

Spring Chickens

(Being the Ninth instalment of the diary of Amelia Bourne-Phipps, in her second year at the Songmark Aeronautical Boarding School for Young Ladies, on Spontoon's Eastern Island. Amelia has returned after a not particularly relaxing "Holiday" on the Vostok Islands, the Russian Tsarist equivalent to present-day Taiwan...)

Wednesday 10th January, 1936

Here we are again! The old song of that name carries on with "Happy as can be/ All good friends, and Jolly good company." That describes things quite well, we are very glad to be back with Helen and our pals after our experiences over on Vostok. Being almost blown up with an exploding salad, captured by deviant Reds and staring down the many barrels of a front-line Soviet squadron's guns, is not my idea of Christmas.

Everything was a mad rush yesterday, our tutors gave us the half-day off but we hardly had time to relax for a minute with getting everything ready for the term. Our timetables, official diaries and everything had to be ready for inspection, and it was barely half an hour before "Lights-out" that we could throw ourselves flat on the beds and catch up on things. The beds will never seem hard again, after waking up on Christmas Day under a mound of branches and pine needles in a Romanov Island forest.

Helen had a wonderful time, by all accounts. Though Vostok was certainly an Education, I could wish I had stayed here with her – or more accurately, on South Island. She is proudly wearing a Tailfast necklace, a different shell type to the one I lost at Lars' party but a similar braid of her and Marti Hoele'toemi's fur. Everything went very well, and she spent the rest of the holiday with him in the family guest hut. Certainly, it is her turn to have some fun and stability in life. But had I not gone to Vostok, it would have been just Molly and Maria out there – I dread to think what Molly would have made of our being captured by the Reds, she would probably have tried to "out-draw" the whole platoon of them.

Her only complaint is that Prudence Akroyd is wearing an almost identical Tailfast ring, and was witnessed ahead of Helen at the Solstice ceremony. I will congratulate Prudence when I see her – I know Helen really dislikes the idea, but Prudence and Tahni are a devoted couple and it would have been unfair not to allow them the same. As I pointed out, just because we really dislike Poi we should hardly want to stop Missy K enjoying it all she likes. Anyway, Tahni is a Hyena and they are Different; I sometimes wonder just what a Hyena mother does tell her cubs about the facts of life.

We had noticed Beryl is going around with her ears flat as a spaniel's, and an expression as if she had been put on an all-Poi diet by her doctor. Thinking of doctors, Helen says the ones on Spontoon are feeling much better, if equally annoyed – and one of Beryl's Business Associates has had to flee the island with the Police in hot pursuit. I recall them being highly puzzled about that outbreak of tapeworms at the end of last term, especially since they could find nothing in common with what the patients ate.

I also remember those "Natura" slimming pills that Maria never got the chance to try, which were advertised as being non-addictive and made from wholly natural ingredients. Just as well she never tried any – although the advertising was perfectly correct as far as it went! They were what the showgirls and dancers were using, and recommending them to their friends when they found they really did start losing weight. The trouble was – although most of the pills in the packs were a perfectly harmless (if probably useless for slimming) herbal mix, the last pill in every pack contained one live tapeworm egg. If you analysed the pill in the traditional way of first grinding it to powder in a pestle, of course it would not show up.

Exactly who exposed the "scam" is rather a mystery, in that it was not the Doctors or even the Police. Beryl is fuming that it was an inside job, and someone is betraying their own comrades in business. Of course she would say that – but it is odd that nobody has taken the credit for putting such an unpleasant (though doubtless profitable) racket out of business. *

* Editor's note – "Those who do not learn from History are doomed to repeat it." Someone pulled this exact same scam in West Germany in the 1960's!

Friday 12th January, 1936

An exhausting week, and in Songmark we generally begin as we mean to go on. Fortunately first weeks of term are always planned by our Tutors assuming we spent the holiday lazing on the beach (or in front of the fire) without a thought in our heads. Wishful thinking! Our Vostok adventures have been written up in part and should count for something; at least we kept jolly fit and could show we had used our training in practical ways. Miss Devinski was quite pleased with our account of how Maria and I crossed Romanov Island, but less so that we had run into an ambush in the first place.

Actually, I am getting quite worried about Molly. She was recounting quite gleefully to Beryl (a sympathetic and large ear) her adventures with the Pelmeni, when they raided the Red camp and were

disinclined to take any prisoners. I am glad I was not there myself – I can accept taking any measures in self-defence if really given no choice, but Molly seems to have enjoyed it rather too much. Father has mentioned some folk who went through the Great War and found it to their liking.

I have hardly seen Tatiana since we returned, though from her looks I fear the trip has rather knocked the stuffing out of her. I expect she will have a rather tough report to write for her Embassy, and is worrying about just how much of the truth to include in it. She would not have got back alive without being rescued by that dashing “Akula” – but if she is bright enough she might be able to slant it as being rescued by an Anti-Bolshevik crusader gives wonderful credence to her cover story. She needs adulation from Vostok like she needs a hole in the head (though Maria says in her part of the world they have stopped using that particular phrase as a joke. If Tatiana revealed she let a Menshevik officer de-brief her, she might get one.)

I must say, some of our holiday makes rather grim reading! We have the weekend to look forward to – no dances arranged yet, but we will certainly get back into practice. Molly is so much more social with a hula rather than a hand grenade.

One unfortunate after effect of our Vostok trip is we appear to have “jumped quarantine”, as there is now a raging paratyphoid epidemic in Tsarogorod, where we ate the food and drank the water. All the surface ships were stopped the day we left, but nobody seems to have considered airships. We have not been put into Isolation or anything but must present ourselves to the Hospital on Monday for tests, and hopefully cleared. Actually we all feel fine, the more so with the weekend coming up.

Saturday 13th January, 1936

It does seem more than a month since we were last on Casino Island. But today we had all day to enjoy without having any First-years to escort, so we made the most of it. It was a rather choppy crossing; being Tailfast has done nothing to help Helen’s seasickness problem.

We were so keen to get over that we arrived before the shops were open. Maria suggested we use the time and head over to the North side of the island and see how our poi peelings and fish bones are being treated these days. Helen says she has not heard any loud bangs recently, but she has been on South Island most of the time.

Both “Bio-reactors” are there still, though we were expecting at least one to be a hole in the ground by now. Indeed, they have expanded. Doctor Maranowski’s methane plant has grown an extra metal tank big enough to drown a bus in, and Professor Kurt’s structure looks rather bulkier with a fat tube the size of a railway carriage built next to it.

Professor Kurt greeted us warmly, being always keen to show off his pet project. He has insulated the whole structure against the winter rains, and added a secondary chamber to scavenge what heat he can from the almost finished compost. He tells us he has been around the islands preaching the merits of his designs, which he envisages powering the lights in every village and large plantation. True enough, oil has to be bought and imported, while crop residues and seaweed are something the Spontoon group are not liable to run short of. Some of the sugar cane plantations on Main Island actually set light to the dried-up fields after harvest, creating a spectacular blaze that looks good on the films but is awfully wasteful of “Bio-material” as Professor Kurt obliquely calls it. He is a very fine speaker, though tends to polish things too much for my tastes – nobody else would talk about what gets washed up on Pebble Beach as “untreated bio-humic wastes, rich in nitrogenous and phosphoric nutrients.” But if his business is transforming liabilities into assets, I suppose he needs to keep up his enthusiasm for the raw materials.

Maria even requested a copy of his pamphlet – I got one myself, and indeed it is a most poetic work. Some of it hardly seems to be about gardening, being a philosophy of the Soil, Labour and Natural Sciences for a new age. We were asked to keep an eye on him, though surely there is nothing wrong with a philosophy of conserving and developing the National Spirit on the National Soil. He had a few very scathing things to say about Helen’s part of the world, where the “Dust Bowl” is still spreading. From his lecture tours of Spontoon, he is (he tells us) helping to build a Land Consciousness. It is amazing what one can grow with compost.

Leaving him to his steaming empire, we passed his rival on the way to the Dance School. Judging by the delivery lorry, Doctor Maranowski has a contract with the Eastern Island sawmill to use their bark and leaf trimmings. I’m not sure the Althing really expected folk to be importing more wastes into Casino Island; the idea was to reverse the flow! Still, he is doing a fair job of supplying the power station with fairly clean gas, if rather too smelly for domestic use – although there is the consolation that gas leaks are easy to trace with his product.

We washed our paws of the whole business for the day, and had a very fine practice at the dance school followed by lunch at “The Missing Coconut”. It is good to be back! Our friendly rivals of the S.I.T.H.S. are all there, and seemed to be pleased to see us back. At the least, we provide a rival they can aim to devastatingly beat without the risk of offending their relatives and neighbours who are on the other teams.

It felt rather good to be back in Native dress, although the weather is rather chilly for it still. The forecasts are for snow on Vostok this week – thank Heaven that Spontoon is in a warm current and not the

Arctic one that chills Vostok! It also felt rather odd putting our “Euro” clothes back on afterwards, especially for Helen, who wore the full Native kit (if “full” describes something so scanty) every single day of the holiday, including a few trips to Casino Island.

Certainly, Casino Island is a wonderful asset to have – I hate to think where the nearest international bank would be without it; possibly back on Vostok, rather a long way to go to check one’s account. I checked mine, half dreading that Father had both heard of and believed the stories Sopy Forsythe is spreading about me back home, and might have cut me off without a penny. It was a great relief to find my Allowance waiting for me in my account as ever.

Actually, there is something rather puzzling in my account. Even if nothing had been wired over from Home, I would not have been literally without two pennies to rub together. I was anonymously credited with two cowries the day I left for Vostok, which I am quite at a loss to explain (my daily account does not pay interest, not even pennies’ worth.) Molly claims that money is money, how you got it makes no difference as long as you can spend it, but I disagree.

Molly is looking rather dismally at her own depleted account – after settling this term’s fees and the excitement of Vostok, she is faced with another uphill struggle or back she goes at Easter to the awaiting G-men. Not a cheerful thought for the first week of a brand new term! I think she was hoping to find an abandoned Red “war chest” in the ashes of their camp, full of unmarked gold bullion intended for bribery and subversion.

Still – pledging Molly half my allowance, I still had enough to treat us to a slap-up meal at Bow Thai, that rather nice Oriental restaurant that does such major things with tiny chillies. It may cheer us up – and even if not, a mouthful of Thai bonnet peppers makes a distraction impossible to ignore!

(Later) Back at Songmark I bumped into Adele Beasley – literally, she was on the far side of the door when I opened it rather energetically. Applying a bandage to her bruised snout, I sympathised that it must be difficult to live in Missy K’s dorm, with Beryl a rather uncomfortable comrade. Poor Adele – we retired to a vacant classroom and I learned things are not too well with her. As a lepine, any jokes about having “Lucky rabbit’s feet” rather fall flat (as she often does tripping over them.) She has enough trouble with her accident-prone nature without Beryl’s practical jokes, and Missy K cares nothing for most Euros. Adele says she wishes she had joined my dorm – which would be very good for her no doubt, but I could not help shuddering at how some of our adventures might have ended. There is absolutely nothing wrong with her safety techniques, one could never point out anything she does wrong – but neither could one hand her a corned-beef tin to open without having the first aid kit open first.

Adele also commented wistfully that we seem to be getting all the boys. True, she is the odd one out of her dorm as well, Missy K being conspicuously engaged and Beryl having what sounds like a full-time partner-in-crime in Mr. Van Hoogstraaten Junior. She was the odd one out even in her first dorm, having started out in Prudence’s group before being transferred to swap for Ada (proving that even our Tutors are sometimes mistaken.) Being in a happily working dorm is a wonderful boost; the Spontoones have a saying something like “It takes more than one stick to make a fire” and indeed Molly, Maria, Helen and myself certainly strike sparks from each other.

Actually, though I sympathised as I finished bandaging her muzzle, my ears went right down at the thought of her search for a gentleman friend finishing with her usual bad luck. Being merely kidnapped and sold to the “Euro slave trade” as Molly nearly was last year, might be far from the worst that could happen to her; it was a good thing Adele could not read my mind, as the word “hasenpfeffer” featured largely in it.

Sunday 14th January, 1936

Our first Sunday back, and both Helen and myself spent a long while with the brushes getting ourselves ready for our trip to South Island. I had time on Vostok to do some hard thinking about our Sundays, and have decided that the Reverend Bingham’s church will have to do without me from now on. Madelene X was scandalised (her usual state around us) when she heard me discussing it last night with Helen, but I am going to a religious meeting anyway, unlike Molly and Beryl.

Helen has quite a lot to teach me these days, as she has been taking very regular instruction from Saimmi. In Helen’s case, she has very little family to argue about her future, and last night after lights-out she told us she is planning on staying here if she can. It is very hard to become a permanent Citizen of these islands (waving large sheaves of currency at the right officials will not do it, a concept that had Molly speechless with shock) but becoming Helen Hoele’toemi would qualify her. In which case, I can see why she is keen to learn all she can from her potential sister-in-law about fitting in.

Still, that might be quite a long way off still – although looking at this year’s official diary, it came as an awful shock to discover that after Easter we will be more than half-way through our days at Songmark! We only have one Winter and one clear Summer solstice ceremony we can attend here – our final Summer will be hectic and a lot of it probably spent away from Spontoon. It makes you think.

We met Saimmi on the beach of Hotel Bay; all three of us dressed in decorous “Ulàul cloth” sarongs and picked fresh flowers for our head-fur as we entered the jungle. Although we looked around hopefully, this time none of the Wild Shamans made themselves visible to us. Saimmi has mentioned that they turn up only when needed, and we might not meet another one this year. Our destination was a small shrine hidden at the very end of the narrowest trail I have ever walked – certainly Missy K could not have managed to fit along it, even if she is a native Spontoonie. We re-dedicated the shrine with the seasonal version of the standard ritual, and as we rested Saimmi described what I had missed at the Winter celebrations on the peak of Mount Tomboabo above us and on Sacred Island. Some of it sounded a little disturbing, but I wished I had seen it.

A good thing about South Island is that nowhere is more than three hours walking away unless one decides to hack through the “three-yard jungle”. So it was just lunchtime when we stepped out of the forest at the Høele’toemi household, where we had a very enthusiastic reception. It looked as if half the cousins had come over to meet us, including Namøeta who lives these days on Orpington Island, and has such bizarre control over chickens. Certainly, the local religion has some interesting sides to it.

It was wonderful to sit down in a longhouse with the cubs and kittens crawling playfully over us (Helen seems to be accustomed to the idea by now) and just relax with the household. Mrs. Høele’toemi formally welcomed me back – and Jirry was extremely pleased to see me, to my great relief. Simply not being Tailfast right now is not the same as breaking an engagement – besides, having to go to Vostok I had no choice in the matter. From the Native’s usual point of view I suppose I was Tailfast too soon – and if I do wear Jirry’s braided fur again, it will be with a real hope of settling here.

For the time being, it was a very fine afternoon as we headed out to the waterfall pool for a swim and to catch up on everything in the style approved of by the Tiki gods. A marvellous Sunday and one I hope we can repeat often. Although my neck-fur did get rather bitten, it was very much worthwhile.

Monday 15th January, 1936

A rapid bustling over to Casino Island, where we were poked and prodded and swabbed by the medics – who agreed that we would be feeling ill by now if we had carried back anything unpleasant from Vostok (where the Government are accusing the Reds of sabotaging the water supply) and were warned off from handling any food for other people just in case. Still, we used the trip to get our term’s Medical Certificate that everyone else got last week. With all the spots on the globe Songmark girls start from and travel to on the way here, it is definitely needed. We are told that our Certificates are held as a public record while we are here – a sensible notion, if anyone wishes to hire a chef or nurse they can be certain of good health.

Back to classes after lunch, with a vengeance. The good thing is that we have plenty of flying hours scheduled this term – and indeed I demonstrated my little Sand Flea to the first-years. I am rather glad it was not Flying Flea #3, whose two-stroke engine was rather too recognisable as once having graced a lawn-mower and burned about a quarter as much oil as petrol. It would have made a useful sky-writing aircraft, except those are meant to be able to shut the smoke trail off. Today though, I logged another hour on the Sand Flea, all written up in my logbook next to the solo hours I put in on a Balalaika. That was a very different experience, the Balalaika being more like piloting a large boat through the water, and none too keen on snap rolls or Immelman turns. Although nothing like as aerobatic as the high-performance Sea Fleas we saw last Easter, my own little craft is really rather sprightly.

This term we study for our official Pilot’s exam – all being well, before Easter I will be at the nearest Empire Training School down in the Sullivan Islands (the chain next to the Gilbert Isles) to be examined for my “B” license. Molly and Helen might have to go all the way to Vanilla Field in Manila, if they want an American equivalent. I have heard good things about the flying schools in Manila – far from just ticking in the legally required boxes, they let their advanced students really “push the envelope”. I really don’t know where Maria wants to take her test; the nearest Italian air base is in East Africa!

At the self-defence classes today, we were being put through our paces with broom-handles as quarterstaves. They might not be the most effective weapon, but in skilled paws really quite useful, as a dozen Robin Hood films have shown the world. Unlike many such things, they are easily obtained anywhere and one can carry a brush straight past a policeman without being questioned – and our instructor invited any three of us to try and take it off her. Although she definitely pulled her punches, Molly, Beryl and Irma Bundt are nursing bruises as witness what a practiced brush-wielder can do. We will never walk past a cleaner in the corridors again in quite the same way.

Molly really should have learned by now not to try and up-stage people until she knows what they are capable of. She proudly produced her Cossack souvenir and announced it was much better. Our instructor mildly agreed, and pushed one of the broom handles (an inch and a quarter thickness of seasoned hardwood) well into the ground. Accepting Molly’s knout, she gave in a wide swing and actually cracked it like a circus ringmaster’s whip – the steel tip cutting the broom handle clean in two! Smiling, she handled it back to Molly with the one word – “Practise.”

Wednesday 16th January, 1936

Hurrah! We received our clean bills of health today, having been found free of anything unpleasant (except Molly's slight case of Athlete's paw – those high leather Russian boots she now wears are rather stifling) and are free to take jobs at any Popatohi food stall in the islands should we care to. A restful sort of career, by all accounts.

Actually, the chance would be a fine thing – our timetables are booked solid all week, and the most “resting” we do is on water-taxis between heading out to courses on Casino Island. I am happy just to flop down for five minutes, but real swots such as Prudence and Susan de Ruiz take their notes along to study en route. Adele's textbook blew overboard. Apart from my dorm and Prudence's, I don't think any of us really know enough Spontoonie to chat with the water-taxi folk. The taxi folk do speak English, rather better than most tourists guess, but do not gossip in it.

Helen has her doubts about them, but on everyday subjects they are certainly a mine of information and not at all close-mouthed in their own language. Today everyone is talking about the sensational arrests made by their chief Detective, Inspector Stagg who has managed to shut down another smuggling gang (netting half a million shell's worth of contraband and, oddly enough, a consignment of old English mill stones.). I was relaying some of the details to the first-year class we were escorting, when I saw Liberty Morgenstern go a peculiar colour as if she was about to be seasick.

I keep forgetting that many of our first-years do not read the “Daily Elele” and miss out on a lot of local news. I remembered reading about Inspector Stagg coming from New Haven, but had not put two and two together – Liberty must be delighted to see she has a fellow countryman here. It's a small world, in these seaplane days!

By contrast, Beryl is an absolute mine of misinformation. We arrived back before teatime to see her at work on one of our regular chores, feeding the security bigdogs. I noticed the gaggle of first-years listening to her with hushed voices and shocked expressions, as Beryl fed the hounds and blithely explained the origins of three of them. According to Beryl, she had the story off one of the local cooks who was there at the time when a canine lady thief broke into the Songmark compound trying to steal the payroll. Everything was hushed up afterwards, she says, and nobody will ever admit what happened. I have to admit, Beryl can spin a convincing yarn – the more people deny it the truer it will seem that it really was hushed up. Although – I must say, it is true that three of the guard dogs are of the right age and ARE noticeably more intelligent than the rest.

