

Spontoon Springtime (Or, "Three months hard labour and no parole!")

(The continuing adventures of Amelia Bourne-Phipps, studying at the Songmark Aeronautical Boarding School For Young Ladies on Spontoon East Island. Her second term looks as if it's going to be quite as Eventful as her first, which will take some doing. As ever, her diary is in the never-popular Lexarc School Shorthand, which was obscure enough even then to make a quite secure code.)

January 12th, 1935

Dear Diary – back again to the Songmark Aeronautical Boarding School for Young Ladies, back to Eastern Island with its hangars and classrooms. A splendid Christmas break has only made returning here more of a shock for Helen Duclos and myself – two weeks of "going Native" in most appreciative company, was something we could have definitely used more of.

Still, here we are – dressed neatly in our Aeronautical Boarding school uniforms, looking at the driving rain hissing on the runway outside the hangar doors. ("Boarding School" has such a depressing sound to it, I always think – bringing to mind some dingy ex-manor house in the Home Counties, with porridge, cabbage and boiled mutton perpetually on the menu.)

All of our group have arrived on time – Maria Inconnutia having been specially flown from Italy by one of her Uncle's "Reggia Aeronautica" floatplanes. He must think a lot of Maria – no sooner had she appeared in Rome fresh from her Alpine skiing holiday, than she was taken straight to the airport and put on the first flight out, without even the inconvenience of having to unpack! It must be gratifying, to have relatives so concerned about one's welfare.

Our chum Molly arrived this morning, all the way from Chicago – and this time round, thanks to a special licence, all her baggage made it in through Customs. At least, it all arrived on the Islands – she is complaining that the large cello case she carried has been licensed only for her to use on the official ranges across on Moon Island – and how disappointed her Uncle "Lewis-gun" Lewis would be if he heard how Officialdom are treating the Xmas present he gave her. One dreads the prospect of her arriving next time with a double-bass case, probably the gift of Mr. "Paris-Kanone" Parizzi or some such gentleman.

Of our other friends, only Jasbir Sind is late in arriving, though she has to travel across all her home state of Utterly Pradesh to find an airport - and the radio reports have been full of storm warnings delaying flights and sailings across from India to Humapore, where she would pick up the Imperial Airways flying boat. One hopes she will arrive safely!

Our Tutor, Miss Devinski, welcomed us back and looked us up and down with a rather steely eye. She had a notebook which she referred to as she counted us in and handed out the paperwork – to judge from the number of pages she turned over between students, the quantity of Intelligence gathered on us varies quite widely. "Soppy" Forsythe rates a page, whereas Helen and myself must have taken a half-inch of notebook between us! It would be fascinating indeed to read through that notebook someday, though no doubt it is guarded using "extreme measures" that we might take a term or two to counteract.

Indeed, Miss Devinski took her time flicking through our records, while we tried to look angelic – and though she shook her head slowly at some of her notes, it was with a smile that she welcomed us back. Songmark does after all pride itself in developing Initiative and Innovation – and while Soppy has no doubt diligently collected a Nature study of pressed leaves, rocks and beetles in between listening to her gramophone this past holiday, we have certainly been finding out as much about the Island's true life as is good for us.

It was certainly fun to meet again with the rest of the first-years, though the definitely full timetables we were handed left us in no doubt over our work load. Madelene X looked quite shocked to see how much we are to get done – she has been staying at her Father's aircraft-factory back in France watching prototype wings and fuselages being tested to destruction, and loudly complained that our Tutors must be running bets on Our breaking strain this term.

I sincerely hope that the cooks here have not taken the same New Years Resolution that I made, "begin as you mean to go on." For after nearly a month's freedom from the noxious stuff, we were faced at teatime with a huge sludgy mound of Poi, the local tuberous mess that combines the texture of flour-glue with the visual appeal of wet concrete. Missy Kahaloe is back, looking bigger than ever, and on seeing our faces announced that Pacific Islanders in far parts of the world wake up dreaming about the Poi of their homeland. Maria suggested raising an appeal fund to export our ration to them, as rapidly as possible.

(Molly added under her breath that she should report our cooks to the League Of Nations, as she is sure it would count as a chemical weapon. In a matter of days, anyone stuck with nothing else to eat would surely be bored to death.)

Our rooms were freshly swept and decorated, and we retired early to talk over our holiday experiences before catching a good nights sleep. Lessons start in tomorrow, and start in with a vengeance – tonight being the last truly free evening in sight. Maria had a lot to say about her Alpine trip – and had a sheaf of photographs to show us. Her chalet happened to be a bare

mile across the snow from a hut used by trainee “Carabinieri”, most of them younger sons of good family who are being sponsored through military schools by the benevolent Government. Their black shirts look very dashing, and stand out well against the sunlit snow. By Maria’s accounts, a certain mile of snow became very heavily ploughed by ski-tracks in the ten days she was up there.

Molly, on the other hand, was complaining that her Father’s business was getting dull, since diversifying into dealing tinned foods rather than ferociously inflammable liquors. Not surprisingly, there is not quite the same flair and intrigue in controlling train loads of pressed ham, as there is in racing “cigarette boats” of elegant cordials across half-frozen lakes from Canada or St.Pierre. When Maria asked her if she had any interesting Experiences, she grumbled that the average worker at a meat-packing plant was about as exciting and lively as the tinned product. Most of her Father’s more colourful associates seem to have left Chicago, as witnessed by a postcard from a Mr. “Knuckles” Maldonado from Cuba which was awaiting her on her return here.

And then, of course, the two of them wanted to know what Helen and I had been doing while given the run of South island. I hesitated slightly, letting Helen set the tone – for not everything we had discovered was entirely safe for our friends to know, and we had promised to say nothing of our discoveries about the “Waterworks Project”. Still, there was an awful lot we could tell them – Molly in particular was looking almost green with envy as I described our experiences of “going Native”. Certainly, she declared straight away that she would put her name down to stay here at Easter, though it is three months and more ahead of us.

I let Helen finish the story, explaining where we had spent the night before last, in excellent company on the mountain top – and we could almost hear poor Molly seething at the thought of what she had been missing out on. This term, if we have any free time at all, I feel sure Molly will be trying hard to catch up on some parts of her Education that are not on the timetable.

An early night, with some of us still worn out from travelling, and all of us wincing at the sight of the timetables on our writing-desks. One thing we are very sure of – the Holiday, is definitely over. This time, I have managed to get the bed furthest from Maria, who is certainly a staunch comrade by day, but snores deafeningly. I kept waking up last term in the middle of the night, with dreams of Flying Fleas with misfiring engines about to shake loose from their mountings. (Happily, when that happened to poor Flea #6 back home, I was over the Vicar’s ornamental lake and only received a wetting. The engine parted company at sixty feet and did a rather striking aerial torpedo impression – nobody was injured, and the Vicar’s gazebo must have needed replacing anyway, to disintegrate the way it did.)

January 13th, 1935

A full day indeed! The timetables mentioned flying today, which had been the one thing to look forward to – but alas it was a refresher course on air navigation with Miss Pelton, setting us some ferocious tests full of wind drifts and dead-reckoning. None of us scored brilliantly, except Molly – which surprised us, till she admitted rather grumpily to having taken her textbooks to bed most nights. I can see the point of our Tutors making sure we had not forgotten the basics, before entrusting us in the cockpit again – and indeed, we spent most of the morning in unearthing whatever skills had been buried while on holiday.

The afternoon was more interesting, though still classroom-based – as promised, we made a start on aerial photography. It seems that Songmark must have contacts in the Government Surplus trade, for we practised on war-surplus reconnaissance cameras. Very nice instruments, though rather battle-scarred and rather older than ourselves. Helen has done a little survey work for her late Father, but complained bitterly about having to work out the focal lengths and exposures on paper first. As with her flying – she prefers to work by the seat of her pants, but that is hardly something one can measure on an examination paper.

The lesson finished with some darkroom work, a fascinating subject. I have a box brownie camera at home, but always simply handed the plates in to the local chemist to be developed. It looks as if this time the whole process will be up to us, with nobody else to blame when the films come back fogged or the top of one’s subjects’ ears are cut off in the frame. (Madelene X received a useful lesson when she had been keeping a roll of film in her pocket, next to her expensive and very bright radium dial stopwatch. Her photos emerged appearing to have been taken in thick fog, which caused much hilarity.)

After supper, Maria remembered to unpack her cases – the dear girl has Christmas presents for us! We have parachute training starting next week, and she has brought back some jolly useful accessories. It seems that her Uncle’s Air Force is conducting joint parachute exercises with the German “Luftwaffe”, and she managed to acquire four prototype emergency knives intended for the trials. They look rather like pocket-torches, but the blades drop out under gravity and lock firmly when the trigger is released. They can be used one-handed: should we drop into the jungle canopy and have to cut our way out of the parachute rigging, they will be

very handy! (Although the idea of cutting up sixty guineas-worth of parachute is not something one really looks forward to.)

January 16th, 1935

It has been a hard week already – with little to write in the diary, but an awful lot to fill our exercise books. Air safety, navigation, First aid and almost everything has been crammed into a fast refresher course – definitely our Tutors believe in knocking the dust off us before carrying on with the main courses.

Jasbir Sind arrived a day late, having been delayed by bad weather off Humapore. She listened with great interest to what we told her of our “Native” holiday – in her case, it has been quite the reverse. From being a plain student (actually, quite a pretty one rather than plain) she returned to take up the luxury of a junior Maharani, complete with hunts and banquets. She confided that although having a dozen or so servants around was very handy, she had rather enjoyed getting about these Islands in privacy. Once we have settled down this term, we must see about organising another breakout to Mahanish’s Pilot’s bar beside the runway. So near and yet so far – after a few weeks like this one, we will certainly be wanting some diversion.

Thinking of which, we at least have our radios working again - tonight I managed to get in touch with Jirry and pass on my regards to the rest of his family. Rather odd – Jirry mentioned that it would be very good if Helen and I were to be on especially good behaviour, and to use extreme caution. I wonder why? We have seen nothing out of the ordinary this week, and surely he could have given us that advice when we last met. Helen seems to have a bad case of nerves, looking around most carefully when we go outside the Academy to the various facilities, as if she is looking for someone. But the only people we regularly see are instructors, janitors etc – and surely she is in no fear of anyone pushing a broom. I have looked around myself, but seen nobody who really looks much like a counterintelligence Agent.

In the meantime, we are looking forward eagerly to getting airborne again. Maria has come back waving plans for some fascinating Italian aircraft, which looks rather like a flying cigar, with no obvious propeller. It seems the propellers are on the inside of the tube, and extraordinary thrust is to be generated by burning fuel downstream of them. She has been arguing with Madelene X, who not unnaturally supports her own countryman Monsieur Rene LeDuck. His planned aircraft look very impressive, but have no way of getting off the ground since their “athodyd” engines will only start up when already flying at the speed of a Schneider Trophy winner! Maria is busily doodling “reaction jet” aircraft, much to everyone’s amusement. I am sure they will never catch on.

January 18th, 1935

At last – our first weekend, when we can draw breath after a hectic return to hard work. Actually, this involved a lot of hard work in itself, as we returned to Casino Island to start on the Native dance classes! Helen and I had practised a little at the Hoele’toemis’ place, but hardly competitively.

The two groups of us were escorted by Miss Wildford to the water-taxi, and after a fairly rough crossing, we were glad to be around the bright lights again as we arrived at the Casino Island Dance Studio. Alas, our rivals from the Spontoon Island Technical High School were there already, and with many a cry of “Who let You back in again?” and similar, they let us know they had not forgotten us, or our challenging them to a dance contest.

Actually, it all went very well – Molly seemed a little rusty, Chicago not really having the atmosphere to practice hula moves, but Maria seems to have been keeping in excellent condition on and off the piste. We started to learn another dance, “The Palm Sway”, which our instructor admitted afterwards had been invented some five years ago for the first “talkie” to be filmed in the Islands. Lunch followed at “The Missing Coconut” – sadly, Jirry and his family are busy this weekend, though we had plenty to talk about. Helen and I passed on our tips on improved Costume, which Jasbir and co. listened to eagerly. Unlike last term, we should stand a good chance of passing for Natives on whatever unofficial excursions we might manage.

Just to annoy us, the S.I.T.H.S. crowd “accidentally” dropped a copy of their own newspaper on our table. I had to admit, it is a rather well-produced affair, with some twelve pages of news and articles. On the back page was a rather boastful announcement by their Flying Club, who (unlike us) actually build full-scale aircraft. They claim to have a “high-speed model range” laid out on Moon Island and ready to start testing shortly. Still, they must have easily ten times our number of students, and by all accounts receive a lot of support from the Authorities, despite not being as well-funded as Songmark. We shall definitely be looking out for their “model range” next time our classes take us over to Moon Island.

Our dance classes in the afternoon were rather more relaxing, as we learned more of the basic steps, and were invited to improvise to tunes played by a trio of Spontoonies on flute,

drum and guitar. If every dance tells a story, possibly we can write some of our own scripts when we get the hang of it.

On the way back, Helen seemed rather alarmed for some reason. Not till we were heading back up the hill towards the airfield, did she confide that she had noticed the same water-taxi driver on the past three trips – despite there being quite different boats and routes involved. I recommended she see Matron and request something for her nerves – evidently the poor girl has been working too hard and reading too many of Ethyl's "Three-fisted Detective Tales" and sees Agents everywhere now. (Thinking of which, Molly is reading through the latest edition of "True Crimes Illustrated", with evident amusement. She keeps making amendments in the margins, and complaining about unsympathetic journalism.)

January 19th, 1935

A very bright day, if rather windy – we are already noticing the days getting a little longer. Off to Church, in our various directions – Maria to South Island, Helen and I to Casino Island to hear Mr. Bingham preach, and Molly to play the role of Conscientious Objector and stay behind with a mountain of sweet potatoes to peel. She had successfully argued that being given the taro tubers to scrub was Cruel and Unusual Punishment, since being made to spend all morning preparing Poi and then having to eat it, is certainly adding insult to injury.

Helen was quite relieved to see a different boatman awaiting us on the trip out – though he does look somewhat familiar, and I am sure he was on Meeting Island that time we met the survivors of the Gunboat Wars. Still, this is not such a huge place that one should be surprised by meeting the same people around and about.

The sermon was rather fine, with the Rev. Bingham in creative mood, with "The parable of the four lascar sailors and the lifebelt." Not a tale I recall from Scripture, but I was never top of the class in the subject (unlike my friend Phoebe back at St. Winifreds, whose Father was a Reverend at age twenty, a Very Reverend at twenty-five, and by now is probably off the top of the scale of most measuring instruments.)

Happily, Jerry and family were there in church when we arrived – and we managed ten minutes talk after the sermon, on the way back towards the water taxis. A far cry from this time last week – I could hardly help my ears blushing as I looked across at Mount Kiribatori, or noting that Jerry's scratches were healing very rapidly. His parents were both there, and had many kind words for me – indeed, Mrs. Hoele'toemi told me that she would do all in her power to protect me. A pleasant thing to hear, but rather puzzling, as the main risks we run these days would be spin-stalling a Tiger Moth or striking sparks too near open tins of fabric Dope – neither of which she could really help us against.

On the way back, Helen relaxed a little more, the mysterious boatman being nowhere in sight. Actually, I spotted him fishing on the dock as we arrived, though I did not want to alarm Helen by pointing him out – and I presume the binoculars he carried were for spotting shoals of fish entering the harbour. There is an innocent explanation for most things, if one only has the right attitude.

January 20th, 1935

A strenuous day indeed – as we head over to Moon Island and the naval base there, at rather short notice. From what our tutor Miss Blande tells us, we were scheduled for parachuting next week, but the Rain Island Naval Syndicate happen to have a visiting team of instructors over, who have offered to show us the ropes while on their tour here.

Many of us were apprehensive, never having "hit the silk" before – and indeed, today was not the day to do it. On the far side of the island, there is an observation post standing on tall posts about forty feet high, looking over a steep drop to the West. Folk had rigged up a long rope slide, ending in a sand-pit, with pulley-like sliders for one to zoom down and drop into the sand.

First, though, we were introduced to Captain Pardue, the first Rain Island serving officer we had met (not counting the base personnel here.) A definitely tall gentleman of the Badger persuasion – recognisably of European rather than American stock to judge by the fur pattern. But then, Rain Island was once part of our loyal Dominions, not so many decades ago – and surely some good people must have stayed on in their homes in the breakaway section rather than move to the still-staunch pieces of Canada. He looks indeed a quite Respectable person, but doubtless anyone who truly supports Rain Island must be at least in part an Anarchist, and the Empire is best off without them.

Our first lessons were basic indeed – there was a wooden platform with three levels, from four to eight feet above a sand-pit. Dressed in a rather nicely tailored jump-suit, Captain Pardue demonstrated how to jump and land from the lowest step, with one's feet together and rolling to take the fall. Our Self-defence classes proved useful training for this, as we have been learning very similar moves for months now! Not till he was confident with each of us were we allowed to get to the next level to practice from.

I fear that some of us are at a disadvantage – Maria is certainly on the hefty side for this, while Missy Kahaloa leaves rather a crater on landing! It took till lunch-time till Captain Pardue was satisfied with our platform jumps, and we repaired to the Syndicate canteen for a rather light snack. Having dusted the sand out of our overalls (and boots – I had the forethought to seal cuffs and such with rubber bands to keep the sand out) we sat down to a very pleasant fish “chowder” as Helen calls it.

I noticed Molly looking around the kitchens with interest, though she is hardly noted for her culinary skills (being the only person I have met who can burn coffee). She confided that her Father’s product should sell here, these islands really having very little meat production for the locals, let alone the hordes of tourists in Season. I believe she called the pressed meat PAMS, probably after Packed Animal Minced Stuff which describes it truthfully if unflatteringly. She looked up at the menu board, describing how it would look everywhere – PAMS and beans, PAMS and chips, PAMS egg bacon and beans, and probably PAMS with mashed potato, PAMS, PAMS, PAMS and a decorative order of PAMS on the side. One almost expects her to write a song about it, as it will surely have to sell by advertising rather than taste. I might be more sympathetic about her Family product, had she not shared one of her sample cans with us.

Oddly, I noticed the waitress who came in about half-way through the meal was the same one who had been serving us at The Missing Coconut on Saturday. A small world indeed!

After some half-hour of instruction and watching demonstrations, we finally mounted the steep ladders up to the observation tower, where a safety line was clipped onto our harnesses to prevent them releasing till we were already most of the way down and over the sand-pit. Captain Pardue explained that we would be lucky indeed to “hit the silk” on a wholly windless day, and to expect to hit the ground at a fair trot. Prudence Akroyd’s bunch went first, making a rather good showing of it – no broken ankles, at least on the first jumps. We were next – and as I had had occasion to already test my parachute making unhappy adieus to Flying Fleas Numbers 1, 3, 5 and 6, I volunteered to go first.

Alas – for a bad half minute, I found my nerve wholly letting me down ! Very unexpectedly, my legs almost seemed to turn to jelly at the prospect of stepping out over forty feet of air, whereas I had “baled out” at ten times that altitude and more. Granted, on those occasions I had little choice in the matter or time to think about it, but I thought my diet had included enough moral fibre to get me going. Helen solved my dilemma with a hefty push, like the great pal she is, and once started I found the swoop down quite exhilarating. In fact, I almost forgot to let go of the harness, and performed quite a tumble on landing.

Helen, Maria and Molly made it down with no trouble, and we were soon back in the queue at the foot of the tower for another turn. It was quite suprising to see who had troubles stepping off the ledge – Sophie D’Artagnan seemed to be in a regular funk, while “Soppy” Forsythe stepped off the platform as if alighting from an omnibus. NOT at all as one might expect!

Another four jumps apiece took up most of the afternoon, with little real incident – Ada Cronstein and Li Han from Jasbir’s dorm both twisted ankles, which was awfully bad luck. Missy K got through the whole thing unscathed – but then, with her figure, she at least is well qualified for rolling.

As with the First-aid and Self-defence classes, of course this is a skill one really hopes not to need to practice – but indeed, knowing one has the skill is very comforting, and lets one try things that otherwise would be simply irresponsible.

(Later). It has been a decidedly trying two weeks, one way and another. They say that people can surprise themselves, and indeed I have, twice. Having my nerve go was a most alarming thing – when might it happen again, in worse situations ? Though the other occasion, some ten days ago, is one that I am trying to regret without much success. I am sure it would hardly make good reading in my dear old school St.Winifreds’ newsletter, that one term apart from them had turned one of their Young Ladies into a Young Alleycat. Still, one never hears of alleycats complaining, and there are an awful lot of them – two facts than I can see now are very probably linked!

January 22nd, 1935

A very calm day today – our schedules were again adjusted to take advantage of Captain Pardue’s kind offer to train us before he leaves at the end of the week. After a half-dozen jumps on the tower (losing Missy K and Adelle Beasley to a wrenched knee and a dislocated shoulder respectively) we assembled back at the airstrip on Eastern Island. Four casualties is not so bad, considering that even trained parachutists run a similar risk every time they jump – and at the polo match a year ago against St. Iscariot’s, we had that many down in the first ten minutes. The Matron insisted then on sending me off, although I tried to reassure her that I had one collar-bone still intact, and was right-handed anyway.

The aircraft we were to use, was quite a classic that I had to look up in the books later on – an old american Barling Bomber, one of their first mass-produced six-engined craft, evidently sold to Rain Island as surplus. Its lack of speed should prove an advantage, as the

escape hatch is just behind the wings, and there should be plenty of room to avoid the biplane tail when exiting.

Well! It was quite a thrill, the first two dorms of us to “Kit up” and pack ourselves inside, as the big triplane rumbled down the Eastern Islands strip with its ten propellers thundering. Though neither speedy or fast-climbing, in five minutes we had circled to just over a thousand feet, and under the eagle eye of Miss Wildford and one of the Rain Island crew chiefs we clipped in our static lines. Molly looked a little nervous peering down through the bombardiers’ rangefinder at the altitude – though I pointed out that having more altitude, gives one time to sort out any problems that might occur on the way down. And climbing higher would give more scope for the winds to scatter us across the island, or possibly miss it altogether – though it is a quarter of an hour’s walk across, Eastern Island looks a decidedly small target from a thousand feet.

Helen added that hitting the ground from a thousand feet or a hundred was unlikely to make much difference to the outcome – which somehow failed to cheer poor Molly.

Madelene X’s dorm were out ahead of us, there being only time to get so many away on a single pass of the runway. We watched them through the open hatch, somewhat open-mouthed – but the static line triggered all the parachutes straight away, and they opened up like great white silk jellyfish swinging down to earth.

After another circle and another check of the static lines, it was our go at last – I insisted on going first, and whispered (or rather, shouted quietly, above the roar of wind and engines) to Helen to not assist me out this time. As before, I froze for a second as the signal went to jump – but forced myself out, tucking my arms, tail and legs in as the tailplane whistled past above me. The static line tugged, and five seconds later there was a great jerk as if a giant had pulled me up under the shoulders – and there I was, eight hundred feet above Eastern Island, swinging down in what was suddenly a great empty silence, as the Barling Bomber droned away off towards the West.

Looking up, I could see Molly, Maria and Helen descending behind me, as the wind spun my ‘chute around. In fact, I was so busy looking at them that I only looked down when a hundred or so feet from the ground, barely enough time to prepare myself. Happily, I touched down on the grass strip to the side of the runway, though rather harder than I had hoped – hitting the ground as if jumping from an eight-foot wall is no joke, even unladen and onto rain-softened earth. But I picked myself up and gathered in the ‘chute as my friends landed, without much trouble (Maria having the misfortune to land on a gravel road beside the runway. Ouch!).

