The War Years

We had arrived in India during the beginning of the cool season in November and we would not be going to school until early March. Schools were located in the 'Hills' - our term for the lower Himalayan range including Darjeeling- to escape from the heat and the Monsoon. In keeping with the climate, school consisted of one term of nine months and a 'winter' holiday of three.

I had decided one winter to breed ducks as somebody had given me a pair of big white Aylesbury ducks. Of course they became pets and I didn't want them eaten. Though I did sell an Aylesbury to our neighbours to whom I rode over with the duck tucked underneath my arm. While I was a school I'd get these letters from home saying 'we're sorry but such and such duck died'. After a few months of this I twigged it was always my young ducks that 'died' never the old scrawny ones.

When Jane and I got tired of the doll's house games, we'd go behind the kitchen garden where the servants' houses were set up like a mini-village with the inevitable goats. Goat, after chicken, was their principle meat. Jane and I learnt the facts of life from the goats. And we would sneak off to watch a goat being ritually sacrificed for a Festival. It was tied with a complicated series of ropes that would hold it upright during the act, because it was important that it did not fall until it was dead And we loved to watch the Bobachee cut the heads off chickens on a block of wood outside the cookhouse because they would run around after their heads were cut off.

We kept an elephant and used it occasionally for fording rivers. It had a mattress contraption tied on its back with ropes. It wasn't suitable country for hunting from its back, for which we would had to have a howdah, so it mainly stood around eating its head off or hauling the odd tree. It took one coolie all day just to cut enough food for it.

After lunch - tiffin, as it was called - Jane and I took a forced nap which rarely involved napping. Everybody slept in the afternoon; the mid-day sun was much too strong in the Plains to do much else despite Noel Coward's song 'Mad Dogs and Englishmen go out in the Midday Sun'.

Later in the day we might try to round up some of the younger servants or the malis (gardeners) to play soccer with us, or we'd just explore. The Tea Gardens of the Plains are open, unlike the Assam Gardens where the jungle pressed in on you. So it was pretty safe to wander around and the two mongooses kept the garden fairly clear of snakes. I did step on a small cobra once, sunning itself on the gravel path. It shot off, more scared than I.

Daddy would end his day at teatime, at least in the winter months, and we'd all have an English tea together on the verandah. Afterwards we'd play croquet. In those first years Jane and I would have supper in the early evening then join our parents in the drawing room. Daddy would turn on the radio to hear the 6 o'clock news of the war in Europe.

Then he would read to us, bringing alive the wonderful stories of Rudyard Kipling. I still have the red, leather-bound set that he used. Our own reading leaned towards the Comics, or more correctly the Comic that came to us monthly and

the book series of Rupert Bear.

The highlight of the week was going to the Planter's Club at Mal on Wednesday afternoons. Daddy had the syce walk the two polo ponies over earlier in the day,


Jane and Ann dressed for the Club

so he could play polo. Mummy played tennis - there were clay courts at the Club. For Jane and I it was a chance to play with the other planter's children.
In the early days of the war we had a huge American car that guzzled gas. It was commandeered by the Army in return for a petrol allowance for our little Austin.

Mummy was the 2-time Bengal Women's Tennis Champion. The third time all the family had to watch as she made it to the semi-finals. I can remember Jane and I sitting there and fidgeting away, just wishing something would happen and it would all be over so we could go and play with our friends. And then she tripped and tore her Achilles tendon, which put her out of the Tournament. I felt so guilty, believing I'd wished it on her.

Once a month, if we were lucky, the clubhouse would be set up for the latest movie from England via Calcutta. The big projector was set up in the back of the room and the woven bamboo chairs were lined up in front of the screen. These squeaked all through the movie as people shifted around in them. Between each reel the grown-ups would refresh their drinks at the bar and chat to each other.

I only remember seeing two movies in all the years we were there. At one showing, the reels were shown out of order. Nobody realized we had seen reel #3 first until we were well into the next reel, which turned out to be #1 - and nobody cared!

Santa Claus also visited us at the Club with a gift for each child, I assume planned long ahead by the parents. Nobody could buy toys or suchlike on the spur of the moment. Everything had to be ordered from catalogues that came from the Army & Navy Store or Timothy White's and then be shipped up from Calcutta. This must have taken place before Christmas as we usually rented a Dak bungalow in the Forest. The forests in India were controlled and strictly patrolled by the Forestry Commission. Permits had to be obtained for shooting. There was a Season on game. Elephants were protected and Rhinos too, I believe.

The forests of Bengal all had Rides – dirt roads built through them -, which allowed for the patrols and also acted as fire brakes. The Dak bungalows, which were set on the edge of the forests for the use of game wardens and as a source of income for maintenance, were fairly spacious wooden houses on stilts with either a ditch and/or a high thorn and barbed wire fence around it, mainly to keep out curious elephants, leopards and tigers.

