

24 Dec 1944

Dear Mum, Dad and Tom,

I think this is going to be the longest letter I have written because I'm such a lot to tell you as there were no censorship facilities in Kalimpong, so when I had used up the two "on leave" envelopes I had to wait until I got back to the unit today before I could get a letter away home.

First of all, let me say that this leave is by far the best one I have spent abroad for a lot of reasons which I will tell you as I go along.

I will start from when I got back to the unit about 17th of November and after which I was granted 24 days. I immediately sent off a telegram to Mr & Mrs Duncan at Graham House, Kalimpong with whom Harold had been staying, as I had had a letter from them say that Mrs Duncan would be pleased to have me at any time. I think I told you that the telegram arrived without any date on it with the result that when I did arrive no one was expecting me, because the second telegram saying I was definitely coming didn't arrive until three hours after I did. However, I'm jumping ahead too fast.

I arrived in Calcutta by road OK on the 21st and went round to a Leave Centre. I knew one of the Sergeants on the staff there as he used to be in our regiment until he was rather badly injured at Kennedy Peak last year when he had an accident with his gun. However, he was regraded and seems okay now. He put me up for a couple of days when I was waiting for the answer to my telegram to Mrs Duncan. It came about two days later saying she would be very pleased to fix up accommodation for me, so I sent off my second one saying I hope to arrive the afternoon of the 25th. I then went along and made my reservations to Kalimpong for the night of the 24th. I saw one or two films in Calcutta and duly departed on the 24th. The journey up was made first on the standard gauge railway and then about 40 miles from Kalimpong you change to the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway which has a gauge of about 2 feet. Try measuring 2 feet in the kitchen table. It is one of the funniest things I've seen yet.

The width the train itself is about 5 to 6 feet so you can imagine the overhang. Needless to say it seldom exceeded at 20 miles an hour but that didn't detract from the pleasure of the run. In fact, had it exceeded 20 miles an hour it would have caused some anxiety. After about 20 miles on this railway during which it climbs very gently up the valley of the River Teesta we eventually arrived at the terminus from which you we had to make a fifteen mile journey by road up hills of one in two right up to the mountaintops. The Teesta Valley is very pretty. It is very narrow and the mountains rising sheer up on either side and covered with thick jungle. In the monsoon it is a raging torrent but was pretty low just now. It winds so much that you almost think you're coming back to where you started from. Every 2 miles or so there is a very small station, at each of which there are literally thousands and thousands of oranges piled up in mounds from the orange plantations nearby, waiting to be dispatched to Calcutta and other markets. You can buy baskets of 150 or so for about three shillings. Does that make your mouth water? There was a small military vehicle waiting for us so we didn't have to be fleeced by the taxi drivers. We arrived up at about two so and made my way up to Graham House.

I think it would be best if I tried to explain Kalimpong to you, so you will have an idea what I'm meaning later on. The village itself is set in a sort of dip about 500 feet below and between the two topmost peaks in the local mountain range. The residential parts are on the slopes of both of these peaks which face the village. On the one peak are all the Homes, schools and people connected thereto, and on the other are the two hotels and the houses of practically all the civilians who are not connected with the Homes. The place is so situated that both sides of the village where people stay receive the sun.

I had nothing whatsoever to do with the other side of the town, as all the civilians to whom I was introduced and to whose homes I was invited lived on the Homes side of the town. The other side is mainly populated by retired civilians from India etc. It is about 2 miles up a fairly steep slope to the centre of the Homes area, on Delo Hill as it is called, but there is a footpath which runs down near the top of the range which cuts it down to about 1½ miles.

The St Andrews Colonial Homes were founded about 1900 by a Dr Graham who must have been a very fine gentleman. He foresaw the need for such a place to take these homeless Anglo Indian and often illegitimate children and in addition to give them a proper education and believe me it is a proper one too. There are about 500 to 600 children there, about half and half girls and boys although nowadays about 25 to 50% are legitimate and owned and accepted by their parents. But there are some very sad stories about the other ones.

