

Back To Basics – Being the seventh diary of Amelia Bourne-Phipps, starting her second year at the Songmark Aeronautical Boarding School for Young Ladies, Spontoon Eastern Island. The original diary was written as ever in the never-popular Lexarc Shorthand system, which Amelia believed was secure enough for everyday matters....

Monday 18th September 1935

Back to work! It was a good thing that we had all braced ourselves for a shock – as our Tutors have had all summer to rest and seem keen to make sure we get the full benefit. Our alarm clock was set to six-thirty sharp, and Miss Devinski was through the dorms one minute later, looking brisk and keen as she roused us like an infantry sergeant with a barrack of recruits.

Maria is about as hard to get started as one of the Dornier X flying boats, but Helen and myself “jump started” her by bouncing her out of bed, and an initially rather cool shower had her properly awake and moving. I must say, I had missed this – back in St. Winifred’s there were no prizes given for attack and defence tactics with knotted wet towels, or I would certainly have had enough practice to earn one. We were quite surprised at how we managed to handle Maria – having had two months of very strenuous living has paid off, and I fear our experiences may have made us just a little ruthless. Still, not a bad state to face the new term.

Back to timetables, back to breakfasts in the big dining hall. It was something to have the first-years looking at us as if we were returning Explorers or some such – which in a sense I suppose we are. The first week’s meals are generally the best of term – Helen muttered about us being worked so hard afterwards that anything tastes good. Certainly, one would hardly expect to sit down to a breakfast of mashed breadfruit at the Marleybone Grand Hotel – but it is tasty enough, very healthy and portions are exceedingly generous.

After breakfast we were lined up and Miss Wildford addressed us – it seems true that she has been “promoted” to a full member of the staff, at least for this year. With Miss Pelton being now married and relaxing (one of the things we missed on our travels was seeing her wedding, becoming Mrs. Voboel) there is definitely a vacancy.

Still, that is one step up for our dear Tutor, who it seemed had been spending the summer thinking up ways to prove her zeal to the original Songmark founders. At least, that was Maria’s comment, when Miss Wildford announced gleefully that she needed to see how soft we had become over the holidays. Many tails drooped to the floor – Madelene X had just been happily telling us she spent most of the summer holidays on the beach at St. Tropez blissfully relaxing.

Honestly, our feet hardly hit the ground this term before we were back in our sporting outfits, a compass pressed in our paw and sent off on a top-speed chase around Eastern Island! Just to make things interesting, we had to race in dorms – and the poorest performers would be getting up an hour early for some hard remedial work. Help!

As it turned out, we had no real worries. Though Maria is no sprinter, this was two hours of hard work and her scrambling around the Alps all summer had built up plenty of stamina. When we arrived at one target a Third-year would pop out of hiding and yell bearing and distance to the next one, noting our times in their pocketbook. It was rather like a two hour math exam done while panting for breath – much as I recall Great War veterans describing navigating over enemy lines – except they were being fired on too. Perhaps that will come in our third year.

Our final course and bearing was one that had us all screeching to a halt to check our compasses – as they pointed straight out to sea. Maria spotted a water taxi at anchor about two hundred yards offshore – and with more speed than enthusiasm we charged across the beach to put our swimming skills to the test as we mercifully slapped the side of the boat to have our finishing times recorded. We were allowed to rest and swim back at leisure, spotting Prudence’s dorm charging across the beach with Jasbir’s close on their tails.

Our recent adventures may have been a strain emotionally, but they proved to be a good foundation for this term, if things go on like this!

Tuesday 19th September, 1935

Back into the classrooms, having to demonstrate what we remember of air navigation and aircraft recognition. Fortunately Helen and I had guessed there would be something like this, and had taken our notes to revise from last week while we awaited aircraft arrivals. Still, it was rough going having to squeeze into a classroom frame of mind – after last year’s thorough lessons Helen had been complaining there could hardly be anything else we could be expected to know! A glance at our timetables dashed her optimism.

By the end of the year, we are supposed to not only prove to our Tutors that we can fly safely, but gain actual commercial qualifications – in my case an Empire “B” class license, which would let me call myself a pilot

and apply for any basic transport position. There is quite a list of possibilities to choose from – obviously not everyone can find an instructor of their own nationality around here, but there are six world qualifications available. Miss Devinski mentioned there was an Empire Training school in the Gilbert and Sullivan Islands (the next chain to the Gilbert and Ellis Islands) that I might have to travel to for the exams.

At least this year we have (some) choice in our classes – after the first fortnight, when we should have been reminded of all the basics. There is a lot more flying this term, some of it in Songmark's brand new seaplane! "Brand New" to us, anyway – it is a rejected prototype for the familiar Rain Island "Osprey". I had been rather surprised at the sight of the service Osprey, thinking they looked definitely tubby for a fighting aircraft – our pride and joy has much longer wings and fuselage, and (I think) is far more graceful. Someone disagreed though – the current stubby versions have a much faster roll rate and snap turn, which I suppose is a good thing for a fighter. If this trend becomes world-wide, future fighters will all look like Geebees and pilots will never be able to get life insurance again.

Of course, our prototype never carried armament – we all found ourselves saying Molly would have been disappointed. Poor Molly – I wonder where she is? Whatever the ruin of the family fortune, one would hope she could at least afford a postcard.

Friday 22nd September, 1935

An awful week, but at least we had expected nothing else. Our heads hurt from all the rapid re-learning, and the rest of us is one big corporate bruise – we spent all Friday afternoon revising self-defence exercises. For the last hour we were no longer using mats; after the rains the grass outside is softer than it has been, but it felt quite hard enough when Missy K surprised me with a "timber topple" that all but broke my tail bones when she pulled my feet from under me. I can only be glad we will not be sitting down to classes tomorrow.

I must say, after all the enthusiasm of meeting old friends and catching up on news wore off, my ears started to droop a little. The work is piled up in front of us like an incoming tidal wave – this time last year we were blissfully ignorant of just how hard it was going to be. Still, nobody has dropped out voluntarily (except for Soppo Forsythe, and that was nothing to do with the work) which might be helped by the huge fees paid and the distance travelled to get us here.

By the time we had finished our third day of air navigation and fuel calculations, both Helen and myself were looking around half hoping to see Mr. Sapohatan coming in to hand us another mission – any mission. But still – as Helen ruefully pointed out, our skills are what make us useful, and we certainly were not picked to help the Authorities for the sake of our pretty snouts.

Miss Devinski had a quiet word with us after tea, pointing out our new duties and liberties as second-years. As I expected, we will be shepherding the first-years around and keeping them out of (too much) mischief. The great reward is, on weekends we no longer need passes! Alas, just as my head filled with plans for heading out to South Island until Sunday night, she pointed out that meant "in our free time". It looks as if we will have precious little of that, with projects and first-year herding around the place.

Still – we get to the Dance Schools – Jasbir Sind is joining us with her dorm, which rather fills our depleted ranks for the more large-scale dances (it looks silly to have a chorus line of three.) So I am cleaning off my ceremonial head-dress and we are looking forward to some more stern competition this term. The S.I.T.H.S can look forward to another hard time of it – it is too much to hope they have all spent their time on the beach like Madelene X, who is in our infirmary right now having strained muscles bandaged. All that warm sea, and she could have spent her time swimming in it. I hated to tell her "I told you so", but one must make sacrifices for one's comrades, even if they do not appreciate the effort. As it turns out, Madelene is quite competent with the wet towel technique too!

Saturday 23rd September, 1935

Hurrah! This week the first-years are still under the strict eye of the staff, so we actually had the whole day to ourselves (with the warning to return before dusk, otherwise the third-years will be sent after US, and none too happy about being pulled away from their own plans.)

I would have headed straight for South Island, but Helen and Maria outvoted me – and true enough, Maria has not seen Casino Island since July. So off we went, first thing after breakfast, filling Maria in as we went on our adventures there. Maria glowered somewhat on hearing what she had missed – commenting that the only way to keep her Uncle paying the fees for her to come out here was to go home for the holiday. I think I might work that out, someday.

Just a week away, and the island is quite different. All the lights are being taken down for the year, and the beach huts and souvenir stalls are all gone. The Coconut Grove has teams of workmen on the roof; certainly the Spontoonies are a versatile folk. As soon as the season changes, some of them put away their tour guide grass skirts and waiter's dress suits, to grab overalls and tool bags. This year I recognised some familiar faces and could greet them in Spontoonie – certainly, despite the awful hard work we are gaining real benefits. Very cheering, in view of the timetables in front of us.

Maria insisted in seeing the two waste power plants on the Northern coast, and we immediately agreed (any day now one or the other may no longer be there to explore.) We had told her our reports had been commissioned as a holiday project – perfectly true, and as she assumed it was for our Tutors we did not complicate matters by explaining further.

Things do progress – between the two projects there is now a large transplanted acacia thorn hedge, which glittered with barbed wire. I doubt the local authorities really want anything like an armed camp on Casino Island, tourist slack season or no – but the thought was certainly there.

We spotted Doctor Maranowski far off on the solar pyramid that acts as a pre-heater for his fermentation tank; by the glint of glass he was closely observing us through binoculars. Professor Kurt Von Mecklenburg Und Soweiter proved charming as ever, and bowed low to kiss Maria's hand as we introduced them. It seems there is trouble brewing, as noxious as the other things fermenting around here. Someone sabotaged one of the drums of ether delivered to Professor Kurt's site – persons unknown had put a test tube of fuming nitric acid in the lid; if an incautious workman had unsealed it and poured that into the main ether tank, that would have definitely "brought the house down". The week before, one of Doctor Maranowski's fermentation tanks had stopped bubbling and started to sit and stagnate. Tests showed it had been "poisoned" with Lysol disinfectant, and the owner immediately pointed a wing of suspicion this direction.

Honestly – if people plug their digesters into the public drains, they should expect to deal with what gets poured into drains to clean them! The incident with the acid flask was something very different – I suspect Mr. Sapohatan has his paws full running down the culprit. Still, if he wants our help, he certainly knows where to find us.

Maria was most impressed by the big ether turbine, mostly fed by the sun in daytime and the fermenter at night. The engine room is sweltering, despite good thick layers of asbestos insulation piled around all the hot pipes – and all the outside pipes are armoured with one foot gage cast iron pipework that used to form part of an old pier. Professor Kurt was just about to show us the safety system he had installed when Maria inadvertently demonstrated it – I had noticed there were loops of rope hanging from the roof every few feet, and Maria got her horns tangled in one.

Professor Kurt has certainly thought this one out. One second after a leak the room would fill with explosive ether vapour – unless the air was immediately drenched with something like a tropical downpour from high-pressure water pipes. I can now report that the system works, very convincingly. Still, we had been overheating.

After a brief stop in the workmen's changing rooms to towel dry, we waved goodbye and headed out towards the dance classes. This year we are in the "Intermediate" groups, where the dances are far more intricate, if not more energetic. Having learned the basics, we are given dances to improvise now, a very different problem than just remembering which steps to follow through. Every dance tells a story, and one suspects some of the ones they teach to Euro beginners might not quite be what the students would want to shout out loud – I recall some of the audience folding up with mirth at our early attempts. At least by the end of the term we should be able to avoid saying anything too embarrassing.

Considering folk manage to communicate a deaf-and-dumb language entirely using their paws, I wonder if you can do the same in hula. I was quite good at semaphore in the Guides (and have practiced more at Songmark.) I have not seen any actual Hula dictionaries, but it seems quite possible. The idea of two Hula dance teams not only facing off in an aesthetically pleasing dance routine but yelling non-verbal challenges to each other is intriguing – and possibly the sort of thing the Advanced classes teach.

A splendid and strenuous dance routine, which really had us thinking on our feet. The Intermediate classes are taught by Mrs. Ponole, a very elegant avian lady with charmingly groomed feathers and a highly decorated and inlaid beak such as one sees in the ancient carvings hidden under the park. Being taught dance moves by someone whose knees bend the opposite direction was a little unnerving at first, but we soon got used to translating.

Jasbir whispered at break time that most of the dance instructors are married – certainly anyone exhibiting so much grace and energy in public should have no trouble in finding admirers. A lesson to be learned there; I thought at once of Mrs. Hoele'toemi.

On the way back, we saw a very strange craft tying up against the old Number One dock – I saw the twin-row rotary engines first, and thought it might be an aircraft being salvaged after a nasty accident that had taken the outer wings off. It is a definitely home-built affair, floating on a flat-bottomed hull with outriggers and powered by two very large rotary aero engines driving four-bladed airscrews; very distinctive.

As we went past it on the way back home, Helen asked the water taxi lady if she knew about it – and indeed, we got quite a story (water-taxi folk seem to know everything). We had missed its launch while we were off on Mildendo and Krupmark, the project being the pride and joy of two brothers recently graduated from the Technical High School here. With all the shoal water and sandbanks around the lagoon, it is awfully difficult to get salvage tugs near enough stranded boats and aircraft to secure a line – and the tugs get through a fortune in broken rudders and propellers. An obvious solution – use air thrust rather than water screws, and build a vessel that floats in knee-deep water. By our guide's account, it has already pulled off some dazzling rescues, having a very sprightly top speed of about twenty knots (though with those heavy engines set so high up, I dread to think how it would handle in a rough sea. Helen says she gets queasy just looking at it.)

Maria looked definitely jealous, commenting that we should have thought of that one – though I pointed out we do not get actual building projects till our final year. Besides, we are rather busy in classes, and I doubt any stranded aircraft crew would be too happy to wait till the weekend for us to get out to them.

One of the third-years was on the dock to count us in, and very cryptically mentioned that she hoped our cooking and accounting skills were in order. Very odd! Next week we have several non-flying days on the timetable marked as "Logistics" – something I happily have a family background in. Some of my earliest memories are of painting and drawing on discarded requisition forms and store reports for entrenching tools, duckboards and picketing wire – I only hope the skills have sunk in.

Sunday, 24th September 1935

Hurrah! Off to church again, where we met Jirry and family. It seems an awfully long week without him – and of course that is only the start, as our timetable is packed. I fear my tail went definitely sideways, though fortunately not inside the church or with too many folk watching. Helen was highly amused.

My heart skipped a beat at the sight of a familiar-looking deer silhouette on one of the pews ahead – but of course it was not Molly, Church being the very last place one would expect to find her. Jirry pointed her out as Miss Fawnsworthy, the secretary to some magnate who came here to fly in the Schneider Trophy races and has been staying on Casino Island ever since. It seems Marti was employed to show them around South Island the week after the races, where their Ercorsair came second in its class, very creditable.

It was the first time in months that I had attended church, to my shame – although I suppose the Native religion counts as a church. The Reverend Bingham was back in fine form, having calmed down considerably after his holiday; one imagines it must have been rather frustrating to be surrounded by so many Spontoonies who refuse to be Converted. Still, the sermon was quite lively, finishing with the parable of the left-handed pearl fisherman and the corkscrew. Quite a memorable tale.

Again, I compensated for my spiritual neglect by getting a double ration today, as Saimmi was waiting outside the church for us to emerge. She had changed her head-dress, now wearing a very nice one with new fish-leather decorations that positively gleamed in the sun. It was very fine to accompany her to South Island to visit one of the small shrines there – a delicately carved one of redwood, which hundreds of tourists doubtless pose against every Summer without any idea of its true significance.

Back to Songmark, with some time on our paws after tea (a rare occurrence, and one I doubt we will see again often.) Although Molly's bed is still there and ready for her, it is something none of us are talking about – we can only hope, but we are less hopeful as the days go by. A deer friend, Molly, and a dear one as well.

Monday, 25th September 1935

Now we find out why the third-year hinted about needing our logistics skills! Miss Devinski unveiled our latest project – the good news was we were given quite a respectable sum of money. The bad news was, this was the food budget of the third-years for the next two weeks. We are going to have to draw up ration plans and practice our haggling skills in the markets, or we will have five dorms of rather unhappy Seniors to cope with (and they have the power to make our lives Extremely Unhappy, should they wish to.)

I spotted Beryl's eyes lighting up at the sight of the money, and she whispered something to Missy K – who slapped her ears flat. One expects that the Recidivist temple Beryl attends would think fresh vegetables a very poor investment.

Off into a huddle with Helen and Maria, then we went window-shopping with the approval of the Staff. By the end of the morning we had some reasonable ideas of current prices (and current prices) and could get to work. Madelene X was still arguing with her dorm when we returned, about a proper French style full dinner menu. The expensive roast beef and turtle soup will have to be “off” from the start by our reckoning, or our Seniors will have a decidedly lean second week.

Helen seems fairly cheerful about this, which surprised me. She had always been very reluctant at the Hoele'toemi household to cook and scrub, though she does both perfectly well. I had asked her, in a quiet minute, what was worrying so – and she pointed out that I was wearing an apron and carrying a brush, something Helen really avoids. She is braver than me against physical danger, but has a total horror of being “domesticated”, and the sight of me sitting in a grass hut cooking surrounded by crawling kittens, struck a very jarring chord with her. Our current project is perfectly all right for her; she thinks of it as planning and feeding an expedition, something she is very happy with.

At last, in the afternoon we were back in the cockpit of our dear Tiger Moths, the first time since July that we had been at the controls. My last flight had been in the cockpit of Lars' Nighthawk, on the escape from Krupmark. I found myself quite wishing I was back in such fine company – which of course is something I cannot do, being Tailfast elsewhere.

A very pleasant flight, and nothing too hard for our first day back in the air – merely a few circuits round Main Island, while Miss Devinski in the back seat put me through my paces. I noticed a very strange wake on the water below us, something like a flying boat but more so – on the next circuit I spotted it was the new salvage tug, both engines running flat out pulling a tramp steamer off one of the sand banks North of Eastern Island. Quite a sight!

On our way back to Songmark, there was an awful coincidence - I spotted a familiar profile indeed, for the first time in three weeks, Lars is back! I had to tell him the bad news about Molly – and indeed his tail drooped considerably. He was most solicitous about my health, and confessed he had thought much about me. Indeed, I hardly recall what we said exactly, but half an hour had gone past before he snapped his fingers and gently pointed me back to Songmark. I had to change costume almost on the run, but arrived just in time for the evening meal. (Poi again – though I confess to being in such a turmoil I shovelled it down without complaining.)

Helen quizzed me rather sharply, and I could tell her that Lars has been under great scrutiny by the Authorities. But he is still in business, and seems in quite marvellous condition, so I assume he must have been acquitted of whatever he was accused of. Helen muttered something darkly about “Rolling all sixes”, which I assume is a Monopoly reference. A splendid game, which is quite sweeping the globe this year – Adele Beasley and Prudence both came back carrying brand new sets this term.

Back to work on the problems of feeding our Seniors. Hotel-scale catering is a tricky business, unless we put them on regular military rations based on one tin of Maconochie stew per meal with one tin of plum and apple jam per dorm per day, risking a mutiny that would make the French army of 1917 look like a tea-shop tiff. Beryl has been mentioning we could try to feed them on deliberately overpriced Poi and pocket the difference – but the last time anyone tried that sort of thing it brought about the French Revolution, when the line was “Let them eat cake.” And cake is so much nicer.

Tuesday, 26th September 1935

A shocking day! We were heading out to the Casino Island main market towing trailers, when again we bumped into Lars stepping off a water-taxi. He offered to give us a paw with the trailers, which was very thoughtful (it being a scorching day and quite a steep ramp up to the Market.) Just because I am Tailfast, doesn't mean I cannot give anyone an appreciative kiss in gratitude. Lars has a very nice scent, and an exceptionally healthy one. I heard Helen and Maria start making embarrassed strangling sounds, but assumed they were just jealous – until I opened my eyes and looked around.

Dear Diary. Molly is back. After all the time we had waited for her to show up, she definitely picked the wrong half-minute to do so. In fact, I hardly recognised her for a second – her fur was very bedraggled, and her costume looked like she had scavenged it from a dustbin – but very definitely she is back, though our meeting was rather more embarrassing than joyous – to begin with, at any rate.

When she had calmed down a little, we began to get her story as we hunted for bulk bargains around the market. As our Tutor had mentioned, the Government seized her family business for tax reasons (or rather, no-tax reasons) and her Father fled to Cuba, leaving Molly rather thrown on her own devices. With the small sums of money she could lay paws on, there was no hope of getting her usual airline ticket, and she had to travel the hard way – after six transfers she arrived on the tramp steamer we saw being towed off the sands yesterday.

She would have been here last night, but had been travelling light – so light it had not included much in the way of documents, and Customs had detained her until she could be vouched for. Interestingly, she mentioned Mr. Sapohatan had turned up half an hour ago and liberated her, kindly advancing her enough small change to get the water taxi to Songmark.

Poor Molly! Literally poor now, though she mentions her Father's cheque for the term's fees had been cashed about an hour before his bank account was impounded. So she has a one-term reprieve at least, explaining why our Tutors kept her bed made and ready for her. They are very supportive of their students, but Songmark is a competitive business and not a charity – I recall how fast Sopy Forsythe's place vanished from the notice boards and dinner table when she "resigned".

(Later) It was quite something to be together again, as after delivering our shopping to Prudence's team, we welcomed Molly back. A very urgent shower and disposal of her rags was the first priority, as I had heard of what steerage passage on a tramp steamer is like, but never quite grasped the full extent of the hardships. Once washed and groomed and back in uniform (complete with two bars on her Songmark badge) she looked very presentable, and felt up to seeing our Tutors and our Matron. For some reason, she kept insisting she needed to see Mrs. Oelabe right away, and was pacing quite distractedly until Maria returned and announced she had found her in the compound – at which Molly vanished as if her tail was alight.

In fact, she only reappeared just before "lights out" – we were wondering if she had vanished again, or (horrors) not been allowed to stay without any prospects of paying her remaining fees. But she did return, looking relieved though extremely chastened, and only commenting that Mrs. Oelabe was far more sympathetic and less of a dragon than she had remembered.

Whatever the circumstances – we are back together again. Hooray!

Friday, 29th September 1935

A busy week indeed – Molly was excused our Senior-feeding project this week until our Tutors brought her up to speed on the regular work. She has been very keen to hear of our Summer, though I am waiting for the right time to tell her some of the details. On her part, she has been very quiet about her adventures, though Maria was very keen on the adventure and romance of working one's way across the planet on a tramp steamer from one unknown tropical port to the next. Molly's ears went right down at that suggestion.

There is one souvenir of her trip that we wish she could have left behind; the other dorms are avoiding us, as we all have to shower three times a day with awful-smelling derris-root shampoo. Molly says she hopes that fleas were the only things she had picked up on her trip, as it could have been a lot worse. She tells us never, ever be a stowaway on a tramp freighter, and darkly hints it may cost more than one could possibly imagine.

Still, our projects are proving quite successful. Every day we go out to the markets and haggle over yams and fruits, counting out our cowries very carefully. I was quite right about the price of a Euro style roast meat dinner last holiday – that really can feed our whole dorm for the day, with a bottle of Nootnops Red thrown in. We have managed to keep Poi off the menu, though it is definitely the cheapest starch of its kind.

Unlike classes, the project carries on all weekend, so we have to share out the duties. Several days of bickering had boiled down to who gets the choice break times being decided by Monopoly games. Molly and Beryl brought their own dice along, which the rest of us promptly confiscated and Missy K securely sat on for the duration. Madelene X won, much to our surprise – but she has been spending part of her Summer at Monte Carlo, and hints that she was playing for higher stakes than who gets Saturday afternoon off. I suspect we should have carefully checked her dice too.

While not actually cheating, we then played our trump card, pointing out we are booked to go to Dance Classes regardless, and the Songmark rules also protect our church-going time. Molly felt quite put out, and says she is considering joining Beryl's "Church", but of course that will not be in time for this weekend. I imagine she had other things in mind than taro peeling as she struggled half way across the globe to get here.

Saturday, 30th September 1935

Not a relaxing weekend – busy shopping and cooking all morning, then a quick-change routine and out to dance classes! Molly struggled rather, not having had such a strenuous Summer as the rest of us and being somewhat out of shape to dance at our new level. Still, an excellent time was had by all, finishing in the traditional dash down the beach to cool off after the dancing. It will be warm enough for at least a month on fine days, but the leaves are certainly changing and we are getting back into the swing of things as we get used to the hard work of term-time.

Jasbir's dorm has joined us in the Intermediate level classes, and is really doing very well. Of course, as a Maharaja's daughter she has been brought up on live dance tradition, and says that though the dances are

different a lot of the basics are much the same. Li Han and Sophie D'artagnan are extremely agile gymnasts, better than I am, and though Irma Bundt looks far too solid for the faster dances, she really moves very well. Like Missy K these days, although she certainly has a lot of weight it is "all engine and no spare baggage".

We are racking our brains to find ways of helping them with their cherished dream of getting into a public dance troupe – our tutors naturally do not approve, though they can hardly compare the behaviour of dancers here with what Molly has mentioned about chorus-girls. At least, they have not said yes as yet, but they have often pointed out what good planning and hard work can do against any opposition. One supposes they have Songmark's reputation to defend, and they can hardly be blamed if we creatively bend the rules they give us.

Beryl and Missy K turned up to watch the contests, much to our surprise: we had never thought of them as dance fans. Actually, Beryl was here to cheer on the male dancers and heckle the rest. It was a chilling piece of what alienists call "deja-vu" to hear the old Saint T chants on Spontoon – I recall from many a fiercely fought hockey match hearing that song "*Wouldn't it be fun, if they gave the Ref a gun?*" whenever her side lost a point.

Happily, Beryl takes her lumps without much malice. Though not dressed for swimming, she performed quite creditably after Irma and Maria threw her off the boat pier.

Sunday, October 1st, 1935

October already! We all put in a hard four hours work cleaning the kitchens and getting the third-years' Sunday lunch in the oven (roasted sweet potato and fish stew) before waving farewell to see Molly vanishing behind a delivery of breadfruit. It really is quite an eye-opener, how much food a Songmark student gets through in the course of a week, especially as vegetables make such a bulky diet. An exceedingly healthy one, though – we have a modern diet book to refer to by Messrs. Sellers and Yateman, who quote various eminent doctors as saying "*It's roughage, roughage ALL the way*", and "*There is more food value in one black beret than a hundredweight of blackberries*". *

The chance to sit down for two hours in Church was very welcome, with Reverend Bingham in slightly more conventional mode – it was the first time we had heard him preaching on the traditional Seven Deadly Sins. I can happily report we are in no danger of today's target, as Sloth is nowhere on our timetable. As Beryl says, the chance would be a fine thing – and we can hardly gain credit for resisting temptations we never face. Still, some of the long-standing congregation seemed to welcome the change in tactics, one of them after the sermon marvelling that before our current Vicar arrived folk hardly knew what Sin was. (I think I would have a harder time getting Helen to attend if our Reverend was an elderly warthog or suchlike, as she was murmuring something about practical demonstrations.)

It is fascinating to see all the religions we have between us in such a small group as Songmark, brought together from all around the world by our common love of flying. Just yesterday our ex-Senior Erica sent a postcard from the shores of the Baltic, where she is taking a well-earned holiday. By her account, there was a super torchlight procession culminating in the re-consecrating of the Holy Wotan stone at Memel, a place of veneration for thousands of years. I doubt our dear Reverend would approve, though.

We had a polite word with the doe we had seen last week, Miss Fawnsworthy – she says she will be attending Church here when she can, though there is no guarantee how long that will be. Most odd – she was carrying a rather heavy handbag with what we recognised as a military quick-pull catch (albeit with a nice bow on it) and both Helen and myself agree it smelled decidedly of gun oil. Not the usual perfume one expects to take to the sermon.

Back to more hard work in the kitchens – to find Molly and Ada Cronstein all alone and surrounded by piles of washing up. Most other folk were in Church, though of course Ada had hers yesterday. They should have had Adele Beasley helping them, but she had been unlucky with a filleting knife this morning, to the tune of seven stitches, and is excused food preparation work for a few days.

It is nice so be appreciated – our Senior friend Conchita dropped in to congratulate us on our organisation and cooking skills – admitting that this time last year they had spent the two week budget after ten days, trying to feed their own seniors rather better than the regular cooks do. Which was fine while the money lasted – but our Tutors really do have access to large stocks of ex-military Maconochie stew, and doled out one can a day to tide each of the Seniors over till the end of the week. Conchita did not say how Erica, Noota and their pals took vengeance on her year, but warns us to keep our cowries well counted. She has had a year to think of refinements to whatever was done to her, so we will definitely take her advice.

"And Now All This", © Sellers And Yateman, 1935

Monday, October 2nd, 1935

Hurrah! For the first time in ages we get over to Moon Island, for some refresher work on the firing range and a look at the newly completed wind tunnel. The teething troubles have mostly been worked out, and the main tunnel no longer booms like an organ pipe when run up to full power.

In fact, there have been quite a few changes made since we first saw the tunnel – the section behind the test piece has been lined with galvanised steel sheeting, and there are auxiliary electrical fans that can be switched in for truly high performance tests. Molly speculated that as Spontoon was the base for the Schneider Trophy races, it made sense to have testing facilities that can match the fastest aircraft tested here. Certainly, the technician who showed us round the facility explained that Rain Island expected to get its investment back well inside the year, from foreign test programs alone. One wonders what the domestic programs will really include – we have heard the tunnel running late at night, when the electric fans can use the spare power in the system (or so the technicians claim.) Moon Island being the main military reserve, I would not be surprised if there are “night manoeuvres” around the tunnel compound when those sessions are run.

Molly can still hardly believe we missed the main Speed Week, even if we did see some of the early trial runs – she has been eagerly questioning Beryl and Missy K, who saw the whole thing. In fact, Molly seems extremely indignant about what we have told her about our Krupmark trip – we rescued an heiress who had a substantial reward out for her return, and still came back a lot poorer than we started. (I am really wondering when I will find the right time to tell her about Lars and myself.) Still, I dread to think what she would have made of our mission – all the successes came with patience and caution, virtues that I hoped she would have trained in by now. Despite being unusually quiet, Molly is still definitely her old self.

Still, she cheered up considerably when she got to the firing range and could blaze merrily away at pop-up targets. Imagining them as State tax inspectors put her score right up, she confided to me. If her general fitness has gone down in the holidays, at least her enthusiasm has stayed high for this part of the course.

I am allowed to practice with my own Webley-Fosbury revolver for part of the time, though naturally our instructors emphasise we should be proficient with any firearm we come across. They frowned somewhat at the ammunition I purchased on Krupmark though, which were sold as “Hunting shells” as it seems they are definitely illegal in military use and indeed make an awful mess of the targets. Molly offered to buy them from me (forgetting for the moment her lack of two pennies to rub together), but I think the world is a safer place with them in Miss Devinski’s safe.

Alas, we are now tasked with convoying the first-years over for their first lessons and back – not just a matter of counting student snouts on the way out and making sure no “acquired” gun muzzles are poking out of their bags on the return trip. Many have never fired a firearm before – but the red-furred Irish setter Brigit Mulvaney is certainly well practiced and top of her class. It may be a family tradition – though hopefully not in the way Molly uses that phrase.

On the way back, Madelene X was having a long conversation with our rather odd new lioness Saffina. My grasp of French could not quite follow all of it – but from the tone of it Madelene started off quite friendly and ended up utterly outraged, moving to the far end of the boat and pointedly turning her tail to our new arrivals. We wonder what that was all about.

(Later) Some interesting developments – on Radio LONO we hear that one of the major Powers is holding fleet exercises in the area, and has requested shore leave and replenishing rights. Our Tutors and the locals we meet (cooks at Songmark and airport staff) do not seem wholly keen on the idea. Seeing the Soviets demonstrate they can reach here for the sake of it was unnerving enough – we hope this is not part of a new trend.

Tuesday, October 3rd 1935

Of all the roles we expected to serve on Spontoon, being official aerial reconnaissance was not one I had expected – at least not so soon. A fairly uneventful timetabled flying morning had finished at lunchtime, when Miss Devinski ordered us all to refuel and head out to the East, keeping in close formation and for Jasbir in the one radio-equipped Moth to report any unusual sightings.

