

The Pied Piper of Manhattan

New York, 1978

Written by Kenneth Park

I never thought of myself as a country bumpkin, growing up in a fairly big city and all ... but now, as I look back and write about my adventures of thirty years ago, I'm caused to admit, that unknowingly, I owned an 'innocence' that is shamelessly revealed in my experiences as told in the following two essays. One proved personally very risky and is entitled "The Pied Piper of Manhattan". The other was financially costly and is entitled "The Spider and the Fly". Both of these tales are written as happened. I cross my fingers that you are already beguiled enough to read on and enjoy both.

In my late thirties, I was busy promoting a 'Special Risk' insurance business that required me to travel internationally. A typical trip would take me from Vancouver to Toronto, Montreal, New York and London with stops in less amusing cities. Most salesmen who live in airplanes would agree that traveling the international business highway brings out the best in us peddlers ... whatever that may be? However, the rigors of travelling for financial gain are not the subject of these essays although they certainly play a part in the hazards encountered.

"Ken, your new money belt holds your 'big bucks' concealed in the pouch at the back. In your wallet I've put forty US one dollar bills for tipping. You're going to require this protection in New York" cautioned my wife Laurie. "Your bags are packed and all you have to do is get your shaving gear and prescriptions together and you're good to go. Here's your passport, travel itinerary and plane tickets ... don't lose them." "Okay Mom" I chided, and with a big hug and a kiss, I was off to conquer the world. Toronto, five flying hours away was the first stop and I got off that plane feeling just like Willy Loman, stepping onto the stage of Arthur Miller's play, "Death of a Salesman". I knocked over Toronto handily and with 'blood in my eye' moved on to my next challenge ... the big apple, New York.

It was St Patrick's Day, 1978, when I arrived at JFK International Airport late in the afternoon. Inspired by the lofty recommendations of my old friend Cliff, a frequent New York visitor, I reserved a room at the Commodore Hotel near Grand Central Station in Manhattan. "It's good value, commodious and convenient to the business district you'll be visiting" he confirmed. He failed to warn me that Donald Trump had bought the property and was about to tear the Commodore down ... in other words, it was a hotel about to be taken off life support.

"The Air Porter bus will take you from JFK to the 'East Side Airlines Terminal' where cabs queue up and are plentiful. Enjoy New York, Ken".

Cliff's help was valuable and I had no doubts it would ensure that my first visit to New York was memorable. Just how memorable couldn't have been forecast!

I cleared Customs and Immigration and with luggage in tow boarded an Airlines Terminal bus that I assumed would take me to the East Side Terminal. On the third loop past Air Canada arrivals I realized something was wrong and asked the driver if he was ever going to leave JFK and go to the East Side Airlines Terminal. I might as well have asked him what time we would lift off for the moon.

Being a New York bus driver, it was likely he'd met all manner of wacko, until that is, I arrived on his scene. When I posed the question I didn't realize I was on the wrong bus ... but I sensed he was a little incensed and may have thought I was having him on. He looked at me as though he was measuring my normality and then said "this bus is never going to the East Side Terminal". I looked at him as though he might benefit from counseling and asked "if you're not going there then who is ... your sign says Airlines Terminal Bus". Can eyes roll that far back into one's head and still return to normal was now the point at issue in my mind. It was one of life's golden moments ... I wouldn't have been surprised if he'd turned to me and asked "who's on first"? Everybody knows "who" was on first.

Finally in a voice that convinced me this driver could have played Brando's role in the Godfather, he replied "Okay, I'm going to take you to the East Side Terminal pick-up station. But do me a big favor. Wait there until you see a bus with an East Side Airlines Terminal sign on the front and then be sure to get on it ... capiche?" I "capiched" and was grateful for his generous help which included detouring from his usual route to get me to the pickup station.

