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THE BILLIARD-ROOM MYSTERY

BRIAN FLYNN

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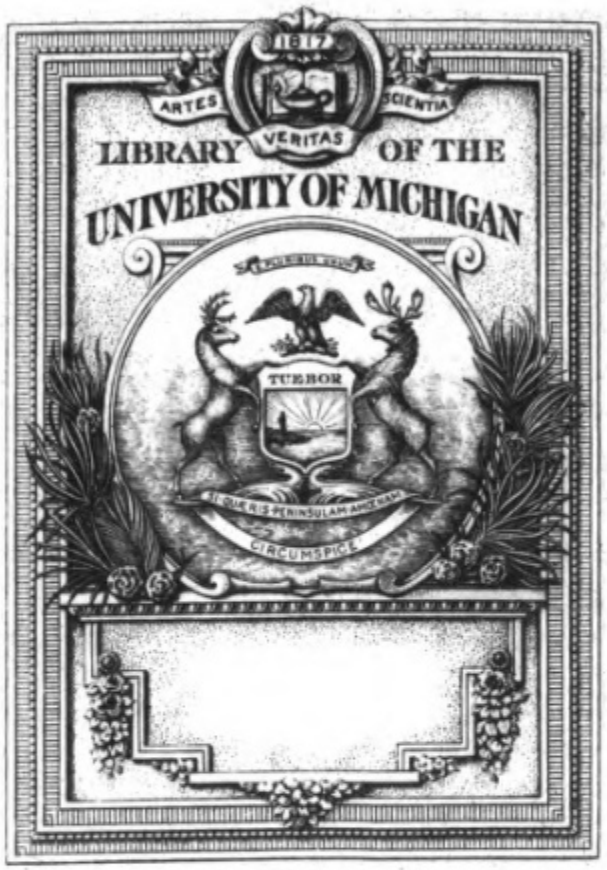

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The
BILLIARD ROOM
Mystery

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THE BILLIARD ROOM MYSTERY

BY

BRIAN FLYNN

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PUBLISHERS NEW YORK

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BRIAN FLYNN MYSTERIES

THE CASE OF THE BLACK TWENTY-TWO
THE BILLIARD ROOM MYSTERY

FIRST PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES,
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C. F. BUTLER
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THE BILLIARD ROOM MYSTERY

CHAPTER I

MR. BATHURST AS AN AID TO MEMORY

SEEING Bathurst this evening, after a lapse of eight years, has given me a most insistent inclination to set down, for the first time, the real facts of that *cause célèbre,* that was called by the Press at the time, the "Billiard Room Mystery." Considering the length of the interval, and regarding the whole affair from every possible point of view, it is sufficiently plain to me that an authentic history of the case can harm nobody and can prejudice no interests. I therefore succumb to the temptation, serenely confident that, no matter what shortcomings there may be in the telling, the affair itself as a whole, is entitled to rank as one of the most baffling in the annals of criminology.

Inasmuch as I was a member of the audience tonight at a private theatrical performance and Anthony Bathurst was playing lead for the company (amateur of course) that was entertaining us, I had no opportunity for conversation with him, but I am certain that had I had this opportunity, I should have found that his brain had lost none of its cun-

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ning and that his uncanny gifts for deduction, inference, and intuition, were unimpaired. These powers allied to a masterly memory for detail and to an unusual athleticism of body, separated him from the majority—wherever he was, he always counted—one acknowledged instinctively his mental supremacy—he was a personality always and everywhere. A tall, lithe body with that poised balance of movement that betrays the able player of all ball games, his clean-cut, clean-shaven face carried a mobile, sensitive mouth and grey eyes. Remarkable eyes that seemed to apprehend and absorb at a sweep every detail about you that was worth apprehending. A man's man, and, at the same time, a ladies' man. For when he chose, he was hard to resist, I assure you. Such, eight years ago, was Anthony Lothering-ton Bathurst, and such had he promised to be from comparative immaturity, for he had been with me at Uppingham, and afterwards at Oxford.

Which latter fact goes to the prime reason of my being at Considine Manor in the last week of July of the year of the tragedy.

At Oxford we had both grown very pally with Jack Considine, eldest son of Sir Charles Considine, of Considine Manor, Sussex, and although Bathurst had to a certain extent fallen away from the closest relations of the friendship, Jack and I were bosom companions, and it became my custom each year, when the 'Varsity came down, to spend a week at Considine Manor, and to take part in Sir Charles' Cricket Week. For I was a fairly useful member,

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and had been on the fringe of the 'Varsity Eleven; indeed many excellent judges were of the opinion that Prescott, who had been given the last place, was an inferior man. But of that, more later.

