

PART I

Little Bob
and
Mr. Jones

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East Lake Days

Bobby Jones played his first competitive game of golf when he was six years old and lost. They gave him the trophy anyway.

Mary Bell Meador, who owned the boardinghouse where Robert P. Jones had rented rooms for the summer, proposed the match when she saw how much her young son Frank enjoyed playing with Jones's son, a frail but game boy they called Little Bob.

The Meador boardinghouse was across from the tenth fairway of the East Lake Country Club, a golf course that had recently been built by the Atlanta Athletic Club in the rolling countryside six miles outside the city limits of Atlanta. During General George Sherman's march to the sea near the end of the Civil War, one of his generals, John Schofield, had spent a night in a house on the grounds while his troops had slept in the open on what would later become East Lake's fairways.

The recent extension of the municipal streetcar line had helped East Lake become a popular vacation destination for Atlanta residents who wanted to beat the heat and perhaps play some tennis or golf. And East Lake itself offered an inviting beach as well as hotdog and popcorn stands and a penny arcade where visitors could peek at bathing beauties in turn-of-the-century bloomers.

Frank Meador and Little Bob invited two other children spending the summer of 1908 at East Lake, Perry Adair and Alexa Stirling, to

play with them in the six-hole match. Stirling, who was ten and the oldest member of the foursome, won.

“We couldn’t have a girl beat us,” Meador remembered, so the tiny cup his mother gave him went to Little Bob.

“I’ll always believe that Alexa won that cup,” Jones confessed years later. Of all the trophies and medals he won in his lifetime, it was the only one he ever slept with.

During that first summer at East Lake, Little Bob and his friends fished, killed snakes, picked raspberries, and rode a pony, which Jones named Clara, after his mother, who did not entirely appreciate the compliment. Since the children were too young to be allowed on the golf course by themselves, they marked their own two-hole layout on the road outside the front door. In all, it was a heavenly existence for a six-year-old boy, and just as much a blessing for his parents.

A year before Jones was born, his mother had given birth to a son who had been doomed from the start. None of the doctors in Canton, Georgia, where Clara Jones was living with her new husband, knew why the baby could not gain weight and had no immunity from childhood diseases. At the age of three months, William Jones, whom Clara had named after her father, died. Clara quickly became pregnant again, and she insisted that Robert P. Jones move his law practice to Atlanta, where there was bound to be better medical care. But when her second son, Robert T. Jones Jr., was born on March 17, 1902, he seemed no healthier than the boy Clara would always refer to as “the baby that died.”

Little Bob had an enlarged head and tiny, fragile limbs. He suffered from fits of colic and, more terrifying to his frantic parents, could not seem to eat anything. None of the half dozen doctors his parents took him to had any suggestions other than egg whites along with whatever pabulum he could keep down. The child did not eat solid food until he was five years old.

Recalling little William Jones’s lack of immunity, Clara kept her son away from other children and, except for an occasional ride on his tricycle in the backyard when the weather was good, indoors. A young black nursemaid named Camilla, whom Jones always remembered with affection—it was her brother who first taught him to swear, he said—provided discipline, affection, and so many readings

from Joel Chandler Harris he could recite the adventures of Br'er Rabbit and Br'er Fox almost word for word.

So the prospect of a summer at East Lake appealed to the Joneses because Little Bob could play outside without coming into contact with crowds of people and they could keep an eye on him. And when he thrived at Mary Bell Meador's boardinghouse, the family spent every subsequent summer at East Lake, where they lived in a building near the 13th green called the mulehouse, after the mules that once pulled the mowers for the golf course and had been quartered at the bottom level.

The move was a great one for Little Bob—what better place for a future champion to grow up than on a golf course?—and it was wonderful for his family as well. Jones's father, his legal career thriving as counsel for the newly reorganized Coca-Cola Company, took to the game immediately and played it well enough to compete in tournaments with his son in later years. Even Clara, who was five feet tall, weighed ninety pounds, and had little use for foolishness, enjoyed the game and learned to play it decently.

Robert Purmedus Jones, who was known in Atlanta as Big Bob and the Colonel, could hardly have been more different from his son. The father was loud, gregarious, and creatively foul-mouthed. "He can question a man's ancestry and make it feel like a caress," a friend once said. The son was shy, reserved, and polite. Though he would go on to receive more public attention than all but a handful of other men—ticker-tape parades, huge ovations, and hysterical displays on the golf course that occasionally threatened his safety—he would always maintain a reserve that only a few close friends ever managed to penetrate. And yet the two men could not have loved each other more.

Robert P. Jones had been held in check by his father, Robert Tyre Jones Sr., from the day he was born. He would always regret being denied his father's full name, which would be passed on to the grandson instead.

A self-made man who grew up on a farm in northern Georgia during the Civil War, R. T. Jones put his entire fortune, \$500, into a

general store in Canton, Georgia. In time, he would all but own the town—the mill where cotton was ginned, the company where it was woven into denim, the town bank and store—and for forty years he taught Sunday school at the Canton Baptist Church as well. By the 1920s, R. T. Jones was earning \$1.5 million a year, and when bad times struck he borrowed the funds to keep his employees making denim, which he kept in storehouses he had built for the purpose. As the economy began to recover, he sold the stockpiles to the army at a large profit.

“Stern” is one word for R. T. Jones. “Uncompromising” is another.

