

From the author of "I Shot My Bridge Partner"

MURDER AT

THE

BRIDGE

TABLE

The first book
in the classic
Bridge Mystery series

or,
*"How To
Improve Your
Duplicate Score
Overnight"*



Matthew Granovetter

MURDER AT THE BRIDGE TABLE



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Master Point Press

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This is a work of fiction. Except for Roth, Zia, the Mitchells and my wife, all the characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to real people or events is purely coincidental.

***If you like this book, don't miss
'I Shot My Bridge Partner'
also by Matthew Granovetter***

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FOREWORD

(TO THE FIRST EDITION)



The notion of a murder at the bridge table usually makes people smile. Although the thought of committing such a violent act over something so casual as a card game is funny, it is not unrealistic. Bridge players know how emotionally distraught they can become over a misplayed hand or a horrible bid.

Partners that hope for longevity require both a cool disposition and consistently accurate card play. Quite frankly, they are usually doomed from the start. I have said goodbye to over a dozen 'long-time' partners. The hardest element in such an affair is finding the appropriate technique. One way to end a partnership, like a marriage, is to simply state you want a divorce. This is a rather unpleasant business. Guilty feelings linger and sad remembrances, such as old convention cards, pop up when you clean out drawers. A more efficient way of ending a partnership is murder, which at least has the merit of sparing your ex-partner's feelings.

The most famous bridge murder case is well documented. It occurred in Kansas City, 1931, and involved the Bennetts, a husband and wife playing in a 'friendly' home game. Unable to cope with his last misplay in a four spade contract, Mrs. Bennett called Mr. Bennett 'a bum bridge player' for the umpteenth time that evening. He reached over and slapped her, the game broke up, and

Mrs. Bennett slipped into the bedroom, emerged with a pistol and shot her partner twice through the heart. At the trial (in which she was acquitted for reasons of temporary insanity), bridge experts testified that her husband's pitiful performance that evening would be ample cause to drive a partner crazy. The momentary madness which infects bridge players occurs frequently at rubber bridge and duplicate; and though it rarely results in murder, it often terminates marriages and close friendships (when such couples dare to form bridge partnerships).

I shall never forget my first experience with bridge violence. I was fourteen years old and was playing in the Asbury Park Individual, a duplicate tournament that required each player to partner every other. While I was declaring a hand there was a piercing shriek. It came from two sections away. Some lunatic was standing on top of the table, a chair raised above his head. He was swinging it, attempting to bring it down hard upon his partner's head. The madman was restrained of course, and play resumed briskly. Later we learned that the lunatic was a local clergyman, and his partner had merely pulled a penalty double.

Within the last two years the bridge world has seen vile crimes committed upon three well-known players. One was a kidnapping and two were murders. The most publicized incident was the Los Angeles murder of Barry Crane, (then) the leading ACBL master-point holder of all time. He was killed in his home, and to this date the crime remains unsolved. There is no reason to connect the murder with his bridge career; however, the lack of clues certainly leaves bridge as a possible motive. It is not unusual for even the best bridge players to annoy an opponent, upset their partner, or create jealousy by choosing to play with one person rather than another.

If even a good bridge player can do things which cause tempers to flare, one can imagine the extreme emotions that can be provoked by a bad bridge player. As a writer, I imagined such a situation occurring within my circle of friends. The story told in these pages involves Victor and Jacqui Mitchell, Zia Mahmood, Alvin Roth, and my wife, Pamela Granovetter, who all talk, act, and discuss bridge as I know they do in real life. Vic Mitchell was in fact the manager of the Bucket O' Blood Bridge and Chess Club located in Times Square, New York, during World War II. It later moved

uptown to the Embassy Hotel. In the book, I meet him for the first time in 1983, while in fact, I've known him since 1975. The bridge hands that appear are also 'true' in spirit — hands similar to these have actually been played, discussed, and analyzed. The bridge lessons are as true as one could want in a book designed to help improve your game.

This brings us to the question: what is this book, a self-help duplicate bridge book or a mystery-detective novel? The answer is 'both'. In the past, there have been novels set in the background of bridge tournaments with a few bridge hands sprinkled in. This book is more like a 'how to improve your duplicate game' with a murder mystery thrown in! The amateur sleuth story line is designed to parallel the bridge lessons (the game is certainly a mystery to most of us). After a few chapters, my investigation of the murder of a bridge player in 1942 begins to intertwine with the lessons. The bridge hands and story become more and more tied together until finally a novel emerges.

Many of my experiences in life have contributed to the make-up of this book. The real-life characters have been dear friends and mentors. Victor Mitchell* has been my friend and adopted godfather for twelve years. His wife Jacqui literally fed me through college when I returned to school at the age of twenty-seven. Al Roth taught me much more about bridge than I ever admitted. Zia Mahmood introduced me to realms of bridge thought I never dreamed of before. My wife, Pamela, is my editor here and co-writer at other times. She crosses out the worst, and helps me correct the best in both my writings and my life.

Two friends who have enriched my life but did not fit into this particular plot (watch out next time) are Jimmy Cayne, a silent, but important partner in Granovetter Books, and Nick Lyons, formerly a professor of creative writing at Hunter College. While I'm at it, I'll thank my parents too. My mother tried her best to get me to write early in life and eventually succeeded. My dad died when I was eighteen, but he played a vital role by teaching me both to pursue the things I love most, and also to play a decent game of bridge.

Matthew Granovetter
May, 1988

* Victor Mitchell passed away in 1994. M.G.



