The Governor of the island of Minger thought hard about how best to involve Sheikh Hamdullah, the leader of the Helveki sect, in the imposition of quarantine measures against the plague. He had met the Sheikh five years ago, very soon after being appointed governor of the island. At the time, the Sheikh had seemed to the Governor a cultivated, pleasant, mild-mannered man. Perhaps he still was. They had become friends in that first year, and had enjoyed many conversations. Yet in spite of this joyful friendship, the Sheikh did not respect quarantine measures enough, a fact which would do neither their friendship nor the people of the island any good, and would, regrettably, turn the plague situation into an international matter.

As the editor of the Adektos Arkadi was currently locked up in the castle dungeons, the Governor summoned the editor of the other Greek newspaper that was still being published in the island, the Neo Agnos, a young Greek nationalist whom he’d had arrested a number of times before, and whose newspaper he’d occasionally confiscated, to tell him that Sheikh Hamdullah’s lodge was going to be effectively disinfected, and that if he intended to put out a new edition of his newspaper the next day, this was the news he should definitely report. “There need be nothing further said on the matter,” the Governor concluded. He then presented him with some coffee and a plate of dried figs and walnuts which he (falsely and meaninglessly) claimed he’d just had “disinfected in the hot air oven,” as if it were not plague but cholera they were dealing with. Finally, as he saw him out, he spoke of the scale of the calamity they were facing and the
anxiety it was causing in Istanbul and in the rest of the world, and explained
with a menacing smile that in the interest of preventing anarchy, it was the duty
of the press to support the Ottoman state, and that he had better make sure he
didn't print the wrong thing and get himself in trouble.

The next day the registry clerk brought in a copy of the new issue of Neo
Agnos fresh from the printing press. The translator read out to the Governor
the column he had carefully translated from Greek into Turkish. The report
referred explicitly to the very incident the Governor had told the journalist he
must not write about, and announced to the whole island and to the whole
world that the siphon-men – as the decontamination crews were affectionately
known – had been turned away by the headquarters of Sheikh Hamdullah's
Helveki sect, and that devout and fatalistic Muslims were not respecting quar-
antine measures. The tone of the piece implied a smug satisfaction with this
turn of events, and a wish to make as much of the incident as possible. Gover-
nor Sami Pasha could already see that the report was bound to encourage the
charlatan sheikhs who'd been handing out amulets, the rural folk who believed
in their powers, the angry young migrants from Crete, and indeed every Muslim
on the island, including the more enlightened ones, and that it would lead to
resistance against quarantine measures and against his own authority as Gov-
ernor.

The Governor and Manolis, the journalist responsible for the story, had had
disagreements in the past. There had been a period three or four years ago
when brave Manolis, in a concerted campaign to undermine the Governor and
the Ottoman bureaucracy, had reported at length on problems in the munic-
ipal government, the filthy state of the city streets, accusations of corruption,
and the laziness and ignorance of the town hall clerks. The Governor, whose
patience had long since run out, but who had nevertheless been putting up with
the situation lest he should be accused of intolerance, had eventually sent word
through intermediaries demanding that Manolis soften the tone of his report-
ing and threatening to shut his newspaper down, and for a time the journalist
had acquiesced.

But in the wake of the “pilgrim ship affair” which had so perturbed the Gov-
ernor, the newspaper began to publish stories blaming the governor and the
quarantine authorities for what had transpired, compelling the Governor to
find some excuse to lock Manolis up in the dungeons – although he had been
forced to set the prisoner free soon enough, under pressure from the British
and French consuls, and from the telegrams he kept receiving from the Palace.
The thing that hurt the Governor most now was the strange sense of betrayal
he felt in discovering that all the special warmth he had shown Manolis after
he'd released him from prison appeared to have been for nothing. Once, when
they had run into each other at the Hotel Splendid, the Governor had praised Manolis for his piece about the fight between the coachmen and the porters, congratulated him on his sources, and offered to pay him upfront with cash from the municipal purse to publish the piece and two future columns in the municipality’s own Turkish language newspaper, The Times of Minger. Another time when they both happened to be in the restaurant Dégustation on the same night, the Governor had made it a point to be very publicly courteous toward Manolis, invited him to join his table, offered him some mullet fish soup with onions, and told him openly and loud enough for everyone else to hear that his newspaper was by far the finest in the whole Levant. Given these cordial antecedents, His Excellency the Governor had been sure that his small request would be granted, and that Manolis would not report about the siphon-men being turned away from the lodge. He therefore now concluded that there must be some other power secretly at work that had made Manolis publish his column, as indeed it must have all those other columns he’d written in the past. What power was this? The Governor resolved to have the fearless, troublemaking journalist thrown into the dungeons once more, use the freezing, humid cells to teach him a lesson, and wear him down until he revealed who had made him write his articles on the pilgrim ship incident.

