

ENCOUNTERS OF THE THIRD KIND

AT THE OXFORD BRIDGE CLUB

How often do you hear of a play at bridge which deserves to be called original, in the sense that it has never appeared in the literature? Or, since that can't be known for certain, at least one that nobody seems to have come across before? Occasionally perhaps in the report of some world championship match, but surely not in the regular game at your local club?.

Nevertheless such plays do occur from time to time at the less exalted levels of competition. This is the first book in a collection of a dozen hands featuring different characters at the Oxford Club, where it would be no exaggeration to describe their performance as historic. Maybe original even. And, in one or two cases, literally out of this world.

A couple of the protagonists are shrinking violets, who would be mortified to have such fame thrust upon them; which could explain the peculiar pseudonyms in two of the hand titles.

First Book

- P1 Carol's Discovery Duck
- P4 Hilde Spots a Bargain
- P7 Don't Double Ernest Truelove
- P12 Irina Plays Ping Pong
- P15 And Ernest Plays Double Dummy
- P18 Cooper's Coup
- P20 Vita In Gretna Green

Carol's Discovery Duck

Along with all keen bridge players, Carol takes every opportunity to sharpen her game. She likes her partners to discuss points of interest, and any smart moves or mistakes either of them have made in the course of the evening duplicate at the Oxford club.

A hand cropped up recently where she suspected her partner would have a field day, pontificating about it later on. So she resolved to cut the ground from under his feet, by being fully prepared for the third degree in the post mortem, little realising that she would be making bridge history in the process.

This was the hand, with Carol sitting North.

Vul: All
 Dlr: North
 Pairs

♠ K82
 ♥ 1098752
 ♦ 7
 ♣ K95

♠ 54
 ♥ AK
 ♦ KJ3
 ♣ AQJ1087

♠ 10976
 ♥ Q63
 ♦ A108
 ♣ 643

♠ AQJ3
 ♥ J4
 ♦ Q96542
 ♣ 2

W	N	E	S
	P	P	P
1C	P	1S	P
2NT	P	3NT	P
P	P		

Carol and her partner, conservative bidders on this occasion, gave the opponents a clear run in the auction. Against their 3NT contract she led ♥10. These were her thoughts, set out as a series of questions that she asked herself as the deal progressed. Some had easy answers, some were a bit more testing, and one needed all her analytical resources, and then more. But she got it right in the end and became the only person in the club ever to have a defensive play named after her.

Q. I've found out that West's 2NT shows precisely 17-18 points. What do I think of East's raise to 3NT?

A. Not much. Short on values, lifeless shape but some intermediates admittedly. I reckon well over half the field will pass. "Only 6 points partner", the rest will raise in rhythm to 3NT because they always do, just in case they can make it.

Q. Anything else about dummy?

A. Weak Spades for the bid, but doesn't need much opposite for a stopper. Could well prove the critical suit.

Dummy and South play small, West winning the Ace.

Q. Who holds the ♥K?

A. Declarer. Partner should have 2 Hearts at most, since declarer is most unlikely to hold a singleton ♥A on the bidding. If partner holds the King it would have appeared anyway, unless he held precisely KJ which he doesn't.

Declarer crosses to dummy with ♦A and plays a Club to the Queen.

Q. What do I know of declarer's hand?

A. It's looking like 16 points so far. ♣Q and Ace by inference. ♥AK. ♦K by inference. No sane player would establish a possible setting trick for the defence so early on, whatever the entry situation. Probably 17 actually, if ♣J is with the Queen

Q. Can declarer hold a Spade honour?

A. Ace no. Queen unlikely. Just room for the Jack though.

Q. If I win the trick should I continue with a passive Heart or switch to an optimistic Spade?

A. Don't know. Either could be right, which means either could be wrong, and I don't fancy that.

Q. How about ducking the Club to get some more information?

A. Seems a good idea, but...

- Q. Suppose declarer only needed 2 Club tricks. Wouldn't I look silly?
- A. If she only needed 2 Club tricks, she would need four Diamond tricks, even assuming she could get at her ♥Q in dummy. So her diamond suit would have to be KQJx or at least KQ9x. In either case too many points for her second bid. So I'm not anticipating egg on my face for that reason.
- Q. Why shouldn't I just win and switch to a Spade?
- A. I don't know how many Spade tricks we've got coming our way. Two certainly, probably three, possibly four. But suppose partner holds ♠AQx. He would have no reason not to play me for ♠KJxx. Great! We've just handed declarer the contract, where she doesn't hold long Clubs, AQJx, say. ♠10 becomes established and declarer can reach it if she holds a third Heart. Wait a minute. That gives declarer a 19 count, with the two extra jacks. How peculiar! This hand is all about Jacks. Well in that case, I'm going to give her ♣10 instead of ♣J, and this time a successful finesse position in the suit, provided she holds a third Heart as an entry to take it.

Back to square one. What a rigmarole all this stuff is. I still don't know what to do. It's driving me nuts and I feel quite exhausted. Who wrote Bridge is an Easy Game? I shall sue them under Trade Descriptions. Pity I couldn't have ducked smoothly, but then I'm not a computer.

Anyway, mind made up, Carol plays low and declarer continues, as expected, with Ace and another, Carol winning her ♣K.

- Q. What now?
- A. No problem. All is revealed, and I can relax at last. Declarer has at least nine tricks as soon as she gets in, 5 Clubs 2 Hearts and 2 Diamonds. Ten, in fact, if she can reach ♥Q. So a Spade is easy now. If declarer holds ♠J (just room for it), giving her a fourth round stopper, too bad. We'll have done our best.

So this time a Spade hits the deck at the speed of light - the King in case of accidents, followed quicker still by another. Bravo! What a player!

Partner showed his appreciation in the usual manner. "What on earth were you thinking about all that time?" Don't you realise you gave away the position of ♣K?"

