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1

Commynes: *The Memoirs*

Philippe de Commines (c. 1447–1511) served as an important adviser and diplomatic envoy to three princes in late medieval France between 1464 and 1498.¹ His first master was Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy. His second was the Duke's bitterest enemy, Louis XI, to whom he deserted in 1472 and over whom initially he had great influence. And his third was Louis' successor, Charles VIII, whom he accompanied on the invasion of Italy in 1494. This was not, however, a seamless progress for, following the death of Louis XI in 1483, Commines became vulnerable to the powerful enemies he had acquired while a favourite of the king. Participation in factional struggle was followed by over two years of imprisonment, upon release from which he was sent – briefly as it turned out – into exile on his estate at Dreux. Indeed, it was not until the beginning of the 1490s that Commines returned to (qualified) favour at the French court and was able to resume his diplomatic career.

Though resident embassies were being used increasingly by the Italian city states in the second half of the fifteenth century, neither France nor the other transalpine powers yet felt the need for them. Commines's experience beyond the court, therefore, was confined to that of the envoy sent on a temporary mission.² But this experience was varied and extensive, and included numerous occasions when he accompanied his masters to meetings with other princes – 'summits', as we now call them.

Commines began to write his memoirs in 1489, during his exile to Dreux. The first part (Books 1–6), which he completed in 1491,³ covers the period 1464–83 and was published in 1524; the second (Books 7–8), written in the three years after his return from Italy, narrated the Italian expeditions of Charles VIII and first appeared in 1528. Many more

editions appeared over the following centuries, among them five English translations.⁴

Commynes is best remembered today by students of diplomacy for his hostility to summitry,⁵ and for insisting that negotiations should be left in the hands of wise and experienced counsellors such as himself. However, he also advised the utmost caution in the reception of ambassadors, especially should they come from hostile courts. The following passages have been chosen chiefly to illustrate these themes.

The translation that I have employed is that of Andrew R. Scoble. This was first published in 1855 and reprinted in 1896.⁶ It is based on the critical edition published by Mlle. E. Dupont for the *Société de l'histoire de France* in 1840–47.⁷ Since Commynes's syntax is sometimes difficult (it is usually assumed that he dictated the text), I have thought it advisable to give pointers to the theme at the beginning of each extract, though this is not a method that I employ in the rest of the book. These pointers are placed in italics. I have also grouped the extracts under two sub-headings of my own: 'Summitry' and 'Ambassadors'. I have included the given chapter titles only where they seem suited to my purpose. Unless footnotes accompanying the main text are followed by '[Ed.]' they belong to Scoble, though I have by no means included all of the ones he provided.

SUMMITRY**BOOK THE FIRST, Chap. IX**

Apart from showing his distaste for summitry, this selection is interesting for revealing the awareness of Commynes of the importance of what today would be known as 'news management'. It comes from his account of the fighting near Paris in 1465 between the forces of the disaffected nobles led by Charles the Bold of Burgundy and those led by Louis XI, who had come to the throne of France in 1461. Charles was known as the Count of Charolois until he formally succeeded as Duke of Burgundy on the death of his father in 1467.

...

There was scarce a day passed, but some artifice or other was made use of to bring over people from one side to the other; and several times there were truces, and conferences between both parties in order to an accommodation, which conferences were held at the Grange-aux-Merciers, not far from our army: As commissioners from the king, there were the Count of Maine and several others. For the princes, the Count of St. Paul, and as many with him. The commissioners met often, but came to no conclusion. Yet the cessation of arms was continued, and several persons on both sides, who were acquainted, saw and conversed with one another, but with a great ditch between them, as it were in the mid-way between two armies, which ditch, by the articles of the truce, no person was to pass. There was not a day passed but, by means of these interviews, some ten or twelve would come over to us; and some days as many of ours went away to them, for which reason that place was afterwards called the Market, because of the bargains driven there. To speak truth, such liberty of communication is, in my judgment, very dangerous at such times, especially for that party which is most visibly declining: for naturally most people are intent, if not upon their advancement, at least upon their safety, which inclines them more easily to the strongest side. There are some, indeed, who are above temptations of this kind, but they are very few, and rarely to be met with. But if ever such communications are dangerous, it is when a prince himself makes it his business to oblige and cajole people; which is an excellent qualification in a prince who knows how to do it well, and renders him clear from that foolish vice and sin of pride and haughtiness, which all persons abhor. For which reason, when any treaty of peace is on foot, it is safest to commit it to the wisest and faithfulest persons about the prince, and those of competent years; lest otherwise, their want of experience betray

them to some dishonourable compact, or they alarm their master with groundless fears at their return. If it be possible, such persons ought to be employed who have received honours or advantages from their princes, rather than any others; but above all, they ought to be men of great wisdom and experience, for nothing ever prospered that was managed by a fool. This kind of treaties ought likewise to be managed at a distance, and not near his camp; and when his plenipotentiaries return, he ought to hear them alone, or in as little company as he can, that if their news should be apt to dishearten the people, he may instruct and dictate what account they shall give to such as are inquisitive; for everybody is desirous to hear news from those that come from a treaty, and many are so conceited as to boast, 'Such an one will hide nothing from me;' but if the plenipotentiaries be such as I have prescribed, and know their masters to be wise, they will discover⁸ nothing to any man.

