

CHAPTER 10.

Your true golfer is a man who, knowing that life is short and perfection hard to attain, neglects no opportunity of practising his chosen sport, allowing neither wind nor weather nor any external influence to keep him from it. There is a story, with an excellent moral lesson, of a golfer whose wife had determined to leave him for ever. "Will nothing alter your decision?" he says.

"Will nothing induce you to stay? Well, then, while you're packing, I think I'll go out on the lawn and rub up my putting a bit."

George Bevan was of this turn of mind. He might be in love; romance might have sealed him for her own; but that was no reason for blinding himself to the fact that his long game was bound to suffer if he neglected to keep himself up to the mark. His first act on arriving at Belper village had been to ascertain whether there was a links in the neighbourhood; and thither, on the morning after his visit to the castle and the delivery of the two notes, he repaired.

At the hour of the day which he had selected the club-house was empty, and he had just resigned himself to a solitary game, when, with a whirr and a rattle, a grey racing-car drove up, and from it emerged the same long young man whom, a couple of days earlier, he had seen wriggle out from underneath the same machine. It was Reggie Byng's habit also not to allow anything, even love, to interfere with golf; and not even the prospect of hanging about the castle grounds in the hope of catching a glimpse of Alice Faraday

and exchanging timorous words with her had been enough to keep him from the links.

Reggie surveyed George with a friendly eye. He had a dim recollection of having seen him before somewhere at some time or other, and Reggie had the pleasing disposition which caused him to rank anybody whom he had seen somewhere at some time or other as a bosom friend.

"Hullo! Hullo! Hullo!" he observed.

"Good morning," said George.

"Waiting for somebody?"

"No."

"How about it, then? Shall we stagger forth?"

"Delighted."

George found himself speculating upon Reggie. He was unable to place him. That he was a friend of Maud he knew, and guessed that he was also a resident of the castle. He would have liked to question Reggie, to probe him, to collect from him inside information as to the progress of events within the castle walls;

but it is a peculiarity of golf, as of love, that it temporarily changes the natures of its victims; and Reggie, a confirmed babler off the links, became while in action a stern, silent, intent person, his whole being centred on the game. With the exception of a casual remark of a technical nature when he met George on the various tees, and an occasional expletive when things went wrong with his ball, he eschewed conversation. It was not till the end of the round that he became himself again.

"If I'd known you were such hot stuff," he declared generously, as George holed his eighteenth putt from a distance of ten feet, "I'd have got you to give me a stroke or two."

"I was on my game today," said George modestly. "Sometimes I slice as if I were cutting bread and can't putt to hit a haystack."

"Let me know when one of those times comes along, and I'll take you on again. I don't know when I've seen anything fruitier than the way you got out of the bunker at the fifteenth. It reminded me of a match I saw between--" Reggie became technical. At the end of his observations he climbed into the grey car.

"Can I drop you anywhere?"

"Thanks," said George. "If it's not taking you out your way."

"I'm staying at Belper Castle."

"I live quite near there. Perhaps you'd care to come in and have a drink on your way?"

"A ripe scheme," agreed Reggie

Ten minutes in the grey car ate up the distance between the links and George's cottage. Reggie Byng passed these minutes, in the intervals of eluding carts and foiling the apparently suicidal intentions of some stray fowls, in jerky conversation on the subject of his iron-shots, with which he expressed a deep satisfaction.

"Topping little place! Absolutely!" was the verdict he pronounced on the exterior of the cottage as he followed George in. "I've often thought it would be a rather sound scheme to settle down in this sort of shanty and keep chickens and grow a honey coloured beard, and have soup and jelly brought to you by the vicar's wife and so forth. Nothing to worry you then. Do you live all alone here?"

George was busy squirting seltzer into his guest's glass.

"Yes. Mrs. Platt comes in and cooks for me. The farmer's wife next door."

An exclamation from the other caused him to look up. Reggie Byng was staring at him, wide-eyed.

"Great Scott! Mrs. Platt! Then you're the Chappie?"

George found himself unequal to the intellectual pressure of the conversation.

"The Chappie?"

"The Chappie there's all the row about. The mater was telling me only this morning that you lived here."

"Is there a row about me?"

"Is there what!" Reggie's manner became solicitous. "I say, my dear old sportsman, I don't want to be the bearer of bad tidings and what not, if you know what I mean, but didn't you know there was a certain amount of angry passion rising and so forth because of you? At the castle, I mean. I don't want to seem to be discussing your private affairs, and all that sort of thing, but what I mean is... Well, you don't expect you can come charging in the way you have without touching the family on the raw a bit. The daughter of the house falls in love with you; the son of the house languishes in chokey because he has a row with you in Piccadilly; and on top of

all that you come here and camp out at the castle gates! Naturally the family are a bit peeved. Only natural, eh? I mean to say, what?"

George listened to this address in bewilderment. Maud in love with him! It sounded incredible. That he should love her after their one meeting was a different thing altogether. That was perfectly natural and in order. But that he should have had the incredible luck to win her affection. The thing struck him as grotesque and ridiculous.

