

## “The Curious Dealings of Sheriff Ned”

A Parody by Jeff Stauffer

Sheriff Ned Percy had been the Clayton County Sheriff for the past 19 years. Well liked by the local community, Ned was known for being a hard working man, never leaving clues dangling regardless of how many rabbit trails it led him to pursue. He also had a competitive spirit. Sometimes he'd get down-right ornery when losing, but would always shake your hand when the game was over. And so it was on this particular Saturday afternoon that Ned decided to join in a local charity event poker tournament. Rarely missing an opportunity to involve himself in these kinds of public gatherings, Ned was happy to join in the fun. It didn't hurt that he had been known to deal a card or two back in his younger days...

Ned walked into a back room of the local basketball arena to register for the event, and was assigned table number 315 along with five other players. He took his seat and waited for the others to arrive, introducing himself as “Sheriff Ned” as each one took their seat. While the others may have taken it as vanity, Ned never missed an opportunity to “read” his competition. Something as simple as a handshake and a hello can tell a lot about a person's behavior, Ned believed, and as a result how they'll play their cards.

The timer went off, and the games began. The dealer set down his pack of cards on the table, introducing himself as Richard Denton. Richard went over a few ground rules, shook everyone's hand, and started dealing the cards. The first few hands were pretty uneventful as each player tried to feel out the competition, dabbling with small raises and mid-risk bluffs. Slowly as the hour passed by, Maggie (over on Ned's right) began to amass a pile of chips, and started to bet more aggressively. And that's when an interesting event occurred. Without taking any cards, Max, who sat across from Ned, was dealt a royal flush. After the hand finished he showed everyone his ten through ace of clubs and collected his earnings. It's hard to be angry at a man who beats you with the best hand possible, so everyone gave Max a few congratulations, telling him how lucky he was and that sort of thing. However, this is where the story gets a little strange. Two hands later Max was dealt another royal flush! The same five cards: ten through ace of clubs. Suddenly the mood was not so jocular.

Ned was the first to sound off his concerns. “Now wait just a minute there Richard,” Ned began, “Don't you think that's a little peculiar?”

Richard responded, “Now hold on Sheriff Ned... I know where you're going with this. This is the first time I've met Max here, and I've got no reason to help him out. After all, this is a charity gig!”

“Yeah, but *two* royal flushes?” returned Ned, “The odds of being dealt one of them is something like a half a million to one. I can't even imagine what the odds are of getting it twice!”

“Well, in all my years of dealing, I've seen some strange things,” Richard said. “I swear to you Ned, I've got nothing to do with it.”

There was a short intermission for a few minutes and everyone around the table continued to talk about Max's great fortune. Next to Max was Steve, one of the local pool sharks in town. He said to Max, "You know Max, statistics don't lie. At some point someone was going to get dealt that hand. You were just the lucky one in the right place at the right time. Isn't that something?"

Maggie disagreed. "Well I don't believe in all that coincidence stuff," she began. "The Good Lord has put all of us here for a reason. I think it was your destiny to win, Max. You should be honored to be chosen for this!"

A third player, a German fellow named Friedrich, thought the whole discussion was silly. He was more concerned about keeping his beer glass filled. "Who cares," he began, "It's a charity event. No one's going to become a millionaire here, let's just keep playing." He waved over a waitress to fill up his pint. "Anyone else want a drink?" he asked.

Ned wasn't convinced with any of their answers. He thought it too quick to jump to such commonly-quoted explanations. "Richard, I don't mean to offend you here, but it seems the most likely answer is someone rigged those cards. I'd like to call over the event manager if that's alright with you?"

Richard was a bit defensive at this point, but he knew it was a reasonable request. And after all, Ned was the County Sheriff; how could he refuse? "Sure thing Ned. Like I said before I've got nothing to do with it, but let me call Gene over." Gene Scotus was the gaming manager for the event. He walked over in a few minutes after a brief side conversation with Richard.

"Hi Ned," Gene started, "I understand you have a complaint?" His tone was rather abrupt, looking as if he didn't like to be interrupted by petty rumblings from the players. After all, he thought to himself, it's just a charity event. What does everyone get so hung up about?

"Yeah Gene, as a matter of fact I do," said Ned. "You know as well as I do how rare a royal flush is in this game. Max got one twice within three hands. The guy didn't win a hand all day, and right after he took a call on his cell phone he gets dealt all those pretty face cards."