However there are about 20 cottages as they are called, in which the children live, each of which has been bequeathed by someone or other. Each cottage holds about 30 children I think there eight 8 boys and 8 girls cottages and infant and senior ones. Probably less than 20 altogether. Each cottage is in the charge of two ladies, a housemother and the house auntie. Can you imagine having 30 boys or 30 girls to look after and keep out of mischief? Their ages range from about 6 to 12 in the normal cottages. The elder boys do the housework, gardening cooking etc under the house mother's supervision but all the boys have various jobs to do. All the people connected with the Homes are missionaries but they don't wear flowing robes or anything like that.

The infants' cottage is under the supervision of Miss Peglar about whom more later. She has sole charge of about 12 nurses, about eight babies and 20 - 30 children under 5. Poor Miss Peglar; I don't know how they don't drive her crazy but she's stuck it so far for 15 years.

The elder boys letters from 12 to 16 or 17 all stay in Fraser cottage which is the most senior one, and there they stay to take the junior and senior Cambridge certificate examinations (the papers for which incidentally have to be sent to England for correction). If they pass they take jobs in India. I had a great time with these lads, especially the ones who are left behind and nowhere to go when their friends went home for Christmas. There is no senior girls' cottage. They either stay in their own cottage until they get a job or go in for a two year nursing course with Miss Peglar at 'Lucia King' cottage as nurses at the Homes Hospital.

Some of them take domestic science courses in Calcutta etc and I believe quite a number go to the dominions, especially Australia to take jobs as stenographers.

The homes altogether take up about an area of 2 square miles as the cottages are spaced over the hillside, about 200 – 300 yards apart, each with their own huge gardens and all are connected throughout by gravel paths.

