

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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A couple of days at sea, and it seemed like months since the passengers aft had set foot on dry land. They had become a bit accustomed to the ocean, to the ship's chopping in the sea, and both the viceroy and the inquisitor had emerged from their cabins. They had gotten over their seasickness.

Don Pedro de Carajaval didn't bother much with the other passengers. Only with the inquisitor and doña Inez did he at times converse in his stiff and formal way, and doña Inez found it difficult to suppress a yawn every time he approached. The small, dry, and elegant man emanated such deadly tedium that she really began to pity the court, which would soon enjoy the honor of his visit. Silence descended wherever he appeared, or cheerful, informal discourse was succeeded by strained conversation.

The only one who by preference sought don Pedro's company was colonel Gonzales, and he had his well-considered reasons. He was an old warhorse who had served for forty years and now was on his way back to Madrid to work on behalf of his plans to conquer new lands toward the north. His face was like tanned leather, his mustache bristled fiercely, and when he became animated, his voice could be heard from one end of the ship to the other. His one arm was stiff from a machete blow, and he went about clothed according to the old soldier style which was still in use in his musty garrison. Don Vargas maliciously called him the belated conquistador.

Doña Inez smiled, but actually she rather liked the old soldier. One could imagine him landing on the beach at the head of his people and, with sword in hand, conquering kingdoms bigger and more splendid than Europe's to be repaid with oblivion and poverty by the king, whose might he had created. She shrugged her beautiful shoulders sympathetically. No one knew better than she that the colonel was a relic of the past, and that the future belonged to the enterprising mineowners and planters, who used not sword and carbine, but the whip.

The colonel was wont to pay a visit to the viceroy in his cab-

in in the morning and politely to request intelligence on how his excellency had slept and the state of his health. Don Pedro liked that, the visit evidencing respect for his rank and position, and nodded graciously to the colonel. Thereafter Gonzales guided the conversation over to his political ideas. Toward the north lay tremendous and fertile tracts of land to which no one other than the king of Spain had the right, and a military occupation could be undertaken very easily.

— Don't we actually have enough land? don Pedro asked.

— Can a sovereign get sufficient territory? And new lands offer new possibilities for emigration. The native population is uncivilized, but we can civilize it and use it as a labor force. Or we can introduce negro slaves. It's our historic mission to spread our Christian culture to these regions. No one knows better than your excellency, whose noble title is among our country's best, that we Spaniards are a master race, which is created to rule over others.

— Far be it from me to deny this fact, don Pedro conceded. But I am seriously afraid that an occupation will lead to war. After all, we made agreements in the past with France and England.

— War, colonel Gonzales replied and straightened himself up. Are we Spaniards afraid of war? Whom should we fear? The debauched and degenerate Frenchmen or the English shopkeepers' souls? If war comes, we must accept it; no threat can prevent us from fulfilling our historic mission.

The viceroy nods, but there's a malicious little smile on his wooden face. The colonel's plans are politically impossible, and among the dispatches on board is a report that discusses them with indulgent jocularly. Gonzales will never get an audience at the court; all doors will be closed to him. The old officer will wind up running in vain from pillar to post until he's probably placed in a lunatic asylum. But he has breeding—that can't be denied. He knows that he owes his superiors respect.

No one took the colonel's political ideas seriously, but he was the best man at the gaming table. Every evening the dice game began in the mess, where the passengers took their meals.

Colonel Gonzales was attended by invariable luck, and it didn't occur to anyone to accuse him of cheating. Anyone who would have done that wouldn't have gotten off lightly because, even though space was tight on the San Salvador, there was space for a duel.

Most of the passengers tried their luck and gracefully lost a few gold pieces to Gonzales. The most eager was don Luis, who as a rule had no luck. He played nervously, with blazing cheeks, and swore furiously when he lost. He had already sold a gold ring to the Englishman he shared the cabin with, and got paid shamelessly little.

When don Luis wasn't playing, he stayed near doña Inez. He had quickly fallen in love with the beautiful, middle-aged woman, whose wealth was so great that one had trouble imagining it. His obvious infatuation amused her; she nodded to him:

— Sit down, don Luis, and tell me about all your experiences.

And the young officer took a seat next to doña Inez under the awning and reported on the experiences that the new world had conferred on him. He had been on an expedition to find El Dorado, the golden land, and he depicted the terrible dangers he had undergone among savage Indian tribes, who had never seen a white man. He had met Indians who were head hunters and others who smeared themselves with phosphorous so they shone like pillars of fire at night, and if don Luis hadn't had his good, shiny sword, he wouldn't have been sitting here safe and sound.

