

Dire Decisions

Being the twenty-first episode of the diaries of Amelia Bourne-Phipps, at the Songmark Aeronautical Boarding School for Young Ladies, on Spontoons Eastern Island. Right now she's off on a mission of National Importance ...

Saturday February 6th, 1937

Dear Diary: it has been a very long time since I saw Tillamook! Last time was from the liner bringing me to Spontoons in September 1934, where we anchored for six hours to refuel. The cloud level was about a hundred feet then, and all I remember was seeing glimpses of dripping pine trees sweeping down through the fog to the water's edge.

The commercial Pan-Nimitz flight out from Spontoons was uneventful, although Molly and Helen did keep trying to second-guess the pilot. As we hear a lot in Mahanish's bar, pilots make very poor passengers just as sick doctors are very troublesome patients to their colleagues. After our weeks of intensive preparation I took the chance to relax for the hours of flight, and read through various guides to the area. Not that we will be here very long, just enough time to pick up the "cover" of being Lady Allworthy and party, ready for our next section of the trip to Macao. Tillamook is quite the wrong direction to go from Spontoons, but it has a friendly government and Mr. Sapohatan has presumably set things up so anyone checking our stop before Macao will hear the right story. Apart from Vostok, all the small independent nations of the Pacific have tolerably good relations with each other.

It made a change to have Adele with us; she can relax while in the air as nowhere else. Of course, all being well this will be the last trip she has to worry about such things. She found a lost ten-shell note wedged down the back of her seat, amazingly enough! That is the way of some specific types of curse, as Clear-Skies Yakan has told us - the most powerful ones act not by creating misfortune but by moving it into one's usual path. So a curse active on water would be devastating to a fisher-fur, even though they could have all the good fortune they can get, on the ice, in the desert or other places they are not likely to go and find it. It is very hard to actually create or destroy such things - but one can certainly move them elsewhere.

On the way over Adele was telling us something of her adventures on Krupmark last holiday - she admitted she is wearing the same sort of gold ring around her tail-root that I am. In her case it is not to be confused with a wedding band - she has mentioned a Miss Chartwell on Krupmark who she works for in the holidays. Not an entirely safe or pleasant employer, but Adele hints there are compensations. As I suspected, her particular misfortune there was learning that she liked some things that it is a generally bad idea to get involved with. Like me, Miss Devinski has told her very plainly that she stands in clear danger of being thrown out. At least I have an almost embarrassing range of options in that case - neither Mrs. Amelia Hoele'toemi nor Lady Amelia Allworthy absolutely needs a Songmark certificate.

The float equipped DC-2 made excellent time, and we touched down in Narrawangan Bay about half an hour before sunset. The hills further inland were certainly swathed in fog but as they say, the coast was clear for us. Narrawangan Bay certainly looks a distinctive place with all red cedar and pine buildings, even the one church we saw. The hotel we were all booked in at was a low, sprawling complex two storeys high, with a fine view out over the bay if the clouds managed to clear. What a sweat-lodge looks like I do not exactly know, but they seem to be inconspicuous and the centre of towns might not be the place to find them.

Our hotel was a few hundred yards up from the seaplane slip; we all checked in for one night as Songmark students and were intrigued to see that Lady Allworthy and party had arrived already according to the register. That is the plan; supposedly Adele and party arrive from Spontoons and vanish out of sight into the interior, reappearing when they are finished talking with the traditional Shamans deep in the backwoods. But only Adele will actually do that; the rest of us pick up the Lady Allworthy party identity and head out to Macao leaving our Songmark papers and outfit behind.

By the time we had got to the hotel it was fully dark. We were still in Songmark dress uniforms but the hotel management were apparently fully informed of our arrangements - they provided trunks for those clothes to stay in storage till we returned. Mr. Sapohatan has a long arm

indeed! It was a relief to get into the rooms and relax; all the bedrooms are up on the first floor and are done very plainly but neatly in polished red cedar with locally woven rugs on the floor. We are not due out till the next Imperial Airways clipper touches down at midday tomorrow - by unanimous vote we decided to have one enjoyable evening first. Certainly a party of Songmark third-year girls away from class should know how to make the most of their chances.

The first priority was a leisurely soak and fur-grooming after the long flight. There was a huge wooden tub filled with steaming water but no tap or plugs, which puzzled me until I spotted a notice on the wall explaining there were natural hot springs piped into town from the hills just above. With a nicer climate, this would make quite a fine tourist resort. Tillamook is well off for interesting Anthropomorphology, good sports fishing and wide open spaces - but so is the whole coast through to Alaska and Rain Island, and it needs something special to make it stand out.

Molly seems determined to take her cover role as my maid seriously; at least, she announced that a Lady Allworthy does not wash her own back and tail-fur. Certainly, it would look suspicious if anyone in Macao noticed that was happening. I agreed, on condition I returned the favour. Of all Songmark only myself, Helen and Maria are the only ones Molly feels comfortable letting wash and groom her. This is triply so since she last encountered Captain Granite at New Year; apparently before she died Captain Granite told Molly various things to her severe disadvantage, complete with evidence Molly cannot ignore. Molly does say that it was some compensation bringing the rest of the crew to justice, and that style of justice ends not with judges and prisons but well-fed sharks.

We all wished Adele good fortune for tomorrow, or at least ordinary fortune, which would be a big improvement for her. Adele is quite a pretty lop-eared rabbit, and though she always shown an interest in handsome males she has never risked taking it any further on Spontoon - with her usual curse that might be just as well. For them to turn out to be slavers or extreme carnivores would be entirely par for the course. Oddly enough, she seems to have gained quite a lot of practical experience here and there, despite never having had a sweetheart. We all hope she can get her curse fixed - though Helen did caution her not to expect everything to suddenly reverse thrust and become automatic good luck! We have had our fair share of knocks and tumbles, which we managed without suffering any curses.

After drying and grooming, it was down in our best Songmark outfits to dine in the hotel restaurant. An unusual situation; Songmark is world famous in certain circles but most of the guests had no idea who we are, and asked us what company we were flying with. Of course there are many small airlines, most of whom have their own uniforms, and ours is certainly practical enough to resemble an airline outfit. There was no need to conceal anything tonight; we told the story of our coming here to study some of the more ancient tribes in the interior, and any star-nosed moles hidden in the audience will be reporting it as truth should they be asked.

Something they do not sell in Tillamook is Nootnops Blue, in fact there are very few places in the world it is legally on sale. Places such as Krupmark hardly count, not having any real laws in the first place. Molly has mentioned that technically it would have been legal in her home town when Prohibition was on - and she often bemoans the fact that nobody thought to get into that import trade before the Volstead act was repealed. They do not even do Nootnops Red, though that might be because of its reputation of staining everything it touches a deep red; I believe a main ingredient is red mulberry juice, which makes a very decent ink or cloth dye. So we sampled the local brew, a pumpkin-based ale that is certainly ... distinctive.

Although it was pitch dark outside, under the hotel lights we could see garden plots behind the hotel stretching up in terraces all ready dug over for the new season's sowing. Adele has actually been here before twice with her parents, hunting ancient burial mounds. She says the locals use the Red Indian tradition of growing three crops intertwined in the same patch; maize grows up first, beans grow up the corn for support and pumpkins and marrows rampage around below, covering up the ground and keeping the weeds down. They call this the "three sisters", the plants living together very happily. (N.b Adele does persist in calling a marrow a "squash", which is properly what happens when one steps on a ripe one. Despite being a vegetarian type, she had hardly heard of that staple of the Euro vegetable diet, the mangel-wurzel either.)

The hotel was quite empty this time of year and we were soon talking with the waitress, a rodent girl named Kalakapa, of some sleek-furred local breed. Perhaps she is a marmot, though I did not recognise her type exactly and did not ask. While the cooks got busy with our order she showed us the back rooms where they have various local foodstuffs in preparation, the sort of thing our

Tutors always ask us about. I suppose it is a case of “you are what you eat” and they like to know just what we are becoming. Mind you, back on Albert Island in their cannibal days they might have thought it a good thing to have eaten strong warriors and visiting Euro professors, but nobody seems to promote that idea much in the schools these days. Nor do they warn herbivores off harming their intelligence by eating cabbages.

Molly was intrigued by the way they make the local drink. The backroom was very warm, courtesy of the hot springs, and scented strongly of yeast. Hanging up were various bloated shapes in sacks and nets - it looked alarmingly Cranium Island-like, and I was wondering what might be about to hatch out of them. Maria’s eyes crossed and her tail twitched at that suggestion; she has been telling us stray details of her experiences there and having thought it through, she seems to be alarmingly unworried by the idea.

Actually, there was nothing alarming about to burst out of the swollen shapes. The locals have a variant on the classic farmhouse “Marrow Rum” * recipe using one of the local “three sisters” they grow. Kalakapa tapped one of the hanging marrows and announced it was almost ready to drain; good news she said for next week’s customers.

An excellent meal followed; they have a relative of the Alaskan King Crab living in the waters off these islands, which has legs as thick as my tail. It is not a matter of using a nut-cracker on the legs and claws, but a one-pound geologist’s hammer to break into them. Whoever wrestled these ashore alive and fighting certainly earned their wages; Molly was speculating that sometimes the crabs win. Adele declined and went for the traditional Winter vegetable stew. Not surprisingly, here it involved maize, beans and pumpkin.

It is interesting, that Adele is one of our most herbivorous herbivores. Molly and Maria eat anything, and though Adele does eat fish at times she far prefers vegetables. Except Poi. Being brought up to eat very small amounts of meat and fish, she can at least digest it. Then, her parents were hardly poor, what with all that raiding of tombs. Last week our Anarchist first-year Rosa was telling us just why Spain is in such a mess; the peasants of all species there in some areas never get to eat meat, live in unheated windowless adobe huts and get about three week’s actual paid work a year which they share out between them so few folk actually starve to death. It is no huge surprise that some even see Anarchy as offering an improvement, seeing how little they get out of life under every variation of regular government. Spain has had quite a few different governments this century but the actual life of a peasant has changed little whoever is in power, we hear.

The weather outside turned to thick fog as we ate, which rather spoiled our idea of heading out to see the Narrawangan Bay nightlife (which Kalakapa assured us is minimal in Winter anyway.) So, another sample of the pumpkin brew and we retired to our rooms. Molly as befits my maid is in the adjoining room, with communicating door left open in case I call - it is something we will need to practice.

**Editor’s note: this recipe appears in many of the older wine-making books usually described as “a classic” which means it’s not guaranteed to actually work. Take a huge vegetable marrow, the sort you missed harvesting as a tender courgette before going on holiday and returned to find grown to the size of a battleship shell and about as edible. Cut off the very top and scoop out the seeds and stringy innards, leaving a cavity. Pour in a mix of warm water, brown sugar and orange juice, add yeast then re-seal the top of the marrow. Hang up in a warm room with a big bucket underneath. In theory the yeast ferments, digests its way through the marrow tissue till it eats through the skin, then trickles out into the bucket ready to bottle as a rich, fruity wine.*

In practice - in the only documented case the Editor knows, the marrow was reassembled firmly duct-taped together and left to ferment above the bathtub while the intrepid scientist went on his summer holiday. In the meantime the fermentation pressure grew and grew - and one day blew. Think home-made explosive biological warfare device, by the time folk returned from holiday...

Sunday February 7th, 1937

An unfamiliarly soft bed and last night’s two helpings of pumpkin brew had me sleeping through till past eight o’clock, something quite unheard-of at Songmark, even on Sundays. I was quite embarrassed on waking to see a stranger standing silently by the bedside - even more so when she turned out to be Molly, dressed in her black and white starched and spotless lady’s maid outfit. Even

the lace ruffles at her wrists were starched.

Molly seems to be getting into the role alarmingly well - that is, it is a frightening sight to see her looking respectful and demure, quite blending into the furniture. Molly in that outfit is about as incongruous as seeing a cheerful woolly tea-cosy on a land mine; a decorous outside hardly alters what is underneath. She had my clothes brushed and neatly laid out; evidently Madame Maxine has been educating her very thoroughly in her official duties. One hears such things about Madame Maxine and her establishment; they can do just about anything for a customer it is possible to do, and their secrets are absolute.

Dressing for the first time as Lady Allworthy was an experience. Whoever put the outfit together had impeccable taste and my exact recent measurements ready to paw. There was a very modish light cotton trouser-suit with belt in the latest style ideal for travel, with a belted overcoat ready to don against the fogs and rain of Tillamook. There was no sign of our Songmark uniforms from last night; Molly had evidently been up early at her duties packing them away for our return. Whether she was just hard at work practicing or feared someone might be observing us already, my "maid" was as silent and dutiful as any of the socially invisible servants of a stately hall. (Butlers may be acceptable as the guilty party in weekend murders, maids and gardeners, never. Simply not done.) In all the novels set in stately homes the servants are rarely mentioned unless it forms part of the plot, but having half a dozen attending in a room would be nothing special at parties and such.

Well! I little thought in my first week at Songmark when I was elected head of my dorm that I would be in charge of them to quite this extent or even want to. Not that I want to as it is, but as the German chancellor keeps saying, Providence will not be denied. He generally says so whenever he wants to justify something and claims the Universe is on his side. It was with some trepidation that I knocked at the room next door to see just what I had in the way of a Guide and a secretary. Neither Maria nor Helen have been to Madame Maxine's for training, but neither are taking on a role so far outside their usual style.

I need not have worried; though Maria was all business in a plain, simple brown tropical tweed outfit Helen looked suitably rugged in a bush jacket with the pockets obviously bulging with useful objects. In our self-defence classes we have been shown that a pocketful of spanners in a leather tool-roll make a most useful weapon and one that police and Customs furs are liable to let through unchallenged. Neither did they make any comments about Molly's new outfit; in fact Maria had her notebook out and asked if I had any letters to dictate. It makes a change; normally I am the one scribbling in the notebooks and diaries.

As Lady Allworthy, my first instructions to my staff were for us all to head downstairs and get some breakfast. The idea of being able to order breakfast in our rooms was a great treat and rather tempting, but I needed to practice our teamwork in public somewhere a slip-up would not be too disastrous. Maria had our travel schedule ready in paw; she commented that although Sunday lunchtime on Tillamook seemed an unlikely time for international departures, it made perfect sense for a route starting Saturday midnight from Sealth with a Monday lunchtime arrival in Macao. Strictly speaking we are flying to Hong Kong, but Macao being just across the bay the ticket covers both cities.

We saw Adele at breakfast; she almost jumped out of her fur when she recognised us - although she knew we were changing outfits, evidently we were being more convincing than just playing dress-up. I hardly recognised myself in the mirror, for that matter. Although the outfit looks perfect to appear on the front page of *The Tatler* or *Harper's Bizarre* it is rather less practical than I am used to, rather lacking in pockets (ladies have other people to carry their things) and too restrictive for an Adventuress. And the shoes are loud; they are hard tipped at the heels and click echoingly on every pavement. I had forgotten just what such things are like; last year's transforming into a Spontoonie maid or Kim-Anh Soosay put me into less formal outfits than Songmark, not more.

It was something of a strain not being able to give Adele any parting advice or encouragement. We do not officially know her now, and had to leave her to her own devices to contact the shamans far in the backwoods. I would quite like to see how that goes, but we have our own mission to perform. A farewell nod had to suffice, then we had to go and make ready.

Any observers outside the hotel at eleven o'clock that morning would have seen only a perfectly normal party departing, I hope. The porters had already taken our valises to the dock (though we could have carried them easily ourselves, it would have been out of character), and Molly went first holding a silk umbrella over my ears against the light rain. Maria followed then Helen

brought up the rear dressed practically in a long Melton overcoat that actually did conceal some useful equipment. A scene totally familiar on Spontoon outside Shepherd's Hotel or The Grand in tourist season, but not involving Songmark girls.

