

# The Double Agent

*The characters in this story bear no resemblance to any person living or working outside Aylesbury.*

The EBU's initiative to have bridge taught in schools is bearing fruit. The Aylesbury Academy for the Moderately Gifted (known as Aylesbury College until renamed under a recent government edict) has just finished its first year of bridge lessons, and I was invited to give a talk.

The form teacher, Dawn Martin, met me at the metal scanner and took me to the classroom where a dozen or so teenagers were assembled.

"Let's start with a problem," I said, writing two hands and a bidding sequence up on the board.

North-South Game.		♠ 54	
Dealer North.		♥ Q3	
		♦ AJ3	
		♣ KQ10862	
♠ 8			
♥ K106542			
♦ K10764			
♣ 9			
West	North	East	South
	1♣	Pass	1♠
2NT	Pass	4♥	4♠
Pass	Pass	5♥	5♠
All pass			

"You are West and you bid an unusual 2NT to show a distributional hand with the red suits," I explained, "and your partner carries the bidding up to the five level. You lead the ♣9. Your partner wins with the ace and South drops the jack. Now your partner plays the ♥A and declarer follows with the eight. Which card should you play?"

"The ten, innit, to say you like the suit 'cos, like, you've got the king," said PJ.

"But you don't want him to play another heart," said Ian, one of the swots sitting at the front. "Partner obviously has four of them and it will be ruffed."

"So play the two to tell partner you *don't* have the king," said Barry, the only boy with his shirt tucked in and his tie on properly. "And he'll play a club."

"I agree with Barry," said Ian. "But for a different reason. The two is a low card and it says you want a low suit – a club."

"If you play the two, partner might think you are showing an odd number and play another heart," said Michael, joining in.

"I know," exclaimed Ian, "So you play the four! That shows an even number *and* it's a low card."

"Nah, the four's too small," said John, who was sitting at the back of the class with Gill. "If you want partner to know you have six hearts and get him to return a club, you must play the six of hearts!"

"No, John," said Gill. "Don't you remember that lesson about a defensive card denying the card below? If you play the six it denies the five. Play the five."

"Well, we've heard arguments for nearly every card," I summarised. "It seems to depend on whether you are playing length, attitude or suit preferences signals. And whether you and your partner are on the same wave-length."

"What's the answer?" they all chorused. "There must be an answer."

"What about the king?" asked Karen, who hadn't said anything so far.

"Why do you say that?" I asked.

"Well, it's the only card that hasn't been mentioned," she said, to good-natured jeers from her classmates.

"Hey, that's not such a bad idea," said Michael. "Your partner will know that you don't want a heart because the queen's in dummy and ..."

"Yeah," said PJ excitedly. "... and, like, playing a spade or a diamond would, like, be silly, so he'd have to play a club. Totes amaze!"

"Well done, Karen," I said. "So it doesn't matter what signalling system you are playing, the king is the right card."

The class settled down and I moved on to the next topic. "Which bid do you think has the most meanings?" I asked.

"Two clubs," suggested Gordon. "Acol, Benji, Checkback, Drury, Extended Stayman ..."

"What about Double?" I interrupted, worried that he might have 26 answers.

"That's not a bid," said Gordon, "It's a call."

I resisted the temptation to give him a clip round the ear. I understand such things aren't done in schools any more.

"Miss Martin tells me you've done doubles, so let's make this like one of those TV talent shows. You can come up one at a time to answer the problems, and Miss Martin and I will be the judges."

I wrote a nice easy hand up on the board as Gill came and stood in front of the class. "The hand on your right opens one heart. What do you bid and what is it called?"

"I double," said Gill. "And it's called a take-away double."

"That should be take-out, Gill," corrected Miss Martin.

"My mum says take-out is American, Miss," replied Gill. "She says we should say take-away in England."

There was more trouble later with negative doubles; apparently Gill's mum thought they were bad English. "Oh, you can't not play negative doubles," I quipped, but I don't think anyone noticed.

Everyone enjoyed themselves as we worked our way through a selection of doubles. The answers included a couple that were new to me. I hadn't heard of compulsive doubles or lightning doubles before, although, come to think of it, I have seen both of them in action at the table.

"That talent show with the doubles went down well," said Dawn, as she showed me out after the class. "It is a shame more people don't play bridge, it would make a great TV programme."

"Yes," I agreed. "We could call it *The Double Agent*."

"That sounds too much like a spy series," she replied. "What about *The X Factor*?"

*Simon Cochemé* May 2015