

CARCOSA

(or the Queen and the Stranger)

A Fantasy in Two Acts

by Talbot Estus

ACT ONE

(A balcony of the palace in Yhtill, in the land of Hastur, overlooking the Lake of Hali, which stretches to the horizon, blank, motionless and covered with a thin haze. The two suns sink toward the rippleless surface.

(The fittings of the balcony are opulent; but dingy with time. Several stones have fallen from the masonry, and lie unheeded.

(CASSILDA, a Queen, lies on a couch overlooking the Lake, turning in her lap a golden diadem set with jewels. A servant enters and offers her a tray, but it is nearly empty: some bread. A jug. She looks at it hopelessly and waves it away. The servant goes out.

(Enter PRINCE UOHT, a portly man in his early millions.)

UOHT: *Good day, mother.*

CASSILDA: *Good-bye, day.*

UOHT: *You have been looking at Carcosa again.*

CASSILDA: *No... Nobody can see Carcosa
 before the Hyades rise. I was only looking at
 the Lake of Hali. It swallows so many suns.*

UOHT: *And you will see it swallow so many more.
These mists are bad for you; they seep
into everything. Come inside.*

CASSILDA: *No, not now. I am not afraid of a
little mist; not of a little time. I have seen
quite a lot of both.*

UOHT: *This interminable siege!
Would that the Lake would swallow Alar
for once, instead of the suns.*

CASSILDA: *Not even Hali can do that,
since Alar sits upon Dehme, which is
quite another lake.*

UOHT: *One lake is like another:
water and fog, fog and water. If Yhtill and
Alar changed sites between moons, nobody
would notice. They are the two worst
situated cities in the world.*

CASSILDA: *Necessarily, for
they are the only ones.*

UOHT: *Except Carcosa
... Well?*

CASSILDA: *I am not sure, my Prince, that
Carcosa is in the world. In any event, it is
certainly fruitless to talk about the matter.
(CAMILLA, a Princess, enters, then hesitates.)*

CAMILLA: *Oh, I -*

CASSILDA: *Come ahead, Camilla, hear us. There
are no secrets any longer. Everything has been
worn thin, and Time has stopped.
(Enter THALE, the younger Prince.)*

THALE: *Nonsense again, mother?*

CASSILDA: *If it pleases you to call it that, Prince Thale. As for me, I am only a Queen, I can be mocked at will.*

THALE: *But no, I didn't mean -*

UOHT: *Mockery or no, Prince Thale is right. Time does not stop. It is a contradiction in terms.*

CASSILDA: *Time stops, my Uoht when you have heard every possible banality every possible number of times. Whenever has anything happened in Yhtill, please? Any new word, or any new event? The siege, as you very justly and repeatedly observe, is right flat out interminable, and that's that. Neither Yhtill nor Alar will ever prevail. We shall both just wear down into dust - or boredom, whichever arrives first. Ah, I am sorry for you Uoht, but I'm afraid you only remind me now that there's no future in being human. Even as a baby, you were a little dull.*

UOHT: *You may say what you please of me, too, for royalty of course has its privileges. All the same, not all time is in the past, Cassilda. It lies in your power to change things, were you not so weary of us - and of yourself.*

CASSILDA: *Oh, are we to talk of the Succession again? Nothing is duller than dynasties.*

THALE: *Mother, must the Dynasty die only because you are bored? Only a word from you, and the Black Stars would rise again. Whatever your Soothsaying, Alar could not stand against them; you know that. It would be - it would be an act of mercy, to the people*

CASSILDA: *The people! Who are they?
You care as little for the people as Uoht does.
Thale, I know your heart, and his as well.
All the diadem means to either of us is your
sister. There's no other reward now, for being a
king in Yhtill. As for black stars, enough!
They radiate nothing but the night.*

THALE: *Camilla loves me.*

UOHT: *Liar!*

CASSILDA: *Camilla?*

UOHT: *Ask her, if you dare.*

THALE: *Who would dare, without the
diadem? You're not so bold, Uoht. Have you
found the Yellow Sign?*

UOHT: *Stop your mouth!*

CASSILDA: *And stop your bickering, you
two frogs! ... I will ask her.*

CAMILLA: *I am not ready to be asked, mother.*

CASSILDA: *No? Camilla, you could take your pick of your
brothers, and we'd have an end to all our
problems. See how I tempt you. The Dynasty
would go on, and you'd be free of all this
conniving. Perhaps, even, the siege would end ...
Well, Camilla, speak!*

CAMILLA: *No, no. Please. You cannot
give the diadem to me. I will not have it.*

CASSILDA: *And why not?*

CAMILLA: *Then I would be sent the Yellow Sign.*

CAMILLA: Mother, there's a stranger in the city.

