Mogens Klitgaard

God Tempers the Wind to the Shorn Lamb

Translated and
with an Introduction and Notes
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The cover image is one of the friezes adorning the lobby of the Danish Parliament, which were painted by Rasmus Larsen between 1918 and 1921. Courtesy of Folketinget.

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Third Chapter

1

When you're sitting like this at a people's kitchen and have to give an account of your life, you're inclined to forget what it actually is that you want. You're inclined to let yourself be carried away by what you've experienced and just talk away. Events and people surface; dramatic experiences that were actually insignificant are revived in your memory.

I mean, back then I didn't understand why I'd run away from home and why I behaved the way I did. And in a way, I probably don't understand it today either. Other people would presumably have experienced something completely different than I did. I mean, it's not so much what you get mixed up in as the way you face things that matters. I think it was my misfortune to have been brought up too respectably. Or too boringly. During all the time I roamed around Europe, even during the harshest periods, I never longed for home. The memories of my childhood home have always depressed me. The quiet living room, the rule-bound life, the newspaper holder with *Hovedstaden** and *Kristeligt Dagblad*,* where the papers from the day before were taken out every morning and put in the haybox, every morning on the dot, the calm ticking of the clock, the potted plants, and the picture of Jesus blessing the little children.

Sometimes I didn't have such a good time of it, I starved, and wasn't in a bed for weeks, but I never longed for the close, stagnant rooms where I lived in my childhood, never missed the cage of rules, laws, customs, and morality that secured its residents against life's dangers and insecurity, but at the same time removed every sensation of living. Everything was situated within fixed limits; you never needed to be in doubt about how you were supposed to act. You had the laws and rules to stick to. You had to do that and you weren't allowed to do this. And it was always the most interesting thing that was forbidden and the boring thing that you had to do.

I've experienced many strange and unusual things. Things

people in general don't meet up with. I've been a doorman in Paris, smuggler on the Norwegian-Swedish border, shoestring dealer in Hamburg, and tour guide on the Riviera. And, still, lying on the side of the road has been my greatest experience, lying there on my back just staring up into the air, being completely free and independent, completely without responsibility, without obligations. Freer than the birds, which have a nest and mate and chicks and all that stuff. Not having any domicile, any goal, was a splendid thing; lying on the outskirts of a forest a million miles from what's called civilization, lying there in a bed of bear skin fescue,* wild chervil, and forget-me-nots and counting yourself lucky that you're not standing in a factory or sitting in a galley.

There was just one thing I had to make sure of: scrupulously avoiding all work. The danger of getting work lurked everywhere you went; twice I'd let myself be tricked and sacrificed my freedom: I'd gone to work with a go-getter's impulse and zeal and experienced a miserable and fettered existence—all that stuff I'd run away from home to avoid. What pleasure is there in hoeing beets. What pleasure is there in being a messroom boy on a Thurø-schooner. You get a place to sleep and you get something to put in your stomach. But I mean, you get that anyway. And I've never had such bad bunks and never eaten so badly as when I let myself be lured into taking a job.

But it could be hard to avoid. People would try to lure you in every possible way. They used all the ploys. Some of them believed in the principle that if they gave you a little bit of food, in return you were supposed to do a little work, chop a little wood, do a bit in the garden or something like that. And if, based on your unfortunate upbringing, you were so stupid as to say yes, you might be at risk that they'd urge you to stay—they had a lot that had to be done; you could live up in the loft—you'd definitely get a little for it and so on. Or they'd heard that the farmer next door needed a young man and they absolutely wanted to go along with you over there and make sure you got the job.

The damn thing about it was that you were forced to pretend

that actually you'd love to have something to sink your teeth into, you were forced to bend over backwards agreeing with the whole thing and let yourself be hauled along to the farmer's and let yourself be hog-tied to a wheelbarrow and a shovel instead of going off on the tramp down the road free and easy. Otherwise you'd forfeit people's sympathy and get neither food nor money for lodging. People were peculiar on that point—they said that work ennobles and all that kind of stuff. The vagabonds said that work ennobles, but the nobility don't work. Besides, people always wanted to know what your profession was, and since you were forced to say something, I used to say I was a gardener's trainee. I felt that sounded nice. Especially that stuff about being a trainee. In other occupations the ones who went for the beer were just apprentices, but among the gardeners they were trainees. That was, so to speak, a bit superior. And when I went to places where there was a need for gardener's trainees, I immediately did an about-face and said I was a carpenter or whatever I could think of right then.

