

PLAIN TRUTHS

BY "SAM SOLOMON"

LET US RETURN for a period of quiet contemplation upon that little volume by Mr. Garrott Brown, written fifteen years ago upon the Texas prairie, of great truths, acute discernment and some remarkable prophecy upon the future of American golf, which I rediscovered among some old and half-forgotten treasures and took for our mutual delectation to the fireside a month ago. I said then that it indicated, as no other little volume I had read had done so in anything like such full and clear measure, what are not merely the joys but the beauties of golf.

This little book, which, consisting of but sixty-four pages, not heavily burdened with type, must certainly have been one of the first two or three golf books ever published in the United States, considered the game when it was very young in our country, and it is a work which has long since passed from the public ken, and is to be found, I imagine, in but few golf libraries. But I am happy in the possession of my own copy, for I think that few such delightful, discerning and truthful books have ever been published upon golf or any other pastime.

ONE OF THE simple truths propounded by Mr. Garrott Brown in this one long essay is that the only way to enjoy golf is to play it,—except perhaps, to rest after it, and talk of it. That we all know; it is more emphasized season by season, despite all the efforts to attract the public to some matches, and even despite the increasing attendance at championships, that golf is no spectators' game. It is nice to see a shot or two by some great player; it is instructive to watch them—if one will do so with sufficient closeness and assiduity, which is seldom the case—and there are times when it may even be exciting to follow a golf match if one will only bet heavily enough upon it.

But most times watching golf, and not playing it is poor business for the body and the mind, and the general sentiment among players, even though it be but seldom expressed, is that one shot of their own, however ineffectual, is better for themselves than a whole round of strokes by the most accomplished champion. And it is no bad thing that this is the case, for surely the true function of a game is exercise and play, not merely the watcher's entertainment.

Nevertheless, says the essayist, the play is not play alone, but work and play, give and receive, object and subject, achievement and contemplation, as no other playing but life itself is. The variety of the situations it presents is such that there arises a constant demand upon the player's intelligence; from the unequalled importance of delicate adjustments, and the heavy penalties imposed upon very slight errors, there arises a constant demand upon his self-control, and then again a quite peculiar demand is made upon his conscience by reason of the clearness with which its standard of excellence is defined.

"True," he says, "there is a point of view from which it may be regarded as an extremely simple game,—the very simplest of all the games with a ball

and a club. The player's object is simple and single to the point of simple-mindedness and singularity, one might say: to put a small ball in a small hole with the fewest possible strokes. But so are the objects of the highest ambitions, the guiding stars of careers the most perplexed and devious."

It is true, likewise, that all the countless strokes a golfer makes are resolvable into three kinds of stroke,—driving, approaching, and putting. But Mr. Everard, in a dictum unsurpassed for truth and brilliancy by any in all the extremely clever literature of golf, has declared that to make those three strokes aright one must have "art, science, and inspiration."

AND HERE IS the story of the emotions, as they progress and change:—"From the moment the ball leaves the tee, whether it be topped, pulled, or sliced, or whether, struck in proper fashion a trifle below the medial line, and urged forward with an exquisite, free lashing out of the wrists, it take flight as with wings, and seek its true course as with a mind and purpose of its own, until it drop into the cup with a tintinnabulation that no louder clang or paean ever surpassed in its suggestion of victory and consummation, there is no foreseeing what perplexity or temptation to carelessness or overconfidence it will present.

"Not twice, off the tee ground and the putting green, will the possibilities and the probabilities of the stroke be quite the same. In the lie, the wind, the distance to be traversed, the obstacles to be carried, there are variations not to be reckoned by any known mathematics. The state and prospects of the match, the situation in reference to the hole,—as, for instance, whether one is playing the odd, or the like, or perhaps the comfortable and beguiling one off two,—and the measure of one's superiority or inferiority to one's opponent, and one's own state of self-command and confidence, or rage, or blank despondency, must all help to determine how that particular stroke shall be played.

"For into each stroke there must go not merely the thought of the stroke itself, and all its parts, and of all the material conditions of it, but the thought of one's self and of one's adversary. If the match be a foursome, one's responsibilities are not halved, but doubled. If a mixed foursome, they are multiplied by as many fold as the thought of one's partner outweighs all thoughts of self. *Then*, as the match approaches its dreadfully quiet climax of defeat or victory, the responsibility may grow positively appalling. The very deliberation which, impossible in most games, is characteristic of this, so far from lessening the strain on one's nerves, undoubtedly heightens it. One has time to estimate the emergency, to realize the crisis."

