

PLAIN TRUTHS

BY "SAM SOLOMON"

IT IS GOOD to see that the Editor of this magazine is practising the quotation, indiscriminately, of some of the writings of the late Sir Walter Simpson, Bart., as a settled policy. I hope he will continue. It was found out some time ago in the old world that, despite the tens and twenties of new golf books that have been produced, nothing yet has been brought forward that is so good as Simpson, or "the Bart.," as he is sometimes called in a certain affected familiarity, not familiarity with the writer indeed but with all that pertains to the golf of old. In the same way it will be found out in the new world very soon that his book, "The Art of Golf" (unobtainable now) is the true classic of the game, to bear company with which only one or two that are worthy have been written in modern times.

THE VALUE of Sir Walter's writing was made up of many special values. His golfing perspicuity, his understanding of the subtlest emotions that are provoked by the game, his complete realisation of the way in which the game plays upon the temperament and the moods of a man, have never been excelled by any writer, and in the possession of that very knowledge there is an advantage from the instructor's viewpoint. His appreciation of the rare humor of the game, arising chiefly through the way in which this remarkable diversion plays upon the rawest mental simplicities of man, is wholly delightful and illuminates almost every line of his paragraphs, and through the very suggestions in this humor he often conveys rare points of instruction. In his wildest fancies, as they may seem to the casual glancer at these pages, he is often nearer the truth than may be imagined.

For example, let me take the most imaginative lines in the whole of his writing, those wherein he plays with the idea of the origin of the game. Some of the historians discuss this point as if somebody set themselves down in the fifteenth or sixteenth century and, thinking hard, deliberately evolved something in the nature of the game of golf. It was "invented." So there are quarrels as to whether it was invented first in Holland or in Scotland. All this, to my mind, has always been so much nonsense, because nothing is more certain than that golf in essence was the very first game of all that the world knew, and that for its beginning one would have to go back and back, long past all the centuries that are written about and into the remote ages of primitive man. For golf of all games is that in which the principle is the simplest and the most obvious. There is a ball, a stick to hit it with, and a mark at which to aim it. There is the game. What man, in the most distant and uncivilised past, on having anything like a ball at his disposal, a stick in his hand, should not wish to hit the ball—or the stone, or the piece of wood—in the direction of some distant mark which he might select, and should not try to make it reach that mark in fewer hits than some fellow human being might do? That the earliest men should do something of this kind seems really inevitable, and this was golf after all, the principle of golf.

If there were great elaborations of materials between that period and the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the game came to be regulated in some definite form in Scotland, were those changes after all greater than the others that have taken place since? Think of one of the original courses on the old commons or on the links by the sea, with just a few holes cut in them and nothing else. Was the gap between the earliest, almost savage golfers, such as we have been conjecturing about and the first golfers of St. Andrews mentioned in history, greater than the gap between the latter and the modern players with their most elaborate and highly groomed courses and all their multitude of materials? Why, think of the big gap that already exists between the courses and the materials employed at the beginning and now in even the lifetime of any golfer of some years. Thirty years ago the courses everywhere were the simplest things, and so were the clubs, while the balls were made of solid gutta percha. And now! High elaboration has only come in within the last twenty years, and, much as one likes and enjoys many of our modern improvements as we call them, they have done nothing to change the principles of the game.

THINKING upon these lines, and seeing the absolute inevitability of the game as we may say, all the old discussions upon whether it began in Scotland in the fifteenth century or whether the Dutch set it going earlier with some sort of a game played upon the ice, or even, as some assert, whether the French did not start it with what was called *jeu de malle* are beside the point. The fact that all these peoples played a game which in essentials had resemblances to each other, without knowing that they were all playing it, strengthens the point about the inevitability and the beginning in the remotest ages of which we can think.

