



**The Classic  
Guide to Tarot  
from the  
Co-Creator of the  
Rider Waite  
Tarot Deck**

A  
PICTORIAL KEY  
*to the*  
TAROT

Being Fragments  
*of a*  
Secret Tradition  
*under the*  
Veil of Divination

*by*  
A.E. WAITE

*Second iFate Edition  
with a Foreword by Jon Samvere*

# The Pictorial Key to the Tarot

Being Fragments of a Secret Tradition  
Under the Veil of Divination



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by A.E. Waite

*with a foreword to the second edition by Jon Samvere*

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by A.E. Waite

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“The true Tarot is symbolism; it speaks no other language and offers no other signs.”

—— **Arthur Edward Waite**

## FOREWORD

FOREWORD *to the iFATE* EDITION

To say that this is an important book to the world of Tarot would be an understatement. Here we have one of modern Tarot's seminal works. For most of us however, it is not our first book on Tarot. It is the book at which we arrive after we have finished more easy-to-read, contemporary books. It's the book we turn to because not only was it published contemporaneously with the creation of the *Rider Waite* tarot deck itself, but because it was written by the deck's co-creator.

Very few would disagree that there are no tarot decks quite as famous as the *Rider Waite* deck, with its gorgeous illustrations by Pamela Colman Smith. It must be said equally however, that there are no tarot *books* as famous or as central to the study as this one.

Stitching centuries of mismatched Tarot lore, hermeticism, esotericism, and mysticism into an ambitious whole, A.E. Waite managed to give us one of the earliest glimpses of how Tarot can weave together the unlike threads of humanity's disparate belief systems. Waite intertwines his Tarot story into a tantalizing tapestry that very *nearly* explains the mystery of the cards.

But it *doesn't* explain the mystery.

Therein lies the principal criticism of Waite and this book: He takes us to the doorway. He tells us what we need to know. But then Waite so often moves-on before finishing his explanations, leaving us wondering if we know anything at all.

As so many students of Tarot know, Waite is fond of painting an *almost complete* picture; Serving up a basis for understanding and then pointing off into the distance, as if to say: *That way lies enlightenment —when you're ready for it.* At other times Waite simply states that *prepared minds* will understand what he means, while other minds will not. Which are we, we wonder?

Waite has a formidable command of occult lore. It is not by some sleight of hand that he points to enlightenment and then fails to take readers by hand and walk them into the light. Rather, Waite is deeply, often profoundly, cognisant of the *process* of enlightenment that each of us must endure.

This book is incomplete. It is *meant* to be incomplete. It offers tastes, ideas, guidance and the occasional promise. But it consistently stops short at the threshold of understanding.

It is in these *shards* of partial knowledge that we come to understand Waite's original, and often forgotten, subtitle to the book: *Being Fragments of a Secret Tradition Under the Veil of Divination*. Indeed, these are but *fragments*, and divination is but a wrapping for the knowledge herein.

When I first considered the task of writing the preface for this iFate.com edition, it took me back to my first reaction to this book many decades ago: A younger version of me was deeply frustrated by this book. I found it to be too cryptic, disconnected from the cards, and sometimes I found its esteemed writer to be seemingly unaware of his own creation.

The older me realizes that Waite stopped at exactly the point where he wanted to stop. While his long-winded style may be a symptom of a more flowery age, it is not his rococo prose nor his never-ending sentences which invite the most criticism. Instead, it's the passages where his writing is sometimes infuriatingly unclear; often confoundingly brief - and at other times intentionally terse.

Tarot is a riddle — A gigantic towering riddle of the ages, built out of 78 beautifully composed, self-contained puzzles. Every aspect of Pamela Colman Smith's iconic artwork from botanical references to elemental symbolism to subtle variations in color palette, convey vital clues about a vast esoteric truth which lies locked within.

While Colman's artwork is of course the real story, Waite's *Key* provides a vital, parallel and irreplaceable companion work. His references are not my references, and likely will not be your references. But it is in Waite's references that we see new dimensions of the cards unfold before our eyes. Most importantly, Waite's interpretations point towards a beautiful, mysterious and infinitely larger truth — and encourage us to look harder.

Before closing, I would make a suggestion to new students: Many new readers simply jump to the card definitions portion of this book. The real gems hidden herein come from reading the book in its entirety. There are surprises here which despite hundreds of other books on Tarot, are seldom mentioned anywhere else.

As a beloved and now deceased teacher of Tarot taught me over 3 decades ago, "*Don't come to Tarot looking for answers. Come instead looking for questions*". In addressing that simple piece of wisdom, this amazing book delivers endlessly. *Read. Enjoy. Absorb*. When you don't understand something, congratulate yourself for finding the next onion-layer between you and the answers at its core.

*Jon Samvere, 2020*

## PREFACE

### 0.

# The Pictorial Key *to the* Tarot

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 symbolism according to some of its higher aspects, and this also serves to introduce the complete and rectified Tarot, which is available separately, in the form of coloured cards, the designs of which are added to the present text in black and white. They have been prepared under my supervision-in respect of the attributions and meanings-by a lady who has high claims as an artist. Regarding the divinatory part, by which my thesis is terminated, I consider it personally as a fact in the history of the Tarot - as such, I have drawn, from all published sources, a harmony of the meanings which have been attached to the various cards, and I have given prominence to one method of working that has not been published previously; having the merit of simplicity, while it is also of universal application, it may be held to replace the cumbrous and involved systems of the larger hand-books.

## **CONTENTS *to the* ORIGINAL EDITION**

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- 8.—An Alternative Method of Reading the Tarot Cards.
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### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

A concise bibliography of the chief works dealing with the Tarot and its connexions.

## INTRODUCTION

# PART I

## The Veil and its Symbols

### 1

## INTRODUCTORY AND GENERAL

THE pathology of the poet says that "the undevout astronomer is mad"; the pathology of the very plain man says that 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 honour 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 a 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 Albigenian 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 connexion with the notion of a secret Albigenian 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 Albigenian 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. 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 archaeologist 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 shewn 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:

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