Interpretation

The Yellow Kid had staked out Geezil as the perfect sucker long before he set up the con. He knew the boxing-match scam would be the perfect ruse to separate Geezil from his money quickly and definitively. But he also knew that if he had begun by trying to interest Geezil in the boxing match, he would have failed miserably. He had to conceal his intentions and switch attention, create a smoke screen—in this case the sale of the lodge.

On the train ride and in the hotel room Geezil's mind had been completely occupied with the pending deal, the easy money, the chance to hobnob with wealthy men. He had failed to notice that Gross was out of shape and middle-aged at best. Such is the distracting power of a smoke screen. Engrossed in the business deal, Geezil's attention was easily diverted to the boxing match, but only at a point when it was already too late for him to notice the details that would have given Gross away. The match, after all, now depended on a bribe rather than on the boxer's physical condition. And Geezil was so distracted at the end by the illusion of the boxer's death that he completely forgot about his money.

Learn from the Yellow Kid: The familiar, inconspicuous front is the perfect smoke screen. Approach your mark with an idea that seems ordinary enough—a business deal, financial intrigue. The sucker's mind is distracted, his suspicions allayed. That is when you gently guide him onto the second path, the slippery slope down which he slides helplessly into your trap.

OBSERVANCE OF THE LAW II

In the mid-1920s, the powerful warlords of Ethiopia were coming to the realization that a young man of the nobility named Haile Selassie, also known as Ras Tafari, was outcompeting them all and nearing the point where he could proclaim himself their leader, unifying the country for the first time in decades. Most of his rivals could not understand how this wispy, quiet, mild-mannered man had been able to take control. Yet in 1927, Selassie was able to summon the warlords, one at a time, to come to Addis Ababa to declare their loyalty and recognize him as leader.

Some hurried, some hesitated, but only one, Dejazmach Balcha of Sidamo, dared defy Selassie totally. A blustery man, Balcha was a great warrior, and he considered the new leader weak and unworthy. He pointedly stayed away from the capital. Finally Selassie, in his gentle but stern way, commanded Balcha to come. The warlord decided to obey, but in doing so he would turn the tables on this pretender to the Ethiopian throne: He would come to Addis Ababa at his own speed, and with an army of 10,000 men, a force large enough to defend himself, perhaps even start a civil war. Stationing this formidable force in a valley three miles from the capital, he waited, as a king would. Selassie would have to come to him.

Selassie did indeed send emissaries, asking Balcha to attend an afternoon banquet in his honor. But Balcha, no fool, knew history—he knew that previous kings and lords of Ethiopia had used banquets as a trap. Once he was there and full of drink, Selassie would have him arrested or murdered. To signal his understanding of the situation, he agreed to come to the banquet, but only if he could bring his personal bodyguard—600 of his best soldiers, all armed and ready to defend him and themselves. To Balcha's surprise, Selassie answered with the utmost politeness that he would be honored to play host to such warriors.

On the way to the banquet, Balcha warned his soldiers not to get drunk and to be on their guard. When they arrived at the palace, Selassie was his charming best. He deferred to Balcha, treated him as if he desperately needed his approval and cooperation. But Balcha refused to be charmed, and he warned Selassie that if he did not return to his camp by nightfall, his

army had orders to attack the capital. Selassie reacted as if hurt by his mistrust. Over the meal, when it came time for the traditional singing of songs in honor of Ethiopia's leaders, he made a point of allowing only songs honoring the warlord of Sidamo. It seemed to Balcha that Selassie was scared, intimidated by this great warrior who could not be outwitted. Sensing the change, Balcha believed that he would be the one to call the shots in the days to come.

At the end of the afternoon, Balcha and his soldiers began their march back to camp amidst cheers and gun salutes. Looking back to the capital over his shoulder, he planned his strategy—how his own soldiers would march through the capital in triumph within weeks, and Selassie would be put in his place, his place being either prison or death. When Balcha came in sight of his camp, however, he saw that something was terribly wrong. Where before there had been colorful tents stretching as far as the eye could see, now there was nothing, only smoke from doused fires. What devil's magic was this?

