The Royal Game of Human Life:
Or,
Celestial Snakes and Ladders.

The first part of my title comes from Papus' *The Tarot Of The Bohemians.* Near the end, the author sets out a game to be played with the Tarot. It involves divination too. At first sight, it seems wholly fascinating and one would like to try it. Unfortunately, the author's instructions for playing 'The Royal Game of Human Life' are so unclear, that one regretfully concludes that it cannot be played or else is not worth playing.

Even *so,* I was inspired by the conception of a game with the Tarot. My desire to create one was further enflamed by Hermann Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game.* In this extremely interesting novel, wise men in an undated future express their wisdom and that of humanity by playing a game with glass beads. Each move represents a wave of thought or sensibility which affects all previous moves. Unfortunately, the author does not tell us how we can play it. It remains an ideal. However, there is merit in the notion therein that moves are judged not so much in terms of 'winning' and 'losing' but in terms of aesthetic play.

I invented a number of games with the Tarot, tried them on my friends, produced delight for a limited period in some cases but inflicted boredom in most, then withdrew in an endeavour to create another. Finally, and once again at the age of 22, I came up with a game which fulfilled all the criteria I had set myself and which was welcomed with enthusiasm. It is still being played in various parts of England, most notably London, and was recently introduced into California, where it has spread with gratifying swiftness. Many have asked me to codify the rules and to bring it to the attention of a wider public: I duly oblige.

Although the reasons for calling it 'The Royal Game of Human Life' or 'Celestial Snakes and Ladders' will become apparent, for the sake of simplicity, let us term it 'The Game'. The Game has five purposes.

1 - As an enjoyable and intriguing card game which can be played by anybody, whether a student of the Tarot or not.

2 - As the swiftest and most painless method of dynamically learning the correspondence between the Tarot and the Tree of Life, the diagram which summarises the Qabalah.

3 - As a complex but rewarding method of communication between players, suggesting Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game.*

4 - As a meditative method of learning about both the nature of the cards and one's own strengths and weaknesses.

5 - As a method of obtaining a divination for one's life at the point when the game is played, suggesting what can be extracted from Papus' *The Royal Game of Human Life.*

In order to play it, you will need a pack of Tarot cards and the diagram of the Tree of Life given in this book *(back page). This* diagram shows the Ten Sephiroth of the Qabalah from 10 to 1 and the 22 Paths, represented by the 22 Trumps, which connect them. The next chapter on Qabalah will explain the theory of this diagram and also why Crowley changed certain Golden Dawn attributions but theory is not required for initial practice of The Game.

First look at the diagram. This is the map of The Game to which any player may refer at any time. You will be dealt eleven cards. The object is to play these cards and others you will acquire so as to ascend from 10 at the bottom to 1 at the top before any other player. You do this by playing your cards in numerical order, as in 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, Ace. So far, so uninteresting perhaps, but the Game has rather more to it. It is probably best understood if you play through a hand. If you have no one in the vicinity willing to be conscripted, simply deal out two sets of 11 cards for yourself and an imaginary player. The Game is for 2-7 people.

Look at your hand and arrange it in a way which satisfies you. It is prudent to put any Trumps to one side. Their extraordinary use will be explained. The so-called 'small cards' represent, obviously enough, the numbers they have on them. What about the Court Cards?

The Princess -   10.

The Prince -   9.

The Queen -   6.

The Knight -   1;   and can be used as a wild card to substitute for ANY NUMBER. One could, for example, play a Knight for 10; hence the saying, 'a Knight to the rescue!'

