

A NOTED BILLIARD MATCH

MICHAEL PHELAN AGAINST JOHN SEEREITER.

WESTERN FAITH IN THE DETROIT DARK HORSE WHICH COST THE WESTERN POCKET DEARLY.

By his skill with the cue, his example as a professional, his judicious code for the settlement of mooted points in play, his different treatises upon billiards, and his practical suggestions for the improvement of its appliances, Michael Phelan admittedly did more for the advancement of the game than any other man who has ever made a life study of it. He found billiards in undeserved disrepute, and he popularized it by investing it with respectability through cheery surroundings. He saw it played in secret, and he made it open and known by bringing it up out of basements and forward from saloons whose entrances were up alleyways. He set the example of carpeted, cleanly, and finely appointed rooms, and his establishment on Broadway, which always held at least 29 tables, and for a time had 30, was a model of cozy comfort, and the pioneer in the matter of roominess for players.

Singleness of purpose was the leading characteristic of Michael Phelan, whose tastes, habits, and pursuits were surprisingly plain for one who had furnished so much reason for being regarded as a public character. Billiards was his life, and he had little thought but for that, the family he cherished, and the cause of Irish freedom, to which he devoted his personal services by a perilous trip to his native land when he was 34 years old, besides contributing of his means always. His amusements were few, being limited to chess and billiards. He never went to the theatre unless to take his family. The race course was unknown to him. He was in a gambling house but once in his life, and then he was entrapped into it by a professed friend, who was a professional billiardist. He never saw a boat race, and yet as an encouragement he backed one of the leading oarsmen in this country (Walter Brown) in a match for the championship. He never saw a prize fight, and yet he was about the heaviest main-stake backer of John C. Heenan against Tom Sayers at Farnborough in 1860, furnishing the money not because he believed in prize fighting, but because he believed in America. When not called out of town by the duty of attending some billiard match or opening some billiard room, his office hours were from 9:30 to 5, and it was during that interval he played chess. His lunch invariably consisted of oysters and a mug of ale. He always dined at home, and after that meal he repaired to some public billiard room to chat with familiars. Except on Saturday nights, which he regarded as his vacation, and which were spent at the room corner of Broadway and Twenty-second-street, he retired to his home about 10:30 o'clock. On Sundays he never left his house. During the Summer months he dwelt in a roomy but plain cottage at Locust Point, Shrewsbury River, but he shunned publicity there as elsewhere, his visitors being only his immediate billiard friends. It was often marveled at that so well read a man and so entertaining a conversationalist should have been so reluctant to mix in promiscuous gatherings, his habit upon entering a public billiard room being to take a chair by himself somewhere near the rear. The secret of this was that he dreaded "buzzers," and especially disliked the personal compliments that strangers, as if to ingratiate themselves, are bent upon bestowing upon public men. He longed for "peace and quietness," as he expressed it. There was no nonsense about Phelan. He was thoroughly sincere, and lived by rule. A man with such a life should have been a fond husband and a devoted father, and Michael Phelan was both conspicuously.

He was born in Ireland on April 18, 1817, and came to this country in his seventh year. His father kept billiard rooms in this city and at Saratoga, shipping his tables from here to that watering place in the Summer time. The boy was apprenticed to a jeweler, and this trade he followed until his marriage, about 1837, when he made billiards his profession, as he had practiced the game in his boyhood, at first using the mace instead of the cue. He was proprietor of several rooms in this city, among them being that of the All Nations' Hotel, corner of Broadway and Thames-street; that at 310 Broadway; that known as the Arcade, 8½ Barolay-street; one in Chambers-street, adjoining Burton's Theatre, and the last and largest of all, that at 786 and 788 Broadway. In 1854 he went to San Francisco and established a room there with 20 tables. D. D. Winant, of this city, furnished the latter. It will indicate the progress this branch of manufacture has made to state that, although Winant did about the largest business of all the makers of those days, the best he could do with that order was to be in readiness to ship two tables by every steamer. It was while he was in San Francisco that Phelan played his noted three-ball match with M. Damon, a Frenchman. It consisted of the best in three games of 100 points apiece, on a 6x12 carrom table, Phelan giving the odds of 20 per cent. The stake, \$500, was of no consequence compared with the wagering of "slugs," (fifty-dollar gold pieces.) The match was played in February, 1855. The Frenchman won the first game by 6 points, and Phelan won the others by 3 and 5. Phelan returned to this city in the Summer of 1855, founded the manufacturing firm of O'Connor & Colender, (the latter gentleman having married Phelan's eldest daughter,) and opened the room at 39 Chambers-street, in which were placed the first six tables made by the new firm. The senior partner, Chris O'Connor, lacked a year of being 21, although he was represented as of age. To establish the new house Chris's father, Tobias O'Connor, had been bought out, and the money needed for the start, \$2,500, was furnished by Capt. Tom Murphy, Phelan's friend, who died last May. It was supposed by Phelan's family that "Capt. Tom" had loaned the money, but a search of the Register's office a few weeks ago showed that a house in Yorkville owned by Mrs. Phelan had at that time been deeded to the Captain by the lady. The money was subsequently paid him, and he released the house, which led to the impression that the \$2,500 had been a loan. Upon its release the house was taken by Chris O'Connor. It represented the savings the wife had made of the money Phelan had forwarded from San Francisco in dribs and drabs. He himself, after selling out his room there to George Waters, who is still living in San Francisco, landed at the foot of Canal-street, this city, with \$800 in his pocket.

