

1603

PROLOGUE

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MY QUEEN IS DEAD. MY FRIEND IS DEAD. The world is not the same. It is darker now.

How she carried herself so well in this chaotic world, I shall never know. In a life lived in a maelstrom of courtiers, bishops and commanders, she always got her way. This she achieved oftentimes through charm, many times through shrewdness, and on rare occasions through the more direct method of executing those who opposed her.

She always knew when people were watching. I have no doubt that when she sent some poor wretch to the Tower, it was as much for the spectacle of it as it was for the crime. Sometimes rulers must set grim examples.

It has been said by many that her extraordinary nimbleness of mind was the result of her education at the hands of the great schoolmaster Roger Ascham. Having personally witnessed some of that education, I can attest that her

schooling was of the highest order.

As the child of one of her household's staff and being of a similar age, I was the young princess's principal playmate. Later in life, I would assume the role of chief attendant to her bedchamber, but as a girl, by sheer virtue of proximity, I was allowed to partake in her lessons and thus received a level of instruction that I otherwise would never have known.

By the time Elizabeth was seven, she was fluent in French, capable at Spanish and could speak and read Latin and Greek. When William Grindal—supervised by the great Ascham—took over her education in 1544, she had added Italian and German to that list. While Grindal managed her day-to-day lessons, it was Ascham who always loomed in the background, the grand architect of her overall schooling. He stepped in when major subjects were taught: languages, mathematics, and history, both ancient and recent. A vocal advocate of the benefits of regular outdoor activity, he even taught her archery in the grounds of Hatfield.

He also, it must be said, taught the young princess Elizabeth chess.

I can still see her as a thirteen-year-old, bent over the board, the wild curls of her carrot-coloured hair framing an elfin freckled face, her eyes fixed in a deadly stare at the pieces, trying to deduce the best available move, while across from her, Ascham, utterly careless of the state of the game, watched her think.

As a child Bess lost more games than she won and some in the royal house at Hatfield thought it scandalous that

Ascham should continually beat the daughter of the king, often crushingly.

On more than one occasion Bess would fall into my arms in tears after a game. ‘Oh, Gwinny, Gwinny! He beat me again!’

‘He is a cruel monster,’ I would say soothingly.

‘He is, isn’t he?’ But then she would regather herself. ‘I shall beat him one day. I most certainly will.’ And, of course, eventually she did.

For his part, the great teacher made no apologies for his brutal manner of play, not even when Bess’s governess wrote a letter to the king complaining about it.

When pressed by an emissary of the king about the matter, Ascham argued that unless one loses, one does not learn. His job, he said, was to ensure that the little princess learned. The king accepted this argument and the beatings at chess were allowed to continue. As an adult, Elizabeth would rarely lose at the game and on the far more dangerous chessboard of her life—at court in London and on the high seas against the House of Castile—she never lost.

Chess, Ascham claimed, taught many important lessons: to flatter one’s opponent, to lay traps and to see them laid, to be bold and to restrain one’s tendency to boldness, to appear naïve when in truth one is alert, to see the future many moves ahead and to discover that decisions *always* have consequences.

Ascham taught my young mistress well.

But now, to my great shock, I have just learned that Ascham's best lesson might have occurred not in our little schoolroom in Hertfordshire but far from England.

For last week, as her health faded and she lay confined to her bed, my mistress called me to her side and then ordered all the other attendants to leave the chamber.

'Gwinny,' she said. 'My dearest, dearest Gwinny. As the light dims and the end draws near, there is something I wish to tell you. It is a tale that I have kept to myself for nigh on sixty years.'

'Yes, Your Majesty.'

'Call me Bess, like you used to, when we were children.'

'But, of course. Please go on . . . Bess . . .' I had not called her that for half a century.

Her eyes opened but they stared at nothing. 'Many have wondered at the life I have led, Gwinny: a queen who never married or bore heirs; a woman with no military training who fended off Philip's armadas; a Protestant ruler who continually executed Ignatius of Loyola's Catholic missionaries and who on more than one occasion rebuffed proposals of marriage from the Russian tsar, Ivan.

'How I came to be such a woman—sexless and aloof with men, wary of courtiers and ambassadors, ruthless when dealing with enemies—was the result of many things, but above all of them rises one experience, one singular experience from my youth, a journey that I took in absolute secrecy. It was an event that I have not dared tell anyone about for fear that they would

think me a fabulist. It is this experience that I wish to impart to you now.'

For the next two days, my queen spoke and I listened.

She recounted to me an event early in her life when, during the autumn of 1546 at a time when Hertfordshire was gripped by a sudden bout of plague, Roger Ascham took her away from Hatfield House for a period of three months.