BOOK THE FIRST, Chap. X A Digression concerning some of the Virtues and Vices of King Louis XI.

In this extract, which concludes a warts-and-all portrait of Louis XI, Commynes reveals his low opinion of princes in general.

It is certainly a great blessing from God upon any prince to have experienced adversity as well as prosperity, good as well as evil, and especially if the good outweighs the evil, as it did in the king our master. I am of opinion that the troubles he was involved in, in his youth, when he fled from his father, and resided six years⁹ together with Philip Duke of Burgundy, were of great service to him; for there he learned to be complaisant¹⁰ to such as he had occasion to use, which was no slight advantage of adversity. As soon as he found himself a powerful and crowned king, his mind was wholly bent upon revenge; but he quickly found the inconvenience of this, repented by degrees of his indiscretion, and made sufficient reparation for his folly and error, by regaining those he had injured, as shall be related hereafter. Besides, I am very confident that if his education had not been different from the usual education of such nobles as I have seen in France, he could not so easily have worked himself out of his troubles; for they are brought up to nothing but to make themselves ridiculous, both in their clothes and discourse; they have no knowledge of letters; no wise man is suffered to come near them, to improve their understandings; they have governors who manage their business, but they do nothing themselves: nay, there are some nobles who, though they have an income of [only] thirteen livres, will take pride to bid you, 'Go to my servants, and let them answer you;'

thinking by such speeches to imitate the state and grandeur of a prince; and I have seen their servants take great advantage of them, giving them to understand they were fools;¹¹ and if afterwards they came to apply their minds to business, and attempted to manage their own affairs, they began so late, they could make nothing of it. And it is certain that all those who have performed any great or memorable action, worthy to be recorded in history, began always in their youth; and this is to be attributed to the method of their education, or some particular blessing from God.

BOOK THE FIRST, Chap. XIII

*This chapter deals with the conclusion of the peace negotiations between Louis XI and the Count of Charolois, which led to the Treaty of Conflans, October 1465. Its theme is that princes taking on peace negotiations themselves are in unnecessary physical danger.*¹²

Having in the preceding chapters enlarged upon the dangers which occur in treaties, and the necessity that princes should prudently, and with circumspection, make choice of such persons as are fit to be employed in the negotiation of such important affairs, especially if they have the worst of the game; I shall now give an account of what it was that induced me to insist upon them so long. . . .

The king . . . resolved to conclude a peace, and immediately signified to the Count of Charolois (who was then with his army) that he desired to have a conference with him, and appointed an hour when he would meet him in the fields near his camp, which was then about Conflans. Exactly at the appointed time the king marched out of Paris with about a hundred horse, most of them his Scottish guards, and very few besides. The Count of Charolois, attended but by a very few, went to the place without further ceremony; yet so many followed after him, that by degrees their number was much superior to the king's; but the count caused them to keep at a distance, while the king and he walked alone together a while. . . .

This discourse of peace was so pleasing both to the king and the Count of Charolois, that (as I have heard him say since), as they were talking friendly together how the remaining difficulties might be adjusted (not regarding their way), they walked on towards Paris; and so far they proceeded, that they were entered into a great bulwark of earth and wood, which the king had caused to be made at a good distance from the town, at the further end of a trench, whose other end led into

the city. The count was attended by only four or five persons, who were all of them extremely surprised when they found where they were. However, the count put the best face on it that he could; but it is probable that at that time neither of those two princes had any design in it, for neither the one nor the other received any prejudice. When the news of the count's being got into one of the enemy's works was brought to the army, there was a great murmur in the camp, and immediately the Count of St. Paul, the Marshal of Burgundy, the Lords of Contay and Haultbourdin, and several other of the chief officers, met together about it, and unanimously agreed that both the Count of Charolois and those that were with him had been guilty of a great piece of indiscretion, especially after the misfortune which had happened to his grandfather¹³ at Montereau-fault-Yonne, in the presence of Charles VII. Hereupon they commanded the soldiers that were strolling up and down in the fields to stand to their arms; and the Marshal of Burgundy (whose surname was Neufchastel), spoke to this effect: 'If this mad hair-brained young prince has cast away himself, let not us ruin his family, his father's interest, or our own. My opinion therefore is, that every man should retire to his quarters, and be ready, without alarming ourselves, for anything that may happen; for, keeping together, we are enough to make our retreat to the frontiers of Hainault, Picardy, or Burgundy, as we please.'

