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THE LONELY PUTTER

A Contemplation

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A LONELY PUTTER is a dismal thing for the contemplation of a man of generous human sympathy and understanding. He perceives the pathos of the situation; he knows that of all the clubs in the golfer's equipment the putter comes to most intimacy with its man. A driver is just a driver, and often a precious thing; so with the irons. But the putter, for all its vexations, is a thing of the confidence, of the affections. It is as if it knows and understands.

Few men ever part with a putter which has once established itself in their collection even though it may have been discarded after a season or less. There are reversions; in any case there has been too much intimacy between man and club in such a case for them ever to be utterly and completely parted.

In the house of the old golfer there are often many putters. There may be nearly a hundred of them. It is a strange contemplation, but it is true. Do we not know of the case of the great golfer who had not merely his hundred putting instruments, but used

seven of them in a single day and that a day of competition? Yet for all his grand establishment of putters he would not part with any of them and we must admire him as a golfer accordingly. He knows and loves them all. And yet while, as we say, the putter that once passes through the tests of the novitiate with him and is accepted as one of the great family, perhaps being prime favourite for a while, has a home forever, he has in the most exceptional circumstances been known to part with one of the fairest of them, a gentle, aristocratic French-polished wooden putter of exquisite balance and such points as would satisfy Mr. John Low himself. This putter was indeed added to my own inferior but still comprehensive lot, and, though not treated as a matter of bargaining, it was sufficiently evident that it came to me in recognition of a loan I had made to its original owner of a lovely putter of magic parts at the crisis of a championship with authority to apply a hammer to it for the straightening somewhat of its lie.

BUT IT IS of lonely ones we come now to speak, though these slight reminiscences of affection and intimacy between man and putter serve for introduction. Is there not told the story of an important two-thousand mile journey being postponed and the whole of a little community being thrown into chaos and despair because the chief putter was missing? Is there not the affair of the man who travelled specially from the Highlands to London and back again at a cost of some ten sovereigns and the loss in time of about thirty hours in order to pick from the collection in his deserted house—for it was August and the servants were on "board-wages"—the putter that he knew by instinct would be as his salvation—and eureka! was.

The putter and the old jacket, they have their places in the golfer's heart. Odd fancies, as we know, flit through the minds of men at the fighting front during grim hours that are lived through there, and when learned that such seeming trivialities as these occupy their minds. The players there have thought at times of their old putters as of the other almost semi-animate things of home that they treasure and some day will fondle again. They have put it to themselves (we have reason to know that they have) in the simple way that comes naturally to strong men at such times that there are putters waiting for them. We know it because an expression much to that effect appears in the letters of two men in khaki who have written home from a place out there. That, then, allows almost a little pathos to the case of the putter that stays at home. It seems almost like the master's dog. It is best that it should be kept in some sort of com-

pany in a corner by the fireplace where many a good putter instals itself in times of peace, or in a bag along with others, but it should not be allowed to lie about anywhere, or be thrown carelessly in a cupboard. The lieutenant would not like to know of such neglect. He might ask if it were for such disrespect to things he liked that he went out to the wars. It is a good rule for wives, mothers and sisters, that if they love the lieutenant—or whate'er he be—they should love his putter too.

BUT OF ALL putters in such straining times as these, surely that is most pathetically situated whose master is at the war and which has no home whatever for the time being, is looked at and is pitied by the passers-by, is sometimes touched by them, and to which I have heard them say, "Poor thing!" This is not fancy, or a pretty tale, but simple fact of war. There may be added to it this, that the state of the putter of which we speak is so forlorn that it has even been noticed by those who have nothing to do with this game and do not, except by quick instinct, understand the affections that may exist. We do not know that the master of this putter is at the war; we merely guess at it, but yet we guess with that same confidence that permits us to forecast the rising of tomorrow's sun. In no other circumstances could the old putter possibly be in the case that it is. If its master were dead it would have been taken away long ago.

The loneliest putter I have ever seen, this one, is in a stick and umbrella stand in the hall of one of the most important social clubs. There are twelve openings or compartments in this stand which is an auxiliary affair and is situated somewhat privately

round a corner of the hall, and the lonely putter usually occupies one at the left hand corner. Sometimes in the day it has a few canes and umbrellas for company, but it is little the better for that. It looks no less forlorn, and seems of an ill sort in company. On the fine days, even now in the war, there comes a galaxy of fancy walking sticks to this stand. They have shining surfaces, and pretty handles, with bits of silver about their necks. The lonely putter seems strangely situated then amidst so much aristocracy of wood. It is nearly always in a corner of the stand, and so is somewhat hidden by this gay crowd. When the luncheon time and the hour afterwards have passed away, and the gay butterfly crowd of walking sticks have pattered off down the busy street, the lonely putter is left again with a couple of old umbrellas that have been forgotten for a week or two, and in this solitude it assuredly seems better situated.

