

THE GREAT SHOTS OF GOLF

WITH SOME CRITICAL COMMENTS UPON THE WAY IN WHICH
THEY ARE MADE

BY HENRY LEACH

HARRY VARDON when playing in an important competition once on the course of the Northwood club near London was confronted with a difficulty which seemed to his friends, well acquainted as they were with his amazing resource and powers of recovery, to make the situation impossible. I myself had seen him rescue his ball from most appalling plights by that combination of dexterity, ingenuity and genius which go to the making of fine recovery work (and it is this work, the gaining of safety without loss, which often distinguishes the great player from the one who is not so great), but observing his predicament on this occasion I reflected that the game must surely score a point upon him. For see: he was playing to the last hole, the clubhouse at Northwood stands close up to the home green, a green of Lilliputian mountains, that is so tantalizing to putt upon when the highest of the group becomes a factor in the situation as between the ball and the hole. Playing his long second shot towards this eighteenth hole he had a touch of cut on the stroke and his ball made a course too far to the right, with the result that it came to rest only a couple of yards from the high wall of the clubhouse. So the corner of this obstruction, embracing a balcony which was thronged with curious people who, like all others of the human race, somehow feel a little better for witnessing the misfortunes of others, came between the ball and the putting green which was close up on the other side.

For practical purposes the problem that was presented was much the same as that in which an individual might be asked to play in one stroke a ball that lay against the foot of a high wall so that it would jump over the wall and come to rest close up to it on the other side, and, knowing the tricks that can be done by clever people on billiard tables and the like, some scientists might still hold, I think, that a shot of this kind was impossible. But the capacity and genius of some of our greatest golfers go a little way beyond all science and philosophy, and that is why I have still in my mind the little drama of Harry Vardon politely requesting the people, hungry for their sensations, to move from the corner of the balcony lest anything should go wrong with the operations that were pending, and they should suffer for it. Then the champion unbagged his niblick, laid it to the ball with the face so far back that it seemed it might just slide under it like a knife and leave it lying there, swung back the club, made the stroke, and the ball shot up perpendicularly into the air for some forty yards. Then as if it had been possessed with a mind and knowledge or had the rudder of an aeroplane, it turned round towards the green, descended, and the next moment lay prettily close to the hole, so near as to have been looking into it. I have seen Harry Vardon, a master of recovery, play many trick shots as some people call the like of this, and some of them may have been more wonderful, but somehow this

one of eight or nine years ago lingers vividly in my remembrance when many of the others have gone.

Five minutes after it had happened I was discussing the point with Vardon and asked him how he did it. "Oh, just a niblick!" the master answered, and the further obvious fact was mentioned that the face was well laid back. I would say that everybody knows that you could not do a shot like this if the face were at all straight up were it not that I sometimes think that the great champions could do a great shot with anything and no matter what kind of a face it was. The swing of a shot like this of Vardon's has to be a most delicate and precise sort of thing. The club is taken very vertically back, the arc along which the head is taken is changed several times on the return to the ball, there is a corkscrew kind of twist at the moment of impact, and the follow through is as vertical as it can be, suggesting that the ball is being pushed straight up, though club and ball have long ceased to have any connection with each other. But when all this is said and done and explained, there remains the effect of genius and simple instinct which subconsciously makes the most subtle movements that never could be done by previous arrangement and cannot be repeated in that way.

That is the factor in golf, quite one of the most important but least appreciated, that though this game may be one of science and mathematics and is most remarkably, most worryingly, exact as such, instinct and inspiration always take the command of the stroke at the supreme moment in some marvellous, magical, superhuman manner; and that is why the best golf is always played subconsciously, why carefully calculated golf so often