Well! We had flown right out of sight of land, sixty miles by my estimate, when we spotted a major plume of smoke on the horizon. In a few minutes it resolved itself into a major fleet, two battleships with six cruisers and a dozen destroyers, with a tail of oilers and support vessels some miles behind being shepherded by another two destroyers. For a minute things looked rather worrying for our adopted home – but then I spotted there were no troop transports, landing craft or aircraft carriers in the fleet. Whatever this force intended, they were hardly equipped for land assaults on Spontoon.

Radio LONO was quite right, a fleet is coming to play – the American one, this time round. One of the battleships dipped its pennant politely at the sight of us, which was nice. I suppose they heard our radio callsigns before we took off, and felt rather less worried than if a squadron of torpedo-armed Ospreys had sortied to see who was calling. It would be no consolation to imagine the awful scandal and newspaper headlines if their Navy got trigger-happy and shot one of us down – especially if the one downed in the Pacific was oneself.

Of course, our Tutors would never put us in harm's way like that. Neither would the local Authorities, even if they did have any influence with them. Certainly not.

Anyway, after one circuit of the fleet we headed back to base, Jasbir leading the flight and hitting land right on course for the airfield. Interestingly, while circling in to land I noticed two flights of Ospreys sitting in sheltered waters well away from their bases, one in the lagoon of Sacred Island and one south of Haio Beach on South Island. It must have been some pre-arranged exercise, as I noticed one of them furiously working to load off a resupply vessel we have usually seen moored at the docks on Moon Island. Moon Island looked quite empty, with no sign of most of the official boats, not even that oddly named Rain Island submarine, "Sailor's collective 54" or whatever they call it.

A fascinating diversion, and the first time we have flown over any capital ships. As long as they greet us with dipped pennants and not ranging shots, I am definitely keen to take another look tomorrow.

Wednesday October 4th, 1935

Just when the locals thought Tourist season was over, a lot of them are having to dust off their head-dresses and grass skirts for another wave – it seems the Althing gritted its collective teeth, thought hard about the money and granted shore leave for three hundred sailors. That is, shifts of three hundred at a time – Casino Island hurriedly brought back out the souvenir and hot Tiki punch stalls for the sudden boom, and the local police are very nonchalantly walking around with their ears perked up for trouble.

We saw nothing of it ourselves, being hard at work in the engine-sheds all morning and sweating over our telegraph keys in the afternoon. An interesting exercise indeed – practising "telegraphese", or the art of saying as much as possible in as few words as possible. A very handy skill, whether in saving money with a commercial wire or managing to get a vital message out over a wireless in a few seconds. Prudence Akroyd won handsomely; explaining folk are thrifty in her part of the world and have been developing the skill for three generations already. "When in doubt, say nowt" is her motto, and it certainly encourages her to be sparing with her words at any time.

The only place we went was the airport, escorting our first-years to take a look at the hangars – for trips on Eastern Island our tutors evidently trust us already, which is encouraging. Beryl wants to design a special "Escort" uniform with glossy peaked police-type cap and official Songmark night-stick, just to persuade our juniors we mean business – though I doubt our Tutors would approve. Surprisingly, Molly backed her up on this one, adding that it would be a thrill to be on the handing-out side of the Law rather than the receiving end for once. Personally, I would not be keen on living anywhere that thought Molly was an ideal Police recruit; though she has mentioned some innovative ideas on extracting confessions. I just hope Beryl does not give her TOO many bright ideas on those lines.

One thing we did see was the new flying boat, the "skinny" model Osprey, taking off from the dock moorings and flying overhead. From the timetable, our third-years will get the most use out of it – rather galling for us to have been surrounded all year by seaplanes and flying boats but never managing a single water takeoff or landing. It looks a most elegant design, and everyone's paws are itching to get at the controls.

On the way back, I managed to talk with Saffina, a most friendly girl. Her English is basic, but she knows the flying vocabulary by heart, and seems definitely well qualified to be here. I had vaguely heard of the new emerald discoveries in her home colony of Ubangi-Chari, but it was news to me that the organisation is almost entirely supported by air. Roads there are very basic and distances huge, with a lot of desert, swamp and river to cross – and unlike most mining, gemstones are eminently suitable to be airfreighted out to the coast.

Saffina mentions she is the Chief's daughter, which is what I might expect given the cost of a Songmark education. I really don't know what Madelene X has against her, she gets along relatively well with the other non-euros here (in the geographical sense, not the rather odd Spontoonie usage. To the Spontoonies, even Jasbir and Li Han are Euros.) Considering many of Madelene's people are Missionaries, one should hardly expect her to dislike folk of foreign parts on principle – indeed, there is hardly a "lost valley" gets discovered these days than all the nearest Missionaries converge on it like flies on honey. (Actually, when Molly used the phrase, honey was not the target. She can be awfully crude sometimes despite my best efforts.)

Thursday October 5th, 1935

Back to Casino Island, dodging the attentions of assorted sailors who seemed to think anything in a skirt (grass or otherwise) was provided for them by the Tourist Board. Beryl quite liked the attention, but I found myself thinking that her idea of the official Songmark riot-club could occasionally be handy - as long as neither Molly nor Beryl gets one. Still, even if I liked her ideas for the uniform, there is no reason to copy her behaviour. As I keep telling Maria, just because our Governments have the same sort of dress sense in boots and saluting styles, they do not necessarily get along with each other.

Our final shopping run for the third-year supplies started off as fairly uneventful, though we saw our friend Nuala apparently waiting for a bus on the North end of the market. She looked decidedly tired – evidently being in Entertainments right now involves a lot of dances or whatever she does. I must ask her some time just what theatre she does work in, as I would love to see her perform! Oddly enough, when I mentioned it to Helen her ears blushed quite markedly, and she seemed exceedingly doubtful that I really would enjoy the show.

We were just hauling our trailer back towards the docks when a familiar ferret stepped out of the shadows and hailed us – Mr. Sapohatan, looking sharp as ever, and courteously asking if Helen and myself would like a word. We all went down to the floating dock and helped load the trailers onto one of the cargo water-taxis with the drop sides and ramps, and waved Molly and Maria off while taking a different water taxi via a roundabout route, far from prying ears. For some reason, even Mr. Sapohatan seems not to worry what water taxi folk overhear.

Mr. Sapohatan began by complementing us on our successes at Krupmark, which he has been checking up on since the start of term. He looked rather annoyed when he mentioned that Lars had apparently done nothing illegal in the Spontoon jurisdiction, and had indeed volunteered to help the Authorities in another delicate matter closer to home. Furthermore, Lars had suggested asking if we would be interested in helping out, as we had worked together so well before.

Helen rolled her eyes somewhat at the suggestion, but agreed through gritted teeth, provided our Tutors had no objection. I suggested bringing in Molly and Maria, but Mr. Sapohatan politely declined the offer. At any rate, now we have another Mission, hurrah! Time will tell just what everyone has planned for us.

Friday October 6th, 1935

A filthy wet morning, with flying on the timetable. We were sure our flight would be scrubbed with the bad weather, but Miss Wildford swept in breezily and announced we were going anyway. So on with oilskins and a damp shuffle over to the airfield, the windsock hanging limp and the official forecast eight-tenths cloud cover at about a thousand feet.

I suppose that is the difference with being a second-year – we can already fly quite well in good conditions, now we need to practice everything in the bad ones. The runway is very well drained, but still our props were throwing up great sheets of spray as we taxied out from the hangars and took off into the murk. Not a day for sightseeing. The rain was absolutely painful in the slipstream, going through one's exposed fur like a fusillade of marbles – I could feel the whole aircraft shivering as the rain hammered against it at ninety miles an hour.

Our trip today was certainly not one we would have been allowed as first-years: climbing up through the clouds till we emerged at five thousand feet into sudden brilliant sunshine. The only landmark was the tip of Mount Kiribatori on Main Island, which fortunately points its main cliffs straight towards Eastern Island, giving us a good nav fix. In the slipstream and bright sun we were almost dried out by the time Miss Wildford signalled us to return and find Eastern Island.

One thing we did see under the clouds was the American fleet leaving, drawn up in full formation off the Beresby coast (no doubt a little heavier in the water with the weight of genuine Polynesian sculptures and anything else the Spontoones could sell them). I can well imagine the locals get worried at the sight of that sort of formation suddenly appearing in their waters, "requesting" to buy supplies and entertainment. The crew of the two battleships alone probably outnumbers the whole Spontoon militia, so within reason it seems to be a good idea not to argue with them. From what we heard the Gunboat Wars started in much the same manner, as the invaders (by some accounts) would have been happy to pay for supplies and peacefully occupy the islands. Spontoones seem willing to sell anything to anybody, except their independence.

It is fascinating what one can see from the air, even on such a dismal day; only a few miles away near Sacred island we saw a long grey shadow in the water – presumably the Rain Island submarine that had made itself scarce when the new visitors arrived. After all, the central waters are rather crowded for a fleet to manoeuvre in, and getting the submarines and aircraft dispersed to outlying parts saves the risk of collisions. Interestingly, it looked as if the submarine was lying in the gap in the reef, with white water breaking all around

that part of the coast – from the books I have dipped into, I should have thought that would have played havoc with anyone’s sound detectors.

Landing in the driving rain with a very wet and heavy aircraft was quite a challenge – our Tiger Moths do not have wheel brakes, which in any case would probably flip us over on the nose if we used them. As it was, I finished with about twenty yards of runway to spare, and poor Molly ran right onto the grass! No damage was done except to her ears, which were surely burning when Miss Wildford had finished telling her off about it. Considering we have watched thirty tonnes of strategic Soviet bomber land here in very similar weather, I found it depressingly easy to agree with our dear Tutor. Molly has by her accounts been flying from the Law recently, but not in aircraft.

(Later) We served our final meal (fish with lime and mashed yams) to the third-years, having exactly sixteen cowries to spare – about enough to buy a cup of coffee. Our Tutors and the heads of their dorms went into a huddle with their notebooks, while we breathlessly awaited the results. An hour later Miss Devinski pinned up an announcement on the notice board – tomorrow night our whole year is being treated to a meal at Bow Thai, that oriental restaurant on Casino Island. I rather think we passed this part of the course.

Saturday October 7th, 1935

After two weeks, a nice change to lie in bed till seven and not have to head straight down to the kitchens to start preparing someone else’s breakfast. Maria was initially quite indignant at the project, pointing out we are being used as servants AND paying large sums to do their work. She seems rather more settled now, and (I hope) more appreciative of having food put on the table after two weeks of putting it there for other folk.

Just as we were making plans for a fine morning on Casino Island, Miss Windlesham breezed in and took volunteers to show the first-years around Radio LONO. Actually, she volunteered us in traditional military style – “you, you, you and you volunteer.” Much gritting of teeth and tearing up of plans ensued, but we obeyed and presented ourselves outside wearing our regulation shorts and blazers, while Beryl heckled us from the window.

Actually it was quite a fine trip, just a mile along the edge of the airstrip and heading towards the low complex of studios and offices at the foot of LONO hill (Putakahala Hill on the maps, but nobody calls it that.) Now the Tourist season is well and truly over, the local musicians and entertainers are suddenly without an audience – tourists do not stay in any one place long enough to be bored to the back teeth with forty-minute ukulele solos, but the locals would make their opinions decisively plain after awhile. Having a spot on Radio LONO reaches a less jaded audience and is good free advertising for the bands, often leading to a better venue in the next tourist season.

I remember seeing the radio ventriloquists lining up for auditions last year – if we thought that was odd, this year the contest is to find the island’s best radio juggler. The radio magazines are making much of that Scottish ursine inventor Mr. Logie Bear, whose “Tele-vision” system is already being trialed around London and a few major capitals. If it takes off as rapidly as Radio did, cubs the age of Moeli’s might grow up on a diet of several hours of Tele-vision juggling and ventriloquism every day.

Although our own Senior years had little to do with us at first, I am determined we should try and be a good influence on this next batch – for a start, I am memorising all their names and backgrounds. Our Tutors are notoriously close-mouthed about letting out any private student details, (it took us a term before we discovered what Madelene X’s actual name was, and it came as quite a surprise) so I am having to gather the information myself.

I must say, it is a poor show that of the twenty new applicants, not one of them is from Home. I noticed on the brief details we had that Brigit Mulvaney was born in Kingstown, Ireland – but she fiercely corrected me and insisted it was Dun Laoghaire and always “really” had been. I will show her some proper maps and try to explain things to her. Just as our Russian arrival Tatiana mentions St. Petersburg is now Leningrad – it had just got used to being Petrograd, when evidently the locals decided that was still too “retrograd”. Tatiana boasts that it will now be Leningrad for the rest of history, which may prove depressingly true with the way Reds are cropping up everywhere.

I hardly need to ask about Tatiana, as she rarely stops talking. Most of the Russians one sees around here are off-white Russian exiles such as Countess Rachorska, but Tatiana is as “Bolshie” as they make them (much to Maria’s disgust). More than that, she is part of some very odd Bolshevik sect, the “Otzovists” who seem to be radically religious reds. Not a combination that I would expect to work.

Well – I was hoping to find some kindred spirits, but it seems Songmark’s international reputation is not an undiluted benefit. I think I will have some trouble with little Miss Mulvaney, while Maria is polishing up her horns at Tatiana (her Uncle always charges when he sees Red) and Helen has spotted another Red from the ex-American province of New Haven. Although Helen dislikes all Bolsheviks, meeting Miss Liberty Morgenstern

from (formerly) her own country really irks her – as they taught us in Religious Education years ago, it is far easier to tolerate a heathen than a Heretic. All it takes now is for one of the first-years to reveal they have Detectives as parents and a membership in the Junior G-men League to irritate Molly, and our dorm will have a matching set of opponents.

All in all, it was a relief to hand our charges back to our tutors, grab our dance costumes and dash out to Casino Island, very eager to forget our new irritations and dance our cares away. A very strenuous routine, with our tutor Mrs. Motorabho really putting us through our paces. Jasbir and her friends spent most of the lesson dancing as a unit with us – it is really quite difficult getting in step with eight dancers where one was used to manoeuvring with half as many. Certainly, Li Han and Jasbir are easy to work with, having a natural dance rhythm and an awful amount of practice this holiday. Jasbir mentions she has had her Father's court dancers teach her three hours a day, every day, all through the Summer.

For a change we did not have to dash back to Eastern Island to eat after the dance class: as soon as we were showered and changed, it was hardly three hundred yards across the top of the island to Bow Thai where we met up with the rest of our year. Quite a meal! Very different indeed from the standard Foreign meals they have around here, and happily short on large native tubers. The rice was very well done, one can certainly imagine they have practiced with that cuisine for quite awhile. (Memo to myself: when a Thai dish says it uses hot chillies, believe it. Tiny chillies are not mild junior versions of big strong ones.)

A great surprise was to see our tutor Mrs. Voboel (nee Pelton) there waiting for us, with her new husband. I got the impression that everyone was extremely surprised that our dear Tutor ended up getting married like any village girl, after a life of incredible adventure. Possibly that was the attraction. At any rate, nobody at Songmark recognised her husband from Orpington Island; a dark horse in more ways than one.

(Later) A postcard for us – a local stamp and five-cowry landscape view card without return address or signature, but we are fairly sure we know who sent it. Anyway, we should know more tomorrow when we meet after church – time to draw another deep breath, as here we go again. I must say, it is gratifying to be able to help out like this – something like being a Special Constable. And it is hardly as if we were working for an unfriendly Major Power – the style is quite different. According to all the films, a real Intelligence Service is a dashing band of slinky “Femme fatales”, Rogue Males, unstable geniuses, technical prima donnas and all sorts of “loose cannon”. Spontoon surely has nothing like that, it would be awfully hard to hide.

Helen says the same sorts of films show Test Pilots as spending all day and every day taking up untried aircraft to maximum height, power-diving them to maximum possible speed and then pulling up at sea level as hard as possible, to see if the wings stay on. Possibly Hollywood exaggerates aircraft films more than spy dramas.

Sunday October 8th, 1935

An early start today – we noticed Molly had not been sleeping too well, and when I woke up at half past five to see her staring at the ceiling wide awake, I roused Helen and Maria so we could have an undisturbed talk, a difficult thing to arrange with our timetable.

Of course, I had thought about how hard it had been for her to get here – but I had only thought of it in terms of inconvenient schedules and cramped lower-class accommodation. The full story of it was far more extreme, starting with her and her Father quarrelling over Songmark and his ultimatum that if she went there she need not bother returning. (One hopes he will have relented by now.) For tax reasons, a lot of the Family assets had been put in her name, and when those assets became a legal liability the G-men were hot on her tail. All the airports were blocked: only by calling in some favours did she manage to sneak onboard an ex-associate's “cigarette boat” for the trip from Cuba to Panama City. Her funds were rather depleted by the time she found herself looking at the Pacific, awaiting a ship going in even vaguely the right direction.

Unlike in the adventure novels, it seems commercial freighters are not really keen to take unskilled crew on for the price of their meals and ticket – she stowed away on one bound for the Seabear Republic, having noted it was a mixed crew with a lady Captain and hoping for the best. Not only was she discovered the first night out from port, but her hopes were sadly disappointed (I had read in old Pirate tales about the Captain taking first shares before sharing captured spoils with the crew, but had not suspected the custom survives. Poor Molly!) The worst of it being there is nobody she can complain to, as being a stowaway she was never officially onboard the ship, and the entire crew would deny she ever was.

Even having got here, she had more troubles to tell us. Miss Devinski has told her gently but quite firmly that unless Songmark receive at least half of next term's fee by the end of term, they will regretfully use her deposit for a one-way ticket back to the nearest American port, where Molly says the G-men will be eagerly waiting. Every new Songmark student has to pay a travel deposit, which the rules say is used in the event of being

expelled or invalidated out of the course – having asked, Molly discovers she cannot transfer the deposit to her term fees.

I had no idea things were this bad, as one always hears of folk in financial straits suddenly getting an inheritance from an Aunt or similar at the last minute – it seems this is a custom folk in Molly's hometown have lost. So, we have another urgent task this term – lay hands on a fairly huge sum of money, and preferably have the option on doing it again a few months later. All this on top of the little matter of all getting through our own coursework, as well as whatever Mr. Sapohatan might send our way.

Helen whispered that unlike Molly, in similar circumstances we could at least stay on the islands and await better fortune. There is a longhouse that Mrs. Hoele'toemi would like to see filled, and it is possible in the Songmark rules to take a year's break between courses – Missy K has hinted that she might discover she needs to do that. We could join the Hoele'toemis as I am Tailfast and Helen is definitely considering taking that step with Marti, but Molly has less official connections here, having nobody local to sponsor her. I have heard nothing about Lars having a family, apart from his mysterious and villainous brother who nobody ever seems to mention. But even if we manage to get Lars back in good odour with the Authorities, I doubt Molly has quite the options Helen and myself enjoy; as I discovered in the past year, there are very fine gentlemen in these isles of very different sorts, but Lars is not the sort that one marries.

In my Brother's collections of ripping good yarns, there are scenes where friends stand over the campfire at midnight and swear blood oaths over the flames to stick by each other. We managed without the blood and campfire (inconvenient indoors and most unhygienic) but pledged just the same to do our utmost. We have ten weeks and counting – the trouble is, we are not actually earning anything right now, nor have we time to do so with all our coursework. A rapid pooling of cash followed: Maria put in the lion's share, and I pledged every cowny of my allowance (no more ice cream at Song Sodas for me, let alone new Rachorska dresses!) while even Helen threw in more than I would normally have thought wise for someone in her situation.

We are still about twelve hundred Shells short of meeting next term's target, but it is a start. With us four and our friends working on the problem Molly is looking rather more hopeful. Just as "hunger makes the best sauce", necessity is definitely a spur to Adventure. Whatever Adventures might beckon, we should try and find the ones this term with a substantial payback involved. After all, it is in a good cause.

Breakfast and Church went by in rather a whirl, with the Reverend Bingham giving Avarice a good shelling and strafing. Helen seemed a little uneasy (the first time any of the actual Religious bits have affected her) but I pointed out we were not trying to acquire riches for ourselves. Indeed, there is a Church Roof restoration fund starting up – our dear Reverend is hardly avaricious for hoping to raise a pile of shells for the project.

Neither Jerry or any of his brothers were there today, but we spotted Saimmi outside the church awaiting us – we whispered that we had a meeting, but she smiled and escorted us up to the Park on top, where Mr. Sapohatan was awaiting us by the central pond. Not quite the sort of scene one sees in the films, Agents sitting on park benches looking out over municipal gardens. Indeed, when we arrived a food-less Mr. Sapohatan was surrounded by wildfowl which were expecting to be fed as in Tourist season; our first sight was of him being noisily disbelieved by a duck.

As always, he was unfailingly polite, and asked after our health – we had to confess our worries about Molly, as it is no secret (at least to our tutors and assorted G-men) about her unfortunate situation. Far from encouraging us, Mr. Sapohatan had to explain that there seemed little chance of her being able to remain on Spontoon without a Songmark course. The Althing are not really keen to have large numbers of Euros moving in as Citizens – there are some, but they generally are folk with exceptional skills, or who have rendered exceptional services.

He noted that it was rather a coincidence that we were looking for funds – from his pocket he pulled a huge sheaf of various currencies, what must have been fifty brand new pounds sterling plus I don't know how much in foreign notes. He invited us to look it over, and it was quite a sensation to hold what was probably the price of Molly's term fees, with enough besides for a new Rachorska dress to cheer her up.

The real surprise came when he took the cash back, put it on the gravel walk beside the bench, lit a match and dropped it. The whole fortune went up in seconds, while we looked on with eyes wide and tails fluffed out in horror. Counterfeits, he explained, extremely good ones that quite a few tourists had found out about when returning home from these waters and presenting to their local bank. Definitely NOT good publicity for the Tourist Board.

By his account, it seems unlikely that actual printing is going on in these islands (the presses needed for this quality of work are massive beasts and impossible to conceal) but certainly distribution is taking place. Being in the middle of the Pacific on a transport hub pointing in all directions, Spontoon is rather well placed for all sorts of quiet international dealing. Which brought the conversation round to Lars, who has offered to keep his

ears open and pass on any information he finds. I hardly think he would make such a specific offer unless he already had the scent to follow.

Helen complained this sounded like a standard Police matter, and hardly something for us to tackle – unlike the search for Phoebe, which was unofficial as no actual laws were being broken. He agreed, except that in this case it was possible Spontoones were involved who might recognise what their neighbours do for a living. In islands these small, of course there are only so many trained and competent folk available and other locals are probably aware of whom they are. As none of the notes were actually being circulated on the island and none of the forged notes are Spontoone Shells, those involved might think of it as relatively legitimate business – the sort of evasion he hints that Lars would be quite familiar with.

Of course, we agreed to take the case, so long as it does not take us away from work too much – I would be surprised if our Tutors raised any objections. Actually, I found myself wondering if it would be an entirely bad thing if a few million ersatz Russian Roubles or similar was let loose in the world – folk such as the Countess Rachorska might regard it as a harmless way of getting some of the confiscated fortunes back off the State. On consideration, with the mood Molly is in about her own Government right now, she would probably say just the same about forging dollars.

We are in it again, and this should prove Interesting – at this rate I wonder what we will be getting into by our senior year. Helping the local Police is always a good thing, though I recall Erica mentioning some of her relatives take it rather to extremes.

There is always the problem of what to tell Molly and Maria – it was well enough in the summer holidays when they were not around to worry about, but this is term time and we can hardly go about vanishing without a word. Mr. Sapohatan agreed, and promised to find something for them to do – I would not be amazed if he kept them on something important-sounding but futile such as submarine spotting in areas where none are expected.

A brief farewell on the Eastern Island jetties, then back to Songmark to tell Molly and Maria what we could. They were thrilled to be given a part, and Molly was loudly hoping she would be allowed to take my T-Gew rifle out on official missions.

I rather doubt it, but I hated to dampen her spirits by telling her so. If Molly goes around with that hardware, I expect Mr. Sapohatan will find her a vital role defending that strategic rock (for seagulls) Metzger's Pyramid, fifty miles out in the ocean.

Tuesday October 10th, 1935

At last, we have started to get some choices in our timetable. All of us are poring over mimeographed sheets describing specialist areas, which might or might not appeal. It seems the local educational system is very flexible, with the local high school offering classes not just to its enrolled students but for anyone who wishes to buy into the course.

Though we are naturally very air-minded, Songmark covers that side of things quite comprehensively and farms out other subjects to specialists. Several of the classes are at Superior Engineering, with advanced Engine repair and maintenance plus a good deal of general boat and aircraft work. Thinking back to our adventures this Summer, some more boating experience would have been very handy (Helen agrees, though plumps for the shore-based maintenance course.) Naturally we have more to think of than just “planning to fight the previous war” as next time will probably be quite different. Madelene X and her countryfolk disagree on this score, and to look at their Maginot Line they are set on building the world's finest trench system well in advance. I am sure it will prove a sound French investment for at least a century or two.

By the end of the day, I had agonised long enough – they are all sensible, practical-looking courses which might be very handy in the right situation, but we only have room in our timetables for five out of the fifteen. My choices are:

- Small boat Handling and Navigation (Moon Island harbour)
- Marine and aero engine repair and maintenance (Superior Engineering)
- Advanced Reef and Shore fishing (Beresby docks)
- Advanced field medicine (Casino Island general hospital)
- Open-water and beach survival (Main Island, Lukapa Village)

I think that should keep me busy enough, not that that looks like being a problem around here. Maria has branched out in Observation and Reporting, somewhere on Casino Island – though she is hardly a budding journalist, in her political career it could be very useful to be expert in noting and analysing exactly who did and said what and why. Molly has gone for the Field Engineering at Moon Island, although from the course notes there might be too much raft and bridge building and less of the demolitions she would really enjoy. Still, if we suddenly need a log trestle bridge building over a jungle ravine, we will know just who to call on.

Thursday October 12th, 1935

Three cheers for Jasbir! We had mentioned our quest for Molly's Songmark fees, and she very generously donated fifty shells, all the disposable cash she had on hand. Li Han, Sophie D'artagnan and Irma Bundt chipped in with twenty apiece, plus they offered to treat us at Song Sodas whenever we needed to. In fact, after classes they insisted on taking us there straight away to cheer Molly up.

Prudence's dorm was already there with their friends, watched over tolerantly by Miss Windlesham. They have been making waves this term already, with some stunning successes in the swimming team they join on Saturdays. Carmen is a definitely exotic girl, and like all anteaters swims very well (one imagines a muzzle that pointed having little drag in the water.) Her very affectionate friend I have not been introduced to as yet; a native canine girl with patched black and khaki fur who I recall seeing dancing at the Hoopi Jaloopi festival.

I noticed Molly's eyes glazing over slightly as she watched the very affectionate scene, especially when Carmen licked clean the deep bottom of her sundae glass. Possibly that is good manners in Mixtexca. Molly's ears went right down as she watched Carmen finish – I must ask why sometime. Possibly other anteaters enlist as villainous tramp steamer crews on villainous tramp steamers.

Anyway, although a large hot fudge sundae will not solve our troubles, it put us in a far better mood for facing them. An hour's dance practice with Jasbir and co. after teatime put us in a healthy glow, though we were glad it is definitely getting cooler. A most necessary shower, then up to our dorm and hard at work with textbooks trying to get a head start on our new courses next week. Molly was looking smug, there being nothing specific on Field Engineering in the Songmark library, and anticipating a relaxing evening. Having her sitting back reading her "True Crimes Illustrated" while we struggle was voted down by the rest of us – Helen found a coil of rope and a book of constructional hitches and lashings which she will definitely need. Although she eventually was persuaded (Maria grabbed her in a jolly good double hammerlock to immobilise, while both ears and feet were tickled mercilessly) Molly's initial rejoinder was that Helen can get knotted.

Saturday October 14th, 1935

A busy Saturday, which we quite expect these days – starting with escorting the first-years over to the swimming baths on Casino Island: they are fairly empty this time of year, but fill up in winter when the sea gets chilly. Happily we were not required to escort them back, Beryl's dorm being grabbed for that duty much to their disgust.

It is a small world – after our dance classes, we were taken to the next hall to see the Advanced class in action – and for the first time in ages, we saw Lars performing. It was one of the interpretative Hulas, a most vigorous one that had the audience rolling with laughter or blushing deeply, according to sensibilities. Mrs. Motorabho gave us a rather condensed commentary on the plot, which was a rather updated take on an ancient Polynesian legend. It is amazing what one can get away with if one puts it forward as a classical legend: my Brother has mentioned the only worthwhile thing he has used his school Latin for is to read some very surprising stories that one would never get translated in a bookshop. But it is all Classical, so perfectly all right.

It was a shame we missed the start of the performance, though we did get to see half an hour of incredibly vigorous dancing, fully the equal of any effort we have made in the dance contests. Finishing to rapturous audience applause, Lars bowed his way out and made his way over to our table.

Although Helen and Maria excused themselves and headed out, it was a very pleasant hour or so as we caught up on things. All of us were in our dance costumes, sitting on a very cosy bench, Lars between us. Of course, I had to act as chaperone. I must say, even after such a dance Lars has an exceedingly healthy scent – I notice Molly had her snout almost pressed to his fur, and I confess I was quite appreciative myself. As ever, I cannot quite recall exactly what we said – except that I was very sorry when he finished and announced he had to shower and work on some business arrangements. We both watched his departing form with some regret; he has a very fine tail indeed. Constant exercise will do that.

Helen had been awaiting us, exceedingly annoyed – by her accounts we had been very cosily cuddled up for an hour, our tails absolutely twisted sideways while we did all but groom Lars' fur. She says we were sitting in a cloud of musk so dense she could almost see it, and urges us towards a shower with carbolic soap.

Well! I had a few words with her about Jealousy (adding it is scheduled for Reverend Bingham's target list tomorrow) and pointed out that Molly has ten times the right to complain, but seems unaccountably contented. Helen was right about the time though – time certainly does fly. I could wish I recalled it better, Lars is SUCH a captivating speaker, and has such fascinating deep hazel eyes.

Sunday October 15th, 1935

So now we know what has Madelene X hissing and spitting at the very scent of Saffina! Off to Church today, with some of the new girls to see Reverend Bingham. Jealousy came in for a “zone call” as they called it in the Great War, where every artillery piece in range was brought to bear on an urgent target. Really, Reverend Bingham does it awfully well – pouring on scripture, common sense, parables, pathos, bathos and even sarcasm. Helen was transfixed at the sheer output power of a trained sarcastic vicar on full throttle.

Saffina was waiting outside the Church, with Miss Wildford who had brought her over specially – not for the Church, but for our regular meetings with Saimmi afterwards for local Religious instruction. It seems Saffina had noticed some of the small local shrines with offerings of fruit and flowers, and was interested in seeing if her homeland’s faiths were more than superficially similar.

Saimmi seemed quite willing to take on another pupil, and as she quizzed Saffina on her home beliefs, we discovered exactly why Madelene is one step from jumping at Saffina with claws out (she’d lose if she tried it, though.)

From what she tells us, Saffina’s mother was a missionary’s daughter like many of Madelene’s relatives, out in the wilds of Ubangi-Chari, their mission being days of travelling from the next Euros. It would be bad enough for her to have married the Chief’s son and converted him to a good Catholic – but there are precedents for that, so it would be forgivable. By all accounts, the tribe own a far larger piece of real estate than many perfectly respected European principedoms, and everyone likes stories of a girl upgrading from commoner to Nobility regardless of where the Nobility resides. What makes Madelene X get the “red mists” is that Saffina’s mother married the Heir and converted to HIS religion, making a total mockery of the family tradition. Her Family refused to accept the marriage, and hoped nobody would ever hear from the disgraceful pair again – which was just before the emerald discoveries catapulted the province into world-wide fame and fortune. Saffina and her six siblings kept her original French family name, which is a tradition in the local religion and something else the Euro side of the family must be choking on.

