



THE BOARD OF GREEN CLOTH

BY FREDERICK ADYE

Let us to billiards.—Antony and Cleopatra

THE last few decades have witnessed a notable change in the reputation of this splendid game. Fifty, perhaps forty, years ago the game of billiards was in rank odour. Not merely did the unco guid hold up their hands in horror at its very mention, but sensible persons of average liberality looked askance at it, associating it in their minds with cigars, brandy-and-water, late hours, and moustachioed sharpers. In short, respectable members of society generally regarded a billiard-table, as some author or other (I think Frank Sinedley) has described it, 'in the light of a twenty-devil-power man-trap.' For a young man to have the reputation of frequenting billiard-rooms meant that in the estimation of the circumspect he was on the downgrade to perdition. And, truth to say, this has been lamentably often the case, for how many a fair youthful promise has been blasted by the fatal fascination of the board of green cloth! There is the case of my young friend Fitz-hazard. He went up to Camford with every prospect of taking a good degree, but had the misfortune to win his college handicap in his second term, and thereafter forsook the river and running-path (in either of which he might have found salvation) for the billiard-room. He cut lectures and spent his mornings in practising for the 'Varsity Cue, his evenings at pool with the crack players at the Clarendon. By the time he was sent down for repeated ploughs he was certainly one of the best of them, and could make upon occasion a forty or fifty break. It must not be denied that this experience has stood him in later life in good stead, for is he not now the marker at the public room in the hotel of a small provincial town, where he may be pointed out as a warning to youths who love the game, not wisely, but too well? Perhaps most of us do this at some period

of our lives. Billiard fever is as prevalent as measles, and in several cases you may see the patient hanging about the table for hours, playing whenever he can, watching with a feverish eagerness every stroke made by others. Nor is one entirely safe at a more advanced age. I have known old gentlemen hard upon sixty take it badly, and plod away night after night at the same game with a zest unimpaired by constant defeat. Generally in patients of robust mind the disease wears itself out; remedy there is none; but probably the best prophylactic is a gentle and gradual inoculation upon a private table in early youth.

Yet how unfair to the game itself has been the reputation won for it by indiscreet admirers! For where is its compeer among indoor pastimes—where so happy a combination of science and manual skill? Chess and whist are both superior as intellectual amusements, but a game of billiards exercises every muscle of the body, promotes the circulation, and if played in a properly ventilated room braces the whole system, a thing which no sedentary game can pretend to do. Neither chess nor whist, the former especially, can be to the ordinary intellect any real recreation after a day spent in mental labour. The hard head contest of the one, the constant effort of memory required for the other, the subtle combinations of both, afford to the average brain no adequate relaxation from the cares of business or the trying concentration of mind essential to most kinds of professional work. A quiet game of billiards, on the other hand, without the excitement of any serious wager dependent on the result, or a friendly pool with sixpenny lives, affords a genuine recreation to the hard-worked brain, as well as the pleasantest pastime for people of leisure on a wet day, combining moderate exercise with amusement, and involving a sufficient degree of skill to sustain the interest of the player. This degree, too, is one readily acquired with a little regular practice, supplemented by a few hints from someone possessed of a fair knowledge of the game.

The great disadvantages of the game are the expense of the table and the size of the room required to accommodate it when purchased. In houses of moderate dimensions there is not usually a room large enough to hold a full-sized table; or, when there is, it cannot always be spared for the purpose of a mere game; *Materfamilias* appropriates it for the dining-room or the children's playroom. Thus many a lover of billiards is driven to play either at his club, which is pleasant enough; or, if he lives in the country, at the public room in the nearest town, built generally

over the hotel stables, where he is soon disgusted with the atmospheric and social conditions, and prefers to forego his favourite pastime altogether.

This need not, however, be so often the case if he would condescend to play on a miniature table; not the very smallest, but one, say, 10 ft. \times 5 ft., or even 8 ft. \times 4 ft. This he generally scorns as not the real thing. But it is; the game, when once you have adapted yourself to it, is as good on the smaller as on the table of regulation size. Nay, if one happens to be short-sighted, as so many people nowadays are, it is better; the way into the top pockets, and the distance of the object ball from the cushion, being more readily discernible from baulk. Many a fine break has the writer seen made, and many an exciting finish between two evenly matched players, on one of these smaller tables. The only drawback to their use is that after playing upon them one is somewhat lost for the first few strokes on returning to a full-sized board.

