

Easter Eggs

(Being the eleventh part of the diary of Amelia Bourne-Phipps, now back at Songmark Aeronautical School for Young Ladies, on Spontoon's Eastern Island. She now has her official pilot's licence, and returns after a trip filled with adventure.)

Sunday 30th March, 1936

Back again, safe and sound! It was a busy evening last night, when I returned to Songmark and checked in with our Tutors. Miss Devinski knows about my passport problem – I doubt she knows about the other passport I own, but she accepted fairly calmly my explanation that I had difficulty getting through Customs in the usual way.

She was in a good mood although I was the last of my class to return – as she handed me a registered package posted from the Gilbert and Sullivan Isles, which contained my “B” License, valid for five years “to fly for hire or reward”. Although in different national standards the details vary, my own formal qualifications look good on paper – there was the solo night flight, the solo two hundred mile circuit with two takeoffs and landings, and the navigation across water without any landmarks to assist.

It seems everyone has passed, the first time this has happened since Songmark opened in 1930: as the exams are getting noticeably tougher every year, it must reflect well on our Tutors. I am “invited” to explain my delay to her on Monday, though I think I will just stick to the basics of times and places and not disturb her with details that she might take issue with.

Our dear Tutor has some fascinating pictures on her office wall, which one generally stares at when being hauled over the coals for stretching the rules. Miss Devinski finished in the top five of the 1929 “Powderpuff Derby” in America, that ladies-only air race that always features so prominently in the newsreels. There is another picture of the first ever class graduating at Songmark; one keen and pretty canine I recognise as Letitia Fosbury-Smythe, now the Air-Pirate Queen of the South China Seas with the rest of her dorm as her trusted lieutenants. It all goes to show, hard work and Songmark qualifications can get you anywhere one wishes to go.

Back to my dorm to celebrate with Helen, Molly and Maria! We stayed up late catching up on everything and taking notes; they had a long and rather dull trip, arrived in Manila in the middle of a tropical downpour and spent five days waiting for hour-long gaps in the storms to get the flying sections of their exams done. It was exciting enough – but I preferred my trip, troubles and all. Molly in particular went cross-eyed at even the edited account I gave her of how my day had been – waking up on the deck of the Ruddigore in the starlight with rather fine company, our tails entwined. It is amazing what air travel does, moving me from one very different world to another in a day – certainly as I relaxed on the clean ironed sheets of my Songmark bed, I could hardly imagine a greater contrast with the night before. It is super to be back with my friends, after all – for a few days on Pinafore Island I nearly lost hope of getting back here.

Today, I caught up on lost time returning to South Island with Helen and our religious training. It is actually feeling like coming home – there are folk waiting for me here, and shrines that need tending. When I thought of “home” in my troubles on New Penzance, it was here more than England I was longing for. Disturbing, in a way. That is the thing about being brought up to an Empire: whole generations of folk are brought up to leave school and head out overseas for their whole careers, only returning to Bassetshire as crusty retired Colonels after forty years of their fur bleaching in the tropical sun, and never again quite getting used to the idea that one does not haggle in the village shops.

Anyway, Saimmi was very pleased to see me, and commented I was looking well and my adventures do not seem to have taken much out of me. We tended a shrine on the East side of Mount Tomboabo, looking out over Sacred Island. Next week, she says, we might go over there and she will show us some of the oldest shrines on the island, which by some evidence must be far older than any of the history books would suspect possible.

That reminded me of Professor Schiller – I asked after him, almost dreading that Saimmi would tell me he succumbed to food poisoning from a faulty wurst or gone swimming and encountered a fatal undertow. Looking at Sacred Island, I can imagine what might sometimes do the towing. But folk round here try and be more subtle than that, and it seems he has been “Diverted” to study some abandoned settlements on the Mare's Nest Shoals, a day's sailing away. It is a great relief; after all, he was only looking for ancient artefacts as he chased around the Mare's Nest.

One can imagine the locals being worried about spies getting the technology of the “Sea Flea”, but the Professor's colleagues are only interested in bringing old cups, spears and caskets back to the museum. On the last newsreel I saw, they had brought another antique to Berlin for the

Olympic Games, a big golden casket carried on two poles like a stretcher. In the same newsreels our own Government has been making much of a certain sword found miraculously intact near Glastonbury where a lake used to be a thousand years ago.

Back down to Haio Beach, and a very welcome reunion with Jirry. Although he does not worry too much about me when I am off on my trips, he is always glad to see me back. Actually, he had an interesting story to tell of Helen and Marti, who are more than capable of Adventuring without me.

I had been agonizing about Molly's secret "project" and whether to tell the authorities about it; Helen had no such qualms and enlisted Marti and some of his friends to trace where Molly and Beryl were working. Last Thursday they made a midnight swoop on a building next to the cannery and grabbed samples of the "product" for testing – which revealed rather a surprise.

Jirry smiled and told me he had tried some of it himself, and so had his family who had found it quite addictive. As my ears and tail drooped, he laughed and called for Marti to open the icebox. At last I found out just what Molly has come up with, inspired by her family business back in America. It was not quite what I had expected.

I was baffled to be handed an ounce or so of pink boneless fish that tasted quite delicately of crab. It seems she had the idea when we were hunting them on Main Island and drinking the soup – the woods are full of tasty but fiddly land crabs, and the seas are full of big Pastefish that are so dull nobody wants to eat them. So she came up with a local version of PAMS – a crab and reconstituted fish version, something original, blandly boneless and tailor-made for Tourist picnic hampers!

That was definitely a load off my mind. Further, it seems Beryl has used her local business contacts to persuade the cannery to start a small run, just a few hundred cans using all the available home-made crab sauce she could get in the market. It has been going out as free samples to the hotels who have placed advanced orders for next year when crab-hunting can be put on a more deliberate scale. Selling her rights to the idea and a guaranteed percentage of profits, it looks like Molly has an income at last.

I would have said Beryl is turning a new leaf, but of course anything with money in it attracts her even if it is legal. I am not investing in the new enterprise she is fundraising for, the "South Sea Bubble Bath Company", as it sounds like money laundering to me.

As we left, Helen reminded me we only have one more week before the holidays – in all the excitement with getting our pilot licenses, I had hardly thought about what was happening afterwards. Time does fly. A most enjoyable evening by the waterfall catching up on things, then we were heading back to Songmark with a full timetable of classes looming ahead of us.

(Later) There was one piece of unfinished business to take care of. I took a plain envelope and commercial paper without a watermark, and wrote a letter to a certain black and white furred collie who might still be waiting patiently. To Lionel, I would have simply vanished again, and last time I turned up after a few days; I had to let him know I was alive and well, and he should stop searching New Penzance for me. As I could truthfully tell him, I am "returning home via Spontoon", although I was rather unclear where Home was. That is getting quite near the truth, these days.

I think I handled things on Pinafore Island rather nicely, thanks to my Songmark training – there was no frantic dashing around on the run, and I had a thoroughly civilised trip all things considered. A Class B license and the memories of two very fine (and very different) gentlemen are the perfect souvenirs of my trip.

Although I am awfully glad to be back, as I stamped and dropped the letter in the post box by the Marine Air Terminal my tail did droop somewhat. Really, one cannot have everything – but to a "real" Kim-Anh, it might be quite nice to be set up in the cool spa town of Wellington Wells, the summer retreat high on Mount Mikado. I had thought quite a lot of Lionel; the only gentleman I have met so far who really would fit in with domestic life back Home under my real name. Of course, since coming out here I fear I might have been rather spoiled in terms of what to expect in gentlemen – and realised the limitations a good girl has back home. Only as his exotic Eurasian mistress could I have an interesting time passing onto him what I have learned since leaving St. Winifred's. As Amelia Bourne-Phipps – well.

Monday 31st March, 1936

One more week to go! This morning, Miss Cardroy came in with a roster of who had elected to stay in the area for Easter. Maria is going home to Italy to report in more detail on our Vostok trip, but a lot of other folk are staying.

Songmark do seem to have a lot of local contacts with all sorts of people. Furthermore, they dislike the idea of students actually having relaxing holidays and getting into trouble on

Casino Island, so they try and farm us out as hired paws to further our education. One of the options she “suggested” was helping crew a historical sailing ship, the Liki-Tiki. The ship is due here in two weeks; she sails the Pacific as a mobile film set and tourist cruise ship, and being of entirely authentic design she always needs a lot of fit and agile crew. I hope the ship is not “Leaky” as its name suggests, I worked hard enough on the bilge pumps of the Ruddigore.

I was considering volunteering when Molly and Beryl jumped up and volunteered themselves straightaway. I followed suit, as really Molly needs someone responsible looking after her. Helen’s ears went flat at the prospect of another sea voyage – in vain I pointed out that a much bigger ship than the Noenoke’s fishing fleet last year would be a lot more stable. But Helen can practically get seasick in the bath, and refused flat out. I suppose she has a lot to look forward to staying with Marti and the Hoele’toemis, and I can hardly blame her.

Now we have our Pilot’s licenses, I had hoped our Tutors might relax before the end of term, and just concentrate on sports and such as they did after exams at St. Winifred’s. No such luck! The good news is, we are heavily booked for flying, as we now try to fill our logbook with experience in as many commercial aircraft as our Tutors can fast-talk their owners into letting us fly.

As if we needed it, we spent the morning in a rigorous session of aerobatics. I was allowed to take up Sand Flea 1, and it handles beautifully in the cold air first thing in the morning. How well it might do in full Summer heat, I will find out later. Aerobatics was fun after our examinations, when we all had to keep quiet about how good we were at a “falling-leaf” manoeuvre while piloting passenger aircraft. Maria was allowed to throw her Tiger Moth about the sky to her heart’s content, far more skilfully than she did last year. She knows now that if she strains a bracing-wire she will be the one to fix it, and moves accordingly.

On the airfield there was a quite phenomenally ugly French tri-motor, a “Jabiru” that is rented by the advanced party of a film crew. It is actually one I have heard of, that lady director Prudence has mentioned who does such surprising versions of classical tales. The pilot is a familiar face, a very fierce-looking Fillypine mare who I have seen in Mahanish’s always dressed in leather flying gear. Prudence tells me her dorm are trying to persuade the pilot to let them fly the Jabiru, at least round the bay and back. Even a half-hour trip counts in our log-books, and our Tutors have been known to open the purse-strings a little to pay for fuel and costs for this sort of chance.

Beryl is up to her old tricks: I returned to find her expounding the “facts” of international trade to some of the first years. Her method is to start with something accurate, then to seamlessly switch into pure invention – true enough, Spontoon gets some Japanese oranges from Satsuma, and we just might get a delivery of coconuts from the Cocos (Keeling) Islands. We do not get our dates from the International Date line! If I had stayed to listen long enough, she would have been telling us the Pacific gets its Easter Eggs from Easter Island.

Tuesday, 1st April 1936

A momentous occasion – by my calculations we are half-way through our Songmark careers, in terms of teaching days (in absolute time, having the Easter Holiday skews it a bit.) Things have certainly changed in the last year and a half. We arrived hardly knowing what we wanted to do (except fly and adventure) but now we are well on the way to becoming sturdy, self-reliant Adventuresses in full control of our futures and with everything planned out. It is a fine feeling to have. A Songmark girl is a girl whose life is not ruled by other people’s unwanted surprises.

Miss Devinski accepted my version of my experiences on Pinafore Island, and wryly commented that although I do keep getting into trouble, I at least manage it with style. Actually, she agreed that I managed rather well, considering I got there and back without a valid passport, stood up to investigation and returned home completely unscathed. I would say “without a scratch on me”, but the back of my neck would show otherwise and I am perfectly content with it. Our Tutors’ next target is to get us all some commercial flying experience: of course nobody is going to entrust us with a dozen expensive tourists, but an old flying-boat hauling coconuts will do to start with.

The first-years have gone from strength to strength without us; today we escorted them to a village festival where their Kilikiti team fought hard and shouted vigorously against a Meeting Island High School team. Saffina is a star player – there does not seem much subtlety involved in swinging five-foot war clubs at a solid rubber ball, and anyone sledgehammering it into the ocean two hundred yards away gets extra cheers.

After that match, we stayed to watch the other sports of the day. Some of the locals are of Samoan ancestry, and wrestling is a big thing there. There are some very ... impressive wrestlers,

and we hardly had to slap any first-year ears flat to keep order while they concentrated on watching. Brigit Mulvaney was almost well-behaved, with a good view and scent downwind of two huge polar bears throwing each other around the ring. Of course, bears are canine like her or near enough, as the speed of her tail thrashing quite demonstrated. Wo Shin may be married, but red pandas are roughly canine too and it seems she has not sworn off appreciating a pleasant view.

Back to Eastern Island after lunch, and I diverted to Superior Engineering to see if any interesting aircraft need spare pilots. I know just where to look; the section where low-priority repairs are handled and their cash-starved owners might appreciate us buying flying time. Alas, those low-cost slipways were empty today, but looking through the book that ancient Junkers F13 is due for a service this week. I am always surprised to see it holding together – in another two years it would be old enough to attend Songmark itself as a pupil. It would be more useful for me to get my paws on a nice new Douglas DC-2 that would impress a future employer – but of course nobody would want to entrust those to student pilots with the ink on their qualifications barely dry.

I have not seen that big lioness Andrace or her Scottish wildcat boss for months; they are probably off Adventuring. The only person in tartan I have seen here is that odd fellow in a kilt and Arab headdress who I am told runs The Devil's Reef tavern, and calls himself "Abdul ben Nevis". I have seen Professor Schiller, who does not look particularly drowned but rather dispirited; it seems his chase around the Mares' Nest Shoals has not been too rewarding. Still, by his accounts he has searched for King Solomon's Mines for years – patience is a virtue in his job as with many others.

