

VIRGINIA WOOLF GOES GOLFING

By David J. Mills

Mrs. Virginia Woolf announced, as the event in question was now settled and all had agreed on a date to meet on the links, that she would bring her new golf clubs.

Margaret Richards, that elderly well-preserved figure of a waif with the unlikely disposition of a schoolgirl threw back her head of purple hair. Purple hair! What on earth was the poor dear thinking? Purple hair at her age. And in her profession. She worked in Accounts, of course, that staid occupation of numbers and figures. She was not, after all, a movie star where such frivolity and flamboyancy would not only be endured and accepted but likely encouraged and flaunted in the extreme.

It was with utter dismay that Margaret threw back her head, for she did not want to go golfing with Virginia. She did not care for Virginia. Not a straw. She found the woman rather pompous, erudite and not the least bit entertaining. Often, when she spoke, Margaret would find herself drifting away, thinking of something else entirely, unable to concentrate as the poor woman – famed writer that she was! – droned on about some inane subject of interest to no one but herself.

Nevertheless, there it was. It had already been decided. It was a fait accompli. A thing not to be undone. For George had invited her and there was little she could do.

George, her husband and companion these many years, professed a profound admiration and respect for Virginia and all her ostentatious and pretentious work although Margaret suspected that the bulk of his intelligence on the subject came not from consuming the various literary pieces themselves but from perusing such professional evaluations as Cliff's Notes.

Their fourth, for this sporty July outing, was Christopher Manley, an associate of Margaret's husband, a balding, rather lumpish figure of a man, forever coughing and wheezing whatever the physical requirement of the activity in which he was engaged. Another fervent and devoted aficionado of the verbose and incoherent Virginia.

The day came bright and sunny – a fine summer's day. George led off the foursome by executing a masterful stroke to the delight and vocal approval of the other three.

The tiny, pale, dimpled sphere shot into the cloudless azure sky like a firework, like a rocket destined for the stars, climbing ever higher and higher, slicing the air with its kinetic thrust until finally after what seemed an eternity but was in truth a mere five or six seconds slowed as it peaked in the heavens, reaching the height of its arc, hanging momentarily amid the sparse cumulous like a child's kite, a mere speck in the sky, only to plummet to earth like a meteorite crashing through the atmosphere, falling, landing swiftly, abruptly with a barely audible plop some two hundred and twenty yards distant.

Christopher followed, addressed the ball in the appropriate fashion and proceeded to slice the small round projectile into the infestation of wild vegetation to the right of the fairway. He let out a course expletive to the indecorous mirth of Margaret, but Virginia was not so amused.

“Chris,” George said with a sober glance in Virginia’s direction. “There are ladies present.”

Christopher, wheezing from the strenuous effort of swinging the driver, beheld the two women sheepishly as he returned his club to its proper home.

“Oh, shit. Sorry.”

Proceeding to the women’s tee, Virginia utilized her rather unconventional and unorthodox delivery to propel her object safely down the fairway a goodly distance.

“Nice shot!” the men positively gushed, adding kudos of style, venerating her swing and the ensuing follow-through.

Margaret executed a comparable shot, much resembling the outcome of her partner but no similar verbal platitudes were forthcoming as the men had left to retrieve the errant ball amid the deciduous splendour and Virginia had been distracted, musing over a single robust dandelion that had somehow materialized and survived in the centre of an otherwise pristine field of cut grass.

Once on the green, the closer balls checked and marked, putters retrieved, the simple amiable afternoon banter abated in anticipation of the first putt. Christopher removed the pin, examined the minute slope of the smooth terrain, aligned his shot, then proceeded to propel his ball towards the targeted cavity. Closer and closer it rolled, then seeming to gather momentum rather than eventually slow from the natural effect of resistance, it continued with ceaseless energy free of any encumbering obstacles, racing across the plain field past the hole in question until it finally settled, deflated and spent amid the thicker tufts of grass on the apron surrounding the green.

Another expletive ensued.

“Oh!” cried Virginia, embarrassed for the poor man. “The disgrace! The ignominy! The opprobrium!”

To actually putt a ball off the green! What a circumstance to experience! What a thing to behold. What would Leonard say if he had seen such an event! She thought of her husband inexplicably and frequently at such moments. Why she could not say except that, perhaps, at times such as these, she missed his society, his companionship, his ease, his humour.

George, standing behind Virginia and the others observing the concluding strokes of the first hole with a stolid resignation, silently and discreetly reached into his back pocket, quickly and surreptitiously consulted a compact paperback thesaurus which he always carried on his person, then just as quietly and inconspicuously returned it to its concealed home.

“Yes!” he exclaimed. “The opprobrium! Really, Christopher.”

The foursome completed their remaining strokes with Christopher announcing to George, the appointed scorekeeper for the afternoon, that he had to admit to having taken an eight.