The great match of Phelan against Seereiter came about in a quite businesslike way, and was quietly made. It was unexpected to Phelan, although he had invited it in June, 1857, when he issued a proposition to play any one in the country at either the three-ball carrom or the four-ball carrom game. That challenge was unanswered, but the annoyances that had drawn it out continued, and in September of 1858 it was renewed, with the stipulation that the contest should be for \$5,000 a side, \$1,000 forfeit. In the ensuing October the *Detroit Free Press* announced that "the boy Seereiter has taken up the gauntlet, and will play for the championship as soon as the preliminaries are arranged. One gentleman has put up \$2,000 and another \$1,000, and the remainder will be in the hands of the stakeholders soon, unless Phelan backs down and withdraws his challenge." This was seven months after Seereiter had defeated Barney Chrystal in their two 1,000-points four-ball carrom games for \$500 a side each, the triumphs of the Detroit player over the New-Yorker having so elated the Western sporting men that they had come to regard their section of the country as invincible in billiards. Nothing further occurred until Jan. 28, 1859, when Phelan received from Seereiter a letter meant to be regarded as an acceptance of the New-York player's challenge, but which in reality embraced a new proposition. Nevertheless the match was germinating.

One night in the succeeding February two strangers entered Phelan's room, then occupying the three upper floors of what has since been Fleischmann's Vienna Bakery, at the corner of Tenth-street and Broadway. Both were tall. The red-haired man was Cornelius Carson, while the very dark one was Isaac Flowers. Michael Phelan's only son, George E., then not more than 17 years old, was the cashier of the establishment, and was behind the desk at the time. The dark man asked if Mr. Phelan was in, and the boy informed him that he was at his home, in Eleventh-street, laid up with rheumatism, and would not be at the room that night. Mr. Flowers explained that he and his companion had come from Detroit to see the elder Phelan about making a billiard match with Seereiter, whereupon young Phelan volunteered to send a messenger home. The messenger was dispatched at once, and in a few minutes the proprietor of the room walked in. The dark man told him that he was there for the purpose of making a match for Seereiter to play him 1,000 points up in Detroit, and in 30 days. Quick work was contemplated, as the usual time between making a match and playing it was from 60 to 90 days; but it was not to the hurry that Phelan objected. He did not like the idea of playing Seereiter on his own stamping ground, as, having the rheumatism, he was in no condition to do all the traveling. He suggested to Seereiter's emissaries that the match might be played in this city, or in Buffalo as half-way

ground. It was agreed before the short conference broke up that Messrs. Flowers and Carson should next day meet Phelan at Henry J. Colton's for further consultation. As they were leaving his room Phelan remarked:

"So far as I am concerned, there will be a match made, but not for less than \$10,000."

They met next day, Feb. 11, at Colton's and arranged for a game of 2,000 points of four-ball carroms on a 6 by 12 six-pocket table, the date to be April 12, the place Detroit, and the stake \$5,000 a side. It will thus be seen that this important match had to come off in just 60 days, and that in return for having the stake to his liking Phelan had to go to Detroit to play. This was not the only concession he made. He bound himself to accept a table taken from Whipple's room, of which Seereiter was the Superintendent, there being no stipulation as to it save that it should have a new cloth when set up for the match, and that after Phelan's arrival in Detroit he and his antagonist should have regular and equal hours for practicing separately upon it. Such a concession was probably never before extended to a player in any important game. It has certainly never been granted since. At the same time it is to be recorded that it was infinitely less of an advantage than that it would be now, for "position playing" was almost in its infancy.