Our good fortune held up, in that the wind stayed down until the last two dorms’ teams took off. Jasbir Sind’s team and Prudence Akroyd’s bunch had a rather trickier time of it, in a sudden gust that threatened to give them practice with their life-jackets as well as their parachutes. Sophie D’Artagnan had been the last out, and actually landed on the beach – after which, our Tutors decided to call a halt for the day. Main Island is of course rather bigger to land on, but has less in the way of open, flat areas for a first attempt. Getting down safely in the jungles or swamps might be on the advanced course, but I for one will happily wait till the third-year to try it!

January 25th, 1935

At last, we return to the skies under our own power (so to speak. Jasbir Sind has mentioned the Indian Rope-trick, but I feel our Tiger Moths are more dashing, and break fewer laws of Nature).

Having checked and re-packed our parachutes on Tuesday evening, we had sewed small patches on our sleeves, marking us as initiates of the “Caterpillar Club”, having descended safely on our silks. Which is more than many commercial pilots of many years’ experience can claim – certainly, here at Songmark we have a very comprehensive Education.

It was very like meeting an old friend again, to finally get in the hangar with the Tiger Moths of the Academy. Possibly more like a horse, though, in that we needed to do the equivalent of cleaning the stable, feeding thoroughly and checking the tack down to the tiniest buckle, before going for the ride. Still, after luncheon I climbed into the front cockpit with Miss Pelton watching keenly from the rear instruction seat – and though she is hard to please, in five minutes I had checked all the instruments, received the clearance from the tower, and was taxiing over the grass towards the start of the runway. A minutes’ wait for the green flag, and off we went, for the first time in a month!

After a few circuits, Miss Pelton tested me on flying perfectly straight and level, which proved harder than I had thought, with rather “bumpy” air at a thousand feet. She explained through the speaking-tube that we would start on photography next week, and that we would be paying for each others’ plates. Should I be the one to spoil Missy K’s shot, I would get both the blame and the bill – a powerful incentive. Half an hour saw her satisfied for the present, and we went into circuits of the small “sacred Island” to the South of our own. Having seen signs of interesting Native rituals carried out there on the shortest day, I was keen to investigate further – but not to be too obtrusive. Having lived a little with the Hoele’toemi family, I would rather be

shown these things properly by Saimmi or her people, than ferret it out like a spy. Still, it is undoubtedly fascinating, and the next Solstice is a long time away.

On coming in to land, I passed low over the five Barlings drawn up outside the hangars. They must have arrived here by a rather roundabout route, island-hopping across the Pacific. Although not as huge as the Soviet K-7 that was here, not every runway can take them, and even our largest hangars can only house the tail and fuselage, leaving the wings and nose sticking out. One hopes we avoid any more tropical storms while they are visiting.

After two more flights and the filling in of the log-book, I was quite ready to call it a day. Though heaving on the stick and rudders is fairly hard work, it is the nervous strain that really "takes it out of you" – especially having the Tutor looking over one's shoulder the whole time. I felt more tired than many of our far more energetic trips with Jirry and his family through the jungles or sailing around the islands, which merely gave me a keen appetite, like a hard-fought hockey match.

Thinking of which, tonight I got out my radio and managed to contact Jirry. From my window I could see Mount Kiribatori outlined against the fading sunlight after supper – and thought of various events of that trip. One other event began on time today – after which I passed on the news that our adventure up there has not, after all, left me with a souvenir the like of which gift-shops do not sell. Which is a great relief to us both, but I have to confess one thought – the kittens in his village were indeed, quite adorable.

26th January 1935

A lively day indeed, heading out over to Casino Island for our dance lessons. Noota and Ethyl were on the water-taxi, and as we rounded Moon Island they mentioned strange explosions coming from the South tip. As there is a firing range on the island, it would usually provoke little comment – except that Ethyl says they were a most Historical sounding boom, with a cloud of grey smoke rising. Possibly a film company is stealing a march on their competitors by shooting Pirate films before the main tourist flood begins.

Ethyl tells us that March to May is when most film crews arrive on the island, with a good chance of sunshine and not too many tourists. Many a good "take" must have been spoiled by a speedboat cruising past a Spanish Galleon, or a gaggle of Hawaiian-shirted americans with cameras waving at the Polynesians of a supposed Eighteenth Century.

Jirry had mentioned that commercial films are a good source of money on these islands, as extras who bring their own Costumes with them are a great saving for a small film company. In fact, the locals often supply a whole range of behind-the-scenes workers in everything from props to stunt persons, which similarly saves a fortune on shipping a large team across the ocean and accommodating them over here. Who knows, perhaps one day we might have the opportunity to appear in some hula scene or Native crowd – in my local Costume and with my fur oiled for outdoor life, I would bet against my best friends back Home recognising me!

We surrendered our Passes to Miss Blande, who was chaperoning us across to the island, and hurried over to the Dance Studio. A strenuous morning indeed – we were quite gasping for breath by eleven, when we took a break for coconut-milk shakes. (These seem to be a local speciality, though the coconut milk is evidently canned, rather odd considering how the locals prefer fresh foods.)

On the wall, there is always a full display of posters advertising the music and dance events of the Islands, with a whole range of styles. There are small bands such as The KoKo-Knutts, The Spontones and The Jumping Jitneys, as well as large European dance orchestras such as the Syncopated Seventeen. This time of year, it appears that they are in very lively competition with each other, and rivalries appear to be fierce according to the "Daily 'Elele". (In which I discover that "Duelling Banjos" is more than just a musical duet.)

Helen spotted that next week there is the first real dance meet of the year, with famous solo and groups of dancers attending from all over the Islands and further afield. Definitely we want to go there – though alas it only starts in the evening, and runs till late. Persuading our Tutors to give us late Passes will not be easy. Molly suggests that we stealthily set fire to some large public building and then heroically extinguish it while folk are watching – but I think not. She has been telling us wistfully of inventive ways that businesses who have "gone straight" work the "insurance racket", which sound to me almost dishonest. Possibly being in Trade does that to one's principles.

Helen complained that Molly would do anything to "Make a fast Buck", just as a most striking Native gentleman of the antlered persuasion began to demonstrate his routine on the stage for us. Molly assented rather breathlessly, though I doubt she had the same type of Buck in mind.

Another two hours of hard exercise and attention to detailed dance routines followed, after which we retired to our usual luncheon spot, "The Missing Coconut". Much to Molly's delight, the gentleman who we had watched dancing came in, though somewhat more dressed for the street.

When Molly bought a second cup of coffee and “accidentally” tripped over his table with it, the rest of us inwardly groaned, I am sure, and wrote it off as her having seen far too many slushy movies. Such things never produce anything but cleaning-bills and a reputation for clumsiness (and for believing what Hollywood tells you.) Well! I would not have wagered a brass farthing on her chances, but in five minutes she was chatting very animatedly to a most apologetic buck, a Mr. Lars Nordstrom as we overheard, who is one of the Norwegian “Natives” of Main Island. From what I gathered and she recounted later, he is here rehearsing for the big dance meet next week, which is promised to be a major fire-lit event down on the beach.

With Maria’s assistance we managed to drag Molly away at the end of lunch break, and whisper to her that flicking one’s tail in such a way is quite Unladylike. Molly replied with some more unladylike Words in the privacy of the dressing-room, the like of which had Helen comparing her to a famous Sergeant her Father had known, who could swear for ten minutes and not once repeat himself.

A fine but uneventful afternoon followed, though on the way back I stopped off again at the Missing Coconut, to add to the tip we had left (Native Costume is very fine, but in its more Traditional form is rather short on pockets.) To my surprise, there again was the same waitress whom we had seen on Moon Island and elsewhere. I greeted her, with the observation that it must be a trouble to wander around the islands doing the same job – to which she replied that she is one of four almost identical cousins doing the job, and that they might be found almost anywhere on the Islands. So that’s all right! The mystery solved, and no need to tell Helen, who seems to prefer jumping at shadows these days.

29th January 1935

A still and damp day, as we made the trip over to Moon Island for the first of our armed Self-defence classes of the term. Miss Blande specialises in such things, and shepherded the entire First Year over for some more weapons safety lectures and familiarisation classes. A loud half-hour followed on the ranges, where I single-handedly dispatched twenty onrushing paper targets, and mortally wounded eight more. Molly appeared rather let down when handed a compact Beretta .22 automatic, and complained that an ordinary Police bullet-proof vest would probably stop it.

(We really must keep an eye on Molly, as she is getting decidedly Fanatical these days! On the way to the firing range, we noticed a pile of crates of equipment, one of which was labelled “Pineapples – Rain Island Militia”. There were no officials in sight, so before we could stop her, she had prized up the lid with her pocket jemmy set, muttering “They’ll never miss just one.” She looked awfully disappointed when she saw the contents – nice ripe pineapples, destined for the canteen. What did she expect?)

I did notice a dozen of the Spontoon Islands Technical High School students carrying boxes down towards the Southern tip of the island, all clad in their very unflattering dungarees. Ten minutes later, we were leaving the firing range when there came a very distinctive boom, with a grey cloud rising just as Ethyl had described.

Leaving Molly and Maria to cover for us, Helen and I ducked behind the coal bunkers and sprinted between cover to the Southern tip of the island, where we could look over the beach. A strange sight! Twenty of the S.I.T.H.S and two teachers were working on a platform looking out over the empty waters, clustered round a large tube. When they stood clear, I saw what they were doing – loading what looked like an ancient cannon with a smoothly fitting billet of wood, and making ready to fire. Then, one of them opened up a suitcase and attached a model monoplane to the front of wooden billet, before hastily stepping to one side.

So, at last we find out what the Model Club were boasting about, having a high-speed testing range. The cannon was fired in authentic Pirate style, the billet acting as a push-rod to launch the model – which streaked out on its own over the water, a dozen binoculars, cameras and stop-watches eagerly tracking its fate. One assumes the model is made of sturdier stuff than balsa wood and paper to withstand the shock of firing – sheet metal to judge by the colour, possibly mild steel or severe bronze. It must be a pain to see them heading out to sea after so much work, as they assuredly sink on landing.

Still, it looks like the S.I.T.H.S. has jumped ahead of us in their class project - we are both quite envious.

January 31st, 1935

A musical day, or at least a loud one. Although every day we look out of our window and see the tall short-wave masts (and the short tall-wave ones, presumably) of Radio LONO on its hill scarcely a mile North of us, none of had been there till today. Being so close to the transmitters makes it easy for even our most concealable “cat-whisker” radios to pick up a good signal, which certainly helped on our early tries at building a receiver.

Although the transmitters and studios are on top of the hill, Radio LONO have more extensive offices down here at the far end of the runway. Miss Pelton informed us that this time of year, they run talent contests before deciding which artists to “sign” for the tourist season. Spontoon’s tourists appear to be a demanding crowd, not content with hearing broadcast records, and wanting a regular supply of live and local talent.

Molly’s eyes lit up on hearing this – she has been telling us of how her Father’s Establishments often pulled in major Broadway stars, famous jazz musicians and the like. We have often sat up after lights-out with the headphones on, listening to radio crooners, tap-dancers and ventriloquists, the whole range of wireless entertainment. Alas, no stark Futurist bands seem to play within range of our receivers – though Madelene X has often commented that one might get the same kind of sound by rapidly turning the tuning dial back and forth in a thunderstorm. She is no great fan of the genre.

Anyway, after breakfast we assembled in our best uniforms and followed our Tutor down the gravel road alongside the runway. Maria looked at one particular patch with disdain, as if it still bore the mark of her unlucky landing. One day, folk really must invent parachutes that one can steer, at least enough to avoid a tree or greenhouse.

The Radio LONO headquarters were a long, low building with a steeply pitched asbestos sheet roof, something like a native longhouse rebuilt in more solid material. When we arrived, the main room was filled with (mostly) very bad ventriloquists and their dummies, all competing furiously for a “show” in the coming season. Molly whispered that they would have had short shrift from one of her Father’s Associates, “Legs” Lucciado, who has extensive interests in show business. One or two acts had indeed thought themselves “dead funny”, to discover the verdict was “dead funny, but funnier dead.”

We briefly met the head of the studios, a large and harassed white bear, before heading up the hill to see the radio setup, the reason for the visit. Fascinating! I fear we must have pestered the technicians ragged, as we filled in our notebooks. It seems that there is a submarine cable and land-line across to Main Island which connects to the new radio towers past Crater Lake – so the radio can transmit from two stations at once, on slightly different wave-bands. Madelene X’s ears went right up, indeed she almost jumped up and down barking, having spotted the idea straight away (she generally carries a Wireless magazine to class and has solder flux for a perfume.) Radio LONO has been used for years by flyers to find their way to the islands with a direction-finder: now with a more modern set, they can read out the distance as well from the angle of the two transmitters.

At least, as the technician pointed out, from the North and South they can. One wonders if the Spontoonies have anything against encouraging arrivals from the East and Western sides of the Nimmitz Sea ?

On the way back down past the offices, we passed a small ambulance slowly heading out towards the water-taxis, with two dishevelled-looking Natives glaring at each other, one arm apiece in slings. Molly suggested that they were ventriloquists who had tied for first place, and the radio station had made their glove-puppets fight to the death to decide the winner.

We are all getting quite WORRIED about Molly.

February 1st, 1935

Dear Diary. We did it! Passes for tomorrow to the dance festival!

Today being Friday, we had almost given up on getting a chance to win Passes. But Molly saved the day, with a most excellent suggestion. All this week we have been busy in the classroom and the cockpit with aerial photographs, and yesterday we each had to think of a project. Molly hit upon the perfect mission for us.

As we were taking instructions on the ranges today (small-calibre hunting rifles, very handy when shooting “for the pot”), we made it to Moon Island unchallenged, despite our unusual luggage. Skipping lunch was a small price to pay – the four of us laid down a full “reconnaissance” of the S.I.T.H.S project, drew up a tightly surveyed map of their firing range, and with cameras, stop-watches and a great deal of stealth, we “scooped” the whole trial on film. A very busy afternoon followed in the developing labs and with slide-rules (which I at least know how to use, though the sight of one terrifies Helen practically out of her stripes) we measured their rather odd monoplanes’ performances just as well as they could have managed themselves. One particularly good shot Maria managed with our longest lens, showing the model performing an inelegant “splash-down” some four hundred yards offshore. One hopes that a manned version will have somewhat better landing behaviour.

A hasty compiling of our results into a folder, and we were off to see Miss Devinski. Helen was a little worried, muttering something about “this stuff they either give you an ‘A’ or an ‘F’ for”, but our tutor was quite delighted. She did caution Helen and myself not to do the same on any of the more Official projects around here – but that the S.I.T.H.S was fair game.

So – we are retiring early, unsure of just how late tomorrow the dancing will go on till. Miss Devinski has cautioned that we must be at the water taxis of Casino Island no later than midnight, and that she will be attending the dance herself. Presumably if we do not leave the

dance by midnight, we will not be transformed into pumpkins – but if the Senior Years have to come looking for us, we will probably wish we were.

February 2nd, 1935

(Though written the day after – it was a very long day.)

A fine day, quite the best we have seen in weeks. Off bright and early after breakfast, having picked up our passes. Having literally all day on Casino Island is a great treat, though it is educational – and indeed, we learned a few things that were not on the timetable.

First, our usual strenuous dance lesson, with our instructor really putting us through the wringer as she teaches us some of the more spectacular moves. If this dance is really titled “The Palm Sway”, I feel sure its full title must be “The Palm Sways as a typhoon ties its branches in knots.” We hardly took a break till lunchtime, and were feeling quite “all-in” by the time we broke for lunch. None of the Hoele’toemis were there, and neither was Mr. Nordstrom, though we pointed out to Molly that he is due to be dancing tonight.

The waitress we met last week was not to be seen, but another one was there to replace her – obviously a Native by her fur pattern, and one I am sure I have seen before somewhere.

In the afternoon, Helen and I demonstrated our freshly repaired native Costume, at least the more modest versions. Many of the S.I.T.H.S. were there, and were trying to find fault with our tailoring – but the worst they could come up with, was that we had no right to be wearing it. So, I believe we can put that down as a vote for authenticity! Molly and Maria are still wearing the first designs we wore last term, over bathing-costumes. Which proved to be a wise move, as Maria’s Native dress suffered an “in-flight structural failure” when stepping through one of the more strenuous moves. Proving the advantage of always having a back-up system, unless one cares little for consequences.

Casino Island is definitely what the Spontoones call “Euro”, which is odd as they also use the term to apply to Chinese, Australians and generally anyone not wearing a grass skirt. Indeed, it is the only spot one expects to see folk in formal dress. We pass the Japanese Embassy on the way to lunch every Saturday, and have often seen folk there in stiff white shirts, black tail-coats and meticulously polished top-hats, looking in the height of fashion (the fashion of 1895, that is.)

A long afternoon session took us up till four, when we were left with three hours until the dance festival starts. Of course, we could have returned to Songmark, eaten there and returned on a later water-taxi – but having got to Casino Island, we determined to make the most of our chance. It is a pity that Jasbir’s dorm had no Passes to stay late – we waved them off from the “Rainbow Bridge” breakwater, and argued in a friendly way of how to spend the time. Leaving the other three busy at it, I slipped away for two minutes and booked a taxi back. Arriving at midnight to find the docks empty and our allowed time ticking away, would not be a good thing.

Maria had won the argument when I returned, using a jolly effective arm-lock that Mrs. Fairburn-Sykes taught us all last term. Having no strong opinions either way, I agreed with her plan to see something of the high-life here. We had packed a respectable-looking coat each, to cover our Songmark uniforms, so we should be able to pass muster in “Euro” society as well as Spontoonian tonight.

On the southern side of the island, there are a number of famous hotels, cinemas and clubs, “The Coconut Shell” being just the most famous of them. There is the Tiki Hut, the Volcano Club, the Typhoon Tavern and many others – most of them closed at this time of year. Although the locals do use them, there is hardly the demand to make opening and staffing a hundred-capacity dance floor worthwhile, let alone half a dozen of them.

Maria seemed rather hard to please, so we kept going North until we were in less well-lit streets, before she spotted somewhere she liked the look of, “The Durian Grove”. I have seen the ferocious-looking fruits of that name in the markets here, and have passed the stalls rapidly and on the upwind side. I was hoping the tavern would not have the same fragrance as its namesake! In fact, it was a fairly standard-looking place, with a roof of low wooden beams that either came from wrecked ships, or wished they had. (The tavern across the street on the other hand, looked definitely seedy. With a name like The Devil’s Reef, and signs proclaiming “Saturday Special - get wrecked for 4 shells!” I was glad Maria did not insist on taking us there.)

Being rather early, there were only a few folk in the place, mostly nautical types, though looking rather like staid bosuns rather than swaggering sailors out on shore leave. It is a great disappointment – the real sailors one sees are not at all like in the films, and I have yet to see one dance the hornpipe or half a dozen of them break out into song. We ordered a large Nootnops Blue apiece, not having classes or such tomorrow – though it does not leave one with a headache the next morning, the after-effects are quite vivid, and rather disturbing when trying to calculate wind drifts and fuel flows.

One interesting character did appear, a thin feline with a slightly worse-for-wear safari suit and hat, and a rather fanatical expression not unlike our local Bishop back in Barseshire. He took a look at us four – Maria looked somewhat menacing perhaps, clad in trench-coat and dugout-boots – and instead he latched onto the sailors, and was telling them a tale of

misfortune, ruin and horror at least eighteen percent beyond all possible imagination, when the landlord threw him out into the street. One suspects he is well-known here. A pity in a way, as what I overheard of his story sounded quite fascinating, especially the bit about the lobsters. Helen whispered rather disparagingly that even if a lobster was as big as he described, it would hardly have the equipment or the inclination to do THAT to anyone.

After a meal and another Nootnops Blue apiece, we realised that we would just be in time for the start of the festival, which is being held in "Student's bay" on the Northern side of the island. Although Casino Island is little over a mile across, actually finding one's way about takes time, especially since the side away from the great tourist hotels is rather poorly lit. The Spontoonies themselves seem to get around perfectly well by moonlight, and probably fire up the more expensive lights when there are tourists to appreciate (and pay for) them.

Thinking of lights, we spotted the lights of Student's bay as soon as we rounded the hill, recognisably fire and torch light rather than electrical. The bay is a sandy bite taken out of the coast, equipped tonight with rows of benches and some large marquee type tents, presumably for refreshments and such. Just above is the rather large school – not the S.I.T.H.S. but a more junior branch, whose boathouse was sheltering the judges as we arrived. Quite a crowd had already gathered, though folk were still setting up tables and a rather crackly loudspeaker unit. I spotted Jonni and Marti Hoele'toemi, and we had a fine chat – Jirry and the rest of the family are arriving for the village dance, with some of their neighbours. The schedule was quite crowded, with a large area fenced off where Haio village was to compete, or "strut their stuff" as Helen called it.

A quite excellent evening followed – almost discouraging, to watch what a top-rate dancer can manage after starting young and practising constantly. But we hardly had time to compare our own poor efforts – the solo shows alone would have made it worth coming to watch, and indeed Molly was far from the only one to have her tail flagged while watching Mr. Nordstrom perform. He won third prize in the Main Island competition, which even we could see was awfully hotly fought !

Around ten, there was a half-hour break, where we met up with the Hoele'toemis and had time to talk. It seems they are quite accustomed to competing for Haio village - and managed to win twice last year, despite it being such a small community. The whole family were there, including half a dozen cousins from Main Island we were introduced to – Mrs. Hoele'toemi seems to have mentioned me to them, by their reactions – they greeted me almost as if I was a relative.

It was quite a sight, two complete village teams facing each other in a close formation dance, lit by the firelight and the rising moon. It must be a real challenge to judge the winner, but as the "heats" played off, Haio village came a very tightly fought second place, only beaten by one of the Philippine villages on Main Island, that must be easily five times the size. Still, an excellent sight, and as dear Mrs. De Rais our Hockey teacher used to say, "It's how you play, not just how you score that counts." She would then advise us to "nobble" the opposing team's three best strikers in the first two minutes, which rather spoiled the sentiment.

At last, it was over – the prizes awarded, the band packing up, and half past eleven at night, with a nicely gibbous moon rising above the phosphorescently glowing ruins on the hilltop. A pretty sight indeed, but one we had little time to appreciate. Getting Molly away from Mr. Nordstrom was rather a chore, and Maria seemed to have been partaking of FAR too much Nootnops Blue to understand the need for urgency.

We headed back as fast as we could, through the very dark streets. Hardly wanting to risk getting lost on top of the island, I judged the fastest route should be around the coast road towards the Eastern side of the island. It seemed much the oldest part with "Euro" buildings, though the parts around what the map prosaically calls "Number One Dock" and "Number Two Dock" were rather run-down. There were street-lamps, though most of them were dark, rather than the occasional lantern that had lit the more "native" Northern side of Casino Island.

Still – the area was hardly deserted, even so late in the evening. We had only explored there briefly in daylight, and the view around midnight seemed rather different. Certainly, the Spontoonies seem to stay up awfully late, as there were quite a few taverns and what looked like small hotels lit up and sounding quite packed. I was about to ask some island ladies who were standing on the street corner, when the bus was due that they seemed to be waiting for – when Helen dragged me away quite urgently. True, we saw no signs of buses on the long jog round to the water taxi docks.