Carol's defensive manoeuvre, ducking to learn more about the layout, has become pretty routine in the bridge world since then. It has earned a place in the Official Encyclopaedia under the entry "Carol's Discovery Duck". Of course it's better known in the trade as the "Stuck? Duck!" A nice rhyming, easy to remember piece of advice for aspiring players, along the lines of "Eight Ever, Nine Never". Apparently there's a more colourful version doing the rounds, but for obvious reasons never seen in the bridge literature. They say it contains, between the question and the imperative, a brief comment on the player's predicament.

Hilde Spots a Bargain

Hilde likes to get a move on, not only in her motor car but also at the bridge table. She's not too concerned about penalty points on the score card, or on her driving licence for that matter. Her guiding light is the principle of fast arrival, which, judging by results, seems to have served her well. Bid to the limit and preferably beyond it, and don't hang about in the play. This gung-ho approach has paid off more often than not, at least in the mixed field of a typical Oxford Club duplicate pairs.

Interestingly though, a recent small contretemps with some players at the well known National Bridge Centre in Swansea, where the Diamond Version of Lebensohl was Authorised, persuaded the management that a six months rest away from the card table might do her opponents a power of good. Time also for her to reflect that the brake pedal is not just an optional extra, particularly where there could be a bargain in the offing. You see, Hilde is always on the look out for a decent bargain, even if this means a spell in the slow lane, in order to secure it.

Take this hand, for instance, Board 7 in the Tuesday game, 21st Jan at the Oxford Club.

Vul: None
Dlr: South
Pairs

♠ KJ4
♥ J1063
♦ 64
♣ AKQ2

♠ Q8
♥ AK7
♦ AJ10
♣ J10984

♠ A975
♥ 4
♦ K932
♣ 7653

♠ 10632
♥ Q9852
♦ Q875
♣

As West, after an uncontested auction, Hilde found herself sitting at the wheel in a 3 Club contract. The defence sensibly began with four rounds of trumps, denying her the Heart ruff that could have provided the ninth trick. ♠A, 2 Hearts, 3 Diamonds with a good guess, 2 trumps and a ruff. Still in top gear, she had rather carelessly dropped ♣4 from hand on the first trump, and now, with the suit blocked, couldn't win the fourth round in dummy. Had that been possible, the natural line would have been to lead low to ♠Q, hoping to develop two Spade tricks, and if ♠K was right, later guessing ♦Q for three more in Diamonds. If ♠K was wrong, she would have needed to play Diamonds for four tricks. As it was, this straight forward approach was dead in the water through lack of entries. Luckily for her, since it would have spelt failure on all counts.

So it looked as though she would now need four Diamond tricks. She could pick up $\spadesuit Q$ to four with North but not South, although this would mean South having eleven cards in the majors and not a squeak out of him in the auction. More to the point, going down that route might sacrifice the opportunity for a bargain. An unwelcome prospect, instantly ruled out. A measly 18% then - Diamonds 3/3 and guessing the $\spadesuit Q$. A fraction less in practice, taking into account South's club void, implying length in the side suits. Not looking good but Never Say Die; So Said Winston Churchill. That rang a bell. Yes, of course, how silly!. It must be a NSDSSWC. A Non Simultaneous Double Suicide Squeeze Without the Count. Perhaps also a BOGOF, Buy One Get One Free.

North would need to hold $\spadesuit K$; South the diamond length together with $\spadesuit Q$, and either $\spadesuit J$ or $\spadesuit 10$. What did all that amount to? She decided to forego the number crunching entailed in modifying the a priori %ages, by factoring in the 13/9 odds (vacant places with South), and came up with the following. Zone of diamonds not breaking (64%) x length with South (50%) x $\spadesuit Q$ with South (50%) x $\spadesuit K$ with North (50%), x either $\spadesuit J$ or $\spadesuit 10$ with South (75%) = 6%. And this time quite a bit more in view of the extra room available to South for all but one of the critical holdings. Call it the magic 10%, and 10% extra on top of the 18% in the bank, was something at which no self respecting bargain hunter would sneeze.

This is how the play went. A Diamond to the King. Then a Diamond to the Jack, $\spadesuit A$, revealing the bad news that South still held a Diamond winner, followed by the final trump, pitching a Spade from Dummy in this position.

\spadesuit KJ4	
\heartsuit J106	
\diamondsuit -	
\clubsuit -	
\spadesuit Q8	\spadesuit A975
\heartsuit AK7	\heartsuit 4
\diamondsuit -	\diamondsuit 9
\clubsuit J	\clubsuit -
\spadesuit 106	
\heartsuit Q98	
\diamondsuit Q	
\clubsuit	

Apparently harmless enough in itself, this delayed action squeeze card (the count had not been rectified) ruined each opponent in turn. North's discard forced South to commit suicide, and in doing so, inflict the same fate on his partner in one way or another.

1. If North throws a Heart, South, in order to keep the Heart guard and $\spadesuit Q$, must part with a Spade. Declarer now advances $\spadesuit Q$ (North must cover) letting North hold the trick; while South's $\spadesuit 10$ is pinned. Declarer wins the Heart return and cashes $\heartsuit A$. A finesse of the $\spadesuit 9$ then does the business.

2. If North throws a Spade on the last trump, declarer plays ♠Q, ducking as before, and dummy's Spades are now good.
3. Finally, where North throws a Spade, and South has come down to: ♠1063, ♥Q, ♦Q instead, three rounds of Hearts end plays North to lead from his ♠K.

Congratulated by the assembled company for being the only player ever to have brought off a NSDSSWC at the table, Hilde replied. "It was pure luck really. I mean, to have got one of those contraptions for 10%, adding with slightly curious logic, "I make that 90% off the list price, a clear 40% better than a BOGOF. Now that's a bargain, surely, in anyone's book".

"Don't Double Ernest Truelove"

The Oxford Club prides itself on the welcome they extend to any visitors who turn up on spec for a game. There's one rather strange chap who comes along by himself from time to time. The management make every effort to find him an experienced partner, but this never makes any difference to his results. Weak or strong partner, he invariably emerges top of the field in the evening duplicate.

