

# Bluebook

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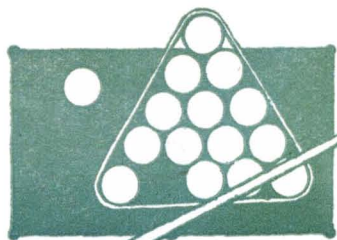
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*The short stories and novel herein are fiction and intended as such. They do not refer to real characters or actual events. If the name of any living person is used, it is a coincidence.*

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# the MAN from CHICAGO

*Charlie figured he could  
spot a pool hustler every time,  
so he knew the mild old man was a phony.*

IT MUST have been at least two years ago that Hustler Curtiss first came into Charlie's poolroom. I can remember pretty exactly, because right from the time he first walked in the front door, with his smooth white hair, his bright-blue plaid shirt, and his straight, stiff way of walking, he was the kind of man you would notice. He nodded politely at Charlie, who was sitting behind the counter reading a comic book, and said, "Good afternoon, sir." It wasn't hard to tell that for a small-town poolroom like ours, this was a pretty unusual guy.

From that time on, he started coming in regular, every day at three o'clock. Other old men came in and hung around because there wasn't any place else for them to go; but you could tell it wasn't that way with Curtiss. He didn't talk and fool around like the others; he always had his eyes right on the tables. But he never seemed interested in playing the game himself.

He didn't hang around the barbershop or the courthouse, either, like all the other footloose old men did; you never saw him, ever, until three o'clock in the afternoon. It seems he had this widowed sister who lived out on Catalpa Street—which is, by the way, about the highest-class district in town—and he stayed with her. She was why he had come to our town in the first place, I guess, after he'd retired. I suppose he would spend the mornings with his sister, talking about books or paintings or something; he seemed like that kind of guy. A different kind of guy; not my kind, but a kind I respect.

For instance, he never did chew tobacco like most of the other old men did; he smoked, cork-tipped cigarettes, and he carried them in a thin, silver case in his shirt pocket. It was kind of funny, the way he would pull that elegant-looking case out of an old flannel shirt and then reach into the

pocket of a baggy pair of pants and pull out a little matching lighter and light up. The lighter was different from any I'd ever seen before; it was very small and it always worked.

When I said it was funny, watching him, I didn't mean that it was the kind of a thing you'd laugh at; because Curtiss didn't do things *that* way. There was something different, something natural and smooth about the way he would handle that fancy little lighter. And about the way he dressed, too. He always had on something loose and comfortable looking; but it was never cheap or worn out. I think "casual" is the word you use for it; and that's the way he looked in his clothes. You could tell the stuff he wore was good goods, like the materials you see in the windows of those little, quiet stores in the big towns with a little sign saying "from England," and no price tag.

He never tried to tell anybody anything, either; never seemed to want to do anything but just watch the games and smoke his cigarettes. I hardly spoke 20 words to him in at least two years; but I couldn't help liking him.

Curtiss didn't seem to strike Charlie that way, though. Charlie was the kind of guy who figured that if anybody was much different from himself—and I can't think of any two guys more different than Curtiss and Charlie—there must be something peculiar about the other guy. Charlie always was a great one for kidding people, too; especially people who wouldn't kid him back. That was Charlie's way. In fact, it was Charlie who first gave Curtiss the nickname "Hustler" back when the old man had started coming in the poolroom.

He'd been coming in for maybe a couple of

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Illustrated by TRACY SUGARMAN



weeks and had been doing a lot of smiling but not much talking and some of the boys had noticed he carried a big roll with him. Not that he flashed it on us or anything like that; but most of the boys are pretty observant when it comes to bank-rolls. So anyway, this time, out of a clear blue sky, Charlie comes up to Curtiss and says, "Mind if I ask a question, old-timer?"

Curtiss smiles. "Not at all, young man."

Then Charlie says, "Where did you get that big roll I see you carrying all the time?" Now this kind of shocks me, since a question like that is not considered very good taste around a poolroom.

Curtiss looks at Charlie for a minute. Then he gets a serious look and leans a little forward in his chair. "Well, Charlie, I'll tell you," he says, "I made my bank-roll hustling pool."

