

The Tarot: A Wheel of Fortune¹

by Arthur Edward Waite

This is not, for once in a way—though It may seem certainly for once only—a study in withdrawn areas of mystical philosophy, nor precisely an investigation of root-matters of symbolism, nor is it even exclusively an account of divination, which in itself would suggest a sufficiently wide departure from my known and admitted concerns. Having thus stated a fact rather than opened out an *apologia*, I will take up the matter in hand and complete the circle, if necessary, by reverting at the end to the point at which I begin. To the great majority of my readers, I suppose that it will be scarcely necessary to answer, by way of precaution, the hypothetical question: What then is the Tarot? Every one knows that it is a method of divination by cards, but that the cards which are used for the purpose differ in some important respects from those ordinary playing kinds which are perhaps a good deal more familiar in most homes than the things which used to be called household words. These cards also are used for fortune-telling, and the publishers of *The Occult Review* have recently issued a certain *Manual of Cartomancy* [by Grand Orient. i.e., A.E. Waite]², which gives one of the modes of operation among a hundred and one curiosities for the delectation of people with occult predispositions and perhaps some intuitive faculties. The writer of this *Manual*, who has sufficient grace in his heart to speak of trifles only with becoming seriousness end of grave things as if he knew that strange worlds lie occasionally behind them, has included in his budget of paradoxes a long and recollected section on this very subject of the Tarot³. I have myself still more recently prefaced and revised a new edition of *The Tarot of the Bohemians*⁴, translated into English from the French of Dr. Papus [Gerard Encausse], the head of the school of Martinism at Paris. There is thus once more available a work which had become scarce, and for which many have been looking there and here in the catalogues. It follows that the Tarot is, as people say, in the air; but there is one difficulty with which we had all to contend in England. It is easy to read about the subject, and if people have the mind they may become quite learned respecting it, more especially if they are familiar with French; but the cards themselves are not too easily obtainable. They are imported from the continent, which usually produces very indifferent versions in these our modern days, and has just now nothing to offer us but a very inferior Italian pack, which any one who can be called a student would do well to avoid. A little further afield some pains may secure one of the Etteilla sets, in which, however, the symbolism, has been confused by the reveries of the editor, who was firstly a professional cartomancist of his period - being the end of the eighteenth century - but secondly a *virtuoso* in general occult arts whose zeal was in advance of his discretion and out of all measure in respect of his learning. The Marseilles pack is very much better, but this also is not at the corner of the streets, either in the city which has given it an imprint or in the great centre of Paris. Bolognese and Venetian Tarots are mentioned rather than *seen*.



Eight of Pentacles

This being the case, and recurring for a moment to the fact that the Tarot, as I have said, is in the air, while many people who divine—and a substantial minority who are students rather than dippers at random into the chances of fortune - are all in want of the cards, I have embraced an opportunity which has been somewhat of the unexpected kind and have interested a very skilful and original artist in the proposal to design a set. Miss Pamela Coleman Smith, in addition to her obvious gifts, has some knowledge of Tarot values; she has lent a sympathetic ear to my proposal to rectify the symbolism by reference to channels of knowledge which not in the open day; and we have had other help from one who is deeply versed in the subject⁵. The result, and for the first time on record, is a marriage of art and symbolism for the production of a true Tarot under one of its aspects: it should be understood that there are others, but whatever has transpired about them or is likely to be related hereafter is and can be only concerned with a part of hidden system and will mislead rather than direct.

The version with which I am concerned is on the eve of publication; this is therefore an advertisement concerning it, and that it may not want for boldness I produce here in their order certain specimen cards which, on the artistic side, will

- I think - speak for themselves. About their meanings a word must be said presently, and to this I will lead up by a few preliminary remarks on the debated origin of the Tarot. It has been referred to India, China, Egypt, which allocations are speculative, and, though presented in the terminology of certitude, they are so much fantasia. No one knows whence it came, unless, by a great dispensation, he happens to have been born in France, where there are high grades of conviction in all that belongs to the province of occultism and its history. It is in this way that the Tarot is called *The Book of Thoth*, the *Book of Thrice Great Hermes*, and because the cards themselves did not support the attribution, they have been perfected by the late editors and adorned with Egyptian characteristics. The truth is that the intimations of mystery abiding behind the Tarot have suggested too readily the conventional places of mystery; but seeing that secret doctrine - admittedly concerned therein - is of all ages and peoples and climes, remoteness of origin in time and the farthest Orient in place are not indispensable assumptions. Now, the Tarot has twenty-two Trump-Major cards, which have no analogy with playing cards, and from these I have erected four specimens taken direct from the drawings and naturally much larger than they will appear in the colour printed set. I will speak of these in respect of their higher symbolism. Last or first, as you please, in its own series, is the card which represents Zero and is entitled *The Fool*. It is in no sense, though it has been called, a type of humanity as the blind slave of matter, though in the common traffic of fortune-telling it may, and does, stand for extravagance or even for enthusiasm and the folly which its name implies. It is said by Eliphas Levi to signify eternal life; it is a card of the joy of life before it has been embittered by experience on the material plane. On the spiritual plane it is the soul, also at the beginning of its experience, aspiring towards the higher things before it has attained thereto. The first numbered Trump Major, called the *Magician* is he on whom "the spark from heaven" has fallen, who draws from above and derives thence to below. Levi says that it is God in His unity and man as a reflection of God; others describe it as the Divine World and the Absolute. It is the card of illumination, and at looks the Fool when he has seen God. The second numbered Trump is the *High Priestess*, here beautifully depicted, with all her symbolical attributes. She has the solar cross on her breast and the lunar crescent on her head. She is called the house of God, the Sanctuary and even the Kabbalah, or secret tradition. She is really the Great Mother and the Secret Church. The last of the Trumps Major which I present here is the nineteenth in the series, and is called the *Sun* as the symbol of light and revelation. It is the glory of all the worlds. The naked child mounted on the great horse is the complement by antithesis of the thirteenth card—which is *Death*, also mounted. My smaller cards are designed to illustrate the Minor Arcana, and I will refer to their divinatory meanings. The *King of Wands*—ardent, equitable, noble—represents goodness blended with severity. The *Queen of Cups* signifies love and devotion, the images of which she sees like visions in her vessel. The *Knight of Swords* is even as Galahad on the Quest, dispersing the enemies thereof. The *Page of Pentacles*—a youthful figure looking at a talisman, which hovers over his raised hands—really typifies the scholar, but he is also one who bears news. I can hardly mention the remaining numbered cards—the *Six of*

