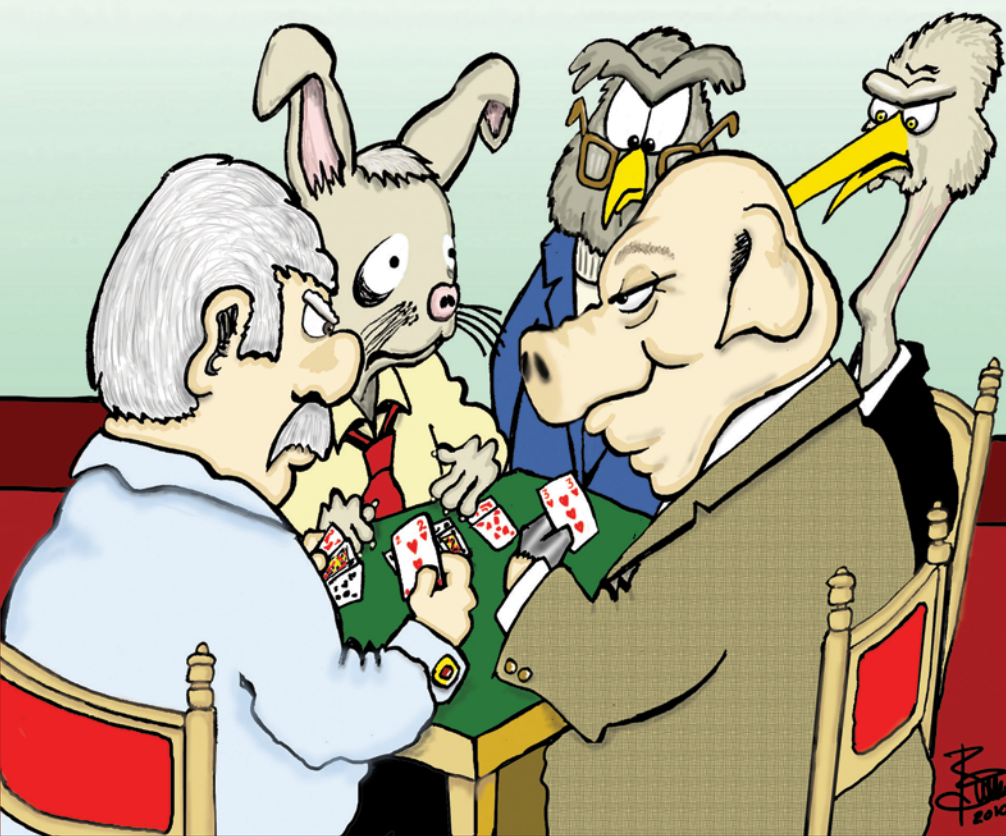


Victor Mollo

THE HOG

Takes To Precision



The lost Menagerie stories ... never before in book form

Victor Mollo

THE HOG

Takes To Precision

Collected and Edited by Mark Horton



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Victor Mollo was born in St. Petersburg into a rich Russian family. When he was eight, the October Revolution occurred and his family fled Russia, traveling by a purchased train, with forged Red Cross papers, crossing into Finland, then Stockholm, Paris and finally London.

He neglected his studies and devoted himself to bridge. As an editor in the European service of the British Broadcasting Corporation, he began to write books and articles on the game. After retirement in London in 1969, he started to write even more extensively, and during the time until his death in 1987 he wrote thirty books and hundreds of articles. He was also active in developing bridge cruises, mostly in the Mediterranean.

His lifestyle was exceptional. He would play rubber bridge at his club each afternoon, enjoy dinner and wine with his wife, the Squirrel, and then work all night until 6 a.m., when he would take a nap. While he occasionally successfully competed in the major duplicate bridge tournaments, winning four national titles, he preferred rubber bridge. Many of his daily achievements at the rubber bridge table would become elements in his fictional stories.