After he had given his opinion in this manner, he and the Count of St. Paul mounted on horse-back, and rode out of the camp, to see if they could descry anybody coming from Paris. After they had waited some time, they perceived a body of forty or fifty horse marching towards them; who were the Count of Charolois, and an escort that the king had sent to guard him to his camp. When the count saw them coming towards him, he dismissed his escort, and addressed himself to the Marshal de Neufchastel, of whom he was most afraid; for, being a true old soldier, and firm to his interest, he took the liberty sometimes of reprimanding him severely, and ventured to tell him, 'Whilst your father lives, I am your servant only by loan.' The first thing the count said to him was, 'I pray be not angry, I am sensible of my great folly, but I perceived it not till I was too near the bulwark to get off.' The marshal replied, 'that it was done in his absence.' The count bowed his head, and gave him no answer, but returned presently to the camp, where he was joyfully received by the whole army, and every one highly extolled the king's honour and generosity; but, for all that, the count never afterwards would trust himself in his power.

BOOK THE FIRST, Chap. XIV Of the Peace that was concluded at Conflans between the King and the Count of Charolois and his Allies – 1465.

This extract shows Commynes emphasizing the corrosive effect of suspicion and how easily it can be aroused when princes, inevitably accompanied by armed followers, engage directly in negotiation.¹⁴

At length all things were accommodated, and the next day the Count of Charolois made a general muster of his whole army, to see what men he had left, and what he had lost. On a sudden, without any warning, the king came thither, attended only by thirty or forty horse, and went from regiment to regiment to take a view of them all, . . . It was resolved, that the next day all the lords should repair to the Castle of Vincennes to do homage to the king, and for their security the Castle of Vincennes should be put into the hands of the Count of Charolois.

The next day, according to agreement, the king came thither, and not one of the princes failed to attend him: the porch and gate were lined and strongly guarded, by a good number of the Burgundian soldiers, in their arms. The treaty of peace was read, and the Lord Charles of France did homage to the king for the duchy of Normandy; the Count of Charolois for the towns he held in Picardy; others for what they held in other places: and the Count of St. Paul took his oath as Constable of France. But there never was so plentiful an entertainment, but somebody rose hungry: some had their utmost ambition gratified, and others got nothing at all: some honest but inferior persons the king took to himself, but the greatest part remained with the Duke of Bretagne and the new Duke of Normandy, who took their leave, and went to Rouen, to take possession of that town. At their departure from the Castle of Vincennes, they all took leave of one another, every man retired to his lodgings, and the letters and pardons, and whatever else was agreed upon by the peace, were signed and despatched. All the princes departed upon the same day; the Dukes of Normandy and Bretagne went first to Normandy, and the Duke of Bretagne afterwards into his own country: the Count of Charolois retired towards Flanders, and, as he was upon his way, the king made him a visit, and conducted him to Villiers-le-Belle¹⁵ (a village some four leagues from Paris), expressing a great desire to maintain a friendship with him; and that night they lay together in the village. The king had but a very small party with him, but he had commanded two hundred men-at-arms to attend him back again, which being told to the Count of Charolois as he was going to bed, he immediately entertained great jealousy and suspicion, and ordered all his

guards that were with him to arm. From whence one may observe, that it is almost impossible for two great princes to agree long, by reason of the reports and suspicions which hourly arise: and indeed two great princes, who are desirous to preserve a more than ordinary friendship, ought never to see one another; but rather employ such honest and wise men between them, as may cultivate their amity and palliate their faults. . . .

BOOK THE SECOND, Chap. VIII A Digression, demonstrating that when two great Princes meet in order to adjust their Differences, such Interviews are generally more prejudicial than profitable.

This is the passage where Commynes draws together most of his arguments against summitry, supporting them with a variety of examples.

It is the highest act of imprudence for two great princes, provided there is any equality in their power, to admit of an interview, unless it be in their youth, when their minds are wholly engaged and taken up with entertainments of mirth and pleasure; but when they are come to years of emulation, though their persons should be in no danger (which is almost impossible), yet their heart-burnings and animosities will certainly augment. It were better, therefore, that they accommodated their differences by the mediation of wise and faithful ministers, as I have sufficiently instanced already in these my Memoirs; however, I will give some examples of the like nature, which I have seen and known myself in my own time.

Not many years after the coronation of our king, and just before the confederacy called the Public Good, there was an interview between the Kings of France and Castile, princes of the nearest alliance in Christendom, for the kings are akin, their kingdoms almost contiguous, and their subjects bound by oaths and execrations to preserve it inviolable. To this interview Henry, King of Castile, came to Fontarabia,¹⁶ very splendidly attended, and the King of France came to St. Jean de Luz (about four leagues' distance), and each of them was upon the very borders of his kingdom. I was not present myself, but I had my relation¹⁷ from the king, and from Monsieur du Lau, and it was confirmed to me afterwards by several persons in Castile, who were then present with their king, and particularly by the Grand Master of St. James,¹⁸ and the Archbishop of Toledo, the two greatest persons in that kingdom at that time. There were present also the Count of Lodesme (that king's favourite) in great splendour, with his guards, consisting of 300 horse, all Moors of Granada, or Negroes. It is true, indeed, that King Henry was a person of no great

sense, for he had either given away all his patrimony, or suffered it to be taken or embezzled by anybody that had a mind to it. Our king was also well attended, according to his custom, and his guards made a glorious appearance. The Queen of Arragon was present at that treaty, upon occasion of a difference between her and the King of Castile about Estella, and some other places in Navarre, of which difference the King of France was made umpire.

