

LAW 24

PLAY THE PERFECT COURTIER

JUDGMENT

The perfect courtier thrives in a world where everything revolves around power and political dexterity. He has mastered the art of indirection; he flatters, yields to superiors, and asserts power over others in the most oblique and graceful manner. Learn and apply the laws of courtiership and there will be no limit to how far you can rise in the court.

COURT SOCIETY

It is a fact of human nature that the structure of a court society forms itself around power. In the past, the court gathered around the ruler, and had many functions: Besides keeping the ruler amused, it was a way to solidify the hierarchy of royalty, nobility, and the upper classes, and to keep the nobility both subordinate and close to the ruler, so that he could keep an eye on them. The court serves power in many ways, but most of all it glorifies the ruler, providing him with a microcosmic world that must struggle to please him.

To be a courtier was a dangerous game. A nineteenth-century Arab traveler to the court of Darfur, in what is now Sudan, reported that courtiers there had to do whatever the sultan did: If he were injured, they had to suffer the same injury; if he fell off his horse during a hunt, they fell, too. Mimicry like this appeared in courts all over the world. More troublesome was the danger of displeasing the ruler—one wrong move spelled death or exile. The successful courtier had to walk a tightrope, pleasing but not pleasing too much, obeying but somehow distinguishing himself from the other courtiers, while also never distinguishing himself so far as to make the ruler insecure.

Great courtiers throughout history have mastered the science of manipulating people. They make the king feel more kingly; they make everyone else fear their power. They are magicians of appearance, knowing that most things at court are judged by how they seem. Great courtiers are gracious and polite; their aggression is veiled and indirect. Masters of the word, they never say more than necessary, getting the most out of a compliment or hidden insult. They are magnets of pleasure—people want to be around them because they know how to please, yet they neither fawn nor humiliate themselves. Great courtiers become the king's favorites, enjoying the benefits of that position. They often end up more powerful than the ruler, for they are wizards in the accumulation of influence.

Many today dismiss court life as a relic of the past, a historical curiosity. They reason, according to Machiavelli, "as though heaven, the sun, the elements, and men had changed the order of their motions and power, and

were different from what they were in ancient times.” There may be no more Sun Kings but there are still plenty of people who believe the sun revolves around them. The royal court may have more or less disappeared, or at least lost its power, but courts and courtiers still exist because power still exists. A courtier is rarely asked to fall off a horse anymore, but the laws that govern court politics are as timeless as the laws of power. There is much to be learned, then, from great courtiers past and present.

THE TWO DOGS

Barbos, the faithful yard-dog who serves his master zealously, happens to see his old acquaintance Joujou, the curly lapdog, seated at the window on a soft down cushion. Sidling fondly up to her, like a child to a parent, he all but weeps with emotion; and there, under the window, he whines, wags his tail, and bounds about. “What sort of life do you lead now, Joujoutka, ever since the master took you into his mansion? You remember, no doubt, how we often used to suffer hunger out in the yard. What is your present service like?” “It would be a sin in me to murmur against my good fortune, ” answers Joujoutka. “My master cannot make enough of me. I live amidst riches and plenty, and I eat and drink off silver. I frolic with the master, and, if I get tired, I take my ease on carpets or on a soft couch. And how do you get on?” “I?” replies Barbos, letting his tail dangle like a whip, and hanging his head. “I live as I used to do. I suffer from cold and hunger; and here, while guarding my master’s house, I have to sleep at the foot of the wall, and I get drenched in the rain. And if I bark at the wrong time, I am whipped. But how did you, Joujou, who were so small and weak, get taken into favor, while I jump out of my skin to no purpose? What is it you do?” ““What is it you do?’ A pretty question to ask!” replied Joujou, mockingly. “I walk upon my hind legs.”

FABLES, IVAN KRILLOFF, 1768-1844

THE LAWS OF COURT POLITICS

Avoid Ostentation. It is never prudent to prattle on about yourself or call too much attention to your actions. The more you talk about your deeds the more suspicion you cause. You also stir up enough envy among your peers to induce treachery and backstabbing. Be careful, ever so careful, in trumpeting your own achievements, and always talk less about yourself than about other people. Modesty is generally preferable.

