

Songmark Solstice - or, "Hurrah For The Hols!"

(The continuing adventures of Amelia Bourne-Phipps, studying at the Songmark Aeronautical Boarding School For Young Ladies on Spontoan East Island. Actually, she's staying on Spontoan over Xmas, at the Spontari Boarding House on Southern Island. As ever, her diary is in the never-popular Lexarc School Shorthand, which was obscure enough even then to make a quite secure code.)

December 20th, 1934

Dear Diary - it's amazing how things can change so in a single day. Yesterday morning we were all at Songmark, myself, Helen, Maria and Molly – all very busy with aeronautical training, whether taking apart rotary engines, or trying to memorise local radio frequencies for navigation. But all that seems very far away now – as we look out from under the dripping eaves of the Boarding House into deep green jungle, appearing quite untouched by civilisation.

There are eleven of us Songmark girls staying here, for one reason or another. Most of us are from Europe, and either cannot afford the fare back for the short holiday, or have Family reasons for not going home right now. My Father writes that his inspection tour of Eastern Matabeleland's anti-tank defences is going well, and that they are adequate to meet the perceived threat to that corner of the Empire. Which is gratifying to know, as a careful perusal of "Jane's All The World's Fighting Trenches" makes no mention of them at all! Ah, if I was home right now, I could surely put my dear Flying Flea #8 back in flying order after its unfortunate landing on Father's prize greenhouse, and (happy thought) perhaps test its performance on skis!

Looking outside right now, conditions are very far from Christmas-y. It seems that although the Spontoan Islands might not have a Monsoon in the mainland sense, they try very hard. December is definitely not the tourist season – which is why it might be a very good time to find out what the "real" life on the Islands is like.

Helen ventured out before lunch, exploring one of the pathways that head up the stream. The Guest House is between the two big hills on South Island, and is at the end of the actual road – but a jungle track follows the stream up, heading East. She reports she got about half a mile, almost to the source of the stream, when the heavens opened. (Drying a wet tigress is a non-trivial task, especially when the Guest House is not built with the roaring fires and steam heaters of home.)

Anyway, it appears that the trails head on over the crest and down the far side to the coast road, where Helen saw some extensive excavation works in progress. Given a dry day and oilskins, that looks a fascinating place to explore.

Having spent the morning unpacking my light travelling-chest, I finally have time to write. It looks as if I shall have plenty of time for this, as there seem to be very few things to do up here, a mile from the nearest building down a definitely dripping track. Most of the resort hotels on the Northern bay side are either closed, or operating at tick-over speed until Spring brings the big tour-boats to Casino Island (though Casino island is little over a mile from us as the Flying Flea hops, the curve of the hill hides it from view.)

Apart from Helen, only "Soppy" Forsythe is here from my class, and the twins Ethyl and Methyl are the only Seniors I have more than nodding acquaintance with. According to Ethyl, we will definitely have to "make our own amusements" this holiday – and I certainly intend to try.

At luncheon, we met our hosts, Mr. And Mrs. Tanoaho again – a charming couple, Spontoones by birth although of Oriental descent, having definitely Siamese features. It seems that they run the Guest House as a second string to their bow, as one or the other of them is often away on business trips. Helen had been speculating on exciting smuggling adventures masterminded here, tucked away a mile from the nearest dwelling (unless there are huts in the jungle, which could be fifty yards away and quite unseen). Alas, the truth is far less romantic, and quite innocent – the Tanoahos are involved merely in metal shipping. Tin and copper to Japan, tungsten and molybdenum to Germany, and such like – Mr. Tanoaho mentioned being disappointed last week, having returned to Spontoan to analyse promising-looking ores from a huge deposit on Orpington Island. Far from being the Radium he had been looking for, it turned out to be merely Uranium, only useful for specialist pottery glazes (a market very soon satiated.)

Happily, the Tanoahos seem to have travelled widely enough to have lost their taste for Poi, yams and cassava, although we have seen the cooks bringing the formidable-looking roots in for their own use. The menu is quite home-like, and we are promised a full Christmas meal next week. Definitely something to look forward to! (Later). "Soppy" Forsythe has announced that she intends to Botanise, and collect a fine collection of dried pressed leaves and flowers (plus probably bugs and logs, if her aim with a collecting-book is no better than her dismal performance on the ranges in our Self-Defence classes.) While I can applaud her preferring to Botanise rather than vegetate for 3 weeks up here, I have seen very few flowers this time of year, and all the leaves are far too wet to preserve well before they spoil. One wonders if there is a recognised hobby involving pressed compost.

December 21st, 1934

Considering today is the shortest day, we managed to make the most of it, indeed. "House Rules" are quite strict about our being back for supper, and not leaving the Island without special permission – but apart from that, we are quite free to explore as we wish. Straight after breakfast, Helen and I assembled oilskins, haversacks, binoculars

and suchlike outdoor equipage, and headed up the trail beside the stream. It was steep and surprisingly muddy after the rains – but in half an hour we stood on the Col between the two peaks of South Island – the Northern one steeper and rocky-topped, while the Southern summit appears to be crowned with dense jungle all the way.

Looking downhill, we could see the beach about a mile away, and the mysterious, uninhabited “sacred” island a mile further offshore. Helen must have excellent eyesight indeed – even at such a distance, she spotted movement there, and we put our binoculars to good use. Quite a sight! The reef around the steep little island appeared almost unbroken, but moving through a narrow gap in the South side of it, was a little flotilla of “native” boats, rowed by a dozen or so crew apiece. In a few minutes they ran their canoes up onto the beach and vanished from view into the trees, leaving no trace even from the air.

Watching for half an hour or so, we were about to press forward when a thin plume of smoke rose above the trees – evidently the Natives are having a cook-out or some such rustic celebration. Although – looking at the map, Helen did comment that the camp-fire is exactly the least visible spot on the island – apart from this very spot and the summit of the Northern peak, it is visible from nowhere except the open ocean, which is utterly empty of shipping.

Nothing more could be seen after another ten minutes, so we pressed on downhill, the “trail” branching and narrowing all the way, making it very difficult going. Happily, there was little chance of getting lost in the jungle, as we merely had to follow the streams to find the beach ahead – and after another forty minutes, we did so.

Fascinating! Although the map shows a few scattered houses on this side of the narrow cultivated strip near the shore, in practice they turned out to be only field-barns and such, making this whole side of the island wholly uninhabited. Looking across to the Sacred island, the smoke was still rising – and looking back to the steep Northern peak behind us, we were fascinated to spot a fire on there as well, though the curve of the hill prevented us from seeing who was tending it.

Most odd, certainly. I had noticed that the trail up the stream was far more heavily-trodden than one might expect, seeing that it appeared to go nowhere – at least, it definitely faded out on the far side of the pass. One might almost think that there was another way up from there which we had missed, with all the “traffic” heading up to the hilltop. A fascinating mystery, which we agreed to look into another day.

In the meantime, we discussed whether to take the Northern route or the Southern one back along the coast. The Northern one would go past the odd excavations Helen had seen yesterday – but in our haste to get off we had omitted to pack lunches, and the prospect of food seemed more hopeful in the villages marked on the Southern bay of the island.

Two miles uneventful march along the coast road brought us to the first real, postcard-type long-houses we had seen – some of them set in the fields, others visible peeking out of the jungle slopes uphill. Very few fires seemed to be lit, and indeed the place looked half-deserted – possibly they are out at Church, though Christmas is not until next week. Still, we found one general store open, run by an obviously expatriate German shopkeeper – a very crowded, but tidy place with shelves piled high with everything from paraffin drums to mouse-traps.

It was quite jolly, sitting on the veranda of the shop, eating sandwiches and looking out over the beach. The village proper seemed to consist of about twenty thatched houses, though with doors of corrugated iron. Only the shop had a modern roof – new sheet asbestos, surely much healthier and safer than musty thatching in this climate. One can quite see what Jirry meant, when mentioning the Native roofing needs extensive maintenance every year – in the wet season it grows mouldy, and in the Summer season, it must be rather heavy on Fire Insurance!

While returning the empty ‘Nootnops Red’ bottles for two cowries deposit, I asked the Shopkeeper where the villagers had gone to – he gestured vaguely Eastwards, and muttered something like “Waldzaubermensch”, which I must look up in the dictionary sometime. He indicated that it was mostly the more European “natives” who were left to mind the village today – most odd.

Helen did ask him about the major excavations we had seen on the far side of the island – he seemed happier to talk about that, explaining that the ‘Thing’ has decreed a special drainage and water supply system be set up on the island, providing employment in the tourist off-season: evidently only native-born Islanders are invited to work on the project. Quite an enlightened idea, for such a tiny administration. Still, it has been two disappointments in two days, if one were of a Romantic persuasion – our Hosts are mere metal traders, and the hidden earthworks in the jungle just drain-pipes. Ah well, sometimes things really are what they seem to be.

We decided to leave the main road (which would have taken us straight back to the Spontari Guest House) and strike out West along the beach to the next village, and see what else we could find before dark. We were hoping to find one of the temples we had heard of, tucked away in the forest – but what we found, was something quite unexpected. About fifty yards in from the beach, we noticed a change in the trees, as if they had been cut down years ago along a broad swathe and not yet re-grown – and a just perceptible trail led into the interior, tempting us to follow.

The sun was getting lower, and the clouds sweeping in from the South – as we stepped out into a narrow clearing to see a huge cylindrical structure. I first thought it was a submarine, by the shape – we speculated that some typhoon or tidal wave might have somehow tossed it there. But on closer approach we saw the structure was thin plywood, peeling apart under the weather – and then we noticed the torn-off stubs of not one or two, but three sets of wings! Evidently some colossal aircraft either tried to land on the beach and ran out of room, or mistook South Island for Eastern Island with its airstrip.

There was little time or daylight left to explore, but we marked the place on our maps and returned to the beach – from there to the next village and an uneventful two miles along the road to the Spontari Guest House, arriving with just enough time to wash and change for tea.

(Later). We asked our host, Mrs. Tanoaho, about the wreck. And quite a tale she told us! At the very end of the Great War, a prototype German bomber had been on trials in Turkey when the final collapse and armistice was signed. Rather than face internment, the crew abandoned their bomb load and substituted all the fuel they could carry, heading East with the target of German Samoa, half way around the planet. Even such a mount, the only "Forsstman Giant Triplane" to see service, could not make that trip in one flight, but by dint of scrubbing off the telltale Maltese Crosses from their wings, they deceived a sleepy Native-run aerodrome in Ceylon that they were actually a British prototype aircraft! After all, there would be no reason to suspect such an improbable deception, two thousand miles and more from the nearest "front" and the War effectively already over. Another stop in the occupied Caroline Islands (overrun by allied troops, but with German personnel still on the airstrip) found them with enough fuel to get them over the Nimitz Sea.

Alas for the wily Huns, events had overtaken them, and by the time they were over the Pacific, their radio informed them that Samoa was no longer flying the Eagle flag. One has to admire their achievement, to hit the neutral Spontoon group before running out of fuel – although they hit it in the wrong place, and harder than they might have wished.

Evidently, several of the crew are still here, the news from Europe not encouraging them to return. Given the relatively balmy climate (both in weather and political terms) prevailing here, one can quite see their point.

December 22nd, 1934

A fine day for a change! Helen and I are sharing a room, and were awakened by brilliant sunlight streaming under the eaves. Our room is up on the second floor (despite Helen's insistence it is the third), and tucked away at the end of the corridor. Ethyl is next door – her room is tiny, but she prefers it to sharing one with Methyl, who is highly volatile at the best of times. It seems they both went down into the main village yesterday, and found the shops all shut – not conducive to improving Methyl's temper.

Fortunately, whatever odd Festival the Natives had yesterday appears to be over, as we strolled down ourselves after Breakfast. The main hotel "strip" as Helen calls it, is wrapped along the curving beach that faces North towards Casino Island – most of the shops there are tourist souvenir stalls, all closed up for the Season. Happily, there is a second road behind there with the everyday shops, including the record and radio shop! We immediately scoured the place for any new "V-Gerat" discs, but to no avail – and besides, the coveted gramophone was left behind at Songmark, being Academy property. ("Soppy" Forsythe has a travelling one, but is no devotee of bold Futurist groups, claiming they sound "Like an accident in a boiler factory.")

We did manage to purchase new batteries and valves for our radio – Eastern Island was clearly visible off to the North-East, and the Radio LONO tower should still be near enough for even our improvised sets to pick up. Helen and I were leaving, when I spotted a bundle of newspapers being thrown out – amongst them was a copy of my dear old Barsetshire Chronicle, only a month old! I immediately acquired it, and spent a pleasant hour immersed in the "real" world of harvest festivals, country fairs and traditional Manor-house murders. It seems all a very long distance away – and yet, someone must have air-freighted this copy out to the Island groups, or it would be at least two months old.

I had scarcely finished reading the latest scandal (the murderer turned out to be the butler – in the library – with the candlestick) when a roar of aero-engines overhead heralded a splendid new China Clipper heading in towards the seaplane landings at Eastern Island. Alas, South Island is definitely short on all things aeronautical – if we are to make any practical headway at becoming polished Aviatrices, we shall need to take some trips elsewhere.

I fear Helen knows me almost TOO well by now – she spotted my gaze at the Clipper going over, and my expression whilst reading the newspaper from Home – as I walked along the esplanade counting paces, she correctly spotted that I was measuring it in terms of a Flying Flea takeoff! I fear I DO harp on about the dear little aircraft a little – and indeed, one would be quite handy right now. Despite enquiries, I have been told none have been seen in these Islands, having not a fraction of the range necessary to get here from any other island chain. (Memo to myself – Flying Flea #9 to be the first Water Flea? Floats would be handy in the unlikely event of it ever needing to force-land.)

