Mogens Klitgaard

God Tempers the Wind to the Shorn Lamb

Translated and
with an Introduction and Notes
by Marc Linder

With the Assistance of
Gitte Gaarsvig Sørensen

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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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Fifth Chapter

1

We sat in detention for two days in Middelfart. The reason for our arrest was that we'd called attention to ourselves by virtue of our peculiar flight from Odense. Which, of course, we'd undertaken precisely to avoid arrest.

Now when I sit here today and have to talk about that time, I can't help noticing that I took everything so damn seriously back then. It was the first time I'd been arrested and I was so shaken up, as if I were going to go to the electric chair; I cried at night in my cell and when I finally fell asleep, I dreamed about my mother. I couldn't eat anything, and during the interrogations I shook all over and they had to drag every word out of me. Of course, I've been arrested so many times since, and today it doesn't bother me any more than someone asking me for a match. There's nothing remotely dramatic about being arrested—everything becomes habit. Young offenders and newly hatched detectives still enjoy the situation and try to soak it for as much romanticism as possible, but afterward it's very straightforward—just come along now up to police headquarters, he says—and then you slouch along and on the way you chat about anything but; after a while arrests become so uninteresting that you try to avoid them just because they're boring and devoid of excitement.

And it's just the same for most of the experiences surrounding a vagabond's life as for the arrests. The first time an experience makes a deep impression on you, but the repetitions are tiring and life as a tramp gets just as monotonous and kind of boring as work in a factory or an office—everything becomes habit.

That's probably why I talked at such length about the first period of time I was out in life; what I experienced in that period stands sharp and distinct in my memory; later the experiences made less of an impression on me, and there's a long period of time that I've completely forgotten—it's not possible for me to

recall what I was doing during that time and in what country I was living.

What I can say about the following years is that I never succeeded in becoming a real vagabond: every time I was about to realize my dreams of the real freedom, something or other got in the way—I got a job or got arrested or got sick or whatever might get in the way. Maybe it was because, when push came to shove, I didn't dare. I mean, I was brought up to be a slave, to do whatever I was told, and, to be perfectly blunt, I myself wasn't capable of taking responsibility for my own life.

2

Well, as far as Middelfart's concerned, we were in fact released after two days; they probably could've found something or other to get us in trouble over, but if we weren't the jewel thieves, they just wished to get rid of us as quickly as possible. An officer accompanied us to the ferry* and made sure that we were really leaving their nice little town. Schmidt claimed that his noble ancestry was the cause of our sudden release—an exchange of telegrams with a high-ranking person in Copenhagen had done the trick.

We parted company in a Jutland town where a pastor had taken an interest in me and managed to place me as a hotel porter at the town's temperance hotel—the circumstances had developed such that I was forced to take a job. It was while I was at the temperance hotel that I got the glasses—I'd used my nearsightedness as an excuse for mistakes so often that one day the hotel's owner lost her patience and ordered me to the doctor to get glasses.

I think that the glasses have had a big influence on my fate—I wound up looking more intelligent and more pious. That was very fortunate for me in many situations, but it made me have a hard time making contact with women. That's why on my days off I used to leave them at home, but then on the other hand I had to put up with contemptuous looks from my female

acquaintances when they saw me at the train station, where I was forced to wear the glasses to see the passengers.

3

My pious, bespectacled face secured me a promotion: Every other week I had to act as night clerk. That was a nice cushy job: I'd sit comfortably in a wicker chair with a little green lamp above my head and read a novel every night. My only work consisted in letting the guests in, eating a huge plate of open-face sandwiches, and shining shoes in the morning. I slept during the morning, got up and ate lunch, and spent the afternoons taking walks. It was a glorious existence.