Anyway, the complexities of the Polynesian religion are so extreme that there is room for a few more deities, and Saffina was welcomed as another student (or acolyte?). She says the climate is quite like her home and a lot of the diet is similar, poi resembling her local staple of fufu, as there are only so many variations on what to do with boiled mashed yams. I would suggest wallpaper paste rather than eating, personally.

On the way back we spotted Molly and Beryl returning from their Sunday “Church” somewhat unsteadily, the Temple of Continual Reward evidently preferring cocktails to sacred wine. Molly marvels that the “holy water” they use there could be lit with a match – whatever they do on religious lines, they certainly contact some sorts of spirits.

Hurrah! Jirry and Marti were awaiting us at the dock – we have all afternoon free, and though we are out of cash, we hardly felt like heading back for another Songmark meal. It would probably be fish fillet and yams anyway. Instead, we very happily accepted the offer to dine with the family on South Island, where for a change the entire Hoele’toemi clan is together. I had not seen Jirry’s father in ages – evidently his import and export business keeps him away from home for weeks on end. An excellent meal of fresh fish with the local vegetable Jirry called Mo’moa root, something like a turnip with great long “fingers”: my book lists another name as “Chinese Keys” though last week when I pointed it out in the market to Li Han she was baffled by it.

We would have been very surprised a year ago to discover they already know about the counterfeiting scandal that Mr. Sapohatan swore us to secrecy on – but the whole family seem to be engaged in State business of one sort and another. Mr. Hoele’toemi is certainly right to be concerned, as any exporter would be hit hard if nobody trusts the cash he buys his goods with. He warned us to be very careful, and pointed out that people are sometimes found floating in the harbour in Spontoon as well as Krupmark. We promised to be wary – as being “bumped off” by enraged forgers would severely spoil our timetable.

One thing they did not do was try and discourage us from taking the case. I hardly like to ask what they know about it – Mr. Sapohatan knows his business, and we like to think he tells us as much as we need to know. We do not ask what he tells other people!

Happily, we did not have to be back in Songmark till evening meal, so I chaperoned Helen (and visa versa) for a long walk with Jirry and Marti back to North Bay the long way round via the West-facing coast. It is rather odd how there is nothing on this side of the island, just steeply sloping jungle and a narrow beach that dives into the deep channel between South and Main Island. Still, it has its compensations, as nobody is liable to disturb a private party.

(Memo to myself: though catnip is something I really am in NO need of with Jirry, I should enquire discreetly if I can buy some. It is only fair that I use it at least once with him, having used it elsewhere.)

Tuesday October 17th, 1935

Our staff certainly wastes no time: last week we chose our specialised subjects, and we are already starting them. I headed out with Li Han, Adele Beasley, Carmen and Prudence to Main Island, the first time for ages we had crossed over to the Beresby side. Our friends the Noenokes were nowhere around, though I noticed the Ice Maiden pulled up unloading at the dock next to the cannery. We had been expected, and soon met our tutor Mrs. Nonopeka, a very powerful Pacific Otter lady in respectable Native dress.

I hoped to have a head start in the Advanced Reef and Shore fishing after our Easter trip here – but that had been on a proper fishing-boat with professional equipment. On this course we start from quite the other direction, as if we had been cast ashore without anything except what we might have in our pockets or found locally. At least I have had plenty of practice in knots and lashing, as our first project was to assemble a workable fishing net. Much ladylike cursing and making of bizarre cat's cradles followed, though we all finished the morning with vaguely net-shaped objects that our tutor critically agreed looked the kind of thing a castaway might make on a first effort.

Lunch was provided at the cannery cafeteria – considering they have great vats of fish always on the boil, it was definitely fresh and rather fine. A stroll with our nets followed, out on the long, curving coral sand spit that is Main Island's most Northerly point, a mile or so from the nearest house. It felt definitely exposed out there, with only a strip of sand in the middle of the Pacific, which the biggest waves were washing right over. One freak wave would wash us right into the Nimitz Sea, and we saw quite a few rogue waves on our Easter trip.

While we set our nets in the tidal races and undertows, Mrs. Nonopeka showed us various ways to spot shellfish and all sorts of burrows. Our basic Songmark survival course had covered some of this, but we certainly learned a lot more – though the various species of lugworm look very unappealing, they are edible and a castaway might be quite glad to find them. Given a choice, our Tutor suggests they make better bait for more edible catches. If our survival training has done nothing else, it has certainly broadened our definitions of “edible”.

Though none of us caught very much, we were all praised at having caught enough to live on. It would be a decidedly hungry life, but not bad for the first day of the course. As we discovered on Gunboat Atoll and our other survival trips, without proper equipment one really needs all the daylight hours just looking for food and fuel. Actual commercial reefs as productive as the one a mile offshore the Noenokes fish are rare – having seen the size of our catch, we stopped wondering why none of the Natives were working this sand-spit.

(Adele Beasley has learned another lesson today – though Razor Shells can dig to escape remarkably fast, it is a bad move to grab them with the naked paw and try to tug them out. They get their name from a more than cosmetic resemblance to a fur-trimming razor.)

Wednesday October 18th, 1935

Another damp day, but not so far from Songmark – we can see the Rain Island naval base from the windows of our new dorm, and I headed over with Jasbir, Beryl, Prudence, Belle and Irma Bundt. This time round we were mixing it with a class from the “Euro” High School on Casino Island, various folk who we have sometimes met at the dance classes. This time our tutor was a proper naval instructor, Able-Seaman Fenton of the full-time Rain Islands navy. A most able-looking seaman indeed, and a sea-dog in the truest term, being a yellow Labrador gent.

There is quite a selection of small boats to learn on, from a two-person dinghy to a thirty-foot catamaran that will need the whole class of us to handle. Motor-boats are definitely out, being too easy – but there are six different styles of sails to learn, and we are promised a trial of any interesting Native craft with willing owners who make port here.

A morning with Mr. Fenton followed, ably assisted by half a dozen of the Spontoonies who are always found around the naval base doing odd jobs and looking hopefully at flying-boats. With one trained sailor on each boat, we were spared most of the embarrassing mistakes. Irma Bundt took an awful crack on the head from the boom when the wind shifted, but she has a head like seasoned teak and shrugged it off with a rueful grin and some Swiss-German words I had not heard before.

It was certainly interesting, sailing one of the outrigger canoes: being square-rigged it was only workable before the wind, with no tacking possible. For unfavourable winds, we were advised to use the oars or simply wait on the beach for a favourable wind. A long, thin outrigger canoe with ten or twelve square yards of sail can certainly shift when the wind is behind it – twelve knots, Mr. Fenton announced over the measured run. Missy Tupuebe helped me with the sails, a Polynesian otter girl who assures me she was brought up on the local boats. I expect half her fun comes from watching us bungling what must be second nature to her – certainly, when Belle

capsized her dinghy she was grinning ear to ear, even as she dived into the lagoon to help. Quite an amazing swimmer, even for her species and upbringing – not surprisingly, she mentioned she is competing for a place on Spontoon’s Olympic team next year. Belle has at least the excuse of being from Oklahoma, where folk are less familiar with ocean squalls.

Lunchtime saw us pulled away from our boating to escort the first-years over for a swim on the Eastern side of Eastern Island. It might be the last week or so before Spring, as the water is getting quite chilly. Saffina and Tatiana were asking me about their first survival trip next week – something they are rather worried about. It seems they had been asking Beryl, who had airily announced that a tenth of the group last year never came back alive, and one is still confined in a rubber room in the Casino Island hospital. Even though I am not her dorm leader, I must definitely have words with Beryl about this sort of thing.

It turns out that while Saffina has never lived in a town bigger than two hundred mud huts, Tatiana is from the industrial part of the Volga basin and has never been in real countryside before. Not surprisingly, our Tutors have put them in the same dorm, where they will have a lot to talk about. Big cities seem to breed radical politics (by contrast, Spontoon has less public Government than anywhere I know) and indeed our Government back home started off in the industrial areas. It was the well-named League of Carbon Steel, well before the late martyred Lord M reformed it into the Jingoist Party and won the first elections on its way into power.

Tatiana seems to be exceedingly puzzled about the local set-up, as she has been brought up strict Bolshevik and cannot quite work out where in its “inexorable proletariat progression” the local system fits. I doubt I will send Maria in to debate with her – it might start off as a political exchange, but would probably become an artillery exchange very rapidly.

One wonders why Tatiana was sent here, really. Joseph Starling has a well-publicised aeronautical youth movement – Tatiana proudly claims she is a “Komonsol”, apparently the local version of the Girl Guides. It is a rather expensive course (as we know all too well, faced with the problem of Molly’s fees) and apart from the tropical setting she mentions having quite similar ones much nearer home. Of course, to hear her describe it all the brave Soviet aviatrixes are going to be arctic explorers, airline pilots and air-police. Some folk might believe her, but she rather gave the game away by asking what size torpedo our Tiger Moths could carry, the first time she ever examined one.

Friday 20th October, 1935

Time definitely flies – a whole month into term already, and little nearer solving Molly’s problem. We have used up all the cash on hand – Maria’s chequebook is presumably hiding under the bed whimpering at the damage she has done to her bank account. I would do the same if I could – my allowance is pledged down to the last cowry, but we have scarcely scraped together a third of the Spring term fees.

Still, we can hardly complain about what the fees are spent on – this morning (at last) we all went down for a flight in the new Osprey, and took a turn at the controls! The prototype is a dual-control model, and with Miss Wildford at the front controls one can fit six eager (if cramped) students in the crew compartment behind her. Changing over the rear pilot in flight was definitely an exercise in gymnastics – happily Missy K was not on the first planeload with me.

It makes quite a change, flying an aircraft with an enclosed cockpit. Certainly it is a lot quieter, and we were grateful for the shelter when a rain squall rattled across the lagoon – but one misses a lot of the vital sights and sounds, peering out through glass. I know a lot of commercial pilots dislike the idea with the problems of getting out fast in a crash – even our machine has a fireman’s axe secured to chop out through the canopy in such an emergency. The canopy gives one rather a poor view behind and below, rather than just leaning over the cockpit edge to look down as we do in the Tiger Moths – it might be all very well for luxury airliners, but obviously no successful military aircraft will ever have a closed glass hood around the pilot.

Actually, the stretched Osprey is a very steady aircraft, with two engines and much bigger all round. It is not as responsive as our Tiger Moths, and one has to “think ahead” a lot more. On that scale, one imagines the commercial Dornier X pilots will be planning their landing in Spontoon before they start the engines in Hawaii!

Take-offs and landings are scheduled for next week, to our delight – we only hope and pray none of our Seniors gets careless or unlucky before then. There are quite a few hazards even in the well-regulated Spontoon air and waters: right in the middle of the seaplane channel Li Han spotted a drifting tree trunk, which Miss Wildford radioed in as an urgent hazard. By the time we had done three circuits around Eastern Island the new aircraft-engined tug was roaring out from Moon Island ready to deal with the offending flotsam: running into that on a landing run could definitely ruin your day, not to mention your insurance premiums.

Ten minutes each at the controls was a good start, before we headed back to Eastern Island for ground duties. Maria has finally got used to the idea that one hour’s flying “costs” at least five or six hours hard work in

the hangars – a year ago she still believed an aircraft was more like a pair of shoes one chose, strapped in and headed out wearing (after someone else had cleaned and polished them, in her case.) Just re-fuelling took half an hour with us all working up to the waist in water, passing out gallon petrol cans from the shore to hand up to fill the tank on the top wing. Definitely an expensive business, flying – even ordinary petrol costs the equivalent of four shillings and ninepence a gallon here, against three shillings at home. (Memo to myself: Professor Kurt has done rather well in transforming noxious waste into very useful stuff already. Ask him if he can process Poi into petrol – preferably ALL of it?)

Typical – our Seniors have been given the treat of deciding what to christen RI-J548, Songmark's first amphibian. If they call it something silly like "Joey-bird" we will be stuck with it – though I could hardly support Beryl and Molly's rather alarming suggestions, it is a civilian aircraft despite their disappointment with the idea.

Saturday October 21st, 1935

Quite a day for revelations – we were heading in towards Casino Island (having won the toss against Prudence's dorm, who were stuck with first-year escort duties) when we discovered a water-taxi awaiting us. To see Mr. Sapohatan there was no great surprise – but to see him there with Lars definitely was. Molly was almost restrained, relatively speaking. The water-taxi was one of those with the big woven matting arches giving wind and spray protection, and had concealed Lars very well – I can imagine it could be hazardous to the health if villains see him with Mr. Sapohatan, who is certainly concerned with law and order.

It was rather a long route we took, but the water-taxi folk never seem to charge Mr. Sapohatan anything. I assume he has a season ticket. He did not repeat his rather dramatic burning of counterfeit currency (dangerous on a boat, and it would be plain cruel to do it in front of Molly these days) but mentioned that a lot more of it had been turning up, some of it in official bank drafts to Rain Island. Definitely, he believes that some Spontoonic locals must be involved, which rather cuts down on his chances of successfully using his regular people on this job.

Rather sourly, he admitted that Lars had freely handed over some promising leads that had already tracked down some of the money, though not its distributors. Further, he added that there are well-known local "businessmen" who would be interested in such a project – but the problem would be to catch them at it.

Lars took up the story, and a most enthralling tale he made of it. He mentioned that transport crews of his own enterprises had seen vessels they recognised as Spontoonic regulars, moored in rather odd places around the islands for no obvious reason – and twice, an unmarked aircraft had been seen taking off very near them. With a respectful bow to Mr. Sapohatan, he pointed out that ten times the number of police that Spontoonic employs could not search all the small craft coming in and out of even the regular harbours, let alone coming ashore some moonless night on the wilder parts of the island. Even if the local law enforcement made a lucky capture, he explained that it was common knowledge how such smuggling operated – the actual smugglers would only know that they had to move a certain box from A to B, and the masterminds would have thoroughly insulated themselves from the riskier part of the business.

In fact, Lars explained, the only real way of stopping the operation was to find where the organisation was based, and get to their records – after which the whole business could be unravelled. He was following certain clues, but nothing that could really be handed to the police as solid evidence. Very gallantly taking off his cap and bowing, he asked if we were prepared to risk ourselves in what could be a dangerous business.

Well! Had I wanted a nice cosy existence I would have joined my chum Mabel and be studying deportment at her Swiss finishing school, not standing braced in a Native boat on the other side of the planet talking with a Secret Policeman and a Secret Businessman. Of course I volunteered like a shot – my Grandfather fought at Balaclava and Father saw a lot of Gallipoli, and it is up to me to carry the Bourne-Phipps family tradition on this side of the planet. Molly and Maria volunteered a fraction later, and eventually Helen gave her rather lacklustre consent. I really must have words with her about showing the proper spirit, and make sure her diet has plenty of healthy Moral Fibre in it.

Anyway, he mentioned that he had heard hints of a particularly large piece of "business" due sometime in the next month – which would probably mean going into action on short notice. This could be a problem for us, with our timetable – it is rather like having an air force that all work in City banks and have to sneak off on Alert without anyone noticing. Still, we nodded dutifully and promised to do what we could – at any rate, we should have some interesting experiences in this job. As long as we keep up our good reputation on the islands we should have little to fear from Mr. Sapohatan: certainly someone to have supporting rather than opposing oneself.

The two Spontoonies transferred to another water-taxi in the middle of the lagoon far from prying eyes, and we carried on with our usual Saturday dance classes. Some of the first-years have been trying to enrol already – as soon as they have earned Passes, it looks like half of Songmark is heading this direction.

Only three of our Seniors have kept up their interest, though they are in the Advanced classes and we rarely see them. Happily, perhaps the best of all is Jessica Fawcette, not quite from my native Bassetshire but from just over the border – about the only one of our Seniors from Home than I really know. Still, she has an athletic family tradition, her grandmother being the famous lady archaeologist Miss Laura Shieling who obtained so many Native treasures for the museums and private collectors in Victorian times. This is not the sort of thing I would try to persuade Jerry of, but at the time it was felt a much better thing for famous and valuable pieces of treasure to be on display to millions of museum visitors in Europe than to be hidden away in some sacred temple treasury. At least her granddaughter's costume is less uncomfortable for dodging traps and hostile Natives: if the "penny dreadfuls" are to be believed, Laura Shieling was scaling jungle-clad mountains and temple complexes wearing high-button boots, a whalebone corset and a detachable bustle with a four pound guncotton demolition charge.

Unfortunately, Beryl had arrived just as the Advanced class were leaving; although we are all Songmark students these days, her old school has an awful rivalry with Jessica's which Beryl never forgets. She burst into an old Saint T's chant that I have heard variants of before, on many a stricken hockey field:

*"If I had the wings of an Eagle, If I had the rump of a Crow
I'd fly myself over the Cheltenham grounds
And spit on those persons below." **

Although Jessica might not wear her grandmother's military issue crinolines, she seems to do well enough without them. Three years of Songmark self-defence lessons certainly come in handy – Beryl is fast but Jessica was faster, practically tied our classmate in a knot and pitched her into the swimming pool. Applause all round!

A very fine evening wandering around Casino Island, just the four of us. Strolling by the docks on the sunset side of the island, there was quite a lot of boat traffic considering the time of year. No standard tourists, but a lot of commercial traffic and the year-round trickle of random travellers passing through in all directions. Looking at a cargo ship unloading logs from Vostok for the sawmills, Helen commented that just one hollow log could hold millions in forged notes – one big shipment a year would hold a very good chance of getting through, rather than a steady stream of folk with suitcases. Molly quite agreed, and recounted various tales from her Family business. At least we should be spared one of her business associates' tricks (running a pipeline across the river from the Canadian border on the far shore) – even if the money pipeline was a "pneumatique" such as banks and city post offices use, on Spontoon one would need a rather long pipeline.

On the way back we met our friend Nuala, who must have inherited her lupine mother's tolerance to Siberian cold: at any rate, she was dressed in a rather chilly costume for the time of year. She was quite chatty, and indeed seemed far more energetic than last time we met; by her accounts she had been resting a lot since then. One always hears of "resting" actors and actresses between engagements.

I took the chance to ask her just which theatre she does work in – as we tend to see her taking the air of an evening on the Northern side of the island, and one never sees her name in lights at the Coconut Shell. She seemed quite amused and waved vaguely over the northern part of the island, merely saying her "hunting license" covered all of Casino Island. Very odd, I have never seen her wearing any sort of hunting costume, quite the opposite – and Casino Island is absolutely the last place I can imagine wearing one. Of course, one sees a lot of the "great Euro Hunter" types relaxing stylishly around hotel patios in tourist season, in impeccable safari suits that have never been further than a stroll in Tower Hill Park – but Nuala has always struck me as being far more of a professional than that.

* (Editor's note: Amelia is being polite. The original chant is rather cruder.)

Sunday October 22nd, 1935

Definitely an Autumn day, or at least heading into the rainy season – the cloud was covering the LONO radio masts, which means a flying ceiling of about three hundred feet – well above the reach of my dear Flying Fleas, to be brutally honest. I hope for better performance from the professionally built kit Father is sending me at the end of term.

A very wet ride over to Casino Island with Helen to hear the Reverend Bingham give Pride a severe mauling. Certainly it comes before a fall (one needs only recall Molly's family business problem, with an almost immediate descent from high-life to near refugee status) and we were always told at St. Winifred's that the meek will inherit the earth. Helen whispered that would depend on how good the Meek are at forging wills.

Though Helen has been attending Church for over a year, I can hardly say she has picked up much actual Religion as yet – though we can always hope. She certainly likes the singing, though can often be heard fitting radically different words to the tunes: as far as I can see she treats the place as an interesting morning out with a

social club attached. At any rate, she has been steering well clear of Molly and Beryl's Sunday amusements, though there seems to be little religion involved there.

I must confess it was rather more interesting to spend the rest of the afternoon with Saimmi and Saffina – four assorted feline girls with a common interest in the local customs, looking around South Island. The low cloud stopped us heading up to Mount Tomboabo as Saimmi had hoped: from the summit she says there are various interesting sights if one only knows what to look for. Still, we visited three fascinating shrines in the deep and dripping jungle, and learned the story behind them. Fascinating!

Helen has been watching too many Hollywood jungle epics – she quite delicately (for her) managed to enquire if Saffina's tribe have any unfortunate dietary customs. Saffina laughed it off, and explained that very few tribes actually eat each other, but often whisper it about their neighbours when anthropologists come to call. She allows there are exceptions, and mentioned having a Congolese classmate at her finishing school who had some rather alarming things on the "Special diet" form she presented to Matron at the start of her first term.

Saimmi finished up our trip with an interesting diversion to the Eastern end of the island, where some new Tiki sculptures are being installed. She gave Helen and myself quite a meaningful look, and noted Tikis are placed to give guidance and protection to important projects, just as other folk might buy insurance policies. These new ones were quite fierce-looking sculptures, facing seawards with raised claws – and they look over the recently finished section of the "waterworks project" that runs under our paws here. If the editors of "Jane's All The World's Fighting Trenches" ever get to hear of the local defences, I think they will need a new category of defence work: divine protection!

I might think this rather silly, if my Uncle had not showed me pictures of his unit's Padre "baptising" and naming each of a new batch of Vickers Medium tanks arriving at their squadron. Obviously if a professional Padre in a socially respectable regiment thinks it worthwhile, he must know something that does not appear in the training manuals – at least, the unclassified ones.

(Later) The rain was absolutely sheeting down outside, so our tennis match against Prudence's dorm in the compound was a washout. On the way back up to dry our fur in our dorm, a missile just brushed past my ears – to be followed by the first apology I have ever heard from Beryl about anything. She has managed to acquire a dartboard and has set it up at the end of the hall – which probably means somewhere else is wondering where theirs went to. Further, she has been teaching Jasbir how to play Saint T's rules, which involve standing thirty feet from the board and substituting energy for precision. I suspect her apology was for almost hitting me by accident – Beryl would have no qualms about perforating anybody, but thinks it very poor form to do it accidentally.

Possibly Mabel at her finishing school in Switzerland might be taught that darts is unladylike – but less so than Cumberland Wrestling, another sport we hear of on the Saint T's games programme. Actually, we all had quite a fine evening learning the new long-range rules, which is probably a good exercise in co-ordination skills and jolly fun, though a little loud. The only downside is what one could call "collateral damage" to the walls, about tenfold that of a regular darts match. A lively discussion was taking place as to the merits of overarm versus underarm throws and the trick of bouncing the darts in off the ceiling, when Miss Devinski came up to call a halt to the proceedings. Honestly, with the fees we pay for Songmark, one would think we could afford a few new walls when needed!

Monday October 23rd, 1935

Hooray! After a year of watching flying boats taking off and landing in these waters, we finally get to do some of that ourselves. At least my dorm and Madelene X's did, our Seniors having reserved the Osprey for the afternoon.

We spent an hour looking over the hull carefully, even donning bathing costumes and a diver's mask to look underwater for any signs of damage. There are a few small dents and scratches already: even minor pieces of driftwood can pack quite a punch when landing on them at sixty miles an hour. But we all pronounced RI-J458 "Sound in wind and limb" and eagerly threw dice to decide who takes first flight. Madelene X had brought her own dice along, but we wisely used our Tutor's instead.

My luck was out today, and I ended up second from last of the two dorms with only Madelene herself waiting and fuming next to me all morning. It was an awful wait, watching everyone take off and splash down: Molly stalled on takeoff, dropping our poor Osprey about ten feet for a rather nasty-looking "belly-flop" that had our dorm bleeding assignment marks, and making us all dive back into the water again to check for damage. I was about to have Words with Molly, but from the look on her face and her blushing ears, I think Miss Wildford already did a far more professional job.

Still, there was no lasting damage and at last I managed my first takeoff – holding the nose level as we lifted off the step, not pulling the nose up till we had about seventy knots showing. The Osprey is a much heavier

aeroplane than anything I have flown before and everything seemed a little sluggish next to our Tiger Moths. Certainly, it would take a very bold pilot to try pulling loops in one – and I never hope to be the passenger or the owner of the machine that tries it. But after twenty minutes of circuits I was smoothly back afloat, taxiing up to Eastern Island docks with a lighter heart and a significant piece of news for my flying logbook.

There was no time for back-patting and congratulations today – as soon as Madelene had been up and down we scattered off to our Advanced classes; in my case off to Casino Island where we reported to the hospital for the Field Medicine classes, our personal health certificates and our First Aid qualifications ready for inspection. It is a small world, as Doctor Unity Monotega, who gave some of us certain advanced check-ups at the start of Summer term, met us. She smiled and recalled my name, explaining she never forgot a face – though that was definitely not the part of me she checked for soundness last time.

Only three other Songmark girls are doing this option; Ada Cronstein, Li Han and Jasbir Sind. Of course, our regular first-aid classes are quite advanced as it is, but on this course we are promised a lot of exceedingly practical work, and the chance to do some real medicine. As it turned out, that started rather sooner than we had expected.

Doctor Monotega had put us together with two seniors from the Technical High School I knew by sight, and warned us that if any of us were allergic to the sight and smell of blood and various other things, the time to leave was right now. Suitably braced, we donned hospital masks and trainee Nurse gowns and followed her around the wards, with a brace of handsome junior doctors explaining various conditions and treatments as we went.

It had all been a fascinating afternoon and we were about to hand in our gowns, when a bell went off and we were rushed into the Casualty department – accidents happen, and it was just our luck to be there after a bad one. Furthermore, many of the senior doctors were very busy on a delicate operation elsewhere, leaving the hospital short of staff. A very nasty accident, a goods cart had slipped its parking brake and run down the loading ramp right over one of the market traders – crush injuries and jutting out bones, quite enough to turn one's stomach. We were drafted in to move the stretcher and get her straight into the operating theatre, there being nobody else on the spot in sterile gowns.

Though we ended up an hour late back and missed our evening meal, none of us felt particularly hungry. All our first aid so far has been rather theoretical, and this is the first time we have had to scrub blood off our fur. Still, I chose that course – and what I start, I jolly well intend to be good at.

Tuesday October 24th, 1935

Good news and bad news for us: the good news is we have the Osprey all to ourselves until November! The bad news is there will be more work shepherding the first-years around. The reasons for both are the same; our Seniors all head off today for ten days exercises in the Aleutian Islands. Apart from the distance and expense of getting there, by all accounts it is something for nobody to do lightly – the weather is amongst the worst in the world, but a third-year should be able to hold up to anything. We are expecting some very battered and storm-tossed Seniors to return in two weeks.

Molly is very cheerful, reminding us that we are now unsupervised except for our tutors, who have their paws full with the first-years (Liberty will learn after enough pummelling that calling people “bourgeois mud on the road to world revolution” will not be well received around here, even if she did mean it in a nice way.) Miss Blande and Miss Windlesham have headed North with our Seniors, so even our tutors are rather thin on the ground. At the weekend, we are certainly planning an evening at Mahanish's, as soon as we are free of escort duties for our juniors.

Wednesday October 25th, 1935

Molly's twentieth birthday, hooray! Jasbir contributed a home-made cake (breadfruit-based) and we all enjoyed a very jolly party, complete with a bottle of Nootnops Blue for the birthday girl. Molly being Molly, the presents list looked more like the contents of a trench raider's pouches: I had purchased my present for her on Mildendo Island, happily before pledging away all my Allowance. These are emergency matches/ signal flares, guaranteed to light in the middle of a howling gale and torrential rain: about the thickness of fat pencils and securely packed with warning notices, they are not so much Safety Matches as Mortal Danger Matches. They were very well received, and I could see Molly immediately considering what to set fire to first.

For a change, Lars sent a present actually labelled and signed by himself: a genuine M1918 Mauser Pioneer's special issue bayonet with a most formidable saw-back as featured in many tales of “frightfulness”.

Beryl looked exceedingly jealous, and commented that the head of her dorm back in her old school owned the only other one she had seen. I suppose it will come in handy for Molly's Field Engineering course.

Molly whispered that today was a great day for many reasons, as the Matron had finally given her a clean bill of health after all her unfortunate adventures in getting here. It has been a week since our last fleabite, but in her case our Matron was worried about more embarrassing health problems. Still, all is well on that score and Molly is exceedingly keen to celebrate with Lars – something she has obviously not been able to before.

The weather seemed to join in the celebrations, yesterday's rain having stopped and the skies as clear as crystal – perfect for a flight in our dear Tiger Moths. We had Songmark's whole mini squadron up at once today, practising formation flying – not that we really expect to be in defensive flights, but it is a real test of flying skills to keep in position through whatever aerobatics the lead aircraft decides to go in for. Stunt flying comes only in the third year, despite everything we have read of far less experienced pilots in the Great War. Flying under telegraph poles, looping straight after takeoff and trying to spin the wheels by clipping buildings are stunts we are absolutely forbidden – Miss Devinski has warned us that anyone trying similar tricks will be grounded for a month on kitchen duties and lose chunks off their final marks next year. Maria is quite outraged, and fumes that any real fighter pilot flies under bridges as a matter of principle.

Thinking of people losing chunks of things, we had handed over our aircraft and were heading in towards the hangars when Molly's ears went right up and she gleefully yelled "Fight!" before tearing off round the corner. We followed her and discovered she was quite right – Tatiana Bryzov and Liberty Morgenstern were tearing into each other with a most unladylike abandon, hissing insults. Molly was all for placing bets on the outcome, but the pair were ripping fur out at a great rate and looked likely to do each other serious injury. Much to Molly's disappointment, I waved Maria forward and we practiced our preventative self-defence, grabbing them both in triple hammerlocks (tail and both arms) and using our ju-jitsu chokeholds to good effect. Total time from fighting to flattened first-formers, about fifteen seconds, a very smooth operation though I say it myself.

We handed the pair and our report over to Miss Wildford to be dealt with – after all, it will hardly do for Songmark ladies to brawl in public like that, and they do not have Beryl's old school traditions for an excuse. From what we could gather from Liberty's snarls, it was a political thing – very odd, as they are both Reds. I would have expected Liberty to object more to the "Idle rich daughters of bloated profiteers and plutocrats" as she called the rest of the class last week before Saffina all but twisted her ears off for it. Saffina may not be from the most civilised part of the planet (her hometown is something that sounds like Chockie Biccie) but at least does not go around muttering about whom will be first against the wall when the Revolution comes.

Anyway, it is hardly our problem – though it does help us keep sharp, and Maria greatly enjoyed putting a full-strength hammerlock on Liberty Morgenstern. Preventative self-defence is a frightfully useful subject to learn – and the more "frightfulness" employed, the more defence one gets.

Thursday 26th October, 1935

A surprising article in the Daily Elele – a local businessman is under lock and key in the Seabear Republic, having been found with a whole bundle of brand new currency that certainly never saw an official mint. I had thought this story was being kept quiet – but Helen pointed out that the Seabear newspapers had probably "spilled the beans" anyway, and it might do more harm than good to try and ignore the tale around here. I seemed to recognise the name, a Mr. Lalaka, and had it confirmed when Beryl came storming in waving a second copy of the paper and cursing most inventively.

From Beryl's account, Mr. Lalaka is one of the various associates of the Van Hoogstraaten family she is such chums with – she is furious at the idea of common police having caught him, and stormed off swearing he was far too good to get caught unless there was double-crossing involved. Still, that is one local villain the less, and another bundle of funny money taken out of circulation. Whoever is behind this trade has piles of freshly printed shells, sterling and shekels, but a distinct shortage of scruples.

Molly is still in high spirits, though as far as I know she has yet to set anything on fire with her birthday present. Her ears drooped somewhat yesterday when she tried to match Lars' present to my rifle, which it decidedly was not designed for. However – some careful measurements and two hours hard effort in the workshops produced a perfectly working adapter and she immediately posed grinning for the camera with the complete ensemble.

