



## THE HISTORY OF BILLIARDS.



N investigation into the early history of billiards reveals the curious fact that while many English writers on the game attribute its invention to a native of France, the French authorities declare that it had its origin in this country. There is however great conflict of opinion on both sides of the Channel, and no research has definitely settled when the game was first invented. Among those who declare for its English origin we find that Bouillet in the *Dictionnaire Universel des Sciences* says—"The game of billiards appears to be derived from the game of bowls. It was known in England in old times and was perhaps invented there;" and he adds it became the fashion in France owing to Louis XIV. playing the game after meals by the advice of his physicians.

This monarch's predilection for billiards is noticed in the *Memoirs of the Duc de Saint Simon* by M. Chernel, and the good fortune of M. Chamillard was attributed to his skill at the game. A quatrain concerning him ran as follows—

"Ci-git le fameux Chamillard,  
De son roi protonotaire,  
Qui fut un héros au billard,  
Un zéro dans le ministère."

The *Académie de Jeux* also says—"It would seem that billiards was invented in England." Dr. Johnson, characteristically perhaps, remarks in support of its English origin, that the name was originally "balyards," that is a game played with balls and sticks, and an allusion in Spenser, as we shall see presently, supported his theory. Strutt of the *Sports and Pastimes*, gives very contradictory evidence. He says—"The invention of this diversion is attributed to the French and

probably with justice; but at the same time I cannot help thinking it originated from an ancient game played with small bowls upon the ground, and indeed that it was when first instituted the same game transferred from the ground to the table." But this "ancient game" of which he gives a picture, like "pall-mall" and many others resembled croquet much more than billiards, and might quite as probably have been derived from the latter game, as have suggested it.

The authorities on the French side are no less numerous. Todd says the word billiards should be spelled *billard* from the French *bille* a ball and adds that the game is of French origin. Other dictionaries give the same etymology, and the first English writer on the game, Mr. E. White, in 1807, states that, "Billiards like the greater number of games which are prevalent in modern Europe is of French invention," a sweeping assertion which is hardly borne out by facts. In the *Nouveau Dictionnaire* the invention of the game is claimed for the French, but it is going too far to name the inventor as some authorities do, one Henrique Devigne, an artist in the days of Charles IX., 1560-74, for the game was undoubtedly known and played here before the days of Elizabeth. The earliest issue of *Hoyle's Games* does not mention billiards but the writer of the article in later editions speaks of the game of "Carambole" as an introduction from France; while Cotton in *The Compleat Gamester* assigns the origin of the game both to Spain and to Italy, an impartiality not particularly satisfactory to the historian. In a correspondence in *Notes and Queries* as to the origin of "crow" or "fluke," an accidental score at billiards, Mr. Mansfield Ingleby wrote—"Crow is a corruption of *raccroc*, the French equivalent. The game is originally French, and naturally many of its terms in England are from the French." He adds, "May not *raccroc* be from *raccrocher* to

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hit upon?" There is no doubt that most of the terms used in the game are derived from the French. There is the name itself, unless we agree with Johnson, and then we have *bricole* explained in some French rules published just before 1700, "on emploie ce mot pour signifier le chemin que la bille fait, après avoir frappé une des bandes du billard;" the word has the same meaning now and is acclimatized here. Cannons in old books are called *caroms* from *caramboler*—"C'est toucher avec sa bille les deux autres billes," while the *Queue* is of course the cue of our day, and the *Masse* the mace, now never used except by ladies and children at games played on the bagatelle table. It may be noted in this connection that it is a pity "cannon" ever took the place of "carom," and that "crow" is a word only heard now from the lips of very old-fashioned players, if indeed it be not quite extinct. "Fluke" is the word in vogue nowadays, and has been derived for obvious reasons from the fluke of an anchor. To sum up, it must be said that the balance of opinion inclines to the French origin of the game, but be that as it may we can console ourselves with the fact that nowhere in the world has it been brought to a greater state of perfection than in this country.