Unfortunately I misused it. And lost it. Along with the open-face sandwiches went half a pale, light beer,* but I could get a real pilsner fit for a human being* instead, if I paid the difference. Since I loved sitting at night fancying that I was a big deal, I bought half a bottle of schnapps and kept it in my closet. When it was three o'clock in the morning, I'd spread out a big napkin on the desk, set out the open-face sandwiches, arrange the plate, knife and fork, beer glass and schnapps glass, and get myself settled. I'd clear my throat and try to look dignified while I inspected the open-faced sandwich. Then I'd pour a beer and schnapps and take pains to believe that I'd never done anything else but have breakfast with beer and schnapps. In the parish deacon's home a breakfast like that was totally unheard of and, as far as I know, had taken place only the two times the pastor had been on a visit. I'd draw out the meal as long as possible, and between each sandwich I'd lean back in the wicker chair and read the newspaper. To be sure, it was old at that point, but in one way or another that was part and parcel of the image of a breakfast. When I was finally done, I'd wipe my mouth with my napkin, pour myself a cup of coffee, and light a cigar. Before that time I actually didn't care for cigars—I'd smoked only cigarettes—but I realized that the cigar was an important part of the ceremony.

Afterwards I'd set about dreaming about the extraordinary and sensational things that some day I'd eventually perform. That keyed me up immensely, stimulated me, and caused me to be in a position to treat a guest in a friendly and courteous way, even if he was rude and insolent. It was a lovely time.

Gradually I wouldn't be content with one schnapps, but would drink a couple with coffee. I wasn't used to alcohol and the light intoxication better enabled me to dream. After a while, this night-time breakfast became a necessity for me, and all afternoon and evening I looked forward to it downright devotedly.

But it cost money and I wasn't earning much. That's why I began to avail myself of the many little illegal possibilities there were to earn a little extra, and for a long time things went well, so well that I always had money and in the afternoon, when I was off, I could go into one of the little taverns, drink a beer, and play billiards. After a while these afternoons also became necessary for me and I became bolder and bolder in my little transactions to procure money.

It was beginning to be rumored in town that the new night clerk wasn't that difficult to deal with for people who wished to rent a double room but didn't look especially married, and that he didn't pay attention if they left the room again after a couple of hours, just as he didn't always take it that seriously whether their names were entered in the guest book. One day, while I was standing on the platform waiting for passengers, a doctor, the one who'd prescribed glasses for me, got out of the train in a largish party. When he saw me, he said in a loud voice to the others: Well, there we have the temperance hotel night clerk—God gives his mercy to the lovers. There was general tittering and it was difficult for me to pretend that I hadn't heard the comment.

About a week later I was called in by the hotel owner; she was from Vendsyssel* and in the Inner Mission.* She asked me how it could happen that No. 12 had been used that night without its being apparent from the guest register. I dealt with it by saying it was an oversight, and since I hadn't settled up the accounts for the night yet, I got away with a reprimand.

Things went well for a while—I'd become more cautious and thought that it'd be all right and that the previous night clerks had doubtless used the same practices; but one evening she came home from a parish council* meeting and was blue in the face from being so worked up. She didn't explain anything at all, but shouted nonstop that I should leave, that I should vanish from her house and do so right away. That night I had to live in a hotel myself. I rented a cheap room at The Harmony.

4

That was the year there was an exhibition in Gothenburg.* I went to the police and got a passport. The constable joked and didn't make a secret of the fact that he knew the reason for my trip. The whole town appeared to know—the hotel proprietor was obviously the last to find out.

I traveled to Gothenburg on the steamer. On board there were two unemployed printers who were going to tour Sweden; back then it didn't matter where you went in Europe—you'd meet Danish printers on the trip. They had a fine benefits system, travelled by train from town to town, and travelled around like other tourists.* I wanted to feel in the same class with such widely travelled and experienced persons and I lied rather flagrantly about where I'd been and what I'd experienced. In the beginning they were very impressed and I let myself be encouraged by my success to give my fantasy free rein. Finally it got too crude for them; they told me to shut up and went down to the restaurant to drink coffee.

