

'The Deck of Cards' recording by Wink Martindale
(with additional notes)

NARRATIVE:

During the North African campaign, a bunch of soldier boys had been on a long hike and they arrived in a little town called Casino. The next morning being Sunday, several of the boys went to Church. A sergeant commanded the boys in Church and after the Chaplain had read the prayer, the text was taken up next. Those of the boys who had a prayer book took them out, but this one soldier boy had only a deck of cards, and so he spread them out. The Sergeant saw the cards and said, "Soldier, put away those cards." After the service was over, the soldier was taken prisoner and brought before the Provost Marshall.

The Marshall said, "Sergeant, why have you brought this man here?" "For playing cards in church, Sir." "And what have you to say for yourself, son?" "Much, Sir," replied the soldier. The Marshall said, "I hope so, for if not I shall punish you more than any man was ever punished." The soldier said, "Sir, I have been on the march for about six days. I have neither a Bible nor a prayer book, but I hope to satisfy you, Sir, with the purity of my intentions." And with that, the boy started his story:

"You see Sir, when I look at the Ace, it reminds me that there is but one God. And the Deuce reminds me that the Bible is divided into two parts, the Old and the New Testaments. When I see the Trey, I think of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. And when I see the Four, I think of the four Evangelists who preached the Gospel; there was Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. And when I see the Five, it reminds me of the five wise virgins who trimmed their lamps; there were ten of them: five were wise and were saved, five were foolish and were shut out. When I see the Six, it reminds me that in six days, God made this great heaven and earth. When I see the Seven, it reminds me that on the seventh day, God rested from His great work. And when I see the Eight, I think of the eight righteous persons God saved when He destroyed this earth; there was Noah, his wife, their sons and their wives. And when I see the Nine, I think of the lepers our Saviour cleansed, and nine out of the ten didn't even thank Him.

When I see the Ten, I think of the Ten Commandments God handed down to Moses on a table of stone. When I see the King, it reminds me that there is but one King of Heaven, God Almighty. And when I see the Queen, I think of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who is Queen of Heaven. And the Jack or Knave is the Devil. When I count the number of spots on a deck of cards, I find 365, the number of days in a year. There are 52 cards, the number of weeks in a year. There are 4 suits, the number of weeks in a month. There are 12 picture cards, the number of months in a year. There are 13 tricks, the number of weeks in a quarter. So you see, Sir, my pack of cards serves me as a Bible, an Almanac and a Prayer Book."

"And friends, the story is true. I know, I was that soldier."

NOTES.

Although recent events have inspired an e-mail-circulated version featuring a soldier serving in Afghanistan, the tale about a serviceman using a deck of ordinary playing cards as an aid to prayer and meditation dates at least to at least 1788. The popular song "Deck of Cards" (sometimes known as "A Soldier's Prayer Book") was written in 1948 by "T." Texas Tyler and was recorded by (among others) Tex Ritter in 1948, Wink Martindale in 1959, and Bill Anderson in 1991.

In that 1948 musical offering, the story is set during World War II and stars a soldier whose outfit, which has been fighting in North Africa, is newly arrived at Casino. One Sunday morning, some of the soldiers in that unit go to church; those who have prayer books read them during the service, but one soldier pulls out a deck of cards, prompting his sergeant to haul this apparent blasphemer before the provost marshal. In the e-mailed version of fifty-five years later, certain details about this prologue to the cards' meanings have been updated to better fit the current climate: the soldier sits alone in a bunkhouse rather than with his buddies in church because he's in a non-Christian country, and he turns to his deck of playing cards not because of a shortage of prayer books for the congregation but because Bibles are supposedly banned in Afghanistan. Once those scene-setting details are out of the way, the two versions dovetail, with the meanings of each of the cards agreeing from one version to the other.

Differences between the two versions aside, is it an account of an actual event? The 1948 song concludes with "Friends, I know this story is true, because I knew that soldier," a statement that on the surface would seem to confirm the veracity of the narrative. However, tellers of tales do sometimes add flourishes of such nature to their offerings, especially those of an inspirational or tear-jerking nature.

Moreover, a broadsheet titled "The Soldier's Prayer-Book" which recounts the same story as the 1948 song "Deck of Cards" appears in an 1865 book about the history of playing cards. French versions of the tale were printed in 1778 and 1809. Throughout the years the story about the soldier, his playing cards, and his explanation of their meanings to a superior he's been brought before has gone by many names: Deck of Cards, The Soldier's Prayer Book, Cards Spiritualized. Some of the meanings assigned to the pasteboards have changed too: the queen symbolized the Queen of Sheba instead of Mary, and the jack was a knave. The older versions also mention the deck being divided into thirteen ranks, one for each (lunar) month, a detail dropped from more contemporary versions in recognition of modern society having moved away from the lunar calendar.

