

In 1623, Prince Charles of England embarked on a journey to Madrid, seeking the hand of Infanta Maria Anna of Spain. English commoners were alarmed at the thought of a Roman Catholic queen on the English throne, as it conjured the specter of their most recent Catholic queen, Bloody Mary. Spurred on by the Duke of Buckingham, the prince and his traveling party disguised themselves as merchants and crossed into France, and then Spain, on horseback. Undetected, they entered the city gates of Madrid. The affair became known as “The Spanish Match.”

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The Keeper of the Kingdom

February 1623

Southampton, England

Lady Anne looked up, amazed the day had flown. The diamond-paned windows glimmered with the colors of the setting sun. She lifted a burning candle from the candelabra and lit three more wicks before re-fastening it to its base.

Quentin, her four-year-old, looked thoughtful as he knelt on the chair next to hers. Lady Anne selected a slender paintbrush from the tray and dipped it into the watery, brown ink.

“Here is what a bunny looks like,” she said, as a chubby rabbit flowed from the brush’s tip.

“Can I make a bunny?” Quentin asked, reaching for her brush. Just as his little fingers closed over it, an outside movement caught her eye. She glanced through the window and her blood ran cold.

In the mid-distance, a thick man in a black cloak and a black, flat-brimmed hat strode up the walkway.

How did he get past the guard at the gate?

Anne rose, darted to the side of the bay window and peered outside. Flames from the fireplace reflected in the windowpanes, partially obscuring him. She touched a hand to the prim bun at the back of her head, knowing the blonde curls at the side of her face, along with her well-formed figure, could invite the wrong kind of attention from the dark stranger. Her position afforded a clear view of the château across the broad lawn. She had convinced her husband to move into the cozy parson's house for the winter, finding the three-story manor far too drafty and eerie after dark—unsuitable for a child.

She waited for the man to approach the château. No doubt, he would assume the lord and lady of the house resided there. Instead, the stranger turned toward her window, as if he knew where to find her. Her heart sped as she stared into his cruel eyes, shadowed by thick eyebrows. His chin drooped into his fat neck, but his gait made him seem as solid as a boulder.

“Harald! Come down!” she shouted, hoping he could hear from his upstairs study. She breathed more easily at the sound of her husband’s massive feet pounding the wooden steps. Harald stormed down the curved stairway into the parlor.

“There’s a man coming up the walkway. Please, hurry! Meet him on the landing. I do not want him in our house.”

Harald swung open the door, allowing in a rush of winter air. Anne noticed he wore nothing but a chemise over his trousers. The icy breeze lifted his auburn hair from his shoulders. He motioned for Anne to step out first, then followed, shutting the door behind them.

“Greetings!” he called, his baritone voice booming into the evening air.

The stranger peered at them with tiny, reptilian eyes as he closed the space between them.

Harald stepped in front of Anne and asked, “May I ask who I have the honor of meeting on our doorstep at the end of day?” His voice dripped with sarcasm.

The stranger’s expression was as cold as a crypt.

“I am an envoy from the Vatican.”

Anne stifled a gasp. The man’s attire was devoid of Roman Catholic insignias. Yet, it made sense. In Protestant England, an obvious papist would be mobbed on sight, even burned alive.

“And you are?” Harald prompted.

“But a humble Keeper of the Kingdom.” His accent was unmistakably Italian.

Harald pulled his head back. “What do you want from us?”

“I have come to do *you* a favor. But first, a revelation. All of Britain is returning to the fold of the True Church.” He paused to let the words sink in. “A match has been made between England’s Prince Charles and the Spanish infanta. This is a proud blessing upon the House of Stuart. By the grace of God, this match shall allow the prince to retain his father’s throne.”

The threat was veiled, but Anne caught it at once. If the king declined the match, the Roman Church would prevent Prince Charles’s succession to the throne, somehow. She looked into Harald’s stormy eyes and their communication was instant: play along and discuss the matter later.

