TEMPER FUGIT

It happened by the Marshes of Glynn, but Sidney Lanier would never understand. It was the beginning of the end for one of the great golf tempers of our time—mine.

I had gone there in part to drink the soul of the oak and put my heart at ease from men, as the poet advised, but, more particularly, to golf the old Sea Island course that lies off the Georgia coast by the wide sea marshes of Glynn.

On this April evening as I finished the eighteenth, recording my customary eighty-fourth blow, the "emerald twilights and virginal shy lights" that Lanier advertised a century ago had been replaced by the approach of a wind-swept storm. However, my last stroke had been no normal putt, but a tap-in birdie. Though the rest of my foursome knew better, I could not stop. I headed out alone to the Marshside nine.

By the third hole I was far out into the marshes, the storm apparently coming fast. I could retreat, or risk a drenching, and play one last picturesque reed-and-water-locked 475-yard par-five. Oh well.

My drive was as good as *Golf Digest* and graphite could bring out in me. My second shot—a three-wood barely flying a lake and fading toward the pin—was as perfect as the ten thousand shots that preceded it were flawed.

I faced a straight uphill four-foot putt for an eagle, a simple little darling that a hacker could play fifty years and never have again. As possessor of two sheer-luck eagles in ten years, and never a hole-in-one, I sensed this moment might not come again.

There was no one else on the course, only the wind, the smell of rain on the way, the wild, bleak marsh, the sea in the distance, and one four-foot putt for an eagle. I finally stepped up to what was going to be the

most enjoyable stroke of my life. I read it perfectly, hit it perfectly, and watched it stop dead in the center of the hole—but an inch short.

It is at such moments that I have made what reputation I have as a golfer, consigning me to the company of other famed Toms of Temper—Bolt and Weiskopf. A great black cloud crosses my mind, and unspeakable, unrealized forces that D. H. Lawrence would love rush out of the dark forest of my soul, and I do things that contradict every thread in the fabric of my life.

After just such an offending putt, I once took my mallethead putter and drove the devil ball 200 yards into the woods. My divot—nearly a foot long—was gouged not six inches from the hole.

The fellows I was playing with did not believe it then and probably do not believe it now, but I simply replaced the divot on the green and played the rest of the round without ever mentioning the incident, or apologizing. It was a very quiet foursome.

One middle-aged gentleman waited several holes, then said quietly from a safe distance, "You probably shouldn't have done that."

"Probably," I said.

I never took another such divot. But a year later I picked up another short missed putt, tossed the ball in the air like a baseball player hitting a fungo and caught it flush on the club face for another excellent drive from the green. It was a shot I'll never duplicate.

Actually, I have usually been comparatively mild-mannered on the greens. Putting never seemed to me to be worthy of a man's full attention. I may be the only golfer never to have broken a single putter—if you don't count the one I twisted into a loop and threw into a bush.

I was always harder on other clubs. That is why I have sticks from nine different sets in my fourteen-club bag. Each club has its story.

I once hit five straight balls into a water hazard. Just after the fifth splash, someone threw my five-iron into the middle of the lake. The someone was me. I don't remember how the subterranean decision—that the five-iron and I could never really be friends again—was made.

But I remember that a friend asked me why I had paused in the middle of my backswing before launching the club to its rippling grave. "I didn't want to leave it short," I answered.

Other clubs died less spectacularly: bent on trees, beaten against the earth. Once, while trying to discipline a five-wood, I broke three clubs. I threw the offending fairway wood at my Sunday bag and permanently bent the shafts of two more clubs that were in it.

Not every heave has been a disaster. I hurled a three-wood at an electric car and twisted the club head into an extreme hooded position. I hit it better that way.

A favorite driver somehow ended in the top of a tree at East Potomac

Park years ago, but I returned in winter when the leaves were gone and knocked it down with sticks.

The sand wedge is the only club that has never been thrown. I recognized early that I was a miserable wedge player. So whenever I give in to the urge ("Just once") to play the wedge and then skull it, I gently put the club back in the bag and then slap myself on the side of the head three times.