Friday 18th January, 1936

A record week, I have put twenty hours flight time in my logbook, four of them in my own aircraft. I had been dreading returning to find Beryl had “borrowed” it for one of her schemes, and either crashed it or had it seized by the Police. Possibly dear Sand Flea 1 was saved by having almost no cargo or passenger capacity, and being able to only reach Orpington Island even with a pilot of Beryl's size. I dread to think what would have happened in her paws if it had the range to make the run to Krupmark.

Thinking of that unpleasant place, it seems Songmark now lists a new student from there! One of the first-years is a most distinctive ring-tailed girl of obvious Oriental stock, who only joined us this term. I can hardly imagine what the entry requirements to do that must be, considering our Tutors are absolutely twitchy about the prospect of failing any of us. Songmark has never failed to graduate a student yet after the full three years (though some have dropped out before completing) but we are often told that they will if they have to. The school's Reputation is its greatest asset, and they will do anything to preserve it; rather like back home at Oxbridge, where by repute any academic suspected of (say) selling exam papers gets invited out to a country house weekend and makes a useful victim for the local amateur detectives to investigate. It would be as socially unthinkable to invite a houseful of guests over and not provide them with food, as it would be not to provide them with a murder mystery. Simply not done.

Anyway, Wo Shin seems a quiet enough girl; at least we have not had to break up any fights yet. Considering that one of the dorms in Songmark's very first year of graduates started off as very respectable and are now the Air-Pirate scourge of the South China Sea, it might well be that someone who regards Krupmark Island as a nice place to live, can become respectable. At least, we live in hope.

Of the various first-years we are escorting around, Tatiana looks the most “driven”, especially after she had that interview at her Embassy last week. Although as she is still here it obviously went better than it might have, one gets the impression she was sternly “called to the carpet” and told to do much better next time.

Saturday 19th January, 1936

A damp day indeed – we awoke to the hammering of torrential rain on the roof with no real inclination to race out to Casino Island on the first available water-taxi. In fact, we only just arrived in time for our dance classes

– a fine though exceedingly strenuous hula with twenty of us taking part, and lasting well into the middle of the afternoon.

Having all day, we were just about to relax with a matinee (“Road to Ry’leh” with Bob Hype, “Wing” Crosby and Dorothy Llama) when Susan de Ruiz trotted past and hailed us. Duty calls. We have all-day Passes to Casino Island, but the first-years have not – and of all people, Tatiana has gone over the wall and was traced to a water-taxi heading this way. It is most annoying.

Our matinee had to be abandoned as we split up and searched, getting wet to the skin and more irritable by the minute. The usual locations drew a blank – and indeed, Tatiana is not the type to break the rules for the sake of a flagon of Nootnops Blue or better meals than they serve at weekends at Songmark when half the cooks are away.

An hour later, I happened to spot Prudence and Tahni heading towards the Main Island water taxi dock arm-in arm and clearly not running search-patterns for any Missing Red Miss. I was about to remind Prudence of her Second-year duty to search when she casually mentioned she had seen Tatiana five minutes earlier, and indeed she had been at the Double Lotus all afternoon.

If someone had told me Tatiana had been at the Vostok Ambassador’s birthday party, I could hardly have been more amazed – I think my fur must have looked like a porcupine, standing out in shock even though I was soaked to the skin. I thanked Prudence and jogged straight over to that inconspicuous venue – there is a rather large lady doorman there on weekends, but rather than throwing me out like a drowned rat she gave me a smile and a large towel, even offering to help rub me dry. One can hardly deny it is a friendly place. She would have taken all day over her task had I not excused myself as soon as I ceased to actually drip on their carpets.

Duty calls – I must have looked rather grim and ruffled as I strode in, still somewhat damp. Tatiana certainly was there, sitting at one corner of the elegant bar with her ears right down and her tail bottled out like a flue-brush – I have seen her very cool when surrounded by heavily armed and highly homicidal Pelmeni, but here she looked like a goldfish thrown into a shark pit. There must have been a dozen other ladies there, all minding their business (and that of their friends) but nothing at all indecorous. It is quite a genteel place all round, with the same décor as last time but freshly repainted – lotus blossoms entwined in various ways, all perfectly botanical.

I was wondering what the correct etiquette was about frog-marching someone out of an establishment discreetly, but Tatiana saw me like a drowning sailor sees a life-raft, and rocketed towards me causing good-humoured chaff from some of the regulars. I did frog-march her down to the water taxi with her arm behind her back, in no mood to listen to explanations – it was already getting dark by then, and she had wasted our afternoon for us. Actually she was in no mood to resist, though she was babbling incoherently about “decadence” and such things. Honestly, the door was open to leave at any time, and I confess to having no sympathy for her.

(Later) We had handed Tatiana over to await our Tutors’ displeasure and were sitting down to an extra-healthy but extra-gloomy meal of three-finger Poi, when Beryl bounced in scented of healthy rat musk and Nootnops Blue. She was in an expansive mood – and let slip one little detail. Tatiana had asked her in confidence if there were any secret meeting-places of the locals that she could investigate, no doubt thinking of political clubs and “cafes” such as European parties form in when they are not partying in beer-cellar.

Beryl innocently told her that she did know of one, where she might find out an awful lot she never knew before – very true in its way no doubt, and very “Beryl” for you.

Sunday 20th January, 1936

One can quite understand why the filming season only begins here in March – for two days it has rained so hard we can hardly see across the Songmark compound. Off again to South Island, wishing we had oiled fur again (Helen having been nicely waterproofed for three weeks in the holidays) as our standard oilskins are really not up to scratch. The water between the islands was very calm, almost as if it was hammered flat by the rain, and Helen was not seasick even once.

Saimmi was not around, being called off to Main Island – but her sister Moeli was, and greeted us very happily from the family longhouse. She was in traditional costume as ever, with only a grass skirt and a straw hat keeping the rain off, but seemed perfectly comfortable. Jirry and Marti were both away today, probably on that “waterworks project” that makes its best progress when there are no tourists around.

It was an educational day as ever, as Moeli pointed out with pride some of the markings combed into her fur – or rather, some significant variations on the standard ones declaring her status. None of these are compulsory to wear of course, but any fur markings one does wear must be accurate. For us to wear some of them would be like wandering through Aldershot with forged medal ribbons on – absolutely not done.

Commenting that we could hardly get wetter whatever happened, Moeli invited us for a swim. The Spontoones swim all year round, and indeed even the January water temperature here is no worse than midsummer back Home. We followed her through the narrow trails to the uninhabited Western side of the

island, where the land slopes steeply down with nowhere to anchor a canoe – Main Island was quite hidden by the sheets of rain, and this time of year there is very little shipping in the channel.

Our friend waded out to waist-deep and started to slap the water in that peculiar rhythm she has always refused to teach us so far, and then we waited. Four or five minutes later a head broke the surface cautiously – a casual viewer might have thought it was just a pearl-diver coming up for air, but we guessed otherwise.

I had not met the “Natives of no island” since the Summer Solstice festivals, but some of them remembered me by name. Helen whispered she had met them twice during the holidays, once before she was officially Tailfast to Marti – and now she knows why Moeli is perfectly happy with her choice. They mentioned having seen me swimming off Eastern Island on last week’s practice dives; I had no idea we were being observed. The idea of them watching all swimmers from below is a little disturbing, and might explain a few of the “tragic swimming accidents” that happen to deserving enemies around here.

We had a very interesting morning’s swim, although they were clearly humouring us, like swallows darting around a lumbering turkey. The underwater Nature films one sees of fishes darting away at incredible speed are equally true of them – for sheer power, stamina and reflex speed I doubt any land-dweller can begin to come close. Helen and I are as fit as we have ever been, but we felt like wooden-legged veterans trying to keep up with Olympic athletes. Moeli’s husband and cub were not there, today they are fishing off the far side of Main Island we were told, but we played a ball game with the other kittens using a giant sponge where they proved their reflexes must be easily four times faster than ours. Just think what they could do if they were not restricted to the water! If they ever revealed themselves to the outside world, I would bet my last cowny on Spontoon winning the water-polo at this year’s Berlin Olympics.

By mid-afternoon we were quite worn out, and waved farewell as we staggered up the beach to don our grass skirts again. A slow walk back to the Hoel’toemi household and a very nourishing and welcome meal, then back across the island in the dusk to the ferry and Songmark.

We had another run-in with Madelene X as soon as we returned, still clad in our (respectable) Native costumes. Our Songmark shorts and shirts were in our packs, as we saw no point in getting them soaking wet for the sake of half an hour on water taxis and dripping our way up from the docks. True enough, we are not meant to wear Native costume around Eastern Island – but what really irked her is that it was on a Sunday, when she insists we should have been in Church.

Honestly, the Church is not going to go out of business for the want of our custom. As to her complaint of us “losing our Beliefs”, we are actually gaining a lot more. The only faith I have recently lost that I know of, is my remaining belief in “What you don’t know can’t hurt you” – and if she wants to complain about that one, I think I can point her to our Tutors to argue the point with them.

Monday 21st January, 1936

A bad day for me. I have written four times to our Embassy trying to get a replacement passport – Songmark keep mimeographs of everyone’s papers on arrival to help with this sort of thing, but so far I have heard nothing back. Miss Devinski grudgingly gave me the morning off to head out to Casino Island and get it fixed, as it is always more effective to sit on an official’s doorstep than to pile up papers in their In-tray.

I should have known I was in for trouble when they sent their most junior aide, a rather supercilious tabby girl, to shoo me off the premises. She explained rather gloatingly that the Ambassador could not be bothered with the likes of me – they have had strict Instructions about me from the government in Whitehall. I was told to take myself off and not bother them again – and to apply for a passport from whoever I was reporting to. The cheek of it! She must have been a day-school scholarship girl, as everyone else knows that one simply does not get traitors and moles from proper Public Schools such as St. Winifred’s. One might as well suspect folk from good Cambridge Colleges of turning traitor.

We should have let the Natives of No Island catch Sippy Forsythe, as they so very nearly did. When I remember how upset we all felt thinking she was “lost at sea” last Easter, I could spit hairballs. The worst of it is, she actually WAS a legitimate Agent, doing her job – though I doubt that character assassinations are part of it.

I returned to Songmark with my tail dragging in the mud, feeling about as hollow as we did crossing Romanov Island on an empty stomach. The only passport I have now is that Macao one that Lars gave us for Christmas – happily Molly’s got her through customs on Vostok, which must be about the fussiest around – so hopefully mine should be as good.

Everyone was away at the hangars when I returned to drop off the unused paperwork in our room – and I spent a long time looking through the very convincing details on my new passport. If this is going to be used I had better get my facts straight on the person on the passport – “Kim-Anh” is rather a nice name, and with a profession listed as Entertainer I can at least go through some dance moves if I need to prove it. Alternatively I could claim to be a saxophone player – I have never touched one, but I could hope no Customs

posts keep one handy to call my bluff. If I had Adele's luck, it would of course turn out the entire Customs shed are in a marching jazz band and insist on examining my style.

(Later) Just before lights-out, we four put our heads together and tried to think of a way ahead. It really is most discouraging – just having my name appended on one list of names in far-off London might well have shot my reputation down in flames – and from this end there is nothing we can do about it! I can only hope my Brother manages to disprove the accusations. He is at least politically well connected, and I found myself looking at the only picture I have of him before joining the Army, already looking dashing in the black Direct Action uniform.

Molly sympathises, as indeed we are in more or less the same boat. Her name is known by Interpol, and she has a hot reception waiting if she ever goes to Europe or the Americas. She may have been brought up in a less than law-abiding family, but says she has personally done nothing illegal that she can remember – if her Father had not put so much of the Family Business in her name, she would only have financial woes. So we are both stuck here by other folks' actions.

Helen gritted her teeth and suggested I send a postcard to Mr. Sapohatan, and volunteer again for one of his "little errands". She says we might need all the Spontoon credits we can get, as the Authorities in the rest of the world are taking a dim view of us. If Helen ever does get to be a Citizen, I think she will have earned it – Mr. Sapohatan's jobs might not be quite as dangerous as her Father's career in oil-well fire fighting, but they have their moments.

Tuesday 22nd January, 1936

Back in the cockpit of Sand Flea 1, putting it through its paces! My entire dorm has flown her now, and so have Jasbir's (though it was rather a strain getting off the ground with Irma Bundt, who is not fat but extremely solid.) Adele Beasley flew after me, and pulled off an exquisite outside loop without as much as straining a bracing wire. If she could only get a job where her paws never touched the ground, she would live a charmed life I am sure.

Even our Tutors seem to be grudgingly coming round to some faint praise for Sand Flea 1 every now and then. True, it is the only "radical" aircraft Songmark can lay paws on whenever wanted – and it is radically different from the Tiger Moths, so it makes for good training. Miss Wildford has given up her habit of solemnly shaking paws with me before I get into the cockpit "In case I never get another chance" as she is fond of saying.)

I have sent off a postcard to Post Box Nine, volunteering our services – after all, it seems unlikely that I will be cleared any time soon, and (dreadful thought) I may never be. Mr. Sapohatan has always given us missions on the right side of the law and nothing that our Embassy would disapprove of. Missions such as sending a certain Junior Embassy Aide to Krupmark Island parcel post C.O.D "The Beach" might be something I would balk at, but for special cases I might allow myself to be talked into it.

We are looking forward to Thursday night, when we have passes for a Meeting Island dance festival, and are escorting ten of the first-years. Honestly, if they want escorts Songmark should recruit sheep-dog canine girls for the job and leave us free to get on with more important things. Our own exercises start before breakfast still – by the time most folk have barely staggered out to comb their fur we have done six laps of the compound, rain or shine.

I must say, having got through our Vostok trip we are definitely taking our lessons to heart. Molly likes equipment – she positively clinks when she walks, having added a mini tool kit and a day's iron rations to her usual Swiss Submariner's Knife and pocket jemmy kit in sewn-down pockets. Maria is less convinced, and points out a lot of the adventures around these islands involve swimming or wading; five pounds of metal sealed into one's clothes might not really be an asset when next they drop us off two hundred yards from shore.

Wednesday 23rd January, 1936

Unusual weather for Spontoon – thick cloying fog, merging into ten-tenths cloud all the way to four thousand feet! We could hear Radio LONO sending out warning messages first thing, and a lot of the scheduled aircraft flights are landing on the water and waiting for the tugs to find them and pull them around the reefs. Definitely a proof (if one were needed) in the advantages of flying boats. In fifty years time aircraft may have twenty engines and "tip floats" the size of petrol tankers, but they are sure to be seaplanes and amphibians.

We were drafted down to the harbour to help the rather strained Customs and seaplane terminal crews handle all the work – half a dozen passenger and freight seaplanes being towed in rather than landing under their own power with tugs hooting constantly – somehow it all worked rather well. I was taking a pot of coffee up to the controller in the tower who had a plotting board of the island inner waters with small models of tugs and aircraft on it – he could see nothing outside the windows, but had two telephones off the hook and

was shouting out bearings to his staff. I came up behind him with the coffee while he was talking to whoever was on the other end of the line – calling them “White Tiki” and “Blue Tiki” which is an odd sort of call sign.

As a coincidence, since returning from Vostok we have noticed some rather large statues erected on Eastern Island, looking out over the straits. They are obviously new works by Mr. Tikitavi whom we met last year – we are told they turn to track the sun, as part of folk rituals. Oddly, enough, despite Helen and I having learned a lot about local Traditions, we have never heard anything that would match that one. They are definitely pivoted, but exactly why is an interesting question.

I noticed an interesting feature in the main control tower itself. It is a standard two-storey building, with a fine view out over the slipways and jetties given decent weather. The tower is only normal brick (coral sand-lime bricks, made locally) but a door on the ground floor was left open in the rush that has always been securely locked before. It seems the tower is built on heavy-looking concrete foundations, and has a cellar with armoured junction boxes and far more cables than just a few telephones would require. Interesting indeed, but I have given up asking people about that sort of thing around here – it could be an unhealthy pastime.

It was quite alarming working outside seeing tugs looming up from the fog scarcely twenty yards away – without fairly accurate plotting we would have had a lot worse than the minor bumps against the jetties that we did. Everyone breathed large sighs of relief when the wind got up and the fog lifted to about a hundred feet, making it only a normally awful day.

Our flight plans were still scrubbed for the afternoon, so Miss Wildford had the bright idea of leading us to the rock face at the North end of the island where she promised we could gain altitude without worrying about the cloud level. Just what we wanted, I don’t think – wet, cold greasy rock dripping with condensation, and one’s fur soon turning green with moss stains. Having twenty pounds of water bags in our knapsacks hardly helped, nor was it really meant to.

Beryl had the bright idea of stealthily emptying hers then inflating them to hide the fact – but our dear Tutor is up with all the tricks, and did a last-second check before we started off. Beryl was carrying a thirty pound load after that – it is marvellous how our Tutors fine-tune the education for each of us in their own special way.

We may not have reached ten thousand feet as we had planned for the afternoon’s flying, but in the circumstances ten feet seems quite far enough above the rocks while traversing on slippery ledges. I filled in a log book of a sort, putting down a new route that had me shaking like a leaf by the time I put paws on horizontal ground again – in the circumstances, I named it after Beryl’s favourite self-defence move. *

A tired return to Songmark in the gloom, where a hot shower and a meal revived us all considerably – and I headed out with Molly to Casino Island, for our regular socialising and style lessons.

Madame Maxine tutted somewhat at the state of our claws, but one can hardly wear gloves when clinging on to rock edges for grim life. Molly had her disguising facial fur stripes re-touched with permanent dye, and asked for dark “bands” around her wrist areas. They seem familiar somehow.

I took Madame Maxine into my confidence and showed her my new passport, asking her how I can become more convincing. Amelia Bourne-Phipps is stuck on Spontoon for the foreseeable future, with no way to go elsewhere without a passport while being “persona non grata”. Molly guesses that means “Her? No Thanks!” which may be inelegant as a translation but gets the point across rather well. If I am stuck here as Amelia, a half-Siamese girl called Kim-Anh Soosay from Macao has rather wider options.

Although she is not from Macao, Madame Maxine had some interesting tips for the role. Some of them, I do NOT think I will be using, but it is interesting to know what I could do if I wanted. I wonder if Jirry likes Siamese girls?

* Editor’s note – the 1994 Spontoon and Kanim Area rock climbing guide lists one HVS (Hard Very Scary) grade route on Eastern Island – “Cheltenham Death Grip”. Though the guide does not mention the date or climber of its first ascent, it is described as “A Classic Route”. Future editions should give Amelia the credit.

Thursday 24th January, 1936

The weather cleared up completely overnight, and much to the first-years’ disgust we had their slot of flight time to make up for yesterday. A first for us, formation flying including Sand Flea 1! Maria took half a reel of film, which we will send to “The Daily Birdwatcher” and hope to get printed.

We went out after teatime to Meeting Island, us and Prudence’s dorm escorting Brigit Mulvaney’s dorm who have somehow managed to get the highest marks of their year. Having Brigit, Tatiana, Liberty Morgenstern and the new girl Wo Shin together is an interesting decision for our Tutors to have made. I would have thought of scattering them safely apart, but at least we can keep an eye on them more easily in one bunch.

Tatiana is looking definitely quiet, which makes a nice change. I doubt she has said much about her Vostok trip – if Liberty Morgenstern knew half the details she would never let her live it down!

It was pitch dark when we got to Meeting Island, but the dance platform was well lit by about a dozen flaring torches, giving a rather authentic Native feel to it. A six-piece band was already playing some of the local dance tunes, and vendors were circulating with all sorts of edibles.

I must say, our first-years are quick on the uptake. Brigit Mulvaney was just about to buy one of the innocent-looking coconuts with straws from a vendor, when Ada Cronstein intercepted her. The coconuts with the red straws are plain, but those with the blue straws are half full of white rum. Brigit pleaded ignorance (she is a jolly fine actress) until Ada pointed out she had in her paw the exact change for the much dearer spiked version.

