

# CARD PLAY

OR THE ART OF BEING LUCKY

# TECHNIQUE

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REVISED EDITION



VICTOR MOLLO & NICO GARDENER

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## FOREWORD TO THIS EDITION

In many ways Nico Gardener (my father) and Victor Mollo had a symbiotic relationship.

Nico was born Nico Nehemi Goldinger, in Riga, Latvia in 1908 and Victor was born a year later in St. Petersburg, Russia. Apart from bridge they had an amazing amount in common: their first language was Russian (my father also spoke Latvian as a child), both were polyglots (Victor spoke three languages and my father seven), both were Jewish, both had fled their homeland and both were married to my mother.

Victor had the easier early life. He told my father about his family's audacious escape from the Russian Revolution — at one point on a whole train his wealthy mother had bought to expedite their departure to England. Thus he came to be educated at Brighton College and the London School of Economics.

My father was forced to leave four countries as a youth. At the age of eleven, upon the death of his mother, he took his elderly grandparents and forsook the war and deprivation in Latvia for the Ukraine, only to have to flee pogroms there for Moscow, where he buried his grandparents. The Russian revolution forced him yet again to decamp and, having learned that his father, formerly in the Russian Army, was remarried and living in Berlin, he went there. He attended Berlin University but fled the rise of Nazism and ended up in England.

Victor and Nico met in England in the 1930s.

Victor's skill with languages gained him a job at the BBC where he worked until he retired as editor of the European Services. He continued to write books and newspaper columns on bridge for the next twenty years. He told me that he was greatly saddened and frustrated not to be allowed, as a White Russian, to work in the war effort — he saw himself in MI5 or MI6 working as a master spy.

Victor's marriage to Pat lasted seven years before they divorced. It was an amicable separation. He found love again with his Jeanne (known as 'Squirrel'), whom he met at the BBC, while Pat did the same with my father — and I grew up surrounded by them all.

Nico and Victor both had sharp minds, wit, humor, an elegant 'old world' charm and were both consummate teasers. They had pet names for each other. To Victor my father was 'The Cat', perhaps an allusion to my father's early ballet training. My father called Victor the 'Subcarpetian' (under the carpet), referring to his lack of height. Not sure Victor was that pleased with it.

Whilst Victor was married to Pat, she bought a watch from Harrods that never worked. He returned the watch to the store with this note: 'This timepiece, throughout its inglorious career, has rushed forward at a giddy pace and lagged languishley (*sic*) behind but has always maintained its lofty contempt for time!' Harrods rewarded him with a new watch and a case of wine.

When my father suffered a heart attack Victor rushed to his bedside, whereupon my father said, “Victor, you smoke more than I do, you drink more than I do, you eat more than I do, how come *I* had the heart attack?” A week later, after Victor had his own heart attack, they were convalescing together in Brighton.



*Nico Gardener*

My father was often to be seen sporting a clove carnation or a red rose in his lapel, so much so that in the after-dinner speech at a Camrose event in Belfast they talked about the British team traveling Aer Lingus — all except Nico, who came Interflora! My father was very amused.

My father worked for P & O, lecturing on bridge on board their liners, for over forty years. One of the greatest moments for him came when, in his late seventies, the ship he was on docked in Riga, his first time back there since he had left as a child. The Russian passport officials came on board and when they saw my father's place of birth in his passport, three of them stood up and hugged him saying, “Welcome back, comrade!”



*Rixi Markus, Boris Schapiro, Fritz Gordon and Nico receive the trophy for winning the World Mixed Teams in Cannes 1962.*

As far as bridge careers go, my father was a competitive player *par excellence*, playing board after board and rarely faltering. Victor did not enjoy competitive bridge, preferring the cut and thrust of the rubber bridge table, though he did deign to partner my father once a year in the Devonshire Cup, representing the RAC. My father founded the London School of Bridge and became as fine a teacher as he was a player. Victor used his skills — along with his wit he had a deft turn of phrase — to write his books. They ended up collaborating on two, *Card Play Technique* in 1955, followed in 1956 by *Bridge for Beginners*, which sold over half a million copies. My father gave me a copy of *Card Play Technique* when I was fifteen and told me how lucky I was to have safety plays at my fingertips, when he and Victor had had to work them out. It is an amazing book.

