

BERNARD GUTTERIDGE

TANANARIVE

Hills blossom in small red houses: the Palace
Governs like an implacable queen her plains
And lazing people. The children play like ducklings.
All are so happy but nothing here seems clean
Except the gull-like washing and white arum lilies.

We take over the bars and speak English arrogantly,
Stare at the pigeon—crouching French whose faces
Speak with their voices. Rhum, citron and orange pressé:
And sly, beautiful soignée women take
No notice at all of our caps and Sam Browns.

Flags are saluted everywhere: above the dusty street
High in the lilac trees we see from the verandah
The ice-like stillness of encircling ricefields, greenly glinting;
Pousse-pousse boys jolt past like broken toys
And above us all the time frowns the forbidding palace.

Some of it is quite lovely. Down in the market place
An acre of red and white carnations, a moving scent of cloves,
And girls like Hedy dressed in Gauguin colours
Slipping among the striding, pavement—singing soldiers.
And subtle, ageless children more wicked than any pirate.

Till night holds all its treacheries cupped like a black breast
With light in the town its sensuous, desirous smile.
All over the small hills depart the ambushing steps
That crumble and snare; and in the drifting gloom
The velvet stab of pleasure that pushes to the heart.

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JOHN ARLOTT

INVITATION TO THE LOCAL

The swing-doors, dark curtained, will let you in
To the heat and light and merging din
Of laughter sprung from broad-based humour
And gossip out of slight-based rumour,
The weighted pause for the point of a joke
Till sudden roars ride the waves of the smoke
To drown the whisper of racing tips
And crackle of bags of potato chips.

Old women with Guinness and beaver coats,
Scrub-wrinkled fingers and beads at their throats,
Tap gently with tired, black-booted feet
To faded piano's nostalgic beat.

Catch the reflection of beer-engine's brass
In the wealthy brown of a full pint-glass,
Haunting and sad is the smell of spilt beer—
If beer is best, what heaven is here.

The barmaid twists in her tight satin frock
To look at the pale-faced oracle clock,
Then, shouts and jostling for the night's last drink
The till-bell rings and the glasses clink.

Now shuffling of boots on the splintery floor,
Warm-breathing crush in the wide-open door,
And the night-wind strikes with cheek-chilling stroke
To carve a deep cleft in the banks of smoke—
They're turning them out of the old 'Black Bull'
For both the till and its fillers are full.