Kings fell. Empires vanished. He remained.

TALLEYRAND

A NOVEL OF SURVIVAL



RADIM KAUFMANN

Talleyrand

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Kings fell. Empires vanished. He remained.

Radim Kaufmann

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Talleyrand

A Novel of the Long Survival

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Dedication

For my friend,

Bernhard Mann,

whose stories, conversations,

and fascination with

Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand

helped inspire this book.

Some men disappear into history.

Others quietly shape it.

“Speech was given to man

to disguise his thoughts.”

— Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord

TALLEYRAND

Reges cecidērunt. Imperia evanuērunt. Ipse mansit.

— Kings fell. Empires vanished. He remained.

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Introduction

HISTORY USUALLY REMEMBERS THE LOUDEST MEN.

The conquerors. The revolutionaries. The generals riding through smoke and fire while crowds scream their names.

But behind nearly every great political transformation stands another kind of figure entirely:

the survivor.

Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord was never the strongest man in Europe. He commanded no great armies. He inspired little public devotion. He was rarely loved. Often distrusted. Sometimes hated.

Yet kings fell, republics collapsed, emperors rose and vanished, revolutions consumed entire generations — and Talleyrand remained.

He survived the final decades of the French monarchy. He survived the French Revolution. He survived the Terror. He survived Napoleon. He survived the restoration of the Bourbons. He survived another revolution at the age of seventy-six.

And through it all, he helped shape modern Europe.

— ■ —

To some contemporaries, he was the greatest diplomat of his age. To others, he was simply an elegant traitor.

Napoleon called him:

> “Shit in a silk stocking.”

Others called him:

> “The Limping Devil.”

Both descriptions contain some truth.

This novel does not attempt to present Talleyrand as either hero or villain. History is rarely that simple, and power almost never is. Instead, this book explores a more unsettling question:

What kind of man survives every regime change without losing influence?

And perhaps an even darker one:

What remains of the soul after such survival?

— ■ —

The world Talleyrand inhabited was violent, sophisticated, theatrical, cynical, and profoundly unstable. Aristocratic salons glittered while entire populations starved. Diplomats discussed civilization while Europe burned around them. Men spoke endlessly of honor while quietly arranging betrayals behind velvet curtains.

In many ways, it was not so different from our own age.

This book combines documented historical events with dramatized scenes intended to capture the emotional and political truth of the era. Major diplomatic developments, political figures, and historical turning points are grounded in extensive historical research, while private conversations, interior reflections, and certain personal moments have been reconstructed imaginatively where the historical record falls silent. Readers interested in the documentary basis for any chapter will find it discussed in the corresponding *Author's Note*, with full sources collected in *Appendix E — Bibliography*.

The result is intended not merely as a historical novel, but as an exploration of power itself: its seductions, its compromises, its loneliness, and its cost.

Most importantly, this is the story of a man who understood earlier than almost anyone else that modern politics would belong not to the pure, nor to the brave, but to those capable of adaptation.

Europe changed around Talleyrand repeatedly.

He changed with it.

That was his genius.

And perhaps his tragedy.

— Radim Kaufmann



PROLOGUE

Vienna

The Kaunitz Palace, Vienna, 30 September 1814. Half past ten in the morning. Metternich's footman had already knocked twice.

Talleyrand was at the mirror, adjusting his cravat. Not because it needed adjusting — it did not — but because the adjustment was the point. The footman knocked a third time.

"His Highness asks whether the Prince of Benevento requires assistance finding the salon."

Talleyrand did not turn from the mirror. "Tell his Highness that the Prince of Benevento arrives precisely when France requires him to arrive. Neither before nor after."

He set down the silver comb, took his cane, and walked — slowly, with the measured economy of a man who has learned that a limp, properly deployed, conveys authority — down the marble corridor toward the sound of arguing powers.

September 1814

”You are late,“ Metternich said, with the pleasantness that powerful men deploy when they mean the opposite.

”Prince,“ Talleyrand replied, without adjusting his pace, “I am, as always, precisely on time. It is the hour that has erred.“



The apartments of the French delegation, Kaunitz Palace, Vienna — morning of 30 September 1814

A MAN WHO HAS PREPARED FOR A SINGLE DAY FOR FIFTY YEARS arrives at that day, when it finally comes, with very little remaining to do.

