

# The Old Man and the Tree

Cabell is an American with a very bushy moustache. The first few mornings I was with him I assumed that he had a ghastly labial deformity partly hidden by the exuberance of his facial hair. Lurking underneath the very bushy moustache was a huge dark wart.

On the third morning, in front of the seventh green, as bulldozers with rome ploughs and flecco blades were ripping through the pine scrub, Cabell turned and said, "I'd love to keep that tree, but he'll never go for it. Not in a million years. Mr Jones hates trees in front of greens. Mr Jones likes space." With that, he reached up under his moustache, removed the wart and flicked it into the moving mountain of sand being shoved forward by the nearest Caterpillar.

"Jeez." I felt rather sick. Cabell coughed. Best to ignore it, pretend nothing happened. "Pity to pull it down. They take a hundred years to grow. Cork oaks aren't weeds. Why don't we just move the green a few yards to the right? He'll never know."

"Jeremy, he always knows, even if he's never been near the place before. He'll know." Cabell left at lunch time. I kept the tree where it was.

Ten days later it was still there, a magnificent Cork Oak smack bang in the front of the seventh green. Except that the green had somehow moved to the right.

"Think of it as an aerial bunker," I said jauntily to Cabell. The wart was back in place. This is horrible. Poor man, I thought, they seem to regenerate like cut worms. "It's supposed to be a beginners' course. A teaching aid." "He hates beginners' courses as well as trees." The wart moved. It moved right across to the other side of his mouth. Slowly it dawned on me. Cabell sucked fat unlit cigar stubs up to mid morning. They were very short stubs, and his moustache was very bushy.

He was giving up smoking.

I was starting to like Cabell. Especially when he said, "It looks great. Leave it like that. He'll be here next week, let him decide."

Mr Jones arrived after lunch. It was cloudy and a strong autumn wind was coming in from the Bay of Biscay. The surf was very loud, booming on the beaches at the other side of the site.

Mr Jones, a short, stout man, was wearing the American equivalent of a knotted handkerchief – a cotton golf hat – together with a borrowed plastic Mac two sizes too big, and galoshes. He was surrounded by 'golfies'. Contractors with large coloured golf umbrellas; the surveyor learning instant golf course architecture from the master; the client's agent, looking smarter than I'd ever

seen him – except for his motor cycle boots; Billy the design apprentice, newly arrived from Augusta, Georgia; Bob the golf course superintendent from Florida. (Bob had been in Vietnam, Intelligence Corps. He was never very happy in Europe. I later gave him my deerstalker, which cheered him up in Fort Lauderdale.) And Cabell.

I don't think anybody knew I was there. Certainly not Mr Jones, who suddenly started grumbling at Cabell. "Why have we got so many par threes?" "It's a beginners' course, Mr Jones. Phase one, remember?"

"Cabell, I want you to lengthen this hole over that ridge". "Mr Jones, that's where the clubhouse is going to be." "Well Cabell, I want you to add two par four's and get rid of these par threes." Cabell stopped translating at this point. The French drifted off and started taking photographs of everything, but mainly of Mr Jones.

"Mr Jones," Cabell was trying very hard not to act ruffled; we still had the problem of the tree on the 7th, only two holes ahead. "Mr Jones, we designed this course two or three years ago. The planning permission was granted with the road over there, the clubhouse behind the ridge, one hundred holiday homes along those fairways and the other 27 holes alongside the ocean. We can't suddenly change it all."

Mr Jones started to sulk. I think that at his age he hated not to be able to do whatever he wanted. And walking through sand dunes in galoshes after a heavy lunch couldn't have been easy. He was 78 years old.

We moved on to the sixth green site. Mr Jones pulled out a notepad and pencil. As he sketched, he told Cabell what he wanted. He'd been in front of that green for all of 25 seconds before he thrust the 'drawing' at Cabell. Cabell passed me the scrap of poor quality note paper and said "Now build it."

Mr Jones knew exactly what he wanted, and what he wanted was exactly right. I was beginning to understand why even guys who had worked for him for twenty years still called him Mr Jones behind his back.

"Ah, this is the err seventh fairway, and over there is where we going to put the ah green. We've um, not quite got round

to pulling out that large oak in front of the green. But it'll be gone tomorrow. Absolutely gone. Tomorrow." Cabell appeared to have lost his nerve. I was about to interrupt and suggest that we leave the oak where it was. Cabell looked hard, very hard at me. I shut up.

"What do you mean, Cabell? What's wrong with it there? Leave it where it is, it's not in front of the green is it? That tree is the making of this hole." He was really very irritable. By then he would have contradicted anything Cabell said.

It began drizzling. Mr Jones had had enough. We took him back to the car and he left for the airport as the storm broke.

Cabell and I had dinner – fresh goose liver garnished with stewed apples. He looked thoroughly wiped out. We chewed over the events of the day. "It's not always as bad as that. Sometimes he's just mean though. I hate it when he does that in front of everybody. If I'd asked him to keep the tree, we'd be out there now, chopping the god-damn thing down."

We toasted our tree with a very fine Pommerol and I drove Cabell back to his hotel through the storm.

The storm which blew the tree down that night.

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