

A Cat for Constantinople ...

... Queen's Command

'A cat.' Sir Robert Cecil, Secretary of State to Queen Elizabeth, raised his eyes from the translated letter the scribe had handed to him.

'Yes, Sir Robert.' Allingham nodded.

'The Sultana wants the Queen to send her a cat?' Cecil's eyebrows disappeared under the brim of his hat. 'Constantinople is full of cats.' The scribe forbore to comment. 'I will read it to her majesty, it may amuse her, Lord knows she –' he shrugged. 'You had better get one stuffed.' Cecil waved him away.

Days later he returned. 'The Queen was amused. She wants to send a live cat. A black cat.' His lips curled. 'A witch's cat.'

'A witch's cat, Sir Robert?'

'She thinks it will make spells – persuade the Ottomans to join her against Spain,' the eyebrows descended into furrows. 'Do you know how long it takes to sail to Constantinople?' The scribe shook his head. 'Four months, maybe six. We have to keep a cat afloat, alive for half a year!' Cecil squinted as sudden rain darkened the window behind him

'It could catch the ship's mice.'

'And be fed ship's food, get scruffy, bitten – what does that say about us? It must be kept in a cage.'

'For six months?' The scribe raised his voice against the thunder outside. The Secretary of State rumbled with it. 'A big cage.'

Allingham glanced at the window. 'With a cover - A keeper could sleep in the cage with it,' he rambled, 'that way it would be kept clea...'

‘I have a country to run, the Spanish are making trouble again, the Queen has been excommunicated by a third Pope. .. and I am discussing travel arrangements for a cat!’ The scribe shut his eyes to avoid the spittle. ‘Tell the Lord Chamberlain to source a cat, and a man to look after it. And,’ a lightening crack, ‘find a ship that’s ...’ his last words were lost in thunder.

Allingham frowned, this was not his job. His was to draft letters, pass them by the Secretary of State, write them in beautiful lettering on the best vellum for Cecil’s signature and seal, to be then passed from his hand to a courier. At the age of twenty-three, the youngest of five sons of a baron, fluent in five languages, his ambition was to compose letters for the Queen herself. He was above things that forced him to leave a fuggy, cramped, but warm, office.

‘With respect, Sir –’

‘With respect Master - ah, get it done!’ The bellow, like the wind of the gods, caused the scribe to back out of the Mighty Presence and scuttle down the corridor to seek the Lord Chamberlain, who was, wisely, not in residence. The Controller of the Household, across the courtyard, was next in line. The rain chose to increase the moment Allingham was halfway across.

The Controller stared at the puddle spreading from Allingham’s feet over the till-then-perfectly-dry floor recently strewn with herbs and sweet straw. Allingham conveyed the order about the cat. ‘Black, perfect not scarred, young. It has to be on a boat for six months.’ He sneezed.

‘Cats don’t like water.’

‘That’s neither here nor there’ snapped Allingham. ‘It’s the Queen’s Command. I will inspect tomorrow.’

‘Best try the Stablemaster too.’

At the great oak door to the outside, blinking up at the rain and down at the puddles, Allingham pulled his coat around him, bowed his head and slid across the mud to the stables. Inside, shaking himself, he caused yowls and the exposure of evil teeth from a variety of squint-eyed cats huddled in the dry. He hissed at them. The Stablemaster, sitting on a bale of straw watching an underling brush a horse, paid no heed, scribes being below a real man’s notice.

‘I need a cat.’

‘Take your pick.’

Allingham regarded the growling multi-coloured moggies. ‘A black cat.’

‘Better find a witch then. Hey!’ he rose to scold the underling and scuff his ear. ‘You useless oaf. Out!’

The boy ducked, headed for the door, collided with Allingham, knocking his hat off into a puddle. He picked it up.

‘Sorry Master.’ Allingham snatched it, snorted, pulled it over his head.

‘Master, you need a black cat?’ his adolescent voice crackled.

‘Have you got one?’

‘My aunt, sir, she ‘as several, as black as you like.’

‘Is she a witch?’

‘Oh no sir, just – a woman, sir’

‘Bring it tomorrow, to the kitchen hall... ‘ Allingham sneezed into an already-soaked handkerchief and set off for the docks.

He found the Master-of-Ships, Levant Company (English End) in a dry warehouse drinking small beer in front of a fire. Allingham talked as wisps, then clouds, of steam rose

from him. The Master invited him (he was blocking the heat) to sit while he consulted his ledgers.

‘There’s two ships leaving next week – one to Cyprus, calling at Constantinople before returning via Venice,’ he glared as Allingham pulled his stool right up to the fire, took up the Master’s beaker and gulped down his beer.

‘How much?’

