

THE HOUSE OF THE OCTOPUS

By
CHARLES WILLIAMS

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*The fee for an amateur performance of this play is
£3, 3s., and all enquiries should be addressed to
the publishers, Edinburgh House Press.*

First published 1945

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
MORRISON AND GIBB LTD., LONDON AND EDINBURGH

PREFACE

THIS play is not meant to have any direct topical relation. The name of P'o-l'u and the title of its Emperor were taken from certain earlier poems published before the outbreak of war. It is true that they were there referred to the sixth century, but it is unlikely that between the sixth and the twentieth centuries the state of P'o-l'u, within or without, has much changed ; and I should regret now an identification with any particular nation or land which would then have been impossible. It is rather a spiritual threat than a mortal dominion.

Neither are the Chorus and its leaders meant to present any particular locality. Certain details of their original worship are taken from Mr John Layard's fascinating *Stone Men of Malakula*, but 'the Outer Seas' is a sufficient place for them. It may be argued that these natives are too metaphysical. But the effort after simplicity in verse is likely to end in mere silliness ; outside lyric, its achievement is on the whole the mark of the greatest poets in their greatest moments. Nor am I wholly convinced that such a simplicity would be any truer to these imagined minds than their present speech. Their hymn is a free translation from a twelfth century hymn to the Holy Spirit by St. Hildegarde.

The character of the Flame, or the *Lingua Coeli*, is meant to be exactly what he says : that energy which went to the creation and was at Pentecost (as it were) re-delivered in the manner of its own august covenant to the Christian Church. I had some idea that his dress might suggest this by being of a close flame-colour within and of a deep star-sprinkled blue without. When he speaks to the Christians he throws back his outer cloak ; when to the others, he gathers

it round him. But this is only a suggestion which I do not press. No effort should, I think, be made to distinguish Alayu's appearance in the first two acts from that in the third.

It remains only for me to thank the United Council for Missionary Education for having asked me to write the play, and for their great kindness throughout. And I should like especially to thank Miss Margaret Sinclair, the convener of the Plays Group. It cannot often happen to an author to meet with such understanding of what an author's business is.

CHARLES WILLIAMS

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

LINGUA COELI, in the form of a Flame

ASSANTU

RAIS—his wife

ANTHONY—the missionary priest

SIRU—a deacon

TORNA— }
TANTULA } men of the land

OROYO—from a neighbouring island ; a man of the Chorus

ALAYU—a girl of the Chorus

THE CHORUS

THE IMPERIAL PREFECT

THE IMPERIAL MARSHAL

TWO SOLDIERS

The scene is outside a newly built wooden church ; against it, a little higher than the roof, is a watcher's platform with a ladder. On the left and right of the church is the jungle, through which on the right a path leads to the village. Through a break at the back the sea can be seen. TORNA is on the platform.

ACT I

It is full moonlight. THE FLAME comes out swiftly from the church, pauses, and speaks abruptly.

THE FLAME

Call this a land in the Outer Seas,
where the ease and joy of our Lord reaches at last ;
as in all the past of his Church, so now here.
First it was Jerusalem, then Damascus, Rome,
all the patriarchates ; and some of you to-night
are alive and alight with fire of this same kind.
O driven in search or dire in mastery, the mind
of God's Church is the only final subject of song.
It is the only and universal joy.
Joy is man's condition and our language.
We are of those who first came into being
when the Holy Ghost measured within the waters
the angle of creation ; then in a sudden visibility
we dropped from his rushing flame-scattering wind,
to teach the blessed the speech of heaven and of us.

THE CHORUS (*within the church*)

Fire of the Spirit, life of the lives of creatures,
spiral of sanctity, bond of all natures,
glow of charity, light of clarity, taste
of sweetness to sinners, be with us and hear us.

