THE PALACE OF THE SULTAN

PASSING THE MIGHTY HAGIA SOPHIA, we arrived at the Sultan's palace.

Mounted on a high promontory overlooking the Sea of Marmara to the south and the Bosphorus Strait to the east, it claimed the most strategic and commanding position in the city. A striking tower rose from within its own set of high stone walls.

'That tower is the *Adalet Kulesi*, the Tower of Justice,' Mr Ascham said. 'The Moslems pride themselves on being a just and fair people.'

'Are they?'

Mr Ascham cocked his head. 'Some say they are *overly* zealous in their pursuit of justice. Thieves have their hands cut off. Adulterers are stoned. Do *you* think this is just?'

I pondered this. 'Crimes must be punished so that order is maintained.'

'True. But shouldn't a punishment be commensurate with the crime?' my teacher said. 'If we executed every adulterer in England, the population would be reduced by half.'

'We hang thieves in England,' I said. 'Here they only lose a hand. Harsh, swift punishments make for secure streets.'

'They certainly do,' Mr Ascham said, just as we passed a young man with a stump for a right hand. 'The question every society must ask itself is: how much force are people willing to accept in exchange for the safety of their persons and possessions?'

I frowned. 'I don't think I know the answer to that.'

Mr Ascham smiled. 'I'm pleased to hear it. For the answer to that question is a balancing act for every king and queen. Tyrannical rulers get deposed and beheaded. Weak ones find themselves manipulated by cunning lords and duplicitous advisors. Successful rulers find the balance that suits their time.'

I nodded at the palace ahead of us. 'And in your opinion is this Sultan Suleiman a successful ruler?'

'The Moslem people follow the edicts of a great prophet named Muhammad who instilled in them a respect for a higher law. This is the mark of every great society in history: the realisation that all folk, rich and poor alike, are better off abiding by accepted laws rather than the sword. For only once laws are in place can a society truly flourish: the protection of the law gives a population safety and security, and once people have that, they happily contribute to their society. Farmers farm, warriors train for war, artists paint, playwrights write. People become

experts in trades and occupations and so society advances at an even greater rate. All because the people accepted basic laws.'

'What happens in societies that don't accept such laws?'

'They end up marching on the spot,' Mr Ascham said sadly. 'Look at Africa. There the native tribes still fight each other with spears and sticks, engaging in raids for food and women. Every time a new tribe wins a battle, society has to start all over again, so there is no progress.'

'With respect, didn't you tell me only recently that, ultimately, force prevails?' I said, not a little cheekily.

My teacher half smiled at me. 'I'm pleased to see you were paying attention. And you are right, you've found a paradox in my argument. The only answer I can give you is this: a society of laws is the best we have come up with, but unfortunately not every society chooses to go down that path.'

We came to the Sultan's palace, and truly it was a wonder of the world.

We passed through an immense and well-guarded outer gate and stepped out into a wide grassy courtyard shaded by many trees. Through this courtyard stretched a broad curving path that brought us to a second gate in a smaller but still sizeable wall.

This inner gate was called the Gate of Salutation and it was surmounted by two triangular spires that looked to me more European than Ottoman. Our guards explained that the gateway had been designed and built recently by Hungarian

architects brought to Constantinople by the Sultan. To my eyes, it looked very Hungarian: overdone and dandyish.

After passing through this gate, we were met by an official party of ministers dressed in red silk robes and high white turbans. Some black African eunuchs stood behind them.

Leading the official party was the sadrazam, the Grand Vizier or chief minister to the Sultan. While the others all wore turbans, the sadrazam alone wore one with a beautiful snow-white heron plume rising from its linen coils. He was an exceedingly tall and thin fellow and he bowed low as our player, Mr Giles, was introduced by a herald.

The herald spoke first in Turkish and then in Greek, which, we were told, would be used as a common language at the tournament: 'Mr Gilbert Giles! Representative of King Henry the Eighth, King of England, Ireland and France!'

The sadrazam shook Mr Giles's hand.

'Gentlemen. Welcome to the city of Constantine,' he said in English. Forgetting myself, I gasped in surprise at his command of my mother tongue.

This caught the sadrazam's attention and he spied me. 'Why, hello, little girl.' He moved toward me. 'I am Mustafa. What is your name?'