He's known as Ernest Truelove, ET for short, but this can't possibly be his real name. Anyone less like an Ernest would be hard to imagine and the less said about his second name the better. One thing his opponents have learned by now is never to double this particular visitor for penalties. Perhaps he regards such behaviour towards a guest as unsporting, for he redoubles automatically and proceeds to put the offender on the rack, if that's the right description for a discipline that in practice has quite the opposite effect. The point is that Ernest specialises in pressure play. Now even he can't squeeze a defender, where no squeeze exists on the cards, but this never seems to inconvenience him; he simply manufactures what he likes to call a virtual one in its place.

He maintains that our usual term for such a play - the pseudo squeeze - is rather downmarket. A bit like repro furniture, not the proper thing at all. Mundane, in fact, and everyone now has a fair idea of what he means by that. What difference if a player is genuinely squeezed or merely thinks he is, provided the outcome is the same? Real enough, surely, even when it's not.

Take this hand for instance, which caused quite a stir on his first visit to the club. For a spot of fun and a serious headache, put yourself as South in Ernest's seat and try it first of all as an unusual sort of single dummy problem - how to make an unmakeable contract. You'll have to remember the old saying about pearls and swine. All is well in this case, because the hand was played on county night at the club. So you can be sure the opponents will be absolutely top-notch performers. Otherwise you might as well cast your pearls into the bin.

Vul: N/S
 Dlr: South
 Pairs

♠ 54
 ♥ Q4
 ♦ A1065
 ♣ KQ865

♠ AKJ82
 ♥ K6
 ♦ Q73
 ♣ AJ7

W	N	E	S
			1S
P	2C	P	3D(1)
P	3H(2)	P	3NT(3)
P	4D(4)	P	6NT(5)
Dbl(6)	P	P	Redbl(7)

- (1) Without special methods, normal players bid 3NT, living with the slight understatement of values, and effectively ruling out delayed 3 card support for Spades. Your 3D effort is a typical Ernest improvisation, keeping the options open. Or perhaps you foresaw the consequences in the play? More space would have been welcome, but partner belongs to an era when 2D could be passed.
- (2) 4th suit. More info please.
- (3) Rejecting the alternatives, but staking your claim to play the hand at least. Ernest's never dummy.
- (4) A minor setback, the downside of the 3D bid and the last thing you wanted to hear. Forcing of course, looking for a diamond slam. How could your venerable partner be so pushy?
- (5) Fixed, and serve you right for your smart alec bidding. With Diamonds agreed, 4NT is Blackwood, 5NT the grand slam force, 4S and 5C cue bids, and 5D ridiculous.
- (6) Must have forgotten something.
- (7) You didn't.

West kicks off with ♥A, followed by ♥ 3. Over to you.

Here is the complete deal

♠ 54
♥ Q4
♦ A1065
♣ KQ865

♠ Q93
♥ A1083
♦ J9842
♣ 4

♠ 1076
♥ J9752
♦ K
♣ 10932

♠ AKJ82
♥ K6
♦ Q73
♣ AJ7

Focus on West's double. Greedy and against the rules, no doubt, but assume it wasn't entirely fatuous. Who's got the guarded ♠Q? Who knows your minor suits aren't breaking, if you need them to? Why did West cash ♥A over your promised King? He doesn't want to broach the other suits, and must be simply expecting a further trick or two in the wash.

Good. You've got a nice blueprint of West's hand, and can rest assured that your slam has no legitimate chance whatsoever. So what are your prospects? Excellent of course, though you'll need a small favour in the Diamond suit - singleton ♦K with East to be precise. Naturally you play for it and run four clubs pitching a diamond from hand, reaching this position.

♠ 54
♥ -
♦ A1065
♣ 5

♠ Q93
♥ -
♦ J984
♣ -

♠ 1076
♥ J97
♦ K
♣ -

♠ AKJ82
♥ -
♦ Q7
♣ -

On the last club East discards a Heart; you throw a spade. And West? Join him in the tank. Taking your bidding at face value, you are marked with a 4243 shape. In that case if you hold both top spade honours you have twelve tricks, whatever he does. He can merely hope you are missing ♠ K, since you failed to open 2NT on what would be a balanced 20 count at least.

But you retreated from the Diamond slam. Though not the strongest inference at pairs, perhaps your 3D bid was a simple force on a three card holding - ♦KQx or Kxx, say; what in the old days they used to call the force of control; though since the Ace is with North, your control appears a bit second rate. ♦KQx he could rule out, or you'd have played the hand like a beginner, by blocking the Diamond suit, not to mention the 20 count it would give you with the top Spade honours. What about ♦Kxx? Now if you hold the 3 missing spade honours, he is squeezed. Partner's ♦Q is dropping and you have a finesse position in the suit for four tricks, unless he retains his diamond length. Then he can't guard spades. So he will have to hope his partner holds ♠J, when he can dispense with a spade. A straightforward 50/50 expectation.

Perish the final thought. Your 3D bid was not worth the bit of cardboard it was written on. No reason to think so, but not impossible, as is anything, once a player starts to unpick an opponents bidding. If that's the case, he has an easy diamond discard. A nasty imponderable. Let a diamond go, get it wrong and his partner will be fascinated to learn why he played you for a hand you hadn't advertised, rather than one that you had. Enough is enough! Suddenly it's a no brainer for West and a racing certainty for you. A Spade appears belatedly on the table. Cash the ♦A, with a welcome to the King. Play a spade to hand. No finesse of course. And a silent thanks to West for the lead and double. Ernest would be proud of you.

Some Oxford players have convinced themselves that bridge with Ernest is the closest they'll ever come to an encounter of the third kind. Others say that it's easy to recognise one of their own club members, what with his improbable alias and ludicrous attempts at disguise. Whatever the truth of the matter, the credulous faction are supported in their view by the logic of his analysis, which is based on a third order system of conjectures and inferences, exemplified in the hand above. It goes something like this.

