

THE ILLUSTRATED KEY TO THE
TAROT



The Veil of Divination

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The Illustrated Key to the Tarot: The Veil of Divination

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PART I

THE VEIL AND ITS SYMBOLS

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SECTION I

INTRODUCTORY AND GENERAL

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The pathology of the poet says that "*the undevout astronomer is mad*"; the pathology of the very plain man says that "*the genius is mad*"; and between these extremes, which stand for ten thousand analogous excesses, the sovereign reason takes the part of a moderator and does what it can. I do not think that there is a pathology of the *occult* dedications, but about their extravagances no one can question, and it is not less difficult than thankless to act as a moderator regarding them. Moreover, the pathology, if it existed, would probably be an empiricism rather than a diagnosis, and would offer no criterion. Now, *occultism* is not like mystic faculty, and it very seldom works in harmony either with business aptitude in the things of ordinary life or with a knowledge of the canons of evidence in its own sphere. I know that for the high art of ribaldry there are few things more dull than the criticism which maintains that a thesis is untrue, and cannot understand that it is decorative. I know also that after long dealing with doubtful doctrine or with difficult research it is always refreshing, in the domain of this art, to meet with what is obviously of fraud or at least of complete unreason. But the aspects of history, as seen through the lens of occultism, are not as a rule decorative, and have few gifts of refreshment to heal the lacerations

which they inflict on the logical understanding. It almost requires a *Frater Sapiens dominabitur astris* in the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross to have the patience which is not lost amidst clouds of folly when the consideration of the Tarot is undertaken in accordance with the higher law of symbolism. The true Tarot is symbolism; it speaks no other language and offers no other signs. Given the inward meaning of its emblems, they do become a kind of alphabet which is capable of indefinite combinations and makes true sense in all. On the highest plane it offers a "*Key*" *To The Mysteries*, in a manner which is not arbitrary and has not been read in. But the wrong symbolical stories have been told concerning it, and the wrong history has been given in every published work which so far has dealt with the subject. It has been intimated by two or three writers that, at least in respect of the meanings, this is unavoidably the case, because few are acquainted with them, while these few hold by transmission under pledges and cannot betray their trust. The suggestion is fantastic on the surface, for there seems a certain anti-climax in the proposition that a particular interpretation of fortune-telling—*l'art de tirer les cartes*—can be reserved for Sons of the Doctrine. The fact remains, notwithstanding, that a *Secret Tradition* exists regarding the *Tarot*, and as there is always the possibility that some minor arcana of the Mysteries may be made public with a flourish of trumpets, it will be as well to go before the event and to warn those who are curious in such matters that any revelation will contain only a third part of the earth and sea and a third part of the stars of heaven in respect of the symbolism. This is for the simple reason that neither in root-matter nor in development has more been put into writing, so that much will remain to be said after any pretended unveiling. The guardians of certain temples of initiation who keep watch over mysteries of this order have therefore no cause for alarm.

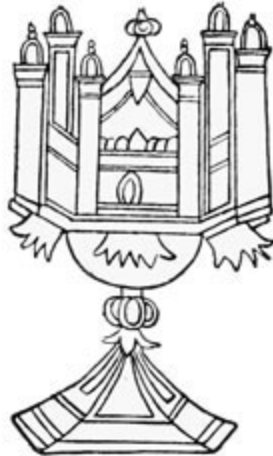
In my preface to *The Tarot Of The Bohemians*, which, rather by an accident of things, has recently come to be re-issued after a long period, I have said what was then possible or seemed most necessary. The present work is designed more especially—as I have intimated—to introduce a rectified set of the cards themselves and to tell the unadorned truth concerning them, so far as this is possible in the outer circles. As regards the sequence of greater symbols, their ultimate and highest meaning lies deeper than the common language of picture or hieroglyph. This will be understood by those who have received some part of the *Secret Tradition*. As regards the verbal meanings allocated here to the more important Trump Cards, they are designed to set aside the follies and impostures of past attributions, to put those who have the gift of insight on the right track, and to take care, within the limits of my possibilities, that they are the truth so far as they go.

It is regrettable in several respects that I must confess to certain reservations, but there is a question of honor at issue. Furthermore, between the follies on the one side of those who know nothing of the tradition, yet are in their own opinion the exponents of something called occult science and philosophy, and on the other side between the make-believe of a few writers who have received part of the tradition and think that it constitutes a legal title to scatter dust in the eyes of the world without, I feel that the time has come to say what it is possible to say, so that the effect of current charlatanism and unintelligence may be reduced to a minimum.

