Mogens Klitgaard

There's a Man Sitting on a Trolley

Translated and with an Introduction and Notes by Marc Linder

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Twelfth Chapter

Then December dawns and Lundegaard’s being led by blind forces toward the crossroads of his fate the way a lamb’s led to the slaughter. It’s the month of the solstice: before the month’s over, it’ll start out all over again and the city’s eight hundred thousand people can face the spring, face a new year. Before the month’s over, the days will be longer by a couple of minutes, you’ll get the courage and optimism to tackle things afresh and can turn your back on the disappointments of the year that’s been concluded.

It’s as if the month doesn’t quite want to get off the ground—what’s really Decemberish is hesitating to put in an appearance. True enough, the evening appears in the traditional manner with a blackish-blue sky and cold, white moon with a frosty wreath, but when you look up the next afternoon, the clouds are furnished with a pink edge and the atmosphere’s so color-saturated that it completely upsets the acquired picture of December, the month of Christmas, snow, and elves. Naturally there are plenty of symptoms of Christmas, but they’re too early, so to speak, staged, so to speak, to create, by hook or by crook, a Christmas mood so something can be sold in the stores. During these days there isn’t an item or thing, there isn’t a product that doesn’t have Christmas’s authorized stamp printed on it. It may be the new perfume, which, for use for the season, was designed by Prince Yousoupoﬀ in London, or the ravishing velvet dream of a dress with zipper Madame Landowska has created. All of it’s Christmas—cookies, marzipan and spruce twigs, postcards, sock-suspenders, theater performances, and
church collections. Christmas sheaths of grain have been hung on the trees on the boulevards for the birds, which aren’t permitted to starve in December, and barrel organs play Christmas hymns. There’s a man standing on the corner selling candlesticks made of spruce.

II

Lundegaard isn’t going to call Carlsen till December 3rd. Maybe he’ll even draw it out till the 4th or 5th. For one thing, you shouldn’t be too aggressive, and for another, perhaps he might smash something to pieces by provoking a hasty decision. And if he’s been able to wait this long, it surely doesn’t matter whether he has to wait two or three more days.

These days he’s taut as a bowstring, taut to the breaking point. His face with the pince-nez eyes gives no evidence of it, but all the more restless are his fingers, which nervously drum on the cafe’s tabletop or pick apart a matchbox in his gabardine coat pocket piece by piece. To calm himself down he blows out cigar smoke in a thin, fine strip, or he hums a snippet of a tune in a monotone tempo, the same snippet of a tune over and over, until another snippet of a tune by chance takes the previous one’s place. He’s restless and strolls up and down the streets to find an outlet for his impatience, is startled to hear himself talking out loud in the middle of the street. But the way Carlsen put it, there can’t be any reason to be nervous, and Carlsen’s a person you can rely on. What was supposed to be so strange altogether about obtaining such a position through influence—after all, that’s something that happens every single day in this city. It’s only because little by little he’s become accustomed to defeat that he’s nervous about how things’ll go. There’s no reason whatsoever to be nervous; his optimism guarantees him that the matter in fact has already been decided, that Carlsen’s just waiting for him to call to tell him that it’s taken care of, that he can begin right away. Maybe he should stop at the first kiosk and call to get it over with—right over there on the square there’s a
kiosk. All you have to do is take out a ten-øre coin and ask for the firm’s number—in five minutes he can have his answer if he wants. Or rather get confirmed that he now has a position that in one fell swoop is going to lift him up above all his worries. But he doesn’t want to be overeager. He’s going to keep calm and wait a day or two. Better to go and enjoy speculating about the problems connected to his taking the new position. Of course, he has to have a new suit, a nice blue serge suit, double breasted, with two changes of pants. He’ll surely also have to have a bag, a big, spacious suitcase for underwear, pyjamas, toiletries, and so on. Maybe he won’t begin till the fifteenth, maybe not till January. But once he’s gotten the position, he’ll surely manage to get through that time as well and manage the necessary new purchases. He’s enjoying in advance his visit as travelling salesman for a prestigious firm to his little home town, is enjoying his possible visit at the store he served his apprenticeship at. God knows whether old Jacobsen still runs the business. Or whether he died and his son took it over. Probably such big changes really haven’t happened—there’s something conservative about textiles; he’d bet that the stores by and large look the way they did back then. Dry-goods stores in the provinces have an atmosphere that takes generations to change. Of course, they’ve surely gotten modern store fronts with big plate-glass windowpanes, modern furnishings of steel and nickel. And they’ve gotten cheap ready-made Czechoslovak goods, an installment payment system with a contract, and they’re surely forced to keep up with the fashions more than in the old days. But the atmosphere’s the same. And Lundegaard, who’s forgotten that he used to hate that atmosphere, loves it now, loves the smell of the fabrics, loves the sound of the scissors ripping and whizzing through a piece of summer dress fabric, the sight of the counter shiny from use and of the shelf with its brilliantly colored woolen yarn.

