Mogens Klitgaard

There's a Man
Sitting on a
Trolley

Translated and
with an Introduction and Notes
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Tenth Chapter

The billiard season, by the way, has just begun now and scorekeeper Nielsen's earning more than in the summer. And the man's nevertheless dissatisfied with his life. Maybe he himself's the one there's something wrong with. He's obsessed with the thought that he has an inferiority complex and he's shouting about that poor complex in and out of season. When all's said and done, he's stuck up and arrogant, quite a grumbler, hard to satisfy. But on the other hand, if people had always been satisfied with the way they had things, we'd of course still've been living on the stone-age level, living in caves and bashing stray animals' heads in with a club and eating their meat raw. It's human beings' dissatisfaction with things as they are that's driven them forward. Incidentally, Nielsen doesn't have nearly as much fun as the club-swinging stone-age man: his life's boring as hell, the guests are boring, his buddies are boring, even his time off's boring. After all, it's perpetual repetitions. Forever the same thing. Over and over again. Now he's been keeping score for a couple of hours for a man whose best witticism's a belch that echoes in the hall. It's half-empty in the hall, nothing to do, and in peace and quiet he can indulge his annoyance with a nice little man who's chairman of a billiard club. The nice little man is wearing blue serge and looks solemn, as becomes a chairman. He talks like a man who has to weigh his words because he has responsibility. He's a mediocre billiard player, but an excellent chairman. When anything goes wrong for him, he peps himself up with the thought that he belongs to the chosen whose death will be publicized in the press: One of Danish billiards' prom-
inent figures has passed away. — And if not in the daily press, then in any case in the sports papers. And there’ll be something in there about his ability as a leader; his good fellowship will be discussed—a great man, it’ll say. And in fact he tries hard to live up to this fine reputation.

Scorekeeper Nielsen’s annoyed. He’s annoyed with the proprietor, who’s always hanging around the premises as if he were afraid that the staff’s going to run away with the whole business. He’s annoyed by the fact that the girls smile at him when he’s busy and on the way to work, but that they don’t smile at him when he’s got plenty of time, when he’s got a day off, and can easily imagine playing the conqueror; he’s annoyed there’s so much work to do because he gets tired and his feet get sore; and he’s annoyed when there’s no work to do: after all he’s got expenses left and right and can’t ever make ends meet.

Naturally there are bright spots in life. Recently the proprietor had to skedaddle out the back door when a man came who wanted to borrow money from him. And the man stayed there the whole evening. Every time the proprietor came back, he was faithfully sitting there waiting. Maybe you could hire the man to sit there every evening so you’d be spared having the proprietor hanging around in the hall.

But those kinds of bright spots are nevertheless few. It is and remains a treadmill. Galley slaves presumably also had bright spots. Life’s flat and boring. Besides, the night work destroys your health: you’re always going around half-run-down; you’re never really going strong. And that’s the way time passes, one month after the next. And before you know it, the months have turned into a year, an empty and pointless year. A human life consists of so and so many years, and if you examine it right, there aren’t very many. Then the party’s over, and you can’t live life again. A human being has only one life.

II

Incidentally, the weather’s not suited to boosting his spirits
either. It’s drizzly and damp and cold. Of course, October’s usually the month with the golden colors, the clear air, the high sky, fall sun, and all that stuff, but this year, damn it, October, to put it mildly, is boring. Before the leaves managed to turn red and yellow, the storm tore them off and swept them together in nice piles on the boulevard corners; the night frost all at once killed everything that was called flowers so they’re now lying like corpses along the cold ground in the parks’ flower beds. In the mornings there’s hoar frost on the roofs, at Langelinie pier the storm’s ripping the pleasure boats loose from their moorings and smashing them against the stone sea wall, on the West Coast foreign ships are stranded, and small, poor homes in Liverpool and Antwerp are deprived of their breadwinners, the rose beds in the garden of the Eastern High Court are being covered, the sidewalk cafes are being moved inside, and the newspapers are filled with ads for winter clothing. In Brønshøj there’s a man who killed his five-year-old son because they were starving and were going to be evicted by the bailiff, and a suburban theater’s having a success with a play whose main character’s a worker who incessantly claims that, after all, we have it pretty good—it’s only the idiots who’re complaining—there are really lots of places where they have it much worse. Moving day, as usual, is turning the city upside down, and the king’s been to the movies to see Panserbasse.

