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

Fǎnpìhuà Press
Iowa City
2000

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Printed in the United States of America

Translated from the first edition of Hans Kirk, *Slaven* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1948) and the fourth (Tranebog) edition of Hans Kirk, *Slaven* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1998).

Cover illustration: Judy Polumbaum

Suggested Library of Congress Cataloging
Kirk, Hans, 1898-1962
The Slave/by Hans Kirk. Translated and with an Introduction by Marc Linder
ix, 150 p.; 21 cm.
Includes bibliographical references
ISBN 0-9673899-4-1
PT8175K53 S5313 2000
Library of Congress Control Number 00-134645

839.88
K555!
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In the evening two cannoneers fetched the Indian down on the orlop deck. He didn't resist, but calmly let himself be led along and bound to the main-mast. Doña Inez went over to him, and stood a while watching him.

— Have you thought it over? she asked, and her voice trembled so the words almost sounded like a request.

— I don't know what you demand of me?

— Obedience.

— I owe nobody obedience, the Indian answered.

— Then you must take your punishment, doña Inez said. I will punish you the way one disciplines a disobedient child. And some day you will understand it was for your own good, you fool.

She remained standing as if expecting him to say something, perhaps to yield and beg her for mercy. But he merely looked down apathetically at the deck like a person ready to meet his fate and accept the inevitable. The passengers had gathered in small clusters and regarded the scene with curiosity. Don Ramon went over to doña Inez.

— You are going to punish him, gracious señora? he asked.

— Nothing else can bring him to reason, doña Inez said, trying to keep her voice calm. Nothing works, and this afternoon he committed an act of gross insubordination. The man must learn to understand that he is a slave and has to obey. I'm sorry it's come to this, but what should one do? I really can't acquiesce in a slave's not caring the least about what I order him to do.

She was annoyed about having given this superfluous explanation, about her nervousness, her anger, and her sorrow. Don Ramon shook his head. He saw before him the earnest Indian youngsters who played ball on the lawns at the university, he saw them sitting with dignity and meekness on the benches at the lectures and absorbing wisdom's good nourishment. Oh, what rich abilities and possibilities there were in this people! But also much stubbornness, wickedness, and savagery, and sometimes

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there was no other means than punishment, tough corporal discipline.

— Only this one time, señora, but do it thoroughly, he said. The man is intelligent, and he will be a source of delight for you.

— I hope so, doña Inez said dismissively. She wasn't in the mood to accept good advice from the learned little theologian.

— The Indians are basically good, don Ramon said. Like all humans, by the way. The point is just to find one's way to the original human goodness and liberate it. It sometimes happens that we have to handle a person roughly; in order to enable goodness to get the chance to grow freely in the light we have to clear away the obstacles and pull up the weeds. And especially these primitives we have to treat like children, good children or stubborn . . .

Doña Inez stamped impatiently on deck.

— Your principles are undoubtedly very honorable, fray Ramon, she said. But it's a matter of total indifference to me whether my slaves are good or evil, sinners or saints, as long as they obey my will.

— Forgive me, señora, I understand that the Indian has roused your anger, don Ramon said. And naturally slaves must obey. Both the divine and the natural laws demand it.

When will the day come when the white and the brown man will extend their hands to each other, he thought. The Indians have been driven from the rich plains and the coast's luxuriant, easily accessible regions, or they earn their handful of corn as slaves on the plantations or as tenants or day laborers on the huge haciendas. But in the depths of the jungle and behind the impassable mountains they still live, wild, proud, and full of hate. They hate the conquerors who overthrew their empires and made their gods homeless. And if one comes too close to the jungle, a poison arrow comes whizzing out of the dark, green depths. The snake still has its sting.

Perhaps it was God's will that these empires be conquered and the true faith be disseminated for the salvation of the heathen, and punishment cannot be dispensed with, insubordination must be subdued. But power must also serve good, fray Ramon

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believes, and some day compulsion and slavery will be replaced by Christian brotherhood, people will love and serve one another in piety and humility, and together white and brown will seek the sources of wisdom at don Ramon's university. That's why doña Inez's reply torments him, for this lady is very rich and powerful, and she could do much to alleviate the Indians' conditions.