There is evidence that the Red Indians in their savage days, when white men first found them, played something very like golf—even more like the game as we know it than the "kolf" that the Dutchmen played. That being so, it may very well have been played away back in the very distant past on that land which we now people, and so golf may have belonged to America long before it was practised in Scotland in that definite way which is written about in the golf histories. In this way of thinking one imagines the game beginning, or of even having been elaborated away back in time beyond the Pharaohs, back in ancient China, away in the childhood of the world.

This claim may be made for golf as for no other game, for here is a simple principle, and a natural one; but when you come to baseball, cricket and practically all the other games, you introduce a complexity of principles, and that is quite a different thing. The farther you get from simplicity, the farther you are also from what we call inevitability. By this I would urge that it is foolish to write of the "beginning of the game" and to the particular place to which it belongs, as is done by some of the old authorities. We indeed may have taken something of the "golf craze" over from Britain—though that is not proved—but it is obvious that golf had no real beginning in any time

with which historians are competent to deal, and that it probably was begun all over the world, wherever men were, in much the same simple way, and so America is as likely to be a place of origin as any other.

THIS IS A GREAT TRUTH that the historians do not seem to recognise, but Sir Walter Simpson with his deftness half expressed it, and went as far as perhaps he safely could, considering that he was a Scot himself and dwelt among the golfing Scots, and was one of them. His fanciful conjecture of the origin is classic. "Many antiquarians," says he, "are of opinion that the game did not become popular till about the middle of the fifteenth century. This seems extremely probable, as in earlier and more lawless times a journey so far from home as the far hole at St. Andrews would have been exceedingly dangerous for an unarmed man. It is not likely that future research will unearth the discoverer of golf. Most probably a game so simple and natural in its essentials suggested itself gradually and spontaneously to the bucolic mind. A shepherd tending his sheep would often chance upon a round pebble, and, having his crook in his hand, he would strike it away; for it is as inevitable that a man with a stick in his hand should aim a blow at any loose object lying in his path as that he should breathe.

"On pastures green this led to nothing: but once on a time (probably) a shepherd, feeding his sheep on a links—perhaps those of St. Andrews—rolled one of these stones into a rabbit scrape. 'Marry,' he quoth, 'I could not do that if I tried'—a thought (so instinctive is ambition) which nerved him to the attempt. But man cannot long persevere alone in any arduous undertaking, so our shepherd hailed another, who was hard by, to witness his endeavour. 'Forsooth, that is easy,' said the friend, and, trying, failed.

"They now searched in the gorse for as round stones as possible, and, to their surprise, each found an old golf ball, which, as the reader knows, are to be found there in considerable quantity even to this day. Having deepened the rabbit scrape so that the balls might not jump out of it, they set themselves to practising putting. The stronger but less skilful shepherd, finding himself worsted at this amusement, protested that it was a fairer test of skill to play for the hole from a considerable distance. This being arranged, the game was found to be much more varied and interesting.

"They had at first called it 'putty,' because the immediate object was to putt or put the ball into the hole, or scrape, but at the longer distance what we call driving was the chief interest, so the name was changed to go off, or 'golf.' The sheep having meantime strayed, our shepherds had to go after them. This proving an exceedingly irksome interruption, they hit upon the ingenious device of making a circular course of holes, which enabled them to play and herd at the same time. The holes being now many and far apart, it became necessary to mark their whereabouts, which was easily done by means of a tag of wool from a sheep, attached to a stick, a primitive kind of flag still used on many greens in almost its original form.

"Since these early days the essentials of the game have altered but little. Even the stymie must have been of early invention. It would naturally occur as a quibble to a golfer who was having the worst of the match, and the adversary, in the confidence of three or four up, would not strenuously oppose it."

How inevitable all this does seem! The story is so obvious that Sir Walter evidently seemed to think it necessary to insert the anachronistic absurdity about the shepherds finding the golf ball at St. Andrews to show that he was simply fooling after all. And, Americans, please extend your sympathy to the consideration that Sir Walter was one of an amazing few who ever spoke disrespectfully of the stymie in those old days.