Without his assistance I would never have found my way to the pickup station ... it wasn't obvious from where we were located. Soon an Airporter bus with its destination showing 'East Side Airlines Terminal' arrived and we were on our way into Manhattan ... the heart of the 'big apple'.

I'm not sure what I expected on arrival, but being dumped off on a dimly lit New York Street with my baggage stuck to my hand and my courage heading for my toes didn't quite match my expectations of the East Side Terminal. The bus driver had announced that this was as far as he was taking us because the Terminal was closed for unexplained reasons relating to the St Patrick's Day parade. No cabs were available there as a result and he encouraged us to hail one down on the street.

He must have been joking ... no cabbie would ever risk his life or 'hack' driving down this 'back alley'. The other passengers were no happier. There was some discussion about what to do next but it seemed more like the conversation one might hear on a stricken airliner ... closer to prayer than solutions. Some of the passengers with light luggage set off on foot immediately ... they must have known where they were and where they were going. The rest of us had bulky luggage and not an inkling of where we were so we sat on our bags and prayed for a taxi or a divine intervention ... neither of which were likely to drive by.

We hadn't been there that long however, when a black man approached our group and asked if anyone wanted a cab ... he got immediate takers. Was he going to be our divine intervention? I watched on, mesmerized as a young woman who had taken him up on his offer, disappeared around the corner at the end of the block, with him carrying her luggage. She asked no questions of him ... just said "yes" and left. Instinct warned me that this was a scam ... a Gypsy cab sting or maybe worse. This was the pre-Giuliani era in New York, a period famous for its lawlessness. Soon he was back again and other passengers continued to leave with him. But where were they going for God's sake? If there were taxi's close by, why didn't we all go or even better why didn't he bring the cabs to us? We were like the children of Hamelin; we heard his song and followed this Pied Piper to an unknown fate, willingly and without apparent concern for our own safety. I could understand the desperation of our predicament but the gullibility was reckless in the face of the risks ... which had to be high.

After a while it looked like I was going to be the last passenger standing. I started to believe in the unbelievable ... maybe there were cabs just around the corner and he was earning a curbing fee for bringing in the fares. Perchance he was a legitimate black messiah, but acceptance of that required a reckless optimism or an overwhelming foolhardiness neither of which I would claim. But there was one undeniable conclusion. If I continued to do nothing besides whine to myself I was going to spend the rest of the night alone on this street. It was time to put risk where it belonged ... on the appropriate burner. With no other options I decided to take him at his offer of a cab ... but not without some reservations.

Even if it was a Gypsy cab sting maybe I could negotiate a deal that would at least get me to the hotel, even at usurious cost! I couldn't know what he was really up to, but I resolved to refuse any situation that looked dicey and just move on. My decision to get moving seemed to affect my steadfast distrust of this guy.

He started to take on a more plausible, even helpful persona. Clearly, I was falling into a New York version of the 'Stockholm' syndrome. Now his hostage, I started to show signs of affection ... disconnecting him from the dangers involved and convincing myself that I was probably wrong in my earlier appraisal of his character. He picked up my suitcase and offered to take my briefcase but I clung to the latter. We started walking and moved into a brisk pace. He was chatty, friendly, interested in where I was from and where I was going. We walked for a couple of blocks or more and I started to question where in-the-hell these cabs were located. I was wary and moving toward a 'defcon' two level of readiness!

It was dark; the streets were looking less inhabited and more decrepit. I thought I should act now before it was too late ... if it wasn't already. "Where are these cabs anyway?" He didn't answer. I had that sinking feeling! I was just about to stop him and get my suitcase back when he wheeled off the street into an empty, 'cave like' entrance way with me following lock step along. He stopped abruptly a short distance in and by then I was a half step further into the entrance. He moved quickly to block my escape. Apprehensively I turned to face him preparing for the worst. I knew I was in trouble ... just how much was about to be made clear to me. He had put my suitcase down, reached inside his overcoat then paused as though concealing a gun. In a sinister and threatening tone he warned "give me all your money or I'll kill you".

