

## Bureaucracy by Fyodor Dostoevsky

Some days ago, in Il. province, it happened that a young man arrived at a boarding-house. He was an entirely unremarkable young man – dark hair, sunken eyes. He was too thin because he had never quite kicked the habits he had picked up in his days as a student.

The boarding-house was well-known in some circles. It was originally a home for some of the country's greatest heroes, to this engineer or that scientist. The original landlord, though, had long since passed on, and the boarding-house itself had gradually faded from renown. The current tenants seemed content to keep it that way (though there were rumors that each Spring they took pains to remind the public of their existence by any means possible – the young man smiled to imagine it).

The man entered and, directed by a steward, walked into a large common room to his right. A green rug was spread over the tile floor. There were couches and chairs of all varieties, and people of all varieties seated upon them. One man, made tall by the air of authority he carried, stood at a wooden podium. Presently he turned to the newcomer:

“Ah! *Quelle bonne chance!*<sup>1</sup> No doubt you were dispatched from the capital directly.” His eyes twinkled merrily – he had recently grown disillusioned with his power and was not entirely sure his request to the higher-ups would be heeded. “You’ll be taking the notes, then?”

The young man nodded, and indicated the notebook and pencil he carried.

“Then sit, sit,” said the man in charge, indicating a chair. “You’ll want a good view of the spectacle. Without delay, then,” he said, now addressing everyone in the room, “two of our most esteemed representatives will present you with a charade!”

At this point two men entered – certainly no older than twenty years, but probably nineteen or eighteen – and presented themselves to the assembled crowd. The one was dressed in a mode that had seen brief popularity some thirty years ago. The other, a generally reserved youth by the look of him, was somehow got-up in ladies’ attire. The two presented a charming lampoon: a story of seduction in the style that was once popular.

Our hero, the minor bureaucrat dispatched from the capital, bent over his notebook so as not to leave out any detail.

The entertainment portion of the meeting thus concluded, the presidential figure turned to more mundane business. The secretary breathed a secret sigh – so far this meeting had been like none he had seen before.

A new man – more distinguished, somehow – stood. “I am pleased to report a new arrival in our family,” he began. This was met with much cheering and good-will. “With little Julian Jeremiovich in our lives, I don’t doubt that many of us will be getting much less sleep.” Laughter. “But in celebration, I’ll receive anyone who cares to visit on Saturday – and give them free food to boot.

“But come now, there’s no point to my carrying on this way. Come here, Daniel, Danya, and little Perlenka, you two that I love as my own children. Say your piece!”

At the distinguished man’s request, two more people rose, a gentleman and a lady who also seemed to hold some authority over the assembled crowd.

“Tuesday next is Saint Valentine’s Day,” began the gentleman. “What better time, then, to go on a wonderful group outing? We’ll visit the zoo in L. Park.”

“It will be a perfectly gay affair,” put in the lady. “And on Wednesday, our receiving day, we’ve arranged some extra help to entertain whoever stops in.”

“Too true!” came a voice from the back of the room. All eyes turned as another two rose to speak. “That extra help now presents themselves to you,” continued a tall, bearded man.

“Indeed, Max,” said his companion, a shorter lady. “But we are not only assisting at that *soirée*: we have plans of our own for this coming week.”

“What are they?” came a shout.

“A ‘Secret Cupid’ contest,” replied the lady.

“What? Cupid? That Roman imp of love?” asked the heckler.

“None other. The contest is quite simple. Even you should be able to manage it,” she said drily. When no response came from her adversary, she continued: “Anyone who partakes in the contest shall be secretly assigned the name of one of his neighbors. Their task shall be to find some trinket or bauble and

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<sup>1</sup> What good luck!

present it secretly to their assigned person. This way, everyone receives some small token of companionship on Saint Valentine's Day."

"Very well," announced the man at the podium, cutting off further debate as to the merits or drawbacks of giving spinning-tops or self-sticking papers as gifts. "I now call upon our representative to the Council to give his report."

At this, a meek young man stood and approached the podium. When he spoke, it was not a voice that seemed suited to impassioned oration in some great hall of debate: he discussed the showing of the boarding-house's members in a recent contest of wits – an endeavor earning nearly eight rubles for the common good. (At this, the treasurer interrupted in the interests of precision: it was seven rubles and twenty-five kopecks.)

After the representative to the Council had had his say, a frenzied man with unruly hair and a round cap rose and strode to the front of the room.

"I can contain myself no longer!" he exclaimed. There might have been a commotion at this outburst, but it died quickly before the force of conviction. "It's all lies, all of it! Those fools – no competition at all and they've taken it as an excuse to walk all over us! Well, I, for one, won't have any part of it. Who's with me?"

With some coaxing, the assembled crowd was able to learn that the object of ire was none other than the local grocer.

"Those criminals at Bartlett have sung their last song!" he yelled. "There's not a whit of justice in this world, not when Winter is six months of flat, gray days and the least a man wants is something to fill his belly in the mornings – but they won't do it. It's barely palatable. Criminal, I say! Who's with me?"

At length, the commotion died down and some brave souls had agreed to help register complaints.

"One further point of business," said the president, when some form of order had been restored. "As you all have no doubt realized, every week at our discussions there are many proposals, and many announcements for such-and-such affair at this time and this place. It's nearly impossible for any one man to keep track of it all. To that end, I propose that we standardize some system of making announcements. I myself would be willing to post a paper in a common area, to advise passers-by of current goings-on. However, I must ask this body for some small recompense, for the cost is beyond my means."

There was lively debate, but in the end, the note-taker was amazed by the bureaucratic efficiency with which they tabled the motion until the next meeting.

"Are there any other announcements?" asked the president.

He was met with a chorus:

"Friday, at nine o'clock, come see a spectacle of improvisational comedy!"

"Saturday next, be in this space for artistic performances and exotic coffees!"

"Cast your ballot for a tunic that immortalizes this boarding-house!"

"Thursday, come to a performance of song!"

"See a poetry competition in honor of Saint Valentine!"

"Watch and ridicule 'The Beast from Ten Thousand Fathoms,' Sunday at ten o'clock!"

"Clearly," muttered the president, "we have no need for such a system as the one I was proposing. No need at all."

At this, the note-taker smiled behind his notebook.

Once the meeting had adjourned, the note-taker went on his way. It was now his solemn duty to write up a report, to inform his superiors – no, he decided, let us say bosses, not superiors – of what had transpired these past fifty minutes.

As he walked away, he mused that maybe he had learned something from this particular meeting. He fancied he had seen the festering truth that lies at the heart of all bureaucracies: his report, he decided, like all reports and all decisions, could probably wait until next week.