I remembered the time vividly and for several reasons.

First, the plague of 1546 was a particularly vicious one. Escaping outbursts of the dreaded disease was common for royal children—removing a young heir from the locale of an illness was the best way to avoid a severing of the royal line—and that year many of the residents of Hertfordshire fled the district very promptly.

Second, it was a particularly dangerous time for Elizabeth. Although the passage of the *Succession to the Crown Act of 1543* had seen her returned to the line of succession, in 1546, at the age of thirteen, she was still third in line behind her younger half-brother, Edward, then nine, and her older half-sister, Mary, then thirty. Yet Elizabeth's mere existence still posed a threat to both of their claims and she faced the very real possibility of being taken away in the dead of night and meeting a bloody end in the Tower—an end that could be conveniently blamed on the plague.

The third and last reason perhaps reflects more on me than on my mistress. I remember that particular time well because

when she went away to the east, Elizabeth chose not to take me with her.

Instead she took another young member of our household, a spritely older girl named Elsie Fitzgerald who was, I admit, far prettier and more worldly than I was.

I wept for days after they left. And I spent that autumn miserably alone at the home of relatives in Sussex, safe from the plague but missing the company of my friend.

When my mistress finished her tale, I was speechless with horror and shock.

In the years following that missing autumn of 1546, she had always maintained that her trip away had been an uneventful one, just another excursion to the Continent with Ascham. Although they had ostensibly gone east to see some chess tournament, upon her return Elizabeth had never talked about chess or any such championship, and her friendship with Elsie was never the same again.

After hearing her account of that time, I now know why.

Her trip had not been uneventful at all.

Ascham had not just taken her far to the east—beyond the borders of Christendom, into the very heart of the lands of the Moslems, the great city of Constantinople—he had also exposed the future queen to many dreadful perils as they became privileged witnesses to the most remarkable event never recorded in history.

When she finished telling me her tale, my queen lay back on her pillow and closed her eyes. ‘Long have I wondered if

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I should tell anyone of those days, but now all of the other participants are dead and soon I will be, too. If it pleases you, Gwinny, write down my words, so that others might know how a queen like me is formed.’

And so I make this my task, my final task on her behalf, to commit to writing her exact words and recount to you, dear reader, the marvellous things—the terrible things, the terrifying things—she beheld over the course of that secret journey in 1546.

1546



IN MODERN CHESS, the rooks are presented as castles anchoring the four corners of the board, but it was not always this way.

In fact, the name 'rook' derives from *ruhk*, the Persian word for chariot. Pawns were footsoldiers, bishops were elephants, knights were mounted cavalry, and speeding along at the edges of the board were the swift and deadly chariots.

But as times changed and the game spread from Persia to Europe, chess pieces began to reflect the social hierarchy of medieval Western Europe. Thus the chariot became a castle. It was still a powerful piece, able to race down the board in a single move and control entire ranks, but the original reason for its fleetness of foot was lost.

Still, in its own way, the rook-as-castle remains an excellent example of chess pieces reflecting medieval society, for many a king of those times was judged by the strength and grandeur of the castles he kept.

From: *Chess in the Middle Ages*,
Tel Jackson (W.M. Lawry & Co., London, 1992)



*I thank God that I am indeed endowed with such qualities
that if I were turned out of the realm in my petticoat,
I were able to live in any place in Christendom.*

– QUEEN ELIZABETH I



ENGLAND, SEPTEMBER 1546

I WAS LIVING AT Hatfield House in Hertfordshire when the invitation arrived at court in London. It was delivered to Hatfield a day later, accompanied by a typically curt message from my father to Mr Ascham.

Truly, it was a wondrous thing.

It was printed on the most exquisite paper, crisp card with gold on its edges. Written on it in shining gold ink (and in English) was the following:

HIS EXALTED MAJESTY
SULEIMAN THE MAGNIFICENT,
CALIPH OF THE SONS
AND DAUGHTERS OF ALLAH,
SULTAN OF THE LANDS OF THE OTTOMANS,
LORD OF THE REALMS OF THE ROMANS,
THE PERSIANS AND THE ARABS,

MATTHEW REILLY

HERO OF ALL THAT IS,
PRIDE OF THE GLORIFIED KAABA
AND ILLUMINED MEDINA, THE NOBLE
JERUSALEM AND THE THRONE OF EGYPT,
LORD AND RULER OF ALL THAT HE SURVEYS,
BIDS YOU MOST WARM GREETING.

