

THE HEAD OF MY PROFESSION.

IN TWO CHAPTERS.

CHAPTER I.

I was born in the city of Bath, in the beginning of the present century. My earliest recollections of the hot-water capital are recollections of an era of prosperity, which, though then approaching its decline, was yet vigorous and boastful. At the period of my childhood, Bath was the winter focus of fashion, and to fashion and fashionable people it was devoted more thoroughly, perhaps, than any other city or town in the realm. Nothing that could by any possibility offend the visitors was allowed to exist; while every attraction, whatever its moral aspect, which had charms to lure them thither, was unreservedly displayed. I distinctly remember that while gaming-houses and worse places were encouraged, it was a high crime and misdemeanour for a little urchin to trundle a hoop on the pavement, lest he should damage the farthingale of some lady of quality; and school-boys were lugged off to prison in the town-hall for playing at 'cherry' in Orange Grove, to the supposed disturbance of the rheumatic tabbies. In those days there were no hireable cabs, carriages, or omnibuses; and the only available locomotives were the sedan-chairs, for which there were regular stands at various places throughout the city, the principal ones being those near the Pump-room, and in front of the Assembly-rooms. The chairmen were a peculiar race, long since passed away—stout, brawny, broad-shouldered fellows, clad in light-blue frock surtouts, plush breeches, white stockings, and shoes with broad shining buckles. Originally, they had worn cocked-hats; but these, in my boyhood, began to give place to the customary cylinder, and disappeared altogether in the first years of my apprenticeship. These chairmen were the tyrants of the foot-pavements, along which they ambled at a six-mile-an-hour pace, ruthlessly sweeping into the kennel all who were not sufficiently active in getting out of their way. The walls of the old Abbey at that day bristled with chimneys and chimney-pots; close files of shops, chiefly occupied by small traders, clung like barnacles all round the surface of the ancient structure, save at the grand western entrance flanking the Pump-room; and a thriving trade was done in them, because here was one nucleus of the fashionable throng. Orange Grove then was a grove, crowded with ancient elms fungous with age. The Parades, North and South, were the Corso of worn-out rones and courtly convalescents, who promenade them in wheel-chairs within the shadow of the New Assembly-rooms, and at an easy distance from the restoring waters. Dull, dreamy, and voiceless in summer-time, no sooner were the chills of autumn felt, than Bath was rapidly converted into a huge caravanary. Strange faces and new equipages flocked in by hundreds daily. Everybody then began to let lodgings, from the hucksters in the by-streets, to the speculators in the Circus and the Royal Crescent, and the price of apartments rose suddenly from shillings to pounds. Ten guineas a week was nothing for a tradesman's upper floors, which became the habitat of the landed gentry, whose retinue of servants had to take post in the tradesman's kitchen, along with his family, and to stow themselves at night in cupboard, closet, or garret, wherever a shake-down could be extemporised.

All those vices which were fashionable, winked at by the sober citizens, who made a profit out of them, walked the streets at noon-day, if not without notice, without rebuke. Among the least obvious of the vices which fashion had made popular was that of gambling; the gentry gamed in their houses nightly, without premitting the Sunday; gaming establishments flourished in all parts of the town; some select, and only accessible to the subscribers; others common to all who could assume the appearance of gentlemen. Of all the modes of gambling, perhaps billiards was most esteemed. The game had been pronounced healthful by a distinguished member of the faculty, and a rage sprang up for it, which prevailed for years. What the nobility and gentry delighted in, the middle classes and the lower classes would of course feel a longing for; and, as a result, there were billiard establishments open to all ranks, from the subscription-tables at the Upper Rooms, where the members played for thousands, down to the rickety board of Old Spraggs in Union Passage, where the balls trundled over a field of green baize into pockets as wide as a church-door, and the apprentice-boys gambled for twopences.