There is not the most absolute silence; there is a peculiar music which must be particularly grateful to the lonely one if it has a little of the consciousness with which we credit things that are so intimate with their human owners. Very near to the stand in which it is held, not more than three club lengths away, there are two machines that go tick-ticking all the day and nearly all the night, with brief intervals when the fountains of news are waiting for a fresh supply. These are the tape machines as we call them, the wonderful instruments which, worked by some unseen hand far away in the big city, tick off on bands of paper in type-like characters all the newest news of all the world, hot from its very source. It tells in the afternoon what the unhappy revolutionists

have been doing at Petrograd in the morning, it gives us speedily an account of the stirring scenes in the French Chamber of Deputies by the Seine and of the interrogations by the ministers at Westminster and the ministers' haughty answers as of men who know their righteousness. When there are races it gives us the result of them; in old times of peace it was; a frequent occurrence for chronicles, of golf to be made upon this hurrying tape. The progress of the amateur championship was set forth, there were some details of what the ladies did at Ranelagh, and Taylor, Braid and Vardon were familiar material for this machine. Two or three times a week there would be the names of these worthies, and after the names of each of them would be eighteen figures in two lines of nine each, and a grand total at the end of each series. The tape machine was very well accustomed to this golf scoring for the champions, and with the same facility that it set down the closing prices at the Stock Exchange, that strange medley of figures with eighths and sixteenths, and the names of strange railways at which, if you ever travel far in the United States, you will wonder at and feel much interested in seeing the titles again and that the railways really exist. Even now in war we see the names of the old champions on the tape again, and one almost fancies that the ticker is glad to give them a turn, one which they well deserve for the war charity golf they have been playing.

IN THE OLD TIMES when their deeds were a matter of daily consideration there was no lonely putter here in the gloomy hall to listen to the ticking. It was out in the sunshine, was soled on the greens and was tapping the

ball on its way to the waiting cup. Those were more anxious times, perhaps, than now, but there was a certain degree of satisfaction in the effort.

With but a little imagination and sympathy you may conceive that there is something peculiarly pathetic in the lonely putter being here now, listening, as it were, to the ticking of the tape machine with its intelligence from every part of the world. There is news continually from the Italian front showing what fine things those Latin Allies are doing against the Austrian enemy, every night and morning there comes the official reports from French and British headquarters, indicating the great things that have been done and the progress that has been made. Almost hourly there is news of some new feature of America's mighty effort. Now and then there is a line, pregnant with great suggestion, from Mesopotamia. Besides the official notes, there are from time to time purple patches of the narratives of stirring incidents in the war, heroic deeds, glorious sacrifices. Alas! day by day the tale of the brief statements of the uttermost sacrifices has to be told. In all that struggle for a world to be good and free, the lieutenant who owns the putter is playing his part away on one of the shrieking fronts; something that he and those with him have done must be ticked off here from time to time—within those three club-lengths of the lonely putter. Let us hope that there will never be ticked an odd last line or two that would make it so much more than lonely. Perhaps it is a stupid fancy, but one cannot help thinking that it is somehow an odd linking up of things, with that old and very favourite club alongside this machine, and the news of the soldiers' work and achievement so far

away being ticked continually in this hall in town.

IT MAY BE SAID that we are assuming a deep affection without the definite knowledge. It can hardly be so. The very fact of the putter being here, lonely, away from all its old associates, suggests that special care and interest were generally taken in it. It had been brought there for a special purpose; it was wanted. It had been taken from the bag. Perhaps it had been shown to someone. It must have been at the beginning of the war, and such were the excitement and the hurry then that one can well understand how it came to be left here. There are evidences upon it of the regard in which it was held, and many more of its most extensive use. It is an aluminium putter of the Braid-Mills variety.

Taking it from its present receptacle and handling it in a sympathetic way, what old memories do not this very name and style recall! That Braid-Mills variety became greatly popular, perhaps more so than any other, but I think its time was spent before the war, and somehow I do not fancy a boom in this pattern when next putters become of like importance as guns. I never loved this pattern; it seemed such a stodgy and ungraceful thing. Perhaps I should not say it, because the king of his model, the acknowledged chief of all of them, is in my possession with a silver plate tacked to its shaft. James Braid, who knows how to make putting a matter of mechanism and careful arrangement if any man does, thought out the design of the Braid-Mills putter, evolving it from the longer, flatter-headed aluminium putters that Mr. Mills was making for us on the model of the old wooden beauties. It is this orig-

inal model that always most appealed to me, and not only because the best and most fateful putt I ever did was done successfully with one of them. Braid took one of the new models of his own designing, did little things to the face in the way of filing added an inch to the end of the stick to change the balance, and generally treated it with files and chisels and so forth like the master craftsman and golfer that he is, until it was just exact, for his own smooth, splendid, putting way. When that state of contentment had been reached, Braid went to the Open Championship at Prestwick, and won it with the lowest score that ever a championship was won by, and after finer putting than had ever been done in any golfing event.

