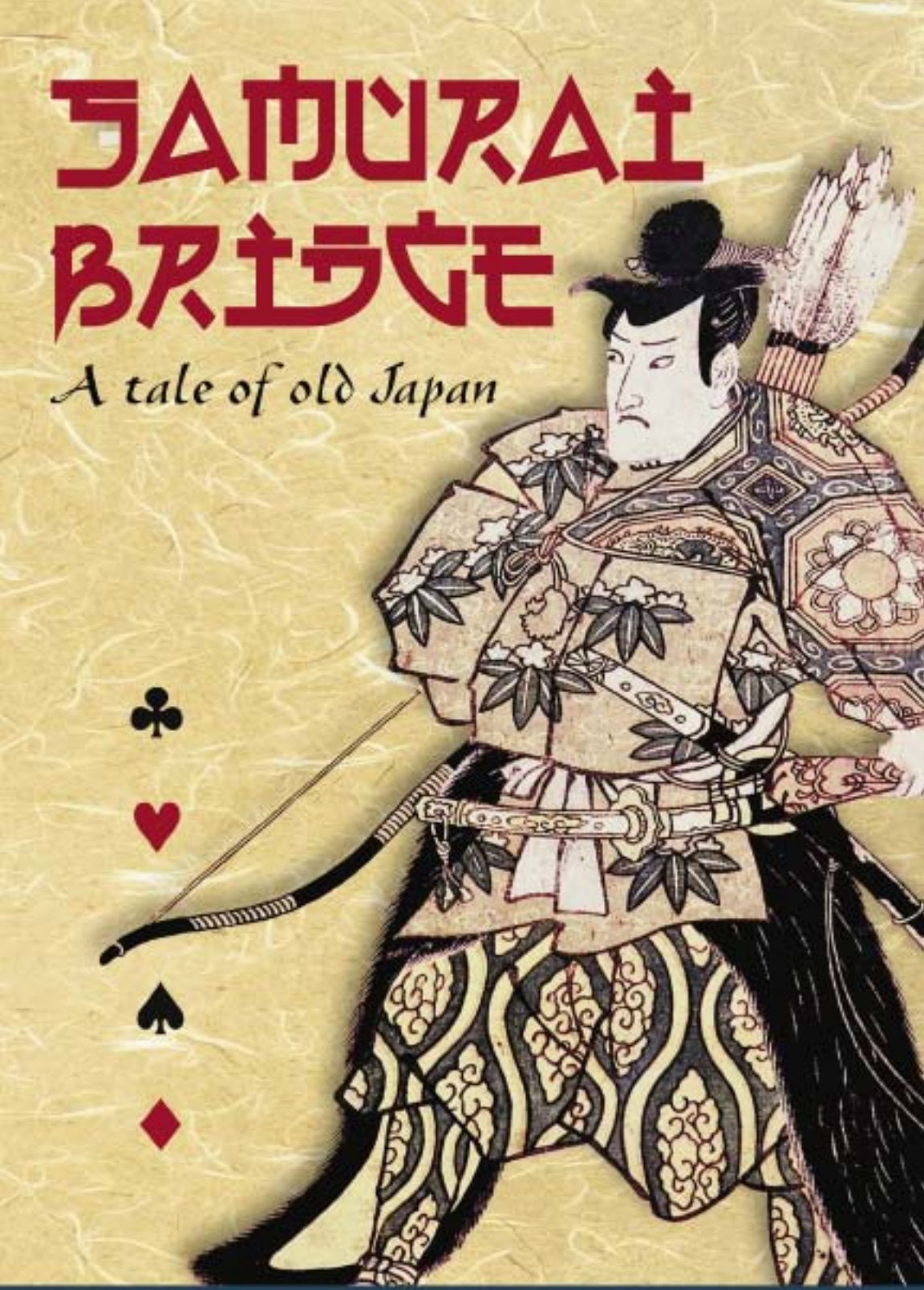
SAMURAI BRIDGE

A tale of old Japan



Robert F. MacKinnon

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Master Point Press • Toronto

Master Point Press
331 Douglas Ave.
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
M5M 1H2

(416) 781-0351
Internet: http://www.masterpointpress.com
http://www.masterpointpress.com
http://www.masterpointpress.com
http://www.masterpointpress.com