AS ESTEEMED KING OF ENGALAND,
YOU ARE INVITED TO SEND
YOUR FINEST PLAYER
OF THE GAME KNOWN AS SHATRANJ,
LUDOS SCACORUM, ESCHECS, SCHACHSPIEL,
SCACCHI, SZACHY OR CHESS,
TO COMPETE IN A TOURNAMENT
TO DETERMINE THE CHAMPION
OF THE KNOWN WORLD.

I snorted. ‘For a great sultan who is lord and ruler of all that he surveys, his English is lamentably poor. He can’t even spell *England* properly.’

Still holding the note, Mr Ascham looked up at me. ‘Is that so? Tell me, Bess, do you speak his language? Any Arabic or Turkish-Arabic?’

‘You know that I do not.’

‘Then however lamentable his English may be, he still speaks your language while you cannot speak his. To me, this gives him a considerable advantage over you. Always pause before you criticise, and never unduly criticise one who

has made an effort at something you yourself have not even attempted.’

I frowned at my teacher, but it was impossible to hate him even when he chastised me so. He had a way about him. In the way he carried himself, in the way he spoke, in the way he chastised me: gentle but firm.

Mr Roger Ascham was thirty-one then, and in those days—long before he wrote *The Schoolmaster*, the work for which he became rightly famous after his death—he was already one of Cambridge’s most celebrated instructors in classical Greek and Latin.

And yet, if I could have wished anything more for him, it would have been that he were more handsome. He was of average build and average height and in a world of rich young colts with broad shoulders, hard features and the imperiousness of inherited wealth, this made him seem small, soft, harmless. He had a big round nose, hangdog brown eyes and oversized ears that he kept covered with a mop of thick brown hair. I once overheard someone say that at a society ball, not a single one of the young ladies accepted his polite invitations to dance. I cried for him when I heard that. If those silly ladies only knew what they were missing.

But while I shed tears for him over it, he didn’t seem to mind. He was more interested in the art of learning and he pursued that passion with a ferocious intensity. In fact, he displayed a deep intensity of concentration in almost *everything* he did, whether it was practising his beloved archery, debating matters

of state, reading a book or teaching me. To learn, as far as Roger Ascham was concerned, was the noblest of all endeavours and it was an *active* one.

He was, quite simply, the most curious man I had ever met.

Mr Ascham knew all manner of strange arcana, from theories about the ancient stone circles on the Salisbury Plain to the latest scientific methods in medicine and mathematics. And what he didn't know, he sought to find out. Whether it was the visiting Astronomer Royal, the king's surgeon or a travelling tinker selling a miracle cure, Mr Ascham would always probe them with pointed questions: asking the Astronomer Royal if Amerigo Vespucci's claims about using the moon and Mars to determine longitude were valid, asking my father's surgeon why certain plants caused certain kinds of rashes, or asking the tinker if he was aware that he was a quack.

Such was Mr Ascham's knowledge of so broad a range of subjects, it was not unknown during his time at Cambridge for professors in *other* disciplines to come to his rooms to confer with him on areas of their own supposed expertise.

For in a world where people claimed to find higher wisdom from God or the Bible, my dear tutor prayed at the twin altars of knowledge and logic. 'Everything,' he once told me, 'happens for a logical reason, from the downward flow of streams to illnesses to the actions of men. We just have to find that reason. The acquisition of knowledge, the sheer pleasure of finding things out, is the greatest gift in life.'

On one well-known occasion, after a local boy prone to foamy-mouthed fits died suddenly and the local abbot attributed the event to the boy's possession by Satan, Mr Ascham asked to see the lad's brain. Yes, his brain! The dead boy's skull was cracked open and, sure enough, Mr Ascham found a white foreign body the size of an apple lodged in his brain. Mr Ascham later told me in reference to that event, 'Before we blame the supernatural, Bess, we should exhaust all the natural explanations first.' The abbot didn't speak to him for a year after that. Not everyone shared Mr Ascham's pleasure for finding things out.

And then, in the prime of his university career, he had come to teach me, a mere child, the third in line to the throne. Even at that tender age, it had struck me that the remarkable Mr Roger Ascham was wildly overqualified to be tutoring a girl of thirteen, even if she was a princess. I wondered why. What did he see in me that no-one else did?

In any case, this exchange between us about the Moslem sultan's use of English was not unusual. I was wrong and he was right—again.

We turned our attention back to the invitation. It added that the chess tournament would take place in one month's time in the Sultan's capital, the ancient city of Constantinople.

Accompanying the invitation was a note from my father, addressed to Mr Ascham.

