

Nut Farm

(Being the fifteenth adventure of Amelia Bourne-Phipps, who is doing her best to get some commercial flying experience before starting her final year at the Songmark Aeronautical Boarding School for Young Ladies, on Spontoon Island. The Albanian South Indies beckon!)

Thursday September 7th, 1936

This is my last night on Spontoon for awhile – tomorrow I take off as co-pilot and navigator on a strange colonisation mission – about the first time a colony has been established from the air. By all accounts King Zog has claimed more uninhabited atolls than he can find people to settle on (some of them are not only uninhabited but uninhabitable, one fears) and selling a 99-year lease to one of them to some American religious folk probably seemed a good idea at the time to all concerned.

This morning I met my flight crew, all familiar snouts, which is good as far as that goes. But my ears and tail went right down when I saw who I will be sharing this trip with – Zara, who is a logical choice as liaison with the Zogist Empire, and Brigit Mulvaney, who is not.

I think we are going to have some trouble with Miss Mulvaney. If she had retractable claws hers would have popped out all the way when she saw me approaching, and I doubt that the Gaelic words she used were a traditional folk greeting, despite what she turned around and sweetly explained to Mr. Johnson our employer. Brigit is employed as supercargo, having (she says) experience in swiftly packing and unpacking cargoes. I doubt most of that was gained as part of any activities our Tutors would really approve of; rumour has it most of her family are currently behind bars for smuggling.

She should at least have plenty to keep her busy; just as we finished cordially shaking paws in front of Mr. Johnson a runner arrived to tell him the ship with his co-religionists had been spotted off Main Island. We carried on the handshake till she whimpered and called pax; even without using claws (which would be cheating) I have had the advantage of a year's training over her and all this rock-climbing improves one's grip strength wonderfully.

Zara is chief pilot, and she at least is in a good mood about landing this contract. It is the worst possible commercial deal for a skilled pilot; low pay and long trips, with very little help available if things go wrong and little chance of any entertainment or relaxation. Still, Zara wants to go where we are headed, and being the first ever Songmark girl to fail her final year (there are no re-sits or second chances for the finals) she is glad of the work at any price. Exactly how she failed I have no idea, and our Tutors have not even officially said she is the one. I may find out by the time I see Spontoon again.

She took me down to see our transport, and my tail sank; the basic aircraft is sound but it is hardly a China Clipper. I had never read of anybody putting a Handley-Page Clive transport aircraft on floats; evidently this is someone's idea of a home conversion. The aircraft floats on water and flies well enough to get here from Rain Island (empty) but it was never designed for floats and how well it will handle full of cargo is anyone's guess. Zara and I are suddenly in charge of passengers, and if anything happens to the aircraft it is our responsibility. I can quite understand why nobody else wanted to take this flight. A home conversion of a prototype is just asking for trouble.

The afternoon was taken up with swarming over the Clive, being somewhat reassured by its condition. The engines are in good condition and of a pattern I am quite familiar with, although the tool kit is rather sparse for this trip and we will be a long way from any spare parts or workshop facilities. (Fortunately the aircraft is in Imperial and not Metric sizes so I can bring my own kit to add to it tomorrow.) Sleeve-valve engines are reported to be hard to work on, but we have taken some test ones apart and reassembled to running order at Superior Engineering often enough that they should be no special challenge.

I had to warn Brigit that smuggling in any alcohol would be absolutely frowned on for this trip; there is hardly a bartender on Casino Island who will serve her, and where we are going to the Albanians are reputedly strictly "dry" as well. I relieved her of an empty container of "Windscreen de-icer" that she swore she was taking ashore to have washed and re-filled in accordance with flight regulations. Well I am sure she was; but as we will not need de-icer in the tropics, I doubt it was de-icing liquid she planned to fill it with. Tatiana has mentioned pilots in her homeland are issued with industrial spirit for the job, though how much ends up on the windscreen is anyone's guess.

It was rather a sad return to South Island, like ending the holiday early. I do need the flight experience and could use the money, but another two weeks of "holiday" would probably

not be spent idly sitting on the beach. We have not seen Mr. Sapohatan for awhile, and doubtless he will think of something for Helen to do, along with Maria and Molly if the job is suitable. There are jobs one needs a watchmaker's screwdriver for and jobs that need a large hammer; Molly is definitely of the hammer persuasion.

Helen says the islands are starting to fill up with new Songmark girls already; at least she has seen Beryl in her full official blazer giving unofficial guided tours of the island to some fresh new faces. I doubt these tours are for free. There is the little issue of anyone who listens to Beryl taking half a term working out which bits of the information are actually true. By all accounts Beryl has a "special preview" of Things You Need To Know About Songmark that she is offering to lend for ten shells apiece (and to retrieve the day before term starts, "so the Tutors don't find out about your head start." Oh yes, and for good reason.) Maria laid paws on a copy and has curiously mixed feelings about it, where I might have thought she would drop it off at Miss Devinski on sight. She has a good memory and recounted some of the actually useful facts as follows:

Fact 14: You will never carry enough toilet paper, or manage to keep it dry. However hard you try.

Fact 21: Every "educational" trip is much tougher than the Tutors will tell you in the briefings.

A: And it will hurt a LOT more.

B: And you will carry far more than you ever wanted to.

C: And there will be more and deeper mud/soft sand/snow than you expected.

Fact 33: If you calculate your Songmark bills per term, compare it with a good full-board hotel and then complain about the difference in the food for the price, you will discover you have wasted your time.

All well and good, but she also includes a few little land-mines scattered around the text such as:

Fact 7: The native respectful greeting is "Watohi nandan bo hotopaca!" (If a girl says this in some of the waterfront dives she is suddenly liable to be very busy and very popular, though probably not in the way she expected. We had better warn people about this before they find out the hard way.)

Fact 29: If a Native bows to you, it means he or she wants you to rub their head for good luck.

Fact 32: The Spontoonie National Anthem is "Allthings Bright And Beautiful" (see back page for local lyrics), which first-years are obliged to sing before sitting down to eat. Practicing in groups beforehand is strongly recommended.

I expect Beryl is responsible for some of those small advertisements one sees in the back of newspapers offering miracle cures: generally saying "Are you Gullible? Send for our 30-day trial self-improvement course, just one penny for the first day, tuppence the second and so on!" * I know for a fact she has been selling people blocks of shares that are perfectly legal but mostly valuable as wallpaper – those Imperial Russian Railway Stocks might indeed be worth what she says they are, the day the Tsar gets back in power. Her motto is "you must speculate to accumulate" which is fair enough but other folk do the speculating while she does the accumulating. Good business practice, as she would say.

One final evening was spent comfortably dressed under the palm trees of the Hoele'toemi compound, sharing a Nootnops Blue with Helen, Molly, Maria, Saffina and the family. At least when we headed out to Cranium Island I was embarking with good company I could trust my life with, whatever the danger. This trip – well, I am feeling underpaid already.

* Editor's note: at 240 pennies to the pound the last instalment alone of a 30-day course costs £2,223,962 one shilling and twopence, which was a lot of money in those days. One assumes all sales are final.

Friday September 9th, 1936

(Rough position: 700 miles SW of Big Island, Hawaii.)

Dear Diary – I am writing perched on two large sacks of rice which are about as much comfort as this aircraft has to offer. It was built as a military transport with no pretence at airline levels of comfort for passengers or crew; the seats are plain canvas strap type and my tail felt like it had a knot in it after the first two hours.