“Well, R. T., I guess there’s no rest for the wicked,” an associate said when he found the boss at work on a Sunday.

“And the righteous don’t need it,” Jones replied.

Jones saw no need for games and never went to see his son play baseball for Mercer College in Macon. Nor would he allow the boy to play for his mill’s sandlot team. A hat was often passed when it played, and he would not countenance the idea of one of his employees losing a chance to make a little extra money so his son could play a mere game. As for the professional contract R. P. Jones was offered by the Brooklyn Superbas (the name was later changed to Dodgers), his father would not consider it for a moment.

“I didn’t send you to college to become a professional baseball player,” he told his son. And though he was probably doing him a favor—the hardscrabble, ill-paying game of professional baseball was no career for a promising young man at the turn of the century—the missed opportunity stung. His own son, Big Bob vowed, would be allowed to do anything he liked.

Little Bob never had a formal golf lesson, but he had the best teacher possible in Stewart Maiden. Maiden was one of hundreds of young men from the small Scottish village of Carnoustie who left home to work at the growing number of golf clubs in the United States. His brother, Jimmy, who had preceded him at East Lake, left in 1908 to take a job on Long Island. So after an evening of farewell songs at the Carnoustie Golf Club, whose members presented him with a steamer trunk, Stewart Maiden set off to replace him.

“Stewart was just another little Scot, like Jimmy, only Scotcher,”

Jones would recall of the first time he saw him. “He said very little and I couldn’t understand a single word of what he said.”

But words were the least of what Maiden had to offer a six-year-old boy. Indeed, he hardly seemed to notice as Little Bob followed him around the course for several holes, watching every move he made, then ran back to the mulehouse, where he gathered balls in his cap and tried to imitate what he had seen on the 13th green outside his front door.

Maiden believed in simplicity above all, simplicity in a golfer’s swing—feet together, hands low, body upright—and in his approach to the game. He would step up to the ball and, with a minimum of preparation or fuss, swing at it. Throughout his career, Jones would be known for his lack of deliberation over shots and his quick play.

“Hit it hard and it will land somewhere,” Maiden liked to say, and his advice was seldom more complicated than that. Once, when Jones was playing competitively and having trouble with his stance, Maiden watched him hit a few balls, then told him to move his right foot and shoulder back a bit and square up his stance.

Jones did as he was told and asked, “Now what do I do?”

“Knock the hell out of it,” Maiden said.

Maiden was frustrated by some of the duffers at East Lake—“The best thing for you to do is lay off the game for two weeks, then quit,” he told one—but the course also offered him avid young players who would absorb his lessons and make his reputation. Besides Jones, there was Perry Adair, who was two years older and became a highly regarded amateur player. And Maiden was delighted by the natural talent and competitive spirit of Alexa Stirling, who learned the same simple Carnoustie swing the boys had imitated.

The daughter of a physician born in Scotland, Stirling, all long red hair and freckles, was a sort of Renaissance tomboy. Though her mother, a classically trained singer, saw to it that she learned to play the violin, her own interests ran to more physical pursuits—swimming, tennis, golf, and “helping” the family handyman. “I had a natural bent toward hammers, nails and other tools,” Stirling wrote, “so I suppose also golf clubs. Boys’ pursuits appeared to me the most reasonable and enjoyable, girls’ beneath notice.” Before long, she was learning to repair automobile engines, and during World War I she served in the Red Cross Motor Corps.

Stirling was serious about her music—"If she would just leave that dashed fiddle alone, she would be a fine player," Maiden once grumbled—and even made herself a violin out of a cigar box. But there was nothing she liked more than playing golf at East Lake with Perry Adair and Bobby Jones, often as much as two rounds a day.

"None of us was very big but our bags were," she wrote. "I thought that anyone who did not have at least three wooden and eight or ten iron clubs was beneath notice. We were all too insignificant for the honor of caddies, and the three of us would trudge round the course nearly hidden by our bags, but happy as could be."

By the time Stirling began to play in tournaments, she had to accommodate herself to the fashions of the day—bulky jackets and long, sweeping skirts—that were as annoying as they were inhibiting. "We could do much better in knickerbockers," she wrote. "The skirt is a big handicap in putting, especially on windy days when it may often hide the ball just as you go to hit it."

There was no hiding Alexa's talent, though. Not for her "the flabbiness and gentleness usually found in feminine play," wrote O. B. Keeler. "She smacks the ball with absolute confidence in beautiful precision; and produces when necessary a powerful backspin that will make even a long iron shot sit down like a poached egg upon the green."

In 1916, Stirling and Jones both made their debuts in the U.S. Amateur national championships. Jones, at age fourteen, won two matches and became the hottest young player in golf. Stirling, four years older, won the first of three straight national titles.

"Hurrah for Sex!" read the telegram Stirling's parents sent her in Massachusetts after she had won, using the family nickname that had innocently changed from Alexandra and Alexa to Sexie and Sex. The message was too risqué for Western Union to deliver, but the members at East Lake made their feelings known when she got home.

Over the years, there would be many dinners held at the club to celebrate the championships won by its favorite son, and today the ornate lobby in the spacious clubhouse and several other rooms serve as a shrine to Jones's trophies and his memory. But in an inconspicuous corner on the second floor there is a photograph from the first gala evening ever to celebrate a national champion from East Lake. It was attended by more than three hundred people, and it was in honor of Alexa Stirling.