To continue our proposition, that interviews of great princes are not necessary, you must know, these two kings had never had any quarrels, neither was there the least difference between them; they saw one another not above once or twice upon the bank of a river (which parts the two kingdoms), near a little castle called Heurtebise, where the King of Castile passed over to the other side; but they staid no longer together than the Grand Master of St. James and the Archbishop of Toledo thought good; which being observed by the King of France, he desired their acquaintance, and they went to wait on him at St. Jean de Luz. His majesty received them very honourably, and a mighty friendship and intelligence was settled between them and the King of France, who immediately began to dislike the King of Castile, and had but little value and esteem for him. The greatest part of their attendants were quartered at Bayonne, between whom several quarrels immediately arose (notwithstanding the alliance); their languages also being different. The Count of Lodesme passed the river in a boat, whose sail was of cloth of gold; he was himself in a pair of buskins set thick with precious stones, in which he went to wait upon the king; though he was not really a count, yet he was very rich, and I saw him afterwards made Duke of Albourg, and invested with great possessions in Castile. Several jests and scoffs happened between these two nations, notwithstanding their alliance. The King of Castile's person was homely, and his dress did not please the French, who laughed at and derided both. Our king wore a short coat, as ill made as was possible; sometimes he wore very coarse cloth, and particularly then; his hat was old, and differing from everybody's else, with an image of lead upon it. The Castilians laughed as heartily at his dress, supposing it his stinginess. In short, the convention broke up, and they parted, but with such scorn and contempt on both sides, that the two kings never loved one another heartily afterwards . . . but to give other examples.

Since that time Charles, Duke of Burgundy, with great labour and solicitation, obtained an interview with the Emperor Frederick¹⁹ (who is still living) and spent vast sums of money to show his grandeur and magnificence: the place of meeting was at Treves,²⁰ where several things

were discoursed of, and among the rest a marriage between their children, which was afterwards accomplished. After they had been several days together, on a sudden the emperor departed without so much as taking his leave, which the Duke of Burgundy looked upon as so great an affront, and it was so generally resented, that there was never afterwards any true love between either themselves or their subjects: the Duke's pompous and lofty manner of speaking (which they imputed to his pride) offended the Germans; and the Emperor's meanness, both in his train and dress, appeared as contemptible to the Burgundians; and so far was this accident extended, that from it alone the wars of Nuz²¹ had their origin.

I was also present at an interview,²² at the town of St. Paul in Artois, between the Duke of Burgundy and Edward IV, King of England, whose sister he had married; and, besides, they were brethren of the same order.²³ They were but two days together, and yet in that small time there was great difference between the king's servants, and both parties recommending their quarrel to the duke, and he deciding it for one of them, their hatred increased. However, he assisted the king in the recovery of his kingdom, with men, money, and ships, for he had been driven out by the Earl of Warwick. Yet, notwithstanding that good office, they never loved nor spoke well of one another after this interview.

I was present likewise when the Count Palatine of the Rhine made a visit²⁴ to the Duke of Burgundy at Brussels, where he staid several days. He was honourably received, nobly entertained, and lodged in an apartment richly furnished. The duke's servants upbraided the Germans for their nastiness and incivility, in laying their dirty clothes and their boots upon those rich beds, and accused them of want of neatness and consideration, and they never liked them afterwards so well as they had done before. The Germans, being as much dissatisfied on the other side, reproached them for their pomp and extravagance; so that, in effect, they never loved nor did any good office for one another afterwards.

I saw also the meeting between the Duke of Burgundy, and Sigismund, Duke of Austria,²⁵ when the latter sold to the Duke of Burgundy the county of Ferrette (which lies not far from the county of Burgundy) for 100,000 florins of gold, as he was unable himself to defend it against the Swiss. These princes also were not well pleased with one another. Afterwards Sigismund made peace with the Swiss, possessed himself again of the county, but never returned his money, from whence great mischiefs resulted to the Duke of Burgundy. At the same time also the Earl of Warwick²⁶ came to visit the Duke of Burgundy, and ever afterwards a mortal hatred continued between them.

I was also at the interview²⁷ at Picquigny (not far from Amiens) between our king and Edward IV, King of England, and shall give a larger account of it in another place; but must observe by-the-by, that scarce any thing was performed that was promised there, but all their whole business was hypocrisy and dissimulation. It is true, they had no wars, because the sea divided them; but there never was any real friendship or good correspondence between them afterwards. To conclude, if great princes have a desire to continue friends, in my judgment they ought never to meet; and my reasons are these: courtiers cannot forbear reflecting upon past actions, and one or other will be sure to take exception;²⁸ neither is it possible to hinder the train and equipage of the one from being finer and more magnificent than the other, which produces mockery, and nothing touches any person more sensibly than to be laughed at. The princes being of different nations, their language and habits are commonly different, and that which pleases one will not please the other; besides, among the princes themselves it often happens, that the presence of the one is more obliging and acceptable, which gains him honour and reputation, and everybody extols him, which cannot be done without reflecting on the other. For some few days after they are parted, all their fine stories and observations are whispered and told privately up and down, but afterwards having told them often, they become less cautious, and by degrees their tales grow to be table-talk, and are at length carried to both parties; for few things (especially of that nature) can be concealed in this world. And these are part of the reasons which I have known and observed touching this matter.