CASSILDA: A stranger! Now living god, hear that. You have the mists of Hali in your brains. I know every face in Yhtill, and in Alar too. Camilla, how many people do you think there are in the living world? A spate of handfuls, and I've seen them all.

CAMILLA: This one is new in Yhtill.

CASSILDA: Nobody, nobody these days goes about Yhtill but the hearse-driver. Sensible people hide their faces even from themselves.

CAMILLA: But that's it. You cannot see his face. He's walking masked.

CASSILDA: Oh, covered with a veil? Or is he hooded?

CAMILLA: Neither, mother. He wears another face. A white mask - whiter than the mists. The eyes are blank and it has no expression.

CASSILDA: Hmm ... In all conscience, strange enough. How does he explain it?

CAMILLA: He speaks to no one.

CASSILDA: I will see him. He will speak to me. Everyone does; and then he'll be unmasked.

UOHT: But mother, this is only a conceit. It is of no moment in the tree of time. If Camilla will but choose -

THALE: And bring back the succession -

CASSILDA: *(placing the diadem upon her head):*
We will talk of that some other time.
Send me now Noatalba, and the man in the
pallid mask. Camilla does not wish to choose now,
and no more do I.

UOHT: Time is running out. There has been no
king in Yhtill since the last Aldones -

CASSILDA: Do not tell me again the story of the Last
King! Oh, I am so sick, so sick of you all!
I tell you now, do you goad me further, there will
be no other king in Yhtill till the King in Yellow!

*(There is a long, shocked silence. CAMILLA, UOHT and
THALE go out, stunned and submissive. CASSILDA lies
back, exhausted and brooding.)*

*(Enter A CHILD, with jewelled fingers, wearing a small
duplicate of the diadem.)*

CHILD: Tell me a story.

CASSILDA: Not now.

CHILD: Please, tell me a story. Please.

CASSILDA: I do not feel like telling you a story now.

CHILD *(menacingly)*: Grandmother?

*(CASSILDA sits up resignedly. She does not look at the
CHILD.)*

CASSILDA: Once upon a time ...

CHILD: That's better.

CASSILDA: There were two lakes in the heart of the land of Hastur,
called Dzhme and Hali. For millions of years they lay there
with no-one to see them, while strange fishes bit their
surfaces. Then, there appeared a city by the Lake of Hali --

(During the course of this scene, the suns set. Across the water, the Hyades comes out, slightly blurred by mists)

CHILD: *That's not a story, that's only history.*

CASSILDA: *It is the only story that there is.
Besides, if you'll be quiet, I shall tell you the rest
that's in the runes. Is that agreed?*

CHILD: *Oh good! I'm not supposed to know what's in the
runes.*

CASSILDA: *That doesn't matter now. To go on:*
This city had four singularities. The first singularity was that
it appeared overnight. The second singularity was that one
could not tell whether the city sat upon the waters, or
beyond them on the invisible other shore. The third
singularity was that when the moon rose, the towers of the
city appeared to be behind it, not in front of it.
Shall I go on?

CHILD: *Of course, I know all the rest.*

CASSILDA: *Misfortunate prince.*
Well then, the fourth singularity was that as soon as one
looked upon the city, one knew what its name was.

CHILD: *Carcosa.*

CASSILDA: *Even as today. And after a long time, men came to the
lakes and built mud huts. The huts grew into the city of Yhtill
and soon a man arose who proclaimed himself king in Yhtill.*

CHILD: *Aldones. My grandfather.*

CASSILDA: *Yes, some ages back.*
And he decreed that all the kings in Yhtill thereafter should
bear his name. He promised that if his Dynasty be
maintained, then someday Yhtill would be as great as
Carcosa across the waters. That night, someone heard him.