After a stroll to the northern tip of the island, we repaired to the "Pie-Shop of the Sacred Steak and Kidney" for luncheon. A most excellent place, indeed! These islands are very cosmopolitan indeed, managing to serve up a substantial meat pudding that would not have disgraced my old school, St. Winifreds. Helen sampled some native fish dish, the poor girl seemingly having an aversion to suet pudding. Which would be less appetising in tropical heat, certainly, but makes the perfect restorative after a hard-fought morning on the hockey pitch, with the mud freezing to one's fur. (Is it really a whole year since my staunch team beat St. Herod's Reform School 9-7, despite taking six casualties in the first half?)

(Later) With the new batteries, we both put our radios back in commission – and while Helen sat on the window-sill with the headphones on listening to Hawaiian "swing" bands, I set up my transmitter. The aerial could not be easier to rig: a lead weight on the end of the wire, and carefully drop that end out of the window! "Soppy" Forsythe should have kept a sharper look-out, is all I can say. (The weight was not particularly heavy, but I discover she knows some words not commonly associated with a Quaker upbringing.)

After four days, at last I was able to send my "Osprey" call-sign out, at the arranged time and frequency – and was most gratified to hear the fairly immediate response from "Plantain" – Jirry being a most alert and appreciative gentleman, and by all impressions, very pleased to hear from me. Naturally, one does not simply arrange a meeting without regard for one's Reputation – Helen can chaperone me, and if Jirry brings along his brother Marti, I will gladly perform the same office for her. One has a name to keep up, after all!

December 23rd, 1934

(Morning). Mrs. Tanoaho announced at Breakfast, that we would be “invited” to help with the Preparations for Christmas tomorrow, helping the domestic staff with the food. Methyl objected loudly to this – but I should think this applies in the same sense as my dear Father’s butler McCardle “inviting” an untidy groom to scrub the stables with a toothbrush. Needless to say, we shall be cooperating.

Still, today will be the last day till after the festivities that we have to ourselves – so after a full breakfast and a trip to the kitchens for luncheon supplies, we equipped ourselves for exploration. Helen has an old canvas drill knapsack that had been her Father’s, when he was a “doughboy” in Flanders. My own equipment is new, my own Father having given me a free choice and liberal allowance to spend at the Army and Navy Store, on condition I was on the way within the week. Alas, I had not been expecting mud and rain, and have had to make do with the Songmark issue oilskins, which are tailored for a girl of quite different size and species. My Solar Topee remains in its box at Songmark, where it attracted some ribald attention. Dear Molly had asked if I had a Lunar Topee for Night manoeuvres, though I suspect she might have been making light of me.

Although it might not be on the curriculum for Aviatrix training, we put my Girl Guide experience to good use, “tracking” the footsteps on the trail heading up towards the pass. In a few places, trees had shielded the tracks from the rain of the last two days – revealing quite a large selection of bare paw prints both arriving and departing the hilltop path. A careful search showed what we had missed on Saturday – a long ridge of exposed rock leading down towards the stream, had concealed where the mysterious crowds had turned off the main path and headed to the Northern summit.

Ten minutes’ stiff climb brought us through the remaining jungle, and out onto a surprisingly grassy summit, crowned by large rocks. The view was superb, with every one of the Spontoon Islands in full sight – we spent a good half hour using our field-glasses, checking the scenery against the map. (Alas, the only map we had is a “tourist guide”, good for resort hotels and scenic attractions, but with nothing to say about native trails and temples.) Producing my own map might be a worthy project, especially if we will be using the reconnaissance cameras next term.

There was indeed the remains of a fire on the summit – but had we not been searching for it, we would surely have missed it. There was only a large discoloured patch, but not a single piece of charcoal – even the ashes seem to have been carefully removed. Certainly, whatever celebration picnics take place up here, the Natives seem very diligent about tidying up.

After a thorough search around, we returned to the main path, climbed to the pass, and nearly lost ourselves in the maze of minor paths branching down towards the Eastern side of the island. This time, we headed North, towards the excavations. They proved quite hard to find, until we almost fell into them – an absolute minimum of tree clearance has been done, and in a few years the site will be quite invisible, even from the air.

Well ! Though drains are hardly matters of immense interest, there was nothing else to look at except for damp jungle, of which we had already seen a sufficiency. They appear to be laid awfully deep, ten or fifteen feet – and exceedingly large, the pipes being five feet across, quite big enough to walk inside. Helen seemed a little puzzled, somehow, and made a few sketches. She paced out the spoil heaps, and measured the hole quite diligently – then counted the number of piled-up pipe segments about three times.

A slight noise from down the trail alerted us, and we hurried on, somehow feeling unwelcome here, as if we were disturbing something we were not meant to see. A very strange feeling, for the circumstances! But as we emerged onto the road, we noticed that it was closed off to the public, with “Danger, deep Excavations, Do Not Enter” signs. Most odd, as we could clearly see the whole road length from the hill top, and none of the diggings were anywhere Near the road.

(Later). After supper, Helen got out her sketchbooks, and enlisted my aid and arithmetic skills in a rather curious problem. As she said, somewhat quaintly, “I didn’t figger much on geometry, but I seed a lot of pipelines bein’ a-laid down in Texas”. And her gut feeling is certainly right – having measured the spoil heaps, they are much too big for the holes they supposedly came out of! Perhaps the local soil expands when exposed in the rain like rice, or something of the sort. But that hardly explains the rather large number of pipes stockpiled ahead of the trench – at least twice as many as needed. (My Great-Aunt Edna had a similar conviction that buying in bulk was cheaper, and laid in several lifetimes’ supplies of coal shovels, tin baths and ear-trumpets.)

December 24th, 1934

A busy day! Though fir-trees are at a premium in these islands, Mrs. Tanoaho has brought in a tree-fern that is much the same size, shape and colour – “Soppy” Forsythe was happily pressing discarded leaves, while the rest of us decorated it with cotton-wool in lieu of snowy decorations. The Staff have the day off tomorrow, so we were all put to work busily cleaning and cooking, with Island fare approximating to whatever cannot be obtained in the Traditional menu. Sweet potatoes will fill in handily for parsnips, and we are promised a major fish to carve, that currently is residing in the big icebox (Ethyl and Methyl were co-opted to carry extra ice up from town to last us through the Holiday. Seeing Methyl wielding the ice-pick with undisguised glee, one is reminded of dear Molly – in Chicago right now, a lack of ice is one problem they are unlikely to have.)

At last, we can put away the coveralls and exploring costume – though I dearly love my neat and efficient jacket and breeches (tropical twill, tailored by Proctor and Jermyn of Saville Row), it makes a definite change to put on a party frock! Helen looks quite unrecognisable, having been brought up almost in the cockpit, or in rough boom-towns where she tells me wearing such a dress would give the locals Quite the wrong impression as to one’s career and intentions. Alas – I will have to take out my one frock in most directions, should I wish to wear it next

year – with all this fresh air, good food and hard exercise, I am putting on about an extra size, mostly in muscle! Helen almost stopped looking embarrassed at her own appearance, and assured me that should St. Herod's ever challenge me for a re-match when next I return Home, they would do well to have the ambulances arranged before the hockey match commences.

One might almost think that dear Molly has been having an Influence on her.

December 25th, 1934

Merry Christmas! Though these islands never see snow by all accounts, a definitely chilly North wind made it feel quite festive. Helen gave me a fine brass compass, and I had selected for her a copy of "Jane's All The World's Fighting Dirigibles", which will make good reading for these dark evenings. I opened and shared the tinned fruitcake which had arrived from Home last week – I know the brand was called "Canned Popularity" back at St. Winifred's, but it seems genuinely appreciated here.

Half of us were drafted to help the Tanoahos prepare the dinner, and the rest to put the finishing touches to the decorations – a merry meal was had by all.

(Later) Ethyl and some of her friends invited us to pile into their room to partake of some festive spirits, a bottle of which they had smuggled in and cached in the jungle till now (house rules being strongly against it, but this is Christmas.) I was introduced to three third-years, Erica (German, light-furred Alsatian), Conchita (New Mayan, guinea-pig but definitely ferocious-looking) and Noota (Aleutian Isles husky). They regaled us with tales of how they had spent their Summer, not going home at all but on an expedition to Yap Island. An intriguing place! They showed us their photographs: the ancient canine culture on the island do not use regular money for "real" transactions, but giant pierced gritstone discs, some a yard and more across. As there is no gritstone on the island and it must be rafted in from another island a hundred miles away, Inflation is kept very low.

Or at least, they complained, that had been the case. However, a disturbing recount of the stones on the island this Spring, revealed there were more than could be easily accounted for – and that some of them were forgeries! How anyone could forge such a thing, is quite puzzling. Certainly a mystery to think of over the Holidays.

December 26th, 1934

Dear Diary: I must make a New Year Resolution, to be more moderate in sampling island-distilled beverages. I wish Erica had told me yesterday, that the triple-distilled "Arak", date derived, is featured in Schneider Trophy fuels! Alas, it tends to wreck engines if run as a regular fuel – and by Helen's expression, she too is discovering how the engines must feel.

Still, it is one more Experience to record, and cross off the list. "Soppy" Forsythe appears to be practising her Virtuous look, having been out yesterday afternoon and evening to Church services on Casino Island. Definitely, we will be petitioning the Tanoahos to let us attend the New Year festivities over there – though the Guest House is very nice in its way, the bright lights are beckoning us. Certainly, we shall have little enough time to explore there when Term starts, and we return to hangars as surroundings and castor-oil spray as a major item of diet...

Some fresh air was certainly called for, so after a frugal breakfast (dry toast and a pot of tea was all I could face, while Helen seemed to be intent on stimulating the Brazilian economy with her coffee consumption) we headed out again, up all the way to the North Peak. The hill must surely have a name, but not on our Tourist map. It is most odd, that we have seen no accurate maps of the island for sale – the air charts are no doubt accurate, but on too large a scale to be of any real assistance. Even stranger is the fact that although quite expensively produced, all the publicly available maps seem to be quite wrong – as a morning with binoculars and sketch-book could quite rapidly confirm.

One has to admire the Islanders, they are as far from the stereotyped "Sleepy Pacific Native" as one can imagine! Or at least some of them are – we could quite clearly hear what sounded like large concrete-mixers working below us on the excavations, the sound carried on the wind. Mrs. Tanoaho had professed to know nothing about the project – which is odd, as judging by the disturbed ground being carefully re-forested or re-turfed, they must have dug within half a mile of the Guest House last year.

With our binoculars, we could keep quite a close eye on the airfield on Eastern Island, little over two miles distant. Very visible was the great shape of the Soviet bomber we helped to land, the Kalinin K-7. One wonders what they are going to do with it – and if the crew are still standing guard around their charge! Somewhere on these islands, one presumes, the Pilot is hiding out, having nothing good to look forward to should he return home to face the wrath of Joseph Starling, the "Red Bird" himself.

(Evening) After getting the cobwebs decidedly blown clear, we both recovered enough to start making more plans. As before, the transmitter aerial was dropped out of the window, the circuit grounded to the water-pipes, and soon we were getting the latest news from Jerry. No wonder the reception is so clear, his family is back on this very island, just over the hill! It seems they are working on renovating the family huts for next year, being too busy working in the Tourist season. Certainly, we should have a lot to talk about, and since Helen and I will be chaperoning each other, tomorrow should be interesting.

Oddly, Helen has been asking where I packed my jungle survival kit, and if it is fully stocked. Surely South Island is not that far from Civilisation, for us to need to worry about carrying mosquito nets and water purifying tablets on a rendezvous!

December 27th, 1934

Dear Diary – what one could call an Interesting day out. The festivities being mostly over (as was the supply of cake, alas) we ventured out Southwards after breakfast, to Haio Village, where the German run general shop is. A useful landmark, and a pleasant place to meet up. We had only a few minutes to wait before the welcome sight of Jirry and his next-older brother Marti appeared, stepping out of the jungle that presses in around the village.

Whatever they had been doing in the past week, the brothers appear to have been working decidedly hard – it seems I am not the only one who will be needing to let out some working clothes. Happily, with the Native costume being what it is, Jirry and his family will have no worries about tailor's bills ...

A most pleasant stroll along the beach Westwards followed, past the site of the old crashed Forsstman Triplane, hidden in the jungle – indeed, Marti tells me the shopkeeper is one of the original crew, some sixteen of them having made the epic flight. Haio Village, it seems, is mostly occupied by Natives who work in the big hotels around the Northern bay, being a mere half an hour's walk away. In the off season, they revert to a "traditional" life, farming their garden-plots, digging for shells and such. We passed several groups digging diligently away, appearing quite happy to exchange the pressures of serving boatloads of demanding tourists, for the simpler, more relaxed life of their Ancestors.

The South side of the island was perfectly sheltered – all the more so as we stopped to look at a strange feature, something like an abandoned cellar, a stone-walled structure set just inland from the beach. Oddly, at its entrance there was a wreath of fresh flowers – and though obviously empty, the place seems to be kept in good repair. Helen did ask about this – to be told it is a relic of the Gunboat Wars, some quarter of a century ago, which seem to feature so largely in island folklore, just below the surface.

Looking at the structure with my perusal of "Jane's All The World's Fighting Trenches" fresh in mind, I volunteered that it appeared to be pointing inland – hidden by a sand ridge from the coast, but looking across the obvious strategic gap at the "neck" of the island. Jirry seemed quite taken aback – and joked that although I had told him my Father is a General, he had never heard the talent was inheritable! My guess seems to be decidedly on target.

We passed the second village, which I discover is called Ranganoa Beach, though my Tourist map leaves it nameless. Climbing the long ridge, we looked down on the wholly uninhabited West Coast of the island – a rather tangled, but definitely unspoiled section, with just a few trails leading to the beach. In Spring, it should be a splendid place for picnics and the like.