I arrived with my kitbag and flying suit first thing, to find the aircraft already full of passengers who had spent the night in the fuselage. I knew they had arrived yesterday, but anyone might expect folk to put up in a hotel overnight. Not so; high-season tariff hotel beds for 20 are quite out of the question given the budget of this exodus, and Mr. Johnson was unwilling

to expose his family to the evils of Casino Island. I can well believe his assertion that his former homeland Utah will never have anything like a casino this century; living in a desert they are not going to get any tourist customers and with a population opposed to gambling and such levity there is no local market either. You would need air-conditioning in every building in town to attract tourists out into that sort of desert, and obviously that will never pay.

Anyway, it made Brigit's job rather harder as she had to order everyone out and stand on the dockside while she worked out how to pack and balance the aircraft. This would be hard enough if we were familiar with the Clive (Clive-on-Sea as one of the dockside wits called our ship) but the best she could do was to look at how it sat in the water totally empty, then start loading on the centre of gravity and work outwards each way. To her credit, she did a decent job of it and by ten announced the passengers could start boarding, and we could file our flight plans with the tower.

Zara wanted a fully laden test flight around Main Island and back, to get the feel of the controls and try a landing where there are crash-boats and a repair facility in case the worst happens. But Mr. Johnson refused, tapping the contract we had signed and insisting she paid for the extra fuel herself for any such extravagance. My own ears drooped at that; instead the entire party had an impromptu prayer meeting on the dock before boarding, which is intended to have the same results more economically. Saimmi has told us about various spirits, but she has never suggested they are interchangeable with petroleum spirit when one is a hundred miles from land with a stiff head-wind.

To be honest, I would be happier with a plane full of Joseph Starling's henchmen if they were applying ruthless efficiency rather than faith to the planned route. Nobody ever found a trace of that Christian Scientist round-the-world flyer, the one who was last seen taking off last year shaking with malaria and with an engine that any Songmark First-year would have improved with an hour's servicing, but I felt it quite the wrong time to remind folk of that. The Customer may be always right in a grocery store, but buying the wrong brand of cocoa rarely results in the customers perishing in the middle of the trackless Pacific and being eaten by sharks (except of course for my pal Mabel's cousins, but that's quite another story.)

Whatever Zara failed on in her Songmark course, it was not on the piloting exams: she got us on the step in half a mile and inside a mile the laden Clive was airborne, the floats sounding rather rough but doing their job quite well on the sheltered main island waters. It took a minute to get us properly trimmed, what with the unfamiliar controls and the cargo; having put floats on makes the rather brief official Pilot's Notes hopelessly outdated in terms of handling. Zara swears she will fly the Clive as if it was an eggshell, and I heartily agree.

Most of it has been quite routine, simply setting a course and sticking to it at two thousand feet keeping just under the cloud base. I have charge of the radio, and although the D/F loop is small it seems to work well enough. Keeping Radio LONO as our lifeline home, one does not feel quite so alone high above a blue but exceedingly wide and empty ocean. Fortunately our passengers cannot hear it, or they might complain about the local band doing their version of the "Beer Barrel Polka", this being the "Pineapple Punch Hula"!

Saturday September 10th, 1936

(Rough position, 100 miles NE of French Sandwich Islands)

There is little time to write on this trip. I have doubled my commercial flying time already; in fact I did that yesterday, while Zara was relaxing in the co-pilot's seat trying to hold a bearing on the last signals of Radio LONO. It was the last reminder of home, the strains of "Irene Adler's Hula" just fighting through the static to get to us, like watching an old friend fading into the dark as one's train pulls away from the station. When that finally faded over the horizon it was an hour before we picked up anything else, a station out of Brisingaland that was broadcasting in Icelandic. All very bardic indeed, but we would have quite liked a weather report we could understand.

Looking at our flight plan, it is more of a zigzag than I would have liked given the Clive only cruises at a hundred and twenty mph, and when fully laden has a rather unimpressive maximum range. One could do worse; on the original plan Mr. Johnson had simply taken a piece of string with the aircraft's official range marked out on scale and played "join the dots" across the map with it. Zara had to pull out the Airline Union's regulations about fuel safety margins and do some hard negotiations with him, which she won though not without its price. Parachutes are beastly uncomfortable things to sit on all day, but I had been quite used to having one before we unloaded them yesterday much to the shaking of snouts of the ground staff. To be honest, in

this case I probably feel safer having that weight used for spare fuel; this trip is 99.9 percent over water and there is little future in parachuting into the middle of the Pacific.

Our first refuelling stop went well, and indeed gave everyone an hour to stretch their legs and smooth the kinks out of their tails. The passengers are a quiet bunch, all black-clad canines who are not complaining about the decidedly steerage-class accommodation. There are three large families, in terms of one Mr and three or four Mrs of the name, plus four single gentlemen. There are no children on this trip, as folk will be starting from scratch and things are sure to be rough at the outset (to put it mildly.)

At least it is rather better than we hear from some of the regular flight crews and stewardesses who have to cope with the Spontoon tourists at their worst and in cramped conditions. Mahanish's bar has a laundry next door associated with it, and the arriving crews often dive through there removing evidence of drunken and/or airsick passengers from their uniforms. After folk are finished with that, the bar itself probably does a roaring trade in drinks and rented rooms. Flight crews have a certain notoriety, but having heard what they put up with for the working day it is quite understandable that they have a lot of steam to let off afterwards. In tourist season, that much steam could run the laundry.

Another thing we managed to get was about half a gallon of hot coffee for Zara and Brigit, and the same of tea for me. Our aircraft has a basic electrical heater that can warm a cupful, but in the supplies there is not a coffee bean or leaf of tea to be found. Getting up in the morning after a night in a canvas seat one needs all the help available, and we are all sorely feeling the lack. It is not improving Brigit's temper, and I can feel my own tolerance level fading rapidly the longer I go without tea. There is some fine print in the contract about what we can and cannot bring aboard, but happily it does not mention what is already in our systems.

We managed to get a weather report at last, with strong Westerly crosswinds forecast all the way across the Equator. A big, slow floatplane like the Clive-on-Sea is absolutely the worst thing to have in a crosswind, and both Zara and I will be double-checking for drift every minute. If we just let the ship fly itself, the chances are we would end up on Walpurgisnacht Atoll and not the Albanian South Indies!

We have an existing name on the map for the atoll that is our target – though to be honest if we put our passengers down on the wrong one they would probably not notice; the maps are rather sketchy and one lot of coral sand looks much like another. Mr. Johnson tells us their homeland will be called New South Zion ... at which there was rather a silence in the cockpit, until Zara pointed to the world map and suggested there was one of those already in Australia, with about a million times the land area and population (so far.)

Oh well. The Customer is always right, and it is not our problem. Our first-year friend Jane Ferris is from the environs of Boston, which is not the only one of that name in the world (the real one is still in Lincolnshire). I think it is rather a cheek though, like some new industrial city re-naming itself so they can legally put "Made in Sheffield" on their cutlery and cash in on someone else's hard-earned reputation. *

*(Editor's note: Amelia is not a brilliant seer, but in this case she got it spot-on. Possibly the steel manufacturers of Sheffield, Korea just wanted a more pronounceable trademark name. Or not.)

Sunday September 11th, 1936

(Position: Waohabono Island, French Macronesia.)

Total miles travelled and registered in log – nil. Total salary earned for flight – nil. Last night Mr. Johnson insisted we stretch our trip to the next fuelling stop, arriving with about ten minutes light left in a strange harbour with a laden aircraft. Zara and I did not like that one little bit, but we got the Clive down with only a few bounces. I am not sure just how strong these floats really are especially considering our heavy load of freight and passengers, and have no intention on putting them to any hard tests. Of course, being Sunday we are told we can do no flying, while our passengers improvise a prayer meeting on the beach.

