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THE PICTORIAL KEY TO THE TAROT

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Preface

IT seems rather of necessity than predilection in the sense of *apologia* that I should put on record in the first place a plain statement of my personal position, as one who for many years of literary life has been, subject to his spiritual and other limitations, an exponent of the higher mystic schools. It will be thought that I am acting strangely in concerning myself at this day with what appears at first sight and simply a well-known method of fortune-telling. Now, the opinions of Mr. Smith, even in the literary reviews, are of no importance unless they happen to agree with our own, but in order to sanctify this doctrine we must take care that our opinions, and the subjects out of which they arise, are concerned only with the highest. Yet it is just this which may seem doubtful, in the present instance, not only to Mr. Smith, whom I respect within the proper measures of detachment, but to some of more real consequence, seeing that their dedications are mine. To these and to any I would say that after the most illuminated Frater Christian Rosy Cross had beheld the Chemical Marriage in the Secret Palace of Transmutation, his story breaks off abruptly, with an intimation that he expected next morning to be door-keeper. After the same manner, it happens more often than might seem likely that those who have seen the King of Heaven through the most clearest veils of the sacraments are those who assume thereafter the humblest offices of all about the House of God. By such simple devices also are the Adepts and Great Masters in the secret orders distinguished from the cohort of Neophytes as *servi servorum mysterii*. So also, or in a way which is not entirely unlike, we meet with the Tarot cards at the outermost gates--amidst the fritterings and débris of the so-called occult arts, about which no one in their senses has suffered the smallest deception; and yet these cards belong in themselves to another region, for they contain a very high symbolism, which is interpreted according to the Laws of Grace rather than by the pretexts and intuitions of that which passes for divination. The fact that the wisdom of God is foolishness with men does not create a presumption that the foolishness of this world makes in any sense for Divine Wisdom; so neither the scholars in the ordinary classes nor the pedagogues in the seats of the mighty will be quick to perceive the likelihood or even the possibility of this proposition. The subject has been in the hands of cartomancists as part of the stock-in-trade of their industry; I do not seek to persuade any one outside my own circles that this is of much or of no consequence; but on the historical and interpretative sides it has not fared better; it has been there in the hands of exponents who have brought it into utter contempt for those people who possess philosophical insight or faculties for the appreciation of evidence. It is time that it should be rescued, and this I propose to undertake once and for all, that I may have done with the side issues which distract from the term. As poetry is the most beautiful expression of the things that are of all most beautiful, so is symbolism the most catholic expression in concealment of things that are most profound in the Sanctuary and that have not been declared outside it with the same fulness by means of the spoken word. The justification of the rule of silence is no part of my present concern, but I have put on record elsewhere, and quite recently, what it is possible to say on this subject.

The little treatise which follows is divided into three parts, in the first of which I have dealt with the antiquities of the subject and a few things that arise from and connect therewith.

It should be understood that it is not put forward as a contribution to the history of playing cards, about which I know and care nothing; it is a consideration dedicated and addressed to a certain school of occultism, more especially in France, as to the source and centre of all the phantasmagoria which has entered into expression during the last fifty years under the pretence of considering Tarot cards historically. In the second part, I have dealt with the