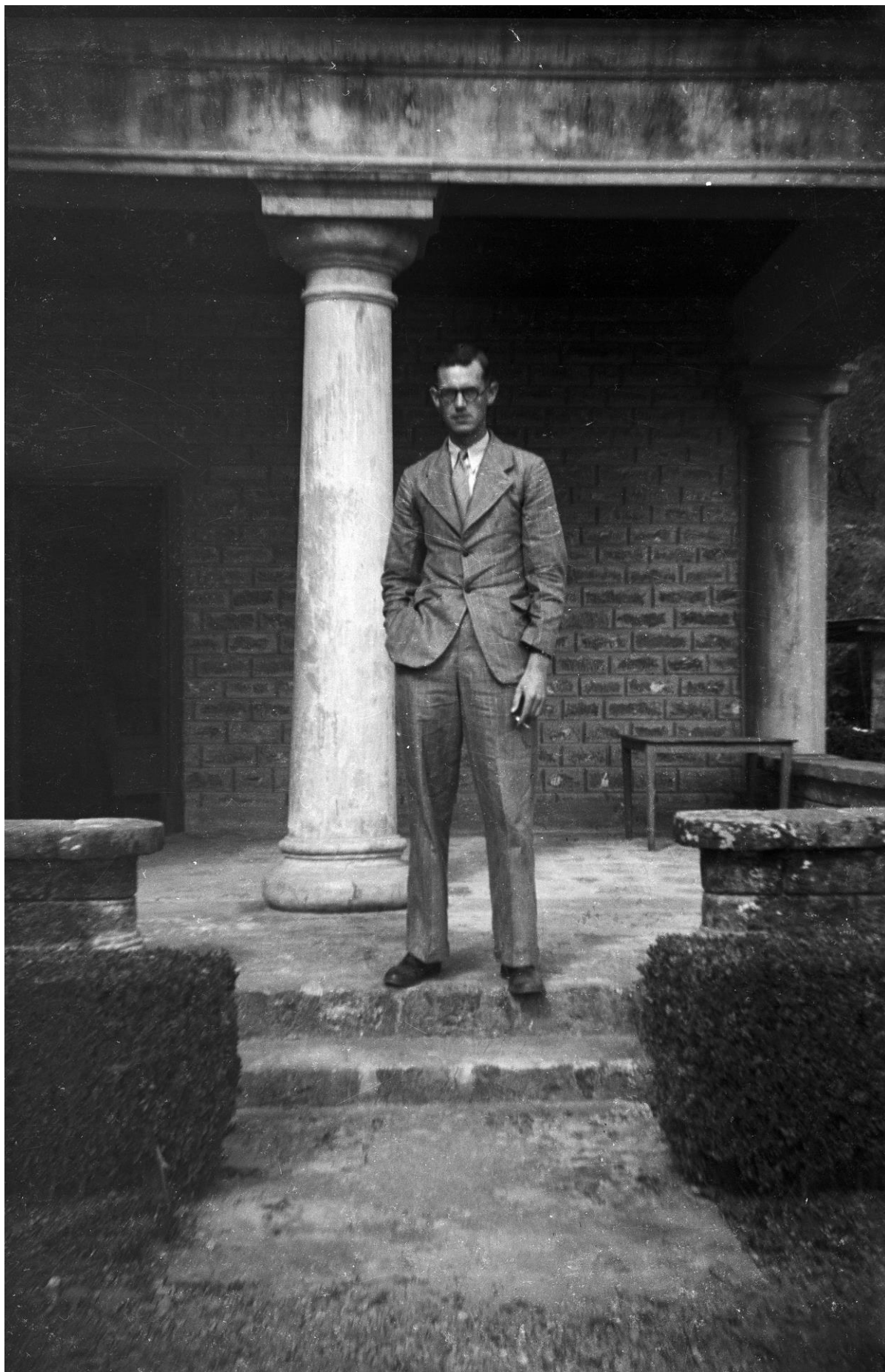
Near the top of Deolo hill there is a huge clearing on which the school is situated. It lies on the top of the ridge and is on the way up if you know what I mean. I took 16 photographs altogether which is the film I could get and on one of these you will see the school and the church. My back was to the village when I took it. I tried to get photographs or postcards of everywhere but they are practically unobtainable owing to the paper shortage (film paper I mean). Looking out to the left of that photograph you get a wonderful view. The mountain drops sheer down in front of you and towering high above the next ridge in front of you. If the weather is clear, you get the most truly magnificent view of Kinchinjunga and all the other snow capped peaks in the highest mountain range of all. There were only two days on which the view was totally clear of clouds and on both these days I hadn't a camera. Was I annoyed! My own, which I lent to one lad to go on leave with, before I went in to hospital was very kindly brought back safely and taken away by another fellow who happened to be still away when I left on leave. I was rather annoyed about that, but managed to hire one from a photographer in Kalimpong but not until halfway through my leave. Unfortunately I could only get two films. They were a different type from the ones you sent before unfortunately. I could have used 20 films without duplicating anything. On top of the hill which you can see in the photograph there are reservoirs but very little else. You can see one cottage up the hill to the right. Quite large buildings they are, white with red roofs. In the photograph the whole of the buildings on the right are the school minus the kindergarten which I couldn't get in. The tennis courts are for the staff as each cottage practically has a makeshift tennis court attached to it. The holiday home where I stayed for the last 10 days of my 24 is round to the right of the hill in the photograph about half a mile further up. I have managed to get copies of one film done Mum so I will enclose these in this letter and explain them to you now. The second one is of Mr & Mrs Duncan on the porch of Graham House.



The third is of their staff, the two bearers are for serving meals etc at left and right, second from the left the sweeper, next the 'bobje' or cook, then the gardener and lastly in front, the odd job man.



The fourth one is yours truly in his curry suit and tie.



My suit wasn't as shiny as it looks, and my shoulders are not as humped as that. Although you can't see it, I was leaning slightly forward which makes them look that way. Apart from that it's me!