About the 1st of April Phelan reached Detroit. He was still a sick man, and the weather there was not calculated to help his rheumatic trouble, which was in his left shoulder. It rained almost continuously up to the day of the contest. As he practiced for several days in Firemen's Hall without its being heated, he caught a fresh cold, which made his rheumatism more binding. April 12 happened to be a fine day, and he took a long walk, at the close of which he expressed himself as feeling much better. It may to some seem trivial to speak of a right-handed billiard player as suffering from rheumatism in his left arm, but on the big tables of that period right-handed men had often to play shots left-handed, and in the course of one of these strokes in the great game the cue dropped from Phelan's hand onto the table. Besides, his being disabled had annoyed him all through his practice in this city. It so ruffled him that, although he had his pick of many hundreds of cues and artisans at his beck and call for him, he could not find one to suit. He tried all kinds from 13 ounces to 22 ounces, medium sized butts and large butts, small points and large ones. One night, when he was more disgusted than usual, his son handed him his own cue, with the request that he try it. The elder Phelan complained at once: "It is too light, and its point is too small." But he played with it and did better than at any time before. This stick became famous. It had belonged to an amateur named Hopkins, and had long stood unused in the rack when young Phelan, happening to notice that it was perfectly straight and exceptionally well balanced, put a new leather on it and used it for several months. On the butt was inscribed "Hop." Michael practiced with it a few times, said that he liked it, but that it was too light, and when he was putting his cues into a box for Detroit he omitted it. Asked by his son if he did not intend to take it, he said: "No; it's of no use." In his frame of mind nothing would have been of use that could not deal the ivories hard thwacks. The youngster slyly slipped "Hop" into the box with the other sticks, and it went to Detroit. Phelan began the big game with a cue weighing 20 ounces, but had not played two dozen shots before he thrust it under the table and picked up "Hop" from among a dozen cues he had in reserve; and to that slim ash he clung during the remainder of the night.

The contest took place in Firemen's Hall, which had a capacity of between 500 and 600 persons. Tickets were \$5 apiece. Phelan had promised a committee of the Ladies' Mount Vernon Association, then contemplating the restoration of Washington's tomb, that if he won he would present the net receipts to their worthy cause. The returns brought him in upward of \$100 in debt, although the hall was crowded. A great many complimentary had been issued by those directing the affair. As it would have been difficult to explain to the ladies why a full house, with tickets at \$5, realized nothing, Phelan, when the committee applied to him after the game was over, gave them his personal check for \$250.

Play was to have begun at 7 o'clock. An hour before that time the sidewalks in front of Firemen's Hall and the Bible House were crowded, and so they remained until 5 o'clock the next morning, when play ceased. Not much was talked of in Detroit but the match, and men had gathered there from almost every State in the Union. Probably 95 out of every 100 believed that Seereiter could not lose. He was a "dark horse." The Western people had been whispered to of his doings with the cue for months, and they credited the reports. Some of the Eastern men also heard of his play, but they did not believe it, because they were not allowed to see any of it. Phelan practiced openly in Firemen's Hall, playing on April 9 before the Governor of the State and the Supreme Court judges; but Seereiter practiced in secret, those who were backing him not even admitting Philip Tieman, who had journeyed from Cincinnati as Seereiter's friend and well wisher, and in consequence became friendly to Phelan, whom he had never seen before. After the match there was no lack of cordiality between Tieman and Seereiter, the latter of whom was not blamed by the former for the tactics of exclusiveness; but the friendship thus begun between Tieman and Phelan became of the firmest kind, and endured until the latter's death.

The Western faith in the "dark horse" manifested itself as soon as the players "strung" for the lead and choice of balls, which were the usual size, two and three-eighths. Duncan, a well known brewer, stood up and started the betting fever.

"I would like to bet \$500 or \$1,000 that Seereiter wins this game."

"I will take that," said Phelan.

As they went forward to put up the \$500 a side in the hands of H. J. Colton—a once active sporting man of this city, who is still living, and who was stakeholder for the match—Mr. Duncan pressed the New-York player:

"Let's make it \$1,000 or \$2,000."

"All right," responded Phelan.

"Suppose we make it \$2,500?" queried Duncan.

"All right," again said the player who was always of few words.

