



David Bird

# Christmas Morning

## at St Hilda's

IT was the tradition of the St Hilda's Convent to hold an 18-board pairs session on Christmas morning. They would then have plenty to discuss during the splendid roast turkey lunch that was to follow. Sister Brigid and Sister Cathleen, two of the convents' novices, looked somewhat nervous as they took their seats to face Sister Grace and the ancient Mother of Discipline. The MD's black punishment book was there on the table, under her convention card. Could she not, for just this one day a year, have left it in her cell?

Sister Grace smiled warmly at the two novices. 'I believe this will be your first Christmas lunch with us,' she said. 'It's the only meal of the year where we permit ourselves more than one course. I expect you're looking forward to it.'

'Yes, Sister,' the two novices chimed in unison.

The Mother of Discipline pointed a gnarled finger at the first board and the players leaned forward to extract these cards:

E/W Game. Dealer South.			
		♠ 5	
		♥ K 6 3	
		♦ K 6 4 2	
		♣ 10 8 6 5 4	
♠ K 9 6 3		♠ Q 10 7 4 2	
♥ 10 8 4		♥ Q	
♦ Q 10 7		♦ A J 5	
♣ K J 2		♣ Q 9 7 3	
		♠ A J 8	
		♥ A J 9 7 5 2	
		♦ 9 8 3	
		♣ A	

West	North	East	South
Mother of Discipline	Sister Cathleen	Sister Grace	Sister Brigid
Pass	2♥	Pass	3♥
Pass	4♥	All Pass	

'I've never heard such poor bidding!'

declared the Mother of Discipline, tossing the four of trumps onto the table. 'If you want to make a game try, Sister Brigid, you should bid a new suit.'

'Oh yes, I see, Reverend Mother,' the dark-haired novice replied, 'but I wanted to agree hearts as trumps.'

'Foolish girl!' exclaimed the Mother of Discipline. 'Your partner had already done that.'

'She had, yes, Reverend Mother, but I wanted to agree them as trumps too.'

Unable to suppress her irritation, the Mother of Discipline beckoned for play to proceed. Declarer played low from dummy on the trump lead and won East's queen with the ace. What now?

Sister Brigid paused to make a plan for the contract. She had five possible losers in her hand – two spades and three diamonds. Perhaps she could ruff the two spades in dummy. Yes, and then she could lead a diamond towards the king. If the MD held the ace of diamonds, she would lose only two diamond tricks. Brilliant!

Sister Brigid cashed the ace of spades and ruffed a spade with dummy's six of trumps. She returned to her hand with the ace of clubs and ruffed her last spade with . . . oh dear, it would have to be with the king. Well, maybe trumps would break 2-2.

The novice returned to her hand with a club ruff and played the jack of trumps. Good news was not forthcoming; East showed out on this trick and declarer would now have to lose a trump trick to West's ten. The last hope was to lead a diamond to the king. This enterprising manoeuvre failed too and the game went one down.

'Your play was as awful as the bidding!' exclaimed the Mother of Discipline. 'For Heaven's sake, child, you must win the trump lead with dummy's king.'

All memory of the deal had flown from Sister Brigid's mind. 'Yes, I see, Reverend Mother,' she replied. 'Win with the king.'

'Ace of spades, ruff a spade low, ace of clubs, ruff a spade low,' continued the Mother of Discipline. 'Then you return to

your hand with a club ruff and draw my remaining trumps with the ace and jack.'

Sister Grace nodded her agreement. 'The Reverend Mother wouldn't lead a singleton trump,' she said. 'And she certainly wouldn't lead away from the queen of trumps. My queen must be singleton or doubleton and there's no need to finesse against it.'

'Ah, yes,' said Sister Brigid. 'Singleton or doubleton, that's very true, Sister.'

'It could hardly be more obvious to rise with the king,' muttered the Mother of Discipline.

Halfway through the session, the Mother of Discipline faced Sister Benedict and Sister Myrtle. Despite submitting themselves to an endless stream of diets, or so they claimed, the two nuns seemed to be larger than ever.

'May I offer you a Rowntree's fruit gum, Reverend Mother?' asked Sister Myrtle.

The Mother of Discipline had more than once noted that she was only ever offered one of Sister Myrtle's fruit gums when there was a green one on top. Why they made green ones was a mystery to all concerned; no-one seemed to like them. 'Surely you're not eating sweets only an hour before our splendid Christmas lunch?' she said. 'It's no wonder you're the size you are!'

'That's not a very charitable observation, Reverend Mother,' Sister Myrtle replied. 'Tiny little sweets, they are. No more than five calories each, you can be sure.'

Sister Benedict came to her partner's aid. 'What a thing to say, Reverend Mother,' she said, 'on the very week when Sister Myrtle made a special effort and lost five pounds in weight.'

The Mother of Discipline surveyed the two nuns suspiciously. 'Really?' she said.

Looking somewhat proud of herself, Sister Myrtle took up the story. 'I weighed myself every day for a week, first thing when I woke up. I lost two pounds on Monday, two pounds on Wednesday and one pound on Friday.'

'You see?' exclaimed Sister Benedict. 'A total of five pounds.'

The Mother of Discipline was unconvinced. 'What about the other four days?' she demanded.

'Ah, yes, well, I did put on a few pounds on the other four days,' Sister Myrtle replied. 'But, taking all the readings together, I still finished about even – near enough.'

