

# An Audience with the King

Kenneth Halpern

The petitioner had first sought the ear of the king at the tender age of eighteen, though one suspects that this reflected the demands of the law rather than an assessment of expedience. In his mind there had emerged an idea whose brilliance and beauty must be shared with his lord for the benefit of all the land. As was customary, the first dozen solicitations were perfunctorily refused. As years passed the entreaties grew stronger, more urgent. What had started as one idea grew to several, then a multitude. Eventually, a filing system became necessary and much of the man's time was devoted to organization and revision. Rejection no longer hurt him, as it had - viscerally - in the first few years. Rather, it was part of a routine, accepted, anticipated, eagerly awaited. Each refusal constituted an opportunity to improve his planned presentation, expand it, and reconstruct his appeal. With time, he mastered the persuasive arts and his letters grew to be masterpieces of eloquence and vapid rhetoric. For, by necessity he could never divulge the details of his ideas; such wisdom was reserved for the king alone. At each point, he was grateful for past failure; an audience with the king was to be had at most once in a lifetime- and so much more had occurred to him in the interim. Rather, he regretted the youthful folly that had prompted him to prematurely petition. Though as a result he had doubtless already traversed many of the beaurocratic hurdles that impede progress in such affairs, to risk squandering such an opportunity had been unconscionable. However, the danger had passed and he now possessed a certain degree of stoic maturity. He framed speeches and poems, some of adulation, some of recommendation. This was his life and he was content.

Then one day he heard a banging on the door. The man answered the impetuous knocking with a snarl; his work had been interrupted and would take some time to resume. Grumbling, he unlocked the door and

was confronted by a tall man dressed in regal attire and boasting a haughty air. Looking down, the visitor appraised the man's worth with a curt sweep of the eyes and scoffed.

The man bowed and stammered "Are you the king?", realizing the question's absurdity only as it escaped his lips. "No" came the laughing reply, "I am his humblest servant, a mere messenger, yet my distance in station above you is a yawning gulf, vast and forbidding. For some reason, which I cannot fathom" - he snidely began, accompanying his words with a meaningful glance - "your audience with the king has been approved." The messenger presented him with a small sealed envelope, quickly retracting his hand before the man disgraced them both by trying to shake it. "Thank you, thank you" the man shouted after the retreating figure, though doubt already gnawed at his heart.

Trembling, he broke the seal and opened the envelope. Contained within was a small strip of paper commanding him to present himself at the palace two weeks hence at eight o'clock in the evening, after the royal supper. A slow anxiety crept through his body and evolved into the full flush of terror. What would he say? How would he conduct himself? How could a mere commoner converse with the king? Yet he had faith in his work, if not in his person. The king was a man like any other, though elevated in dignity and power. As such, he could be spoken with, reasoned with, even convinced. "But", the man thought, "I must prepare." This was a single opportunity, the culmination of a life's dream, and he would not waste it.

The intervening days were occupied with frenetic preparation. At night there was no time for sleep. By custom no objects could be brought into the sovereign presence, so the man would have to rely solely on his wit and tongue. In addition to his own ideas, analyses, and exigences - a not inconsiderable body unto themselves - vast tomes of ancillary material were committed to memory. Perchance they would be needed to illustrate or refine a point. Perhaps they would even tip the balance in his favor and allow him to prevail upon the king.

When the day arrived, a carriage presented itself at the front door and the man stepped inside. He was disheveled and unshaven, but this

did not concern him, for he focused solely on retaining the monumental body of facts, words, and ideas that filled his being. When he arrived at the palace, he was ushered into a small waiting room. An indeterminate amount of time passed, during which he struggled to remain awake.

A valet kicked him brusquely, startling him awake: "It's your turn!" he barked and commanded the man to rise. Wouldn't he be instructed in proper protocol before entering the august presence? He nearly panicked. The valet, sensing his fear, and either sympathizing or wishing to expedite matters, explained "The king does not stand on formality."

What did those words mean? They alleviated the panic, but answered no questions. He was led into a small ante-chamber containing two guards, ceremonial rather than military, and a chair in which there reclined a robed aristocrat. This was the king. The man wished to avoid a repetition of his earlier faux pas but there could be no mistake this time. He bowed to the floor but was impatiently ordered to rise. "No need for that here" exclaimed the king.

"I, I have so much to tell you" stammered the man, almost choking with emotion. The king smiled, put his arm around him, and led him to a little table. "I know. This is why you are my last interview of the day. I have all evening, and if need be, all night, to hear you out." Then he gazed at the man with an air of genuine interest and warmth. This was majesty. The man thought of all that he had to say and searched for a place to begin, but a weariness crept over him. The king's eyes lulled him to sleep. One of the guards moved as if to roughly awaken him, but the king stayed his hand. "No. Tonight he will sleep in my bed." The man was brought to the great royal bedroom and gently laid in the bed. Though he was unaware of it, the king himself tucked him in. The next morning he was discretely brought home.

The man awoke in his own bed to the horrible realization that he had failed. His one audience had been spent in sleep and he would never have another. Yet he was not distraught. For he understood that he had nothing to say.