It was a pity we were not allowed to wear our own Native costume, but as official escorts to the first-years I suppose we had to look at least half way Official ourselves. Ada in particular was bemoaning the fact – and indeed she can look wholly Authentic, having a fur pattern very like many of the native canines here. When we returned last September before the start of term we had found her in minimal Costume escorting a wide-eyed tourist lapine lady around (a librarian from somewhere in the Mid-West bible belt) who still writes long letters to her and remains convinced she is a native Spontoonie.

Still, the authentic Natives certainly put up a wonderful show. I had been worrying how we would keep track of our charges in the crowd and the dim light, but as it happened there was no problem. It is their first trip to a non-tourist Dance exhibition, and their attentions were definitely glued to the stage. Brigit's tail was thrashing like a scarf in slipstream at one of the dance teams of local gentlemen – despite all the fine views she keeps telling us of “Back in Dear Old Ireland” I doubt they have anything quite like that.

Molly and Maria vanished for a few minutes and returned with bottles with long straws concealed in bags. Nootnops Blue, unless I miss my guess. At least they didn't drink it in front of the first-years, who would all demand some. They did offer me some, but I had to set an example – as Prudence was doing, though the rest of her dorm was sipping from coconuts. I think they brought their own straws especially to add confusion; Prudence is good at planning things like that.

It was an hour and a half later that we had to shepherd Brigit's dorm away, being very careful to keep them in full sight at all times. Miss Devinski had sternly told Prudence and myself not to come back without them. There were no problems as it turned out, as they were eagerly discussing the evening's entertainment and we shepherded them back to Songmark without any attempted breakouts. The idea of having to chase them around Meeting Island in the dark until our Tutors spotted we were overdue and sent the third-years after all of us, was something I had been dreading.

Molly complained she had hoped to see Lars at the dance, and indeed it is the sort of place one expects to find him. In fact, none of us have heard of him at all this term – Helen seems optimistic that things will stay that way.

Saturday 26th January, 1936

A rather standard morning at dance classes was followed by a definitely intriguing afternoon. We finished our lunch at “The Missing Coconut” and headed out with the idea of getting to the cinema – Molly may not be able to afford to subscribe to “Film Frolics” any more but she is still keen to see the Barx Brothers' latest comedy. But all thoughts of laughing our tails off at the antics of Blotto, Wino and Dipso went right out of our heads when we noticed a certain grey ferret waiting for us on the bench outside. It is the first time Mr. Sapohatan has been in touch this year – but I could feel my heart racing as I waited to hear what he has for us this time.

I must say, the Authorities here have a certain style. We followed him up to Tower Hill Park where a bench by the pond provided a spot free of any eavesdroppers. After all, one hardly expects Agents to meet sitting around on park benches and discuss secret matters while feeding the ducks from brown paper bags.

He began by apologising for taking so long to contact us, but explained that he was keeping our services for the right kind of problems, which do not come up every day. I can well believe that. Then he asked a strange question – had we ever been to Orpington Island? Helen and I have briefly passed through the docks on our trip last Summer, but we have never really set paw there, and all that was in the reports we gave him. Otherwise, it is just a spot on the map and a distant shadow on the Northern horizon as seen from high flights on a clear day.

I mentioned that the only person we really know from there is Namoea, one of Jerry's cousins whom we last met two weeks ago. He nodded at that, and explained that people were getting rather concerned about her. Without actually telling us so, he hinted that she was getting involved with some rather unauthorised Import and Export trade – or at least, he believed so. It is hardly a matter for the Police yet, as it seems to fall in one of the grey areas that cover about half the shipping transactions in the Nimitz Sea.

Mr. Sapohatan pointed out that he can hardly send any of the Hoel'toemi family on this one, but that as we know Namoea she should not be too suspicious. Again, he stressed that he would be very happy if we could prove her innocent – but he has other people he can call on if we feel we have to refuse the task.

Well! She has always seemed a perfectly respectable Native girl, and her only odd feature of being able to control chickens is hardly something I can imagine being useful to a criminal conspiracy. Despite what

they print in the more lurid pulp comics, I hardly see her raising an unconquerable assault force of free-range pullets. Just as well, as this is too warm a climate to wear pullet-proof vests.

After a quick huddled discussion, I volunteered us. I was rather worried that Helen might balk at the idea, but the chance of clearing a potential cousin-in-law's good name appeals to her, and besides we have been getting a lot of mathematics at Songmark this term. She declared she could use some fresh air and the sight of views that do not include a textbook.

With a nod, Mr. Sapohatan thanked us, promised he would be in touch, and departed. Oddly enough, a minute later we had the park to ourselves as half a dozen gardeners who had been busily sweeping the paths and pruning bushes suddenly went home for the day.

Still, a quick check of the time showed us we could still catch the Barx Brothers matinee if we ran – and we did. Maria treated us to four tickets, and indeed we nearly did laugh our snouts off. “A night at the barbershop chorus” is quite the funniest thing I have seen all year. We may need to store up all the relaxation we can get, if this mission turns out anything like the others.

From the last issue of Film Frolics I saw, the famous brothers are due to make a film on location in the Spontoon area this summer. Certainly a thing to look forward to. Molly says she once had a crush on “Stinko” the fourth Barx brother, who played the main romantic leads in the first two films.

The newsreel afterwards was interesting, as this is Olympics year and there was a reel of the big new stadium (looking about the size of Casino Island, including all the car parks and support buildings) being completed in Berlin. Spontoon will certainly be represented, and indeed it is a wonderful place to be a sports star. With a population this size (less than twenty thousand) and all the different events, one only has to specialise in an unusual event to stand a fair chance of making it on the team. We have all seen (and dodged) the home-built go carts made of bamboo and old pram wheels, hurtling down the steepest road on Casino Island as the Bobsled team practice as best they can. The nearest permanent snow slope is probably in either Alaska or Japan, rather far for a weekend's training run.

Actually, the only definite Olympic team member we know of is Beryl's partner in crime, Piet van Hoogstraaten Junior. One would hardly expect him to have won his place fairly – but he is the captain of one of the tough Casino Island rowing teams, the “Screaming Skulls” and we have seen him working hard at the oars driving his skiff across the winning line. There is really no way to cheat at that, though no doubt he has tried.

Sunday 27th January, 1936

A brilliantly clear day, as we headed out to South Island to meet up with Saimmi. It was something of a strain, wondering whether or not to mention our new mission – she generally seems to know everything we get up to on Official business, but with her cousin involved we thought Mr. Sapohatan might have kept quiet on that.

In fact, she brought up the subject herself when we had finished practicing the rituals proper to the first full moon of the year. She told us a fascinating tale of her Great-Aunt, who is a Chicken Shaman on Orpington, and communes with her charges. If Madelene X had heard, she no doubt would be heading for the emergency Holy Water hose while screaming about worshipping fowl spirits.

Helen did think it rather odd that one would want to hold a conversation with next week's dinner, as these days despite the films the Pacific Islanders have mostly given that sort of thing up. Tastes have changed since the unfortunate but aptly named Captain Cooked first chartered this ocean and tragically mistranslated his invitation to a native feast. Saimmi laughed, and explained that the Chicken Spirits are quite used to the fact that none of their hosts are likely to die of old age. It would certainly never happen in the wild, and the life of a chicken is actually far better in a well-supplied and well-protected hut, with the jungle available when wanted.

Saimmi pointed out that being any sort of Shaman is not the sort of thing one can learn – one either has the ability from birth or never will. It is generally more of a burden than a benefit, rather like being plugged into a radio channel with no off switch – which partly explains why shamans are often sampling the more disturbing herbs and potions. There have been keen and earnest Euros who have tried to learn it, misunderstanding that it is not like a religion one can decide to convert to; the excessively painful initiation rituals are often designed to discourage them, as is the fact that they never pass anyway. Beryl has mentioned various punishments at Saint T's having been inspired by some luridly illustrated Amerind books of similar rituals.

An excellent luncheon at the Hoele'toemi household was followed by a very welcome afternoon with Jirry and Marti at the guest hut – Helen and I chaperoned each other, one might say. I told Jirry of my problems with the Embassy, and had brought along my Macao passport. Happily, Jirry has no dislike of Siamese girls, given that I might have to look like one sometimes – but even better, he tells me he prefers me just the way I am. I never really thought about it – just as a Siamese is exotic to me, I must be just as exotic to his family.

My neck-fur seems to be growing especially well this year, it must like being bitten. Poor Jirry ended up rather tattered by nightfall, but none of us are complaining. I know my Krupmark dress has gloves that prevent me scratching, but somehow it feels improper for felines.

We returned on a water-taxi with the new first-year girl Wo Shin, who we noticed was contentedly rubbing her own neck-fur. I have no idea what Red Pandas like, never really having met many of them to ask. It seemed rather odd that she was unescorted on South Island, as last year we were only allowed out in groups with Passes. She looked us up and down, and to our amazement proudly declared that she is a married woman, and unlike us, had been respectably spending the weekend with her husband!

This completely floored me. I know Missy K is planning to marry her fiancé on what you might call a month's notice, but I had never thought of married girls joining Songmark – it is such an intensive course, one would be away from home nine tenths of the time. On the other paw, we have all read the Songmark rules till we can quote them in our sleep, and there is nothing actually written down about it one way or the other.

Anyway, Shin took great pleasure in telling us she has a house built for two on South Island that her parents pay for, and a husband who is a Troubleshooter on Krupmark Island. She winked at Helen and revealed her husband is a very large young Siberian Tiger, and that Helen had better keep her paws off.

I imagine being a Troubleshooter in that part of the world means exactly that – except when silence calls for using teeth and claws instead. Molly has often contemplated that a smart girl could go far on Krupmark – to which I always reply that a smarter one would go a lot further to avoid the place.

(Later) We dropped in on Jasbir's dorm to have a chat with Li Han about our new arrival – she may be from the island of Kuo Han and not this area, but by repute all Chinese know everything about other Chinese everywhere. She proved to be no exception, and with her ears flat down described Shin's wedding last Autumn to which a large number of Orientals were invited from all over this part of the Pacific – none of whom Li Han wants to know.

I had better not tell Molly. That would probably be her idea of a High Society wedding, as she has described being a bridesmaid at similar ones back in Chicago with the bridal couple walking out of the church under an "honour guard" of raised Tommy-guns in parody of a military ceremony. At least one can hardly say the poor bride is in for a surprise, if she begins as she means to go on.

Molly as a bridesmaid. The mind boggles.

Tuesday 29th January, 1936

I wondered how our Tutors were going to do it. Every dorm has been given a budget and forty-eight hours to put together a complete plan for a scratch expedition. We are scheduled to head out to Orpington Island, not I think a coincidence. Prudence's bunch are taking a major trip as far as the Skookum Isles, which has the rest of us green with envy. For the first time we are really heading out on our own, our Tutors merely being there for emergency backup. If Prudence misses and carries on another fifty miles she will end up at another island we do know rather too well.

There would be quite enough to think about if this was just a regular field trip, and Miss Devinski warns us that we will have a report to write on our trip like all the other dorms, whatever else happens. It is that "whatever else" that worries me. Still, today we spent drawing up lists of equipment and such for a week's stay – I doubt we will exactly be checking into a hotel, Orpington Island is not really on the tourist route and we may have to camp out. This time of year, given the choice we do not want to be plaiting palm leaves to keep the rain off, if we are allowed to carry proper tents and such.

I have heard Missy K mention she has often been there, but she is walking around in a large-sized huff at our getting the "easy" Orpington Island trip, and is pointedly telling us nothing about the place. Or as she describes it, she is "actively encouraging our research."

Molly grumbles she will research itching-powder after we get back and actively encourage its transfer to Missy K's big "Coco de Mer" shell native costume brassiere. She cheered up briefly when told we could carry firearms, until told we have to properly register them with Customs and the local Police – which (she says) takes all the fun out of things. Despite her pleading, we are most definitely NOT taking my 13 mm "T-Gew" rifle, even if she volunteers to carry it.

Wednesday 30th January, 1936

A frantic day of packing knapsacks and arranging transport – we have booked on a "general cargo" vessel that is heading out tomorrow. I would call it a tramp steamer (which it is) but after her experiences last September Molly freezes up at the phrase, and we had better get her on board before she makes the connection.

I fear I have rather put Molly's back fur up by flat-out refusing to take our firearms. It is an Executive Decision, as they say these days, despite the fact our Tutors were willing for us to "tool up". Remembering our Vostok expedition, I reminded her that there is always someone around with heavier

artillery – we have been training to use our wits, and those should be enough, especially if we are simply on a fact-finding mission. I let her pack her Vostok knout, there is no point risking outright rebellion before we have even got out there. She sold her fishing spear gun last term to Jasbir, and is trying hard to borrow it back for the trip. I must have a word with Jasbir and try and to persuade her not to let it go.

In the Songmark library there is a shelf of field notes and guides written by previous years, and I managed to find a rather thorough Orpington Island survey from the 1933 senior class by a dorm led by Victoria Chow. That is a famous name here – she left the year before we arrived, but she is the “Number One Daughter” of the even more famous international canine detective Charlie Chow. Molly commented that she must have been a sneaky sort, as unlike the other Chinese we know she has her family name written last to confuse people’s inscrutable oriental card indexes.

Happily, Orpington is politically in the Spontoon Islands Dependencies, so there will be no worries about passports. Which is just as well, as I am trying to save my other fur pattern for emergencies, and possibly a party or two? As we are openly going there as Songmark students, whatever local authorities exist have been wired to expect us, and arriving under a different name would be nothing but trouble.

It was a vast relief to finish packing by teatime and head out with Molly to Casino Island to Madame Maxine’s for some more social tuition. I really do not think our Tutors like us going there, but it is all perfectly respectable. By repute, Madame Maxine can teach a girl just about anything she needs to know, including some skills that I rather doubt my chum Mabel is learning at her finishing school. (I received a postcard from her just last week, all snow-capped mountains and jolly winter sports. As the current leader of Germany keeps having everyone shout at the least excuse, “Schi Heil!” He was in the Alpenkorps in the Great War and is much into “Strength Through Joy” and other healthy outdoors notions.)

Whatever else we do on the trip, I doubt there will be any deep steam baths and luxurious massages, or Tango lessons on Orpington Island. Impromptu cold mud baths are more likely – so we might as well at least start off clean, as long as it lasts. Definitely we will be in canvas gaiters and puttees rather than fashion heels, so we practiced our stylish costumes as well. In all the films the heroine has a tendency to fall over and twist an ankle whenever running away from danger – I can certainly understand that, without sensible footwear.

We started learning another very lively South American dance, the “Carioca” which is jolly fun and extremely energetic. As always, we begin wearing sensible gym shoes and move onto “fashions” later – much as in Songmark they sent us up the rock faces on a dry, clear day first and piled on the problems later. Our instructress is Miss Gonzales, the ovine lady who taught us to tango. One can see she loves her job, having seen her dancing it most energetically at The Double Lotus – being paid for teaching one’s hobby must be quite a bonus.

Friday 1st February, 1936

(Transcribed from field notebooks.)

Dear Diary. The first thing I can say about Orpington Island is that it is decidedly not Spontoon. I had read up on it yesterday, the basic facts such as its lack of hills and mountains stop it getting anything like the rainfall Spontoon Main Island generates – the interior is dry and scrubby rather than jungles.

What I had not realised, is it has a continuous native History, the sort that the Spontoonies have had to invent almost from scratch – its inhabitants are still mostly in their original tribes, just as their first ancestors arrived centuries before. For obvious reasons, Polynesian exploration was by family groups, of the same or at least compatible species – and the ones who settled Orpington were mostly avians.

It is a good thing none of us four are allergic to feathers – Madelene X would have sneezed her snout off by now, as we arrived at a dock and marketplace mostly run by ducks. Most of them are short, coming hardly up to my shoulders, but highly energetic types who are dashing around the markets non-stop (“Like their tails were afire” as Helen says. I hope that does not give Molly Ideas.)

Just getting here was far more of a problem than I had hoped – I had assumed last Summer that when we stopped for Orpington Island passengers at to change in the middle of the night, we had actually docked. Not so – the regular boat ties up at a buoy outside the reef and we all changed onto a fast, narrow craft not unlike what Molly has described as a “Cigarette boat”. The reason was explained in the next fur-raising five minutes as we shot through tidal races and convoluted gaps in the reef – and that is the main commercial route in. I don’t really want to see the “tricky” routes the smugglers presumably use. Helen was quite record-breakingly unwell as the boat bounced off the swells and turned sharp corners between coral stacks and indeed some of the crew cheered in genuine astonishment and admiration; rarely can they have seen anyone being so explosively seasick in just a few minutes.

Maria had rather a surprise looking around the place, as she had expected something like one of the Spontoon Islands just a bit further out. It was not unlike Mildendo Island, in that the main buildings were not hotels but industrial concerns (one of them a feather pillow factory, an obvious money-spinner for the natives

in moulting season.) We did find a hotel in Popokolo Bay, though obviously it was mostly for commercial travellers and the like; the brochures lying around the foyer were all for telegraph and shipping services rather than beach attractions and tourist entertainment.

We have a rough map, and discover Namoeta's village is on the far side of the island. Of course there are jitneys that would take us there around the coast road, but we are supposed to be on an expedition and going across the heart of the island on foot is far more the done thing. A day or so at the hotel getting supplies and gathering data hardly counts, as all expeditions start somewhere at least semi-civilised.

Our packs included camping kit but very little food, as we had planned to supply locally. As it happened, the only grocers open by the time we dropped our packs off at the hotel was catering entirely for avians. The only food they had was millet (three kinds), that or whole maize on the cob – I had scarcely hoped for a delicatessen such as the one next to Lingenthal's on Casino Island, but this was more of a "Crude-Essen."

Our hotel rooms were cramped, but there was space to all squeeze in with the maps laid out on my bed and hold a "Chinese Parliament" as we hammered out just what we would try and do. Of course, we could head straight over to see Namoeta and then try and shadow her – always a possibility. Our second idea was to head into the area and see if there was any suspicious behaviour that looked as if it might be smuggling, and then see if we could see her involved. The trouble is, there could be half a dozen smuggling gangs at work and we end up watching all but the one Namoeta is involved in – assuming she is involved at all.

We put it to a vote, and the second idea won (I was outvoted). At least it should make for a better expedition report, and please our Tutors if nobody else. So we took a quiet evening walk around the streets of Popokolo Bay, and retired early. I might not really like the plan, but perhaps it is just as well - "No plan survives contact with the enemy", as Father always says – and there is no point in getting too attached to one.

Saturday 2nd February, 1936

A day of hard work – we wasted an hour trying to find some better food, but drew a blank. As Helen grumbled, the local rations may only cost chickenfeed, but that is what you get. By ten we were grimly stuffing our packs with dried manioc flakes and instant millet porridge (the best lightweight camping food we could find) and heading into the interior, notebooks and cameras ready. At least this makes a good cover story – we really are sent out by Songmark to practice our solo expedition skills, and report on what we see. Bird watching would be the obvious nature project around here.

The island is barely a day's march across, even allowing for its rather rugged interior. There is a coastal flat belt with all the settlements, then most of the inner section is a plateau, the vegetation mostly plants such as aloes, acacia and other thorny inhabitants. There are no lakes and not many streams on the high plateau even at this time of year; in August it must be baked like an oven. Helen said she felt quite at home. In fact, our water only just held out before we descended into the damper coastal strip on the far side, where some very welcome springs gush out of the base of the cliff. In future I will make sure we take two water bottles apiece.

"Base Camp" was set up two hundred yards from the track, next to a minor spring that drops down in a loud waterfall that should mask any sound of our camp. Really a very pleasant spot to put the tents – we are well hidden except from the air, and even then an aviator would have to look hard to see our green tents on the grassy little shelf. And looking through the scrub we can see the smoke of the village Namoeta lives in, next to a narrow bay that our binoculars show is well used by small craft. It all looks very promising.

