

Firestone Plantations
Monrovia, Liberia,
West Africa.

June 29, 1940

My dear Bob:

I received your letter just before I left New York and really enjoyed hearing from you again. It seems that it requires a wedding or trip to Africa to wangle a letter out of you so I guess I will have to do a bit of travelling since it would not be good policy to attempt another wedding. I must admit that I have been almost as negligent and I had every good intention of answering your last letter much before this. The trip over was so rough that writing was practically impossible and since I have been here I have hardly had time to write Mother. Time is available now for I am in the hospital recovering from an uncomfortable, if mild, case of tropical malaria. For the first four days Gladys chided me for goldbricking but on the fifth day she piled up in the other bed and has been there ever since, for the same reason. We have both about recovered and expect to go home tomorrow.

This was started yesterday and, since the doctor allowed me to get up for the evening, I postponed the letter until today. This is Gladys' birthday and both of us spent it in the hospital though out of bed. The doctor put us to bed again early and then sent over a bottle of champagne to celebrate the birthday and our last day in confinement. And speaking of confinement, we have been the butt of many jibes since we are occupying the maternity room. Everything ~~but~~ but the latent malaria parasites have been expelled from our systems so a shot in the stern of each of us will send us home tomorrow. I have heard nearly everybody out here speak of malaria in a jocular manner but I wish to go on record as saying that it is far from a laughing matter. Those chills, sweats and fevers give you one good workout.

When Gladys and I arrived here we promised ourselves that we would remember the things which interested us most in order that we could write letters more interesting than the "having a fine time-wish you were here type", but we failed to do so and I am afraid that the contents of my letters are almost trite for the things seem so matter of fact now. I think you would be interested in the plantation, or farm, for the prime purpose of everyone here is to produce rubber. Having developed the rubber trees to produce about four times what the wild trees did the first step is to plant seedlings to which are bud-grafter wood from the high producing stock. These grafted trees are then allowed to stay in the nursery for two years after which they are set out, or transplanted, on the farm. After six years they begin to produce and after twelve they reach their maximum production and no one knows the limit of time of usefulness. The trees are tapped by cutting a spiral strip of the outer bark each day allowing the latex to drip out in a cup, and each tree produces about one teacup of latex per day. This is collected and brought to a latex station, one of which is located

on each division of approximately 2000 acres. Here it is treated to prevent coagulation, then piped to tank trailers and hauled to the factory where it is reduced by centrifuges to a highly concentrated latex. The skim from the centrifuges is dried in thin sheets and used in the manufacture of tires while the higher grade concentrate is used in the manufacture of other rubber products requiring a superior latex.

The farm consists of 70,000 acres of rubber under cultivation and about another 30,000 acres of bush which has not yet been developed but which is steadily being cleared and planted. The appurtenant services require a large part of the staff since power must be generated, the 200 miles of roads maintained, houses built and repaired, a ~~garage~~ garage to assemble the cars as they are received and to maintain the hundred and fifty cars and trucks. In addition to this there are many stationary engines requiring service and about a thousand tons of materials, supplies and foodstuffs to be received from the ships, checked, stored and distributed. In addition to all of this we must keep the 20,000 native laborers supplied with rice and this amounts to around 12,000 pounds a day which must be issued. On my job alone, I have twelve trucks, fifteen stationary gasoline engines driving generators, pumps, tractors, crane, rock crusher and concrete plant. I also have 700 half savage blacks to house, feed and keep working. Praise Allah, I have six of the white staff to assist in this and the other hundreds of details that come up.

During March and April fishing is the favorite sport. I managed to hook a thirty pound barracuda and Gladys topped me off that day with a forty pounder. The record is about seventy pounds here but the snappers run much larger, the largest this year weighting about 160 pounds, caught by the company lawyer. We take the company launch and troll from the plantation to the ocean, a distance of about twelve miles. Spinners which mount a hook comparable in size to that used on a three ton chain hoist. With about a hundred yards of line out the fisherman wears heavy gloves to prevent burning of the hands should a big one strike. When they do strike the battle begins and the brutes have to be gaffed before they can be brought aboard. An occasional shark also adds a bit of zest to the sport.

