Mogens Klitgaard

There's a Man Sitting on a Trolley

Translated and with an Introduction and Notes by Marc Linder

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Seventh Chapter

One evening when Lundegaard came home, Mrs. Lundegaard said to him from out in the kitchen that a letter had come for him. And that it was lying in there on the dining room table. Lundegaard hung his gabardine coat on a hanger, stuck the crocheted scarf in his inside pocket, and put his hat on the little table under the mirror. If the letter weren’t lying in there on the table waiting for him, he’d have made a fuss about how everything was lying about on the little table. How often had he not said that. But they obviously didn’t care what he said. He was allowed to tear around town, all right, and find money to keep their home afloat, for the rent, for the gas bill, and so on, knock his head over managing hand to mouth, rack his brain to find solutions when there was an emergency. But just show a tiny bit of consideration for his wishes about orderliness—that they couldn’t do. Even if you lived in a rear-tenement apartment, you could surely have some order in the entrance hall. What’s the big idea of such an entrance hall with everything lying about. It was the coziness and order that made a home into a refuge; damn, it wasn’t so strange that he wasn’t home more than he was. After all, after a while you couldn’t stand being there. Okay, you probably had to put up with the basting threads and pieces of material being all over the place; after all, actually it was commendable that his wife was helping out a little now that things were tight. But that was no reason why their home had to resemble a pigsty. You were a good-natured poor devil—that’s what was wrong. They were taking advantage of it.

But so now the letter was lying in there on the table and a
new letter probably meant a new annoyance, a new worry. For Lundegaard, no news was good news.

In spite of his premonition about something bad, the contents of the letter were like a bombshell all the same. It was from the Fabric Warehouse and was, in so many words, a request to Lundegaard to go up there because they wished to talk to him. It had the department head’s signature on it. There couldn’t be any doubt whatsoever about what the letter meant.

So that was the end of the game. Naturally, he’d imagined that it would burst one fine day. But actually it wasn’t from that quarter that he’d expected the danger. To be honest, in recent days he hadn’t given the Fabric Warehouse a thought.

And how easily it could’ve been taken care of if he’d thought about it. If he’d written a card informing them that he’d gotten a new address. Because that’s of course the way it’d happened. They’d sent a messenger with an invoice for the fabric and he’d returned and said that the store wasn’t there any more. Damn it all that he hadn’t thought about that. After all, he could’ve told himself that that’s the way it would wind up happening. And he could’ve prevented it. That was an unbearable thought. He could’ve prevented it by sending a postcard. Now all the crap was crashing down on account of that piece of fabric. It was also because he didn’t have someone at his side he could confide in, someone who could help him. Everything rested on his shoulders and always had. A wife who was becoming pious, a daughter who was forever and always running out, and a son who was sitting in jail. So of course that’s the way it was going to end, in spite of all his honest efforts to keep it going. And it was for their sake that he went around destroying himself to keep the pieces together. And if he now told the whole story to his wife, would she understand and thank him for the sacrifices he’d made, because he’d risked everything for the sake of the home, for their sake. No, he knew quite exactly how she’d take it—from that quarter you couldn’t expect support or understanding, only reproaches for their life, which had been ruined. As if it were his fault. As if he hadn’t always slaved away like a dog to pull through.
But now of course actually it didn’t matter. After all, now the whole thing was over with. To be sure, with 200 crowns in hand he could go up there and get rid of the affair. After all, they had no interest in getting him in trouble. Only in getting their money. But where was he supposed to go and raise 200 crowns. He could just as well try to fly to the moon. No, this time there was no escape. He’d reached the end of the road.

II

Lundegaard didn’t sleep that night. Not at all. Didn’t shut an eye all night. And when he got up in the morning, he’d made his plan. It was about like making his will.

