

# 85. Dead Man's Hand

*By Ron Klinger*

As dealer, what would you do with:

♠ KJ985  
♥ K762  
♦ 85  
♣ K10

In standard methods, the hand falls just short of an opening bid. Only 10 HCP plus one for the 5-card suit is not quite enough. If you use the Rule of 22 (or 21½), it still falls short. (Rule of 22: Add your HCP total to the number of cards in your two long suits plus your quick tricks. If the total is 22+, you have a 1-suit opening in first or second seat. Aggressive approach: With a total of 21½, you can open.)

The hand above has 10 HCP + 9 for length (5 spades and 4 hearts) + 1½ quick tricks = 20½. That strongly suggests that a pass is indicated.

In practice, in a rubber bridge game, South opened 1♠. This leads to the next problem:

North  
♠ A1063  
♥ 1085  
♦ 4  
♣ A9842

South  
♠ KJ985  
♥ K762  
♦ 85  
♣ K10

West	North	East	South
2♦	4♠	All Pass	1♠

West leads the ♦A and switches to the ♣J. Plan the play.

There is no absolutely sure line of play. You have to try to place the missing cards. The ♦A lead makes it likely that West has the ♦K. Given the 2♦ overcall, the ♥A will probably be with West. Unless West is playing a tricky game, the ♣J switch could be a singleton or top from a doubleton and marks the ♣Q with East.

What about the ♠Q? With nine trumps, one normally plays ace and king and hopes the queen falls singleton. The switch to the ♣J might persuade you otherwise. West is not likely to have a 3-4-5-1 pattern. With that, West might make a takeout double and remove a club bid to diamonds. West might be 3-3-6-1 or maybe 3-3-5-2, but 2-3-6-2 is also possible. You will have to guess the spade position, but given the 2♦ overcall and the ♣J switch, it is not outlandish to play West to have three spades.

This was the full deal:

	North	
	♠ A1063	
	♥ 1085	
	♦ 4	
	♣ A9842	
West		East
♠ Q72		♠ 4
♥ AJ3		♥ Q94
♦ AQ1092		♦ KJ763
♣ J6		♣ Q753
	South	
	♠ KJ985	
	♥ K762	
	♦ 85	
	♣ K10	

If you choose to play West for the ♠Q and East for the ♣Q, you would win trick 2 with the ♣K, cash ♠K, finesse the ♠10 and cash the ♠A. Continue with the ♣A and the ♣9. If East plays low, discard a heart. Play another club and ruff East's ♣Q. Ruff your diamond loser in dummy and ditch another heart on dummy's fifth club. If East covers the ♣9, you ruff and then ruff your diamond loser in dummy, followed by the ♣8 and ♣4, discarding two hearts from hand. You follow up with a heart to the king. That loses, but you have made ten tricks, losing only a diamond and two hearts.

At the table, that is not how the play went. Declarer did win trick 2 with the ♣K, but he continued with a spade to the ace and a spade back to the king. South ruffed his diamond loser in dummy, followed by the ♣A and the ♣9. East covered with the ♣Q and South ruffed. There was good news – dummy had two club winners – and seriously bad news – there was no entry to dummy any more.

South played a trump. West won and switched to hearts. Declarer won with the king and returned a heart. Declarer lost a spade, two hearts and a diamond, one down.

In my young days, I studied at Sydney Law School. After being a solicitor for a brief time, I was offered a government research grant into *Computers in the Service of Law*. This was back in the 1960s. I accepted the 3-year term and 2-year extension and for five years I was a lecturer in the Department of Jurisprudence and worked on the research project. In the middle of this period, I was invited by the NSW Bridge Association to teach bridge to beginners.

That was when I came across the above deal, which played a central role in the 'Bennett Murder Case'. You can find references and details of the case in *The Official Encyclopedia of Bridge* (page 29 in the seventh edition, elsewhere alphabetically in earlier editions) and in *Bridge Play from A to Z*, by George Coffin at pages 151-152. Coffin thought it might have been named *The Three Kings Murder Case*, because in 1931, John S. Bennett, a prosperous perfume salesman of Kansas City, USA, was shot dead by his wife because he opened 1♠ on three kings and failed to make the 4♠ contract which she bid.

