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BRIDGE OR BACKGAMMON?

BY FRANK CROWNINSHIELD

IF one were asked to name the most striking single difference between the society of New York at the moment and the same society a few years ago, one might reasonably answer, "Higher gambling." Higher risks, higher stakes, higher hazards are in the air, and this follows naturally from the constantly increasing prosperity, extravagance, and adventurousness of the American people, the craving for the chief manifestations of which have been speed and the rocketing course of the stock market.*

Look, for instance, at our recent records in the air, in motordromes, at our altitude feats, motor-boat records, and other achievements in speed. A motor driver seems literally not to be happy unless he is breaking the speed regulations. One railway announces a two-day air service from coast to coast. Another railway system cuts it by four hours. The *Bremen* slashes seven hours off the trans-Atlantic voyage. Everywhere, the pace is faster, the love of risk greater. This love of risk has been extremely well exemplified by recent adventures in the stock market. Where, two years ago, there were ten speculators in the market, there are twenty to-day. Where investors bought bonds, they now buy common stocks. Where the public bought cheap motors, they now buy the high-priced cars.

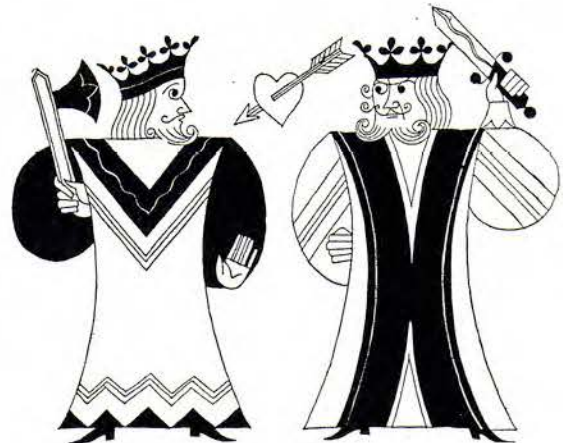
Risk is in the air in all walks and classes of society. This new passion for hazardous enterprises has also manifested itself, in a curious way, in the games indulged in by fashionable people in New York. Auction bridge, which, in effect, was beginning to languish a year or two ago, has suddenly come violently to life again in the new form of Contract. Backgammon, as a game, was a dead and discarded pastime relegated to old men in chimney corners until the practise of doubling—"doubling by matches," as it is called—was injected into it and gave it a new stimulus, so much so that it has now everywhere become the rage in clubs and at house-parties. Even straight Contract was deemed, of late, a little tame and lacking in excitement. But, with the injection of goulashes, particularly the "passing" variety, the game once again became the principal evening occupation of pleasure-loving New Yorkers.

