

Topical Heatwave

(Being the twelfth part of the diary of Amelia Bourne-Phipps, at the Songmark Aeronautical Boarding School for Young Ladies on Spontoons Eastern Island. Having survived a severe illness, she is back in class eager to make up lost time ...)

Monday 11th May, 1936

Back to the grindstone! Molly and I have two weeks lost time to catch up, and there is no “easing into” term at Songmark. Everything is coming as rather a sudden shock, and not just our classwork. When we left for Easter the islands were still in the off-season, and now they are a hive of activity getting ready for the tourist tidal wave. The first ripples of that are already visible, with a crowd of new faces arriving on Eastern Island, mostly workers and entertainers bound for the Casino Island to prepare for the hordes to follow.

Still, first things first – we were back in class for the first time in five weeks, our first one being aerodynamics with Herr Bussmann who is leaving us to return to Germany at the end of this term. He has been teaching off and on since Songmark was founded, but his main job is with the Schneider Trophy teams where he is a rather valued consultant. We have only another eight weeks of his wise (if sometimes rather irritable) advice, and then he is saying farewell to these shores for an even better position with the recently expanding firm of Junkers.

Herr Bussmann admits he will miss the climate here, but as consolation he will be seeing the whole Olympic Games before starting his new job. One day we may see mail-planes and passenger aircraft landing on the Eastern Island strip bearing his distinctive design hallmarks of “arrow wings”. It would be a good time to sell my shares in companies making struts and bracing wires, if I had any.

Although that is one sad farewell we will be making, there is news of a happy arrival – our ex-tutor Mrs. Voboеле (nee Pelton) who married to everyone’s surprise last August, has a new daughter! The whole family are doing well on Main Island, and we must send a congratulatory card to our only Tutor who has given up being a “bachelorette”. Our remaining Tutors announced it at breakfast, some of them looking distinctly strained – I assume they had been celebrating the news last night and are feeling under the weather. Mind you, there may be other explanations.

I feared Molly was her rash old self today, when in our talk with Miss Devinski she asked as a hypothetical question just what would happen if despite all our Precautions a Songmark girl did discover her family tree was going to have a quite unexpected new bud. Of course, Miss Devinski can spot a leading question like that one. As my cousin says admiringly of his tank crew’s gunner, she is sharp enough to spot targets “hull down in cover a thousand yards down-range”. Our Tutor looked her in the eye with a distinctly steely gaze and marched her straight off to see our Matron, who we had been due to meet today anyway after our convalescence.

Hurrah for Molly! I was quite wrong about it being an unwise move on her part. As she explained when she returned an hour later, she had decided to “draw off some fire” from me, guessing I might be going to ask that myself after today’s glad news. Our Matron Mrs. Oelabe was most exceedingly ... thorough in Molly’s check-up, and I fear would have spotted things had she been as rigorous with me. Miss Devinski had told Molly in no uncertain terms that after all the work she and her colleagues had put in to training us to be independent and self-supporting Adventuresses, they would not be pleased at all – and there would very shortly be a vacancy in class. The world is full of girls to whom things “Just Happen” and Songmark does not need any of those. An Infantry sergeant would be just as displeased if a recruit asked if “accidentally” shooting oneself in the foot would get one out of a dangerous assault.

Oh well. There were no surprises there, I suppose. After all, Songmark must keep its reputation as a safe place for families to entrust their more venturesome daughters, and our Tutors are “in loco parentis” as they say, looking after us and keeping us as safe as reasonably possible. I passed my own more cursory health check with flying colours, and am cleared to fly again. Mrs. Oelabe was quite relieved, as one of the 1931 class was the first to be sent home without graduating, on health grounds – an ear infection after bathing off the rather dirty Pebble Beach turned very nasty and permanently ruined her sense of balance. * That would be awful, having one’s flying career over before it had even started – no wonder our Tutors are so fanatical about us staying in top condition.

- Editor's note: Penicillin will not be available until the early 1940's, and even Sulphanilamide is experimental in 1936! How much of either gets out to Spontoon, and when, is another story ...

Wednesday 13th May, 1936

Two hard days of catching up were followed by our first Escort duties of the term, shepherding the first-years out to watch the sports on Main Island. By the end of the month the Olympic teams will be leaving for Germany, and they are having final training heats before they go.

Of course, an island chain this small can hardly put a team into every event in the Olympics – sending teams all that way is awfully expensive, and the Althing have sensibly decided to limit it only to a half dozen sports we have a chance at doing well in. It would be more of an embarrassment than an advertisement to come last in every event in the Winter Olympics – Saffina's homeland of Ubangi-Chari in tropical Africa would probably beat us paws-down just by having a population a hundred times bigger to draw on. Actually, Saffina has been griping that France never lets anyone from its colonies compete – they would rather lose to European teams from Monaco or Luxembourg than have their top runner come from Senegal, even though they might stand more chances of getting the gold.

Everyone is pinning their hopes on the swimming and rowing teams, as Samoan Cricket and Satirical Hula have not yet found favour as events with the Olympic organisers. Pity. The bobsled team have scraped up enough shells to send themselves to compete – it seems folk were impressed with their suicidal bravery and hard work of constructing a two hundred yard mostly vertical track through the jungles of Main Island. According to our chum Violobe who has seen it, half way down that run they probably break the world land speed record for an unpowered vehicle running on perambulator wheels – when they hit the bottom she is amazed they avoid breaking everything else.

One of the events they do here is, surprisingly, cycling – but then, the trails of Main Island are mostly cycleways, some of them simply taken over where the old narrow-gage railways used to run. The usual Spontoon bicycle is a sturdy affair without gears, wide tyres and (generally) big panniers of fruit or fish hung off it anywhere that will not get tangled with the chain. Having all the workshops on Eastern Island specialising in light aircraft construction, does mean though that there is plenty of machinery and experience in light tube structures to build racing cycles.

Madelene X has told us interminably about the Tour de France race which she watched almost every year before coming here, and I have to admit she does know her stuff. Today we saw what one might call the "Tour de Main Village", actually a marked route over the top to Beresby and back. Some call it Vikingstown, mostly the tourist brochures. The Olympic team have certainly been putting in plenty of practice by all accounts – although Madelene never exactly praises anything around here, she admitted they should be a worthy challenge for her countryfolk.

One can generally spot the Beresby inhabitants by their costume, unless of course they are in Euro mode or getting the sun on their fur in Polynesian native mode. They also have a distinctive traditional cuisine, some of which is conspicuous quite a distance downwind – there is a dish of fermented trout that I would have thought better as a material for the "Bio-reactors" than a food, though Prudence says it is her friend Tahni's favourite snack. She is a hyena, after all.

Someone who we keep seeing about the place is that skunk gentleman who seems to be some Althing official in charge of engineering works – he has a paw in everything from those odd Leduck flying model engines to the chimney factory, quite a range of industries. I overheard him mentioning that if the locally built racing cycles do well in the Olympics, they are thinking of opening a factory on Eastern Island. Certainly the Spontoon Isles have more ways of earning money these days than just nice beaches!

Friday 15th May, 1936

A scorching day, with the amusing sight of watching some of our first-years discovering just how much runway a fully loaded Tiger Moth needs in this heat. Only about five of them got it right first time, the rest bounced and hopped as their pilots frantically tried to unstick. Not surprisingly, as a local Wo Shin judged it nicely, as did Saffina. Ubangi-Chari is much nearer the equator than Spontoon, and about a thousand miles further from the nearest cooling sea breeze.

The first-years are under the same flight restrictions we were, and had to land before a scheduled flight entered the area. Although our impressions of film crews have been rather soured recently, this was one flight we certainly wanted to keep out of trouble – the Barx Brothers arriving

to shoot their new comedy, "Parrot Hooves". All four brothers are in on this one, Wino, Blotto and Dipso, plus the less zany but very dashing Stinko.

Not surprisingly, those are not quite the names on their birth certificates. It seems that whenever someone makes a name for themselves in that industry, the name is a faked one. I suppose I can hardly complain after my exploits "in character" as Kim-Anh, but I had little choice about that. It would be a very unfortunate real family name to make someone want to change it, as did the marvellously witty writer and playwright the world knows as Noel Hero.

Our third-years are starting to look grim and haggard with the strain of their final term, but they were allowed the afternoon off to help with the Casino Island party for our new arrivals. The Althing always put on a fine show for visiting film stars and producers; evidently it pays off as every season more keep coming! Our seniors are not expected back tonight, so we are on gate watch for the weekend.

As Helen pointed out, we are practically third-years ourselves now – a frightening thought. But our seniors are far too busy now to do much looking after the rest of us, which leaves my year very much in the pilot's seat and looking round rather nervously. I suppose it is like being an officer in wartime: after just concentrating on surviving and staying on top of things, one day you realise there is nobody senior left in the area and you are running the Regiment. Hardly a matter of career planning, more "last one standing".

(Later)

Gate duty is definitely not the most exciting job in the world. I was on till midnight with Molly, who our Tutors barred from carrying heavy artillery but "acquired" a Kilikiti bat as soon as they had left. She was very keen at first waiting for the first marauder to come over the fence – but after a few hours realised it was hardly likely to happen. Anyway, with the bigdogs trotting round the inside of the fence we hardly have to watch every foot of the wire all the time.

I pointed out that on military bases all over the world there must be tens of thousands of sentries kicking the mud or snow off their boots as they watch fences, and we can hardly complain about a few nights of it. Her response was that they are at least equipped to shoot on sight, which would help to relieve the boredom.

It would be a rather strange desperado who came over the Songmark fence in the middle of the night, considering the school's reputation. Anyone we want to meet, we can meet outside, and unwelcome visitors intent on robbery or worse would sorely regret it. The only story I know of someone making the attempt was that quite impossible horror tale of Beryl's with the canine lady burglar – I still don't like to think of that one. It is a fact that three of the guard dogs ARE remarkably intelligent, and sometimes look at one in a quite unnerving way.

From one end of the compound we can just see the lights of Casino Island through the trees: not the big displays of the hotels round the Casino, but the street lights of the less expensive side of town. It was a quiet night; the wind tunnel on Moon Island has not been running night experiments since before Easter. I wonder if they have given up on their project, whatever it was, or have succeeded and no longer need tests? The last sign of activity outside hours I saw was a delivery from that firm making steel chimneys and chimney-pots, who of course need a high-speed wind tunnel to see how well they hold up in typhoons.

Some of those chimney pots are rather excessive, I should have thought, being almost four foot long and over a foot across. Apart from the power station on Casino Island, I can hardly see much demand for them around here. It is surprising what the Althing ends up sponsoring – although Spontoon has the very furthest thing imaginable from the "properly planned central economy" that Tatiana and Liberty keep telling us about, they do seem to get what they want developed. Hardly a Command Economy, more a Quiet Suggestion Economy – but it works.

Saturday 16th May, 1936

A scorching day again, and a very fine start for my first real dance class in ages. We are outside in the sun for our Interpretive Hula lessons, which are really very interesting. There is so much meaning in the dance that one wonders if some of the newsreels sent out to distant parts of the world are all that they seem. I briefly had visions of Government back rooms full of folk looking for secret codes in the sound track or the film can labels, not realising the meaning is in the dance itself.

We have quite an audience, with a party from a small tour boat dropping by to stare wide-eyed at our costumes and uncostumed places. The "Native Guides" do not just escort intrepid visitors into the wilder parts of South Island, but around the wilder parts of Casino, and we seem to be on their route today.

I recognised one young equine gentleman from Violobe's class in the Guide School, and managed to wave without changing the meaning of the hula too scandalously. He is very distinctive, being that rarest of types, a mule. In most places that is a socially unthinkable idea, but by his age he must have been born in the aftermath of the Gunboat Wars, when things were socially more confused. To judge from the raptly attentive gazes of some of his tour group, he is proving a distinctly popular Guide. Molly always thinks long ears are very handsome; she whispered something about him being a perfectly safe escort for any respectable girl; though I doubt she means it in quite the way one would at a finishing school.

Although I was definitely flagging by the end of the afternoon, I can feel my fitness returning – and I was perfectly keen on the traditional dash across the beach to cool off in the waves. I fear the tourists must have got only blurred streaks on their souvenir films, as some of my dance class are hoping to be picked for the athletics in Berlin and look as if they have a very reasonable chance!

On the way back we passed the two "Bio-Reaktors" as Professor Kurt describes his industrial compost plant. There was a notice outside detailing the new works for Main Island to be built this autumn, which makes the pilot plant here look like a tin bucket. The workforce have become enthusiastic converts to the idea, and are often to be found spreading the word as well as the compost. In fact, Professor Kurt is proving quite an ambassador for his country, especially since nobody has heard him mention politics in the slightest – he works hard, never smokes, drinks or gambles, and is promoting fascinating things such as the World Spirit and Folk Spirit, that sound not unlike some of the local religions. Maria grumbles about it a lot, but her family has a hereditary distrust of any Germans, and thinks her Uncle did not go far enough the year we joined Songmark when he "dissuaded" Germany from annexing Austria. *

One can hardly blame the Spontoonies for having something of a double standard, as the economy mostly relies on getting as many visitors to drink, smoke and gamble as possible! A good Visitor and a good Citizen are rather different creatures entirely, around here.

Still, despite the joys of Casino Island we had to return to Songmark for the evening meal; even if we are currently in good odour with our Tutors, second-year Passes only go so far. Back to gate guard duty – this time in the small hours. Farewell sleep.

*(Editor's note: one of the unfashionable truths of History, was Mussolini saving Austria from Hitler in 1934, moving troops up ready on the Brenner Pass. It's a fact, look it up.)

Sunday 17th May, 1936

It is amazing how much a postcard can change things! Molly very rarely gets any post these days, and had not checked our racks till breakfast time today. There was a card I had thought was for Maria, as I had noticed it was Italian. Not so. It was a picture card of the port of Fiume on the Adriatic near Venice, but addressed to Molly – from Lars. Definitely it was giving no secrets away, but it did say he was returning home with souvenirs.

Well – that was a surprise. It is six months since we last saw him, and nobody ever mentioned Italy. We quizzed Maria about Fiume, and by her account it is a rather odd place. Until they lost it after the Great War, it was one of the main ports of Austro-Hungary, and a major naval base. Nobody really thinks of Austria and Hungary having a navy, but until 1918 they definitely did, and some of it on quite innovative lines. When Italy took it over they already had much better harbours in better locations so the place slipped into rather a decline, with surplus battleships rusting at the dockside and warehouses full of supplies and spare parts for them nobody needed.

Thinking about it, that does seem rather the sort of place that an unscrupulous Importer and Exporter might pick to go shopping in – and although six months is a long time, some transactions Molly says take ages to set up, if one is not buying goods off the shelf but tunnelling into the warehouse one dark night. Anyway, we will find out when he returns.

Beryl's large ears heard the news as soon as Molly started enthusing; she has heard a lot about Lars and does seem to be interested. She has even heard what Helen has to say about him, without being put off in the slightest.

Actually, Beryl has a postcard of her own she is looking rather happy about – her tendency to stretch the truth is well-known, but she can put it to good use. She has mentioned the Head Girl at her old school of Saint T's is an aristocratic Chinese girl of a famous criminal (some say patriotic) family, Miss Manchu – which is something Wo Shin has flatly refused to believe. Something on the scale of Maria being told the school has the Pope as divinity teacher. Anyway, Beryl has a bet of ten shells and a postcard half of which is written in tiny but quite exquisitely executed Chinese calligraphy, which she says will "blow Shin's socks off" when she returns from

seeing her husband on South Island tonight. It is equally disturbing when Beryl is fibbing and otherwise.

We headed over to South Island, waved Maria farewell as she turned right to the Church of the Sacred Heart, passed the Pie Shop of the Sacred Steak and Kidney, and were in Haio Beach inside ten minutes. Definitely the tourists are here – there were a dozen souvenir stands visible on the beach and about fifty tourists busily making money for the film developing industry.

Although it is often a source of pride to have a well-travelled hotel trunk with souvenirs of previous exotic trips, folk should really not bring souvenir hats and such back from the year before. I noticed two large tourists wearing the style popularly sold to deserving customers two years ago with “Quaint Native writing” on them. I doubt either of them would go into a tailor’s in their home town and order anything proclaiming “skirt lifter” or “cheats bar bills” if they knew what the inscriptions said! Then again, where ignorance is bliss, we have a lot of happy tourists.

As ever, it was wonderful to just spend a few hours with the family, helping Mrs. H prepare the food and the like. Two years ago I was still doing Home Economics classes at St. Winifred’s – in another two years time I might be helping with a new longhouse, possibly exploring the delights of the nineteen types of Poi. Mrs H is a very fine teacher, as indeed cookery on a native hearth is rather different than in a “euro” kitchen. Still, having the fruit picked off the trees outside and the fish brought in straight from the boat makes it a rather different business in another respect – with ingredients like that a cook can hardly go wrong.

I am sure our Tutors know quite as much as they want to about our visits here – if anyone did ever ask how this helps my Adventuring experiences I can certainly say I have learned to cook for a whole party, Adventuring or otherwise. There were twelve of us sitting down to dinner, including two of the cousins from Main Island and two kittens – I lost track of exactly whose was whom, they moved around too much.

I think Saimmi spotted my ears and tail drooping slightly as I served mashed fish and breadfruit to the kittens – at least, in the afternoon she took us out to the Eastern tip looking out towards Sacred Island, where a small row of very ancient Tikis face out over the waters. They are barely knee-high, and one could walk within twenty yards of them without suspecting they are anything but natural boulders. There is no inscription on these, not even in the local language, but Saimmi tells me these are dedicated to the spirits of those who were expected and never came home – sailors and fishermen lost at sea are one category, but there are others.

We learned the proper ceremony for these, and returned to the family longhouse feeling somehow rather better. I asked Saimmi if she would be at the Solstice ceremony to see Jerry and me being made Tailfast again – she assures me she would not miss it for anything. I hope our Tutors give us the time off again on “cultural studies” – if not, we will grimly accept whatever points they charge us and go over the fence regardless.

Back to Songmark, our home from home which increasingly seems a very different world from our Sunday explorations. Maria had put her afternoon to good use, and practiced in the darkrooms making huge enlargements of her Easter photographs. Lampedusa is not much more than a rock in the Mediterranean, but Maria’s Uncle has been doing a lot of extensive redecorating (I liked the aircraft hangars dug into the cliff faces.) We are not likely to see these pictures in “Flight” or “International Geographic”, as anyone but Maria taking these would get into extreme trouble with the Police, secret and otherwise!

Adele dropped in to see us, looking distinctly worried and asking if Wo Shin had returned. Rather odd, as that is the last person I thought Adele would want to see. She was in too much of a hurry to even look through Maria’s fine shots – I asked her if she had any photos of her Easter holiday, at which her tail went rigid in shock and she said she certainly hoped not. Very odd.

Monday 18th May, 1936

Pouring with rain for our “escort mission” to Moon Island to look after the first-years on the firing range. When it decides to rain in Spontoon this time of year there is nothing half-hearted about it – the water just comes down in torrents. Brigit Mulvaney has been getting nostalgic for the “soft weather” of her home, and indeed I can cheerfully admit that they have a clear superiority over England in the fog and drizzle department. Both our home islands are rather disadvantaged in terms of solar energy, but if folk ever found out how to extract energy from Greyness we could close all our coal mines the following week.

Although most tourists were safely sheltered in their hotels till the rain stopped, there was one party of rather odd horned rabbits who we saw in the gardens near the water-taxi dock playing some ball game, laughing and shouting with the rain absolutely streaming off their fur. Helen

passed near enough to spot their accents – she just said “Arizona” and she and Molly nodded significantly.

Moon Island does seem rather dull in the rain, as it is the only island with no “attractions”, natural or built. The view from Hanamahina Bay is mostly military base and docks with the anti-aircraft sites and water towers on the skyline, but it all has to go somewhere.

Our first-years were grumbling rather as they got to the firing range and had to strip, clean and reassemble their rifles out in the middle of the field with everything absolutely soaking. Rain Island has a lot of Great War vintage Canadian Ross straight-pull bolt rifles which are rather prone to jamming, especially if dropped in the mud a few times. The range instructors demonstrated that, and then had everyone clean and strip them again. The Ross Mark III is a very fine target rifle, but everyone agreed it was better on a target range than in the trenches. (Beryl’s logical and surprisingly Quaker-ish conclusion: stick to target ranges and avoid fighting the Great War in future.)

One of our first-years is Lucinda Beresford, whose father is a Colonel in her nation’s armoured train fleet. She was being enthusiastic about the idea of conducting the defence from behind waterproof armour plate that can be much stronger than any practical tank and a lot smoother ride than a battleship. To listen to her, one gets the idea that future conflicts will be one great melee of manoeuvring train consists, with every marshalling yard a tangle of squadrons shunting to and fro as they try to bring their rail guns to bear. Presumably their version of surprise charges will be a rather stately affair, limited as to how fast the sappers can lay down railway lines.

Fortunately Molly did not hear her, as that is one side of her interests we are not trying to encourage. Just last week when she was still fast asleep, Beryl mischievously dropped in and tried an experiment. Whispering things in her ear like “*Paris Cannons ... whole batteries of Paris Cannons – all illegally converted to full auto belt feed ... loaded and ready for your signal ...*” certainly showed folk are rarely a hundred percent asleep, even when they are dreaming. By her scent, Molly appreciated it in more than technical terms – she gave a pleased moan and one could tell it was inspiring a rather pleasant dream. Although we agreed with Beryl it was an interesting demonstration it was rather an unfair thing to do to anyone, so we swatted the pesky mouse out of the room with wet towels. Maria commented she would forgo suggesting the usual bucket of water, as it was hardly Molly’s fault.

Still, Molly did have a cheering twenty rounds on the long rifle range today with my M1918 Mauser. This was the first time she had tried it in pouring rain, and discovered rather a problem – the muzzle blast is so huge it throws up about a ten-foot splash of very conspicuous spray from the wet ground. Definitely not something a sniper wants to happen. But nothing can dampen her enthusiasm for this kind of thing, and she looked very much happier by the time she handed the tank-hunting Mauser over to me.

Back via Main Island, where the public hot baths and dryers managed to restore the proper species mix to what had looked like thirty drowned rats. We pointed out that very often there will be no hot shower to look forward to, and they should appreciate today – at which Liberty was most unappreciative. The first-years have already had quite a lot of expedition training, and are heading out all next week, leaving us and the third-years in peace. Definitely we can use the break – Molly points out, it is such a strain “riding shotgun” on them, especially since we are not allowed the shotgun.

(Later) Really, it is very odd how the three years of Songmark are so different, given that we are from all corners of the globe and one year’s intake is as mixed as any other. There is no reason why our year could not have worked together as a big team like theirs rather than split into dorms – our Tutors leave that kind of decision to us, not that we ever sat down and decided it. Reading the reports from the years before us, two classes voted to have a head girl in charge, though really there are too few of us and we are too evenly matched to make that work well.

The first-year dorms are still rather fluid, but I think they have mostly settled into their final cast lists. Lucinda is the only one who keeps complaining, as she is a bloodhound with perhaps the finest sense of scent among us. This would be fine except her dorm mates are a skunk, a fox and a badger respectively, and of course we are all exercising flat-out in the heat this time of year. It is interesting how our Tutors manage to juggle things – it took them a term and a half to settle Prudence’s dorm together, but some things are missed out on the qualifications our schools and parents send in to apply to Songmark. At least, I think so.

Wednesday 20th May, 1936

Quite a treat today – Songmark actually took part in some filming! In a very minor way, with the Barx Brothers' director wanting a shot of a flying boat zooming overhead as his characters duck. Of course he could have done this the Hollywood Union-approved way, of hiring stunt pilots and the like – or he could do things the Spontoon way of offering twenty free cinema tickets and a bit-part in film History. Operating costs are rather lower out here, once folk reach these waters.

Our Tutors approved, as we need to keep up our flying hours anyway – so our third-year chum Conchita drew the short straw and dutifully bounced over the camera crew at thirty feet in the Sea Osprey, our only flying boat. Her dorm were outraged that the producer approved the very first "take", as they had been listed to take the next three attempts between them. It was a jolly good low-level run, and I should think it was frightening enough on the ground that nobody wanted to be on the receiving end twice.

From what we heard of the party at the weekend, the Barx Brothers are just about the same off camera as on – except that Dipso actually speaks, and in fact is quite eloquent (his character in the films never has any lines, just a deranged and incoherent mumbling.) Blotto is quite as outrageously funny in the fur as he is without the aid of a scriptwriter – indeed, the scriptwriter hangs around at the studio parties with his shorthand notebook handy ready to capture his finer quips for posterity. They also have a Miss Murgatroyd as their foil, a genteel and matronly lady who the Barx brothers almost run rings round in the films – that is genuine as well by all accounts, as she confessed she really had no idea why folk found the films funny.

Molly used to swoon over Stinko, the brother with the longest ears who plays the romantic interest. But then, she certainly has a liking that way – I recall her looking with definite interest at two of the rabbits in our dance class, and of course gentlemen rabbits and deer are both called bucks.

The first-years are starting to pack up for their trip, twelve days out in the Kanim Islands starting this weekend. It will be a great relief for everyone to see them out of the way – two whole weekends of freedom for us. The third-years are working absolutely on full throttle now – if they were engines they would be running like a Schneider Trophy racer on the final straight under twenty pounds of boost and the pistons about to come through the cylinder heads.

Some of the juniors have had the bright idea of actually coming to ask us about it – our third-years being manifestly too busy to do anything but study and only breathe when they remember to. Saffina certainly is used to getting by in a desert climate, but as a matter of equipment we have been able to drop her some broad hints about what to pack and what to leave strictly on the shelf. Songmark has an extensive collection of outdoor gear, ranging from native fish-spears to bicycle generators for battery charging – and any student on an expedition like this can choose just what to take. If Saffina listened to Beryl, she might end up carrying a pair of skis to the Kanim Islands ("glide over the quicksands easy as anything, honest," and one day we will make Beryl demonstrate it) which she would either have to haul around all her adventures, or abandon at awful cost to her marks as well as pay for replacements.

Florence Farmington is another of the sensible ones and I suppose being not only of Puritan stock but a solid business background would encourage proper planning. She has asked if it is true "real" adventurers cut short their boot laces and saw off half their toothbrush handles to save weight – I had to admit never having seen that, but at the end of a long day hauling supplies, every ounce really does add up. When she is not suffering her unfortunate affliction (Molly says that everything folk falsely claimed as an alternative intoxicant in Prohibition, actually works for her) she is one of the brightest of the bunch, and the rest of her dorm adore her. Rather hopelessly, Ada says, and she would know. I can hardly envy Florence, imagining if I ever had to fill in for Prudence leading her dorm with their interests – it would be like a hockey captain trying to do her best for a lacrosse team. But then, Songmark is hardly going to advertise for suitable candidates to make up the numbers that way – or are they?

Friday 22nd May, 1936

Farewell to the first-years! They are not going as far as we did to Gunboat Island, but if one is stuck on an uninhabited island over the horizon it hardly matters. Saffina is carrying a proper fish-spear, which should make things much easier (and they are only about a shell and a half to replace in the market, if she does lose it.) It seems Ubangi-Chari does have rivers in their desert, and she is practiced at the rather tricky sport of spear fishing and knowing where to aim to beat the refraction underwater. I fear anything smaller than a tuna at point-blank range would be quite safe from me.

