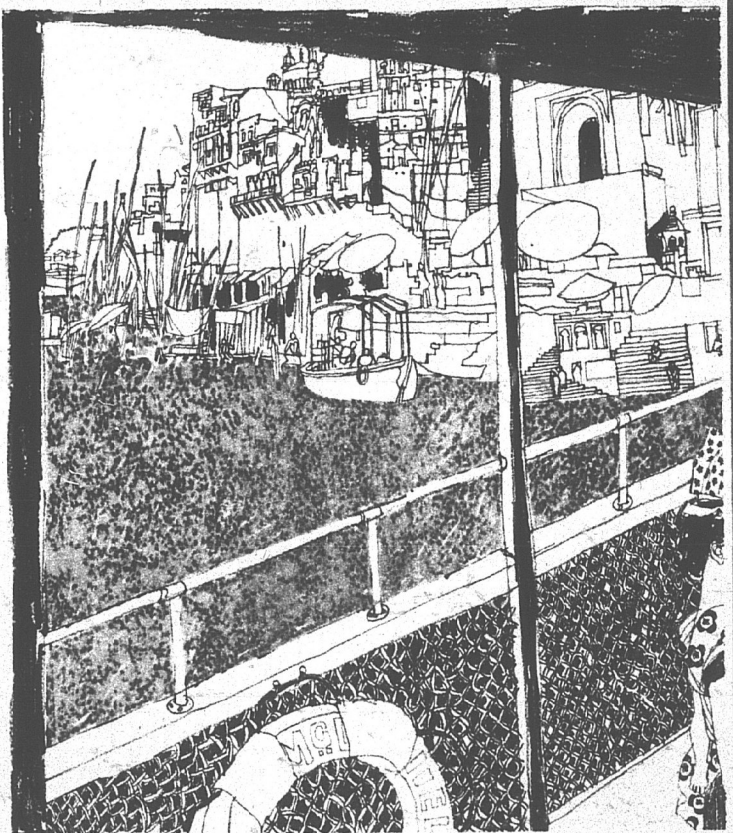


JOURNEY TO YESTERDAY

As I stood beside the rail, the steamer cast off and started backing slowly away from the Indian port.



IT HAPPENED in India towards the end of the war. Letters from British troops in that country had complained about the lack of war effort amongst the British women there, and pointed questions were asked in London in Parliament.

It was alleged that the women were not working for the common cause but still leading luxurious lives; that very few were concerned with the welfare of the troops, most of whom were young and all of them thousands of miles from home. It was said when hospitality was offered it was limited to officers, and there was much bitterness among the rank and file; much bitterness too among the women because the criticisms were sweeping and, in many cases, most unfair.

So it came about that the Women's Voluntary Service in India asked me if I would investigate and make a report. (Editors' Note: This eventually was published as *Bengal Journey*.) I was told I could choose a province and chose Bengal.

I was brought up in Bengal. My father was in inland navigation so that we lived in small towns on the banks of two of India's great rivers, the Brahmaputra and the Megna, great slowly flowing giants sometimes two miles wide.

These rivers carried a constant traffic of steamers, launches, and flats (barges that carried the jute, rice, and tea of the districts), and there were country boats made of wood and wickerwork with a single wide sail. There was, too, a life of fish, from porpoises somersaulting over and over to tiny minnowlike fish that filled the fishermen's baskets; of reptiles, crocodiles and watersnakes; and of birds, water crows, fishing eagles, and paddy birds like egrets that waded in the shallows.

Yet those rivers were lonely—as I suppose our childhood was lonely—lonely and far away. Now, as a sort of correspondent officially appointed and wearing various uniforms so that no one would guess I was a writer, I was to visit them again.

I journeyed over Bengal by plane, rail, car, bullock cart, pony, walking, and often by boat, until one day in late March I found myself in the university town of Dacca. From there, as I saw in my schedule, I was, on the following morning, to investigate what war work the women were doing among the troops and airmen in a jute-trading station 11 miles away.

"To Almorra, 10 a.m. by car," the typed sheet ran, with a list of sites and canteens to be visited and of women to be interviewed. "Luncheon, Chur House 12 noon. Catch mail steamer 2 p.m."

"We thought you needn't spend longer," said my hostess for the

night. "There are not more than 30 Europeans in Almorra all told. A dead-and-alive little place."

I nearly said, "I know." My father was sent to Almorra when I was seven, and I did a great deal of my growing up there. Perhaps it was an alien, circumscribed, and dull place to the grownups who were stationed there—"station" was a good word because sooner or later they moved on—but to us children it had been home, a halcyon home. I did not want to go back; willy-nilly I would have to see it with grown-up disenchanted eyes, and the memory would be spoiled. But this was war time, I had a task to do—then the strangeness began.

In the early hours of that March morning one member of Almorra's small European community died. In India, when death comes, everything has to be done swiftly because of the climate, especially when, as in March, it is on the verge of the hot weather.

THE DEAD MAN had to be buried that morning. It would be in a coffin made hurriedly by the carpenters at one of the Works, the body brought across the river on a launch and taken by lorry to Dacca—Almorra had no hearse—and, as custom decreed, the entire community would accompany it for the funeral.

What was to be done with a strange visitor? With me? I had to catch that steamer and, "Would you mind driving in and having lunch by yourself?

You could walk around and do your inspection. One of the babus (clerks) will show you round and see you onto the steamer."

It seemed a sensible plan. I had no idea then what it would mean, but when the car had driven away and I stood on the graveled drive at Chur House, listening to the sound of the steam escaping from the jute works—puff-wait-puff, puff-wait-puff—and smelling the grass hot in the sun, the scent of English flowers in the beds, and of the champak flowers on the trees by the house, and hearing the lapping, lazily lapping, sound of the water against the jetty that led from the garden, I was no longer this "I" in uniform with a brief case full of notes and letters, a report to write, but a long-legged sallow little girl in short skirts, sandals, and a topknot tied with a ribbon.

Chur House had not been our house, but I knew every corner of it. How many times had I been there to children's parties, to spend the day, play hide and seek?

I knew every step through the Works when I followed the peon who had been sent to guide me through the small township. I knew the bazaar and, as soon as I set foot in it, knew there were two things I had missed in the years away in England: the feel of the dust underfoot and in one's nostrils, sun-baked dust, and the bazaar smell—though some people might call it a stench.