

Victor Mollo

LAST CALL

In The Menagerie



The final collection of Menagerie stories

Victor Mollo

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In The Menagerie

Collected and Edited by Mark Horton



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Foreword

I was never fortunate enough to meet Victor Mollo, but I got to know his widow Jeanne, universally known as Squirrel, quite well.

Victor was born in St. Petersburg and worked for the BBC as a correspondent by day. By night he played rubber bridge and wrote about the game he loved. Some of his books were technical; *Card Play Technique*, co-written with Nico Gardener, remains a standard to this day. But he will be best remembered for his series of books about a fictitious bridge club called the Griffins, and his wonderful characters: the Hideous Hog, the Rueful Rabbit and many others. The books were deliciously clever, funny and wicked.

Squirrel never learned to play bridge, but she faithfully followed Victor around the world on his bridge exploits. It was a glamorous era, when bridge was played in black tie and long dresses. She may not have understood the bridge, but Squirrel had an intimate knowledge of the many bridge characters of the time, some of whom were immortalized in Victor's books — not always with their knowledge.

Squirrel and I met when Phil and Robert King sought permission to use Victor's characters for their book, *The Hog in the 21st Century*. I would take tea with Squirrel regularly until her death, and she would regale me with tales of the great players from Victor's era. I saw photos of Victor's trip — by cruise, naturally — to America to play against Ira Corn's Aces in exhibition matches.

When more books were produced from Victor's old magazine articles, Squirrel was delighted that a new generation of bridge players would be acquainted with Victor's writing. She was enormously proud of Victor's talents, as well she might be. His death left the bridge world without its most witty, clever and insightful writer.

Squirrel is alas no longer with us, but she would be delighted that more books of Victor's writings are being published.

Su King

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A Knave in King's Clothing



'You all think it's his good luck, but it isn't, you know. It's my bad luck. It's me the furies are after.' Karapet was in a somber mood as we sat chatting in the Griffins bar.

'I didn't put a foot wrong. He didn't put a foot right. Yet look what happened.' Vainly he searched through his pockets for a scrap of paper. Finding none, he picked up a book which someone had left on the counter. It was Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed*. On the flyleaf, the Armenian drew the familiar diagram.

Both vul.
Dealer South

♠	3 2	
♥	A 10 6 2	
♦	10 4	
♣	A K J 6 5	
		♠ J 6 5 4
		♥ J 8
		♦ J 8 3 2
		♣ 7 4 2



West	North	East	South
<i>Papa</i>	<i>T.T.</i>	<i>Karapet</i>	<i>R.R.</i>
pass	2♣	pass	1NT
pass	4NT	pass	5♥
pass	6♥	pass	6NT
all pass			

'No one who has played rubber bridge with me,' he went on, sipping his Fernet Branca, 'will have much trouble in identifying my hand. But this

was duplicate at the Unicorn, and we were doing quite well until this board came along. Papa, my partner, put them through the catechism, for as you know, the Toucan and the Rabbit are always trying out new gadgets, chopping and changing from day to day. What was the notrump? “We are back to standard Acol,” said the Toucan, “weak non-vulnerable, strong vulnerable.” It was the Rabbit’s turn to explain that the Toucan’s four notrump was two-way Blackwood, either quantitative or an enquiry for aces. Next, Papa wanted to know about the Toucan’s six heart bid. Was that an invitation to a grand slam? The Rabbit agreed that it might well be, but it could also be showing a suit or perhaps be a cuebid. “Our bidding methods are essentially flexible,” said R.R. To cater for all eventualities, he converted to six notrump.

‘No other pair in the room,’ said Karapet bitterly, ‘got near a slam and none scored more than eleven tricks. But then they knew what they were doing, at least part of the time.’

‘See if you defend as I did,’ he went on. ‘Papa led the seven of diamonds, low from dummy, the knave from me and the queen from the Rabbit.’

‘That seven doesn’t look like a true card,’ interposed Oscar the Owl, our Senior Kibitzer.

‘Papa doesn’t play true cards,’ rejoined the Armenian, ‘except for the occasional double-cross, of course, when he leads the two to conceal a four-card suit. By and large, however, he believes in showing what he hasn’t got. Here, mind you, he had every excuse, for he was marked with whatever high cards might be missing and it was more important to conceal them from the declarer than to show them to me. I allowed for that. I allowed for everything and yet...’

Downing a second Fernet Branca, Karapet resumed his blow-by-blow story of the play. ‘The Rabbit ran the ten of clubs, picked up Papa’s queen on the next round and switched to spades, inserting the ten and losing to the king. To the next trick, the fifth, Papa returned another spade, the eight to be precise. I followed low and R.R. won — with the queen.’ Karapet paused.

The Owl frowned. ‘Where, then, was the nine?’ he asked.

‘Where indeed?’ echoed Karapet. ‘Not even Papa would lead the eight from under the nine. Besides, on the spade ace, which came next, he played the seven, dummy throwing a heart. Be that as it may, the Rabbit crossed to dummy with his last club and cashed the other two. How should I discard?’

