

THE ART OF GOLF

By Sir Walter Simpson, Bart.

ANNOTATED BY THE HON. MR. RECORDER WEIR.

PART II.

CHAPTER III.

ADVICE TO BEGINNERS.

(Continued.)

IF he acquire a grip as in Fig. 10, it would be hypercritical to interfere. As I have said, great latitude may be allowed to the right hand in this matter, particularly if it grasp loosely. But should any one be so misguided as to hold disproportionately in the opposite way—that is, with the right hand over and the left under—farewell to all chance of even passable driving.

It is not generally till after the first week that the golfer begins to think about his game—to wish to know how it is done, in order that he may improve. With these inquiries his troubles begin, and let us hope that, with patience and common sense, he will get through them without crippling his style.

He will soon hear on all sides, "Keep your eye on the ball." Of course one must see the thing which is to be struck; but it is a mistake to insist upon it as if it were very difficult. If the beginner glares at the ball too determinedly it will mesmerize him, so that the hammering will be a distraction, and cuts from former tops appear to be fatuous mouths smiling derisively.¹

¹ A large part of the difficulty of keeping the eye on the ball arises from swaying, even ever so slightly, to the right. It also occurs when the left shoulder is allowed to come round too far in the up-swing. The advantage of a three-

Then it comes to be a question with the beginner whether he ought to go in for a full or for a half swing. If

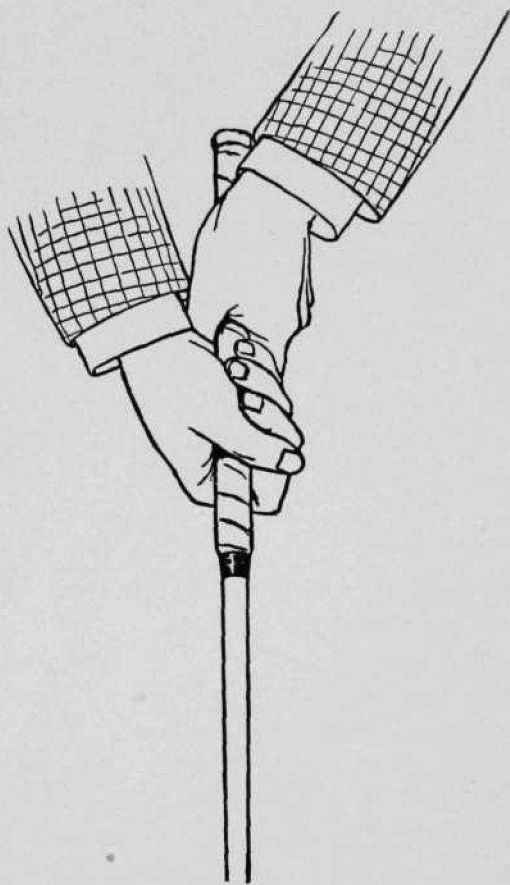


FIG. 10.
UNEQUAL GRIP. RIGHT HAND "UNDER."

he must have an answer—if he must have a name for, and an ideal on which to mould, his blow, let it be a half

quarter swing is that the left shoulder does not need to come round in an extreme way; it is then easier to keep the ball in sight and therefore easier to hit it.

swing. It will be some time before his unpretending thump can be classed at all; but no matter. It ought to be more like a half swing than anything else; it will grow into that, and from that into a full one, unconsciously, as the fetters of awkwardness fall from his limbs; but if he try for a full swing at once, he will not get it,—he will merely acquire the habit (difficult to correct later on) of allowing his club to wander aimlessly about his back and shoulders.

In the laudable endeavor to drive far (and no man should ever accept the position of a weak player), the beginner has to stumble through many errors before mastering the secret of where and how to apply his force. There is one the beginner is certain to fall into. In order to get a good sweep at the ball, instead of causing his trunk to revolve on its own axis, he sways it back over his right leg. One feels as if tremendous force were acquired in this way. So there is, but of the wrong sort—slow, ponderous, clumsy. Even a ball clean hit, and getting the full result of this swaying motion, does not go far. But it seldom is hit, and no more wonder than that it should be missed if struck at whilst the player is walking. Swaying thus is a standing walk, a term which may be objected to, although it ought to be as intelligible as the accepted phrase, a “standing jump.” It is perhaps as well to advise young golfers to have both hands close together; at all events, it is but fair to warn them that every inch which separates them takes ten yards off the length of their shot.

