



B R I D G E
A LOVE
STORY

BY ZIA



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Martin whose impeccable linguistic ability to help correct my many grammatical shortcomings was most welcome.

And the sprinkle of experts and friends who have meticulously perused the bridge deals and endeavoured to ensure they have retained their original form.

For the convenience of the reader, I have endeavored to make South the declarer whenever possible.

To my brother Ali, who laughed when I told him I was going to be a bridge player.

And to my sons Zain and Rafi, whom I urge not to follow in my footsteps.

I am a proud father blessed with two wonderful sons, but as there's little chance they will ever read this book, and as my life has clearly not always been exemplary, I will borrow the last lines from Rudyard Kipling's "If – ": beautiful words and advice to them and for us all.

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with kings – nor lose the common touch;
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you;
If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run –
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And – which is more – you'll be a Man, my son!

1 DOUBLE!

The player on my left had just bid 6♥.



Almost in slow motion, I watched myself place the red double card on the bidding tray. My heart was pounding so loudly I expected the other players to look up. Indian fakirs may be able to control their heartbeats, but not bridge players.

This was the moment I had been waiting for.

The year: 2009

The place: Sao Paolo, Brazil

The matchup: USA vs. Italy

My partner: The Legend, Bob Hamman

We were playing the last 16 boards in the final of the Bermuda Bowl – the World Open Team Championship and the game’s ultimate prize. Our USA team had entered the final session some 40 IMPs ahead, a good margin but by no means a gimme. Our opponents were the formidable Italian team, and the winners would be crowned the champions of the world.

After the first five or six boards I thought we might have lost some of our lead. Then I picked this up:

♠J9843 ♥A10 ♦— ♣1097652.

“Six – five come alive” is what they say, and distributional hands often produce large swings.

I was East, and the bidding soon took off:

West	North	East	South
<i>Bob</i>	<i>Giorgio</i>	<i>Zia</i>	<i>Antonio</i>
<i>Hamman</i>	<i>Duboin</i>		<i>Semanta</i>
–	–	–	1♥
Dble	2NT*	4♠	5♥
5♠	6♦*	Dble	6♥
Pass	Pass	Dble	All Pass

2NT	Good raise in hearts
6♦	Control bid
Dble	Lead a diamond
Dble	We’ve got them just where we ...

I felt that the auction had developed perfectly. I had bid to game, then I doubled the diamond cuebid and the final contract.

For me, this meant that I was asking – *begging* – Bob to lead a diamond, any diamond. After ruffing the diamond lead, my ♥A would defeat the contract – nothing could beat the ace of trumps. In fact, it was as clear as the bubbles in the champagne we would soon be sipping from the most coveted cup in the game.

Long ago, the great Teddy Lightner invented a method where a double of a slam asked for an unusual lead. I had doubled 6♦ to say “lead a diamond,” then I had doubled 6♥ – maybe that asked for an unusual lead of a nondiamond?

“Come on Bob!” I screamed internally, as loudly as thoughts can shout. But the more Bob pondered, the more I started to worry.

Could he be thinking that my last double was some sort of super-Lightner, cancelling the earlier double? Didn’t he remember I’m a simple savage rubber bridge player whose first love is to increase the penalty and demoralize the opposition? If I have learned one lesson when doubling slams for a lead, it is that what seems obvious on one side of the table is rarely so on the other.

Meanwhile, Bob, a pragmatist to his fingertips, was staring at ♣KQJ3. Who knew what his crazy partner was up to? He led the ♣K. How bad could that be? Have a look at the layout and see for yourself.

Board 121	♠ 6										
Dealer South	♥ K9764										
E/W Vul	♦ AQ98										
	♣ A84										
♠ Q752	<div style="display: inline-block; background-color: #008000; color: white; padding: 5px; text-align: center;"> <table style="border: none; margin: 0;"> <tr><td></td><td>N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>W</td><td></td><td>E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td>S</td><td></td></tr> </table> </div>		N		W		E		S		♠ J9843
	N										
W		E									
	S										
♥ —		♥ A10									
♦ KJ432		♦ —									
♣ KQJ3		♣ 1097652									
	♠ AK10										
	♥ QJ8532										
	♦ 10765										
	♣ —										

Answer: Really bad. I felt sick to my stomach and more, as a moment later, Antonio Sementa grabbed the ♣A, knocked out my ♥A, drew my last trump, ran the ♦10 – *he* knew I had a void even if my partner didn’t – and wrote 1210 in the plus column of his scorecard.

