

SPOUSAL BRIDGE

by Wally Malaczynski

Some time ago in Poland a story was published that Isabel and Michael K exhausted all possible arguments about the way a certain hand should have been bid. In the end Isabel grabbed a crystal ashtray and threw it at her husband. Michael was alert enough to duck and the ashtray slammed into the TV just behind him. The tube imploded and as a consequence of the injuries suffered, he was taken to hospital. Similar situations, sometimes with even worse consequences, have occurred all over the world including England and the United States.

In England an argument developed between a married pair when the wife became enraged by her husband's poor play. The squabble came to a quick end when she pulled her pistol and shot him. Thanks to timely help he survived but he never ever played with his wife again, even though they remained happily married thereafter.

In New York, however, Mrs Betty Smith didn't have a pistol handy when her husband drew her attention to her incompetent bidding. Disagreeing with his point of view she settled the matter with a simple but most elegant reply; I am not exaggerating, she threw the scissors she happened to be holding straight into his face. Believe me, dear readers, there have been countless even more extreme repercussions that have stemmed from the multiplicity of problems that can arise when spouses play bridge together.

Bridge can be a complex game, with many baffling psychological traps where surprising and unpredictable ramifications can unfold. A civil standard of behaviour between married pairs is the first casualty of any misunderstandings that the game predisposes them to have. Each spouse will often have to make a decision faced with exceptional or unusual circumstances without any template to guide them in their actions. Neither partner can be certain of the others reaction and should any misinterpretations lead to disaster, courtesy gives way to disrespect escalating to extreme rudeness and sometimes even worse!

Eminent writers have reported numerous such events. We live in an age of husband and wife bridge, said an American lady who, not long after making this statement, threw a hot cup of coffee into her husband's face when he allowed a grand slam to make by leading away from a doubleton king that could not have been finessed in any other way. Many consider that married couples should not play together at all. They conclude that it is silly for them to bring into their lives all the unnecessary trouble and arguments that all of us are a witness to, both in rubber and competitive bridge.

"Five years ago my mother warned me not to marry that donkey but now after five years that donkey of mine leads fourth best from J109642. Mum warned me that my troubles would multiply but I had no idea it would be to this extent."

That's what a stunning, velvety voiced and lithesome blonde with gorgeous blue eyes said after her husband went four down doubled, vulnerable, in a makeable contract. It counted for nought that this poor sap worked like a dog, gave her all his pay and gave up smoking and drinking to boot; being a good, loyal and friendly husband, an excellent and interesting companion who buys his wife tasteful gifts every birthday and anniversary is just not enough. If you lead the jack instead of the queen, if you give a weak response when holding a strong hand, that type of thing brands you permanently in the eyes of your wife, and the ruin of your lucky marriage has come much closer. Likewise for many poor wives, if she can't play up to scratch all her 'thank you's' are worth nothing. New dresses won't help either because they won't even get noticed. All he expects from her is:

"Good, quick play and killing leads."

"Maybe its better if you don't play together anymore." This is the opinion of one of my friends who never ever plays with her husband. It's enough, she confesses, that we have spats and arguments at home so it's not worth having fights about bridge there as well.

Up till now I have yet to hear of any bridge arguments that have caused a divorce, even though nowadays so many occur. It should also be pointed out that there do exist married couples that play together quite beautifully – win or lose. However, we do not have accurate statistics about how many married bridge pairs are able to play competitive bridge without conflict. Most of us would probably say that there are lots of them. A few of these are actually overly pleasant to each other, conversing in a sickly sweet tone, a tone that often greatly irritates their opponents. I know of a pair like that and they are still playing together with good results. What do they do that is so irritating?

"And what did my little dreamboat bid?" she asks her dear, wonderful husband.

"It was two hearts, sweetie pie," he fawns.

Do these pairs ever clash? Certainly but never as often and it's no longer the case that 'the man is always right'. With hand on heart I recognise that in many fields women outperform men and they have kept pace with them in bridge too. Ever more often the fair sex can be seen atop the mountain, just like in life generally. The idea that in bridge only men count is ancient history. Nowadays not only can they match our skill at the bridge table but they outshine us in terms of beauty and grace, which is something we men have always valued highly anyway.

To play or not to play with one's spouse – that's the dilemma faced by many a bridge-playing partner. It's a regular talking point whenever this eternal question arises in conversations. Generally the outcome is that everybody is unhappy when they lose. Some are angry that their wives have a passion for bridge, others are disappointed that their wives not only don't play but also don't view the game as a useful recreation. They even begrudge the fact that their husbands play as often as they do.

I have a friend who is extraordinarily pleasant with a very sympathetic nature. Many times I have wanted to partner him in an afternoon bridge session, but each time I asked he explained with great sorrow:

“Listen my wife isn’t too keen on bridge and she only lets me play once a week.”

Another friend, a great bridge thinker, is in a worse predicament because he is not allowed to play at all, and this often leads to explosive arguments between them. This poor bloke has to think up imaginative schemes and excuses to get to play the game. Once when he came home late from a round of social bridge, he chanced upon his wife waiting at the door:

“Do you realise what time you have come home?”

“Well just as I was returning home I met Mr Kowalski, you remember him, he invited me to dinner and time got away from me.”

“Do you think I believe that – tell me the truth, where were you?”

“All right then, I’ll tell you the whole truth, only don’t sulk. On my way home I bumped into a beautiful young girl and invited her out for a coffee. Later she invited me home for a chat and to take a look at her unusual collection of flowers. Well I stayed there for quite a while.”

“And you think I will believe such crap you horrible bridgeaholic? Tell me this very instant who you played with during all these hours? Perhaps a session or two of competitive bridge” she hissed with contempt. “I’ll show you which one of us is more competitive.”

That was the last word my friend heard before he was knocked out when a heavy vase hit his head. Later on he confessed to me that he was not sorry about the incident because he discovered three bridge lovers in his hospital ward and outside of visiting hours, they played to their hearts’ content.

I remember another similar story. I once had a doctor as a neighbour who was a rabid bridge enthusiast but his wife was nowhere as keen, in fact she was trenchantly opposed to playing on a regular weekly basis. It was unbelievable the amount of time and energy the doctor spent thinking up stories that he could use as a pretext to get out and play at least once a week. The only people who would fully understand this are those that find themselves in similar circumstances. He was at home one afternoon when the phone rang and a voice whispered:

“Listen, come on over to our place because we are short of a fourth.”

“What was that about?” asked his wife inquisitively.

“Bad; a very bad accident.” Clarified the husband:

“There are three doctors there already!”

In the end can we resolve this dilemma? Is it better if the wife plays or doesn’t play? Perhaps it’s a case of damned if she does and damned if she doesn’t. Maybe it’s best not to marry at all if you are going to play bridge. Dear readers I’ll leave it to you to determine, but I’ll have you know that I never sugar coat anything.