His job might be easier if he did not have to make the facts fit the theory: he has explained that his research grants for that project depend on proving that all the wandering Tribes of Israel were in fact Teutonic and had wandered in from the Black Forest despite common belief to the contrary. I doubt our pal Hannah Meyer would be easily persuaded: "Agreeing would be difficult" as the Japanese say when they are too polite to say "No."

Thursday 3rd April, 1936

Our ship's crew applications have been accepted, hurrah – so six of us are practicing our knots and brushing up our flag recognition for a berth on the Liki-Tiki. Beryl has been seen practicing quick-draw moves with a sharpened marlinspike, which we hope will not be necessary.

Madelene X is coming along, worse luck, and has been boring us with tales of her seafaring ancestors, who (she says) were the finest in the Napoleonic French Navy. This might explain why they rarely won. I confess to leaving a large illustrated book on the Battle of Trafalgar in her desk, which did not improve her mood although it cheered the rest of us considerably. Then, she is always telling us about her ancestors, claiming to go back two thousand years to some warrior called Asterisk or something like it who fought the Romans. She certainly has inherited a lot of gall from somewhere.

Ada Cronstein and Carmen are the other two booked for the trip: both of them swim like fishes and can climb as fast as I can which should be handy in the rigging. As the only feline volunteering from Songmark, I suppose I might get the honorary role of ship's cat – Ada reads far too many "Spicy Pacific Adventure tales" of a certain nature and dreamily commented she would do well as a Cabin-girl with the right lady passengers – there are quite a few cabins she wants to visit. I think she means cabins on the Ark, not necessarily aboard the Liki-Tiki.

It was a very good thing Molly was not around to hear that – she would either have done Ada a severe injury or vanished to a dark corner for an hour, and neither are good news. I fear she might never be quite the same again, deep down. She still loves blazing away on the self-defence courses and setting things on fire on her Field Engineering tests, but sometimes looks a little hollow round the eyes when she thinks nobody is watching. And she always takes elaborate detours around the Double Lotus, even though it is a perfectly safe and respectable place as far as I know. From what she has let slip, she actually did jump off that tramp steamer as soon as land was a mile away, trusting herself to unknown currents and sharks rather than stay onboard a minute longer.

It is a pity she cares nothing for religion, as the Spontoonie rituals do settle the mind wonderfully. Maria says her own Church is most consoling – like paying off an overdraft at a bank, once she confesses and makes penance her account and conscience is cleared with nothing more said about the issues. Even our wild first-years seem to have plenty of faith – at least, Brigit Mulvaney once let slip she had been about to go into a "Magdalene", some sort of Irish convent I think, when she got away to Songmark instead.

On the way to taking the first-years rock climbing, we stopped to look at Eastern Island's latest industrial site. Really, it is very odd for a place like Spontoonie where most native huts do not

even have chimneys; a whole factory making steel chimneys, cowlings and chimney-pots. I suppose it is a useful piece of light engineering for folk who have practiced on aircraft repairs and fabrication, and the product is hardly going to spoil in transit if its market is half way across the Pacific. Most of the designs are similar, roughly the size and shape of a five-gallon milk churn, built in what looks like stainless steel. A sensible choice of material out here, as the combination of smoke, heat and sea spray would rust holes in ordinary metal sheeting long before a standard Native hut even needed its first re-thatching.

It was good to realise this is the last time this term we will be acting as escorts for our juniors, even though for once Liberty Morgenstern and co. were fairly well-behaved. Knowing you can “accidentally” kick loose a brick-sized rock on your roommate’s head below, seems to be moderated by knowing next time up the rock face they can freely return the complement. Actually, I think Tatiana and Liberty have called each other every combination of political heretic they can think of by now, and have settled down to an armed truce.

Someone who did get in the way of a spare rock was Adele – she was just walking towards the rock face when Saffina slipped and an apple-sized rock bounced off Adele’s muzzle. She was more hurt than surprised, but bore up stoically as we had Saffina, Maria and Irma Bundt carry her off to out Matron to be looked over again. That is the strangest thing about poor Adele – our Tutors have spent days with her just trying to work out what she is doing wrong, and returned shaking their heads in bafflement. I fear she will find insurance policies expensive.

Friday 4th April, 1936

Our last day! Our Tutors were merciful, and as we had all passed our Piloting first time, they took the Songmark cheque book and treated my whole year to a feast at Bow Thai. It was a wonderful evening, more so as Maria could attend (she leaves tomorrow morning) and for once we were allowed to order whatever we like. It was very strange being able to order Nootnops Blue in front of Miss Wildford (who was having the same, but even so.) Term technically finished at five and the meal started at seven; we are on holidays now and if our dear staff wants to treat us we are hardly going to refuse.

As Miss Devinski pointed out from behind a flaming Tiki punch bowl, we are all Pilots now, and the first stage of our education is complete. In theory, we could get jobs tomorrow – but in practice we would stand no chance at all interviewed against a qualified three-year Songmark graduate. Nobody was dropping out, as if they would ever want to. We have so much adventuring to look forward to; I can hardly wait to see what develops for me this Summer.

Although most of the waiters were Spontoonies, I did see in the kitchen one feline who was as authentic as the (most excellent) food, a Siamese cat who made me look definitely squat and clumsy in comparison. It was a shame she was busy in the back room juggling pans over roaring gas jets, as I would have liked to chat. Ada followed my gaze and winked at me; I expect she had the same idea, but with rather different reasons.

A late evening, with some folk not returning to Songmark at all – Missy K vanishing home to Main Island right after the dessert, as did Prudence and Tahni who was already waiting at the restaurant when we arrived. She is a fine organizer, is Prudence Akroyd. I heard Ada whisper the rest of their dorm was moving on elsewhere, and I think I know where to.

Maria has to be up at six to catch a trans-Pacific Dornier X that just stops long enough to refuel and pick up passengers, but she urged us not to get up just to say goodbye – her bags are packed and she only needs to slip into her travel costume and trot the quarter mile with them down to the Marine Air Terminal. So we said farewell in the dorm, with one last toast in smuggled Nootnops Blue; a fine end to a fine term!

Saturday 5th April, 1936

It was very strange to wake up in the quiet, in our dorm – normally Maria is still snoring by the time the rest of us are half dressed, and we have to resort to drastic measures to get her up. She had managed to get herself up and out without waking us today though – and ten minutes later the confident roar of ten Jupiter engines made the windows shiver as the Dornier X headed over the island. They will be in the French territory of Clipperton Island by tomorrow morning, then stopping at Scottish Darien near Panama before heading over towards Europe.

I must say, Nootnops Blue is much nicer the morning after than ordinary drinks. Molly often laments there is none in America, even though in the first years of Prohibition it would actually have been legal to sell on the streets, while beer was not! The laws have caught up with it now, she

tells me, just when her family moved out of the import-export business; unfortunate timing for them.

Whether it is the Nootnops or the fact of it being the holidays, I felt quite excellent and almost bounced out of the dorm, already making plans for the day. Songmark closes on Sunday morning for three weeks: we have all the instructions to rendezvous with the Liki-Tiki on the 10th of the month, and are totally free till then.

It was good to see Molly in a cheerful mood: at four o'clock yesterday afternoon she returned from the bank and presented our Tutors with a bonded cheque for her Summer term's fees. It seems the fish and crab "product" has been judged a success by some Tourist Board committee who plan to develop the idea next year, and at last she has a source of money our Tutors will not suspiciously wrinkle their snouts at. So until July she has nothing to worry about – and she should honestly be earning money till then as a percentage of every can sold. Nobody has yet decided what to call it, though as it can be prized out in a solid pinkish cylinder "Fish Log" has been suggested. That might be too prosaic for the tourist trade. I expect an exotic name will probably be chosen giving it an expensive image but with an escape clause such as "Nimitz Sea Caviar" which has its own Beluga Caveat.

By lunch we had packed our books and Songmark uniforms away for the holidays, and had just our knapsacks ready for the trip to South Island. Helen hardly needed that; she plans on being in oiled fur and Native costume from today onwards, and is decidedly travelling light. She declared that all she needs bring is herself – there is everything else she wants already on South Island. I know how she feels.

One thing was rather odd – I was passing the dining hall when I scented the usual Saturday dinner and felt distinctly hungry. Our kitchens turn out some quite fine meals, but hardly ever on a weekend, when the usual meal is Poi. Very nutritious, as everyone keeps telling me, but gruesome stuff to my tastes – I would rather have plain mashed potato. Helen was amazed, as I was myself, as I emptied a large plateful of the sludgy stuff. It seemed somehow satisfying. Helen did cautiously try a spoonful, but declared it was just the same as ever, as far as she could tell.

Beryl's comment was it was an old prison superstition – folk who do not finish their plateful of porridge on the last day of their sentence will be back for some more. I agreed with her, but of course returning for another session is definitely what I want to do. Still, it saved the expense of Popatohi, which Helen and Molly lunched on as we waited for a water taxi.

We did see Belle and Ada returning from the direction of Casino Island, looking rather the worse for wear. Ada confided that they had got their flights in the Jabiru, and had earned them. She warned me the pilot Nikki is definitely not someone she will be asking any more favours from. I think that is the fierce Fillipine mare who always wears such tough costumes, and filed the fact away in my fairly short list of things to avoid at all costs; I would have thought it takes a lot to quench an enthusiasm like Ada's.

Of course we are not the only folk going on holiday, and we shared a water taxi over with Wo Shin who is also bound for South Island. She tells us Liberty Morgenstern has already vanished, back via odd routes to New Haven (few airlines like to go there as they refuse to pay anyone in money, believing it perpetuates the Plutocratic World Conspiracy.)

Shin does look very keen, and says she will be seeing her husband and family; although her husband has a house near the resort hotels it is only rented. The Althing has very strict laws about actually buying property, and only full citizens can do that.

Molly complains this is awfully unfair, and points out islands such as Cuba are doing very well by selling estates to folk with plenty of ready cash; she mentions her Father's old colleagues "Knuckles" Maldonado and "Mad Frankie" Frazetti now have a stake in the island. Well, yes. I think that is rather the sort of citizen Spontoon is trying not to import.

By all accounts it used to be a lot easier to settle on these islands as long as one had a needed skill; the Countess Rachorska confided that she demonstrated her talent with a needle before she was given her papers. I always thought it odd that a full Countess should be so handy with a sewing machine; possibly they used to do things differently in Russia. They certainly used to in Spontoon, as after five years of working and staying out of legal trouble she became a full Citizen. I know they stopped doing that after the tourist trade took off – about a month's supply of big cruise boats could bring enough people in to double the island's population.

Anyway, we parted from Shin on the beach and headed down to Haio Beach for a welcome reunion with the Hsole'toemis. They have finished with the Public Works project for tourist season, and the whole family are busy tending their garden plots. We hung up our respectable Songmark outfits and joined them, the first time Molly has worn Native costume this year except for our dance lessons. She does look good in the sunshine, and it is a real shame there is nobody to appreciate her as she deserves. I often wonder what happened to Lars – but in his line of work, I

expect a lot of folk “disappear” and the ones who know why will not be telling the Daily Elele the circumstances. It is a great pity, as he is a fine match for her in so many ways.

A hard but very satisfying day on the taro patch was followed by our helping Mrs. Hoele'toemi prepare us a special welcome meal. She joked that with one of her daughters off at sea and the other busy with tending shrines it was good that she can find some more to do the work. Helen gets the spare family longhouse this trip, and quite right too; Molly and I am quartered in the village women's hut but that is no real hardship.

An excellent evening, with a dip in the waterfall and Mrs. H helping to oil our fur and apply the proper patterning- Helen as Tailfast to her family, myself as a close family friend, and Molly as a guest. I have been practicing this myself, but it is hard for even a feline to reach between her own shoulder blades.

I helped Helen settle into her snug hut, where everything is kept ready for guests. Mrs H tells us the family built it for Moeli, not expecting she would get a husband and cub who have no need of any land dwelling. Saimmi is very busy with the local religion, though she has mentioned she was Tailfast once. I got the impression of a tragedy there.

Certainly Helen looked as happy as I have seen her, with a month of real holiday to look forward to – helping run a household and work on the family farm might not be everyone's idea of a holiday, but it depends on the company. She murmured that it is a good thing the holiday did not start last week, or her calendar might rather restrict things with Marti – but as it is, she should have no worries. It was luckily getting too dark for her to notice my whiskers droop as I steeled myself to admit I DO have something to worry about that way. Helen and I share the same timings on such things, or at least we did.

Dear Diary: I have been counting and re-counting the days myself all this week, rather thoroughly re-checking and accounting for the fact the previous full month started in February. Oh dear.

Sunday 6th April, 1936

One of the things they teach you at Songmark is to face facts – to find out exactly where you stand and make a definite plan from there. It was a wonderful Spring day, and Jirry was free all morning – I suggested we take a walk up Mount Tomboabo and take a picnic lunch with us. Sitting on the mountain top, I broke the news to him, both welcome and what I thought would be devastatingly unwelcome.

Jirry Hoele'toemi is even better than I thought he was, which is saying a lot. He kissed me most affectionately, and declared I was worrying needlessly – these things sometimes jump generations, and he is confident he can “discover” a Siamese in his ancestry if anyone asks questions later on. He can count days just as well, and is familiar with my calendar.

I knew the Native girls were sometimes “flexible” about things, but I was amazed, and showed him just how much I appreciated him. There is an old Polynesian belief in ancestry not being an absolute thing, but more like “proportional representation” in politics that Maria rather sneers at. Even though as a textbook fact the Polynesians know otherwise these days, they still think theirs is a nicer idea.