The substantive work has been completed. The instruments have been chosen. The interlocutors have been studied. The arguments have been rehearsed, in private, against imagined opponents, on a hundred mornings of which the documentary record preserves no trace. What remains, on the morning itself, is the small business of execution: the dressing, the cold coffee, the walk across town to the room in which the matter will, after a great deal of preparation, finally take place.

Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, Prince de Bénévent, Minister of Foreign Affairs of His Most Christian Majesty Louis XVIII, woke in his apartments at the Kaunitz Palace at twenty minutes past seven on the morning of the thirtieth of September, 1814.[1]

It was raining lightly over Vienna.

The mist had not yet lifted from the Hofburg.

He was sixty years and seven months old.

— ■ —

The bedroom in which he had slept was the second largest of the principal apartments which the Austrian government had assigned to the French delegation as a courtesy, and which the duchesse de Dino, who had arrived with him from Strasbourg eight days previously, had arranged with her customary precision. The walls were panelled in pale gray-and-cream, with restrained gilt mouldings of the late ancien régime — Viennese interiors of the period being, on the substantive aesthetic record of the years between the Peace of Lunéville and the Congress, conservative even by the standards of conservative cities. A small fire was burning in the marble fireplace. A silver coffee-pot stood on a tray by the window. The window looked across the inner courtyard of the palace, toward the spires of the Stephansdom two and a half streets distant, just visible above the fog.

He drank one cup of coffee.

He did not eat.

He had not eaten breakfast on a working morning for, on the recollection of the duchesse de Dino, approximately the past twenty-five years.[2]

The valet de chambre dressed him in the costume that had been laid out the previous evening: a black silk court coat of restrained cut, white silk waistcoat, lace cravat at the throat, white silk stockings, black buckled shoes; the broad blue silk sash of the Légion d'honneur across his chest from right shoulder to left hip; the silver eight-pointed star of the Order on the left breast of the coat; the Order of the Golden Fleece — given to him by Carlos IV of Spain in 1808, in the period of his quiet and substantively decisive correspondence with Madrid against the interests of his own emperor — at the throat of the cravat.[3] The dressing took, on the substantive record, twelve minutes. He had been dressed in the same arrangement, with minor adjustments for the weather, on every working morning of the previous fourteen years.

He took up his cane.

The cane was of black ebony, mounted with a chased silver handle representing, in low relief, the head of a fox. He had carried it on every working day for the past twenty-three years.

His right foot, on the morning of the thirtieth of September 1814, had been giving him pain since approximately three in the morning.

He paid it no particular attention.

The pain in the right foot was, on the strict accounting of the body of Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, the oldest of his discomforts. It had been with him in some form, on the recollection of his own *Mémoires*, since approximately the age of four. It would, in due course, be with him until he died.

He walked, on the working mornings of his sixty-first year, with the calm composed gait of a man whose body has been a problem to him for so long that the problem has become merely a fact.

— ■ —

The morning's first appointment was scheduled for ten o'clock at the second salon of the Kaunitz Palace, where the Committee of Four — Castlereagh of Britain, Metternich of Austria, Hardenberg of Prussia, Nesselrode of Russia — was to convene a procedural session at which the disposition of post-Napoleonic Europe was to be settled. The Committee of Four had not, on the strict legal evidence of the procedural memorandum which the four powers had drafted on the twenty-second of September, contemplated the participation of France.[4] The procedural memorandum had proposed that the substantive decisions of the Congress should be taken among the victors; that the smaller powers should be admitted to discussion of those questions which directly concerned them; that France, Spain, Sweden, and Portugal should be admitted as observers; and that the formal sessions of the Congress should ratify the conclusions reached.

Talleyrand had received a copy of the procedural memorandum from the marquis de Labrador, the Spanish ambassador, on the evening of the twenty-third of September.

He had read it twice.

He had then written, in his own hand, on a single sheet of folded paper, a list of seven words and three principles, of which the first principle was *légitimité* and the first word was the name of the Bourbon king of Spain.

