
INTRODUCTION

THIS INTRODUCTION TO *A Cut Above* is word for word as I wrote it for the chapter of Ross Bertram's book *Bertram on Sleight of Hand*, published in 1983. I do not think I can improve on it now.

This minor excursion or incursion into an intriguing by-way of card magic is intended as a tribute to Ross Bertram. I first met Ross in January of 1966 when I was amazed by his "Birdcage" card vanish and his facile mastery of cards and coins at the table. Long before that I knew of his genius from the *Stars of Magic* and appearances on T.V. Since then the wonder and the admiration have grown. His Erdnasian dedication to detail is already legendary. Those who know Ross Bertram know also that his writings have preserved only a portion of his legacy and cannot quite recapture the spell his magic casts. As one who of necessity and by vocation has drifted only on the outer fringes of the magic fraternity I salute a coinmaster and cardmaster and all-round mystifier who truly belongs with the all-time greats of the inner circle. I salute also a dear friend and a fine gentleman.

In Defence of One-Hand Cutting

Now to my circumscribed but not insignificant subject... Some, I know, have genuine distaste for flourishes or displays of skill when interspersed with card magic. They feel that there is danger of breaking the spell so that others will think, "Oh, it is only sleight of hand jugglery." Such thinking has its point for the style of some. Perhaps it is rooted in the gambler's care to avoid any show of skill. Erdnase had immense influence when he wrote about card conjuring: "In this phase of card-handling as with card-table artifice, we are of the opinion that the less the company knows about the dexterity of the performer, the better it answers his purpose." (*The Expert at the Card Table* pp. 127,128) Still, for the most part and for most I believe that judiciously introduced and well-executed flourishes here and there are always a joy.

Allow me to apply this thinking to one-hand cuts and shuffles. Houdini, one of the best publicists of all time, used precisely this gimmick, if you will, to advertise his powers. One of his turn-of-the-century posters shows the great escapologist performing difficult multiple one-hand cuts

with both hands. Whether he ever dared to attempt these cuts on stage I do not know, but others did with good effect. In the "Introductory" to *The Art of Magic*, first published in 1909, in which T. Nelson Downs is described as the author and J. Northern Hilliard is reduced to editor, we learn that "many persons who do not now remember a single trick or illusion of the late Alexander Herrmann's programme will descant enthusiastically on the artistic manner in which he 'shuffled cards with one hand.'" We learn further that "a certain foreign conjurer, who disguises himself under the attractive title of 'L'homme Masqué—actually shuffles the cards with either the right or the left hand, but it is an operation that demands a large and powerful hand. To cite another example of the value of fancy sleights, how much more attractive Mr. Kellar's programme would have been had he executed an occasional flourish with the cards."

The examples could be multiplied. Paul Le Paul used a publicity photo showing him doing a one-hand shuffle. Cliff Green, in the introduction to his book *Professional Card Magic* describes how he was fascinated when one of the characters in a play flicked some tobacco onto a sheet of cigarette paper and rolled the cigarette with one hand. He learned the knack but wrote, "It had occurred to me that it would be much more interesting as well as original if I developed a method for shuffling a pack of cards with one hand. Within several months I developed a method and accomplished the feat and used a one-hand shuffle during my many years in vaudeville." Harry Lorayne even as a boy knew the value of a good card flourish. In his fine book *The Magic Book* (p.157) he describes how his card work helped him to land a job. He says "Because it had worked before I took out my deck of cards and did some fancy one-hand shuffles and cuts." I recall showing a card trick to a small boy, ending with a one-hand cut. The trick didn't seem to impress him at all but he said, "Boy, I wish I could cut the cards like that." One-hand cuts can look magical and help create the atmosphere of illusion.

There is another plus: the one-hand cut or shuffle can be much more than a flourish or show-off. It can serve as a means of misdirection. It can be used to force a card or cards, to control a card or packet, to false cut or shuffle, to add-on or subtract cards, to glimpse top, middle or bottom cards, or as an integral part in a number of novel card revelations. It is a many-faceted magician's tool.

Origins

The precise history of the one-hand cut is lost in the labyrinth of time and no one will ever trace it. Probably it is as old as card magic and card gambling. The oldest reference in English I have been able to find is in the anonymous *The Secret Out* (1859). There it is entitled “To Make the Pass with One Hand or Single Handed Pass.” Robert-Houdin gives us three one-hand passes in *The Secrets of Conjuring and Magic* which appeared in English in 1878 but had appeared in French ten years earlier. What is enlightening here is that Robert-Houdin tells us that he had selected the three passes from among many so we can conclude that at least several other one-hand cuts were already current.

