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THE HISTORY OF MAGIC

Including a Clear and Precise Exposition of Its Procedure, Its Rites and Its Mysteries

Éliphas Lévi

Translated by Arthur Edward Waite

MODERN ENGLISH ANNOTATED EDITION

First published in London, 1913.

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Modern English Annotated Edition Note

This edition presents a modern-English reading layer for Éliphas Lévi's *The History of Magic*, based on Arthur Edward Waite's 1913 English translation. Lévi's arguments, historical judgments, theological synthesis, and occult interpretations remain his own, while Waite's translator preface and historical notes remain identifiable as Waite's contributions.

Modernization reduces unnecessary friction in spelling, punctuation, syntax, and ordinary wording while preserving changes of speaker, technical vocabulary, quotations, and the distinction between Lévi and his translator. Historical claims and interpretations remain part of the work rather than being silently rewritten to reflect later scholarship.

Fox & Webb notes are used where source history, chronology, terminology, textual questions, or later scholarship materially improves the reading. They clarify the book without turning the reading text into a running commentary, and remain visibly separate from both Lévi's and Waite's voices.

We modernize the language, not the ideas.

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Chronology

A brief path through the traditions Lévi inherits and reshapes

1471 — HERMETIC REVIVAL

Ficino's Hermetic translation reaches print

The Latin Pimander helps make Hermes Trismegistus central to Renaissance claims of an ancient wisdom.

1486 — CHRISTIAN KABBALAH

Pico publishes the 900 Conclusions

Pico draws magic and Kabbalah into an ambitious Christian philosophical synthesis.

1533 — OCCULT PHILOSOPHY

Agrippa's Three Books appear in full

De occulta philosophia organizes natural, celestial, and ceremonial magic for later occult readers.

1781 — OCCULT ANTIQUITY

Court de Gébelin recasts Tarot as ancient wisdom

The speculative Egyptian origin story becomes an important source for later occult Tarot.

1854 — LÉVI'S SYNTHESIS

Dogme et Rituel begins publication

Lévi joins Kabbalah, ritual magic, Tarot, and a theory of universal occult symbolism.

1860 — PUBLICATION

Histoire de la magie appears in Paris

Lévi presents magical history as a continuous esoteric tradition rather than a modern critical history.

1896 — ENGLISH RECEPTION

Waite publishes Transcendental Magic

Waite's English version of Dogme et Rituel brings Lévi's occult synthesis to a wider English readership.

1913 — ENGLISH EDITION

Waite's The History of Magic is published in London

The translation adds Waite's preface and historical notes, creating the two-voice edition preserved here.

INTRODUCTION

Reading Lévi's Magical History

The History of Magic is not a modern academic history. Lévi writes history as occult synthesis: scripture, legend, Kabbalah, Hermetic literature, church history, folklore, political revolution, magnetism, and nineteenth-century occultism become parts of one continuous argument about hidden tradition.

Its seven-book architecture is therefore more than chronology. Lévi moves from origins and ancient doctrine through Christianity, medieval Europe, adepts and priesthood, revolution, and finally the occult currents of his own century. Each book is also keyed to a Hebrew letter, making the structure itself part of his symbolic system.

A second historical voice runs beside Lévi's. Arthur Edward Waite translated the work into English in 1913 and supplied a long preface and hundreds of notes. Waite often disputes Lévi, but he does so from within his own early-twentieth-century esoteric and Christian framework. His comments remain historical apparatus rather than Fox & Webb editorial judgment.

The modern apparatus is separate again. It identifies sources, distinguishes legend from documented history, and supplies context where Lévi's synthesis compresses periods or traditions. The aim is not to flatten the book into current scholarship, but to let the reader see clearly what Lévi is doing — and where the historical record is more complicated.

