



the *ART*
of HONEST
DECEPTION

by Vincent H. Gaddis

John Mulholland, the well-known magician, was displaying his fascinating mastery of sleight of hand before an audience of college professors and students. He picked up a coin with his left hand, placed it in his right, then opened his hand slowly. The coin had vanished. Suddenly a book flew through the air, narrowly missing the performer's head. An embarrassed professor arose from his seat and quickly apologized.

A similar experience is described by Milbourne Christopher, another wielder of the wand. He was performing before a social gathering in Philadelphia, and he asked a reserved, dignified lady to assist him by selecting a playing card. "I changed the card in her hand from the king of hearts to the three of spades without touching it," Christopher relates. "She looked up, exasperated. Then she gave me a terrific shove, toppling me over a small table and onto the floor. Afterward she was most apologetic."

This instinctive and violent reaction to being fooled occurred because the spectators did not understand, and therefore could not enjoy, the principles in the art of honest deception. Since all deception employs the same basic methods, you should know what they are. Not only will your pleasure in witnessing magical performances be increased, but you will be able to guard against dishonest attempts to fool you.

Let us analyze what happened when the professor was baffled. With a perfectly natural move, the magician apparently picked up the coin with his right hand. Actually the coin remained in his left hand, dropping down into the palm from the extended fingers. His eyes and directed attention followed the moving, closed right hand, while his unobserved left hand slipped the coin into his coat pocket. Then, when the performer slowly opened his right hand, the coin had apparently vanished, and his left hand was empty also.

The coin did not vanish because the hand is quicker than the eye. The hand is slicker, not quicker, than the vision of spectators. Magic is successful because it is nine-tenths simple distraction. Your attention is cleverly misdirected. It is your own brain that deceives you.

You do not see with your eyes alone, but with your brain and mind, which sorts out the confusion of outlines and colors, and forms them into definite, understandable

images. Because the mind has so very much to do with what is being observed, deception is made possible.

Your mind is a censor. If you see two men--one twenty feet away from you and the other forty--your eyes tell you, falsely, that one man is only half the height of the other. Your intellect, however, corrects this erroneous impression. The mind, on the other hand, has the habit of building up familiar objects and individuals on the basis of a fleeting glance or a vague impression. If you happen to see a friend, for example, passing through a doorway, you may actually see only a familiar hat or ear or shoulder. But your mind fills out the incomplete picture, and you say to yourself: "That's Mr. Smith!" Usually you are right, but sometimes you are wrong.

As a result of this mental habit details are not observed. Most men cannot tell you whether the numbers on their watches are Roman or Arabic, whether all twelve numbers are present, or whether the manufacturer's name is in view. Unimportant matters, despite clear observation, are not registered in the consciousness.

We see what we expect to see, and it is difficult to recognize anything we are not prepared to encounter. If we ran across a polar bear in a field near Chicago, we would likely recognize it as a large white boulder--until it moved or we got close to it. But if we knew a bear had escaped from a circus and we were searching for it, we might at first identify a rock as a bear.

A magician tosses an orange into the air. Three times the orange rises and falls, each toss being made with the identical motions of the performer's body and hands. The fourth time we see the orange rise--and vanish. Actually, the orange never left his empty right hand the fourth time, but the repetition of his preceding movements had deceived us. We observed what we had expected to see--and were fooled.

Most popular ideas about the trade of all tricks are false. When a magician tells you there is nothing up his sleeve but his elbows, he generally means it. Sleeves are seldom, if ever, used in accomplishing an illusion. The same is true about the use of mirrors, and as for trapdoors in the stage floor--they went out with the gas lamp. The more intelligent you are, the easier it is to deceive you; it is more difficult to mystify children than adults. Finally, the closer you are to the performer and the more carefully you watch his movements, the more likely you'll gasp with astonishment when his mystery is completed.

The belief about the use of sleeves originated back in the early days of theatrical performances when prestidigitators customarily wore huge robes with large sleeves. In those days the now-you-see-it-now-you-don't artists could conceal several rabbits and a bowl of goldfish up around their elbows. But the evolution of clothing produced a development of magical methods. The modern trickster can perform in a bathing suit. Mirrors, too, were once used, but the road show, with its constant danger of breakage, caused the development of far better methods of creating large stage illusions.

It is difficult to mystify children and mental defectives because their general knowledge is limited, and their attention cannot be distracted or misdirected by suggestions of factors they do not understand. Never be ashamed if you are fooled; only your intelligence is proved.

Let us suppose that the performer is causing a ball to float in the air. He refers to the powers of magnetism and cosmic energy; he suggests that mental radiations may be the answer. The adults present in his audience have heard that such powers and factors exist. They may not believe his suggestions, but their attention has been directed away from the natural and obvious, and they seek a complex solution. The children, however, are paying no attention to his remarks. They are looking for the thread that is holding the ball up, and if the performer is not careful they finally see it.

Intelligent persons try to explain what they see in terms of their extensive knowledge of causes and effects, and the remarks of the performer assist in confusing them. On the other hand, children, lacking adult knowledge, rely on direct observation. When the performer points his finger at something on the other side of the stage, the adults look in the direction indicated, but the children first look at his finger. The more intelligent a person is, the more he uses his mind instead of his eyes. Thus he fools himself.