III

But already on December 2nd there’s a letter lying there for
him from Carlsen when he comes home in the evening. It says in short to please call the next day, sincerely, Carlsen.

Naturally he’s afraid that he’ll sleep badly that night, and since he was hoping to be fresh and rested if Carlsen asked him to come up to the office, he has to do something to get to sleep. He tries taking a long walk, but the feeling of loneliness drives him into a tavern. And when he’s had something to drink and his sense of life gets stronger, he calls up the manicure parlor. But the girl in the jaguar fur isn’t in—in any event nobody answers. And since the thought of his visit to her took on such definite shape even during the telephone call, he can’t get himself to go home, but instead forms a casual acquaintance on the street. Not until toward morning does he steal up the rear-tenement stairs, shivering with cold, while he gets undressed and keeps mumbling: Tomorrow, tomorrow.

At eleven o’clock the next day he goes down to the greengrocer to call Carlsen. It takes a long time before Carlsen comes to the phone and Lundegaard catches himself standing there with the receiver pressed against his ear thinking about everything possible except what he’s finally going to find out now—where he stands. He stands there looking at the boxes full of fragrant red apples, at the barrels with potatoes and at the kale stalks in the window, looking at the greengrocer’s wife, who’s now gotten her hair bleached platinum blond, looking at her red hands, at her wedding ring, and thinking about the pieces of gossip going around about her. She’s sturdily built and has lively eyes. Maybe her husband’s neglecting her.

Then finally Carlsen comes to the phone; his voice hits him like a blow. He wants to talk to Lundegaard. Lundegaard shouldn’t come up to the office, but should sit down in the wine bar on the other side of the street. Around twelve. It isn’t certain that Carlsen’ll come right away, but Lundegaard should just stay calm. In any case he’ll come at the latest at half-past.
It’s nice and cozy in the wine bar—comfortable chairs, newspapers, and a quiet and calming atmosphere. Carlsen comes a little after twelve—from his face Lundegaard sees right away that everything isn’t as it ought to be. Carlsen doesn’t beat around the bush, but comes right to the point: he feels that the boss’s trip abroad hasn’t produced the desired results and that’s why he’s in a bad mood. In any event, he’d replied very curtly that it wasn’t travelling salesmen he needed, but foreign currency. Could he maybe get him foreign currency? What the hell was he supposed to do with travelling salesmen if he couldn’t get any goods to sell?

But Carlsen’s quick to add that Lundegaard shouldn’t take it too seriously—the boss is unpredictable—there’ll probably be a chance again soon. The firm works according to the principle of rapid promotions, and so when the employees have reached all the way up to the top and are living in a fool’s paradise, and think that the boss regards them as one of the firm’s cornerstones, they’re fired. That way the boss succeeds in getting the staff to constantly stretch their capacity to work to the utmost. And that’s why Carlsen, as far as possible, has kept in the background and preferred slow promotion.

Pleased, Carlsen laughs at his clever insight into modern methods of rationalization—probably also hopes that his cheerfulness will infect Lundegaard and make the bitter pill glide down more easily.

But Lundegaard doesn’t hear anything of his good-natured chatter. All his plans’ve been wrecked. Everything’s lying smashed to pieces. It was make or break, this business here, and obviously it turned out to be break.

Carlsen chats on; he’s embarrassed about not having been able to keep his promise and tries to smooth things over by chatting. It’ll be all right, another chance’ll come again soon, and so on. Now damn it, Lundegaard certainly can’t go and lose heart—it’ll surely all work out all right.