My father told me the story of how a lady, clutching a copy of this book, asked him for his autograph.

“You are Mr. Mollo?” she enquired anxiously.

“No, I am the other one...”

“Oh well,” she said, “I suppose that will have to do... Sign!”

Which I am sure he did with his usual flourish!

Nicola P. Smith, M.B.E  
London, June 2012



Nico and Nicola Gardener

# INTRODUCTION TO THE FIRST EDITION, 1955

Fortune only smiles on the brave. She positively beams on the skillful, versed in the technique of wooing her. For to be lucky is an art which can be mastered like any other. You, dear reader, can hold much better cards than you do at present, not by dealing yourself more aces and kings, but by getting a higher return from your existing ration. Persuade the cards to work harder for you than they do for your opponents. Therein lies the formula of success. The purpose of this book is to point the way, to enlist on your side, whether you be declarer or defender, fifty-two sturdy and loyal allies.

Can it be done? That bridge lends itself to the written form is shown by a cascade of volumes on both sides of the Atlantic. But can the expert pass on his secrets? Can he impart his judgment, his flair, his sense of timing? We say that he can, because we have put it to the test and we have seen it work, at the card table, where it matters.

The approach to expert card play in the pages that follow is based on the Advanced Correspondence Course of the London School of Bridge. Through this medium many players have been introduced already to the technique of the masters. Their cards, of course, have improved out of all knowledge, for they have learned the 'lucky' plays. What is more, they know just *why* they are lucky and in that lies the guarantee of continued good fortune.

Does a mischievous gremlin haunt you at the table, bewitching every finesse, spoiling the distribution of every suit? If so, you can exchange him for a friendly leprechaun. He will sit behind you, averting bad breaks, warning you against impending ruffs and inspiring the luckiest leads. Better still, if you propitiate him, he will pierce the linen curtain and reveal to you the holdings of your opponents. The art of card-reading, 'seeing' the hands of the other players, is one of the secrets of being lucky. That is why we expound it in some detail, and engage the ever-friendly leprechaun to assist you.

Complex coups, which happen once a decade or so, receive little prominence in these pages. Our concern is essentially with the plays that win team games and bring in the matchpoints, not with the spectacular deals which sometimes astound, but rarely instruct. We have endeavored to describe all the moves in the thrust and parry of the eternal struggle between declarer and defense. But in every chapter, and in the exercises which follow, the spotlight is on everyday situations and on how to handle them. Leaving double-dummy problems in the shade, keeping the focus on the real, vibrant deals that recur again and again, we seek to make theory the handmaiden of practice.



Cards have their magic. We pass on the incantations and ask you to weave the spells. Our success will be measured by yours.

*Victor Mollo  
Nico Gardener*

## *The Exercises*

Weaving their pattern through this book, dummy play and defense counter one another in alternating chapters. Each one is followed by Exercises. Their purpose is not to tease or puzzle the reader, but to provide him with material for practice. As the book unfolds, the plays and defenses grow more advanced, and the Exercises with them. But easy or difficult, every example is designed to illustrate a method, to bring out a specific point in the mechanics of card play. No problems are intended, no riddles and no mystification. For success in bridge lies not in solving problems, but in finding none. In the manifold situations to which the distribution of the deck lends itself, no element of mystery is present, only a challenge to technique. Every card combination carries within itself the key to its solution. Approached with the right password, it will yield it readily enough. The object of the Exercises is to let the reader pick up the key for himself. It may grate a trifle, at first, but as he learns the secrets of the lock, he will find that it fits every time.

# INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW EDITION

When Nicola Smith and Su King (Squirrel's granddaughter) asked me to edit this new edition of *Card Play Technique*, I was immediately transported back to my embryonic bridge-playing days in Nottingham. I had traveled to a tournament in Derby and on one deal I held (amongst other cards) ♦AQ6. Partner led this suit against 3NT and dummy had ♦85. I had the wit to put in the queen and declarer won with the king. When my partner (Scotland's Ron McEwan) regained the lead, he played another diamond and we were able to cash four tricks in the suit and defeat the contract. Had the tournament taken place a day earlier I would doubtless have put up the ace, enabling declarer to hold up the king and then (with a different line of play) make nine tricks. Luckily, the night before I had read a chapter in *Card Play Technique* that described this elementary defensive stratagem.