'Elizabeth, sir,' I said, bowing.

'Are you an enthusiast of chess, Miss Elizabeth?'

'Yes, sir.'

'You play?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Ah, the English.' He turned to his own group, switching to an archaic form of Latin that I could actually understand. 'A most bizarre people. Imagine it, girls playing chess. I have even heard that girls go to school there. And they once had a ruling queen.'

His retinue all recoiled as one in shock.

'You do not have queens in the Moslem world?' I inquired politely, also in Latin.

The sadrazam whirled at the sound of my voice, his eyes wide at the realisation that I had understood him perfectly.

'But of course we do,' he said in Greek, recovering, his eyes cold. 'Only they do not rule. They are merely vessels for the Sultan's seed, wombs on legs, useful only for the production of heirs and troublesome the rest of the time.' He turned from me, our conversation over, and with a tight smile addressed Mr Giles and Mr Ascham.

'Gentlemen, you must be tired from your journey. These eunuchs will escort you to your quarters in the south pavilion. Tomorrow evening, His Majesty the Sultan will host a banquet in honour of the players. It will begin at sunset. Good day to you.'

THE CITY OF CONSTANTINE

WE SETTLED INTO OUR QUARTERS—three small but well-appointed rooms gathered around a central entry vestibule. Mr Ascham and Mr Giles had a room each while Elsie and I shared. That evening I delighted in a wonderful night's sleep in a comfortable bed under a solid roof.

The following day we ventured out into the city.

Up close, it was even busier than I had at first perceived.

One immense bazaar, known as the Grand Bazaar, was simply the greatest marketplace I had ever seen and it was all contained under a single gigantic roof. Stalls stretched as far as the eye could see. Chaos reigned. It seemed that everywhere there was movement and noise: carpet sellers mixed with root farmers who traded with spice merchants who yelled at shepherd boys whose lambs strayed among their sacks. If the Bosphorus Strait marked the dividing line between Europe and the Orient, this was the spot where European and Oriental commerce collided.

The aromas of the spices almost coloured the air—cinnamon, cassia, saffron, turmeric (which we call 'Indian saffron')—and everywhere I saw the notoriously potent yellow-and-orange Persian spice mixture known as *adwiya*.

Oriental silk dealers displayed their wares on vast racks: silks of every conceivable colour, divinely smooth to the touch, delightful to the eye and of the highest quality, for the artisans of the Orient have long been experts in the harvesting of silk-worms. Elsie and I were in heaven, and Elsie purchased two multicoloured skirts and one translucent silk veil of the kind worn by belly-dancers to cover their faces but not their eyes.

She also, I should add, helped me choose a new dress, dissuading me from buying a purple robe-like thing ('Oh, no, Bess, that won't do! You need something that complements your gorgeous hair!'). She convinced me instead to purchase a shimmering golden dress that did indeed go very well with my curly orange locks ('Remember, Bess: match the dress with your hair and the jewels with your eyes. Oh, look at you. You won't be able to keep the boys away from you!'). I loved such times with Elsie.

Signs in the local language were everywhere. I had always considered myself rather adept at the acquisition of foreign tongues but the language of the Turks in Constantinople baffled me. Not only was it a strange guttural form of speech but it was also written in a script that was entirely unlike the Roman script I was used to in England. Rather, it was a series of curves, slashes and dots that made no apparent

sense whatsoever. My teacher told me that while the script was Arabic, the language it conveyed was actually Turkish, confusing me even further.

I viewed all the signs of the bazaar with squinting eyes, trying to detect some kind of pattern in them. After a time, I found that one phrase seemed to be repeated in several stalls:

سلطانڭ كنديسينڭ ده قوللاندغى كيبى

I asked a trader who spoke Greek what it meant and he said that the phrase translated as: 'As used by the Sultan himself.'

'Oh! It's an endorsement . . .' I said to my teacher. 'Just like at home.' When my father wore a certain bootmaker's boots or ordered a play to be performed at Whitehall, that variety of shoe would then be made, or the play in question would then be performed, 'at royal command'. That the king might use a certain product was a big selling point for its trader and increased his sales immeasurably.

There were also, it should be said, other indications of the Sultan's overriding power.

