

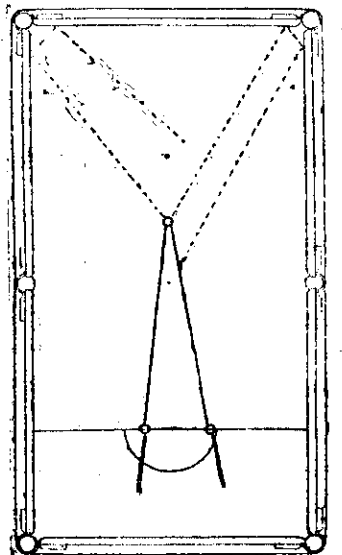
BILLIARDS

BY AN EXPERT

Avoiding the Natural Angle.

It is one thing to mechanically allow the balls to steer their own course, and a totally different matter to dictate their movements. In a measure, we may here find a reason for the wide gulf that is fixed betwixt the professional and the amateur billiardist. The avoidance of pitfalls forms one of the chief difficulties of the play. All the way through the length and breadth of a break the skillful player is endeavouring to avoid all complications in the re-ter-position of those terribly elusive spheres. To do so he has more often than not to tend to the most simple "leaves" with some intricate stroke arrangement which passes the notice of all but the very observant and critical onlooker. It is the little things which count for so much in good billiards. Once the balls are nicely under the player's control he has to exert all his knowledge and best powers of execution, shot by shot, to retain his hold over them. The greatest test of merit may be found in the way one operates upon the balls at loose quarters. It is then with what is, apparently, only a succession of the most simple positions that one's capacity to direct matters can be fairly measured. What looks more absurdly easy to the uninitiated than a run of close cannons? Not knowing the inwardness of things and the delicacy of the work, it is assumed that, because the actual scoring stroke is practically always assured, nothing could be easier. But, so far from this, these sequences of little cannons with the balls turned and twisted into fantastical triangular shapings represent the highest flights of the game.

By deep studying and unending practice the professional expert has revealed the greater possibilities of billiards. He has elevated his profession to the level of the fine arts. He is, indeed, an artist, a master of technique, a controller of effects of light and shade, of power and of gentleness. It takes as long to train and send forth the cultured article in billiards as in music, singing, or painting. The finer senses are, however, less developed among the professional than with the amateur class. A strongly competitive nature is one of the chief needs of a great billiardist. He has not the same beautiful traditions to soften his nature as have the students and the professors of the greater arts. Only by sheer force of character, allied to the most masterful cueing, can he rise to the head of his profession. He must be ambitious, and even jealous of his contemporaries; true to himself and patient and unwearied in his efforts to put his foot upon the topmost rung of the ladder of fame. Few who may see the leading lights of the billiard world can conceive



How the professionals avoid pocketing the object-ball.

the years of unalloyed attachment theirs has been to the game they adorn. There is no college to educate the youthful player, and he has to pick up the hints and the thousand and one details that go to polish him into one above the ordinary by close attention, the keenest observation, and diligent workings out upon the table.

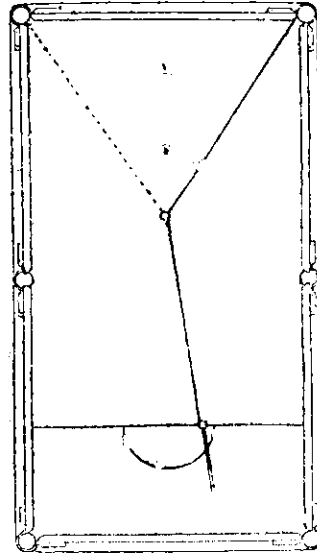
The path of the would-be champion is, indeed, a thorny one, as knowledge of the chief essentials to success is not exactly spread broadcast. There is, of course, much that the rising young player may do for himself, but the time of his probation would be infinitely shortened if the first-class artists were more expansive.

