## 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

Fănpihuà Press Iowa City 2000



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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 K5S5! LL74



I am not fond of these Englishmen, the oidor said, they are people without culture or upbringing. They have acquired a set of square moral rules, which they take with them everywhere and in reality regard as the true ark of the covenant. Notice that the merchant was scandalized by the bishop's having a lover. We are a people with long experience and know that we are best served by bishops who have lovers.

- But they're clever businessmen, doña Inez said.
- Far too clever, the *oidor* said.
- Let's find a more amusing subject, doña Inez said. It's a pity to turn in early in the cool evening, and I hope my wine is good. Who's the old man by the way, don Vargas?

She made a slight gesture in the direction of don Guilemo, who at that moment was being led into his cabin by two of his Negroes and added:

- Terrible to become so old.
- But worse to die, señora. For most people eternal salvation seems to lack any attraction.
  - Do you know him?
- Everyone knows him. Our lands are great in extent, but we ourselves are few. Everyone knows everyone. Moreover, I have the pleasure of sharing the cabin with him on this voyage, which will scarcely be his last. Count Guilemo Castillon is an estate owner from a noble family, who has had good connections and has been a shrewd businessman. An uncle played an important role at the court and procured him various monopolies, which he has exploited with a hard hand. He traveled across the ocean to acquire a new youth, and now he is on the homeward journey just as old as when he sailed out.
  - A new youth?
- Surely you've heard about the fountain of youth Ponce de Leon searched for half a century ago? He tried to find it in Florida's mountains. Since then the legend has been just as vigorous as the fable of El Dorado. Naturally it's foolish, but what should we humans dream about if not inexhaustible wealth and eternal

youth? A lapsed Franciscan had gotten his fingers into don Guilemo and made him believe he knew where the fountain of youth was located. Presumably he got a suitable price for his information—what isn't a new youth worth? The old man is tough and doesn't want to let go of life. The story is told that he drank the blood of a newly slaughtered child. A Moorish magician used it as part and parcel of a rejuvenation treatment, which however remained without any visible result. Well, it's only nonsense, but his hunt for the fountain of youth is a fact the whole world knows in detail. The Franciscan arranged the expedition for him, and they really succeeded in dragging him on the endless trip to Florida's mountains and woods. For weeks his sedan chair rocked over savannahs and mountains, through jungles and swamps. It was a trip that could have taken the life of a man in his best years. But don Guilemo survived the whole thing.

- And the fountain of youth, did he find it? doña Inez asked.
- Do you think he looks as though he did, gracious señora? don Vargas smiled. But he reached the Barfaykaou valley in Florida. It's a nine-mile long valley, which the Indians consider sacred, and where there are no settlements. It's situated in the Apalatey mountains, and a single narrow pass leads into it. One has to know these valleys to form a notion of their marvelous beauty. The valley here is covered with oak trees, and small crystal-clear brooks ripple down from the mountain precipices. They collect into a slowly gliding stream, along whose banks live otter and beaver. Here wild chamois, akuyas, gambol whose hair is so long that it can be spun. Only seldom does one meet a group of Indians hunting for akuyas; otherwise there are only gurgling water streams, trees, and chirping birds. In Barfaykaou valley there is a fountain the Indians hold to be sacred. The water goddess, the mother of the serpent, Nakawe, mother of the Gods and all the world, lives in it, and if one bathes in its water, one's life is prolonged. We know these fables, of course. No matter how much we baptize the Indians, they keep believing in them.
  - After a long and exhausting journey, don Guilemo, more

dead than alive, his doctor, the Franciscan, and their retinue of Indians and Negroes came to the valley and succeeded in finding the sacred cave in the happy valley. Don Guilemo stood at the destination, which he had traveled across the ocean and through half a continent to find. He sits a bit in the sedan chair and looks out over the beautiful valley before he lets himself be lifted into the cave. The birds are chirping under the green foliage, a fish is splashing in the rivulet; it's like God's own paradise before Adam and Eve were created. He greedily inhales the fresh, spiced air; it's the fresh, immaculate land of youth itself, and the old sinner gets heart palpitations, a new life, quite a long life, and perhaps he thinks about what he can use it for. For new, sweet sins, for all evil, since people do not change. Oh no, señora, we are as we were once created, and a profound wisdom lies in the doctrine of original sin.