Twelve rotting bodies hung by their necks from a great tree in a square outside the Grand Bazaar. A nearby sign (we were informed) identified them as resistance fighters from the city of Buda, Habsburg holdouts who refused to accept the Sultan's

rule of that city. The corpses rocked awkwardly on the ropes as ravens pecked out their eyes.

We returned to the palace around lunchtime, not wanting to stay out too long and overexert ourselves, for that evening we had a formal occasion to attend: the Sultan's opening banquet.

After a restful afternoon in the much quieter world of the palace, that night, dressed in our finest evening attire, we left our rooms to go to the banquet.

Mr Giles was nervous, Mr Ascham was curious, and I was just excited to be wearing my new gold dress.

Elsie, however, was beyond excited. It took her all afternoon to get ready. She fussed over everything: her hair, her powder, her shoes, her bosom, her hair again, the set of the hoops under her skirt and her bosom again.

I inquired as to why she was so flustered. She had been to many banquets before.

'Bessie, Bessie,' she said. 'Don't you know? Beneath their veils, Moslem women are the most beautiful in the world and tonight, within the confines of the Sultan's palace, the women of the palace have been granted leave by the Sultan to dress as they please and show off their beauty to his esteemed visitors. They will be on full display, as will we, representing the womanhood of England. In closed settings such as this, Moslem women are renowned for dressing fabulously, painting their faces with the most artful skill, and wearing around

their necks and wrists marvellous and exotic jewellery. In such company and as a representative of Mother England, I must look my very, very best!'

I wasn't convinced that her desire to look her finest was done entirely for England. I knew enough to realise that her efforts may also have been intended to enhance her chances of snaring a visiting European prince—or, given what I had witnessed her doing in that back alley during our journey, some other kind of gentleman—but in the end, as always, her enthusiasm won me over and I helped her prepare anyway.

By the time we left our rooms, she looked radiant: she wore a sky-blue dress with a very slim waist, a white lace hem and, of course, a plunging bustline. Her gorgeous blonde tresses were raised off her bare shoulders, exposing her long neck. A few escaping curls—carefully crafted to appear so—cascaded to her décolletage, as if pointing the way. A silver pendant and matching bracelet on her left wrist completed the dazzling ensemble. Elsie was a goddess.

The Sultan's banquet was to be held in what was called the Third Courtyard, but to get to that place, all guests had to pass through the bottleneck that was the imperial audience chamber. There they would be formally introduced to the Sultan himself before moving on to the banquet.

Our party arrived at the entrance to the audience chamber to find a short line of guests already waiting at its archway, men and women of various nationalities, all wearing outfits peculiar

to their regions: Italians with their ruffled cuffs, Castilians in their stiff-collared Spanish outer jackets, Austrians in their broad-shouldered ermine coats and, of course, churchmen from Rome in their flowing robes.

I noticed that the lead person of each delegation carried a scarlet envelope just like the one Mr Ascham bore on behalf of my father. In addition to this, it became clear to me that each delegation had also brought a gift of some kind for the Sultan: every party carried a large chest filled with treasure. They had each then added some extra touch peculiar to their culture: furs, paintings, and in one case a glimmering sword with a hilt embedded with rubies. Every delegation had done this; every one except ours.

Our delegation, I noted with dismay, bore no gift at all.

No chest, no collateral trinket, just the scarlet envelope. I wasn't certain if this was evidence of my father's stinginess, or of an ignorance of protocol on his part, or just his renowned intolerance of useless token gestures.

We took our place in the queue behind a group bearing the coat of arms of Ferdinand, the Archduke of Austria. Mr Giles went over and spoke with the Austrian player, a square-jawed young man named Maximilian of Vienna, while I was delighted to see a girl of about seventeen standing in the midst of that delegation wearing a pretty white dress with a cerise sash.

I took Elsie by the hand and approached her. 'Hello,' I said in my best German. 'My name is Bess and this is my friend,

Elsie. We are from England. What is your name and are you excited to be here for the chess tournament?'

The girl bowed her head shyly. 'My name is Helena, but I will not be seeing any chess. I am to go immediately to that part of the palace known as the Harem, where the Sultan's wife, children and concubines live. I am Archduke Ferdinand's gift to the Sultan.'

