

ON A DICEY CRUISE

The voyage promised to be rough, with high-rolling in the richest backgammon tournament ever, but a first-class gambol was assured

by **EDWIN SHRAKE**



Esmond Cooper-Key woke up early on a Tuesday morning in his London town house with the feeling, as he later said, that he was about to do something many people, not the least of them being his wife, might consider naughty, or even *mondo bizzarro*. But the hell with what they might think for the moment; he could either lie back and reflect about obstacles to what was becoming his plan or he could get up and carry on with it. Esmond opened his suitcase and threw in a tuxedo, a pair of sneakers and random garments that his eye fell across. He trotted out to the car, drove to the bank as it opened, wrote a check for cash and *continued*

headed for Heathrow Airport, where he caught a noon flight to New York.

About eight hours' worth of champagne later, at Kennedy Airport, Esmond Cooper-Key climbed into a taxicab and asked to be delivered to Pier 84 on the Hudson River side of Manhattan. There, beside the pier, gathering power of sorts from the broken boilers that had stranded her near Bermuda two weeks earlier, rose the astonishing bulk of the *Queen Elizabeth 2*. From keel to funnel, as high as a 13-story building. From bow to stern, longer than three football fields. Yes indeed, this was the place he was looking for. Esmond plunged through the ring of toy balloons at the end of the gangplank and hurried toward the First-Class cabin he had just booked for the QE 2's return voyage to France and England that very same evening.

Up on the Quarterdeck, in a room colored maroon and gold and tucked away behind one of the two First-Class restaurants, gaffers were setting up movie lights, cameramen from Paragon Films were tinkering with their machines and pretty girls were tugging into place a board that said **DUNHILL INTERNATIONAL BACKGAMMON TOURNAMENT** with spaces below for the names of 32 invited players and the results of the matches.

Esmond's name was not on the list of 32, but he had, after all, once reached the quarterfinal of a junior backgammon tournament at the Clermont Club in London, and he was a friend of some of the assorted *elegantini*—an earl, a lord and what not—who had been included. Besides that, Esmond had bought his own ticket, which most people had not, for what was until then the richest backgammon tournament ever held. In all there was close to \$100,000 to be played for out in the open, not to mention the private betting in a game of which Prince Alexis Obolensky says, "You don't play backgammon just for fun—always for money, even if you are playing the game with your little daughter, it should always be for money."

Not that Esmond came on board to look at money. They did it all with checks, anyhow; one never saw stacks of cash moving across the tables as one often does in Las Vegas. Esmond merely had a notion that he ought to go have a bit of adventure and meanwhile indulge his fascination with backgammon at the world's first floating tournament. However, six nights later when Prince Obolensky, a father figure of the modern version of the game, arose to speak at the black-tie gala that ended the tournament,

it was a celebrating Esmond who walked past and said, "It's not necessary to hear from you, old chap," and dismissed Obolensky back to his table until part of the crowd began to applaud for the prince to return to his speech. By then so much had transpired that such a scene seemed not at all strange, and the next morning Esmond claimed not even to remember it.

"Waiter, actually my wife can't see a damned thing with you standing in front of the window, now can she?" said the old British gentleman.

As the QE 2 pulled out of New York Harbor during dinner hour the waiters found reasons to linger in front of the big windows, polishing away tiny specks with their napkins while the food cooled. The lights of New York are a rare and incredible sight. One of the headwaiters, a man not easily moved, could stand beside a table at a meal and recount tales of torture and mutilation he had witnessed during World War II in Kenya in the same stolid tone with which he discussed aircraft maintenance or snake handling. But the view of New York Harbor reached his soul. "It's a grand sight, sir," he said, "one of the grandest that exists, and I've seen most of them."

The lights of New York had barely vanished astern when the auction commenced in the maroon and gold room. An auction in backgammon is what is called a Calcutta pool at a golf tournament; players are sold and the purchaser wins if his player fares well. It is not uncommon for a player to buy himself at an auction by arranging for someone else to bid for him. He ordinarily buys back a piece of himself if he is bought by someone with whom he did not have an arrangement.