The Bridge in the Menagerie series

The *Bridge in the Menagerie* series started with the book of the same name, first published in 1965. Most of the pieces had previously appeared in either *Bridge Magazine* or the American *The Bridge World* and that pattern was repeated in the works that followed. Mollo was recognized as ‘the most entertaining writer of the game’ in a poll among American players in the 1980s. Although duplicate bridge features from time to time, the books largely focus on entertaining events at a rubber bridge table in the Griffins Club. Many of the characters are nicknamed after the animals that they most resemble both physically and psychologically, and that caricature common archetypes of real-life bridge players.

Mollo often refers to the main characters by their initials. They include:

H.H. *‘Please, please partner, let me play the hand. I assure you that it’s in your own interest.’* Much the best player and the biggest bully, aptly named the Hideous Hog. Regarded as a genius, he cannot understand why he is so grossly underrated. His greatest rival is:

Papa *‘The essence of bridge is to see through the backs of the cards.’* Themistocles Papadopoulos — Papa the Greek — who alone among the Griffins challenges the Hog’s supremacy. A fine technician, intuitive, so subtle is Papa that he can falsecard with a singleton. And he always knows what everyone will do — except that the Hog usually does something else.

Karapet *‘Again everything has happened to me.’* Karapet Djoulikian, the Free Armenian (Karapet the Unlucky), is without doubt the unluckiest mortal since Job. He has come to expect the worst and is rarely disappointed. Worse still, no Griffin these days will listen to his hard luck stories, and one or two have even had the temerity to tell him their own.

R.R. *‘One gets used to abuse. It’s waiting for it that is so trying.’* The Rueful Rabbit is gentle, generous, always ready to help — more especially his opponents. The Rabbit used to think of himself as the second-worst player in the world. But that was before he met the Toucan. R.R. rarely knows what he is doing or why he is doing it, but hovering over him is the best Guardian Angel in the business, and every time R.R. does something outrageously idiotic the Angel waves a magic wand and the ugly duckling turns into a bird of paradise.

T.T. *‘Perhaps I should have ruffed that heart with my king.’* Timothy the Toucan owes his nickname to a long red nose and a disconcerting habit of bouncing in his chair. Longing for affection, the Toucan tries to ingratiate himself with one and all by admitting every mistake before he makes it. Technically, he is in the same class as R.R. and W.W.

- W.W.** *'I had twenty I tell you, half the points in the pack.'* Walter the Walrus, a retired accountant since early youth, is an outstanding exponent of the Milton Work Count. Brought up on points and percentages, he espouses in bridge the philosophy of Molière's doctors, firmly believing that it is more honorable to land in the wrong contract with adequate values than to reach the right one without them.
- S.B.** *'Respect for the Laws is the basis of civilized society.'* The Emeritus Professor of Bio-Sophistry, commonly known as the Secretary Bird, knows the laws backwards and would sooner invoke them against himself than not invoke them at all. Opponents dislike him. Partners fear him. Nobody loves him.
- C.C.** *'Do you mean that non-vulnerable you would have made fewer tricks?'* Colin the Corgi, a facetious young man from Oxbridge, bites and snaps and rarely troubles to hide his contempt for lesser players. Still lacking in experience, he has all the makings of a future master.
- Ch.Ch.** *'Thank you Professor, thank you very much.'* Charlie the Chimp is an inveterate chatterbox, interested in every deal except the one he is playing. He likes the inquest on every deal to continue through the next one. This greatly confuses the Rabbit, but then so does everything else.
- O.O.** *'Curious hand. Both sides can make Four Hearts.'* Oscar the Owl is the most respected figure at the Griffins. The Senior Kibitzer, he is a stern disciplinarian and demands the highest standards in manners and decorum. As Chairman of the Monster Points and Ethics Committees he insists that no partner, not even the Toucan, should be abused or vilified until the deal is over. He frowns on all sharp practice, even when there's no other way to make or break a contract.
- P.P.** *'A technician is a man who knows exactly what to do the moment he has done something else.'* Peregrine the Penguin is Oscar's opposite number at the Unicorn, where the Griffins play duplicate on Thursdays. Precise and somewhat pomp-

ous, the Penguin is a committee man, as well as an accomplished kibitzer, and helps to award Monster Points.

