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DARK VARDARIS

Novel, 274 pp. Set in Meleniko, Thessaloniki, Paris, 1911-1913, shortly before the outbreak and shortly after the conclusion of the Balkan wars, which ended with the Treaty of Bucharest in August 1913. Nothing is the same. Everything in the Balkans has changed. And between these sweeping and traumatic changes, an entire generation is trying to come of age. The author deftly constructs the complex racial and social mosaic of northern Greece in the early 20th century in clear, vivid, colour snapshots. *Dark Vardaris* is an amalgam of elements drawn from the tradition of the political and historical novel as well as from the epistolary novel and the *bildungsroman*, in addition to an inspired dialogue with the history of the art of photography.

SUMMARY

In September 1913 the French photographer Auguste Léon, using a new method evolved by the Lumière brothers, takes a picture of a large group of Greek refugees from Melekino, older and younger men and children in the square of Sidirokastro, which was known as Demir Chisar under Ottoman rule. One is struck by their clothes: they are refugees and yet they are all dressed in suits, cravats, ties some of them, most of them are wearing a hat, even the children are well-dressed. All of them looked dressed for a party. But their expression belies this: all of them, including the children, look very angry. So angry that one wonders how the French photographer got them to pose for the picture. One also wonders how he got to this small Macedonian town near the new Greek-Bulgarian frontier after the Bucharest Treaty signed on July 29th, 1913. The treaty marked the end of the second Balkan war. Fate and history were to plunge the young French photographer into an incredible adventure.

But let's take things at the beginning; let's focus our attention on the photograph. In the first line of young men, towards the middle, we can make out the main character of our story: twenty-year old Stephanos Fourtounas, who finds himself in Sidirokastro with his fellow-countrymen from Melekino. How did they get there? And among them young

Stephanos, a fully graduated student from the Thessaloniki Greek Teachers Academy? They all left their town with their families, when the Great Powers gave it over to Bulgaria in the Bucharest Treaty. They abandoned their large wealthy houses, their Orthodox churches, their schools, their printing-house that had been working since 1843, their beautiful summer houses and their coffee-shops. They loaded carts and chariots with what they could sort out from among their belongings: beautiful furniture, glassware and textiles from Central Europe where they used to go on regular trips, on business or to study. They left in a body and came down to Greece. The elders of Melekino took the drastic decision on the day that followed the Bucharest Treaty: "We are all leaving for Greece". They used to keep their wine in cool arcades formed by the imposingly white rocks on which stood their Byzantine citadel. As they didn't want the Bulgarians to have it, they broke the wine caskets and the bottles and let the dark red wine flow out onto the streets of Melekino, like blood flowing uncontrollably from their own veins.

Stephanos recalls this scene, and many other similar ones that he has witnessed in his short life. Melekino, the town of his adolescence, beautiful Melekino, that was once the Byzantine frontier fortress Zagorai where, as of the 10th century, many Byzantine officials who had fallen out of favour with the emperor were exiled with their families. Bit by bit they had founded a small mountain town which they called Melekino. We are in 1905 now and Ottoman Macedonia ablaze. Bulgarian nationalists, the so-called 'Exarchikoi' after their church cut itself away from the Patriarchate in Constantinople and with the silent approval of their government indulge in all kind of violent and terrorist acts against the Greek population in the area and against the Slavonic speaking people who remain faithful to the Patriarchate and follow Greek ways. Their objective is to annex Macedonia to Bulgaria. The Greeks counteract with their own armed groups and the notorious Macedonian Struggle of the beginning of the 20th century has now extended to all the Ottoman Macedonian area. Stephanos, however, is unable to grasp the situation. He listens to the priest in church every Sunday warning them against the growing threat of the 'Exarchikoi', he overhears his father and his friends talking about the fearful deeds of Santaski, the leader of partisans, and his gang; he can read fear in their eyes. Still, as far as he's concerned, he feels very happy with his friend Georgi who is just a little older than him and who has become his blood brother. Georgi on his part feels the same about Stephanos: he too fails to understand why he should want to kill his beloved friend and make Melnik –the Bulgarian name of Meleniko- stronger and better; however there are times when he is afraid of his uncle Boris who sometimes comes home armed to the teeth and with a wild look on his face. One day, his uncle Boris arrives with another uncle from Sofia who is an official in Prince Ferdinand's Royal Guard. The family decides that Georgi is to leave Meleniko and go to Sofia with his uncle to study at