Indeed, he joked his family would be very pleased for me – whether I wanted to be Amelia Hoele'toemi or not. A perfect “Wahini” can prove all her accomplishments, and this is one they think highly of. At least now I know I can provide kittens for our longhouse, whatever their fur pattern. Helen has decided she can contribute tiger-stripes to the family, and Jirry says he does like the grace of Siamese.

We had a very pleasant afternoon – and indeed, for the first time ever there was one thing I had no further need to worry about with him. Returning paw in paw down the hill, I started to count my blessings – I had feared I would be returning alone. But of course that is only the start of it – I can see an awfully rocky road ahead, even if his family are pleased to welcome a new kitten. What our Tutors and my family back home will say about matters, is another thing entirely. I remember Miss Devinski's comment the first month we were in Songmark, about the place never having unexpectedly lost or gained in numbers – well, there is a first time for everything but I had not planned on being a test case.

Anyway, for the minute I could relax and enjoy my holiday. It is already warm enough to sunbathe and swim comfortably, although the waves were rather high. Some of the locals had brought out those odd Hawaiian “surfing boards”, solid wood and quite a bit heavier than a canvas canoe of the same length – although any portable exploring canoe would be crushed like an eggshell under the waves hitting Haio Beach today! Jirry borrowed a friend's board and spent the rest of the day teaching me how to stay on it; a wild ride guaranteed, ending up with me

exceedingly wet. On the way we stopped at the waterfall to wash the salt out of our fur, although with oiled fur it is far less of a problem. It will always be a magic place for me, that waterfall – and now more than ever.

Back to the Hoele'toemi household, to find Molly being taught domestic skills not generally practiced by Chicago bootleggers. At least she has a lot of useful skills; she does like lighting fires, and now is doing it entirely without petrol.

Monday 7th April, 1936

Pouring with rain, worse luck; all of us were indoors more or less all day repairing fishing nets and the like. I took the chance while everyone was together to announce the news, paw in paw with Jirry – it was like stepping onto the stage at my first school play, but I managed to get through with it.

Mrs. Hoele'toemi was delighted, and almost hugged the wind out of me (one never forgets she was a dance champion). Helen sighed and rolled her eyes, but congratulated me. Molly was pretty much speechless, her ears right up in shock and her tail trembling.

I was not much surprised when after supper Helen motioned me over and suggested we go for a walk, our oiled fur, straw hats and grass capes doing rather better against the rain than our Songmark oilskins ever manage. It was getting dark but we only went about a hundred yards, to the edge of the taro patch where a small roofed shrine looks out protectively over the fields. The rain was hissing down in the jungle next to us, and I doubt anyone except one of the Wild Priests could have got near enough to hear us.

Helen can be really very blunt when she has to. She painted a rather less than rosy picture of exactly what our Tutors are going to say – it is one thing for Missy K to be permanently poised to take a year out, as she is engaged and was before she applied to Songmark. Her family are funding her regardless of which year she graduates, which might not be the case for me. We have all seen enough of what the third year at Songmark is like, to know it needs total fitness and complete concentration – the chances of anyone actually getting through it after a year away are not hopeful. Our Tutors do keep telling us they will fail anyone who does not totally deserve to pass, as Songmark's reputation is everything to them.

Besides, she pointed out that even if by some miracle my family and our Tutors did clear it, I would be dropped down to live the final year with our current first-year class – the idea of sharing field trips and meals with Liberty Morgenstern and Brigit Mulvaney is enough to make anyone's tail droop. The Spontoonie saying "It takes more than one stick to make a fire" sprang to mind as I thought of exchanging Helen, Molly and Maria for that crowd – it would be like trying to light a fire with wet coral.

When she had run out of arguments, I agreed with everything she had said – but the situation is what it is, and wishing otherwise changes nothing. It is just as well I talked to Jirry first and announced the news to his family, as Helen's rather ruthless suggestion had my ears and tail dropping flat as wilted flowers. It might have been a different matter had I the awful experiences Molly went through – but Phao was wonderful, and I hope to keep more than the memory.

Whatever happens, it is unlikely I will be hauled back to Barsetshire in disgrace, as without a passport I have no way of getting back there unless the Spontoonies deport me. Father can cut me off without a penny, but if he insists I return he knows that will mean to be arrested for espionage, something (my brother writes) he is sure I am innocent of. Besides, if I am cast off as a blot on the family name there will be no interest in bringing me back; better to leave me on Spontoon which is already as far as possible from folk back Home who would be doing the complaining.

Helen sighed, but then hugged me affectionately and commented there was plenty of room for another longhouse down the path from the one she is sharing with Marti. We picked Frangipani flowers for our head-fur from the edge of the jungle, and returned to the Hoele'toemi household as darkness fell. An excellent evening, with Saimmi returning from her duties and getting the news. She seems pleased as well – though I did ask her not to tell our Tutors, as I would be doing that myself (she did not deny our Tutors do seem to find out an awful lot about what we get up to on Spontoon.)

Wednesday 9th April, 1936

It has been a very fine trip so far, settling into life in Haio Beach. Weather permitting, in the mornings we help with the garden patch and getting the buildings ready for tourist season, and in the afternoon we have a pristine and tourist-free beach to swim and practice the surfing-boards.

I almost envy Helen having the whole holiday here while the rest of us sailing crew probably scrub decks, haul keels and splice mainbraces – but she might well be right, it could be the last Songmark trip I go on, and then I will be seeing a lot of South Island. Thank heavens I have my five-year Pilot's license now, whatever else happens! There is always a big demand for pilots around here, even without full qualifications, and it is growing all the time. New airlines and routes are opening up all across the Pacific: by the time my first license expires in 1941, there could be direct routes through here from as far as Japan to America and Australia.

Although the tourists have not yet arrived, the film crews have; on Resort Bay one of the smaller hotels is booked almost solid with a production team who are setting up and casting local extras for "Daughters of the Snake Goddess". Prudence and all her dorm are there, along with a lot of her friends from the swimming club and volleyball teams – Molly whispered something about the casting couch being busy but there seems no shortage of applicants. Those who do not get on film as extras will be carrying the cameras and the like, as the director has very specific staff requirements; Jirry is not going to get this job, but if she was interested his sister Moeli might.

From Resort Bay we could see a sight that we have only seen before on old photographs and paintings of the islands: a full three-masted sailing ship, anchored off Casino Island! This must be our ship, the Liki-Tiki, which we are due out on tomorrow. I was scratching my head-fur as I trained my binoculars on it; although I am no expert in tall ships, the masts and rigging did look very odd. Although the sails were furled, they hardly looked at all what I expected of a schooner, more like a pirate-ship of old.

We bumped into Ada Cronstein and Carmen at the Tiki Lounge on Resort Bay (North Fluke, as some old charts call it) and had a fine lunch as we are expecting to live on ship's biscuit, salt pork and weevils from tomorrow. In Ada's case it will be just the biscuit and weevils, of course. She says she is half regretting volunteering for the trip, as she has pictures on her wall of Morgaine Melson, the lady director who is auditioning for suitable talent.

I was surprised when I recognised the director, who I had been imagining as some big strapping bear or rhino in riding breeches: Miss Melson is actually a quite short and slender rabbit, who would be shorter than me not counting the ears. She really looks quite ordinary, but Ada whispers she changes gear entirely in the studio and is a veritable whirlwind of energy. I remember reading of one of her earlier triumphs in "Film Frolics", a rather odd sequel to the Three Musketeers with a pair of heroines who would fit into Songmark quite well (Prudence's dorm) had they been born four centuries later. They certainly spent enough time airborne considering ropes and chandeliers were the only means available!

There is a record number of my year staying over this holiday, more than half the class. Even folk who have always gone home before are staying, such as Adele Beasley. She had been asking me if she should volunteer for the sailing trip – happily I managed to talk her out of it. The idea of someone with her bad luck high in the rigging makes shivers go down my tail, and even below decks in the galley – sharp knives, open flames and pots of boiling liquid. It would be asking for trouble. Still, she says she wants a job, and on Spontoon we cannot just apply for anything advertised, only what our Tutors clear with the authorities. I hope she manages to keep busy and meet some interesting people, anyway.

Our own sailing trip should be a fine way to keep fit and healthy, with all the fresh air and exercise. We will not be away long enough to re-enact some of the classical traditions (scurvy etc) and in any case will not be at sea very long at a time according to our instructions.

It is rather a wrench to pack my bags again, and settle in for one last evening with the Hoele'toemis. We had a large bowl of three-finger Poi shared amongst us on the table, the slightly fermented sort that always turned my stomach before. I know it tastes exactly the same, but it went down as if it was the finest dish from Bow Thai; Mrs. H commented she always had cravings for Nimitz Sea caviar when expecting. Of all the possible foods, it is rather ironic that I suddenly discover what Missy K sees in Poi; at least among my worries I have not picked up expensive tastes.

Helen and Marti were busy and Molly was off meeting Beryl at Resort Bay, leaving me to help Mrs H with the house. She is very supportive, and told me a lot about what to expect this year and how best to cope with it. She is well qualified that way; looking at her, one would never guess she had six grown children. I am keeping up with all the exercises she prescribed, and indeed have never felt fitter.

A fine evening as Jirry returned, and then I retired to the village women's hut. It is basic but very comfortable, rather like a native version of our Songmark dorm – every necessity there, and not a useless piece of bric-a-brac to be seen (I am sure Hannah has already told her Father that sending salesmen here will be a dead loss.). Tomorrow – off for a life on the wave!

Thursday 10th April, 1936

It was quite a send-off the Hoele'toemis gave us, waving Molly and myself farewell from the shore of Resort Bay – Mrs H, Jirry and all his brothers and sisters, with Helen and Marti at his side and half a dozen cousins turned out to wave us off for the fortnight. One would think we were heading out to Easter Island on a log raft, some of us never to return.

I had already spent a few cowries and an hour after breakfast in the bathroom of one of the hotels with Molly – we helped each other remove the cured oil from our fur, and comb out the clan markings. I never like doing this, and since this past fortnight, walking around with Hoele'toemi markings has felt wonderfully reassuring. Helen has confided that she is looking forward to putting on hers one day as a permanent fixture.

Still, where we are going there are quite enough original Natives without needing us to make up the numbers. Molly has been doing some asking around and it seems an interesting setup we are joining. Our schedule has us heading out to Albert Island, which is an “Authentic” Polynesian island; the first one I will have seen since our Orpington trip. The difference is, it is much keener to stay unspoiled and not commercialise the way Orpington and Spontoon have. No grand Casinos and luxury hotels for us on Albert Island, as Molly commented rather sourly - I am surprised Beryl is going at all.

Our joining instructions were for noon at the offices of the Inter-Island Tours Company, the sort of vaguely universal name that Helen always associates with secret agents. But there was nothing secret about this place, as it was papered with large and glossy posters showing the delights of a wild tropical isle. Bits of Spontoon are certainly wild, but none of it is more than three miles from a village and less from a road, so there are limitations that Albert Island has not got. Albert Island is not huge though, being about the size of the Spontoon group with one solid main island twelve miles across and some outliers about the size of our Eastern Island.

Beryl and Madelene X were already there along with half a dozen assorted locals I recognise from our dance contests against the Meeting Island High School. Definitely they all looked fit and ready for adventure – from the talk, I gathered that they held several rounds of severe athletic competitions to decide who would fill their quota of places for this voyage.

The Casino clock was striking twelve and I was starting to worry about Ada and Carmen, when they turned up looking definitely breathless and with their fur rather ruffled. Beryl whispered something about Melson Productions being infamous for their parties, and I suppose I am glad we will not have Ada complaining this trip that she missed out on absolutely everything.

Anyway, we had no more time to catch up on things – as twelve struck, the door opened for us to sign in and it was locked behind us a minute later. It seems Inter-Island “runs a tight ship” and anyone late gets left on the beach, so to speak! First we had a brief welcome from Mr. N'Kualita, a strikingly dressed jungle cat, clouded leopard I would have guessed. He explained that though the Liki-Tiki had several years of service already, this season the company was trying something rather different. The ship had been re-rigged with square sails, more like a Pirate galleon than the classic schooner rig she usually carried. We were to support a film crew on location, then if all went well we have a full test in open ocean, which sounds exciting with a sailing rig that has not been seen in these waters since before the resettlement of Spontoon. Even the actual Pirates who were reputed to land and swap water for treasure were of the Indian Ocean type, Sinbad rather than Blackbeard in style, and would have had lateen sails.

Madelene X muttered something about the ship looking as authentic as a chariot with aircraft rotary engines on the wheels – she may be able to spot the differences, but the average cinema-goer happily believes municipal swimming baths are Roman so long as the actors relax decadently on couches wearing enough laurel wreathes and togas.

Anyway, it was a very busy afternoon. We “signed aboard” with particulars of our nautical experience, our health certificates and our releases from Songmark. Happily, Passports are not required for this trip as we are listed as sailing crew. It surprised me to learn that as crew, we do not need them for shore leave – diplomatically sailors dock and undock too frequently for most countries to insist on checking them (though I am sure places such as Vostok go the extra mile.)

By teatime we had all signed for a kitbag of authentic costume, a sturdy but rather basic set of sea shirt and sailor's trousers, with old-fashioned “bell-bottoms”. The trousers are quite a sight – and our silhouettes will be very historical on the film, as I am sure nobody will ever be wearing trousers again with the ankles twice as wide as the knees! We have neckerchiefs, ditty-bags, those repair kits called “Sailors housewives” that caused much amusement to Ada and Carmen, and quite as much kit as an articulated sailor would have carried.