Again, we all had to restrain ourselves from yelling with enthusiasm as the Imperial Airways clipper appeared from the clouds, dropping to get "on the step" exactly on time and pulling into the harbour with a precision that might have had even Miss Devinski smile briefly. Again, Maria took charge of the passports and efficiently chivvied the porters to get our baggage up to the mooring dock - one can quite understand how her Uncle makes the trains run on time, though right now she is keeping quiet about that connection.

Our first-class cabin on an Imperial Airways flight must certainly have cost Mr. Sapohatan and Spontoon the profits on a lake of Nootnops Blue and a shop full of postcards - so we resolved to make the most of our good fortune, and enjoy our trip. The chairs were comfy and lightweight wickerwork with watered silk cushions, the cabin walls finely inlaid veneer, and the cabin service excellent. Not quite as hinted at on the front page of that Casino Island Pulp comic "Spicy bell-hop Confessions", though indeed the impeccably uniformed young Malay steward was rather handsome and extremely charming. Kim-Anh Soosay might have been more suited to admiringly watch a well brushed civet-cat's tail sway down the aisle than Lady Allworthy. Neither of those two are Tailfast and my ears drooped as I reminded myself that the only rings any of us have right now are the ones hidden in my tail-fur and Adele's.

There were no fellow travellers in the seats behind us, so I could bring Maria and Molly up to talk with me while Helen watched over us. Helen is rather distrustful of this whole trip; we are a long way from any help and heading into an area famous for its instability. However, we are well equipped for the job - Helen is carrying most of our money. As we learn at Songmark, money might not be the answer to everything but it can buy you useful options. Oddly enough, Miss Devinski and Beryl were quite in accord on that.

The first four hours flight appeared to be rather a waste looking on the map, as only then did we cross Spontoon's longitude again on our way West. Our first stop was at Marcus Island, a little coaling and fuelling station where there was half an hour to stretch our legs and do some in-character sightseeing. Then back into the air; a silver service supper from the very civil civet and we retired to the sleeping compartments. I would have dearly loved to feed my flight logbook with a turn at the controls, but not on this trip!

Monday February 8th, 1937

Macao in sight! A most comfortable night in a first-class bed had me reflecting there might be something in being Lady Allworthy after all - though I quickly squashed that notion. At Songmark we are very happy for our beds after a few nights on the ground, and a longhouse with Jerry's company is the right and proper place for me to lay my head next year. It might be only six months time, in fact. Besides, currently Spontoon is paying with its not inexhaustible funds for us to travel first-class right now, and if it was not the long-suffering Allworthy estates would be. I have done nothing for them yet to deserve to draw a salary on them, I know.

The mountains above Hong Kong go right up from the water, making it a perfect place for seaplanes and very difficult for land models to operate. Maria joked that the only way anyone could put a major airport in the Territories would be to slice the whole top off a mountain, and nobody will ever do that! The only other option would be to fill in a big piece of the bay, which is almost as impractical.

It is both a reassurance and a worry, having Hong Kong right next to Macao across the bay. Having a staunch outpost of the Empire there would be useful if things go wrong on Macao - but I cannot forget I am wanted as an Enemy Agent under my real name, and having to throw myself on the authorities for help might do more harm than good. At any rate it is a lot safer than China, where furs can simply vanish and never be heard of again. We touched down at the Imperial Airways dock and I was pleased to see our passports and travel documents stood up to close scrutiny. Nobody looked much at Molly; even to keen-eyed and hard nosed Customs officials a maid is just a generic maid and attracts no interest as a person. In that uniform the question of where she is going and why, rather answers itself.

By the time we had cleared Customs the rain was coming down; it is the rainy season here

and everything was rather sticky in the heat. One tends to forget how far North Spontoos really is, until one gets to compare it with the real semi-tropics. Then Helen went out and engaged a local guide to point us towards the Macao ferry piers; the dockside was an absolutely bustling place with thousands of furs and the waters criss-crossed with boats and ships of every size going in every direction; some smart new designs and some a floating collection of old junk.

The locals were quite a mix; a lot of mice and rabbits in Native Chinese dress, with the occasional red or black and white panda. Even in China it appears the black and white ones are not common. There were some exotics; small Muntjac deer, snow leopards and one very striking black and yellow Salamander girl who presumably was not bothered by the heat. At least I assumed it was a girl; the traditional robed costumes of both sexes look similar to me and with some reptiles there is not much physically to tell the sexes apart.

Definitely, it is a lot easier to spot Euros here than in the extremely mixed Spontoos where one can see a Spontoonic waiter in full evening costume and a tourist trying on a hula skirt, often with amusing results. Over here the wolves, bears and similar are almost entirely in European costumes. I did not notice any jackals, hyenas or mongooses, but they are possibly around in the “non-Euro, non-Native” business section of Hong Kong. Though the Chinese are justly famed as traders, in the British Empire a lot of the international commerce is in paws that originated in Daar es Salami, Bombay or Calcutta. Some folk say it is a deliberate policy that binds the Empire together, not having locals in charge of their own commerce. I doubt there is anything actually written down about such things, but it does make sense.

It was tempting to go sightseeing, but Lady Allworthy is here for business and we had a hotel in Macao booked and waiting for us. So Helen followed the guide towards the other end of the dock, while she watched over us. If ever there was a heaven for pick-pockets this is surely it - although there were no lack of keen-eyed Colonial Police officers on the street corners. Helen has tightly sealed pockets and I have almost none as they would spoil the outline of the costume. We have not adopted Beryl’s plan of sewing fishhooks in fake pockets and behind easily-grabbed lapels, as it only irritates one’s dressmaker and laundresses when they come back covered in blood. Anyway, it would be out of character for Lady Allworthy, who is not based on Beryl or Kansas Smith, for that matter.

Maria did manage some brief shopping as we waited for the ferry; she returned happily waving one of those shoehorns, the sort with teeth she has been unable to find on Spontoos and has been told do not exist. In Hong Kong you really can find anything. We may return with more time to spend on the return trip, all being well. Ironically, Maria as the humble secretary is the only one with her own money to spend, the rest of us are on expenses and will have to account for everything. If we end up having to use those emergency gold sovereigns sewn into various parts of our costume, Miss Devinski is liable to hand us shovels and frying-pans and book us working passage in steerage on a tramp steamer to Alaska with orders not to return without enough gold to replace them twice over. And she would probably have us manufacture coins from the raw metal that would pass inspection at the bank, too.

The boat across the bay was generally rather packed; even so there was a first-class deck that was half empty and we took our place on it. Molly was holding a sun-shade over me this time, and I had to fight down an impulse not to laugh. I doubt I will get much fresh air on my fur this trip, unlike the trip to qualify as a pilot last year in the Gilbert and Sullivan islands. It is a long way from oiled fur, but I could hardly appear in whatever high-level meeting of the Direwolf’s financiers dressed in Spontoonic costume!

Customs formalities were rather brief; we showed our passports and Helen handed over a large tip to ensure Customs did not look in our bags but waved us straight through. Evidently there is nothing in Hong Kong that the Macao authorities are worried about being brought in; by all accounts it is traffic in the other direction that gets searched. On the far side of the barrier was a tall grey-furred Weimaraner canine in an unfamiliar uniform holding a placard “*Lady Allworthy and party*”, and evidently awaiting us.

The crew of the Direwolf certainly believe in not waiting for the grass to grow under their paws. The officer clicked his heels and bowed in the old-fashioned manner, and I was introduced to Seeöberleutnant Franz Kramm, a supply officer of the Direwolf’s crew. The ship itself was currently at sea, he told me with another bow, but should be returning shortly. In the meantime, they had left a cadre of officers and local staff ashore to handle the meetings. Herr Kramm ruefully acknowledged he was not one of the original crew that had sailed from Kiel in 1914; he had spent some years as a

“Hula Junker” having left Europe never to return after his family estates had been seized by what is now Poland. Having new countries on the map is confusing as well as inconvenient, and one must keep up to date with memorising where they all are. It is not always obvious; as Maria has said, just because the river Rhine goes through the Rhineland does not mean the river Po goes through Poland.

Macao looks very much like Hong Kong except there are fewer police to be seen on the streets, and rather more exotics rather than Euros and Chinese species. Then, the Portuguese have been famous for having a rather more relaxed society in their colonies; there was one spectacularly mixed equine I saw who seemed to be thoroughbred on one side of the family and an Angolan or Mozambique Grevy’s zebra on the other. Definitely not a marriage that would appear in *The Times*! He was rather handsome though. Publications such as “Extra-Spicy Tropic Tales” are full of stories of society girls inheriting estates and ranches a hundred miles from the nearest Euro settlement with hundreds of Native workers there to be of service – and after a few months alone in a tropical climate the mistress of the house forms her own ideas of what services she requires.

I had looked at all the maps but not been prepared for just how small Macao really is. It is about the size of Spontoon’s Main Island, though with about twenty times the population. So in about five minutes we were in the up-market hotel district, a fine collection of colonial architecture with tropical flowers winding around the shady porches and verandas. These really were tropical, very different from the Spontoon flora that has to cope with the rather cool winters there.

Well! We have checked into some interesting places since starting our Songmark course; I was reminded of the grand hotels of our arrival at Vostok last year. These were just as grand and an awful lot warmer. It still felt strange to have a swarm of servants carry our bags up, hand us tall cool glasses of lemonade and generally treat us like eggshells. (If Molly is like any sort of shell it is an armour-piercing model, and these days the rest of us are scarcely more fragile).

One strange thing was the hotel manager bowed and welcomed me back here, saying his predecessor had talked much about me and he hoped all the facilities I had usually requested would be to my satisfaction. He then whispered something to Maria, who was filling in the paperwork. When we got into the lift Maria told me he had wanted to confirm that all damage and breakages would be paid for before our departure. Very odd! We surely do not look the sort of wild party-goers who entertain themselves by seeing how far one can hurl a radio from the third-storey balcony, or insist in seeing if the hotel limousine can float in the swimming pool. And none of us have been here before.

Two minutes later my tail drooped as we discovered just what it meant. In the suite the bell-hop announced everything was there for the exclusive use of me and my party - he indicated the bathrooms, the telephone with a private outside line, the Dictaphone with other secretarial equipment - and three shy and downcast-looking local girls dressed in rather abbreviated versions of Molly’s respectable maid’s costume. It suddenly struck me - the Lady Allworthy who had been here before was Lady Susan Allworthy, and having presumably missed hearing the news of her capture and fate last year, the staff assumed I was her! She ran the “lavender house” on The Beach at Krupmark, and from what I have since heard, I hardly like to think of the sort of “damage and breakages” the hotel was blithely accustomed to computing on the bill. This may not be Krupmark, but it is certainly not Casino Island either!

It was awfully embarrassing. The door closed and I looked over the “facilities”, a tiny deer far smaller than me and hardly breast-high next to Molly, a white-furred mouse and a very slender and upright avian girl of that strange mostly East Indies sort they call “runner ducks”. They looked at us with rather downcast eyes and the cervine girl (a Péré David’s deer, I think) announced shyly that they come with the room, like the bath and beds. It looks as if Lady Susan Allworthy had rather specific tastes. This is a very high-class hotel, but it is rather alarming that they supply such “facilities” as a matter of course.

It was a jolly uncomfortable situation; apart from them I had Molly, Maria and Helen looking at me, Helen trying to hide a broad grin while Molly’s look was definitely one of horror. The first thought was to dismiss them with a tip to go away and stay away - but that might simply have them moved by the management to serve the suite next door and the (probably not very) tender mercies of whoever happens to want such “facilities” there. While they are with us, they should be quite safe.

At the same time, there was a good chance that they were here to find out about us, whatever else they expect to do. So I put them to work under Maria’s charge unpacking our trunks, putting

everything away while Molly helped me out of the travelling costume. We have our first meeting tonight with the Direwolf's representatives, and first impressions certainly count. I had to remind myself to let Molly do the work filling the bath and arranging everything. After nearly three years of being taught self-sufficiency at Songmark, it is quite an effort to relax and have other furs wait on me. Still, we did the same for Maria on our Vostok trip.

In this humid climate one's fur soon gets decidedly damp and bedraggled, and a hot bath followed by a vigorous brushing worked wonders. Once Molly had groomed and helped dress me, she had the slightly used bath to herself - about four times the size that regular servants' quarters have, she tells me. From the splashing ten seconds after I closed the door behind me, she could hardly wait to get out of that starched black costume.

Maria was doing her part well as the efficient secretary; when I came back into the main sitting-room she introduced our new "staff". The deer is Soo Lin, the mouse Ting Lao and the duck-girl Kahavarti Matraporshah, of East Indies ancestry as I had guessed. All are refugees from the troubles in China, and have been working girls in this hotel for nearly a year. None of them had met Lady Susan Allworthy, but they had heard much about her from the departing manager and did not seem to be relishing the encounter.

It was hard to work out what to do; without actually saying I am not the one they were expecting I reassured them that they have nothing to fear from any of us - we are here for business, not pleasure. I left Maria in charge of them; she has no real secretarial work to do in this trip, and if they really are any sort of Agent she has a good chance of finding out.

An eventful afternoon indeed; as Lady Allworthy I decreed an hour's nap to get us refreshed and sharp for the evening's meeting where no doubt we will need all our wits. Lars set this up from this end, which by his account was easy enough to do as the Direwolf's commanders really do want to meet me with a view to getting military supplies, and they want to make a good impression as much as I (and my unnamed rivals).

I retired to my bed, which has a very nice corner window open to the breezes and looking across the bay back towards Hong Kong. I noticed Soo Lin, Ting Lao and Kahavarti Matraporshah standing by the door expectantly, evidently awaiting orders. I told them to retire to their beds and get some rest - at which point I found out they have none, at least none of their own. I would complain to the hotel management about that, but we are trying to stay inconspicuous on this trip and that would never do. As a compromise, I told them to tidy the other rooms and use my bed - when I am not in it. If I was the sort to ask "Why me?" I would wonder why Providence did not push this situation in the direction of Prudence and co. But they would not take advantage, either. Prudence is consecutively Tailfast and I have seen Ada with a Tailfast locket, too.

Room service brought up a tray of hot tea and coffee; really we must use them more often to stay in character. On my own I would rather look around for an interesting street stall to investigate the local cuisine, but Lady Amelia Allworthy has different standards. It would not take a local reincarnation of Sherlock Hound to spot there was something severely out of character if I strolled down the street in hobnailed boots chatting with Natives and patronising street vendors. As it is, I do not even pick up the telephone and order room service myself; Molly does that.

Actually, the hotel seems to specialise in handsome staff; I suppose it is a buyer's market right now and they sent up a footman with a tray. He could have pushed a car with the same ease, being a distinctly athletic Chinese wild ox. Though I have seen one or two of the species on Krupmark acting as bouncers and general "heavies", this one was impeccably uniformed and I could see a certain secretary on my staff looking him over with interest.

There was no time to do more than finish our drinks before we had to meet in the ground floor foyer at five. Herr Kramm was there, impeccably turned out and looking as if the humid heat was nothing to him. He seemed surprised to see Molly with me, but I would certainly not travel to business out here without my guide and secretary, which would leave my maid all alone in a strange city unless I brought her with me. Running repairs to my costume and coiffure are certainly something I have to think of now.

