

Southampton

Yasseen embarks for Port Said

I had at last reached the head of the queue. A pale man in a cream raincoat took my passport. I was about to board the P and O's SS Chusan, sailing from Southampton for Port Said, Aden, Bombay, Colombo, Penang, Singapore, Hong Kong and Yokohama. I was getting off at the first port of call and then going on to Cairo: Home.

December 18th, 1957 had, as far as I was concerned, nothing to recommend it. A light mist prevailed in the departures shed. A Gothic mist hanging from the steel rafters, or swirling up from the floor, would have suited my mood better. This one prevailed, like a ghost, unaffected by physical presences. The draughts that blew through the shed, icing my feet and legs below my half-length duffel coat, did nothing to disperse it. I was in the sort of mood you get into before seeing the dentist: having to go, but not wanting to, jumpy, but held in the waiting room by the ache.

I should have been looking forward to going home, but since I had not been there before, I was apprehensive. That, at least, was part of the matter.

"A new passport, sir?"

"Yes. Got it last week."

The immigration officer turned the pages quickly and then slowly back and forth.

"How long have you been in this country, sir?"

"Ten years."

"And you haven't reported to the police in that time?"

He sounded mildly startled. What was he getting at? Was it something to do with the student demonstration in October last year? But we had police permission for that and there had been no mishap.

"Good heavens! I'm not a criminal! Why should I report to the police?"

"You're an alien, sir."

"What on earth do you mean! I'm British!"

He shook the little green book that I had given him gently.

"This is an Egyptian passport, sir."

His tone was neutral, his brown eyes puzzled, but still friendly.

Despite the chill my ears caught fire. In his job he must have met a million loonies.

"Oh! Yes! See what you mean."

I fought to undo the coat's top peg and twisted my hand into the inside of my jacket.

"Sorry. Should have shown you this. I'm a dual national."

I handed over my navy blue book with the lion and the unicorn on the cover. On the inside of the cover, under another coat of arms of an alligator and two Arawak Indians in grass skirts, it said: "I, Sir John Huggins, K.C.M.G., M.C., Captain-General and Governor-in-Chief in and over the Island of Jamaica and Its Dependencies.

"Request and require in the Name of His Majesty all those whom it may concern to allow the bearer to pass freely..."

At the bottom of the opposite page with my name on it, I was described as 'British Subject by Birth'.

The officer was brief now. "That's all right, sir," he said cheerfully and waved me on. I walked towards the grey chunk of ship's hull and the two and a half portholes that were visible through the door. A ship's officer stood at the foot of the gangway, a huddle of people around him. He was explaining something about cabins to a middle aged man with liquid brown eyes. The man was about my colour of beige. "I do not understand," he was saying. "A cabin for me only, I have no wife..."

He could have been Indian, or Burmese, or South American, or Maltese, or Corsican, not that I'd ever seen a Maltese, or a Corsican, but something about his manner, patient and expecting the worst, and his way of speaking told me that he was Egyptian.

Funk gripped me. Did I really have to launch myself into the unknown: a stepfamily, Egypt, Arabic? I wouldn't be a tourist and I wouldn't be considered one. My father had said: "You had better come home, my boy. You are, after all, Egyptian." His thinking was simple:

he was my father; he loved me; he wanted me to be with him. But he didn't know me. Not even I did. My brain had become a salad.

"You're not a doctor," he'd said. "You can't do anything for your mother by staying. She'll be ill for a long time."

Things had been different when I left Jamaica for England. Britain was the 'Mother Country' of all the red bits and pieces in the atlas. That's what everybody said. England, as Jamaicans called Britain, was a red bird near the top of the world with an eccentric looking comb that was Scotland. It had laid a crocodile-shaped red egg in the Wash that had rolled into the Channel and out into the Atlantic, and almost into the Gulf of Mexico. That was Jamaica. Jamaicans were all British subjects and, like Muslims want to go to Mecca, they all wanted to go to Britain. Some did.

I did not question my nationality. I seldom thought about it. My parents had long separated. Hassan had returned to Egypt before World War Two. Jeanne had gone to do yet another postgraduate course in London when the war ended. I had been left at boarding school in Jamaica and spent my holidays with Jeanne's relatives. Success at the Common Entrance exam in 1947 had got me into a school in England. Jeanne met me at Tilbury. Shortly before we docked, nine stowaways, some of whom had been caught and made to scrub and polish, sprang overboard as if at a signal, and swam sturdily through the grey and black September waters of the Thames to shore. I had met one on the voyage. He had appeared beside me as I was washing my hands before lunch.

"You got food, bwoy?"

"No."

He turned on the tap in the next basin with a rough movement. "Bring food," he said urgently. He bent low, cupping his hands to drink the water and then washing his face. When he emerged his chocolate face looked grey. There was stubble on his chin and he didn't bother to wipe away the drops of water round his mouth. "Doan tell nobody, bwoy," he said sternly. "Bring food. You heah?"

"Okay."

