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Bridge to everywhere

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By Richard L. Frey

"Ridiculous!" I would have answered the most revered of 1925's seers had he ventured to predict that my not-too-distant future would include sitting down to play bridge with Harold S. Vanderbilt. He had not yet skippered the three great yachts that successfully defended the America's Cup. I was not aware that he had just invented contract bridge. But even I knew that Vanderbilt was a multimillionaire, the bachelor catch of society's Four Hundred and a scion of the tough old Commodore who had got his start by plying his own private ferry to Staten Island and wound up owning the New York Central Railroad.

I was 20, a social nobody, having a lot of fun and a modest financial success eking out an extra \$5 a week or so playing auction bridge at home or at the homes of friends. I don't mean that I ever became Mike Vanderbilt's pal; we just played bridge together a few times and once he sat beside me for a couple of hours, acting the part of the most silent and attentive kibitzer I ever enjoyed. My contemporary, Sam Fry, Jr.—an early Life Master like me and with the same highly non-social background—was on much friendlier terms with Mr. V. In fact, Vanderbilt loved a good bridge game so much that he once sent his private plane clear across Florida to bring Sam to Palm Beach for a game. Knowing that Vanderbilt hated to lose, Junior has never been quite sure whether he should consider this a friendly gesture or a kind of Las Vegas free plane ride to welcome an expected sucker. Since neither of us owned a yacht, my point is that nothing but bridge could have brought either of us into the orbit of a Vanderbilt.

I know I have made more friends, been to more places and earned more recognition because I became a good bridge player than ever I could have by becoming a great advertising man—my original line of work. Actually, I've made my living as a writer, but it never hurt that some of my editors also liked to play bridge. Not long ago, for example, I went on a nine-day Caribbean

cruise as maitre de bridge aboard the plush steamship *Nieuw Amsterdam*. At the first luncheon, seating was catch-as-catch-can so my wife and I introduced ourselves to two other couples at our table. One of the husbands replied, "Our name is Jacoby—but we don't play bridge. And our friends here are Mr. and Mrs. Sulzberger."

In my usual facetious fashion, I said, "Of *The New York Times*, I presume." Mrs. Sulzberger nodded, "Yes," and there I was with egg on my chin. But it was a pleasant luncheon and when my wife encountered Arthur Ochs Sulzberger at one of our island shopping stops a few days later, she asked, "How are you doing?" He smiled and said, "Running out of money." Her offer of a loan was genially refused.

As did most everyone at the Cavenish Bridge Club in New York, I called Wall Street genius Jack Dreyfus "Babyface." I might even have become one of that club's Polaroid "millionaires" except that I didn't happen to be around at the time that Jack was expressing his confidence in that then brand-new stock. I was one of the first to call Alfred M. Gruenther, "General," because that was how we all greeted the young lieutenant who moonlighted from his duties as math instructor at West Point in order to direct the most important eastern bridge tournaments. Later, of course, he did become a four-star general. I never got to play with Al's most famous bridge partner, Ike Eisenhower, but I met him when he dropped in at the National Championships in Washington and spent not less than two hours as a fascinated kibitzer.

Name dropping? Of course I am. Nor could I have expected these things to happen to me if I hadn't happened to be a pretty good bridge player. **But if you play any kind of bridge, you can find friends fast, no matter where you go in this world. A bridge deck is like 52 calling cards.**

There are really two games of contract bridge: the tournament game, where they know you are an amateur if you introduce yourself when you come to a new table, and the social game, where you can find a bridge game to your liking and people you like and who will like you in any city you may visit or move to. You don't have to go to the bridge club, or the country club or the athletic club. If you are married, you and your wife will meet dozens of other couples who enjoy an evening of home bridge.

I am not going to pretend that husband-and-wife bridge battles are unknown. But, if Ely Culbertson's theory is psychologically sound, neither are such fights unwholesome. Ely used to say that since a certain number of marital quarrels are natural and inevitable, it is better to fight about bridge than about more important matters.

Whether or not he was right, so far as I know there is only one confirmed case of homicide as the result of a bridge argument. That was way back in 1931 when John Bennett of Kansas City, after losing a hand with his wife as partner, learned too late that the locked door of his bathroom was neither rageproof nor bulletproof. Mrs. Bennett fired several shots through the door and, in the ensuing postmortem, the late Mr. Bennett was, for once, in no position to explain why he had bid and played the hand as he did.

I do not maintain that husband-and-wife bridge spells inevitable bankruptcy for the professional marriage counselor. A doctor friend whose bridge skill had helped pay his way through med school played bridge with his wife only once. After a couple of deals, she asked, "How can you take bridge so seriously? After all, it's only a game." Wisely, and promptly, he gave up playing bridge with her as his partner, and eventually gave up the game completely.

Then there was the time my wife and I played a friendly game against another expert and his still-almost-new spouse. We had lost a little — never

Bridge

conducive to my friendliest behavior, since I cannot bear to be defeated in anything, even by my children. Nevertheless, on the way home my wife agreed when I remarked, "Gee, dear, wasn't I nice tonight? I hardly criticized you once." Meanwhile, back at the ranch, the feminine half of the opposing team was saying to her husband, "Darling, if you ever talk to me the way Dick spoke to Mabel, I'll divorce you." I can add only—and not in proof of anything, mind you—that we are still happily married. Alas, our good friends are not.