The single sheet of paper had been on his desk for seven days.

It was on his desk now.

— ■ —

He sat down at the desk by the window. The morning light, such as it was through the Vienna mist, fell on the folded paper. He read it for the seventh and last time. He folded it once more, and placed it inside the breast pocket of the coat, against the silver star of the Légion d'honneur.

The folded paper was the substantive content of the working day to come.

It was also, on the longer accounting of the political life of Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, the substantive content of the previous fifty years.

The seven words and three principles which he had written on the paper had not been invented on the evening of the twenty-third of September. They had been worked out, in some cases over decades, in the course of conversations conducted in salons, in carriages, in the antechambers of three royal palaces, in the cabinet rooms of two republics and one empire, at the dinner tables of approximately two hundred women, and in the private correspondence of a network of forty-seven principal interlocutors which had been maintained, with the assistance of no more than three personal secretaries at any one time, since the autumn of 1789.

The preparation had begun, on the documentary record, somewhat earlier.

It had begun on the afternoon of a day in the late summer of seventeen fifty-nine, in a small back garden of a foster-mother's house in the working-class faubourg Saint-Jacques south of the river Seine in Paris, in the late reign of Louis XV, when a fair-haired boy of approximately four years and seven months — who had not, at that point, seen his mother or his father at any point within his conscious memory — had stood alone on a flagstone path between two low boxwood hedges, leaning lightly on a child-sized walnut walking-cane which the foster-mother had had made for him by a neighboring carpenter, and had observed, with the steady unselfconscious attention which would constitute, for the next eighty years, his principal instrument of survival, the manner in which adults conducted their mutual affairs in the absence of the people they were supposed to love.[5]

The walnut cane in the small back garden, on the strict accounting of the long preparation, had been the first instrument.

The folded paper in the breast pocket of the black silk court coat, on the morning of the thirtieth of September 1814, was the most recent.

Between the two there extended the life of politics with which this book is concerned.

— ■ —

The valet announced that the carriage was ready.

It was nine o'clock.

Talleyrand rose from the desk, took up the ebony cane from where he had placed it against the corner of the desk, glanced once at the silver coffee-pot which had grown cold on the tray, and walked, with the calm composed gait which would carry him across the Vienna courtyard and through the procedural memorandum and across the entire post-Napoleonic settlement of Europe, toward the door of the apartments.

The pain in the right foot continued.

He paid it no particular attention.

The preparation, on the morning of the thirtieth of September 1814, was complete.

What remained was the small business of execution.

— ■ —

It would, in the course of the next eight months, succeed.

It would succeed for the same reason every long preparation succeeds, when it succeeds at all: because the man making it had been preparing, on the documentary record, since he was four.

The story of the preparation begins where the preparation began.

It begins in the small back garden of the foster-mother's house in the rue Saint-Jacques.

It begins in the late summer of seventeen fifty-nine.

Notes — Prologue

1. The date of Talleyrand's arrival at Vienna (23 September 1814) and his lodgings at the Kaunitz Palace are documented in his correspondence to Louis XVIII of the same period; see *Correspondance inédite du prince de Talleyrand et du roi Louis XVIII pendant le congrès de Vienne*, ed. M. G. Pallain (Paris, 1881). The hour of waking and the detail of the cold coffee are reconstructions consistent with the duchesse de Dino's recollections of his working-day habits in the period 1814–1815. ↩

2. Dorothée de Dino, *Chronique de 1831 à 1862*, vol. I (Paris, 1909), records her uncle's lifelong refusal of breakfast on working mornings and dates the habit, on her own recollection, to the period of his ministry at the Foreign Office under the Directory and Consulate. ↩

3. Talleyrand was admitted to the Order of the Golden Fleece by Carlos IV of Spain on 12 May 1808, on the recommendation of the Spanish ambassador in Paris and at the moment of his quiet correspondence with Madrid against the substantive interests of Napoleon's Iberian policy. The award is documented in the records of the Order at the Spanish royal archives; the political context is treated in detail in Chapter 16. ↩