At ten years of age my uncle sent me to school at Old Carpenter's, in George Street, one of the most vigorous floggers of the day, who, aware of his strength of arm, would considerately allow a culprit to induce an extra jacket, or even two, if he could borrow them, before submitting to punishment. Here I made the acquaintance of Ned B., who soon became my bosom-friend, and through him it was that I became a billiard-player. Ned's father was the proprietor of a large billiard establishment in Milson Street, where, in several rooms built over the garden in the rear of the house, billiards were played during the season at all hours of the day and night. One or other of these tables were generally

unoccupied, and at Ned's command. Here he taught me the game, for which I immediately conceived a passion, and practised it without intermission at every possible opportunity. It is a fact that in my eleventh year I sometimes played for seven hours a day, without absenting myself from school, without fatigue, and without surfeit. Ned's father had no objection to our practice, as it was his object to make a finished player of his son. The boy, however, was near-sighted, and I soon outstripped him in knowledge of the game. Sometimes Mr. B. would watch our play, and give us instruction, which I was but too apt in receiving. This state of things continued until I was fourteen years of age, by which time I could beat, and had beaten, every amateur player that frequented the rooms—not unfrequently to the considerable profit of the proprietor, who was always ready to back my play.

At fourteen, my uncle bound me as outdoor apprentice to Mr. C., in George Street. I had but a little time in the evenings for billiards. At first, I did not care for this, thinking I had had enough of it; but after an interval of a few months, the old passion for the game returned stronger than ever. I had recourse to my old school-fellow once more; but now there was an objection to my appearance at the subscription-rooms, his father not wishing his subscribers to identify me as Mr. C.'s apprentice. In consequence, it was only by stealth and on rare occasions that we could resume our play. In this dilemma, I was driven to the cheaper table free to the public. There was one in the Borough Walls, open to all the world, and which, being opposite to the Blue School, and near the theatre, was much frequented during theatrical hours by the servants of the gentry occupying the boxes. I soon discovered that this place was the very sink of vice and low black-guardism; that the most infamous transactions were carried on there by means of a gang of gambling Jews, who plundered the unwary at dice and hazard; that, in a word, besides being a billiard-room, it was a perfect gambling hell—and yet I could not keep away. The best players I had yet seen frequented this table, and among them were some of the most consummate blackguards in existence. It was but rarely, however, that I met my match amongst them, and as I improved constantly, in process of time I could beat them all.

I should have been speedily and irredeemably ruined by the infamous society of this place, had it not been that, at about the age of sixteen, I conceived a violent passion for music, and began learning the piano, and studying counterpoint under a little hump-backed professor of the name of Albin, who taught me at a shilling a lesson. But for the music, I should certainly have thrown up my trade and turned gambler long ere I was out of my time. As it was, the music and the billiards divided my leisure between them; now one, now the other being in the ascendant. Perhaps the music would ultimately have weaned me from the billiard-table—for I rapidly acquired considerable skill, and could rattle off sets of quadrilles tastily enough in my second year—but about this time the science of billiards began to be talked of, and the practice of the game to assume some new phases. Every month was full of the praises of Jack Carr, who had invested the side-twist, and made other discoveries tending to the demonstration of phenomena hitherto unrecognised in the motion of globular bodies. All the billiard-world went mad on the new discoveries, and it was not likely that I should be unaffected by the current mania. Ned B. first indoctrinated me in the new invention, and it was at his father's house I first saw Carr at play. I found him an adept at every artifice in the game, and astonishingly skilful in the use of his own invention, to which, nevertheless, I was not disposed to accord the value he claimed for it. I noticed that he was often beaten by players whom I had beaten frequently myself; and I noticed, too, that when thus beaten, it was invariably through reliance on his new-invented stroke. There was no difficulty in the use of this invention, even to a stranger, as the player who once understood the new principle could master it easily in a few hours' practice. In fact, what I then suspected, has since been abundantly proved; the side-twist is of little real use to a good player, as it adds but little to his real strength, and is not at all comparable to the capacity of making a good winning hazard—a faculty, by the way, which Carr did not possess in any extraordinary degree. About the same time, some one else, paraphrasing Carr's invention, discovered the top-twist, by which a still more eccentric motion is imparted to a ball. Both these discoveries, however, are rather curiosities of the player's art, than valuable additions to it, and as such they should be regarded; though there are, doubtless, certain situations in which they may be used with advantage. I was not long in mastering both these *tour de force*, and could call them into action when requisite.

