

Chapter I

SS Carthage

Between Colombo and Penang

June 1956

Dear Norman

This letter will be posted in Penang so I have no idea when you will receive it. I am sorry it has taken me so long to write but I really have been busy enjoying myself. From the date of my hasty interview in London to my leaving on the *Carthage*, I had so little time to write to let you know how I landed this job.

As I hinted before, I really regretted leaving Africa and returning to England with a few loose shillings in my pocket. Dad did not say a lot when I returned but I could see he was none too happy to have a penniless son land on his doorstep. I really could not explain to him how lonely it had been in Africa. All I knew was that the rubber companies in Malaya wanted planters and the pay was good.

A couple of years ago, I remembered seeing an advert in the *Farmers Weekly* to this effect. Not knowing where to start, I looked up “rubber” in the London telephone directory and found something called Rubber Growers Association. Being close by, I called in to their offices and a helpful man gave me a list of all the rubber companies in Malaya who had their head offices in London; he even marked a few that had been looking for planters six months before. One of these, Tropical Plantation Agency (TPA), was only a few minutes walk away and, undaunted, I walked in and explained to the receptionist that I wanted to be a planter.

That day was like magic. I was asked only three questions:

“Are you over twenty-one?”

“Yes.”

“Are you married?”

“No.”

“Are you engaged?”

“No.”

In no time at all I was shown into a hot little office to meet the company secretary. I was surprised because he asked only a few questions about my previous work on farms and nothing else. Then I was shown into a series of rooms with big leather-topped desks to meet the directors, all of whom had very silvery hair, pink cheeks and were dressed in black suits. The interview was really easy and pleasant. No difficult questions. One asked me if I knew anything about bulldozers so I said yes. That pleased him. All I know is I saw one working once.

Another director asked if I played any sports so I said, “Yes, sir, rigger,” and hoped he did not ask which position. It seemed like the right reply and it was. Always the honest idiot, I offered one piece of information to the company secretary when I told him that I was not good at maths. His reply was a mild, “Oh really, I’m sure you can add up can’t you?” This was not the time to reply and say “Well, just about”.

In no time at all I was offered a job as a planter but I had to leave on this ship because they had engaged another planter a few weeks earlier who was already booked on the *Carthage*. Because I had turned up in the right place at the right time I was an afterthought; as I said, a day of magic. Perhaps they were impressed by my continuation of farm work in Kenya, or maybe it was the fact I had walked in from the street looking for work, or is it their policy to recruit this way and save the advertising expenses? I have no idea.

All I do know is that I walked into that office with a few shillings in my pocket—enough for my fare home and a cheap meal of cheese on toast and an apple pie at a Lyons Coffee House—and an hour later I walked out with a cash advance of £50 for initial clothes kit and a promise of another £50 for household kit on arrival in Malaya.

I have never had so much cash in my hand before. When I walked out of that office and onto the street the sun was shining and my feeling of happiness knew no bounds.

My dad was as pleased as punch when I told him and I walked on air too for the next few days. In only days, my contract arrived by registered post along with another large envelope containing P&O sticky labels, baggage tags, pictures of the SS *Carthage*, deck plans and cabin locations. All very exciting and exotic. I am travelling tourist class. I had so little time and this is the reason for not seeing you before I left. Naturally, I signed the contract and had it witnessed and posted back before they could change their minds.

The voyage has been great. Drinks are all duty-free and so are cigarettes. I really enjoy this lifestyle; a mix of deck games to work up an appetite for the splendid multi-course meals, pre-lunch drinks and parties every night. After some parties I have bounced my way back to my cabin from wall to wall along the passageway and the sea has been calm. None of the other passengers I have met are on holiday or anything like that. They are almost all working somewhere overseas, with the exception of a few Chinese and Indians who are returning to India or Malaya having completed their university studies in the UK.

