

RANDOM REFLECTIONS

By A. C. M. CROOME

FOR more than two months the majority of British golfers have not struck a ball or seen one struck. Clubs stand rusting in corners, gradually assuming an appearance more and more strange to their owners, who at last are tempted to wonder what you do with those curious looking instruments. Nay, more! More of us who are prevented by increasing age or other infirmity from passing the doctor do not even talk golf. I have only once heard the game mentioned since war was declared, and that was by a Frenchman, who came from Paris to London on his country's business, just after the German retreat from the Marne. He did not know whether his house at Chantilly was still standing, but professed himself convinced that the enemy had been turned back by the sight of a new bunker recently constructed on the neighboring golf course. People who are taking an active and personal part in the making of history can retain a lightness of tone in conversation, which is impossible to others whose most absorbing occupation is the comparative study of the evening papers undertaken in the vain hope that the difference between intelligent anticipation and the recital of solid facts may thereby be made apparent. At the time of writing anxiety about the future has visibly diminished, even if the distress and mourning caused by the war is great and the scars of it destined to be permanent. Many of our golf courses, including Sandwich and Deal, are being used as training-grounds for battalions of Lord Kitchener's new army, a likely lot largely manned and officered by golfers. The rest, which have been deserted for weeks, are again coming into occasional use as places of recreation for elderly and infirm civilians. This is a healthy sign of the times. Another is the welcome given to the September number of this magazine. We have remembered that we really were in anticipation keenly interested in the play for the Open and Amateur Championships of the United States, and that our press had given us only the most meagre information about it. I now recollect that I had seen only the results of every other round played at Ekwanok, and had not been seriously annoyed by the absence of detailed news.

When we were at Sandwich in May we were told on highly respectable authority that this year's competition for the American Amateur Championship would resolve itself into a match between Mr. Ouimet and Mr. Travers. We were loth to believe this, because Mr. Evans had during the two preceding days played better golf than either of the selected pair, and had fought with a larger measure of coolness and success when pinched. But the prophets

were right. Different crowds must exercise a different influence on different individuals. Over here we do not walk round with Mr. Evans expecting him to crack: his style is so compact and sound, and his power of club with all his irons so remarkable. When he comes onto the green his British opponents and their supporters do permit themselves to hope that he will occasionally miss a putt, and are not always disappointed. In this particular he may fitly be compared with Harry Vardon. And this is not the only point of resemblance, for there is something Vardonesque about the rest of his game. The element of the second-best is entirely lacking from it. His shots, with few exceptions arouse envy and jealousy in the breast of the beholder, and the exceptions are invariably disastrous. Moreover he presents to the eye that appearance of simplicity which masks an unusual amount of adroit finesse. His must be an exceedingly pleasant way of golfing.

I note that his defeat in the first round, even though administered by a redoubtable and seasoned opponent, has been made the text of a sermon against the iniquity of the eighteen-hole match. As a general rule arguments based upon equity should be ruled out from a discussion of golfing problems. The admission of them has been the cause of many errors in course-construction. Bunkers, for example, which have been made solely to discriminate fairly between shots of all kinds, are the most futile of created things. A bunker is good or bad according as it does or does not add interest to the play of a hole. The very best bunkers, such as the pots bang on the direct line to the Long Hole out at St. Andrews, very rarely trap anything but a clean hit ball; the top or the schloff does not reach them. This is manifestly unfair, but it adds immense interest and infinite variety to the play of the hole. But championship golf is a peculiar form of the game. The prime object of it is not the amusement of participants in it, but the finding of a winner. All competent judges seem to agree that for the proper fulfilment of this purpose thirty-six hole matches are desirable. The balance of argument is heavily against them, but they may yet be right, because instinct is often a sounder guide than reason. The case for the defence is this. Firstly in a one-round match the play of every hole is of vital importance. The man who gets down to business straight away, reaps his due reward as against another who starts badly whether the cause be nervousness or rheumatism. "Two down and thirty-three to play," is no great matter, but a two-hole deficit with only fifteen chances of recovery means a licking more often than not, and the licking is likely to be made the

