

**QUICK READS**

# The Spymaster

A short story by Patrick Kennedy



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*It was 1586. England was the most powerful country in the world. Queen Elizabeth had been on the throne for the last twenty-eight years. However, Elizabeth was a Protestant, and many wanted to see England become Catholic again, as it had been before Elizabeth's father, Henry VIII, had cut ties with the Roman Catholic Church in Rome. Elizabeth believed that there was a plot to replace her with her Roman Catholic cousin, Mary Queen of Scots. In order to ensure that this did not happen, Elizabeth had Mary under house arrest at Chartley House, a mansion in the English countryside. Elizabeth believed, though, that Mary was corresponding with her fellow conspirators via coded letters. Elizabeth gave the task of uncovering the plot to Sir Francis Walsingham. Walsingham used Gilbert Gifford, a trusted friend of Mary's, to discover who the conspirators were. He also employed Thomas Phelippes, a master cryptographer and forger, to decode the letters that were entering and leaving Chartley House. Walsingham's official title was the Queen's Principal Secretary but, unofficially, he was known as the Spymaster.*

### ***Part One***

Black clouds hung over Manor House like a widow's veil. Rain was falling heavily. Some horses were taking shelter under a tree. A flash of lightning lit up the early evening sky. The crash of thunder following it threw the horses into a panic. Sir Francis Walsingham watched from behind a rain-spattered window.

'I wonder how they knew,' he said.

‘I beg your pardon,’ asked his wife, Anne. She was sitting in a rocking chair near the fire, sewing a blanket for their daughter.

‘The horses.’ Walsingham didn’t turn around; he continued to watch the horses and the rain.

‘How they knew what, dear?’ Anne stopped sewing for a second.

‘That the storm was coming.’ He wiped the steam from the window. ‘They went under that tree long before it started to rain.’

‘Instinct, my dear,’ said his wife. ‘It’s a powerful thing.’

‘What do you mean?’ Walsingham turned to his wife. He often thanked the stars that he had married such an intelligent woman.

‘Creatures can often sense that something bad is going to happen, even if there is no evidence to show them that such a thing is about to occur.’

Walsingham turned back to watch the horses. The thunder and lightning continued to make them nervous. They shook their manes and lifted their tails. ‘I wonder if humans can sense approaching danger in the same way.’

‘Are you referring to the Queen of the Scots?’ asked Anne, but she immediately realized her mistake. Her husband turned quickly, a look as black as the clouds on his face.

‘Never refer to that woman as *queen* again. She is a traitor, not a queen.’ His eyes were like ink spots on white paper. Anne looked back at her sewing. Her husband smiled to

show that the remark had been forgotten. He turned back to the window.

‘Perhaps she, too, thinks that her friends will protect her from the storm,’ said Anne. ‘Only to realize, like the horses, that shelter can entrap as well as protect you.’

‘Indeed, my dear,’ said Walsingham, turning to smile at his wife. ‘The most dangerous place to be in a thunderstorm is under a tree.’

‘Do you know the names of all the conspirators yet?’ Anne was glad that her earlier remark had not put him in a bad mood. He was a good husband, but she, like everyone else who had ever met him, feared the Queen’s spymaster.

‘Not yet,’ said Walsingham. A frown appeared on his face, making his eyes dark shadows. ‘I am sure I will receive news soon; Gifford has become a trusted member of Mary’s circle.’

‘But is he a trusted member of ours?’ asked Anne.

‘That is something I can never be sure of.’ Walsingham thought for a moment. ‘Double agents are, by nature, duplicitous.’

‘And what about the codes?’ asked Anne. ‘How many weeks has it been since Thomas received the last letter?’

‘Seven.’

‘He will finish it soon, dear.’ Anne stood and lit a lamp. It was not late, but the storm had stolen the remaining daylight.

‘He must,’ said Walsingham, looking up at the darkening sky. ‘Time is running out.’ He closed the curtains.

## ***Part Two***

Thomas Phelippes sat at his desk in his room. The only light was a single lamp that he was using to examine the document in front of him. His fingertips were stained black and his white shirt had streaks of ink down it. He had not slept for several days. There was a knock at the door. Thomas didn't even hear it; he was so engrossed in the letter. The knock changed to a loud bang that shook Thomas from his task.

'Who is it?'

'It's Gifford! Open the door!'

Thomas stood up and stretched. Every bone in his body cracked and complained. It must have been twelve hours since he had last left his chair. 'OK, OK, I'm coming.' He opened the door to see an angry looking Gilbert Gifford. Thomas was secretly glad that he had irritated Gifford, he distrusted the double agent.

'What were you doing in here?' asked Gifford as he pushed past Thomas into the room.

'What do you think?' said Thomas, nodding towards the table.

'Haven't you finished yet?' Thomas didn't like the ex-priest's tone.

'You're welcome to try to decipher the letter yourself... if you think you can.' Thomas picked up the document and offered it to Gifford.

'How long will it take?' asked Gifford, shifting the attention back to Thomas.

‘I’m not sure.’ Thomas sat down, the document rested in his lap. ‘This letter is so much more complicated than the others.’

‘Walsingham is growing impatient.’ Gifford gave Thomas a warning look.

Thomas sighed. The last person he wanted to make his enemy was the Queen’s favourite guard dog. ‘Do you have a message from him?’ asked Thomas, dreading the reply.

‘Nothing specific.’ Gifford shook his head. He lit a lamp. ‘How can you work in this gloom?’