M.M. *'I must make a note of this, a group of men have actually let me have the last word.'* Molly the Mule was the first member of the stronger sex to be admitted to the Griffins. Radiating goodwill to all humankind except the male half, M.M. compensates for her rocky card play with her unshakeability in the post-mortem.

Having met the stars you will know what to expect when you watch them perform.

Books published in the series:

Bridge in the Menagerie (1965)

Bridge in the Fourth Dimension (1974)

Masters and Monsters (1979) Reissued as *Victor Mollo's Bridge Club: How to Turn Masterful Plays into Monstrous Points* (1987)

You Need Never Lose at Bridge (1983)

Destiny at Bay (1987)

After Mollo's death, further books appeared posthumously, some making use of deals and material from previously uncollected articles and others containing new material by Robert and Phillip King, who were assisted by Victor's wife, Squirrel:

The Hog in the 21st Century (by Phillip and Robert King, 1999)

Winning Bridge in the Menagerie (by 'Victor Mollo and Robert King', 2001)

Bridge in the Fifth Dimension (by 'Victor Mollo with P & R King', 2002)

Murder in the Menagerie (by 'Robert King, Phillip King, and Victor Mollo', 2002)

This book is the product of research into Victor Mollo articles that appeared in various periodicals in the 70s and 80s but have never been put together into book form. We discovered some interesting anomalies. The story *Monster Points* appeared in *Master and Monsters*, but the version we include here, whilst having virtually identical text, features

different deals. The story *Satanic Hands* appeared in *Destiny at Bay* under the title *The Prince of Darkness*, but there are significant differences in the early part of the text.

Most exciting of all, we located several ‘lost’ stories that appear in print here for the first time — they are among the last stories in the book.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book could not have been brought about without the help of Ron Tacchi, Wolf Klewe, Tim Bourke & Brent Manley.

*Mark Horton
Bath, England
November, 2010*

1. The Hog Takes to Precision



The Distinguished Stranger, chatting to the Hog in the Griffins' lounge, was drinking water. He appeared to be doing it from choice, so I put him down as an American.

'What shall we play?' he asked the Hog who was to be his partner at our weekly duplicate that night. 'Acol?'

'No, no,' the Hog hastily dismissed the idea. Anyone who pronounced 'Acol' to rhyme with 'able' obviously didn't know the first thing about it.

'Standard American?' suggested the D.S.

'I, er, don't know it very well,' demurred the Hideous Hog. Eyebrows were raised around us. Surely H.H. knew everything very well, or made it up as he went along.

The American tried again. 'Precision?' he ventured. This time the Hog accepted.

'But you don't know Precision,' protested Oscar the Owl, our Senior Kibitzer, after the D.S. had left us.

'True,' agreed the Hog 'but I know Standard American and what better reason could I have for playing Precision?'

'But how will you tell...?' began O.O.

The Hog waved all objections aside. 'No problem. Precision is natural,' he explained. 'Knowing from the start what partner can't have, a good player can work out what he should have. As for the bad player, he can't work anything out anyway, but being simple, Precision is less likely to confuse him than do other systems. So, you see, though I don't know how our friend plays, I am on to a good thing either way.'

After making myself unpopular by winning three rubbers in a row that night, I looked in to see what was happening in the duplicate. As I came up to the Hog's table he was waving the traveling scoresheet and gloating.

‘Result merchant,’ hissed the Emeritus Professor of Bio-Sophistry, known on account of his habits and appearance as the Secretary Bird. ‘Just because he gets a lucky lead he thinks he’s done something clever.’

