

## From The Putting Green A DETECTIVE STORY

By RUSSELL E. SMITH

CUSTOMS INSPECTOR BROWN slammed down the lid of his desk at the San Barco custom house building and rattled the windows of his office, as well as the nerves of Investigator Bronson, who stood up as his chief turned to him and snapped:

"Excuses don't go! You've been after those opium smugglers operating around here for months, and you haven't got a line on a single one. You suspected that Carson feller, but you haven't got anything on him, have you?"

"But, Chief," protested Bronson, his tanned face reddening as he spoke, "you know as well as I do that we are morally certain that he is responsible for the carrying into this country, and through this very place, a small but certain amount of opium every day. We've seen him with the Chinks, and at the places we found some of the stuff cached, and—"

The Chief spoke hastily and irritably as he reached for his coat and started out the door, followed by his subordinate.

"But you haven't connected him with it, and Washington is raising hell about it! He's the man we want, all right, and it's up to you to hang it on him and to find out how he does it. So long!"

"And say"—he turned back an instant—"I suppose you know that if you don't get this feller you'll be answering want ads one of these days, don't you?"

Then he hurried off, leaving Bronson standing on the curb with an anxious look in his eye. He had never failed to make good before, and it was hard to be made to realize that this time he had failed, and that the department would let him go, as they did all failures.

But soon his eyes hardened and glinted, and his mouth took on a firmer line, as he gritted to himself:

"I'll get him or—quit, I guess," he added, and swung off, turning over to himself plans whereby he might "get the goods" on Carson.

The latter was a mysterious personage of the city who dealt ostensibly in fruit, but who for a long time had been suspected of smuggling opium into the United States from across the Mexican line.

But shadowings innumerable had failed to show any proof of it. Several times a sloop had been seen to glide by the cove at the international boundary, but though the line was guarded, every foot of it, nothing was ever seen to get by without a thorough search, a search that so far had resulted in absolutely no trace of any contraband goods.

Carson had been shadowed a thousand times, but nothing suspicious had ever been discovered except his foregathering with certain Chinese merchants.

Though this might be explained by his fruit business dealings, Bronson and his chief suspected other deals, but no proof was forthcoming—and the opium kept coming in from somewhere.

"And I'm going to find out where, too!" grunted Bronson. "Guess I'll take a look at Carson's place over the line again."

Carson, it seemed, owned a large rancho just across the boundary in Mexico, and while Bronson had snooped around several times in the guise of a laborer seeking work on the ranch, he had seen nothing unusual about Carson except that he seemed to be a golf maniac.

Bronson then lost all respect for Carson, for he considered golf a game that ranked with croquet and bean bags. Surely a man who would waste his time driving a foolish little ball about with a still more foolishly shaped steel club could not be much of an adversary.

But he still had a "hunch" that the secret of the smugglings lay in the keeping of Carson, and determined not to lose sight of that gentleman until the secret was solved and his job in the service safe once more.

Careful inquiry revealed the fact that Carson was out at this ranch again, and late the next afternoon a ragged, unkempt young man appeared at the rancho and asked for work.

It was Bronson, and the customs man was lucky enough to secure a job help-

ing about the yards and grounds of the big ranch house.

Here, bright and early next morning, he saw Carson start off on his morning golfing tour with his caddy, an old Mexican who did not look as though he would be able to travel very far without carrying, his face a perfect match in color and texture with the golf bag he carried.

Under Carson's arm was snugly encased a new box of golf balls.

"Always he lost so many," remarked the gardener under whom Bronson was at work raking the leaves and twigs from the carefully kept lawn on one end of which was raised a tea, from which Bronson's golf links stretched away. "Ah, Santa Maria! And they cost almost uno peso each! Such waste of money!" sighed the old man, who made less than that every day he worked.

Bronson was watching Carson narrowly from under his tattered straw hat, and did not reply. A red flag fluttered away off to the east, and the links ran, green and undulating, broken here and there by bunkers and spaces of rough hillocks right by the side of the boundary line.

Bronson watched, his lips curling, as he saw Carson tee his first ball and with a long sweeping blow send the white globe careening across the greensward and bunkers. But the driver in the hands of Carson side-swiped the ball and instead of sailing toward the first hole flag, just in sight over the nearby hills, it soared to one side and in a long curving parabola, swung out of sight across the barren hillsides outside the links, and across the international boundary.

The ancient caddy gazed after it in despair as though in fear lest he should have to stir his superannuated stumps in a search for the lost ball.

But Carson gruffly called, "Never mind! Let it go!" and culled another from the box that Bronson noted he did not allow the aged Mexican to carry, and set it upon the remade tee—and proceeded to "slice the ball" once more, and off it sailed out of sight on the barren hills across the line.

Thrice and again and still again did Carson repeat the performance, while Bronson, watching as he raked, grew disgusted with the apparent poor work of the golfer, who appeared nowise disheartened at his failure to send the ball where it should go, but kept on trying.

Finally he hit it right, and away sped the ball in a graceful flight, this time toward the first hole, and Carson strode away on his tour.

"Always the same," muttered the old gardener by his side, "always the same. Ever' morning he lose one—two—three ball—all the time. Such waste of good money!" He groaned as he thought of all the mescal and frijoles that he saw go flying across the hill every day in the form of golf balls.

"An' he does not worry—not him," he dolefully went on to Bronson, who, wondering how he could ever hope to discover anything here, still listened with half an ear. "Much money has he got—so he don't even go look for them. Hundreds has he lost, and he does never seem to play any better. Even I, Yegoine, could play the silly game better!"

And off he pattered about his work, while Bronson continued raking in a desultory fashion, his mind always upon his problem, driving it toward a possible solution of the mystery.