Well, naturally, this stops Charlie cold. But only for a minute. Then he starts looking very wise and nodding his head, like he understands.

"Oh," he says, "I sec. And where," he says, real polite—and Charlie is never polite without a good reason for it—"did you do this hustling, sir?"

Curtiss looks at Charlie real serious again and he says, "In Chicago, young man. At Wenneker's Billiard Hall. I was houseman there for 40 years."

WELL, right off I figure there's no doubt but what the old man is pulling Charlie's leg, and beating him at his own game. But what he says seems to knock Charlie and the rest of them right on out. They must be figuring the old man is expecting them to believe him—and even I have to admit he looks mighty serious about it—and that he's out of his head. You see, everybody's heard of Wenneker's. It must be the biggest and the oldest poolroom in the country. Not that any of us has ever been there; but you can't play pool very long without hearing about Wenneker's. It's the place where the toughest—but the toughest—pool hustlers hang out, and where they say the big horse men and the Syndicate boys come in and drop maybe 50 G's and never bat an eye. And for this quiet old codger in our little poolroom to say he was houseman there—the man who plays anybody who comes in for anything they want to play for—well, I start expecting to see Charlie double up any minute and start pounding on the floor and hollering.

But I got to give Charlie credit; he's still playing it straight. He keeps the innocent look on his face and he says, thoughtful, "Well, now. After 40 years I'd think you'd be mighty tired of pool playing."

At this the old man looks a little sad and wistful. "Son," he says—and I can hear some guy in back gag on that one—"Son, you're absolutely right."

"But then why, sir," says Charlie—and the guy in back is by now having a spasm—"do you spend so much time in here, watching games?"

Now, up to this time, I've figured that the old man has just been kidding Charlie along; but what he says next makes me wonder a little if he hasn't been serious. He says it like he means it; like he means it so much it hurts.

"Well," he says, "the game gets a grip on you—gets in your system. And I'm a little too old to start getting it out." Then he smiles; but his eyes still look kind of wistful.

Charlie puts a real sympathetic look on his face and says, "Gets in your blood, huh?" Then he gives a quick wink to a couple of guys who are standing off to one side, listening, and he says, "Maybe it would do you good if you played a little every now and then. That is, if you could find somebody that wasn't scared to take you on, knowing what a great, all-time hustler you are and all that."

Charlie has begun to quit faking it; and he's got a sneer in his voice that you could tell a mile off. "Maybe you could talk *me* into playing you, for instance," he says, with the big, dirty grin he's got. "Just a few friendly little games for about 20 bucks apiece."

But Curtiss has still got a faraway look; and he doesn't seem to notice that Charlie has begun talking mean, because he just says, "No, son. Thank you. I'm afraid I'm too old to be much of a player any more. I had to retire quite a few years ago. You see, my heart is not too well."

So Charlie says, "Sure, I know. But come on, Hustler"—and this is the first time Curtiss is called "Hustler"—"you can play me just a few. Why, a few \$20 pool games wouldn't be any strain on an old big-time hustler like you."

"I'm sorry, son. I'd better not."

Suddenly Charlie gets a thoughtful look. "Hustler," he says, "I bet I know what's the matter with your heart."

"Really?" Curtiss says, politely.

"Yes sir, Hustler," Charlie says, "you got the kind of heart trouble that guys who talk big get. The kind that makes you chicken out when a game comes up." Then, suddenly, he steps closer and sticks his face up to Curtiss. He says, slow and soft, "You got a chicken heart, Hustler."

Then I look at Curtiss to see how he's taking it all. Curtiss is just sitting there, like he hasn't heard a thing.

He pulls out his silver case and takes out a cigarette. He gets his lighter out of his pocket and lights up, very calm and unconcerned. Like always, the lighter works on the first try.

MOST people think of hustlers as young, skinny men, with pale faces, dark hair, and hawk eyes. At least, that was the idea I had, until this stranger showed up. He was short, thick around the waist, red-faced, middle-aged, and he wore glasses—the steel-rimmed kind. He had on a brown

suit and a darker brown tie, and his shirt was plain white and a little wrinkled around the collar. He looked like a small-time business man—which, after all, you might say he was.