Naturally there are also days with clear skies and clear air, days with sunshine and colors and red rose hips, and of course it’s mainly trees standing alone that’ve been stripped bare by the storm; the ones that are standing in groups have more or less weathered it and are blazing in all colors as is customary on a sunny October day. But obviously it hasn’t turned into any kind of real October: the cold’s come too suddenly and the ground’s so dry that the farmers can’t get to plow. People who drive cars are talking about changing oil, and the most cautious of them have already put the cap on the radiator.

But naturally Lundegaard couldn’t care less about all that. To be sure, he reads the newspapers and sees what’s happening around him, but of course he’s got plenty to do with his own
stuff. To be sure, he’s gotten past the first of the month once again without a hitch, and the time’s no longer far off when he’ll be on top, but the constant economic speculation’s spoiling his life all the same. He’s testy and absentminded and smokes his cigar in small, nervous puffs. After all, he’s living on a volcano and even the strongest nerves can’t withstand it in the long run. Besides, it’s an irritating thought that regardless of how much he pays Mr. Salomonsen, he’ll still owe more than he’s managed to pay. As soon as he can’t pay the whole installment, an IOU will be issued for the remainder, and since the interest’s added right away, the amount’s significantly higher than what the installment payment is short.

III

But now he’s at least getting closer to his goal, and once he’s reached it, all these petty worries will of course be disposed of in one fell swoop. Funny thing is that it was precisely his stupidity that provided him with the chance he went around sighing for. Because of course it was a stupid thing to go ahead and buy an encyclopedia on installments in order to sell it. Even if you took the circumstances into account, it was a stupid thing. But the stupid thing was lucky because as he was coming out of the second-hand bookdealer’s, where he’d sold the books, he ran into an old acquaintance. Naturally that had to be celebrated with a modest glass of beer and a cigar in a wine bar. Carlsen and Lundegaard had served their apprenticeships together in the small Jutland provincial town, and so despite the fact that both of them had lived most of their lives in Copenhagen, it wasn’t until now that they ran into each other. It was like a sign from fate: now Lundegaard had had enough adversity, now the tide would turn, now the torments were over with. Carlsen was precisely the person in the whole world Lundegaard most wanted to bump into: Carlsen had a prominent position in one of the country’s biggest dry-goods firms. Dry-goods imports. Carlsen, who was a few years younger than Lundegaard, still looked up to him
from force of habit, and regarded Lundegaard’s genuine joy at the chance meeting as sheer joy of meeting again. He totally forgot that during their apprenticeship Lundegaard had pushed him around and was just as effusively happy about meeting as Lundegaard. They had many glasses of beer, and, when they parted, it was settled that Carlsen was going to get Lundegaard a job in his firm as a travelling salesman. Naturally it wouldn’t be today or tomorrow; the boss was out of the country, but when he got back, Carlsen was going to talk to him. That would certainly work out. The boss would get back in about a month and then Carlsen would certainly take care of the matter. Just count on it, old boy.

Naturally Carlsen had gotten something into his head and was in an exhilarated mood, and at moments like that you gladly promise more than you can deliver, but, on the other hand, Carlsen was a man you could rely on—Lundegaard remembered him from back then as reliable and a stickler for his honor. It’d be all right. In a month’s time this hell would be over with and a new chapter of his life would begin. Skoal, Carlsen, old boy, can you remember when I gave you a black eye up in the warehouse New Year’s Day when we were taking inventory.

Carlsen’s sitting there on a throne: he enjoys being Lundegaard’s benefactor, as thanks for the thrashing he got back then. His face is the same as back then: chubby, with dimples and pleasant eyes. It seems to Lundegaard that he looks like a happy pig, a happy little pig like the one you see on the bacon posters. Naturally Lundegaard’s got to come to his house and say hello to Carlsen and his wife some evening. And he absolutely has to bring his wife along. They can reminisce and play a round of cards—that’ll be an enjoyable evening.