Practice Nonchalance. Never seem to be working too hard. Your talent must appear to flow naturally, with an ease that makes people take you for a genius rather than a workaholic. Even when something demands a lot of sweat, make it look effortless—people prefer to not see your blood and toil, which is another form of ostentation. It is better for them to marvel at how gracefully you have achieved your accomplishment than to wonder why it took so much work.

Be Frugal with Flattery. It may seem that your superiors cannot get enough flattery, but too much of even a good thing loses its value. It also stirs up suspicion among your peers. Learn to flatter indirectly—by downplaying your own contribution, for example, to make your master look better.

It is a wise thing to be polite; consequently, it is a stupid thing to be rude. To make enemies by unnecessary and wilful incivility, is just as insane a proceeding as to set your house on fire. For politeness is like a counter—an avowedly false coin, with which it is foolish to be stingy. A sensible man will be generous in the use of it... Wax, a substance naturally hard and brittle, can be made soft by the application of a little warmth, so that it will take any shape you please. In the same way, by being polite and friendly, you can make people pliable and obliging, even though they are apt to be crabbed and malevolent. Hence politeness is to human nature what warmth is to wax.

ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER, 1788-1860

Arrange to Be Noticed. There is a paradox: You cannot display yourself too brazenly, yet you must also get yourself noticed. In the court of Louis XIV, whoever the king decided to look at rose instantly in the court hierarchy. You stand no chance of rising if the ruler does not notice you in the swamp of courtiers. This task requires much art. It is often initially a matter of being seen, in the literal sense. Pay attention to your physical appearance, then, and find a way to create a distinctive—a *subtly* distinctive—style and image.

Alter Your Style and Language According to the Person You Are Dealing With. The pseudo-belief in equality—the idea that talking and acting the same way with everyone, no matter what their rank, makes you somehow a paragon of civilization—is a terrible mistake. Those below you will take it as a form of condescension, which it is, and those above you will be offended, although they may not admit it. You must change your style and your way of speaking to suit each person. This is not lying, it is acting, and acting is an art, not a gift from God. Learn the art. This is also true for the great variety of cultures found in the modern court: Never assume that your criteria of behavior and judgment are universal. Not only is an inability to adapt to another culture the height of barbarism, it puts you at a disadvantage.

Never Be the Bearer of Bad News. The king kills the messenger who brings bad news: This is a cliché but there is truth to it. You must struggle and if necessary lie and cheat to be sure that the lot of the bearer of bad news falls on a colleague, never on you. Bring only good news and your approach will gladden your master.

Never Affect Friendliness and Intimacy with Your Master. He does not want a friend for a subordinate, he wants a subordinate. Never approach him in an easy, friendly way, or act as if you are on the best of terms—that is *his* prerogative. If *he* chooses to deal with you on this level, assume a wary chumminess. Otherwise err in the opposite direction, and make the distance between you clear.

Never Criticize Those Above You Directly. This may seem obvious, but there are often times when some sort of criticism is necessary—to say nothing, or to give no advice, would open you to risks of another sort. You must learn, however, to couch your advice and criticism as indirectly and as politely as possible. Think twice, or three times, before deciding you have made them sufficiently circuitous. Err on the side of subtlety and gentleness.

Be Frugal in Asking Those Above You for Favors. Nothing irritates a master more than having to reject someone's request. It stirs up guilt and resentment. Ask for favors as rarely as possible, and know when to stop. Rather than making yourself the supplicant, it is always better to earn your favors, so that the ruler bestows them willingly. Most important: Do not ask for favors on another person's behalf, least of all a friend's.

Never Joke About Appearances or Taste. A lively wit and a humorous disposition are essential qualities for a good courtier, and there are times when vulgarity is appropriate and engaging. But avoid any kind of joke about appearance or taste, two highly sensitive areas, especially with those above you. Do not even try it when you are away from them. You will dig your own grave.

Do Not Be the Court Cynic. Express admiration for the good work of others. If you constantly criticize your equals or subordinates some of that criticism will rub off on you, hovering over you like a gray cloud wherever you go. People will groan at each new cynical comment, and you will irritate them. By expressing modest admiration for other people's achievements, you paradoxically call attention to your own. The ability to express wonder and amazement, and seem like you mean it, is a rare and dying talent, but one still greatly valued.