Just to rub things in, we are only paid for flights ... so basically we are losing money today, as well as losing weight sweltering in the full tropical sun. At least we are in the South Seas now, having passed the Equator yesterday afternoon and having about another day's flying to go.

Waohabono Island is a fly-speck on the map, whose only "attraction" is a coaling station that has recently expanded to include seaplane refuelling; there is nothing remotely resembling a runway here as it is about a thousand kilometres SE of nowhere. If the French got some official

Mad Scientist of theirs to blow it off the map one day, nobody would know or care. In other words, not quite the place any of us would have chosen for our enforced “shore leave”!

The inhabitants seem to be composed of officious and sorry-looking French officials who wish they were posted anywhere else, and Polynesian natives who heartily agree and would happily pay the postage. The natives wear rather ugly dungarees or plain calico frocks that look like Missionary committees back in Paris who have never been out in this climate designed them. One can sometimes see what the Spontoones object to about Euros.

The only good thing was, we had the morning off after checking over the Clive and putting canvas covers over the engines to keep out blown beach sand. The engines are in rather good shape considering, with no real signs of wear and with the exception of changing some worn spark plugs there has been little to do with them so far. I was eager to extend the paw of peace to Brigit Mulvaney and offered to call a truce, explaining that I knew it was not her fault that her nation had so disadvantaged its people by cutting themselves off from our Empire. Oddly enough, this did not go down too well with her and she growled that she could think of a hundred and one good uses for a dead cat, but none at all for a living one.

Zara rolled her eyes somewhat, and remarked she had been head of her own dorm for three years, and had had enough of patching up impossible teams. I wonder if that was her problem? I do recall rumours of some of her year having repeatedly fighting formal duels to first blood, but never heard any details.

Anyway, the offer had been made, and if Brigit turns it down that is her affair. We will have enough to do on this trip without fighting each other; should anything happen to me Brigit does not have her license yet so could not fly the Clive even if she wanted to. Ninety percent of our wages is payable on our return to the Spontoons, as there is a bank account here unlocked only with a code phrase Mr. Johnson will tell us when he agrees we have lived up to expectations (only natural caution; for all he knows he could have got the rest of Red Dorm for a crew who might think it a smart idea to dump him on the wrong atoll and fly off with the aircraft and trade goods laughing their snouts off.)

Being Sunday all the shops are shut, so we were living from the expedition’s precious supplies; corn bread and dried fruit with dried fish from Tillamook that the passengers must have picked up on the way. Not an appetising mixture but better than nothing; we found a beach where at least we could get out of our flight suits and get some sunshine and water on our fur. After two days mostly cooped up in the cockpit that was a great relief, and I imagined my friends on South Island right now having two more weeks of wearing oiled fur and not much else. I imagine I shall envy them a bit before I see them again!

A good swim put all of us in a rather better mood, and indeed the ocean is the only place to be in a sweltering day in the tropics (exotic jellyfish and stinging fish aside.) Poor Brigit! She had finished her swim and was heading up the beach when she gave a yelp and collapsed – there are no stinging sea urchins in the Spontoon waters but there seem to have no lack here, as she trod right on one!

It was fortunate I never go far without my first-aid kit; we have studied various tropical hazards in class and I have a sturdy pair of surgeon’s tweezers for this sort of occasion. Urchin stings are barbed and very nasty – while Brigit was cursing volubly in Gaelic I had the kit unsealed and ready for use.

We have heard in our courses all about difficult patients. Brigit spotted me unpacking various surgical instruments, gave a yelp and started hopping up the beach away from us. Zara intercepted her and asked just where she was going – Brigit swore she would not let me touch her with a bargepole, if I had been on all the medical courses in the world.

I must say, I would have had to pass Zara in her self-defence exams. She distracted Brigit by suddenly pointing my way then applied a version of the Roedean Nerve Pinch that had our red-furred Miss collapsing like so much red woollen carpet. I was over right away, and before Brigit fully came to I had extracted two long brittle quills intact and thoroughly washed out the wounds with strong tincture of iodine That is liable to sting rather, but it is better than having it go septic out here. In a perfect world Brigit would have realised the error of her ways, acknowledged that injuries in the tropics have to be treated promptly and thoroughly, and thanked us for our speedy work.

Of course, we do not quite live in a perfect world. I am sure Brigit’s threat to pull my claws out with my own pliers was said more in jest than serious intent. She limped off back towards our aircraft without a word of thanks, while Zara sighed and commented it was her old dorm all over again.

(Later) Having checked the aircraft over again and filtered the spare fuel we had purchased, there was time still for another relaxing swim. Being cramped up all day in a narrow pilot's seat is no sort of healthy life, and having persuaded Mr. Johnson we were not engaging in Sabbath-breaking sports but healthy exercise, it is probably the only thing to do here on a Sunday. There is a café that Brigit was looking at longingly, but having no Francs with us that is all she can do. They do not, she reports moodily, accept Spontoonie Shells.

It was a most peculiar feeling, being so far out from Spontoon with nobody to talk to; Zara is quite down in the snout and in no mood to chat, and Brigit only snarls when I get within hearing range. Drying my fur out in the setting sun, I felt my brush touching the gold bead hidden in my tail-fur, and before I thought about it my tail had quite gone sideways in recollection. It would take scarcely two seconds' delicate work with a pair of tin-snips to remove it, but otherwise I recalled Judy saying it was there as a permanent reminder. It might not be the only souvenir.

Dear Diary: I have been feeling most peculiar for the past few days, and hope it is just the lack of tea and the change of climate. If there was any poi included in the expedition's stores I would sample some to see if it tastes appetising all of a sudden. Fortunately there was nobody around on that part of the beach to see me as I retired to think things over.

It would be nice to think that Lars was quite mistaken about Leon Allworthy, and that Miss Susan just sent that sack and bucket in spite when she found out. But I think I will just have to face facts, and if there is any saving grace it is only being able to blame the Krupmark Fragment for some of it. This hardly helps matters right now. It is rather different from back in Spring, where I was expecting a half-Siamese kitten that Jirry was perfectly happy to welcome to the family and invent a Siamese ancestor. There is no canine ancestry in the Hoele'toemi family, and I would not like to be the first one to contribute, especially having seen what the Allworthy family are like! The only truly mixed folk I have met are Kansas Smith and Liberty Morgenstern who are absolutely no advert for the idea, and Nuala Rachorska whose Father was a Pirate. At least that is the story, but somehow it does not smell quite convincing to me any more. Given what she chooses to do for a career, though she is a friend it hardly is a wonderful example. Saffina is perfectly nice but at least her parents are both feline. I am not sure about Miss Wildford, who does look rather odd but has not told us about her pedigree.

Well, by the time I get back to Spontoon I will know one way or another. I definitely wish I had that paper back I signed at Leon's; like many other things that seemed like a good idea at the time.

Monday September 12th, 1936

(Position: Zmajevich Atoll, 12' South, 170' West.)

There at last! My Pilot's log records identifying Zmajevich Atoll at 17:00 today, and putting down in the central lagoon at 17:10 after a precautionary flight over our landing run. Since taking over the area, the Zogist Empire has re-named all the islands in Albanian and perhaps Mr. Johnson's re-re-naming is not such a bad thing. The touchdown was smooth (the water is totally clear with no unpleasant surprises such as coral bosses inside the lagoon) and soon the passengers were holding their first thanksgiving prayers on the shores of their promised land.