The allusions to billiards in our literature are very interesting. Some here presented are stereotyped in treatises on the game, but three or four have as far as we know not had attention called to them before. The most familiar reference to the game is that in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. After having asked for music the Queen continues—

*Cleo.* Let it alone; let's to billiards: Come, Charmian.

*Char.* My arm is sore; best play with Mardian.

*Cleo.* As well a woman with an eunuch play'd As with a woman. Come, you'll play with me, sir?

*Mar.* As well as I can, madam.

*Cleo.* And when good will is show'd, though't come too short,

The actor may plead pardon.

This game did not come off as every one knows, which is much to be regretted. A description by Shakespeare of the game as played in his time would have been invaluable. Spenser's allusion to billiards is not a complimentary one. He makes the Ape, in *Mother Hubbard's Tale* entertain young gallants—

"With dice, with cards, with balliards farre unfit,  
With shuttlecocks, misseeming manlie wit."

Ben Jonson, in the *Celebration of Claris*, has a pretty simile drawn from billiards, for we read—

"Even nose and cheek withal,  
Smooth as is a billiard ball."

In Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* we read—"The ordinary recreations which we have in winter, and in most solitary times busy our minds with are cards, tables, and dice, shovel-board, chess play, the philosopher's game, small trunks, shuttlecock, billiards," &c. In the comedy, *The Woman's Prize*, of Fletcher, which according to the office-book of Sir Henry Herbert was "anould play" in 1633, when he prohibited it



A. T. GASKELL (AMATEUR).

From a Photograph by E. C. PORTER.

till he had purged it of oaths and ribaldry, we find a rather indecent allusion to playing at billiards, which has, we fancy, not been noted before. In Locke's *Essay on the Human Understanding*, we read that, "When the ball obeys the billiard-stick, it is not any action of the ball but bare passion." Boyle speaks of "ivory balls meeting on a billiard-table"; Misson in his *Travels in England* mentions the game, and Gayton in his notes to *Don Quixote*, published in 1654, alludes to billiards, which he says, was in those days played in taverns. Some twenty years after that date, we find Evelyn describing a billiard-table which he saw at the house of the Portuguese ambassador, and he notes that the balls were struck with sticks shod with silver or brass—very uncomfortable cues we

should imagine. In the reign of James I. there is a note of a payment to a "joyner" for a billiard-board made of walnut-wood—evidently the forerunner of some of the handsome tables of the present day. In Charles Cotton's *Compleat Gamester*, 1674, which we have quoted above, we read that—"The gentile, cleanly, and most ingenious game at billiards had its first original from Italy, and for the Excellency of the recreation is much approved of and plaid by most nations in Europe, especially in England, there being few towns of note therein which hath not a publick billiard-table; neither are they wanting in many noble and private families in the country for the recreation of the mind and the exercise of the body." This writer says that the cushions were



JOHN ROBERTS, JUN. (CHAMPION)  
From a Photograph by H. H. CAMERON.

stuffed with "fine flax or cotton," and that the maces were of heavy wood tipped with ivory, the balls being made of the latter substance. He also gives a picture of two gentlemen playing at an oblong table with six pockets, prodding at the balls, with the broad ends of the maces held over their shoulders, the whole business looking very like the "ancient game" transferred to a table, which Strutt declared to be the original of billiards. In the edition of this work published in 1734 we first hear of "French billiards," as distinguished from English. This is said to be "so-called from their manner of playing the game, which is now only with masts [maces] and balls, port and king [the arch and stick of croquet] being now wholly laid aside." This game, as