The plainclothes officers he sent out to look for Manolis did not find him in the offices of the newspaper whose copies they’d withdrawn from circulation, nor in his own house in the Kora neighbourhood, but hiding in his uncle’s house, where they caught him reading a book (Hobbes’s Leviathan) in the garden, and hauled him straight to the dungeons. Eventually the Governor, feeling guilty, had arranged for Manolis to be transferred to the western wing of the prison, which was more comfortable and somewhat removed from the spread of the epidemic inside the dungeons.

At this point in our story, it will benefit this historical account for us to go back three years in time to describe the events of the “pilgrim ship mutiny,” which were still causing the Governor such political complications today, and grieving him on a personal level. In referring to these events as the “affair of the rebel pilgrims,” some historians have implied that the pilgrims themselves were somehow to blame for what transpired, but this is not correct. During the 1890s, one of the precautions the “Great Powers” took to halt the outbreaks of cholera that spread from India through to the rest of the world via pilgrim ships passing through Mecca and Medina was to impose a ten-day quarantine on those vessels upon their return from the holy lands. The French, for example, not trusting the quarantine measures employed by the Ottoman authorities in the Hejaz, would put the Messageries ferry company’s ship Persepolis, returning from the
hajj to their colonial possessions in Algeria, through a second enforced quarantine before allowing its passengers to disembark and go back home to their towns and villages.

The Ottomans too implemented these procedures, motivated by a lack of trust – particularly in its early years – in the efficacy of their own Quarantine Authority in the Hejaz. Whether or not a ship bringing pilgrims back had raised the yellow flag or reported any sick passengers, the Quarantine Committee in Istanbul had made these “precautionary quarantine” measures mandatory across the Ottoman Empire.

The long journey itself was grueling and torturous enough, with many dying on the way (it was considered normal for a fifth of pilgrims coming from Bombay and Karachi to perish in transit), and most returning pilgrims, having made it safely back home, objected to the prospect of being quarantined for another ten days. Soldiers often had to be brought in, and in many places doctors had to ask the police and the gendarmerie for help. In outlying ports and small islands like Minger, where quarantine premises fell short of requirements or the old buildings available were not enough to contain the villager pilgrims, the authorities would hastily round up leaky old ships and barges available for cheap hire, and convert them into temporary isolation facilities. Sometimes, as in Chios, Kuşadası, and Thessaloniki, these vessels would be towed to some remote bay or near a stretch of empty land, where a camp would be set up using tents borrowed from the army. The tired hajjis would be thus quarantined for ten days, with medical personnel trying to ensure they got enough food, cleaning supplies, and drinking water.

The pilgrims, by now desperate to get home as soon as possible, were frustrated with these quarantines. Some, having managed to survive the whole journey more or less unscathed, would die during those final ten days. Arguments and fights would break out between the hajjis and the Greek, Armenian, and Jewish doctors of the Ottoman Empire sent to examine them. On top of having to endure enforced quarantine, the exhausted pilgrims were also expected to pay a quarantine levy. Those among them who had still some money left and were cunning enough to try would bribe the doctors to let them break quarantine and run away, which infuriated all the other pilgrims.