A year ago, I might have wasted an evening and spoiled both our tempers trying to convince her why a bayonet on a thirty-five pound tank rifle is a very impractical idea indeed – but we have learned more at Songmark than features on the timetable. I had a brief flash of premonition, Molly cherishing the photographs next year of herself posing shamelessly in the tropical sun with heavy artillery, looking back on it as the peak of a

Songmark career cut mercilessly short. With the spectre of her funds running out and a humbling farewell, right now she needs all the encouragement she can get.

We were drafted again to escort the first-years over to Superior Engineering, where I have been working on marine engines two days a week – solid, useful, uneventful stuff. Having Songmark first-years to look after is never uneventful, especially with our three Reds along. Brigit Mulvaney is red by fur colour rather than politics, but just as much trouble as the other two.

Actually, Tatiana has a surprisingly good singing voice, and generally lets rip with a marching song between classes. She has translated some old Civil War songs into English; one of which went to a tune that seemed familiar:

*“Hurrah! Hurrah! The Proletariat
Hurrah! Hurrah! Now hunt the Tsarist rat
Let’s sing it as we used to sing it, every hound and cat
As we were marching through Azerbaijan...”*

One feels that it definitely loses something in translation.

Friday 27th October, 1935

A good weekend for us; the first-years are off till Wednesday on their first survival trip, where they will discover the delights of the native leeches and gain practical experience of what to do in a quicksand. This means we are pretty much on our own, and very keen to see what fun we can have without folk riding guard on us. Molly suggests dressing up in our best Native costume and wander past the first-year camp to see if they see through the disguise, while muttering dire things about plague burials on the spot and vengeful spirits, to throw some interest into their long dark evenings in the jungle. She is quite welcome to try – personally I can think of better things to do with our first totally free weekend since the start of term.

Our radios are up and running in our new room, with some improvements – we have managed to tap into the electric mains, so no more brick-sized batteries to try and conceal, which were always prone to running out at just the wrong time. Still, the radios do need concealing – Madelene X is fuming at the confiscation of her short-wave set, which she left out in plain sight for ten minutes while taking a bath. Our Tutors are still very strict on the letter of the regulations, which forbid that sort of thing for second-years. This term Maria has brought along a very handy folding gramophone that disguises itself as a medicine-chest – but can only use it when nobody else is playing the single official one of our dorm, or it would rather give the game away. We still have to work hard for our fun.

Thinking of which, I contacted Jirry and arranged a meeting on Casino Island after our dance classes – sheer bliss, being able to stay out till ten without worrying about Passes. And with the first and third-years out of our hair, we will not be grabbed and sent off in search of them even if Tatiana and Liberty decide to go for “pistols at dawn”. Right now, it is happily not our problem.

(Later) A most surprising turn of events – we had agreed to help Mr. Sapohatan and Lars, but were under the impression the real action would be much later, possibly even in the holidays. Not so: a postcard was delivered by hand, calling us all up on immediate notice! Ten minutes later, Miss Devinski arrived, announcing we were being sent on an official offshore seabird survey over the weekend. Our hearts sank into our sandals – until she looked at us levelly and told us we had company waiting at the docks in half an hour. One gets the impression the “seabird survey” is just something that nobody in the other dorms would complain about missing out on when asked where we are going for the weekend. Only time to grab our small packs and head out!

Monday 30th October, 1935

I am really, really considering “throwing in the towel” to this whole Adventuring business. There is a nice Finishing School awaiting in Switzerland with my friend Mabel where she says they have healthy winter sports and carefully chosen company from respectable families. I am sure I can catch up on my deportment and etiquette lessons, I will have only missed a month of term.

Dear Diary: it is awfully hard to consider giving all this up, but I have absolutely landed in it this time, and even felines do not always land on their feet. Everything started well enough on Friday night – ten minutes after closing your pages we were all down on the Eastern Islands docks dressed as if for a nature trip, shorts and hats with oilskins in our knapsacks. We found Mr. Sapohatan waiting in a water taxi, and he briefed us as we took an indirect route to Casino Island.

It seems that Lars has kept his promise, and had one of his own unofficial employees trail the money coming in – it would be far too much to expect the counterfeiters to have a regular base on Spontoon, something

the regular Police could raid any dark night and expect to find evidence. No: by Mr. Sapohatan's accounts the whole enterprise is mobile and never meets twice in the same place – exceedingly hard to spot, and timing the raid is critical. Once we lose the trail, the chances of finding it again in time are slim.

Not only has Lars come up with the place they are meeting, but he even has rough descriptions of the key people who will be there – no names, but the Authorities can find those out afterwards. What he needs us for is to find out exactly when they have arrived – new faces that nobody suspects. The meeting will be in the next two days, is the hardest evidence anyone can give us.

Maria and Molly are quite bursting with enthusiasm, especially Maria, who has been complaining she never gets to go on any of our adventures. After all, we are supposedly being qualified to be Adventuresses (though the Songmark brochure does not exactly use the word) and she is very keen to put all the hard classroom work to the test before the end of our third year. I managed to persuade her not to raid the armoury before coming out: the locals presumably have quite enough of that on official strength and having Molly and Maria running around Casino Island heavily armed is not really a good idea.

Helen is considerably more thoughtful, and pointed out that even if we succeed we run the risk of getting famous, and will be no further use for this sort of job. Knowing what we do and becoming less valuable to the Authorities could be harmful to the health, she thinks. That assumes that Secret Police departments are ungrateful and hard-hearted, and I tried to reassure her on that score – less than successfully.

Maria was ready to start lurking in dark alleyways in her trench coat looking inconspicuous – but happily we were not thrown on our own resources, at least straight away. We were given a meeting at eight at The Missing Coconut, where we are familiar faces; Molly was muttering under her breath that proper Agents always have their own bars in the films, with secret knocks and hidden doors like her father's old "speakeasies". I fear she is in for a disappointment.

Although we go there every Saturday, The Missing Coconut really felt a very different place after dark, without our familiar dance tutors and rivals to set the scene. There were two dozen customers in there, but none of them looked like secret agents – and two waitresses were running around at maximum speed with trays and empty glasses, definitely working flat-out despite it being the tourist off-season.

We cautiously ordered a Nootnops red apiece and settled down to wait – and quarter of an hour later we were still waiting. Then Maria idly picked up her napkin, and a sheet of thin rice paper fell out, with a message on it! Very exciting and puzzling, nobody except the waitresses had been near our table since we arrived. The message was for one of us to come out to the balcony – Helen volunteered, and was gone five minutes while we tried to work out who could have got close enough to leave the note. Molly and Maria squabbled a little as to who should eat the rice-paper note, which from the films is the stylish thing to do.

She returned full of news for us: three of the gang have been spotted already at a restaurant up on Aloha Avenue, a rather fine one we have passed on the way to Tower Hill Park. One hardly associates criminals with exclusive restaurants (we had been expecting somewhere low-class like the Devil's Reef or the Tum Tum Club) but of course these ones are literally making money. Our orders – well, "suggestions" was the word to be exact – were to see who they meet and gather what information we could. Even Molly agreed with that one, especially as we were getting quite hungry.

There was no time to waste, so we paid our bill and were off into the night, tails held high and whiskers twitching at the prospect of some real action – it was only about two hundred yards up the hill to the Golden Crab, the far end of the street to Countess Rachorska's house. One of the finest parts of Casino Island, and certainly the dearest houses. There we had an awful shock – we were dressed for a weekend of scrambling round cliffs and beaches, and the Maitre'd on the door turned us away! Molly was all for telling him we were on a State mission of high importance – but luckily Helen grabbed her muzzle shut in time. It was a clear evening and we could see the lights of the airstrip over on Eastern Island, with little dots of light from water-taxis passing back and forwards. There was only one thing to do – Molly and Helen are our fastest runners, and they went off at a sprint heading back to Songmark for our party dresses.

It was forty minutes nerve-wracking wait outside in the shadows: fortunately there was only one exit and although several diners arrived, nobody left. At last Molly and Helen reappeared, panting with their tongues hanging out like canines and carrying the precious Rachorska bundles. Getting changed was a problem, but we found a war-surplus gazebo in a nearby garden to use as a dressing room while still keeping an eye on the street.

Just when we were properly dressed, Maria called a halt – pointing out that Molly and Helen had run two miles on a warm evening carrying packs, and although their appearance would get us through the door, their scent would definitely not. Rather an impasse – until we agreed that two of us could now go inside leaving the other two to cool down and watch the door. There was nobody else around on the street except for the usual "litter patrols", one of whom I recognised from the Guide's School we had trained with in Summer.

About an hour later than we had hoped, Maria and myself strolled into the restaurant, receiving an appraising nod from the headwaiter. Fortunately, Maria has a generous stock of cash she keeps for such emergencies – looking at the prices on the menu, I was very glad we were not relying on my depleted allowance. I hope we can claim expenses, even so.

One thing my Aunt taught me in such circumstances is not to keenly scan the place like a hotel detective: we scrutinised the menu and argued over who would pay before looking casually around. There were twelve tables, all but one now full – certainly at the Golden Crab they can afford to be fussy about their customers. We were glad to see there was nobody who recognised us – our tails had drooped at the prospect of, say, one of our dance teachers happily waving, loudly calling us by name and being keen to ask what we were doing.

On the table next to us, was a very distinctive gentleman indeed, one we had been told to watch for. He was about the third star-nosed mole I have ever seen, outside films (where they can always find parts whenever utterly exotic Natives are wanted.) There were two well-dressed canines with him, and a place was set for a fourth diner to join them. Our hearts raced, at the thought of the mission coming together so soon – I could see Maria eyeing the door, wondering exactly how she would signal the authorities when we decided everyone was there.

As it turned out, I received far more of a shock than I had expected when the door opened and a familiar avian figure strode on in – looking very sharply dressed in a safari suit was a figure I last saw on Krupmark Island – Lars' employee Boto Pikida! I had mentioned him to Maria before, so she perked up her ears when I whispered the name under cover of discussing our appetiser.

Boto looked exceedingly sharp, I thought, even for a falcon gentleman – not a feather out of place, and wearing an impeccable white suit. To my horror he waved cheerfully, before sitting down at the vacant seat and going into a huddled conversation.

We had decided on a light meal for the sake of our finances and the chance we might need to run and climb; the waiter had just served our prawn salads when I noticed the mole gentleman tap Boto on the shoulder and point our direction. Boto nodded, waving us over and we decided to test our luck. I could hardly believe he was a member of their criminal organisation – at least, not if Lars knew about it. The other explanation was that he was Lars' agent on the inside, which was a far more comfortable notion.

It was a decidedly interesting experience – we had been asked to watch this group, and we were certainly managing it rather well. We were introduced to their leader, Mister Brown – a rather commonplace name for such an exotic gentleman. His snout was quite fascinating to look at, fringed with pinkish protruding fingers like a sea anemone, and if our old schoolchum Ethyl was here she would surely be writing to “Weird Tails” ascribing him an unusual ancestry. It was very practical, as he could actually raise his glass no-handed and drink: rather like an elephant but with twenty-two opposing “thumbs” rather than a single trunk.

His accent was American, but rather “red Indian” rather than anything like Molly's or Helen's – he mentioned Mr. Pikida had vouched for me, and invited us to join them for their meal, which we agreed to very happily. Some surveillance missions seem to be much easier than we had expected.

Boto laughingly commented we had better not join Mr. Brown for poker, or we would be sure to lose our shirts – and with a warning glint in his eye, he mentioned that he can tell the truth. A strange statement to make, I thought – even Beryl can tell the truth sometimes, if she feels it worth her while.

I felt Maria rather stiffen next to me, and she mentioned having heard of one of Mr. Brown's possible distant relatives who is a diplomat – and is actually a walking lie-detector, which makes a lot of the usual diplomatic niceties rather hard to get away with. An alarming notion! This could explain why nobody has managed to catch this gang so far, if he can simply ask someone if they are working with the Police and guarantee their answer.

Boto nudged me under the table, and asked me if I was at work tonight. As this is an official mission rather than fun, I supposed I was – and as I agreed, I saw Mr. Brown relax slightly. Boto explained to the rest of the group that he had met me on Krupmark Island, at The Beach – perfectly true as well, if a little misleading. I could see him thinking fast, trying to think of harmless things that would point away from what I was actually doing here – fortunately, Mr. Brown seemed to be rather more at ease as he whispered something in Boto's ear-pit.

I tucked into the meal with a will, pointing out that I had never seen Boto on Spontoon before, and was surprised to see him here – which was an understatement and a half, and probably radiated Truth like hundred-watt bulb. He agreed, confirming that he usually worked in the rest of the island chain, and was here on business. Possibly we are not the only ones Mr. Sapohatan drafted in as “new faces” for this particular show.

It was a very thrilling meal, having a combination of party game with rather more serious business – being very careful to only ask each other the right sort of questions, and still make it a perfectly normal dinner conversation. Maria immediately caught on, and we had a very relaxed evening on the surface of things, before

Mr. Brown announced they were going to move on, and invited one of us to join them. He made it fairly clear there was only an engagement for one.

A quick conference with Maria in the powder room followed: she would have to brief Helen and Molly, and contact the Authorities. Everything seemed to be moving a lot faster than we had planned, indeed we were quite swept along by events.

We expected things to happen very quickly, and Maria memorised the telephone number we were given – not one that I imagine appears in any public directory, or goes through the usual switchboard. In five minutes we had been assured there would be a raid in force, but folk would be very unhappy with us if we called it in before the real leaders had showed up. Of course, we are totally unofficial and all that - I suppose this is only like being a Special Constable, sworn in for special occasions such as strikebreaking and not liable to the usual disciplines that hold back more formal officers of the law.

A farewell to Maria and I returned to the table, trying to keep my ears and tail up and not to make it obvious how worried I was feeling. Boto took the chance to whisper that not everyone was arrived, and the Boss was still missing – but that everyone was moving on to a party from the restaurant. That was certainly more cheerful news – I'd not been to a real party in ages, and it hardly seemed the kind of thing desperate criminals would do.

It was a fine night outside, and I saw no sign of my friends, with only the street sweepers visible working on the far side of the road. Everything must have been already arranged, for a large covered “jitney” taxi pulled up as we stepped out of the restaurant, and I found myself squeezed in with Boto as we drove off. The back window was rather small and I hardly wanted to be noticed keeping exact track of where we were – but one can drive anywhere on Casino Island in four minutes, and the drive took five, as if we were going in circles and being sure to avoid pursuit. We stepped out directly into the porch of a spacious house, and when Mr. Brown asked me if I knew where I was, I could give him an answer that pleased him. The only clue for direction was the low booming of the Moon Island wind tunnel away behind me, where they are presumably testing something interesting.

I had expected some dingy waterfront apartment, as one sees in the Talkies where crooks meet in profound discomfort. I had rather a surprise; it was a very tastefully furnished house, with stylish modern furniture and hardly a speck of dust to be seen. My spirits decidedly rose as I walked in, Boto escorting me very properly on his arm. It looked as if his ploy of passing me off as a business acquaintance was working very well, as Mr. Brown hardly gave me a second glance. Indeed, he was rather too busy to do so – as three lapine girls must have heard our arrival and came running in with squeals of delight – and were most affectionate. One of them brought out a huge champagne bottle, a Magnum at least (actually a 6-bottle Rehoboam, as I later discovered) and poured us all glasses with the skill one sees in a practiced waitress.

I must say, I felt quite at ease – the rabbit girls looked as if they were littermates, and oddly enough all were called Natasha, having indeed faint Russian accents. Still, they were quite sparkling, devastatingly witty and cultured – not at all like one sees molls in the films of crook's hideouts. Their dresses were definite Rachorska designs, though if anything more conservative than mine, certainly nothing like I had seen folk wearing at The Beach, where Boto introduced me as having been before (Mr. Brown's nose twitched when I admitted having been there with him, but he seemed very satisfied.)

The three Natashas had different head-fur ribbons, in red, blue and green. Natasha (red) had quite a long chat with me – she asked about Krupmark, and I very truthfully told her what I thought of the place and that I was very glad to be here instead. I asked if they owned this house, which they seemed to find very amusing – possibly they are renting it. Natasha (blue) looked very thoughtful, and mentioned she had heard of an awful robbery at The Beach at the end of August, where somebody had stolen a month's bankroll. My ears went right up in shock, and I noticed Mr. Brown watching me very carefully as I admitted I had heard nothing about it.

It was well after midnight when the party began to break up – I noticed one of the canines vanish, followed by Natasha (green) and then his friend along with Natasha (red.) When Mr. Brown went off to the bathroom, Boto whispered that things were not going as expected – he had been told the Boss would be joining them, and that everyone was under orders to wait till he arrived. This left us in rather a pickle – I could see everyone was in a decidedly friendly mood, and to “bale out” now would quite spoil things. Boto's tail dipped as he looked me over and whispered that he was willing to play along with the deception – which I could hardly disagree with, as we had almost nothing yet to tell the Authorities. He whispered that The Boss was bringing with him all the important information we needed to capture – without that, the whole exercise would be a “flat bust.”

As it turned out, there were very well appointed rooms upstairs, with rather fine art prints and a wonderful carpet that felt almost ankle-deep to bare paws. I have never stayed in a hotel half as luxurious, except for that afternoon last year when I chaperoned Helen with the Hoele'toemi brothers at the redecorated Marleybone. Boto announced he would be taking the couch, and very courteously looked the other way as I made ready for bed, discovering a freshly laundered and very fetching tulle night-gown laid out on the pillow. I kissed

him goodnight most gratefully – certainly, he is a perfect gentleman and indeed falcons are often called the aristocrats of avian kind.

Despite all the hard work of the day, the late hour and three glasses of extremely good champagne, I found it quite impossible to sleep. To judge from the sounds filtering through the discreetly padded doors, I think Boto was the only one actually asleep in the place. I even went to check in the dim light half an hour later – I could see his eyes moving under closed eyelids, and his breath panting slightly as he unmistakably dreamed deeply; I doubt there is any actor who could really fake that. Looking at him, I realised he is a most strikingly handsome gentleman even with the beak - and felt my tail start to go sideways, but batted it back scoldingly as I returned to my bed to leave him in peace.

I heard the town hall clock striking two from the distance, and felt rather ridiculous sitting up in bed like a sentry on watch. It hardly seemed likely that the mysterious Boss would arrive in the next minute and order his troops out to work – not without an immediate mutiny, I should think.

Dear Diary. I must make a resolution to stop doing this kind of thing. Boto stirred about half an hour later and staggered out to the dim hall and the bathroom. When he returned – well, I thought the couch looked very uncomfortable for him, and Mr. Brown might ask if we had enjoyed our evening. The answer I could truthfully give him is “yes”. I do recall thinking before finally falling asleep that I should save my resolutions till the proper time, the next Solstice festival.

I slept very soundly, awaking with the sun streaming through the windows, evidently past eight. I confess I panicked slightly, waking up alone – and chided myself that had Boto’s cover been blown, he would hardly have been dragged off without it waking me. Indeed, one of the Natashas came in cheerfully, carrying a pot of fresh coffee – it was hard to say which, as she had left off her ribbon as well as much else. She grinned and bade me good morning, happily chatting that she was glad of these booked weekends, with the whole day to relax in between times.

Natasha red (as it turned out) noted that everyone would be back in the evening – but we were to stay indoors and wait or lose our bonus. Bonus? I was only grateful that my tail was still hidden in the silk sheets as it fluffed out like a log and an awful realisation hit me – just as a beaten-up old war surplus biplane is at heart much the same in principle as a Schneider Trophy winner – this place might be the height of Everest upmarket from The Beach, but it is at heart the same – and I was in it. Natasha Blue bounced into the room in that energetic Bunny style, complaining that the neighbours on Moon Island probably heard me yowl the place down. I had not realised I did!

I had a choice between running out of the place in panic and probably blowing the mission wide open, or staying at my post. A good soldier hardly argues about his orders when given them in the field – I might not have expected this, but I did promise to go through with the mission. I had thought of us dodging bullets or sliding over precarious rooftops, and that idea had not held me back – running away from a tastefully furnished room with breakfast served in bed would not really sound well when Mr. Sapohatan asked why I ruined everything.

Once I determined to stick with the situation for better or worse, the day really was very interesting. I kept the mission in mind though – from what I gathered the house was rented for the week, with the three sisters being rather vague from whom – the ideal cover for anyone needing to arrive and vanish at odd hours. It is very well appointed, with an absolutely huge bath and an electrically heated fur dryer, with fans – the first one I have ever seen, let alone used. I must say, it is a great convenience.

Natasha (blue) seemed an uncomfortably inquisitive girl, and I was very glad she did not have Mr. Brown’s lie detection skills. She asked me again about The Beach, and noted it was a feline girl who had gone missing with the money, along with her friend – and I had mentioned leaving there with a friend who was now on Spontoon with me. I must say, it is an awful coincidence. The cat-burglar must have been one of the other felines we saw there: Phoebe is of course quite out of the picture, being of good family.

I had a rather hard time stopping the lepine girls spotting my ears blushing red, as they chatted perfectly freely in somewhat ... technical detail. It turned out that Natasha (blue) is curious about most things, and had much to say about Mr. Brown, the first of his species she had met. I must confess, for a second some possibilities on those lines occurred to me, Amelia Bourne-Phipps. From what I did gather, Natasha (blue) has now what she called “two cabins left to see on the Ark”: she mentioned two species so exotic I had to confess I had never even seen them in the movies. (Memo to myself: find out what an Australian Quoll and a Maori Tuatara look like. Natasha [blue] mentioned something about Quoll gentlemen that I cannot quite believe.)

To my surprise, all the Natashas put in four hours of awfully hard exercise a day, and I very happily joined them in their routine while some maids discreetly came in and tidied without saying a word to us. By five we were definitely ready for more bathing and I felt more comfortable letting them groom me afterwards. It is no different really than being in the showers back at St. Winifred’s after a hockey match with the rest of the team,

and the décor is rather superior. They have very surprising details of grooming, but I can see the practical reasons behind it – Molly has kept up that style all year, and I saw no harm in following suit.

Still, every minute I kept checking the exits, expecting the unexpected, up to and including an awfully premature raid by the Authorities. That WOULD be embarrassing. But the unexpected failed to happen, and at nine that night we answered a most mysterious knocking. Natasha (green) seemed to know just where to go – she pulled back a section of panelling to reveal a door that seemed to be coming up out of a cellar I had no idea was there. Mr. Brown led the way into the hall, asking some questions of how we had spent our day – the two canines were there, but Boto was not. My heart skipped a beat when I saw who was, though – it was another very distinctive person, a Babirusa gentleman more than two metres tall, with most elegantly polished tusks. I had seen one or two on films, but they are more Dutch East Indies than anywhere in our Empire, and I had never met one in the fur before – rather like a wild boar, with two sets of upward-pointing tusks like small sabres. He was announced by the others as Mr. Greene – their backer.

The rabbit girls seemed very pleased to see them, and I saw Mr. Brown's fascinating snout start to twitch – had he only been on the right side of the law, what an asset he would be to any Police force. I know they have official bloodhound constables who can track where suspects have been, but not what they are thinking.

I did ask if Boto would be joining us, but Mr. Greene laughed and chuckled that they do not invite their friends to ALL their social gatherings. He joined the rest of the group in the parlour, leaving me hesitating for a second at what to do. It would have been nice if we had pocket-sized radios as one sees on futurist films – but there is nothing so easy as pressing a red button and signalling rescuers outside.

Still – I had noticed the bathroom faces out over the street, and is invisible from the rest of the house – opening the curtains, I was grateful it was dark already as I began to flick the light switch in Morse – SOS and my own call sign, OSPREY, as I had agreed with Helen. All I could do was hope they had managed to follow me, and were looking out for my signal.

I had hoped that rescue would be prompt. As it turned out, I had rather underestimated how much the Authorities really want to catch this counterfeiting ring – before I had gone all the way downstairs to rejoin the party, the front door was opened rather violently by a dozen burly constables, and one minute later everyone in the place was arrested – including me!

Either the local constabulary were keen not to give me away, or they had not been told just who was on their side – either way, I was hauled away to the central police station with more speed than ceremony. This is my second unexpected visit, and I even got the same cell. Fortunately our Tutors were not called to get me out this time: half an hour later Mr. Sapohatan did that himself, though he spared any congratulations till we were out of earshot of the other cells.

From what he told me, they had found in the cellar what they were looking for, not indeed huge piles of currency but the details of meetings and contacts which should enable the police to roll the rest of the gang up like a carpet. I did ask what they would do with the rabbit girls, who were really very nice to me – he frowned rather at that and pointed out they were not legal residents and had been working without a license. They would probably get nothing worse than an escorted expenses-paid boat ticket out of Spontoan jurisdiction, he suggested. I rather wonder if we will see this in the Daily Elele – unlike some other things I have seen, it is official Police business after all. I enquired after Boto, who I am assured is well and furnished with alibis for both sides – an odd way of putting things, I thought.

A very happy meeting with Maria, Molly and Helen outside, who had been worried sick about me – and I could reassure them I had come to no harm. The hour still being early, we headed out to celebrate, and for once I could tell them everything that had happened (well, almost.) Molly looked a little disappointed that I had spent all day in a counterfeiter's headquarters without taking away any money – she mentioned a phrase about not being able to organise a party in a brewery, or words to that effect. Still, I could point out that although my dress is excellently styled it is totally lacking in pockets – and of a fabric fine enough that everyone can spot the only thing underneath it is me.

Everything went very well, and we returned to Songmark in the highest of spirits just before the compound closed at ten – to see Miss Devinski waiting for us, her ears down. She was clutching an opened envelope, and as she beckoned me into the gate office I could see she was fairly trembling in rage.

I was going to ask what I had done wrong when she slapped the contents of the envelope on the table in front of me, and gestured for me to pick it up.

Oh dear. I remembered the previous night Natasha (green) asking me if I had a hunting license – of course I do not, and told her so. But I added that if I legally needed one, I would get one.

Dear Diary – Natasha (green) was only trying to be helpful, I am sure. I was puzzled earlier at Nuala mentioning her license for Casino Island, and now know just what she meant. The application form already had my description on it – Natasha could have done that. But I took very good care not to use my real name, let alone

my address – but someone filled it in and sent it off, in time to get here today. Nobody in that house knew my full name and address, not even Boto, and he is on our side!

You could say that Miss Devinski was not at all pleased. In fact, she asked me right there if I had one good reason why I should not be expelled on the spot and board the first flight out on Monday – there is nothing specific in the rules about this, but there is a vague clause similar to the catch-all “conduct unbecoming to the traditions of the Service” that Father mentioned is used for obvious offences not detailed elsewhere. I had various good reasons, starting with having no idea the form existed, and the whole project being a successful one by the Authorities that she had approved us going on in the first place. As that exiled German scientist (Albert Beer Stein or somebody) said about a book by his detractors at home titled “40 reasons why Beer Stein is Wrong” – if he really was wrong, one reason would be quite enough.

I was about to tear up the form, but suggested she forward it to anyone who might be interested in handwriting and fingerprints – and she could ask Mr. Sapohatan what we actually did with our weekend. Miss Devinski calmed down slightly, but suggested I start packing anyway. Though we hear little official about what back home we called School Spirit, I think she would be far less upset had I been charged with Piracy – which may be illegal in most countries, but less of a betrayal of everything Songmark stands for as a producer of wholly independent, liberated young ladies. We have never heard of anyone being expelled from Songmark before – but there is a first time for everything, as Beryl found out when she so suddenly left Saint T’s.

(Sunday) A somewhat gloomy day in more than the weather. It is either my bad fortune or a conspiracy on a scale that would hardly occur even to Helen, what the Sin on today’s service was. At any rate, it put me in no better mood – though the Native rituals after rather cheered me up. Saffina and Saimmi are getting along very well, as neither of them come from jealous religions that object to adding deities to the heavenly crew. In fact, I made my “confession” when I was alone with Saimmi, telling her more than I had even told to Helen. She absolved me in the Native way, and judged that there are many sorts of casualties in defending one’s Island – some folk lose their limbs, others reputations.

I hope Jirry is as forgiving as his sister – last time I had at least the excuse of catnip. It is a definitely uncomfortable thought. I am very glad Boto escaped unharmed, though I may never be able to look at a feather pillow or duster in quite the same way again.

Tuesday October 31st, 1935

The good thing is, I am still here and not changing seaplanes in Hawaii right now on the way back home – in fact, Miss Devinski seems to have relented. There are headlines in the Daily Elele (without mentioning me) and I believe she must have been having a long chat with a certain ferret. We have even been given souvenirs – a freshly printed Spontoonie Hundred-shell note apiece, the first one I have ever seen! Alas, they are stamped across both sides with “SPECIMEN” and are presumably forgeries recovered from the gang– Molly ruined hers discovering the stamp is quite indelible.

I caught up on how they had traced me across Casino Island – fortunately the roads were freshly swept and show tyre traces in the blown sand. Tracking the Jitney had taken them half the night, and a slight disagreement with a wandering constable had slowed them still further. In fact, by lunchtime they had only narrowed the search down to two houses – but when they saw me drawing the curtains after the afternoon bath, Helen phoned the official number and the local law was around in quite a hurry.

We went over what worked well or badly, and tried to puzzle out how we could have improved on matters. Molly and Maria kept coming up with all sorts of outlandish gadgets which could save the day in the right circumstances – but I had to ask them just where in my party dress they expected me to carry the hardware. Although I would dislike having to wear a crinoline like Laura Shieling, having a cubic yard of skirt space could be handy at times. If Miss Shieling had not invented the detachable exploding bustle half a century before, Molly would probably have patented it herself.

At least the timing was perfect – I was in the right place and at the right time to signal. We will have to improve on our signalling, preferably without carrying Aldis lamps around. I was very glad to get the chance – Mr. Greene seemed to have some definite plans for our evening, and in the circumstances it would have been hard to turn him down. Having added one tick to the list (If I did that sort of thing) per weekend is quite sufficient. Besides, what he had suggested to me was something I would not feel at all comfortable with, even with Jirry, unless we were Engaged as well as Tailfast. I must confess, I had thought about what might have happened had Helen lost my trail – hardly what the romance novels call a Fate Worse Than Death, but definitely a fate to be avoided. After all, he is a known Criminal, despite being rather nice-looking.

When I left St. Winifred's last year, I certainly planned on becoming an adventuress – but not THAT sort. I can hardly believe Nuala is involved in anything like this, despite the evidence – she is our friend, and of such good family on one side.

Beryl is going about the place in a tearing rage, declaring there is no honour among thieves these days. She seems to know Mr. Brown and Mr. Greene under other names, and hints darkly that someone is waging an ill-advised war against her friend Mr. Van Hoogstraaten's associates in the various import-export trades. Fortunately, the prisoners were immediately moved to Rain Island to stand trial and there is a line in the paper about four illegal arrivals being deported – so I still hope that nobody knows my part in things.

(Later) The First-years are back, and are busy washing the jungle mud out of their fur and treating their insect bites. From what I gather, Liberty Morgenstern and Hannah Meyer are being treated for rather larger bites – each other's. Ada Cronstein came bouncing in very cheerfully to tell us, having escorted them separately to our Matron – she is only sorry she missed the fight, which was what she calls “a doozy.”

Hannah is the cherished daughter of the famous Joseph Meyer, the Bric-a-brac millionaire who clawed his way up from pushing a street barrow to being the biggest knick-knack and Bric-a-brac magnate on the whole American East Coast. Hearing her father called a “Bloodsucking neo-feudalist tyrant of the oppressed masses” rather irritated Hannah, who engaged Liberty in a spirited political debate using a still-spiky piece of Acacia thorn driftwood. She refuses to apologise - except to her rabbi, as it seems sinking her teeth into a canine breaks her dietary laws. For some reason, Liberty feels the only possible way for anyone to gain wealth is by mercilessly exploiting everyone else; the idea of honest profit is not something that seems to appear in her dictionary.

