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Achilles Heel

Ruth Rendell

The walls of the city afforded on one side a view of the blue Adriatic, on the other, massed roofs, tiled in weathered terra cotta, and cataracts of stone streets descending to the cathedral and the Stradun Placa. It was very hot on the walls, the sun hard and the air dry and clear. Among the red-brown roofs and the complexities of ramparts and stairs, different colours shimmered, the purple of the bougainvillea, the sky-blue of the plumbago, and the flame flash of the orange trumpet flower.

‘Lovely,’ said Dora Wexford. ‘Breathtaking. Aren’t you glad now I made you come up here?’

‘It’s all right for you dark-skinned people,’ grumbled her husband. ‘My nose is beginning to feel like a fried egg.’

‘We’ll go down at the next lot of steps and you can administer some more sun cream over a glass of beer.’

It was noon, the date Saturday, 18 June. The full heat of

the day had kept the Yugoslavs, but not the tourists, off the walls. Germans went by with cameras or stood murmuring ‘*Wunderschön!*’ Vivacious Italians chattered, unaffected by the midsummer sun. But some of the snatches of talk which reached Wexford were in languages not only incomprehensible but unidentifiable. It was a surprise to hear English spoken.

‘Don’t keep on about it, Iris!’

At first they couldn’t see the speaker. But now, as they came out of the narrow defile and emerged on to one of the broad jutting courts made by a buttress top, they came face to face with the Englishman. A tall, fair young man, he was standing in the furthest angle of the court, and with him was a dark-haired girl. Her back was to the Wexfords. She was staring out to sea. From her clothes, she looked as if she would have been more at home in the South of France than on the walls of Dubrovnik. She wore a jade-green halter top that left her deeply tanned midriff bare, and a calf-length silk skirt in green and blue with parabolas on it of flamingo pink. Her sandals were pink, the strings criss-crossed up her legs, the wedge heels high. But perhaps the most striking thing about her was her hair. Raven-black and very short, it was cut at the nape in three sharp Vs.

She must have replied to her companion, though Wexford hadn’t heard the words. But now, without turning round, she stamped her foot and the man said:

‘How can you go to the bloody place, Iris, when we can’t find anyone to take us? There’s nowhere to land. I wish to God you’d give it a rest.’

Dora took her husband’s arm, hastening him along. He

could read her thoughts, not to eavesdrop on someone else's quarrel.

'You're so nosy, darling,' she said when they had reached the steps and were out of earshot. 'I suppose it's what comes of being a policeman.'

Wexford laughed. 'I'm glad you realise that's the reason. Any other man's wife would accuse him of looking at that girl.'

'She *was* beautiful, wasn't she?' said Dora wistfully, conscious of her age. 'Of course we couldn't see her face, but you could tell she had a perfect figure.'

'Except for the legs. Pity she hasn't got the sense to wear trousers.'

'Oh, Reg, what was wrong with her legs? And she was so beautifully tanned. When I see a girl like that it makes me feel such an old has-been.'

'Don't be so daft,' said Wexford crossly. 'You look fine.' He meant it. He was proud of his handsome wife, so young-looking for her late fifties, elegant and decorous in navy skirt and crisp white blouse, her skin already golden after only two days of holiday. 'And I'll tell you one thing,' he added. 'You'd beat her hollow in any ankle competition.'

Dora smiled at him, comforted. They sat down at a table in a pavement café where the shade was deep and a cool breeze blew. Just time for a beer and an orange juice, and then to catch the water taxi back down the coast to Mirna.

In Serbo-Croat *mirna* means peaceful. And so Wexford found the resort after a gruelling winter and spring in Kingsmarkham, after petty crime and serious crime, and finally a

squalid murder case which had been solved, not by him in spite of his work and research, but by a young expert from Scotland Yard. It was Mike Burden who had advised him to get right away for his holiday. Not Wales or Cornwall this time, but the Dalmatian coast of Yugoslavia where he, Burden, had taken his children the previous year.

‘Mirna,’ said Burden. ‘There are three good hotels but the village is quite unspoilt. You can go everywhere by water. Two or three old chaps run taxi boats. It never rained once while we were there. And you’re into all this nature stuff, this ecology. The marine life’s amazing and so are the flowers and butterflies.’

It was the marine life with which Wexford was getting acquainted two mornings after the trip to Dubrovnik. He had left Dora prone on an air bed by the hotel swimming pool, knowing full well that sunbathing was impossible for his Anglo-Saxon skin. Already his nose was peeling. So he had anointed his face, put on a long-sleeved shirt, and walked round the wooded point to Mirna harbour. The little port had a harbour wall built of the same stone as the city of Dubrovnik, and kneeling down to peer over, he saw that beneath the water line the rocks and masonry were thickly covered by a tapestry of sea anemones and tiny shells and flowering weed and starfishes. The water was perfectly clear and unpolluted. He could clearly see the bottom, fifteen feet down, and now a shoal of silvery-brown fish glided out from a sea-bed bush. Fascinated, he leaned over, understanding why so many swimmers out there were equipped with goggles and schnorkels. A scarlet fish darted out from a rock, then a broad silver one, banded with black.

