

The man I was watching was rather dapper. He was nothing like those tramps whose appearance on a tram or bus causes panic to break out among the other passengers, who bring with them the stench of such great misfortune that the vehicle empties at the next stop. This poor wretch smelled only of alcohol, and not too strongly. He clambered onto the tram with great difficulty and sat in the first free seat, right by the door. He clearly had trouble walking. He wore an old, baggy jacket that had been mended in a few places, and a woollen beret with buttons, pulled down low over his ears. This strange get-up indicated that the man lived in a shelter and someone, perhaps the nuns, had got him dressed, because he seemed too muddle-headed to have done it himself. I had the impression someone else had put the beret on him like a child, and he'd been walking around in it like a little scatter-brained tot, forgetting he had something on his head. He was holding a large, half-empty cotton shopper. It was hard to say what was inside. Probably he was a can or bottle collector and, despite his evident mobility problems, he was going into town to try and make some money.

'Sit down, madam, don't validate your ticket,' he said to a woman who got on after him. 'Why should we? We don't owe them anything.'

He moved over to make room for her to sit down next to him, but she had no intention of doing so. Casting him a suspicious glance, she walked past him, heading towards the back of the tram.

[...]

Silence fell in the carriage. The man's raised voice had shaken everyone from their apathy. Conversations ground to a halt.

Eventually, a woman sitting nearby broke the silence. 'Such profanity. That's Poland for you,' she said in disgust.

'Traffic disruptions on Długa Street,' came the voice of a controller from the depot.

'Shut it, you scumbag. Don't be making a noise here,' replied the tramp angrily, not taking his eyes off the Basilica. 'Yes, Wyspiański's buried there too. A great man, I saw a photo of him once when he was in Paris. I've also been to Paris.'

Some of the passengers started exchanging amused glances, but the poor wretch in the beret, his eyes still fixed on what was outside the window, kept talking: 'You oaf! You had the Golden Horn! You oaf! You had your feathered cap which was stolen by the breeze. The Horn resounds among the trees – you're left with nothing but the strap! All you're left with is the strap!' His hoarse, breaking voice contrasted strangely with the words he was speaking. He sounded like an old, malfunctioning contraption playing a familiar melody off-key. The young lad sitting opposite him pulled his hood down over his face; someone else got up and moved further down the carriage, as far as possible from the man and his monologue.

'He had a good friend, Rydel,' continued the tramp. 'I

remember that because I had a good friend once too. They called him "Rome" even though he only drank beer and smoked cigarettes. There was nothing Italian about him. Nor noble, as it turned out. But all the same, they called him "Rome", that was the nickname he got, the scumbag.'

He shook his head nervously, turned away from the window and looked around the tram.

'There was a student as well,' he said to a young woman sitting nearby. 'They called her "Muriel". Beautiful, like you, I liked her very much. Very much. We used to go to the Basilica together.' The young woman didn't reply. She pretended to be occupied by something outside and kept staring through the window.

'Then Muriel had Rome's baby, a son. The weather was like today when they whisked her off to the hospital on Copernicus Street. Scumbag. Her hair was auburn.' The lights that illuminate Wawel Castle at dusk were shining on the Vistula, so the tramp looked in that direction too.

'Oh, that's where they should have buried Wyspiański,' he muttered and fell silent.

Excerpt translated by Kate Webster



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