Be Self-observant. The mirror is a miraculous invention; without it you would commit great sins against beauty and decorum. You also need a mirror for your actions. This can sometimes come from other people telling you what they see in you, but that is not the most trustworthy method: You

must be the mirror, training your mind to try to see yourself as others see you. Are you acting too obsequious? Are you trying too hard to please? Do you seem desperate for attention, giving the impression that you are on the decline? Be observant about yourself and you will avoid a mountain of blunders.

Master Your Emotions. As an actor in a great play, you must learn to cry and laugh on command and when it is appropriate. You must be able both to disguise your anger and frustration and to fake your contentment and agreement. You must be the master of your own face. Call it lying if you like; but if you prefer to not play the game and to always be honest and upfront, do not complain when others call you obnoxious and arrogant.

Fit the Spirit of the Times. A slight affectation of a past era can be charming, as long as you choose a period at least twenty years back; wearing the fashions of ten years ago is ludicrous, unless you enjoy the role of court jester. Your spirit and way of thinking must keep up with the times, even if the times offend your sensibilities. Be too forward-thinking, however, and no one will understand you. It is never a good idea to stand out too much in this area; you are best off at least being able to mimic the spirit of the times.

Be a Source of Pleasure. This is critical. It is an obvious law of human nature that we will flee what is unpleasant and distasteful, while charm and the promise of delight will draw us like moths to a flame. Make yourself the flame and you will rise to the top. Since life is otherwise so full of unpleasantness and pleasure so scarce, you will be as indispensable as food and drink. This may seem obvious, but what is obvious is often ignored or unappreciated. There are degrees to this: Not everyone can play the role of favorite, for not everyone is blessed with charm and wit. But we can all control our unpleasant qualities and obscure them when necessary.

A man who knows the court is master of his gestures, of his eyes and of his face; he is profound, impenetrable; he dissimulates bad offices, smiles at his enemies, controls his irritation, disguises his passions, belies his heart, speaks and acts against his feelings.

Jean de La Bruyère, 1645-1696

SCENES OF COURT LIFE: Exemplary Deeds and Fatal Mistakes

Scene I

Alexander the Great, conqueror of the Mediterranean basin and the Middle East through to India, had had the great Aristotle as his tutor and mentor, and throughout his short life he remained devoted to philosophy and his master's teachings. He once complained to Aristotle that during his long campaigns he had no one with whom he could discuss philosophical matters. Aristotle responded by suggesting that he take Callisthenes, a former pupil of Aristotle's and a promising philosopher in his own right, along on the next campaign.

Aristotle had schooled Callisthenes in the skills of being a courtier, but the young man secretly scoffed at them. He believed in pure philosophy, in unadorned words, in speaking the naked truth. If Alexander loved learning so much, Callisthenes thought, he could not object to one who spoke his mind. During one of Alexander's major campaigns, Callisthenes spoke his mind one too many times and Alexander had him put to death.

Interpretation

In court, honesty is a fool's game. Never be so self-absorbed as to believe that the master is interested in your criticisms of him, no matter how accurate they are.

Scene II

Beginning in the Han Dynasty two thousand years ago, Chinese scholars compiled a series of writings called the *21 Histories*, an official biography of each dynasty, including stories, statistics, census figures, and war chronicles. Each history also contained a chapter called “Unusual Events,” and here, among the listings of earthquakes and floods, there would sometimes suddenly appear descriptions of such bizarre manifestations as two-headed sheep, geese flying backward, stars suddenly appearing in different parts of the sky, and so on. The earthquakes could be historically verified, but the monsters and weird natural phenomena were clearly inserted on purpose, and invariably occurred in clusters. What could this mean?

The Chinese emperor was considered more than a man—he was a force of nature. His kingdom was the center of the universe, and everything revolved around him. He embodied the world’s perfection. To criticize him or any of his actions would have been to criticize the divine order. No minister or courtier dared approach the emperor with even the slightest cautionary word. But emperors were fallible and the kingdom suffered greatly by their mistakes. Inserting sightings of strange phenomena into the court chronicles was the only way to warn them. The emperor would read of geese flying backward and moons out of orbit, and realize that he was being cautioned. His actions were unbalancing the universe and needed to change.