I must say, I have seen islands with more promise. Most of the Kanim Islands are more habitable; there is a central strip of forest barely a hundred yards wide between the beaches, and what it is like in a typhoon I do not want to find out. A twenty-foot wave would go right over the lot. No fresh water springs and no high ground; no wonder the Polynesians never bothered to settle it.

The anchorage was good at least, and by sunset we had made camp at the edge of the forest. There are coconuts here and already in season, perhaps the one thing this island has to offer. The Johnson family, the Tames and the Grayes are now the founding families of New Elohim City, currently consisting of five large tents and some packing crates. New Amsterdam was once that size, they tell me, though in terms of potential it had rather more than a hundred yards of palms before the next beach. I have not heard what they paid King Zog for the lease, but I doubt he accepts any beads and trinkets these days.

Zara and I put our field craft exercises to good use and managed to get fresh water by sinking a bottomless barrel into the sand just below the tree line. Mr. Johnson was asking why we did not make the well deeper – on these islands the only fresh water is from rainfall, a thin layer "floating" on the salt groundwater, and if you dig deeper you mix the layers and it turns

brackish. He nodded and took notes, admitting that deserts and desert islands are quite different propositions.

Apart from the expedition's thirsts there are bundles of live saplings that need to be kept moist, cashews, macadamia and half a dozen other small bushes that are meant to be food and some day cash crops. They are a thorough and practical bunch I must confess; these islands hardly have a hundred acres of cultivatable land even if they cut down every existing tree (a very bad idea, and I was not afraid to tell my employers so) and they are not going to compete even with Spontoon on any sort of bulk crops. One ship a year of prime spices might make a profit, but one of commercial grade dates or oil palm will not. It is like Molly's idea where she points out small and distinctive places are better off making distinctive products such as the Scottish single-malt whiskies that could not be duplicated even in the next valley, or the little Caribbean isle of Tropicco with its spiced rum. Her father had a special business deal with "El Presidente" as she has often wistfully told us.

By nightfall we retired to our aircraft, leaving the bulk supplies to be unpacked tomorrow. Brigit is behaving herself; possibly a year of having to work with Liberty and Tatiana might have rounded off some of her sharper edges. One can but hope. If you keep hitting a flint you only get fresh, sharp new edges.

Having brought our load of supplies all this way they are suddenly extremely precious to the colony until they can establish local food supplies, and the first meal was hardly a banquet. One thin sliver of corned beef on a pawfull of plain boiled rice, with a small square of military oat biscuit and tinned cream for dessert. At least that was one familiar product; Fenwick's Original Lumpy Crème! It really took me back; the delicious product sometimes appeared back at St. Winifred's on half-holidays and for the winning teams at sports days. I well recall being a Junior there and happily squabbling with my friends over the biggest and choicest lumps. It was much the best thing our cooks ever served and not only felines thought so; anything served straight from the tin needs real skill and determination from a cook to spoil, unlike fresh ingredients. The school chef's favourite so-called "Fish Surprise" should more honestly have been called "Marine creature Astounded."

Whatever one might say about English cuisine, one could do worse, as we found out when we hired that chef who had been dishonourably discharged from the French Army's catering corps in 1917 just after the mutiny; possibly the high command were looking for contributing factors. I assume his never-to-be-forgotten "corned mutton coup de main" was an authentic French dish but it might harm international relations to enquire too deeply into the matter.

To sleep at last, carefully putting the customers between me and Brigit. She is limping still, but though apparently unarmed is still looking daggers at me.

Tuesday September 13th, 1936

Some things are not exactly in our contract, but it is always good to keep in well with one's employers. We spent all morning unloading the Clive, carrying everything up to the highest part of the island where a sandbagged wall is the most solid structure available. I know there are islands as low as this that are inhabited, but they are a lot bigger and presumably the Polynesians knew enough about this one to decide not to settle here.

By lunchtime the unloading was done, and Zara was looking over the next part of our contract. Although the Zogist Empire is widely scattered, its capital New Tirana is not so far off; three hundred miles is near relative to most distances in this part of the world. The settlers are now landed with what Helen has called a "grub-stake" that will keep them alive awhile; there are a hundred and one things they need for a proper settlement that we are going to have to try and get locally. If one calls a six hundred mile round shopping trip local, that is.

A brief drama later when Brigit went for a swim in the lagoon. I had mentioned it might not be a good idea, but she turned her long snout up at the suggestion and dived straight in off the cockpit. The reef around this island is almost complete with very few gaps (possibly explaining why settling it from the sea would have been difficult) and at mid tide a lot of the reef is only just below water level. Of course, that squeezes the draining flow through the gaps available at a high rate of knots, and it was Brigit's bad luck to strike out towards one of the outflows. In a minute she found she was in the grip of an eight knot current flushing her straight out into the Pacific!

Well, swimming after her with a rope was obviously an idea, but one had to catch up with her first. Fortunately the Clive has an automatic engine starter, one engine running the

dynamo that starts the next, so it was a matter of twenty seconds before I had the engines turning over and had cast off. Zara and the Johnsons were on the beach but there was no time to enlist any of their help; we have seen what razor-sharp coral can do in our medical courses at Casino Island Hospital – and there is no hospital here.

The view forward and down is not brilliant from the Clive's cockpit and with nobody to poke a snout out of the crew hatch as spotter, I had to trust my judgement of where Brigit would be by the time I got out there. Another ten seconds and I cut the engines, already dangerously close to the reef, and slid down out of the hatch to the float with rope in paw. Good luck was with me, and I had been hardly four yards out, Brigit's snout appearing just under the idling prop. I cast her a line secured to the float strut, saw she had grabbed it then had to triple-time it back up into the cockpit and juice the throttles to move us clear before we all ended up on the reef. Getting wrecked out here would be very embarrassing.

By the time I got back to the beach the whole nation was lined up to watch us land; very likely the only time an entire country will turn out for me! Mr. Johnson clapped soberly while his wives helped pull a rather battered Brigit ashore (I might have opened up the throttles a bit wider than strictly necessary, but one needs safety margin with one's only transport and people hang on to ropes going faster than that water-skiing for fun.)

Brigit's expression was something to behold, she thanked me with gritted teeth in front of the customers but her every line was one of baffled (and rather damp) fury. I kept my own snout firmly shut and smiled politely – as Prudence says "*It looks like a smile'd kill 'er*", then went back to work helping folk plant the seedlings under the shade of the palm trees. Hopefully the scent of wet dog is an effective fertiliser.

Zara has a lot to say to the Johnsons, Tames and Grayes about their farm project; these islands are fragile heaps of sand and the palms are the only thing stopping the whole place blowing away. If they have any plans of tilling broad acres of ploughed fields here they had better forget all about it. They do seem to be listening, but they are a polite bunch and are not inclined to argue with the hired help.

Tomorrow we are due to make the big supply trip, our employers presumably trusting us not to run off with the shopping money. We leave at dawn, hopefully managing to buy all they need and refuel with the cash available – if not, fuel has to come first. Zara is rather apprehensive about meeting her countryfolk en masse for the first time in three years. From what I have read, every Albanian mountain family is locked in complex death feuds with their near and distant neighbours, and most people have lists of others they may have never met but are honour bound to assassinate on sight. It must make village fetes and dinner-parties rather fraught. It is not only socially acceptable to kill someone in a family blood-feud but indeed socially imperative; to be a "Ghaksur" or "taker of blood" is the only way of restoring family honour. Hmm.