Bathurst never took his 'Varsity cricket seriously enough. Had he done so he would probably have skippered England—he's the kind that distinguishes whatever he sets his hand to—but it was cricket that took me to Considine Manor, and it was cricket that took both Prescott and Bathurst—but not in the same direction.

Sir Charles that year was particularly anxious to have a good team—which got Prescott his invitation. An invitation that he had certainly not lingered over accepting. For he had met Mary Considine at Twickenham the previous autumn, and had improved upon that acquaintanceship at Lords' in the first week of July. Mary was the third and youngest child, Jack coming between her and her sister, Helen, who had married a Captain Arkwright —a big, bluff Dragoon. Now whatever Prescott's feelings may have been towards Mary, I had no idea then, what hers were to him. Decidedly, I have no idea now; I can only surmise. But Mary Considine with her birth, her breeding and her beauty was a peach of peaches. She had grace, she had charm, and a pair of heavy-lashed, Parma violet eyes that sent all a man's good resolutions to the four winds of heaven and to my mind at least, it was something like presumption on Prescott's part to lift his eyes to her. Still that was only my opinion. As I said,

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what encouragement he received I have little knowledge of.

The Cricket Week passed off comparatively uneventfully. The first three one-day games—I forget whom against, except one against the "Incogs"—were relatively unimportant. That is, to Sir Charles! His *pièce de résistance* was always kept for the Thursday and Friday, the last two days of the week. Then came the hardy annual—Sir Charles Considine's Eleven, versus "The Uppingham Rovers." Prior to this last game I had failed lamentably, my bag being 3, 7 and a couple of balloons. Two of the days were wet and real cricket out of the question. Prescott had a lot of luck and got a couple of centuries and a 70 odd in four times. Which of course gave him a good conceit of himself.

"Bill," said Mary to me on the Thursday morning, "I do hope you see them all right to-day—Gerry Prescott's getting a bit of 'roll' on, charming man though he be."

I finished my fourth egg and remarked, "Thanks, Mary—I'll have a good try, but I don't seem able to do anything right lately—still my luck must turn before long. Thanks again." She slipped over to the sideboard and helped herself to some Kedgeree—smiled—and then replied, "I think it will—*to-day*." The rest of the crowd then joined us—Jack, Gerry Prescott, Helen and Dick Arkwright, Sir Charles and Lady Considine, three boys from the 'Varsity, Tennant, Daventry and Robertson, and two Service men, friends of Arkwright, Major Hornby and

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Lieutenant Barker—the last five all pretty decent cricketers—the rest of the eleven being recruited from the Manor staff.

It was, I remember, a perfectly glorious summer morning. One's thoughts instinctively flew to the whirr of the mowing machine and a real plumb wicket. The insects hummed in the sun, and there was a murmur of bees that gave everybody a feeling that an English summer morning in Sussex could give anything in Creation a start and a beating.

"Toppin' mornin'—what?" said Prescott. "Feel like gettin' some more to-day, if we bat."

"You won't," said Dick Arkwright. "You'll field, and this big brute of a Bill can get rid of some of his disgraceful paunch. He hasn't had much exercise all the week. Exceptin' of course walkin' back to the pavilion."

"Feeling funny, aren't you?" I sallied back. "And as for 'big brutes' and 'paunches,' neither you nor Prescott has a lot to telegraph home about."

Actually I was about a couple of inches taller than either of them and decidedly heavier.

"Anybody of the old crowd playing for the Rovers, Jack?" queried Helen.

"Don't know, haven't seen the team yet."

Daventry, I think, handed the *Sporting Life* to the two girls. They scanned the names.

"Only Toby Purkiss and Vernon Hurst that we know," from Mary. "What a pity."

"I am very keen on winning," boomed Sir

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Charles. "Very, very keen. We haven't beaten the Rovers for more years than I care to—ah—remember. I spoke seriously to Briggs this morning about it. And I may say, here and now, Tennant—Daventry—I trust without offence, that I viewed with some disfavor your late retirement last night. You were very late getting to bed. I am willing to concede that Auction Bridge has a fascination ——"

"That's all right, Governor," said Jack. "They're just infants—stand anything. Think what a tough bird you were at their age."

