

White Gold

Giles Milton

Published by Hodder &
Stoughton

Extract is copyright of the Author

PROLOGUE



THE CLATTER OF A CHARIOT broke the silence. It was hidden from view by the towering battlements, but could be heard squeaking and rattling through the palace gardens. As it passed through the Gate of the Winds, there was a muffled rumble of footsteps and wheels.

In the ceremonial parade ground no one stirred. The imperial guard stood rigidly to attention, their damascene scimitars flashing in the sunlight. The courtiers lay prostrate beside them, their robes splayed theatrically across the marble. Only the vizier, sweltering in his leopardskin pelt, dared to wipe the beads of sweat from his brow.

The stillness intensified as the chariot drew near. From beyond the courtyard there was a furious cry, followed by the crack of a whip. The hullabaloo grew suddenly louder, echoing through the palace courts and corridors. Seconds later, Sultan Moulay Ismail of Morocco entered the parade ground in his gilded chariot, drawn not by horses but by a harnessed band of wives and eunuchs.

This unfortunate team staggered up to the assembled courtiers before allowing their reins to slacken. As the sultan leaped down from his chariot, two statuesque blacks sprang into action. One whisked flies from Moulay Ismail's sacred body, muttering obsequies all the while. The other, a young lad of fourteen or fifteen, shaded the sultan with a twirling chintz parasol.

Such was the ritual that habitually attended an audience with

the great Moulay Ismail, who demanded absolute deference from his subjects and was punctilious in his observance of protocol. But on a sweltering summer's morning in 1716 the sultan scarcely noticed the courtiers grovelling in the dust. His eyes were drawn instead to a band of wretched Europeans herded together in the far corner of the square. Fifty-two Englishmen, bruised and barefoot, stood in mute bewilderment. Seized at sea by the corsairs of Barbary and marched inland to Morocco's imperial capital, they were about to be sold as slaves.

Their story was to cause outrage and horror in their home country; it would also expose the utter impotence of both the British government and its navy. Yet the seizure of these men was neither unique nor unusual; for more than a century, the trade in white slaves from across Europe and colonial North America had been destroying families and wrecking innocent lives.

One of the newly captured men – Captain John Pellow of the *Francis* – had been forewarned of the perils of his trading voyage to the Mediterranean. Yet he had shunned the danger with characteristic bravado, sailing from Cornwall to Genoa in the summer of 1715. His six-strong crew included his young nephew, Thomas Pellow, who was just eleven years old when he bade farewell to his mother, father and two sisters. It would be many years before his parents would receive news of their unfortunate son.

Two other ships were captured on the same day. Captain Richard Ferris of the *Southwark* had attempted to rescue the *Francis's* crew, but had also been captured by the corsairs. So, too, had the good ship *George*, which was making its return voyage to England. The terrified crews of these three vessels now stood side by side in the palace courtyard.

'Bono, bono,' cried the jovial sultan as he inspected his slaves. He passed along the line of men, poking their muscles and examining their physique. The captives were still reeling from the treatment they had received on their arrival in the imperial city of

Prologue

Meknes. Crowds of townspeople had gathered at the palace gates to abuse them, 'offering us the most vile insults . . . and giving us many severe boxes'.

The sultan, oblivious to their fears and anxieties, was delighted to see that these hardy mariners were in good shape and noted that many years of service could be expected of them. He paused for a moment as he sized up the young Thomas Pellow. There was something about the boy's plucky demeanour that intrigued the sultan. He muttered a few words to his guardsmen, at which young Pellow was seized and taken to one side.

As the rest of the men were led away by a black slave-driver, Pellow prayed that his nightmare would soon come to an end. In fact, he was beginning twenty-three years of captivity as one of North Africa's forgotten white slaves.

I travelled to Meknes in the spring of 1992 when the Boufekrane valley was carpeted with wild mint and the little river was brimful with icy water. My travelling companion belonged to another world – an eighteenth-century padre, whose colourful account described the city at its apogee. His duodecimo volume – bound, appropriately enough, in tooled morocco – evoked a city of unparalleled grandeur. But it also revealed a far darker and more sinister story.

When my padre travelled here, the imperial palace of Meknes was the largest building in the northern hemisphere. Its crenellated battlements stretched for mile upon mile, enclosing hills and meadows, orchards and pleasure gardens, its sun-baked bulwarks looming high over the river valley. This impregnable fortress was designed to withstand the mightiest army on earth. Each of its gates was protected by a crack division of the black imperial guard.