The auctioneer on the QE 2 was Charles Benson, 38, who describes himself as a constant gambler who spent four years at Eton studying racing charts. Benson is a racing correspondent for the London *Daily Express*, for which he tries to pick winners under the name Bendex. When Esmond Cooper-Key walked in, Benson was auctioning Philip Martyn (36, Lincoln College, Oxford, member of the 1964 British Olympic bobsled team). For a year and a half, Benson has lived with Martyn and Martyn's wife as what Philip calls "our permanent and very welcome guest."



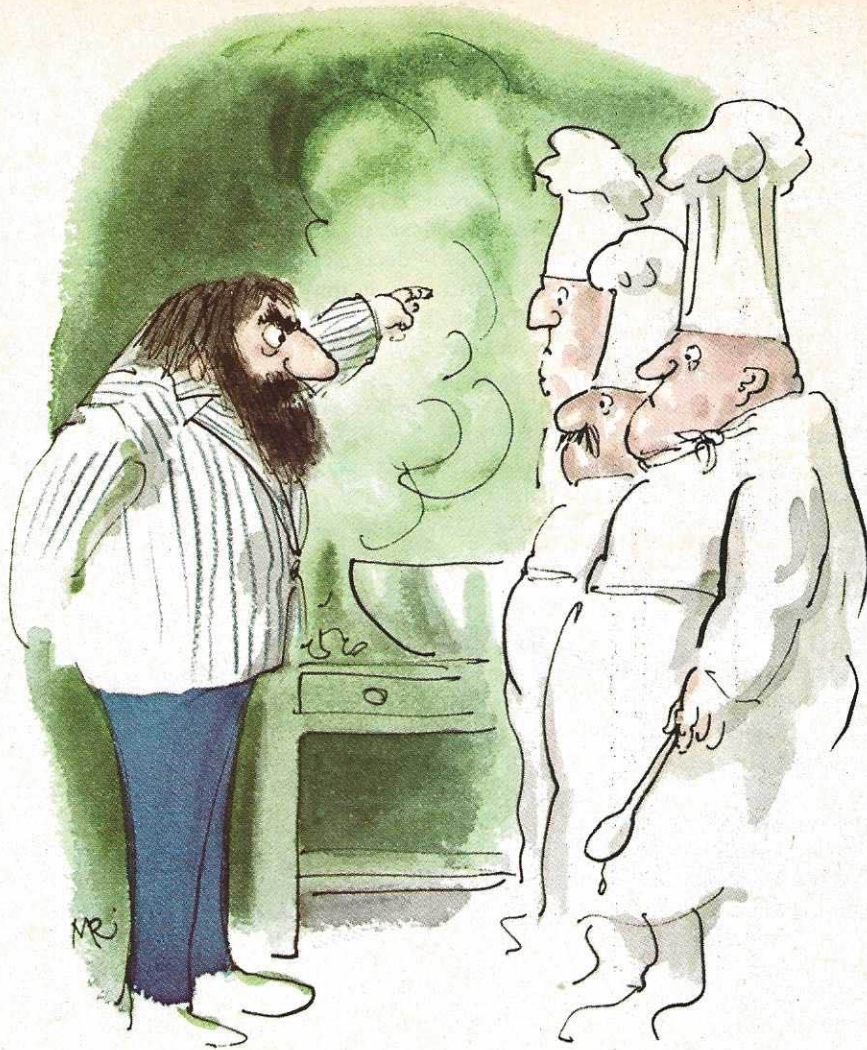
In the final, Barclay Cooke, cool as his ice water, met bubbly Charles Benson.

"Philip Martyn is the world's first self-professed professional backgammon player," Benson was saying to a roomful of backgammon players.

Vast sections of America may be astounded to hear that there is such a thing as a professional backgammon player. But, in fact, there are a lot of them. Many with backgrounds in clubs like the Racquet in New York or the Clermont in London refer to themselves as gentlemen gamblers, amateurs who nevertheless play backgammon for very large amounts of money. Others go to backgammon tournaments the way professional golfers go to golf tournaments and hustle the sales of backgammon boards and books as golfers sell equipment. Gentlemen gamblers sometimes hustle a few books and lessons themselves, which makes the distinction between a gentleman gambler and a professional even more vague.