I went from Grimsby to Hamburg as a stowaway on an English freighter. It was a disgusting trip. To begin with, I walked around Grimsby for a couple of days and enjoyed the freedom I'd regained without actually knowing what to use it for. One night I sneaked on board one of The United's* boats, a butter boat*—I think it was called "Primula"*—to ask the crew for a little food. They said I was wanted for desertion and that I'd better try and get out of town one way or another; there was a freighter over by the coal cranes that was probably going to Hamburg.

Toward morning I boarded the freighter and hid in a lifeboat that was covered with canvas. In the boat there was a compass, a can of water, and a container with biscuits. After I'd been lying there freezing for two days and nights, we docked at Hamburg and when night fell, I left my hiding place and went ashore. That night and the next day I walked Hamburg's streets. The following night I slept in a little Scandinavian seaman's home on *Little Parrot Street** in Altona.* I had no money, but I pawned my bundle.

But I had to try and get out of Hamburg. After all, a city represented everything I wanted to avoid. The real freedom was on the highway. Wandering through beautiful landscapes completely free and independent. Mountains, forests, and lakes. Chirping birds and a brook trickling down the mountain, a grassy slope beside the brook where you could lie stretched out and loaf. Just as long as you cared to. Without anyone coming and asking why you were lounging about there. No need to jump up whenever someone came. And to stand looking embarrassed like a thief who's been caught red-handed. Just remain lying and stare up into the air. Nobody could boss you around. No obligations, none at all. No responsibility. Free and independent.

2

And if you got hungry, you just needed to go into a farmhouse and ask for a bite to eat. Everybody knows from films and tourist propaganda what such a German farm looks like. Well-kept half-timbered buildings, beautiful, sunburned people in national costumes, a cheerfully barking dog bids you welcome. On such a farm they'd receive a travelling journeyman in a friendly way, almost enthusiastically—it meant a diversion, a breath of air from the great wide world. You'd be entertained, persuaded to stay overnight.

In Sweden it'd been something else again. Sweden's so densely populated and so overrun with vagabonds. Here in Germany the farms were located so far apart from one another. And I'd certainly wind up experiencing something. The great experience lies in wait on the highway. Maybe I'd stop off in some idyllic little mountain village, take a job for a week or so, go for a stroll after knocking off for the day with the most beautiful girl in the field, maybe seduce her in the little grove by the brook. And I'd move on to new districts, new experiences, new adventures. That'd be the life. That's the way life was supposed to be lived.

That'd be something different than walking around in a

windy seaport like Hamburg tightening your belt, sleeping in a filthy seaman's home, where you'd be treated like a dog, and spending the day wandering around in cold and wet streets, hungry and homeless.

So out on to the highway. Hamburg was hell. Being without means in a city is to be the least advantaged person, to have the worst possible conditions for getting something to eat and a bed to sleep in. And if you finally do get any, it's the vilest grub and the most miserable lodging. Not having to work just means that you have nothing to do, that you feel superfluous, rejected; idleness is a curse—you saunter up and down the streets and don't know how to make time pass, you're treated like a dog by the police and meet with hostility from people. You constantly go around fearing arrest; if you're finally able to pay for lodging, you don't know whether it'll be the police that'll come to wake you; if you don't have lodging, you don't dare sit down on a bench to try to sleep a little—then the damn officers will come and want to hear a little about what kind a fella you are. Damn it, decent people can sit on the benches all night long, if they feel like it. And, after all, they have a warm bed they can go home to; it'd be more reasonable if you chased them away from the benches.

A city is hell for a person without money or without friends. There's nowhere you can feel as lonely as in a city; nowhere is the danger of having to stay overnight greater than there in the midst of all the houses. You aren't even allowed to go into a stairway; nowhere is the danger of winding up starving greater than where piles of foodstuffs are heaped up; nowhere do you feel lonelier than in the midst of a throng of people.