Interpretation

For Chinese courtiers, the problem of how to give the emperor advice was an important issue. Over the years, thousands of them had died trying to warn or counsel their master. To be made safely, their criticisms had to be indirect—yet if they were *too* indirect they would not be heeded. The chronicles were their solution: Identify no one person as the source of criticism, make the advice as impersonal as possible, but let the emperor know the gravity of the situation.

Your master is no longer the center of the universe, but he still imagines that everything revolves around him. When you criticize him he sees the person criticizing, not the criticism itself. Like the Chinese courtiers, you must find a way to disappear behind the warning. Use symbols and other indirect methods to paint a picture of the problems to come, without putting your neck on the line.

Scene III

Early in his career, the French architect Jules Mansart received commissions to design minor additions to Versailles for King Louis XIV. For each design he would draw up his plans, making sure they followed Louis's instructions closely. He would then present them to His Majesty.

The courtier Saint-Simon described Mansart's technique in dealing with the king: "His particular skill was to show the king plans that purposely included something imperfect about them, often dealing with the gardens, which were not Mansart's specialty. The king, as Mansart expected, would put his finger exactly on the problem and propose how to solve it, at which point Mansart would exclaim for all to hear that he would never have seen the problem that the king had so masterfully found and solved; he would burst with admiration, confessing that next to the king he was but a lowly pupil." At the age of thirty, having used these methods time and time again, Mansart received a prestigious royal commission: Although he was less talented and experienced than a number of other French designers, he was to take charge of the enlargement of Versailles. He was the king's architect from then on.

Interpretation

As a young man, Mansart had seen how many royal craftsmen in the service of Louis XIV had lost their positions not through a lack of talent but through a costly social blunder. He would not make that mistake. Mansart always strove to make Louis feel better about himself, to feed the king's vanity as publicly as possible.

Never imagine that skill and talent are all that matter. In court the courtier's art is more important than his talent; never spend so much time on your studies that you neglect your social skills. And the greatest skill of all is the ability to make the master look more talented than those around him.

Scene IV

Jean-Baptiste Isabey had become the unofficial painter of the Napoleonic court. During the Congress of Vienna in 1814, after Napoleon, defeated, had been imprisoned on the island of Elba, the participants in these meetings, which were to decide the fate of Europe, invited Isabey to immortalize the historic events in an epic painting.

When Isabey arrived in Vienna, Talleyrand, the main negotiator for the French, paid the artist a visit. Considering his role in the proceedings, the statesman explained, he expected to occupy center stage in the painting. Isabey cordially agreed. A few days later the Duke of Wellington, the main negotiator for the English, also approached Isabey, and said much the same thing that Talleyrand had. The ever polite Isabey agreed that the great duke should indeed be the center of attention.

Back in his studio, Isabey pondered the dilemma. If he gave the spotlight to either of the two men, he could create a diplomatic rift, stirring up all sorts of resentment at a time when peace and concord were critical. When the painting was finally unveiled, however, both Talleyrand and Wellington felt honored and satisfied. The work depicts a large hall filled with diplomats and politicians from all over Europe. On one side the Duke of Wellington enters the room, and all eyes are turned toward him; he is the “center” of attention. In the very center of the painting, meanwhile, sits Talleyrand.

Interpretation

It is often very difficult to satisfy the master, but to satisfy two masters in one stroke takes the genius of a great courtier. Such predicaments are common in the life of a courtier: By giving attention to one master, he displeases another. You must find a way to navigate this Scylla and Charybdis safely. Masters must receive their due; never inadvertently stir up the resentment of one in pleasing another.

Scene V

George Brummell, also known as Beau Brummell, made his mark in the late 1700s by the supreme elegance of his appearance, his popularization of shoe buckles (soon imitated by all the dandies), and his clever way with words. His London house was *the* fashionable spot in town, and Brummell was the authority on all matters of fashion. If he disliked your footwear, you immediately got rid of it and bought whatever *he* was wearing. He perfected the art of tying a cravat; Lord Byron was said to spend many a night in front of the mirror trying to figure out the secret behind Brummell's perfect knots.