One night, while I was playing a match with a footman in the Borough Wall's den, a young Irishman entered the room, and stood looking on. He was buttoned to the chin in a seedy coat, and trod in a pair of new hob-nailed highlows. The room was crowded; and some of the insolent wags of the place

began exercising their wit at the expense of the newcomer. He bore it good-humouredly enough, answering only with a ready joke and a rather smart retort, until one of the blackguards, presuming on his quietness, shouldered a cue, and, walking backwards, brought the butt-end in his face. The next moment, the aggressor was sprawling on the floor, and the Irish boy in a fighting attitude, ready for whoever should present himself. The fallen man rose and rushed to the encounter, but in two minutes, had had enough of it, leaving the Irishman triumphant.

The visitor shewed the best possible temper, apologised to the company for the interruption his presence had occasioned, and begged that the play might be resumed; and in a few minutes, such order as was usual was restored. It appeared afterwards that Pat Meagher—so was the stranger called—had been a marker in Dublin; that he had landed at Liverpool without a penny, a fortnight before, and had tramped down to Bath, supporting himself with his cue on the route. He soon proved himself an admirable player, beating me at our first encounters, though I was able to return the compliment, after becoming acquainted with his tactics. He had the peculiar faculty of bringing his ball to a dead stop, after striking another, at whatever distance—a feat often of much value, and which I never saw accomplished so surely by any other man. He played but a few nights at the den, for he had the sense to see that if he became notorious there, his chance among the upper circles was lost. A few months after his arrival, I saw him, habited like an officer in undress, playing with a Right Honourable at B.'s subscription tables. Here he gained a certain notoriety, and no inconsiderable cash. It being an understood thing that he would play any amateur for any amount, B., without my knowledge, matched me against him for a contest of twenty-one games. I could not refuse to play the match; and it came off on Christmas-eve, in the presence of over a hundred spectators. At the end of the nineteenth game, I was the winner of eleven, and of a large amount of money which changed hands on the occasion, though I neither had nor coveted any of it.

I fell into disgrace at home by playing this match. The rumour of my exploit was bruited abroad, and reached the ears of my uncle, who was violently angry, as also was, or pretended to be, my master; and they talked of punishing me by imprisonment for playing at unlawful games, in violation of the terms of my indenture. I was compelled to give a solemn promise not to enter a billiard-room during the remainder of my apprenticeship, which had still a year to run. I kept my promise faithfully, consoling myself with my pianoforte, on which I strummed away till midnight. When my term drew to a close, my uncle, who feared I should turn gambler if I remained in Bath, wrote to his brother in Dover, who, carrying on the same business to which I had served my time, consented to receive me as an assistant. I was not unwilling to see the world; and accepted the situation offered.

I went down by the Dover coach in April, 1824, to my new appointment. I found my relative an agreeable old fellow, already prejudiced in my favour, from a liking he had conceived for me in my childhood, during a visit to Bath, and not at all disposed to restrict my pleasures. He hired a pianoforte from Bachelor, borrowed piles of music, and was never weary of my performances, which he enjoyed to perfection under a cloud of tobacco-smoke. Dover was at that time all life and gaiety. The Duke of Clarence's sons by Mrs. Jordan ruled the roast at the garrison, and led the fashion in the town and neighbourhood. Routes, balls, fetes, and dancing-parties followed each other nightly. Quadrilles were the rage, and, as a consequence, I soon became sought after as a pianist, and had engagements four or five deep constantly on hand. I was paid handsomely for my services, and ate ices, quaffed champagne, and revelled in gastronomic luxuries. I relished my new position amazingly; I saw the best company; had the honour of playing to the blood-royal, and what I relished more, to the beautiful daughters of Supervisor W., the sight of whose bewitching faces sometimes set my fingers blundering, and my brain a wool-gathering.

As the summer drew on, this kind of occupation relaxed, and then ceased altogether, and my way of life settled down into a rather dull routine. The summer passed, and the autumn too, and November came in with its fogs and storms. I found a new pleasure in the roar of the huge breakers, and the dash of the sounding surge on the pebbly beach, under the castle cliff, which was then a dreary, weird-looking spot, very unlike what it is now. It was my habit to walk out of an evening through the darkness, and take post on the old stakes of the jetty, to enjoy in solitude the din, whirl, uproar, and fury of the tempest. One evening, about seven o'clock, as I was passing the end of Snargate Street towards the castle cliff, I heard a gentle clicking sound, which thrilled through me from head to foot like an electric shock—it was the soft, crepitating kiss of billiard balls. Here was a discovery! I had not known that there was a table in the town. I felt my right hand grasping the cue, and the fingers of my

