

# SOMETHING TO HOPE FOR

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BY the time Michael Andrews reached the fourteenth he was in that vicious mood possible only to golfers.

It had all begun about the second. Even the first, which he usually did in par anyhow, was shaky. But on the short second he had eventually found his tee ball behind a thicket some forty yards off course. His pitch had cleared the shrubs and gone unerringly to the trap on the far side, He took too much sand and failed to clear. He was sullen by the time he took the ball from the hole for a six. It was some consolation to know that there was no one around at this early hour to see his humiliation. He was hoping to have his handicap revised and had eventually managed to get time to play each day for a week before he put in a card. This was the first morning and he was out early on his own.

On the 420-yard third he had tried to get on in two by using a wood off the fairway from an indifferent lie. This had resulted in a *mélée* on the outskirts of the course involving several blasting shots, a tangle of bracken, a lost ball and the silent appraisal of several workmen on the adjacent housing project.

A sweet drive on the long fifth restored his confidence for a while and he managed his five. But from there on things had gradually deteriorated. He kept telling himself that a golfer who played off ten should be able to raise his game even after a start like that, but his touch eluded him. By the time he turned for the back nine he was wondering if golf was any sort of a game for a promising young surgeon anyhow. There never seemed to be enough regular time, there was the mountainous volume of reading waiting to be done, the sleep debt to be paid. Then all that social life expected of an ambitious young doctor—harder work by far than his professional duties. He picked up his clubs and followed a passable tee shot.

By the time he reached the eleventh he was developing a grudge against the senior physician. It was on the advice of that worthy that he had undertaken this programme at all. He had been injudicious enough to wisecrack with a bite when his senior approached him on a matter of hospital timetable. The result had been a kind but very firm piece of advice that he let up for a while. “How long since you had a spell? Unwind for a while. . . you’ve been operating every day for months., what have you got against the human race anyhow?.. ” He’d known it was true. He’d have to get away for a. while . . . get a week off at any rate and get down on that golf handicap.

After a debacle on the twelfth, his mind was hardly on the game at all. He was sour on the whole of humanity and found himself brooding on some of the troublesome patients who had driven him to this; You slaved over their fat, overfed, under-exercised bodies for four or five hours, fixed up the results of years of neglect and they complained because the stitches hurt coming out. Where would it all end? You build up a good practice, you become an artist at healing bodies and their minds remain as empty as ever. What is there to think about when it’s all said and done? If you work hard you get old sooner, and then what . . . ? He smacked a good six-iron which ran up to within five feet of the flag. The putt failed. Where do I go from here. . .

And now this catastrophe on the fourteenth. He finally surrendered his ambitions by playing the safe easy shot which would require the extra stroke later rather than the risky one which might enable him to end on the green. His feet were getting sore; the bag of clubs heavy, the sun was in his eyes. The rest of the round he devoted to experiments . . . to the extent even of using his nine-iron all the way along the seventeenth fairway. A woman golfer passing down the nearby twelfth favoured him with the glance of disdain of ‘the knowledgeable’ woman golfer considering a male duffer.

When he finally picked his ball up on the eighteenth it was still only mid-morning. He avoided the few loungers in the clubhouse and made his way over to the seat in the shade near the practice fairway. There was a bag of clubs angled against the end of the seat and a lean-looking individual was placing balls on the far end. Michael watched absently as he hit them one by one and noticed that with a couple of exceptions they landed in a group in front of where he sat. As the lean one made his way after them he recognized the priest; “Padre” he was called around the course, a result apparently of his days as a chaplain in the army. Michael did not know him personally—he didn’t seem to be here much—but had seen him occasionally on the links, he remembered him on one occasion blasting away in a bunker spreading sand all over the green. Now he regarded him with professional interest. He had some-

times seen the priesthood at work in hospitals, remarked to himself on the purposefulness with which these men attended their duties to the sick, seen a quite noticeable difference in some patients afterwards. Was it just the confidence inspired by men who were well disciplined themselves? Were they able to inspire people by their own dedication? Dedication to what... .

Some of those people had appeared genuinely happy in the face of imminent death. Could religion give a measure of happiness?

The priest gathered his balls and came over towards his bag, nodded to Michael as he sat down on the seat. "Morning, Padre," he responded (the title "Father" embarrassed him, it always felt clumsy on his lips so he avoided it when possible). "Don't see you out here lately. Have things finally got slack in the spiritual world today?"

"Afraid it's rather the physical which brings me out. One of you doctor fellows has ordered it." He made mental notes of the coincidence with his own case, of the fact that the priest apparently knew him, and also medical signs of fatigue.

