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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A couple of minutes later the ship's bell tolled and wild confusion arose on the San Salvador. The sailors on watch below came running from the orlop deck, and the passengers emerged from the cabins half-dressed and startled. The lanterns were lit and moved in the night-time darkness, and in the midst of the noise and the shouting the weak, hollow blows could be heard steadily from the bowels of the ship.

Captain van Laahr didn't take time to answer the passengers' questions. He had hurried up to the bridge and shouted his orders through the speaking-trumpet. The viceroy made his way through the crush and reached him up there.

— What does this all mean, captain? he asked in a voice hoarse from exasperation.

— It means it's a matter of life or death, van Laahr said.

— I am entitled to a clear answer. What in heaven's name has happened?

— Don't you hear the blows, man? the captain said, totally forgetting his respect for the viceroy's high position.

— Where is the noise coming from?

— From the bottom of the ship. The Indian slave is gone, and one of the carpenter's axes has disappeared. If he succeeds in knocking out one of the ship's planks, the tub will go down in less than a quarter of an hour. And we're at least two hours' sailing from Isla de Pinos. We're too heavily loaded, all that damned gold . . .

— Well, then go fetch the scoundrel up, or blow his head off, don Pedro shouted. That's what you have your cannoneers for. You can't just let him sink the ship without undertaking anything at all.

— Now there's a bright idea, excellency. First we have to find out where he is on the ship. There are many cargo holds, but the investigation is in full swing. Now just go down—this is serious, and there's no time for palaver.

— The viceroy was about to complain about this lack of respect, but at that very moment José Nuñez came running.

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— We found him, he said. He broke the hatch midships in the 'tween-decks and crawled down that way.

— Is the water rushing in?

— I think so.

— Fling a couple of Negroes down to him, and promise them freedom and a reward if they can kill him. We have to try to get the leak repaired. Take the cannoneers along and let them see if they can get a shot at him with the muskets. I'll give instructions to the second mate and Chaparrito to man the pumps and make the boats ready. We're on course for Punta Brava.

— The viceroy noticed his legs shaking under him as he clambered down from the bridge. In the dark he ran into a man who took hold of him so as not to fall. It was don Jesus.

— What's happening here? the inquisitor asked. What in the name of everlasting God is going on here?

Don Pedro explained to him what the captain had said, and don Jesus squeezed his arm.

— I don't fear death, he said. I do *not* fear it. But it's terrible to meet it here in the cold loneliness of the ocean. A Christian can't die that way; God will not permit it. Death must be full of solemnity, and one should surrender one's soul to God without terror. But not this horrible cold deep! Don Pedro, we must immediately secure ourselves space in one of the boats. God doesn't want us to die this way.

— The boats first have to be prepared, and after that is done, I assume one will make proper allowance for rank and station.

— Do you think we'll go under, don Pedro? the inquisitor whispered. Say you don't think so. It's not right if heaven lets me die now. I still have many souls to save, still have work to do in God's vineyard. Have I not earned the Lord's and all the saints' mercy? Have I not fought against sin and heresy my whole life? One can't let me die in this unworthy way.

He cried, desperate like a child or an old woman, and his grief suddenly made don Pedro calm. He remembered he was a man of an old and honorable lineage, and that his forefathers had had the courage to look death in the eye, indeed, to seek it out. Now the time had come when he could show that he had *sangre*

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azul, blue blood in his veins. If he perished now, presumably someone would be saved who could recount that he, Pedro Carajaval, had met his death like a man.

In the lanterns' weak gleam he saw people stagger past, shouting and crying. He caught a face here and there and noticed features distorted by terror and almost unrecognizable. He saw a glimpse of fray Ramon, who was clinging to a young brother in the order, and he shouted to don Vargas, who rushed past. But the Jesuit didn't hear him—he was on his way to the long-boat in the stern. A group of members of the order knelt on the deck and sang in clanging, fearful voices:

— *Miserere nobis, Domine!*

— Miserere mihi, Domine! don Jesus wailed, and don Pedro took him by the arm and led him over to the kneeling priests and monks. Then he went up on the bridge to the captain.

— How do things stand? he asked.

— Not well, she's already lying a bit lower in the water. I'd recommend that your excellency remain near the boats.

— I find your advice quite inappropriate, don Pedro said. In my family it is not customary for us to try to save ourselves before others. I shall remain here.

Captain van Laahr looked at him with astonishment and hit him on the shoulder so hard that don Pedro almost went down on his knees.

— Pardon, excellency, but it's good to meet a man! he said.

