



Around the world with 52 cards

Travels and adventures of a bridge pro

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One of my regrets is never having had the opportunity to return to Ireland. I was in Killarney in 1991 for the European Championships. Its lush emerald fields dotted with thatched cottages, its pubs, music and poetry struck a deep chord within me.

I had arrived with expectations of green grass and plentiful potatoes packed in my mental baggage, but I left with much richer impressions of a land where good-humored people show pride in an ever-visible history and are so wonderfully keen to share stories with strangers and to make them feel truly welcome.

The tournament itself had many ups and downs but the after-game evening walks to the local watering hole, the picturesque Murphy's Bar, soon became our traditional way to talk about hands and the many might-have-beens, and also to join the happy sing-alongs that would spontaneously break out time and again among the Guinness drinking regulars.

We soon made friends with a few of them and they even arranged a day outing for us: a trip to Blarney Castle and its legendary stone. The stone is believed to be half of the Stone of Scone, which originally belonged to Scotland, and its mystic powers were associated with the coronation of many Scottish Kings. It crossed the Irish Sea when it was given to Cormac McCarthy, then King of Munster, by Rob-

ert the Bruce, as thanks for the support received in the battle of Bannockburn.

The origins of the Blarney Stone's magical properties aren't clear, but one legend has it that an old woman cast a spell on the stone to reward a king who had saved her from drowning. Kissing the stone while under the spell gave the king the ability to speak sweetly and convincingly. Would that translate to "faultless bidding" for us bridge players?

In an attempt to find out, I and a few hardy friends, locals and not, climbed 120 circular steps to the top of the 1446 Blarney Castle. Once we got to the top, I realized that something was terribly wrong: Someone had moved the stone to an impossible out-of-the-way place outside the battlements of the castle and, what was worse, people were still queuing up to get to it! I wondered if hanging upside down 70 feet above hard Irish turf was worth the gift of eloquence. With no time for dither-



ing, I lay on my back on the hard stone parapet walk and put my trust in the wizened Irishman who held my legs for tips gratefully given, as I grabbed two metal bars and did a backbend, planting a warm kiss on the cold stone. It worked for Winston Churchill, who kissed the stone in 1912, so why shouldn't it work for yours truly?

* * *

A couple of days later this hand came up in the match against Turkey and it would serve as an eloquent test to the effectiveness of the magic power of the Stone.

Imps • All vul • East dealer

Sitting South I held:

♠ QJ9874 ♥ A842 ♦ AKQ ♣ —

I opened 1♠ in second seat and rebid 2♥ over Ruti's (my partner) 2♣ reply. She now continued with 3♦ to which I answered 3♠, since I was not too keen to close the auction with 3NT when there were still great chances for slam if partner could contribute honor doubleton in spades and some useful cards in hearts or the top clubs. The bidding tray came back with 4♠.

Decision time: partner could arguably have a hand like this for me:

♠ QJ9874	♠ x x
♥ A842	♥ QJx
♦ AKQ	♦ J10x
♣ —	♣ AKJxx
1 ♠	2 ♣
2 ♥	3 ♦
3 ♠	4 ♠

Now even 4♠ could be in danger, but I reasoned that most of the time I would find

enough cards to give a five-level contract decent play. So (no doubt spurred on by confidence in the Blarney stone) I continued with 5♠ to ask partner about trump quality of her doubleton holding, and that was raised to 6♠. I imagine few people will be impressed with the 3♠-4♠-5♠-6♠ sequence that closed the bidding!

West led the ♣K:

North
 ♠ A K
 ♥ Q 6 3
 ♦ 9 7 5 3
 ♣ A J 7 5

♣ K

South
 ♠ Q J 9 8 7 4
 ♥ A 8 4 2
 ♦ A K Q
 ♣ —

	Ruti		Migry
West	North	East	South
—	—	pass	1 ♠
pass	2 ♣	pass	2 ♥
pass	3 ♦	pass	3 ♠
pass	4 ♠	pass	5 ♠
pass	6 ♠	(all pass)	

The prospects of the slam were not too bad (at least compared to my usual slams). Apparently I needed the ♥K onside, since even if the diamonds split 3-3, there's no entry to dummy after drawing trumps.

Do you agree or can you see a way to give yourself a slight edge over the 50% chance of the ♥K onside?

North
 ♠ A K
 ♥ Q 6 3
 ♦ 9 7 5 3
 ♣ A J 7 5

South
 ♠ Q J 9 8 7 4
 ♥ A 8 4 2
 ♦ A K Q
 ♣ —

One of the most useful tips that I remembered from my early days in bridge was to preserve a cashing trick opposite a void,

either to delay the discard until more information is gathered about the hand or, as in this case, to provide an entry at a later stage of the play.

Here I could see that pitching a heart on the ♣A does not help at all: After drawing trumps, if the ♥K is onside, the ♥Q will provide the necessary entry to cash the ♣A for a heart pitch. Ruffing the lead in hand, however, creates a small extra chance if the ♥K is doubleton offside and East holds at most three diamonds, because East will be forced to play a club back to the dummy providing me with two discards.

Here is the complete hand:

	North		East
	♠ A K		♠ 10 7 6 3
	♥ Q 6 3		♥ K 10
	♦ 9 7 5 3		♦ J 10 4
	♣ A J 7 5		♣ 10 9 4 3
West		South	
♠ 2		♠ Q J 9 8 7 4	
♥ J 9 7 5		♥ A 8 4 2	
♦ 8 6 2		♦ A K Q	
♣ K Q 8 6 2		♣ —	

So I ruffed the ♣K lead in hand and drew trumps in four rounds, using the ♦A as an entry back to hand. I cashed two more diamonds, noting the 3-3 split, and then played the ♥A and a heart to the queen. East took it but was forced to play a club, putting me back in dummy, allowing me to pitch my two losing hearts on the ♣A-J. I didn't even need the last diamond.

At the other table the Turkish ladies, clearly missing the goodly influence of the Blarney stone, stopped in 4♠. This was a 13-imp gain, which helped us to a final score of 21-9.

Anyone for a trip to Blarney Castle?