1st order Conjecture

From the bidding/play so far, declarer forms a provisional picture of the defenders' hands.

2nd order Conjecture

Declarer says to himself "A strong defender will in turn have formed his own picture of my hand. What is it?"

3rd order Conjecture and Inference

The defender has made a previous bid and/or now makes a certain play. Declarer asks himself "Was this move consistent with his (assumed) construction of my hand? If yes, my original conjecture is reinforced and I will take it as correct. If no, my original conjecture was false, and a change of plan is needed, where that is still a live option".

Needless to say, all these horrible, mental gymnastics - thinking about what an opponent is thinking about what you are thinking about - only have point in a game of the highest standard. The inclusion of a non-expert player at the table invalidates the logic from the start, since less experienced players don't generally count their opponents hands in the first place.

So what's the future for this kind of reasoning in the bridge world today? A steward from the Union of Oxford Bridge Teachers, hoping for a few tips, convened a meeting where they put the question to Ernest. Sadly his reply was not quite the model of clarity they were anticipating.

"Depends what, where and when you mean. In my club, for example, most players are used to working at the 'n'th logical order. On the other hand, extrapolating from the context of explanation to that of procedure, we are persuaded by the cutting insight of your own distinguished 14th Century nominalist, who cautioned against the unnecessary multiplication of entities. So we have been forced to devise a mechanism for escaping the vicious circle of an otherwise infinite analytical regress. We don't usually teach it to our beginners though".

"My thanks to you all. I have enjoyed our encounters at the bridge table, and look forward to welcoming an Oxford team to my club for an away match one day. Provided, that is, they can manage to cope with the awkward travel arrangements".

And with that typically enigmatic parting shot, he was gone, as the fog that had descended on his bewildered audience gave way to the bright aurora of an early North Oxford dawn.

Irina Plays Ping Pong

Most bridge articles and match reports tend to feature game and slam contracts, in the belief that these are more interesting to the reader than the humble part score, or search for an overtrick at pairs, say. This is a pity, because sometimes the most subtle and interesting plays can equally well occur in these apparently less glamorous settings.

Take this hand for instance. Board 20, 7th Feb in a local Swiss Pairs event. It is a strong candidate for a claim to originality, with an idea not seen before in the literature, as far as we know. Irina from the Oxford Club was North at the helm as declarer in a fairly routine 4S contract, after the following slightly less routine auction.

Dlr: N
Vul: N-S
Pairs

♠ AQJ8653
♥ A10952
♦ A
♣

♠ 42
♥ QJ63
♦ Q872
♣ A76

♠ 1097
♥ K84
♦ J53
♣ 10942

♠ K
♥ 7
♦ K10964
♣ KQJ853

W	N	E	S
	1S	P	2C
P	2H(1)	P	2S (2)
P	4S(3)	P	P
P			

- 1) The 7/5, 3 loser hand has great playing strength, but a misfit looms and the simple rebid is probably best, though it scarcely does justice to the power of the hand. Some players might prefer to ignore the hearts and rebid spades at the 3 level, especially if 2H forcing or 2½H is not available.
- 2) South also is staring at a horrible misfit, and despite his values wisely downgrades to simple preference. Some of those who try the 4th suit 3D may wind up in an ungainly 3NT, but most should get to the standard 4S, one way or another.
- 3) Clear cut to subside in game, especially at pairs.

♠10 was led, and Irina donned her pairs hat to consider the situation from a match point angle. The lead was most unfriendly. Though it may have seemed attractive to an intelligent defender on the bidding, no doubt most pairs would receive a Diamond lead, when 11 tricks should be easy, barring accidents. Seven trumps, a ruff, 2 Aces and a King. Now the crucial overtrick was looking most unlikely, with no ruff and no entry to dummy after diamonds are unblocked. 10 tricks should be straightforward, unless hearts were 5/2 or worse in an unkind layout. But that would score poorly, and something better was needed, at least to equal those pairs who received a non trump lead. If someone out of the blue had said “How do you play A10952 opposite stiff 7 for two losers in almost all layouts?”, you’d have sent them packing for asking silly questions. But wait a minute. Supposing every time you lost a trick in the suit, the opponents had to play the suit back at you. Now we’re getting somewhere. Yes, a game of ping pong might deliver the goods.

With these thoughts in mind, Irina won ♠K and advanced ♣K, covered by ♣A and ruffed. Trumps were drawn and ♦A unblocked. Now she had reached the sought after position where, if the defenders won a trick, they couldn’t play Clubs or Diamonds without handing her 12 tricks on a plate. That was the first hurdle. Now the second one, how to broach the Heart suit. Not only the missing honours, but also the pips right down to the 2 were critical, and a full analysis was out of the question. No time for that at the table, but a fascinating project for the armchair analyst on a wet Sunday afternoon. As an illustration here are a couple of nice rallies in the 5/2 break: West QJ643 opposite K8. Remember that neither East nor West can allow themselves to remain on play with no Heart exit available.

AK73; 28J; 69; 5Q; 410	North wins
2K73; 8JA; 104; 9Q; 65	West wins

Once the particular line has been chosen, best play and defence are obviously assumed. There are in fact well over 100 relevant layouts for the analyst to evaluate in comparing the 3 main lines, a task perhaps best left to the computer.

Common sense came to the rescue. The choice seemed to be between leading ♥10(or 9), or playing ♥A then small, or small at once. Irina reasoned as follows. Small at once would likely collect ♥8, and that didn’t look promising. Ace and another could work on certain layouts with blockages, where the defenders might not be able to afford to unblock. But she preferred on general principles to keep a potential tenace (♥A and ♥9) in hand, with the idea of restricting the defenders options.