CHILD: *Thank you, that's enough.*

CASSILDA: *No, it is not enough, you have asked, and must hear the end.*

CHILD: *I have to leave now. I forgot something.*

CASSILDA (*Her eyes closed*): *And that same night,
He found the Yellow Sign.*

(The CHILD runs out. CASSILDA opens her eyes and resumes watching across the Lake. A page enters with a torch, fixes it in a sconce, and goes out again. CASSILDA does not stir.)

(In the near darkness, NOATALBA, a priest, enters)

NOATALBA: *My Queen.*

CASSILDA: *My priest.*

NOATALBA: *You forgot the fifth singularity.*

CASSILDA: *And you are an incurable eavesdropper. I am not surprised. In any event, one does not mention the Mystery of the Hyades to a child.*

NOATALBA: *No, but you think of it.*

CASSILDA: *No. Everyone today imputes philosophy to me. I'm not so thoughtful. It is only that the shadows of men's thoughts lengthen commonly in the afternoon. Dusk is dusk.*

NOATALBA: *Long thoughts cast long shadows at any time of day.*

CASSILDA: *And no news is good news. Noatalba, must you wash me clean with banalities too? Next you will be speaking of the Succession.*

NOATALBA: *As a matter of fact, nothing was further from my mind.*

CASSILDA: A good place for nothing.

*NOATALBA: I am pleased to hear you jesting.
Nonetheless, I have something else to tell you.*

CASSILDA: The man in the pallid mask?

*NOATALBA: You have heard?
Good, then I will be brief.*

CASSILDA: Good.

NOATALBA: I think you should not see him.

*CASSILDA: What!
Nothing will prevent me! Do you think I will
refuse the only novelty in human history, such
as it is? You know me little.*

NOATALBA: I know you better than you know yourself.

*CASSILDA: And nothing is certain but death and ...
Oh living God!*

NOATALBA: You spoke?

*CASSILDA: Ignore me.
Why should I not see this man?*

*NOATALBA: It is by no means certain that he is a man.
And if he is, at best, he is a spy from Alar.*

*(There is a very long silence, as if something had
interrupted the action; both CASSILDA and NOATALBA
remain absolutely immobile throughout it. Then their
dialogue resumes, as if both were quite unaware of the
break.)*

CASSILDA: *A poor spy then, to be so conspicuous. And in any event, poor priest, what is there that Alar does not know about us? That is why we are in this impasse in the war: We know everything. Were one stone to fall in Alar that I did not hear about, the war would be over; and Aldones, poor man, is in the same whale. But he knows me, and I know him, and that's the end of the matter. We shall die of this glut of familiarity. He and I, lying in the same tomb, measuring away at each other's hair and fingernails in the hope of some advantage even in death. Why would he send a spy? He is the father of my tiresome children, and the architect of my miserable city. Oh Noatalba, how I wish I could tell him something he does not know! He would die of joy, and Alar would sink into the Lakes - Yhtill thereafter!*

NOATALBA: *Perhaps. You think more highly of novelty than I do; it is a weakness in you. But I myself do not think this creature in the pallid mask to be a spy. You are surprised? But no; I only said of that possibility: "At best."*

CASSILDA (with a short chopping gesture): *All right, I yield you that. The worst then?*

NOATALBA: *This thing may be the Phantom of Truth. Only ghosts go about in white.*

CASSILDA (slowly): *Oh. Oh. Is that moment come? I see. Then I was wise to abort the Dynasty, after all. I am not often wise. But perhaps any end is a good end ... if it is truly an end. But ... Noatalba -*

NOATALBA: *Speak.*

CASSILDA: *I have not found the Sign.*

NOATALBA (indulgently): Of course not, or you would have told me. But we cannot be sure that the Sign is always sent. The sender -

(He falls silent. CASSILDA, perceiving that she has the upper hand again, grins mercilessly)

CASSILDA: -- is the King in Yellow.

NOATALBA: Well ...yes. The King ...warns ...as he warned the first Aldones. We know nothing about him but that. And should not know.

CASSILDA: Why not? Perhaps he is dead.

(NOATALBA abruptly hides his face.)

Or too busy in Carcosa, so that he has forgotten to send the Sign. Why not? We are well taught that with the King in Yellow, all things are possible.

NOATALBA (unmasking his face slowly): I have not heard you. You did not speak.