Here is the test of the golfer, expressed better than it has been done at any other time—"Not the fiercest rally at tennis, not the longest and timeliest home run at baseball, not the most heroic rush at football, requires a more rigid concentration of thought and energy, or more of the lover's courage, than the flick of the putter that sends the ball crawling on its last little journey across the putting green, when the putt is for the hole and the hole means the match. There is not a quality of mind or body,—I will not except or qualify it at all,—no, not one, that life itself proves excellent, which a circuit of the links will not test."

SOME DEEPLY interesting and acute remarks upon the essence and quality of bogey are made, which I should like to reproduce, but space will fail me before I have finished my consideration of this charming little work. But there is this which must be given—"With every single stroke we assail an ideal. There is no taking refuge in a breath-saving lob as in tennis. Wherever and however the ball may lie, there is a certain right way to play it, a certain reasonable hope in the stroke, from which we may be tempted by overconfidence and an adventurous trust in luck, or frightened by too low an estimate of our own powers. The ideal of golf, the moral law of golf, is thus, throughout, the ideal and the moral law of life: similarly persistent, silent, inescapable. A golfer's mistakes, his individual misjudgments, slices, pulls, fozzles, are sins,—nothing less; he will writhe under them ere he sleeps."

BUT THEN there is the handicap in the game, the allowance, the sympathy that is made to exist, as it were, with honest effort and excusable incapacity. What of them? "True," says the author, "of each according to his strength it is demanded. There is, of course, one's handicap. But the consolation of a handicap is precisely such as it yields in the greater game, and no more. In both alike, to be quite consoled with it is despicable; to refuse altogether to be consoled with it is to reject philosophy; to strive on, either desperately or sweetly, to the end of doing without it, to the attainment of a positive, non-relative excellence, is the right virtue and heroism.

"The principle of the handicap is always an admirable one, and it is illustrated in golf as in no other game; for in no other, probably, does one's play so vary from day to day, in no other is there such need of patience under discouragement or of restraint in good fortune. To aim at a high average of performance, and not to be overmindful of temporary fallings off or streaks of brilliancy, is the principle turned into rule. Does life enforce another so wise, so practical, or so fine?"

Thinking upon this point the philosopher concludes that if life indeed enforces another principle so salutary, it is that of self-study, which also is a rule of golf, commended by like rewards and enforced by penalties as logical as they are sure. "The line between the self-study," he says, "which is needed, and the self-consciousness which is fatal, is precisely the same in both. You discover, let us say, that the position of your left foot in driving is wrong, and by practice ascertain that you should set it thus, and not so. Nothing, surely, can be simpler; you will thenceforth avoid the error, and slice or pull no more.

"But it is not merely necessary to place that left foot properly: it is necessary to leave it there, to withdraw your mind from it, to redistribute your attention, or will, or whatever may be the right term, throughout all the parts of your anatomy. A hang, a catch, a snap o' the lid, and you are snared. That left foot will not down. At every stroke it will offend you. It is no longer yours, but it becomes a foreign and an alien thing. It rises up and kicks you. It shall be set upon your neck. Rebellion and civil war is let loose within your state. Conquer it you may, but you know not when it will grow again outrageous. You are cursed with a besetting sin, and in the time of stress it will find you out. Henceforth, only by a constant watching and willing can you

doubtfully maintain your poise between the outward and the inward thought, and precariously regain the wholeness you have lost."

BY PAGE and page Mr. William Garrott Brown goes on in his true eulogy of the qualities of our sport, giving fine expression to our own feelings upon the game which we had not been able to phrase in definite thought. I should like to set forth how golf is the best and most graceful exercise, how the golfer loves his clubs and why, how he comes by this game into the most intimate companionship with his fellow men. He is inclined, he says, to set a match at golf above any other known method of beginning an acquaintance, and the number of such acquaintances that ripen into good-fellowship and friendliness, or even into friendship, must be very great. One of the veterans told him that the very best things he won were not the cups and medals but friends.

But I must refer now to that part of the essay which, for all the charm of the rest, attracted me most at the first glance upon the whole, and that is that which concerns what I have called, vaguely, the beauty of golf, which would have been better expressed as the way in which golf leads the man of fine mind and good emotions to a true contemplation of the beauties of nature.

