

## CROQUET.

### DEVELOPMENTS REGARDING CROQUET.

Life is short, but (a writer in the "World" says) croquet is long. Yet, in its initial stages, the game is easy, and this, probably, is the first fascination which it exercises upon beginners. Later on it develops attractions of another and quite different order. Given four things—good health, good nerve, good temper, and a good eye—you can at once begin to knock the balls about, and, after a fashion, play croquet. A couple of years' continuous play, with solitary practice whenever opportunity offers, will bring you well forward in manual skill. If you have that sort of quickness of perception and promptness of performance, added to deliberate thought and sound judgment, which make a man's fortune in the world of commerce, you will now quickly support your execution by a certain grip on the tactics of the game. Patience, modest assurance, a steadfastness of purpose which cannot be shaken by misfortune, and the kind of courage which burns brightest under difficulties and bursts into a flame of triumphant action in the darkest hour—should you find you possess these qualities—will do much to help you to a further advance in proficiency. If you are now conscious that, by perpetual exercise, your will-power has enormously increased, and is still increasing, in force and volume, so that you appear to yourself when playing to be issuing a series of irresistible brain commands (so absolute and complete is the obedience of hand and arm, muscle and sinew, in successfully carrying out the intention of each stroke), you will undoubtedly be justified in seriously taking up the game with the hope of one day becoming a fairly good player.

There are, of course, two croquets. There is the trifling croquet of private lawns, smart house parties, lawless squabbling, and unfinished games; and there is the real croquet—the croquet of correct courts, tournament, and regulated contest, in which quarter is neither craved nor given. The former is the recruiting ground of the latter. If you know nothing about the second, it is pleasant enough to dally with the first—to watch the futile struggle between my Lord Dreadnought and Captain Careless of the Blues, half round the course for a pony, or to join in dawdling four-somes with Lady Peggy Hooper, Miss Muddler, Sir Harry Fottle, and other amiable triflers. And if, after a time, you come to fancy the game and yourself, you can join the world of real croquet. A wonderful little world this, quiet, unostentatious, and, above all, in deadly earnest: it will open its arms to the newcomer, and will teach him the

the newcomer, and will teach him the stings of joy, the pangs of pain, the ecstasies and despairs, the collapse and the delirium which the real croquet holds for its devotees.

The croquet world may be said to be contained in, and governed by, the Croquet Association. It is the first duty of anybody wishing to play serious croquet to join this honourable guild or brother and sisterhood of the mallet. Until he has achieved membership, he is in the worst of false positions—as completely outside the pale as a jockey who has never applied for a licence, a yacht-owner without a right to fly a national flag, a foolish bandit or outlaw, upon whose head no price has been placed simply because he is not dangerous—in a word, a croquet-player without a handicap. Once enrolled, the committee will sit upon him and his attainments; and, with a number of bisques (the free shots which he will require in each game to bring him to a theoretical equality with a scratch player) attached to his hitherto unknown name, he will, so far as the croquet world is concerned, begin to exist. In the social aspect it is a community as delightful as it is wonderful. Drawing its members from the widest sources, here are gathered together men and women, old and young and middle-aged, high rank and honoured position, beauty and intellect, valour and wit: wise clerics, dashing Guardsmen, plodding scholars, butterfly scientists, deep thinkers, agreeable rattles, the confessions of Worth, the costumes of Common-sense, bright-eyed worldlings, spectacled recluses; and—most wonderful!—all class distinction, tiresome observances, and funkey barriers swept into nothingness by the game itself. So that you have at once the perfect equality of the sexes, together with an ideal aristocracy—the aristocracy of merit; the stupid table of precedence superseded by the handicap table; the accidents of birth and fortune obliterated, and men and women taking rank only according to their deserts. Thus, if, for instance, a great and formal croquet banquet were to be given, the company would undoubtedly be marshalled to the feast in the order of their bisques—the scratch and minus to the high table, then the one bisquers, the two, the three, the four bisquers, down the scale to the poor eights and nines, and perhaps elderly or afflicted tens; and, though a prince of the blood should be among this tag-rag of the game, no voice would bid him step up higher. But as the place of the present writer in this stately procession would be immediately in front of the hired waiters with the soup, it perhaps ill becomes him to dogmatise in his endeavour to make the point clear.

