

THE PURPLE FLOWER

CHARACTERS

Sundry White Devils (They must be artful little things with soft wide eyes such as you would expect to find in an angel. Soft hair that flops around their horns. Their horns glow red all the time— now with blood—now with eternal fire—now with deceit—now with unholy desire. They have bones tied carefully across their tails to make them seem less like tails and more like mere decorations. They are artful little things full of artful movements and artful tricks. They are artful dancers too. You are amazed at their adroitness. Their steps are intricate. You almost lose your head following them. Sometimes they dance as if they were men—with dignity—erect. Sometimes they dance as if they were snakes. They are artful dancers on the ThinSkin-of-Civilization.)

The Us's (They can be as white as the White Devils, as brown as the earth, as black as the center of a poppy. They may look as if they were something or nothing.)

Time: The Middle-of-Things-as-They-Are. (Which means the End-of-Things for some of the characters and the Beginning-of-Things for others.) *Place:* Might be here, there or anywhere—or even nowhere.

SETTING: The stage is divided horizontally into two sections, upper and lower, by a thin board. The main action takes place on the upper stage. The light is never quite clear on the lower stage; but it is bright enough for you to perceive that sometimes the action that takes place on the upper stage is duplicated on the lower. Sometimes the actors on the upper stage get too vociferous—too violent—and they crack through the boards and they lie twisted and curled in mounds. There are any number of mounds there, all twisted and broken. You look at them and you are not quite sure whether you see something or nothing; but you see by a curve that there might lie a human body. There is

thrust out a white hand—a yellow one—one brown—a black. The Skin-of-Civilization must be very thin. A thought can drop you through it.

Scene: An open plain. It is bounded distantly on one side by Nowhere and faced by a high hill—Somewhere.

Argument: The White Devils live on the side of the hill. Somewhere. On top of the hill grows the purple Flower-of-Life-at-Its-Fullest. This flower is as tall as a pine and stands alone on top of the hill. The Us's live in the valley that lies between Nowhere and Somewhere and spend their time trying to devise means of getting up the hill. The White Devils live all over the sides of the hill and try every trick, known and unknown, to keep the Us's from getting to the hill. For if the Us's get up the hill, the Flower-ofLife-at-Its-Fullest will shed some of its perfume and then there they will be Somewhere with the White Devils. The Us's started out by merely asking permission to go up. They tilled the valley, they cultivated it and made it as beautiful as it is. They built roads and houses even for the White Devils. They let them build the houses and then they were knocked back down into the valley.

Scene: When the curtain rises, the evening sun is shining bravely on the valley and hillside alike.

The Us's are having a siesta beside a brook that runs down the Middle of the valley. As usual they rest with their backs toward Nowhere and their faces toward Somewhere. The WHITE DEVILS are seen in the distance on the hillside. As you see them, a song is borne faintly to your ears from the hillside. The White Devils are saying:

You stay where you are!
We don't want you up here!
If you come you'll be on par
With all we hold dear.
So stay—stay—stay—
Yes stay where you are!

The song rolls full across the valley.

A LITTLE RUNTY US. Hear that, don't you?

ANOTHER US. (*lolling over on his back and chewing a piece of grass*) I ain't studying 'bout them devils. When I get ready to go up that hill—I'm going! (*He rolls over on his side and exposes a slender brown body to the sun.*) Right now, I'm going to sleep. (*And he forthwith snores.*)

OLD LADY. (*an old dark brown lady who has been lying down rises suddenly to her knees in the foreground. She gazes toward the hillside*) I'll never live to see the face of that flower! God knows I worked hard to get Somewhere though. I've washed the shirt off of every one of them White Devils' backs!

A YOUNG US. And you got a slap in the face for doing it.

OLD LADY. But that's what the Leader told us to do. "Work," he said. "Show them you know how." As if two hundred years of slavery had not showed them!

ANOTHER YOUNG US. Work doesn't do it. The Us who work for the White Devils get pushed in the face—down off of Somewhere every night. They don't even sleep up there.

OLD LADY. Something's got to be done though! The Us ain't got no business to sleep while the sun is shining. They'd ought to be up and working before the White Devils get to some other tricks.

YOUNG US. You just said work did not do you any good! What's the need of working if it doesn't get you anywhere? What's the use of boring around in the same hole like a worm? Making the hole bigger to stay in?

(*There comes up the road a clatter of feet and four figures, a middle-aged well-browned man, a lighter-browned middle-aged woman, a medium light brown girl, beautiful as a browned peach, and a slender, tall, bronzy brown youth who walks with his head high. He touches the ground with his feet as if it were a velvet rug and not sunbaked, jagged rocks.*)

OLD LADY. (*addressing the Older Man*) Evenin', Average. I was just saying we ain't never going to make that hill.