Don Ramon sees how one of the cannoneers is preparing the whip for use. It's a scourge with a short handle and long leather straps with lead balls. He sees the young Indian standing and waiting for the punishment, calmly, as if what is now about to happen had nothing to do with him. Couldn't this brother be spared? he asks himself, couldn't he be turned toward obedience by wise and gentle words? But oh, even if the church bells ring in the cities, and the mother of God has her temples, the serpent goddess Nakawe is still alive, and Mother Eastwind and Mother Westwind take turns blowing across the plains and rocking the ripening corn.

The first blow of the scourge whistled across the Indian's bent back. A trembling went through him, but no complaint came from his mouth. Then he began to sing in a voice that mounted into an ecstasy of pain, but also of pride and obstinacy. Astonished, doña Inez listened and turned toward don Ramon.

— What is he singing? she asked. You understand his language, fray Ramon.

Don Ramon translated slowly, fumbling for the right words:

The whip sings over me,
as it has sung over my brothers.
It plows my back,
as the cornfield is plowed,
before the rainy season comes.
And the blood streams from me,
like the goddess, the eternally streaming,
which twists in brooks and rivers.
Afterwards comes the harvest.
Afterwards comes death,
and let it be welcome.

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My enemies stand around me
and enjoy my torment.
Contemptible are they,
with small and evil souls.
Nothing can they do to me,
for pain is my brother
which puts its cloak around me
and exhorts me to leave
the house, which no longer is my soul's.

With song I will go,
from the house which is now a house of bondage.
With joy I will go,
for never did my enemies overcome me.
Contemptible are they,
and even more contemptible is their god,
a god for thieves and robbers.
Swallow them up, mother of the waters,
let them suffer an ignominious death,
and permit not their breath
to pollute the pure air.

The strong, stocky cannoneer used the scourge calmly and systematically, and the led balls tore off the skin in strips. The Indian stood as if clothed in a cloak of blood which streamed from his chest, shoulders, and back down over his thighs and legs and collected in a puddle on deck. And steadily he sang, but his voice became weaker, as if death were approaching. Doña Inez couldn't take her eyes off him, and she had to keep her wits about her in order not to rush over and embrace the bloody body and hug it weeping. A sorrowful horror seized her mind, and in a strange way the sight of the indomitable slave under the whip blended with the memory of the stooped, gaunt men in the gold mine, their joyless wives and famished children. Each of the blows struck her like a terrible torment in her soul. It was as if she saw a child mistreated, and nevertheless the slave was not a child, but rather a young god, suffering for humans' sins and drop by drop tasting death's bitter chalice. She had a feeling of being far away from reality, and as if in a bad dream she could

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not move a hand or a foot to stop the scourge whistling across his bloody back.

The cannoneer lowered the scourge and turned toward her, and there was something cold and hostile in his look.

— Will that do? he asked. Or does the gracious señora wish that I whip him to death?

— That will do, she heard her own voice say, and she was surprised by its calm and everyday sound. She felt like screaming, like throwing herself down at the feet of the semi-unconscious slave and begging him for forgiveness for all the evil in the world. But she remained standing and saw how the two cannoneers half dragged, half carried him away, leaving a bloody trail behind him on the deck planks.

She heard that someone was talking to her, a voice that came from far away. Then she slowly awoke from the nightmare and discovered that don Jesus was standing next to her. He had apparently said something or other and was waiting for her answer.

— Excuse me, she said. I don't know where my thoughts were. What your right reverend said escaped me.

— I was talking about your slave, señora, said the inquisitor, a little offended. I don't know whether you understood the words in his song, but it contained a gross blasphemy. He flung out words of scorn against the Almighty. I take it for granted that his immortal soul's salvation is on your mind.

— Naturally, doña Inez said.

— Would you turn your slave over to me, don Jesus said in his friendly, old-womanly fashion.

— What will you do to him?

— Do what I can to save his soul.

— With torture?

— With all means, and is a human soul not worth it? You have had him whipped to teach him obedience to you, but isn't it more important that he learn obedience to God? What his body comes to suffer will perhaps save him in eternity.

— But I don't think this slave can be subdued, doña Inez said. He is created out of different material than other humans.

— The person doesn't exist who can't be subdued into hear-

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ing God's voice and yielding to God's law, don Jesus said gently. It would be bad, señora, if we didn't know how to use pain to get the soul to speak. Be assured that we know how, and if you will turn the Indian over to the inquisition, he will become a new testimonial to the fact that no one can stand his ground in the struggle against God.

— But he scoffed at the whip.

