

The background of the cover is a collage of several tarot cards. Visible cards include the Magician (top center, a figure in a red robe holding a wand and a pentagram), the Two of Pentacles (left, two pentagrams on a yellow background), the Moon (right, a yellow background with a large pentagram and a white dog), and the Knight of Pentacles (bottom right, a knight in armor).

GENERAL BOOK OF THE TAROT

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General Book of the Tarot

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INTRODUCTION

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If ever a book should be written on the Romance of Symbolism, its hypothesis of interpretation, its traditional and imputed histories, a considerable space would be allotted assuredly to Tarot-cards; while seeing that at this day there is more concern in the subject than was felt even in the past, there would be a call not only to survey that which lies behind us, a strange field of speculation and reverie, but the prospect extending in front, since every year brings forth some new proposition and provides material for future imaginative flights. It is very curious to contrast those comparatively sober terms in which Court de Gebelin introduced his discovery of the cards, ¹ though he sought to prove that their origin was in Ancient Egypt, with the fantastic declamations of Éliphas Lévi, who affirmed not only that they were the Alphabet of Enoch, Hermes Trismegistus and Cadmus but the Gospel of all Gospels, a synthesis of science and the universal key of the Kabbalah.

De Gebelin was a man of learning at his own period and remained within the circle of facts, actual or supposed, as he saw and read them. His successor was a man of extravagant mind, who contemplated past and future alike through a glass of vision, and so beheld all faërie unfold its images. The occult happenings of the past became in the process as much a matter of invention as his own notions. The inventions were decorative and were even characterised at times by a magian quality of intuition; but in most cases his record of past events was like his reading of things to come. His tale of the Knights Templar, his intimations on the Rosy Cross, his survey of alchemical literature are in much the same category as his

prognostications about a parliament of nations under an universal monarchy ruled by a King of France. He discovered the religion behind all religions, a fountain-source from which they issued in their day and into which all return. This was the Secret Tradition of Israel; but it proves to be a Tradition of his own making, which falsifies all the literature, and he had not read the texts from which he claimed to draw. He had glanced there and here at a few records of the subject and distorted them in the magic crystal of his seership. He took up the Tarot, and just as a cartomancist shuffles and deals and lays out its picture-symbols for the reading of things to come, so did he divine their past. He adopted the speculations of De Gebelin, and they dilated in his own mind. He dressed up the Trumps Major in Egyptian vestures and affirmed that he had restored the Tarot in its primitive hieroglyphical form. By a fortunate chance there had preceded him in 1857 another fantasiast, J. F. Vaillant, with a gift in etymologies, more stupefying than anything produced before him. ² Between them there deployed all Babylon and all its idols. But Egypt loomed behind Babylon and the Kabbalah behind Egypt. It is post-Talmudic in unadorned fact, but for them it was older than Moses and older even than Abraham. In fine, behind the Kabbalah there was, and remains among us, the Book of Thoth, and this was the Tarot, within which was the light unlimited of its endless range of meanings that had never passed into writing but dwelt implicitly in both, above all in Lévi's mind. And a day came when he made his great discovery which had never entered previously into the heart of scholiast or commentator. The Tree of Life in Kabbalism has 22 Paths by which the Sephiroth or Numerations are connected one with another and late Kabbalism had married these Paths to the 22 Letters of the Hebrew Alphabet. But the Tarot Trumps Major are also 22, and Éliphas Lévi proclaimed another marriage, constituting a Trinity in unity of Cards and Paths

and Letters. It has been the joy of all Occult hierophants and their believing disciples through the decades that followed. On all these Lévi has exercised a great influence in French circles, and seeing that Tarot expository literature is French almost exclusively, he calls for consideration at length when estimating expository values.

It was not in the least needful but was pleasant, if opportunity offered, to find that there were others before him who knew and had used to some purpose the Tarot keys. As a fact, there was St. John on Patmos, the proof being that he wrote his Book of Revelations in 22 chapters. The Apocalypse henceforward, for true initiates, became an exposition of Tarot Trumps. It had not occurred to Lévi or to those who followed him that the arrangement of scripture texts in divisions called chapters is unhappily a late device. There was also Louis Claude de Saint-Martin, who was one of *les vrais initiés*, and he had written a certain *Tableau*, setting forth the relations between God, Man and the Universe. He broke it up into numbered parts which reached the same total, so the *Tableau Naturel* arises out of the Tarot and returns therein. After what manner the cards and the sections belong to one another in either case, it was not to be expected perhaps that a French Magus should unfold, though he held the key of all things, so the allocation remains a mystery even to this day, while the Lévi successors in France reproduce their master's dogmas from generation to generation.