4. The procedural memorandum of 22 September 1814 is reproduced in the documentary appendix to the *Recueil des actes du congrès de Vienne*, ed. J. L. Klüber (Erlangen, 1815–1818). The substance of Talleyrand's response to it — including the use of the principle of *légitimité* as the operative concept — is treated in detail in Chapter 20. ↩

5. The detail of the child-sized walking-cane in the foster-mother's garden is reconstructed from the consistent indications, in Talleyrand's own *Mémoires* and in the surviving correspondence of the family, that his lameness manifested itself in early childhood and required the use of a stick for support from the age of approximately four. The specific date and setting are dramatized. The substance is documented. ↩



CHAPTER 1

The Crippled Child

Paris, 1764

”The boy will not walk,“ the surgeon told Charles-Daniel de Talleyrand-Périgord. “Not without difficulty.“

”Then he will learn difficulty,“ his father replied, and that, by the surviving accounts, was the entirety of the consultation.



A child of the Talleyrand-Périgord family in a Parisian salon, c. 1764

THE CHILD ENTERED THE WORLD BENEATH PAINTED CEILINGS AND inherited expectations older than most kingdoms.

He was born on the second of February, seventeen fifty-four, in a tall stone house on the rue Garancière, near the church of Saint-Sulpice in Paris.[1] His baptismal name unrolled like a small treaty: Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, son of Charles-Daniel, Count of Talleyrand, and of Alexandrine, of the noble line of Damas d'Antigny.[2] The candle wax, the lace, the muttered Latin — every ceremony surrounding his arrival was meticulous.

His mother was not present at any of it.

Aristocratic women of the age rarely nursed their own children, and Alexandrine de Damas d'Antigny did not consider herself an exception.[3] Within days, the infant was bundled into the care of strangers and carried across the river, into the working-class faubourg Saint-Jacques, where a paid wet nurse received him in a small house above a tannery. There the boy was placed.

And there, for reasons that no one in the family ever satisfactorily explained, he was largely forgotten.

Months passed.

Then years.

His parents did not visit.

When the matter eventually surfaced — apparently raised by a great-aunt over dinner, who inquired politely after the absent child — it transpired that no one in the immediate household had laid eyes on him in a very long time. He was four years old. A messenger was dispatched. He was brought back from the suburbs.

And something, it became clear, was wrong with his foot.

— ■ —

The physicians disagreed almost immediately.

One of them blamed a congenital deformity that had simply gone undetected during infancy. Another suspected damage during the years of unsupervised care, perhaps the result of a fall. The wet nurse, when asked, mentioned vaguely that the boy might once have tumbled from the top of a chest of drawers. The detail was repeated, then disputed, then politely abandoned.[4]

The family discouraged further discussion.

In aristocratic households, preserving dignity mattered more than discovering truth.

Whatever the cause, the result remained visible. The right foot turned inward at the ankle. The right leg, denied normal use during the most formative years, had grown shorter and weaker than its brother. He walked badly. He would always walk badly. In the centuries to follow, the limp would furnish caricaturists with their easiest weapon, and Napoleon Bonaparte with his most contemptuous nickname.

And in eighteenth-century France, weakness was not merely unfortunate.

It was socially dangerous.

His father, Charles-Daniel, observed him with the restrained embarrassment of a soldier who has been handed an unsatisfactory weapon. The Count had served the Crown well; he expected his eldest son to do the same. His mother, elegant and emotionally distant even by the standards of her caste, redirected her attention elsewhere — toward salons, obligations, appearances, healthier children.

The child learned early that noble families often treated affection as an investment.

And damaged investments rarely inspired warmth.

Within months of his return, his mother was pregnant again. Eighteen months later she gave birth to a second son, Archambaud, healthy in every respect. A third son, Boson, would follow.[5] By a discreet and entirely legal arrangement, the privileges of the eldest — the title, the estates, the family name in its undivided form — were quietly transferred to Archambaud, as though the elder brother had never been born at all.

Charles-Maurice was not informed.

He simply discovered, one afternoon, that a document had been signed.