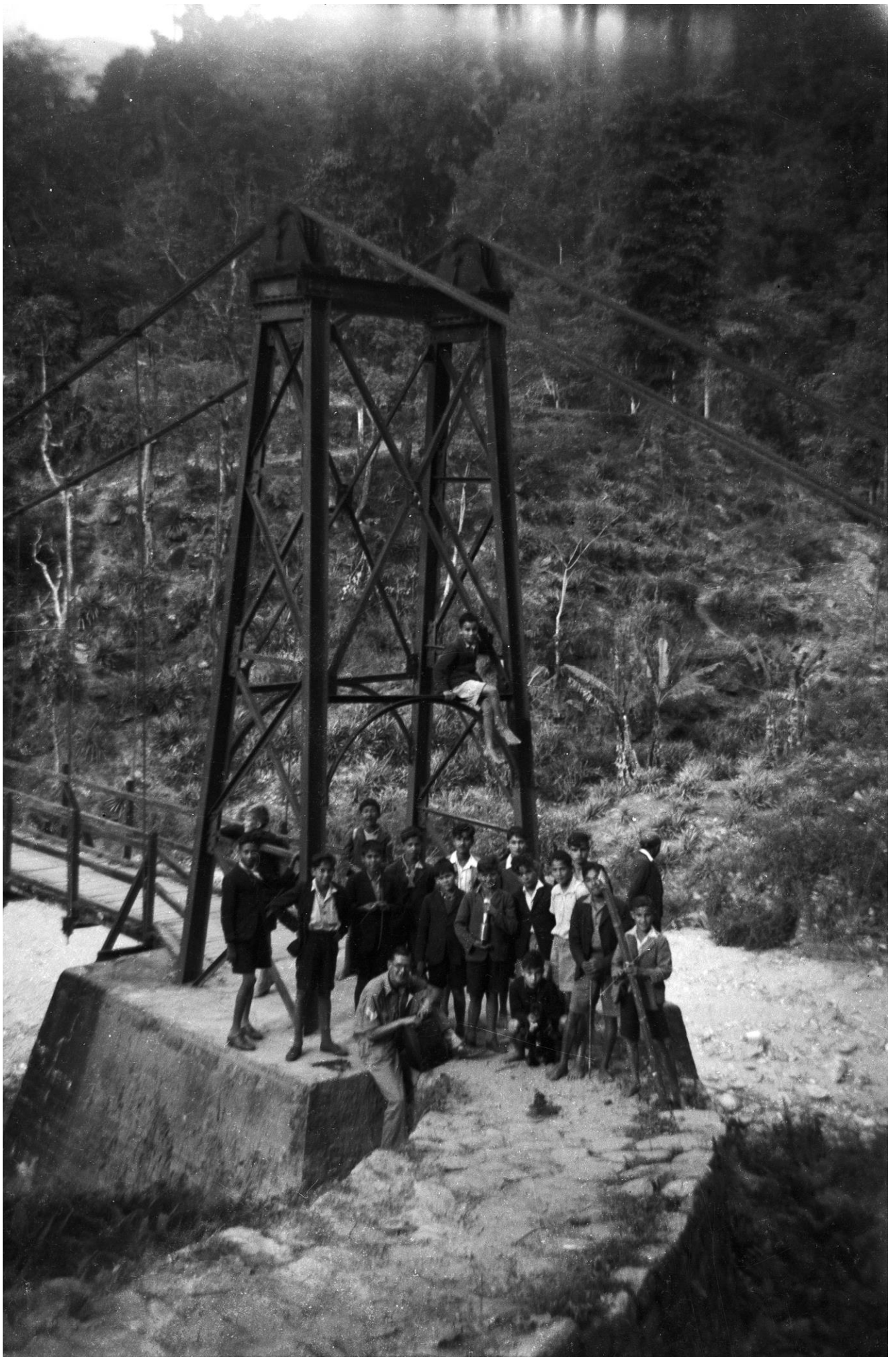
The fifth photograph is of a Nepalese wedding which we saw up there.



