mate. In five minutes you could clear out the cabins up there of all the fine passengers and throw them all overboard. But you don't do that because you know they own you. They've banged that into your stupid heads: they own us, and they can do with us whatever they feel like. And if someone or other thinks of asking what the situation basically is concerning all the property rights, they've taught you to answer: it's God's will, and no one shall resist God. But has God himself told you what his will is? No, the priest did that. First and foremost he serves the rich and powerful, and he gets his food without pain by preaching wealth's commandment, which is not God's.

— What are you trying to achieve with your words? asked the veteran without a nose. Do you want to egg them on to plunder the ship?

— I'm no fool, brother noseless, don Pablo answered. If I had my way, I'd sink all the gold down to the bottom of the

ocean. I'd put a pickaxe and a spade in every man's hand and say to him: now eat your bread by the sweat of your brow in accordance with God's own word, drink your wine with joy, love your wife and replenish the earth, and every time you meet a thief or a robber who wants to live on other people's toil, make short shrift of him. There weren't any caballeros in paradise unless the serpent was of the aristocracy, and the scripture doesn't report anything about that.

— You interpret the holy word like an emissary from hell.

— Then interpret it yourself since you're so versed in the scriptures. Is it written: in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, or is the word: in the sweat of thy face shalt thou serve the masters' superabundance? Does your gospel demand that the poor man must let his children want for bread so the rich man can get cake?

— But no good comes of violence.

— Is that what you thought before you yourself lost your nose? Was it with God's word as the weapon that you went chasing after the Indians' boy and girl, his ox and ass? Or maybe you lost your nose in the whorehouse?

— Watch it, Juan Gomez mumbled. Don't provoke him—even an old bull can become vicious.

The old man's face was red with anger, he breathed heavily and as if snoring and could barely get the words out.

— What are you but a drunkard and a vagabond? he stammered. You should be whipped for daring to take God's word in your polluted mouth. If only your tongue would rot in your mouth.

— Maybe it's better to hear God's word when it's spoken from the depth of degradation than from the altar of self-exaltation, don Pablo said. God's own son preferred to rub shoulders with publicans and sinners and not with the Pharisees.

The old man hobbled ill-temperedly into his bunk, and the others laughed, but Juan Gomez shook his head.

— That wasn't smart, he said. There are many ravens in the world, and the old man looked as if he has the ability to remember his enemies.

— In any case he can't smell them, don Pablo said. And it's not enough to hate one's enemies, one must also know who in reality is one's enemies. Do you know that, good soldier Juan Gomez, and do you courageous seamen know that? You all hate those who crack the whip over you, but not him who directs the whip's blows. Whiskey can scratch your throat, but hatred scratches more in the heart, and if only you could hate.

— What's the advantage of hatred supposed to be? Will we get richer from it? Alberto asked.

— Certainly you won't get richer, but what wealth do you have now except the prospect of a couple of years' toil and drudgery and then a death in the waves. If you people talk about the gold we have on board, your eyes are about to fall out of your head with desire to get your fingers in it. But gold isn't worth anything. Can you perhaps eat it or have a good time with it in bed? Gold means nothing but power over all of us who don't own it. If it weren't there, we'd be free.

— Surely you've studied at the Devil's university.

— You guess right, don Pablo said. I know all about the Devil and his work, which you people should also know. I know about blood and tears and about the rich people's stone-hard hearts, which are an abomination to God. I know those who use God's name to advance the Devil's work, and those who speak with pious tongues, while their souls are wells of evil and filth. I know whom I should hate, and I hate them. And if I were pope and infallible, I would introduce the sacrament of hate and distribute it to all the poor and wretched, to whom the rich give stones for bread, and they would learn to hate till their souls were scorched, and the pain would incite them to action.

— You're drunk—you better go to bed and stop talking foolish words, Juan Gomez said.

— I'm drunk, but my words are not foolish, don Pablo said. They're good, strong words which come from a place in me that whiskey can't penetrate. You, my friends, scarcely know what the demand for unconditional intellectual honesty is. But for me it's more than father and mother, more than my beloved and love, more than paradise lost and eternal peace.

He babbled and his head sank down onto his chest, as if he suddenly had become very tired. Juan Gomez took him by his tall and thin body and lifted him up as lightly as if he were a child, who had to be carried into bed.

— What is wisdom and what is folly? he said almost gently. Now we've talked as between brothers, and now he's best off going to bed.