

The Siren's Song

1942. 'One cannot always like the unfortunate.' The second secretary from the British Embassy, Gareth Whitebrook, whom Iakobos has been deputed to see, makes this remark as if it established something in common between them. Neutral tone, neutral ground; nothing personal; on we go then, you and I. They are on a quayside on the Bosphorus; two men allotted the same short straw. Iakobos frowns, as if the English language, not the messenger who speaks it, were what puzzled him. 'Nothing more H.M.G. can do.' Having done what? Official sentence is passed; full stop. I. nods in disagreement.

Kurds in peakless white caps hurry away with bulging cargoes, like sacked secrets, on tilted trolleys. Others tote loads on their backs, with alleviating straps over their foreheads. Servitude is a Kurdish monopoly here. Every nation has its burdensome burden-carriers. *Mutatis mutandis*, don't you agree? Young Whitebrook's problem is the unfortunates above them on the *Broda*; these – they *would* be, frankly – Jews; pilgrims who can move neither forward nor back, at least until pushed. So, what's to do?

For Captain Rubik, an Albanian Epirot, they are a cargo of stinking fish; not his first. He has asked Iakobos to deal with the authorities because he is clever, and handsome, and because Rubik is sure that he will fail (and a captain must avoid failing himself). Gareth Whitebrook implies that some higher power is dictating to the otherwise sympathetic British (their record on kindness to animals is, after all, second to none). A consideration not of London's making forbids them granting the Jews visas to Palestine. 'Unfortunately'. Iakobos explains what Whitebrook knows: Ankara will not allow the Jews to set foot on land unless they have the means to leave Turkey. Without transit visas to Palestine, they are stymied.

'You'll simply have to sail somewhere else,' the Englishman says. 'Unfortunately. Isn't whence-you-came a possibility?'

I. is Greek, from Thessaloniki. He has commercial English (and some Ladino); his father was chief clerk to a ship's chandler, for some time, in Liverpool; I. worked more recently for a Jew chandler in Thessaloniki, hence the Ladino and an almost furtive concern for the passengers. I. amuses Whitebrook with the pupil's frown that corrugates his forehead at the simplicity of the message which comes to him in the King's English. I.'s dark eyes, curly black hair (not *oiled*, is it?), pouty lips are not what an Englishman always likes, but the two of them have in common this burdensome company leaning along the rails of the *Broda*; more heavy shadows than men. Glance at the pleading, accusing, hooded, unblinking, damnably hopeful faces! Isn't the hope what irritates one most?

'We've got engine trouble. Bad. Worn pistons. No power.'

‘Ah well, this is a port. They must have people for that.’
Work for other people has to be good news; almost an exit
line. Get out of jail free. We’re never far from childhood.

‘And we’re heavily overloaded. In England, you would
not allow us to sail.’

‘Not in England though, are we? Hence...’ An English
pause.

‘And in very bad repair. Rust. Rotten plates.’

‘No less out of my province, unfortunately.’ Meaning:
must you? Allowing: ‘Look here, I must be getting back.
Black-tie nonsense tonight. Unfortunately.’

‘Black tie?’ The young man is corrugated again.

One can still be nice: ‘Dinner-jacket affair. Embassy do.
Wish I could have been more helpful.’ And, thank God, that’s
about it. Is that the time already? A dozen things to do!

Of his uniform, Captain Rubik wears only the anchored cap;
from the neck down, as if he had already begun to abandon
ship, the canvas trousers and the cotton vest (which venti-
lates sour armpits) rehearse survivor’s anonymity. The kit of
sauve qui peut. Without looking at I., Rubik tilts a bottle of
raki towards two squat, clouded glasses and asks to hear
what he knows already: whether I. achieved anything. I. tells
him ‘*Tipote*’; nothing. Rubik says, ‘The British are not
human; they cannot be bought. If the Turks make us sail
when they make us sail — what then?’

His first mate is young; I. has been hired to be young,
and guileless, but he needs no beard to know that the ship’s
certificate of seaworthiness has been bought. Rubik’s is the
voice that says nothing and at the same time tells him what
he does not want to hear: once at sea again, the Jews and
any officers or crew who stay to help them are doomed.

When the ship goes, it will go – pouf! – like that. The facts shout; therefore, nothing needs to be said. Iakobos knows that his duty, and the Captain's, is to the passengers; that is why, in the circumstances, both men hate the Jews. Between the impossible and the immoral, man chooses freely. Rubik means to survive; and will. Iakobos can; and... ? This is a cargo ship; one does not die for one's cargo. 'If we are forced to sail, we are forced to think of ourselves,' the Captain says, as if such a thought were unusual with him.