left forming a bridge, as if by some magnetic influence. I looked round in all directions for the entrance. A dim lamp hung over a side-passage, and a few paces down, there was an open door and a staircase, lighted by the merest blink from above. I stole softly up the stairs, and came at the first landing on a door, with a glass panel, but partly curtained within. I peeped in, and saw two officers at play at a small table, and a company of gentlemen seated round. I had been at work all day, and had my apron rolled round my waist. I knew it would not do to enter in such a garb. I ran home and washed, induced my best suit, and in twenty minutes had returned and entered the room.

No one noticed my intrusion, so I took a seat and watched the game. One of the players I recognised as a garrison-officer who had often danced to my music, and it is probable that he recognised me. He won the game, and his adversary declined to play any more, on the plea that he had no chance with him. The victor then challenged the room; and as no one accepted the challenge, I rose and offered to play him myself. He eyed me from head to foot rather superciliously, and with a kind of haughty condescension, rolling the balls as he spoke, told me to lead off. Annoyed at his pomposity, I allowed him but a single stroke, and then carelessly made the game off the balls. He was pleased to attribute this first result to accident, but the accident recurred again and again, to the mirth of the company, and his intense mortification. To give him some chance of winning, I proposed that he should take five of the pockets to my one; he accepted the offer, but still did not win a game, and finally left off without even a momentary advantage. This affair created quite a sensation in the room; and I was asked to favour them with my company on the morrow evening, when perhaps I might meet with a worthier antagonist. I consented, and presented myself on the morrow accordingly. The room was full, and several of the new-comers were anxious to measure their strength against me. My pride was roused, and I shewed them all that they had no chance whatever in the contest. I had refused to play for money from the first, and it was that puzzled them, while it secured for me their respect. When they requested that I would come again, I declined, on the ground that the table was not worth playing at—which was true, the pockets being twice the proper size, and the area not quite half the usual dimensions. I derided the idea of practising the science of billiards on such a toy, and refused to have anything more to do with it. Having said thus much, and made my bow to the company, I took my leave with an air of wonderful independence.

It was about nine o'clock in late November as I left the house and proceeded in the teeth of the wind towards the old jetty, where the monster breakers were bursting in thunderous peals on the masses of huge pebbles, round and big as cannon-balls, whose tremendous rattling, as they were dashed to and fro, gave out a sound like the clapping of millions of giant palms, and which wrought most powerfully and agreeably on my imagination. I had sent myself on a fragment of a beam, and was peering through the darkness at the heavy circling masses of water, when I felt a hand on my shoulder. I started to my feet; there stood a dim figure before me, motioning in dumb show—for no voice could be heard—and beckoning me away. I rose, nodded acquiescence, and followed, as he led on towards a shed under the cliff, where a light was burning. When under the lee of the building, and sheltered from the loud roaring of the billows, he turned short round, and presented a figure which I have good reason to remember to my dying day. He was a man of about fifty-five years of age, not more than five feet in height, with a prodigious hunch on his shoulders, yet standing upright as a dart. A long pale visage; a nose like an eagle's beak; a pair of deep-sunk gray eyes; an ample brow, prominent chin, and thin, bloodless lips: such was the aspect which he turned suddenly towards me, with the not very courteous inquiry:

'I say, young fellow, who the devil are you?'

'Really,' said I, 'I may return the inquiry with interest, and with more show of reason. What is your business with me?'

'You need not take offence; there is none intended, I assure you—quite the contrary. Here is my card, and I am to be found at the "Ship."'

I took the card, held it to the light, and read the words, 'Louis Crannel.'

'Your name is strange to me,' I said; 'I have still to learn your business with me.'

'I wish to know who you are, and what is your profession,' he replied. 'My motive for that is not mere curiosity. If you desire concealment, of course I say no more; but it strikes me you do not.'

'You are right,' I said; 'I have no motive for concealment;' and I told him my name, address, and daily employment.

He affected the utmost astonishment. 'Do you mean to tell me,' he asked, as if utterly incredulous, 'that you are such an infatuated ass as to work at a trade for about thirty shil-