He wasn’t going to go up to the Fabric Warehouse right away. Maybe tomorrow. Maybe not until the day after tomorrow. Definitely nothing would happen because of that. After all, he could’ve been out on a trip when the letter came. Or he could’ve been lying in bed sick. Hadn’t he in fact been lying in bed sick for a couple of weeks in the spring? So he could easily wait a day or two and arrange everything in a suitable way before he let himself be led to the slaughter. He was going to straighten out all that chaos a bit out in Sundby, where he naturally from the start had had to keep silent about a series of payments in order to get on an even keel after the redistricting. He was going to undertake an exact accounting of the actual lay of the land. In addition, there were a few petty debts to a few people, who in any case shouldn’t have to suffer a loss because of him. It was best to concentrate everything he’d embezzled in as few items as possible. In addition, there was the girl in the mauve outfit. Maybe it was a scandal, but now that the whole thing was all over with, he didn’t give a damn what was a scandal and what wasn’t.

There was a whole series of things he intended to do. Today and tomorrow. In addition, he intended to write one letter to Mr. Salomonsen, one to the firm, and one to his wife. In the letters he intended to explain everything. He didn’t intend to ask for
forgiveness, but for understanding. In addition, he intended to inform Mr. Salomonsen that Anna’s signature was forged and to request that she not end up suffering for his offenses. So that she lost her job.

But he didn’t want to put the letters in the mailbox until he went up to the Fabric Warehouse, because in his heart of hearts the hope still lurked that it was possible to reach a kind of agreement with them or that maybe it wasn’t this business with the fabric at all. But he knew very well it was false optimism. This time there was no way out and he had to take whatever came like a real man.

III

So he was ready. To Mrs. Lundegaard’s great surprise, he’d changed his underwear and shirt and pants and carefully tidied himself up. The various letters were written and were in the inside pocket of his gabardine coat. He cast a last glance across the rooms before he left. The mess in the entrance hall didn’t make his blood boil, but put him in a sad mood. There was no use denying that he was fond of the mess. It was a part of what he now had to leave.

On the way he got caught in a shower and had to stand for half an hour and take shelter on Vesterbro Street. At first under an awning, where 15 people were already standing, and afterward in a passageway when the awning was suddenly rolled up and together with the other 15 he hastily had to make his escape to a place where there was now room. There was plenty of water in this shower. The big, heavy rain drops splashed down across the street, which was almost empty of people. And it kept up. Some gave up waiting any longer, turned their collars up around their ears, and made a heroic rush out into the storm. After Lundegaard had stood for half an hour taking shelter, he, too, thought that was enough—after all, he certainly couldn’t stand here his whole life. And even though it was pouring down through open floodgates, he set out. In the course of a few min-
utes he was soaked through, but actually of course it also didn’t matter whether he was wet or dry in this situation.

Naturally the rain stopped the very moment it’d gotten him thoroughly soaked and the sun came out. The big yellow tourist buses, jam-packed with foreign visitors who were going to see the Paris of Scandinavia, the city with the beautiful towers, stopped at City Hall Square. The thunder was still rumbling someplace northward and you could expect more showers would be coming.

IV

But of course that’s the way July always is. It’s summer vacation month and who’s ever taken summer vacation without lots of rain showers. According to the almanac, it’s the warmest month of the year and then you can hardly go out without a jacket for fear of frequent, prolonged drenching showers.

But when the sun then afterward bakes and steams the water from the asphalt and pavement, even the worst grumbler has to admit that life’s lovely. After such a shower the weeds surge forth, luxuriant-green and succulent, in the city’s parks and grounds, and out in the new housing blocks with the funny little balconies blue and yellow down quilts are being put out in the sun. In the lake at the Botanic Garden the water lilies, in full bloom, are lying on the shiny surface: the lush flower is like a wide-open embrace, turned toward life and the sun. And in Herlev the hollyhocks are blooming. In the woods near Holte you can pick wild raspberries, and if you look into the people’s gardens, the lawns are dotted with green apples, which have been knocked down by the summer wind, by the Danish summer wind, which doesn’t take anything seriously, not even the dresses of girls riding bikes. The rye harvest’s begun and the whole country’s eating red fruit pudding, housewives are making raspberry and redcurrant jam, and on the parched grassy areas of Fælled park boys who didn’t manage to go to the country this year are playing soccer.
The d'Angleterre’s sidewalk restaurant’s filled with people, a fat and merry lump of a man in yachting clothes is giving a lecture on the upcoming regatta at Lake Bagsværden, and outside, on the narrow strip of sidewalk that’s left over, a man’s coming with a gabardine coat, pince-nez, and crocheted scarf. He’s just on the way to the Fabric Warehouse to place himself at their disposal at their discretion, maybe for a longer or shorter prison sentence. Actually it’s kind of funny: next month his son’s coming home and now it’s his turn. Police, judge, interrogation, cell. And maybe it’ll be in the newspaper. Bill collector convicted of embezzlement and fraud. After all, you live in an orderly society. Of course, people can just keep within the framework of the law.