But the incompetence of the local authorities ensured that the most grievous of such episodes unfolding throughout Ottoman lands occurred on the island of Minger. As ordered by telegram from Istanbul, upon its return from the Hejaz the ship named Persia, sailing under a British flag, was turned away from the port of the capital Benen, and its forty-seven pilgrims were transferred onto a rickety old barge procured by Quarantine Master Nikos. The barge was towed to one of the small coves in the north of the island and made to drop anchor there.
This remote bay was surrounded by steep slopes and rocky cliffs that served as a natural prison for the pilgrims, and was therefore a particularly suitable quarantine spot. But those same slopes and cliffs also made it harder to deliver food, potable water, and medicines to the pilgrims.

When a storm broke out, operations to set up tents on shore where pilgrims could be examined, doctors and soldiers could shelter, and medical supplies could be stored, were all delayed. The storm went on for five days, and the Mingerian pilgrims, left without food or water and at the mercy of the waves, were first rocked into a stupor, and then sizzled in the baking sunshine that followed. Many of them had never travelled beyond the island before. The pilgrims were mostly bearded, middle-aged villagers with small farms and olive groves back home, together with a handful of younger men, pious and also bearded, who had accompanied their grandfathers on the journey.

After five days, cholera broke out on the overcrowded barge, and the pilgrims, by then already exhausted, began to die at a rate of one or two per day. Though the ship was filthy and overrun with disease, the officials and doctors who had dragged the pilgrims all the way there were nowhere to be seen, and as the death toll kept rising every day, even the older hajjis began to grow restless.

The two Greek doctors who’d climbed over the mountains on horseback and had eventually managed, after three days, to reach the quarantine camp, were in no hurry to row out to the germ-infested barge and visit the furious Muslim pilgrims. Some of those aboard the barge didn’t understand why they were being kept there, but vaguely sensed that they were dying. Several of the tired, bearded old pilgrims did not want these Christian doctors with their strange spectacles to spray them with Lysol and disinfectant liquid just as they were about to die. The two spray pumps that had been carried across the mountains on horseback broke on the first day. The pilgrims who were in favour of disposing of the dead by throwing them overboard clashed with those who argued “they are martyrs, they are family, we will bury them in the village,” and used up what little strength they had left in these quarrels.

At the end of the first week, with the disease still spreading, and the bodies of the dead still aboard and unburied, a rebellion broke out on the barge.

First the angry pilgrims overpowered the two Muslim soldiers that had been sent to guard them, and threw them overboard. When one of the soldiers – who, just like the pilgrims themselves (and indeed like most of the Ottoman Empire’s Muslim-majority population), didn’t know how to swim – drowned in the sea, the Governor and the Commander of the island’s garrison made plans to retaliate.

Some of the younger pilgrims managed to pull up the anchor, but the barge did not run aground immediately; instead it was swept farther out to sea and
swayed about for half a day before crashing into rocks in another, similarly beautiful cove farther west along the shore of the island.

With their barge now aground and leaking water, the tired pilgrims were not easily able to gather their bundles and their gifts and flee back to their villages. Had they managed to do so, perhaps the whole incident would have been quickly forgotten, even though a soldier had died. But instead the pilgrims got stuck in the barge full of increasingly foul-smelling corpses, and found themselves having to battle the waves, and struggling to collect their parcels and their bottles of cholera-infested holy Zamzam water and get away from the scene of the shipwreck.

The troop of gendarmes that had been following the pilgrim ship from the shore positioned themselves behind the rocks and along the edge of the cliff, and their commander instructed the pilgrims to surrender, respect quarantine regulations, remain on board the ship, and refrain from coming ashore.

It is difficult to say, now, whether these warnings were understood by those they were intended for. The pilgrims were overcome with dread: they all knew that they were going to be quarantined again, and that this time they would definitely die. To them, quarantines were a diabolical European invention designed to punish and kill perfectly healthy, devout Muslim pilgrims and take all their money. The situation escalated when the Ottoman soldiers stationed on the cliff panicked and started shooting at the pilgrims who were hopping across the rocks to escape. Some were trying to climb up the cliff face along trails used by goats. The soldiers shot at the Muslim pilgrims as if they were enemy troops come to invade Minger. In the eight to ten minutes it took for them to calm down and set their weapons aside, a large number of people had been hit.