Very well; it is your go. A 'go' consists of any one of the following:-

1- You build on your own pack. Each player has the pack he builds before him and therefore can observe the progress of the other players. In your case here, your aim is to get started by establishing yourself in 10. Therefore play a 10 or a Princess, or failing that, a Knight, if you have them. Place the card in front of you. OR -

2 - You can, in the future, accelerate your own progress up the Tree by playing an appropriate Trump on your pack. This remains to be explained. OR -

3 - Once your opponent(s) commences building his own Tree, you can impede it by placing an appropriate Trump on his pack. This remains to be explained. OR -

4 - If you can do none of the above, you may pick up the top card from the undealt pack. Then you must discard any card in your hand that you choose. This may be the card you have just picked up. You place it face up on top of the discard pile. OR -

5 - You may take the card face up on the discard pile and replace it with one from your hand. OR -

6 - You may open negotiations with any or all of the other players by asking for a card you need. No one has to deal with you and you don't have to deal with anyone else. A player may want a card you have in exchange. You do not have to state whether you have this card or not. However, all completed transactions must be by mutual consent and strictly honest. A completed transaction constitutes your go. If your negotiations yield no result, then you must exercise one of the options 1-5.

7 - Every go must end with you holding 11 cards in your hand. If you make a mistake, before you begin your next go, you start your turn by discarding if you have more than 11 or picking up if you have less.

Each player has a go in the above way. Let us suppose, then, that you have played a 10. The next step is to play a 9. But this is where the Trumps come

in and the 'Ladders' aspect. It is possible to take short cuts. If you have The Moon, play that, for, as the 'map' shows, it will enable you to omit the playing of 9 and 8, and travel towards 7. If you have and play the Aeon, you may travel towards 8 without bothering with 9.

It is essential that the players grasp the notion of 'travelling towards'. The Trumps are not Numbers; they are paths *between* the Numbers. If you play The Moon from 10, on your next go you will be looking for a 7, and until you have played a 7, you cannot progress. Note also that there is no point in playing a Trump which is not a short cut at all. E.g. it would be a waste to play The Universe upon your 10 because after that, you would still be looking for a 9 anyway.

Good fortune in the hand could enable a lucky player to win very quickly via the following route: 10, 9, Art, 6, The Priestess, Ace - straight up the Middle Pillar. But games are only rarely as easy as that.

One major reason is the use of the Trumps as 'Snakes' or weapons. Suppose an opponent is at 9. You could place The Universe upon his pack. This would send him back to 10. Until he found and played a 10, he could not continue. Or you could be very pleased with yourself, having ascended from 10 to 8 via The Aeon, only for an opponent to knock you back towards 9 with The Sun.

You can use the Trumps to send opponents upwards and onwards only to encounter the disaster you planned. For instance, in one game, A was delighted, being established at 6, to have The Lovers placed upon his pack by B. This took him from 6 towards 3, which 3 he played on his next go. Unfortunately for him, B knocked him back towards 5 with The Chariot, and when he'd played a 5, towards 8 with The Hanged Man, and when he'd played an 8, she dropped him back towards 10 with The Aeon. It is an essential part of the spirit of the game to play it utterly ruthlessly and with no thought of personality. The word 'sorry' is allowed as Game etiquette but it often adds insult to injury.

The winner is the first player who can place an Ace on his pack. He or she then leaves the Game.

If the others wish to continue, which is optional, the winner's remaining cards are added to the pick-up pile. If the player lacks an Ace, he may finish with a Knight, but he has not yet won for one round of goes. If during this round, anyone can place The Fool on his Knight, he is sent back towards 2.

The Fool has a unique function in the Pack. It is a completely wild card and can be played as a substitute for any Number or any Trump. When the pick-up pack is exhausted, one simply turns over the discard pack, leaving the last card exposed.

If it is impossible for anyone to reach 1 and stalemate ensues, the winner is the player who has reached or is travelling towards the highest number.

The winner should closely scrutinise his winning pack before handing it in should other players wish to continue. And these other players should examine the packs that have been built at the conclusion of The Game. For each player will have acquired a divination of his state which should be read card by card, in chronological order, from the beginning to the end, as a story. The card on which one ends has the greatest importance for the immediate future.