The next day, and the next after that, Bronson worked in the yard, and each time he saw Carson stroll languidly out to the tee and proceed to drive ball after ball, slicing every one with his driver, and causing it to sail far off to one side of the green links.

"Well, if I couldn't play any better than that," thought Bronson, "I'd quit! Why, he loses enough balls to more than pay my salary!"

And his face sank as he thought that maybe he wouldn't get any more salary from the government if he didn't make good this time.

"I know that stuff comes from this side of the line," he said to himself, "and I'll bet Carson is in on it—but how in Tophet can I prove it!"

That evening, seated in a corner of the common house assigned to the laborers on the ranch, Bronson overheard a snatch of conversation that set him thinking—puzzled him somewhat. And when Bronson was puzzled he usually got busy and ferreted out that which caused his puzzlement.

"What the boss spends for his bloom-in' golf balls he loses every day would bloom-in' well pay us better wages," growled a young Englishman, assistant to the chief, who had drifted south of the line in search of work.

"Yah!" snapped a Mexican. "He not even cares, and will not let Alessandro go hunt for them."

"Why don't you go hunt them up some night and sell 'em?" queried the Englishman. "My word! There must be lots of them over there across the line—the bloom-in' ground must look like snow from 'em!"

The young Mexican grinned.

"No—one night I go look, and what you think? A Chinaman farmer over near there he get them all—every one! One night I see him with large basket." And he groaned as he thought of the rich mine of golf balls plundered by the unknown, wily Celestial.

Bronson, as he listened, found his mind following strange channels of thought. A mine of golf balls gathered by a Chink in the dead of night! And they all came from—Carson!

Bronson lost no time. Yawning, he slowly passed out into the evening quiet and slipped around a corner of the house and set out across the fields toward the boundary line.

After a rather long tramp he came to the line, silently slipped across, and soon after spied a tiny light flashing along the ground.

"Our Chinese friend, no doubt," he thought, "out picking golf balls for market!"

Sneaking quietly along he got very close to the Chinaman, who carried a large basket along on his back and a tiny lantern in one hand, while he swept the ground carefully from side to side.

Bronson watched him a long time and saw that he worked along in a regular line, up and down the hill systematically, every now and again stooping to pick up an object from the ground, which he stowed away in a capacious pocket of his blouse.

Bronson pressed forward and stepped on something hard and round which rolled under his weight and almost precipitated him to the earth.

He reached down and found a white golf ball! Next it laid another, which he pocketed. When he looked up again the midnight prowler with the light was gone, frightened away no doubt by the noise made as Bronson stumbled.

"Huh!" the investigator mumbled. "He got away terribly sudden. Wonder what—"

He left his question unuttered and retraced his steps back to the ranch, his booty tucked away in his clothing. Hiding in a stall of the horse barn he examined one of his finds with care and found that it seemed just like any other golf ball, although in truth he had never handled any before at all.

Poising it in his hand, he mused over it, weighing it carefully, and idly started cutting a bit out of it. His knife cut hard at first, but soon sank easily into a soft mass in its center.

Pulling out the blade, he put the sticky blade to his nose—and almost yelled out loud in his joy.

The smell that arose from the keen

blade, now covered with a sticky substance, was the unmistakable one of the poppy.

Bronson almost reeled with the shock of finding his suspicions verified, but soon recovered his usual coolness of action. He must be sure, and the only way to be sure was to get hold of one of the new golf balls that Carson carried to the links each morning. The other ball he did not cut open, but slipped it where he could reach it easily, for he already had a plan.

The next day he clumsily allowed his rake to fall against the shins of Carson as that gentleman hastened to his links and his favorite morning exercise. The rake tripped him, and the box of golf balls fell and rolled all over the green.

Hastening, with many abject apologies, Bronson picked them all up with the assistance of Carson and put them all back in the box—all but one, which he palmed and for which he exchanged one of the balls he had picked up across the line. That night found him back in San Barco and at the home of his chief.

"Well, Bronson—found another job yet?" heavily joked his chief, surprised at Bronson's sudden appearance. "Where have you been the last few days?"

"Collecting golf balls," replied his young assistant, as he smiled back.

The Chief stared. "Well," he snapped, "find anything?"

Bronson pulled two golf balls out of his pocket and placed them both on the table before him.

"Where'd you get those things?" the chief asked.

"This one," said Bronson, cutting it open, "I found across the line from Carson's golf links. Smell!" And he poked his knife blade under the snub nose of the chief, who nearly fainted as he recognized the odor.

"Good Lord!" he breathed.

Bronson was holding up another case. "That one I got out of Carson's box of new golf balls this morning," he calmly announced, while the chief's eyes almost popped out of his head, as he got a whiff of it into his trembling nostrils.

"My boy," he said, reaching for his subordinate's hand, "it's the best yet—but how—"

"He drove them across the line with his dinky golf clubs, right under my nose," said Bronson calmly.

"Can you beat it! Can you tie him!" was all the chief could utter in his amazement.

Carson's golfing soon came to an end, and the next time he came over the line to attend to his business Bronson met him on the street, and stepping up to him, calmly asked:

"Want to buy any golf balls?" Carson stopped and suspiciously peered at Bronson.

"Well, I might. Why?"

"Just thought I might sell you some, that's all," said Bronson. "I found a lot of pretty good ones just across from your ranch the other night. Want to buy?" He opened his coat just sufficiently to show a gold custom inspector's badge on the inside of it.

Carson's face grew green, and he almost dropped, but he calmly followed Bronson to the custom house, where he was soon persuaded that golfing, even on one's own grounds, and losing golf balls freighted with opium, on Uncle Sam's domain, was a dangerous and expensive pastime.

But it took Carson several years in the federal penitentiary, along with his Chinese confederates, to discover how expensive it was.

Bronson doesn't need to look at the want columns any more now.

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