CASSILDA: I only spoke to your point, my priest ...that this man in the pallid mask may indeed be the Phantom of Truth, though I have not found the Sign, no more than you. That was what you were saying, was it not? Be silent if you wish. Well, I'll chance it.

NOATALBA: Blasphemy!

CASSILDA: Is the King a god? I think not. In the meantime, Noatalba, I would dearly love to see the face of Truth. It must be curious. I have laid every other ghost in the world; send me this man or phantom!

(exit NOATALBA).

(The STRANGER enters. He is wearing a silken robe which the Yellow sign is embroidered: a single character in no human script, in gold against a circular black ground. The QUEEN turns to look at him, and then with a quick and violent motion, plucks the torch from the sconce and hurls it from the balcony into the Lake. Now there is only starlight.)

CASSILDA: *I have not seen you! I have not seen you!*

STRANGER: *You echo your priest. You are all blind and deaf - obviously by choice.*

CASSILDA: *I ...suppose it is too late to be afraid. Well then, I am not.*

STRANGER: *Well spoken, Queen. There is in fact nothing to be afraid of.*

CASSILDA: *Please, Phantom, no nonsense. You wear the Sign.*

STRANGER: *How do you know that? You have never seen the Yellow Sign.*

CASSILDA: *Oh I know. The Sign is in the blood. That is why I aborted the Dynasty. No blood should have to carry such knowledge through a human heart; no children's teeth so set on edge.*

STRANGER: *You face facts. That is a good beginning. Very well; then, yes, in fact this is the Sign. Nevertheless, Cassilda -*

CASSILDA: *Your Majesty -*

STRANGER: *-- Cassilda, there is nothing to fear. You see how I wear it with impunity. Be reassured; it has no power left.*

CASSILDA: *Is that ...a truth?*

*STRANGER: It is the shadow cast by a truth.
Nothing else is ever vouchsafed us, Queen
Cassilda. That is why I am white: in order to
survive such coloured shadows. And the Pallid
Mask protects me - as it will protect you.*

CASSILDA: How?

*STRANGER: It deceives. That is the function of a
mask. What else?*

*CASSILDA: You are not very full of straight
answers.*

*STRANGER: There are no straight answers. But I tell you
this: Anyone who wears the Pallid Mask need
never fear the Yellow Sign, You tremble. All the
same, my Queen, that era is over. Whatever
else could you need to know? Now your
Dynasty can start again; again there can be a
king in Yhtill; and again, Cassilda, the Black
Stars can mount the sky once more against the
Hyades. The siege can be lifted. Humankind
can have its future back.*

CASSILDA: So many dreams!

*STRANGER: Only wear the Mask, and these are
given. There's no other thing required of us.*

CASSILDA: Who tells me this?

STRANGER: I am called Haita.

CASSILDA: That is only Alaran for "stranger".

*STRANGER: And Aldones is only
Yhtillic for "father". What of that?*

CASSILDA: *Your facts are bitterer than your mysteries. And what will happen to you, Haita, you with the Yellow Sign on your bosom, when the Sign is sent for?*

STRANGER: *Nothing at all. What has Carcosa ever had to do with the human world, since you all lived in mud huts? The King in Yellow has other concerns, as is only supernatural. Once you don the Pallid Mask, he cannot even see you. Do you doubt me? You have only to look again for yourself across the Lake. Carcosa does not sit upon the Earth. It is, perhaps, not even real; or not so real as you and I. Certainly, the Living God does not believe in it. Then why should you?*

CASSILDA: *You are plausible, you in your ghost face. You talk as if you know the Living God. Do you also hear the Hyades sing in the evening of the world?*

STRANGER (shortly): *No. That is strictly the King's business. It is of no earthly interest to me.*

CASSILDA (once more recovering a little of her aplomb): *I daresay. How can I trust any of these answers? Do we indeed have to do nothing more to be saved than don white masks? It sounds to me like a suspiciously easy answer.*

STRANGER: *Test it then.*

CASSILDA: *And die. Thank you very much.*

STRANGER: *Not so fast. I would not kill you, or myself. I propose a masque, if you will pardon me the word-play. All will wear exactly what they choose, except that all will also wear the Pallid mask, I myself shall wear the Yellow Sign, just as I do now. When you are all convinced, the masks will be*

doffed; and then you may announce the Succession, all in perfect safety.