Deer hunting is the next in line during the dark of the moon. As all of us are supplied with pick up trucks, one drives and the other rides the back with an electric head lamp adjusted for shooting position. When the deers eyes are shined the hunter signals the driver to stop by rapping on the cab roof. He then dismounts and goes into the rubber after the deer. Since these critters will not always stand it is usually a long walk to get with shooting range. This may seem somewhat unsporting, but when you consider that the eyes may belong to a bush cow (water buffalo) or leopard then it takes on an entirely different aspect. Both of these beasts are plentiful. My one experience with brother leopard cured me of any big game hunting ambitions. Fortunately the eyes, this time, were close enough for a shot from the car so I blasted away with a twelve gauge shotgun loaded with 00 buckshot. I might as well have had a pop-gun for that devil came out with the obvious intention of taking care of

of his tormentor. Naturally I gave the signal for full speed ahead, losing no time in doing so, and only wished that the Ford had a hundred horses under the hood instead of sixty. Since then I have taken great care to be sure the eyes are a deep red instead of yellow.

We have not yet become accustomed to walking out of the house and finding either a Cassava snake or horned viper coiled on the door step. Our house boys have killed several under the house and our next door neighbor killed a green mamba, the most vicious of all Liberian snakes, in his wood pile. The mambas, black and green, are of the cobra family, the black one being more or less timid and will do his best to get out of mans way while the green mamba will follow you just for the fun of striking. This is the only creature except the bush cow which will stalk a man. My first, and so far only, face to face encounter with deadly snakes, took place on the job. I was working late one night and when the concrete had been placed I thought I would go by the field office to complete some records. I started the generator for light, unlocked the door, switched on the light and in the middle of the floor was a six foot black mamba, coiled with his head about eighteen inches off the floor, cobra fashion. I suppose my efforts to attain full speed astern involved some shuffling of feet which scaredhim off. However, I am quite confident that I was out of the front door several seconds before he reached the back one. My office is right next to the bush and I can usually look out the window and see some sort of small animal. The monkeys are the biggest pests around the office with their chattering and squealing. I tried heaving stones into the trees and even stationed Bush Boy Charlie out back to pinch hit for me. The monkeys, however, became accustomed to this and kept on chattering and by that time I was used to them so we called it a draw. Our house is rather close to the bush and we have seen such varmints as the mongoose, bush cats and three foot lizards over the side of the hill. In fact, Shakey, our prize dog from the Charleston pound, treed a bush cat within a hundred yards of the house and it took all the boys to round him up. I am afraid one of these cats will take him apart some day for he high tails it into the bush every chance he gets.

The natives are probably the greatest source of amusement and worry that we have. The tales about them are better told than written but a general description might be interesting. They are small, friendly, and lazier than any Negro that you ever saw yet they do a surprising amount of work if a white man stands over them. They abandon their country, or native, names when they come to work and that is something for which we are all thankful. They assume any civilized name which strikes their fancy and also change it at will. Some of the names on my payroll are good. Aside from the may Africas, Liberias and Monrovias there are such names as Six Pence, Money Sweet, Rice Bag, Empty Bay, Twenty Five, Number Two(or any number as far as that goes), Wheelbarrow, Buzz Saw, Fine Boy and many others. Their adaptation of the English language is equally sensible. "Humbug" is worry, "chop" is food, "one time" and "just now" ar immediately, "vex" they use more or less corectly and Boss, Massa and Missey ar standard forms of address for white people. They eat any sort of meat from snake to elephant, the latter being con-

sidered quite a delicacy. Ben, our number one boy, met me one day with a smile from ear to ear and said "Massa, ~~mexicoidder~~ we brudder bring fine chop, he bring elephant meat, fine chop Massa, he stink plenty". I have no way of knowing whether it was good to eat or not but I know he was exactly right about the stink part for I had to make him hang it a hundred yards from the house. I sent him back for the tusks but never did get them. Incidentally, the site of my work is, according to the natives, an old breeding ground for elephants, the last herd having been seen about three years ago. I hope they do not decide to return.

