

NELSON'S

by Harry Dunn

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As you walk along the Esplanade, in an easterly direction,
Beyond the Inlet pub, you will pass a landmark site,
The place where Edwin's Palace stands today, a model of perfection;
But it wasn't always thus; that site was justly famous, many years before,
When it held a less imposing place, with parapets which bore
A sign which boldly said, in letters visible from afar:

NELSON'S *PALAIS*, RESTAURANT, RECEPTIONS, HOT DRINKS AND TARAX BAR.

Now, when one sees the word *PALAIS*,
One thinks of entertainments grand -
Things like opera and art, and classical ballet,
In palais' like the ones they have in Paris, and on London's stately Strand.
The Macquarie definition (and I looked it up, of course)
Defines a palais as a dance hall, opulent, expensive,
A place intended for recitals and the high performing arts,
Attended by sophisticates, the high-born and pretentious
And the consorts of these privileged gay old farts.

In continental Europe, especially in France,
The European palais' catered to the bourgeoisie and upper-classes,
All those who could afford to sing and dance,
But down here in Fifties Inverloch, the quaintly-named Palais
Catered to the masses,
It offered French fries and greasy Aussie burgers,
Which could lead to running and lots of sitting down,
And cursing those old purgers:
And there wasn't too much dancing in this little seaside town.

Yes, Inverloch-on-sea had its very own Palais,
Nelson's - by ownership and name,
Impressive architecture and expensive objets d'art
Were not this Palais's claim to class and fame,
In fact, Nelson's Palais, Caff and Tarax Bar
Was rather down-at-heel, as its wonky floors attested,
Where here and there the rotting stumps had waved the place "au 'voir"
And departed from the scene,
So the bearers had long rested,
On sandy terra firma - with nothing in between.

The maitre d' was Arthur Nelson, known to all as Sammy
And the Lady of the House was Mrs. Nelson - Myrtle,
Sammy's darling wife, a hard-working and good-natured soul
Whose name was often rhymed unkindly with the Turtle;
But, tho' Myrtle's outer shell was hard,
The heart that beat within was solid gold.

Sammy wore a cardigan and his pants were always baggy,
He was a veteran of coal-mining days
At the State Mine in Wonthaggi.
Sammy moved to Inverloch when his mining days were over
And bought the old Palais, which - like himself
Was a bit run-down and daggy,
But he *was* the *bossa nova*.

Nelson's Palais during summer was a bustling seaside shop,
Selling tucker to the terrorists, the foreshore campers,
The day-trippers, the beach-strippers, and all who chose to stop;
Ice creams, Tarax, post cards, smokes and Ayrton toffee;
They offered pots of tea and scones with jam on top,
Although I don't remember any coffee:
But this was the Nineteen Fifties, don't forget,
Long before the coffee-drinking craze
And the coffee-culture set.

But winter down in Inverloch - and it seemed to last forever,
Was off-season for the Nelsons and other local shops
Selling ice cream, food to go, cold drinks, whatever,
Except for David Beaton's Esplanade Hotel,
Which never lacked for custom,
Regardless of the weather,
Introducing many local lads to that hand-cart bound for Hell -
But that's another story altogether!

Nelson's had some fall-backs, during the off-season,
Unlike all the others,
It was large enough to host *events*, like anniversaries,
Birthday parties and meetings of The Brothers,
The occasional wedding breakfast, often called in haste
By young couples who'd been playing - Fathers - yes - and Mothers,
And hadn't been entirely chaste.

The Palais put on quite a show,
With tables set for wedding guests

And lighting turned down low,
With fly-strips hung to catch the air-borne pests,
And many a local dynasty was launched
From Nelson's little Palais, where the guests were festive-fed
Choice of meats, three veg, choice of sweets and tea,
Waiter service, and all for fifteen bob a head!

I attended one such function,
A reception held at night;
I was not a wedding guest, I have to here admit,
But a witness uninvited, out of sight,
Concealed in scrub across the road, which was more or less unlit
And why were we concealed there, me and my young mate?
Well - we'd heard there was something on that we might appreciate. .
And soon enough, when Bride and Groom, the newly- wedded pair,
Were leaving in their car, young and fancy-free;
Only then did we become aware -
Of a long and heavy chain, unseen by other folk,
Which ran from that old car's rear axle, to a sturdy nearby tree;
We watched in horror as the newly-weds set off,
In a cloud of sand and smoke,
Until the chain ran out, and then they stopped - rather sudden - ly.

Their diff and axle had migrated, much closer to the rear:
The new bride and groom were shaken and perhaps a little bloodied;
Then the hunt was on to find the mug who set this booby- trap,
And he had much to fear -
Perhaps a jilted lover or just a scallywag who thought it might be fun,
In any case, if he'd been caught that night, the population of this town
Would have dropped by one.

Nelson's Palais during winter had another useful function;
It was where Inverloch-Kongwak Combined, the local football team,
Held their end-of-match recrimination meal, with drinks, and punch-on,
Although the pub was closed at six or thereabouts,
The Palais, which wasn't licensed to serve liquor
Became a pretty lively place on footy-final nights,
By eight o'clock - sometimes even quicker.

And on weeknights down at Nelson's, the Palais by the sea,
When Inverloch was dark and tranquil,
The Palais was a refuge for a few young lads like me,
Because it housed a *billiard table*
Ten by six, I think,
Located in the living room, which had an open fire,

**Beside which Sam and Myrtle played cards with their friend, Jack
And enjoyed a quiet drink.**

**The attractive thing about this place,
Was the way that they allowed young blokes - like me -
Full of teenage cheek and froth,
To use that precious table, as long as we behaved ourselves,
And didn't tear the cloth.**

**They were decent folks, those Nelsons,
And made us feel at home,
But woe betide the lad who swore an oath
Within Mrs. Nelson's hearing,
Or was overheard reciting - the latest smutty pome:
The rules were strict and mostly well-observed,
For well we knew that he who mis-behaved,
Wouldn't soon be re-appearing.**

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**Nelson's Palais's now long gone,
As are Sammy and his spouse,
And most of us young lads who played a game of pool,
In that crumbling old hash-house -
Located on the Esplanade, which we thought was rather cool,
But young and thoughtless tho' we were,
We held both Sam and Mrs N in high regard.
Even when we played the fool.**

**The Palais's been replaced by a handsome, stately home,
Massive, grand and most respectable,
But the ghosts of Nelson's Palais and its long-departed guests
Only live in memory,
Fading now, of course, but still connectible -
Little gems secreted in an old man's vault and gemmery
With all his other treasures -
Of no worth to anyone else, of course,
But, to him at least, still valued and collectable.**