‘Ooo, what’s the cargo, a letter, a gift?’

‘A cat. In a cage.’ The Master blinked. ‘A present for the Sultana, Queen’s command.’

‘How big?’

Allingham swallowed another mouthful, his teeth chattering against the beaker. ‘Cat-size’

‘The cage – ’

‘Uh, big enough for a cat to run around, for the keeper to sleep in, luggage.’

The Master-of-Ships scratched his head. ‘On deck. Square, size of a man plus a bit, protection from weather,’ he chewed his lip, ‘then there’s food and water.’

‘Good, clean food. Fresh fish, sweet water.’

‘He’ll have what the crew eat.’

‘For the cat. Queen’s command.’

The Master frowned then named a price three times the one he’d worked out. Allingham shook his head. The game continued until the price agreed was just below twice that calculated by the Master. He hid his delight with a scowl.

‘I’ll need a letter of commission. What about the return?’

‘The cat’s staying there.’

‘The keeper.’

Allingham had not considered this, paying for the keeper to come home. Why couldn't the Queen send something inanimate – a clock, or a carriage? 'He can come back on the next ship.'

'I'll add that expense then.'

Allingham, head thumping like an executioner's drum, walked into the kitchen hall amid the noises of Hell: a squabble of servants and cats struggling and squawking to be let go. One completely black cat, glossy and neat, bright-eyed, ears alert, sat peacefully on the knee of a lad Allingham thought he knew.

'Whad's your name?'

'Thomas Filkin sir. I spoke with you yesterday. This is my Aunt's...'

'Priddy thing,' Allingham's head protested at the cacophony and demanded a decision. He sneezed. 'You're to dake th'cat to Consdandinoble.'

'Where's that sir?'

Allingham waved his arms. 'Id de Mediderranean.' The lad was none the wiser. 'You'll look after id, keep id fed, warm and safe. Id's a presend from the Queen to the mother of the Suldan – tchoo! - a long drip, by sea. Sid months. Next week.' Thomas gawped.

Allingham left, followed by a stream of escaping cats, to oversee the making of the cage, and to write the letter of commission. The Secretary of State read it while marching along a corridor.

'Provision of cage... food... Thomas Filkin, boy.....what about you?'

'Me?'

'D'you think I would let a mere boy present the cat in the Sultan's Court?'

'I thought the Ambassador...'

‘Need a proper Courier, political etiquette.’ They entered the office, Cecil scrawled on the letter, signed it, added the seal, rolled it. He took two purses from a box. ‘This one your expenses. Buy some new clothes. This one,’ he emptied it, a circle of diamonds and sapphires, ‘a collar for the cat when it is presented. You can write the address to the Sultana on the way, usual thing. You can write it in Turkish, you’ve six months with nothing else to do.’

‘Sir Robert, six months, a year, my position...’

‘I’d have thought you’d like a bit of adventure, looks like you could do with a bit of sunshine, God knows I could. Off you go.’

Allingham stood on deck looking out into fog. Behind him, in a cage hidden by a gabardine, Thomas was whispering nonsense to the cat, both wrapped in a wool blanket. The scribe sighed, wished he was with them, but his station in life did not permit that he should consort thus with a servant. The ship rocked on almost still water while the fog quelled cries from the odd seagull above. He had looked up his destination in an atlas and traced the route, noting names he knew from his grammar school studies: Carthage, Rome, Athens, the islands of Candia and Cyprus, and Byzantium/Constantinople, all edged by Homer’s ‘wine-dark sea’. His blood tingled as he realized that these places of his imagination were real and he would be passing them, perhaps visiting them: the Roman Empire, now the Ottoman Empire. So much sea. He had only ever been on water in a barge between Greenwich and Hampton Court, and today in the pilot boat up the Thames to Tilbury.

He watched the lightening of the sky, heard shouting, running and the clank of chains, saw a shadow on the wharf move, no, the ship was moving, gliding through lifting fog towards a pale light. The tingle returned: it might be an adventure after all.

Thomas, holding the cat, came alongside him to stare. The sound of unrolling sailcloth cracked over their heads to stretch out into huge bubbles of wind carrying them forward, the leaden river turning into a widening ruffle of grey sea. The small pilot boat turned, as if to make obeisance to the figurehead of the *Andrew*, then left. Safe in Thomas's arms, the cat stared with them as the disc of the sun appeared from the clouds to light the path to the East.

'Caw! 'said Thomas.

'Caw indeed!' thought Allingham.

The Bay of Biscay was quite another matter – pitch, toss, loss of balance and stomach contents, water, water everywhere. Allingham, thinking to enjoy the drama on deck, instead threw up over the side. The gabardine might have stopped water from above from entering the cage, but not that sloshing through its bars, nor did it stop the wind forcing it into an extra sail. Thomas put the cat in its small basket, covered it with a cloak and staggered towards Allingham.