Wands, crowned with hope and confidence; the *Five of Cups* which is the card of heritage diverted and life emptied of Joy; the *Eight of Swords*, which means disquietude, conflict, crisis, sometime fatality; the *Nine of Swords*, which should be compared with the former; it is the card of disappointment, well illustrated by the picture. The meanings attributed to the Trumps Major, or Greater Arcana, when taken, as they usually are, apart from the ordinary numbered and court cards, depend upon the worlds or spheres of consciousness to which particular interpretations have referred them. When they are combined with the Lesser Arcana for purposes of divination, and when thus the pack forms one sequence of seventy-eight cards, each cartomancist has followed his own intuition and observation of results. The gift of second sight overrides conventions and precedents, but for those who do not possess it, or in whom it has not been developed, a summary of accepted meanings is desirable, and this I have sought to supply in the little interpretative work which accompanies the set of cards. The question remains whether there is an integral connection between the Greater and Lesser Arcana, and in this case how to establish their respective offices in higher Tarot symbolism. If, however, their connection is arbitrary, a separation should be effected, the Lesser Arcana being allocated to their proper place in cartomancy and the Trumps Major to their own, which is to seership of another order.

The compiler of the *Manual of Cartomancy* calls the Tarot the higher way to fortune, and - between the Major and Minor Arcana - if any one can so interpret it - as he and I do - let me say unto him with the Psalmist: *Intende, prospere procede et regna* [Spread out, favourably make progress and reign]. And so I return to the question of an *apologia*, but only to conclude that after all the Tarot a research in symbolism; its study is a mystic experiment; and though it has been, is, and will be used for divination, it belongs to another realm and began therein. Those who desire to go further will learn how and why in my short *Key to the Tarot*, which accompanies the set of cards.



The Fool



The Magician



The High Priestess



The Sun



King of Wands



Queen of Cups



Knight of Swords



Page of Pentacles



Six of Wands



Five of Cups



Eight of Swords



Nine of Swords

¹ 'The Tarot and the Rosy Cross' by G.H. Frater Sacramentum Regis (A.E. Waite) was bound in a book titled *Studies and Rituals of the Rosy Cross*. London: unpublished Independent and Rectified Rite typescript, no date. [1910] - D.K.

² *A Manual of Cartomancy: Fortune-Telling and Occult Divination*. By Grand Orient [i.e., A.E. Waite]. 4th edition. Crown 8 vo, pp. 256. Price 2s. 6d. net. W[illiam] Rider & Son, Ltd. [1909.]

³ The important Tarot article printed in *A Manual of Cartomancy*, is called 'The Book of the Secret Word and the Higher Way to Fortune,' pp. 125-44.

⁴ *The Tarot of the Bohemians: an Absolute Key to Occult Sciences*. By Papus [Gerard Encausse]. With Preface by A.E. Waite. Crown 8 vo, 384 pp. Price 6s. net. W[illiam] Rider & Son, Ltd. [1910.] There is also being issued by the same publishers: The Complete Set of 78 Tarot Cards, drawn and coloured by Pamela Coleman Smith. [The cards were issued in 1910 at 5s. separately and with *The Key to the Tarot* in a box set for 7s. 6d. The cards were also reissued on a better quality card in April 1910 for 6s.—D.K.]

The Key to the Tarot. [Being Fragments of a Secret Tradition under the Veil of Divination]. By A.E. Waite. Royal 32 mo, about 160 pp. [*The Key to the Tarot* was published in December 1909 and issued in 1910 for 2s. 194 pp.—D.K.]

⁵ Roger Perisious suggested that the "one who is deeply versed in the subject" is in fact W.B. Yeats in his lecture *Figures in a Dance: W.B. Yeats and The Waite-Rider Tarot*. - D.K