John Roberts, and his father before him, were the exemplary billiardists who may be said to have laid the foundations of English billiards. Both were—and one still remains—bewitching masters of the cue, who believed in the game as a game, and who set themselves to solve its hidden mysteries. They conjointly form the patterns which the new generation of billiard experts have adopted. No greater freedom of plying the cue can be imagined than that which the natural style of the Robertses gave to them. Being tall men, verging on six feet in height, and of proportionate physique, their long arm leverage provided enormous power of cue. And it was by such means, by dazzling stroke-play, in which forcing hazards were much to the fore, and the balls consequently moved about to a greater degree than is usually associated with billiards of the first-class, that the foundation stone of the game was laid. Not until that most eminent demonstrator of the delicate touch (a faculty inherited by his son, the present bearer of this illustrious billiard name), the late William Cook, burst unexpectedly on the scene and acquired championship honours, was the finer side of billiard technique employed. It only needed the force of this example and a grasp of the immeasurable strength. It gave to one able to combine the two extremes of stroke play to show John Roberts the younger the path he should pursue. It was uphill work for him, however, for many a long day. Having learned in the old school, he did not too readily adapt himself to the new one, much as he appreciated the added power these lessened ball movements afforded to a player. That is the course of his trials and tribulations, which none will admit more freely than the father of modern billiards, John Roberts, jun. He contrived to fashion himself into a more effective playing instrument than had been thought possible.

With an increased and seemingly ever-increasing command over the willful balls, Roberts invented any number of strokes by playing them in unconventional ways. Position was his great objective, and his numerous conceptions always leading up to the best of results, made him the idol of the billiard world, as well as the exemplification of one bearing all for the future. The spot-stroke was hedged with too many limitations and a certain monotony, despite its inherent value as a scoring force and the pivot of play, and he discarded it for a more attractive and, assuredly, more complex game. As a precursor of the present all-round, or, at any rate, open style of play, the spot-barred billiards exercised a world of good. The real beauties of the game have been unearthed by its means, and a vastly more accomplished band of cue-men has been trained to the pocket form of billiards, which, by the way, has no equal in point of variety of spectacular effect. Both Dawson and Stevenson wisely made John Roberts the younger their model. Then, in the fulness of time, it became an open question whether the pupils had not improved upon the master. They gave an incentive to another group of rising players, of whom Reece is rapidly giving himself a right to challenge comparison with his mentors. Apart from him there is that prodigy of match-player, Melbourne Inman, whose adherence to old-fashioned but still charming losing hazard, has made him a veritable billiard hero in the eyes of Australian and Indian enthusiasts. Other than these, there is that unconventional cue-man, Edward Diggle, who opposes every cannon of the

game in his preliminary address to the ball, yet manages by some occult means to impart to it a trueness of aim, and an exact strength and fitting motion which cannot be excelled.

When players of the stamp of those I have quoted break down, as they usually do at some seemingly easy stroke, you may depend upon it they have endeavoured to score by the most difficult of the several possible ways which are ever at the option of a skilled cueist. As an idea in point, I recommend a glance at the diagrams given herewith. They represent the object-ball in a position which it not infrequently runs to—equidistant between the middle and pyramid spots. When so placed the natural angle will regularly and automatically bring about the disappearance of both cue-ball and object-ball. They will respectively



The recurring "pair of breeches" stroke.

find the depths of the two top pockets, if, as I say, played with the customary half-ball stroke, as the amateur is wont to do. He does not enter into the avoidance of this double-pocketing, nor of guiding the object-ball, especially if it is the white, on to the end or side cushions. The actual scoring is only one part of the scheme, and the remaining part of it—the control of the object-ball—is more finished and difficult than the mere sending of the cue-ball to the pocket. Upon the second diagram is shown how the professional gives the object-ball a direction to the top cushion or side cushion, as the position of the second object-ball advises him to do. If either spots his ball nearer the centre of the D, and using check "side," strikes it fuller than half-ball, or by placing it near by the corner-spot, and using running "side," and taking the ball somewhat thinly, keeps it away from the pocket.

GOLDEN DAYS IN MANY LANDS.

Continued from page 20.

Aldo's manoeuvres in his cage were somewhat erratic, and the snap was not a success, but each time we passed Aldo's home some neighbour was sure to see and recognise us, and rushing in, would bring out little Aldo, best clothes, cage, and all. I haven't the very faintest idea what is the technical name of this cage, nor for what you would ask if you went to a shop to buy one, but without doubt it is the cleverest thing I have ever seen for the assistance of a toddling baby.