They were the two sons of the head bearer of the holiday home (not Mrs Duncan's). A double wedding it was. The two boys were 12 and 14 and you can see them with the chains around their necks, one at either end of the front row. The two girls were 9 and 11. The one who is 9 is sitting third from the left, all wrapped up. No wonder! She was not in the least interested in her wedding poor kid. She had a temperature of 104 and was in the fifth day of measles. Aren't they terrible! They would not put her in the hospital because it would spoil the wedding! They all get married about that age in Nepal and generally throughout India it is the same. The band was hired all pukka too. Can you see one part of it at the right hand side – yes, your eyes are not deceiving you. There was a man there with bagpipes. Can you see him at the extreme right? The other band is not in the picture. It consisted of about 6 men with horns and the music is beyond description. If you could imagine about 6 Indian bands like you hear on the wireless all playing at once you will get some idea what it sounded like. However, they thought it was wonderful although I expect by 2 or 3 days later more than the 9 year old bride will have the measles. The next photograph is of a lad I met up there in

the RAF. His name was Jimmy Burton and he is a male nurse. The other two photographs are taken on a picnic I went with some of the boys from Fraser House were who left behind.





The one I'm in was taken at the end of the suspension bridge over the Rhyllay river, the other one was taken almost underneath the bridge at the bathing rock.

Then I come back to when I arrived. I reached Graham House about 2 and of course they didn't know me from Adam. However, they were very nice and put me up right away. I had a lovely double bedroom with bathroom attached. Absolute luxury! Tea and toast in bed at 7, breakfast at 8, tiffin at 1230, tea at 4 and dinner at 730. I was made very very comfortable indeed.

Mrs Duncan only came out in June 1944 although Mr Duncan I think was born in Darjeeling. Mrs Duncan only came out for the first time in June. His father and mother are missionaries in Darjeeling. They came from Edinburgh. She used to live in Churchill somewhere before she was married. They worked in Glasgow for some time just before they came out. The Gorbals I think it was.

The first week I knocked about with a flight lieutenant in the RAF who was also staying with Mrs Duncan. The first two days or so I was rather at a loss because I didn't know anybody but after that I was ok. Being the superintendant Mr Duncan always had someone to dinner, either members of the staff or visitors to their homes. So it wasn't long before I had been introduced to a lot of people. For the first week or so I knocked about with this flight lieutenant and we used to walk down to the bazaar every morning and back for tiffin. In the afternoon we used to go for walks etc and generally got to know some of the people. The school that week of course was still open as they didn't close until 11 December. Mr & Mrs Duncan as you can well imagine were very busy all of the time. Whenever any lads or girls were going anywhere or leaving for jobs they were always invited to breakfast the day they were going. In addition, all the children whose birthdays arrived on a certain day used to come to tea or something like that. In addition, the nurses when they had a half-day once a month were invited up for tea. Some of the nurses and children when they were leaving for good used to stay for perhaps 3 or 4 days or more.

After the first two days as I say I really got started. Each one of the Christmas parties which each cottage held before the school broke-up sent out an invitation to yours truly. I thought it was very kind of them indeed as I was usually the only serviceman there, sometimes 2 or 3 but not much more. I had great fun. They all started off with a colossal feed and knowing

boys, you can imagine what that was like. The tables were all joined together and piled high with hundreds and hundreds of cakes and sandwiches so that it was almost impossible honestly to see the tablecloth. In about 30 minutes there was nothing to be seen but empty plates. That happened every time. After that we had the Grand Old Duke of York to start off the party games. More than once I had visions of sponge cake repeating but thankfully nothing happened any time. The party games were good. One game they had is where everyone got a strip of paper. They were all in well known pairs! For example, one of the papers would have Anthony and somebody would have Cleopatra, another was Robert the Bruce, somebody else in the room with the spider. After you had found your partner you had to go outside and come in afterwards and act a silent charade. I was the spider one so the boy I had as a partner and myself came in. He had to try 7 times to climb up a chair while I watched attentively. We must have done it pretty well because everybody guessed it right away. After that we had a lot of the normal party games, some of which I hadn't seen before.