This was the deal they had just played:

Neither Vul.
Dealer North

	♠ A Q 9 8 4		
	♥ 9 5 4		
	♦ A Q 3		
	♣ 3 2		
♠ 5 2	<div style="display: flex; flex-direction: column; align-items: center; justify-content: center; gap: 10px;"> N W E S </div>	♠ K	
♥ A K 10 8		♥ Q J 2	
♦ J 10 9 7 4		♦ K 8 6 5 2	
♣ 6 5		♣ J 10 9 8	
	♠ J 10 7 6 3		
	♥ 7 6 3		
	♦ —		
	♣ A K Q 7 4		

All the Norths in the room had opened one spade and most Souths responded with two clubs. Some ventured three clubs, but the final contract was everywhere four spades. Deterred by South’s bid from starting a club, most Easts led the queen of hearts and thereafter the defense couldn’t be denied four tricks, the king of spades scoring by overruffing West’s fourth heart.

At the Hog’s table the bidding sequence was different:

West	North	East	South
	<i>D.S.</i>		<i>H.H.</i>
	1♠	pass	4♦
pass	4♠	all pass	

Clubs not having been mentioned, the Secretary Bird made the natural lead of the ♣J. Anxious to get rid of his losing hearts and to avoid a club ruff in the process, the D.S. began by laying down the ♠A. When the ♠K dropped he had twelve tricks, an indisputable top.

‘Had it only been my lead...,’ lamented the Chimp, looking accusingly at S.B.

‘Blind chance. No skill at all and we get a bottom,’ fumed S.B.

‘You don’t appreciate the manifold advantages of limit bids,’ retorted H.H. scornfully. ‘Knowing that partner’s high card strength was limited to fifteen and might well be less my first impulse was to go straight to four spades, for a slam seemed most improbable. And yet, if partner had the right cards, a few worthless diamonds, top trumps and the ace of hearts, it might just be on. In our brief discussion about gadgets, partner had told me he was not in favor of playing splinter bids, but four diamonds wasn’t likely to be misunderstood. Since it couldn’t be a suit, it could only be a cuebid and having the ace himself, partner knew it was a void, so...’

‘What has that to do with the Professor’s injudicious lead?’ broke in the Chimp.

‘More than you think’ rejoined H.H. ‘for whether I bid four spades directly or chanced my arm with what’s known, I believe, as an Italian jump cuebid, I had no reason to show my clubs. The other Souths did. Not playing Precision, they had to investigate slam prospects methodically since the opening might be worth eighteen, nineteen or even twenty points.’

‘But...’ began S.B.

‘Of course,’ pursued H.H., ignoring him, ‘a club might not have been the natural lead. Then it wouldn’t have mattered either way. But mark my words: the more you know about partner’s hand from the start, the quicker you get to your contract, the less you disclose to opponents on the way, and the greater your chance of a lucky lead. It’s a case of heads I win, tails I don’t lose, and what could be fairer than that?’

The Hog caressed the traveling scoreslip as he replaced it carefully in its slot. He was beginning to like Precision. He liked it better still after a board he played against Papa the Greek and Karapet the Armenian, the unluckiest player of the current millennium — and before that, too, of course.

The Hideous
Hog



North-South Vul.
Dealer South

♠ K 10 7 5 3	♠ 9 4 2
♥ J 10 9	♥ A K
♦ Q 10 3	♦ K 2
♣ K 3	♣ J 10 8 7 5 2



West	North	East	South
<i>Papa</i>	<i>D.S.</i>	<i>Karapet</i>	<i>H.H.</i>
1♠	2♣	pass	1♦
pass	3NT	all pass	2NT

Papa led the ♠5 to Karapet’s jack. Playing at top speed, the Hog seized the trick with the ace and crossing to the ♥K called for the ♣J. Karapet followed with the ♣4 and the Hog with the ♣6.

Winning with the king, Papa considered his options. Should he lead a low spade to Karapet’s queen, hoping to find him with a third spade? Or should he lay down the king, relying on Karapet to unblock? Surely he couldn’t go wrong.