Lose heart? Lundegaard stares at him—lose heart. What
does the man mean? Lundegaard’s face is ashen and he fumbles for his hat.

A trivial little thought says to him all of a sudden that it isn’t Carlsen’s fault, after all—that of course he did his best. And Lundegaard mumbles a kind of thanks to Carlsen, shakes hands with him as if in a dream, and staggers out the door, unsteady on his legs like a man who’s had too much to drink.

V

Now he’s been wandering for hours up and down the streets without knowing where he’s actually gone and without knowing how long he’s been walking. That damn pressure that’s settled over him has surely got to be able to pass little by little, if he just keeps walking. There he turns the corner at Farimags Street and swims with the current down Frederiksborg Street. There he comes to a halt at Kongens Nytorv and stares out across the harbor, as if suddenly he can’t go on any further; here he’s pushed and shoved forward on Stroget, a nice ordinary man in his gabardine coat that’s a bit worn out and his crocheted scarf, a quite ordinary man who all of a sudden can’t find a platform any more that he can keep living on. It’s as if his instinct of self-preservation is paralyzed; his thoughts keep returning to the incomprehensible fact that everything’s all over now.

Later in the evening a physical demand tries to wake him—he feels hunger. Maybe that can save him. At least he has a body that demands maintenance. But his ego, which is racked to the point of great exhaustion and doesn’t glimpse any perspective for continuation, refuses to listen to the body’s warnings, doesn’t permit the sensation of hunger to penetrate into consciousness.

The air’s saturated with moisture, the cars put tracks of dampness on the asphalt, from a radio store the strains are blaring out on to the street: Smile your way through life.

Then the self-preservation instinct gets the upper hand after all. Getting around his consciousness, it leads him into an auto-
mat and sits him down to an a la carte meal. He stares dull-witted at his surroundings, sticks the fork into the half-cold potatoes and time and again forgets to chew. He still hasn’t gotten the slightest bit further in his reflections than when he staggered out of the wine bar; his thoughts, as if fascinated, still revolve around the same point, can’t tear themselves away from it. Every little feeble attempt just runs into a wall of darkness.

VI

But now his fingers are fumbling in the breast pocket of his vest for a cigar: habit’s once again outwitted his dead-tired ego, which sluggishly mumbles its incessant: All over with.

It’s his ego’s fault that he’s now a done-for man and it now disclaims all responsibility by just letting things take their course, by suffocating every single thought his self-preservation instinct tries to send into his consciousness. It was smart of the self-preservation instinct to ally itself with habit and put a cigar into his mouth—the nicotine stimulates the cells and forces the ego to abandon its passivity, forces it to occupy itself with the problem, to try to find ways out.

Grudgingly the man in the gabardine coat tries to mock himself: Good god, little man, now have they been nasty to you again? Now couldn’t you even achieve a good and convenient way out of your difficulties by letting a childhood buddy be your patron, you twirp?

But there’s no sounding board for the mockery—melancholy and depression have dug their way too deeply into him.

The defeat doesn’t make an impression on the self-preservation instinct, which is now aroused and ready to fight. It makes a new attempt: Well, I have to say, that was certainly one thumping kick in the teeth.

But Lundegaard sees quite clearly that it isn’t tenable. He desperately looks for a thought to cling to, but he doesn’t find any. His lower lip’s quivering. He’s so full of that single big thought that there’s no room for more. The thought that today
brought the decision he knew would come. That the only thing left now is hell or destruction.

VII

So he now tries the solution he’s recently had to have recourse to so often. He’ll go in some place and have something to drink. He thereby also gains time, postpones the decision. And if he decides to put an end to it all, it’ll go easier if he’s drunk. An end to it all, completely and for all time. Won’t need to explain anything, won’t need to cope with more problems. It’d be so easy, so pleasantly easy. Besides, it’d be completely impossible to continue along the course laid down—collect, struggle with the creditors, constantly fiddling with things in order to cope with the moment. Then in any case better to go to the police and say: Gentlemen, you’ve got me here, I pulled off such and such scams. — But what then afterward?

But for the time being the alcohol’s breaking a hole in the wall of his apathy and he’s gaining time. He’s drinking energetically. With the definite intention of getting drunk as quickly as possible.