Again, although we cannot claim for billiards the picturesque imaginativeness of chess, with all the varied and analogical movements of its pieces—‘the plodding pawn, the common soldier that does the rough work of the battle; the active knight, ever ready to take his enemy in flank; the wily side-long bishop; the castle coming down with a rush like that of the elephants of Pyrrhus; the Amazonian Queen; the slowly moving, sacred, inviolable king’—yet it is a pleasant sight to watch the clean ivory spheres, deftly impelled by a clever cueist, travel swiftly and smoothly over the expanse of green, Nature’s prevalent hue, and therefore of all colours most grateful and restful to the human eye. Interesting also to mark the nicely calculated effects of ‘side’ in the ball’s altered course after impact with the object ball or cushion; the delicate manipulation of a nursery of cannons; the clever ‘running-through’ stroke; the clean-struck slanting hazard; the flying all-round-the-table cannon; or the brilliant but fluky ‘doubling’ of the red.

The origin of the game, if not so remote as that of chess, is nevertheless of considerable antiquity. It came to us, as so many games have come, from the French; *billiard* in that language meaning a mace, with which instrument no doubt the game was first played, although according to some authorities the ancient orthography was *balyard*, a compound of ball and yard, or ball-stick.

No other game perhaps has been so wonderfully developed by its acclimatisation in this country. The ancient game, in which

the balls were pushed with a flat-headed mace against dull cushions of list or felt, could have borne little comparison with the fast and scientific game of to-day. Now and again, standing forlornly on its six rickety spindle legs in the hall of some ancient manor house, we come across one of the old-fashioned tables, with a wooden bed, moth-eaten cloth, and list cushions, against which, one would think, a ball must have had to be struck with considerable force to make it rebound at all. What a contrast it presents to the modern table by some first-class maker, with its heavy slate bed supported by four pairs of massive legs, its resilient cushions of vulcanised rubber, and neat brass-bound pockets, or hazard nets, as they used to be called—a handsome piece of furniture, of such solidity and weight that the clumsiest player could not disturb its exact equilibrium. Slate beds were first used in this country in 1827, and since then the chief improvements have been in the cushions; the most recent being the lowering of them so as to obviate that awkward elevation of the cue-butt which used so greatly to mar the precision of the stroke in the case of a jammed ball.

Billiard balls should properly be made of ivory, but owing to the increasing difficulty of procuring that substance, they are now often manufactured of a composition closely resembling it, and are then termed cellulose. Hard, close-grained substance as the best ivory is, the friction which the balls undergo is so considerable that a set in constant use remains true but for a very short time, and requires to be frequently adjusted. We have all heard of the billiard sharp in the Savoy ballad, condemned for his iniquitous practices in purgatory to play,

On a spot that's always barred ;
On a cloth untrue,
With a twisted cue,
And elliptical billiard balls.

It is probable that a very large percentage of innocent players do also play with elliptical balls, or at least balls that are anything but perfect spheres; for the proprietor of some first-class rooms once assured the writer that so few of the players frequenting his rooms knew whether the balls were really round or not, that he had to keep but one perfectly true set by him, in case such should be demanded by some casual expert dropping in.

There is, I suppose, no game in which so wide a disparity exists between the professional and the amateur as in billiards. Whereas the Gentlemen frequently beat the Players at cricket,

and can always make a match of it; and whereas it would take an uncommonly smart waterman's crew to get away from a good college boat; while even at tennis and racquets the thoroughly skilled amateur is to a certain extent 'in it' with the professor; yet at billiards the best amateur has no sort of chance with even a fifth-rate professional. Of all the imbecilities displayed by a notorious specimen of that strange product of civilisation known as the 'plunger,' whose instructive memoirs have been lately given to the public, perhaps the most remarkable was the fond idea, which he assures us he honestly entertained, that he could beat a very celebrated professional player at pyramids! This immense disparity is obvious at a glance; for whereas the highest professional break (spot-barred) is, if I remember rightly, the 690 made the year before last by Roberts, there are very few amateurs who can make a sixth, or even a seventh, part of that number.