He came in one afternoon about two o'clock and started practicing on the front table, shooting just a fair stick of pool. You know, better-than-average shots; but nothing a player like Charlie couldn't beat. He had a big roll, too, and he flashed it around. Altogether, it was a good come on; and Charlie fell for it, all the way.

He watched the stranger shoot for about 15 minutes. Then he started talking to him, friendly; and in five more minutes the two of them were playing a game, just for fun.

**Y**OU could tell Charlie was throwing off. He let the man win about four games, and then asked him how about betting a little something on the side. The man said well, yes, but of course he really didn't believe in gambling on pool games, since he thought it could ruin the game, sometimes. Charlie agreed with him, and they started playing for \$2 a game. Then Charlie won a few and he suggested they double the bet so the other man could get even. The other man was doubtful for a minute, but they doubled the bet, and before long the other man was hooked for about \$50 and he started getting mad and saying he'd just come in to practice a little pool, peaceful-like, and here Charlie had come up and hustled him, and he didn't see how it was fair.

So Charlie looked real innocent and said he didn't mean to be hustling anybody, and that he'd just been lucky so far, to be winning like he had, and that he knew how it was, and that he'd be willing to give the other man an even break and would be glad to spot him one ball out of an eight-ball bank game, and that they'd play one for \$50 and that way they'd be sure to break even. So the other guy calmed down a little and said well, okay, and then Charlie racked the balls and they started playing, and you could tell Charlie was a little nervous. Even though as far as he could tell he was a good three balls better than the stranger, that \$50 bet was a good ways out of his \$5-and-\$10 league. Which just goes to show what the idea of easy money'll do; even to a guy as basically small-time as Charlie.

And then, about the middle of the game, Charlie began showing how small-time he really was. He started opening up, shooting his best game and not trying to fool anybody any more. It was almost unethical, the way he did it; just dropping his hustle all of a sudden and playing shutout pool, showing his best stick, shooting his best shots, letting his best game show. It was wrong two ways: First, he should have kept stringing the other man along, since he might have been ready to drop \$300-400; and, second, it was kind of dirty

to kid a fellow along like Charlie had been doing, and then to open up on him like that and make him feel like a sucker.

So Charlie beat the man, but good. For \$50. That put him \$100 ahead; and, if he was cocky before, you could read "strutting high" all over his face now.

And then the stranger made his big play.

He pulled out his billfold, jerked out a wad of bills, peeled a 50 off the top, threw it down on the table, and then started counting 10's and 20's from the rest of the pile, and talking—only it was more like spluttering.

"By golly," he said, counting off his money, "By golly, I'm not a gambling man; but I'll be switched if I know I can't beat your brand of luck pool."

He stacked \$100 in bills together on the table, and then started counting off another \$100. Charlie didn't say anything; you could see he was fascinated. As a matter of fact, we all were. I just happened to notice that it was almost four o'clock, and I looked over towards the wall, and there was Hustler Curtiss, sitting in his usual chair. He was leaning back, watching the money-counting routine like it might have been on television, and he was just kind of smiling. And when he saw me looking at him he did something I had never seen him do before. He winked at me, still smiling. I didn't understand, then, what the smile and the wink meant.

The stranger had finished counting out another \$100 from his roll—and the roll was still pretty big—and he was glaring at Charlie and he said, "By golly, this is two week's commissions and expenses; but I'll lay you the whole \$200, on just one more game, that I can still beat your kind of luck."

**I**T was perfect. Even for Charlie it was too perfect to chicken out on. I think maybe it was the talk about "commissions and expenses" that did it. Everybody knows there's no better sucker than a traveling salesman. Of course, what we didn't know then was that there's maybe 20 fast shooting hustlers on the road that carry sample cases into poolrooms with them—and carry the money out. Only this stranger wasn't that kind—he didn't carry a sample case.

So Charlie bit. "Okay, mister," he said, "You've got you a game." Then he racked the balls.

Racking, you could see his hand was shaking, just a little. Even playing a game he thought was a mortal lock—a lead-pipe cinch—you could see the chicken in him.

