Mogens Klitgaard

There's a Man Sitting on a Trolley

Translated and with an Introduction and Notes by Marc Linder

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1

Enveloped in spiderwebs, silvery-glistening with morning fog and dew, this nice little country greets September. All around the coasts the tuna are beginning to turn up, and in the quiet mornings the sputtering of the fishing boats’ motors can be heard when they return home fully loaded with shiny, fat autumn herring. For the last time the boat sails to Saltholm with Copenhagener fond of outings, and, along North Zealand’s highways, garden owners are standing and offering passers-by the first fruits for sale. On Nybro Road’s houses the Virginia creepers are redder than blood, and on Copenhagen’s boulevards the leaves on the trees are beginning to yellow; on the big avenue along Deer Park’s border near Hjortekær the chestnuts are lying strewn across the wet ground. The starlings are gathering to prepare their departure, and in all decent houses there’s heat in the pipes. The waiters in the sidewalk cafes are wailing that it’s chilly, and in the country the farmers are wailing that there hasn’t been enough rain for the beets. People who have lots of time are solving open-house coupon-book puzzles, and others are chatting only about the Landsting election. Some are talking about sulfuric acid’s again yielding 12-percent dividends. The big language courses are opening now and the fashion houses are busy preparing the ladies’ winter gowns: it was laid down long ago that pink silver lamé will be the coming season’s big craze. There’s never any mistaking September. There’s not a place in this whole little wonderland where you can’t see it’s September. In the marshes the cattails are swaying and the rushes’ downy heads are whispering of the summer that passed and the winter
that’s coming.

But nobody feels more than the warehouse clerk that the
summer’s over. He’s a dreamer. Sentimental. And now that
he’s lost Anna, his dreams have glorified her and embellished
her. The funny thing is, at the same time he’s trying to convince
himself that there really wasn’t that much to her that he’s lost out
on something. But the dreams have taken over anyway, and little
by little she stands so idealized in his consciousness that prob­
ably he could barely recognize her if he runs into her.

And the chances of his running into her aren’t that small, be­
cause of course he knows more or less where she makes her
daily rounds and instinctively he steers his steps that way. And
maybe she didn’t mean it that seriously, maybe it was just a
whim, and if they do run into each other, everything will be all
right again. She just doesn’t want to be the one who takes the
first step. At least that’s the way he’s fond of picturing the en­
counter to himself. He pictures it to himself in all imaginable
details. She’ll come walking in her swagger coat and with her
beret, which is pushed down over her forehead, and at the very
moment he sees her, she’ll smile warmly and her eyes will say:
Can we be good friends again.

Sometimes he appears ridiculous to himself. Going around
acting like an idiot for a girl’s sake. A girl who’s jilted him. He
gets a grip on himself and says that now this is too much of a
good thing. But then suddenly, while he’s standing there putting
an invoice in an envelope in the warehouse, he again sees her im­
age before him, her lips, her eyes, her hair, and he gets a feeling
that something in him is going to force him to burst into tears.

Again and again he tells himself that it’s only a matter of
time; then her image will appear more and more infrequently,
and little by little he’ll forget her. But it doesn’t at all look as
though things are going to go that way. If anything, they’re get­
ning worse and worse. He’s considering writing to her and tell­
ing her how much he longs for her, but instinctively he feels that
that’d be the worst thing he could do. When you say to a wom­
an: Come, then she goes, and if you say: Go, then she comes.

Besides, there’s that business with the pullover. It’s a hope
he’s clinging to. After all, she’d said that even if they were now through with each other, he’d get his pullover. So sooner or later she’ll be forced to get in touch with him: after all, his measurements will have to be taken and the like. And even if she finishes it without taking his measurements, of course she’ll have to give it to him. So if he’s just patient, the whole thing’ll turn out all right. He just can’t let her know in any way how much he longs for her—that’ll just ruin the whole thing.

II

As Lundegaard had imagined, he’s still riding around on his bike in Sundby collecting debts. No change has taken place. He’s been to the Fabric Warehouse and the world was quite the same when he left there as when he went up there. Naturally, he had hell to pay: the department head wasn’t nearly so polite as when he was up there to get the fabric. But Lundegaard had the trump up his sleeve that in the last analysis his brother-in-law would probably lend him the 200. That lent his demeanor more composure and his humble politeness did the rest. Naturally, the department head wasn’t any monster: he understood what had driven Lundegaard to his desperate act. Besides, the department head’s daughter’s getting married next month and these days the department head was fond of the role of philanthropist. And the main thing, of course, was that the firm got its money and that the department head didn’t get into any trouble. So at first there was talk of four monthly installments of 50 crowns, but when Lundegaard said he didn’t feel he could manage that, they agreed on 20 crowns per month. That was a humane arrangement, and Lundegaard felt convinced that he could easily manage it. All things considered, he’d gotten back his courage. Things would be okay after all, they’d be okay.

