



Victor Mollo

Russian émigré Victor Mollo (1909 – 1987) is widely considered one of the funniest bridge authors, if not the funniest.

His fictional characters are so well known that they are now part of the bridge language. One hears ‘that was a rabbit line of play’, or maybe in a discussion about a ruling or director call ‘well, only a secretary bird would do that, others would turn a blind eye’.

The Mollo main characters are summarised well in Wikipedia. Here is a selection:

Hideous Hog by far the club’s best player, but also an insufferable shark who seeks to humiliate opponents for their mistakes.

Rueful Rabbit a small, timid man who can barely hold his cards together and can’t always tell diamonds from hearts, but has such incredible luck that even the cards he accidentally drops (several at once, occasionally) become the right ones.

Secretary Bird who knows the laws of the game perfectly and insists that they are applied to the letter, always to his own downfall.

Mollo’s family were from St. Petersburg, and they were wealthy. Wealthy enough to buy a train, masquerading as a Red Cross service, and escape the Russian Revolution using forged passports and papers, which as he explains in his autobiography were unintelligible by ‘the new masters’ because many of them could not read. And ‘...some of the best forgeries were, therefore, wasted on them. On the other hand, after four years of war everyone in Russia recognised The Red Cross symbol’.



After their escape the family lived in several cities in Europe including Stockholm and Paris, then finally made their home in England. The young Victor was sent to school here and later continued his education at the London School of Economics (which happened to have a fairly active bridge playing scene). No longer wealthy, his financial hardship meant that he had to make his own way in life. He worked as a film extra, taught Russian, gave bridge lessons, and did a range of other jobs.

Eventually he became a journalist. In 1940 he worked as sub editor at the BBC, in its European Service, later becoming an editor. When he retired in 1969 he became the bridge correspondent for *The Evening Standard*, and he later held the same position for *The Mail On Sunday* when it launched in 1982.

His first marriage was to bridge player Patricia Cohen in 1943; she later married Nico Gardener, and was the mother of Nicola Smith MBE. His second marriage was to Jeanne Forbes in 1952, she was known to friends as Squirrel.

He spoke many languages and was an eloquent writer. I wondered if his language skills were put to use during

WW2 in an intelligence or possibly code-breaking capacity. About 15 years ago I asked Tony Priday to find out, by talking to Squirrel, Victor’s widow. She replied that Victor had put himself forward as a volunteer in that type of role, but because he already had a job at the BBC, which contributed to the war effort in some way, it was not their practice to reassign people, and so he continued on at the BBC.

Mollo enjoyed some success in tournament bridge, winning Crockfords in 1948 for example, but he preferred rubber bridge and played regularly, finding it to be lucrative. As a writer of books, both instructive and humorous, he was and continues to be internationally well respected. He wrote dozens of books and articles, starting in 1947 and continuing until he died. Some have been posthumous collections of previously unpublished work.

‘My first book was an accident. Perhaps my second was another. Then it became a habit, which soon turned into an addiction. I could not stop writing and as happens with all addictions, I had to increase the dose.’

Victor Mollo
Confessions of an Addict

His obituary in *The Times* (30/9/1987) read: ‘Mollo was a man who enjoyed good food and wine; and he especially enjoyed the spirited debate which these could engender. He was a passionate and skilful apologist for several causes, in particular that the game should not be defiled by political interference. But however forcefully he aired his views, his remarks were always lightened by a puckish smile and the wit which was the hallmark of his writing’.