

The Opera Singer

WITHOUT SO MUCH as a glance behind us, despite the excitement we had experienced only a few moments earlier, Tail Gunner and I marched briskly down the steep slope at the back of the 11th green at Doonbeg Golf Club in westernmost Ireland. As we made our way around the corner of the shaggy dune on top of which the 12th tee (466 yards, par 4) is perched, we were startled to overhear Papageno's opening aria from Mozart's *The Magic Flute* being sung in beautiful German.

'What in heaven's name is that?' exclaimed my companion, James (aka Tail Gunner) Carew. (The Tail Gunner reference relates to James's normal position of being 'last man' on Limerick Golf Club teams. His unflappability and ability to raise his game in a crisis was frequently called upon and never found wanting, as five All-Ireland winning medals attest.)

Within moments, we discovered that the voice belonged to a handsome, stocky gentleman of about thirty years of age, wearing a fetching straw hat. Neatly dressed in dated but impeccable golfing attire, the singer had a deep tan, dark brown hair and a winning smile. He wore stone-grey plus-fours that emphasized his powerful, tree-trunk thighs; sky-blue knee-socks; a long-sleeved, dazzlingly white silk shirt with a saffron Augusta National Golf Club tie; USGA-engraved gold cufflinks and matching tie-pin; a cotton sports jacket that matched the colour of the socks perfectly; and brown-and-white golf shoes that sparkled in the early evening

sunlight. Elegantly brandishing a lighted cigarette in an ebony holder in his right hand (presumably to conduct an imaginary orchestra), he had a highly polished, hickory-shafted blunderbuss of a wooden-headed driver tucked neatly under his left arm. Charisma and self-assurance exuded from his every pore.

'Sure is nice to meet y'all. My name is Robert Tyre Jones Junior. May I tag along with you fellows for a few holes of gentle flog?'

Even though the smile was friendly and sincere, I was dumbfounded. Tongue-tied, I looked at my companion, hoping that he would possess the composure to respond. After all, Tail Gunner was a ghost too. He had joined me earlier in my round, at the 7th hole, to fulfil a long-established promise we had made to inform each other about the quality of golf in the after-life. He should have been accustomed to meeting famous deceased golfers.

For almost forty years, ever since we were kids in school together, the late James 'Tail Gunner' Carew was my friend, soul mate and most frequent golf companion. As young lads we played rugby, soccer, tennis and hockey together. In our mid-teens, our respective fathers, both long-serving members and captains of Limerick Golf Club, introduced us to the fascinations of golf. From that moment onwards we spent the lion's share of our recreation time travelling around Ireland, Britain and Europe playing in golf tournaments of varying importance.

We were planning to continue our golfing odysseys together as senior golfers when, out of the blue, at the age of only fifty-one, Tail Gunner discovered he had a genetic heart problem that required surgery. To the distress of everybody who knew him, James did not make it through – he passed away unexpectedly on the operating table, illustrating the stark reality of how fragile the grip on life can be even for the strongest and fittest amongst us.

On our various travels Tail Gunner and I often joked that if there was no golf in heaven neither of us would be all that interested in going there. A few weeks after he had passed on, Tail Gunner did, I am convinced, honour our pact of sending back a message to confirm the quality, or otherwise, of golf in the after-

life when he appeared in one of my dreams and reassured me that, 'Nothing to worry about! Golf in heaven is exactly the same as it is on Earth: paradoxical, unpredictable and endlessly fascinating. You will love it!'

Then the ghost had disappeared without giving me an appointment for my first tee-time. I never again heard from Tail Gunner until the unforgettable day that I am about to describe.

'Delighted to meet you, Mr Jones. As you are a newcomer to this part of the world, we will gladly concede the honour. Please play away,' he said, with the minimum of fuss, before turning to me and whispering, 'I knew that this was on the cards. I heard Jones was doing a tour of the great Irish courses and felt sure that if I hung around here at Doonbeg the opportunity to meet him would present itself sooner or later. You hardly believe that I came all the way from eternity just to golf with you?'

