

Masters

by David Ackley

My own master, whom I had gladly taken, he with much to teach, I who had much to learn, was all-knowing and canny, the captain's own arm of order over the slash purses, pig thieves, runaways and wife burners who make up the crews of these bloody errands. He wore the short curved sword of his tribe and left his belongings openly on a shelf over his hammock. In a vessel of clear liquid a man's finger rocked and spun with the motion of the ship and sometimes pointed at the passer, warning against what might be chanced in the master's absence. I did his asking without question or pause, flogged his floggings, brought his meals from the scraps of the captain's own table, kicked the men from their hammocks to climb the rigging and take down sail in the wildest tempest, all he asked and more. And when he saw how willingly and well I obeyed, he took me for his son and began to teach me.

He put me to train the Samoyeds, little wolves, to corner our prey, and gave me the brined bull's pizzle—his stinger, he called it—to keep men and dogs to heel. He knew many languages, having been to sea with Malays, Franks, Tatars, Lascars and Huns and more whose tribes were unknown to me, teaching me useful scraps of those tongues—farewells, commands, insults, curses in English, German, French and Chineese—I'd hear most, on the long, slow days coasting the southern seas, where the ship rode the gentle westerlies, the birds followed behind, and even the most vicious among us dozed quietly and at peace under the cloudless blue. Auf wiedersehn, Goodbye, Au revoir, we murmured, back and forth, squatting together on the fantail, watching the gulls circling over the pale wake.

Even so, with him one had to take care **since** his thoughts were yielded up only by his choice, and no more than he wished. Once I was following him up the ladder from the hold, when his right leg dipped as if he were like to fall. I reached to steady him, but something stayed my hand before he was touched. He gave no sign

he had noticed, but a few days later, with his sickle smile, said, "You do well not to give help when none is sought. Your intent might be mistook, your hand forfeit."

He had his secrets but I could not but wonder if his body had its own, hidden even from him. I knew better than to observe him for signs; he would have taken it ill, and ceased to trust. So we went on as before.

On deck under the stars, we shared his vodka, and passing the cup back and forth, we listened to one of Peter's songs floating on the quiet breeze, making it easier to bear in our hearts the memories it raised.

"He sings well, your brother," the master said. "Even the dogs are quiet."

It was so, they'd stopped their caged howling to listen.

*Dear Mother, remember
The boys who went away
who crossed the broad steppe
That bright, windy day...*

"You know he will not last. The little Prince will tire of hearing again and again the same songs and throw him back to the crew. You nor I can stop what the men will do to him."

"I know. But perhaps not. He has many songs. Always more than I remembered."

"Does he make them, then?"

I hadn't thought of this. "It could be. There is never an end."

"A rare gift."

"Is his master a prince, so?"

"Yes." He passed me the cup.

"What does His Worship here?"

"Nothing, as you see. Listens to songs. Buggers your brother. Picks his teeth and smokes his pipe and jokes with the ensign, another noble. It is said your brother's master killed a gifted poet in a duel and was sent away in disgrace."

"And he a prince!"

My master laughed. "In your country, princes are ten to the kopeck and produce nothing. But killing a poet and ending all he might have written steals from everyone, even generations unborn. You would see this if you learned to read," he said then.

In a few more months, before we had made the turn north from the Malacca Straits, with his help, I had learned. I saw then what he meant for he had the book of the one the prince had killed, and the poet's words stirred feelings the acts of men had always left untouched.