The stranger won. Not by a lot—he beat Charlie eight balls to six—and not by looking good either. His game didn't seem to improve any; but, somehow, Charlie didn't get any of the easy shots and somehow the other man did. You couldn't say

the stranger was playing safe—at least you couldn't see it—but Charlie was always stepping up to a hard shot, and the stranger seemed to get an awful lot of the easy kind.

When Charlie lost he looked like he couldn't believe it. He didn't say anything at all, just walked up to the cash register on the counter, rang up a No Sale, and started pulling bills out of the cash drawer. He must have had a good deal on hand; because he was able to get out the \$100 he needed without having to go to the safe. Then he fished the \$100 he had won out of his pocket, came back over to the table, and started counting out the bills. He stacked them neatly together, and handed them to the other man.

Then Charlie happens to look up and he sees Curtiss sitting there, still smiling, minding his own business. Charlie looks at him a minute, real hard, and you can see he's getting mad at that smile: and

if you know Charlie you know that about this time is when he's going to start looking for someone to take his losing out on, and especially somebody who won't fight him back.

So suddenly he says to Curtiss, very mean, "What are you grinning at?"

Curtiss looks surprised. You can see he's been sort of wrapped up in his thoughts, and that Charlie has jolted him out of them. "Sir?" he says, surprised.

"Sir, my butt!" Charlie says, "I said, what do you think you're grinning at?"

"Oh," Curtiss says, "I was just thinking. Thinking about some . . . games that I had seen before, somewhat like the one you've been playing." He smiles at Charlie, like he might be smiling at some little boy. "Only, of course," he says, "that was a long time ago."

"In Chicago?" You can tell by looking that Charlie is about ready to blow his top.

But Curtiss isn't noticing. He has sort of a faraway look, and he says, "That's right. At Wenneker's."

This does it. Charlie's top blows. He grabs his cue stick and slams the butt of it down on the floor, hard.

"Good old Wenneker's in Chicago!" he says, spitting out the words. "Good old Chicago where you used to hustle." He looks at Curtiss real hard, and says, slow and loud, "You give me a pain."

Curtiss raises his eyebrows, just a little. "A pain?" he says.

"That's right. You crummy old phony. You couldn't hustle my grandmother, and you know it." He spits on the floor. "Chicago!" he says, like it's a dirty word.

FOR at least a minute nobody says a thing. The stranger's been quiet, naturally; and I feel as if I should say something, but I don't know exactly what; and I'm standing there thinking of ways to tell Charlie off, when somebody speaks up from the crowd that has been gathered around the table and says to Charlie, "Lay off the old guy, will you? He never bothered you none." And Charlie turns around to say something back when, suddenly, Curtiss speaks up.

"Charlie," he says, "you don't believe that I know anything at all about pool playing, do you?"

Charlie looks at him. Then he spits again. "Hell no!" he says.

"I see," says Curtiss. "I really suspected as much." Then he looks at the stranger. "And you, sir, how about you? Would you say I was a good pool player?"

The stranger looks annoyed. "How should I know?" he says. "You might be Willie Mosconi, for all I know."

All of a sudden Curtiss' smile turns into a grin, and he chuckles, real soft. Then he says, "Well, gentlemen, this is a new one. Here I am trying to tell you that I'm a pool hustler, and you won't believe me. And this gentleman here"—he waves his hand towards the stranger—"has been trying very hard—and, evidently, succeeding—to show you that he *isn't* a hustler." He gazes at us all, very confidentially, looking like a king sitting up on his throne. "Now that *is* an odd one, isn't it?"

"Wait a minute," says the stranger. "Who says I'm trying to hustle anybody?"

"Why I just did, young man," Curtiss says. "Aren't you?"

The stranger starts getting a mean look on his face and he says, "Now hold on a minute, old-timer . . ."

"Don't get angry, young man," Curtiss interrupts. "You won't lose your chance of winning yourself some money." He leans back in his chair, and pulls his silver cigarette case out of his pocket. He takes a cigarette out of it and holds it, for a

minute, between his fingers. Then he says, "I'll be glad to play you."

The stranger says, "What?"

