



## THE “TRUE” HISTORY OF EUCHRE

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*Matt Onica*

One day, two brothers traveling together found themselves in a small town in Michigan. They had been wandering long and far and had no place to stay. They had no money either. The only things they did have were some banged up pots, an old knife and half a deck of cards. The other half had been used to start last night’s fire.

“What should we do, brother?” the elder asked the younger. “We will freeze if we have to sleep out here tonight.”

“Let’s try to find an inn,” said the younger, “perhaps the innkeeper will put us up for the night.”

So the two wandered on and found the town’s only inn. They entered to find the innkeeper talking with another man.

“Excuse me, gentlemen,” the elder brother said. “We two are travelers and are hoping to find a place to stay. Do you have an open room?”

“If you have money, I have a room for you,” said the innkeeper.

“Ah, I’m sorry but we have no money at present. If you could give us some credit we would be sure to pay you back,” the younger suggested.

“I’m sorry,” the innkeeper replied, “but I don’t know either of you so how do I know you’ll keep your word?”

“I see your point,” the elder said, “but please have mercy

on us. It's the middle of winter and if we slept outside we would freeze."

"Hmmm . . ." the innkeeper mused to himself, "Ok. I'll tell you what I'll do. You two clean the bar, fix the front door, sweep the rooms, cook up some chow, do the dishes, mop up the kitchen and I'll let you stay tonight."

The younger drew the elder aside. "This daft old man will have us working until dawn. What point is there having a room if we can't even sleep in it?"

"Well, what choice do we have?" the elder asked. "We need a place to stay."

"I have an idea brother," the younger said, "just follow my lead." They turned back to the innkeeper and his friend.

"Tell you what, let's have some fun. We bet you that we can beat you at a card game. If we win, we get the room free. If you win, we'll work for you a whole month free."

The innkeeper smiled, "I'll take that bet. My friend and I are the best card players in this state. We'll beat you at any game you choose."

"Very well," said the younger. "Since there are two of us and two of you we'll play on a team. I know a game our family plays all the time back home that requires four players."

At this, the elder drew the younger aside, "Are you mad? We don't even have a full deck. What if we lose?"

"Relax," the younger brother said, "just pretend you've played this game before and we'll be fine. With my quick wit we'll win this bet. Besides, how could we lose a game that I am making up the rules for?"

"Hey, are you two ready to play?" The two men had pulled up another set of chairs and were sitting next to each other.

"No, no, no," the younger said. "You sit across from your partner." The men looked at each other, shrugged their shoulders and changed seats. They didn't notice that with this setup the innkeeper would have his back to a window allowing the younger brother to see his cards in the reflection; while the innkeeper's partner would be sitting with his back to the liquor

bottles allowing the elder brother to see his cards in a reflection as well.

So the younger took out the half deck and began to deal it out.

“What’s all this?” the innkeeper’s partner asked. “This is only half a deck.”

“Yeah,” the younger brother said. “This game is played with only half a deck. We only use the Nines through the Aces.”

“Then why do I have a set of Fives?” the innkeeper asked, throwing two Fives on the table. Apparently the Five cards had been lucky enough not to be used for kindling.

“Oh . . . err . . . we use those for keeping score. Set them aside.” The man did so. When the other set of Fives was found the elder brother took them and set them next to himself.

“Ok, now this game is played in rounds. One person leads and everyone plays a card. The highest card of the suit that was led wins. Then the winner of the hand plays again, until everyone runs out of cards. The team with the most cards gets a point. Oh, and you can’t tell your partner what you have. No talking across the table.”

“Ah, so the object is to take tricks,” the innkeeper said.

“Tricks? Hmmm . . . tricks, yes, that’s a good thing to call them.” The younger responded.

“Well that sounds simple enough. But I have one question: since there are only twenty-four cards in this deck, we will each get six cards. What happens if it’s a tie?”