But out in the country it'll be something totally different again. There you'd surely also have a goal—getting from one place to the next; when, overcome by sensations and wandering, you lay down to sleep in the fragrant hay of some barn or other, you'd have the satisfaction of having gotten so far, maybe twenty miles, maybe thirty. And you wouldn't know what the next day would bring, what districts you'd get to, what experiences you'd be exposed to.

In the city one day was like the next. And every day felt as if it was wasted. If there was finally a change to be noted, it was only that you'd sunken deeper down into the muck.

3

The day I decided to leave Hamburg it rained. I'd slept on Little Parrot Street at night. It was located in Altona, down by the harbor. I had no money for the trolley and it was much later in the day before I got out of Hamburg. It was still raining, I was soaked through, but in good spirits; now life was finally going to take on a little shape; now I'd experience the life I'd run away from home to achieve.

A big city's periphery isn't anything especially uplifting; I never felt I could deal with garbage dumps, allotment gardens, storage depots, factory grounds, and cheap tenement houses. Now and then there was a bit of a field, and a tumbledown farmhouse and a lean cow got me to believe that I was in the country now, but right after came an old farmhouse that was fitted up as a hauler's garage, after that came a truck garden and a chemical plant. It was clear that the real farmland still lay far away. In addition, my feet were no longer in shape, there wasn't a dry spot on my body, it was getting to be evening, and I had no idea where to stay the night. I was in no position to begin riding in a car: no driver stops that close to town to pick up a vagabond. I wasn't far from wishing I were back in the seaman's home in Altona.

In the houses along the road the lights were being lit; big trucks with trailers rattled past me on massive tires and splashed me with slush and mud; in front of a dirty sign bespattered by dirt from the road was standing an abandoned circus caravan that looked as though it'd been forgotten; there were still remnants of a poster: *Huge sensation. Direct from New York.* Underneath the picture of a death-rider on a motorcycle there was written in pencil the name of a village and a date. A rusty bicycle frame was standing leaning against one of the caravan wheels. Some

place out in the clammy twilight you could hear the sounds from a train being shunted.

But in spite of everything. Now I'd finally experience freedom.

A man rode past me on a bicycle. He was in a raincoat and high boots. On his head he had a uniform cap. He was probably a kind of policeman. When he'd gone a little bit past me, he stopped and got off. It was right under a light—the glint of his buttons and gold braids made me afraid. He began to move over toward me, while he raised one hand and shouted something or other. I didn't have enough presence of mind to scram, or else the dread of the uniform, authority, was in my blood from childhood. My upbringing, you understand. It was impossible for me to imagine that there was an ordinary human being inside the uniform, a human being like all the rest, a human being who on Sundays would lie on a sofa in a boring living room in shirtsleeves and couldn't be distinguished from all other human beings. Here on the highway he was something fear-inspiring, the law, the authorities, and all that stuff. He represented power, society, which caught a vagabond red-handed. When he waved his hand, I had to stop. Stop all at once. It wouldn't even have occurred to me to scram.

Have you ever seen a horse in a fenced-in field where all the grass has been cropped to the root. Outside the fencing there's tall, succulent grass and the fencing isn't that high that the horse wouldn't be able to jump over without a run-up. It stands there looking longingly at that lush, green grass out there, tries by stretching and pointing its muzzle to reach just a little of the splendor, but not for a second does it think of jumping over and satisfying its hunger in the knee-high, fresh lushness. It doesn't occur to it. Not for a second. It doesn't at all suspect that it can be done.

That's the way I stood there on the highway and saw the uniform coming toward me. An order from a uniform quite simply means that it has to be obeyed—not doing it wouldn't even occur to me.

I'm sitting here in a people's kitchen like a man who's been knocked out. That might suggest that I have a certain talent for doing the wrong thing, but don't worry, in any event you can rely on my being right when I say it's been my experience that it's a false doctrine that people should speak truthfully. The point is not to speak the truth, but to say what the situation demands—what's most expedient. The times my good upbringing has had the upper hand and lured me into saying the truth, I've almost always gotten into hot water, whereas I've extricated myself from a series of situations with a handy little lie. You have to say the smartest thing there is to say. Sometimes it may be smart to say the truth, but that's rare.