The Greek had already detached the king when a thought suddenly struck him. The Hog had grabbed that first trick very confidently. What if his spade holding was AQx? If he feared a switch wasn’t he just the man to win the first trick deceptively with the ace to encourage a continuation?

Looking with new interest at dummy’s ♦K2, Papa conjured up a picture of the Hog’s hand. It could be:

♠ A Q x ♥ x x x ♦ x x x ♣ A Q x x

Playing Precision, he obviously couldn’t open 1♣ and there wasn’t quite enough for INT. That all-purpose 1♦ would doubtless be his choice and it would explain his play, if, that is, he had ♠AQx and feared a diamond switch. Should either the ♣K or the ♦A be well placed he would have his nine tricks. And if both were wrong his cunning play of the ♠A would allow him to bring off one of his characteristic swindles.

Against Papa? Perish the thought! With a defiant flourish the Greek slapped the $\heartsuit 3$ on the table.

'I'll take my ten tricks' said the Hog, grinning at the kibitzers. This was the complete deal:

	\spadesuit 9 4 2	
	\heartsuit A K	
	\diamondsuit K 2	
	\clubsuit J 10 8 7 5 2	
\spadesuit K 10 7 5 3	<div style="display: flex; flex-direction: column; align-items: center; justify-content: center; gap: 10px;"> N W E S </div>	\spadesuit Q J
\heartsuit J 10 9		\heartsuit Q 8 7 6 5 4
\diamondsuit Q 10 3		\diamondsuit J 8 6 5
\clubsuit K 3		\clubsuit 4
	\spadesuit A 8 6	
	\heartsuit 3 2	
	\diamondsuit A 9 7 4	
	\clubsuit A Q 9 6	

'Just my luck,' sighed Karapet. 'It couldn't happen to anyone else. He has four more cold tricks begging to be cashed and he has to play their suit. Did I tell you what happened to me on...?'

'Yes, you did,' snapped the Hog. Then, with a patronizing look, he addressed Papa. 'I must admit that for once you had a genuine excuse for being clever. I might have held the hand you suspected. That dubious diamond, a feature of Precision, led you astray. It has its snags, of course, though no good player should find them insurmountable. But there's the other side of the picture, the invisible profit it brings. If partner must be careful when he hears one diamond, opponents must be doubly so. It may mean nothing — or something. A bid of convenience — or a genuine suit. And the moment there's a guess to make, there's always the risk of a misguess, as here.

'All in all, I can only claim half the credit,' concluded the Hog modestly. 'My reputation for subtlety accounted for Papa's suspicions. Precision's diamond syndrome did the rest. You should take up Precision, Themistocles, you'll be a new man.'

'Fantastic luck,' spluttered Papa indignantly.

'That's part of the system,' rejoined the Hog with a friendly leer.

Karapet pricked up his ears.

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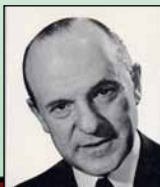
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Precision in the Menagerie

We always think of the denizens of the Menagerie as rubber bridge players, their bidding (a simple Acol-based system) usually far less important than the play of the cards. However, in this new collection of original Victor Mollo stories, we see a different side of the Hideous Hog — he sees definite advantages in adopting the new approach of Precision Club; they are not for the most part, however, the same advantages envisaged by C.C. Wei. ‘Does it matter what system the Rabbit misplays?’ asks Peregrine the Penguin at one point. ‘Indeed it does,’ replies the Hog, and goes on to prove his case.

The stories in this book are all original Victor Mollo creations. Some were published only in (usually obscure) magazines, while others have never before appeared in print. It is a collection that will delight any Mollo fan (and who isn’t one?) and perhaps even introduce Mollo’s wit and technical brilliance to a whole new generation.



VICTOR MOLLO (1909-1987) was an expert player and a fine writer on the technical side of bridge (his *Cardplay Technique*, co-authored by Nico Gardner, is still highly regarded). However, it is as the creator of the *Bridge Menagerie* that he will always be fondly remembered.



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