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THE

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# NEW YORKER



## "TABLES FOR TWO"

**H**ARDLY a man is now alive who will be interested in the statement that I am about to write a book on how to turn on the cold water in a bathtub. Nevertheless I make the announcement and explain how the decision was reached. It seems that the Scribner boys, who have been kind enough to publish collections of stories that I either wrote or that were ghost-written for me, have asked me time and again (that makes twice) to give them a full-length novel or book on one subject, but I kept refusing on the ground that I couldn't think of a subject that I could stretch into a novel or book. However, the other night I dropped in on the neighbors and found four gents, including the host, playing contract bridge, and two ladies, including the hostess, playing backgammon. Scattered on the floor around the backgammon board were five books of various catchy titles, all dealing with backgammon.

Inasmuch as nobody paid any attention to my entrance, I picked up one of the books at random (Long Island) and discovered that it was over a hundred pages long and retailed for a dollar-fifty. "Well," I said to myself, "if anybody can write a book of over a hundred pages on backgammon and sell it for a dollar-fifty, I am a fool if I don't dash off a novel about fifty pages longer than the backgammon opus, on some equally interesting topic, and allow the Scribner boys to print it to retail at two dollars, thus earning enough in royalties to send a couple more of the children away to school, as the traffic conditions around the house are getting to be something frightful."

The next question was what subject to pick, and all that night I lay awake wondering whether to write on what to do with a shoehorn or which part of your pajamas to put on first. Finally the cold-water-faucet idea struck me like a bolt from the blue and it seemed so obvious that I wondered why the hell I had wasted so much time on the other notions.

In the morning I went back to the neighbors' and borrowed the hundred-and-four-page book in order to study the technique, not considering it an unethical thing to do because Edgar Lee Masters probably read Gray's "Elegy" before he ever penned a line of the "Spoon River" stuff. I started at the foreword and found, to my temporary

dismay, that the work I had chosen as a model promised to be hot, or dirty, or daring, or whatever you choose to call it—at any rate not the sort of volume that I, a born prude, would stoop to copy. For example, the first two sentences: "This world of ours moves in cycles. Fashions and customs change." Then it came to me that the very word "bathtub" was risqué in itself and the frequent, necessary references to it in the book I have planned may give the latter a semblance of naughtiness sufficient to make it a good seller.

**W**ELL, friends, I do not intend to spoil the sale by telling you the story in advance. Instead, I will tip you off to a few of the intricacies of backgammon, using the knowledge I gleaned from watching a few games of it and from reading the book, a book which you can't lay down without going right to sleep.

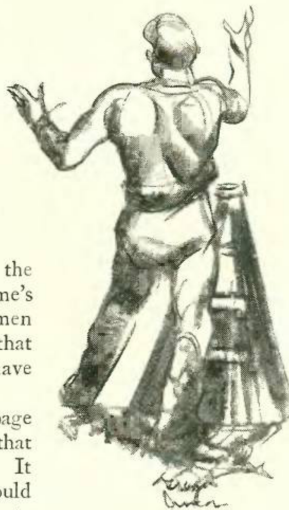
To begin with, the game is called "tric trac" in France and "tables" in England. The author of the work I borrowed disappoints you on Page 4 by saying "How tables came to old England cannot be proved," something everybody has wanted to know since they were a foot high. There is also a difference of opinion as to the derivation of the word "backgammon," one tong claiming that it is from the Welsh, meaning "little battle," and another holding that it is of Saxon origin, "bac and game," meaning "bac and game." No doubt exists, however, regarding the reason for the pastime's popularity with women—the rules provide that each player shall have fifteen men.

On the eleventh page of the book is a line that kind of worries me. It reads: "Players should accustom themselves to play in either position." In my bright lexicon, "either" means one of two (and not more than two) things. Well, if there are only two positions in which a woman, or a man for that matter, can play backgammon, some of the players are almost sure to develop cramps.

If I took up the game, I bet you I could, and would, accustom myself to playing it lying down, standing up, creeping, rolling over, hanging from the chandelier by my heels, or doing an off-to-Buffalo. There ought to be exercise in every sort of athletics, and there *is* exercise in every sort worth while. For instance, poker-players are wont to get up and walk around their chairs; bridge-players, elected dummy, are accustomed to pour themselves a drink or go and look at their partner's hand with a view to asking how the hell he came to think of that bid; tennis-players rush to the net and shake hands after the match is over, though in a large majority of cases they have met before and will see one another again in the dressing-room. But backgammoners merely sit here or there, never moving from their original seats and only shifting those seats an inch or two to the right or the left in order to obey the letter of the law about accustoming themselves to play in either position. When you consider the lack of physical activity and the tremendous mental strain that are part of an evening of tric trac, little battle, tables, or whatever you wish to call it, do you wonder that an addict wakes up in the morning so irritable that when her husband mentions his golf date, she barks like a dog?

Page 13 gives us an epigram which you would do well to remember: "Men part way home have only the remaining distance to travel." In my young and foolish days this slogan slipped my mind on more occasions than I care to count and after getting part way home, I have turned right around and gone back to the place I had just come from, and, next day, felt much the worse for it mentally and physically.