"You understand me, bwoy?"

He gripped my wrist for a moment and looked me directly in the eyes. I suppose he meant to look fierce, but his eyes betrayed him. They were hollow and frightened and the shock he had given me wore off.

I nodded. Then he loped off into a cubicle and locked the door.

Lunch that day was an adventure. I managed to overturn a basket of bread on to the floor and cram my shorts' pockets with rolls under the table without anybody noticing. Afterwards I went back to the lavatory. He appeared again, took the rolls and returned to his cubicle.

But I could not get him the rice and meat and gravy he wanted. On the fourth day he was gone. Perhaps he had been caught, or had given himself up. One of the men who jumped off the ship turned and waved before disappearing into the smoky shapes by the riverside. A passenger near me exclaimed, "What a cheek," but I thought he was 'my stowaway' saying goodbye.

I sometimes thought of him in the years afterwards. He couldn't have had much of a clue about where he was going before he set off. He reminded me of Pericles, our gardener. How had he fared with no place to go and probably no money? I knew where I was going.

I'd been there before, when I was four, to see King George going to his coronation, as he passed along the Mall in his carriage. A man had picked me up and put me on his shoulders to wave as the carriage went by and we lost Jeanne briefly in the crowd. Caliban had spoken to me in Regent's Park when rain had suspended an open-air performance of "The Tempest" and the cast took shelter in the tea marquee. One evening Jeanne had taken me to a re-enactment of the Battle of Jutland on a lake, with radio-guided model ships whose guns flashed in the dark when they fired.

Malaria had been my friend. I had read what seemed like libraries recuperating from bouts of it. London, to me, was how Dickens described it, except that there were motorcars now. The countryside was the Wild Wood in "The Wind in The Willows". You could meet Pip, Ratty, Fagin, Bertie Wooster and Biggles any time, or people like them.

I was not disappointed. Post-war London was a dark, cold place with few lights and power and gas cuts and fogs the Ripper would have loved. One night I saw a policeman with a torch, on his hands and knees in Victoria, following the tramline. The countryside round the school was wild. Nobody had clipped the hedgerows since before the war.

Miss Havisham sometimes invited me to tea. She was a friend of the family's who lived in a cottage near Esher and was not in the least like Miss Havisham. She lived alone, but she did not sit around in a tattered wedding dress with a crumbling, mouse-nibbled wedding cake on the table. Even so, her face reminded me of the actress who played the part in the film of "Great Expectations".

Her orchard had run to jungle, most of the fruit dropping off to rot on the ground. She was keen on my eating her William pears, which I did with a will, sitting in a tree. When I was there, even the drabness of school, whose stone walls in some places could have built Elsinore, vanished, and the dream that had begun to be threatened by a boy called Cogsford returned.

Cogsford was Mr Toad at his most pompous.

"And where," he inquired on our first confrontation, "are you from?"

"Jamaica."

"Oh! Another colonial."

"What d'you mean!"

"You're from the colonies. That's what I mean."

Cogsford and I were about the same size. If anything I had a slight advantage in height, but he was senior to me. He was allowed to keep one hand in his trouser pocket.

I reacted to his derisory tone. Egypt was a green or yellow square on the map. That meant it was not a colony.

"My father is Egyptian."

"And what nationality does that make you?"

I knew I'd bash him one day but I needed longer to warm up to it. I used an old family joke:

"Parasitologist."

He turned away. "I say chaps! This man says his nationality is parasitologist!"

There were shouts of "Parasite, more likely!" and "Worm!" I was not bothered. I had distracted him.

Jeanne had taught me the life cycles of the malaria and Bilharzia parasites before I knew the alphabet. Hassan and Jeanne were parasitologists. Once, when they'd quarrelled, I'd reminded them of it. "What a shame for two parasitologists!" They'd laughed, the quarrel had ended and later they reminded each other of it. When anger hung in the air between them - especially over questions of Egypt and Britain - safety lay in their being parasitologists. You didn't have to take sides. You could love them both equally.

Mr Eden's ultimatum to Egypt had struck like a V-2. It had arrived invisibly overhead and fallen to wreak indiscriminate devastation. What had gone wrong with the man? He had worked out a brilliant treaty with Gamal Abdel Nasser. He should have counted himself lucky Abdel Nasser wanted to keep the Canal open. It had done Egypt more harm than good. How many people remembered that the Canal had not been excavated with bulldozers; that sixty thousand Egyptians had died scratching it out of the rocks and sand with picks and shovels? And what had they, or Egypt, got for it? I had once bought a grey Homburg in Eden's honour. Suddenly I was helping to organise a demonstration against him.

Now I was in a no man's land between an immigration officer and a ship's officer. I could go on, or go back. What had brought me there? Eden's V-2. But how, exactly? I didn't know. I had an overwhelming feeling, though, of finality to whatever step I took. It was as though the mist held its breath to see what I would do.

I was leaving the good-hearted people of Leeds behind.

"The communists will be with us. A few cranks will join. But by and large we'll be on our own".