I met two Parsee lady doctors travelling to Kathmandu; what an exotic sounding place. They were not only beautiful but clever too and really pleasant to talk to. All of the other ladies are English missionaries returning to China with a few trainee types to continue the gospels or whatever. No parties for them. The older missionaries are polite, civil and interesting to talk to and I was really impressed to see one of the lady missionaries in the library writing in Chinese characters. Writing a letter or something, as fast as I am writing this. A strange thing with the ladies is that not one of them could ever have been described as pretty or even attractive when they were young women and I could not help wonder what motivates such people to do what they call the Lord’s work. To the best of my knowledge He is not known to pay well, at least not this side of Heaven. Maybe these women see little chance of finding a husband with their less-than-plain looks and so they seek satisfaction in a difficult career?

One of the younger male missionaries approached me on deck one night and was not shy in telling me, "I am a Witness. I used to be like you, drinking and playing around, but now I have seen the Light. It is not too late for you to change and join me." When he said "witness" I thought he meant he had seen me doing something, but some days I am a bit slower than others and it took a while for it to dawn on me that he meant one of the Jehovah ones. All I managed in the way of a reply was a muttered "Excuse me, I'm going to the bar." I'm sure he meant well but he did not speak to me again for the rest of the voyage, which was maybe just as well.

Most passengers are Royal Navy personnel going to the Singapore dockyards, plus a lot of others are heading for Hong Kong. Five young men around my age are also going out to be planters with various companies I have never heard of. Not too many passengers are married but there are a few single girls going to work in Hong Kong or engaged to be married to fellows serving overseas. Older men say that the air does something to women travelling alone by sea; I can confirm that it does and one fine day I will tell you.

Mind you, there were a couple of young wives who started a manhunt as soon as the ship left the docks and was heading out to sea but they looked so obviously tarty and made up I would not have cared to be seen with either of them, except in a dark place.

Being a planter must be popular; there are six of us in tourist class. I share my cabin with one called Tony Stinger, plus a police officer returning to Hong Kong. Tony is the one engaged by TPA before me. He has plenty of money and thinks nothing of ordering half a dozen drinks for the two of us when the bar is closing. The other four planters are in a cabin next to us. They are going to work for different companies, seem pleasant types and have all been in Malaya before in the army.

I wonder why the companies need so many planters? Tony says that in first class, there are two more planters from TPA; one a manager and the other is an assistant coming back for a second tour. The two classes of travel cannot mix so we have not had a chance to meet up. The bosun on this ship is a handsome, strong-looking, suntanned, solid type. One of his jobs is to make announcements to

the passengers on deck about the deck games. He always calls, "Will passengers travelling first class ...", but he never says, "First-class passengers". I'm not sure if the subtle difference has been noticed by anyone else.

He was dicing with the risk of being found out by the officers as he was seeing and spending time with a single Englishwoman who was returning to Hong Kong where she worked as a secretary. She was pleasant, fortyish with dyed hair, smart and obviously lonely. I remember her saying one day that she was the loneliest woman in the Colony and never had the chance to go out with anyone.

The two of them spent time in what to me looked like a largish storage cupboard on deck where the bosun kept "things" and maybe he was the only one with a key. She certainly had a good trip judging by the way she regularly staggered out of the cupboard but we were too polite to even hint at anything.

I forgot to mention to you my contract with the company. My first tour is for four years followed by eight months' paid leave. Sounds great, the leave bit. I must learn "a language of the natives on the estates" in eighteen months or I face the sack. I cannot marry in the first four years (not that I want to) and if I want to leave the company during the tour, I must pay back to the company the kit allowance plus a proportion of the fares both ways. The longer I stay, the shorter the proportion. Tough tit as Frank would say.

Subsequent tours are three years followed by six months' leave but believe me, I have no intention of staying longer than the one tour. That should give me enough to start a small mixed farm. The other five would-be planters already know some Malay so they are ahead of me already. One of them told me the other day that they were recruited because "In the army we know how to handle men." I think this is baloney because Tony told me that he himself had only been a private in the army; a busted corporal, the way he said it.