When we got to Gothenburg, I rented a room at a hotel on Post Street and went out to look at the town. I had about 50 crowns and decided to feel like a tourist. The next day I went to the exhibition and looked at the things that were exhibited as if I were a good judge of them. That's an obligation you have when you go to an exhibition and everyone around you is doing the same. In addition, you walk around studying things scrupulously that don't interest you in the slightest and that you've seen

displayed hundreds of times in shops without having bothered to cast a glance at them.

I was an exhibition visitor with sun glasses and my hands full of brochures until my money ran out. I was just barely able to pay my hotel bill and buy a train ticket to Borås.* In the train I met a travelling magician. His name was Bror Wallen and he wanted to use me as an assistant in return for paying for my lodgings wherever we appeared. I'd have to find the money for food in some mysterious way or other—he wasn't going to get involved in that, as long as I didn't compromise his racket.

It went well for about a week: we visited the restaurants, got the proprietor's permission to perform, and when he'd displayed his tricks with me as assistant, I went around with a plate and collected. Bror Wallen's eyes followed the plate incessantly—it was impossible for me to get any cash out of it for myself.

I had to beg for food and money for cigarettes in the villas on the outskirts of the city. I'd hoped to be able to learn something from the magician, but he knew very little; he was an unemployed carpenter from Gothenburg and it was but a month since he'd bought "The Little Magician"* and taught himself some of the most common tricks. People took it very good-naturedly, but of course it didn't produce big money.

I said goodbye to Bror Wallen, gave my suitcase as security at a hotel to have a place to keep my clothes, and took to the road.

5

Now I was once again finally standing face to face with the existence I'd dreamed so much about, the life, the free, unfettered life on the road. I tried to put into practice the little fantasy images I'd been lavishing so much care on; I lay down by the side of the road and said to myself that I was free now. But after two minutes had elapsed, I got up again and walked on. Somehow or other I was restless; it was as if I didn't dare lounge away a totally ordinary workday, as if I had a kind of bad conscience.

I had the feeling of doing something illegal, and every time I found myself a nice spot to lounge in and some people came walking by, this idiotic dread came over me that they'd interfere with my business and order me off into some unfree existence or other.

I figured that this feeling would gradually pass, but by the time four days had gone by, I'd taken a job on a farm where they needed people to help with the hay harvest.

And just as things went on that occasion, that's the way things always went during the following years: I was constantly working toward being free, and when push came to shove, I didn't dare give in to my desire for freedom—it was the upbringing I'd received that incessantly ruined it for me.

There's no reason to deal with these years in more detail. I experienced a lot, had hundreds of odd jobs, was always on the move from one place to another—I was in Germany, Norway, Holland, France. Once in a while I came home to Denmark; as a rule, that was when the consulate in some country or other had sent me home, and it took only a few days before I left the country again. When I needed to, I managed with petty crimes, sat in jail a couple of times, I was sick a couple of times; in Marseille I was laid up in the hospital for six months—it didn't quite correspond to what people understand by a hospital here in this country.

I think these stays in hospitals and jails have had a certain influence on me: I got time to read a lot, devoured lots of novels and works of popular science—at the Welfare Office shelter in Berlin they called me the professor. But my glasses probably did their part too; besides, I think the nickname obligated me to be smarter than the rest of them; nicknames obligate you to do what people expect you to do.

6

That turned into an obsession with me—that stuff about freedom. In the first years, it had been, if anything, an uncon-

scious urge: as a child I was never allowed to do anything, everything was forbidden, and I'm certain that that's why I later had such a desire to do everything that was forbidden.

Now you mustn't think I go in for philosophizing—I don't want you to think that I fancy I'm smarter than other people—but you have to admit that as you see me sitting here, almost thirty-five years old, with tattered clothes, scruffy, with a shattered eyeglass lens, at a people's kitchen with a cup of coffee in front of me I got by begging, a down-and-out person who doesn't even have the brutality that's required to be down and out, it might damn well look as if my life had been smashed to bits.