'Come on sir, best below.' He steered master and cat down into relative dryness, the former to lie, groan and vomit, the latter to bury itself in its sanctuary, muttering the way cats do. Thomas stroked her ears.

'Nice Puss. I ought to give you a name.' The anonymous creature stirred, poked its head out.

'I'm going to be sick.' Not Allingham's voice. 'I said, I'm going to be sick.'

The cat coughed a stream of vomit onto the deck. She watched it wander backwards and forwards, licked her paw, pulled it across her face. 'Well?'

He must be asleep, so, as one does in dreams, he replied. 'Well what?'

'Aren't you going to clear it up? It's sliding towards you,' as indeed it was.

They watched Allingham lurch forward. ‘No, not worth it’ they said together. The cat curled its face into its fur. ‘I’ve got a name - Princess.’

Funny thing dreams, often answered a thought one had. The ship slashed on.

It was warm, Thomas rigged up a sun canopy for Princess with the gabardine and folded up his doublet for her to lie on. She pulled the doublet into the sun. Thomas shrugged and leaned over the side to marvel to at the blueness, the sea-sparkles, and to watch grey fish-shapes swimming alongside. Mermaids?

‘Porpoises.’ Princess stretched her front legs and rolled over. ‘Not to be confused with dolphins.’ He had accepted that Princess could talk, and he certainly did not know those facts, though no-one else seemed to hear her.

The three ship’s cats slunk across the deck towards the cage in ready-to-jump formation. Princess stared, the cats hissed, then prowled nearer, heads touching the deck. Princess sat fur upstanding, and glared. Their ears fell, they whimpered then backed away like courtiers from a queen. ‘They’ll be no more trouble,’ she said, softening her fur.

‘Impressive’ said Allingham, who was watching from a seat on the hatchway. He wore just a white shirt and trunks, his face was browned by the sun, with a beard started when sick and which he had not bothered to shave off. Thomas thought he looked very different, more like a young Lord at court, or an actor. All he needed was a sword and an earring, and perhaps a few muscles. What muscles Allingham had, he stretched and stood up, crossed to lean a little way from Thomas. Princess sauntered across and jumped on top of a keg between them, licking her paws. They all gazed at high Gibraltar sheltering Spanish ships which seemed not to notice the *Andrew*, seemed to be held at bay.

They stopped at Sicily for provisions, and to take on jars of wine. Allingham watched it fold onto itself when poured, dark, like the sea, and understood Homer.

He had acquired the earring, and his hair needed to be held back by a ribbon as he learned a new skill from the Captain's mate - swordsmanship. Thomas copied them with a stick, proving a better pupil than his Master, helped by Princess's advice, who seemed to know a lot about it. So much so that Allingham forgot his "social status" and started practising with his servant. He had forgotten about writing an address to the Sultana.

As they headed for the Island of Candia, a fierce wind took them from their route, bouncing the *Andrew* from wave to wave, south, towards the Barbary Coast. Allingham joined the crew hauling on ropes, until the wind softened and a line of coast was seen on the starboard side. A call came from the masthead

'Ship ahead!'

The Captain raised his telescope.

'Corsairs! Prepare for battle!'

Sailors ran to get muskets and swords. Thomas took Princess below, found the jewelled collar and secreted it into the cushion of the basket. Allingham ignored the Captain's advice to follow them, and stayed on deck, holding a sword, tingling with excitement: feeling more alive than ever before in his twenty-three years.

The alien ship fired first, cannon balls flew over the deck. Thomas buried his head in a blanket, hands over ears, and shook. The ship rocked, there was a great crash, the air filled with yelling, the pounding of feet on wood, the sizzle of swinging swords and the teeth-wrenching clash of metal on metal. The ship veered, a splash of men overboard and cheers.

Thomas took hold of the basket and waited. The door swung open to reveal a man as black as the sea, who pushed them up the ladder onto the deck where the Captain and Allingham

were held at sword point. A man in a turban, with trimmed beard and rich clothing climbed aboard.

‘We will only take the best of your cargo, and a few men for the galleys, then you may depart for Venice,’ he said in a perfect English accent, and spoke to his men in – Turkish? Arabic? Princess stared at him.

‘What have we here? A child and a cat in a basket? Captives? Perhaps we should rescue them!’ he laughed. ‘Here Pisi – pisi!’ Princess narrowed her eyes. The ship’s cats stood around her and Thomas and blew themselves out to their top-size.

‘Leave them!’ Allingham shouted.

Thomas spoke.

‘I’m not a captive, Sir, I am the Keeper to the cat. She is a present from Queen Elizabeth to the Valide Sultan in Constantinople’

‘Is she indeed!’