I blinked back my shock, thunderstruck. This seventeen-year-old girl was a *gift*, a prize of no greater value than a sword or a fur.

But Elsie wasn't perturbed at all. 'You are to become a concubine of the Sultan? How exciting for you! Consort to a king . . . !'

I returned to my teacher's side, indignant. 'Do you know that that girl over there is an offering from Archduke Ferdinand to the Sultan?'

My teacher sighed. 'No matter how distasteful we may find the practice of slave-giving, sadly it does still happen in these parts. I must say, however, I am rather surprised that the Archduke of Austria would even send a *player* to the Sultan's tournament, let alone such a gift: a virgin concubine is seen as a most valuable and deferential thing to give. I am surprised because the Sultan and the Archduke have long been bitter enemies: over the last twenty years, Suleiman has seized much of Hungary from Ferdinand, saddled him with a weighty annual tribute and twice laid siege to Ferdinand's beloved Vienna. Who knows, perhaps it is a sign of more peaceable relations.'

A short while later, Mr Ascham spotted a group of cardinals and priests joining the queue. He elbowed Mr Giles, drawing his attention to a tall grey-haired priest wearing a long black cassock, a tuftless biretta and a large wooden crucifix around his neck.

'Giles, look. That's Ignatius de Loyola.'

Mr Giles nodded. 'I had wondered if he would come.'

'Who is he?' I inquired.

'Only one of the most famous teachers in the world,' my teacher replied. 'Ignatius de Loyola is a Jesuit priest from Spain and a staunch advocate of the power of knowledge.'

'And also a renowned enthusiast of chess,' Mr Giles replied. 'That young monk with him is Brother Raul of Seville, Spain's finest player. Both Ignatius and Raul are devotees of the *Repetición*.'

'Ah, but does Brother Raul come here representing Spain or the Papal States?' Mr Ascham asked.

'A very good question, Roger, and according to Maximilian of Vienna the cause of much gossip and scandal. Maximilian just told me that Brother Raul is here representing the Papal States. Advised by Ignatius, the Church moved faster than the Spanish and claimed Raul as *their* player in his capacity as a Jesuit monk. It was most impertinent, invoking the name of God against that of the Holy Roman Emperor himself. It means that King Charles is represented here by a capable but lesser player by the name of Pablo Montoya.'

'These Jesuits dress very plainly,' I observed, 'for an

audience with a king.' Their ankle-length black cassocks were of a simple coarse fabric. To me they looked like beggars.

'Jesuits own no property,' Mr Ascham said, 'not even the clothes on their backs. They are devout servants of the Church, footsoldiers of Christ. But they fight their holy war through education and evangelism, sending missionaries to the farthest corners of the world. The Jesuits are a curious group, for they prize science and learning while the very Church they serve decries such things; yet the Jesuits are at the vanguard of the Pope's fight against Luther and the Protestant movement.'

'And my father.'

'And your father. Mark that man, young Bess, for should you ever become a Protestant Queen, you will find yourself duelling with Loyola's missionaries for your people's souls.'

I nodded at the cardinal leading the delegation from the Papal States. 'Their cardinal has no such qualms about wealth.' Unlike Ignatius and their player, the head cardinal wore scarlet robes made of the finest silk and many gold chains.

'Ah, yes,' my teacher said with some distaste. 'Cardinal Farnese.'

Cardinal Farnese was enormously fat and the loose skin around his neck folded to form many chins: he was clearly a man who ate well and often. He had hair of a deep, shiny black with grey tips above the ears, and he held his Roman nose haughtily high. He also carried his hands in an unusual, almost feminine, way: he held his pudgy fingers—bedecked with many

glittering rings—aloft, above things, as if touching the grit of the world pained him.

Mr Ascham said, 'When it comes to material matters and the Roman Catholic Church, Ignatius is the exception rather than the rule. The Church and most of its senior clergymen enjoy the trappings of their wealth and power. This is part of Luther's problem with them. And the likes of Cardinal Farnese do not help their image—he is the Pope's brother, most trusted advisor, and, many believe, his likely successor. Pope Paul favours his family; he made his grandsons cardinals before their seventeenth birthdays.' My teacher frowned. 'But it is a curious thing for Farnese to be here leading the delegation from the Papal States.'