E-mail: info@masterpointpress.com

Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data

MacKinnon, Robert
Samurai bridge

ISBN 978-1-55494-077-6

I.Title

PS8575.K486S25 2001 C813'.6 C00-933103-4
PR9199.3.M34S25 2001

Cover and Interior design: Olena S. Sullivan
Editor: Ray Lee
Interior format and copyediting: Deanna Bourassa

Printed and bound in Canada by Webcom Limited

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 07 06 05 04 03 02 01

Contents

Acknowledgements

Ink Drawings	Alan MacKinnon
Bit Map Drawings	Robert MacKinnon
Calligraphy	Junko MacKinnon

Introduction

Before embarking upon a literary journey through the strange world of feudal Japan, made stranger still by the imaginary addition of bridge to an already complex life style, the reader might welcome a few words as a guide. Human nature, like a bridge hand of thirteen cards, is the same the world over; however, as every bridge player has learned from the bidding process, what is revealed varies from system to system as well as from person to person. Social conventions, like bidding conventions, are the external trappings that mask an internal structure that often remains hidden to the casual observer.

Feudal Japan is far removed from today's western world yet the spirit of the *samurai* lives on and can still be encountered to this day in unexpected places — at the bridge table, for example. We bridge players, women no less than men, have adopted some of the ways of the ancient warrior. We are taught to express no grief in the face of unmitigating disaster and no joy at a lucky success. We are excessively polite to our enemies and we adhere assiduously to a mind-boggling set of rules. We revere skill, acknowledge merit, cherish honesty, and submit willingly to authority. Yet we are ruthless warriors who show no mercy and expect none during our battles.

Away from the bridge table, the external trapping of culture differ vastly between East and West. There is nothing that demonstrates this better than the gulf between Japanese names and their significance. When addressing someone, it is customary in Japan to add a suffix to indicate one's social relationship to that person. If a Japanese refers to a person with the name of Francis as 'Francis-san', it implies the relationship is one of near equality. If 'Francis-chan' is used, Francis is a younger relative, whom you have known from childhood; if 'Francis-sensei', Francis may be the family name of a person of learning or accomplishment to whose expertise one is giving cognizance; if 'Francis-sama', this Francis has a higher social standing than the speaker.

This custom is easily grasped: think of a deck of cards containing fifty-two cards separated into four suits. Rank is important and each card has its rank clearly defined in its name: the ace of spades rests at the top, the deuce of clubs at the bottom. Today in Japan it is quite appropriate to call for a card from dummy by saying, '*top-u spade-u onegaishimasu*' — be so kind as to supply me with the highest surviving spade. A Japanese would be puzzled if you were to say, 'Go with Johnny', and offended if you were to order abruptly, 'Up!'

Even lovers adhere to a certain formality of address. In Japan love often follows sex rather than vice versa. The thinking of a young lady pondering the mysteries of love might go, 'If I have sex with him a few more times I could very well fall in love'. The Japanese recognize that a sexual encounter may be no more significant than the

sharing of an umbrella during a thundershower. Of course it is rather foolish to venture out unprepared and the consequences of sheltering in a strange place during a storm may be regrettable; nonetheless, it happens. Social standing is temporary laid aside with one's clothes, to be put on again upon departure.

How does a woman address her lover under such circumstances? She might preserve a certain distance and retain the formality of the office or classroom ('Thank you, Tanaka-sensei'), but if she wants to imply a greater intimacy she may call her lover *anata*, meaning simply 'significant other'. That may sound rather cool, but not if you realize what it implies. Endearments are like masterpoints: the harder they are to win, the more cherished they are when earned. Saccharin utterances condemn a romance to an early sugary grave. Given a choice, I would personally prefer the socially pregnant *anata* to the purely functional 'Number One Lover-Boy'.

Moving on to marriage, a husband addresses his spouse simply as 'Wife', or 'My Foolish Wife', when talking to other men, until such time as she bears a child at which time she is promoted to 'Mother' and he to 'Father'. A husband does not kiss his wife in public — that would be as peculiar as kissing his own hand. Of course, the same is true at the bridge table — wouldn't your sensibilities be offended if a husband were to stretch over to kiss his wife and say, 'Nice lead, sweetie'? I know mine would.