The military career traditionally reserved for noble sons became impossible almost before his life had properly begun. France admired beauty, discipline, posture, elegance. Versailles itself functioned as an enormous theater where physical perfection translated into political power. A limping aristocrat disturbed the illusion. And disturbing illusions carried consequences.

By the age of six, Charles-Maurice already understood something fundamental:

People forgave cruelty more easily than weakness.

The realization settled inside him quietly and permanently.

Years later, emperors would distrust him, kings would fear him, diplomats would study every movement of his face searching for hidden meaning. But the foundation of that future man began here — in elegant rooms where he was tolerated rather than loved.

— ■ —

The family eventually reached its practical conclusion.

If he could not serve France through the army, he would serve through the Church.

For younger sons of noble houses, the clergy offered prestige, influence, income, and survival.[6] Faith itself remained negotiable. The Church before the Revolution often resembled another wing of the aristocracy dressed in religious language: bishoprics passed quietly through the same dozen families that already controlled the great regiments and the most lucrative offices of the Crown. To enter that machine was to inherit a comfortable life and the possibility of considerable power.

Charles accepted the decision without protest.

But privately, even as a child, he understood the humiliation hidden beneath it.

He had not been chosen.

He had been reassigned.

That distinction mattered.

— ■ —

There was, however, one early exception to the pattern of indifference.

His father's grandmother — Marie-Françoise de Rochechouart-Mortemart, Princesse de Chalais — was a woman of the previous century, born in the closing years of the reign of Louis XIV.[7] She presided over the family estate at

Chalais, in the southwestern corner of the kingdom, where the air smelled of vineyards and the manners had not yet been simplified by Paris fashion. When she learned that her great-grandson had been left, in effect, to raise himself, she summoned him.

He travelled south by carriage, accompanied by a manservant and a small trunk of clothes he had outgrown.

The Princesse received him on the gravel before the chateau, supported by a cane and three liveried domestics. She was very old. She wore powder, lace, and the quiet authority of a woman who had once watched the Sun King eat his soup.

She studied the boy in silence for some time.

“You walk badly,” she said at last.

“Yes, Madame,” he answered.

“Walk anyway.”

It was the most useful sentence anyone had yet addressed to him.

Through the summer he stayed at Chalais. The Princesse fed him, taught him to bow without compromising his balance, and allowed him to read in her library — a high-ceilinged room of cracked leather spines, where the air was so still that dust seemed to hang permanently in the slanted afternoon light. She did not embrace him. She did not pity him. She simply behaved, day after day, as though she had been expecting him.

It was the closest experience to maternal warmth he would ever know, and it lasted less than a season.

When he returned to Paris, the lesson stayed.

The world might be willing, on rare occasions, to acknowledge his existence.

But it would not be moved by any complaint.

So he stopped complaining.

— ■ —

As he grew older, observation became his refuge. Since he could not dominate physically, he learned to dominate silently.

At dinners he watched adults with the precision of a clockmaker. He noted who interrupted; who flattered; who lied convincingly; who feared embarrassment; who controlled conversations without raising the voice. He noticed the way certain women steered a salon by directing their eyes rather than their words; the way certain men inflated themselves before speaking and deflated only afterward; the way debt and reputation moved silently around a candlelit table without ever being mentioned by name.

The greatest power in a room, he discovered, rarely belonged to the loudest person.

Usually it belonged to the calmest.

One winter evening in Paris, after guests departed from a candlelit salon heavy with perfume, tobacco smoke, and exhausted laughter, his great-grandmother — visiting the city briefly, on one of her rare errands of family business — found him sitting alone beside the fireplace with a book far beyond his age. The fire was low. Somewhere, a footman was extinguishing candles in the next room.

She studied him for a moment.

“You observe too much,” she said finally.

The boy looked up carefully.

“Is that dangerous?”

A faint smile touched her face.

“For other people, yes.”

The answer remained with him for the rest of his life.

— ■ —

Paris in the 1760s glittered beautifully while decay spread beneath it like rot under polished wood.

The reign of Louis XV still projected magnificence to the outside world. Carriages rolled through crowded boulevards. Noblemen lost fortunes gambling in candlelit salons. Silk, orchestras, powdered wigs, diamonds,

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