

# 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**

**Fānpihuà Press  
Iowa City  
2000**

Copyright © Hans Kirk & Gyldendalske Boghandel, Nordisk Forlag  
A/S, Denmark, 1948

Translation and Introduction Copyright © 2000 by Marc Linder

All rights reserved

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!  
tL74

Not until toward evening the next day did the upper-class passengers gather under the awning on the quarter-deck. The coast of the mainland could still be glimpsed like a fog-bank on the horizon, and once in a while one felt the dry warmth from the plains like a blast from a baker's oven. Most of them had been seasick the first night at sea, and neither the viceroy nor the inquisitor had made an appearance yet, but were resting in their cabins.

Doña Inez Escobedo was sitting in a bamboo chair surrounded by cavaliers. She had slept splendidly at night, gotten up early in the morning, and eaten with an excellent appetite. She was in a slightly low-cut silk dress which revealed her beautiful round shoulders, and the red awning gave her cheeks a fine tint, as if she were still a very young girl. Her arms were beautiful, her hands with the many expensive rings lean and fine, and when she sat down, it wasn't to be seen that she was a bit too matronly broad across the hips.

Next to her sat the young, elegant Jesuit priest don Vargas, who for some years had resided in the western lands and felt it as a banishment and now was finally returning home to civilization. On the other side she had the *oidor* don Francisco de Elinaz, who had been designated as governor of one of the provinces and was now on his way to the court to arrange his appointment with appropriate means. The other two around the low table were the young officer don Luis de Zuniga, whose genealogical table was just as long as his purse was empty, and an English merchant Samuel Rayburn, who had been on a business trip to the New World.

Doña Inez had had wine fetched from her cabin, an excellent sherry, and the atmosphere was light and free. The San Salvador was sailing with a serviceable wind and there was every prospect of a fairly easy and pleasant voyage.

A big mottled butterfly with its wings extended had settled on the awning.

— Look, doña Inez said, pointing to it. It has probably taken

the awning for a flower bed, and now it has to come along on the entire voyage.

— Rather, it thought you were a flower, señora, don Luis said and tilted his young, beautiful head affectionately.

Doña Inez looked at him the way one looks at a boy who has made a stupid remark.

— Poetry is wasted on me, señor, she said coolly. I've been married twice and can distinguish good prose from bad poetry. Let us rather talk about something amusing. Tell us something, don Vargas.

Don Vargas bowed politely toward her:

— What do you want to hear about, gracious señora?

— Gossip, malicious gossip, she said. About those who are not present. What else are ocean voyages for? Tell us something about the inquisitor, don Vargas.

— It is altogether impossible to say anything disparaging, let alone malicious, about the venerable don Jesus. On the contrary, books could be written about the invaluable services he has rendered religion, and I am absolutely certain that will be done. But in order that one understand what a prominent personality he is, I shall sketch his career very briefly. Don Jesus belongs to one of the preeminent and rich families from which the good Lord prefers to obtain his highest servants, and at quite a young age he became a bishop. It was to be sure in New Spain and in a rather remote nook, near the Almira river, but a bishop is a bishop just as an egg is an egg.

— Why did one place a young man of good family in a ministry in this desolate region? the *oidor* asked.

— It was in accordance with his own wish. Don Jesus was, you must know, not only of good family, but in possession of a rare piety. He felt it as a calling to sally forth into the mission field and save darkened heathen souls. In his soul lived a youthful and visionary dream of sacrificing his life for the faith and gaining the martyr's crown, and the only thing that prevented him from doing that was the lamentable fact that the Indians in his district were so pious and peaceful that it was completely impossible for him to find his martyrdom. The church taxes

were paid to the last penny, and the Indians did not nurture the least wish to stone their bishop or burn him. On the contrary, they showed him the greatest deference and filled the church to the last pew every time he preached.

— As a rule one ought not to rely on this apparent submission, the *oidor* said lecturing.

— Undoubtedly your excellency is completely correct about that. And don Jesus gradually came to recognize that the population might well be good-natured and obedient, but that this Christianity was not deep-seated. The Indians tended to their corn fields, drank their cassava beer, and dutifully attended church for mass, confession, and communion. But the deeper understanding of the sacred faith was lacking, and this lukewarmness inspired don Jesus. He resolved to rouse this primitive Indian population, which regarded the true faith in which alone salvation is to be found as a kind of magic and believed that one could sleep oneself into salvation. He decided to hold a series of revival sermons, where he took things at their root, so to speak, and you would have been pleased with his Christian ardor and fervor, señora. He told the Indians about hell, and it was really hell. One could hear the fire crackle, smell the stench of sulphur, and hear the unfortunate people's desperate screams. And quite particularly he gave a detailed and picturesque depiction of the devil's person and horrible power. In sermon after sermon he portrayed the prince of darkness in all his ugliness, talked about his deeds and evil schemes, and when he cast a look at his terrified parishioners, he was not at all dissatisfied with the result of his efforts. But life sees to it that the trees don't grow up into the sky. Among his priests was a mestizo, quite a talented fellow, who knew how to use his eyes, and one day he sought an audience with his bishop.

