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FRANZ KAFKA

The Trial

Translated and with an Introduction by IDRIS PARRY



PENGUIN BOOKS

Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	ix
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	xvii
<i>Arrest – Conversation with Frau Grubach – Then Fräulein Bürstner</i>	1
<i>First Examination</i>	25
<i>In the Empty Assembly Hall – The Student – The Offices</i>	39
<i>B.'s Friend</i>	59
<i>The Whipper</i>	66
<i>The Uncle – Leni</i>	72
<i>Advocate – Manufacturer – Painter</i>	90
<i>Merchant Block – Dismissal of the Advocate</i>	133
<i>In the Cathedral</i>	158
<i>End</i>	178

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Arrest – Conversation with Frau Grubach – Then Fräulein Bürstner

Somebody must have made a false accusation against Josef K., for he was arrested one morning without having done anything wrong. The cook employed by his landlady Frau Grubach who brought him his breakfast every morning at about eight o'clock did not come this time. That had never happened before. K. waited for a while and with his head on the pillow looked at the old lady living opposite who was observing him with a curiosity quite unusual for her, but then, feeling both annoyed and hungry, he rang the bell. Instantly there was a knock at the door and a man he had never before seen in the house came in. He was slim but solidly built, he wore a close-fitting black suit which was provided, in the manner of travelling outfits, with various pleats, pockets, buckles, buttons and a belt, and which consequently seemed eminently practical, though one could not be quite sure what its purpose was. 'Who are you?' asked K., starting to sit up in bed. But the man ignored the question, as if his appearance were to be accepted without query, and merely said: 'You rang?' 'Anna is supposed to be bringing me my breakfast,' said K., and then he tried to determine through silent observation and reflection who the man really was. The latter did not submit himself for long to this scrutiny but turned to the door and opened it a little to say to someone who must have been standing close behind the door: 'He wants Anna to bring him his breakfast.' This was followed by a short burst of laughter in the next room; from the sound it was hard to say if several persons might not be involved. Although the stranger could not have learned anything from this that he did not know before, yet he now said to K., as if making an announcement: 'It is impossible.' 'That's news to me,' said K., who

leaped out of bed and quickly got into his trousers. 'I must see who these people in the next room are and what explanation Frau Grubach will give for this disturbance.' He immediately realized of course that he should not have said this and that by doing so he had to some extent recognized the right of the stranger to supervise his actions, but it did not seem important to him now. All the same, this is how the stranger took his words, for he said: 'Wouldn't you rather stay here?' 'I will neither stay here nor be talked to by you unless you tell me who you are.' 'I meant well,' said the stranger and he now opened the door without further objection. In the next room, which K. entered more slowly than he intended, things looked at first glance almost exactly as they had on the previous evening. It was Frau Grubach's living-room; perhaps there was a little more space than usual in this room packed with furniture, rugs, china and photographs, but that was not immediately apparent, especially as the most striking change was the presence of a man who was sitting by the open window with a book, from which he now looked up. 'You should have stayed in your room! Didn't Franz tell you that?' 'Yes, but what do you want?' said K., and he looked from this new acquaintance to the one spoken of as Franz, who had remained in the doorway, and then back again. Through the open window the old woman was again visible; with true senile inquisitiveness she had moved to the corresponding window opposite so that she could continue to see everything. 'I want to see Frau Grubach –' said K., and he made an abrupt movement as if he were tearing himself free the two men who were in fact standing some distance away from him, and made to leave the room. 'No,' said the man by the window; he threw the book on a little table and stood up. 'You are not allowed to go from here. You are after all under arrest.' 'So it would seem,' said K. 'And for what reason?' he then asked. 'It's not our job to tell you that. Go into your room and wait. The proceedings have now been started and you will learn everything in good time. I am exceeding my instructions by talking to you in such a friendly way. But I hope nobody can hear this except Franz, and he himself has been obliging to you in defiance of regulations. If you continue to have as much good luck as you've had in the choice of your warders you

