

Preface to

Charles Williams'

The Greater Trumps

William Lindsay Gresham

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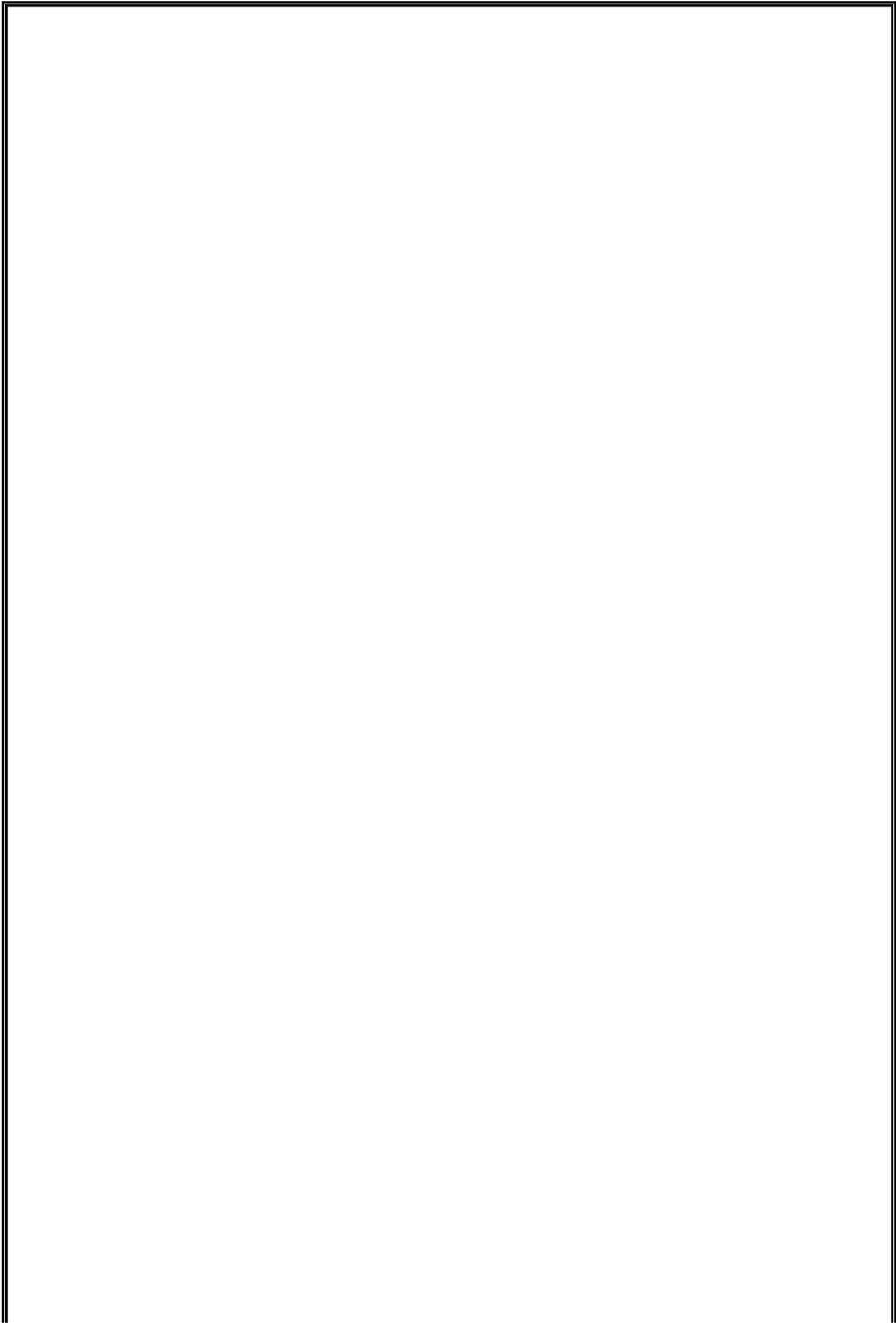
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THE GREATER TRUMPS

by Charles Williams

PREFACE BY
WILLIAM LINDSAY GRESHAM

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PREFACE

Who speaks in primordial images speaks to us as with a thousand trumpets, he grips and overpowers, and at the same time he elevates that which he treats out of the individual and transitory into the sphere of the eternal.