The man now menacing me had changed ... he was unequivocal, cold and seemingly completely at ease in this confrontation. "Come on get it out" he bullied. I was frightened but still functioning and started slowly reaching for my wallet. I had no idea what kind of cutthroat I was dealing with ... I kept my eyes fixed on him while I opened the wallet, pulled out the fistful of "tipping" money and handed it to him. It appeared to be a lot of money. He grabbed it from me and with a look of satisfaction, removed his hand from his coat and started to count the wad of bills.

As soon as I saw both his hands and no gun I was in motion, making for the exit, grabbing my suitcase as I passed by him and springing out onto the street ... all in a succession of moves unplanned but carried off flawlessly ... similar to making a surprise catch of a plate accidentally knocked off a table ... your moves were intuitively programmed.

As I reached the questionable safety of the street I could hear him shrieking expletives at me over the smallness of his heist. Maybe he was coming after me?

Escape was my only concern and I hastened down the deserted street, God knows which direction ... just out of there. I didn't think I could keep going at this pace dragging the luggage and briefcase with me. But I did and to this day I cannot remember how I arrived at the Commodore Hotel ... but there it was. I thought it an illusion, it wasn't.

They had my reservation and I was soon in my room, primitive though it was. Lying there on the cot, I was enjoying just being alive, but experiencing that inexplicable sensation that overwhelms one following a near-miss potentially fatal car accident. I had been robbed and threatened with death ... a frightful ordeal that I can remember with vivid detail even now. But I couldn't help laughing at Laurie and her tipping money ... she was so clairvoyant and so exquisitely frugal ... that bastard could have had hundreds if she hadn't hidden the 'big bucks'!

The next morning I was making my way to an Insurer's office somewhere near Wall Street. Following Cliff's recommendation, I was about to sample the joys of traveling on the New York subway and I was ready, willing and able. There was an entrance close by and I descended on the escalators with the rest of the rush-hour masses. The line-up for admission to the train level was long but moving smoothly. Most of the riders had some kind of pass that they waved at a heavy set woman cramped into a glass cubicle ... then off they went. My turn came and I had no idea what the fare would be so I emptied the coins in my pocket and placed them into the small money opening of her cubicle hoping she'd just take what she wanted. With a practiced eye, she scanned the coins and fired back all the Canadian money ... then she said something inaudible to me through the speaker opening. I asked her to 'say again' and she repeated herself 'loud and clear' ... I was no further ahead as her accent made it sound like a foreign language. The lineup of commuters behind was stopped dead by me and the Port Authority's defensive blocker. What now?

I just couldn't seem to get anything right in New York.

Either the fat lady had to let me through or the determined-to-get-to-work crowd might stampede over me. In total desperation I invoked the international signal of hopelessness ... a shrug with hands turned up ... establishing beyond any doubt that I hadn't the faintest idea of what to do or say next.

It worked. Clearly, she shared my frustration. Without further adieu she slid some of my coins into her tray, shot the rest back at me like an expert marble player and then crashed her hammy finger down on a button that produced a transit ticket.

That, along with a warm smile sent me sprinting down the escalator to the train platform where I boarded the first graffiti laden subway car I encountered. It was garishly painted much like a woman who had over corrected on the application of her make-up and then got caught in a rainstorm. As though ordained, and to my delirious joy the train just happened to be going my way. Crowded in like the sardines in the tin, we roared off into the darkness at what seemed like 'runaway' speeds while I stood clinging to a ceiling strap lurching and swaying into those around me until mercifully, we reached my station.

The uniformed doorman at the AIG office building politely asked for my name and who I was visiting. He made a discreet check and I was quickly on my way to the 57th floor in the elevator. Later, at lunch in the executive eatery, I related the story of my welcoming ceremony the previous night. My hosts were most sympathetic and gently suggested that when traveling in New York, one should always go by Yellow Cab. I thanked them for their valuable advice and promised it would be rigidly followed ... beginning at the airport. I said my farewells sensing that many New Yorkers believed their streets had become a war zone of crime and racial hostility ... a conclusion I already accepted as entirely valid.