All round we had grand fun. Altogether we had about 16 parties. Before Mr Styles (the flight lieutenant) left he wanted to go round a cottage so he and I went round Heathland cottage of which Miss Prentice was house mother. But more about Miss Prentice later. She comes from Edinburgh and is due to go home about February. I have got her address and asked her if she would like to come and see you. She said she would be delighted. She is very nice indeed, about 35 or so and she has had a handful right enough. They do a 5 year tour abroad then they get a month's leave to go home. If they want to come out again for a further 5 they can. She tells me there is a lady who stays at 48 Eyre Place who is a retired house mother. I'm afraid I don't remember her name but if you would like to go round and see her I'm sure she would be delighted to see you. Was Mrs McDonald her name?, maybe not.

Anyway, one day in my second week I was introduced to Miss Belcher, the housemother of Fraser, the senior boys' cottage. She is very nice too and has been out since 1934. Five years ago, at the outbreak of war, she was due to come home but owing to the war had to get her leave in South Africa instead. She introduced me to the Fraser boys and from then on, I knocked about with them a lot. They were a great lot. I had a lot of fun with them. One thing I shall never forget and that is the genuine politeness of all the boys and girls in the homes. After I had been introduced to any of the cottages, the boys always addressed me with 'Good morning sir' or whatever time of day it was and that was the same until I left.

The church services, especially those before the school broke up, almost used to bring a lump to my throat. If you can imagine about 600 children singing the hymns, really as if you meant it, you will understand what I mean. At the end of the second week, about Thursday, the senior nurse at Lucia King cottage, a girl named Phyllis Clyde, came to stay with the Duncan's. She was staying for a few days for a holiday before going to a job in Darjeeling. She is about 19 and was a very sensible girl. She is actually a Scots Nepalese. Her father married a Nepalese girl. She had a young brother John, about 10, and a young sister called Shirley. Shirley had a bad fall when she was young and hurt her back, poor kid, so is at present in hospital in Calcutta having a recurrence of the sore back. I went to see her on the way back. She is a lovely kid about 12 but I think she has hurt her spine a bit; she was very cheery though but I will tell you all about that further on.

Anyway, Phyllis came to stay with Mrs Duncan and as Mr Styles had gone, we knocked about quite a bit. It was she who introduced me to Miss Peglar, the matron of Lucia King. Phyllis had been there of course for two years. I shall not forget my first visit to Lucia King cottage. All the children shouted all the time if you know what I mean, they are all under 5 of course. As half of them at least don't know their fathers, I was somewhat embarrassed at the beginning by having about 15 children start calling me daddy. Poor kids, they don't know what it is to have a daddy. However, Miss Peglar tactfully intervened and told them they were to call me 'uncle' so from then on, uncle I was. That wasn't quite as bad but it did make me feel very old. I was asked to play nursery rhymes and Christmas carols for the children during tea. I took 6 photographs altogether at Lucia King but as the nurses and Miss Peglar were all in them, I had to give them all away. However, I have sent the negatives away for further prints so hope to send you them a bit later. The prints as far as I can remember are

(1) one of Phyllis and John,



(2) one of Phyllis with the baby girl who is a special charge for over a year,



(3) one of Miss Peglar with one of the babies and one of the nurses with another baby,



(4) one of Phyllis, John and another Edinburgh minister's daughter and Scot age 11 from Howe Street, and Buff, the Duncan's Siamese kitten,



(5) one of the Lucia King children on the chute,



(6) one ditto with Miss Peglar,



(7) one of the children on the jungle gym as it is called with Miss Peglar at the back,



(8) one of the children on the Lucia King pony. I will send them on as soon as I can.



Miss Peglar invited me down almost every day after that, either for tea or supper. Phyllis was well known around there, she certainly had a way with the infants. One day on the way down to the market she took me to see 5 babies altogether, two of them were twins. I'm afraid both twins immediately burst in to tears whenever I looked at them, I didn't think I was that ugly.