I wonder how many copies of this rare book there are on the continent of America. Are there more than one or two? In truth I am told that there are perhaps not more than twenty or thirty that are known about in Britain itself. A first and a second edition were printed, but no more, and that was in the old days when there was but little golf and less reading of it. The greater number of the original copies printed therefore became lost with time. They are now exceeding rarities and at a high premium.

THERE ARE MANY of our materialists who will urge at once as a criticism of the Simpsonian writings that the teaching conveyed by them is out of date, and therefore not well suited, without considerable allowances at any rate, to the circumstances and the greater knowledge of the present time. This is a point upon which careless readers may easily go wrong, much to their own disadvantage, and for this reason I have rejoiced to see the Editor point out in his introductions to Sir Walter's essays that the supposed differences were more imaginary than real, and suggest that with but slight allowances, the principles remained. It is of the highest importance that this truth should be realised. I am going further than the Editor in this advocacy of a new consideration of Simpsonian doctrine. I consider that there is nothing of a practical kind being written in these days, or has been for many years past, that is so well worth the consideration of the golfer who wishes to better his game.

Why is this? I will tell you why. It is because Sir Walter Simpson dealt with, expounded, and explained the basic principles on which the strokes of golf are played, and basic principles do not change. Not only this but he dealt with variations of the principles, their advantages and disadvantages, and so forth. Now, though the game may have been conducted in a very elementary way in those days in comparison with what is done now, still do not forget that nearly all things in connection with those basic principles had long been found out and thoroughly tested and experimented with. There was nothing about the basic principles that we know now that they did not know then.

We have filled our minds and often our methods with much nonsense in the way of embroidery on those principles, but it is doubtful if we are any the better for it. Do not forget that in the days when Sir Walter Simpson wrote these delightful pages they could play the game very well indeed. Those days

were by no means prehistoric. The age of the Morris'es, and even of Jamie Anderson, Bob Ferguson, their successors, was past, and the Willie Park who is now with us in America had just begun to win championships himself. Therefore do not think of this advice as being too ancient. It was the Simpsonian doctrine on which to a large extent the games of the men of the period of John Ball, of J. H. Taylor and others of the very great, were trained and nurtured, and it is often said that golf champions of the quality of those old ones are not bred in these days.

NOW THE TENDENCY in golf instruction for many years past has been towards eccentricity, novelty and peculiar detail. Somebody is always wanting to find something out, a new trick, a dodge that will improve his game. There has been a boom in that kind of teaching. Anybody who would advocate something that was different from what others had consistently and steadily advocated, has been sure of a hearing, and thousands would go immediately to the links to practise these wonderful tips. The worst of it was that, golf being what it is, many of these marvellous discoveries did really produce good results for a time, not because they were really sound and valuable methods of practice but simply because the expectation of the buyer had led to a certain sort of confidence which invariably makes for a measure of success while it lasts. But after the first few failures, and the decline in enthusiasm for these new tips as the novelty wore off, their hollowness was discovered and they were abandoned, though they had made a bad mark on a man's game which was likely to endure. It is in this way that the game of the moderns has often become clogged with fantastic detail, and it would do the players a rare amount of good if they were to give it a dose of purification and go back to the basic principles which are often in danger of being forgotten.

Variations which were due to special circumstances have often and very wrongly come to be regarded as original basic principles in themselves. For example, take the question of stance for driving. A player is regarded as something of an extremist when he keeps his toes in line with each other and adopts thus an absolutely square stance; if he let the left toe be in front of the right he would be looked upon as breaking all the rules by which a good tee shot could possibly be made, and it would be considered that he might as well try to stand on one leg. Nobody uses this stance now. Yet Sir Walter Simpson recommended it, and more than that some of the greatest players of his time adopted this stance, and found it the best of all. There are reasons why its advantages are less now than they used to be, but in the case of many players it might still have pronounced advantages, and it is one of those things sometimes worth a trial. I believe that when the Editor of this magazine won his first successes he was distinctly inclined towards this system of stance.