Ascham,

I understand that your associate, Mr Gilbert Giles, was the finest player at Cambridge. Would you please inquire as to whether this is still the case and if it be so, dispatch him to me at once. No less than the reputation of the corpus christianum requires our best man at this tournament.

Henry, R

By the way, I appreciated your efforts in the matter of Cumberland's son. They did not go unnoticed.

In those days, it was more than just Christendom's reputation that was at stake: the Moslem sultan was threatening Christendom itself.

His empire spread from Persia in the east to Algiers in the southwest and had recently crossed the Danube. Eight years earlier, in 1538, the Sultan's navy, led by the brilliant Barbarossa, had done the previously unthinkable: it had defeated a European fleet—a 'Christian alliance' of ships—at Preveza. This Christian alliance, assembled by Pope Paul III himself, lost over forty ships, more than 3,000 prisoners, and, after paying 300,000 gold ducats in reparations to the Ottoman sultan, a large portion of Europe's pride.

Then Suleiman's land army had taken the city of Buda. Now it was poised at the gates of Vienna. Suleiman's nearest European neighbour, Archduke Ferdinand of Austria, was said

to be apoplectic with rage at the Sultan's incursions into his territory, but except for sending out ever more spies to report on the movements of the Moslem armies, there was nothing Ferdinand could do. Suleiman's empire was twice the size of *all* of Christendom combined and growing larger by the day.

And that was all before one spoke of Suleiman himself. He was said to be a wise and shrewd ruler, a speaker of no less than five languages. He was a gifted poet and patron of the arts, a cunning strategist and—unlike his bitter enemy, Archduke Ferdinand, and many of Europe's kings and queens—he was utterly beloved by his people.

On more than one occasion my teacher had said to me that while the royal lines of England, France and Spain jockeyed among themselves for pre-eminence, a great shadow had been rising in the east. If it went unchecked our noble families might one day look up from their squabbles and find themselves paying tribute to a Moslem overlord.

The other unspoken challenge in the gilt invitation was the inevitable contest that this tournament would pose between faiths. Just as he had done at Preveza, Suleiman was pitting his god against ours, and at Preveza his god had won.

'Sir, is this Mr Giles still the best player in England?' I inquired.

My teacher said, 'He most certainly is. I still play him regularly. He beats me nine times out of ten, but on the odd occasion I manage to outwit him.'

'That sounds like our record.'

Mr Ascham smiled at me. ‘Yes, but I have a feeling that our record will soon be reversed. Giles, on the other hand, will always have the upper hand on me. But this’—he held up the invitation—‘this is momentous. Giles will be thrilled to answer the king’s call.’

Mr Giles most certainly was.

Mr Ascham sent him to meet with my father, who (again, typically) arranged for a test of Mr Giles’s chess abilities: a game against my father himself. Naturally, Mr Giles lost this game.

Like everyone else in England, Mr Giles was reluctant to beat a king who, in addition to beheading two of his wives (one of whom had been my mother), had had Thomas Cromwell beheaded for match-making him with one of them. It was not unknown for those who defeated my father at other games to end up with their heads mounted on stakes atop London Bridge.

To my surprise, however, upon winning the game my father reportedly boomed: ‘Do not play lightly against me, Giles! I do not need a sycophant representing England and the primacy of Christ and the Christian faith at this event. I need a player!’

They played again and Mr Giles beat my father in nine moves.

Things proceeded swiftly from there.

A small travelling train was assembled, with carts, horses and guardsmen for the journey across Christendom.

But then just as Mr Giles was about to depart Hertfordshire, a terrible case of plague descended on the district.

My half-brother, Edward, the heir to the throne, was whisked away. My sister Mary went soon after.

I, apparently, was not so valuable: no-one moved with any kind of alacrity to facilitate my removal from Hatfield House, so I simply continued with my studies with Elsie and with you, my dear friend Gwinny Stubbes.

Then one day there arose a commotion.

We were sitting in my study reading Livy's account of the mass Jewish suicide at Masada. Elsie, who was several years older than we were, sat in the corner at her mirror, idly brushing her hair. Oh, do you remember her, Gwinny? Lord, I do! At seventeen, Elsie was a genuine beauty, with the willowy figure of the dancer she was. Slender of waist yet pert of bosom, with gorgeous blonde hair that cascaded over her shoulders, Elsie drew the eye of every passing gentleman.