One of Brummell's greatest admirers was the Prince of Wales, who fancied himself a fashionable young man. Becoming attached to the prince's court (and provided with a royal pension), Brummell was soon so sure of his own authority there that he took to joking about the prince's weight, referring to his host as Big Ben. Since trimness of figure was an important quality for a dandy, this was a withering criticism. At dinner once, when the service was slow, Brummell said to the prince, "Do ring, Big Ben." The prince rang, but when the valet arrived he ordered the man to show Brummell the door and never admit him again.

Despite falling into the prince's disfavor, Brummell continued to treat everyone around him with the same arrogance. Without the Prince of Wales' patronage to support him, he sank into horrible debt, but he maintained his insolent manners, and everyone soon abandoned him. He died in the most pitiable poverty, alone and deranged.

Interpretation

Beau Brummell's devastating wit was one of the qualities that endeared him to the Prince of Wales. But not even he, the arbiter of taste and fashion, could get away with a joke about the prince's appearance, least of all to his face. Never joke about a person's plumpness, even indirectly—and particularly when he is your master. The poorhouses of history are filled with people who have made such jokes at their master's expense.

Scene VI

Pope Urban VIII wanted to be remembered for his skills in writing poetry, which unfortunately were mediocre at best. In 1629 Duke Francesco d'Este, knowing the pope's literary pretensions, sent the poet Fulvio Testi as his ambassador to the Vatican. One of Testi's letters to the duke reveals why he was chosen: "Once our discussion was over, I kneeled to depart, but His Holiness made a signal and walked to another room where he sleeps, and after reaching a small table, he grabbed a bundle of papers and thus, turning to me with a smiling face, he said: 'We want Your Lordship to listen to some of our compositions.' And, in fact, he read me two very long Pindaric poems, one in praise of the most holy Virgin, and the other one about Countess Matilde."

We do not know exactly what Testi thought of these very long poems, since it would have been dangerous for him to state his opinion freely, even in a letter. But he went on to write, "I, following the mood, commented on each line with the needed praise, and, after having kissed His Holiness's foot for such an unusual sign of benevolence [the reading of the poetry], I left." Weeks later, when the duke himself visited the pope, he managed to recite entire verses of the pope's poetry and praised it enough to make the pope "so jubilant he seemed to lose his mind." Interpretation
In matters of taste you can never be too obsequious with your master. Taste is one of the ego's prickliest parts; never impugn or question the master's taste—his poetry is sublime, his dress impeccable, and his manner the model for all.

Scene VII

One afternoon in ancient China, Chao, ruler of Han from 358 to 333 B.C., got drunk and fell asleep in the palace gardens. The court crown-keeper, whose sole task was to look after the ruler's head apparel, passed through the gardens and saw his master sleeping without a coat. Since it was getting cold, the crown-keeper placed his own coat over the ruler, and left.

When Chao awoke and saw the coat upon him, he asked his attendants, "Who put more clothes on my body?" "The crown-keeper," they replied. The ruler immediately called for his official coat-keeper and had him punished for neglecting his duties. He also called for the crown-keeper, whom he had beheaded.

Interpretation

Do not overstep your bounds. Do what you are assigned to do, to the best of your abilities, and never do more. To think that by doing more you are doing better is a common blunder. It is never good to seem to be trying too hard—it is as if you were covering up some deficiency. Fulfilling a task that has not been asked of you just makes people suspicious. If you are a crown-keeper, be a crown-keeper. Save your excess energy for when you are not in the court.

Scene VIII

One day, for amusement, the Italian Renaissance painter Fra Filippo Lippi (1406-1469) and some friends went sailing in a small boat off Ancona. There they were captured by two Moorish galleys, which hauled them off in chains to Barbary, where they were sold as slaves. For eighteen long months Filippo toiled with no hope of returning to Italy.

On several occasions Filippo saw the man who had bought him pass by, and one day he decided to sketch this man's portrait, using burnt coal—charcoal—from the fire. Still in his chains, he found a white wall, where he drew a full-length likeness of his owner in Moorish clothing. The owner soon heard about this, for no one had seen such skill in drawing before in these parts; it seemed like a miracle, a gift from God. The drawing so pleased the owner that he instantly gave Filippo his freedom and employed him in his court. All the big men on the Barbary coast came to see the magnificent color portraits that Fra Filippo then proceeded to do, and finally, in gratitude for the honor in this way brought upon him, Filippo's owner returned the artist safely to Italy.