It was a delight to work through the book, because it is a classic introduction to the basic techniques that must be mastered if you are to move on to more advanced concepts and possibly become an expert player. Indeed, at whatever level you play this most complex of card games, it is never a bad idea to remind yourself of the fundamentals.

For the most part the text remains as it was originally written (it bears the inimitable stamp of Victor Mollo); it is as fresh and amusing as it was when first published. The deals and examples reflect the analytical clarity with which Nico Gardener was able to approach this demanding subject, and only a few required any correction or additional analysis. However, in this edition the spot cards are no longer represented by 'x' in all the diagrams, but have been assigned actual values. Bidding is a not a major feature of a book on card play, but nevertheless I felt the auctions should be modernized. Except where noted, the examples now employ a Standard system, with five-card majors, 15-17 notrump and Jacoby transfers. I have also added a glossary which explains the bridge language that is an essential part of the book.

Victor and Nico worked out the simplest and clearest way to convey the technique of bridge. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I did editing it.

Mark Horton  
Bath  
June 2012

DUMMY PLAY  
~ CHAPTER I ~  
ON NOT PLAYING HIGH CARDS

By tradition, every bridge book opens with a chapter on the simple finesse. Every reader, of course, knows all about it, and seeing the familiar diagram with the ace-queen over the king, wishes that he had stuck to horror comics. Why, then, do authors, raring to get their teeth into Smother Plays and Trump Coups, expend their pent-up energies on the seemingly obvious? Is it lack of appreciation for the erudition of the average reader? Perish the thought — and the authors.

Naturally, every reader knows how to take a finesse. He knows, too, that it is an even-money chance, and that if it fails, it is just another case of bad luck. But does he know, also, how to convert a fifty-fifty bet into an odds-on proposition? Does he know, in fact, how to load the cards in his favor?

The essence of every finesse is *hope* — the hope that a missing card is where you want it to be, under a card above it. That, too, is the basis of some of the most complex plays in bridge. And in both situations, the simple and the complex, technique consists in backing the right hope, at the right time, against the right defender.

Since one finesse is too simple, let us start with two.

♥ A J 9  
□  
♥ 6 5 3

The play may not be very difficult, but the reasons behind it are not always apparent. The finesse against the ten must be taken *first*. If the nine falls to the king or queen, a second finesse develops against the other court card. But the order of precedence cannot be reversed, because the second finesse does not exist until the first, against the ten, has succeeded.

In executing the double maneuver, declarer assumes *split honors* — the queen in one hand, the king in the other. To do that, when there is no indication, is a fundamental of good play. It is a case of playing with the odds, in other words, of being ‘lucky’. Simpler still, on the face of it, is this very humdrum position:

♠ J 9 2  
  
♠ Q 4 3

To make one trick, declarer finesses against the ten, and half the time he succeeds. What is worse, the other half of the time he fails, and that is not quite good enough.

Of course, the ideal is to do nothing at all, until opponents open the suit. Then one trick is certain. But if we are driven to take the initiative, let us at least snatch some sort of advantage. It costs nothing to lead the two towards the queen. The next player may have a doubleton honor. Or the ten singleton. Or even — he may make a mistake. It all improves the chances, and if nothing materializes, there will still be time to finesse against the ten.

Just as a good player avoids committing his own high cards, so he should give his opponents every opportunity to commit theirs.

### *Playing Towards Honors*

This brings us to an important principle, which sometimes escapes identification until it is too late. To illustrate it in its simplest form, assume that you hold:

♠ K Q J 2  
  
♠ 5 4 3

With plenty of entries everywhere, what do you do to avoid losing more than one trick?

