

THE KING IN Ψ YELLOW

ROBERT W.
CHAMBERS

volume I

illustrations SANTIAGO CARUSO

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IN ΨELLOW

& ESSENTIAL TALES

selected & illustrated by

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PREFACE

THERE IS A BOOK THAT HAS THE POWER TO TWIST the human. Only someone naive may be surprised by the fact that it is one of the most widely read in the world. However, *The King in Yellow*, the terrible book to which we will refer, does not belong to the hegemony of the *best sellers*, nor was it written by humble men stirred by divine fear. No. Robert Chambers belonged to a different social stratum, that although it was also believer, it has not allow itself to suffer any deprivation. What happens, is that even in the comfort of the mansions, sooner or later, the terror of losing privileges or the stockpiling of goods takes place. And if there is a bourgeois enjoyment in controlling the forces of nature, there is an even keener pleasure in mastering that terror. Perhaps this is the explanation for the eccentric invention of Chambers, fond of his caste and traditions, who also finds pleasure in disturbing the stability of the order which sustains his privileges. This double enjoyment is also evidenced in the original idea of creating an imaginary book within another. In this work of fiction, their *fortunate* characters collapse in horror as the pages of *The King in Yellow* turn: a dark play whose second act introduces whoever reads it to the abyss. The intrusions of this parallel reality are occurring in an oblique, fragmentary way, until the last act of those who dare peruse its pages is contaminated with real tragedy.

In the four stories collected here, when unwary readers wander through these maddened passages, they dig their own grave in the cosmic void of Carcosa. A round of ghosts leads to a funeral masked ball. The last room is covered in black and that is where total corruption will reveal itself to contest the scepter of the living.

But the kingdom of Carcosa is not glimpsed through telescopes, but through a kaleidoscope fashioned by Bierce&Poe. “An inhabitant of Carcosa” and “The Masque of the Red Death” are originary influences for the configuration of spaces and characters of the imaginary play, but it would also be worth regarding another, perhaps, less famous piece by Poe: “King Pest the First”, where two drunken criminals meet this sinister character with a face <<as yellow as saffron>>, surrounded by a cohort as decadent and sick as him, and with whom they end up entangled through alcohol. About the grotesque and madness that take over towards the end of Poe’s tale, Robert L. Stevenson wrote: <<He who could write “King Pest” had ceased to be a human being>>. These two-movements in the structure of the narrative and the previous comment, could have influenced the idea of that second and fatal act in the play *The King in Yellow*. With this, his second book, Robert Chambers also walks the passage from sanity to horror, abandoning the conventional narrative style of his first book and gained fame among fans of the frightful, he stopped his work as illustrator for magazines such as *Life* or *Vogue* and devoted himself straight into writing.

The idea of Chambers provided another imaginary book to Howard Phillips Lovecraft: the *Necronomicon*, his cursed book, a famous source of all the arcane knowledge he would gradually reveal with each story, and that seems to be an inexhaustible corpus, in so far as the volume seems to be expanded in the imaginary of the relatives of the weird or cosmic horror literature. Jorge Luis Borges himself could not escape the influence of the work of the Providence mythographer and added his “There are More Things”, which I don’t know if it is due so much to the fact that he also loved libraries of infinite fiction or to Lovecraft’s design of placing one of the five copies of his mythical grimoire on the shelves of the University of Buenos Aires, as mentioned in chapter five of “The Dunwich Horror”. With Borges, the Lovecraftian flow extends to the Río de la Plata, but its waters, which also carry sediment from Machen, comes from Chambers’s idea.

In 1895, the year of the publication of *The King in Yellow*, he made the category of a cursed book re-sound as years before: *Les fleur du mal* by Charles Baudelaire or *Les Chants du Maldoror* by Isidore Ducasse had done; both, true bibles of evil, drawn in rich hallucinated poetry, which blew up the meaning imposed by the European elites, strengthened after

the industrialization of the economy and the exploitation of the working classes. Chambers, unlike these cursed authors, does not configure his characters as enemies of the order, or moved by the beauty of a young prostitute or even a shark. He keeps his characters in a safe enclosure. Churches for the obedient or spacious rooms for the bohemians, without forgetting puerile and chaste love, a refuge as safe as boredom, are his milieu. And I think that is why *The King in Yellow* is also the corrosive idea that seeps into conventionality to eventually crack tedium.