We shall see in due course that the history of Tarot cards is largely of the negative kind, and that, when the issues are cleared by the dissipation of reveries and gratuitous speculations expressed in the terms of certitude, there is in fact no history prior to the fourteenth century. The deception and self-deception regarding their origin in *Egypt*, *India* or *China* put a lying spirit into the mouths of the first

expositors, and the later occult writers have done little more than reproduce the first false testimony in the good faith of an intelligence unawakened to the issues of research. As it so happens, all expositions have worked within a very narrow range, and owe, comparatively speaking, little to the inventive faculty. One brilliant opportunity has at least been missed, for it has not so far occurred to any one that the Tarot might perhaps have done duty and even originated as a secret symbolical language of the Albigensian sects. I commend this suggestion to the lineal descendants in the spirit of Gabriele Rossetti and Eugène Aroux, to Mr. Harold Bayley as another *New Light On The Renaissance*, and as a taper at least in the darkness which, with great respect, might be serviceable to the zealous and all-searching mind of Mrs. Cooper-Oakley. Think only what the supposed testimony of watermarks on paper might gain from the *Tarot Card* of the Pope or Hierophant, in connection with the notion of a secret Albigensian patriarch, of which Mr. Bayley has found in these same watermarks so much material to his purpose. Think only for a moment about the card of the High Priestess as representing the Albigensian church itself; and think of the Tower struck by Lightning as typifying the desired destruction of Papal Rome, the city on the seven hills, with the pontiff and his temporal power cast down from the spiritual edifice when it is riven by the wrath of God (Nature). The possibilities are so numerous and persuasive that they almost deceive in their expression one of the elect who has invented them. But there is more even than this, though I scarcely dare to cite it. When the time came for the Tarot cards to be the subject of their first formal explanation, the archæologist Court de Gebelin reproduced some of their most important emblems, and—if I may so term it—the codex which he used has served—by means of his engraved plates—as a basis of reference for many sets that have been issued subsequently. The figures are very primitive and differ as such from the cards of Etteilla, the Marseilles Tarot,

and others still current in France. I am not a good judge in such matters, but the fact that every one of the Trumps Major might have answered for watermark purposes is shown by the cases which I have quoted and by one most remarkable example of the Ace of Cups.



I should call it an eucharistic emblem after the manner of a ciborium, but this does not signify at the moment. The point is that Mr. Harold Bayley gives six analogous devices in his *New Light On The Renaissance*, being watermarks on paper of the seventeenth century, which he claims to be of Albigenian origin and to represent sacramental and Graal emblems. Had he only heard of the Tarot, had he known that these cards of divination, cards of fortune, cards of all vagrant arts, were perhaps current at the period in the South of France, I think that his enchanting but all too fantastic hypothesis might have dilated still more largely in the atmosphere of his dream. We should no doubt have had a vision of Christian Gnosticism, Manichæanism, and all that he understands by pure primitive Gospel, shining behind the pictures.

I do not look through such glasses, and I can only commend the subject to his attention at a later period; it is mentioned here that I may introduce with an unheard-of

wonder the marvels of arbitrary speculation as to the history of the cards.

With reference to their form and number, it should scarcely be necessary to enumerate them, for they must be almost commonly familiar, but as it is precarious to assume anything, and as there are also other reasons, I will tabulate them briefly as follows:—

CLASS I

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SECTION 2 TRUMPS MAJOR

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OTHERWISE, GREATER ARCANA

1. *The Magus, Magician, or Juggler*, the caster of the dice and mountebank, in the world of vulgar trickery. This is the *colportage* interpretation, and it has the same correspondence with the real symbolical meaning that the use of the Tarot in fortune-telling has with its mystic construction according to the secret science of symbolism. I should add that many independent students of the subject, following their own lights, have produced individual sequences of meaning in respect of the Trumps Major, and their lights are sometimes suggestive, but they are not the true lights. For example, Eliphas Lévi says that the Magus signifies that unity which is the mother of numbers; others say that it is the Divine Unity; and one of the latest French commentators considers that in its general sense it is the will.

2. *The High Priestess, the Pope Joan, or Female Pontiff*; early expositors have sought to term this card the Mother, or Pope's Wife, which is opposed to the symbolism. It is sometimes held to represent the Divine Law and the Gnosis, in which case the Priestess corresponds to the idea of the *Shekinah*. She is the Secret Tradition and the higher sense of the instituted Mysteries.

3. *The Empress*, who is sometimes represented with full face, while her correspondence, the Emperor, is in profile. As there has been some tendency to ascribe a symbolical significance to this distinction, it seems desirable to say that it carries no inner meaning. The *Empress* has been connected with the ideas of universal fecundity and in a general sense with activity.

