

A Game of Chess.

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I.

THE CHALLENGE.



"EACH SUCCEEDING ASPIRANT
LOST HIS HEAD."

as far as possible, the dangerous honour of facing his Master across a chess-board.

Naturally, no official could with more difficulty escape the ordeal than the Grand Vizier himself, and, indeed, it was owing principally to this cause that so many occupants of this high post

SULTAN MURAD was devoted to the game of chess. To say, without flattery, that he was a good player, is to say that he was a man of considerable intellectual power.

But Sultan Murad in his play had two failings, from which many other good players have not been entirely free.

He liked to have an adequate stake on the event of the game, and he could very ill brook defeat.

These weaknesses are always trying, but, in the case of so powerful and absolute a Monarch, they rendered the game one of exceeding danger.

To lose pretty constantly meant ruin; to win too often might easily mean death.

Under these circumstances, it became difficult for his Majesty to find an adversary, and an invitation to a contest came to have as fatal a significance, and to be as much dreaded, and, if possible, avoided, as the post of Grand Vizier had been in the reign of Selim the Grim.

So many had lost all they possessed, and some their lives into the bargain, that every high officer of State shunned,

had rapidly succeeded one another during the reign of Sultan Murad.

It so happened that the present Grand Vizier was as keen an enthusiast for the game as the Sultan himself. This had been probably his chief recommendation for the office ; and, being a born gambler, and of a constitutionally bold and reckless nature, he was always ready to play, counting neither the cost nor the hazard.

He played on with varying fortune, but generally losing, until he had staked and lost everything he possessed or could scrape together.

At length, one afternoon, on the Sultan saying to him, " Well, Grand Vizier, and what dost thou venture on this new game ? " he answered, ruefully, " My Padishah, except the garments in which I stand before thee, and which are thine already, there is of a truth no one thing I possessed that I have not staked and lost, and only by the bounty of thy Majesty shall I and Fatima, my daughter and only child, find bread or shelter, so great is the skill of your Majesty at this infernal game."

" Come, Vizier," said Murad, " if it be as bad with thee as that, I will tell thee what thou shalt do. Thou shalt on thy part stake thy daughter, and I on my part will stake the loveliest odalisque in my harem, and ten thousand gold pieces to boot, and we will play yet another game."

The Grand Vizier heard this proposal to stake his daughter, his only child, with dismay ; but he knew his Imperial Master too well to venture a refusal.

Therefore they played, and he lost. Then the unhappy father, in the bitterness of his heart, said, " O Sultan, I have my head only, and that is at thy mercy, but if thou wilt on thy part stake my daughter, whom thou hast just won, I will wager my head against her."

" Vizier," said Murad, gravely, " the stakes are hardly even, but if thou wishest it, so it shall be."

And once more they played, and again the Vizier lost.

Then Murad laughed, and said, " Be not alarmed, I give thee thy last stake, for thou hast never flinched, but hast ever played boldly and well ; only this understand, we have played our last game, and thou holdest thy office only until I appoint another in thy place."

The Vizier bowed, and retired from the presence of the Sultan.

After this final defeat of his courageous and indomitable Grand Vizier, Murad was hard put to it to find any suitable

opponent to face him at the chess-board. All men shirked the dangerous honour, and the unhappy Vizier, or Pasha, commanded to undertake the duty, found it difficult to guess whether victory or defeat might prove more perilous.

At length the Sultan bethought him of a plan which seemed to promise more diversion than could be obtained from encountering these timorous and unwilling adversaries.

He caused it to be proclaimed that any man might challenge his Majesty to a game of chess, the conditions being that the challenger staked his own head against the office of Grand Vizier.

To such lengths will the cupidity and self-confidence of many men carry them, that numbers were found ready to face the Sultan on these terms; but whether Murad's skill was invincible, or whether his opponents were frightened and unnerved by the risk they ran, at any rate each succeeding aspirant lost his head instead of attaining the object of his ambition—the coveted position of Grand Vizier.