Behind him, a voice said, 'You like it?'

Wexford got up on to his haunches. The man who had spoken was older than he, skinny and wrinkled and tough-looking. He had a walnut face, a dry smile and surprisingly good teeth. He wore a sailor's cap and a blue and white striped tee-shirt, and Wexford recognised him as one of the taxi boatmen.

He replied slowly and carefully, 'I like it very much. It is pretty, beautiful.'

'The shores of your country were like this once. But in the nineteenth century a man called Gosse, a marine biologist, wrote a book about them and within a few years collectors had come and divested the rocks of everything.'

Wexford couldn't help laughing. 'Good God,' he said. 'I beg your pardon, but I thought ...?'

'That an old boatman can say "please" and "zank you" and "ten dinara"?'

'Something like that.' Wexford got up to stand inches taller than the other man. 'You speak remarkable English.'

A broad smile. 'No, it is too pedantic. I have only once been to England and that many years ago.' He put out his hand. 'How do you do, *gospodine*? Ivo Racic at your service.'

'Reginald Wexford.'

The hand was iron-hard but the grip gentle. Racic said, 'I do not wish to intrude. I spoke to you because it is rare to find a tourist interested in nature. With most it is only the sunbathing and the food and drink, eh? Or to catch the fish and take the shells.'

'Come and have a drink,' said Wexford, 'or are you working?'

‘Josip and Mirko and I, we have a little syndicate, and they will not mind if I have a half an hour off. But I buy the drinks. This is my country and you are my guest.’

They walked towards the avenue of stout palm trees. ‘I was born here in Mirna,’ said Racic. ‘At eighteen I left for the university and when I retired and came back here after forty years and more, those palm trees were just the same, no bigger, no different. Nothing was changed till they built the hotels.’

‘What did you do in those forty years? Not run a boat service?’

‘I was professor of Anglo-Saxon studies at the University of Beograd, Gospodin Wexford.’

‘Ah,’ said Wexford, ‘all is made plain. And when you retired you took up with Josip and Mirko to run the water taxis. Perhaps they were childhood friends?’

‘They were. I see you have perspicacity. And may I enquire in return what is your occupation?’

Wexford said what he always said on holiday, ‘I’m a civil servant.’

Racic smiled. ‘Here in Yugoslavia we are all civil servants. But let us go for our drinks. *Hajdemo, drug!*’

They chose a cluster of tables set under a vine-covered canopy, through which the sun made a gentle dappling on cobbles. Racic drank *slivovic*. The fiery brandy with its hinted undertaste of plums was forbidden to Wexford who had to watch his blood pressure. He even felt guilty when the white wine called Posip which Racic ordered for him arrived in a tumbler filled to the brim.

‘You live here in Mirna?’

‘Here alone in my *kucica* that was once my father’s house. My wife died in Beograd. But it is a good and pleasant life. I have my pension and my boat and the grapes I grow and the figs, and sometimes a guest like yourself, Gospodin Wexford, on whom to practise my English.’

Wexford would have liked to question him about the political regime, but he felt that this might be unwise and perhaps discourteous. So instead he remarked on the stately appearance of a woman in national costume, white coif, heavily embroidered stiff black dress, who had emerged with a full basket from the grocer’s shop. Racic nodded, then pointed a brown thumb to a table outside the shadow of the vines.

‘That is better, I think. Healthier, eh? And freer.’

She was sitting in the full sun, a young woman with short black hair geometrically cut, who wore only a pair of white shorts and jade-green halter top. A man came out of the currency exchange bureau, she got up to meet him, and Wexford recognised them as the couple he had seen on the walls of Dubrovnik. They went off hand in hand and got into a white Lancia Gamma parked under the palms.

‘Last time I saw them they were quarrelling.’

‘They are staying at the Hotel Bosnia,’ said Racic. ‘On Sunday evening they drove here from Dubrovnik and they are going to remain for a week. Her name I cannot tell you, but his is Philip.’

‘May I ask how you come to be such a mine of information, Mr Racic?’

‘They came out in my boat this morning.’ Racic’s dark bright eyes twinkled. ‘Just the two of them, to be ferried across to Vrt and back. But let me tell you a little story. Once,

about a year ago, a young English couple hired my boat. They were, I think, on their wedding journey, their honeymoon, as you say, and it was evident they were much in love. They had no eyes but for each other and certainly no inclination to speak to the boatman. We were coming into the shore here, perhaps a hundred metres out, when the young husband began telling his wife how much he loved her and how he could hardly wait to get back to the hotel to make love to her. Oh, very frank and explicit he was – and why not with only the old Yugoslav there who speaks nothing but his own outlandish tongue?