THE FLAME

But each among us has his own charge ; and I,

this new congregation of the faithful in a land
of the Outer Seas, brought to Christ's doom
by a missionary mouth. Sins flooded away,
a stay of guilt granted for old faults
by the joyous equity of heaven, and food given—
well might they thrive ! But now see, how it happens
that an empire of paganry lies within these seas,
called P'o-l'u ; it has long stayed quiet,
but now moves. It stretches wide tentacles,
gasps and clutches, and one by one fetches
into its maw these ancient scattered islands.
O now who shall save my young
innocent Church ? who but I ? and how I—
alas, you too know ; do you not ?
ask your hearts, my people, ask your hearts !—
heaven's kind of salvation, not at all to the mind
of any except the redeemed, and to theirs hardly.

THE CHORUS (*singing*)

Composer of all things, light of all the risen,
key of salvation, release from the dark prison,
hope of all unions, scope of chastities, joy
in the glory, strong honour, be with us and hear us.

THE FLAME

And—ask your hearts !—there are nearer dangers !
We who since Pentecost were granted by the Holy Ghost
to men's needs—we powers of heaven, we flames of the Spirit,
we seeds of conjunction—are sometimes seen on earth
in uncovenanted shapes, shapes of triumph and terror,
tempting gloom and greed. Ask your hearts, my people,
if you do not mistake your desires for the fires of the Spirit :
mistake, did I say ? God send that that be all,
that you do not crawl in a voluntary and besought error ;
terror indeed ! But here, on this wild shore,
a sorcerer's child has seen me so in the jungle,

and clairvoyantly traces my glow among the trees
by the sea's edge nearest P'o-l'u. He long,
purposing to gain special and spiritual power,
pretended to keep the Faith. That fails ;
he rails upon it and joins himself to my foes.
Now under the moon he comes again
hoping to catch me uncovenanted. I will fill
his heart with me in his manner, be sure. As I will
yours, if you choose ; as you wanted, if you insist.

*[He begins to move among the trees. ASSANTU
enters slowly.]*

ASSANTU

Stay a little ! stay a little ! stay !
Stay for me, Flame of the dreadful Father !
You are he, I know, of whom my master
taught me, who go faster than a wind or a wave
and less traceable, in sea and air, than either,
and neither so strange nor so full of death as you.
O you, the dream and dance of feet more fleet
than theirs who beat the sand when the band of initiates,
in the old days when our people were still pious,
span in the house of spirits, below the heads,
smoke-dried and yoke-fitted, of our enemies
that hang under the beams. Spirit, stay ;
they did not see you, Fire, but I saw you ;
in the angry smoke of the lodge of initiation
I called to you, fire of the lodge, fire of the spirit,
fire of the dead, licking and pricking our hearts
with the hunger of the sea, and the sea beyond the sea.
I only adore you, I alone of all our people.

THE FLAME (*over his shoulder*)

I have told you before, you will not catch me thus.
Another latch than that of your lodge of initiates
opens upon us of heaven. I have told you before

there is under all heaven one place only
where I am sworn to stay. Go back ; go back.

ASSANTU

You look over your shoulder and seem to speak
but my hearing is too weak to catch your words.
The wind in the leaves and the waves on the shore deafen me.
They are mild, but their terrible mildness fills my ears
as if I felt the air of that shore
where the Father and Eater watches and waits for the dead.

THE FLAME (*dancing*)

Go back, Assantu, go back ; turn again.
Do you think I am here ? I am not here ; I am there
in the church with the holy ones. What you can see here
is only a spark of the furious dance we made
before my companions and I were gathered and thrown
and sealed to the Christian altars and the souls of men.
It is your nature you see, Assantu, not me.

ASSANTU

The moon's rising is not more fixed than I
to pry after you in the jungle night by night.
I am one of the wise souls ; turn and speak ;
speak loud ; there is none as proud as I to hear.

THE FLAME

I speak to the proud only in their own tongue ;
there I am loud ; elsewhere very soft,
whether in heaven, at the altar, or in the heart.
I am more gentle and cleansing than any water
for those who find fire in water and water in fire.

ASSANTU

I see an edge of you among the trees ; my heart
seems to hear you ; speak : what shall I do ?