"Cavendish" points out, was essentially the single pool of to-day, and it is curious to find that only good players were allowed to use cues—there were no tips then—others having to content themselves with maces for fear of cutting the cloth. The cue, by the way, appears to have been a foreign importation, and the French, Italians, and Dutch, we learn from White, looked down upon the English for clinging to the use of the mace. In a ballet of cards in a comedy by Thomas Corneille, acted in Paris in 1676, we see that one of the four slaves who held up the trains of the queens represented billiards: while it may be noted, too, that the stage of to-day has recently shown a pyramid ballet. In a book by M. Jean Barbeyrac, Professor of Law, published in 1710, which discusses at length the lawfulness of games of chance, we find billiards mentioned more than once as a game which, like tennis or raquets, depends upon manual dexterity. As billiards sometimes lead to gambling, one is not surprised to find it declared an unlawful game in an Act of the 30th year of George II., when playing it in public houses was prohibited under a penalty of £10. In a similar spirit were the regulations put forth regarding the game by the Elector of Saxony in 1716, among which there is a rule that "Those who frequent billiard-rooms must be served by men persons," as if female markers were fashionable. There was a billiard saloon in Oxford Street where, some fifteen years ago, a girl officiated as marker, and did her work carefully and well. Coming to the present day, readers of *Frank Fairleigh* will remember Smedley's condemnation of the game, in a heading to one of his chapters from a supposed old legend—

"The devil he baited a trap,  
With billiard balls and a cue;  
And he chose as marker,  
An imp much darker  
Than all the rest in hue.  
And he put on his Sunday clothes,  
And he played with saint and with sinner;  
For he'd found out a way  
To make the thing pay,  
And when losing he still was the winner."

Calverley too has told us in some ringing verses how in his undergraduate days he "Struck at Brown's the dashing hazard." John Sterling in the *Election*, a tiny duodecimo without name attached, which was published in Albemarle-street in 1841, tells us of Peter Mogg how—

"A younger son, he learnt in Oxford's halls  
The spherul harmonies of billiard-balls."

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Byron mentions billiards twice in *Don Juan*, the last two lines of Canto xiv. running as follows—

"You'll never guess, I'll bet you millions,  
milliards,  
It all sprung from a harmless game at billiards."

A "Lecture in Verse" on billiards appeared in *The Billiard Journal* now extinct, published by Messrs. Orme of Manchester, 1874, in which the poet declared somewhat prosaically that

"Of all the sports that glad the heart of man,  
Proudly may billiards claim to lead the van."

A writer quoted in *Songs of Society* has thus expressed himself regarding the game, when played with ladies (and they are often great proficient) in some verses entitled—"A Billiard Lesson"—

"'Twas pleasant on the winter nights  
To see beneath the shaded lights  
Her classic head bent low;  
To watch her snowy fingers make  
A tiny 'bridge,' and count each 'break,'  
Of this heart-breaking foe.

"And though she said it was a sin  
To beat her, I could always win  
To bear such pretty blame;  
While 'mid the winning strokes I made,  
It seem'd to me as if I play'd—  
A very losing game.

"There's *κῶδος* in the rattling strokes,  
You make amid a fire of jokes  
From chaffing fellow men;  
But should a beauty turn away  
And pout at your superior play  
You've other feelings then.

"No 'hazard,' that my cunning cue  
With all my greatest care could do—  
Or lucky 'fluke' might get,  
Could ever equal that I ran  
In playing—miserable man!  
With such a flirting pet.

"And though I lost such heaps of gloves  
In betting with her, when one loves  
Such losing bets are blest;  
And since she teased me night and day  
I only had at billiard-play  
The chances of a 'rest.

"The 'cannon' on the table green  
Will to a Canon come I ween,  
Who'll tie me to a wife;  
And she with backers not a few,  
Will quietly put on the 'screw,'  
And 'pocket' me for life."

No less a poet than Robert Browning has  
deigned to go to the billiard-table for an

illustration of his meaning. We read in  
*Mr. Sludge, the Medium*—

"This could not last long; soon enough I found  
Who had worked wonders thus, and to what  
end:  
But did I find all easy, like my mates?  
Henceforth no supernatural any more?  
Not a whit: what projects the billiard-balls?  
'A cue,' you answer: 'Yes, a cue,' said I;  
'But what hand, off the cushion, moved the  
cue?'"