But there’s still the permanent job he has to have as a goal. As long as he went around believing that things could come crashing down any day, there was of course no point in working with a longer view—the point was just to create as many liquid
assets as possible in order to be able to stave off the dangers little by little as they arose. It was like in war when you exploit all available possibilities in order to cope with the moment. Now he felt as if peace had been concluded and the point was to build up from the bottom, to work with a long view. That was probably also why his prospects weren’t very good: he’d constantly had to maneuver, had drawn on future promissory notes in order to manage the situation, notes that had to be paid off later, and paid with more than he’d received. It was clear that this way you’d just get in deeper and deeper. It was crazy to believe you could get through the rest of your life with the help of maneuvers. Naturally he realized it the whole time, but the circumstances had forced him to maneuver. And no one can say anything except that he was clever at managing the most desperate situations. His family should know what they owed him. But they didn’t have the slightest notion about what dangers had threatened their little home, dangers he’d parried, one after the other, calmly and cold-bloodedly, without ever losing his head. And they’d never hear about it—he wasn’t the man to toot his own horn.

The only thing was he realized now that all the clever observations, all the economic summaries, budgets, didn’t help a bit. The only thing that could help was for him to get another job and get to earn more money, not just five or ten crowns more a week, but something that would make a difference. That’s what he had to put his energy into. He had to try to become a travelling salesman or something. In the dry-goods trade. Naturally that was doable. After all, he was a capable man in his line of business, a good judge of fabrics and workmanship, former businessman, and with an ability to socialize with people.

Because what’s been happening until now has of course been nothing but a rearrangement of debt items. And at the same time the debt’s increased—the debt’s increased incessantly. Yeah, when he really considers it, there probably were to be sure a couple of months when they just made ends meet; those were months when he lived according to the principle: Be thrifty and energetic. But it’d be impossible to live life that way: you can do that for a couple of months or three, but not constantly. That
was the old saying about cutting your coat according to your cloth, and of course that was all right, but naturally it didn’t mean you should put up with living the way you were without trying to make it better. Then after all you could really just as well sit in jail—you could make a living there, too, all right. It was fine to focus your energy on making ends meet, but it’d be better to focus it on getting yourself a more plentiful source of income. When all was said and done, in spite of everything, that was where the rub was.

Travelling salesman would be excellent, and besides, he was the man a firm wouldn’t regret having. True enough, Lundegaard knew full well that there are so many travelling salesmen you could use them as hog feed, but there’s always a chance for a capable man. And doesn’t it happen to be true that you can do whatever you want to. And Lundegaard had both the energy and the ability—the point was just to tackle the matter the right way.

There were several methods that could lead to the goal, but especially two that seemed to contain possibilities of yielding results. One was an ad stating that a former dry-goods merchant with many years of knowledge of the trade would like to travel about the country for a larger firm. Don’t ever pretend to be less than you are, especially not in the business world. But with his knowledge of life, Lundegaard really feels that it’s the other method that will probably get him the desired position. And the other method was influence. He had to consider what connections he had in wholesale dry goods, look up these connections, and get into something that way. After all, they could hire him on probation; hell, he’d certainly show them he was the man who could sell a product. When he thought about the travelling salesmen he knew, he got fresh courage. If they could, so could he. He wasn’t at all the man to overrate himself, but if he had to say so himself, he might dare say that he could perform the work better than many of the ones he knew. A good deal better at that.
A September evening like this is, in spite of everything, about as wonderful as they come. The lighting and temperature, colors and scents evoke in you a calm, restrained zest for life. September's the late season for love and delight in nature. September's not, like May, a month of big tempestuous emotions: there are no crimes of passion, no nightingales in Ordrup Scrub, no sighing in moonlit maids' rooms, no hullabaloo at the inn dances in the countryside—just a calm and gentle afterglow of the strong manifestations of life in the spring. It's the farewell to summer that brings out the same feelings as the welcome after the bleak, meager winter; it's the evening whose symptoms resemble those of the morning.