That night, I planned to 'stay put' in the Commodore Hotel, enjoy a few drinks in its bar and no matter how bad the food, eat in its restaurant. I was relaxing with a large glass of Johnnie Walker Black, drenched in ice and touched up with some Canada Dry soda while exchanging conversation with two other guys at the bar. One of them was a powerfully built man whose size and presence oozed power. It turned out he was a recently retired Military Policeman and it took no special talent to see why he was chosen for that line of duty.

He was thrifty with his words and had an engaging mid-west accent. There was an undeniable warmth and friendliness to his presence. On the other hand I thought that only a fool could have doubted his capacity to bring about hell-on-earth if sufficiently provoked. His name was Beauregard ... "just call me Beau" and I did. His associate, Dave, was a good looking man, the kind you'd want your daughter to marry, with an executive air about him and a sense of humor that Jay Leno would envy.

These boys hailed from Indiana and were in New York closing down a branch office for their company. They had been residents of the Commodore for some weeks and had developed a particular dislike for it and the denizens who dwelled in its environs.

After a couple more drinks, they announced they were going out for a steak ... and invited me to tag along. I confessed that I was too damned scared to leave the hotel after the previous night's experience. They listened to my story and I could see that Beau was profoundly disturbed. "You come with us and don't worry. We know a great restaurant within walking distance and nobody's going to bother you tonight, we'll see to that." I was delighted to have the promise of a good T-bone steak, the pleasure of their company ... and most of all the comfort of having Beau as my private body guard!

Now, dear reader you must believe I am not making this up ... we hadn't walked more than three blocks along a moderately busy street, chatting amiably when I spotted something on the sidewalk ahead so unbelievable that either I had become untethered from the bonds of reality or was suffering the delayed effects of Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome. It didn't seem possible, but there he stood, dressed in gaudy elegance ... Glen check suit, burgundy brogue shoes, tomato red socks, a charcoal tie and brown felt hat ... a drugged or drunken man, swaying back and forth to the music blaring from a portable radio planted on the sidewalk. He was either the man who robbed me last night or a 'real' apparition thereof.

It was definitely him ... his face was tattooed indelibly into my memory. "Are you alright Ken"? asked Dave. "That's him, that's the son-of-a-bitch that robbed me last night" I said with absolute certainty. Beau looked hard at him, then back at me. He needed to be sure before starting a war and questioned me; 'Which one' ... 'the one in the hat'... 'Are you positive'... 'I'm positive'. The tension was palpable. What was going to happen? "All right", said Beau, I'm going to turn that bastard upside down and shake your money out of his hide". Dave agreed ... "let's get it on"!

Now the situation became unpredictable and dynamic. Beau had become Charles Bronson's vigilante in the movie "Death wish" filmed in New York four years earlier. The circumstances were eerily similar. That black guy had no idea that 'hell' was closing in on him for a wrong he thought could never find its way back to haunt him ... it was too long a shot!

I would have delighted in this revenge ... the robber was about to be robbed ... could there be a better justice? I would have reveled in his terror... relishing every moment of his suffering, watching him ponder the threat of his death and for good measure, piling on the dehumanizing expletives that would let him know he was what he called me, scum!

But I was also going eyeball to eyeball with myself ... and I blinked. I couldn't go through with it. I had to stop Beau because he could and would. Everything about it was right except that the bastard wasn't worth the trouble and the \$40 he got was meaningless. Dave and Beau were now my friends. I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if they met with any unexpected grief while acting on my behalf ... such as an intervention by the NYPD or even worse, weapons. With my luck we'd have been charged for robbing him and provoking a race war.