'Say y'all, if you don't mind, please call me Bob, not Bobby, and pardon me for saying so but your narrow Irish roads would scare the hell out of a body, if it were mortal that is, but I sure enjoyed the experience of travelling by automobile in real time along that scenic coast road between Lahinch and Doonbeg. Earlier today I had the pleasure of playing a game with John Burke. What a stylish exponent! As for that Lahinch layout, it is one of the best tracks I ever set foot on. If a fellow can beat old man par there he can darn well do it anywhere,' drawled Jones. He treated us as if we were long-lost buddies of his, while at the same time he blew enormous clouds of disconcerting cigarette smoke in all directions.

Getting over my initial shock, I tentatively joined in the conversation, finding the wit to say, 'That Burke fellow could play all right. He wasn't called the King of Lahinch for nothing. From the late 1920s to the mid-1940s he was virtually unbeatable over his home course. I'm not sure if you realize that you two narrowly missed opposing each other in the Walker Cup? When John played at Brookline in 1932 it was one series too late, because you had quit in 1930. John should have been selected in 1928,

but the selectors were a biased group who did not think an Irish Republican should be eligible to play for Great Britain and they overlooked his outstanding credentials. By 1932, the political climate had changed sufficiently to allow Burke to be included. During his long career, Burke won the Irish National Amateur eight times and the South of Ireland Amateur Championship eleven times.'

'Yes sir! Burke told me all about Brookline, giving me one of those dreaded blow-by-blows of his singles match with Jack Westland. Darn it, the match went the full thirty-six holes before ending up all square.' Jones chuckled heartily.

'To tell you the truth,' he went on, a little sadly now, 'I was more interested in finding out about John's parallel life experience to mine: ending up in a wheelchair while still a relatively young man. Like me, he was prevented from being able to play social golf with his buddies into venerable old age, which I am sure he would have enjoyed.'

'Why do you continue to play golf in the after-life, Bob?' asked Tail Gunner. 'Do you still find the challenges of the game fascinating?'

Jones seemed to have a well-prepared answer to that potentially complex question.

'To the uninitiated, golf appears to be a dignified, mannerly game played with decorum and not too much fire in the belly. How wrong they are! Golf is an athletic pursuit of considerable passion. It's a game that burns inwardly, searing the soul. It can be quite explosive, as I demonstrated far too often by losing my temper when least expected. Long after I had ceased to play the game seriously, I remained utterly devoted to it and entranced by it.'

Bob Jones may or may not have realized it, but by answering that question in such a thought-provoking way he had invited big trouble. A touch more aggressively than intended, I blurted out something that had been sitting uneasily on my mind since I had first heard it.

‘If you were that entranced by the game, why did you retire so young? Ken Venturi told me when I met him at Lahinch last year that Gene Sarazen had always maintained that you quit because you were unable to make a successful transition from hickory to steel shafts.’

‘That little Italian was always talking hogwash, always applying the needle. He used to stick his needles in me at every opportunity when we played. Apparently he has not lost the habit. Sarazen hated to be beaten by me because I was an amateur. He felt it reflected badly on his profession. With that outsize ego of his, Sarazen should have been a screen actor. Wait a minute! As the host of *Shell’s Wonderful World of Golf* for nine years, he was one! That television series gave many people, including me, a lot of pleasure. The way Gene could turn on and off the charm was really something. During his career, he pretended to be friendly and cheerful all the time, but you better believe that he was ruthless when the chance to win a golf tournament arose. Sarazen may have been the toughest competitor I ever came across.’

Far from being irritated by our questions, Bob Jones was really warming up now and in full flow.

‘As for Venturi’s comments about steel shafts, I would like to point out, because it is not widely known, that when I went over to playing steel for the first time in 1932 – to help promote my own signature clubs, which I helped to design for the Spalding Company (the first matched set of clubs ever made, by the way) – I broke seventy in the first seven rounds I played with them. Then when I played in the inaugural Augusta Invitational (Masters) Tournament in 1934 – as a ceremonial golfer in my own tournament rather than as a serious competitor, because when I retired from competition in 1930 I never had any intention of making the necessary effort or sacrifices to try to win again – my play from tee to green with those steel shafts was as good as it ever was at any time during my career. Unfortunately, my touch with Calamity Jane, my beloved putter, deserted me. To be honest, the fire in my belly for competition had gone out

and my nerves were finally shot. I was burned out and could no longer focus on getting the ball into the hole with the intensity that is needed to win. For the first time in my life, I did not care what score I shot. The hunger and drive just weren’t there any more. I had begun to treat golf as a distraction. I was content to be out of the office and playing social golf with my friends. Dipping in and out of competition does not work because the mental side gets flabby if not exercised continually. I had had enough of golf stress, I guess.’ Jones shook his head.