'Why not tell the Turks that the ship is unseaworthy?'

'Never force people to hear things they know already.'

'We could sink her here. It wouldn't take much.'

Rubik looks at Iakobos as if his presence were now uninvited. 'Sabotage? I am the Captain. Think of the future. My owners tell me to sail, I sail.' Servility doubles as authority; callousness is dignity. Another glass? Sweet to refuse, when refusal carries no sanction.

The ship will sail and the ship will sink and the Captain instructs I.: Be ready with the lifeboat, the only seaworthy lifeboat, when the moment comes. Be glad that orders are orders: others must not get into it. Rubik is saving himself by saving I., and I. by saving himself. Discipline before morals. Unfortunately? Gareth Whitebrook's adverb has taken root in I.'s mind. Unfortunately, the ship is both unseaworthy and insured; and because she is not fit to sail, she will sail. Insurance is immortal; it cannot sink, has no location; it has pure being. It precedes (and defines) all acts of God.

The cargo is several hundred and some filthy stinking Jews who shit and piss and vomit and want food and water, water. In charge of them are four Zionists from the organisation

which has chartered the ship; three dangerous men, and a woman (Irina), not underfed, not passive. They show their contempt for Rubik, and for the crew and – with different eyes – for the refugees they have to escort to Eretz Israel, *tant bien que mal* (Irina is Russo-French). Their suspicion angers and alarms the Captain. It also warrants premeditation; to survive, with honour, he cannot have witnesses to his survival. The Jews are dead or he is. He is Captain enough not to share his thoughts with I.; I. is cursed with his kindness.

I. is twenty-two years old, a sailor since he was fifteen. He is ambitious and without connections; there are no easy ladders for him. He will do what Rubik asks, and plans. As time passes, the inevitable fattens like a rat in the rancid, trickling innards of the *Broda*. There is strength, of a kind, in swallowing filth, in living in it, in learning to tolerate, digest, ignore it: degrading exaltation. It makes I. a man, or will, if all goes badly.

Rubik's confidence in I. flatters and disgusts the young man; the disgust lies in feeling flattered. Rubik's favours are reeking kisses which I. does not refuse; his whispered schemes are the siren's song which promises I. hateful salvation. Unfortunately.

Gareth Whitebrook has a double-ended black tie, and it is a bastard to tie; his chin is high and his eyes are painfully lowered in order to see the knot. We all have our problems. Unfortunately.

The *Broda* cannot stay and she cannot go. The Turks fear what it is their convenient right to fear: typhus, cholera,

dysentery. Providential bacillic trinity. The British have made their decision and hold to it as if it were not theirs; that is what British decisions are like (sorry about that). The owners insist that the ship must sail; to prove it, they can send no money for repairs. The Turks stand on the quay and look at the rust and do not see the problem. The Jews look down at the Turks, as if from below them.

A wide, flat tug sidles in; its cable cheeses the brothy water, tautens, sings. *Mehmet II* is sent to tow the powerless *Broda* into the Bosphorus, under the Anatolian breasts and pricking minarets of the mosques, past the little cathedral, low to the water; its cross is all there is to be seen of the city's Christian past. Two Lascars have jumped ship. I remains, buoyed by the sombre levity that says, 'I am not only here; I am also ahead of myself; I see myself surviving.'

The Lebanese engineer has managed to make some mechanical noise come from below decks. A parody of power screws the *Broda's* slow wake into sour green soup. The Zionists come to Rubik's cabin and say that if the ship re-enters the mouth of the Danube, they will kill him. In case he has any doubts. Their threats make cowardice wisdom.

When the ship is torpedoed, or hits wreckage, it splits soggily, soundlessly, like a paper bag full of water. A dud torpedo would explain it. The night is not rough; the indifferent sea shrugs and the *Broda* collapses. Soft coffin, it is swallowed in a single gulp. Already in the lifeboat, the Captain and the first mate are proved right; the Captain has saved Iakobos's life, and may be forgiven. The Jews are drowned. This is the Black Sea, not the Red. That is Ararat, where the stars are not.

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1946. Piraeus. Iakobos has been in Egypt for almost four years. He is a medalled lieutenant in the Greek navy, a freshly risen sun in his glaring whites. He is a subsidised conqueror; part of what he has conquered – trust the British! — is his Greekness. He brings concocted freedom to his country. There are kinds of gratitude which enslave the grateful and embitter the benefactor. I. wishes he were less popular; it would make his compatriots less foreign to him. The unheroic hands that slap and caress him – ‘Mprabo, mprabo!’ – also pick the pockets of his soul.