Molly complains that boarding-axes and cutlasses are authentic, so she should have at least one of them. She has been reading up on naval history, and seems to have the idea we will be

spending our time being filmed swinging on ropes holding on with one paw, a dagger in our teeth and a blunderbuss in the other paw. For a change it was Beryl who put her right, commenting anyone who falls into rigging with a dagger in their teeth is liable to cut their own snout off. If it comes down to being traditional, my Barsetshire accent is better for growling “A-harr me mateys!” in than Molly can manage. It somehow does not quite fit right with her dulcet Chicago tones.

We did discover why Inter-Island are happy to sign us on with so little sailing experience on large ships – and not (as Molly grumbles) just because we work cheaply. Having such an old rigging system means there is nobody with practical experience in using it, so hiring general yachting crew would be a waste; we are nearly as good at this job, and hopefully keen to learn.

Quite a thrill! There were twenty of us signed aboard from Casino Island, including some senior mariners who probably can use their general experience with ship repair, rationing our grog and serving out the lime-juice. We do actually have that, at least I saw some kegs being loaded aboard at the last minute – by the end of this trip Molly will have to stop calling me a “limey” as she will be one just the same. Better than a scurvy knave, however authentic that would be for a Pirate ship. It was a five minute pull in an authentic whaler to the ship, which was anchored in the deep-water channel between Casino and South Island: by all accounts nobody wanted to start experimenting with delicate docking manoeuvres as a first test of the new sailing qualities: it had been towed out to where we have plenty of sea-room to make mistakes without our first voyage being a full-speed ramming of the Rainbow Bridge.

As we climbed up a boarding net to the deck we were greeted by the Captain, a grizzled timber-wolf gentleman with a considerable mane of greying fur. He shook paws with all of us, then issued his first order – the senior hands to show us to our quarters, sling our hammocks and report back on deck in ten minutes. Of course, we jumped smartly to it, remembering just what had been in the releases we signed to get here – the Captain of a ship is the law onboard, and if he felt like being authentic as regards discipline, there is nothing we can do but go along with it.

I think it was about eight minutes later that the last of us lined up on deck, hoping we were neatly enough turned out – the senior hands had been whispering that the ship had been restored using classical materials, with “holystone” to scrub the decks and tarred oakum to plug the seams – it is awfully laborious, and the first one of us appearing with an unbuttoned shirt or talking unnecessarily on duty, would find out just how much work needed doing.

Amazingly, we all seemed to pass inspection. The Captain gruffly told us to carry on, and we were “told off” into our watches for the trip. Just my luck – I drew first watch, which meant delaying my appointment with my hastily slung hammock: Molly is on my watch but nobody else I know is.

It could have been worse – Beryl was drawn for the small hours, which the able-seamen tell us is called the dog-watch. I always thought that was because anyone working then would be dog-tired, but Beryl of course has her own ideas. Noting it is at least shorter than the others, she whispered that it was “cur-tailed”. I am sure there must be authentic Royal Navy punishments for jokes like that! *

*(Editor’s note: if it causes alarm or confusion, it seems Beryl can gratuitously tell the truth. This time, she is.)

Friday 11th April, 1936

The last time I woke up at sea, it was on a smaller boat with rather more select company – indeed, I am hardly likely to forget it. It was a very different experience below decks on the Liki-Tiki, with the women’s quarters a swinging forest of hammocks like caterpillars and cocoons slung between trees. Even riding at anchor the ship is surprisingly loud, with creaking fittings, the slap of the waves heard through open hatches and the deck crew working just above us.

Although I have slept in hammocks before last year with the Noenoke clan, there at least we were a pace or so away from the open air. This time, Beryl’s shift was fast asleep still – as the ship’s bell rings, one has to ignore it and sleep, but wake up on time for your own watch regardless of whether it is day or night outside. Either way, disturbing a sleeping shipmate is considered extremely bad form, so we wriggled and ducked past the swinging hammocks on the way to the door. The film crew get the actual cabins with bunks, but then they are paying for it.

Another difference with last year aboard the Noenoke fishing boats, was our wearing Native dress at the end and hardly considering modesty – a bath was the day’s first dive overboard, and with oiled fur one hardly notices the dampness. Here of course it was rather different: most of the senior crew are gentlemen, and the Meeting Island High School contingent is co-educational. Molly was grumbling about it being no time of day to be getting up, and asked loudly where the hot

showers were. I had to remind her of a few uncomfortable (but authentic) truths: this is not a steam-ship with always-lit boilers, and the galleys will do well to provide us all with a mug of tea for breakfast, let alone hot showers.

Our “hot shower” was a gallon bucket of cold seawater apiece, a piece of salt-water soap (almost impossible to lather) and about a pint of lukewarm fresh rinsing water that smelt as if it had been in the ship’s tanks since its last re-fitting. I must say, the Inter-Island trading company are doing a wonderfully authentic job of re-creating the atmosphere onboard ship. Molly agrees, and says she never listened to her History teacher back in school – now at last she knows why so many crews mutinied, turned Pirate or “jumped ship” at the first moment. This is not quite the right attitude for Day One in clear sight of Casino Island, and turning Pirate is hardly going to make modern plumbing miraculously appear.

Anyway, we had little enough time to compare notes on the tepidness of our rinsing water, as ten minutes later the washroom was needed for the gentlemen. At least we get first go at it, though we will doubtless be second tomorrow and scrubbing it in the meantime.

Our timetable is quite fierce, with one day for each watch to learn the ship and be able to recognise a fore “stun sail” if they are ordered to reef one. This sailing setup is a lot less mechanised than a final-generation schooner, and although it certainly uses plenty of blocks and pulleys, it needs a bigger crew hauling on it for the same effect. Thinking of bigger crews, I could wish I had Maria, Missy K and Irma Bundt hauling on my capstan rather than Molly and two rabbit brothers (wiry but small) from Main Island. Sometimes size does beat style.

Breakfast was both quite fine and rather a disappointment – I had been expecting hard-tack and salt beef, and gone to the dentists last week especially for a check-up anticipating a lot of tough diet. Instead, we were served rather nice oatmeal porridge with lashings of condensed milk, and fresh bread cakes from the galley. Delicious – though Madelene X turned her snout up at it. She would.

As the watches changed over, we were all gathered on deck to help onboard the film company we are taking out to the famous “Cannibal Isle” – its name an invention of the pulp comics, I am sure. The film crew is quite small, sixteen people and (to Molly’s disappointment) totally lacking in movie stars: they explained they want long-range sailing shots of the ship and landscape, and the actors will be doing their close-ups on a sound stage somewhere more comfortable.

Actually, the film crew (“X-Zan-Do Productions Inc” of Burbank) had not been aboard an hour when we discovered that strictly speaking the production team has fourteen workers and two spare wheels – the producer Mr. Stanton Sturdey the Second has brought his two pups aboard, more than half-grown but more than twice as loud to make up for it. He made clear that they are to be given every courtesy and anything else they want – one gets the impression they are not happy to be coming along on this trip, but their doting parent is determined to make it up to them at any cost to anyone else.

Anyway, they were loudly declaiming their disappointment that we were not in Native dress, which was the only reason they had “let pop drag them along” for this trip. I have heard the previous trips were made for tourists with the crew mostly in Native mode, with the passengers no doubt enjoying the scenery. It seemed a pity myself, if only to see how Madelene X would have taken the news about her costume – she would have been steaming enough to solve all Molly’s complaints about the plumbing.

We had no time to worry about them, as a whistle blast called us to our stations and we started hauling ropes in earnest. The wind was steady behind us, and as the anchor came up we raised the mainsail. Rather a smart acceleration I thought, but then the Liki-Tiki has a final-generation schooner hull and not the portly shape one associates with galleons. It is conspicuously lacking in cannons (much to Molly’s disappointment) and has a fairly flush main deck without the raised forecastles and poop-decks that folk defend tooth and claw in the swashbuckling films.

It looks so easy in the films, the Captain just shouts an order and the ship heels over onto a new tack. The films tend not to show all the sweat and blisters involved in getting that to happen! Our film crew are not interested in this part of it, so it seems that “Buccaneers of Bone Island” is not going to be a tale of honest seafaring folk demonstrating the purity of labour (as Liberty and Tatiana would both say, then squabble furiously about the interpretation.)

Ten minutes later we could relax for the minute with the sails all set and the Liki-Tiki heading steadily before the wind at about five knots. The Pacific is a much wider place at five knots afloat than at two hundred in the air – though of course here we are hardly likely to run out of fuel, and if the wind does die out it is just a matter of waiting for more.

I noticed a very striking aircraft taking off and going right over us barely two hundred feet above our crow's nest, a Keystone-Loening K-85 with Chinese characters on the fuselage heading straight North-West. It reminded me of all the air adventures I might end up missing – but as one door shuts another opens, and I will definitely get to use my pilot's license one way or another.

Beryl is such a joker sometimes; one can hardly help but laugh. She claims that was Wo Shin flying off with Adele Beasley, and she had persuaded Adele to try a job at her family's Casino where she may make plenty of money and meet lots of interesting people. As if we would believe that one! The tale about the dates being imported from the International Date Line is easier to swallow. After all, just last month Adele had to report Shin for being caught with a bottle of whiskey in the dorm and I would scarcely think Shin would be doing her any favours.

I must say, it was a good thing we have kept ourselves ferociously fit this year, and all of the Songmark team are fairly bulging with good health. Hauling sails on a square-rigger is exceedingly hard work, as bad as fishing on the Noenoke clan's boats last Easter, and by the end of the watch many of the other volunteers were complaining about aching muscles and sore paws. Had this been a film shot we would have been authentically bare-pawed on the deck, something I will have to practice. I mentioned it to Molly, who looked at me quite oddly and commented she was surprised I actually wanted to be bare-pawed as well as everything else.

The evening meal was slightly more "traditional" in Euro terms, a fish and potato Sea Pie with a jolly nice Plum Duff for dessert. I am not sure what Madelene X actually said about it, and from her expression I am not sure I really want it translated. I expect the salt beef and pickled cabbage is being saved up till we are on the open ocean and it is too late for us to jump ship. We have read a lot about the classical Salt Beef – its attractions must have improved like wine with keeping, as the Royal Navy issue was often of a classical vintage and older (and far tougher) than the crew that ate it. Given all that, it is surprising that the Natives who lived on tropical isles full of fresh food and surrounded by fish were the ones popular tales accuse of being cannibals, rather than the Navy.

Before turning in for our hammocks, I took a last breath of air and saw the figure of our Captain standing on the quarterdeck silhouetted against a rising moon. It is a pity the film crew still have their cameras packed away, it made quite a dramatic sight.

From what I gathered back on Casino Island, our skipper has been around these islands off and on since the start of the century, and even since retiring still takes on odd jobs if they promise to be interesting. Just think, he was here before the Gunboat Wars, even! It must have been a very different Spontoon in the days when it was Accounting Island rather than Casino, and when the islands were loud with plantation steam railways hauling plump pineapples rather than tour-boats hauling loud plump tourists.

Saturday 12th April, 1936

Out at sea at last! This morning we threaded our way through the channel North of Eastern Island, surprisingly without a local pilot on board – and more surprisingly, without getting stuck. Our Captain must know this route awfully well, considering the sand banks change after every big storm and charts five years old are worthless.

The only folk who were disappointed were the crew of that experimental tugboat, the one with the flat bottom and pair of giant aircraft engines on outriggers – they shadowed us a mile away till we were into the open ocean, before giving a derisory toot on their foghorn and heading back to Moon Island at about thirty knots. That tug can definitely move, when it is not hauling a cruise ship. I am sure they will get enough custom soon enough, what with the tourist season starting up next month.

A day of tacking and reaching followed, with us slowly zigzagging and beating our way around the Spontoon group heading roughly South-East. Every change of tack needed the sails adjusted; if we added up all the hauling we did in the day the mainsail would be cruising at about 3,000 feet by now. Once we were in open waters there was even more to be done, as the senior crew started asking us to raise other sails and measure how well the ship responded. I could hardly judge how well the Liki-Tiki works compared to its usual schooner rig, but it certainly seemed speedy enough.

It was quite a sight from the rigging as we worked on the topsails sixty feet above the deck, with everything looking very small below. Some things are less than authentic, such as the climbing belt and snap-hooks that we are secured with: in the authentic films one sees sailors walking out on the swaying yards like tight-rope walkers, but a traditional life at sea was noted for its dramatic casualty rate. Still, I can climb rigging as fast as any of the crew, and by the end of the day got into the crow's nest. That is my idea of a view! It is also the only spot in the rigging where

one does not have to concentrate on hanging on tight, and can relax a little to look around. By sunset the only sight of Spontoon was the peak of Mount Kiribatori on the Northern horizon; my ears blushed at the memory of our climb to that peak. Had things turned out differently on that trip, there would already be a new kitten in the Hoele'toemi family, and it would not be half Siamese.

Although we have no tourists on this trip, the Sturdey Boys are just as bad as any – they are ingenious it is true, having been caught peeking into our bunkrooms at shift change with an inverted periscope; from the deck it looked as if they were simply looking overboard. Their father just laughed and commented “boys will be boys” – which will not be true much longer if they peek at some of the rougher ladies of this crew. I have worn Native costume in front of tourists before, but that was my choice to uncover, and felt perfectly wholesome. Since their father directed “The case of the deadly Credenza” Joe and Frank fancy themselves as Detectives and seem to think they have an automatic search warrant on everybody!

Sunday 13th April, 1936

Another full day at sea, with us all getting quite enough exercise to keep our Tutors very happy. It seems the run to Albert Island should be two days, but that is with an average fair wind. It feels as if we have tacked and beaten halfway across the Nimitz Sea to get half-way, which I suppose is a good test for the crew and the new sails. Fifty miles as the ruler on the chart would be just half an hour in even my little Sand Flea, but we are probably sailing over a hundred to get there with the wind as it is.