College is an excellent place to learn bridge if you have not already picked up at least the rudiments at high school, or in a home game with the family. But I am not too happy about the way that some of our most expert young bridge players are neglecting their studies because they are fascinated by the game. It is not necessary for a college player to be a fixture of the permanent non-floating bridge game found in many a fraternity or sorority house. Nor is it necessary to graduate from university as an LM—that is, as one of the American Contract Bridge League's Life Masters—although that achievement is far from uncommon today. It's just nice to learn to play while you're young. It is also apt to stand you in good stead for more years than most extracurricular activities.

to
Everywhere



However, almost anything is likely to happen if you spend a little time learning bridge at college. Charles Goren did, for example, when three co-eds nagged him into making a fourth in their bridge game at McGill University. It bugged Charlie that the girls made him look so bad. So he read a bridge book, and look what happened. Charlie became the world's greatest bridge authority. Somewhat bafflingly, in view of his start, two women, Sally Young and Helen Sobel Smith, became his favorite bridge partners. And Charlie remains a bachelor.

The best way to learn is by playing—but first it's a good idea to read a

beginner's book. Even better, if no one in your family plays, is for married couples to join a bridge class and learn together. One highly successful teacher organized his groups by house-to-house canvassing and put emphasis in his pitch on the parties that would be included in the course. He was following the proved technique of dancing schools because, after all, bridge is entertainment whether you are playing or just learning.

There are perhaps 10,000 professional bridge teachers in the country and not too long ago that occupation won a separate listing in the Dictionary of Occupational Titles published by the U.S. Department of Labor. However, since everyone who already plays, or thinks he does, is all too willing to teach, there may be as many as 30 million amateurs to add to the teaching list. There are also bridge schools, and classes given in high school adult education programs, the YWCA and other organizations.

Then, too, there are games or self-instructional devices with which you can at least begin to learn—and with which, in fact, you can play a kind of solitaire bridge—all by yourself. Good ones include Bradley's Rollamatic and Parker Brothers' Autobridge, in the \$5 to \$10 range, and go all the way up to a self-dealer of teaching hands, called Bridgeeveryone, complete with lesson book, that sells in the neighborhood of \$30. New ones, including cassettes-plus-visual aids, are on the drawing board and may be ready in a year.

Incidentally, additional sets of deals that go beyond primary instruction are available for both Rollamatic and Autobridge. In fact, some people learn by ticking off the cards as the play is described in the articles that appear in

almost every newspaper. Although most of these hands are not for beginners, lots of what Charles Goren calls "napkin players" never play the game in any other form. Basic descriptions of bridge are also to be found in books of rules of games, almost invariably called "Hoyles." My own, for example, *According to Hoyle* (Fawcett) is available in paperback for 95¢.

The beauty of contract bridge is that even the player who is dealt a poor hand has a fighting chance to triumph if he can cooperate with his partner to outbid the opponents, or to win the trick or two necessary to defeat them when the opponents bid their hands to the limit that will give them a chance to collect the rich slam and rubber bonuses. Thus, even a run of poor cards does not make bridge boring, although admittedly it may make it frustrating.

Or, if you can afford a yen to become a Life Master player in the shortest possible time, you can hire a tournament star to give you private lessons and to play with you in anything from your local duplicate game to a national championship. Some thirty years ago at the bridge club which he organized, Ely Culbertson became concerned at the size of the losses of one of the wealthy "little old lady" members playing in the three-cent game, located appropriately enough on the third floor and attended usually by at least three top experts to carve up her losses. One day Culbertson suggested that perhaps she might enjoy playing one floor lower, where the stakes were two cents lower. "Thank you, Ely," bridled the L.O.L.—the "in" term for anyone, male or female, who plays in top competition but doesn't play very well. "However, I have set aside \$15,000 a year for my bridge entertainment and I intend to lose it to only the best players."

Today, with play-for-pay experts getting as high as \$150 per session (plus expenses) to play with their "pupils," that \$15,000 wouldn't go very far. It has been estimated that it costs the untalented player as much as \$200

to win a single master point, and you need at least 300 master points to become a Life Master, the top player ranking of the American Contract Bridge League. Yet anybody can afford to play bridge, and to play in a game with the best players in town, too, because duplicate bridge is played for no stakes at all. In some places the entry fee is as low as \$1 per session and includes free cake and coffee, though most fees run around \$2, which still makes a cheap afternoon or evening's entertainment.

Duplicate is an exceptionally good game for travelers, whether singles or pairs. There's scarcely a city of any size in the U.S. that doesn't have at least one of the 6,000 duplicate clubs affiliated with the American Contract Bridge League and some of these clubs offer a game virtually every afternoon and evening. You can call the club manager in advance, or just turn up at game time and chances are that he can find you a partner. You don't even have to be an ACBL member—dues \$5 a year—although sometimes this may help. A copy of the Directory of Duplicate Clubs may be had on request by writing Club Directory, ACBL, 125 Greenwich Ave., Greenwich, Conn. 06830. Ask for either the Eastern or Western edition. But you may have both if you wish.