A witness told Balcha what had happened. During the banquet, a large army, commanded by an ally of Selassie's, had stolen up on Balcha's encampment by a side route he had not seen. This army had not come to fight, however: Knowing that Balcha would have heard a noisy battle and hurried back with his 600-man bodyguard, Selassie had armed his own troops with baskets of gold and cash. They had surrounded Balcha's army and proceeded to purchase every last one of their weapons. Those who refused were easily intimidated. Within a few hours, Balcha's entire force had been disarmed and scattered in all directions.

Realizing his danger, Balcha decided to march south with his 600 soldiers to regroup, but the same army that had disarmed his soldiers blocked his way. The other way out was to march on the capital, but Selassie had set a large army to defend it. Like a chess player, he had predicted Balcha's moves, and had checkmated him. For the first time in his life, Balcha surrendered. To repent his sins of pride and ambition, he agreed to enter a monastery.

Interpretation

Throughout Selassie's long reign, no one could quite figure him out. Ethiopians like their leaders fierce, but Selassie, who wore the front of a gentle, peace-loving man, lasted longer than any of them. Never angry or impatient, he lured his victims with sweet smiles, lulling them with charm and obsequiousness before he attacked. In the case of Balcha, Selassie played on the man's wariness, his suspicion that the banquet was a trap—which in fact it was, but not the one he expected. Selassie's way of allaying Balcha's fears—letting him bring his bodyguard to the banquet, giving him top billing there, making him feel in control—created a thick smoke screen, concealing the real action three miles away.

Remember: The paranoid and wary are often the easiest to deceive. Win their trust in one area and you have a smoke screen that blinds their view in another, letting you creep up and level them with a devastating blow. A helpful or apparently honest gesture, or one that implies the other person's superiority—these are perfect diversionary devices.

Properly set up, the smoke screen is a weapon of great power. It enabled the gentle Selassie to totally destroy his enemy, without firing a single bullet.

Do not underestimate the power of Tafari. He creeps
like a mouse but he has jaws like a lion.
Bacha of Sidamo's last words before entering the monastery

KEYS TO POWER

If you believe that deceivers are colorful folk who mislead with elaborate lies and tall tales, you are greatly mistaken. The best deceivers utilize a bland and inconspicuous front that calls no attention to themselves. They know that extravagant words and gestures immediately raise suspicion. Instead, they envelop their mark in the familiar, the banal, the harmless. In Yellow Kid Weil's dealings with Sam Geezil, the familiar was a business deal. In the Ethiopian case, it was Selassie's misleading obsequiousness—exactly what Balcha would have expected from a weaker warlord.

Once you have lulled your suckers' attention with the familiar, they will not notice the deception being perpetrated behind their backs. This derives from a simple truth: people can only focus on one thing at a time. It is really too difficult for them to imagine that the bland and harmless person they are dealing with is simultaneously setting up something else. The grayer and more uniform the smoke in your smoke screen, the better it conceals your intentions. In the decoy and red herring devices discussed in Part I, you actively distract people; in the smoke screen, you lull your victims, drawing them into your web. Because it is so hypnotic, this is often the best way of concealing your intentions.

The simplest form of smoke screen is facial expression. Behind a bland, unreadable exterior, all sorts of mayhem can be planned, without detection. This is a weapon that the most powerful men in history have learned to perfect. It was said that no one could read Franklin D. Roosevelt's face. Baron James Rothschild made a lifelong practice of disguising his real thoughts behind bland smiles and nondescript looks. Stendhal wrote of Talleyrand, "Never was a face less of a barometer." Henry Kissinger would bore his opponents around the negotiating table to tears with his monotonous voice, his blank look, his endless recitations of details; then, as their eyes glazed over, he would suddenly hit them with a list of bold terms. Caught off-guard, they would be easily intimidated. As one poker manual explains it, "While playing his hand, the good player is seldom an actor. Instead he practices a bland behavior that minimizes readable patterns, frustrates and confuses opponents, permits greater concentration."

