

HOW TO MANAGE YOUR SLAVES



MARCUS SIDONIUS FALX

Commentary by Jerry Toner

Foreword by Mary Beard

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› INTRODUCTION ›

BE THE MASTER



A REMARKABLE THING happened to me in the gardens of my villa some months ago. It was an event so strange and thought-provoking that it caused me to write this book. I happened to be entertaining a guest from one of the German tribes, an Alan to be precise. You may well wonder what a man of my rank was doing playing host to a miserable barbarian, but this man was no normal German. He was a prince who had come to our great city of Rome as part of an embassy to the emperor. Tired of having to find small talk concerning the benefits of trousers, and other such tedious issues which interest their sort, our great leader had asked me to house his foreign visitor until his return to that foul swamp he calls home.

We were taking a casual walk in the extensive parterre at the back of my villa and I was explaining to my guest, in simple Latin so as not to confuse him, what various mythological heroes the many marble statues represented. Then this happened. Concentrating my attention

on the statuary, I failed to notice a small hoe lying in the pathway. As I stood on the metal end, the wooden handle sprang up into my shins, causing me to cry out, more in alarm than pain. A certain slave, who was standing nearby and whose tool it was, smirked as he saw me hop about on one leg. Naturally I was outraged that this worthless idiot, a man who is himself nothing more than a tool that can speak, should laugh at his master's mishap. I summoned the bailiff.

'This slave thinks that injuries to the leg are amusing. Let us break his legs and see how much he laughs.'

That wiped the smile from his face. Ignoring the pitiful begging which slaves always resort to when faced with their just deserts, the bailiff and two sturdy attendants pulled the man down to the ground, while a fourth ran over with a heavy iron bar. Just as he was raising the implement above his head, my barbarian guest cried out, 'No!'

Turning to confront him, I saw that he was as white as a freshly sulphured toga.

'What is the matter?'

He hesitated. I pressed him:

'Surely you would treat your slaves the same way?'

'We do not have slaves,' was his extraordinary reply.

Imagine that? A society without slaves! Who has ever heard of such a thing! How would it function? Who would perform the basest tasks, those that are beneath even the lowest-born free man? What would you do with all those captives acquired in wars of conquest? How would you display your wealth? With my mind turning over all these imponderable questions, I found my anger softening.

‘Please, master, I beg you ...’ whimpered the slave.

‘Oh all right ...’

I told the bailiff to stop and let the slave off with a light beating with rods. I know, I know, I am too soft. But so many owners today are far too quick to punish their slaves brutally for very minor offences. It is always better to count to ten before you act.

Leading my troubled guest back towards the house, it occurred to me that this German barbarian might not be alone in being unused to owning slaves. With so many in the world now addicted to vulgar equality, it became clear to me that people no longer understand how to treat their slaves and underlings properly. I decided, therefore, to set down the principles with which any free person can ensure the efficient running of their attendants.

This is a vitally important task. The man who devotes himself to personal advancement through the acquisition of power and wealth should understand everything that will help him in this endeavour. It never ceases to amaze me how many in authority today have no inkling of how best to treat those who are so fortunate as to serve them in their ambition. Instead, desperately seeking to ingratiate themselves with those whose loyalty should be in no doubt, they fawn and pander to even the lowest sort of humanity. I have even seen a leading politician smile warmly at a woman working in the street in a pathetic attempt to win her worthless support. Knowledge of how to treat the basest in society, which can be acquired from the careful study of this work, will, by contrast, provide the wherewithal to achieve glory. It will teach the means to attain the goal of a household that is fully in

accord with its master's wishes. This will provide a secure power base from which to rise in society. The book will impart the social skills with which to command those who will come to report to you as your reputation burgeons. Accordingly, any attentive head of a household, whose heart is set on pursuing a leadership role, is strongly advised to take special pains to consult my work, which is the fruit of one of the most experienced heads of the ancient past.

