The Trial

Franz Kafka

Definitive Edition
but the questions are put quite impersonally, as great men
put questions, and always conclude with the statement that
the man cannot be allowed to enter yet. The man, who has
equipped himself with many things for his journey, parts
with all he has, however valuable, in the hope of bribing
the doorkeeper. The doorkeeper accepts it all, saying, how-
ever, as he takes each gift: 'I take this only to keep you
from feeling that you have left something undone.' During
all these long years the man watches the doorkeeper almost
incessantly. He forgets about the other doorkeepers, and
this one seems to him the only barrier between himself and
the Law. In the first years he curses his evil fate aloud;
later, as he grows old, he only mutters to himself. He
grows childish, and since in his prolonged study of the
doorkeeper he has learned to know even the fleas in his fur
collar, he begs the very fleas to help him and to persuade
the doorkeeper to change his mind. Finally his eyes grow
dim and he does not know whether the world is really
darkening around him or whether his eyes are only deceiv-
ing him. But in the darkness he can now perceive a radi-
ance that streams inextinguishably from the door of the
Law. Now his life is drawing to a close. Before he dies, all
that he has experienced during the whole time of his so-
journ condenses in his mind into one question, which he
has never yet put to the doorkeeper. He beckons the door-
keeper, since he can no longer raise his stiffening body.
The doorkeeper has to bend far down to hear him, for the
difference in size between them has increased very much
to the man's disadvantage. 'What do you want to know
now?' asks the doorkeeper, 'you are insatiable.' 'Everyone
strives to attain the Law,' answers the man, 'how does it
come about, then, that in all these years no one has come
seeking admittance but me?' The doorkeeper perceives that
the man is nearing his end and his hearing is failing, so he
calls in his ear: 'No one but you could gain admittance
through this door, since this door was intended for you. I
am now going to shut it.'"