It is for the same fundamental reason that being close to the magician aids him in deceiving you. When you are close to him, he can easily misdirect your attention by merely looking in your eyes, or calling attention to his left hand while his right hand is busy making the apparent miracle possible. Angles of vision are much greater at a distance. The farther you are from the wizard, the easier it is to watch both his hands.

But sight is not the only hazard the magician must guard against. Fred Keating, whose family placed him under the observation of a psychiatrist when he took up the practice of magic as a boy, was once performing at a party in honor of the famed violinist, Fritz Kreisler. Musicians are always fascinated by the dexterity of a

sleight-of-hand artist, and the renowned Kreisler was no exception. He asked Keating to repeat a certain vanish, and then he smiled and said: "I know how you do it. The coin bounces back into your right hand!"

Keating was astonished. He knew that it was impossible for the violinist to have observed the flight of the coin since the rapid action was concealed from view. "How do you know?" he asked.

"I heard it," was the reply.

The musician's ear, trained to detect the slightest sound, had succeeded where his eyes had failed.

Misdirection is possible because of the power of suggestion. It is a psychological fact that the first impulse of people is to believe. Doubting is usually secondary. And the power of suggestion wields a tremendous influence on our lives and opinions.

An actor using suggestion can baffle trained magicians. Some years ago a group of twelve professional prestidigitators in Chicago went to see Frederick Tiden play the part of Cagliostro in the play, *The Charlatan*. During the performance Tiden produced flowers and silks from empty boxes. The magicians knew that no magical principle or secret known to them was being used by the actor. After the show they invited Tiden to have lunch with them.

Tiden was surprised when he learned that his tricks had fooled the wizards. He explained that the man who appeared most innocent of helping him--the villain, a skeptic who opposed Cagliostro constantly--had secretly introduced the silks and flowers into the boxes while apparently making sure they were empty. The suggestion that Cagliostro and the skeptic were bitter enemies was made so strongly throughout the play that the magicians never suspected that the villain was actually Tiden's helper and made his miracles possible.

When suggestion succeeds in misdirecting the attention of his audience, the performer is in a position to substitute one object for another, or obtain or get rid of other objects. One action can act as a distraction for another action at the same time. For example, when a magician is picking up or laying down his wand, he may be obtaining or disposing of another small object in his hand at the same time. The wand acts as a mask for the real reason he approached his table.

"Give me the full attention of a man," Harry Kellar, the famous necromancer of the last generation, used to say, "and a herd of elephants preceded by a brass band can march behind me, and he will not know it." Kellar's mastery of misdirection is still a legend in legerdemain, but nevertheless he was once fooled--very cleverly.

Handbills were left in all the New York magic stores one morning announcing that a new and unknown magician would perform the floating woman illusion at midnight that evening at Broadway and Forty-Second Streets. Apparently it was a publicity stunt by a newcomer in the profession, and Kellar flew into a rage. The floating lady mystery was the feature of his show, and he had spent \$50,000 in perfecting it. To exhibit it on the street would expose its secret, and at that time he regarded the illusion as his personal property.

Shortly before midnight a large number of magicians, Kellar among them, gathered on the corner to await the show. Midnight came--and passed. The mysterious wizard did not appear. Finally an idea dawned in the mind of one of the mystics.

"What's the date?" he asked Kellar.

"March thirty-first," Kellar replied.

"But it's after midnight. This is April First. Somebody has played us for a bunch of April fools."

The joker in the pack of performers was never discovered.

All of the tricks of the magician can be reduced to seven basic effects. These include a *disappearance*, an *appearance*, a *transposition of objects*, a *physical change in an object*, an *apparent defiance of natural law*, an *invisible source of motion*, and *mental phenomena*. In the production of these effects the advance of magic has kept pace with science. Many modern tricks use radio-control, electronics, and magnetic induction principles.

In addition to misdirection, the magician uses two other basic methods in the production of his pseudo-miracles. In some large stage illusions the eye is deceived by an optical illusion--but not in the manner usually suspected by the layman. There are, in fact, over thirty methods of stage camouflage, some of them quite

complex. These secrets are carefully guarded by the profession since they represent investments of many thousands of dollars.

The final principle is simply the use of a little-known scientific law or bit of knowledge. These stunts work themselves. When the performer turns water into wine and wine into milk with the aid of certain chemicals, he is taking advantage of this principle.

As to little-known bits of knowledge, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the famed advocate of spiritualism, once fooled a gathering of New York magicians with this method. He presented without comment a remarkable and realistic motion picture of prehistoric dinosaurs which, apparently, could only have been taken by supernormal means. Sir Arthur's collection of psychic photographs was famous, and the puzzled magicians wondered if this film was his latest acquisition.

Several months later the explanation came to light when the motion picture *The Lost World*, taken from Doyle's novel of the same title, appeared in the theaters. Sir Arthur had obtained a part of the film in advance in order to briefly mystify the wand wielders.

By these principles are we deceived. Remember, the next time you see a magician, that he is tricking your brain and not your eye. You are actually fooling yourself. The more you try to solve his mysteries by using your intelligence, the more easily he will baffle you.

When deception is honest, it's fun to be fooled. So sometimes, strange to say, we are fooled because we wish to be deceived. And that is the greatest, most important, principle of them all.