On the Saturday when I left the Duncan's to go to the holiday home, the lady organist left for home so I will leave you to guess what happened. Yes. Mr Duncan asked me to play the organ for the two services, 10am and 4pm on the breaking-up Sunday. It was a 3 manual one, pumped up by an Indian. I'm afraid I kept him hard at it because for some of the popular hymns I had all the stops out which caused him to perspire a bit. However, I think I managed OK although the voluntaries caused me some trouble. I must have done quite well because I was asked to play again the Sunday before I left. I thoroughly enjoyed playing and Mr Duncan was most profuse in his thanks.

On the Monday after the first Sunday I played, there was a grand prize-giving and concert for the breaking-up. It was really a very good concert and was very well done considering there was nobody in it older than 16. I was down in the market almost every day as there was a measles and mumps epidemic on and all the children and nurses were quarantined all the time I was there. Phyllis had to do a lot of shopping for Miss Peglar and the nurses as they were not allowed out themselves.

Miss Peglar's favourite was a little girl of 5 called Joan Dunn. She was an orphan who persisted throughout in calling me 'daddy'. One day when she was having her bath, she asked Miss Peglar for the lifebuoy soap wrapper. Miss Peglar asked what she wanted it for but she just said 'for a friend'. While later I was duly presented with a lifebuoy soap wrapper. She was much too young to realise the inference behind the gift of soap but I thought it was rather nice of her, as she had absolutely nothing to give of her own.

After the school broke up on the Monday about a week before I left about 50% of the children went home for Christmas. I was rather sorry for those who were left behind but I think they will have quite a good time.

I suggested to Mrs Duncan that I might be allowed to take some of the boys from Fraser House for a picnic on the Friday, so it was duly arranged. Actually they took me. We

decided to go to the river Rhyllay (the place in the photographs). Kalimpong is about 4,200 feet above the Rhyllay river which is about 200 feet, so you can imagine it. It seems to be a homes' tradition when going on a picnic to rush there as fast as you can. We did the 5 miles down there in about an hour and a half. You should have seen me leaping from rock to rock (like a stag at bay – no that's not quite right – like a young foal). Anyway, it was as bad as any jungle course I've done. They told me that they do it every second day but Miss Belcher thought they were exaggerating a bit. However, they do about 15 mile picnics twice a week or so. It is a tradition by the way, and no disgrace whatsoever, that all the children walk about in bare feet and the soles of their feet are as tough as shoe leather.

One boy whom I did like very much was Herbert Speed. He is one of the oldest in Fraser and sat his junior Cambridge exam this December. In the photo taken on the rock he is the second from the right of the 5 sitting and in the photograph of the suspension bridge, the one right at the back behind the fellow whose eye is covered by the bamboo pole. We had a great time there. The boys all bathed in the pool but I'm afraid it wasn't deep enough for my lanky form. We left about 2.45 to climb back up the 5 miles and eventually arrived at about 5.30, tired but happy. Herbert Speed had the whole thing organized, the biscuit tin to boil the tea in and everything. The boys behaved very well indeed and although I half imagined I might have to chase some of them out of the orange plantations, I had no need to as they were on their best behaviour. We had a great business with Miss Belcher counting how many there were before we left. However, we started with 20 and returned with 20 so I think everything was OK.

Phyllis left for Darjeeling on the Thursday after the prize giving. She is a very nice girl indeed but don't you go thinking anything! After many days with Fraser boys at tennis my holiday eventually came to an end and I was due to leave the following morning which was the Monday. There were about 5 of us going on the Monday and we had each sort of made individual arrangements for the military truck to pick us up but unfortunately the whole thing fell through and the truck never arrived. The result was that the whole lot of us missed the bus and had to wait until the next day. On the Monday then we went down to Miss Peglar's again and she had an idea! Could we help to put up the Christmas decorations for the kids? Sure we could and we stayed there until 11.30pm. All she could offer was 3 tables and an old pair of rickety stepladders. And what a time we had! It was I who did all the climbing as unfortunately I was the tallest. The first part wasn't so bad, I had 3 tables on top of each other and I had to fix 4 chains up with a bell right at the centre. The nurses told me they did it