‘I said nothing. I betrayed nothing in my face. We pulled in, he paid me twenty dinars and they walked off up the quay. Then I saw the young lady had left her bag behind and I called to her. She came back, took it and thanked me. Gospodin Wexford, I could not resist it. “You have a charming husband, madame,” I said, “but no more than you deserve.” Oh, how she blushed, but I think she was not displeased, though they never came in my boat again.’

Laughing, Wexford said, ‘It was hardly a similar conversation you overheard between Philip and his wife, though?’

‘No.’ Racic looked thoughtful. ‘I think I will not tell you what I overheard. It is no business of ours. And now I must make my excuses, but we shall meet again.’

‘In your boat, certainly. I must take my wife over to Vrt for the bathing.’

‘Better than that. Bring your wife and I will take you for a trip round the islands. On Wednesday? No, I’m not touting for custom. This will be a trip – now for a good colloquial expression – on the house! You and me and Gospoda Wexford.’

‘Those very nice Germans,’ said Dora, ‘have asked us to go with them in their car to Cetinje on Wednesday.’

‘Mm,’ said Wexford absently. ‘Good idea.’

It was nine o’clock but very dark beyond the range of the waterside lights. They had walked into Mirna after dinner, it being too late for the taxi boats, and were having coffee on the terrace of a restaurant at the harbour edge. The nearly tideless Adriatic lapped the stones at their feet with soft gulping sounds.

Suddenly he remembered. ‘Oh, God, I can’t. I promised that Yugoslav I told you about to go on a trip round the islands with him. It’d look discourteous to let him down. But you go to Cetinje.’

‘Well, I should like to. I may never get another chance to see Montenegro. Oh, look, darling, there are those people we saw in Dubrovnik!’

For the first time Wexford saw the girl full-face. Her haircut from the front was as spectacular as from the back, a fringe having been cut into a sharp peak in the centre of her forehead. It looked less like hair, he thought, than a black cap painted on. In spite of the hour, she wore large tinted glasses. Her coloured skirt was the same one she had been wearing that first time.

She and her companion had come on to the terrace from the harbour walk. They walked slowly, she somehow reluctantly, the man called Philip looking about him as if for friends they had arranged to meet here. It couldn’t have been for a vacant table, for the terrace was half-empty. Dora kicked her husband’s foot under the table, a warning against overt curiosity, and started to talk about her German friends, Werner and Trudi. Out of the corner of his eye,

Wexford saw the man and the girl hesitate, then sit down at a neighbouring table. He made some sort of reply to Dora, conscious that it was he now who was being stared at. A voice he had heard once before said:

‘Excuse me, we don’t seem to have an ashtray. Would you mind if we had yours?’

Dora handed it to him. ‘Please do.’

She hardly looked up. He insisted, smiling. ‘You’re sure you won’t need it?’

‘Quite sure. We don’t smoke.’

He wasn’t the kind to give up easily, thought Wexford, and now, very intrigued by something he had noticed, he didn’t want to. Another prod from Dora’s foot merely made him withdraw his own under his chair. He turned towards the other table, and to the next question, ‘Are you staying long in Mirna?’ replied pleasantly, ‘A fortnight. We’ve been here four days.’

The effect of this simple rejoinder was startling. The man couldn’t have expressed more satisfaction – and, yes, relief – if Wexford had brought him news of some great inheritance or that a close friend, presumed in danger, was safe.

‘Oh, fantastic! That’s really great. It’s such a change to meet some English people. We must try and get together. This is my wife. We’re called Philip and Iris Nyman. Are you Londoners too?’

Wexford introduced himself and Dora and said that they were from Kingsmarkham in Sussex. It was lovely to meet them, said Philip Nyman. They must let him buy them a drink. No? More coffee, then? At last Wexford accepted a cup of coffee, wondering what was so upsetting Iris Nyman

that she had responded to the introduction only with a nod and now seemed almost paralysed. Her husband's extrovert behaviour? Certainly his effusive manner would have embarrassed all but the most insensitive. As soon as they had settled the question of the drinks, he launched into a long account of their trip from England, how they had come down through France and Italy, the people they had met, the weather, their delight at their first sight of the Dalmatian coast which they had never previously visited. Iris Nyman showed no delight. She simply stared out to sea, gulping down *slivovic* as if it were lemonade.

'We absolutely adored it. They say it's the least spoilt of the Mediterranean resorts, and that I can believe. We all loved Dubrovnik. That is, I mean, we brought a cousin of my wife's along with us. She was going on to holiday with some people she knows in Greece, so she flew to Athens from Dubrovnik on Sunday and left us to come on here.'