These few hints are ample theoretical equipment for many months. But the beginner will get many more,

to which I advise him to turn a deaf ear. Every old hand will be anxious to persuade him that his own last crotchet is the one thing needful. He will be told that the great point is to keep his hands tight, or not to keep them tight, or one slack, his elbow in, or his elbow out, to let the club follow the ball, or his arms follow the ball, etc., etc. Naturally he thinks these people know. He tries one and all, getting as confused as if he were selecting a new religion. The fact is, there are more bad teachers than good, and if the beginner must have advice, let him consult a really first-class player, who will probably tell him he knows nothing about grips, or elbows, or following, and that all he has to do is to stand firm and smite hard.²

If the beginner is liable to be confused by his friends, his danger is much greater from his caddy. The former only gives advice when it is asked, the latter volunteers it, and insists. There are such things as good professional coaches. On the whole, it is better not to allow your caddy to interfere. Most of them advise a thousand and one things within the hour. They feed babes with strong meat, and expect to, or at least try to, make them full-grown golfers within an hour. Besides things good enough in themselves if they be but digested, two pieces of advice which they mostly insist upon are positive poison. One, already spoken of in the last chapter, is that the player

² But in golf as in Art, no one can excel who does not study the living model. The true swing cannot be adequately described by language or even by camera; but it can be recognized when seen; it should then be imitated.

should rise upon his left toe.³ The swing not yet being so full and free as to tear the heel from the ground, by acting upon this advice the beginner is simply left with a few spare inches of leg which he does not know what to do with. He may double them under him out of the road, but most likely he will use them to sway his body away back over the right leg, his caddy thus actually encouraging him to commit this common and fatal mistake of beginners. The other is, insisting on the right thumb being over, not on, the club. If (which is likely enough, as we have seen) the beginner is holding his club as uprightly as possible, both hands too much under the club, it is absolutely impossible for him to strike at all if he obeys. His grip well over, he may do it; but ought not to unless it is natural—perhaps not even then, as at this early stage it foreshadows an intention of driving with the wrists, and opens the way to these wanderings of the club round the back—these so-called long swings of which I have already said a good deal. Leave the thumb where it is. By degrees, if the player allows himself to acquire his art without prejudice, it will slip into its proper place, getting out of the way to allow a fuller swing. But at first it is needed to guide the stroke, and if not allowed to be used, the beginner will effect his purpose by some other means, perhaps burying his club in his palm so as to work with the end of the second joint instead of which the point of the thumb. This inevitably “turns in the nose” of the

club, and it breaks. His faith in his caddy costs many a beginner much money and many sad rounds in which his set gets reduced to some irons and some headless shafts. It is lucky for his golf if in the end he rebels against the oracle. If he does not, his grip with the right hand is a difficulty ever after. It remains twisted, and to do any work at all the body and legs have to twist too.

For some time the beginner (I am speaking of men, not boys) makes marked and regular progress, until suddenly one day there is a breakdown, which crushes his sanguine hope that his march toward perfection was to be smooth and rapid. It is the first of many which will occur from time to time so long as he is able to hold a club. To avoid them altogether is impossible, but their number may be lessened, their severity checked, by wisdom and care. When the beginner is getting on swimmingly, let him not be carelessly confident, for pride goes before a fall. Nor when his driving is very satisfactory ought he to attempt to note what he is doing, so as to be able to return to it if a relapse occurs. This in itself is the beginning of backsliding. Golf refuses to be preserved like dead meat in tins. It is living, human, and free, ready to fly away at the least sign of an attempt to catch and cage it. It will confute your logic if you, as it were, stand aside and try to produce it by causes. With patient attention to hitting, not relaxed even when we are in the full pride of good play, our relapses will be fewer and less severe; but there is no means by which we can secure uniform progress. In proportion as the wave of advance is great, so will be the back draught. Let not the learner be discouraged by

³ Of course the player should *not* rise upon his left toe. He makes a half-turn upon it. His left shoulder goes down and the left leg accommodates itself by bending at the knee and turning on the toe; the head is not elevated a hairsbreadth.

it, and begin to doubt lest the tide has turned. Golfers often speak of their game. The best the learner has ever played is his game, even supposing it is a third better than what he has relapsed to. It will come again soon, unless, indeed, he begin to ask, "What am I doing wrong?" "How did I stand?" "How did I swing then?"

