

**Bridge
Below
the Belt**

by

Larry Cohen & Liz Davis

Edited by Arthur Jacobs

Thanks to:

Tim Bourke, Susie Cohen, Leta & Rufus Davis,
Jim Houser, John Lewis, Alex McCallum,
Ravindra Murthy and Naomi Sachs

Special thanks to Paul Cohen, Karen McCallum
and Steve Weinstein

Copyright © 1997 by Natco Press

All Rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever.

The characters, events, and organizations in this book are fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental

ISBN No. 0-9634715-5-4

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 97-091842

Table of Contents

The Players	7
Heavy Hearts	9
Fired	17
Dialing for Dollars	27
One Club & 1/2 Pass	49
Divine Wrong	77
Mojo	97
The Gilded Ass	117
Ebb and Flow	145
The Queen's Court	157
Rigged Bridge	181
Glory Bids	197
The Honorable Feast	209
The Trap	219
Finesse	233

The Final Trade-Off 237

The Players

The Majors:

Hereford Willis III: Past 60, but powerfully built, and with more oil wells than scruples; spite, sarcasm, ruthlessness and an unforgiving nature are some of his more pleasant qualities.

Parson: Hereford's hired bridge pro. Not restricted by ethics or personal hygiene.

Vanessa (The Contessa): Unpleasant and untalented, she owns Miami's new upscale bridge club, Trumps, and would also like to own . . .

Ford Maddox: A brilliant professional player and Hereford's bitter enemy. Closing in on 40, he's known for his puckish charm and gracious demeanor. He shares a secret.

The Minors:

Meyer: Ford's first bridge partner and long-time pal, a private detective who is reliable and loyal to his friends.

Penny: Bridge director and programmer, she's thirty-something, attractive, decent, but unlucky. She desperately hopes that the mistakes of her carefree college days don't return to haunt her.

Richie: Longtime friend of Penny's; inveterate gambler and proprietor of the run-down Aces bridge club; can he make a new start?

The Ladies of the Club:

Maura: A good player, much in demand in her circle; she has a constitution of steel and a fascination with the world of disease.

Prissy: Happy to play with a partner as good as Maura; desperately looking for her own moment in the sun at the local bridge club.

Eileen: At 68, she still has the voracious appetite of two lumberjacks and a sense of humor to match.

Gilda: Eternally consumed with her possessions, her status and herself.

Heavy Hearts

The wind flew through the summer sky, pelting Miami with warm rain. Wearing a cap of gray curls and matching steel-rimmed glasses, Maura Bund watched the storm through her front window as she awaited Priscilla, her bridge partner.

On Maura's fortieth birthday, some hundred years earlier, she had become acutely preoccupied with her mortality. An intelligent woman, her friends quickly came to know her as a veritable encyclopedia of disease. Over a

cup of tea, she could speak eloquently on the subject of small intestines or work herself into a rapture about the colon. And nothing made her eyes twinkle like the discussion of bowel movements. The size, shape, consistency, and color all revealed a person's state of health or lack thereof. Interpreting bowel movements was a fine art, and Maura read them as finely as a gifted fortune teller read tea-leaves.

She could tell you what disease was most likely lurking nearby (she experienced all the symptoms regularly, and could easily spot them in others). Today, for instance, would be ripe for contracting pneumonia. The thick, phlegmy, tropical air was loaded with pollutants headed straight for your lungs. The rain was falling so hard it would soak you to the bone. And as Maura was headed for the bridge club for her weekly game, she would be sitting at a table all day while air conditioners froze her bones;½everything you need for pneumonia. In preparation for venturing out, Maura reached down and cinched the belt on her raincoat ever tighter, hoping to ward off the unruly advances of the grasping wet wind.

By the time Priscilla's silver Mercedes pulled up, Maura's mind had slipped into replaying one of her favorite death fantasies. When she wasn't concentrating on symptoms, she frequently imagined her own death filled with drama and poignancy. The ominous din of the storm was the perfect backdrop for Maura's daydream. She saw herself heroically walking to the car, being struck down by lightning, and being taken away in an ambulance. After imagining her death, her mind flashed to the wake. She saw her friends gathered around her casket, mourning the quiet greatness of her modest (but heroic) life. Maura had at least one death fantasy a day. While they all shared an identical ending, Maura found it profoundly satisfying to vary the Death's modus operandi. She did not recall whether she had ever been struck by lightning before. This might be a first.