‘Iakobos!’ It is Rubik. Iakobos, laundered and creased like an Englishman, frowns at his old (younger!) Captain with the fearful relief of a man recognised for what he is. Rubik too is disguised by valiant achievement; he has been the master of two tankers: the Persian Gulf to Suez, Suez to Sicily, Napoli, Genova, that has been his beat, with how many thousand tons of oil? He lost one ship in the Med, but saved his crew. Hero greets hero; liar, liar. Rubik is on his way to see old Tachmindji, the bastard. Coming? Iakobos declines, and goes along.

The long, file-filled upstairs offices are not changed. Look! The same old upright telephones, black daffodils. Here it is before the war; out there it is after. The dark ditch can be straddled at will. Tachmindji – has he suffered some kind of a stroke? – might have been happy never to see the two survivors again, but he is happier to welcome two hands which can haul him safely into the future. Iakobos has a good name with the British, Rubik has connections in the Gulf. Therefore: ‘Kalos irthate!’ Welcoming Tachmindji has tears in his cold old eyes – where’s that big silk handkerchief? – as nervous urgency rolls back the slatted top of his rosewood desk. He rocks the cork from a special bottle he kept for

today, or tomorrow. On the narrow ledge above the desk is a silver-framed photograph. The old man (fifty-eight!) passes it to Iakobos: 'You remember Irine?' Peace with the face of a beautiful girl.

She is amused to be docile. She has a face like an Egyptian; the want of smile is a kind of humour. She is amused, and does not laugh; yielding, she does not give in. There is, Iakobos knows, and wishes he loved, something in her which he can never know and which can never love him. There is comfort in their incompleteness; it prompts desire which is manly, but cannot relax to affection. When they are married, and they soon are, Iakobos is armed by the submissiveness in both of them: Irine gives herself to a stranger; the stranger gives himself to her father. Their facsimile of passion is more passionate, more reckless (in secret), than passion itself. It almost makes them like each other; it almost generates love. They are Greeks; they understand what it is to be what they can never be. The past is no good to them. They dignify each other with the rigour of their falseness; if they could speak frankly, if they dared to love truly, they would teach each other contempt for their cowardices. Fraud rings truer than truth.

Irine's father becomes Minister of Marine for long enough to give certain favours; it is more important, he tells Iakobos, to distribute favours when you are powerful than to collect them. It is not only more blessed to give than to receive; in the long run, it is also more profitable, *pethimoo*. There is no better use for bread than to cast it on the waters. Jesus was a Jew, my boy; we are all alike, Jews, Greeks, Arabs, Turks, but very few of us are lucky. You need not believe in God, but never make the mistake of not thanking Him.

The Minister has a black labrador called Dick and another called Rover. He takes them, and Irine and Iakobos, to the island where he was born. It is a white bone wedged in the mouth of the sea. Solon spoke contemptuously of its poverty two-and-a-half millennia ago. The people call the Minister 'master'; they are still poor.

Iakobos buys surplus ships (some he scraps, some he scrapes). 1954. The old man *says* he wants only to build a retirement house on the heights above his birthplace. By volunteering to be older than he is, he secretes a little of his youth. He would like to make his island prosperous: a marina perhaps, where the English can come; not the Germans. Iakobos will take care of the business, and Irine. The Old Man (in his sixties!) plays at philosophy, but – for fun, for fun – likes to hear what deals Iakobos is doing, how he sees the future, what he hears. Iakobos is glad to tell him; it is in the telling that what he is doing takes on its meaning and plots its purpose. Fancy creates fact; the wet finger makes the wind, as the fishermen say on the island.

Thanks to the Old Man, something magic, powerful, almost noble, is fostered and grows in Iakobos. He is a visionary. Greed becomes superfluous; because he thinks clearly, because he reasons with superstitious accuracy and observant cunning, his head becomes clear, and as purely speculative as a saint's. Because he has no illusions about men or about himself, he can read the world as if its future were available to him in the facile text of a child's book. Contempt and respect cannot, need not, be distinguished; he sees Arabs and Jews, French and English, Americans and Persians as ciphers in a symbolic language which is void of prejudice: no one he meets or thinks about is required to bear the

burden of being liked or trusted. Iakobos's attentions, public and private, have the diligence of a lover unembarrassed by emotions. He and Irine have a son, and another, and a daughter. Captain, later Commodore, Rubik commands a fleet of – according to the annual reports of an increasing number of companies – twelve, eighteen, thirty-one, sixty-eight ships. Then there are the planes.