—C. G. JUNG

In the conscious use of primordial images—the archetypes of thought—one modern novelist stands out as adept and grand master: Charles Williams. In *THE PLACE OF THE LION* he incarnates Plato's celestial archetypes with hair-raising plausibility. In *MANY DIMENSIONS* he brings a flock of ordinary mortals face to face with the stone bearing the Tetragrammaton, the Divine Name, the sign of Four. Whether we understand every line of a Williams novel or not, we feel something deep inside us quicken as Williams tells the tale.

Here, in *THE GREATER TRUMPS*, he has turned to one of the prime mysteries of earth: a collection of twenty-two symbolic pictures which have come down to us as the Major Arcana—or Greater Trumps—of the Tarot deck of playing-cards.

The Greater Trumps were first noticed by the *cognoscenti* in the 18th century when the French archaeologist, Court de Gébelin (1728-1784) concluded that they were the pages of the Book of Thoth. In pre-Rosetta stone days everything old was apparently suspected of being Egyptian. The gipsies were said to have brought the Tarot to Europe as a tool of their traditional trade, *dukkeripen*, or fortune-telling; the first record

of the cards appears in 1393. Eliphas Lévi, the French magus, writing in the middle of the last century, treated the gipsies with his usual blend of eloquence, erudition and inaccuracy. His speculations on the Tarot must be taken in this light.

Where did the Tarot designs come from, and what do the Greater Trumps mean? No one knows. But anyone who has studied them at length has felt their power of releasing unsuspected ideas from the subconscious. The cards seem to have an inner life of their own.

The literature of Tarot symbolism is vastly confusing; most authors insist that their personal interpretations are the “correct” ones. A safer approach is to let each Tarot trump stand for whatever complex of ideas it pulls from the mind. The Tarot is not a mnemonic device for a set doctrine, it would seem, but a philosophical slide-rule on which the individual can work out his own metaphysical and religious equations. There is no single trump which represents Man. The Tarotist himself is Man and since the symbols point to relations between God, Man and the Universe, the student at once becomes part of the Dance.

It is interesting to compare three distinguished authors who have dealt with the Tarot: Arthur Edward Waite (1854-1942), translator of Eliphas Lévi, authority on magic and the Kabbalah, was the greatest occultist of his age, and proud of it. He hints in his *Pictorial Key to the Tarot* that the trumps can be arranged in a special order by initiates of the Secret Doctrine so as to convey the Deep Truth. This is the old Gnostic approach—it reminds one of a child hiding a bright new penny under a loose brick.

Peter Demianovitch Ouspensky, in *A New Model of the Universe*, gives his spontaneous reaction to the cards but hints at deeper meanings. In his last book, a novel called *Strange Life of Ivan Osokin*, the Russian mathematician and occultist came out of the shadows. It would be interesting to know if he ever read Williams' *THE GREATER TRUMPS*, for of the three men, Williams set the Tarot ablaze with a release of its pent-up spiritual force. He did it by his interpretation of that card called *The Fool*.

From the standpoint of Jungian psychology the Tarot bristles with “archetypes”: the worm ouroboros, weapons and instruments, the enclosed place or region of taboo, the great mother, the snake, the sphinx, the wise old man, and two dominant symbols—water, signifying the unconscious itself, and the mandala-wheel of integration, divided into quadrants by the cross, the mighty sign of four.

The spirit of our times demands a simple and comforting explanation for everything, whether flying saucers in the kitchen of a *poltergeist* house, or flying saucers over airfields. One can make a prosaic guess, from internal evidence, as to the origin of the Tarot. In Alexandria, during the fourth century, pagan philosophy was making its last stand against Christianity. The Neo-Platonists viewed the ancient body of myth and symbol as reflections of higher reality. The three subdivisions of Plotinus' practical doctrine are: (1) the primeval Being, the One, absolute causality, (2) the ideal world and the soul, and (3) the phenomenal world. This trinity is quite obvious in the *Greater Trumps*. Neo-Platonic discipline, designed to lead the soul back to its Creator, began with a study of ethics, passed to the contemplation of phenomena in their inter-relation and

harmony, and ended in direct perception of the divine light. The ethics were sifted from the past. The final stage was pure *raja yoga* imported from India. But the second level gives us a clue to a possible source for the 22 leaves of the Major Arcana. Certainly the mood of the Tarot is Neo-Platonic and we must remember that Neo-Platonism and Christianity first fought and then merged, with Christianity triumphant outwardly.