It is very odd, I get along perfectly well with Molly and Maria, and yet folk from such similar social and ancestral roots declare immediate hostilities. Liberty has been going on a bit about instituting Revolutionary Justice – which needs to be identified separately, as from her account it seems very different from any other sort of Justice. Even our two Reds are at daggers drawn (or on a daily basis, wet towels) yet folk such as Hannah and Saffina seem the very best of chums despite having backgrounds worlds apart.

Maria adds that her Uncle has often said that politics is a great curse and one he hopes to entirely abolish from daily life. “Il Puce” has certainly worked hard at taking the burden entirely on himself, and boasts that of his original opponents, there are fewer and fewer around every year!

(Later) A fascinating evening with Passes to see the native celebrations on the Northern tip of the island. Helen and I escorted Saffina there to see the rituals – her very first Pass, which she was pleased as anything at. It was very good to join in with Saimmi and the locals at their fireside celebration – I have given up the idea of Switzerland, and will stick with Songmark unless they throw me out. Hopefully I have heard the last of my “hunting license” and can convince our Tutors of that. I just wish I knew how it happened in the first place. Even the signature looked remarkably like mine.

Thursday November 2nd, 1935

A fine day, escorting the first-years around the main airstrip, showing them the various aircraft being serviced and fuelled. There was quite a collection on the tarmac, everything from one of the Rain Island Barling bombers to the latest passenger liners just coming into service. We talked with Mr. Pulu'evi, one of the senior mechanics at the airport, who showed us round the new metalwork shop. He shook his head wistfully and recalled it seemed like yesterday to him that the first permanent hangars were put up, and he worked in repairing nothing but wood and doped canvas.

I had to agree that aircraft are changing so fast that one hardly dares blink without missing a new model coming into and out of service. The pride and joy of Tahiti Royal Airways is a brand new Douglas DC3, just delivered this week – no doubt by the time we leave Songmark it will have been replaced and mostly forgotten by everyone. Who now recalls the Sopwith Camel, despite its strange name?

The first-years were really very impressed by all the fine flying, and were quite well behaved. Tatiana broke into a cheerful song again, to a tune that Helen swore she recognised:

*“Our leader Lenin's body lies preserved in old Red Square
Our leader Lenin's body lies preserved in old Red Square
Our leader Lenin's body watches over old Red Square
But his Party marches on
Glory, glory to the Proletariat,
Glory, glory to the Proletariat
Glory, glory to the Proletariat
As the Party Marches on!”*

The rest of the group objected less than usual, and the tray of used sump-oil that Liberty threw her way entirely missed. It was good to see Molly taking her responsibility seriously, as she stood guard over Liberty and made her clean it off the tarmac with caustic soda and a toothbrush. Molly seems to be quite taken with the idea of enforcing Law these days provided it is done in the right style and involves a lot of shouting. (We are still holding out against having official Songmark peaked caps and nightsticks.)

One of the aircraft that attracted most attention was a very impressive “mail carrier” from Vostok, one that is so new it hardly appears in our recognition books. It is a very sleek twin-engined affair that actually is delivering mail right now – but the large hatch in the underside rather gave the game away, as does the optically flat aiming window in the cabin floor. Although Vostok has little industry for building aircraft, the nobility managed to bring a fair chunk of the Russian treasury with them into exile, and they seem to be spending more of it on aircraft these days. I expect purchasing the “mail carrier” cost a few Faberge diamond eggs, to say the least. What sort of eggs it is designed to drop, is another matter.

Saturday November 4th, 1935

A damp day for our dance practice, the rain fairly sheeting off the roof of the dance hall – in our Intermediate classes we are learning more Hula “language” which is really quite expressive. Beryl comes along to watch, as well as to get a decent meal on Casino Island; her Casino winnings over Summer can pay for her dining every week at The Golden Crab if she wishes. Saturday lunch at Songmark is invariably Poi – as we explained to Saffina, “One finger” and “Two finger poi” refers to the consistency of the mash and how one eats it, not the gestures Beryl makes when presented with it.

Our dance tutor Mrs. Ponole has made us an intriguing offer, to come and dance next week at one of the other dance schools, which are for locals only and generally do not let Euros compete. Quite an honour indeed – we shall be on our best behaviour and dressed in our Native best. Maria complains she has never worn the full (scantiest) Costume yet, not having been around in the holidays. In fact, she tells me she is doing her level best to stay over the Winter holidays – if she can just convince her Uncle. Time is definitely flying by, this term.

We only have six weeks to find the rest of Molly’s Songmark fee, or we only have six weeks of Molly! A very disturbing notion. And there is another disturbing thing – Saturday is the only time I get to the bank here to draw my allowance, and the figures do not add up. I seem to be rather richer than I can account for, to the tune of fifty shells. Possibly Mr. Sapohatan has discreetly handed us a reward for our work last week – at the local bank it is very easy to anonymously pay into any account, Beryl tells me. She has quite a few numbered accounts under various names, she says, and is opening more at Mr. Van Hoogstraaten’s new Spontoon International Bank.

Fifty shells is an awful lot of money, though. Wherever it came from, I donated it to Molly, and indeed we only need another three hundred or so to pay her bills. Although I would not exactly relish every weekend being like last week, fifty a week would clear things just in time.

Molly is rather down in the dumps, despite having six weeks more grace – it would be eight weeks, but our tutors are rather unreasonably insisting she pay at the end of this term, not the start of the next one. She mourns her lost family fortune, and complains that her Father could perfectly well have paid the whole year’s fee in advance, as mine did. (Father sent a postcard that arrived today from French Antarctica, where presumably he is building gas-proof redoubts for penguins. He writes that the chance of anyone invading is now almost nil.)

Hurrah! We met Jirry and Marti again – as we had planned last week, before certain events intervened. Off to the cinema with the brothers and Helen, while Molly and Maria window-shopped, the best they can do while Molly’s future is in doubt. Maria is not the greatest culture fanatic around, but there is an exhibition at the museum by an Italian archaeologist that she feels duty bound to visit, which makes strange revelations of lost empires in the jungles of what is now the Dutch East Indies. I have heard of Caesar Roman myself, his “Roman’s decline and fall of the Gibbon Empire” being a school classic.

It seems Saimmi has kept her brother updated – Jirry congratulated me on the successful raid, and commiserated on my losing my good name (strictly speaking, the only folk who know about this already know it is untrue. I hope the story does not get out to the world at large.) He sympathises, and says Saimmi has been enquiring for me to clear my name off whatever register it is on – she had discovered to our horror that my license had been already anonymously paid for, and all the paperwork has been progressing smoothly to officially issue it! Whoever arranged this seems to know very well how such things operate.

It seems to be like the problem Father had with officially buying engineering supplies from a company who then discovered they had quoted the wrong price; they tried to return the excess money but Father discovered there was no procedure established for individuals to pay the Army. Licences may lapse or be refused, but the applications stay, like trying to remove a birth certificate from the records – nobody has ever wanted to cancel one before. Nobody puts reverse gears on a Whitehead torpedo, for much the same reason.

Despite everything, I am still Tailfast to Jirry, though he suggests I might like to leave that off for half a year to see more of the world. I can see the sense in that – if we carry on as we are progressing, I can see us being engaged by this time next year, and then I will always be wondering what Natasha meant about Australian Quolls. Still – it is very fine to be Tailfast, knowing I have a longhouse waiting and a local family very happy for me to join them. Helen and Marti are planning to exchange fur braids, so Songmark will not be unrepresented at the next Solstice festival.

The cinema was a real treat – it is such a long time since I could relax with a properly stark and brooding German Expressionist film; “Tagebuch von ein Verloren” (“Diary of a Lost Girl”) starring the raven-haired beauty Louise Rooks. A more neurotic person might start putting together grandiose conspiracies of folk screening it specially for me in the circumstances – except that Jirry has mentioned the locals have to order films from Europe a month in advance. Actually though not a “talkie” it was a splendid film – had it been any darker as a “film noir”, one would have needed searchlights to see the screen!

Sunday November 5th, 1935

The wet season has definitely arrived, and the first-years are heaving sighs of relief that it held off for their trip. What the locals call “a mild day” has about an inch of rain in the morning, getting wetter from there. The trip to Church was one continuous soak – and when we got there the various strategically placed buckets showed how necessary is Reverend Bingham’s roof restoration fund.

We were treated to a full-scale assault on Anger in the sermon today, which really hit a chord with many of the congregation. I definitely think the churchgoers here are more fanatical than at Home – possibly because even in the Euro community there is little pressure on lukewarm worshippers to attend, only the truly dedicated ones actually do. Reverend Bingham can really rouse his audience when he gets into his stride – after the sermon I overheard two spinster cats loudly decrying that there are so many folk who do not love their fellows – and they bitterly hate people like that.

My tail drooped somewhat as I thought of the rather more peaceful Native religion – which might not stir enough motivation to build gothic cathedrals, but on the other paw is unlikely to launch witch-hunts and pogroms. Other missionaries have bemoaned the locals’ moral laxity, and have blamed everything from the food to the sultry climate for acting as a moral laxative. Personally, I think there is no such thing – with the possible exception of catnip.

Most of the churches here are in intense competition with each other over a quite small Euro population (Native converts are rare and much-boasted about.) One hears various rumours of unsporting competitions between them – normally petty things such as switching a temple’s supply of sacred joss sticks for a greatly inferior brand, causing “bad joss” to affect its whole congregation. The Unitarian Fundamentalist who stands on Market Dock ranting about expunging all non-Unitarian Heresies with fire and sword, is hardly helping matters.

I managed a few words with Miss Fawnsworthy, who hinted she had been away for the last two weeks in the nearby islands – her left paw was somewhat bandaged, so I doubt it was anything as peaceful as collecting flowers or her usual position as secretary, unless she dropped her typewriter on her foot. Possibly we are not the only ones with “interesting” spare-time jobs around here.

Despite the pouring rain, the clouds were up around four thousand feet and there were a few clear breaks between the showers – when Saimmi met us outside with Saffina, we all headed across to South Island. I really miss having oiled fur. Keeping plain fur dry is a losing battle on Spontoon at this time of year; our smart Sunday oilskins flapped in the wind like flags, and were about as waterproof.

Saffina is really a jolly fit girl, having been brought up running around after the family cattle – rather a common sort of occupation I would have thought, but of course they were the Royal cattle. At any rate, even after a hard year of Songmark training we could hardly keep up with her as we went straight up the North flank of Mount Tomboabo almost at a jog, an hour of very stiff exercise. Saimmi was as good as her word – although the steep rocky top looks quite untouched, there are holes driven into the bedrock where sighting stakes can be fixed and she pointed out some of the interesting ritual sights they pointed to. It is splendid seeing the old traditions kept up to date – just like Archbishop Crowley is doing back home, reconsecrating some sites that have not been in use these two thousand years and more.

Today we found one of the shrines deep in the jungle, and learned the rituals of caring for them. We had brought fruit and flowers to replace the offerings – and we learned how to return the previous offerings to the jungle, and why it had to be done that way. It is definitely unlike Church at home, where last week’s flowers end up on the rubbish heap with the lawn mowings.

Back on Eastern Island, we saw a big Saunders-Roedeer “Sea Spirit” pulled up at the Marine Air Terminal – our long-lost Seniors returning from the Aleutian Islands, looking distinctly the worse for wear. In

fact, they look rather like one sees photographs of shell-shocked troops coming home from the Great War – “boiled too long and run twice through the mangle” as my old Nurse used to say. Even our Tutors with them looked rather haggard – I overheard Miss Blande muttering something about it being “the third time I’ve sworn I’d never go there again.”

At dinner, the third-year table was almost empty, with the few attending wolfing down their food and staggering across to their dorm carrying plates for their classmates when they woke up. The rest of us looked on in rather shocked surprise, considering how much fitter and better qualified than ourselves our Seniors are – and they have already had a full day’s rest on the flying boat returning to Spontoon. Of course, Songmark can hardly send out Adventuresses into the world only prepared for lush tropical climes: by all account in January they are heading out to Alaska – I pity the lizard and amphibian girls in the class. When we see Conchita again, we will have to ask about her trip – Molly had been complaining none of them sent us postcards, but from the look of things it was hardly a postcard sort of trip!

Monday November 6th, 1935

Another pouring wet day and a soaking water-taxi ride over to Casino Island with Ada, Li Han and Jasbir. We have an awful lot of prep to hand in for our Advanced Field Medicine course – though Songmark has trained us hard in first aid, the Nursing course at the hospital is three years of hard work and we have a lot to cover. Our Monday course is something in between.

Looking through the course mimeographs, at least it makes things very plain that we are only expected to handle emergencies, not set ourselves up in medical practise. Reading through all the accounts of expeditions, it is alarming to think that on some of them we would already be the most qualified medics for several days’ travel in all directions – an incentive to study extra hard!

Though there were no severe accidents rushed in today, there was a surprise for us. After scrubbing up, we were invited into the Maternity ward, where one of the native girls from Main Island was already going into labour.

Oh my. That was – educational. We were reassured by Doctor Monotega that this was an easy birth with no complications – and indeed, two hours later there was a tired but smiling bear girl and freshly washed newborn cub enjoying its first feed. Books and diagrams hardly hint at the... details, though. If that was a relatively fast and relatively painless delivery, I hope never to see a difficult one.

Ada Cronstein had no problems with the very nasty accident case two weeks ago (that patient survived but will be in plaster for months) but turned rather pale round the nose and hurried out to be violently ill. Rather extreme, but at least in her case she is never likely to be in the position herself.

Jasbir is quite surprised at all the fuss, commenting that back home in Utterly Pradesh the women sometimes work in the fields till they feel they need to lie down, call their friends around to help and then simply take the rest of the day off to celebrate. She is eldest of eight, and remembers helping her Mother with her youngest four siblings, even though she is a Maharani.

Our afternoon seemed rather dull after that, working through logistics problems back at Songmark. I confess my mind was not really on the details of supplying twenty theoretical but hungry miners five days from a railhead – in fact, Miss Devinski commented rather sourly that she hoped the customers liked oatmeal, as by the end of the month that was all my schedule had left on their menu. Still, it could have been Poi.

Tuesday November 7th, 1935

Back in the air at last, after four days of gusting winds and ten tenths cloud over the islands. The Osprey is now loaded with sandbags to its maximum rated takeoff weight, and we are becoming familiar with how it handles. Maria did complain that we could be taking up paying passengers rather than unappreciative sandbags – luckily Helen and I shushed her before our Tutor heard. For one thing, none of us are legal commercial pilots yet – and for another, there is always the possibility of an accident. Our Tutors may sometimes seem to look on the gloomy side, but I have seen too many sensational headlines in aeronautical journals to imagine them risking the general public with us.

In Madelene X’s latest “Revue D’aeronautique Francaise” there is the plans for the airliner of the future, designed with safety in mind. The passenger seats are all equipped with automatic parachutes – in the event of total mid-air catastrophe such as collisions, a compressed-air system blows open the cabin roof and shoots the passengers clear – one can see the idea is not designed for trans-Pacific crossings. I can see a few more problems with it – indeed, Beryl very craftily altered the illustration to include a passenger running down the aisle after his

empty seat departing without him. She is a jolly fine artist, and has a wonderful writing hand, always borrowing exam certificates and legal documents to use their calligraphy as an example.

Although our Seniors were booked to fly today, they are still resting, except to eagerly get through four large meals a day. Still, their loss is our gain, and the Osprey has hardly stopped moving since Monday. Next week we are starting night flying, but not in our new flying boat despite various protests. I have to admit; in a Tiger Moth the only place one would want to land at night is the runway, whereas if one avoids the islands and reefs the Osprey is much safer. Compared with Spontoon's one runway, the Pacific Ocean is a lot easier to find in the dark.

In the afternoon we headed out to Casino Island Hospital where a visiting Australian doctor was lecturing on unpleasant insects to avoid being bitten by – it appears his home University of Wallamalo is world-famous for studying all sorts of venomous things. He looked feline by the ears and whiskers, but there was something definitely odd about him, almost Opossum-like, certainly no cat type I have ever seen before. *

On the way back, a shocking thing – I spotted Nuala by the docks, wearing a most respectable slacks suit and waving at me. I hurried over, keen to explain things – but she rather beat me to it. Pressing her snout close to my ear, she whispered that a lot of powerful people had been trying to stop her helping me – but they had been too late by about ten minutes. She slipped something in my pocket, gave me a heartfelt hug and hurried away, looking rather worriedly around the place.

Oh dear. I remembered Nuala mentioning part of her job was to bank the proceeds of Entertainers for them. She has evidently gone to an awful lot of trouble and possibly put herself in danger for me, being both my friend and evidently high up in something like an Entertainers Union.

I took one look at what was in my pocket and walked back to the water taxi, feeling rather numb. Running after her and telling her why this was a really, really bad thing to happen to me, hardly seemed appropriate – but I was at my wit's end to decide what was. Setting a match to it would be an awful insult to Nuala, who went to such trouble with the best of intentions – but keeping it would certainly be worse, these things get found. I had read cautionary tales of folk losing their Reputations, and imagined it would feel like walking around without one's clothes. I have certainly worn rather scanty Native dress and got used to it – hopefully I can get used to doing without a Reputation too. I just hope nobody has a newspaper column announcing my license as they do military promotions in the London Gazette.

(Memo to myself – find Nuala and get her to accept it back along with my explanation. Possibly she can shed some light on things, if she did the paperwork.)

* Editor's note: in plain text is scribbled in the Diary margin – “Spotted Quoll! Yes he was! And I didn't know till months later, and never met another!”

Wednesday November 8th, 1935

A letter from Father, hurrah – he is heading back home, having made Antarctica a most unwelcome place for any invaders. The postcard from Adelaide Land is rather jolly, a Winter sports scene with the stamp displaying the French Antarctic Territories heraldry of “Penguin Rampant, field blanche”. He writes that my Christmas present is on its way surface freight: Paris to Spontoon through the Suez Canal. I can hardly believe it – an actual Mignet-built Flying Flea kit, made from proper aircraft grade materials and not the nearest pieces of canvas and plywood that came to hand. This New Year should be a happy one all round – if we can just solve Molly's financial woes.

We had Miss Cardroy taking us for Air Navigation class, who is the one of our full tutors we see least of. She noted that Songmark would be reaching its 5th anniversary as an officially recognised school next Spring, and told us to think of some relevant ways to celebrate it. I think she has public displays in mind, rather than Beryl's idea of forming a Drinking team for next year's Olympic Games.

From what various folk have told us, Songmark had a rather odd foundation – we all scattered out after class at full speed to gather information. Maria had the bright idea of asking permission to head out to Casino Island and consult the back issues of the newspapers – she came back with her notebook full of some interesting stories indeed.

Our Tutors have not actually mentioned how Songmark was founded – we discover now that they had all been working as pilots and general partners in Song Airways. The major scandal was when the majority shareholder, a Mr. Abner Washenback the Third, decided to dissolve the company by the simple means of loading all its liquid assets into his aircraft and heading out over the horizon. One can quite imagine our Tutors getting together and swearing they would found a school for severely practical young ladies who would never be taken in like that. Hmm. Thinking about it, I can see why Miss Devinski was even more annoyed with me After I explained I had no idea how my current ... licensing issues came about. I can imagine Beryl brazening it out with our Tutor, even knowing she had no intention of taking a part-time job.

Really, it is not unlike the first time I saw Liberty Morgenstern get “squashed” in her first week – she calls everyone a Fascist who disagrees with her. When she got around to Maria, Maria coolly pulled out her Party card, pointed to it with pride and simply said “Yes?” Confused collapse of Red party, sadly not for long. It is very hard to insult someone unless you agree on what you find insulting.

It was fascinating today, passing the classroom where they were discussing how to organise their year. We second-years voted for a democracy, as they did in the end – but the Staff gave everyone the chance to demonstrate how they run government back home. Saffina showed how the village elders hash out a problem between them based on seniority (and cattle owned). Jenny Allis from Rain Island followed with a demonstration of how Anarchists handle debates (very messy!), and amongst other more conventional voting systems, Liberty showed how to decide by trading denunciations and counter-denunciations until there was only one Party member left in good standing. Tatiana was asked to demonstrate but declined, saying it was unrealistic without a knout involved.

Thursday November 9th, 1935

A fine day for Molly, as we head over to Moon Island – our regular rifle-range session was followed by watching some more major artillery in action. Although the areas are fenced off, we were allowed in to look at the anti-aircraft guns as they went through their twice-yearly manoeuvres. Definitely a sight to see! All private and commercial aircraft were grounded, except for one brave pilot who flew an old Fnord Trimotor pulling a fabric flag on the end of two hundred yards of cable. One assumes that a three-engined aircraft is a safety feature, as keen but unskilled defenders are liable to take some chunks off the aircraft as well as the target.

We were allowed to help, carrying ammunition – a task that is allocated vaguely to “citizens” in the plan, so previous experience is not required. Very strenuous! The ammunition magazine is almost at the base of the hill, and we had five sites to be supplied. The plan started off easily, with a motor van moving the crates – but ten minutes later it was labelled as a casualty, and we had to use hand-carts. It took about sixty people to supply the five guns, and every now and then a Referee would point at a bunch of us and declare us “hors de combat” as well.

By the end of the morning there were only twenty of us left with three carts, feeding two surviving emplacements. Songmark girls, S.I.T.H.S. students and Althing Gate (The Meeting Island High School) students comprised most of the survivors – by good or bad luck I was amongst the last ones on my feet, though to tell the truth I could barely stand. Molly bagged a job as assistant loader to replace a “casualty” and all day her eyes were shining as she recounted her experiences on the 3.7 inch AA cannon. One feels that mere “Tommy-guns” will rather pale after this. Helen joked that Molly already had her birthday presents for this year, and we are not buying her one for Christmas.

When the final whistle blew and we joined the rest of the defenders, the Naval Base very decently opened its mess hall for a free feed for all of us. Actual roast meat and plenty of it, a rare treat indeed – it seems the Rain Island Naval Syndicate are mostly supplied from the mainland and not restricted to local produce. I have said some hard things before now about a Syndicate being no way to run a military force, but have to admit they have got the catering very well done.

As they often do, our Tutors managed to get someone else to provide lunch for us. Watching Missy K eat is like watching a steam-shovel at work – I would hate to pay our food bills, myself. But then – though I have managed to teach Helen and Molly some better table manners, I have to admit we each get through in a day what back home I would have thought ample for two or three; four thousand calories, according to the ready reckoner in my logistics book. Unlike diet books back home, our manuals are geared towards feeding working parties and troops, and give hints of how to add extra calories to a diet rather than reducing them.

The gunnery results were not posted in public, but from what I overheard as well as witnessed myself, the Rain Island professionals were rather unhappy about how well they did against low-flying aircraft. The big AA guns are just too big to swing fast enough to track someone skimming in over the palm trees, and I would not be amazed to see some light ack-ack appearing on top of buildings next time folk try this.

Still – it was rather chastening to look at the figures and spot more than half of the guns and defenders were written off as casualties in a single morning – not an encouraging prospect, but probably a realistic one. After all, anyone making a serious attack here will hardly come over in twos and threes, unless one means two or three aircraft carrier’s worth.

As if we had forgotten it, the morning’s work rather reminds us how seriously the locals take all this. Having seen the American fleet cruising past at short notice and the Russian air force buzzing the islands with their latest and greatest, it is easy enough to see why they get worried. Irma Bundt was another of the “survivors” and has been telling us of how Switzerland is organised – though it has a lot more money to spend and mountains to tunnel into, they are just as surrounded and try just as hard. The trick, Irma tells us, is to make sure everyone knows just how expensive invading would be.

(Later) The newspapers are full of the trial of the counterfeiting gang in the main Rain Island court, with photographs and everything. It looks as if the police at both ends made a pretty clean sweep, and have seized about twelve million Shells' worth in various currencies. Molly complains that there must have been some regular money grabbed too, and we deserve a cut of it – the police get paid regardless, unlike us. She hints that she would happily take the good fakes, her family still having connections who know how to handle it.

I have been following the trial avidly, and happily note my name does not appear in it – neither do the three rabbit girls (I doubt any of them actually has Natasha written on her birth certificate.) There is a very striking portrait of Mr. Greene (real name Susus Subiabatim) who is described as a “criminal playboy” with the pictures taken of his yacht being impounded and cases full of printing plates being displayed by grinning constables. Molly claims the only people who are hurt by counterfeiting are bankers who can well afford it, but I remember Jirry's father telling me the trouble the whole islands would be in if nobody could trust their own wallets here.

Dear Diary: I have been trying to shake off the unasked-for daydream of what might have happened to me had Helen and the rest got lost, and how that would have changed things. It is an awful thought; I very well might have passed a second night there and enjoyed it as much as the first. Mr. Greene may be a criminal, but he was very polite to me, appeared most ... impressive, and I am hardly likely to meet another of his breed socially. Worse – I imagined having the chance to call the police afterwards, and being unable to bring myself to do it. The idea of the constables bursting in hour later to find the gang safely vanished but me contentedly chatting and grooming with the Natashas while one of them fastens on me a pretty yellow head-fur ribbon to match theirs, is one I am doing my very best to squash.

I definitely have my limitations when it comes to some of this Secret Agent business – but there is one limitation I want to keep. No matter what the legal rights and wrongs, handing over someone to the police after happily... enjoying their company that way, would be something I doubt I would ever really get over. It is bad enough being responsible for having Natasha and Natasha and Natasha thrown off the island – and an awful irony that if they had the license I have but desperately want to be rid of, they might have been allowed to stay.

Beryl is livid at the newspaper reports, and spends her spare time practising throwing those sharpened croquet hoops at various targets – a healthy way of relieving nervous tension, I should think. Molly asked her if her shares in the company had gone down, and Beryl fumed that they had gone through the floor. Very odd, we are not scheduled to do advanced finances till next term, where we learn how one can entirely lose ones shirt on bad investments. I'm not sure what company Beryl has invested in, but she seems to be already learning the hard way.

Still, at least Beryl has more than one way of earning a quick shell – “someone” with a very similar art style anonymously posted sketches of the morning's action on the notice board, showing a fiendishly grinning Molly tying a bayonet to the end of her AA gun, “against parachutists.” As a parody it fell rather flat – at least, I saw Molly looking at the sketch with a smile and a calculating air. I must ask Beryl not to give her Ideas like that; she is bad enough as is!

Saturday November 11th, 1935

A change to our dance lessons today: instead of our public Intermediate classes, our dance instructor Mrs. Ponole took us across to the Western end of Casino Island, where one of the natives-only groups was meeting while their usual venue on Meeting Island was redecorated. Quite a different crowd entirely, being mostly composed of Polynesian types, including one of the Noenoke cousins I had met at Easter.

Happily, we seem to be quite well-known to various people through our dance successes – at least, I hope that is where they know me from, rather than our less public adventures. Maria was at a disadvantage as they only spoke Spontoonie, which she is rather behind in. Helen and myself are pretty much fluent by now, as being effectively part of the Hoele'toemi family is a great help – the family generally speak English to tourists, but Spontoonie the rest of the time.

Mrs. Ponole interpreted some of the hula dances we watched, which were quite fascinating – we watched the Tourist and Bottle, the Wolf Shadow, the Flat Nine, the Squirrel and the Apex. It is certainly a complication, telling a story at the same time as staying in rhythm – back at St. Winifred's we worked hard at dance lessons but never needed to mix it with narration!

The only non-Spontoonie dancing was a very smooth mink girl who we were introduced to as Hetty Jackson, a name we have seen in the dance championships. She is Head Girl of the Casino Island Cooperative High School, a place we have had little contact with – like us, she might not have been brought up in local dance tradition, but has worked awfully hard to catch up.

I suppose Songmark is too small a school to have a Head Girl for each year – which is a pity. It is a splendid rank to have, one that everyone can aspire to. I have often tried to inspire Molly with the example of St. Winifred's top girl, Masie Royce-Derwent, a calm and devoted grey-eyed canine at whose frank gaze any fib would curl up and perish. Alas, Molly says she "sounds like a fink" and quotes Beryl's account of the top of the pile at Saint T's, the daughter of a famous Chinese criminal genius, who is escorted to school at the start of each term by her Father's loyal band of Burmese dacoits. Reformed dacoits, one hopes.

Anyway, Miss Jackson is a stirring example, proving one does not have to have Polynesian blood to master even the advanced hulas (though it certainly seems to help.) We spent a very educational and strenuous afternoon at the dance school, and were invited to see them when they get back to their usual venue at Meeting Island. Certainly an invitation we accepted.

(Later) I have an invite to see Countess Rachorska, for Monday night! I have been trying to find Nuala without success, and wrote to her mother – hopefully we can sort things out. I have always laughed at the phrase of a stolen banknote or document "burning a hole in someone's pocket" but now I know exactly how it feels.

Sunday November 12th, 1935

Clear, bright weather between the rain showers, as we head out to Church and more of Reverend Bingham's inspiring sermons. Envy was in the firing line today, though some of the parishioners seem to be taking it rather the wrong way – the two spinster cats who sit behind me were saying they would do anything to be able to write sermons like that.

One hopes our dear Reverend will get back to his original line of parables when he has run out of deadly sins – or possibly he will detour onto Minor sins, and by Spring we will be exhorted not to squeeze the toothpaste from the middle of the tube.

Far more interesting was the follow-up with Saimmi afterwards. She tells us we have covered the basics of the local faiths well enough to be shown some more interesting things. Considering what we have already seen at the Solstice festivals, and the Natives of No Island coming to join worship, this rather floored me. She has mentioned the Wild Priests before, and I presume we have seen them presiding at the festivals – they are strange and elusive figures, and even the locals on Main Island can never be sure just where and when they will turn up.

Not surprisingly, she did not have one of them at hand for us to interview, but she did tell us various interesting tales of their powers and exploits – most of which I took with a grain of salt, never having seen any actual Magic working (except for Archbishop Crowley that one time at Candlemas, and that could have been mass hypnotism except for the photos.)

We have certainly heard in Japanese history of the "Kami Kasi" or Divine Wind that blew up from nowhere and wrecked an invasion fleet; that one is claimed by the locals (and Rumiko in our first year) to have been summoned on demand by their priests. The Spontoon Wild Priests are said to have similar powers over the elements, not that Spontoon has any shortage of typhoons anyway.

Some fascinating stories indeed, but I will have to see something highly convincing before I credit them for being anything else. It does all fit in, though, and could explain a lot that we have definitely witnessed. Helen asked if it had any connection with the real reason Crater Lake is held sacred, and Saimmi indicated that it did.

Back to Songmark, unfortunately on the same water-taxi as Beryl and Molly. Even in Prohibition days Maria's sort of church was permitted to carry on dispensing wine for the ceremonies – but at the Temple Of Continual Reward it seems folk prefer gin. Beryl is a very devout member of the congregation.

Monday November 13th, 1935

A busy day, flying our Tiger Moths in formation half the morning, and then putting them through basic aerobatics until lunchtime. Certainly the best weather for weeks – November is decidedly damp here, but the rain-washed air was totally clear – we could see all the Kanim Islands and right out to Gunboat Atoll from altitude, something quite impossible from any of the Main Island peaks. It must be nearly a hundred miles, after all.

Despite putting on a faultless performance in the air, poor Adele Beasley is in with our Matron again; she was hardly on the ground a minute before the rest of us got to practice our first-aid skills (she fell over a set of landing chocks, right onto her snout, on the concrete runway. Ouch and double ouch.) Very odd – give her anything aeronautical to do and I would want her on my team without question – otherwise she is hardly safe with a burned-out match. Helen says she fears Adele will walk in the way of someone's propeller one of these days – I think that is too aeronautical, but that could be said of the landing chocks too.

Still – I would trade a bruised snout and black eye for the accident that happened after lunch. We four were on our own looking through a local dance magazine with pictures of the winning free-style dances on Meeting

Island last month – there was a picture of Lars caught in the middle of a very strenuous move, his rather scanty Native costume flying; I rather doubt that it would be printed in the papers back home. Molly sighed wistfully, commenting on his various fine points – and his fine points, as in antlers. She closed her eyes, commenting they were just right to grab hold of – and without thinking what I was saying, I heartily agreed with her.