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more severe by desperate endeavors to get back losses at early and inconvenient opportunities. Secondly when two equally matched competitors are set to play thirty-six holes, they will in the vast majority of cases come in to lunch all square or thereabouts. Practically it is the second round of a thirty-six hole match which counts, so they may as well start to play it in the morning as in the afternoon. Thirdly—this may be considered fantastic, but isn't, if equity is to be considered—on a good course there are three parties to a well-made match, you, me and providence. If we play two rounds the third party does not get a fair chance. By the law of averages the telling stroke which he delivered on your behalf in the morning must be counteracted by one designed to help me after luncheon, so that he is reduced to a most unbecoming impotence. We know it, and the knowledge soothes our nerves. The nerve strain of an eighteen-hole match is greater than that incurred in one of double the length, and the power to resist nerve strain is a mark of the high-class golfer conscious of no radical fault of style. But if we may be reckless of equity in placing bunkers we must at all costs be fair to opponents in discussion. They advance an argument which is arresting, if not conclusive. A championship tournament lasts over several days, and the playing of two rounds daily taxes too severely the stamina of many competitors. The most superficial student of golfing history will readily recall the name of one man, who in pure skill is the equal of any British amateur that ever swung a club, but has never appeared in a final. Given a qualifying competition and a reasonable number of thirty-six hole matches Mr. Jack Graham would undoubtedly begin to collect his due share of gold medals. His first was practically in his pocket this year when he strained his elbow.

May I here offer my congratulations to Mr. Ouimet? A shrewd critic on this side has suggested that while during his recent visit to Europe Mr. Ouimet was, possibly without exactly realizing it, as much occupied in increasing his knowledge of the game as in reeling off his 4's and 3's. Inquisitiveness of mind on the links does not lead to the immediate acquisition of prizes, because it interferes with the proper concentration. Whether this be or be not the reason why Mr. Ouimet did not do himself justice at Sandwich, Prestwick, and elsewhere, it is certainly true that his style underwent a subtle change between the beginning and the end of his tour. It gained a compactness which was lacking when he made that horrible drive from the first teeing-ground at Sunningdale, his first competition stroke in England. When we said "Goodbye and Come Again," at Prestwick we realized that though he might seldom, if ever, again experience a return of Brookline madness, he had made considerable progress in developing the equally dangerous Four-Habit.

I also noted in the September number of this

magazine the reproduction of the sketch with which Dr. Mackenzie won the golf-architecture competition promoted by Mr. C. B. Macdonald. It is impossible not to agree with every word of the commendation meted out by Mr. Darwin, one of the appointed judges to the design, equally impossible to imagine that he and his colleagues had much difficulty in arriving at their verdict. Nevertheless a thorough paced conservative may find in the sketch excuse for sounding a note of warning even if his voice be destined to echo through a wilderness. Because it is admitted that holes should be made interesting either by art or nature, it does not follow that architects should overleap the line which divides interest from excitement. When every stroke from tee to hole has the margin of error reduced to a minimum excess of virtue is almost worse than positive vice. In April last I was playing in a foursome over a course where one of the earlier holes had been vastly improved by the construction of a new green, a long narrow plateau with cunning hazards eating into the front and sides of it. The architect, not content with making it a meritorious act to land the ball anywhere on this green in two shots, had broken up the putting surface with a bold gully, terminating on the right in a ravine so steep that a ball only a few yards wide of the pin and lacking but little of the pace necessary to reach it would run down the emergency exit into horrid country. I pointed out this feature to one of my opponents, commenting on the ingenuity of the idea and the care exercised in carrying it out, "M' Yes!" he replied, "But if it had been put there by nature, they would have smoothed it out." Fortunately a permanent protest against the tendency of green committees to over-elaboration may be found at Westward Ho! the best course in Great Britain in my thought. There at most of the longer holes there is a generous expanse of fine turf on t'other side the hazards in front of the tee. Carry the trouble, which generally wants doing, and you get a lie even if you are several yards off your intended line. You are not cramped in use of the driver except on two or three occasions, but then you are asked to do something special: wise men like Mr. Travers then eschew wood and resort to the brassie. By way of compensation, when the tee-shot is difficult the subsequent approach is simple—for Westward Ho! But I know many a modern course, especially among those situated inland, where anything like spaciousness is studiously avoided. Thus variety, which is one of golf's chief charms is curtailed. I do not ask that we should always be allowed to drive light-heartedly as on a prairie, but it is good every now and then to spit on your hands and have a real good lap at the ball. Fancy playing at eighteen holes all laid out on the lines suggested by Dr. Mackenzie's sketch! One would come in wearied, if not bored, by the debauch of excitement.