II.

OSMAN OF ADRIANOPLIS.

At the time of the issuing of the proclamation concerning chess, there lived in Adrianople a family consisting of three persons: father, mother, and one son. The latter was a young man of pleasing manners, a good presence, and of remarkable energy and intellectual capacity.

Being very poor, they inhabited a mean house in a remote suburb, yet anyone who should meet either the father or son would at once recognise in them men of rare ability, fitted to adorn a position very different from that in which they now found themselves.

The news of the Sultan's offer to make that man Grand Vizier who should beat him at a game of chess had reached this retired and secluded family, and the son, who had long been a devoted student of the game, had just announced to his father and mother his determination to proceed to the capital and put his life on the hazard of the event.

To this, both father and mother vehemently and very naturally objected, and tried by every argument they could think of to dissuade him.

"My son," said the old man, "consider carefully what thou dost, and weigh well the probable consequences of so rash an undertaking. The Sultan, who has all his life been playing against all

the greatest players and brightest wits of his Empire, can scarcely fail to overcome thee, who art a mere novice and student of this pastime of science. Then shall we, thy parents, lose thee, the only solace and the prop and support of our declining years."

"Father," said the young man, whose name was Osman, "I am indeed not unmindful of the risk I run, nor unconcerned at the grief I know you both would feel should I perish in this attempt to snatch fortune from the hands of destiny. But what is the alternative? To remain in this condition of abject poverty in which we find ourselves, to sink month by month into still deeper distress, and, finally, each to watch the others as they slowly, yet inevitably, perish. What chance is there

of aught else happening to us, marked out as we are for destruction by this envious and evil Governor?"

"My son," said the father, "what thou sayest is true; nevertheless, let us have patience, for none knows what fate may have in store, and, as it is written, it must happen to each of us."

But Osman was yet too young and full of life to surrender himself easily to this fatalistic apathy.

"Father," replied he, "as it is written, so must it be, no doubt, yet who knows what is written? Let us at least strike a blow in our own defence, and if we must perish, let us at least die fighting to the last. From the Governor of Roumelia there is nothing to expect. Has he not seen thee formerly sitting in the seat he now occupies;

does he not know how well thou didst administer the province, and feel how much better fitted thou art to fill the post than he can ever be? Was he not the one who poisoned the mind of our late Sultan against thee, and procured thy dismissal? And must he not be always apprehensive lest Murad should learn the truth and reinstate thee? After inflicting such injuries upon thee, he cannot be satisfied until he has utterly destroyed us."

"My son," said the old man, "all this may be true, yet to all



"THE FATHER OBJECTED."

this misfortune a still greater will be added, if thou shouldst stake thy life on the hazard of a game and lose it."

"But, my father," cried Osman, with all the enthusiasm and self-confidence of youth, "I shall not lose it. I have but just discovered a new opening for the game, and he who is ignorant of it will almost infallibly be mated at the fifth move."

"Well, well," said the father, knowing that it is useless to doubt any man's invention, "admit that thou dost win the game as thou dost expect to do, thy danger then begins. Do we not know how ill Murad of all men can brook defeat? How long will it be before he bids his new Grand Vizier again to play with him, and what result may we not reasonably expect from the second encounter? Believe me, my son, the man who loses his life over the first game simply anticipates his inevitable fate."

"My father," said Osman, "all this may be true, yet it must not deter me. I would rather die in attempting to escape from our present hopeless position than die without having at least made the attempt. Let me but win the first game, and the same wit that gives me the first victory may bring about a second."

"Go, then, my son," said the father, "since thy heart is fixed on it, and may Allah guide thee and guard thee and keep thee in safety."

The father having thus given his consent, it was now his mother's turn to endeavour by her entreaty to dissuade him from his project.

"My son," she exclaimed, "remember how essential thy life is to the happiness of both of us. We have borne the loss of wealth and high station, we have become accustomed, almost reconciled, to poverty, but we could not bear the loss of thee, in whom all our hopes and all our consolation are centred."