Upon this, nearing the end of his discourse, he says—"After all, however, golf is most rightly considered as one method of returning to nature, and the most reasonable criterion of golf as a recreation is the mood and attitude in which it brings one in touch with nature. Probably the great majority of its votaries find in a fresh concern about nature the principal constant effect of it in themselves.

"Though we must concede it accidental, the requirements of the game are ordinarily very much at one with the demands of good taste and an artistic sense in the matter of the choice and laying out of a course. No doubt, courses have often been chosen merely for the reason that they were beautiful; but it is true likewise that in any given region the most attractive square mile or more is very apt to prove the best for a links.

"Every good links must have firm green turf underfoot; it must have vistas; it is better for swells and undulations; variety is essential. In but one respect, and there only superficially, is the artistic sense antagonized; trees are banned from the fair green. They are the worst hazards conceivable, because the most illogical and unjust. The loss, however, is hardly real. Proverbially, the greatest hindrance to the enjoyment of trees is other trees. The last place in the world to go to find trees beautiful is into the heart of the densest wood.

"Better even this Texas prairie, where I happen to be writing now, treeless, and bare as yet of its richly embroidered mantle of spring wild flowers,—where people remember their childhood homes in Eastern states most tenderly as tree-clad places, and will always have trees in their pictures, and long backward for them as for no other delight they have left behind.

"To see trees one must have at least a clearing, and the lake-like interval of an inland course, or the shore margin if it be seaside links, is often the best point of view conceivable. For the finest effect of trees, whether they mass in walls and make a sky-line or stand apart, singly majestic, is rather architectural than domestic. Who cares for the underside of leaves? A high love would no more invade a tree than a cloud. Mystery is as much a part of its

charm as silence is. It should wave before us, come athwart our vision, menace, invite, suggest, lift up our thought,—all of which is its function on the border of the course, or crowning the hill near the clubhouse, or sentineling the drive. If the reader, not yet a golfer, find this far-fetched and fanciful, let me assure him, quite seriously, that golf has helped the present writer to develop a taste for Corot."

No, it is not far-fetched and fanciful. I have quoted this passage, or part of it, once before at the beginning of this discussion, and it is worth quoting nearly every month until other players, whose perception and observations and love of the beautiful things of the wild, natural world, may not have been developed, are led for their happiness to an appreciation of the full truth of it.

And that brings one to reflections on American courses, as they are being made in these latter days, and to wondering if there is not some suppression or neglect of the tree. There are many of them that are beautiful in their luxury of surrounding trees, but too many, as I think upon them, are bare. Science, as they call it, seems to be operating against the trunks and boughs and the beauties that adorn them in the spring, the summer and the fall. But, yet America has some glorious treeful courses. In the corners of some of them there are tree effects and arrangements that might give a life of happy labor to any artist.

SO THE ESSAYIST says that his confession as to the origin of his taste for Corot, the wonderful French landscape painter who saw the beauty of the trees at dawn and dusk as nobody else has ever done, may perhaps make it easier for the reader to bear with him while he adds that golf may likewise awaken one to a sense of the beauty of wild flowers, and many another delicate loveliness in nature. "I have known," he says, "the note of a song-sparrow to arrest a stroke. As for the larger appeals that nature makes to us, the sky-lines, the sunsets, the fresh green of the landscape in spring and autumn's red and leafy splendours, I should but hurt my cause by too much protesting were I to attempt to explain how, after years of a mere casement acquaintance with these things, of a laborious and creak-kneed homage, the habit of golf has gradually made me truly aware of them, and of my rights in them and theirs in me.

"It is a matter of moods, I suppose, and golf permits and induces moods scarcely conceivable in other athletic competitions. It permits one to be contemplative. One can actually play it dreamily. That, in fact, is a mood I should recommend in driving to anyone who affects the full swing, if his style be naturally slow, and grace not clearly beyond him."

One is arrested by this remark. In a little book of philosophy and delight, given over to no mere practicalism whatever, one suddenly finds here and for the only time a little hint of a practical character slipped in, as it were, accidentally and unawares. Those who play with full swings are recommended to play them dreamily! Here is advice!

Dreamily—dreamily—to play golf dreamily? Have we not understood that in the making of the perfect swing, and in the full swing more than any other, there are a million movements and combinations of movements of muscles and nerves and that they must all be just right and be set together in

perfect harmony or the swing will be ruined and the shot become a failure? And how are we to arrange this awesome complexity by a "dreamy" attitude towards it? Could any idea be more fantastic, any advice more obviously wrong?