— How is a primitive cannoneer supposed to know how one speaks to a human soul through pain, the inquisitor said. One could just as well set a blacksmith to forging an ornament of gold and precious stones. But I shall put a purple cloak of suffering around his shoulders and press pain's crown of thorns around his temples, and in the pain his soul will open itself to the light and mercy will pour forth over him as it did over the disciples that blessed Whitsunday morning.

Don Jesus no longer resembled a good-natured old woman. His cheeks had taken on color, and in his eyes an ecstatic fire was ablaze. He had seized doña Inez's hand and held it firmly in both of his, as if fearing she would go her way before he managed to finish talking. She wanted to tear herself loose, but couldn't; it was as if the all too soft hands were holding her tightly in an iron grip.

— No, she whispered. You can't have him! I myself will try to save his soul. I will make sure he receives instruction in the faith; I will give him the best teachers. I won't turn him over to you, right reverend.

— You love this slave, señora, I know it, don Jesus said. But I, too, love him. And while your love is carnal love, I love his soul. I love him as God has commanded that we love our brothers, and I will guide his soul to God.

— As an executioner you want to torment him . . .

— As God's executioner, yes. You whipped him to coerce his body into submission, I want to do it to coerce his soul into salvation. And don't speak with contempt about the executioner, doña Inez. You are a rich and powerful woman, but what would your wealth be if the executioner didn't guard it, and what would your power mean if the executioner didn't exercise it? One can

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vault a heaven of splendor over kings and princes and fill the world with song in their honor, but it's the executioner who keeps their thrones afloat, and without his sword and wheel, his tongs and scourges, the kings' scepter would be only a foolish toy. It's the executioner's hand that guides our world, his coarse, humble, and merciless soul, that bears all the earth's power and splendor, and without him the mighty would lose their riches, their might, their estates, plantations, and haciendas, their hosts of servants and slaves, their lives as kings. With sword and gallows he watches over *your* wealth when you're sleeping, with whip and scourges he carries out your will, punishes the presumptuous who want to rise up against power, and checks the headstrong minds, and it is God's work he carries out. For God is the God of the mighty, and God wants there to be poor and rich, strong and weak, and by the executioner's hand he bestows upon us his mercy. From death and suffering the Almighty has created all power, and with death and suffering he strengthens it, and so it will be until judgment day, when he will judge the living and dead and as the great executioner himself hurl the condemned into the everlasting torments.

— Frightful words, don Jesus, whispered doña Inez.

— Words of truth, doña Inez, the inquisitor said. And as an executioner of God, I carry out his work and coerce obstinate souls into submission. You believe I wish to torture your Indian, and you are right—I want to. Along pain's dreadful path I want to wander into his soul and save it. With fire I want to drive the Devil out of his flesh and cleanse it; with iron and boiling oil I want to force him away from the abyss of perdition, for even a slave's soul is dear to God. And what does the suffering he must endure mean against the salvation he gains? I am God's executioner, but my hand is guided by divine love, and no earthly love knows of my love and care when the wretched scream frantically with pain, and of my heart's joy when the flesh abandons its resistance and the peace of the holy ghost pours forth over the tortured soul. I beg you again, señora, turn over to me your slave, whose soul is so full of defiance and heathendom, and let me lead him through suffering to blessed redemption.

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— No, doña Inez almost screamed. You can't have him, right reverend.

— As you wish, señora, don Jesus said, and released her hand. But then you must bear the heavy responsibility for the loss of his soul. I will pray for you.

Crook-backed, he shuffled like a tired old woman into his cabin, and doña Inez slowly began to feel her old self again. After all, what had happened? She'd had an insubordinate slave whipped—that was all. She'd had so many unreliable servants punished before—every single day slaves and serfs were whipped on her estates. And this slave was young and handsome, and she liked him, but in the final analysis, he was of course a slave like all the rest.

Again she saw the defiant brown face before her, and it was as if a hand clutched her heart tightly. For the point was that he was not a slave, but a man, whose indomitable will she couldn't bend, and the power he had over her was greater than the power she had over him. She could have him killed, and he wouldn't die, but live on like something dark and threatening and at the same time something happy and unattainable in her mind.

She tore herself loose from her thoughts and hurried over to the nearest cluster of chattering passengers. They became silent as she approached, as if realizing that something horrible had happened, and that she, a queen, had become a slave's slave.

