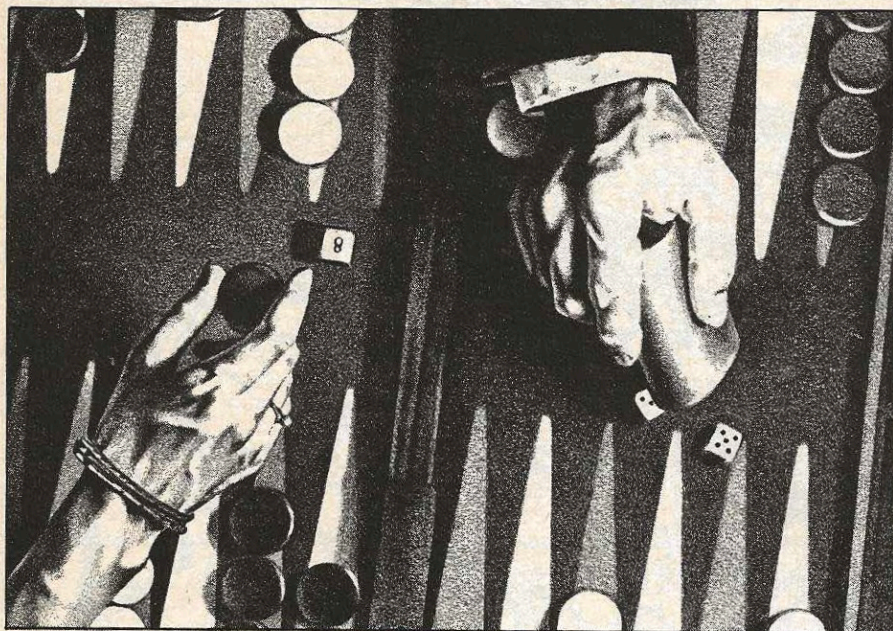


Cityside/Abigail Gerd

BOBBY LE FLAMBEUR



The Backgammon Beat

AMID CLACKING DICE AND SHUFFLING cards, Bobby* pockets \$400 that he's won playing gin rummy with a white-haired businessman. He strolls through the brightly lit rooms of the Mayfair Club to its lounge and pours a cup of coffee. A smile draws across his lips in anticipation: Marshall, a discredit to his profession, is expected to make a rare appearance at the club tonight. He spends most of his time abroad hustling wealthy "pigeons"—easy marks. Bobby considers himself a purist, a game lover first and a hustler second, but he plans to hustle Marshall at backgammon, and he's confident he'll win. Playing pigeons exclusively has eroded Marshall's skills, but Bobby isn't about to let his own slip. "Other people get ulcers," he says. "I take out my aggressions at the table."

At 31, Bobby is a member of a small group of professional game players, men and women who make a living playing bridge, backgammon, or gin rummy for stakes. Their major place of both business and entertainment in New York is the Mayfair Club, a private establishment occupying four airy rooms on the third floor of the Gramercy Park Hotel. Throughout the world, "Mayfair players" are recognized as the best. The proprietor of the club, which moved downtown from 57th Street last year, is Alvin Roth, a world-class bridge expert now in his late sixties.

*Bobby, Marshall, and Mark are pseudonyms.

A generation ago, game players, even most titleholders, held regular jobs. Then younger players began to appear on the scene, many of them college dropouts. They raised the ante and turned to faster-moving games—from chess to backgammon, from bridge to gin and poker. After his junior year at Princeton, Bobby took a leave of absence to play poker tournaments and got used to the high life and the fast money. He never returned to college. "You can't top waking up in Monte Carlo after making \$5,000 at backgammon the night before," he says.

In becoming a professional, he had to adjust to the rigors of his profession—48-hour sessions, catnaps, maintaining the freedom to go anywhere at any time. A lasting relationship with someone would be hard to sustain. He finds the life intense and stark—you never relax or let down your guard, and once he went through \$15,000 before realizing he wasn't concentrating. He's seen other players have tantrums and become violent, but Bobby thrives on it all. "You can go along in a nine-to-five existence and never know how you're doing," he says, puffing on a cigarette. "Here, you know. You're either plus or minus."

Bobby approaches his profession scientifically, and reduces the gamble as much as possible. He studies modern strategy and past games and has learned money management. "The cardinal rule," he warns, "is that you never risk more than 5 to 7 percent of your capital at one session." Yet, like any gambler, he

has had streaks. His worst one lasted for six months, during which he couldn't draw a decent card or get a good roll. "But a pro," he says, "has the skill and the discipline to pull himself out of those periods."

He won't say how much he's made, but he just had a "giant" year. He's been playing at the top of his form and traveling constantly to tournaments, choosing them according to prize money and the number of entrants. The tournaments last one to six days, and there are thousands of them—in backgammon, poker, gin, and almost any other game—held in resorts all over the world.

Sometimes, Bobby doesn't even try hard during the first few rounds of a tournament; concentrating on side action (private games with pigeons) can be much more worthwhile. "In Geneva last year," he recalls, "I picked up \$17,000 in three days, a record for me, by the hotel pool and in private suites."