In reality, the expedition was confined to a foolish trip, which he had undertaken with a couple of fellow soldiers up in the mountains because some Indians had twaddled that there was gold. Perhaps they hoped to get money to buy *taatsch*, perhaps it amused them to get the young, white warriors out on a long and onerous walk.

— And the gold? doña Inez asked teasingly. How much did you find?

— The gold? don Luis repeated, confused. Of course, the gold. No, we didn't find it, but there's hardly a doubt that it's there, and I want to equip a new expedition—later sometime.

Doña Inez nodded with interest; of course he ought to try a new expedition—sometime. No doubt he really had been on the trail of El Dorado. Thousands of young adventurers had been on the trail of the golden land and had returned just as poor. But it is to be hoped that they never find the Indians' fabled treasure because then gold will drop in price, and doña Inez's gold mine will lose in value.

She closes her eyes a moment and thinks about the El Dorado she owns. Her mine lies in a place far into the mountains. One reaches it by narrow mountain paths, where one must stop every moment and gasp for breath in the thin air. A couple of hundred miserable huts of clay and straw sit on the mountain slope, and every day four hundred Indian slaves descend into the mine galleries with pick-axes, while the overseers with whips take care that they work industriously, and that they don't steal the lumps of pure gold that are sometimes found. Nevertheless, it happens that an Indian and a lump of gold have disappeared. If he didn't take his family along, his wife and his children are tied to posts in front of the *calpixqui's* house and whipped. It's brutal, but necessary, doña Inez knows; one must teach the others what happens if gold is stolen.

The Indians work fourteen hours in the mine in the thin air, where every movement inflicts great pain and one feels as if one is to be suffocated. It is hard to furnish provisions up here, and the slaves live mostly on cornmeal, which is transported along the paths on the backs of mules. There are no vegetables, no fresh corncocks, no fruit, milk, or meat. The men are gaunt, one can count every rib in their chests, and the women are a pitiful sight, gaunt, with big stomachs and pendulous breasts. And the children. Doña Inez doesn't care to think about them. They're only skin and bone and resemble small brooding old men with oversized heads, who know everything about life and its conditions the moment they come out of their mother's womb.

— They ought not to have children, doña Inez is thinking. Perhaps one ought to forbid them to take wives. And of course they don't get any joy out of the little ones because the children don't grow old. They languish like plants that can't grow so tall

up in the mountains. Besides, no one gets old in the gold mine. New slaves have to be procured constantly. It's altogether distressing, and the only consolation is that the Indians don't understand their own sufferings. A mule doesn't suspect there's another life than bearing burdens and getting whipped.

Her thoughts go further, to the large plantations and haciendas she owns and has just visited. There, too, are Indian slaves who toil hard under the burning sun till one day they can't go on and fall down like horses that have been ridden too harshly. They live in barracks or wretched huts, and they have to be whipped to work, her *calpixque* assert, because they are as lazy as donkeys. One has to use a hard hand; there's no use showing leniency. They're a really miserable race, an *over-calpixqui* assured her. One would think that they lie down to die from pure obstinacy rather than doing the work their masters demand of them.

Of course, there is an El Dorado. The whole country is an El Dorado, with pits, mines, fertile soil, and as many Indian slaves as one has use for. But what does a stupid little officer understand about it? What does he know about her cotton and tobacco plantations, about the large haciendas where she has mighty herds of cattle, about the new territories where she has had grapevines planted to raise grapes, about the Indian villages she rules over, about the *encomiendas* she owns and where the Indians are for the time being her tenants, but where she is about to shift to a more intensive and profitable operation, which means that the Indians will have to submit to becoming slaves.

The new world is rich and enormous, nature has bestowed on it all its luxury, and doña Inez has subdued it. Oh, how she understands don Guilemo's horror of death. If she just had another couple of lives, what wouldn't she be able to accomplish? What do these Indians have to complain about after all—they die, and some time she herself will also die? But she will do something to ease their hard lives: she will build many churches, and no expense will be spared on their splendor. The gold mine, too, will have its church or at least a beautiful chapel. There the Indian mothers can kneel before the altar and pray that they might

meet their little dead children in the eternal light, because presumably there is also a kind of Indian heaven.

— I've been married twice, she said half to don Luis and half to herself. And both my husbands were asses. They weren't good for anything at all, not even in bed. They were very proud of their blue blood and very zealous about getting their rank respected at the court. Our whole country is poisoned by power which is no power, and by men who are not men. Have you ever thought about that, don Luis?

— No, I haven't, don Luis answered, confused.