‘Is that why you gave up?’ enquired Tail Gunner softly.

‘No. I gave up championship play because my wife, Mary, to whom I was devoted, told me it was high time to start giving my family responsibilities and legal career my full energy and attention. Disappearing for months on end during the summer was unfair on her bringing up a family of three children. To be honest with you, giving up travelling all around the United States playing for trinkets and glory was no hardship. I was tired of it. Tired of the crowds and the adulation; never felt one bit comfortable with that.

‘At the end of the 1928 season, Mary stepped up her campaign to rein me in. She decreed that the time was coming to put golf to one side. I had been gadding about the country as an amateur golfer for fifteen years. Amateur golf would not pay any of the bills. Soon after I got my head around the undeniable fact that there were more important things in life than winning golf tournaments, I decided that I would quit at the first ideal opportunity.’

‘Why is golf such a difficult game?’ I asked.

‘Too much down-time, too much time to think between shots. It may be why some people say that golf is a good walk spoiled,’ came the instant reply.

‘But that’s the very nature of the game!’ Tail Gunner declared and then, showing his eagerness for education from one of the game’s greatest heroes, he asked, ‘How can you overcome it?’

‘In golf, probably less than one per cent of the time on the course is spent actually hitting the ball. That means you have to

control your mental activity for ninety-nine per cent of the time to remain fully focused. Golf does not allow one to run off one's tensions; everything happens so slowly and the act of striking the ball is over in a flash. That's the supreme mental challenge. It took me for ever to learn how to cope. My mind was constantly wandering off the job. Especially if things were going really well, I could become stupidly careless and lose the train of what I should be doing. I never really mastered this failing. The mental toughness of players like Sarazen, Nelson, Hogan, Nicklaus and, now, Tiger Woods is what separates them.'

'Was mental toughness part of your nature or did you have to practise it to perfect it?' I asked.

'Not part of my nature at all. Mental toughness is an acquired skill; anyone can learn it if they are fully dedicated to the task. Anybody can do it if they want to badly enough.' While that statement may have sounded plausible, personally I was not convinced, but I didn't want to be argumentative; I decided to change the subject and maybe try to broach it again later.

'Did John Burke say anything to you about the changes that have taken place at Lahinch since his era? I can well imagine the reintroduction of all those wild, Mackenzie-like undulations on the greens giving him fits.'

'You've got that right!' Jones exclaimed. 'Burke said he sure would love to put a bulldozer to some of those Mackenzie undulations, which, amazingly, he told me is exactly what he did do back in 1941 when he was Captain of the Club. Above all though, Burke seemed perplexed by the destruction of the former 3rd hole, a par 3, right beside the clubhouse. He told me that it was a tiny, postage-stamp affair that required an extremely precise mashie stroke, especially in a crosswind. He also said that he was surprised that the Klondike sandhill that dominates the 4th hole had not been bombed out of existence. Apparently it has always been a dangerous crossover point, and with so many people playing the game in the litigious twenty-first century, it is more dangerous than ever. As for the quirky, blind par 3 Dell [the 5th],

John said that he never liked that particular hole, but because Old Tom Morris built it in 1894 it was ingrained into the traditions of Lahinch and would be there for ever.

'Burke also told me a cute story about the day he defeated my Irish buddy Joe Carr in the "South Final" of '46. I got to know Joe quite well when he played in the Masters Tournament as British Amateur Champ on a number of occasions. Those who saw that Burke-Carr match claim that it was the greatest head-to-head match of all time. After a titanic battle littered with birdies and eagles, Carr overcame a considerable early deficit to be one up coming down the last hole. The youngster hit an enormous drive down the centre of the 36th fairway, 30 yards or so ahead of his rapidly tiring opponent. With mischief written all over his face, Burke told me that he put one of his infamous decoy routines into play. In advance, he had worked out a scheme with his caddie to help him outsmart opponents. The scam was that if he called out loud twice for any club, in this case his spoon [3-wood], the caddie should not move a muscle but allow his master to dip into the bag and make his own selection. In this case, John pulled the driver instead. Letting fly as hard as he could, he nipped the ball as sweet as a nut straight off the deck. The ball pitched on the back of a friendly mound and scooted forward into the middle of the raised green, 270 yards away. Carr fell for the ruse. He selected a 2-iron, which came up well short of the target. Burke won the hole and went on to defeat Carr at the now "disappeared" third extra hole. A wonderful story!'