He was grateful that no clinical details were paraded—an occupational hazard for doctors. He wasn't a talkative man it seemed. Nor was there any sign of the professional "good will" which he sometimes associated with clergymen. This man was somewhat steely-looking, obviously intelligent and prepared to be friendly in a quiet way. Also he hit a good five-iron.

They conversed rather superficially on the state of the course after the rains, the proposed visit of some overseas pros, overcrowding in hospitals and the inadequacy of facilities for treating the growing volume of mental illnesses. It was Michael who gave the conversation a serious turn by enquiring if the clergy found any difficulty in keeping up with the developing techniques of dealing with psychiatric problems.

"...or do you think," he asked, "that there will be less demand for religion as the science of treating the maladjusted develops?" It was somewhat sharp.

"On the contrary, psychiatric medicine deals with the abnormal in human mental processes. People so afflicted will always need God to become normal again. And normal people will always need Him to stay that way. There will always be a demand for religion." It was said quite calmly, but there was no sign of a smile.

Michael noticed the matter-of-fact way in which he spoke of God. He decided to put a little pressure on.

"Why will there *always* be a demand for religion?"

"Because it satisfies the most fundamental longing in the human heart."

"What is the most fundamental of men's desires?"

"The desire for happiness."

He knew instinctively that this was true, but a little elaboration wouldn't hurt.

"You consider that yearning to be very important?" he asked.

"Yes. We all long for happiness. It is the most fundamental of all aspirations. It is at the bottom of all human effort. Everything we ever do is done because we want to be happy. There are no exceptions. More than that—we are always seeking perfect happiness. We are capable of the idea of complete satisfaction—and once we know of such a thing nothing else will satisfy us. We work and love and suffer and hate and endure because we want to be happy. It is humanly impossible to do otherwise. No matter what complicated and foolhardy things we do it is always for the same reason; we want to be happy."

Michael felt that the discussion was going further than he had intended. It was interesting to hear this priest speak so surely, but he felt that the control of the situation was passing from his grasp and he didn't like it. He stood up in preparation for leaving. There was something cynical in his question:

"You say that your religion can satisfy this craving? Does the Church have the answer? Is there a secret for being happy in this world, Padre?"

"Yes," calmly. "There is a secret." No more. He would not continue unless asked. His listener did not ask. "You can tell me about it sometime. So long," and he strolled off.

He was irritated for some time. He had been abrupt in his approach and his challenge had been met. For the rest of the day he could not get some of the remarks made by the priest out of his mind. He even regretted that he had not continued the discussion.

When he drove up to the clubhouse two mornings later the Padre was finished on the practice fairway and heading for the tee. Michael joined him. They waited for a threesome to get out of range and hit off together. The Padre concentrated on his golf and they halved the first. The presence of competition lifted his game considerably and he returned an 85, a few strokes ahead of his companion.

By the time they sat down to a snack in the club dining-room Michael felt more at home with this man whom he now knew to be capable, on the quiet side, but very direct. He opened up without any preliminaries.

“What is the secret, Padre?”

The priest understood immediately that he was taking up the conversation of two days ago and replied:

“The secret is in the virtue of hope.”

“Hope?” It wasn’t along the lines he expected.

“Yes. We are happy in this world because of our hope. Nothing you ever get in this life will ever make you really happy. Nothing you ever do will give you the necessary complete fulfilment of your aspirations. We never can be completely happy in this world. But a large measure of happiness and peace of mind is possible. It belongs to those who have something to hope for.”

“Plenty of money, a mansion to live in, security and ease would not make you happy?”

“No. Wealth is far from the answer. I’ve no doubt that many of your most miserable patients are also the wealthiest. There are many fundamental things you can’t buy— like a spent youth. You can’t buy it back. Security? What security is there really when everything must come to an end sooner or later? The years get shorter as you get older. There is no permanence. Times, places, friends, all change. These cannot make us happy for any length of time. We have a passing excitement sometimes; a new enthusiasm about something can buoy us up for a while. Happiness is more than that.”

“And in the face of all this desolation you Catholics can be happy?” There was a tinge of sarcasm in his voice.

“Yes.” Decisively. “Good Catholics are always fundamentally happy.”

The doctor’s mind roamed over some of the Catholic patients he’d known. He had no way of knowing which were “good” Catholics and which weren’t. But some of them had shown definite signs of peace of mind. Not one of those whom he had known to be attended regularly by their priests had he known to fall into that state of apathy or panic which made the death of some individuals like that of an animal. What is it they had?