The sultan's palace was constructed on such a grand scale that it came to be known simply as Dar Kbira, The Big. Yet Dar Kbira was just one part of a huge complex. A further fifty

palaces, all interconnecting, housed the sultan's 2,000 concubines. There were mosques and minarets, courtyards and pavilions. The palace stables were the size of a large town; the barracks housed more than 10,000 foot soldiers. In the sprawling Dar el Makhzen – another vast palace-town – scheming viziers and eunuchs kept their courts. The fabled hanging gardens, perpetually in blossom, rivalled Nebuchadnezzar's fantasy in Babylon.

My padre had never seen anything like it and returned home with tales of bronze doors cast in fantastical arabesques and porphyry columns that sparkled in the sun. The courtyard mosaics were wrought with geometric perfection – a dizzying chiaroscuro of cobalt and white. There were slabs of jasper and Carrara marble, costly damasks and richly caparisoned horses. The Moorish stucco was most extraordinary of all; chiselled and fretted into an intricate honeycomb, it appeared to drip from the cupolas like snow-white stalactites.

Every inch of wall, every niche and squinch, was covered in exquisite ornamentation. The glasswork, too, was extraordinarily fine. Chinks of azure, vermilion and sea green were designed to catch and refract the brilliant African sunlight. In the hours before sundown, they scattered hexagons of colour over the tessellated marble paving.

Palace doorways were emblazoned with the emblem of the sun, prompting visitors to wonder whether the sultan was vying to outdo his French contemporary, King Louis XIV, the Sun King. In truth, the megalomaniac sultan hoped to build on a far grander scale than the recently constructed palace of Versailles. His vision was for his palace to stretch from Meknes to Marrakesh – a distance of 300 miles.

Three centuries of sun and rain have not been kind to this sprawling palace, built of pisé, a mixture of earth and lime. The winds of the Atlas Mountains have blasted the pink walls, reducing them in places to a powdery heap. Arches lie broken and

Prologue

towers have been eroded to stumps. The earthquake of 1755 caused the greatest devastation: the fabric of the great palace shuddered, groaned and expired. What had taken decades to construct was torn apart in minutes. Cedarwood ceilings were ripped from their rafters, and stucco crumbled and collapsed. Whole quarters of the palace slumped in on themselves, crushing furniture and antiques. The court fled in panic, never to return. The broken imperial shell, reduced to a sorry hodgepodge of roofless chambers, was quickly colonised by the poor and wretched of Meknes.

I approached the city through the Bab Mansour, the greatest of all Meknes' ceremonial gateways. It opened the way to a world of giants, where ramparts towered over palm trees and courtyards were as big as the sky. A second gateway led to a third, which contracted into a series of alleyways. These labyrinthine passages, festooned with telephone wires and cables, plunged me deep into the heart of the palace. To this day, people – indeed, whole families – live in the ruins of Dar Kbira. Front doors have been carved into the bulwarks and there are windows hacked out of the pisé. Ancient chambers have become modern bedrooms; courtyards are strewn with marble rubble.

I squeezed through a fissure in the battlements and found myself in a whole new jumble of ruins. A shattered porphyry column lay half embedded in waste, casually discarded like household junk. A twirl of acanthus betrayed its Roman past, pillaged from the nearby ruined city of Volubilis.

I wondered if this lost quarter had once been the forbidden harem, whose looking-glass ceiling was propped up by just such columns. Arab chroniclers speak of crystal streams and tinkling fountains; of sculpted marble basins filled with brightly coloured fish. Pausing for a moment in this roofless chamber, I scooped up a handful of the cool earth. As the powdery dust filtered through my fingers, a precious residue remained: fractured mosaic tiling in a myriad of shapes – stars, oblongs, squares and diamonds.

If my padre was to be believed, these tiny chunks were evidence of one of the darkest chapters in human history. Every hand-glazed mosaic in this monumental palace, every broken column and battlement, had been built and crafted by an army of Christian slaves. Flogged by black slave-drivers and held in filthy slave pens, these abject captives were forced to work on what the sultan intended to be the largest construction project in the known world. Moulay Ismail's male slaves were said to have toiled for fifteen hours a day and were often forced to work at night as well. The female captives were even more miserable. Dragged to the harem and forcibly converted to Islam, they had the dubious honour of indulging the sultan's sexual whims.

Morocco was not the only place in North Africa where white captives were held as slaves. Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli also had thriving slave auctions, in which thousands of captives were put through their paces before being sold to the highest bidder. These wretched men, women and children came from right across Europe – from as far afield as Iceland and Greece, Sweden and Spain. Many had been seized at sea by the infamous Barbary corsairs. Many more had been snatched from their homes in surprise raids.