When I begged a boon of him he gave me the pick of his bag, but was dismayed when I took the putter. "Alas!" said he, "to-morrow I must play in an exhibition match"—somewhere about Glasgow, I think it was—"and wherewith shall I putt?" I was unsympathetic; I suggested the niblick. Late on the following evening I sat in London again, and read in the evening paper of the golf that had been played that day. Somewhere in the north James Braid had broken the record of a course, and had accomplished the most marvellous putting ever seen in those parts. And just to think that the old man had done that with a new putter, just freshly bought! However, it did not change the fact that the one of his I had was the greatest of its class, the king of its kind.

The lonely putter in the hall is of that same strain. It is much the same kind of club, though somehow, having handled it, I care less for its balance than for that of the king. It has

a medium lie, and a driver face, and the weight of the head is ten ounces and two drams, marked upon it. That is what you might call a fair all round putter, though with aluminium the vertical driver face is always rather a dangerous thing, and, like Braid, I believe firmly in more loft in such a case. The aluminium sets the ball off with a great speed, permitting you little control over it. Some control must be established by the loft of the face, and that was one of the chief features of Braid's design, for he established a deep face and laid it back, so that even with aluminium he was able to put much drag upon the ball. If you apply a large block of this metal and a quite perpendicular face to a modern golf ball, the latter will shoot along the green like one possessed, and attempts at putting become ridiculous. However, the lonely putter is not by any means so bad as that, but when the lieutenant comes home again, if he finds himself putting badly, he might almost be recommended to try a shade more loft.

BUT THIS MEDDLING with other people's putters and their putting fancies has always been found to be a most dangerous thing. One who undertakes it embraces a fine prospect of making enemies, and small one of gaining a friend. It is an interference in the too intimate domestics. Just as well might you go to give a man warning of his sweetheart, or even indeed of his very wife. Do these things if you must, but be sure you will pay a price for good intention. So have a care if you are coming between a golfer and his putter. The lieutenant knows the peculiarities of this odd thing of his very well; it has not been a putter of occasional use. There are many marks and scratches upon it, and the grip

is well worn. The end of it, at the top of the shaft, must have been coming untacked just when the Huns sprang loose, for the leather has since become unwound for some inches.

Men who pass by this stand are often attracted to this lonely putter—men who know and understand. You see them take it from its compartment, grip it and sole it on the marble floor, make a little swing with it as if accomplishing an imaginary putt, and then remark, "Nice old putter this!" or "I think I could run them in with such a putter!" Those are the things one always thinks. And then when they put it back again, a thought occurs to them, and there is a momentary gleam of sad consciousness in their eyes. In this upset old world, when we no longer writhe at the knowledge of awful slaughter, the emotions sometimes have it for an instant—until we feel we must be cold and practical and as materialistic as we may, according to the new way of things. But I have heard men say in the way we know, "I wonder whom that old putter belongs to now. . . . Perhaps . . . yes, very likely. Well, good luck to him!"

There is a feeling that the lieutenant, when he comes home again, will be delighted to see the old putter once more. Surely so. It is one of the pleasures of increasing age and experience in golf that we look upon the old clubs of our early years with a strange warm affection not unmixed with that

sweet sorrow of regret for the good times that have gone. A new club we like is a splendid thing, but it is not so good as one of the old, old time. He will like to see it, but when the war is over all our ideas are to be changed, our methods, our acts. Golf is to be changed, too, so they say. In any case you would hardly expect a man to play in the same way and with the same ideas after more than three years of war as he did before. There will be a fresh starting. Most of the old clubs certainly will be employed, but there will be new ways—old ones revived. Square stances, as they were, may have become open, men who crouched, or "sat down," to their ball as was said, may stand stiff and straight, and will hit hard. I am afraid, indeed, that there will be much hard hitting, more than ever there was before, and that the actions of the pastime will not be more graceful for it.

And somehow I fancy that men will take more to plain iron putters after the war; and great putting, the putting one delights in when fully the master of the ball upon the green, is best done after all with wood or iron, and for my own part, in defiance of the testimony of the ancients, I believe in iron. But we shall hope there are no disappointments ahead for the lonely putter. Were it so, the romance of the story would be spoiled, and these are times one must try to believe in faithfulness. So we imagine that the end of the time of waiting is at hand.