You play low *towards* the honors, twice and three times, if need be. What you do will make no difference if the suit breaks 3-3. You can't go wrong. And you will not escape the loss of two tricks if ♠A1076 lie over the honors. For then you can't do right. But correct play makes all the difference if the suit is divided 4-2 and the ace is under the honors. Then laying down the king is bound to cost a trick.

The rule is never to lead a high card when a small one will do. Don't *spend* an honor by laying it down. Lead a small card towards it, and towards honor sequences. Confronted by a diagram, there is little temptation to err, for the position is clear. But at the card table the inexperienced player must stop to think. The expert need not, for it is an instinct with him to economize his own high cards and to bypass those of his opponents.

Good players, however, have been known to mishandle this:

♠ K Q 5 2  
[ ]  
♠ J 6 3

Yet it is precisely the same idea as in the more obvious example above. Declarer ignores a 3-3 break, for then nothing matters, and hopes to avoid the loss of two tricks in the event of the more probable 4-2 split. (As you will see when you come to Chapter 9, with six cards of a suit outstanding, there is a 48% chance that they will be divided 4-2. A 3-3 break occurs only 36% of the time.) He leads a low card towards the ♠KQ52. If the ace does not come up, and the king wins, the process is repeated. Maybe the player sitting under the two honors holds the doubleton ace. Let him use it on a small card. Playing towards the jack will not work the same way, for should it hold the trick, declarer may still lose the king to a doubleton ace. The objective should be to come through that ace twice. Hence the play towards the two honors.

At no time is the need to conserve high cards more urgent than with:

♦ K 4 3 2  
[ ]  
♦ Q 7 6 5

The only hope of landing three tricks is to find a doubleton ace, locate the culprit and play through him. If you guess right and the king (or queen) wins, play low from both hands to the next trick — and hope that you bring down the ace. It must be bought for two spot cards, for that is all you can afford. The distribution you need is:

♦ A 9                      ♦ K 4 3 2                      ♦ J 10 8  
[ ]  
♦ Q 7 6 5

Or vice versa for the East-West hands.

Hope and guesswork are present again in this picture:

♥ J 5 3  
[ ]  
♥ A Q 4 2

You collect three tricks with your eyes shut if the suit breaks 3-3. And if you open your eyes, you may be able to do the same against a 4-2 split. Should the bidding or the play to previous tricks suggest that West owns the king, lead low towards the jack. If you

think that the king is more likely to be with East, play small towards the ♥AQ, finesse, and hope to bring the king down on the ace.

Apply the same principle to the common finesse:

♠ Q J 3 2  
 [ ]  
 ♠ A 10 6 5

If dummy has plenty of entries, play the two, just in case there is a singleton king under the ace. It is the sort of bad luck that a good player learns to avoid. With no further entry to dummy, you can't afford the premium on the insurance. The queen must be led, for if you hold the trick, you want to play from dummy once more.

♣ 9 6 5  
 [ ]  
 ♣ A Q 10 3

Assuming adequate entries, lead a small one, not the nine. Should the defender under the honors hold the bare ♣KJ, all four tricks can be made. But not if you play the nine. For if one defender holds the ♣KJ alone, the other must have the ♣8742. And if the nine is needlessly absorbed in the first three tricks, the eight will be top dog on the fourth.

### *A Finesse Takes Shape*

Some situations do not lend themselves to a finesse until the other side paves the way. The more missing links there are in a suit, the better it is to have it opened by the defenders. The reason is that, being last to play, declarer's side can practice the greater economy in high cards.

♥ A 10 5  
 [ ]  
 ♥ K 9 6

With this holding you can finesse nothing. But if the enemy makes the first move, a finesse position develops at once, and unless both the missing honors are in the wrong hand, with the partner of the player who first leads the suit, you are bound to win all three tricks.

♥ Q 8 4 2                      ♥ A 10 5                      ♥ J 7 3  
 [ ]  
 ♥ K 9 6

If West leads and East plays the jack, the king takes the first trick, and the finesse against the queen is taken on the next round. If the lead comes from East, South plays low, and the second round finesse is taken against the jack.

