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The Devil's picture-books

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PREFACE.

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The “Devil’s Books” was the name bestowed upon Playing-cards by the Puritans and other pious souls who were probably in hopes that this name would alarm timid persons and so prevent their use. Whether or not his Satanic Majesty originated Playing-cards, we have no means of discovering; but it is more probable that he only inspired their invention, and placed them in the hands of mankind, who have eagerly adopted this simple means of amusing themselves, and have used it according to the good or evil which predominated in their own breasts. Many learned men have written books or treatises on Playing-cards, and I am indebted for a large part of the information contained in this history to “*Les Cartes à Jouer*,” by M. Paul la Croix; “*Facts and Speculations about Playing-cards*,” by Mr. Chatto; “*The History of Playing-cards*,” by the Rev. Edward Taylor; and “*The History of Playing-cards*,” by Mr. Singer.

These books are now out of print, and somewhat difficult to obtain; and I hope, by bringing into a small compass the principal features set forth in them, I shall be able to place before a number of readers interesting facts that would be otherwise unobtainable.

Hearty thanks are due to the custodians of the National Museum in Washington, who have aided me in every way in their power, and also to the many kind friends who have sought far and wide for unique and uncommon packs of cards, and helped materially by gathering facts relating to them for me.

That many nations have cards peculiar to their own country and almost unknown beyond its boundaries may be a matter of surprise to some; that such ordinary and familiar objects as Playing-cards should have a history, will astonish others. My hope is that the subject will interest my readers as it has done me. Any facts concerning Playing-cards or any communications relating to rare or curious packs will be gladly received by the author, who would like to add to her collection.

M. K. VAN RENSSELAER.

NEW YORK, 1890.

THE DEVIL'S PICTURE-BOOKS

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*"The Ladies arm-in-arm in clusters,
As great and gracious a' as sisters;*

*On lee-lang nights, wi' crabbit leuks,
Pore owre the devil's pictured beuks."*

BURNS.

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A youth of frolic, an old age of cards.

HONE: *Every-Day Book*, ii. 98.

THE origin of Playing-cards and their inventor is still a subject of speculation, and will probably remain forever undiscovered. Almost every country in Europe has through her scholars laid claim to having been the first to use cards; and many documentary and other proofs have been brought forward to substantiate their assertions, which are based upon ancient laws, common traditions, or contemporary illustrations.

That cards were brought from the East to Europe about the time of the Crusades, and probably by the home-returning warriors, who imported many of the newly acquired customs and habits of the Orient into their own countries, seems to be a well established fact; and it does not contradict the statement made by some writers, who declare that the gypsies—who about that time began to wander over Europe—brought with them and introduced cards, which they used, as they do at the present day, for divining the future. Cards may well have become known by both means, and they spread rapidly over all of what was then considered the only civilized part of the world; and the proofs that have been brought forward show that they were known nearly simultaneously in Italy, Spain, France,

Germany, and England, and point to a common origin not to be found in any one of these countries.



Plate 2.

The first cards known in Europe, and which were named *Tarots*, *Tarocchi*, etc., seem to differ in almost every respect from those of the fifteenth century, although these probably inspired their invention. The latter resemble much more those of the present day than they do the original Tarots. The first packs consisted of seventy-eight cards,—that is, of four suits of numeral cards; and besides these there were twenty-two emblematical pictured cards, which were called *Atous*, or *Atouts*,—a word which M. Duchesne, a French writer, declares signifies “above all.” This word used in French has the same meaning as our word *Trump*. The marks which distinguish the Tarot suits are usually *Swords*, *Cups*, *Sticks*, and *Money*; and each one consists of fourteen cards, ten of which are “pips” and three or four “coat” cards,—namely, King, Queen, Knight, and Knave. The Queen was not always admitted. These suits seem to be the origin of the modern packs; and the emblems used on them have been adopted in many countries where the *Atout* part was discarded while the rest of the pack with its original symbols was retained.

Mr. Singer gives a graphic description of these cards and the games to be played with them, and says that “among different nations the suits [as will be hereafter shown] are distinguished by marks peculiar to themselves, while only the general features of the numbered cards headed by figures or court cards have been retained.”

The second division of the Tarot pack, called *Atouts*, are numbered up to twenty-one, each of these having its proper value; and besides all these there is one, not numbered and not belonging to the division of the suit cards, which is

called a *Fou*, and in playing the game is designated *Mat*, or *il Matto*. This "Joker," as we should term it, has no value of its own, but augments that of any of the Atouts to which it may be joined, and is sometimes played instead of a Queen, being then called "her Excuse."

These Atouts are each represented by a print which is supposed to resemble some character, and the name is generally placed on the card. Among them are an Emperor, a Cupid, a Chariot, a Hermit, a Gallows, Death, The Day of Judgment, a Pope, Fortune, Temperance, Justice, the Moon, the Sun, etc. The order in which they are placed is not always the same, and is seemingly unimportant. The game may be played by two or four persons. "The one who holds the 'Fool' regains his stake; 'La Force' (or Strength) takes twice as much from the pool, while 'La Mort' (or Death) most appropriately sweeps the board."

It is said that the distribution of the suit cards has a peculiar signification. Each one is distinguished by an emblem which represents the four classes into which communities were once divided. First comes the Churchman, represented by the Chalice (or Copas); next in rank, the Warrior, whose emblem is the Sword; third, the Merchant, symbolized by a Coin; and fourth, the Workman with his Staff. It will be shown hereafter that almost all writers on the subject allow the possibility of the divisions of the suits being shown in the cards.

The earliest known specimens of these Tarot cards are now to be found in the Cabinet des Estampes in Paris, and are supposed to have formed part of the pack which was painted for King Charles the Seventh of France in 1393, to

cheer and amuse him during an illness which had been caused by a *coup-de-soleil* in 1392, and which made him a melancholy but not a dangerous lunatic. M. Paul la Croix describes these Tarots as having been most delicately painted and resembling in treatment the illuminations of manuscripts. They are on a golden background on which dots forming an ornamental pattern were impressed. A border of silver surrounded and as it were framed each picture, through which a dotted line twisted spirally like a ribbon. M. la Croix points out that this dotted line, in his language technically termed a *tare* (which also means a "fault" or "defect"), was a sort of fluting produced by small holes pricked into the substance of which the cards were made, and fancies that to these Tares the Tarots owe their name. Other writers, however, dispute this derivation of the word, and discover new ones for themselves which are generally quite as fanciful and far-fetched.

These well preserved Tarots are eighteen centimetres by nine, and are painted in water colours on a thin card. The composition of the figures is ingenious and artistic. The drawing is correct and full of character, and the colours are still brilliant. A narrow border of black and white checks surrounds each one. This border is a piece of checkered paper pasted on the back of the card and neatly folded over its edge as if to protect it, showing on the face of the card and forming a frame for the pictures. This fashion of having a checkered or diapered back was closely followed in many of the countries where cards have been used; and these backs are still seen, although this old pattern (which, as will hereafter be seen, had probably a very interesting origin)