To those who still think of backgammon as that odd foreign-looking diagram on the back of a checkerboard, this may be hard to swallow, but backgammon in the Western world has broken out of the clubby atmosphere in which it flourished for a century as a smart, inbred game not meant for the public. (In the Middle East, they have been playing it in cafés for thousands of years.) People who might never be suspected of playing backgammon have taken it up—housewives in Fort Worth, Gestalt therapists in Santa Barbara, Calif., retired postmen in Hollywood, Fla. Backgammon is getting as hot as Mah-Jongg and Scrabble were in their day.

With all that action in tournament prizes, gambling, auction sales, backgammon schools, backgammon books and equipment, it was inevitable that agents would be drawn to the scene by the smell of money. Thus came Mark McCormack, agent for professional sporting figures like Arnold Palmer, Rod Laver, Larry Csonka and Jackie Stewart. McCormack signed a contract that made Philip Martyn the world's first professional backgammon player with a manager. A number of people pick up a handsome, even a semiglamorous, living out of the game. As head of the World Backgammon Club and promoter of many tournaments since he staged a big one in the Bahamas 10 years ago (SI, May 4, 1964), Prince Obolensky, whose face looks like a granite outcrop, is an exam-



Member of Parliament Clement Freud: his goose was cooked more ways than one.

ple of one whose profession is, in fact, backgammon. But Philip Martyn is one of the few who admit backgammon is his livelihood, rather than passing it off as a game he happens to be so good at that he doesn't need to go to the office very often.

So as Benson was selling his London host, Martyn, at the auction, Esmond Cooper-Key wandered into the maroon and gold room and bid £1,100. Esmond's smile seemed a bit too bright when he realized his was the winning offer. Already that day Esmond had flown across the Atlantic to begin sailing directly back home, and now he had just paid the top price for a player in the tournament.

"Why did you do that, Esmond?" someone asked.

"I only heard what they were saying about his professionalism, and of course I do know something about Martyn," Esmond said. "But I don't know anything

really about whether he will win, do I? I mean, one doesn't follow backgammon players the way one might follow thoroughbreds. Actually, I thought the numbers would keep going up, and someone else would buy him. Well, there's no use crying, is there?"

Esmond sipped a glass of Moët and leaned on a railing that separated a gallery from the carpeted pit a few feet below, where the auction was in progress and the games would be played. "Some people are spending tremendous sums of money to promote backgammon, and I wonder why," mused Esmond. "I can't imagine the masses are clever enough to buy millions of boards, can you? I mean, backgammon is more of an in-here game than an out-there game, it seems to me."

From reading the invitation list of players, it was clear Richard Dunhill, the deputy chairman of Alfred Dunhill Ltd., intended his tournament to be an in-here

continued

affair. "Backgammon is a good promotion for our company because it has a certain snobbish appeal," Dunhill said. But Dunhill wanted to be certain the tournament was heard of out there. Hence free airplane tickets to New York and First-Class return passage to England on the QE 2 for members of the British press. Hence the invitation of celebrities to keep the press awake once the fascination with galloping checkers wore off. Singer-actress Diana Ross, who would have provided the tournament its only woman and only black in the same body, turned down the trip, as did *Playboy* magazine Publisher Hugh Hefner, in whose heart of games backgammon has replaced Monopoly. British TV star Spike Milligan came along to chat up the press, but spent much of the time in his cabin writing a novel. "I always thought backgammon was a particular cut of bacon," Milligan confided at dinner on the night of the gala.

Liberal M.P. Clement Freud, who occupied a penthouse suite, was knocked out in the first round as a player but served as a narrator for the film and phoned in stories to the *Daily Express*. Bulge-eyed and bearded, Freud (grandson of Sigmund, of course) roamed about the ship scowling and looking perpetually startled, as if he were afraid he might have accidentally said aloud what he had just been thinking, and that was why people were behaving toward him in such a manner.

Richard Dunhill, though, was pleased with his lineup. "It's been wonderfully traumatic wondering if we would make it," he said. The idea for the floating tournament was conceived a year before when Patrick, Earl of Lichfield, cousin of the Queen, winner of Male Elegance and Best Dressed awards and a free-lance photographer to boot, phoned up and suggested it. "I rushed out and bought a book on backgammon and became terribly keen on it," Dunhill said.

By now Benson had come to the last players to be auctioned. "One of them is tall, handsome, witty and well-bred, and the other is Takis," he said.