"In love with me?" he cried. "What on earth do you mean?"

Reggie's bewilderment equalled his own.

"Well, dash it all, old top, it surely isn't news to you? She must have told you. Why, she told me!"

"Told you? Am I going mad?"

"Absolutely! I mean absolutely not! Look here." Reggie hesitated. The subject was delicate. But, once started, it might as well be proceeded with to some conclusion. A fellow couldn't go on talking about his iron-shots after this just as if nothing had happened. This was the time for the laying down of cards, the opening of hearts. "I say, you know," he went on, feeling his way, "you'll

probably think it deuced rummy of me talking like this. Perfect stranger and what not. Don't even know each other's names."

"Mine's Bevan, if that'll be any help."

"Thanks very much, old chap. Great help! Mine's Byng. Reggie Byng. Well, as we're all pals here and the meeting's tiled and so forth, I'll start by saying that the mater is most deucedly set on my marrying Lady Maud. Been pals all our lives, you know. Children together, and all that sort of rot. Now there's nobody I think a more corking sportsman than Maud, if you know what I mean, but--this is where the catch comes in--I'm most frightfully in love with somebody else. Hopeless, and all that sort of thing, but still there it is. And all the while the mater behind me with a bradawl, sicking me on to propose to Maud who wouldn't have me if I were the only fellow on earth. You can't imagine, my dear old chap, what a relief it was to both of us when she told me the other day that she was in love with you, and wouldn't dream of looking at anybody else. I tell you, I went singing about the place."

George felt inclined to imitate his excellent example. A burst of song was the only adequate expression of the mood of heavenly happiness which this young man's revelations had brought upon him. The whole world seemed different. Wings seemed to sprout from Reggie's shapely shoulders. The air was filled with soft music. Even the wallpaper seemed moderately attractive.

He mixed himself a second whisky and soda. It was the next best thing to singing.

"I see," he said. It was difficult to say anything. Reggie was regarding him enviously.

"I wish I knew how the deuce fellows set about making a girl fall in love with them. Other chappies seem to do it, but I can't even start. She seems to sort of gaze through me, don't you know. She kind of looks at me as if I were more to be pitied than censured, but as if she thought I really ought to do something about it. Of course, she's a devilish brainy girl, and I'm a fearful chump. Makes it kind of hopeless, what?"

George, in his new-born happiness, found a pleasure in encouraging a less lucky mortal.

"Not a bit. What you ought to do is to--"

"Yes?" said Reggie eagerly.

George shook his head.

"No, I don't know," he said.

"Nor do I, dash it!" said Reggie.

George pondered.

"It seems to me it's purely a question of luck. Either you're lucky or you're not. Look at me, for instance. What is there about me to make a wonderful girl love me?"

"Nothing! I see what you mean. At least, what I mean to say is--"

"No. You were right the first time. It's all a question of luck. There's nothing anyone can do."

"I hang about a good deal and get in her way," said Reggie. "She's always tripping over me. I thought that might help a bit."

"It might, of course."

"But on the other hand, when we do meet, I can't think of anything to say."

"That's bad."

"Deuced funny thing. I'm not what you'd call a silent sort of chappie by nature. But, when I'm with her--I don't know. It's rum!" He drained his glass and rose. "Well, I suppose I may as well

be staggering. Don't get up. Have another game one of these days, what?"

"Splendid. Any time you like."

"Well, so long."

"Good-bye."

George gave himself up to glowing thoughts. For the first time in his life he seemed to be vividly aware of his own existence. It was as if he were some newly-created thing. Everything around him and everything he did had taken on a strange and novel interest. He seemed to notice the ticking of the clock for the first time. When he raised his glass the action had a curious air of newness. All his senses were oddly alert. He could even--

"How would it be," enquired Reggie, appearing in the doorway like part of a conjuring trick, "if I gave her a flower or two every now and then? Just thought of it as I was starting the car. She's fond of flowers."

"Fine!" said George heartily. He had not heard a word. The alertness of sense which had come to him was accompanied by a strange inability to attend to other people's speech. This would no doubt pass, but meanwhile it made him a poor listener.

"Well, it's worth trying," said Reggie. "I'll give it a whirl.

Toodleoo!"

"Good-bye."

"Pip-pip!"

Reggie withdrew, and presently came the noise of the car starting.

George returned to his thoughts.

Time, as we understand it, ceases to exist for a man in such circumstances. Whether it was a minute later or several hours, George did not know; but presently he was aware of a small boy standing beside him--a golden-haired boy with blue eyes, who wore the uniform of a page. He came out of his trance. This, he recognized, was the boy to whom he had given the note for Maud. He was different from any other intruder. He meant something in George's scheme of things.

"Ullo!" said the youth.

"Hullo, Alphonso!" said George.

"My name's not Alphonso."

"Well, you be very careful or it soon may be."

"Got a note for yer. From Lidy Mord."

"You'll find some cake and ginger-ale in the kitchen," said the grateful George. "Give it a trial."

"Not 'arf!" said the stripling.