

CHAPTER IX

THE PHILOSOPHY OF GOLF

“**T**HERE are no snakes in Iceland,” wrote the old monk when he began his celebrated chapter, and in like manner I would begin this by saying, “There is no philosophy of golf. At any rate, if there be such a thing, the best definition of it would be that given by an unhappy Oxford undergraduate in his vivâ voce in Divinity when the examiners invited him to define Original Sin. “It is,” he answered, “a fond thing, vainly invented, grounded on no certain warranty of Scripture” He never finished his sentence, being promptly ploughed for irreverence by the indignant dons.

Yet I hold that a golfer is bound to be a philosopher of sorts. There was another celebrated question once put at Oxford: “Could a good man be happy on the rack?” To which the reply was “Possibly, if he was a very good man, and if it was a very bad rack.”

This question (and the answer?) may be altered on the links into “Can a good golfer be happy in a bunker?” If he can (and if the bunker be a very bad bunker!) then beyond a doubt he is a

good philosopher. What a true philosopher would say under such trying circumstances I hardly know, but there is a story of Mr. John Ball, junior, who, playing in a championship, bunkered himself, failed to get out in one; tried again, and failed in two; and was heard to murmur as he addressed his ball for the third time, "What a silly old ass it is!"

If that was not true philosophy I never heard of anything half so well deserving of the name. Most assuredly if there be one thing certain about golf it is that you will sometimes find it very hard to keep your temper, more particularly in a bunker; but you had better keep it, in you can, as did he. We all know this well enough; the difficulty lies in the doing of it; while as for laddling out screeds of advice on the subject to you, O weak brother well, who am I to preach? Indeed I have said some things in bunkers myself. Nay, even great professors, not of golf but of philosophy, can say things in a bunker that it would hardly do to print here.

There is a legend in a certain golf club I know of concerning the cause of the abrupt termination of the right of the club to use a piece of land which was private property. The property owner, a citizen of credit and renown, had a worthy dame, who happened one day to be innocently taking the air in the immediate vicinity of the golf course, when her ears were scandalised by words of wrath issuing from a neighbouring bunker. In the bunker a struggle was going on between a distinguished

elderly philosopher and a golf ball, and the winged words that issued from it were such that the lady fled in horror, with the result that the lease of the course was never renewed. I give this legend with the caution that legends are not always founded on fact. It is only fair to add that there is a totally different version of the story current (among the senior club-members) in which the whole blame is transferred from professorial shoulders to those of certain juniors; this, as Herodotus says, I know but may not relate.

It is sound philosophy for the golfer to keep himself in health by proper exercise, but he need not go into such hard training as our boxers and runners. Their violent exertions require the heart and lungs to be fit to work at concert pitch, but the links make no great demand on those organs. All the golfer needs is to have his eye clear, his muscles elastic, and his nerves tight. It can do him no harm, however, and may do him good, if he does a few physical exercises at home; but how is one to select among the many much advertised systems that are in vogue? Dumbbells and Indian clubs, Swedish or Danish stretching and bending movements, gymnastics and elastic cord pullers, they are all good, that is if you can be at the bother of keeping them going. For they are contrary to Voltaire's maxim; they are dull, all of them, dull as ditch-water, beyond a doubt. On this account, if I may venture personally to recommend anything, I would like to put in a word for the punching ball. To begin with, I know no

better form of physical exercise ; and it has a special interest of its own in this way, that the ball hits back at you, which dumbbells and Indian clubs and the like never do ; if you don't dodge it as it rebounds from the ceiling you may get a clip on the nose that will surely waken you up. Moreover there is one way of using it that has some points very much in common with the full shot at golf ; the way is this : strike the ball as hard as ever you can and see how many times you can make it rebound. The actual number of rebounds will depend upon the weight and elasticity of the ball and the length of the string by which it is suspended as well as on the force of your punch, but you will soon find out what number of rebounds constitutes your private bogey, and ambition will make you want to beat it every time you punch. I compare this way of using the punching ball to the full shot at golf because in both you look calmly at the passive ball waiting there for you to strike ; calmly you waggle or measure your distance ; and then finally you let go at it with every ounce of strength you have got ; you follow through ; and afterwards you stand by to watch the effect. Say your particular bogey with the punching ball is ten rebounds ; any sort of punch will give you eight, which is no better than a fizzle ; to get nine you must hit the ball square in the middle and get your body well behind the blow ; but when it bumps the ceiling for the tenth time you know you have got in a screamer. As you have to wait for half a minute to count the rebounds the delay

involved just gives you time to collect your strength for the next shot ; you stop the ball and bring it to rest, and then go at it again. Only when you get your whole force into it and hit the ball perfectly true have you a chance of doing your bogey score of ten. And every time as you gather yourself to strike the hope springs up in you that this time you may surpass yourself, and do an eleven. For these reasons I say that ball-punching has something in common with the golfing drive and may therefore prove worth your attention.

As the parson said in his sermon, one word more and I have done. Do not let your practice be continued long enough to be a bore but do let it be done in close connection with your reading on the subject, or in other words, combine practice and theory. So did the immortal Mr. Squeers expound his method, "c-l-e-a-n, clean, verb active, to make bright, to scour. W-i-n, win, d-e-r, der, winder, a casement. When the boy knows this out of book, he goes and does it."

How did such a horrible beast as Squeers get hold of the true philosophy of education? For such precisely is what that admirable principle of his amounts to.

However, it is time to call a truce to philosophy. I have headed this chapter "the philosophy of golf," though looking back now I can't see that there is much philosophy in it, but that perhaps is no great loss, for we are apt to talk (or write) too much about the hows and whys of most things; in time-honoured phrase it is better to cut the gab

and come to the osses. I remember once taking out a nephew of mine, a hopeful youth, to give him a little instruction in the art of golf, and naturally proceeded to lay down the whole law about body-swing, and finger-grip and keeping the head still, and following through, much as I have done above. The youth listened awhile with attention, and then cut me short with "Why, uncle, all you've got to do is to look at the ball, and hit it!"

I think he hit it that time.