Now of course the family will be deprived of its provider, but Lundegaard thinks it’ll certainly work out anyway—his brother and brother-in-law will surely extend them a helping hand now that he’ll be gone. And they’ll regret their lukewarm attitude, their lack of family feeling, when they see how it ended. They’ll feel like accomplices and, damn it, Lundegaard doesn’t begrudge them it. Because, after all, it didn’t mean anything to them—after all, they had good jobs. Earning good money. But now maybe they’d see the error of their ways and pay for their reluctance. The brother-in-law in any event. After all, really, it was his sister. It would’ve been better if they’d done it while the whole thing could still have been salvaged.

And when Poul comes home, he can certainly get work. Burmeister and Wain’s gotten big orders from the Soviet Union and has lots of work to do for the time being. And it’s easier for a man who’s been in jail to get work. Prisoners’ Aid will get him a job. Besides, Anna’ll probably get a wage increase and his wife’s earning more now that she’s begun to sew vests.

So Lundegaard’s reached the Fabric Warehouse. He walks up the wide stairs and in through the glass door, takes his hat off, and goes over to the counter. A female office worker gets up and comes over to him. He says that his name’s Lundegaard and that he got a letter. Takes out the letter and gives it to her. Lundegaard feels disgustingly rotten—he’s certain that the entire
staff's familiar with the story and that they're now secretly observing him and thinking: Huh, so that's him.

But the female office worker, who'd gone into another office, now comes back and says that the department head isn't in, he's gone on summer vacation, and won't get back for a month. And since no one else knows what it's about, he better come back then.

V

So Lundegaard's standing on the street again. The letters are in his inside pocket and he feels so strangely like a fool. Everything in him had been prepared to receive the blow. But the blow didn't come. Naturally he was pleased—at least he ought to be. So now he was going to have to keep fighting. He'd gotten a delay again. And if this delay meant that he'd make it, then of course everything was fine. But did it? Naturally, the fabric would have to be paid for sooner or later anyway, but he'd probably have been able to keep it going for a long time. And by that time of course he'd counted on having gotten the difficulties over with.

But in any case, then, he did now have a month to spare. And maybe a way out would turn up. After all, so much can happen in the course of a month.

But naturally nothing will happen. It's just false optimism instead of sober appraisal. Lundegaard doesn't believe in miracles. Now he can go out to Sundby and continue running up stairs and down stairs.

Go to Sundby today and collect? No, nothing doing—at least there's nobody that can get him to do it. He neither can nor wants to. He'd rather get drunk. Soon he won't be able to go on. This isn't funny any more. He can't stand it. He'll wind up going crazy. It'd almost have been easier for him if he'd been driven up to the police headquarters and gone through everything he'd been expecting and prepared for. It's these violent tensions that do him in.
He really doesn’t know himself which streets he’s been walking along, but now he’s standing on Graabrodre Square staring into the window of a second-hand bookstore. Naturally without seeing anything at all. He’s just standing there struggling with himself to find a new platform to keep living on. Because now of course he’s really got to get on it again. Collect and mix it up with Mr. Salomonsen, rent, sewing machine installment payments, embezzlement, and borrowed money. And of course he’ll soon be an old man. When you’re young, you don’t take it that seriously.

There’s a white envelope lying at his feet. It’s unused, but something’s written on it in pencil. He kicks it with his foot so it’s facing him and he can read what’s written there. In fact there’s nothing written there except: Remember to take something home. So just a note for someone or other whom it all of a sudden occurred to at the office that he wanted to take something home, whatever reason he may’ve had for it. And now he probably did buy something or other since he flung the envelope here on the street.