Priscilla Bristlemore proudly parked her sleek new car in front of Maura's house. It had a fine interior, complete with supple black leather and mahogany trim. This was Prissy's pride and joy;½she loved her car above all else. It was who she was. Prissy flipped down the driver's side sun visor and clicked on the bright little vanity light. She checked her deep, rich, burgundy lipstick. The palette of her make-up was skillfully matched with the hue of her dyed sable hair. Unfortunately for Prissy, her lovely, soft, 70-year-old skin had not also been dyed to match. The combination of white skin and deep lipstick was startling, if you weren't prepared for it. Prissy did not yet understand the silver luminosity of graceful age.

The horn honked loudly. Maura dragged herself out of her daydream and braced for the soggy journey from the house to the car. Giving her belt the last cinch, she turtled her head into her collar and carefully navigated the walk. Priscilla pushed the car door open, knowing Maura's frail arms would struggle with it. The car door hung in the rain. Every raindrop within a ten-mile radius found its way into the open silver door. By the time Maura got to the car, the seat was drenched, the carpet was soaked, and the dashboard had trickles of rain dripping to the floorboard. Priscilla frantically mopped up the seat with an old towel, grumbling under her breath.

“Maura! For Heaven's sake, get in and close the door!” Prissy scolded.

Maura sat on the seat, gathered her legs in after herself, and placed both her hands on the door handle. She pulled. The door didn't move. The rain fell. “Maura, close the door!” Prissy yelled.

Maura let out a big breath and pulled the door closed. She peered out from under her dripping raincoat. “Whew, I made it. It's dangerous out there,” she said. “You know, I could have been hit by lightning,” she pointed out, “and in my condition I'm especially susceptible to electric shock.”

Prissy rolled her eyes and sighed futilely. “Well then, what took you so long?” she said, her voice weary with exasperation. Maura strapped herself into the car seat like an astronaut about to be catapulted into space and Prissy sped off for the bridge game.

“Prissy,” Maura raised her eyebrows and paused for effect, “remember, the tortoise won the race.”

Priscilla squinted through her glasses. She had received many compliments on these lenses, because although they were bifocals, the line was not apparent. It was a much younger look, Prissy thought. They chattered all the way to

the club. For all of Maura's annoying idiosyncrasies, and imaginary ailments, she was one of the best bridge players at the club. And winning was very important to Prissy. She would gladly trade listening to Maura talk about some disease, or morosely ponder her own death, for the satisfaction of winning at the club. Prissy had evaluated this trade-off frequently.

By the time they got to the club, most of the other regulars were already there. Eileen Gready hovered territorially around the luncheon food next to the coffee machine. She greeted Maura and Prissy between mouthfuls of spinach dip which she had slathered on an unsuspecting slice of bread.

“Hello there, ladies,” she said, sending out food-laden spittle like a goodwill messenger. “Nice weather,” she added with a laugh that revealed her personal favorites from the luncheon selection. Prissy answered with a limp smile that fell short of disguising her disgust. Eileen turned and steered her graying bulk toward the far end of the food counter. Prissy immediately checked her crisp linen lapels for food particles. “That woman eats like she plays bridge. She hogs everything,” said Prissy distastefully.

“Yes, she is a hand-hog, isn't she?” Maura reflected.

“She certainly is. Eileen steals every hand she possibly can. I don't know how Gilda can stand it.”

“I would not like to play with her,” Maura confirmed. “She thinks she plays better than anyone else.”

“Yes. I don't know why she feels she has to declare all the hands. Gilda is a pretty good player.” Priscilla had a hard time imagining playing with Eileen.

“Yes, she is a good player,” Maura said after consideration. “But she's too flashy. She tries to make the showy play, even when it's not there,” Maura pinpointed her own thoughts.

“Maura, my hair has completely wilted from the humidity and the rain, and you know how that bothers me. I must go freshen up before game time; otherwise, I'll never be able to concentrate on anything,” Prissy stated. She drew up the well-groomed bearing of her seventy years, head high, chin tucked, glasses perched, and strode regally to the bathroom. She did not look in need of freshening.