It's just dark out, and members are trickling into the Mayfair. Some are looking for a social game or to kibitz. Others are amateur gamblers who want to improve, pitting themselves against world-class players. And one or two may be real pigeons—the rich entertaining themselves, hoping to get lucky and beat the best.

"Hey, Mark. How'd you do?," Bobby asks a tall, lanky friend. Mark, 22, who just returned from a Boston backgammon tournament, slumps into a chair. His rolls were lousy, he says, his opponents lucky, and the side action terrible. In the semifinals, he let himself be distracted by his opponent's décolletage.

"Women dress like that intentionally to throw you off," he says. "And I fell for it!"

Bobby has taken Mark, another college dropout, under his wing. He slaps him on the back and says, half-seriously, "You need a break."

After a while, the repetitive sounds of dice and cards become hypnotic, and the club gets smoke-filled and claustrophobic. An outsider might feel as if his ears were about to pop, but the pros don't seem to notice. Bobby, sipping his third cup of coffee, and Mark, nibbling a candy bar, are watching new arrivals. Who to hustle? A schoolteacher walks in and they dismiss her—a nickel-and-dimer, poor sport. They could fall asleep while she decided which backgammon checker to move. A Haitian dentist flashes a smile their way. They always pass on him—he's a voodoo expert who

practices his craft at the game table, scribbling symbols on score sheets. And he never loses. "You've got to be crazy to play him," Bobby says.

A well-groomed older woman, her fingers laden with rings, waves to Bobby. "She's a gin pigeon," he whispers to Mark. "You can have her. I'm waiting for someone."

Mark, grinning boyishly, strides over and guides her into the cardroom, to a corner table, away from a bridge game that's attracted a small crowd. After a few games, he casually suggests raising the stakes. She agrees.

"Mark's still wide-eyed," Bobby says. He hasn't had a real bad streak yet, or gotten bored sitting around waiting for action. Nor has he tired of the constant traveling to tournaments. This is Bobby's eighth year as a pro gamester, and he talks sometimes of looking for work on Wall Street—joining friends, ex-pros who've entered the options and commodities markets. Those high-tension, high-risk businesses are especially popular with game-world dropouts. A steady job would give him more time to be with his new girl friend.

An immaculately dressed man of about 30 enters the club and saunters over to where several people are watching a sports update on TV. After five minutes, Bobby casually approaches the man.

"How are you, Bobby?," Marshall asks, grabbing his arm.

They exchange pleasantries, gossip a bit, and Marshall suggests that they go to London together. He'd like the company. Bobby says he'll think about it.

"We'll stay at Claridge's, on the same floor as some Italian aristocracy," Marshall says. He finds Europeans easier marks than Americans—losing graciously is part of their tradition. Formerly a street kid, Marshall is now fluent in several languages, and his manners are impeccable. He has friends at travel agencies and airlines and among Europe's top *maitre d's*, and they tell him when the wealthy are traveling and where they're staying.

He flips through the pages of a little black book. "See this?" he exclaims. "Lists of dozens of rich pigeons!"

"I don't know," Bobby replies.

"Come on," Marshall says. "You'll never get anywhere if you don't hustle."

"Well, maybe. Let's play a little backgammon and talk about it."

Bobby rolls fast and moves quickly. A couple of hours into the match and down \$1,800, Marshall looks like someone standing on a highway with a truck charging toward him. All he wants to do is jump out of the way.

"Enough!" he says. "I thought this was supposed to be a friendly game."

"It is," Bobby assures him, and he suggests a dinner break. "My treat!"

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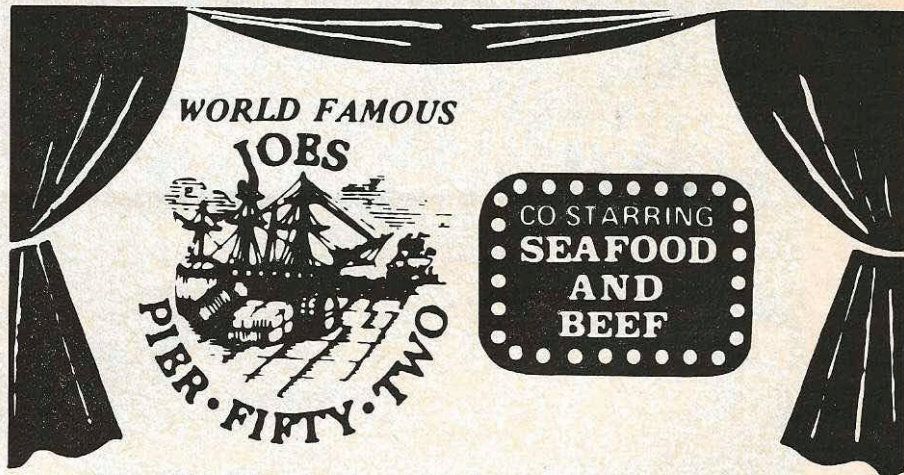
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