fails, and why again the greatest golfers, playing most from inspiration and instinct like Vardon and Duncan, have most difficulty in explaining how they have accomplished their miraculous strokes. Be he ever so phlegmatic, ever so calculating, the humblest player is influenced by this instinct and inspiration also; it is the one thing he has in common with the great masters of the game—that something, that erratic little controlling force that is within him and is the lord of the actions all the time. The point is not sufficiently appreciated. The text books and the famous professionals most solemnly advise that in order to strike the ball a certain distance with an iron club you must, according to your capacity, swing the head of the club back a certain distance so that it achieves a certain amount of momentum by the time it comes into contact with the ball, that to make the ball travel the further from the blow the club should be swung back the further, too, and to gain still greater distance with the stroke the head should be swung back still more, and so on all in proportion, making a very mechanical business of it all. The player may think of some of these things shortly before the ordeal, but during the brief period of action he ponders on none of them, but instinct and inspiration clear the deck of his thoughts of all the confusing mass of reckonings that lie there and simply take the head of the club back such distance as according to the knowledge of the man and his power of limb seems the right one. It is of some importance that players should recognize this fact. When you wish to throw a stone or a ball a certain distance, do you reckon beforehand what amount of power you should

apply to the movement of the arm, or the extent of the swing of it, or, when hitting at a nail with a hammer, is the backward lift of the tool or the speed of the return calculated carefully in advance? No, indeed; instinct and inspiration settle the matter, and generally their work is approximately correct, and so it is in golf. It is, in our consideration, more an effect than a cause, as one might say, that the swing of the club is longer for the longer shots than it is for the shorter ones.

It is the fact that in the great recovery shots of golf, genius, instinct and inspiration are, in their performance, exalted to the highest, with the skillful hand and the quiet nerve attendant upon them for their service, to the end that the seemingly impossible is most amazingly accomplished, that makes these strokes the more interesting for contemplation, and none the less so for the circumstance that the strange situations presented to the player are the fashioning of Nature uncontrolled and are often more fantastic than man with his limitations of reason might devise. As he tackles them the player realizes that all his skill, all his knowledge, and all his experience are in themselves insufficient to guarantee any successful issue to the trial, and that his fate is laid in the hands of Providence, which does so often help the deserving and the brave. Give the wide world in its most open country aspect and a little white ball that soars and runs wheresoever it listeth, as it seems to do at times despite the controlling attempts of its owner, the possibilities in curious situations are nearly infinite.

Some time since a friend wrote up to me from the far south at Sydney to say that they had had some trouble

on points of the law down there, the rules of golf—as they were then—not seemingly to cover completely the question of a player's abilities and disabilities in situations which had arisen. In one case the errant ball had gone into unexplored country and thereabouts had snuggled inside what was possibly the only empty jam tin that there was in the open country for miles round. It was a question as to what should be done, but the resourceful golfer, taking no risks, played at the tin with the ball inside, made quite a good shot of it, and lost nothing by the occurrence. And in another case a ball rolled under a sheet of newspaper that somehow had become fast to the ground, and the player feeling that he must try to play it as it was, speculated upon its position and played at it, and made a successful shot. Mr. Horace Hutchinson once told us that when playing the game at Bembridge he found his ball after a shot to be lying in the carcass of a dead dog on the beach; and again at that times the rules of golf covered no such contingency, nor indeed to this day are dead dogs mentioned in the volume of the golfing law. I recall that one of the best little players that Scotland has ever produced, being Mr. Robert Andrew, now, as you know, of America, once had to play his ball from the top of a barrel, and another time at Troon played it when it had gathered to itself a hairpin and made putting exceedingly difficult.

The importance of ingenuity has already been emphasized. A golfer unknown to fame excelled in it when in a competition on a course in the west of Lancashire he found his ball had betaken itself to a tub half filled with water. That was in the days when all balls floated, as all balls do

not float now, and whereas nearly all golfers would have considered the situation hopeless and treated it as such, this thoughtful person espied a pump alongside the tub, and worked at the handle until the tub was full, when he lightly and nicely flicked the ball off the surface of the water on to the course again.

