

# THE PRETENDER

John George Keyser (1698–1743)

1730

As to your inquiry concerning the figure made by the Pretender<sup>1</sup> to the British Crown, I must say it is every way very mean and unbecoming. The court of Rome indeed has issued an order that all the subjects should style him King of England, but this is no more than an empty title, and made a jest of by the Italians themselves; for some of them discoursing with me, whom they conceive to be none of his friends, sometimes by a kind of jocular civility term him “the local king” or “king here,” whereas the rightful possessor is styled “the king there,” *i.e.* in England, upon the spot.

This person, who is known in Europe by the title of the Chevalier de Saint George, has an annual income of twelve thousand *seudi* or crowns from the Pope’s treasury, and though the clandestine remittances of his adherents in England may amount to as much more, it falls very short of what is required to keep up the state of one who sets up for a king, and expects to be treated as such. He was in hopes of a vast fortune with the Princess Sobieski<sup>2</sup>, her father Prince James<sup>3</sup> being unable to raise the money; and though, in order to bring about the conclusion of both matches, he sent an agent to Paris to dispose of some assignments which he had on the French post office and salt duties. Yet the regent was so much in the interest of King George<sup>4</sup> that all such proposals came to nothing, so the agent left Paris without effecting anything. This disappointment, it is said, occasioned the necessity of assigning the second daughter a portion out of the Sobieski estate, which was not a little encumbered before. This marriage was the work of the court of Rome; and though possibly the Empress dowager Eleonora<sup>5</sup> might have been assisting in it, the Emperor<sup>6</sup> knew nothing of the matter. Princess Clementina’s relations were so elevated with this marriage that they made no secret of it; so that the British minister at Vienna had time to prevail with the imperial court to stop her in passing through Tyrol. How she made her escape out of custody is not unknown to you; and the Pretender had a medal struck on this occasion, by Hamerani<sup>7</sup>, the Pope’s medalist.

He generally appears abroad with three coaches; and his household consists of about forty persons. He lately assumed some authority at the opera by calling *encore* when a song that pleased him, and some others, was performed. It was not, however, till after a considerable pause that his order was complied with. This is the only time that ever he has been known to affect the least power; and this instance of compliance is no more than what the claps of half a dozen of the spectators will at any time procure. At his coming into an assembly, no English Protestant rises up; and even the Roman Catholics pay him their complements in a very superficial manner. It is certain that his pusillanimity, and the licentiousness of his amours, have certainly lessened him in everybody’s esteem.

His lady is too pale and thin to be reckoned a handsome woman. Her frequent miscarriages have brought her very low, so that she seldom stirs abroad, unless it be to visit a convent out of devotion. She allows her servants no gold nor silver lace on their liveries, and this proceeds from what is called her piety. But it may be presumed this is owing partly to her ill state of health and partly to the jealousy, inconstancy, and other ill qualities of her husband; and one of these provocations affected her so much that she withdrew for some time into a convent, whilst the Pretender, in order to be more at liberty to pursue his amours, went away to Bologna; but the Pope disapproved of these separate households and, in order to induce him to return to Rome and be reconciled to

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<sup>1</sup> James Francis Edward Stuart (1688–1766), *The Old Pretender*

<sup>2</sup> Maria Clementina Sobieska, (1702–1735); she married the Old Pretender on 3 September 1719 in Italy.

<sup>3</sup> James Louis Henry Sobieski, (1667–1737), son of King John III Sobieski of Poland.

<sup>4</sup> George II (1683–1760), King of Great Britain (1727–1760)

<sup>5</sup> Eleonore-Magdalena (1655–1720), wife of Leopold I (1640–1705), Holy Roman Emperor (1658–1705)

<sup>6</sup> Charles VI (1685–1740), Holy Roman Emperor (1711–1740)

<sup>7</sup> Goivanni Martino Hamerani (1649–1705)

his lady, discontinued his pension. This, however, is but an outward reconciliation, as he still continues to pursue those vices which occasioned the difference; and she knows him too well even to entertain a cordial affection for him again. Mr. S<sup>1</sup>, who pretends to be an antiquarian and bears the title of a Polish councilor of state, narrowly watches the steps of the Pretender and his adherents and holds a correspondence with the British ministry. Whilst the Pretender resided at Bologna, Mr. S<sup>1</sup> had little news to send; and being himself no longer necessary, his remittances were likely to be withdrawn till the Pretender's return gave him an opportunity of continuing his services.