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INTRODUCTION



Overnight success

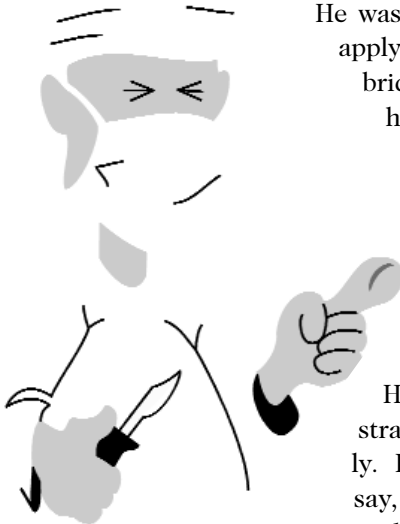
No one can become a success at bridge overnight. In the chess world we encounter eleven-year-old prodigies because chess is an open game — all the pieces are in view and strategies may be calculated by any capable mind (or computer). Good bridge players usually do not come into their own for at least five to ten years. This is because bridge is a closed game — the pieces (the cards) are hidden (75% during the bidding, 50% during the play). Thus, other elements besides pure analysis are crucial — deduction, psychology, imagination, and the adult attribute of poise.

Although overnight success is almost inconceivable, overnight improvement is easy. Most players are taught bad habits by well-meaning partners. This book is intended to do away with illogical conventions and popular misconceptions. Although you may not be a great bridge player by the time you finish this book, I guarantee you will become a vastly improved player.

What does it take to become a 'bridge player'?

'About ten years of losing your money in a tough rubber bridge game.' This is the answer Alvin Roth would give. The bridge world's greatest theorist, Al has always thought that unless your bad bids cost money you can never learn to stop making them. (One famous psychiatrist agreed with Al, and compared learning bridge to learning to drive a car. Can you imagine how bad one's driving would be if accidents merely cost matchpoints rather than higher insurance premiums and lives?) Still, not all of us have the time or money to spend at rubber bridge clubs. Presumably, if you have bought this book you take your bridge seriously, whether you play for pleasure on a train, for matchpoints at the local duplicate, or for money at the club. As with any other endeavor, you should be able to become a better bridge player through reading and practice.

Are we born with bridge talent or is it something that can be achieved through hard work? The answer is 'both'. The talent to analyze and deduce within a given time period is certainly a natural thing — some are better at it than others. Some of us must work harder at the table to achieve the same results as those lucky people born with 'card sense'.



I used to know a respected surgeon whose hands shook at the bridge table.

He was a brilliant man who could not apply his high IQ to the game of bridge. Through constant practice he was able to become a good player, but not an expert. At the same club where he played, a young backgammon expert switched his attention to bridge with stunning success. He was deemed a 'natural' by his peers.

He counted the hands without strain and played his cards smoothly. But if I told you his name, you'd say, "Who?" The reason he never realized his full potential was laziness. He didn't care to discuss a

bridge hand or study a better approach. He only wanted to play bridge if he could do it without a lot of effort.

The point is this: whether you are a natural or not, you will benefit from a solid foundation. Your future success at the bridge table will always be proportional to the extent of work you are prepared to put into the game.

Constant thought processes on defense

Anyone can become a decent bidder, and most people can become adequate declarers. However it is the person who defends well, that is considered to be ‘a bridge player’.

During the course of an evening’s duplicate, you will find yourself on defense roughly 50% of the time. It is therefore important to keep the mental juices flowing from trick one to trick thirteen. Average players stop and think on defense only when they have a problem — the good bridge player thinks constantly.

What does this mean? It means that he is ready to play a card in tempo without giving away his hand by hesitating. He can duck an ace smoothly if he has to. But more importantly, by thinking constantly he alleviates mental strain when problems arise late in the hand. At trick twelve, when he has to discard correctly, he doesn’t have to sit there with his head in his hands trying to remember who played which card. He remembers the original fifty-two cards and now makes the logical discard in the same way that an actor remembers his lines late in a play — they simply come to him because he’s been following the scene throughout.

When dummy comes down, I count. I count points and figure out from the bidding how many points my partner is likely to hold. I count distribution, and with the bidding reviewed in my mind, I try to piece together declarer’s shape as quickly as possible. Although at first it might seem like hard work, relentless thought on defense will open up a whole new world. You’ll begin to form mental pictures of all the cards around the table. Bridge hands will become double-dummy problems rather than intangible mysteries. You’ll take a giant step toward becoming a ‘bridge player’ — someone who plays the game rather than someone who plays at the game.

A BRIDGE COURSE AND MURDER MYSTERY ALL IN ONE

'My husband writes a great book to improve people's duplicate game. But it isn't enough for him to give away all our bridge secrets for only a few dollars. Next, he sticks me and half of our friends into a murder plot. Then he adds a mysterious blonde and winds up spending the night with her in Zia's hotel room! Wait till he gets home...'

— Pamela Granovetter

Praise for *'Murder at the Bridge Table'*:

- *'Good fun'* Alan Truscott, New York Times
- *'An enduring masterpiece'* Frank Stewart, ACBL Bulletin
- *'How refreshing to have a textbook included in a mystery'*
Ted Horning, Toronto Star
- *'A fascinating mystery novel, and an excellent instructor'*
Michael Cassel, Cleveland Plain Dealer.



MATTHEW GRANOVETTER (matt@bridgetoday.com) is a professional bridge player, writer, and teacher, who has won three North American Championship titles. Among his many books are the three titles in the *Bridge Mystery* series, as well as *Forgive Me Partner*, and *A Switch in Time*, which were co-authored by his wife Pamela. Matthew and Pamela are the publishers of *Bridge Today* magazine, and also the directors of an Internet bridge school. They live in Israel with their three children.