"Perfectly true. I remember the night I ——"

"As long as you can remember it, you can't have been so bad, sir," said Daventry.

Lady Considine smiled.

"Would you like me to stop Auction in the evening, till the week is over, dear?" she said. "You never seem to win anything."

"As a matter of fact, Marion—I have been most unusually successful; and I have no wish to—er—interfere with others' pleasure."

"Thanks, Father. For we don't all play cricket."

"No, Helen, that's so."

"Seems to me, Governor, it takes age and judgment to play really good Auction."

"Thank you, Arkwright. You have keen powers of observance."

The clock chimed ten.

"Gracious," said Mary, "I promised to help get the big marquee ready." She flew off. Very shortly

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the breakfast party withdrew entirely, the ladies to the selection of appropriate raiment, the men who were playing, to get ready.

I was late getting down to the field and had no sooner arrived than up came Sir Charles.

"Fielding, Bill!" He guessed right. "Know you're pleased!" he grinned.

"Of course—just what I expected! It'll rain in the night."

The first wicket put on a few runs and I was chatting to Robertson and Jack Considine while we were waiting for the next man.

"Good Lord," I heard from behind me.

I turned.

Strolling in, nonchalantly adjusting his left-hand glove, was the very last person I expected to see there—Anthony Bathurst.

"Bless you, Bill," he smiled. "Seeing you is a reward in itself."

"But I had no idea ——"

"What on earth?" queried Jack.

"Tell you later," grinned Anthony; "Umpire, Middle and leg, if you please."

He didn't get a lot. But when we got into lunch he told us that Hurst had cried off from the game, developed measles or spotted fever or something, and he had been roped in, being handy. He was staying near Bramber and going on to Canterbury for the "Old Stagers." Angus McKinnel and Gerry Crookley were great chums of his, and as the entertainments of Canterbury Week were in their

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hands as usual, they had been only too glad for him to help them.

Everybody, of course, was delighted, for Considine Manor had heard much of Anthony Bathurst from both Jack and me.

Sir Charles immediately issued an invitation.

"Stay on, my dear fellow! I shall be charmed, I assure you. Stay till the Bank Holiday—then motor over."

"Thanks, I will. It's good of you." Anthony accepted the offer.

Thus, it was that the Friday evening saw Anthony still at Considine Manor, and the stage set for what happened subsequently. When I reached the drawing-room that night I had a fit of the blues. The game had ended in a draw and once again, I had not reached double figures. Prescott had got another 50 odd and, in the opinion of most, had saved our side from a beating. Conversation was desultory as it had been at dinner.

As usual most of them were listening attentively to Anthony Bathurst. He was well launched on a theme that I had heard him discuss many a time before in his rooms at Oxford. "The Detective in Modern Fiction." It was a favorite topic of his and like everything that aroused his interest, he knew it thoroughly—backwards, forwards, and inside out.

I caught his words as I entered the room.

"Oh—I admit it quite cheerfully—I look forward tremendously to a really good thriller. I'm

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intrigued utterly by a title like 'The Stain on the Linoleum.' But, there you are, really good detective stories are rare."

"You think so?" interjected Major Hornby, "what about those French Johnnies, Gaboriau and Du Boisgobey?"

"Like the immortal Holmes," replied Anthony, "I have the greatest contempt for Lecoq. Poe's 'Dupin' wasn't so bad, but the majority ——"

"You admire Holmes?"

"Yes, Mr. Arkwright, I do! That is to say—the pre-war Holmes!"

"You don't admit that his key is always made to fit his lock?"

"Of course," replied Anthony, "that must be so! But he deduces—he reasons—and thereby constructs. The others, so many of them, depend for success on amazing coincidences and things of that nature."

"You think Holmes stands alone?" queried Mary.

"Not altogether, Miss Considine, as I've often told Bill Cunningham." He turned to me, "Mason's *M. Hanaud*, Bentley's *Trent*, Milne's *Mr. Gillingham*, and to a lesser degree perhaps, Agatha Christie's *M. Poirot* are all excellent in their way, but oh!—the many dozens that aren't."

"I could mention three others," said Jack Considine.

"Yes? Who are they?"

"Bernard Capes' 'Baron' of *The Skeleton Key*,

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Chesterton's *Father Brown*, and H. C. Bailey's *Reginald Fortune*."

"I am willing to accept two," said Anthony, "but *Father Brown*—no. He's too entirely 'Chestertonian.' He deduces that the dustman was the murderer because of the shape of the piece that had been cut from the apple-pie. I can't quite get him."