1957. After Suez, Tachmindji and son-in-law are so rich that greed becomes an art, an exercise. Every disaster is someone's good luck, *pethimoo*. As if Iakobos didn't know, and had not already laid down keels in Japan for ships that would not, could not, use the canal! He has arranged their insurance too. All is for the best in the worst of all possible circumstances.

Iakobos's ruthlessness extends to his generosity. His kindness is as implacable as his acquisitiveness. It is as if, in both cases, the same piety is at work; fear and nerve, dread and hope, friendship and enmity. He prefers to do good by stealth; perhaps stealth excites him more than the good it does. He slides money towards good causes as if to corrupt them. The Old Man's island has a dredged harbour, a jetty for the ferry service; it has its marina, water supply, hospital, doctor. In due course, ruinous riches. These things, done by Iakobos, are credited to the Old Man.

1974. Iakobos's reticence is his fame; men have learned that to whisper of a misfortune in his presence is to be reminded that it is unlikely, very, that he can do anything about it. They are happy to be told this, since something will now be done. Iakobos makes no promises, and keeps them all.

Why? Rubik, the only man who might, never asks. The Commodore's irreplaceable silence jeers at the man who now governs a fortune which makes him a citizen of the world. Public orators have said as much in a dozen universities where he has been capped and gowned a doctor (having been benefactor). He has so many interests that he finds, at times (intriguingly in 1972, in London and Bombay), that he conspires against himself. His manifold balance sheets reveal that he sometimes registers successes in one of his companies by ruining another. He insures himself, he sinks himself, he is richer than he knows and still picks his own pockets.

To his fellow citizens, he is like Demetrios the Besieger, to whom the sceptical Athenians had no doubt that they should build an altar; more benefits stemmed from him than from the gods. All those he wounds go to his hospitals.

Iakobos is a benefactor who finds it salutary to remain a bastard (a man must not allow his reputation to decline). He is grateful to his enemies for frustrating him; a prized poet tells him of Polykrates the tyrant, who threw a gold ring into the Samian Sea in order to avoid having everything he wanted, which – he had been warned – would excite the jealousy of the gods. When a fisherman recovered the ring in the belly of one of his catch and brought it back to the tyrant, Polykrates knew that his days were numbered. Iakobos throws gold where it cannot be known to be his.

1980. The Mediterranean is his pond; he sails his yacht, *Ithaka*, in it. He has many friends in the Gulf, he said, and he also gives money, in great secrecy, for the rebuilding of a synagogue in Thessaloniki. There remain very few Jews to go to it. How many speak Ladino now? When Irine says to

him, 'You are a good man, Iakobemoo,' he replies, 'You too are among my accusers?'

'Am I a whore?' she says. 'After all you have done for me, how can I defend you?'

Next to them, all their lives, are the unused ghosts of the couple they might have been. As it is, their cruel sons are playboys; their distant daughter has been twice married at nineteen.

1986. Iakobos's official biography comes as a present from his Board. Once commissioned and furnished with all the facts, the biographer grows impatient with his own venality; impatience warrants impenitence. Treachery becomes a symptom of pride; he cleans his hands with dirt. As Gareth Whitebrook's late ambassador discovered, soon after the *Broda* went soundlessly to the bottom, if one cannot trust one's servants to betray one, whom can one trust? The biographer's name is Leo 'Ratters' Ratcliffe. He is blind.

'Ratters' is a blind man who sees. But sight, with him, is an inquisitive faculty: he asks many questions, takes many notes, and colours vivid prose with his informants' colours. He is authorised to 'see' the records of all the companies. Rubik, now younger and more eager than Iakobos (who has fattened on his rivals), is deputed to be his eyes. 'Ratters' scans the darkness which is his element and he sees Rubik and Iakobos like living print on the sable pages of his intuition. Rubik learns resentment late; his devotion to Iakobos curdles. Yellow with his own iniquity, he wishes it on the man who, having been for so long his master, he elects its originator. 'Ratters' reminds him of his captaincy, and the reminder notches new barbs in Rubik's hidden blade. Iakobos's favours have docked him of command of his own

life. Having been given so much, he believes he must have been cheated of more; Tachmindji meant him to be the dauphin, who has become the major domo. 'Ratters' doubts all this, and fosters it by doubting.