And it would be easy to say that I myself had ruined my chances by being a twirp, a guy without a backbone and with criminal tendencies. And maybe in a way that's true enough, but why did I turn into a twirp, why wasn't I able to become a rough customer like the others or stay in the box I'd been put in. After all, I'm a grown man now and have to confess that I was lying out there in my rusted crate of a car crying because I felt my life was wasted, because I wasn't able to have a job like other people and go home after work to a woman and a couple of children, who were waiting for you and said *dad*. And, I mean, a person has just one life and it can't be lived all over again.

It's possible it was cowardly of me not to want to take the responsibility myself, but I'm certain that it was my nice upbringing that's to blame for my fate. Of course, I'm also not the only one like that: all around I've met countless guys of the same caliber as me, guys from nice homes with a nice upbringing and all that kind of thing, and when we took the trouble to chat about it, we've always agreed that we were the ones on the right side, we were the only normal ones. That the other people were the ones who, to be blunt, didn't have enough guts to resist the upbringing—that it obliterated them.

I understand really well if this stuff doesn't interest you: You've given me a helping hand and in return wanted to hear my story, my experiences, the stuff I've pulled. Naturally, you don't care about this nonsense I'm sitting here dishing up, but there's

something here, you understand, that little by little has become so important to me by now that I can't get on with life, so to speak, until I succeed in understanding it. When people say to children: *You're not allowed to*, they instantly answer: *Why not*. But little by little, as they grow up and either don't get any answer or find out that that's the way it is because that's the way it's supposed to be, they don't ask any more and you can palm off on them any prohibition that's necessary—they don't even ponder any more about *why*, but are content with taking note of it; to be perfectly blunt, they've been subdued, and the employer and the state can do whatever they want with them—they've learned to obey. And to obey without asking *why*.

And in a way that's become their good fortune—they've been assigned a box to be in, they get their tuft of hay at the prescribed times, and if they get a stomach ache, someone fetches the veterinarian for them. And the real living human being in their heart of hearts breathes in innocent little affairs, when they're not under observation; in small dark streets they violate the sixth commandment, and if they can't get away with violating the rest of them any other way, then they do it in their dreams. And that's the way life goes for them—their real self secretly lives side by side with the official one and they constantly have to keep a sharp lookout so that the former doesn't compromise the latter.

But if the upbringing is too total and completely walls up the real self so it can't breathe, it either has to be smothered or break its way out. And maybe that's the way things stand with me.

7

But naturally I wasn't thinking about all that back then. I was just trying to find some way or other of living, which I could feel right about, and little by little, as I suffered defeats, I became less scrupulous about morality, or rather, little by little, I got a different morality.

It was while I was a globetrotter in the South of France that

I discovered that I was a success when I was immoral and a failure when I behaved nicely. If I told a whopping lie, I achieved what I wanted to, if I stuck to the truth, things went wrong. Another thing was that I always got afraid when I was a success that way and didn't dare hold on to the advantages I'd obtained. That way life incessantly forced me to act immorally and afterwards let my good conscience appear on the scene and destroy the fruits of my immorality. I became a globetrotter because I couldn't come up with anything better. I'd gone to Nice, where I felt there'd be lots of opportunities for a plucky man. I lived in a small hotel on the rue Marceau and while I went around waiting for an opportunity to turn up, the bill got bigger and bigger. The only food I got in those days was the coffee I had brought up to the room. Every morning I got coffee with warm milk and bread and butter; they called it petit dejeuner and there wasn't a crumb left when I got up in the hopes of finding a cigarette stub; I knew very well there weren't any, but I looked anyway. In the afternoon I went back to my room and rang for the maid to bring me up a cup of coffee, but after a few days I was so sick with hunger that I also went back in the evening and ordered coffee. Of course, that was a stupid thing to do—I mean that way they were bound to discover I was out of money—but I simply couldn't help it. I'd tried many ways to shore up my reputation in order to extend my credit—I'd written postcards to myself with flattering invitations and all that kind of stuff—but when I also began to come back in the evening to get coffee, they saw through me and the next morning I got the bill. I got a three-day grace period which I used to smuggle out of the hotel the things I needed most. I had a big backpack I'd once bought in Lyon from a Danish journeyman carpenter who lacked money for food; I filled it with the most important of my possessions and slipped out of the hotel safe and sound, went across to the train station and deposited them in the left-luggage office; when I left the hotel again later in the day, my pockets were stuffed with other things; I went back across to the station, asked to borrow my backpack for a minute and emptied out my pockets into it. I continued like that the next two days and that way left