I guess we all have different motives for wanting to be planters. Tony is a strange chap. He just wants to be back in Malaya because during his service there he met a Malay *joget* dancer and he wanted to marry her. Permission applied for to his commanding officer and

the next thing that Tony knew was he had a transfer to Hong Kong where he met a pretty Chinese girl who worked in a shoe shop. He promptly fell in love with her too but that is another story.

I think I will end here. The company sent me a letter c/o P&O in Colombo. I will be met in Penang by the senior assistant of Sungei Jernih Estate. His name is Alton Cravender and he will take me to Sungei Jernih where I will work. Please write to me with your news.

My address will be:
Sungei Jernih Estate
Kuala Ketil
Kedah
Malaya

With best wishes

Yours ever

John

PS: To be fair, the company secretary did talk casually about the Emergency and terrorist activity in Malaya. A lot of the action has been against tin miners and planters and many have been killed. Knowing I had lived through the Mau Mau killings in Kenya, Mr Halley just said that I would be armed, have a police bodyguard, and finally, "Just be careful."

His main warning was to mention that Malaya will become Independent in August next year (I had no idea) and a career in planting might not be long term. I did not want to disillusion him and spoil my chances by telling him that I only wanted to save money and buy a farm. I am not really worried about getting another job because just after I was offered this one, the crown agents wrote inviting me for an interview for a job in Tanganyika. Maybe on reflection I should have waited for this interview but I needed a job quickly. Anyway, it is too late now.

* * *

SS Carthage

Between Colombo and Penang

June 1954

Dear Dad

I hope you received the postcards that I sent you from each port of call: Port Said, Suez, Aden, Bombay and Colombo. This will be posted from Penang. Tropical Plantations Agency are just called "the agents" or so I am told. Anyway, they sent a letter to me in Colombo saying I am to work on an estate in Kedah called Sungei Jernih. I will write the estate's address on a slip of paper along with this letter.

I realise that a letter from me is long overdue but I now have some time to think back on the voyage and fill in some details. My cabin is small and L-shaped. The bottom line of the "L" is where the four bunks are, two next to each other, one above the other. I boarded last and found a bottom berth vacant which suited me fine. The washbasin and locker space are in the other line of the "L" with a single porthole. You know the word "posh", well I've found out that it means "port out, starboard home". I am lucky because the cabin is port side and does not get the afternoon sun. Even so, it is stifling hot; and this despite the metal scoops fitted to the portholes which funnel air into the cabin.

The cabin can be heated in cold weather but not cooled during hot weather. This cabin is a superior one as there are some in what is unofficially called "steerage". These are cabins situated below the water level and just above the rumbling prop shaft.

I visited one of these cabins once and found it not only noisy but hot and stuffy too. Thank goodness our company is not stingy with the grades of travel. It has been so hot from Suez onwards that I have started taking a pillow and sleeping on deck at night. Two problems: hard on the hip bones and the crew swab the decks at 6 a.m. I do not sleep on deck every night but only when it feels unbearably hot.

I had a good tan before I started this trip. Even so, I made one mistake by taking off my shoes and socks. After that, the tops of my feet became sore and blistered. Worse were passengers travelling for

the first time. As soon as the weather became hotter, out they went on deck to sunbathe all day and returned with shoulders and backs like lobsters. The shop on board has done a roaring trade in sales of calamine lotion. It sells all sorts of other useful items from toothpaste to safety pins. Bit expensive though.

There is a hairdressing shop too. Ladies and gents are catered for by appointment only at London prices, so I have avoided a haircut for three weeks. It can wait until I arrive in Penang as I had a short back and sides before I left.