There was a large black cab waiting on the kerb; again there is nowhere in Macau we could not walk to in an hour or so, but it is the principle of the thing. Even Casino Island embassies in Spontoon have chauffeurs and such on their diplomatic lists, which is a good cover for less official activities in their copious free time (the Soviet Embassy has four huge bears listed on the books as "mechanics" though I doubt it is motor cars they work over with hammers and soldering irons back

home.)

At any rate, it was not three minutes till we pulled up on the far side of the harbour at what looked like an Embassy. In fact it was; I noticed the double headed eagle flag of Albania on the wall. This rather baffled me till I recall Maria mentioning they act as a “flag of convenience” for many of the tiny independencies in the Pacific, claiming local interest by way of their colony of the Albanian South Indies. Plus they know that no matter how outrageous their clients behave, nobody around here is liable to come storming over the Balkans to complain to King Zog in person.

So - the four of us were following a Hula Junker into a room leased from the Albanian Embassy to some Pacific micro-power, who in turn are a flag of convenience and mutual insurance policy to a privateer mostly financed by Chinese Warlords, and whose only official allegiance is to an Imperial German Crown that no longer exists. It is a good thing the Tutors encourage us to do puzzles and logic exercises, my head was almost spinning as it was. Just to make things really confusing, I had started to wonder how Albania could have ever afforded to build on this scale out here when I noticed the spacious walls still had carvings with the Austro-Hungarian flags. Evidently King Zog picked the building up after 1918 in the political equivalent of a fire sale.

Anyway, there was a cool and lofty room which in brighter days had been a ballroom, and a table with a dozen furs awaiting me in a mix of tropical white Naval uniforms and civilian suits. I waved the rest of “my staff” back and went in with Herr Kramm, who made the introductions. The highest ranking fur there was a tall mastiff, Count Ulrich von Thurn aber nicht Taxis, who is chief of the commissariat on the Direwolf. It is an essential job in their situation, where the ship needs supplying all the time with a thousand and one essential items and could end up fatally stranded for want of grease, solder or gland-packing asbestos fibre. The others were more Junior ranks, some of them introduced as specialists in procuring food, fuel, mechanical supplies and weaponry. Many of the younger ones were Chinese or other Easterners presumably from near their old Imperial trading post of Tsingtao, and one rather strange-looking amphibian I could only think came from near Ponape which was once in the German Marianas Isles.

Although they have been gone from Kiel since before I was born, the Imperial German Navy certainly have not forgotten their manners or their efficiency. They have a shopping list as long as my tail, some of which is very specific in terms of equipment and some of it is broadly-defined specifications to solve certain problems. It looks like inventors as well as middlemen like Lars will be competing here; mechanisms to fit some of these specifications are surely not available off any shelf and one would only expect to see them built and tested on Cranium Island!

The bidding is arranged as follows; for items that actually exist in stock, the suppliers have to provide test samples and demonstrate them working. I expect it will discourage unscrupulous furs from palming off ancient naval shells that are likely to explode in the barrel, if they are going to be standing next to the breech at the time. The “specifications” bids are rather looser, the inventors having to demonstrate a prototype, provide full engineering plans and only receive the final payment when the system is working aboard the Direwolf and the crew fully trained.

I have been sending a few telegrams back and forward to Barrow-in-Furryness in the past month, and have a fair idea of what they can build and what we would have to charge for it to make the Allworthy estates any profit. Fortunately I was given a copy of the shopping list to take away, it is rather a lot to memorise and calculate just how feasible it all is. There are around thirty people bidding for engineering contracts I am told, but that covers all areas and some of them will be concerned with standard commercial parts like winches, cranes and pumps that should be no problem to get through Customs. The initial paperwork will probably not say in whose paws the items will end up; in this part of the world Malayan tin-mines need pumps and dynamos just as much as renegade commerce-raiders.

They certainly do not waste time! I suppose if the Direwolf is on its way back here, they want to get everything set up in time for its arrival. I am one of the last interested parties to arrive, and just tomorrow night there is a Reception being held here where there is no ban on talking “shop”. Possibly the idea is competitors will beat each other’s bids down.

Back to the hotel to talk over our approach. Maria is a keen reader of “Jane’s all The World’s Naval Review” and was fascinated by some of the things the Direwolf’s officers want to get. As a heavy cruiser the ship is meant to be armoured against any gun-armed ship that can catch it, but torpedoes launched from fast craft and shore defences are a perpetual worry. Since in most conditions one can see torpedo tracks incoming, the idea of a torpedo breaker seems a good idea and

not impossible, although no Navy actually has one. That will probably have some highly qualified Mad Scientists busy at work on the problem.

The big problem facing the Direwolf is it chiefly depends on its main guns which are no longer in production, and neither are the spare parts or shells. For most countries that would not be much of a problem, but the whole German military was decommissioned and scrapped in 1919, along with all the machinery and industrial complex to make it. The price of putting together an assembly line to feed one ship specially would be quite hideous. And for most applications they are quite unnecessary; the Direwolf last fought another armoured naval vessel in 1918 and most of its commissioned jobs in China have been shore bombardments that a battery of standardised artillery would be better for and far easier to keep supplied. Molly has told me much about munitions being like people, getting irritable in their old age. Having been exposed to tropical conditions since 1914, I doubt the crew really want to test any original rounds they have left.

Molly's eyes began to gleam and she started doodling a massed battery of huge calibre recoilless "Davis guns" such as the Rain Island aircraft carry but scaled up by a factor of ten. The back-blast would be prodigious but an armoured ship should survive it, although any crew on the open deck are probably uninsurable. It is certainly an idea. Maria says the trouble is that turrets are not just stuck on the deck but are rooted deep in the ship all the way down to the magazine below the waterline, with shell hoists and channels designed strictly for their original loading. Anything that really can be bolted onto the decks would be so much easier to install.

Any original spare parts, Maria says, might have to come from unlikely places. Before 1914 Britain and Germany had a major export rivalry on equipping the smaller navies in areas such as South America; Germany as the new contender sometimes did underhand things to break into the market such as throwing in expensive shiploads of spare parts free with every new cruiser and destroyer. If Mixteca or Bolivia has any naval warehouses full of unused twenty year old main gun barrel liners and the like, the Direwolf is one of the few customers left. Actually finding the spares and getting them here (with or without the original owner's consent) is the kind of trade Lars is in – and he is only a small player, I am sure Hong Kong has operators that make him look like a wayside fruit vendor next to Harrods.

I hardly felt like heading out onto the streets of Macao in quest of a suitable restaurant for Lady Allworthy, so room service got some more custom and indeed they responded valiantly. In half an hour there was a covered trolley brought up that Helen searched carefully before letting into the suite (it is a favourite route in for thieves and secret agents if one believes the films.) Actually there was nothing more sinister than half a dozen steaming bowls of fish and vegetable satay, a decidedly spicy dish with chillies, coconut milk and peanuts that certainly hit the target.

I have certainly expanded my diet in various ways since arriving at Songmark. And I have heard of a lot more through my friends that I would like to sample some time. The world is changing fast, and a lot of the old dishes will probably be gone and wholly forgotten in a generation. Maria has described an Italian peasant dish that is like a thin round bread with cheese, tomato and various thinly sliced meats on top, which she has not sampled in years. Peasant dishes are being replaced by more sophisticated menus as the world develops, and this one seems more likely to go than most. It was originally baked on hot paving stones by workers re-laying a mediaeval city square, which explains why it is called "Piazza" or something like that.

Our three "resident maids" looked extremely hungry, and I asked them what they usually ate at the hotel. Boiled rice with vegetables twice a day, and sometimes millet or rice porridge, with sometimes fruit rejected from the guest's fruit bowls as a treat! No wonder they looked half starved. I immediately ordered them to tuck in; we are full of Songmark good meals and are not exercising a tenth as much as usual on this trip.

I should have chosen my words more carefully, on reflection. Ting Lao was sampling the fish satay dish with some trepidation, which I thought was only because it was too hot for her and encouraged her to eat more despite her polite protests. As we learned in our first term, really potent chillies and curries do one's senses of taste and scent no harm; in fact they clear the snout most healthfully. Five minutes later she turned rather pale around the nose and asked if she could be excused – of course I let her, which was just as well as the mouse barely made it to the bathroom on time. The overall effect was like Helen on a rowing boat on a choppy sea; audible two rooms away she could do a fair impression of a fire hydrant as she sounded pretty much as if she would throw her tail up. It seems it is the first time in her life she has ever eaten meat or fish, and her system was

really not expecting it, any more than one of her first ancestors who presumably sniffed around for wild grains in forest clearings. I had heard of but never actually seen that reaction before, as all my school chums' parents could afford to feed them well whatever their species.

Memo to myself; most Chinese here are really a lot poorer than I had imagined. Back in Barsestshire even the poorest cottager of any type might have a pen with some chickens scratching around, and the village schools see the children get at least one square protein meal a day. Failing that, poaching game is a grand old tradition. Last week when preparing for this trip Molly had mentioned the furs around here are "so poor they ain't got a pot to piss in", which instantly prompted Beryl to contemplate starting a charity supposedly collecting for a million chamber-pots at a guinea apiece. The administration costs would have been unexpectedly large, and reside in her pockets.

The rest of the meal passed without incident, and after another bath to combat the humid heat it was time to retire for the night. Yet another problem – I would have happily slept on the floor (it is well carpeted, and we have done far worse) and surrendered my bed to the three maids, but as Lady Allworthy that would never do. Neither did I feel like ordering them to sleep on the floor.

Next time we should bring Belle or Carmen along for one of these trips, they would probably enjoy it even without taking advantage. As it happens the bed was quite big enough for all, and I made it plain I wanted an undisturbed night's rest. If anyone is "investigating" us, at least they can report that the sleeping arrangements are as expected – assuming they are still working off Lady Susan's dossier and have not noticed I have unaccountably changed species since last time.

Tuesday February 9th, 1937

A busy day! We had time in the morning to go sight-seeing, which we made good use of. Macao speaks mostly Portuguese and Chinese, and Maria has enough Spanish to make sense of most of the Euro signs and notices. She speaks French, German, Spanish and Spontoonie very well, as well as of course English and Italian, in which she is making her notes which should foil any casual investigators in our rooms expecting to read Lady Allworthy's business plans. Actually the only thing she does not do as a secretary is shorthand; I tried to teach her my school's Lexarc system in the first year but I fear I made a poor teacher.

It is quite handy that we all speak Spontoonie, which over here is another language nobody is too likely to know especially as (my) Lady Allworthy has never been there and any eavesdroppers will hopefully be quite baffled. We found a nice public garden looking out over the bay and spent half an hour hammering out details. Rather ironic seeing where we are right now, that we always refer to one of these free-style mutual arguments as a "Chinese Parliament", a phrase the older Songmark years taught us. Tonight I am the only one invited, as it will be a confidential discussion. But there is nothing to stop the rest of us being in the neighbourhood ready to move in at any signs of trouble – and as Miss Devinski has frequently impressed on us, one should always expect trouble especially when far from home.

All being well, we will get to see the Direwolf when she arrives, ask the crew just what they really need (which should be a good guide to their intentions) and return with the information for Mr. Sapohatan. It is not impossible that we could be out of here in a week.

The main shopping streets of Macao were absolutely packed and bustling, though there was a definite air of watchfulness and desperation away from the Euro areas. The backstreets were lined with shanties put up with odd bits of wood, canvas and bamboo, crammed with refugees from the fighting in mainland China. One can certainly see how the hotels and less reputable places have their pick of staff for any "requirement" whatsoever. But the shops were full of goods, and the stalls piled high with food for anyone with the money to buy; Macao as a province is probably bustling and sending back a healthy harvest of taxes to its mother nation. After all, it assumes no responsibility for the refugees, so they cost it nothing – and since enough other folk are making a profit to generate taxes, the local Governor has nothing to lose as long as the money keeps rolling in.

On the other paw, this was definitely not Krupmark Island, in that weapons were nowhere to be seen on sale. Krupmark is the only place I know where one could swap a crate of tinned food for a crate of new rifles and make a loss. Then, nobody would want to trade on Krupmark at any sane profit margin, and the most ordinary essentials are hugely over-priced. Here, the Governor wisely keeps all the weapons in official paws, as otherwise the prospect of a desperate mob grabbing

arms would always be present. We have not seen any furs looking as if they were actually starving to death, but most in the alley shanties are thin and hungry-looking. An army, or indeed anyone, could recruit thousands here with the promise of a good meal, but it would take a good many such good meals before they would be up to much hard effort.

Maria spotted me looking down the alleyways and told me in Spontoonie not to feel responsible. We could spend all the money we have down to the last emergency coin and perhaps feed one street on rice for a few days – but the overall effect would be minimal and soon forgotten. There are hundreds of streets. We are here for a mission, and have to stick to it. I understand what she means, but it hurts to walk away when we could do something however small. Some Spontoonies are poor in Euro terms, having only a longhouse and a garden plot to call their own, but unlike here they are all well-fed and can choose to dance for tourists if they want to earn some hard currency.

Luncheon was a fine spiced fish meal, the restaurant having big glass tanks that I thought were ornamental aquaria until I spotted a diner point out which fish he wanted to eat! Well, one can hardly complain about the freshness, and in this climate it is a big point in favour of the system. I resolved to eat well but tip better; Maria's comment being that our starving ourselves would not mean other folk ate any better. There is no actual shortage of foods around here, and we have a responsibility to Mr. Sapohatan to stay at our best. One gets the impression that Il Puce is not the only one of ruthless practicality in the family, something that has been coming out in Maria these past few months. She started off at Songmark resolutely keeping her eyes and ears open but her mouth shut; now she has rather more she feels qualified to say.

Two hours walk was enough to cover most of the island, then a rickshaw ride (Helen with me, Molly and Maria following in another) back to the hotel got us there by mid-afternoon. The manager waved Maria aside as we entered the lobby, and they had a minute's whispered conversation. As she relayed to me when we were back in the suite, he had asked if our three maids were proving satisfactory, having asked them various rather detailed questions. If not, he had declared, he would have them immediately dismissed and find me some more to my satisfaction.

I think my ears must have drooped like wilted lettuces, and my tail certainly hit the carpet. Of course, he is doing his very best to please the tastes of Lady Susan Allworthy and not Lady Amelia of the same title – and it might be bad policy to explain his mistake, in terms of our cover identities. Maria had reassured him that we would like to keep them for our stay here, despite his offers of finding various exotic species for me at no extra charge. Not exactly what I had in mind! It rather brought home the uncomfortable fact; one hears the phrase "life is cheap" a lot, but here and now the lighting, laundry and room service meals probably make up more on the bill than our maids. Damages and breakages included.

While Molly ran the bath, I had the difficult task of putting all that quite out of my mind and concentrating on the evening ahead. I pulled out my shorthand notebooks and looked at my appraisal of just what the Barrow-in-Furryness shipyards actually could supply, with managers' notes about how long it would take and how much it would sell for. Though Mr. Sapohatan did say it was all the same to him whether I placed an order or not, I am in the uncomfortable position right now of having two sides to satisfy as long as I have to carry the Allworthy title. Three, if one includes Songmark.

A steaming hot bath proved most refreshing, and indeed it is one of the "facilities" of the hotel I am very happy to take advantage of. The improvised tub at Songmark is a big improvement on three years of showers, but it is of rather meagre dimensions (Maria, Irma Bundt and Missy K hardly fit in it) and there is always someone else wanting their turn. This one is big enough for a honeymoon suite for a pair of elephants or hippos! I was just relaxing in the hot water when Maria came in and in Spontoonie explained we had better give our three workers some work to do. I thought she meant cleaning the rooms, so agreed – when in came Lin, Lao and Kahavarti, all decidedly in their barest fur or feathers.