Happily, my planning had paid off – there was one water taxi waiting, and it was ours. Off home to Songmark, with Miss Pelton awaiting us with a lantern and a stopwatch – and a half dozen third-year girls who seemed greatly relieved not to be sent out to get us. (We had asked, last term, if they ever actually have to track down the junior years. Indeed they do – one dorm of our current second-years was found an hour after curfew, having bought each other rounds of "Pineapple Krakataus" and been quite carried away with high spirits. Which was the last time they were in high spirits all term, with no more Passes and as many chores as would incite a Penal Regiment to mutiny.)

A long, but quite excellent day – and we have seen yet more sides of the islands. Molly seemed highly amused, after a brief conversation she had with one of the ladies at a bus queue –

at any rate, she was chuckling and murmuring something about “buldaggers” whatever those may be, as she dropped off to sleep.

February 3rd, 1935

Alas, they issue no Passes for being excused reveille at Songmark! Yesterday’s six hours of dances, followed by a late evening of the local herbal beverage and a late-night sprint around Casino Island, took rather a toll on us. Getting Maria started in the mornings tends to be difficult at the best of times – it is hard to persuade her to get up when she is holding two pillows over her head and locking her horns in the bed-posts.

I took a leaf from Uncle Archibald’s book, of how he has three teams “Bump-start” his tank battalion’s Vickers Mediums when their engines fail – the beds here are firm but really quite bouncy, and we managed to bounce her out, hitting the floor with a very decisive thump. Her “Bump-start” was followed by the other three of us practising the “Bum’s rush” Molly has demonstrated in self-defence classes – all the way to the showers. As I pointed out, had we awoken earlier, there might have been some warm water left.

Maria can be most unreasonable before breakfast. The two-pound block of soap missed my head by a fair margin, but we will still be expected to pick up the pieces.

February 5th, 1935

Dear Diary - I well recall my dear Father’s expression when he saw the Songmark Prospectus, and the size of the fees they charge for the course. But after two days of being either Pilot or Observer in our dear Tiger-Moths, zooming around the island exposing hundreds of feet of film (sometimes accidentally – the back plates on the war-surplus cameras have seen better days) it is hardly suprising. Still, Father did say it was money well spent, and that I should try not to be home-sick. This very morning I received his postcard giving me full permission to stay at the Academy over the Easter holidays as well, and promising to wire me a most generous extra allowance if I did. Most touching ! And to think, I had not even got round to asking for his approval!

Anyway, we have “Recce’d” all of Casino Island, and are making big sketch-maps based on the results. It is proving quite a lesson – Prudence Akroyd’s dorm were almost at civil war with each pair insisting their photos were the only accurate ones – it turned out in the end that one aircraft had always mapped on the North-bound leg of each run, and the other on the South-bound one. Putting the resulting photographs together made a rather odd map, especially on the centre join where the old ruins make a good landmark on top of the hill. Or they would have, but the angles were all wrong.

At lunch-time, we were just checking our bracing wires and engines, when we had quite a treat – the red lights flashing on the control tower announced an aircraft was arriving, and to clear the runway. Ten minutes later, we rushed to our recognition sheets as a very distinctive shape arrived – a brand-new Handley-Page Heyford, the pride of the Fleet Air Arm! Prudence Akroyd might have cheered louder than I did, but there could scarcely be a broken window’s difference of energy in it.

The Heyford looks a wonderfully futuristic craft – a really radical, modern biplane bomber, with its fuselage high on the top wing and its fuel and bombs in lower wing bays, where ordinary lorries can load them without cranes and winches. Maria looked quite envious – and indeed, in a few years surely all aircraft will look like this. I think everyone who had any film left, took a shot or two of the visitor as it taxied up to the control tower, and turned towards our biggest hangars. Still, although we are paying for each others’ films, I doubt anyone will object to such a snapshot for their scrap-books.

We had to wait till after supper to learn more, when we tuned into Radio LONO for the daily news, which lists shipping and aircraft movements. A stirring tale indeed – the Heyford is mapping out emergency fuelling stations, our Fleet having agreed it with the Althing that rules the island. It had taken off from the Lord Moseley, one of our largest carriers, some eight hundred miles out in the Nimmitz Sea. Even after such a flight, it still carried enough fuel on board to reach Vostok on the far side – which is its destination in a few days’ time.

I must say, it was a splendid sight in the moonlight, to see the great shape casting its shadow over the runways like a guardian sphinx. Three cheers for the Fleet Air Arm!

February 7th, 1935

Definitely, one can see signs of spring here, with the first flowers of the season coming out. A warm day – and after a very hard lesson in rigging biplanes, we are thinking about the weekend.

Though not with Passes – Helen for one votes that we break out and re-visit Mahanish's Pilot's Bar. Of course, we pass it every time we fly our Tiger Moths, but that is hardly the same thing.

Molly has been collecting "True Crimes Illustrated" since last term, and is building up a handy reference collection. Each issue has a "Handy hints and Tips" supplement written by professionals, which compiles into a jolly useful book – for serious reference use only, I need hardly add. There is a section on cat-burglary that we can put to legitimate use – stealing away from our dorms, without the staff underneath our rooms noticing.

Helen has been looking through the section on lock-picking, which has templates and cutting jigs printed in the magazine for the requisite tools, which we can quietly make in the workshops. Again, it is quite legitimate – after all, one might lose one's keys, and be locked out. (Molly's preferred solution is one we have been warned against in self-defence classes, as shooting off a lock tends to send metal bouncing in all directions, and may wake the neighbours.)

Our dance practising goes very well, and indeed we need more than one day a week to practice what we learn on Saturdays. Our Tutors are quite supportive, and both our dorm and Jasbir's are excused chores on condition we work hard. Miss Wildford drops by occasionally to check we are not shirking, and indeed she has shown us a few fine moves herself. (Having seen her in something like a Native costume, one understands why she is said to be called "Checkers", as her fur pattern really is very oddly symmetrical. One might think it dyed, even.)

Alas, Li Han sprained her ankle quite badly on the parachuting, and even two weeks later is not really up to a long dance routine. Which is a shame, but she is eager to try a break-out on Saturday. After all, with their help we all managed to get to the "V-Gerat" concert, even when I could hardly walk – and no doubt we can get her across the island to Mahanish's. But as my Uncle Gerald said, of the times he spent looking through the wire of the German prison-camp – "Two hundred miles to Sweden wasn't so bad – the first twenty yards are the hardest part."

As our two dorms have a good excuse to have the sewing-machines out to make our dancing costumes, we are taking the chance to put some more disguises together, having seen more of what is actually worn on the islands. Eight easily concealable extra costumes are made and hidden for what Erica calls "Der Tag", and we are looking forward to pitting our wits against our tutors' precautions.

Oddly enough, Erica and Noota, being third-years, comment that it is just as hard for them to break curfew as it is for us. Which would either mean they have never improved their techniques (improbable, to say the least) or that our Tutors deliberately make it harder, like raising the bar at a high-jump contest. Very strange – if the latter case was true, Miss Devinski could keep us within bounds as securely as the Tower of London, using the vigilance she applies to the third-years. And yet, if we exert ourselves to the utmost, we have a fair chance of getting away with it.

Interestingly, Missy K's dorm have not "broken out" once, and the only time Madelene X tried it, she was caught with her dorm and marched back in despair. Only Prudence Akroyd's bunch have had any success apart from us – and they are making it on their own, which is all to their credit. I get along very well with Jasbir, whose Family are of course Maharajahs, and send their other children to Eton or Roedean. (Jasbir has shown me a snapshot of her sister Meera at Roedean, happily charging into a hockey melee with stick whistling above her head. Always an innovative school, it seems to have adopted Australian Rules hockey, where using the sticks as quarterstaves is not only legal but gains points.)

One would suppose that Missy K has very little reason to risk her dorm's reputation on breakouts and such stunts, when she can go anywhere she chooses in the holidays. Being our only native "Spontoonie", she is perfectly free to go wherever she wishes without the restrictions Helen and I were under, merely returning to her village. Plus there is the fact that she is hardly suited to swinging down improvised ropes or squeezing through tunnels – and unlike the rest of the dorms, there are only two others in with her. She may not outvote Ada Cronstein and Sopsy Forsythe, but her vote (like most things) carries a lot of weight.

February 8th, 1935

Our First Aid classes certainly took an advanced form today – as we headed out to Casino Island, to look at the hospital there. Of course, our Matron Mrs. Oelabe is fully qualified in the usual remedies, having by all accounts set Noota's broken arm last year after an engine slipped its mountings – but we spent all morning being shown round by local professionals who are skilled in the Island's more special problems.

It is a good thing indeed that most of the tourists keep to their resorts and beaches – as we were introduced to some rather nasty denizens of the jungle (safely pickled in alcohol.) Although mostly rare except on Main Island, there are scorpions and spiders, and one adorably fuzzy-looking millipede that one would bitterly regret stroking. We also saw photographs of the afflicted patients – and all swore to be very careful to check our boots and flying helmets carefully in the morning when we next get into the jungles.

The main hospital is quite high up on the side of the island looking over Tower Park, where we would have passed last Saturday night if we had taken the shortest and not the safest route back from Student Bay. Although the sign outside says "Casino Island General", inside there is a plaque in the local language. Missy K tells us it says "Joseph Munrotoapu Memorial Hospital", and is named after a medical hero of the Gunboat Wars. For a change, Missy K was quite useful to have around, and recounted the tale.

It seems that during the landings on the eastern end of Main Island, Doctor Munrotoapu was captured when his village was cut off by advancing soldiery from the troop ship "Whitmore" – he refused to leave his hospital and patients, but treated casualties on all sides. After two days, the occupying troops had been scouring the jungles looking for native sharpshooters and "Franc-tireurs" who had been causing them steady losses. Finding very few, they became frustrated enough to hold the village for ransom, and demanded that all partisans must turn themselves in, with their weapons, or the village would be shelled flat. (There is a picture of the scene in the hospital, one can see the huge dynamite-gun of the "Vesuvius" floating in the eastern channel, ready to bombard the islands again.)

Alas for both sides, the commander had quite underestimated the resolve of the Spontoonies. They had been laying in hundreds of one-shot "Bamboo mortars" in the thickets, and having laid them in lit the fuses and commenced a barrage of their own, just as the troops were drawn up in the market square ready to move into the interior. The main officers being killed or wounded, the surviving troops commenced what in the Great War one heard of as "a campaign of general Frightfulness" and set the village alight with most of its inhabitants in it. The hospital was not spared – Doctor Munrotoapu personally dragged twelve of his helpless patients out to safety, but was lost when the burning roof collapsed as he was going back for the last ones.

Definitely, these are tales that do not feature on the postcards – especially so considering many of the tourists these days come from the nations who were involved in the whole sorry mess. Still, a generation ago things were very different – one can hardly imagine these days a Native militia holding out in the jungle against a modern army with all its artillery and air power to call on. Bamboo spikes and booby-traps are really something we shall see only in the historical dramas, which is just as well.

February 9th, 1935

A complex day indeed, Dear Diary – but quite a lot to show for it! We started with our usual Saturday trip over to the Casino Island Dance School, where our instructor noted our practising had paid off. Maria especially is proving popular by all comments – although the films naturally show island heroines with classical "film-star" looks, in fact the Spontoonies seem to prefer a more generous, and decidedly powerful figure. Still, one can see the studios' point – Maria is hardly the type to swoon and need rescuing from being cast into a volcano, even if the script demands it. Having seen her throw even Missy K like a sandbag in our self-defence class, one had better risk the wrath of an unfed volcano.

Alas, of Jirry's family, only Moeli dropped by at lunchtime – though she did whisper that Jirry and Marti would be passing Mahanish's Pilot's Bar tonight. Her fur is looking definitely glossy and glowing, though hardly smelling of tulupas oil at all. And her figure is certainly attracting complements – though I blush to think why.

We have almost mastered "The Palm Sway", and are learning how to read the "story" of traditional hula dances. Our teachers are certainly of the fun-loving type, and mentioned a cautionary tale of an island girl slipping in the middle of one story routine, and inadvertently proposing marriage to the audience. As with the natives' fur patterning, we shall wait until we know what they say, before saying it in public.

After all this exercising, indeed I have had to let my clothes out – especially around the shoulders, where all our heavy work in the engineering sheds is making its mark. What with our improving physique from dance practice, self-defence classes and everything, one can see that by the second or third-years, our Tutors can afford to be more relaxed about letting us out of their sight. It is also proving very handy, as we can get through dance routines that would have us left panting on the floor, this time last term.

The Spontoon Technical High School crowd were proving as irritating as ever – Helen had challenged them before Xmas to a dance contest, and now they "invited" us to name the day. Well! The First of March is a local holiday, which our timetables are allowing us to join in – and I hope our Tutors will give their approval. After all, we will be upholding the name of our School, and giving the S.I.T.H.S. a severely tweaked nose if we win (if we lose, Molly says she will claim an unfair advantage of their having a lifetimes' exposure to the style, as against a single term's hard practice for us.)

On returning to Songmark, a bath and a fine meal (fish and sweet potatoes. No Poi.) were all we needed to quite restore our energies – which is another benefit of our growing fitness. Fortunately, being a Saturday we have no set work for the evening – the much-coveted

gramophone was filling our corridor from Prudence Akroyd's room, something from Mr. Thornton Throbby by the sound of it.

By half-past six it was quite dark, and we bundled up our costumes – and put our plan into effect. Leaving our radios on, we hooked up pulleys to a belay around a roof support, well padded to leave no telltale marks on the paintwork. And then out of the window from Jasbir's dorm, which is above the kitchen rather than the staff living areas – leaving our rope behind us for our return. Of course, having an open window and a dangling rope would really not do – so we used the second part of the plan. We had climbed down a double bight of the rope – but each end was fixed to a much longer silk thread unpicked from a frayed parachute, making a closed loop. Pulling it round the pulley left only the thin silk on the outside of the building, quite invisible in the dark. A quick check that there was nobody around to see, and we were off, heading out into the dark along a footpath away from the roadway, which we had marked with white papers tied to bushes an hour before sunset.

Ten minutes' cautious work got us to the "village" at the end of the airfield – mostly hangars and repair shops now closed and dark, but with three small hotels well lit for incoming aircrew, and Mahanish's Pilot's Bar. We changed into our costumes behind Sara's Air Repair, and strolled nonchalantly into Mahanish's, trying to look and feel unworried. (Molly has had experience with people getting through Customs and other troublesome barriers, and has given us some tips. One husband and wife team employed by her Father, were always in the middle of a carefully rehearsed tearing argument when they passed the Officials – and were rarely questioned, probably since no "real" smuggler would conceivably draw attention to themselves. Besides, most folk secretly love to watch a good argument, and would think it impolite to interrupt.)

The place was surprisingly full, with the crews of three transport planes, nice Armstrong-Whitworth Argosies, and a flying-boat crew who it seems were berthed off Moon Island but sleeping over here. Mahanishes is famous for its food across this part of the Pacific, not only for its chilli but for "Popatohi", a variant of a native Spontoonie dish that a generation of adapting to tourists has tamed from its original pungency. I had wondered what the odd aroma was, on my last trip here – but very soon after, an encounter with the local chilli had put my nose quite "hors de combat" for the evening.

Eight large bowls of Popatohi were the first things on the menu – with a large pitcher of Nootnops Blue for each of our two tables. The local dish was definitely – Distinctive, consisting of a local fish something like anchovies but more so – cooked with garlic and a Native plant served like pickled cabbage, but FAR more so. Not a dish to have one's co-pilot eating before a long flight, unless one had dined on it as well!

Sophie D'artagnan and Li Han were in the best of spirits, and compared the dish very favourably to similar ones from their homeland – Sophie to "Bouillabaisse", and Li to "Kim Chee", which I have heard of as prepared by pickling cabbage and spices in a pot and burying all winter before exhuming in Spring (or from other reports, it is far better left buried indefinitely.)

The rest of the company was very lively, one of the crews of the Argosies singing at the table next to us. From what I heard, the crew had all flown together at the end of the Great War, and were getting quite nostalgic about their experiences. Though from what they were recounting it is hard to imagine why, as witnessed the song they sang in a quite tolerable close harmony:

"When you're a mile over the trenches
You're dodging both side's shot and shell
And keep one eye watching your tailplane
For Huns on the warpath as well

They'll sneak up from under your blind spot
They'll drop on you out of the sun
So watch out for Fokkers behind you
Or Pfaltzes you just can't outrun

When you're out alone and surrounded
Your Lewis-gun's jammed tight as well
You can't even jump with your 'brolly
For 'chutes are expensive as hell!

They've handed you out a new airplane
All signed for and guaranteed sound
So the Powers That Be say "Stick with it!"
And you'll stick it right into the ground

The recovery teams come to get you
They'll pick the bits out of the hole
Though pilots are cheap, not so airplanes

No bets on which one they want whole!

Take out the cam-shaft from my backbone
Pull the piston rods out of my brain
Untangle the pump from my pelvis
And assemble the engine again! “

Just as we were finishing our meal, we spotted to our joy Jirry and Marti arriving, with three of their neighbours – evidently they had brought additional company along, having heard that our two dorms were “busting out” together. And a fine evening it was – though both Maria and Irma made the mistake of adding Palm Wine to Nootnops Blue, the two of which complement each other in a quite alarming way.

I might have been the only one to have been watching the clock – or to notice at ten that Helen was missing, as indeed had Marti been for some time. Molly volunteered that she had headed out to the “restroom” twenty minutes before – which curious phrase took me a few seconds to translate, real Rest Rooms having comfy chairs and couches, unlike any privvies I have ever found. Someone had to be the first to break up the party – though as I kissed Jirry a fond good-night and steeled myself to having to hunt Helen down outside, Helen and Marti returned, looking slightly out-of-breath.

The Hoele’toemis offered to return with us, to “draw fire” by perhaps some loud singing in the opposite direction to where we would be scaling the wall – but Jasbir and I had to decline, not wanting any extra eyes looking out of the Songmark windows for any reason. So we parted at the end of the runway, changed costumes by the furthest runway light, and made a quiet retreat towards our Dorm building.

And then – horrors! The silk cord that should have been drifting invisibly was quite invisible indeed – our window was slightly ajar, but twelve feet off the ground! We searched for any sign of the cord for ten minutes, growing increasingly desperate. Maria suggested setting off a fire-alarm and pretending we had been the first to get out when the rest of Songmark joined us outside – but I doubt that would fool our Tutors for a second (and one close sniff of Maria would reveal the distinctive fragrance of Nootnops, or Popatohi on the rest of us. Popatohi is not on the menu at Songmark, being rather a Bold dish for most tastes.)

At last, I hit upon a scheme that I had once seen in a circus act. There being eight of us, and knowing Maria, Irma Bundt and Sophie D’artagnan are built on sturdy lines, I arranged them on the ground, bracing themselves against the wall. Helen and Molly went up on their shoulders, while I climbed up between them, my fingertips just grasping the window-ledge, but too precariously to pull myself up. Li Han climbed up our whole edifice, being by far the lightest and most agile despite her sore ankle– and though her claws scratched me somewhat, she managed to wriggle past me and up into the room. A worried minute followed, before the main rope was let down again – and I was the first one to climb it.

We were all up inside a minute, Jasbir being the last as she diligently scuffed out any footprints on the ground below. There was no sign of any disturbance in the room – none of the neatly penned “See me in the morning” notes that our Tutors leave – and yet Li had found our rope neatly pulled up and coiled on the floor. We hastily removed the evidence and bade goodnight to Jasbir, returning “home” to our next dorm, to puzzle over the fate of the rope. Had anyone such as Missy K pulled it up out of spite, surely she would have also closed the window, leaving us to our certain fate. Very odd!

The worry and exercise seemed to have sobered Maria up considerably, and indeed to have put her in rather an irritable mood. She asked Helen what she was looking so pleased with herself for – and when Helen told her, in somewhat excessive detail, I doubt it improved matters.

Still, a daring “raid” out and an exciting evening all round, especially for Helen. Next time, we will have to do better than a rope left outside the window – unless of course Jasbir can get the Rope Trick of her countrymen up and working. One lives in hope!

February 10th, 1035

A day of torrential rain indeed – quite enough to wash any tracks we might have left outside with our circus-trick last night (or “Combined Tactics” as an old military manual of Father’s called it.) Maria in a rather bad mood, suffering the after-effects of mixing Palm Wine and Nootnops Blue – but not as severely as Irma Bundt, one “Swiss Miss” who is feeling decidedly under the weather. Indeed, Miss Devinski inquired quite sweetly whether she would like to visit our Matron – at which point, Jasbir reports, Irma sprang out of bed instantly and reported herself quite well. Our Matron Mrs. Oelabe is skilled in accurately diagnosing her patients, and in dosing them with ferocious concoctions that at the very least discourage one from reporting in sick.

Despite the weather, at nine sharp we heard the thunder of radial engines as one of the Argosies took off right on schedule, heading out for Vostok and points West. We keep all the

schedules in the downstairs common-room, and it is a point of honour to bring in an updated timetable before the other dorms manage it. (Missy K generally wins, and refuses to say how.)

The rain was quite torrential as we headed out towards the dock, suitably clad in oilskins and sou'wester hats crammed over our ears. I should think the water taxi lady charged double on such a day – the visibility was awful, and there was hardly another boat to be seen moving, apart from a rusting collier moving away from the power station site at Casino Island. Still, I always keep my binoculars handy – and today, it proved just as well. The rain was coming across in sweeping curtains, with perhaps half a minute of tolerably clear visibility before the next drenching – and someone was using that to their advantage.

As we approached the tip of Moon Island, I had my binoculars out to spot if anything interesting had arrived in the night. Nothing had – but some interesting craft were leaving the Island, hidden from general view by the weather. I had heard the distinctive gunpowder boom of the S.I.T.H.S. testing range when leaving the dock, but thought nothing of it. When we turned the corner, it was a different matter.

I suppose our water taxi must have been hidden entirely by the curve of the shore and the dense sheets of rain – at any rate, we emerged into a clear corridor just as they touched off their salvaged cannon. This time, however, things were rather different – instead of merely zooming, stalling and falling into the ocean a few hundred yards from the shore – it was not fifty yards above us and to our right when the model gave a dull “Whump!” and began to trail a foot of blue flame roaring like a blowtorch. I had my binoculars on it in an instant, as it pulled away and began to accelerate – only to shed a wing and tumble into the waters a mile North of Casino Island, itself unseen in the driving rain.

By the time I had watched its splashdown and turned round to whence it had come, there were tarpaulin covers over everything, and all the launching crew had ducked out of sight. I had noticed a very striking gentleman whom I had seen when we surveyed their project before, a tall black and white striped Native with a most luxuriant tail, who seems to be in charge of the works. One definitely suspects the S.I.T.H.S. did not want us to see that, despite their test being a partial failure. I caught one good glimpse of the model, and am fairly sure I have seen something like it before, though not as a flying aircraft.

Arriving at the docks, we hurried up the hill towards the Church for a rather damp but heart-felt sermon by the Reverend Bingham. I for one thought “The parable of the left-handed lascar and the monkey-wrench” quite amusing, and to judge by the full attendance, the Reverend is proving quite popular. Still, we were glad to meet Jerry and the rest of the Hoele'toemis out in the entrance hall afterwards, Marti and Helen doing their best to look saintly. It is just as well Helen does not subscribe to Maria's religion, or with all the confessionals, she would have but little time to socialise after.

Interestingly, I noticed a plaque commemorating the founding of the church in 1913 – referring itself as the first Anglican Church, Accounting Island. I mentioned this to the Hoele'toemis – at which his Father explained that had been the island's name, before the Casino was built. It had been the administrative centre for the various plantations in the old Colonial days, of which little but the old China Dock at the Western end of the island remains. Fascinating!