I believe that there is a science of how to be a master, which proves that running a household and controlling slaves is the same as being a leader in wider society. Whether leaders and masters are not also born is impossible to answer with any certainty. Some Greeks have argued that all men differ from each other according to their inner natures. Those who do manual, physical work are slavish by nature, and it is better for them to come under the control of people such as myself who are in possession of natures of a higher sort. For a man who is capable of belonging to another person is, by nature, a slave; and that is why, the argument goes, such a man belongs to someone else. Nature, they say, clearly also intended to make the bodies and souls of free men different to those of slaves. Slaves have bodies that are strong and well suited to the kind of physical services they have to do. Their souls are less capable of reasoning. The bodies of free men, by contrast, are upright and not much use for that kind of manual work. But their souls are intelligent. They are suited for the purposes of partaking in the life of the community, whether it be political or military. Of course, nature sometimes makes mistakes and the

opposite happens – slaves are given the bodies of free men, free men only the souls and not the bodies of free men. But on the whole, the Greeks said, nature does not make mistakes. She makes sure that each is allotted a nature suitable to his fate in life.

But most Romans disagree with this. They believe that controlling another human being is contrary to nature. So many of us Romans who continue to rule a great empire are now descended from slaves that it would be ridiculous to believe that slaves are inherently useless. Roman thinkers argue that it is only social convention that leads one man to own another as a slave. They say that there is no natural difference between the two. It is a simple injustice, one that is based on the use of force. They also rightly point out that many slaves have acted in a brave and noble way during times of great crisis, which shows that they are not all slavish by nature. And if slavery is not natural then neither is being a master. It must be learnt!

Rome is full of slaves. I have heard it said that as many as one in three or four of the inhabitants of the Italian peninsula are in servitude. Even in the vast expanse of the empire as a whole, whose population cannot fall far short of 60 or 70 million persons, perhaps as many as one in eight is a slave. Nor are these slaves only to be found in the rural areas. Rome is teeming with every kind of slave activity and its servile population is as high as anywhere. Perhaps a million live in the capital city, and some claim that at least a third of them are slaves. While such estimates represent little more than the informed guesswork of those with overactive imaginations, it tells you how

important an institution slavery is for the Roman world. We Romans need our slaves.

You may well ask how this situation came about. What were the advantages in using slaves instead of free labour? Let me explain. In the past, during the republic, whenever the Romans had conquered a region of Italy, they took part of the land for themselves and populated it with Roman settlers. They intended these colonies to act as garrison towns. But much land was left empty and unfarmed as a result of the fighting. This was either because the owners had been killed or had fled while fighting in the army against us Romans. The senate proclaimed that anyone who wanted to farm this land could do so in return for a payment of 10 per cent of the annual harvest of cereal crops and 20 per cent of the fruit crops. The aim was to increase the population of Italy, who would, by dint of their hard work, produce more food for cities and also act as soldiers to fight for Rome in times of war.

Such fine intentions! But the result was the very opposite of what they sought to achieve. What happened was that the rich got hold of most of that land which was not distributed as allotments, and, once they had grown used to owning this land and felt comfortable that no one would snatch it back from them, they persuaded the poor peasants who owned smallholdings next to their own to sell them. Or, if the peasants refused, they sometimes simply seized the land violently. There was nothing that a poor farmer could do to defend himself against such a powerful neighbour, often because he was himself away on active service. Bit by bit, the large holdings grew

until they became vast estates instead of simple farms. The estate owners did not want to rely on the very farmers they had dispossessed to farm their land, nor did they wish to employ free men to labour for them since they would almost certainly be called away at some point to serve in the army. So they bought slaves and relied on them. This proved to be a very profitable exercise, in particular because the slaves bred and produced many children. And the beauty of it was that none of these slaves was liable for military service, since the army naturally cannot rely on slaves to serve in defence of the state. The estate owners became extremely wealthy. At the same time, the number of slaves grew rapidly. But the number of Italians became fewer and those few that there were grew poorer, oppressed as they were by taxes and by the burden of long military service. Even during those brief periods of leave when they were not on military service, the freeborn could find no work because the land was owned by the rich and they used slaves to work it instead of free labour.