‘And that gentleman there, Sir, is the Queen’s Courier’

The Pirate Chief, for that is what he was, laughed.

‘In that case, you’re worth more than you look.’ He held out a hand to Allingham. ‘Kahlil bin Mohammed – Anthony Marlow as was.’

Allingham hesitated. The Captain, watching the trail of pirates with boxes and bundles leaving his ship with equanimity, said to him.

‘Kahlil may take men for the galleys, but he will not kill after he has secured a ship’s cargo. He will hold you for ransom, which will be paid, and he will then escort you to Constantinople. We will continue to Venice and see what we can get for what’s left.’

Kahlil turned to Thomas, Princess settled and began to purr. The cats stood down.

‘Come, Princess,’ (how did he know?) ‘Little Keeper, Master Courier, come.’

They were taken aboard the pirate ship. The ship's cats, paws up on the side, watched them go until all Thomas could see was the line of their heads and the tips of their ears.

In Kahlil's settlement by the shore on the island of Djerba, which Allingham was thrilled to find was close to Carthage, the three lived together in a one-room, flat-roofed building, which had a tiny garden with a fruit tree for Princess to climb and sweet herbs to roll in. Thomas played with her and talked to her while acting as servant to them both. He quickly picked up everyday words from their captors, who mostly sat around drinking or sleeping, so he soon had the run of the place. Allingham set himself to learn both language and script; he talked with Kahlil who called him Ali-al-Amun, 'the hidden one', and studied with the local Iman. Master and servant dressed in cotton clothes, Allingham learning to wind a length of cloth into a turban.

Months went by quite happily until a ship came with a message; a ransom and exchange at sea had been agreed. By this time Allingham had completed his address for the Valide Sultan in Turkish as flowery as the Muslim arabesques in the mosques.

On the day of the presentation in Constantinople, dressed in English clothes, to Allingham's discomfort, they arrived at the Palace and Seraglio to be led to a small gold-roofed pavilion overlooking the sea. A female shape in a long veil came through a golden gate accompanied by two very large dark-skinned men with turbans and curved scimitars at the side.

Thomas knelt, lifted the lid of the basket and let down its side to show Princess, lying on a crimson cushion with gold tassels, the collar of jewels sparkling below luminous green eyes. The Valide Sultan laughed.

'She sits like a Sultan!'

Princess stepped out of the basket stretched elegantly, sat with her tail neatly across her front paws to stare at the Valide Sultan, who held out a hand.

‘Pisi, isi, come here!’ Princess, very prettily, walked up to her, and jumped lightly onto her lap. The hand caressed her, she curled up and purred, then looked directly at Thomas.

Allingham was reading his address.

‘You see I am here’ he thought she said. ‘I kept the Spanish at bay, drew you to a place where Master Allingham could write his address in Turkish, and arranged the ransom. I have led you to your destiny.’

‘I shall miss you’ he thought back. She lowered her eyes.

‘Wait.’ The last word he heard her say.

The Valide Sultan, delighted with the address, conversed with Allingham for a while. He then spoke to Thomas.

‘The Valide Sultan wishes you to stay. She will make Princess Number One Cat, and wishes you to be her Guardian. You will be called Omay, “the chosen one”.’

And so it was. Princess had the run of the Harem, being cuddled and played with by the women, but especially by the Valide Sultan. She slept on silk and brocade from Samarkand, and at night went to catch mice in the gardens and to visit Omay, who lived in the Palace grounds. When she died, Omay, with his children, buried her in a velvet lined box under a tree outside the Harem watched by the Valide Sultan, who might have hidden a tear under her veil.

And Allingham? He decided to stay, to become interpreter between the Ambassador and the Sultanate, and composer of letters to Queen Elizabeth. Sorting the Embassy letters one day he discovered the original letter in Turkish script and its transliteration. The original read: *özel bir İngilizce hediye* – ‘a special English gift,’ while the transliteration read ‘*özel bir*

İngiliz kedi – a special English cat’. He and Thomas owed their new and better lives to a single mistake.

Ali-al-Amun smiled, tucked the documents away and returned to his new house near the Şehzade mosque, to which he would soon welcome his new wife.

Acknowledgments: *this story was inspired by a sentence in paragraph 3 on page 469 of Istanbul by Bethany Hughes:*

‘Elizabeth was said to have sent her Ottoman correspondent (the Sultana, or Valide Sultan) a large black English cat that stalked the harem until it died of natural causes’.

I am also indebted to the books of Jerry Brotton, and for John Mole's transliteration of the diary of Thomas Dallam, the clockwork organ-maker, who accompanied it to Constantinople (but did not stay).