

REFLECTIONS FROM THE SEA END – JULY 2016

June has certainly not been at its flaming best this year, and the cricketers amongst us have had to wile away the many damp moments, by playing canasta or cheat by otherwise resorting to the subtle arts of diplomacy to keep body and soul in one piece.

It thus occurred to your author that a cricketers dressing room during a rain break and the bar of the Infamous Young Chelsea Bridge Club in the 1970s had a lot in common, since there were groups of young men waiting for the main action to start and trying to occupy their time in civilised conversation, while lacking the social graces to do so. Indeed it was a running joke that within 5 seconds all conversations in the YC bar would include the words “You hold....”

Anyway the YC bar was the place where prior to a session any players requiring partners would meet and Warwick Pitch (the de facto proprietor of the Club) would sort them out into partnerships. One day I was needing a partner and I was paired with a guy called Chris. Now I have always been fairly plump and not many people were bigger than me, but Chris certainly was. He was an industrial blacksmith and his hands and arms were huge and he had a bushy black beard and Hagrid the Gamekeeper in *Harry Potter* could have been his look-a-like. He did have a twinkle in his eye and took real pleasure in playing bridge since he wanted to show the world he had a brain and was not all brawn. One of his affectations was that he carried one of the first designer “man bags” where he carried his “bits and pieces”.

Anyway on this evening when he partnered me, in the middle of the session we played against a young pair of Camrose English internationals, one of whom was an income tax inspector and was known for his love of complicated artificial systems. Now Chris was a gentle giant and got on with most people, but he didn't like tax inspectors, especially ones who used fancy systems, (he himself always called “a spade a spade”) and always tried his hardest to win against them. On the first board of the round, the young internationals took a slow 10 rounds of bidding and bid and made a difficult club slam. Chris congratulated them on their good sequence but as some experts do, they chuntered on discussing the bidding and didn't acknowledge Chris's remarks. On the second board, I opened the bidding with 1 of a major, the tax inspector passed and Chris after a brief pause bid 7. The tax inspector looking at 2 Aces expressed his opinion of the bid by placing a red card on the table. Chris looked through his bidding box and couldn't find a redouble card, so he reached into his man bag and pulled out, a small brass presentation blacksmith's hammer (which Chris had won in an international blacksmith's competition) and informed the whole bridgeroom by making a sharp tap on the table and by singing a snatch from the pop song *Convoy* that he was “putting the hammer down” ie he was redoubling.

The tax inspector eventually led one of his aces and sighed when Chris put down his dummy with two voids and a 7-6-0-0 shape and AKs of the other suits and the contract therefore made. No further comment was made by the internationals but Chris observed that the bidding sequence had an elegant, if slightly agricultural, simplicity to it and it had effectively taken just 2 bids to reach the optimum spot. He then enquired of his opponents how they would have bid the hand. Wisely they did not proffer an opinion.

After the session, an impromptu celebration was held and the incident was immortalised in the tradition adopted thereafter by the members of the “Real Man's YC team” whose common system incorporated the agreement, that all grand slams (other than those clearly bid as sacrifices), if doubled, were to be redoubled as a matter of course. It was called “putting the hammer down”.

The pussy cats do like the sound of this convention.

Geoffrey Wolfarth, Hove