“We only deal out five cards a piece, that way there can’t be a tie,” the elder put in. The younger glared over at his brother who was smiling goofily as if to say, “Look, I’m helping.” The younger was going to say that ties went to the challenger, but since his brother butted in, that plan was ruined. He dealt out five cards each.

Once the younger had finished dealing everyone their cards he set aside the four extra.

“Ok, so the highest card wins right?” The innkeeper started off by playing the King of hearts. The elder, seeing he could not play higher, played the Nine of hearts; the

innkeeper's partner likewise played the nine of spades. The younger had the Ace, however, and played it to take the trick.

Then the younger led off the next trick with the ten of hearts. The innkeeper had no hearts so he played off as did the elder brother, but the innkeeper's partner had the Queen of hearts and played it to take the trick.

"Hey, hey, hey," the younger said indignantly, "you just cheated."

"What? I played the Queen of hearts!" said the innkeeper's partner.

"But you have to follow suit. The first time you played spades."

"B-but . . . you didn't SAY we had to follow suit!"

"Hey, you two said you could beat us at our own game and in our game you must follow suit. That's two points for us. We get two 'cause you cheated you know."

"So you are telling me that we have to follow suit every time we play? But that means the winner will be the team that has the most Aces!" the innkeeper put in.

"Oh, come on, you don't think it's as simple as that do you? I thought you guys were class players here. Not our fault you can't follow the rules," needled the younger.

"Yeah," said the elder, "in fact you might say they have trouble *FOLLOWING SUIT*." The elder leaned back in his chair smiling at his own joke. The younger rolled his eyes.

"Ok! Fine!" the innkeeper said, taking the cards. He dealt them out and everyone took up his hand. The younger looked into the window's reflection and saw his opponent had two Aces and he had none. He looked at his brother who was looking over his opponent's shoulder into the glass bottles and frowning. Not good. He'd have to come up with something clever to win this hand.

The innkeeper started by playing an Ace of clubs and all followed suit, the younger playing the Jack of clubs. The innkeeper started to sweep the trick but the younger brother stopped him. "Hey. Don't you know that the Jack is high in this game? I won this trick."

The younger swept the cards back from under the innkeeper's suspicious gaze. The elder brother, getting the hint, played the Jack of spades on the next trick capturing two. On the third trick, the elder brother led the Ace of diamonds but the innkeeper's partner had the Jack. He was just about to collect the trick when the younger brother stopped him again. "No, that's not the way it works."

"What do you mean? I played the Jack!"

"But it's the wrong color," said the younger sweeping another trick away.

"You mean one color is better than the other?"

"Yes, of course! The Jacks of that color are high. We call them bowers. Don't you know that?"

"You didn't tell us that!"

"Well, I didn't think I had to since you guys are the best card players in the state," the younger said.

"Ok, ok! So black is always high?" the innkeeper's partner asked.

"No," the younger responded, "red could be high; it depends on what you call."

"But we didn't call black," the innkeeper said.

"Of course not, my team did," the younger replied.

"What? We didn't hear you."

"That's not my problem. You should pay more attention."

"What kind of fool game is this? Where did you learn it?" the innkeeper's partner demanded.

"It's a German game," the younger replied.

"Really popular where we are from," the elder chimed in.

"Travelers and card players huh? Well, you two do everything," said the innkeeper's partner with a hint of sarcasm.

"What can we say," began the elder, "we are **JACKS** of all trades." This time he had to chuckle. "Get it? Jacks?" he snickered, elbowing the innkeeper's arm lightly. The younger shook his head, determined to ignore his brother.

The innkeeper's partner scowled and shot a glance across the table, but didn't say anything else. The next two tricks went

to the innkeeper's team. Then, the elder shuffled the deck and passed out the cards for the third hand.

"Alright, question," said the innkeeper's partner, determined not to be caught off guard again. "When do we call the color, and how do we know which Jack is higher?"