the Military Academy and one day take his uncle's place in Prince Ferdinand's Guards. And so Georgi leaves, happy and excited on the one hand, but on the other sorry to have to leave his friend and the girl he secretly loves. This is beautiful Eleni, the only daughter of a wealthy nobleman from Meleniko called Doukas who is of Byzantine descent. Eleni, naturally, has not once deigned to look at the poorly dressed Bulgarian boy. Stephanos Fourtounas is also in love with Eleni Doukas, but boys that age don't talk about girls. Eleni however is fond in an innocent girlish way of Stephanos and this leads to an innocent romantic love. Stephanos' feelings are stronger, but Eleni also loves him too in a playful, light way. Stephanos has another friend: Theodoros Laskaris, who is the same age as him and tells such peculiar stories that most people think he's a bit soft in the head. Eleni doesn't like him. In 1905 the French journalist Michel Jarry arrives in Meleniko; he is a reporter for the Parisian newspaper Le Temps. Michel Jarry supports the nationalist movements in the Ottoman Balkans; he is daring in words and actions, and doesn't hesitate to criticize his own country and the other Great Powers for their clumsy decisions and interventions in this troubled corner of Europe. In Thessaloniki, Jarry meets the distinguished Administrator of Macedonia, Chilmi Pasha, who informs him on the more recent developments of the changes that the Great Powers are enforcing on the Sublime Porte and that are to benefit the Macedonian Christian population. He then leaves for the hinterland wanting to see for himself what is happening. In this way he reaches Meleniko which has been placed under French supervision and where the French general De Bélier is staying with one of the wealthiest families of Byzantine descent. The French journalist is struck by the natural beauties of the place; he is convinced of the Greek character of the town's inhabitants, and he falls in love with Anastasios, the son of a powerful man, Prokritos Nikolaou Baboura, the descendant of a libertine general who was exiled to this remote Byzantine fortress by the Emperor Alexios Komninos. Whenever Stephanos runs into the French journalist he is struck by the latter's chic and by the elegant cloaks he wears.

In September 1911 eighteen-year old Stephanos leaves Melekino to go and study at the Greek Teachers Academy for Boys in Thessaloniki. His good friend Theodoros leaves at the same time for Bucharest where he is going to study law. Stephanos is accompanied by a wealthy merchant who is a friend of his grandmother; on their journey he tells Stephanos about the events in the Balkans and in Thessaloniki, and expresses his fears of an inevitable war. However, Thessaloniki for our young friend is a place of new discoveries, inventions, modern technology, cinema and the electric tram, cars, theatres, classy houses built in European style, smart pastry shops, European banks and important European insurance companies; and of course large shops like stain and tipping where he promptly goes to buy new clothes and above all a cloak like the one the elegant French photographer wore. At the

Academy –which is also a boarding-school- he meets nineteen-year old Miltos from Monastiri, a young man who is much more interested in the pleasures of the flesh than in his studies and who feels a great attraction for sinful amusements. Stephanos also makes the acquaintance of Konstantinos, the son of a Greek middle-class family, who studies at the French school and is an enthusiastic reader of Romantic poets: Shelley, Byron, Hugo, Lamartine and so on.

The three young men become inseparable. Miltos introduces Stephanos to the hedonist world of the café-chantants in Thessaloniki, and to the scandalous novels of the time such as Zola's *Nana*. On the other hand, Konstantinos introduces him to the theatre, the movies, the elegant pastry shops, the coffee lounges in elegant hotels, first and foremost the Splendid Palace Hotel by the seafront, a hotel that plays an important role in our story. Stephanos will also meet Ino, a young polite Jew, and through him one of the most important personalities in town, Abraham Benaroya, the Federation Secretary, the first Socialist Labour Federation in the Balkans.