(Later). Back at Songmark, I scoured the pages of “Jane's All The World's Aircraft” for the rather distinctive shape I had seen earlier, but without success. I was just about to give in, when Madelene X came in, arguing loudly with Ethyl and Methyl about the merits of monoplanes as opposed to biplanes. Seeing her reminded me at once – and in three minutes flat, I had unearthed the French-language magazine with the bold propeller-less designs of Mr. Rene LeDuck. Well! It looks as if someone else on Spontoon subscribes to “L'Aeronaut”, and has thought about the problem of actually launching one. A nice class project, but surely little future in it. One hopes that, Mr. Jules Verne aside, pilots will not be trading runways for launching cannon any time soon.

(Helen took a look over my shoulder, put two and two together and muttered something about “Aerial Torpedo”. She suggested quietly that we look the other way in future, or we are liable to be taken for an equally short and unhealthy ride.)

Indeed – are the S.I.T.H.S. doing this as a class project, or something more? In some parts of the world, one would expect the Government to instruct aircraft companies to work on this sort of thing – Madelene X proudly boasts that France has over two hundred companies fiercely competing at any one time. Over here though – things are different, as they lack manufactories such as Birmingham or the Ruhr to support aircraft building. The S.I.T.H.S. are partly supported by the local government, after all. A lot of the most ground-breaking work has always been done by mavericks and keen amateurs working outside the confines of a traditional company, back Home at least. One hopes we have projects like it in remoter parts of Britain – or are their Mad Scientists better than our Mad Scientists?

A busy week in class had a most interesting interruption this afternoon – Miss Pelton announced that a flying-boat had arrived over on Moon Island, carrying three of the original Songmark Academy students! It seems they run a company together, arranging transport for film producers looking for unusual locations. Spontoon is of course well-known already, but makes a fine base for the remoter islands. Miss Pelton added that they had found some of the least-known spots in the Pacific, as witness last year's great hit "Ponape Pool", featuring many batrachian bathing beauties from truly ancient cultures who had never seen a camera before.

We were all very keen to meet them when they turned up for dinner in the evening – Misses Theda Walsley, Meena Gharbada and Jacqueline Dubarrie from Northern Rhodesia, India and French Canada respectively. Quite a mix of origins, and yet they trained together and have stayed together, very successfully too. I definitely admired their flying costumes, which are fine advertisements for their company – certainly, prestigious film moguls would hardly want to be photographed next to the rather well-worn and oil-stained coveralls we have for our Tiger Moth flights. (Maria was similarly impressed, and I could see her sketching design notes. With a chequebook like hers, she could buy a matching suit for our whole class without worrying about the bill.)

A fine meal indeed, as the cooks had surely been told to "pull out all the stops" and serve up something very special. Roasted meats are quite rare on our menu, apart from chicken, as the islands have little enough area for pasture and prefer to grow yams and such on the available flat land. Next week we are scheduled for another trip to the far side of Main Island, and will definitely not be dining on fine roasts. We are issued with solid-fuel tablet stoves to fit in our survival kit, which are slightly better than just leaving the meal in the sun.

Quite a treat – Miss Walsley announced that they would be leaving tomorrow lunchtime, this literally being just a "flying visit" – but they would have time to take one group of us up for a flight-test. Their machine is by all accounts a customised De Havilland Drake racing floatplane, which has only lost thirty miles an hour acquiring an extra four seats. Twin nine-hundred horsepower glycol cooled engines, Hamilton Standard superchargers and the very first variable-pitch propellers we have seen outside the Schneider Trophy racers – an exceedingly "hot ship" and one we would give our tails to own!

Of course, every dorm in Songmark wanted to be the lucky passengers. Sixteen classes in all, every one suddenly trying to look saintly and studious (had the award been for acting, one would have been hard-put to choose the winner.) Our Tutors announced that they would decide at breakfast, so we should be on our best behaviour.

As soon as the meal finished (and I had overheard the Staff would be heading out with their guests to Mahanish's Pilot's Bar for the evening) I took the initiative and raided our small technical library. There are duplicate records of all the Songmark graduates, as well as a scrap-book with postcards and cuttings, of their later careers. I managed to get it back to our dorm before anyone noticed, and spent a fascinated hour with Molly, Maria and Helen looking through the stories. No wonder our guests are being given the red-carpet treatment, of the fifteen first students to complete the course, they seem to be by far the most successful.

Molly argues that the other famous ex-Songmark team headed by Letitia Fosbury-Smythe is richer and more newsworthy – but our Tutors would hardly have advertised their Academy as being the training ground for the reigning Pirate Queen of the South China Sea. She claims it is nothing but the sort of prejudice that her family business has had to struggle against for years.

February 15th, 1935

A definite day of excitement – the staff having declared the day a half-holiday, and indeed none of them were to be seen till well after breakfast, Miss Blande in particular looking quite unwell. All of us were very keen to hear who had been chosen for the treat – Miss Devinski announced that they had thought us First-years would benefit most from the motivation. So the ride goes to Prudence Akroyd's dorm, worse luck, who beat us to the gramophone by just three marks this month! At least we all got to watch, as late in the morning folk announced that anyone who wished could go over the straits and watch the flight-test. It seems that the aircraft has been in for a 12-hour servicing with Superior Engineering over on Moon Island, and naturally its owners want to test it before heading out into the far Pacific again.

What our tutors did NOT tell us, was that getting to Moon Island for all but the chosen dorm was entirely up to us, and that the arrival of whole Academy would take about five trips of the available water-taxis. Fortunately, I had a pocket of spare change (the quaint "Cowries" in use on these islands) and it being a holiday, it was quite all right to run the quarter-mile to the nearest public telephone and contact Moon Island to send a boat over for the four of us. So by the time we arrived at the harbour, we had transport arranged, the boat woman staunchly refusing to take any of the crowd except her designated passengers. Along with hairdressers,

surely Taxi drivers in their various forms must be the most decisive and opinionated class on the planet – indeed, I have heard that Rain Island’s Government is quite largely composed of them.

At least, we managed to get over to Moon Island in time to see Prudence’s team take off, with Miss Walsley at the controls. A decidedly different kind of takeoff to the usual sedate pull-up which takes most of the “sea-room” available – with its powerful engines and variable-pitch propellers, the De Havilland fairly leapt off the water, leaving us quite awe-struck. Even with its extended cabin, it performed several loops and rolls very smartly – fortunately, none of Prudence’s dorm suffer from airsickness.

Maria was most impressed, despite having actually flown some of her country’s Schneider Trophy entries. With those, she claims, with a single huge engine, small wings and a fixed-pitch ‘prop, half the pilot’s time is spent fighting engine torque. Indeed, should one incautiously bang the throttle open, the aircraft is liable to rotate one direction while the engine rotates the other! Not something one wishes to do on takeoff.

A few more aerobatics completed that piece of the flight test, before the De Havilland put its nose Eastward and opened the throttles all the way – not something we really get to do on our sedate trainers. It re-appeared a half hour later, having cruised fifty miles out and back, hitting a measured two hundred and ten miles an hour to the landmark of Metzger’s Pyramid, a steep and barren rock that stands far out at the edge of our local charts. A smooth landing and taxi to the dock, and we were all diving to interview Prudence and her dorm on their experiences.

Any of us who were merely envious before, surely turned green under the fur when we heard that all four of them actually had several minutes apiece at the controls, ten thousand feet over the Nimmitz Sea. Miss Walsley had of course handled takeoff and landing, but had my dorm just scored a little better in the navigation tests last week – it would have been us. Most annoying (or inspiring, depending on the point of view.)

The rest of us at least helped to load supplies into their cargo hold from the military “PX” (a sort of glorified NAAFI) just inland from the slipways. All too soon we were waving farewell, as three of Songmark’s finest vanished back over the horizon in search of new adventure and profits.

Molly seemed unusually quiet, and passed the naval base without even seeing if the doors to the armoury were securely locked, as she usually does. We agreed later that – although having qualifications on paper is very fine, being practically qualified to actually lead such a life – that would make all the “cramming” worthwhile. Even Helen admitted that it made all the book-learning seem more bearable, realising that this very minute Misses Walsley, Gharbada and Dubarrie were far out of sight of land, confident that their Songmark-taught navigation really would get them to target and on time.

February 16th, 1935

Quite the warmest day of the year so far – at any rate, being Saturday, we were very grateful to get into our “street” Native dress and head over to Casino Island. Helen looked across at South Island quite wistfully, commenting that she would be more comfortable still in the fully Authentic mode, which is a little brief to wear on the paved streets of the town. Hopefully we shall be back there at Easter time, probably with Molly to chaperone. Of course, having Helen staying through the holidays made a huge difference, as in our adventures we could chaperone each other – the Academy has a good name to keep up, after all.

A fast trot over to the Dance School quite served to limber us up – which was just as well, as our instructor really put us through our paces. She introduced another Spontoonie, Mrs Ratahabe, a very flexible reptilian dancer who works in tourist season at the “Coconut Shell” on the south side of the island. We were all quite eager to hear her accounts of working there – and I could see that Jasbir was quite taken by the idea. Jasbir, being of the mongoose persuasion, was about the only one of us who could really keep up with the stretching exercises that were demonstrated.

Jasbir, indeed, was talking with our instructor at break-time quite eagerly about the prospect of attending auditions, which are being held in two weeks time. Certainly, dressed in Costume, she would be quite unrecognisable as either a Songmark student or as a Maharajah’s daughter – which would be just as well, as dancing at the Coconut Shell is about as public a position as one could have on these islands.

Another two hours of very strenuous dance exercise left us all quite worn out and more than ready for luncheon. Mrs. Ratahabe joined us at our usual restaurant “The Missing Coconut” which now has its gardens open for business. An excellent view across Northwards towards Meeting and Main Island, the weather like a fine Easter in England, but without the rain or hailstorms.

Mrs. Ratahabe pointed out her home village, just visible beneath the very striking volcanic cone on Main Island. We must have been quite a handful, but she answered a host of questions about working in the “tourist” business. Some of the dancers and such are “tourists” themselves, in that they arrive a few weeks before the tour-boats and head out on the last of

them, despite being dressed in Native mode for the summer. So right now, many folk must be working on Broadway, in Hollywood and other such places, eagerly looking at their calendars and booking their tickets to Spontoon, as the Coconut Shell opens its doors on the first of April (weekends only, and mostly dress rehearsals.)

Indeed, we were told that a fair number of the entertainers find themselves more comfortable here and end up staying – having heard Molly's accounts of the winters in Chicago, one can quite understand it, especially for someone whose profession involves a costume cut for looks rather than warmth.

Another long dance session, and by four o'clock we were "all-in", though not beyond exchanging a few spirited remarks with the S.I.T.H.S. team. They at least can put together a mixed dance team, being co-educational: an aspect of their school that sometimes one quite envies. Still, we seem to be managing quite well on that front, except for Molly (who is feeling greatly put out by discovering yesterday that Missy K of all people has an official fiancé, not one arranged by her Family either! Much speculation as to what HE must look like, and earnest enquiries as to any of the Norwegians or Icelanders on Main Island being of the walrus type.)

On the way back, Jasbir was quite running away with the idea of taking to the stage as a holiday post – in India it is not considered unseemly for even Princesses to dance before the courts, though admittedly not in public. I fear one needs rather more training than we have, to take part in the kind of show arranged by Mr. Bushby Barkley, the great canine director whose "Hula Howlers" film was shot here two years ago and is still much talked-about. (Speculations are rife concerning how much of the moonlight transformation scene was actually special-effects.)

February 19th, 1935

Well! For the third time, we are packing our knapsacks, machetes and first-aid kits in preparation to head out into the wilds tomorrow. After so long cooped up in hangars and classrooms, while the second and third-years get the lion's share of the flying time, we are definitely in need of some fresh air. Molly is taking it seriously, I am glad to say, though her expression as she sharpens her machete is a little unnerving.

(Memo to myself – my blood is Type O, as is Helen's. Molly's is AB positive, and Maria's is AB Negative. Just in case anyone needs to know it in a hurry, I have stencilled it on our first-aid box.)

As we are not allowed to take more than a standard food ration, we are stocked-up for a midnight feast, rather more appetising than anything one expects to find in the jungle. Breadfruit and plantain are very fine when prepared in a kitchen, but a liberal mixture of grit and wood-ash serve very poorly as seasoning, whatever they may add to the diet in minerals. My old Nurse used to say "Tha must eat a peck o' dirt before tha' dies" – which can hardly be true around here, as in the Jungle one would eat more than that before even reaching marriageable age. Possibly the dirt over here is cleaner than in Barssetshire.

Hopefully, this trip will not start with a two hundred yard swim ashore like the last one, though one never knows – and the third-years claim the course varies wildly to prevent the staff getting bored. After all, none of our Tutors exactly chose a career in teaching – and Helen has muttered various appreciative things about them making an excellent model for an improved modern "School-Ma'am".

Happily, Molly has managed to sneak in a bottle of Nootnops Blue, enough for one glass apiece. This is strictly against regulations, but for the past week she managed to conceal it under the floorboards. Not of our own room, of course, but of the bathroom, where anyone might have put it there. There is a whole section in the pull-out supplement to "True Crimes Illustrated" on avoiding incriminating evidence – having practised, I know I can lob the empty bottle out of our window into the collecting box in the yard from thirty feet away – and there will be no fingerprints on it when I do. Certainly, the curriculum here has more on it than meets the eye.

February 25th, 1935

At last, we return to civilisation! Having made up for five days' worth of hot showers and wolfed down a very generous meal, we still had to sit through and give a "de-briefing" to our Tutors quite as exacting as any reconnaissance pilot returning from a mission.

On Wednesday the 20th, we were roused exceedingly early, dawn hardly breaking when we assembled and filed out, before breakfast even. Not till we arrived at the ferry dock did we find out there would BE no breakfast – a good plan to get us out so early, as had we been more wide-awake some of us would have mutinied – as many of us looked quite ready to anyway. Still, we had little time to argue – as out of the dawn mists we heard engines, and thrilled at the sight of a big Lockheed Lamprey flying-boat, taxiing over from Moon Island where we had seen it the

day before. (The Lamprey quite resembles its fishy namesake, having a very bluff, almost chopped-off appearance to the nose which holds the cargo doors).

From what I gathered, we had been scheduled to visit the far Northwest part of the island, around Crater Lake, when the Lamprey dropped in, piloted and part-owned by an old friend of Miss Wildford's. He had just delivered cargo, and would be heading back empty to Tillamook for more, when she suggested dropping us off on the way at Gunboat Atoll. It seems that the island has been deserted for more than twenty years, since the sole fishing village there was gratuitously shelled flat. (Memo to myself – should Molly be taking on more bets, remember that thatched roofs have very poor chances against 10-inch Cruiser shells.)

We all managed to find seats amongst the cargo straps in the nose – the front-loading doors are quite an innovation, though Heaven help the crew if they ever blow open on landing, the aeroplane would sink like a bucket thrown in open-end first. Alas, being cargo and not passenger space, there was a quite minimal view out, and Madelene X grabbed that the instant she saw the chink of light at the inspection hatch. So twenty-three of us were mostly sardined into the hold, while Miss Wildford, Miss Blande and the crew of three sat up in the dawn sunshine on the flight deck for the hour-long trip, a hundred miles almost due North. The weather out over the open ocean turned decidedly gusty, and our lack of breakfasts might have been an advantage for some of us (especially Sophie D'Artagnan, whose stout heart is sadly not matched by her stomach.)

At last, we landed in a lagoon fringed by quite fiercely roaring surf on the reef outside. One can see why the island never became re-settled in modern times, as only a Native canoe with very skilled handling stands much chance of getting over the reef on most days. Still, the island looks very attractive, with a dense wood of palm trees covering the whole centre except for one steep black crag that towers above the treetops.

Not ten minutes after we landed, we received our "Marching-Orders" – basically, to shift for ourselves until Monday, when we were to reassemble on the beach. Miss Wildford and her friend would be camped there, but disturbing them for anything but dire emergency would lose spectacular portions of points for the individual or team responsible. As to whether we worked as teams, all together or as individuals – that was entirely up to us.

By mutual agreement, we all went round the corner and had a "Chinese Parliament", or general large-scale argument, until the details were hammered out. We have what amounts to a Treaty with Jasbir's dorm, and a Non-aggression pact with Prudence Akroyd's, who in any case tend to go their own way. (While we attend dance classes on a Saturday, they have found an all-ladies' netball team on South Island to play against.) So we bunched up as Us and Jasbir, Madelene X and Missy K, and Prudence heading out first happily waving her Machete. Molly might have a rival in that style of thing, and I was intrigued as to whether all her dorm would reappear with a full complement of ears and tails.

With Jasbir, I heartily agreed that breakfast, or at least lunch, should come before any major exploration. As Missy K went off clockwise round the island, we headed around the other way, to where a stream left the jungle to vanish into the sand. An easy landmark on an otherwise rather featureless beach and forest edge – and we further split, Jasbir to explore the beach and lagoon while we headed inland along the stream banks.

Two hours of hard foraging produced an arm-load of salad apiece, but little else. Bamboo shoots were in season, much to Molly's delight, but apart from a few palm-hearts there was hardly anything filling. (Bamboo shoots are certainly filling, but only in the same respect as sawdust.) Happily, when we returned to the beach, we found Jasbir was willing to trade for rather more substantial food – mostly courtesy of Sophie D'Artagnan, who as an otter was well qualified to raid out into the lagoon. Crab and shellfish made an excellent salad with our contributions, though we had to draw a blank on coconuts for dessert. There are definite coconut palms all over this island and abundant rotting shells on the forest floor – but no ripe and edible ones in February, alas.

We set up camp just inside the forest, handy to the stream and with an easy route inland through the definitely pathless forest. By nightfall we had a snug shelter and a fire going with a good supply of fallen timber – rather too good a shelter as it turned out, as by the time we had finished it was getting too dark to gather any more food. A more basic "lean-to" for the first night and another hour's foraging time would have been a better plan, we all agreed as we sat around the fire, looking at our emergency tins.

One suspects our Tutors have more of a sense of humour than they are letting on. One might have expected Army "Bully Beef" or "Maconochie" stew in the tins, but our selection is a rather superior collection of some dishes we have not seen on the Songmark menu before. Sophie has a French tin of mussel and eel stew, Maria a very hefty tin of Beef Carbonade with pasta, and with my own selection there is a big suet pudding with raisins, of the kind I used to imagine eating when confronted with more of the noxious "Poi".

All this would be very considerate of our Tutors but for one twist – we are NOT supposed to eat them! Miss Blande has an exact list of what we are issued with, and will be counting them on Monday, ready to knock off points for any "Missing in Action." It may be

coincidence that all the labels are very fine examples of the advertisers' art, but I for one doubt it.

A surprisingly restful night followed, with no rain to test our shelter's waterproofing. It is a good spot, we decided between us, and the Island is not so large that we cannot return at night no matter where we might explore in the day. Molly took a little persuading not to sleep with unsheathed machete in hand – she is a great believer in being prepared, but we are liable to roll on each other in cramped conditions, and Maria's horns are hazards enough.

Thursday was a day of foraging, and exploration. After another raid on the lagoon and into the surrounding forest for Breakfast, we followed the stream in towards the heart of the island. The jungle was quite oppressive for most of the route, and even when walking along the stream-bed our machetes came in very handy against low branches and lianas. About three hundred yards in, the trees thinned out, with a large squareish patch of shrubs and saplings, which we explored eagerly. Jasbir was the first to notice that many of the plants were cultivated ones – cassava, Taro and Kava were running riot, and soon we were all cutting ourselves digging-sticks and rooting for tubers. (When issued with our equipment, we had been sternly warned that apart from in emergencies, machetes are NOT to be used for digging, or we will be spending days with grindstones trying to repair the edge.)

In the far corner of the clearing, we found other evidence of bygone settlement. There was a stone well head still poking above the weeds, and some strips of short grass yielded to our digging to show crushed coral paths underneath, as the Spontoon roads still use. The reason for its abandonment I spotted – surveying the lie of the land, I noticed half a dozen broad, shallow bowls in the otherwise flat village site. Craters left by the shells of a cruiser, unless I misremember the spotting guide in "Jane's All The World's Fighting Trenches" – and from their spacing, there would have been little left of the village afterwards to rebuild.

The rest of the morning we steadily gathered roots, hauling them over to the stream for washing and storing. Unfortunately there was nothing immediately edible – no fruits this time of year, and cassava is actually poisonous raw! I had not seen the "Kava" tubers that Jasbir pointed out before, but she assures me they are eaten in the South Seas by shamans and medicine-men. It sounds perfectly respectable, if the local vicars and doctors specialise in them, after all.

Around noon we saw the first sign of our fellow-students – half a mile away above the jungle, we could make out some figures ascending the central crag of black rock that rears above the rest of the island. Probably Prudence's dorm, as we could only see four of them, unless indeed the other team have had a civil war already. It was tempting to head up there and see the sights – indeed, Maria was all for carving a path towards them there and then. But I managed to persuade her that food came first – so we had a rather dull, but very fruitful afternoon of digging up more roots and tubers, Jasbir's team heading back two hours before dark with the first load to get the cooking-fire going and the meal underway.

A much merrier meal than the night before followed, with about as much roasted tuber as anyone cared to eat. Definitely a filling diet, if not exactly exciting. One can deduce that dishes such as Popatohi were intended to live up large quantities of basic starch, and only with "Euro" eating habits did they become meals in their own right. Indeed, by the end of the meal we were putting aside some for the next day – when we would be hungry enough to face some more. Hunger may be the finest sauce, but I could certainly have drunk a bottle of anchovy essence straight down.

Friday and Saturday were really more of the same – when one gets into the swing of Jungle life, it really revolves into foraging and cooking – with a garden patch rather than a mostly inedible jungle, it is indeed a relaxing lifestyle. On the Saturday, Jasbir showed us how to prepare the Kava roots, having read an article in their use on Vanuatu Island in "International Geographic". The taste was quite awful, but not as bad as poi. One wonders if the Natives used it for medicine rather than food, as its effects were really quite – surrealist. Not the kind of ration one wants as part of a flying breakfast, even less so than Nootnops Blue. One advantage was that vision in the dark was increased quite remarkably – a fire was quite painful to look at, but the midnight moonlit jungle appeared to be quite navigable, and no darker than a December teatime back in Barseshire. Alas, there were other effects that were more entertaining than practical – and I for one vowed to leave Kava root strictly alone from now on!

On Sunday, once the scenery had ceased to drip with crawling colours, we looked over our stockpile of food, and decided we could "afford" to explore the island for the day. So out with the machetes and across the abandoned village site, finding what was once a track heading up towards the centre of the island and its crag, rising into the blue Pacific skies like one of the dear old black monoliths of Barseshire. We had not seen a sign of Missy K or Madelene X's dorm, despite being on the same little island! Still – surely there was little that could go wrong with such an expedition. Having explored most of the area, one can hardly expect any great danger or drama to be found on a Three-Mile Island.

The main crag had a rather fascinating feature – the trail approaching it seemed to be not quite disused, and half-way up Helen spotted one of the same shrines that we had seen on South Island, with carven pillars and an offering of food inside. The food was coconuts –

evidently some months old, but from last year rather than twenty years ago. Molly and Maria were quite intrigued by the shrine, not having seen one before – and indeed, it is one of the many features of Island life that keep getting omitted from the tourist brochures.

