

Baron Munchausen

by Alan Truscott

A Tale So Tall That It Might Even Be True (Or Nearly)

Baron Munchausen, a distant relative of the legendary Teutonic teller of tall tales, claims to have held the South hand in a money game and heard his right-hand opponent open seven spades.

Board 26
East Deals
Both Vul

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

♠ 2
♥ A K Q 3
♦ A K Q 4 2
♣ K Q 2

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
Pass	Pass	Dbl	All pass

This was a situation, as close to unique as one could be, in which a player could pinpoint an opposing hand exactly after hearing one bid. East was a sound bidder, so the only hand he could have, given South's holding, was a singleton club ace and 12 solid spades.

That meant that West was void in spades and would not know what to lead against seven notrump. Full of his customary bravado, Munchausen made that bid and was doubled on his right.

The spotlight was now on West, who was somewhat dazed by an auction that he, like the rest of the world, had never heard before. The Lightner double, asking for an unusual lead, did not seem to offer any guidance in this situation.

Leading one's long suit against notrump is standard, and it was right here for a reason that was far from obvious. East would not have doubled holding 13 spades, so he had to have an ace. If it was a red ace, the contract was almost sure to be defeated with any lead. The chance that the declarer would take 13 tricks in clubs and one of the red suits was negligible.

So West should have led a club, which would have given the defense 13 tricks and a penalty of 3,500. Instead he did not reason correctly and led the diamond jack. Munchausen, finding exactly the dummy he needed, quickly gathered in six diamond tricks and seven heart tricks, scoring 1,790.

"That is new to me," declared Munchausen thoughtfully. "A grand slam for either side that depends on the opening lead."

The Baron asserts that the player in the East seat was Jack Dreyfus, who is as well known in the private world of rubber bridge as he is in the public world of finance. He now had to suffer some weird advice from Munchausen.

"You should have made a lead-directing opening bid of one club," he suggested, "and then bid seven spades. That would have guarded against the actual situation and prevented me from brilliantly bidding seven notrump."

Dreyfus might have replied that one club could end the bidding, an event that was very slightly more likely than the deal itself. But his reply is not on record, nor do we know what he had to say about his partner's opening lead. There is, indeed, no certainty that he was in the club at all that day.