

Victor Mollo

SWINGS and ARROWS



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Collected and Edited by Mark Horton



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Foreword

Tony Priday was one of Britain's leading players in the 1960s and 1970s, winning more than twenty national titles, including seven Gold Cups. Formerly the bridge correspondent for the Sunday Telegraph, he won a Bermuda Bowl bronze medal in 1962, and a silver (as non-playing captain) in 1987. Playing with Nico Gardener, Priday won the prestigious Sunday Times invitational pairs event in 1970.

I first met Victor Mollo in the late 1940s walking across St. James Park in London. He was returning home after a losing session of rubber bridge at Crockfords and, as a young puppy, I was flattered to be spoken to by the great man.

Short, dapper, *bon viveur*, energetic and erudite, Victor told me that he didn't mind losing as it gave him hands and inspiration for the animal book he was thinking of writing. 'Not those damned animals again', Terence Reese used to say, but he was in a big minority for the Hideous Hog and the Rueful Rabbit became much loved characters, even in the United States. One tends to forget that Victor also wrote many diverse books and that *Card Play Technique**, written with Nico Gardener, was the favorite book for all beginner, average and advanced players throughout the 1950s to 1970s.

Victor was a superb linguist and his services were used by the British Government throughout the Second World War. He was also an excellent and persistent negotiator, as my late wife and I discovered when we were doing a television series on bridge in the 1980s, with Victor and Irving Rose. As well as keeping us entertained during the endless breaks in filming, Victor managed on our behalf to uplift a most reasonable stipend from the BBC by half as much again.

If Victor did have an Achilles heel, it was his height. Every year on Boxing Day my wife and I were invited to dine with the Molloes.

* Now, happily, in print once again ([Master Point Press, 2013](#)).

Squirrel, Victor's wife, was a delightful person and kept an excellent table. Victor, of course, was a wine connoisseur and was never happier than to have his guests seated at the table so that he could walk round and explain and pour the wine. 'It's the only way I can ever feel taller than my friends,' he would say with a wry grin.

Victor was fun to be with and an industrious and imaginative writer. I feel sure that new readers will be amused by his stories about the Menagerie and old readers will be delighted to renew old acquaintance.

Tony Priday
Marbella, Spain
July 2013

Contents

THE TAIL OF THE ANGEL	9
THE STARS SPEAK	13
PAPA'S UNLUCKY DAY	21
THE RABBIT PLAYS WITH THE ODDS	31
SIMPLE ARITHMETIC	35
TECHNIQUE OF WRONGDOING	39
UNEQUAL COMBAT	49
MAY THE BEST MAN WIN	57
THE RABBIT THWARTS DESTINY	65
AN UNLUCKY HAND	69
THE HOG SPLITS HIS ACES	75
SWINGS AND ARROWS OF OUTRAGEOUS FORTUNE	81
A MIXED PERFORMANCE IN THE MENAGERIE	87
UU AND NON UU	93
THE RABBIT COUNTER-ATTACKS	101
THE QUALITY OF BAD LUCK	109
SIGNALING TO DECLARER	117
LIGHTNING STRIKES TWICE	123
PARTNERSHIP UNDERSTANDING	129
THE WOES OF THE WALRUS	135
THE VIXEN'S KITTENISH WAYS	141
SPOTLIGHT ON KARAPET	147
THE RABBIT PLAYS LIKE A CHAMP	153

SMILE OF CONTENTMENT	161
'TIS BETTER TO BE FEARED THAN LIKED	167
MISTAKES, LAPSES AND REGRETS	175
IN DEFENSE OF THE RESULTS MERCHANT	181
PAPA'S BLACK DAY	187
JUSTICE	195
THE RABBIT ASSERTS HIS RIGHTS	201
KARAPET'S LUCKY DAY	209



The Tail of the Angel



(This story uses some of the text from ‘The Horned Angel’ — You Need Never Lose at Bridge — but the deals are different. Ed.)

‘Those dreary problems!’ said Themistocles Papadopoulos disdainfully. ‘South to make twelve tricks against the best defense. The best, indeed! Why, the silliest computer can do that if you feed it with points and peters and facts and figures. How does South get home against the worst defense? That’s what I want to know.’

We were chatting over dinner at the Unicorn. Or rather the Hog was chatting and we were listening. Papa’s chance came with the Hog’s second helping of lobster salad and he seized it with both hands, gesticulating eloquently with left and right to drive home his arguments.

‘Here you are,’ he said, flourishing the wine list. Under the liqueurs he had put down these North-South hands:

♠ 9 7 6
 ♥ 4 3
 ♦ A K 3 2
 ♣ A Q J 8



♠ A K Q J
 ♥ K J 5
 ♦ J 10 4
 ♣ K 9 3

‘As you can see,’ went on Papa, ‘the bidding is quite straightforward.’ Boldly inscribed and extending into the Minerals as far down as Perrier, was this sequence:

West	North	East	South
			1♠
pass	2♣	pass	3NT
pass	5NT	pass	6♦
pass	6♠	pass	6NT
all pass			

‘What exactly does your six diamonds mean? Is it Monaco?’ asked Oscar the Owl, Senior Kibitzer at the Griffins.