BOOK THE FOURTH, Chap. IX How the King entertained the English in Amiens, and of the Place appointed for the Interview of the two Kings – 1475.

In this and the following extract, Commynes once more shows his sensitivity to the physical dangers of 'summit' encounters and the lengths to which it is advisable to go in order to minimize them. It is drawn from his account of the meeting between Louis XI and Edward IV, King of England from 1461 until 1483. Edward had come to France with an army in June in order to support his ally, Charles the Bold, against Louis. However, under the Treaty of Picquigny of 29 August 1475 Edward agreed to withdraw his troops from France in return for a large cash payment and an annual pension.

...

And then, in order to bring the whole affair to a conclusion, they consulted what place would be most convenient for the interview of the two kings, and persons were appointed to survey it; the Lord du Bouchage and I were chosen to represent our master; and the Lord Howard, one Chalanger, and a herald, represented the King of England. Upon our taking a view of the river, we agreed the best and securest place was Picquigny, a strong castle some three leagues from Amiens, belonging to the Vidame²⁹ of Amiens, which had been burnt not long before by the Duke of Burgundy; the town lies low, the River Somme runs through it, and is not fordable or wide near it. On the one side, by which our king was to come, was a fine champaign country;³⁰ and on the other side it was the same, only when the King of England came to the river, he was obliged to pass a causeway about two bow-shots in length, with marshes on both sides, which might have produced very dangerous consequences to the English, if our intentions had not been honourable. And certainly, as I have said before, the English do not manage their treaties and capitulations with so much cunning and policy as the French do, let people say what they will, but proceed more ingenuously, and with greater straightforwardness in their affairs; yet a man must be cautious, and have a care not to affront them, for it is dangerous meddling with them.

After we had fixed upon the place, our next consultation was about a bridge which was ordered to be built, large and strong, for which purpose we furnished our carpenters with materials. In the midst of the bridge there was contrived a strong wooden lattice, such as the lions' cages are made with, the hole between every bar being no wider than to thrust in a man's arm; the top was covered only with boards to keep off the rain, and the body of it was big enough to contain ten or twelve men of a side, with the bars running across to both sides of the bridge, to hinder any person from passing over it either to the one side or the other; and in the river there was only one little boat rowed by two men, to convey over such as had a mind to cross it.

I will now relate the reason that induced the king to have the place of their interview contrived after such a fashion, that there should be no passage from one side to the other; and perhaps the time may come, when this may be useful to some persons, who may have the same occasion. During the minority of Charles VII the kingdom of France was much infested by the English. Henry V lay before Rouen,³¹ and had straitened it very much, and the greatest part of those in the town were either subjects, or partisans of John, Duke of Burgundy, who was then reigning.

There had been a long and great difference between John, Duke of Burgundy, and the Duke of Orleans, and the whole kingdom, or most of it, was engaged in their quarrel, to the prejudice of the king's affairs; for faction never begins in any country, but it is difficult to extinguish, and dangerous in the end. In this quarrel that I speak of, the Duke of Orleans had been killed in Paris one year before.³² Duke John had a powerful army, and advanced to raise the siege of Rouen; that he might do it with more ease, and assure himself of the king's friendship, it was agreed that the king³³ and he should have an interview at Montereau-Faut-Yonne, where a bridge was erected, with a barrier in the midst, and in the middle of the barrier a little wicket, which was bolted on both sides; by which means, and by the consent of both parties, they might pass to either side. The king came on one side, and Duke John on the other, both attended with a strong party of their guards, but especially Duke John; they met, and had a long conference upon the bridge, and about the duke's person there were not above three or four at the most. In the height of their discourse, the duke (either by the persuasion of others, or out of a desire to pay a more than ordinary respect to his majesty) unbolted the wicket on his side, and it being opened by the others, he passed through it to the king, and was immediately slain,³⁴ himself and all those who attended him; which was the occasion of abundance of mischief that ensued afterwards, as everybody knows: but this is not material to my design, so I shall speak of it no farther, only let me tell you, you have the story just as the king told it me himself, when he sent me to choose a place, commanding expressly that there should be no door; for said he, if that had not been, there had been no means of inviting the duke to the other side, and then that misfortune had been prevented, – the principal contrivers and executors of which were some of the murdered Duke of Orleans' servants, who were present at that time, and had great authority with King Charles VII.

BOOK THE FOURTH, Chap. X Of the Interview between the two Kings, and of their swearing to the Truce which had been concluded before . . .