CASSILDA: *Oh, indeed.
And then the King descends.*

STRANGER: *And if the King
Should then descend, we are all lost, and I have
lost my bet. I have nothing to lose but my life.
You have more. And if the King does not
descend, what then? Think! The Yellow Sign
denatured, human life suddenly charged with
meaning, hope flowering everywhere,
The Phantom of Truth laid forever, and the
Dynasty free of all fear of Carcosa and
whatever monsters live there, free of all fear of
the King in Yellow and his tattered,
smothering, inhuman robes!*

CASSILDA: *Oh Living God!
How would I dare to believe you?*

STRANGER: *You do not dare to ...*

(During this conversation, the moon has been rising slowly, contrary to the direction of sunset, and the stars fade, though they do not quite disappear. Long waves of clouds begin to pass over the surface of the lake of Hali, which begins to sign and heave. Spray rises. The STRANGER and CASSILDA stare at each other in a dawn and sunset of complicity and hatred.)

CASSILDA: *Why would I not dare?
I who am Cassilda, I, I who am I?*

STRANGER: *Because, Cassilda, risk nothing, and
you risk it all. That is the first law of rulership.
And, too, because, Cassilda, in your ancient
heart you love your children.*

CASSILDA: *Oh, you are a demon!
You have found me out.*

STRANGER: *That is what I came for. Very well. I shall see you tomorrow, after sunset. Wear the Mask, and all eyes will be opened, all ears unstopped. Good night, my Queen.*

CASSIDIA: If you are human, you'll regret this.

STRANGER: Utterly.
And so, good night.

(The STRANGER goes out. CASSILDA puts her hand to her head and finds that she is no longer wearing the diadem. She gropes for it, and finally locates it among the cushions. She starts to put it on, and then instead stands at the balcony rail, turning the crown in her hands. The lights go down into semidarkness)

The fog rises in the moonlight; the stars disappear. On the horizon, seemingly afloat upon the Lake of Hali, appear the towers of Carcosa, tall and lightless. The centre of the city is behind the rising moon, which seems to be dripping white blood into the lake.

Enter $NOAT\mathcal{ALBA}$)

NOATALBA: *And so, good night, my Queen.
You saw him?*

CASSILDA: *I...think so.*

NOATALBA: And -- ?

CASSIDA: *He says ...he says the King in Yellow can be blinded.*

NOATALBA: *And you heard him out.
Now, very surely, we are indeed all mad.*

(Curtain)

ACT TWO

(The CHILD appears before the curtain.)

THE CHILD: I am not the Prologue, nor the Afterword; call me the Prototaph. My role is this: to tell you it is now too late to close the book or quit the theatre. You already thought you should have done so earlier, but you stayed. How harmless it all is! No definite principles are involved, no doctrines promulgated in these pristine pages, no convictions outraged ...but the blow has fallen, and now it is too late. And shall I tell you where the sin lies? It is yours. You listened to us; and all the say you stay to see the Sign. Now you are ours, or, since the runes also run backwards, we are yours ...forever.

(The stage is in darkness when the curtains part. After a pause, there are a few soft spare chords of music, and the voice of CASSIOTA is heard singing.)

CASSILDA: *Along the shore the cloud waves break,
The twin suns sink behind the lake,
The shadows lengthen*

In Carcosa.

*Strange is the night where black stars rise,
And strange moons circle through the skies,
But stranger still is*

Lost Carcosa.

*Songs that the Hyades shall sing
Where flap the tatters of the King,
Must die unheard in*

Dim Carcosa.

*Song of my soul, my voice is dead,
Die thou unsung, as tears unshed
Shall dry and die in*

Lost Carcosa.

(A murmur of voices and music rises under the last verse. The lights go up to reveal that the front of the stage has become a crowded ballroom, with the balcony at its back. The STRANGER and all the Yhtillites are present; all the latter wear white masks with the visage of the STRANGER, to which individual taste has added grotesque variations. The result is that each mask looks like a famous person. The costumes are also various and fantastic. The STRANGER still wears the silken robe with the Yellow Sign, and CASSILDA, though masked, still wears the diadem, as does the CHILD. Many are dancing to a formal measure, something like a sarabande, something like stalking.

CAMILLA is talking to the STRANGER, front left. CASSILDA watches the masque from the balcony, Carcosa and the Hyades behind her; the moon has vanished.)

