

A PORT-AU-PRINCE MARKETPLACE

Noise is all around: the laughter of children playing, punctuated with cries from empty stomachs; the bark of a customerless banana vender hoping to sell his wares before they rot in the blazing sun; the scream of a peasant woman bargaining for the best price for her husband's crude wood carvings; the mournful wail of a mother who must sell her hand-woven blankets if her family is to eat tonight. Every sound reflects desperation. Even the laughter of the children is strained. They laugh because they are children, and children must laugh; it is the plan. But their laughter is one of bravery, not innocence; it is weeping with a smile. The older ones do not bother with such fronts. Their faces show a wearied acceptance of life, a painful life that seems to be without meaning. When they bargain for food their eyes betray the fear and dread that haunts them. As they yell out in protest against the price of sugar cane, they really are lamenting the price of life. The clamor in the marketplace is a song of despair.

Brilliant, vibrant colors lend the scene a deceptive air of festivity. From a distance, the mountain woman peddling her fresh yellow grapefruits looks merry and blithe in her green skirt, red polka dot blouse, and blue scarf. The playing children are streaks of blue, yellow, red, and green against a background of shiny black. The blacks and browns of wandering donkeys, buzzing flies, the filth in which they breed, and the dusty old buildings lining the streets of the marketplace cannot detract from the color and excitement of the shoppers, merchants, and their wares. Crowning this lively spectacle, adding its own dash of brilliance is a glistening, cloudless sky. A poorly focused slide of the scene would present it as a beautiful, carefree bazaar.

Over this all—the sounds of laughing, crying, shouting, pleading; the signs of despair; the color and activity—there hangs the oppressive heat of the tropical sun, heat that dries the earth to dust and turns precious food to waste. Following the heat come the odors of the market; of damp, dirty clothing; of animal droppings underfoot; of carved green wood painted with shoe polish and called mahogany; of straw woven into baskets and purses; of bananas, oranges, mangoes; grapefruits, and coconuts growing warm in the sweltering sun. These are the sounds, the faces, the colors, the smell—the *feel*—of a marketplace in Port-au-Prince.