have reason to be confident.' K. wanted to sit down, but he now saw there was nowhere to sit in the whole room apart from the easy chair by the window. 'You will come to see how true that is,' said Franz, at the same time walking towards him with the other man. The latter in particular towered over K. and tapped him now and then on the shoulder. The two of them examined K.'s nightgown and said he would now have to wear a gown of much inferior quality, but they would take care of this gown as well as his other linen and would return everything to him if his case should turn out favourably. 'It's better to hand these things to us than to the depot,' they said, 'because there's a lot of thieving in the depot and, apart from that, things are sold after a specified time regardless of whether the relevant proceedings have been concluded or not. And how cases of this kind do drag on, especially as we've seen in recent times. Of course you would get the money eventually from the depot, but these proceeds are small enough in the first place because it's not the size of the offer which determines the sale but the size of the bribe, and secondly we know how such proceeds dwindle as they are passed from hand to hand over the years.' K. paid little attention to these words; the right which he still possessed to dispose of his things did not rank high in his estimation; to him it was much more important to understand his position clearly, but in the presence of these people he could not even think; the belly of the second warder – they could of course only be warders – bumped into him again and again in quite a friendly fashion, but when he looked up he saw that this fat body was out of keeping with the dry bony face, its prominent nose bent to one side, which was exchanging glances with the other warder over his head. What sort of people were they? What were they talking about? To which authority did they belong? After all, K. lived in a country which enjoyed law and order; there was universal peace; all the laws were upheld; so who dared pounce on him in his own home? He had always been inclined to take everything as easily as possible, to believe the worst only when the worst happened, not to worry about the future even when everything seemed threatening. But in this situation that did not seem right; one could of course regard the whole affair as a joke, a crude joke

organized for some unknown reason by his colleagues at the bank, perhaps because today was his thirtieth birthday. This was of course possible, perhaps all he had to do was laugh in some way in the warders' faces and they would laugh with him, perhaps they were porters picked off the street, they looked rather like that – all the same, ever since he had first seen the warder Franz he had been utterly determined not to surrender the slightest advantage he might possess in relation to these people. K. saw a very slight danger that people might say later he could not take a joke but, even though it had not been usual for him to learn from experience, he now recalled certain incidents, not important in themselves, when, unlike his friends, he had deliberately set out to behave rashly without the slightest regard for possible consequences and had suffered as a result. This was not to happen again, not this time anyway; if this was just a bit of make-believe, he would go along with it.

He was still free. 'Do you mind!' he said and passed quickly between the warders to his room. 'He seems to be reasonable,' he heard one say behind him. In his room he immediately pulled out the drawers of his desk; everything was arranged in perfect order, but in his agitated state he could not instantly find the identity papers he was looking for. At last he found his bicycle licence and thought of taking this to the warders, but then the paper seemed too trivial and he looked further until he found his birth certificate. As he was going back into the next room the door opposite was just opening and Frau Grubach was about to come in. She was visible only for an instant, for as soon as she saw K. she became embarrassed, begged for forgiveness and disappeared, closing the door with extreme care. 'But do come in,' was all that K. could have said. Now he stood in the middle of the room with his papers, still looking at the door, which did not open again, until he was roused by a shout from the warders, who were sitting at the small table by the open window and, as K. now realized, were devouring his breakfast. 'Why didn't she come in?' he asked. 'She's not allowed to,' said the tall warder. 'You're under arrest, after all.' 'But how can I be under arrest? And above all in this way?' 'Now you're beginning again,' said the warder and he dipped his bread and butter in the honey jar. 'We