"Actually, that's two questions," said the younger, "but I'll answer both. We . . . uh . . . call a suit before we start the trick . . .," the younger had to wait a moment for his brother to suppress his laughter. ". . . And the suit called is the best Jack. The same color Jack is the second best."

"And if we don't want to call?" asked the innkeeper.

"You can pass, but then the next person gets to call it," the younger explained.

"Alright, then I pass," said the innkeeper's partner.

"Hearts," said the younger. He started the game by playing the Jack of hearts taking one. Then the younger played the King of spades. Unfortunately, the innkeeper's partner had the Ace taking that trick. Then he played the Jack of diamonds taking the next trick as well. Finally, he led the Ace of clubs threatening to take the point.

"*Uh, oh,*" thought the younger, "*They are going to get us if I don't think of something.*"

The younger had to follow suit as did the innkeeper, but the elder, having no clubs, played a heart. The innkeeper's partner was about to triumphantly sweep away the fourth trick when the younger once again stopped him.

"That trick is ours," he said, "we played a heart."

"What? That's not fair. How can you just trump over my Ace like that?"

"We called hearts." The younger said matter-of-factly.

"Wait, so the *whole suit* is high? I thought it was just the Jacks," said the innkeeper.

"Nope," the younger said, "I told you at the beginning this game was more complicated than you thought."

"In fact," started the elder, "one could say it is down right **TRICK-y!**"

The innkeeper's partner, who had a bit of a temper, threw

down his cards in anger. "YOU TWO ARE NOTHING MORE THAN CHEATS! How can this be a real game?"

"Calm down, Amos," said the innkeeper, "let's just sit and learn. I kind of like this game."

"Yeah, Amos," said the younger, "you need to calm down."

"All right you bloody little charlatan," Amos snarled at the younger. "You just wait. You'll run out of rules to make up and then we'll beat you."

The rest of that hand passed uneventfully. The younger took the last trick safely capturing the point. Then the cards passed to Amos to deal. He was so angry he dealt the cards in threes and twos to hurry along the game. The younger took up his hand saw that he had three queens and two nines and winced.

"PASS," he said loudly.

"Spades," said the innkeeper. This time the brothers could do nothing to stop the innkeeper's team from taking four of five tricks. The score was now one to four. The younger then took up the cards and dealt them out for the next hand. When he finished and was setting aside the remaining pile he accidentally flipped the top card over. It was the Jack of diamonds.

"Oh, one rule I forgot to mention," said the younger. "Before we call the trumping suit whatever we want, we have to decide on whether or not this top card here is trump. If we decide this is the trumping suit, the dealer gets to pick it up and put it into his hand."

"You FORGOT to mention it? Funny how you remember it now," Amos said eyeing the Jack suspiciously.

"Well, I didn't want to confuse you," said the younger, "since you were having so much trouble with the other rules."

"Hmmm . . . well, if you get to have that then I will pass," said the innkeeper.

"Pick it up," said the elder. With the Jack of diamonds the two brothers easily won all the tricks. They got two points for this because (as the younger explained) it was the other team's fault that they didn't take any. After another of the elder

brother's puns the innkeeper got on with dealing the next hand. This time, Amos ordered up clubs and the innkeeper's team made a point. Now it was two to six.

For the next hand, it was the elder brother's turn to deal. He turned up spades and discovered that he had the Jack of spades and clubs, the Ace of spades and the Queen of spades.

"Wow," he said aloud, forgetting himself. "My hand is so good I could take all of them by myself."

"Hah," Amos said, "you can barely take one trick without your brother. There is no way you could go alone."

"Bet I can."

"Alright, fine, give it a shot."

"What will you give me if I make it?"

"If you make it, we'll give you four points. How about that?" Amos challenged.

"Fine with me," accepted the elder.

"This is going to be an easy point," Amos said confidently, "Without his partner it'll be a cinch." The younger set his hand down and looked on nervously but he had nothing to fear. With the elder brother holding a full hand of spades and the Jack of clubs he easily took all the tricks.