My golf temper has always been both a mystery and an amusement to friends who know me away from the game that Satan, himself, designed.

For years people who had never played golf with me were amazed to hear whatever had transpired in my latest round. It should be chiseled on my tombstone: "Tom Did That?"

Golf may not teach character, but it reveals it. Sometimes painfully. When you suddenly stop in the fairway, turn and walk two miles back to the clubhouse without bothering to retrieve your last sliced drive or bid adieu to the rest of your foursome . . . well, it is hard not to ask yourself questions during that walk.

Golf is a humbling game, but often it takes years to learn the right sort of humility. People have been trying to sort out their frayed feelings about golf for a century.

The best golf literature has little to do with Ben Hogan or instruction techniques, but is found in little volumes with titles like: *Kill It Before It Moves; How to Give Up Golf; It's the Damned Ball; 18 Holes in My Head; The Truth About Golf and Other Lies; The Dogged Victims of Inexorable Fate* and *89 Years in a Sand Trap.*

From the day I got my first set of clubs for high school graduation (what irony), I was no less perplexed than my predecessors by my own performance on the links. Every round seemed to be the same. I exploded at least once in every round. Sometimes, if the wheels came off early enough, I had time to repeat the entire Jekyll-to-Hyde cycle twice.

As every golfer knows, no one ever lost his mind over one shot. It is rather the gradual process of watching your score go to tatters shot after shot. It isn't even the big mistakes that eat at the soul. It is the great recovery shot that is undone by three putts. It is somehow playing five straight holes decently, but knowing that you have found a different way to bogey each one. So, when you finally reach the end of patience and pump one into the deep woods, and all is lost, and you know you have wasted six hours, nay, an entire day, for another 92, why, you are ready to kill—yourself.

Just as brutal is the process of watching yourself come apart. The progression was the same for me for a decade—from calm ("What a wonderful day. Great to be alive.") to annoyed resignation ("Oh well. It's just

a game.") to suppressed whimpering ("Oh no. I'm going, going, gone.") to the final conflagration.

Invariably, as soon as I had my little tantrum—which nine times out of ten was not a club-throwing fit, just a complete loss of the inner control without which a golf ball becomes an unguided missile—I would relax, resign myself to fate and run off a string of pars.

But as soon as I realized I was playing well ("No no," I'd whisper to myself, "take no notice." But I had.), the tension would build again and I would go off like a toy pistol, again.

I never knew quite how to feel about my internal combustion. I knew Jack Nicklaus threw his last club at the age of eight. Nevertheless, I kidded myself that I was doing myself serious internal damage to hold the unbearable tortures of golf inside. I could feel the teeth of the gears of my soul being snapped off as I clenched my jaw.

Some infernal bon mot by one of the club-throwing philosophers—Nietzsche, Lawrence, even poor Mark Twain—would pop into my mind, and there my driver'd go, getting more airtime. "The only way to get rid of a temptation is to give in to it" must have undermined my will for the better part of a year.

So, with all this behind me, I was curious to see what I would do when the four-foot eagle putt stopped an inch short.

The world seemed to stand still. The marsh was silent. Mist hung in the air. If I had never thrown a club, this might truly have been the instant. But I had done it all. Many times. There was nothing in my repertoire of fury adequate to the moment. I either had to kill myself or shut up. I shut up. It wasn't much of a choice.

I picked up my ball and went to the next hole without so much as a "Darn it."

I played the rest of the nine in something of a daze. I remember saving par from a trap so deep that I couldn't see the top of the flag, and making a downhill fifty-foot birdie putt that some mischievous marsh sprite nudged into the hole.

The sky did not open until after I walked off the last green with the first subpar total of my life—if only for nine holes.

I still get mad, but not irrational. I occasionally flip a club, but not too far. And I still have an automatic choke on the back nine.

But now I leave the course feeling like Dr. Jekyll. Mr. Hyde drowned in the Marshes of Glynn.