An adaptable concept, the smoke screen can be practiced on a number of levels, all playing on the psychological principles of distraction and misdirection. One of the most effective smoke screens is the noble gesture. People want to believe apparently noble gestures are genuine, for the belief is pleasant. They rarely notice how deceptive these gestures can be.

The art dealer Joseph Duveen was once confronted with a terrible problem. The millionaires who had paid so dearly for Duveen's paintings were running out of wall space, and with inheritance taxes getting ever higher, it seemed unlikely that they would keep buying. The solution was the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., which Duveen helped create in 1937 by getting Andrew Mellon to donate his collection to it. The National Gallery was the perfect front for Duveen. In one gesture, his clients avoided taxes, cleared wall space for new purchases, and reduced the number of paintings on the market, maintaining the upward pressure on their prices. All this while the donors created the appearance of being public benefactors.

Another effective smoke screen is the *pattern*, the establishment of a series of actions that seduce the victim into believing you will continue in the same way. The pattern plays on the psychology of anticipation: Our behavior conforms to patterns, or so we like to think.

In 1878 the American robber baron Jay Gould created a company that began to threaten the monopoly of the telegraph company Western Union. The directors of Western Union decided to buy Gould's company up— they had to spend a hefty sum, but they figured they had managed to rid themselves of an irritating competitor. A few months later, though, Gould was it at again, complaining he had been treated unfairly. He started up a second company to compete with Western Union and its new acquisition. The same thing happened again: Western Union bought him out to shut him up. Soon the pattern began for the third time, but now Gould went for the jugular: He suddenly staged a bloody takeover struggle and managed to gain complete control of Western Union. He had established a pattern that had tricked the company's directors into thinking his goal was to be bought out at a handsome rate. Once they paid him off, they relaxed and failed to notice that he was actually playing for higher stakes. The pattern is powerful in that it deceives the other person into expecting the opposite of what you are really doing.

Another psychological weakness on which to construct a smoke screen is the tendency to mistake appearances for reality—the feeling that if someone seems to belong to your group, their belonging must be real. This habit makes the seamless blend a very effective front. The trick is simple: You simply blend in with those around you. The better you blend, the less suspicious you become. During the Cold War of the 1950s and ’60s, as is now notorious, a slew of British civil servants passed secrets to the Soviets. They went undetected for years because they were apparently decent chaps, had gone to all the right schools, and fit the old-boy network perfectly. Blending in is the perfect smoke screen for spying. The better you do it, the better you can conceal your intentions.

Remember: It takes patience and humility to dull your brilliant colors, to put on the mask of the inconspicuous. Do not despair at having to wear such a bland mask—it is often your unreadability that draws people to you and makes you appear a person of power.

Image: A Sheep’s Skin.
A sheep never marauds,
a sheep never deceives,
a sheep is magnificently
dumb and docile. With a
sheepskin on his back,
a fox can pass right
into the chicken coop.

Authority: Have you ever heard of a skillful general, who intends to surprise a citadel, announcing his plan to his enemy? Conceal your purpose and hide your progress; do not disclose the extent of your designs until they cannot be opposed, until the combat is over. Win the victory before you declare the war. In a word, imitate those warlike people whose designs are not known except by the ravaged country through which they have passed. (Ninon de Lenclos, 1623-1706)

REVERSAL

No smoke screen, red herring, false sincerity, or any other diversionary device will succeed in concealing your intentions if you already have an established reputation for deception. And as you get older and achieve success, it often becomes increasingly difficult to disguise your cunning. Everyone knows you practice deception; persist in playing naive and you run the risk of seeming the rankest hypocrite, which will severely limit your room to maneuver. In such cases it is better to own up, to appear the honest rogue, or, better, the repentant rogue. Not only will you be admired for your frankness, but, most wonderful and strange of all, you will be able to continue your stratagems.