Typically a love poem is short and does not strive to express the tingling anticipation of an unspecified pleasure, as might be the case in English poetry. Rather, the Japanese poem aims to sound a sad note as the pleasures of the night give way to the melancholy of the morning after. One of the many little delights of Japan even today is to lie awake in bed besides one's beloved in the silence awaiting the temple bell that with one solemn sound will announce the dawn of a busy, new day.

What about the pronunciation of Japanese names? My experience tells me that the reader shouldn't be overly concerned here, because you will never get it right, no matter how hard you try. An easy rule is that vowels are pronounced as in Italian. Every sound segment ends in a vowel, so the Japanese spoken language has an easy Italianate beauty that lends itself to poetry, although rhyming is not a popular device.

When reading a long name, like Hideyoshi, the reader should aim to break it up into segments ending in a vowel — Hi-de-yo-shi — then apply Italian pronunciation, so 'de' becomes more like 'day' than 'duh', but lies somewhere in between. Although Westerners may feel some initial satisfaction in this modest accomplishment, I have to tell you that Japanese names are not, in fact, so divided. Names are written in Chinese characters, and these have at least two different pronunciations — the traditional 'Chinese' rendering (considered high-class) and the more commonplace Japanese reading for the same character. Each character may have several different meanings: *matsu* means 'pine', the tree, but it also can be read as 'to wait'. This variety of sounds and meanings possible for one word is a delightful, untranslatable characteristic.

The town in our story is named Nanashimachi (Na-na-she-match-ee), *machi* meaning 'town', *na* meaning 'name' and *nashi* indicating 'nothingness'. Such a town would be devoid of status in the highly structured society of feudal Japan.

List of Characters

Shintaro (Shin-ta-ro) Our main character is a rebellious young *ronin* who backs the underdog and seeks justice for all. He is wanted by authorities for the part he has played in the revolutionary 'Save the People' movement. *Shin* means 'new' and *taro*, 'man'.

Kiku (Kee-koo) A tea house hostess who plays bridge better than most of the men she serves nightly. *Kiku* means chrysanthemum, a flower revered for its sturdy qualities — some tender varieties are edible.

Saburo (Saa-bu-roe) A naive player whose fate it is to be the victim of sophisticated squeezes and endplays from which he never learns. This name indicates 'third-born'. To rise to the important role of Fire Chief, a lower-class person had to be active, ambitious, popular, and not easily discouraged.

Tsuki (Tzu-kee) An orphan who works as a bath house scrubber — promiscuous and naive, a mixed-up teenager. Her name means 'moon'. She has grown up without parental guidance and support, learning to survive as she goes along.

Gunpei (Goon-pay) A businessman who believes in unbridled competition. He plays a crafty, psychological game, somewhat unsound at times. *Gun* connotes 'power' and *pei*, 'smoothness'. Gunpei epitomizes the iron hand in the velvet glove.

Ichiro (Eee-chee-roe) A tax collector, bridge partner and unwitting accomplice to Gunpei. Japanese give great significance to birth order. This name indicates first-born, the heir to his father's profession.

Sachie (Saa-chee-ay) Ichiro's wife. The 'good wife' who raised three daughters and rules the roost. Her name means 'happiness', not in the sense of 'contentment' but of the kind that comes from being active and giving to others. She doesn't have time for bridge.

Inazo (Ee-na-zo) The venal chief priest of the main temple who doesn't play nearly as well as he thinks he does. His name connotes 'rice', but as a consumer rather than a producer — someone who enjoys the luxury of eating rice instead of gruel, which is what the farmers themselves eat.

Hidematsu (Hee-day-mat-sue) An aging intellectual and author of bridge books, most comfortable in his study. *Matsu* means 'pine', a tree highly appreciated for its longevity and adaptability to harsh conditions.

Hidetada (Hee-day-ta-da) Hidematsu's famous father, long deceased, whose memory still haunts his less gifted son. The second shogun had the name of Hidetada, so it became common amongst middle class *samurai* families.

Kashio (Cash-ee-oh) A shop owner whose cautious approach is no match for Gunpei's tricks. He is a successful maker of sweet bean cakes and his name is equivalent to 'Mr. Doughnut'. This is not his real name, but a self-mocking nickname he has good-heartedly assumed for business purposes.

Ine (Ee-nay) Kashio's wife who runs the shop and spoils her son. *Ine* indicates rice, the equivalent to a Westerner's 'salt of the earth'.