1. The Tarot And Secret Tradition

THE Tarot embodies symbolical presentations of universal ideas, behind which lie all the implicits of the human mind, and it is in this sense that they contain secret doctrine, which is the realization by the few of truths imbedded in the consciousness of all, though they have not passed into express recognition by ordinary men. The theory is that this doctrine has always existed--that is to say, has been excogitated in the consciousness of an elect minority; that it has been perpetuated in secrecy from one to another and has been recorded in secret literatures, like those of Alchemy and Kabbalism; that it is contained also in those Instituted Mysteries of which Rosicrucianism offers an example near to our hand in the past, and Craft Masonry a living summary, or general memorial, for those who can interpret its real meaning. Behind the Secret Doctrine it is held that there is an experience or practice by which the Doctrine is justified. It is obvious that in a handbook like the present I can do little more than state the claims, which, however, have been discussed at length in several of my other writings, while it is designed to treat two of its more important phases in books devoted to the Secret Tradition in Freemasonry and in Hermetic literature. As regards Tarot claims, it should be remembered that some considerable part of the imputed Secret Doctrine has been presented in the pictorial emblems of Alchemy, so that the imputed *Book of Thoth* is in no sense a solitary device of this emblematic kind. Now, Alchemy had two branches, as I have explained fully elsewhere, and the pictorial emblems which I have mentioned are common to both divisions. Its material side is represented in the strange symbolism of the *Mutus Liber*, printed in the great folios of Mangetus. There the process for the performance of the great work of transmutation is depicted in fourteen copper-plate engravings, which exhibit the different stages of the matter in the various chemical vessels. Above these vessels there are mythological, planetary, solar and lunar symbols, as if the powers and virtues which - according to Hermetic teaching--preside over the development and perfection of the metallic kingdom were intervening actively to assist the two operators who are toiling below. The operators--curiously enough--are male and female. The spiritual side of Alchemy is set forth in the much stranger emblems of the *Book of Lambspring*, and of this I have already given a preliminary interpretation, to which the reader may be referred.² The tract contains the mystery of what is called the mystical or arch-natural elixir, being the marriage of the soul and the spirit in the body of the adept philosopher and the transmutation of the body as the physical result of this marriage. I have never met with more curious intimations than in this one little work. It may be mentioned as a point of fact that both tracts are very much later in time than the latest date that could be assigned to the general distribution of Tarot cards in Europe by the most drastic form of criticism.

They belong respectively to the end of the seventeenth and sixteenth centuries. As I am not drawing here on the font of imagination to refresh that of fact and experience, I do not suggest that the Tarot set the example of expressing Secret Doctrine in pictures and that it was followed by Hermetic writers; but it is noticeable that it is perhaps the earliest example of this art. It is also the most catholic, because it is not, by attribution or otherwise, a derivative of any one school or literature of occultism; it is not of Alchemy or Kabbalism or Astrology or Ceremonial Magic; but, as I have said, it is the presentation of universal ideas by means of universal types, and it is in the combination of these types--if anywhere--that it presents Secret Doctrine.

² See the Occult Review, vol. viii, 1908

2. The Trumps Major And Their Inner Symbolism

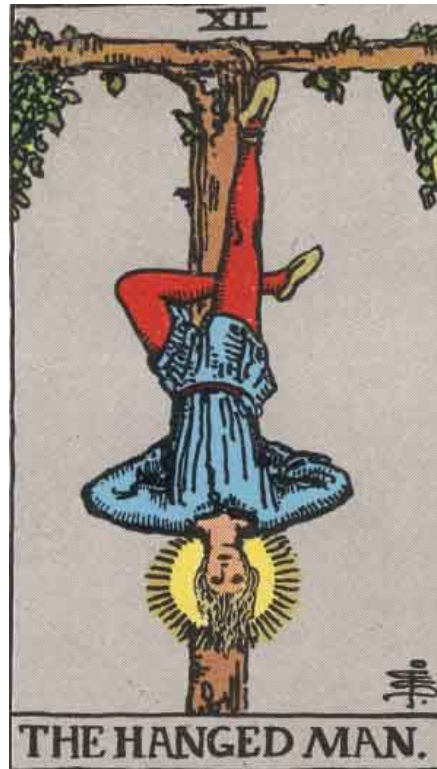
1. The Magician



A youthful figure in the robe of a magician, having the countenance of divine Apollo, with smile of confidence and shining eyes. Above his head is the mysterious sign of the Holy Spirit, the sign of life, like an endless cord, forming the figure 8 in a horizontal position. About his waist is a serpent-cincture, the serpent appearing to devour its own tail. This is familiar to most as a conventional symbol of eternity, but here it indicates more especially the eternity of attainment in the spirit. In the Magician's right hand is a wand raised towards heaven, while the left hand is pointing to the earth.

This dual sign is known in very high grades of the Instituted Mysteries; it shews the descent of grace, virtue and light, drawn from things above and derived to things below. The suggestion throughout is therefore the possession and communication of the Powers and Gifts of the Spirit. On the table in front of the Magician are the symbols of the four Tarot suits, signifying the elements of natural life, which lie like counters before the adept, and he adapts them as he wills. Beneath are roses and lilies, the *flos campi* and *lilium convallium*, changed into garden flowers, to shew the culture of aspiration. This card signifies the divine motive in man, reflecting God, the will in the liberation of its union with that which is above. It is also the unity of individual being on all planes, and in a very high sense it is thought, in the fixation thereof.