The question was purely rhetorical and he quickly answered it himself.

‘I had to keep the knave of spades, for the nine was still out, and as I rightly suspected, the Rabbit had it.’

‘But —’ began Peregrine the Penguin.

‘So I threw a diamond,’ pursued the Armenian, ignoring the interruption. ‘But what could I let go on the last club? Consider. The Rabbit had shown six points in spades and six in diamonds, the ace by inference. For the slenderest vulnerable notrump, he needed the king of hearts. If he had the queen, too, he had twelve tricks. So, I placed Papa with it and if, as I rightly assumed, he had the king of diamonds too, he would be inexorably squeezed in the four-card ending. After a diamond, three rounds of spades and five clubs, he couldn’t keep three hearts and a guard for the king of diamonds. And yet that king, concealed from declarer’s view by the deceptive lead of the seven, was our only hope of defeating the contract. The Rabbit readily admits that he placed me with it and had every intention of finessing. I had to play my part, didn’t I? I couldn’t throw another diamond without giving the whole show away, could I?’

There was an anguished look in the Armenians black liquid eyes as he appealed for sympathy.

‘So I shed a heart, baring my knave. I knew, of course, that the Rabbit had the nine of diamonds. With the king-nine, Papa would have played the king, smothering dummy’s ten, when he was in with the king of spades. I was right once more, but it was all to no avail. The Rabbit threw a heart on dummy’s fourth club and the nine of spades on the fifth. Then he led the ten of diamonds, went up with the ace and —’

‘But didn’t you say that he placed you with the king and was going to finesse?’ broke in O.O.

With a hollow laugh, Karapet filled in the diagram, adding one more demonic episode to *The Possessed*.

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

‘Having failed to put up the ten at Trick One,’ explained the Armenian, ‘he had blocked the diamonds and now he had to overtake. He had no choice.’

O.O. frowned; P.P. shook his head. ‘I don’t understand,’ he said.

‘Of course not.’ Karapet spoke with feeling. ‘I needed an orderly succession of well-timed blunders, the play matching the bidding, for each piece to fit smoothly into its groove. One blunder fewer and the whole crazy pattern would have come unstuck.’

The Armenian went back to the bidding. ‘The Toucan was playing the strong notrump. The Rabbit, none too sure, decided to reduce the margin of error by stretching a little both ways. So he bid one notrump with a fraction too much for a weak one and a point or so too few for a strong one. Hence, the heart queen instead of the king. The final contract was due to the usual confusion over Blackwood.’

The Owl nodded. ‘He who rides a tiger cannot dismount,’ he observed sagely. ‘Blackwood is fun while it lasts, but the withdrawal symptoms can be painful. The bidding, however, doesn’t explain why the Rabbit won the eight of spades with the queen when he had the nine.’

‘That,’ replied the Armenian, ‘came to light later. As far as the Rabbit was concerned, the queen and the nine were equals. He was under the impression, you see, that his ten had fallen not to the king, but to the knave, and that the king was still out. On occasion, we all have such lapses and as a rule we pay for them dearly. When it happens to the Rabbit, it’s his opponents who pay. That’s the difference. Observe what follows if he doesn’t mistake the king for the knave. Instead of two winners in spades, he now has three, and that proves fatal. With

two diamonds, five clubs and the ace of hearts, he has eleven winners. The king of hearts would be the twelfth, so I don't place him with it and by the same token I know that the diamonds are blocked. I am no longer squeezed, no longer under pressure to save Papa from a squeeze and —'

'And so,' interjected the Owl unkindly, 'instead of two imaginary squeezes, your own and Papa's, you wouldn't have engineered a true one against him.'

Karapet winced.

'Let's hear about the unhappy ending,' broke in the Penguin, taking pity on him. 'What was the last turn of the screw?'

With an injured look, Karapet resumed the sad story. 'Having to keep three hearts, after I had bared my knave, Papa had to let go a diamond, so his king fell on the ace, and after cashing the nine, the Rabbit led the queen of hearts —'

'Pinning your knave,' interrupted O.O.

'Not exactly,' replied Karapet. 'At least he didn't do it with malice aforethought. He had seen the Hog bring off pseudo-finesses in this situation, leading an unsupported honor in the hope that it wouldn't be covered, and now he tried it on Papa. He probably doesn't know to this day what happened.'

"I've often fallen into this trap myself," he told Papa consolingly when the queen held the trick. "No one is infallible. We all make mistakes, even you, Papa."

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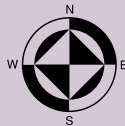
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'People shouldn't be allowed to read books they don't understand. It's unfair to opponents.'

Yes, the Hog, the Rabbit, the Owl and the rest of the familiar denizens of the Menagerie are back, sadly for the last time. The first collection of stories, *Bridge in the Menagerie*, appeared in 1965, so it seems appropriate that this final volume be published exactly 50 years later. Yet the characters are as fresh as ever, the bridge hands just as fascinating, and situations just as funny. Some things are indeed timeless.



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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