Crash! Takis Theodorocopoulos threw a champagne glass at the rostrum. Takis, 35, Greek, karate champion and former Davis Cup tennis player, is a gentleman journalist for the *National Review* and heavy gambler with a fortune somewhere behind him. He was bought for

£400 by his friend John Zographos (Greek, 45, called "King Zog," Cambridge, investments and real estate). Wait, a player had been overlooked. The Hon. Michael Pearson (29, Gordonstoun, the Household Cavalry, film producer, son of Lord Cowdray, whose family in this century controlled more than 1,500,000 acres in Mexico, with attending mineral rights and the country's only Atlantic-to-Pacific railroads) was sold for £500. Then Benson himself was peddled for £500, and most of the players retired to the ship's casino to get in shape for the next afternoon when half of them would be losers. The ship's casino was a very good place to get accustomed to losing.

In the game of backgammon each player has to move 15 disks around the board as determined by skill and by the roll of the dice, which obviously means it helps to be lucky. The first player to get all his disks off the board wins. A disk can be "hit" by an opponent if not protected, and must start all over again. A "doubling cube" is used to raise the stakes and test the nerve or sense of the players. If you are offered a double and feel the odds are too strongly against it, you can decline and forfeit the game and cut your losses, or you can accept and perhaps defeat the odds and win extra points. "A good player is one who knows when he has the advantage," said American Tim Holland. "A mediocre player is one who thinks he has it when he doesn't. The cornerstone to backgammon is anticipating future moves."

It is said that among players of equal skill luck is about 80% of the game. Supposedly the superior player will overcome the luck factor and beat his opponent if they play long enough. But a player who can count up to 24 (the sum of a roll of double sixes) and can keep his head clear enough to march his men in orderly fashion is liable to beat a master anytime by shaking hot dice. Holland, 43, who is not reluctant to acknowledge that he is tops at backgammon, estimated that five or six of the 32 players in the Dunhill tournament could be rated among the world's elite 50.

A few of the best players in the world play not at the Racquet or the Clermont, but at New York's Mayfair Hotel in a place called The Dump. They are known as Dumplings. Some of the Dumplings don't get their shoes shined, their sweat-

ers don't cover their bellies, they have social connections that reach into the wrong Queens and they are too shrewd to be allowed access to big games like the Dunhill tournament.

"You can't blame Dunhill for not inviting them," said Holland, who occasionally plays at The Dump but usually at the Regency in New York. "Dunhill has worked hard to build up the Beautiful People aspect of this promotion. Five Dumplings could come on board and take everybody's money. How would that look?"

Some say the best players are found at none of those places but in sleazy little clubs in Beirut. Obolensky learned to play the game in Turkey.

Jack Vietor is an American, 59, educated at St. Paul's and Yale, former publisher of *San Francisco* magazine, grandson of the inventor of Jell-O. Though he has held the Vietor Round Robin Private Backgammon Tournament at his home in La Jolla, Calif. since 1962, Vietor says he is merely an amateur. He says one big problem with backgammon tournaments is keeping the hustlers out.

In the first round of the Dunhill tournament Vietor beat Philip Martyn. Martyn had been twisting in agony in his seat at each throw of the dice, raising his eyebrows as if to ask heaven how things could be going so badly for one who deserved so much better. Vietor was flushed and sweating, lighting cigarettes while previous ones still burned in the ashtray. Both men looked as if the game were as pleasant as sinking in quicksand. "A lot of top players go through pain when they play. They fight as if they think they can control the dice," said Claude Beer (American, 36, former squash champion, winner of the Clermont Club British backgammon championship in 1970 and the 1974 Las Vegas World Championship). "I always try hard, but it's not worth agonizing over."

At the final roll Martyn leaped up from the table and rushed out of the room like a Tex-Mex border-town tourist who just found out that wasn't chicken in his taco. In a minute or so Martyn was back to shake hands with Vietor.

"It must be a terrible feeling for a pro like you to lose to an old California hacker like me," Vietor said with a smile.

"Absolutely galling is what it is," replied Martyn. "Staggering."

continued

In the back of the room Esmond Cooper-Key steadied himself against the subtle movement of the ship.