But what about Eleni? Will he forget her? No, of course not. Whenever he can he writes to her in the evenings. A need for atonement for the world of men he frequents emerges from these letters; but Eleni never gets the letters. In the meantime, the Balkans are on the verge of explosion, the smell of war is everywhere. In June 1912, after his exams, Stephanos goes back to Melekino. His friend Theodoros is also back from Bucharest and he tells him that he met the Doukas family in Bucharest and that Eleni's father told him he considered his daughter ripe for marriage. Stephanos is deeply troubled and wants to see Eleni. He learns that she too has come back to Melekino. He goes and waits for her outside her house and when she comes out in the company of her French chaperon and teacher, she gives him a cold greeting and refuses to take his letters. Black days follow for Stephanos; war is about to break out. Some weeks after his last conversation with Eleni, weeks during which Theodoros seems to have disappeared, Stephanos learns that his friend's father has asked Eleni's father to consent to their children marriage and that Eleni's father has accepted. The betrothal is to take place very soon. Stephanos staggers under the double blow and makes up his mind to go back to Thessaloniki. More sorrow lies in wait for him there: his friend Miltos is killed in a café brawl, in a fight with a Turk over the sweet eyes of a Turkish dancer; Konstantinos grabs Stephanos by the arm in the midst of the pandemonium and they both run for their lives. When Konstantinos finally stops running, he embraces his friend, ask for his forgiveness and disappears in the dark alleys without adding a word of explanation. [Later on Stephanos will learn that his friend had secretly volunteered to join the Greek army to fight the Turks.] The following day is September 18th, 1912; Athens calls for a general mobilization. That same day at midday, the great French banker Albert Can meets his friend the journalist Michel Jarry in his office on Richelieu Street in Paris who tells him of the

general mobilization in Athens. There can be no doubt, war has broken out in the Balkans. Two weeks later, on the day following Greece's war declaration on the Ottoman Empire (October 6th), Albert Can has lunch in his property with the seven gardens in Billancourt with the geographer-anthropologist Jean Brun. He decides to send a photographers' team to the Balkans, in particular to Thessaloniki, as soon as the war ends. The head of the group is to be a young chemist, Auguste Léon, who has studied photography with the Lumière brothers. When the war ends in May 1913, the French mission under the direction of Jean Brun arrives in Thessaloniki. Since October 26th 1912 the city has been annexed to the Greek kingdom. But where is Stephanos? In Thessaloniki, living in Konstantinos's mansion. A flash-back to former events informs us on what has been happening since we last heard of him. Like all the other students, Stephanos, who is an Ottoman citizen, was called to arms; he flees the army and seeks refuge in Thessaloniki a few days after the arrival of the Greek army, which is followed a day later by the arrival of the Bulgarian division. The Bulgarian general has among his followers a young official from Prince Ferdinand's Guard: it is Georgi Michailov, Stephanos's blood brother from Melekino. Handsome Georgi and his companions are very disheartened when they realize they have arrived too late to take possession of the much-desired city. With downcast hearts they attend the victory ceremony that the Greek king Georges holds at the Splendid Palace Hotel. There Georgi will see again the woman of his dreams, Eleni Doukas, who is in Thessaloniki with her family. Her fiancé, whom she profoundly dislikes, has remained in Bucharest. Eleni doesn't recognize her childhood acquaintance and Georgi doesn't tell her who he is when he salutes her. The meeting will fire off a passionate illicit love between the Greek wealthy girl from Melekino and the handsome Bulgarian official.