When they finally part, their faces are bright red from beer and the atmosphere. What a splendid thing indeed a newly-struck friendship between real men is. What an excellent human being indeed Carlsen is. How grand indeed Lundegaard is. He’s simply much too solid—the kind of person life’s always hard on.
But when life begins to appear tolerable, when things brighten up, and your perspective gets a pink glow, naturally annoyances always turn up, small and big annoyances, which cast a shadow across the idyll. In itself maybe it’s no big deal that Poul’s moving out, but still it’s enough to prevent a man from humming when you walk up the stairs to the little apartment that quite obviously had kept the family together. Now of course Poul has work and can take care of himself. Now he doesn’t need them or the home any more and so he’s going. The home was good enough as long as he benefited from it, but now it’s obviously not good enough any more. Now that he’s earning something and could help out a little with the rent, he’s moving into a furnished room.

If he’d just given an explanation they could accept. You couldn’t swallow that nonsense about his not being able to stand seeing their reproachful faces all the time. Lundegaard for one had never reproached him for anything. If anything, it was probably, as Anna said, that he’d met a girl and that he wanted to have a place where they could be alone. Naturally, it wasn’t any fun either for him to have to be lying and sleeping in the kitchen when he went to work every day and earned a week’s wage, but they’d helped him, all right, while he’d been unemployed. After all, they were poor and had to stick together. That’d be a fine kettle of fish if one day all of a sudden Lundegaard moved out into a furnished room and let tomorrow take care of itself.

Now maybe Anna’ll also move out one fine day when her wage is increased so she doesn’t need her parents’ help any more. Your own children, whom you’ve done everything to protect and give a good upbringing, in turn do their part to ruin your life for you. And it’s for their sake that you go and rack your brains constantly trying to find solutions, for their sake you’ve risked everything time and again, for their sake you’ve rushed around town to get yourself a job, solely so that all of them would have it good. Is it perhaps for his own sake that Lundegaard was so happy about his getting in soon as a trav-
elling salesman for a big firm? Isn’t it solely for the sake of his children, home, and wife? All in all, has he ever thought about himself? If he hadn’t had them to support, he could’ve been in clover. And now this is the way they reward him. And when they finally are home and he asks them about something, they barely bother answering him. In addition, there’s no doubt about it—Anna long ago got more in salary without saying anything about it at home. But if she doesn’t feel she owes them and her home that consideration, all right, then, let her have it her own way. It’s not so much for the sake of the few crowns either: when all’s said and done, they don’t really count one way or the other. It’s the way she does it. Her egotism. That’s the kind of thing that makes you sick and tired of everything. Naturally they don’t have the slightest idea what he’s had to go through for their sakes; of course, in general they think only of themselves.

But incidentally that’s the way it is, of course, all the way down the line. People think only of themselves. Maybe just except people like the news dealer, who these days never talks about anything but Spain and has a big map of the theater of operations near Madrid hanging in his room, with black pins for Franco and red for Caballero. But that’s going to extremes; after all, that’s actually something that’s none of our business. But naturally that’s up to the man—if he’d just stop preaching to Lundegaard every morning. Damn, Lundegaard has more than enough with his own stuff to have to be going around worrying about Spain.

V

When Monday morning at 5 o’clock you stagger out of the folding bed in a cold kitchen where the window’s been open for the simple reason that it can’t be closed in spite of numerous complaints to the janitor, put on the clothing that’s absolutely necessary, and sleepily lurch down into the dark, cold courtyard where your bike’s naturally gotten stuck behind twenty others, which first have to be moved, and, unwashed after two or three
hours of sleep, without having had morning coffee, shivering from cold and depression, five minutes too late, rush out to Teglholmen, where you put on a work jacket, which is stiff and filthy, full of iron splinters, which prick and chafe through the thin undershirt, which is the only thing you can have on under the jacket, stick your feet in a pair of wooden shoes, which are so stiff from the heat in the iron foundry that they chafe a hole on your instep, a hole that never manages to heal before it’s chafed up again—you could very well wish you were unemployed again.