The company laughed merrily.

"Ah, Mr. Bathurst," remarked Sir Charles. "There is a great gulf between fiction and real life. Give me Scotland Yard every time."

"I am ready to. Scotland Yard is a remarkably efficient organization—but ——"

"Well, Sir Charles, I think this! Give me a fair start with Scotland Yard, and its resources to call upon, if necessary, and I'll wager on my results."

"What about that trumpeter?" from Gerry Prescott.

"Never mind that. I was asked for my opinion and I gave it."

"In the event of your being on the spot at a murder case, then, you consider that you would solve the mystery quicker than trained men?"

"Under equal conditions, yes, Captain Arkwright! Again, what is a trained man? I am a trained man. I've trained myself to observe and to remember."

Here, Lady Considine interrupted with "Pardon me, Mr. Bathurst. But these girls won't sleep if you keep on discussing murders. Besides, Sir Charles wants his game of Auction."

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Two tables started, the military party playing solo. And gradually the hum of conversation subsided as the games got under way. Helen Arkwright played while her sister sang. Jack Considine and Anthony went into the garden to smoke cigars. I stayed and watched the cards. Prescott won steadily from most of them, but from Lieutenant Barker chiefly. And when after a time, I saw a look of more than ordinary chagrin pass over the latter's face and following that, an I. O. U. handed across the table to Prescott, I felt that they had played long enough. For neither Sir Charles nor Lady Considine cared for such happenings as that. So at eleven-forty or thereabouts, I suggested they stop.

The others assented readily.

"I'm for bed," I said, "after just one 'spot'!"

I walked to the French windows that commanded the garden and looked out. The rain that had come on just before seven, had ceased and there was a moon with a sparkling retinue of stars.

I swallowed my whisky.

"Good-night, you fellows."

"Good-night, Bill!"

At the foot of the staircase just in the shadow of the heavy banisters, I passed Prescott and Barker, deep in conversation. The conversation stopped as I approached.

"Coming to bed?" I interrogated.

"Not yet," replied Prescott. "Time's young yet. Besides I have ——"

I didn't wait for his sentence to be finished.

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Our bedrooms were on the second floor—seven of them in a row along a long corridor that ran the length of the house. All the men were together. Jack was in the biggest—the first—that night he was sharing with Anthony—then came in order, Daventry and Robertson together in No. 2, Hornby, Prescott, Tennant, myself, and Barker last. On the first floor was the billiard room, directly facing the stairs as you ascended, and the bedrooms of the other members of the family.

Each one of the bedrooms on the second floor was fitted with a bathroom and shower. There was a connecting door in each room, leading to the bath. This connecting door in each instance faced the door of the bedroom opening out on to the corridor. It was a fancy of Sir Charles Considine, this, and much appreciated by all those privileged to enjoy the hospitality of Considine Manor. I shall never forget that night.

I slept but little, a most unusual state of affairs for me.

I was strangely uneasy, and it was not till close on five o'clock that I fell into a doze.

And if I never forget that night, I shall never forget the memory that followed it!

For I was awakened by a piercing scream that echoed and reëchoed through the house. It came from the floor below!

"Murder! Murder! Help! Help! Murder!"

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CHAPTER II

IN THE BILLIARD ROOM

IT WAS a woman screaming! Not that I'm in the position of having frequently heard men scream. But the feminine note in the voice was apparent to the most careless listener.

I hastily threw on a blazer, pulled on a pair of slippers, opened my bedroom door, and came out into the corridor.

Everybody's door seemed to open simultaneously.

Leaning over the banisters, it was easy to tell that the screams were coming from the billiard room.

We dashed down the staircase, the crowd of us—white-faced and anxious—as men and women are, when suddenly aroused by shock! And as we came to the billiard room door, I was conscious that we were one short—and something told me whom we lacked. I was soon to know for sure.

For as I entered the room that held the horror that had brought us flying from our beds I could hear Sir Charles Considine's voice rising authoritatively above the hum of excitement, "Gentlemen, gentlemen—please—whatever the trouble is—one of you stay outside and keep the ladies from entering."

Across the bottom of the table face downwards, the right arm hanging limply over the side, lay

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Gerry Prescott. He lay partly on his right shoulder, and it was easy to see how he had met his death. A dagger had been driven fast into the base of his neck, at the top of the spinal cord.

The shock hit us all hard, and the chatter of the girls, querulous and interrogative, although just outside the door, seemed vaguely distant.