Of course, the trouble with doing it this way round is spotting which if any of these boats count as suspicious. We could shadow a boat for a week because of its odd night-time trips, only to discover it is a moonlight squid-fishing boat such as featured in "International Geographic" last month. But then, if we strolled into the village and introduced ourselves, Namoeta might smell something unusually fishy and keep her paws clean till we are off the island. Problems, problems.

By the time we had made a decent camp and gathered enough wood, it was quite dark and getting decidedly chilly, rather like a September evening back home. Molly does love lighting fires, it is a real treat for her to have us approving it for once. She had been itching to use one of those large-calibre matches I bought her for her birthday, and marvels she could set light to a wooden building using one even without using any kindling.

Alas, the meal was hardly inspiring, dried Manioc flakes made up with boiling water and a tin of Spontoon's own brand of canned Pacific Saury in brine, the fish just possibly ones caught by us last Easter! The idea added some interest otherwise sadly lacking. I suppose it is nutritious enough, and we were definitely hungry enough to eat it. Hunger is the best sauce, as our Tutors keep telling us cheerfully as they serve out the Poi – but I quite agree with Helen, we can afford the weight next time for a bottle of Tabasco.

Monday 4th February, 1936

We have spent two days settling in – our camp is half an hour's walk to the nearest part of the coast, where we have been avidly sketching and mapping. There is one small settlement on a little inlet; its folk are certainly chicken farmers, and we could hear their charges clucking before we came around the corner. Hundreds of wild birds were in that one little valley, of all breeds and sizes – I noticed Molly looking around a little puzzled, as if there was one missing that she expected to find. It seems she had taken the menu back at Bow Thai too literally, and knowing my favourite is Thai Green Chicken Curry, she expected to see some Thai Green Chickens.

There was no point hiding, as the birds immediately kicked up such a racket that half the coast must have heard. We strolled into the village with notebooks in hand, and made our introductions. Sometimes it is best to hide in plain sight – whatever else, we really are doing wildlife studies for a Songmark project, and we are not the first such group they have seen. As Miss Devinski says, it is mysterious people who get noticed, and one should always have a cover story however basic.

There are only five houses in Topikiha Landing, all of them inhabited by coyote families with several hundred feathered charges and two small fields of maize on the headland looking out over the lagoon. They were quite friendly and very willing to chat, not too surprising considering we were the first new snouts they had seen for days.

It is amazing what some people value, we traded our whole collection of millet and manioc mash with them in exchange for fresh and dried fish – this piece of coast being too dry and rocky to grow tubers at all well, they regard it as a rare treat. Fortunately our Spontoonie is now good enough to casually chat in, as they had a lot to say about life on Orpington Island that we jotted down in our notebooks. Shorthand is jolly useful when a circle of people are talking at once!

As we noticed back in the main town, on Orpington the original tribes are still very much a feature. They are not all based on species as is the Duck tribe – some are named for their “Spirit Totem” animal. There is a Seabird Spirit tribe who are not all seabirds, split into Puffin, Albatross and (unfortunately named, at least in English) Boobies. Similarly there are Frog Spirit, Chicken Spirit and presumably others – the Chicken Spirit tribe farm chickens, but the Frog Spirit tribe do not herd frogs. All rather confusing, actually – but then again, folk back home who keep bees are called apiarists, even if those who keep apes are not “beepiarists”.

From what we gathered, there are long-running tribal and religious disputes, the exact details of which one would probably have to be brought up here to fully understand. But everyone agreed, in the last few years the Duck tribe has been getting quite troublesome – even to sending “Missionaries” over to Spontoon, from where the authorities often send them straight back home with their feathers ruffled. Perhaps I can arrange Madelene X to have a religious discussion with one of them sometime – it might be fun to watch from a distance. The ducks we saw back in town wore little but loincloths, and Madelene is still scandalised by that idea; she even objects if her salad turns up without dressing.

We asked about the nearby villages, discovering the larger one a mile to the west is Pudotu Bay (where Namoeta lives) and further on is Tamo'ha Landing, one of the main hot-beds (or should that be “hot nests”?) of the more militant Duck tribe. Just the sort of thing we needed to know.

Tuesday 5th February, 1936

A day for finding out just how waterproof our tents really are. I woke up in pitch darkness to the sound of flapping canvas and torrential rain hammering on the canvas just a few inches above my snout; although crossing the interior we rather cursed the weight of formal camping kit, we were very glad not to be sheltering under an improvised leaf framework this morning.

A cold and cheerless breakfast of dried fish and rainwater left us all feeling out of sorts, but I managed to persuade folk that we might as well use the cover of the rain to take a look around. Anyway, sitting in wet fireless tents is nobody's idea of fun. I felt definitely homesick for the solidly built Hoele'toemi family guest longhouse and the company there, and I know Helen feels the same. It might be a good thing that only one of us is Tailfast right now, or that place could get crowded.

An hour and a half of muddy tracks in fifty yard visibility took us to Tamo'ha Landing, where we sheltered under an overhang looking over the dock to see what was happening. It was a hive of activity, the locals bustling about loading and unloading at full speed despite the weather; the phrase “water off a duck's back” certainly springs to mind. Although there were folk of various species to be seen on the streets, all the workers we saw on the boats and docks were ducks. This looks as if it could be hard to infiltrate.

We did the logical thing for soaked travellers and headed straight in to the shelter of the nearest teahouse, a modern tin roofed affair with the rain hammering loudly on it; straw roofing is quieter even though leakier. The only person serving was a rather perky coyote girl, who made us quite welcome. We noticed the lunch menu was rather sparse, and dishes such as omelette and scrambled eggs were conspicuously absent. Still, the seafood and rice was very welcome, though as Helen found out “Mixed seafood” is a dish best attempted only by the brave. (Memo to myself: Sea Cucumber is NOT a vegetable.)

Notebooks out, we managed to ask the waitress about the port here, though were careful only to start with the sort of things commercial travellers would want to know. The whole shipping trade in the village is run by three Duck families, who are rather clannish in who they recruit. They have extensive foreign trade connections, but it is hard to say what due to the rather odd state of affairs at Orpington Island. The long-distance shipping anchors well offshore and only the light local boats are ever seen close to, generally heading straight into a warehouse, duck owned of course.

Molly whispered that it would be a sweet setup for smuggling, as it was what she called a “company town” and any police would probably be in on the deal up to their tail-feathers. Very probably – but it brings us little nearer our actual mission, trying to spot Namoaeta. We asked the waitress if there were any felines employed in the shipping at Tamo’ha Landing as Helen and I were looking for a holiday job – at which she just laughed. I noticed some large drakes at the other table looking us over with interest; one very striking mallard asked me if we were competing in the contests. Not being too sure what he meant and not wanting to broadcast we were rank outsiders, I said we had been considering it. Must find out what they meant, as we are getting quite good at local dances and suchlike.

The rain showed little sign of slacking, so we went on our way after making some “landscape sketches” out of the teahouse window. It was certainly atmospheric – about the thickest atmosphere we have seen for ages, down to twenty yards visibility at times. There was no point in arousing suspicion by investigating the docks too closely, when any aircraft with a camera on a clear day could take a better picture than us and look down into open yards and holds besides.

An hour along the track over the headland had us soaked to the skin again, but we found Pudoto Bay right on schedule and were soon sheltering in another teahouse with steaming pots of tea and coffee in front of us. I fear we hardly look like a fashion plate right now, in drab oilskins and with our boots and puttees plastered in mud up to the hocks. More Paschendale than Paris fashion, in fact.

This time we found a rather more mixed population in town and rather less industrial development: just one open jetty and some longhouse sized sheds. If anyone is smuggling here, they might be bringing in the odd crate of ammunition but definitely no tankettes. There were only fishing boats tied up at the jetty, but certainly there was room for lighters the size of the one we arrived in.

Amazingly enough, the rain stopped – in half an hour we were blinking in strong sunlight, and spotted a general store at the far end of the village. That put quite a different complexion on things: we managed to load up on cans before making the half hour trip back to our dripping wet tents. Pouring puddles off the oilskin groundsheets came rather too late, all our spare clothing and food was soaked through already.

A rather dismal evening followed, though it was enlivened when Molly brought out a large bottle of Nootnops Blue she had purchased behind my back. I must say, it quite lifts one’s spirits – we were still soaked to the skin as was everything else around (someone should invent a better tent material than canvas) but somehow it felt much less important – and indeed we ended up performing an impromptu hula around the spirit-stove, which might have won no points for style at our Dance School but at least shook some of the water out of our fur.

Wednesday 6th February, 1936

A brilliantly sunny day after yesterday’s rain, our tents and fur quite steaming. We laid everything out to dry in the sun and headed down the path again to Topikiha Landing, now we have found a few of the right questions to ask. The coyote families were pleased to chat and we offered to help them carry grain out to some distant coops, where several hundred animal chickens were also pleased to see us.

Oh my. It seems on Orpington they really have kept some classical Polynesian traditions alive, despite everything the missionaries doubtless tried to do. I have seen postcards of the mock battles and dances – the battles being more like fencing rituals with carefully sized bamboo staffs rather than war-clubs, rarely causing much injury. We have parish sports days and cooking contests back home, but the rival tribes here really DO seem to be comprehensive in proving as the song says, “we can do Anything better than you.” I think the contest the drakes were keen on asking us about was what they call the “Weho’la’laha” match in Spontoonie, which even I can translate after being Tailfast with Jirry and learning a lot of relevant vocabulary. Suffice it to say that Helen is disqualified from taking part by her Tailfast necklace, even if she wanted to.

One supposes that having mostly solid blocks of incompatible avian, reptile and mammal tribes competing would save a lot of problems later. I wonder how folk all agree on a scoring system? Anyway, it seems we have arrived at the right time; the matches start on Friday, though some of them are definitely not tourist spectator sports. Molly wistfully remarked she could sell any number of tickets, but Helen vigorously dissuaded her with a wet sock. Maria says there is a traditional Tyrolean snout-slapping dance rather like that.

One thing is certain, there will be a lot of traffic around these islands in the next week as folk travel to the festivals; good cover for slipping in some extra cargo traffic without anyone noticing. It looks as if our original plan of watching from a distance is not going to be good enough; we need to get in to scent range.

After another quick discussion (for which read argument) the four of us decided to go with my original plan after all; suddenly we need a local contact if we are to attend the festival, and Namoeta is our girl for that.

It took us all afternoon to find her, as it turned out she does not exactly live in the village of Pudoto Bay but quite a way inland, in a longhouse sheltered by the tallest trees we have seen on Orpington. Even then we had to wait until she returned in the evening – and Namoeta immediately invited us to stay in her longhouse, prophesying more heavy rain in the next few days. She does look very pleased to see us.

We could hardly refuse her offer, as even if she was doing anything illicit it would make her suspicious of our rejecting traditional hospitality. All five of us dashed out at top speed to break camp and pack up before full darkness came, and indeed we would have been quite lost on the final stretch back to her longhouse without her knowing the trails.

So, we ended the day more comfortably than we had expected in some respects. It was very pleasant to look out into the rain through the carved doorposts of her dry hut, rather than having it forced in as a fine spray through the canvas and pooling on the ground sheets. But we could not forget what really brought us here – Mr. Sapohatan has some evidence she is involved with smuggling, and we cannot really relax till we find out.

Thursday 7th February, 1936

I am sure our Althing contact will be pleased to know we have not let Namoeta out of our sight all day, for whatever it's worth. One thing is certainly true, that she is in the import-export trade – she has a lighter that trades around the coast of Orpington, supplying the smaller settlements with various goods. Of course this means she knows the whole coast and the reef like the back of her paw in all weathers, and her craft excites no comment anywhere it goes. So far, so good – but she is hardly going to be taking on cargoes of contraband while we are helping sail the boat.

We have found out a lot more about the festivals, and indeed one of the reasons she was so keen to see us is that many of her friends and relatives in the trade are busy practicing for the weekend. Maria has had a bout or two herself – of the mock combat at least, putting our self-defence training into practice with six feet of sturdy bamboo. She has a hard head and packs quite a wallop, so should do well. Molly is equally keen on that one, and of course we are all going to enter the dances. Namoeta had to do some fast talking with the Village councils to get us accepted, but she managed it; it seems Songmark girls are quite famous even out here, and two of us having been Tailfast into her family persuaded the doubters.

Of course we shan't be going in for the "Weho'la'laha" match. Certainly not. But I have enquired about the scoring system in the spirit of scientific interest, and have to say it seems fair. I expect when the Missionaries objected the Orpington Islanders just pointed to the section in the Bible exhorting them to "Love thy neighbour" and at least had material for a sturdy argument.

The evening was spent putting together suitable costume to mark us as guest members of the Chicken Spirit tribe; we were formally introduced to the birds and now wear Buff Orpington pinion feathers in our new headdresses. Maria was less than keen on that side of things, but promises us she can square it with Father Mulcathy when she gets back to Spontoon. Anyway, from one point of view it is a disguise put on to help Law and Order, so I hardly see him getting into too much of a stew over some chickens.

One thing we discovered was though Chicken does not feature too highly on the menu here, there is no shortage of eggs. Namoeta showed us how to tell which ones will have chicks by "candling" against a strong light, and which ones we can have for breakfast. Hurrah! Whatever else, our diet is markedly improving here, as we have donated our remaining stocks of millet and manioc flakes as an offering to the birds; by far the best thing to do with it. I wonder if one can make eggnog with Nootnops Blue?

Saturday 9th February, 1936

Dear Diary – it has been another of those Broadening Experiences. Yesterday we climbed into the lighter and set sail for a village four miles West of Tamo'ha Landing, where by tradition the ritual games are held. It was a decidedly windy day, the waves crashing over the reefs a hundred yards to starboard as we skimmed along the North Coast.

There was quite a tent city when we got there, easily a thousand folk gathered from all over the island. Our costume was relatively modest compared with the full Native dress, and indeed it reminded us that where Spontoon's traditions are "rebuilt", here they are authentic and unbroken for centuries. Still, it was rather chilly out on the waters.

Our notebooks and sketchbooks were busy as we were shown around, noting all the different tribes and their costumes and rituals. Definitely, this is being kept out of the guidebooks. I doubt even many anthropologists get to see these festivals. Namoeta had to vouch for us in front of her Shaman, who examined our costumes and looked us over like a medic with an infantry recruit before giving us her blessing. One

supposes personal health is more important than in traditional times, since the “Euros” brought less welcome things than trade routes to the islands.

It was a full day’s contest, and by the time the log drums beat for luncheon we were definitely glad of the fitness our Songmark course gives us. There was about an hour of dancing, where I think we held up our end quite successfully, and the first heats of the ritual combats.

The only controversy was Maria being rather too successful – she had checked the rules, and there is nothing against trapping a pole with her horns and twisting it to disarm an opponent. With neck muscles like hers, it is easy to see why she thinks of herself as a “female bull” as I am sure she could defeat many of the male ones. Indeed, she was the only bovine competing for the Chicken Spirit tribe, and there were murmurs of us having brought in a “ringer” as her style was quite unexpected. But the other tribe’s judges declared it a fair win, so she went on to the next rounds.

The afternoon was the first of the “Weho’la’laha” matches, which for obvious reasons are spread over two days. Only the judges actually keep score and announce the results, and they are mostly merry-eyed but grey-furred elder Priestesses; it is far less public than I had feared. Anyone Molly had sold tickets to would probably want their money back. The Priestesses pick the individual matches from out of the opposing teams, which reduces a lot of problems I am sure.

Actually, when I first heard of this I thought it the very last thing one would ever want to set up as a competitive sport, but having seen how things are arranged and talked to some of the girls I can see how it works. One of Namoea’s other cousins (from the Orpington Island side) won the first of her (well titled) heats having triumphed over the Seabird Spirit Tribe’s champion, and looks absolutely none the worse for her experiences. Ote’ana is her name, a most demure looking Jellicle feline who certainly looks more like a Missionary’s daughter than the tribe’s champion. She gave me several exceedingly practical hints that I stored away and told myself someday I might find useful.

The day ended with a very fine feast, also part of the competitions as the more domestically inclined members of the tribes get to show their talents. A non-competitive dance rounded off the evening, and those who were already eliminated from the competition were loudly drowning their sorrows with palm wine and Arak. I did notice the Duck tribe are still in the running for all the events, and bumped into the very distinctive mallard drake we met on Tuesday. Wakkakana is his name, it appears, and he seems quite proud of his victories already. His plumage certainly is very well groomed, and quite a few avian ladies seemed to be following him around with their gaze tonight.

I made sure the rest of us got plenty of sleep, after half a bottle of palm wine apiece and no more; the Chicken Spirit clan had been good enough to let us compete, so of course we needed to be at our best.

The second day started off much like the first after a communal breakfast; the finals of the dance and mock-battle contests came first. I notice the judges were equipped with “Kilikiti” bats, those very practical war-clubs we have seen folk playing Samoan cricket with on Spontoon’s Main Island. I assume they keep order with them, as severely as the situation demands.

Molly got as far as the semi-final before being disarmed by a very fast Wolverine girl, her bamboo being sent spinning right over the crowd’s ears. Maria proved again that she can both take punishment and ladle it out in triple helpings, staying on her feet when a Komodo Dragon native broke his bamboo over her head. Her own pole did not break, but the lizard did (albeit not seriously.) Bravo for Maria!

Just as we were celebrating that victory, Namoea called round with some troubling news. Ote’ana rather foolishly celebrated last night with catnip wine after the contests, and failed the medical for today’s heat. Catnip is quite rightly banned as an unfair advantage, but she had thought the effects would have worn off in time.

Dear Diary – we had promised each other to do the best we could for our hosts. Helen was disqualified by her Tailfast locket, and Maria had foolishly put her own name down in full (I registered as “Amelia, of the Chicken Spirit Clan”) and cannot risk word of such things getting back to her Uncle. Molly was less than keen on the idea, as she is saving herself for Lars (a pointless exercise if ever there was one). That just left me. Of course I could not walk away and let our borrowed clan be downtrodden by the Ducks for the third year running, especially since I learned what “trodden” meant in poultry terms.

It must be rather like one of those recruiting drives in 1914 where folk volunteered by the thousand in music halls and theatres – once you put your hand up, it starts events that utterly sweep one along. I found myself registering and then having half an hour with a rather glum Ote’ana who primed me as to exactly what to expect – as she knows we will be facing the Duck tribe in the finals, and need to win this event. It is a good thing they are not mammals, that is one thing less to worry about.

Ten minutes after that, I was with the rest of my team, checking each other’s ritual costume. The mood was less like troops about to go “over the top” and more like a grudge hockey match, with the rest detailing fiercely what they were going to do given the chance – and how to get those chances. I got quite caught up in the idea, I admit – and found my tail definitely responding unbidden at the scent of feathers on the breeze.

As I expected, it was a wise-looking ferret Priestess who lined us up and looked the respective tribes over. Certainly, there were a dozen of the finest Drakes I had ever seen there – a prime flock of sleek feathers and polished bills. From the murmurs I heard, I rather felt my ears blushing as I realised I had been picked to be in a team just as good – and I vowed not to let my Chicken Feather symbol down. Although folk displaying lack of moral fibre in the Great War were given white feathers as a mark of shame, these are brown and we will try to add to their reputation.

Wakkakana was there as I had expected, his white “flash” of brow feathers unmistakable. I remembered his boasting of a certain victory yesterday, and indeed my gaze flashed to meet him – the Priestess spotted it, and cheerfully selected us as a pair.

Dear Diary. I don’t ever want to think about winning or losing in a thing like this. It was a very nice afternoon, is all I can say. Actually, the Priestess eventually called it a victory on my part and commented that I was like a starving wild fox in a hen-house ... certainly there were a lot of feathers flying around by the time she called to me for the third time the contests were over. I don’t know much about ducks in general, but I can quite believe how Wakkakana won the previous two years.

Hurrah for the Chicken Tribe! We did not exactly make a hash and a fricassee out of the Ducks, but we won by a very comfortable margin. The celebration feast was definitely frenzied, with even the clans who had been eliminated early cheering along with us. It was not till we had been feasting for an hour that I really had time to think about what I had been doing in detail, this time without the accident of catnip to excuse things.