Unfortunately, film crews do not think in terms of “two days given a following wind”, as they are used to timetabled services and are a long way from their studio with the clock ticking and the wages bills mounting. Mr. Sturdey Senior is pacing the deck impatiently, while our Captain smokes a pipe as placidly as can be, and the Sturdey boys ask everyone “Are we nearly there yet?” about every half hour until the most placid of the crew start to think about keel-hauling and plank-walking. They spend the rest of the time setting “amusing” pranks and chewing gum. That is one bad habit Molly has dropped this year – and even she complains that with a whole ocean four strides away there is no excuse for them to tread it into the deck.

I don't know what folk do in their home East Coast town of Coveport (not that far from New Haven, Ada tells me) but just because we are ultimately getting paid for their charter trip, does not make us their personal servants or worse. It is nearly as bad as what Jirry tells me of working with Little Shirley Shrine, who at least has the excuse of being famous in her own right and not inheriting influence.

The Meeting Island crew are a fine bunch though, and all of them have years of experience on small boats. Growing up on Spontoon looks a fine thing, what with trees to climb and the sea always in sight. It definitely builds independent and very competent crew, as our Captain never has to give an order twice around here – folk “jump to it” as smartly as any Naval cadets at Dartmouth.

A tiring time of it indeed – we have no privacy on board, as even the “bedroom” is an open plan deck with one watch always fast asleep and another coming in to wake them. One cannot really sit and talk there, but there is a fore-castle cabin (“Fo'csul head” to the old salts) where we can relax before heading to our hammocks. Considering there are at least twenty more crew than the ship normally carries, we are happy just to have that one luxury. It is a good thing we are only heading for Albert Island and not crossing the Pacific, as I can quite imagine problems with food and water for this number of us. Carmen is looking forward to sampling the ship's supply of fresh weevils, which I suppose would be an exotic treat to an anteater like her.

Ada and Carmen are particularly looking forward to getting to our destination, as they are rather short of congenial company onboard. I suppose with Miss Morgaine Melson filming on Spontoon, all their friends are on South Island right now trying to catch the Director's eye. Ada has seen the script, she tells me, and without being at all subtle Melson Productions takes a standard Adventure plotline and does with it what that squadron of Handley-Page 400 bombers did to Cologne railway station. The film poster might look quite conventional, as there is a dashing hero, a leading lady cast by Miss Melson (very) personally, and all the usual ingredients. The difference is that pious Missionaries actually do get eaten in this script, the hero spectacularly fails to carry out any rescues and the heroine and the exceedingly slinky villainess – well, one can imagine. As with many films made on Spontoon, there is a version that will pass the American “Hayes Office” censorship and a Pacific and European one that will not, and not just because of the costumes – I expect the European version is an awful lot longer and with plot twists that would send the Hayes Office up in smoke.

I suppose it makes a change, and keeps actors busy: although the plotline does call for a hero and his sidekick, they will not be coming back to star in any sequels. Some studios maintain a

small stable of stars, but Melson productions seem to prefer a rapid turnover! Even the leading lady changes over every few films, which keeps Ada ever hopeful.

(Later) Land ho! The sun was setting when Albert Island appeared on the horizon. We were ordered to take in all sails and set the sea anchor a mile out, much to the disgust of the film crew. I heard our Captain telling them the reefs were treacherous, and not even the Natives dared them in the dark with their sailing canoes, let alone with a ship this size. Besides, there is little point in arriving in the middle of the night, as even if the producer loaded the cine cameras with that amazing new infrared film, so much technology would hardly suit a classical Pirate theme.

Monday 14th April, 1936

This is a morning I am definitely glad I am not on Beryl's watch, as they slept through the whole thing. After breakfast the bell rang for "all hands on deck" and we lined up on the main deck while our Captain quietly puffed his pipe and kept a weather eye open.

I had not realised that Albert Island was so dangerous to approach – Captain Gary solemnly warned us of the dangers of the reef and currents, pointing out there was only one route into the main bay for a ship this size, and even that was narrow. He had us uncover the lifeboats and had all the film crew put on lifejackets "just in case" – of course, all the sailing crew can swim these days even though the stories say many authentic Pirates could not.

Then – my heart was in my mouth as he selected me as forward lookout, to warn of reefs ahead! Feline eyesight and balance were what was needed, as he told the rest of the disappointed Casino Island crew. Three of them were told off to watch the water depth – and although folk talk of lazy people "swinging the lead" it looked jolly hard work.

So this morning I stood on the bowsprit four yards above the waves, holding onto the forestay as we raised quarter sail and gradually worked our way towards the invisible gap in the reef. For an hour we felt our way forwards, staying on short tacks until the Captain called out we were on the right heading. Then the mainsail was raised and we fairly charged forwards, the foam surging round the bows behind me as another half hour brought us safely into the bay, much to everyone's relief. We must have been dead centre in the channel, as although the water was crystal clear I could see nothing dangerous for at least two hundred yards either way.

Albert Island at last – we anchored in twelve fathoms, a hundred yards from shore. If this had been the Noenoke fleet I would have jumped in and swam ashore, but we are under orders here until we get shore leave. It looked rather like the West side of Spontoon's Main Island, except not quite so vertical – nothing but jungle, except where smoke rising through the trees marked villages. I had my adventure for the day, and was glad to see Molly being picked to go with the whaler to make contact with the natives. Although they are expecting us, I heard Captain Gary warn the film crew that they are a wild crowd and one never really knows with them. They have a lot of "taboos" that they take extremely seriously, and are liable to get very annoyed if one breaks them – the nearest police and Embassies to complain to are back on Spontoon.

(Later) We are back on dry land – or perhaps I should say solid land, as the rainstorms are just as sudden and heavy as Main Island gets. My watch was given permission to go ashore, and discovered the nearest village was only a hundred yards into the jungle. The Natives are a very striking clan of felines, leopards such as Mr. N'Kualita who ran the office on Casino Island. It turns out he is the son or grandson of the Chief, and must be the only one of his tribe who wears a suit. The rest of them are dressed very ... comfortably, with costumes as brief as on Spontoon but constructed to quite different patterns. It is a matter of the weaving and patterning, which to someone fresh from Europe would look very similar, in the same way a true Native might confuse a Euro policeman and a park-keeper.

Some of the film crew had their cameras out immediately, and others had their tongues hanging out. I have never seen so many felines in so little costume, and I think Ada and Carmen will enjoy at least the scenery here. Our timetable is a mixture of sailing and shore leave, depending on the weather and the needs of the film crews: a pity since we are only likely to get to explore the island when it is pouring down. From what the senior crew tell us, they have waterfalls even bigger than the ones on Spontoon, and some fascinating ancient ruins.

There is a dance and welcoming festival scheduled for tonight, but my watch is wanted back onboard the Liki-Tiki. Life at sea is full of little disappointments like that – but on the whole I have no complaints!

Wednesday April 16th, 1936

It has been quite a time, helping sail the ship while film cameras roll. Molly almost got her wish, being one of a dozen filmed in the rigging waving a cutlass although the ship was three hundred yards from the lens and a silhouette is about all the audience will see. Actually the cutlass was a piece of bamboo, as other folk were working below on deck and nobody liked the idea of accidentally dropping real hardware on them.

I have to keep pointing out to her that the Sturdey Boys are our employer's cherished pups (though her term "brats" is not inaccurate) and however deserving they should not be on the receiving end of a winch block "accidentally" dropped from the crow's nest. With all the Native fur ashore to look at, one would have thought they would give up putting mirrors and cameras in our quarters – but I suppose folk only really value things that are hard to get. Two cameras have ended up overboard just this morning. If anyone objects, they just wave their passports and claim whatever it is, it doesn't apply to them. They keep referring to the locals as "Injuns", which even Molly says is all wrong.

Happily, we will be dropping them and the film crew ashore where they can shoot some jungles before coming back next week and then we can see just how the Liki-Tiki really can go. I was quite wrong about our sails, as it turns out a lot of commercial ships actually did have square rigs until the middle of the last century – still, there can have been few of them in these waters since the resettlement of Spontoon.

Another thing I was quite wrong about was the diet of the Albert Islanders, at least at the time this sailing rig was common. They freely admit that they did used to eat people – but only tribal enemies they knew and respected personally. I suppose it might be a case of "you are what you eat" and they would not want to take pot luck eating strangers for fear of how they turned out. They have given that up fairly recently, but I have overheard the price they are charging the film crew to shoot here – financially at least, some folk are still getting skinned and scalped.

We are being kept very busy working on the ship, ferrying in fresh water from ashore, polishing the brasswork till it gleams and scrubbing the deck with chunks of pumice (the "holystone" of the old stories). Still, tomorrow we have a major treat – shore leave!

Friday 18th April, 1936

A marvellous two days, of sand and sunshine. We started off yesterday with a Native guide, a young jungle cat calling herself Tomo'bola who promised to show us some of the sights of the island. She spoke quite good English, and said she was very surprised to hear Molly and me addressing her in Spontoonie. It is good to hear that our accent is convincing, as much as many Casino Island folk at least.

Madelene X turned her snout up at being escorted round by anyone in such a costume, so the party was the rest of the Songmark contingent plus three from the Meeting Island school, a rabbit girl and two otter brothers, identical twins. All of us were feeling energetic, and keen to make a change from hauling ropes, so we asked if we could climb the island's central peak. Tomo'bola readily agreed, and a fine and strenuous morning's climb up through the jungle trails got us out onto the summit rocks just in time for lunch.

The island was spread out below, and quite a sight it was. Our guide pointed out the various landmarks, including some that did not show up on our map. Two valleys and one stretch of coast she says are Taboo, and neither the locals nor visitors should go there. I am familiar with a few possible reasons for that – but when I asked in Spontoonie, she replied than not even their priests set paw in those regions. So it is nothing like Sacred Island – more cursed than sacred in fact, though our guide would not say why.

Looking at the coastal strip through my field-glasses, it seemed harmless enough. A bright green swamp seemed to be steaming slightly in the sun, with rocky outcrops poking up here and there. Some of the outcrops looked artificial, as if ancient towers were crumbling away in the moist heat. The sort of place in which Professor Schiller would doubtless be interested, as he has been looking for inexplicably ancient structures in this area, and claims to be on the track of some primal religion or other.

We returned via Tomo'bola's village, a rather well laid-out settlement of two dozen longhouses in a familiar style. These folk are definitely not on a tourist trail, which made it rather odd to spot a pair of radio wires slung between trees. Down in the main village by the bay everything was as untouched as possible, with the Sturdey Boys discovering to their horror that waving money is no use at all where the natives were "too dumb to even know about cola."

I would not be amazed if the main village hoisted their radio aerials as soon as they see us hoisting sail to depart, these islands are like that. They might be celebrating our departure in cola

dug up from concealment next week, though I would expect by then some of them will want rather stronger refreshment.

Although the really impressive waterfall was on the far side of the island, Tomo'bola showed us a perfectly good one about forty feet high, with a sandy pool just perfect for bathing. It was as well Madelene X refused this trip, as we spent two hours in bare fur swimming and relaxing on the beach. The Spontoones are of course quite used to this, as the native bathing costume is none at all. I was very glad to feel the sun on my fur, as the authentic sailing shirt is beginning to chafe in places; I think it would have anyway but my figure is starting to be a tender subject. I remember what Moeli said last year about being able to improve my figure, and definitely the process is underway. Whatever the problems, I am really quite looking forward to it, now I have got used to the idea.

Ada is possibly our best swimmer in the whole year and even the otter gentlemen were impressed by her performance. She can take a complement from anyone, and is happy to bathe in bare fur in any company. Still, I could see she was going to have to turn down some other invitations from them soon – a word in Beryl's capacious ear sent her their direction very happily instead, while I invited Ada to help brush my fur. She was over here as fast as a barracuda, and I only wish I had a stopwatch with me.

Despite everything that happened to her, Molly always seems perfectly at ease with Ada on the beach or in the showers, as she is a great pal and knows exactly where she stands with us. Still, I did see Molly watching us very closely as Ada expertly brushed the sand out of my fur – Molly later said Ada's eyes suddenly lit up and her ears perked when she looked at my figure closely "like a bank teller with a fake C-spot bill." I would hardly have thought Ada liked the idea, remembering how she was violently ill after seeing a cub being born in hospital last year, but she groomed me with very evident and growing enthusiasm till I told her enough was enough.

Oh well. Someone was bound to notice sooner or later. I had not thought there was anything obvious yet, but I do not spend time memorising every line and dot of banknotes either. Since I left Songmark I have not really spent time looking in a mirror, and wearing native dress at the Hoele'toemis was a lot less restricting than this authentic but itchy sailing rig.

We returned to the main village where the locals had laid on a feast for us, that is the Liki-Tiki crew not including the film crew. I think I preferred this one, with a lack of formal dances claimed to be centuries old but probably made for the occasion.

There was one dance they definitely made up for the Spontoones among us – it was a satirical hula, which even I could translate. There were two of the older kittens who came bouncing into the dance bumping into everyone, throwing handfuls of green leaves around and gesturing as if to look under a grass skirt. The backing chorus line made the motions of pile-driving a stake into the ground – of course one does not actually do that to paying customers and their relatives, but none of us would really rush to object if it happened. The youngsters brought up around here are very lively at play, but nothing like the Sturdey boys who are plain obnoxious.

I noticed our Captain looking on in the firelight, and from his expression he can read the hula as well as any of the Casino Island crew, who were roaring with laughter. It was a fine night all round – Beryl is getting on very well with the otter twins, and even Ada and Carmen seem to have found congenial company. They do not have oiled fur with significant comb markings right now, but there is a certain way of wearing one's head-fur and such that seems to be the same here as on Spontoon.

