

THE THISTLETREE SYSTEM

YOU'RE CHEATING !

by Jack Goodman and Albert Rice

You may not know it, but it's ten to one
that you play thistletree bridge.

We all know her. Let's call her Mrs. Thistletree, because that isn't her name. She's very virtuous. She's a bulwark of the D. A. R., and a pillar of the neighborhood charities. Once every year she informs the graduating class of the local high school that honesty is the best policy.

Yet every single time Mrs. Thistletree sits down for a session of contract bridge, she does things which, if attempted in a faro joint of the old West, would have resulted in her speedy departure from town on a rail.

Mrs. Thistletree employs three weapons at a bridge table - tones, gestures, and expressions. When using all three at once, she conveys more information to her co-worker across the table than experts do by a series of the most brilliant bids imaginable.

She calls a spade a spade - but she has a lot of ways of doing it. In any one of the major systems of contract, a bid of one spade means that the declarer possesses from two and one-half to five quick tricks. The Thistletree System does away with all that vagueness. If her partner has played with her long enough, she can tell within a half-trick what cards Mrs. Thistletree holds.

Suppose Mrs. Thistletree sits bolt upright in her chair, leans forward eagerly, and says buoyantly, ***I bid one spade, partner!*** That means a four-and-one-half-trick hand, not quite enough for a two-bid. Conversely, when she coughs deprecatingly and murmurs, *One spade* in a small, hushed voice, as if she'd just learned of the death of a dear one, it is clear that she has opened the bidding with a minimum holding.

These are conventions that you won't find in any bridge book but Mrs. Thistletree's system is the one which is really played more widely than Culbertson's or Sims'. To list all her methods would require several books. Here we have time for only a few of the most efficient, any one of which when used judiciously, and at the right moment - is guaranteed to swing the tide of conflict in favor of the user.

There is, for example, ***The Soul-in-Torment Pass***. This is employed only when firm handling of the partner is imperative. Mrs. Thistletree's partner, let's say, has gone on a bidding spree and has ignored the dour frowns and irritable passes which greeted each declaration. At last the partner bids five hearts and the opponent on the right says five spades. Mrs. Thistletree's relief that the five hearts has been overcalled is tempered by a gnawing fear that her doltish co-worker will bid once more. Now comes *The Soul-in-Torment Pass*, uttered with a frenzied twitch of the shoulder muscles and a tortured little laugh.

This indicates even to the most obtuse partner: *I know that you have gone completely mad and will probably keep bidding on and on, but don't expect anything from me. If you don't pass now, you belong in an asylum!*

The Amazed Query is another powerful weapon. Opponent on the right bids one diamond. Mrs. Thistlethorn finds herself with six diamonds headed by the ace-queen and an outside ace. In a voice in which incredulity, geniality, and high spirits are nicely blended, she says to the opponent, **You bid one diamond?**

This is far more effective than the most emphatic double. Although addressed to the opponent, it is actually directed to the partner and conveys the glad tidings: *But that's my bid. If you have any sort of holding, partner, this is going to be too, too wonderful!*

The Happy Nod, although often employed in the bidding, is an even more powerful weapon on the defense. Suppose the partner lays down an ace and Mrs. Thistlethorn is unable to signal that she has the king-queen because she has no other card higher than a four in the suit. This emergency is easily met. She now places the four-spot on the table with a sharp click, smiles a slow, sweet smile, and raises and lowers her head graciously.

If, however, she doesn't want that suit returned and is forced to play a *high* card, you can expect **The Pursued Lip**, a grim gesture which says very plainly: *If you persist in this blind folly, we will be ruined. Pay no attention to this discard.*

A less forceful, but just as efficient, way of handling the same situation is **The Defected Discard**. This involves flicking the high card disinterestedly on the table, trying to slip it under the others so it won't be visible. Then, when partner asks, *What did you discard?* she answers dully, **Who? Me? I don't remember.**

The Part Score Wigwag is another emergency measure. Mrs. Thistlethorn and partner have, let's say, ninety points toward game. Partner opens the bidding with one of a suit and Mrs. Thistlethorn has everything in her hand but the four aces in the other deck and wants to try out slam possibilities. She also wants to make certain that her partner will realize that the subsequent bid is based on knowledge of the score. So she leans forward and closely scrutinizes the score pad, making sure that she catches her partner's eye. If she is unable to do this, she will then say firmly and with emphasis on every syllable, **Let's see - we have ninety on frame? One spade puts us out, I bid two spades!**

Another convention which calls for fast thinking is **The Determined Double**. The opponents flounder beyond their depth and are doubled by Mrs. Thistlethorn. Glancing in a satisfied way across the table, she sees to her horror that her partner is debating another bid. Stern measures being necessary to avoid this, Mrs. Thistlethorn doesn't wait for that bid, but says, hastily and significantly, **It is my lead, I believe.** This means, of course; *Partner, if you bid again and let these suckers out of my double, I'll never talk to you as long as I live.*

As a matter of fact, Mrs. Thistlethorn's doubles are invariably airtight. Although the printed rules mention only two types, she has about twenty. No partner of hers is ever in doubt as to whether her double is business or informative. Sometimes her doubles are informative even when the bidding has reached the six-level. A curled lip, a snort, a shrug, a raised eyebrow, a sharp whistle - each of these helps convey to the partner just what Mrs. Thistlethorn expects to do to the enemy.

There is no situation with which her system cannot cope. Are you her partner, worried whether or not she has made a psychic bid? Have no fear - she'll remove all doubt from your mind by a gesture peculiarly her own, a slow weaving of the torso back and forth, accompanied by a roguish smile and a tongue in cheek. Are you playing the hand, with Mrs. Thistlethorn as the dummy, and are you worried about which to take a finesse? Just notice which of the opponents' hands she into lengthily. That'll be the one that contains the missing honor.

Even when these more subtle methods can't be used, Mrs. Thistle tree can always fall back on the more obvious ones: ***The Simple Groan, The Dismayed Outcry, The Gnashed Teeth***. But don't be too critical of her. It is just possible that you yourself use a few of her little tricks - unconsciously, of course. There are few bridge players - who don't. That's why the Thistle tree System has caught on so widely., and why her methods will be used universally until someone invents a robot player, a thing of steel and solder, soulless and emotionless.

And when that day arrives, the robot, deprived of the many advantages of the Thistle tree System, will almost certainly play a mediocre game.



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Jack Goodman and Albert Rice, both short story authors and published authors, cooperated on many dual publications, mainly the magazines of that era of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Such magazines were: *Cosmopolitan*, *Colliers*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and the *Delineator Magazine*.