Here, again there is no finesse — not quite:

♣ Q 7 2  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 ♣ 10 9 3

If dummy's seven grew into the eight, South might make a trick by finessing against West's jack. As the cards are, it won't help even if the jack is in the right place. Declarer can do nothing but hope that the enemy will fire the first shot. Then a finesse position appears immediately and the prospects of winning a trick are no worse than fifty-fifty. If West leads, declarer plays low from dummy and hopes that the jack is not with East. Next time, he plays the ten and runs it, unless West covers. If East makes the first move, South plays low from his hand, and again a finesse position takes shape against the jack.

### *Ruffing Finesse*

The ruffing finesse is peculiar to suit contracts, because the mechanism hinges on the *control* power vested in trumps. A ruff does the work normally assigned to an ace. Here it is:

♠ A Q J 10  
 ♥ Q 9 6 3  
 ♦ 8 7 4  
 ♣ A 3

	N	
W		E
	S	

♠ 7  
 ♥ A K J 10 5  
 ♦ K 5 3  
 ♣ 9 7 4 2

West leads a trump against 4♥. As soon as East follows, you can be certain of ten tricks. Five trumps, the ace of clubs, one club ruff in dummy (maybe two), and three spades, make up the total. The only danger is that before you can set up the spades, a diamond may be played through your king. Don't let that happen. After drawing trumps, lay down the ♠A, then lead the queen. If the king does not go up, discard a diamond. Now you will have only one more diamond loser, because the lead will be with West.

Alternatively, if the opponents don't play the diamonds for you, you can discard the other two on the spades.

The singleton spade gives you control of the situation. It is almost as if you had it in your power to decide which of your opponents should hold the ♠K. For, of course, if the ♦K53 were in dummy, you would take a natural, not a ruffing finesse. It would be West, not East, you would try to keep out.

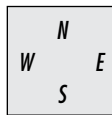
With a void, only a ruffing finesse is possible. Change the hand slightly and see what happens:

♠ A Q J 10

♥ Q 9 6 3

♦ K 5 3

♣ A 3



♠ —

♥ A K J 10 5

♦ 8 7 4 2

♣ 9 7 4 2

Much as you would like to keep West out of the lead, when that is impossible you are reduced to the traditional hope that the missing honor is where you want it. This time, with East.

A feature of the ruffing finesse is that declarer reverses the normal procedure. Instead of 'hoping' that a missing honor is under the one above it, he hopes that it is over it. And instead of covering, he ruffs.

When the queen is the missing link, this position arises:

♦ A K J 10



♦ 7 4

Declarer plays off the ace and king, exhausting his own holding in that suit. Then he leads the jack and runs it, unless East covers. In this case, declarer can play either opponent for the queen. His decision between the natural and the ruffing finesse will depend largely on which defender he is anxious to keep out of the lead.



## ~ SUMMARY ~

1. When two honors are missing, and there is no indication of where they are, declarer should play for *split honors*, assuming that each defender has one.
2. Wherever possible, avoid leading out high cards. Play towards honors and also towards honor sequences e.g. ♠QJ102 and ♥KQJ9.
3. A corollary to the above is that you should seek to lose your spot cards, not your honors or intermediates, to the top cards of the opponents.
4. The more chinks in your suit, the more urgent it is to conserve your honors and intermediates, and whenever possible, to wait till the suit is led by the opponents.
5. Sometimes a finesse position does not exist, but takes shape as soon as a suit has been led by defenders.
6. The characteristic of a ruffing finesse is that the missing honor is assumed to be over, not under, the card above it. The play depends on having a shortage in one hand opposite an honor combination in the other.
7. A singleton (or doubleton, if the queen is missing) enables declarer to choose between a natural and a ruffing finesse. With a void he is compelled to rely on the latter.

# ~ EXERCISES ~

Assuming adequate entries, how do you play the following combinations?

1.                      ♠ Q J 3 2  
                              
                            ♠ A 7 4

...to make three tricks.

2. Same as above, but no side entry to your hand.

3.                      ♥ Q 6 4  
                              
                            ♥ K 10 3

...to make two tricks.

4.                      ♦ A 4 3 2  
                              
                            ♦ Q 10 9 8

...to make three tricks.