I asked Jirry why the area seemed so isolated, considering we were little over a mile from the nearest big hotels on the North Bay. The answer was intriguing - the Tourists mostly go to specific areas, written up as "must-see" in the guidebooks. True, there are guided tours into the wilds – but Jirry points out that those are carefully routed to similar areas. Very few people ask their guides to take them to particular points on the map – and Marti hinted that they generally get shown patches of quicksand or leech-infested swamps to discourage them doing so. Considering the Hoele'toemi family earn much of their living as guides in season, they know whereof they speak, as the Reverend Bingham would say.

We had a most enjoyable picnic luncheon, Helen having remembered to bring blankets to spread on the sand, and the Hoele'toemi brothers had a hamper filled with local delicacies – the breadfruit cakes were a definite treat. Indeed, Helen seemed to be very appreciative, of both the food and the company – despite not having been socially introduced, she was showing her definitely affectionate side for Marti. (She has mentioned having – experience – in these matters, having been instructed rather than chaperoned by her Aunt, a most forward-thinking lady by her account.) Although not taking things to Quite such an extreme as Helen, I had a most enjoyable afternoon.

(Dear Diary. Now I know why Helen asked if my Survival kit was fully stocked. It turns out that the "Water Carrier, Emergency, Elastic" has more than one use. Gosh!)

December 28th, 1934

After our adventures yesterday, I had expected to be somewhat exhausted – but quite the reverse, we were both up well before Breakfast, and busily planning the day. The House Rules permit us to leave the island only in parties of four or more – fortunately, Erica, Conchita and Noota had mentioned last night they were hoping to get to Casino Island. As Seniors, we were glad to have their company and advice for the trip.

Erica was most impressed at our explorations (the ones we told her of, at any rate) and mentioned having spoken with Herr Rassberg, the shop-keeper in Haio Village. It seems he is not unusual for these islands – many Europeans settle here and adopt Native traditions, giving rise to such odd social groups as "Hula Junkers", exiles from her own East Prussia.

The water-taxi ride over was uneventful, and we split up for the day, arranging a rendezvous for three in the afternoon. At last, some leisure time to wander around Casino Island – even though most of it does seem to be closed for the season. We passed the famous club on the southern side, "The Coconut Shell" – and stopped to watch, as rehearsals were taking place on one of the outdoor stages. Quite a sight! We recognised two of the dancers as tutors from our Native Dance Class, but they were far too busy to talk with us.

Certainly, the island seemed busy enough despite the lack of tourists. All the shops were open, except for obvious souvenir stalls and tour agencies – and at last, we managed to purchase some new Futurist records. The covers are fine and stark pieces of art in their own right, and by the instruments depicted, it should be a most exhilarating performance. Having been forced to take Violin lessons and hating it, I can quite sympathise with the

brave musicians manning their batteries of squealers, hissers, throbbers and exploders, without a traditional instrument in sight.

Helen claims she can barely get a tune out of a player piano, but has a fair chance of fixing one. While her education may have been a little short on Culture, one cannot doubt she has plenty of practical experience, and is never afraid to acquire more ! Thinking of which, we must re-stock our survival kits, Helen having used the entire stock of certain items in both. Not an item, however, that either of us feel like making public inquiry about.

A morning of shopping was a rare treat, only brought to a halt by the increasing weight of our valises. I managed to find an Oriental-run general tailors and dressmaker, where a veritable crowd of tailor mice swarmed over me with measuring-tapes, calling out the results to the back-room in what I assume was Chinese. There are certainly quite a number of Orientals here - I recall hearing that in the world as a whole, every third child born is Chinese (though I rather doubt it - my dear friend Mabel was the third in her family, and is purest Barseshire.)

Anyway, I left not forty minutes later with a very handsome oiled silk suit, waterproof and perfectly fitting in a vaguely military cut, perfect for Winter explorations in these islands. The chief tailor assured me that the fabric would blend in with any background imaginable, providing it was green. Certainly, my enlarged Allowance is proving very handy, especially since we have had very few opportunities to shop – one must make the most of one's chances.

Luncheon was an excellent fish dish at "The Absent Coconut", opposite our Native Dance classes – whose door has a sign, "Closed till New Year". In perhaps three weekends, we expect to be back there – until then, we shall just have to take our exercises in other ways to stay in condition. Looking over to Moon Island, just across the water scarcely half a mile away, we spotted a big Caproni ca60 bis, making its approach from the direction of Tillamook. Fascinating! The four sets of wings were flashing in the sunlight, as it seemed to drift in and touch down effortlessly, its comfortable houseboat-like hull making a swan-graceful landing. Quite a contrast with the strange arrowhead-like monoplanes that our Aeronautical lecturer Herr Bussmann displays on his desk as the shape of future flight – according to him, there will be no future in firms supplying struts and bracing wires. And yet the Capronis are making Trans-ocean voyages, with sixty passengers apiece. The moral of it seems to be, as aircraft demonstrably need wings, the more the better.

Having dined well, we continued exploring the North-East side of Casino island - obviously the oldest docks and warehouses are over here, some of them in need of a Spring cleaning (and in some cases, many Springs have passed between painting.) Certainly, this seems a place catering less to tourists - even at this time of year, the docks are very busy unloading crates, logs and less identifiable items. One presumes that the Tanoaho family business is somewhere around here, supplying scrap iron and zinc for the peaceful Japanese economy.

One thing we have seen very little of on Spontoon, is Authority - but we did notice a fair number of Police in the neighborhood of the Old China Dock, keeping a watchful eye on things. Possibly this is the part of town where those less advantaged than ourselves live (though as Helen points out rather acidly, that describes most people.) Still, what entertainments there are seem well-supported, mostly small taverns and cinemas. To judge from the posters, they show a lot of Native Culture films, to judge by the minimal quantity of costume involved. No wonder the tailors here are so eager to see a customer, considering how much less demand there is for their wares than in the climate (both social and weather-wise) back Home.

Three o'clock was on us almost before we noticed, and we hurried back across the Park where V-Gerat had played so marvelously Starkly, and down to meet with the Seniors at the water-taxi dock. Another uneventful boat-ride back, and a dash up the road to the Spontari Guest House, just as the rain arrived for the evening. A splendid trip all round!

(Evening). A long talk indeed with Helen, before setting up the radio and contacting Jerry. Helen pointed out that these islands are an excellent opportunity for Adventure, in various forms, in that nobody is keeping a close watch on us and reporting home. Even the teachers at Songmark certainly seem to encourage resourceful exploration, if tempered with carefully planned Discretion – as Helen says, "Folks don't go a-tellin' you what to do, but how to get away with it."

On contacting Jerry, I confess I felt somewhat daunted – after all, we have only known each other two months – but Helen has been telling me tales of life in the oilfield towns, compared to which, anything I might be planning seems utterly discreet and decorous. The Natives here do seem – relaxed – about such encounters, and indeed, when in Rome, do as the Romans, as our The Very Reverend "Loony" Pontephrigh used to say back home (before the Bishop had Words with him about conducting services clad in a toga. The Bishop had to concede that they were very well-attended sermons, though.)

(Later). I am writing this by torch-light, unable to sleep properly. Fortunately, Helen is a sound sleeper – and more fortunately still, she does not snore like Maria. I should have purchased some books today, as all I have to read is my one copy of the "Barseshire Chronicle", and all the interesting scandals I have read through twice already. Still, it is a definite reminder of Home, even the market-day and local elections. One wonders how the Islanders here run such things – back home it is a quite cheerful occasion, all the candidates plying the voters with complementary beer and cider while they publicly harangue and insult each other. My Family normally reserve an upstairs room overlooking the market square and watch the process of Government in action – ever so many broken heads and bloody noses, and everyone as drunk as can be!

Still – one cannot expect much in the way of amenities out here – Casino Island apart, we are very far from "Civilization". Despite it all, one must admit there are some fascinating local customs – and I am definitely looking forward to discovering more Native traditions...

December 29th, 1934

A day of torrential rain indeed – not one for venturing outside in. All eleven of us were thrown definitely on our own devices, which proved interesting. We had asked Erica, Noota and Conchita about constructing Native costumes, as they were wearing them in some of the photographs they had shown us of Yap Island. Mrs. Tanoaho took a motherly interest and provided some supplies – and with a brief dash out into the streaming jungle with a machete for fresh raw materials, we were well provided for the day's construction.

Nine costumes later, ("Soppy" Forsythe and Methyl refused to take part) we looked like a genuine Native band. Or so I thought – until Mrs. Tanoaho smilingly started to point out errors of style. At least, I had the satisfaction of knowing I was right not to attempt it as a disguise earlier, as even our more evolved costumes were blatant imitations that any true Spontoone could spot fifty paces off. However, in the afternoon, we were taken through the finer points of native "tailoring" – until even our hostess grudgingly admitted we should pass muster.

My own "costume" is one of the more conservative variations on the theme. Above my briefest bathing costume is a knee-length grass skirt, with a liana fibre "belt" holding it up – the waist section of the skirt is plaited, but the lower section hangs in separate strips, ensuring modesty. Some of the other girls are using coconut shells (provided by Mrs. Tanoaho from stock) as brassiere – alas, my figure hardly fills such, and I am making do with a plaited palm-leaf top, again held up by a liana fibre cord behind the neck. To be authentic of course, one would not have the bathing suit underneath, but presumably genuine Native girls either are assured their costumes will not suffer "catastrophic structural failure" (like my poor Flying Flea #1 endured in mid-flight), or are less concerned with retaining their modesty should it take place.

Just before sunset the rain stopped, and the sun appeared from under the clearing clouds. The party of us gathered outside decorating our costumes with what flowers and such we could find, much to "Soppy" 's despair, as there are few enough around at this time of year for her to botanise. I must confess, one feels really quite different dressed in Native style: doubly so knowing that the costume is at least half-way convincing. Any casual visitor from Home would look at me and see a daughter of the Islands, and not the daughter of General Bourne-Phipps!

Helen looks quite dashing in her own woven cape, with her stripes showing underneath – still quite covered-up by full Native standard. She points out that the local costume may need replacing every few days, but that it certainly saves on washing, with the daily rains doing quite as much refreshing as one might want. Certainly, looking at myself in the mirror, I feel a very long way from Home – but with more to look forward to, I confess that it bothers me less all the time.

Thinking of Home, this evening "Soppy" donated to us an eagerly-grabbed pile of newspapers from her native Lancashire. Though a month old, they were handed round and discussed well into the night. Actually, compared with my own treasured "Bassetshire Chronicle" I found the whole collection rather lacking - the scandals were very so-so, and the murders very uninspiring. Having been brought up on proper Country-house crimes, one expects a certain colour and flair to the business – the case at Lord Forbesby's estate last year involving the specially imported Peshwari assassin, the trained jackdaw and the bacon-slicer should give people the right sort of idea.

December 30th, 1934

A day of exploration, Dear Diary. While our Native costumes were still fresh, Helen and I raced out after Breakfast, up over the col barefoot, picking our way over the softer grasses and mud – equipped with binoculars, but little else save some fruit in a bark pouch. I had been mentioning the exploits of my Uncle Gerald in the Bolshevik Revolution, and his escape across the Russian Steppe disguised as a peasant – when Helen was fired with a similar idea. In our regular guises, we can be identified as non-Natives a mile away – and if anything interesting is happening over the hill, folk will have plenty of time to cover up evidence. Hopefully anybody tracing our bare pawprints will not notice our starting to limp after a mile, not being used to doing without shoes.

Once on the downhill side, we went cautiously, as silently as we could manage, towards the area we had heard the concrete-mixers at work. By the time we were half-way down, they had started again – and the next hour we spent inching nearer, watching out carefully as we neared the site. At last, Helen spotted movement, and we took to the trees. Being of a feline persuasion is sometimes very handy – and I was glad that it was not Maria with me, staunch friend though she is.

From the top of a large tree, we had an unbroken view of the excavations in full swing – easily fifty or sixty Natives hard at work, with a junior-sized steam shovel and two large concrete mixers. I must say, they were much tidier than the workmen putting in new gas-mains and such at home – one could see them piling up the topsoil tidily, bucket-chains of other workers carefully scattering the excavated soil in the jungle while their comrades carefully "made good" the finished excavation with topsoil and saplings. The main work seemed to be a big reservoir or pumping-station – at least, a large and solid concrete structure, where the two pipes led into, and other pipes led out towards the sea. Helen was quite right – the hole is actually twice as deep as it appears, with two levels of pipes stacked one above the other. A very strange arrangement – and surely a rather expensive one, considering this side of the Island is uninhabited ?

At one point we thought we had been discovered – there were cries of alarm, and most of the workforce vanished into the trees, having thrown netting over the steam-shovel. But a minute later, we could breathe again, as an aircraft appeared overhead (a very strange-looking floatplane, one of those tubby GeeBee racers made yet more improbable by putting it on floats. The design idea appears to be to purchase the biggest radial engine available, and hide the smallest possible aircraft behind it.) Ten minutes later, evidently the "all clear" was given, and work resumed.

Not wishing to spend all day watching concrete being poured, we cautiously descended our tree and made our way Southwards, to the less developed area of the pipeline. This took us an hour, as we hardly dared make noise cutting trails and such, and had to work our way through quite dense woods. Still, by lunchtime we were on the section that had been only surveyed and marked out – bamboo stakes indicating a big round structure, like the pumping-station now being cast.

Very curious. Though all the engineering I have done has been of the aeronautical variety, I would have thought that pumping stations would be on the bottoms of hills, while this one is definitely on the top – and with an excellent view out over the beaches. Checking with my map, it overlooks the only decent-sized break in the reef on this side of the island – one could put quite fair-sized boats ashore here, though there is no commercial reason to do such a thing.

Helen was busily sketching up her recollections, having had no opportunity to wield pen and notebook while clinging to a branch at our last vantage-point. She, at least, has had a passing acquaintance with a lot of industrial structures, oil tanks and pipelines (not all of them on fire at the time. It seems her late Father was often called upon to give his opinion as to their general safety, having seen so many unsafe models).

From our treetop vantage point, we had been able to look at the concrete shuttering from above – and Helen pointed out a very strange feature. Either the builders are most slovenly in putting their structures together, or the pumping stations are supposed to have concrete twice as thick on one side as the other – the side facing seawards, as it happens.