"I said I'll play you," he says, and he leans forward again, fishing in his pocket for the little lighter. "Although my doctor wouldn't approve—not at all—and although I can't guarantee that you'll beat me; I'll tell you that I have a lot more money than Charlie has; and I'll play you longer before I quit."

Charlie is still staring. "Well, I'll be damned!" he says. Then he laughs. "Well, I'll be damned!" he says again.

Only this time he doesn't seem quite so sure of himself.

The stranger has had a mean look on his face; but now he starts looking sort of puzzled too and he says, "Now, listen, old-timer, I was doing all right here before you started butting in."

Curtiss just smiles and reaches for his billfold.

His billfold is one of the kind that opens from the side and is long—so as not to bend the money I guess—and he opens it and pulls out a very neat looking stack of bills and then he holds the stack in one hand and flips through it at the corner with the thumb of the other hand, real graceful, and he more or less answers the stranger's objections that way, since as far as I can see every one of the bills has the number "50" neatly printed on the corner, and there are a very great many of the bills. Then, to clinch his argument, he says, "How much would you like to play for?"

So the stranger looks at Charlie, who he must have known was about ready to quit anyway, and he looks at Curtiss, who looks very old and feeble, as well as very rich, and it doesn't take him long to make up his mind.

"Let's start it with 50, old-timer," he says; and you can hear respect in his voice for the first time.

**B**UT all of a sudden Charlie begins to look indignant or, more truthfully, he *continues* to look that way—and he says, "Hey! What about my 100 bucks, mister? I got a right to win it back." This is amusing on Charlie's part; because we all know that Charlie probably was getting ready to quit anyway when Curtiss got into it.

But Curtiss smiles at him and says, "All right, Charlie, I'll give you a chance to get your money back—probably a much better chance than you would have had playing this fellow yourself."

"Now wait a minute," Charlie says, "I was beating this guy. So he won one game, so what? I was a cinch to do all right with him."

But Curtiss just says, "You were out of your class. All of the way out of your class. You're lucky I stopped you." Then he pauses for a minute; and when nobody says anything he goes on and says, "Very well, then. Here's my proposition: I'll bet you right now \$100 that I win this first game."

Charlie just stands where he is, looking at the old man, and he doesn't seem to catch on. He doesn't say anything; just looks.

Then Curtiss says, "How can you lose?" His face is deadpan; but I can see kind of a twinkle in his eyes. "Certainly this man is a better player than your . . . ah . . . grandmother?"

Then Charlie seems to come out of his daze and he says, "Hell no." Real loud.

Curtiss says, "He isn't?" He raises his eyebrows. Somebody in back laughs. Charlie looks pretty stupid, and I have a hard time keeping a straight face, myself.

"NO!" Charlie says, "I mean, no I won't bet." He seems suddenly to try to look sly—like he is seeing things going on that nobody else sees. "How do I know I'm not pushing a rigged game. I don't like it."

It's really pretty plain what Charlie is beefing about. Here he's got what looks like a big, beautiful bet being offered to him, the kind of a bet no self-respecting gambler should ever turn down; and he hasn't got the nerve to cover it.

But Curtiss just keeps smiling and says, "All right, Charlie, have it your way."

Then he gets down out of the high chair—you could almost call it a throne—and goes over to the rack, and studies the cues. Then he picks him one, and starts chalking up. It almost makes me feel sick, watching him. He moves so slow and careful; you can almost hear his joints creaking; and I don't see how he's going to make it when the time comes for him to bend down over the table.

So they play: eight-and-out bank pool for \$50 a game. The stranger breaks the balls, banks one, and misses. He has left Curtiss a so-so kind of shot—not too hard; but not so easy, either. In a \$50 game, that's a hard kind of a shot to deal with.

It doesn't take Curtiss long to figure it out; but the way he bends over the table to get into position, we think it's going to take him forever. But he gets there, way up over the table, and he calls his shot, "Cross the corner, young man," real pleasant, pumps his cue stick once, and then pokes into the cue ball. The ball goes: cross corner.

At this point, I feel like applauding. But if I am expecting any miracles I am soon to be disappointed. Curtiss misses the next one. So the game goes on; but it's a quick game; because both of these boys, it seems, know what's what with a pool table; and when it's over the stranger has won. But it's a close score; eight to six.