You saw the plan of the ship's decks so you have an idea of the tourist-class dining room, library/writing room and also the lounge and bar. The dining room is air-conditioned with constant cool air when the weather is hot, and warm air when it is cold. Very comfortable really. The food is great. There is a wide choice for breakfast including fruit, some of which is fresh. There is even a large basin of stewed prunes. Who on earth eats stewed prunes at any time, let alone breakfast? There are cereals, from porridge to corn flakes and shredded wheat, eggs any style, bacon, ham, sausages, poached haddock, kippers, cold meat and all sorts of bread.

Imagine lunch and dinner on the same scale. I have never seen so much food. You can have sandwiches and coffee at 11 a.m. and there is afternoon tea with all the trimmings, from stacks of cucumber sandwiches to cream slices.

After the bar closes for the night, anyone who feels peckish can go down to the dining room for tongue or ham sandwiches made by the night-watchman. He sells these and bottles of cold beer. The quality of food is good and matches the quantity; this is not like British restaurants.

I have not been at all bored with three weeks of fully paid-up holiday. The swimming pool is small and rather crowded so I have been playing some deck tennis. Not a bad game, singles or doubles. Using a rope quoit you throw and catch to each other over a net. The missionaries are good at this game having had a lot of practice on many voyages. The game is played on a canvas-covered deck hatch.

My big mistake when the weather became hotter was to play in bare feet and I did not notice how hot my feet had become until I

stopped and found my toes and soles were badly skinned. There is a doctor and a few nurses with a small clinic-cum-ward but the crew are more at risk from accidents than the passengers. I have seen a couple of the crew carried off on stretchers at various ports of call because the facilities on the ship are not large enough to deal with serious injury or sickness.

In addition to deck games, books from the library, meeting people and enjoying a couple of drinks in the evening, the officers also organise all sorts of other activities. There are quiz contests, raffles, daily "Guess how many miles (sorry, I should have written nautical miles) the ship has travelled in twenty-four hours". It's great fun.

I forgot to tell you that I am quite lucky as I share my four-berth cabin with one other planter called Tony (he is in the same company) and a police officer from Hong Kong who is much older than us and knows his way around. He doesn't say much but when he does, he is worth listening to. Gives little tips such as, one time when the weather became really hot, he suggested a simple way to cool off was to fill the washbasin with cool water and soak one's arms in it for a few minutes. I certainly felt cooler, at least for a while. He spends most of his time with a pretty Chinese lady. They don't mix with the other passengers and she shares her cabin with three other single women.

The police officer told Tony he was married to her but we have no idea why they can't share a cabin. Our cabin steward is Goanese. I suppose you know that Goa is somewhere on the west coast of India. Anyway, he is a small-built, skinny man who bustles around organising our cabin and several others. Talks too much for my liking. His main preoccupation is in getting the sleepy occupants out of bed every morning so that he can get on with his job. Can't blame him as the captain or first officer make daily visiting inspections to all parts of the ship.

Breakfast is free seating but most passengers sit in their usual allocated places. Lunch is free seating too because as well as the usual meal there is an alternative lunch of salads and sandwiches served on deck for those who want a lighter meal. Dinner is always fixed seating held in two sittings.

For dinner, I am on the second seating roster which is a more social affair with more officers attending. Most tables of six or eight people have an officer seated with the diners. The more senior people like the captain mainly dine in the first-class dining room, but it is clever how they share themselves around and only the most sensitive passengers could feel slighted that they have been ignored by the officer hierarchy.

Tony and I sit together with an Aberdonian who is the second engineer and the other three seats are taken up by a rather quiet middle-aged couple going to Hong Kong and a single man who is a civil servant. I don't know how the seating is arranged. It is done by the purser and chief steward (I think) on the second day at sea and each table has a good mix of folk who, on the whole, do not seem to share much in common but provide a balance in ages. On most tables the chatter is constant and animated and even the shyest of passengers soon joins in.

In the evening, lounge suits are worn for dinner but in first class it is dinner jackets. My one and only suit is thick and woolly so I was pleased when the dressing became more casual and jackets were not worn. Most ladies go to a lot of trouble and wear long dresses but there are always the few who want to be different and wear something unsuitably casual.