“If it is the king’s will for his son to marry the infanta,” Anne said, her tone obsequious, “of course, we will support the match and do all in our power to carry out his wishes.”

“You will make it the king’s will, Lady Audley. I understand you possess the powers of persuasion.”

Anne froze as she met the stranger's glass-green eyes. He spoke of the espionage training she had received; she could sense it in her bones. *How does he know?*

The stranger shifted his cold gaze to Harald. "If you assist the Church in converting the prince and vouchsafing this union, the Vatican will reinstate the House of Audley to our good graces. We know the enemies of God in this land. They will be stripped of their fortunes. As it is written, 'To those who have much, more will be added unto them.'"

Anne hoped Harald would hide his disgust. He lifted one eyebrow in a pantomime of greed, but asked, in a more conciliatory tone, "Pray tell, how can we be of service to the Keepers of the Kingdom?"

The stranger smirked, fooled by Harald's counterfeit deference. "Your mission is simple. Go to King James. Tell him there are whisperings from the Duke of Buckingham's quarters that a match between the Spanish infanta and Prince Charles is under consideration but say nothing of our meeting. You must convince the king it is the only way to pass his throne on to his son. Remind him, in the most courteous fashion, that he is old and his son is naïve. Prince Charles can be easily replaced by his cousin, Ann Stanley, Countess of Castlehaven. She is devoted to the Church, and her claim to the English throne is far stronger than James Stuart's, let alone that of Prince Charles. Our original plan was to replace Charles with her, upon his father's death, but the Lord is kind. He has chosen to give King James an opportunity to return Britain to the True Church and escape damnation.

"You, Lady Audley," he continued, his predatory eyes back on Anne, "will play Cupid to this royal couple. Explain to Prince Charles how delightful a Roman Catholic wife could be, with a never-ending appetite for producing heirs. Although your task is woman's work, it is vital.

“That is all. Fini,” he said with a twirl of his thumb and forefinger. “Go now, to the king. Both of you.”

He spun on his heel and glided into the shadows, leaving nothing but the sound of boots on gravel echoing in the evening air.

Kitty

Kitty awoke to the sound of feet pounding on the stairs. A volume of *Romeo and Juliet* fell from her lap as she bolted up. The parlor door opened and slammed shut, shaking the rafters above.

She rushed into the parlor, surprised to find the room empty, save for Quentin, who stared at her with large, blue eyes from behind the desk.

“Mummy and Daddy went outside to see a man,” he said, as if disappointed he had not been invited.

She peered out the window of the parlor, but it was difficult to see the portico from there. Noticing her reflection, she finger-combed the tight, bronze curls that crowded her ears. If Anne and Harald had a visitor, she didn’t want to look like a rag doll when they came in. A turn of her head revealed her bun was still presentable. Her tawny complexion made her self-conscious, but Anne and Harald had remarked on her golden glow often enough to put her at ease.

She went to the desk and gave Quentin a cuddle as she sat beside him to examine the painted creatures. Anne had hired her to be her lady’s maid, but Kitty spent more time with Quentin, which suited

her. The flaxen-haired boy was the most adorable tot she had ever known.

“What is this?” she asked playfully. “Are we making foxes and bunnies?” She picked up a thin brush and tried her hand at painting, glancing repeatedly at the diamond-paned window as she did so. Their candlelit faces reflected against the encroaching dusk.

“I don’t like your bunnies,” Quentin complained. “Mummy’s are better.”

Kitty looked down at the blotting paper. Indeed, her bunnies looked like hedgehogs with clumsy spatulas rising from their heads.

“You are right, Little Master. My bunnies look silly, next to your Mum’s. How about I tell you a story about a bunny, instead?”

“I want to hear a story about a bunny named George,” Quentin said as he studiously set about painting another one.

“Very well.” Kitty put down the brush and rested her hands in her lap. “There once was a little bunny named George Villiers,” she began, referring to the avaricious Duke of Buckingham, whom she loved to mock. “He flattered the king endlessly, held his hand, and blew him kisses, thereby becoming the king’s favorite bunny. George didn’t give two figs that no one else liked him.”