Does Iakobos suffer from 'Ratters's tactful inquisition? In the creaking saloon of the *Ithaka*, he submits – with a heavy sigh from the heavy man he is today – to the preliminary sizzle of the tape recorder. When the question is put – did he ever think he might have acted differently? – he looks at the dodging eyes of the blind man and makes, maybe, a franker face (crueller *and* gentler) than might be expected. It is as if, but only as if, he believed that 'Ratters' was *pretending* to be blind, just as he has pretended, no less successfully, to be invulnerable. 'Life,' he says (and the cultured voice resembles Lord Whitebrook's, his man in London), 'is like a game of simultaneous chess in which one sees a dozen and more games unfolding from the original position and in which one is allowed to play on only one board. Unfortunately.'

'Ratters's eyes float here and there, twitching with greater mobility than sight could endure. He seems excited, unless he is embarrassed. 'The *Broda*,' he says. 'Tell me about that.'

'I was young,' Iakobos says, 'and I did what I was told.'

'For the last time?'

'I think not. I am, after all, a very obedient person. I even answer your question! Cigar? My whole life, to be honest with you, has been a matter of question and answer. It has not, I sometimes think, greatly concerned me at all. And in this – I know I am not answering your question, but – in this I am very much, despite appearances?, a Greek. We have many faults, many, but *egotism* is not one of them, in

the sense – forgive me – that ‘I’ has no great meaning for me, or for us; I am part of something else and I have no notion that I *personally* have created anything, least of all the wealth which, believe me, is enjoyable only because it is not mine. We bring nothing into this world, we shall take nothing out; all that is commonplace with you, but let me add this: we also have nothing while we are here. Nothing truly ours. Odysseus said he was nobody; Odysseus was right, but how can nobody be right? I am accused of generosity, but I have no more feeling that I am generous than I do of being a tyrant, of which I am also accused.’

‘The *Broda*,’ ‘Ratters’ says.

‘Philip told you what?’

‘That you met on board.’

‘They wanted us to die; you know who. We survived. I *think* we survived.’

‘Forgive me; I must put in another tape.’ The blind man’s fingers see to it.

‘You’ve done a lot of talking.’

‘Listening,’ the biographer says.

‘I wanted to sink her,’ Iakobos says, before the tape can work again. ‘I wanted never to be what I have become. But it was not my decision. As for who I am now, I have no idea who he is.’

‘I’m sorry,’ ‘Ratters’ says, ‘I think I missed that.’

October 16th. 0145 hours. Cruising off Samos. Rubik comes into the saloon where Iakobos is on the line to invaluable ‘Whiters’ in New York. Half sitting, half lying on the long cushions, he raises his dark brows (does he dye them?) at Rubik, who will not be warned. The Commodore goes to

the chiming drinks cupboard and helps himself, as if it were a liberty.

The biographer is sleeved in his long darkness. He sits on the rubbered companionway that comes up, and goes down, to his stateroom, and he is, as he listens, in a great space, memory's cave, a boundless place, before and after life, in which the future can be remembered as well as the past. He hears the burble of reproach and reminiscence, of accusation and amusement, and he sees what he hears as black on black. Iakobos and Rubik are alone in the creaking saloon, Greek and Greek; the slur of their contest comes, untranslated music, to the listener. The great man (whose corpulence now lends credibility to his fortune) moves little and yet seems to agitate Rubik, as if, in his case, *pushing* on the strings could dance his puppet. His voice leans back on the cushions and denies Rubik the comfort of dismaying him. Should he be provoked? He prefers to be amused.

Should he rebut the charges? He confirms them: cowardice, of course; cruelty, no doubt; duplicity, what else? He denies only that he is good. He is beyond that. 'Ratters' sees the smile through the closed door and smiles too. When Rubik says 'Cheat', it is in the words of the poet who called the moon a cheat for cadging the sun's light.

The nation of the moon brings Iakobos to his feet. His bladder takes him out to see it. No mountain kills the sky. There are, the Greeks said, as many souls as there are stars, and no more. Our souls are not our own; the soul has me, I do not have it. Is Iakobos drunk when he lurches to the rail and, with a vulgarity not usual with him, unbuttons? Rubik has no prospect of the inheritance; he cannot – can he? – imagine, at his age, that the dauphinate might still be his. Yet, with a smudged movement, he blunders against the

pissing potentate and, as if by mistake, nudges him through the rail and into the soft Ionian Sea. The engines throb; *Ithaka* is an island that does not stop.

Iakobos is himself now. He feels hands reaching up to him from below. He hears the siren's song in his ears. The water closes its shutters on him, and in his helplessness he is, at last, at home.

Rubik watches and waits. The perfect crime has been an accident. He hears the saloon door stub against its stop, and turns and ... 'Help!' The blind biographer has seen it all. Unfortunately.