I rather envied them, although we have another big trip on the timetable this term; we only had a week rather than a full twelve days last year, and were sorry to leave Gunboat Island once we

had made ourselves comfortable and managed to build a stockpile of edible roots and a relatively leak-free roof. Certainly our Tutors look as if they have confidence in that class, and indeed it is hard to imagine them being worried by what they find out there. Although nobody is allowed firearms, Rumiko has even been allowed to take her swords with her, which she is very pleased with (not being allowed to wear them in class.)

Molly might have been a touch jealous, at least she complained that a longsword and a shortsword are hardly going to help anyone on a desert island, being far too precious to use for cutting firewood or anything practical, unlike two shell's worth of locally made machete (we have seen the workshop on Main Island where they make them out of old car leaf-springs.) But then, Molly's idea of the perfect pocket-knife is my Pioneer issue saw-edged bayonet: far too thick for a practical handsaw and (the books say) the saw teeth make it very inconvenient as a bayonet too.

It is an interesting idea of Jasbir's that the recent years of Songmark seem to be recruited from a more ruthless bunch than the Boarding School started off with. Though we never met the first three years' classes, by the accounts they left behind they were more inclined to exploration and treasure-hunting, and spent less time on the firing-ranges. Either the days are somehow getting stormier outside, or at least our Tutors believe they will be.

Maria is always busy on Fridays with her reporting and journalism class, which she uses to keep track of world events. Whenever she returns to Italy (if her Uncle does not appoint her as permanent ambassador to the German Antarctic colony of New South Thule) she will certainly have all the facts at her paw-tips, even if rivals expect her to have spent three years learning nothing but aviation and the price of coconuts. There is about the world's smallest Reuter's branch next to the Western Union Telegraph office where they let journalism students help out, and a lot comes in off the wire that never gets into newspapers.

She came in today with a rather interesting project – tracing a string of events across the world, these past three weeks. Many people employ “clippings Bureaux” to search for strange things; she mentions Professor Schiller has a standing order on religious revivals and discoveries of archaeological artefacts. The key is to spot hundreds of raw facts and look for a pattern – at the same time remembering that nine times out of ten there is no pattern. Despite what folk say in detective stories, the world actually is full of coincidences.

Maria unfolded a world map of shipping and nautical related events. The first thing that caught her eye was a mysterious fire on the dockside – in Trieste of all places, exactly five weeks ago. That started her looking, and indeed she caught a trail of interesting stories. One of the locks on the Suez Canal was found entirely deserted, with no sign of its crew when the next shift arrived. A vessel in the Red Sea reported distant gunfire on the horizon, though no fleets were exercising in the area. A dozen similar incidents, finishing with a report from Macao of how the elderly but still potent commerce raider the Direwolf had sortied, and was last seen heading South into the open ocean at flank speed.

It all makes a lot of sense when she plots it on a map with timings. That is, from Trieste one can almost push a toy boat across the map and see things happening around it. Exactly what is heading this direction is not very clear, as there is nothing official at all – indeed, no government has said anything, which is rather odd. The last event that the wire reported was the Direwolf sailing, and that was three days ago – but the Pacific is an awfully big place, even if you do know where someone is going.

From what I have heard of that ex-commerce raider, she is available for hire with no unnecessary questions asked – like many things in Macao. One supposes that the prospect of returning to Europe to be interned and one's ship seized somehow did not appeal to them in 1918, and they have certainly managed admirably as far as keeping their original charter to raid enemy shipping goes. Although the Direwolf's crew are said to display their Imperial German Naval flag when they raid, their current Government has nothing to do with them. But then, the current Government seems to be more into running Olympic Games, building lots of giant roads and producing hundreds of tracked agricultural vehicles, fleets of which can be seen coming off the production line. Certainly it is very different from 1914, for which we can all be grateful.

When Maria was distracted I quickly raided the waste bins for the carbon papers she had used – by teatime today they were heading out to Post Box Nine, who might be interested. The line of odd events is heading this direction, but of course this could mean Hawaii or anywhere in the Pacific – except that remembering who was in Trieste at the time, I rather think a certain handsome stag is involved.

I feel rather ashamed of myself for using Maria's work without asking, but I could hardly explain to her exactly where I was sending it, let alone why. That is one of the things that make Helen's tail and my own droop sometimes – our own best friends, we have to keep secrets from.

But Maria can never forget whose relative she is, nor could I ask her to try – and despite what they teach us in Songmark, knowledge is not always safety, quite the opposite. If the folk at Post Box Nine do already know exactly what is happening out there – at least now they know that anyone with access to the public wire and an enquiring mind can work it out too.

Saturday 23rd May, 1936

Relaxation. Songmark feels a much quieter place without the first-years around the place – for a change, our second-year weekend passes are just that, with no escort duty or need to stay within call to act as the “shore patrol.”

Just think, in a month’s time I will be Tailfast again! I would have spent the whole weekend on South Island, but Jirry is busy carrying cameras and setting up scenery for the Barx Brothers on Casino Island. So I carried on with the dance lessons, grimly determined to get back to one hundred percent fitness. It is definitely hard work, but has to be done.

Some of the dance class were missing today, the ones who also perform at the Coconut Shell and other mainstream Euro venues. “Parrot Feathers” has a big dance routine that needs a lot of trained extras; it is dear enough sending the stars and the key production team over here without sending every supporting cast member as well – and Spontoon has a very decent pool of experienced actors.

Madelene X was being sniffy again last week about Jasbir wanting to be a “chorus girl”, which she thinks is very low-key for anyone, let alone a Maharani. From what I used to read in Film Frolics they have an unenviable reputation, which is rather unfair. Most folk would never have the training and stamina to get through one of the classic high-kicking dance routines, let alone the fifteenth “take” of the day after the stars forget their lines again. Society newspapers love to have headlines like “The millionaire and the chorus girl” – but if nothing else he would be getting a guarantee of extreme health and fitness as good as any professional athlete. And just because the job does not actually demand keen wits and a pleasant personality, there is no reason to think it excludes them either.

Although I got through our dance exercises without actually falling flat on my snout, by the time we finished I was feeling quite weak at the hocks. We stopped in Luakinakina Park to rest, which is fairly tourist-free still (most of them heading straight for the beaches this time of day) where we had a very welcome surprise. Our ex-Tutor, now Mrs. Voboelle was there with her new husband and newer daughter! We had not seen her since the Autumn term – and of course we all went over to congratulate them.

I remember Helen’s comment then about Mrs. Voboelle not wasting any time – after years of being an Adventuress and more years at Songmark, our ex-Tutor certainly seems to have had a fine honeymoon to judge by the timing of things. Looking at her husband, a very dashing equine gentleman whose scars make him look more striking than otherwise, one can quite understand.

We did ask if she would be coming back to teach later on; she had been in charge of the class that graduated a year ago, having seen them through their three years from start to finish as Miss Devinski is doing with us. It is certainly a natural time to think about changes, and one could hardly have a bigger one. She smiled and commented that Songmark was in good hands, while her own were going to be busy enough from now on.

Her kitten looks absolutely adorable, though her eyes are hardly open yet. She takes after her mother except for the tail and the fur colour – rather than being cooped up in a perambulator she was asleep curled up on the park grass in the sunshine the way the Spontoonie kittens do outside the longhouses. Of course, one can do that here – back in Barsetshire the park-keepers delight in forbidding absolutely everything as a general principle, and are well qualified to enforce it (our Parish Council has a policy of employing ex-servicemen, generally those who were dishonourably discharged in mid-1917 for offences too hideous ever to be brought to trial.)

Still, by teatime all four of us were down on South Island, even Maria happily changing into Native dress for the day. I must say, she attracts more attention than Helen or myself, her figure being far nearer the local ideal of beauty. I can imagine some of the lady tourists prefer these islands as they need not spend the months before their holiday trying to slim down for the beach. Mind you, some of them decidedly should, as even the most Samoan influenced Spontoonie would admit one can always have too much of a good thing. At least Missy K at her roundest had impressive muscles under it all, but some of these folk one can imagine taking fright at the sight of a whaling ship.

South Island was definitely filling up with the summer crowd, a hundred and more on Haio Beach with the souvenir stalls doing a roaring trade. The waves were just right for the villagers to

demonstrate their “surf riding”, that ancient Hawaiian sport. It is good to see they still keep the old traditions up here – in a few decades who will have heard about it anywhere else?

We met some of the Guide School, who are in their “authentic” costumes for the first time this year, and are busy being photogenic for the visitors. Having met them last Summer away from the tourist routes, they wore rather less elaborate and more practical costumes than, although definitely from the same traditions. Violobe mentioned that it was a great test of one’s resolve, ten times a day being the wide-eyed Native girl just in from the forest, with no idea why the visitors wanted a picture of her for their “spirit-box”. It might be interesting to see if we could try that for awhile, and if we manage to convince anyone.

Of course, we did not say that in English in front of the tourists – just as crooners learn to sing and grin at the same time, we have been practicing our tourist smiles regardless of what we are actually saying behind them. Molly’s Spontoonie accent still shows definite Chicago tones, but her language is improving all the time. It is hard work though – I was puzzling out one of the local historical folklore guides myself last week about delinquent Pirates apparently punished by being painted purple – the word I wanted of course was “marooned”.

Certainly we have quite a range of visitors to cater for, with everything from folk who just flop on the beach for the afternoon with a newspaper over their muzzles, to some who insisted on trying the surf riding. I suppose they provided some entertainment for the Spontoonies who can actually do it. Similarly there is just about every species around; some of them look as if they are here for more than a relaxing beach holiday. I would have said that chimp girls are not really made for scanty modern bathing costumes (especially at certain times) but two of them seem to be competing on their display. I felt my ears blushing red at the sight, but they were not half the colour of some things in view. One hopes they consider sunburn a cosmetic.

I left Violobe about to earn her Guide’s School marks, as a very large and loud tourist was bearing down on her with camera cocked and loaded. His souvenir shirt proclaims “I AM A MONG” in Spontoonie, which is as good as a hazard warning light at fifty paces.

(Later) The Hoele’toemi household is its usual friendly place, with all of us lending a paw on the taro patch; with Jirry and his brothers away helping with the films and as tourist guides, they appreciate the help more than ever. Although Mrs H insists it would be perfectly all right for us to spend the rest of the day on the beach, we can hardly laze about in the sun while she labours over a hot fire-pit getting our supper ready. In a way it is relaxing after the week of hard brain work, just to weed and hoe what will be next month’s dinner for the family.

I must say, Helen has rather lost her horror of being “domesticated”. As she points out, she will only be doing as much of that as she wants to. As ever, she is determined to pay her way, and as Mrs H will not accept a cowry of our money, this is the only way she can do it.

Actually, looking at her in full native costume of grass skirt, Tailfast necklace and a flower in her head-fur, Helen looked exactly like the other local girls in the fields around, with husbands working beside them and kittens playing in the irrigation ponds. I asked her if she was planning on getting more than Tailfast this year - Missy K is engaged and Wo Shin is married after all, and I doubt our Tutors would really object if Helen made the case of it being part of a proper career plan.

Molly’s comment was that Helen hardly needs to get married unless she really plans on becoming a resident; she has Marti already, and there is “no point in buying a cow, while milk’s cheap”. Hardly the way that I would have put it. But then, the news of Lars returning has put her rather on edge, and she confessed she looks up at the sound of every aircraft to see if it is his.

A fine evening followed, with Jirry and his brother Joni returning from their film work on Casino Island. Jirry has an excellent memory, and by his accounts the Barx Brothers are well worth seeing at work – as well as being very easy to get along with unless one is a Director used to telling the stars what to do and how to do it; they have gone through quantities of directors like Missy K goes through Poi. They do their very best by their co-stars too, as after poor Miss Murgatroyd has been hit by cream-cakes all afternoon in the course of duty, the brothers booked a suitable evening of relaxation for her at their own expense (a palm-court orchestra: not my idea of fun, but it takes all sorts.)

Sunday 24th May, 1936

Rather a damp day all across the Nimitz Sea, according to the radio; I must confess it is a very snug feeling looking out from the shelter of the freshly thatched Hoele’toemi family hut to watch the sheets of grey rain lashing the jungle outside. Molly is in a gleeful mood, imagining how the first-years are managing out on some open beach in the Kanim Isles trying to get their fires lit and their driftwood shelters up. As she points out, whatever happens there is consolation in thinking of

others less fortunate. If they had a postal service, I expect Liberty and Brigit would be sending us heartfelt "Wish you were here" postcards right now.

The problem with only having a weekend pass is that oiled fur is hardly an option, the process taking nearly two hours to put on properly and half an hour with hot water and special soap to remove afterwards. That much time can be better spent elsewhere – and indeed I helped Jerry with renovating one of the smaller longhouses of a friend of his who is working on Casino Island for the season. If we did not spend absolutely all the time on decorating, nobody complained – it was hardly as if we had a foreman watching over everything. That could have been embarrassing. It was a very nice morning to be indoors with such company.

Although the rain hardly let up all day we did a tour of local shrines with Saimmi, cleaning and tending them. One of those facing Haio beach had been damaged, almost certainly by tourist brats. I was quite surprised to see just how Helen's fur bristled at the sight – had the culprits been in sight, the tourist board would not have been happy about their fate. Considering how little Helen used to think of religion, it is quite a change for her. The Spontoonie religion is rather neutral in some surprising ways, and tends toward achieving balance rather than heading towards a definite ideal – Saimmi did not protest at Helen's idea with the rock-pool and the crabs, the way the Reverend Bingham surely would.

Anyway, an hour's work cleaning and a ceremony to appease the spirits of the shrine, put things back in order and had Helen merely fuming rather than fulminating. If Helen does settle down in these islands, I am sure folk know they will be gaining a fiercely loyal defender.

Back to a peaceful Songmark, with the third-years too busy to do more than wave and the first-years not due back till Wednesday. We are not in any hurry to see them, as gate guard takes half the usual number of us right now and we trust each other not to illicitly hop the fence. Even Beryl is doing nothing more worrying than looking forward to the holidays and her next adventures, even though she was banned last year from playing at the Casino. I am not sure why they have such a down on "card-counters", as one might have thought losing track of one's cards would be the very last thing a player wanted.

For some reason Adele Beasley seems to jump at the very mention of Casinos these days, though as far as I know she has never been to the one here, and with her bad luck she is quite wise not to. She would only get into trouble and embarrassment. When Beryl dreamily remarked how fine it would be for an unknown player to hit the jackpot, Adele looked quite ill and hurried out. Very odd.

Maria is the only one in argumentative mood and it is not too hard to see why. It seems the Althing have very generously offered a bigger building plot for her church, to be relocated on Casino Island this year after Tourist Season ends. The Chapel of the Sacred Heart is rather the odd one out, as in general no "Euro" churches are allowed except on Casino Island. She points out that it has been standing there since 1890, and has a perfect right to stay as it has been around longer than the Althing has been a proper government. From the way Maria tells it, moving addresses is what Molly would call "an offer they can't refuse". The old chapel is only timber and corrugated iron anyway, and Casino Island is nearer home for her and most of the congregation.

Still, despite the fact that she is more amused than scandalised by our likings for the local religion, Maria has been brought up to the idea of her Church moving ever outwards as a "civilising" influence in native lands, with the South Island chapel a beachhead on the map. Abandoning it and retreating to the Euro part of the islands looks like a shameful retreat, especially to someone with her background ("Italian tanks have no reverse gears, only forward" as she sometimes boasts, though I think her Uncle coined the phrase.) Still, as my own Father learned at Gallipoli – some beachheads are better off abandoned as a bad idea.

Monday 25th May, 1936

A fine day, after the rain! We were joined again in our usual self-defence classes by Mr. Toshiro Finkelstein, that rather odd half Japanese gentleman who is the inventor of "Jude-Jitsu". Beryl was very pleased, as she often gets bored at the simple defensive holds and blocks we are taught. Indeed, this sport is decidedly more ... decisive, and half the moves are ones one would definitely not practice at full strength on a friend. He specialises in what they call "Atemi" or going for vulnerable nerve spots, with less caution than the books elsewhere suggest. As our regular instructors point out, one can do severe damage without the trouble of learning judo.

Still, as our Tutors point out, we are only liable to need these skills when the opponent is not using competition rules, so they limit their disapproval to making very sure we only use them in genuine defence. It is also a case of using scarce resources as our instructor Finkelstein-sama is

leaving this summer to open his own “dojo” on the Japanese mainland. From the commercial atlas I can see Nagasaki is a thriving port with all sorts of international links, and I am sure he will end up with a very bright future there.

Like many of these oriental skills, his style depends far more on speed and agility rather than strength and size, which is probably why Beryl is such a fan. The best of us is Li Han, who has had years of training in something similar – though she is a smaller feline than I am, she can beat me two falls out of three and is an absolute terror on the mats. Which is odd as she is so polite most of the time; as Molly enthuses, with this kind of oriental discipline one can “*leave a passer-by looking like a road accident and STILL be into peace and tranquillity*”. Certainly she managed to flatten Irma Bundt very convincingly, and there is nothing wrong with Irma’s style.

Another familiar face we saw on the way back near Pirate’s Cove was our commander of the Easter holidays, Captain Gary heading towards the dock leading a small cart pulled by two stalwart locals, loaded with supplies. I noticed along with the cases of beans and meat hash, one tin of Molly’s own recipe, the “Fish log” or whatever folk will decide to call it, which has financially saved her bacon. He congratulated us on our recovery and thanked us for the crew’s hard work, and the present we had contributed to in appreciation (we were guided by Molly, who chose for him a Caribbean spiced rum, “El Presidente” brand from the little republic of Tropicico.)

I had to agree that the waters were getting definitely crowded around Spontoon this time of year, and can quite understand him vanishing for awhile to somewhere quieter. Although I am far from a polished sailor myself still, even I wince at the sight of some of the tourist sailing yachts veering and lurching around the bay on an afternoon’s hire. The hospital does a busy trade in patching up heads and snouts that got in the way of an unexpectedly swinging boom and the boat hiring firms have to put a lot of shells aside to cope with repairing almost wartime levels of damage.

Molly is full of bright ideas these days – having spotted her own product on the cart, she mentioned her next idea as a canned “cheeseburger”, a dish of doubtful pedigree that the Captain had commented missing afloat. Heaven alone knows why; I have smelled them being sold to tourists from the Americas – give me Popatohi any day. I think I will be on a diet the week she invites volunteers for testing that one.

Tuesday 26th May, 1936

Definitely it is that time of year again, as the first posters are going up about this year’s Schneider Trophy. Of course the final “Speed week” is not till August, but some of the teams arrive months early to fine-tune their machines and learn the course. I should think that explains an awful lot about these islands having far more advanced facilities than anyone would expect: not just Superior Engineering but many of the smaller concerns are tasked with working on absolutely world-class aircraft. One gets the impression that local mechanics are less than fussy about patent rights, and any outstanding new features may not stay secret for long. Possibly the “Sea Flea” has a rather mixed ancestry, despite performing like a true thoroughbred.

Having the wind tunnel in operation will be a big boost to the races, as teams can test variations without having to send back to their home factories to do the work. This is just as well, since it must have taken a lot of money to construct, and whatever folk used it for on those dark winter nights will probably not raise a profit in commercial terms. I am sure having Schneider races here is a big boost to disguising whatever folk do when no Euros are watching; otherwise it would not take a particularly bright spy to wonder what a tourist island chain is doing with a tunnel where the instruments go to five hundred miles an hour.

Our third-year chum Zara surfaced briefly from her revision to tell us she hopes to stay on to see the races – it will be the first time Albania has competed, and naturally she wants to cheer her home team. She wistfully mentions there might be royal patronage – although her King Zog might not come out this far, his fashionable younger sisters (surprisingly, they are semi-officially known as the “Zoettes”) * may stop in on the way to visiting their colonies of the Albanian South Indies. It is amazing how the right statistics can be made to look impressive – as Zara boasts, the Zogist Empire now is actually bigger than Europe – pity it consists only of several score coral atolls with a population about the same as Casino Island, minus all the attractions.

Well – in just a year we will be in her shoes, preparing for the final tests and then to say farewell. At least, Maria will be saying farewell – Helen is staying if she can, and as for Molly and myself – we have a year to see what develops. Being at Songmark is starting to feel like an ocean liner cruise (Molly says more like a Roman galley “cruise” with us doing the rowing) with competent officers and crew steering us safely. One day – they will get us to where we paid to go, and leave us on the shore.

Some third-years are going to be landing on a rather less relaxing shore than others. Carmen is heading back to help her family in Spain as soon as she graduates: the Spanish are having some turbulent times right now with various Reds and Anarchists. No doubt it will all blow over by the time she gets there; I hope she is not too disappointed at missing the fun. She says she wants to make a name for herself but hopefully not one too similar to some of her revered ancestors; Spanish hidalgo families are very proud of their history, even if it does include famous names such as 'Pedro The Cruel' and 'Francesca, Butcher of La Paz'. Mind you, with her high social standards she would feel far worse if her ancestress actually was a market butcher rather than the red-clawed scourge of heathens and heretics.

It looks as if Europe is getting to be a decidedly stressful place this year – Maria blames the League of Nations, but then she tends to do that for most things. I am not sure if Spontoon is in the League, even included under Rain Island's membership. One hears of them operating sinister black airships and flying boats – at least if one reads pulp comics. I rather doubt it myself – they have no military muscle to enforce anything, and about the worse they can do to an erring member is to throw them out, after which the exiles can carry on without having to listen to the complaints.

I wish Maria would have some words with her Uncle about his ideas for Ethiopia, where he is being rather unsporting with the Natives. Surely Italy has enough sand and sun of its own in North Africa without wanting to annexe more? Plus they will have to clean the mustard-gas off the scenery before any tourists are likely to visit.

* (Editor's note: it's a fact. King Zog and the "Zogettes" were a real royal family, not a band.)

Wednesday 27th May, 1936

It was too good to last: the first-years are back, looking rather windblown but very pleased with themselves after their adventures in the Kanim Islands. Everyone has survived fairly intact, though there are a few bandages to be seen – although from the enthusiasm with which they dived at the very ordinary evening meal, they have not exactly managed to stuff themselves with local produce. Twelve days of drinking brackish water and eating whatever shellfish they managed to outwit, definitely generates an appetite.

Poor Hannah – at least when my class did that trip last year there was plenty of vegetable food to be found on Gunboat Island – but although there was quite a harvest of clams and other shellfish on the smaller Kanim Islands, that is one class of food she is simply not allowed to eat. When Saffina managed to spear a conger eel Hannah had to refuse it, pointing out it does not have scales, and even fish have to have both fins and scales to be good enough for her. It is not as if she even wanted to eat the scales.

Ada is very sympathetic, and confided that although strictly speaking she was allowed to eat them rather than starve to death, a training exercise does not count as a good enough excuse, in that nobody is liable to perish of hunger in twelve days. One never sees missionaries of her religion, and round here I can understand why.

It was quite something to see folk turning in all the equipment they had signed for – or desperately trying to explain what happened to it. In all the adventure yarns, folk get by with whatever they have in their pockets, and though the Songmark costume has generous pockets we try to be rather better prepared. These days we definitely laugh at some of the stories, with square-jawed heroes setting out to cross continents carrying only a gun and a change of underwear (and in some of them, when the ammunition is used up they become far more dangerous to meet.)

Madelene X complained to our Tutors that they were getting soft, allowing the first-years all this equipment when we only had aircraft survival kits last year. Miss Wildford smiled sweetly and pointed out that we only had seven nights out and not twelve, on an island with plenty of fresh water and edible plants growing wild (unlike the Kanim atolls). She also assigned Madelene an extra two nights of gate duty starting immediately, just to reassure her how soft they really are.

Of course, we are back on gate duty tonight, and just my luck to have Madelene X as partner. She is in a worse temper than usual, her nose covered in calamine lotion after getting sunburn there: it is a very pink nose and her fine muzzle fur lets a lot of sunlight through. I recommended the much-advertised local patent medicine "Snouto for immediate snout relief" but having a blistered nose never stops her turning it up at local produce. We often wonder just why she chose to come here in the first place; although she will no doubt graduate very comfortably in terms of marks, the only things she has approved of yet she could have stayed home to enjoy. Every time we point out a feature of local life, she can find a reason why it is inferior or simply wrong and should be done away with.

Although I hate to be uncharitable, I can see what Prad Phao meant when he complained about his colonial “oppressors” in French Indo-China. Madelene does boast that all the colonies in her empire are represented in the Paris parliament with equally valuable places as any mainland “department” – which is nice but in practice means they get outvoted on everything. Saffina’s homeland of Ubangi-Chari is nearly the size of France but has just one seat in Paris, the same as little mountain “departments” thirty miles across and mostly inhabited by mountain goats and glaciers.

I hope Phao is doing well – I will never look at a Siamese again in quite the same way, especially not a kitten. Things could have turned out better or worse than they did, I suppose – had I not gone to sea but stayed on South Island with Helen, I would still be enjoying poi and looking forward to a kitten for Christmas, almost certainly at the at the cost of my Songmark career. On the other paw, something unfortunate might have happened anyway, after I had already been expelled here and disowned at home – talk about paying for one’s cake and not eating it! Things could certainly have been worse.

One good thing about having to stay up late on gate duty is we have a chance to listen to the short-wave broadcasts from home. What with the clocks being on Summer Time back in England, we are an hour later here than usual – so the lunchtime news only gets here at one in the morning Spontoon time. Things do go on without me – strikes, floods and the cricket rained off except when the Australians beat us (Australian Rules cricket is certainly an exciting variant, but can put pounds on one’s life insurance premium and years off one’s life expectancy). It is rather alarming that it seems so distant now – the first year I was here, I eagerly scanned every airmailed newspaper down to the advertisements and listened to every BBC announcement Mr. Joyce made.

Madelene, not surprisingly, is still doing much the same. She pooh-poohs our worries about Europe, pointing out France is invulnerably shielding the rest of Europe with its Maginot Line that can withstand anything. Perfectly logical in its way – as the Great War was won with trenches, start off with the ultimate in prepared trench systems and one gains years’ worth of advantages. It is certainly impressive, and it covers every metre save where the terrain is so rough any invading army will have to lob its tanks over the mountains with catapults to get them across. As she says, a whole General Staff can’t be wrong.

Thursday 28th May, 1936

It is surprising what one’s friends come up with – Jasbir Sind has always been keen on dancing at the Coconut Grove, but our Tutors have officially always told her no. No surprises there. I hardly expected Jasbir to be the one to get a whole bundle of identification papers for herself in a different name, right down to birth certificate and the like! These are not from Macao either – it makes my own “second face” look rather flimsy with having just a passport. I am definitely NOT going to carry that “hunting license” around with me, although it is in Kim-Anh’s name. I need no identification on Spontoon, and the license would be pure trouble to any authorities elsewhere, as well as being awfully embarrassing even if it does refer to a certain half-Siamese whom I have sometimes seen in the mirror.

Of course, Jasbir is a wealthy and determined girl, and that can get an awful lot done. She has friends in the Coconut Grove, and it seems that show business often needs to make quiet arrangements to travel – “the show must go on” as they say, and they have friends who have friends with printing presses and a selection of blank papers that Beryl would kill for.

Since Molly found some honest income of her own, my own allowance has been available to spend on other things. The trouble is, in my situation that could stop any time – though if it does, having some convincing travel documents might be a good investment. I will definitely talk this one over with Molly and Helen. Maria is justifiably proud of who she is, and even now is not greatly into subtlety. A bull in a china shop is proverbially a bad employee, whether female or otherwise.

