
Opening Extract from...

The Tournament

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THE TOURNAMENT

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It has long been accepted that the first international chess tournament was the event staged in London in 1851 and won by Adolf Anderssen of Germany. Sixteen men from all over Europe competed to determine the best player in the world. (Prior to that occasion, individual players would play in celebrated one-off matches.)

But a rumour persists in the chess world of a tournament that was held long before the London one, an event that took place in the 16th century in the ancient city of Constantinople, now Istanbul.

Sadly, no records of this event remain and until some kind of documentary proof of its staging arises, it is destined to remain the stuff of legend.

From: *A History of Chess*,
Boris Ivanov (Advantage Press, London, 1972)

1603

PROLOGUE

1603

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

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.