Oh dear. I never did get around to finding the right time to tell Molly about Krupmark Island. Today was not the right day either, and that was definitely not how I had planned to break it to her. Helen's tail fluffed out in alarm and she exited stage left, dragging a surprised Maria with her, possibly to break the news in a more subtle way than I had managed.

Things became a little heated, as they said of the first day of the Somme offensive in 1916.

(Later)

After a rather stressful and argumentative afternoon, I happily retreated from Songmark to Casino Island, with staff permission. I had thought of asking Helen to come for company, but we have a tough-looking navigational examination first thing tomorrow and I hated to drag her away from her studies.

It felt rather odd being all alone, heading out in the dark towards Casino Island. The bars and cafes were lit up, the ones that are open this time of year – in the cool dampness they did look rather inviting. But I had a Countess expecting me, certainly the highest social ranking resident of the whole Spontoan island group, and I definitely was not going to be late. Indeed, I confess I was in such a hurry that I was a whisker away from being run down by a lorry pulling out of one of the warehouses – my ears were pressed right down for the rest of the walk as I thought of that. Many folk worry about always having on a clean set of under-clothes in case they are knocked down and sent to hospital – in my case, I imagined being taken in unconscious and identified by that license in my passport pocket. I could hardly leave it behind; Molly knows all the hiding-places and might do something in the heat of the moment she would always regret.

Aloha Avenue looked very respectable as I passed the Golden Crab restaurant with an unexpected glow, recalling my last visit. Countess Rachorska's house at the far end was warmly lit, and the Countess herself was there to receive me, wearing naturally one of her own creations, a very stylish evening dress in taupe satin that could have come straight off the daily Air France flight from Paris. (Odd how Madelene X always mispronounces it as "Paree", one would think she knew her own capital.)

An interesting evening and not one I quite expected. The Countess had another guest, a very nice feline by the name of Lily, who I have seen before at Mahanish's, generally in admiring company. The Countess passed on Nuala's apologies for her absence, and with one ear dipped asked me directly just what I had been getting into, that had caused her daughter to take a sudden holiday at this time of year.

This is really not my day. Even if the Countess is Russian, with that social rank I could hardly conceal or deny her a direct answer. But I did first ask her what Nuala's usual job was – and hardly knew whether to be relieved or shocked when her mother calmly confirmed exactly what it was, adding some details which I learned to my disadvantage.

Without mentioning Lars or Mr. Sapohatan by name, I told them exactly what had happened, and what everyone else seemed to assume had happened. After that, pulling out the embarrassing card and handing it over seemed less of an ordeal than I had feared. Lily laughed good-naturedly and pointed out it was invalid still, with various signatures and essential medical stamps missing – my tail fluffed like a flue brush and I nearly choked on my Darjeeling as she pulled out another one from her own bag to show the difference.

Things are never what they seem. Living on Spontoan the "government" is a rather more shadowy business without imposing public ministries, mostly run by "meta-committees" that handle their own areas. Just because we never hear about their internal wrangling, hardly means it never happens – Nuala was something like a Secretary of Trade, suddenly being privately approached by a General and ordered to cancel a deal. Naturally she resented anyone interfering in her own business, so rushed things through instead – with the resulting situation resembling the Trade Ministry suddenly being ringed by its own government's troops. An awful tangle, both sides working at cross purposes after having promised to help with the very best of intentions.

Lily chatted quite unconcernedly about the problem, pointing out she is a taxpayer and a respectable citizen here, and is no more ashamed about her ... documentation than any doctor or dentist is of her diploma, guaranteeing health and quality. She admits it could be a source of embarrassment to me, but Nuala legally has to return the money to return the license – and as it was paid for anonymously, that could be difficult.

I left with my head somewhat spinning, though at least minus one incriminating document which the Countess promised to keep in her safe. Nuala is such a nice girl, as is Lily – I can't possibly see how they could do a thing like that. Nuala is in line to be the next Countess Rachorska, someone for folk to look up to and emulate. (I don't want to think about that too much. Dear Diary, goodnight!)

Wednesday November 15th, 1935

A stressful two days in class and outside it – Helen has been trying to defuse things with Molly by explaining about the effects of catnip, something deer are not affected by. Molly retorted that I had none with me the day she returned to Songmark – crossing half the globe as a refugee and stowaway to find me in Lars’ embrace. Which is true, and awfully bad luck considering all the weeks we had been waiting and hoping for her to return – that she had to come round the corner that very minute.

Anyway, we were prepared for night flying, with the cooperation of the airfield staff who have set out numbers of emergency “gooseneck” landing flares, scenting the airfield with the perfume of burning paraffin. Everyone first did a takeoff and landing in the dusk, then a full circuit and landing in full darkness. “Only owls and damn fools fly at night” is the usual pilot’s phrase, and it is certainly unnerving enough. One loses the horizon on a misty night like tonight, and without stars it would be far too easy to get completely turned around without the radio compass and the artificial horizon. We have heard so many horror tales of pilots at night losing all track of their orientation and only finding out when they come out below a cloud layer almost heading straight down or flying on their sides. With luck one has enough airspace to pull out in time.

One full circuit in the pitch darkness is quite enough to start with, and even landing proved very tricky with distance and speed looking very different at night. Poor Susan de Ruiz misjudged her “flare” and came down so hard she burst a tyre and popped two bracing wires – there’s a girl who’ll be seeing a lot of the repair sheds tomorrow! All in all a heavy strain on the system.

When we had finished, Beryl offered us a sip from her hip flask – which I certainly declined, knowing her tastes in both drinks and practical jokes. Maria tried some and her ears and tail locked rigid for an instant – she tells me Beryl is drinking “Vin Mariani”, a chemically ... fortified Italian brew not unlike Nootnops Blue but with a wine base and a rather more active ingredient. She also notes it is banned in most of Europe, which hardly surprises me. Beryl claims it is perfect for a really rousing pick-me-up, but I think I will stay well clear – in the past year I seem to have acquired enough new interests, and that is an expensive one I can do without.

Maria was certainly enjoying herself when we returned, breaking up another row with Liberty Morgenstern and Rumiko, our sole Japanese student. I can quite see Liberty has a problem with Rumiko’s Shinto shrine in her dorm with portraits of her Emperor – Liberty being politically sworn to the bloody overthrow of all such proper forms of Government. Surprisingly, it seems that Rumiko is not in fact a member of any ancient Martial Arts tradition, nor is she trained from birth in subtle and devastating forms of deception and combat wholly inexplicable to Western minds. Perhaps her family sent her out for that very reason, as the black sheep of the family. If half the films and pulp tales of the Far East are correct, she must really be the odd one out.

One hardly envies our Tutors trying to put compatible dorms together – I assume they have character references of new students, but they hardly tell the most important things. Just a year ago I was surprised to see Ada Cronstein and Irma Bundt trading places – Ada is very definitely suited to Prudence’s dorm, which our Tutors wasted no time in spotting. In the case of Liberty and Tatiana, I would on paper have put them in together and we would probably have seen pistols at dawn (or at least crowbars) by now; nobody else cares about the details of Tatiana being an Otzovist and Liberty being a Trotskyite, but they seem to care about little else.

Helen comments that we are probably sent the more extreme examples of each political “faith” here – by all accounts it is very hard to escape Ioseph Starling’s grasp. The only folk semi-officially sent out to preach, are ones who are not likely to drop their principles and vanish over the horizon at the first sight of a grass skirt. Tatiana certainly fits that description.

Thursday 17th November, 1935

Quite a chase today – we were just heading in after lunch for another logistics test when Miss Cardroy came in and announced Brigit Mulvaney had gone “absent without leave” and certainly without a pass. Hurray! Rapid cancellation of logistics test and out hunting, our very first real tracking mission. She had half an hour head start and a generous allowance, so she might have jumped onto a water taxi heading anywhere.

We have taken care to be good customers and chat to the Eastern Islands water-taxi folk whenever possible – so while the other dorms were poking around Mahanish’s and asking the ticket office at the Marine Air Terminal, we were heading out to ask our acquaintances if a certain fiery-haired and fiery-tempered young Miss had passed that way. It took a lot of cross-checking and calling out to passing boats, but we found her trail, heading towards Casino Island not twenty minutes earlier. Some day, two-way radios will be cheap and waterproof enough to help in this sort of thing.

A brief dilemma – whether to go for the credits of going after her ourselves, or the credits of getting the rest of the year to work as a team with us? Molly had the clever notion of telephoning our tutors to report before

stepping onto a water-taxi ourselves; that way we score both ways, and if the other dorms never bother to check base it is hardly our fault.

The good news was that Brigit seemed to be in her Songmark uniform still, and with her fur colour should stand out like a sprained tail. Had she planned things properly instead of just flying off the handle, she would have had at least a native straw rain-hat handy to hide her distinctive ears and head-fur from a distance. The bad news was she was twenty minutes ahead of us, and could be anywhere on Casino Island (or if really smart, have changed water-taxis and be half way across the central waters in any direction.)

Helen pointed out the first-years have had very little time on Casino Island, and none of it unsupervised – in tourist season they might be drawn to the southern esplanade with its horde of hot-dog and coconut-floss vendors selling dishes not on the Songmark menu. As we headed into Pirate's Cove, we tried to put ourselves in her shorts (though not the way Ada might want to) and see what would be the obvious attractions for her.

Most of the entertainments section around the Casino and the big hotels is closed up for the season; we passed the covered-over Crazy Golf course, noticing next Season a Criminally Insane Croquet Lawn was setting up as a rival. The bar and restaurant of the Manston and the Marleybone are open for business, but I doubt Brigit in her Songmark blazer would get served there. On the other hand, she had the cheek to try it – as I found out from Joe the bartender, who had thrown her out of the Marleybone not ten minutes earlier. At last, the trail was getting warmer!

I teamed with Helen and took the back street behind the Manston, as Molly and Maria took the front and we started to search. Half an hour later Helen pointed ahead – just in front of Mama Malarkey's general store there was a red-furred figure emerging, still blatantly wearing her Songmark blazer. Talk about letting the side down! She could have at least turned it inside-out, the lining is far less conspicuous.

Of course, Miss Mulvaney is here to learn some lessons, and I hope she learned several today. We “dry-gulched” her to use Helen's phrase, jumping her from the cover of an alleyway she should have been watching, and demonstrating the “Wasi-kodo” judo hold dear Mrs. Fairburn-Sykes taught us last year. We needed it too – she was in no mood to admit her mistakes and come along quietly, but a double hammerlock and tail hitch demonstrated the error of her ways.

Another half hour had us dropping her back at Songmark to Miss Cardroy's tender care, where the huge chunk of marks her dorm is sure to be fined will probably drop Brigit in the popularity stakes. Next time, she should put in some planning, and get the rest of the dorm helping if only to act as distractions. Anyone can break the rules and get caught – nowhere in the Songmark prospectus does it exactly say it teaches you to get away with it, but after more than a year I think I can claim that is the foundation of everything else in the course.

I certainly hope that the third-years are never sent out after us that way, it would surely mean we had awfully bungled one of our “raids” – and to be caught and frog-marched back to Songmark would be a far greater humiliation than just losing the points. The only time we have called our seniors out was that occasion when Molly was kidnapped last year, and then I managed to find her myself. I am having trouble thinking just what did happen back then; although I know Lars explained it perfectly convincingly I cannot bring to mind exactly what he told me. Very peculiar, and unlike Beryl I cannot blame the local pink gin.

On our return, Molly and I had typed postcards awaiting us, without a return address. This looks like another mission from Mr. Sapohatan for us, though the cards are not quite the same (possibly he has a new secretary.) We are requested to attend Maxine's, a salon on Casino Island on Wednesday evening for some course or other. Thrilling! Although Songmark teaches us most things, possibly there are things we will be asked to do that we need special training for. At any rate, we are bursting to see what we get.

Helen seems a touch irritated that she is not invited, considering Mr. Sapohatan has trusted her as much as myself, and has avoided giving Molly anything important. I can quite understand that – after all, there is a limited demand for Molly's favourite occupation, someone having burned down the Reichstag building already.

Saturday 19th November, 1935

An alarming day in the calendar – we have one month left to find the remainder of Molly's fees, or it will be a very un-Merry Christmas, especially for her. Still two hundred and fifty shells to go, and our resources are mostly used up already. Beryl has offered to get us a bank loan, but we have seen the interest rates charged by Mr. Van Hoogstraaten's Spontoon International Bank for unsecured loans. Helen says they hire the sort of debt collectors who always collect, though sometimes in instalments of ears and tails.

Still, it was a very bright day and we headed out to dance class – not to our usual one but to Meeting Island, where the invitation-only one is organised by Mrs. Ponole. A very fine and strenuous day, and a rare chance to look around the government buildings afterwards.

The Spontoonies really have a fascinating double culture; weekends in tourist season Mrs. Ponole is shaking her skirt down on South Island, but this time of year she is a bureaucrat at the Interior Ministry in their Registry of Births, Marriages and Deaths. (Molly wondered if that means everyone who is born, married or dies on the island has to go there and fill in the forms immediately.) One would hardly expect it to turn a profit, but it does so by her account – there are ways of making money from printing blank paper without copying banknotes. I have heard from Jirry about various lady tourists who enjoyed themselves so thoroughly here that a month after getting home they feel it important to send for a back-dated local marriage license – actual husband and citizenship rights decidedly not included.

Maria is always fascinated by the way folk in this part of the world effectively generate revenue from nothing; just by existing as an independent state they have all sorts of concessions and franchises available to use. Even their post office gets into the act, with three issues of bright commemorative stamps a year to delight collectors around the world – I can hardly see any country keeping that up for long before they flood the market, but they are doing rather well so far. This must be what we heard of as “invisible earnings”, though not the sort that Mr. Brown and Mr. Greene were making.

We returned via Casino Island, where we sadly passed by a Papatohi stall that was making the whole street fragrant with fish and garlic. A good meal here is only fifty cowries, but between us that’s two whole shells lost from Molly’s Songmark fund. Back to window-shopping! And when we returned to Songmark, there were no surprises as to the menu. As they might say in a crossword puzzle: three letters, begins with P, derived from a vegetable found underground that would be happier for everyone if it stayed there.

Beryl was in fairly high spirits at least, having returned from a day of seeing the sights with her friend Mr. Piet Van Hoogstraaten Junior. She is singing a ditty she claims to have heard in a low tavern (full of mice like her rather than giraffes, one assumes) on the northern side of Casino Island, that hardly inspires confidence in the Island’s newest power plants:

*“Two Bio-Reactors, standing in a row
Both are belching vapour and are certainties to blow
The pipes they are all leaking and the safety valves nailed down
All nailed and welded down!”*

*Lordy, Lordy, let us scam,
Lordy, Lordy, let us scam,
Lordy, Lordy, let us scam,
And nail our hatches down!”*

One hopes it is just idle tavern chatter, not a sign that folk there know something we don’t. Professor Kurt is a very gentlemanly wolf, and sure to lose in the exchange – even if it is his rival’s plant that blows first, we have plotted in class the likely blast danger zones and they definitely overlap. Whichever one blows first will at least have the consolation of taking its rival with it, along with the rest of the neighbourhood!

Sunday 20th November, 1935

A disappointing trip to Casino Island, Reverend Bingham has started on the Virtues, which seem far less photogenic somehow than the deadly sins. But things perked up considerably when we met Saffina and Saimmi, to head out direct to Main Island, arriving at Lukapa Village. She took us up into the jungle on the lowest slopes of Mount Kiribatori, where there is a fascinating Tiki statue looking out over the main waters. By the workmanship I guessed correctly that it was one of the rare original pieces of art left by the first settlers: that statue had stared out all alone for centuries over an empty Spontoon group, with only the Natives of No Island to wave to it from the deep waters a mile away.

Still, the Tiki seems to be getting its share of worship these days, to judge from the offerings and traces of other ritual that Saimmi has been teaching us to recognise. We did not exactly howl shocking obeisance to it as the Natives of Goatswood do back home to what they find in their woods, but I think we made a good impression. After all, if it is anything like back home, statues of such things are not always guaranteed to stay as statues.

It was a fascinating afternoon, sitting on the ridge rising out of the jungle and hearing Saimmi tell us tales of the island. Somehow it makes everything far more convincing, sitting with the actual statues involved, having just performed the full ritual exactly as the first settlers had done (Saimmi says the Natives Of No Island kept the memory alive of how it was achieved, even though for various reasons they were not equipped to perform it themselves.)

Saimmi then lowered her voice, not that there was anyone to overhear, and told us something we have been wondering for the past year – the reason no coconuts grow on Spontoon. We had always assumed some

change in climate had caused the islands to be abandoned, or a nearby volcano choked the place in ash as keeps happening in this part of the world. But the full story was very different indeed, and one that Saimmi had to induct us this far into the local religion before telling us. I hardly knew whether to be shocked or horrified first, and even Helen's ears and whiskers were sticking up in alarm as we heard about the Great Ritual and the awful Mistake that was made. I had wondered why coconuts grow freely on Orpington Island, within sight of Spontoon on a clear day; climate could hardly be very different over such a slight distance.

I can see now why the islands had to be abandoned; and why despite being a prime piece of territory, no Polynesian natives could return until a significant fraction of the of the Precession of the Equinox. It seems so simple, to hear how Saimmi describes it, but no archaeologist could ever have guessed the truth from the evidence of what was abandoned. She also hints that a lot of the critical evidence was left on an island that is hardly ever there, but this is harder to believe.

On the way back through Lukapa village we spotted Mrs. Voboel our ex-Tutor with her new husband, shopping in the market (which unlike Casino Island's shops, opens Sundays.) I must say, she looks very well in a Native sarong, and positively glowing with health. Helen whispered she seems to have wasted no time, and speculates if we saw her longhouse it would also be in the process of expanding.

(Later) Beryl is trying to interest the others in our year in buying shares in unheard-of companies, with the specious argument that some of them will grow huge over time, and anyone who "gets in at the ground floor" on them will be very well-off. She keeps using the simile of acorns growing into mighty oaks – which is true enough for a few of them but most acorns end up as squirrel snacks. I overheard her with Jasbir trying to peddle shares in some unknown American typewriter company (HAL or something like it) that also make counting machines for their national census. Happily I managed to dissuade Jasbir, pointing out the world is full of typewriters already, and as for census counting – it is hardly sound business to make equipment that gets only used every five years! There are a few blessings with my dorm now being famously low on cash; at least Beryl has stopped trying to sell us "sure-fire deals."

Monday 21st November, 1935

A day of squally winds and lashing rain, but despite everything we were out in it all afternoon, on that low North-facing cliff inland from the coast of Eastern Island. We had climbed it back in Summer, but now while Miss Wildford cheered us on, we tried all our routes on rock streaming with water. A very different experience, but of course Songmark can hardly send out purely fair-weather adventuresses.

Not only do we have to climb the faces but map them in detail, along with all the routes we have put up on them and full descriptions! Molly claims it is simply adding insult to injury, and indeed she is one mass of bruises after twice spectacularly failing to get up Radiator Gulley * and then having to give a hold by hold description of the whole sorry business.

Beryl is quite brilliant at this sort of thing, and tells us she had two years of intensive coaching at St. T's from her friend Sarah "Second storey" Samedi, who has a family tradition of such things. Three hours of it was enough to reduce the toughest of us to tears, with our fur matted with green mossy stains, mud and assorted debris kicked down by the climbers above.

Just to cheer us up, Miss Wildford announced that we would be back here until we can get up anything in the rain – after which we will try it in the dark, then carrying equipment – and when we manage all that, we will go back and do it again, only faster.

I must say, it was a great relief to get back and all pile into a hot shower at Songmark – though Madelene X kicked up something of a fuss when she noticed I had adopted the same ... trimmed fur style as Molly, which she comments is only used by folk of ill repute. I was about to retort that the three Natashas I copied it from, probably had a most excellent reputation of their kind – but stopped myself just in time. Madelene is awfully annoyed with us for spending our Sunday afternoons being what she calls "wilfully steeped in heathen darkness" as we learn the local traditions from Saimmi. Helen is more amused than respectful of most religion, and mutters we should fake up some news reports of Pacific islanders sending their own missionaries to France and converting the locals to the worship of the Tiki god. It would be only fair, I suppose.

(Later) The wind was blowing straight from Moon Island at lights-out, and we could very clearly hear the wind-tunnel at the naval base. It sounded very different somehow – starting off as normal, but a minute or so later a sort of extra noise kicked in – something I can only describe as a wailing boom, however unlikely that sounds written down on paper. The first time it ran for about ten seconds and sort of stuttered out – the second time it lasted well over a minute. Fascinating! One wonders what they are testing over there – and if we will see the results in next year's Schneider Trophy. Somehow, I rather doubt it.

(*Editor's note: tucked into the Diaries is an old mimeographed survey of two hundred yards of a basalt sill criss-crossed with routes, and some scribbled notes. The entry for Radiator Gulley reads: "Grim exposed open angles and paw-holds up to chock stone, break left on imperceptible claw-jams over crozzly basalt plates, sparse chickenheads and greasy scoops up to start of "Green Streak" [pointless and dangerous diversion up rotten rock 2 yards west of "The Fly"]. Squeeze through gap labelled "Diet, Maria!" then break left across route of "Plummeting Mousie". Depending on conditions and will to live, take either the Direct or Super-Direct finish, both being five yards of brutal snout-jamming to the top. Or better still, let Beryl do it, and heckle her.")

Tuesday 22nd November, 1935

My birthday, hurrah! Twenty years old today – if I return Home next year I'll be old enough to add my vote for the Jingoist Party. Jasbir treated us to a slap-up treat at Song Sodas, where Helen surprised us all by sampling a Durian Surprise and finding it tasted much better than its aroma (onions, stilton and bad drains.)

Beryl gave me the big block of penny shares she had been trying to sell to Jasbir – what a joker she is! I will cherish them carefully, and every time I buy a typewriter ribbon feel happy about raising my HAL stocks by a millionth of a cowry. Molly gave me the nice saw-edged bayonet that Lars gave her on Her birthday – it is all she had to give, poor girl, and she commented that as it fitted my rifle I had better have the complete set. Her tail was rather drooping as she added that U.S. Customs would only confiscate it when she gets sent back next month.

Helen gave me a grappling-hook and sixty feet of fine Manila rope, and Maria contributed a new flying-scarf, both just right for our courses. All wonderful to have, and I am pleased as punch to have such thoughtful pals. Helen's birthday won't be till April, but I must find her something good for Christmas.

And yet – I caught sight of Molly's final issue of "Film Frolics" (her subscription has run out) with its pictures of well-groomed starlets glittering with gems and not an awful lot else. I realised that I don't own a single piece of jewellery, not even a cheap brass tail-band or earring. I never felt the need, and if anyone gave me some it would spend most of its time locked away in my small trunk. But still – Molly's thoughts about having to return home, rather reminded me of how far everything has moved on since I first arrived here. My only decoration is my Tailfast necklace, just a piece of sea shell with braided fur, not worth a cowry to anyone else although I wouldn't part with it for as much real money as Mr. Greene and his gang printed fakes. My pal Mabel often writes from Switzerland about the finely dressed debutantes she learns with, none of whom wear flying scarves or steel-toecapped boots or habitually wear the distinctive perfume of old engine-oil. If they ever quarrel they may socially "cut someone dead" but bayonets are not involved in the process.

It was a strange day, indeed – out to the Casino Island general hospital to carry on our advanced first aid classes. Jasbir, Ada and Li Han seemed a little apprehensive as they wondered what we would face, as the hospital serves a huge area of the Pacific and serious cases come here from half-way to Tillamook.

In Ada's case she was rather behind with her homework, having been decidedly down in the dumps since I told her of our meeting her former heroine (Miss Pelton, as was.) I had noticed the big wall photograph of Miss Pelton winning at tennis had been taken down from their dorm wall, and the framed one on Ada's locker followed it yesterday. I wonder what our remaining Tutors think of it, a founder of Songmark and confirmed Adventuress of so many years deciding completely to turn round and walk down the aisle, heading for a traditional honeymoon and a family following immediately after. One hardly needs to share Ada's preferences to imagine them being rather shocked and disappointed in her.

Our course had nothing spectacular today, but we learned a good deal about wound care and treatments – straightforward splints and such we covered in First Aid last year, but we now learn more about looking after healing patients. Treating infections is a tricky job in this climate, but everyone is talking about "sulpha drugs" that the Hospital received its first package of this month and is trying out on some desperate cases who took days to be brought in from distant islands. We were warned not to expect sulphanilamide in our first-aid kits any time soon, and having been quoted the price per dose I can quite understand.

We were shown round the out-patients ward by Doctor Tarohan, a very rugged young boar who was handing out all sorts of prescriptions. He had a pile of health pamphlets he gave us – for some reason there has been a very major epidemic of tapeworms, mostly amongst the showgirls and various Euro entertainers, plus quite a few other folk almost at random. Very few gentlemen have been affected, and very few older citizens, a fact which is puzzling him greatly. He was almost tearing his fur out trying to track down the source, as his best enquiries have found nothing in common with the patients' diet – there were four dancers from the Coconut Shell being treated, who eat at the same hotel canteen as the hotel staff who have no problems that way. Although nobody is critically ill with this, it is awfully unpleasant and not the sort of news one wants to get into the worldwide papers just when folk are deciding whether or not to come here for next year's gastronomic holiday.

Still, a super Birthday, and indeed I only have one more of them left at Songmark. Decidedly something to think about – if my circumstances have changed as much by then as they have in the last year, it will be a very different Amelia who leaves Songmark than arrived!

Wednesday 23rd November, 1935

A damp day, but at least a good test of our flying kit's waterproofing. We had three hours of formation flying in the morning and were at last allowed some modest aerobatics, well away from the air lanes. Up to eight thousand feet to give us plenty of room for correcting mistakes, then we followed Miss Wildford's lead in loops and barrel rolls. Bracing! I was flying with Helen and Adele Beasley, and I have to say Adele is a superb flyer. People are strange; Helen loves throwing her aircraft around to beat any roller-coaster ever built, yet is seasick at the slightest excuse – and Adele is graceful as a swallow in the air but falls over her own paws on land (and overboard, on water.)

After the evening meal Molly and I headed out to Casino Island, with our invites to Maxine's – which is a rather large building on the West-facing side of the island, with high walls and a very refined yet powerful looking Tigris on the door. Though Helen is very good in all our self-defence classes, I would have to bet against my friend if those two ever competed, as the "receptionist" at Maxine's must be twice her poundage and none of it fat. She had been expecting us by name, and passed us through very smoothly closing double doors that let us into a very tasteful inner courtyard.

Well! I was not sure what to expect, but I expected a surprise and certainly got it. We were introduced to Madame Maxine herself, a stately Eurasian Siamese lady in a silken sarong who explained she runs what sounds very like the finishing school my dear chum Mabel attends. She teaches manners, social skills for all occasions and what she describes as "elegant transformations." The place has its own extensive fur grooming parlour, and an awful lot of equipment that one would hardly expect to find outside London or Paris – another surprise for this semi-tropical island.

Madame Maxine noted we have been booked in and paid for, so we need not worry about that – at which we both heaved sighs of relief. Many of the dancers, aspiring film starlets and other such folk come here by her account: we are booked for a special course that our Sponsor had requested.

Hurrah for Mr. Sapohatan! I had been reflecting just last week that my education is rather short on social graces – and had uncomfortable thoughts of someday mixing with other debutantes back home, discovering nobody else in the room knows or cares tuppence about engine compression ratios or avoiding aileron reversal.

We were passed on to a pair of politely smiling Eurasian felines, who put us through quite a treatment – steam baths, fur grooming and an instruction in some of the finer points of Euro style cosmetics. All rather new to me – such things were frowned-on back at St. Winifred's, and since arriving at Songmark the main fur treatment has been a frequent showering of scorched castor-oil. I assume we have a Mission being planned that calls for us navigating in higher social circles than Pilot's bars and Mechanic's institutes. That would explain why Helen was not invited along – I can hardly imagine her being thrilled at being groomed and beautified, it is not her style at all. Molly certainly has the looks, it is just a shame about her Chicago accent.

Leaving a few hours later, scented with something that probably came from a Paris "parfumer" rather than an East Indies oil refinery, we did feel definitely different. Next week we will bring along our Rachorska dresses, it is time they got an airing.

Thursday 24th November, 1935

Hurrah! A postcard from the freight docks informed me that a large packing crate was awaiting me in Customs – so as soon as classes finished I hurried over to Casino Island with my chums to pick it up. A few signatures later I was looking in awe and some alarm at a crate the size of a garden shed, nine hundred kilograms according to the shipping details. Help! I should have guessed that the Mignet aeronautical factory would have crated and double-sealed everything very securely for its trip in cargo holds across the globe, probably with as much weight in the packing as the contents. (This time, the aircraft kit is made of rather better material than the packing crate, unlike previous incarnations of my poor G-WIZ at home.)

The loading dock staff was rather unhelpful, insisting I clear my property out of the way but refusing to provide transport to Songmark. After shipping the crate all the way from France, one might think another two miles would hardly be a problem. They did suggest our hiring a freight barge from them – but quoted ten Shells to move the crate over to the hangars, an awfully steep price for us right now. It is a good thing Father pre-paid the import duty, or I would be in a real pickle. I must write off immediately and thank him – by far the best Birthday present I have ever had.

Fortunately Molly had brought her pocket crowbar set along as usual, and by dint of a lot of hard work we uncrated the kit, piled it onto two standard water-taxis and before dark had everything safely stowed in the Songmark hangars, Jasbir and her pals helping us carry it up from the ferry terminal. Everything is present and accounted-for, right down to the last nut and bolt – if the assembly manual had been in English rather than French it would have been nice, though it is profusely illustrated and I should think I know how to build a Flying Flea by now. The engine is rather different, 80 horsepower it claims (twice what I managed with before!) but we have been up to our elbows in engines of all sorts for the past year and we are rather looking forward to getting it running.

Beryl was actually useful, turning up at the dock with one of Songmark's old Ford lorries for the heavy lifting. She innocently remarked that the lorry had been sitting ready fuelled in an open garage with only a 3-tumbler lock on the door, so obviously it was meant to be used. In the circumstances we did not feel much like arguing the point with her.

I had asked Miss Devinski how I would go about registering my pride and joy on Spontoon – if it had been a case of rebuilding poor #8 with fragments sent out, I might have been able to carry over the G-WIZ registration. But a brand new machine has to be certified and everything here – so it will carry a SI and not a G to its name. Annoying, but I will live with it. Anyway, first we have to build it. I fear the weekends are going to be rather busy till the end of term, and any erring first-year responsible for pulling us away from the hangar will learn a lot about good behaviour from me.

(Later) Molly bounced in from her field engineering classes, looking very pleased with herself. She had a class in lumber work involving felling trees with no tools but fire, and happily described all the things she had burned with her tutor's full approval. Her only misgivings were about being slapped down hard when she suggested labour-saving tips involving some sort of "soup" she offered to cook from dynamite – a popular recipe in her social circles in Detroit, she assures us.

The wind-tunnel was running again tonight, and from the end of the corridor there is a window looking out over Moon Island. We had our field-glasses out, not that there was much to see, the main test section being indoors. There was one odd sight though; when the strange howling boom started up, I could almost swear I saw a flickering blue-yellow light at the tail-race end of the tunnel. Most odd.

Friday 25th November, 1935

Back onto the rock faces of the North shore, mapping and climbing – it is one thing to scramble up a route, but quite another to describe it well enough for someone to be able to follow it from your notes. Maria is getting very good at it, her Observation and Reporting classes are really paying off. Still, she needs some help with some of the harder routes – it is not strength as such but suppleness that really helps, and Li Han practically dances past all of us on the rock. Bravo for her!