As P. T. Barnum, the nineteenth-century king of humbuggery, grew older, he learned to embrace his reputation as a grand deceiver. At one point he organized a buffalo hunt in New Jersey, complete with Indians and a few imported buffalo. He publicized the hunt as genuine, but it came off as so completely fake that the crowd, instead of getting angry and asking for their money back, was greatly amused. They knew Barnum pulled tricks all the time; that was the secret of his success, and they loved him for it. Learning a lesson from this affair, Barnum stopped concealing all of his devices, even revealing his deceptions in a tell-all autobiography. As Kierkegaard wrote, “The world wants to be deceived.”

Finally, although it is wiser to divert attention from your purposes by presenting a bland, familiar exterior, there are times when the colorful, conspicuous gesture is the right diversionary tactic. The great charlatan mountebanks of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe used humor and entertainment to deceive their audiences. Dazzled by a great show, the public would not notice the charlatans’ real intentions. Thus the star charlatan himself would appear in town in a night-black coach drawn by black horses. Clowns, tightrope walkers, and star entertainers would accompany him, pulling people in to his demonstrations of elixirs and quack potions. The charlatan made entertainment seem like the business of the day; the business of the day was actually the sale of the elixirs and quack potions.

Spectacle and entertainment, clearly, are excellent devices to conceal your intentions, but they cannot be used indefinitely. The public grows tired and suspicious, and eventually catches on to the trick. And indeed the charlatans had to move quickly from town to town, before word spread that the potions were useless and the entertainment a trick. Powerful people with bland exteriors, on the other hand—the Talleyrands, the Rothschilds, the Selassies—can practice their deceptions in the same place throughout their lifetimes. Their act never wears thin, and rarely causes suspicion. The colorful smoke screen should be used cautiously, then, and only when the occasion is right.

LAW 4

ALWAYS SAY LESS THAN NECESSARY

JUDGMENT

When you are trying to impress people with words, the more you say, the more common you appear, and the less in control. Even if you are saying something banal, it will seem original if you make it vague, open-ended, and sphinxlike. Powerful people impress and intimidate by saying less. The more you say, the more likely you are to say something foolish.

TRANSGRESSION OF THE LAW

Gnaeus Marcius, also known as Coriolanus, was a great military hero of ancient Rome. In the first half of the fifth century B.C. he won many important battles, saving the city from calamity time and time again. Because he spent most of his time on the battlefield, few Romans knew him personally, making him something of a legendary figure.

In 454 B.C., Coriolanus decided it was time to exploit his reputation and enter politics. He stood for election to the high rank of consul. Candidates for this position traditionally made a public address early in the race, and when Coriolanus came before the people, he began by displaying the dozens of scars he had accumulated over seventeen years of fighting for Rome. Few in the crowd really heard the lengthy speech that followed; those scars, proof of his valor and patriotism, moved the people to tears. Coriolanus's election seemed certain.

When the polling day arrived, however, Coriolanus made an entry into the forum escorted by the entire senate and by the city's patricians, the aristocracy. The common people who saw this were disturbed by such a blustering show of confidence on election day.

And then Coriolanus spoke again, mostly addressing the wealthy citizens who had accompanied him. His words were arrogant and insolent. Claiming certain victory in the vote, he boasted of his battlefield exploits, made sour jokes that appealed only to the patricians, voiced angry accusations against his opponents, and speculated on the riches he would bring to Rome. This time the people listened: They had not realized that this legendary soldier was also a common braggart.

Down on his luck, [the screenwriter] Michael Arlen went to New York in 1944. To drown his sorrows he paid a visit to the famous restaurant "21." In the lobby, he ran into Sam Goldwyn, who offered the somewhat impractical advice that he should buy racehorses. At the bar Arlen met Louis B. Mayer, an old acquaintance, who asked him what were his plans for the future. "I was just talking to Sam Goldwyn ..." began Arlen. "How much did he offer you? "interrupted Mayer. "Not enough," he replied

evasively. “Would you take fifteen thousand for thirty weeks?” asked Mayer. No hesitation this time. “Yes,” said Arlen.
THE LITTLE, BROWN BOOK OF ANECDOTES, CLIFTON FADIMAN, ED., 1985