One Christmas we rented a Dak bungalow with some friends on the banks of the Jaldacca, a good fishing river. We took all our supplies and several servants on a lorry. Usually we would expect to get enough game and fish to keep us fed, as we had no refrigeration.

The men and Mummy loved to fish. Daddy was an expert fly fisherman and if the water was right could be counted on to catch a few trout. Unfortunately the most common fish is the mighty Mahseer. It fights like a salmon, but tastes like very bony cod that no camp cooking can disguise.

Our intention was to bag a couple of wild peacock, which taste somewhat like turkey, for Christmas dinner. We could hear them calling all around and I even saw a mating display by one cock. However they are hard to track, as they are ventriloquists. One of the hunters was calling a peacock which he thought was answering him from a bush, when out stepped another hunter who had heard him and been calling back.

We never did get a peacock; neither did we see any jungly morghis, the common wild fowl. Even deer were nowhere to be found. Among six guns, all they got were doves. Christmas dinner was dove pie. The wild dove were plentiful, very plump and tasty but not very festive. Needless to say, we always ended our meal with Christmas pudding, which Mummy had made some weeks before.

A shooting party, Jack front left

Our next Christmas at a different Dak bungalow was more successful and game was plentiful but it was to be the last for the duration of the war. Daddy was on the Manipur road for the Christmas of ’42.

Jane and I spent most of our time playing in the river, sometimes going out with the guns for the jungli morghi. I’m sure there were presents on Christmas Day but they don’t linger in my memory like the pools and rapids of the river and the jungle creatures of the night.

However, we made many day trips, and sometimes weekend trips, to the Jaldacca. In the winter it flowed peacefully in small streams over a wide riverbed of white pebbles, which became a raging torrent in the Rains. Everybody in India was used to the rivers becoming un-fordable then – except by elephant.

The Jaldacca was a tributary of the Teesta, which in turn was a tributary of the Bramaputra. The Teesta flowed between our Garden and the road to Siliguri and Darjeeling. The Jaldacca was the grown-ups favourite river. We usually took the truck and servants with a picnic lunch. We’d drive upstream, where we’d be dropped off with our rubber dinghies. The driver would take the truck to a prearranged point where lunch was set up.

The dinghies were air-sea rescue dinghies. I don’t know how we acquired them. They had a canvas slung underneath, which acted as a keel, but more importantly protected the boat from the inevitable rocks we’d hit in the rapids. We’d come ashore at a pool below the rapids and the grown-ups would fish. We’d continue like this till we reached the lunch spot. I loved the ride – the giddy sliding though the rapids - but hated it if the fish were dumped into the bottom of the boat. However, usually

they were trailed in the water to keep them fresh.

The servants set up a folding table, with white tablecloth and captain's chairs, china, glass and silverware – it was before the days of plastic, which I'm not sure we'd have used anyhow. I think we were served cold meats and salad or the fish were grilled over a pit fire – I don't ever remember eating sandwiches.

Jane and I preferred the Chel River, which formed one boundary of Ranicherra. Daddy was aware that standing water was the ideal breeding ground for mosquitoes but knew they were unable to breed in water that runs more than 6mph. He invented a sluice that worked on water pressure and he had these built at intervals across the various streams on the Garden. As the sluice emptied the rush of water would clean out the larvae from backwaters. When he realized how effective they were, he showed this simple device to other planters and several of them installed sluices wherever they had a stream.

For us, the sluices had the advantage of creating a pool behind them for swimming. However, this is where I developed a phobia for fish. The tiddlers would come up behind and suck on your legs. I hated this. In my mind I put it together with the Grimm's tale of "The Boy who Learnt to Shudder " whose father had poured a bucket of minnows over him as he slept.

For Daddy, the Chel provided reasonably good fishing near at hand, though nothing so exciting as the Jaldacca. The Chel also was the boundary of a 9-hole golf course built on the Garden land. It had a small Clubhouse, mainly for the convenience of the golfers, who met once a month or so, to play. Of course, Mummy could play more often and did which may have helped her to become the Bengal Women's golf champion, adding this to being the Bengal Women's tennis champion and the Rifle champion as well.

Though war was being waged in Europe it didn't affect us in the first years. Every evening we listened to the BBC broadcasts and, like all the British, got to recognize the name and voice of every announcer as they introduced themselves at the beginning of each program as a protection against false newscasts...."This is Alvar Liddel..." Of course, we also recognized the voice of Winston Churchill and his peculiar pronunciation of the Nazis as 'Nar-sis' as he gave his stirring speeches of encouragement.