Due to Governor Sami Pasha’s ban on any news of these events being reported, or even indirectly addressed, 120 years later we still do not have a definitive account of how many pilgrims were shot and killed that day, how many surrendered and were put back into quarantine (some really did go on to die of cholera during this second quarantine), and how many made it back to their villages eventually, to spread the disease and news of that day’s grisly events throughout the island. But we know from historical accounts from the period, as well as from the telegrams sent to Istanbul, to the Palace, and to Abdul Hamid, that the incident had a significant effect on what came later.

Following his role in this historical event, the Governor was never able to shake off the condemnation, contempt, and reputation for cruelty that it brought him. He expected to be punished by Sultan Abdul Hamid, but this didn’t happen. Whenever people criticised him to his face, he would respond by arguing that sending soldiers against the pilgrims in order to protect the island
from cholera had been the right decision, and that there was no room in his conscience to sympathise with miscreants who had seen fit to hijack a vessel belonging to the state (though in fact the barge had been hired) and kill one of its soldiers. But he would also always make it clear that he had not been the one to issue the order to shoot at the pilgrims, and that it had been a mistake resulting from the inexperience of the troops present on the scene.

The Governor decided that his best defence was to wait for the incident to fade from memory.

Accordingly, he was particularly vigilant about the event not being reported in any newspapers, and for a time, his efforts were successful. During this early period the Governor expounded at length on the idea that those who died on the Hajj were to be considered “martyrs,” as indeed the laws of Islam stipulated, and that there was no higher honour than this.

When the dead pilgrims’ families came to the capital to demand compensation, he would receive them in his mansion, begin by bringing up the holy topic of the “special status granted those who have tasted the elixir of martyrdom,” and tell them that he would “support them in their demand for compensation, and do everything in his power to help them, but could they please not speak to any of the Greek journalists and exaggerate the significance of the matter.” This was when the Pasha first began to exert a direct influence on compensation payments handed out by the state.

The incident was perhaps on course to be forgotten when Governor Sami Pasha gave an interview to the Greek newspaper he was on good terms with, the Neo Agnos, during which he mentioned a drinking fountain he’d arranged to have built in one of the villages. In speaking of the hajjis there with something of a protective air, the Governor used the expression “these poor pilgrims.” Ordinarily, nobody would have taken any notice of this. But Manolis, the same journalist he’d now had arrested, had gone on to write a polemical piece in Neo Agnos arguing that the Muslim pilgrims weren’t poor at all; on the contrary, the island’s wealthy Muslims had been following the latest fashion by selling off their possessions to embark on the Hajj, during which so many of them fell sick and died. But considering how undereducated the island’s Muslim population was when compared to the Orthodox community, would it not be more sensible for the wealthy rural Muslim families to band together and raise funds to set up a secondary school to serve their community, or at the very least repair the broken steps in their neighbourhood mosques, instead of frittering their riches away on British ships and faraway deserts?

If it had been up to him, the Governor too would have put schools before mosques, but even so, when he’d read the article he had been so furious he’d felt he might choke. He was annoyed by Manolis’s open disdain toward Mus-
lims, but the main cause of his anger was the fact that the matter of the “pilgrim ship mutiny” had surreptitiously been given a second wind. The Governor had been spying on Manolis ever since the publication of that article. After reading his latest piece on the “Siphon-men turned away” from the lodge, and throwing Manolis in prison, he had summoned the two spies who were currently on the job (who went around dressed respectively as a pastry seller and a junk dealer) and tried hopelessly and indeed fruitlessly to find out from this pair of illiterate men any clue as to who might have made Manolis write the article. But what he did learn from his spies caused the Governor even greater concern. It was true: the whole island was talking about how the siphon-men had been turned away from Sheikh Hamdullah’s lodge.

“And why were they not let in?” the Pasha asked his two spies. He had put on that slightly theatrical air he used whenever he spoke to his mistress, Madam Marika, but the pastry-seller spy didn’t notice. “I regret to say I do not know, your Excellency!” he replied.

“It’s because Sheikh Hamdullah has the plague,” said the spy disguised as a junk dealer.

“Is that so?” said the Governor.