Preface to the English Translation

In several casual references scattered through periodical literature, in the biographical sketch which preceded my rendering of *Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie* and elsewhere, as occasion prompted, I have put on record an opinion that the *History of Magic*, by Alphonse Louis Constant, written—like the majority of his works—under the pseudonym of Éliphas Lévi, is the most arresting, entertaining and brilliant of all studies on the subject with which I am acquainted. So far back as 1896 I said that it was admirable as a philosophical survey, its historical inaccuracies notwithstanding, and that there is nothing in occult literature which can suffer comparison therewith. Moreover, there is nothing so comprehensive in the French language, while as regards ourselves it must be said that we have depended so far on a history by Joseph Ennemoser, translated from the German and explaining everything, within the domain included under the denomination of Magic, by the phenomena of Animal Magnetism. Other texts than this are available in that language, but they have not been put into English; while none of them has so great an appeal as that which is here rendered into our tongue. Having certified so far regarding its titles, it is perhaps desirable to add, from my own standpoint, that I have not translated the book because it is entertaining and brilliant, or because it will afford those who are concerned with Magic in history a serviceable general account. The task has been undertaken still less in the interests of any who may have other—that is to say, occult—reasons for acquaintance with "its procedure, its rites and its mysteries." I have no object in providing unwary and foolish seekers with material of this kind, and it so happens that the present History does not fulfil the promise of its sub-title in these respects, or at least to any extent that they would term

practical in their folly. Through all my later literary life I have sought to make it plain, as the result of antecedent years spent in occult research, that the occult sciences—in all their general understanding—are paths of danger when they are not paths of simple make-believe and imposture. The importance of Éliphas Lévi's account at large of the claims, and of their story throughout the centuries, arises from the fact (*a*) that he is the authoritative exponent-in-chief of all the alleged sciences; (*b*) that it is he who, in a sense, restored and placed them, under a new and more attractive vesture, before public notice at the middle period of the nineteenth century; (*c*) that he claimed, as we shall see, the very fullest knowledge concerning them, being that of an adept and master; but (*d*) that—subject to one qualification, the worth of which will be mentioned—it follows from his long examination that Magic, as understood not in the streets only but in the houses of research concerning it, has no ground in the truth of things, and is of the region of delusion only. It is for this reason that I have translated his History of Magic, as one who reckons a not too gracious task for something which leans toward righteousness, at least in the sense of charity. The world is full at this day of the false claims which arise out of that region, and I have better reasons than most even of my readers can imagine to undeceive those who, having been drawn in such directions, may be still saved from deception. It is well therefore that out of the mouth of the masters we can draw the fullest evidence required for this purpose.

In the present prefatory words I propose to shew, firstly, the nature of Éliphas Lévi's personal claims, so that there may be no misconception as to what they were actually, and as to the kind of voice which is speaking; secondly, his original statement of the claims, nature and value of Transcendental Magic; and, thirdly, his later evidences on its phenomenal or so-called practical side, as established by its own history. In this manner we shall obtain his canon of criticism, and I regard it as serviceable, because—with all his imperfections—he had better titles of knowledge at his own day than any one, while it cannot be said that his place has been filled since, though many workers have

risen up in the same field of inquiry and have specialised in the numerous departments which he covered generally and superficially.

Before entering upon these matters it may be thought that I should speak at some length of the author's life; but the outlines have been given already in an extended introduction prefixed to a digest of his writings which I published many years ago under the title of *Mysteries of Magic*, and again, but from another point of view, in the preface to the *Doctrine and Ritual of Transcendental Magic* already mentioned. These things are still available in one edition or another, and very little has transpired subsequently, because—as a matter of fact—the salient biographical facts are not numerous.