Maura methodically made her way to the teapot. She believed many foods led to a premature death, so, despite her doctor's assurances of good health, she had placed herself on a very restricted diet. At the club, she drank decaffeinated tea, lukewarm. She was slowly carrying her tea to the table when she heard the bold laugh of Gilda Shein reverberating through the bridge club. Gilda passed out her Hollywood kisses like invitations to a large, but still exclusive, gala. Midway through the procession her diamond bracelet snagged someone's sweater, which prompted a comedy of errors involving everybody's jewelry getting caught on everybody's clothing. This performance offered the perfect opportunity for the communal comparison of gems, gold and the occasional strand of pearls. Gilda shone brightly under the hot light of envy; each plump, milky hand swathed in translucent rocks and shiny metal.

The din began to die down and Gilda, not wanting to leave the spotlight just yet, reached into her handbag and withdrew a newspaper clipping. Raising it into the air like a speaker's wine glass, she proclaimed, “Wait till you see this amazing hand! Has anyone seen this hand? It happened Saturday at the sectional, and I was there.” She mooted the clipping out onto the table so all could see the hand, and began to read,...

	♠106532		Vul: Both
	♥--		Dlr: South
	♦AKQJ10532		
	♣--		
♠AKQJ9874		♠--	
♥--		♥--	
♦--		♦98764	
♣AKQ106		♣J9875432	
	♠--		
	♥AKQJ1098765432		
	♦--		
	♣--		
WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
7♥ !!!	7♠	Pass	2♠ !!
Double	Redouble	All Pass	Pass

At last weekend's sectional in Miami, a famous hand somehow found its way into the tournament. When the South players on Board Four picked up their cards, they received the shock of a lifetime. Most simply opened the bidding with seven hearts and were disappointed to hear West overcall seven spades. Some of the North's doubled, and all around the room North-South were plus either 100 or 200.

The very same deal, right down to the last spot card, originally appeared in the classic bridge book, *Right Through the Pack*, by Robert Darvas. In the fictitious story, the bidding followed the unbelievable sequence shown in the auction diagram. The South player, an "inveterate psycher," opened the South hand with a strong two bid in SPADES! He figured that he'd sneak up on the opponents and end up getting doubled in seven hearts. West played a joke of his own by jumping to seven HEARTS! If he got doubled he planned to run to seven SPADES. Meanwhile, this "counter-psyche" had the effect of eliciting a seven-spade call from North! West doubled and North redoubled. West, suspecting that all the missing spades were in dummy, led the spade seven. Declarer played low from dummy, and went on to lose all thirteen tricks. He was down 13 doubled and redoubled minus 100 honors for a loss of a record 7700 points.

It was not known how this famous deal could appear as a computer-generated hand in the tournament. According to the *Encyclopedia of Bridge*, the odds of this occurring are 1 in 52,644,737,765,488,792,839,237,440,000. League officials are investigating."

Immediately the women's voices sparked the fire of controversy, each person offering an explanation for the appearance of the hand at the tournament. The speculations popped and crackled amidst the electric hum of hand analysis. Priscilla came back from the powder room looking, ironically, exactly the same as she had when she went in. She fluttered over to the excitement and alighted near Gilda's shoulder. Prissy looked down and gulped, "I think I would faint if I picked up 13 of a suit. Did you actually play this, Gilda?" she asked, with a new admiration for her friend.

“I did. When I played it,” Gilda beamed beneath her perfectly coifed silver wig, “I opened seven hearts.” She waited for the women to coo at such a gutsy bid (rarely did anybody actually open at the seven level). “West doubled me,” she narrated theatrically, sending a buzz through the crowd, “and I made 2470 for a top!” Gilda’s pride bubbled out of every pore. Her friends showered her with congratulations, and quickly returned to wondering how that hand had come up in the sectional. Prissy walked over to her partner and said, “Maura, I’m not sure I understand that story from Right Through the Pack. Why would anyone open two spades with 13 hearts?”

“Oh, well, the guy with the hearts was trying to trick the other fellow. He wanted to get doubled in seven hearts. But his opponent, West, was a gambler with a sense of humor. So he bid the heart suit as a joke. The bidding went around, and eventually it paid off for West,” Maura chuckled to herself.

“Imagine, plus 7700,” Prissy said foggily, starry-eyed.

“Yes, imagine. There’s something funny about that hand showing up in the sectional. Mark my words, it’s not natural,” Maura’s heavy heart dragged her voice low.

“Oh Maura,” Prissy teased lightly, “it’s just a coincidence. Have some fun.”

END OF CHAPTER ONE