Yet if the possibilities of strange situations in golf be infinite, it is none the less true, so it seems sometimes, that there is nothing new under the sun even in this way, and I had a reminder of the fact last year when watching the Open Championship of the United States being played for at Brookline, Mass. McDermott, the reigning Open Champion, was confronted at one hole with a most extraordinary situation, for, having played his ball off the straight line into the rough grass he found on reaching it that it had come to rest on the top of another ball, one that had been lost and abandoned. The shot that thus was presented was a most difficult one to play. There was nothing for it but to hit at both balls at once and trust to luck for the top one taking something like the proper direction. The stroke worked out fairly well. Now what must be the odds against any wayward ball coming to rest on the top of a derelict in this way at any other time? Think of it for a moment, and surely they must be millions and millions to one—representing something quite impossible in all the world and all eternity, or nearly. Yet it happened in the course of a game only seven years ago on the Town Moor at Newcastle in England.

And in the briefest consideration of such odd happenings on the links one recalls that it is not only what happens to the ball that makes the situa-

tion strange, but what the ball makes to happen elsewhere, and here again I perceive a coincidence, for when I recall that Mr. Elwes when playing his approach to the third hole at St. Andrews and feeling most mighty uncomfortable as he saw his ball making straight for a lady who was crossing the links at the time, and being much relieved when he saw that after it had apparently hit her on the head she did not fall (the extraordinary truth being that it had become firmly impaled on her hatpin). I recall again that the great golfer-soldier hero, darling of the game, the late Lieutenant F. G. Tait, who was killed in the South African war, was once out playing at this very same St. Andrews, when he drove a ball clear through a man's hat without injuring a hair on the head of the owner. He paid five shillings compensation, old Tom Morris remarking to him, "Ha, Master Freddie, ye may be verra thankful that it's only a hat and no an oak coffin that ye ha' to pay for!" Into the golfing diary of Mr. Tait there went that night the laconic entry, "Driving very poor. Put a ball through a man's hat and had to pay 5s." And now suddenly I remember—so astonishing are these coincidences of golf—that when I was playing the game in Canada, a little while since, Mr. George Lyon, the Canadian champion many times over, was telling me one day a tale of how when he was once playing at the Rosedale course at Toronto the man with whom he was matched made a fine strong brasse shot right in the direction of a stranger on the links and there seemed death in that ball until the very instant when it came into the stranger's zone. Then Providence intervened, for the wanderer, all unconscious, lifted his hat and held

it in two fingers at the back of his head while he scratched that head—as people do—with the remaining fingers. Along came the ball at full whizz for the head and found the hat a good buffer, though it nearly stripped the crown from the brim.

Hundreds of golf balls, I am made to believe, have dropped down chimneys, and at least one has tumbled into a pot of soup that was stewing on a kitchen fire; thousands of golf balls have been driven through windows, but none to such good advantage as that struck by a Montreal art dealer who went out for his game one day, did this thing and was roundly abused by a French-Canadian virago who owned the cottage of the broken window for the fact that not only was the glass pane smashed but a picture inside was damaged. Being sympathetic the player offered to pay five dollars for the picture, if he could take it away with him, to which the lady consented, and some time afterwards received a further sum equal to \$1,250 from the gentleman, who had discovered that the picture was a Dutch interior by Teniers (he did not know that when he bought it) and had got \$2,500 for it.

In these freaks of happenings on the links the situations are provoked by natural and not artificial circumstances; there is nothing really curious about such extraordinary golf as is sometimes played for wagers such as that in which a man undertakes to play a ball over miles of country in a certain number of strokes, or that of another who will play his ball to the top of Arthur's Seat, overlooking Edinburgh, or of a third who would play his ball through miles of the streets of Pittsburgh. In a certain way these affairs are interesting enough, but they are too artificial. If