don't answer such questions.' 'You'll have to answer them,' said K. 'Here are my identity papers; now show me yours, and especially the warrant for my arrest.' 'Dear God in heaven!' said the warder. 'Why can't you just accept your position, why do you seem determined to irritate us needlessly, we who probably stand closer to you now than any other of your fellow men?' 'That's how it is, do believe that,' said Franz; he did not raise to his mouth the coffee cup he held in his hand but looked at K. with a lingering glance which was probably meaningful but yet incomprehensible. In spite of himself, K. entered on an exchange of glances with Franz, but then slapped his papers and said: 'Here are my identity papers.' 'What have they got to do with us?' shouted the tall warder. 'You're behaving worse than a child. What do you want? Is it your idea to bring your damned great case to a quick conclusion by arguing with us, your warders, about identification and arrest warrant? We are junior officials who hardly know one end of an identity document from another and have nothing more to do with your case than to stand guard over you for ten hours a day and be paid for it. That's all we are, but we are capable of seeing that the high authorities we serve would not order such an arrest without gathering exact information about the reasons for the arrest and about the person to be arrested. There's no room for mistake. Our authorities, as far as I know them, and I know only the lowest grades, do not go in search of guilt in the population but are, as it says in the law, drawn to guilt and must send us warders out. That is law. Where could there be a mistake in that?' 'This law is unknown to me,' said K. 'All the worse for you,' said the warder. 'It probably exists only in your heads,' said K., who wanted to worm his way somehow into the warders' minds, turn their thoughts to his advantage or entrench himself there. But the warder merely said in an indifferent manner: 'You'll soon come up against it.' Franz intervened and said: 'See, Willem, he admits he doesn't know the law and says at the same time he's innocent.' 'You're quite right, but you can't make him understand anything,' said the other. K. made no further answer; do I, he thought, have to let myself be even more confused by the twaddle of these lowest of instruments – they themselves admit that's all they are? Anyway,

they are talking about things they don't understand at all. Their certainty is possible only because of their stupidity. A few words with someone on my own level will make things incomparably clearer than the longest conversations with these two. He walked up and down a few times in the open space in the room; across the way he saw the old woman, who had dragged an even older man to the window and now held him tightly; K. had to make an end of this exhibition. 'Take me to your superior,' he said. 'When he tells us to, not before,' said the warder who had been addressed as Willem. 'And now I advise you', he added, 'to go into your room, keep calm, and wait to see what will be decreed about you. We advise you not to disturb yourself with useless thoughts but to pull yourself together; great demands will be made on you. You haven't treated us in the way our considerate attitude might have deserved. You've forgotten that we, whatever we might be, are at this moment in relation to you at least free men, and that's no mean superiority. Nevertheless we are ready, if you have the money, to fetch you a light breakfast from the café opposite.'

Without making a reply to this offer, K. stood quietly for a moment. Perhaps if he were to open the door into the next room or even the door into the hall, these two would not dare get in his way, perhaps the simplest solution of the whole thing would be to take it to an extreme. But perhaps they might get hold of him all the same, and once he were thrown on the floor all the superiority he still preserved to a certain degree in relation to them would be lost. So he came down in favour of the solution which must come in the natural course of events and went back into his room without another word being uttered either by him or the warders.

He threw himself on his bed and took from the bedside table a fine apple he had put aside the previous evening for his breakfast. Now it was all the breakfast he had, and at any rate, as he ascertained from his first great bite, much better than the breakfast from the filthy night café which he might have got through the gracious favour of the warders. He felt well and confident. True, he was absent from his post in the bank this morning, but that could easily be excused because of the comparatively high position he held

there. Should he tell them the real reason? He thought he might do so. If they did not believe him – which was understandable in this case – he could call Frau Grubach as witness, or even the two old people from over the way who were probably now moving to the opposite window. K. was surprised; at least, when he tried to follow the warders' train of thought, he was surprised they had forced him into his room and left him here alone with all the many possibilities he had of killing himself. But at the same time he asked himself, trying to see it from his own point of view, what reason he could have for doing such a thing. Because those two were sitting next door and had intercepted his breakfast? Killing himself would have been so senseless that even if he had wanted to he would not have been able to do it, because of its senselessness. If the intellectual limitations of the warders had not been so obvious, one might have assumed they too shared this conviction and therefore saw no danger in leaving him on his own. They could watch if they liked as he went to a cupboard where he kept a bottle of fine schnapps and see how first of all he drank off a glass in place of breakfast and then a second to give himself courage, the second only as a precaution for the improbable event that it might be necessary.