Between the performances of professionals themselves in what are called the 'spot-barred' and the 'all-in' games there is a similar disparity, some enormous scores having been lately made in matches wherein the spot stroke has been allowed. Peall last year, playing at the Westminster Aquarium, made a break of 2,416, which beat his previous record by three points; while a few days later the same player eclipsed this stupendous score by a run of 3,304, this marvellous break occupying him no longer than two hours and forty minutes.

A considerable contention has arisen among devotees of the game as to which player, Peall or Roberts, is more properly entitled to the distinction of champion. But I think there must at present be no question as to this. However we may be more inclined to admire the famous all-round player, whose consummate skill yet keeps all younger aspirants at bay, so long as the game remains intact, with the spot stroke an integral part of it, a sense of ordinary fairness would seem to oblige us to admit that a player who can win by means of it is more entitled to the honour than one who requires a certain legitimate stroke to be barred in his favour. Nevertheless, as someone has remarked, 'life is monotonous already, without the spot stroke; and to watch a man make several hundred consecutive spots is a dreary business, about as amusing as to watch a horse go round in a mill.'

No one who has not tried it can have any idea of the terrible amount of practice required to become proficient at this apparently simple stroke. One of the best exponents of it owed his skill to the interest of a sporting farmer, who promised him when

a boy a crown every time he made forty consecutive spots; to earn which the lad would rise early and practise the stroke by the light of a tallow candle-end stuck by its own grease to the rim of the table of a village inn. With such indefatigable students it is possible that, being by incessant practice reduced to a certainty, the spot stroke will presently have to be definitely and absolutely barred, and, like the beautiful and delicate quill or 'feather' stroke, will become obsolete.

The most probable means of accomplishing this would be by an alteration in the position of the spot upon the table; yet there would be an obvious risk in tampering with either the table or the game. Other strokes might be practised and developed to such a degree as to become wearisome to the onlooker. The game as it stands is a sufficiently interesting one to the amateur player, who very rarely can afford either time or patience to acquire so much dexterity on the spot as to become a burden to his friends. But the professional nowadays is deemed of so much importance, that if he can amuse his patrons better on one kind of table than another, we may look to see it altered to suit his and their pleasure. Already the Billiard Association has invited the chief makers to send in patterns and designs for an improved table. It is curious, by the way, to behold how in these modern days the professional in various branches of sport has risen in consideration. From the menial position of groom or marker the successful jockey or cueist has become the pet of the public, and earns an income equal to, or greater than, that of a bishop or eminent pleader at the Bar.

In the play of amateurs there has of late been considerable improvement, owing doubtless to the inauguration of an amateur championship. In a comparatively recent match, in which the challenger, Mr. W. D. Courtney, beat Mr. A. P. Gaskell, the holder, three breaks were made of over a hundred, with several runs of over fifty—a distinct advance upon previous amateur form. Formerly, the competitions for the Universities' challenge cues were the chief amateur events, and these, as a rule, do not call forth more than very moderate talent, owing, perhaps, to the disfavour in which the game is not unreasonably regarded by college authorities; moreover the competitors are young, and with so many counter-attractions in the form of sports at which a purely athletic glory may be won, do not care to train for a mere indoor contest. Nevertheless, some very fine players have made their début, and as knights of the cue have won their spurs in these matches. The names of Lascelles, the two Rogers, Pontifex,

Adye, Douglas-Lane, and others, will readily occur to many old University men as those of quite first-class amateurs. It is a common experience to find army men playing a good game. They have every facility for practice, tables provided in every barracks, ample leisure in which to use them, and comrades at hand to play with; while again, among the *habitués* of club and hotel tables in provincial towns, may generally be found two or three who are no mean performers at this beautiful but difficult game. On the other hand, the country gentleman, so generally in the van in outdoor sports and pastimes, is commonly but an indifferent cueist. He lacks opponents, does not care for solitary practice, and often suffers a really fine table to become dull and sluggish for want of use and attention.

To speak as we did just now, of training, other than practice with the cue, in connection with a game like billiards, may sound to some ears incongruous. Nevertheless, it is the case that a moderate degree of physical training on the orthodox athletic lines gives the player, in a match or tournament, an indubitable advantage. A long game takes more out of the player than might be imagined, while a close finish is a severe strain upon the nerves; and these we know are largely dependent upon condition. A very good player, himself a winner of the 'Varsity Cue' and many matches, has assured me also that in his experience to smoke during a game is equivalent to giving twenty points in a hundred.