With the airy confidence common to beautiful people, she was convinced that her prettiness alone would win her a husband of suitable rank and so did not feel it necessary to study—she spent more time in front of her mirror-glass than at her books, and I must confess that in this regard I was a little envious of her. I had to endure many tiresome lessons and I had royal blood. (I was also, I should add, jealous of her womanliness, given that I was nothing less than awkwardness personified: all knobbly knees and bony arms with a chest as flat as a boy's and a ghastly shock of curly strawberry-red hair

that I hated.) That said, most of the time I worshipped Elsie, entranced by her grace, enthralled by her beauty, and awed by her worldly seventeen-year-old's wisdom.

It was while we were thus engaged that I heard the commotion: my governess, Miss Katherine Ashley, raised her voice in the next room.

'You will do no such thing, Mr Ascham!' It must have been serious. She only called him 'Mr Ascham' when she was upset with him.

'But it will be the learning opportunity of a lifetime—'

'She is *thirteen years old*—'

'She is the brightest thirteen-year-old I have ever taught and mature beyond her years. Grindal agrees.'

'She is a child, Roger.'

'The king doesn't think so. Why, just last month when he was informed that Bess had started to bleed, King Henry said, "If she is old enough to bleed then she is old enough to be married off for the benefit of England. Daughters have to be good for something."' That sounded like my father.

'I don't know,' Miss Katherine said, 'the kingdom of the Moslems could be a very dangerous place for her . . .'

Mr Ascham lowered his voice, but I could still hear him.

'*London* is a very dangerous place for her, Kat. These are pivotal times. The king grows sicker and more erratic every day, and the court is divided in its loyalties to Edward and Mary. Our Elizabeth has the weakest claim to the throne yet her very presence in England threatens each of their claims.

You know how often rival heirs die mysteriously during plagues . . .’

Listening from behind the doorframe, I gasped softly.

Miss Katherine was silent for a long moment.

Mr Ascham said, ‘She will be well guarded on the journey. The king is providing six of his finest troops to escort us.’

‘It is not just her physical safety that concerns me. I want her morals protected, too. She will need a chaperone,’ Miss Katherine said haughtily. ‘It is scandalous enough that she should be travelling with two bachelors in yourself and Mr Giles, but soldiers, too.’

‘What about you and John, then?’

‘Oh, don’t be silly. I am far too old and far too fat to undertake such a journey.’ Miss Katherine was, it must be said, a rather large woman. She had married the kindly John Ashley only the previous year at the advanced age of forty (although she still liked me to address her as ‘Miss’ because, she said, it made her feel young).

‘All right, then—’ Mr Ascham rallied.

‘A *responsible* chaperone, Roger, married or at least betrothed. One who will be a moral example to Elizabeth. Not some silly strumpet who will be tempted to stray in an exotic land or liaise with the guards on the journey there—wait, I know! Primrose Ponsonby and her husband, Llewellyn.’

My teacher groaned at the suggestion. ‘The Ponsonbys . . .’

Miss Katherine said, ‘They are model Christians, tragically childless, yet ever keen to be of service to the king.’

If they go with you, Roger, my fears will be somewhat assuaged.'

'Very well. Agreed.'

A moment later the two of them entered our study.

Mr Ascham nodded at me. 'What say you, Bess, since we have to leave this place anyway, would you like to go on an adventure?'

'To where, sir?' I asked, feigning ignorance.

'You know exactly where, young miss. You have been listening from behind the door.' He smiled. 'You need to gasp more quietly if you are to become a master spy, little one. To the chess tournament in Constantinople. To watch Mr Giles compete.'

I leapt up, smiling broadly. 'What a splendid idea! Can Gwinny and Elsie come, too? Can they? Please?'

Mr Ascham frowned, glanced at Miss Kate. 'I fear I am already bending far too many rules just by taking you, my young princess,' he said. 'It is too much to ask of your chaperones to govern three of you, but two would be manageable. You may bring one friend along.'

I hesitated, glancing at my two friends. There you were, Gwinny, shy and sweet, a wallflower if ever there was one, looking at me with quiet hope while Elsie's entire being blazed with excitement; her eyes wide, her fists clenched in desperate anticipation. She adored romantic tales about dashing princes in glittering palaces. A trip to an exotic city in the east was her dream come true. I had her undivided attention and I liked it.

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‘I shall take Elsie!’ I cried, and Elsie squealed and threw her arms around me in utter delight. As I struggled in her embrace, I confess I did notice how you bowed your head in dismay.

The young make mistakes. This is what they do. And given the awful things that occurred in Byzantium, perhaps this choice was a mistake.

But having said that, given the true and lasting friendship that we have forged over the course of our lives, Gwinny—and mark my words, queens need true friends—there is a part of me that is glad for that error, for in choosing Elsie, I spared you the trauma of witnessing firsthand the events I beheld in the Moslem sultan’s court.