Yeah, why shouldn’t you take something home with you. Maybe it makes the whole thing easier if you’re not so afraid to show one another a little friendliness. Naturally you have to save. But of course it still isn’t enough anyway.

On Skinder Street he stops at a cart and buys a big bag of cherries. Of the best quality. Naturally, his wife’ll probably become suspicious when he rolls up with them and will think to herself: what’s going on here if he’s acting this way. Because, after all, he never did things like that while they had the store. Just as all husbands become suspicious when their wives make their favorite dish for dinner or put out their slippers. But maybe she’ll understand nonetheless that it’s just a need to show her friendliness. After all, women have such a fine instinct for such things.

And in general he’ll try to be more sociable at home. He’ll take her and Anna along some Sunday on an outing or something like that. Yes he will. That’s certainly one of the reasons that things are going the way they are. Since they moved out to
Vesterbro, each of them's been wrapped up in himself. That's also probably why things went the way they did with Poul. They need to get together; really, it might be a lovely day, take the lunch basket along and all that stuff. A bit of the same mood from their summer house. And now he notices for real how fond he actually is of them. It's his fault that they're sort of almost going around being hostile to one another. That's because he's had all that stuff to be pondering. He's neglected his family, but now it's going to be different.

He picks up the pace—he almost can't get home quickly enough. On Sunday the Worker Good Samaritans are going to have an air defense display at Fort Kastrup—that'll be a splendid place for an outing. And Anna can take her fiancé along. Maybe he should tell his wife everything. Without keeping back anything at all. But that's probably going too far all the same. Just right away all at once.

Maybe they also ought to get together more with their family. Maybe then they also wouldn't be so unwilling to give them a helping hand when they're in a pinch. Maybe you could invite the in-laws along to Kastrup. After all, to be honest, the brother-in-law's a really nice man.

VI

An ear-splitting crash filled the air. It must've been a high-explosive shell that had struck. And now the sirens got cracking and emitted their protracted, mournful wail.

And now this unearthly sharp popping from an exploding gas bomb. The most indescribable confusion reigned. The moaning of the wounded was mingled with the ambulances' shrill howling.

Instinctively their faces turned toward the sky. When would the pilot perform his next dive, when would he drop off his next shipment of fire, death, and destruction. The sirens were already giving warning of a new attack.

The place where the high-explosive shell had struck pre-
sented a frightful sight. Private automobiles were still arriving that had been commandeered by the government as ambulances and police cars, the street was blocked off, the personnel had gas masks on. A man came staggering over, blood streaming down over his face.

That’s really only red lead they’ve smeared on, Lundegaard said, but, damn it, it looks very lifelike.

Now they were dragging along some people who’d been victims of the gas, whether it was mustard gas or phosgene. Soon you won’t know what to believe, said the warehouse clerk. One day they say in the newspaper that mustard gas is so terrible there’s nothing to combat it with, and here they’re treating the people attacked by gas as if they’d just gotten a little on their clothes. He was sitting with a yellow leaflet in his hand—it was one of those the pacifists had handed out outside the entrance to the fort. As a protest against the air defense demonstration. By the way, the leaflet claimed that one member of the board of directors of the Light Automatic Rifle Syndicate was also in the management of the Air Defense Association and that the whole show was supposed to serve as an advertisement for armaments capitalists. And if war came, we could look forward to being mowed down by Danish light automatic rifles. Made in Denmark.

Yeah, said Lundegaard’s brother-in-law, all that’s certainly true enough, but these pacifists here are fanatics and that kind always pushes things to extremes.

Lundegaard, who with all his heart wanted to be good friends with his brother-in-law, agrees with him. People should never blindly believe what’s written in some such leaflets.

Well, says the brother-in-law, now I didn’t say that what’s written in the leaflets isn’t true. I’m just saying that they only explain the matter from one side.

There’s no denying that Lundegaard’s a little offended. Here he moves to his brother-in-law’s rescue, and as thanks the nitwit stabs him in the back. Damn, you can notice whose brother he is—that’s of course exactly the way his wife acts, too. Naturally, I’m sure what’s in the leaflets is true, he says in a subdued way,
I just meant that a half-truth is also a lie.