It is impossible to say how good a player a man may become; but every beginner ought, as much as possible, to play with better golfers than himself. He will unconsciously by that means aim higher. It should be his ambition to beat somebody, and, having done so, to attack a still stronger adversary. Many half-crowns will be lost in the process, but what of that? It is cheaper and pleasanter than to employ a professional coach.

In the early manhood of his golfing-life, the earnest and promising player's mind is apt to be much exercised as to the weight, length, lie, and spring of his club. He will feel sure that a best club for his style is to be found, and to find it will for some time appear a matter of the last importance. After many experiments, he will be in possession of a mass of conflicting evidence, and a box full of clubs more remarkable than useful. From extreme hope and faith he will fall back into a condition of dogmatic unbelief. He will try to use any club—even the rubbish accumulated in his days of faith. Truth lies between these two extremes.

In the matter of lie, a tall player's club ought to be upright, a short man's flat. The reason is that for all sorts and sizes of men about 3 feet 6 inches is the proper length. That a longer club will not drive further, that a shorter one drives as far, is proved to be true. Theoretically, the long club

reaches the ball with greater velocity, but as each inch adds to the difficulty of being accurate, it has to be taken easier. It is not your strong man who can wield a long club; on the contrary, it is your pocket Apollo, whose long driving is due to precision and neatness. An exceptionally short club, on the other hand, can be, and instinctively is, swung with much more force. The objection to their general use is that they break a man down, not so much from the fatigue of over-exertion as from the loss of self-control which results from it.

As for weight, so long as the specific gravity and the absolute weight of the head are both greater than these qualities in the ball, the carry will not be affected. Within these limits the lightest club will drive the longest ball, because it can be swung more swiftly than a heavy one (with what lightning accuracy one sweeps off daisy heads with a walking-stick). The danger with a very light club is that muscles having so little strain are apt to grow frisky and wanton. Theoretically, therefore, a heavy club ought to steady a wild, pressing player. It does not do so. It ought to act as a bit in his mouth. He takes it in his teeth. Practically, the golfer with an ambition for lead handicaps himself terribly. He cannot play easily in proportion to the weight of his weapon, for part of his ambition is sure to be to drive a long ball. This he will do occasionally; but he must hit perfectly clean, or else make an egregious fizzle. There is no reserve force in him if he scuffs. His club sticks in the mud, or is twisted out of his hand. To avoid the ground he is apt to top. Sometimes, when he does hit clean, the club runs away with him to the right or left. And

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CHAPTER IV.

OF PECULIARITIES AND FAULTS.

all this on account of a crude, erroneous idea that the heavier the club the farther it will drive. It is a mistaken idea, otherwise the man who could swing a 16-lb. hammer would beat the record. It is evident that even Goliath would have made a very feeble shot with such a club or with his own; but with a Philp he might have outdriven the champion.

The spring of a club has more to do with comfort than with carry. Nobody likes stiff shafts.⁴ Many charges are laid at their door; the only just one is that they jar the hands. Each man will drive, not further, but better, with the club he likes best. A "fozy" handle will do very well if you have a sweeping, scythe-like swing. If your style is jerky, such a shaft, or one with the spring under the rind, will prove itself useless to you at once; the club or the jerking must be abandoned. For all kinds of forcing players (those who let in when they get to the ball), the spring must be confined to the neighborhood of the skeer. If you wish to compel yourself to drive easily, buy a "wabbly" club; it will either teach you or top your ball. It is pleasanter, however, to play without a master. In short, my advice is—use a stiff club, whatever your style, with just enough elasticity to make the ball go off sweetly, and give up all idea that spring here or spring there will make you drive further. If you don't want to abandon this notion, no matter. Your club with an ideal spring may drive further on account of your confidence in it.