This is just one detail; there are many others. What is needed is that golf teaching, which has wandered too far from its base, should go back for a reconsideration of things and in some measure a fresh start. There is too

much thinking and worrying in these days about such a question as to whether the third toe of the left foot should be bent at the top of the swing or which kind of fish is best for breakfast if one is off one's putting. The players of the United States have been as bad as any in this matter; but again I think they are going to be the first to realise the mistaken tendencies and to get back to the elemental truths, in fact they are doing it.

The American player has often been chided by the British and others for only having, as they say, one sort of iron shot, a standardised shot, the same sort of shot done with all irons, the varying power being given by different irons. This has been set against the American player for lack of resource. In point of fact the suggestion is not quite true; but in so far as it is, it is to the Americans' credit, and results prove its value. It is better to have a good shot and perfect it for every part of the game than to have—or think you have—five or six shots, none of which is reliable, and as to which is the better for any particular occasion you are regularly in doubt. Now it is part of the Simpsonian teaching that there should be this very standardisation and uniformity which is characteristic of many Americans and which is apparently regarded as weakness by some others.

Take another point—style in putting. We are as diverse in method in the United States as in most other countries in dealing with the difficulties and exasperations and mysteries of this part of the game, but if there is one style more than another that has won approval, success and popularity in recent times, it has been the stand-up style, as we may call it with the erect body, all close together including the feet, and not the suspension of a movement anywhere except at the wrists. McDermott was the foremost exponent of this method, it has had many prominent adherents since, and a permanent influence on putting generally in our country. It is at the same time one of the most beautiful and most serviceable methods. But this is nothing but a reversion after a very long period to the methods of the old brigade, the basic principles as they are expounded by Sir Walter Simpson. Mr. John Low at his prime was one of the greatest putters according to this method. Since those days the tendency has been to lie down on the green to putt, and it is neither good for the game nor for the putting.

These are but odd selections for examples of what is meant. In many other ways you will find a tendency among the players of the time, wearied out by experiment, novelty and the advice of a multitude of teachers, to get back to simplicities and obvious truths. In such a mood the writing of Sir Walter will be as grateful to them as a draught of sparkling water in the middle of the most parching round. I do not pretend, of course, that all that he says is right for these times, or anything like it, but often it is much more right than it may seem at the first glance. His is not writing to be read hurriedly while one has a club in hand and stands upon the tee; it is philosophy, counsel and humor that should be taken at leisure in one's resting moods, and be deeply reflected upon. Then there will be adaptations made in the mind, and the player may benefit.

And how wonderful is that humor! Simpson, as we have been told, was a friend of Robert Louis Stevenson, and there is a suspicion in some quarters that R. L. S. knew more than a little about the preparation of this work. Anyhow, Sir Walter possessed some of the charms of subtle humor and fascinating expression that distinguished the great novelist, and his book stands along with Izaak Walton's "Compleat Angler" as being one of the two finest works on sport ever published.

It has the great quality also of not being "above the heads" of the readers, as we say, but of being, on the other hand, in close sympathy with them always. At the end of these notes I would like to quote to you a few lines from the preface about what Sir Walter once wrote about his own authority and qualifications. He said "The authority of the text is another matter. It may be—nay, it has been—asked, 'What does he know about it?' Indeed (and alas!) I cannot speak from the highest platform. But if a poor cricketer, a hopeless billiard player, an execrable shot, begins golf by the doctor's orders after three decades, flounders hopelessly for years, and then by theory and experiment evolves a golf which I shall only characterise as infinitely better than his cricket, his billiards, or his shooting ever were, it is evident that he knows (whether he can say it) something of that department of brick-making which does not depend upon the quality of the straw." And in that also there is wisdom.

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