One useful thing about longhouses is there is little in the way of personal furniture, so it was no real trouble for some families of Albert Islanders to squash together for a couple of nights and free up a couple of them for our use. It was a restful evening on my part, though not for everyone. I found myself wondering how Beryl tells the two otters apart (the Ingoldsby twins from Main Island) – at which Molly suggested she simply does not worry about it. Oh my.

We had another fine morning today, with a trek to the main waterfall carrying our cameras. It was well worth the trip, as I reckon the main cascade as a hundred and ten feet unbroken drop into a perfect clear pool. It is already getting hot in the afternoons, and another swim proved very welcome. This time Carmen volunteered to comb my back-fur, and I could tell she was scenting me very carefully. Of course, my year knows each other's scents down to the last detail by now.

I suppose I could have hidden my changing scent had I made another discovery an hour earlier. The locals provided us with a lunch of local fruits of the season, mostly mangoes and breadfruit ("green" coconuts come in next month.) They also had for their own consumption something that sent my whiskers twitching – I think that happened to everyone, but most folk retreated upwind rather than begged a share as I found myself doing. A large, ripe Durian fruit would probably be declared contrary to the Hague Conventions on chemical warfare, but today my mouth watered at the first scent. It was absolutely ripe, with flesh as soft as custard inside, and a

taste all of its own (Molly describes it as vegetable carrion, and insisted I wash my paws and muzzle for five straight minutes after I had finished.)

All good things come to an end, and by sunset we were back on the Liki-Tiki getting everything extra-shipshape for tomorrow's departure. There is a consolation for this part of the trip; not only are the film team on shore until we return, but we have their sixteen proper bunks to share between us – quite a treat for whoever gets lucky enough to have one!

Sunday 20th April, 1936

Sea, sun, sails, sweat! We have paid for our shore leave with two days of hard labour in the open ocean, where the Captain and senior crew have been putting the Liki-Tiki through its paces and seeing what speed she can log. Molly has stopped calling the ship a "boat", after her third spell of holystoning the deck. Sailors use all sorts of colourful language, but they object to their ocean-going ship being miscalled, claiming it brings bad luck.

Thinking of which, I hope Adele Beasley is having a successful time finding a holiday job. I recall her saying she really gets little chance to meet people, as she is always coming out of our sick bay and having to catch up with her Songmark work. Something in the tourist industry might suit her, safe indoor work where she meets plenty of interesting gentlemen.

We are better fed aboard than we were led to expect – in fact a lot of the hardships are not what we were led to believe. It is awfully hard work and the accommodation and plumbing are only what we can realistically hope for, but our galley does a very fine job of feeding thirty hungry crew. There are only two folk who complain – Madelene X (who always does) and Carmen (who was expecting biscuit with live wholemeal weevils although they are said to be rather bitter and an acquired taste.)

Not surprisingly, given a part Spontoonie crew there is a lot of Poi on the menu – plus an alternative such as sweet potato much to Molly's relief. I remember being amazed at hearing Missy K describe in the "pre-euro" times some of the bigger and stronger Hawaiians ate up to five pounds of Poi a day. Molly snorted, and pointed out everyone who did that before Captain Cooked surveyed the area is dead by now, so it cannot be that healthy. She was amazed to see me getting through about three pounds daily with obvious enjoyment, but then we are working awfully hard. All the work beforehand on the Hoele'toemi garden plot is paying off, as we are getting as sleek as racehorses with the hard work and sunshine. I could wish this was one of the Liki-Tiki trips where the crew had Native dress, as I have to wear my one silk slip under my itchy shirt now, and it is getting jolly hot on deck.

Around noon we had a Sunday "church parade" as they call it in the Army, for any interested parties. I stayed away, as did Molly. Beryl attended, and practiced looking sweet and innocent throughout. When I queried her afterwards she put on a Confederate American drawl like Ada's and declared with languid gestures "All mah life, ah hev depended upon the gullibility of strangers". I think it is from some book of Ada's which she borrowed.

The Spontoonies had their own ceremony at sunset, which I did join in with. As it was entirely in the local language, Madelene X was persuaded that it was a folk-song session, though to Beryl's disappointment we did not get her to sing along with the chorus. One of the Spontoonies did offer to compromise and recited the Lord's Prayer in Pidgin English – but he got as far as "God, you our Fadda. You stay inside da sky..." when she howled for mercy. I suppose anyone brought up to finish with "Amen" might take issue with it translated as "Dass all", but surely it is the thought that counts.

So ends our first full week at sea!

Tuesday 22nd April, 1936

After another two days of hard sailing we saw Albert Island reappear on the dawn horizon, and it was Beryl's good luck to be the one in the crow's nest shouting "Land Ho!" There are some advantages on being on her watch. She is not short of company, having the Ingoldsby twins to talk to – between the three of them, the chances are at least one a night will be given one of the private cabins with a bunk. The bunks are small, but so is she, and the otters are most remarkably agile young Spontoonies.

Our Captain is a jolly steady sort, and as long as all the duties get done he has not yet invoked any of the severe traditional Naval punishments that Beryl says were used as inspirations at her old school. In fact, I have taken a peek at the chart of Albert Island – and either the charts are woefully inaccurate about the dangers of the coral reef, or he was pulling our tails pretty severely!

In fact, although he did put one of the Meeting Island girls on the bowsprit as lookout again that might have been just for effect, as this time we sailed straight into the bay without having to tack once. There is certainly some coral at low tide, but the channel marked on the map is half a mile across, and without the film crew aboard there was no mention of readying the lifeboats.

By mid-morning we had anchored and the third watch (with Ada and Carmen) had gone ashore with the Captain. There is always plenty of work to do on a sailing vessel, with ropes to be spliced and sails to be patched – even the ones stowed in the lockers have to be regularly taken out and aired against tropical mildew which can leave them looking intact but about as strong as blotting-paper.

Still, we had a treat at lunchtime when two of the native canoes pulled up against us and a dozen folk climbed up to pass the time of day. The Liki-Tiki being an Inter-Island Tours boat and the island's main tourist vessel, it was not surprising that half the senior crew had relatives ashore.

I spotted what I thought was a fascinating local custom when one of the visiting felines, a rather pretty one, solemnly handed over two handfuls of what looked like ten-inch ship's nails to a crewman relative, who bowed and vanished below with them although I could see he was trying hard not to laugh. I sought her out later on and quietly asked in my best Spontoonie about the custom, quickly adding that I was sorry if I was asking about one of their taboos.

She actually did burst out laughing, and explained the whole thing as I scribbled down her accent as best as Lexarc shorthand can record; it was quite different from both Orpington and Spontoon speech.

"Plenty trouble movie men! Big movie-chief, pay he plenty Cowry take picture, movie chief sons think make picture means own what picture show. All Wahini'i smile, Wahini'i give guests flower lei, no look twice movie-chief sons, no take to hut. Us call they "Injun squaw" we think be bad word in movies. They go talk-talk other movie men, hear Island tale Hawa'ii from Grandmother's grandmother her days, of first tall ship crossed Great Ocean. No-good pups next day come they back, Cowry no good here, brother tell brother. Euro cowry no good say Grandmother's grandmother, ask she for thunder-metal. Thunder-metal fine make needle, make spear for fish, cost Grandmother's grandmother only take sailor-fellow go hut.

"But movie-chief sons they no tall fine sailor-fellow, All Wahini say world no have enough cowry, enough thunder-metal take them mat! Think of Taboo fast; say no village take one, take then two brothers from off island, till one moon month she passes by. Brother he say bad word against brother and go, no brother want to be one he wait! Wahini'i think of new taboos if movie-chief sons come back."

Well, I can hardly say I am amazed. Actually, I passed the story around and my watch raised three cheers for the home team. Beryl grinned, and whispered she and the Ingoldsby twins could get Frank Sturdey's cabin tonight. I refrained from even asking her any more about THAT.

Actually, if the Sturdey Boys just knew it, they could have been perfectly well received here without raiding the carpenter's chest. The natives are generally quite friendly if treated with any ordinary measure of respect – I could see the Meeting Island crew grinning and tails wagging as they talked the story over and discussed how spectacularly the visitors had "fouled their own propeller" as one nautical vole gentleman rather aptly put it.

I expect Ada is having fun, as she found some sympathetic company ashore last time, as did Carmen who might be the first ant eater some of these folk have met. They will have a lot to tell Prudence and Belle when they return, and can hardly complain too much about missing the filming. It is harder for them to find suitable company than it is for the rest of us – that dorm might make up a fifth of our number, but Songmark is hardly anyone's idea of a standard population.

We took the chance to resupply on fresh fish and fruits, after five days on ship's rations. We do eat a lot of corned beef onboard (Molly mourns the lost chance to sell them PAMS) and "skilly and duff" is the galley cook's culinary highlight, which is at least filling. An authentic Pirate ship would dine on Salmagundi, which is a stew of everything luxurious and edible found in a captured ship's galley together with wine and spices – probably it would not include PAMS, as even Molly admits.

There is little chance for privacy aboard, even with one watch of us ashore. Having bought a nice dripping ripe durian from the locals, I thought it better to eat it sitting in the ship's dinghy towed six yards astern so as not to disturb anyone. I was surprised to see Molly jumping in and swimming over to me, though indeed she stayed on the upwind side of the boat.

I suppose it must be rather a shock to Molly, watching me take a liking to Poi and durians, and inviting Ada to groom me (which was all she did, my tastes have only changed as to food.) She is just as worried as Helen about what our Tutors will say about it. Something she pointed out that I had not thought of, was that Miss Devinski keeps the picture of the dorm that are now wanted Air Pirates on her wall, and it might not be as I thought it was, kept on show as an awful warning.

I'm not sure about Molly's idea that Letitia Fosbury-Smythe's dorm are successful examples of Songmark training put to good use, with just a few unfashionable details that fussy folk would quibble about. Molly is a little prejudiced against Law and Order but that is hardly her fault, just a matter of her upbringing. But I can see her point, that they might even prefer that idea to me finishing up hoeing a taro patch in between scraping for low-paid second pilot positions without full qualifications. I will find out quite soon enough, and till then try to make the most of this trip.

Wednesday 23rd April, 1936

Another day's hard sailing, with the cameras rolling onshore and us glad to be onboard. The day started with one of the (frequent) lively debates about the filming schedule – Mr. Stanton Sturdey the Second demanded we sail into the bay stage left, or on a south-west heading. Our Captain blew out a streamer of smoke from his pipe, and quietly pointed out the wind was steady at exactly the wrong quarter, and even with its handier schooner rig the Liki-Tiki could not do it today. Major argument followed, but the laws of Nature won (she is bigger and more experienced than Mr. Sturdey and cares nothing for scriptwriters.)

Just one more day of sailing around the island, and then we head home to Spontoon! We had some close-in shots done yesterday of hauling sails, where we were authentically bare-pawed. The cameraman asked us not to look as if it was too hard – as the film's stars will be the ones straining heroically against the wheel et cetera and we are just extras. I suppose it could have been worse, in the Little Shirley Shrine film "Good Ship Sherbet-Dip" there is a comic keel-hauling scene where the entire cast had to haul, sing and grin at the same time.

After our exertions we at least had a suitably nautical treat, a generous issue of hot grog made with lime-juice. Molly was most impressed, calling the rum "The real McCoy" though that sounds more like a whisky to me. Her ears drooped at the thought of Prohibition being over in her homeland, with so many profitable business opportunities now closed. The senior crew are arranging a fine party on Casino Island when we return on Saturday, and indeed we are looking forward to it. After that – well, it will be time to give Miss Devinski some news, and to work out what I will say when I write home.

We anchored in the bay again and welcomed two boatloads of locals aboard. Just because we are wearing Euro costume for filming does not mean we have to do without flower leis and the like when the cameras are not watching. Ada and Carmen vanished and reappeared in native costume, pointing out to a seething Madelene X that a big enough flower lei provides quite as much coverage as a bathing costume top. I followed suit, and indeed a cool wreath of flowers is very much nicer than cotton duck when working in this weather.

The Sturdey boys have been causing more diplomatic incidents ashore, to nobody's surprise – one of this year's movie hits was "Treasure Archipelago" and they have been digging large holes around the island in search of ill-gotten gold. Of course, anything found on islands full of savages rightfully belongs to whatever Euro lays paws on it, according to all the films. Apart from being successfully diverted to dig the rocks out of Mama Potuvu'hi's taro patch, they have left some of the village gardens looking a bit like Flanders in 1918, and this morning managed to put their pick through the new water pipe feeding the village washing hut. As everyone knows (in movies) the Natives hurriedly bury their treasure at the sight of explorers, and all one has to do is to look for disturbed ground and dig it up. They have probably been following the real-life and controversial exploits of "Kansas" Smith, that rather swashbuckling archaeologist who thinks careful excavation with brushes and trowels is far too slow. The rumours have it she invests her expedition profits in Nobel Dynamite Company shares, and at any rate must get bulk discounts as a major customer.

Beryl was asking keenly about the local Taboo on cannibalism of visitors, but it seems this is one they take seriously however provoked. She seemed most disappointed, as it takes a lot to impress a graduate of Saint T's, and she is always interested in the more extreme local customs. The locals do not eat strangers – but after some thought they agreed in certain cases they would not mind if someone else did. It is a good thing Beryl is a mouse, not a tigress, is all I can say. I left her writing down cookery tips and recipes that do not feature on any restaurant menus (I hope.)

One reason for the ship's watches being different lengths is that we gradually rotate around the clock – if they were all eight hours long rather than two nines and a six, whoever started off doing the midnight shift would be stuck with it. We are on tonight's night watch, which should be relaxing – Molly is teaching some of the Spontoonies the delights of Detroit straight flush poker, and the forecabin is a handy place for those not actually on deck watch to relax while

staying handy for emergencies. It looks like it should be a peaceful shift – then off to Spontoon tomorrow on the tide!