I might have passed a troubled minute, but realised that everyone else just looked on me the way the girls back at St. Winifred’s did when I scored the winning shot in the Lacrosse match against St. Jezebel’s Reformatory, ninety minutes into injury time with the referee’s whistle in her hand and about to blow for full-time. Different places, different ideas. I suppose a Contentious Objector would be horrified at the idea of someone earning a Victoria Cross in battle, too.

Actually, there was only one thing that kept troubling me. It must have been an awful shock for Wakkakana to hear he had let his clan down, and to an outsider at that. I had seen him slowly heading back to the Duck tents, beak down and trying disconsolately to smooth the gaps where my claws had robbed him of feathers. As soon as the formal part of the feast was over I made my excuses and left, pleading tiredness even though I felt nothing of the kind. The Duck tribe may be boastful, but in some cases they have a lot to squawk about; I might not be here this time next year so – the etiquette books’ chapters on sport always do say never to boast about winning but to offer a sporting opponent a return match.

And they are right, too.

Sunday 10th February, 1936

This has been a trip of surprises. I woke up this morning expecting the trip to be barely begun, and discover it is suddenly over. We were back at Namota’s place by lunchtime, to find a postcard awaiting us – typewritten, Spontoon postmark, no signature but it had “somehow” found its way here even though we had told nobody about our change of plans. All it said was – “Proved innocent. Return as you like.” It seems some of Mr. Sapohatan’s other eyes and ears have beaten us to it, and I would guess whoever was really responsible in what Namota was suspected of, has been caught. Possibly we will never know the full facts in this business, as Mr. Sapohatan never tells us more than he has to.

Of course, Molly and Maria were all for stretching our trip by another week, but I am sure our Tutors have already been told at least as much and will be expecting us shortly. There was no need to grab our packs and head off that minute, true enough – I set us to finishing off our reports with some of the things we have learned. Naturally, we will be giving a rather edited account of the folklore customs – we did not learn about the “Weho’la’laha” contest from a guidebook, and next year’s classes coming here will not have us spoiling their surprise. Molly insisted on including some of the jokes we had heard tell at the festival (“Why do Ducks never need to carry money? They just put everything on the bill.”)

There was a ritual at the chicken coops first of “telling the birds” of their clan’s victory, then we helped catch up on the chores neglected while we had been away. I must confess, it felt rather different now holding an egg up to the light checking for chicks – to the victor the spoils, and all that. Wakkakana had been much moved this morning by my describing this job, which quite stirred his interest even after everything else.

Anyway, today was a steady day’s chores and writing, Molly and Maria nursing their bruises and hangovers and not really champing at the bit to head into the high-life of town (for which read one tea-house with a few beer and Nootnops bottles in a refrigerator that works on alternate days.)

Monday 11th February, 1936

Farewell to Orpington! We actually had all day to use, as Namota promised us to take us round to the port after lunch on her regular resupply trip. Much sighing of relief, as the tents are heavy and the interior routes

rough. Though not exactly mountainous on the map, the trail winds up and down thirty-foot gullies all the time, giving us about a thousand feet of scrambling climb and descent.

I was about to hand in our Buff Orpington feathers, but Namoeta laughed and told us we had all earned them; even though our names are not written down (a great relief to Maria) we will be remembered by the clan. Well! A great relief, especially for Helen and myself. We may need all the local support we can get.

Tuesday 12th February, 1936

An uneventful trip back had us in Songmark by lunchtime. I must say it felt odd again to return to our neat shorts and shirts, and relax on the beds after sleeping on native head-rests or damp groundsheets for a week – and in my case, the rather strange “nest” arrangements the avians have. We were the second group back; only Jasbir’s dorm has returned, which we hoped would give us plenty of time to relax till the rest returned and our Tutors could start classes again.

No such luck. I should have thought of it; the first-years are still here to be looked after, which means we get all the duties normally shared out amongst us. No sooner had we showered and presented ourselves and our logbooks to Miss Blande, when she had us escorting the first-years straight back onto the water taxis to Main Island to watch a sports festival. Unfortunately the efforts to get Samoan Cricket into the Olympics has failed this time round, but the local teams are not too disappointed.

Main Village was not quite as packed as the festival on Orpington, which was just as well – we had our paws full keeping our charges together, until Irma Bundt had the good idea of promoting some of them to “Squad Leaders”, which are not necessarily their heads of dorms but the ones we work best with. Saffina was an automatic choice (nice girl, and nobody really wants to argue with a lioness, even a tabby one) and by default we had to pick Wo Shin from her dorm, as the only one we have not had any trouble with yet. What a dorm that is – the alternatives being Brigit Mulvaney, Liberty Morgenstern and Tatiana Bryzov. From what we have heard, they spend at least half the time verbally or physically tearing strips off each other – but somehow seem to pull together rather well on the classwork. Perhaps they will knock each other’s sharp edges off in time. Shin is a graduate of the Spontoon Island High School a year behind Missy K; I am not sure whether her having local knowledge is a good thing from our point of view, as it cuts our advantages.

The longer we stay at Songmark, the more I realise just how our tutors actually manage to run the place with so little effort, given the sort of girls whose families decide they would be better off sent to the far side of the planet. Everyone gets a turn at being in charge – and we pass on the hard work to the lower years. Seeing Saffina rounding up her classmates was quite a treat, and gave us a chance to relax enough to enjoy the match.

The Kilikiti rules vary across the Pacific but the local version is twenty players a side, with lava lava costumes and a lot of dancing between batting sessions rather than just sitting quietly in a summerhouse ready to be called. Mixed teams are not unheard-of, and anyone short on finesse can easily make up for it with enthusiasm. We are told it has been well over a year since anyone actually was killed in a professional match, which was slightly reassuring – it is easy to see how someone could be “bowled out” permanently.

By the time they had watched two teams of huge natives laying about with slightly modified war-clubs and cannonball-solid rubber balls for an hour, there was a spontaneous (or is that “Spontoonious”?) vote on forming a Songmark team. The number is about right, even allowing for injuries – for once Liberty and Tatiana were in agreement in there would be no “defaulters or malingerers” letting the side down. They do speak the same political language, but I commented that it is hardly one suited to writing romances in. (Maria murmured something about “... *and then the Commissar’s daughter liquidated the handsome prince and the People lived happily ever after*”, but she is hardly unbiased herself.)

Well, that is another difference between our two years. I doubt our dorms would all agree to come in out of the rain, let alone pass a block vote like that.

As Helen whispered on the way back, another tip we are finding out from our Tutors is to always keep folk busy, the Devil finding work for idle paws as the Reverend Bingham frequently would tell us. I know one dorm who hardly needs the Devil to think about finding them work, they would have applied to him first with some suggestions he found inspiring. Anyway, we got everyone back on time, and managed to “dissuade” Liberty from dismantling a picket fence on the way for Kilikiti bats. She objects to the idea of people having private property – but before we had to intervene Saffina objected to her having personal space, and sat on her. Top marks for Saffina!

Wednesday 13th February, 1936

A great relief – Missy K’s dorm and Madelene X’s both got back today, so they took over the escort duties while we all headed down to Superior Engineering to help out. I’m not sure just what our deals our Tutors made with local businesses, but whenever someone needs a team of fairly skilled workers to work hard for

free, we seem to get called on. I suppose it is only like back home when companies ask the local militia Colonel for emergency aid with floods, fires or strike-breaking.

Anyway, we were busy helping folk winch up a big French Latécoère seaplane onto the slipway for running repairs. This is an interesting model, with what looks like an open round space at the nose where a turret or a gunner's "Scarfe ring" might go – right now it looks more like a flying pulpit. From what I gathered from the local workers, that was exactly what it had been used for, its owner being one of those annoying Missionaries who will not take "no" for an answer. On Spontoon Main Island he had been annoying the locals even after being refused permission to land and preach, by taxiing up to harbours and sermonise from there. I remember Molly telling us of floating speakeasies on the same principle, but those were twelve miles offshore and their customers actually wanted to go there. I doubt he will stay long in the Spontoon Islands, and any business less ethical than Superior Engineering would mercilessly gouge him for repairs in the knowledge nobody else would touch his floating mission-house.

Back at Songmark I found a sheaf of documents awaiting me, with Gilbert and Sullivan Isles stamps on them. It is that time already, I have to start registering for my official "B" Pilot's license! By the end of term we should all be official commercial pilots if all goes well – although well equipped, one thing the Eastern Island airport cannot do is issue recognised licenses. The Spontoonie pilots have to make the trip to their nearest accredited examination centre, all the way to Rain Island. Whatever else happens, after that we will have something to fall back on – Molly at least is looking forward to the tests, after which she can in theory work anywhere in the world even if Songmark do throw her out for unpaid bills.

I was half-way through filling in the forms when an awful thought struck me – my test centre is of course in the Empire, that being the whole point. But being officially "Persona Non Grata" and my name presumably known to Customs and police, I am liable to get turned away before I get a sniff of the runway there. My Macao passport will really be of little help in this, as it has a different description and the pilot's licenses are exceedingly precise on identification.

I could probably dye my fur and get there as Kim-Anh Soosay, but that fictional feline has no log book and is not registered at Songmark – besides, I want this in my own name. I put the problem to the others and indeed Molly has a solution, having been brought up dealing with this sort of problem on a daily basis – travel out and back under one identity, but take the test as another. Hopefully it is only the Customs folk who are looking out for my passport number; I scarcely think my picture will be hanging up in post offices yet.

Molly says her grandfather on her Mother's side actually did feature on post office walls. He was an estate agent or possibly a road agent, I for get which, though indeed they have odd laws in that part of the world.

After a week away it was very relaxing to return to Madame Maxine's, and gain a scent not involving chicken coops or damp canvas. She is very approachable, and indeed I found myself telling her rather more about the Orpington trip than went in the reports for our Tutors. Nothing seems to shock her, and she always has a fund of good advice on whatever we ask.

I spent the evening being taught how to put fur dye on properly myself, as it looks as if I will need that skill. Even given all the right equipment it takes easily an hour, remembering to do things in the right order – hands are treated last, otherwise one almost paints oneself into a corner and splashes dye in unwanted spots. I suppose somewhere there are Dalmatian canine/feline crossbreeds walking around, but I have never seen one and do not plan on copying the style.

Saturday 16th February, 1936

What a week! Two days of solid lessons commenced as soon as Missy K and Prudence returned with their dorms and exciting tales of far-flung islands – Prudence diverted on the way back to some island called "Nintindo" or something like it, where by all accounts they were very well received. Ada Cronstein has been walking around with a blissful expression and her tail wagging since she came back, having been absolutely the belle of the ball (even more so than Belle herself).

We had a surprise on the water-taxi heading out to our dance classes – Mr. Sapohatan was waiting for us under the matting spray shelter and we travelled across together. As always he is very polite, and congratulated us on our achievements on Orpington – we might not have ended up doing quite what we had planned, but he seems to think it a successful trip. Although he did not tell us exactly why Namota is officially in the clear, he did say they had found out why it had looked black against her. And that is probably all we shall hear of that.

Our reports on Orpington were well received, as although it is in Spontoon's backyard and they know it well it is always good to get a fresh perspective. Helping the Duck tribe lose "face" (or possibly beak) for awhile is always a good thing, he says, although it will just make the more militant drakes try harder next time. I have to admit, in one or two respects I found that a pleasant notion – technically I have been very thoroughly "trodden" now but feel quite the opposite of downtrodden.

He bowed most gallantly before we arrived at the Market Square dock, and informed us that he had nothing for us right away, but if we were still interested certain situations might develop into something suited to our talents. Helen did wonder that our Tutors might worry about us neglecting our education – but then again, all the trips we have been on have turned out to be rather Educational in their own way. We agreed to be kept on the strength, and he waved us farewell from the shelter of the water-taxi arch. Once on a water-taxi one is quite invisible and can be on any of the islands in fifteen minutes.

A definitely lively dance lesson followed, where we caused some comment by turning up in our Chicken Spirit tribe head-dresses and pinion feathers. One of the Instructors had a quiet word with us about it, on the lines that tourists wear what they like, but we should know better: she was quite flabbergasted to discover we had actually been given them officially and had every right to wear them. We had no time last week to really learn any of the distinctive Orpington Island dances, but hope Namoeta will find time to teach us next time we meet her at the Hoele'toemi household.

It would be interesting to return to Orpington someday, as the Chicken Spirit religion seems quite fascinating, and we presumably only hen-scratched the surface. Maria speculates that advanced initiates may have it revealed to them exactly why the chicken DID cross the road.

Casino Island is not such a huge place, and we never go there without seeing familiar faces. On the way back we bumped into Professor Kurt, who invited us to Lingenthal's for coffee and cakes. He is in a very good mood, having been given the contract by the Althing to build another Bio-Reactor just outside Main Village. The power station on Casino Island only serves Casino and Moon Island, and on the Main Island there is a much better supply of surplus vegetation from the plantations. There is even talk of getting one of the old narrow-gage lines put back in commission, as there will be an awful lot of compost to move about the place.

He introduced us to a colleague of his, another Professor who is visiting the islands. Most Germans do seem to be very well qualified, at least the ones sent out here; even the mechanics sent out for the Schneider trophy mostly have "Dipl.Ing" after their names. This one is Professor Schiller who is researching primal folklore across the Pacific, and is very keen to hear any folk tales.

It is rather odd, really – Professor Schiller is an archaeologist, but says he has been working for two years out of New Suden Thule. I'm sure I can't think what archaeology there can be down in the Antarctic, but he says the world will be quite surprised at the results if his Government releases them. He works for some scholarly body called the "Ahnerbe" who collect all sorts of curios. He pulled out a letter from his department with pride and showed us the stamp; their leader holding up some ancient spear or other that the Ahnerbe recently delivered to him (apparently with information on exactly how to use it, too. Very strange, one would have thought a spear scarcely needed a manual.)

He seemed quite disappointed to discover that Spontoon actually has no authentic ancient folklore, having lost it while abandoned for centuries. However, I could tell him that some of the lizard folk on Orpington claim to be descendents of the original Spontoonies, and might recall tales passed down from their ancestors here. Orpington Island is a different story entirely, you could say.

Although we could have told him an awful lot more, I kept my snout shut after that and Helen as usual was the very soul of discretion. Had Saimmi wanted the world to know why Coconuts no longer grow on these islands (and why it was uninhabitable by the locals for centuries despite Pirates and such camping on occasion) I am sure the tourist bookshops would be doing a roaring trade selling the revelations.

A great surprise came when Prudence's friend Tahni showed up, and it turns out she knows him! Though she was born on Spontoon, Tahni's family hails from Africa like all the spotted hyenas and today I discovered they are from the former German East Africa. In fact they supply Lingenthal's and the hotels with Euro style "wursts", having originally run a sausage business in Dar Es Salaami. By her account, they left just before she was born when more competition meant everyone wanted a slice of the business.

Actually, there is a perfectly reasonable explanation for most things. Professor Schiller spent most of the 1920's searching for all sorts of antiques, old cups and caskets and the like for his Museum, and he had been in Tanganyika looking for King Solomon's Mines. Nobody else believed they were within a thousand miles of there, but on the other paw nobody has found them anywhere else, so he may yet be right.

Sunday 17th February, 1936

A relaxing day – Molly came with us to South Island for a change, mostly I think to avoid being collared for escort duties and the like. We introduced her to Saimmi, who amazingly enough she had never met before – I keep forgetting how much she misses out on our Sundays.

Though Molly had to wait outside the sacred groves while we practiced the rituals, she really perked up when we lunched at the Hoele'toemi household and met the various cousins – one of whom was in the Kilikiti team. Although it is called Samoan Cricket she says it is "kinda like baseball", the oddly degenerate version of lady's Rounders we have seen in the newsreels.

I asked Mrs. Hoele'toemi if I could see the family tree and work out exactly which of the cousins are related to whom and how. She hugged me quite affectionately as she brought the book, explaining that to a

Native girl, asking to check the book was a big social step in joining a family. Happily, she knows it is new to me and takes it only at face value. Anyway, I now know where Namoeta fits in, and worked out the various symbols on the family tree. Some of the kittens with radically different fur patterns are marked as “arrived”, just the same as folk getting to the island for the first time, with no further ancestry noted. It came as rather a shock to realise that if I ever did appear in the book, I would be listed as “arrived” too and effectively starting from a clean slate rather than bringing the Bourne-Phipps family name with me. Given that the current Spontoonies were brought together from all over the Pacific in the last century, they must have agreed to leave their previous heritage behind when deciding to become culturally Polynesian.

A very pleasant afternoon with Jirry followed, in which I put some recently acquired knowledge into practice. I had been a little worried about doing that – but the Native idea of being an admirable “Wahini” is rather more robust than being a “good girl” back home, and involves other skills than cookery and needlework. Jirry reassured me that as we are not Tailfast right now, it is quite expected that I make use of my opportunities elsewhere.

I am not sure how long my trip will be next month to take my pilot’s license – assuming all goes well and Songmark pay for air fare, I might be there and back in a week as the Gilbert and Sullivan Islands are only just South of the equator. But if I have to take scheduled shipping routes and find indirect ways onto the island – well, it will be at least twice that.

Jirry noticed my ears going down at the prospect, and indeed he is always perceptive of my moods. We talked over my problems, and like the rest of his family he is very supportive. If I do manage to get a pilot’s license I will be able to work for a decent living whatever else happens, though he has often assured me the family would welcome me even if I came to them with nothing but my fur to call my own.

Not being able to go home under my own name is a most peculiar sensation. Folk are always willing to put up another longhouse to welcome new family members – for a minute I daydreamed of living next door to Helen just up the jungle pathway, with the Hoele’toemi name on both our letterboxes. We could both do that any time we wanted, true enough, and I am very happy to have the chance. These islands are full of people who seem to be doing very well despite arriving in unhappy circumstances – Countess Rachorska springs to mind, as does Tahni’s family. But if I end up staying for good I would prefer it to happen as my perfect choice amongst many others, not as something circumstances pushed me into. Some folk might think me overly fussy, but at Songmark we are taught that with proper work and planning one need never put up with a life of second-bests.

Again, both Helen and I returned to Songmark very contentedly rubbing our neck-fur, with Molly unusually subdued. I suppose she has the worst of both worlds – Helen is Tailfast and meets Marti regularly, I am not but have Jirry’s attentions, but Molly thinks of herself as being Tailfast to Lars who seems to have vanished. Folk say one cannot have one’s cake and eat it, but poor Molly is more like paying for hers and not having a crumb of it. And the local cake is quite wonderful.

Tuesday 19th February, 1936

A lively time of it this afternoon, when Helen and I heard the familiar sound of conflict in the first-year dorms. We found Hannah Meyer and Liberty Morgenstern rolling on the floor fighting like cat and dog again, with both their dorms cheering them on. Liberty already had bleeding bite marks on her ear and Hannah’s nose was looking rather bashed – though Songmark is no beauty parlour, it seemed time to put a stop to it.

We did hesitate, but only because we both wanted to be the one to take Liberty down, Hannah being quite a polite and well-spoken girl when she is not sinking her teeth into her classmate. I let Helen do the honours and tackled Hannah myself, managing to pinion her rapidly without causing her much significant harm. Some folk might have thought Helen used excessive force, but when dealing with Liberty that hardly applies.

What a volatile year’s class this is. It seems that it had started perfectly harmlessly with folk getting nostalgic about the foods they love at home, only Rumiko and Saffina really liking Poi. Liberty described her local New Haven dishes, the approved People’s Diet served in all Workers’ Facilities being based on scrapple and scrod. Liberty has told us before about New Haven forbidding the private ownership of food and what happens to criminals caught hoarding dangerous contraband like a can of beans. Though “scrod” seems to be nothing but young cod, scrapple is a pork dish and Hannah objected to Liberty championing it being compulsory. One might say things went downhill from there.