Martyn is a tall, lean, athletic-looking man with hair that has turned muddy gray. Besides being on an Olympic bobsled team, he played rugby at college and he drives fast cars. Martyn runs in a park for exercise with his friend Jackie Stewart, and he is married to Nina Rindt, 28, widow of racing driver Jochen Rindt. Talking about backgammon, Martyn describes some fierce primeval struggle that may not be immediately apparent to a casual observer.

"Backgammon is a sport, not a game," Martyn said after he had calmed down a bit from his loss to Vietor. "It has contact, violence, one-to-one competition like boxing. Good players tend to stay in good physical shape. People used to think you had to stay up all night and drink and smoke to be a backgammon player. That's silly. One can think much more sharply when the body is fit.

"This is not an intellectual endeavor like bridge, where the players are usually ashen gray and cigarette stained, and

it's certainly not like chess. Backgammon is all out in the open, full of stingers, very aggressive. I went bonkers when I lost to a softer player like Vietor. Backgammon has had the image of rich, bum sportsmen and very private clubs, and some of these sportsmen want to keep it their own private affair, but I want to see backgammon become widely popular. It's not hard to learn. I've got no flair for math. Even a beginner can play well if he doesn't let his ego defeat him. The doubling cube is what makes it so extraordinary."

Martyn foresees pro backgammon leagues with players dressed in sweat-shirts that say OMAHA or MADRID, competing with each other on TV. The final of the Las Vegas tournament, in which Martyn lost to Claude Beer, was on closed-circuit TV at the Hilton with a commentary by Lewis DeYoung (London, 39, Oxford, noted amateur tennis player and international gambler). "The tension of an international match would be terrific," Martyn said, "and all there for the audience to see, millions of people watching and criticizing the moves."

While Martyn was talking, Esmond

Cooper-Key went to recoup his fortunes at the ship's casino. But he was distracted by his friend the Baron, who had put down quite a few doubles at the bar and had decided to disrobe.

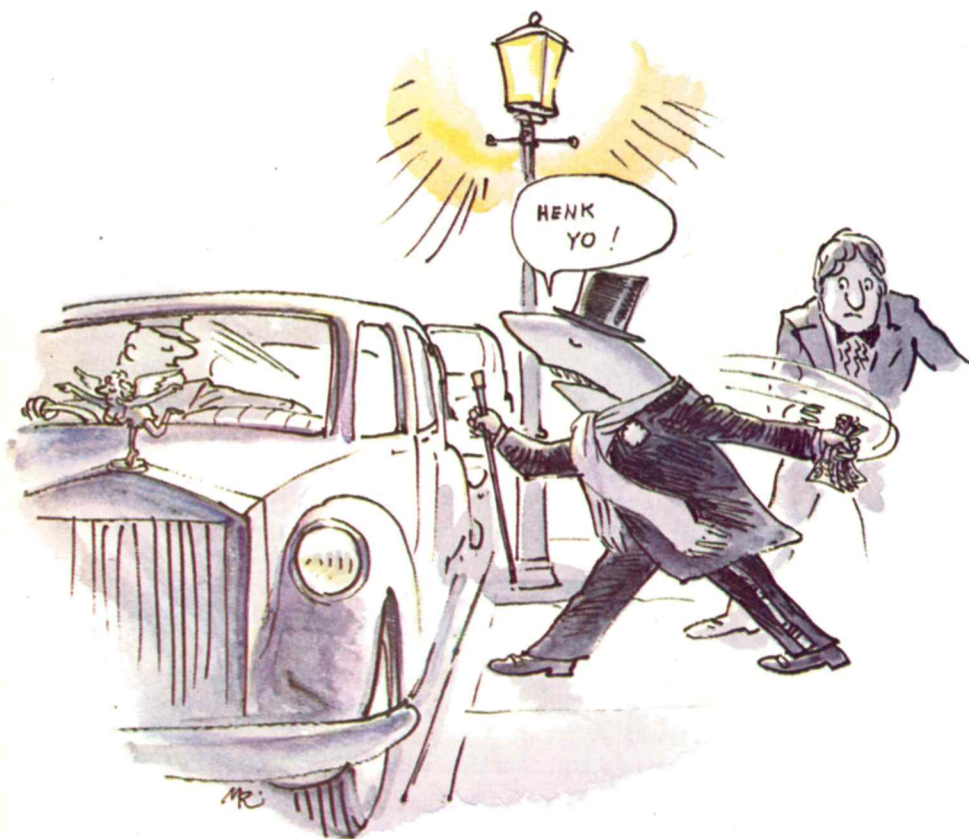
The Baron, it should be explained, is not actually a baron. He is a young London businessman who came on the voyage to be with some of his pals who were involved with the backgammon tournament. On a whim, he wrote on the booking form, in the space for titles, that he was a baron. As a result he was furnished with a dressing room, refrigerator and enormous stateroom at no extra charge, addressed as Baron by the staff and requested to dine in the smaller and more exclusive of the First-Class restaurants.