From the summit we had quite an excellent view of the island – which is roughly egg-shaped, the narrow end towards the East, and completely given over to jungle. Two wisps of smoke rising out of the trees showed where presumably Prudence and Missy K were camped – of Miss Wildford and her friend there was no sign. Presumably they are busy surveying, or something of the sort. (Helen disagrees, but refuses to elaborate on her own theory.)

One more night, finishing up our harvested roots except the Kava which we respectfully re-planted, and Monday arrived exactly on time. A very different expedition to the first one – whereas then we were learning how to stay alive in the jungle, now we have managed to make ourselves quite comfortable. Even Maria was admitting she was not looking forward to returning to classes, and she is usually quite fastidious about her living quarters (when someone else cleans them, that is.) Molly is becoming quite keen on several aspects of outdoor life – she is becoming skilled and very enthusiastic about setting light to anything that can possibly burn. Her claim that setting things on fire is a Constitutional Right, is something I must check on, as Helen seems to disagree sharply. Given her Father's career, one is hardly surprised.

It was quite a wrench, to dismantle our snug little hut and pack all our gear away. Certainly, one can quite see how useful this sort of "education" could be in a generally adventurous career: after a little instruction, there is nothing that encourages one to learn skills as much as having to use them to keep fed and dry. (Next time we must pack more fishing-kit, even if we have to conceal line and hooks in our head-fur as the books recommend). A half-hour's walk along the beach took us back to Miss Wildford's tent, where we were the first to arrive. I had expected to be immediately "grilled" as to how we had managed, but our dear Tutor seemed really quite relaxed and "laid-back". I whispered as much to Molly, who seemed rather fascinated by her companion, a very striking dark equine gentleman. Molly whispered something about "Back, forward and sideways too". Very odd. Another entry for the ongoing "Strange sayings of Molly, Volume four."

Around lunchtime, Missy K arrived with Sopsy Forsythe and Ada Cronstein – having split with Madelene X's dorm on the third day. Madelene X brought her team in an hour later, and the two ex-allies stood glaring at each other for the best part of the afternoon. Only towards evening did we hear the aircraft arriving, much to our relief – and just as it touched down in the lagoon, Prudence's dorm arrived, stepping out of the forest edge dressed in quite staggeringly good "Native" dress, authentic down to the plaiting of their grass skirts! We were quite astonished – but then, Prudence is notoriously close-mouthed about her plans. "When in doubt, say nowt" is her motto, and she certainly pulled a surprise on the rest of us.

A tight crowding into the cargo bay of the Lamprey and a stuffy hour's flight took us back to Eastern Island – and very pleased we were to be home, despite the attractions of the jungles. Scarcely had we finished unpacking, "signing-in" our equipment and using up most of Eastern Island's supply of soap, when it was lights-out time – and an end to a fascinating trip!

February 26th, 1935

I should have known better, thinking that we would escape a rigorous "examination" on our five days on Gunboat Atoll! All four tutors grilled us, in groups and alone, as to exactly what we had done, and why we had decided to do it that particular way. The whole morning was taken up with grilling us – after which, we were sent off to write it all up, in detail. I think we all wished we were back diving for shellfish and digging tubers – hard work, but not involving writer's cramp.

Still, I believe that we managed rather well, with Jasbir's help. Better than Madelene X managed, as her team arrived definitely hungry at the end of the trip. At dinner time today, we were allowed to cook for ourselves the emergency tins we had been carrying around for the trip – at least, some of us did. Madelene X's team seemed reluctant to open theirs, while our tutors watched – when Miss Blande insisted, we found out why. They had taken off the labels, opened the tins along the seams, eaten the contents and re-sealed the labels, having weighted the empty tins with mud! Helen says there is a dish called "Mississippi Mud Pie", but I presume it uses a more appetising mud.

At least, after all the roasted tubers, we could sit down to a hearty meal. Tinned meat-pudding and a suet pudding with raisins for myself – with enough to give Madelene X a share. It was good to see her appreciate it, at least it brought tears of joy to her eyes to eat it. I must look up what "Cette Cuisine Anglais debecter" means, if I can find a French cookery book.

February 28th, 1935

A very fine day for a flight – and for once we actually managed one, managing to log another two hours apiece in our log-books. As the Eastern Island tower reported no incoming aircraft were expected, we made our longest trip yet – all four of us taking off together, with Miss Pelton flying

behind to shepherd us. A circling climb to four thousand feet, then across towards Main Island, looking down at the wakes of ships and water-taxis far below us.

Still, even at that altitude the main peaks towered over us, and we flew just near enough to feel a powerful updraft pulling us off course. A few more circles to eight thousand feet, and we were over Mount Kiribatori, looking down over a tiny green patch just big enough for a camp site, that Helen and I will hardly forget. We missed the mountain peak by half a mile, under Miss Pelton's careful supervision – but I hate to think what Helen would say if I told her about my other near-miss involving adventures on that summit ...

It was surprisingly chilly at that altitude, and I was glad of my wool-lined gabardine flying-suit. What with the wind-chill and the cold air, even through the helmet I could feel my ears freezing as we turned to make a long sweep North to follow along the spine of Main Island. Despite the cold, it was an excellent sight, all the island laid out beneath us, with nothing but eight thousand feet of air in the way. Some of the modern designs I have seen for fighters (or "Pursuit-ships" as Helen insists on calling them) have enclosed cockpits, but I doubt they will ever catch on.

After a rather bumpy landing in the growing afternoon heat, we returned to the Academy to find it rather empty. Evidently, the third-years are off on another trip, and three of the second-year dorms are away at Superior Engineering, tinkering with engines bigger than anything available at Songmark. (After our first year, we are allowed some choice in which classes we take, though I doubt Helen will ever manage to escape the maths side of things.) Two second-years we know quite well, Dolores and Margarethe, invited us up to see their block – after nearly two terms here, we had never set foot in their territory.

The Songmark main buildings are three long two-storey blocks, facing a central courtyard. Ours is the central one, above the duty staff living quarters and staff kitchens – the second-year block has its dorms above the main dining-hall, while the third-year block is above mostly classrooms. Actually, though we had hoped for some more spacious accommodation to look forward to in September, in fact the dorms are no bigger or better than ours. Molly pointed out that the locks on the doors are, however, of a far superior manufacture.

On scale, Molly continued, she quite expected the third-year block to be welded shut by the Tutors at lights-out each night. Margarethe seemed quite concerned at the idea, and confessed that she had never yet been in that block herself – certainly, each year in Songmark seems to like keeping surprises from its juniors.

March 1st, 1935

A day we had been waiting for all Spring – when our challenge to our rivals at the S.I.T.H.S. actually comes to a clash. After breakfast, Miss Devinski called in my dorm and Jasbir's, to ask if we are really intent on seeing the dance challenge through – she warns that unlike Songmark, perhaps a half of the S.I.T.H.S. crowd are natives, and may have been practising for years.

Of course, we intended to stick it through – Jasbir is a brick, and came in to support us. She was sorely disappointed herself this week, when Miss Wildford turned down her application to audition at the Coconut Shell. (Apparently Miss Wildford said NO, very loudly and firmly in six languages, four of them Indian, though I think Jasbir got the point before she had to hear it in Tamil and Farsi.)

With obvious misgivings, Miss Devinski signed our Passes, and wished us luck. Naturally, it is sure to be a hard-fought contest – but I led St. Winifreds' senior croquet team in the grudge match against Genghis Academy's finest, and am hardly going to back out of a few dance manoeuvres. Besides, win or lose, we are determined to put up a good show – but we would never manage to live it down if we ducked out at this stage. And quite right too.

Being a holiday, we had some support on this one, with Prudence Akroyd managing to beg passes to watch us shake a grass skirt. She also arranged them for her dorm, on the understanding she kept in full Songmark uniform and not her recently perfected Native dress, until arriving at the Dance school. Our Tutors do seem to be somewhat strict when it comes to dress standards – although considering what we manage to squeeze into the rules as it is, it might be just as well that they start on the cautious side.

A rapid water-taxi across to Casino Island, steering around a battered freighter creeping into the jetty of Superior Engineering, and we were there – standing in Ferry Square Market, our Costumes in our valises, feeling much as I imagine troops must when alighting on a foreign shore for their first campaign. At least we know what we are up against – five rather overconfident and rather well-padded Island girls, who have accused us once too often of being too rich and too thin. (How they accuse Maria of that is beyond me, as she is extremely solid, though almost none of it is "excess baggage".)

Casino Island seemed fuller than ever – being a holiday and the first of the month, many shops were opening up that we had never seen open before. But there was no time to look, alas – in five minutes we arrived at the dance-school in good order, or what Prudence Akroyd calls "mob-handed." The S.I.T.H.S. were there – in fact, it looked like ALL the S.I.T.H.S. were there, easily two hundred of them crowding around, eager to see us getting trounced most thoroughly.

With such a crowd, the dance teachers had staged an open-air contest under a row of waving palms (oil palms, not coconuts, alas) and had announced the rules with a loudspeaker – ten minutes each dance, themselves to select the first two, and the last one to be decided by ourselves – best out of three winning, with their decision as final. A tough schedule – half an hour almost non-stop, with two minutes break. The S.I.T.H.S. team have changed their line-up today, replacing two of the girls with a pair of obviously senior male students, of the mustelid persuasion. Still – if they feel they need to change their tactics radically to take us on snout to snout, we must be worrying them.

Maria was looking a little apprehensive, until one of the crowd shouted something I did not quite catch about the price of Spaghetti. That proved ill advised for the opposition, as she dropped her head and tossed her horns in a manner I have rarely seen – and I was quite glad that it was a dancing bout rather than a self-defence class we would be going into. Molly looked as gleefully fierce as we have seen her off the target range, and Helen was sharpening her claws nonchalantly on the railings, shaving off large pieces of hardwood.

The first dance was “The Palm Sway” as we had half expected. I fear that I was too busy concentrating on my own performance to judge on how the contest as a whole was running, and so I must paste in the piece from the “Daily ‘Elele” and let that stand as the official account.

“March 1st – skirt-shaking showdown at Dance School! Off-island team throw down the gauntlet! As brought to you by Missy Aha (whose Editor told her to come back with a hot story or not at all.)”

Round one: - The Spontoon Islands Technical High School team outnumbered the opposition five to four – and would have given a weight advantage with even numbers, projecting a good “presence” as they stepped through their warm-up routines. Students Tabodo, Lalaba and Oneabo led in a 3-2 formation with Maa and O’Grady back on the wings. Facing them was a four in line formation from over on Eastern Island, the Songmark team of Bourne-Phipps, Inconnutia, Duclos and Procyk a new contender, having only studied for two seasons.

The High School team took an early start, with a loose interpretation of the first melodic turns, swaying in good order as they shifted to 4-1 formation, Maa in the front, the position held by her Mother in last year’s South Island Luau festival. Songmark shifted into a forward V, nice individual steps from Bourne-Phipps and Procyk, with Duclos and Inconnutia dancing a solid backing pattern. The teams broke apart in the ninth chorus, Songmark dancing in a plain but well-organised line, with good timing if a little textbook about the swaying technique.

Our High School re-formed on the eleventh chorus, a smooth shift into a “Rock and wave” pattern, Oneabo making the most of her poundage as the centrepiece while the others surged in the “Banoba Whirlpool” manoeuvre – a little rushed, but a good attempt for a non-professional team. Songmark seemed slightly nonplussed, the manoeuvre not being taught as part of the formal courses here – but rather than attempting to imitate it, Bourne-Phipps rallied in a textbook “Storm Surge”, with Inconnutia as the pivot – and they rallied with solid, obviously practised teamwork with a spirited performance by Duclos, showing her stripes to full advantage as she stepped into the lead of the final fugue.

Round One finished with our High School lined up in a “Willow-leaf” with O’Grady as the focus, finishing their move on the exact last beat. Songmark were caught just a little late, but pulled off a creditable “Wave-break” just in time to avoid any major points loss.

Judges’ verdict – Spontoon Technical High School win, on general polish, though very little to choose between the two teams. Both sides still looking fairly fresh, but O’Grady and Oneabo panting noticeably.

Round two: - the band struck up “High Tide at Sunset”, which our readers will remember was such a hit last year for Mr. Barkley. A very fast-paced number for two amateur teams, and a choice that caused some comment amongst the spectators.

Songmark got ahead with a good start this time, Bourne-Phipps leading. Evidently some gymnastics training here, but she managed to hold the moves well within the Traditional range, while the Songmark team fell into line, dancing with evident enthusiasm, as the High School were caught wrong-footed and Tabodo almost tripping over his own tail. Some points surely lost there. The High School rallied in a 2-3 formation, finding their pace as the fifth chorus started, Maa leading the steps. Some solo improvisations on the back row caused heads to turn – a few points off from O’Grady, high kicks are really NOT in the mainstream Tradition, whatever the Tahitian dancers might perform for the Moulin Rouge audience!

The final ten choruses picked up the pace considerably, both teams dropping any pretence of advanced moves and dropping into facing lines, working hard on the taught moves, really throwing themselves into the sways, Inconnutia moving her weight with surprising energy, taking some very appreciative cheers from the crowd. Songmark and our High School finished raggedly, Oneabo managing to pull a good flourish right at the end. A very energetic performance from both teams – and both sides obviously in trouble, Oneabo’s tongue hanging out like a window-blind, as the judges deliberated. Procyk’s tail was certainly drooping, but no sign of either side calling on the substitutes (Sind for Songmark and Ehringberg for the Technical High School, both sitting on the bench looking daggers at each other.)

A surprise decision – Songmark win, having avoided any real points penalties, and keeping up the required style all the way! The crowd very quiet now, with one dance to go and everything to play for. A game of three halves this, with the bets split right down the middle.

The judges called in Maoa and Bourne-Phipps to choose the final number in the break – most of us were expecting a long quarrel over the choice, but it looked to this reporter as if the choice had been hammered out long in advance. Both captains returned to their teams, looking grimly determined, evidently tired but still game for the last bout. Both substitutes looking on from their bench, tails definitely bristling there, watching this third and final round.

Round Three: - the dance band struck up the tune, and surely the crowd were asking themselves questions as they recognised “White Wall of Water”, all twenty-two choruses worth, starting up. A long, brutal grind of a dance, totally unrelenting up till the final stanzas, NOT one most of us expected as the third round of an amateur contest.

Maoa dropped her team back, swinging into an easy-looking blend of improvisations, more Hawaiian in tradition than anything seen so far, evidently content to save her team’s strength. Songmark took the initiative in the third chorus, Procyk and Duclos moving forward to a vigorous “Surf Kick” pattern, a nice piece of formation work though a little energetic so early in the round. Inconnutia and Bourne-Phipps relieved them at the front line, the spirited Songmark pattern standing out against the technically fine but slower-moving High School formation, finishing up the sixth chorus with a “Surge Wall” that pushed the High School line right back against the boundaries.

On the ninth chorus, Maoa dropped the Hawaiian moves and tail-waved her team back into 2-3 wedge, Oneabo in the middle rear position not looking in a good way. A forward surge, a more vigorous style with definite Maori influences, certainly pushing the Songmark team back to their side, both teams definitely tiring now, in what would be the end phase of a standard length dance set but only half-way through this one. Two, three choruses of stalemate, Songmark with a slight reprise of their “Surge Wall” but adding some touches obviously appropriated from their opponents. Two hard, confrontational choruses’ worth, and the band picked up the tempo still further – as the crowd held its breath and waited to see if either team would stay on their feet long enough to reach the finale.

Chorus twenty arrived – and the High School made their move, a reprise of the “Banoba Whirlpool” that would have matched the beat exactly. But by this stage, none of them had enough left in them to make the tricky crossover moves, Maoa and O’Grady actually colliding as they stretched for the last round – Songmark moving forward to make the most of it, re-forming their line formation as they held the centre as the final chorus swept by, the High School struggling to keep in step as the music ended.

Judges’ decision – Songmark Wins!”

I must say, at the time, we were hardly in a fit state to take more than a brief bow before staggering back to the dressing room, Molly being practically carried in between Maria and myself. But after a few minutes refreshing shower, we rapidly changed into our Songmark uniforms and went out to mingle with the crowd. Jasbir seemed definitely overjoyed with our luck – though true enough, we had won by staying power rather than dazzling technique. The S.I.T.H.S. team did not reappear till much later, when I congratulated Miss Maoa on her splendid performance. She looked a little rueful, but shook hands and promised us an even harder-fought rematch next term.

I had just assured her we would be ready for that, when I heard Molly say a most unladylike word behind me. Indeed, I was quite surprised at the sight myself – our own Missy K, arm in arm with one of the S.I.T.H.S. newcomers, Mr. Tabodo as she introduced him. I was about to remind her of school Solidarity when she dropped a complete bombshell – that he is actually her fiancé, all arranged and socially approved already.

Had Molly been in one of those amusing American cartoons they show at the cinema matinees, one would have heard her jaw hit the ground with a loud clang. A less likely match I could hardly imagine, as having spent forty minutes facing the local dance team almost snout-to-snout on some moves, one could hardly but admire their exceptionally fine form, in one way and another. Mr. Tabodo, one of the senior year’s classmen, being an exceptionally tall and agile young gentleman of the mink persuasion, with a gloss on his coat that proclaims he is more used to strenuous work in the fresh air than behind a desk or workshop bench.

Missy K thoroughly enjoyed Molly’s obvious discomfiture, and announced that they have been engaged for two years already – and that unlike the rest of us, neither her Family or our Tutors will mind if she suddenly has to make her planned lengthy engagement a shorter one. With that she bounced off, and indeed when in high spirits she can certainly bounce.

I confessed myself puzzled at her comments about her possibly briefer engagement– till Helen reflected that it would be difficult to spot if our classmate was getting any rounder. Molly looked at the departing couple with a very strange expression, shaking her head with the evident thought of “How did SHE get HIM?”

Still, it was quite a day of triumph for Songmark, and we returned to Eastern Island to discover the news had travelled ahead of us. Miss Devinski was most generous – passes to Casino Island for all day Saturday, hurrah!

March 2nd, 1935

After yesterday's exertions, a quiet day in class was quite a relief – and happily, the post arrived despite yesterday being a local holiday. A letter from dear old Bassetshire for me – my dear school chum Mabel writing from her hospital bed, where she is making a steady recovery. For an instant I wished I could have been back to assist at St. Winifreds', where last week they played an "away" hockey match against that new and already famous school we know as "Saint T's". It seemed that they have followed Roedean's lead in teaching Australian Rules Hockey – but that they neglected to inform us before the match! Whatever sport you play against that school, casualties are sure to be heavy. Their school motto rather gives the game away, being a deceptively elegant Latin epigram, which translates as something like 'tangling with us and chewing a brick are both good ways to lose teeth'. Mabel writes that the previous week, even the badminton match had been fought to a Somme-like stalemate, despite our new Games mistress Mrs. Von Wewelsburg having instilled our team to play with "studied Frightfulness".

Molly says that one of her friends is currently a first-year at "Saint T's", where she has sent "Till the Heat's off". (Another strange Molly saying, considering what she has told me of Chicago winters, where the heat is never ON.) Still, no doubt her friend's education will benefit considerably from our good old Traditions – if she survives.

As luck would have it, we were in the open air heading back from the workshops when a very impressive aircraft flew over – only the third Royal Air Force aircraft I had seen over here, and an impressive one at that – a Boulton-Paul Overstrand, which I had only read about last month, the prototypes being sent on a world-wide tour to test their reliability in extreme climates. A splendid aircraft indeed, with the front gunner enclosed in a glazed turret that actually rotates – a world "First", this, and one that might quite possibly be adopted elsewhere. (Maria too had her binoculars out, and claims the turret looks like a glass dustbin with motors. Helen's comment was an enquiry as to the price of Italian sour grapes.)

Happily, we are permitted to carry our binoculars at all times, those of us who have them. So I could follow the flight perfectly as it circled the airfield and came in to land – a perfect three-point landing right on the centre of the runway, taxiing up towards the hangars – and to our delight another two Overstrands following behind it!

As we had a lesson with Miss Pelton next, we had to hurry away from the splendid sight, so missed the two "support" amphibians landing just off Moon Island. Naturally, one would hardly send out such untried aircraft over the Pacific without rescue flying boats in formation ready to pick up the crew if the worst happened.

Excellent as our advanced biplanes are – the sight of them on the open concrete runway filled me with some unease. Unlike a floatplane base, one bomb that cuts the runway could make the whole squadron quite useless. Not a happy thought! Surely, the best runway is a watery one – sometimes a little rough certainly, but cheaper, of unlimited length and far harder to make a lasting hole in. Before we even reached the classroom, Maria was already comparing the new arrivals to the glorious Italian Air Force seaplanes that are certainly breaking records for long-distance flight. Their Air Marshal Balbo managed to cross the Atlantic with a whole squadron of Capronis some years ago, showing the way forward – in theory, all it would need is a secure island with a sheltered atoll and a resupply ship, and one could set up a Squadron for operations almost anywhere in the world.

Perhaps that is just what the Spontoonies are worried about.

March 3rd, 1935

Quite a day – the first time all term when we have gained Passes to Casino Island – and indeed we all decided to make the most of them. A hasty breakfast and a change into our "respectable" clothes (my green oiled-silk suit is seeing a lot of use this term) and we were off, waving our Passes merrily at Madelene X, whose dorm are currently deep in our tutors' "black books".

As usual, we spent the morning at our Dance classes, where we seem to have become minor celebrities. I fear that the newspaper report was rather exaggeratedly "written-up", but there was no other major Island news that day, and everyone seems to have read it.

An interesting difference – Maria positively basks in Publicity, looking quite radiant as she waves to an autograph-hunter – while Molly entered the far side of the Dance School to evade them. Mind you – Molly has told us various tales of her Family wines and spirits trade, where they sold their wares by personal recommendation, without any public advertisement at all – no wonder she is shy of the press.

For myself, it was good to get back into the swing of our dance training – the S.I.T.H.S. were rather subdued, despite having given us a jolly close-run contest, with nothing to be ashamed of. Indeed, for the first time they sat with us at rest-break, Molly getting into conversation with Mr. Tabodo, who is certainly one of the most energetic of their dancers. Of course, being of the mink persuasion, he starts with an inbuilt advantage, though he is obviously

highly trained and practiced at local dance. Helen has mentioned that Minks have a definite reputation for quite a few athletic abilities, of one kind and another. (Evidently Missy K must have hidden depths, to have won such a fiancé – I had mentioned as much to Molly, who complained that she had the same, but hers were remaining sadly unexplored.)

One surprise was the appearance of the tall gentleman with black and white striped fur, whom we had seen with the S.I.T.H.S. as they conducted their fascinating model aircraft tests. He appears to be in charge of the works there – and four of the students left rapidly with him, no doubt to work on another interesting class project.

An excellent luncheon in South Ferry Plaza, as we watched the ships arrive. According to the newspaper, there is a cruise ship due in today – not one of the major ones from the Americas that the Casino and such depend on, but the first ship of the year nevertheless. While we watched out for it, we did spot another welcome sight – Jerry and Marti, having got our radio message the night before and made this rendezvous right on time.

By prior arrangement, Molly and Maria left to make a rendezvous back at “The Devil’s Reef”, that somewhat desperate-looking hostelry that we had passed on the night of the big dance festival. Molly had managed to contact Mr. Nordstrom, the dancing champion of her own type, and of course Maria was needed as chaperone. We waved them farewell and wished them luck, as indeed we hoped for ourselves.