Miss Nordlingen arrived to take over from us, and quietly wrote us a note for Song Soda. Hurrah! Though we might get there once a week, it is irksome to always have Maria paying for us, and I only wished she was not off today on her Reporting classes so she could share our good fortune (all staff notes like this have a time limit, and are “not transferable” to other people as are rail warrants.)

Song Sodas was actually quite full, as it is the only place of its kind on Eastern Island apart from the harbour cafes. There were various pilots in there and a scattering of Third-years, all happily enjoying the

dozen flavours of ice-cream and Nootnops Red. Despite most Songmark girls stuffing their Suggestions Box every time we come here, they refuse to stock the Blue.

Though there were quite a few airways uniforms and the local “Euro” fashions to be seen, we did spot one unusual costume, a small Mouse girl in very plain oriental robes rather like the ones we use in our self-defence classes. She was trying very hard not to look at Belle and her native friend, who were being rather too affectionate in public – I was about to have a quiet word with them when Miss Devinski patrolled through and they suddenly practiced their angelic choir girl impressions. Perhaps the Mouse is from Main Island; we have seen various oriental villages there but not yet explored them in detail.

Anyway, the ices were most welcome even at this time of year, Helen deciding again on the rather ferocious Durian ripple despite the smell. As she points out – it is surprising what you get a taste for if you try it. I might try a fish flavoured ice cream if I ever saw one – I wonder if there is a market for them?

Thursday 21st February, 1936

Spring is definitely on the way! A sunny day, starting with our Tutors briefing us on a rather odd local event. Although we missed it last year, on Main Island there is a massive swarming of land crabs at this sort of time, when they all head down to the beach at full moon to lay their eggs under the sand. This might be nothing more than a nice nature ramble, but the crabs tend to snack on any growing crops on the way and local farmers invite their friends and relations to divert them. Crab soup is a local delicacy this time of year.

Anyway, both us and the third-years are to consider ourselves on call this week and are warned to catch up on all the sleep we can. Furthermore, after the crab hunt we will be handed to the local Militia instructors for some sort of endurance training that neither our Tutors nor the third-years will explain. They do like to spring surprises on us.

We had rather a surprise after lunch, when it seems our Tutors have decided falling off rock faces is good for first-years as well as the rest of us. At any rate, we had the fairly easy job of escorting them there and demonstrating some of the basics. There are no distractions at that end of Eastern Island, and the knowledge they would soon have to be doing it themselves concentrated our juniors’ minds most wonderfully.

Tatiana was rather down in the dumps, as it seems Miss Nordlingen cancelled all Passes for her dorm for a month. Not so much for Liberty fighting, but for the rest of her dorm not breaking it up (Hannah’s dorm got the same). I hope the lesson on dorm solidarity is well learned, as Tatiana confesses she really wanted to go to Casino Island. I can’t think why, she is allowed to go to her Embassy when needed anyway and has often called the rest of the island a “sink of bourgeois depravity”.

I have to agree, our Tutor’s plans are rather well thought out – give them plenty of practical ways to prove themselves rather than sitting around arguing. By the end of the afternoon Liberty was heard to grumble that even if she is a member of the International Plutocracy, Hannah did get up the rocks faster than she did, and with a lot more style. A few hours of concentrating on sticking to a ledge really puts political theories in perspective, it seems. The more advanced climbs should be interesting to watch, as when dangling on a rope over a large drop, it is good to know the person holding the other end of it is a friend.

Liberty rarely talks to me given the choice, but she does talk to Molly and Beryl. Molly says she is almost tearing her fur trying to understand the “dialectic” of Spontoon. With as much certainty as anything preached in a church, Liberty’s view of the world is an inevitable overthrow of Imperialist and Plutocratic powers leading to a Worker’s State, kept forever pure and uncorrupted by continual revolution as Trotsky teaches. Once would be bad enough without making a habit of it, anyone might have thought. She tells us Trotsky has his base in Mexico, which might not be Red yet but presumably suits him as they already have the continual revolutions part right.

The trouble is, Spontoon actually left an Imperialist state a generation before Russia ever did and is free to be as Communist as the locals want to be – which by Liberty’s standards is hardly at all. Why it has failed to “progress” is causing her a headache, but she can buy her own aspirins. Beryl whispers she has some nice political spanners under construction to throw in the works when the time is right, which will probably cause Liberty more grief than Helen’s rather energetic quadruple hammerlock and tail hitch did on Tuesday.

Beryl usually lists her politics as Anarchist, and then happily spoils it all by announcing she approves of most institutions (with the possible exception of police stations.) I suppose a truly Anarchist state could not support prosperous banks, casinos and well-stocked jewellery stores, her favourite places. I think her idea of anarchy is best summed up by what I learned back in Saint Winfred’s in our Economics lessons:

*“The good old rule, the simple plan
That those should take, who have the power
And they should keep, who can.”*

Saturday 23rd February, 1936

Dear Diary: our Tutors had warned us, but it came rather a shock half an hour before lights-out to be conscripted for crab patrol! The moon was rising above the central Spontoon waters as we trooped off the water taxis at Main Village and joined parties of natives armed with fire brooms. Our dorm and Madelene X's was told off to follow the group heading East to one of the plantations, as the crabs were already on the march.

Although I hardly appreciated it in the dark, Nennington Plantation is one of the oldest on the islands, having a fine mansion house dating from 1860 that is used these days as the farming Co-operative headquarters. A sad come-down from its gracious early days when folk of good family planned and enjoyed the elegant rooms and laid down well-tended lawns that are now cassava plots. These islands have tried all sorts of crops, I have had exotics such as ginger and vanilla pointed out elsewhere on Main Island, but the fields we were guarding was a pineapple plantation. Land crabs love young pineapple shoots by all accounts, and can strip a field bare before sunrise.

It was quite eerie waiting in the dark at the edge of the fields. I could see quite well, but many of the other girls had to use their noses and ears for the first signs of crabs. Just before midnight we heard it, a rustling noise in the jungle – then we found out what we were up against.

The first land crab I saw, I laughed at, wondering what all the fuss was about. They are small, and my paw could easily cover one. But when the next fifty scuttled out, I stopped laughing and started swatting in earnest. They are very agile and very tough: our fire brooms are not meant to kill them (that would take a hammer) but to sweep them out of the way of the crops and shepherd them along to the beach.

I can see why the locals do not simply fence off their fields; land crabs can climb like spiders, and maintaining a good enough barrier round all the plantations would cost a fortune. The farm workers see this as an extra festival rather than a chore though, having prepared dozens of stout baskets that are the work of a minute to shovel full of the annoying crustaceans.

We were up all night, and I must have swept thousands of the things away from the fields. There was compensation, in the form of a crab soup breakfast /supper for everyone involved up at the plantation house. Absolutely delicious. I begged one of the cooked whole crabs from the cook and did my best to sample it, but they only hold about an ounce of meat each that takes five minutes of delicate work to extract. Far more frustrating than satisfying, and I see why they are normally just boiled, pounded and the shells strained out of the soup.

By the end of all that, we were such a collection of drooping ears and tails as I have never seen, almost asleep on our paws. Most of us fell asleep on the water-taxi back, only managing to wake up to stagger off the dock up to our dorms, pull the curtains tight against the daylight and collapse on the beds. Most annoying that we miss our Dance lessons, but we would have been no earthly use. Instead of the Palm Sway, the only dances we could have managed might have names like the Toppling Tree or Collapsed Pile of Carpets.

I was up and around at noon, feeling decidedly hungry and none too keen on the usual weekend fare Songmark provides. It would have been such a let-down after dining at the plantation house, and after that supper I quite see why the farmers do not discourage the crabs more strongly. Helen and the rest were fast asleep despite Maria snoring on full throttle, so I left them to it. I pity Ada Cronstein though, who I met staggering in through the gates as she returned from her temple on Casino Island; apart from the usual attitude around here of “work hard play hard” she adds “pray hard” on a quite uncompromising schedule.

It was quite a novel experience, being on Casino Island on my own without a definite errand to run. A quick combined lunch and breakfast at a Popatohi stall was the first priority, followed by a leisurely hour of window-shopping. We can never forget that Molly still needs every cowry we can scrape together, and it would be awful for her to be thrown out for the lack of funds we spent on luxuries. Our Tutors have made it very plain that Songmark is strictly a business and if she is one cowry short, she goes.

I was admiring party frocks I can no longer afford, when in the reflection I spotted a familiar white-furred figure, with a long black-tipped tail waving nervously as she looked about herself. Tatiana almost jumped out of her fur when I clapped my paw on her shoulder in best Police style, and asked sternly what she was doing here without Passes. I know for a fact she has no pass to be here, none of her dorm has.

For half a minute she refused flat out to speak, though I noticed her ears were blushing brightly with embarrassment. Of all the tough situations we have been in on Vostok and elsewhere, there is only one place I have seen her embarrassed before – I hazarded a guess she had been back to the Double Lotus, and from her reaction I was right first time. She gabbled rather incoherently about being ordered to investigate sinister political meeting-places by her Embassy – but that would be a Duty, and she is stern as anything where that sort of thing is concerned. Besides, I pointed out that apart from the scent of fear on her, there was quite a different musk she did not get out of a perfume bottle.

By rights I should have frog-marched her right back to Songmark again and handed her over to our Tutors, then probably her whole dorm would spend their free time cursing her while peeling taro roots all this month. But there was little point in spoiling my afternoon as well, and unlike last time I had not actually been sent looking for her. I let her go on her way, looking fearfully around as if both the Vostok secret police forces were watching her – more so, in that she copes with that sort of thing very well.

Well! Life is full of surprises. Though it is a perfectly respectable place, the Double Lotus is not my idea of a social club. Had I not spotted Tatiana first, I am sure Prudence and her friends would have done so soon enough, and Prudence is more of a stickler for regulations than I am. I just hope Tatiana is more sensible about getting Passes the day they do find her in there, as discovering they share common interests will not stop Prudence from running her in.

Back to Songmark, to receive the unwelcome news that we are “stood to” ready for crab-swatting tonight as well. Help!

Sunday 24th February, 1936

A busy night sweeping crabs till our whiskers drooped was followed by another very fine crab breakfast as the sun came up over LONO hill. Land crabs have an incredibly intense flavour, compared with the regular sort they are like anchovies next to cod. I was chatting with one of the plantation cooks before we left, who boils down any excess and bottles it for the rest of the year – I have occasionally seen jars of it privately sold in the market, though with only a few days a year to harvest the swarm, it is hardly a commercial product.

Helen commented that it would be handy stuff to have on the table if we had to eat Pastefish, those large and meaty fish we caught a lot of last Easter with the Noenoke clan and mostly threw back (they taste of wood pulp if anything, and are only used dried and ground for chicken fodder.) Molly’s ears and tail went right up at that, and in the matinee cartoons one would have seen a light-bulb switch on over her head. She announced she has a Plan, though she has several of those a week and nothing ever comes of it.

Although we were worn out, Helen and I knew where we wanted to be. With our yawning Tutors’ permission we headed down to South Island, and joined Mrs. Hoele’toemi for breakfast - or supper, depending on one’s timetable.

The guest longhouse was very welcome, more so when Jirry and Marti arrived from helping friends crab hunt elsewhere on Main Island. All though all we did was promptly close the shutters and fall asleep, I very much appreciated the company. Some folk are fussy about the need for glamour and grooming, but actually Jirry is just as pleased to see me even asleep on my feet and smelling of crustaceans as he is when I am dressed up and sparkling with energy. In fact, we had both been working hard for ten hours, and neither of us had the scent of a Paris perfume house – though I must say I far prefer this way. Waking up with his scent around me is such a fine thing.

Of course, by the afternoon we were fully refreshed and rested – which was just as well. I have never heard of crab soup having any special restorative powers, but I can certainly say that something did the trick very nicely.

Monday 25th February, 1936

(Written much later)

It is surprising what our Tutors will agree to if one stays in their good books – yesterday we were allowed to spend the whole day on South Island, meeting up with the rest on Main Island at the same time and place as the last two nights. Happily, we hear the crab season is almost over - although that was the last piece of good news we had in quite some time.

We had a shock when we had finished our soup in the morning and were looking forwards to our Songmark beds – Miss Blande appeared in fine spirits (having had a good night’s sleep no doubt) and breezily announced we were joining the annual militia training exercises – so rather than our beds, we went to the equipment stores and were issued with knapsacks full of outdoor kit.

Madelene X complained we were dead on our paws and in what she called “condition de merde” for any adventuring – to which Miss Blande cheerfully agreed, explaining that was rather the idea. Having read many tales of true exploration, it did impress me how many folk managed their feats despite being in desperately poor condition – it looks as if we will discover what that feels like. It is an awful shock to spring on us just when we were winding down and heading for bed.

Prudence has been reading a Japanese field army manual by a Mr. Nanami Togarashi, and whispers they sometimes keep troops up for a week – “they already know how to sleep; they can learn to stay awake.” I thought she was being pessimistic. In fact they may have read the same books.

The local militia turns out this time every year, before the islands get busy planting crops or preparing for tourists. From Father’s tales, most modern battles rarely start off with crisp lines of fresh troops sweeping across a conveniently empty countryside; far more often it involves files of bone-weary and mud-encrusted foot-sloggers scrambling through whatever remains of people’s back gardens and factory yards.

A fleet of water taxis ferried us over to Main Island, landing at a spot just South of the delta where the river comes out from Crater Lake. We went past here last year and noticed what looked like an abandoned village with bamboo groves taking over backyards and the like, but never heard anything about it.

Missy K rarely shares any of her local knowledge, but she did today. Maybe we should keep her awake twenty hours with no end in sight more often. The ruins were once Komako Village, a casualty of the Gunboat Wars which was never re-settled but kept as a reminder; more of its inhabitants perished (and not as Molly says “like old rubber bands”) than survived. The ones of us who can read Spontoonie paid homage at a black basalt memorial on the outskirts, listing over forty names.

I suppose it is fitting, that the militia put the place to good use in training to avoid the same kind of thing happening again. There are what looks like longhouses standing still, but they are more like stage props or what Tatiana calls a “Potempkin village”, hurriedly thrown together from discarded materials to give the right size and shape without being actually habitable, and quite without decoration apart from some bullet holes in the posts.

Molly seemed quite cheerful, and asked Miss Blande what we were going to do here – I think she expected to be issued with a “Trench Broom” and half a dozen grenades on the spot and told to storm the place. From what she has said of some of her Father’s Business Associates, they picked up habits in the Great War that proved rather unsettling in civilian life afterwards. Entering a strange room has a certain prescribed etiquette, to be sure, but not usually involving throwing in a grenade first.

I have to admit, it was a relief to see my friend’s ears and tail droop in disappointment – if anyone was going to be doing that sort of thing it is the Militia, not us. Our role is to act as “concerned citizens” searching the area for signs of invasion, and run to alert the defending forces. This way, the militia get extra eyes and noses working for them at no cost.

Though Molly was disappointed, she picked up at once at the sight of the defenders assembling on the road. We were detailed off to watch over two-hundred yards strips of track and jungle, and quite left to our own devices. Of course, we had no idea exactly what to expect or when – which I suppose is the point.

Thursday 28th February, 1936

I now know what “tired” really means. We are back at Songmark after twelve hours sleep, a big evening meal and a bath – and most of us will not be awake at “Lights-out” in an hour’s time.

For four days and nights we have been haunting the jungle trails, trying desperately to stay awake and alert, in what became more like a waking nightmare. We had an awful shock at our first sight of the “Invaders” – not local militia shopkeepers with broom-sticks and armbands, but actual uniformed troops, armed with rifles and definitely not in a holiday mood. I might have broken my track sprint record despite the mud and branches on the way to the nearest field telephone half a mile down the trail.

It turns out that Rain Island and Tillamook have each sent along four companies of their finest, who are determined to “invade” at all costs. Not that I think they are practicing to annexe Hawaii, but if anything unfortunate ever did happen to these islands, they would be the only ones liable to counterattack. So everyone gets a good test, as they see things from different perspectives – the local Militia are occupying forces to the Rain Islanders, and they are the invaders to the Militia. We are just trying to keep awake and pass on what we see without getting caught.

I must say, it is a world away from the genteel military exercises my cousin takes his Vickers Medium tanks to on Salisbury Plain. There, umpires ride around on horseback and judge the score – “casualties” sit down and relax, and are given a red flag so everyone knows they are out of the game. I saw Missy K and Adele Beasley get captured, at which the captain fired two shots in the air and announced he had executed two spies. They were released at the next break period, unhurt but looking extremely shocked. I took particular care not to get caught myself, after that. I would have hoped folk would have followed the Geneva Convention (especially as we are civilians), but neither Vostok nor Ioseph Starling’s regime has actually signed it, and I would think they are the “prime suspects” in this sort of setting.

The one improvement over being chased across Vostok at Christmas was that we had plenty to eat. Every lunchtime we would assemble back at the road in Komako Village, and sample the fare of a Field Kitchen that looked distinctly Great War surplus but was very well supplied. Even folk in the trenches got hot food sent up if at all possible, and I have never appreciated it half as much before. I would have been grateful for even lukewarm Maconochie in the circumstances, but folk seem to have filled the five gallon kettles with fine fish stew straight from the Beresby cannery vats, and there was as much as we wanted. I suppose that is just the sort of island institution that would be commandeered in emergencies.

Another welcome sight was our matron, Mrs. Oelabe, who took time to check us over thoroughly every lunch hour. Even as fit as we are, this sort of thing is an awful strain on the system and we are ten times more likely to run into things and fall over things than when we are rested. Apart from patching up various cuts and stings, she passed us all fit for duty and sent us back. Madelene X had been speculating she might get out of it by pretending to have “shell shock”, but Mrs. Oelabe presumably knows the symptoms better than she does, and can diagnose malingering with unerring accuracy. Adele Beasley’s messy scalp wound from a branch had already been treated by Li Han, who is jolly good with a needle and her stitches earned her dorm

quite a few points. We all carry our First Aid kits these days, they are like Insurance Policies – when you suddenly need them, you had better have one handy.

After two days, we had got into the swing of things. I found myself separated from Helen in escaping from an ambush, and spent the last day teamed up with Carmen from Prudence's dorm. We managed to get a few hours sleep, taking alternate watches. Of course we could have done what Madelene X did and "guarded" a completely dense piece of jungle with no trails, spend a full night comfortably asleep then report nobody had been seen anywhere near. But remembering what happened to our pals, we took it as life-or-death serious and stuck with our task. If any Tillamook trooper got within fifty yards of us without being spotted, it was not because we were asleep at our post.

We did move around a lot, though it was nothing like our chase across Vostok and given a spot with a good view and no likely surprises, there was often time for one of us to relax while the other had the binoculars busy. Of all the people in our year, I suppose Carmen and Belle are the ones I know least. They went straight into Prudence's dorm, and seem absolutely content there – and all their leisure time is spent away from Songmark on swimming teams and other sports. After a year and a half here I don't remember actually sitting down on our own and talking to her for more than a minute at a time.

We certainly had the chance to talk, trying to keep each other awake on watch. Of course at night we had to keep quiet and use our ears and noses mostly, but for a day and a half we shared improvised grass bowers and tree-top perches looking out for signs of movement. Carmen definitely prefers Spontoon to Mixtexca, she tells me, as her homeland is decidedly more strait-laced about a lot of her interests. I assume she is not referring to beach volleyball.

Interestingly, she too has been thinking about just how "official" our Tutors are on this island. Carmen mused that there may be reports written on us after this trip that we will never see, but the Althing will. True enough, we have had self-defence classes and survival trips before, but anyone can benefit from those – and we have helped the Authorities with brush fires and emergency landings. This is not the first time as a class that we have actually been helping with the defence of the islands (Molly still recounts the thrill of working a 3.5 inch AA cannon) but it is the only one needing real dedication. I think Beryl dug herself a well-concealed hole and guarded the inside of that all exercise, as she only turned up for meals.

Of course, there is a matter of personal loyalties in this. Madelene X would probably defend the place tooth and claw against an invasion by Joseph Starling's forces, but not against the French deciding an extra colony would look good in the stamp albums. Carmen has a more neutral view of all this, Mixtexca not being really equipped to stage overseas invasions even if they wanted to.