The unconscious is the silent writing of the body, which opposes to the order of power that subdues it a subplot of antibodies to stupidity or falsehood. It seems that Chambers’ unconscious purpose was that it would be good to medicate human reason with nightmares to tear down the walls of security reserved only for a minority. Even against his will, it is clear, Chambers’ legacy is articulated in the powerful idea that someone or something monopolizes fear and has its throne high over our heads. In this, too, he is Lovecraft’s benefactor. The ruined and dirty seat of *The King*, shows both his longevity and the decadence of the evil arts of conservatism. The despotic power takes in this book the form of an emperor of cosmic darkness. Even the constellations of his realm are black. When the strength of those who gaze upon him fails, along with the veil of the illusory security of the Christian-capitalist order, it is horror that dominates the existence of someone who previously believed himself to be all-powerful just because he belonged to the group of the “good guys.” Faith in the tyranny of only one over millions is the true insanity unmasked. And therein lies the value of this book.

In the first story, “The Repairer of Reputations”, an admirer of Napoleon entrusts his small fortune to an abject being to be anointed king of the world. It is curious that this story is set in 1920, future for Chambers and past for us, in which, as we now know, fascism was growing feverishly. The author’s imagination seems to foreshadow that other megalomaniac failure which imposed on Europe war and extermination, to anoint him as the purest emperor of men, even though he was the worst of the models of reactionary doctrines.

Also, it is striking how both figures, Castaigne and Hitler, pursued their pathetic chimera believing in ancient legends and fetishes. Another ominous element of that imaginary future is a lethal chamber, a *beautiful* suicide cabin

that the government makes available to citizens, and that was decorated by one of the artists who takes part of the following story: a love triangle, where “The Mask” conceals a secret desire, petrified. Its protagonists love beauty to such an extent that they are not afraid of annihilating it with the dangerous touch of Midas.

Art is always a double-edged blade. “The Yellow Sign” is the stain of corruption that creeps upon the bond of a young model and a fairly mature artist, perhaps already rotten, as he stopped from believing in the power of art. “In the Court of the Dragon”, an intricated fugue breaks the walls of the cathedral and escapes into mystery.

And this story is, I think, the one that best relates, conceptually, to the subject of the first season of *True Detective* written by Nic Pizzolatto, where The King in Yellow seems to be the apothotic incarnation of the abuse or, maybe, just a metaphor of the influences that have the sinister cults hidden in the decaying areas of post-industrial society. The same tension between Christian vision and nihilism is resolved in Rust Cohle’s character in a similar way to Chambers’ story: a radiant *afterlife* is unveiled in the end, even though it is nothing more than an uninhabitable space for man.

The King in Yellow exists and his dominance seeps into reality in a slow but persistent trickle, like the poison on Loki’s forehead.

The fragments of his image are nailed into the flesh of the world, they are sharp pieces of a cyclopean mirror, which from time to time reconfigure the image of a tyrant dressed in gold.

S. C.

*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.*

Cassilda's Song
The King in Yellow Act I, Scene 2





THE MASK

Camilla: You, sir, should unmask.

Stranger: Indeed?

Cassilda: Indeed it's time. We all have laid aside disguise but you.

Stranger: I wear no mask.

Camilla: (*Terrified, aside to Cassilda.*) No mask? No mask!

The King in Yellow Act I, Scene 2

I

ALTHOUGH I KNEW NOTHING OF CHEMISTRY, I LISTENED fascinated. He picked up an Easter lily which Geneviève had brought that morning from Notre Dame, and dropped it into the basin. Instantly the liquid lost its crystalline clearness. For a second the lily was enveloped in a milk-white foam, which disappeared, leaving the fluid opalescent. Changing tints of orange and crimson played over the surface, and then what seemed to be a ray of pure sunlight struck through from the bottom where the lily was resting. At the same instant he plunged his hand into the basin and drew out the flower. "There is no danger," he explained, "if you choose the right moment. That golden ray is the signal."

He held the lily toward me, and I took it in my hand. It had turned to stone, to the purest marble.

"You see," he said, "it is without a flaw. What sculptor could reproduce it?"

The marble was white as snow, but in its depths the veins of the lily were tinged with palest azure, and a faint flush lingered deep in its heart.

"Don't ask me the reason of that," he smiled, noticing my wonder. "I have no idea why the veins and heart are tinted, but they always are. Yesterday I tried one of Geneviève's gold-fish,—there it is."

The fish looked as if sculptured in marble. But if you held it to the light the stone was beautifully veined with a faint blue, and from somewhere within came a rosy light like the tint which slumbers in an opal. I looked into the basin. Once more it seemed filled with clearest crystal.

"If I should touch it now?" I demanded.

