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## The Game That Trumps All Others

*Alexander McCall Smith loves bridge's endless rules, carping partners and mental challenges*

by ALEXANDER MCCALL SMITH

I am not sure if there are clinics that will help you get over bridge, but if there are not, then perhaps some enterprising entrepreneur will take up the idea. I think it would work, but the problem is that we all know what those admitted would do in their spare time. Exactly.

And somehow I feel it would not work. Addicts have to want to change, and most bridge players I know have no desire to do so. Of course they claim to be only social players; nobody stands up and says, "My name is John, and I play bridge all the time." That's the first step, but nobody seems to take it. That's not entirely serious. Most players of bridge are ordinary social players, and not addicted in any way. Yet it's true that bridge is a very special game that can take over lives to a remarkable extent.

I receive a British bridge magazine called *Mr Bridge*, which keeps its head above water by advertising bridge holidays. The ads make it very clear that the point of the holidays they are peddling is to play bridge; being in Turkey, or Morocco (both popular bridge destinations) is not the point of the exercise. You go to Turkey or Morocco to play bridge—serious bridge, with morning, afternoon and evening sessions.

And if you don't fancy a seaside hotel filled with other bridge players, then how about a cruise on a ship filled with fellow players? These set out from British ports regularly throughout the summer, taking players to the fjords of Norway, to St. Petersburg, to Greek islands, all while feverish bridge-playing goes on in every public room and on every deck. And if you are worried about your standards, then there are cruises for novices and cruises for experienced players. Everyone is catered for.

My wife and I have never gone on a bridge cruise, but on the one occasion in which we did go take a cruise, the *Queen Mary II* 'round South America, bridge classes were available as an alternative to ballroom or Latin American dancing. My wife, who's a much stronger player than I am, plucked up her courage to go to a class that described itself as intermediate. She discovered that such was the level of bridge on the *QMII*, that she would have been better placed in the novices' class. That must have been a difficult thing to be told when one has been playing bridge regularly, every other week, for 35 years.

The problem is the rules. Most games have a small number of rules or propositions that will see you through the game, sometimes rather well. Bridge is different: There exist whole tomes on strategies and conventions that go on for page after page of rigorous analysis. Marty Bergen shows what can be done here. His famous "Points Schmoints!"—one of the great bridge best-sellers—is just the tip of his oeuvre. The serious reader can then progress to "To Open, or Not to Open" and "Understanding 1NT Forcing." I have read none of these, preferring a somewhat antiquated manual called "The Sports Illustrated Book of Bridge" by Charles Henry Goren. What appeals to me about Mr. Goren is his understanding. A religious manual—which any bridge book necessarily is—should always take into account that there are the weaker brethren, whose bidding is not all that might be desired. Mr. Goren, it is said, took a most sporting attitude to

bridge and was not indignant with the bad bids of others. Bad bids, he said, made good drama, a quote that we weaker players should pluck up the courage to use more frequently.

Mr. Goren's book tells us more than players of my low standard can possibly remember. It reminds us of the early history of bridge, which, like the history of baseball, is full of uncertainty and obscurity. One thing seems to be accepted—that bridge derived from the much simpler game of whist. Gradually whist became more sophisticated and the new game was born.

Of course it had its opponents—no new game gets away without scathing criticism from those who thought the old games were just fine. In the U.S., *The New Republic* accused bridge players of a "drunken attempt to escape from realities." Other, more temperate, criticism was leveled at the effect that bridge had on conversation—a fair-enough point, as conversation at the bridge table tends to the perfunctory.

A milestone in the development of the game came with the introduction in the 1920s of the modern system of scoring. This was an invention of Harold Vanderbilt, a scion of the famous shipping and railroad family, who went on a cruise with three friends and invented a better scoring system. The scores that one sees on the modern bridge score pads—with totals above and below the line, and with penalties of varying severity—go back to this famous cruise.

Bridge is still a game that a single player may leave his or her mark on. The Stayman Convention was so named after Samuel Stayman, who wrote on it in the 1940s. The idea here is to use a two-clubs bid after a one no-trump opening to invite one's partner to reveal whether he holds four cards in a major suit. Simple enough? Yes. But the difficulty with these rules, I find, is remembering them. It is, however, very impressive to be able to say to a new partner: "You play Stayman, I take it?" That may sound like showing off, but it at least reveals to the other players that you know something about the game, even if it may not be very much.

There are psychological aspects to bridge that should be taken into account by anybody thinking of taking up the game. The first thing to be aware of is that bridge is not an inherently friendly game. It is not as bad as croquet, which makes players red in tooth and claw, but it certainly brings out the bad in you. This is because bridge is quite unlike so many other games that are merely played for fun: this game is deadly serious.

What's the point of playing bridge? It's difficult to pinpoint the exact attraction, but it must have something to do with the fact that bridge is an intellectual game. I am always impressed with players who appear to know exactly where all the cards are. Obviously the bidding reveals something about who holds what, but these players are able to use statistical models to work out just what the chance is of another player having five hearts or whatever it is. So, from that point of view, it's a game of concentration that hones the neurons.

It's also a game of memory. Again, there are players who shoot past us in their chariots in respect of their ability to remember what cards have gone out. These people remember exactly who played way and in what order. For most of us that is impossible, but at least we can try to remember what trumps have gone. That is not too tall an order, as there are only 13 in any hand, but many of us are still surprised when a trump we did not quite notice is produced with a flourish.

From the social point of view, if one has to choose whether bridge is a good or bad thing, it is undoubtedly the former. The world is full of lonely people, and lonely couples too. Bridge makes lonely couples into lonely foursomes, at least for that short time round the table. It is also a good game to grow old playing, when tennis and other games get a bit much for creaking limbs.

Bridge is a quintessentially bourgeois game. It is a fine game for respectable people to play—people who don't get to night clubs or bars all that often, or who do not have all that many extramarital affairs. It is also a very good game for those who have no other excitement in their lives: If your average day has no great salients to it, then the prospect of getting a high-point hand at the bridge table in the evening is a very attractive one. And if you are an all-round inadequate, then being a strong bridge player is a tremendous boost.

If I were to imagine a typical bridge player, I suppose that I might say Woody Allen. Now I have

no idea if Mr. Allen plays bridge, but he looks as if he should, and I think that he would be a very agreeable bridge partner. His etiquette would be good: He would not criticize his partner, his criticism being reserved, I should imagine, to self-deprecation. He would also be very strong on post-game analysis of what went wrong. I imagine that he might go on at that for some length.

Another good bridge player would have been Liberace. Again I'm not sure whether he played bridge, but I suspect he did. Liberace had a terrific memory, apparently, and so he would have been excellent at remembering what cards had gone out. He would also smile very sweetly if one made a mistake, and one would not have felt bad at all, even after some very irresponsible bidding.

My ideal bridge four? W.H. Auden, me, Woody Allen and Barack Obama, who strikes me as being the sort of person who is considerate—and a listener. I'm not sure whether the current president plays bridge; he has other things to do, I suppose. And my least ideal bridge four? Saddam Hussein (an unforgiving partner), me, Marilyn Monroe (bad memory for cards), and Gandhi (not competitive enough).

— Alexander McCall Smith is the author of more than 60 books, including the "No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency" series.

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