AVERAGE. The Us will if they get the right leaders.

THE MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN—CORNERSTONE. Leaders! Leaders! They've had good ones looks like to me.

AVERAGE. But they ain't led us anywhere!

CORNERSTONE. But that is not their fault! If one of them gets up and says, "Do this," one of the Us will sneak up behind him and knock him down and stand up and holler, "Do that," and then he himself gets knocked down and we still sit in the valley and knock down and drag out!

A YOUNG Us. (*aside*) Yeah! Drag Us out, but not White Devils.

OLD LADY. It's the truth, Cornerstone. They say they going to meet this evening to talk about what we ought to do.

AVERAGE. What is the need of so much talking?

CORNERSTONE. Better than not talking! Somebody might say something after while.

THE YOUNG GIRL—SWEET. (*who just came up*) I want to talk too!

AVERAGE. What can you talk about?

SWEET. Things! Something, father!

THE YOUNG MAN—FINEST BLOOD. I'll speak too.

AVERAGE. Oh you all make me tired! Talk—talk—talk—talk! And the flower is still up on the hillside!

OLD LADY. Yes and the White Devils are still talking about keeping the Us away from it, too.

(A drum begins to beat in the distance. All the Us stand up and shake off their sleep. The drummer, a short, black, determined-looking Us, appears around the bushes beating the drum with strong, vigorous jabs that make the whole valley echo and re-echo with rhythm. Some of the Us begin to dance in time to the music.)

AVERAGE. Look at that! Dancing!! The Us will never learn to be sensible!

CORNERSTONE. They dance well! Well!!

(The Us all congregate at the center front. Almost naturally, the Young Us range on one side, the old Us on the other. Cornerstone sits her plump brown self comfortably in the center of the stage. An old Us tottering with age and blind comes toward her.)

OLD Us. What's it this time, chillun? Is it day yet? Can you see the road to that flower?

AVERAGE. Oh you know we ain't going to get up there! No use worrying!

CORNERSTONE. No it's not day! It is still dark. It is night.

(For the sun has gone and purple blackness has lain across the Valley. Somehow, though, you can see the shape of the flower on top of Somewhere. Lights twinkle on the hill.)

OLD Us. *(speaking as if to himself)* I'm blind from working—building for the White Devils in the heat of the noon-day sun and I'm weary!

CORNERSTONE. Lean against me so they won't crowd you.

(An old man rises in the back of the ranks; his beard reaches down to his knees but he springs upright. He speaks.)

OLD MAN. I want to tell you all something! The Us can't get up the road unless we work! We want to hew and dig and toil!

A YOUNG Us. You had better sit down before someone knocks you down! They told us that when your beard was sprouting.

CORNERSTONE. (*to youth*). Do not be so stupid! Speak as if you had respect for that beard!

ANOTHER YOUNG Us. We have! But we get tired of hearing “you must work” when we know the old Us built practically every inch of that hill and are yet Nowhere.

FIRST YOUNG Us. Yes, all they got was a rush down the hill—not a chance to take a step up!

CORNERSTONE. It was not time then.

OLD MAN. (*on the back row*) Here comes a Young Us who has been reading in the books! Here comes a Young Us who has been reading in the books! He’ll tell us what the books say about getting Somewhere.

(*A Young Man pushes through the crowd. As soon as he reaches the center front, he throws a bundle of books.*)

YOUNG MAN. I’m through! I do not need these things! They’re no good!

OLD MAN. (*pushes up from the back and stands beside him*) You’re through! Ain t you been reading in the books how to get Somewhere? Why don’t you tell us how to get there?

YOUNG MAN. I’m through I tell you! There isn’t anything in one of these books that tells Black Us how to get around White Devils.

OLD MAN. (*softly—sadly*) I thought the books would tell us how!

YOUNG MAN. No! The White Devils wrote the books themselves. You know they aren’t going to put anything like that in there!

YET ANOTHER OLD MAN. (*throwing back his head and calling into the air*) Lord! Why don’t you come by here and tell us how to get Somewhere?

A YOUNG MAN (*who had been idly chewing grass*) Aw, you ought to know by now that isn't the way to talk to God!

OLD MAN. It ain't! It ain't! It ain't! It ain't! Ain't I been talking to God just like that for seventy years? Three score and ten years—Amen!

THE GRASS CHEWER. Yes! Three score and ten years you been telling God to tell you what to do. Telling Him! And three score and ten years you been wearing your spine double sitting on the rocks in the valley too.

OLD Us. He is all powerful! He will move in his own time!

YOUNG Us. Well, if He is all powerful, God does not need you to tell Him what to do.

OLD Us. Well, what's the need of me talkin' to Him then?

YOUNG Us. Don't talk so much to Him! He might want to talk to you but you do so much yelling in His ears that He can't tell you anything.