The triumph of Venice, even greater than the Grand Canal and its palaces, is the Piazza San Marco. What an unequalled square it is, with its three massive colonnaded sides, and inviting church of San Marco at one end! When I first walked into it years ago, the tall rugged campanile was standing, compelling all eyes towards the beautiful church; after standing for a thousand years it

fell, and with its fall the Piazza lost one of its most striking features. But a new building, reproducing the features of the old structure, is now in course of erection. All round the colonnaded sides of the Piazza are the numerous picture, glass, marble and jewellery shops, inter-crypted here and there by a cafe—Florians and the Quadri, famous in history, and many a more insignificant one. A storey above these is the Imperial Palace at the end facing the church, and the Old and New Procuratie on either side. Towards sunset and again after dinner, when the music of the band resounds from those pillared colonnades the tourist and resident life of Venice collects in the cafes. Every morning we found countless tourists feeding the pigeons in the Piazza or dodging in and out of the shops of the Merceria—that famous and busy highway that leads from the Piazza to the Rialto.

Beside San Marco, facing the Piazzetta on one side, and the Riva Degli Schiavoni and the lagoons on the other, is one of the most famous palaces in the world—the home of the Doges for many a year. From the Piazzetta and from the Grand Canal the palace is most beautiful, but inside it is gloomy. To climb the golden staircase and wander through profusely decorated halls and find them all empty of living creatures; to crane one's neck to view the wonderful works of art that are "skayed" on the ceilings, and to find that even in the far-away days of Tintoretto, Paradise was overcrowded, all this is, I confess, depressing. When will genius condescend to invent a chair, somewhat on the plan of that used by dentists, by means of which one can recline in a comfortable position and view the beautiful pictures on the ceilings of Italian palaces? It is full time this want was attended to. After a few weeks in Italy one begins to have grave suspicions that all the pictures one likes best are in most-unlook-at-able positions on the ceilings.

In the Doges' Palace we wandered by the hour through numberless halls—those of the Council of Ten and those of the Grand Council, and many another—and in spite of the picture-covered walls, and ceilings our footsteps echoed ominously and our spirits sank. After passing through the Sala Della Bussola, and peeping into the Lion's Mouth, which had received so many false accusations in the Fourteenth Century days, and then continuing on from the Halls of Justice across the Bridge of Sighs and down into the tiny dungeons—but there at least we had Ruskin's authority that we need waste no signs for persecuted righteousness—we felt not a little bit relieved to come out again on to the Riva and find the motley crowd of modern Venetians dodging in and out of the Piazza quite unaffected by the history we had just been recalling.

Sweetest of all in Venice are the cries of her night. When the sound of the band on the Piazza has died away, and the hush of slumber hangs over her noisy canopies; just as my drooping senses had almost lost themselves in sleep, there came to my ears the lap, lap, of the water against the walls of our house. Not a bit like the uneven clamorous noise of the waves on the sea shore or on your vessel's side, but the very softest and gentlest of tapping, that of a lover who knows his lady is awake and will hear, and who fears to arouse others from their sleep. It did not rise and fall, it never grew harsh and impatient, but ever continued to gently caress the walls of my room, and indeed I grew to love it, and to listen tremulously for it, fearful lest by any sound I might drown its gentle murmur. Sometimes sleep forsook me and then at intervals all through the night I would hear the cry of the gondoliers, as they turned the corner into our canal—very, very often they were singing—singing in the strong baritone of the Venetians; they sang at midnight, during the hours between midnight and the dawn, and a voice still rang as a gondola hurried by when the first rays were waking the pigeons of St. Mark's.

Next of the Series—

FLORENCE, THE LILY AT THE FOOT OF THE APENNINES.

Jinks, M.P.R., grew desperate. Drudge by the quart was quaffin', And yet his cough would indicate He'd soon require a collin'; He took Woods' Peppermint Cure! And since He's been of all debaters The one plus ultra, and the prince Of loud-juggled legislators!