



SOMETIMES
CHEATERS DON'T WIN!

How could these guys be so blind? I was watching Nick Milanius deal cards to a bunch of privates and P.F.C's one night at the Army Base near Rapid City, South Dakota. He was pretty good, but, because of my knowledge of magic and card tricks, I could see he was using a deck of marked cards. Even with those, he was "dealing seconds," which means he was holding the top card and dealing the rest. I didn't know Nick very well. He was in my barracks, but he kept to himself pretty much. Kind of slick, though, older than me, maybe in his late twenties. He was always looking in the mirror and combing his jet black hair. I Guess he thought he was good looking, but he wasn't. He was a little guy, chubby, had a nose as big as mine, and walked like a turkey. His accent placed him from the east, maybe New Jersey or New York. In a way, though, he was like me. Both of us did our best to get out of K.P. or guard duty, the worst job of all in winter. Some nights in South Dakota, it got down to 40 below zero. Those nights we had to switch duty every forty-five minutes. I used to see Nick in the quartermaster's office when I was sent over to pick up supplies, so he knew who I was. But I could tell he didn't think much of me. I guess he had pegged me as a dumb hick from the mid west.

"Hey Nick, c'mere!" I called, after he raked in his winnings..

Nick took his time, but he finally sauntered over to where I was waiting. "Yeah, wha'd'ya want?"

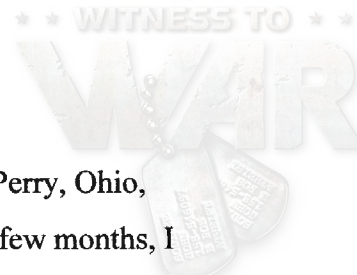
"*You've* gotta quit cheating these guys. You're gonna get caught," I told him.

"Aw, go to hell. I ain't cheating anyone. Git outa here!" and he walked away.

I caught up with him, "I'm not kiddin', Nick. I *saw* ya dealing from the bottom, dealing seconds. You even used a marked deck! If I caught you, someone else will too. You gotta quit or you're gonna get in trouble!"

"Lee me alone, kid. Just stay away from me, okay?"

So I did. You don't rat on a fellow soldier. I'd done what I could, and sort of forgot about the incident. There was plenty of other stuff on my mind. The war was raging both in Europe and in the South Pacific, and I had enlisted after my first year in college, hoping to be fighting the



Nazis or the Japanese within weeks. Instead, for basic training, I was sent to Camp Perry, Ohio, then to Utah's "great salt flats," a godforsaken place far from everything. Within a few months, I was promoted to Private First Class and transferred to Rapid City, where I became a truck driver. That brief stint taught me never to be a truck driver. To simulate war duty, we had to drive these big Mack trucks loaded with soldiers on narrow gravel roads along the mountain's edge at night without lights. Until I encountered a "Jap," with a knife in the Philippines, my most hair-raising experience was discovering that my right front wheel had gone over the edge of a steep cliff one stormy night. No power steering in those days! But somehow I was able to manipulate the truck back on to the road.

At camp when we had some leisure time, I liked to entertain my fellow soldiers with magic and card tricks. It was good practice for me, and the fellows enjoyed the shows I put on.

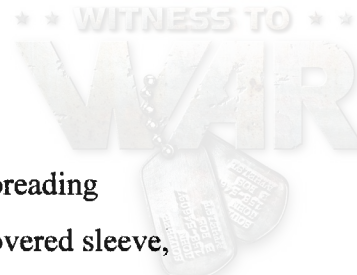
But for laughs, we had a fellow we called "Sad Sack Colby." Colby was a tall, gangly guy from the mountains of Arkansas. Even more naive than the rest of us. Nice as could be, but somehow everything happened to him. For example, one day he and a team of other guys were assigned to paint the outside of a barracks building. By ten a.m., Colby had paint all over himself—his curly hair, all over his face and clothes, which in itself was plenty funny to look at, but when the sergeant came along to inspect the work, you could hear him a half mile away.

"Private," he shouted at Colby, "You've got more paint on yourself than you got on this building. Look at you! You look like a goddamn zebra. Ain'tcha ever painted nothin' before?"

Colby was a good six inches taller than the sergeant, but he was quivering. "No, sir, I ain't never painted nothin, sir!"

"All ya gotta do is dip your brush in this big can o' paint an' swipe it on the wood. Now let's see ya do it. *Now!*"

The paint can was between the sergeant and Colby and the barracks was behind Colby, who did as he was told. He dipped the brush into the paint can, and gingerly holding the dripping brush shoulder high, he spun around toward the building, splashing white paint all over the sergeant's hair, face and clothes. It was like a scene from a funny movie. For a second, everyone stood transfixed, but there was no way we could help laughing. When Colby saw what he had done, to make matters worse, he yelled, "Golly! I'm sure sorry, sir." and he stepped toward the



sergeant, tipping over the paint can. Taking little notice of the pool of white paint spreading across the grass, Colby tried to wipe the paint off the sergeants face with his paint-covered sleeve, smearing it even more.

By then there were at least twenty-five of us soldiers, drawn by the sergeant's loud complaints. We couldn't stop laughing, as the sergeant stomped off. Every one of us loved Colby a little more that day.

A few days later, my first sergeant, a six-foot-three giant in his thirties, called me aside. "Private, I saw you doing card tricks for the guys yesterday. You're not bad."

"Gee, thanks!"