Thursday 24th April, 1936

Memo to myself – never, ever write again about tomorrow being sure to be a peaceful day. It is just tempting fate. Everything started well with a fair steady breeze as we woke up and made ready to sail on the evening tide. The boat went ashore to start ferrying the filming crew aboard, and we were getting set when someone started flashing us a message via heliograph from the shore.

The equipment and films are packed and the camera crew are too – except the Sturdey Boys, who have been missing since last night. They have vanished with their knapsacks, coils of rope, lanterns, hammer, pick and chisel – three of us on the deck said “treasure hunting” in the same breath. By lunch time they had not turned up, and folk were getting worried – their Father is starting to make noises about his sons being kidnapped, and insisting we radio off for the police straight away. It is probably a good thing nobody is admitting to having a radio around here.

Honestly – anyone who would kidnap that pair would probably be cured of criminal tendencies for life. It seems the locals have already searched and passed the word out to the other villages, but nobody has reported seeing them, and they have already been leaving tracks everywhere which makes things difficult to spot the most recent ones.

Our Captain was very cool indeed by all accounts as Mr. Sturdey started flapping about contacting Interpol about kidnapers or the American Embassy to send some marines. Captain Gary has asked for volunteers to help in the search – of course I put my paw up immediately. I could see Molly wavering until one of the senior crew added that we would be going nowhere till the missing brats were found, at which she grudgingly gave in.

Two trips in the whaler got the ten volunteers from my shift ashore, where we met our Captain and the headman, Mr. N’Kualita senior (very senior, he looked quite ancient but still as tough as an old tree-root.) It seemed they had been having quite some discussion, and indeed they might have known each other decades.

As the Sturdey boys are not greatly into delicate archaeology, one can hear them pickaxeing a good distance away – and nobody in the villages or on the paths has done this morning. That led our Captain to think they can only be in one of the areas the locals refuse point-blank to set paw in, despite the huge reward Mr. Sturdey was waving for their safe recovery.

The old chief was really quite upset at the idea of anyone going in there – he insisted all three areas were full of “bad juju” and absolutely too dangerous to even visit. Well, that was perfectly true of the Western Front but plenty of people went there. He agreed to allow his folk to act as trackers up to the boundaries, but insisted they go no further. His whiskers did not even twitch as Mr. Sturdey pulled out his cheque book and offered him any sum he cared to name.

There seemed no point in delaying further, so Molly and I joined up with the bosun Mr. McReady and three of the Spontoonies, the water vole and two perky coyote girls from Main Island. We took much the same equipment as the Sturdey Boys had, leather knapsacks, water bottles, iron spikes, lanterns plus oil flasks and all the usual exploration gear; Mr. McReady even insisted on carrying a stout ten-foot bamboo pole, as he said it was the tradition.

We also enlisted three local hunters, brothers from the Lalataba family, who joked that they could scent the Sturdeys half-way across the island by their fur-gel they comb into their head-fur. Unlike the Spontoonie oiled and cured fur, this attracts dirt and does not repel insects, in fact quite the reverse which gives the junior Sturdeys another thing to complain about (as if they needed it.).

Our search area was the valley and swamp we had seen from the top of the central peak, the far side of the island from our East coast anchorage. Four hours of strenuous walking along jungle trails carrying packs followed, and then the Lalataba brothers pointed down to the trail with pride – two clear sets of prints from square-toed patent leather polo boots, leaving the trail and vanishing into a swathe of crushed and trampled vegetation that plunged down towards the valley where no paths lead. The ten-foot pole was rather a burden, but we took turns carrying it between pairs of us, and I could hardly argue with it being a traditional accessory.

The three felines were tough-looking native hunters, and I would have them on my side in any sort of fight – but half way down the slope they stopped, and adamantly told us they were not breaking Taboo. Molly did point out we would never tell their Chief if they disobeyed his order – but no, they absolutely refused to go a step further into that valley, and told us they would wait uphill on the path two days for us. One hears of the total power of Taboo on the primitive mind, but generally in the sort of Hollywood films that Spontoonies only watch for laughs.

The sun was getting alarmingly low as we went down the bank, following the vegetation trail. The plants were rather surprisingly crushed for only two people to have made the trail, and

when I widened the trail I found they were oddly soft and pulpy for normal jungle growth. I took one last look up the hill, and saw the three brothers standing like guardian statues on the trail that led between settled villages and farmed lands, the red sun shining on their mottled fur. For a second I hesitated, fighting the urge to run back up to join them – but I have never quit on anything yet, and could hardly start when there was absolutely nothing visibly dangerous in our path.

After a few minutes the slope levelled out, and the too-flimsy vegetation thinned out. There was what looked like an abandoned, cast-up beach – or more like the polluted waste land behind Barchester Gas Works, a cinder-strewn dead zone where only scrubby bushes cling on to life for a few painful years. I felt really very odd, considering there was nothing much to see, and I could tell the Spontoonies were getting very nervous. Molly and Mr. McReady strode on seemingly unworried, only commenting they were glad the tailroot-high bushes were no longer slowing us down.

It was a very singular place. Looking along the valley side in the evening light, I could see the evenly sloping beach zone continuing until the bend of the hill hid it from view. Downhill, things were different again. We could smell the swamp, and it was rather awfully different from the brown, peaty aroma of Grimpond Mire back home – had even Beryl been here and told us there were unburied battlefields under the waters, I would have believed her in that place.

From the top of the mountain we had seen the general features of the valley, a flat green swamp perhaps half a mile wide at the point we met it. There were five or six islands of solid-looking ground in the shivering moss, with piled stones that could have been just natural products of weathering or might have been something entirely different. The bog around it was a peculiar colour, and seemed somehow unconvincing, like a painter's first attempt at colouring tropical growths. It did not seem to be growing as part of the land like the jungle, but to have crawled out and over the land, except where the rocky islands had worn through like fingertips sticking through an old glove or bones poking through the hide of a carcass.

After ten minutes casting up and down the dead beach, Mr. McReady gave a call and we gathered round – sure enough, there was mud splashed where someone had recently started to wade into the swamp. Looking across, the nearest hillock was about two hundred yards away, but though we all shouted there was no reply except the hum and buzz of millions of biting insects.

Despite everything, this was the sort of situation we had been trained for. We took a long drink from the water bottles and cached the packs high up on the shore, roped ourselves together and sent the lightest one ahead, Haroo the water-vole probing with the aid of the ten-foot pole.

It was an awful crossing. What made it worse was that the pole often went down without resistance beyond a few feet as if we were walking on a floating raft of vegetation that might rip open like a rotten carpet under our weight. My heart was definitely pounding as we stepped onto the greasy but reassuringly solid stones of the hummock, and cast about for more clues. The whole thing was hardly twenty yards across at widest, and it was not hard to see where rocks had been prized up to look underneath and a few tentative trenches hacked in the slick and greasy earth. A chewing-gum wrapper caught in the dead twigs of a shrub at the swamp's edge was our confirmation as if we needed any.

From the middle of the valley we could get a clear view, though the sun was already on the horizon and we were all rather worried about running out of light. About four other hillocks broke the surface of the swamp as the valley neared the coastal lagoon from which an odd mist was rising. Three of them were no bigger than the one we were on, but the furthest seemed lower but four times as wide. It might have been a mile and a half away.

We were hesitating, when I saw a sudden flash in the last rays of the sun, from the biggest and furthest island. It might have been a pickaxe raised to dig or a water bottle raised to drink – whichever, there was certainly someone on that islet. Mr. McReady saw it too – and he hardly needed to growl that we had to “jump to it” if we were to get there in time. I wished we could have jumped to it, but we were condemned instead to flounder across the swamp. Even on the drier land the insects were absolutely eating us, and against the sunset every one of our figures was clouded with a dark halo of flies.

Anyway, we had no choice in the matter, and started picking our way forward through the green flabby moss with its inhabitants crawling into our ears and noses. On firm land we would have jogged it in ten minutes, but here it was a tortuous probing with many dead ends and sometimes we would recoil at the sudden shore of a jet-black lake where the pole found no bottom. All the time the sun was setting, and I thought of the cheerful sunsets in the stern cabins of the Liki-Tiki peacefully anchored on the far side of the island.

Every now and then we would come across a muddy splash where the Sturdeys had preceded us, and wondered how they had managed it. Molly saw the answer first – she had been looking longingly at the nearest dry ground with a distinctive dead tree as we struggled past one of

the small islets – and in ten minutes one of the branches had vanished. The floating swamp valley is tidal, and was rising up as the tide comes in! They must have come this way at low tide hours ago, when the ground was a lot more solid.

By the time we had got to five hundred yards from the large islet we could see part of it was already under the rising swamp – and we could also see two figures silhouetted in the fading light on top. Mr. McReady had his bosun's whistle and blew it hard – at which I could see the figures stop for a few seconds, wave and carry on digging.

It was a jolly good thing we were roped together; about two hundred yards from the islet, I felt the moss ripping under me and I plunged into the oily waters up to my shoulders. Molly and the rest pulled me out – and we found out what else was down there. Leeches. A dozen or more ugly-looking red and black leeches had fastened onto me, and it took two precious minutes of daylight to remove them with tincture of iodine. I have never seen ones marked like that before, and I never hope to again.

We were definitely running out of daylight by the time we reached solid ground – and by then the islet was down to about half the size it had been. This is a week of Spring tides, almost the highest and lowest tides of the year. While we unroped and Molly helped me treat all my bites (plus the ones she had herself) our bosun went forward to have a word with the Sturdey boys. One might have thought they would have ran to see us delighted to be rescued, but it took another five minutes of furious debate before they all came back.

It is a good thing we are all jolly fit, as getting this far had been a major strain on the system and getting back after sunset proved a lot harder. The insects definitely do not go to bed at dusk, and simply call up a new watch of them who all wake up hungry. I am only glad I made sure Molly kept up with her quinine tablets every day, and all our inoculations are up to date.

We reached the solid shore about midnight, after all of us had taken several duckings. If not for the rope, I doubt any of us would have got out alive. It took another half hour in the dark to find the cache of knapsacks marking our trail and we drained our water bottles – trying without much success to wash out the taste of the swamp water we had all swallowed.

Our rescuees halted on the shore and demanded we make camp for the night – right on the scrubby beach with no drinking water, tents or vegetation to make shelters from. A fine camp site, I don't think! Mr. McReady was the soul of discretion, though I could hear him grinding his teeth as he persuaded them to at least get up the hill onto the trail where we might send word to their father, who (he diplomatically said) might be worried about them.

True to their word, the Lalataba brothers were waiting where we left them, and one went off at a run to report our return safe and sound. They had picked a fair feast of wild fruits while they waited for us, and we all had a very welcome supper on the trail. After that – our bosun simply told the Sturdey boys we were going back to the ship, another ten miles, and invited them to follow. They were furious about not getting their way, but joined on the party as we took the next six stumbling hours to cross the island in the dark, arriving at the beach just as dawn was breaking. The jungle trails were definitely dark even for my night vision, and we all stumbled along in file like those pictures of the blinded after a gas attack. In the films, the captives are taken back to the cannibal's village suspended from poles tied by their paws, and indeed we still were carrying a very suitable pole for the job – but although it was very tempting, we had to remember who our employer was. Otherwise I am sure the Lalatabas would have been very happy to re-enact for us an authentic piece of Island history.

I only recall us all staggering onto the beach, throwing away our clothes (which were beyond salvage), lying out in the breaking surf to wash our fur as best we could and somehow getting onboard as the Liki-Tiki sailed on the morning tide. That was enough for me!

Friday 25th April, 1936

How I got into my hammock I have no idea, but I certainly woke up there in mid-afternoon – feeling rather unwell, with a sick pounding headache as if we had spent the night drinking that awful bootleg gin Prad Phao sold me on Pinafore Island. The rest of the search party were there, all of us in definite need of a proper wash and grooming – which was the first thing I attended to, even without fresh rinsing water.

In a few hours we were all up and about, and caught up with washing and news. The good news was we were making excellent sailing, with every sail set and a strong South-easterly pushing us along at twelve knots to the delight of the senior crew. The bad news was the Sturdey boys got to tell their father their version of events first – they had been just about to get the treasure when we had stopped them, obviously part of a sinister Native plot to steal it for

ourselves. As proof one of them showed some bones he had dug up on the main islet – where there are bones, there is treasure, obviously.

Ah well, we hardly expected gratitude. The rest of the crew and the Captain have a different opinion, and we were all heartily thanked. It must have been even more discouraging for the two search parties who drew a blank; they had just as bad a time as us and all for nothing.

There was one of the crew who seemed very pensive, one of the Albert Islanders. I saw him having a word with Captain Gary, then all my party were called to the Forecastle cabin where he wanted to speak with us. He started by revealing his Chief had authorised him to tell us the facts, but that the story is one that has not spread beyond Albert Island, and they would be happier if it stayed that way. Obviously I could not make notes at the time, but from memory he said something on the lines of:

“Chief N’Kualita he say brave folk come back from Taboo valley, he fear for them. Hear story why Taboo, why Island fur no go. Long long time gone, Grandfather’s father then he young, tall ships come to Islands, Missionaries they come say all Island folk pray wrong. No pray Fire-gods they say, no pray Sea-gods, Earth-gods. Make mission down on beach one-two islanders they help, treat as guest.