I would have generally shooed them away and chucked a wet loofah Maria's way for the cheek of it, but the hotel management seem to be paying its staff for performance and not by the day. So I had to think of some orders I could give; the first one was for them to have a thorough wash and soak. I asked Lao what they usually get; apparently the servant's quarter has only cold showers that are fed from the not entirely clean roof water-cachement tanks rather than the expensive drinking water mains. It was something, to see them enjoying the hot scented water.

Definitely, we should have brought Belle or Carmen with us; in the circumstances I would

have just left them to it. There is nothing wrong with letting our maids scrub my back, or indeed give me a thorough fur-combing; Songmark dorms generally do that for each other anyway. They seemed quite relieved at my letting them groom me, and indeed they were most expert at the job. Lao found the gold ring in my tail-root while combing, and was very surprised to see it there, as they were surprised to see the fur trimming style both Molly and I have adopted since she was rescued in our first year. Meaning to put them at their ease, I told them Molly was fur-trimmed just the same.

Having been cleaned, dried and dressed in my best, I readied myself for a tricky evening. Possibly Beryl or someone used to the crowd at the Temple Of Continual Reward might be better prepared for a social swim with the sharks of international shady business. Molly is the obvious candidate, but it would look rather odd with me asking my maid intricate questions about such things. Besides, this is an invite for me alone. Molly is to stay and make sure nobody ransacks our rooms, and to keep an eye on what our own staff are doing. I am sure she will get on well with them as a fourth maid.

At six I was down in the lobby again with Helen and Maria to see me off; they were to make their way separately to the Direwolf's reception and stand by for my signal if needed. It is one thing to get behind a bush and "stake out" a suspect campsite or airfield in the middle of the countryside, but without a convincing cover (the Spontoonie street-cleaners come to mind) one is liable to attract attention from the police or other furs eager to know what one is doing. Still, they have done this sort of thing before, as have we all. As they teach us in Songmark, there is a lot of "urban jungle" around the world just as deadly as anything with literal quicksand or leeches.

Herr Kramm seems a very busy hound, or possibly I am his special responsibility. One thing folk are not short of in this part of the world is people, though folk of suitable background and qualifications are thinner on the ground. Anyway, he bowed politely and escorted me into a waiting taxi. This was the risky part; we are discouraged from getting alone into closed cars in strange cities, but this is a risk Lady Allworthy has to take. I am here in Macao to sell not to buy, so I have little that anyone wants to take from me.

The drive was uneventful and I did not have to put into practice those lessons in getting out of moving vehicles. Actually, the sound of a swing band could be heard as I stepped out at the embassy; possibly even those folk who might not like the music would appreciate the background noise making it hard to eavesdrop.

Inside, the old ballroom was quite crowded with respectably dressed furs. Anyone in the gun-running trade is likely to be able to afford a nice suit, even if they do spend more time running blockades dressed as a fisher-fur. There were five quite grey-furred Euros in a uniform I recognised from my brother's picture books; the difference being the lack of villainous expressions and manic laughter as they send another unarmed passenger liner to the bottom with a surprise torpedo. One would almost think the 1918 vintage books were biased.

Herr Kramm introduced me to more of his crew and associates; lacking a permanent home port the Direwolf has a travelling shore crew as well as a sailing crew. It is as if every ship in the Navy had its own share of dockyard and all the support furs travelling around the world to look after it. A hard life the Direwolf has; it was one thing to be a Pyrate in the days of sail, but another thing to do it in these days where every nut, bolt and radio valve has to be paid for! The wind was free for the old pirates and ropes and cannonballs might be looted, but the chances of these Hula Junkers finding the right spare parts on a battlefield of Chinese warlords is slim.

Count Ulrich was greeting everyone as they came in, and announced that the bidding would start in half an hour. At least, furs would say what they were bidding for on the shopping list, and it would proceed from there. Very efficient. I recall our first-year Eva Schiller has school badges that some folk say were awarded for ruthless efficiency, and indeed her country-furs have not lost anything of that in all the years they have been exposed to the mysterious East.

I was introduced to the competition as Lady Allworthy, of the Barrow-in-Furryness yards, and nobody immediately denounced me as an impostor. So far, so good. Indeed, one grey French boar was rather better informed than the hotel management – he said he had done business with my late husband before his "unfortunate legal troubles", and commiserated me on my widowhood.

I managed to suppress my tail drooping as he talked about trading profitably with Leon Allworthy in Monaco ten years ago. If I am going to claim the title however temporarily I will have to tell myself that I really did marry Leon, and willingly took his ring (and everything else.) There is really no way around this. I explained that we were married on Krupmark in the best ceremony the

island could provide, and that I had been in the famous Krupmark chapel taking part in certain ceremonies there. Quite true, although the two facts were not linked as they sounded. By his reaction, some people have heard about that chapel and the ceremonies that took place there. Maria had wanted to destroy the absolutely dangerous paintings on the walls, but there was no time what with Kansas Smith jumping us.

There were perhaps thirty furs who seemed to be the bidders, in that they were not in the Direwolf's uniform or serving food and drinks. Most were Euro species, but there was one big Sumatran rhino and a jet-black jaguar, possibly from Mixteca or thereabouts. I had spotted Lars Nordstrom right away, though his horns are currently "in velvet" and growing they make him quite conspicuous. Of course I had to wait to be introduced as a stranger; he bowed politely and winked as he said he hoped I leave Macao with a deal I will never forget.

A few rounds of introductions and canapés later, we got down to business. Three quarters of it was regular, uncontroversial supplies that any other ship could have sailed into Casino Island and ordered from the chandlers; food and fuel and welding supplies, tools and clothing and the like. The best received bids were not always the cheapest; one agent boasted that he had depots all across the Pacific, while another who was based at the main refinery in unoccupied China was almost waved aside despite his good quote. An hour or so later I could start to put together an idea; the Direwolf looks as if it really is planning to leave the mainland harbours behind and head out. Nobody could blame them, with the situation in China.

At last they reached the areas I could bid for, and the fur really began to fly. I put in a bid for the torpedo breaker system they wanted, but I have little hope of getting it. Two furs already announced they had test systems going, one of whom had it installed on a ship in Macao harbour right now and ready to demonstrate. It would take months or more likely years for Barrow-in-Furryness to design, test and build such even if it worked.

I bid for hydrophones, direction-finders, range-finders and a few other items I know very little about but have a shipyard that does. The Direwolf is really taking aircraft threats seriously, they want ten anti-aircraft guns fitting! Not something the original designers worried about in 1910. They also want a seaplane hangar, the aircraft landing on one of those towed floating mat affairs we used on the Parsifal last year and being winched up on deck. I bid for the crane and weather hangar, having been given schematics of the vessel as to where things might fit.

It felt decidedly unreal. The winner of this will be expected to start work right away; in my case there are folk back in England waiting to see if I will put wages in their pockets. And if I do; when that order is filled I will have to do it again and again, as long as I claim to be Lady Allworthy.

The general meeting broke up into huddles, with at least one member of the Direwolf's commissariat taking notes in each and all the different areas of suppliers sizing each other up and making deals. I told myself that I am Lady Allworthy, owner and controller of a shipyard making things the Direwolf wants to buy. Confidence is everything. With a slight twinge of conscience I imagined how Beryl would do this; one never sees her nervous or hesitant, she just swings in with an air of quiet confidence. Fools may rush in where angels fear to tread, but it does not take a star-nosed mole to scent fear and that is definitely something I could not show in such a place. Madame Maxine advised me that it is always best to act as if one knows far more in such situations than one is letting on.

Actually, once my initial shock had worn off it proved jolly interesting. I was soon talking with a brown Kodiak bear from Vostok (his ancestors evidently canoed along the Aleutians from Alaska) and was soon deep in details I had learned from listening to Molly enthusing. Personally I would not have known or cared tuppence about the protective merits of German "Wotan hard plate" battleship armour versus the old "Krupp Cemented", but Molly reads the most amazing technical books and often doodles snapshots of shells tearing through armour steel at a thousand feet per second. I would think less of that and more about the furs who happen to be on the other side of the plate. Very few girls back in Saint Winifred's ever got excited reading about spall cones, shot shatter or plugging failures. Except for Chloe Bryce-Mainwaring, of course, but that is quite another story.

Certainly, once such a crowd of furs starts to talk shop one hears the most interesting things. One American badger has enough brand new anti-aircraft guns in stock for all the Direwolf's needs in his warehouse already. When asked where he got them, he just winked and hinted that was a question their new Tankette-Destroyer Command would love to know the answer to, as well as Interpol. It always seemed odd to me the Americans have such a force; most armies seem to feel the

best counter to a marauding tankette is another tankette.

An hour of fascinating talk had all sorts of alliances and cabals forming, as furs teamed up to outbid and undercut each other. Rather the idea, from the Direwolf's point of view. Some who had local warehouses and suchlike were planning presentations for the crew, ready to deliver samples in the next few days – the others were rapidly scribbling on radio telegraph forms to have such things air-freighted in. These are not folk who wait around till the public wire offices open at nine tomorrow; in Macao there are private facilities to send and receive twenty-four hours a day.

I noticed Lars was getting his share of attention from the others, having a wide catalogue of items that could be described as “one not so careful previous owner.” It seems that a lot of material that is officially scrapped may be sent to scrap-yards but never gets melted down. Folk with quiet contacts in the trade keep catalogues, and there is as much “inventory” available in scrap-yards as most armouries have on the official lists. Not all of it is obsolete either; I have never asked him how Spontoon and Rain Island got hold of all those T-Gew rifles after 1918, but he might be one of the few people who could tell me. When the Allied Control Commission ordered everything destroyed, some of the front-line and experimental designs were far ahead of anything the victors had. I doubt there are any spare Paris Cannons lying around, much to Molly's disappointment, but most other things have been in the scrap-yards kept carefully oiled and rust-free for years.

It was rather strange walking over to Lars as Lady Allworthy and introducing myself socially. He is a fine actor, and while entirely deadpan he said he had heard good things of me, and that the Allworthy yards were famous for fine work. He even commiserated me on the loss of my “dear husband” though as the only Krupmark Island dealer here he probably knew a lot about Lord Leon and can hardly think I would have chosen to be his bride.

I have heard the main dealing at this kind of event happens behind the scenes, and by the time the evening drew to a close furs were arranging to meet each other to arrange deals. Some of the furs who lost out in the bids directly, seem to be happy enough to act as sub-contractors to the others. Then, there is only a certain amount of this kind of equipment in the word at any one time and it is hardly something one buys off the shelf. I will find out in two days' time if the Barrow-in-Furryness yards have won any contracts; I certainly hope so. It is enough of a strain being Lady Allworthy without worrying about being a bad one. Lady Susan had at least the excuse of being an exile on Krupmark with warrants out for her. How she risked going to Spontoon I never found out, probably she had convincingly false papers. She was certainly less conspicuous than her brother, as well as a lot more mobile! One grey wolf bitch looks much like another, on a passport photograph that purports to be several years old even if the ink is barely dry on the forgery.

Anyway, by ten o'clock the evening was over and Herr Kramm escorted me out to a waiting taxi, efficient as ever. There was no sign of Helen or Maria outside, but I hardly expected to see them standing on the pavement in the rain. Ten minutes later I was back at the hotel feeling decidedly worn out from the strain; being effectively on my own with a collection of ruthless furs like that is hard on the nerves. Although they were dressed in their best and being polite, I remember being with Lars on the Parsifal, the only time we really saw what he does for a living. All the furs tonight have probably done as much or more, the international gun-running trade hardly being noted for a quiet life or indeed a long one. Sporting behaviour seems to be very much at a discount.

It is certainly nice to have someone to wait up for me! Molly was there in her full outfit; I had thought she would be able to drop the uniform for awhile when I am out but with the other 3 maids there she is under observation and has to stick with it. Hers is the standard European version of the costume, with a very much longer skirt than the local girls wear. Of course, the climate here is a lot warmer.

Another ten minutes later, Helen and Maria arrived, soaked to the skin after having “staked out” the embassy all evening. Helen seemed rather dispirited with the idea; I get to drink pink champagne (one glass, anyway) and nibble canapés while she sits on a tree branch in the rain looking through the window across the street. I sympathised, but we can hardly swap duties on this trip! If next time round the disguise needs a Texan oil millionaire's daughter, she will be the one taking the lead role and welcome to it. Anyway, she rather dislikes wearing high fashion dresses and has had a lot to say about Molly and myself taking trips to Madame Maxine's for more than one form of grooming.

Maria had an interesting idea; she waved a sheaf of telegraph forms and suggested I contact Songmark, specifically that first-year mad scientist shrew from Cranium Island. Barrow-in-

Furryness might be rather nonplussed at a radical project such as the torpedo breaker, but Cranium Island has rather a liking for such ideas and has been known to assemble the most unlikely things at improbably short notice. Nothing ventured nothing gained, so a telegraph was drafted on the spot and Molly trotted off to hand it to the night staff downstairs. One of the advantages of being in a high class hotel is they handle such things for their guests, and though somebody presumably had to go running out in the rain in the middle of the night to the nearest open telegraph office, it was not us. Then, it is the small hours in Spontoon and nobody will read it till breakfast, but on the other paw it is about midday in England should I have good news to send there. What with radio and telegraph the world is becoming such a small place.

While Helen and Maria tossed a coin as to who got the first bath, I enquired of my three local talents if there was anything they needed. Evidently not; they are greatly enjoying a rest, as when they are not sent to provide “personal service” to a suite they work fourteen hours a day scrubbing and cleaning around the hotel. Not a career most folk would choose – but Lin has mentioned being brought up on a rice farm, which is probably a lot worse being outside in all weathers.

Helen is rather upset about us having to leave our three maids when we go. I know what she means. But as Maria pointed out there are a million like them in China these days, and here they are at least fed and housed unlike so many. Besides, where could we take them? Getting documentation should be no trouble, but we can hardly drop them on the streets of Casino Island, or leave them on Tillamook on the way back for that matter. Dropping someone on a foreign shore however peaceful is not always doing them a favour; there is such a thing as jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire. Many White Russians ended up in worse places than Vostok.

A tiring day! And I have to deal with the sleeping arrangements, too. It is a good thing I am not allergic to feathers. Kahavarti seems to be shedding slightly; one hopes it is not with worry. At the Casino Island hospital we once saw a parrot gentleman whose chest feathers had all fallen out with shock following financial ruin; furless or featherless skin is not a pretty sight. It is a good thing the only furless mammal is that Mixtecan Hairless canine, and they are rare enough (though many folk would say they can never be rare enough). There are stories about a kind of naked mole-rat from the same part of the world that were all wiped out by the Conquistadors, but nobody has actually proved it.

Wednesday February 10th, 1937

Dear Diary; on Spontoon tourists often marvel at how green the islands are and wonder how it stays that way – until a summer storm drops an inch of rain on them the next morning when they are half-way across South Island and half an hour from shelter. It was about that wet today, and our plans for another exploration of Macao were put on hold.

For once I was not a bit tempted to head out into town looking around; every roof was streaming like a waterfall, and I hardly like to think what is like in the shanties. It will at least help the place get cleaner, as Maria pointed out. In this climate, one is not going to freeze to death even if soaked to the fur, which is one consolation. Trench paw is another matter. Molly and Helen have told me about other shantytowns or “Hooverilles” as they were called, where the risk of freezing was bad enough in Winter but the only alternative was keeping rubbish fires lit all the time and risking sending the whole place up in flames. Which sometimes happened anyway. If only all houses were made from modern safe, hygienic asbestos sheeting! It is certainly the material of the future, being fireproof, rot-proof and as easily sawn and sanded down as wood.