There is a general—I might say universal—tendency among golfers to exaggerate the importance of style. From the best to the worst, when off their driving, they begin at once to alter something, assuming that the cause is to be found in a wrong stance, grip, or what not. And yet the experienced know well enough that their driving will never come back so long as they pursue this line of research. Style, in other words, is not nearly of so much importance as accurate hitting. Take a batch of first-class players, and we find that they all drive practically about the same distance, notwithstanding infinite variety in their way of doing so, and even greater differences in physique. It is usual to attribute the powerful driving of small men to the excellence of their style; if this be the cause of it, how does it happen that there are big men twice as strong, and with as easy swings as their little rivals, who as often play the odds after the tee shot as not? A batch of second-class players drives, on an average, some ten yards shorter than those who can give them a shade of odds (I do not include those who are second-class because they are beginners, or incurably careless). The same slight superiority exists in the approaching of first over second-class players; and I am inclined to believe that this is also true in regard to putting, although it is the fashion to credit many bad drivers with skill in this department. Where are those fine putters on the ladies' green? How is it, when there are prizes there for men, it is some golfer known to fame who usually wins? No. Strength and style are

⁴ It is generally accepted that a man with a naturally slow swing is advantaged by a somewhat whippy shaft, while your rapid swinger is better off with a stiffer one.

of minor importance compared with accuracy. I do not mean that the first is of no value at all; but to ordinary physiques of five feet six inches up to girthhood it gives no advantage, except from bunkers and bad lies. Even from these a Hercules is not necessarily the best. Precision is the main thing. When a man's eye is in he may address the ball in a dozen different ways with the same result; when it is out, no shifting of position will mend matters. First-class play is compatible with ugly style.⁵ A third-rate biceps may drive a long ball; but a second-class combination of hand and eye will prevent a man being both far and sure. To be a steady player, a man who finds he cannot hit a screamer every time must either play more easily or more coarsely, the latter preferable. Men learn their position instinctively. Watch an eminent golfer in the prime of youth, a prudent liver, or not old enough to be affected by imprudence, driving against, perhaps, a stronger man, who either never did aim exactly, or whose more delicate machinery is a little shaken by the wear and tear of life. How coarse and sclaffy the latter's shots are by comparison! One drives like a new hansom, the other rattles like an ill-built or old four-wheeler.

As we are accustomed to see dissimilar swings producing about the same result, so, on the other hand, cases of the exact converse are not uncommon—cases of two men with apparently the same style, one a powerful driver, the other incapable of

sending the ball a hundred yards. Here comes a player who gets his hands under the club, swings it over his head, stands with the ball close to him, and yet sends it flying. Behind is another, his exact counterpart, except in the matter of results. Why is this? Why is the one a good player, the other not? If we take up a club of the first man, it is found to be very upright. Why he adopted this lie, whether by accident or on purpose, matters not. There it is, and he plays well, because his style is a natural product of a single-minded concentration on hitting clean. The duffer got his swing in another way, namely, by mimicry. The copy is fairly good, but not quite exact. The hands are Esau's, but not the club, which, being flat, compels him to add some movements not indulged in by his master. He has to bend down to adjust its head behind the ball, to rise during the swing, and subside again at hitting-time. Not that this omission in the copy of externals matters much. His play would be no better with his ideal's club, because they differ utterly in their thoughts. The one thinks of hitting, the other about his manner of threatening to do so. Here is another good driver coming up to the hole where we critics are standing—another with an ugly style, as anything with peculiarities is called. He stands with his feet far apart—stands "open"—and swings round his biceps, not his neck. Why is he driving well, and his partner and reflection so badly? Again a flaw in the copy gives a

⁵ Criticism of style, as in the case of our author, confines itself chiefly to the first part of the swing. Here there is undoubtedly infinite variety. But in the finish or follow-through there is great similarity and I doubt whether any first-class player ever exhibits an "ugly style" as he finishes the stroke. The follow-

through is the test or proof of a stroke and cannot be ugly or lacking in recognized style if well done. There are only two styles after all, viz:—the more or less vertical and the more or less horizontal. The follow-through is modified by one on the other, but otherwise is the same in every good stroke.

hint as to the origin of the leader's peculiarities. He has his hands very much under the club and at the same time exceptionally near the ground, whilst the other is evidently proud of his "proper" grip. The intelligent onlooker (if I may be allowed so to speak of myself) retires a little off the course to drive imaginary balls, to discover that, given this particular grip, the rest follows as a natural consequence, and to speculate that probably the leader accidentally took this grip when he began to play, and thought no more about it.