Eight?! Virginia thought. One could not possibly have gotten eight. Not on such a simple, artless opening hole as this. Perhaps there had been some error, some miscalculation. Perhaps Christopher had mistakenly added one or two strokes in compiling his inflated score. Perhaps the heat of the midday sun had already begun to have an adverse effect on the poor man who, possibly in haste or in carelessness had neglected to wear upon his balding head a sun hat of some sort. She retraced in her mind Christopher's various attempts out of the tangled vegetation and along the fairway, recalling the frustration of several efforts, as she herself bent and retrieved her ball from the cup with the satisfaction and self-assurance of having completed the hole in a regulation four, concluding that, yes indeed, Christopher had taken the unlikely and embarrassing total of eight.

Eight. It was the number eight that made Virginia think of evenings – dining at 8:00 as often as she did, the hour at which society dined, society and garrulous modern writers. Feasting on escargot, lobster bisque and exquisite dishes of filet mignon or braised lamb on a succulent bed of wild rice. Tea and coffee to succeed the decadent repast, as family and guests alike adjourned to the sitting room only to be then offered another treat – a large silver platter of mints. After Eights, naturally.

Continuing along the course, quite suddenly, out of the blue, with not a whit of connection to any previous pronouncements or prevarications, George asked Virginia how, exactly, Orlando had changed, altered, transmogrified from a man into a woman. The obscure and unanticipated reference to Mrs. Woolf's unusual and controversial fictional thesis on sexuality came like a shot in the dark, a lightning bolt, a heart attack. As unexpected, disruptive and disconcerting as it was. No one anticipated it. One felt it was not the right time, not the right place. One did not ask such things here. Now. Still, it had been asked and the inquiry could not be unasked. Could not be ignored. Must be faced and addressed. But what, one wondered, would Virginia's reaction be? How would she respond? Naturally, she was caught off guard and ill prepared for such a question. She would have assumed that such questions were not asked here and therefore would not, by nature, have an appropriate response at her disposal.

All turned to Virginia who, quite abruptly, burst out laughing. Once, many years ago when she was quite a young girl, naïve and inexperienced in many of the social conventions that older and more veteran persons often take for granted, she had asked an intimate friend and colleague how one responds to personal and invasive interrogations that one does not wish to answer. This friend, Cecilia Townshend, who she had not seen now for close to twenty years, had advised such an outburst of disarming laughter and Virginia had, time and again, found the response more than adequate.

The subject was not pursued further as Virginia's laughter became infectious, first spreading to Christopher, then to the inquisitive George.

Margaret however, gazed from one to the other then asked innocently, "Who's Orlando?"

There was a brief, ever so momentary pause in which the remaining three were mute, founded dumb, perhaps from the astonishment, the sudden awareness and realization that she – Margaret – a dear friend of Virginia’s – could have been so unaware, so oblivious and ignorant of the renowned novel (and movie) of which George had spoken. Then all three exploded into renewed peals of laughter, Virginia possibly enjoying the mirth to a greater extent than her compatriots.

Had she had an axe handy, a poker, or any weapon that would have gashed a hole in the writer’s breast, there and then, Margaret would have seized it. Such were the extremes of emotion Virginia excited in her. It was not the pleasure of upstaging Margaret or the thought of casting ridicule upon her that prompted this response but more some secret conceit at her own accuracy of judgement. Margaret, of course, recognized her own inadequacy in the minefield of critically acclaimed works of literary merit but resented the judgement nonetheless.

Not long afterward, Margaret found herself in quite a delightful state of affairs. The two men having driven from the next tee, Margaret and Virginia had proceeded to those posts designated for the ladies. Christopher had, once again, sliced his ball and had gone off in search of the errant orb. George, having had several bottles of water in an effort to ensure that the summer heat did not leave him dehydrated, had apparently consumed more than what was adequate for his intended purpose as he now found himself in need of finding a discreet and private place in which to relieve himself.

The two ladies were quite alone, no other golfers being ahead or behind them. It was at that moment, under the pleasant blue skies of the pastoral setting, that Margaret was struck with a thought. A sinister, wicked thought to be sure, but one she could not momentarily displace, despite all efforts of her conscience. What if, she thought, she were to take a practise swing (or two) and inadvertently be so close to Virginia as to accidentally strike her with the club? After all, accidents happen all the time on golf courses. She had often read of them or heard such stories. Someone struck by a ball when the offender had not realized the subject was within range. Another hit by a club that had unsuspectingly slipped from the grasp of another as he followed through on his rather unusually aggressive stroke. Yet another had not seen the player ahead until – too late – after he had executed his shot.

Yes, it appeared that this could indeed be the perfect moment. The time for another, shocking mishap. As Virginia approached the tee, Margaret took out her driver and tapped the end of it with her knuckles, verifying its solidity, then stepped softly and quietly toward the writer.

“Found it!” cried out Christopher, from their far left. He had emerged suddenly, triumphant, from between a smattering of mature oaks to offer his pronouncement and to witness Virginia’s drive.

