

KNUT HAMSUN

HUNGER



genç destek

GENÇ DESTEK: 84
LITERATURE: 45

KNUT HAMSUN / HUNGER

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Cover Design by Sedat Gösterikli

Page Design by Cansu Poroy

Genç Destek: September 2024
Certificate# 43196

ISBN 978-625-6051-85-0

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Deniz Ofset – Çetin Koçak

Sertifika No. 48625

Maltepe Mahallesi

Hastane Yolu Sokak No. 1/6

Zeytinburnu / İstanbul

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I HAVE ENDURED WORSE



Part I

During my days of aimless wandering with hunger in Christiania, that peculiar city, one cannot leave without bearing the marks of their stay.

As I lay awake in my attic, the chime of a clock downstairs marked six. Daylight flooded the room, and the sounds of people traversing the stairs echoed through the space. Near the door, where the walls were covered with old issues of the *Morgenbladet*, I could discern a notice from the Director of Lighthouses and, slightly to the left, a prominent advertisement for Fabian Olsens' freshly baked bread.

The moment my eyes fluttered open, I instinctively pondered whether there was anything to celebrate that day. I had been somewhat hard-up lately, and one after the other of my belongings had been taken to my "Uncle." I had grown nervous and irritable. A few times I had kept my bed for the day with vertigo. Occasionally, when fortune smiled upon me, I had succeeded in securing five shillings for an article from one newspaper or other.

As the light gradually became brighter, I turned my attention to the advertisements near the door. I could discern even the slender, smiling letters of “winding-sheets available at Miss Andersen’s” to the right of it. That occupied me for a long while. The moment I heard the clock below strike eight, I got up and put my clothes on.

I opened the window and looked out. From where I was standing, I could see a clothesline stretching across and an open field beyond. In the distance, the remnants of a charred smithy lay, with laborers toiling diligently to clear away the debris. Leaning with my elbows propped on the window-frame, I peered into the vast openness beyond. The day held promise with its clarity - autumn, that delicate and cool season of transformation, had gracefully descended upon us, painting everything with its hues of change and impending dormancy. The escalating clamor of the streets beckoned me outside. The empty room, its floor undulating beneath my every step, felt like a suffocating, ominous coffin. With no secure latch on the door and lacking a stove, it offered no comfort. I used to lie on my socks at night to dry them a little by the morning. The only thing I had to divert myself with was a little red rocking-chair, in which I used to sit in the evenings and doze and muse on all manner of things. When the wind howled fiercely and the door downstairs remained open, dreadful noises echoed up

through the floor and along the walls. The *Morgenbladet* newspaper, placed near the door, would often tear into strips, adding to the unsettling ambiance.

I stood up and searched through a bundle in the corner by the bed for a bite for breakfast but finding nothing. So, I went back to the window.

God knows, I pondered, whether seeking employment will ever bring me any relief. The repeated rejections, vague assurances, along with the dashed hopes and futile efforts, had all but extinguished my spirit. As a final recourse, I had applied for a position as a debt collector, but my efforts were in vain. Not only I was too late, but I also lacked the fifty shillings required as security. There was always something or another in my way. I had even offered to enlist in the Fire Brigade. There we stood and waited in the entrance, some half-hundred men, hitting our chests out to give an idea of strength and bravery, whilst an inspector walked up and down and scanned the applicants, felt their arms, and posing one question or another to them. He passed me by once more, shaking his head and remarking that I was rejected due to my sight. Determined, I applied again, this time without my glasses, frowning my brows and straining my eyes to appear sharper. However, the man recognized me and passed with a knowing smile. To compound matters, I could no longer seek employment as a respectable man.

Things had declined with a regular and steady rhythm over time, until I found myself stripped of every possible possession. Not even a comb remained, nor a book to offer solace during the bleakest moments. Throughout the summer, while seated in churchyards or parks where I usually wrote my newspaper articles, I had contemplated column after column on diverse topics. Strange ideas, quaint fancies, opinions of my restless brain; in despair I had often chosen the most remote themes, that took long hours of intense effort, and never were accepted. When I complete one, I started to work at another. Usually, I was not discouraged by the editors saying “no.” I used to tell myself constantly that someday I was going to succeed; And occasionally, when luck was on my side and I struck gold with something, I could earn five shillings for an afternoon’s worth of work.

Once more, I lifted myself from the window and crossed over to the washing-stand. I dampened the shiny knees of my trousers with some water, hoping to dull them slightly and give the impression of being a bit newer. After that, I put my paper and pencil into my pocket and went out. In order to not attract my landlady’s attention (A few days had passed since my rent was due, and I had nothing to pay it with.), I walked down the stairs with great care.

It was nine o’clock. The hum of vehicles enveloped the air, creating a powerful morning chorus alongside the

footsteps of pedestrians and the crack of cart-drivers' whips. The bustling traffic everywhere immediately lifted my spirits, and I found myself growing increasingly contented. Nothing was farther from my intention than to merely take a morning walk in the open air. What had the air to do with my lungs? I felt as strong as a giant, capable of halting a dray with my shoulders if need be. A sweet and unusual mood, a sense of carefree happiness, seized hold of me. I started to observe the people I met and who passed me, to reading the placards on the wall, noted even the impression of a glance thrown at me from a passing tram-car, let each bagatelle, each trifling incident that crossed or vanished from my path impress me.