Then the operatic singing resumed in a low, rhythmical hum; lazy waggles grew longer and more vigorous. A pronounced forward press followed as those tanned, powerful hands took the club into a long, slow back swing that travelled well past parallel. Jones appeared to be made of rubber as he turned his left shoulder under his chin. There was a sudden and distinct shift of body position as his left heel was stamped firmly on the ground before the club was pulled down in a blur of speed, meeting the cream-coloured Spalding Dot with a loud, distinctive click. The ball

seemed to adhere to the club face momentarily before soaring away, gaining height for nine-tenths of its journey before suddenly losing momentum and dropping straight down to earth behind a low ditch, approximately twenty paces to the right of where I thought the centre of the fairway was.

‘Is that the correct line?’ I asked, slightly alarmed.

‘If you can carry the ball 240 yards or better, that is perfect. It’s a short cut that sets up the best approach to a most unusual green,’ said Jones, a trifle enigmatically.

As I teed up my ball, I noticed my hands were shaking. I tried to calm my nerves by taking a few deep breaths. I shook my arms and stretched out my fingers. My driver felt strange and heavier than normal, and I peered anxiously down at it. I could not believe my eyes when I saw the first brand-new driver that I had ever purchased from my own resources, in 1961, a beautiful pear-shaped, laminated wood, painted bright red with the words ‘Spalding – Robt. T. Jones Jnr.’ printed on it in a flowing white script. In my sweating palms, the long-discarded club felt as if it weighed about 10 kilos. The extra weight seemed to slow down my swing. For once I maintained my posture and spine angle, and I pounded a terrific shot on the same line and trajectory as Jones. My ball barely cleared the ditch – but enough is enough, and it took a few sprightly hops forward before stumbling to a halt 5 yards short of where Jones’s ball had come to rest.

Tail Gunner was never able to fly the ball high or achieve much in the way of hang-time. With his feet (legitimately) outside the designated teeing area, he placed his ball tight to the marker on the left-hand side of the tee box before hitting one of his trademark low skimmers. The ball ran and skipped along the left-hand side of the fairway, close to an out-of-bounds fence, before eventually stopping a long way behind Jones and me. For his second effort, Tail Gunner played another daisy-cutter, this time with his 4-wood. The ball found the front left corner of the green. Ignoring the flag, I played into the middle of the green, where my ball took one vigorous hop forward before disappearing.

At this stage, Tail Gunner and I were blissfully unaware of what our next tasks were going to be. Hidden from view, a small sand bunker is quixotically located in the middle of the green. We were soon to discover that the trap had stymied Tail Gunner’s route to the hole, whereas my ball rested snugly in the middle of the sand. Caressing his ball with a deft flick of a silver-bladed niblick, Bob played towards the back right-hand corner of the green; the ball ran up a slope before turning around and trickling slowly backwards towards the centre of the green.

Accepting the disappointing result with enviable calmness, Tail Gunner played first, putting past the trap to the back edge of the green. From there, he would be able to make a more conventional approach towards the hole in due course. Determined to emulate Tail Gunner’s example of restraint, I rid myself of the annoyance I felt by digging my feet more deeply than I usually would into the soft sand and feathered a delicate recovery to within 4 feet of the target.

Now it was Bob’s turn. He waved his famous Calamity Jane putter over the ball as if blessing it. Then he placed the putter head down in front of the ball before lifting it back over it again. One final, quick look at the hole and he sent the ball on its way down the slope with the gentlest of taps that disguised a distinct, accelerating hit. With its very last gasp the ball reached the hole and toppled in.

‘Birdie!’ we all shouted in unison.

It was now Tail Gunner’s turn to putt, but he came up 9 inches short, bogey 5. Ignoring whatever subtle breaks may have been present on my line to the hole, I willed my 4-footer into the cup for a scrambling par. My match with the Doonbeg Ghost was back to where it had started, all square.