The most natural manner in which to address a ball is, of course, to stand with legs straight and firm, and with no more stoop of the body than is absolutely necessary to enable the player to see it with straight eye. But golfers, good ones, in the laudable endeavor to stand well away from the ball, acquire in great numbers the habit of stooping forward more than is necessary. These instinctively apply a corrective. For instance, some bend their knees. There are extremists who even stoop so far forward, and have cancelled the effect of doing so to such an extent by bending their knees, that they would fit a chair if placed behind them when driving. Some of the stupid imitators of these think the secret lies in the stooping, some in the knee-bending, with bad golf as a result in either case. Other good players, who stoop over their work, keep their bodies steady and their grip of the ground firm by placing the left foot nearer the line of fire than the right. They stand as in Fig. 3 exaggerated. Some of the stability given in the line of fire by keeping the feet apart is thus used to prevent falling in. One of the best—if not the best—players in the world at the pres-

ent moment, in this way cancels the bad effects of his stooping forward to his work, and, as might be expected at the sacrifice of a little of the straightness which a "square" stand gives. At this moment his miserable imitators swarm on every golf green in the Lothians.⁶ They all copy his peculiar stance, some have grasped some other point; not one has improved his game. They have a little of Pygmalion's art; not one of them can animate their work. The ass of fable dressed like a lion they address like one. When the beast brayed he was betrayed; so it is when they swing.

Some day we may have a great player who has fallen into the habit of cancelling his stoop by placing his right foot near the ball, his left back (why not?), and then there will be a revolution among the mimics.

The example of mimicry I have taken are of imitators of eccentric styles. Those who make copies of the orthodox swing are not so common, although there are pretty players who miss as often as not. Most who try it make an unrecognizable caricature which is not to be wondered at, as caricature of persons with no salient feature is very difficult. Some again, who try to learn golf on imitative principles, have merely an imaginary ideal. In their case one can only infer from their exceeding bad play that they aim at a style instead of at a ball. Under this head come those who secretly determined to jerk instead of sweep the ball away, either through ignorance or stubbornness, or both. The ignorant flounder on, misdirecting their

⁶ This flattering reference is, we believe, to Mr. J. E. Laidlay, British Amateur Champion 1889 and 1891, also runner-up, 1888 and 1890. The nice question as to who is "the best player in the world" is never answered. One never knows.

energy because they never have tried to strike in the right way; the stubborn, because they often jerk a long ball, and prefer the sensation to the gentler joy of feeling it slip away almost by itself, which a proper shot gives. The latter are hopeless. Golf is not a game for men who find more pleasure in brute force than in the exercise of skill.

It is usual to attribute peculiarities, whether of good or bad players, to their only having taken to the game late in life; but this neither explains them, nor is it quite in accordance with the facts. It is true that there are more artlessly artful players amongst those who have been on the green more or less since they could handle a leadless club 2 feet long, but it is quite a mistake to suppose that a man who takes his first lesson after his beard has grown, or even when the hair has all flittered from the top of his head to his chin, is too old or too set or too something ever to swing easily. Why it is more exceptional for him than for the other to do so, is due to another cause. The boy begins differently from the man. He lets fly, indifferent as to a hit or a miss; or, rather, he means a clean, swishing, smashing blow. All others, from a glober to a fair shot, are merely misses, to which he pays no attention. They do not put him out; he expects them, and does not count the proportion of them to good shots. The bad ones do not matter, for his pleasure is to drive balls, not to play holes. Hence his style is quite free. A man has not patience for this. Just as the boy finds a round monotonous, so the man aims at striking steadily, leaving the rest to develop later.

It thus appears that the chances in favor of the former having a free style

when he grows up almost amounts to a certainty, and yet, except that he has acquired a certain amount of skill, the boy beginner, as soon as he is old enough in mind to settle of his own accord to match-playing (I do not include those little boys who are forced into double harness with their fathers) is in the same position as a grown-up beginner. The man playing his first shot, and the golfer of (say) twenty-one, are equally ignorant of how much or how little it is safe to play consciously. The former thinks of what he is doing from the first, the latter begins to do so about this time of life. Either may go astray, or either they discover the golden mean before becoming set in the tricks they have excogitated. If this were not so, there would be fewer of those boy players, who are expected to do wonders in two or three years, who at eighteen can beat any one, and who at one-and-twenty disappear, either forever, or to come to the front after an interval, with or without peculiarities, according as they use or abuse their new-born consciousness. A perfectly unconscious style in a grown man is very rare. It will oftenest be found among professionals whose education does not tempt them to think. There is one illustrious and venerable champion of whom it is proverbial that not even a whole round of bad shots can tempt him to consider his position. "I've missed the ba'," is all he says. To hit it again, is all he tries. It is wonderful how soon he succeeds, too—much sooner than if he were to begin asking why.