Professor Hoffmann, borrowing mostly if not entirely from French sources, describes four one-hand passes in *Modern Magic* (1876). In his classic *Sleight of Hand* (1877) Edwin Sachs refers to “various single-handed passes, one or two of which at times come in very handy.” He describes, without naming it, the then-new Charlier pass and two other one-hand passes. We can say with certainty that in the latter half of the nineteenth century one-hand cuts or shuffles were used on the stage as flourishes, in parlour magic mostly as passes or shifts and at the gaming table for shady purposes.

King Charlier

Of all the one-hand cuts, there is one undisputed king: the Charlier cut or pass or shift. It is attributed to that shadowy figure who drifts in and out of the magic and gaming circles of late nineteenth century England.

Will Dexter tells us about all we know of Charlier in his book *This is Magic* (pp. 147-154). Charlier assuredly gave us the Charlier Hay Mow Shuffle and the Charlier system of card marking described by Professor Hoffmann in *More Magic*. Above all he is famous for the Charlier one-hand pass. Probably more has been written on it than on all other one-hand cuts combined. In *The Complete Illustrated Book of Card Magic*, Walter B. Gibson gives us an extensive treatment of the Charlier cut and its uses, but that excellent treatise is in no way complete. There are many variations of the Charlier cut, not all in print, and even more cuts in which the Charlier cuts play an integral part. It is unlikely

that King Charlier will ever be toppled from his throne. All one-hand cut devotees owe him obeisance.

Having given King Charlier his due, it must be quickly added that for specific purposes and in the order of grace and beauty the Charlier cut is outdone by whole troops of one-hand cuts and shuffles. Among these is Howard De Courcy’s One-Hand Riffle Shuffle which first appeared in *Hugard’s Magic Monthly* in December 1945 (p. 175). Then there is its close relative, the Notis Cascade, described in Dai Vernon’s *More Inner Secrets of Card Magic* by Lewis Ganson (p. 31). Among table shuffles what could be more eye-catching than what is called the Vernon One-Hand Shuffle, from *Dai Vernon’s Ultimate Card Secrets* (p. 142). Incidentally, Ross Bertram executes beautifully a slight variation of this shuffle. Other cuts and shuffles surpass the Charlier in effect and complexity but none in all-round utility and popularity.

Cuts and Numbers

The number of one-hand cuts and shuffles in print goes on increasing year after year. *The Master Index to Magic in Print*, compiled by Jack Potter and edited and published by Mickey Hades takes us up to and including December 1964. It lists twenty-seven items under “One-Handed Cuts.” Most of these references deal with the Charlier pass. Some entries indicate that the reference source contains more than one one-hand pass. There is considerable duplication in the passes listed, e.g. the three “Single Handed Passes” listed from Professor Hoffmann’s *Card Tricks Without Apparatus* are identical with the three listed under 1859. This, of course, is in the pre-Charlier era. Under “One-handed Shuffles” there are twenty entries, some duplicates. The oldest listed is from *The Expert at the Card Table*, Erdnase, 1902. Alas, it is not a shuffle at all but the well-known Erdnase Shift with one hand. If one disregards the one-hand Waterfall Shuffle as a hybrid involving two hands, the oldest entry is a “One Hand Card Shuffle” by Baffles Brush from *The Sphinx* of February 1922. Potter’s *Master Index* is a marvellous compendium but certainly not complete and is limited to books and periodicals in English. Since December 1964, many other one-hand cuts and variations of old ones have appeared in print. Some are reinventions of others bearing new names. In all, I would think that

about fifty truly different one-hand cuts and shuffles are described in magic literature in English.