Interest and necessity were the motives which brought the Pretender back to Rome; this gave rise to an observation that no stricter friendship could be imagined than that betwixt the Pretender and Mr. S<sup>1</sup>, the one not being able to live without the other. The King of Great Britain, though at such a distance, is not a little dreaded at Rome on account of his long arms, as the Italians call the powerful fleets which he can send into the Mediterranean. Mr. S<sup>1</sup> is a man of a good presence, and has made himself considerable by affecting whatever. Some years since, his chariot happened in the night to run against that of a lady with a numerous retinue, one of whom leaped down and gave S<sup>1</sup>'s coachman several blows with his cane; but S<sup>1</sup> in the meantime called to his servant not to strike again. The next day he went to Falconieri<sup>2</sup>, Governor of Rome, to demand satisfaction, or else he threatened to find out the offender and take his own revenge. The Governor made several proposals for mitigating or dropping the affair, but to no purpose. Mr. S<sup>1</sup> insisted upon the offender's being publicly whipped; upon which Falconieri, with some warmth, asked him why he had not run the fellow through the body without more ado; that all the loss would then have been of a worthless scoundrel, which would have saved him a great deal of fatigue and vexation. It cost the Pope three hundred *scudi*, or crowns, before the offender could be found out, who was sent to the galleys for five years, which is the punishment for assaulting a foreign minister's servant.

The Pope, as a temporal prince, has no small influence on the affairs of Italy, with which the tranquility of Europe is also connected; and sometimes it happens that he finds it necessary to treat with the British court. This cannot be done but through a third hand, which used to be the Cardinal for the Imperial Affairs at Rome; but since the misunderstanding betwixt the courts of London and Vienna, the Cardinal-Protector of France has been the instrument.

A few days before the demise of Pope Benedict XIII<sup>3</sup> I saw a letter from Cardinal Polignac<sup>4</sup>, written with his own hand, to Mr. S<sup>1</sup>, earnestly desiring him to prevent a certain affair from coming to extremities, and allow a little time for the College of Cardinals, who were entirely disposed to do the English gentlemen justice. This related to Mr. St<sup>5</sup>, brother to the Earl of Ch<sup>6</sup>, who had been affronted in the person of one of his domestics. At the breaking up of the opera, a cardinal's servant called out to make room, for his master was coming, which civility and the privileges of that order, indeed, require. But it now happened that the cardinal's coach was empty, and a great way behind; whereas Mr. St<sup>5</sup>'s chariot was already before the door, and he going to step into it. His servant made some remonstrances to the officer, who was for driving back the crowd, and only desired leave for his master (whose name indeed he did not mention) to pass; but all the notice the officer took of the servant's request was to hit him over the head with his cane. Mr. St<sup>5</sup> required that the officer should be turned out of his place, which would have been no easy matter as he was a relation of Cardinal Coscia<sup>7</sup>. In the meantime, the officer took care of himself; and whether on account of a pretended sickness or that his apprehensions had brought any disorder upon him, he kept close at home. But the vacancy of the papal chair, which happened so soon after, having put a period to the offender's office, as it did to Cardinal Coscia's sway,

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<sup>1</sup> Philip, Baron von Stosch (1691–1757)

<sup>2</sup> Alessandro Falconieri (1657–1734), Governor of Rome (1717–1724) and Cardinal (1724–1734)

<sup>3</sup> Benedict XIII (1649–1730), Pope (1724–1730)

<sup>4</sup> Melchior de Polignac (1661–1741), Cardinal (1713–1741)

<sup>5</sup> William Stanhope of Ascot (1702–1772) *or* John Stanhope (1704–1748) *or* Charles Stanhope (1708–1736)

<sup>6</sup> Philip Dormer Stanhope (1694–1773), Earl of Chesterfield (1726–1773)

<sup>7</sup> Niccolò Paolo Andrea Coscia (1681–1755), Cardinal (1725–1731, 1742–1755), *de facto* governor of the Papal States (1724–1730)

the affair may possibly terminate here. On these occasions the commonality never fail to side with foreigners, and always see with concern and resentment any indignity offered to those who spend their money so freely, and whose resort hither is of so great advantage to trade in general.

I am inclined to think that Mr. S— sometimes undertakes matters without waiting for instructions; however, he never fails of carrying his point. A few years ago Cardinal Alberoni<sup>1</sup>, to save the Pretender's charges, proposed that the palace Alla Lunghara, belonging to the Pope, should be assigned him for his residence. This house lies as it were in the suburbs, and in a private place. It has also a large garden, from whence there was a passage through the city-walls, so that the Pretender's followers might have visited him with more convenience and privacy, and he himself be a long time absent, without its being known in Rome.