— Your most reverend father . . . he said hesitatingly.

— Just speak freely, my son, don Jesus encouraged him.

— I believe there's something wrong with these Indians. He said it with a certain contempt since half-bloods seldom nurture much respect for full-blooded Indians.

— There's something wrong with all people, whether we are

white or brown, don Jesus said gently. That comes from original sin, my son.

— To be sure, most reverend, but I have come to learn that the Indians are holding divine services at night and making sacrifices out in the mountains.

— Sacrifices! don Jesus burst out, justifiably becoming enormously appalled. To their old gods? I thought they were all converted.

— They are, they long ago forgot all that heathen abomination, and in the last fifty years they have lived like pious Christians, the priest said with real regret in his voice. But I'm afraid that your most reverend's Christian and fiery sermons have given the naive natives an all too violent impression of Satan's power. Those who have been led astray have gotten the sinful idea that it's Satan and not God who has the greatest power, and now they have set about appeasing him with sacrifices.

— Are you trying to tell me they're worshipping Satan!

— It does not beseem a humble servant to teach a man of the highest wisdom, the mestizo said modestly. But as far as I'm concerned, it looks as though it's devil worship that's taking place at night in the gorge at Antomacao.

Don Jesus at first refused to believe in the dreadful possibility, but at last he resolved to undertake a personal investigation. One evening the mestizo informed him that the Indians had left their huts, and that they presumably had stolen away to perform their rites. Together with a couple of his priests don Jesus walked out to the gorge, and there he saw it with his own eyes. His whole parish was gathered around an image which without the slightest doubt represented the prince of darkness, and they sang hymns to it and performed sacrifices of goats and fowl. It was a clear case of satanism.

— There was of course something logical in the Indians' reasoning, doña Inez said.

— It is sufficiently well-known that Satan has a predilection for acting by means of logic, don Vargas nodded. Don Jesus of course immediately intervened, and a big affair was made of it with excommunication and a whole series of autos-da-fe. As

proof of his zeal it may be mentioned that he had his own lover—a beautiful mestizo—charged when he discovered that she had been among the satanists. She was convicted and burned.

— Did the pious bishop have a lover? Samuel Rayburn asked.

— Don Jesus was a human being, and he had a lover. We have our customs, as you have yours, señor.

— But his vow of chastity?

— Don Jesus surely settled that with his father confessor, and it is not ours to interfere, don Vargas said.

Rayburn was a short-legged, undersized man with a blond beard, gray eyes, and a sunburned, obstinate bull's neck. There was something substantial and immovable across his square figure, and the Jesuit looked at him with an arrogant smile, while he sat there with pearls of sweat on his broad forehead, where the veins swelled angrily. Don Vargas was a European, but with a Spanish taste for bullfighting.

— Our custom can of course seem strange, he said teasingly. I'm certain the English regard it as a waste of mercantile values to burn fully able-bodied Indians exclusively out of solicitude for their immortal souls. In Britain, I've heard it said, they are content to burn worn-out old women.

— Yes, witches, Rayburn said. Women who are convicted of witchcraft.

— It seems to me I have heard something whispered about the fact that people of our faith are also not completely safe in your fatherland, señor.

— Every Catholic can with permission travel freely and unimpeded in the realms of the British king.

— As you do in his Catholic majesty's lands, although we are not fond of heretics.

— One thing surprised me not so little, the *oidor* intervened in the conversation. It is said that your well-known usurper Cromwell sold his prisoners of war to the lords in the Barbados. The price was 600 pounds of sugar for a man.

— That was a humane arrangement, Rayburn said. Otherwise these prisoners would have been executed, and it brought

money into the treasury and necessary labor to the plantations.

— But there were caballeros among these prisoners.

— Most were of foreign origin.

— Nevertheless, noblemen were sold as slaves for 600 pounds of sugar. You must permit me to say, señor, that it appears to us to be a barbaric method. We regard it as contrary to the command of religion to hold white men as slaves, and what should one think of a statesman, even if he is a rebel and a usurper, who sells noblemen like cattle? That kind of thing cannot take place in a civilized country. And without in any way wanting to offend you, señor, I am forced to say that there is undoubtedly a connection between these barbaric methods and your country's apostasy from the sacred principles of religion.

A cockroach came scurrying across the deck toward Rayburn, and he rubbed it out with his foot.

— Poisonous vermin, he mumbled in his mother tongue.

The *oidor* jutted out his ram face to go on in the discussion, but doña Inez interrupted him:

— It's don Jesus we're talking about and not the morals of the English. Tell us more, don Vargas.