So this is how the ping pong rally went, short and sweet. ♥10 to the ♥4 and ♥J. ♥3 back to the ♥A and West must unblock the ♥K, or he is thrown in to give declarer access to dummy’s winners. The Ace here by declarer is the key play. On the assumption that the opponents have defended correctly, thereby ruling out a large number of alternative possible layouts, it can only gain and never lose. Declarer needs to exploit the blockage that exists in the actual layout, where ♥K and ♥Q are interchangeable but ♥8 is needed with East, as the play to the next trick demonstrates. Had she played low, East could win cheaply and force her Ace, leaving her with a third trick in the suit to lose. Now the beautiful final shot. Small to ♥8, and West must overtake with ♥Q promoting declarers ♥9 and establishing the suit. Otherwise East is again left on play and is forced to resurrect the dummy.

A far sighted East might have tried the double unblock of ♥K and ♥8, in order to avoid this fate, since now if declarer plays ♥A on the second round, West is left with the major tenace ♥Q6 against ♥95, and declarer on play must lose two more tricks. No good. Declarer has the perfect counter to this manoeuvre. If East drops ♥8 on the first round, she simply covers West's return, and now it is North with ♥A9 over West's ♥J6 or ♥A5 over West's ♥J3, and she wins the remaining tricks. And if East wins the first round of Hearts with ♥K, declarer ducks West's ♥J on the second, leaving her with ♥A9 over ♥Q6. All bases covered. Lovely stuff.

This concept of forcing a continuous exchange in a particular suit, in order to reduce the intrinsic loser count, has great subtlety and charm. It has recently merited an entry in the Official Encyclopaedia under the heading "Irina's Ping Pong Coup". Olé.

And Ernest Plays Double Dummy

We told you before not to double Ernest Truelove for penalties. Some people never learn. This time it happened to be a different Ernest visiting the Oxford Club – his twin brother, as a matter of fact, also called Ernest, presumably for reasons of economy rather than practicality. It must have made family life very difficult for the Trueloves in the early days.

There's another odd thing about the Truelove twins. One of them, the younger one, is several years older than his brother. Since this is not usually the case with twins, the phenomenon needs an explanation. The Club committee is offering Honorary Life Membership to anyone who can shed light on the mystery. All we can say is that both Ernests live miles and miles away from Oxford, and therefore need an exceptionally fast mode of transport, if they are to arrive in time for the evening duplicate. Furthermore, one of them visits the club for a game far less often than his brother. Now explaining the age discrepancy should be relatively simple, or relatively complex, depending on your point of view; and relatively easy to work out or relatively difficult, depending on how you see it.

But we digress. Here is Ernest in action, Board 12, 13 December, Oxford evening duplicate pairs. His partner, found by the ever solicitous management, was a charming, but inexperienced and nervous young lady, who fortunately was only too happy to abide by the other club rule regarding the Trueloves; namely always to support their suit at the first opportunity, no matter how few cards you hold in it, right down to none. Dutiful application of the second rule enabled the partnership to reach the par contract of 4S on the N/S cards, while other pairs played 3NT – no chance on a heart lead, or the easily made but poor scoring 5C.

Dlr: W
Vul: Both
Pairs

♠ KQ76
♥ A7
♦ 98
♣ 98754

♠ 3
♥ KJ842
♦ QJ742
♣ Q6

♠ 109542
♥ Q1065
♦ 105
♣ K2

♠ AJ8
♥ 93
♦ AK63
♣ AJ103

W	N	E	S
P	P	P	1C
1H	1S	3H(1)	3S (2)
P	4S	Db1(3)	P
P	Redbl(4)		

1. Pre-emptive
2. An awkward bid, made simple by the second rule
3. As we said, they never learn
4. Automatic

Lead: ♥5

Ernest was North in the above auction, and as declarer in 4S Redoubled, saw the hand immediately as an open book. This was his thinking, supported by the basic pairs principle that one's own sides bidding is always right, whatever it takes in the play to justify it. In other words, 'Keep Faith'.

- East West's 1H, 3H pre-emptive = Hearts 5/4
- The double = Trumps 5/1. Not 6/0 when the contract would be unmakeable
- Clubs 2/2. Another necessary assumption, since the suit must be established simply for one loser, or again the contract cannot be made
- Hence Diamonds 5/2
- The location of all honour cards with the defenders interchangeable and therefore irrelevant.

After this analysis, which took all of half a second, this right line was clear. Trumps could not be broached, or subsequent forces in the Heart suit would prove lethal. Ernest immediately established Clubs and used the Club winners to force the 5 card defensive trump holding. This is how the play went.

The lead was ducked and the Heart continuation won. Ace and another Club (♣ J avoiding the blockage) established the suit. The Diamond return was won and a second Diamond cashed. Now declarer played one round of trumps (♠A) to prevent West ruffing Clubs with his single trump, and exited with ♣ 10, East ruffing, to reach this 5 card ending.

♠ KQ7
♥ -
♦ -
♣ 98

♠ -
♥ J84
♦ QJ
♣ -

♠ 1095
♥ Q10
♦ -
♣ -

♠ J8
♥ -
♦ 63
♣ 3

A trump return by East and declarer simply draws trumps; so East played a Heart, ruffed in hand, while dummy's last Club was discarded. Now winning Clubs forced East again, and declarer could overruff and finally draw trumps, parity restored. Neat. There are a number of interesting variations, occasioned by different defensive plays, which the double dummy enthusiast may care to work out. Don't go and ask Ernest, if you get stuck though. Like his brother, he always talks in riddles, quite unintentionally of course – and you will end up none the wiser.

There is something unusual, possibly original, about this hand, which might be of interest to the technically minded player. It belongs to the great class of plays consisting of suit establishment combined with accurate trump management. Trump control is in the balance, but trumps must be drawn at some point, in order that established side suit winners can be cashed. Here the defence starts with the trump length, but repeated forces restore parity. When declarer is forced in turn, you would expect the trick to be won in the short trump hand. Here, strangely, trump parity is surrendered by taking the force in the longer hand, in order to win it back on the subsequent trick, when trumps can at last be drawn. It is this factor which makes the play difficult to find at the table, and needs an Ernest to recognise it. The theme does not appear in the Official Encyclopaedia, since that publication, as we all know, is only concerned with down to earth matters.