Dignity? . . . simplicity? (what was the use of complicating things anyhow?) . . . a direct approach?... His mind flashed over this question of happiness and hope. Yes, he had been happiest when he was hoping and striving for something. How he had studied and hoped to be a doctor. How he had looked forward to his own practice, to some eminence in his profession; the expectation had given him a measure of joy. Was his own emptiness of the last few months a result of nothing to hope for? Would life take on a new colour if there were magic at the end? “Complete happiness” the Padre had mentioned. Was it possible? Push hard now he thought; see if this line of thought can be defended.

“A person would need a lot to hope for in order to be genuinely happy. Do you propose perfect happiness as the goal of our endeavours?”

“Yes.”

“What does perfect happiness consist of?”

“The fulfilment of all our desires. We would be perfectly happy if we had all our deepest longings satisfied.”

“You consider it possible then to arrive at such a state? For men it is possible to be completely happy, to have satisfied all the yearning of their restless souls, to be content without the tinge of regret, to behold beauty without the touch of sadness?”

“Yes.”

“Where and when?”

“With God when we possess Him.”

“Is that what you call heaven?”

“Yes. There are many very inadequate ideas of heaven, I’m afraid. Many seem to consider it a place of sentimental inactivity. But it is far from that. It is the possession of God—with our minds, by knowledge; with our hearts, by love.

Because God is infinite He can satisfy the ability of these powers to know and love, and satisfy them perfectly. These are the intellectual powers of a man, and the important ones. The satisfaction of our senses follows as an incidental. We are then perfectly happy. Heaven is a state of very intense activity, a state of life lived fully, of goodness enjoyed thoroughly, of all desires perfectly satisfied.”

“You would have to be very sure of reaching such a state if it were to give you a measure of happiness in this world”— even while he said it he saw in his mind the face of the young woman he had tried to save from death by repeated operation. She had been cheerful to the end and died with a smile on her face, holding a pair of rosary beads.”

“We *are* sure. The virtue of hope is a firm expectation of eternal life. We look forward to something good in the future. It is a difficult goal to reach, but it is possible and we look forward to it with confidence, because God has promised us the means to obtain it if we use them. There is something vigorous about hope. It leads us to exert ourselves to attain something hard. We have to summon our courage and forge ahead. But we do it with confidence. Our confidence is based on the promise of God to give us all the necessary help. He has said: ‘I am the Lord thy God, who take thee by the hand and say to thee: “Fear not; I have helped thee’,” as we read in the prophecy of Isaias. Hoping for Heaven is placing our hand in God’s. If we want to be content in this life we have to remind ourselves often, I will one day with God’s help be in heaven. I will. Perhaps soon; soon in any case. I will then thank God that I did not let my human life become dull, that heaven was always an ideal, and life an adventure for me.

“Hope is a natural sentiment. Men are incurably optimistic, always hoping for something good in the future. Hope sustains the farmer when he plows and sews, the student when he studies, the athlete when he trains. When we apply the same attitude of confidence to our whole life we are exercising the virtue of hope.”

“You do not think it is possible to be happy without it?”

“No, not genuinely happy. The satisfactions of this world lack some important qualities. They lack completeness, they lack permanence. There is no completely happy person in this world. There is even less happiness than would appear. Every heart has an ache of some kind. The happiest people are those who have a lively hope. We are happy in this life because of our hope.”

“How does this virtue of hope, as you call it, affect the life of the average Catholic?”

“The practising Catholic will know the virtue of hope as an ever-present, serene confidence that he will one day be perfectly happy with God. The background of this will be his firm faith—his certain knowledge that God exists and has spoken to us about all the important things which affect human existence. He will know with certainty that there is a heaven and that God has given us all the means of getting there. He will use these ways to heaven, prayer for example, constantly and sincerely. The result will be this quiet confidence of one day being perfectly happy with no reasonable desire unfulfilled.

“The result of this will be true peace of mind. Christ, as reported by St. John, xv, it, says: ‘All this I have told you, so that My joy may be yours, and the measure of your joy may be filled up.’

“Perhaps the most obvious result, in this life, of a strong hope is serenity in the face of difficulty and disappointment. When we are confident of complete happiness in a few years time at the most, the trials of life, even severe ones, will not greatly upset us.”

There you are, thought Michael, the whole works; a complete philosophy of life, neat as a seven-iron right on the flag. At this point several golfers entered the room and two of them sat down at the same table so that the conversation came to a halt.

They did not meet again for several months. It was on a crowded footpath. The priest noticed the “Good morning, Father,” and the smile of genuine pleasure. He could not help but notice the change in Michael. “You seem to have picked up since your short golf holiday.”

“Yes, Father, it makes a difference when you have something to hope for.”

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