— These punishments are barbaric, she said in a forced way. Unfortunately they must, of course, take place now and again. But let's drink a glass of wine.

She almost forced them to sit down in the chairs under the awning and had the wine fetched from her cabin. She didn't let the conversation come to a standstill even for a moment; she extinguished, as it were, the memory of the Indian's punishment, and she herself noticed how the world again became light and bright around her. But darkness and shame still shrouded her heart of hearts and would not let themselves be banished.

— I will guess that the right reverend don Jesus was prepared to take charge of your unfortunate slave, don Vargas said. I hope you didn't let him?

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— No, doña Inez said.

— Naturally, one ought to do what is in one's power to save an immortal soul, don Vargas said. But I must confess that under these restrictive spatial conditions, the smell of burnt flesh would not be especially pleasant. And don Jesus, who is an outstanding specialist, has a predilection for the application of glowing irons. Your slave . . .

— Let's talk about something other than my slave, doña Inez said.

— I merely wanted to remark that don Jesus's thoroughness is incomparable, don Vargas said, glancing over at her with curiosity. I heard about a case of a man prosecuted for witchcraft. His own wife informed on him, and the matter appeared so open and shut that a less conscientious judge than don Jesus would simply have had the man burned. Don Jesus, however, deemed it right for certainty's sake to have the man subjected to examination by torture, but the man denied the accusation with an obstinacy that was quite amazing after he had been treated according to all the rules of the art. He was strangled, squeezed, stretched and burned with glowing irons, whipped, pinched, and stuck, but not even boiling oil in his eye sockets got him to confess his guilt. And at the last moment, as he was about to give up the ghost during the interrogation, his wife confessed that her denunciation was false, and that she had wanted to get rid of her husband in order to marry her lover. Don Jesus's exemplary thoroughness in fact saved the unfortunate man's life.

— And what became of him, doña Inez asked.

— To be sure, he was no longer a real person, but don Jesus displayed great sympathy for and interest in him and procured permission for him to collect alms on the uppermost step of the cathedral's stairs. He sits there now blind and rather disfigured and begs for his daily bread, but he can't praise don Jesus enough, who in fact saved his life, and who afterwards had his wife broken on the wheel and burned, so that both earthly and heavenly justice were done in the most beautiful manner. But let's leave this topic and ask don Guilemo, who seldom keeps us company, to tell us about his travel experiences.

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The old man, who was sitting crouched in a chair and sipping at his sherry, blinked his eyes like a sick hen.

— We have heard about your expedition to find the fountain of youth, doña Inez said. It must have been a great disappointment for you.

— These countries are full of gossip and malicious twaddle, don Guilemo snapped.

— Miraculous if it existed, doña Inez said. Who doesn't dream of regaining his youth.

— In any event, there seem to be forces in nature we still aren't familiar with, despite the rapid development of modern science, don Vargas said. I'm not thinking of the sacred sources, where divine forces are at work and from which countless miracles can be reported, but of nature's own fountain of health. I once knew an 80-year-old man in Zaragoza who preserved his youth by drinking a can of warm breastmilk every morning.

A glint of interest appeared in don Guilemo's eyes, and he munched with his mouth like a rabbit eating a tuft of grass.

— He explained that the treatment was unfailing, don Vargas continued. And in truth, this old man's strength was so marvelous that he himself impregnated his own wet nurses. It was said, moreover, that he did it with the greatest enjoyment and extraordinary energy.

Darkness was about to fall, and doña Inez had lights and more wine brought. The night darkness surrounded the little party like a wall; only the foaming seas and the phosphorescence shone. It was quiet, but once in a while the sails flapped when a gust of wind took hold of them, and each time the conversation died out. It was as if all of them held their breath and sensed their hearts beating for fear of something threatening and fateful which came out there from the sea or perhaps from the depths of the ship. But immediately afterwards the conversation started up again, a bit too ardently, as if it were necessary to speak in order to soothe the heart's inexplicable unrest.

— What are we afraid of, doña Inez was thinking. Is it the lone man who is himself without fear and alone dares defy all our frightful power? Perhaps the ground we've built our might

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on is as fragile as the thin planks that separate us from the ocean deep.

Again she felt the insuperable longing clutch her heart, and while once more pouring wine into the glasses, she decided she would see him yet tonight. She would kneel before him and beg him for forgiveness, and mournfully bitter and humiliated she whispered anew:

— An Indian slave. A slave whom I could have killed.

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