The example was contagious. Everybody in the hall seemed seized with a desire to speculate. For fully 15 minutes the putting up of money went on. Nothing else was done. It surprised Phelan, and it seemed to amuse Seereiter. At last it came to an end, and the two players started the game.

It is doubtful if among the 500 or 600 persons present as much as \$1,000 could have been scraped together that had not been invested on the result. Men held stakes who had never held them before, and some of the stakeholders had every pocket stuffed with bills. No betting occurred within the hall after play had begun. During the intermission some of the Phelanites offered to risk a little more, but found no takers, the supporters of Seereiter declining to lay otherwise than that Phelan would not win by so many points as he was then ahead, or about 150.

At about 7:30 Seereiter opened play, which need not be followed in detail. His umpire was John R. Gillett, while Phelan's was Ralph Benjamin, whom Phelan, giving him the odds of 3 points in 16 at the best in 17 three-ball carrom games for \$1,000 a side, had defeated by 9 games out of 11 in Philadelphia on Dec. 30, 1857. These umpires, be it known, were such in the proper sense of the word. They dared not open their mouths until appealed to by one player or the other. If they disagreed, the dispute then went to the referee or final judge, who was a Judge by profession, being Judge Strong, of Detroit. The marker was Peter D. Braisted, Jr., of this city, afterward for many years Color Sergeant of the Seventh Regiment. It was his duty to hand the players the artificial "bridge," which on that table would come into play in almost every inning. After Peter dies it may be recorded that sometimes Seereiter would fail to make himself understood right off by the marker, who was never a second late in handing the "bridge" to Michael.

The limits of this article confine it to the state of the game at every successive 100, which is tabulated thus:

Innings.	Seereiter.	Phelan.	Innings.	Seereiter.	Phelan.
14.....	110	59	81.....	709	1,006
21.....	232	204	90.....	961	1,105
27.....	301	269	104.....	1,142	1,229
29.....	314	322	113.....	1,312	1,303
32.....	321	403	120.....	1,530	1,516
43.....	401	502	127.....	1,570	1,608
50.....	425	608	133.....	1,638	1,706
61.....	486	710	145.....	1,732	1,838
65.....	498	818	157.....	1,847	1,924
79.....	703	968	164.....	1,904	2,000

It will have been seen that both players made no halt between their thirteenth and fifteenth hundreds, as in his one hundred and twentieth inning, by a finely executed run of 150. Seereiter advanced himself from 1,380, where he was 7 points behind, to 1,530. When this feat was made known to them the crowd outside set up a yell that could have been heard half a mile, and they kept it up until later news from the seat of conflict dampened their ardor. Seereiter had wound up his run by playing all the balls into the "strung" but Phelan's, which he had previously held. The latter, playing from in hand, was forced to go to cushion first. He used the mace in this banking shot, counted, and ran 120, which advanced him from 1,387 to 1,516. This was his highest run.

The New-Yorker had opened timely, and at the end of Seereiter's twentieth inning he was 101 points behind. It was in the twenty-first inning, after the Detroit man had put up 63 more, giving him a lead of 124, that Phelan made his first run of note. It was 96, or 33 better than any his opponent had so far made. As Seereiter went to the table to resume play he remarked, with a tinge of sarcasm:

"Considerable of a shower!"

It was to a drop the shower by which Phelan washed him out, as the final score shows. The other notable runs were 91 and 101 by Phelan, and 59, 60, and 157 by Seereiter. The 157, the highest of the game, were rolled up in the eighty-seventh inning, when "Dutch Hans" was 302 behind. It was a fine performance, and opened the eyes of the New-York party to the fact that Seereiter had made marked progress since they had seen him at work with the ivories against Chrystal in Gotham. It made H. W. Colender leave the hall, go to his room in the Bidle House, and stay there. It made Phelan bite his lip with vexation, because he realized that it was his own fault that the opportunity to make this telling run had come to his opponent. He had, in the overconfidence engendered by a long lead, played what he called a "gallery shot," which he missed, whereas he should have aimed at safety. The experiment might have lost him the match, and he never forgave himself for what he termed his desire to "show off." The run restored to Seereiter the confidence he had

lost, and, as almost invariably happens to a skillful player who becomes generous to a foe, Phelan could not for a long time get in favor again with the ivories, and at the one hundred and thirtieth inning he had lost the lead. It was apparent that nothing but his superior generalship saved him. He himself admitted this. He won the game less because of the subsequent shots that he made than because of those he refused to try to make. After that run of 157 both resorted to safety playing frequently, each driving his own ball into the pocket when he found the other balls outside of the "strung," and often doing the same when he felt in doubt about counting. Close work like this was clearly to the advantage of the more experienced match player, who was also the longer headed, as well as the better general carromer, the Detroit expert having no advantage outside of "position" play and the resultant greater chances to "nurse" the balls. In the last 30 innings of the game Phelan deliberately holed himself no fewer than six times, and in all that period Seereiter reached 59 but once, and on but two other occasions passed 19, and then not getting beyond 25. Phelan felt that to his own folly was due his having so slight a majority as 96 in so long a game as 2,000, after he had once (eighty-fifth inning) led by 333.