STRANGER: There, Princess, you see that there has been no sending, are there will be none. The Pallid Mask is the perfect disguise.

CAMILLA: how would we know a sending if it came?

(CASSILDA descends and joins them.)

STRANGER: The messenger of the King drives a hearse.

CASSILDA: Oho, half the population of Yhtill does that. It is the city's most popular occupation, since the siege began. All that is talk.

STRANGER: I have heard what the Talkers were talking - the talk of the beginning and the end; but I do not talk of the beginning or the end.

CAMILLA: But - the sending? Let us hear.

STRANGER: Also, the messenger of the King is a soft man. Should you greet him by the hand, one of his fingers would come off to join yours.

(CAMILLA recoils in delicate disgust. NOATALBA, who has been circling closer and closer to the group, now joins it.)

NOATALBA: *A pretty story. You seem to know everything. I think perhaps you could tell us, given gold, the mystery of the Hyades.*

STRANGER: *He is King there.*

NOATALBA: *As everywhere. Everyone knows that.*

STRANGER: *He is not King in Aldebaran. That is why Carcosa was built. It is a city in exile. These two mighty stars are deep in war, like Yhtill and Alar.*

NOATALBA: *Oh, indeed. Who then lives in Carcosa?*

STRANGER: *Nothing human. More than that, I cannot tell you.*

NOATALBA: *Your springs of invention run dry with suspicious quickness.*

CASSILDA: *Be silent. Stranger, how did you come by all this?*

STRANGER: *My sigil is Aldebaran. I hate the King.*

NOATALBA: *And his is the Yellow Sign, which you mock him by flaunting before the world. I tell you this: he will not be mocked. He is a king whom Emperors have served; and that is why he scorns a crown. All this is in the runes.*

STRANGER: *There are great truths in the rooms. Nevertheless, my priest, Aldebaran is his evil star. Thence comes the Pallid Mask.*

NOATATBA: *Belike, belike. But I would rather be deep in the cloudy depths of Dehme than to wear what you wear on your bosom. When the King opens his mantle --*

(Somewhere in the palace, a deep-toned gong begins to strike.)

CASSILDA: *Have done ...
Now is the time I never thought to see:
I must go, and announce the Succession.
Perhaps ...perhaps the world itself is indeed
about to begin again. How strange!*

(As the gong continues to strike, everyone begins to unmask. There are murmurs and gestures of surprise, real or polite, as identities are recognised or revealed. Then there is a wave of laughter. The music becomes louder and increases in tempo.)

CAMILLA: *You, sir, should unmask.*

STRANGER: *Indeed?*

CAMILLA: *Indeed, it's time. We have all laid aside disguise but you.*

STRANGER: *I wear no mask.*

CAMILLA: *No mask? (To CASSILDA): No mask!*

STRANGER: *I
I am the Pallid Mask itself. I, I, I am the
Phantom of Truth. I came from Alar. My star is
Aldebaran. Truth is our invention, it is our
weapon of war. And see -
By this sign we have conquered, and the siege of
good and evil is ended ...*

(On the horizon, the towers of Carcosa begin to glow.)

NOATATBA (pointing): Look, look! Carcosa – Carcosa is on fire!

(The STRANGER laughs and seizes CAMILLA by the wrists.)

CAMILLA (in agony): His hands! His hands!

(At her cry the music dies discordantly. Then a tremendous, inhuman voice rolls from Carcosa across the Lake of Hali.)

*THE KING: Haïta!
 Haïta!
 Haïta!*

(The STRANGER releases CAMILLA, who screams wordlessly and falls.)

*THE KING: Have you found the Yellow Sign?
 Have you found the Yellow Sign?
 Have you found the Yellow Sign?*

*STRANGER (shouting): I am the Phantom of Truth!
 Tremble, O King in tatters!*

*THE KING: the Phantom of Truth shall be
 laid. The scalloped tatters of the King must hide
 Haïta forever. As for thee, Yhtill –*

ALL: No! No, no!

*THE KING: And as for thee, we tell you this; it is
 a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living
 god.*

(The STRANGER falls, and everyone else sinks slowly to the ground after him.)