I managed to talk Beau and Dave down ... and they grudgingly agreed. I was never sure that Beau saw it as trouble ... more probably he saw it as police work.

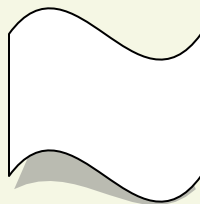
As we walked by I turned and looked that black man in the eyes ... but oddly, he had no eyes. All I saw were his Ray-Ban cools sitting on top of a wide smile. Did he recognize me? I doubt it. That wolf had escorted too many other 'Red Riding Hoods' to grandmas last night to remember me.

We carried on to a delightful restaurant and feasted on a delicious steak dinner which I paid for over much protestation. It was simply my privilege. It was hard saying goodbye at the hotel that night because they were in all likelihood, forever ... but so were the memories!

Ah ... the long since demolished Commodore Hotel ... a sanctuary and an unlikely place to meet people. I will never forget our short but memorable evening together, that great steak and of course their friendship ... the recollections of which I treasure as I write these words thirty years later.

What's was a nice guy like me doing in a place like this? Leaving on a SAS flight the next morning for Copenhagen where I will enjoy the weekend and then go on to London where more misadventure awaits me.

I took a cab to JFK International ... as promised!



The Spider and the Fly

London, 1978

Written by Kenneth Park

After a short flight from Copenhagen I landed at Heathrow Airport and made my way to the baggage pickup. From there it seemed like I walked several miles to the Customs and Immigration area. Immigration was quick and easy for a colonial boy presenting a Canadian passport. Next came Customs and at this point you have a choice to make between gates: Red for goods requiring declaration, or Green for “try your luck at not getting caught”! My only option was to “go Green” as I had in my possession a Danish porno movie which in those days was a big deal. So I took a deep breath, fixed my face with a happy-to-be-here smile and headed for the Green gate.

To my relief Green waived me through. It was a short reprieve ... ahead of me lay the ‘green mile’ ... an exit corridor staffed by a battalion of customs officers, randomly pulling people out of the passersby and ‘giving them a damned good look’. There was no turning back now and regrettably no bathroom handy to dispose of this ‘hot’ contraband. So like all great smugglers I strode boldly forward wearing an innocent countenance, confident that not even the most intuitive officer would single me out as his contrabandist.

I noticed one officer lock-on to me visually as I approached the surveillance area and with breathless apprehension I casually exchanged eye contact on the gallop by. I assumed that he had dropped me from the suspect list until in the next instant I heard that dreadful word “Sir” ring out. I wished I’d had a plan “B”. I interrogated myself ... should I stop, drop and roll, bolt for the door or turn and face my accuser with a “what could you possibly want with me, you fool” stare? I chose to beard my tormentor. Just as I had mustered the courage to do that, I realized with leg wobbling relief that he wasn’t flagging me after all. He was pouncing on that poor brave soul directly behind me!

The fresh English air that greeted me outside the terminal was pleasant therapy for the mental unbalancing I’d just endured and even though I’d proved myself a hardened and skillful smuggler, walking the Green mile convinced me I was ill suited to embracing it as a career choice.

“The Holiday Inn at Marble Arch please driver” rolled off my lips and away we went in a London cab. What a wonderful city London was in those days. The taxis were honest to the farthing, the streets of the West End safe and entertaining and the English people the friendliest you could ever hope to meet; and many you would, if a Pub was on your list of calls.

In my business circles, I was entertained literally to exhaustion by my hosts. However, on this particular Sunday my only engagement was a dinner with our partners that evening at The Ritz London. I was promised England's best Dover Sole "Meuniere" and I was looking forward to this posh affair.