The average rate of progress in this game, whose actual playing time was 7 hours 35 minutes and upon which more wealth was risked than upon any other contest at billiards before or since, was 12 1-5 points—12 32-164 by Phelan and 11 100-164 by Seereiter. The latter's skill on this occasion justified the faith that those who knew of it placed in him. He had never before played so well, and he never again came anywhere near his mark of April 12-13, 1859. His averages against Chrystal had been 1030-92 in the first 1,000-point game and 6136-144 in the second. He next played in the championship tournament of 1863, and his averages were 13 6-38, 10 9-46, and 11 5-45; but those won games were but 500 points up and the table was a four-pocket, and on the same table he played next and finally for the same championship in a game of 1,500 points, when his best run was but 57 and his average but 8 11 88, Dudley Kavanagh defeating him. This was in 1863 also. He has never since appeared in public, but he has always borne the reputation among professionals of an earnest, well intentioned player, who might have attained to first honors and held them long had not the mistake been made (which Phelan himself committed when in 1865 he backed Melvin Foster against Joseph Dion) of pitting him too early against so experienced a man as Phelan, regarding whose capacity at the four-ball game but little could have been known to the Detroit billiardists, inasmuch as theretofore his chief contests had been at the three-ball game.

The heaviest bettor in Detroit on the Phelan side was John Cleveland, long the champion at tenpins, and who ultimately made billiards his profession, and was longest associated with old Lafayette Hall, on Broadway, nearly opposite the Metropolitan Hotel. "Tenpin Johnny," as he was called, was one of a party that went from this city, and included Neil Bryant, H. A. ("Pud") Freeman, G. E. Phelan, Dudley Kavanagh, Peter Braisted, Jr., D. E. Gavit, Chris O'Connor, and others. Cleveland never left his seat that night, and missed not a shot. But he could not have accomplished this feat without, as he often related, the unconscious aid of the veteran Prof. Bill Lake, who also sat it out, although he must have missed many a shot. When Seereiter ran that 150, "Tenpin Johnny" so pinched the arm of Kavanagh, who was sitting next to him, that next day it was black and blue in many places. But one among the New-York party found fault with the game. That was Chris O'Connor, who was chagrined because he had not invested more money. Besides being of the manufacturing firm of O'Connor & Colender, in which Mr. Phelan was a silent partner, he was also the brother-in-law of Charles Ransom, who died about a year ago, and who was known as "The Square Gambler." The bulk of the money "Tenpin Johnny" bet was Ransom's. Chris won only \$2,200. Early in the following year he sold out his interest in the manufacturing house for \$35,000, and shortly afterward for \$15,000 purchased the room at 60 and 62 East Fourteenth-street, kept by him until he died, on Dec. 3, 1875. Phelan, besides the bet of \$2,500, had \$3,000 in the main stake, the deceased William Wickes \$1,000, and a gentleman still living the other \$1,000.

Michael Phelan, after his defeat of Seereiter, engaged in but one game that could in any sense be regarded as a match. That was for charity, the loser to pay \$100 to the Workingwomen's Protective Union. It was played in Irving Hall, this city, April 8, 1864, on a 6 by 12 four-pocket table, Dudley Kavanagh being his opponent. As the push shot and the crotch were both barred, the game suited Phelan's style of play much more nearly than Kavanagh's at that time, and the former won by 1,000 to 965.

Undeniably the foremost player of his times, Michael Phelan never laid claim to the title of champion. On the contrary, he privately and publicly repudiated it, and after his conquest of Seereiter he took early steps to confer it upon some other American expert. Phelan died on Oct. 7, 1871. It is scarcely necessary to add of so unselfish a man that he was sincerely lamented. The throng that attended his funeral services from St. Francis Xavier's Church was almost altogether made up of genuine mourners. A column as simple but solid as was his life marks his resting place in Calvary Cemetery.