The human tide glides down along Vesterbro Street in both directions, the stores' lights gush out across the street, and from the roofs the neon lights' strong colors attract the eyes. The girl in the mauve outfit isn't wearing the mauve outfit any more. But since she loves mauve and mauve's the fall's big fashion, she wears a mauve dress under the imitation jaguar coat, which is new and flashy, and probably must have cost a hundred crowns or thereabouts. Maybe she doesn't have her boyfriend to support any more; maybe it's a Swedish wholesale merchant who was on a business trip to the king's city. Besides, it's only in daylight that you can see that the jaguar is imitation, and of course she's rarely on the street in daylight. After all, something's still happening, and of course the girl in the jaguar coat also reflects on her life and right now is of the view that, in spite of everything, there's no sense going around and saving up and dreaming about a store: the facts show that it doesn't lead to anything. You'd better enjoy life while you're young and look good: at least no one can take away from you the pleasures you've had. The point is to earn money, buy pretty clothes and show up at the places where it's all happening, where life's pulsating. Maybe someone'll fall in love with her and marry her. Just don't take life too seriously. You've got to smile, be happy and reckless the way the real men like it. After all, who cares for wet blankets or
thrifty go-getters, who save up for a store or are worried about the future. One day she buys a nickel armband, the next day a sweet little dog out of wood, which is fastened to her breast with a pin and reveals its owner to be a modern girl with good taste; one day a new hat and another a bottle of warm-smelling perfume, which surges in a cloud around her and appeals to men’s feelings via their nostrils. She spends agonizing hours at the ladies’ hairdresser, and spends a lot of money on expensive silk stockings and manicures. That’s the way life is supposed to be lived. Smile, be elegant and charming, and wait for your chance.

It’s wrong to think that nothing’s happening. Lots of things are happening. Life’s eventful and splendid. Poul’s gotten work at Burmeister & Wain and Anna’s transferred to another department and is getting more in wages. With quiet glee you can point out that the barber, who was taking a crown and a half for a haircut, has had to close the little joint, the shop windows are already filthy, and the sign that says: For rent, is yellow and has damp stains. Down at the greengrocer’s you can buy big, green cooking apples, which smell of Taasinge, and on Strøget a man’s standing near the Helligaandshus selling marvelous bouquets of autumn flowers for 1 crown.

Anna’s been on a trip with the motorcyclist to Lake Gurre where they found a glorious spot near the shore, put up a tent, and went into the water despite the fact that it was so late in the year and they didn’t have any bathing suits along. They made on the whole a day of it that was about as romantic as you see in the American films, where youth has nothing to do but paddle around on large woodland lakes in canoes, which are padded with flowery pillows and with a portable phonograph, whose languorous notes mix with the lake’s gentle lapping. Naturally the motorcyclist, in spite of everything, is a bit of a disappointment; sometimes he’s both coarse and stupid, but of course there’s nothing here in this world that’s perfect.
Naturally something's constantly happening, and it's funny to see how the chance occurrences intervene in daily life, and funny to notice that nevertheless it's not the chance occurrences that decide your fate, but the way you react to the chance occurrences. Because of course it's not at all the first time in his life that Lundegaard meets a person in a tavern who's selling encyclopedias on installments, and if it'd happened just a week ago, Lundegaard would naturally have let the encyclopedias be.

Naturally Lundegaard can't help going to taverns. If you're going to have to knock about like that forever out in the tenement slums, you can certainly do with a cup of coffee or a beer. Sit in peace for a bit with a cigar and think things over before you go at it again. Besides, there are big differences among taverns, and the places Lundegaard goes into for a refreshment and to take a little rest are really just as respectable as a church. There's sand on the scoured floor, the proprietor waits tables and his wife takes care of the buffet, they have a girl for the kitchen, and twice a week they have a waiter in a white jacket. There are just as big differences among taverns as there are among people: they adapt according to the requirements and the requirements vary.

Incidentally, Lundegaard's now counting on his poverty and hardships' lasting only a short time. He's already talked with several people, and before long he'll have a position where just a month's earnings will be able to sweep all debt items out of the world. Naturally, it could be as long as two or three months, but the crucial thing of course is that he now has something to look toward and the bill-collector life with its accessories is only a guest performance. That's also why he doesn't attach much importance any more to smoking one cigar more or less—after all, it's fairly irrelevant whether his status is 25 öre better or worse that day he starts as a travelling salesman—the point, after all, is just to keep things going for a short period yet; then his little visit in this dreary stairway-existence will be over with and he can look back on it as an unpleasant, but naturally instructive period.
Accordingly, he does now in fact sit more often than before in a cozy little tavern like this and dream about the future. His beer’s standing on the table and in the ashtray, which is an ad for a whisky firm, his cigar’s lying there emitting a delicate, blue smoke coil toward the ceiling. He hasn’t taken his gabardine coat off, its tails are fastened firmly to its pockets with bicycle clips; his hat’s lying on the chair beside him. He’s sitting there so quiet and calm, like an Indian buddha, staring through his pince-nez into his future existence as a travelling salesman. He lives in the biggest hotels—of course the firms require you to do that—and the hotel staff treat him with exquisite politeness. Mr. Lundegaard this and Mr. Lundegaard that. He does a good business and when he’s in Copenhagen, he sits in a buff chair and confers with the boss. Damn it, that’s something different than having to stand at the counter and settle accounts with the bookkeeper, who barely knows whether he feels like greeting you.