The Baron's real name will not be mentioned here for reasons to be made clear. For now it is enough to say that when the Baron felt the urge to undress in the casino, he even removed his eyeglasses. The Baron trotted around the casino naked a couple of times and then careened into the Tourist-Class disco. There is an assumption in First Class that people in Tourist Class are probably having more fun, the swine, and the disco in the QE 2 was crowded every night with *elegantini* looking for a serving wench to pinch or a plumber's apprentice to say hidy to. The Baron loped onto the dance floor and blinked at the laughter. Abruptly, he whirled and fled from the room.

When he was asked why he had chosen to put his clothes back on so suddenly after all the terrific trotting and loping, the Baron said, "It was really quite thrilling to be buffers in the casino, and it was a kick to arrive in the disco. But standing there nude on the dance floor without my glasses—couldn't see a bloody thing in that violet light—I began to feel a small touch of paranoia."

Mondo bizzarro, all right. By the second night out, when the captain's cocktail party was held in the First-Class nightclub, the ship was already steaming half a day behind schedule with its impaired boilers. "Right now, at this moment, I can hopefully say that I think we'll come out on top," the captain assured his cocktail guests. His leeriness was as sensible as the sign posted in First-Class cabin bathrooms that said: DO NOT STEP INTO SHOWER BEFORE TESTING WATER TEMPERATURE.

There already had been open snarling about the food. Not that it was in short



Sharks abound not only on the high seas and are ever ready to snap.

supply during the limited hours it was available, but a piece of fish, a filet of beef, a slice of veal, a Caesar salad, all seemed to taste pretty much like a piece of newspaper.

After having returned a few meals to the kitchen for further study, Clement Freud, who appears to examine everything placed before him as if it might be made of spiders, decided to investigate the source of this paper food. He went into the kitchen, lined up the staff and marched up and down peering around with his look of surprised disgruntlement. "These are the boilers back there, are they?" Freud asked the chef.

"No sir, those are the cookers."

"Ah. I have been under the impression that you did the cooking in the boilers."

Adding to the general feeling of oddness aboard the ship, it was soon discovered that one stateroom key would open many other staterooms; exactly how many is not known, but experimentation proved it true in dozens of cases, and a steward cheerfully admitted, "Saves us the trouble of different passkeys, and only old ladies lock their doors, anyway." Patrick, the Earl of Lichfield, is not an old lady in any sense; he even has a tattoo on his arm. But he rushed to the captain to demand protection for his photographic equipment. There is a story in Dunhill publicity releases that the Earl of Lichfield, "coordinator" of the tournament, is forbidden by his family to play backgammon because an ancestor had lost a fortune at the game. True or not, the earl certainly had no desire to lose his cameras. "Outrageous," is what he called the matter of the door keys. *Mondo bizzarro* is the way Esmond put it.

Charles Benson, the auctioneer, kept advancing in the backgammon tournament in the maroon and gold room, while better rated players like Tim Holland, Ted Bassett, Walter Cooke, Claude Beer, Philip Martyn, Joe Dwek, Gino Scalmandre, Porter Ijams, Lewis DeYoung, Michael Stoop and others fell out. In one match Benson needed to throw double sixes on the last roll to win, and he did it. Benson's puckery smile grew steadily. A friend described Benson as "the sort of fellow who owns two coats, three shirts, a necktie and a Ford, but when the rest of us are betting £2 on a race at the dog track, Benson will be betting £200."

Lewis DeYoung said, "Benson has tremendous courage. He's been whipped by every bookmaker in London, and he keeps coming back."