In the present place it will be therefore sufficient to say that Alphonse Louis Constant was born at Paris in 1810, and was the son of a shoemaker, apparently in very poor circumstances. His precocity in childhood seemed to give some promise of future ability; he was brought to the notice of a priest belonging to his parish, and this in its turn led to his gratuitous education at Saint-Sulpice, obviously with a view to the priesthood. There his superiors must have recognised sufficient traces of vocation, according to the measures of the particular place and period, for he proceeded to minor orders and subsequently became a deacon. He seems, however, to have conceived strange views on doctrinal subjects, though no particulars are forthcoming, and, being deficient in gifts of silence, the displeasure of authority was marked by various checks, ending finally in his expulsion from the Seminary. Such is one story at least, but an alternative says more simply that he relinquished the sacerdotal career in consequence of doubts and scruples. Thereafter he must, I suppose, have supported himself by some kind of teaching, and by obscure efforts in literature. Of these latter the remains are numerous, though their value has been much exaggerated for bookselling purposes in France. His adventures with Alphonse Esquiros over the gospel of the prophet Ganneau are told in the pages that follow, and are an interesting biographical fragment which may be left to speak for itself. He was then approaching the age of thirty years. I have failed to ascertain at what period he married

Mlle. Noémy, a girl of sixteen, who became afterwards of some repute as a sculptor, but it was a runaway match and in the end she left him. It is even said that she succeeded in a nullity suit—not on the usual grounds, for she had borne him two children, who died in their early years if not during infancy, but on the plea that she was a minor, while he had taken irrevocable vows. Saint-Sulpice is, however, a seminary for secular priests who are not pledged to celibacy, though the rule of the Latin Church forbids them to enter the married state.

In the year 1851 Alphonse Louis Constant contributed a large volume to the encyclopædic series of Abbé Migne, under the title of *Dictionnaire de Littérature Chrétienne*. He is described therein as *ancien professeur au petit Séminaire de Paris*, and it is to be supposed that his past was unknown at the publishing bureau. The volume is more memorable on account of his later writings than important by its own merits. As a critical work, and indeed as a work of learning, it is naturally quite negligible, like most productions of the series, while as a dictionary it is disproportioned and piecemeal; yet it is exceedingly readable and not unsuggestive in its views. There is no need to add that, as the circumstances of the case required, it is written along rigid lines of orthodoxy and is consequently no less narrow, no less illiberal, than the endless volumes of its predecessors and successors in the same field of industry. The doubting heart of Saint-Sulpice had become again a convinced Catholic, or had assumed that mask for the purpose of a particular literary production. Four years later, however, the voice of the churchman, speaking the characteristic language of the Migne Encyclopædias, was succeeded by the voice of the magus. *The Doctrine of Transcendental Magic* appeared in 1855, the *Ritual* in 1856, and henceforth Alphonse Louis Constant, under the pseudonym of Éliphas Lévi, which has become almost of European celebrity, was known only as an exponent of occult science. It is these works which more especially embody his claims in respect of the alleged science and in respect of his own absolute authority thereon and therein. Certain later volumes, which followed from his pen in somewhat rapid succession, are very curious when compared with the *Doctrine and*

Ritual for their apparent submission to church authority and their parade of sincere orthodoxy. I have dealt with this question at length in my introduction to the *Mysteries of Magic*, and I shall be dispensed therefore from covering the same ground in the present place. Such discrepancy notwithstanding, Éliphas Lévi became, in a private as well as in a public sense, a teacher of occult science and of Kabalism as its primary source: it was apparently his means of livelihood. He was in Paris during the siege which brought the Franco-German war to its disastrous close, and he died in 1875, fortified by the last rites of the Catholic Church. He left behind him a large sheaf of manuscripts, several of which have been published since, and some await an editor. The issue of his life and letters has been long promised in Paris, under the auspices of M. Lucien Mauchel, but the fact that over sixteen years have elapsed since the announcement was first made may signify that they are withheld permanently. Possibly the executors of Mme Constant, who is said to have married a second time in 1872, may have laid an interdict on the design.