Then they play another, and Curtiss loses it, too. This time the score is eight to five. This game he's better, not so stiff and a little smoother; but the stranger is beginning to show his stuff, and it looks like he's got plenty. I guess the first game's score has worried him some; and, besides, Curtiss has said he knows the guy's a hustler anyway, so the guy has let himself improve a little. Now the thing that I'm wondering is: Just how good is this guy's best game? Has he let it all come out yet; or is he still holding back?

Next game I find out. He blasts Curtiss. The poor old guy tries to put up a fight; but the stranger cuts him down before he gets a chance: eight to one. And the shooting the stranger is doing; nobody has ever played like that in this poolroom before.

I steal a look at Charlie's face. He looks thoughtful; I'm betting he's thinking right now about what would have happened to him if Curtiss hadn't stopped him from playing this guy.

Curtiss is paying off his third \$50 after this last game when he looks at the stranger, smiling, and he says, "How would you like to play a game of straight pool, young man. One hundred and twenty-five points?"

"What's wrong with what we're playing?" He stuffs the 50 in his pocket.

"Nothing," Curtiss says. "But it seems as if I'm getting tired more quickly than I thought. And, since I promised you a chance to win a good deal of money, I thought you might like trying 125 points for . . . well, say, \$500?"

The stranger stares a second, then, suddenly, he grins. "You know what, old-timer?" he says, "To tell the truth I *was* getting tired of playing bank." He starts pulling money out of his pockets. Then he says to Charlie, "Rack the balls for straight pool."

Charlie comes over and racks the balls. The stranger breaks, and they start playing.

I SAW Willie Mosconi shoot pool once, back when I was wearing a khaki suit and he was giving exhibitions in Army camps. He was World's Champion then, at 14 and 1, straight pool. Mosconi

didn't shoot pool like anyone else I had ever seen.

I never saw playing like that again, until I saw Curtiss play that one game of straight pool, there at Charlie's pool hall. He was different from Mosconi because he was stiff and slow; but he had the same way of fitting in with the game, the same *class* of playing, the same deadly accuracy. And his eyes—I had never noticed anything peculiar about his eyes before, but now, with his stick in his hand, shooting, then chalking, then shooting again, his eyes were moving over the table, looking from ball to ball, expertly, seeming to glitter—little, black, bright eyes, glancing back and forth, looking for shots, never blinking. Then his eyes would find what they wanted, and he would bend down to the shot, stiff but no longer awkward, easy and smooth, and let fly. His speed was always the same, like Mosconi's, medium-hard, and the balls would roll with a kind of sureness that they never had before. It was beautiful to watch. You couldn't hear a sound in the room, except for the noise the balls made when Curtiss shot them into the pockets.

THE game was over very quickly. For what seemed like a long while, nobody said a word. I looked at Charlie. He was still sitting just like he had been when they started playing. His lower lip was hanging a little lower than usual. He was staring at Curtiss.

Then the stranger walked over to the rack and put away his cue. When he walked back he had his billfold out. He stopped, looked at Curtiss, and said, "Well, I'll be damned." He said one word at a time, slowly, and in a low voice. Then he started pulling money out of his billfold, quietly. He didn't go through any routine, this time, of counting it out on the table.

Curtiss smiled. Then he handed his stick to Charlie, sitting behind him. "Please put it up for me, Charlie," he said. "I'm beginning to feel a little tired."

Charlie took the stick and put it in the rack.

The stranger was still looking at Curtiss. Then he said, "What's your name, mister?" and his voice sounded almost scared.

"Curtiss." He was still smiling. "Billy Curtiss."

The stranger kept staring for a minute. Then his jaw fell down. "Billy Curtiss," he said—it was like a minister saying the name of the Lord—"You mean *you're* Billy Curtiss?"

"That's right," Curtiss said.

"From Chicago?"

Suddenly, Curtiss' smile changed to a grin. He nodded his head towards Charlie. "Ask him," he said.

The stranger looked at Charlie. Charlie looked at the stranger; then he looked at Hustler Curtiss. "Well, I'll be damned," he said.

—BY WALTER S. TEVIS, JR.