— Now just imagine this burlesque scene. One undresses the old man and places him under the fountain, which gushes out of the rock. There he sits, descendant of grandees of Spain, who fought with the Moors and conquered new worlds, peer of kings, in all his pitiful nakedness, bald, with withered limbs, while the Indians in silence and presumably with a bit of contempt look at the old man. He splashes water over himself, he wants to live anew, be young, begin life from the beginning, cast himself out into life, take women, love, and kill. But nothing happens. There is a deathly stillness in the half-dark cave, the Indians are standing like stone pillars; only the water is murmuring. Don Guilemo is sitting crouched under the slender ice-cold jet of water which comes from the earth's cold deep; his lips covering a toothless mouth are blue, his gaunt limbs are shaking from the cold. It can make one laugh or cry. He's an old child who wants to suck nature's breast. But the breast is empty, the nourishing milk doesn't reach his lips. Nothing happens, only the splashing of the fountain and the muffled song of birds outside the cave. And the tension becomes too powerful for him. He moves his lips, as if wanting to shout and conjure nature's spirits; he grabs himself by his gaunt breast, overgrown with tattered gray hair like a monkey's; he doubles himself up and falls over in a spasm.

Foam forms around his mouth, his limbs hammer convulsively against the cave's stone floor. The Indians are standing calmly, with faces as if carved in wood, staring at the old man, who is trying to flee from death.

- The bath in the fountain of youth had almost become don Guilemo's death. But two weeks later he more or less recovered his strength and began the trip back through the valley, where only the birds' chirping in the foliage and the fishes' splashing in the brooks interrupted eternity's repose. The small akuyas watched the procession with eyes that reflected the sky and the swaying trees. And now he is here unsubdued in his lust for life, en route to Europe on his ghastly quest for another fragment of this pitiful life.
- Death is frightful, doña Inez said with a little shudder. But it must be worse to fear death every day one lives. It's like dying every single hour.
- It is so much the more fortunate that we have another life to hope for, don Vargas said.
- But this life is beautiful, doña Inez said, and breathed deeply. It is very beautiful, don Vargas, and it is a great shame that we shall lose it. I understand don Guilemo well. We all want to live and rule and feel that we exist.
- One doesn't often experience such an evening, the oidor said. We are on a voyage which for most of us is significant, we have been torn away from our accustomed existence, and everything has become as new. One feels a marvelous happiness on this ship on this beautiful evening, with the mighty constellations of the universe over us and the ocean's tranquil swells around us. Perhaps the fear we carry with us innermost is the dread that we can never be expunged, and the happiness we now feel is joy over the fact that our life heretofore is gone, borne off by the ocean, perhaps to be washed up on a distant coast as an unknowable corpse. And let it just be buried there without anyone's getting to know who it was.
- Strange words to hear from a respected juridical officer, doña Inez said.
  - Strange words for myself too, the oidor said. At times the

question, however, has skimmed my consciousness, who basically is this oidor Francisco, what drives him, what kernel of energy is there most deeply within him? I know what he is when he sits in the courtroom: a link in a great human enterprise, a judge who passes sentence which a principle enjoins him to utter, and it does not require much intelligence to find out that that principle is the principle of power itself. We are inclined to the opinion that it is we who have the power, but on reflection it is self-explanatory that it is power that has us. Power gives us our opinions and our faith; it molds us in the form which serves it best. At times it has use for warriors, and we become soldiers, at times for statesmen, jurists, priests, or merchants, and it gives us our form according to its needs. And this oidor, whom our ironic friend don Vargas will doubtless compare with a braying juridical ram, is merely one of the functions of power, which it has created in its form and filled with its content.