"Could you spot someone when their cheating at cards or dice?"

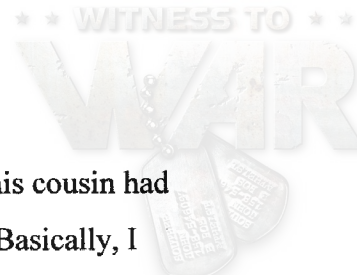
"Easy. Why?" I replied.

"There's a few guys around here, seem to be winning a lot of money, an' I got a feeling they might be cheating. I want you to be on the lookout for anyone cheating at cards or dice, and report to me if you see it happening."

Not a good position for an enlisted man. I didn't want to get any of my buddies in trouble, but on the other hand, I didn't want to see a bunch of innocent fellows being cheated. Of course, I didn't have a choice. If your sergeant tells you to do something, you do it, I had learned that--fast. As a fresh recruit, I was in awe of anyone in command, and so far, every sergeant I had met was tough, demanding, and unforgiving.

I'd been doing magic and performing since I was ten years old. By the time I joined the army, I knew most of the tricks magicians use to find cards and to make points with dice.

I didn't care much for playing cards or dice myself, but I began hanging around when there was a poker or dice game going on. One night I was surprised to spot Chico Alvarez using loaded dice, dice that never come up with a seven. I could hardly believe my eyes. Chico's cot was only three cots away from mine in the barracks. He was such a happy, friendly little guy, sort of innocent looking. Everyone liked him, including me. I really didn't want to get him in trouble, so I waited until the game was over, and then I told him, privately, about my assignment from the first sergeant. Chico was pretty embarrassed and scared too. He looked down at the ground and kept saying, "I'm sorry. I wone do it no more. Jeez, please done report me!" Chico had a



Spanish accent, and sometimes it confused me, but I did understand him to say that his cousin had given him the dice and shown him how to use them, but he felt bad about cheating. Basically, I thought he was a pretty nice guy, and I believed him. He even gave me the crooked dice, saying “Jew can keep dem. I don’ want deez t’ings no more!” and he repeated, “I’m really sorry, Leo. I wone cheat *nobody* no more. I hope jew wone report me!” I believed him, and I never mentioned it to my sergeant. As far as I know, little Chico kept his promise.

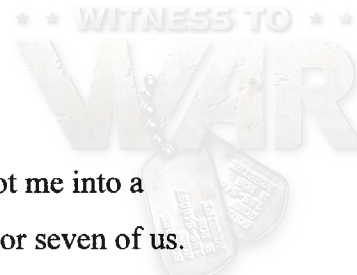
I was eighteen at the time, and I really missed the folks back home, especially my girlfriend, Marian, so I spent a lot of my free time writing letters, and very little time looking for cheaters.

When I hadn’t reported anyone cheating after two weeks, my first sergeant took me aside and hinted that I wasn’t doing my job. He was right. It wasn’t something I liked doing, but evidently it had to be done.

I asked around, and learned that Nick Milanius was having a poker game behind the mess hall that night after mess. By the time I got there, the game was in full swing, and it was really easy for *me* to detect the tactics he was using to win. One of them we call “mis-direction,” when a dealer calls your attention to something away from the cards while he crimps one to four cards with his fingernail so he can recognize what card he’s dealing. Or he can use the same ruse to surreptitiously do a “one-handed cut” of the cards to get his card on top. Nick was doing both, and none of those poor guys noticed. I don’t know how many guys he had cheated out of their pay by then, or how much money he had accumulated before I caught him that time, but thanks to my observation, Nick spent some time in the brig. As they led him away, he turned to me and, in a hoarse whisper, threatened, “I’ll get you for this, you dirty Jew.” By the time he got out, I had left Rapid City and I was glad.

There were a few other guys, whose names I can’t remember, but whom I spotted using marked cards. Another fellow had a deck of shaved cards, a stock component in a magician’s supplies.

I caught another guy, not in our outfit, using “Readers Cards.” These cards require the magician to wear special glasses which make the name of each card clearly visible from the back, while no one else can see the printing.



I'll never forget a guy named Woods or Wilke, something with a "W". He got me into a game of dice one night at the edge of the parade grounds. There must have been six or seven of us. I won a few bucks that night. Didn't notice any kind of trickery, and enjoyed the game. A few nights later I got into another dice game with the same guy, and about six other soldiers. I was having a great time, even though I was losing consistently, when who should show up but my first sergeant. "Okay, you guys, break it up. Break it up," he yelled, and he grabbed the dice. "Whose dice are these?"

Without hesitation, Woods or Wilke, whatever his name was, answered, "His!" pointing to me.

"You? You been cheatin' these guys all along? An' I trusted you?" He threw the dice on the ground, and they came up six. He threw them three times, and they never came up seven "I think these are loaded dice, you crumb ball," he yelled at me.

"Le' me see 'em, sergeant. I can tell if they're loaded or not," said Woods or Wilke.

The sergeant gave him the dice, which, by then I *knew* were loaded. He looked at them and threw them a couple times. The second time they came up seven. The guy was really good at sleight of hand and in a twinkling of an eye, had switched to honest dice without anyone but me noticing. "Nope, sergeant" he said confidently. "These aren't loaded dice."

"Huh!" the sergeant grunted, and to me he said gruffly, "Okay, private, carry on," and away he went.

I might not ever remember that soldier's name, but I'll never forget that *dice* game.