Passing now to the subject-in-chief of this preface, it is affirmed as follows in the *Doctrine and Ritual of Transcendental Magic*:—(1) There is a potent and real Magic, popular exaggerations of which are really below the truth. (2) There is a formidable secret which constitutes the fatal science of good and evil. (3) It confers on man powers apparently superhuman. (4) It is the traditional science of the secrets of Nature which has been transmitted to us from the Magi. (5) Initiation therein gives empire over souls to the sage and the adroitness for ruling wills. (6) Arising apparently from this science, there is one infallible, indefectible and truly catholic religion which has always existed in the world, but it is unadapted for the multitude. (7) For this reason there has come into being the exoteric religion of apologue, fable and nurse's stories, which is all that is possible for the profane: it has undergone various transformations, and it is represented at this day by Latin Christianity under the obedience of Rome. (8) Its veils are true in their symbolism, and it may be called true for the crowd, but

the doctrine of initiates is not less than a negation of the absolute therein. (9) It is Magic alone which imparts true science.

Hereof is what may be termed the theoretical, philosophical or doctrinal part, the dogma of "absolute science." That which is practical follows, and it deals with the exercise of a natural power but one superior to the ordinary forces of Nature. It is to all intents and purposes comprised in a Grimoire of Magic, and is a work of ceremonial evocations—whether of elementary spirits, with the aid of pantacles, talismans and the other magical instruments and properties; whether of spirits belonging *ex hypothesi* to the planetary sphere; whether of the shades or souls of the dead in necromancy. These works are lawful, and their results apparently veridic, but beyond them is the domain of Black Magic, which is a realm of delusion and nightmare, though phenomenal enough in its results. By his dedications Éliphas Lévi happened to be a magus of light.

It will be observed that all this offers a clear issue, and—for the rest—the Grimoire of Transcendental Magic, according to Éliphas Lévi, does not differ generically from the *Key of Solomon* and its counterparts, except in so far as the author has excised here and enlarged there, in obedience to his own lights. He had full authority for doing so on the basis of his personal claims, which may be summarised at this point. (1) He has discovered "the secret of human omnipotence and indefinite progress, the key of all symbolism, the first and final doctrine." (2) He is alchemist as well as magician, and he makes public the same secret as Raymund Lully, Nicholas Flamel and probably Heinrich Khunrath. They produced true gold, "nor did they take away their secret with them." (3) And finally: "at an epoch when the sanctuary has been devastated and has fallen into ruins, because its key has been thrown over the hedge, to the profit of no one, I have deemed it my duty to pick up that key, and I offer it to him who can take it: in his turn he will be doctor of the nations and liberator of the world."

It must be said that these claims do not rest on a mere theory or practice of ceremonial evocations. There is no question that for Éliphas

Lévi his secret doctrine of occult science is contained in a hypothesis concerning an universal medium denominated the Astral Light, which is neither more nor less than the odylic force of Baron Reichenbach, as the French writer himself admits substantially, but it is dilated in his speculation and issues therein greatly transformed as follows. (1) It is an universal plastic mediator, a common receptacle for vibrations of movement and images of form: it may be called the Imagination of Nature. (2) It is that which God created when He uttered the *Fiat Lux*. (3) It is the great medium of occult force, but as such it is a blind force, which can be used for good or evil, being especially obedient to the light of grace. (4) It is the element of electricity and lightning. (5) The "four imponderable fluids" are diverse manifestations of this one force, which is "inseparable from the First Matter" and sets the latter in motion. (6) It is now resplendent, now igneous, now electric, now magnetic. (7) It has apparently two modes, which tend to equilibrium, and to know the middle point of this equilibrium seems to be the attainment of the Great Work. (8) It is "ethereal in the infinite, astral in stars and planets, metallic, specific or mercurial in metals, vegetable in plants, vital in animals, magnetic or personal in men." (9) It is extracted from animals by absorption and from men by generation. (10) In Magic it is the glass of visions, the receptacle of all reflections. The seer has his visions therein, the diviner divines by its means and the magus evokes spirits. (11) When the Astral Light is fixed about a centre by condensation it becomes the Philosophical Stone of Alchemy, in which form it is an artificial phosphorus, containing the concentrated virtues of all generative heat. (12) When condensed by a triple fire it resolves into oil, and this oil is the Universal Medicine. It can then only be contained in glass, this being a non-conductor.