Having ordered a large pitcher of Nootnops Blue between ourselves, myself and Helen finished most of it while Jerry and Marti updated us on what had been going on in the islands. One of Marti’s friends had made a grim discovery when out fishing – the body of one of the Soviet embassy staff, a Cultural Attaché, obviously having been caught by the treacherous off-season currents. He had been wearing the official swimming costume of the Soviet NKVD, their Special Police – despite the Soviet embassy proclaiming that there were no NKVD members in the Spouton islands, or any such official swimming costume, and that their Attaché was too good a swimmer to drown accidentally anyway.

The Hoele’toemi family are indeed versatile – Jerry took us across to one of the hotels where his family have been engaged in modernising and repairing the empty rooms ready for the Season to commence. Naturally, Helen and I had to chaperone each other – there were two bridal suites, from which we could have rushed to each other’s assistance should anything untoward take place. In fact, we enjoyed a very pleasant afternoon – the only casualties being some feather cushions, which became somewhat clawed. I for one would gladly pay for a dozen for every long afternoon like that one – and indeed, we enjoyed some valuable refresher lessons in Native traditions, after almost two months away from them. One looks forward to the holidays – just another month to go!

March 5th, 1935

For a change, although we spent the morning swinging engines into life, we had an enjoyable time while staying firmly on the ground. The Academy maintains four small open-topped lorries (or “Pickup trucks” as Helen insists on calling them despite none having lifting gear) which are often useful for hauling fuel, spare engines and suchlike from the docks. The oldest one has been really too battered and dented to be any sort of advertisement to Songmark – so it has been handed over to us for driving and mechanical lessons. (One expects its remaining days to be few, having seen Maria driving!)

Despite having almost a hundred hours logged flight time and far more unregistered flying at home, it was the first time I had behind a steering wheel rather than a joystick. Far harder than I expected – Flying Fleas do not have gearboxes! And after a few weeks of driving lessons with us at the wheel, neither will the poor old Ford.

Miss Pelton was nominally in charge of our lessons, but our actual instructor was our German chum Erica, who can reputedly drive anything with an engine. Not surprising – her family are all engineers at the big Auto-Union car manufacturers, and they compete in all the races. Unlike at home, the engineers in Germany receive full support from their new Government – Erica tells us her Father has attended rallies at Berlin and Nuremberg, though she has not mentioned who won.

As a matter of fact, there are very few vehicles on Eastern Island – as it is scarcely twenty minutes walk across, only the limited freight which is carried the few hundred yards from the docks to the airfield really needs motorised transport. Maria has often recounted her driving experiences quite wistfully – it seems that she has often “borrowed” Bugattis and other high-powered racers and sometimes even returned them. Or at least, returned significant fractions of them – she has often boasted that there are no drivers like Italian drivers, and having seen her in action, one hopes she is right.

Alas, being in the junior year here, often means that we get called upon to do the menial tasks. While the second and third-years get most of the flying time and such, we repair and maintain the vehicles. Half the afternoon was spent in clearing out the garages – there is a collection of old batteries and suchlike that are far beyond repair, that we had to carry out of the Songmark compound and stack outside. Oddly, the “rag and bone men” here are all Japanese –

a very helpful and cheery bunch they are too, always keen to give the best prices for scrap metals. One wonders if they foresee a famine of old lead batteries and gunmetal in their homeland?

Molly is looking decidedly happier – all yesterday she was walking around in something of a blissful haze. Having quizzed Maria, one gets the impression that she had a decidedly adventurous Saturday afternoon – though possibly Maria might have skimped on her duty as chaperone. Still – despite the various head-shakings from Marti when Mr. Nordstrom’s name is mentioned (one gathers that he has a certain Reputation) our chum is now looking decidedly “in the pink”. We are certainly keeping up our fitness, one way or another – it would have done credit to my old gymnastics teacher to see us tossing twenty-pound batteries around as we piled them up by the gate. I have rarely seen Molly looking more contented – there was a selection of rusted iron castings in the garage that needed breaking down, and she went to work with a will and a sledgehammer.

Indeed, even after hauling so much metal, we volunteered to help the repair party repairing the Songmark compound where a tree had fallen on the fencing. Our tutors are naturally concerned for our safety, not to mention the everyday menace of burglars, Bolsheviks and suchlike ill-wishers who might decide to pay our Boarding School a visit. The accommodation blocks and such are surrounded by a high chain-link fence, and at night are patrolled by guard dogs – who must be very economic for the Tutors to feed, as everyone slipping out of the fence tends to slip them something to eat as a tip. (The gates have combination locks on them, which we have not officially been told the codes to.)

Hurrah! After our hard work, Miss Pelton wrote us a note for a free slap-up feed at the Old Compound – across the road a hundred yards towards the docks, where one of the oldest buildings on Eastern Island houses four classrooms and the official Songmark administration. For reasons nobody has ever explained, there is an ice-cream parlour and tea-shop (which Molly calls a “soda-fountain”, though there are no fountains of soda to be seen) on the ground floor, which is open to the general public.

One imagines that our Tutors decided to keep “Song Sodas” going as a handy safety valve, giving us somewhere to meet under their occasionally watchful eye. And indeed, when we arrived we found Prudence Akroyd’s dorm already there, with four Native girls whom we were introduced to as being from the volleyball team they play every weekend on South Island. At last, we can see how Prudence managed to model her Native costume so accurately, for all their guests were in “respectable” costume, of the type one could send a postcard of back home.

After all our efforts in the garage, an ice-cream was certainly welcome – and being entirely supplied with local products, there were flavours not generally available at home. Two of Prudence’s guests had ordered the Mango and Durian ice-cream – a most alarming concoction, but the girls were of the Hyena persuasion, and their ancestors presumably ate worse dishes.

I noticed Miss Devinski keeping an eye on the proceedings, with a somewhat amused expression. She is in charge of assigning our dorms and working groups, and seems highly skilled in putting the most compatible teams together from the assorted students that Songmark attracts. Indeed, Helen, Molly and Maria last week elected me something like “dorm president for life”, a tenure which Maria comments even her Uncle, Il Puce, does not possess. (Whatever Reds such as Madelene X may say, Il Puce WAS elected as fairly as anyone in Italy ever is.)

A scorching day, indeed – and Maria, who is very conscious of her figure, claims we could burn off the calories of ice-cream faster than we could eat it, with our hard labour in the garage. Alas, we had a free note for only one round of ice-creams apiece – and though Maria never travels without her cheque book these days – there is a prominent notice behind the counter:

*“We have a friendly agreement with the bank.
They don’t sell sodas – we don’t handle cheques!”*

March 7th, 1935

A day of less mechanical and more cultural education for a change – as we piled into water taxis and headed over to Casino Island to look at the newly opened Island Life Gallery! Although Spontoon is hardly billed as a great cultural destination in the brochures (which make much of the casino, night-clubs and beaches), at least one museum is open this time of year. To be strictly accurate, actually it opens next month, but our Tutors had arranged preview tickets.

The Gallery is just up the hill from the South Ferry Plaza, looking out over the roof of the Coconut Shell – a handy stroll for any tourists on a Sunday afternoon. Just outside is a row of ferocious-looking Pacific sculptures, rather like the ones found on Easter Island (though more like those of Walpurgis-Night Atoll). From a poster inside the hallway we discovered that they are not actually a thousand years old, but new designs by a local sculptor, Mr. Ricky Tikitavi. Hardly a minute later, we saw the sculptor himself walk past, looking exactly like his photograph. Being dressed something like an aviator helps – he has a most Futuristic high collar looking as if it is made to seal onto a helmet.

Jasbir Sind is always interested in the local cultures – and having spotted Mr. Tikitavi as having ancestry in her own part of the world, she made her introduction (etiquette books say the daughter of a Maharajah can properly introduce herself if no more eminent personages are around – which is the usual case on Spontoan.) It seems that he is paid by the Althing for commissions – they let him exhibit his own work around the islands, in exchange for various special projects that he undertakes for them.

A fascinating museum! I fear that Helen looked bored to tears, her rather ruthlessly practical education having instilled little reverence for the finer arts. Still, there were some canvases that she rather liked – an abstract skyscape from around 1920, with a pair of fighter dirigibles rising out of a billowing cloud field. Naturally, there was nothing on Spontoan's troubles in the Gunboat Wars – very unlike home. Even quite small towns in Barssetshire tend to have marble statues commemorating some heroic bayonet-charge or other against uncivilised Natives – of course, the Spontoanics being Natives themselves, are unlikely to have a balanced view on this.

Hurrah! Our tutor Miss Blande managed to persuade Mr. Tikitavi to let us see his new works, some fascinating “landscape sculptures” that have appeared in the newspapers. Just as the museum exhibits many strange and enigmatic pieces of ancient artwork, by all accounts the latest public sculptures are so modernist that critics can stand around all day arguing violently about what they really mean. And the locals will no doubt be there with a refreshment wagon to make a useful business out of the whole show.

March 9th, 1935

A fine day indeed, and not only for the weather. After a whole term, the much-coveted gramophone is back in our dorm, and our favourite “V-Gerat” records are being loudly and triumphantly played. (Especially the “Fire and Ice” album, which we have almost worn the grooves off by now. The tones from their supercharged Mark 19 model theramins are powerful enough for the final-stage exciter coils to need water-cooled solid silver wiring.)

For the past two months, Prudence's dorm has won the prize – but, sad to report, they are currently ranked right at the bottom of the form, having lost more marks this week than Madelene X ever did on Gunboat Atoll. Irma Bundt began the first term in that dorm and was transferred out to join Jasbir – she had hinted to me before that she would like to meet someone like Jerry for herself – but that her ex-dorm mates would prefer to be introduced to his sisters. Indeed – our Tutors are quite even-handed about this, and knock off Quite as many points for Prudence trying unsuccessfully to smuggle her dorm's friends from South Island into our compound, as they would if we were foolish enough to try and do the same with the Hoele'toemi brothers.

Poor Prudence – she should have used more of the virtue she is named after, thinking she had any chance of managing such a feat at Songmark! The place has a Reputation to maintain after all – so no passes for her dorm, or trips to South Island to play netball or anything else next week. (But the ban only applies to next week – our Tutors are strict but hardly cruel, and absence makes the heart grow fonder.)

Tomorrow, we are heading out on another Field Trip – the exploration of Main Island that we had scheduled until the chance to visit Gunboat Atoll turned up. Miss Blande is taking us all, and we may even see Mr. Tikitavi's new sculptures in progress. A hurried search of back issues of the “Daily ‘Elele” turned up some articles and interesting photographs – on Main Island there are some very useful combinations of utility and art, as Mr. Tikitavi is seen standing next to his water cachement bowls some twenty yards across. The article notes that in places on the island, the rock is spongy volcanic tuff, through which water drains away without filling surface streams – and with the growth of tourists resorts (all of which demand modern plumbing) the old wells are nothing like adequate in summer.

Quite some sculptures! The first one appears to be a shallow bowl, made of very fine, marble-finished concrete, built on the headland that points towards Meeting Island. There is a moveable statue that can “wade” anywhere in the bowl, and is illuminated at night, acting as the focal point for the whole structure.

The second sculpture is rather like a swimming-pool, a large concrete apron on a headland looking out over the narrows between Main and Eastern Island – with a large round pool featuring a central fountain base, which looks in fact more like a hefty pivot. Tourists can enjoy a cooling dip and a splendid view at the same time – there are four more just like it around Main Island, and more being planned. Handy pay-telescopes such as one sees on sea-fronts, are scattered around the site for air-spotters and shipping enthusiasts to use.

Helen says it looks just like a photo of a Belgian fortress she had once seen with the turret ripped clean off by a “Big Bertha” howitzer – but then, Helen sees conspiracies everywhere. There are real turrets on the island, three of them so far (though oddly, they are not marked on any maps, and are screened from casual view by bamboo groves) and one would hardly commission an artist to build such things.

March 13th, 1935

Dear Diary – I will really have to invest in some waterproof notebooks, to take on-the spot memos of all this exploration. A busy three days away from classes – and although we have been hardly six miles from the Academy on the map, it might as well have been quite a different island.

A fleet of five water-taxis took us from the docks, past Moon and Meeting Islands, and dropped us off near the delta of the river that drains Crater Lake. There is quite a large village there, surrounded by rice fields fed from the delta. The housing was really not what one expects on Spontoon – definitely oriental in appearance, rather than the Polynesian longhouses that South Island is famous for.

Miss Blande took us around the village, where one of the local guides showed us the points of interest – and fibbed somewhat, gesturing up to the great main face of Mount Kiribatori towering above us, “the unclimbable peak”. True, the East and North-facing walls of it are quite sheer, jet-black volcanic rock, but from the far side it is a perfectly practicable (if exhausting) scramble, as Helen and I well know. One suspects that Native Tourist Guides are prone to exaggeration – “Impassable swamp” and “Unassailable peaks” sound very impressive on postcards home, to be sure.

As usual, we each carried a small knapsack with a decidedly minimal outdoor kit – my oiled silk suit passed muster, but Molly had her folding harpoon gun confiscated before leaving Songmark. A pity, as it is a jolly useful fishing device, with bungee rubber cords tensioned to about sixty pounds pull weight. (She has been eyeing more powerful ones all term – there is a compact model that is concealable under a jacket, with folding stock. It looks very handy against sharks, though confusingly the brochure boasts that it will punch through a standard steel helmet at ten paces. One supposes there is no “standard shark” target to compare the various models against.)

Miss Blande did explain that inland of the village was a Sacred Area, with no building allowed, and decidedly no hunting permitted. Maria pulled something of a face at this, as she has been considering getting one of the very strange big-game rifles that we have seen the Militia here using despite the lack of local big game. Furthermore, no cutting wood for fires is allowed, around the lake or on the slopes of the volcanic peaks to the Northwest.

Helen seemed quite intrigued by this, and wondered if it might be an area which we could explore in the holidays – with suitable escort, naturally. Of the two sacred areas, it is assuredly easier to reach than the round island off South Island, that we are discouraged from even flying over. But soon we were too busy to speculate, as we took a narrow footpath from the village along the riverbank, heading up into quite unbroken jungle.

In half an hour, we were far beyond the last traces of Civilisation, having passed only a few scattered huts in garden plots nearer the delta. The valley rose up steeply, the walls quite unassailable and slick with dripping vegetation, mosses and vines hanging down on all sides. A decidedly tricky footpath, sometimes clinging to the banks just above the river. Missy K and Ada Cronstein fell in, though fortunately the water is not deep – Miss Blande used it as a demonstration of how to improvise a pulley slung between two trees, to haul them back up the exceedingly steep and slippery bank.

Very suddenly, we came out through a veritable tunnel of trees into Crater Lake itself – quite a sight! Although we had flown over it several times, it is far more impressive from the shore than from above. Alas, it is hardly suitable as a tourist spot – there is very little beach, the cliffs all around it rising some hundreds of feet, traced with silvery waterfalls where streams pour out of the jungle. Indeed, there was hardly a pawprint to be seen, or any sign of life apart from the birds circling overhead and a veritable boiling shoal of fish in the deep waters. How deep it may be is anyone’s guess, as from what we could see the sides go almost straight down like a flooded mineshaft.

Miss Blande led us around the Eastern side of the lake, climbing steeply up the trail near the rim – and for the next four hours, it was hard going as we circled the lake before climbing up the pass between the two volcanic hills. One discovery we made – the first actual hot springs we had seen on the island, decidedly steaming in the heat. Madelene X was loudly proclaiming that the Spontoones should make the most of such an asset, and bulldoze a road through to build a proper thermal spa – when a large rotten branch fell to the ground right in front, narrowly missing her.

Very odd – the branch showed signs of being partly cut through – and I could have sworn that I saw a dappled feline figure vanishing into the tree canopy. When I pointed it out to Helen, she noted she had seen a large bird accompanying the figure, whom she had just glimpsed for a second.

At least, the event made Madelene X keep quiet for the rest of the day – whatever the Tourist books may say about avenging spirits protecting the jungle, there are some very solid guardians keeping watch over it. Miss Blande cautioned us to be on our best behaviour, in word

as well as deed while in the Sacred Area – which extended to the top of the volcanic summit that was our next objective.

It was another hour's climb to reach the top, on trails that looked as if only wild animals ever used them – ten steps off the path and one would be lost indeed. At the top, the jungle thinned out, and we were looking into the deep bowl of Mount Poponoha, the only obvious volcano on the islands. The view was very fine, looking across one direction back over the shadowed pit of Crater Lake with the radio towers beyond it in one direction and the great spire of Mount Kiribatori to the other. All very familiar from our flying and mapping lessons – but more impressive, to be looking up at the main summits rather than down.

Fortunately, the volcano is extinct by all accounts – the few films that have been made here have had to rely on Special Effects in a studio. Being still in the Sacred Area, recreating real eruptions using aviation fuel or similar would bring down the wrath of the Spontoonies (and their Gods, according to the tourist brochure.) The sun was getting low as we scrambled down the trail into the volcanic bowl, finding a decidedly steaming pool some ten yards across, perfect indeed for washing our tired paws in. From what Missy K tells us, it seems that foraging and washing are “natural” enough activities that will call a minimum of wrath down upon us.

After a much appreciated half hour break, we filed up the far side of the crater and down the Northern slopes, now officially out of the sacred area. I must say, the scenery seemed little different. Having barely an hour before dark, we all set to work on shelters and gathering firewood – at which point Molly caused our Tutor something of a dilemma. Although our equipment had been looked over and passed, Molly had brought along a sealed bottle of Nootnops Red, with the paper seal from Song Sodas still intact. In fact, she had drilled a tiny hole in the cap, drained the beverage out, replaced it with 80-octane aviation spirit and sealed it well enough to avoid detection! Our fire was blazing away merrily, long before anyone else had coaxed more than a smouldering out of theirs.

Miss Blande conceded that this would earn us points rather than lose them – but I doubt the same trick will work twice. Still, it was a very cosy camp, if a little damp – and we were lulled to sleep by the muted bad language of Missy K trying to get her dorm's fire going by the fading light of her pocket torch.

The next day was interesting – as we found one of the famous “landscape sculptures” we had heard so much about. Although barely a mile from our camp on the map, it took us a hard hour to reach the northern coast. Very impressive – the highest sea cliffs on Main Island, sweeping almost sheer down to the waves, with hardly a trace of beach. There was a ledge some hundred yards long, which had been adapted by Mr. Tikitavi and his assistants, as a strange modernist sculpture. The surrounding rock had been smoothed away, to blend in with a deep, precisely straight niche carved in the flat cliff some three yards deep and eighty yards long.

Fascinating! There was a small notice to one side, explaining the sculpture was inspired by the famous “echoing wall” of Orpington Island, where one can hear a whisper spoken a hundred paces away in the open air. The curved face of the sculpture looked quite precisely engineered – and indeed, as we scrambled over it our comments were magnified many times over by the clever shaping. Possibly it is designed for use in strange Native ritual ceremonies, as it looks out only over the open ocean something in the direction of Vostok Island.

Half an hour of sketching, and arguing over its artistic merits, and we headed down the hill towards Chiklooha, one of the “Amerind” villages on the Northern coast. Quite a trip this turned out to be – after seeing unfamiliar Oriental architecture the day before, we were a mile away from the village when we spotted totem poles and houses with much steeper roofs than the Polynesian style suggests, clad in wood shingles rather than palm thatch.

Chiklooha is really quite an isolated village, with just one motor road leading in over a pass from the rest of the island. We arrived from a trail leading in between two huge totem poles, just as the heavens opened and we dashed into the shelter of a longhouse. Looking around, we saw half-built statues of varying styles looming above us in the shadows – by sheer good luck we had found Mr. Tikitavi's workshop, despite it being half hidden in a quarry several hundred yards from the road!

For a minute we just stood panting, watching as the rain hid the view entirely. Our arrival had not gone unnoticed though (there being twenty of us, including Miss Blande) and we were hailed by a native gentleman, who emerged from a surprisingly modern-looking assembly shed across the courtyard. He seemed surprised to see us – and although very courteous, not entirely pleased to have company. True, as we discovered, there is a sign on the track to the village reading “Private Property – keep out” (a very rare sight on Spontoon) but we had come out of the hills from the other direction, and he seemed unwilling to shoo nineteen young ladies out into the storm.

Things became more relaxed when Miss Blande pulled out her introductory note – and he called over to the other sheds, for his foreman, a Mr. Ahana. A decidedly powerful-looking gentleman of the American badger persuasion, he was wearing the only “Euro” clothing we saw that day, a safari suit with Panama hat and Nicaragua collar.

I noticed that while Mr. Ahana showed us around the stone-cutting workshops, two other Native workers hurried over to shut and lock the doors on the more modern building. Very

odd, considering these statues are on public display when finished – and we are none of us likely to crib the latest design and run off to pirate our own ten foot tall Tiki sculptures. Certainly, the works in progress were very imposing, very stylish traditional designs that will look striking on a postcard when “found” in a jungle clearing.

Mr. Ahana showed us a few smaller and much older carvings that were the models for his recent works. It seems that the Spontoon islands were settled once, many centuries ago, by reptilian folk, who left behind very little evidence except for their statues (and the biggest of these he showed us were a foot or so across, and of a nature hardly suitable to be photographed standing next to.) The current works started by Mr. Tikitavi are drawing on that wholly forgotten tradition, of which the nice green water-lizard statue on Meeting Island is the only large survivor.

Quite a little history lesson, indeed. It seems that not all of the Pirate films made in the Spontoon islands are wholly the work of overexcited scriptwriters; between the original inhabitants abandoning the region and the plantation settlements of the last century, it was well-known to some of the most notorious Pirates of the region. In this part of the world, many were of the Sinbad tradition rather than the Blackbeard style – and one notorious Arab sea-raider, Ahmed J'dril, was said to have made this very valley his base. There are the usual rumours of buried treasures that have never come to light, and indeed the ledge where the new sculpture looks out over the sea-lanes is still marked on the maps as J'dril's Bank.

After an hour or so, the rain had stopped and we waved farewell, having seen all around the site and quarry except for the one locked shed. Heading down towards the village, I noticed something very odd – there was a dustbin of exactly the sort we have outside our compound, where we leave worn-out engine parts and such for the Japanese scrap merchants who call once a month. I sneaked a quick look inside, as we passed – and found not broken chisels as I expected, but the remains of electrical transformers, loudspeaker coils and other exceedingly modern electrical equipment. Very odd – unless indeed some of the sculptures are wired up for public performance as talking idols and such.

Chiklooha village turned out to be a working rather than a tourist settlement, having rather more practical buildings such as fish canneries rather than restaurants and souvenir shops. Quite a fine harbour, to judge from the size of the vessels berthed there (three large fishing boats and an old destroyer flying the Rain Island flag.) Missy K tells us that it has the only deep-water port on the entire Northern coast, the other villages being strictly for small fishing vessels. A very strange place to put one's sculptures, where very few tourists will ever see them, staring out over the harbour approaches.

Thankfully, the rain held off while we explored the rest of the coast, definitely hard work scrambling over the ridges on narrow trails. It would have been quite enjoyable, but Miss Blande decided to practice our first-aid and emergency skills on the way. Declaring herself a casualty, she had the different dorms improvise a stretcher with whatever materials were at hand (driftwood and vines in our case, as we were a short scramble from the beach when our turn came.) Carrying a loaded stretcher along a road is one thing, but manhandling along a rocky trail with loose scree below and low branches above, is quite another. Still, it could have been worse – she might have given us a “worst case” exercise and have us haul Missy K around.

(Dear Diary – one must not speak too disparagingly of one's fellow students. Missy K is exceedingly capable, and carried her end of her dorm's stretcher solo without complaint, a task that generally needs two people. Rather like those Japanese wrestlers one sees on the newsreels, she may be outwardly round, but has more muscle underneath than two of me put together!)