According to a report by Ely Culbertson, the game continued after this deal and was punctuated by constant caustic remarks by Mrs. Bennett about bum bridge players, aimed at her husband, and his no-less-acrid replies. Eventually these remarks broke up the game. While the other couple, Mr. and Mrs. Hoffman were preparing to leave, Mrs. Bennett went to her mother's bedroom, picked up a handgun from the dresser and came back to the bridge room. Seeing his wife armed, Mr. Bennett ran into the bathroom and slammed the door behind him.

Mrs. Bennett fired two shots through the door. Mr. Bennett staggered out, fell into chair, moaned, 'She got me,' and died. Police were called and found Mrs. Bennett bent over her husband and sobbing wildly.

I used this story in Law School and in my beginner classes, but slightly modified. I would say, 'Mrs. Bennett suggested that his declarer play might have been better. Mr. Bennett replied that her bidding left something to be desired, although the language used was not as mild. Mrs. Bennett then rushed to a bedroom, found a gun and shot her husband at the bridge table. That broke up the game.'

	North	
	♠ A1063	
	♥ 1085	
	♦ 4	
	♣ A9842	
West		East
♠ Q72		♠ 4
♥ AJ3		♥ Q94
♦ AQ1092		♦ KJ763
♣ J6		♣ Q753
	South	
	♠ KJ985	
	♥ K762	
	♦ 85	
	♣ K10	

In my beginners' classes, I use the story as a warning against playing bridge with your spouse. Mrs. Bennett was tried for murder and acquitted. For the law students, the defence of 'irresistible impulse' existed in USA law in the 1930s. I thought that the defence counsel for Mrs. Bennett must have stacked the jury with bridge players who could well understand the concept of 'irresistible impulse' in wanting to kill your bridge partner.

A further story, perhaps apocryphal, exists that Mrs. Bennett, acquitted of murder, was able to collect insurance on her husband's death. The coroner found that Mr. Bennett had died accidentally. In his insurance policy was a double-indemnity clause, which stated that in case of accidental death, his nominated beneficiary (Mrs. Bennett) could claim an amount for twice the insured amount.

The evidence and story of the shooting is much longer than presented here and can be found at the two references on the previous page. George Coffin in *Bridge Play from A to Z* finds a 'strange resemblance to the Dead Man's Hand of Wild Bill Hickock, who was plugged in the back on 2nd August 1876 by a cowardly, tinhorn gambler, one Jack McCall, in Deadwood South Dakota, USA. . . Wild Bill's poker hand contained two aces and two eights and a fifth card, whose rank and suit are lost in the haze of the past. Aces and eights are still known as Dead Man's Hand. Mrs. Bennet also held two aces and two eights! Jack McCall was hanged, but Mrs. Bennett was acquitted.'

More recently, in the USA in 1994, Lorena Bobbitt was found not guilty under the defence of 'irresistible impulse'. In 2002, the defence irresistible impulse was abolished in California.

Actually, even failing in 4♠ was not such a bad result on today's deal. Had the Bennetts been better analysts, his life might have been longer. One down in 4♠ was better than 4♦, which is a potential contract for East-West and which can always be made. You will have noted that no vulnerability has been given for the deal. I could not find any reference to the actual vulnerability in the sources quoted.

Additional accounts of the Bennett case can be found in *While Rome Burns* (1934), by Alexander Woolcott and in *The Devil's Tickets* (2009) by Gary Pomerantz.

## Problems for Tomorrow:

1. East dealer : Both vulnerable

West	North	East	South
3♠	Dble <sup>(1)</sup>	Pass	1♦
(1) For takeout		?	

What would you do as East with:

♠ 975  
♥ A98  
♦ K76  
♣ 10932

2. South dealer : North-South vulnerable

West	North	East	South
2♠	?		1NT <sup>(1)</sup>
(1) 15-17			

What would you do as North with:

♠ Q72  
♥ K95  
♦ J5  
♣ Q10983

**Why not phone or email your bridge partners and compare your answers and your reasoning?**

*Wife: Did I get fat during quarantine?*

*Husband: You were never really skinny.*

*Time of death: 11.47pm, 25/4/20.*

*Cause of death: Coronavirus*