



SUPER FRAUEN

Clärenore Stinnes

The first person to drive
around the world by car.

**GOETHE
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Podcast Transcript

- [00:30] Eggs, eggs, nothing but eggs! Three men and a dainty woman sat around the basket that held their dinner: hard-boiled eggs. As provisions for the journey, Clärenore had packed 123 portions of eggs. The young women in the brown suit took one egg after another from the basket and ate with ferocious appetite. The men nibbled on their eggs as if they were chewing gum. How can you expect someone to stay in a good mood when there were only ever eggs to eat?
- [01:05] The men's faces were as tired as their bones. For hours they drove here and there in the car, stumbling from left to right und bumping their heads together. Then there was the mud that had covered them for days, clinging to their clothes and in large lumps on their shoes. The car has been bogged in the mud 15 times if not more; each time the three of them had to push the back of the car with all their weight as Clärenore sat at the steering wheel, putting her foot on the accelerator until the car would once again move forward. For as far as they could see there were only lonely forests and roads that weren't really roads. And the reward for their efforts on such days? Hard-boiled eggs.
- [01:58] "She must be made of steel," the men whispered to each other by the campfire each evening. Meanwhile their boss traced her finger around the map and planned the route for the next day. Clärenore never appeared to be tired. The mud, the aching bones, the icy chill in the night? She never moaned or complained. About anything. She only had one goal in mind: to become the first person to drive around the world. And this was in a time when very few women even had a driver's license. In most of the regions, there were still no roads, petrol stations or even exact maps. For a woman living in 1927, her plan was incredibly bold. Cars were a luxury and in the cities they were still mixed in with horse-drawn carriages. So how did it come to be that this 26-year-old woman, who happened to be the daughter of one of the richest men in Europe, embarked on such an adventurous and strenuous journey? And in a world that didn't seem to be made for women or cars?
- [03:15] **What could be the reasons for Clärenore's extraordinary plan?**
- [03:22] So why did she go on this journey? To put it quite simply: defiance. That was the feeling that had formed in Clärenore's stomach shortly after the death of her beloved father. He had only just started teaching her how to be strong in a world full of men: he had often taken her with him as an assistant on business trips. But now her father was dead and everything had changed. "There is no room for you anymore in your father's company," her mother had announced. "Your brothers will take over the business. Look for a husband and get married!"



- [04:00] At first, Clärenore was angry. Then she became defiant: she decided to forge her own path in life. On that day, she packed her bags and moved out of home. Word got around quickly that the Stinnes girl had a driver's license and wanted to earn her own money. The head of a car manufacturer offered her a spot as the only woman in a race with 50 other men. "A woman at the steering wheel, that'd be great advertising" he said, laughing at Clärenore, "even if you came last." Nevertheless, Clärenore had more talent than he could have ever guessed. Instead of finishing in last place, she came third. From then on, she would compete in one race after the other, leaving her male rivals looking pale in comparison.
- [04:57] **Clärenore's defiant streak propelled her to become a racing driver, almost as if to say: "It's now more than ever." Have you ever felt a similar way?**
- [05:10] Nevertheless, Clärenore had a grand dream: she wanted to see the world with her own eyes. Her talent for driving helped her: to finance her journey around the globe, she spent an entire year gathering money from sponsors. She also organised a dark green "Adler" automobile, with 50 horsepower, as well as another accompanying vehicle for spare parts and supplies for two mechanics. The Swedish cinematographer Carl-Axel Söderström would accompany Clärenore to document her adventure. As he had a wife waiting for him at home, Clärenore was certain that he would not fall in love with her and ruin her journey.
- [06:04] At twelve o'clock on the 25th of May 1927, the group set out on their journey and headed east. The church bells in Frankfurt farewelled them as an enthusiastic crowd cheered for Stinnes, who proudly steered her dark green car through the streets.
- [06:22] The trip was originally planned to last for a year. In the end, it went for two years. After just a few weeks, one of the mechanics fell ill and had to leave the team. A little bit later, the second mechanic also quit. He had had enough of the hardships, the lousy food and the iron will of his boss, Clärenore, who rarely let her men take a break.
- [06:50] Only the cinematographer Söderström remained at the young woman's side — even after he had written some rather despairing diary entries. "Everything seems to always go wrong with her," he wrote. "For breakfast only dry bread. She gave away all of the preserves." Or even: "I have gotten out and pushed the car more than I have filmed with the camera."
- [07:15] In the middle of Siberia the arrival of winter forced them to stop. For ten dark weeks. They had to wait until Lake Baikal, a mighty body of water between Russia and Mongolia, froze over. Only then could they manage to drive over the ice — something that no person before them had ever tried to do with a car.



[07:43] One day in January 1928, the time came to cross the lake. Clärenore stood on the banks of Lake Baikal and looked into the milky horizon. Negative fifty-three degrees, the wind blew snow clouds over the lake. The ice sheet looked rough, but solid. Clärenore and Söderström climbed into the car, looked at each other determinedly — and she put the car into first gear. She cautiously let the car roll onto the lake. Under them the ice cracked and moaned — Clärenore had to drive faster. Suddenly: a crack in the ice. “More speed!” Söderström shouted. Out of the corner of their eyes, they saw a horse and sleigh ahead of them break through the ice. But Clärenore and Söderström could not stop. Only speed prevented them from also breaking through the ice. After three hours, they did it: they had reached the other side, Clärenore and Söderström both dripping with sweat.

[08:48] After travelling through Europe and Asia, they travelled by ship to South America, where they planned to drive through the Andes Mountains. Clärenore and Söderström, however, did not foresee that it would have been easier to complete this leg of their journey by foot than with the car. Roads? There were none. In their place were steep mountain slopes, with huge stones or boulders frequently blocking the way. Instead of using the power of the engine, Clärenore and Söderström required the help of pulleys or camels to pull their car forward. One time, 50 members of a village had to help them heave their vehicle up and down a mountain. The obstructions were often so big, that they could only be blown into the air with a hefty load of dynamite. That was how the duo fought their way forward, metre by metre, in their car. “Figuratively speaking, the car comes first, then the road — there is never a road and then a car,” said Clärenore later about this important part of her journey.

[10:13] On the 24th of June 1929, the car’s odometer read 46,758km as Clärenore and Söderström arrived in Berlin to the jubilation of the public. In the past two years, they had traversed 23 countries — they had endured ice, heat, mud and sandstorms. Aside from the engine, every imaginable part of their car had broken and been repaired with plenty of ingenuity. “The world could have swallowed us up,” Söderström said to Clärenore after they arrived. “But it didn’t,” she replied smilingly.

[11:04] **“Where there’s a will, there’s a way.” In what ways does this saying describe Clärenore’s world trip? Have there been similar situations in your life?**

[11:18] A short time later, Söderström separated from his wife. Throughout their adventure, he and Clärenore had become so close that they could no longer imagine a life without the other. They married in 1930 and moved to a farm in the south of Sweden to become farmers. They had three children together — the couple never went to another car rally again.



[11:46] When a journalist later visited the 80-year-old Clärenore in Sweden, he asked her: "Would you ever again repeat such a journey?" Clärenore answered: "If I could bring together all the nations of the world, I would do it again despite my age."

[12:07] And although their great adventure was followed by decades of silence, Clärenore will always remain a pioneer. As a car driver, as a woman, as a traveller. "Within myself, I have always felt liberated," she had told the journalist. "I see no difference between men and women."

Clärenore lived until she was 89 years old.

PODCAST EPISODE

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