Room service saved the day again, with a fascinating collection of Chinese steamed buns and dumplings filled with meat and fish for us but not our local staff. Remembering last time, I had a big side dish of rice and beans brought up to share with our maids – hardly luxurious, but if they are actual vegetarians like Lin and Lao, a plain and cheap diet is about all there is available. It is hard to imagine a luxurious vegetable dish, really (though Kahavarti eats fish of course, being a duck).

I asked them what they had heard about me, which would probably not have got much honest response until I finally owned up that I am not the same Lady Allworthy they had expected. That rather opened the floodgates; some of the other girls had been here a year ago when Lady Susan last came through and the downstairs opinion of her had not been a happy one.

Oh my. I had assumed that having run the Lavender House down on The Beach at

Krupmark, Lady Susan would have called for girls with ... compatible interests. In fact she wanted the opposite – rather like what I have heard Molly describe about her experiences with Captain Granite. Lady Susan it seems took most delight in such things; it seems the priests who accompanied the Conquistadors are not the only ones who enjoyed making forced converts. No wonder our maids they were so apprehensive about me – the new manager had asked who had experience on those lines, and they tried to avoid being picked by denying it, even though Lin and Lao shyly admitted they would normally have put their paws up. Hence it was a double shock to discover being assigned to me anyway! Not what they expected, but Lady Susan's was hardly a usual pastime. Having heard what she was like, anyone would try to avoid that duty.

Molly's ears were right down at all this, and not surprising. In Spontoonie she whispered that they had been asking her all sorts of things about me; I seem to have made a good impression as nobody else really treats them any different to the towels and furniture. Of course they would be more likely to confide in Molly, who wears almost the same uniform. Molly gritted her teeth and said they had been discussing me and seemed a lot less apprehensive now even had I proved to have Captain Granite's tastes. I suppose it is flattering, though possibly Belle or Carmen should have been here after all. I always thought such was a particularly rare taste, as in one girl in several hundred, and hardly believe Prudence's claim of one in ten. Nobody ever said Songmark's selection was a typical sample! There is nothing in the Songmark course about encouraging wishful thinking.

Poor Molly! We will be leaving her here all day with Lin and Lao, who have suddenly become far less welcome company in her eyes. Of course if they make her any suggestive offers she could leave them pretty much tied into knots and hanging by their tails from the flagpole, but we have tried to cure her of such overreactions. At least if I keep them in my room they will not be with her in the servants' quarters.

In mid-afternoon we received a reply telegram from Songmark, just a brief "*received request; investigating*" signed by Miss Devinski. So; although I hardly expect anyone can air-freight me a working system and manuals in time to win the bidding here, I just might have something to eventually contribute to the Allworthy estates. There is the troublesome issue of how one pays a Mad Scientist; presumably not with money and I seem to be all out of radium and such things she would presumably want in kind. Macao and Hong Kong probably sell anything, but going in quest of exotic materials such as Allotropic Iron would be a mission in its own right. There is said to be about ten ounces of it in the known world, though Cranium Island probably has it in bucketfuls.

Tonight it was not Herr Kramm who called for us at the hotel but the Sumatran Rhino, who offered his card as Kwishahei Chanaranaputran. This time Maria and Helen could join me, it not being an official function but an informal one with the various bidders and their associates. Helen made a point of checking her knuckleduster was ready in her pocket; really she is taking her Guide and protector role most seriously.

Actually, we only went about six streets before stopping at another of the finer hotels overlooking the harbour. By the sound of it the party was in full swing, and this time round there were canapés and champagne enough for Helen and Maria both. None of the Direwolf's crew that I had seen before were here, but Lars was along with the various furs I had seen bidding.

There was quite a selection of "Euros" in fact, some of them from surprising places. A jovial Jellicle cat turned out to be a Mr. Czaneck from Czechoslovakia, acting as an agent for the Skoda works. He had a lot of fascinating tales to tell; the Czechs are famously led by the stout and beer-loving badger Mr. Hasek, whose "Society for peaceful and moderate Progress within the bounds of the law" has done so much for his nation in the last twenty years. He is ably assisted by Field-Marshal Schweik, a fur who is said to have blundered into the job quite by accident but proved tactically unbeatable. Actually there is a lot of debate about Field-Marshal Schweik, some folk say he has an IQ of twenty and others claim it is well over ten times that. Certainly he came up with some utterly baffling tactics that happened to work – and as Helen often says, "If it looks stupid and works, it ain't stupid." Many of his opponents are taking long vacations in hotels specialising in cosily padded walls, having tried to match wits with him.

It is a pity Molly was the only one of us missing, as she would have liked the discussions far more than we did. One Eastern European muskrat gentleman claimed to have reproduced and updated something Molly had told me about, the Royal Flying Corps' "Sweeper" bomb but adapted against shipping. * Which just goes to show, it only takes an idea and an industrial area to bring out all sorts of unpleasant surprises for the world. The Allworthy business is not the only one that needs

work; while we were enjoying the mock turtle soup he mournfully added that back in his homeland the best on the menu was mock turnip. He was sympathised by the representative of the famous Baltimore Gun Club, who was a refugee from New Haven and claims the only meat served there is a sort of pork hash called “scrapple”, and eating that is compulsory.

One of the reasons there is so much interest “in the trade” about the Direwolf, is it actually buys radical inventions from radical inventors. What I have heard about the usual procurement process is Navies know exactly what they want and put out specifications for their usual suppliers to fill; the Royal Navy has long-term contracts with White’s and Vickers, and are not too interested in eager young inventors turning up at the Admiralty with brave new ideas that look good on paper. The Direwolf, on the other paw, has little alternative as these days the world’s conventional shipping yards are filling up with orders.

I managed to make a contribution at least; in one of the side rooms Lars introduced me to several “interested parties”, who were fiercely bidding for a contract and needed someone neutral. He was not bidding himself, but he had brought everyone together to discuss the goods.

All I had to do was act as the auctioneer, taking bids – everyone seemed very intent on me as they put more and money forwards. The rhino and the jaguar were bidding, as was a very colourful mandrill gentleman who is presumably impatient for colour passport photography to do him justice. But the winner was a smallish equine gentleman in traditional robes, from Zanzibar. Certainly one sees the most exotic furs around here! I announced he had won the bid, which he seemed extremely pleased about. Being an auctioneer is an easy job, especially when one is not personally involved with the goods.

Back in the main room the rest of the party was very lively, many of the bidders having brought along their own staff. Lars introduced the winning bidder as Hassan M’wede, who was announced as a dealer in “general goods” which probably means anything that happens to make a profit that week. I thought at first he was a plain donkey, but actually I think he is rather more exotic and an Onager gentleman, one of the wild desert breed. He was accompanied by two tall, graceful thoroughbred mares of slightly downcast expressions and slightly Russian accents. Possibly they are some of the White Russians who either never got to Vostok or disliked the place when they did arrive.

I noted Lars was talking with a rather wide-eyed Siamese girl, certainly a purebred by her eyes and snout shape – and later on I bumped into her in the powder room while she was applying her perfume. There was a definite haze of it in the air, and though it had no very pronounced aroma I found my snout and tongue starting to tingle. I did ask her the brand, but she just winked at me and sauntered out rather saucily with her tail swinging.

The band was striking up a fine swinging tune by the time I finished, and after all the strain of business I found myself quite in the mood for dancing. Lars was the one who arranged all this, and the Allworthy yards will have a lot to thank him for if I win them any of the bids – so I grabbed him and we took a strenuous five minutes on the dance floor. He is a wonderful dancer in Euro as well as Spontoonie style, and has a scent greatly improved by exercise.

I did notice him looking me over rather thoroughly, his nose twitching. At the end of the dance he did the least likely thing imaginable – handed me over to Helen and suggested she take me back to the hotel immediately. My hotel that is, not his. He whispered something in her ear that had her whiskers twitching; a few seconds later she sniffed me decorously and called Maria over.

Well! As Lady Allworthy I was just about to tell my “impudent staff” to take a long walk off a short pier, as I had just started enjoying myself for the evening. But Helen has never let me down yet, and with what good grace I could muster I announced I was retiring for the evening. It was gratifying to see a lot of disappointed faces in the crowd.

When we got outside, Helen hissed that I was absolutely full of catnip – I was half way through denying it when I remembered the fog of perfume the Siamese girl had been sitting in earlier, and her rather wide-eyed expression. It must have been the triply distilled sort I rather well remember using last time I was on Krupmark to make various things easier; there had been too little to scent as it was extremely expensive, but perhaps in Macao they have factories to refine the stuff. I still wanted to get back and dance, and argued it would be perfectly safe now they had spotted the danger, but Helen and Maria were having none of it.

Back to the hotel, then! By the time I had got upstairs Maria had beaten me to it and ordered me a long, cold bath and a big pot of hot, bitter tea preparing. Not that I think it works with

catnip rather than champagne, but I could see the idea. After that I was left quite severely on my own to sleep it off – Molly chased the maids out of my room, saying they can sleep on the floor for a change. I think she believed they might find me in a receptive mood, and she absolutely hates that idea. She need not have worried – it is rather like that “Honorary Polar Bear Club” of extremely brave furs who go swimming every New Year’s Day in the icy waters of the Serpentine Lake in London’s Hyde Park. I may know the idea, but seeing more of it done is certainly not going to make me like the idea any better!

*Editor’s note: in 1918 the (soon to be) Royal Air Force had noticed that heavy machinery was extremely difficult to damage with blast by anything short of a direct hit. Many times they had blown the roofs off rolling mills and similar to find the Central Powers’ repair teams just removed the rubble, slung a temporary roof over the machinery and started back to work rolling battleship plate and forging artillery barrels. The “Sweeper” was basically a thin-cased bomb with the outer layer packed with bars of hardened top-quality steel – calculated to spend its energy accelerating the fragments rather than breaking open a heavy bomb casing, the resulting shower of high-speed steel spreading out at a speed enough to break heavy cast iron machinery. One of those exploding in a lightly armoured ship would leave it rather resembling a colander...

Thursday February 11th, 1937

Although it is officially the rainy season, there are some jolly fine days at this time of year – and happily today was one of them. I woke scandalously late, half past eight – evidently Helen and Maria wanted to make sure everything was out of my system by the time I was back in circulation.

I can see why catnip is highly illegal in most places. Helen had been careful to travel in the taxi with her head by the open window to avoid the vapour on my fur and clothes; she was fuming all late last night (Molly says) trying to work out just why Lars refused totally to take advantage of me. It is a rather good thing she does not know about that souvenir of his in my luggage! It would have been embarrassing for Customs to have found it, too. Still, Lady Allworthy kept her stock high in public, and behaved very decorously. Which is all to the good.

Lunchtime saw us on a boat heading to the island of Taibo, one of the areas where there is a Naval and air base that sometimes rents out its facilities. Well, back on Spontoon we admittedly borrow the training grounds on Moon Island sometime. Although I have commissioned a study on the torpedo breaker, I can hardly hope for more than a basic plan on paper, and someone with closer ties to the Direwolf has already got a system ready to demonstrate. I think our customer wants a system in place sooner rather than later.

We were met at the naval jetty by Herr Kramm again, who was dressed in an immaculate white Naval uniform. No medals though; the Direwolf’s crew only acknowledge as appropriate those awarded by Kaiser Wilhelm, who is currently living in exile in Holland and “neither confirms nor denies” his last surviving naval vessel’s legitimacy. At any rate, he is not issuing any more medals. Technically the Direwolf ought to be out “liberating” what was German Samoa and the Marshall Islands, but for some reason they have decided that taking on the American and Japanese navies will have to wait – at least till after they upgrade.

It was quite a sight; though we are told the Direwolf arrives tomorrow the crew members here are qualified to make decisions on behalf of its Captain. There was a big floating dock with a large tarpaulin rigged up over a structure about the size and shape of a motor-car facing out over the open waters. One of the Portuguese Navy’s coastal defence torpedo boats was standing off about half a mile away; apparently they get to do very little actual firing and are pleased that the Hula Junkers have bought six practice torpedoes off them. This is not going to be cheap, Maria murmured in my ear; practice torpedoes are meant to be re-used but these ones are heading on their last trip if the defence works.

About five minutes later the torpedo boat fired up its engines and came in at top speed, well over thirty knots before discharging one tube heading straight towards the jetty. The tarpaulin was whisked away and we saw a strange setup; something like an aircraft turret with a cluster of eight squat tubes pointing at slightly splayed angles. I could see a fur partly hidden behind a steel shield, controlling the platform as it spun and twitched slightly. One of the folk behind me murmured they were “Livens Projectors” that had been made by the thousand to launch gas bombs in the Great

War, and had all been scrapped by treaty. Someone ought to inspect those scrap-yards and check just what really does get melted down.

It was quite a sight – the thing a captain least wants to see, the line of bubbles running straight in from the far horizon, easily visible today in the bright light and calm waters. In most weathers I suppose one might see it at two hundred yards – but we were waiting with bated breath as the underwater missile approached.

Definitely nobody is worried about the noise! It was a deafening roar as the eight barrels fired in a ripple of flame lasting about half a second; I actually saw the projectiles lobbing out in high, lazy arcs. They looked about the size and shape of twenty pound coffee cans. They splashed down in a pattern the size of a tennis court – then the sea heaved up as the charges blew. I actually saw pieces of the torpedo rising into the air like a broken doll, before splashing back into the churning waters.

Well! That proved to be beginner's luck; of the next five shots that came in, two managed to survive to hit the dock and the other three were killed less spectacularly underwater. The Livens Projectors can be loaded in ten seconds flat by a well-drilled team of half a dozen furs, although actually doing that on an open deck in the middle of a battle would be hazardous. The inventor is Mr. Pensworth, a jovial-looking Clumber Spaniel gentleman who invited us to look around – he says he is not worried about anyone stealing the design, as it is the sighting arrangement that took all the effort and it is not at all obvious how it works.

I could certainly see the other furs were impressed, though there were some sour faces among the competition. We got to examine the two practice "fish" that did survive the gauntlet; both were quite dented and one had bent fins. At any longer range it would probably have gone astray; unless it was stopped dead in the water or actually went in circles it was going to make the last hundred yards against a target as big as the dock. The local Navy were arguing they were billing for them as destroyed, as with such damage they would be of no further use without total rebuilding and replacing a lot of parts.

Most impressive! We were invited out for another combination business meeting and party tomorrow, which I agreed to. The Direwolf should be there by then. While the rest of us explored the city and lunched very well, Maria hurried back to our hotel where she has some telegrams to send – to Italy, I assume. She is a loyal daughter of her country, and her Uncle is starting to take note of what she says, after all this time. I would telegraph back to England but nobody is liable to believe me. The papers are full of wild stories of secret electrical weapons that stop aircraft engines etc, and I am sure the Admiralty is quite sick of chasing down red herrings without worrying about the sort of "fish spear" we have seen in action today.

By all accounts the next bidder is rushing his prototype over by aircraft right now, and only then will the customer make his mind up. After that we will be free to go! Macao is interesting, but it is packed with desperately poor furs and it is galling that we cannot help them.

(Later) Life is just full of surprises. We returned to our rooms just in time to see my "secretary" waving farewell to that rather handsome bell-hop; one sniff of the air in the room showed she had not spent all her afternoon encoding urgent telegrams to Il Puce. Well, Maria is not travelling under her own name, and unlike Lady Allworthy there is nothing to link her with the one on the passport. Maria Inconnutia was last seen on Tillamook, an awful long way from here.