By nightfall, we were all decidedly tired and glad to make camp on a ledge above a secluded beach. As this was hardly a mile from the next village, Miss Blande told us not to forage in the woods (the locals need all the wild foodstuffs they can get) but that we may open our “iron rations”. A cheery evening, rigging up grass-roofed shelters and sitting around driftwood fires as the moon came up over the Nimitz Sea. Despite the horror tales I have heard of it from my older cousins, the military “Maconochie” meat and vegetable stew is quite palatable, if served hot to a sufficiently hungry diner. One hopes the tins are not actual Great War surplus, unlike our cameras and some other equipment at Songmark: I can quite imagine whole Maconochie warehouses being surplus in 1918, and finding no buyers amongst those who had lived on it for four years previously.

Still – one can do far worse. Just to provide an alternative, Li Han was busy as night fell gathering edible seaweed for some bizarre oriental stew. Having sampled it, my definition of the word “edible” is now wider than before.

Another day of trekking followed, as we explored the rather more settled farming region at the eastern end of Main Island, finishing up at the biggest village there, rather unimaginatively called “Main Village”. By happy coincidence, we arrived an hour before a major sporting match, which Miss Blande permitted us to stay and watch. Although all the various “cultures” found on Spontoon seem to be represented here, there is a full-time ground laid out for Samoan Cricket, or “Kilikiti” as they call it. Quite a different game than that played on the village greens back home, this being a variant played with long, three-sided “bats” that are very slightly adapted from traditional war clubs.

The game itself seemed extremely lively, played with about twenty a side, and something of a "hit the ball and cheer" style. There was a commentary over a loudspeaker system, but entirely in the local language, which we are only slowly learning. Still, it looked like a fine game, with far fewer casualties than Australian Rules Hockey, and none of them immediately fatal. One wonders if we might put a Songmark team together one day? Alas, it would need the whole year of us to make up a team, so even a few defaulters would put us at a severe disadvantage.

"Soppy" Forsythe was rather loudly denouncing it as a rough and violent game, as we left (not a sensible idea when surrounded by enthusiasts carrying war clubs, to my way of thinking.) Still, her Family are dedicated Quakers, and deeply opposed to all forms of violence. She has been rather sneering on occasion when I have mentioned my family having served their country for many generations – her own family being peaceful industrial magnates, owning the biggest chlorine and dyestuffs manufactory in Lancashire, by her account.

Molly had quite a treat, as in the crowd she spotted Mr. Nordstrom, whom she has been decidedly pining over these past few days. Although they could do little more than exchange polite greetings under Miss Blande's watchful eye, she begged a page of my notebook, and managed to pass him a note. One supposes that Molly has had a definitely restrained upbringing in some ways, her Father being well-respected in his social circles despite modestly keeping out of the public eye – in Helen's words, "if you know what's healthy, don't mess with the boss's daughter, even if she asks."

A water-taxi home and a much-appreciated shower, and another memorable trip to write up! The Polynesian cricket variant was a most fascinating end to the tour, and something I must ask Jerry about. Since arriving here, I have learned to quite appreciate non-"Euro" traditions, without looking down on them as lower-grade debasements performed by ignorant Natives. Soppy is welcome to her opinions – however much money her family makes, she is still distinctly SOPH* herself.

*(Editor's note – this word doesn't seem to appear elsewhere. Amelia might be reversing the standard acronym "POSH" which originated as "Port Outward, Starboard Home" – which is the coolest and most expensive side of a ship touring from Europe to India (and Spontoon) and back. Presumably the opposite "Starboard Outward Port Home" would be a cheap-rate voyage in more ways than one, as cooking costs would be saved by having a cabin hot enough to boil an egg in without a stove.)

March 15th, 1935

Dear diary – a day of hard work, and much racking of brains over how to help poor Molly out. The exercise came first, as we woke to the thundering of hail on the roof, the nearest thing to a snowstorm these islands ever see by all accounts. Certainly, one can see why the tourist season only begins properly in May – our first task this morning was to help out at the airport, clearing three inches of hailstones off the parked aircraft and runway.

Quite a heartbreaking sight! Although our cherished Tiger Moths are safely stored in the new hangar, some of the private aircraft parked outside had been sadly damaged by the weight of hail falling on them. Wooden and metal airframes had survived, but one ex-military Fairey Flycatcher had the cockpit floor ruptured, a three-foot pile of melting hail underneath showing where the hailstones had bounced off the wings, funnelled in and flooded the open cockpit. We are getting to know the airport staff quite well, and this morning they are having to telephone around with some sad news for aircraft owners.

Our new hangar is mercifully secure, and has kept the Songmark aircraft safe – despite a cracked window or so where hailstones the size of cricket balls hammered the place. Just in time, our Tutors had decided to have Superior Engineering build and fit out a building entirely our own. The second-years tell us that last year they had all sorts of trouble, part-renting one of the smaller hangars on the far side of the runway – tools and fuel being stolen, and the airport staff never being handy with the keys when needed.

Molly is really quite hopeless these days, mooning around and unable to concentrate. If we cannot arrange something for her, our Dorm will definitely start to slide down the lists again. Telling her to pull herself together and keep the side up, did surprisingly little good – but then, one must remember that she has been raised without the benefits of public-school Tradition. Even a trip over to Moon Island for a self-defence class yesterday left her with her ears drooping, even though we were practising self-defence with some jolly powerful big-game rifles. Our third-year chum Erica says they are Mauser "T-Gew" rifles, left over from the Great War, basically a standard rifle design scaled up to 13 millimetre calibre. They are quite a handful to fire – even with a bipod, muzzle brake and ear protectors they almost rattle one's fillings out! Still, one can see why the local militia obtained the large stock of them, as they can provide effective self-defence up to two thousand yards away with the tube sight. (We are told that no telescopic sight survived the firing of more than a dozen shots, in testing.)

When Soppo Forsythe complained about the Mausers hardly being self-defence items, Miss Blande explained that in fact they have far better peace-keeping potential than the standard pistol that might fit in one's handbag. Being easily as tall as I am, they can be clearly spotted by a potential miscreant in time for him to reconsider any criminal acts – and prevention is surely better than cure.

Molly perked up somewhat at this, adding that the best form of defence is attack, and the best form of attack is surprise – and proceeded to put in a quite respectable grouping into the furthest range target at twelve hundred yards. Only Erica managed to score higher, but naturally she has an inbuilt understanding of all her nation's hardware.

Erica, I must say, has been a real brick, and told us a lot about Songmark that we would have taken ages to learn on our own. Though by birth and education she is of course what Father would term a “dastardly Boche”, in person she is hardly dastardly at all. One supposes that is why she was sent over here, being regarded as under-par by her Family.

March 16th, 1935

Quite alarming news on Radio LONO late last night – there is a rather nasty “Papeete Influenza” sweeping over this part of the Pacific, laying thousands flat on all the islands on its way. Everyone is talking about it today – almost everyone recovers inside a week, but one is quite prostrated for a few days. No doubt three hundred years ago, it would have taken years to spread amongst these islands – but nowadays it is not only the post that can arrive in a few days by air from anywhere in the world.

Jasbir rather pooh-poohs the “forty-eight hour Flu”, her home province having been stricken with what she calls a “forty-eight hour cholera” a few years ago – with that, she tells us, someone feeling perfectly well on Friday would be buried on Monday. One supposes that it could be worse – at least, the Papeete Flu is not catching the Spontoon islands at the height of the tourist season.

Our letters are of course being fumigated, including parcels. Madelene X was quite speechless with rage when she received her latest food parcel, everything except the tins somewhat reeking of Lysol disinfectant. Having seen what she normally receives in them, one wonders why she bothers – she has to make do with various “pates”, as in France they seem to be rather short of plain standard meat paste.

Molly generously offered to donate a dozen tins of her family product, PAMS, to help our comrade out (her Father having sent over a whole case last month) – and Madelene X became quite animated at the prospect, almost foaming at the mouth. At least, I hardly recognised most of the words, despite having taken the language for three years at St. Winifreds, and having once been on a day-trip to Le Treport aerodrome.

Helen seemed very impressed (she speaks French, some of her relatives being from New Orleans, unlike Madelene whose Father's factory is near the proper one) and noted that she had never thought of someone doing that with pressed meat before. One assumes she refers to a recipe.

March 19th, 1935

Alas! The radio reports the first cases of Papeete Flu, over on Main Island – and by all accounts, it is so ferociously contagious that there is little point in trying to quarantine the islands. Miss Devinski called us together and gave us a briefing: most of us can expect to be more or less stricken in the next few weeks. All field trips are postponed, and off-island travel is banned. (Happily, it is three weeks till the end of term, and this should be over by then.)

Still, we had a whole afternoon's flying to keep our minds off the prospect, and to keep up our skills. It is starting to get decidedly warm in the cockpits on the ground, with the woollen-lined gabardine flying suits and fleecy-lined boots almost baking us as we stand on the runway to receive our flight briefings. And yet one soon feels the need for them, the air at five thousand feet still being jolly chilly with the air-blast of the prop in the open cockpit.

It was quite a treat, to fly out over Main Island, passing over the North coast jungles around Crater Lake, which we had taken days to get through on foot. Following Miss Pelton's lead, the four of us swooped down to follow the edge of the cliffs in formation, keeping half a mile away from the rock faces and downdrafts. An impressive sight – and we spotted what looked like another of Mr. Tikitavi's sculptures in the making, on the far North-east coast near the Icelandic village of Beresby. At least, it looked very similar, a curved wall looking out to sea and another one just up the slope from it, a veritable array of sculptured geometrical planes staring out over the shipping lanes.

At last, we reached our hundred-hour mark in our Songmark flying logbooks! It has taken long enough – I had hoped on first arriving that we might have achieved as much in our first term. And indeed, the second and third-years have easily that much flying time every term: sometimes our little squadron is gone for days on end while they shuttle around the local island

chains. It is a pity that we have only the land versions of the Tiger Moth, as many of the more fascinating islands are quite destitute of runways.

Miss Pelton assures us that she is carefully considering leasing at least one float-plane for the senior years to practice on. Alas, this would mean another hangar to buy or rent down by the docks, and even steeper fees. (Fortunately most of us here are from quite well-heeled families, and indeed in his latest letter my dear Father told me that he is prepared to spend almost any reasonable fee to keep me over here. How thoughtful! Especially as he has selflessly sacrificed most of our lawns and paddocks for the Royal Engineers to practice building anti-invasion obstacles that even my dear Flying Flea would find impossible to land on.)

March 20th, 1935

Dear Diary – the ‘flu has arrived, with one of our native cooks being taken ill, as well as four of the third-years, in the same morning. Our actual kitchen is a separate building, some way off from the dining hall with big ventilated doors to let the steam escape. Molly has spent a lot of time working there as a conscientious Objector while the rest of us are out at church – so she is convinced she will be the next one to be stricken.

Poor Molly! She has been in touch with Mr. Nordstrom on our wireless, and had planned a meeting in two nights time at Mahanish’s bar, with of course the rest of us to chaperone her (at least in part.) It looks as if that will have to be postponed, perhaps even till the holidays at this rate. Molly is sitting on the edge of her bed as I write, gloomily sharpening a trench-knife which she received for Christmas from one of her Father’s associates. Still, she is at least using her energies creatively, keeping all her equipment spick and span: the brass knuckles on the hilt would surely pass muster even with old MacCardle, my Father’s butler and retired Regimental Sergeant-Major.

Helen and I managed to meet Jirry and Marti with their family after church last Sunday, so at least we are in touch, and planning some adventures for the coming holiday. His sister Moeli is looking very obviously round by now – she is in excellent spirits, and hugged me most affectionately. I had asked earlier when her wedding would be, something which seemed to greatly amuse her.

Marti, on the other hand, seemed rather disturbed at the news of Molly and his countryman – whom he says has been in trouble with the local law before. Still, Mr. Nordstrom is at least of the right type for Molly, as none of the Hoele’toemi family have antlers. (At least, not that I have noticed – they are all felines, though Moeli has hinted that her child will be “Rather Different”.)

March 21st, 1935

An alarming day – and little enough time to write, half of the Academy starting to show symptoms. Miss Devinski retired to bed with an ice pack, having issued strict instructions on our looking after each other. Jasbir is already stricken next door, and all of Madelene X’s dorm are running high fevers.

Helen, still cheerful, raided the classrooms where a set of marine signalling flags is kept. Madelene X’s door is now covered with both the quarantine symbol and the “Yellow Jack” of Yellow Fever – as she explained, without a separate Influenza flag, one must make do with the next best thing.

All four of us are healthy still (touch wood) but rushed off our feet serving hot tea and soup to the sufferers, of which there are more by the hour. Help!

March 22nd, 1935

Busy indeed – both Helen and Maria are confined to bed, with raging fevers and sore heads – and it might be easier to list who has so far escaped at Songmark, than who has not. All of our Tutors are down, leaving overall command with a dozen or so of the third-years. The radio reports most of the island as being effectively closed, with only food shops remaining open, and giving advice to sufferers. Not entirely useful advice, on the lines of “keep drinking and sweat it out, you’ll be better next week.”

Molly and myself have been spending most of our time in the kitchens, which are definitely sweltering already even with all the doors and windows propped open. A mercy that the Papeete flu picked March and not July, as we are down to rather scanty “native” dress in the heat. This would of course be quite against school rules, but there is nobody to complain, and we are quite hot enough as it is, filling vacuum flasks with coffee and soup for our friends.

Ada Cronstein is stricken, but wrote out her family recipe for chicken soup, which we are following. Both her parents are Doctors, so one hopes it is a more effective mix than usual.

Molly speculates that as medical science advances, in a century or so it should be possible to make specific chicken soups effective against all diseases.

I do hope the poor girl is not going down with it herself – she is sounding definitely light-headed, though perhaps little more than normal.

March 23rd, 1935

Well ! After nursing half of our class (only Molly, Li Han, Irma Bundt and Sophie D'Artagnan are still wholly well in our year) I am hoping that I might come through this with no more than a mild cold. The radio reports that about a tenth of the "Euros" are unaffected, mostly those who already had the November Lurgy of '28 (which never reached the Pacific.) The islands are almost closed down, with very few water-taxis running, and indeed little enough trade for them. Still, the earliest cases are getting better now, so the worst should be past by the end of the week.

And about time too! The five of us are quite run off our feet, looking after all the rest. Poor Helen says she feels like a wrung-out dish rag – if she tried to get up, she is convinced that she would just collapse on the floor like an empty fur coat. Maria has been praying quite a lot out loud, but mercifully stopped when her headache got worse – "pounding like a radial engine with two cylinders shot away", as she picturesquely described it.

It is a good thing indeed that we have been keeping extremely fit, as we are taking shifts just keeping up with supplying food and fresh bedding to the rest of our class. At least, we are not having to support our Tutors as well; although it would be Miss Pelton's turn to stay downstairs in the staff "duty" rooms, she is in her bungalow outside the compound being looked after by Erica and some of the third-years. One hardly envies the sufferers, but at the end of twelve hours dashing around between the swelteringly hot kitchen and the laundry, the idea of a day in bed for whatever reason seems very sweet.

Our radios are hardly switched on right now – but tonight, Molly came in looking quite radiant, telling me Mr. Nordstrom is perfectly well and on this island, even. I had to admit, Molly has been working flat-out like the good egg she is (despite her lack of a respectable school).

Of Jirry and his family there is, alas, no word – one assumes that they are far too busy to keep radio watch for me, and perfectly understandable too. One day, radios may be small enough to carry around in one's pocket – but I doubt it. At any rate, Molly's idea of a "cure-all" chicken soup will probably come first.

Listening to the unfamiliar voices presumably filling in for the regular announcers, it was not all reassuring news. Despite Spontoon's carefully cultivated image as a safe, friendly island, there were some unpleasant rumours flying around, of unscrupulous folk taking advantage of all the closed shops and businesses, and engaging in wholesale robbery. One supposes that the Police force on the islands will be as hard-hit as Songmark. And indeed – "when the cat's away, the mice will play" – though I have not noticed any unusual number of feline Police officers here.

March 24th, 1935

Hurrah! Things are showing signs of definitely improving. Jasbir has been up and around since last night, her fever having broken, and some of the second-years have joined us on kitchen duty. By all reports, our tutors have been hit hardest, as have older folk all across the islands.

Having a little free time, Molly and myself took insulated mule panniers out to Song Sodas, just outside the compound. Just in time, as it turned out – there had been no ice deliveries in two days, and the stock of ice-cream was already beginning to melt. In two trips, we salvaged what we could and managed to hand it out to our patients. Much appreciated, by all accounts.

A surprise encounter, outside the compound as we returned to clean up Song Sodas (there being quite a lot of melted ice-cream to hose away before the flies and such arrive.) I heard Molly give a gasp, and by the time I turned round, she was hugging Mr. Nordstrom very affectionately – indeed, our Tutors would never have approved, especially as Molly is in her Native dress. He seems in excellent health, having (one presumes) sweated through the Lurgy of '28 somewhere nearer Europe.

I decided to exercise discretion, and busied myself with cleaning up our ice-cream parlour, finding indeed a small stock left in a private ice-box under the staff counter. It would certainly have melted by the time the Academy gets back to operation, and so I decided to find it an appreciative home. Certainly, after the past few days of living on hastily opened tins from the stores, a small treat would scarcely be excessive.

Molly joined me half an hour later, looking positively glowing – and indeed, helped me finish off the ice-cream. She asks if I could help her tonight, and get the breakout to Mahanish's "on" again. Of course, right now it is less of a breakout than a stroll through the empty gates, as the tutors are still "hors de combat" and the senior years hard at work. A tricky proposition though – I can scarcely let her go un-chaperoned, and we are both needed at Songmark. Plus,

we have been asked not to leave except on essential business, which I think a social evening hardly counts as.

Still, Molly has worked exceedingly hard, and deserves a break. After surviving the Papeete flu, with this much luck on our side surely there is little that can go wrong.

March 27th, 1935

Oh dear. As I write this, Dear Diary, my travel case has been brought down from the attic – my full-scale steamer trunk too, which can take ALL my belongings – and indeed it looks as if I might be packing it soon.

Just after the last time I closed your pages, Madelene X and Missy K reported themselves “fit for service”, and indeed they seemed eager to take charge of things. Being waited on by us, turned out to be rather galling for them, especially when Molly insists on serving Madelene X a generous portion of PAMS for every meal and making sure she eats it all. So with the prospect of more of us being up and about soon, I thought it a good time to let Molly have her evening’s relaxation. Helen and Maria were both sleeping soundly, so we put a “do not disturb” sign on our dorm, changed into respectable Native wear, and left the compound. It is well defended still against any casual marauders, the bigdogs that roam inside the fence looking distinctly hungry – one hopes that someone remembered to feed them in all the confusion.

Eastern Island still seemed almost deserted, with scarcely a skeleton staff running the aerodrome, but we found Mahanish’s bar was open and indeed doing a lively trade. From what one could gather from the conversations, most people were in the same state as ourselves – the lucky ones who had escaped the flu, had been working for days looking after relatives and friends less fortunate. With the worst past, tonight was the first night many people had been free for days, and the place was suprisingly crowded.

Mr. Nordstrom was already there, being very conspicuous with his horns and striped face – one can quite understand what Molly sees in him. He was very affable, and bought us both drinks (I stuck to a Nootnops Red, which he was some time getting.)

It was a very pleasant evening, though I discreetly left them to it and mingled, spotting one of the third-years dressed in a very convincing “Pacific Shawnee Airways” uniform as disguise. To judge from the conversations, everyone there sounded greatly relieved, in that few new cases have been reported – and those are from the far corners of the island, where isolated villages are only now starting to get the flu. In a week it should mostly be over, and the islands can get on with preparing for the Tourist Season again.

A few minutes after finishing my Nootnops Red, I felt very peculiar – and feared that after all, the Papeete flu had breached my defences. It was most distressing, indeed I only just made it to the conveniences in time. I was most exceedingly unwell – and yet with nothing like the symptoms I had become so familiar with this week. It was easily half an hour till I felt confident enough to return to the restaurant, and when I did so – there was no sign of Molly or Mr. Nordstrom.

I waited two hours, until the bar began to close, but still no Molly. Thinking she must have missed me and returned to Songmark, I slipped out and in ten minutes was back, expecting to find her in our dorm – but no Molly.

Still, she had been getting on very well with her date, so I assumed she would be back again in the morning, hopefully arriving discreetly before anyone else spotted her (the Papeete Flu sufferers were feeling too tired to get up early, as indeed were the rest of us who had been looking after them.) Helen and Maria were much better the next day, but not until mid-morning did I have to break it to them – that Molly was still missing, and I was the one who lost her!

Helen seemed quite amused for awhile, pointing out that while we had been enjoying several days of fascinating native traditions in the holidays, Molly had been doing nothing more exciting than counting tins of pressed meats – and that in the circumstances, she hardly blamed her for making the most of her chance. But as the day dragged on, both Maria and Helen began to worry somewhat for our friend. I would have been out to look for her, but we were still urgently busy looking after half of Songmark, none of the Native cooks or cleaners having turned up as yet.

At teatime, I was further alarmed to see Miss Devinski busily investigating, and hoped she would not make too exact a head-count tonight. But alas – she made the tour with Mrs. Oelabe our Matron, checking up on everyone’s condition. All the first-years were present and accounted-for – except for Molly’s absence, which she spotted straight away. I was summoned to her office, where to judge from the ice-packs and aspirin bottles she is still suffering severely – and “called on the carpet” to explain exactly how and when I had managed to lose one of my dorm, despite being responsible for her. Not a nice interview! It was rather worse than being taken ill last night, which was itself exactly as bad as our Matron’s drastic purge medicine (which has exactly the same symptoms, onset and duration, oddly enough.)

Of course, I volunteered to set out at once in search of our missing chum, but Miss Devinski was having none of it, and ordered me confined to the kitchens while she summoned half a dozen of the third-years who have had experience in these matters.

It was very worrying, indeed – I spent the evening busily cooking and trying to keep occupied – alas, peeling tubers is hardly a taxing mental challenge, and various unpleasant explanations for Molly’s absence kept running through my head. I hourly expected the third-years to come back with our dear chum frog-marched between them – and I would happily take whatever demotion was coming to me, to just see her again.

Erica popped her head around the door just before midnight, and announced that they had drawn a blank, but they would be resuming their search in the morning. I managed to pump her for some useful facts though – Molly had definitely left the bar with Mr. Nordstrom, in a very good mood. Although they headed out towards Songmark, certainly they never passed this way. Which would leave the docks or the village, and none of the water-taxis were out at all that evening. Most curious!

Despite everything, I was quite unable to sleep for worrying. Helen and Maria were quite dead to the world, Maria making the light bulbs rattle with her snoring. Although I had been strictly ordered to stay in the compound, I reasoned that at the minute, nobody was searching for Molly, so I would have to perform that duty. Leaving a note under Helen’s pillow, I was down the rope to the ground in half a minute, and hurrying past the classrooms.

At least, I had a stroke of luck there – it occurred to me that it might be somewhat dangerous, if indeed the islands were being pestered by looters and criminals. In the classrooms, I noticed the cases for three of the Mauser “T-Gew” rifles that some of the third-years had borrowed and been unable to return to the Moon Island naval base with the disruption to the water-taxis. Although the cased rifle and a dozen rounds must have weighed fifty pounds, I shouldered it quite happily, hoping to pass as a hunter heading out for a spot of dawn duck shooting on the sandbars. (True, having hardened steel-cored ammunition might be regarded as a little excessive, but I have heard that older game birds are liable to be tough.)