I was watching the sun go down over the Reef when one of the Mrs. Johnson's politely asked if she could join me. She is a slender liver-furred Labrador lady only a few years older than me, and I was glad to have someone to talk to.

I must admit, I was rather curious about our employers and their rather non-standard families (which is one reason the American government have been giving them a rather hard time.) She introduced herself as Mary Johnson, and her fellow wives as Mehitabel, Ruth and Joan. It seems they were rather impressed by my rescuing Brigit today and flying on the way here, and they want to sound me out as to joining them permanently.

Well, I have had some interesting offers in my time. I know there is such a thing as "getting in on the ground floor" and I am unlikely to be offered another chance to be in the founding family of a whole nation – but I think my jaw dropped rather when she asked if she should put the notion to their husband.

I hated to disappoint her for such a friendly offer, but had to ask how well that many Mrs. Johnsons got along, and if they thought another one would really improve matters. She smiled and explained they followed the strict and clear path of their religion which explains their rights and duties perfectly, with no room for quarrelling. Whatever I might have been or done before was of no account at all, as they offered a clean new start for everyone willing to convert.

Hmm. At Songmark they do teach you to look at both sides of a question. Should the worst come to the worst and both Songmark and the Hoele'toemis throw me out after my Krupmark misfortunes, it would be somewhere to go. Mr. Johnson is hardly likely to object to my being already ... adapted to folk of his species, or to the prospect of future mixed kittens. If Mary's offer that whatever one did before being baptised to their faith is of no significance, it should cover all eventualities no matter what Leon Allworthy does with that paper I signed.

Still, Songmark training also tells you to work towards what you really want – and a life of tending nut seedlings as Mrs. Johnson #5 is not really what I was aiming for. I thanked her for her kind offer and said quite truthfully that I would think about it and let her know if ever I was interested. I think she picked up the unspoken bit about “but don’t hold your breath.”

Wednesday 14th September, 1936

A long day! Had it been in other company I would have enjoyed myself thoroughly, just three Songmark girls with good weather and open skies to enjoy. Mr. Johnson had suggested he come along, but Zara and I showed him our detailed fuel calculations. Though he is not particularly heavy, hauling the weight of one extra passenger six hundred miles means we would have to sacrifice a hundred and twenty pounds of foodstuffs or other supplies, and he wants every ounce of that.

The flying part of it all went very well, with Zara taking off and flying the first leg out to my navigating, Brigit grumbling in the back as she worked the same calculations with her slide-rule trying to catch me out. We had time to hear quite a bit about where we were going, which is about as different from Polynesia as could be imagined.

I was quite wrong about the Zogist empire, although their royal family right now are Moslem they have a lot of Catholic and Eastern Orthodox subjects, and the history is so complex it makes my head spin. Religion is not actually the problem – or at least, it is only one problem, in that every mountain valley has a complex web of antagonisms with all the others who they are in constant ferment with. Having this far-flung colony was an idea of relieving the pressure; every family that “owes blood” is obliged to take revenge by a socially unbreakable code of honour, as soon as they get the opportunity. But scattering settlers across this chunk of the Pacific ensures it is unlikely they will ever actually meet up. In one stroke King Zog removes blood feuds and gets a stream of hardy colonists who are used to living on very little (and some of these islands have just that.)

I asked about traders and the like, but Zara says they are specially chosen for being free of current blood debts, so can go anywhere with impunity. She has a lot to say about her national traditions, not all of it too complementary. There are the three main religions but it is not unusual for folk to convert or defect in any direction; quite a common thing is for youngsters who discover themselves promised in unwelcome marriages to head over the valley to the next village and swap churches; this inevitably leads to blood-feuds but nobody seems to think it odd. Being an ammunition salesman in Albania seems a lucrative job.

By mid-morning we had passed over a small port the map names as New Durres, which gave us a spot-on navigational fix. This did not improve Miss Mulvaney’s humour; honestly I think she would be happier being lost in the middle of the Pacific just so long as I had been at fault as to the navigating. Another half hour and the slightly larger New Tirana appeared on the horizon, noted for its three churches, broadly speaking (one with a gothic spire, one with onion domes as we saw in Vostok, and one with a dome and minaret.)

New Tirana! I suppose it is the first time since Vostok that I have been somewhere in a totally new culture; on Krupmark Island and the Gilbert and Sullivan Islands they at least speak English. With Zara at the radio we were cleared to land (so she said, and at least nobody fired at us) and by ten a.m. we were tying up at a loading ramp with many curious gazes upon us from the locals.

Quite an experience, indeed – Zara was absolutely in her element, talking Albanian at about 78 rpm speed and leaving Brigit and myself to look around cautiously. After all, the locals had no idea we were coming, and she could find nobody who had even heard of the Johnsons’ project. I only hope someone like Beryl has not set the whole thing up. I have no idea what a genuine official land grant from the Zogist court looks like, and I doubt many people in Utah do either. Finding someone who speaks Albanian, let alone is fluent in legal terms, would probably be a quest in its own right.

After about an hour we had taken shelter in a coffee-house where Zara was happily sinking very small and incredibly potent cups of sweet black coffee, while spreading out town maps and a directory she had borrowed from the café owner. The locals are mostly the usual mix of European species, but with an admixture of hamsters, jackals and such who came from much further East; Albania being as far into Europe as the Mongol Golden Horde settled, and many of those being golden hamsters.

A very busy afternoon followed, with us scurrying around town shopping for supplies a young colony needs. There was a fair quantity of structural material, corrugated iron, L-section

girders, water containers and all sorts of hardware. Getting all that back to the dock took most of the rest of the day, as did paying for it. It was not just a matter of comparing prices in the shops and picking out the best value; I should have guessed that everything needed haggling over, and Zara has been out of practice for nearly four years. A leisurely and civilised way of doing business (as Jasbir and Li Han keep telling us) but not for anyone in a hurry.

Zara went out onto the docks for some last-minute supplies while Brigit and I secured the load in the fuselage, strapping it well down. Sacks of rice and kit-bags of clothing were benign enough to carry out from Spontoon, but I wanted to make very sure no girders come loose and start sliding around should we hit a squall on the way back. Brigit saw the sense in it, and indeed we can take no risks on this trip; anything unfortunate happening to the aircraft would leave us decidedly stranded.

By the time we had secured everything we had expected Zara back – I went up onto the dockside to tell her to hurry up but there was no sign of her. It was already getting near time to leave if we were to get back to Zmajevich Atoll by sunset. Night navigation over the ocean with no radio beacons and very few landmarks to a landing site with no runway lighting is something we have all agreed to avoid. I know Brigit would dearly like to see me make a mess of my navigation, but she also wants to get back to tell everybody about it.

Although it may be the capital, apparently New Tirana does not see a lot of trade. In fact there were only three tramp steamers on the far side of the harbour and us at the seaplane slipway opposite. Everyone seemed to be closing down for the day, and this near the equator the sun goes down almost before you know it. I tried asking various folk where a pilot had gone (we were all in our flight suits although with nothing much underneath in the heat) but they just shrugged and replied in their local language. It could have been Montenegrin as far as I could tell; certainly it was all Greek to me.

My tail was definitely drooping as I returned to give Brigit the news. I could have wished for Helen or someone in her place; the irritating colleen just sat down in the pilot's seat with her arms folded behind her head, grinned and asked what I was going to do about it. So much for teamwork and Songmark solidarity!

It was definitely a problem. Time was slipping away, and even if Zara turned up that minute we could hardly get back in the light. I had no passport with me so even trying to find the local Authorities would be troublesome let alone getting assistance, even if someone there spoke English. I had to assume something unfortunate had happened to her, which meant choosing between staying with the aircraft and going after our Senior.