"My dear mother," said Osman, "do not endeavour to weaken the resolve of him who tries to do right. Here is an opportunity of righting our wrongs, of revenging our injuries, of raising my father's fallen fortunes, and reinstating him in the position from which the base intriguer has ousted him."



"ALLAH PROTECT THEE."

"Thy motives are excellent," she said, "but supposing thou dost fail and perish, how can thy good intentions console us for thy loss?"

"My dear mother," he cried, "I feel confident that I shall not fail, but should I perish, better a bold death than a craven life."

"Well," said she, "if thou must needs go, go, and Allah protect thee, for our lives are in thy keeping."

III.

A NEW OPENING.

When Osman arrived in the capital he went to the house of the Reis Effendi, an old friend of his father, and who received him gladly for his father's sake.

But when his kind host learnt the object of his coming he tried hard to dissuade him from the attempt, putting before him in the plainest terms the extreme danger of the course he was pursuing.

"My son," said he, "dost thou know how many men have come to this city on the same quest as thou comest, and where are they now? Instead of the kilavi of the Grand Vizier adorning their heads, a silken cord has passed about their necks; and, far from winning the white satin robe with its trimming of sable, they have lost the homely caftan in which they came."

"Effendi," said Osman, modestly but firmly, "ungrateful should I be for the kindness I have received at your hands were I to do otherwise than hearken attentively to the warnings of so old a friend of my father, yet consider, I pray, that if circumstances have compelled me to come hither contrary to his wishes, no disrespect to your advice must be imputed to me if I persist in the prosecution of my design. I know the risks of the adventure—I should be unworthy to play chess against the meanest player if I could have overlooked them—yet I am content to run the risk for the sake of those whom I can help in no other way."

When the Reis Effendi perceived that his young guest was absolutely determined to proceed in spite of all remonstrance and entreaty, he promised to procure for him the interview he sought, regretting only that so young and promising a man should thus rush upon his fate.

When, by the influence of the Reis Effendi, Osman was ushered into the presence of the Sultan, and the object of his coming explained, Murad himself felt some regret that so hand-

some and intelligent a youth should risk his life in a combat apparently so unequal.

After regarding him in silence a few moments he asked him, "Dost thou understand clearly what are the conditions of the game we are about to play?"

"If I have been correctly informed, Sire," said Osman, "the conditions are these: if I win, your Majesty will appoint me your Grand Vizier; if I lose, my life is the forfeit."

"And dost thou still wish to play on those terms?" asked Murad.

"I have," answered Osman, "travelled far to seek that honour."

"But what can that fatal honour avail thee?" asked Murad, "or what benefit can accrue to thee, if thou must die?"

"Hope sustains the soul," said Osman, "and makes us willing to risk life for an adequate reward."

"How long hast thou studied chess?" demanded the Sultan.

"My father taught me as a boy," answered Osman, "and all my life I have loved and studied it."

"Very good," said Murad, "then at thy desire this day shalt thou play for thy life."

But first, by order of the Sultan, a sumptuous repast was served, and at his invitation Osman partook of it with him.

Then, after a period of rest during the mid-day heat, the chessmen were brought out, and, amid a circle of high dignitaries and officials of the Palace, the youthful stranger faced his Imperial Lord, and essayed the difficult, and, as it appeared to all present, the foolhardy, task of checkmating him.

Only five moves had been made, during breathless silence, when Osman calmly pronounced the word "checkmate," and on inspection the fact was clearly established.

All were astonished. And the Sultan, amazed and almost stupefied, was filled with fury.

"What," cried he, "beaten, and in five moves, by a mere boy! What is the meaning of this? Say, what demon hath helped thee, or by what power of enchantment hast thou been able to accomplish the feat?"

"Sire," replied Osman, "this opening of the game is a new one. Being completely unexpected, it has given me, for this time, the victory which I can never hope again to attain over so great and experienced a player as your Majesty."