— There isn't much more to tell. This episode became crucial for don Jesus's life. He had obtained a horrible impression of the power of evil, and since it was impossible for him to serve the faith by becoming a martyr himself, he decided to make sure others were tortured with glowing irons and burned at the stake for the honor of the church and the faith. I have a bad head for numbers, and I don't know precisely how many Indian sorcerers, heretics, and apostates don Jesus has put an end to in his high office as inquisitor, but he not need be ashamed of the result. While all pious and good Christians honor and bless his name, he is hated by all those who have reason to fear him, and I sincerely believe that if a malefactor is given the choice between don Jesus's court and the claws of Satan in person, he will prefer to go directly to hell, and I'm certain he'd be smart to do so. Don Jesus's piety and zeal are limitless.

— Fortunately we are all faithful Catholics on board, doña Inez said, and you, don Samuelo, are of course protected.

— Yes, what do we know, don Vargas said. Don Jesus's ability to smell false doctrines and association with dark powers is no less marvelous than a bloodhound's ability to find a trace. No one is gentler at heart and milder in his being than don Jesus, and his way of life is more a saint's than a frail person's, but he is hard as the steel in a Saracen's blade when his exalted duties are at stake. I have heard it said that the Indians call him by a name that means something like "he who scorches the life from fowl and rips the guts from the belly of humans," and in truth, no inquisitor has ever demonstrated such noble energy as he. In fact the torment does not exist that don Jesus is not ready to let a body of sin suffer if he can thereby save an immortal soul.

— I look forward to making the acquaintance of such an excellent man, doña Inez said. When he has overcome his seasickness, he'll surely make an appearance among us less perfect ones.

She waved to a ship servant and had him pour wine into their glasses. It was about to get dark. The sunset had colored the sea scarlet, and one saw the phosphorescence of the sea gleam in the ship's wake. The red evening clouds were slowly effaced, and in the velvet-blue evening sky the constellations emerged like lights being lit. Down in the between deck, old don Guilemo trudged back and forth, supported by his two gigantic Negroes. They almost carried his tiny body, and his long bird's neck jutted out as if he were covetously lapping up the cool evening air. His eyes in their deep cavities shone like glass in the light from the deck lanterns.

Rayburn got up and said good night with a deep bow to doña Inez and a considerably briefer one to the company's gentlemen. He shared the cabin with don Luis and the old colonel Juan Gonzales and felt an urge to be alone for a while before going to bed. He bolted the door, unbuttoned his vest, and took out two books in worn leather bindings. One of them he used to make notes about his business affairs, the other was a prayer book. He sat down on the edge of the cot, and in the meager light from the little horn lantern studied the numbers in his account book. He knew them by heart beforehand, but it gave him a certain securi-

ty to sit and look at them and calculate the earnings once again. He had made good business deals; the long voyage had been worthwhile. And he still had a chance. He had made inquiries about doña Inez Escobedo, and this lady owned mines and large plantations. When a favorable opportunity presented itself, he would have to talk to her.

But, oh, this corruption, this levity, which is coupled with black superstition! Rayburn angrily shakes his heavy head; he hates these lands where everything is hot and luxuriant and stinks of decay. He has contempt for the Spaniards, the foolish noblemen and the hypocritical priests and monks, who twist God's pure and blessed word. But he has to be cautious, for it is far from safe for a foreign merchant to sojourn in these papist countries. The point is to hold one's peace, to be silent as the grave and talk only to God in one's private closet. Even here in the cabin, where he is now alone, it was as if something wild and guilty is lying in wait.

He takes the devotional book and reads a prayer for sea voyagers. Here in the cabin incense is burned and holy water sprinkled before the departure, he knows, because these fools believe of course that that kind of thing protects them against death and destruction, unenlightened as they are. But *he* talks by means of his prayer's printed words with his creator and asks that the almighty spare merchant Samuel Rayburn from destruction and shipwreck and other danger that can threaten those who are on the sea.

And while he is reading the good, strong sentences, whose sound is so well-known, the image of his house in the City emerges before him. It's Sunday, the floor is strewn with green sprigs, and outside it's drizzling, but the rain is marvelously cool. There's a weak fire glowing in the fireplace, one hears it crackle cosily, and his wife is sitting at the table, decorously clothed with her reddish-blond hair swept from her high, white forehead and gathered modestly under her cap. Along the wall stand his children, guilt-ridden, for after the morning prayer the week's account is to be settled. The good merchant Rayburn also has an account book in relation to God, where credit and

debit are painstakingly settled, and the account is regularly balanced. He himself is sitting at the end of the table in the high armchair with the Bible before him and reading God's word, and afterwards he interprets the scripture, for in his house every master ought to be a priest. At the other end of the table stand the servants, the neat girls clad in their Sunday best, the scribes, who live in his house, the man-servant and the coachman in fine cloth vests embroidered with green and red flowers. They too are anxious because perhaps they also have an entry they will answer for in the week's account.

So good and solid is Samuel Rayburn's domestic world, built on labor, honor, and strict fear of God. Here there is no levity, no loose words, but only a wall and immovable morality, which rests on the scripture's rock foundation.

— A bishop with a lover, he thought shaking his head, oh, Babylon, Babylon!