Actually, now would be a good time for getting anything we need to do past our tutors, who are concentrating on getting the third-years ready for their final tests. What with that and the first-years at their maximum potential for trouble (having learned a lot of skills but not how to behave with them) we are as free of pressures as we have ever been, or expect to be at Songmark.

One advantage is that we spend a lot of time out of the classrooms and in the air: my little Sand Flea is in the air every day, and we are all getting in useful hours of flying time for our logbooks. All except Irma Bundt and Missy K, who have grave difficulty in fitting into the cockpit; the difference between them is that Irma sorely regrets it. The memory of watching my poor Sand Flea take over half of the Eastern Island runway to get off the ground carrying Irma on her first attempt is one that still makes my fur rise, as it hopped and bounced with the end of the strip

looming up seconds away from a crash. I am sure the only thing that let it leave the ground was losing the few pounds of fuel used along the runway!

Although she fits the cockpit perfectly well, one could almost hear Madelene X grinding her teeth before deigning to fly it – Flying Fleas being a French idea, she would never live it down if she refused to champion it at least in theory.

I must say, Adele Beasley is an absolute genius in the air; she rather reminds one of a seabird in flight – but is equally clumsy on the ground. She is awfully distracted for some reason these days, but in that dorm there is nobody to confide in. Oddly enough, although she does talk a lot with Wo Shin, I would hardly say they are friends, the way Saffina is with us.

The third-years are heading out themselves next week, for what looks like the severest test yet; part of it involves a week on a completely deserted coral atoll in the Hundred Keys group, with almost no water or equipment. I remember last year hearing from the Noenokes about life on a raft, with the only water being rain or what one can “extract” from caught fish. One certainly hopes they are good at fishing by now.

Friday 29th May, 1936

A day of celebration indeed – 5 years ago Songmark opened its doors to the first classes! We had hoped for some sort of celebration, or at least the afternoon off – but our Tutors are as brisk and keen as ever. They do not talk much about the early years, and indeed one gets the impression they made mistakes they learned from. In fact, Mrs. Hoele'toemi has mentioned the school was planned to set up the Autumn before, but ran into financial difficulties. I recall that one of the early backers took off with the funds, literally, and was never seen again.

This might explain why the term started at such an odd time of year. A lot of students come here in rushed circumstances, and it is the lucky few who plan it to finish their regular education to fit with what follows. I would have had a last term at St. Winifred's had I not had that unfortunate crash-landing, and Beryl would be graduating from Saint T's this year if not for her misfortune of being found innocent of a criminal record.

Beryl says that Songmark is viewed as something like a more respectable asylum, where incurable members of the family are packed off to where they will not scandalise the neighbours. Just the sort of thing Beryl would say. And then again, it might have a grain of truth in it – if not for Songmark I might be trying to pester my way into the Air Force by now, having had differences with a Finishing School or two.

Saturday 30th May, 1936

Oh my.

Dear Diary: if I have learned one thing since arriving on Spontoon, it is that life is full of surprises. Looking at our timetables for Friday, who could have possibly guessed the consequences?

It all started innocuously enough, with Maria coming in at lunchtime from the miniature Reuter's branch next to the telegraph relay offices. She waved her maps excitedly, and as we pushed our plates aside we looked at the unfolding events – none of them earth-shattering or really newsworthy in themselves, unless one already knew what to look for.

The first thing she spotted was a report of that (in)famous vessel the Direwolf, now definitely in the Nimitz Sea and heading this way. At least, it had been seen fifty miles North of Cranium Island yesterday, heading Southwards – always something to make shipping nervous. The Direwolf claims to be an independent anti-piracy vessel, but by all accounts it specialises in raiding smuggling craft since they are full of easily “fenced” items and nobody will be calling out their Navy as a consequence.

Apart from that, a merchant ship spotted two known South Sea Pirate vessels also heading Eastwards in this direction at speed – and despite being caught alone and laden in the straits between two of the Mildendo Isles, the merchant was not even approached. Maria deduces they were going somewhere under higher orders and had no time for everyday pillaging. The R.I.N.S. base at Eastern Island scrambled its seaplanes and they have been on patrol ever since, but the Pacific is an awfully big place.

Certainly, we agreed that things seemed to be counting down to some sort of climax. But we had to leave her to it, as both Molly and I had a navigation flight booked in the Sea Osprey as soon as Jasbir and Sophie D' Artagnan came in and refuelled from theirs.

By one o'clock we were on the slipway, checking the Sea Osprey over and signing for it under the watchful gaze of Miss Wildford. As ever, we take full tanks of fuel for seven hours even if

we were only planning to be gone for two – and every item on the checklist was very thoroughly checked. Then, into the cockpit and the usual wait for the marine air terminal to clear us, getting us onto the main seaplane lane just ahead of a Dornier X.

I must say, it is a lot easier to navigate “indoors” with the closed cockpit, than trying to hold the map out of the slipstream in the back of a Tiger Moth, with the clumsy Gosport hoods and speaking tubes to try and talk through. The Sea Osprey is very quiet, with the engines back in the wings and no prop wash blowing back over the cockpit making a normal conversation possible. One hardly needs flying costume at all, and unless climbing high it could be flown this time of year in the regular shirt and shorts. Needless to say we were fully equipped with flight suits and helmets, all the kit right down to those parachutist’s gravity knives Maria got us last year.

The flight plan was to head straight North past Orpington and then turn North-West towards the Kanim Islands, taking a timed photograph of Lobopeete atoll to prove we had done it. Then we were scheduled to land and swap positions, with Molly navigating us home and photographing the coast of Orpington. It looked challenging, but nothing much to write in the diary – we would be back with plenty of time to clean up before the evening meal. Everything went to schedule, with very fine visibility all the way to Orpington and twenty minutes past it, with us both in a very cheerful mood and enjoying the ride.

Of course, there was a fair amount of shipping in the regular lanes and a scattering of fishing boats around Orpington – but once we had left those behind, the Pacific looked decidedly empty. We were surprised to see two vessels right next to each other, about twenty miles from the nearest of the Kanim Islands – even more so when Molly spotted one was a warship!

We immediately thought this must be the Direwolf, possibly raiding these waters. All thoughts of the navigation exercise went out as Molly banked us steeply and brought us in for a closer look, ready to start weaving if they opened fire. I agreed that we had to see what was happening, and then radio Spontoon to let them know. We have standing instructions about helping emergencies, and that definitely seemed to fit the bill.

Things turned out to be rather different when we flew closer with my camera ready for taking evidence. For one thing, the two vessels were steaming along quite comfortably side by side about a hundred yards apart, with nobody doing any attacking that we could see. The Direwolf is a heavy cruiser with two funnels – and though manifestly a warship, this was definitely not it. In fact, it was hardly even a destroyer; I have seen yachts nearly that size although they tend not to be armed. There was no flag flying from the mast, and as we zoomed overhead I noticed it seemed to be decidedly damaged, with obvious emergency welds and repairs. The name “Parsifal” was just visible in rather faded gothic lettering on the bows.

I was quite surprised at the sight – but more so when I took a close look at what it was escorting. This was a fairly typical medium-sized freighter, with a few unexpected things – such as the lack of national colours, and what looked like improvised Maxim guns on railing mounts. But it was what it was towing that had my tail bottling out and Molly jinking the Sea Osprey in shock as she saw and recognised it.

We have heard about experiments with seaplane tenders, with them towing a floating mat providing shelter that a light aircraft can “beach” on to be hauled up by the cranes, even if there is no proper deck hangar. This was the first time we had seen it done. But the aircraft sheltered on the mat was one we had certainly seen before, as even if the markings had been removed there were very few Pemberton-Billings “Nighthawks” ever reworked as floatplanes. We both know who flies it: Lars Nordstrom!

Molly pulled up and we circled at about a thousand feet while we worked out what to do. This definitely looked as if Maria was right, and Lars is returning home from Fiume after the sort of shopping trip that one does not declare at Customs. There are at least three ships in the area trying to stop him. If the authorities on Spontoon approve of the trip, either they do not want to be seen to be involved or they do not know exactly where he is – otherwise there could be a squadron of armed Ospreys flying him air cover at this range.

We were arguing what to do, when as our circle brought us West something happened to force our decision. On the horizon we saw the wakes of two fast vessels heading towards us; there was no doubt we needed to investigate. Molly opened the throttles and we found out what our top speed really is: two hundred and fifty knots flat-out, about the fastest we have ever been outside a dive! It was just as well we did.

About twenty miles from the freighter and escort there were two speedy and similarly unmarked ships approaching, that Molly says are the same model as coastguard cutters. They were definitely armed – and definitely hostile, as the winking of gunfire showed. Anyone ill-disciplined

enough to open fire unprovoked and at impossible range just has to be a pirate! It is the first time anyone has shot at me – may everyone in future miss by as much.

That decided things. We had no idea what frequency the freighter's radio was using, but we had to warn it. Had this been an "ordinary" pirate attack the thing to do would be to scream for help to Spontoon, and hope the Rain Islands air fleet have a squadron patrolling somewhere this side of Moon Island. But we have no idea if the authorities are acknowledging this delivery, and if not I doubt Mr. Sapohatan would much appreciate us telling everyone with a radio about it. There is the Direwolf in these waters as well, which is surely listening out on the air bands with direction-finders ready to swivel their ears this way.

Molly brought us in low between the two ships almost at stalling speed, while I opened the signalling locker and got the Aldis lamp out. There was time for little more than "SOS" and a few naval flag codes – "You are standing into danger" and "Enemy action ahead" can happily be compressed in six-flash groupings. I saw a figure on the bridge of the freighter wave acknowledgement, and then we had to hit the throttles again to go around.

Of course, the sensible thing to do having warned them would be to head back to Spontoon and pass the warning along. But without using the radio it would be an hour's flight away, then the problem of who to contact, and how – writing to Post Box Nine (even first-class) would hardly do, and we have no other way of contacting those authorities! We must ask if they have a matching telephone number. One thing I could do: I sent a standard message to the control tower with our location and a weather report – but finished it with "all's looking as happy as our friend Helen on the high seas". Hopefully that will get in the transcripts if anyone remembers to check them, and at least now folk know where to start looking for us.

With Molly at the controls, I could hardly stop her from bringing us into land behind the freighter, which was conveniently steaming into the wind. There was little swell, and we are quite practiced at ocean landings now: Molly caught us just on a wave as we touched down, and inside a minute we were taxiing onto the towed mat behind the ship, while they let a ladder down.

I hardly knew what to expect. What we found was an almost skeleton crew, many of whom were bandaged and all looked definitely the worse for wear. At close quarters the ship had seen better days, and many recent ones had been quite turbulent to judge by the bullet scars and cracked windows. The captain, a grizzled sea-otter, was grateful for our warnings and increased speed; that is ten knots rather than eight, and about the best he said the old engine could do.

I turned round at a familiar voice – and there was Lars, having just followed us up the ladder from the gunboat's pinnacle. He looked worn but healthy, and I confess my tail twitched slightly at the sight of him. Molly sprang into his arms like a jungle cat on her prey, and indeed she has missed him sorely this past half year. Her tail went right aside like a key turning in a lock.

There was very little time for greetings, as we repeated our warning and Lars' ears fell. In half an hour the two cutters would catch up with us here – from what he described, they had been fighting all the way across the Pacific, with a wide range of unofficial local "talent" lined up to take a swing at them as they went past. Only the unexpected factor of having "obtained" a 1915 vintage Austrian gunboat had kept them relatively intact.

The trouble was, breakdowns and casualties had reduced the crews to barely what was needed to keep the engines working – Lars had been piloting the "Parsifal" for twenty hours, and it was down to the last few rounds of large calibre ammunition. The most conspicuous gun on the bow end could only be described now as a five-centimetre quick-firing Quaker Cannon, as it is completely out of rounds. As we suspected, he cannot call for official help from Spontoon – if there was time something could be arranged to "accidentally" discover the pirates, but we were running out of time by the minute. He gave orders for the freighter to head straight for Spontoon, and grimly announced he was going to lead the enemy off into the Kanim Islands for as long as he could. He gave Molly a fierce hug, and kissed her farewell, suggesting we head back as fast as we can and say we saw an unidentified gun battle; the authorities can investigate that without any fear of compromising themselves. What is coming, he admits, they have little chance of getting out of with their hides intact.

Of course, Molly was having none of that. She had not come out here to kiss him farewell forever – where he went, she went. I could see her eyes lighting up, as she pointed out she is quite good with artillery and he needs every paw he can get.

I could have taken Lars' suggestion myself, flown back to safety and come out with a rescue party from Spontoon to see if there was anyone left to rescue. It would have been the sensible thing to do. But I was definitely not going to run away and leave Molly behind! I am not too bad at self-defence myself, and decided to see it through. Lars looked at us both steadily and told us the folk pursuing were not the sort to take prisoners – at least, one would regret being taken alive,

especially for us. Although our ears drooped, Molly stuck to her decision, and I was hardly going to back out. Abandoning one's friends is absolutely Not Done.

Five minutes later we had secured the Sea Osprey to the landing mat and watched from the deck of the Parsifal as it headed Southwards, towards as much safety as it could get. I had hoped it would be safe once it reached the shipping lanes, but Lars grimly commented that there were two boatloads of Moro pirates heading our way who would not care in the slightest if a crowded tour boat saw the whole thing – indeed, they would be very happy to increase their booty that way as well as disposing of inconvenient witnesses.

The Parsifal was a lot smaller than I had thought, and I was amazed it had managed to cross the Pacific. True, as for fuel, food and water it had the larger freighter to resupply from, and by Lars' accounts they had managed to refuel and take on water in Ceylon. The price of that had been being spotted and forced to fight their way through the Andaman Islands – to our sorrow he told us his colleague Boto had died in that battle. I will never forget Boto Pikida, a fine falcon gentleman and the first feathered person I got to know in that way.

Still, although the Parsifal was in poor shape, the ship was far from helpless. There was a three-centimetre shielded cannon at the stern with sixty rounds left, and two old M1908 water-jacketed Maxims on the railings with cases full of ammunition. Molly's tail had gone sideways at the first sight. As to crew, there were only five left, four of whom were in the engine-room. Lars had been steering, following the freighter which had to navigate for both of them since the previous skirmish of the Malacca Straits wrecked the Parsifal's chart room. So that left one crewman and us to defend the ship – the engine-room crew could come up in emergency, but the ship would not keep underway twenty minutes without them. I should think the regular crew must be at least thirty per watch, and even including us it makes less than ten.

It was quite a sight. The old gunboat made all possible steam, the smokestack sending out a plume of black smoke that was visible for miles. Of course, that was the idea – both to get us nearer land as fast as possible, and to attract both our pursuers. If one went after the freighter that would be the end of it – by making more smoke Lars hoped to convince them both ships were still together until it was too late.

While I climbed up to the lookout post forwards of the funnel, Molly went down to look through the ship with Lars and see what could be done in the way of last-ditch defences. It was suddenly rather lonely up there. When I had woken up that morning, I had no idea that before sundown I would be outnumbered on the high seas by desperate Oriental pirates by whom it is unwise to be captured alive! Being best friends with Molly is liable to lead a girl into interesting situations - as they say in the Loris and Hartebeest comedies, "Another fine mess you got me into."

For five minutes we made about three quarters speed, heading at about fifteen knots for the Kanim Islands. Then I spotted twin smears of grey smoke to the West, with the cutters' engines being powerful diesels rather than our old coal boilers. I shouted down to the bridge and Lars went to flank speed, about twenty knots but nothing that would more than delay the inevitable encounter. In another ten minutes they had taken definite shape and were barely two miles away, closing rapidly. From my lookout I could see the decks were crowded, not indeed by the sort of romantic "pirate" one sees posing for Spontoon tourists but by folk in drab and practical outfits that looked as if they could carry a lot of lethal hardware. There must have been forty of them that I could see on the decks, and although the ships did not seem to have any heavy armament I spotted half a dozen Lewis guns.

Standing up on the observation platform suddenly seemed a rather precarious thing to do, considering that with enough Lewis guns one can get by without accuracy given enough ammunition and enthusiasm. In ten seconds I was down out of sight with the Parsifal's plating protecting me: looking at the older impact splashes it was a relief to see it is at least small-arms proofed. It is an unpleasant sensation to think that I might not be the only one with a M1918 Mauser "T-Gewehr", though

Molly was sitting on an opened crate behind Lars at the wheel, putting some components together I did not recognise at first. She had one box of blunt metal cones about the size of an ice-cream cone which she was fiddling with and screwing onto dull metal cylinders from out of the box, the size and shape of baked-bean cans. Despite everything she grinned, and pointed to a translated manual for "vulcanite fuzes, super-quick acting" which she says were meant to detonate even hitting radio wires or rigging. With a pencil she demonstrated how to jam the mechanism open to prime it as if it had already been launched and was in the air.

In any other situation I would have backed away very slowly, and ran for safety when outside the room. Unfortunately there was no safety to be had outside, and precious little inside as Molly assembled the fuzes and gaine charges intended for large naval shells – enough Great War

vintage trotyl to give an artilleryman grey fur at the sight. I sincerely hope the stores at Trieste were well maintained, as from all we hear it is very unlike a fine wine and gets definitely worse tempered over the years. But if one of them had gone off I suppose at least she would have died happy, to look at the expression on her face – having Lars at her side and a large pile of unstable munitions ready to use with nobody to tell her not to.

The bridge was rather a shambles already with welded repairs, cracked instrument glasses and scorch marks showing where an earlier encounter had almost finished the ship. But Lars was as cool and collected as any ferry pilot on an everyday crossing: even when the mongoose crewman on the bows shouted the pirates were splitting formation to board us at both sides, he just nodded and called down the speaking tube to abandon the engine-room and repel boarders.

Dear Diary. I thought it was bad enough on our Vostok trip, with the Bolsheviks bombing us and the Pelmeni hunting them through the woods. I don't think I'll ever forget the next ten minutes as long as I live.

I must say, Molly's enthusiasm has paid off in terms of skill and style. Lars warned calmly to get ready, as the usual pirate tactics were to rush from both sides at once. He lashed the wheel on course, noting we were twenty miles from the nearest atoll, and checked a pair of polished metal mirrors he had rigged to let him see over the port and starboard sides. From the bridge I could see the mongoose crewman dive into the small fore turret although I could not see why, having been told it was out of ammunition.

Boarding a vessel travelling at twenty knots on the open ocean is not the easiest of things – for which we can all be grateful! Lars nodded calmly and pointed out that from the last encounter the opposition knew all the Parsifal's main armament had been silenced; hopefully they do NOT know that while the big bow gun had run out of ammunition the stern "pom-pom" had only jammed and is back in service although there is nobody to crew it. He gave his orders – and indeed we both jumped to it as we could hear the clang of grappling irons on the railings.

If the Parsifal had open deck railings like a cruise ship, we would never have made it. But it was a military vessel with half-inch plating up to waist height, and while gunfire raked the top both Molly and I rolled out of the bridge doorway cradling a two-pound gaine charge with its fuze set to blow at the slightest knock. Although we could not see over the sides, thanks to his mirrors Lars could – and at his shout we both hefted them overboard like putting a rather ungainly shot.

Oh my. From what I pieced together later, both of us landed the charges on the decks of the smaller cutters with the first shot, packed with folk swarming up the ropes. It was messy. We had time to throw another two each, and at the second the entire ship shuddered as if we had run into a shoal. Then half a dozen pirates were on our decks, and things became very busy. Lars yelled something in a language I did not recognise: later he explained he said the whole ship was full of explosive, and with a dozen gaine charges rolling around unfuzed on the deck that give the pirates pause before deciding not to open up with their broomhandle Mausers and "trench brooms". As they all carried extra machetes and the like, that was only a slight improvement.

I hardly remember exactly what I did. Two years of self-defence lessons somehow took over, boosted by the very certain knowledge that this was playing for keeps. I had the advantage of not just being shaken by high explosives – indeed some of our assailants' ears and noses were bleeding, and they could not have been in top shape. One mongoose came at me with a Kris sword, which I stepped under and used one of the Jude-Jitsu blows I was warned about never practicing on full strength – which I did and he went right over, collapsing in a heap by the bridge door.

Lars was amazing to watch, not that I had time to note details. I know he is a dancer, and with his job I guessed he had done this kind of thing before – but he was just one blur of hooves and hands, and in one occasion showing the practical use of horns. Three pirates were down – but I saw two more crossing the deck behind him, oriental felines with machetes the size of longswords. Yelling a warning I sprang in behind them – before they could turn I had practiced another of the Jude-Jitsu moves and discovered that the favourite move Beryl talks about actually does what it says. There was no time to think about it as a large puma dived my direction – and I confirmed the Songmark issue steel toed boot has other uses than protecting against dropped engine blocks. Though it looked more like a circus stunt when we first were shown it, the "Legionnaire's trick" I have not used since Krupmark actually works jolly well if one can get the timing just right.

From the bows there was a burst of automatic fire that made me duck until I realised where it was from. The big cannon may be out of ammunition but it has an armoured shield and Lars' crew had rigged a Lewis of their own to shoot from behind its protection. Three more of the pirates were caught in the fire and went down – and for the moment our deck was free.

As I got my breath back I noticed that the ship was listing slightly. One of our charges had missed the cutter alongside and fallen into the water between the two ships, which was bad news –

we had practically torpedoed ourselves! But the starboard pirate vessel had the worst of it, as even without sticking my head over the side I could see it dropping behind, already noticeably down at the bows. The other one has pulled clear, not wanting any more of the same – though when we did a shouted roll-call Lars grimly announced two of his crew were dead and another wounded. There was no sign of the pirates we had flattened, and I think they had been thrown overboard. As for the ones our crew had hit – there were definite signs where they had been; I had heard of folk being cut to pieces by machine-guns, and now know it really happens.

Hails of bullets were ricocheting off the armour as the nearer pirate cutter came in again with half a dozen Lewises firing from fifty yards range. Our own vessel was listing increasingly, and with no crew or time free for any sort of damage control, even I could see that the poor Parsifal was not going to get to the Kanim Islands. Things looked definitely bleak – until Molly made her move.

How she managed to get across the deck through a hail of ricochets I will never know: at Songmark they tell us that although Providence often looks after fools and drunks we should never expect it to help us. But she made it uninjured to the aft gun, which had been no use while the two pirates had been right alongside us and below our deck level.

Oh my. Whether it was beginner's luck I can hardly say, but I doubt she missed with a single one-pound shell. The first twenty rounds swept all life off the decks of the intact cutter, and the next twenty went into its waterline – a wooden rather than steel hull, smashing holes in it one could have put a steamer trunk through. The last she took her time with, hitting the one that was already sinking some two hundred yards astern of us and setting it on fire. Both vessels were dead in the water, with any lifeboats surely been smashed to splinters. I could see the fins of sharks already circling.

For a minute there was almost calm as we panted for breath, our tongues out and hearts pounding with exertion. Then Lars called his surviving three healthy crew over and they hurriedly went below decks to check on the damage while I did what I could for the injured one, a muskrat called Kovic. We have read the books and passed the tests in theory, but this was the first gunshot wound I have had to treat. Luckily it had passed through his leg without breaking the bone, but it was bleeding awfully and my own fur was soon soaked as well as I packed in gauze and held down the pressure points.

It was a very strange ten minutes. Molly had come over to help, with a sort of wild fascination in her eyes. I had thought she might be in shock about what we had to do – but though she was panting hard, by her expression she looked as if she had won the lottery. I had her take turns on holding the dressings tight on Kovic's leg, and pointed out this was what it all came to. I fear I hardly discouraged her.

By the time Lars came back the ship was listing at twenty degrees, and with a shrug he announced that there was nothing to be done but abandon her – three yards of seam were opened and there were too few of us left to fight the damage. While the rest of his crew lowered the two lifeboats he helped us get Kovic onto a stretcher; the bleeding had slowed but he was in a rather bad way. If we were outside Casino Island hospital I would have said he had every chance, with transfusions and such available – but out there, it was a different story.

The only proper lifeboat was the larger of the two, with a locker equipped with first-aid supplies, food and water. We helped stow Kovic on that and they cast off, leaving me and Molly to grab what supplies we could from the galley while Lars got the second boat away. He was the last one to leave the ship; as Captain he almost went down with it as he leaped clear and swam out to us.

A sad sight. The Parsifal went down in two minutes, the boilers exploding in a huge gout of steam as the water reached the engine room and fragments splashed down around us while we rowed frantically away from the sinking ship. At two hundred yards we felt safe enough from the undertow to stop and rest to watch the last of it vanish beneath the waves.

I would hardly have thought of Lars as sentimental, but he took off his cap as he saw the last bubbles rising. A sad end for a gallant ship, he told us, but at least a fighting finish. The Parsifal had been seized with the port of Fiume, and kept on maintenance status for fifteen years as a coastal defence craft, although as Fiume is now far from any non-Italian ports there was little interest in it. One final voyage across the world after fifteen years tied up against a dock was not a bad way to go, rather than being broken up for scrap as it had been scheduled for. It is a long way from the Adriatic.

That aside, we got down to practicalities. Our boat was an eighteen-footer with four sets of oars, and after checking the compass we started rowing. It was about an hour before sunset, and our best guess put us ten miles from the nearest land. Which could be far worse of course, but on scale that is like being half-way across the English Channel heading to France! The good news was

the ocean currents are flowing the right way, and in a day or so would wash us into the Kanims regardless – or onto a reef, more likely.

The other boat pulled alongside and Lars gave them their orders, to head straight for Main Island Spontoon; having the only outboard motor between us, they have to get Kovic to hospital as soon as possible. Merely aiming for the nearest land and hoping for rescue as we would need to do would probably be too late for him. With a wave they departed, and in a few minutes we were all alone on the rolling ocean.

I must say, as we started steadily rowing, I found myself shaking in reaction as I had time to think about it. There had been no chance to imagine things going wrong, but as we put our backs into the work I definitely did, and the consequences. I also imagined what our Tutors must be thinking right now, assuming the freighter has not made radio contact with Spontoon. True, we were carrying enough fuel to get us to Vostok, and one can put the Sea Osprey down anywhere – but the search aircraft must be alerted already. They know the position we last radioed from, but we are already twelve miles from there and heading out all the time.

It was almost dark before we came within sight of land: the Kanims are low-lying atolls with no major hills and are hard to spot from a small boat with no mast to climb. What with the landward wind and currents, we decided it was safer to try and get ashore straight away rather than risk being blown ashore in the middle of the night: we had a sea anchor in the boat but that hardly helps in an ocean current. So we passed the water bottles round and made a final effort, with Lars just managing to steer us through a gap in the reef in the very last of the light, before we pulled into a calm lagoon and almost collapsed at the oars for ten minutes, panting for breath.

Luckily the moon was almost full and we could see well enough to make a dry landfall and pull the boat up the beach. From what we could see there was not exactly a jungle, but certainly bushes and a grove of coconut palms, though no lights or signs of life to be seen. There are a lot of little atolls around here, and though this might be the one the first-years spent last week on it is probably not. Anyway, it was so dark that if they had left us a mound of unwanted emergency rations, the only way we would have found them would be stumbling over the tins.