We looked at the plans, and then at each other – having little other literature to read at the Spontari Guest House, Helen too has dug her way through all 300 illustrated pages of “Jane’s All The World’s Fighting Trenches”. There is a cut-away diagram of one of the Maginot Line casemates in the centre of the book, with carefully described varying thicknesses of concrete facing expected threats – and we have seen what looks like a baby version of the same thing, right here on Spontoon! Helen had argued with Madelene X last term about the publication, pointing out that it should be kept secret if it is to be of any use. (In theory it is, but since the French are employing the cheapest available engineers, many of whom happen to be German, the secrecy involved is about as watertight as a sieve in a typhoon.)

I confess that the idea somewhat alarmed us – we had seen various references to Spontoon being a base for “Anti-Pirate Patrols”, which is all well and good and no doubt reassuring for the tourist trade. This development, however, puts quite a different slant on the whole place. There is an awful lot that the Spontoonies are not telling us, it seems.

Helen suggested we head out of the area as fast as we could without attracting attention, and I heartily agreed. We had not forgotten to pack Native sandals, so we made better speed when we reached the road on the coast to Haio Village – remembering to wear them as soon as we reached a hard surface where our unshod paw-prints will appear to have simply vanished. Not that anyone appeared to be observing us, but there could be half a tribe hiding in the jungle without us spotting them.

In half an hour, we were back on familiar territory, stopping at Herr Rassberg’s shop for a much-needed bottle of the Nootnops Blue to calm our rather strained nerves. Certainly, the beverage seems to work well for the purpose, being (as the label honestly states), being made from all Natural herbal ingredients. Indeed, we were quite collapsing in giggles, after finishing the bottle – nervous reaction, no doubt. Helen suggested a relaxing afternoon on the beach, the sun having come out and the South side of the island quite sheltered from the wind. I seconded the motion, and soon we were comfortably watching the waves, Helen having reduced her costume still further, to quite show off her figure. I hesitated to do so, till she pointed out that the Natives dress in this style without a thought – and any passing Europeans would think us to be locals, with nothing shocking about the idea.

(Memo to myself. Sun and fresh air on the fur are actually quite pleasant, and presumably will be still better in Summer time. I confess that the Songmark shirt and blazer were quite sweltering, even in late September. Still, one must make the most of the opportunity to get so much fresh air, as in two weeks we shall be back in class.)

On returning to the Spontari Guest House (our costumes restored to their original modesty), we found a postcard from Maria. The lucky girl found that as soon as she set foot in Rome, her Uncle arranged her to immediately head out for a holiday in a far corner of the Alps, where she is having a fine time! Evidently she has a warm and caring Family, who are keen that she should expand her education with a lot of travelling. While we are hacking through wet jungle, she is enjoying many of the local Winter Sports, evidently “shilly-shallying in chilly chalets”, as my Father would have put it. She writes that she is “Putting Miss Devinski’s advice to good use” – which is odd, as our Tutor never mentioned skiing as far as I recall...

Helen seems highly amused at this, breaking down into another fit of giggling. Poor girl, evidently the strain on her nerves today has been considerable.

December 31st, 1934

An eventful day to finish an eventful year. We made ready our best clothes, while the rain came down in complete sheets – then listened to the Radio LONO forecasts on our crystal sets, which promised better conditions for the evening. Mrs. Tanoaho had agreed that we could all attend the Casino Island festivities – in fact, she and her husband would be going as well, and shutting up the house completely. Even “Soppy” Forsythe seems quite animated at the prospect.

I confess I am looking forward to next year, with plenty of flying and exploring the islands – and to the various good company, both at Songmark and amongst the Islanders that I have found. Helen quite agrees, and voted that we contact the Hoele’toemis to arrange a meeting on Casino Island – and another informal one

tomorrow, which she seems very keen on. Our radios did their trick, and we were soon all set. The afternoon seemed to just vanish in a whirl of preparation. Since the cooks are going as well tonight, they are getting the evening off, and we made do with a light meal of fruits to tide us over till the evening. Still, we felt rather empty, which should at least help Helen on the water taxi, who is as poor a sailor as anyone I have met. Oddly enough, she not only tolerates, but tells me she greatly enjoys flying through rough air – having been brought up “Bustin’ Dust-Devils” through hot Texan summers.

After dark, we put on our oilskins over our festive clothes, and trooped down by lantern-light along the jungle trail to the beach. Quite a band – the eleven of us, the Tanoahos, and Obaio and Uleria, two of the native cooks along for the occasion. Our hosts had thoughtfully phoned ahead to book water taxis, as tonight of all nights they are in huge demand. A smooth trip across the bay, Casino Island sheltering us from the waves and throwing up a great display of lights as we approached the main quay, alighting next to “The Coconut Grove”.

Not having seen the islands in true Tourist season, I can hardly imagine how more crowded the place can possibly be – the streets were quite simply packed with revellers, all intent on having a good and rather noisy time. We had booked a meal first at “The Hot Tub Hotel”, right on top of the island, looking over the park next to where we saw V-Gerat play. Quite a fine meal, with more of the breadfruit cakes that the Natives seem to keep for special occasions.

From our seat by the window (a rare treat with just the two of us, as dear Molly has a positive phobia about sitting by windows or with her back to any doors) we could see the Water Taxis arriving, lanterns lit as they converged from all the other islands in the group. One rather odd vessel caught my attention – a low, barge-like boat coming in from Meeting Island, where we saw the meeting-place of the “Thing” that rules the Islands. By the end of our meal it had arrived – we had thought it might be local dignitaries, arriving on a State Barge – but Spontoon scarcely has any “Dignitaries” in the proper sense, having about the total population of a good-sized county town back home. Our interest was piqued further when we saw it drawing up on an otherwise deserted dock, and a small fleet of what looked like ambulances assembled to meet it. We had heard that there was a “sanatorium” on Meeting Island, but surely the patients are not hauled out of bed for these celebrations? Sadly, we were too far off to see exactly who was getting out of the boat, and the ambulances soon vanished below the curve of the hill.

Having finished the meal with a toast to the New Year (in palm wine, which the Tanoahos allowed us for the occasion, “Soppy” drinking bootlegged saspirilla instead), we assembled and headed out to the main park, where a good nine hundred people must have been gathered around a bonfire ready to be lit. I noticed that some of them were throwing palm-leaf effigies of various things on the pyre – some were of animals such as sharks, and some seemed to be of various people.

Our cook, Obaio, had brought along what looked like a green-painted book, made of newspaper with currency symbols sketched on it as if it was some huge sheaf of banknotes. She added it to the pyre, with a look of great satisfaction. Fascinating!

On inquiring, Obaio told me this was a local superstition (though “tradition” was the term she used.) At the end of the year, the Natives have a bonfire and burn effigies of whatever has been causing them problems in the old year, to ward it off from the New one just beginning. She had cast away imitation money, having had financial difficulties – I imagine the sharks were the worries of fishermen and such, and that the people being burned in effigy were enemies. Quite a charming, colourful tradition, I suppose – though I doubt it is as effective as the good old-fashioned Wicker figures still burned in the remoter woods of dear old Bassetshire, exactly as they have always been.

Helen whispered that if half the films are true, all these Pacific Islanders make a habit of throwing folk into live volcanoes. Having not seen any signs of eruption around Spontoon, I suppose this is a case of “make-do”, for overcoming local volcanic deficiencies. (Thinking of films, I had heard Ethyl mention her disappointment when she had arrived at Spontoon and discovered the nature of the “Thing” that rules it. The poor girl evidently lives on quite unladylike trashy pulp Science-Fiction comics, and had expected something more on the Giant Invertebrate lines as its overlord. According to one book-cover I noticed in her room, one only has to poke around any ancient ruin to be surprised by entities quite resembling twenty-foot sea anemones, but much more so.)

At five minutes to Midnight, torches were passed around the crowd, and a Native band struck up a stirring tune. Helen had sneaked out a menu from the restaurant as a souvenir, but evidently found a better use for it. Writing “Mathematical Fundamentals of Flight” on the cover, she pushed forward and tossed it onto the pyre, just as the torches were lit! Just in time, as Obaio told me later, as according to Tradition, anyone left carrying an image after Midnight is stuck with double the problem for the whole coming year.

Quite a sight indeed, Dear Diary! To judge from the quantity of effigies going up, one would suspect these Islanders have rather more to worry about than the tourist brochures mention. I was fairly sure I saw well-crafted ships, one of which resembled an aircraft-carrier, exposed deep in the pyre as the outer layers burned away. A very fine bonfire, which could surely be seen from the whole island group. Indeed, looking around, one could observe several fires on what must be hilltops all around us – except for Sacred Island, which stood out dark against the rising moon.

In such a crowd, I had almost despaired of finding Jerry – but Helen spotted one of his brothers, Jonni I believe, and waved them over. Jerry was certainly there, dressed in his best (that is, his best Native costume, which is decidedly Not his church-going clothes) and most pleased to see me, as ever. A very fine hour we spent, watching the pyre burning away, as 1935 arrived. I met his sisters, Saimmi and Moeli for only the second time – the older sister, Saimmi, a tall and stately girl indeed, who I hear is studying to be a local Priestess. Moeli, the youngest of the family, is a lively and highly mischievous-looking young lady, I can tell! Both of them were dressed in a formally decorated, but somewhat ... minimalist Native costume, which I would have felt decidedly

chilly in outside the range of the bonfire. I must say, it did seem to suit them, their fur appearing to quite sparkle in the firelight. Fresh air and sunlight certainly seem to improve one's fur condition, and indeed the Hoeie'toemi girls have more exposed to sunlight than most.

Far too soon, we were shepherded up by the senior Songmark girls, some of whom were making good-byes of their own to evidently local gentlemen. On reflection, the other two years of Songmark seem to be around the Guest House very little – one assumes they have local contacts and are learning healthy pastimes such as Native dances and the like.

Another choppy ride back to South Island, a tired march up the hill, and a weary good-night, the first of 1935!

January 1st, 1935

After the celebrations, a late start – the cooks only arrived in mid-morning, evidently having carried on till long after we were back. Helen seemed quite amused, and whispered “If you're not in bed by one, go home” – a baffling piece of advice, I must say. Still, things had returned to normality after luncheon, when Helen and I dressed ourselves in our own Native costume, freshly garlanded, and slipped out into the jungle. A narrow trail headed South of the Guest House, aiming almost straight toward Haio Village, where we had arranged a New Year's Day meeting.

As before, we met at Herr Rassberg's shop, to find Jirry already coming out, with his brother Marti. The old shopkeeper looked at us and at the brothers, and gave us a most peculiar stare, though I could hardly see why. Certainly, they seemed none the worse for wear after whatever celebrations carried on into this morning – in fact, they seemed most energetic indeed. Their good humour proved quite contagious, and at Helen's suggestion we removed to the beach, for a bracing dip (no colder than a May day on Brighton beach, and with far more sand.)

A brisk toweling-off later, we headed back inland, along a narrow trail to the East of Haio village, crossing the road and heading uphill. In a clearing, there was a freshly thatched Native longhouse, scented quite wonderfully of new-cut palm fronds - which Jirry tells us is one of his family's Summer homes! A fascinating place indeed - he and his brother showed us around, not that it took very long. It seems that several members of the Haio'Toemi clan work along North Bay here, with the tourist hotels, and use this one as a seasonal home. There was everything there that we had seen in the Tourist books – the long fire-pit with the iron spits over the ash bed, the quaint carved wooden head-rests, the decorated main beams with marine life symbols – the original and authentic collection!

The weather outside improved quite markedly while we were exploring their domestic arrangements. I confess that had I seen the place four months earlier, I would have thought it a fine example of staunch yet primitive Native peoples, just ripe to be taken into the fold of our (or someone's) Empire, and in severe need of being put into the 1930's and not the 1330's. And yet, clad wholly in their own garb and knowing exactly how well suited every feature is to their lives – certainly, I could hardly offer any suggestions as how to better the place.

Marti had offered to show Helen the source of their domestic water and bathing – and Helen waved for me and Jirry to follow. Not fifty yards in through the jungle, was an absolutely perfect waterfall and pool, with a small and secluded sand beach looking back over a foaming fifty-foot fall that drowned out all conversation. Though Helen soon made very obvious that conversation was the very last thing she had in mind, having found such a spot and such company ...

(Dear Diary. My old House Mistress at St. Winifred's, Mrs. Claidh-Mhore, always impressed upon us the value of keeping New Year Resolutions. “Begin as ye mean to go on, gels”, was an exhortation that I still recall her ringing tones in my ears. Well! Once clad in the garments of Nature, in such surroundings and with such – Natural companions, I can quite see what she might have meant. I am sure that our dear tutor Miss Devinski would not have given us such sound and practical advice had she not expected us to put it to good use. And indeed, after a morning of Explorations across half the island, the afternoon passed in explorations still more Interesting, but covering quite different Territory.)

I believe I shall endeavour to follow our old House Mistress's advice as well as that of our Tutor's. New Year is an excellent time to acquire new Interests, and in such good company, too!

January 2nd, 1935

A decidedly windy day, with the branches leaning right over to tap at the eaves and windows of the Guest-House. The whole forest seems to be roaring with wind – we spotted “Soppy” giving chase to an escaping Botany book, which had decided to make a break for freedom.

We took a stroll down to the North Bay, watching the breakers roaring up the beach, just angling in through the gap between the islands – my new oiled silk suit stood up to the conditions perfectly, and was a great success in the few rain-squalls that blew over. In the “service town” behind the hotels, we ran into Erica and Noota, out on their own errands. Having been three years on Spontoon, they showed us some fine shops, many of which are tucked away and clearly not intended for casual tourists.