Almost six years were to pass before I first began to search for written records of the Barbary slaves. I had assumed that such archives – if they had ever existed – would have disappeared long ago. But it gradually became apparent that a great many letters and journals had survived. There were plaintive descriptions of the ordeal of slave labour and blood-chilling reports of audiences with the Moroccan sultan. There were anguished recollections of the macabre humour of the slave merchants and petitions from 'slave widows' that begged for mercy and relief. I even found missives written by the sultan himself – grandiloquent tracts demanding that the kings of Britain and France convert to Islam.

Prologue

Many of these accounts were to be found only in manuscript. The extraordinary journal of John Whitehead, a British slave in Meknes, remains unpublished to this day. Others were printed in such small quantities that only a handful of copies survive. A very rare volume by the French padre, Jean de la Faye, turned up in St Anthony's College, Oxford.

The most fascinating testimonies were those written by the slaves themselves. The story of the white slave trade is one of individuals caught up in a nightmare far beyond their control. Most were to end their days in a hellish captivity, but a fortunate few managed to escape the clutches of their owners. Those who made it back to their homelands were invariably destitute. One of the ways in which they could restore their fortunes was to publish their tales, in the hope of earning a few shillings.

The white slaves who survived their ordeal invariably emerged from incarceration in deep shock. Writing helped them come to terms with the past and reintegrate themselves into a society they had thought to be lost to them for ever. All who recorded their stories had undergone raw and harrowing experiences, and they left tales that even today have the power to be profoundly moving. They rarely make for pleasant reading, yet are illuminated by flashes of heroism and selflessness. A touch of kindness from a slave guard; the warm embrace of a padre. Such gestures reminded the captives that they were still a part of humankind.

One of the most remarkable stories of the white slave trade centres around Thomas Pellow and his crewmates on the *Francis*. Pellow would be witness to the barbaric splendours of Sultan Moulay Ismail's imperial court and would experience at first hand the ruthlessness of this wily and terrifying ruler. But his story was to prove far more extraordinary than that of a mere observer of events. As a personal slave of the sultan, Pellow unwittingly found himself thrown into the very heart of courtly intrigue. Appointed guardian of the imperial harem, he would

also lead slave-soldiers into battle and take part in a perilous slave-gathering expedition to equatorial Africa. He would be tortured and forced to convert to Islam. Three times he would attempt to escape; twice he would be sentenced to death.

Pellow's tale is filled with a colourful cast of characters. He writes of lusty eunuchs and brutal slave-drivers, imperial executioners and piratical scoundrels. At the heart of his story is the towering figure of Sultan Moulay Ismail, who through the course of his long reign became increasingly obsessed by his opulent fantasy palace.

It was long believed that Pellow's *Adventures* – reworked for publication by a Grub Street editor – strayed far from reality. It is now clear that this is not at all the case. The early chapters are corroborated by letters written by his own shipmates, while the later years accord with reports written by European consuls who met him in Morocco. Arab records, too, support his version of events. The newly translated *Chronicles* of Muhammad al-Qadiri reveal that Pellow's account of the Moroccan civil war is remarkable for its accuracy. His revelations about life in Meknes also tally with Moroccan sources. Both Ahmed ez-Zayyani and Ahmad bin Khalid al-Nasari paint a strikingly similar picture of life in the imperial capital.

Thomas Pellow and his fellow shipmates were captured at a time when North Africa's slave population had diminished, but conditions were as wretched as ever. Their incarceration coincided with one of the last great flurries of slave trading, when virtually every country in Europe found itself under attack. But the story of the white slave trade begins almost ninety years earlier, when the Barbary corsairs launched a series of spectacular raids on the very heart of Christendom.

1 A NEW AND DEADLY FOE



THE PALE DAWN SKY GAVE no inkling of the terror that was about to be unleashed. A sea mist hung low in the air, veiling the horizon in a damp and diaphanous shroud. It enabled the mighty fleet to slip silently up the English Channel, unnoticed by the porters and fishermen on Cornwall's south-western coast.

The lookout who first sighted the vessels was perplexed. It was not the season for the return of the Newfoundland fishing fleet, nor was a foreign flotilla expected in those waters. As the mists lifted and the summer skies cleared, it became apparent that the mysterious ships had not come in friendship. The flags on their mainmasts depicted a human skull on a dark green background – the menacing symbol of a new and terrible enemy. It was the third week of July 1625, and England was about to be attacked by the Islamic corsairs of Barbary.