Memorable as the croquet season of 1900 must be, by reason of the tremendous impetus the game has received from all quarters, the multitude of re-

ous impetus the number of re-  
 from all quarters, the multitude of re-  
 creants, the number of tournaments, the  
 abolition of the india-rubber end of the  
 mallet, the alteration of the wrong-ball  
 rule, the adoption of the best-of-three  
 games arrangement for the more impor-  
 tant meetings, etc., its most gratifying  
 circumstance is that the association has  
 now found a home and headquarters of  
 its own. At the Sheep House Club, a  
 fine old house with beautiful grounds  
 near the Marilake gate of Richmond  
 Park—a homelier Hurlingham, a less  
 riotous Ramelagh—surroundings worthy  
 of the noble game have now been secur-  
 ed. Here, on summer days, a perpetual  
 garden party holds sway, and, to the  
 strains of a string band and the wooden  
 music of the balls, the curious and re-  
 flective, may ascertain as he  
 wanders round the ten or dozen  
 courts the excellence and perfection  
 of the new croquet. And, should his  
 visit fall in the midst of a tournament,  
 he may, at his ease, witness the combats  
 of the giants of the game. He will in-  
 deed be dull of comprehension and wall-

ed in with ignorance if he cannot fire  
 at his first sight of an all-round break,  
 or flash into some sort of enthusiasm in  
 presence of the wizard-like ingenuity,  
 colossal control, incredible precision, un-  
 dreamed-of dash, and more than mortal  
 force displayed by these masters (and  
 mistresses) of the art, as they work their  
 way to victory over equally formidable  
 opponents.

There is a whole literature of croquet,  
 a library of precious volumes from the  
 pens of past and present adepts, ready  
 to the student's hand. In those pages  
 he can acquire all that mere book-learn-  
 ing may give, gathering as he reads the  
 certainty that croquet in many respects  
 resembles violin playing; that it con-  
 tains all and more than the brain-work  
 of chess; that it is more exciting than  
 blockade running, less tedious than rou-  
 lette; that it is resonant with echoes of  
 all that is best in golf, poker, billiards,  
 Japanese wrestling, acrostic solving, and  
 war on the grandest scale. But it is to  
 be regretted that the croquet authors  
 have not thought proper to attack what  
 is probably a widespread error—the im-  
 pression that croquet is only a summer  
 game. Croquet is undoubtedly at its  
 best in fine weather, but it is never bad;  
 and it is impossible to exaggerate the  
 value of regular winter practice, more  
 especially to the neophyte. Just as  
 peace makes armies and war destroys  
 them, private practice fits the croquet  
 player for the arena, and the tournament  
 itself unhinges him. He learns in the  
 calm of solitary endeavour; he falls back  
 into faulty style in the heat of public  
 combat. Throughout the winter months  
 therefore, when lawns are less crowded,  
 when, in colloquial phrase, croquet is  
 not everybody's money, he should, while  
 the light holds, be rarely seen without

not everybody's money, he should, while  
 the light holds, be rarely seen without  
 a mallet in his hand.

If the present passion for the pastime  
 continues—and who can doubt that it  
 will?—there is a great future in store  
 for croquet. Compulsory croquet at  
 the public schools, croquet examinations  
 for the army and civil service, severe  
 croquet tests for all generals about to  
 take up commands, and for holders of  
 high State office before kissing hands;  
 then the democratisation of the game,  
 municipal croquet grounds, national  
 tournament meetings, may be safely pre-  
 dicted. Calm, self-reliant, endowed  
 with apparently superhuman skill, the  
 best croquet players already impress the  
 thoughtful spectator as different from  
 the players of all other games, and sug-  
 gest to him the people of Bulwer Lyt-  
 ton's fanciful tale—the coming race. If  
 in the past our country's battles have  
 been won on the playing fields of Eton,  
 surely the ultimate supremacy of nations  
 will be decided on the croquet grounds of  
 the world.

There is only one objection to croquet  
 —the real croquet— and that is, if you  
 play it seriously, there is not room in  
 life for anything else.