THE FLAME

Lay spells on the shining drops that are flung from the spray,
or the sparks that ride in the smoke.

ASSANTU

I hear ! I hear !

That I can do.

THE FLAME

Bid the shark swim
to be harmlessly stroked by your girls.

ASSANTU

That I can do.

THE FLAME

Command the dead heads in your lodge of spirits,
the tiny smoked heads of dead foes,
to swell where they hang from the roof and live and speak,
and shout as they once shouted when their dusty hands
clanged their spears together.

ASSANTU

That I have done.

THE FLAME

Go up to the images that stand along the cliffs
looking, for ever and ever, out to the sea—
as old men's stony longings gaze
out on the ways of the ocean they fish no more—
and bid them melt into manhood, and bring you safe
past the great shore of the ghostly island
where your fabled Father eats the fabled flesh.

ASSANTU

That you must teach me. I cannot do it.

THE FLAME

If you could do all, you were no nearer me.
I tell you again there is no place but one
where the air that we—I and my fellows—breathe
is tolerable to mortal lungs, the tongues that we use
are audible to mortal ears. The chosen of my Lord,
the holy ones, are praying in the church ; go there.
There alone are my own, there alone.

[He hides himself.]

ASSANTU

I thought I heard you ; now I hear no more,
and the fire's edge is vanished. Spirit, stay ;
bring me to the other shore, bring me safe
past the Father who makes his meat of the dead
among the fiery volcanoes in the waste of the seas.
Save me from the soul's swallowing, O spirit, O fire !

THE FLAME

I am weary of you, Assantu ; this very night
I am plight to my lord to begin the purging of souls.
Hark ! you hear the sea on the shore ; can you hear
the waves whispering about the transports of P'o-l'u ?
Hark ! you have another thought in mind,
designed to find without me the way of your will.
I will warn you no more ; go on, Assantu, go on.
The voice of your wife is near ; do your choice.
I shall see you again presently among the blessed.

[He goes into the church.]

ASSANTU

Voice's echo and fire's edge disappear.
I hear a human foot.

[He whirls round. RAIS enters.]

Ha, Rais !

Why do you follow me so ?

RAIS

Why do you go ?

Why do you wander from our hut night by night ?

ASSANTU

To know if that whose passage I saw in the jungle
will come out of the jungle.

RAIS

Twelve nights
you have gone thus, husband, under the moon.

ASSANTU

These nights, till the full of the moon, are thick
with the spirits of jungle, sea and sky. Go.
You are my wife, but a woman : back to bed !
It is dangerous for women to walk in the full moon.

RAIS

Some—but I am the daughter of a wise woman,
and you, husband, less in that learning than she.
When I was a girl, I was not made a woman
with the other maids, but with a hidden rite
before the sacred images—more than yours.
For the sake of that, and being your wife, I come.

ASSANTU

Speak softly, lest the watcher above hear.

RAIS

Why does he watch ?

ASSANTU

To catch, in sea or sky,
sight of the flight of the planes or the sides of the ships
of P'o-l'u—P'o-l'u, the thick-tentacled octopus,
the empire of mastery within the waters.

RAIS

And you ?

do you too wait here for P'o-l'u ?

ASSANTU

Perhaps.

RAIS

You are a Christian.

ASSANTU

Am I ? or am I not ?

RAIS

You have been washed with their sacred waters ; you have fed,
as I will never do, of their sacrosanct meal.

ASSANTU

I have known many rites. Do not you forget,
for all your talk of magic and your wise mother,
it was your brother who brought, ten years since,
in his own boat the white priest here.
You are the twin of a Christian.

RAIS

It was my shame

then, as now to be a Christian's wife,
if you are a Christian.

ASSANTU

Their meal is strong magic—
unearthly, but then I myself am half unearthly,
and I find in them and their meal no more than I have
in my own power already. Speak lower ;
do not disturb our watchman lest his gaze
wander, and he do not see in the moon yonder
the thickening shapes of the ships when P'o-l'u comes.