These words somewhat mollified the Sultan, and, after having

sat silent for a few minutes, his wrath being partly appeased, he said, "By whatever means the victory has been gained, incontestably it has been won, and since thou must have paid thy forfeit hadst thou lost, Allah forbid that thou shouldst fail to receive the reward that I have promised."

He thereupon commanded that Osman should be arrayed in the gorgeous robes of the office, and, summoning all the officers and high dignitaries of the Seraglio to the Hall of the Throne, he presented Osman to them as Grand Vizier.

Then, as he dismissed him, he said, significantly, "Grand Vizier, to-morrow we will play again."

IV.

THE NEXT MOVE.

In the evening Osman sat in the official Palace of the Grand Vizier, and the Reis Effendi by his invitation sat at meat with him, and they discussed what had passed and what was to be apprehended.

"Osman," said the Reis Effendi, "thou hast played a bold game and won it; yet I know too well the character and disposition of Murad to be able sincerely to congratulate thee. To-day thou art victorious and Grand Vizier, to-morrow thou mayest only too probably be defeated and slain—was it worth while to risk so much to gain so little?"

"Reis Effendi," answered Osman, "each must yield to fate, nevertheless a good chess-player should never despair. All he has to do is to consider his next move carefully, and play his best."

"In what way," asked the Reis Effendi, "can those wise reflections avail thee here? To-morrow thou must play again; has he not plainly said so? Then thou wilt find thyself in this dilemma—either thou wilt again win, which will render him furious; or thou wilt be defeated, in which case he will be the more incensed that so poor a player should yesterday have inflicted a defeat upon him. Now, as thou must needs either win or lose, I fail to perceive how thou canst escape from these dangers."

"Very true," said Osman; "but for my part I have no intention of playing a game against the Sultan to-morrow."

"Thou hast no intention!" cried the Reis Effendi, in amazement; "nay, but he has the intention to command thee to do so,

and art thou so simple as to suppose that thou hast power to refuse?"

"I am hardly so country-bred as to suppose that," said Osman, "nevertheless I venture to hope that I may be able so to order things that Murad shall not demand a game again to-morrow."

"And how is that to be accomplished?" demanded the Reis Effendi. "What dark scheme is this thou hast in hand?"

"At present I have no scheme completed," said Osman, "but only the outline or idea of the tactics which must be resorted to. My aim must be to set some affair of such urgency and importance before Murad to-morrow morning that, for the nonce, he will have neither the leisure nor the inclination for chess-playing or any other form of amusement."

"But what is this weighty question to be?" said the Reis Effendi. "The time is short for deciding upon it, and I warn thee that there be few things which, in the eyes of our lord the Sultan, are of equal, not to say superior, importance to the playing of the game on which he has set his heart."

"That I can readily believe," said Osman, "yet in the concerns of so great an Empire——"

Before Osman could complete the sentence an attendant entered, and announced that an old man was waiting without who desired earnestly an interview with the Grand Vizier.

"It is late," said Osman, "but if he be an old man, doubtless he must have an adequate reason for coming at this hour. Let him enter."

When the applicant entered the apartment, what was Osman's astonishment to behold in him no other than his own father.

After having been warmly welcomed by both Osman and the Reis Effendi, the old man was pressed to say how it came to pass that he had undertaken so long a journey.

"My son," he replied, "after thy departure neither thy mother, nor, sooth to say, myself either, could control the anxiety and apprehension we suffered on thine account. Therefore, having sold a ring, the last remaining valuable in our possession, in order to provide the small fund necessary for my journey, I followed thee, to learn the result of thy rash attempt, and whether the issue of thine enterprise had proved fatal, as we had so much cause to fear that it would do. Happily, it appears that thou hast won and not lost the game, yet whether thou art not still in imminent peril is much to be doubted."

"That thy son is even now in extreme peril of his life there can be no question," said the Reis Effendi. "To-morrow he must again play, unless, indeed, he can manage to divert the Sultan's attention and alter his declared intention. But in what way such a diversion is to be accomplished I cannot imagine."