Erica has news indeed from her friends on Casino Island – the big Russian bomber is to attempt to fly out tomorrow! Their Government has sent out a working team to modify it, and the idea is that another aircraft will fly out meeting it half-way and attempt to refuel it in mid-air. A silly idea, which will never catch on – surely they would be better off putting floats on it and landing by a seaplane tender, if they cannot get landing rights within range of home. There is news of the Pilot too – he has requested Political Asylum here, rather than face the music at home. (Helen says the music would be whatever Russians play for court-martials and firing squads.)

A postcard from Molly! Her Family has expanded their investments into foods as well as beverages – she says her Father is putting money into some pressed-ham like product, that she says is sure to be all the rage. No mention of her having a particularly Eventful Christmas – but she is on home territory, and is well-known to be her Father's daughter. Possibly this makes socialising a little tense at times.

Erica is definitely a good sort, and treated us to a fine "Bockwurst" sandwich at a small café that seems to be just open for the passing trade. The proprietor seemed to know her well, and there was a poster on the wall for "Friends of German Opera", a Society that appears to meet on Casino Island. From what my Father said, German Operas all last at least a week, and the more Dark and Brooding the plotlines are, the better.

Alas, Jerry and his family were busy elsewhere on the island, repairing another of the clan houses ready for Spring. It seems to be quite a busy schedule – winter for repairs, Spring to plant the garden-plots and fish, Summer the tourist season, then harvest-time again. Still, absence makes the heart grow fonder – though we only have one more week until we are back under the watchful eye of our Tutors, so we must make the most of it. "Carpe Diem", as the Romans said, - seize the carp while you can.

After lunch, we parted from Noota and Erica, and spread out our maps in a sheltered grove to look at the baby Maginot-line that is running round the island. From what we can see, it appears to start somewhere near here at North Bay, and run right around the island with the aim of linking up again. We sketched on the map what we had seen, and started making detailed notes from memory. Fascinating! I am wondering whether I should write and tell Father of this – it should be quite his "thing."

Helen suggested that we try and find where the system starts – so we casually began to look around for signs. But there was nothing at all visible – several years' plant growth in this climate had entirely concealed the line of the trenches. After searching minutely, we gave up and retired to the shelter of a beachside cafe, having at least had some fresh air. Oddly enough, my suit, though a perfect fit and of quite splendid fabric, felt somewhat confining after yesterday's adventures in Native dress. One can quite imagine that the Missionaries had a difficult time in persuading the locals that cotton frocks were the right thing to wear.

Our first success came while looking at the long ridge forming the West coast of the island, where Helen spotted definite water tanks (and they were indeed water tanks, we could see inside through a grating.) Following the pipelines down, we noticed them vanish into the ground, next to a suspicious area of new concrete. Once hot on the trail, we could start tracking it under the back gardens of the settlement, surveying the route carefully in my notebook. Dressed in our more modest Native costume, from a distance we should attract little attention. Only when we open our mouths are we likely to give ourselves away – the native language is one that was definitely not on the timetable at St. Winifreds, or even at Songmark so far. I suppose that our course here is geared towards a truly world-wide qualification, and the Spontoon dialect is scarcely likely to be found much outside these islands.

Interestingly, the tourist map has the main road junctions and villages at least a hundred yards from their real site – and yet the tourist hotels are perfectly positioned. One wonders if there was a proper Ordnance Survey map made of the islands, when it was still nominally a part of the Empire? Though villages and roads would have moved and expanded a little in the time, surely the main landscape can have changed little. (All the glaring errors, we are drawing in on our map. Refining it will make a nice class project when we start with aerial camera work next term.)

Just as we were discussing our flying ambitions, right overhead came a very sleek-looking Caproni mail carrier, heading for Eastern Island and the seaplane base. Postcards from Maria, quite possibly – and indeed she must be finishing up her skiing about now, if she is to arrive here for the start of term. Quite a lot we shall have to tell her, indeed!

(Later). A somewhat drenching downpour called a halt to our detective-work, and we retreated to the Guest House. Although Mrs. Tanoaho is usually informative about most aspects of Island life, we will not be asking her any pointed questions about the "waterworks project" as we are calling it – she might learn more of our intentions, than we of the Natives' own.

A somewhat dull evening – I was reduced to re-reading my cherished (but now rather tatty) copy of the Bassetshire Chronicle, even the small adverts. It is amazing what people will buy – right at the back amongst the farming implements, was an offer, "Your old millstones bought for cash! Condition immaterial!" What anyone would want with half a tonne of gritstone when the Pennine hills are made of it, is quite beyond me.

January 3rd, 1935

The morning dawning bright and cheerful, we were in excellent spirits for another day's Adventures. Putting on Native costume has become quite habitual this holiday – Methyl comments acidly that we will be wearing bones through our ears and necklaces of shrunken heads next, though I have not observed any Spontoonies wearing that style so far. Still, once over the initial embarrassment, it is comfortable and very well-suited for the climate!

We took the trail through the jungle, using the fine brass compass Helen gave me for Christmas – though we could scarcely see five yards ahead at any time, the trail was well-used, heading along the feet of Tamboabo, which Jerry told me is the local name for what we were calling South Peak. The distance must have been two miles or so as the path winds: it took us most of an hour to arrive at the scatter of longhouses owned by the Hoele'toemi clan, near the waterfall of such delightful memories.

Hearing voices, we knocked – the door was of modern corrugated iron, at least – and found the two sisters there, Moeli and Saimmi. Moeli did most of the talking – it seems that Saimmi speaks very little English by choice, though it is a standard subject at the islands' schools. All the menfolk are away at work on one of the other houses – but Saimmi volunteered to find Jerry and Marti for us, the work not being urgent.

We had a fascinating talk with Moeli, while she wove rattan matting – and happily accepted our help, though Helen is better with a socket wrench than a weaving-hook. She was dressed as we had seen her before in a definitely breezy costume, in full postcard tradition – although I fear the Royal Mail would think it rather indecorous to deliver a view of so much healthy fur.

Helen did ask if she found it cold at this time of year, especially considering the drenching rains that seem to hit at least twice a day. Moeli simply laughed, and pointed to a large pot of evidently local manufacture, something like a Roman amphora. Seeing our mystification, she opened the stopper and dipped her paw in a clear and rather glutinous oil, proceeding to rub it into her fur. The aroma was sweetish, something like brazil-nuts, and one I had noticed before on several of the Natives.

Well! Nothing ventured, nothing gained – Helen asked if she could try a sample, having a need for waterproofing almost as great as Moeli's. Not wishing to use up what might be a valuable product of the jungle, I offered to buy the jar and try some myself – when in Rome, and et cetera.

It was quite an experience, certainly – sitting in a Native longhouse, entirely “dishabile” while Moeli poured the local waterproofing over us, combing it right to our fur roots, head-fur and all. It seems that the oil is indeed a local product, from some plant called the Tulupas Palm, a grove of which was pointed out behind the house (the nuts, though sweet-smelling, taste awful, and are far better for making soap than eating.) Certainly, we gleamed like a pair of seals in the sunshine by the time she had finished – though indeed we dripped rather in places.

Grinning, Moeli asked us if we wished to complete the treatment in the traditional manner – of course we agreed, at which she made up a paste of salt and wood-ashes and gave us a further wash-down, rinsing us clean afterwards. One can see the point – it somehow changes the oil, leaving it still glossy but no longer sticky, something like candle-wax. With a comb, Moeli finished our coiffure, brushing “traditional patterns” in our fur before the oil cured. She suggested that I can leave off wearing my bathing costume underneath, and I laid it aside without complaint, now feeling very strange indeed – as if giving up for the time being my last link with Home. Helen agrees that if a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing well – although she has been “authentic” in that way for the past two days.

We just had time to dress again in our jungle-made costumes, when there was a friendly hail from outside, Jerry and his brother having arrived. Moeli giggled, and vanished out of the opposite door into the jungle – leaving us to a very pleasant afternoon. Jerry was very surprised indeed to see and scent our new fur styling, even though we explained that Moeli had organised it. He did admit it made an excellent waterproofing, and that a few of the islanders used it as a regular feature, especially those more active in local Religions.

As I had hoped, we are certainly finding out about local customs and traditions, one way or another. The newly thatched hut smelt very pleasant, and the traditional wooden head-rests are surprisingly comfortable, as it turned out.

(Later). Indeed, my impressions of Moeli were quite right! While bathing in the waterfall pool, we noticed the waterproofing was exceedingly effective – it simply does not wash off! Jerry asked if Moeli had told us the oil's other property, of staining clothes and fabrics for two or three days after application. Oh dear. It is fortunate that we are getting accustomed to Native dress, as we will have little choice in the matter for the next few days. Marti also pointed out that although the patterns brushed into our fur do indeed have traditional meanings, Moeli should have asked us if we really meant to say that to all passers-by. (He explained the meanings, and we hurriedly combed our fur before it entirely set. After all, one does not walk around with slogans on one's shirt, uniforms excepted.)

After a lingering farewell, we hurried back to the Guest House just in time for tea, feeling rather self-conscious (though waterproof.) Mrs. Tanoaho tutted and clucked over our condition, though she seemed more amused than annoyed. Certainly, it exposed us to some more Traditional customs, of which we have had quite a lot today. The standard bed sheets were removed, and soft pandanus palm coverings substituted, which will not show oil-stains. Quite comfortable really, and as Helen points out, we have already tried such out once today, so we should be used to them.

“Soppy” is quite scandalised by our appearance, and is threatening to write home about us. Definitely not the Done thing here – both Ethyl and Methyl agreed for a change with each other on hearing her, and grimly promise she will receive a bath in sump-oil if she tells on us. (A very good thing we only told folk of a tenth of our milder Experiences today!)

Erica tells us that she watched the huge Kalinin K-7 head out today, after waiting for a suitable tail-wind to help it home. There was no mistaking it, as 7-engined bombers are hardly inconspicuous – even with all the length of the Eastern Island runway and a stiff head wind on takeoff, it only just made it off the ground with the fuel load needed to get it even half-way home. One assumes that the radio will inform us of its fate, though Erica has doubts about that. She claims that the Russians would rather see it at the bottom of the Pacific than stranded in full view of cameramen over here - while it was on the ground on Spontoon, it was a security leak big enough to be visible for miles.

A postcard from Maria, hurrah! She tells us she has had an enjoyable time with many of the local Sports, by which I presume she means skiing, bob-sleigh and such. Helen has other interpretations - though in little more than a week, we can ask her ourselves. Time certainly does fly when one is having fun.

January 4th, 1935

Quite an experience, indeed, Dear Diary – waking up in Native sheets, without a night-dress or such like, and scarcely recognising one's own scent! I confess that by a matter of association, I awoke and looked around – for a second or two, feeling quite disappointed that it was Helen asleep in the room with me.

Having dressed again in Costume (our first time to Breakfast wearing such, as it is strictly speaking against the House rules) we received some more friendly Advice from Mrs. Tanoaho, regarding local customs. Decidedly few tourists are shown actual family houses and customs – but as honorary residents, we are expected to respect the local privacy and keep close-mouthed about what we may see. She mentioned a craze last year for tourists buying hats with woven slogans in the native language – it would only have taken one native-speaker to have exposed the joke that the slogans were saying rather uncomplimentary things about their buyers (anyone using the words “quaint” or “how Darling!” was a sure candidate to be offered a special hat.)

Certainly, the Tulupas oil makes us look very different – it darkens the fur a shade or two, which Mrs. Tanoaho assures us will wear off. And our scent is quite transformed – I doubt that anyone would recognise us now, even at quite close quarters. Still, it is a fascinating and Healthy tradition by all accounts – and explains how some of the locals manage with such lightweight costumes, without feeling like a drowned rat two or three times a day.

Indeed, we put it to a thorough test after Breakfast, when we headed out again. Not fifty yards into the jungle, we were almost swamped by a downpour, quite deafeningly hissing off the vegetation around us, a sudden squall tossing the leaves around us quite wildly. Not pleasant weather to be navigating a small boat or aircraft in, definitely. In fact, while keeping our heads down in the rain, we quite missed the direct trail to Haio Village, and ended up some distance to the East, in dense and quite unexplored forest. Spotting a structure through the trees, we made a run for it and arrived, shaking ourselves dry as we had seen some of the canine residents do on the beaches.

Looking around, we saw a small, round one-roomed hut – open to one side, and exquisitely constructed with carving on every beam and post. Definitely a temple, unless small altars and offerings of fruit are a regular feature in local garden designs. We disturbed nothing, waited till the worst of the squall had past and left quietly – possibly this is where Saimmi attends whatever rituals the locals have. The jungle of course streams with water for half an hour and more after actual rainfall has stopped – though oiled fur sheds it quite effectively, and retains its good looks.

Another half hour brought us to the main road, if a ten-foot ribbon of crushed coral can really bear such a title. Still, it was rather faster going than along jungle trails to Haio village, where we halted as before at Herr Rassberg's general store. The old gentleman looked quite disapproving at us, even though we bought a big bottle apiece of Nootnops red – though outside, Helen whispered that she could probably work out why. Having seen us first in recognisable Songmark shirts and skirts (the shirts are well-made and very comfortable, even for holiday wear) he next saw us over the days in ever more extreme versions of Native dress – and had Herr Rassberg at all approved of Going Native, he would presumably have done so by now. Further, he has seen us heading off with the Hoele'toemi brothers, after they have just made Certain small Purchases at his shop. We shall definitely have to practice our Discretion around here!

Though usually quite ruthlessly practical, Helen did daydream somewhat as we sat on the verandah looking at the waves breaking over the reef, regarding the attractions of “Going Native”. Though of course she is perfectly keen on the Songmark course and looking forward to leaving at the end of three years with such a prestigious qualification, she pointed out that anyone desiring a more relaxing life can certainly find it here. There is as much Civilisation as would prevent one missing it, to be found on the occasional trip to Casino Island, and for anyone without a family at Home to answer to, submerging oneself in local Custom would be quite an adventure in itself. Quite an idyllic picture indeed – for an instant I too imagined myself happily bare-pawed in the jungle, contentedly filling up a long-house with kittens. I dismissed the idea, a trifle regretfully – although as dear Mrs. Creighton-Ward warned us in the Moral Turpitude tutorials back home – a mind stretched by a new idea, never wholly regains its original form.