The Christmas season of 1939 started the tradition of having a treasure hunt on my birthday, December 15. Christmas day was a family affair. New Year's Day we would have 12 people to lunch and a tennis tournament in the afternoon. Jane and I acted as ball boys along with the servant's children.

Come February of 1940 Jane and I headed up to school in Darjeeling, the "place of the thunderbolt". Darjeeling was the hill station for the Governor of Bengal and all the ICS (Indian Civil Service) people who could get away from the stifling heat

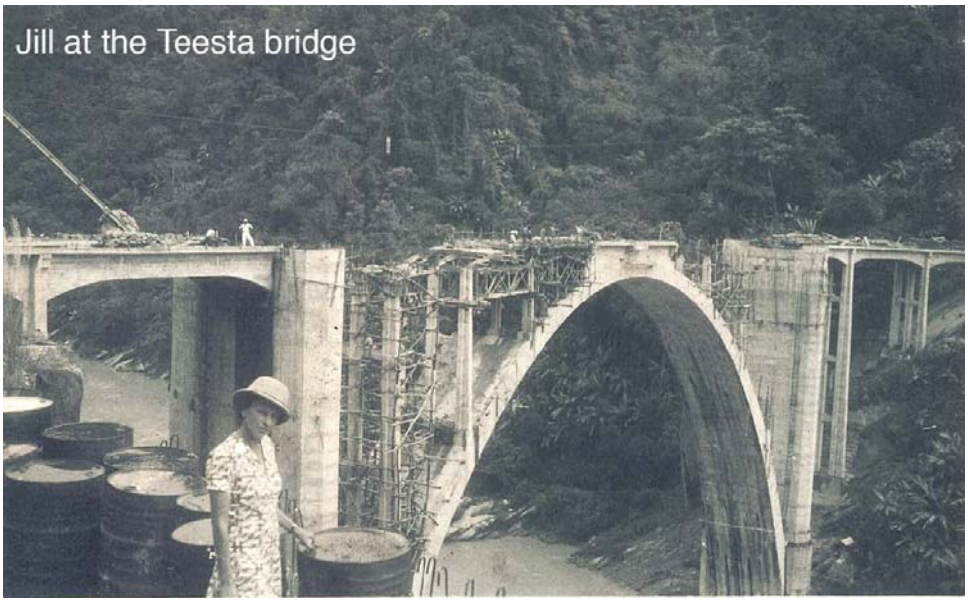
of the Rains in the Plains. The Maharajah of Birdwan has a summer palace there.

Consequently it had many nice homes and an active social life, in which, of course, mere schoolchildren did not participate.

The trip up took about 4 hours; so we packed a lunch – well, let's admit the cook prepared a fairly elaborate cold lunch! We'd usually eat it at the Teesta river. There we would cross on the pontoon ferry at Rydak and join the road to Siliguri again.

This added about an hour to the trip.

In a couple of years the construction of the Teesta bridge would begin. It was the highest, longest, one-span bridge in the world – and one of the most beautiful bridges I have even seen. It was an awe-inspiring sight to look down on the gorge.



So then we would stop for lunch at the edge of the bridge.

The drive up to Darjeeling was prolonged torture for Jane and me, though the road itself, built in 1839, was always kept in great repair. There are thirty-six

hairpin bends, plus plenty of curves as we wound around the hills, going ever higher. Not only that, there were shallow indents in the road to channel the run-off in the rains, which added a switchback effect. The average trip saw us being sick at least five times.

If only we'd been able to enjoy the scenery! The hills were aflame with the Flamboyant trees. One could see into the valleys below and the Himalayas would appear and disappear from view.
We would drive the relatively straight road to Kurseong, the foothill station, where every car was given a chitty (note) telling how many cars and trains you would

meet on the way up so you could observe this rule:

***Cars give way to Trains, Down gives way to Up*.**

The train from Siliguri, with its two-foot wide tracks, used the same road. But it snaked across it at various points where the gradient was too steep, or looped the loop, as it chuffed its way slowly up to Darjeeling. When you arrived at the last checkpoint you handed in your chitty. It was all very well organized. Of course, it wasn't a very heavily travelled road in those days.

The school term went from mid February to mid October with a three-week break in the middle. A lot of small makeshift schools had been set up for the British children who had been brought back to India because of the war. I think there were ten of us; boys and girls, living and learning together in the first school we went to there. Jane lived in a house next door with other kindergarten aged children.

Ann & Jane with Edward in Darjeeling

We came back to Ranicherra in early October to enjoy the usual round of Winter events before returning to school in March 1941.

Jane went back to my previous school for one more year, which now concentrated on younger children. By then, schools were better organized and I went to a new school called Singamari.