At no game, it is well known, is the incautious novice more likely to be swindled by the unscrupulous sharper than at billiards. The tricks of the billiard sharp are indeed many and various; and it is doubtful whether the tiro with a taste for betting is likely to fare worse at the hands of unscrupulous and needy markers, or at those of the quiet gentlemanly stranger whom he meets in a public room and challenges to a game. The invariable device, of course, is for the tempter to disguise by some means the actual superiority of his play, until he has established a wager that is worth the winning; and even then to win by the narrowest margin consistent with the safety of the bet. So cleverly was this once done by a notorious marker (who by the exercise of his talents earned for himself the significant sobriquet of 'Sam the Robber') in the case of a well-known amateur, that in a long sequence of play the professional, who began by requiring fifty points in two hundred, one fourth of the game, gradually demonstrated his ability to give those points, and thus by his artistic *finesse* won 200*l.* before the suspicion of his

antagonist, a really fine player with a considerable knowledge of sharpers and their little ways, was aroused. Needless to say our friend's experience was considerably augmented upon this occasion.

In our naval stations and seaport towns it is a not uncommon trick for a sharper to assume the garb and bearing of a mate or midshipman in the merchant service, in which guise he will enter a well-frequented billiard-room, and begin knocking the balls about in a frank and fluky sailor-like fashion until he gets a wager on his game; when, as will be readily imagined, his skill somewhat rapidly improves.

One deadly ruse is adopted to entrap a dupe of average intelligence. Suppose that Captain Rook engages Mr. Pigeon at the fascinating game of pyramids. Being immensely superior in skill the gallant captain chivalrously allows Pigeon to win the first game by one ball, and the second by two. Bully for P., who feels himself improving in his play and enters confidently on a third game, which the captain contrives to win by thirteen balls; when it is obvious that, the stakes being so much a ball, the captain will have secured a substantial gain on the three games. Moreover, the hapless Pigeon, having won two games out of three, still fancies himself rather the better player of the two, and is ready for another rubber at double the former stakes, to recoup himself for his previous loss. This is an artistic fleecing, but the surreptitious soaping of the tip of an adversary's cue (which has been known to be done) is but a low trick, and one which Captain Rook would very properly repudiate as unworthy of an officer and a gentleman.

Although billiards is one of the most difficult games at which to excel, involving as it does qualities of hand, eye, nerve, and judgment, yet a painstaking student soon acquires sufficient skill both to enjoy the game and avoid making himself a spectacle to lookers-on. His first business should be to acquire a knowledge of 'strength,' to attain which the tutor often requires the neophyte to play with a single ball, striking it until he can bring it after impact with one or more cushions to a given position; then this should be repeated with two balls, the position of each at the termination of their course being carefully noted. Tables vary very considerably in pace, according to the quality of the cushions, and the degree of care with which they and the cloth are tended; a fast table being more easy as well as pleasanter to play upon than a sluggish one. Probably the immense superiority of the professional, before alluded to,