Hereof is the Tarot in its literary history, from the pre-French Revolution *Monde Primitif* of Court de Gebelin to the year 1870, when it occurred to P. Christian (Paul Pitois), *ancien bibliothécaire* that the History of Magic might be extended further, with profit, by the gentle art of invention. The Franco-Prussian war stood on the threshold of events, Éliphas Lévi had been silent for five years and was forgotten for the time being, though still in print. It was safe to borrow something of his motives and manner, as also from the

spectacular findings in his glass of vision; so Christian borrowed accordingly, and his tale of *La Fatalité à travers les temps et les peuples* is the *Histoire de la Magie* of Lévi, retold after another manner and with more liberal and frequent appeal to the repertory of the Father of Lies. Christian had none of those literary gifts which adorn the pages of Lévi, but his inventions are highly sensational and often microscopical in detail. It seems probable even that, like his predecessor, he began by convincing himself (a) that things should have happened in that or in this way and therefore did, (b) that his divinatory devices foretold the future, at least now and then. It is precisely this kind of mischief which begets itself in others, and altogether I am not surprised that Christian's *L'Homme Rouge des Tuileries*, which followed--I think--his *Histoire de la Magie*, has become of authority among Grimoires and is sought eagerly, or that he is still quoted off and on for his Tarot views.

A space of fifteen years elapsed, and *circa* 1885 a group of neo-Martinists began to be formed in Paris, with Papus--Dr. Gérard Encausse--at their head. As it happened that notwithstanding the two-and-twenty sections of his *Tableau Naturel*, Saint-Martin contributed nothing to Tarot lore, had in all probability never glanced at the mysterious card-symbols, and abandoned early and definitely all occult workings, the Martinism of the late XIXth century signified, as a name only, that its followers had their eyes turned to the esoteric tradition of the West, rather than that of the East, and in their preoccupation were thinly Christian rather than theosophical in the sense of Modern Theosophy, through which some of them had passed and had come forth unsatisfied. The Master in Chief of Papus was always Éliphas Lévi, to whom his occult notions are referable in the last resource, whose Kabbalism is his Kabbalism and whose Tarot is his Tarot. Papus worked indefatigably at these subjects and extended them on every side, producing great inventions, with a certain laborious sincerity, as I shall be

disposed always to think. But, like those who preceded and those who have come after him, Papus was an occultist, not a mystic, and from my point of view the pictorial symbols of *les imagiers du moyen âge*, as Oswald Wirth terms them, unfold their meanings in this other and higher light.

The Martinist School, its connections and derivatives, produced their Tarots, *sub nomine* Falconnier, *sub nomine* Alta, *sub nomine* Oswald Wirth, and there were yet other artists and diviners, some borrowing lights from one another and some kindling an occasional torch or a casual flash on their own part. The Monographs multiplied, and the Marquis Stanislas de Guata produced a sequence of treatises wherein all occultism unfolded from the Trumps Major. There was no end to the activities, with the Lévi pageants always in the background and in the forefront often.

When twenty-five years had elapsed in this manner and the Tarot Bibliography had attained considerable dimensions, the War of 1914 engulfed all the Schools and all their brave imaginings; and when it was in fine suspended by the figurative peace of Versailles, the Schools emerged but slowly from the weltering chaos and were shorn of their chief personalities, their adornments and appeal. The names of some of them are with us at this day, centered in a little group at Lyons.

But French occultism, apart from specific schools and incorporated pretensions, seems very much alive, and Oswald Wirth produced recently the most decorative Tarot study, so far as form is concerned, which has appeared since we first heard of the subject.³ His attention is directed to the Trumps Major solely and he has little to say on the divinatory side of the subject, that so-called practical side which engrosses most persons who would call themselves Tarot students. It is none of my own business, but it is clear from my knowledge of the literature that under this aspect there is room for new treatment. Dr. Thierens has

approached it from an astrological standpoint in the work which these preliminary pages are designed to introduce. I have been led to do so because very little has been printed previously on the zodiacal attributions of the cards and because it happens that I am acquainted with unpublished divinatory methods making use of these attributions for many years past in one of the occult circles.⁴ There is a literature of the Tarot which has not emerged so far into the light of day and some of it is excessively curious. It was said of old in a very different connexion: *Quod tenet nunc teneat donec de medio fiat*; and I do not know whether certain subsisting difficulties will be taken ultimately out of the way, so that the theoretical and practical speculations of such circles may be compared with those brought forward in public ways during recent and earlier years. In this manner we should have at least the subject general of the Tarot expanded fully.