The barrier being finished, and the place fitted for the interview, as you have already heard, on the next day, which was the 29th of August, 1475, the two kings appeared. The King of France came first, attended by about 800 men-at-arms: on the King of England's side, his whole army was drawn up in order of battle; and though we could not discover their whole force, yet we saw such a vast number both of horse and foot, that the body of troops that were with us seemed very inconsiderable in

comparison with them; but indeed the fourth part of our army was not there. It was given out that twelve men of a side were to be with each of the kings at the interview, and that they were already chosen from among their greatest and most trusty courtiers. With us we had four of the King of England's party to view what was done among us, and they had as many of ours, on their side, to have an eye over their actions. As I said before, our king came first to the barrier, attended by twelve persons; among whom were John, Duke of Bourbon, and the Cardinal his brother. It was the king's royal pleasure (according to an old and common custom that he had), that I should be dressed like him on that day.

The King of England advanced along the causeway (which I mentioned before) very nobly attended, with the air and presence of a king: there were in his train his brother the Duke of Clarence, the Earl of Northumberland, his chamberlain the Lord Hastings, his chancellor, and other peers of the realm; among whom there were not above three or four dressed in cloth of gold like himself. The King of England wore a black velvet cap upon his head, with a large fleur de lys³⁵ made of precious stones upon it: he was a prince of a noble and majestic presence, but a little inclining to corpulence. I had seen him before when the Earl of Warwick drove him out of his kingdom; then I thought him much handsomer, and to the best of my remembrance, my eyes had never beheld a more handsome person. When he came within a little distance of the barrier, he pulled off his cap, and bowed himself within half a foot of the ground; and the King of France, who was then leaning against the barrier, received him with abundance of reverence and respect. They embraced through the holes of the grate, and the King of England making him another low bow, the King of France saluted him thus:-'Cousin, you are heartily welcome; there is no person living I was so ambitious of seeing, and God be thanked that this interview is upon so good an occasion.' The King of England returned the compliment in very good French.

Then the chancellor of England (who was a prelate, and Bishop of Lisle³⁶) began his speech with a prophecy (with which the English are always provided) that at Picquigny a memorable peace was to be concluded between the English and French. After he had finished his harangue, the instrument was produced which contained the articles the King of France had sent to the King of England. The Chancellor demanded of our king, whether he had dictated the said articles? and whether he agreed to them? The king replied, Yes: and King Edward's letters being produced on our side, he made the same answer. The missal being then brought and opened, both the kings laid one of their

hands upon the book, and the other upon the holy true cross, and both of them swore religiously to observe the contents of the truce, which was, that it should stand firm and good for nine years complete; that the allies on both sides should be comprehended; and that the marriage between their children should be consummated, as was stipulated by the said treaty. After the two kings had sworn to observe the treaty, our king (who had always words at command) told the King of England in a jocular way, he should be glad to see his majesty at Paris; and that if he would come and divert himself with the ladies, he would assign him the Cardinal of Bourbon for his confessor, who he knew would willingly absolve him, if he should commit any sin by way of love and gallantry. The King of England was extremely pleased with his raillery, and made his majesty several good repartees, for he knew the cardinal was a jolly companion.

After some discourse to this purpose, our king, to show his authority, commanded us who attended him to withdraw, for he had a mind to have a little private discourse with the King of England. We obeyed, and those who were with the King of England, seeing us retire, did the same, without waiting to be commanded. After the two kings had been alone together for some time, our master called me to him, and asked the King of England if he knew me? The King of England replied he did, and named the places where he had seen me, and told the king that formerly I had endeavoured to serve him at Calais, when I was in the Duke of Burgundy's service. The King of France demanded, if the Duke of Burgundy refused to be comprehended in the treaty (as might be suspected from his obstinate answer), what the King of England would have him do? The King of England replied, he would offer it him again, and if he refused it then he would not concern himself any farther, but leave it entirely to themselves. By degrees the king came to mention the Duke of Bretagne (who indeed was the person he aimed at in the question), and made the same demand about him. The King of England desired he would not attempt any thing against the Duke of Bretagne, for in his necessity he had never found so true and faithful a friend.³⁷ The king pressed him no farther, but recalling his retinue, took his leave of the King of England in the handsomest and most civil terms imaginable, and saluted all his attendants in a most particular manner: and both the kings at a time (or very near it) retired from the barrier, and mounting on horseback, the King of France returned to Amiens, and the King of England to his army. The King of England was accommodated by the King of France with whatever he wanted, even to the very torches and candles. The Duke of Gloucester, the King of England's

brother, and some other persons of quality, were not present at this interview, as being averse to the treaty; but they recollected themselves afterwards, and the Duke of Gloucester waited on the king our master at Amiens, where he was splendidly entertained, and nobly presented both with plate and fine horses.³⁸

As the king returned from this interview, he spoke to me by the way upon two points: one was, that the King of England had been so easily persuaded to come to Paris. His majesty was not at all pleased with it, and he told me, 'He is a very handsome prince, a great admirer of the ladies, and who knows but some of them may appear to him so charming, as may give him a desire of making us a second visit. His predecessors have been too often in Paris and Normandy already; and I do not care for his company so near, though on the other side of the water, I shall gladly esteem him as my friend and brother.' Besides, the king was displeased to find him so obstinate in relation to the Duke of Bretagne, on whom he would fain³⁹ have made war, and to that purpose made another overture to him by the Lord du Bouchage, and the Lord of St.Pierre. But when the King of England saw himself pressed, he gave them this short but generous answer, 'That if any prince invaded the Duke of Bretagne's dominions, he would cross the seas once more in his defence.' Upon which they importuned him no farther.