Cooper's Coup

Cooper's Coup is described in the Official Encyclopaedia as the jettison of a plain suit card, in order to neutralise an impending ruff. Some say it takes its name from this hand, played on 21st Feb, Oxford Club – board 23 of the evening duplicate. Others believe the editors chose the title purely for its resonant alliterative effect, rather than the play itself, which they say comes from the early days of whist, very 19th Century in fact, and seriously old hat. The eponymous recipient of all this thoroughly unwelcome attention was Oxford Club member, Ashley, whose surname is Cooper, you see. Hence the designation.

Here is an account of the hand, and it's left to you to decide whether the play merited all the fuss, or was merely recorded in the Encyclopaedia, since it tripped off the tongue so nicely, that there just had to be a Cooper's Coup somewhere in the literature. Fortunately for Ashley's partner the board was played early on. Declarer had not yet got round to the second bottle of the evening, and was making a rather better fist of things than usual. But we mustn't tease the old boy too much. After all, he was the one declarer to bring home the only game contract on the East West cards. Other pairs were in part scores, 4 Spades off trivially (3 Aces and a ruff), or 4 Hearts, failing anyway. The hand is difficult, with several traps for the unwary.

Dlr: S
Vul: Both
Pairs

♠ J62
♥ 4
♦ AQJ76
♣ A1083

♠ KQ5
♥ KJ875
♦ K1054
♣ 6

♠ A10873
♥ Q106
♦ 2
♣ KQ52

♠ 94
♥ A932
♦ 983
♣ J974

S	W	N	E
P	1H	Dbf	1S (1)
P	2D	P	4H (2)
P	P	P	

1. The old fashioned Redouble is the alternative, but with good support for partner's suit, perhaps not best. The modern style is to bid as though there had been no intervening double.

2. Can hardly do less with her 6½ loser hand and known 8 card fit. Those Easts who bid 3H tended to get a 3S (forcing) response from West, bidding out shape. If 4S was then chosen as the perfectly sound final contract, that was just bad luck.

♠2 was led. For a bit of help, take a look at the hand double dummy, all cards visible; and see if you agree with declarers reasoning.

Winning the Spade lead in hand, he could see 10 tricks easily enough, provided things were straightforward, including a 3/2 trump break. 4 trumps, 5 Spades even if North held J to 4, and a Club. But when North showed out on the second round of trumps, South sensibly holding up his Ace, and declarer winning in hand, all bets were off. Now if he played a third round, South wins and the defence promptly cashes 2 Diamonds (Ace marked with North on the bidding) and a Club. If he played a Diamond in order to secure an early ruff, North could lead another Spade and now nothing can prevent a Spade ruff by South with his ♥9, at some point.

What could be done? Cooper's Coup makes its appearance at last. A Club was led, North taking the Ace and returning a Spade won in dummy. The ♣K was cashed and the ♠Q dispatched from hand. Now it was safe to exit a Diamond to North. On the Spade continuation, ruffed by South and over ruffed, declarer ruffed a Diamond with dummy's last trump and cashed ♣Q, pitching a Diamond from hand. Then a further Spade winner left South high and dry. Declarer's last Diamond would go away, whether or not the trump Ace was used then or later. There are a number of minor variations in the defensive plays. Cooper's Coup figures in most, and declarer can always succeed.

Ashley says that anyone in the club who worked all this stuff out for themselves is more than welcome to take over ownership of the coup – and save him from the hassle he's been getting lately about it. They'd have to change their name of course. The editors would insist upon it.

Vita In Gretna Green

An account of Vita's adventures in the course of the evening duplicate at the Oxford Club on 4th May; when, as declarer on Board 20, she embarked on a hazardous journey to a faraway place. In ten short chapters.

Chapter One: Grand ambitions

Every bridge player, at all levels of the game, likes to bid a grand slam, whether it is simply lay down or needs good technique to make the contract. The experienced player, however, knows that the thirteen trick assignment in particular has to be viewed quite differently, according to the form of the game being played – Teams, Rubber Bridge or Match Pointed Pairs.

Vita is no exception. She holds, with very good reason, that it is hardly ever right in a pairs event to bid the grand, unless it is overwhelmingly obvious; especially when the field consists of players of widely varying standard and ability. Virtually none of the other pairs will be in it. A number will bid the small slam of course, typically making twelve or thirteen tricks. A sizable minority – perhaps even a majority in the average club game – will stay out of slam altogether. So the risk/reward balance is almost always unfavourable, since the small slam, made with an overtrick, say, should be enough to guarantee a good score.

Board 20, 4th May at the Oxford Club, where Vita sat West, was a case in point.

Dealer: West

Vul: All

Pairs

♠ 10875
♥ K972
♦ 98
♣ J105

♠ KQ43
♥ 84
♦ J
♣ AK8762

♠ A962
♥ AJ103
♦ AKQ3
♣ 4

♠ J
♥ Q65
♦ 1076542
♣ Q93

W	N	E	S
1C	-	1D(1)	-
1S	-	5NT(2)	-
7S(3)	-	-	-

1. No complaints so far.
2. The grand slam force, requiring partner to bid seven of the trump suit – spades, here by inference as the last bid suit – when holding two of the top three honours. The less said about this effort, the better!
3. With a sinking feeling. “How can he possibly know I hold ♣ A?”. Vita thought to herself. “He must have a void, I suppose, along with the other Aces, though I can’t see how that improves his hand. Still, must keep faith, obey orders, assume he has a rock crusher and knows what he’s doing”.

Chapter Two : A straw in the wind

♦9 was led, and even before dummy went down, Vita had a fleeting presentiment. Don’t players lead trumps against grand slams? Perhaps North’s holding made a trump lead undesirable. Too early to worry about that, but something to bear in mind for later, though.