Lars was as weary as the rest of us, having been piloting the Parsifal all last night, but we just managed to pull the supplies up into the first grove of trees. Ten minutes work with our gravity knives cut enough foliage to make a good enough bed, or rather nest on the ground under the branches – and then all three of us almost literally fell over asleep.

I hardly know how to put this. Molly was the first to wake up, as when I stirred at the first hint of dawn she greeted me quietly, looking more thoughtful than usual. Lars was sleeping peacefully and after all his hard work his scent was very – entrancing, even in the open air. Molly looked from one to the other of us and thanked me for saving his life. I did point out I was not going to have run out on her – and once the pirates closed in I had little choice in the matter; I would have done the same for the sea-otter captain of the freighter who I had never met before.

Molly agreed that I probably would have – but the fact is that I did save Lars. She looked me in the eye and suggested a certain arrangement that had my ears blushing. I have heard that in ancient days some folk such as deer and sheep had rather different family... arrangements, but although Molly and I happily share some precious things such as my Sand Flea, there are limits. She twitched an ear, looked down at the sleeping stag and quietly commented it would be nothing new for me. Well, I could hardly deny it, but that one time on Krupmark I had a snout full of catnip and was hardly in my usual state of mind.

Rather than discuss it, I went down to the beach in the paling starlight to try and wash my fur clean. It was awfully matted with Kovic's blood, but a scrubbing with coral sand and vigorous cold seawater brushing got the worst of it off and cleared my head slightly. I would have thought Molly would have been far more likely to think up elaborate fates involving detonating cord for any other girl as much as looking at Lars. I did help save him, but I helped save the rest of the crew and Kovic too I hope. Anyway she knows I am almost Taifast and very happily so to Jerry, or will be in three weeks.

It was still dark under the trees and Lars was fast asleep, indeed one could hardly blame him for sleeping all day after what he has been through. He doesn't snore, which is nice. Molly seemed to be asleep again so I decided to try and get another hour in before the rigors of the day, pressing in for warmth against the dawn breeze. Though we do a lot of exercise I have not been rowing much and my back muscles were awfully sore after the two hard hours of the evening before. Our leaf nest seemed as snug and cosy a bed as I have ever tried, though after yesterday anything short of hard rock or freezing mud would look welcome. The deer scent was really very pleasant, and I let my snout fill with it as I lay down to catch another forty winks.

Dear Diary: there are other things than catnip that have the same effect. Surviving a highly lethal attack seems to do that for me, as I found out when Prad Phao rescued me from the barracuda. At least this time I will not have to worry about the results, as my overnight bag with Native Precautions travels everywhere with me these days. The plain fact is that I awoke again rather later than Lars and Molly, having been a very poor chaperone to them (as folk would see it at home) and in a mood that would hardly listen to sensible advice. Helen and I have often acted as each other's chaperones, but of course on those occasions we had different escorts.

One can quite see how stags in ancient times managed. I am sure that despite Lars being tired out, if there had been another two of us with him they would not have been disappointed. Oh my.

When the sun came up we breakfasted on the emergency rations from the lifeboat, plus from a few boxes we had grabbed on the way out of the Parsifal. One of them was a rare delicacy that Lars had brought from Europe, a traditional Nordic preserve that he said was made by treating dried cod with wood lye until it turns transparent and gelatinous *. Fascinating! Decidedly an acquired taste, as Molly put it. I can quite believe the Spontoon shops do not stock it.

Of course, the next thing we had to do was find out where we were, and after digging a twenty-foot "SOS" deeply in the sand where the low morning sunlight will pick it out to any search aircraft, I climbed a coconut tree to take a look. It was a pretty view but not entirely encouraging: our islet was about half a mile across and the grove of palms was its only highlight. Maria's parachutist knife came in most useful again as one can open it one-pawed and cut down coconuts while holding fast with the other paw.

I could see some larger islands a few miles to the North, and we made ready the boat to row around and search for signs of habitation. As it turned out we did not have to – just as we were packing the coconuts under the seats as extra rations there was the welcome sound of an aircraft engine, which rapidly resolved itself into a Rain Island naval Osprey, the stubby winged conventional sort. Rescue! The pilot spotted our "SOS" and us waving on the shore, just as well as it was the other of the Parsifal's boats that had the full emergency kit including the flare gun.

The seaplane landed in the lagoon and picked us up: evidently the freighter had radioed something of the situation to the proper authorities who had been searching since first light. By ten o'clock we were in the naval station on Moon Island, almost wishing we had stayed out for another night on the islands. Lars was taken away to talk to the relevant folk (we determinedly did not ask who THEY might be) and a trio of rather hard-bitten RINS officers had us go over our story again and again till they seemed to be satisfied. Satisfied with us, that is; we could tell they were distinctly unhappy with the rest of the situation.

Oh dear. I should have known we were in hot water when Miss Devinski and Miss Blande came over to Moon Island along with our matron Mrs. Oelabe. Miss Devinski rather icily explained that we were not meeting at Songmark until she had decided if we were ever coming back there. She first motioned Mrs. Oelabe forward, who asked us seriously if there was anything we wanted to tell her. I reassured her that although we both still had a definite scent of blood on our fur it was not our own, apart from a few nicks and scratches we had already treated. I inquired after Mr. Kovic, and was reassured that he had survived to get to the Casino Island hospital and a transfusion. Rather grudgingly, Mrs. Oelabe commented that the hospital staff had praised my work as a battlefield medic, and she was glad to see that at least one of my classes had not been wasted.

Although we had already told our story to the Rain Island officers it took twice as long to tell it again to our tutors, who not only wanted to know the facts of what we did but also the reasons. I had to admit that the way they assessed things, it looked rather shaky putting ourselves up against those odds with those sorts of consequences for losing. Miss D asked snappishly if two years of Songmark had been wasted on us thinking we could go and do that sort of thing – to which Molly replied evenly that two years of Songmark had equipped us to do it and win. I am very glad she kept her temper; it is hard to argue with success but our Tutors are very skilled at finding fault with us.

Of course, no armies train to lose but in every battle at least one of them does - which was not the sort of point I wanted to remind anybody of at the time. Our tutors then sent us out and then called us in separately to grill us more severely one after another – by the end of the morning it reached the stage of being asked if I thought there was any point in my wasting my Father's money keeping me at Songmark. But having come through an experience like yesterday I was in no mood to buckle under. I acknowledged that if they wanted to send such a message to the world they had the right to do so – but for my family's sake I wanted a written explanation that I had been dismissed for putting my own life in peril to help a friend in need. If they throw me out for that I do not think they would get another properly brought-up student from our Empire ever again, and have

to make do with folk such as Beryl. Whatever I have learned at Songmark, I have not un-learned how to stick up for my friends, and hope I never do.

Miss Blande asked if I knew what the freighter was carrying and for who. I could look her in the eye and truthfully tell her that I had not looked, and had not asked.

We were both sent out of the room for half an hour. The thing was, I felt very different from contemplating essentially the same fate at Easter – and not just because Molly would probably be joining me in exile. Sitting there, I could have wished we had stayed out on the island another day before being rescued; the grilling could hardly have been worse and at least we would have had more time to work on our story. As it is, we did not tell them everything or Mrs. Oelabe would have done more than just ask about our health. My main worry was what to tell Jirry – I know he had no objections to things such as my explorations and taking part in the festival on Orpington Island, but most people seem to have such a down on Lars.

At last the door opened and we were waved silently in. I had resigned myself to a career of Island life when Miss D curtly told us we had managed to hang on to our courses by a thin whisker. I could tell Molly was about to make some wise-crack about that, but a sharp elbow is a convincing a move in the right place as the Cheltenham Death Grip proves in certain other circumstances. I had never expected to use that hold, and it was rather chilling to reflect that sometimes Beryl does tell the unvarnished truth.

Actually, she did say one rather odd thing – that if we insisted on pulling this sort of stunt, we should put our energies to some better use – and warned us that travel was in our horoscopes for the near future. Very odd, as I hardly thought she would be the type for star-gazing apart from our timetabled celestial navigation.

As we followed them out and back to Songmark, on the water taxi Miss Blande winked at us and whispered that we would either graduate with an “A” or an “F” but nothing in between. Thinking about it, it might be that our Tutors would even rather have us sent home in disgrace than be caught by Moro pirates and come to the sort of none-too-rapid end we have heard about.

Quite a reunion! Helen and Maria were waiting for us on the dockside; with rather a start we realised it was still only Saturday and we had been gone little more than twenty-four hours. On the way in we noticed our Sea Osprey tied up on its regular berth, so evidently the freighter made it into these waters at least as far as being able to get a ferry pilot to return it here. We looked around the Casino Island docks as we went past, but saw no sign of the freighter. It is hardly the sort of thing one can just park out of the way, after all.

Molly was rather subdued, and whispered that she had worked out what the cargo was – but it made no sense to her. The fuzes and gaine charges she had sunk everything in sight with were definitely for battleship shells, twelve inch calibre or probably even larger. But as “Jane’s Naval Review” tells us, one needs at least an eighty tonne gun to fire them, and those are made in only about half a dozen steelworks in the world, taking at least a year of specialised heavy engineering per barrel. I know that back home, even in Sheffield there are just two factories qualified for the Navy and battleships order them before even laying the keels in the boatyards. The Austro-Hungarians may have some surplus but surely Rain Island cannot be getting hold of any, as there are strict world Treaties controlling such things that the League of Nations enforces. They are rather conspicuous after all, and testing can hardly be kept quiet. So – they are bringing in ammunition that could worry any ship afloat, but have no way of firing it!

* (Editor’s Note: this is evidently “Lukefisk”, a Norwegian dish that Amelia actually describes quite accurately – as does Molly. The Editor knows whereof he speaks.)

Sunday May 31st, 1936

After yesterday’s adventures, a nice relaxing day was in order. Unfortunately we do not give the orders around here, and despite it being Sunday Molly and I were assigned to escort the first-years who need such to Casino Island church services. Molly of course does not attend and I hardly felt like leaving her alone on Casino Island for two hours while I went in to see what the Reverend Bingham is sermonising. I fear I have rather dropped out of that style of Church-going, having been introduced to the Spontoonie variant.

Actually it was as well that we waited outside in the nearest café, as Mr. Sapohatan appeared in his usual inconspicuous way and greeted us as if we had done nothing out of the ordinary. For us, I fear that is what our Tutors complain about. I know better by now than to ask him anything; he will tell us what he wants us to know whenever he feels ready.

Molly has no such caution and eagerly enquired about Lars, asking if he had got into trouble with the authorities. Mr. Sapohatan's tail twitched in what might have been irritation, and admitted that some particular authorities had to be placated, but in general Lars had done the islands a great service – though for various reasons he would be home on Krupmark for awhile (“until the heat's off,” as Molly commented sagely.)

He congratulated us quietly, and cautioned us that we should never assume that everything Lars does is for the National Interest, as he is an entirely independent businessman. In fact, one of the reasons he is willing to go to such lengths for Spontoon is to buy himself some leeway with the Authorities. Many folk think he is “mad, bad and dangerous to know” – but I am sure he is not mad, and Molly will believe nothing bad about him. As for dangerous to know, I must confess that every time we cross paths, dire peril is never far off. But we are training to be Adventuresses, and can hardly complain about that sort of thing.

Anyway, he enquired if we had any plans for the holiday, as otherwise he had some ideas that we might find interesting. I know by now what “interesting” means around here. He seems to have heard about our rather icy reception at Songmark yesterday, as he mentioned some other projects had come up which in other circumstances we could have started on right away – and we should not worry too much about travelling expenses.

Though I should not be too surprised, he pulled out a photograph from his pocket and compared it to me – and commented that although they might have difficulty with issuing a British citizen with a local passport, a half-Siamese girl might not have such problems. Of course, I had passed through Customs both ways at Easter and it was hardly amazing that someone had spotted me behind the dyed fur. It was something new to see his ears and tail perk up in surprise when I admitted that Kim-Anh already has one – but she could use a birth certificate and supporting documents suitable for a dancer or other respectable Macao resident working here for the Season.

I think this might be the first time we have seen a certain ferret impressed. He rose, bowed politely and said he would see what could be arranged. He turned and added that if we heard news of a shipwreck in the near future, we need not be too concerned – and neither would Lloyds of London, as there was nothing insured on it. Very odd.

Molly finds shepherding our juniors rather a chore, especially as on Sundays she has other places she would prefer to be. We were reminded rather directly when we returned to the water-taxi dock to see a rather contented and unsteady Beryl obviously returning from the Temple of Continual Reward, the only religion where they seem to have communion cocktails. Beryl has been saying farewell to her friend Mr. Van Hoogstraaten who is heading out next week with the Olympic rowing team; evidently he is no believer in saving his energies for the competition, as Beryl dreamily commented he would need the whole eight-day trip to Europe to rest up.

Everyone else seems to be back, except for Adele Beasley who vanished quite legitimately on her weekend pass on Friday evening – rather odd, as I hardly thought she had anywhere round here to go. I hope she did not go wandering the islands on her own, as if there is a patch of quicksand a yard square she will be the one to find it – I just hope she can find help to get out of any trouble she finds herself in.

Helen was back before us, having had a fine time on South Island and mercifully free of first-years except for Saffina. She was very interested in hearing what Mr. Sapohatan had to say, and is only worried that any adventures he has planned might be on the rolling wave (her roiling stomach does not improve with practice as I hoped it would.) As long as it is in the air or on dry land she has her paw up to volunteer for it.

We also got the chore of doing the final snout count before curfew, to check everyone is actually in. For a minute we thought we were two short – then Shin and Adele turned up just as we were about to lock the gates for the night and report them (our third-years would be called out for something that serious, and woe betide anyone who distracts them from their final revision!) Shin mentioned being delayed getting back from home by headwinds – rather odd, as I would hardly have thought those two would be into sailing round South Island, and first-years are banned from term-time unofficial flying. But all's well that ends well.

Monday June 1st, 1936

The first of June, hurrah – and three weeks until I am Tailfast again! Once I have that locket around my neck as an official reminder, I am sure I will be able to keep up to its promise no matter what temptation comes my way. I had to tell Helen what happened with Lars on the beach, with her reaction being rather predictable. Having been grabbed yesterday for escort missions, I had no chance to see Jerry. Helen gritted her teeth and admitted that strictly speaking a girl only says

“forsaking all others” the day she gets married, but that really is not what being Tailfast is about. She suggests I tell Saimmi the full facts before planning the trip to Sacred Island.

Oh dear. Looking back on things, I have hardly been a shining example of devotion to Jerry; though he is the only one I like the idea of sharing a longhouse with. Unless I take him with me on all my adventures I will have to do a lot better about keeping things in check – dangerous Adventure seems to have such an effect on me, and I am training for a permanent career of it.

Our tutors were taking a brief respite from coaching the third-years to pile on us some more useful experience – it must be handy for local businesses to know they can get free labour for the hard and messy jobs whenever a student has annoyed the staff. Molly and I were sent out all day with that new salvage boat, the aircraft-engined one that is getting a lot of use when the tourists are having fun learning to sail. Although the dangerous reefs are mostly far out surrounding Main and South Island, the main lagoon has an awful lot of sand banks just in the tidal range – many boats head out to anchor in what they think is open water, and discover they are fast aground by the time they finish the picnic hamper!

Although it was jolly hard work, if Miss Devinski thinks this is a punishment for us she may have miscalculated. The tug is basically a wingless piece of flying boat on a flat-bottomed hull, with just the engines and fuel tanks on wing spars which also hold the outriggers keeping it stable. We were introduced to the Monpanoeha brothers who built it last summer, the three sea-otters having salvaged it and built the superstructure at Superior Engineering where they were apprentices. They handle most of the swimming, diving overboard to secure the rescued craft with towing hooks and hawsers.

When the engines really open up it is definitely exhilarating and we can hit thirty knots inside half a minute – as an emergency salvage vessel it must be encouraging for the visitors to know that when they capsize in the central waters we can reach them from Casino Island in five minutes at most. There is an engineer’s seat on top of each engine to make servicing handy – although she was right in the prop blast Molly greatly enjoyed sitting astride the engine, whooping like a cowgirl as she kept a lookout for stranded yachts.

Of course, by the end of the day we almost had to carry her off the boat as she was saddle-sore beyond belief after hours of straddling eight hundred horsepower, as well as being heavily perfumed of burned oil. But she took it all in her stride (a somewhat bow-legged stride by teatime, to be sure) and was keen for another go.

It is fascinating to compare the tourist “sailors” with some of the old hands who are in and out of these islands all the time. We recognised one small vessel moored in Pirate’s Cove by its crew, an incredibly grizzled pipe-smoking skipper who looks like he could compete in the Olympics at wrist-wrestling, and his incredibly skinny lady-friend who looks as if she eats twice a year and sticks to salad even then. I think the other gentleman is their cook, a very rounded and whiskery individual who even carries a portable mincing machine at his belt for constantly making those “burger” things Molly is keen on immortalising in tinsplate. No doubt Beryl would claim it is actually used in some exotic Oriental fighting style too hideous to translate.

Our first-years have boat handling classes in the afternoon, and we are volunteered for helping supervise those as well. Interestingly, Liberty Morgenstern is far and away the best of them – Helen says New Haven is about as nautical a state as one can get, and with its political stance these days their national sport is blockade-running. Liberty has a lot to say about the robust virtues of naval life for organising the Proletariat, and (for a change) agrees with Tatiana when lovingly describing Bolshevik naval revolts before the Great War. It is somewhat like Ada and Maria agreeing that Moses was a fine fellow, as that happened before their theologies parted company. Of course, she remains as staunchly Red as ever and just last week was railing about Maria’s homeland and its “rampant imperialistic aristocracy”. As ever, Maria managed to sit on her quite decisively, with the one unanswerable fact that her Uncle’s father was a blacksmith and the family is quite as far from aristocracy as any Bolshevik could wish.

I must say, Liberty has got a lot quieter recently. One gets the idea that initially she suspected the rather Spartan regime at Songmark was just a front for the cameras – we have not really heard why she was sent to this “playground for pampered parasites on the proletariat” as she used to put it. But by now even she has seen a distinct lack of pampering in the neighbourhood; possibly having poi served three meals in a row might have got the point across, or discovering the duty staff bungalow has the same model of (jolly hard) bed as our dormitory. As Maria often grumbles, it hardly matters if one does fall out of bed around here as it is just as comfortable on the floor. A thing to remind her of next time the rest of us are up at six and she needs crowbars and hydraulic jacks to prize her out!

Definitely that is a dorm to watch out for, and not turn one's back on. I often think the "Red dorm" as it is called by its mix of politics and fur colour, sometimes sets out to annoy people, and if they were awarded points for that our Tutors would put them top of the dorms. There is nothing in the Songmark rules either way about playing cards, but last week Liberty was loudly teaching Tatiana and the rest "Revolution Rummy" where one of the rules is to rapidly discard ("liquidate" as she says) all the Court Cards and get a winning hand of twos. Aces are thought to be elitist, it seems. At least I managed to point out that given the state of their respective nations, rather than the Proletarian twos it should realistically be the joker that ends up on top.

One rather alarming thing on the way back: I found Adele sitting on the bench outside Songmark looking most unwell, with a rather dry nose and dull fur. Normally our Tutors would pick up on that right away, but as everyone knows they are keeping a very light eye on us second-years right now, what with the demands from our seniors and juniors being at its peak. I offered to help her to Mrs. Oelabe as she needs a thorough check-up – at which Adele looked quite panic-stricken and insisted she would be all right if I just helped her up to her dorm, but not to tell our Matron. I wish she would confide in someone – with her bad luck she needs all the help she can get, and having been landed in a dorm with Beryl and Missy K is just another misfortune.

It makes me realise just how lucky I really am, to have such staunch friends with Helen, Molly and Maria. Going adventuring with Molly may put me in a few sticky situations, but if I was allergic to those I would have followed my chum Mabel to Switzerland for a respectable finishing-school!

Wednesday June 3rd, 1936

Our Tutors are definitely still annoyed with us: there is a consignment of old engine blocks that Songmark has got from Superior Engineering for demonstrating mechanics to the first-years. All of these are from wrecks, and by the state some of them were in it is no surprise their aircraft crashed: if the engine is half an inch thick in baked-on oil residues the rest of the plane is hardly likely to be healthy. Guess who got the job of cleaning them?

Actually, Molly has a few home recipes which do not feature in the books, and after a rapid raid on the supply sheds came up with a useful cocktail of petrol, acetone and carbon tetrachloride that definitely did the trick: I am sure her original Family business made worse mixes and sold it as whiskey. She found one appreciative audience if one can call it that: we had all the workshop doors wide open for the breeze to blow the fumes clear, and on hearing a loud thump behind us found our first-year Florence completely passed-out just from walking downwind of the sheds.

I fear poor Florence will have to stick to gliders at this rate, as all it takes is someone opening a tin of metal polish in the room and one might as well have poured a pint of gin down her. It is awfully ironic given that she and her family are staunch teetotallers. Molly is mightily impressed by her weakness, and asked me to look out for any Native herb that had a tenth of that effect on people: she could have sold a million doses a day during Prohibition she says, and it would be the only way of making that American "near beer" remotely saleable. What in the military they call a Force Multiplier.

Still, we had quite enough fresh air after lunch as we were farmed out to a familiar figure from last year, the local sculptor Mr. Tikitavi. Although mongeese are generally Indian like our chum Jasbir, the Spontoones came from all directions in Plantation days and his folk have been here two generations. He did ask after Jasbir as we headed out to Main Island, and though he must be ten years older than her is very interested in hearing that she may dance at the Coconut Grove, despite our Tutors' objections.

Well, of course Jasbir is exceedingly pretty and an excellent dancer, probably better than us. Anyone can watch her in a show, though I should think Spontoon's main theatre would start her as a backing dancer rather than the front row. I hardly liked to tell him that she is a Maharajah's daughter, and could not possibly take an interest in him; it is absolutely Not Done. Although she comes from a Native State, she has awful social commitments at home and in just over a year has to return to Utterly Pradesh without any hint of scandal chasing her tail.

Molly nudged me and whispered that Mongeese have quite a variety of fur patterns, and nobody feels too scandalised about what a dancer gets up to in her spare time – whether she is a mongoose girl who has dyed her fur or a half Siamese. This year is probably her last chance before returning to the searching gaze of her family, and she is not the only one. My ears blushed somewhat, and I quite took the point.

I was saved from further embarrassment by our arriving at the site of the new sculpture on the North-Eastern tip of the island, past Beresby where we hunted the land-crabs. This is the last

ridge of solid ground before it turns into the long, hook-tipped sand spit where we learn beach survival and foraging, and it has a wonderful view of open sea and skies.

Definitely it is an imposing spot for a sculpture! It is one thing to put a Tiki in a Casino Island park where tourists can marvel at it between trips to bars and souvenir stalls, but to see it on the skyline raised up as a thirty-foot landmark makes a far more powerful statement. Just as in Europe many mountains are crowned with crosses, this Tiki sculpture shows to the world Spontoon's vigorous cultural heritage, as it sits under the main air corridor for the central waters.

Like most of Mr. Tikitavi's sculptures this is based on traditional designs and represents a local deity called "Tonno'wai'hapa" who is a rain-god. There are pictures of her carrying a vast bowl of water which she tilts out over the land as he sees fit: this statue is half finished but its main feature is the twenty-foot tilted bowl pointing to the North-Eastern horizon where the sun rises on the longest day. The great bowl is really very symbolic of the local religions, anchored firmly in the earth as it endlessly stares out into the empty seas and skies.

Though some of the other Tikis we have seen have been carved from the living rock (an idea I understand rather better since starting to learn the local religion) the location and design of this one means he will have to use concrete. We were put to work on the shuttering, nailing it together as strong and watertight as a flying-boat hull, while other more skilled workers finished off the big bowl. It was explained that since most of the smaller versions of the statue are in the finest stone available, this one had to be of the finest concrete: indeed they were taking almost mathematical care to get the curve of the bowl exactly like that of the reference model, and hand-trowelling a very rich and fine-grained concrete mix for its surface.

Tatiana keeps saying that hard work never killed anyone. Possibly all those folk Joseph Starling sent to Siberia die of unexpected tropical diseases, in that case. But although we worked non-stop to six in the evening, it was good honest exercise in the fresh air and we felt all the better for it. Actually, our Passes to work on the project said we were to stay as long as required, and by the time we had finished it was too late to get back to Songmark for the evening meal. If it is Poi, doubtless Missy K will not let ours go to waste.

One thing they teach us that our Tutors would have to agree we have learned is how to take a problem and look for an opportunity inside. We retired to hand in the tools at a municipal depot in Main Village, and Mr. Tikitavi invited us to dine with his family. Quite a treat! Apart from the Hoele'toemis we have not seen the insides of many homes, and only a couple on Main Island. His is not Indian décor as I would have thought, but a rather milder version of Polynesian, and absolutely packed with very modern radio and sound equipment. Madelene X would need a towel round her muzzle to stop herself drooling on the circuits.

He explained that he does a lot of work with Radio LONO and the film studios, presumably soundproofing their recording booths. Indeed, there were many photos of the wall of him with famous island bands. But one picture I saw looked rather odd, of him with a half dozen bat folk all wearing headphones. One would hardly have thought they needed them.

I think he must have spotted me looking at that one in particular, as with a rather forced laugh he explained it had been an idea of his inspired by some problems a bat school friend was having. Modern cities are noisy places and bats' ears are exquisitely sensitive; the headphones had been his idea of an equivalent to dark glasses to stop their senses being "dazzled". If so, what were the wires from the headphones plugged into? Very odd.

Still, he served us up a rather fine meal of local fish with tapioca "greens", which is Molly's favourite dish although it has been voted unpopular as poi by the more carnivorous of us at Songmark. That is an interesting one: apart from Molly, Adele, Maria and Irma, most of our year are carnivores. We have no bats though, as I suppose they find the noise and air blast of an open cockpit very troubling to the ears. Indeed, thinking about it I have only seen them here in the deep woods, far from noisy aircraft engines and the like.

We met his family, which are two sisters and a younger brother who has just returned from University at Sealth City where he studied acoustics. As he pointed out, with all the filming done on these islands someone will want a proper sound stage before long. These islands really do have a jolly good long-term plan; it is one thing to hire out inexpensive local labourers to carry sets and the like, but they want their share of the skilled and well-paid parts of the film industry as well. Molly says the Hollywood film unions are screaming blue murder about it, but the local film co-operatives think rather differently and sponsor their best and brightest to take the best available courses even if they have to cross the Pacific to get them.

Back to Songmark just before curfew, with only enough time to wash the lime and cement dust out of our fur before bed. Mr. Tikitavi's workers all are obvious Spontoonie natives who have oiled fur and one can see why.

Friday June 5th, 1936

Two more days of hard labour mixed in with our regular flying classes have definitely brought our fitness back up to Easter levels; if our Tutors really are punishing us it is hardly working, as we are relishing the fresh air outside the classrooms.

A rather strange thing today: after her journalism class Maria brought in a report of a shipwreck off Tillamook, which is nothing so very special. The odd thing was that although fragments of lifeboats and other ship's rescue gear had been washed ashore, there was no identifying marks on any of it – except for some empty ammunition boxes with German markings. That is what the report says at least, as although that was also the official language of Austro-Hungary, they have no registered merchant ships any more, and certainly no trade this far East.