Naturally, the senate and the Roman people grew anxious that they would no longer be able to call upon enough Italian troops and that this great body of slaves would destroy their masters. But they could also see that it would be neither easy nor equitable to take these huge estates away from their owners, since they had been in their possession now for generations. How do you dispossess a man of a tree that his grandfather planted with his own hand? Some of the tribunes of the people brought in laws to try to limit the size of such estates and force the great landowners to employ a certain proportion of

free men. But no one took any notice of these laws. As to the threat of slaves, the worry was not so much that they would revolt, but that they would eradicate the freeborn peasant, on whom the Roman elite relied to serve in the army and keep them in power. So it was decreed that no citizen over twenty years of age and under forty should serve in the army outside of Italy for more than three years at a time in order to give them a chance to keep control of their smallholdings at home.

Thankfully, the slave owner today need not trouble himself with such concerns. The army is now professional and it is many, many years since there has been a great slave revolt. Today's slave owner needs to worry only about keeping control of his own household. These are matters that I picked up at my father's knee. As a lad, I learnt to command authority, issuing my string of attendants with their orders: 'Bring me my cloak!', 'Wash my hands!', 'Serve me my breakfast, boy!' were the commands that punctuated my daily life. And as a callow youth, my father taught me how to instil respect into even the most recalcitrant slave.

The household is the cornerstone of society and, indeed, all human life. No kind of civilised existence is possible at all without the acquisition of the basic necessities that the household provides. But a household is just a house if it has no slaves. To be sure, a family needs a wife and children. Indeed, we can profit from their work. But it is the slaves who provide the bulk of the services. This is particularly beneficial because it means the master of the household does not have to rely on outsiders to provide those services. We all know how

degrading it is to have to ask others for help and how tiresome to bring in external contractors to do jobs for us. They never turn up when instructed to, take liberties with their fees, and, taking little pride in their work, carry out their tasks shoddily. With slaves, however, we can be sure that work will be carried out in just the way that we want it to be done. The slaves, therefore, turn the family unit into a much more significant unit, that is to say, the household.

The household is like a miniature version of the state itself, with its own structure, hierarchy and leadership and its own sense of community. Husband/wife, father/son, master/slave are the basic building blocks of social life. As such, slavery is one of the key principles of social organisation. The slave is at the complete disposal of the master of the household, in the same way that the citizen must obey the commands of the state. But slavery is a state of absolute subjection. The slave has no kin, he cannot assume the rights and obligations of marriage, his very identity is imposed by the owner, who gives him his name. Slavery is the same as social death in this respect. Complete submission is expected. Regrettably, slaves sometimes have to be coerced and worn down into obedience. Their spirit has to be broken. It is for this reason that some of the prouder tribes refuse ever to surrender when defeated in battle. The Cantabri in Spain, for example, killed themselves after the failure of their revolt rather than suffer enslavement.

All slaves share the same lack of legal rights. But we should not assume that they only perform tasks that are beneath the free man. In fact, as we shall also see, many

slaves have acquired positions of influence on account of the power of their masters. Equally, many poor free men have to carry out the most loathsome tasks in order to put bread before their families. Slaves are also used to carry out a bewildering array of tasks. Whether it is the old retainer keeping watch on the front door, or the young boy serving water at table, or the comely slave girl attending in the bed-chamber, slaves carry out a wide variety of jobs within a large household that minister to the master's every need.

My father taught me what slaves were also for – showing off! Slaves may be morally worthless, mere things and possessions, but despite this they confer high status upon their owners. In the same way that a fine horse reflects well upon its rider, so a well-mannered and deferential slave highlights the merits of its owner. And if there are four hundred of them in the household, then how much greater is the glory which is displayed! Who but the highest in society can afford to maintain so impressive and prestigious a retinue?

For slaves might be dullards but they serve the noblest. If you want to learn how you too should treat those slaves who accrue to you as your good fortune grows, then read on. For however much the practice of your own times is at variance with the principles of the ancient world, that should not discourage you from learning from them. For in the works of the ancients far more is to be found to merit your approval than your rejection. Read and learn.