4. *The Emperor*, by imputation the spouse of the former. He is occasionally represented as wearing, in addition to his personal insignia, the stars or ribbons of some order of chivalry. I mention this to show that the cards are a medley of old and new emblems. Those who insist upon the evidence of the one may deal, if they can, with the other. No effectual argument for the antiquity of a particular design can be drawn from the fact that it incorporates old material; but there is also none which can be based on sporadic novelties, the intervention of which may signify only the unintelligent hand of an editor or of a late draughtsman.

5. *The High Priest or Hierophant*, called also Spiritual Father, and more commonly and obviously the Pope. It seems even to have been named the Abbot, and then its correspondence, the High Priestess, was the Abbess or Mother of the Convent. Both are arbitrary names. The insignia of the figures are papal, and in such case the High Priestess is and can be only the Church, to whom Pope and priests are married by the spiritual rite of ordination. I think, however, that in its primitive form this card did not represent the Roman Pontiff.

6. *The Lovers or Marriage*. This symbol has undergone many variations, as might be expected from its subject. In the eighteenth century form, by which it first became known to the world of archæological research, it is really a card of married life, showing father and mother, with their child placed between them; and the pagan Cupid above, in the act of flying his shaft, is, of course, a misapplied emblem. The Cupid is of love beginning rather than of love in its

fulness, guarding the fruit thereof. The card is said to have been entitled *Simulacrum fidei*, the symbol of conjugal faith, for which the rainbow as a sign of the covenant would have been a more appropriate concomitant. The figures are also held to have signified Truth, Honor and Love, but I suspect that this was, so to speak, the gloss of a commentator moralizing. It has these, but it has other and higher aspects.

7. *The Chariot*. This is represented in some extant codices as being drawn by two sphinxes, and the device is in consonance with the symbolism, but it must not be supposed that such was its original form; the variation was invented to support a particular historical hypothesis. In the eighteenth century white horses were yoked to the car. As regards its usual name, the lesser stands for the greater; it is really the King in his triumph, typifying, however, the victory which creates kingship as its natural consequence and not the vested royalty of the fourth card. M. Court de Gebelin said that it was Osiris Triumphant, the conquering sun in spring-time having vanquished the obstacles of winter. We know now that Osiris rising from the dead is not represented by such obvious symbolism. Other animals than horses have also been used to draw the *currus triumphalis*, as, for example, a lion and a leopard.

8. *Fortitude*. This is one of the cardinal virtues, of which I shall speak later. The female figure is usually represented as closing the mouth of a lion. In the earlier form which is printed by Court de Gebelin, she is obviously opening it. The first alternative is better symbolically, but either is an instance of strength in its conventional understanding, and conveys the idea of mastery. It has been said that the figure represents organic force, moral force and the principle of all force.

9. *The Hermit*, as he is termed in common parlance, stands next on the list; he is also the Capuchin, and in more philosophical language the Sage. He is said to be in search of that Truth which is located far off in the sequence, and of

Justice which has preceded him on the way. But this is a card of attainment, as we shall see later, rather than a card of quest. It is said also that his lantern contains the Light of Occult Science and that his staff is a Magic Wand. These interpretations are comparable in every respect to the divinatory and fortune-telling meanings with which I shall have to deal in their turn. The diabolism of both is that they are true after their own manner, but that they miss all the high things to which the Greater Arcana should be allocated. It is as if a man who knows in his heart that all roads lead to the heights, and that God (Nature) is at the great height of all, should choose the way of perdition or the way of folly as the path of his own attainment. Eliphas Lévi has allocated this card to Prudence, but in so doing he has been actuated by the wish to fill a gap which would otherwise occur in the symbolism. The four cardinal virtues are necessary to an idealogical sequence like the Trumps Major, but they must not be taken only in that first sense which exists for the use and consolation of him who in these days of halfpenny journalism is called the man in the street. In their proper understanding they are the correlatives of the counsels of perfection when these have been similarly re-expressed, and they read as follows: (a) Transcendental Justice, the counter-equilibrium of the scales, when they have been over-weighted so that they dip heavily on the side of God (Nature). The corresponding counsel is to use loaded dice when you play for high stakes with *Diabolus*. The axiom is *Aut Deus, aut nihil*. (b) Divine Ecstasy, as a counterpoise to something called Temperance, the sign of which is, I believe, the extinction of lights in the tavern. The corresponding counsel is to drink only of new wine in the Kingdom of the Father, because God (Nature) is all in all. The axiom is that man being a reasonable being must get intoxicated with God (Nature); the imputed case in point is Spinoza. (c) The state of Royal Fortitude, which is the state of a Tower of Ivory and a House of Gold, but it is God (Nature) and not the