Brigit suggested we leave Zara and get back to our paying customers. After all, we had done all the shopping we are contracted for, and I could get us back to Zmajevich Atoll and Spontoon with Brigit navigating. I looked at her rather hard, and spotted from her tail angle she had something in mind. I think I know her plan – let me take the decision to abandon a comrade and pretend to go along with it until we get back to Spontoon, when all of a sudden she tells everybody about me leaving Zara in the lurch! On the other paw, if anything happens to our aircraft we are not going to get back to Zmajevich Atoll or anywhere else in a hurry.

I spelt that out for her, and by the way her snout wrinkled I think I defused her plan. But I had to come up with a better one; if I am in charge I determined to BE in charge, and ordered Brigit out to help me pull the aircraft further up the slipway to above the high tide mark, and secure it to the docks. I needed a guard dog to make sure it stayed safe, so I at least had the satisfaction of pointing at her and saying “STAY.”

At Songmark, they do train us to deal with emergencies. Having secured the exits as best I could, I headed out into the city streets having agreed to rendezvous at sundown two hours later (sundown at 18:20 as we are somewhat South of the line and they are heading into Spring in this hemisphere. 18:00 on the dot every day of the year on the equator, which must get rather boring.)

If I thought it was tactically inconvenient enough to search a strange city where I can hardly read the street signs let alone understand anybody, as I headed out I felt a familiar pain and realised things were going to get ... more inconvenient, biologically. It was something I had hoped for a few days ago; mentally I tore up my copy of that document Mr. Allsworthy so “generously” wrote for me. That was the good news, and a weight off my mind. I could wish things had been timed a day or so differently though, as I hurried along the city streets wearing only a thin flight suit.

I had to confess, wandering around New Tirana at random with no clues to go on and with nobody to ask for them, was not a wonderful plan. It was hardly likely I would find Zara standing in the street chatting with an old friend and quite unaware of how the time was passing,

after all. The only alternative I could think of was NOT looking for her though, having left Brigit guarding the aircraft in case she showed up there.

The inhabitants seen decidedly relaxed, in terms of folk lounging in coffee-houses rather than stalking the streets in hunting parties as I had half feared. Zara had told me the Albanian South Indies were governed by strict rule of the one traditional code of law everyone agreed with, the “Canon of Lek” named after a folk hero and ruler of old. It is full of surprising things, such as having everyone walk at least the length of a gun barrel apart, “lest they accidentally turn and strike the one behind, as even accidentally given every blow must be avenged.” * One assumes post office queues take up more room than in other countries.

By the time I had quartered the city twice the sun was getting low on the horizon, and with a matching sinking heart and tail I turned round to return to the docks. Getting caught out in an unknown city at night would be a bad move, and I was hardly likely to see Zara in the dark anyway. Just then there was a shout behind me – and turning round I spotted our missing senior in full flight along the street, being hotly pursued by four locals!

There was a narrow alleyway just behind me, with some broken barrels lying around. I grabbed a barrel stave and called Zara’s name; fortunately she saw me and headed my direction, and I ducked out of sight before any of her pursuers spotted me. Zara was totally out of breath; but nodded when I whispered for her to wait at the far end of the alley in sight. It was a classic ambush, with the three stoats and small fennec fox spotting her at the other end and not looking down to where I was concealed behind a barrel – until the first two stoats found out as I swung ten pounds of wood at their knees and flattened them right away!

Dear Diary: there are things that I doubt my chum Mabel learned at her finishing-school. In the films you see adversaries weighing each other up, feinting and ducking. At Songmark we are told to avoid fights altogether but if needed – go straight in at full strength without hesitating, and use momentum to keep the opposition off guard. It took a second or so for the fox and remaining stoat to switch from “chase” to “fight”, and in that time I had gone for an Australian Rules Hockey strike, connecting with full force. Anyone hit on the nose that hard tends to lose concentration altogether; they were wide open for me to use my Jude-Jitsu holds and I did so with a lot more energy than we are allowed to in training.

Zara is a true Songmark girl whatever our Tutors say; she had returned to help me out and by the time I had settled the second pair, she was busily banging the first two stoat’s heads against the wall. It became obvious that none of the four would take an interest in running after us for awhile, but just to discourage them Zara pulled off one sandal apiece and we ran with them straight for the harbour where she dropped them off.

Yelling for Brigit to wake up and get out to help us, I asked Zara if an immediate retreat was in order. She nodded breathlessly and helped us pull the floatplane back into the water and cast off. I was definitely glad we had stowed the supplies firmly, as I cast off the last of the lines and put all my strength in to turning the nose round into the harbour. Brigit helped for a change. Even before the nose was lined up we heard the port engine starting up; sleeve-valve engines are famous for being tricky starters in cold weather but happily there was none of that in the South Indies! Scrambling aboard, we just got our tails through the hatch as the second engine roared into life and Zara pushed the throttles open.

Of course, in most circumstances we would taxi out of the harbour to get into cleaner water with less chance of a floating balk of timber or other debris shed from the docks, but it was time to take a risk and hope we got back to Songmark to be “chewed out” as Helen calls it by our Tutors. All went well and even with its full load the Clive was airborne inside a minute, as we shook our tails at New Tirana and its inhabitants.

I had laid in a course for Zmajevich Atoll but the sun was about to set and we had twenty minutes of usable light. There was a tense debate about where to go; Zara pointed at an uninhabited atoll just past New Durres we had overflown that morning and seen it was big enough to take off and land in with no nasty surprises such as internal reefs or coral bosses. In fifteen minutes we had it in sight in the last on the sunlight; there was no time even to circle but to put the aircraft straight down in the central lagoon and idle forward till the floats kissed gently shelving sand and Brigit and I jumped out again to secure it, still soaked from our last wetting.

Well! After all that we could finally relax in the last of the light, and pitch our pup tents on the beach. Brigit was still growling about now being a good time to break out the medicinal brandy she would have sneaked onboard if not for me. At least there was tea and that bottled “camp coffee” to be brewed over a stove made from a can filled with sand with a cup full of petrol soaked in it.

Zara refuses to talk about what happened to her, which is less than useful. And rather ungrateful I should have thought, but that is up to her. Still, we got away with our shopping done and our tails intact, which is the main thing.

- Editor's note: see the classic travel tale "In High Albania" by Edith Durham, written in 1909. Amelia is not exaggerating; if anything she is glossing over the less believable bits.

Thursday 15th September, 1936

(Position: unnamed Atoll approx. 20 NM SSE of New Durres)

A most unwelcome sight when we awoke – our beloved aircraft leaning over at ten degrees, one float half submerged and resting on the bottom! This is exactly what we hoped to avoid.

Zara stripped down to the fur and splashed into the water; hopefully the leak could not be too bad or we would have noticed it last night. She surfaced half a minute later, shook her head and went down for another look. Ten minutes later she could still find nothing.

The floats have access panels on the top for inspection and draining seepage, which are just big enough for me to squeeze through. Looking at the clear water filling it, I had an idea. I asked Zara to move the aircraft a little further into the water, and to bring me a bottle of her Camp Coffee. She objected to us sinking any further, but went along with me.

As the float moved off the bottom, I opened the stopper of the bottle and drew lines of the dark treacle-like coffee concentrate from one end of the float to the other. Suddenly I spotted it; as the water moved in through the leak, I could see where it disturbed the dissolving coffee. It was not a hole exactly, but a leaking seam that we might have strained taking off on full throttle bouncing through the waves.