So the day was mine and I was anxious to explore. My hotel was well located in London's West End near Marble Arch and convenient to just about everything you'd care to visit. 'Speakers Corner' at Hyde Park was my first stop where any number of speakers, standing on makeshift apple boxes would be fully engaged in bawling out their sermons while taking incoming fire, almost on a sentence for sentence basis, from hecklers in their audiences. It was an interesting experience, more theatre than anything but immensely entertaining. I moved on to Green Park and then Buckingham Palace where I enjoyed the "changing of the guard". Finally, I succumbed to the weariness that attends a nine hour time change and the rigors of travel and decided to walk back to the hotel for a nap before dinner.

As I neared my hotel I saw a bizarre sight. On the sidewalk ahead, amidst the heavy pedestrian traffic, four men were standing around a portable card table busy doing something. That I was intrigued is an understatement. What could they be up to? I moved closer to appease my curiosity. The sidewalk traffic showed no interest whatsoever in this novelty. Maybe the only fellow not in a suit was a vendor offering something the other three were attracted to ... they seemed very focused by what was on the table. I inched in even closer ... an investigative look was now my paramount objective.

As I neared the table, I got a clear view of a simple card game. It resembled a poker game called "three card Monte". But in this adaptation the dealer laid out three cards face up ... one of which was an ace. Then he turned them face down and shuffled them making it a challenge to tell which was which. A player would then place his bet and choose one of the cards. If he picked the ace he won and was paid twice the amount he had bet, otherwise the dealer pocketed his money.

Although coming across this game in a busy public venue struck me as a bit eccentric, even for the Brits, nothing untoward jumped out at me and I found it quite amusing to watch. I had no desire to get mixed up in a 'floating card game' for obvious reasons and at this point, no invitation to join in had been extended in any event. Bobbies were often in sight and if this game was illegal, it seemed to be decidedly low risk as neither the operator nor the players appeared concerned in the slightest ... or so I thought!

Although I didn't know it, their real concern at that moment was me ... whose obviousness as a tourist made me a standout candidate to be snared in the web they were so carefully spinning. Unwittingly, I had stumbled onto a card game variation of that well known swindle the "shell game".

I must pause here to discuss the tactical essentials of a professional 'confidence ring'. Without some knowledge of how a 'ring' is structured, one cannot imagine the degree of sophistication employed in the swindle. First off, all of the players at the table are in league with the dealer who is usually in control of the 'ring'. He is a card magician, being gifted with exceptional sleight-of-hand skills. The dealer controls the game and no matter how successful you are at playing, you will never win unless he permits you to.

The 'skill' is the most animated player and the one who will ingratiate himself as your "friend" and advisor. His job is to keep the game 'humming' and most importantly get the victim, known as the 'mark', to place bets ... this is essential to the ring's success as the mark's money is the only new money being injected into the swindle. The other two players, at least one of whom is likely a professional 'pick-pocket' or 'pick', help maintain the pretense that it's an honest game, keep watch for the police and provide 'muscle' in the event the mark becomes unruly.

A mark suspected of understanding the swindle or of not placing a bet or of just wanting to watch, will be quickly edged away from the table by the skill or the muscle. Often there are other members of the ring in the background who assist in the subtle manipulation of the mark into the desired position at the table, block unwanted viewers and prevent incriminating photos from being taken.

The game's set-up and lay-out is quick and simple, so that in the event of trouble they can remove all traces of it and be gone in seconds.

Now back to my Sunday outing. Across the table facing the dealer was the skill. The two other players were to the right and left of him as would be expected in a table accommodating four.

My position, and this was vital to the success of the sting, was just to the right and a little behind the skill, placing me in handy proximity to both him and the pick, who was also the player on his right. In retrospect, maneuvering me into this position was easy but carefully orchestrated. It was necessary to make it the foremost viewing spot ... the best seat in the house ... the location I would naturally gravitate to. I had no idea that I was at risk in any way. What could happen to me on a crowded sidewalk in broad daylight?

Even If the game was crooked, and I hadn't ruled out that possibility, I shouldn't expect to be abused if I wasn't a participant. What I hadn't anticipated was that everyone at the table was a thief and in league against me, which made the encounter much more sinister than my defenses could have forecast.