The bibliography of billiards is not very extensive. Most of the leading professionals have put their names to books compiled for them under their supervision by other people, and one or two amateurs have also written on the game. By far the most interesting work is the one by White quoted before, *A Practical Treatise on the Game of Billiards*, 1807, which has a historical value as the first regular book on the subject published in this country. He says that after "the French, the Germans, the Dutch and the Italians brought it into vogue throughout most parts of the continent," it became "a favourite diversion in England, particularly among persons of the first rank." He then utters a prediction which has certainly been fulfilled—"As it is replete with entertainment, and attended with that kind of moderate exercise, which renders it at the same time more agreeable and conducive to health, it will, in all probability, long remain in fashion." We have an engraving of a billiard table, the instruments used at the game which include the cue, the mace and the bistoquet, the latter being described as "sorte d'instrument avec lequel on joue pour éviter de billarder." With regard to the cue which had then no tip, though leather tips were invented by Mingaud, a Frenchman, about the same period, the player is advised to roughen the end with a file to prevent its slipping from the ball. The advice as to playing the game is for the most part sound and has been copied into the majority of the works published since. The rules appear to be mainly founded upon some French ones promulgated shortly before, and here it is that we meet with the famous axiom so often repeated since that, "*L'angle d'incidence de la bille contre une des bandes du billard est égal à l'angle de reflexion*," but the players of that day soon discovered that especially when using the cue, the angle of reflexion was not always equal to the angle of incidence: that is to say what we now call "side" had been accidentally put on, with the result that the ball was deflected one way or the other,

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according to the side on which it was struck. White saw this and elaborately explains that "it is the effect of the particular manner in which the point of the instrument is applied to the ball, and it requires some delicacy to avoid it." Here was the first recognition of the side-stroke, but White only looked upon it as a nuisance to be avoided by playing with the butt, and it was not utilized until shortly afterwards when Bartley, the proprietor of billiard rooms at Bath, rediscovered it, as it were, and showed it to his marker Carr. This individual saw the capabilities of the stroke and improved upon it, and it is said that while it was still a secret he attributed it to the chalk he used and sold it for half-a-crown a box, as possessing "twisting" powers.



WILLIAM COOK.  
From a Photograph by H. H. CAMERON.

There are rules for the various games then in vogue in White, many of them as he acknowledges taken from the French, which he quotes, and those for "The Winning and Losing Carambole Game—" that is to say the ordinary game of billiards—are substantially the same as those in force at the present day. He also gives rules for other games now extinct except the simple cannon game, and one virtually single pool, and the regulations of an extraordinary game called "Fortification Billiards," played with French and English forts, passes, batteries, flags, balls and all the paraphernalia of warfare. This was evidently an amplification and survival of the earliest game on a billiard-table like "pall mall," which we have already noticed. The author's general observations are admirable and have not been improved upon

in more recent works while he gives elaborate tables of odds and much curious information on the doctrines of chances, mainly from the French. There are further a number of useful diagrams, and in them the player will note that the "Jenny"—or hazard from baulk into a middle or top pocket, which was called so then as it is now, must have been played without "side," as Mr. Cook still counsels it should be done in certain positions.

More recent books on billiards can hardly be said to have improved much upon this early treatise. The books ostensibly by the players Roberts, senior, Dufton and Cook, and claiming to be practical, are only in a measure so; as a rule they leave the beginner to find out for himself precisely the things he wants to know most, and they are full of irrelevant padding about great matches in which the authors have taken part, and in some cases with wholly useless mathematics. There are of course interesting mathematical problems connected with billiards, but they are of no practical use whatever. An earlier book by Kentfield, a celebrated Brighton professional, is better than most modern treatises, and an amateur, Mr. Mardon, wrote a sensible book on the game, disfigured however by much egotism and by absurd glorification of the said Kentfield, who would not have been considered even a second-rate player nowadays. A little book by a writer who called himself "Captain Crawley," is mainly, it would seem, a compilation, and this too, is disfigured by twaddle in imitation of Thackeray about the Megatherium Club and so forth. Better still perhaps is Bennett's book edited by "Cavendish," and best of all for beginners is a little work recently published entitled *Billiards Simplified, or How to Make Breaks*. This is the only book which makes perfectly clear and illustrates the half-ball stroke, or "natural angle" of which other writers say so much but never condescend to explain. Very little however can be learned from books. More can be taught by a professional in half-an-hour, supplemented by practice and carefully watching good players than by all that was ever written on the game. Oddly enough the books supposed to be written by the finest players are the least practical. Mr. Cook is a very good spot-stroke player, though his fame has been eclipsed in recent years by Mr. Peall; but the directions given for playing it in a little book he published some years ago leave much to be desired.