But there’s nothing else to do but bear it. And little by little you presumably get into shape, get accustomed to it. In the foundry the molds give off such heat that the sweat jumps off you, the air’s full of gas and drugs you so you can hardly keep awake. When people all over see a piston ring, they haven’t the slightest notion what kind of hell’s tied up with its creation, they’ve never seen a sand mold which the gas flames shoot out of while the huge gas rings are roaring, they’ve never been about to be suffocated by the smoke. To be sure, they read in the newspapers that B. and W.’s stockholders are dissatisfied with the dividend, that they’re at daggers drawn over the profits, but they have very little sense of the number of bodily injuries it costs to bring fine, shiny piston rings into the world. Naturally they read once in a while that now a worker’s been killed again, but there are of course also more interesting things in the newspapers, and it’s the interesting things you pay attention to.

Poul already knows a good deal about piston rings, about rationalization of production and firings, about the pace of work and about accidents. He’s also learned that tomorrow morning a new man’ll be standing there in the injured man’s place, but, honestly, he doesn’t think about it more closely. He just knows that he’s firmly resolved to get something out of life and that this stuff here’s just a transition, a transition he has to go through. All around him they can talk as much as they want, they can talk about politics, about solidarity, about considerateness toward your family, about filial respect, about comradeship—he means to let them talk, he means to get something out of life, in spite of
everything, in defiance of everything. At the end of the day, of
course, they, too, don’t care a hoot about him, or they want to
take advantage of him. He doesn’t intend to let himself be ex-
ploded. When push comes to shove, they just want to bambo­
zle him with all their nonsense. Naturally he’s not stupid: he can
see perfectly well that sticking together’s necessary, that it’s nec­
essary to be organized in order not to be flayed alive. But that
far and no further. He doesn’t intend to make sacrifices, he
doesn’t intend to let others control his life. And he wants to get
something out of life while he’s young, earn money, be inde­
pendent.

That’s why he also doesn’t want to continue spending his
day in a hell reeking of gas and his night on a folding bed in a
cold kitchen; he can’t consider his free time at all: in his free
time he’s so fatigued and lethargic that he doesn’t know what’s
going on. He wants to rent a room, a cozy furnished room,
where he can arrange things the way he feels like. And he wants
to be a go-getter and constantly be on the lookout for a better
job, a job where he earns more, a job where he doesn’t have to
work himself to death. As soon as he’s gotten settled in a bit, he
wants to go to school in the evening; he’ll certainly man­
age—he’ll surely get things to go the way he wants them to. He
definitely saw the face his old man put on when he said he’d be
moving, and he also knows full well that his old man’s going and
making a mess of things and can’t make ends meet. But that’s
because his old man’s been going at it the wrong way, and why
should he suffer for it? If they should happen to be up tight for
the rent, he really won’t hesitate to fork out a ten’er; he just
wants to be allowed to be himself, not to be constantly regarded
as a child, as the prodigal but, to be sure, returned, son you have
to indulge. Anna’s actually the one who understands him best;
she doesn’t intend either to let other people determine what she
thinks or what she does. Not because they ever talk with each
other, but all the same they know each other inside and out and
tacitly have a shared view of their parents, of their mother, who’s
completely broken down, who sits at her sewing machine in­
cessantly and goes to a Nazarene meeting twice a week, and of
Lundegaard, who, after his business went bust, is completely erratic, veers from one extreme to the other and constantly thinks the whole thing stands and falls with him.

VI

By the way, the warehouse clerk had now begun to be his old self again more or less, but it was obviously his lot to be constantly reminded that he'd been rejected by a girl he loved. But on the other hand, maybe it's good that he got to see Anna in that situation—maybe it can do away with the last vestiges of his feelings for her.

And if it hadn't been just now, it surely wouldn't have hurt so much. But just the day it happened, he'd been going around nursing the thought that everything might become good between them again. Of course it couldn't be helped that he ran into her at least once a week when he was constantly gadding about the places he knew she frequented, and the confounded thing about it was that one time she'd give him hope and the next time she'd plunge him into despair with her dismissive indifference. But maybe she didn't know either what she wanted; maybe she longed for him once in a while and wanted to make up, maybe she was waiting for him to say the crucial word, maybe her coolness was only calculated to goad him. Because naturally she still cared about him—how else could you explain that she stood there straightening his tie and admonishing him not to be messy, or that she asked how things were going in evening school, whether he was making progress, and so on. But when he was on the verge of asking whether they could become good friends again, it went through him like a cold wave that she'd rejected him, and something in him demanded that she be the one to take the decisive step toward a reconciliation.