When a man first attempts to play, he is stiff and awkward indeed, but he has no mannerisms. They begin to show after his first breakdown, and after each succeeding one a mark is

apt to be left on his game. When that is full-grown and set, the cicatrices of old wounds remain as excrescences, which, unless inconvenient, are better not excised. There is a risk of hurting the constitution of our golf if the operation is attempted. But as when an ankle has once been sprained, it is inclined to give way occasionally, so people with "wonderful" styles are apt to crack unexpectedly, and when out of practice they take a long time to come into their game. Some people are lucky enough to have developed their abnormalities on non-vital spots. Though ugly, the ball yields as readily to their style as to something more elegant. You strike your shoulder, your thumb or thumbs are down the shaft, you bend your knee, shuffle with your feet, get your hands so far under the club that a full swing is impossible, etc., etc. These things will give no trouble. But if by playing for a pull, by gripping the club in a way that, although become natural, was acquired at a time when there was a wrong conception of how to make a ball fly, etc., you are wild and uncertain, there is nothing for it but to begin again. It is of no use to attempt patching; other faults have grown up alongside of the original one. They were necessary to put life into it at all. Say, for instance, you have a nipping style. You realize that, in consequence, your driving is short. It is useless to force yourself to follow the ball; you will only top. Stance, grip, and attitude have adapted themselves to the conditions originally imposed. There is nothing for it but contentment or a fresh start. For the latter, experience gives you an advantage over the real beginner. You know the true theory, viz., to stand opposite the ball and sweep it away by describing

a true radius, on which it is a point. At first you will flounder, miss, and be uncertain; but a new and better game will grow to its full strength at last.

If we consider the plausible and insidious means by which these tricks insinuate themselves into golfer's affections, it is not so much to be wondered at that he is conquered. By their aid he finds himself suddenly steady, able to beat adversaries previously dreaded, and to win handicap electroplate with strokes to spare. At first they do not even shorten driving, the diseases taking some time to get into the system and cripple the other members. By the time they have done so, it is too late to get rid of them. The player works through stages of foozling, and, after as long a period as it would have taken to be a pretty golfer, he comes out a robust cripple, ungainly, although perhaps strong. This is the prognosis in the most favorable cases, but some would-be golfers are restless in the use of remedies. They employ device after device, add fault to fault. No sooner is their driving weakened by assimilating one, than another, and yet another, infallible "steadier" presents itself, and is accepted, till at last there is not a chance of their cleanest-hit ball going more than fifty yards. Steady, indeed! They top and puff just as often, if not oftener, than those who have acquired their game with less prejudice. They are steady only because it does not matter to their partners whether they hit or miss, and straight, because wildness is not appreciable in very short distances. Any morning we can see men out aiming at a style instead of at a ball. A trial swing now and then, especially before starting, may do no harm. There are even good players who indulge a good deal in the amusement. Them one

can distinguish from the deluded creatures who are teaching themselves styles by the free thoughtless way in which they let out. The others—earnest, careful, apparently concentrated on the blade of grass in front of them—do not hear “Fore—stop that—hurry up,” shouted behind them; for their mind is busy committing to memory their last patent gyration. If the fools would but reflect on a certain passage of Scripture they might learn that neither leopard nor golf spotting can be managed by taking thought, and that thought will not add cubits either to their stature or to their driving. From the latter it will take some off.

These remarks do not apply to the petty variations in their style which

many, or most, golfers are conscious of from day to day. Little vagaries are not part of us. Our knowing of them proves them external. If not made a serious point of, they do no harm. One of them will amuse for a round or so, and being the only thing which, for the moment, divides our attention with the essential of aiming, it may even improve our driving, and then be forgotten, modified, or smoothed out. The points under discussion are so superficial, or even imaginary, that no one notices them but ourselves. They are quite another thing from playing in the Morris, or the Fergusson, or the Fernie manner, which is amusing as tomfoolery, but, taken seriously, bob as he will, can never make a man a golfer.

(To be continued.)