behind at the hotel only a worthless suitcase devoid of anything of value. In the meantime I paid a visit to the Danish consul and managed to persuade him to give me a ticket to Marseille, which, with a little ingenuity and a fictitious telephone call, I managed to get refunded at the travel agency. Afterward I had my picture taken and went to a printer and got him to make some picture postcards with my picture and a text, which recounted that I was on a round-the-world tour, stated which countries I'd passed through, and indicated the future route. Underneath, in bold type, there was a request to people to support my interesting project by buying a card. The cards cost more than I had money for, but the printer let himself be talked into delivering half of the cards for the money I had—then later I was to pick up the rest.

After the three days at the hotel had passed, the cards still weren't ready and so I asked for an extension of an extra couple of days, by reference to the possibility that money might be coming to me from Denmark any day now. I was allowed to live there for two more days, but then I was kicked out. They kept my suitcase as security. I had to spend that night on the Promenade des Anglais.* The next morning the cards were ready and I made use of them right away; I went into a cafe right across from the printer's and asked the proprietor for permission to sell the cards to his patrons. I got permission by a hand gesture and afterward I went around and put a card in front of every patron. After having waited a bit, I went over to the table I'd put the card on first and took up my position and waited. I was lucky enough that there was someone at the second table who gave me a franc; after that, everyone all down the line bought a card. Nobody took any further notice of me; that relieved me—I mean, I didn't exactly look like a globetrotter and didn't care for any indiscreet questions. In any case, not like that right at the start. Later on, I suppose, I taught myself to deal with them.

By the time I left the cafe, I had enough money to go over and get a shave, redeem my backpack from the checkroom, and get myself a bite to eat. Success right from the start.

I didn't feel like staying in Nice any longer than absolutely

necessary and in the afternoon I began walking out along the coastal road.

8

It wasn't quite so amusing as I'd imagined. The backpack was damned heavy, the straps cut into me and my back became sore, the cars drove by me incessantly and forced me to walk way out onto the shoulder, which was full of holes and stones. In addition, of course, I hadn't been in bed at night and was tired and sleepy. Actually, of course, it was supposed to be beautiful there on a road like that along the Mediterranean, but the dust and heat ruined your ability to see something like that. Besides, you quickly get tired of looking at palms and agave and after a while you lose interest in the fact that the sea is blue—I mean, it's got to have some color and one's just as good as the next.

I was inside all the cafes on the way, but I didn't sell more cards than could just pay for the wine I drank. When I got to Cagnes sur mer,* I decided to spend the night there; I found a room at Madame Rose's up at the top of the mountain, and after I'd washed, changed socks, and gotten something to eat, I felt life was grand—now I'd finally found my niche, I could be a vagabond and enjoy freedom's blessings and still I had a kind of job, a legitimate occupation. I wanted to roam around the world like that. Damn it that I hadn't thought of that a little sooner.

My importance didn't really dawn on me until the next morning when a Swedish painter I met down in the cafe wanted my autograph and offered me a Pernod; in return, I told him some hair-raising stories from my globetrotting life. He wanted me to write articles for the newspapers about my experiences; I happened to think of Schmidt and said that modesty forbade. Let others lay themselves and their lives bare for people to contemplate, I said, and let them get paid for it—I just wish to carry out my project, the trip around the world on foot; afterward I want to buy myself a little cottage on the moor and live there with my woman and my children.