Disaster!

This was likely to be a game-changing swing of about 16 IMPs. I felt as if I had just scored an own goal in the final of the World Cup. Suddenly I could sense the Italians sitting up in their seats, strength and hope surging back into them.

Thinking negative thoughts: Maybe if I hadn’t doubled, Bob would have led a diamond. I desperately needed to clear my mind and I asked the tournament director to accompany me to the washroom, which was necessary for security. The opposition pair came along, chattering excitedly in rapid Italian, but Bob remained at the table staring straight ahead, immobile as a statue.

I can still see him, a veteran of nine previous world championship wins, sitting calmly, waiting for us to return – just another day at the office. Sang-froid, the French call it; I would add “tough Texan with balls of steel.”

I have little doubt that his incredible talent in handling adversity at the table is the key to his being the most successful player of all time. His uncanny ability to put emotions behind him makes him almost a


freak of nature. I am sure one day they will find ice in all parts of his body, not just the veins.

When we returned to our seats, I made an effort to put this setback behind me. I forced myself to refocus, motivating myself with positive thoughts and compelling my inner self to be strong. But another blow was around the corner, as on the very next hand, our opponents bid a sub-par game that rolled in with lucky breaks.

Had we lost the lead? It was difficult to know, but there was no point in thinking about something that was completely out of our hands.

Anyway, we had Jeff Meckstroth and Eric Rodwell in the other room. Known jointly as Meckwell, the world's greatest partnership for the past few decades could destroy an army when in form. I did, however, reflect on how it might be interesting to have running scores as in other sports; bridge is one of the very few games where you find out the result only when it is too late to do anything about it.

The next couple of boards were likely "pushes" – deals on which no IMPs would change hands. But then it was our turn to get lucky.

Board 125	♠ AK1042	
Dealer West	♥ AQJ8	
Both Vul	♦ 872	
	♣ Q	
♠ 8653		♠ Q9
♥ 62		♥ 10953
♦ Q9		♦ 103
♣ J9862		♣ AK1075
	♠ J7	
	♥ K74	
	♦ AKJ654	
	♣ 43	

West	North	East	South
<i>Antonio</i>	<i>Bob</i>	<i>Giorgio</i>	<i>Zia</i>
<i>Sementa</i>	<i>Hamman</i>	<i>Duboin</i>	
Pass	1♠	Pass	2♦*
Pass	2♥	Pass	3♦*
Pass	4♣*	Pass	4♥*
Pass	4NT*	Pass	5♥*
Pass	6♦*	All Pass	

- 2♦ Forcing to game, so that
- 3♦ was also forcing, so that
- 4♣/♥ showed a control (ace or king, void or singleton) with diamonds agreed, enabling
- 4NT to ask for key cards, of which 5♥ showed two – in this case the ♦AK – without ♦Q, so that
- 6♦ was bid without guarantees

I say lucky because our system didn't allow us to explore for the important ♦Q at a low enough level to stay out of slam if we didn't have it. We didn't have it, but we bid the slam anyway, and when I had no reason to do other than to play diamonds from the top (a fractionally superior line to the finesse), we made our slam for 1390.

At the other table:

West	North	East	South
<i>Eric</i>	<i>Lorenzo</i>	<i>Jeff</i>	<i>Alfredo</i>
<i>Rodwell</i>	<i>Lauria</i>	<i>Meckstroth</i>	<i>Versace</i>
Pass	1♠	Pass	2♦
Pass	2NT*	Pass	3♦
Pass	4♣*	Dble	Pass
Pass	4♥*	Pass	5♦
All Pass			

- 2NT Artificial, various hand types
- 4♣/♥ Showing a control, agreeing diamonds

The double by Meckstroth holding the ♣AK107 changed the tempo of the auction. Meck is a big believer (as am I) in doubling to help direct the lead. There are many experts who would disagree. The double here gave the opponents room; South denied first-round control in clubs and North got his hand off his chest with another control bid, but that worked in a strange way for us. South now felt that he had described his hand and signed off.

I didn't know it at the time, but this was practically the end of the match.

The remaining deals were relatively tame, although I did remind myself to take extra care to avoid the dreaded "last hand syndrome" – where a player, in his rush to compare results, blows the match by not concentrating on the last hand.