"Going to the track with Benson is a thrilling experience," said Takis Theodoropoulos. "If people find out he's the famous Bendex whose tips they've bet their life savings on, they'll try to kill him."

At last it was the final, and Benson was still in. His opponent was Barclay Cooke, who could hardly be more unlike Benson. Cooke, 61, an American, is from Yale, a gentleman gambler, coauthor of a backgammon book, winner of the Clermont Club British Championship in 1972 and co-holder, with his son Walter, of the World Cup Duplicate Backgammon Championship. "Barclay Cooke was the best player in the game until about 10 years ago," says his friend Porter Ijams. "Then a number of people went past him, but in the last two or three years Barclay has become the most improved player in the game."

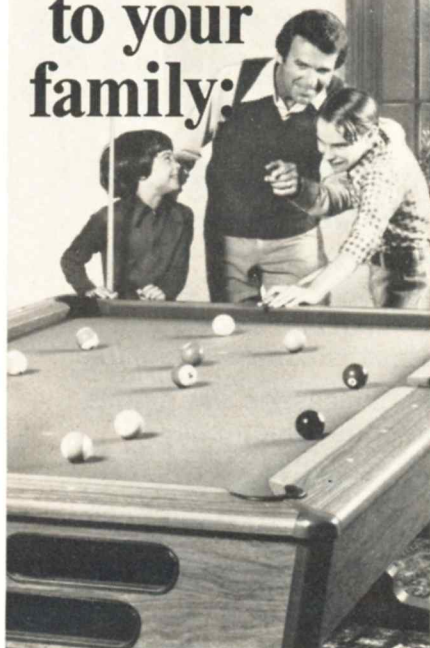
Barclay Cooke does not drink or smoke. Benson, on the other hand, was furnished for the final with all the Moët champagne he could put away, and that turned out to be an amount that would have floored a goat. Where did this champagne come from? The donor was Esmond Cooper-Key, who had taken the waiters aside and told them to keep Benson's glass full no matter what the cost.

Esmond, it developed, is married to the sister of Benson's dear friend, Lady Charlotte Anne Curzon, a lovely blonde girl who was sitting at Benson's side during the final match. Why did Esmond do this with the champagne? Was he for Benson or against him? "I'm totally for him, old man," Esmond explained. "I don't own a piece of him, and it's costing me a bloody fortune the way he drinks. But I want Benson to win, and he plays best when he's loaded to the ears."

"Merry Christmas," Benson said to Cooke before the match. "Let's shake hands now. It's liable to turn ugly later." That morning Benson had left the Tourist-Class disco at 5 a.m., at the gentle urging of Lady Curzon and Victor Lownes, a 46-year-old American who is managing director of the Clermont Club and of Playboy's European enterprises, of which the Clermont is one. "Look at Benson's eyes. He's in absolutely perfect

continued

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CRUISE *continued*

shape for the match," Esmond said as the two opponents faced each other across one of the \$1,000 leather boards that the Dunhill company had supplied for the tournament.

Whether a spectator cared much for backgammon or not, there was excitement in the Benson-Cooke match—two greatly different personalities opposing each other in the glare of movie lights, with the audience crowded close around and the waiters pushing to get through with trays of champagne. Benson started poorly but recovered to tie the 29-point match at 27-all. Cooke won the next point, and Benson tied the match again. The last point developed into a running game in which each player had his disks clear of his opponent's end of the board. The winner would be the one who threw the highest dice.

Benson looked at the board and took a thoughtful gulp of champagne. Cooke toasted him with a glass of ice water.

Benson spoke in a low voice to Cooke. He was asking if Cooke would care to split the prize money. That meant each would receive £7,500 instead of the £10,000 that was to go to the winner and the £5,000 to the runner-up. Cooke agreed. That done, Benson shook the dice cup and rolled double fours. Benson had won the tournament.

At the black-tie gala that night, wine was thrown about, large splashes of it landing on chests, laps and faces, and a great many speeches were made, including the one by Obolensky that was interrupted by Esmond Cooper-Key, champagne glass in hand. Later, Benson capered madly through the noisy Tourist disco with his shirt off, buying drinks as fast as they could be poured, howling and singing, unreservedly celebrating his victory.