"Well, I guess we get four points for that one," said the elder brother with the same ridiculous smile plastered on his face.

"And that's all she wrote," said the younger also smiling, "we have ten points and the game."

Amos was so angry he couldn't even speak; but the innkeeper chuckled to himself and handed the brothers a key and a book. "Sign your names here and then you can take this key up to your room. It's the first door on your left." The boys thanked the man, signed the book, and went upstairs.

"Man," the elder began as they were climbing the steps, "I can't believe what a good *DEAL* we got for the free room. Get it? Deal? I am so funny." The younger slapped his brother on the back of the head and they disappeared upstairs.

"I can't believe you let those two rook us like that. They

obviously made the game up. They didn't even tell us the name of it," Amos complained after the brothers had left.

"Well," said the innkeeper, "I like that game. If they did just invent it, we should commend them."

"Yeah, right," Amos snorted, "maybe we should name the game after them."

"Not a bad idea." The innkeeper said, taking Amos's sarcasm seriously. He looked the brothers up in the sign-in book. "Let's see, Tom and Wes Euchre."

"Kind of long for a name, isn't it?"

"Well, we'll just call it Euchre. Got a nice ring doesn't it?"

"Whatever you say," Amos said getting up to leave, "but if you ask me it'll never catch on."

A Brief Explanation:

This paper grew out of a project assigned to me in my Folklore Honors College class at Oakland University. The professor was fairly open about project ideas, allowing my classmates and me the freedom to write or report on anything as long as it was within the scope of the course. Having spent a great deal of time on "Trickster" tales in the class, and knowing that my teacher was fond of such characters I prudently decided I would write a trickster story. For those who don't know, Trickster characters are the pranksters of folklore. They are usually divine or semi-divine beings who exist on the edge of society. The Trickster lives for himself and tends to act upon impulse. His actions could be for good or for evil and are often dictated by his needs or wants at that particular moment. Frequently they are dual natured, able to concoct a plan of stunning brilliance only to be defeated by a spectacular act of stupidity. Tricksters are also usually cultural heroes and many of their stories explain tribal customs or natural phenomena; some examples include: where the sun came from, why people have tongues, and why spiders are found in dark places.

I decided that I would like my trickster story to explain a modern phenomenon. One night, about a week before the project was due, I went out to eat with my brother and three of his friends bringing my computer along to catch up on work

while we were waiting for our meals. After we ordered, I began brainstorming for my trickster story, typing a few sentences out only to delete them in disgust a short time later. My brother and his friends, who were famished, started playing a game of Euchre to take their minds off their hunger. As I sat watching the game trying to find inspiration I recalled the time years ago when I had originally learned it. I was at Boy Scout camp and had stopped to watch the scoutmasters play. At first I only intended to observe a few hands but sheer curiosity kept me rooted to the spot. For the next hour I was determined to discover the seemingly random set of rules that governed this strange game. I couldn't figure it out. They seemed to bend and change every time the cards were dealt. I recalled my first impression that the original creator must have made the rules up haphazardly. Then I hit upon the rough idea for the plot for my story. Still, I was unsure if this would be a good topic. Even though it is quite popular in Michigan, I knew there were a great many people who had never played Euchre (if you are one of these people, contact me for a lesson. When in Michigan, learning Euchre is a requirement). While I was trying to decide whether or not to use my idea I looked up the definition of Euchre for the heck of it. Besides being a card game Euchre also means: "to deceive by sly or underhanded means, to cheat." That coupled with the fact that one needs to take "tricks" to win at Euchre sealed the deal for me. The parallels to a trickster were just too good to pass up. I finished it a few days later and looked back on it with satisfaction. I was nervous about presenting it to my class, but when I did it was well received. I thank the reader for taking time to read my story and I hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I would also like to thank the editors, who helped to transform this paper from a farmer's hand into a loner.