The other players hadn't realized that Max had taken a call just before being dealt the royal flush. Ned was always astute about those kinds of details. It's what kept him elected in the Sheriff's office for almost two decades.

Gene could hardly wait for Ned to finish his sentence before responding, "Look, I've got a lot of details to attend to here today. If you've got any evidence that Richard here did something wrong, then let me know. Otherwise I've got to get back to my station."

Gene stormed off, and Ned mumbled under his breath, "I'll remember that next time I see your son speeding in front of the high school..." There wasn't much he could do. After all, he didn't catch Richard doing anything suspicious, and now that it was an event in the past, Ned couldn't exactly produce empirical evidence. So they all sat back down and began to play another hand.

Guess what happened next.

Yep, Max was dealt *another* royal flush! This time, Ned flew off the handle.

“Oh C’mon!” he yelled.

Everyone across the room heard Ned screaming. He quickly got out of his seat and stormed over to Gene Scotus again.

“Gene, this is ridiculous! What’s going on here?!”

Gene once again seemed annoyed at this interruption: “Ned, you clearly don’t understand statistics. Things like this do happen once in a great while. Why are you so eager to assume foul play here?”

“Gene, don’t give me that. The odds of that happening are astronomical. Don’t you think it’s more reasonable to look into a rigged deck? I mean, seriously, there are only a couple of tables here. That’s not a very big statistical sample to draw from.”

“Yes Ned,” began Gene, “but these aren’t the only games being played. You see, this gym is filled with games, this tournament has been going on all week!” Gene opened one of the doors to the main hallway, and pointed to a huge corridor full of other poker games being played. Ned was quite stunned at the number of people involved. “So if you take into account all of these games, and well, why stop there? Why I bet there’s hundreds of thousands of poker games going on all over the planet right now! Like I said, these things are inevitable.”

By now all the games had stopped and the dealers began to crowd around Gene and Ned’s discussion. Most of the dealers were making comments backing up Richard’s claim of innocence. They seemed to take Ned’s accusation personally, wanting to stand up for dealers everywhere. “How dare he accuse us of cheating? It’s outrageous!” one of them shouted.

As the commotion grew, no one noticed Steve who was closely inspecting the deck of cards at Max’s table. He seemed to be on to something. At first he tried to get the attention of the people next to him, but the noise level had risen to the point that no one could hear him. He finally did his best two-finger whistle and was able to capture his audience.

“I think I found something. Look at these cards. You can see a tiny oily sticky smudge near the corner of some of these cards!” Upon further investigation, Steve and the others at his table noticed other cards had an extremely small spot on the back side of the card where the surface seemed roughed up, almost like a mini piece of Velcro. They quickly put the clues together to realize that the oil spot and the Velcro had an affinity for one another, to what appeared to be a mechanism used to attract certain cards together when shuffled.

“Well there you have it,” touted Gene, “There. We’ve found the mechanism responsible for this. See? It wasn’t the dealer’s fault at all! It looks like an accident of the manufacturing process I suppose, which would also explain the incredible odds to be dealt...”

“Gene, I can’t believe what you’re saying!” Ned interrupted, “It might remove guilt from the dealers, but it still appears something’s going on here. Think about it. Why these particular cards? It’s clearly designed to produce royal flushes. This is no random fluke of some card-cutting machine! It just pushes back the problem one step further.” Ned looked at one of the boxes of cards, and noticed they were made just down the road in a neighboring town. And like any good clue-sniffing Sheriff, Ned had an idea: “You know, I’ve got an old buddy that works down at that factory. I think I’ll go pay him a visit and see what’s going on.”

Gene moaned and rolled his eyes. “Ned, there you go again on some wild goose chase. Why does it always have to be a conspiracy? We found out the cause for the royal flushes. Isn’t that the end of it?”

Ned didn’t hear him finish his sentence. He was already putting his cap on and taking long strides towards the door. He stopped only for a brief moment to reach back and grab the suspect-cards off of the table.

Ned’s investigation turned up numerous other clues. He was able to get inside the playing-card factory and look at some of its machines and processes for making the various decks. His old friend Mike and his wife Terrie were busy working away, fixing one of the stations that had broken down yesterday. It gave him a good excuse to stick his nose inside the machine and ask lots of questions. Terrie was interested in his theory, and quickly jumped to one of the rollers that print out the ink. With his cards in hand and her knowledge of the machinery, they quickly tracked down a design-flaw in how the cards are printed. This recently added component, as it turns out, was routinely cranking out decks with this very same flaw. Who knows how many had shipped in the month since it had been installed? Terrie seemed quite pleased with herself in tracking down the clues, but Ned still wasn’t convinced. “We still haven’t solved the puzzle” he stated.