"So the doorkeeper deceived the man," said K.
immediately, strongly attracted by the story. "Don't be too
hasty," said the priest, "don't take over someone else's opin-
on without testing it. I have told you the story in the very
words of the scriptures. There's no mention of deception
in it." "But it's clear enough," said K., "and your first inter-
pretation of it was quite right. The doorkeeper gave the
message of salvation to the man only when it could no
longer help him." "He was not asked the question any
earlier," said the priest, "and you must consider, too, that
he was only a doorkeeper, and as such fulfilled his duty." 
"What makes you think he fulfilled his duty?" asked K.
"He didn't fulfill it. His duty might have been to keep all
strangers away, but this man, for whom the door was in-
tended, should have been let in." "You have not enough
respect for the written word and you are altering the
story," said the priest. "The story contains two important
statements made by the doorkeeper about admission to the
Law, one at the beginning, the other at the end. The first
statement is: that he cannot admit the man at the moment,
and the other is: that this door was intended only for the
man. If there were a contradiction between the two, you
would be right and the doorkeeper would have deceived
the man. But there is no contradiction. The first statement,
on the contrary, even implies the second. One could almost
say that in suggesting to the man the possibility of future
admittance the doorkeeper is exceeding his duty. At that
time his apparent duty is only to refuse admittance and
indeed many commentators are surprised that the sugges-
tion should be made at all, since the doorkeeper appears
to be a precisian with a stern regard for duty. He does not
once leave his post during these many years, and he does
not shut the door until the very last minute; he is conscious
man away, but gives him, as we are told, a stool and lets him sit down beside the door. The patience with which he endures the man's appeals during so many years, the brief conversations, the acceptance of the gifts, the politeness with which he allows the man to curse loudly in his presence the fate for which he himself is responsible—all this lets us deduce certain feelings of pity. Not every doorkeeper would have acted thus. And finally, in answer to a gesture of the man's he bends down to give him the chance of putting a last question. Nothing but mild impatience—the doorkeeper knows that this is the end of it all—is discernible in the words: 'You are insatiable.' Some push this mode of interpretation even further and hold that these words express a kind of friendly admiration, though not without a hint of condescension. At any rate the figure of the doorkeeper can be said to come out very differently from what you fancied.
to say, he serves only this man for whom alone the entrance is intended. On that ground too he is inferior to the man. One must assume that for many years, for as long as it takes a man to grow up to the prime of life, his service was in a sense an empty formality, since he had to wait for a man to come, that is to say someone in the prime of life, and so he had to wait a long time before the purpose of his service could be fulfilled, and, moreover, had to wait on the man’s pleasure, for the man came of his own free will. But the termination of his service also depends on the man’s term of life, so that to the very end he is subject to the man. And it is emphasized throughout that the doorkeeper apparently realizes nothing of all this. That is not in itself remarkable, since according to this interpretation the doorkeeper is deceived in a much more important issue, affecting his very office. At the end, for example, he says regarding the entrance to the Law: ‘I am now going to shut it,’ but at the beginning of the story we are told that the door leading into the Law always stands open, and if it always stands open, that is to say at all times, without reference to the life or death of the man, then the doorkeeper cannot close it. There is some difference of opinion about the motive behind the doorkeeper’s statement, whether he said he was going to close the door merely for the sake of giving an answer, or to emphasize his devotion to duty, or to bring the man into a state of grief and regret in his last moments. But there is no lack of agreement that the doorkeeper will not be able to shut the door. Many indeed profess to find that he is subordinate to the man even in knowledge, toward the end, at least, for the man sees the radiance that issues from the door of the Law while the doorkeeper in his official position must stand with his back to the door, nor does he say anything to show that he has perceived the change.” “That is well argued,” said K., after repeating to himself in a low voice several
passages from the priest’s exposition. “It is well argued, and I am inclined to agree that the doorkeeper is deceived. But that has not made me abandon my former opinion, since both conclusions are to some extent compatible. Whether the doorkeeper is clear-sighted or deceived does not dispose of the matter. I said the man is deceived. If the doorkeeper is clear-sighted, one might have doubts about that, but if the doorkeeper himself is deceived, then his deception must of necessity be communicated to the man. That makes the doorkeeper not, indeed, a deceiver, but a creature so simple-minded that he ought to be dismissed at once from his office. You mustn’t forget that the doorkeeper’s deceptions do himself no harm but do infinite harm to the man.” “There are objections to that,” said the priest. “Many aver that the story confers no right on anyone to pass judgment on the doorkeeper. Whatever he may seem to us, he is yet a servant of the Law; that is, he belongs to the Law and as such is beyond human judgment. In that case one must not believe that the doorkeeper is subordinate to the man. Bound as he is by his service, even only at the door of the Law, he is incomparably greater than anyone at large in the world. The man is only seeking the Law, the doorkeeper is already attached to it. It is the Law that has placed him at his post; to doubt his dignity is to doubt the Law itself.” “I don’t agree with that point of view,” said K., shaking his head, “for if one accepts it, one must accept as true everything the doorkeeper says. But you yourself have sufficiently proved how impossible it is to do that.” “No,” said the priest, “it is not necessary to accept everything as true, one must only accept it as necessary.” A melancholy conclusion,” said K. “It turns lying into a universal principle.”

K. said that with finality, but it was not his final judgment. He was too tired to survey all the conclusions arising from the story, and the trains of thought into which it was leading him were unfamiliar, dealing with impalpabilities better suited to a theme for discussion among Court officials than for him. The simple story had lost its clear outline, he wanted to put it out of his mind, and the priest, who now showed great delicacy of feeling, suffered him to do so and accepted his comment in silence, although undoubtedly he did not agree with it.

They paced up and down for a while in silence, K. walking close beside the priest, ignorant of his whereabouts. The lamp in his hand had long since gone out. The silver image of some saint once glimmered into sight immediately before him, by the sheen of its own silver, and was instantaneously lost in the darkness again. To keep himself from being utterly dependent on the priest, K. asked: “Aren’t we near the main doorway now?” “No,” said the priest, “we’re a long way from it. Do you want to leave already?” Although at that moment K. had not been thinking of leaving, he answered at once: “Of course, I must go. I’m the Chief Clerk of a Bank, they’re waiting for me, I only came here to show a business friend from abroad round the Cathedral.” “Well,” said the priest, reaching out his hand to K., “then go.” “But I can’t find my way alone in this darkness,” said K. “Turn left to the wall,” said the priest, “then follow the wall without leaving it and you’ll come to a door.” The priest had already taken a step or two away from him, but K. cried out in a loud voice, “Please wait a moment.” “I am waiting,” said the priest. “Don’t you want anything more from me?” asked K. “No,” said the priest. “You were so friendly to me for a time,” said K., “and explained so much to me, and now you let me go as if you cared nothing about me.” “But you have to leave now,” said the priest. “Well, yes,” said K., “you must see that I can’t help it.” “You must first see who I am,”