News of the fleet's arrival flashed rapidly along the coast until it reached the naval base of Plymouth. A breathless messenger burst into the office of James Bagg, Vice Admiral of Cornwall, with the shocking intelligence of the arrival of enemy ships. There were at least 'twentye sayle upon this coast' – perhaps many more – and they were armed and ready for action.

Bagg was appalled by what he was told. Over the previous weeks he had received scores of complaints about attacks on Cornish fishing skiffs. Local mayors had sent a stream of letters

informing him of the 'daily oppression' they were facing at the hands of a little-known foe. Now, that foe appeared to be preparing a far more devastating strike on the south coast of England.

Bagg penned an urgent letter to the Lord High Admiral in London, demanding warships to counter the threat. But it was far too late for anything to be done. Within days of their being sighted the corsairs began to wreak havoc, launching hit-and-run raids on the most vulnerable and unprotected seaports. They slipped ashore at Mount's Bay, on the south Cornish coast, while the villagers were at communal prayer. Dressed in Moorish djellabas and wielding damascene scimitars, they made a terrifying sight as they burst into the parish church. One later English captive would describe the corsairs as 'ugly onhumayne cretures' who struck the fear of God into all who saw them. 'With their heads shaved and their armes almost naked, [they] did teryfie me exceedingly.' They were merciless in their treatment of the hapless congregation of Mount's Bay. According to one eyewitness, sixty men, women and children were dragged from the church and carried back to the corsairs' ships.

The fishing port of Looe was also assaulted. The warriors streamed into the cobbled streets and forced their way into cottages and taverns. Much to their fury, they discovered that the villagers had been forewarned of their arrival and many had fled into the surrounding orchards and meadows. Yet the corsairs still managed to seize eighty mariners and fishermen. These unfortunate individuals were led away in chains and Looe was then torched in revenge. The mayor of Plymouth informed the Privy Council of the sorry news, adding that the corsairs were steadily ransacking the surrounding coastline. The West Country, he said, had lost '27 ships and 200 persons taken'.

Far more alarming was the news – relayed by the mayor of Bristol – that a second fleet of Barbary corsairs had been sighted in the choppy waters off the north Cornish coast. Their crews

had achieved a most spectacular and disquieting coup: they had captured Lundy Island in the Bristol Channel and raised the standard of Islam. It had now become their fortified base, from which they attacked the unprotected villages of northern Cornwall. They had 'seized diverse people about Padstow' and were threatening to sack and burn the town of Ilfracombe.

These two-pronged attacks caught the West Country completely unprepared. The Duke of Buckingham despatched the veteran sea-dog, Francis Stuart, to Devon, with orders to root out and destroy this menacing new enemy. But Stuart was dismayed to discover that 'they are better sailers than the English ships'. His letter to the duke, admitting defeat, expresses his fear that the worst was yet to come. 'Theis picaroons, I say, will ever lie hankering upon our coastes, and the state will find it both chargeable and difficult to cleere it.' The long coastline had few defences to deter the North African corsairs, who found they could pillage with impunity. Day after day, they struck at unarmed fishing communities, seizing the inhabitants and burning their homes. By the end of the dreadful summer of 1625, the mayor of Plymouth reckoned that 1,000 skiffs had been destroyed, and a similar number of villagers carried off into slavery.

These miserable captives were taken to Salé, on Morocco's Atlantic coast. This wind-blown port occupied a commanding position on the north bank of the great Bou Regreg river estuary. Her massive city walls were visible from far out to sea, and her turreted battlements and green-glazed minarets sparkled in the North African sunshine.

Just a few decades earlier, these landmarks had been a welcome sight for England's seafaring merchants. Lace-ruffed Elizabethans had come to Salé to exchange silver and woollens for exotic produce, brought in by desert caravans from the steaming tropics of equatorial Africa. In the overcrowded souks and alleys, they had jostled and traded with Moorish merchants dressed in

flowing djellabas. After much haggling and bartering, they loaded their vessels with ivory and skins, wax, sugar and amber, as well as the fragrant Meknes honey that was famed throughout Europe.

On the south bank of the estuary, directly opposite Salé, lay the ancient town of Rabat. This, too, had been a 'great and famous towne', boasting beautiful palaces and an extraordinary twelfth-century mosque. But Rabat had fallen into slow decay. By the early 1600s it was scarcely inhabited, and most of the dwellings had been abandoned. 'It was in a manner desolate,' wrote an anonymous English visitor, 'abandoned by the Arabs because of wild beasts.'