“Why?” Terrie asked. “The evidence is right here. What’s missing?”

“It’s the same question!” Ned screamed out, feeling frustrated no one was catching on to his line of thinking, “We still haven’t solved the puzzle of why these particular cards. How could some random design flaw in this card station produce such a beneficial result?” Terrie and Mike weren’t following him. “What I’m saying is, this error could have produced any sort of random anomalies, but it’s producing royal flushes, at an amazingly high rate. Doesn’t that seem like someone designed it that way? It sure seems like a ‘flaw’ put in place for poker players to notice, don’t you?”

Now Terrie was catching on. “I see your point.” She had a curious look of excitement on her face, “You know, now that you mention it, the engineer that designed this station lives in town here. Mike, what was that guy’s name? He was in here a few months back helping us install it... nice `ol fellow...reminded me of my grandpa actually.”

Mike chimed in, “Yeah I remember him. I have his business card on my desk.” He went back to his office and shortly thereafter came running out. “John Campbell. He’s up on Old Charles Road a few miles. You guys thinking of giving him a visit?” Before Mike finished his thought, Ned had already written

the name down and was calling his local dispatcher to get an address as he walked towards the exit. Everyone knew he was meant for this job; Ned was good at what he does.

So Ned arrived up at John's house with Mike and Terrie along for the ride in the backseat. They were just as curious as Ned was now to talk to John to get to the bottom of this. They found him sitting out on his front porch, tinkering away at some small electronic gizmo. He had his spectacles down over the end of his nose, attempting to feed a small wire through a long shiny tube. When the car pulled up, he looked up, put down his tools and walked over to the driveway.

After introductions and some time explaining why they were visiting him, Ned hastily pulled out the deck of cards from his car, asking if he installed the roller station at Mike and Terrie's shop. John recognized Mike and Terrie right away and acknowledged designing and helping install their station. The entire time he had a wide smirk on his face as if he was one step ahead of their conversation, anticipating what they were to ask next. Ned was always quick to get to the point:

"So do you realize that this design is printing off decks that are designed to produce royal flushes at an alarmingly high rate?" Ned asked.

"Yes. Yes I do" was John's reply. Ned was slightly taken aback at his admission, expecting another round of denying the whole thing as just an accident.

"I see... and why do you suppose you'd do such a thing?" Ned continued.

"Oh, I don't know," began John. He wiped his forehead with a cloth from his pocket, stared off down the street and then cleaned off his glasses for a few seconds. He didn't seem to be finished with his explanation so Ned gave him a few moments. Ned's professional career gave him many moments such as this, confronting criminals and the like. He wasn't sure if John was going to sprint off down the street or break down crying right in his front yard.

"If I can be frank with you Ned, I did it on purpose," John confessed. "I've been building these things for a long time you see, and, well, I don't know, I always thought it'd be fun to design something like this to see if anyone would notice. I guess I got a little mischievous in my old age. But you know what Ned? You were the first one to figure it out. The other few I installed, well, they just shrugged it off like some accident in shipping or some other crazy thing." John chuckled for a minute, and as he did he pulled on his belt and re-tucked his shirt. "You know, I'm actually quite amazed at myself to have come up with the idea. That took a lot of tinkering to get those spots on the cards just right. I was getting frustrated no one would figure it out!"

Ned, quite pleased with himself for his sleuthing capabilities, thanked John for his time and warned him to not be surprised if charges were filed for knowingly installing damaged machinery. He also told him that their conversation may come up as part of a court case and that he would be obligated to share his findings. John didn't seem to mind though: "Oh no need for that Sheriff. I figured this day would come. I'm fully prepared to replace the parts and pay for any damages. You won't get any trouble out of me. But you know what?" John leaned a little closer and tipped his head a bit to look at

Ned above his glasses. He quickly peered to the left and right to see if anyone around was listening, and said with a big grin on his face, "Wait till you hear about the new lottery ball mixing machine I've developed and how it produces the numbers one through six, all in a row!"

Ned knew this would be only the beginning of yet another investigation to be solved.

He sure was good at his job.

The End.