It was certainly something to think about. Unless some major threat actually turns up in the next year and a half it will stay quite theoretical for us, but certainly we are an air unit with better training than most air forces manage even in peacetime. I can see why some folk assume we are one of the "secret schools" that are rumoured to exist; as one can hardly hide the sight of us flying all the time it would be possible to hide the "real" explanation. As for our being mostly from overseas, France does very well with its Foreign Legion and given its small population Spontoon might want to do the same – a day's work on our Tiger Moths could fit them with torpedoes, and a week's practice could give even our year some chance of hitting an invading troopship, let alone the third-years.

If there really are "secret schools", all I can say is they must be extremely good at being secret, as we have never bumped into any. Possibly people see groups such as the Guide School that Violobe attends, and jump to conclusions. They do practice being inconspicuous, but that is to help with observing wildlife, as Violobe told me herself and she should know.

At last, at eight this morning we heard the foghorns playing the signal to come home at the end of the exercise. The pair of us almost held each other up as we staggered in to where the camp kitchens had about twenty gallons of Camp Coffee steaming in an invitation our noses picked up three hundred yards away; though I think the bottled Camp Coffee concentrate is awful stuff, Carmen has been known to drink it neat and lick the bottle clean. Being an anteater, she certainly has the right tongue for the job, though it is quite unnerving to see her plunge it into a tight-necked clear bottle and watch her enjoy cleaning it out.

Having about an hour and a half of sleep a day is certainly better than none, although I can now believe Father's stories of furs who have slept standing up or even marching. We had little time to arrange comfortable camps as we were constantly on the move, and only had a single blanket and a mackintosh sheet as shelter in our packs. Fires were definitely out, so the only warm and comfortable thing to rest our heads on was each other. Interesting facts one learns – when an anteater dreams, her tongue curls in and out like one of those party squeakers. Fascinating!

Friday 1st March, 1936

The first day of spring – not that any of us were up to see the sunrise, having seen the previous six will do for awhile. While we were away the Songmark post room received my pilot's examination details for the end of the month, as did Beryl and Prudence. One excellent piece of news is that the trip is included in the Songmark

fees, since it is a necessary part of the course. So I will not have to cast around for tramp steamers to drop me offshore away from the Customs posts this time, which is an improvement on our Krupmark trip, but most things are.

We escorted the first-years over to Moon Island, the first time this year we have been on the Link Trainer. Miss Wildford was in charge of the trip overall, and told us some alarming tales of pilots who insisted in flying while in poor shape – sick or tired or whatever. She cautioned all of us against it, and took special care to impress on us that flying with a hangover was a very bad idea.

Beryl whispered that she has heard some exceedingly interesting stories of our dear tutor from before she joined Songmark, and that Miss Wildford can definitely speak from personal experience. She was starting to tell a very risqué tale about her and the Duck tribe, when we were called away to break up a scuffle between Liberty Morgenstern and Rumiko, our Japanese girl. Rumiko is a good patriotic girl, and when Liberty carried on as usual about “Liquidating all Capitalist-Imperialists and their running-dog lackeys” she naturally took offence (and a fence post, which she broke over the orator in rather fine “kendo” style. Liberty has a very solid head, solid all the way through as many say.)

One day, the Daily Elele will run fifty-point banner headlines declaring “*Liberty Morgenstern gets through whole day without insulting or irritating anyone*”, but I shall not hold my breath waiting for it. Having her in medical quarantine with diphtheria and unable to speak, is about the only way I can see it happening.

Actually, both Liberty and Rumiko did jolly well on the trainer, while all our responses were way off still. A valuable lesson for all of us, as I would have said we had entirely recovered our form. This time yesterday I do vaguely remember not being able to hold anything for a minute without spilling or dropping it; we must have been in such poor shape we could not even feel it properly. A lot of our course these days is like that, learning where our limits lie; generally a lot further off than we expected. A year ago, things like the rock faces on main Island I would have regarded as quite impossible, but now I know it is all a matter of hard work and the right equipment (or no equipment and an awful lot more hard work).

The link trainer is equipped for “blind flying” which consists of a canvas hood sealed tight while the controller throws the model cockpit into difficult situations. I am not looking forward to ever being upside-down and spinning in the middle of a dense cloud, but at least I have survived it in theory. Risking a real test in the one Songmark Tiger Moth with full night instruments is something we will do in our Third year.

Certainly, if Casino Island is a small place, Moon Island is a smaller one by far on which to meet people. Coming out of the Naval Syndicate buildings, I saw two familiar folk in obvious heated debate, waving rolls of plans – Mr. Tikitavi the sculptor, and that skunk gentleman in charge of the testing works. Very odd. I would not have thought someone who test fires model Leduck aircraft would really need an artist. Still, a lot of folk here have Tiki sculptures in their houses, and he might want one himself.

We had seen the original for his biggest sculpture, the “listening wall” on Orpington Island. That looks as if it was part of a smooth lava tube cut lengthways by a rock fault to give a curved wall with fascinating echo effects. Mr. Tikitavi’s monumental work looking out over the Main Island’s northern sea approaches is a much more finished design, it is only a pity it is in such an isolated spot with few folk to appreciate it. I suppose suitable sites are not easily found, and he had to use what he had available.

Saturday 2nd March, 1936

A great relief to be back on Casino Island at our dance lessons. Jasbir’s dorm is coming on very well with their practicing, and indeed both she and Li Han are better than any of us. Jasbir has natural advantages that way being a mongoose – but still, species is not everything. Bovines are not usually known for their grace and poise, but both Maria and Irma have beaten competitors of all shapes and sizes.

As it turned out, we did not have to wait to see Namoeta again to learn Orpington Island dances – our instructor Mrs. Motorabe did ask us if we had any requests, and we learned their “Aloe Hula”. A rather less fluid dance than most of the Spontoon styles, but aloe is a definitely spiky plant and covers a lot of Orpington’s dry plateau. Some of it is the valuable “Aloe Vera”, but most is the cheaper “Aloe Fraudulata.”

Beryl dropped in just to watch, as we have persuaded her that heckling our opponents is not something we really appreciate (Irma was quite definite on the subject last month, I was amazed how far into the ocean a mouse can be shot-putted.) She is quite a fine dancer herself but sticks to “Euro” styles, having (she says) seen more money circulating in cocktail parties than luaus.

We had a surprise when Beryl offered to buy us lunch, despite the fact she has more money to throw around than most of us. Helen looked quite suspicious, but accepted her offer of roast meat rather than the usual fish. Beryl is currently on top in her rather odd friendship with Piet van Hoogstraaten Junior, having gained his renewed affections and “robbed him blind” at the same time. The sport is the thing, and the money is just a way of keeping score, she claims.

The mystery deepened when she chatted with Molly about some money-making scheme they had evidently been discussing earlier – Beryl mentioned the first test batches had been fine, and a pilot plant had been designed, if they can work out how to market “the product”. Oh dear. Given Molly’s background, I fear

she has something illegal in mind. Nootnops Blue is the national drink here and we have seen Italian absinthe and “Vin Mariani” for discreet sale, so anything stronger than those is probably a very bad idea.

I saw Helen’s tail droop, and she pointed out rather forcefully that we have to keep our noses clean with the Authorities here – especially those of us with nowhere else to go. Molly looked quite innocent, but admitted she had picked up the ideas from her Father’s business schemes. She refused to go into any more details, insisting it was a surprise.

Well! We have not given Molly the lion’s share of our funds for her to be deported for the sake of one of Beryl’s crooked enterprises. Maria was furious with Beryl and not surprisingly, promising she will either get the truth or a pair of mouse-ear gloves out of her.

Beryl just smiled innocently and pointed out she is a graduate of Saint T’s, and has been threatened by experts. Besides, she explained she had invested a fair sum of her cash and Molly’s in it, and has high hopes of a good return.

I don’t know if my jaw hung open, but Helen’s and Maria’s certainly did. The only funds Molly possesses are the ones we set aside to pay her Songmark bills at the end of term. We are about half-way there – or at least, we were. Maria lost her temper quite explosively, initially in Italian (she has not done that in a long time) before switching seamlessly to English to tell Beryl what she thinks of her schemes.

Molly was obviously distressed but kept her snout resolutely shut, leaving it to Beryl to ride the storm. Not a good day for dorm solidarity, I think – she could at least have told us.

Maria stormed out, declaring that Beryl could pay for Molly’s fee if Molly no longer trusted us to, and Helen joined her looking rather grim. I felt like following them – but one does not abandon one’s friends, even if they have been jolly silly. Beryl winked, and promised me a sample of the first production batch they cook up, which I hastily declined. I have already picked up some interests on these islands that folk back home would not approve of, but I want to stick to healthy ones.

The cinema was a welcome relief for all of us, and I can afford the ten cowries apiece they charge off-season. We missed the Little Shirley Shrine film “Animal Snackers” last week, which was rather a relief. Molly whispered the only way she’d miss was if the rifle sights were skewed, which is unkind but very understandable. There was a quite amazing feature instead, a full-length cartoon in colour – “Poodle White and the Seven Runts”, which is a world first. Very impressive, but I am sure cartoon feature films will never really catch on.

Sunday 3rd March, 1936

Pouring with rain again all morning, so a damp day on South Island. Like our lessons, the shrines need to be attended to rain or shine, but at least it is getting slightly warmer now.

We have two more weeks before departing for our exams, Maria having decided to follow Helen, Molly, Belle and Ada off to Manila for her license papers. She is very confident, claiming the American exams are sure to be easy. True enough, there are things that folk would definitely lose their license for elsewhere (such as flying under bridges with a loaded passenger aircraft) that she says are essential parts of the Italian exam. She points out that there are no old and bold pilots – but as old ones are due to be retired anyway and no further use, one may as well concentrate on encouraging the bold ones. Her idea is that it is the records pilots make that count, not how long their careers last – fine perhaps for the Great War, but I hope she keeps quiet about it to her safety instructor in Manila.

Helen is still quite upset at Molly and we did not invite her along today. This is probably a mistake, as she headed out instead with Beryl to the Temple of Continual Reward, which from what I have heard is rather like the “Hellfire club” that my great-grandmother used to go to along with the rest of the Regency bucks. Though none of the family portraits show anything but feline features on the Phipps side that may say more about her precautions than experiences.

Every time Molly mentions her “Temple” one can see our Tutors’ snouts wrinkle and ears dip, even though Beryl boasts that some of the richest folk on the island are members, and often invite world-famous visitors to join them – at least, Molly claims they are world famous, but I do not read the International Police Gazette. I doubt they made their fortunes selling postcards, at least not ones that would be allowed through the post.

We did notice on the Southern beach road of the island some cement lorries and a steam shovel heading Eastwards round the corner. Although we have tried not to look at the Waterworks Project this year (and have hardly had the chance anyway) it looks as if the excavations have already come right round to this end of the island. By this time next year they may have finished it, and South Island will have a ring of invisible road and fortifications a lot less conspicuous than the Maginot Line. Hopefully more secret as well – it is easy to needle Madelene X about the French government putting contracts out to the cheapest tender and discovering too late that though the building firms have well-chosen French names they have head offices in Berlin. Rather adding insult to injury, I should have thought – finding out you are paying to give away your own secrets.

Indeed, all the Hoele'toemi family except Mrs. Hoele'toemi are away today working on the project, so we had a pleasant day with her at the family longhouse. She thanked us for helping clear her niece's name, and mentioned that trade is often complex in these islands. Smugglers may bring in perfectly legal goods sometimes as a cover, or official businesses make use of smugglers for particular projects. Her husband is in the import-export trade, so she should know.

Helen is rather down in the dumps, having taken it rather hard with Molly's mysterious but doubtless shady "business deal". She is usually so confident, but worried that if she had a bad Pilot's exam she will be left with nothing. Her own budget is calculated to see her through the rest of Songmark, but after that she will have very little remaining. Certainly, anyone who fails this exam will be in real trouble, as re-taking it would mean reapplying from scratch and returning to the test centre tears a hole in the timetable later on this year. I am not even sure if Songmark would pay for the second attempt – definitely we must enquire, though I hope none of us need two tries.

My ears blushed a little when our hostess pointed out that even without our flying talents we both have everything she would look for in a daughter-in law; we can keep house, we can fish, we can farm, and we can keep her sons extremely happy (she elaborated somewhat, and it seems Spontoonic gentlemen tell their mothers more than I think their Euro counterparts ever do.) Mrs. Hoele'toemi hugged her, tousled Helen's head-fur and told her quite firmly not to fuss.

Back to Songmark to find Maria slightly happier, having a bundle of illustrated newspapers arrive for her less than a week old. There is a large article on her Uncle opening a new alpine sports resort, not dressed in his uniform for a change but showing wholly bare chest-fur as he toboggans rather expertly in the brilliant sunshine. At least, Maria says the article said he was expert, and there are no photographs of him falling off. What that may say about his skills or the freedom of the local press, I can hardly comment.

Wednesday 6th March, 1936

A fascinating trip today escorting first-years to the Casino Island Museum, the first time the Anthropomorphology section has been open in the week since September. There is a steady trickle of visitors throughout the year, but not really enough to open for except at weekends.

We showed them the local treasures, including of course the Fire Crystal. Saffina was much taken by it, and indeed her family are rich from gemstones though they have found nothing half the size of Spontoon's prize. Security is much lighter than one would expect – we left it to Beryl to explain why. From her annoyed tone when telling our usual suspects not to even think about it, I gather she has already asked her local contacts about what happens to people who steal it. I must say, on a few occasions Beryl is quite handy to have on the team, as Brigit and Liberty would do the opposite of anything I warned against, just on principle.

In one of the other galleries we bumped into Professor Schiller, who was working with maps, aerial photographs and a full set of navigator's equipment at one of the reading desks. He seemed pleased to see us, though not all our class reciprocated. I had Ada take our Reds out in a hurry, and Hannah vanished as if someone had let off a stink-bomb in the room.

Anyway, from what I could see with the photographs before he hurriedly covered them, Professor Schiller has spotted that all the inland features on the tourist maps are so badly misplaced that it can hardly be an accident. At least, he has circled all the villages in red and marked their real positions. Interestingly enough, he is looking at cultural sites as well, including some that are not on the tourist map. A series of sighting lines are inked out from Mount Tomboabo on South Island, but we know for a fact the Spontoonies are very discreet about not leaving evidence of their Solstice ceremony there.

We had a brief chat, which was very interesting indeed. He is following tantalising hints about island folklore that he believes has rather more than local interest, and bears on the most ancient history imaginable. Although he regretted that none of his books are yet translated into English, he gave us the main pointers on the "Out of Thule" theory which sounds at least strikingly original. Some of the artefacts found on these islands he says are far older than the official history books could possibly explain; he has travelled from Greenland to Antarctica gathering material evidence to prove it. I would doubt the real cradle of civilisation could be anywhere near here, as it stands to reason cold, healthy places are far more likely to stimulate progress than any jungle. Life is too comfortable here and one can get by on very little – up on the high plateau of Tibet or Greenland one would absolutely have to develop crafts and sciences to survive.

I must say, I wish our Government supported its scholars as well as that. On the newsreels last Saturday they showed clips from "Willpower" or something like it, a spectacularly staged German film of some political meeting or other. They do seem to raise a lot more enthusiasm about their politics than we ever manage, one might almost think they had stage-managers and professional cameramen. Their Chancellor was shown triumphantly holding up against the rising sun an old chalice that Professor Schiller says his Department managed to obtain in surprising circumstances – it looked rather battered, but no doubt it has sentimental value.

We were glad to return our first-years to Songmark, and take to the air for some formation flying. To the East of our islands the waters were perfectly empty, which will not be the case much longer as cruise-ships are being redecorated and resupplied all over the world for the new season. Miss Wildford took the chance to show us some low flying: we practiced holding altitude at a hundred feet, and then at fifty. Exhilarating stuff, but rather nerve-wracking to know one slip would send us into the water before we could recover – especially remembering the number of times when having an insect hit my nose or flying goggles made me wobble in flight far more than that.

An hour of keeping in formation no more than twice our aircraft length above the water was quite wearing. There was an excellent roast fish at teatime to make up for it though, and I was quite restored by the time Molly and I headed back to Casino Island for our evening with Madame Maxine. One evening a week is rather minimal, considering most finishing-schools are full time, but I understand Mabel spends a lot of time in Switzerland on domestic management as like many of her classmates she will be lady of a grand household someday. Learning how to quell a rebellious cook at twenty-five paces is not something I personally feel would be useful.

Although Madame Maxine and her staff are extremely discreet (given some of the things they can advise on) and never mention any other customers by name, I did ask about our friend Nuala. Given that she has an official job, I commented that I had not seen her in awhile, and wondered where she had vanished to. The Rachorska dresses we took to Vostok were casualties of war, one might say, and I would like to replace mine if I could afford it. Father keeps sending my allowance despite everything, so far.

It seems we are not the only folk who have been off having adventures. There are some stories that are not printed in the Daily Elele, despite their being in common circulation and vouched for. I knew there were a lot of entertainers of various sorts who only arrive on Spontoon for the tourist season, and it came as no real surprise that some of them have the sort of “hunting license” that Nuala issues. I can imagine working conditions here are rather pleasanter than in most parts of the world for certain jobs.

As it turns out, quite a few folk “recruited” for what they thought was a nice summer on Spontoon ended up in rather worse places, with no return ticket. At least on Krupmark folk get paid, in theory – but I remember a year ago stopping that yacht full of kidnapped Spontoonies heading out to Kuo Han. I doubt any of those would have been coming back in September. Nuala has been busy helping several Authorities track this sort of thing down and put a stop to it – but alas, it is rather like “G-men” closing down speakeasies. The illicit demand stays, and someone steps in the day after to fill it. The fact that nobody openly advertises this sort of recruiting makes it rather harder to spot where folk have disappeared to.

I can see why Nuala’s successes do not get into the tourist papers, but it is a matter of perspective – what is accepted here might have unkind things said about it elsewhere. If nobody had brought in Prohibition, Molly’s family would have been respectable vintners and brewers rather than criminals. On the same lines, if someone introduced Prohibition at home, respectable wine merchants to the nobility with centuries of staid traditions would be forced to take up racketeering overnight.

Anyway, I am told Nuala is home now for the first time in months, as her travels took her from America across the Pacific and back. I will try to call on her this weekend, I am sure we will have a lot to talk about.

Friday 8th March, 1936

An alarming day all round. After breakfast, I overheard Beryl whispering to Molly that she had enough of “the product” cooked up to start giving out as free samples to interested parties, and had enough base material to go into production. This is really not what I want to hear – I thought very briefly of quietly tipping off the Authorities before anyone gets hurt, but naturally one does not tittle-tattle on one’s friends. Unless of course your name is Liberty, when (by her account) you win the respect of your elders and betters by denouncing anyone you can cast a shadow of doubt over, and boast about it later down at the Red Star People’s Association. I wonder if her parents gave her that name in irony?

On the other hand, it could be more than embarrassing if Mr. Sapohatan asks me someday soon why I knew about people making highly illegal substances here and kept it to myself. We have been strictly on the right side of the law so far, and I had started to hope Molly had seen the benefits of it (Helen had pointed out to her that G-Men not only get to break down doors and fire Tommy-guns, but they get paid for it, wear sharp suits and official badges and are cheered on by the general public too.)

We were called in by Saffina to the repair sheds just after luncheon, for a medical emergency – at least on the face of it. One of the first-years, a Pennsylvanian hound of excellent ancestry, we found passed out behind a pile of freshly doped wings. I would like to think it was an accident, but she had an open bottle of fabric dope with her and the class were studying engines that day.

I recognised her by sight and name, Florence Farmington, daughter of one of the major radio magnates in New England – her family being reputed as unreformed Puritans and absolute Prohibitionists, who (Molly says) are fighting tooth and claw to keep that law running in their home state. She has been the

first to tell us of folk in her dorm illicitly smoking and suchlike; I would have thought her a common sneak except that I know she has been brought up to absolute moral rigidity.