The Byzantine Church several hundred years later began an iconoclastic crusade, and monks who were painters of icons and illuminators of manuscripts fled to Sicily and Calabria. During the years of image-destroying fury a shrewd monk may have disguised the pagan treasure of the Tarot as a harmless toy—a deck of playing-cards. The pictures may have been used separately and in combination as they are used today. Or they may have been illustrations for a lost book. Or they may not have come from Alexandria at all.

Let us hope that in the future some devoted iconologist of means and broad scholarship will set himself the task of solving the mystery of the Greater Trumps' origin. But let him not be an occultist, claspng his secrets close. Let us hope that he is a humble Christian, eager to share.

Charles Williams was such a Christian. As novelists, he and his friend, C. S. Lewis, inherited the mantle of George Macdonald—their fantasies are balm for the spiritual sickness of the world. While the materialist aesthetes and moralists tear each others' throats, Williams and Lewis write with beauty about things which are right or wrong, realizing that ethics and beauty are two mansions of the soul and that the third is the mystical, the direct experience of God, to which the others lead.

Several Tarot leaves, as described by Williams, contain details which may have originated in his own mind. But details are unimportant—even in the case of Card i, The Magician or The Juggler, who is usually shown holding a wand toward the zenith with his right hand, and with his left pointing to earth, while before him, on a bench, are the four suit symbols of the Minor Arcana: a staff, a cup, a sword and a coin. Charles Williams makes him literally a juggler, “showering” a number of balls. But the symbolism is the same. In Kurt Seligmann’s pictorial *The Mirror of Magic* (page 428) there is an interesting account of this card, the meanings ascribed to it and the changes of design which time and place have wrought in it.

Here is a personal list of interpretations of the Greater Trumps, drawn from Williams, with Waite in the background, and intuition-of-the-moment playing a large part:

- (i) *The Juggler*. He is the inventor, creator and operator of our three-dimensional illusion, behind which stands reality. Job’s Voice from the Whirlwind is the Juggler speaking.
- (ii) *The Empress*. Here is the Great Mother of the Gods; nature as we perceive her, with the twelve months as jewels in her crown. She is both loving and cruel—an imperfect creature.
- (iii) *The High Priestess*. Between the pillars of dark and light she guards the sanctuary of truth; behind the veil of the temple is the secret of God, man and the universe which we long to know.
- (iv) *The Hierophant*. He expounds the truth in terms of dogma and formal ritual; for many seekers it is enough. His mitre and

staff are emblems of power in human terms.

(v) *The Emperor*. He is worldly power and man's will applied to matter; authority over other men is the end result of man's proud "control of the forces of nature."

(vi) *The Chariot*. Man's will is a charioteer, driving the black and white sphinxes of decision with invisible reins. But who stands behind the curtain of the chariot, whispering to the driver?

(vii) *The Lovers*. Adam and Eve, perhaps, or simply sex. Yet there is an implication of the divine in the angel over their heads. Sex as a powerful element in spiritual growth; a hint of heaven.

(viii) *The Hermit*. Paired with the Lovers, he is spiritual growth in solitude, search for the inner light. In a Zen Buddhist poem: "You must know that the fire which you seek is in your own lantern."

(ix) *Temperance*. Williams: ". . . an image bearing a cup closed by its hand . . ." Also called *Time*: an angel pouring light from one cup to another. The mystery of time, space, dimension.

(x) *Fortitude*. (or *Strength*) The Earth Mother, with her garlands, is closing with her hands the mouth of one of her lions. This is strength from beyond earth, strength through surrender of self.

(xi) *Justice*. With sword and scales. She is in the exact center of the Major Arcana, whenever it is arranged symmetrically. [v]
Whence comes man's sense of justice? And why do men die

for it?

(xii) *The Wheel of Fortune*. Cyclical nature in constant motion; wheel of seasons and the Big Dipper about the north star; to the Hindus—Karma: causality and the web of action-reaction.

(xiii) *The Hanged Man*. Renunciation of self is the greatest triumph; the long battle with man's untaught impulses and self-will; sacrifice leading to the secret at the heart of the world.