Interpretation

We who toil for other people have all in some way been captured by pirates and sold into slavery. But like Fra Filippo (if to a lesser degree), most of us possess some gift, some talent, an ability to do something better than other people. Make your master a gift of your talents and you will rise above other courtiers. Let him take the credit if necessary, it will only be temporary: Use him as a stepping stone, a way of displaying your talent and eventually buying your freedom from enslavement.

Scene IX

Alfonso I of Aragon once had a servant who told the king that the night before he had had a dream: Alfonso had given him a gift of weapons, horses, and clothes. Alfonso, a generous, lordly man, decided it would be amusing to make this dream come true, and promptly gave the servant exactly these gifts.

A little while later, the same servant announced to Alfonso that he had had yet another dream, and in this one Alfonso had given him a considerable pile of gold florins. The king smiled and said, “Don’t believe in dreams from now on; they lie.”

Interpretation

In his treatment of the servant's first dream, Alfonso remained in control. By making a dream come true, he claimed a godlike power for himself, if in a mild and humorous way. In the second dream, however, all appearance of magic was gone; this was nothing but an ugly con game on the servant's part. Never ask for too much, then, and know when to stop. It is the master's prerogative to give—to give when he wants and what he wants, and to do so without prompting. Do not give him the chance to reject your requests. Better to win favors by deserving them, so that they are bestowed without your asking.

Scene X

The great English landscape painter J. M. W Turner (1775-1851) was known for his use of color, which he applied with a brilliance and a strange iridescence. The color in his paintings was so striking, in fact, that other artists never wanted his work hung next to theirs: It inevitably made everything around it seem dull.

The painter Sir Thomas Lawrence once had the misfortune of seeing Turner's masterpiece *Cologne* hanging in an exhibition between two works of his own. Lawrence complained bitterly to the gallery owner, who gave him no satisfaction: After all, *someone's* paintings had to hang next to Turner's. But Turner heard of Lawrence's complaint, and before the exhibition opened, he toned down the brilliant golden sky in *Cologne*, making it as dull as the colors in Lawrence's works. A friend of Turner's who saw the painting approached the artist with a horrified look: "What have you done to your picture!" he said. "Well, poor Lawrence was so unhappy," Turner replied, "and it's only lampblack. It'll wash off after the exhibition." Interpretation

Many of a courtier's anxieties have to do with the master, with whom most dangers lie. Yet it is a mistake to imagine that the master is the only one to determine your fate. Your equals and subordinates play integral parts also. A court is a vast stew of resentments, fears, and powerful envy. You have to placate everyone who might someday harm you, deflecting their resentment and envy and diverting their hostility onto other people.

Turner, eminent courtier, knew that his good fortune and fame depended on his fellow painters as well as on his dealers and patrons. How many of the great have been felled by envious colleagues! Better temporarily to dull your brilliance than to suffer the slings and arrows of envy.

Scene XI

Winston Churchill was an amateur artist, and after World War II his paintings became collector's items. The American publisher Henry Luce, in fact, creator of *Time* and *Life* magazines, kept one of Churchill's landscapes hanging in his private office in New York.

On a tour through the United States once, Churchill visited Luce in his office, and the two men looked at the painting together. The publisher remarked, "It's a good picture, but I think it needs something in the foreground—a sheep, perhaps." Much to Luce's horror, Churchill's secretary called the publisher the next day and asked him to have the painting sent to England. Luce did so, mortified that he had perhaps offended the former prime minister. A few days later, however, the painting was shipped back, but slightly altered: a single sheep now grazed peacefully in the foreground.

Interpretation

In stature and fame, Churchill stood head and shoulders above Luce, but Luce was certainly a man of power, so let us imagine a slight equality between them. Still, what did Churchill have to fear from an American publisher? Why bow to the criticism of a dilettante?

A court—in this case the entire world of diplomats and international statesmen, and also of the journalists who court them—is a place of mutual dependence. It is unwise to insult or offend the taste of people of power, even if they are below or equal to you. If a man like Churchill can swallow the criticisms of a man like Luce, he proves himself a courtier without peer. (Perhaps his correction of the painting implied a certain condescension as well, but he did it so subtly that Luce did not perceive any slight.) Imitate Churchill: Put in the sheep. It is always beneficial to play the obliging courtier, even when you are not serving a master.