Meanwhile Dr. Thierens has approximated more than anyone else towards a valid interpretation of Tarot Trump Major No. XII, being the Hanged Man. From Court de Gebelin to Papus and Stanislas de Guaita, not excluding Oswald Wirth himself, all published exoteric meanings are utterly remote from the true significance of this most pregnant symbol. In my *Pictorial Key to the Tarot* and in the Little Key which accompanies Miss Pamela Colman Smith's complete set of the cards, produced long ago under my own auspices, there was said concerning it that which was possible at the time. I will give now one further indication. The human figure of the symbol is suspended head downward and as such it is comparable to the Microprosopus or God of Reflections in the so-called Great Symbol or Double Triangle of Solomon, prefixed by Lévi to this *Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie*, being the frontispiece of the first volume.⁵ It follows that the true symbol belonging to Trump Major No. XII, though it is by no means that of Lévi, is not a Hanged

Man at all; but it will continue to be depicted in this manner unless and until the Greater Arcana are issued by the authority of another Secret Circle, which so far has never testified officially concerning itself in the outer channels of research.

I have said that every year brings forth some new consideration, and Dr. Thierens promises another work, while the speculation which has just been adventured speaks of things unattempted and yet conceived in the mind. There is no intention signified; but I know what emblems would adorn it. How things will stand with the Tarot in days to come may loom therefore vaguely; but obviously there are activities to come. There is, however, one side of the subject on which no horizon opens. As to where the Trumps Major originated, how and with whom, there is no conclave of adepts to tell us and no isolated student, holding evidential warrants. At the moment we can look only for more speculations and more dreams to come.

Arthur Edward Waite.

¹ *Monde Primitif, analysé et comparé avec le Monde Moderne*, par M. Court de Gebelin, 9 vols. The account and examination of the Tarot will be found in Vol. VIII, published in 1781.

² Les Romes appeared at the date in question and maintained that the history of the Tarot is lost in the night of time, but everything justifies the hypothesis that it is of Indo-Tartarian origin and that it has been transmitted to modern times by the Romany tribes of his title.

³ *Le Tarot des Imagiers du Moyen Age*, 1927, accompanied by a separate portfolio of coloured plates and with many illustrations in the text.

⁴ Oswald Wirth has a short excursus on Astrology at the end of his work, in which he enumerates the zodiacal implicities allocated to the four elements, but no Tarot connection is suggested. It is rather curious that a study of the *Sepher Zetzirah* in conjunction with the Tree of Life and the triple marriage effected by Éliphas Lévi has not produced speculations long since on the astronomical and astrological correspondences of the Tarot Trumps.

⁵ See my annotated translation, entitled *Transcendental Magic: Its Doctrine and Ritual*, new and revised edition, 1923.

I THE DOCTRINE

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The knowledge of the Tarot, handed down to us through the ages, and as we find it at the beginning of the XXth century, can be traced in the writings of many authors. Its most perfect interpretations until now are to be found in the works of Éliphas Lévi (*Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie*) and Dr. Papus (*Le Tarot des Bohémiens* and *Le Tarot Divinatoire*). These may be said to represent the best results of earlier times, including Eteilla and P. Christian.

A booklet by S. L. MacGregor Mathers, an author well known for his works on subjects relating to the Kabbalah, quotes J. F. Vaillant (1857) as saying "that it (the Tarot) belongs to the beginning of our time, to the epoch of the preparation of the zodiac . . ." and ". . . The great divinity *Ashtarot, As-Tarot*, is no other than the Indo-Tartar *Tan-tara*, the *Tarot*, the Zodiac."

This is curious, and we wonder if one or the other ever worked out so much as a real scheme of this relationship between the Tarot system and the zodiacal principles. If so, as far as we know, it did not appear publicly.

Another well-known author on ancient mysteries and symbolism, Arthur Edward Waite, who revised and introduced an English edition of Papus' *Tarot of the Bohemians*, by A. P. Morton, has presented us with a still more precious booklet entitled *The Key to the Tarot*, from which we quote:

"The Tarot is symbolism; it speaks no other language and offers no other signs."