The next few hours were spent waiting for the tide to go out, which happily left us high and dry and able to get to work with rubber cement patching the seams as soon as we had bailed about a hundred gallons of Pacific Ocean out of the float. Against Brigit's objection I poured about ten gallons of it back as soon as the repair finished but before the tide came back; if there had been any gaps left we would have seen water leaking out again, but all seemed healthy.

By lunchtime everything was double-checked and drained dry, and we were ready to start again. Having twice bailed the float out by paw we were absolutely dripping in the tropical heat, so Zara voted we take a break before we needed all our concentration for the flight back. She took the first swim, then relaxed on the beach while I had my turn. I must say, it was a relief to be able to clean up my fur and flight suit. There is no laundry out here and the soap is packed away in the aircraft, but scrubbing with coral sand is better than nothing.

It always happens that things go wrong just when least expected. I had just returned to the beach to dry my fur when Brigit gave a yelp and beat a hasty retreat from the shallows she was just about to swim into. She was absolutely spitting furious, and snarled that I would have to do better than that if I wanted rid of her.

I followed her pointed paw and spotted the lagoon was suddenly full of six and eight foot Mako sharks, their fins cutting the water as they thrashed around obviously hunting. They had definitely not been there earlier, and we had looked carefully before going for a swim. Then I realised just what Brigit was saying – from her point of view it had been a typically cunning English trick for me to scent the water as I cleaned myself up, giving the sharks time to move in before she took her swim.

Honestly. That is not the sort of trick to play on people, no matter if they deserved it. Actually, I did find myself contemplating it would have been a rather effective plan for someone totally unscrupulous who knew the sharks were a minute or so away. I hate to say it, but if any Songmark student has to get eaten by sharks ... well, some would be less of a loss than others.

An uneventful flight back in fine weather brought us across to Zmajevich Atoll with an hour of light spare, or perhaps I should say to New Elohim City. Our customers were very happy to see us, Mr. Johnson gravely informing us that they had all prayed all night for our safety. Which was nice of them. Zara explained that we had a leaking float that took some time to fix, and we were delayed until it was too late to make the flight in the daylight. This is all perfectly true, but not actually in the right order or cause and effect. Still, all's well that ends well, and before dark all the supplies were unloaded and carefully piled ready to begin the first real buildings.

Brigit got her bath after all, six hours later than she planned – twenty feet up the beach, using a carefully checked and shark-free bucket.

Friday 16th September, 1936

(Position; Zmajevich Atoll still. Or New Elohim City, New South Zion. Or is that Newer South Zion? Possibly New, New South Zion. Not our problem.)

Hurrah! Today Mr. Johnson told us the password and account number that will actually get us paid back on Spontoan. I hope so anyway; it is a long way to come back here to complain if our pay cheques bounce. We spent the day helping erect buildings and plant nut trees in sheltered groves amongst the coconut palms. I would not like to bet if any of these will survive the climate, let alone give a decent crop.

Happily, the Johnsons, Grayes and Tames are not depending on the nut farm for food. They have assembled fishing nets which are positioned in the gaps in the reef; the tide can do the work, and all they have to do is boat out and check the catches. Quite a neat system, all told, and even the first day's attempts provided enough for a jolly fine evening meal. Just because these folk are banned from alcohol or any other stimulants, does not mean they cannot enjoy a really good meal. It will also be our last fresh food for awhile as we fly back first thing tomorrow.

It certainly makes a contrast, heading out with Brigit and Zara rather than my regular friends. Zara is moody and never tells us anything, and Brigit is so convinced I have it in for her that it is liable to be a self-fulfilling prophesy as soon as we do not have to rely on each other. It feels like climbing up a cliff of rotten rock rather than sound basalt; one never knows what hold will let you down next.

Still, we are in each other's pockets for the next few days and there is no avoiding the fact. At least I had one last night away from them, and sat down to watch the sunset on the West-facing beach. I was joined by the four Mrs. Johnsons, Mary, Mehitabel, Jean and Ruth, who also will be in very restricted company after we leave and until their next wave of colonists arrives by sea next year.

Mary made another gentle attempt to persuade me to stay. She admitted that it was a selfish thought, but she needs to have the best people available in her family, and says they need someone with my skills. It is nice to be in demand! I had to tell her that I am training to be an Adventuress, and settling down to farm life is really not what I have been aiming for as I worked my claws blunt these past two years. Plus there are folk waiting for me back on Spontoan.

Actually, I was thinking "Absence makes the heart grow fonder", and indeed we have only been gone a week though it feels a lot longer. A regular week at Songmark flies by even if we do get grabbed for gate duty or such at the weekend; I feel like a sailor-girl contemplating shore leave after three months at sea, and there is little in common with a respectable life as Mrs. Johnson #5. So I had to quite firmly turn them down, to their great disappointment.

Saturday September 17th, 1936

(Position: Waohabono Island, French Macronesia.)

A long flight! We left at dawn to much tearful paw-waving, wishing the new colony well (but I would not bet on it. That looks like a tragedy waiting to happen. Faith can move mountains I am told, and it would be a good idea if they moved a small one next to New Elohim City to retreat up if ever a tidal wave sweeps over this part of the Pacific.) The weather was sunny and the aircraft empty apart from fuel, as we had gone over it yesterday and donated every scrap of materials not actually listed in the manifest we signed when we took it over in Spontoan. That speck of coral sand is a long way from anywhere; I gave the Johnsons some of my own tool-kit as I can replace it far easier than them.

It should have been quite a holiday atmosphere; mission accomplished and heading home for a few days holiday with money awaiting us in the bank and our log-books getting healthier by the flying hour. Now I can claim commercial flight experience, which should put me in good stead next holiday. No more disastrous Krupmark trips for me! If I never see that place again (except through a bomb-sight) it will be a minute too soon.

Sadly, having Brigit in the back rather poisoned the mood as she was doing her best to catch me out in every navigational calculation. Eventually even Zara lost patience and told her to shut her snout; the rest of the trip to French territory was done in glowering silence.

It seems that Customs is a dull job on small islands, and folk resort to extreme measures to justify their pay. This is not unique to the Gilbert and Sullivan Islands. When Zara landed to refuel, the half dozen splendidly uniformed and extremely overheated Customs Officers were all over us. Hearing that we were carrying nothing at all, not even passengers, got their noses twitching at the scent of the most suspicious flight they had seen in ages. The fact that we were

from three different countries (as Brigit insisted) was another red rag waved at their faces. Happily we are in no hurry now, and could sit back and watch with amusement as they swarmed over the aircraft, probed and sampled the fuel tanks and looked inside the floats for contraband. One of the officers was a bloodhound, who proudly announced he could scent targets as well-hidden as a sealed hip flask packed in a new rubberised tarpaulin – but after two hours he retreated in bafflement, glaring at us as if we had filched his pay bonus from under his nose.

There may be some advantages in ferrying the folk from Utah out and following their rules about not having alcohol or pretty much anything else – in a few rather bizarre sets of circumstances.

Sunday 18th September, 1936

(Position: Passing Cap Gallette, French Sandwich Isles)

Back in the Northern Hemisphere, much to our delight. Zara managed to coax the unladen aircraft up to 12 thousand feet, which made for a far cooler ride in the tropical sun. It is quite a sight; the Pacific stretching out unbroken for hours, the water absolutely dark blue and miles deep. From that height one can see occasional “seamounts” that almost reach the surface in the clear waters, some of them obviously having coral reefs despite now being hundreds of feet below the waves. Not having ocean depth charts, unfortunately they were no use to us for navigating.