‘Routine inhibitory bid,’ explained the Greek with a superior smile. ‘I want to discourage a diamond lead and since partner can’t pass, I shall end up in six notrump anyway, gaining on the swings without losing on the roundabouts. Elementary, you know. Just kindergarten stuff.’

‘In fact, a Papa-Papa game,’ observed Peregrine the Penguin, Oscar’s opposite number at the Unicorn.

‘And now,’ continued Papa, ‘kindly tell me how you propose to make twelve tricks — against the best defense, needless to say.’

‘The lead?’ we all asked in unison.

‘The ten of clubs and alternatively the nine of hearts. First try the club.’

We agreed at once on the diamond finesse. If it succeeded and the suit broke three-three, our troubles would be over. If it split four-two

we might still get home with a heart trick, so long as the same defender did not hold the ace and the long diamond.

‘Now let’s have the nine of hearts,’ said Papa, turning to the Penguin. ‘East plays the seven and declarer’s jack wins.’

‘I cash my eight black winners...’ began the Penguin, when a loud, angry splutter interrupted him. The Hideous Hog had been wrenching open a claw and I thought for a moment that his magnificent concentration was broken. But as he snarled he kept his eyes firmly on the crustacean, and having made his meaning plain, he continued, unperturbed, to winkle out the soft pink flesh.

‘H.H. is quite right’ observed Oscar, getting the message of the snarl and splutter. ‘You can’t cash the spades before the clubs for then you would end up in dummy. And you can’t start with the clubs for there is nothing you can throw on the fourth round. If you part with the seemingly useless four of diamonds, the suit will be blocked and the finesse would no longer help.

‘But, of course,’ went on Oscar, ‘the lead of the nine of hearts transforms the situation. It clearly marks East with the ace, so the king will be the twelfth trick and there is no need to finesse anything. No,’ he added, ‘I can’t see any particular snags.’

‘Quite right,’ agreed Papa. ‘All very simple. And now please forget about the best defense. What would you do, what would you tell your computer, if it had to cope with, say, the Rueful Rabbit?’

Before we could so much as wince at the thought of such cruelty to a defenseless machine, Papa was once more in full flood.

‘I was declarer,’ announced the Greek, ‘and naturally I did not finesse the diamond. Even against the worst player in the world one avoids unnecessary finesses, and the Rabbit claims to be only the second worst. Of course, the king of hearts stood out a mile as the twelfth trick. It so happens that the diamond finesse would have come off and the suit split three-three. Against decent defense, against any sane opening, the slam could not be lost. Against the worst,’ he concluded after a pause, dropping his voice dramatically, ‘I went three down. Against a slam contract, that Rabbit led the fourth highest from an ace-queen suit!’

This was the hand:

	♠ 9 7 6				
	♥ 4 3				
	♦ A K 3 2				
	♣ A Q J 8				
♠ 10 8 5 ♥ A Q 10 9 6 ♦ Q 9 5 ♣ 10 2	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 100px; height: 100px; margin: auto;"> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">N</td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W E</td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">S</td></tr> </table>	N	W E	S	♠ 4 3 2 ♥ 8 7 2 ♦ 8 7 6 ♣ 7 6 5 4
N					
W E					
S					
	♠ A K Q J				
	♥ K J 5				
	♦ J 10 4				
	♣ K 9 3				

Opening lead: ♥9

I recognized the hand and I recalled someone asking R.R. at the time what had possessed him to make such an extraordinary lead against a slam.

‘It was the only unbid suit,’ he had replied defensively.

‘But the nine...’

‘That,’ explained the Rabbit proudly, ‘is something I have learned from the Hog. One should never make a true lead against a slam. It helps declarer more than partner.’

‘But the nine of hearts was the truest lead imaginable,’ protested a kibitzer.

‘That’s just it,’ agreed R.R. ‘and since Papa would never do such a thing himself, he would not expect it of anyone else. Not even of me. Nothing, says the Hog, deceives like the truth and the best defense is often the worst. Or is it the other way round?’

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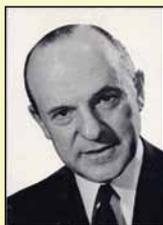
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'Not those damned animals again!'

Just about every bridge player over forty has read Victor Mollo's *Bridge in the Menagerie*, a book that is on any list of the all-time top ten on the game. Towards the end of his life, Mollo continued to write stories about the same well-loved characters (the Hideous Hog, the Rueful Rabbit, Oscar the Owl, and the rest), but they appeared in various magazines around the world, and if you weren't a subscriber, you didn't get to read them.

This is the third Master Point Press collection of these lost Menagerie gems, collected for the first time in book form (following *The Hog Takes Precision* in 2011 and *Diamonds Are the Hog's Best Friend* in 2013).



VICTOR MOLLO (1909-1987) was one of the best-loved authors ever to write about bridge. He wrote many excellent how-to books on the game (including the classic *Card Play Technique*, with Nico Gardener) but it is as a humorist, and the author of *Bridge in the Menagerie* and its sequels, that he is best remembered.



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