Some point out that if you count up all the spots on the cards, you come up with only 364, not the 365 claimed. The 1865 version contained an explanation for that, which has also been dropped from newer accounts:

When I count how many spots there are in a pack of cards, I find there are three hundred and sixty-five, there are so many days in the year.

Stop, said the mayor that is a mistake. I grant it, said the soldier, but as I have never yet seen an Almanac that was thoroughly [sic] correct in all points it would have been impossible for me to have imitated an Almanac exactly without a mistake. Your observations are very correct said the mayor. Go on.

Given that the tale has been in print since 1778, if the author of the 1948 song "knew that soldier," as he claimed in the final line of the song, he was very long-lived indeed.

Other catechism-type songs have been around for centuries. One such musical delight many (erroneously) think falls into this category is "The 12 Days of Christmas," but a genuine example of the genre is "A New Dial," a question-and-answer song dating to at least 1625, which assigns religious meanings to each of the twelve days of Christmas:

What are they that are but one?
We have one God alone
In heaven above sits on His throne.

What are they which are by two?
Two testaments, the old and new,
We do acknowledge to be true.

What are they which are but three?
Three persons in the Trinity
Which make one God in unity.

What are they which are but four
Four sweet Evangelists there are,
Christ's birth, life, death which do declare.

What are they which are but five?
Five senses, like five kings, maintain
In every man a several reign.

What are they which are but six?
Six days to labor is not wrong,
For God himself did work so long.

What are they which are but seven?
Seven liberal arts hath God sent down
With divine skill man's soul to crown.

What are they which are but eight?
Eight Beatitudes are there given
Use them right and go to heaven.

What are they which are but nine?
Nine Muses, like the heaven's nine spheres,
With sacred tunes entice our ears.

What are they which are but ten?
Ten statutes God to Moses gave
Which, kept or broke, do spill or save.

What are they which are but eleven?
Eleven thousand virgins did partake
And suffered death for Jesus' sake.

What are they which are but twelve?
Twelve are attending on God's son;
Twelve make our creed. The Dial's done

[history from <http://www.snopes.com/glurge/cards.asp>]

Another source regarding The Deck Of Cards.....

Story

"The Cards" is set during World War II, where a group of Army soldiers, on a long hike during a campaign in southern Italy, had arrived and camped near a town named Cassino. While Scripture is being read, one boy who has only a deck of playing cards, pulls them out and spreads them in front of him. He is immediately spotted by a sergeant, arrested and taken before the Provost Marshal to be punished.

The Provost Marshal demands an explanation, to which the soldier explains the significance of each card:

Ace: The one true God

Deuce: The Old Testament and New Testament in the Bible

Trey: The Holy Trinity; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit/Ghost

Four: St. Matthew, St. Mark, St. Luke, and St. John, authors of the four Gospels

Five: The two groups of five virgins who trimmed their lamps for a wedding. Five were wise (by saving enough oil) and were admitted, while the other five were foolish (did not have enough oil) and were shut out.

Six: God creates the Earth in six days.

Seven: God rests on the seventh day, now known as the Sabbath.

Eight: The eight righteous people who God saved during the Great Flood: Noah, his wife, their three sons, and their wives.

Nine: The ten lepers who Jesus cleansed; nine of whom didn't even thank him.

Ten: The Ten Commandments God handed down to Moses.

King: Jesus Christ, King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Queen: Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of Jesus and Queen of Heaven.

Jack or Knaves: Satan or the Devil

365 Spots: Days in a year

52 Cards: Approximate number of weeks in a year

Four Suits: Approximate number of weeks in a month (can also mean the four seasons but this is not included in the song)

Twelve Face Cards: Number of months in a year

Thirteen Tricks: Approximate number of weeks in a quarter

He then ends his story by saying that "my deck of cards serves me as a Bible, an almanac and a prayer book." The narrator then closes the story by stating that "this story is true," either by claiming either he is the soldier in question or that he knows him.

Flaws

The story, as told, contains flaws, including:

- There are not 365 spots on a deck of cards. No construction of a card deck with four identical suits could contain an odd number of spots. On a standard deck there are 364.
- Only in February are there exactly four weeks in a month (and then not in leap years), so the deck would provide a rather unreliable almanac.
- Similarly there are not exactly 52 weeks in a year, or exactly 13 weeks in a quarter.