5.                      ♣ A 4 3 2  
                              
                            ♣ Q 10 6 5

...to make three tricks.

6.                      ♠ Q 9 8  
                              
                            ♠ 10 7 4

...to make one trick.

7.

<p>♠ K 7 4</p> <p>♥ —</p> <p>♦ K J 9 5</p> <p>♣ A K Q 10 6 3</p>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: 60px; margin: 0 auto;"> <p style="margin: 0;">N</p> <p style="margin: 0;">W      E</p> <p style="margin: 0;">S</p> </div>	<p>♠ A 5 2</p> <p>♥ K Q J 10</p> <p>♦ 8 4</p> <p>♣ J 9 8 2</p>
--	---	--

Sitting West, you are in 5♣. A spade is led. What is your line of play?

8.

<p>♠ K Q J</p> <p>♥ 2</p> <p>♦ A Q 10 4 3</p> <p>♣ A K Q J</p>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: 60px; margin: 0 auto;"> <p style="margin: 0;">N</p> <p style="margin: 0;">W      E</p> <p style="margin: 0;">S</p> </div>	<p>♠ 6 5 4 3</p> <p>♥ A</p> <p>♦ J 6 5 2</p> <p>♣ 6 5 4 2</p>
--	---	---

You are in 6♦. A heart is led. What card do you play to the second trick?

9.

<p>♠ K Q J</p> <p>♥ 2</p> <p>♦ A Q 4 3 2</p> <p>♣ A K Q J</p>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: 60px; margin: 0 auto;"> <p style="margin: 0;">N</p> <p style="margin: 0;">W      E</p> <p style="margin: 0;">S</p> </div>	<p>♠ 6 5 4 3</p> <p>♥ A</p> <p>♦ J 7 6 5</p> <p>♣ 6 5 4 2</p>
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Same contract and same lead as in question 8. What card do you play to the second trick?

## ~ ANSWERS ~

1. Ace first, then a small one towards the ♠QJ3. If the queen holds, reenter your hand and lead again towards dummy. The point is not to finesse. This cannot gain, since you are missing the ten, and it can easily cost a trick if the suit breaks 4-2.
2. A small card away from the ace. If the queen holds, the ace will provide an entry to play once more towards the dummy.
3. A small card towards the queen. Then finesse against the jack.
4. Play for split honors. Lead the ten and run it. If it loses to the jack, finesse against the king next time.
5. Ace first, then a small one. If no honor appears, it is a guess. But, if there is no indication, the ten is the best bet. The opponent under the ♣Q1065 may have started with ♣KJ87.
6. Run the ten, hoping that the jack is under the queen. If the trick is taken by the ace or king, reenter your hand and finesse again.
7. This calls for a ruffing finesse. Draw trumps, ending in dummy, and lead the ♥K. Unless it is covered, discard a diamond or a spade.
8. The ♦J. It is essential to be able to play from dummy again if the finesse against the king succeeds.
9. A small diamond. This time, since the ten is missing, the only hope is to find South with a doubleton king, or the bare king, under the ♦AQ. Note that the play of the jack will lose against the bare king, for then the other defender will have ♦1098.

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# LEARN TO BE LUCKY!

Yes, being lucky is an art that can be mastered like any other. You can hold much better cards than you do at present, not by dealing yourself more aces and kings, but by getting a higher return from your existing ration. Persuade the cards to work harder for you than they do for your opponents. Therein lies the formula of success. The purpose of this book is to point the way, to enlist on your side, whether you be declarer or defender, fifty-two sturdy and loyal allies.

First published in 1955, *Card Play Technique* offers a comprehensive survey of declarer play and defense, and is widely regarded as the best intermediate-level book on card play ever written. Gardener's technical expertise and Mollo's witty writing style combine to provide a unique instructional experience. This new edition has been updated and modernized by *Bridge Magazine* editor Mark Horton.



**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 but is best remembered as the author of *Bridge in the Menagerie* and its sequels.



**NICO GARDENER** (1908-1989) was a distinguished international player, winner of many British national events, and founder of the highly successful London School of Bridge.



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