man who has become *Turrus fortitudinis a facie inimici*, and out of that House the enemy has been cast. The corresponding counsel is that a man must not spare himself even in the presence of death, but he must be certain that his sacrifice shall be—of any open course—the best that will ensure his end. The axiom is that the strength which is raised to such a degree that a man dares lose himself shall show him how Nature (God) is found, and as to such refuge—dare therefore and learn. (*d*) Prudence is the economy which follows the line of least resistance, that the soul may get back whence it came. It is a doctrine of divine parsimony and conservation of energy because of the stress, the terror and the manifest impertinences of this life. The corresponding counsel is that true prudence is concerned with the one thing needful, and the axiom is: Waste not, want not. The conclusion of the whole matter is a business proposition founded on the law of exchange: You cannot help getting what you seek in respect of the things that are Divine: it is the law of supply and demand. I have mentioned these few matters at this point for two simple reasons: (*a*) because in proportion to the impartiality of the mind it seems sometimes more difficult to determine whether it is vice or vulgarity which lays waste the present world more piteously; (*b*) because in order to remedy the imperfections of the old notions it is highly needful, on occasion, to empty terms and phrases of their accepted significance, that they may receive a new and more adequate meaning.

10. *The Wheel of Fortune*. There is a current *Manual of Cartomancy* which has obtained a considerable vogue in England, and amidst a great scattermeal of curious things to no purpose has intersected a few serious subjects. In its last and largest edition it treats in one section of the Tarot; which—if I interpret the author rightly—it regards from beginning to end as the Wheel of Fortune, this expression being understood in my own sense. I have no objection to

such an inclusive though conventional description; it obtains in all the worlds, and I wonder that it has not been adopted previously as the most appropriate name on the side of common fortune-telling. It is also the title of one of the Trumps Major—that indeed of our concern at the moment, as my sub-title shows. Of recent years this has suffered many fantastic presentations and one hypothetical reconstruction which is suggestive in its symbolism. The wheel has seven radii; in the eighteenth century the ascending and descending animals were really of nondescript character, one of them having a human head. At the summit was another monster with the body of an indeterminate beast, wings on shoulders and a crown on head. It carried two wands in its claws. These are replaced in the reconstruction by a Hermanubis rising with the wheel, a *Sphinx* couchant at the summit and a Typhon on the descending side. Here is another instance of an invention in support of a hypothesis; but if the latter be set aside the grouping is symbolically correct and can pass as such.

11. *Justice*. That the *Tarot*, though it is of all reasonable antiquity, is not of time immemorial, is shown by this card, which could have been presented in a much more archaic manner. Those, however, who have gifts of discernment in matters of this kind will not need to be told that age is in no sense of the essence of the consideration; the Rite of Closing the Lodge in the Third Craft Grade of Masonry may belong to the late eighteenth century, but the fact signifies nothing; it is still the summary of all the instituted and official Mysteries. The female figure of the eleventh card is said to be Astræa, who personified the same virtue and is represented by the same symbols. This goddess notwithstanding, and notwithstanding the vulgarian Cupid, the *Tarot* is not of Roman mythology, or of Greek either. Its presentation of Justice is supposed to be one of the four cardinal virtues included in the sequence of Greater Arcana; but, as it so happens, fourth emblem is wanting, and it

became necessary for the commentators to discover it at all costs. They did what it was possible to do, and yet the laws of research have never succeeded in extricating the missing Persephone under the form of Prudence. Court de Gebelin attempted to solve the difficulty by a *tour de force*, and believed that he had extracted what he wanted from the symbol of the Hanged Man—wherein he deceived himself. The Tarot has, therefore, its Justice, its Temperance also and its Fortitude, but—owing to a curious omission—it does not offer us any type of Prudence, though it may be admitted that, in some respects, the isolation of the Hermit, pursuing a solitary path by the light of his own lamp, gives, to those who can receive it, a certain high counsel in respect of the *via prudentiæ*.

12. *The Hanged Man*. This is the symbol which is supposed to represent Prudence, and Eliphas Lévi says, in his most shallow and plausible manner, that it is the adept bound by his engagements. The figure of a man is suspended head-downwards from a gibbet, to which he is attached by a rope about one of his ankles. The arms are bound behind him and one leg is crossed over the other. According to another, and indeed the prevailing interpretation, he signifies sacrifice, but all current meanings attributed to this card are cartomancists' intuitions, apart from any real value, on the symbolical side. The fortune-tellers of the eighteenth century who circulated Tarots, depict a semi-feminine youth in jerkin, poised erect on one foot and loosely attached to a short stake driven into the ground.

13. *Death*. The method of presentation is almost invariable, and embodies a bourgeois form of symbolism. The scene is the field of life, and amidst ordinary rank vegetation there are living arms and heads protruding from the ground. One of the heads is crowned, and a skeleton with a great scythe is in the act of mowing it. The transparent and unescapable meaning is death, but the