And don Pedro felt so aglow with pride for this spontaneous recognition from a gruff and simple seaman as if the king had made him knight of the golden fleece. He straightened his small, gaunt body a bit and thought about the fact that he was adding a new glory to his family's chronicle of heroes. Now he was ready to die.

José Nuñez had gotten hold of a couple of Negro slaves and summoned the cannoneers. One way or another, colonel Gonzales must have gotten news of what was going on, and joined them. They stood for a moment on the between-deck and looked through the hatch down into the dark deep.

— Listen to the water, the colonel said. The ship is leaking.

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— Down with you! José Nuñez shouted to the Negroes. If you can get the upper hand on him, you'll get your freedom and a thousand escudos. If you don't get a move on, you'll be shot.

— The two Negroes looked at each other and cast a glance at the cannoneers standing with their muskets at the ready. Then they put their knives in their mouths and climbed down the ladder.

— And now after them, José Nuñez commanded. While he's fighting with the Negroes, we'll overpower him.

Colonel Gonzales was the first man with sword in hand. José followed with a lantern, and last came the cannoneers muskets at the ready.

They reached the bottom and were standing in water to their waists. José Nuñez lifted the lantern up over his head, and in the weak gleam of the light they saw the Negroes standing with their strange gray-wan faces. The Indian slave wasn't there.

— He drowned, the colonel said. He used the ax till he fell down from exhaustion. But he did his work, and how the hell are we going to get the leak stopped?

José was already on his way up to the carpenter. The colonel waded over to the side of ship and found the leak.

— Hopeless, he mumbled. This leak can't be repaired. And I prefer to die under the open sky than to drown like a rat in a hole.

Cursing, he climbed up the ladder, and the others followed behind. He felt a deep sorrow, not because he was going to die, for he had been close to death many times, but because he wouldn't be allowed to carry out his plans for the conquest of the northern border districts. He had hoped to erect a memorial to himself as a conquistador, and now who would remember colonel Gonzales? The officers in his garrison in half a year's time would learn that he had died at sea and would drink a good glass to his honor, but his life's great idea would die with him.

— To hell with it all, he thought. Who can see any meaning in life? A damned Indian goes crazy and everything is over with. And it's exclusively a result of the soppy humanitarianism of modern times. The damned slave should have been whipped to

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death. But at least I'll be spared seeing how the whole thing ends. Let the rest of them worry about it.

The priests' trembling voices rose toward heaven and melded with desperate screams and wild oaths. The sailors struggled with the two long-boats to get them into the water, while the passengers swarmed around them and tried to climb into them. Pablo Avarano and Juan Gomez had found a corner in the forecastle deck where they sat and listened to the noise and the screams. Don Pablo had been in the mess and found a couple of bottles of the sour wine, and each put his bottle to his mouth.

— This will probably be the last drink we enjoy together, you good soldier and peasant Juan Gomez, he said. And what are we going to think now? Probably you'll never get the chance to sit on your own farm and drink wine with the *alcalde*. But life goes on, and it will be tit for tat among humans until they learn to rule over it. People like us two will be born by the thousands, and they'll be confronted with the same problems, and their sluggish brains and sleepy hearts will some day perhaps learn to hate, as this slave hated. Hate those who take our freedom from us and make ourselves masters of our own lives.

— He's also taking innocent people to death with him, Juan Gomez said.

— We're all guilty. What are you and what am I? Didn't you draw your sword for injustice, didn't you let yourself be used for repression and violence? And wasn't I a God awful fool, when I should have fought and let myself be tied to the mast and sung the song he sang? He was an Indian and a primitive, but a new world shall be built from his heart's pride and courage when the old one goes down like this ship. Are you afraid to die, brother Juan? Take comfort that there's a drink more bitter than a little salt water in your mouth.

— I'm not afraid, Juan Gomez said.

— It's the gold that's dragging the ship down into the deep, don Pablo said. It's the bloody gold that's to blame for all of humanity's destruction. See how low we're already lying in the water. In a bit we'll have to jump out and try to find a piece of wreckage to cling to. But just in case, farewell amigo.

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They hugged and kissed each other, and took off their outer garments and shoes. The clouds had scattered and the moon had risen. One saw the struggling crowd around the boats, and the coast of the Isla de Pinos could be glimpsed like a bank of clouds. And the monks' and priests' *miserere* rose steadily toward heaven, at times drowned out by wild screams and accompanied by the roar of the waves, which had come quite close. Doña Inez had sat down in her customary chair under the awning and stared absentmindedly at the eerie scene which was being played out in the ghostly light of the moon. She saw the kneeling and singing clerics and glimpsed don Jesus's figure, which had collapsed and lay like a shapeless bundle on death's rack.