And yet Mr. Garrott Brown is absolutely right, and his advice is the best possible. He who in making that swing with the million combinations of movements charges his mind with a care for only one of them throughout the process will surely fail. All of us know that we drive best when we know not how we drive. The human machinery must do its business undirected as if by old knowledge, experience and instinct. When we have to begin to show it the way, and to remind it of things, there are going to be hitches in the performance. The system must be taught its business, it must veritably become second nature with it, and then the whole thing must be left to the subconscious direction of the instinct, so that by such means all the movements may be harmoniously co-ordinated as they never could be in any other way. That is what Mr. Garrott Brown means when he recommends that full swings in driving should be done "dreamily" if the style of the player be naturally slow and grace not clearly beyond him. Better advice I have not seen more prettily expressed.

BUT HE GOES on to say that fairness demands a certain qualification, a concession of fact. "The severity," he says, "and the frequent sudden changes common to most of our American climates, and particularly the extreme clearness of our atmosphere, do somewhat lessen for us the golfer's peculiar privilege of a contemplative delight in nature, and prevent or disturb his characteristic mood. The tendency of these things is to induce an eager, high-strung, and even feverish responsiveness rather than serene enjoyment. That temper, though it be, as I have said, not on the whole detrimental to our play in respect of skill, does probably incapacitate us at times for the fullest measure of the delight we might have in it. Even if it does, however, there would seem to be better rather than worse reason for us to play.

"Serenity and tranquillity are in truth the very moods which Americans of the classes that play golf need to cultivate. To such as criticise the game because it is slow, and takes more time than busy, effective men can afford to give it, my favorite answer is that this is just what makes it so good a recreation for Americans, and particularly for the very Americans who, because they are so busy and hurried, will not take time for it, but prefer instead some sort of rapid transit through their diversions, and would have their relaxation without relaxing, and bolt their nature like their luncheons. They are men who do not know how to stroll."

AT THE BEGINNING of this essay, which I dealt with last month, Mr. Garrott Brown was nominating three things which were working powerfully on the American mind and character, and in his closing pages he goes back to those three things and suggests that the future historian, if he should thoroughly understand our life, have a right sense of values in civilization and a keen eye to the sources of national character, will not rate golf as the least of the three new things which came with the end of the last century. "He

will note of us, as of the Romans and other conquerors, that in the very years when we took upon us the imperial tasks of older peoples we borrowed of them also their arts and their pleasures. It needs but a schoolboy's reflection on what came of the Romans' imitative self-indulgence to make us thankful that from our cousins of England and Scotland, our forerunners in sports as in empire, we can learn so much concerning the right spirit in both.

"That we should continue on this continent to play the same manly, healthful games they play on the little island, pursuing always in our golf, with a just balance between eagerness and sedateness, between overconfidence and despondency, its clear idea of excellence, displaying the heroism of wholeness, and sweetening our natures with that fine right sense of the human and wild nature about us which it so subtly quickens,—this is no little aspiration, even beside our other aspiration to the right spirit in those vaster occupations which seem to be devolving from Englishmen, weary of the perplexities of empire, upon us, whom at last it visits in its westward course."

THAT IS the end. I lay down this little book of fine literature with gratitude and regret. No such appreciation and analysis of golf has been written by any other person, and, written fifteen years ago, its application to the circumstances of the present time is very wonderful indeed. Look again at those last lines and the mention of America's increasing responsibilities, and think how a thousandfold they have increased again. The strength of our faith in golf, our need for such a thing—and this is the only thing of its kind—needed no strengthening; but if it had needed it here are the thoughts and the words.

The nearest thing to such excellent and penetrating philosophy, the revelation to ourselves in full expression of great and subtle truths which we had felt within our consciences but could never formulate, is that which was once prepared by the Rt. Hon. A. J. Balfour, the English statesman, the fine figure who some months ago came to America to introduce us as it were to our eastern Allies in the war. Mr. Balfour loves the game, and he understands it in its marvels and its mysteries as very few of his compatriots for all their increased hundreds of thousands ever did. I like to imagine a game between Mr. Balfour and Mr. Garrott Brown. It would be a pleasant, a delightful game; the rarest flavours of golf would be tasted by these gentle philosophers. They would know delights that we of cruder spirits may but dimly guess upon. But yet there is great happiness for you and me in this game also, now and in the future time when wars are done.