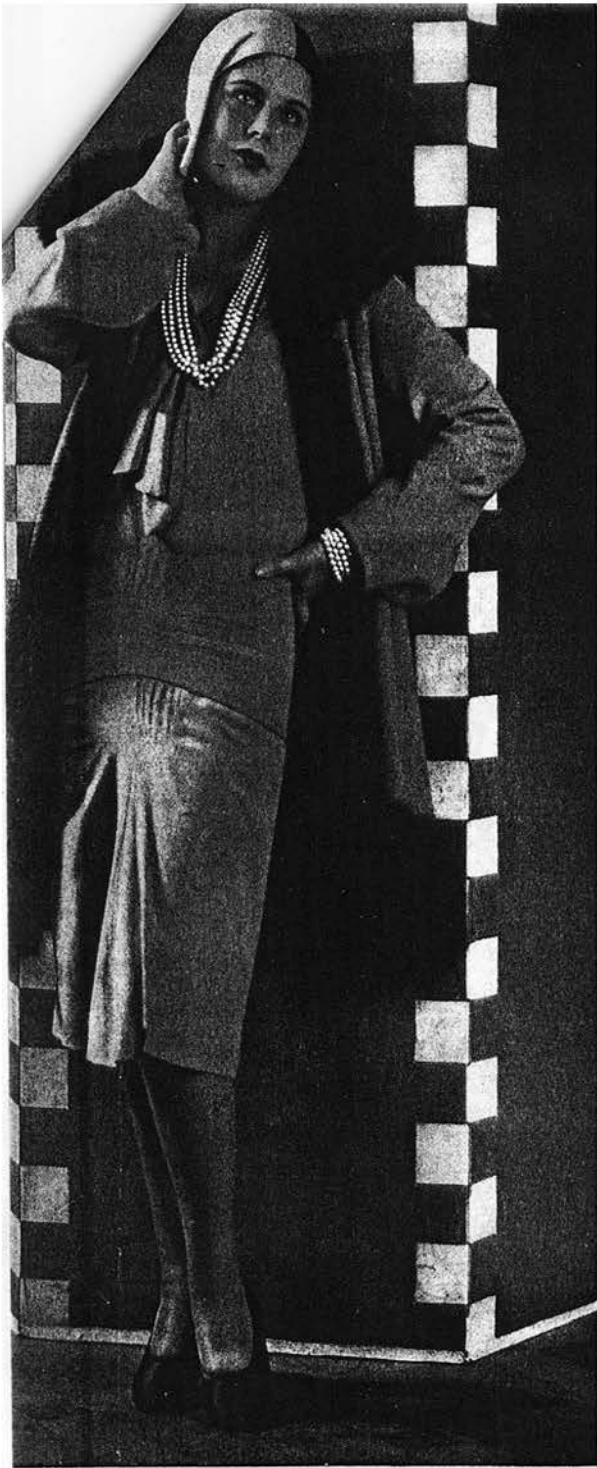
In the new form of Backgammon, with matches, it is

possible to win—or lose—not only the regularly named stake for which the players are competing, but twice, four times, even eight times that stake. A woman playing at five dollars a game may well lose eighty dollars on a game. In Contract, since the advent of the passing goulashes, a small slam is an occurrence so common that it is bid (not necessarily made) once in five times, a grand slam once in fourteen. With two slams in a rubber and two successful doubles of slam bids by over-optimistic adversaries, a player playing five-cent Contract may now win, not the thirty dollars which, two years ago, was the average harvest of a rubber, but three or four times that amount. So great has become the fascination of these risks that more and more people are seriously studying goulashes and "matches" Backgammon.

The passing goulash—the exchanging of a certain number of cards with one's partner—has not yet been standardized, and there are several systems in good usage. Many men players are afraid of these exciting adjuncts to the game and are often too lazy to learn them. And it must be admitted that many authorities and excellent players like Charles Stuart Street do not play them. There is a real technique and theory to the passing goulash, and the player who regards it merely as a chance to discard from weakness is making an error that will cost him dearly. In the first place, to quote Lelia Hattersley in a recent issue of *Vanity Fair*, "The keynote of success in the passing goulash is consideration of one's partner."

The best-known forms of the passing goulash are, (1) where four cards are passed to the partner; (2) where three cards, then two cards, and then one card are passed; (3) where one card, then two cards and then three cards are passed, and (*Continued on page 188*)





TYPICAL
 The exclusive fashions created by Bruck-Weiss this Ensemble costume has a long
 of cloth deeply collared and bordered
 fur. The frock is of flat crepe silk. The
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(4) where two cards and then one card are passed. It is not possible here to go into details regarding the potentialities of these methods, but a brief outline may give some idea of the theories that underlie them.

When four cards are passed to one's partner, it must be remembered that if one's own hand is not really strong enough to make a game bid, passing one's four best cards (aces, kings, and so forth) may enable one's partner to make one. Two, three, or four cards of a major suit mean that a hand has been stripped of that suit. A single high card—not an honour—means length and strength. Passing an assortment of suits is often confusing, but low cards in odd suits mean that the hand is strong enough to justify sacrificing the partner's.

In the second and more complicated method of passing (the three, two, and one method), the three cards which are first passed are the ace, or king (if one has not the ace), of one's best suit and two cards to indicate the trash suits of the hand. On the second passing (two cards), the partner's ace or high card must be returned to the partner unless that card makes one's hand strong enough for a slam bid. The other card is usually to help one's partner, if one's own hand is weak, or a poor card, if the hand is very strong. And, on the third interchange, the single card passed may be strong or weak, according to the inference gained by one's partner's offerings. An unselfish partner is greatly to be desired!