East, looking mightily pleased with himself, put his cards down one by one very deliberately, as though inviting everyone at the table to marvel at his enterprise. “Thank you, partner. Now there’s a hand I really don’t deserve”. It was Vita’s favourite remark which she wheeled out whenever she was unimpressed by her partner’s bidding. The dummy confirmed her worst suspicions; partner was suffering a serious shortfall in the marbles department. A grand slam with odds of about 25% at a cursory glance – clubs and trumps breaking favourably; maybe a tad more, but certainly not much.

She would have to give it her best shot, needless to say, though if she succeeded, partner would become quite insufferable, and all the more inclined to repeat the performance next time.

How was she to set about this uncomfortable contract? For a brief moment the solid Diamond suit tempted her to consider setting up the dummy, playing to discard a Heart on ♦A; then ruffing two hearts in hand and pitching one on ♣K. But she quickly realised that East’s trumps were nowhere near good enough for that to work. No, the Clubs must obviously come in, and almost certainly with one ruff only. If they broke 4/2, she would need to ruff twice. Then either South would overruff, or North, with the shortage, would force her to use ♠A, promoting a trump for the defence; alternatively if his trumps weren’t suitable for that, Jxx say, then he might well be able to discard to a void in one of the red suits, which would prove fatal for communications.

In practice, therefore, clubs must break, and declarer rightly decided to establish the side suit first, before touching trumps, keeping maximum flexibility. This would prove to be an essential move.

Chapter Three: Damned lies and statistics

The Diamond lead was won in hand. Declarer cashed ♣A and ♣K, pitching a Heart from dummy. North followed with ♣5 and ♣10, South with ♣3 and ♣Q!! “Don’t like the look of that”, was Vita’s instant reaction. If ♣Q was a true card, she was in danger of being overruffed on the third round. Mind you, there might just be an answer, if that were the case, though it was a pretty remote possibility.

Suppose North held J10x in trumps. Now she could ruff with ♠9, cash ♠A and ♠K, and ruff the fourth club to set up the suit, returning to hand with a Diamond ruff, to draw the last trump.

On the third Club North produced ♣J, which didn't help, since ♣J and ♣9 were manifest equals now. But if South's ♣Q was from Q93 though, wouldn't that have been a seriously dangerous false card to risk? Not really. Even if declarer held ♣J, and the suit immediately became good, that could be no worse from his point of view than declarer establishing it herself with a low ruff. Whilst it might have simplified the play for declarer in certain awkward trump layouts, this little bit of fun would never cost, and might just have persuaded her to ruff higher than necessary.

So Vita resolved not to let any shenanigans by the opposition influence her, and simply to rely on the probabilities. The club break was nearly 36%. The chance of North holding precisely J10x in trumps was goodness knows what – somewhere around 10% on a rough estimate. At any rate, no contest. She would stick to her guns, and ruff low.

When South, with a silly, fatuous smirk on his face, followed to the third club, Vita could not resist a little joke. “I'm afraid you have just played a card you don't possess. Such an infraction is twice as damaging as a revoke, so I make that two tricks transferred to our side, if I'm not mistaken. We don't need to call the director, do we?”

Chapter Four: Looking around corners

So far so good. Declarer paused to consider her prospects. All would be well if trumps behaved, but she recalled her early reaction to North's original lead. Was there any play to cope with a bad break? Yes, she might just manage it, if North had the length in a favourable layout, provided she had advance warning. Some kind of coup, with Clubs as substitute trumps would be needed. In that case she didn't want North discarding on the run of the clubs and subsequently ruffing a red suit winner.

Allowing for problems ahead, she cashed ♥A and ♦K, pitching her small heart from hand, before at last playing a trump to the Queen. This remarkably far-sighted precaution would later prove absolutely necessary and a key move in the ending she had envisaged.

Chapter Five: The flashing red light

On the trump lead from dummy, ♠J appeared from South, a danger signal if ever there was one. Or was this opponent up to his nonsense again? Well, once more Vita refused to be deflected and considered the matter objectively. The a priori probability of ♠J being single was 2.83%, as against 3.39% for doubleton J10. But this latter probability must be halved, since the Principle of Restricted Choice (PRC) stated that South might equally have played ♠10, rather than ♠J.

Unfortunately this finding was contradicted by what is known as the probability of cause, namely that South started with J10x, three times more probable than J10 doubleton. With this holding it would never cost to drop an honour, whether second or fourth in hand, and a seasoned player was likely to do so most of the time. This swung the balance temporarily in favour of playing for a 3/2 trump break, and no further worries. But North's opening lead was nagging her again. From two small, a standard trump lead against a grand slam was hardly difficult or unlikely, once East/West are known from the bidding to hold the top three honours. Two pieces of evidence against one, therefore. Rightly or

wrongly she was going to back her judgement. And if by chance South had produced ♠J from Jx(x), she would have to pay off this time to the smart Alec, grit her teeth and congratulate him afterwards.

So placing North with an original holding of four trumps to the 10, she was confronted with the problem of what to do about it. A simple finesse of ♠9 was no use, because she would be unable to return to hand after unblocking ♠A, without North coming to a trump trick. Time then for something completely different.

Chapter Six: Diversion; Gretna Green

Declarer needed to play winning clubs through North, in order to score that ♠9 without using up one of her own trumps. This would be a fairly standard manoeuvre, technically known as a single positional elopement by rank. “Single” because it involved one trump rather than several; “positional” because it could only operate against North; and “by rank” since the ♠9 could over ruff North’s lower ranking card, whenever he chose to use it. Only here there was the additional complication that, when West eloped with the ♠9, it created a blockage in the trump suit which had to be untangled later. In this respect it was an unusual variant on the pure elopements, such as the coup en passant, which players will recognise more readily.