"I don't know," he replied, "but you had better not try."

"There is one thing I'm curious about," I said, "and that is where the ray of sunlight came from."

"It looked like a sunbeam true enough," he said. "I don't know, it always comes when I immerse any living thing. Perhaps," he continued, smiling, "perhaps it is the vital spark of the creature escaping to the source from whence it came."

I saw he was mocking, and threatened him with a mahl-stick, but he only laughed and changed the subject.

"Stay to lunch. Geneviève will be here directly."

"I saw her going to early mass," I said, "and she looked as fresh and sweet as that lily—before you destroyed it."

"Do you think I destroyed it?" said Boris gravely.

"Destroyed, preserved, how can we tell?"

We sat in the corner of a studio near his unfinished group of the "Fates". He leaned back on the sofa, twirling a sculptor's chisel and squinting at his work.

"By the way," he said, "I have finished pointing up that old academic Ariadne, and I suppose it will have to go to the Salon. It's all I have ready this year, but after the success the 'Madonna' brought me I feel ashamed to send a thing like that."

The "Madonna," an exquisite marble for which Geneviève had sat, had been the sensation of last year's Salon. I looked at the Ariadne. It was a magnificent piece of technical work, but I agreed with Boris that the world would expect something better of him than that. Still, it was impossible now to think of finishing in time for the Salon that splendid terrible group half shrouded in the marble behind me. The "Fates" would have to wait.

We were proud of Boris Yvain. We claimed him and he claimed us on the strength of his having been born in America, although his father was French and his mother was a Russian. Every one in the Beaux Arts called him Boris. And yet there were only two of us whom he addressed in the same familiar way—Jack Scott and myself.

Perhaps my being in love with Geneviève had something to do with his affection for me. Not that it had ever been acknowledged between us. But after all was settled, and she had told me with tears in her eyes that it was Boris whom she loved, I went over to his house and congratulated him. The perfect cordiality of that interview did not deceive either of us, I always believed, although to one at least it was a great comfort. I do not think he and Geneviève ever spoke of the matter together, but Boris knew.

Geneviève was lovely. The Madonna-like purity of her face might have been inspired by the Sanctus in Gounod's Mass. But I was always glad when she changed that mood for what we called her "April Manœuvres." She was often as variable as an April day. In the morning grave, dignified and sweet, at noon laughing, capricious, at evening whatever one least expected. I preferred her so rather than in that Madonna-like tranquillity which stirred the depths of my heart. I was dreaming of Geneviève when he spoke again.

"What do you think of my discovery, Alec?"

"I think it wonderful."

"I shall make no use of it, you know, beyond satisfying my own curiosity so far as may be, and the secret will die with me."

"It would be rather a blow to sculpture, would it not? We painters lose more than we ever gain by photography."

Boris nodded, playing with the edge of the chisel.

"This new vicious discovery would corrupt the world of art. No, I shall never confide the secret to any one," he said slowly.

It would be hard to find any one less informed about such phenomena than myself; but of course I had heard of mineral springs so saturated with silica that the leaves and twigs which fell into them were turned to stone after a time. I dimly comprehended the process, how the silica replaced the vegetable matter, atom by atom, and the result was a duplicate of the object in stone. This, I confess, had never interested me greatly, and as for the ancient fossils thus produced, they disgusted me. Boris, it appeared, feeling curiosity instead of repugnance, had investigated the subject, and had accidentally stumbled on a solution which, attacking the immersed object with a ferocity unheard of, in a second did the work of years. This was all I could make out of the strange story he had just been telling me. He spoke again after a long silence.

"I am almost frightened when I think what I have found. Scientists would go mad over the discovery. It was so simple too; it discovered itself. When I think of that formula, and that new element precipitated in metallic scales—"

"What new element?"

"Oh, I haven't thought of naming it, and I don't believe I ever shall. There are enough precious metals now in the world to cut throats over."

I pricked up my ears. "Have you struck gold, Boris?"

"No, better;—but see here, Alec!" he laughed, starting up. "You and I have all we need in this world. Ah! how sinister and covetous you look already!"

And now, far away, over leagues of tossing cloud-waves, I saw the moon dripping with spray; and beyond, the towers of Carcosa rose behind the moon.

Death and the awful abode of lost souls, whither my weakness long ago had sent him, had changed him for every other eye but mine. And now I heard his voice, rising, swelling, thundering through the flaring light, and as I fell, the radiance increasing, increasing, poured over me in waves of flame. Then I sank into the depths, and I heard the King in Yellow whispering to my soul:

"It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God!"

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