The system that reverses this last order, passing one, two, and then three cards, uses something of the same signals. The first card passed is a low card in one's strongest suit, indicating what one wishes to receive on the second round from one's partner. Then, the two best cards in one's partner's suit are handed over. The third interchange depends on whether, after study of one's hand, it seems the weaker or stronger of the two. This passing is a test of character!

BACK TO BACKGAMMON

As for Backgammon, this game needs skill and daring and provides the most exciting possibilities. It requires study and a nice feeling for mathematical chances on the part of the players. But what will endear Backgammon to the hostess is the fact that it can be played by two or three people. No longer will the pleasant number of six or seven at dinner cause one to question what to do afterwards, for now four can play Contract and the extra two or three can be left to the joys of Backgammon. It seems an answer to the great problem of how to pass the time on every occasion from honeymoons to house-parties. And a Backgammon-board would be far more welcome on a desert island than anything that the Swiss Family Robinson ever found there.

The principal reason for the revived interest (and rage, even) of Backgammon is the discovery of a new method of making the game a little more costly and hazardous. For thousands of years, Backgammon has been a game played either for pleasure or for a definite stake per game. It is true that, in the event of what is known as a double game, that is to say, if one player, say "white," threw off all of his men before "black" threw off any of his, the game was called a "gammon," and the stake automatically doubled. This happens very rarely.

But, for the jaded tastes of people to-day, this was certainly not enough. It remained for a group of enthusiasts at the Racquet Club in New York to invent a further hazard in the shape of "matches and doubles." This device is simplicity itself. Whenever a player, in the course of a game, feels that he has a decided advantage over his adversary, he is at liberty to say, "I double." This means that he is willing to double the agreed stake, for that game only. The adversary is then at liberty to say, "I resign," and pay the original stake for the game; or he may say, "I accept," in which case he assumes the responsibility of a double payment in the event of his losing the game.

Furthermore, at any period of that game, should the fortunes of the players alter, the other player may in turn double the original doubler. This process of doubling and redoubling may go on indefinitely (always in turn, however), but it is rare that a game is of such a nature that it can be doubled or redoubled more than twice. Occasionally, however, eight doubles are met with. A lady on Long Island, recently playing for a stake of five dollars a game, soon found herself playing for eighty.

SCORING BY MATCHES

In order to keep track of these doubles, the device of ordinary parlour matches is resorted to. Twenty or more matches are put in a bowl somewhere near the players. At the beginning of the session, a single match is placed on the bar, or backbone, of the board to show that it is a single game. If, in the course of the game, the stake should be doubled, another match is put on the board. If white wins a single or a double game, he takes down the one match (or the two) from the backbone of the board and puts it at one side (not on the board) and not with the common stock of matches. If he wins another game, he puts aside another match. If black should then tie white, in wins, he would put all of the matches back into the original pot, as the players would be even. The matches beside the players show the number of stakes won by each. When the session is over, a settlement is made for the net number of matches held by each player, at so much a match. That is, at two dollars a match, if the table stake was two dollars, five dollars, if it was five dollars, and so on.

It should be added, of course, that in a "chouette" game (where three players are involved in each game), the player "in the box" (the box seat is first gained by throwing dice for it, the second highest being the active adversary, and the third the consultant adversary) is playing the full stake against each of the two players playing (and consulting) against him. In the case of the lady on Long Island, for instance, had she been playing "chouette" and sitting "in the box" against two adversaries, she would have lost one hundred and sixty dollars, or eighty dollars to each. So long as the player in the box continues to win, his tenure of the box continues. But when he is defeated, he is ousted from the box and becomes the consultant player against the new occupant of the box, who is the former active partner, while the former consultant becomes the active member of the new combination. In this way, as the players are in turn defeated, all of them have equal chances of playing in the box.