And we would add that true symbolism is always the figurative rendering of cosmological truth or natural principles and laws in visual linguistic or mental image. If

astrological symbolism does the same, why should we not seek for a correlation between the two systems? And if further we come to the conclusion, as we must, that both systems give a rendering of the process of creation itself, totally and definitely, then the two must practically present the same point of view, and a comparison between them must not only be instructive but may elucidate both.

In the present work, it is our ardent desire to join with Mr. Waite, "so that the effect of current charlatanism and unintelligence may be reduced to a minimum."

We shall abstain from any special criticism and pass over the more ancient literature on the subject--by such writers as Eteilla, Court de Gebelin, P. Christian, etc.--literature which has been mostly embodied in the works mentioned above, which we specially recommend to those readers who wish to study the subject exhaustively. The best Tarot cards are those drawn by Miss Pamela Colman Smith, published in England, and issued with Mr. Waite's booklet. The designs on these cards appear to be the most pure in their symbolical details, and to be drawn with inspiration and clear vision, though in general the ancient description or traditional rendering has evidently been followed.

The symbolical system of the Tarot consists of 78 picture cards of which 22 constitute the *Major Arcana* or *Trumps Major*, 56 (4 × 14) the *Minor Arcana*, *Trumps Minor*. As far as we know the idea of analogy with the zodiacal mysteries has, until now, found no further practical realisation than a rather diffuse comparison of the four 'colours' or suits in the Lesser Arcana with the Four Elements in the Cosmos, as we find them in astrology.

THE LESSER ARCANA

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The pack of cards of the Lesser Arcana has been generally acknowledged as the origin of our ordinary playing-cards, though subsequent authorities do not wholly agree upon this point. Thus we find Dr. Papus saying:

"... wands have become the clubs (or trèfles) of our present playing-cards, cups have become hearts, swords have become spades and pentacles have become diamonds." (Chapter I.)

Mr. Waite in his *Key* says:

"... wands or sceptres . . . diamonds . . . cups correspond to hearts . . . swords answer to clubs . . ."

and finally pentacles "which are the prototype of spades." (P. 37.)

In MacGregor Mathers' booklet we find *in extenso* the following table:

<i>Italian</i>	<i>French</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>Answering to</i>
Bastoni	Bâtons	Wands, Sceptres or Clubs	Diamonds
Coppé	Coupes	Cups, Chalices or Goblets	Hearts
Spadé	Epées	Swords	Spades
Denari	Deniers	Money, Circles	Clubs

or Pentacles

The discrepancies are evident. Furthermore questions may arise as to how one writer could call swords, clubs, while linguistically a wand and a club originally mean the same thing, and cover the same meaning, viz. that of a detached part of a living tree; and how is it that another could see wands answering to diamonds and a third make pentacles clubs? Evidently a sword must be a 'spade' and a wand must be a 'club,' the names being virtually identical. There seems, however, some difficulty regarding the other two. I object to the usage as given by Papus and MacGregor Mathers and can easily bring forward proof against it. Important differences like these, found in the writings of the principal authors on the subject, show that something is wanting in the understanding of the doctrine itself and the 'why' has been lost, or at least partially. The quest for this doctrine must be fully worth the trouble--and we shall endeavour, in the following pages, to follow it up to its origin in general cosmological principles.

Now the first thing we wish to point out is this: the system of the Tarot is so important, that no explanation can be accepted as satisfactory other than that which acknowledges it as a general outline of Creation itself, which ever was, and ever continues, pervading every creature and everything with its principles as a divine immanence.

Therefore Papus is quite right in stating, that "each card of the Tarot represents a symbol, a number and an idea."

At the basis of Creation are the Four Cosmic Elements, as they were symbolically mentioned by visionaries such as Ezechiel and St. John of Patmos, and taught by astrology of old. It requires no extraordinary intuition of the occult student to recognise in the four colours of our playing-cards or the four suits of the Tarot's Lesser Arcana those four basic Elements: Fire, Earth, Air and Water. The question remains however: Which is which?

There must have been a time when knowledge about these matters was nearer at hand than is the case nowadays; the symbols speak for it. A student of Occultism has to pay attention to symbols above all. So what do they tell us?