Takashi (Ta-ka-she) Kashio's spoiled son who, because of his quick mind, often turns impatiently to desperate measures at the bridge table. His name means 'a seeker of higher things', which he is, never content with the normal result.

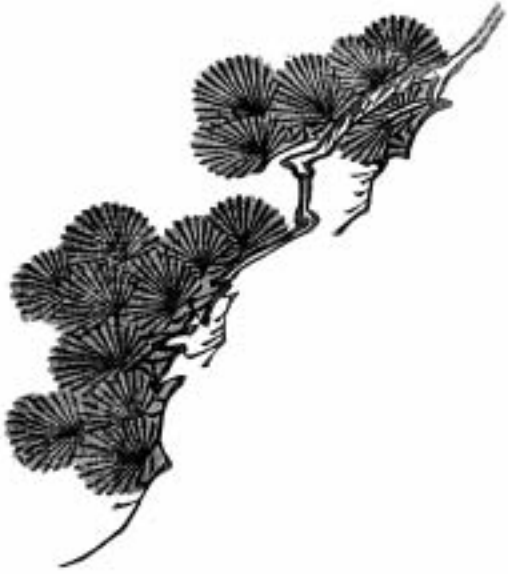
Haraka (Ha-ra-ka) An accomplished *ronin*, former mentor and companion-in-arms to Shintaro, now hired by Gunpei to play bridge on his team.

Unosuke (Uoo-no-skay) Exceptionally, one does not say 'sue-kay'; instead the sounds run together. *U* stands for 'rabbit' and *suke* has an association with an actor's factotum. This character was born into a theatrical family during the Year of the Rabbit. In feudal Japan, actors were viewed as suspicious low-lifes, much like carnies and street performers.

Zenzanjo (Zen-zan-joe) A *yamabushi* or mountain monk, a free spirit at the table and away from it. His name is a reversal of Zazen, a form of meditation. It is inconceivable that a chief priest would assign such a name to a pupil, but some *yamabushi* lived in isolation and this must be a name that the untutored fellow made up for himself.

SAMURAI BRIDE

A Tale of Old Japan



Prologue

Hideyoshi the Taiko 1536-1598

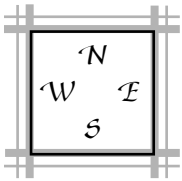
Our story takes place in Japan in the month of August, 1837. It was a time of civil unrest due to the poverty and hunger brought about by several consecutive years of poor rice crops. Ineptitude of government officials in the face of the growing crisis was merely a surface manifestation of a system that professed commitment to the general welfare but that tolerated decreasing living standards for the common man and increasing corruption in high places — which, not coincidentally, promoted the interests of a few merchants who grew rich through speculations on the rice market. For these wealthy few, their way of business made hunger a necessity and greed a virtue.

It was a time in Japan when many young, adventuresome, unemployed *samurai*, *ronin*, took to the roads in search of unknown adventure.

A half century before the turbulent year in which the violent events recorded in this story took place, a former bridge master in the court of the Emperor Sakuramachi (1720-1750) retired to a remote town lying halfway between Morioka and Sendai along the spine of northern Honshu. There he took up his brush and put down on paper the knowledge he had garnered over a lifetime at the bridge table as follows.

MAKING THE CUCKOO SING

Dummy
♠9 7
♥A Q 9 5
♦A 9 3 2
♣Q 6 4



Declarer
♠K 8 2
♥7 6 2
♦K Q 10
♣A K 10 9

The student should consider how this hand is to be played in the contract of three notrump after the lead of the ♠3 to the ♠7, ♠Q and ♠K. The form of scoring is matchpoints, neither side vulnerable. Before deciding on a line of play, the student should recall the story of 'Making the cuckoo sing'. Legend has it that the three great warriors, Nobunaga, Hideyoshi and Ieyasu, were asked, "What would you do if a cuckoo refused to sing for you?" Each replied according to his character. Nobunaga stated, "I would kill it." Hideyoshi replied, "I would persuade it to sing." Ieyasu answered, "I would wait for it to sing."

