THE BEST GOLF STORIES

By Beverly Stark

WITH a large percentage of the literate population of these United States playing golf or playing at golf, at one moment in elation glorifying it as no mere sport but as the occupation of a lifetime, at the next moment in depression reviling it as the most futile and senseless of time wasters, there is always a demand for stories of the links, and the consequent writing of many golf stories. Yet so far, while any number of golf stories mediocre in quality have found their way into print, the really good golf story is a rarity, and what might be termed the best golf stories can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

The simple truth of the matter seems to be that the game, as a game, does not lend itself readily to the purposes of fiction. There is in it nothing quite analogous to the winning touchdown in the last minute of play, that old stock contrivance of a football tale, or to the home run clearing the bases and turning defeat into victory

of a baseball story. There are great moments in golf, but they have not the obvious dramatic appeal. Therefore the effective golf story is usually built not about some particular shot or series of shots, but about the complex reactions of the game upon those who play it.

What are the best golf stories — and why? That is a question which came up recently when a group of golfers — as golfers good, bad, and indifferent but all inoculated with the lasting virus of the game — were sitting round a clubhouse table. There was much argument, but in the end all but one man gave first place to Owen Johnson's "Even Threes". For other places in the lists there was division of opinion, some standing out for certain of the golf stories of the late Charles Van Loan, others for Holworthy Hall's "Dormie One", and others for P. G. Wodehouse's more recent "The Clicking of Cuthbert" and "The Coming of Gowf".

In view of what was practically a consensus of opinion as to the merit of "Even Threes", Mr. Johnson's story may be used as an illustration of the model golf tale. It was purely a narrative of golfers, for golfers, without any attempt to force in a sex interest. Never once did even the suspicion of a petticoat flutter across the scene (the Stockbridge, Massachusetts, golf course as it was many years ago). More than the players themselves in that memorable round crowned by "even threes", the protagonist was the river Housatonic, winding its way through the course, its surface water dancing in the sunshine, the spirit of a whimsically malicious genius mocking at the ambitions of men.

Booverman and Pickings, one the secretary and the other the treasurer of the club, have been playing together for years. The latter is an atrocious golfer, the former a golfer of possibilities who has always been followed by a malignant fate which seems determined that some chance somewhere shall spoil his score. But the day comes when the two start out on the usual round, unaccompanied by caddies, and Booverman achieves his miraculous "even threes", that is, plays the eighteen holes in an average of three strokes apiece. In the telling of the tale Mr. Johnson invents an absolutely new situation for every hole. But when the last putt, propelled by a club held by trembling fingers, zigzags across thirty feet of rough green to drop into the cup for a marvelous total score of 54, the end is not yet.

The wild eyed men dash into the clubhouse to tell their story. There they are greeted as consummate comedians. The more they insist upon the verity of the tale the louder the laughter. Their anger at skepticism is accepted as a triumph of acting. But only for a time. Their persistence begins to irritate. Derision turns to hostile suspicion. Secretly their books are examined by a committee, and the following year finds a new secretary and a new treasurer. But day after day the two men, accompanied by caddies, go round the course in the hope of a repetition of the miracle. Meanwhile the waters of the Housatonic dance mockingly in the sunshine.

The riotous humor of the game is summed up in Charles Van Loan's "Fore!", and also in the "Fore-word" written for that book by Robert H. Davis. A golf course, Mr. Davis defines as "an out-door insane asylum, peopled with madmen suffering from the delusion that they *will* finally master the game. The more violent cases believe that they *have* mastered it. One who takes up the recreation

of golf comes to the greensward with the conviction that a golf ball should act like any other ball and roll in the direction in which it is started. This of course is absolute bunk. A golf ball carries its own opinions as regards movement, accuracy and speed."

Nevertheless, Mr. Davis contends, golf is the game of games:

> It lures and repels; it cajoles and repudiates; courts and kills. It appeals to us all in a greater or less degree; to youth, to middle and old age. There are times that it inspires one with a feeling of infinite power. In the stillness of the night, we tee the ball on Mount Shasta, drive it across the Rocky Mountains, iron it over the plains, lean on it with a brassie and watch it carry the Mississippi; swat it with a long, low wallop through the Southland; loft it into the Cumberlands; jigger it low and straight via the Everglades, with a mashie shot into Florida, laying the ball at last by the side of the Ponce de Leon spring of immortal youth, now the 19th hole of the great American golf course.

For the more conspicuous Van Loan golf stories there is a distinct formula — the formula of the biter bitten. It is when dealing with that idea that Mr. Van Loan is at his best. As illustrations take "The Ooley-Cow" and "The Major D. O. S." The "ooley-cow" is Wesley J. Perkins of Dubuque, Iowa, who derives his nickname from the ease with which he is milked by those two hoary old scoundrels of the links, Uncle Billy and Old Man Sprott. They played him for golf balls, they played him for caddy hire, they played him for drinks and cigars, they played him for luncheon, for everything in fact but the locker rent and the club dues. Once in a while he was allowed to win, for Poindexter and Sprott followed the system practised by other confidence men; but they never forgot to take his winning away from him the next day, charging him at the rate of fifty per cent for twenty four hours. At length, however, the "ooley-cow's" apparently inexhaustible patience broke when he was made the victim of a particularly scurvy trick.

It was then that Perkins introduced as a guest his fellow citizen from Dubuque, the large, loud person who answered to the name of Calvin D. Cottle. Cottle proved to be even worse as a golfer than Perkins. Uncle Billy and Sprott waxed fat at his expense. But the day came when Cottle, apparently in a mood of reckless and offensive boastfulness stimulated by many toddies, inveigled them into a match by the terms of which he should play with one hand only and also tricked them into a prodigious wager on the result. Then, of course, the obvious. The swing, an atrocity when both hands were used, became, with one hand, a thing of perfect timing and power.

The "ooley-cow" explained. Cottle had broken his left arm and had been without the use of it for six years. He had learned to play golf with his right arm. "Decided there was no sense in spoiling a one-armed star to make a dub two-armed golfer. Country full of 'em already. That's the whole story. You picked him for an easy mark, a good thing. You thought he had a bad bet and you had a good one. Don't take the trouble to deny it. Gentlemen, allow me to present the champion one-armed golfer of Iowa and the Middle West!"

The P. G. Wodehouse golf story is, in a nutshell, hyperbole raised to the nth power. Two admirable examples of this in "Golf Without Tears" are "The Clicking of Cuthbert" and "The Coming of Gowf". Cuthbert Banks, negligible everywhere except on a golf course, loves, but sees a successful rival in the rising young novelist. To Cuthbert's rescue comes the great Russian novelist, invited to tea by the

town's literary circle. Cuthbert's rival begins to tell the distinguished visitor of his debt to the Russians and the early influence on his style of Sovietski. "Sovietski no good. I spit me of Sovietski", is the crushing rejoinder. A switch to Nastikoff is equally disastrous. "Nastikoff no good. He worse than Sovietski. I spit me of zem all. Nobody anywhere any good except me. P. G. Wodehouse and Tolstoy not bad —but not good. Nobody any good but me." The great Russian has not been impressed by the celebrities of America that he has met. The President has been a disappointment. What gives him the "pipovitch" is that he has not met the really great men, "your Volterragin and Veener Sirahzen". It is then that Cuthbert clicks. He has often played with Walter Hagen and had been paired with Gene Sarazen at the last Open. "You are a great man," says the Russian, "the way you lay up your approach putts."