Oh dear. I might wager she has never sampled as much as a glass of sherry in her life, and since nobody has probably preached against it, thinks fabric dope “doesn’t count.” We laid her out in the fresh air to recover, returned the bottle to the locked stores and had an urgent word with Saffina, her new head of dorm. Some things are listed very plainly in the Songmark rules as being liable to get you decisively kicked out with no appeal. Certainly, although we might occasionally sample more than a glass of Nootnops Blue, we take great care to avoid it when we are anywhere near classes and aircraft. Except of course that first time when Madelene X “generously” brought us a bottle each to drink before the tricky navigation exam, not telling us what was in it (she has mellowed a good deal since then.)

As Florence was coming round by the time we left, we did not report it to our Tutors – the first-years are going to have to sort that mess out for themselves.

Saturday 9th March, 1936

If I thought yesterday was shocking, at least the shocks were from what happened to other people. Today started off so nicely, too.

Jasbir’s dorm are grinding their teeth at being grabbed to watch over the first-years, even if it is a sporting event. They have already organised a Kilikiti team and started breaking Songmark windows in earnest: there is a sports pitch just South of the airfield where they can lay about themselves with their improvised bats and hopefully burn off some excess energy. From what I have seen on their practices, Brigit Mulvaney is quite the fiery star of the team as she says it is very like her favourite sport “Hooley”, the aboriginal Irish version of Australian Rules Hockey.

Having someone else get collared for the hard jobs always makes getting away oneself seem much sweeter. We went to our usual dance lessons, and then split up as I had a postcard from Nuala inviting me up to see her. I had promised Maria a Rachorska catalogue for the new season, and I fear she will get her check-book out for her wardrobe rather than our friend; Maria’s support for Molly has taken a severe downturn in the past week. I fear I have been only half-hearted on encouraging her to forgive Molly myself.

Aloha Avenue looked splendid in the sunshine, with all the flowers out and a big Latécoère flying boat heading over at two hundred feet towards the seaplane ways. Certainly, the Rachorska family have done very well for themselves on Spontoon, considering the Countess arrived in a distressing condition with hardly more than the clothes on her back (and not a valise stuffed with Faberge eggs, despite what Tatiana assumes.) It all goes to show, inherent quality shows through – you may drop a golden guinea in the mud, but it remains gold through and through despite its looks.

Nuala answered the door herself, explaining that her Mother was off in Japan purchasing silks at source, and was expected back next week. We did have a lot to catch up on indeed, as I have not seen her since that distressing affair with the counterfeiters last Autumn. She looks rather worn after her adventures, and indeed says she will be taking a holiday except for administration till things get busy in May.

I did bring the conversation round to our last meeting, meaning to gently raise the subject of a certain unwanted document that I never applied for or wanted anything to do with in the first place – but Nuala is a direct and forceful girl. She laughed, groomed back her ears and asked me to wait a minute – vanishing to the next room I heard her opening and closing the safe. With a smile she returned and dropped the completed thing right unto my lap.

Oh dear, again. I never thought about this, when we had our medical results posted at the public notary, where anyone can look at to check we are not carrying typhoid and suchlike before considering offering us a job at their milk bar. The last time I was here I handed the Countess the unwanted License for disposal, but she is a very busy businesswoman and presumably forgot it in the depths of her safe. Nuala must have found it, spotted it needed her signature and a health certificate, bounced down to check the public notary and filled in the blanks on the spot.

I think my tail must have bottled out like a chimneysweep’s brush when she happily handed me the document – rude of me, but I doubt there is a page in the etiquette guide to cope with this exact situation. The only License I ever want to use to make my living is that of a Pilot. I know Nuala went to a lot of personal trouble over this, but I had to take a deep breath and explain exactly how all of this came about. Several deep breaths actually, as it is rather a long story.

I had expected Nuala to be mortified, and quite expected to be shown the door. I certainly didn’t see what she found so funny about the situation, but she laughed till her snout was wet with tears, and her civet musk glands scented the whole room. Cheerfully she offered to alter the name to Kim-Anh Soosay, the fictional feline whose Siamese features actually appear on the description, and remove all the Songmark identification that made my tutors naturally upset.

Well, Kim-Anh is listed as an “entertainer” on the passport, and I have no other official identification for that character. If I had a wild elephant-hunting game license made out in the name I would take it, even

though I am totally opposed to actually using it. If my Tutors find it, I could say I picked it up on Casino Island by accident and am going to hand it in – both quite true as far as it goes. In situations severe enough to need that sort of extra identification, I think necessity would beat embarrassment over using it. Besides, Nuala is a great pal despite her unfortunate career, and I hated to actually throw all her work back in her face.

Anyway, I will leave the documents in her care until needed, as unless I dye myself to fit the description it is more harm than good – hopefully nobody would recognise me by the Siamese description on it. I would far rather have a birth certificate or almost anything else to flesh out the identity, but Nuala cannot provide those.

I picked up Maria's catalogue and headed out, feeling definitely dazed. My only consolation was I seem to fall on my feet better than Adele Beasley, who when she does fall generally discovers broken glass. For a minute I imagined what would happen if my misadventures were combined with her ill luck – but that exercise frightened me so much I found myself loudly humming Little Shirley Shrine numbers trying to forget the nightmarish speculations. The jingle stayed with me all the way down the hill; in most other cases I would have said the cure was worse than the disease.

Another surprise awaited on the docks of Eastern Island, though less shocking. As I arrived I spotted Wo Shin affectionately hugging farewell to a very large tiger gentleman in a white "Shanghai" suit and hat, looking rather rakish (or possibly rakshasa, as Jasbir would say.) He stepped into another water taxi as I stepped out of mine, to see Shin waving him farewell till the boat went around the corner of the jetty out of sight.

One would rarely think of any native of Krupmark as being dreamy-eyed (unless they had been sampling imports not publicly sold on Spontoon) but Shin seemed quite floating on air on the way back to our compound. So, that is her husband! Apart from them both having tail stripes, I would have thought him rather a contrast, being possibly twice her weight and a feline besides. I have heard Red Pandas are related to bears, but I would have thought more like raccoons by general size and shape.

Even so, she does seem quite blissful – at least, till I commented that I thought her dorm had no passes this month after Liberty's latest fracas. Her tail swished, and her claws popped out as she agreed, which is why she was not seeing him at their house on South Island this weekend. Though I did not ask, I know Mahanish's restaurant at the airport has rooms for rent, and first-years can go there at the weekend without a pass. Being both married and at Songmark must be quite a strain, and as far as I know she is the first one to try it.

I cautioned her that although Liberty may be a severe pain in the tail, she is partly Shin's responsibility and visa versa, and they have to take care of each other. Shin snapped back that Liberty is convinced she will be a martyr to her Revolution anyway, so there is very little anyone can do to discourage her – though she added in a quieter tone there were a few things she had been considering that might be fun.

Well, I tried.

Sunday 10th March, 1936

Our last Sunday here for awhile – and one I think we made the most of. This time I insisted we take Molly with us, where we can at least keep an eye on her. Helen's muzzle wrinkled a bit but she saw the sense in it.

The sun rises at seven now, and by half past we were out of the Songmark compound, in fact as soon as the gates were open we were through them. There is a staff bungalow by the gate itself, though most of the time our Tutors do not occupy it. All sorts of staff at Songmark take turn on gate duty, helped by the more trustworthy third-years on occasion. A responsible but dull job we are told – though the rewards are good for third-years, and just might earn one the coveted "twenty-four hour pass."

Molly speculated the bungalow looked quite cosy, and big enough to invite over company on a long night shift – at which Helen playfully put her into a double hammerlock and ear hitch, while explaining that was exactly the sort of thing being on gate watch was meant to discourage. I think Molly got the point – she never reads official notices or memos, but remembers anything told to her with the right kind of lecture style.

Anyway, we were over on South Island just past eight with a fine Spring day before us. The mile to the Hoele'toemi household on the south side seemed to flash past, and indeed we arrived to find the second round of Breakfast still being served. Excellent! Both Jirry and Marti were there, with their oldest brother Joni and both sisters.

I hardly thought back at St. Winifred's dining hall, that I would ever come to like tapioca and sago. They are of course compulsory in all proper boarding schools, but in a form the Spontoones would hardly recognise; the local recipe is ten times better. Even tapioca and taro greens are edible in a spinach fashion, if properly cooked (I recall Madelene X being awfully sick last year eating them raw despite advice, on the grounds that we had too few French-style fresh salads and she refused to do without a minute longer.) Molly absolutely loves them, tapioca greens sautéed in palm oil being as much her favourite as fish is to Helen and me. She is a deer, after all.

My ears drooped when Jirry told me the whole family was working that day on the Public Works Project – but picked up when he invited us along. I was quite surprised, especially since Molly was included in

the party and she is scarcely an initiate of the local mysteries. We changed into plain lava lava cloth costumes, blending in with the rest of the villagers setting out with picks and mattocks.

As it turned out, we had nothing to worry about. I had visions of telling Molly to look the other way while Maginot Line style vanishing cupolas were emplaced in acres of reinforced concrete. But of course the “Waterworks Project” is far more discreet than that. We spent the morning gardening, in terms of carefully uprooting saplings and bamboo roots in advance of the main workings a few hundred yards round the corner, and stacking them to one side. As soon as the “cut and cover” work finishes, the vegetation will be carefully replaced and in a couple of years the whole site will be quite invisible.

I must say, Molly is looking more cheerful than she has been in awhile. After four hours hard work we still had the energy to run down to the beach for a swim, the three of us and the Hoele'toemis. The beach was quite deserted for a mile each way, with no tourists on South Island and most of the locals busy on the public works in the woods. Molly has convinced herself it is what she calls a “pork barrel project” to win votes by soaking up unemployment this time of year. I suppose that is part of it, but Spontoon politics seem rather different from her local Chicago style and winning votes in Anarcho-Syndicalism is a rather strange idea anyway.

After half an hour's swim we retired to the beach, with cold roast fish and breadfruit cakes for a fine picnic lunch. Of course, Helen and Marti are Tailfast and retired further inland for an hour, Molly's rather envious gaze following them. I felt my own tail twitching at Jerry's scent, and indeed after a morning's hard work and a brisk swim he tells me I am at my very best – though a Paris perfume house might not agree.

South Bay is rather exposed, with just one great sweep of open sand. Jerry pointed out to the reef, and suggested we take a leisurely swim out, three hundred yards being nothing to us these days providing one knows the currents. Though we were sternly warned about swimming after a meal back home, the local diet is light enough to cause no problems with stomach cramps. For packed lunches at St. Winifred's they normally made us a Bedfordshire Clanger * apiece – perfect for hard work in a freezing climate, but anyone getting into even the Dead Sea afterwards would probably sink.

It is a good thing Jerry knows this reef like his own back garden, as there are patches of razor-sharp stag-horn coral and breaks with vicious undertows that would make short work of anyone except the Natives of No Island. There are also sheltered patches on the landward side, where at low water the coral sand forms very nice secluded bays, the waves just gently breaking over them today. A very pleasant afternoon – “Make hay while the sun shines” as they say, and in the next two weeks I will be far away with less relaxing company.

We did have a surprising encounter on the return trip, passing through Haio Beach and the shops. We know the local storekeeper Herr Rassberg quite well, as he is one of the few Euros to live on this side of the island. I had been thinking of today showing Molly the remains of his Forstmann Giant Triplane that slowly moulders in the jungle a mile west of here, since its final flight from Turkish Mesopotamia in 1918.

What surprised us was who he was talking to – on the lamp-lit veranda outside his store he was sharing a two-litre bottle of genuine German beer (from Tsingtau, China) with Professor Schiller, the archaeologist! I know Professor Schiller has been surveying South Island, but hardly expected to see him today. I doubt he recognised us, it was dusk and we were in local costume while he has only seen us in Songmark uniform before. I pointed him out to Saimmi, who seemed extremely interested to hear about him, and especially his mapping projects.

An excellent day, returning to Songmark rubbing my neck-fur contentedly, with Helen seeming quite unconcerned at a slightly bitten ear. I think Marti looked rather more tattered, but neither of them were complaining in the slightest. Molly had a nice picnic and a healthy swim, so she can hardly complain.

* Editors note: an ancestor of the modern “All in one TV Dinner”, based on the calorie needs of agricultural labourers doing it all on muscle power. Take a roll of suet pastry, start filling with cooked meat and vegetables in one end, sealed off from the dessert end filled with stewed fruit or jam. Seal tight and bake hard. Presumably the “clang” is when the meal hits the stomach.

Wednesday 13th March, 1936

Well, at last I have my ticket to Pinafore Island, the main land mass of the Gilbert and Sullivan group. Fortunately we were told to arrange them ourselves – this morning I took my Macau passport down to the Shawnee Pacific Airpaths booking office at the docks and bought a ticket for “a friend” – made out in the name of Kim-Anh Soosay. Things are going well so far, as our Tutors only want the receipts for the money, and do not look at the tickets themselves. I have an open Return, with no specified date for the homeward leg.

Prudence and Beryl are taking a later flight, which is handy too since I do not really want to explain to Beryl why I have turned into a half-breed Siamese all of a sudden. If she radically changed her fur colouring, we would just shrug it off and assume she was off to pull a confidence trick somewhere – but I have a reputation to maintain. I am not too sure what it IS any more, but in general principles I would like to keep

it (or Kim-Anh's, anyway. This is getting confusing. I hope the passport Lars gave me was made from scratch and not stolen goods, I hate to think of running into myself someday.)

Although Shawnee Pacific do not run a direct service to the Gilberts, I only have to change once on Ile de Croissant in the French Sandwich Islands, and the ticket covers the transfer flight. That part of the trip should be fun; I have not been in an aircraft someone else flew since our return from Vostok. The rest of it I will just have to "play it by ear" as Beryl says, and she always manages very well. Then again, one must consider the size of her ears.

Molly has been working hard on her classwork, I am glad to say, and seems quietly confident. As our tutors keep telling us, at five hundred feet above the approaches to a busy airport there is no time to read reference books, and everything we need we must have in our heads. The past week our class has been very quiet, with Sunday our last relaxation for awhile. I am even sorting out some textbooks to take with me on the trip, though not the ones with my real name printed inside. Being detained at customs on suspicion of stealing from Amelia Bourne-Phipps' library would be rather unfortunate.

Molly and I had rather a shock when we turned up for our regular evening at Madame Maxine's; Madame M herself gently told us that our six months of training was almost up, unless we wished to purchase more. Very odd – I thought our Tutors were paying for this? Although some of them might not at all like us visiting here, they are a pragmatic lot and I assumed they sent us here for skills we were likely to need. I hardly liked to ask who our real benefactor was, as for one thing it would be awfully embarrassing to admit we have no idea, and for another – Madame M might not tell us. We can hardly ask her to be discreet about us and to "spill the beans" about other customers, after all.

Still, I made the best of it and asked for two applications' worth of fur dyeing supplies to take away with me, which she granted. We helped out with some of her other customers transforming their fur; some are dancers and such who are starting rehearsals at this time of year, and finished their evening here looking suitably exotic.

I have been studying quite hard in the Kim-Anh "character", and the two real Siamese who work here seem fairly happy with the performance as regards mannerisms and general style. They point out that the big hole in the story is that I speak only English and Spontoonie, while Macao is Portuguese – fortunately I am not going there, but to an Empire base where the language should not be a problem. Real Portuguese or Thai pilots are not too likely to show up there, after all.

Helen has been worrying quite a lot over my trip, the first time I have been entirely on my own abroad, let alone technically illegally – I will not want to involve Prudence or especially Beryl. Helen at least will be glad I have almost finished at Madame Maxine's, as she shares our tutors' dislike for the place and often asks me to take another shower after I return quite nicely scented. Still, she admits I need a passport right now, and Kim-Anh's is what I have; it is only like learning a character in a play. I studied to play Shakespeare's Juliet in the last term at St. Winifred's, and this is more important for my career. (Beryl claims she played Madame Defarge in a very modernist Saint T's play about the bloody excesses of the French Revolution; she was "red-hot on the guillotine action" but complains learning the knitting was hell.)

Thursday 14th March, 1936

Dear Diary. It is always a mistake to make too many assumptions. When we were called out to settle another "Native revolt in First-Year Territory" as Maria quaintly puts it, my main thought was whether we would find Liberty Morgenstern half-submerged in a vat of used sump oil by Brigit Mulvaney or the other way around. Actually it was nothing to do with their dorm at all, although Maria did find it hard to believe and insisted on checking exactly where that four were at the time.

For someone whose family are unrepentant Puritans, Florence Farmington seems to spend rather a lot of time completely "off her skull" as Beryl puts it. She was yelling and carrying on like a stage drunken sailor, having already broken one window and threatening to bite anyone who comes close. She has a good set of teeth, to be sure – but Maria grabbed her shoulders at arms' length like a dockside crane, while I went in behind and practiced the Roedean Nerve Pinch. It worked jolly well, and she collapsed like a roll of carpet.

While Molly went running off to get our Matron, I grilled the rest of her dorm who shamefacedly produced an opened Nootnops Blue bottle. The odd thing is, it was still half full, and they had each had exactly one glass (I made certain to examine the glasses carefully.) None of the other three seem at all affected, only scared, so it can hardly be "spiked" with anything more potent. As Missy K quite truthfully told us the first time, it is a non-alcoholic drink, whatever else is in it. Otherwise Florence would hardly have tried it.

When not passed out or raving drunk, Florence is quite a model student and started off as the head of her dorm. I am not sure, but I doubt this year's class has enough students with the right interests to make a full dorm to match Prudence's – if it had, at least Florence's classmates Coral Fensbury and Phillipa DeGama would be candidates. Coral was rather tearfully telling me how wonderful and beautiful a leader Florence had been, until she lost all her dorm's points while they were de-greasing engine blocks in their first term.

I think I see a pattern here. When Mrs. Oelabe arrived, I had to confess about the incident last week with the fabric dope – and pointed out how little Nootnops Blue Florence actually had. Our Matron nodded thoughtfully as we laid Florence out on the bed, and commented that some people are hugely over-sensitive to certain chemicals. I know Maria’s nose breaks out in blotches if she eats strawberries, even though she says she loves the taste and the smell.

Molly whispered that it was a good thing everyone else was not like that – her Father could hardly have made the family rich if the customers only needed to buy one bottle a year. I must have Words with her about that, it is hardly funny. Well, I can see the funny side of it, but not for Florence. When Beryl finds out, I expect she will try to sell her a Great War respirator and gas cape against dangerous boot-polish fumes – and plant open saucers of fabric dope around Florence’s room till she gives in and buys it. Molly’s family is not the only one who have offered to provide customers “protection” that is more threatening than useful.

Friday 15th March, 1936

Farewell to Molly, Helen and Maria! A big Sikorski left at lunchtime today with them and the other Manila-bound students onboard, determined to return as proudly licensed pilots. As they used to say in classical times, “return with your shield or carried on it” – that is, they are primed and eager to see what the examiners throw at them, but our Tutors warn that commercial aviation standards are high and getting tougher by the year. Maria has been warned to keep her snout firmly shut about what folk do in the Italian exams.

I spent the day studying hard, the last time I will have access to all my books. Tomorrow morning I have arranged to meet Saimmi here, and she will help me dye my fur in Siamese style hopefully without our Tutors finding out. I don’t know how I’ll manage changing my fur on my own on the return trip, but I will cross that bridge when I come to it. Of course, I can hardly carry someone else’s diary through Customs, in case I am searched – Molly speaks from great experience when she says Customs Officers often unravel a carefully built story from just one carelessly loose thread of fact. Arriving with no luggage at all would be suspicious (I need a respectable “Euro” costume and my flying kit at least) but will make sure everything is as unremarkable as possible.

So, I will have to take a blank notebook and trust to luck, pluck and fast thinking. They are awaiting Amelia Bourne-Phipps at the Pinafore Island Empire Flying Test School – then the hard work will begin. First, I have to get there!

(And she did – as she described in “Flying Solo”.)