I would be feeling awful about it if that is the freighter I think it is – except that Mr. Sapohatan mentioned this in advance, and I very much doubt any of the crew went down with their ship. If things are as I suspect, a lot of unwanted evidence did go down with that ship but none of its cargo. Exactly where the cargo ended up, and what folk plan to do with a ship full of battleship shells that are so old that they would probably detonate in the gun when fired, is something I might find rather dangerous to know. Molly has been looking up old editions of Jane's All The World's Navies, and has been happily whispering to herself something about the never-completed Austro-Hungarian advanced "Viribus Unitis" class of battleship with 13.8 inch Skoda armament, a very non-standard calibre – exactly the sort of thing that might end up having shells forgotten about since 1918 in a Trieste warehouse.

Still, we are looking forward to a relaxing weekend without too much first-year herding and then heading out on another trip on Monday. Exactly where we are going is a surprise; our Tutors just love to keep us guessing. Or as they say, we have learned enough theory already of the basics, and just need real practice to hammer it in.

Our last lesson of the week was an interesting one over on Casino Island, at the offices of the Nimitz Union Mining Company. They have a small "museum" of specimens that we looked at initially with little interest – until folk pointed out some of the greatest fortunes have been made in prospecting. Everyone recognises gold, but around the world far more people have got rich on tin and copper, which one could pass by unless trained to spot them. There is definitely gold in New Guinea and many of the surrounding islands are barely explored still; at least we know what rocks to look for when approaching a potentially rich metal vein.

Some of it is a long way from the old image of a grizzled miner with pickaxe and sifting pan, as we were showed the sort of equipment the Tanoaho family use to detect radium ores, a gold-leaf electroscope that loses its charge and the flimsy leaves droop when radio-activity is in the area. I should think that cellar of theirs can be detected clear across the street. Still, there are always advertisements in the newspapers for radium-enhanced health bracelets, corsets and suchlike, so no doubt it is good for one. Madelene X says there are constant scandals in France at all the hydrotherapy spas getting caught cheating by adding pitchblende ore to increase the radio-active effect of their waters before it is sent for public analysis.

I did rather well in the metal ore prospecting tests by spotting intrusive rocks of the right kind, which was gneiss. Poor Adele scored bottom marks and picked up quite the wrong sort, a worthless lump of fused volcanic ash. Tuff.

Saturday June 6th, 1936

Today was that rare thing recently, a perfectly normal Saturday. It felt very good to "recalibrate the instruments" as folk say, with a morning at our dance school and our old rivals of the S.I.T.H.S. now behaving themselves as we keep each other's competitive edges sharp. Luncheon was as fine as ever at the Missing Coconut – and then we took a stroll back past the fuming enmities and fuming industrial plants of the two bio-reactors.

We did not meet any of the owners, but saw one of the local engineers working on Professor Kurt's site: it seems Molly is not the only one around here interested in new products. The usual end result of Professor Kurt's process is rather like peat, and not unpleasant to the scent – but it is very bulky and the gardens take it by the cart and barrow load, which makes it rather unprofitable to carry far. He has a new project to continually re-ferment and concentrate it down to what folk are calling "vege-guano" which might be a considerable export money-spinner. Considering that in Grandfather's time we found it worthwhile to import the original seabird product to England all the way from the Pacific, it has definite potential.

Actually, the engineer whispered that the Althing was getting itchy about having a large installation full of hot, explosive ether vapour so near the expensive tourists and hotels, and using that site as a compost refinery would remove the risk to Main Island where there are more open spaces and the plantations are handy for truly large-scale production using their crop wastes. It is rather unfair: unlike his rival he gets his main site banished from Casino Island despite the fact it has not exploded even once. Doctor Maranowski's methane plant is staying, despite its predecessor having redecorated half the city of Ulm one hot day in truly Biblical style. I recall reading of the rain of frogs in Scripture classes, but even that must have been less unpleasant than being on the downwind side of Ulm that day. The plague of flies which followed surely was another epic visitation.

A very quiet afternoon, with the only odd thing being the number of police arriving on the water taxis and heading into Casino Island. When we returned to Songmark we found the reason: despite all the security features and awful warnings about the curse, someone this morning stole the famous Fire Crystal ruby from the Museum of Anthropomorphology! I remember Molly telling Beryl how totally impossible such a gem would be to dispose of, but someone seems to have decided acquiring it is the first priority. As to disposing of the loot, probably they expect to cross that fence when they come to it.

Well, I know where Molly was all day, and Beryl came along to watch the dance lessons. So if the Police do the usual thing and seek out the usual suspects, I can give an honest alibi to two of them. Indeed, our Tutors did check with everyone returning as to where we had been today. Considering the lower two years alone have Molly, Beryl and Shin on the strength and that Songmark's very first class did produce a complete dorm of very successful Pirates; one can hardly blame folk for asking. Molly says it could be worse, in some countries the police work entirely on commission – as the monks used to say, “confession is good for the soul.”

Beryl was glibly explaining to some of the other first-years that Maria was quite right to be proud of her local cuisine: she then went into utterly plausible accounts of the lives of Marcus Borlotti and Claudio Canellini, two ancient Roman inventors without whom (she claimed) there would be no such thing as beans. She is really a fine story-teller, although she can distinguish fact from fiction perfectly well. The facts are whatever will profit her, and the fiction is “for export only.”

Sunday June 7th, 1936

Dear Diary – life has a way of sneaking in unpleasant surprises from unexpected directions. Everything started off so well, with us crossing to South Island on a summer sea so smooth that Helen quite forgot to be sick. Saffina was with us and we met up at the Hoele'toemi family longhouse for our religious instructions.

The morning was very pleasant and we certainly learned a lot – although there were some puzzling things, such as the Tiki statues on Main Island not really fitting their religious standard descriptions – although Saimmi explained that permission had been sought and granted to show them the way they had to be built. Very odd. Some of it was rather glaring, like seeing a statue of Buddha in a top hat.

While Helen and Saffina finished cleaning one of the shrines, I took Saimmi aside under a tree and confessed to exactly what happened last week, with the fight on the Parsifal and the equally disturbing events afterwards, though I have no complaint at all to make against Lars. In fact he did very little, both Molly and I being very ... unladylike with him. The Missionaries would doubtless complain. I had hoped for some guidance – and indeed I received it, and her personal forgiveness.

Saimmi is of course a priestess as well as Jerry's sister and she has strict laws to enforce which include approving of who can be Tailfast. Her personal forgiveness is just that, but she seemed rather disturbed by some parts of my account, not including our sinking two boatloads of people with no survivors. It was rather strange. She asked if I trusted her completely – to which I replied that I jolly well ought to, she being not only my religious instructor here but hopefully my sister-in-law! She put her paw to my forehead and asked me to make my mind as empty as I could – “see deepest in still waters” as she put it.

I could have sworn I just blinked for a second, but next thing I knew the sun had moved round to the far side of the branch and Helen had appeared with Saffina. Saimmi was looking a little grim, and said she had to tell me I could not be Tailfast to Jerry this coming season.

!

Monday June 8th, 1936

I am feeling decidedly in the dumps despite the fine weather, my tail drooping after yesterday's news. I spent yesterday afternoon with Jirry, and had to tell him about Saimmi's veto. She is just as keen as ever to welcome me to the family someday – but her duty is to ensure the sacred institutions are kept that way, and if she thinks I do not pass “quality control” right now, so be it.

Her reason was rather odd – she says she had no reason before now to look as closely as she did, but says there is a cloud over me. I feel perfectly fine, or at least I did until she made her decision yesterday. Had I simply gone over to Orpington again and competed in another of those distinctive folklore festivals, something like that would not be a problem at all, even the night before a Tailfasting ceremony. She says there is no objection to my heading over to the Reverend Bingham's church with Jirry any time we wish to marry – but as to being witnessed before the rows of Tikis on Sacred Island, in all conscience she cannot approve right now. Although for most locals they can be officially joined there without any fuss, now I know the locket has very substantial symbolic power that I definitely did not understand when I received mine. Had it been lost at sea or destroyed in an accident, that would not be a problem either – but Saimmi seemed utterly horrified at the trivial detail of my losing mine at Lars' party when it still had some days of useful life.

Oh dear. Molly is equally furious, pointing out we had surely done enough for these islands last week to be given a little credit for it. Alas, it does not really work like that.

It hardly helped matters to be sent escorting the first-years to Casino Island this afternoon, and pass the local Guide's association being eagerly looked over by the crowd from a newly arrived tour boat as they pick who they wish to show them the sights tomorrow. Of course this is almost entirely respectable and far more than nine times out of ten the “school ma'ms” and stenographers will return to the ship having only seen exotic scenery and explored the showier parts of the island with a qualified and knowledgeable guide. But as Jirry says, some of them are subtle and persistent – very few of the Guides wear Tailfast locket.

We met that rare equine gentleman returning with half a dozen respectable lady tourists from South Island, and it is a good thing Beryl was not with us. She has cheerfully “informed” us of the shocking scandal of some unscrupulous stallions dyeing their muzzles and trimming their tail-fur to a mule-like tuft to take unfair advantage. She would probably have repeated the story just in earshot of the contented group to see if any of them suddenly looked panic-stricken.

There is no news on that daring theft of the Fire Crystal, though everyone says it is just a matter of time. We have seen that famous Inspector Stagg here interviewing Red Dorm (who do NOT have an alibi, and in fact sneaked out at the right time). I thought I had seen Liberty Morgenstern in a rage before, but the reaction to her sight of the Inspector was rather like Maria meeting Joseph Starling with no weapons handy. I suppose given that she is a “daughter of the Revolution” and he is a “condemned Enemy of the People and fugitive from Proletarian Justice” as she puts it, they are not short of things to talk about.

(Written later)

Our Tutors definitely got their money's worth out of us today, sending us on escort duties in the morning and then out on a trip after lunch! We managed to stop at a fish stall on the way back to Eastern Island and had a rather excellent lunch; there is no indication where we were being sent, but it rarely involves fine food.

Actually, Helen rather regretted it as two hours later we were in lifeboats tethered to a buoy just off the Kanim Islands, on an open water survival exercise! Although one hears stories of folk in shipwrecks having to eat each other to survive, Helen is an excellent companion in a lifeboat – one thing is certain, in a small boat on the open waters she has absolutely no appetite. Having her constantly looking over the side of the boat has some advantages, as she can be relied on to spot any shoals of fish coming within range of our emergency fishing nets.

Friday June 12th, 1936

Well, one can hardly say any part of a Songmark career is dull. It might not sound particularly exciting to spend four days and nights in an open boat, but we had to keep alert and do what we could to fish and conserve water. I know Li Han thinks of fish eyes as a gourmet treat, but I will definitely leave her all my ration whenever I am not in a lifeboat and desperate for water. There is no cooking equipment in a lifeboat, so anything we caught was eaten cold and raw – as a cuisine the Japanese are welcome to it. Molly experimented with cutting it very thin and using the big fire-lighting magnifying glass from the emergency kit to at least scorch it; decidedly one of her more half-baked ideas.

Actually, we were hardly alone on the boundless ocean but moored in a lagoon off one of the Kanim Islands and less than a hundred yards from shore: Miss Blande and a canine gentleman friend had a camp on shore and rowed out every morning to check on our health. A hundred yards downwind in the cool of an evening is not so far when one is hungry: they had roast fish cooked on driftwood every evening and the scent was maddening when all we had apart from our catches was tinned water and a few “lifeboat ration” biscuit packs that are like hard-tack case hardened. The wind carries sound as well and possibly more than folk expected: tents are not at all soundproof and one could definitely tell that our dear Tutor was having a very sociable time of it. Her friend is one of the Scandinavian type Spontoones by his accent, and by species and other things is certainly a Great Dane.

Memo to myself: be very careful in a tent where one puts the lantern, or one may be the unwitting performer in a jolly educational shadow-play. As Beryl said admiringly before Missy K held her head underwater awhile, the things one sees when one leaves the camera at home.

All in all it was a very useful experience, and nobody had to eat any of their shipmates, not even Beryl. After that we had been hoping for a slap-up meal with possibly chicken, but two of the cooks were away and we simply got more of the usual. Having fed us on emergency rations and water for five days one might think our Tutors had saved up enough of the food budget to splash out a little, and there is no shortage of chickens around here – on Orpington it looked as if every second longhouse had signs saying “*Fresh eggs best price! Baby chicks going cheep!*”

There is hunger and hunger, as I discovered – this went down like fuel into an empty tank and although I finished my plate of one-finger poi, I remember how much better it tasted back in Easter when I was unknowingly eating for two. My ears still droop sometimes thinking about that – but at least the next time the island speciality begins to taste wonderful, I will know what to expect.

On our return we found that things had definitely been moving on without us; the Fire Crystal has been recovered, the Red Dorm found innocent (there must be some things they are innocent of) and a small fire near the Old China docks promptly extinguished without unduly alarming the tourists. The legends about that gem being “too hot to handle” seem to be demonstrably true – at least it is an awful coincidence that everyone who steals it pays dearly. One imagines any local insurance policies have special clauses excluding “acts of God” and specifically an enraged Fire-God. That is the sixth time the gem has been stolen and recovered in about the same circumstances, which may be pushing coincidence rather far.

Having been cleared of all charges the first-years are now playing that very strenuous variant of hide and seek that we started last year, chasing each other around the island. Maria had the treat of seeing Liberty’s tail droop when reminded that their carefree first-year days are numbered, and what they are really practicing is hunting down first-years for next term.

Despite Spontoon being so far from anywhere we do get families with prospective new students dropping through every now and then to take a personal look at the place. But then, with the fees Songmark has to charge, one has to be exceedingly sure. For anyone contemplating investing in sending a daughter for three years here, a reconnaissance holiday in the Nimitz Sea is a comparatively small extra expense and a worthwhile trip in its own right.

Jasbir’s sister Meera has her name down for September: she is already head of the Roedean school rocket fanatics, the Congreve Club. The Austrians have tested a “rocket mail” postal service from one alpine valley to the next, and Jasbir notes with pride her sister has the ambition to launch the first cross-channel postage system to France as soon as she can run an engine at over two hundred pounds of thrust for a minute without the usual catastrophic explosion. If she keeps up her interests here, I am sure the Spontoones will appreciate eight foot of inter-island post box touching down in their vegetable patch at four hundred miles an hour – I don’t think!

We do get some surprising applicants, not all of whom will get in. I would have thought it was fairly fundamental, Songmark being an Aeronautical Boarding School for Young Ladies. But we were on gate-guard duty this evening when a very aristocratic poodle lady and her son turned up and asked to speak to our Tutors. Of course while she went in he had to stay outside the gate: a very handsome and well-spoken canine with wonderful curled head-fur down to his shoulders. He gave his name as Marcel DuChamp, and we chatted for half an hour before his mother stormed out and swept him up. He is absolutely first-class as an aviator, and has even unofficially raced some of the Schneider Trophy test aircraft – quite a “catch” for any flying academy, I would have thought. What I would never have guessed, was which one his family wanted to enrol him in – ours!

I heard the rest of the story from Beryl, who has ears that can spot a farthing hitting the carpet in the next room. According to her she hardly needed to listen hard as Madame DuChamp got quite voluble and it needed little to reconstruct Miss Devinski’s side of the conversation. Marcel has most impressive classroom qualifications, a flight logbook like a telephone directory and is an

award-winning athlete. The rather obvious aspect where he does not qualify, his mother rather airily waved aside, explaining that Songmark's pupils were completely safe with him and he needed an equivalent to the military Academy Aeronautique that was less prejudiced about certain things.

Oh my. Just when we had hopes our Tutors might be thinking of making the place co-educational. Such a handsome fur, too. It seems an awful waste – except that one could say the same about Prudence and her dorm, who assure me nothing whatever goes to waste. I think I will continue to take their word for it.

Saturday June 13th, 1936

Quite a day for letters! I received one from Father, who does seem to be keeping very busy – the War Department have posted him to British Somaliland, where he is in charge of anti-tank defences in case the Ethiopians suddenly build armoured formations and decide to come over the border. Considering what Maria's Uncle seems determined to do to their side of the frontier, ours probably looks more attractive right now and smells less of phosgene. No doubt he will be over there until the local militia and our garrison are happy they can contain as many armoured divisions as Ethiopia is likely to throw at us.

Actually, I would be in rather a quandary if Father DID invite me home for the holidays, even supposing my name was cleared with Whitehall and I could go. The idea of spending a leisurely two months looking up old school chums and attending vicarage tea-parties is starting to seem rather ... washed-out. As an alternative to sharing a long-house with Jirry all summer and being called out for adventure when Mr. Sapohatan decides he needs us, it hardly compares.

Molly received a letter from Lars, which rather oddly has Spontoons stamps although Krupmark reputedly has no postal service. Of course, when one thinks about it he would give the letter to one of his employees heading to Spontoons to post it the final mile or two to our door. She insisted I read it – though it might have been personal, she is determined to share that as well with me.

Molly says one has to read between the lines; according to her interpretation Lars has been very busy these last two weeks on Krupmark re-establishing himself. I suppose that is hardly the sort of place where one can simply vanish to Europe for six months having told the staff to get on with it – either the competition would have stepped on them or the staff responsible might have got ambitious ideas and not be pleased to see the rightful owner return. Anyway, he says his labour problem has been "settled decisively" though Molly puts a rather bloody interpretation on that.

Honestly, I don't know where she gets her ideas from. Just because some deer in Biblical times (or in uncivilised parts of the world like Utah where it still happens) might have shared their stag, is hardly a reason for me to want to on any sort of formal basis. I am a feline after all, and it is not our sort of thing - except for lions, who perversely enough take a pride in it. * But then, as I noticed Molly is far more "sophisticated" as she calls it, more so than I really want to try. Lars was a perfect gentleman to both of us in different ways and my neck-fur was definitely tingling afterwards; he knows just how to please me there although it is not something deer do by instinct.

Just to make matters worse, Beryl dropped by when I was reading and cheerfully announced that her friend Piet van Hoogstraaten had arrived with his rowing team in Berlin and was going to be there until the end of July, leaving her at a loose end. Had they been in those Saturday matinee cartoons one sees before the main feature, one would have seen a line of daggers drawn from Molly's eyes as Beryl innocently asked how Lars is doing these days.

Anyway, we all made it to Casino Island for our dance classes without any severe outbreaks of violence – though Beryl was being very coy when Maria asked about what she was being interviewed about by that Inspector Stagg. Some people's idea of an adventuring career would be to fly around the world solving mysteries: Beryl has often said her preference if there was enough profit in it would be to go about leaving mysteries scattered around like land-mines. I fear that she was really better suited to Saint T's than Songmark: even as late as last term Miss Nordlingen had to explain patiently that although it was not technically poisoning, slipping people industrial strength laxatives as a joke was usually not considered a suitable prank for a young lady.

To be honest, Liberty Morgenstern had been annoying that day, for a change loudly agreeing with Tatiana (and Joseph Starling) that every nation needed a violent purge to eliminate its counter-progressive elements. Beryl's idea of a violent purge was at least survivable.

Although she is hardly into religion, our annoying mouse has mentioned having heard of a very suitable "patron" from the Scandinavian furs on Main Island, some disreputable deity called Loki whose congregation (by her account) have no established church as they would compete to be first to steal the lead off their own roof. One assumes her Temple of Continual Reward is thatched

and heavily insured against fire with any company gullible enough to issue the policy. It is one of the few buildings on Casino Island I have not actually seen except from the air, as it is in its own compound with high walls that no doubt prevent the neighbours from witnessing things best unseen.

A very fine Interpretive Hula lesson followed, where we and Jasbir's dorm learned the "Dance of the sunburned Tourist" which I recognise as having been performed last weekend in front of a whole tour-boat crowd. It is a jolly good thing there is no "hula dictionary" or folk who arrived in a tour bus would definitely go off in a huff!

Jasbir introduced me to a very well-groomed falcon gentleman, who is connected with the Coconut Shell and had dropped in to see her dance. This summer she is staying over on Spontoon, and I doubt there is much our Tutors can do to dissuade her from taking to the stage out of term time. Indeed, we have only three weeks left to go: terms at Songmark do seem to be rather flexible things and hardly match up with last year's dates.

Molly offered to take care of any journalists threatening to put Jasbir in the limelight of publicity under her own name: although the only journalist we know by name could probably be negotiated with rather than "taken care of", we certainly ought to help give Jasbir her chance this summer. It will be back to being a respectable Maharani for her next year, and by her description her ceremonial costume is a lot less comfortable than a grass skirt.

We returned via the tailor, where I picked up my repaired green raw silk "adventuring" suit, which has seen a lot of wear in the past year. I have needed to let it out twice at the shoulders since then; happily they are familiar with Songmark students and hid plenty of growing room in the seams when they first made it. I must say, it is hard to credit the quiet, industrious mice that run the place are the same species as Beryl. Father has a saying, "tell me what longitude a fellow's from and I'll tell you how much latitude to allow him" – rather embarrassingly, in this case the Orientals definitely win the contest.

* Editor's note: scribbled in plain text in the margin is the following jingle, presumably from a music-hall song: *"When choosing wives, Sheikh Ali Kat prefers them big and whopping / His favourite saying; 'Buy in Bulk – it saves last-minute shopping!"*

Sunday June 14th, 1936

Quite a day for Churches in one way and another; Maria was off to hers to hear how they will protest against being turfed off South Island after nearly half a century. There is much talk of sending special envoys from the Vatican – but I hardly see much hope of success, they would only be preaching to the converted. Maria points out the Church is not in the habit of losing in the long-term, as witness its return with Italy's reconquest of Cyrenacia in North Africa after twelve hundred years. But the Althing has its policy, and if it will not listen to the Spontoonie Catholic congregation it will hardly care a cawry about any foreign church-fur!

Interestingly, Brigit Mulvaney fanatically attends the same South Island church; one assumes their priest puts in overtime when she needs confession. She was telling us that she is a good girl despite what they thought at the "Magdalene", which I discover is a rather more severe institution than I had thought and is not unlike being imprisoned by the Inquisition; there is no appeal from any other authority in the land. Had she fallen into their paws, she might have been imprisoned in the laundry till her red fur turned grey, "for the sake of her soul."

By arrangement, we did not meet up on South Island but on the Southern tip of Main Island in a plantation far from any village. We had not been within a mile of there since the day we swam from South Island, a trip nobody wants to repeat. I did not recognise the crops; a small shrub that Saimmi told are Illipe Nut trees that yield "Borneo Tallow" from their nuts, an obscure but profitable fat that goes into tropical confectionary. Definitely there is more to this island than non-existent coconuts.

Helen and Saffina were there, and indeed we had an unexpected encounter in the fields. There is a shrine on the plantation, a small and plain Tiki that had an inscription in Spontoonie; but its real explanation was given by the one who put it there.

I had only met Saimmi's superior once before, an ancient black pantheress called Huakava, who was one of the first born on these islands in Plantation days. Strictly speaking they were not "colonial" days as the plantations were run by commercial companies that happened to be British, rather than anything planned and nurtured by our Government. She can remember back to the middle of the last century, but this shrine is rather newer than that.

There may be several reasons why nobody writes any books on the Gunboat Wars: if they were accurate they would not make comfortable reading (Helen says Hollywood would go into fits trying to make them into acceptable box-office hits.) The islands were very different in 1912; it was more like Mildendo is today, with no “attractions” and the buildings cheap and practical: less carving and more corrugated iron. What with the flimsy buildings and the risk of typhoons, all the plantation villages had tornado shelters as indeed they still do, although nowadays they are really rather well-built ones with thick reinforced concrete and air filters “to keep the dust out”.

The difficulty of mapping what happened in those weeks was there was no general plan: with the varied naval forces in the area, nobody ever took out a map of the island and decided on a clear policy. It was more a case of the available troops and gunboats “quashing rebel opposition” wherever it could be found, a difficult matter as the local militia mostly vanished into the jungles rather than obligingly forming up in regiments as the manual prescribed.

Well, unfortunate things do happen in wars that neither side wanted. The raiding forces had cruisers with four-mile range shellfire, but no clear targets. This plantation village had just completed its new tornado shelter the month before the war, and sensibly sent all its children and civilians into it while the militia vanished off the map and harassed raiding parties.

The trouble is, from anyone’s point of view a recently completed log reinforced structure buried deep in the earth looks rather like a command post. Not having put any troops on the ground that came back to report, the cruiser could not know otherwise and responded to the deteriorating situation by practically wiping this square off the map. I had noted the ground under the bushes was hummocky, and I can understand why nobody liked to disturb this acre with their ploughs. Illipe trees take fifteen or twenty years to start yielding, so even if there had been a second invasion during the Great War, this site would have been left undisturbed.

We spent an hour at that shrine, and then discovered why Huakava wanted to see us. Though one assumes Saimmi is privy to almost everything, her senior had personally seen some things she wanted us to know about. Saimmi had told us of the true reason why these islands had to be evacuated at about the same time Columbus was sailing: the same reason why even Pirates never felt comfortable here two centuries later and why the sacred coconut palms will not grow even now.

It seems that although the Spontoon group had to be abandoned, the reason why lived on as stories passed on by the Natives of No Island, and on neighbouring settlements such as Orpington where the survivors had fled to. When the plantation owners decided to re-settle, the local priests knew there was no way of dissuading them – but they felt a responsibility to the furs who would be arriving unaware. By Huakava’s accounts, the life expectancy of local priestesses was rather short when she was a kitten, but as the years went on their work began to show some good effect. Of course, the plantation owners had some trouble replacing workers who perished apparently of unknown tropical diseases – the Euro doctors being quite baffled, as indeed they still would be.

There are Taboos and Taboos, definitely. That valley that cost us so dear on Albert Island certainly had a legend to go with why it was a place to avoid, though probably an anthropologist would claim the legend grew up after it became a swamp as a warning sign. In the case of Spontoon, the ritual that went so horribly wrong left certain ... fragments behind, whose exact nature Huakava was rather evasive on. They must not be destroyed, as that would release their power over a wider area, rather like tampering with a mustard gas shell – and one of the tasks the first returning priestesses faced was moving some of them off Spontoon. Due to their nature, dropping them in the deep ocean would not be appreciated by the Natives of No Island. One fragment is kept under fresh water in Sacred Lake, and two others were sent to the furthest islands then having priestesses who knew what to do with them – Cranium Island and Krupmark.

Unfortunately neither island now has a practicing Native community – Krupmark we know about, and we have heard many conflicting tales of Cranium Island. It is certainly home to various scientists of Ill Repute, many of whom are said to conduct the boldest and most innovative medical experiments around. Possibly I might meet some of my old hockey rivals from home there; St. Ursula’s Secure Boarding School for the Gifted Insane were always coming up with such fascinating tactics (though most of those girls who were too violent and unstable for the military went into politics or the Church). Without the expertise of the local traditions and rituals to contain them, the influence of the fragments spread – which may explain why neither island is exactly a tourist attraction despite great natural beauty, and why certain people are attracted to them without exactly knowing why.

What made this more than another lesson in local folklore, was Huakava’s startling revelation that the time is coming when the various fragments can be dealt with – they are rather

like shrapnel in the spirit of the Land, but it may heal if they can be found and removed. This Summer they want to make the attempt on the Cranium Island item – to locate and neutralise it. It will be a difficult and dangerous thing to do, and anyone involved will have to be aware of the risks they run, not just the regular perils of exploration but to their very spirits. There are few people really qualified for the job – but she asked us if we were interested. Exactly where the items were is a lost secret, as it was known to the local priestesses who have unfortunately not survived.