(xiv) *Death*. It is not what we see, it is other. Paradox; the worst punishment man can inflict on evil men is a fate met daily by thousands of the innocent as well. There is no Tarot card for *birth*.

(xv) *The Devil*. Man in bondage, held by self-will, lust and the illusion of mortality. From these come evil and malice. The lovers are chained to Satan's throne by self-love.

(xvi) *The Falling Tower*. "Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it." The structures man raises by his pride fall to dust, stricken by a bolt of fire.

(xvii) *The Star*. Beneath it a naked girl pours water from two urns, upon land and sea. Waite: "She is in reality the Great Mother in the Kabalistic *Sephira Binah* . . . supernal understanding."

(xviii) *The Moon*. Into the field of man's inner visions come thoughts from the deeps and impulses as irrational as those of the dog and wolf. While above them is the passionless Watcher of the mind.

(xix) *The Sun*. Source of earth's life, the children play in its warmth. Yet it is but a reflection of Divine Light, a fact of which most men are as ignorant as are the children. [vi]

(xx) *The Last Judgment*. Immortality, resurrection—in this same three-dimensional segment or in another? And is not the heavenly body promised us but a parable of extra-dimension?

(xxi) *The Universe*. In the circling mandala-wreath, watched by the symbols of the Apostles, a girl turns in the harmony of the Dance. The circle is the boundary of man's mind, thinking: "Universe."

(o) *The Fool*. Whether Charles Williams' interpretation has any basis in Tarot tradition or not, it has transformed the Tarot for the modern student. The occultists were blinded by pride.

The reader may wonder how the Tarot is used. The comparison of any card with any other generates ideas. However, one traditional arrangement is an equilateral triangle with the Juggler at the apex, the cards dealt in sequence, seven on a side. The Lovers are in the lower right hand corner, Death in the left. And in the center of the triangle is placed The Fool. The mind is allowed to wander over this design, making associations, drawing parallels and inferences, until at last a new conception is born of understanding. It is a strenuous pastime.

I have never heard of any other mechanical aid to meditation save one: Hinton's cube of 27 smaller cubes, which are arranged in different sequences to train the mind toward realizing the subject of his book, *The Fourth Dimension*.

This hypothesis would have been a boon to the tormented

curiosities of the ancients, for its gentle folds cover a multitude of mysteries. It would seem to be a product of the mathematics and higher physics of the past century. And yet . . . and yet there are hints of it in the Tarot; the Juggler's table, one leg and corner of which are traditionally concealed; Time—in which the angel pours eternity in both directions at once. [i]

The story told by each man's Tarot is different. In *THE GREATER TRUMPS* we have the Tarot of a Christian mystic, gifted with uncanny insight.

In the novel, Williams has created a set of sub-archetypes in the little golden images that move over their giant chess-board of gold. And they are in the care of "gipsies." But as one gets deeper into the tale, it is obvious that these are no gipsies—they are a much older folk, wise and foolish at once, and desperate with that hope deferred which maketh the heart sick.

The book is a kaleidoscope of ideas: a particle now takes on the hue of Zen Buddhism, then twists into the simple piety of Brother Lawrence, then clashes with a dark jewel of sorcery. It is a guide to Christian charity, intercessory prayer and the practice of the presence of God—as in the luminous passage in Chapter Ten where Sybil Coningsby, a comfortable, middle-class English spinster, while putting on her shoes, demonstrates the mystical achievement: ". . . she turned to her habitual resource. She emptied her mind of all thoughts and pictures; she held it empty till the sudden change in it gave her the consciousness of the spreading out of the stronger will within; then she allowed that now unimportant daily mind to bear the image and memory of Nancy into its presence. She merely held her own thought of Nancy stable in the midst of Omniscience."

It's a slam-bang action-fantasy melodrama too!

Williams is one of those rare authors one longs to know and query in person about important things. But this we cannot do—he has slipped out of our three-dimensional segment. We have his books; perhaps he said in them all he had to say—or at least all that we could understand.

God bring him to a fairer place than even Oxford town.

WILLIAM LINDSAY GRESHAM

Christmas 1949

TRANSCRIBER'S NOTES

A few typographical errors or inconsistent spellings were corrected.

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[The end of *Preface to The Greater Trumps* by William Lindsay Gresham]