Billiards like most other games and especially those which depend upon skill as well

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as chance, has been, since its earliest days, a favourite one with *chevaliers d'industrie*. It can be of course, and is, played fairly and honestly by gentlemen, but the "sharper" sees in it many opportunities for his illicit gains, and no sketch of its history would be complete without some notice of the way in which he proceeds. White complains that even in his time the game had "been in some measure prostituted by a set of men, who infest the various places of public resort and live upon the spoils of the unwary," and in an elaborate foot-note he warns his readers against betting with strangers who may all the time be concealing the strength of their game. The caution was needed if there were many men about like a Mr. Andrews who flourished about the period at which the book appeared. We are told of this interesting individual that "He devoted himself entirely to the goddess, and worshipped her incessantly in the form of two ivory balls. He was remarkably thin, not very tall, and a perfect vacuum with respect to every possible idea except billiards." It is said that while always "laying by for bets," and exercising "latent *finesse*," he did not win so much money as his devotion to the game deserved, though his gains were considerable. After winning large sums at billiards however he would lose them at hazard and tossing, and it is recorded that he died a very poor man. A good story is told of the famous Earl of Chesterfield, who when at Bath used to amuse himself by playing billiards with a notorious gamester named Lookup. The latter won a game or two and then asked his lordship how many he would give him if he were to put a patch over one eye. Lord Chesterfield agreed to give him five—the game then it must be remembered was twenty-one, or at the most twenty-four—and Lookup having won several games in succession his opponent threw down his mace declaring that Lookup played as well with one eye as with two. "I don't wonder at it, my Lord," replied Lookup, "for I've only seen out of one these ten years." A very similar case is within the writer's own experience. Some curious tales were told in 1820 about an individual named the Dutch Baron, who "concealed his play so well that no one could form an idea of its extent." He "always won on important occasions," and after "rooking" scores of players in Bath and London turned out to have been a billiard-marker in Hamburg. Readers of *Peregrine Pickle* too, will remember the chapter in which "Godfrey executes a scheme at Bath by which a whole company of

sharpers is ruined." They played billiards, the old white winning game, and it may be noted that the cues are called "masts." In a later edition of *The Compleat Gamester*, in 1750, we come across a story of sharpening in which a gentleman's cue was tampered with, a little rising being left in the middle; and in a sporting work, *Crockford on Life in the West*, 1828, there is an elaborate account of how a young gentleman at Cheltenham was swindled out of £5,300 at billiards. Sir John Fielding, writing in 1776, warns strangers against coffee-houses, and says that if any one "finds in you the least inclination to cards, dice, the billiard-table, bowling-green, or any other sort of gaming you are morally sure of being taken in." This part



W. J. PRALL.

From a Photograph by CHARLES F. TREBLE.

of the subject may be dismissed with the following curious story told by T. B. Thiers in his *Traité des Jeux et des Divertissements*. He says—"Saint Ignace de Loiola joua un jour au billard avec un gentil-homme qui l'avoit invité d'y jouer, et s'il en faut croire l'éloquent Jésuite Maphée, il le gagna miraculeusement quoiqu'il ne sçût pas le jeu. *Cum nihil minus calleret Ignatius, divinitus factum est ut in singulos omnino trajectus victor evaderet.*" It is amusing to find a Jesuit divine representing St. Ignatius Loyola as a sort of "Heathen Chinese," for we may be sure that his antagonist, though probably a devout believer, had his private suspicions about that particular miracle.