(There is a commotion in the back stage. Sweet comes running to Cornerstone crying.)

SWEET. Oh—oo—!

CORNERSTONE. What is it, Sweet?

SWEET. There's a White Devil sitting in the bushes in the dark over there! There's a White Devil sitting in the bushes over in the dark! And when I walked by—he pinched me!

FINEST BLOOD. *(catching a rock)* Where is he, sister? *(He starts toward the bushes.)*

CORNERSTONE. *(screaming)* Don't go after him son! They will kill you if you hurt him!

FINEST BLOOD. I don't care if they do. Let them. I'd be out of this hole then!

AVERAGE. Listen to that young fool! Better stay safe and sound where he is! At least he got somewhere to eat and somewhere to lay his head.

FINEST BLOOD. Yes I can lay my head on the rocks of Nowhere.

(Up the center of the stage toils a new figure of a square-set middle-aged Us. He walks heavily for in each hand he carries a heavy bag. As soon as he reaches the center front he throws the bags down groaning as he does so.)

AN OLD MAN. 'Smatter with you? Ain't them bags full of gold.

THE NEWCOMER. Yes, they are full of gold!

OLD MAN. Well why ain't you smiling then? Them White Devils can't have anything no better!

THE NEWCOMER. Yes they have! They have Somewhere! I tried to do what they said. I brought them money, but when I brought it to them they would not sell me even a spoonful of dirt from Somewhere! I'm through!

CORNERSTONE. Don't be through. The gold counts for something. It must!

(An Old Woman cries aloud in a quavering voice from the back.)

OLD LADY. Last night I had a dream.

A YOUNG Us. Dreams? Excuse me! I know I'm going now! Dreams!

OLD LADY. I dreamed that I saw a White Devil cut in six pieces—head here (*pointing*), body here—one leg here—one there—an arm here—an arm there.

AN OLD MAN. Thank God! It's time then!

AVERAGE. Time for what? Time to eat? Sure ain't time to get Somewhere!

OLD MAN. (*walking forward*) It's time! It's time! Bring me an iron pot!

YOUNG Us. Aw don't try any conjuring!

OLD MAN. (*louder*) Bring me a pot of iron. Get the pot from the fire in the valley.

CORNERSTONE. Get him the pot! (*Someone brings it up immediately.*)

OLD MAN. (*walking toward pot slowly*) Old Us! Do you hear me. Old Us that are here do you hear me?

ALL THE OLD Us. (*cry in chorus*) Yes, Lord! We hear you! We hear you!

OLD MAN. (*crying louder and louder*) Old Us! Old Us! Old Us that are gone, Old Us that are dust do you hear me?

(His voice sounds strangely through the valley. Somewhere you think you hear—as if mouthed by ten million mouths through rocks and dust—"YesLord!—We hear you! We hear you"!)

And you hear me—give me a handful of dust! Give me a handful of dust! Dig down to the depths of the things you have made! The things you formed with your hands and give me a handful of dust!

(An Old Woman tottering with the weakness of old age crosses the stage and going to the pot, throws a handful of dust in. Just before she sits down again she throws back her head and shakes her cane in the air and laughs so that the entire valley echoes.)

A YOUNG Us. What's the trouble! Choking on the dust?

OLD WOMAN. No, child! Rejoicing!

YOUNG Us. Rejoicing over a handful of dust?

OLD WOMAN. Yes. A handful of dust! Thanking God I could do something if it was nothing but make a handful of dust!

YOUNG Us. Well dust isn't much!

OLD MAN. (*at the pot*) Yes, it isn't much! You are dust yourself; but so is she. Like everything else, though, dust can be little or much, according to where it is.

(The Young Us who spoke subsides. He subsides so completely that he crashes through the Thin-Skin-of-Civilization. Several of his group go too. They were thinking.)

OLD MAN. (*at the pot*) Bring me books! Bring me books!

YOUNG Us. (*who threw books down*) Take all these! I'll light the fire with them.

OLD MAN. No, put them in the pot. (*Young Us does so.*) Bring me gold!

THE MAN OF THE GOLD BAGS. Here take this! It is just as well. Stew it up and make teething rings!! (*He pours it into the pot.*)

OLD MAN. Now bring me blood! Blood from the eyes, the ears, the whole body! Drain it off and bring me blood! (*No one speaks or moves.*) Now bring me blood! Blood from the eyes, the ears, the whole body! Drain it off! Bring me blood!! (*No one speaks or moves.*) Ah hah, hah! I knew it! Not one of you willing to pour his blood in the pot!

YOUNG Us (*facetiously*) How you going to pour your own blood in there? You got to be pretty far gone to let your blood run in there. Somebody else would have to do the pouring.

OLD MAN. I mean red blood. Not yellow blood, thank you.