VIII

Far into the evening he rides in a taxi to the billiard parlor. Why shouldn’t he get himself drunk and ride in a taxi? He still has about twenty crowns in his pocket and he’s had so many speculative thoughts these last years that he can’t imagine dying with money in his pocket. And if he sees Mr. Salomonsen up there, he’ll say to him: old boy, things’ve gone bust for me and you’ll never get to see a penny of your money. Maybe he’ll even slap Mr. Salomonsen on the shoulder and ask him whether he’d like to have a drink. That’ll be glorious. That’s the way to treat that swine.

But Mr. Salomonsen isn’t there. Scorekeeper Nielsen isn’t
there either—he probably has the day off. Lundegaard walks down along the billiard tables to find a place to sit; he has the same sensation of being dazed like the last time, even though it helps him somewhat that he’s half-drunk. He’s never liked the bigger restaurants and hits it off better with the taverns and wine bars. It’s strange to walk across such a big floor, while all these people are sitting and gaping at you. In any case, you have the feeling they are. You don’t quite know how to hold your arms; your way of moving appears ridiculous to you, and you’re sure that every single person in the hall is thinking: What a queer fish who’s coming there.

But once he’s found a table to sit at and has ordered a drink, when he passes back into inconspicuousness as a spectator, that loathsome sensation stops. Now he’s moved up from the accused’s place to the judge’s bench and can join in in sitting and staring hard at the new arrivals, judging their clothes and their way of moving.

Incidentally, the parlor’s jam-packed and before half an hour’s gone by, he’s fallen in with a few nice people who were lacking one party for club-sjavs. Lundegaard can certainly play club-sjavs and why shouldn’t he join the game. He knows perfectly well that the game’s played for high stakes, but actually that suits him fine. It’ll give his thoughts a different direction and if he loses what he’s got in his pocket, things can’t get any worse than they are. And if he wins, he’ll get the wherewithal for continued intoxication and can delay the unpleasant decision. Besides, superstition says that people in his situation always win.

And he really does win. At closing time he’s got fifty crowns on the table in front of him. But his fellow players want to go somewhere else and continue, and naturally Lundegaard goes too. They take a taxi to a billiard club where the members can go in all night. Lundegaard becomes a member, his name and address are entered into a register and the clubs-sjavs game can continue.

Around four in the morning Lundegaard’s been cleaned out. He’s drunk and downcast and prefers to leave. City Hall Square lies dark and empty: on the whole big square you see only a few
night wanderers and some homeless people. The light’s on in
the newspaper stand and Lundegaard buys a morning paper. Not
because he’s interested in reading what’s in it, but when, because
of the circumstances, you’re one of the privileged who can get it
before ordinary people, naturally you have to make the most of
the privilege.

IX

He actually doesn’t have a feeling of despondency and de­
spair—rather of emptiness and depression. So now he’s reached
bottom. Now all he’s lacking is to put a period at the end. It’s
an onerous and unpleasant act that’s expected of him. If his
brother hadn’t been so dismissive that day, the depression
wouldn’t have been complete and maybe he could’ve found a
way to continue. Actually, his brother’s responsible: because of
his egotism, his lack of brotherly feeling, he’s to blame that this
is where Lundegaard wants to get off. Let the rest of them just
keep on dancing with their bank book and their stinginess—what
do they get out of it. He can’t be bothered any more.

But his brother’s going to get a reminder about how he drove
his brother to death. When at day break he comes down into the
courtyard to get his bike in the shed, a corpse will be hanging
there from the rug-beating beam. And when he cuts the corpse
down, he’ll discover that it’s his own brother, whom he refused
to give a helping hand when he was hard up. The thought
pleases August Lundegaard. Unsteady on his feet from booze,
sentimental and self-pitying, he walks down the boulevard to get
to Islands Wharf.

X

But when he reaches Lange Bridge, he stops in the middle of
the bridge and looks across toward the Ørsted Works where the
sky’s begun to get lighter from the dawning day. Of course
that’s not at all what he wants. He’s just tired and wants to turn into nothing.

He goes onto the ramparts and sits down on a bench. The night’s almost over and he doesn’t care to get to know the day that’s coming. He’s familiar with it in advance and is familiar with the days that’ll follow too. Now it’s got to be over with. He’s got to pull himself together and try to put an end to it.