The really hot weather started in the Suez Canal and most of us change back to more comfortable, light clothing once dinner is over. A few days ago, we passed another P&O ship, the *Chusan*, going back to England. Everyone came on deck waving and cheering and sirens wailed to each other. I suppose that, whichever direction the ship travels, there are always those who go into a kind of exile and those who are going "home".

When we crossed the equator I joined with the other first-time passengers for a going over by King Neptune and his helpers. Some of the crew were dressed as Neptune and his courtiers and, one by one, the willing first-time passengers were doused in coloured stuff and tossed in the pool; all good fun and washable afterwards.

I can't say that I have enjoyed the ports of call. Port Said felt hostile and I made a terrible mistake by telling one persistent boy to

push off in Swahili. He replied in the same language and this attracted a lot of hard and hostile looks from the crowd. I beat a retreat back to the ship, still followed at a distance by the wretched boy who bellowed to all and sundry how he had been abused by the foreigner. I breathed a sigh of relief as soon as I stepped onto the gangway and saw a burly seaman guarding the deck entrance. Nothing bad really happened but it was all so unpleasant. On reflection, I was supposed to feel intimidated and distribute some baksheesh for peace. I certainly felt intimidated, but not enough to give away money.

Most passengers headed for a large shop called Simon Artz (I think that is the correct spelling) but those we talked to afterwards said that there was little of interest for sale there. I did enjoy watching the trading from the bum boats around the open side of the ship. Why are they called bum boats?

These traders sell camel-leather bags, pouffes, slippers, fruit, trinkets, etc. They are not allowed on the ship. In fact, in port, all portholes are screwed tightly down and we have been warned not to leave cabin doors unlocked. Theft is said to be bad in Port Said, not only in that port but all of them, even though only those with some sort of business on the ship are allowed to board.

The officers gave advice on how to bargain and goods were passed from the boats to the deck in baskets on a long line. I spent some time watching this and, finally, everyone seemed happy with their bargains, except one last-minute buyer who was sent a pair of left-footed slippers. Too late to change as the ropes had been cast off and we were already in motion, heading for the entrance to the canal. One can't help but feel that the two left-footed slippers were not a mistake; few of us will pass this way again for years to come so it is safe for any trader to do a little, or even a lot, of cheating. At all ports of call some cargo is discharged and more loaded plus tonnes of fresh provisions and water.

Boy divers were everywhere, swimming around and diving beneath the surface for silver coins thrown by passengers. I never saw them miss a coin. Having no liking to waste silver this way, I tried wrapping a penny in silver foil from a cigarette packet and tossing it over. Quick as a flash, they spotted my counterfeit and ignored it but

plenty of abuse was shouted up at the McTavish who was so stingy. Why McTavish, I wonder? What had he done wrong here before?

All along the Suez Canal we sat on deck to take in the scenery, a lot of it being the tiresome view of peasants turning their backs to the ship and lifting their *galabiahs* to show their bare bottoms. Given the amount of shouting and exposing of themselves, I have a feeling we are not well liked.

The Red Sea was like a sheet of molten glass and disturbed only by the ripples of our own passage and the flying fish which leap out of the water into the air and back in again. The distant background was a range of barren, hazy, red and brown, sun-baked hills. It all looked hotter there than even we felt. Difficult to imagine anyone living in such a desolate, hot place.

Aden was the hottest place I have ever been to. Seems all sand and rock. The main part inland is called Crater City and is supposed to be a good place for bargain watches and cameras. The officers and well-travelled passengers were all full of warnings to be careful; a big dodge is to buy a working Rolex on shore only to unwrap a watch shell once back on board ship. Frankly, it was so hot and following my Port Said experience I had no wish to go ashore. Anyway, I have my pocket watch and I do not need a camera. For the few hours we stayed there I sat on deck under a canvas awning and the sweat trickled down my bare legs.