I confess, I had never considered such a possibility, as it would be rather a waste right now - anyone without our talents and advantages might do such a thing – it is far more a vision to retire to, than to make a career out of. Plus, before jumping into the deep end, it is as well to test what may be lurking in the depths (as my poor friend Maude found out in the inter-schools high dive championships against St. Caligula's Academy for the Gifted Insane.) Considering what we have found out so far about the sides of Spontoon not mentioned in the tour guides, what else might be happening that only the Natives know of – and would one really wish to be a part of it?

Our conversation was brought to an abrupt end by the appearance of Jirry and Marti, who appeared from out of the jungle. A most affectionate meeting indeed – we shall definitely miss them when we return to Songmark next week, under the watchful eyes of our Tutors (and the even sharper eyes of our senior classes, who also outnumber us.) Things will become decidedly more difficult, and we might need every resource of wit and skill to beat the curfew. (Tunnels have been used by previous classes, so something else will probably be needed.)

We explored the whole West coast of the island, looking out across the narrows to the great cliffs of Main Island, rising up above the jungles. Certainly, some of the peaks there look practicable climbs, as Jirry confirmed – although only a few tourists ever climb them, mostly due to the exertions needed to climb six thousand feet in the full heat of Tourist Season. After a swim looking out over the narrow point, little over half a mile across, we retired to the beach and the shade of the forest for a most pleasant afternoon. Certainly, we seem to be getting far healthier the longer we stay here, as our morning of hiking and swimming seemed not to have tired any of us in the slightest.

And then – Disaster!

While packing our bags this morning, I had used the same bark bag as the day before, when we had been engaged in our Survey work. Reaching in to retrieve my comb, the notebook fell out flat on the blanket – and at a most unfortunate page. It would HAVE to be the page with our recognisable survey notes, sketched-in with my speculations such as “Casemate #5?”, “Landing beach” and “Stop line” pencilled over the new constructions. Having been brought up with such diagrams covering the walls of Father’s study, naturally the ideas occurred to me having seen them here in the field for the first time.

Unfortunately, Jirry saw them too – he leaned down to retrieve my book, and his tail fluffed right out like a bottle-brush – evidently he spotted the object of our Researches immediately. For a few seconds he was speechless – then showed the notebook to Marti, and they conversed in the Native language for some time.

The day broke up rather uncomfortably, the Hoele’toemi brothers escorting us back to the village and leaving us, feeling definitely downcast. I can quite see their problem – for all the evidence they have, they might think themselves involved with a couple of Spies! Which has never been a part of my background, except of course for Aunt Beatrice and her side of the family. Helen seems decidedly worried – and mentions tales from the oilfield towns, of the fate of individuals who have stumbled on secrets such as new “fields” that the Greater Powers have interests in protecting. I pointed out that they have not asked us who we have told about this – and that if she is worried about our safety, there are steps we can take. Even if we were actual Spies and Agents, it would not be Jirry we would have to worry about, but the people he tells, and whatever Authorities they may report to. Certainly, works such as these defences must have a lot of organisation behind them, whether planned in longhouses or Government offices.

Dear Diary – farewell for now, I am at the Post Office on South Island. There is a cover letter going with you and my notebooks, which I hope to be retrieving and tearing up fairly soon. Till then, adieu!

January 8th, 1935 (Back-dating.)

A definite relief to be opening your pages again! I confess that when I posted you and my notes off to Songmark, with instructions to post them right back to me, I was quite concerned that I might not see you again. But events proved rather stranger, if less unpleasant, than even I had thought.

For two days we heard nothing from the Hoele’toemis, and feared the worst in various ways – that they had either reported us, or at least were shunning us as deceivers and enemies of their country. But then, yesterday on our usual time and frequency, I heard a message with my callsign, after I had almost given up hope. Interestingly, though the first part was certainly Jirry, the second was in quite a different Morse “fist”, a rather more practiced hand as best as I could determine. The second person asked for a meeting in the main North Bay village, in any public place – we agreed, having made it plain that we would (for once) let everyone know exactly where we would be going, and when to expect us back. (I have of course picked up SOME precautions from listening to Aunt Beatrice.)

For a change, we dressed more formally in our Songmark shirts and slacks; I wore my green oiled silk suit on top – Helen wore her belted khaki jacket, the pair of us looking distinctly Practical. Still, my heart was definitely in my mouth as we entered the Topotabo Lounge, the publicly open café that is attached to the Topotabo Hotel, largest hotel on South Island.

Waiting for us there were Jirry and Marti, dressed rather more thoroughly than their usual jungle costume – and with them was a somewhat aged Native gentleman, wearing a richly embroidered fabric rather like a shawl. We were expecting something like a court-martial – and indeed, a similar investigation had taken place. For the last two days, the Elder told us, we had been checked over quite thoroughly, and had our references taken from not only our Academy tutors, but various other “interested parties”. Which would be alarming enough, but for the news that we had passed with flying colours, subject to a few conditions.

It was a strange scene, indeed – the pair of us with our Native friends and the Elder, whom I later learned was their grandfather, sitting in the wicker chairs of the café with the ceiling fans slowly turning overhead and the waves crashing on the beach just outside. We were given a choice – as long as we were at Songmark, we could give our parole to keep silent to outsiders, and we would learn many things otherwise hidden except to the Natives. Alternatively, we could refuse – in which case we would be effectively “sent to Coventry” as we say at Home, and be quite cut off.

This was definitely not something to decide on the spot! Helen and I excused ourselves and went out onto the patio to talk it over. It is plain Discretion to not write home about some of our Adventures, but this is rather bigger. After all – we may be here for three years, but we are both staunchly loyal to our own Homelands – and should strange political events require the Royal Navy to descend on Spontoon next year or the year after, what should I do? Should ever a force of the Royal Marines have to make a landing, I can scarcely keep silent while they learn about the hidden fortifications the hard way. Helen has the same problem, having had an Uncle lost in the Bolshevik revolution – she is quite aware that countries may change their politics rapidly and unexpectedly, and formerly firm alliances completely turn around.

We agreed amongst ourselves, and returned indoors to talk things over. Agreed – that from some points of view we become honorary Spontoonies – as long as our own homelands are friendly or neutral. This would of course mean that anyone else threatening the islands, would be our concern. That accepted, things became more cordial all round – I agreed to hand over my notebook, as one never knows who else might find it. And as for writing home – unless Father actually asks me directly, my conscience can stand not burdening him with more tiresome fortification plans, of which his study is already full.

Helen did whisper her concern as to what we could tell Maria and Molly when they return – that might be quite a problem, especially seeing Maria's political connections. One must cross one bridge at a time, though. Still, the elder called for coffee all round (I far prefer tea, but will drink coffee if I have to) and indicated to Marti and Jerry that we could be shown some of the History of the island that is not mentioned in the travel brochures. I was quite surprised that the Islands have that much significant history, having been away from the Empire barely forty years – indeed, my Father is old enough to have served here as a young subaltern, having graduated from Sandhurst in the class of '89.

Well! Things seemed to thaw quite considerably, and I noticed Moeli arriving to escort her grandfather out. It was quite a change to see her "dressed up", as indeed I had only seen her in the most breezy of Native styles. (Helen murmured that she hardly recognised her with her fur covered up.) We waved farewell to them, and retired to the beach with Marti and Jerry, to have a long talk. A very fine day, with some other folk sunning themselves on the beaches – more to make use of a few hour's much-appreciated sunshine between the rain squalls, than to cool off. There were quite a few fishing-boats landing their catches opposite the Church of the Sacred Heart, today being Friday and any churchgoers determined enough to practice their religion so far from Rome, being likely to be the more dedicated type. Of course, in these islands, the problem is hardly that of avoiding meat on Fridays but of obtaining it at all!

I promised not to draw any more survey maps of the "Waterworks Project" – there are plenty of other things to draw around here, without vexing the locals. Looking at Jerry helping his brother pull some friends' fishing boats ashore, a picture could be drawn outwardly like those of the "Noble Savage" – and yet he has excellent taste in German Expressionist films and a fine ear for the theremin. Savage-looking indeed, but with more sophistication than many of the locals back home in Barsetshire – quite a reflection of his homeland!

(Later). Returning to the Spontari Guest house, it seems that news travels fast around here. Mrs. Tanoaho seemed to know exactly what we had been doing, as she noted that we had best make use of our remaining three days before having to return to Songmark – and that she could waive some of the rules as regarding Costume for us. It is a little unnerving, thinking how much we seem to be watched – but then, we have done a lot of watching ourselves, and I suppose have attracted attention that the likes of "Soppy" might not get in the whole three years.

Still, as Helen pointed out, having permission to practice our Costume and to start learning more fine local Traditions, there is no more time to waste! The radio aerial went straight out of the window as I connected up the batteries – Soppy really should learn not to stand around under the eaves like that.

January 11th, (and more back-dating.)

It has been quite a time, these last three days – tomorrow we pack up our travelling bags, heading back to classrooms and hangars. Just an hour after my last entry on the 8th, when we went downstairs for supper, we found Mrs. Tanoaho deep in conversation with Saimmi and another similarly attired lady in a more elaborate costume.

Well! It seems that Saimmi must have some influence indeed, even as a trainee priestess. We were invited over to stay for the weekend in their longhouse, and Mrs. Tanoaho agreed to let us go. Before she could change her mind, we dashed upstairs and broke our quick-change costume record, appearing in two minutes flat as aspiring daughters of the Islands. Evening was well advanced as we entered the jungle, heading down the narrow trail towards Haio village. We were introduced to Ropitapi, evidently Saimmi's superior, though the two of them seem quite friendly (wholly unlike the authentic medieval servility shown by wise junior curates back Home in the presence of a Bishop, especially our local Bishop "Brimstone and Thermite" Jefferstone.)

The two priestesses seemed to have a quite uncanny ability to see in the dark, and managed wholly without lanterns even through the densest part of the jungle, where Helen and I would have been quite at a loss. It was with some relief that we saw lights gleaming through the trees, and stepped out to see the familiar shape of the clan longhouse across its garden-patch clearing. Indeed, the whole clan seemed to be there – the two sisters and five Brothers, their parents, and easily a dozen others who seemed to be relatives and neighbours.

Had the wind been in the right direction, I feel sure we could have homed in on the place from half-way across the island, as there seemed to be a major feast in celebration. The cooking technique was interesting – whole fish wrapped in large wet leaves, entombed in a clay case and baked under a mound of glowing coals. Not quite the cuisine advertised in hotel brochures, but excellent – it appears this is one more "secret" that the locals are keeping for themselves.

While the meal finished cooking, we were introduced to Mrs. and Mr. Hoele'toemi, a grave and serious couple at first sight. But they soon unwound somewhat as their daughters served the food (Jonni and his brothers had been out all day catching it) and we relaxed around the fire-pit.

Definitely, we are going to need some intensive courses in the Native language – although we have been picking up quite a few words over the term, it is a long way from being able to chat freely. Although few tourists probably care, it was a little troubling to us knowing that many of the folk were having to translate everything for us. Saimmi's superior seems to speak hardly any English, though I am assured she speaks Chinook "jargon" and half a dozen Polynesian tongues. Though there are Spontoonies from many "Traditions", this family and most of South Island seems to be of South Sea Islands style, in their various customs. (Which does not mean most of their ancestors hail from Tahiti, given that the Hoele'toemis had quite a different name a century ago in Barsetshire!)

A fine meal indeed, with the fish baked with yams and sweet potatoes, and a blessed absence of poi. The breadfruit cakes which followed were excellent, as was the palm wine that was passed around quite soberly. Nothing at all like the films, where the Natives seem to spend all their social gatherings swilling firewater like a Dragoon on leave, before heading out to headhunt Missionaries. And indeed, a few folk pulled out bamboo flutes

and odd-sounding guitars – not quite as polished as a radio band, but far more atmospheric. An interesting observation that Jirry made today – that although most of the profits on Spontoon are made from the tourists, they are prepared to face the day when the tourist boats fail to appear on the horizon. The Hoele'toemis can keep themselves in fish and breadfruit, even if Casino Island was reduced to a ghost town.

The party lasted until the moon was high overhead and the air felt quite chilly away from the fire. Mrs. Hoele'toemi took us aside, and showed us the sleeping arrangements – perfectly respectably, Helen and I are sharing a small hut with Moeli, Saimmi and two other girls. It seems to be their tradition that families share a longhouse – but when grown-up, the young members of the clan head out into separate Women's huts and Mens' huts, till they marry and build a hut themselves. After a stressful day and rather a quantity of palm wine, I fear we scarcely exchanged greetings with our fellow residents before we were fast asleep.

The next day, the 10th, we were awakened early, with what sounded like half the islands' chickens greeting the dawn from the top of the hut. Without glass windows, everything outside is decidedly on the loud side! Moeli bustled around, feeding chickens and shaking out bedding – by the sun I guessed it to be around seven, though of course a wristwatch hardly seemed to fit in with native dress, so I had left mine behind.

Certainly, the family are hard workers – half an hour later we were all assembled in the main longhouse, which doubles as a communal meeting house. With only sleeping-mats rather than rigid beds, it is the work of a minute to switch roles of the building. Breakfast was a substantial dish of rice, fish and shellfish, the portions certainly calculated to keep one working hard till luncheon. Having finished, the family headed out to their various jobs, leaving Helen and I with Moeli for the morning, after which we are told there would be a boat trip to see various things that might interest us.

When we were alone, Moeli jokingly asked if we needed waterproofing again – I think she was quite taken aback when we both agreed, to the full treatment. It proved as before, a quite pleasant experience, feeling one's fur being transformed in such a way, and knowing this time exactly what was taking place. Of course, we insisted that she explain the various fur patterns this time, and chose suitable ones ourselves. (Apparently this is a Polynesian custom, not suprisingly considering they tend to show rather more fur than say the Icelandic folk who have centres on Main Island.)

