

On the still bank I shake
My intense line of chosen fly into
The stream where change is flowed
Into deep change, and tempt the casual fish.
But who is the bait and who
In that lilting procession, fish or man?

Casually reflected image
Fish or fisherman, that heaving minute
Changes my life away.
Life as sensation baits me to grasp the fish.
I cast into the stream
And take my chosen bride into my arms.

Never shall I within
That crystal water net so brilliant
Or coloured a dancing fish
As I bestride her. I make the minute yield
Only a meadow's breath
Green, green intangible, breath through my life.

Gentle as a new bride
The baited fish leaps to my line. I pull
Its fretting body out of
The unguent water wriggling with breath;
I lay that fish onto
The meadow where my girl lies, netted in

Green, green, a green breath.
It is his death. He lies still through that stroke
Of my mounted hand upon
His quivering neck, struck, and lies stilled upon
My red, huge hand;
And such a fish for such a stroke as this.

Casually reflected image
Fish or fisherman, I hurl that creature
Back into the stream.
Its life, small as a pool of soft blood in
The hunter's hand it was
Not worth the tremor of the hand to kill.

Like this death hooks our flesh,
He puts his subtle hooks into our flesh
Baited with tiny flies
And nets our lives away. Death is that dead
Creature's unworthy kiss;
We are death's fish as we are death to fish.

LETTER FROM BANGKOK

The Country with a Smile

IT WOULD be almost impossible, I thought, for Bangkok to live up to its reputation. I heard so much while I was in Asia about the delights of the Siamese capital and the charms of its people that I was almost biased against them before I arrived. What can Bangkok have to offer—I asked myself with a frown—to a man who has seen Hong Kong? Can the Siamese be more likeable than the Malaysans?

But Bangkok and the Siamese did live up to their reputation, if not quite in the way my informants meant. Bangkok is not a beautiful city, in fact it is a very ugly one. It has no shape or plan; it is almost as confusing as London without London's many redeeming features. The Gods are housed all right but human beings are less fortunate. While the temples of Siam, especially the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, rival in magnificence European architecture at its best, there are less than half a dozen decent buildings for mortal habitation and there are far too many ramshackle huts and other eyesores. The city is a strange mixture of splendour and filth. Comparison with the Malaysans? Well, the Malaysans are very charming people indeed. But if the Malaysans never stop smiling, the Siamese never stop laughing. Even their currency unit has the delightful name of tical, pronounced tickle.

I could not help falling in love with their philosophy of life, which had, in fact, been mine for a long time. I had been a crypto-Siamese without being aware of it. It is the philosophy of the shrug of the shoulders—not, however, in a cynical “couldn't-care-less” manner. On the contrary. They do accept the pleasures of life gratefully, but not avidly. Why worry? Why hurry? Things are never as important as they seem. And, hurry or no, we shall all arrive at the same destination sooner or later. Is the earth's existence really threatened by the hydrogen bomb? Most regrettable if it is indeed so, but why worry before it blows up? After all, it may never happen. In any case, it is not such a terrible thing for the earth to be blown to bits as most people, inclined to exaggerate, are trying to make

out. There will be plenty of other desirable celestial bodies left in the heavens.

Ambition, advancement, prestige, and keeping up with the Siamese equivalent of the Joneses are notions as strange, indeed, incomprehensible to the Siamese as the idea of being happy and content in a primitive mud hut (without hot water and the usual offices) would be for a New York salesman.

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SIAM—or Thailand, if we want to be pedantic—is the only country in South-East Asia which has never been under the domination of any European power. (She was, however, occupied by the Japanese during World War II.) Not to have been under European domination is partly a blessing; but it is also a little annoying. The Siamese have always been free men and this may well be the explanation for the pleasant and open manners of the Thais—although I know quite a number of European races which have always been free, yet are far less pleasant than the Siamese. They treat Europeans as their equals, do not know what a “white sahib” complex is, and have no feeling of inferiority on account of their colour (which, by the way, is a much more attractive colour than ours and ought to give them a superiority complex, if anything). After the war, there was a terrific upsurge of Asian nationalism. All the peoples of this region fought glorious battles for their independence, got rid of their European masters, and proved that they could manage their own affairs. But Siam could fight no glorious battles for her independence because she was independent to start with; she could not get rid of her European masters because there were no European masters to get rid of. She found no way of proving that she could run her own affairs, having already proved that long ago to everyone's satisfaction. She had her own civil service, army, navy, and air force; and even her civil air line, with Siamese aircrews. The whole of South-East Asia was in a ferment, drunk with the exhilaration of a dream come true; and poor Siam felt a little bit left out of it.