



Inside Ed's Head

Written by Ed Hass

Edited by Sal Mannuzza

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The Telephone Mystery

(A Wonderful Trick for a Horrible Time)

In this time of lockdowns and social distancing, it's time for magicians to find a trick that can be done using technology that will let them amaze friends while they are in separate locations. Skype? Zoom? No, I am talking about a 19th-century device known as the telephone. {I actually remember back to when some people just picked up their handset and asked an operator to connect them to a person. I also remember potato fields and a small dairy farm in the town where I lived.)

Today, our smartphones have all sorts of magical possibilities. I do wonder if people who see cellphone tricks are amazed by the magician or by the cellphone. The trick in today's article would have worked just as well in the 19th-century as it does today. It will amaze all who see it—and they sure as hell won't have any reason to credit the telephone.

I was taught this trick when I was a teenager; I don't recall by who. Sometime back in the late 20th century I performed it for Ring 244. Mike Maione, one of the members liked it so much that he asked me for permission to include it in his lecture. I told him it wasn't mine and looked for a source. I eventually found it in Tarbell 2, page 210. It's credited to Audley Walsh and Al Baker. William H. McCaffrey adds a good idea on the next page. Neither of these is exactly the way I ended up performing it—probably because I didn't remember it over the years and had to reconstruct it every time I performed it. Here's the way I do it now.

Effect

The magician calls a friend on the phone and asks him to scrounge a deck—it doesn't have to be new or even complete—and bring it back to the phone. The spectator is asked to shuffle the deck and cut it into two halves. He can then pick up either half and look at the top card and lock it into his memory. The deck is reassembled and cut.

The spectator is now asked to take cards from the top of the deck and call out their names. Eventually, the magician stops the process and names the card.

Method

You must have a pen or pencil, and a sheet of paper prepared in advance. It has some blank space at the top, then a single line with the card values spaced across the page, like this:

A 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 J Q K

When the spectator returns with his deck of cards, ask him to shuffle it, cut it in half, and then pick up either of the packets. Give him a chance to change his mind. Once he's satisfied, have him look at the top card, show it to anyone who might be nearby, and place it back on top. To help him commit the value of the card to his memory, ask him to take a number of cards, equal to the value of the one he's memorizing from the tabled packet, and place them on top of the cards he is holding. Explain that an ace is one, a jack is eleven, a queen is twelve, and a king is thirteen. If the card on top of the deck is a three, he's to take three cards from the tabled pile and put them on top of the cards he's holding. Take some time with these instructions to make sure the spectator knows what's to be done. After you explain this, have the spectator put his cards on top of those on the table and pick up the entire deck. His card is now among the top fourteen. Say that you will now learn the identity of the card by having him call out the names of the cards as he deals them face up. Ask him not to deal the cards too fast, so you'll have enough time to process the "vibrations." As he calls out the first card, tell him to stop and ask him to replace the card he just dealt on top of the deck. Immediately write down the name of this card at the top of your sheet of paper.

Act confused about what you're supposed to do. Go over the steps you just had him perform. "I had you shuffle the cards, right? You cut them into two halves and left them on the table. You chose the half you wanted. You looked at the top card and locked it into your memory by taking a number of cards equal to the value of your card from the tabled packet and putting them on top of your packet? You put your half on top of those on the table and picked up the entire pile and cut the pack?" He should say he never cut the pack. Regardless of his answer, have him cut the pack. Point out that before the pack was cut, he knew where his card was. Now, *neither* of you could know where it is.

Once again, ask him to start dealing the cards face up and call out their names in a stentorian voice as he does so. As he does this listen carefully for the key card that you noted earlier. As soon as you hear the key card, you'll do the following for the *next* thirteen cards.

Put the tip of your pen on the A on the left of your paper. If the card named is *not* an ace, cross out the A and move your pen to the next card on the paper. If the card *is* an ace, write the letter of its suit after the A and move on to the next card on your sheet. For each succeeding card, you'll follow the same process. If the card named is not the same value as the card you're pointing at on your paper, cross out the entry and move on. If it is the same, write the letter of the suit after the value you're pointing to.

After he's named the card that corresponds to the king, let him call out a few more cards and then stop him. You can now begin the process of revealing his card.

If you're a little lucky, you have twelve numbers crossed out and one with a suit written next to it. That will happen almost 38% of the time. (Read the Afterword to see how to increase your chances.) You can now just blithely announce the name of the card he has been thinking of, and leave him with a blown mind.

You might find yourself in a position where you have two, three or more candidates—there's even a 1% chance of getting five. Now, your skill in fishing will come into play. All I'll mention here is that you will try to group your candidates by red/black, high/low or odd/even to eliminate some troubling cards. It's conceivable you might find yourself with the two and four of clubs. You'll need to be smooth of tongue to navigate that situation successfully.

Of course, it is possible you'll get thirteen hits. If that happens, I suggest you quit magic and move to a well-guarded bunker and never leave, for you are a very unlucky man, indeed.

Afterword

If fishing isn't your forte, you can greatly reduce the odds of getting multiple candidates by using the following stratagem. After asking your spectator to look at the top card of his packet, say, "I have a lot of trouble reading picture cards over the phone; their images get scrambled too easily. If the card you are looking at is a picture card, please push it into the middle of your packet and look at the next card—I can only work with cards from ace to ten." This will increase the odds of getting only one match to almost 50% and decrease the odds of getting more than three to less than 3%.

For those of you who wish to perform this trick immediately, the last page of this issue can be printed and used for many performances. Enjoy!

R.I.P.

All too many of us know a magician who has succumbed to Covid-19. I knew Chris Ward; an amateur magician who embodied the very meaning of the word amateur.

It derives from the Latin “Amare,” meaning “to love.” He loved magic. He loved watching it, performing it, and learning it. He also loved people. He was a good kind man who was a friend to all of us. He lived a good life that wasn’t as long as it should have been. I can still see his face before me and hear his voice—and I will for the rest of my life.

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