Emerging apprehensively from the playing area, we were greeted by beaming teammates and our coach, Eric "Kokes" Kokish: "Well done guys, we did it!"

It had been a long journey from the early games in Karachi, Pakistan, across continents and filled with near misses and disappointments, but at this moment, I knew it had been worth it all. I could finally hold the Bermuda Bowl, the greatest prize in the game.

Later, while talking to Alfredo Versace, who had been in my seat in the other room – I learned that an almost identical auction produced a 6♥ doubled contract there as well, with the same lead and result! “Can you please tell that crazy partner of mine, Lorenzo, that when I double a diamond cuebid and then double 6♥, I want a diamond lead?”

I certainly had no intention of saying that to Lorenzo, let alone to Bob Hamman, who is a very big guy capable of squashing both Versace and myself in one of his huge hands. Besides, the champagne corks were popping.

The Brazilians are in a class of their own when it comes to celebrating, so the party went on late into the night. Watching Rodwell dance the samba was worth the price of admission. For Bob, Nick Nickell and Meckwell it was one of many wins, but for Ralph Katz and me, newcomers to the team, it was an unforgettable first.

My brother’s words echoed through time: “If you’re going to be a full-time bridge player, be the best.” With this Bermuda Bowl victory, I could honestly say that I was. At the awards ceremony, our team stood shoulder to shoulder as the official draped the gold medal around each of us in turn. When my turn came, I held it with pride.

If I have to be honest, I won’t say there was a piece of dust in my eye.

2

Home Sweet Home

The flight home from Sao Paolo to London takes 15 hours. Usually, long flights are boring, but this time I was excited and happy, not because of the victory, but because like any doting father who had been away from his young children for two weeks, I was terribly missing my sons Zain and Rafi.

You might think a 15-hour flight at 40,000 feet after an arduous tournament, added to a couple of over-full glasses of the best British Airways claret, are enough to send anyone to sleep. But “anyone” is not a bridge player. Hamlet may have said, “to sleep, perchance to dream,” but that doesn’t always work for us bridge players; we dream perchance to sleep! We all know how, at the end of the day, our minds spin endlessly in a whirlpool of hands swirling around mercilessly in our semiconscious. And so, it was with me on this night as the plane headed homeward.

My thoughts drifted back to the memories of my long journey: at 21, a qualified accountant (CPA) headed to a career in the family business, but diverted inescapably into the life of a vagabond card player, endlessly traversing the globe, almost escaping from the real world.

The sea of reminiscence is a fickle friend. While one moment it rages fierce and furious, at others it can be as clear and calm as a mountain stream.

That night, it was the latter. Gentle ripples inside my subconscious trickled back the more soothing memories of this journey of mine, while the steady drone of the plane lulled me into a state of half sleep.

Recollections crisscross with no respect for the order of time; one moment they are of 20 years before, the next moment they jump years, to days just past.

***Bridge, A Love Story* is the compelling memoir of Zia Mahmood and his passion for the greatest game ever invented.**

Zia unlocks his personal bridge vault to share the secrets to his remarkable and enduring success for over 50 years. Fast-paced, irreverent, humourous and instructive, this book is for all levels, from beginner to super-expert.

Join him as he travels the world playing mega high-stakes games in exclusive clubs as well as under the spotlight at international tournaments.

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- **Why is bridge “sexy”?**
- **How did the rampant cheating scandals wreak havoc on the game?**

If you enjoyed Zia’s best-seller, *Bridge My Way* which Omar Sharif called “Simply the best bridge book ever written,” you won’t be able to put this down.

Zia is one of a kind and so is his story.

“Reading *Bridge My Way* as a teenager, I fell madly in love with the game. Now in my fifties, *Bridge, A Love Story* brings back the same passion. In both books, Zia vividly explains why bridge is so much more than just a game; it’s life.”

– Boye Brogeland, World Champion

“In his elegant and literary style, Zia shares intimate details of his life as a professional bridge player. He immediately captures the interest of a wide range of players, from world champions to casual participants, as he brings to life the details of his adventures. You’ll love this book. It’s personal and insightful.”

– Audrey Grant, Acclaimed Bridge Teacher

“Zia is a once-in-a-generation bridge player. He’s one of my favourite partners; when I play with him, I don’t have to play against him. He has more charisma and style than any other player on the planet. You’ll find many of Zia’s secrets in this terrific book.”

– Jeff Meckstroth, World Champion

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