Margaret forced a terse smile as her partner executed yet another flawless stroke sending her objective directly toward the distant green.

Virginia parred the next two, amid verbose and rambling expostulations on the slope of the greens, the intensity of the sun and its particular place in the solar system, and the nature and role of sport in modern society. Christopher and George feigned a comprehensible fascination while Margaret

pursed her lips. A new fervour of distaste enveloped her like a thick fog, a pervasive mist consuming all it meets. Such was the level of disgust and displeasure felt by Margaret in that particular instant.

The two men followed the arcane Virginia down the fairway laughing incongruously and excessively at the feeblest attempts of witticism expostulated by the legendary writer. Margaret detested the woman with a heightened intensity. She wondered, in passing, if it were possible for her to strangle the writer then position Virginia's own hands around her neck in such a way as to simulate the act of suicide.

Just then Margaret observed, they were approaching a pond over which they must shoot. A narrow bridge spanned the centre of the aquatic hazard. Wouldn't it be pleasant, agreeable, even beneficial if Virginia were to fall while traversing the bridge, she wondered. If the edge of the pathway were wet and slippery, if the weak wooden railing were to give way, if the water at that point was sufficiently deep, if Virginia could not swim. But no, one could not contemplate such things! It was not done. Still, as they neared the spot, Margaret could not shut the image of the possibility out of her jealous and disturbed mind.

As Virginia strolled across the bridge, she stopped midway to peer over the side, captivated as she was by the sound of several ducks directly below her. Margaret adopted a delightfully malicious smile. She could not believe her luck. Christopher and George had gone on ahead, having already negotiated the formidable obstacle. Again, she was quite alone with Virginia. Should the writer have an unfortunate accident here, there would be no witnesses.

Margaret casually approached her target and slowed, with the pretense of sharing the natural bucolic splendour of the ducks at play. Swiftly then, in one single decisive aggressive movement, she seized Virginia, crying "Watch out! You'll fall!" while at the same time propelling her victim against the flimsy wooden network constituting the weak railing.

Virginia panicked and flailed about, losing her balance, clutching at Margaret's sleeve and twisting away from the railing. The sudden and unexpected motions of the writer caught Margaret off guard and, resultantly, she lost her footing, fell against the wooden slats. Virginia let go of her intended saviour and satisfactorily stepped away from the edge of the bridge, then turned to see – the horror! – her companion plummeting to the surface of the water below.

The pond itself was quite a shallow affair – a mere three or four feet deep at its centre – and at the spot where Margaret had plunged, there was hardly more than a single foot of water. However, under the serene, placid and pastoral home of the aquatic birds were several large, jagged rocks. It was, regrettably, upon these that Margaret landed.

As Virginia screamed in distress, her two companions hurried back to find that Margaret, lying askew in the pond, dishevelled, injured and bleeding, had broken her leg.

Margaret was promptly and efficiently taken to the nearest hospital where, it was confirmed, she would need to stay for some time. Virginia visited her as soon as she was able.

“I feel positively dreadful, my dear,” she moaned. “There you were trying your best to save me from a dangerous and debilitating fall only to succumb yourself. Why, it is the most unjust circumstance I have ever encountered.”

“Very unjust,” Margaret agreed.

“Still, what can one do?” Virginia continued. “Here you are. One must do what one can for others, as the opportunity arises. I shall visit often to help pass the time.”

“It’s not really necessary,” argued Margaret.

“Oh, but I insist. It is the least I can do. I perceived, during our otherwise joyous outing, that you were quite unfamiliar with my work. I have, therefore, taken it upon myself to both acquaint you with my novels and to help you fill the long and lonely days of your lengthy convalescence. I shall visit every day and read to you hour after hour.”

“No!” Margaret cried out in agony, a sound Virginia attributed to the patient’s attempt to move her twisted and mutilated limb.

Virginia reached into her bag and pulled out a copious volume of her collected works.

“I shall begin with ‘Mrs. Dalloway’.”

A Golf Shot (Described by Different Authors)

R.L. James (50 Shades of Gray):

He struck the ball hard with a lusty pleasure, making the ladies gasp, which brought a smile to his face. He enjoyed the psychological game of power he wielded on the golf course. The concentration, the intensity, the delivery, and the thrust. It was here he felt at home, dominating others at the sport, revelling in watching them as they squirmed with discomfort while at the same time experienced the reluctant pleasure of seeing his balls consistently go the distance.

George R.R. Martin (Game of Thrones):

The ball shot up like the cock of a lusty young squire upon his seeing his first maiden bare skinned. Up and up it rose until, hewn from its upward path as if sliced by a sword of Valerian steel, it just as abruptly fell, landing flat and lifeless in the field below.

Ernest Hemingway

He hit the ball hard. It went up in the air. It went high in the air and far. He watched it rise and fall. Then it landed. It was a good shot. He was happy.