it comes to that, I myself with the Town Clerk of one of the finest cities of the west for rival have played a ball from two miles from the base of one of the highest mountains in Wales to the summit; but Providence had nothing to do with that arrangement, and looking back upon it, we feel less satisfied than we did at the moment of holing out on the mountain top, well aware then that a magistrate's clerk and some ladies who were in the plot had hastened up the slope—and it was a steep slope—with a repast for the conquerors which embraced not merely chickens but champagne. I would rather have been the first golfer to drive a ball across Victoria Falls, on the Zambesi River, which honor fell to Professor John Milne, the scientist who always knew when earthquakes were happening anywhere, and to Professor Sims Woodhead, who made the same shot immediately afterwards. Why could they not have left it at that instead of straining their good fortune by trying again and giving their balls to the river and to the crocodiles? Those were good shots across the Zambesi, for it is a carry of a hundred and sixty yards over roaring, foaming water.

But, returning to the most legitimate of all, the great and extraordinary shots that have been played in big matches and competitions, a coincidence again confronts me. When you listen to golfers' tales of their own experiences you are, if you believe them, to understand that the most extraordinary shots they have ever done in their lives are excelled again by them the next day and then again the next, records being made repeatedly, and even the best players are not exempt from such marvelling at the possibilities of the game as

come within their own experience. When in America last year, along with Harry Vardon and Edward Ray, our two champions in quest of the American championship, Ray came up to me one day to tell me that on the day before, at Baltusrol, he had certainly done the most wonderful shot ever made in his life, and I have seen him accomplish many most marvelous things. On this occasion his ball lay very close up to a clump of trees with the hole just on the other side. It seemed just such an impossible shot and one of the same variety as that of Vardon's to which I have already referred, and he treated it in the same way. He laid his niblick almost flat, shot the ball up nearly vertically, and down it came within ten feet of the pin. Does it not help the coincidence that Vardon was playing with him at the time?

There is one shot in past golf that is of all others historic; but the circumstances are too well known to justify a full narrative of it here. That was the shot that was made by Mr. Tait in the final of his last championship at Prestwick when he was opposed to Mr. John Ball, and when playing the seventeenth hole, the famous Alps, he had the misfortune to find his ball in the waterlogged bunker guarding the green. The crisis was a desperate one, if that hole were lost then all was lost. Tait, great heart, waded in and played the water shot most perfectly, saving the situation. He made the stroke as well as if the ball had been lying on the nicest grass, and it was a great stroke made by a very great player. But it is too often forgotten, when the story of that thrilling deed is being told again, that Mr. Ball was in a predicament almost equally as bad at the same time and did a shot that was just as good.

Another wonderful stroke that has established a permanent place for itself in the records was that made by Mr. C. H. Alison, now secretary of the Stoke Poges club, who, when playing for Oxford in the inter-Varsity match of 1904, landed his ball on the top of the roof of the Woking clubhouse, and to save his match, the issue to which was hanging in the balance, he got a stepladder, made his way to the roof and played a most successful shot off it on to the green. I think we may take it that most of the great and best-remembered shots have been done with niblicks for the reason that to make them so wonderful in the eyes of the multitude the ball must have been in a seemingly hopeless place, and when that is the case there is only one club indicated. Some of the most superb shots that have ever been played have stirred few emotions and made hardly any lasting memories, because the circumstances have been comparatively normal and plain. There are shots like those made by Mr. Hilton with his spoon to the seventeenth hole at St. Andrews in the earlier amateur championships in this half-forgotten collection. The niblick used to be the Cinderella of the bag, despised except when it was needed, and then it was needed badly, but today it is used for other than bunker work and its resources are splendid.