Turning to the practice of the game it will be found that the popularity of billiards

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has been enormously on the increase of late years. There are now three or four times as many public tables in all large towns as there used to be, and no country house is considered complete without a billiard-table. The game too is recognized as a healthy exercise, developing the muscles of the chest and arms more particularly, but it should of course be played in a properly ventilated room. The progress of the game in another way has been equally remarkable, that is to say, players have become extraordinarily proficient at it as compared with the performances of fifty years ago. The old game, as we have said, was "twenty-four up," and in the second edition of Mr. Mardon's book, published as lately as 1849, he advises a player to "confine himself to the legitimate game of twenty-four up," adding that "the game of fifty or one hundred up produces generally a desire of showing off, begetting a passion for display, leading to an elaborate style, at variance with discretion." We shall see presently how absurd this sounds when compared with the play of to-day, but before discussing that it must be said that the long scores made are mainly due to what is known as the spot-stroke, which is, it may be explained for the benefit of beginners, a series of consecutive red winning hazards into the two top pockets, the red of course being spotted in the same place after each stroke. The use of this stroke had been known for years, but no one took full advantage of it until John Roberts, senior, for long the champion billiard-player, practised it assiduously, and mainly by its aid held his own against all comers. Then a curious thing happened. So long as the elder Roberts was the only man, so to speak, who could make the spot-stroke, there was no outcry about it; but the moment Cook and other younger players became proficient at it, it was arranged that the games for the championship should be played on a table with smaller pockets and the spot nearer the cushion, making long spot-breaks practically impossible. This curious anomaly still exists. The games for the championship are played upon a table which differs from those in ordinary use, an absurdity which could only be paralleled by altering the form of the wickets or the bats when Eton and Harrow meet at Lord's and reverting to those now in use when playing ordinary games at cricket. Then again matches are played "spot-barred," which explains itself, or "all in," that is to say, the regular game, and there is no doubt that something should

be done to make the tables uniform, so that the championship honours should belong to the man who could beat every one else at the game as it is ordinarily played.

A glance at the greatest "breaks," or continuous scores, of the most famous players will show the gigantic strides made in the game. We shall enumerate the "all in" breaks first.

The largest break made by Edwin Kentfield, known as "Jonathan," a Brighton professional, who was said to be the best player up to 1849, was 196 points, and another player in the same town, named Bedford, made 157. Then John Roberts, senior, appeared on the scene, and his best break of 346 was for many years considered unsurpassable. But those feats are as nothing to recent performances. Cook has made 936, John Roberts, junior, 1,100, Mitchell 1,863, while Peall has reached the astonishing total of 2,143. In the spot-barred game the figures of these fine players vary a little, for Roberts heads the list with 690, followed by Cook with 462, Peall 322 and Mitchell 312. As to consecutive spot-strokes it may be noted that while Kentfield never made more than 57 spot-strokes, Cook has made 270, and Peall 548, while more have been made in practice by Mitchell who achieved 612. It will thus be seen that the professional players of to-day have positively made a number of single spot-strokes exceeding the largest break of John Roberts, senior, who was billiard champion for twenty years. Taking that fact into consideration, and seeing that Peall came near to beating his own record the other day, it would seem that the breaks of the future will only be measured by the physical endurance of the players.

Descriptions of the various games played on a billiard-table do not come within the scope of this paper. We will conclude with a bit of advice to young players given by an old writer which is worth remembering—"Every inordinate affection of the mind," he says, "immoderate bursts of passion, and even the fretting at trifling disappointments in his game, are usually found prejudicial to the player; his nerves being affected, it becomes impossible for him to make his stroke with that steadiness and nicety the game requires." If the beginner remembers that, inscribes *Dum spiro spero* on his cue, and above all practises assiduously he need never despair of becoming proficient in that most fascinating of all recreations.—"*Le Jeu Royal de Billard.*"

H. SAVILE CLARKE.