She awoke from her thoughts when the *oidor* sat down next to her.

— Why aren't you trying to get into one of the boats, don Francisco? she asked, wishing merely that he would go and leave her in peace.

The *oidor* didn't answer immediately, but bent down and took the gallon jug doña Inez's company had drunk from a few hours ago. He shook it, confirmed there was still something in it, and poured it into the glasses.

— For one thing, gracious señora, the overcrowded boats will inevitably capsize, and for another it isn't easy to decide who ought to live and who ought to die. I've never felt edified by religious ceremonies, but at the moment in a strange way I'm filled with great joy. In a little while I'll be freed of something that has plagued me my entire life. It's quite simply all over for a lick-spittle, an ambitious jurist, a foolish *oidor*, whose shame it is that he knew better. I'm gloating a bit over the fact that the beast didn't succeed in worming his way to governor.

— He was a man, doña Inez said.

— Who? the *oidor* asked with surprise.

— My Indian. And isn't it strange, don Francisco, that I never met a man before? I was married, and I had lovers. Not at all so few lovers. You could also easily have been one of them.

— With my ram face.

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— No, really, you could have been. But I never met a man before. It's very strange. He came from a world we consider primitive, and he was my slave. I had a right to kill him, I could do with him what I wanted. But I, who loved power and only it, could not gain power over him. Now that everything's over with, I know how terrible power is. It killed in me what should have been allowed to live, it killed him, and it killed us all. It destroys everything that is originally genuine in us, everything that should give us joy.

— That's also my experience, the *oidor* said. But if I lived on tomorrow, I'd begin where I left off today. It's this disgust with ourselves that kills us. Perhaps not purely physically, but it hollows us out and makes us into lovers of death. I'm actually sitting with my soul full of hatred and looking forward to the fact that the *oidor* don Francisco must die. I rejoice at his dread of death, for he has been my worst enemy. If his calf muscles at this moment tremble a tiny bit, it fills me with a joyful thrill. Let him just suffer, for he destroyed my existence. Power created him and ruled over him, and he prevented me from getting joy from my life. To your health, doña Inez. Now look there!

With one hand, which was shaking perceptibly, don Francisco pointed toward the San Salvador's stern. The one boat had been put into the water, and a wave washed it against the side of the ship. The sides of the boat were smashed, and it rolled over. One saw people struggling in the water and disappear one after the other. The ship was now lying so low that the waves swept over the deck, and the singing and praying clerics fled up onto the quarter-deck.

— One isn't lacking clerical participation at the burial, the *oidor* said, and laughed a little. On this occasion both priests and choir singers have to follow along into the grave, which seems to be disagreeable enough. They forgot to take don Jesus along, and now he's going overboard.

A wave foamed over the deck midships and sucked the unconscious inquisitor out with it. He rocked for a moment on the waves and disappeared. The other boat was now in the water and rowed away from the sinking ship. It was overcrowded with

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people and had barely gotten a boat's length from the ship before a wave filled it, and it sank.

— Miserere, the *oidor* said gently. And in a few minutes it will be our turn. It's odd, highly odd. I believe there's still one more glass of sherry left.

He poured, lifted the glass, and drank to doña Inez.

— You flattered me more than you suspect with your comment that I could easily have been one of your lovers, he said.

— But I don't think I could have loved you.

— That would also have been asking for too much. But in any case I'm glad for the honor of dying together with you. If the priests would just stop bawling so loudly. Our Lord must surely have heard them. Do you believe in God, doña Inez?

— No, doña Inez replied.

— I don't either, the *oidor* said.

— Let's sit completely quietly, doña Inez said. In a moment it will be all over.

She emptied her glass and closed her eyes. She saw before her her fields where the Indians worked stooped in the scorching sun, she saw their worn-out wives and gaunt children they carried on their backs. And in her gold mine the children didn't get past a couple of years old, and the wives hadn't the strength to cry at their small graves, and there was nothing else to do but sentence them to harsher punishment, the over-*calpixqui* said. And there stood the slave Pancuiaco, tied to the mast, the whip lashes wrapping themselves around his bloody back.

— But I loved him, don Francisco, she said. I loved him.

— Yes, the *oidor* replied. But whom did I love? Oh, at this moment I don't remember anything of my life.

The evening of the next day a boat drifted through the breakers on the coast of the Isla de Pinos. Five men rode in its wake. A foolish and worn-out sailor, Alberto, an English merchant, Samuel Rayburn, a middle-aged soldier, Juan Gomez, a clever rogue, Pablo Avarano, and an old man, count Guilemo Castillon, who promised to give two gold candlesticks to the cathedral in Havana as thanks for his salvation.

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