There has hardly ever been such a master of recovery shots with the niblick as the great, five-times champion, James Braid, and not only has he brought into vogue a special niblick of his own design, but he originated a special shot with niblicks. The club he designed is much larger than an ordinary niblick—a really large and nearly round piece of iron; it is of great weight, which some people have likened unto a soup plate and others

to a meat chopper. But when there is hard smashing work to be done, Braid's niblick is the thing to do it with. The shot which he popularized for such special circumstances is what has come to be called the "dunch" shot, and it is one in which the maximum amount of force is employed to move the ball the minimum distance, and the smaller the distance the greater the force that is needed. That is paradoxical, but the explanation of the "dunch" and the circumstances in which it is needed are these; the ball is lying closely up to some strong obstruction, particularly the face of a bunker, and the object is to get it just out of that bunker and only just out on to the green which begins immediately at the other side. An ordinary niblick shot that would make a recovery might send the ball flying far away to the other side of the green and perhaps into more trouble. What Braid began to do, and what thousands of others do now, is to come smash down with the club with every grain of power that the man possesses several inches behind the ball, not touching it, of course, and creating what Braid himself has called something like an explosion underneath the ball, as the result of which it is blown upwards, as it were, and not very high or far, and it then just flops limply down on the green close by. I saw Braid himself play this shot to the most complete perfection, in ideal circumstances for it, the last time he won an open championship at St. Andrews, and if there had been no such shot and he had not so played it he might not have won that championship. He had come by the most dreaded situation that is ever encountered on this course, that is to say his ball was settled in that horrid deep bunker on

the left side of the seventeenth green. There was the narrow green adjoining and the road beyond; and what usually happens in such a case is that the man plays from the bunker to the road, then back to the bunker, then on to the road again, and so goes on with anger and despair increasing. If Braid was to be champion it was imperative he should do none of this, but should thump the ball out of the bunker and deposit it by the hole which was so close to it that you might almost see the bottom. Braid played the "dunch" shot as he has never played it better, and he saved himself.

Braid for power with the niblick! I have seen him once in what seemed a most parlous difficulty. It was at Prestwick. His ball had become entangled completely in a little bush and the putting green was not far away. To nearly all others the situation would have been hopeless; Braid hesitated a moment, and then, deciding that the ball could not be got out of the bush, determined to move both bush and ball in one stroke, and so he did and with one great heaving blow deposited them both on the putting green! Again it was when winning a championship at St. Andrews that Braid found himself in another very tight corner indeed. He was playing the sixteenth hole the line to which runs parallel to the railway and close to it, and, after being bunkered he struck the ball out of the sand on to the railway. At St. Andrews when you do this thing you must play the ball off the railway, and James climbed over the rails to do so. "When I got up to it," says he, "I found it lying in a horrible place, being tucked up against one of the iron chairs in which the rails rest. It was on the left hand side of the right hand

rail, playing towards the hole, and the only crumb of comfort was that it was not on the other side of either of the rails. I took my niblick and tried to hook it out, but did not succeed, the ball moving only a few yards, and being in much the same position against the rail. With my fourth, however, I got it back on to the course." James Braid won that championship. What he does not tell us in this recital—perhaps in his concentration he did not know—was that the signals were down and a train was steaming out from St. Andrews station in his direction. I saw that anyhow.

Last season I witnessed one of the most remarkable recovery shots I have ever seen in my life, and it was made by that most brilliant of all the young players of the time, George Duncan, in the final of the great autumn professional tournament at Walton Heath. It was at the seventh hole, and he had hooked out a long shot into the extremely wild country to the left of the green. This sort of place is sometimes called the "jungle" and the "tiger" country for it appears,

some say, as wild as anything could be in untrodden India or Africa—a dense mass of bracken, ferns and growths of various wiry kinds. To the bottom of these the ball descended, as balls will do. Holes were very valuable to Duncan just at this stage of his most important match, the first prize for which was a hundred pounds. He waded middle high into the jungle, caught a glimpse of his wayward ball, and glanced at the flag which might have been forty yards away, and to the ordinary player in such a plight might just as well have been forty miles. Then his niblick flashed in the sunlight, there was a crashing among the ferns, a speck of white was in the air, and the next moment the ball lay at rest at the very edge of the hole. We drew long breaths and sighed. Shots like that cannot be explained, and to golfers they are almost too wonderful even for admiration. They just happen, and they happen through inspiration and the sublime instinct that the masters have. For inspiration and instinct there is no man better than George Duncan.