He must have sat on the bench for a long time; the factory whistles wake him—he’s totally stiff from the cold. He gets up and walks across toward Christianshavn. Now there are many bikes on the street, dark figures who have to go to work. He stops at the octroi house, shakes himself in his thin coat and reproaches himself for not having spared himself this morning.

The next moment he’s mocking himself: I mean, you just want to die so they’ll feel sorry for you, so they’ll regret they didn’t always act toward you the way they should’ve. And in your heart of hearts you hope you’ll be saved at the last moment so you can benefit from their remorse.

By the mill he goes up onto the ramparts. All of a sudden his despair breaks through and he protests against the accusation: No, but I mean I can’t go on, damn it, I mean I can’t go on. The tears burst forth in his eyes. I mean I just want to be allowed to be left alone, I mean I don’t owe anyone anything, I’ve always done my best. And now I can’t go on any more.

For the first time in many years he suddenly sees his mother’s face before him, her gentle face, which says: My poor boy.

He totally gives himself over to desperation and despair, presses his face against his hands and sobs like a child.

Incessantly he repeats that of course he can’t go on.

That it’s over with now.

XI

Then suddenly he becomes afraid that he won’t have the courage to do it after all. And decides that it’s going to happen now, not in a minute, but now. He takes out his knife, opens it,
clenches his left fist, and desperately slices two deep gashes in his wrist.

It wasn’t enough, there’s a scream inside him. One more, one more. Then with brute force he wields the knife for a third time across his wrist.

At first the gashes are white, but the next instant the blood’s gushing out, pouring out, and squirting down on his clothes.

Wild with terror and agitation, he runs down the ramparts and toward the street, desperately holding his right hand around his maltreated wrist. At Christianshavns Square he runs over toward the taxicabs. The driver, who saw him come running, opens the door. Lundegaard flings himself into the car. To the National Hospital, he moans, to the National Hospital. Quick, quick.

When the car stops in front of the hospital, he says to the driver: Just a second, and runs in through the portal. In the emergency room they treat him gently and indulgently, sew up the gashes, give him a glass of something that can calm down his nerves, and say that he can come in a few days and let them look at him again. They don’t ask him anything, not even his name.

XII

When he comes back out to the street, he sees the car, which is faithfully standing in the gutter waiting for him. He goes over to the driver and explains that he’s been injured, that he’s got no money on him, but that the driver can apply at his address and get what he’s owed.

Damn it, nice guy you are, says the driver. Why didn’t you take an ambulance, now you’ve made a mess of the car, and to boot you don’t have any money to pay with. Besides, it would’ve been closer to drive to Sundby Hospital.

So former dry-goods merchant Lundegaard’s again walking up and down the streets. Now he has his arm in a sling and is getting sober. It’s cold and he doesn’t have any money. With his good hand he feels in his pockets to see whether there might
be some small change. There’s thirty øre. At St. Hans Square he goes over to a coffee stand and buys a cup of coffee. He sits down on a crate of cream, which has been stood upright. The coffee man would like to talk and asks him what he did to his arm. And when Lundegaard doesn’t answer, he says something about King Edward and Mrs. Simpson. And that now of course it’ll soon be Christmas; there are already Christmas trees put up for sale all around.

XIII

Late in the evening Lundegaard goes home. He lets himself in quietly and goes into the living room. There’s no one home. He sits down by the window and stares down into the courtyard apathetically.

Then his wife finally comes. She gives a start at the sight of him, she goes over and stands next to him, strokes his hair with her hand, presses his head close to her, and says: August, my poor dear.

They sit like that for a long time. She doesn’t ask about anything, but strokes his hair incessantly. Then finally she says that the driver was there and got the money. Lundegaard just nods.

Some people come up the stairs and let themselves in. They’re standing and talking in the entrance hall. He can tell from their voices that it’s Anna and Poul. Poul’s explaining that he was at the welfare office to take care of something and that he ran into the gardener, that guy who started the florist shop in their old premises. He doesn’t have a business any more and now has to go on welfare.

Down in the street there’s a man shouting ten sweet ones for fifty. It’s probably oranges.