With further reference to what I have called the sign of life and its connexion with the number 8, it may be remembered that Christian Gnosticism speaks of rebirth in Christ as a change "unto the Ogdoad." The mystic number is termed Jerusalem above, the Land flowing



The gallows from which he is suspended forms a *Tau* cross, while the figure--from the position of the legs--forms a fylfot cross.

There is a nimbus about the head of the seeming martyr. It should be noted

- (1) that the tree of sacrifice is living wood, with leaves thereon;
- (2) that the face expresses deep entrancement, not suffering;
- (3) that the figure, as a whole, suggests life in suspension, but life and not death.

It is a card of profound significance, but all the significance is veiled.

One of his editors suggests that Éliphas Lévi did not know the meaning, which is unquestionable nor did the editor himself.

It has been called falsely a card of martyrdom, a card of prudence, a card of the Great Work, a card of duty; but we may exhaust all published interpretations and find only vanity.

I will say very simply on my own part that it expresses the relation, in one of its aspects, between the Divine and the Universe.

He who can understand that the story of his higher nature is imbedded in this symbolism will receive intimations concerning a great awakening that is possible, and will know that after the sacred Mystery of Death there is a glorious Mystery of Resurrection.

13. Death

7. An Ancient Celtic Method Of Divination

This mode of divination is the most suitable for obtaining an answer to a definite question. The Diviner first selects a card to represent the person or, matter about which inquiry is made. This card is called the Significator. Should he wish to ascertain something in connexion with himself he takes the one which corresponds to his personal description. A Knight should be chosen as the Significator if the subject of inquiry is a man of forty years old and upward; a King should be chosen for any male who is under that age a Queen for a woman who is over forty years and a Page for any female of less age.

The four Court Cards in Wands represent very fair people, with yellow or auburn hair, fair complexion and blue eyes. The Court Cards in Cups signify people with light brown or dull fair hair and grey or blue eyes. Those in Swords stand for people having hazel or grey eyes, dark brown hair and dull complexion. Lastly, the Court Cards in Pentacles are referred to persons with very dark brown or black hair, dark eyes and sallow or swarthy complexions. These allocations are subject, however, to the following reserve, which will prevent them being taken too conventionally. You can be guided on occasion by the known temperament of a person; one who is exceedingly dark may be very energetic, and would be better represented by a Sword card than a Pentacle. On the other hand, a very fair subject who is indolent and lethargic should be referred to Cups rather than to Wands.

If it is more convenient for the purpose of a divination to take as the Significator the matter about which inquiry is to be made, that Trump or small card should be selected which has a meaning corresponding to the matter. Let it be supposed that the question is: Will a lawsuit be necessary? In this case, take the Trump No. 11, or justice, as the Significator. This has reference to legal affairs. But if the question is: Shall I be successful in my lawsuit? one of the Court Cards must be chosen as the Significator. Subsequently, consecutive divinations may be performed to ascertain the course of the process itself and its result to each of the parties concerned.

Having selected the Significator, place it on the table, face upwards. Then shuffle and cut the rest of the pack three times, keeping the faces of the cards downwards.

Turn up the top or FIRST CARD of the pack; cover the Significator with it, and say: This covers him. This card gives the influence which is affecting the person or matter of inquiry generally, the atmosphere of it in which the other currents work.

Turn up the SECOND CARD and lay it across the FIRST, saying: This crosses him. It shews the nature of the obstacles in the matter. If it is a favourable card, the opposing forces will not be serious, or it may indicate that something good in itself will not be productive of good in the particular connexion.

Turn up the THIRD CARD; place it above the Significator, and say: This crowns him. It represents (a) the Querent's aim or ideal in the matter; (b) the best that can be achieved under the circumstances, but that which has not yet been made actual.

Turn up the FOURTH CARD; place it below the Significator, and say: This is beneath him. It shews the foundation or basis of the matter, that which has already passed into actuality and which the Significator has made his own.

Turn up the FIFTH CARD; place it on the side of the Significator from which he is looking, and say: This is behind him. It gives the influence that is just passed, or is now passing away.