

CHAPTER IV

PLAYING PENITENTE

WE may suppose now that the idea of inspired golf has become tolerably familiar to your mind, and that you no longer need to keep the limelight on it so strongly while you address the ball. The next step in our course of experimental psychology is to see just how large a variety of the older ideas stowed away in our subconscious self we can combine with the act of inspiration at the moment of striking. Variety, that's what we need to keep us from being bored; and did not Voltaire, the great philosopher say of education, "Every method is good except the one that bores you." The same thought occurred to Lin McClean, the cowboy hero of Owen Wister's cleverest story, when he suddenly determined to quit cow-punching, and remarked to the startled ranch foreman who wanted to know why, "What's the matter with some variety?"

Here, then, is the particular variety that I would next offer you. Tee up, as before, and I don't care a jot whether you tee a free ball on the links, or a captive in the garden; and begin operations once again with the usual preliminary swing.

You have already got the habit of inspiration at the beginning of the stroke as well as of using the wrists properly, even at the risk of giving yourself a mental squint by the attempt to keep both points steadily in view at the same time. Now I propose to introduce a third object into the foreground of your mental view, namely the posture at the finish. Consider the many fine finishes you have seen when watching golfers strike off, and the many pictures you have admired in books and newspapers which have been taken of them in the act. What is it that has struck you most? I suppose the way in which the arms and hands have come out away from the body in front and very often have swung clean round to the left till the club has finished right down behind the back. Not all the fine players bring the club so far round, but all, I think without exception, get the hands away so that the club comes right through. Tell yourself that you will do the same as you address your daisy for the preliminary swing. As before, you can put down a gun-wad or a scrap of paper if you happen to be short of daisies.

Swing, then, remembering both to inspire and to flex the wrists, and also to insist on the club coming through. Perhaps you find that the club seems to wish to pull itself up short before the finish is completed. If so, don't let it do so; shove it on; keep it moving, aye, till it fairly hits you in the small of the back. Hitting yourself in the small of the back may be an exaggeration of the ideal follow-through, but then it pays to

exaggerate sometimes. My name for this exaggerated finish down the back is playing the Penitente.

Let me tell you why. On a certain day in Lent, now alas ! over forty years ago, I rode into a very remote village of what was then the very remote Territory of New Mexico. I saw the people (many of whom I knew) standing about in groups apparently occupied in watching some performance, and then in their midst I caught sight of a mysterious white object, moving about very queerly and acting in a way that I could not make out or understand. I rode closer and what I beheld was this. A human being, stripped naked save for a pair of loose white drawers, and also for a loose white cotton muffler that entirely swathed its head, was dragging itself about with long half-kneeling steps in a bent posture. Its two hands grasped a soap-weed scourge, and the scourge was red, and the bare back was red, and there were red stains on the white cotton drawers down below. At each dragging step the creature raised the hands that held the bloody scourge and brought it sharply over the shoulder so that it came with a whish-h-h down the back. This ghastly self-torturer was one of a band of Penitentes or flagellants, who publicly flogged themselves every year in Lent, and I was destined to learn a good deal more about the horrid business and the people who took part in it ; but that is a long story which I have partially told elsewhere.

However, I have never forgotten the first sight of that awful Penitente slashing himself down the

back ; and every time on the links that I indulge in a preliminary swing with an exaggerated follow-through his figure rises before my memory. And if I want to remind myself of the importance of bringing the club right through and well down the back I look back upon that strange scene under the torrid New Mexican sun and bid myself, " Play Penitente."

Those poor benighted self-torurers slashed their backs as a penitential atonement for their sins. Come on, then, weak brother and do your share of penance to atone for your golfing sins of the past. It is up to you now, as we used to say out west, to be a Penitente. Fix your eye on that meek daisy, inspire, swing, strike, and make that club whistle through till it hits you where the Penitente hit himself. Now address the teed ball, fill your lungs again, hit it for all you're worth, and fetch that club through. Did you fail to get it through with the ball, where you had succeeded with the daisy? That very likely was because the shock of the collision with the ball checked the club. Never mind. Tee up another, take a full breath once more, and strike off again. You may not succeed the second or even the third time, but persevere, and you will do so eventually and will get off a shot in which, after smiting not the empty air but the solid ball, you find that you have succeeded in bringing the club quite through until it finished down across your back.

Now at once apply the self-examination process.

Did you keep in mind the inspiration and the right use of the wrists in the up-swing as well as the third idea of following-through at the finish? Probably you were all right with the inspiration, for that came at the very beginning, but possibly you slurred the wrist action. Anyhow you had better swing again and again till you manage to keep all three points in your mind together and slur none. If you like to avail yourself of a small material aid to this, write on a piece of paper in large letters

INSPIRE
USE WRISTS
FOLLOW THROUGH

and stick it up on an impromptu stand right opposite your tee, just where on many links they stick up a notice "REPLACE THE DIVOT." Look at it before you begin the swing and fix your attention firmly on it. You will find the effort to keep this triple bill in mind rather fatiguing, but go on doing it steadily for several shots. Take a rest, lest you grow stale, and do something else for a few minutes. Then begin again, and repeat the process, always laying the chief emphasis on the third of the trio, the last item in your mental programme. Concentrate entirely upon that, upon the determined follow-through. Let the club hit you hard on the back every time. You know you deserve it for your past sins. At all costs make yourself play the Penitente.