Molly whispered that I had nothing to worry about, and neither should Maria, having taken all necessary Precautions. She seemed somewhat flushed herself. I wonder if this will appear on the bill as "room service" and how the hotel will phrase it if it does?

Friday February 12th, 1937

Another busy day down by the docks with Helen looking at the competition trying to sink the local navy's last remaining practice torpedoes. This inventor, a Mr. Whitesmith, had been tinkering with his system in the aircraft hold all the way from California, and it was a haggard-looking otter indeed who unveiled his creation.

Against the Whitehead designed torpedoes, the Whitesmith Projector looked rather odd. It is a six-inch cannon, rather thin in the barrel, that is suspended from a gantry by a ball joint, swung in any direction by the gunner's shoulder as if it was a giant rifle. But there is no magazine or rather the whole unit is its own magazine; the whole barrel starts off full of shells stacked one after the other

and firing like a roman candle firework. It needs a sharp eye and a steady paw, but Mr. Whitesmith showed how he starts the burst near the ship and “walks” it out to meet the torpedo. He managed to hit two out of six; better than nothing, but he was looking exceedingly tired with his nerves frazzled from a non-stop flight without probably a wink of sleep. Moral; do not rush into these things, or at least have someone trained and handy to assist to let you get some rest first.

The advantage is that the Whitesmith Projector comes as a ready-loaded tube that two furs can pick up and clip onto its firing frame in a few seconds – the inventor was saying it could easily be adapted against submarines, and most aircraft could carry quite a few tubes under the wings. Considering the Direwolf is bidding to get an aircraft, that might be a useful selling point. And having the same system against both threats would be popular with the ship’s quartermaster.

Still, I think the Pensworth system is likeliest to win. Whatever design I get for my own bid, I do not have a specimen ready to show, and I think the Direwolf is in a hurry. Herr Kramm was asking how soon the Allworthy yards could manufacture and ship any winning bids over here, and I got the impression six months was about the limit including installing and training crews! Definitely something Mr. Sapohatan would want to know.

The local squadron of the Portuguese Navy seem happy enough to have exercised their crews on someone else’s budget for a change – one of them was saying some sailors serve their full term out here and go home without firing a shot. Then, the only Navy likely to invade these waters is the Japanese one, and I doubt there is much the little squadron of destroyers and torpedo boats stationed in Macao could do about it. They are happy to have Hong Kong and the Royal Navy just across the bay, as Portugal is famously Britain’s oldest ally, an association so old that I have met nobody who knows exactly why. Then again, colonies need to be defended from pirates and wandering warlords needing a new base of operation – the advantage of being in an Empire is any tiny piece of it can draw on the protection of all the rest. For instance, Singapore would be hard put to build its impregnable naval defences from its own resources, let alone the newer “national redoubts” other European empires have in far places such as Kerguelen and Bouvet Island. The world has learned its lesson from the successful case of Franz-Joseph Land, which held out for years against the Allies and even now may harbour hordes of folk who may appear by surprise one day intent on a sudden resurgence of the Hapsburg Empire.

Back to the hotel late afternoon, having been shown around various luxury yachts the other competitors have arrived in, making their own floating base (one never hears of a “grinding poverty yacht”, only luxury ones.) The Allworthy Estate is missing various transport that went out with Lord Leon and Lady Susan fleeing the law; I am hardly going to enquire about it on Krupmark Island. One might as well leave a sugar cube on an ant-hill with the expectation of coming back for it the next day.

At the hotel there was a telegram awaiting from Songmark – “*Design completed. Tested well.*” I had expected a sketch of basic principles and some calculations, not a finished and tested system! Helen pointed out that we can hardly have such a secret trusted to the post, even if we go to the Royal Mail in Hong Kong to pick up the plans as a registered post restante package. Only if the Direwolf’s officers decide against the two systems we have seen demonstrated, will I have time to get back and arrange things. Then, there is the matter of series manufacture in England and training to be arranged out here... not something I think I can get done by Monday.

Also at the hotel was Maria, looking pensive. Helen jokingly asked if Room Service had been up to standard – at which her ears went down and she confesses that it was, extremely so, and she could hardly wish for better – except that since her experience on Cranium Island, nothing else could really compete. Poor Maria! I suppose it will be the same when she goes back to Europe this Summer, and realises she will never drink Nootnops Blue again. She admitted that she had hoped that taking advantage of the facilities here, would help her forget her strange encounter – instead, it has just thrown everything into focus. She has been looking forward to shedding her identity as Il Puce’s niece for awhile, but having enjoyed the local opportunities, is rather worried that she should have been able to enjoy herself rather more.

Molly seems in quite fine form, and whispered that our maids are behaving themselves. Then, there is no reason to think that just because Lin and Lao share similar interests they will be inviting her to join them. Prudence’s dorm never did, not even in the first year.

She has enough to do while we are out; apart from the official job of looking after my clothes and such, I noticed she has found from somewhere a copy of “Criminal World”, though it is

subscribers-only and she says is not available on direct sale. Certainly they are not lacking in imagination! In the comics section their ruggedly handsome robber wolf Rick Traceless (who is drawn with a muzzle so hard-edged one expects him to use it to wedge open safe doors) is now aided by a “somewhat portable three-way radio” that he uses to signal his accomplices with and intercept Police messages. Since last time I read a copy he has managed to completely corrupt the Police Chief’s beautiful daughter and is using her shamelessly against the latest strange-looking Detective lined up against him, “Psybil the Psychic Psquirrel.” Actually the strip is full of social comment, of a rather warped kind. One of the characters was loudly complaining about the spread of organised crime, saying (a) it was stifling free-thinking criminal creativity and (b) the local Big Boss was asking for a “cut” so big that “a fur might as well go straight and pay taxes again”. I have heard Beryl say much the same.

Quite a stressful day! Another excellent bath helped me relax, and I put our maids to work scrubbing the cordite smoke out of my fur. We got downwind of the tests, worse luck. Kahavarti is very good with the combs and hardly needs to dry off afterwards – one understands now where that expression “like water off a duck’s back” comes from.

Saturday February 13th, 1937

Dear Diary – there is something very strange going on, and I will have to talk with both Jirry and Saimmi when I get home to South Island. Possibly with Saffina, too.

The day started quite comfortably, with Molly bringing me breakfast in bed. I may never get the chance again, after this trip! It is hardly a Spontoonie custom, grand hotels aside. Apart from a few times when I was a kitten and ill, it is just not the sort of luxury I ever got at home, and at St. Winifred’s things were remarkably Spartan. On the other paw, Maria had always had her own maids which she rather missed in her first year at Songmark.

Helen came in with a set of field-glasses, and announced we had a big arrival in the night. Certainly there was quite a sight in the main harbour, the great three-funnelled bulk of a capital ship not half a mile away from us. Unlike other vessels we have seen, this one was wearing Great War style “dazzle paint”, in huge angular blocks and zigzags designed to deceive the eye at a distance. For instance, the paint patterns gave the impression that her bow was her stern and visa versa – which would cause no end of confusion to a submariner only able to get a hasty glimpse through the periscope and having to work out which direction and how fast she was sailing. Though modern navies tend to go for a neutral all-over grey, the Direwolf has kept a style that tries to fool the usual visual clues. Even the funnels are painted with false shadows to make it look like they are leaning forward when in fact they lean ten degrees aft.

Just as I was finishing breakfast (everyone else had theirs before waking me) Herr Kramm sent up his business card. Today is the day! I was very glad of Molly’s assistance getting me into my “business” dress, a rather nice Paris-styled creation that certainly cost a few guineas, or at least someone in Hong Kong or Macao can imitate the style rather convincingly. Again, the shoes are rather uncomfortable but as Lady Allworthy I am hardly expecting to be climbing any trees or hauling a pack over any sand dunes.

Quite a meeting! Molly stayed at home looking after the suite, but Helen and Maria followed me and Herr Kramm out to the far side of the dock where we could see the wharf heaving with activity like a stirred anthill. The white sparks of welding torches could be seen even in the daylight, and indeed it looks as if the ship must have radioed ahead with instructions to have everyone waiting for it. Then again, the time it spends against the dock in Macao it is not earning any money, and even without these expensive upgrades it cannot afford to stay idle for long.

In half an hour we were being “piped aboard” by Captain von Kierkegaard, an elderly fox who has certainly not forgotten his manners in the long years since he last saw Europe. He most have been in his seventies, yet his back was ramrod straight and his eyes steely and sharp – it was a first for me to be addressed as “gnädige Frau” *, though his English was generally extremely good. We had what one might call the ten-shilling tour, since there are probably few secrets after we have already seen plans and drawings of the vessel. The rear deck certainly has room for a hangar and crane, and I almost jumped for joy on hearing that I (or rather Barrow-in-Furryness) have got the contract for it! I measured out the deck myself; though I am sure the plans they gave are accurate we are always taught at Songmark to measure everything twice and then double-check if the

measurements are in feet or metres. Measure twice, cut once, as they taught us in our first workshop classes.

Maria was earning her theoretical pay as my secretary today as she rapidly drafted a telegram to send back to England, so furs can there get to work right away. The Captain also handed me a bank order for the full contract drawn on the Imperial Oriental Banking Company who have a branch handy in Hong Kong. All one has to do is put it in the Allworthy account there and by this time tomorrow my tenants in England can start cutting metal.

Over Helen's objections I tasked her and Maria to do exactly that – head for Hong Kong and get it started today, before the banks close for the weekend. They can wire money to their English branch as fast as a telegraph can click, without us worrying about shipping chests of gold across the planet. As I whispered to Helen, I was now as safe here as anywhere – being now on good terms with the most powerful warship in these waters, and under their protection. As long as I was on the *Direwolf*, nothing was going to happen except getting wine and dined and hopefully getting a good reputation for providing reliable naval supplies.

Helen left in rather ill grace, but recognised Maria can hardly make the trip alone. Well, in practical terms she certainly could and heaven help the street thief who tried to stop her, but it would be quite out of character for Lady Allworthy to make her do so. We arranged to meet back at the hotel; there was a party scheduled for the evening and there was no telling how late that would be running.

While they were piped ashore, I took a good look around. About half the crew were locals; it seemed rather odd to see young Asian civets, pandas of both sorts and mongese dressed in newly made but old-fashioned Imperial Naval uniforms. Rather neat white tropical uniforms were topped with a strange white fabric hat something between a solar topee and one of those conical straw coolies' hats; very neat and it looks as if it would keep the sun off in a climate rather hotter than the regular issued by Kiel or Friedrichshaven. I suppose that as with everything in Macao, this is a "business" that can pick and choose only the very best furs for their needs and at discount rates. There were quite a lot of German colonists who never returned to Europe after 1918, and every estate had a cadre of picked and trained local staff who might have followed their liege lords out to sea, not liking their future overlords much when the colonies changed paws. In places such as Tsingtao, that is currently a war zone and folk are probably as safe onboard as at home.

Once Helen and Maria had vanished to hail a taxi, I had time to talk with those of the crew who spoke English. The ship is very neat and trim; one would hardly expect a Royal Navy vessel to be any cleaner! But it has evidence of a hard life in terms of welded-on patches and repairs; some components are obviously new and somewhat spoil the symmetry. One of the gadgets that I enquired about is a radio-reflection apparatus such as fitted to big liners; it uses arc lamps to send out blasts of radio energy that is listened for at night and in fog. Madeleine X has mentioned these; they were first installed in the French liner "*Normandie*" about fifteen years ago and seem a quite promising idea. Though I hear they are not perfect – they can spot a metal target the size of a liner at a mile in the fog, or a steep cliff face at twice that range. A torpedo boat or rocks just breaking the surface would be "beneath its notice", probably with unfortunate consequences.

Actually, I can believe they have more than one use. Apart from being arc lamps in their own right, that much radio "noise" could deafen any receiver in quite a distance, very handy for preventing lookouts or picket ships passing on a warning! Arc lamps put out loud static that would sound like natural thunderstorm interference and should not alert the defences. Certainly the *Direwolf* has had to take a lot of rough jobs over the years, and radios are getting so common that even a sentry can carry one so long as a comrade carries the batteries and nobody expects more than a few miles range out of them.

As the afternoon wore on the guests departed, and I accepted the invitation to one of the evening parties. Lars had said it was a good place to socialise; a lot of interesting contacts get made on such neutral territory and it is all good news for Barrow-in-Furryness. One of the yachts, the "*Scimitar*", was owned by the Onager gentleman, Hassan M'wede and indeed it was a jolly lively crowd aboard who gathered to celebrate winning their bids. The yacht basin is the far end of the harbour from the noisy commercial side of things, and indeed looks out over quite undeveloped wooded hills and secluded bays in China proper. They had a swing band playing on the quayside (there being no room on the yacht as such) and indeed I had an hour's rather lively dancing, mostly with Lars. I can say I was very careful to avoid any catnip this time around! I only had two glasses of

champagne the whole day, and that surely was rapidly burned off with all the dancing.

It might make things more explainable if I had been downwind of a leaking catnip refinery, or something on that scale. The party lasted about two hours, and I danced with our host for five minutes. He was looked after mostly by the two pale-furred thoroughbred mares, who I think are Russian. I will have to check if Circaccia is in Russia or Romania these days. Then the rest of the guests left well wine and dined, the band packed up and I would have returned to the hotel. Only I did not. I can report that the evening sunlight is most photogenic in the wooded bays on the Chinese shore, and that Mr. M'wede proved rather agreeable company. Although there were similar problems that I faced with Leon Allworthy, the ... details were rather different.

* "Gracious Lady" (Editor's note) Amelia doesn't speak German, it seems, but Maria does.

Sunday February 14th, 1937

Dear Diary; I returned to the hotel via taxi at dawn, and slept till lunchtime, having fallen asleep flat out as soon as I hit the hotel bed. I awoke to face something of an inquisition from my dorm-mates (mostly Helen), which I was struggling to find answers for myself.

By her account Lars turned up in the downstairs lobby about ten last night to enquire if I was home safely – and he mentioned where he had seen me going quite willingly. Helen was all for immediately heading out, "acquiring" a torpedo boat with searchlight from the Naval base and scouring the Chinese shore, but Maria and Molly talked her out of it.

I have heard of various ways folk may be interrogated involving a bath, but at least in my case I could relax comfortably enough in body while Helen called me seven sorts of fool and I tried to puzzle it out myself. Mr. M'wede was certainly handsome enough, but decidedly not my species, and he had enough mares of his own handy, thoroughbreds at that. At least one of them was just starting to show, having a foal on the way that was probably a mule. Most pedigree equines would have thought that a shocking idea; in past times they were not even allowed to be baptised. The Church's idea was that though every species was created in the beginning, naturally none of the mixes would have existed then – and whatever was not planned by God was necessarily the Devil's work.

The only times I have ever acted this impulsively have been just after extreme danger, being rescued from the barracuda by Prad Phao and after the fight and shipwreck of the Parsifal, with Lars. Plus that other occasion with Lars, after the running fight over the rooftops in the storm. That hardly applied last night. Anyway, we know Lars very well, and if I had expected to leave with anyone last night it would have been him. At least Molly would have approved, as she is still keen on us three as a "herd" in the style of the Biblical era. As it is, Lars seemed quite concerned, and she whispered that she had at least managed to cheer him up. She at least is reassured she has not caught anything of Lin and Lao's preferences, though I have told her several times that such interests are not infectious. So Prudence and co tell me, and they should know.

At least my calendar saves me any such embarrassments as last time I had an unexpected encounter. Lady Allworthy is not supposed to be an Adventuress as such, so having visited "another cabin on the Ark" will not be a bonus point for her. In fact, she is supposed to be a quite chaste, if somewhat thorny, English Rose of the sort held in high regard across the world, not only in Civilisation.