If I'd told the uniform the way things were, I'd have been arrested, expelled from Germany, and sent home to the potted plants and my family's crabby reproaches. That's why I said that I was a German South Jutlander,* a gardener by occupation, who was out looking for work. He remarked that I spoke German badly. I said that my family was Danish, that they spoke Danish at home, but that *I* felt and thought like a German, that my heart was with Germany, and that among other things that was the reason why I'd left home. That seemed to make him sympathetically disposed, and I already thought that I was going to be let off, when it turned out that he'd gained too much sympathy for me to want to let me paddle my own canoe. That wasn't so lucky: I began to be afraid that he was going to invite me home for dinner and it would come out that I'd told him a pack of lies. That's why I said that I'd just eaten, that I'd given up looking for work for today, and asked the way to the train station.

He wanted to go with me part of the way to the station and asked me on the way what he should do with a geranium that wasn't doing well—the leaves were yellow and curled up. I replied that it had to be transplanted right away in fresh earth; maybe he should mix a little sand in the earth and try and put a bit of lime at the bottom of the pot. He was very surprised.

Lime? I confirmed that it'd come to light that a bit of lime could do wonders—it was a relatively new discovery; I'd heard about a gardener in Schleswig who'd specialized in geraniums and the previous year had been on the edge of ruin in that it turned out that all his geraniums, many thousands, were on the verge of dying. The gardener became desperate, his whole existence was on the line; he didn't sleep at night and began to get religious, until one morning, when, careworn, he was wandering around in his hothouses among the dying geraniums, he discovered that a dozen of them that were standing off to the side were thriving splendidly, had fresh green leaves, and were bursting with buds. He took a couple of them inside and knocked them out of the pots to find out what the reason could be. It turned out that there was a little lime lying at the bottom of the pots. He called in the gardener trainee, who'd worked with these plants, and asked him how it happened that there was lime at the bottom of the pots. The gardener trainee became very scared and thought he was going to be fired; he swore that he had no idea how the lime had gotten in there. The gardener pondered about it all night and the next morning he made the drastic decision to transplant all the geraniums and put lime at the bottom. In the course of two weeks all the plants recovered and he was saved from ruin.

Well, I'll be damned, the uniform said. Maybe a guy should try it.

When we reached the station, he suddenly stopped and looked at me thoughtfully, said that he was just going to make a call and that I should wait outside till he was done. Now you stay here, he said. That was an order. And besides, I didn't have any great chance of getting away: he had a bike and I was a stranger in the place. What was it he had to call about? Maybe I should take the chance anyway and try to disappear.

Before I could decide, he came back out. It was right before the departure of a train and he was greeting people left and right. Well, now what do you think, he said, when he came over to me—I've got a job for you. He said it with the donor's suppressed delight, just the way you say: Well, you didn't expect that, did you. Or: I've got a surprise for you—what do you think

it might be.

I've got to admit that I wasn't as ecstatic as I should've been. Damn it all, that idiot. If people would really just keep their magnanimity to themselves and let me alone. Now I was right on the verge of being able to realize my dreams of freedom, of the real freedom, and then this stupid ass comes along and spoils the whole thing with his slobbering kindness; if I just hadn't said that I was a German South Jutlander—that was what gave him such sympathy for me; it was right after the vote in South Jutland,* and all the good Germans were convinced that the whole border population loved Germany and was being snatched away from the fatherland and the mother tongue by all imaginable skullduggery. At least the youth. Things were desperate: so now I was going to have let myself be ordered around again. Go and lug around a wheelbarrow. Right on the threshold to freedom. I was lying here with my tail in Hamburg and couldn't get any further. Damn it to hell.