last year but I don't know how as it took me all my time to reach the roof let alone press the drawing pins in. However I managed OK. The 4 corners were worse as I had to use the rickety stepladders. Three of the corners I had something to hold on to but the 4th there was just bare wall. You know how you start to unconsciously lean forward when you descend? Well I did, toppled over, kicked Burton on the nose and landed on the floor unhurt. We started about 8pm long after all the children were in bed and at 9 the nurses were sent off to bed by Miss Peglar so we really got started. We hung decorations from the lights, walls, doors etc until we had them all up. We eventually said goodnight to Miss P at about 11.30.

The next morning about 9am before I left at 10.30 I ran down to Lucia King to see how the decorations looked in daylight. The kids were altogether amazed and couldn't understand it. Bare rooms the night before and all this in the morning. Miss P told them that two of Father Christmas's friends had come. She didn't say we came on reindeer, that I know of anyway, but personally I'm glad I did not come on one.

After being round saying goodbye to everyone I eventually left at 10.30 with half of Fraser cottage seeing me off.

The journey down was uneventful. When I got to Calcutta I got some sweets and posted them up to Fraser and Lucia King as they are almost unobtainable there. I hope they will arrive by Christmas Day.

Now Mum I think I said I had sent off 32oz of wool (Tibetan). I hope you are able to use it and save a coupon or two. The dress material nowadays is absolute rubbish so I have not sent any. There is a Tibetan bag maker, however, in Kalimpong who made some very nice bags using leather which appear to be much better than the ordinary. Now I hope you like the two I have had made. One is for you Mum which is square, double-pocketed, brown with your initials on it. The other is for Trish with her initials on it. It is almost the same but black. I couldn't get any blue leather at all. Now I want to get one for Auntie Nellie. If you would like to send the shape and colour which she would like I will send it on to the bag maker. Honestly, if you or Trish really don't like these two let me know what shape and colour and I will see what I can get. If anyone else fancies one let me know as I still have two duty free labels left. I have sent them both to you Mum, under the one label.

By the way, the lady in 48 Eyre Place is Miss Betty McLaren. I knew I had written it down somewhere. When Miss Margaret Prentice comes home in March or so she will probably be staying with either Dr & Mrs Finlay at 9 Hermitage Gardens or at 9 Comiston Gardens. I would like you to meet her Mum. She is a grand person and right Scotch. Perhaps, as I am writing them all regularly, I will be able to find out when she is due to go and Tom might take a trip up to Morningside in February or March and see if she has arrived. However, I will let you know later on.

Well Mum I think that's all about my leave I can think of at the moment but I had a really grand time due to the kindness of the people there. There are no cinemas or anything like that. If you are not with the civies there there is little or nothing for you to do. But my time was fully occupied.

My thanks very much indeed for my Christmas parcel. You almost seem to send the things I am needing just before I replace them myself such as toothpaste, boot polish etc. The books and notebooks are especially welcome, also the notepaper. The cigarettes from home still come in and are very welcome indeed. By the way I also sent off some flowery orange Pekoe Darjeeling tea, 2lb to you, 2lb to Auntie, 1lb to Peggy, 1lb to Mrs Miller. Tell Jessie I'm sending some on to her later. Also Auntie Jeanie and one or two others.

Now I have quite a lot of AMLC from you Mum including one in which you say you have received my first from Kalimpong. It is Christmas Day today so I'm afraid I won't get much writing done today as the sergeants do a lot of manual labour today.

Thanks a lot for your and Auntie's Christmas Airgraphs. Also please thank Auntie Jessie and Auntie Nellie for their Christmas presents. It was very kind of them. I think it would be as well if I answered all your queries in another letter or else you'll have to charter a special plane for this. Anyway I'm very glad to hear that everyone is keeping OK as I am. But I really had a wonderful time in Kalimpong.

Lots and lots of love

Steve

PS My manual labour so far has been sanitary orderly!