The story entwined the boy in its spell. Quentin stared at her with unblinking eyes.

“One day,” Kitty continued, “George the bunny told the king, ‘I want to be a duke.’”

“The king said, ‘That is a splendid idea, but I have no ducal titles to give.’”

“‘Yes, you do,’ said George the bunny. ‘Yonder lies an old man, almost dead, who has a ducal title. Very soon, he will need it no longer.’”

“‘But what about the duke’s heirs?’ cried the king.

“‘But what about precious me?’ cried George the bunny.

“‘But, of course,’ said the king. ‘I nearly forgot. You are the key to my happiness. I hereby pronounce you Third Duke of Pickpocket, by royal decree.’”

“‘But I very much wanted to be the First Duke of Pickpocket,’ said George the Bunny.

“‘First Duke you are, then,’ said the king.

“‘Now, I want a big house,’ said George the bunny, ‘even bigger than yours.’”

“The king hesitated. Such a house could cost him his entire treasure, but George the bunny batted his eyes, clasped his hands over his heart, and swayed his hips to-and-fro until the king could stand it no longer—”

Kitty jumped at the sound of the front door opening. Anne looked anxious. Harald looked grim as he stomped up the stairs.

Anne rushed over to gather Quentin into her arms, hugging him tighter than usual. His short, blond curls melded with her long ones as he struggled to break free.

“Look, Mummy. Look at the critters I made!” Quentin exclaimed. He resumed his perch on the chair.

Anne ummed and aahed at Quentin’s painted creatures as she carried on a conversation with Kitty over his head.

“Who was at the door?” Kitty asked in a low voice.

“A beastly man. He wouldn’t say his name, but the Vatican sent him. Have you ever heard of the Keepers of the Kingdom?”

Kitty put her hand to her mouth.

“But, of course, you have,” said Anne. “You overhear everything.”

“Some time ago, an old traveler was passing through town. He was full of tales. I chatted with him at the market. He told me The Keepers of the Kingdom are a nest of Vatican spies appointed by the pope to function as overlords to the Inquisition. I thought he was spinning a yarn.”

“I wish he had been,” said Anne.

“What did the man say?”

“I can’t discuss it here. But we must pack—” Anne mouthed the rest of the words, “For a long trip.”

At midnight, their coach pulled up to the two-story guest house, where Harald's brother, Cedric, and his wife, Aelfreda, lived on the far side of the château.

Anne looked down at Quentin, perched next to her. His wide eyes signaled he was still awake.

"We're at Uncle Cedric and Auntie Aelfie's house," she said. "Would you like Daddy to carry you, or would you like to walk?"

"I want Daddy to lift me from the coach. I can walk to the house myself," he said.

Kitty lifted Quentin onto her lap to bring him closer to the coach door.

Cedric came out onto the portico holding a lamp. "I received your message," he said. "Janie and Tommie would be most honored to host their distinguished Cousin Quentin. We have many adventures to conduct, and I fear we may not succeed in our endeavors without your help, my lad."

Once Harald set Quentin on the flagstones, the boy rushed past his Uncle Cedric, up the portico stairs, and let himself into the house. The rest followed him. The parlor danced with shadows, lit by a candelabra with three flickering wicks. Aelfreda sat at a table, tatting lace by the candlelight.

“Where are Tommie and Janie?” Quentin asked, his hands on his hips. Aelfreda set aside the lace and rose. A floppy cotton cap concealed her hair.

“They’ve gone to bed, my love. You can see them in the morning.”

Quentin marched up to her. “Janie makes kites,” he said. “I need to know how to do that.”

Aelfreda had their cook bring hot toddies for her guests and warmed milk for Quentin. They chatted in low voices until Quentin fell asleep on the couch.

Anne held her breath as she stroked his cheek, willing herself not to cry. She kissed his forehead.

After saying their farewells, Anne, Kitty, and Harald left for the Port of Southampton and boarded their private ship.