But let's go back to where we left off: May 1913, the French photograph team arrives in Thessaloniki. They have all come in the Orient Express, except for Auguste Léon who has taken the *Gustave Flaubert* steamer from Marseille. On the morning of his arrival he sees a very beautiful but obviously scared and troubled young woman leave the Splendid Palace Hotel in a great hurry. The young photographer is impressed. The team begins to work on the following day and Auguste Léon keeps a diary of his work until June 12th, 1913. It is from this diary that we learn that Auguste Léon, at a reception given by the French Consul in honour of the team, sees again the beautiful unknown woman he first saw at the Splendid Palace Hotel. The woman is Eleni Doukas. He falls head over heels in love with her and offers to take her picture. She hesitates but finally accepts. In the various talks they have she confides in him that she doesn't want to marry Theodoros whom she thinks is almost mad, and she explains that she gave in to her father's pleas for obvious personal advantages. The romantic French photographer, madly in love, begins to daydream. He is abruptly brought down to earth and

made to face the tragic truth when in one of their meetings Eleni tells him about her love for Georgi. She tells him why she had gone that morning to the Splendid Palace Hotel and asks him to help her secretly leave Thessaloniki before the second Balkan war breaks out. Léon feels his world crumbling but Eleni is so full of ardour and his love for her is so strong that he finally gives in. When the team's work is over, Léon pretends to be suffering from lumbago and remains behind. He leaves two days later by train, and with him Eleni whom he presents to the train officials as his wife. They both get off the train at Demir Chisar which is still in the hands of the Bulgarians –to become Sidirokastro after the Greek victory. There Auguste Léon hands Eleni over to Georgi and watches them disappear off at a gallop into the Strymona valley. The French photographer writes a last entry in his diary in the train that takes him back to Paris. He has Eleni's photographs and decides to keep them and not give them to Albert Can. The second Balkan war breaks out two days later, a war that ends with the Bucharest Treaty on July 29th, 1913. The treaty ascribes Melekino to Bulgaria. In the meantime Stephanos has returned to Melekino with his teacher's degree; he learns of Eleni's elopement with Georgi. At some point he runs into Theodoros who looks as if he has gone really and truly mad. When the Greek inhabitants of Melekino decide in a body to abandon their homes, and just as the Balkans fill with boats full of refugees of all nationalities and religions, Albert Can in Paris decides to send his team of photographers back to Thessaloniki to take pictures of the refugees that crowd the outskirts of the city. He feels warmly about it having been a refugee himself at the age of ten when his place of birth, Lorraine, was annexed to Germany in the Frankfurt Treaty.

So it happens that three months later Auguste Léon and his team of photographers under the direction of Jean Brun arrive once again in Thessaloniki. The Greek authorities tell them among other things that the Greeks from Melekino are now refugees in Sidirokastro. Jean Brun who knows of the young photographer's love for Eleni –though he doesn't know what happened at the end- sends Léon to Sidirokastro to photograph the Melekino refugees thinking that in this manner Léon will see his beloved again. At the end of September 1913 the French photographer arrives at the Sidirokastro train station, the same train station where the previous month of June he put Eleni into the Bulgarian army official's care, Georgi Michailov. Vestiges of the Bulgarian army are scattered all around: abandoned machine guns, sandbags and so on. Léon sees nothing, he only came to photograph the refugees and the rest is not his business. The news that a French photographer has arrived in Sidirokastro spreads among the refugees. Nikolaos Babouras takes it upon himself to find out more about this unexpected event. At the café in the main square he talks with Auguste Léon and translates their conversation for all to hear. "So as not to forget and not to be forgotten", Léon tells them and finally persuades them to have their picture taken. When Stephanos hears what is

going on he doesn’t want to go. He feels nothing can interest him any longer, now that he has lost everything. But when he sees his countrymen pouring into the square dressed in their best black suits, most of them in their hats, he decides that he can’t miss out on such an important event: the historical photograph that this stranger is going to take of them, the same man that loved the woman he loved and handed her over to his worst enemy who once was his blood brother. This is how on September 9th 1913, the French photographer Auguste Léon takes a picture that seventy years later will trigger off the present novel.