Then a call from the next room startled him so much that his teeth struck against the glass. 'The supervisor wants you,' was the message. It was only the shout that startled him, this curt, clipped, military shout he would not have thought possible coming from the warder Franz. The command itself was very welcome. 'At last,' he shouted back and locked the wardrobe and hurried straight into the next room. There the two warders were standing and they drove him back into his room as if this were a matter of course. 'What are you thinking of?' they cried. 'You want to appear before the supervisor in your shirt? He'd have you thrashed, and us with you!' 'Let me be, for heaven's sake!' said K., who had already been pushed back as far as the wardrobe. 'If you pounce on me in my bed you can't expect to find me in my best suit.' 'That doesn't help,' said the warders who, when K. shouted, became quite calm, almost melancholy, and thus confused him or to some extent brought him to his senses. 'Ridiculous formalities!' he growled, but he had already taken a

jacket from the chair and was holding it out with both hands as if spreading it for the warders' judgement. They shook their heads. 'It must be a black coat,' they said. K. threw the jacket on the floor and said – he himself did not know in what sense he meant this: 'After all, it's not the main hearing yet.' The warders smiled but kept to their 'It must be a black coat.' 'If I can hurry up the business in this way, I don't mind,' said K., and he opened the wardrobe, looked for some time among the collection of clothes, selected his best black suit, a two-piece that had caused quite a sensation among his acquaintances because of its cut, put another shirt on too, and began to dress with care. He secretly thought he had managed to expedite the whole affair because the warders had forgotten to make him take a bath. He watched them in case they might yet remember that, but of course it did not occur to them, although Willem did not forget to send Franz to the supervisor with the message that K. was getting dressed.

When he was fully dressed he had to walk in front of Willem through the empty room next door into the adjoining room whose double door was already open. This room, as K. well knew, had been taken recently by a Fräulein Bürstner, a typist, who went off to work very early, came back late, and with whom K. had exchanged little more than a passing greeting. Now the bedside table had been moved from the bed to the middle of the room to serve as the interrogator's desk, and the supervisor sat behind it. His legs were crossed, one arm was draped over the back of the chair. In the corner of the room stood three young persons looking at Fräulein Bürstner's photographs stuck on a board which hung on the wall. A white blouse was hanging on the latch of the open window. The two old people were again to be seen in the window across the way, but the group had increased in size, for behind them and towering over them was a man with an open-necked shirt who stroked and twirled his reddish goatee with his fingers.

'Josef K.?' queried the supervisor, perhaps only to draw K.'s distracted glances to himself. K. nodded. 'You must be very surprised by this morning's events?' the supervisor asked and at the same time used both hands to move the few objects on the bedside table, the

candle with matches, a book and a pincushion, as if these were objects he required for his interrogation. 'Certainly,' said K., and he was overcome with pleasure at meeting a reasonable man at last and being able to discuss his case with him, 'certainly I am surprised, but I am by no means very surprised.' 'Not very surprised?' asked the supervisor and now placed the candle in the middle of the table and grouped the other objects around it. 'Perhaps you misunderstand me,' K. hastened to remark. 'I mean . . .' Here K. broke off and looked round for a chair. 'I can sit down?' he asked. 'It's not customary,' answered the supervisor. 'I mean,' said K. without further delay, 'I am as a matter of fact very surprised, but when you've spent thirty years in this world and had to fight your way through as I've had to, you become hardened to surprises and don't take them too seriously. Especially today's.' 'Why especially today's?' 'I'm not going to say I regard the whole thing as a joke; the arrangements that have been made seem too extensive for that. All the people in the boarding-house would have to be involved, and all of you too. That would take it beyond the limits of a joke. So I'm not going to say it's a joke.' 'Quite right,' said the supervisor, and he looked to see how many matches there were in the matchbox. 'But on the other hand,' K. went on, and he turned to them all and would have liked to include the three standing by the photographs, 'on the other hand, the matter can't be very important either. I deduce this from the fact that I'm accused of something but can't find the slightest guilt to justify an accusation. But that's a minor point. The main question is: who is accusing me? What authority is conducting these proceedings? Are you officials? Nobody's got a uniform unless' – here he turned to Franz – 'we can call what you are wearing a uniform, but it's more like a travelling outfit. I'd like to have these points cleared up, and I'm sure that after this clarification we'll be able to take leave of each other most amicably.' The supervisor slammed the matchbox down on the table. 'You are making a great mistake,' he said. 'These gentlemen here and I are of minor importance to your case, indeed we know almost nothing about it. We could be wearing the most correct uniforms and your business would be none the worse. I am absolutely unable to tell you that you