News of Coriolanus’s second speech spread quickly through Rome, and the people turned out in great numbers to make sure he was not elected. Defeated, Coriolanus returned to the battlefield, bitter and vowing revenge on the common folk who had voted against him. Some weeks later a large shipment of grain arrived in Rome. The senate was ready to distribute this food to the people, for free, but just as they were preparing to vote on the question Coriolanus appeared on the scene and took the senate floor. The distribution, he argued, would have a harmful effect on the city as a whole. Several senators appeared won over, and the vote on the distribution fell into doubt. Coriolanus did not stop there: He went on to condemn the concept of democracy itself. He advocated getting rid of the people’s representatives—the tribunes—and turning over the governing of the city to the patricians.

One oft-told tale about Kissinger... involved a report that Winston Lord had worked on for days. After giving it to Kissinger, he got it back with the notation, “Is this the best you can do?” Lord rewrote and polished and finally resubmitted it; back it came with the same curt question. After redrafting it one more time—and once again getting the same question from Kissinger-Lord snapped, “Damn it, yes, it’s the best I can do. ” To which Kissinger replied: “Fine, then I guess I’ll read it this time. ”
KISSINGER. WALTER ISAACSON, 1992

When word of Coriolanus’s latest speech reached the people, their anger knew no bounds. The tribunes were sent to the senate to demand that Coriolanus appear before them. He refused. Riots broke out all over the city. The senate, fearing the people’s wrath, finally voted in favor of the grain distribution. The tribunes were appeased, but the people still demanded that Coriolanus speak to them and apologize. If he repented, and agreed to keep his opinions to himself, he would be allowed to return to the battlefield.

Coriolanus did appear one last time before the people, who listened to him in rapt silence. He started slowly and softly, but as the speech went on, he became more and more blunt. Yet again he hurled insults! His tone was

arrogant, his expression disdainful. The more he spoke, the angrier the people became. Finally they shouted him down and silenced him.

The tribunes conferred, condemned Coriolanus to death, and ordered the magistrates to take him at once to the top of the Tarpeian rock and throw him over. The delighted crowd seconded the decision. The patricians, however, managed to intervene, and the sentence was commuted to a lifelong banishment. When the people found out that Rome’s great military hero would never return to the city, they celebrated in the streets. In fact no one had ever seen such a celebration, not even after the defeat of a foreign enemy.

Interpretation

Before his entrance into politics, the name of Coriolanus evoked awe.

His battlefield accomplishments showed him as a man of great bravery. Since the citizens knew little about him, all kinds of legends became attached to his name. The moment he appeared before the Roman citizens, however, and spoke his mind, all that grandeur and mystery vanished. He bragged and blustered like a common soldier. He insulted and slandered people, as if he felt threatened and insecure. Suddenly he was not at all what the people had imagined. The discrepancy between the legend and the reality proved immensely disappointing to those who wanted to believe in their hero. The more Coriolanus said, the less powerful he appeared—a person who cannot control his words shows that he cannot control himself, and is unworthy of respect.

The King [Louis XIV] maintains the most impenetrable secrecy about affairs of State. The ministers attend council meetings, but he confides his plans to them only when he has reflected at length upon them and has come to a definite decision. I wish you might see the King. His expression is inscrutable; his eyes like those of a fox. He never discusses State affairs except with his ministers in Council. When he speaks to courtiers he refers only to their respective prerogatives or duties. Even the most frivolous of his utterances has the air of being the pronouncement of an oracle.

PRIMI VISCONTI, QUOTED IN LOUIS XIV, LOUIS BERTRAND, 1928

Had Coriolanus said less, the people would never have had cause to be offended by him, would never have known his true feelings. He would have maintained his powerful aura, would certainly have been elected consul, and would have been able to accomplish his antidemocratic goals. But the human tongue is a beast that few can master. It strains constantly to break out of its cage, and if it is not tamed, it will run wild and cause you grief. Power cannot accrue to those who squander their treasure of words.