Marshall, the maid, who had given the alarm, stood shaking against the wall, her affrighted eyes staring at the body of poor Prescott.

"Get back to your room, Marshall," said Sir Charles. "I'll see you again later." His ordinary pomposity of manner seemed to have deserted him.

"What can we do, sir?" said Arkwright.

"He's past all earthly help," muttered Anthony. —"Been dead, I should say, some hours."

"Terrible, terrible, in my house too," went on the old man. "I shall never . . ."

"May I suggest, sir, that perhaps Jack and Arkwright should get a doctor and the police here, as quickly as possible?" said Bathurst.

"Yes, yes, my boys, excellent!"

"And of course we must touch nothing. Look!" He pointed round the room. Then went and whispered in Sir Charles's ear.

"Certainly, Bathurst. Capital suggestion. You and Jack get along, Arkwright. And all the rest of you go, please, to the garden except Mr. Bathurst and Bill Cunningham. No good can be done by crowding round."

Hornby, Barker, Daventry and the others did as

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they were bid, very pleased I think to get into the wholesome fresh air! And I turned to look at what Anthony had pointed out.

Three chairs were overturned on the floor, the other side of the table, and by the side of one lay the poker from the billiard room fireplace.

The window at the further end of the room, overlooking the gravel drive that ran along that side of the house was open at the bottom—at least, a couple of feet. Prescott was fully dressed. As far as I could judge in the same clothes as he had worn the previous evening. Dinner jacket, wing collar, bow tie, dress shirt, to my eye exactly as he had dined. An exclamation from Anthony arrested my attention.

"What's he wearing brown shoes for? Eh"—rubbing his hands—"Bill, I fancy I've got my chance after all. Do you see that, Sir Charles? Brown shoes! And what is more"—he crowed with excitement—"one hasn't got a lace."

"My God!" said Sir Charles, "you're right. Perhaps he dressed in a hurry."

Anthony was shaking his head. "Perhaps," he muttered, "but ——" Sir Charles turned to us, agitation on his face.

"It has just occurred to me," he said, "you don't think anybody in the house . . . ?"

Anthony shook his head again. "It's a bad business, and I can't tell you anything till the police come. There are several questions I require answered."

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This time it was my turn to provide the sensation.

"Sir Charles," I cried, "look at the dagger! Don't you recognize it?" He adjusted his pince-nez, and went across to the body.

"Good God, Bill! It's the Venetian dagger off the curio table."

"What's that?" Anthony's eyes gleamed with excitement. "Your property?"

"Been in the family two hundred years. An ancestor of mine brought it from Italy."

"Where was it kept?"

"On a table in the drawing-room!"

"I don't like it," murmured Anthony. "Why was it brought up here?"

"I have it," cried Sir Charles. "It's burglars after all. Poor Prescott heard them and . . ."

"It's no good theorizing, Sir Charles . . . without facts to go on! When the police come and deal with points that I can't possibly touch yet . . . I may be able to help you."

No sooner had he finished speaking than Jack's voice was heard outside. "This way, doctor . . . in here."

Dr. Elliott entered. Jack followed him. Close on their heels came Arkwright with an Inspector of Police, and a man who was apparently his assistant—in plain clothes.

"This is Inspector Baddeley, of the Sussex Constabulary," said Arkwright. "I was lucky enough to find him at the station." The Inspector assented.

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"Good-morning, Sir Charles. Good-morning, gentlemen."

"This is a bad business, Sir Charles," declared Dr. Elliott. "It hardly seems credible that only yesterday this poor fellow . . ." He went to the body.

The Inspector followed him.

"Quite dead, gentlemen—hum—hum—been dead several hours."

The Inspector carefully withdrew the dagger.

"Try that for any prints, Roper," he muttered. "It's just on the cards."

"Yes, sir," replied plain clothes; he at once got to work with the "insufflator."

"Then photograph the body from both sides of the room."

Roper retired; to return in a few minutes with a camera.

"I think it would be better for you, Baddeley," declared the doctor, "if you had a good look round before I make my examination. I can do nothing and the cause of death is pretty obvious. The murderer knew his business, too! A blow at that part of the spinal column—effective—and to all intents and purposes instantaneous."

"Very well, Doctor. These gentlemen—Sir Charles?" he queried.

"My son, my son-in-law, Captain Arkwright, Mr. Bathurst and Mr. Cunningham, guests and very old friends."

"I understand. All staying here, I presume?"

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