'Why do you say that?'

'Because Cardinal Farnese is particularly harsh in his anti-Moslem rhetoric. He despises the Islamic faith and he doesn't mind saying so. Last year, he practically called for another crusade on Jerusalem. He once likened a polygamous Moslem marriage to a male ape keeping a harem of she-apes. For their part, the Moslems hate him for his views; the most senior cleric here in Constantinople, the Imam Ali, has publicly called for a *fatwa* against Farnese—essentially, a death warrant that any Moslem may carry out—but as yet the other clerics have not agreed to such an extreme move. Sending Farnese to this tournament is a most provocative act on the part of the Church. They are almost daring the Imam to act.'

'Is that so—' I said before I was interrupted by, of all things, a loud animal roar.

I turned to see a new delegation moving through the courtyard outside the audience chamber: a group of burly rough-faced men wearing fur-lined hats and leading behind them a wagon on which was mounted a cage with thick black bars. Inside the sturdy cage, hunched to fit into it, was an enormous bear.

At the head of this delegation was a short boy of perhaps sixteen.

He strode casually past the entire queue and made to shove past me but I stood my ground.

The boy snorted as he stopped. He wore many gold neck-chains, a green felt jacket and a hat lined with black sable, the most expensive fur in all of Europe. But he was short, while I was tall for my age, so I stood half a head above his angry little eyes.

'Let us pass, girl,' he said in Greek. 'I am here to see the Sultan and present to him the most wondrous gift he shall receive today, a Russian bear to add to his famed animal collection.'

'Then you will wait your turn like everyone else,' I said primly. 'Take your place in the line, with your bear.'

'Do you know who I am!' he demanded.

'Should I?'

'I am Ivan, Grand Prince of the Duchy of Muscovy, which means I do not wait in *lines*, least of all behind someone like you.'

'*Grand* Prince?' I said. 'Little boy, everyone here is in some way royal or representing royalty. And Muscovy is not exactly a leading kingdom of the world.'

'It will be when I am done,' he said.

That was quite enough for my little-girl mind. Like many a young girl confronted by a bratty young lad, I adopted a posture of high superciliousness.

'My, my, such grand designs. And given that you are already such a pushy lad, Lord help the rest of Europe when you grow to adulthood and lead armies. Ivan, was it? I shall call you Ivan the *enfant terrible*, or maybe just Ivan the Terrible for short. Join the line, Ivan.'

The boy's face went beetroot red and he was boiling up to reply when a commotion arose in the queue behind us.

A large party had arrived and like the Red Sea for Moses, the queue parted for it. Whispers and murmurs shot through the line and I heard voices saying, 'It's Buonarroti . . . Signor Buonarroti himself . . . They say the Sultan commissioned two chess services from him just for this event . . .'

I peered down the line and saw that the party happily overtaking the queue was dressed in fine Italian raiment. A pair of cardinals led the group, but the central figure at whom all were gazing was an older fellow with a broad face, sad eyes, a long white beard and a pug nose. His two servants carried in their hands a pair of flat wooden boxes carved from the finest oak and sealed with gold clasps.

This was too much for young Ivan. 'Who is this fellow to push past the line?' he cried, suddenly won over to the theory of orderly queues.

'Shh, Your Highness,' his chief aide whispered. 'It is the great artist, Signor Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti

Simoni. He has crafted the chess sets on which the tournament is to be played and he has brought them himself.'

At the mention of the man's name, my teacher's head snapped up and his eyes found the old long-bearded Italian.

'Michelangelo . . .' he said.

'Who is Michelan—' I began.

My teacher was still peering out over the crowd, so Mr Giles answered me.

'A genius of world renown,' Mr Giles said. 'Artist, painter, sculptor, architect. Some say he is more brilliant even than Leonardo. Once, Mr Ascham took me to see his *Pietà* in Rome. It brought tears to my eyes. Word is, he has just finished a painting on the ceiling of the Pope's chapel in Rome that has no equal anywhere in the world.'

As the queue parted deferentially for it, Michelangelo's party strode directly into the Sultan's audience chamber, led by the master artist himself.

Cries of delight were heard from within the chamber moments later.

I looked at my teacher and he looked at me.

'This event,' he said, 'is momentous.'