Incidentally, now it's raining again. It's really unbearable that when you finally go on an outing, the weather can't even stay dry. A bunch of people in their Sunday best are sitting, lying, and standing up along the slopes. And now they're getting their good clothes ruined by the rain.

Then the demonstration's over and the loudspeakers begin broadcasting music. There's probably going to be a dance afterward. After all, there usually is on these kinds of occasions. Lundegaard and his family go up on one of the bastions to eat the food they brought along. They crack the jokes of the day and, in spite of everything, sort of little by little, they succeed in managing to create something like a picnic atmosphere. The warehouse clerk goes for beer and mineral water. Anna and Mrs. Lundegaard unpack the food in the basket. The brother-in-law's wife isn't along. She didn't want to, but incidentally it doesn't look as though the brother-in-law misses her either. Nevertheless he apologizes for her. After all, she's seen so many war films, he says, and her nerves can't stand it. She'd much rather be sitting home.

Incidentally, the relationship between the warehouse clerk and Anna isn't that warm any more and Anna would've preferred that he not come along today, but that of course would've looked a bit strange since she'd just introduced him at home as her fiancé. And Lundegaard thought he was surely pleasing her when he invited the warehouse clerk along and in general treated him like a member of the family. Anna would've greatly preferred not to have gone along if it weren't that she'd hate to hurt her parents. Of course, you couldn't always do exactly what you preferred to either. After all, it was really a family outing. But she wouldn't deny that it bored her. And she was annoyed at the warehouse clerk who seemed to feel splendid in the family circle. He seemed to get along well both with the brother-in-law and Lundegaard. It was totally ridiculous to hear them sitting and discussing military questions and the like. As if they knew anything about it. After all, they were just sitting and saying what they'd read in the newspapers. At the moment the ware-
house clerk was sitting with a prosaic expression saying that they ought to do just what was being done in France, which had nationalized the war industries; that was the only right way because it was the armaments capitalists who were inciting to war. To put it bluntly, he made an almost comic impression as he sat there acting smart. In one hand he had a sandwich with liver paste and cucumber salad, and in the other a beer. Anna was certain that all around everybody was amused by them.

The warehouse clerk took all imaginable pains to make a congenial impression, to win them over. Once in a while he stole a glance at Anna and observed her facial expression. If he just understood what actually went on in that girl. Naturally, he hadn’t been able to avoid noticing that recently she’d become cooler toward him, and had become afraid that maybe she was no longer that fond of him. Otherwise he’d felt so certain of her. Thought he had her in the palm of his hand. Especially after she’d taken him home and introduced him to her parents. And now she’d obviously begun to get irritable and hardly even answered him when he spoke to her. If he at least just knew why. At first he thought it was because she was afraid of a repetition of those terrible days when they thought things had gone wrong. And in order to calm her down and so she wouldn’t slip away from him, he’d then confided to her that he probably couldn’t become a father, and so he wasn’t in a position to get her into trouble. True enough, he hadn’t the slightest idea whether that was really the case, but he certainly hadn’t become anyone’s father yet. And he’d known girls other than Anna.

But to his surprise, that piece of information had precisely the opposite effect on her. Afterward he could certainly see that he’d acted stupidly and that in his eagerness not to lose her, he’d actually estranged them from each other. Because Anna of course didn’t have anything against having kids, though, true enough, she didn’t want to have them until she’d gotten married. She’d certainly even like to have kids alot. Because she’d been so strange after that conversation and recently they’d been, if anything, like strangers to each other. Later he’d tried to patch things up by saying that of course he actually didn’t know de-
finitely whether that was really the case. That it was just a kind of idea he’d had. Why wouldn’t he be able to be a father? It was really damn annoying all right that he’d come up with that nonsense. But her moodiness was getting on his nerves. You never knew where you were with her.

They’d brought along the coffee in thermos bottles and the brother-in-law had taken schnapps along. Now the weather had turned really nice again, the air was clean and fresh after the rain, and when you looked out across the blue sound, you could glimpse the coast of Sweden on the horizon.