“Earth-god she angry! Island shake, island go down, Sea-god eat valley in night, all mission all village go to feed sea-god before sun-god come he back. Sunset-face valley bad place since, all Chief say no fur go there, mighty big taboo. Sea-god watch over, fur walk in valley they no see village more, some they cursed by Sea-god, they die soon after. All island fur pray you no taken by taboo!”

Well, there is folklore and folklore. I can certainly believe some of the facts, these islands are earthquake-prone and it would not be impossible for one side to drop a few yards and be flooded. It would have shaken the Spontoon group pretty fiercely – but at that date there was nobody there to record it, which would explain why we have never heard about this. If the old main village had been on that side of the island, far from buried treasure the Sturdey boys were probably digging up the Mission graveyard! That would definitely bring anyone severe bad luck, and I only hope it is not contagious.

Thinking of that, I hope I am not going down with anything. I have an awful headache aspirin is doing nothing with, and feel desperately thirsty. Molly says she is the same, and there is a regular queue outside the cabin acting as ship’s hospital.

Still, we are making good speed back to Spontoon, and my shift is excused heavy duties today. We certainly had enough of those last night!

Saturday 26th April, 1936

Spontoon ho! We sighted land on Ada’s watch after a fine run before the wind; all sails set for more than thirty hours brought us sweeping in past South Island before dark. Just as well – my watch was due on next, and I was feeling too sick and dizzy to go into the rigging, with my back and other muscles aching fiercely though we have done no heavy hauling recently. But we put a brave face on things and lined up on deck as the ship docked at the brand new jetty on the western end of Casino Island, this time sailing into port rather than having tugs haul us around. I think the square-rigged sails are a success, even though it needs a lot of us to work them.

The party is tomorrow, we are told, and the film crew will not be invited. They hurried off the ship without as much as a thank-you, eager to get their films developed and themselves on the first seaplanes out towards California.

Back to South Island! Beryl helped us get back to Haio Beach, which was nice of her as Molly and myself were getting worse by the hour with a burning fever. Mrs. H took one look at us and gently led us to the guest hut, which Helen and Marti rapidly cleared out of. She has prescribed complete rest – and is standing over us till I put the pen down. Dear Diary, good night.

Monday May 4th, 1936

(Written much later.)

Oh dear. We had read about Pacific Marsh Typhus in my advanced Field Medicine classes – it was just as well we were in peak fitness, as untreated barely one in four survive it – we came within an inch of our lives, though I am not sure quite how you measure that.

I am writing this in the Casino Island main hospital. Mrs H nursed us herself and would let nobody near until the crisis was past and we could be moved without danger of contagion. Not that the hospital could have done any more for us, though Haroo and one of the Spontoonie coyote girls from our party are in the fever ward with Molly and myself. Although I have had some narrow

shaves piloting Flying Fleas, this is definitely the closest I have come to finding out whether the Baretshire or Spontoonie churches were right in the end – the local strain of Marsh Typhus is something that Joseph Starling and Vostok would be falling over each other to grow in their test-tubes, if they found out about it. Quinine does nothing against it, and there are no vaccinations yet. One of those coyote girls who went with us – well, her village is mourning her.

Molly was even worse hit than I was, and Mrs H says twice she really feared losing her as well. But we are on the mend now, though feeling as if we have been run through the mangle and hung up to dry. Definitely we can tell anyone who asks to avoid that valley, the locals are quite right about the place, and millions of insects are waiting for the next foolish explorer to come wading in there. Whether it is a Sea-God's curse or not scarcely matters.

I hear from the nurse that despite everything, a highly-priced Hollywood doctor has given the Sturdey boys a clean bill of health. It is good to hear, as after all that it would be too bad to save them from the swamp to have the "Taboo" catch up with them.

Though everyone is recovering, I am still feeling rather down in the dumps. I always try to look on the bright side, but right now it hardly seems to help – although true enough it looks like I will not now be having any embarrassing interviews with our Tutors, or writing home with unwelcome news. I had just got used to the idea, too. Everyone says convalescing patients need to be encouraged and kept cheerful. It is a very hard thing to do right now.

Mrs H is a tower of strength and visits every day. I am to hurry up and get better, she says, as there are quite a few folk waiting to celebrate us coming home as heroines. She is one herself, without a doubt: a shiver runs down by tail if I think of what might have happened had she caught it nursing us. The Hoele'toemi clan might have lost all of us. As it is, we are expected to be in here a few more days and then back to South Island to convalesce.

Thursday 7th May, 1936

South Island, sea, sand, sun and – Jirry, who is helping my convalescence by keeping my spirits up. The only good thing about that strain of Typhus is the survivors recover faster than the Euro version, or we would still be in the Doctor Munroabe Memorial Hospital. Fresh air and good plain food are doing their best, and Molly and I am making progress.

I fear I have lost my taste for Poi, which is not too surprising – a pity, as on these islands Missy K has mentioned their having nineteen different taro breeds, each with its own distinct flavour. At least in future I will have that to look forward to. And in future when the locals say an area is even Taboo to their priests, I will stay well clear!

Our Tutors have come to visit, and are very encouraging. In terms of our education the Liki-Tiki trip has counted very favourably, so we are well "in credit" and they tell us not to worry about hurrying back till we are fully fit. Helen has been back nearly two weeks, though of course she returns home for the weekends and gets the guest hut back.

Convalescing has given me plenty of time to think. I remember very little of the worst part of our illness, but I remember Mrs H sponging us with cold water in the middle of the night in our fevers and seeing to – well, everything, when we were too weak to move. Last year when I was Tailfast to the family I thought through some of the future possibilities – one of them being me leaving here at the end of three years, waving goodbye to Spontoon and leaving Jirry to start from scratch looking for another. I have made my mind up now, and that is NOT going to happen. I would be every species of fool to say goodbye to the Hoele'toemi family, who have literally saved my life at least once – and possibly other times that I might not be told about.

Considering they were willing to take me in and a half-Siamese kitten who in truth would have rather stood out in that family – well. Who could possibly do more, and ask for less? In the films it is the heiress who gets kidnapped and is always about to be forcibly married to the Native chief for her inheritance – but it is quite the other way round here, as they are the ones doing all the giving and I can promise them nothing but me. As Helen has pointed out more than once, I am not likely to find better than Jirry, and there is no reason why I should try.

Molly is getting stronger by the day, and indeed it was awful to see her looking almost deflated, lying there like a deer rug. She is healthy enough to have a few things to say about the movie industry and the folk in it – even if she could afford it she says she will not be subscribing again to "Film Frolics".

(Later) Maria and Beryl dropped in to see us – our tutors are being generous with the passes on our behalf. Maria had a fine trip to Italy – or near enough. Her Uncle met her on a new airfield on their fortified Mediterranean island of Lampedusa, which he was officially opening. I suppose it is good security to meet on a wholly military island for discussing secrets, but it does seem rather odd that Maria never sets foot in Italy proper these days, always being whisked away

to some remote spot before she has time to meet anyone she knows. She wistfully remembers her Neapolitan homeland she has not seen in two years – some guidebooks say “see Naples and die” but I am assured that only happens if you drink the unboiled tap water.

Maria is most sympathetic – and indeed, tenfold more when I told her about having started my first kitten, and lost it before even thinking of a name. It is an awful loss, the more I think about it – my kitten might have cost me my Songmark career, but I had decided it was worth the price. I was definitely not going to follow Molly’s suggestion of dyeing my fur as Kim-Anh next January and trying to hide it with a false name; Kim-Anh is not a real person, but a kitten does need a real family.

Maria has a hatred of swamps anyway, and it seems to run in the family; her Uncle has almost finished a big public works project to drain the malarial swamps near Rome. I remember Liberty Morgenstern arguing last term that any government might have done that, as it is only common-sense and saves so much in health costs. Maria very coolly agreed, then pointed out sweetly that anyone in the past century might have done it, but only her Uncle actually did.

Beryl says we should hurry up convalescing and come back, as the first-years are acting up again. Of course, the only reason she would care is her dorm gets our second-year duties like first-year riot control. Wo Shin has for some reason been looking very smug these days by her account, and that dorm seems to have buried their differences without burying each other (amazingly enough), making them a formidable team. Being the leading lights in the Songmark Kilikiti team is getting them a good deal of prestige, and on the Casino Island pitch Brigit Mulvaney managed to put a ball through the British Embassy window at a hundred and twenty yards. It would be nice to think it was an accident, but at Songmark they do teach us to face unwelcome truths. And I must confess - if a certain junior tabby aide had been standing at the window at the time, I might have very quietly cheered.

Saturday 9th May, 1936

Back to Songmark, hurrah! At least, we are to report to our Matron first thing on Monday, and today we all met up on Casino Island to watch the dance classes. Helen and Maria had teamed up with Jasbir’s dorm while we were recovering, but are very pleased to have us back.

Though we have recovered well enough to stroll around Casino Island, getting through a full dance routine is quite another story – my tail drooped as I found out how much fitness we have lost. Still, we gained it by hard work before and we can do it again – considering we came through Swamp Typhus with our lives, we can hardly complain. Had we been on Beryl’s watch on the Liki-Tiki we would have been fast asleep when they called for rescue volunteers – just our bad luck, though someone had to go and get the Sturdey boys home. Molly thinks I made a very poor swap.

Thinking of unlucky folk, I also bumped into Adele Beasley outside our tailors where she was picking up a complete new formal Songmark uniform with blazer – rather odd as we rarely wear the formal kit, but she has been known to spill paint, oil and all sorts of unfortunate things on her clothing. Everyone seems to have had an interesting Easter holiday, and she at least has stayed intact. I asked if she had managed to find a part-time job on Spontoon as she had planned – her ears blushed, she shook her head and said things turned out very differently to anything she expected. Poor Adele – I suppose she had to hang around Casino Island all holiday being bored. I noticed she had an expensive new head-fur style and her claws professionally lacquered, which takes absolutely hours to dry each coat – she must have had a lot of time to kill.

At least when I enquired if she had met any interesting people, she agreed she certainly had – so it cannot have been a complete loss, even if she did not get to put her talents to work like the rest of us.

Sunday 10th May, 1936

Today was a day I had looked forward to for some time, when Saimmi received permission to take us to Sacred Island. Helen and I woke before dawn as requested, kissed our respective sleeping Hoele’toemi brothers good morning and joined Saimmi on the beach where an outrigger canoe was crewed and ready. We took our place at the oars: really, there is no room for passengers on these canoes when getting through the surf, and rowing is jolly good exercise.

South Island really looked very peaceful, although there has already been a big tour boat dropping off tourists at the Resort Bay hotels this week. The first of this season’s beach-side concession stalls is just being erected, and in a few weeks Haio Beach will be a very different place.

It is half an hour's hard row across to Sacred Island, especially given there is only one small gap in the reef which protects it from most directions. But we were ashore ten minutes before sunrise and hurried up the hill to the Tiki array on the summit. It is amazing how folk centuries ago managed to survey the hilltop so exactly – with what I now know, I can see having the structure 3 arc-seconds out of true alignment would stop it working. I just hope no earthquake ever tilts this place like Albert Island. As Susan de Ruiz says about her family's homeland – “God preserve the Pyrenees mountains from an earthquake big enough to make the maps right.”

The ceremony was very moving, and one that Anthropologists would die for (literally.) We were both allowed a small part in the choruses, but of course only Saimmi and the three senior priestesses could chant the final ritual. Helen is becoming quite devout in the local religion, as she says it is the only one where you can actually see results in front of your snout.

On the way back we paused at the beach-side Tiki rows, where both Helen and I were made Tailfast, and will be again in another six weeks. Definitely we are looking forward to that, and perhaps we will meet Moeli's other family when they swim ashore for the Solstice celebrations. My Accounting Island head-dress is carefully stored with the other family clothing in Mrs H's hut – it is rather out of place in the cupboard at Songmark, and not exactly safe if Beryl discovered a well-heeled collector who recognises what it is worth. Whatever its value to a museum, I would not part with it for any money – someday I will need it.

We were back at Haio Beach by lunchtime, and afterwards I helped Helen with the sad task of combing out her patterning; Molly has been in oiled fur since returning from the hospital, but thinks of it more as waterproofing than anything more significant. By half-past two we were back in our Songmark costumes, looking rather out of place amongst the palm-thatched huts and comfortably dressed Spontoones in the warm sunshine.

A farewell to the Hoele'toemis, and then we took a collective deep breath and headed up the trail to Resort Bay and the water-taxis back. At least there was plenty to keep us busy – our water-taxi barely dodged a big Sikorski flying-boat taxiing out of the Marine Air Terminal, and overhead there circled a new French-built Block seaplane carrying the familiar double-headed eagle markings, heading in to refuel before carrying onto the Albanian South Indies.

Maria welcomed us back very energetically – she has been on her own in the dorm, with Helen down on South Island weekends and us away. Much to her disgust our tutors did the logical thing and attached her to Beryl's dorm for duties, the first time they have had four on the team. She says she was definitely needed there – Beryl is not exactly dedicated to law and order, and recently Adele Beasley seems to have lost all ability to control Shin and that dorm. Given the fact that Missy K has never got on too well with anyone, that must make it a hard dorm to work with.

We had a lot to catch up on, or we would have dined at the Hoele'toemis rather than the Sunday tea at Songmark. My ears drooped more than ever at the scent of Poi and the sight of Missy K shovelling it down – I remember how good it tasted, but now I can hardly touch the stuff again. At least I will know in future what to expect if it starts to be delicious again.

(Later) Well, here we are again, with our freshly cleaned and pressed uniforms on and a pile of Helen's notes for me to catch up on. It will be a shorter term than usual for me and Molly – but at least we are here to see it. The tour-boats are on their way to Spontoon, and we will see what sort of troubles, I mean Adventures, they will bring with them!

(And she did. Amelia's adventures continue in “Topical Heatwave.”)