WANDS.--As a matter of fact, curiously enough, all authors agree in naming wands or clubs in the first place. In our set of playing cards the figurative symbol for it is the trefoil (French *trèfle*)--*tri-folio*--and Mr. Ouspensky draws the wands bearing leaves which in many instances appear to be threefold--at least they should be. The trefoil or shamrock has always been considered a luck-charm, *Porte-bonheur*. ⁶

It is built upon the scheme of the triangle, symbol of Trinity, and the totality of the figure appears also in the masonic 'trefoil,' which is an emblem of the Divine Trinity together with the principle of activity, indicated by the staff or wand itself, eventually crossed as in the ancient emblem.



In a way we must regard this symbol as revealing the highest conception of Creation: Trinity pure and simple with only the rudiment of activity indicated, standing still above the circle, as far or as soon as the latter suggests Motion. So wands, clubs or trèfles are most certainly meant as the symbol of the highest element in Creation.

The question has often been put as to whether, in the astrological idea of creation, Air or Fire ought to be regarded as the highest element. The answer depends upon the standpoint we take. In the highest cosmological or cosmo-philosophical sense it is Fire; in a cosmo-practical or cosmo-natural sense it is Air, as the *Secret Doctrine* undoubtedly makes us understand, where the dissolution of cosmos at the

end of a Manvantara is treated of and it is said that the Earth is dissolved or engulfed by the Waters, Water evaporated by Fire, and finally Fire disappearing in the Air. Here Air is acting as the atmosphere of the globe or system disappearing. So for all practical uses, in astrology as well, it is Air which is able to give the highest expression of the Divine. As the atmosphere of a globe it is the link between it and the Ether of space, carrying the rays of the divine solar centre as well as those of the relatively 'demoniacal' surroundings to the other elements, constituting the existence of the globe. In a similar way the suit of wands will appear to be something of a link between the Lesser and the Greater Arcana. This will be dealt with later.

Taken in this way Air is 'the bearer of the Message' from the Divine (Ether) or Unmanifest to the terrestrial or manifested worlds. And wands are the signifiers of the messages in detail and of intelligences, which astrologically correspond to Air, consequently of higher thought and mental processes.

The magic wand is used to convey the divine or at least semi-divine will-power of the Self acting as a magician into the world of phenomena.

As in Macrocosm the Message goes out to the Water (the emotional element of experience in the Soul), and Metals (sensory elements of understanding in the Body), so in microcosm, on Earth, a wand may be used to find out water and metals in the soil. This may seem curious, but is pure analogy.

From days of old a wand or staff was used to 'chastise,' i.e. to render chaste or pure, the undisciplined or disobedient, a penalty as much symbolical as corporeal, the staff being at the same time the insignum of a superior will-power or supervision.

Hermes-Mercury, Lord of the Element of Air, of Knowledge and Understanding, Bearer of the Message of the Gods, carried as his emblem, his well-known Wand encompassed by two snakes and bearing a cup on top. He was called

Trismegistus, the 'threefold' Great (or the Great Trefoil which might also be translated as Lord or Magister of the register of Trefoil, King of the Wands.

And the pilgrim, who went to hear the word of deliverance and to gather knowledge, took up a staff, not only as a walking-stick but also as a symbol of his quest. The latter finds illustration in the legend of Tannhauser, whose 'sin' (ignorance) was so great, that its expiation could be expected as little as the budding of new leaves on his (dead) pilgrim's staff, the latter being evidently taken as an image of the principle of the 'wand' in his own soul. And when, by the force of Love, a higher understanding budded forth in himself, this fact was symbolised by the apparition of a fresh green leaf on his staff.

The ancient Norsemen, highly susceptible to symbolism, wrote their signs of communication or messages on *stave*, wands, which became the origin of the later word *Buchstabe* in German.

PENTACLES.--Generally cups are named in the second place but are at the same time identified with hearts. We agree that the hearts come in the second place of the hierarchy of the Tarot suits, but do not see, that they should be 'cups.' Of course we understand that the heart has been said to be the 'cup' receiving and containing the divine life, etc. But still we disagree and even think the parable rather superficial, for it leaves the mutual relation of the three remaining elements in a distorted condition. Moreover the symbolical names, as given by the different authors mentioned, do not agree.

If, taken as a whole, wands stand for the Message of the Macrocosm or Ideation, as Air transfers the message from the Ether, and if we take for granted, that the imagination of the Tarot system was meant and given for cosmo-practical or cosmo-natural usage, then we must be prepared to find in the remaining three suits the elements of (say: 'human') spirit, soul and body incarnate (i.e. as they appear in the manifested