Again, here is a clear issue at its value, and I make this qualification because the Astral Light is, as I have said, a speculation, and personally I neither know nor care whether such a fluid exists, or, in such case, whether it is applicable to the uses indicated. It is enough that Éliphas Lévi has made his affirmations concerning it in unmistakable language.

Let us pass therefore to the *Histoire de la Magie*, though I have been borrowing from it already in respect of the putative universal fluid. Magic therein is still the science of the ancient Magi; it is still the exact and absolute science of Nature and her laws, because it is the science of equilibrium. Its secret, the secret of occult science, is that of God's omnipotence. It comprises all that is most certain in philosophy, all that is eternal and infallible in religion. It is the Sacerdotal Art and the Royal Art. Its doctrine is contained in Kabalism, but it derives apparently from primeval Zoroastrian doctrine, of which Abraham seems to have been a depositary. This doctrine attained its perfection in Egypt. Thereafter, on its religious side, the succession appears to have been: (*a*) from Egypt to Moses; (*b*) from Moses to Solomon, through certain custodians of the secret law in Jewry; (*c*) from the Temple at Jerusalem to St. Peter's at Rome, though the method of transition is obscure—as that which was affirmed previously is still maintained, namely, that Rome has lost the Kabalistic Keys. It is naturally left to our conjecture as to when the Church possessed them—from Éliphas Lévi's point of view, perhaps in the days of Dionysius, perhaps in those of Synesius, but not from my standpoint, and so the question remains.

Now, if these things do not differ specifically from the heads of the previous testimony, on the surface and in the letter thereof, it is no less certain that there is a marked distinction alike in general atmosphere and inward spirit. About this all can satisfy themselves who will compare the two texts, and I need not insist on it here. What, however, in the *Histoire de la Magie*, has befallen that practical side which, after all the dreamings, the high and decorative philosophy, the adornments —now golden, now meretricious—was the evidence, term and crown of the previous work? Those who are reading can again check me; but my answer is this: whether the subject of the moment is the art of evoking spirits, whether it is old cases of possession, whether it is witchcraft or necromancy, whether it is modern phenomena like direct-writing, table-rapping and the other properties of spiritism, as they were known to the writer and his period, they have one and all fallen under the ban of unreserved condemnation. It is not that they are

imposture, for Éliphas Lévi does not dispute the facts and derides those who do, but they belong to the abyss of delusion and all who practise them are workers of madness and apostles of evil only. The advent of Christianity has put a decisive period to every working of Magic and anathema has been pronounced thereon. It is from this point of view that Lévi takes the disciple through each century of the subject, sometimes indeed explaining things from the standpoint of a complete sceptic, sometimes as Joseph Ennemoser might himself have explained them, but never—no, not once—like the authorised exponent of practical Magic who has tried the admirable and terrifying experiments, who returns to say that they are true and real, which is the testimony of the *Doctrine and Ritual*, if these volumes can be held to signify anything. Necromancy as a science of the abyss; spiritism as the abyss giving up every form of delusion; sorcery, witchcraft, as rich indeed in testimony but to human perversity alone, apart from intervention of diabolism belonging to the other world—I testify with my whole heart to the truth of these accusations, though I do not believe that the unseen world is so utterly cut off from the world of things manifest as Éliphas Lévi considered in his own paradoxical moods. But once more—what has become of Magic? What has happened to the one science which is coeval with creation itself, to the key of all miracles and to almost omnipotent adeptship? They are reduced as follows: (*a*) to that which in its palmary respects is the "sympathetic and miraculous physics" of Mesmer, who is "grand as Prometheus" because of them; (*b*) to a general theory of hallucination, when hallucination has been carried, by self-induced delusion or otherwise, to its *ne plus ultra degree*; and (*c*) but I mention this under very grave reserves, because—for the life of me—I do not understand how or why it should remain—to the physical operations of alchemy, which are still possible and actual under the conditions set forth in the speculation concerning the Astral Light. It is not as such, one would say, a thaumaturgic process, unless indeed the dream should rule—as it tends to do—that fulfilment depends on an electrifying power in the projected will of the adept. In any case, the ethical transliteration of