"Will you walk into my parlor?' said the Spider to the Fly"

I watched with interest as the hands were dealt. The pick played and lost his bet. I thought he must have been blind as the all too 'obvious' shuffling by the dealer made the Ace easily 'followed' in my mind. This was intentional, of course, to appeal to the mark's lust for easy money.

Now it was the shill's play, and as you already know I was viewing the action from his right side. After the cards were shown and manipulated he made the unusual move of reaching out and putting his index finger on a downturned card as if to prevent anyone from moving it. It was no coincidence that he fingered the Ace ... the dealer's sloppy mixing made that an absolute certainty. This should have triggered an alarm with me as no player had previously touched a card until his bet was down and it was time to choose.

Not alarmed, but very amused ... I really didn't care if the dealer went broke due to his clumsy dealing. The shill bets 20 pounds. The dealer responds with the usual "well let's see your money". The shill, with his finger still pinning the face down Ace card, turns to me and says "put your finger on this card for me while I get my money out for the bet"?

I need a time out here before I slide even further into the abyss. We are about to open the curtains on the last act and the climax to this high tragedy is nigh! What I didn't realize, dear reader was that this invitation to participate was crucial to the swindle. It was the first 'easy' step into the Spider's parlor. You will see how the shill builds my confidence on this intentionally innocuous move leading up to the climax. Knowing what I knew then ... wouldn't you have put your finger on that card for him?

It seemed like an odd but harmless request for help so I moved closer to the table and pinned the card for him. He retrieved the twenty pounds from his pocket and spread it down, I removed my finger, the flipped card was the Ace and the dealer paid him forty pounds. Amazing! It seemed so easy, too easy in fact.

I was beginning to believe that the dealer was the 'mark'. Clearly, the odds of winning should have been in his favor. The only other reason for his apparent card shuffling ineptness might have been more subtle ... maybe he was grooming the players for a hustle bet. That probability seemed persuasive to me.

As entertainment, it was just getting better! I particularly enjoyed the interplay that was at work between the dealer and the shill. They acted as though the 'mano-a-mano' bet ...the game winning play was about to explode into an exciting finish in this otherwise banal, seeming-to-be-going-nowhere game.

The irony of all this lies in the fact that it was a massive charade ... in reality they were actually sharpening their knives in preparation to carve me up for Sunday's dinner. In my ignorance, it seemed authentic. In retrospect, it was acting worthy of an academy award.

The play then migrates around the table and the dealer wins a few pounds. But lately he's been giving as well as he's getting. Now it's the shill's play again. He's been very friendly and talkative with me. The dealer shows him the three cards, then turns them over and methodically mixes them. I can't believe it ... the shill has it 'made in the shade'. I followed the Ace during the shuffle ... he must have too. Predictably, he places his finger on the face down Ace card and announces with undisguised enthusiasm "I'm betting 100 pounds". The dealer's face remains sphinx-like.

***"Said the cunning Spider to the Fly, dear friend what can I do,
to prove the warm affection I've always felt for you"?***

Now the shill, wearing a Cheshire grin and a 'how are we going to spend it all look' glances back at me and then boldly proclaims to the table "and my friend here will match my 100 pounds"! If he had suddenly stripped naked, I wouldn't have been more surprised ... I blurted out "no way", shaking my head in reinforcement of my refusal. Without hesitation he says "well for God's sake go for 20 pounds ... it's a winning bet". I think 'what the hell' and agree to the 20 pounds bet!

I can't see how I can lose ... the Ace is pinned; my new friend is in for 100 pounds and even if the world came to an end all I could lose was the 20 pounds. I'd had at least that much value in recreational amusement and would certainly have a million dollar story to tell at dinner tonight!

The dealer says "I hear your bet but don't see your money?"