The form of scoring being matchpoints, the goal in a normal contract is to maximize the number of tricks taken within judicious limits. Nobunaga would try to take eleven tricks. His method was: Attack! Attack! Attack! Since the maximum possible number of tricks will be taken only if the heart finesse is working, he would take that finesse immediately. Even if the finesse loses, the opponent on his right may misjudge this bold action as indicating that a continuation of spades is hopeless; he may even hold up his king, hoping to lay a trap for the unwary declarer. Having won that finesse, Nobunaga would lead the ♣Q from dummy, expecting his right-hand opponent to give a true count on this card. He would play accordingly and might, indeed, take eleven tricks for a top score. His impetuous nature gave little value to measures of safety. Hideyoshi would be more prudent. His method was to try first one way then, if that failed, try another. First he would play off the club

suit hoping to drop the jack in two rounds or find the suit split 3-3 against him. Failing this, he would play off the top diamonds, with the same hope. Only if both actions proved unfruitful would he resort to the heart finesse. If the minor suits yielded eight tricks, he would avoid the heart finesse and be content with ten tricks since the opening lead had been favorable. He knew the Nobunagas of the world might take more tricks in any given contract, but also that the seeds of their eventual destruction lie in their risky methods.

Ieyasu would note that he had only eight tricks in hand. Only after assuring nine tricks and his contract would he venture to play for an overtrick. Since the lead indicates that the spades are split 4-4 in the defenders' hands, Ieyasu would return a spade and let the opponents take their three tricks in that suit. It may happen that they will make a mistake and give him his ninth trick. One possibility for a mistake is to take the spade tricks in such a manner that the right-hand opponent remains on lead after the fourth round; now any card that opponent leads gives away a free finesse. There are other possibilities for defensive errors; Ieyasu's method was to avoid unnecessary risk and to give the opponents every chance to make a mistake and bring about their own destruction.

There are those who liken bridge to warfare. How sweet victory can be! There are those who pursue victory to the ends of the earth regardless of cost. Oda Nobunaga was such a man. "Hooray to the victor!", shout the crowds. Yet sweeter still are the rewards of inner peace, which one enjoys in silence and solitude in the knowledge that one has acted properly. In the end Nobunaga and his heir were murdered by a retainer who had been insulted in public. Let this be a lesson: never criticize your partner at the table for he will surely later seek revenge.

— Hidetada of Gifu (1787)

No more East, West, North, South,
In my mountain retreat, half in, half out
I'm removed from joys and sorrows

Day 1

On the Road

Along a narrow, dusty road in a remote northern prefecture, between the tall pines which clothe the western mountains bordering the Kitakami-Bonchi valley, a single figure appeared, making his way with bold strides from nowhere in the south to nowhere in the north. His powerful, muscular body, his long and short swords, his soiled garb without insignia all marked him as a wandering *ronin*, a warrior without a master, a killer without connection. He was young and lean, but what set him apart from others of his kind were the dark eyes that shone from his grimy, heavily bearded visage like the cliff-top beacons that pirates light to lure ships in a storm to their destruction on the rocks below. Those eyes had seen more than enough of violent death in the past two years to fill the lifetime of all but the most hardened of warriors. It was a time of peace, yes, but peace without tranquility, for there is always the struggle for power, driven by greed, backed by violence, excused by expediency.

He paused at a small bridge under which flowed an inviting mountain stream. Although he had been walking since before dawn and the midday sun caused sweat to form on his brow and cheeks and to trickle into his beard and between his lips, in the true *samurai* spirit it would be evidence of a weakness of character to pause and refresh himself in the cool waters for he had not yet reached his destination. But the man, however fearsome his outward aspect, was not a true *samurai* but merely a lowly *ronin* without connections, which made his character suspect.

Self-denial doesn't apply, he concluded as he walked to the brook's edge and splashed the cold, clear, refreshing water on his face. He sat down and drew from his sleeve two stale rice balls which he had sacrilegiously stolen the previous day from a roadside shrine, wrapped in the napkin that had formerly decorated the neck of a *jizo* (small statue). This journey had begun four months earlier in Osaka, a city torn apart temporarily by a noble but ineffective rebellion, but it was only the latest of many such journeys. His wandering had started when, as a very young *samurai* of a minor clan, he had avoided carrying out an order from a superior officer. He had thought the order to be stupid, cruel and unjust, a judgement vindicated later in all respects, but there is no place for independent judgement in a system that demands unquestioning obedience. Such a system had served well during the time of civil war and national unification, but two hundred years of peace had given rise to inflexible inefficiency, corruption in high places and the subjugation of the general population to the will of a few hereditary bureaucrats. The result was that the system was now slowly but surely collapsing like a barn collapses on itself as a result of internal rot. One violent windstorm and it would fall.