When the king had arrived at Amiens, and was ready to go to supper, three or four of the English lords, who had attended upon the King of England at the interview, came to sup with his majesty; and the Lord Howard being of the number, he told the king in his ear, that if he desired it, he would find a way to bring his master to him to Amiens, and to Paris too, to be merry with him for some time. Though this offer and proposition were not in the least agreeable to the king, yet his majesty dissembled the matter pretty well, and fell a washing his hands, without giving a direct answer; but he whispered me in the ear, that what he suspected was at last come really to pass. After supper they fell upon the subject again; but the king put it off with the greatest wisdom imaginable, pretending that his expedition against the Duke of Burgundy would require his departure immediately. Though these affairs were of very great importance, and great prudence was used on both sides to manage them discreetly; yet there were some pleasant occurrences among them, worthy to be transmitted to posterity. Nor ought any man to wonder (considering the great mischiefs which the English have brought upon this kingdom, and the recentness of their date), that the King of France should be at so much labour and expense to send them home in a friendly manner, that he might make them his

friends for the future, or at least divert them from making war against him. . . .

AMBASSADORS

BOOK THE THIRD, Chap. VIII

This chapter deals with the renewal of war between King Louis and Charles the Bold in 1471. In the following extract, we see Commynes emphasizing both the value (chiefly in the gathering of information) of sending ambassadors and its corollary – the dangers of receiving them. Nevertheless, he insists, even in war they must be exchanged, though here it is clear that he is thinking of temporary envoys rather than residents. The trick is for the sender to employ more of them and more able ones than he receives, and to observe the latter closely. In Book the Sixth, Chap. II (not reprinted here) he uses a long example to show, additionally, how ambassadors may be employed with great effect in advocacy and gaining time, and also how those received may be neutralized by bribes and lavish entertainment.

...

The going and coming of ambassadors in this manner is sometimes very dangerous; for many ill things are often transacted by them, and yet there is necessity of sending and receiving them. Those who read this chapter may perhaps demand what expedient I can propose to remedy this inconvenience. I am sensible there are many persons better qualified to treat of this subject than myself; yet this I shall venture to say, that ambassadors who come from true friends, where there is no ground of suspicion, ought, in my judgment, to be treated with abundance of freedom and openness; and, if the quality of the persons permit, should be often admitted to the king's presence, provided the prince be wise and affable, for otherwise the less he is seen the better; and whenever he gives audience he ought to be magnificently dressed, well prepared in his answers, and not permitted to hold any long discourse, for the friendship between princes is not of a long duration. If ambassadors are sent in a public or private capacity between princes that are in continual hatred and war with one another, as all those that I have known and been conversant with in my time have been, in my opinion they are not greatly to be trusted. However, they are to be honourably received and civilly entertained; for to send to meet them, to lodge them in handsome apartments, and to appoint honest and discreet persons to attend them, is safe as well as civil; for thereby you not only discover

what persons they generally converse with, but also prevent fickle and mutinous people from resorting to them with news, and there is no court without some mal-contents. Again, I would advise that they have their audience and despatch as soon possible, for to me it seems dangerous to keep an enemy in one's house; but to feast them, to bear their expenses, and to make them presents, is but honourable.

Moreover, though war be proclaimed, no treaty nor overture of peace ought to be interrupted, for nobody knows what occasion they may have of them hereafter, but all should be carried on smoothly, and all messengers heard as before; yet a strict eye is to be kept upon such as have any discourse with them, or are sent to them with any message either by night or day; and this should be managed with as much secrecy as possible. Were it my case, for one ambassador or message they sent me, I would be sure to send them two; nay, though they grew weary, and desired to have no more, I would not fail to send when I had opportunity and convenience, for there is no spy so good and so safe, nor can have such liberty to pry and inform himself; and if you send two or three ambassadors at once, it is impossible the enemy should be so cautious, but that one or other of them may secretly or otherwise pick up something to serve their turn; I mean, if they carry themselves civilly towards them, as they ought to do to ambassadors. It is also to be supposed a wise prince will make it his business to place some friend or other about his enemy, and ward him off as long as he can; for in such cases a prince cannot do always as he would. But perhaps it may be objected, that this is but the way to puff up your enemy, and make him more proud. It is no matter if it does; I shall know the more of his councils, and at the making up of our accounts, the whole profit and honour will be mine. Though the enemy should have the same designs upon me, I would not forbear sending, but listen to all propositions without rejecting any, that I might always have fresh occasion to send; for all men have not an equal share of wisdom and penetration, neither have they as much experience in such affairs, nor is there any necessity that they should have; yet in this case, the wisest is always the most fortunate, and of this I will give you a clear and undeniable proof. Never was there any treaty between the French and the English, but the French always overreached them by their sense and ability, insomuch that, as I have been told, the English have a common proverb among them, That in all, or most, of their battles and engagements with the French the English had the better, but in their treaties of peace they were juggled and outwitted. And certainly, at least in my thoughts, I have known politicians in this kingdom as proper to manage such secret negotiations

as any persons alive, especially those of King Louis's training up; for in these cases the persons employed ought to be complaisant, and men who, to compass their master's designs, can digest words and overlook neglects; and such were for King Louis's turn. I have enlarged a little on the subject of ambassadors, and the caution that is to be used towards them; but it is not without reason, for I have known so many intrigues, and so much mischief carried on under that colour, that I could not forbear laying this matter open, or speak less of it than I have done. . . .