THE DELICATE GAME OF COURTIERSHIP: A Warning

Talleyrand was the consummate courtier, especially in serving his master Napoleon. When the two men were first getting to know each other, Napoleon once said in passing, "I shall come to lunch at your house one of these days." Talleyrand had a house at Auteuil, in the suburbs of Paris. "I should be delighted, *mon général*," the minister replied, "and since my house is close to the Bois de Boulogne, you will be able to amuse yourself with a bit of shooting in the afternoon."

"I do not like shooting," said Napoleon, "But I love hunting. Are there any boars in the Bois de Boulogne?" Napoleon came from Corsica, where boar hunting was a great sport. By asking if there were boars in a Paris park, he showed himself still a provincial, almost a rube. Talleyrand did not laugh, however, but he could not resist a practical joke on the man who was now his master in politics, although not in blood and nobility, since Talleyrand came from an old aristocratic family. To Napoleon's question, then, he simply replied, "Very few, *mon général*, but I dare say you will manage to find one."

It was arranged that Napoleon would arrive at Talleyrand's house the following day at seven A.M. and would spend the morning there. The "boar hunt" would take place in the afternoon. Throughout the morning the excited general talked nothing but boar hunting. Meanwhile, Talleyrand secretly had his servants go to the market, buy two enormous black pigs, and take them to the great park.

After lunch, the hunters and their hounds set off for the Bois de Boulogne. At a secret signal from Talleyrand, the servants loosed one of the pigs. "I see a boar," Napoleon cried joyfully, jumping onto his horse to give chase. Talleyrand stayed behind. It took half an hour of galloping through the park before the "boar" was finally captured. At the moment of triumph, however, Napoleon was approached by one of his aides, who knew the creature could not possibly be a boar, and feared the general would be ridiculed once the story got out: "Sir," he told Napoleon, "you realize of course that this is not a boar but a pig."

Flying into a rage, Napoleon immediately set off at a gallop for Talleyrand's house. He realized along the way that he would now be the butt of many a joke, and that exploding at Talleyrand would only make him more ridiculous; it would be better to make a show of good humor. Still, he did not hide his displeasure well.

Talleyrand decided to try to soothe the general's bruised ego. He told Napoleon not to go back to Paris yet—he should again go hunting in the park. There were many rabbits there, and hunting them had been a favorite pastime of Louis XVI. Talleyrand even offered to let Napoleon use a set of guns that had once belonged to Louis. With much flattery and cajolery, he once again got Napoleon to agree to a hunt.

The party left for the park in the late afternoon. Along the way, Napoleon told Talleyrand, "I'm not Louis XVI, I surely won't kill even one rabbit." Yet that afternoon, strangely enough, the park was teeming with rabbits. Napoleon killed at least fifty of them, and his mood changed from anger to satisfaction. At the end of his wild shooting spree, however, the same aide approached him and whispered in his ear, "To tell the truth, sir, I am beginning to believe these are not wild rabbits. I suspect that rascal Talleyrand has played another joke on us." (The aide was right: Talleyrand had in fact sent his servants back to the market, where they had purchased dozens of rabbits and then had released them in the Bois de Boulogne.)

Napoleon immediately mounted his horse and galloped away, this time returning straight to Paris. He later threatened Talleyrand, warned him not to tell a soul what had happened; if he became the laughingstock of Paris, there would be hell to pay.

It took months for Napoleon to be able to trust Talleyrand again, and he never totally forgave him his humiliation.

Interpretation

Courtiers are like magicians: They deceptively play with appearances, only letting those around them see what they want them to see. With so much deception and manipulation afoot, it is essential to keep people from seeing your tricks and glimpsing your sleight of hand.

Talleyrand was normally the Grand Wizard of Courtiership, and but for Napoleon's aide, he probably would have gotten away completely with both pleasing his master and having a joke at the general's expense. But courtiership is a subtle art, and overlooked traps and inadvertent mistakes can ruin your best tricks. Never risk being caught in your maneuvers; never let people see your devices. If that happens you instantly pass in people's perceptions from a courtier of great manners to a loathsome rogue. It is a delicate game you play; apply the utmost attention to covering your tracks, and never let your master unmask you.