Although the highest part of the crag is only twenty feet, that is more than enough to fall off, and we are "learning the ropes" in a literal manner. A four-foot fall is about as much as a good manila rope can be expected to take, and we "belay" our way up the cliff hold by hold in classic style. If ever there was a good demonstration of "Pride goes before a fall", this is it. Maria was rather showing off how horns assist her technique of head-jamming, when she found out wet rock and green slippery algae needs to be taken into account. I barely managed to hold her on the rope wrapped around me as I belayed; feeling like cheddar must when the grocer gets busy with the cheese-wire.

I must say, Maria is getting more considerate the longer she stays here – she apologised and declared she was going to try and lose a kilogram or two. I doubt she needs to, really – she has very little spare baggage anyway, and with a timetable as active as ours I hardly see how much more exercise she can put in. Few race-horses are in better trim than us – they might possibly lose some weight, but not to their advantage.

Saturday 26th November, 1935

We woke to find it absolutely pouring with rain, but nothing dampened our spirits as we wolfed breakfast and headed out to the hangars – after so long, at last I have the prospect of taking up my very own aircraft. A year and a half of relying on other folk is an awfully long time – and I had to remind everybody not to rush into building, but get it right first time.

All the tools and such were at hand and we recruited some of the airport technicians to help – Maria has her camera, and we got through about three rolls of film the first morning as we recorded every step for posterity. The book suggests starting with the wings, as all the layers of dope will take a long time to dry and we can assemble the rest while waiting. I must say, looking at the plans this is a real Thoroughbred flea, next to the rather

non-pedigree models I tried my best on. Eighty horse-power engine, professional laminated mahogany propeller and aircraft-grade materials all the way – I can hardly wait.

We hope to complete the job in three weeks: though it was rather a wrench, we downed tools until tomorrow and headed out to our dance lessons. Beryl had already got there, and is enrolling in one of the introductory classes after New Year. (She was showing Molly a postcard from her ex-school chums at their new address yesterday; apparently they have burned the school down again. Molly is seething with jealousy, as one of her friends from Detroit was there to help.)

Beryl is a rather fine dancer in the more “euro” styles and has been teaching us all to rumba, claiming anyone who is anyone dances it at Home these days. I really have been out here a long time, though not nearly as long as Miss Devinski – in an unguarded comment once she let slip she first arrived when the Charleston was all the rage.

Our Intermediate Hula lessons are going well – rather like poetry, one cannot lay down hard and fast rules as how to do it, but easily spot if it “works” or not. I wonder how it would sound danced inside one of those Terpstones, the full-body Theremins that V-Gerat play at their concerts? It is a whole year since we saw them play; hopefully they will do another Pacific concert soon.

Thinking of interesting technologies, one familiar face turned up that we have not seen in quite awhile; some of our rivals from the S.I.T.H.S were met after class by that skunk gentleman who seemed to be in charge of those model aircraft experiments. He had a quiet word with them and the whole party headed back to Moon Island on the double. That must be real devotion to duty, to work on school projects at weekends. Enquiring of our dance teachers, it seems he is the head of works at some small engineering firm here run by the Althing – probably civil engineering or the like. We waved our rivals farewell, as they followed the skunk off to his works and presumably more interesting model aircraft. Moon Island really is the place to put that wind tunnel, with mostly military and official folk there this time of year who are unlikely to complain – it has been awfully noisy the past few nights, with brief but unpleasant “Howl” and “Screech” sound-effects that we can hear from our dorms all the way across the water.

An excellent evening, Jasbir treated us all to a supper of Popatohi, which might well be the Spontoonic national dish – I have never heard of it elsewhere, though of course we have hardly surveyed the menus of the whole Pacific. Something like anchovies with onion and extra garlic – Beryl says it is the perfect dish for concealing the scent of absinthe on one’s breath, not that I think I will need it for that.

One cannot do everything, alas. Jasbir was telling us of putting out contacts with some visiting film producers who are in need of extras next season: she and Li Han can actually give references as having danced at the Coconut Shell, as long as our Tutors do not find out. She mentions having seen a fine adventure film this morning by H. Hiram Beaupree, one of the directors who has Spontoon pencilled in for location shoots in spring. It sounds a thrilling film that kept Jasbir on the edge of her seat till the final reel; the villain had conquered most of the country with his radio-hypnotic ray, until the hero dressed himself in clothes lined with a radio-proof aluminium membrane and came to get him. Foiled again!

Irma Bundt added that Sadie Shawnee will be filming on the island too, a lady producer of action romances whom I have heard much about in the gossip columns of Molly’s “Film Frolics”. Prudence is far more likely to audition for those roles, Irma says – adding something about “casting couch” that I did not quite catch, though Molly found it very amusing. I must ask her later about it.

Sunday 27th November, 1935

Up early and out in the dark and rain to the hangars – we missed breakfast, but Molly still has half a case of PAMS that needs eating up and has found no buyers in the local shops. We put in a solid four hours and have both wing structures almost completed, and Helen has stripped down and rebuilt the engine all ready for bench testing.

Molly seems fairly cheerful considering, and while we are at church promised to carry on working on the aircraft. We left her perched on a workbench eating PAMS from a hacked-open tin with the tip of her bayonet – not exactly the sort of etiquette one learns at a finishing school, but she seems happy enough with it.

A drenching ride to Casino Island was hardly improved by Reverend Bingham’s homily on the spiritual values of thrift and prudence. I do believe his Bishop must have sat on him severely for his unorthodoxy, but I think he was far better before – I fondly recall his Parable of the Left-pawed Longshoreman and the Watermelon. After all, we hardly need reminding of thrift with Molly’s fees still to pay, and as for prudence – well, the only Prudence who springs to mind is our chum who spends Sunday afternoon at the pool with her all-girl formation swimming team, before retiring to her friend Tahni’s longhouse to spend the rest of the day “discussing tactics” as she puts it. It was a rather dull morning all things considered, with no sign of Jerry’s family or even Miss Fawnsworthy to chat with afterwards.

I far preferred Saimmi's religious instruction today, to be honest. She took us over to South Island and showed us some sacred springs, which were in full flow after all the rain of the last week. We learned some more of the rituals, and why they have to be performed at particular times – I must say, Saimmi puts her story over very well, and it all hangs together quite convincingly.

One of these days, she tells us, she hopes a Wild Shaman might agree to talk with us, but that will be entirely up to them. I certainly hope to meet one – it is an interesting sort of “church” where the highest ranks have the least pomp and ceremony, to the point where nobody can even find them.

Saffina is very happily progressing in her studies, her own Native religion being the all-embracing sort where incoming missionaries are horrified to find their symbols put up on the wall with the rest of the collection. She tells us her mother has qualified in their local church and is now accepted as a Mambo, which I always thought was some sort of poisonous snake – anyway, it is a long way from where she started as a convent-trained missionary's daughter.

Back to Eastern Island to rejoin Molly in the hangar – she has done a jolly good job of doping the wing canvas, though the fumes were making her rather “doped” as well. We had time to get the engine on its mountings and check the sump for metal particles – not a scrap, which cheered me no end. Poor Flea #7 had an engine that sounded rather like a grindstone in action, and had the rudder not structurally failed first, I would have been in real risk of running out of engine just when I most needed it.

All the accessories are ready for the happy event – we have fuel and oil all lined up, the oil being standard European grade this time of year. The “Tropical weight” oil we would need in July at least is easy to store in November weather – one hardly needs a container, it just stands up like a block of butter.

We decided to leave the tricky bit till tomorrow, the top wing pivot. Having no horizontal tail as such, of course the Flea design manages perfectly well by tilting the whole top wing. Monsieur Mignet's idea was that since so many crashes were caused by aileron reversals, to abolish ailerons entirely – a bold and radical approach that is probably years ahead of its time. The only trouble is that the pivot has to take all the flight loads, and has to be rather thick and heavy for safety, as I found out when having to improvise with the drawing-room poker on Flea #4. One would think responsible poker manufacturers would anticipate this sort of reasonable demand and make their wares from some alloy a little less brittle.

It is most curious, recalling the “Sea Flea” I saw at the underground hangar back in Easter – that had a very sleek, streamlined “wing pillar” half the bulk of this official Mignet kit and without a single bracing wire, yet the aircraft was shaped as an advanced fighter that we have seen being thrown all over the skies without anything significant falling off. One wonders how they did it.

Monday 28th November, 1935

Just two weeks to go before Molly's deadline is up! We have scraped together every cowry we can, but the prospects look bleak for our chum. Whatever happens, she is determined not to be returned to her native shores and the waiting G-men: she says she would rather make for Krupmark Island and try to live on her wits there. (Causing Beryl, who overheard, to acidly point out you can't open shop if you haven't got the stock.)

Beryl would have been severely pummelled for that, but as it happens she is doing us a favour this morning, arranging for a self-defence demonstration from the martial arts master we have heard of, Mr. Toshiro Finkelstein. He picked Beryl to spar with, and gave us a Jude-Jitsu demonstration that was really rather impressive – I can see why the more traditional Oriental masters threw him out, there is very little harmonious flow involved and a great deal of going straight for the vulnerable bits.

Ada had a long chat with Mr. Finkelstein during one of the rest breaks; it seems he is not quite world famous yet, but well known in the Yiddish-speaking quarter (more like 1/237th, actually) of Yokohama. He is a rather striking looking gentleman, a mix of jackal and some species with a racoon-like face mask, a Tanuki Maria says, as she has met one who is the Japanese Ambassador to her Uncle's court.

Our Tutors seemed less concerned than I had thought, that we were being taught “low blows and dirty tricks” as Molly accurately described them – I suppose because they know there are unfriendly folk out there who will not hesitate to use them without warning, and we have to be prepared. I can certainly see why Beryl is pleased at having him for a tutor; it fits her style to a “T”.

Thinking about Saint T's, just last week Beryl was recounting how another of her old classmates won the Jemima Pennington-forbs trophy for the season's dirtiest Rugby tackle – I don't see that the move she mentioned was anatomically possible, and if it was I'm sure the victim would never be the same girl again. Even Mr. Finkelstein's rather brutal style hasn't got That one.

Beryl has had more letters from Home today, where one of her friends is in the running to get the prestigious and lucrative post of official School Bully, their previous one having been lured away to Roedean by a

hefty transfer fee. She is quite nostalgic about the place, considering she has never seen the new Saint T's building, which is by the coast this time. They have not just one heated seawater swimming pool but two identical ones – paid for courtesy of their new Head Girl, a Mademoiselle Manchu, who keeps her collection of poisonous tropical marine life in one or the other. By Beryl's account, it provides the raw material for many a robust practical joke.

I suppose there are advantages in having a Head Girl like that – from a very respected and ancient Oriental line, by all accounts. When I arrived at Songmark I had never heard of Stonefish, Pacific Viper Conches or Lion's Mane Jellyfish. Anyone who lives to graduate from Beryl's old school will already know exactly what to avoid.

Wednesday 30th November, 1935

A dry, windy day for the time of year, which we took advantage of first thing to work on the final doping of my Flying Flea. All the airframe is assembled now and we have the engine running on the bench at Superior Engineering – part of the certification is for it to run supervised non-stop for six hours without significant leaks, overheating or power loss.

We are trying our level best to get Sand Flea 1 (as I hope to christen it) flying and certified by the end of term – one of the mechanics at the airport was a fitter in the Great War and says we should manage it, as his old team could have uncrated a Sopwith Puppy one morning and have it flying on the next dawn patrol. In fact, we are pencilled in for certification next week – I just hope nothing goes wrong. Cracking a piston or breaking a valve would be awful, with no time to order any spares or indeed cash left to buy them.

Still, we could leave Helen and Maria pulling through control cables with a light conscience, as Molly and I were off on official business: over to Madame Maxine's on Casino Island for a full evening. It really is a well thought-out regime there: first we swap our street clothing for a plain cotton sarong, and a steam bath erases all scents of our daily lives. The staff is quiet and efficient, relaxing us with a massage as good as any Paris salon could offer (not that I've ever been to one, of course.) We were learning along with four Native girls, who want to work in the hotels around here – it is an interesting contrast, that Helen and I learn hula dancing and the local religion, while some Native girls want the Euro brand of polish. In the tourist season, evidently that is where the money is.

It is all perfectly respectable, and sounds very like Mabel's Swiss courses, with lessons in poise and grooming – if this was ten years ago Molly might have made a film starlet, but the arrival of the Talkies was unkind to many a hopeful girl with a broad Chicago or Brooklyn accent. I think she will just have to depend on her visual and scent charms.

We finished with being squeezed into fashion shoes the like of which I happily threw away on Krupmark Island – and certainly there is a technique to walking in them, which really has to be taught. Half an hour is quite sufficient for one session, my paws were quite sore – Madame Maxine tells us it is possible to get entirely used to the idea, which I suppose I will have to believe despite everything. Molly seems quite keen on the idea – but she is always keen to go up in the world, and five inches is a start. Half an hour a week is no sort of training, so she asked for (and received) the loan of a pair to practice with, and I went along with the idea.

On the way out, we were shown what must be the “exquisite transformations” mentioned last week. Changing clothes, we saw a very strikingly patterned feline lady, who assured us that earlier in the evening she was a drab sand colour. She showed us an earlier portrait to prove it, and indeed she looks exceedingly exotic now. It seems that Madame Maxine has full-body dyeing vats and a range of every colour in both wash-out and permanent formulae (permanent until the new fur grows out, of course.) I remember Molly dyeing herself last year with permanganate of potash for a disguise at the “V-Gerat” concert – a rather crude effort, though the best we could do at the time.

I can quite see why we are here on Official business, as a few cosmetic changes before a mission could make us more useful to Mr. Sapohatan. Helen had been worrying about our “little jobs” for him becoming widely known, with villainous folk finding out just who we are and where we live. Some disguises should help us stay useful longer – and Helen has also been worrying about what happens when we reach the end of our usefulness, with all the secrets we have discovered about the islands making us a liability and no longer an asset.

Molly rather beat me to it, asking rather eagerly if our course included anything of the sort (she worries about G-men watching for her next month) and indeed we were told there was a quite extensive treatment booked in for us should we wish, all paid for. This should be interesting! Although even Casino Island does not yet have an exclusive department store, Madame Maxine's is an exclusive department salon, and given our account there is already paid for we are quite keen to try its wares.

Friday December 2nd, 1935

A fine day for me – yesterday I received a card from Superior Engineering announcing my engine had passed its bench certification with flying colours, and was all ready for collection. So after my “Marine and aero engine repair and maintenance” course there I wheeled an engine trolley over to pick it up, with Saffina helping as Maria and the rest of my heftier friends were elsewhere in classes of their own.

An unexpected encounter – though I was commenting earlier how few lionesses there are around here, I came back with my Test Certificate to find two. Saffina was talking with that other we have seen who has or flies in that garishly painted old Junkers 13 (Helen has opined that if they took the paint away they’d find it was the only thing holding the aircraft together.) By her amazed expression and twitching nose, I doubt she had seen anyone quite like Saffina before – tabby lionesses are certainly unusual.

It was a fascinating discussion, given that I could not understand any of it – they started some Native language full of clicks and gulping sounds that I have never heard before, then switched to very slow French - both of them looking rather puzzled. This went on for about ten minutes before I tapped Saffina and had to tell her folk were waiting for us at the airfield.

The other lioness looked at us amazed when Saffina agreed in English – and waved us farewell, adding that her own Boss was waiting for her at the slipway. She hurried out, leaving Saffina looking at her retreating form with an astounded expression.

As we wheeled the trolley back with its precious metallic cargo, I pieced the story together – the two African lionesses had recognised each other’s origins and started chatting in Swahili, which is not a local language in Ubangi-Chari but one spoken as a “trade tongue” which Saffina knows a little of. Saffina tried to get some points across and failed, so switched to French, which she does speak as a native – but the newcomer, Andrace by name, speaks it as badly as Saffina speaks Swahili. The fact that most folk around here can speak English, somehow never occurred to either of them.

Anyway, from what Saffina did piece together, Andrace is here with her business partner looking for lucrative flying contracts – like half the other seaplane owners in the islands. She had been fuming that Superior Engineering had taken two whole weeks to get around to patching holes in their aircraft – a casualty of them only being able to afford “back burner” service and the Rain Island Naval Syndicate had a squadron of Ospreys booked in for major overhaul ahead of them. There was also something about an autogyro being full of eels – at least Saffina thinks that was what Andrace said, but admits it sounds unlikely. Her own native language is unrelated to any of the primal Indo-Coptic branch, and is spoken entirely from the tonsils.

I think I have met her business partner, at least there was someone else complaining about the repair schedule of that distinctive aircraft last week while I was in the engine class next door. I recognised the same Scottish Highland accent as my dear St. Winifred’s school chum Morag, whose people have a fine old castle in Glen Brittle, under the shadow of Ben Dhuctaille.

(Later) Molly and I spent a precarious half an hour in one of the deserted classrooms after dinner, practicing walking in the fashion shoes as we do every evening given opportunity. I would happily “chuck the whole business” as Beryl would say, but of course we are doing this on Official instructions, and so it must be all right. Besides, apart from increasing our height it is the very last sort of fashion anyone would expect an utterly practical Songmark girl to be seen in – so it is a doubly effective disguise. Anyway, both my daily sandals and my steel toecapped Adventuring high boots look very silly with the dress I acquired back on Krupmark. (Memo to myself – must write and thank Mrs. Critchley for the dress, if the post actually delivers to Krupmark. Perhaps she will let us work for her one holiday, in her Church Mission? We’d work free for a worthy cause, and probably present to our Tutors a holiday report quite unlike anyone else’s.)

Saturday December 3rd, 1935

A raw sort of day for Spontoon, in other words an average May day back Home. We went out to Meeting Island to compete against one of the Main Village teams – they were polished professionals who perform for the tourists in the season, and they beat us 59-41 on points. But we made them dance awfully hard for their triumph, and at last Molly and Maria seem to have given up on their “Winning is Everything” theme. One day we might well beat a team like that, but if we flounce off in disgust with raised tails at them every time we lose, I doubt they will want to invite us again to get the chance.

Maria received a telegram in code from Italy, which she set aside till we returned. After half an hour’s mysterious work locked in the bathroom she came out smiling and waving the decrypt – she will not be returning to Italy this holiday, her Uncle has agreed she can head out to Vostok on a fact-finding mission! It makes sense, Vostok being on good terms with Il Puce’s government, and Maria being already much nearer than anyone else he might send.

There is even better news, in that Maria had requested four tickets and her Uncle has agreed to pay for them, presumably thinking a diplomat has more status with an entourage. Wonderful news – at least the whole team of us get to travel together. At least, assuming Molly can stay and not get shipped out on her return ticket, a prospect that is looming in front of her most discouragingly.

Never one to let grass grow under her feet, Maria was straight out again to Casino Island window-shopping for clothing and equipment she might need – her Uncle’s telegram promised there would be funds wired to her for the trip, just as well as her allowance has been eaten by Molly’s term fees (we have promised that if we still come up short on that and our Tutors give the thumbs-down, we will help Molly escape the clutches of the G-men.)

Well! That should be something to look forward to, certainly. I thought so, at least, though Helen’s tail and ears were definitely drooping. She pointed out that she has plans to become Tailfast to Marti at the Solstice festival, something they are not too likely to have on Vostok where the religion is Eastern Orthodox – and probably as extremely Orthodox as Vostok is extremely Eastern. Definitely a problem – and it is not a ceremony one can do by correspondence.

It looks as if we shall have to wait and see how this turns out: Maria is definitely going, with or without us – I’d love to join her, we have heard so much about Vostok, a staunch bastion defending against Bolshevism. Various folk have complained the government is somewhat Extreme, but it is up against a particularly extreme threat both externally and gnawing within. Every refugee who escaped the Revolution and the Terror that followed has plenty of reasons to be extra vigilant, and their Government simply reflects that.

(Besides, they are ruled over by a Grand Duchess, and have the only proper Court around here. I doubt I am ever likely to be presented at Court at home, so this is as good as it gets socially speaking.)

Sunday December 4th, 1935

Up early in the dark to the hangars, a busy morning finishing off Sand Flea 1, only leaving when the final coat of varnish was drying on the instrument panel. So busy that I had to miss Church – the first time I have done so in term time, but to be honest the sermons have been a little dull of late. I did get out after lunch with Helen and Saffina to meet Saimmi, who gave us something of an “exam” on what we had learned. She led us one at a time into the jungle to a small shrine, and had us demonstrate what to do to tend it and the rituals to employ.

We must have got it right, for after Saffina completed her test, we noticed there was someone else standing next to us. How he got there is more than I can say – we are all quite well trained in spotting people moving stealthily, but in this case – we turned, and there he was. Dressed in a straw rain hat and a bark cape, it was hard to say if he was young or old; his fur was intricately combed in some patterns I had never seen outside the carvings hidden under the walkways of Casino Island. He carried a tall staff of some dark wood, also intricately carved – and somehow I knew that we were looking at one of the Wild Priests.

It was rather hard to look at him, you might say – even now I can hardly recall what species he was, and not because he was any obvious mixture. One had the impression of a solid mirage, as if the figure in front of us was only a shadow of something far more real and powerful somewhere else. I do remember what he said, though I cannot recall if he had any sort of accent, or even if he was speaking Spontoonie or English!

We all paid our respects as we had been taught, and he gave us a benediction in the local style. Helen and myself were known to him, he noted, and he had been following our progress with interest. He nodded to Helen and gave his approval at what she planned to do – I assume he means her plans to become Tailfast. To me he nodded somewhat sadly, and mentioned something about being cut adrift from home and needing to put out new roots. I’m not sure what he meant by that, to be honest, but it sounded fairly hopeful. I didn’t quite catch what he said to Saffina, but her eyes went very wide.

When we turned to look again, he was gone – having vanished on an open stretch of hock-high grass some twenty yards from the nearest cover. That’s quite a trick, one that Songmark don’t teach even the third-years, I’m sure. The local religion seems to be a decidedly practical one, and I am starting to believe even the more extreme legends Saimmi has been teaching us.

Feeling rather subdued, we returned to Eastern Island and had a quick inspection of Sand Flea 1. Everything seemed to be ready to roll, but with only half an hour of daylight remaining we had to content ourselves with starting the engine in the hangar with the wheels securely chocked. It caught first time, such a sweet thunder – and at long last, I was sitting at the controls of a Flea, watching the top wing pivot smoothly and the rudder twist at my command. I really hated to shut the engine down, but we have a lot of class work to get through for tomorrow, and Songmark life is not all dance contests and aerobatic thrills.

On the way back we changed water taxis at Casino Island and shared one back with Prudence, who was wearing a definitely “floating-on-air” expression, her tail wagging enough to add a knot to our water speed. She announced happily that she was staying on over the holidays, especially for one special day.

Helen looked at her with her own ears right down, and whispered that Prudence could not possibly be getting Tailfast – but she certainly seems devoted to Tahni, and Spontoon is a rather socially relaxed place that way. Though Helen is unprejudiced about most things, she really does not like the idea of our classmate’s tastes at ALL – even considering that Tahni is a Hyena and probably quite as fine a Gentleman in some departments as any others who might be getting Tailfast at the festival. I did ask Prudence if she knew about the local religion – she nodded happily, letting slip she has been taking instruction for the past six months.

Prudence is full of surprises – of course, there are other priestesses than Saimmi giving instruction, and she is always over on Main Island on her Sundays, out of our view. But it is the first time I had heard of her taking up any sort of religion. I suppose a conventional religion might have unkind things to say about her – if she followed Maria’s creed, I expect there would be some interesting Confessions every Sunday. Maria is very devout, and comes of a distinguished ecclesiastical line on her Mother’s side; an ancestor of hers in the Renaissance being one of the original Papal Bulls.

Thinking of Maria, she is planning her outfit for the Vostok trip; of course she can hardly represent her Uncle at the Vostok court clad in an oily flying jacket or indeed our Songmark costume. Happily she is being wired a separate clothing allowance, but the rest of us will have to do the best we can. She is determined to lose some weight, but has left it rather too late to make much difference without extreme measures – and anyone starving themselves in term time would probably fail to get up the rock faces or run out of steam half way through the swimming exercises. Ada Cronstein has recommended some wonderful slimming pills, which have worked wonders by all accounts – all natural ingredients and locally made. Ada’s parents are doctors, so they must be all right.

(Later) I rather wonder what the Wild Priest meant by my being “cut adrift from home” – certainly I am a long way from Barsetshire, but plan on returning perhaps next Easter and taking Helen along if we can raise the funds required. I am sure the priest knows a lot he is not passing on (that being a priest’s job) but what is it they know about me? Then – providing a generous ration of mysteries is part of their job description too.

Monday December 5th, 1935

A big day – our Tutors took the chance to give our class a free lesson in alternative aeronautics – in other words, we all got the morning off to help with getting Sand Flea 1 ready for flight. Having eighteen keen critics looking hard for construction and rigging errors was rather nerve-wracking, but even Miss Devinski grudgingly concluded there was nothing obviously wrong that was not designed into the model.

By eleven o’clock I was out on the runway, a bright day with steady Westerly wind – perfect conditions. At last, I could open up the throttle, there being far less power than a Tiger Moth, but a smaller and lighter airframe makes up for it. The view is much nearer the ground than I have been used to here – the main Eastern Island runway looked huge and terrifying as I started a few “bumps” to get the feel of the controls.

Technically, I am not allowed to fly Sand Flea 1 until it is registered and certified – but the Airport staff is sensible about things, and are letting me fly within sight of the tower as long as no air traffic is scheduled for half an hour. So at eleven thirty I pointed the nose into the wind and opened the throttle all the way – in eighty yards the tail was up, and inside a hundred and sixty I was off! A marvellous sensation, feeling the wheels suddenly quieten down as we left the runway (much quieter than the doubled sets of bicycle wheels I had on my home-built models) and Sand Flea 1 positively jumped into the skies.

Marvellous! Two circuits and I landed – the low wing almost floating above the ground, everything far more polished and better all round than any of my Fleas, not surprisingly. Maria was on hand with her camera and I must have been grinning like one of my Cheshire relations as I sat in the cockpit with a precious ten minutes flight being written into my logbook. According to the book, it is my first flight in a Flea – rather galling for someone with my experience, but I had no official logbook at home.

Miss Devinski insisted on taking it up for a safety flight – she has thoughtfully “sponsored” me to get official registration, and says she wants to find out about any problems before handing over to the Airways board pilots. This made a change – instructing our Tutor how to fly, as the Flea has rather special handling that can be very alarming for someone unused to it. My heart was rather in my mouth and my tail trembling as I watched her do two circuits, but thankfully she touched down without as much as a bounce, and conceded it was probably as good a Flying Flea as they make in the factory.

Hurrah! Though the rest of the class had to vanish to classes, I was introduced to one of the Airlines staff, a Mr. Jefferson who flies for Shawnee Pacific most of the time. I have seen him at Mahanish's and now know him for an actual Test Pilot, the first one we have met. In the films they are always dashing, gallant devil-may-care types with flashing smiles and particularly well-tailored breeches – but Mr. Jefferson was a rather slow and steady bloodhound, and I waited in vain for him to do any “Test Pilot” moves. Possibly that is how he has lived so long.

If I had thought it unnerving watching our Tutor doing circuits, the next hour had me almost gnawing my claws as Mr. Jefferson put my lovely flea through its paces, pushing it rather hard after the first circuits reassured him the top wing was not going to part company in the near future. Heading out to sea he even pushed it into a steep dive and managed to pull out – it looks like the new wing design has cured that little “Graveyard Dive” feature, at least some of the time. But sixty-five minutes later he touched down as neatly as our Tutor had, checked over the engine and radiator for leaks and gave me a cautious nod, while the riggers and fitters descended to check for any airframe stretch and strains.

Two hours later I was painting “RI-0651” on the tail in neatly stencilled letters – swelling with pride and resisting temptation to keep taking out the Registration documents and looking at them. After all this time – flying my own aircraft again, all legal and paid-for! Shame about the rather impersonal registration, but I will surely grow to love it (for various military reasons the Spontoon group use Rain Island codes even on civilian aircraft).

Sadly, the test flight used up all the 87-octane petrol I had, and with our financial state there will be no more until Molly's problem is solved one way or another. I have asked our Tutors, but they will not let me have any of the Songmark fuel, not even if I give lessons – sheer prejudice, I bet that they would entrust their precious students to any other officially certified aircraft.

(Later) Beryl asked when she could have a test flight, hinting she would find a short-field aircraft very useful at times. I had to admit being out of petrol, but she just laughed and told me there would be no problem there. Very cheering – certainly things are improving, and I happily declared that the world is looking like my oyster. At which Beryl grinned in that alarming way she has, and commented that to get anything out of oysters one still needs a good sharp knife.

Tuesday December 6th, 1935

Back in classes at Superior Engineering – and as I arrived I saw at long last that old Junkers was being moved out to the launching slip, its repair ticket having presumably come up at last. A fascinating machine, certainly – I have seen them in books, but never thought any were left in service. I could see some extensive repairs around the tail, with newly shaped dural sheets gleaming alloy bright in the sunshine. As good as new or more so, dural alloys hopefully having been improved since the type first flew in 1919, the year I left the nursery and was handed to my Governess.

I was hailed by the lioness who seems to be its crew, Andrace if Saffina got her name right. She seemed in expansive mood, and pointed out with pride the repairs, noting that Superior had not missed a single hole. Her tail suddenly twitched as if she realised she had said the wrong thing, and then “innocently” asked if I had heard of the local metal-eating termites. I refrained from asking her their calibre.

I could answer her questions about Saffina though, confirming her ancestry is just as it appears, and indeed she is one of a family of seven. Andrace's ears went right up at that – I confess I had not really considered the specific ... problems a cat bride and a full-grown lion groom might face, though Saffina's mother seems to have coped perfectly well.

I had to wave farewell and hurry out to my class, as the folk at Superior are always keen on keeping to schedules and my classes are very strictly run. Though most folk on the island have what a “Euro” would call a relaxed attitude, there is no room for slackness when it comes to repairing engines – just as an Army recruit wonders how polishing her boots really makes any difference to how well she shoots, in fact half of the battle is learning a perfectionist style that applies to everything.

After classes, who should I meet but Lars – he has his own aircraft in for service and indeed I spotted the Pemberton-Billings Nighthawk being wheeled into one of the repair sheds; if anyone, he can certainly afford priority service.

It was the first time I had seen him for ages, and I found myself sitting on the dock wall by the slipways, happily relaxing and telling him everything – it is such a change to have a sympathetic ear from outside Songmark. He was very nicely dressed in a pale tan safari suit, not at all the sort that tourists pose in, but a very well tailored and customised model of his own design. Certainly Lars is a very inventive gentleman, there seems no end to what he will think up next.

My ears only drooped when I had to tell him that it seemed certain Molly would be sent home at the end of next week, unless our tutors get the remainder of her term fees – even if she manages it, there is next term to think about, after we have already run dry our available funds. I have even offered to rent out Sand Flea 1 to Songmark, but our Tutors have refused to let any student fly it in any sort of official capacity, citing “accountability”. Anyone of a suspicious nature would check if they have financial interests in aileron factories.

Lars thought for a few minutes, then his eyebrow twitched – and invited Molly and myself to a party Friday after next, when term finishes. Which was jolly nice of him to try and cheer us up, but I sadly pointed out Molly would no longer be around by then, and I would be heading out to Vostok the very next day. To my surprise and delight, he assured me that Molly should make the party, and Vostok too – he would see what he could arrange for us. I confess I was so pleased that I squeezed him tightly, scenting his wonderful musk – and only a minute or so later he gently disengaged my hug and tail wrap, suggesting I not tell anyone as our Tutors are biased against him. I watched him wave and depart with a pang of regret, rather conscious of his very elegant figure and tall, strong horns making him stand out in any crowd; to think that I once distrusted him! Every experience since Summer has washed that notion right out of my head, though Helen still mutters his horns would “make a mighty fine rifle rack on the wall”.