The shill turns to me and says again “put your finger on this card for me”... and of course, I do it. He seems to need the assurance that the cards won't be moved while he's getting his money out and I'm prepared to lend a finger, why not, he'll do it for me. He counts out the 100 pounds and throws it onto the table. The dealer counts the money and then looks at me and asks “where's your 20 pounds”?

Another time out please: You can see where this heading ... I'm now a player but my risk is a paltry 20 pounds ... I can afford to lose that and not miss a hamburger. You're convinced you wouldn't have made the bet notwithstanding my reasoning and further that I'm going to lose. Maybe! But something has to go dreadfully wrong for you to be right! More to the point, can you see any way that I could lose more than the 20 pounds risked?

The shill encourages me “get your money out, I'll cover the card”. I trade fingers with him and he becomes the ‘keeper of the Ace’. With my right hand I reach into my right rear pocket for my wallet. Here comes the climax and if you've guessed the ending you're exposed as member of a confidence ring.

Keeping my eyes on the table, I bring it out and start to look for a 20 pound note. Simultaneously and at the speed of light, the pick moves in from my right side, thrusts his fingers ever so deftly into my open wallet, smoothly pulls out all the money therein and throws it down on the table saying “he wants to increase his bet ... he's a winner”. Startled and momentarily disconcerted I take my eyes off the table for an instant to yell at the pick “What the hell are you doing”?

“Up jumped the cunning Spider, and fiercely held her fast”

The reality of what just happened now cascaded in on me. As I regained my awareness I reached quickly to try and recover my money from the table ... it was too late ... the shill had removed his finger and turned over the losing ‘two of clubs’! The dealer, now the winner hastily scooped up the pot. The swindlers had won whatever amount the pick had so generously ‘bet for me’! The cards had been switched in that nanosecond of confusion. The sting was successfully made.

Perhaps the last guy I would have suspected of complicity was the pick, the sleeper in the swindle. He finessed the swindle into a pseudo-legal bet and “too bad you lost old chap”. It was all over in a matter of seconds and the ring was already dissolving into the crowd ... along with their card table!

I was clearly stunned as I made my way back to the hotel. I couldn't believe my naiveté. And yet I shouldn't take all the credit ... it wasn't so much my naiveté as their Machiavellian cunning and craftsmanship used boldly and with great artfulness to successfully rob even someone as wary as I was.

My shyness prevents me from being honest about the amount that I lost. In fact I don't know for sure myself ... but it was plenty!

A couple of days later, I was returning to the hotel in late afternoon and noticed the same crooks at their table feigning a card game. This time I stood back and watched them from a distance. One of the players was continuously gawking around like a gander in a hay field, his neck stretching up and down; looking to see if the police were about or if perhaps a mark was hovering nearby. It seemed to me they were as "bold a brass" coming back to the same area ... but maybe they returned because they hoped I'd drop by with another donation!

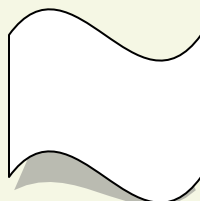
It seems a remarkable coincidence that I should be robbed in two different cities, and then be faced with the anguish of chancing upon my victimizers again within hours of the robbery and in virtually the same location.

You might reasonably ask why I didn't go to the police. But what was I to tell them ... that I'd lost a lot of money at a floating card game in front of my hotel because I picked the wrong card?

London, you can see, for all its charm and history is still home to the modern day Dickensian master thieves such as the likes of Fagin and the Artful Dodger ... my wife Laurie knows them well ... her wallet was 'picked' from her purse while traveling on the tube to shop at Harrods.

However, that is another tale on another visit to be told at another time.

***"Unto an evil counselor, close heart and ear and eye,
and take a lesson from this tale, of the Spider and the Fly"***



June 1, 2008

Thanks for your interest in these essays. I hope you enjoyed the stories. I was tempted to show the author as "Ken Mark" ... it seemed appropriate!

You will be offered some music that I've attached to this page which is quite befitting the theme of the collection.