This was the first board of the round:

**Game All. Dealer South.**

	♠ K 4		
	♥ 8 4		
	♦ J 5 4 2		
	♣ A Q 7 5 2		
♠ 9 8 3	♦ N	♠ 10 7 5 2	
♥ Q J 10 3	W	♥ 9 6 5 2	
♦ K 10 8 7	S	♦ 6	
♣ 8 6	E	♣ J 10 9 4	
	♠ A Q J 6		
	♥ A K 7		
	♦ A Q 9 3		
	♣ K 3		

West	North	East	South
Sister Myrtle	Sister Grace	Sister Benedict	Mother of Discipline
Pass	2♦	Pass	2NT
Pass	6NT	All Pass	

Sister Myrtle led the queen of hearts and down went the dummy. 'Is that not worth a positive response, Sister?' she enquired. 'Two Clubs, Three Clubs. That's how we would have bid it.'

Sister Grace could summon little interest in the bidding methods of such a modest pair. 'What a dull world it would be if we all bid the same,' she replied.

The Mother of Discipline won the heart lead and noted that she had ten tricks on top. There was no hurry to test the clubs; indeed, there was every chance of establishing two extra tricks in the diamond suit. If diamonds were 3-2 or East held K-10-x-x, the contract would soon be hers. She played the ace of diamonds, drawing two lowly spot cards, and continued with a low diamond towards the dummy. Sister Myrtle could not afford to rise with the king or declarer would have the three diamond tricks that were needed. She played low and dummy's jack won the trick, East showing out.

Adjusting the position of her thick-lensed spectacles, the Mother of Discipline turned her attention to the club suit. West showed out on the third round but she could then concede a club trick to the safe

East hand. Four clubs, two diamonds and six winners in the majors brought the total to twelve. The slam had been made.

'Well played, Reverend Mother,' said Sister Grace. 'If you begin with a diamond to the queen, you go down.'

'The play was obvious,' grunted the Mother of Discipline.

Sister Grace studied the travelling score-sheet. 'I fear some of our lesser performers have found twelve tricks beyond them. Two pairs went down in 6♦, too.'

'Foolish contract when the values are there for 6NT,' observed the Mother of Discipline.

As the players took their seats for the last round of the event, the smell of roast turkey was drifting up from the kitchens one floor below. The Mother Superior, whose blue robe was as crisply laundered as ever, smiled benevolently. 'A Christmas lunch smells as wonderful as it tastes,' she declared. 'How lucky we all are.'

Her partner, the sour-faced Sister Thomas, leaned forward. 'Sprouts don't smell very pleasant, Reverend Mother,' she observed. 'Mind you, they taste fairly awful too.'

'I'm not sure that you have fully caught the spirit of the occasion,' the Mother Superior reprimanded. 'The quality of Sister Gretel's vegetables is nothing short of a miracle, when you bear in mind the poor soil that we have here.'

This board was before them:

**E/W Game. Dealer South.**

	♠ A Q 3		
	♥ Void		
	♦ A K Q J 9 3		
	♣ A K 5 3		
♠ K	♦ N	♠ J 10 8 7	
♥ K Q J 10 9 8 7 4	W	♥ 2	
♦ 8	S	♦ 10 7 5 2	
♣ Q 7 4	E	♣ J 10 8 2	
	♠ 9 6 5 4 2		
	♥ A 6 5 3		
	♦ 6 4		
	♣ 9 6		

West	North	East	South
Mother of Discipline	Sister Thomas	Sister Grace	Mother Superior
4♥	2♣	Pass	2♦
Pass	6♠	Pass	4♠
		All Pass	

The Mother of Discipline led the king of hearts and Sister Thomas laid out her dummy. 'A grand slam is there if your

trumps are good, Reverend Mother. I wasn't sure how to bid it.'

The Mother Superior smiled. 'If I manage to make thirteen tricks, it will be an even greater miracle than Sister Gretel's sprouts,' she replied. 'Twelve tricks may be possible, with a little help from above.'

After a few moments' thought, the Mother Superior made the strange-looking discard of a diamond from the dummy. She won the trick with the ace of hearts and led a trump, the king appearing from a somewhat disgruntled Mother of Discipline. 'Is that the help you were looking for?' she said.

The Mother Superior won with dummy's ace of trumps. The king of trumps had surely started life as a singleton, in which case East now held J-10-8 of trumps over dummy's Q-3. The only hope of making the contract was an endplay in the trump suit.

The Mother Superior cashed the two top clubs, ruffed a club in her hand and returned to dummy with the ace of diamonds. Because she had discarded a diamond rather than a club on the first trick, she was then able to ruff another club in her hand. She returned to dummy with a diamond and cashed two more rounds of the suit, discarding hearts. These cards were still to be played:

	♠ Q 3		
	♥ —		
	♦ 9		
	♣ —		
♠ —	♦ N	♠ J 10 8	
♥ Q J 10	W	♥ —	
♦ —	S	♦ —	
♣ —	E	♣ —	
	♠ 9 6		
	♥ 6		
	♦ —		
	♣ —		

'Nine of diamonds, please, Sister,' instructed the Mother Superior.

Sister Grace ruffed with the jack and exited with the eight of trumps. Confident how the cards lay, the Mother Superior played the nine of trumps from her hand. West showed out and the slam was made.

'Lucky view in trumps, I must say,' said the Mother of Discipline. 'I might easily have false-carded the king of trumps from a doubleton.'

'So you might,' the Mother Superior replied. 'And if you'd found such a splendid defence, Reverend Mother, I'd be happy to go one down!' □