Naturally it also happens that he sits around and gets talking to someone—after all, there are all sorts of people who can drop in at such a tavern—and it’s always interesting to hear how other people actually go about managing. And so today he’s gotten into a conversation with someone who sells encyclopedias on instalments, and before half an hour’s gone by, he’s heard the man’s whole career. The man’s father was a gunner’s mate in the navy and they lived at number 12 Kamel Street, he’d been to sea, he had a little cigar store which went bust, lived half a year under the auspices of the welfare office with an unemployment card, investigators in the home, questionnaires that had to be filled out with a solemn declaration, had been in an unfortunate marriage and is now separated from his wife, who went back with two kids to Jutland where she’s from, had casual work doing whatever, and so now he’s selling encyclopedias on instalments, but sells them in a way that gives reason to suppose that he’ll probably soon lose this easy job. Altogether something that’s certain to arouse Lundegaard’s sympathy for the man. In the beginning when he sold encyclopedias, he was animated by the best will in the world. Slaved away at it like a dog. Now that he’d finally gotten a decent easy job, he’d certainly figure
out how to make a position out of it that could make life bearable, maybe he could later get a fixed salary and so on. But then little by little he treated it less seriously, and now the main thing for him is to get a customer’s signature on a contract and as quickly as possible to get to the company office and draw his commission—regardless of whether the customer’s in a position to pay. He’s a man with a strong need to be happy and surrounded by good friends, wants to pay for drinks all around at all costs, and if the proprietor hadn’t looked so grim, he’d really have gotten a drink too. Lundegaard’s naturally a little uneasy about the situation—after all, you don’t even know whether the man has money in his pocket to pay what he’s collected—but on the one hand he thinks they’re sitting there having a cozy time, and on the other hand it may very well be that he’ll buy an encyclopedia.

The forty-year-old son of a deceased gunner’s mate makes no bones about the advantages of buying an encyclopedia. There’s the 5-crown down payment that’s supposed to be paid at the time of signing the contract, but he’ll magnanimously forgive Lundegaard that, who just has to put his name on the paper, after which he’ll get the encyclopedia delivered to his residence postpaid. After that, as far as the salesman’s concerned, he can do whatever he feels like; he’s not going to interfere in it and no one else’s going to interfere, if Lundegaard just complies with his obligation to pay 5 crowns a month. In passing he remarks that you can go straight to a second-hand book dealer and sell the encyclopedia for 75 crowns. In addition, the salesman doesn’t consider himself too good to stand him a drink to seal the deal if Lundegaard decides to buy the encyclopedia.

Naturally Lundegaard’s sitting there thinking about the fabric, the Fabric Warehouse and all that business, but the circumstances are of course nevertheless somewhat different today. For one thing, he can easily manage the 5 crowns a month—they’re neither here nor there—and as long as he takes care of the payment, naturally nothing’s going to happen; for another, it’d be quite extraordinarily pleasant to get 75 crowns straight away like that. The sewing machine installment will fall due in a few days,
and in about ten days it’ll be the first, when the most frightful things can happen if he can’t meet his obligations. Besides Mr. Salomonsen and the rent, now of course there’s also the Fabric Warehouse. Now he’s got a chance to get past the first of the month easily and comfortably.

Nevertheless, he wouldn’t have done it if he hadn’t been counting on getting a position as a travelling salesman in the course of a couple of months. Naturally he realizes he’s losing on the deal, but there are in spite of everything such big and conspicuous advantages with the deal that it outweighs the costs.

And still he’s sitting there and can’t make up his mind. Might it be something along the lines of once bitten twice shy that’s holding him back? Or is it a premonition of something evil, that mystical instinct, that once in a while intervenes in humans’ actions. When all’s said and done, there’s something about the man he dislikes; maybe it’s because he looks as if he’s fond of grilled lamb’s head. And Lundegaard can’t abide people who eat grilled lamb’s head with all the signs of rapture. There’s something lascivious, something repulsive, about lamb’s head eaters. They look as though they’re thinking about women’s exposed knees, while they’re rooting around in the lamb’s brain matter. Lundegaard can’t abide lamb’s head. And gets nauseous at the thought of oysters or sweetbread.

But the 75 crowns are a tangible fact if he puts his name on the paper. 7 ten-crown bills and a fiver. The rest is just some stupid nonsense. So he borrows the man’s fountain pen and writes August Lundegaard on the dotted line in the lower right corner of the contract.

And it has to be said that the man kept his promise. They even got more than one round, and despite the fact that Lundegaard couldn’t really get into the mood, he gave a round too. There weren’t any other guests in the little tavern besides the two of them, who sat there and had one beer after the next. It was after all in the middle of the afternoon. Plaques from the breweries hung all around on the walls, and a cage with two canaries stood over there at the window.