Really, I was quite floating on air as I headed back to Songmark, though bursting with impatience to tell Molly. And yet – of course, things can always go wrong, and if there is anything worse than her current predicament it would be to falsely raise her hopes. She is such a lucky girl to have found Lars – I cannot imagine them ever being Tailfast, but neither are really the domestic type. As for telling our Tutors, I doubt I can influence them about him once they have an idea set in their heads, but they have been wrong about me before and admitted it – they are not the only ones eager to see Molly receive a comprehensive education.

Wednesday 7th December, 1935

An awfully stormy day, the windsock pointing right across the runway and no private flights cleared to takeoff till luncheon. We were scheduled for a flight that had to be postponed till the wind dropped, so with our Tutor’s permission my dorm spent the morning researching the Vostok Isles. Maria received another wire from her Uncle telling her to expect the money to arrive at her bank this weekend, but he will expect a full accounting of every lira spent. She has an accounting-book all ready, and indeed its purchase price appears on page one, line one.

Helen has been writing long letters to Marti Hoele’toemi and receiving longer ones (he and Jirry are away on South Island, working on what I think is the “waterworks project”) and was looking on rather broodingly as we unrolled maps and guides. An hour or so later, she sat down heavily and declared she could not join us on the trip. She is determined to become Tailfast on the Solstice Festival, and it will be rather late to head out to Vostok to join us after that. We congratulated her, but it is a shame to split the team just when we had our first chance to all go out together.

Jasbir came in with interesting news – she had seen the local police leading off some rather muddied workers, as at last the two teams of workers on the “bio-reactors” have come to blows. Both Professor Kurt and Doctor Maranowski seem to be inspiring leaders and have instilled their “troops” with competitive spirit – and this time of year there is simply not enough suitable material for both of them. I recall Professor Kurt explaining that his aerobic reactor needs a certain critical quantity of fuel every day to maintain operating temperature. His rival’s methane pits can just bubble along in low gear, but if the bio-reactor core cannot boil ether, the lights start going out. It seems the rival collection teams were engaged in mud-slinging that was rather more than verbal.

Our Indian chum had another rather odd thing to show us, probably quite unrelated. She had seen some cubs playing with a toy on the pavement when they were called in to dinner, leaving something behind. She thought it was a toy spinning top, and she was almost right – it was a gyroscope, but not a toy one, being a high-precision part bearing the stamp of Howie Huge’s Machine Tool Company. A very, very expensive toy to give cubs! Of course we have gyros in artificial horizon instruments and the like, and it might well have come from a scrap instrument. Alternatively, someone round here might be working on building designs that need to help to stay in stable flight. Interesting.

Molly and I headed out in the evening to Madame Maxine’s, for some dance lessons – there is a very impressive new dance called the Tango from South America, where it started off in night clubs and such places. One of the instructors is a very friendly ovine lady from Buenos Aires and taught it to us, a jolly energetic dance it is too! Though I would have thought it impossible (despite evidence from the Talkies) it actually is possible to dance in high shoes without twisting an ankle, though they are the despair of ballroom owners and wreak havoc on nicely polished floors. The Coconut Shell has a specially sprung hardwood dance floor that cost a fortune to build last year – I can imagine its owners praying for soft slippers to come back into fashion.

Two hours of dance and one of etiquette was quite as hard as anything we do at Songmark, as one constantly has to think of how every move will look to an observer, and how much style it can convey. We have mirrors and film clips to help, and the staff are certainly good at their jobs. The last hour was spent being measured up for more stylish fashions – I had thought there was nothing wrong with either of our waistlines, but apparently we have too much of a good thing. It seems rather impractical, but by all accounts Laura Shieling managed her adventures in Victorian times braced in whalebone, and we have modern lightweight “Spirella” as a better structural material.

I must say, this makes a super disguise, as one not only looks and moves but feels a very different person. I looked at myself in the mirror and hardly recognised myself at all – my tail twitched rather as I recalled the scent of catnip on Krupmark and the unwise but wonderful evening that happened after. After all, it would be an awful thing to imagine spending the rest of one’s days in nothing but mechanic’s overalls, every shop girl and hotel maid has some sort of party dress.

Molly looks very elegant indeed and is keen to try everything while she has the chance, G-men and reformatories still looming in her future – if our Tutors really deport her and she is spotted by the police at Customs, she whispers she could be wearing a far less glamorous costume for a long time. She asked the staff for the most extreme styles they have, and in two minutes was almost falling off the shoes – now those look utterly silly, one might as well wear stilts and have done with it. But as we were taking the same lessons, I followed suit – definitely the sort of experience our tutors at Songmark do not provide. One wonders if salons donate some of their profits to support hospital wards for fashion victims.

We bumped into a familiar face, one of the local girls who had been in the Guide’s school that we chased around in summer. Ularua, I think her name was, seemed very surprised to see us there – and whispered she would look rather different next time we saw her. She added that the staff here are famous for their discretion, and can teach more or less anything one needs to know in the socialising line.

Thinking of it, the Guide’s School certainly gets around – Violobe worked in September at the airport terminal, and I have seen others working as water-taxi crew. If it is a full-time course they have to do something in the off-season, and I imagine Ularua looks forward to some indoor work at this time of year.

Friday 9th December, 1935

Our final climbing session of the term, with Miss Wildford chivvying us up the routes carrying small but heavy packs full of water bags, much softer than bricks when one falls off onto them. The rocks were rather wet, but we managed quite well regardless. All except Adele Beasley who took a nasty tumble off “Crestar Runaway” and needed urgent first aid including seven stitches to her head. Poor girl – she takes all this sort of thing very calmly, being (she says) quite used to it by now.

I managed to put up a new route I shall call “Flea Jump” in honour of dear Sand Flea 1 – a rather bracing climb that Maria has recorded for posterity. * To think, last year I would have looked up at the cliff with a sinking feeling and a certainty that I was going to end up falling off – now I look at it as a jolly challenging piece of exercise that I only fall off some of the time. Beryl comments that I would earn my keep as a second-storey girl – I am not sure what that is, but knowing her it is probably rude.

A fascinating development when we returned to Songmark – Tatiana overheard us discussing our Vostok trip, and asked if she could join us. Of course, with Helen not going we have a spare “place” – Molly has tried to work out a way of keeping the unspent cash for her funds, but Maria’s Uncle is demanding receipts for everything. He is not only famous for making the trains to run on time, but getting the budget to balance, an admirable achievement. It just shows what you can do with single-minded ambition and not having to spend time on tiresome things like electioneering every few years.

Of all the first-years, Tatiana is NOT the one we would have invited, all things being equal – but she speaks Russian and none of us do, which rather changes matters. I did ask if she would be well received there, being an outspoken Bolshevik of deepest red opinions, but she seemed unworried. I hope she can keep her snout shut, indeed she has never done so yet – just yesterday Beryl and Missy K broke up a fight that started with Liberty Morgenstein promoting (and Tatiana denouncing) the Fourth Internationale as the blueprint for all political futures. Nobody else around here really cares about what the equine Trotsky or the avian Starling said about Worker’s Control of Production, but we get dragged into their squabbles anyway. If politics was not enough to argue over, Liberty is a crusading vegetarian and Tatiana a sable who spent the first week demanding rare steaks at every meal. From what we have heard about the famines in the Soviet Union since her “vozhd” (boss) Comrade Starling took over, steaks of any kind there have been rare indeed.

Maria says she is juggling the pros and cons of bringing Tatiana along – it would be one thing to have an unbiased translator to let us know what the Vostokites are really saying – but “unbiased” is not a word one would

use to describe our first-year comrade, especially where Tsarists are involved. And if the locals do find out whom and what she is – trouble all round, with us being merely deported on the spot if we are lucky!

I think Maria must be getting quite distracted, she tells me she has bought four packs of “Natura” slimming pills this week and not managed to try any of them – they have all vanished before she gets the chance. Beryl overheard as usual (given ears like hers, one has to semaphore or hula any secrets in this dorm) and quickly reassured her she does not need any. We might suspect Beryl, who is regrettably light-fingered, but the pills are too inexpensive to bother pilfering and she certainly needs none for herself.

- Editor’s note: there is a sketch map of the climb “Flea Jump”, presumably labelled in Maria’s handwriting. The mimeographed route guide reads: “Paw-jam up vertical crack to arête, break left along vague rugosities and open scoop across route of “Play The Hanging Game”. Mad mantelshelving for two metres under Whaling Wall, reachy breaks up to second arête then dyno like crazy to gain rounded boss at entrance to “Breach Loader” then either super-direct finish to top, thrutching and grunting all the way (Grade Hard Very Scary) or fall off (very likely.) Pumpy!

Saturday 10th December, 1935

The end of our last full week, hurrah! Term finishes on Wednesday, giving us a few days to get ready. Maria has debated with us and with our Tutors, and concluded that Tatiana is probably more of an asset than a liability – just as long as she keeps quiet about the Inexorable Progression of the Proletariat. Of all places, Vostok is one where she has to be discreet and can trust nobody but us – so she has incentive to translate truthfully. It is anyone’s guess as why she wants to go there, or how she expects to get through Customs with her passport.

Off to our final dance lessons of the year, a very fine “Bamboo Wind” hula dance that we competed against Althing Gate’s first reserve team for. We lost 47-53: getting better all the time! In the crowd was a figure who waved to us – not till she came over within scent range did I spot it was Ularua, her face quite transformed by a raccoon-like “mask” and her ear fur trimmed to change her outline. She was certainly right last time about us not recognising her – one wonders just what else Madame Maxine can do? Molly looked at her definitely wide-eyed, whispering that she will see if our credit there holds good for something similar next week.

We returned to find a postcard for me, anonymously typed and asking me to check my bank account for a surprise for Molly (she has none on Spontoon, and has nothing to put in it anyway). At which point things went to panic stations, it was half-past four and the Transcontinental Bank in Market Square closes at five – we were completely worn-out from our dance, but had to drop everything and sprint for the water-taxi, happily finding one with a new engine that could make ten knots across to the jetty. I got in just as they were about to shut – to find my balance was a hundred and fifty-four shells, where it had been just the pawfull of four yesterday! Immediate clean sweep of account, and I handed it over to a disbelieving Molly. A quick addition in my commonplace book shows she can now pay her next term’s fees with about enough left over for a cup of coffee.

At last, I could tell her that Lars had come through – at which point she hugged me tight (Lars not being around to thank directly) and declared that we had saved her life. She added that whatever happens next term, it cannot be worse than her fate back in her homeland, where she has heard well-attested tales of what happens in reformatories – she had enough experiences of that sort as a stowaway, and at least then was always given the alternative of getting off the ship any time she wanted to.

Straight back to give Miss Devinski the news (and the cash) – but our dear Tutor seemed unaccountably suspicious, and not as overjoyed as I had expected. She demanded to know just where the money had come from – at which point Molly turned up her snout and pointed out that Songmark had never asked her Father how he made his living, nor do they ask anyone else. This was perhaps not the best tactic to reassure our dear Tutor, but although I braced myself there was no eruption. Her ears were right down and her tail fluffed out, but Miss Devinski wrote out a receipt and grimly welcomed Molly back on the roster.

Hurrah! A full evening ahead of us and all quiet on the first-year front – being a second-year is such an improvement, not having to worry about Passes at weekends. A rapid grooming and a change into our respectable dresses (not my Krupmark one) and back we went to Casino Island – the water-taxis are doing well out of us today!

Maria has had her own bank balance happily boosted, and announced she had found us some cut-price accommodation on Casino Island between term finishing and starting our Vostok trip. Helen is staying on South Island, lucky girl – but we have only two days to get everything ready to depart, so cannot join her. We all went round to look at the place first, “Palm Towers”, a definite backstreets tourist hotel for folk who are spending their

holiday shillings on something other than luxurious apartments. It will definitely serve, and is handy for the docks for next week's departure.

Out to the Coconut Grove dancing, a pleasant time with various folk we know from the hula classes – a most respectable evening, back to Songmark well on time. Still, I felt rather let-down somehow recalling our last evening out together – despite all the problems we ran into, Adventure seems to be something we are getting used to. Hopefully we might find some on Vostok.

Sunday 11th December, 1935

A damp day, but we went over to South Island with Helen – it might be badly received if folk found out back home, but to be honest I am finding Saimmi's religious education a lot more sympathetic than we get on Casino Island these days. We had arranged to meet Saimmi early on for religious instruction, after which she led us back to Haio Village where most of the Høele'toemi clan were assembled! An excellent luncheon, then a most gratifying meeting with Jirry, making up for lost time and for the times I will be overseas. We strolled up the jungle path to help make the guest longhouse ready for Helen, who will be staying there from Wednesday.

Helen has to brace herself to scrub and clean, so we managed to put the place in good order for her – which somehow turned into a most pleasant afternoon, after which we had to clean the place even more thoroughly. Still very much worth the effort. Though we did not discuss it, it is the last time for awhile we will be meeting as Tailfast: I cannot be at the Solstice festivals and Vostok both, and Maria needs more support. I am sure Helen will manage everything here very happily.

Jirry did mention that at least one of his family would be Tailfast still, as the day ours "time expires" Marti and Helen exchange fur braids. I will definitely miss him – and discovered that all our sports and fitness training had left me exceedingly ... energetic. Then we had to clean the place, again!

(Evening) A rather alarming thing on return to Songmark – both Ada Cronstein and Adele Beasley are under our Matron's care, with stomach upsets and a general run-down feeling that has been building for a week. I noticed Ada was doing rather poorly on the more strenuous exercises, but she keeps telling us about her new diet and refusing second and third helpings - a rare thing at Songmark, given decent food. No Songmark student ever goes hungry unless they want to, and the meals though rather basic are big enough to satisfy an infantryman on winter manoeuvres. I have to say, despite such problems Ada's diet seems to be working.

I hope it is nothing catching, the last thing folk want is to be taken ill on the way home – and those of us heading to Vostok do not want to spend half our trip in quarantine.

Tuesday 13th December, 1935

Busy indeed – we spent the morning on Casino Island with our tutors' permission, purchasing tickets and equipment. Vostok is not so far North of us but it lies in a cold current – very good for the fishing trade by all accounts, but bad for beach tourism. Tatiana demonstrated why she has no worries about being spotted as a Soviet Citizen – when she pulled out her passport to book the ticket, I noticed it was in the name of a Ludmila Tsenko, of Tsarist Russian birth but with International Refugee status. Even her photo was different from her original one, but it matched her winter coat that is growing in by the day even in this climate.

I pointed this out quietly to Maria, who did not seem too surprised – and explained that as Tatiana was here with her Government's approval she would be able to get help and papers from her Embassy on Casino Island. True, Missy K did escort Tatiana there last week, but she claimed that was to telegraph home to her family. I think I will need to have words with our Red Miss about fair play and honesty. What DO they teach them in their public schools over there?

(Later) – Disaster! And just from the direction I had never once worried about, from Home! I received an Express letter from my brother, only the third one this term (he is very busy in the Army, and never talks much about the things he does.) He tells me his branch have lists of Foreign Agents circulating around the place, and in no uncertain or unproven terms, my name and current location are on the list!

I have never yet fainted, but my knees went decidedly weak as I read his note. He says there is something very odd about it all, as every other name on that list is cross-checked against actual Intelligence reports, but mine is not – as if it had suddenly appeared of its own accord. He urges me to stay where I am till he can investigate, as he has faith in me, and indeed the Bourne-Phipps pedigree is second to few.

Helen saw my ears go flat, and asked if it was bad news. I showed her the letter, and her own tail bristled as she read. She put the note down and spoke one name, but I understood – "Soppy Forsythe."

Oh dear. Revenge is a dish best served cold, as our chum Susan de Ruiz has told us (Her family were exiled from Spain half a century ago for being Carlists. She once explained what Carlists were, but I forget.

Anyway, she keeps plotting an impersonal revenge on the current Government, who have probably forgotten too.) I remember that final postcard Sopyy wrote, postmarked Whitehall – Helen does too, and suggests she waited till some list of Enemy Agents was in her reach and made a little modification. The trouble is, lists breed lists and other lists – once something gets into the paperwork, it has a habit of being fossilised as fact.

It sounds as if getting back home for Easter might not be such a good idea – a rather cold sensation went down my back, as I imagined Father believing it and cutting me off without a penny. Molly might not be the only one shipped home to face unwelcoming ranks of the forces of Law and Order – at least in her case she admits that from its own point of view her Government has the facts right.

I wonder how the Wild Priest knew. It definitely sounds as if his prophesy is in grave danger of coming true – “cut off from Home” fits the bill rather well, or badly from my point of view.

Wednesday 14th December, 1935

I had hoped to finish the term in better spirits than this – with Molly’s problems fixed for now and Vostok to look forward to, and Helen to congratulate on her Tailfasting. At least my friends are doing well (and I have yet to hear from Father, though as a General any security threats so close to home are sure to be reported to him).

The final day passed in a whirl, with Jasbir leaving after luncheon and taking Adele Beasley with her for the hols despite being unwell; I do hope she avoids being trodden on by any elephants or holy Juggernauts, but her chances are bleak (Beryl has tried to take out a life insurance policy on her, but the insurance companies do not want to know about either of them.) Ada Cronstein is still in our Matron’s care, as are two of our third-years with the same symptoms. Very odd, as they were the fittest ones around, always into dance contests and hot tips for sneaking onto a film next year.

I confessed to Molly that I was definitely down in the dumps – she hugged me and reassured me she’d help me as I’d helped her – and promised to cheer me up, reminding that we have a final pleasant evening at Madame Maxine’s tonight. As we have – Helen is vanishing to South Island and Maria is busy with code books and telegraph forms, so it is just us tonight.

(Later). Dear Diary. Amazing things do happen, sometimes. Our evening started off in the familiar pattern, of a steam bath and very relaxing massage – quite as if we were expensive clothes being steam-cleaned and scrubbed. Another two hours of dance and instruction followed, when Madame Maxine herself came in with two of her assistants and a “pattern book”. It was not fabric or wallpaper patterns in it, but wholly ... comprehensive pictures of fur styles, many of them produced at this very place. Molly flicked through and found one she wanted, whispering her instructions to our salon guides, and asked me what I wanted. Definitely something temporary, but striking – there is no point in going through the process just to make one’s fur two shades more ginger.

As it was, I could hardly decide, and in the end asked Madame Maxine to pick what she thought was best suited to me. After all, she is a professional in these matters and I rarely have more than a head-fur trim twice a season. She seemed delighted in my choice, rubbing her paws together and looking me over like a painter with a blank canvas.

It may have been the fumes from the dyeing vats, but I confess to feeling quite light-headed as Madame M talked me through every stage of the process, putting swimming goggles over my eyes to guard them and grooming my fur as she examined the details she needed to work with. She led me, quite “dishabille,” into the next room where her staff was mixing up dyes and mordents for treatment. I must say, the dyes stung somewhat and were rather hot when applied – my tail being done to the roots, and my paws to the knees and elbows, plus face and ears. It was really a quite extraordinary experience, but not at all unpleasant.

Perhaps an hour and a half later, the staff announced that my treatment was complete – and they brought out for me a dress that looked as if it had been sized to fit me, a full-length silk affair with a sash at the waist which they pulled tight and adjusted my head-fur with a big tortoiseshell comb. Then they brought in a full-length mirror and removed the nearly opaque goggles – and I had the shock of my life.

They have turned me into a Siamese! Jet black ears, paws in “gloves” and “stocking” patterns and the upper part of my face marked very distinctively in dark brown. The dress was an oriental silken costume with a long side slit, a “Cheongsam” I believe, that went with the overall look perfectly. I looked at myself quite disbelievingly, trying to find any flaw in the patterning – but as far as the fur goes I simply AM a Siamese while this dye is in. And – once the shock wore off, I found myself rather taken with the idea.

Madame Maxine whispered that my eyes and snout shape were not quite right, but not to worry – there being many slight mixtures in the breed, Siamese being known for their beauty and their friendly dispositions. Just then Molly came in – I knew her first by her scent, for she has changed her facial pattern entirely, a nice set of

stripes running down her snout and some more beneath the head-fur. I think Lars should like it, imitation being the sincerest form of flattery. (She looks like a close relation of his, but of course I did not say that.)

Anyway – it was a very strange experience to don our street clothing and leave the secure compound of Maxine’s Salon, to walk down the streets of Casino Island as quite different people. I passed several folk who know us by sight, but they never recognised us – but from other loud and cheerful calls we were wildly appreciated by the rowdier sort. I confess I found myself waving back, something I never do.

Maria almost threw a fit when she saw us! She was part way between being amazed, shocked and laughing her snout off – till she calmed down and asked us how we were going to get through the Vostok customs looking nothing like our passports. Oh dear. Not in my case (the dye washes off with surgical spirit and hot water, although it is “shower safe”) but Molly is stuck that way for months. I recall Madame Maxine saying that her quality of training can be the start of a whole new life, and indeed we are trying to please our sponsor.

Molly’s tail drooped for a second or two, but then perked up as she declared she knew someone who can help on those lines – and looking at me, asked if I would need the same. I rather hesitated, being naturally proud of my Passport – until I imagined Soppy Forsythe’s little trick setting wheels in motion finishing up with my name and passport number being memorised by officials all over the Empire.

Thinking it over, it would be useful sometimes to have two sets of travel documents as long as nobody catches me carrying them both. Tatiana certainly has at least one extra set in a quite different name. I did wonder out loud what happens if the real Ludmila Tsenko showed up, as it might be rather embarrassing. Maria sat me down firmly and explained that there may well have been a real Tsarist Miss Tsenko with a birth certificate to match – but if their Government issue its operatives her name on forged papers, they have personally made very sure the original one will not be around to complain about it. Nobody on the outside exactly knows what has been happening in Russia since 1917, but from all accounts there are radically fewer people around to tell.

Oh dear again. I quite took her point. Thinking it over, I can see that however “extreme” the government of Vostok may be, they have been given millions of good reasons to be that way!

Thursday 15th December, 1935

A day of relaxing – at least a late start, enjoying the luxury of ordering a full hotel breakfast for half-past eight and not having classes to dash off to afterwards. My oiled silk suit is clean and freshly waterproofed, and should be adequate for the outdoors on Vostok, and we have our overcoats and such out from storage. Maria is rapidly memorising phrases in Russian, and I am brushing up on my French – those Russians who could afford it were famous for spending their winters on the Mediterranean before the Great War, and hopefully some of the Vostok exiles speak it still. It should be more useful than whatever fragments of Russian I can cram in a few days. Madelene X has said I speak her language “comme une vache Espagnol”, which possibly means like one of Maria’s Spanish relations. Good enough for me.

Off shopping, a luxury we have almost forgotten about. Molly insisted on taking us to get our new passport photos first, as she will certainly need one for herself. She vanished while Maria and I spent the morning browsing the shops without a care in the world. Just think, some people can do this any weekend they fancy.

I must say, in broad daylight it was rather fascinating to be quite unrecognised by shopkeepers and water-taxi folk who normally know us by sight, if not by name – I found myself reminding myself of our deportment lessons, and not to swing down the street like a trooper (which tends to happen naturally wearing steel-toecapped boots that can survive a cylinder block falling off a testing bench.) Luncheon was very fine, fresh-roasted local fish on rice and a flagon of Nootnops Red between us. I expect we will be living on beetroot soup and black bread for the next few weeks, so we are making up for it in advance.

(Evening) Molly returned, looking very pleased with herself and assuring me that everything has been arranged for us. It would be nice to see something going right for once. We had a quiet evening in the hotel with the radio playing local swing bands such as the Spontones and the Syncopated Seventeen – Maria and Molly retired early, there is no knowing when we will next get a good night’s sleep.

It was most intriguing to study my new look in the mirror, seeing a very different feline looking back. I remembered what I heard one of the staff whisper to the other – that although I might not look pure-bred, it would be pleasant to think of one of my parents having a memorable evening with a pedigree Siamese, and myself being the living proof.

Dear Diary – this is not the sort of thing a well brought-up lady speculates about her ancestry. Yet I have to confess, it is rather fun. Early to bed, trying not to think about it ... but not trying too hard.

Friday 16- Saturday 17th December, 1935

An interesting day indeed – one that started with me waking up in a respectable hotel with room service tapping at the door with breakfast tea and finished rather differently. We were out to meet Tatiana in the morning, checking all was well with her and she had not suddenly got cold paws about heading out to Vostok. They would be pleased to see her true self in a way; the way they told us of back in Religious Education, describing how pleased Inquisitors always were to get their claws on heretics.

Our bags were packed and sent on by lunchtime to be cleared through Customs at the marine air terminal. All we had to do was present ourselves with our tickets and passports for the Saturday morning eight o'clock "Novaya Strany" Vostok commercial flight, leaving us free to do as we pleased in the meantime.

Tatiana was dressed neatly and plainly in a belted overcoat, everything she needs packed in a valise – folk with International Refugee Status tend to travel light, and she certainly looked the part. She gave rather a "double-take" at the sight of Molly and myself, but made no comment – hopefully she can stay that discreet for the rest of the trip. We confirmed all the arrangements, then said farewell as dusk fell – Maria had more telegrams to send before the Western Union offices closed at six, but for Molly and myself – off to the party!

A fine night for the time of year, and Molly led me to the far Western side of Casino Island – still a long way up the hill in very nice neighbourhood, which quite calmed what worries I had. It must be at least two streets away from where I met Mr. Brown and Mr. Green. Many of the houses are of the courtyard design with high, blank outer walls that keep out the tropical sun and (hopefully) tropical burglars, and provide privacy for their owners. This was no exception, and we were greeted at the gate by a smiling spaniel maid who showed us in to the cloakrooms to powder our snouts, explaining the other guests were already arriving.

Well! I must say, we had both been looking forward to this and Lars was a very thoughtful host. The main house is two storeys high, covering one side of a courtyard, and around the courtyard there are lots of changing rooms, very handy for the central pool. There is a "fire pit" which currently had an open-air chef making us drool with the scent of roasting fish and meats – very fine indeed.

Molly and I had decided to give folk a surprise, and picking adjoining changing rooms we dressed in our finest – me with my Krupmark dress, and her in her Rachorska model, with shoes that were definitely not intended for running in. We suited up with as much care as we would take with our flying kit and parachutes, checked each other's costumes and headed in to the party. Looking at Molly's retreating form, I must say it does affect one's walk quite markedly – not in a displeasing way, I must admit.

It was certainly a prestigious affair, many very sharply dressed gentlemen circulating and chatting amicably – and our costumes seemed perfectly in keeping, as there were Rachorska dresses and Paris designs aplenty on the ladies there. Several couples were already dancing when we arrived, and our tails were quite twitching as we heard the tango rhythm being plaid by a rather fine five-piece band.

Lars was absolutely on top form tonight; he had changed out of his safari jacket and into a particularly sharp white suit, wonderfully tailored – I could not begin to guess what fabric it was made of, something that made fine linen look like sacking. He greeted us and was most impressed at our new look, hardly seeming shocked or even surprised at all – certainly, he must be the most unflappable gentleman I have ever met. He offered an arm to each of us and took a stroll through the guests, introducing them – quite a mix of species, and none of them looking at all dull. I gained the impression many were businessmen, indeed some looked extremely smooth, fast operators. Definitely not proprietors of Papatohi stalls, I think.

When we had made one circuit of the courtyard, Lars pulled two small, greetings-card sized envelopes from his pocket and handed us one each, wishing us a Happy New Year. He motioned us to open them – and my ears went right up, at the sight of what was inside. Passports! They had yesterday's photographs of us in our new fur patterns but they were dated as being issued two years ago, with every detail of us except our names being spot-on. I have never been to Macao, but according to this document I have a home and career there. It does not specify what, which is handy.

Molly was most affectionate, hugging Lars with a force that surely made his ribs creak – but he made no protest, even when I followed suit. She declared he had saved her twice now – and even if her Tutors get hold of her, she can "jump ship" to go elsewhere, or at least escape the G-men if she does return to America.

Still both arm-in-arm with our host but with our passports tucked safely away, we returned to the party, drawing many an admiring glance and a few envious ones. The bar was well stocked and free, though I contented myself with one glass of pink champagne, eager to enjoy and remember every minute of the party. When Lars excused himself and headed out to circulate I did the same in the opposite direction, being rather glad that folk saw a Siamese girl bearing no relation to a certain Songmark student, who indeed carried documents to prove it. I might have wanted to be a citizen of somewhere other than Macao, but by all accounts one can get anything and do anything there, and at such short notice Lars did a super job on the papers. There is even a customs entry stamp for Spontoon dated last week, with a three-month visa.

I had a wonderful time, danced myself dizzy, and talked with all sorts of folk. I noticed various couples slipping away together, but nobody commented on it – there was a young squirrel pilot with a most wonderful tail who I had been chatting with. He told me tonight was his first meeting of such swell folk, and he had only got here as he had to fly his Boss out as soon as it finished. I found my own tail definitely going sideways at his scent, which certainly did not come out of a bottle.

Annoyingly, five minutes later I came back from the powder room to see him being led off by a tall hare lady, who I know is a chorus girl at the Coconut Shell. My tail rather forgot itself and must have been thrashing in annoyance before I remembered my manners. Molly came past, followed my gaze and murmured the good ones were already going fast.

Siamese are usually thought of as graceful and smiling types – the grace they get from their ancestry, but they make sure themselves they have reasons to smile. I picked and danced with a very handsome and slender ermine gentleman in white tie and silk shirt, who seems to be something in security – at least, he said he was a trouble-shooter although he was none too clear what that entailed. Nobody seemed to notice as we retired for some privacy – and indeed, the changing rooms were most thoughtfully equipped with the necessary ... protective supplies. If it was a hat shop, it would boast all styles and species catered for. What I had heard about mustelid gentlemen seems entirely true, I was pleased to discover – I quite believe that Missy K's mink fiancé can be thanked for her losing thirty pounds of “spare fuel”!

An hour later I was fully groomed again and back on the dance floor, nobody commenting at all. Of course, Amelia Bourne-Phipps could never do a thing like that – but half-Siamese girls from Macao certainly might, and nobody think any the worse of them. Lars joined me for one dance then introduced me to a friend of his, a rather dashing boar with a duelling scar under one eye that made him look most romantic. He bowed and introduced himself as Ritter Leopold von Schtroumpfenberg, a respectable name if ever I heard one. Shaking paws, I could feel his fur was very different to mine, stiff and bristling like a grooming-brush that seemed to comb right through my own fur to the skin. He was leaving the next day, after conducting certain business here that had gone very well, leaving him in a mood to celebrate. And we did so. Very extensively. I had some surprises awaiting me, but nothing I could not imagine myself getting quite used to.

Dear Diary. I will truthfully put down that Molly and I arrived on the Eastern Islands dock right on time the next day, in my case with my fur back to normal, and with all our papers and tickets intact. We were both bleary-eyed from lack of sleep, but otherwise feeling quite on top of the world - I had an evening I will never forget. To quote Natasha, in one night I “visited two cabins of the ark”, something I had never even considered doing before. Using fullest possible Precautions of course – one might say there will be no unexpected cabin bills to pay later on, and Molly says she has been as cautious; a great relief and a surprise to me.

(Later) We are all aboard the big Sikorski anchored off the Marine Air Terminal, all ready to depart for Vostok. The seats are very comfy, and both Molly and myself intend to catch up on some sleep on the twelve-hour trip. I have left behind my Siamese colouring and costume, and am travelling under my own name, my Macao passport posted back to await my return to Songmark (I hope our Tutors do not open our post.) The only thing I seem to be missing is my Tailfast locket, which could have sworn I put safe with my daily clothes in the changing room. I know it had scarcely a week's “life” left in it, but I hated to lose it.

A wonderful end to a most trying term, I really must thank Lars for all he has done for us; a fascinating adventure, that we have managed to walk away from undamaged, at least I think so. Next term I think I will get more use out of my party dress, even if I have to dig the unofficial route out of Songmark myself. But first, off to Vostok to see what awaits us there!

(And the adventures will continue ...)