consists rather in his completer knowledge of strength than in either his greater command of side or his larger *répertoire* of strokes. Indeed, the better the player, the simpler as a rule will be his game. He plays for the leave quite as much as for the immediate stroke, and therefore seldom attempts what we may term 'gallery' shots, unless there is absolutely nothing else to play for; even then he will choose more often to give a judicious miss. It is a common question for one amateur to ask another, 'What is your biggest break?' And the answer will probably be, 'Well, I have made twenty-five,' or thirty, as the case may be; whereas, perhaps, neither of them has ever made a break at all, properly so called. For what we understand by a 'break' in billiards is not merely a fortuitous series of cannons and hazards, but rather a deliberate sequence of such strokes, the position in which the balls are to be left having been approximately calculated before the making of each individual stroke; in other words, the subsequent stroke should not be left to chance, but so far as possible be carefully provided for beforehand. It is in this way, more than in the actual making of the strokes, that amateurs learn so much to improve their play by watching the exhibition matches now so much in vogue. Somewhat may be learned also from the cues with which these are played. If you were to take one of them in your hand you would find it to be of a good weight, and with a fair-sized top. A common error into which the amateur (especially if a smart neat-handed man, or a lady who can play a bit) is apt to fall, is to prefer a very light cue with a fine tip. Everybody will probably play better with a moderately heavy cue with a broadish tip. The writer of this article remembers good old Dufton during some lessons taken—*cheu fugaces anni!*—advising him to keep on increasing the weight of his cue, the fourteen-ounce one with which he was then playing being considered by the expert far too light. One is very apt to imagine that he can put more side on his ball with a fine-tipped cue; but this is not really the case; while the heavier cue is more steady, and with it one can really play more lightly, using 'less stick,' as the phrase goes. The cue should never be allowed to stand against the wall in the corner of a room, but be always suspended in the rack when not in use; and the tip should occasionally be rubbed lightly with fine glass-paper, to remove the grease which will otherwise prevent the chalk from properly adhering. Cues, it might be imagined, derive no peculiar efficiency or virtue from having belonged to persons of exalted rank; but a marker at Oxford used evidently to think otherwise,

for every term he would sell to confiding freshmen cues that had been left at his rooms by the Duke of Ditchwater.

Billiards, requiring neither great strength nor severe physical exertion, is essentially a ladies' game, and ladies not infrequently play a very pretty, if seldom a very strong, game. Nowhere, save perhaps on the ice or side-saddle, does a fine feminine form show to more advantage than when gracefully posed over a billiard-table, and nowhere do white arms gleam brighter than in the full flood of light deflected from shaded lamps upon the board of green cloth. 'Let us to billiards,' says Cleopatra, bored to death in the absence of her royal lover; and how many a weary hour in country houses, when the rain it raineth every day, and miry roads are ankle deep in mud, precluding out-door exercise, may be so lightened for the ladies of to-day!

What mirth and fun too obtain when the house-party meet at night in the well-appointed billiard-room for a game of 'shell-out' or 'cork-pool,' what time the bitter frost hardens the lawns without, while within, the huge logs roar on the wide hearth, casting many a flickering gleam on the massive mahogany or oaken table, and the cheerful click of the ivory balls, mingled with the sound of happy voices, vibrates in the warm lamp-lit air. Then even my Lady Dowager takes a cue and joins in the merry shout which greets the discomfiture of some young man who hugely fancies his play, as his ball, after missing the cork by the fraction of an inch, careers gaily round the table, and amid inextinguishable laughter subsides in a bottom pocket.

Private billiards must always remain an aristocratic and exclusive game, the great expense of its accessories preventing it from becoming a popular amusement. But this need never be the case with the public room. How often has the tedium of barrack life been relieved by the social game of pool, or even by the interesting endeavour to perform some special stroke in solitary practice! Who will not sympathise with the little band of British officers quartered at a lonely frontier station, when, as happened on a certain occasion, their long-expected table, after travelling for months about northern India, and turning up at every place but the right one, arrived at last, with its slate bed broken in three places!

At the village reading-room too, the working-man's club, what a valuable adjunct is the secondhand table procured by the energetic secretary, with the help of subscriptions from the parson and squire! So far from being prejudicial to the morality of the village, it exhibits quite an opposite tendency; the game, played

under proper regulations, invariably inculcating lessons of fair-play, courtesy, and restraint of temper, invaluable to the uncultured mind, generally lacking in such discipline; while its counter-attraction to the allurements of the drinking bar are well known to every curator of the morals of youth.

Whatever, if anything definite, may be the result of the present stir in the billiard world arising from the spot-stroke complications, there seems to be every chance of the game at last taking its due place in social esteem as the one (though always far behind whist and chess in point of intellectual pretensions) in which science, manual skill, and bodily exercise are in the highest degree combined, and also one which, apart from the accidents of gambling and cheating which have unjustly clouded its reputation, is in itself entirely free from anything to offend the most fastidious critic. Hitherto, the game has been too much in the hands of the professional and his patrons, but much is to be hoped from the establishment of an amateur championship, which we trust may be the means of long upholding the integrity of billiards, and of finally dispersing the unsavoury aroma which for so long has pervaded the moral atmosphere and obscured the genuine merits of a very noble pastime.