This way of looking at things impressed both him and myself and by the time I left Cagnes, I was in splendid spirits: now I'd finally found an attractive way of living and I had a goal to look forward to. Especially this stuff about the modest moorland cottage as an objective for the widely travelled globetrotter appealed to me—I wanted to cultivate the heather and eat coarse bread.

After I'd been in a series of cafes in Antibes without having sold a card, I pondered whether that wasn't a good idea to supplement my income by writing articles—I could buy myself a camera and market the material to the three leading Scandinavian papers; that way I could get out of these disgusting begging calls at the cafes, which were the sole dark spot in my existence. A fountain pen and a camera would be my weapons; I decided to carry out these plans as quickly as possible: this way I'd be able to earn a lot of money with a trip around the world, and maybe a nice little villa out on the Øresund* some place near Tårbæk* was a more pleasant goal to look forward to than the moorland cottage.

The card sales were poor and in Juan les Pins* I decided to go into the water. While I was lying on the beach after my swim eating peanuts, I thought through my plans more closely and felt good, as if I'd won the big prize in the lottery. I was a lucky son of a gun, a lucky dog: now I was lying here in the world's loveliest bay surrounded by the world's most famous people eating peanuts; I love peanuts—I believe they called them cacahuet* there. The man next to me explained that that nice gray-haired gentleman who was doing exercises on the beach was Chaplin. I was convinced that it was a lie, but still I enjoyed the feeling. It was a wonderful afternoon.

The next day it rained and since a bus to Cannes came by, I took it: after all, it wasn't on the road that anything ever happened and it wasn't on the road that I'd sell my cards. Nobody'd be cheated because I rode part of the way.

When I got to Cannes it was still raining and the sidewalk

cafes were filled with people. I was a big hit, sold a lot of cards, until a man took me aside and advised me to get out of town as quickly as possible—the police didn't allow that kind of thing in town and I risked being caught at any moment. I took the bus to St. Tropez.*

I'd now gotten accustomed to riding and the following days I rode from town to town. I was earning good money and bought myself a pair of high boots and a suitcase. When I got to a town, I rented a room at a cheap hotel right away, put on the boots, filled the backpack with crumpled up newspapers and went to the cafes. It was senseless for the backpack to be any heavier than necessary; on the other hand, I didn't look like a globetrotter without it and it had to be full to look impressive.

I painstakingly took care that the boots didn't get polished—the dustier they were, the easier it was to sell the cards. In Toulon* there was a busybody of a chambermaid who'd polished them till they sparkled and looked absolutely new; she was very surprised to see how furious I got about it, and was cold as ice when I later tried to mollify her with an amiable remark. In order to get them to look like globetrotter boots again, I had to find a puddle on the outskirts of town and bespatter them, to the great astonishment of several boys who were standing there watching.

By the time I got to Marseille I was getting tired of being a globetrotter. It annoyed me, when I thought about what an honorable and difficult mission it actually was to go around the world on foot, that people in the cafes treated me haughtily and flung 50 centimes at me as if I were some kind of beggar. I mean, they couldn't know that I didn't walk all the time and that the rest of the story was a lie, and so they should've treated me with respect and interest. An American woman who'd come to Marseille to eat bouillabaisse,* became interested in me and I lived with her for a week in a villa she'd rented on La Corniche.* When I couldn't stand her any more after that week and left the villa one morning, I'd lost my desire to act the part of a globetrotter and moved out to the Scandinavian seaman's home, where, after a few days, I was given an offer to hire on on a

Swedish steamer. I had the choice between taking the job or leaving the seaman's home and chose the latter, went to the consulate, and talked them into giving me a ticket to Paris. However, it turned out to be impossible to get it refunded any way except selling it to a discharged ordinary seaman for half price.

So I had to bring myself to go on with the globetrotting no matter how much I hated to do it.