THE KING can now be seen, although only faintly. He stands in state upon the balcony. He has no face, and is twice as tall as a man. He wears painted shows under his tattered, fantastically coloured robes, and a streamer of silk appears to fall from the pointed tip of his hood. Behind his back he holds inverted a torch with a turned and jewelled shaft, which emits smoke, but no light. At times he appears to be winged; at others, haloed. These details are for the costumier; at no point should *THE KING* be sufficiently visible to make them all out.

Behind him, Carcosa and the Lake of Hali have vanished. Instead, there appears at his back a huge sculptured shield, in shape suggesting a labrys of onyx, upon which the Yellow Sign is chased in gold.

The rest of the stage darkens gradually, until, at the end, it is lit only by the decomposed body of the *STRANGER*, phosphorescing bluey.)

THE KING: I have enfolded Haïta, and the Phantom of Truth is laid. (more quietly): henceforth the ancient lies will rule as always ...Now. Cassilda!

(*CASSILDA* rises mutely to her knees.)

THE KING: Thou wert promised a Dynasty by Truth, and in truth shalt thou have a dynasty. The Kingdom of Yhtill was first in all the world, and would have ruled the world, except for this; Carcosa did not want it. Hence, thereafter, Yhtill and Alar divided; but those in Alar sent from Aldebaran the Phantom of Truth and all was lost; together, you forgot the Covenant of the Sign. Now there is much which needs to be undone.

NOATALBA (faintly): How, King, how?

THE KING: Henceforth, Yhtill and Alar will
be divided forever. Forever shall thou contend
for mastery, and strive in bitter blood to claim
which shall be uppermost; flesh or phantom,
black or white. In due course of starwheels, the
strife will come to issue; but not now; oh, no, not
now.

CASSILDA (whispering): And - until then?

THE KING: Until then, Carcosa will
vanish; but my rule, I tell you now, is
permanent, despite Aldebaran. Be warned. Also
be promised: He who triumphs in this war shall
be my ...can I be honest? ...inheritor, and so shall
have the Dynasty back. But think: Already you
own the world. The great query is, Can you rule
it? The query is the gift. The King in Yellow
gives it into your hands, to hold ...or to let loose.
Choose, terrible children

NOATALBA (faintly): You are King, and are most gracious. We thank you.

THE KING: You thank me? I am the living god! Bethink thyself, priest. There is a price, I have not as yet stated the half of it.

(Everyone waits, petrified.)

THE KING: The price is: the fixing of the Mask.

(Silence.)

THE KING: You do not understand me. I will explain it once and then no more. Yhtill, you acceded to, and wore the Pallid Mask. That is the price. Henceforth, all in Yhtill shall wear the Mask, and by this sign be known. And war between the masked men and the naked shall be perpetual and bloody, until I come again ...or fail to come.

(NOATALBA starts to his knees.)

*NOATALBA: Unfair, unfair!
 It was Alar invented the Pallid mask!
 Aldones -*

*THE KING: Why should I be fair? I am the living
 god. As for Aldones, he is the father of you all.
 That is the price: the fixing of the Mask.*

ALL: Oh!

CASSILDA (bitterly): Not upon us, oh King; not upon us!

ALL: No! Mercy! Not upon us!

*THE KING: Yhtill!
 Yhtill!
 Yhtill!*

*(THE KING vanishes, and with him his throne.
The Hyades and Carcosa are once more visible over the
balcony rail. The mass of corruption that had been the
STRANGER rises slowly and uncertainly. The CHILD runs
out from the crowd, and seizing the STRANGER by one
mushy hand, leads him shambling out across the balcony in
the wake of THE KING. There is a low composite moan as
they exit.)*

*CASSILDA (standing and throwing her arms wide): Not
 upon us! Not upon us!*

*THE KING (offstage, remote, diminishing): What!
 Did you think to be human still?*

*(Those onstage hesitate, as if lost. Then, following
CASSILDA's lead, each stoops, picks up his or her Mask
and puts it on, turning to face the audience and standing
in still silence. When all others are Masked the CHILD
enters from the rear, wearing a mask himself. He walks to
the front of the stage and draws the curtain. He turns to the
audience)*

CHILD: Yhtill and Carcosa are now one city, and our tale is at its end, make of it what you will - history, fable, nonsense or cautionary tale, it is nonetheless, the only tale there is.

(The CHILD exits through the curtains, and the house lights come up at once. There are to be no curtain calls.)

END