

Chapter 7

POOL ROOM PERFECTIONISTS

POOL ROOMS were of course forbidden to young Methodists; and of course the time was sure to come when the average young Methodist would determine to find out what it was about them that made them forbidden. They had an evil name from which they have not wholly shaken themselves free to this day, probably because of the similarity of names between a place where pool and billiards may be played and an illegal place where race results may be obtained and bets laid. Of the latter I had no experience as a youth just beginning to find out that Spadina Avenue was not actually the extreme west, as far as Toronto was concerned and that there was a downtown district which was a good deal livelier then than now. There were a couple of local poolrooms, both run in connection with a sort of news agent's shop, the playing tables being in the rear.

In the months when out of doors entertainment was not inviting, the pool rooms had their own appeal and made their habitués. Once the habit had been formed there was no place more alluring even on the hottest day of summer than a pool room. This recalls an incident in a billiard room on King Street West between Bay and York Streets, where there were two very popular resorts. One was at the time managed by George Sutton, a Canadian, who became a worlds champion, and remains in the records as one of the giants with Ives, Slosson and the current master, Hoppe.

One afternoon in midsummer, which might have been on Dominion Day, I strayed into Sutton's rooms. It was sweltering inside, and half a dozen men were lounging about a centre table, placed immediately under a skylight through which the sun was burning. Sutton had the table to himself. He was practicing. He was a rather stout and florid man, then perhaps in his middle forties. The sweat stood out on his face and on his arms and occasionally he would stop to mop it off. Then he would resume his toil. For toil of the most routine and grinding sort it was. He was practicing a *massé* shot. Every time he made it he reassembled the balls in their original position and tried it again.

I watched him for perhaps an hour, and for the first time in my life got a glimmering of how an artist is made. Sutton, however, was not playing. He was working. He was working on one particular shot long after he had lost all interest in it, toiling to make himself perfect, aware that it was only by this grinding labour that he would become master of the *massé* shot and could count on himself never to miss it when the occasion should arise in the course of a championship match. After a while the loungers lost interest in what was going on, and straggled out one by one. I was the last to leave and Sutton was still hard at work, with the sweat from his arms staining the green cloth.

Several years after, I was the witness of another interesting incident. The place was run by Jake Saunders, a notable figure in the sports life of Toronto. He was a mulatto, ran a poker game and, partly no doubt as a blind operated a billiard room. Saunders was a pretty fair player; that is to say, he was a better player than three-quarters of his

customers. As a rule he played only with a few friends whose game was about the same as his, but it was a convention of the old billiard hall that if a stranger came in looking for a game the proprietor would play with him, if nobody else was willing.

One night a stranger turned up in Saunders' academy and after awhile began a game of English billiards with Jake. They were playing for a couple of dollars a game, and seemed to be evenly matched. Gradually the stranger, who apparently was from out of town, got ahead and in fact needed but two points to end the game. Saunders' ball was just over a corner pocket, with the stranger's ball a couple of feet down the long cushion and an inch or two from it. The red ball was almost frozen to the cushion on the other side of the table and near the lower pocket diagonally opposite to the one where the Saunders' cue ball was lying.

The game was in the stranger's hands and he smiled briefly as he chalked his cue and turned to pot Saunder's ball. As he prepared to shoot Jake said, "*Just a minute*" and laid his cue across the angle of the table in front of his ball. The stranger stopped and looked up with some surprise. "*What's the matter?*" he asked.

Saunders was very grave. "*Do I understand,*" he inquired coldly, "*that you are about to sink me?*"

"*Sure am,*" said the stranger cheerfully. "*Why not?*"

"*Very well*" said Saunders, "*go ahead and shoot. But I want to tell you that it will be the most ungentlemanly act that was ever committed in these rooms. You meet all kinds of people here,*" he went on, getting a tremble into his voice, "*and I'm just an ordinary pool room keeper. But I know what's right and what's not right. So go ahead and shoot if you want to,*" he concluded, trying to give an imitation of Barbara Frietchie.

The man stared at him in embarrassment, and then glanced round at the assembled loafers who regarded him stonily.

"*What other shot have I got?*" he demanded. "*I know I oughtn't to sink the opponent's ball, but I haven't got another shot.*"

"*Course you've got another shot,*" said Saunders brightening up. "*You can carom off the red into the end pocket, or you could sink the red. You might even try a carom off the red with plenty of draw for the white.*"

Two of these shots might have been within the competence of George Sutton. That is to say, he could have made either of them perhaps twice out of five times. The third shot was simply impossible. But the morale of the stranger had been shaken by Saunders' emotional appeal and he was weak enough to accept the forlorn suggestions. He failed to score, of course, and then Jake got the balls and caught up to him. He ran to 98 wanting two to run out. He had a couple of easy chances. One of them was to pot the

stranger's cue ball. This he did to the great amusement of the loafers, and his usually poker face broke into a broad grin.

I never saw the stranger there again. Of course the convention of not sinking an opponent's ball in English billiards has a rational basis which I mention for the sake of those readers who may not understand the game.