Bombay was the next port of call and I went ashore for a brief walk and soon returned to the ship again. I have never seen so many people all pushing, shouting and jostling. The Indian immigration and customs officers were really officious too. Following this was Colombo which was in the grip of a port strike and I really could not be bothered to go ashore there either.

You were right, I allowed £1 a day for my bar bill and this has been enough. Nothing left over for sightseeing though. This brings me up to date with events and I will write again once I have settled in in Kedah. I hope all is well with you ,so with love and best wishes I will close here.

With love
John

* * *

Diary

Tomorrow the ship arrives in Penang—thirty-one days after leaving Southampton—and then continues to Port Swettenham, Singapore and Hong Kong. I have completed my packing and my single large suitcase is in the baggage room and my cabin suitcase is with me. In a way I feel apprehensive knowing that I will leave this organised scene where I am sure of life on the ship to start a new job in a new country.

At first, when we left Southampton, I thought that I would never get used to the rolling movement that was ever present nor the constant creaking of the ship in the “silence” of the night. Every movement made something twist, creak and groan but now, what have become comforting sounds will soon be over and not heard again by me for another four years.

Tony is blasé about his posting. He will continue to Port Swettenham and then by train to Teluk Anson and on to a plantation called Newfoundland. He keeps on telling everyone that it is a “white area” and free of terrorists, but Kedah, where I am going, is still “black”. Airing his knowledge of Malaya at the dinner table this evening, he announced to me in a loud voice, “Doubt if you’ll last six months up there you know!”

Now I am wondering if this was such a good idea after all. Talking about terrorist activity during my interview in Gracechurch Street is not the same as facing it tomorrow.

I thought we might have enjoyed a boozy party tonight as it was our last chance but everyone seems to have withdrawn into himself and is preoccupied with his own plans and futures. Strange how the fast and firm friendships made in the last three weeks are breaking up with a handshake and a vague promise to “keep in touch”. You know, either they never will or else it will be a surprise if they do.

The other subject of conversation this last couple of days has been how much to leave as tips. I have to consider our cabin steward who is not bad. He does bring the early morning cup of tea and

biscuits but has no time for extra service. Then there is the dining room steward, bar stewards, etc. Some of my companions voiced opinions ranging from an extravagant tenner to a miserable “How about £1 each?”

The £50 I started with has dwindled to £11 so I am leaving £3 for the cabin steward and £3 for the dining steward. Every day I bought a drink for the bar steward so I am not leaving anything more. I wish I had the nerve to skip leaving nothing but I daren't be seen to be such a skinflint.

All said and done, tomorrow I leave with all I have: a five-pound note and two suitcases made of printed green cardboard with rusty tin-plated corners. So be it. I doubt that they will survive the next four years and my only hope is that I will.

Chapter II

Sungei Jernih Estate
July 1956

Dear Norman

I hope you received my last letter posted from the ship in Penang. This one will now bring you up to date.

Minutes after berthing, the ship was swarming with visitors meeting old friends and new arrivals. One TPA second-tour planter travelling first class came along to introduce himself. He seemed to know who we were and we chatted together while he kept an eye open for the various people sent to meet us. He made the job sound really boring but said it was pleasant enough on the coconut estates under the dappled sunlight filtering through the palm fronds. I had no idea there were coconut estates too.

In no time at all, we were introduced to all manner of planters from our company. Most of them were not officially meeting anyone, just an excuse for a beat up. All the men we met are much older than us; maybe thirty or forty plus, clean cut and wearing short-sleeved cotton shirts. Khaki or blue shorts seem popular, worn with long white woollen stockings turned down like boy scouts; all very colonial.

The Sungei Jernih Estate manager shook hands with me and said, “Welcome” but most of the time he sat with his replacement who had travelled out with us, also unseen in first class. The incoming manager is called Bill Balfour and the outgoing manager (on long leave) is Andrew Sinclair. They look like chalk and cheese. Bill Balfour looks