- Far be it from me to use such a disrespectful expression, don Vargas said gently.
- The question is whether the *oidor* is anything other than a function, don Francisco continued. What is there in his innermost self, if there is anything at all other than an impulse toward death, a longing to escape power's claws? What remains when the wave of foam bursts, other than a bit of water? But all the same some drops of water. And deepest in us there must after all be something or other that is untouched by power, immaculate, and that we have not been able to destroy because it has hidden itself so deeply that we ourselves have not been able to find it.
  - One can perhaps call it soul, don Vargas said.
- With all due respect for theology I would prefer to avoid using this designation. The *oidor* of course has an official soul, which gets its nourishment from the faith's means of grace, but power has also created this soul and taken possession of it.
- And what is power? doña Inez asked. Perhaps the question is stupid?
- Not so stupid that we are not compelled to ask it, the oidor said. What is power, which fills us with its spirit and seizes us? What's your opinion, don Luis, sitting there so silent-



ly and pensively?

Embarrassed, the young officer smiled. He had drunk a lot of doña Inez's wine and found the conversation boring. The *oidor* really did resemble an old ram, but doña Inez was beautiful even if she was no longer young. And everyone knew that she was very rich.

- I'm not used to talking about such subtle things, he replied. I've never thought further about it. I'm an officer and my people must obey me because I have power over them. I have to obey my superiors, and as a soldier and nobleman I know that all power is united in the king, who was delegated it by God.
- That's a clear and soldierly answer, but it avoids the real difficulty, the oidor said. Because it's clear that the king too is only a function of power. And as far as God is concerned, don Vargas's report on don Jesus's Indians was very thought provoking. They abandoned themselves to satanism because they had found out that it was in reality Satan who was the greatest power in existence. We're good and enlightened Christians and don't nurture any doubt about God's omnipotence, but I'm seriously afraid that if it were demonstrated with good reasons that Satan was the most powerful one, we too would do humble homage to him. It is precisely God we honor and fear because he is omnipotent, and it's worth thinking about the fact that we began by crucifying our savior and didn't fall at his feet until we had a clear understanding that he was an emanation of the omnipotence. I'm not at all certain that don Jesus couldn't have found his martyrdom if he had combated power.
  - God's power? don Vargas asked.
- Now don't lead me on the path to the stake, I'm only a vain official who dreams of still more power before I close my eyes, the *oidor* smiled. But the indeterminable that at times speaks to me says to me that power is not of a good nature. If power didn't exist and force us to become what we are, we would perhaps discover fundamental values that now pass us totally by. I don't know, because power haunts me too, but once in a while I have an inkling of it. And I believe power is evil, for it bestows only emptiness on us and makes us into fools. That's

the way I'm talking now in the evening, when I feel free and easy, and perhaps also under the influence of your excellent sherry, señora, and tomorrow I'll kneel again before the almighty. Don Jesus will scarcely have reason to be dissatisfied with me.

Doña Inez sat with half-closed eyes and a little smile around her mouth. The *oidor* and don Vargas amused her, and she liked the little fop of an officer, whose gaze did not budge from her. Before the voyage was over, all three of them would probably have declared their burning love to her, and perhaps the elegant and cynical Jesuit was not at all a bad lover.

- The viceroy still hasn't done us the honor of putting in an appearance, she said.
- His excellency's health is not good, the *oidor* said. He's suffering from liver disease, and the strenuous journey through the country didn't make it better. I paid him a visit this morning.
  - Tell me about him.
- He's an outstanding official, an excellent human being, the *oidor* said, and . . .
- Thanks, spare us a speech of homage to the powerful one, who of course after all isn't hearing it, don Francisco, doña Inez interrupted. Let's hear what you can tell us about him, don Vargas.
- He is, as don Francisco rightly remarks, an outstanding official and excellent human being, don Vargas said. And he's descended, moreover, from one of Spain's oldest and most honorable families. His progenitor don Pedro de Carajaval fell in love with a lady, doña Leonora de Lara, whose family descends from the old kings of Biscay, and his feelings were requited. Their betrothal was supposed to be celebrated precisely at the time the king's favorite, the powerful count of Benavides, fell in love with doña Leonora at a bullfight, which was organized to celebrate a victory over enemies of the faith. The two brothers were still in the field, and the count availed himself of their absence to ask for the beautiful Leonora's hand, and her family dared not reject his proposal.
- No bull that chases its pursuers can be more raging than Pedro de Carajaval became when he heard this news. Accom-