Notes

1. Less frequently he also served as a soldier.
2. Though he represented France at Venice from October 1494 until the following May, Commynes, Philippe de, *Memoirs: The reign of Louis XI 1461–83*, trsl. by Michael Jones (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), Introduction, p. 24. Hereafter 'Jones'.
3. It was partially revised in 1493.
4. Danett, 1596; Uvedale, 1712; Scoble, 1855; Cazeaux, 1969; and Jones, 1972. See 'Further reading'.
5. This was not always so. For example, Abraham de Wicquefort, from whose work selections are reproduced in Chapter 10, makes no mention of the attitude of Commynes to 'summitry', though he was a huge admirer of his *Memoirs* and quoted him extensively.
6. *The Memoirs of Philip de Commines*, ed. with Life and Notes by Andrew R. Scoble, 2 vols (Bell: London, 1896). It is the 1896 edition that I have employed, though it is worth noting that the translation itself is little improvement on and in fact barely distinguishable from the Uvedale translation of 1712.
7. On this and other editions, see Jones, pp. 34–8.
8. Reveal. [Ed.]
9. Louis XI, when Dauphin, fled in 1456 from Dauphiny, whither he had retired ten years previously on account of a misunderstanding with his father. He sought refuge in Burgundy from the authority of Charles VIII, who wished to force him to return to Court, and remained with his uncle Philip until 1461, when his father died.
10. Agreeable or obliging. [Ed.]
11. Commynes returns to this theme in Book the First, Chapter XII, complaining that even able princes are incapable of discrimination in the selection of advisers until 'they are in distress', p. 68. [Ed.]
12. See also Book the Second, Chap. VI. [Ed.]
13. John, surnamed Sans-Peur, Duke of Burgundy, was the son of Philippe le-Hardi and Margaret of Flanders. He was born on 28 May, 1371 . . . and assassinated on the bridge of Montereau, on 10 September, 1419.
14. See also Book the First, p. 38. [Ed.]
15. The Count of Charolois left Conflans on Thursday, 31 October, and proceeded to Villiers-le-Bel, whither the king accompanied him. They remained there together until 3 November.

16. The interview between Louis XI and Henry took place at Andaia, near Fuentarabia, in April, 1463.
17. Report. [Ed.]
18. The Grand Master of the order of Santiago, in April, 1463, was Bertrand de la Cueva, Count of Lodesma. . . This nobleman was present at the interview between Louis XI and the King of Castile.
19. Frederick III [1415–93. Ed.]
20. On 30 September, 1473.
21. Neuss, a town in the province of Dusseldorf, Prussia.
22. On 7 January, 1471.
23. The King of England was elected a Knight of the Golden Fleece, of which order the Duke of Burgundy was Sovereign, on 13 May, 1468, and notified his acceptance of the honour on 28 October, 1469.
24. On Tuesday, 10 February 1466.
25. Sigismund visited the Duke of Burgundy at Arras, on 21 March, 1468, accompanied him in several journeys, and was with him at St. Omer, on 1 May following.
26. The Earl of Warwick came to the Duke of Burgundy at St. Omer, 26 April, 1469.
27. On 29 August, 1475. See Book the Fourth, Chap. X.
28. As it happened at Venice, when Henry III, King of France, made his public entry into that city. The French laughed at the Venetians' dress, upon which they were like to have come to blows.
29. A bishop's representative in temporal matters. [Ed.]
30. Level, open country. [Ed.]
31. This was in the year 1418.
32. This should be *eleven* years – 1407–18.
33. Charles VII was at this time Dauphin only, as his father did not die until 1422. It was not until after the capture of Rouen by Henry V that the Dauphin and the Duke of Burgundy became reconciled, and signed a peace at Arras on 11 July, 1419.
34. On 10 September, 1419.
35. The royal arms of France, Edward's display of it in this way signifying the English claim to the French throne. The *fleur de lis* remained on the coat of arms of the British royal family until 1801, when George III renounced his title as King of France under the Treaty of Paris. [Ed.]
36. Commines here mistakes *Lisle* for *Lincoln*.
37. Our historian Habington states this reply of King Edward somewhat differently, and says he answered resolutely, 'That he would never forsake the care of a confederate who had maintained his faith so constantly.'
38. The other English lords who took presents, or rather pensions from the French king, were, the Lord Hastings, lord chamberlain; the Lord Howard; Sir John Chene, master of the horse; Sir Anthony St. Leger, and Sir Thomas Montgomery.
39. Gladly. [Ed.]

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