

The Negro of Peter the Great/Kirdjali

A. Pushkin

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Kirdjali is a very short story, not even a story, relating the exploits of the rebel Kirdjali and his murderous gangs, who when imprisoned manages to fools his captors and escape execution. It all takes place in the former Bessarabia at the beginning of the 19th century, and as such has some topical interest.

The Negro of Peter the Great concerns a putative foster son of the czar and subsequent favorite. He distinguishes himself in the French army, and despite entreaties from his foster father - the czar, he remains in the French capital, partaking in its gay life, being the wonder of everybody, due to his black skin. He feels like a foreign specimen, a source of wonder, but nevertheless engages in an affair with a beautiful countess with a reputation of a 'femme horizontale'. The consummated affair leads to a pregnancy, which of course will be a scandal. However, the black baby is interchanged for a white one, and appearances can be kept. Soon thereafter the Negro Ibrahim decides to return to his native land, and is met by the czar, impatient to receive him back, while still on his way to the new capital. He marvels at how much it has grown during his absence, the frantic efforts to make inhospitable marshy nature yield to the designs of man. He is of course a bit bored back in Russia, but escapes the dullness of life by throwing himself into hard work, winning the approval of his foster father, whom he admires very much. To contrast the devotion to duty and hard work of Ibrahim, the author introduces K. a totally frenchified courtier, who apes the customs of the French to absurdity. K. is at loss in St.Petersburg and sins repeatedly against the hidden rules prevalent among the Russian aristocrats. The czar remarks on his velvet breeches that it is mere extravagance, which he, the czar, who is much richer abstains from. A rich landowner, whose young daughter K. has inadvertently insulted by asking her for a dance at an inopportune moment refers to him as the French monkey. Now the plot starts to go into motion. The czar visits the rich landowner during one of his sumptuous dinners, and makes him an offer, which is more in the nature of a demand. Namely asking for the hand of his young daughter into marriage to his Negro foster son. The rich landowner has no way of refusing, although his daughter is so distraught by the prospects of a match to the black devil, that she falls sick. How to resolve it? Unfortunately the manuscript remains unfinished, maybe because of Pushkin's early death at a duel. A captive Swedish officer from the army of Charles XII in the household of the rich landowner seems fated to play a crucial role, at least the last page of the story finds itself in his little room. We can only speculate, maybe fill in the missing details by ourselves, although there is little to go after in the pages already committed to paper. Maybe Pushkin had something more ambitious in mind. We can never tell.

However, one thing is interesting to speculate upon, namely the issue of racism, or more to the point, whether this is an issue at all. A black man must have been an oddity in a white European society. A quirk of nature, similar to a midget or a bearded woman. Something to attract curiosity and wonder. The Negro is described very sympathetically

by the author, and as noted being the favorite of the czar, as well as a preferred lover by the beautiful countess, No racial prejudice here. But what about the daughter given to him in marriage. He is different, and thus somewhat of a freak. And what is freakish is instinctively shunned by the conventional. Still can there be talk of racism? There is no such thing as a race of single man, only when people as a group are discriminated against, can there be talk of racism. Ibrahim is not of a difference race, he is just a very odd individual. To treat him differently may be inhumane, but racism is not about that, but about politics, not about individual morality. It is considerably muted, when it transpires that his origin is not that of a common slave, but that of being the son of a powerful sultan. As some people claim, issues of class go much deeper than issues of race.

September 7, 2014 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden ulfp@chalmers.se*