That was the opinion of the politically aware, when we'd set out on that demo from the university, but the student group had soon become a minority in the town. We knew the townspeople only fleetingly, mostly through asking the way. Nine times out of ten the man you asked scratched his head, "Eeh! I be going that way, lad, come with me," and accompanied you for miles on a tram. A good many people seemed to be going our way that day, many of them women pushing prams.

A tiny counter-demonstration rollicked along on the other side of the street: the University's Tory Society and the Rugby Club in cars, some of my friends among them. They threw thunder flashes at us. What if one got into a pram? The question must have occurred to the mums but they stayed with us.

After that, my brother, Yazeed, came to visit me. We had been out of touch with each other for several years, but he knew where I was. He'd heard of the demonstration.

"You were in it, of course. You must have been!"

"Yes."

"Do you realise that counts as sedition in wartime?"

"It wasn't a war. It was a police action. The government said so."

"All the same... I was on an airfield in Belgium with a whole lot of others. We didn't know for sure where we were going, but everybody said Cyprus and Egypt. They must have been right because when the UN rang the bell on the show out there we were stood down."

"Didn't you tell your officers you were a dual national?"

"Am I?"

"Well of course you are!"

"Look, I was doing national service. I was doing it when this thing blew up..."

"Don't you know what would have happened to you if they'd dropped you on Suez and you'd been taken prisoner?"

"I was doing national service, I tell you!"

We were shouting. I had gone beyond anger with him. I imagined hands tying him to a post in the desert and blindfolding him. What would I have done? Who had put us in this impossible situation? Responsibility lay beyond Anthony Eden and Gamal Abdel Nasser. Did it lie with Dad? He had visited me twice in England, once for two days. "We're all experimental animals," he was fond of saying.

In my mind's eye, I saw him read the headline of a newspaper on his desk, 'SCIENTIST'S SON HELD FOR TREASON'. He'd lock his lab door and pray. What would I have done if a thunder flash had killed a baby in a pram? I'd helped organise the demo...

"It didn't happen," my brother said. "I am here with you."

"Thank God! Thank God!"

Things had suddenly become clear after that. I'd been unbelievably pompous with him, like a bewigged judge dressing down a criminal before passing sentence. "Nationality isn't a state of mind," I'd said. That tore up my hypothetical passport: the one issued by that celestial school of tropical medicine hovering somewhere in British skies. Egypt was only defending herself. If I did my national service there, I wasn't likely to be dropped on the South Downs, or the cricket pitch at Headingly, to shoot down friends. In the British army I could be sent to Suez to kill relatives.

Time had passed since then. There was this dratted mist. Was it really in the shed, or in my head?

The two at the foot of the gangway were still arguing. The officer was explaining that there were too many passengers. Cabins had to

be shared. If I could fling myself between them and run up the gangway, I'd find my cabin and throw myself down on a bunk. I was tired. I would willingly share with anybody.

I walked back to the immigration official. I wanted something less off the peg and ready-to-wear from him. Could I really come and go, as he seemed to imply? Or would he say: "Once over there, sir, you're in enemy country. Your British passport will be cancelled and how you will get a visa on your Egyptian one, I do not know."

Would I really need a visa to visit my mother?

The officer stamped the passport of his last customer, a Chinese, and turned to me. "Yes, sir?"

"It'll be all right to come back, won't it?"

"Certainly."

"I mean I wouldn't need to get a visa, would I?"

"You are a British passport holder, sir."

There was a touch of pride in his voice.

"Thank you."

The status was apparently permanent. Britain still ruled an empire and millions of subjects. All the same, I trod hard on the 'all-is-well-pedal' to drown out the 'self-dramatisation-revs' as I walked back to the gangway. "You're an emotional stowaway from yourself," the self-dramatiser said. "You're trying to hide from yourself by taking action, busying yourself, because you don't know what to do, or even who you are."

"Shut up," I said silently. "Maybe I'll find out who I really am when I get there."

I would soon be talking to myself.

"May I see your ticket and passport, sir?"

I had arrived at the ship's officer. He gave me a card.

"That gentleman is in the same cabin." He nodded towards the Chinese who was nearing the top of the gangway. "If you stick with him you can help each other find the way."

I ran.

Up the gangway.

A bout of inward melodrama overtook me at the top. Should I look back and wave?

"There's nobody you know down there, silly!" a stern voice said. A gentler voice advised: "Wave to somebody who isn't there."

I closed my eyes and turned and waved to Mother and a host of absent people. I waved to Gran and her dining table laid at all times to include several unexpected guests; to Louche in her starched blue fall, starched blue dress and white apron. I blew a kiss to her glittering eyes, to her pout and the objects she carried: a glass of medicine, my hat, my cast off vest which was supposed to soak up my sweat and preserve me from pneumonia. I waved to Scott and Hamish and to Great Aunt Consuela and the cat that stole her toothbrush. I waved to many others, even to Cogsford.

Then I ran on.