The young *ronin* was about to doze off in the grass when his keen hearing, capable of sensing the sound of cherry blossoms falling to the ground, detected an oncoming traveler. He deduced from the hurried, shuffling pattern of the steps that this was a middle-aged man, short in stature, perhaps a town-dweller. He heard mumbling, something like a sing-song recitation of a *sutra* in time with the steps, but the words were strange:"One club, one diamond, zero to seven; one club, one no, eight to ten; one club, two no, eleven to twelve," repeated over and over. The Ronin recognized these as the first few lines of the standard Precision catechism used by Zen sects to focus the mind and sharpen the intellect.

"Hoy! Come over here," the warrior commanded gruffly when the traveler at last appeared at the bridge. He was an unkempt specimen, this priest, comically clothed in brown robes that hung about his skinny frame like the sunken sails of a becalmed ship; an unlikely candidate for saver of souls or consoler of widows. What business was he pursuing along this path normally reserved for cutters of wood, hunters of boar, and evaders of the law? The priest hesitated, pointing to his chest, uncertain whether or not to bolt. A slight suggestive movement of the warrior's hand toward his long sword made the decision easier and he quickly made his way down to the brook.

"Greetings, fellow pilgrim," said the priest, palms touching, with a smile and a bow meant to win, if not approval, a small degree of tolerance.

"I have an important question of dogma to ask of you, brother. What about one club, four notrump? What's that mean, eh?"

The priest hesitated, as if wondering whether or not to sit down beside the Ronin. He judged it wiser to remain respectfully standing.

"Well, that should be, ah, sixteen to eighteen." Then noting the smile of contempt that appeared on his questioner's face, he added quickly,"although I myself prefer it as a weak minor-suit takeout."

"That's more reasonable. By the way, before we continue this illuminating talk, have you by a happy chance got some saké on you?"

The traveler looked in those dark fiery eyes and felt they could penetrate through his own and as easily read the secrets written on the inside of his skull as see what was concealed under his robe. "Why, yes, a kindly peasant gave me this small flask this morning. Although it was a gift to the gods, you are welcome to the whole thing."

As the ever-smiling priest produced the flask, the Ronin caught a glimpse of another hidden treasure — a bulging purse. He accepted the flask without so much as a thank-you nod.

"Oh no, we'll share," he asserted, then contradictorily drained the contents in one draught. "Oh, careless of me. Please forgive me, I was thirstier than I thought." He wiped his rough beard and smiled with satisfaction. "Now, priest, how far to the next village?"

"I left there three hours ago. Just carry on down the road. It's at the bottom of this mountain. A vigorous fellow, I mean, honorable warrior, like yourself should reach

GENERAL INTER-

The most unusual bridge book you've ever read!

The story told in *Samurai Bridge* takes place in a remote village in early 19th century Japan. At first, the characters may seem familiar – Shintaro, the heroic *ronin* (a masterless *samurai*), Gunpei, the evil town magistrate, Kiku, the tea house hostess with a heart of gold, and so forth. But soon, one becomes aware that these people are not quite what might be expected – in fact, they are all fanatical bridge players, and the climactic battle between the forces of good and evil takes place not in the *dojo*, but at the card table.

A host of fascinating characters inhabit this book, including a seductive ghost who has her own plans for the *ronin*; a Buddhist monk who has some difficulty relinquishing earthly pleasures; a bathhouse-girl whose humble appearance masks something much more deadly; an out-of-work actor who has unwillingly become involved in a complex masquerade; a notary whose father was a bridge professional at the court of the Emperor until he fell out of favor and an old comrade-in-arms whom Shintaro may have to face in a duel to the death.

Shintaro's story naturally involves swordplay as well as card play, interspersed with romance, philosophical asides on the game of bridge and a fascinating account of bridge and politics at the Imperial court. An exotic potpourri of love, mystery, mayhem and lots of bridge too, set in a world where life is cheap, this is *Seven Samurai* as Charles Goren might have written it!

DR. ROBERT MACKINNON is a graduate of the Imperial College of Science and Technology, London, UK. After a thirty-year career as a mathematician he began writing humorous stories with a bridge setting, many of which have appeared in **Bridge Plus** and **International Popular Bridge Magazine**. He lives in Victoria, BC.

MASTER POINT PRESS