"If that be the case," said the old man, "it is indeed well that I undertook the journey hither, for I have brought some intelligence which may now stand us in good stead. On my way I learned by accident of a conspiracy that appears to be hatching in

Roumelia, the early knowledge of which may prove of great value to the Sultan and his advisers."

"Thou art indeed fortunate," said the Reis Effendi, "to be in the possession of that information. His Majesty will doubtless be alarmed, and his attention engrossed by the details of such a project."

When, next morning, Osman, in his capacity as Grand Vizier, was closeted with Murad, he hastened to impart to him the intelligence he had received concerning the projected rising, and the design of the rebels to march upon the capital.

On hearing this account, Murad, seized with panic, talked of raising a large army, and at once marching

upon the disaffected province.

Osman, however, said calmly, "If your Majesty will permit me to express my opinion, I should say let no man know of this conspiracy, for even the rumour of insurrection is apt to unsettle men's minds, and spread the infection of revolt. The plan of the conspirators at present is secret; let it never be declared, crush it in the bud. At this stage a very small force will suffice, even as the beginning of a fire, which neglected would waste a city, may be quenched with



THE GRAND VIZIER LEFT
THE CAPITAL."

the contents of a bucket. Let me, your Majesty, take five hundred janissaries with me, proceed with all speed to Adrianople, and two hours after my arrival the leaders of the plot will be executed, and the movement will be at an end."

The Sultan approved this reasoning, and the advice given him by his new Grand Vizier, and bade him start at once on the mission he had proposed.

Within an hour the Grand Vizier, with his escort of five hundred men, left the capital, Osman, as he parted with his friend the Reis Effendi, observing simply, "The game of chess is adjourned."

The Grand Vizier, on reaching Adrianople, proceeded immediately to the house of the Governor of Roumelia, and had him executed on the spot. Having also put to death several of his creatures and officials who had been guilty of the grossest tyranny and extortion, and also those who had been in any way implicated in the projected rising, he replaced, to the great joy of all, his father in his former position of Governor of Roumelia, and hastened back to report to his Majesty that the province was now perfectly contented and loyal.

V.

THE FATAL GAME.

The Sultan, who had been greatly alarmed at the idea of disaffection in a province so important and so near the capital, was delighted with the promptitude and energy of his new Grand Vizier. He began from this time to rely on his judgment, and to take his advice on every occasion, and for a time Osman ruled the Empire with unquestioned authority and conspicuous success.

Murad often commanded the presence of his Grand Vizier at the chess-board, but the stakes to be played for were always fixed within the bounds of reason and moderation, and whether the game were lost or won—and Osman was too prudent often to win—the terrible claws of the Imperial tiger remained sheathed in velvet.

This happy state of affairs continued some time, and might perhaps have continued indefinitely, had not the Bostanji Bashi, in revenge for some imaginary slight or unintentional discourtesy on the part of the Grand Vizier, contrived his downfall.

This was a task not difficult to be achieved with a Master such as Murad. A few words alluding to "the policy and aims of our

new ruler," which he was allowed to overhear, excited the jealousy and suspicion of the Sultan. And with him the interval between jealousy and suspicion and the determination to rid himself of the object of them was short indeed.

He determined at once that Osman should play again for his head, and that this time he should lose.

Why an autocrat, who could order his Grand Vizier or any man to immediate execution, should prefer to work his will by the indirect mode of a wager and a contest on the chess-board, is a psychological problem, a puzzle in human nature, not easy to explain. Partly, no doubt, it may have been due to the influence of what had become with him an ingrained habit, and partly to a love of the excitement evoked by playing for the highest stakes a man can set upon the board.

However this may be, on the same afternoon that Murad had formed his resolution, he took occasion, on winning a game, to address Osman as follows: "My good Grand Vizier, I notice that in these little friendly contests of ours you seldom win. Now I like not to play with one who puts not out his full strength." With a mocking smile he continued, "Probably the stakes are now too trivial to make it worth while for you to exert your full powers. This must be remedied. I on my part will stake one of my daughters; you shall, if you win, have her to wife, and with her a dowry of two hundred purses of gold. And you on your side must, I suppose, play for the stake you played for at first, and then, you remember, you won in five moves, and easily enough."