— Our grandees are insufferable, incapable, unfit, and stuper than geese, doña Inez said. There's no reason altogether to be fond of human beings. Sometimes I wonder about why God created them after all. Can it really amuse him to have this rabble sing his praises, to beg for gold, power, and honor? But perhaps Our Lord is himself a grandee who has created man in his image and conferred on him his own almighty stupidity.

— Señora, be careful what you say, the young officer said.

— That's not necessary, doña Inez smiled. I'm rich enough to be able to say what I think, and what's more, so rich that I have the means to think.

— If you knew how I admire you, señora, don Luis said romantically.

— No doubt, doña Inez said. But I'd like to know whether you'd choose me if I were a girl in a bordello.

That's the way their conversations always ended when they were alone, and don Luis stood confused and didn't know what was serious and what was mockery. He was blinded by her wealth, and her nature satisfied his need for authority. A luster of power and authoritativeness surrounded this woman with the beautiful arms and the round shoulders. She was like the Madonna, who ruled over the people, indeed she was more than the Madonna because she was rich and living and could change captain Luis de Zuniga's whole life with a wave of her slender white hand.

Don Jesus often appeared on the after-deck and had friendly conversations with the other passengers. He was rotund in his

simple priest's garb, which bore no sign of his high clerical rank. His face was round and full of tiny wrinkles. Actually, he most resembled a friendly old woman, but his eyes were small and melancholy like a sick little monkey's, and when he smiled, they didn't laugh along. He ate alone in his cabin and strictly adhered to his fast. The inquisitor was an ascetic, and when he was alone, his lips moved in prayer, while his small thick hands with the bitten-off nails fingered the beads on his rosary.

Don Vargas shared a cabin with the little, corpulent, and learned Dominican Fray Ramon, who was a teacher at the university in Mexico, and the two men took a walk together on the deck every morning. Don Ramon gesticulated ardently when he spoke about his students.

— There are matters we often forget to mention—our work to civilize the Indians and bestow our culture on them. Do you know, worthy brother, that when Mexico's university was founded over a hundred years ago, a professorship in Indian languages was established immediately, and there was already at that time an Indian school with over a thousand Indian boys as pupils? A stream of teachers, bookdealers, and books went to the new world. I've heard that both the French and the English are exterminating the Indians in their colonies, while we are going the other way: we're trying to turn them into useful citizens. And we're constantly making progress. Every year young Indians from the most remote regions come to our university. And they are clever minds, and easily appropriate our learning. We have conquered these lands, and it is our duty as a leading cultural nation to civilize them. We shall give them knowledge, more and more knowledge.

— Pardon, reverend brother, the Jesuit said. But what about the land?

— The land?

— The land, the mines, the gold, which we took from them? They were after all in their way—notice that I say in *their* way, namely according to their primitive, heathen conceptions—things that belonged to them.

— Here you're touching on a difficult and painful question,

don Ramon said, and flung out his short arms regretfully. Of course it can't be denied that the occupation of the land in several respects did not benefit the population. Let's just say it directly: the conquistadors, whose bravery many of my native pupils by the way have celebrated in song in perfect Latin hexameter, undeniably robbed the Indians of what until then they had considered their lawful property, but I don't see how one can remedy it. Even if it were possible as a practical matter to give the land back, the current owners of course also have their duly acquired rights.

— Which, moreover, are rather far-reaching since the circumstances have rendered it necessary in various places to make the original owners slaves.

— Alas, don't remind me of it, don Ramon said sorrowfully. But this injustice can be made good. For there is no other word for it than injustice. May I recall my illustrious brother in the order, the blessed bishop de las Casas, who fought against slavery his whole life. Our order has on the whole constantly fought for the Indians' human rights, and if these Benedictines hadn't—but may God forbid that I should say anything.

— I'm afraid the Benedictines are still the strongest.

— Perhaps, don Ramon said firmly. But I believe in human progress. The world goes forward, humanism grows despite everything. We university teachers have sent many petitions to Madrid for the relief of the Indians' conditions. Already las Casas pointed out that the Indians weren't even suited to be slaves, and that it would be more expedient to use Negroes.

— But Negroes, too, ought possibly to be considered as a kind of human being.

— We are all the Lord's creatures. But I'm not certain that the life on the plantations isn't better for the Negroes than freedom. It's an inferior race, and even if they live in slavery, nevertheless, they come into contact in this way with the Christian culture. I don't believe the Negroes suffer under bondage like the Indians.

— And on the plantations and in the mines one can also enlighten them about Christianity.