Poker, once America's favorite card game, is still widely popular. But poker isn't a good "sociable" game. It's seldom a family affair; it's not much fun unless the stakes are high enough to be expensive if you lose and worthwhile if you win. It's not the kind of game that you can comfortably play with strangers, and you aren't apt to be invited to join a rich man's game unless you play so well that you're a consistent winner—which doesn't add to your popularity.

Bridge, although you can play for high stakes if you like, is mostly just the opposite. The most frequent game is between couples; the most frequent stake is something like a quarter a corner or a tenth of a cent a point, at



THE BENNETT MURDER HAND

which rate only rare hard luck could cause you to lose as much as \$10. Even when played for no stakes at all, as bridge frequently is, the game is so challenging stakes really don't matter.

It is a mistaken idea that a knowledge of mathematics is required to play good bridge. In any event, accountants are not numerous among the leading players. At one time, lawyers led the list by a wide margin. Today, the top hundred is top-heavy with computer programmers. Doctors may be found among the stars, but when you examine their degrees you find that most are dentists, who rarely if ever get night calls. Today, when house calls are more rare and doctors who make them even rarer, more medical specialists are pushing toward the top.

However, it isn't necessary to be first rank to get great enjoyment from contract bridge. Indeed, all the world, except maybe your immediate partner, loves a loser. Of course, the better you play the more enjoyable you will find the game, but there are all levels of bridge skill in all levels of society.

One significant survey, made some years ago by North American Van Lines before they chose to sponsor the Goren Bridge program on TV, showed that among young executives—those whose families moved most from city to city—bridge was the most popular game. And they found it far and away the best game to help in making new friends in new localities.

If, after giving bridge a try, you still feel you don't care for card games, there's always an appropriate moral to be drawn from Buddy Hackett's story about his emotional uplift at watching a candlelight procession at Lourdes. "My wife and I are Jewish," he told one of the priests. "What can we do?" Laconically, the priest replied, "Take pictures."

What can non-bridge-playing accountants do? Well you can always keep score. But for your reputation's sake, it had better be accurately.

If you have ever heard an amateur try to tell about a bridge hand he played as recently as five minutes earlier—never mind the excitement of an intervening murder—you will understand why the diagram reconstructed by the three survivors is called the "alleged" hand by *The Official Encyclopedia of Bridge*.

NORTH			
♠ A 10 6 3			
♥ 10 8 5			
♦ 4			
♣ A 9 8 4 2			
WEST		EAST	
♠ Q 7 2		♠ 4	
♥ A J 3		♥ Q 9 4	
♦ A Q 10 9 2		♦ K J 7 6 3	
♣ J 6		♣ Q 7 5 3	
SOUTH			
♠ K J 9 8 5			
♥ K 7 6 2			
♦ 8 5			
♣ K 10			

SOUTH (Bennett)	WEST (Hoffmann)	NORTH (Mrs. B)	EAST (Mrs. H)
1 ♠	2 ♦	4 ♠	Pass
Pass	Pass		

Opening lead: ace of diamonds.

True, the corpse-to-be did not have sufficient values for his opening bid, but no other bridge player in history has paid so high a penalty for failing to make a four spade contract.

After winning his ace of diamonds, West shifted to the jack of clubs. Bennett won with the king and tried to drop the queen of spades by cashing the ace and king. Eventually, he lost

a spade and two or three heart tricks, in addition to the ace of diamonds.

Both Sidney Lenz and Ely Culbertson discussed ways that Bennett might have saved his contract and his life, even without dropping the queen of spades via a finesse.

Culbertson suggested that Bennett ruff his losing diamond, come back to his hand with the king of trumps and lead his 10 of clubs to dummy's ace. Next would come the 9 of clubs, covered by East's queen, ruffed by South and over-ruffed by West. A heart or a diamond return by West would permit declarer to lose only one heart trick. A heart would establish South's king and let him discard two other hearts on the established clubs, after drawing West's last trump with dummy's ace of spades. A diamond would let dummy ruff while South discarded one heart, and, after cashing the ace of spades, declarer could then discard two more hearts on the good clubs.

As Culbertson somewhat lamely admitted, however, a spade return by West after over-ruffing the club lead "might still have permitted the fatal denouement, but at least Mr. Bennett would have had the satisfaction of knowing that he had played the cards dealt to him by fate to the very best of his ability."

Presumably the Angel Gabriel would then have lent a sympathetic ear to Bennett's hard luck story. At any rate here on Earth there must have been at least one sympathetic bridge player on the jury that heard the murder charge, for Mrs. Bennett was acquitted!

If you already play bridge, you may recognize the name of **Richard L. Frey** as one of the first players to be named a Life Master, an original member of the famed "Four Aces," a former partner of Ely Culbertson, and editor-in-chief of the *Official Encyclopedia of Bridge*. Mr. Frey's books include *How to Win at Contract Bridge and According to Hoyle*. He wrote this article especially for H&S Reports.