Well, in our first year the Tanoahos went out there to look for radium with the Songmark second and third-years, and they all got back without anyone experimenting on them that I could notice. We have spent so many days looking at the local maps on our navigation exercises that the Nimitz Sea chart is almost tattooed on the insides of our eyelids – and Cranium Island is the biggest one we have not yet been to.

Of course, we volunteered. After all this time, helping to right such a wrong is a jolly fine thing to do, and Helen is always glad to lay in stocks of credit with the Authorities here. Our Tutors should be pleased as well: with any luck they might forgive Molly and me our previous adventures with Lars and the Moro Pirates.

If we were less principled, we might make Beryl briefly happy by buying shares in that fraudulent “Nimitz Copra Company” of hers. She has a postal swindle going where investors put up (say) ten percent of the necessary cash into coconut plantations and get ten percent of the value of every crop. Of course, the crops never grow here and the investors never see a penny of their money back; naturally she has already sold hundreds of ten percent shares. It is a risk that anyone would know they were taking, growing farm crops that can be eaten by insects, diseases or land-crabs (as so many of them were in Plantation days, which is why the Plantations ended up losing money.) Actually growing coconuts on Spontoon would be rather an embarrassment to her, as the shareholders might do a quick head count and “get wise to it” as Helen says. Being in the same building, we would have a chance to get our claims in first before the howling mob arrived.

Really, one hardly needs the Taboo fragments of a failed five-hundred year old ritual to be hazardous to the spirit. Just being in the same class as some of these folk leaves one’s paws dirty!

Molly has had an inventive day, thinking about how she can make herself some legitimate money this summer. The success of her “fish log” has fired her to think of more on those lines – preferably something she can make here from local materials. I sometimes forget just how much work she put into being the prospective heiress to her Father’s “PAMS” factory: really she knows an awful lot about food by now, and eagerly reads publications such as “Meatpacker’s Monthly – Summer issue colour special” when she finds a copy. Her current scheme is to get folk to buy their cubs more chocolate by making it more nutritious; one hears of various military forces mixing all sorts of stimulants and such with it for airmen and special troops, but she wants to make it healthier and handed out in schools as they do with milk. Her first recipe involves blending in various percentages of brewer’s yeast for vitamins * with seaweed gel for iodine and bone flour, for minerals for growing cubs.

I saw Helen looking quite ill at the idea, and can quite understand why. If Molly had been with us this afternoon and known what those Illipe trees were planted on, she would not be so keen on how to give the local confectionary its minerals.

- (Editor’s note: correct mid-1930’s spelling!)

Tuesday June 16th, 1936

Out escorting the first-years to Moon Island for their self-defence courses and making sure nobody sneaks a rifle-grenade into their pocket. We had our own class just afterwards, where I put my Webley-Fosbury through its paces, and our Tutors let Molly and myself use the “hunting ammunition” I purchased last Summer on Krupmark. Definitely it must be for bigger game, as one hit on smaller ones would leave one trying to find where all the pieces landed!

I mentioned to Helen how many of the first-years are from rather odd places – there is Greta from the Danish West Indies, and Dolores McCrae from Scottish Darien (which oddly survived as a Jacobite colony though the average life expectancy in that climate was not much longer than the voyage time to get there.) Helen has the idea that although they may learn a lot about these islands, the Spontoones learn more from them. Of course, some of them are from “extreme” places, as Red Dorm proves. If they just recruited from the richest and most populous countries, Songmark’s nationality list would resemble a European map and would be a very different place. The current first-year has two Baltic girls (Tove from Finland and Reet from Estonia) and not a single British one if Brigit insists on disqualifying herself.

Helen rather wrinkled her snout as Red Dorm reappeared from the armoury for us to pat them down for contraband. Mr. Sapohatan can afford to keep us sweet by not asking us to work against our own countries, she pointed out quietly – in my case Brigit Mulvaney would do the job for free, and in hers Liberty would hand out any American secrets to their opponents with a smile.

One hardly likes to think of some of our first-years getting “into the act” as Helen puts it. Saffina is the only one I would trust with my tail, but then she is from the best Royal Family in her part of Africa. In fact, I am definitely pleased she is coming with us to Cranium Island later on – she is as big as a full lioness for starters, and her parents made sure their children are definitely well supplied with hybrid vigour.

A fine day for flying in the afternoon, and indeed we had a trip to remember. Our Tiger Moths have a service ceiling of fourteen thousand feet, and today we were given the task of getting there. On again with the wool-lined leather flying suits we put away in February – and a very hot stagger out to the runway; our fur will reek of mothballs for days.

I must say, the first part was thrilling with our formation climbing up in a loose spiral above Main Island, seeing the fields grow smaller and the ships shrink to dots beneath us. We were soon very glad of our Sidcot suits, as two miles high the air is definitely chilly in the slipstream even in June. After that, things became rather difficult – the aircraft began to misbehave, as even at full throttle there was not quite enough air under the wings to carry us comfortably. It was most alarming to feel our sturdy Moths developing unsuspected vices; rather like watching an old friend getting drunk and violent.

Beryl was the first of us to get into difficulties; she pulled a turn a little too tight at fourteen thousand, dropped a wing and went into a spin – I counted twenty full turns before she pulled out of it three thousand feet below and headed back down as we were told to do. Madelene X was next, pulling a rather nasty whip-stall and dropping straight down.

At “maximum angels” as Helen picturesquely calls it, things get decidedly tense. Another fifty knots would make all the difference in the world, but until someone puts a supercharger on a Moth, this part of the flight envelope feels like edging along an ever-thinner branch – one mistake, and down you go. Helen, Maria and Carmen all held the top altitude, as I did myself – literally balanced in the air like a tight-rope walker, with just the disturbance of sticking one’s paw into the slipstream being enough to topple the balance. In fact I did that myself, feeling the Moth trying to spin but managing to coax it into a tight spiral dive, an exhilarating ride with the wind singing past my ears and the airspeed indicator was passing a hundred and fifty!

We probably get in twenty hours of flight time a week, weather permitting, and today was something of a finale – the highest and fastest our faithful Moths are going to carry us. As our Tutors keep impressing on us, one never stops learning, even with years in the same aircraft – but I think we will be learning faster now on other mounts.

Actually, it was scorching hot on the runway as I handed over to Belle after the usual five minute check. By the time she had signed for it and refuelled, I was absolutely melting away inside the Sidcot suit. Helen and Maria were in just as bad a state (Carmen is of course Mixtecan and accustomed to the heat) and as soon as we filled our log books we took the chance to head straight over to Song Sodas.

Although we have our share of adventures, things definitely do go on behind our tails. There were a dozen folk in there including Jasbir’s dorm – who seemed rather hushed and shocked. It takes a good deal to shock Irma Bundt; if one told her the Great War was re-starting she would just quietly head out to the shops and corner the market in strategic bully beef and Maconochie.

Lars was here! To be precise, he was outside but did not come in. Miss Devinski was here as well, and faced him on the doorstep. They were both outwardly polite, but she was absolutely icy. He assured her he never enters anywhere unless asked in – but he had never been to Song Sodas before.

Our Tutor’s reply was that he never would – and turning to Jasbir’s dorm and the hired help serving, she snapped that any of them who asked him in would be fired or expelled respectively, without appeal. She charged Jasbir to make it very clear to the rest of us.

Lars bowed politely, and just as politely invited her to take him to court any day she named – with a jury of star-nosed moles to decide if he had done anything to anyone unwillingly on Spontoon; the loser to leave the islands forever. It was quite a scene to hear Jasbir describe it (and her family have professional story-tellers at Court, which she has learned much from.) If looks could kill, the ricochets would have left few survivors in the place.

Well! Helen nodded significantly, adding that she is not surprised at all. She reminded me of my original opinion of him – and how very strangely it changed. Sometimes I wish I had not posted my first years of diaries back to Barsetshire for safe-keeping, as I have nothing written down here

as to what did go on. Helen says it might make quite a difference; apparently at one stage I was the only witness against him when Molly and those other folk were kidnapped in the Papeete Influenza outbreak.

Anyway, a round of rum and vanilla fudge sodas cooled everyone's nerves as well as snouts, and we left Jasbir drafting a notice for the second-year dorm. I must definitely tell Molly – who is no respecter of Authority, but quite sensible enough these days not to risk her Songmark place. After all, she has nowhere else to go.

Thursday 18th June, 1936

An interesting day, with us escorting first-years to Casino Island for classes at one of the “Euro” schools. We scarcely know any of the non-natives apart from Nuala and her mother the Countess, but there are hundreds of folk born Spontoonies who never put on a grass skirt in their lives. There are Chinese, European “Euros” (even the Chinese are called euros by Spontoon usage) and quite a few others. Madelene X approves, pointing out that just because Helen's ancestors went across the Atlantic they did not don local war-paint and feathers. Possibly some did, but that idea would only set Madelene off again on another rant about the evils of “going Native”.

Having an hour before we had to pick our juniors up, Maria suggested a stroll by the docks, out West towards the new jetties. There were certainly fewer tourists to be seen, and indeed the area has a certain “reputation” especially at night. Casino Island does seem to cater for all tastes, including the ones who like to watch non-serious barroom brawls and tell their friends at home about the wild and rugged islands they survived on.

Thinking of which, we did see some familiar faces. By the Old China Dock, that interesting nautical trio we met last month were there – the rugged sailor gent was in spectacular unarmed combat with another sailor, a huge dark-furred bristly bull with no visible neck who anyone would think could have snapped him like a twig. I have to say the rest of the crew were no earthly use, the skinny girl just ran around shrieking while the fat cook looked on placidly munching a hamburger.

I was about to suggest to Maria calling the police on such an unequal fight when the bull was laid out flat by a blow like a battleship shell. I have absolutely no idea how he did that – but if he can do it on demand, he ought to be in the boxing ring or in movies! I mentioned the notion, but he said he is happy being what he is.

Actually, Maria was quite keen to use her first-aid on the defeated party, who came round in a few minutes. That was definitely impressive in its own right, had the fellow a neck he would have probably broken it after that punch. If he had been hit with a railway sleeper he could have hardly been knocked off his paws like that; Kilikiti bats are not in the running. Maria was very glad to see him little damaged despite everything.

Poor Maria – we will have to arrange something like fur dye for her in the next year, as her international fame is something of a social handicap. The rest of us are not planning on going into public politics and leadership after Songmark, but Maria has to be decidedly discreet. She grumbled good-naturedly about Helen and myself getting all the best boys, forgetting the company we were in.

Madelene X had a lot to say about that; looking down her snout at Helen and myself she commented it was just as well we kept in with our jungle friends around here, as if we returned home and ever tried to marry we would find out how much of a market there is in civilised lands for damaged goods.

It was just as well there was a crowd on the street with a constable proceeding toward us having heard the commotion or Madelene would have finished the day distinctly damaged herself, and in a more visible way. The trouble is, from some people's point of view she is not exactly wrong. A native “Wahini” is expected to bring a certain amount of experience with her to the honeymoon and a European girl of good family is absolutely not. On my Gilbert and Sullivan Isles trip, with fur dye I could have been a very successful Adventuress managing to snare that very nice Lionel Leamington – under my own name as his innocent blushing bride I fear I could not quite be so convincing.

Oh well. One can hardly be a swimming champion and keep the fur dry.

Friday 19th June, 1936

We managed to cheer up Maria today quite convincingly – not indeed by arranging a discreet romance, but with the arrival of the Italian Schneider Trophy team! The advance guard of them

touched down off the Air Terminal this morning in four big Cant seaplanes carrying mechanics and organisers ready for the aircraft and pilots.

There was a lecture from our departing Herr Bussmann first thing, where he expounded on aircraft industries as a whole, pointing out how Boeing Aircraft in Seattle have cut the person-hours needed to build an aircraft by half by putting far more automation and less hand-crafting on the assembly line. Maria rather sniffily dismissed it after the lecture as “monkey-work”, pointing out all the Fiats and Capronis are built by experienced craftsmen with at least a seven-year apprenticeship. Her country’s “artisanal” idea certainly has done well providing specialised aircraft for the Schneider Trophies, but I cannot help wondering how well they would scale up to turning out thousands in emergencies. In the Great War there was no time to start training folk on seven-year apprenticeships.

Susan de Ruiz was definitely down in the dumps today and no wonder; her family’s aircraft factory in Spain has been captured by the Reds. Spain is looking more dangerous than ever; definitely our senior Conchita is looking worried apart from the strain of her final exams. Her family are prominent in the news, being involved with that record-breaking “air bridge”. A whole army transported from the Sahara to Spain, in a few days! We have heard worse news, Susan has told us of the only European equivalent to Songmark having to pack up and scatter. It is a pity we cannot take them in here, but a Songmark education needs resources that cannot all be loaded into a transport aircraft.

Just think – in a month Conchita and the rest will be gone and we will be third-years. Well, we will be the senior year at any rate. An exciting, but slightly fur-raising idea. There will be a lot of farewells on these islands starting next month – from what Conchita says, nobody is planning on staying after the Schneider Trophy. Many of our Seniors have island friends, in fact most of them – it makes for an interesting life to head out into the world, but I would hardly think it a good idea to be a sailor-girl “with a boy in every port.” Still, the market for Songmark girls making their living is thinly spread worldwide, and we can hardly all set up shop on Eastern Island.

That is another strange difference between the years – what with my dorm and Prudence’s, so many of my year have “gone Native” – and I would be surprised if Prudence does not stay here with Tahni; much to Helen’s discomfort that pair is getting Tailfast again this solstice. Definitely there is no-one like Tahni in Lancashire.

It will be nice not to have to shepherd the first-years around the other islands, true enough; this afternoon we took them round the hospitals on Casino Island. Saffina is now the head of her dorm, which is quite an achievement for someone of her background. She has an actual Parisian girl, Grisette St. Etienne in the dorm as well, causing our “beloved” Madelene X to grit her teeth and threaten to write home about it. Although Saffina won her post fair and square, having a pure-blood Parisian under the (rather friendly) rule of anyone from their colony of Ubangi-Chari is guaranteed to make Madeleine’s fur bristle. I have not heard Grisette complain yet.

We did have nearly an hour to ourselves, and mingled with the tourists near the Casino. It was a fascinating experience as always, seeing a tour-boat docking and a swarm of invaders storming ashore with their cameras cocked and loaded. One can see that the boats must have lists and maps of attractions, as the crowd wasted no time looking for street-plans but split into marauding squadrons heading straight for their various targets. The new “*Criminally Insane Croquet*” course near the sea-front did very well, having upstaged last year’s fad of Crazy Golf, and the Casino has an outdoor tent where those not formally dressed can lose their holiday allowance on the turn of a card.

The Coconut Shell and all the other dance halls are in full swing now, and every lunchtime one can see plainly dressed dancers taking the air at their breakfast-time, having entertained in the casino till the small hours and about to start their exercise routines. Molly is really quite impressed; in Spontoon they are professional dancers as dedicated as any Olympic athletes, and not what she called “B-girls” as she knew back in Chicago. I did ask if B-girls are any relation to G-men; she was quite horrified at the idea and seemed to think it quite insulting to the girls.

I must say, it surely takes determination to stick at a tourist stall all day long throughout an entire Season. What is fresh and exciting to five batches of visitors a day surely wears on the nerves after awhile: indeed I saw one Spontoonie on his rest-break cheerfully breaking a worn record in two and slinging the fragments into a distant bin with accuracy that should have sent him to Berlin as a discus thrower. It was a classic from the first-ever talkie, “*The Scat Singer*”, with Al Pugson’s inimitable voice singing “*You are my son, chien, my only son, chien.*” Still, after listening to it every hour for a week or two I would be tempted to take the record out to the firing range and provide it with some extra holes.

Jirry has been saying he is giving up the tour guide business either this year or the next, as like most folk he fears his native supply of patience will run out when least expected. Squeezed into a refreshment tent by a suddenly advancing tour-boat crowd, one can quite sympathise. At Madame Maxine's we were taught that one should be able to make an impression across a crowded room – but by one's dress-sense, not the strength of one's perfume! One of the large matrons had a voice that could probably make an impression across a crowded hangar. While engine-testing.

Although various folk still deny it, one thing that Father says we learned in the Great War is that even the best have a finite quantity of nerve, and even if you won medals earlier, it may fail later on. Moral fibre seems to be like dural, perfectly sound on its first test but liable to fail under enough fatigue. It would be rather bad for the Tourist Board if a Guide snapped under the strain one day and let some of our tourists know just what they really think of them, in English.

Saturday 20th June, 1936

The Schneider Trophy teams are definitely assembling; today the Germans arrived, in a tight formation of flying-boats that touched down just after lunchtime. I expect that black-furred Miss Klensch will have an awful lot to say to them; part of the reason folk arrive so early is to fine-tune the aircraft for the local conditions, and she has been here all my time on Spontoon. After all, the racing aircraft are built to the tightest possible margins – and one calculated to take off in the legal distance in the dense air of a Baltic January day, will never manage it in these islands in August.

Considering the usual competitors for Spontoon's main aeronautical event, it is rather odd that our first-years have no Germans or Italians (Maria is the last one of her countryfolk to get in) – or British, for that matter. One hopes our Tutors are not being prejudiced about it, though of course it is hardly a thing we can ask them and expect an answer. There was Erica who left a year ago, but she would have applied some time in 1932, when things were different over there. Looking at the year books of the first two classes to graduate, six of them came from Germany, plus one who listed her place of birth as "German Marshall Islands", a name that has vanished from the map. I can hardly count Hannah Meier, whose family is what Helen calls assimilated American.

Anyway, the Daily Bird-watcher will have a busy time of things in the next ten weeks, what with the official racing teams and all the folk coming to watch them. One wonders just how the locals did persuade the Trophy team to hold it here, considering Spontoon has never entered a national team let alone won it!

Our third-years are off all next week, on a survival exercise so grim that not even Beryl has yet found a way of exaggerating it. I have borrowed one of Conchita's manuals which she has finished with, rather grimly entitled "*Things that you can eat and visa versa.*" Of course it is quite like reading a medical book full of awful things that someone somewhere had; one starts to take it personally and wonder if that slight itch is the first sign of Peruvian Sarcoptic Mange. Conchita is out with the rest of the third-years this week on a very practical final field exam, and it is too late now to read up on theory.

Beryl claims there are discreet wards set up for hypochondriacs, staffed by folk who have been convicted of masquerading as doctors. Our Matron Mrs. Oelabe could definitely cure them I should think – one of Florence's first-year dorm tried to get off last week with a clinical case of "Malady Imaginaire" which I think she is now immune to. Old-fashioned country doctors used to prescribe a thorough purgative as the default treatment, so there can be no harm in it.

She has claimed some interesting things this month! She mentions an ancestor who was a harpooner in the Arctic and hunted great white whales. I would have thought mice were rather small for that sort of job; Molly on the other paw comments that even without a harpoon, Beryl is our champion "line-shooter."

(Later) Helen and I have permission from our Tutors for South Island tonight, so we headed out with Prudence in time for one of Mrs. Hoele'toemi's fine meals. I have to confess my tail was drooping somewhat, knowing my friends are getting Tailfast and I am disqualified. I will only have one more chance at this before I finish at Songmark!

The entire Hoele'toemi clan was assembled including Saimmi and Moeli, who I have hardly seen in months. Moeli will be seeing her husband's side of the family tomorrow, something I would love to do. But I volunteered to help look after the village; it is Tourist season after all and the hotels a mile up the road are packed with all sorts of folk. The locals have rather a problem tomorrow, with everyone who is in the local religion wanting to go to the Tailfasting and other ceremonies, leaving the place rather empty. Two years ago someone raided one of the neighbour's houses and made off with some rather special ceremonial items used in the Winter rituals, which probably fetched a

pretty penny from some private collector. Although perfectly suited to the climate, palm-thatch and rattan matting longhouses are not exactly built to be burglar-proof.

Sunday 21st June, 1936

A fine day for most people, though generally a disappointing one for me! I was up before dawn to see the family off to Sacred Island, Prudence having stayed in the village women's hut overnight and meeting Tahni on the beach. Jerry was going to stay on with me – but I could see him following his brother and Helen out with his eyes. I kissed him and told him there was no point in both of us missing the ceremonies, and he gratefully responded in kind. It is not every day one's brother gets Tailfast, and he hurried out to catch up with Marti and Helen. I had thought about attending myself – but it would be too painful.

It felt rather odd being almost alone in the village with just the aged Mama Tupu'kalo and a dozen cubs too young to make the journey; even with the best local boatmen the reefs around Sacred Island are savage and capsizing is not unknown. We stayed in the village centre, by the one longhouse with a telephone – although of course we did not expect trouble, it is always best to be ready, and the local police are quite aware of the village problem today. I had my Webley-Fosbury in my bag, although it does not really go with my Native Costume. Surprisingly, when I told her what I would be doing Miss Devinski had let me take it along with the box of "hunting Shells" that I bought on Krupmark and she has warned me never to try carrying through Customs anywhere. Having tried two of them I can see why, as there are definite international treaties on mercury-cored bullets.

Actually it was a perfectly calm morning as Mama Tupu'kalo and I had our work cut out looking after twelve cubs and making sure they did not wander off. There were some tourists wandering down to Haio Beach itself, though they seemed not amazed to find it empty of concessions stalls today. It is Sunday, after all.

I suppose it is hardly surprising that folk jump to conclusions. Mama T is feline, certainly old enough to be my grandmother, and we were dressed in quite similar costume. Some of the tourists got the impression we were all one family, including the twelve cubs of various species! One respectably dressed canine lady kept looking at me and then at the cubs, her ears perked right up and her eyes going very wide as she obviously tried to work out how I had managed it. I could have enlightened her, of course, had I felt like it. I wonder what sort of tales she will be telling about the Natives when she gets home.

What with waking two hours before dawn and all the cub-watching I was decidedly tired by lunchtime, and while Mama T cooked I managed to calm the younger ones down with a story. The four youngest, Jerry's remoter nephews and nieces I think, were very well-behaved and took a nap.

That is how folk found me on their return from Sacred Island, watching over the village with four sleeping cubs more or less squeezed into my lap. It was rather a strange sensation – although Helen and Prudence have new Tailfast fur braids, for the minute I was the one with the kittens. Mrs H seemed very pleased at the sight.

A fine celebratory lunch followed; Prudence waved farewell and headed out with Tahni to her Main Island village, and no doubt to show off to her friends. Definitely they are a happy couple, and Tahni is very devoted to her. One imagines when European explorers first got down to Tanganyika and met the friendly native hyena girls, they had rather a shock. Helen also looks very happy, and no wonder – I would have been myself, with a twisted braid of my fur and Jerry's witnessed in front of the priestesses and congregation. Some things money cannot buy.

Helen had one worrying note; she says one of the Wild Priests turned up, and after the ceremony solemnly warned her and the rest to defend their lockets and those of their partners with their lives. Nobody said that to us last year! Saimmi has mentioned the mystical significance of the lockets, which are in a very real sense like spiritually exchanging door keys. It is rather galling, that although I seem to be trustworthy enough to be left guarding the village children, Saimmi will not let me be Tailfast to her brother. It is one thing to be told there is a shadow over me, but it might be more useful if she would explain what it is and what can be done about it. It feels rather like the time I tried to leave the Gilbert and Sullivan islands only to be told by the authorities my papers were "not in order" with no further explanation or hint of how I could improve matters.

Saimmi thanked me for looking after the place, as apart from Herr Rassberg in his shop on the coast there were very few folk around to watch over the village except for the sick and elderly. I hardly expected to need to defend the place, but it was good that I could at least keep an eye open for trouble. She noted that Helen has a Pass till curfew tonight, and will presumably be making the most of it with Marti.

My tail drooped, but Saimmi had a diversion that I certainly did not expect. She asked if Jirry and I would be interested in a trip to Meeting Island; as I have never come away from one of her outings without having learned something, I agreed on the spot. Although we had to wait awhile for a water-taxi, by three we were on the slopes of the island's crater.

I know their Aunt Mililani lives in seclusion in the centre of the island in that sanatorium which holds the cripples from the Gunboat Wars, such of them as survived the 1918 influenza and the Papeete version last year. But although she picked flowers and motioned for us to do the same, it was not the sanatorium we went to.

Dear Diary: though Molly and I scraped through the typhus we picked up rescuing the Sturdey boys on Albert Island, we knew one of our ship's company had perished. Of course, we were ill for weeks and hardly knew a thing about it at the time. A sad loss; Hinewehi was one of the cheeriest and perkier of the Meeting Island coyote girls, which is saying a lot. It is an unfair world, where the Sturdeys got off scot-free and not even discouraged in the slightest, except that Beryl mentioned relieving them of their wallets and more (I can hardly believe that one; we would have heard their howls from Hawaii.). We paid respects to where she lay – though Saimmi did mention a rather surprising belief.

As the Spontoon islanders assembled their "custom" and beliefs from a wide stretch of the Pacific cultures, it is not surprising that they have quite a mix, and that I have not yet heard half of it. It hardly fits in with what the Reverend Bingham preaches, but then that is his job to persuade the locals of the errors of their ways.

Saimmi says that though it does not happen as standard, one belief is that in some circumstances the spirits of islanders come back to be born again on the island. An elder such as Mama Tupu'kalo who has lived a full life would probably not want to, but someone who was lost to the islands far sooner than they should have, may well do. She mentioned something about their customs when celebrating the loss of a brave warrior or equivalent, which is something like one hears of an Irish "wake" but yet more positive. According to Saimmi, one or two of Hinewehi's friends that night probably "left the door open for her" as she puts it; alternatively if her spirit does return she might be welcomed as an Albert Islander next time, as some of them came to the ceremony and by tradition might have done the same.

Although it is scarcely something one would teach at home in Sunday-schools, it is quite a consoling idea. It definitely makes sense why the islanders are keen to adopt any cub having Spontoon descent on even one side; some of our tourists have an extravagantly good time and then head back to the American Bible Belt or such places only to send for a back-dated marriage license the month after. One hardly likes to think of a warrior spirit being brought up there, if half the things Belle has been telling me of her homeland are true! I always knew the Spontoonies look after their own, but I had never dreamed to what lengths they will go to.

Wednesday 24th June, 1936

A sweltering day, but at least we have plenty of flying on the timetable. I took my Sand Flea up in formation with Prudence's dorm and we practiced aerobatics with mixed aircraft – far harder than it sounds. A great surprise was when our formation became truly mixed, as one of the Italian Caproni floatplanes came up to join the fun! This is hardly in the regulations, but what Maria says about her countryfolk seems to be perfectly true, especially for fighter pilots. It made a fascinating formation: a home-built Flea, four factory-built Tiger Moths and an experimental Schneider Racer. Actually the biplanes were far more manoeuvrable at a hundred knots, as the Caproni has about three tonnes of engine and gearbox in the nose and wings no bigger than it has to. After five minutes the pilot waved, closed his cockpit and opened the throttle – leaving us wallowing behind like a pack of overweight dachshunds at a greyhound race.

One of the locals was up as well, in that very odd-looking Gee-Bee floatplane. Unlike the very slender Caproni, this one subscribes to the ideal of "take the biggest possible engine and try and hide the smallest possible aircraft behind it." I know which one I would rather fly; Maria would be gratified.