Singamari was a large house, probably once private, on a promontory looking down into a valley and across to the Himalayan range of Kanchenjunga. Again it was co-ed but we had proper classrooms for each age group and teachers for all subjects.

The Jesuits had set up Prep schools for boys in many places in India. Most of the students were Indian or Anglo-Indian. The one in Darjeeling was called St Joseph's. Nuns, not to be out-done, set up similar schools for girls. St Mary's in Darjeeling was on the next bend of the hill from Singamari. This was fortuitous for us, as St Mary's had a hockey pitch, two tennis courts and a badminton court, which we could use. It also meant we had two schools for sports competition.

There were many English children there from all kinds backgrounds, not just planters, and it was co-ed too. That gave us the opportunity to play soccer, which I really enjoyed, and field hockey. We had pretty good mixed teams and played against the two well-established schools; hockey against St Mary's and soccer against St Joseph's – or maybe St Paul's, which was another recent prep school. They had many more students and I don't remember ever winning a game against either of them.

We were not supposed to play strenuous sports for the first three weeks to allow us to acclimatize to the elevation. Darjeeling's highest point was the Observatory on Tiger Hill, at 7,000 ft. It loomed to the back of Singamari, which was about 200 ft lower. never felt the effect of the altitude. Despite this ban, we were expected to do PT every morning and to go for a hated mile-long walk, in crocodile formation, every Sunday round Birch Hill

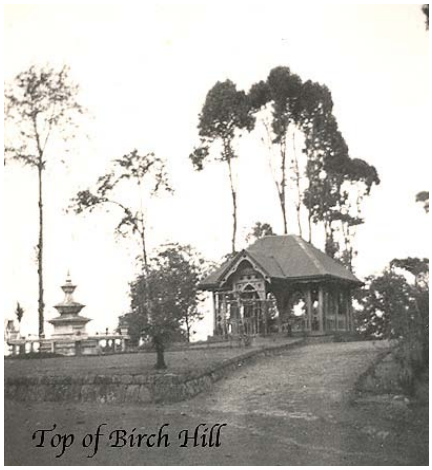
The highlight of the week was when we went every Wednesday afternoon to the Roller Skating rink in town. It was a wonderful rink made of narrow wood planks

laid in a curve around the oval ends of the rink. This allowed one to corner at full speed.

Now I can't believe how we could jump over 3 kneeling people without causing any accidents. Sometimes pupils from one of the other schools would come skating on the same afternoon. We resented this and it was the cause of many battles, which involved the of skimming bottle tops under the skates of our rivals. This did cause some nasty falls and lots of splinters. Having given up trying to ban it, days on the rink were strictly separated by school. Our big treat was being allowed to buy cones of fried chips, which we smothered in tomato sauce and ate during rests, as they were forbidden on the rink.
At school itself space was limited. There was no lawn to speak of though there was a patch of clover we used to search for four-leaf clover. Somewhere I have a photo of my best friend Pat Hollis bending intently over the lawn. (Pat later married a sugar cane planter in South Africa and lives fairly near Jane.)

Our favourite game was marbles, which we played with intensity. The winner kept the loser's marbles. Shooters were prized and protected. If one could get a soda bottle marble, which was slightly larger than a regular marble, it was prized above all. Soda bottle marbles were obtainable only if a soda water bottle exploded while it was being filled.

We had a soda-making machine at Ranicherra. It was a gas cylinder with a wire cage attached which held four bottles of water. This was whirled around with a handle. When sufficient gas was forced into the bottle the marble trapped in the neck would close the opening. If too much gas was used the bottles would explode. Alas, our servant was much too good at it and only one bottle ever exploded that I knew of.


Top of Birch Hill

Sunday was the day for walking after church. We were formed into a crocodile and made to walk at fast pace around the base of Birch Hill for a good hour.

Luckily these roads were not steep but rather zigzagged up the hill in hairpin bends. This allowed us to slide rapidly from one bend to another when we could get away with it.

The food, as in most boarding schools, was awful. I particularly remember the porridge at breakfast. It always had short bits of coloured wool in it – khaki, navy,

mid blue… we called it ‘knitting for the forces’. If you didn’t finish your food it was served to you at the next meal. I once rebelled over some disgusting ox liver and refused for a day to eat it. I won the battle, as by the next day it was bad.

Mummy got permission to take Jane out of school to go to Gantok. The school would not let me go as I was about to take exams.

(Gantok was the starting off point for many of the Himalayan Expeditions)

Before the school year ended, everything in India changed with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the US entry into the war. The Japanese followed up the attack with the invasion of an unprepared Singapore and Burma – and suddenly India was threatened.

Many of the young tea planters who already belonged to the volunteer corps of the Northern Bengal Mounted Rifles joined up, mostly with the Chindits under “Mad” Major Wingate.