"Your Majesty," said Osman, who saw at once that the temper of the Sultan had changed, and who entertained no doubt but that his own fate was already determined upon, "whatever stakes you decree must, of course, be accepted, but this time I have no new gambit to pit against your unrivalled and ever victorious skill."

The Sultan appreciated the compliment, but it did not cause him to alter his decision.

The afternoon of the next day was fixed as the time appointed for the playing of this fateful game.

During the interval Osman pondered deeply on the best course to pursue in the predicament in which he now found himself.

He was in little doubt but that, even though he should win this game, another equally momentous would follow, and that nothing could avail to keep his head on his shoulders if Murad had, as he shrewdly suspected, determined to get rid of him.

Yet it was clear that, under these circumstances, to win would probably be less immediately fatal than to lose; it might for a short time delay, if it could not avert, the end that seemed inevitable.

Therefore, when on the following afternoon the Grand Vizier faced the Sultan at the chess-board, each of these good players sat down determined to win it he possibly could manage it.

They were not alone. A large number of the great officers and high officials of the State and the Palace sat watching the game which might so suddenly terminate the brief and brilliant career of one of the players.

Every move was followed with the keenest interest.

The game was fought with great skill and indomitable patience by both combatants. It lasted long; and the chances of victory and defeat still held an even balance.

It was the Grand Vizier's turn. He moved his piece, when suddenly it flashed upon him that the move was a fatal one. Virtually, it sealed his fate. Unless the Sultan should by some extraordinary obtuseness overlook the opportunity afforded him, three moves would at once terminate the game, and cut short the life of Osman.

He dared not raise his eyes from the board, lest his glance should involuntarily betray to the Sultan his consciousness of the mistake he had committed.

For some time the whole assembly sat silent and motionless.