He'd telephoned gardener Guse, a nice man, who'd give me room and board and a small wage for the time being. Then if I were capable, I could become a permanent hand and get a higher wage. I could certainly go down there that very evening. Well, what do you say about that, he repeated and was very proud of having outdone himself. I had an easy time showing that I was overwhelmed, but I had a hard time showing ecstasy. That's certainly wonderful, I said, but don't you think it'd be better if I took the train to Hamburg this evening and returned tomorrow. I mean, I couldn't very well show up at my new job the way I looked. I mean, I wanted to make a good impression at my new job. I mean, I looked like a vagabond, soaked through and filthy, and, I mean, I'd hate for them to think I was.

Bunch of nonsense, said the uniform—really, don't be so sensitive; I'll go along down there and explain the lay of the land.

When we got down to gardener Guse's, the whole family and the staff were sitting in the kitchen eating dinner. It was a big kitchen, spacious, bright, and scoured white. It was cozy and there was a pleasant odor of good food; the crew looked so nice

and friendly; when we came in the door, they all turned their newly washed faces toward us; a young girl who was on the way over to the table with a plate of freshly peeled yellow potatoes also stopped and mustered me with a friendly look; she had a pretty face with fresh skin and deep eyes, which looked right at you. That made me a little less spiteful.

5

I don't know whether you can imagine how a hard a time of it I had while I was at gardener Guse's. Those people were as kind-hearted to me as if I'd been their son; my greatest wish was to get away from there and out into freedom on the highway, and the whole world was conspiring against me and preventing me from attaining that freedom. If the Guses had exploited me or treated me like a dog, it would've been easy to get away, but they were so considerate and nice it was infuriating. If Gunhild had just even been ugly, just a little bit ugly, damn it, I could've slipped away. But she was pretty and full of roguishness and sex appeal.* Or if she'd been dismissive, but she was the opposite: after I'd been there two days, I kissed her behind the potting shed and after that day we took walks together in the evening and more than that.

It didn't look as though anything could be done about it. It was impossible to leave the Guses: they gave me clothing, gave me pocket money, never criticized my work, tried to teach me something, gave me German lessons after work, and took me along whenever they were going on trips or to the movies. If I'd come straight from home, it might've helped me that Guse was a socialist—my father the parish deacon considered socialists about the lowest thing on this earth—but the ordinary seamen on the Thurø-schooner had disabused me of those kinds of fallacies.

Besides, I had that business with the policeman's geranium hanging over my head; any day now I expected to see him come into the nursery and call me to account. One day I cautiously asked Guse whether it'd be beneficial to put lime at the bottom

of a geranium pot. Guse laughed and said it wouldn't be so beneficial—the geranium would be lucky if it escaped with its life. How the hell could I have come up with that idea. I just replied something to the effect that I'd once heard that it was supposed to be good, but that I'd definitely thought it was a bunch of nonsense.

So however I went about it, I had to try and get away. I hadn't run away from home to go to a nursery and water tomatoes; I'd fled to experience freedom and adventure. If I was lazy and behaved stupidly, Guse'd surely get sore at me—maybe he could even be made so angry that he'd ask me to get lost; in any case, he might well get so peevish that it wouldn't be so hard for me to clear out.

In the meantime, one evening I made the naive slip of confiding in Gunhild. She lay there for a long time without saying anything, which gave me courage to continue and tell her lock, stock, and barrel about my flight from home, that I wasn't a South Jutlander, that I hated work and family life, about my longing to be able to roam about free as a bird without its being anyone's business, and about the policeman's geranium.

Since she still didn't say a word, I felt odd and groped for her head in the dark. When I grazed her cheek, my hand got wet.

I reached up with my arm and turned on the light. Why, you know, the girl was really lying there crying. Maybe it sounds a bit crude, but my first thought, when I saw her beautiful face with her eyes filled with tears lying there on my pillow, was that, of course, girls lying in bed in films cry all wrong: their glycerine tears calmly and tranquilly roll down along each side of their nose, while Gunhild's tears rolled from the outer corner of her eyes and down into each ear. It was a little bit funny.

What are you thinking about? she sniffled. Naturally I couldn't tell her and instead said something about having thought how hard it'd be for me to leave her. With the corners of her nightgown, which was lying at the head of the bed, I dried away her tears and tried to calm her down.

Then she said: I'll go with you.