While quite "Dishabile" waiting for the oil to cure, I did comment that I wished there were Native treatments that could improve not only my fur, but my figure under it. Dressing in such costumes certainly exposes most of one's charms, but also one's shortcomings, with no real possibility of deceiving the viewer. Of course, this may be a good thing at times – with all one's imperfections on display, anyone in Native costume feels encouraged to look at their best. I doubt I have seen any gentlemen with pot bellies since I arrived here – and by extension, this might really be why Missy K always wore "Euro" clothing, with more potential to hide inside.

Moeli seemed highly amused, her personality being not her only conspicuously bouncy attribute – and if anything, more so than when we first met at the V-Gerat concert. She agreed, mentioning that she was improving her figure in a time-tested way, that I could certainly use. Though she refused to elaborate on what it was, only hinting that while she could not provide it, Jirry certainly could. Most infuriating! Helen seemed to think it was extremely funny, for some reason. (Memo to myself – must ask Jirry about this. As after all this exercise I need to take out most of my "Euro" clothing next term anyway, that will be an ideal time to try whatever it is.)

Once our fur was "cured" and dry to the touch, we helped around the house and garden patch until luncheon, when Jirry, Jonni and their sister Saimmi returned, Marti being unavoidably called away. Saimmi complemented us on our fur styling, presenting us with a tortoiseshell comb apiece, which is worn in the head-fur when not in use. Indeed, our fur is getting quite dark, and lustrous as a seal. With such an appearance, it quite goes against one's natural modesty, encouraging one to display it to the best advantage.

Half an hour's walk brought us back to North Bay, and a water taxi trip. Quite the longest one so far, all the way past Casino Island and across to Meeting Island, only our second landing there. An odd destination for such a manifestly healthy crew as ourselves – Saimmi led us towards the main hospital complex of the island. Strictly speaking, the main hospital is on Casino Island for everyday injuries and emergencies – but this is a long-term sanitarium. Many older infirm tourists spend the winter here, as the warm climate and sea air is better than their homelands. (I recall Molly mentioning that Florida was a similar destination, and that business associates of her Father are often packed off down there to recover from "high-speed lead poisoning", which seems an odd thing for a worker in the retail wines and spirits trade to suffer from.)

The hospital grounds are really quite extensive, sitting on the top of the hill. What was not at all obvious until we arrived, was that the top of the hill is a crater, ringed with trees that from below appear to be simply a wooded, flat-topped hill. There is a formidable fence around it, with warning signs proclaiming "Isolation Hospital" that gives no clue as to what is really there. A large and burly attendant stopped us as we entered a long corridor heading from the main wing into the hillside – but a few words from Saimmi in their native language, were enough for him to wave us right through.

The corridor appeared to go slightly underground for twenty yards – and then came out in another building, hidden inside the crater! Presumably, this is visible only from the air, as the trees ringed it round entirely. It was a large square building, opening onto a courtyard fifty paces across, filled with pleasant gardens. Working in the gardens and relaxing were several dozen people, some in various Native dress, and some in what looked like slightly old-fashioned European styles. None of them were young, and some were quite old – but all of them alike were cripples of some sort. Several of those walking had artificial limbs, and one or two being led appeared to be blind.

Jirry whispered that we were to wait in the garden, while he went to collect the person we were here to meet. It was slightly unnerving – I found myself speculating whether the "Spontoonies" were indeed so dependent on presenting a healthy and beautiful picture for the cameras, that they packed away anyone who would unnerve

the tourists? Helen whispered that these must be the occupants of the low barge that we saw arriving to be met by ambulances at New Year – and I think she is probably right.

In a few minutes, he reappeared with his sister and an old lady – or at least she appeared to be exceedingly frail, judging by the careful way he guided her footsteps. To judge by her fur pattern, I guessed that they were related – and indeed, he introduced her as his Aunt Millini – which I supposed was the Spontoonian evolution of Milly. She nodded, her eyes very keen and sharp as she looked us up and down. I was thinking that she was not as old as I had first thought, retaining what had once been a rather delicate beauty – until she turned her other side to face us.

I fear I must have gasped aloud, for she was a quite startling sight. All along her left side the fur was gone, the skin twisted in great ugly knots and folds of scar tissue that I had seen the like of on some of Father's labourers employed after the Great War, who had been hit by dastardly Hun "Flammenwerfer" (Except for Sgt. Mallins, who had been carrying his own perfectly decent one when a stray tracer round had hit the fuel tank.) She smiled, raising an eyebrow (and indeed, she had only one to raise) being possibly quite used to the reaction.

We sat down on a shaded seat in the gardens, while attendants brought us tea and such – not that I had much of an appetite. She asked us quite a lot about ourselves, looking at us with a gaze rather reminiscent of Father's butler McCardle, who in his Regimental Sergeant-Major days was said to be able to spot whether a soldier wearing a greatcoat had ironed his shirt three layers inside. Quite an unnerving experience – she had a way of asking perfectly conversational questions, then throwing in a truly surprising or intimate one, before one had a chance to ready the answer. Though it appears that she is at times a teacher, I believe she would have made a formidable Detective !

After perhaps twenty gruelling minutes, she relaxed a little, still keeping us under close scrutiny. I did venture to ask what this place was, as with its seclusion from the outside world and its relative luxury, it was no ordinary sanitarium – and with the wide mix of ages spanning from perhaps the mid-thirties, to the mid-eighties, it seemed unlikely to be a military veterans' hospital (Spontoon simply has not been an Entity with its own military that long). She paused for nearly a minute, then turned her burned side towards us, her eye almost the only undamaged feature, bright and quite unnerving.

"That," she told us, "Is what you wanted to know about. About the Gunboat Wars."

#####continuity break till Gunboat wars history written#####

It was as a somewhat hushed group that we left the Sanatorium, and returned towards the water taxi. Certainly, the Gunboat Wars feature in the general history books written in Europe, but only as a very minor affair – considering that each of the combatants saw it as a small skirmish involving a squadron at most of their own Fleet, except the Spontoonies who suffered the full effect of all of them !

Helen looked quite serious, as I noticed when she carefully watched the workers and figures on the dock as if looking for someone. When we returned to South Island and had some time alone while the Hoele'toemis talked with the water taxi lady, she confessed to being unsure just how we had "gotten off the hook so darn easy", to use her quaint turn of phrase. She pointed out that we were lucky indeed to have already been in the affections of a prominent Native family – and not to have tried to brazen it out against whatever Organisation strongly disapproved of our surveying work. I recalled the elder mentioning that if we had refused to cooperate, we would be cut off – and at the time, I thought he merely meant cut off from friendly contact with the locals. Helen's interpretation of "cut off" is more on the lines of "cut off tragically in the bloom of youth", as the newspaper obituaries phrase it.

Despite all this, our spirits rose as the sun came out, and we were invited to join a fishing expedition. We agreed immediately, having seen few fishing fleets close-to in Term time – Jirry explained that Eastern Island is too near Casino Island, the waters around which become less than healthy in Tourist Season. One of the advertised features of the "Waterworks Project" will be to fix that problem in the years to come: it seems that some combinations of wind and tide have already left tourist beaches looking (and smelling) rather more like the Thames shore downstream of London, than unspoiled Tahiti.

The boats we were shown around were sailing outrigger canoes, not particularly decorated except for a carved figurehead at the bow. Helen looked a little nervous still, though whether at the prospect of her stomach letting her down again on the choppy waters, or of being "taken for a ride" as Molly would put it, I scarcely liked to inquire. Still, folk would hardly have spent the time and trouble to tell us their semi-secret History if they had not intended us to make some use of it – that would be as unbelievable as a villain in a film telling a Secret Agent his plans for world conquest before he "bumps him off" .

With a stiff Easterly breeze we almost flew out of North Bay, heading out around the West coast to the channel between there and Main Island, where the tidal currents must have been adding a good ten knots to our speed. (I know the strait is half a mile wide, and even without a stopwatch and notebook, all the stiff Navigation lessons we took last term seem to have sunk in.) A splendid afternoon indeed, with the excitement of landing sea bass and tunny by hand. Tourist fishing boats have specially reinforced seats like barber-shop chairs with the rods secured to them, but Jirry showed me how to wrap myself around the mast and brace the fishing rod against the cleats for much the same effect. The other fishermen were all lizard-types, which the books assure me are the islands' earliest inhabitants, their portraits being carved on the impressively Cyclopaean masonry that graces the park on Casino Island. There is a nice statue of a great green water-lizard in the square of Meeting Island, that looks as if it has been here since the year dot, if not longer.

The tide took us round the Southern tip of the island, to within sight of the reefs that ring the main Spontoon group. Being low tide, some of the reefs were exposed, and I spotted definite movement out there – indeed, I could have sworn someone waved to us before slipping into the waves with a very oddly flowing motion. Strange indeed – there was certainly no boat to be seen, and with the currents fairly roaring along as the tide turned, it was hardly possible for anyone but a fish to have swum out there. I wonder exactly what Jerry's Aunt Millini meant by her hints about the Spontoones being helped by Natives who were from “no island at all”?

To add to the mystery, the steersman sent us towards the reef a fair way before pulling us up into its shelter – when Jonni in the next boat stood up in the bows and with great ceremony threw a large and perfectly good sea bass back into the water by the reef. It floated for a few seconds and then sank – though it looked somehow more as if it had been dragged underwater, rather than sinking in the regular way. I might have thought there were sharks about, but there was no sign of the fins breaking the surface.

As the sun began to set, we stowed our catches and headed back, not to North Bay indeed but towards Ranganoa Beach on the Southerly side of the island. Being used to returning rented boats to the park-keeper (my main boating experiences having been on the Upper Thames before coming out here) it seemed a little strange, until I realised that with a boat and a good wind, the Natives can literally go where their fancy and the currents take them. Even our fishing vessel was liberally supplied with at least a dozen gallon cans of water, should an unexpected squall blow us out into the open Ocean.

Landing through the surf proved interesting – with the ocean breakers coming in through a break in the reef, the beach was a mass of white roaring surf, decidedly not for casual bathing in. Yet the six Native fishermen plus Jerry and Jonni paddled hard for the shore – and somehow caught the wave quite perfectly to have it drive up the beach rather than founder in foam. One suspects they have been practicing this.

Helen seemed very grateful to be on “terra firma” again – hopefully she is exaggerating the dangers of our poking around the Spontoones' secret projects. After all, there are Embassies of at least a dozen countries that I have noticed on Casino Island – and some of them surely have professional Agents on call to do such explorations. I confided as much to her, pointing out that anything we could discover is surely common knowledge to anyone who really cares to look – after all, the Waterworks Project is mentioned most weeks in the local newspaper, the “Daily ‘Elele” in some aspect or another.

Helen's response was a somewhat gloomy one, pointing out that if the Spontoones knew their cover was truly “blown” (as they say in the talkies), they would hardly be carrying on with such a hugely costly project, depending as it does on secrecy to have any chance against a modern invader. She tells me she has noticed in the local papers a tendency for off-season visitors and the like to have “tragic swimming accidents”, something that very rarely seems to affect the Natives, despite their being exposed to the same risks of sharks, currents etc far more often. Possibly we might be seeing the fate of those same Agents – a “chilling” prospect in more ways than one.

Still, for the time being we seem to have got away with it, and our luck is holding up despite occasional creaking as of walking on thin ice (NOT a substance to trust in this climate, true enough.) Even Helen cheered up when we reached Haio village, carrying our nets of fish, to be greeted very warmly by the Haio'Toemi family and their neighbours. Moeli was there with her sister, and seemed quite impressed – of course, being of the feline persuasion one expects us to enjoy fish, though not necessarily the soaking to the skin involved in catching it. Our freshly oiled fur, as it happens, now feels comfortable ten minutes after being saturated, and perfectly dry in half an hour. Quite an innovation – though I fear it would not go well in “polite Society” back Home.

While the fish was being cooked, Moeli came and chatted, quite keen on showing us round the village, almost like an Estate Agent eager to make a binding sale. I blushed indeed when she recounted to Saimmi my skill with weaving, fishing and the like – all the domestic Virtues that seem in great demand around here. Spotting her brother, she called him over and then left us alone, just at the edge of the fire light – having first whispered to remind me of the improvements I had asked her about earlier.

As the meal would certainly take some time to cook, Jerry and I went for a stroll under the bright Winter moonlight – and I mentioned that I admired Moeli's figure, and would like one just like it. Which was a perfectly innocent question, as Moeli had provided us with a greatly improved fur condition for the climate – I thought she must be referring to Jerry being able to supply some exotic local ingredients from the bottom of the reef, or somewhere Moeli felt uncomfortable in going. Jerry's response was very odd – he kissed me quite uncharacteristically boldly, looked into my eyes with a kind of worried sincerity, and asked me if I truly wanted that. Rather puzzled, I agreed – at which he embraced me closely, and confided that his Family would certainly approve, though I should make sure my own people would not object.

Most puzzling! One wonders if there is some sort of taboo on cosmetic improvements around here. We returned to the firelight just as the scent announced to that side of the island that the fish was ready. A lively evening followed, with the neighbours bringing out their flutes, drums and guitars. Despite all the marvelous Starkness of Futurist music, there is something very stirring about this Island music. It would be hard to automate, unless one produced a Flute and Treble machine.

One of the Neighbours asked me if I missed the songs of my Homeland – which indeed I suppose I would, after a few years with no radio or gramophones to carry it to this side of the globe. Alas, in the Spontari Guest House this holiday, most of the music from England emanates from Sippy Forsythe's supercharged gramophone – and is inflicted on us by the fiendish comic Lancastrian Ukelele player, George Formless. (Some of the Senior girls have been irritating Sippy by insisting that George Formless is actually a fictional character invented by the War Department to deter invasion. The Chinese Water-Torture is a delight compared with the Lancastrian Ukelele Ordeal, especially from a singer who can play, sing and grin alarmingly at the same time.)