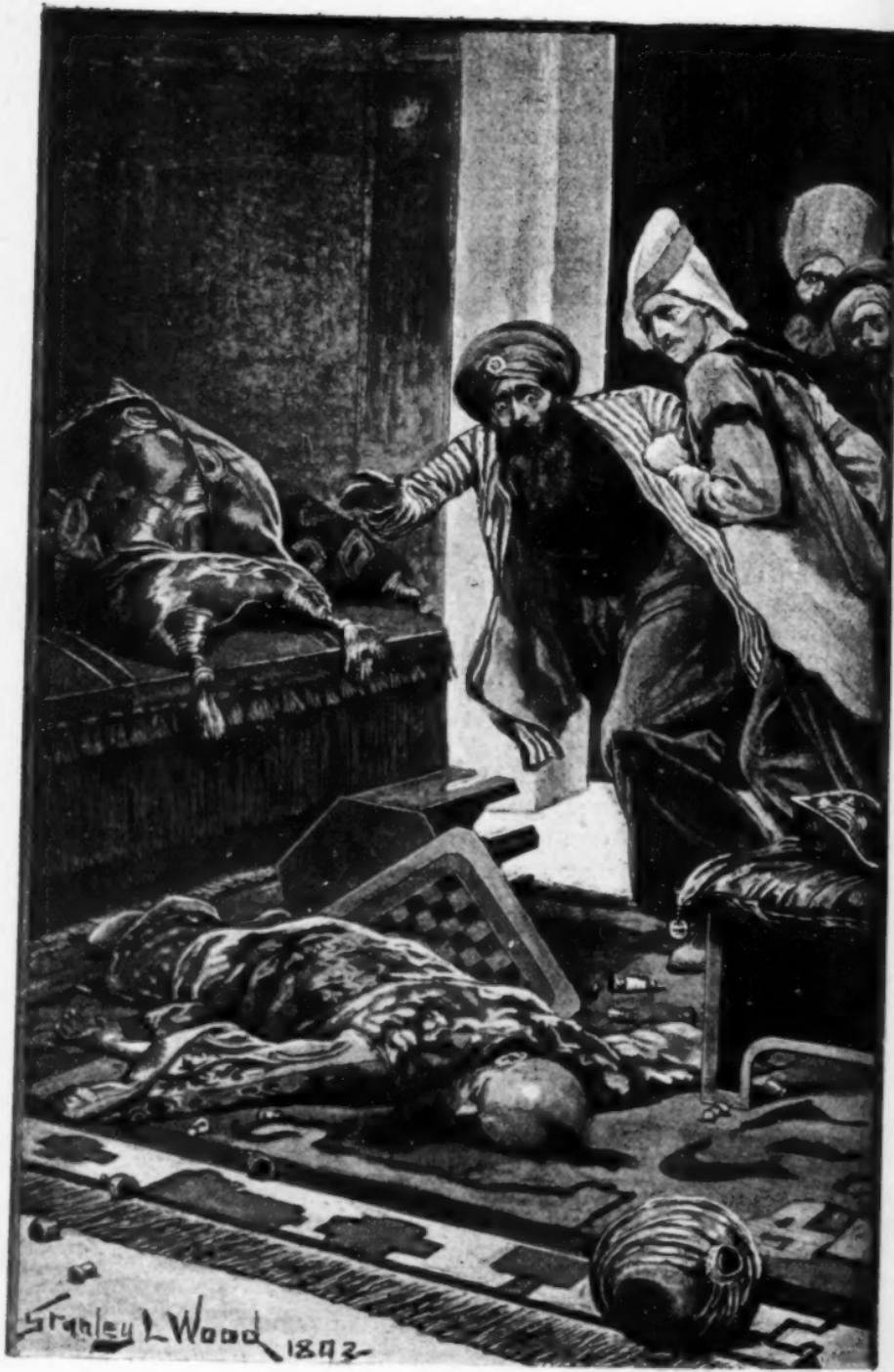
The Sultan made no move. What could be the cause of his delay? Was he gloating over the assurance of victory, and purposely prolonging the anxiety and apprehension of his victim, or could it be possible that he had really failed to observe the opportunity provided for him, and was still considering undecided his next move?

The pause continued so long that Osman ventured at length to raise his eyes to his adversary. Rather than such suspense, it would be preferable to know the worst.

As he looked up a strange sight met his gaze. The Sultan sat with his head bent down; the afternoon was sultry, and at the very crisis of the battle he had fallen asleep!

There was little doubt that when he woke the first glance must reveal the opportunity that was presented to him.

Meanwhile, none dared to disturb him, and the unhappy Osman was compelled to await, with as much patience and fortitude as he could command, the tragic and inevitable result.



"HE WAS DEAD."

No man in that large assembly either spoke or stirred. With calm unruffled demeanour, truly Oriental, they sat silent and watchful till the Sultan should awake and deign to continue the game which his sleep had so suddenly interrupted.

Silence reigned in the court without no less than within the hall itself.

At length the call to prayer of the Muezzin on the Mosque resounded through the heavy air: "Come to prayer, come to prayer, God is most great, God is most great. There is no God but God." Still the Sultan slept, and no one in that bejewelled crowd dared to disturb his slumber.

At last an incident, that none could have foreseen, occurred to break the silence. One of the soldiers stationed at the door followed unconsciously the example set him by his Imperial Master and fell asleep, and suddenly his scimitar, falling from his relaxing grasp, fell clanging on to the marble steps.

All looked up with amazement, all excepting Murad!

Then Osman rose and touched the Sultan lightly on the shoulder, and he fell forward with a crash among the chessmen—for he was dead.

At once guards were stationed at every gate, and the Grand Vizier with the other great officers of State proceeded to the dwelling of the heir to the throne to announce the death of Murad and his own accession.

And for many years Osman, honoured and trusted by Murad's successor, ruled the Empire with firmness and in peace.