On such a cheerful day, if only I had a little something to eat! The joy of the morning overwhelmed me; my contentment became unbridled, and without any specific reason, I found myself humming happily.

At a butcher's stall, a woman stood pondering over sausages for dinner. As I walked past her, she glanced up at me. She had but one tooth in the front of her head. I had become so nervous and easily affected in the last few days that the woman's face made a disgusting impression upon me. The long yellow snag looked like a little finger pointing out of her gum, and her gaze was still full of sausage as she turned it upon me. I immediately lost all appetite, and a feeling of nausea came over me. When

I reached the marketplace, I went to the fountain and drank a little. I looked up; the dial marked ten on Our Saviour's tower.

I wandered through the streets, recklessly, without a care for the world. I stopped at a corner and turned into a side street without any particular destination in mind. I simply allowed myself to drift, enjoying the pleasant morning, mingling carefree among other joyful souls. The atmosphere was clear and bright, mirroring the state of my mind, free from any darkness or shadow.

For at least ten minutes, I had been trailing behind an old, crippled man. He struggled along, carrying a bundle in one hand, exerting his entire body to move swiftly. I could hear his heavily breathing from the exertion, and the thought crossed my mind that I could offer to carry his burden for him. However, I hesitated, and made no attempt to catch up with him. In Graendsen, I encountered Hans Pauli, who nodded in passing, seeming in a hurry. Why was he in such a hurry? had no intention of asking him for a shilling, and moreover, I wanted to return a blanket that I had borrowed from him several weeks ago at the earliest opportunity.

Just wait until I start climbing the stairs; I would owe nothing to anyone, not even for a blanket. Perhaps even today, I might start writing an article on the "Crimes of Futurity," "Freedom of Will," or something equally compelling, something worth reading, for which I could

fetch at least ten shillings... At the thought of writing this article, I felt a surge of desire to start working immediately, drawing from the abundance of ideas swirling in my mind. I resolved to find a suitable spot in the park to write and wouldn't rest until I had finished my article.

However, the old cripple persisted in his slow progress up the street ahead of me, his awkward movements remaining constant. The sight of his feeble figure continually ahead began to agitate me—his journey seemed never-ending. It occurred to me that he might be headed to the same destination as I, leaving him unavoidably in my sight throughout the entire journey. In my frustration, it seemed to me that he deliberately eased his pace at every intersection, as though waiting to discern my chosen direction before briskly resuming his advance to stay ahead. I followed, observing this tiresome individual, my irritation mounting. Gradually, I realized he had sapped away my joyful mood, dragging the once pristine and beautiful morning down to his level of ugliness. He looks like a great sprawling reptile striving with might and main to win a place in the world and reserve the footpath for himself. When we reached the top of the hill, I determined to put up with it no longer. I diverted my attention to a shop window and lingered, hoping he would take the opportunity to forge ahead. Yet, after a few minutes, upon resuming my walk, I found

him still leading the way. It seemed he too had halted. Without hesitation, I took several swift strides forward, reached him, and delivered a firm slap on his shoulder.

He stopped immediately, and we both stared at one another without a blink. "A halfpenny for milk please!" he whined, while his head twisting a side.

So, that's the way things started. I searched my pockets and remarked, "For milk, eh? Well, money's tight these days, and I'm not sure if you are really in need."

"I haven't had a single bite since yesterday in Drammen; I'm completely broke, and I haven't found any work yet!"

"Are you a craftsman?"

"Yes; a binder."

"A what?"

"A shoe-binder; for that matter, I can make shoes too."

"Ah, that alters the case," I said, "you wait here for couple of minutes, and I will go and get a little money for you; just a few pence."

I hurried as fast as I could down Pyle Street, where I knew of a pawnbroker on a second floor (Moreover, it was someone I had never visited previously). When I got inside the hall, I hastily took off my waistcoat, rolled it up, and put it under my arm; after which I went upstairs and knocked at the office door. I bowed on entering and put the waistcoat on the counter.

“One-and-six,” said the man.

“Yes, yes, thank you,” I responded. “If I weren’t feeling a bit strapped for cash, I wouldn’t consider parting with it, of course.”

I received the money and the ticket, then headed back. After all, pawning that waistcoat was a brilliant idea. I’d have enough money for a hearty breakfast, and by evening, my thesis on the “Crimes of Futurity” would be complete. Life started to seem brighter, and I rushed back to the man to send him on his way.

“There it is,” said I. “I am glad you ask to me first.”