Some time ago I was stricken by the minor insanity of trying to invent new one-hand cuts. This was despite the wise counsel of Faucett Ross that, given the thousands of card men who have been experimenting with cuts and shuffles over the years, it is unlikely that much new remains to be discovered. At any rate, I have made notes on over one hundred one-hand cuts and shuffles, some with variations. Besides that I have notes on twenty one-hand table cuts and fifteen one-hand throw cuts. That latter nomenclature I shall explain later. Much of my cutting represents Love's *Labour Lost* in that I have done considerable reinventing. That does not alter the fact that whether most feasible one-hand cuts and shuffles have been invented or not they have certainly not all been pinned down in print, photographed or illustrated—not by dozens. It is likely that some have been forgotten or buried with their originators. For example, Faucett Ross recalls an excellent one-hand cut of Manuel, which the latter executed with great rapidity and grace. Is anyone able to reconstruct it? Again I can find no detailed description of the one-hand shuffle of Alexander Herrmann—though it may well exist. Here and there one meets a magician with some pet unpublished one-hand cut. Let those who would invent new ones be heartened by the words of Edward Love, an expert one-hand curd-cutter: “There is practically no limit to the number of cuts that can be made.”

Cards and Techniques

While in my own sporadic practice sessions I usually confine myself to a full poker-sized deck it will be found that some cuts simply cannot be made by a person of average-sized hands unless a bridge-sized deck is used. Other cuts are better made with the smaller cards or with less than a full deck. A goodly number of one-hand passes and flourishes originated in France and it is good to keep in mind the difference in cards. If one has difficulty in mastering a cut described in a text of non-English origin, the words of Gaultier in *Magic Without Apparatus* become pertinent: “Playing cards vary in size and shape, according to the countries in which they are found. French cards are by far the most suitable for executing all of the card sleights. American cards, for one thing, are wider than ours, and appreciably larger—and this is a serious disadvantage, which makes it impossible, with hands of average size, to perform certain sleights” (P. 61). Professor Hoffmann has good advice on the utility of practising with all sorts and sizes of cards (*Modern Magic*, pp. 11-12). In his delightful book *Card Fantasies* Edward G. Love strikes an encouraging and helpful note when he says, of one-hand cuts: “A person with short fingers need not despair because he cannot make the cuts as easily as one with long fingers; he will soon

find that practice will eliminate the apparent handicap” (p. 32). I have seen performers with small hands execute some intricate cuts. Some cuts, especially riffle cuts, need a new deck or a least a deck with unbent corners, while others are better made with a deck that is well-broken and tried and true. The base rule is that one should not attempt any one-hand cut or shuffle in public except with one's own trusty deck. Strangely enough, perhaps because the cards are usually held in the left hand and left fingers are trained for many sleights, by far the greater number of one-hand cuts are more easily mastered by the left hand by right-handed persons. Some find it worth the practice to perform one-hand cuts with equal facility with either hand or both simultaneously. In the performance of cuts made as flourishes angles should be considered. Most multiple-cut flourishes are better executed with the hand held sideways in front of the body, but this is not a universal rule.

Since the above was written in 1983 there has been considerable development in the area of card manipulation called flourishes. For many decades the controversy has raged concerning the propriety of mixing flourishes and magic. Flourishes seem to be getting the upper hand. Such magicians as Paul Harris, Harry Lorayne and Daryl consider them a helpful adjunct or interlude. Alan Ackerman once was on the side of the rigorists, but now asserts that he has been won over to the occasional flourish camp. It can be legitimately claimed that a flourish or two adds to the aura of mystery that gives lustre to any conjuring performance. Here is an example of the attraction of one-hand cuts. Bruce Cervon tells us that his ill father, a musician, was trying to find a way to exercise his wrist tendons when he could not play his guitar. He found a book called Tricks with Cards by Hoffmann and from it learned some one-hand cuts to keep his tendons strong. Bruce tells us that his father tried to teach him the cuts, but he was about seven, and his hands were too small. “He bought me one of those half-sized decks of cards and he showed me how and I learned. I became the neighbourhood freak. It was great. Whenever neighbours or relatives came over they'd say, ‘Oh, that's great’. I'd do it again. It gave me a taste for show biz.” (Genii, October 2004: “Bruce Cervon: A Life in Magic”, page 46).

In the whole area of card flourishes special thanks are due to Gerald P. Cestkowski. Through his monumental Encyclopedia of Playing Card Flourishes, published in 2002 by Printmeister Press, his videos and lessons, he has done valiant work in spreading the gospel of card flourishes, including one-hand cuts and shuffles.

It hardly needs to be said that a cut poorly or sloppily executed is not entertainment but an embarrassment. So the solution is practice, practice, practice—not just repetition, but practice accompanied by thoughtful analysis. With such practice comes that facility that fascinates and delights.

Now on to the cuts! May they provide both entertainment and challenge and inspire further advances in the card-cutting art.