When a player sinks the red ball, or scoring what is called a winning hazard, the ball is immediately put back on the table and is in play again. When he sinks his own ball either off the red or the opponent's cue ball, it is returned to him and is in hand so that he can continue playing. That is to say, the three balls remain on the table. But when the opponent's ball is sunk it is taken out of the play leaving the player with just the red and his own cue ball. Since obviously there are more chances of scoring when there are three balls in play than when there are two, it is generally bad practice to sink an opponent's ball. From being bad practice the convention has grown up that it is also bad manners.

George H. Gooderham, an inveterate billiard player, used to go to pieces when an opponent would sink his cue ball. He regarded it as a personal insult. But when a player needs only two points to win a game and has a chance to score by sinking the opponent's ball he would be a lunatic not to take it, for since the game would then be over it would be a matter of no consequence to him how many balls would remain on the table for the next shot.

I find it difficult after a lapse of years to say just what was a waste of time and money and what was an experience that may have been of value perhaps subconsciously to a student of human nature. I have told how I got a glimpse of the hot, dusty road an artist must travel if he is to reach his goal or even come within sight of it, by watching a billiard player practice on a day when it might seem as if I could have been better employed elsewhere.

Another memory of another Saunders' pool room has taught me that some of the axioms of conduct I acquired in the grocery store are not of immutable application. There was a man who had not been long in business who used to be in and out of Saunders' pool room, which was just across the road, a dozen times a day. I thought, with the censoriousness of youthful Methodism that this man ought to have remained in his hat store attending to sales, and thus laying the foundations for a respectable career instead of playing billiards; if not indeed doing worse and playing poker in the game that was running another floor up. Since this young man retired some twenty years ago with a fortune made by selling hats, I can see now that playing pool or even poker did not ruin him, that he was, in fact a happier and more successful man than many of his critics would have thought possible. So I have come to the conclusion that to every aphorism or proverb the word "*sometimes*" ought to be attached.

It was in these rooms that as a youth I got an understanding of the character of a man with whom I was to have business dealings in later years, and who, before my youthful

but widely opened eyes, became an eminent citizen, a solid man, of rotund joviality, extremely popular, and whose pinched and rather mean end came as no surprise to me, one perhaps out of hundreds.

It was the night before the twenty-fourth of May and this gentleman, a valued customer, was playing English caroms with three friends. They were all pretty fair players. They had been enjoying themselves for an hour or so, when a rather difficult shot arose and the jovial gentleman made preparations for a *massé* shot. He was going through the preliminary jiggings of his cue when the marker intervened. *"Hi Mr. Simpson, don't try that shot, please. You'll ruin the cloth."*

Mr. Simpson turned a fish-like eye on him. *"I know what I'm doing, Herbie,"* he said. *"When I want your advice I'll ask you for it."*

"That's all right, Mr. Simpson," replied Herbie, polite but persistent, *"but I know by the way you're holding that cue that you're going to rip the cloth. Your cue ought to be dead straight up and down. Yours is slanted."*

Mr. Simpson continued to stare at him. He said, *"If I rip the cloth, I guess I'm able to pay for it, Herbie,"* to which Herbie replied finally, *"Well, that's all right but tomorrow's a holiday and the table ought to be working all day and if you ruin the cloth I won't have time to fix it up."*

Mr. Simpson said nothing but addressed himself to the shot. Sure enough his cue slipped from the top of his ball to the table, and a right angled cut about three inches in each direction flashed out like the breaking of a pane of glass. He turned red in the face. Herbie moaned, and the game came to an end.

Herbie told me the sequel a month later. The next time Mr. Simpson came in he told him that the cost of repairing the cloth was a couple of dollars, which did not of course include the loss of revenue over the holiday when the table was out of use. Mr. Simpson said he would attend to the matter. Three or four days later he called Herbie aside and said to him, *"Herbie, I've been making inquiries at my club and I find out that at a club little accidents like this are not chargeable to individual members. The club absorbs them. So, Herbie, as I consider Jake's place a sort of club I don't feel that I ought to pay anything for the torn cloth."*

And as Mr. Simpson was a valued customer Herbie did not insist. But I was given an understanding of Mr. Simpson's real character which was probably worth a good deal to me in later years when I had to come into close contact with him. Crime does not pay, but sometimes billiards may. But the local pool room on Queen Street East were no such establishments as those downtown with which I became acquainted later. These were mere appendages of cigar stores where also weekly magazines were sold. One was Harrington's; the other Cap Jackman's. Cap was a retired lake captain, a burly hard-bitten citizen, and it was said that he and Chuck, his son with whom he was in partnership, had not spoken to each other for many years. How they were able to

conduct the business, do the buying and divide the profits, without exchanging words was then and remains to me now a mystery.

Boys were not supposed to enter pool rooms until they had reached the age of sixteen, but I think that the proprietors took it for granted that if a boy looked to be old enough to have five cents to spend on a game of pool he looked to be sixteen years old at least.