The Game is in fact much less complicated than it seems at first. Most people pick it up easily in the course of their first attempt. In most cases, it grows on the player and reveals hidden depths. Organising a hand for maximum benefit becomes a subtle and meditative activity. One starts to perceive what is needed and what isn't at various stages of life and learning. The relations between the cards become increasingly apparent. Practised people play with wit and elegance.

Innovations to The Game have been proposed. One variant, which I heard about from Mr. David Rankine, brings in a mystical doctrine. The Numbers 1, 2 and 3 are held to be supreme and Ideal in the Qabalah, beyond the Abyss that yawns between Ideal and Actual. Anyone who reaches 2 or 3 must therefore give up his hand to the discard pile and receive 5 cards. If he is brought down below 3 again, however, he is dealt another 6 cards. This innovation has its attractions but it remains to be seen whether or not it will pass into general play.

A technique of play some have criticised as pointless nevertheless deserves mention here, for it has been demonstrated to me as having a use. This consists of playing a Trump upon oneself when, to all intents and purposes, it is not needed. For instance, a player in 7 plays Death. This takes him travelling to 6, but he can go there by playing 6 anyway - so why do it? The reason is to avoid getting dragged away from 7 by another player. For example, while you are in 7 and looking for a 6, another might pick up and later play The Moon on you, sending you down towards 10. It is, then, a prudent move under certain circumstances, for when you are travelling upon a Trump, no one can play a card upon your pack.

It is to be hoped that The Game will bring many hours of pleasure and even more to readers who try it. Certainly it will accelerate comprehension of the immensely complex subject we are about to tackle, which subject is the backbone of the Tarot and the key to Understanding.

Qabalah.
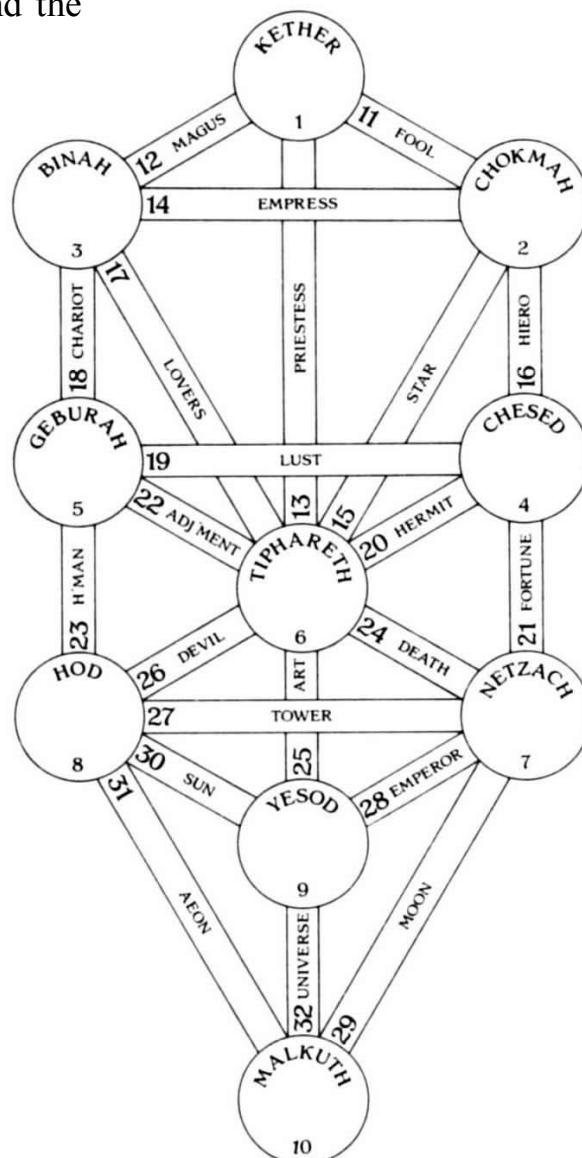
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