FINEST BLOOD. (*suddenly*) Take my blood! (*He walks toward the pot.*)

CORNERSTONE. O no! Not my boy! Take me instead!

OLD MAN. Cornerstone we cannot stand without you!

AN OLD WOMAN. What you need blood for? What you doing anyhow? You ain't told us nothing yet. What's going on in that pot?

OLD MAN. I'm doing as I was told to do.

A YOUNG US. Who told you to do anything?

OLD MAN. God. I'm His servant.

YOUNG US. (*who spoke before*) God? I haven't heard God tell you anything.

OLD MAN. You couldn't hear. He told it to me alone.

OLD WOMAN. I believe you. Don't pay any attention to that simpleton! What God told you to do?

OLD MAN. He told me take a handful of dust—dust from which all things came and put it in a hard iron pot. Put it in a hard iron pot. Things shape best in hard molds!! Put in books that Men learn by. Gold that Men live by. Blood that lets Men live.

YOUNG US. What you supposed to be shaping? A man?

OLD US. I'm the servant. I can do nothing. If I do this, God will shape a new man Himself.

YOUNG MAN. What's the things in the pot for?

OLD MAN. To show I can do what I'm told.

OLD WOMAN. Why does He want blood?

OLD MAN. You got to give blood! Blood has to be let for births, to give life.

OLD WOMAN. So the dust wasn't just nothing? Thank God!

YOUTH. Then the books were not just paper leaves? Thank God!

THE MAN OF THE GOLD BAGS. Can the gold mean something?

OLD MAN. Now I need the blood.

FINEST BLOOD. I told you you could take mine.

OLD MAN. Yours!

FINEST BLOOD. Where else could you get it? The New Man must be born. The night is already dark. We cannot stay here forever. Where else could blood come from?

OLD MAN. Think child. When God asked a faithful servant once to do sacrifice, even his only child, where did God put the real meat for sacrifice when the servant had the knife upon the son's throat?!

OLD Us. (*in a chorus*)

In the bushes, Lord!

In the bushes, Lord!

Jehovah put the ram

In the bushes!

CORNERSTONE. I understand!

FINEST BLOOD. What do you mean?

CORNERSTONE. Where were you going a little while ago? Where were you going when your sister cried out?

FINEST BLOOD. To the bushes! You want me to get the White Devil? (*He seizes the piece of rock and stands to his feet.*)

OLD MAN. No! No! Not that way. The White Devils are full of tricks. You must go differently. Bring him gifts and offer them to him.

FINEST BLOOD. What have I to give for a gift?

OLD MAN. There are the pipes of Pan that every Us is born with. Play on that. Soothe him—lure him—make him yearn for the pipe. Even a White

Devil will soften at music. He'll come out, and he only comes to try to get the pipe from you.

FINEST BLOOD. And when he comes out, I'm to kill him in the dark before he sees me? That's a White Devil trick!

OLD MAN. An Old Us will never tell you to play White Devil's games! No! Do not kill him in the dark. Get him out of the bushes and say to him: "White Devil, God is using me for His instrument. You think that it is I who play on this pipe! You think that is I who play upon this pipe so that you cannot stay in your bushes. So that you must come out of your bushes. But it is not I who play. It is not I, it is God who plays through me—to you. Will you hear what He says? Will you hear? He says it is almost day, White Devil. The night is far gone. A New Man must be born for the New Day. Blood is needed for birth. Blood is needed for the birth. Come out, White Devil. It may be your blood—it may be mine—but blood must be taken during the night to be given at the birth. It may be my blood—it may be your blood—but everything has been given. The Us toiled to give dust for the body, books to guide the body, gold to clothe the body. Now they need blood for birth so the New Man can live. You have taken blood. You must give blood. Come out! Give it." And then fight him!

FINEST BLOOD. I'll go! And if I kill him?

OLD MAN. Blood will be given!

FINEST BLOOD. And if he kills me?

OLD MAN. Blood will be given!

FINEST BLOOD. Can there be no other way—cannot this cup pass?

OLD MAN. No other way. It cannot pass. They always take blood. They built up half their land on our bones. They ripened crops of cotton, watering them with our blood. Finest Blood, this is God's decree: "You take blood—you give blood. Full measure—flooding full—over—over!"

FINEST BLOOD. I'll go. *(He goes quickly into the shadow. Far off soon you can hear him—his voice lifted, young, sweet, brave and strong.)* White Devil! God speaks to you through me!—Hear Him!—Him! You have taken blood: there can be no other way. You will have to give blood! Blood!

(All the Us listen. All the valley listens. Nowhere listens. All the White Devils listen. Somewhere listens. Let the curtain close leaving all the Us, the White Devils, Nowhere, Somewhere, listening, listening. Is it time?)