I suddenly had a most upsetting thought. My stock had been climbing very high up to that point, and only increased when I chastely returned home despite being full of catnip. I never did find out exactly what was being bid so highly for at that auction where I acted as auctioneer – it seemed a natural thing to do at the time, as a lot of confidential deals were being struck for things that do not usually appear on the market. Illegal munitions might not be the only things paid "cash on delivery", and I suppose I delivered about as fully as anyone could wish. It seemed like a good idea at the time – but that is not usually my style! Furthermore, none of the bidders were Euros except perhaps in the odd Spontoonie sense of the word, and none of them would be likely to be invited to a house-party back in England.

That idea I put aside for awhile, but could not quite discard. At the very least I will have to ask Saimmi about it. I know I am meant to be proofed against any ordinary form of hypnotism, and I was keeping very alert since I know what catnip feels like. Not a sniff of it last night, I am sure. One thing I know is that my neck-fur appreciated the attentions despite being rather sore; it seems there

is more in common with feline and equine gentlemen than I had supposed.

At least I accomplished my mission, which is a great relief. Helen and Maria got to the bank in Hong Kong without incident, half an hour before trading closed, and the folk in Barrow-in-Furryness should have a telegraph pup pedalling around town with good news any time now.

Helen grumbled that having done what we set out to do, we had best get out of Macao before anything else happened. I can quite see her point. Now I have the local address for the Direwolf's onshore staff, I can write to them from Spontoon and pass it on to the general manager at the Allworthy shipyards for any more details.

I cannot complain about my "loyal staff" this trip – they have all done very well, and I cannot blame Helen for being devoted as a guardian – though I would quibble with her suggestion that I am hardly fit to be let out on my own these days. I am a third-year Songmark student after all, and I could have got off that yacht in ten different ways had I wanted to. I have to admit, that I am awfully puzzled as to why I decided not to.

Monday February 15th, 1937

A day of tidying-up, with Maria and Helen off into the centre booking our return flights to Tillamook for Wednesday. The hotel manager came up when he heard we were leaving; he still seemed rather worried that the "facilities" had not been to my liking, much as if I had returned the room service food uneaten. I assured him I was perfectly happy with the maid service – that is, they keep the room spotless and the beds aired. Molly whispered in disgust that she had walked in one afternoon to find Lin and Lao together – of all possible sights, a doe and a mouse is likely to upset her most. I would have thought it would have been a doe and a vixen, but Molly muttered she had settled with Captain Granite. To make matters worse, Kahavarti was not making any objections or even leaving the room – proof, Molly says that it is contagious.

I think Molly will be glad to get out of Macao; just her luck that she was the only one who missed out on the trips to the Direwolf and the torpedo shoots, which she would have loved, and ended up stuck in the suite most of the time with what she thinks of as very unwelcome company. I think she envisaged getting out of that hot costume rather more than she has dared to do given the audience.

A telegram arrived from England, confirming the order and the money arrived. I can breathe a sigh of relief, having at last done something useful for the Allworthy Estates. The exact drawings are already in the post airmail, possibly in one of the big Junkers G-38 transports that went over this morning. I have read that all big German aircraft will be 4-engined from now on; last year their Air Force General Wever barely survived a crash when one of the engines in a twin-engined bomber he was testing seized up on take-off, and everything but the lightest transports and bombers will be 4-engined with four times the range of anything currently in service. It should be a great boost to the airmail service! Anyone with shares in aircraft engine factories is likely to be happy as well. No doubt Beryl is planning a portfolio of convincing-looking Maybach Gesellschaft share certificates that will make the purchaser very happy until they try and sell them to someone who knows what real ones look like.

As Molly says, the world just keeps on getting better. The racing aircraft get faster every year, and the heavy bombers heavier. Maria quite spoiled her line of thought by asking if the medium bombers are getting more medium too, though that was probably a blessing.

One thing we have to hurry back for is to see about that torpedo breaker that Alpha Rote has come up with. If the Direwolf has not made its mind up already, it could be a contract that will really bring the money in. Perhaps it would not be a good idea to publicise the designer; the general view of Cranium Island is its scientists spend most of their leisure time in dank basements wringing their paws and cackling in insane glee as they strive to build a more fiendish Doomsday Device than their neighbours. According to that "*Sanity Unprejudiced Science*" pulp magazine I have seen on Casino Island, the only thing saving the world is the still unresolved issue of how to test a successful Doomsday Device and document the results afterwards. Peer review is tricky, too.

There is the little matter of my paying her for it – the price might be alarming and not measured in money. Anyway, the sooner I find out the better. As our dear Tutors frequently say, ignorance is not bliss, a little knowledge is less dangerous than none, and what you don't know can be relied on to hurt you.

Helen is still worried about what we can do for our three maids; it is handy being able to speak in Spontoonie in front of them, as she confessed she could not think of anything more useful than giving them a very generous tip when we go. Molly unexpectedly supported her, saying we could also buy them travel papers and passports too – a lot of furs in Macao are thinking about getting out, and unlike the Direwolf they cannot just sail away so easily. That idea got all our votes; Helen and Maria volunteered to head downtown and try to contact suitable grey-market merchants. It should be easier than most places; without being quite as free-for-all as Krupmark, it is definitely less fussy about such things.

(Later) It is a good thing that we are leaving; Macao turns out to be just as dangerous a place as we had heard! As three local crooks found out when they tried to grab Maria's purse and run away with it. I suppose Maria's secretary costume is rather unfairly on the "Q-ship" lines, as not one in thousands who dress like that has the training we do. Helen was walking a little ahead along the dockside when a ragged ferret came up behind Maria to grab her – something he will not be doing again. Maria put her elbow into his throat with her full power behind it and threw him completely over her head, landing on the edge of the kerb with a definitely breaking-bones sound. His companions tried to rush her, and discovered just how powerful her punch is, both left and right. They were guarding their throats with their muzzles down but she went for the solar plexus; we were taught in Jude-Jitsu to aim for a point three inches inside one's opponent in a real fight. All three assailants ended up thrown in the dock, where they can hopefully swim if conscious. Helen did not say if she stayed around to find out, which means they quite possibly sunk. Even if they managed to struggle out, having swallowed quantities of that harbour water would likely finish them off; Maria says she has smelt worse but only in Naples in August.

Although it seems unlikely the local Police will take an interest, it rather accelerated our departure. We took a quick vote and decided to get out right away and chance our luck in Hong Kong in case the local constabulary trace Maria here. Our papers and identities absolutely cannot stand up to official investigation, and Mr. Sapohatan had particularly warned us about the jails here. People vanish from them, and not by escaping.

Fortunately we were mostly packed, and Maria had already bought everything necessary. We presented the quite convincing papers to Lin, Lao and Kahavarti much to their delight and I presented them with a rather substantial tip. Helen had the suggestion of getting them open tickets to Tillamook – on a ship, not first class flights – where in case anything happens to Macao they could at least have six-month tourist visas and stay safe there. In six months we should have graduated, and if Maria wants three very cheap-to-run maids she can well afford them. Maria at least is returning to Europe, and going via Tillamook picking them up en route is a possibility.

Though I think that is looking much too far ahead, I did mention the idea of Tillamook as a bolt-hole to our maids – and if Helen or Maria wants to give them our contact address on Spontoon it is up to them.

(Later still) Farewell to Macao! It is extraordinary how many places we have had to leave rapidly and quietly; Krupmark always, and in my case not only the Albanian South Indies but the Gilbert and Sullivan Islands. Despite Helen's plea we cannot take our maids with us – Mr. Sapohatan is not running a refugee centre or a hotel, and we might need to use all our Songmark skills to get away. Having three "non-combatants" to look after would slow us down. So it was a fast and tearful farewell to Lin, Lao and Kahavarti, as we tried not to think about the sort of room service their next customers might be demanding of them next week. They cannot come to Songmark with us even if they wanted to; Spontoon visas are only good for three months unlike Tillamook's six, but then Tillamook is not the sort of place where they have many folk wanting to stay. As for them joining the staff at Songmark (Helen's idea) I have heard from my brother that at Oxford the students living in the old halls have room servants who are called "bedders" since they do change the bedding (and nothing more suggestive despite the name); there is nothing actually written down in the Songmark rules about it but I think my Flying Flea has more chance of winning the Schneider Trophy than us getting away with a "*they followed us home Miss, can we keep them?*" Despite our probable support from Prudence's dorm. As Miss Devinski has said more than once, the day Songmark becomes a democracy they will ask our opinions.

I took the precaution of posting some items back to Spontoon; Lars' souvenir I labelled as "anthropomorphological ritual specimen" to avoid embarrassment at Empire customs. I suppose the label is accurate, as far as it goes. It is scarcely a ritual but it has become a tradition, this year.

Tuesday February 16th, 1937

Back in Hong Kong! We have rather a problem in that our flight is at dawn tomorrow, and without dipping into our emergency cash there is not enough left for a fitting hotel. That is, we assume we are being watched and have to stay in character. Lady Allworthy would not settle for a bunk bed in a flop-house! The trouble is, the hotel bill – we had budgeted for the usual rates, but unless we had sent them away on the first day, the “extras” were included whether we made use of them or not and they were substantial. Maria paid her own share of Room Service, which was recognisable on the bill but quaintly worded. “Traditional Massage” indeed!

Molly was grumbling that Helen and Maria are getting sloppy – they should have checked if their assailants drowned in the docks or not, and if anyone cared. I suppose that for a gangster’s daughter the most mortifying fate possible would be to be arrested for an accidental killing. Had it been in Hong Kong the Police would be bound to investigate any disturbance, but in Macao from what we hear, having three less-than-prominent citizens found floating snout down would be a matter of littering offences rather than murder investigations.

At least we are all quite well rested, so I proposed a radical solution – assuming the Police really were chasing us, the first place they would check is the hotel registers. So we did not check into a hotel; our baggage was left at the airport left luggage, already checked in for the Tillamook flight – and we decided to make a full day and night of it. Molly was out of her Maid’s costume for a change and into a rather nondescript dress that still fit her very well – still, Helen is the only one really dressed for a quick getaway should things turn sour.

(Later) Well, we made it! It is now four in the morning, and we can see the big clipper fuelling up at the end of the seaplane pier under the glare of the arc-lights. It is two hours to dawn, but we are through Customs where if anywhere the Law would be waiting to grab us. Sixteen hours is a long time to be on one’s paws; still we were sitting down a lot of that in tea-houses, two cinemas (we managed to resist the latest offering “*Don’t let George do it!*” by the hopefully inimitable George Formless) and an hour in a very surprising little park high up on the hillside over the harbour. Hong Kong is a remarkably vertical place, with most people who live on the flat bits doing so on hundreds of junks and sampans in the harbour. We sampled the cuisine of a floating restaurant as the sun went down across the bay, setting over Macao in the distance. After that, a well-spaced evening of shopping and tea-houses, sticking to the more up-market areas. We have found enough trouble for one week.

As before, the seats and bunk beds on the flying boat look extremely comfortable and we hope to catch up on sleep on the trip back. Going twenty-four hours without sleep is nothing new to us, and at least this time we are not being chased around the island as with last year’s militia exercises on Main Island. Hong Kong never seems to sleep, having tea-houses and such open all night. We all got ourselves souvenirs; I followed Maria’s example in getting a shoehorn with teeth, which I am sure will be most useful. Molly was looking wistfully at a big display of ancient Oriental weapons, but we persuaded her that a Mongolian halberd would be rather difficult to hide in a shoulder-holster. She did buy what at first looked like a rock to wind some string around, which was actually a set of traditional “weighted sleeves”. That is, there is an egg-sized cast iron weight attached to two feet of steel cable and secured to a bracelet; apparently they can be tucked into sleeves inconspicuously and flick out into a close-quarter weapon when needed. Good to see Molly back in character, however alarming that usually is!

Wednesday 17th February, 1937

A relaxing day. We spent most of yesterday asleep in our seats, waking up for teatime when we had our last silver-service meal of the trip. Lady Allworthy and party were booked to Tillamook where they changed for the return flight to Alaska and the big triple triplane Caproni that connected for the polar crossing back to Europe. At least, that is what the paper-trail of tickets and reservations will say if anyone decides to follow it.

There is only one decent hotel in Narrawangan Bay, and we were very glad to see it again. I signed us in as Lady Allworthy, and we had our old rooms with the nice cedar furniture and Native rugs on the floor. There is no sign of Adele as yet. But an hour later another four Songmark students

walked in through the front door – as far as the front receptionist officially saw. It was us, having found our outfits laid out in the rooms as we left them and having gone out the back window as soon as we changed. Molly did grumble they had not been cleaned – but a second later clapped her paw over her snout in embarrassment. It would look odd for us to stroll in from a week and more in the back-woods wearing cleaned and pressed uniforms! People remember that sort of detail.

It was a great relief to be wearing practical clothing again; our rubber-soled boots do not click maddeningly on hard surfaces announcing me half a street away. And at last I have pockets again, which is a great blessing. Molly got her sewing kit out and incorporated the “weighted sleeves” into her Songmark kit, then spent an hour practicing with them rather like a non-spinning yoyo. She can certainly do a lot of lethal damage to a reject pumpkin, as I can vouch for.

Thinking of pumpkins, it was a relief to be able to relax and sample the local brew again. In Macao we had to be on our guard all the time; Tillamook is safer and four Songmark girls hopefully attract less predatory attention than a genuine Lady. Actually, I felt my ears rather blushing as I thought about this last weekend. Somehow, Lady Allworthy definitely did attract a lot of attention, and not just as an agent of a shipyard. I remember that auction, and the more I think of the details the more embarrassing it gets. It could have been worse, the winner might have bid a trivial sum and still won. I will have to ask Lars about that, although as he was not one of the bidders he might not know. Nobody else we know has Macao contacts, though.

There were only about a dozen other guests in the hotel, half of them changing flights. The only two who had come on the Macao flight with us we waited till they had left before coming downstairs, or they might have spotted our change of identity. The main room was very cheerful with a great Russian-style porcelain stove the size of a tankette in the middle of the room, and the snap of fir logs blazing within.

Back in Songmark uniform, we had to think about Adele. There has been no word from her since the day we last saw her, although admittedly post boxes are rare in the deep woods and she never said she would be writing to the hotel. She might have had her curse fixed and be on the way back right now, in which case going out to search would only get us lost or at least delayed as well. On the other paw, she might still be cursed, or not even managed to find those shamans. In which case we will have to find her. Tillamook is a big place, we do not speak the language, and the woods are deep and dense over most of the area. This is one part of the world where an aircraft search would not be much help, what with the frequent fogs, low cloud, steep terrain and dense forest cover.

By the end of the evening we had put our plan together, assisted by some but not too much pumpkin brew. There are three days before we have to leave for Spontoon; we will assume she is in trouble and start looking for the start of her trail. But someone has to stay here at all times and man the fort (the hotel is a log building, if not quite a log fort.) Going back without her is not an option; to say Miss Devinski would not be happy with us is about as accurate as saying Krakatao caused the locals some inconvenience when it erupted. True, but hardly a good description of the scale of things.

Although the baths here lack the sort of “personal service” we have had in Macao, they are well worth waiting for. If anything can put Tillamook on the tourist trail this is the attraction to do it. I had a definite reminder of my Macao trip when I relaxed in the warm water – one might say that although the pool does not require a bather to wear a cap, I had been wearing one inconspicuously for three days anyway. Madame Maxine’s pamphlet mentioning the ... characteristics of equine gentlemen was right about that!