Brigit claimed that one of them away to starboard had great cyclopean masonry structures on top, but that is insane. She tried to get Zara to overfly it so she could get a good photograph (the angles were all wrong from our course), but we are watching our fuel very carefully and Zara refused to divert.

Actually, it reminded me uncomfortably of Cranium Island, which along with Krupmark is a place I will avoid like the plague. That had the appearance of being much older than it had any right to be; we have studied geology at Songmark with a view to prospecting, and I can spot ancient rocks that are the only source of diamond “pipes” and similar. The stranger side of Cranium Island was all Archaean greenstones and deepest Precambrian porphyry, something one only expects in the hearts of continents and not in the mid-ocean at all. One hears of islands being thrust up from the depths by earthquakes (or drowned in them with attendant damage to the tourist trade) and having seen one candidate, I could wish it had stayed where it was.

Our arrival in the French Sandwich Islands was uneventful, as having been worked over down to our toothpaste tubes the last halt, we could wave fresh Customs certificates at the local authorities here. Having been frustrated by not finding anything in French Macronesia their officials had taken great delight in frustrating their colleagues across the map by giving us totally clean papers which made them grit their teeth and wave us straight through! Brigit looked thoughtful about this, and commented that there should be a way of using this next time, probably involving a rendezvous with a suspicious freighter at sea somewhere between Point A and Point B.

Monday 19th September, 1936

(Position: Big Island, Hawaii)

Hawaii again! Despite it being the most famous spot on the Pacific map, I have not seen the place for two years since the ship from Rain Island called in here on my way to Spontoon for the first time. It looked a bustling, cheerful place, with the secure and impregnable naval base of Pearl Harbour protecting the islands as staunchly as the fortress of Humapore does our own colonies.

We touched down in a harbour on the far side from there, where the docking was cheaper and one does not have to dodge battleships on the way in. Just one more night before we are home!

Actually, Zara relaxed to the extent of telling us her plans. Unlike the rest of us she is keen on returning to the Albanian South Indies. She has not mentioned why. But now she has some commercial experience, that and the letter of recommendation from Mr. Johnson should help her as official liaison with New Elohim City and their neighbours.

I can see her point; she is qualified in all sorts of ways. Getting in at the start of a new country has its advantages; unfortunately it is that tiny atoll she is talking about and not some great island full of potential. Newer South Zion (or whatever folk will call it to avoid confusion, if they care) is what I would call the most God-forsaken piece of sand in the Pacific, but the

Johnsons are presumably better qualified to judge. If they prefer that to Utah, I must make a definite note in my Memo book to avoid Utah.

We cleared Customs an hour before sundown, and for a change felt safe in leaving the aircraft in charge of the harbourmaster while we could explore the town. Brigit's nose twitched and before we could stop her she was straight across the road to the nearest bar, where she hopefully waved a paw-full of Spontoonie shells and her tail thrashed like a propeller when the barman (an odd-looking goose gentleman) agreed to take them.

Oh well. I had to admit, a chilled white wine went down very nicely, and is just within my limits for flight regulations tomorrow. Zara does not drink, at least not alcohol, and though she hopefully enquired the barman explained that Nootnops Blue is illegal in Hawaii as well as most other places.

By this time Brigit was on about her fourth pineapple brandy, evidently in no mood to follow strict flight regs. She then switched to something she called "sour coconut Pop-skull" which by definition does not sound a healthy beverage. I think it may be a local version of the "red-eye" that they drink in the cowboy films, which probably killed more cowboys than six-guns ever did. * The bar was quite crowded, with the regular international mix of species plus various geese in partial Hawaiian dress who were mostly working as staff. She was wearing her flight suit somewhat open in the heat, and by the looks she was giving some of the more handsome canine customers, there may have been more kinds of "heat" involved than showed up on the thermometer. After about an hour it was pitch dark outside, and though I was tired out after six hours piloting and four hours navigating, Brigit looked as if she was just ready to start the evening's exercises after her tenth drink. I have never seen "sour coconut Pop-skull" on sale in Spontoon, and there may be good health reasons for it.

Dear Diary: had it been almost anyone else I would have left her to it, merely reminding her that we were leaving at nine tomorrow with or without them onboard; a supercargo with no cargo is merely superfluous now. But after a whispered discussion with Zara, we frog-marched her out of the place, Zara's loud commenting that she was a good shot with a bucketful of cold water having an obvious deterrent effect with Brigit's would-be dates. This might actually be true; I do recall two of her dorm were canine.

As we expected, Miss Mulvaney was not pleased at this, and a minor Civil War took place outside. Hostilities were quite brief, as she is only a first-year and full of enough alcohol to fly the seaplane for a good half minute. She had a decidedly bad half minute, after which Zara and I took turns to carry her unconscious form back to the harbour while smarting from our own injuries. A Songmark first-year is a Songmark girl after all, and we never expect to get away totally unscathed.

Not a wonderful end to the evening, especially later when Brigit came to and proceeded to demonstrate in the back of the aircraft that the coconut brew is bad for the digestion. It smelt bad enough going down. Having weeks or months of abstinence and then seeing how fast one can swig the strongest alcohol in sight, is not a wonderful idea either.

* Editor's note: Authentic 1870's recipe for saloon red-eye: *"Take one barrel commercial raw spirit. Add two pounds burned sugar to give it a colour, and two cups sulphuric acid to give it a kick. Cut with well-water as needed. To make Fire-water for the Indians, add two ounces strychnine per barrel. Make's 'em plumb crazy."* Aren't modern health and safety laws wonderful?

Tuesday 20th September, 1936

(Position: Home sweet home! At last!)

(Written awaiting the water-taxi back to South Island.) A fairly smooth trip back; we were out of Hawaii at 08:30, over the Islets of Langerhans at noon and into the heart of the Nimitz Sea soon after. Radio Lono was serenading our homecoming with a fine swing hula dance tune by the SponTones. By 14:30 we had Mount Kiribatori in sight on the far horizon, and by 15:10 I was hearing the welcome voice of Spontoon air traffic control welcoming us home as our floats kissed the waters off Moon Island. Brigit had spent a bad morning but given us no further trouble and let me do my navigating in peace, so that was an improvement.

It took another hour to sign off the Clive to the renting company (we had hosed the fuselage out before breakfast) and have Customs clear our baggage. Then before anything else, the three of us jumped on a taxi to Casino Island, heading for the bank with our details firmly held between our ears. About the first time this trip the three of us have agreed on anything, our smiles when the cashier consulted the sealed envelope brought out of the vault and handed our

wage cheques over to us! As we had already said farewell to our trusty aircraft, our options had we found the account was empty would have been slim.

I must have been associating with the likes of Beryl for too long now, I am starting to see crooked deals all over the place. It was scarcely a tender farewell either; Zara slunk off without a word while before running off to her own bank Brigit snarled a few words, none of them printable.

Scarcely the Three Musketeers, yet we did our jobs well and got paid for it. My log-book is stamped with thirty more hours commercial flying experience, though unfortunately in a unique aircraft that we are not likely to use again. I will not miss the way it side-slips, or the muscle strains after an hour of holding the tail up when it got badly out of trim. And somewhere in the far Pacific I have yet another invite to settle down with a Respectable family if my tastes ever change that way.

Anyway, we survived and prospered. If I can do that even with Brigit and Zara, the prospects with Helen, Molly and Maria are looking better all the time. Home now to see what they have been getting up to!

(And she did. In her next tale, "Autumn Fruit.")