After an excellent meal and a glass of palm wine, Helen and I retired to the women's hut, where five of the neighbours and their relations seem to be spending the weekend. One of them, Namoeta, is visiting from the distant Orpington Island, some two day's sail away with a fair wind. I recall it from the charts, as just out of range of our Tiger Moths with full fuel tanks, a three hour flight. Definitely, air travel is making the world a smaller place.

The next morning (January 10th), we were awakened as usual by the combined crowing-power of what sounded like ten reinforced squadrons of chickens. I was sleepily remarking to Helen on the adjoining mat that it was a shame that such an alarm clock could not be turned off when to my amazement – the crowing stopped abruptly. Namoeta walked in, looking pleased – Helen asked her jokingly if she spoke Chicken language – and was amazed when Namoeta claimed that she was learning to do so from her Great-Aunt, who was famous for her abilities. Truth is certainly stranger than fiction around here – I must ask Ethyl if any of her lurid issues of the "Weird Tails" pulp magazine feature heroes or villains with amazing poultry control powers ?

After breakfast, Saimmi took me for a stroll around the village, pointing out the various native shrines. Many of the longhouses have shrines, not under their roofs at all but some little distance into the jungle, along beach-sand paths decorated with shells. Certainly, this seemed a charming view into the local culture – and very like my native Barseshire, where even in hearing range of the church bells, one can often come across an ancient rural shrine in the deep woodland, with evidence of authentic folk rituals sometimes still smouldering.

Saimmi appears to speak perfectly good English when she chooses to, though with a rather odd accent. We arrived at a cluster of longhouses that must have been near the crashed Poll Giant Triplane, at which Saimmi was obviously well known and very welcome. She talked for a few minutes in her own language with some of the folk there, and then gestured towards a family hut, with six quite adorable kittens at play. One thing that struck me was their fur markings, some of which were quite different from the other villagers there. I commented as much, and Saimmi seemed pleased that I had spotted it so soon.

It seems, from what she told me, that although Casino Island has examples of most Institutions found in Europe, one thing that it has no need of is an orphanage. The tradition seemed to have begun with the Gunboat Wars, with many orphans and bereaved parents following the civilian massacres – and the Natives living more "Traditional" lives deeper in the jungles decided to turn none away, but rather to adopt and raise them as their own. Some of the traditions have evidently been expanded over the years – one adorable half-Persian girl I was told had been born on the island, her Mother having been a tourist who had visited and greatly enjoyed an earlier vacation. Saimmi pointed out some others with similar histories, remarking that only the local priesthood keep track of such things for geneological reasons – to the villagers, they are simply Family.

Saimmi commented that in all circumstances, the children of islanders are looked after, and that every year some more arrive in unusual circumstances. Quite a forward-thinking attitude, indeed, and one that some of the more "civilised" nations would do well to adopt. I told her as much, and she added that several of her own family over the years had been "holiday presents", whatever that may mean.

On our return to the Hoele'toemi huts, I joined Helen for a wash, and recounted my conversations with Jirri and his sisters, remarking how very strange they seemed all of a sudden. As if to match, Helen's complexion went a very strange colour, and she stared at me quite aghast as if I had grown an extra tail. I quite failed to dodge her first playful swats with the wet towel, but managed to keep in front as she chased me round the hut, seeming half in shock and half bent double with laughter. Eventually she cornered me, gasping for breath and pinning me securely against a roof pillar as she asked if I really had no idea of Moeli's Condition, which was responsible for her figure changing. I must have looked rather blank, and so she spelled out in extremely short and simple words exactly what she meant – and what Jirry and the rest of his family had been assuming I had wanted to do.

(Dear Diary – I think my ears must be still blushing even now, a day later – it would have been bad enough if it was just Helen who had spotted my misunderstanding, but what on earth am I going to tell the Hoele'toemis ?)

Just as Helen released me and we went outside, there was a roar of engines and a big Caproni floatplane circled overhead. From the neat hatchet and firewood-bundle "fasces" insignia on its wings, it was a military transport – and for an instant I am sure we both wondered if the Spontoones would have to put their defences to the test today. But then Helen laughed and gestured, pointing out that Maria would have to be arriving soon – and though term is two days from starting, having a day to spare is certainly good planning when travelling all the way from Italy. Though we are very keen to see her again and the rest of the class, it was a stern reminder that we have very little time left – despite the Songmark uniform being neat and comfortable, we have got quite accustomed to getting by on far less.

Around Noon, Jirri returned from a fishing trip, with his brother Marti (much to Helen's delight.) They mentioned a trip to Main Island, as they have to deliver some small freight to one of the Polynesian villages there – after which the rest of the day is all their own. Looking across the treetops to Main Island, one obvious attraction stood out – Mount Kiribatori, the highest peak on the Spontoon group, easily six thousand feet high. When I suggested it as a worthy final expedition of the holidays, Marti mentioned that he had climbed it before – but if we were to attempt it today, we had best start right away.

Quite a scurrying took place for supplies and equipment – even the Hoele'toemis wear sandals on rough territory, and we filled our bark satchels with enough food for a night out. Then down to the beach, load up the canoes and off in a steady Easterly wind and around the reef. Though we looked (and I had brought along my binoculars in preparation) there were no strange figures visible on the reef – beyond which the waters drop sheer away into the deep ocean, according to the sailing charts. As Jirry has not mentioned the "natives of no island" that I think we saw yesterday, I will not be asking him too many questions, but keep my eyes and ears decidedly open.

The weather turned brilliantly clear as we swung out into the straits, feeling the tugging of the currents. Marti commented that although the distance is little over a mile, very few people have ever swam it, and that

depended on picking the exact time and tide. We fairly shot across to the far side, landing at Munorabte Village, one we have often looked at from South Island – where the brothers' business was quickly completed, and we set off into the jungle along a very steep and narrow trail.

It was fortunate indeed that Marti had taken this way before, guiding some of the more adventurous visitors to the summit – maps would have been useless, as we could rarely see more than ten yards along the trail. But from the slope of the ground, I guessed the route went almost straight West across the backbone of the island, before starting to zig-zag steeply up from the Western side. The distance was only a few miles, but even lightly laden as we were, five hours very strenuous climbing only saw us to where the jungle thinned out enough to permit a view through breaks in the trees.

The sun was getting quite low by the time we left the jungle behind, emerging into an unexpected territory of short but very green scrub and grass, almost like a Swiss alpine meadow. The summit still towered above us, but even after such a climb, we made good time and arrived on the summit of Mount Kiribatori just as the sun touched the ocean rim behind us. Quite a view indeed! The mountain shadow stretched far out, partly touching Casino Island – and the windows of the hotels shone brightly reflecting its last rays. I could see the runway lights of Eastern Island just coming on as we watched, an aircraft approaching from the East with its navigation lights flashing cheerily. It was quite a contrast – standing there in our home-made Costume, with the brothers beside us, looking out over distant classrooms and hangars where some of our classmates should already be waiting. I could certainly imagine Miss Devinski instructing the senior years to start enforcing the curfew on those of us who had arrived early – certainly, despite term not having started, none of them will be heading out to celebrate on Casino Island without hard-earned Passes.

Marti, meanwhile, had explored the Eastern side of the summit. Although it ended at a sheer precipice, easily twelve hundred feet of naked rock, there was a ledge a good twenty yards wide, carpeted with soft grass and sheltered from the wind by lorry-sized boulders. He suggested it as a camping spot – Helen and I looked at each other and very eagerly agreed, being very keen on at least one completely free evening before having to return to the rules and restrictions of the Academy.

Jirry had been carrying two close-woven pandanus palm mats tightly rolled, as had his brother – it turns out that they make a basic but quite effective tent, one mat acting as a groundsheet and the other arching over as a roof. Hardly waterproof, but the stars were coming out brilliantly, and the mats proved perfectly windproof. We all sat outside the “tents” for an hour and more, talking quietly, as the night fell across the island chain below us. At last Helen and Marti retired to their shelter, and I was left with Jirry as the stars came out over the islands.

Though I had been somewhat dreading how to open the subject, I certainly had to explain the misunderstanding of last night – I had no idea that Moeli was expecting a kitten by late Summer, and my own plans had not really included one of my own, at least not while I am still at Songmark! Let alone what my Family might say, I could hardly think of facing Miss Devinski and confessing to being the one who ignored advice and broke the Academy's (currently spotless, at least in public) reputation. Jirry was very understanding, though for an instant looked a little troubled. I discovered why, when I suggested we retire out of the wind – having accepted what he thought was my invitation to add to the Hoele'toemi clan, naturally he had brought nothing to Prevent him doing so! Judging by the sounds from the next shelter, it seemed a poor time to ask Marti if he had any to spare (and knowing Helen, it seemed an unlikely bet).

Still – it was a very pleasant Experience, just to share the shelter, looking out over the starlit islands, with such excellent company. I assume that his Family had given approval for this evening out, as at his home village the domestic arrangements are officially quite “respectably” segregated, as we might say at home. Again, I was hardly looking forward to making my excuses to them the next day, after they had been so supportive of me. I fell asleep, dreaming in his most welcome embrace.

And then – Dear Diary, I hardly know how to confess this. I awoke to a quite perfect dawn, our mountaintop the only piece of land in the light for a few minutes while the sun rose above the far horizons. Jirry was fast asleep still, and appeared to be having a most pleasant dream - I had been breathing his very clean and healthy scent all night, which is perhaps a factor but hardly an excuse. For I confess to having being very – Unladylike indeed, and utterly throwing caution to the winds. Not what I had planned at all! Neither had Jirry, but at the time I confess to being in a wholly unreasonable mood and in no mood to argue. Poor Jirry ended up somewhat tattered, with some tufts of fur missing (by MY claws – how Could I?) and I felt indeed most gloriously sleek and relaxed afterwards.

Oh dear.

Breakfast was a rather subdued affair, with Helen and Marti in a most spirited mood by contrast – Helen somewhat bitten on the ear and the scruff of her neck, and Marti looking as if he had been wrestling with a briar bush, but neither of them seem to mind in the slightest. How on earth I am going to explain all this, I have no idea at all – and I could have done without Helen's comment that even at Songmark, only a few of us would be truly fit and healthy enough to make this climb with so much energy to spare. We packed and were on the trail in a few minutes, heading into the shadows behind the summit. The only direct way down the East face of Mount Kiribatori would involve a good run-up and perfect judgement with steering the parachute away from the cliff face – though the idea of parachutes reminded me too much of other safety equipment we were not carrying for this trip...

I let Marti and Helen lead the way on the trail, dropping back to have a quiet conversation with Jirry, who seems as shaken as I am (and rather more scratched.) I have decided to look on the bright side – should anything Happen, his family at least will be very pleased with me. And if not, I will be spared an embarrassing interview with Miss Devinski and an even more embarrassing letter home. Until then – I refuse to worry till I know there is anything to worry about!

We arrived back at Munorabte Village around noon, with the weather changing to look quite threatening – the mountain behind us was already quite hidden in rolling clouds. Embarking on the boats, we saw the rest of the

fishermen heading home in a hurry, with dark squalls hanging ominously above Eastern Island. Getting back proved a challenge, as we had to tack back and forth half way to Casino Island in the gusting wind before rounding the curving tip of land into North Bay. Not where we had intended landing, but one look at the breakers crashing over the reefs had been enough to persuade us to take whatever harbour we could reach. The four of us managed to pull the outrigger canoe right up the beach and secure her to a mooring ring, before the curtain of rain arrived, soaking us to the fur in scarcely half a minute. A damp end to an eventful trip, indeed! Just how eventful, I will avoid mentioning to Helen, who is looking so pleased with herself it would be a shame to worry her and spoil her mood.

With a glance up at the hillside to the East towards the Spontari Guest House, we took the coral road back through the dripping woods to Haio Village, arriving just in time to dry out before a late luncheon. It was rather a strain to tear ourselves away from the Hoele'toemis, and set our minds towards classes and lectures, after this holiday. But all good things come to an end, and after a lingering farewell with Jirry, I set out on the long and damp road back towards the hotel "strip" and the Guest House. In the circumstances, I said nothing to Jirry's family, and accepted a most affectionate hug from Moeli in the spirit in which it was intended.

(Later). At last, I am up to date, Dear Diary. It is evening, and Mrs. Tanoaho is calling for "lights-out" in half an hour. The first thing we did on arrival was to take a long, hot bath with powerful soap – it has probably quite spoiled our waterproofing, but afterwards we looked and smelt rather more like young ladies of the Academy than we have done for weeks. Our Songmark shirts and slacks are pressed and ironed all ready for tomorrow – we will have to try and get back into a "civilised" frame of mind somehow. The cringe-making tones of George Formless and his dreaded Ukelele are filtering through the door from "Soppy" Forsythe's room across the corridor – so as Helen says, reminding ourselves how fine Civilisation is might be quite a struggle. She will be wearing her hat tomorrow to hide her bitten ear (which she swears she hardly felt at the time) from casual view, and even now she is grooming it in the mirror with evident pride. I finally understand how the students at Heidelberg and other argumentative places can take pride in duelling scars, which I always thought an extremely silly idea.

And so to bed – with four walls and a roof around us, and a curfew keeping us in. One thing I know we will be learning next term – advanced methods of getting out of Songmark Academy, whatever the tutors and the Senior years may put in our way. Possibly Molly and Maria are there already – with their stories and souvenirs from their holiday. We two will have our excellent fur condition to show, after all the fresh air and salt water in the past weeks. Helen will no doubt show off her bitten ear, gained in "fair and honourable combat" as Father's wound medals describe it. As for myself – whether or not I end up with a souvenir of my own, the next weeks will be definitely interesting until I find out!

#####Watch out for "Spontoon Springtime", the next Songmark story!#####

