

Morton's Fork Coup

The word 'coup' comes to our language from Latin through French and, as it pertains to bridge, it means....“a successful action that is unexpected and achieved with exceptional skill”. Oh what names we have given these actions!!

The name I like the best is the Morton's Fork Coup. Now if it hadn't been for bridge I would never have known what the term Morton's Fork meant. The name is derived from an episode in English history. Cardinal Morton, Chancellor (1487) under King Henry VII, loved to tax the wealthy London merchants in order to add to the King's royal treasury. His approach was that if the merchants lived well, they must have plenty of money to pay taxes to the King. On the other hand, if they lived cheaply, he figured that they were saving their money but still could afford to pay taxes to the King. Thus, they were impaled on “Morton's Fork”.

Thus the term Morton's Fork became an expression that describes a choice between two equally unpleasant alternatives. It is analogous to the expression "between the devil and the deep blue sea".

In bridge, the Morton's Fork Coup is a maneuver by which the declarer presents a defender with a choice of taking a trick cheaply, or ducking to preserve an honor combination, but so that either decision will cost the defense a trick. If the defender wins the trick, he sets up an extra high card in the suit, while if he ducks, his winner disappears because declarer can discard a loser. For example:

	North	
	♠AQ87	
	♥54	
	♦Q32	
	♣A973	
West		East
♠2		♠--
♥K10983		♥Q76
♦AJ8		♦109654
♣KQ102		♣J8654
	South	
	♠KJ1096543	
	♥AJ2	
	♦K7	
	♣--	

Somehow or another South gets to a 6♠ contract after West has opened the bidding with 1♥. The King of clubs is led. Since South has no convenient discard on the Ace of clubs, he ruffs the first round, draws the outstanding trump and leads a low diamond towards the queen. If West goes up with the ace, declarer can subsequently discard two hearts on the diamond queen and club ace, while if West ducks, declarer discards his remaining diamond on the club ace and loses only one heart trick. Alternatively, if declarer judges that East holds the diamond ace, he can coup that defender by leading towards the diamond king instead of leading towards the queen.

Another example:

North	Auction:			
♠A9852	East	South	West	North
♥K4	1♦	1NT	P	2♥* (transfer)
♦97	P	2♠	P	2NT
♣J942	P	4♠	All pass	
South				
♠Q743				
♥Q65				
♦KQ3				
♣AK5				

South overcalls East's opening 1♦ bid with 1NT. From here you have the auction to yourselves. Partner transfers to spades and then bids 2NT to invite game in either spades or notrump. While South's hand is minimum it does have a good spade fit thus the game bid in spades.

The opening lead is a small diamond and the prospects don't look good. There are two Aces to lose, a sure trump loser, and possible further losers in clubs and trumps. This hand needs a lot of luck.

A low diamond is played from dummy and East wins his Ace and continues with a second diamond, South winning. Since the first problem seems to be to take care of trumps, a spade is led to the Ace and a small one back. East shows up with the KJ alone.

East returns a club which South wins with the Ace and pauses for thought.

Crossing to dummy with a trump, a small heart is led from dummy and East is pickled. South has executed a Morton's Fork Coup as East has the choice of rising with the Ace of hearts giving South a pitch for one of the losing clubs on the Queen of hearts and another on the King of diamonds or ducking only to have the King of hearts pitched on the good diamond trick in South's hand. Making four and very nicely played.

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