"This was definitely not a triumph for clean living," Philip Martyn said, grinning as he watched his permanent guest crash through the dancers. "One drinks milk and is hard as nails. The other drinks champagne and is soft as butter, and wins."

In another room Barclay Cooke stood quietly in a corner, replaying the match in his mind. "I wanted to win," he said. "It wasn't the money, though that was pretty nice. I just wanted to win. My son, Walter, thinks I played the six-four move wrong. I don't think so. What do you think?"

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CRUISE *continued*

Some people said they thought he was wrong. Some said they thought he was right. Benson hardly seemed to care.

Under its previous owner, the celebrated London gambler John Aspinall, the Clermont Club on Berkeley Square was an 18th-century Palladian mansion where one could gamble for very high stakes and might also be invited to parties that included entertainment by lions, tigers and midgets. Now the Clermont is a Playboy property renting out its basement to an outstandingly snotty private disco called Annabel's. Upstairs from Annabel's the gambling continues with roulette and craps and chemin de fer, and there is a good restaurant, but the pre-occupation of most of the Clermont clientele appears to be backgammon.

In fact, only a few hours after the QE 2 docked at Southampton a full day late, the Dunhill tournament was no longer the richest backgammon tournament ever held. The Clermont tournament, with Charles Benson acting as auctioneer, quickly surpassed the Dunhill. With the players' pool and auction pool, the prize money rose to more than \$50,000.

"This is just the tip of the iceberg," said Tim Holland. "It's like golf a few years ago. Soon we'll have regular \$150,000 tournaments. Sponsors are signing up all the time. You can become a good player without spending a lifetime at it. That is an important point."

Holland was rated at 12 to 1 in the Clermont, in which there were 80 players, a number of them women. Benson was 22 to 1 and had spent part of his QE 2 winnings buying a piece of a player named M. Baquiche (20 to 1).

A private backgammon game was already under way in which one of the Dunhill players would lose close to \$200,000 before the following night. "The biggest gambling games in the world are in London," said Lewis DeYoung, who came downstairs shaking his head over the beating he had just been watching. "London makes Las Vegas look like very small change. I've seen \$312,000 wagered on one spin at roulette in a club here, the man going from \$400,000 loser to \$150,000 winner in a few hours."

A little later a visitor walked out in front of the Clermont, where Rolls-Royces and Bentleys were double-parked and gleaming under the lamps. The visitor saw several banknotes fall onto the

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Anniversary...

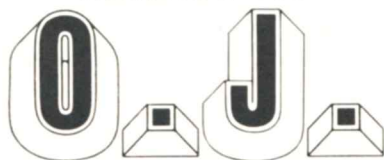


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CRUISE *continued*

sidewalk and thought he saw who had dropped them. The visitor picked them up, but before he could call to the person he thought had lost the money, one of the best-known backgammon players in the world snatched the bills out of his hands and said, "Thank you, I'd hate to lose those."

"But you didn't lose them," the visitor said.

"Of course I did," said the backgammon player and entered a chauffeured Bentley with a bar in the back.

"Now you see what it takes to become an international shark," another well-known player told the bemused visitor.

At cocktails at the S.W. 1 area home of the Baron, people were betting on how many times a certain letter appeared on the back of a particular cigarette package. The Baron wasn't playing. The letter he was interested in was the one he had just received from an aunt, who had read in a London newspaper about the Baron's naked romp on the QE 2. The story had been radioed from the ship to a London columnist by an unidentified snitch who was among the Baron's crowd. "You are a spoiled rich kid with more money than brains," the letter from the aunt said. "You have given your family a right royal black eye. Your uncle has gone into a silence."

"All my mother said was she had looked at my body for quite a number of years, and couldn't understand why I would want to show it around," the Baron said.

Later, back again at the Clermont, one could see across the room the backsides of many people pressing in to watch the final of the tournament. "I would like to see what they are doing," said Esmond Cooper-Key, "but I would rather need to be a giraffe, wouldn't I?"

"With a grasp of the game," the Baron said.

Charles Benson joined the group at the table.

"Are you doing well, Charles?" asked Esmond.

"We'll know in a few minutes. You know I bought Baquiche at the auction," Benson said.

A sudden prattle burst from among the backsides.

"Baquiche has won," someone said, heading for the bar.

"Not too bad a week, all in all," said Benson.

END