stand accused, or rather I don't know if you are. You are under arrest, that's true, I don't know more than that. Perhaps the warders have said something more in gossip, but that's only their gossip. Even if I can't answer your questions I can, however, advise you to think less about us and about what may happen to you, and more about yourself. And don't make such a palaver about your feeling of innocence, it detracts from the not unfavourable impression you make otherwise. You should be more restrained in what you say too, nearly everything you said just now could have been inferred from your conduct even if you had said only a few words, and in any case it was nothing of great advantage to you.'

K. stared at the supervisor. Was he to get schoolboy maxims here from a person perhaps younger than himself? Was his openness to be punished with a reprimand? And was he to learn nothing about the reason for his arrest and who had ordered it? Thrown into a state of some agitation, he walked up and down without hindrance from the others, pushed his cuffs back, touched his chest, smoothed his hair down, went past the three gentlemen and said: 'But it's senseless,' whereupon these three turned towards him and looked at him in a sympathetic but earnest way, and finally he came to a stop by the supervisor's table again. 'Hasterer from the prosecutor's office is a good friend of mine,' he said. 'Can I phone him?' 'Of course,' said the supervisor, 'but I don't know what sense there's supposed to be in that, unless you have some private matter to discuss with him.' 'What sense?' cried K., more shaken than annoyed. 'But who are you? You ask for sense and you are putting on the most senseless exhibition yourself. Isn't it enough to melt a stone? First these gentlemen pounced on me and now they're sitting or standing around here expecting me to do tricks for you like a performing horse. What sense there might be in telephoning a lawyer when I'm supposed to be under arrest? All right, I won't telephone.' 'But do,' said the supervisor and he pointed to the hall, where the telephone was, 'but please do telephone.' 'No, I don't want to now,' said K. and went to the window. Across the way the group was still at the window and only now, because K. had come to the window, did their quiet contemplation seem a little disturbed. The old people tried to stand, but

the man behind reassured them. 'There are more spectators over there,' shouted K. quite loudly to the supervisor and he pointed across with his finger. 'Away from there,' he then shouted at them. 'The three immediately fell back a few steps, the two old people even retreated behind the man, who shielded them with his broad body and, to judge by the movements of his mouth, was saying something which was incomprehensible at that distance. But they did not disappear completely, they seemed to be waiting for the moment when they could come to the window again without being observed. 'Impertinent, thoughtless people!' said K. as he turned back to the room. It was possible the supervisor agreed with him, or so K. thought when he gave him a sideways glance. But it was just as possible he had not even been listening, for he had pressed one hand firmly on the table and seemed to be comparing the lengths of his fingers. The two warders sat on a chest covered with an embroidered cloth and were rubbing their knees. The three young people had their hands on their hips and were looking around aimlessly. It was as quiet as in some abandoned office. 'Now, gentlemen,' cried K., who felt for a moment as if he were carrying them all on his shoulders, 'to judge from your expressions, this affair of mine must be at an end. In my opinion the best thing is not to brood any more about whether what you've done is justified or not justified but to bring the matter to a peaceful conclusion with a mutual handshake. If you share my opinion, then please . . .' and he stepped up to the supervisor's table and offered him his hand. The supervisor raised his eyes, chewed his lips, and looked at K.'s outstretched hand. K. still believed the supervisor would shake hands in agreement. But the latter stood up, took a hard round hat which lay on Fräulein Bürstner's bed and placed it carefully on his head with both hands, just as one does when trying on new hats. 'How simple everything seems to you,' he said to K. as he was doing this. 'We should bring the matter to a peaceful conclusion, is that your opinion? No, no, that really won't do. By which, on the other hand, I definitely don't mean to say you should despair. No, why should you? You're only under arrest, that's all. That's what I had to communicate to you, I've done that, and I've also seen how you've taken it. That's enough for today and we can