We had to be back for our gate guard chores, which I am on three nights a week now; there are ways our Tutors use to express disapproval without docking marks from us. This includes feeding and watering the guard dogs, whose large and fierce presence adds a certain seriousness to the wires and fences. One of the reasons why we are not allowed visitors in the compound is to make it obvious to them who do not belong; we are told earlier years had tried smuggling friends in, but they did not get far undetected. There is a new local cook starting this week, who has been duly sniffed and recognised.

I took over from Jasbir, who had a fairly quiet shift apart from one oddity. She mentions a canine lady in Euro costume who had been talking to the guard dogs at the far end of the compound; of course we are aware of the dangers of our defenders being slipped drugged meat and the like, and went to investigate.

It was very curious – the stranger was very keen on the guard dogs' health, asked if they had plenty of water in this heat, and when they had last been checked by the Eastern Island vet. Anyone would think there was some truth in that horror story of Beryl's about their pedigree! There is obviously a perfectly simple and innocent explanation, somewhere.

(Later) Just when I thought we had enough to do, another plain postcard with an island view and five-cowry stamp was waiting for me in the post racks. Mr. Sapohatan evidently has his paws full in tourist season, and would like to see us. When I went to tell Miss Devinski, she looked rather sourly at me and reminded me that second-years have exams too, which we are quite capable of failing if we do not study for it. Still, given the choice between a blind-flying navigation test and doing some good for the local law and order, the navigation test can get lost!

Helen is still walking around looking extremely happy; she is not the type to show off but wears her Tailfast ring everywhere except in the shower, where she hides it in her shoe. She has definitely taken the Wild Priest's cautions to heart, and anyone trying to take it off her would regret it very briefly. Not that anyone would, except for pranksters such as Beryl (who has been severely warned.)

Beryl hardly seems to take anything seriously except money, and even that she says is just a way of keeping score. As to religion, she treats it with definite amusement and would put on a nun's costume if someone told her that was the way to get the church silver. She does mark her books and things now with an odd bow-tie sort of symbol – I think it might be a rune, and must ask Greta about it as she is our only Scandinavian.

Then – she does have some odd details of knowledge that one would hardly suspect; it rather puts one in mind of a rather inverted Sherlock Hound. I am sure she could publish a monograph on the various kinds of window and door catch if she felt like spreading her knowledge of opening them. Even in classics, she quoted her old Saint T's badminton team Latin motto; I translated it as "Never excessive violence." A very suitable motto, and surprising in its own right for that place – until she corrected my translation. Instead of "never" the first word actually comes out as "no such thing as." And that is just the badminton, not Saint T's Ladies' rugby squad.

Friday 26th June, 1936

Definitely a day of interesting news – this morning I received a letter all the way from Switzerland, from Mabel who is finishing her finishing school next month. It seems to have done its job well for her; she writes that she is engaged to a younger son of a major banking family, and invites me to the wedding in England! I will have to disappoint her on that, I fear. In fact I would probably disappoint her in other ways, as she writes rather gushingly about it being such a pity there can be nobody for me in "those far islands" as she calls them.

Well, I really doubt she would be quite happy with my prospects here – hopefully a mix of high adventure and domestic life in a palm-thatched longhouse. Still, she has what she wants, and no doubt the finishing school has groomed her to be a polished society girl who can be received at all the highest places in the land (and I do not mean on top of the Alps.) She would be horrified at the idea of me "mucking my ticket" as Prudence would say, with a Native whose pedigree is only known on the island. One hears it whispered as one of the classic "fates worse than death" for a girl of good family to end up somewhere beyond civilisation and hope of rescue, sleeping on the floor of a mud or thatched hut. Rather worse from Mabel's point of view that I would actually choose it over a respectable match back Home.

I had little time to think about it this morning, as we had quite a treat considering we were first-year herding. Our Tutors are always keen that we keep up with world events, and we get to see all the newsreels. This morning they arranged with one of the Casino Island cinemas, with the first two years of Songmark getting an exclusive showing of the opening of the Olympics! Actually it happened last week, but film editing and travel from Berlin takes time. It was broadcast live across Germany by the new super-iconoscope system that they are keen on – which sadly does not have much range. Newsreels are better at condensing the important bits into a compact performance – I can hardly see people sitting down all evening to watch a super-iconoscope broadcast.

It was a very impressive piece of filming, with the Olympic torch carried from the airport to the stadium by a silver-grey wolf who hardly seemed to even get out of breath. We saw the nations

lining the processional way – I looked but could not spot the Spontoon team, who are in a joint effort with Rain Island.

I must say, some folk seem to have planned this in advance. The games were opened by their Chancellor, looking very striking in an utterly plain suit that is cut like a uniform without markings. He seems to have kept his interest in antiques up, as he still held that old spear as if he was going to enter himself for the javelin contest. In fact, on Erica's last postcard he was dressed up as if for a fancy-dress party, in a shining suit of absolutely mirror-bright armour, less like an actual mediaeval suit from the museum than an ideal of what it should look like. Our politicians are awfully dowdy in comparison, spend not a farthing on film presentations, and look more like the board-room of a jam factory.

All in all it was quite spectacular, and bodes well for a memorable Olympics. Just think, six teams of our own Spontoonies are there, including the bobsled team. Even in July there is enough packed snow on the North wall of the Gross Glockner to build a suitably dangerous bobsled run; personally I would not get onboard one of those without a parachute.

The general newsreel was full of the Spanish war, which looks as if it will not be over in a hurry. There was one item from Home, only a minute or so (which shows folks' priorities over here) of our Royal Wedding, with our dear King Edward the Eighth ennobling his American bride. I had seen the controversy in the newspapers, with some folk saying he would have to abdicate the throne to marry a divorced lady. But our Archbishop Crowley saved the day again, as he put his foot down most firmly on the rest of the Church – he was a marvellous mountaineer in his younger days and has not thrown away his crampons.

As we left the cinema, I could see the posters going up for the Barx Brothers' "Parrot Hooves" which they must have really hurried into finishing off, after shooting some scenes here. I would love to see that one, and catch up with the latest antics of Blotto Barx. Unlike some film stars he can walk around the streets without being mobbed by any but the most observant fans; his trademark black snout stripe is not actually his own fur but put on with wash-out dye before every filming session! I can certainly appreciate that idea – looking at my reflection in the big plate-glass window, I imagined my alternative pattern looking back at me. One does not wear a party dress to strip down engines, but to enjoy oneself in – and a half-Siamese feline could use some fresh air.

There was no more time to wool-gather, as Miss Cardroy told me and Helen to head out to the Rainbow Bridge on an errand for her – we have seen the signs before, and were not amazed to meet Mr. Sapohatan on the bridge. There was a shoal of iridescent "Jacob's Coat fish" under the bridge leaping and hunting for fragments of food he was tossing them from a paper bag like any other tourist.

Helen whispered that a lot of secret agents ended up feeding the fishes. Not the way I would have put it, but I know what she means.

Mr. Sapohatan looks as if he is getting a lot of work and not much sleep; I expect the tourist season is awfully busy for his line of work, with the ease anyone can slip onto the islands as part of a tour boat. Even the registered shipping lines straight from Hawaii and America often have folk who come aboard at the last minute, and as long as they can buy a ticket some ships ask no other questions.

He was unfailingly polite as ever, and enquired if we would be interested in another little job. I could sense Helen gritting her teeth, so volunteered us both on the spot. He began by explaining that although Spontoon had a good record for law and order, a lot of the neighbouring islands had more trouble with raiders. It is all too easy for a heavily armed crew to simply land one dark night and "hold up" a village, running off with the valuables, sometimes including the choicest inhabitants. There is a village in the Mare's Nest Shoals that was attacked last week, and nobody has found where eight of the inhabitants were taken. Not something that was in the newspaper! Of course the relevant folk know, and are decidedly taking steps, but if there are any headlines they will be in the native language editions where the tourists will not see.

I know why Miss Devinski was happy to let me carry my Webley-Fosbury last weekend, even armed with the rather illegal ammunition. I think she knew no harm was going to befall Haio Beach while I was alive to do anything about it. Mr. Sapohatan mentioned that some but not all of the raids were on occasions when the islands were partly empty – in the Mare's Nest crime, it was when most of the villagers had left to attend a wedding on a nearby island and returned to find a definitely robbed nest.

What this means, is there must be some local contact who can pass the information in advance. I asked if the wedding had been announced in the native edition of the "Daily Elele", but of course he had already considered that and there was no mention. He did mention this is the first time the islands have had the problem since Molly was captured in the Papeete Flu outbreak a year

and a half ago. There are hard decisions to make as to where to use the official police force, and they have to give top priority to protecting the tourists and visitors. I can imagine the effect of one unsolved crime hitting the headlines just when folk are deciding where to go for next year's holidays; although the tourists may be loud and messy geese at times, they definitely provide the golden eggs around here. Depending on holiday fashions is a chancy business, and there are many decayed resorts around the world that simply went out of style.

Helen enquired what we would be wanted for, as the islands have a perfectly good militia and they are hardly likely to be short of volunteers for this sort of job. In fact, the islands are full of folk as well qualified as we are, with more local knowledge besides. I would be surprised to learn that I was really the only defender of Haio Beach last weekend, even though there was nobody else visible to a prospective thief or kidnapper.

Exactly what we are needed for is likely to be decided nearer the time, we were told – as soon as folk get any hard information they will be able to plan traps for the raiders. I doubt we will exactly be the tethered goats of a rogue tiger hunt, but something risky will probably come our way. At least, we are warned, and if Miss Devinski gets us out of bed at four in the morning for a “surprise drill” we will not be amazed. Nothing our Tutors do amazes us any more. These days, rather than complaining I have learned to count my blessings, and if we are shaken awake at four in the morning, I can at least be grateful that it was not three a.m.

Anyway, we promised to do our best whenever he calls – at which he smiled and bade us good day.

Although it is exactly the kind of good deed anyone would be proud of, Helen says she has her doubts about this one. She points out that the only real advantage we have over other folk he might call on is that we are not islanders – but how that will help here is rather hard to see right now. If someone is acting as a spotter for opportunities to raid the remoter islands, it will have to be someone who is familiar with them (like us) and who travels quite a lot (like us.) I cannot imagine any native doing such a thing, unless one counts being from Krupmark as “native.”

When Molly was kidnapped, they caught the crew of that yacht but there was no mention of it or any sort of public trial in the newspapers I never saw the ship again, though I looked hard and expected the usual things such as renaming and repainting. Helen says, and I have to agree, that if Mr. Sapohatan handles this through the Police it becomes a matter of public record, and word gets out. I should imagine anyone caught in this will not get a public trial or punishment either.

(Later) We took Molly and Maria into our confidence on this, as it is hardly a Spontoon secret except to the tourists, some of whom we wish really would vanish. After spending their holiday money, of course. Maria is of course doing Journalism and Reporting, and is getting very good at putting facts together. She quite rightly worked out what was heading our way, in terms of the Parsifal voyage and Lars' pursuers, and promises to put her talents onto this one for us. Her first thought was that such an enterprise would need a lot of mobility and good communications; one can hardly dash in on three hours notice on a freighter that takes a day to get between islands. So we are looking for aircraft, flying boats in particular.

All well and good, but this is Spontoon. There are nearly as many flying boats and floatplanes in these islands as cars, if one counts the ones passing through in a year. Molly agrees that the Police will probably not be the ones to catch the raiders and we will probably not see any trials in public. She mentions having heard of some fellow Chicago dwellers not being allowed to surrender, as they were puritans. At least that was how I interpreted it at first, folk who frown on other people enjoying themselves – until Helen explained what “thrill killers” actually means.

Saturday 27th June, 1936

Quite an island celebration today; we woke to hear the headlines of the Daily Elele being shouted by young newshounds outside – the Spontoon team have gained a bronze medal in the hundred metre freestyle swimming. Definitely an encouragement, and no doubt folk on Main Island will be celebrating tonight. Molly grumbled that it is a pity she has no shares in the Nootnops factory, as they are liable to sell a lot this weekend. Any good publicity that puts Spontoon on the map is something for the tourist board and hotels to celebrate.

Breakfast on Saturdays was far quieter than usual as a dozen copies of the paper were divided up and passed around to be eagerly read. Hannah Meier and Ada were looking extremely pleased; Ada tapped a paper and commented that one medal presentation would probably not get into the newsreels if the local Berlin camera teams were the only ones filming. New South Zion has won gold in the long-jump event – even though the athlete was a kangaroo breed aboriginal rather

than a recent colonist, Ada says the local authorities would rather pull out their own finger-claws than present that medal.

Whatever Ada says about their Chancellor, he does seem to be a great believer in reviving good old folk traditions. There is a picture of him presenting prizes to some junior teams dressed in country costumes crowned with wreaths of ivy and flowers, with a great stone altar and the kind of distinctive maypoles one sees in Goatswood in the background. Our Archbishop Crowley would approve.

The first-years had a rather lively debate on the Chancellor being conspicuously nice in public with Tatiana pointing out that most leaders do; whatever folk say about him, Joseph Starling is a family man as well. Liberty gave rather a nasty chuckle and agreed, rather surprisingly supporting her I thought by adding that even the dreaded Comrade Bearia is well-known for liking cubs. For some reason, though she hardly denied that Tatiana did not appreciate it.

Our dance classes were fine as ever – except for some tourists who were getting rather rowdy and over-friendly. From their point of view, we are part of the scenery and local charm they have paid for – as some of their comments suggested. It takes great strength of will to keep smiling, and unlike the native Spontoones, we are not bound by “the customer is always right” where rich tourists are concerned.

Molly and Maria were definitely heading towards breaking point, and I had to calm them down; although we are not Spontoones we do live here, and I doubt our Tutors would be too impressed at us using the self-defence skills they patiently taught us, to leave paying island visitors looking like “three cans of pet food spattered on the sidewalk” as Molly muttered under her breath.

Still, the dance instructors managed to clear the area by roping off that side of the beach and calling for five shells’ entrance fee for a “special dance exhibition”. There was no such event, but none of the unwelcome guests hung around long enough to find out.

Having some shells to spend and a free afternoon for once, we managed to see the Barx Brothers! All five of us (Beryl was tagging along to watch the male dancers) almost laughed our snouts off at the film, especially Dipso Barx impersonating the evil hypnotist. Beryl claims the father of one of her school chums is a fully qualified Evil Hypnotist, instantly recognisable in his union-approved uniform of black opera cloak and top hat, and taught his daughter all he knew. I would not of course believe her, except that Beryl complained the talent was really not as useful as the films claim, and that nobody could be made to do anything against their nature. I suppose she means that she could be made to try and rob a bank, disregarding her usual caution, as that is something she would like to do (if she could get away with.) But the same command would definitely shatter on my front armour. For some reason, the whole idea made me feel most peculiar.

Beryl is full of plans for the Summer, and says she has invited out some more old school friends to help. If the Casino staff are wise they will renew last year’s ban on letting her in the place, which may be why she needs to send for suitable colleagues. I think the Authorities will have their paws full; when she did the same last year it took a week to track the last of them down. Saint T’s is not such a bad start for a Songmark career, in some respects – she certainly learned a few things a regular public school (wisely) leaves off the timetable. Independence, self-reliance and a definite toughness are very necessary for an Adventuress; it is just a pity I cannot persuade her to use her powers for better projects.

Miss Devinski has already asked us to start making plans for our careers, as by now it seems likely we will get through our course; until now that has been our only concern. Beryl’s notion is to form something like Songmark but with a rather different slant on things – she says it would have made her late Great-Uncle Moriarty proud, though she does not follow all his principles (as she has often said to Molly, she thinks organised crime stifles creativity.) Needless to say, our dear Tutors are not encouraging her. We have had one dorm of Air Pirates already, which is quite enough for Songmark’s reputation.

(Later) it was quite a shocking sight to see our third-years returning from their final big expedition – I would hardly have believed it possible that anyone in their state of fitness could take such a pounding in peacetime. They definitely looked as if they had just been relieved from a month in the trenches. And this was just from one week in Alaska! Their priorities were straight into the showers, grab a bowl of food and straight to bed, some of them hardly able to walk. It is a frightening prospect for the rest of us, and more so for the first-years. Every year in Songmark thinks they are as fit as it is absolutely possible to be, until they start the exercises for their next year and discover their error.

As Helen points out, whatever career they end up in, they are not going to have to learn how to work hard when they start their first paying job. They already have.

Miss Blande was seen to hand over her charges with great relief, then head down towards Mahanish's having arranged with Jasbir's dorm to be picked up later, whether she had passed out through fatigue or otherwise - in the circumstances she was not even going to check if the sun was over the yardarm or not. One gets the impression it has been a stressful trip.

I always thought that was a rather odd naval phrase. I can see the sense in it, except that it rather matters what time of year and what latitude one is in, let alone the design of the masts. In Northern European waters, the sun would hardly be over the yardarm till February, and starting from Xmas one could get quite thirsty!

Sunday 28th June, 1936

A whole day on South Island, much to our delight – Helen and I donned our grass skirts and went to help out at the beach with Jerry and his relatives. The tourist season is really in full swing now, and everyone is prowling around with cameras hoping to spot a secret Native ritual. Actually that is something the South Islanders provide them, by having a dance floor just fifty yards into the jungle and carefully removing traces of previous tourist trails having “found” it. We all joined in one of the hula dances with Violobe and her friends, trying to ignore the clicking of cameras from the undergrowth as we vigorously threw ourselves into the “Dance of the Sunburned Tourist”.

This may be how Beryl sees the world, an endless supply of potential mischief. It is a rather complex sort of trick, pretending not to know that relays of tourists are trying hard and unsuccessfully to sneak silently through the trees to watch us – but they have no idea the dance is a rather blunt parody of them. A few quite gave themselves away, forgetting to turn off the magnesium flashes on their cameras, but we managed to contain our laughter except in the Hula language. Everyone wants to have something special the rest of the folk on the tour-boat missed out on; hopefully they will not compare notes till they are on the way home.

Jerry joined in for the last few dances with some of his other guide friends, and as we rested afterwards mentioned they had made quite a pile of shells being “reluctantly persuaded” to lead several folk on secret paths towards the jungle drums to watch the forbidden rituals. Still, everyone goes away happy, which is rather the idea of a holiday resort. We were definitely not observed a mile further in, when we joined Helen and Marti at the waterfall pool for a most pleasant half hour before lunch. Any tourist trailing us would have been diverted to the Waha'nua quicksand patch, which is sometimes used to make the point when someone insists the guides are making it all up about the hazards of the island. It is three feet deep at most and floored with solid rock but folk floundering in it are not to know; anyone heading into that will be staying there until rescued.

Mrs. Hoele'toemi was her usual cheerful self, and fussed good-naturedly about how skinny Helen and I have become this year. Actually we really are trained down like a pair of racehorses – the Songmark regime does that to its students. It is definitely not due to want of good food (nutritious at any rate, in the case of Poi. It will be something to watch the expressions on the snouts of our new first-years when they are introduced to it in September.)

Saimmi dropped in, and mentioned the Althing has approved our expedition to Cranium Island next month, to the extent of providing a flying-boat for transport. Of course, we are only going as a private exploring party, not an expeditionary force with drums beating and flags flying. Not that the locals really do much of that. We will be going with her and a small group, Saimmi being the senior priestess young and fit enough for what she warns may be a difficult and dangerous trip.

It took some persuading for us to get Molly and Maria invited on this one. Maria thinks of the local religion as “folklore” and does not object to anything we do in it – being so grounded in her own faith that the idea of alternatives hardly occurs to her. Molly should enjoy being allowed to carry my T-Gew rifle, at least for the first half mile – although nobody has said much about the island being full of monsters and escaped experiments, nobody has exactly denied it either. The fact that Saimmi is letting us go armed says a lot.

Our training for this trip has already started, in that Saimmi is teaching us various rituals that she says will act as spiritual defences against the fragment we are looking for. It is surprising how well Helen is getting on with this, considering she was never one for church-going before.

Although Saimmi confesses she does not know exactly what the fragment is, it cannot be too large as it was loaded into a canoe and sailed to Cranium Island. Making it safe will be another matter entirely, even after all these centuries. The three pieces were separated in as many ways as possible, being buried “*one in water, one in earth and one in fire.*” The Spontoon one is at the bottom of Sacred Lake but which site corresponds to the Cranium Island piece, is no longer known.

Exactly how one buries anything in fire is a tricky idea, unless you throw it into a volcano – and there are no active ones in the area. Still, five hundred years ago things may have been different.

Of all the islands on the local maps, Cranium and Dioon are the least explored and apart from aerial photographs are not exactly mapped; Songmark's own archives should have something about them, as they did us well on the Mildendo Island trip.

(Later) It seems we are not the only ones with a religious mission around here. We returned to Songmark to find Maria full of praise for a new visitor, a Father Dominicus who arrived direct from Rome yesterday. It looks as if folk are not going to let the South Island chapel be evacuated without a fight! I recall on Albert Island there was an abandoned mission the Sturdey boys were digging up. That was abolished along with the whole valley by an "Act of God" when the earthquake sunk it – nothing less seems to be acceptable for closing a church down.

Wednesday July 1st, 1936

A busy week! Today we managed to spare an hour to look through the Songmark collection of field trip reports, some of them dating back to the first years. I will try to ask Conchita before she goes, as to what happened on the trip with the Tanoahos in our first Easter holiday.

Unfortunately our Tutors seem to be very unwilling to let Songmark girls go there on regular trips; there was only one other expedition and that was Spring 1932 involving the original class. It was rather a shock to look at the signatures on the reports and spot the name Letitia Fosbury-Smythe, whose name is well known to Interpol these days. She had such neat writing, hardly what one would expect from a nascent Pirate. From reading her public file I had rather a shock, she went to a respectable public school not far from me, the famous Irvine Towers! How on earth someone can go from a healthy life of sports and good comradeship to what she does, I cannot imagine.

Letitia's report has a rough sketch map and some markings on a high-altitude photograph showing their route. The island is heavily forested with steep volcanic cones and several craters, with high cliffs and caves everywhere (lava tubes, I should have thought.) She mentions seeing odd lights and hearing mechanical noises in the distance, but they did not go far into the interior. The geology of the island is in two main parts, one a fresh-looking volcanic zone and the other an ancient, rounded and worn landscape that "*had the appearance of being thrust up from endless aeons beneath the concealing waters still capped with brooding ruins of cyclopean masonry*" as one lurid part of the report has it. The area between the two different parts is where the Tanoahos found all that uranium ore, and possibly we can use our geology training to spot something more valuable.

One of the first-years was very helpful, a mixed-breed canine called Jane Ferry who is always to be found haunting Songmark's small but rather specialised library and knows exactly where everything is indexed. Very few of us are the bookish type, this place being what it is, but Jane's family made all their money in publishing. She hails from Arkham, New England, but boasts her family's presses fill the news-stands with the widest range of literature imaginable. When they have exhausted all the imaginable stories, she says they conduct interviews with folk normally confined to rubber-walled rooms and work up some unimaginable ones.

I remember last year Ethyl and Methyl arguing about pulp magazines such as "*Weird Tails*" but it seems there are hundreds of titles and every publishing house tries to find new untapped audiences. Her own family produce some surprising pulps, not only believable ones such as "*Two-fisted hotel detective action*" but "*Exciting delivery-boy Mysteries*", "*Spicy stenography tales*" and "*All-action Book-keepers go West.*" They certainly seem to fly off the shelves by her account, and one can imagine the curious picking up a copy of "*Plumbing Romance*" just to see how they fill the issues. All these are of course weekly, and every copy sold of "*Lift-boy true confessions*" helps pay Jane's Songmark bills.

With Cranium Island in mind, I asked if they produced anything on the lines of "*Mad Scientist Sorority girls*" which could help us get a feel for the idea. Her ears went right up in delight, and though she had to disappoint me this month she thanked me for the idea and promised to write home about it in her next letter. One imagines in a few weeks the pool of impoverished writers living in rooming-house attics across America will be putting pen to paper on the project. Jane tells me that although her family does not print the official "*Weird Tails*" there is such a demand for strange and outré stories now that they are talking with their lawyers about printing a rival collection titled "*At least 30 % Weirder Tails.*"

Thinking of newspapers, it was fascinating to lay out the two versions of today's "Daily Elele" and compare the differences. In the English version, this Father Dominicus is sent out by the Vatican to help the faithful keep in touch and promote international understanding. This is probably

true from his point of view, but the Spontoonie version is rather blunter. Father Dominicus happily accepts the offer of a new and larger building plot offered by the Althing on Casino Island, but maintains that a Church is a Church forever unless de-consecrated, something he stoutly forbids on the old South Island building. Even if the wooden one burned down, the site remains a place of worship until formally "written-off." I think this tale will keep the local newspapers busy for awhile.

Beryl dropped in and suggested Maria think of some good slogans for the struggle to keep the Chapel of the Sacred Heart on South Island; considering Il Puce seems to govern by slogans and posters it is surprising she has not thought of it earlier. Beryl suggested "South Island – don't be Heart-less" which I could see Maria mulling over trying to work out the trap in it. Anything Beryl hands you free normally has strings attached, and occasionally electric wires.

On the same lines, the Spontoonie edition has a festival announced this weekend for dedicating that big Tiki statue we worked on at the tip of Main Island, Mr. Tikitavi's portrayal of "Tonno'wai'hapa" tilting her great bowl out to the North-West to watch the aircraft pass over her. After our hard work on the concreting, it would be quite something to see!

Unfortunately we already have our exam timetable for this month, and are starting cramming for it. Having our dance classes on Saturday and our religious instruction taking up Sunday rather eats into what free time we have, in terms of doing our homework. As Miss Devinski says, we are still quite capable of failing our exams, though nobody hopes to find that out the hard way.

Friday 3rd July, 1936

Quite a day for aircraft-spotting, with the main German team arriving and setting up their racing aircraft. They seem to be taking a leaf out of our book, not building a dedicated racing machine but putting a prototype fighter on floats. This is the first time we have seen the Messerschmitt 109, and indeed it was only announced last year. It does look a most determined fighter, though the land version is said to be awfully unforgiving to land with its narrow undercarriage and rather poor view from the cockpit. Floatplanes are certainly the way to go, unless one happens to be in the middle of Europe.

The Italians are not to be out-done, they have brought a new version of their hydrofoil Pegni seaplane, the one that sits so low in the water it looks as if it has sunk! In fact they have a tender with a flag saying in Italian something like "*Do not rescue, this is how I'm meant to look.*" Or so Maria translates it. They will have to get an English version of that printed, as the tender was frantically waving off that big twin-engined rescue boat that came roaring across the main lagoon at thirty knots, and might have actually swamped what it thought needed saving.

By the published schedule, the British team is already on the way, hurrah! The Americans certainly are; they are staging via Hawaii, and most of the other national teams are due in the next two weeks. South Island is certainly filling up with interesting people, and from what our third-years report Mahanish's is doing a roaring trade and is taking on twice the staff. What with tourist season already at its height, there are some unfamiliar faces in Native costume – beaks rather, as some inhabitants of Orpington Island have come over to work in the busy period. I looked around but did not recognise any of the ducks we met from our trip over there.

Our dear Tutors are sometimes merciful; the senior class has the whole weekend off. After their exploits in Alaska and all the writing-up, they certainly deserve a break. Of course, this may be about the last chance they will get to have fun in the islands, as they are in their final month as Songmark students. It hardly seems a year since we waved farewell to Erica, Daphne and Noota; in a year's time Red Dorm and the rest will be celebrating waving goodbye to us! Quite a chilling prospect in a way. Maria at least will be leaving us, unless her Uncle suddenly comes up with radical changes in his plans.