— Precisely, we mustn't forget the religious side of the matter. But I would have wished you had visited us at the university so you could study our results. Last semester we had ten Indians studying Greek, and one took a licentiate in Hebrew. . .

The inquisitor came toward them, and they stopped respectfully and greeted him.

— A splendid morning, don Jesus said, inhaling the fresh air in deep breaths. I hope I am not disturbing my brothers' conversation.

— Not at all, your reverend father, fray Ramon assured him.

— We were talking about the fine results that don Ramon has attained with his Indian students, don Vargas said.

— To be sure, the inquisitor said. I am not at all unfamiliar with these things. But I will not deny that I am skeptical. We are dealing with a people which is very primitive and very child-like, and which has lived for thousands of years in the most appalling heathendom. There is a need to learn, but first and foremost to learn to obey.

— But these studies after all do expand knowledge.

— But is it knowledge the Indians first and foremost need? In my opinion it is first and foremost discipline. The almighty has placed this people in our hands in order that we might develop a disposition to serve. This people cannot guide its own destiny, cannot think its own thoughts; we have the responsibility for these little ones of God. And we do not solve the problem by giving them our knowledge and letting them aspire to become our equals. Do not forget, fray Ramon, that it is only a brief time since they sacrificed animals and humans to their idols, and heathendom still resides in the dark corners of their soul. We must treat them justly but firmly, and teach them that by serving their earthly masters, they serve God.

Don Ramon's good-natured face had darkened, and he breathed heavily, but he dared not contradict the inquisitor. Don Jesus glanced at him, fingered his rosary a bit and said gently:

— I know you are acting in the best faith when you educate your Indians, fray Ramon. You must not in any way take my words as a reproach. I am only an old man who is ignorant

enough in scholarly and classical matters, but life has taught me to think more about the one necessary thing. And what I said about the Indians applies in its way to us too. We must learn to submit to discipline because it is for our own best. The Christian must kiss the lash that whips his back bloody.

He took the other two by the arm and walked slowly with them to the railing and pointed out across the sea:

— How deep is the sea? he asked, and answered himself: — No one knows. We know only one single thing, that he who sinks in its depths never returns. And only a few planks joined together by weak human hands separate us from that deathly deep. Just one little storm, and we stagger about and do not know at what hour we will be shipwrecked. Just one undersea rock and we are irretrievably lost. If a little ocean voyage is so dangerous, what should we think of the voyage through life? Everywhere we turn we meet eternal perdition. The terrible monsters of the deep lurk to swallow us, storms to seize us, hell to catch us. There is only one single thing that has meaning, that we step safe and sound onto land on the coast our voyage is going to and which is that of light and salvation. It matters not at all what we may suffer on the voyage, not in relation to the terrible fate that will be ours if we are stranded underway.

— This world is of an evil nature, and we must not set ourselves against evil, but accept our sufferings. God wants someone to crack the whip and another to receive its blows humbly. The Lord knows what serves our salvation, and he casts out into the dark whoever sets himself against the Lord's will. We can serve the lord with prayer and hymn, and we can serve him with torment and fire. We can help him to triumph over the obdurate, help to save them from doom. Would we perhaps not put a man in chains if in sudden insanity he wanted to throw himself into the deep from this ship? It is our Christian duty of love to impose torment, indeed death, on others if we thereby can bring salvation to their souls. For salvation means everything, and life and suffering are nothing. It is better that the body die than that the soul be eternally lost, and has not God himself arranged for purgatory's torment so that we can be purified for the eternal

life?

— Everyone knows your reverend father has saved countless souls, don Vargas said very earnestly.

— I have not saved them, but I have broken their obstinacy and through suffering taught them to turn to God. I have been a instrument in the Lord's hand, and he has punished sin through me.

— And providence could not have found a better scourge, don Vargas said. It will be wonderful for your reverend father sometime to meet all these souls you have cleansed through suffering and saved from the eternal fire by using the earthly fire, which may well scorch, but whose flames nevertheless are like gentle rain compared to hell's sea of fire.

Don Jesus turned his wrinkled face toward him and looked at him a bit.

— Only he can be a instrument of the Lord for good who has overcome desire and malice inwardly, he said. I have loved every single one whom I have punished, and cried at his torment.

He nodded with a friendly smile and trudged back to his cabin in his long cassock.

— What piety, don Vargas said after the inquisitor was out of earshot. I'm afraid human progress will take time, and if the world advances, in any case it's by small steps. But take comfort, fray Ramon, on behalf of your Indians, for those who are the last here will become the first in the next world.

Don Ramon sorrowfully shook his graying head.