The boys earn from seven pence to two or three shillings a day and this means, in American money at the standard rate of exchange, from fourteen to fifty cents a day. It seems small, and is, but when you consider that they can buy a weeks supply of rice for a shilling or cassave for four pence they really are not so bad off. The company furnishes houses and they have only wives and clothes to buy after food. They do go for fancy clothes and put most of their money in them for, when they are out of a job, the clothes are as sure means of raising money as working. They will spend a weeks wages for a belt even if they have nothing but a singlet to support. The women wear nothing above the waist and, if not on the roads, very little below it. When it rains all the boys will take off their clothes even if they are rags and stick them under cover while they stand in the rain stark naked and shiver.

And speaking of rains, boy, the heavens in this neck of the wood can drop more water per square inch than a fire hose. I thought I had seen some mighty fine examples of plain and fancy raining in my thirty odd years but the hardest thunder shower I have ever seen is just a sample of what we get for days at a time. It does not rain for a while and then sprinkle, it just rains constantly, maybe for days, and then clear off in thirty minutes. The record here is 180 inches in a year, and when you consider that this is practically a desert from the first of December to the last of April, that is raining. Sometimes it is as high a ten inches a day, believe it or not. I have learned two things out here, the first is to wear a helmet during the day, rain or shine, and the second is not to bend over to protect yourself from the rain, you might as well stand up and be comfortable for you will get just as wet in any position.

I had gathered from the movies and fiction that the native drums would drive the white man crazy in a short time but we have not yet gone off the deep end, quite. A native village about a half mile into the bush from our house is the favorite play place for the boys and, almost every night these drums pound away constantly into the wee small hours. I must admit they get monotonous but they hardly impair our sanity, maybe because we know they are friendly and merely having a good time devil dancing. These boys are natural born drummers and most of them could show any swing band drummer a trick or two. They dont have to have proper drums either, for they can get a mean syncopation from a piece of corrugated roofing and two forty penny nails.

You must be tired of this by now but since I had to start a new sheet to close I will continue until it is used up.

We were very much surprised at the houses and facilities the company supplies. There is no house rent and the company furnishes car, gasoline and maintenance, they have built two clubs (complete with bars selling all drinks for a shilling each), a golf course, six tennis courts, swimming pool and supply medical attention and hospitalization as well as lights, water and wood for the kitchen stoves. The houses are brick and set eight feet off the ground on concrete columns and beams. They are spacious and nicely furnished with maple reproductions and electric refrigeration. In the ~~dining~~ dining and living rooms the entire wall space is occupied by windows or rather french doors reaching clear to the floor which means that we can open up that part of the house to the extent of it being a screened in shed. These windows are nice in warm weather but just try to close a pair of them in a storm with water on the floor reducing the barefoot friction to a negligible quantity. And there are seven of them to close, seven pairs that is.

I believe this has covered the Liberian situation and, I am quite certain, tried your patience to the utmost. Never again, young fellow, say that I write sparingly even though this is, probably, the longest letter I ever composed. Pardon the poor typing for I am terrible at best and a bed tray is not the most stable of tables for the portable.

It looks as though "Uncle Rafe" will grow to manhood before he enjoys the acquaintance of his ~~cousin's~~ cousin but tell him that I will bring him a polar bear when I come home, the Germans permitting. Gladys joins me, from the other bed, in sending our best regards to you, Dimples and son. Both of you write to us when you have the time and give us all the news. You would be surprised how much letters from home mean when home is 4000 miles away.

Sincerely,

Milau

P.S. I have written most of the contents of this letter to Mother from time to time but I would like for you to pass it on to her as I may have here an item or so that I have not included in my letters to her.