Mr. S— soon had notice of this overture and, without waiting for instructions, delivered in a memorial to the papal ministry showing that the King of England would not be pleased with this alteration, and that possibly it might prompt him to insist on the Pretender's quitting the ecclesiastic state; for his stay had hitherto been connived at as being in a place where he was exposed to public view, and proper notice taken of all his proceedings. To this the Pope's Prime Minister returned a verbal answer that he was not a little surprised that laws should be prescribed to the Pope in his own dominions; that a foreigner, without any public character, should brave the papal power; and lastly added, with a sneer, that the Pretender's enemies were for having him live in Rome as a genteel place of custody, yet without paying any fees for guarding him; alluding to the smallness of the subsidies from England, which he said were found so sweet that few made any scruple of receiving them, though the wages of heretics.

To this Mr. S— replied that he was neither for braving nor prescribing laws, but spoke his mind with a good intention, as he believed it both the Pope's inclination and interest to be upon good terms with the King of England, and not involve himself in troubles; that if the Pope could do any effectual detriment to the Protestant government in England, whether openly or underhand, it was well known he would do it. But how far England could carry its resentment, when it purposes to retaliate evil for evil, is as yet unknown; and possibly it were best for the Pope never to give any occasion to cause him to experience it. The effect of this remonstrance was that the Pretender's removal to another palace was postponed, and Alberoni had the mortification of being charged with a message to the Pretender to signify the change of the Pope's mind. Upon this a stop was put to the dispositions already begun at the palace of Lunghara. The Pretender having represented that the removal was the more necessary, as his former dwelling was too small for the number of domestics which the increase of his family obliged him to keep, this difficulty was removed by building an additional wing to his house. Mr. S— has certainly been of considerable service to the English court by his vigilance in observing the conduct of the English and Scotch gentlemen with regard to the Pretender.

As to his skill in the Greek and Latin antiquities, he is in such reputation at Rome that in all things of that kind, as when the explanation of an ancient medal or intaglio is to be determined, his judgment is generally appealed to. This also gives him many opportunities of disposing of antiques at a much higher price than they cost him. His apartment is not the neatest I have seen. His constant companion in it, some time since, was a young wild boar, but having presented this to an English gentleman, it has been succeeded by several owls. Upon my asking him, how he could bear to have creatures, which necessarily caused so much nastiness about him, his answer was that being frequently inclined to hypochondriac disorders, the sight of these birds, still more dull and saturnine than their master, brought him into good temper again. I have been assured that a medal has been struck for him, with his bust on one side and on the reverse, Diogenes in a cask. Before him stands a dog and behind him, on a tree, a raven or an owl. A pasquinade, reflecting upon him, was lately dispersed in which the owls were said to be his only deities; but these censures affect him so little that he sent a copy of the pasquinade to England as doing him honour by showing how much he is both feared and hated at Rome, as a continual obstacle to the schemes of the Pretender and his adherents.

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<sup>1</sup> Giulio Alberoni (1664–1752), Prime Minister of Spain (1715–1719), Cardinal (1717–1752)

You are not a stranger, Sir, to the strong suspicion which the Earl of P-h's<sup>1</sup> long stay in Italy occasioned there, still at last they came to imagine that his design was to carry off the Pretender. Whatever may have been the earl of P-h's conduct when general in Spain, it is certain that in the latter part of his life he did not show himself fit to be entrusted with important commissions. He had at that time a commission as *legatus ad mone gentes*; *i.e.* "Ambassador to all nations," which, besides a salary of ten pounds sterling *per diem*, at least served for a good passport. The sole view of the British ministry seems to have been only to keep him abroad, as he was of a turbulent spirit, continually forming new projects, and was as impetuous as he was fickle. In the year 1711, being in company at Frankfort-on-Main, where the discourse turned upon the greatest pleasure which a man could enjoy, this lord said there was no greater pleasure than to draw one's sword against one's sovereign, adding that in the year 1688 he had made a voyage from America to England purely for that satisfaction. He once said to the young prince of Piedmont<sup>2</sup>, who died in 1715, that after such and such deaths, the prince would come to be King of England. To which the young prince innocently made answer that he must not be King of England. "Why so, my prince?" replied the Earl. To which the prince answered, "because the English make nothing of taking off the heads of their kings." The prince's grandmother, who was present at this conversation, asked my lord if he well understood what the prince had said? But he, who was otherwise of a ready wit, was here at a loss for an answer.

John George Keyser, *Travels Through Germany, Bohemia, Hungary, Switzerland, Italy, and Lorrain* (1757), II:148–153.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Mordaunt (1658–1735), Earl of Peterborough (1697–1735)

<sup>2</sup> Victor Amadeus (1699–1715), grandson of Henrietta Anne Stuart (youngest sister of the Pretender)