Once in a while he forced himself to take the view that the best method for deadening the longing for her was to find a replacement, to find another girl. That's how he met Sonja, a seventeen-year-old blossom, who thought life was delightful and
loved romance and excitement. And oddly enough, it irritated him when he could sense that Sonja was falling in love with him despite the fact that he wasn’t in love with her, or maybe precisely for that reason. After all, he just thought that she was a sweet girl who was pleasant to be around. Once in a while her being infatuated with him flattered him. Naturally he cared about her, but that was in a different way. After all, he was always thinking about Anna and couldn’t help making comparisons. In the most tender moments when she gave herself to him, he tried to imagine that it wasn’t her, but Anna. And mocked himself at the same time: You could call that love, all right. Afterwards he felt ashamed and regarded his feeling for Anna as something morbid that he had to combat at any cost. An imaginary feeling. In reality, of course, Anna wasn’t at all beautiful—you could almost say the exact opposite. Sonja, on the other hand, was beautiful. Unquestionably beautiful. Her little pussycat head with its pretty eyes made the men turn around and look back at her. And naturally it flattered him to be the favored one. But it’s irritating to be loved by someone you don’t especially care about and to love someone else who doesn’t care about you.

But all in all, in spite of everything, he’d more or less regained his equilibrium, had resigned himself to the thought that Anna was a fickle, unpredictable creature, and that the relationship between them would’ve gone to pieces sooner or later anyway. Good that it happened so quickly. Now he’d see to getting it arranged so that they saw each other now and then; maybe they could go out one evening once in a while, and little by little as there was more and more distance between them, he’d be able to satisfy himself that she wasn’t the ideal his fantasy had erected, and he’d be cured of his unrequited feeling. The worst thing would be if he became completely cut off from seeing her—then his fantasy would again begin to idealize her without his getting the chance to make comparisons between the idealized Anna and the real Anna. As things now stood, it was actually pretty great because every time he saw her, he realized more and more that in his infatuation he’d made her into an angel, and that in reality
she was a perfectly ordinary girl, just like all the others.

Naturally he had relapses, attacks of acute longing for her, which, suddenly and apropos of nothing, could come over him. And if it weren’t because it was precisely during such an attack that he’d seen her on the back of another man’s motorcycle, he probably wouldn’t have taken it so hard. Now it had an effect almost like a shock: he got goose bumps all over from distaste and a strange sensation up in the roots of his hairs. In fact, he’d been going around thinking about her when it happened and thought that if he ran into her now, without scruples, he’d do everything to make things good again, he’d have told her how it was, that he couldn’t do without her, that he was going crazy with longing for her. Regardless of whether that would’ve been a smart tactic or not, he’d have laid his cards on the table, said that he loved her, that he wanted to marry her, that now he’d no longer tolerate this hide and seek game, that now he was the one who’d decide.

Incidentally, of course, he hadn’t seen her at all—she was the one who’d hailed him. It was one evening around eleven, he was strolling down Strøget and all of a sudden heard her shouting his name. And it was when he turned around that he saw her sitting on the back seat of the motorcycle, smiling and very pleased. It was at the intersection with Købmager Street and the motorcycle came to a stop to wait for the green light. At the very second he saw her, he spun around on his heels and walked on without turning around.

In the following minutes he had to go through all the torments one more time. All that laborious work of forgetting her had been in vain; but now a new feeling was added to the rest of them—hatred. Why had she hailed him? To torture him? And still he now longed for her more than ever, in spite of the fact that he knew that now he’d lost her for real. That now things could never be good between them. So now she had another boyfriend. It was finished. Irretrievably finished.

He strolled on through the throng of people, worked up, full of hate, and despairing. At Kongens Nytorv he sat down on a bench. In his fantasy he saw Anna and the motorcyclist in situa-
tions that incited his hatred. The sound from the Angleterre’s orchestra penetrated out into the square, the trees over his head were bare as in winter, the black stripped twigs stood out in sharp outline against the sky, which was reddish from the cities’ many lights.