Rabat would have fallen into complete ruin had it not been for a most unexpected circumstance. In 1610, King Philip III of Spain expelled all one million Spanish Moors from his land – the final chapter in the reconquest of southern Spain from the infidel. Although these Moriscos had lived in Spain for generations, and many were of mixed stock, they were allowed no right of appeal.

One of the most enterprising of these émigré groups was known as the Hornacheros, after the Andalusian village in which they had lived. Wild and fiercely independent, they pillaged without scruple. One Englishman would later describe them as 'a bad-minded people to all nations', and even their fellow Moriscos viewed them as thieves and brigands.

Expelled from their mountain stronghold in Spain, this haughty clan of 4,000 men and women set their sights on the ruined settlement of Rabat. They restored the kasbah, or fortress, and adapted with remarkable ease to their new homeland, which they renamed New Salé. However, they continued to harbour a deep resentment against Spain and vowed to do everything in their power to strike back. To this end, they began to forge alliances with pirates from Algiers and Tunis who had been preying on Christian shipping in the Mediterranean for more than a century. Within a few years, hundreds of cut-throats and

desperadoes – some of them European – began to converge on New Salé in order to train the Hornacheros in the black arts of piracy.

The Hornacheros and their cohort of renegades made a formidable fighting force. This highly disciplined band became known in England as the Sallee Rovers. But to their Islamic brethren they were called *al-ghuzat*, a title once used for the soldiers who fought with the Prophet Mohammed, and were hailed as religious warriors who were engaged in a holy war against the infidel Christians. 'They lived in Salé, and their sea-borne *jihad* is now famous,' wrote the Arabic chronicler, al-Magiri. 'They fortified Salé and built in it palaces, houses and bathhouses.'

The Salé corsairs rapidly learned mastery of square-riggers, enabling them to extend their attacks far into the North Atlantic, and soon assembled a fleet of forty ships. They plundered with abandon, attacking villages and sea ports right along the coasts of Spain, Portugal, France and England. One Salé corsair, Amurates Rayobi, led more than 10,000 warriors to Spain and ransacked the coastline without pity. Their success emboldened their co-religionists elsewhere in Barbary. The *al-ghuzat* from Algiers targeted vulnerable merchant vessels passing through the Straits of Gibraltar. They were fortunate that their attacks coincided with the beginnings of the mercantile age, when there were rich pickings to be had on the open seas. Between 1609 and 1616, they captured a staggering 466 English trading ships.

Kings and ministers across Europe were paralysed by a sense of helplessness. Sir Francis Cottingham, one of King James I's clerks of the council, bemoaned the fact that 'the strength and boldness of the Barbary pirates is now grown to that height . . . as I have never known anything to have wrought a greater sadness and distraction in this court than the daily advice thereof.'

The lack of any co-ordinated defence encouraged the Sallee Rovers to widen their attacks. One of Salé's most infamous

renegade captains, the Dutchman, Jan Janszoon, laughed in scorn at the ease with which he could seize European shipping. Known to his comrades as Murad Rais, he had first cocked a snook at the Channel defences in 1622, when he sailed to Zeeland in order to visit his estranged wife. A few years later, he embarked on a remarkable voyage of pillage to Iceland. His three-strong fleet dropped anchor at Reykjavik, where Murad led his men ashore and proceeded to ransack the town. He returned to Salé in triumph, with 400 enslaved Icelanders — men, women and children.

Wales, too, was hit on several occasions, while the fishing fleets of the Newfoundland Banks suffered several devastating raids. In 1631, Murad Rais set his eye on the richly populated coasts of southern Ireland. He raised a force of 200 Islamic soldiers and they sailed to the village of Baltimore, storming ashore with swords drawn and catching the villagers totally by surprise. He carried off 237 men, women and children and took them to Algiers, where he knew they would fetch a good price. The French padre, Pierre Dan, was in the city at the time, having been granted permission by the authorities to tend to the spiritual needs of his enslaved co-religionists. He witnessed the sale of new captives in the slave auction. 'It was a pitiful sight to see them exposed in the market,' he wrote. 'Women were separated from their husbands and the children from their fathers.' Dan looked on helplessly as 'on one side, a husband was sold; on the other, his wife; and her daughter was torn from her arms without the hope that they'd ever see each other again.'

Murad Rais's bravado was fêted in Morocco, and he was accorded the singular honour of being made governor of the port of Safi, some 200 miles to the south of Salé. His daughter visited him soon afterwards and found that power had quite gone to his head. He was 'seated in great pomp on a carpet, with silk cushions, the servants all around him'. When he took his leave, it was 'in the manner of royalty'.