The man accepted the money and started to examine me intently. Why was he standing there and staring? I had a suspicion that he was particularly examining the knees of my trousers, and his boldness annoyed me. Did he really think I was as poor as I appeared? Hadn’t I practically started writing an article for half-a-sovereign? Besides, I had no worries about the future. I had many prospects lined up. Why should it matter to a total stranger if I chose to treat him to a drink on such a delightful day. The way he stared annoyed me, and I made up my mind to give him a good dressing-down before I left him. I threw back my shoulders, and said:

“My friend, you’ve developed quite the unpleasant habit of staring on a man’s knees when he offers you a shilling.”

He leaned his head back against the wall and opened his mouth wide; there was clearly some thought processing in his empty mind, and he seemed to conclude that I intended to outsmart him in some way, as he handed the money back to me. I slammed my foot on the pavement and, swear at him, insisted that he keep it. Did he imagine I was going to all that trouble for nothing? If all came to all, perhaps I owed him this shilling; I had just recollected an old debt; he was standing before an honest man, honourable to his finger-tips—in short, the money was his. Oh, no thanks were needed; it had been a pleasure to me. Good-bye!

I continued my way. Finally, I was liberated from this bothersome crippled man, and I could proceed on my path in tranquillity. I turned down Pyle Street once more and halted in front of a grocer's shop. The entire window display was brimming with food, and I resolved to enter and purchase something to take along with me.

“A piece of cheese and a French roll,” I said, and threw my sixpence on to the counter.

“Bread and cheese for the entire amount?” the woman asked ironically, without lifting her gaze to me.

“For the entire sixpence? Indeed,” I replied.

I collected the items, said to the fat old woman a good morning with utmost politeness, and dashed up Castle Hill to the park at full speed.

I found a bench to myself and eagerly began to devour my meal. It was satisfying; it had been a long time since I had enjoyed such a hearty meal, and gradually, I felt a sense of contentment wash over me, similar to the feeling one experiences after a good long cry. My confidence boosted up. I could no longer be content with writing an article on something as straightforward and commonplace as the “Crimes of Futurity,” which anyone could deduce from history. I felt capable of a much greater effort than that; I was in a fitting mood to overcome difficulties, and I decided on a treatise, in three sections, on “Philosophical Cognition.” This would, of course, provide me with the chance to crush some of Kant’s sophistries... but, when I took out my writing materials to begin work, I realized that I no longer had a pencil: I had left it behind at the pawnshop. My pencil was still in my waistcoat pocket.

My God! Today, everything seems determined to interrupt me! I muttered a few curses, stood up from the bench, and paced back and forth along the path. It was frightening quiet all around; only two nursemaids were near the Queen’s arbour, pushing their strollers. Otherwise, there was no one in sight. I was in a bitter mood; I walked back and forth like a maniac. It was absurd how things seemed to go so wrong! Imagine, an article divided into three sections stranded simply because I didn’t have a pencil in my pocket. Was I supposed to return to Pyle Street and ask to get my

pencil back? There was still enough time to complete a good piece before the crowds began to fill the parks. So much depended on this treatise on “Philosophical Cognition”—perhaps the welfare of many individuals, one couldn’t say for sure. I convinced myself that it could create tremendous assistance to numerous young people. On second thoughts, I would not lay violent hands-on Kant; I might easily avoid doing that; I would only need to glide almost not detectable when addressing queries about Time and Space. However, I couldn’t guarantee the same for Renan, old Parson Renan...

In any case, an article of a certain number of columns must be completed. The unpaid rent and the landlady’s inquisitive gaze in the morning haunted me throughout the day; it kept resurfacing, confronting me repeatedly, even during my pleasant moments when I otherwise had no dark thoughts.

I must put an end to it, so I left the park in a rush to get my pencil from the pawnbroker’s.

As I reached the bottom of the hill, I caught up to two ladies, whom I passed. In doing so, I accidentally touched one of them on the arm. I looked up; I noticed she had a round and pale face. However, to my surprise, she blushed and instantly became remarkably lovely. I’m unsure why she blushes; perhaps at a passing word from someone nearby, or maybe just at some lingering thought of her own. Could it be because I accidentally

touched her arm? Her chest rises and falls rapidly, and she tightly grips the handle of her sunshade. What could be troubling her?

I paused and let her pass ahead again. For the moment, I couldn't continue; the entire situation seemed incredibly peculiar to me. I was in a tantalizing mood, annoyed with myself on account of the pencil incident, and in a high degree disturbed by all the food I had taken on a totally empty stomach. Suddenly my thoughts, as if playfully inspired, take a singular direction. I feel myself seized with an odd desire to make this lady afraid; to follow her and annoy her in some way. I overtake her again, pass her by, turn quickly round, and meet her face-to-face to observe her well. I stand and look into her eyes, and hit, on the spur of the moment, on a name which I have never heard before—a name with a gliding, nervous sound—Ylajali! When she draws near to me, I straighten up and say in a impressive tone:

“You are losing your book, madam!” I could hear my heartbeat audibly as I said it.

“My book?” she asks her friend, and she walks on.

My mischievous impulses intensified, and I trailed after them. Yet, at the same time, I was acutely aware that I was engaging in a foolish prank, unable to resist the urge despite my better judgment.

My disordered condition ran away with me; I was inspired with the craziest notions, which I followed