Backgammon is essentially a game for two people, usually women and usually unable to read. But there is also a branch of the game in which any number of people can take part, the extra ones being authorized kibitzers who can give advice and participate in the betting, etc. This form is known as "chouette" (which sounds like something to do with mastication) and the more extras



there are, why, I should think, the more interesting it would be. It is hard to imagine being bored looking on at a game of chouette in which Al Capone and Limbs Diamond were the principals and the population of Cicero, Ill., and Jersey City, N. J., the advisers.

FROM what I have gathered in my brief study of the game (backgammon, not chouette), I judge that its advantage over craps (also played with dice) is that you can't, or at least don't, bawl out your opponent for dumbness in the latter; it is preferred to its twin sister, parchesi, because you can get a good parchesi set for four dollars while a real backgammon outfit costs eighty-three-fifty and is prettier, and it is more popular than chess for the reason that during a chess game, you are not supposed to discuss the alcoholic carryings-on of Betty Nauheim at last night's costume ball.

Backgammon is a revival of a game centuries old. Now that it is revived, it is here to stay, but whether it will ever get as much of a stranglehold on the public as mah jong, rhum, or going-to-Jerusalem is a question I will leave to Evangeline Adams or Bugs Baer.

—RING LARDNER

#### A MAN I SAW

In his coat no wrinkle,  
In his heart no rankle,  
In his sock no ankle.

—E. B. W.

### PLAGIARISM

AMONG the books in my vast, uncatalogued, and inconvenient library there is one collection, tattered and incomplete, to which I refer more often than to any other for information and to which I turn frequently for solace against the evil dispensations of this world. I mean the *World Almanac and Book of Facts*, now in the forty-fifth year of its annual publication.

Unfortunately my collection of this thesaurus is incomplete. It comprises only fourteen volumes, because the series had long been under way before I became familiar with it, as assistant day city editor of the *Chicago Tribune*. Those were the days before that newspaper had hired a librarian and had instituted a Bureau of Information, and as assistant day city editor part of my duties, beyond making up the assignment book and going through City Press copy for news items of importance, was to give information over the telephone to subscribers who asked for it.

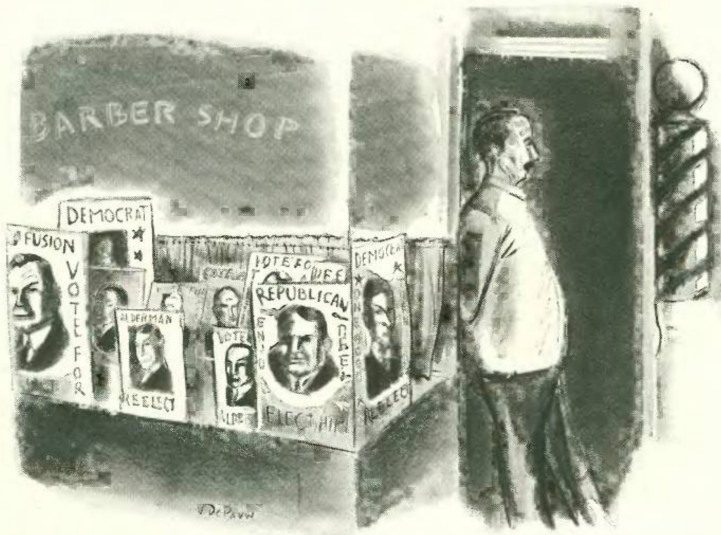
Most of these inquiries came from bibulous gentlemen who were arguing in some barroom over the date of McKinley's assassination, the correct wording of the Preamble to the Constitution of the United States, the name of the fourth president, the correct spelling of Popocatepetl, or the circumstances under which Hayes beat Tilden. Invariably the gentleman who was delegated to do the telephoning

would begin by saying "We want you to settle a little bet," and invariably I would have to reply, under strict instructions from the head office, "The *Tribune* does not settle bets," and, having thus forfended the newspaper against being an accessory in the violation of the state laws against gambling, I would give the information sought. The answer always had to be repeated—sometimes several times, as when witnesses were called to get the verdict at the receiver.

When the inquiry was really a poser and would put me to any such inconvenience as that of leaving my desk and going through the files, I was thankful for that injunction from the head office and thankful, too, for the naïve unanimity of the inquirers in always stating the reason for the inquiry—that a bet was to be settled; for then I could say with ingratiating politeness that the newspaper did not settle bets and hang up the receiver.

It was no great bother and no great tax on the brain to answer most of these requests for information with the reference library of the city room. That reference library consisted of an unabridged dictionary with the page containing the word one wished to look up nearly always missing; a King James version of the Bible in octavo, cloth binding, bearing the rubber-stamp imprint conveying the information that it was the property of the Hamlin Baptist Mission in South Clark Street; a city directory, an out-of-date *Social Register*, and the *World Almanac and Book of Facts*, current issue. This last-named book was really the only volume in that reference library that intensely mattered. Without it the *Tribune's* reputation for Infallibility and Service might have undergone some serious damage.

FROM those days, insidiously at first, the book got a hold upon me. I would find myself reading it even when I was not called upon to dig information out of it. There were marvellous chapters: "Planetary Configurations," "Invisible Balance of Trade of the United States," "Presidents and Their Wives—Biographies of—," "Stage Favorites," "Some Famous Old People," "Relative Hardness of the Elements," "Interest and Annuity Tables," "Notable Marine Disasters in 100 Years," "Width of Standard Gauge Railways," "Pet Names and Forms of Address," and "Memorable Dates."



*The non-partisan*