Thursday 18th February, 1937

At last, the clouds cleared and we had a decent view of Tillamook. I have never seen the tops of the hills before and they are a daunting sight, ridge after ridge of dense pine and redwood forests sparkling wet in the sun and reaching back into the distance. As we saw on Vostok, one could hide an army or an industrial complex from the air in those woods, if one was careful about smoke. That gave me pause to consider why Vostok is so keen on hydro-electrical power, when they have so much coal, oil and gas. With electrically powered factories there would be no tell-tale plumes of smoke rising through the trees, and power cables can be buried.

Unlike our escape across Vostok where we were glad of the dense trees and wide landscape to evade pursuit in, the prospects are bleak for us finding one lop-eared rabbit even if she is where she expected to go and not miles off the beaten trail by now. We needed local advice, and started with

Kalakapa, the marmot girl who served our breakfast and seems to be in on the plan as to our being Songmark students both ends of our trip. At least there is nothing secret about this part of our trip; our friend is out there somewhere and we are anxious to find her before we miss our scheduled trip back.

Looking at the maps, Narrawangan Bay is on the South coast of the main island but only occupies a small dent in the coast – there are few roads going into the interior and they all head rather steeply uphill. The area Adele was making for is at the headwaters of the Squeeshonk River, which at its nearest to here is thirty miles over the passes and the headwaters are thirty and more upstream of that. Plus they are forest trails rather than roads – traditionally most long-distance travel in Tillamook was by canoe, but here we are not on any major river. Our hearts and tails drooped at the prospect. There is a loose network of trails rather than one main highway, so if we did by pure luck head towards where Adele happened to be coming our way, we might be on parallel paths and unknowingly pass each other! In fact the chances are that we would. It would take all of Songmark to cover the area in any sort of comprehensive sweep, and for just three to search of us with one staying here – it seems a rather hopeless task. If Adele really is cured and well and making her way back from an unexpected direction it will be a pointless one, too.

Still, nothing ventured, nothing gained. The trouble is, we do not have time to head out on foot two days into the target area, search and then hike back. We can search in one-day sweeps, returning to the hotel to check if Adele has arrived. If there were telephones along the route it would make life so much easier. One day radios might be portable enough to carry in a cycle pannier, but with all these steep valleys getting any sort of reception is a problem.

Of all people, Molly had the idea of asking around if there were any bicycles in town we could hire. Kalakapa says there is no hire shop as such, but she promised to ask her friends in town and get back to us by lunchtime. She confirmed that most of the main trails were practicable with care on a bicycle, though a double-sized puncture kit is a must.

As our local contact headed out to enquire, Molly admitted she had not been looking forward to returning to the cycle club on Spontoon, which had put the idea in mind. Her head-fur is jet black with almost bluish highlights, but she says she is about black and blue under her fur after a morning on Main Island falling off bicycles onto gravel roads, with or without a leather Sidcot suit. She not surprisingly volunteered to stay here and mind this end of the business.

In an hour we heard the good news; there are three sturdy cycles available for a few day's hire, all of which have already survived rough use on local trails. The hire fees are reasonable but the deposits are awfully steep – Kalakapa pointed out they do not have an actual cycle shop for a hundred miles, and getting any replacements in would be difficult. We will do our best to take care of them, and bring them home safely. I gritted my teeth and handed over a gold sovereign per cycle as deposit from our emergency supply – if we do not find Adele, explaining how I had to spend it will be the least of my troubles. Hopefully we will bring bikes and bunny both safely home.

After a good luncheon we started begging, borrowing and improvising equipment. We did not expect to be camping in the Tillamook cloud forests in February. Tarpaulins are cheap and common around the docks, so those stood in for cycle capes, groundsheets and shelter halves. Our regular Songmark uniforms are practical enough but we borrowed warmer clothing for the evenings, as well as gloves for the inevitable spill off the trail. Then it was time for us to caution Molly against drinking too much pumpkin brew, and head off!

Saturday 20th February, 1937

Quite a trip! We waved Molly goodbye and pedalled off on the Thursday, having taken delivery of three sturdy machines. Rather too sturdy for my tastes; they had no gears and if the frames were not solid cast iron they were good imitations. I found myself wishing for the five gears of Miss Wildford's Vostok-built magnesium framed racer, by the time I panted up to the first pass. The trail is mostly smooth and cycleable, but steep and muddy in places. Still, one is more efficient pushing a loaded bicycle like a cart than carrying the same weight on one's back.

One thing we quickly learned about Tillamook is half the trails are not on the map and any navigating by "third left, second right" is hopeless. Without our compasses we would have soon been helplessly lost, but by the end of the afternoon we reached the valley of the Squeeshonk River, thirty miles as the aircraft flies in one afternoon. No great feat for a cyclist, but respectable given the state

of the trail. Even going downhill we had to go carefully, looking out for sharp rocks poking up through the pine needles flooring the trail. We still had two punctures to fix despite all our caution.

Although it is a worrying search and possibly rescue mission, I found myself quite enjoying it – at least on the downhill sections. The sun was shining through the glades, making the water on every tree sparkle, and the three of us seemed to be riding through a green-lit world of our own, the only noise being the hiss of wheels, the snap of twigs and Maria's voluble Italian as some branch or other got tangled in her horns.

About two hours out we found a village by a tributary of the Squeeshonk, where they recalled seeing Adele passing through last week. So far so good! They had not seen her returning, but that means little in a forest with so many trails. We agreed to keep together for safety; on these rough trails anyone could slide off the edge into a ravine very easily, with nobody knowing where they had vanished to. It is enough that we have to search for Adele, let alone each other.

By the time we got down to the main river it was already too dark to cycle under the trees. Half an hour's work set our camp up snug against the rain; instead of tent-poles we lashed the upright cycles together in a triangle as the core of the tent, as we got the campfire and heat reflector going outside. One of the saddlebags came with a helpful selection of camping equipment, such as a good hatchet for firewood and what Helen thought was a coffee-pot until she noticed it was hollow inside.

I could identify the device as a "Kelly kettle", a rather handy combination stove, kettle and fireplace all rolled into one. Hanging a regular kettle over an open fire is awfully inefficient with the heat going everywhere, but with this the fire is inside the hollow kettle and a dozen paw-fuls of pinecones and twigs had the water boiling within minutes. Rather a handy device, I recall seeing one years ago used by my school chum Kitty Marlowe's family when I holidayed on their estate. Despite expectations, none of the two girls I ever knew called Kitty were feline, nor was Jill in my St. Winifred's class a ferret.

So: with a reflector fire outside and a hot meal inside us we had a fairly comfortable night at the edge of the forest. The pine needles were soft underneath us and the tarpaulins mostly kept the damp out. After all the strains of Macao and Songmark before that, it was good to just have an evening around the fire with nothing to worry about till the morning. The food we had bought for the road was good; smoked fish and what Helen calls "parched corn", that is roasted maize that only needs hot water to make up into a porridge that most folk would prefer to poi. Though she says cornmeal mash is what the poorest furs mostly eat in the Southern States of the USA, we will hopefully not all go down with pellagra overnight.

Fortunately we had supplies of both tea and coffee to make good use of the Kelly kettle; although I do not mind its smell, I will definitely leave the coffee to Helen. Maria has been reading a lot of local histories, and came out with the entertaining story of how Hawaii regained its independence around the time of the Gunboat Wars. They had been invaded in the 1880's and their rightful monarch deposed, but the revolt began when patriots dressed up as Indians complete with turbans, and threw the occupying forces' coffee rations into Honolulu harbour. A sad waste, Helen thought.

The next day we started at dawn, not even waiting to light a fire before pedalling off up the valley. Cold tea is better than plain water, but not much. By midday we had arrived at a village that nestled under the shelter of a great overhanging cliff, and set about our enquiries. Much to our relief we found someone who spoke English, as the Amerindian languages are awful things to try and learn, and by the time you master one you find they speak something utterly different in the next valley.

It was good news – well, mostly. Adele had been here; she arrived two days late with her ankle strapped up and leaning on a staff. The local shaman had been expecting her and took her under his wing (literally; he is a most impressive sea-eagle gentleman) and a week later, that being yesterday, she waved farewell and headed back towards the coast. She was looking happier, and her ankle much improved.

Well, not every rescue party finishes with a dramatic rescue, and we have had enough excitement this trip to last us awhile. We stayed at the village for luncheon, a rather fine fish stew with the predictable "three Sisters" of maize, beans and marrows, then turned our wheels around and headed back. Tillamook is a very unpopulated land, with almost no "Euro" development around here and the villages scattered half a day's canoe ride apart along the rivers. The people here are

mostly various rodents, many of them marmots and beavers, with some bears and a few deer and the like. What the capital is like we will not find out on this trip. The village had a carved wooden sign in addition to its towering totem pole, with trails pointed out measured in time rather than miles. The capital is four days hike away down the trail, and I think it would be two hard days on a bicycle, if the trails are anything like we have found!

Maria was musing as we saddled up that heavily forested areas like Vostok and Tillamook could absolutely eat invading armies, given a resolute population that did not depend on having recognisable strong-points or vulnerable industry. You could not get a tankette down any of these trails, and they would be very vulnerable to ambush if you tried it. As for air power, it may be flattening the open cities of Spain right now rather effectively but it would be like trying to hunt ants on a lawn with a sledgehammer. Most of Ioseph Starling's air force could be circling overhead right now and we would have little to worry about. Besides, even if they got lucky with a Kalinin K-7 and five tons of high explosive it would hardly be worth their time. A heavy bomber against cheap bicycles pushed down an easily repairable mud trail – we agreed with Maria, that's never going to happen.

Having got used to our cycles and eaten much of our food, we made an all-out push to get back to the hotel in the day. On a regular metalled road it would have been easy given the distance, but it was an awful slog getting out of the Squeeshonk valley before dark. We all wished it was a month or two later in the year, darkness being at five on the clearest of days (of which Tillamook has few.) Luckily the fog and cloud held off or we would have had to set up camp in the forest again an hour away from the hotel, and resigned ourselves to another night on the ground while comfy beds were going empty awaiting us. As it happened, a flat-out effort got us over the pass and free-wheeling down the trails towards the lights of Narrawangan Bay just visible through breaks in the tree canopy below us.

It was pitch dark before we actually got into town, bruised from a dozen tumbles apiece and covered in mud, but very glad to get here. The first thing we did was clean the bicycles before worrying about our own fur. After all, we did borrow them from their owners, and we are always taught to return things at least as clean and working as we found them.

At the hotel we discovered that we almost caught up with Adele! She was there to meet us, having only arrived an hour before. Explanations had to wait while we ordered supper preparing and all staggered into the hot pool. Adele and Molly joined us, in Molly's case more in companionship than needing a soak.

Adele had quite a story to tell. She had twisted her ankle when a stable-looking piece of trail vanished downhill, and nobody happened along that section all day to help her. But she is a Songmark third-year after all, and having checked there was nothing actually broken she strapped her foot up tight and carried on. By the time we were in Macao she had reached her target, the village we had almost found her in. From there she was introduced to Waterfall-go-Backwards, the sea eagle Shaman we had heard of, who had taken her further into the woods where a conclave of elders had assembled eager to look at her Curse. It seems that Clear-Skies Yakan had judged their reactions very well; had Adele actually been guilty of what she had been cursed for they would have turned her away, but once they proved otherwise (how, Adele could not tell) they were very keen to put things right. The ceremony was rather impressive and awfully hard work – Adele says she will write it out for Miss Devinski but that will take a few days.

Anyway, she has been pronounced cured! She had a bad minute on the way back when she fell off a log bridge into a stream, and wondered whether her curse really had gone. But on reflection, she thought back on having seen the rest of Songmark slipping and tumbling off things on many occasions. One hardly needs to be cursed to fall off a wet and mossy tree trunk. It is as easy as falling off... well, a log.

Molly splashed out of the pool and rummaged in her pockets, returning with a new set of cards. These she explained she had bought yesterday in town, being waterproof celluloid playing cards sold for use in the backwoods. Of course in the Tillamook climate ordinary pasteboard packs would soon revert to paste. We had an impromptu poker game played for pebbles, and though Molly and Maria scooped the pot Adele actually beat me! I am no great card player, but even so Adele was thrilled. We will try her with the buttered toast test sometime.

We did caution Adele that removing her curse is no reason to get reckless. She probably does not have five years' worth of good luck piled up and ready to spend, things do not work like that.

And she should be careful next time she flies, just in case her airborne luck has deserted her. It would be an awful thing, having a curse removed and that making her fail the flying exams!

Adele says she feels exactly the same as before, and is looking forward to seeing how it all turns out. That makes two of us; Miss Devinski did tell me to fix her or else. It would be good to be in good odour with our Tutors for a change – hopefully I can keep them in the dark about a few of the things that happened on Macao. There is a first time for everything, and we are third-years after all.

An excellent meal followed, which we were very ready for. Cycling all day on rough, steep trails is hard work, and uses quite different sets of muscles than most things. One lesson a Songmark girl learns early is how very many places she can ache. We all thought we were fit when we first arrived, having practiced as the prospectus warned us in running and swimming. Rope climbing, rowing, cycling and hula dancing are very different matters, and by this time there can be hardly anywhere we have not exercised to the limit.

(Later) Our last relaxing evening for quite awhile; no more soft beds and pumpkin brew at Songmark, and our Tutors promised us we would have to make up all the work we missed. If this had been a holiday that might be fair enough, but it has been quite an ordeal all round. Still, we have accomplished quite a bit in the time – in my case, rather more than I should have. I will definitely have to talk with Saimmi on that score.

Sunday February 21st, 1937

A long day in the air, picking up the Sealth-Spontoon-Hawaii route as it pulled in just after breakfast time. The trip ended better than we had hoped; returning the bicycles got the gold sovereigns back as deposit, so that is one thing our Tutors should not be annoyed about. Adele is with us, alive and well and curse-free, and we are even spot on time!

As before the trip was uneventful; exactly what a commercial airline should be. Then, the great Imperial Airways. Handley-Page Heracles have a perfect safety record of eight years without a single passenger injured in flight. Which explains why they have that model on airlines and not bigger versions of the Gee Bee racers. I doubt any pilots would survive eight months regularly flying those, let alone years.

On the way, we had time to talk over our plans. None of us are planning to be airline pilots; a life of sticking to timetables and running the same routes would probably pall quite rapidly. Things are rather different in the wilder parts of the world: nobody has ever claimed that bush flying around Pauper New Guinea (the poorer half of Papua) is dull! What with a definite lack of flying aids and most of the world's supply of natural hazards there is plenty to make a pilot's life uninsurable.

Adele confessed that she had to go to Krupmark Island at Easter – she has “Unfinished business” there. Molly offered to get her some ammunition, but Adele and Molly have rather different meanings to that phrase. Adele says she has to know what part of her was the curse and what was really what she liked – though by her expression it is liable to be disturbing either way.

The rest of us are due to get our snow-shoes on and head down to the all-year Winter Sporting Paradise™ of Neue Suden Thule, to see what furs are doing down there. Saimmi and Mr. Sapohatan are certainly getting their shells' worth out of us this year.

By evening we looked down and recognised the low plateau of Orpington Island below us, with the fractious local spirit-cults happily invisible from five thousand feet. In twenty minutes we were circling over the central waters of Spontoon, somewhat torn between being eager to get back and having awful presentiments about how much hard work is piled up waiting for us when we do. Still, there is not much we can do about that but grin and bear it – it has been quite a trip, and we are just happy to have all made it back in one piece!

(And they found out what was waiting for them in “Spring forwards, fall back”....)