Chapter Seven: Good news and bad

Declarer followed the signpost to Gretna Green with the fourth Club, North and dummy both discarding Hearts. It was a tense moment but all was well and she breathed more easily when she found that South, as expected, had no trumps left. Hang on a minute though. Why didn’t North ruff the Club winner? Had he done so, she could have over ruffed, cashed ♠A, returned to hand with a Heart ruff, drawn the last trump and claimed. The same happened on the next Club - a Heart from North and this time a Diamond from dummy. On the final Club, North went in with ♠7, so Vita won ♠9 and took stock. Irritating as it was, she had to concede that North’s timing constituted good defence. Had he mistakenly discarded on the final Club, declarer would have needed no elopement, and would have been spared any subsequent awkward decisions; simply finessing ♠9, cashing ♠A, and winning the last trick with ♠K.

As things were, North had created a losing option. How was she to return to hand after cashing ♠A? Which red suit should she play without being over ruffed? Did North start with three Diamonds and three Hearts? Or was he 4/2 in the red suits? After all the hard work, having deployed virtually every technical weapon in her armoury, Vita seemed to be faced with a double dummy decision at the death. Surely it wasn’t just a guess?

Chapter Eight: An old friend

Vita was steeling herself to make the critical choice, which suit to play, when an old friend in disguise suddenly turned up out of the blue. PRC had been a factor in divining the trump layout. Could it be called into service again, modified perhaps to fit the present situation?

Many players feel rather uncomfortable with PRC in the first place, let alone any fancy variants that might be derived from it. They either fail to understand it, don’t believe it, or acknowledge that despite

being counter intuitive, it seems to work in practice. The anti PRC brigade would have apoplexy of course if they had to listen to Vita's interpretation of the principle. Interestingly though, they might find themselves struggling to refute the logic, if indeed it can be refuted.

Vita decided to collect all the evidence and visualised a series of propositions which she felt would settle the issue with a fair degree of certainty.

- North, defending a grand slam has rejected the lead of both trumps and declarers suit. Of the remaining two suits he would seek the safest.

- A suit headed by a top honour is unsafe, and he will prefer to lead from small cards.

- North, on simple probabilities, is more likely to hold one Heart honour rather than two or none.

- Diamonds are safe – no honours are out. Hearts quite likely not.

- Where both suits are in fact safe, he might equally have led the other one rather than the actual one. He didn't. Therefore it's twice as probable that Diamonds was his only safe suit. She was aware that this extension of PRC has been frequently discussed in the literature, though in a somewhat different context. It suited her purpose here perfectly.

- The thirteenth Diamond only was out – the ♦10. South had thrown small Diamonds on the Clubs.

- Since North led ♦9, ♦10 should be with South, though this was quite a weak inference, especially with a defender leading against a grand slam.

- If North had a third Diamond, he might have discarded it, in order to void the suit. He didn't. Therefore he hadn't. Another weak inference, but every little bit helps, as the saying goes.

Taken together, with particular emphasis on the PRC factor, all these considerations convinced Vita that she had the answer. Now she could relax and enjoy the scenery on the way home.

Chapter Nine: Interlude; the Victoria Variation

Reflecting on the play so far, something rather interesting struck her. These opponents now, they were strong players. Both of them had previously made good moves in the defence, and yet they both seemed to have missed an opportunity to put her on the wrong track, if the layout was as expected.

“Play the card you are known to hold” is a well established principle of defence, along with its unstated corollary, of course – “Otherwise declarer can't go wrong”. O.K. Try this for size – “Play the card declarer least wants to see”. Its corollary this time – “Otherwise declarer will have less chance to go wrong”. In this case declarer had very strong reasons to place North with a Heart honour, together with a fair expectation of finding ♦10 in the South hand. Had either defender, aware of the potential inferences available, discarded these cards earlier in the play – which they could have done without cost, since they both had a certain count by then – what would have been the effect? Quite simply, to blow a massive hole in declarer's logic, needed to read the ending correctly.

Vita had placed ♥K or ♥Q with North along with the definite trump: and, as if in confirmation, ♦10 with South, plus the other Heart honour therefore. Without expectation of the critical cards being in

their respective slots at trick twelve, the configuration of the three outstanding cards other than the trump would remain indeterminate. In other words, North could equally well hold a Heart or a Diamond. She really would be on a pure guess then, which of course entails the greater chance of error.

Rather a nice paradox, wasn't it? The opposition, with magnificent generosity, bend over backwards to confirm the accuracy of declarer's card reading, and by doing so, render it irrelevant, unusable and of no practical value in obtaining the true count.

Chapter Ten: Happy ever after

Emerging as last from her reverie, declarer decided to trust her own carefully assembled evidence and came off deck with a heart ruff, North following of course. "Drawing trumps", she announced, placing her thirteenth card back in the board unseen, along with its companions, while the opponents paid her the small compliment of doing the same in reverential silence.

East, whose last card was ♦A, left it on the table in solitary splendour. "Look at that", he exclaimed. "What is that beginners are taught is the worst crime you can commit at the bridge table? Why, trumping your partners Ace, of course. Don't fret about it though. At least I've earned us a nice top by bidding the grand. Automatic really. Fifteen easy tricks in a lay down; sixteen, come to think of it, if you hadn't trumped my ace at the end".

Vita was quite impervious to this attack. She could do better. "You'll never make a bridge player, partner", she hit back, "since you are clearly unable to count past single figures. Eighteen tricks, if you don't mind. You seem to have forgotten the two bonus tricks awarded to our side for the opponents' infraction".

After this surreal but good natured exchange, she was content to rest on her laurels; and deservedly so, for she later became the only player in the club to have merited three separate references in the Official Encyclopaedia.

The first, under the entry "Gretna Green Coup", quotes this hand as a paradigm illustrating the single positional elopement by rank. The second records her score of 2270, allowed by the Tournament Director to stand, at the special request of her opponents, as unique in the history of the game, and since it doesn't exist, unlikely ever to be seen again. The third consists of a short footnote to a footnote in an entry explaining the principle of playing the card you are known to hold. Entitled "The Victoria variation", it is considered a controversial insight, regarding which no agreement has been reached, even to this day.