The island seemed quite eerily empty after midnight: it is normally quiet, not having the late-night attractions of Casino Island, but I saw absolutely nobody. For three hours I patrolled, before deciding to head down to the docks and see if there was anything to be observed. Happily, I had remembered to bring my binoculars with me, and having large lenses they helped greatly as I scanned the area under the fitful moonlight. There were no lights except the beacons on the seaplane control tower, and I sat down feeling distinctly cold, tired and hungry. Having heard about probable thieves and such who are the only ones liable to be out right now, I took the opportunity to ready and load the rifle, carrying it on its sling just in case any emergency self-defence was required. Alas – though it felt a practicable weight to stagger under when first I picked it up, carrying nearly half one’s own weight around for hours is severely fatiguing! Some wheels on the corner of the case would have helped matters, perhaps on the lines of a golf-trolley.

It was three in the morning when I heard an unexpected sound from across the water – a marine diesel starting up. There were two large yachts moored off the Northern jetty, one of them fifty yards offshore, and as I brought my binoculars to bear, some lights came on in its cabin. It was quite a large ship, easily ocean-going, registered at Macao as I could see in the moonlight (but then, by all accounts one can register anything at Macao for a suitable sum in gold: the notorious German commerce-raider “Direwolf” retired there in 1918 to escape the terms of the Armistice and has been operating under Macao’s flag ever since.)

Making my way towards the jetty in the shadows, I spotted movement on the decks, and had it in focus in an instant. There were three figures on board, two oriental-looking felines and a stag for whom I had been searching all night. Mr. Nordstrom’s antlers are quite distinctive, being slender and singly branched like slightly uneven tuning forks – I definitely doubt there are two gentlemen with such silhouettes on Eastern Island right now.

Quite a dilemma! I managed to get to the land end of the jetty unobserved, but the jetty itself was wide open and brightly lit by moonlight. In broad daylight with other people in hailing distance, I would naturally have walked up and asked where Molly had got to – but I had an inexplicable feeling that there was something very wrong with this, and that the crew of the yacht might not be pleased to chat with me.

Still, with the engine starting up, there was little time to lose. I returned the rifle to its case (a good “Cork-Lite waterproof brand”) and slipped round to the beach on the far side of the jetty. The jetty was mercifully steel-framed, not slippery wood, and I climbed along the outer ledge, slowly making my way out to just opposite, some sixty yards across the water. The shadows were at least in the right direction for me: from under the jetty the boat’s shadow stretched half way across to meet me. The cased rifle I had to keep on the deck of the jetty, shifting it along as I traversed to the end of the structure, hopefully hidden from casual sight.

Definitely, March is too early in the year for a pleasurable dip in the Nimmitz Sea. I was across to the yacht in two minutes, half-drifting for the first section to avoid splashing any water in the moonlight, the rifle and case towed behind me, and wishing I had something a little more compact. I arrived at the stern, and tried to find an open porthole – alas, it was not as easy as in the Pirate films at the cinema. All the portholes on the lower deck were securely closed and dark inside, and there was easily ten feet of sheer hull towering above me to the nearest paw-hold.

Although it meant risking being spotted, I swam out to the moonlit side of the boat, where the anchor rope was the only likely means of getting onboard. Just as I passed one of the portholes, a light inside came on – and I managed to see inside one of the cabins. Alas! Not Molly, but two girls I had never seen before, in Native dress, fast asleep in a definitely crowded bunk. I had almost reached the anchor chain when there were voices right above me – and the chain began to move, as the yacht weighed anchor!

The noise at least covered me as I closed the distance, passing another porthole – and I risked a glance inside, just as well as it turned out – as I saw Molly in there, again looking fast asleep, despite all the noise. Which was very odd, as she is an extremely light sleeper and often wakes up with some weapon to hand whenever birds start unexpectedly singing outside.

As I looked, I missed the anchor coming up, still some ten feet away, and rapidly swinging up out of reach. The yacht began to move, and though I swam hard, I could tell I would very soon be left behind. Indeed, I realised that as it went past me, I would be in danger from its propellers, which were noisily churning under the power of unexpectedly powerful engines for a yacht that size.

There was no chance of being able to uncase the rifle in time, and indeed the vessel would hardly notice a mere thirteen-millimetre hole even could I have brought it into action. I managed to pull in the floating case, just as the stern swept past me – and sucked me in towards the propellers!

I did the only thing I could: I jammed the rifle case against the nearest prop, pushing myself away as I swam clear. There was a rather nasty grinding noise, but the yacht kept going – and I watched helplessly as it slowly pulled away from me, heading out towards the Northern channel. There was nothing left but to swim back to the jetty, feeling extremely drained, chilled and dispirited, as I watched the yacht “Sea Breeze Two” make its escape.

Sitting on the dock, wringing my coat out at four in the morning, I thought there was nothing else that could possibly go wrong – until the heavy hand of the only fit policeman on Eastern Island descended on my shoulder. As Molly has often said – there’s never one around when you want one!

March 28th, 1935

Dear Diary – it looks like being a sad ending to such a promising career at Songmark. None of our Tutors were happy about being woken up at six in the morning, to collect me from the cells on Main Island. I had written out my reports as to exactly what happened – but nobody believed a word of it. Despite the disruption of the flu, the harbour has been manned all the time, and nowhere has any records of any such yacht arriving in the Spontoon group.

Alas – from their point of view, things do look rather gloomy against me. The Authorities are not pressing charges of wasting police time, but I owned up to losing a valuable military rifle, after taking it without consent – something that could affect Songmark’s use of the facilities here. And our Tutors still have me as the one who helped Molly get herself decisively lost – the first time this has happened to one of their students. Some classes have been marooned or stuck on islands till rescue, but none have vanished like this before. Furthermore, I had broken orders and left the compound (a minor infringement) and been caught by the Police (a major one. Had I not been so distressed and exhausted, I could surely have avoided that.) The truly distressing thing being, that they believe the Authorities and not me – were I truly fibbing, I would deserve everything it looks as if I am about to get!

Helen and Maria have rallied round me like the true bricks they are, but there is really nothing they can do to help. I have been told to pack my bags – it will be confirmed at the end of the week, when they will be telegraphing Home with the news.

Just to make things worse, I know that the only other place that might take me in disgrace, Saint T’s, requires a valid criminal record as part of the entrance qualifications. Being handy with self-defence techniques and firearms would not make up that shortfall in their eyes – and even if the Spontoonies were charging me, I doubt Saint T’s would accept a foreign record.

March 29th, 1935

Dear Diary – bad news certainly travels on these islands. Two of the folk we know from the S.I.T.H.S. dance team dropped into sympathise, and to say goodbye. There is no sign of Molly, and indeed my bags are almost packed.

(Afternoon.) A strange visitor for me: Jerry’s sister Saimmi, whom I have not seen since the start of term. Being highly placed in the Native religion, not suprisingly she does not attend Reverend Bingham’s Church on Casino Island where we meet the rest of the family. She had some mysterious news – she hinted that I might slow down on packing, as Songmark would have two visitors tonight who would be speaking with me and our Tutors. Very strange – and hopeful. It was only yesterday that the Police came to take details on Molly – which did not go well, when one of them recognised her Family name. Molly always said it was most unfair, that

one can buy the International Police Gazette anywhere these days; from their reaction, I doubt they will be looking very hard.

(Evening). Just as I was finishing what I both hoped and feared might be my last meal of Poi, Miss Blande came into the dining hall and firmly whispered that my presence was required immediately. I followed her out of the compound to the administrative block with Song Sodas (still closed) and found all four Tutors, plus Mrs. Oelabe and another person who I last met in similarly grave surroundings – Jerry's grandfather, whom I now believe is a rather greater authority in these islands than being simply the head of his clan.

Old Mr. Hoele'toemi stood up and bowed, quite gracefully – I fear that I was wearing my Songmark shorts, and they are hardly adapted to curtseying in. As if summing up for a trial, he skimmed over the events of the past few days, and indeed he had a copy of the report that I had written for the police.

But then, he stopped, and smiled. Two days ago, a flying boat of the Rain Islands air militia had spotted a vessel in difficulties on a sandbank not ten miles North-east of us – and when they circled low, they were fired on. Happily, they had a radio on board, and half an hour later a dozen armed patrol aircraft had touched down around the stuck vessel, each pointing its pair of four-inch Davis guns at its waterline. The yacht was boarded, and our comrade Molly found onboard, apparently drugged still, as were fourteen other Island girls and four boys.

Mr. Hoele'toemi told us that there had been a rash of disappearances across the islands to the West, apparently kidnappings, though no ransoms were ever claimed. It seems that some criminal gangs were using the disruption of the influenza outbreak to rob more than goods to be sold abroad – from documents on board, the "Sea Breeze Two" was heading straight for New China, where he tells us girls of non-native types such as Molly are very popular indeed.

He motioned towards a long case at his chair side, and for me to open it. There were two, or more accurately one and a half Mauser rifles there – the mangled ruins of the one I had jammed in the port propeller, had stayed in place until the yacht altered course, when it had shifted and jammed the rudder, sending the vessel straight onto the sand bank! Mr. Hoele'toemi presented them both with his complements, and expressed regret that nothing of my adventure would be appearing in the Daily 'Elele. Not suprising, one supposes that it would make rather poor reading at this time of year when folk are deciding on their holiday destinations.

There was a knock on the door – and in walked Saimmi, escorting a rather dazed-looking Molly, perfectly alive and well and rescued! Saimmi mentions that she should be fully recovered after another day, as the Spontoon general hospital have taken all appropriate measures for the state she was discovered in.

Molly, indeed, seemed perfectly contented, though rather woolly-headed (more so than usual, that is.) She waved, and was helped to a seat – where she promptly fell fast asleep. It seems that Mr. Nordstrom or his friends have more than one bottle in the medicine cabinet – I mentioned my drastic symptoms at Mahanish's bar, and our Matron agreed that one of the local plants has exactly that effect. She cautioned me to be more careful in future as to who I accept drinks from, and I heartily agreed!

I asked indeed about Mr. Nordstrom – but it seems he was not onboard the yacht when it was stopped, and there is still nothing but my one sighting to tie him into the affair – and indeed, I saw his silhouette, but had to admit he might have a relative with the same shape. As to the other crew on the yacht – I did wonder how folk would arrange to have them tried and sentenced without it appearing in the papers. Mr. Hoele'toemi reassured me that they would be causing no more trouble, and indeed there was a definite – finality – in his voice that rather deterred me from asking any more.

Well! One would not have thought any of our Tutors were the type to blush easily, but Miss Devinski's ears were somewhat flushed as she shook hands with me and congratulated me on a job well done, at the risk of sacrificing life, limb and reputation. Though she did, indeed, whisper to keep a closer eye on Molly in future, involving four-inch steel docking tethers if needed.

Mr. Hoele'toemi stood up, and thanked us all again, promising that he would see me in the Holidays, and extending the gratitude of his clan. It was my turn indeed to blush! It seems that one of the boys onboard the yacht was a distant cousin of Jerry, twice removed, or thrice marooned or whatever Islander distinctions the Natives have over here.

Our Matron volunteered to watch over Molly, and we made up a bed for her on the floor. At least, she has been getting plenty of rest after her exertions in the Papeete flu outbreak! What with all the adventuring and worrying, I fear I am short about three night's worth by now.

Helen and Maria were overjoyed at the news – and immediately pumped me for all the information they could. I confessed that I was somewhat baffled by some of it – if New China really appreciates young Euro tourists, surely they could offer cheap holidays and accommodation packages as some resorts do back home? It seemed a very expensive way of getting people over, and if Molly had heard she would be popular there, just inviting her over for the holidays surely would have been a lot more effective.

Helen looked at me somewhat glassily-eyed, then motioned me towards a corner of the room and Explained things to me, in what I thought was rather excessive detail for ten minutes. Oh My!

March 30th, 1935

Hurrah! Molly is back with us, looking none the worse for wear, and indeed rather mystified at all the fuss. By her account, she was definitely swept off her feet, assumed that I had discreetly left her to it and returned home, and had an extremely enjoyable evening. She admits that the evening seemed to last for a surprising length, and that it seemed to be light some of the time – but she insists that she had nothing to complain about.

However, she does admit that she seems to have three days unaccounted-for, and she has no recollection of being aboard the Sea Breeze. She was asking if any of us had seen Mr. Nordstrom, as despite everything she still seems very keen to meet him again. Telling her of his low standing with the Police somehow appeared to make very little impact on her. From her point of view, the other crew of the yacht simply kidnapped her while she was sleeping exhausted, like the other captives. Most of those had the influenza, and presumably were in poor shape to put up much of a struggle – whatever did happen to the kidnappers, we all agree they richly deserved it. Molly has been gleefully speculating dire things involving crabs or tiger ants.

With Helen and Maria's help, I am now happily unpacked again, and my steamer trunk consigned to the attic. A tricky place to work, the attic of our dorm – one has to watch out for radio aerials strung by the other dorms, plus strange bits of discarded plumbing that Molly identifies as manufacturing facilities for "bathtub gin" (which is presumably some cosmetic like rubbing alcohol.)

Classes are resuming tomorrow, and on the radio we can hear reports of the islands gradually returning to normal. Soppy Forsythe is still in a high fever, possibly her system has a lack of moral fibre which the flu finds appetising. She had mentioned that some of her Quaker relatives left Britain in 1917 to avoid conscription, and settled down in Liberia where it was safer. Safer indeed until the 1918 influenza arrived in town: they may have Concienciously Objected to it, but it massacred them regardless.

March 31st, 1935

Back in class again, after more than a week off – and indeed, a dozen of us are still out of action. Our cooks and cleaners are back at work, so we are no longer having hotel-scale housekeeping chores taking up most of our time – Maria claims she would rather have the flu than have to do laundry, something she has a violent aversion to. About the only thing she will clean happily is her boots: they are exceedingly large, black and glossy, and she throws a temper fit if engine oil or axle grease ever get on them. (About five times a day, when we are in workshop and flying lessons.)

At last, we can start looking forwards to the holidays, now some two weeks away. Maria is going home, she claims she has to show her face to remind her Family to keep paying her fees. Molly is staying this time, and we have put our names down to stay at the Spontari Guest House again for the month. It should be quite jolly, showing Molly around some of the sights! Not ALL of the sights indeed – Helen and I decided that some of the Native constructions like the "Waterworks Project" we will plead ignorance about if she stumbles across anything incriminating.

Helen is looking a little more relaxed, since I told her of my interview with old Mr. Hoele'toemi. She cautions that we might not be out of the woods yet: from the Spontoonie point of view I could still be a skilled Agent, who happened to use her talents to foil a quite unrelated crime. I pointed out that an Agent would hardly attract attention that way – to which Helen replies that we are both under scrutiny still, so that would hardly make any difference. At least, I seem to have emerged with a good character reference and a rather handy big-game rifle, which I have promised Molly she can borrow on Sundays.

Still, it is a little odd – that the one policeman on Eastern Island waited till I had finished my business with the yacht before collaring me. On balance, I am still inclined to think it was one of those coincidences one reads about.

Helen agrees – except that she adds emphasis, as in "One of THOSE coincidences."

April 2nd, 1935

At last, all of us are on our feet again. To make up lost time, our tutors hustled us down to the docks, where we spent a whole day getting underfoot and pestering Shawnee Pacific airlines. Quite an operation, and run off its feet right now with a huge backlog of orders following the flu:

all the hotels are finalising their preparations and realising they urgently need paint, decorations and supplies that will not wait for the cargo steamers to carry them.

We crowded into the air traffic control tower – just one dorm at a time, under strict orders to keep quiet and not touch anything. Molly was back in her usual high spirits, and was rather put out that she was not allowed to take turns as an air traffic controller. One quite applauds the official controller's common sense.

It appears that the third-years at Songmark are quite busy, in addition to their own classes they are expected to make contacts for the rest of us to use. At least, we met our pal Noota, who mentioned she had been trying for ages to get her friend who works here to let us look around for a day. Still – it was hardly a free ride, as we discovered we had been “volunteered” for three hours after lunch to work in the baggage sorting room! Quite a fascinating time, actually – Spontoon being the main traffic hub and distribution centre for most of the Nimmitz Sea, we got to see the wheels of local trade in motion. There were crates of the usual domestic supplies heading in all directions, large consignments of “Guaranteed native effect artefacts” from the manufactories of Birmingham and the Ruhr to sell in Spontoonie gift shops, and almost everything one could imagine, to look at the shipping manifests! All the urgently needed goods arrive by seaplane these days, right down to the latest records destined for Radio LONO – and indeed some classical ones, which were duly marked “Handel, with care.”

Molly claimed that some heavy crates labelled “tractor spares” and destined for Vostok positively reek of gun oil – possibly it is cheaper than regular machine oil. It is odd, certainly, in that from all accounts Vostok is mostly mountains and forests, with very little farmland that would need tractors.

Maria is also back in her usual spirits, and suggested doing some creative re-routing – there was a consignment for the Soviet Embassy here that she suggested would be better delivered to the base of NeuSchwannland in German Antarctica (the furthest delivery address on the lists.) But I had to put my foot down firmly, pointing out that we are here as guests, and owe it to our hosts to do a good job.

It was fascinating enough as it was, handling mining machinery for Orpington Island and the smaller islands around. I recall last holiday, our hosts at the Spontari Guest House being in the prospecting trade and having worked over there. It is a shame that the looked-for Radium happened to be only Uranium, but one must keep on trying.

Just before we were due to finish, we heard the control tower talking down a new arrival – and it turned out to be the very recognisable Lockheed Lamprey, part-owned by Miss Wildford's friend. Certainly, a flying boat of that size can carry more than any dozen of the little floatplanes that make daily island deliveries, though it will of course take a long time to unload. I commented that Miss Wildford might indeed be glad to see him, having only got out of bed two days ago – at which Helen suggested she might be returning there. One hopes our dear tutor will not have a relapse!

April 4th, 1935

Some dispiriting news – we hear from our tutors that the Spontari Guest house where we planned to spend the Easter holidays, will not be open till May this year. It seems that Mr. and Mrs. Tanoaho who run it, had an exciting “find” on Cranium Island, and are putting together a prospecting expedition. They have asked our tutors if any of us would like to accompany them – to which Miss Devinski has agreed. Alas, this only applies to second and third-year students, so it looks as if our pals Noota, Erica and Conchita will get the chance of a free working holiday.

Exactly where we will be spending the holidays, is something we are looking forward to discovering. I suggested the Marylebone Hotel, which I could easily afford at its current off-season rates – but no doubt the deciding factor will involve finding someone to keep an eye on us. As if we needed it!

April 6th, 1935

Back again to Casino Island for the dance classes, the first since the flu. I must say, it made a nice change wandering around freely rather than being escorted by a Constable as on my last trip here – a sentiment Molly heartily agrees with.

Molly seems to have suffered no ill effects, although Helen keeps trying to impress on her the narrowness of her escape. The only lasting effect is obvious in the showers – our Matron says the fur will grow back there in a month or so, and somewhat restore her modesty. Molly, on the other hand, seems to quite like her new look, pointing out that anyone who she decides to show it to, she has no intention of being modest with.

Still – we had an excellent dance lesson, learning the “Banoba Whirlpool” move that the S.I.T.H.S. used against us in the contest. A decidedly strenuous manoeuvre, and one requiring split-second timing; no wonder our opponents could not quite carry it off at the end of our rather gruelling dance challenge. This time, we will be able to make use of it ourselves, and indeed we hope to get plenty of time to practice in the holidays. Of course, there are a dozen or more other

dance teams that use the school on Saturdays – and our wins against the S.I.T.H.S. has brought us a measure of fame, and offers to compete with rather more senior leagues.

The dance school being scarcely a hundred yards from the beach, some of the braver souls have been finishing off their lessons with a dash down to swim, and to cool off. Although most days one would cool off rather faster than desired, I decided to join the crowd and risk it. After all, it is at least rather warmer than my previous swim in these waters at three in the morning, not to mention having far pleasanter company.

A splendid day, with streaming sunshine to dry one's fur afterwards – alas, we still had to shower afterwards to remove the salt from our fur. That appears to be one of the other advantages of oiled fur, making one quite impervious to salt matting. Moeli looks to have hers at least lightly oiled the whole time, as if she spends most of her leisure time in the water.

Just one more week to go – next weekend we will be on holiday! Exactly where we will be, is still a burning issue. One suspects that our Tutors are finding it difficult to find somewhere willing to take us on – despite only four of us needing accommodation, as all the senior years have opted to follow the Tanoahos to Cranium Island. Ethyl and Methyl agree with each other (a rare event) that it should be a fine adventure.

Molly is trying to be helpful, pointing out to Miss Blande that we should be in no danger of kidnapping, having already had it once (at least, that works for measles.) She promises to carry arms at all times, and to use them at the slightest hint of danger.

Miss Blande looked somewhat sour at this notion, and opined that we were really not helping matters. She mentioned a research project in the Daily 'Elele, of setting a party of volunteers out on Metzger's Pyramid (the very sheer and isolated rock just on the edge of the charts) to count seabirds, but doubts that even there we could stay out of mischief.

April 8th, 1935

Hurrah! Old Mr. Hoele'toemi wrote to our tutors and offered us accommodation on the islands. I had radioed Jerry last week that we were in need of a place that could put up with having Sopy Forsythe for a month. Not the company I might have wished to stand in for Maria, but one must bear one's crosses bravely.

Miss Blande seemed rather more cheerful, and called me in to ask if we would mind a little hard work for a change. Of course, I volunteered us – and discovered that the offer was for us to join the fishing fleet, mostly in local waters for the month. She added that keeping us away from the dangers of Casino Island would be a distinct advantage – it seems she feels Molly has far less potential for harm on a small boat surrounded by sharks, than being let off the leash outside the Coconut Shell.

One great advantage – we should make great strides in learning the local language, being surrounded by native-speakers all day, with hardly a newspaper or gramophone to remind us of home. I ran down to tell my dorm the happy news – to have Helen flatten me with a bolster.

As she pointed out gently while sitting on me and demonstrating the rather effective double hammerlock we have learned from the Fairburn-Sykes – she gets seasick on anything more than the water taxi to Moon Island. Learning that I had volunteered us for a month on the rolling wave, came as something of a shock to the poor girl.

At least, as I explained after breaking out with a fore-flip and pinning her in turn – she should have plenty of time to get used to it. After all – one cannot surely be seasick non-stop for a month ?

April 9th, 1935

At last, the end of term is here ! Maria is packing her bags, ready to depart on the China Clipper calling at Hawaii, from which she travels in a Caproni Ca 60 across Alaska, over the Pole and back to Europe via Greenland and Iceland. This time of year it should be a fine sight, better than her last trip at New Year (a thirty-hour crossing in darkness, lit only by the Northern Lights, with two refuelling stops on the ice cap.)

This morning we had one final flight together, with Miss Pelton leading us over Main Island at about two thousand feet. I doubt we shall be seeing many aircraft this holiday, as our travelling will be strictly at sea level.

We have always observed the various fishing boats on our flights, of course, but thought little of them as we zoomed overhead. By the start of next term, we should know quite a bit more about them. Molly is looking a little crestfallen, until Helen pointed out that a life of hard exercise and plenty of fish in the diet is said to be excellent for building up a healthy physique, in various ways. Certainly, I expect we shall return to Songmark in fine training, what with swimming and net-hauling and whatever else we find to do.

One final toast tonight with a smuggled-in bottle of Nootnops Blue, and that will be the end of an eventful term. Hurrah for the Hols!

Amelia's adventures continue in "Easter Honeys", coming soon!