panied by his brother he proceeded to Valencia, where the young count had taken up his abode with his young bride. That very evening they met the count, who was accompanied by one of his relatives. The brothers attacked them, and soon Benavides fell, never to get up again. The two brothers fled to a church and hurried to send a father confessor to the dying man since they didn't wish to kill the soul along with the body. The gate where the fight took place is still called Puerta de los duelos.

The brothers hoped that in this asylum they could wait for the opportune moment to justify themselves before the king. But he nourished such a love for Benavides that without veneration for the sanctuary he had them seized and even refused to hear their defense. In spite of the chivalrous character of the combat he treated them as assassins and gave the order to hurl them off the palace tower. So the two brothers, who had lost their confidence in human justice and now relied only on God, summoned the king to meet them in thirty days before the Lord's judgment seat, and afterwards they hurled themselves down into the fortress moat.

Don Vargas paused for a bit and added:

- On the morning of the thirtieth day the king was found dead in his bed.
- A genuine Spanish story, doña Inez said. One doesn't understand that every second person at home is of ancient nobility since our forefathers seem not to have undertaken anything except killing one another. But how can the brave Pedro, by the way, be the viceroy's progenitor? After all he didn't marry the beautiful one.
- That's precisely the misfortune, señora. The viceroy is descended from a collateral branch, which the ravens caw a great deal about, and it's impossible to summon all birds before God's judgment seat. According to reports, many not very noble cuttings have been grafted on to the noble lineage.
  - Sangre amarillo, the oidor nodded. Yellow blood.
- Those are your words and not mine, don Vargas said. I fear that don Pedro on the spur of the moment would have slapped you in irons if he had heard that. I'm only repeating



what is said; personally I don't doubt that the viceroy's blood is just as blue as his high position demands, and if his skin is rather yellow, that's probably caused by the liver sickness that don Francisco just mentioned to us and that plagues the distinguished man. However that may be, the ravens peck at his heart. The wicked rumors make him appear in public with an arrogance as if he were ten grandees, and I don't believe that any over-mistress of ceremonies puts greater store by etiquette than he does. He has totally refused to approve the appointment of bourgeois officials to higher offices in his province, and that has gotten him into a good deal of trouble with Madrid. But if one dares judge according to the extent of the baggage he carries around, he'll doubtless get a gracious reception at the court, and everything will thus turn out for the best.

- Oh, this court which everything hinges on, doña Inez said.
- But not everything, the *oidor* said. It's a long way to Spain, and many orders never reach us. No one knows what becomes of them, they disappear on the way, no one knows their fate. How are we supposed to manage and exploit the huge empires if we're supposed to conform to every new sudden fancy?
  - Dangerous words, don Vargas said.
- Words that everyone knows but no one expresses, the oidor said. We are kings of everything but in name. We dispose over mighty countries, we rule over untold human souls, we are lords over life and death. And this terrible power, which we can't free ourselves of, just as little as the fly can liberate itself from the spider's web, destroys us and makes us barren like women who cannot give birth to children. Constantly we must feel the power in us—it scorches like fire. If this ship is stranded on a desolate island, I'll spend my days writing a treatise on our own wretchedness. But I'll write it in the sand.
- It's getting cool, doña Inez said with a little shudder. And it's time to sleep.
  - She's beautiful, don Luis said after she had gone.
- She's very beautiful, the *oidor* said. And she's very rich and more powerful than any of us. May God have mercy on him who falls into her hands.