‘How much time do I have to decipher the letter?’

‘Walsingham knows that you are probably the only man in England who can decode the letter,’ said Gifford. ‘And he knows that you are trying your best. But we all know that this letter contains the message that will mean that Mary will be executed rather than crowned.’

‘Yes, I’m sure that this letter contains all the information that we need in order to convict Mary of treason. Why can’t I break this code?’ Thomas stood up and started to pace up and down the room. Gifford watched him from a comfortable chair.

‘Is it so different to the codes in her previous letters?’ asked Gifford. He didn’t even pretend to understand how Thomas worked out what the letters really said.

‘Yes, it’s as if she knows that they are being read, so she has added another layer to the code,’ replied Thomas. ‘Does she know that the letters are being intercepted?’

‘What are you trying to say?’ asked Gifford. He was obviously offended at the remark.

‘I’m just asking if Mary knows what’s happening, Gifford,’ said Thomas. ‘There is no need to be so defensive.’

Gifford relaxed a little. ‘Well if she does, it hasn’t come from me.’ He stood up and looked up at the sky through the small window. ‘I’m going. I have an appointment at Manor House and I don’t want to get caught in the storm.’

‘Tell Walsingham I am doing all that I can, and that I will break this code if it’s the last thing I do.’

Gifford turned as he was leaving. ‘I’m afraid that if you fail, Phelippes, it will be the last thing that any of us do.’

### ***Part Three***

‘Sit down, Gifford,’ said Walsingham, gesturing to a chair by the fire. ‘Why do you always look so nervous when you visit my home?’

‘Nervous?’ Gifford laughed. ‘Why should I be nervous?’

‘No reason,’ said Walsingham. He despised this insect of a man. He always said that a man that has two masters can never be trusted completely. He could turn against one or the other, or both, at any moment. ‘What news is there from Thomas Phelippes?’

‘He says that the letter is almost impossible to decipher.’

‘*Almost impossible?*’ Walsingham turned on Gifford like a striking snake. ‘Can he decipher it or not?’

‘He says that he can but... it... it might take time,’  
stammered Gifford.

‘Time?’ shouted Walsingham. ‘Does he think that the Spanish will give us time before they invade in support of their Catholic heroine?’ He leaned over Gifford; their faces were just two centimetres apart.

‘He says that Mary has increased the complexity of the code.’ Gifford tried not to shake.

‘And what about the conspirators?’ Gifford could feel spit landing on his cheek when Walsingham said the last word. He didn’t wipe it off.

‘I have... so far... a list of six men.’

‘Including you?’ Walsingham’s eyes pierced Gifford’s. It was as if he was trying to look into his soul.

‘But why would the list include me, Sir Francis?’ Gifford’s voice was high, like he was being strangled.

‘Are you not a member of this treacherous club?’  
Walsingham was close enough to bite Gifford’s nose. Gifford tried to move his head back, but there was nowhere for him to go. Finally, Walsingham stood up straight and walked over to the window. He was suddenly completely calm.

‘My loyalty is to you, sir,’ said Gifford, straightening his jacket and coughing to clear the fear in his throat.

‘Loyalty?’ Walsingham raised an eyebrow and looked at Gifford. ‘What do *you* know of loyalty?’

‘I work for you, sir,’ said Gifford, approaching Walsingham like a man walking up to a sleeping tiger.

‘Make sure that you do, Gifford.’ Walsingham took some paper from his desk. ‘Now write those six names on this piece of paper.’

### ***Part Four***

Two weeks later, Thomas Phelippes looked at his codebook for the thousandth time. He banged his fist on the table in frustration. Time was pressing now. All eyes were on him. Gifford had done his part, they had the names of the conspirators, but they needed hard evidence that Queen Mary was involved in the plot. That was why the letter was so crucial.

He decided to start again, to try to look at the letter through a new pair of eyes. He got up and went to the window. Warm July rain was turning to steam in the hot midday sun. He opened the window and filled his lungs with the country air. From his window, he could see Chartley House, where Queen Mary was being held prisoner. He decided to take a walk.

Thomas walked in the small woods just three hundred metres from Chartley. She was in there, the woman who tormented him with her ingenious codes. He wished that he could just walk up, knock on the door and ask her for the key to the code that he had so far been unable to crack. Instead, he walked back to his own house, ate some bread and cheese, drank some fresh water from the well, splashed his face and went back to work.

Once back in his room, he looked at the letter as if it was a fish that refused to be caught. 'I will break you,' he said to the document lying on the table.

Thomas opened his codebook and laid it next to the letter. After a while the words started to float from the page. They whirled around him, some growing larger, some smaller. They joined together to make longer words, and words that didn't exist. Words glowed on the page, like they were on fire and then extinguished themselves just as quickly. After three hours, he suddenly stood up, banging his head on the lamp above the table. He grabbed the document and checked it against the ciphers in his codebook again.

'Thank God!' he whispered, looking up at the ceiling. A tear rolled down his cheek. The code was finally broken and the message hidden in the letter was clear: *kill Elizabeth and tell the Spanish to invade*. This was the evidence that Walsingham needed to prove that Mary was a traitor.

Thomas washed his hands three times and rolled up his sleeves. He took a clean sheet of paper from the drawer and laid it on the desk. He opened the curtains wide. Now, he was going to forge a reply to the letter. It would inform Mary Queen of Scots that the conspiracy to murder Queen Elizabeth was going ahead as planned. At the bottom of the letter, there would be six expertly forged signatures.