Dora said, 'We saw you in Dubrovnik. On the walls.'

Iris Nyman's glass made a little clinking sound against her teeth. Her husband said, 'You saw us on the walls? D'you know, I think I remember that.' He seemed just slightly taken aback. But not deterred. 'In fact, I seem to remember we were having a bit of a row at the time.'

Dora made a deprecating movement with her hands. 'We just walked past you. It was terribly hot, wasn't it?'

'You're being very charmingly discreet, Mrs Wexford – or may I call you Dora? The point was, Dora, my wife wanted to climb one of the local mountains and I was telling her just how impractical this was. I mean, in that heat, and for what? To get the same view you get from the walls.'

‘So you managed to dissuade her?’ Wexford said quietly.

‘Indeed I did, but you came along rather at the height of the ding-dong. Another drink, darling? And how about you, Dora? Won’t you change your mind?’

They replied simultaneously, ‘Another *slivovic*,’ and ‘Thank you so much, but we must go.’ It was a long time since Wexford had seen his wife so huffy and so thoroughly out of countenance. He marvelled at Nyman’s continuing efforts, his fixed smile.

‘Let me guess, you’re staying at the Adriatic?’ He took silence for assent. ‘We’re at the Bosnia. Wait a minute, how about making a date for, say, Wednesday? We could all have a trip somewhere in my car.’

The Wexfords, having previous engagements, were able to refuse with clear consciences. They said good night, Wexford nodding non-committally at Nyman’s insistence that they must meet again, mustn’t lose touch after having been so lucky as to encounter each other. His eyes followed them. Wexford looked back once to see.

‘Well!’ said Dora when they were out of earshot, ‘what an insufferably rude woman!’

‘Just very nervous, I think,’ said Wexford thoughtfully. He gave her his arm and they began the walk back along the water-side path. It was very dark, the sea inky and calm, the island invisible. ‘When you come to think of it, that was all very odd.’

‘Was it? She was rude and he was effusive to the point of impertinence, if you call that odd. He forced himself on us, got us to tell him our names – you could see she just didn’t want to know. I was amazed when he called me Dora.’

‘That part wasn’t so odd. After all, that’s how one does

make holiday acquaintances. Presumably it was much the same with Werner and Trudi.'

'No, it wasn't, Reg, not at all. For one thing, we're much of an age and we're staying at the same hotel. Trudi speaks quite good English, and we were watching the children in the paddling pool and she happened to mention her grandsons who are just the same age as ours, and that started it. You must see that's quite different from a man of thirty walking into a café and latching on to a couple old enough to be his parents. I call it pushy.'

Wexford reacted impatiently. 'That's as may be. Perhaps you didn't notice there was a perfectly clean ashtray in the middle of that table before they sat down at it.'

'*What?*' Dora halted, staring at him in the dark.

'There was. He must have put it in his pocket to give him an excuse for speaking to us. Now that was odd. And giving us all that gratuitous information was odd. And telling a deliberate lie was very odd indeed. Come along, my dear. Don't stand there gawping at me.'

'What do you mean, a deliberate lie?'

'When you told them we'd seen them on the walls, he said he remembered it and we must have overheard the quarrel between himself and his wife. Now that was odd in itself. Why mention it at all? Why should we care about his domestic – or maybe I should say mural – rows? He said the quarrel had been over climbing a mountain, but no one climbs the mountains here in summer. Besides, I remember precisely what he did say up on the walls. He said, "We can't find anyone to take us." OK, so he might have meant they couldn't get a guide. But "there's nowhere to land"? That's

what he said, no doubt about it. You don't land on mountains, Dora, unless you assault them by helicopter.'

'I wonder why, though. I wonder what he's up to.'

'So do I,' said Wexford, 'but I'm pretty sure it's not pinching ashtrays from waterside cafés.'

They rounded the point and came within sight of the lights of the Hotel Adriatic. A little further and they could see each other's faces. Dora saw his and read there much to disquiet her.

'You're not going to start detecting, Reg!'

'Can't help it, it's in my bones. But I won't let it interfere with your holiday, that's a promise.'

On Tuesday morning Racic's taxi boat was waiting at the landing stage outside the hotel.

'Gospoda Wexford, it is a great pleasure to meet you.'

Courteously he handed Dora into the boat. Its awning of green canvas, now furled, gave it somewhat the look of a gondola. As the engines started, Dora made her excuses for the following day.

'You will like Cetinje,' said Racic. 'Have a good time. Gospodin Wexford and I will have a bachelor day out. All boys together, eh? Are you quite comfortable? A little more suitable than that one for a lady, I hope.'

He pointed across the bay to where a man was paddling a yellow and blue inflatable dinghy. The girl with him wore a very brief bikini. The Nymans.

'If you could manage to avoid passing those people, Mr Racic,' said Dora, 'that would make me very comfortable indeed.'