Although all the teams bring their own mechanics they can hardly bring complete workshops with them and all the Eastern Island facilities are pressed into service. It is a poor prospect for regular customers wanting anything done at Superior Engineering, who are rushed off their paws with high prestige jobs for our guests and will be till the end of August. I suppose one advantage of Spontoon not fielding its own national team is it is trusted to be impartial; nobody is expecting any of our mechanics to drop a pinch of iron filings in their white metal engine bearings on the orders of the Althing. Whether other teams might bribe them to do so is another matter, but I am sure it all adds to the excitement.

Susan de Ruiz is decidedly in the dumps, with the news from Spain of Reds and anarchists taking over about half the country. Of course this means there will be no Spanish entry at the races this year; any high-performance aircraft will be rather too busy at the front. Considering it is a Civil War, there would be a dispute over which "government" would send the team, and I am sure if more

than one side did they would immediately open a Pacific Front on discovering the enemy over here. Not something I think the Tourist Board would appreciate.

(Later) It is a good test of character, I suppose, to have to stick around all evening on gate duty while the entire third year head out in their party dresses towards Mahanish's for the evening and probably longer. Molly was on with me, looking suitably ferocious. It is a rather silly idea, her standing guard with saw-backed bayonet fixed to my T-Gew rifle; Miss Devinski raised an eyebrow when she saw it, but I promised her I was carrying all the rounds and had not let Molly load it. After having such a wrinkled snout about our "adventures" with the Moro pirates she seems to have relaxed slightly about us, providing we stay together. As she said, she trusts Molly to hit a target but trusts me to decide what the target should be. Anyway, Molly looks suitably ferocious with six and a half feet of rifle topped with an excessive quantity of cold steel; definitely the most carefree or drunken tourists needs no further warning about "No trespassing."

I suppose that being half of a trusted team is better than nothing – certainly nobody trusts Beryl with a burned-out match. Although she certainly learns, I fear it is just a matter of her learning more rather than learning better. Beryl claims that contrary to popular opinion she does know right from wrong; just that other people have a different view of which way round it goes. Just like the tourist we saw crashing a rented car last week, having seen so few other vehicles on Eastern Island he had not noticed we drive on the left here, being an ex-British governed island an awfully long way from Europe. Some folk had better stick with self-drive rickshaws, they are less of a menace.

Saturday 4th July, 1936

Helen and Maria had two things to celebrate today, one of them being the arrival of the American Schneider Trophy team. They arrived in quite a formation, six shiny new DC-3 transports full of their staff and the dismantled aircraft they wasted no time in bundling off to the hangars under watchful guard. Although the police normally discourage folk from going around armed (much to Molly's disgust) they make an exception for serving officers' sidearms, though they have to register and fire a testing round at the Customs range to give them a ballistics "fingerprint" in case they are used in any crimes.

The Italians and Germans have their racing aircraft already assembled and as soon as the Americans were landed they took off for an impromptu display. Well, most of them did: the Pegni made a great start, rising up on its hydrofoils driven by its propeller; unfortunately the tricky bit comes when the pilot has to declutch the water drive and start the airscrew while travelling at high speed. As I consoled Maria, he has six weeks to practice it, and they surely have plenty of spare airscrews with them. In the meantime it looks very impressive as a hydrofoil.

The Olympics newsreels are still coming in on every flight from Europe, five days by the fastest route (Germany to Norway and Spitzbergen by the fast new Heinkel 111 mail planes, then Caproni Ca60 over the pole to Alaska and various seaplane routes from there.) Local presses are busy with printing posters from contact sheets, and the Spontoon bronze medallist Knut Erikssen is a familiar sight on many a school and public building display board as an inspiration. Beryl says he would be a lot more inspiring if the Olympics were done in absolutely authentic Classical style, where the competitors were entirely bare furred. Mr. Erikssen is a very handsome and athletic young otter, to be sure. It is a pity that in the original games ladies were forbidden to watch, but I am sure the newsreels would have got out somehow.

It is surprising how much of a classical education Saint T's seems to provide, in a rather lop-sided way. Our ex-schoolgirl is well versed in many of the surprising things the ancients got up to, and I recall being told the Saint T's games mistress was advertising for instructors in original Olympic sports that have yet to be revived. "Pankration" is one of them, which by Beryl's fond recollections is more like no-holds-barred street fighting with the classical rawhide equivalent of brass knuckles. Given the rather martial tone of the Berlin games, it is surprising they were left out.

The original games also had an "Armour Race" where warriors sprinted across a rough course dressed in full fighting equipment; I suppose these days so many millions of people are doing much the same that it is rather redundant to have it as an Olympic event. Still, it would be nice for the first three in the team to win medals rather than the last three to get shouted at by their Sergeants.

Apart from our dance classes, we had to knuckle down all the rest of the day and get to work revising for next week's tests. A splendid summer's day with the Schneider Trophy aircraft wheeling above us, and we had to lock ourselves away in the classrooms and do trigonometry till our whiskers drooped. I must say, Helen has taken to even the dullest work with a most encouragingly grim determination this past year. Not even our Tutors claim we have to enjoy this

side of the course (except for Susan de Ruiz, who doodles equations and finds some of them funny) but it all needs doing. Sometimes I envy Susan, who thinks in Math the way I think in English, rather than having to work at it as a foreign language. It is quite impressive the way she can sit down in a crowded room for an hour and run "Monte Carlo simulations" in her head; I remember someone asked if they would be useful at the Casino but apparently it is quite different. Susan explained once, but most folk who tried to understand it mentally seized up like an engine whose oil is full of sand.

Molly was determined to have some fireworks today, and shows us what she has been using in her engineering classes on a Friday. Cutting large timbers is difficult without powerful saws or a lot of effort, but modern chemistry has provided some alarmingly effective solutions. She asked permission of our Tutors to demonstrate in the middle of the compound after dusk, and achieved her lifetime ambition of setting things on fire in Songmark and getting away with it. The timbers were rotten with termites, but she demonstrated a harmless-looking silvery jelly that burned through them in minutes, being a jelled form of high octane petrol delicately blended with fine aluminium dust. She says in her homeland their Constitution says the citizens have as much right to bear arms as the Government; this might have been well enough when folk had swords and muskets but nowadays folk have flame-throwers and mustard gas as well. Their President Mr. Huey Long is doing nothing to discourage the trend.

Bonfires are meant to be cheerful occasions, and she certainly seemed to enjoy it. I must have a word about her laugh when she sets things on fire; some people might find it just a little disturbing. One wonders if Mabel's finishing school advises on the correct elocution in those circumstances?

Sunday 5th July, 1936

Just when everyone is eagerly scanning the skies for aircraft, we had something else dropping in just before dawn. Last year the Japanese showered these islands with balloons carrying samples of preserved fruits, but half of them fell in the lagoons. This year they seem to have sent just twenty large ones, and all but two landed on Main Island! It is quite a feat, as they are said to reach forty thousand feet where weather balloons are suddenly picked up and grabbed by extreme winds hardly detectable from the ground. The Daily Elele is running a light-hearted contest for people to phone in and say exactly where they touched down, so they can plot it on a map.

Although Japan is not competing this year in the Schneider Trophy, it is a nice touch to have their aircraft industry drop their calling cards on us like this. Four days of solo flight through the stratosphere with only automatic instruments is rather a feat – and their timing is good, with all the aviation journalists arriving and keen to write up the story. Having the balloons land at dawn even cuts down the hazards with them flying into the air traffic routes (powered aircraft give way to gliders, gliders to airships, airships to balloons.) Still, they have demonstrated they can land a whole swarm of load-carrying balloons almost right on target in good conditions; it may be cheaper than manned aircraft one day as there is no airport required. Apart from picking the containers off the ground it would be quite a secure means of travel, as at forty thousand feet one could float them right across Ioseph Starling's Russia and be far above any practicable fighter or air pirate. At night nobody would even know they were on the way.

As usual, I headed out with Saffina and Helen to South Island for our religious instruction. We are definitely concentrating on what one might call spiritual self-defence; the impression one gets is the area around the "fragments" is rather like a spiritual chemical spill, and we are learning to put on our respirators and anti-gas capes. Saffina warns us that actually dealing with the fragments themselves is liable to be miles beyond us, and quite possibly beyond her as well. But it has to be done, unless there was a way of permanently taking it out of the Nimitz Sea area. A nice idea, but who would want a thing like that? Whatever it turns out to be.

We had rather a surprise in that the next stop was Crater Lake, where someone had carried a light canoe up from the river (boats are not allowed on the lake normally.) The four of us had charts of the lake, and Saimmi put us to a surprising test – without discussing it with each other, to try and feel just where the thing lies. We quartered that lake quite thoroughly, sometimes stopping to close our eyes as if it was a spiritualist séance – and over in one corner I had the most peculiar sensation. It was decidedly "spooky" indeed – rather like the unclean sensation when one's fur is completely clogged with mud. On comparing notes, we all agreed that was the spot, something that Saimmi confirmed.

Looking down over the side, the waters are very clear but plunge right down out of sight. Crater Lake is like a lift shaft, with almost vertical walls that go all the way and almost nothing in

terms of beaches on three sides. One gets the impression that whatever was thrown down there was meant to stay there permanently.

Our tails were drooping as we had to decline Saimmi's offer of an evening meal with the family; we had to get back and busy with the textbooks for next week. I had a rather bleak vision of our empty places at the Hoele'toemi table, with Marti and Jirry having expected us. Definitely, a Songmark career is not all solo flights in the sunshine.

(Later) It appears that an excellent meal is not all I missed; Miss Devinski called me in and asked me if I know a retired Major Hawkins, who was asking after me by name at the gate. I cannot recall him as one of Father's friends, but no doubt I have been introduced to dozens over the years who vanished off the map. I could well believe meeting him when I was a kitten; our family moved around so much.

Actually it was a great relief I was not being called to the carpet about Molly's latest fashion accessory. She has managed to "acquire" an inert training rifle grenade, and half an hour in the workshops made an adapter for my T-Gew rifle. Having her on gate duty certainly puts over the right impression, I would have thought – and to my surprise our Tutors have not really complained about it. Molly's only complaint is she cannot fit both that and the bayonet.

Wednesday 8th July, 1936

An unhappy coincidence for us – the first day of our exams and the finale of the Olympics! Of course we might get to see the newsreels later, but we had been tuning in at eleven at night on the short-wave to hear the day's medal ceremonies live. Spontoon has won just that one medal, but that is good going considering our population, about the size of a large market town in Europe. The bobsleigh team survived with no more than minor injuries, much to everyone's amazement. I suppose to the rest of the national winter sport teams, having us represented was a big enough shock without the extra amazement of getting any medals.

Well, that is it for the Olympics, and their Chancellor will probably be stuck for exciting things to do in the next few years. In the last newsreel we saw him handing out the medals using a big carved antique gold box as a stand; if nothing else I am sure he will carry on collecting antiques. Possibly that is why he keeps mentioning expanding his living room, it must be getting crowded!

The exams were absolute frighteners, as ever. Navigation was the worst, especially for Helen who felt like writing "if in doubt, trust to my sense of direction". She is actually rather good at that and rarely gets lost in practice – but that was not what the exam board wanted to hear.

Friday 10th July, 1936

Final exams, hurrah! At least, the final ones indoors with written papers. It was a great relief to finish at four, as the temperature is ninety degrees and even with all the doors and windows open the classroom was an oven. Miss Windlesham looked as dusty as the rest of us, and headed straight for the staff bungalow where no doubt a tall jug of Nootnops Red with ice was waiting for her. Just one more week of this, and we will be on holiday time. The third-years have a last week after that, a sort of grace period where they are still Songmark pupils and can use all the resources we have for one last time before heading out into the world.

I must say, our Tutors do work hard. When we have finished, their work just begins, and no wonder they have to put in plenty of relaxation into their timetable. I pointed out to Beryl that they do practice what they preach, and the staff rooms in our compound are decidedly "no guests" as much as our own dorms are. Beryl tapped her snout slyly and suggested when it is our turn to clean there we look for secret passages.

We have heard more about the Spanish Ladies' flight school trying to find places for its displaced pupils, and there is a lot of speculation that some might want to come here. That would be nice but somehow I cannot see how it would work – we already turn away so many perfectly good pupils for lack of resources. Although the staff rarely talk about future plans for the school, a large expansion would be difficult here without losing the personal touch that really makes Songmark function. I know they have to turn away three quarters of the applicants, some of whom are quite desperate to get in here, and more so with the Spanish school closing.

There are two English girls camped out on the island right now petitioning our Tutors, sisters from the Lake District, a Peggy and Ruth "call me Cap'n Nancy" who would surely do well but have to take their chances with the rest. Even having sailed here from England as they did is no

guarantee that they will not have to sail right back disappointed, although it is the sort of thing our Tutors look on favourably.

After all the revising and hard work, an evening free was total luxury. Both my dorm and Jasbir's voted to head over to the beach, the Eastern side of our island being a clean stretch and fairly tourist-free. Without a proper support team of ice-cream and hot-dog stands, the typical tourist loses interest in mere sun and sea rather rapidly.

Some tourists might have been put off by being right under the approach to the end of the runway (the usual winds being westerlies at this time of year) but not us! I am sure Madelene X will be cheering her snout off when she spots the French team have arrived, carrying with them their Nieuport-Delage and Bloch racers. Anyway, we were the first to see them coming in from the East, having staged in the massive French naval and submarine base of Clipperton Island, just off the Mixtecan coast.

Actually, we had the entire evening off for once so determined to enjoy it – nobody has had much opportunity to spend their allowances this past week, and made Mahanish's our primary target. First, a very refreshing dip in the Nimitz Sea, watching the aircraft practice above us. Some of them were none too far above us: seeing two squads of us in Songmark bathing costume prompted a couple of the Italian racing pilots to do some decidedly low-level reconnaissance. I might be quite impressed by that, if I was not thinking of what fraction of a second's slip would crash them onto the runway or the beach and us. Schneider trophy racers are really not built for aerobatics; they are meant for locking onto a straight course with the throttle wide open where the high wing loading and rather small control surfaces are no handicap. If it goes wrong, ten tonnes of hot metal and a hundred gallons of racing fuel are liable to make quite a hole in the landscape, and nobody in the way has a chance to even duck.

Needless to say, Maria was almost swooning at the sight (though literally she isn't the type to faint; one could break a railway sleeper over her head without her falling down) and the rest of the evening was a variation on "Now that's what flying REALLY is, it's a shame we don't spend our time practicing like that." I doubt Songmark would have so many folk wanting to send their daughters here if we had the accident rate one would get on her system.

Happily, we are well-known enough to the airport staff that they let us use the pilot's ready room showers to wash the salt off and change back into our Songmark uniforms, without having to go all the way across to the compound and back in the heat. Mahanish's does not quite have the dress code of the top Casino Island hotels, but dripping wet fur and bathing costumes are frowned on (and a deserved frown at a Songmark girl gets back to our Tutors at record speed, who repay it to us with interest.) Hurrah for the "Foxtrot Oscar" Chilli, a splendid invention and quite up to the Tindaloo and Phall curry dishes of dear old Saint Winifred's school, where we had them as often as Songmark serves Poi. I would swap our menus any day, though I fear Maria and Molly would probably go up in flames. It was a great relief to be there with our Tutors' permission, and not to need one of us on overwatch in case we had to exit rapidly. A white wine with ice and lemonade exactly hit the spot for me, while most folk dived for the Nootnops Blue like water in a desert.

Although Molly has no shares in the Nootnops factory, she has a bright idea of trying to produce a stain remover that can tackle Nootnops Red. I think it must have mulberry juice as an ingredient, which is about the nearest version I know to drinkable ink. It is quite heartbreaking to think of the costly evening gowns and such that have been spoiled by Nootnops Red; as Helen muttered, carelessly using the Red version damages the hat and carelessly using the Blue does unfortunate things to what you put the hat on. The only problem will be getting a stain remover strong enough to remove the Nootnops and leave some fabric afterwards. Peroxide might do it, but one would need to be decidedly careful. Pure hydrogen peroxide is more than a bleach, as Jasbir says her sister Meera has had a few accidents with it in her "Congreve Club" rocket hobby at Roedean. Even the fumes have left her fur patterned in a way her parents did not contribute to.

We had been in about half an hour when I had a most interesting encounter – I heard a well-spoken English gentleman behind me, and turned to see a distinguished looking bulldog dressed in a tropical twill jacket. He gave rather a start at the sight of me, and with a bow introduced himself as Major Hawkins, Retired. He does not look really old enough to have retired as a Major, though many folk were invalidated out of the Great War without any obviously missing pieces.

Actually, he is the first military gentleman from Home I have talked to on these islands; the last time I talked with any Colonial authorities was on my trip down to the Gilbert and Sullivan Islands which was so decidedly awkward. He bowed and told me he had been asked to look me up since he was in the area, investigating points of interest such as the Schneider Trophy. On my enquiring, he admits not having met me before, but says he has seen my name mentioned in some

surprising places. I doubt he means the dance pages of the Daily Elele. I asked if he was from the Embassy, but he assured me he had heard of me a lot further away than that.

Unfortunately we had no time to chat further, but he assures me he will be on the islands awhile, and says we will doubtless meet again. Fascinating!

On the way back Molly had been in a good mood considering she has not used any ammunition all day. Unfortunately she just had to be looking that direction when Prudence and Tahni were kissing goodnight outside the compound gates. The really galling thing is they are Tailfast, and well accepted here – if Prudence failed her exams and lost her tuition money she could stay here with her friend on Main Island – I am not sure if they could actually marry, but I can ask (not that Molly wants to know.) In contrast, everyone seems to have rather a down on Lars, and is much happier seeing Tahni with a Songmark student than having Lars anywhere on the map. This is liable to irritate Molly severely, and did.

Poor Molly. Although she gets on perfectly well with Prudence and even with Ada (who seems to be actually trying to “visit every cabin in the Ark” as far as ladies go) she has really picked up the most violent distaste imaginable for their interests. Molly thinks nothing of having us scrub her back-fur in the showers, but Ada, Belle, Carmen and Prudence know far better than to offer. There are things I utterly dislike myself, like eating Li Han’s favourite dish of seaweed – but on Molly’s scale, I would be violently ill at the very thought of it. If a certain tramp steamer ever gets into these waters again, I fear its Captain will not be getting away in one piece, and what the Police or our Tutors say about the matter afterwards will not be a consideration.

It hardly helped matters when Ada bounced in the minute before closing, enthusing over her “school ma’m” arriving in two weeks, the one who is still convinced Ada is a Native girl. Mind you, some folk automatically assume the only folk in grass skirts are those too poor or uncivilised to wear anything better. Ada certainly looks as if she will be having a lively summer in her grass skirt – or indeed out of it.

Saturday 11th July, 1936

Just think – in another week we will be free, or at least on holiday. No more classes in the sweltering heat, no more chasing down Red Dorm on suspicion of what they have probably done. No more picking up poor Florence Farmington after she walks downwind of a half-empty petrol drum. Mrs. Oelabe is trying various native herbs to treat her ridiculous level of chemical sensitivity. Florence would certainly be an inexpensive partner to treat to cocktails, one sniff of a freshly varnished table would have much the same effect.

Happily Beryl was busy today having received a registered parcel with what the customs declaration said was a textbook. I suppose it is even if the title is “101 secrets of the professional card cheats”. Without her along we had a relaxing time on Casino Island, actually the first time we have been shopping in a month! Though our course has many delights, we do miss out on a lot of what most folk think of as plain and everyday pleasures.

This summer, all four of us are staying on Spontoon – the last summer holiday we will get together. There is no telling when we will be called out to adventure, so we took the chance to get our Adventuring equipment up to standard. Molly has had nothing to wear since October except her Songmark uniform, after she arrived back here in rags having escaped from the chain locker of that awful tramp steamer. She is philosophical about some things, remarking that a year ago she travelled back to America with a whole trunk full of top-quality clothing, now lost in her flight from the Authorities – had she stored it here that holiday she would still have it. Her one Rachorska dress she left here was a casualty of our Vostok trip – though with the success of her “fish log” she can turn her mind to some relative luxuries again. Plus there is the fact that our dear Tutors do not really like us wearing the uniform in the holidays or after graduation; I can see their point. When one retires from the Army or the Police one has to turn in the uniform after all. It would be rather sad to see an “old girl” of Saint Winifred’s still wearing her blazer and hat years later, and the outfit is hardly seductive, what with itchy black stockings and everything.

The tailors on Casino Island are well practiced in making practical outdoor gear, Spontoon being the major rest and resupply centre for Adventurers across a large part of the Pacific. Anyone without the imagination to design their own outfit could simply say “Outfit, adventuring, marine and desert conditions, sized to fit me” and pick up a perfectly sound costume the next day. Of course, we have our own ideas, Molly especially. There is nothing like a year’s enforced window-shopping to concentrate the mind on what you really want.

In an hour we had sketched out our summer wardrobe and left it in the small but dextrous paws of the Chinese tailor mice. Molly did have an idea for a reversible uniform effect: luckily we

managed to talk her out of it. Having people notice you are wearing professionally built disguise is about as subtle as an "I AM A SPY" hat. She did insist on having two secret pockets built in, something the tailors seemed quite familiar with.

Between the four of us we look rather like a mixed band of soldiers of fortune; rather unavoidable if one goes for utter practicality rather than a fashion-plate appearance. Definitely skirts are out: Helen and Molly wear puttees Army-style, Maria sticks to long boots and I am trying a patent knee-length gaiter that seals right round the boots and claims to be leech-proof. I will be very happy if they live up to that claim!

We had rather a shock on the way out, hearing someone place an order for outfits for "Miss Kansas Smith and party, archaeologists." I knew they were in the area, but not that they were coming through Spontoan. Surprisingly Molly knows of her too; it seems Miss Smith has a famous film-star mother who was the toast of the East Coast cinema set around the time of the Great War. Her daughter has kept what looks like the original family name and not gone with her mother's professional one; thinking about it, Sophia Vavavoom is probably a better name for a starlet than a scientist.

Now we know what some professional treasure-hunters wear, having seen their order! They seem to go in for brown leather flight jackets, high boots with jodhpurs and Australian style bush hats. One of them has ordered a baseball cap with steel lining; although our tailors probably do not have a welding torch in their sewing basket I am sure a trip over to the Eastern Island workshops with the plans can provide that part of the design. It is surprising what information one can pick up from a clothing order. Having seen her measurements, Helen explains one reason why "Kansas" Smith got her nickname – the state in question is flat as a pancake, and so is she to judge by her shirt size.

Our dance classes were fine and strenuous as ever, and included quite a bit of improvised hula. We were each given a short paragraph and had to interpret it as gracefully as we could, while keeping within the standard dance traditions. Mine was "the tourist who never tips" and I think I managed it well enough.

On the way back we saw the first of the French racing seaplanes taxiing around while a motor boat of mechanics followed like a trainer watching over a racehorse. This is the Nieuport-Delage 652, one of two different French racers this year using the Lorraine 12RC "Radium" engine, more than two thousand horsepower of inverted V power. Even Madelene X has grumblingly admitted it has had its problems, little things like catching fire or throwing pistons – but if it can hold together long enough, it will definitely be in with a chance. As our Tutors have predicted about Molly and myself, it will end up with an "A" or an "F" but nothing in between.

Although it was a fine and full day, one cannot do everything – Jasbir's dorm headed straight for the cinema after dance class, and saw the newsreel of the Berlin games finale. It was quite a spectacular event; later on this summer we are promised a definitive film production "Olympia" which should be well worth watching for the highlights (we saw about a tenth of the newsreels if that; our schedule has been rather tight this term.)

Irma says it should be quite something, although their Chancellor may appear in it rather more than some of the rightful contestants. There was one scene at the end which sounds striking, with him raising that old cup in the dying sunset of the final day, with the Olympic flame fortuitously appearing right behind it in the shot as if it was burning in the ancient cup (I cannot comprehend why he cannot afford a new one.) She keeps up with all the news from Europe, and recounts that he has claimed to have already solved five of the seven mysteries of the Spear and three of the Cup, whatever that means. Irma's family in Switzerland are in some odd mystical sect based on a fellow called Rudolf Stoner or something like it, who dislike the Chancellor on mystical principles. I recall when she first arrived being disappointed there was not a "Goethaeum" on Spontoan, her own brand of temple.

They also caught up with "*Flash Gordon: Invasion of the Space Moles*" of which Susan and Irma are great followers. I have seen a couple of episodes, but until the distant day when films are as cheap and portable as gramophone records (if that ever happens) I will have to snatch whatever glimpses I can get.

I must say, one of the things about a Songmark education is it rather alters one's viewpoints; though they are both devoted fans of the hero, all Jasbir's dorm think he is completely wasting himself dragging around the heroine who they regard as utterly useless and a waste of space in a cramped space rocket, perpetually screaming, falling over and needing rescuing almost every episode. Irma described one scene where Dale Ardent spent two minutes cowering back in terror as Flash fought it out with the King of the Space Moles, whose tunnels through the aether had almost reached Earth; by Irma's account she failed on at least fifteen occasions to help, ranging

from throwing the curtain over the King to braining him with the ceremonial statue. If a Songmark girl was in on these films, I expect the fight scenes might be rather shorter. (Jirry has told me how film stars have knock-down fights lasting several minutes being thrown through windows, down hills et cetera without their hats ever coming off. Their head-fur is plaited securely into special hat linings before every scene.)

Failing that, Jasbir says, Dale could have just gone ahead and volunteered to become Queen of the Space-Moles, who have a rather interesting range of advanced sciences and a natty line in costumes. She certainly looks decorative enough if nothing else, and will hardly get to be Queen of anywhere if she does not make use of her opportunities.

Having put so much effort into our takeoff and landing techniques, it is a little disappointing to hear it will all be obsolete in a few years if the Flash Gordon technologies develop as promised. It is impressive the way the spacecraft take off and land at forty-five degree angles, without needing a runway (just as well. All alien worlds look more or less like quarries and gravel pits.) In the comics they explain it by having "Gravity springs" to cushion the landings; Susan did once write into the newspaper asking how they worked. Their science fiction editor actually wrote back – "they work very well, thank you."

Sunday 12th July, 1936

A scorching day indeed, with the sun absolutely blazing out of a cloudless sky. Helen, Saffina and I met up with Saimmi on South Island, and again met the aged High Priestess Huakava. She has been "communing" as she put it, to try and find out more information about the Great Ritual of five hundred years ago. There are no written records from the time, but some of the rock carvings under the park gravel walks of Casino Island hold ambiguous meaning which she says the initiated can read much into. They date from the generation before, when many marvels had already been achieved (they say) and the path indicated for a leap into a whole new level of power. It might have been rather better for the islands had they not made the attempt.

I suppose "communing" is a rather more traditional version of Ada's high-speed electric Ouija board, which she used quite a lot last term until her rabbi heard and strongly objected. Anyway, Huakava says the Great Ritual was intending to do something with uniting all the Spirits of the island, but exactly why is obscure. Whatever the idea, it was incredibly powerful – if five hundred years later the islands are still suffering the consequences. One can imagine its equivalent in a Flash Gordon world some great Radium furnace having an accident and rendering possibly acres of land quite inhospitable for ages.

Huakava is really none too sure about the wisdom of us taking Molly and Maria on this trip; if it was anywhere but Cranium Island (or possibly Krupmark) she says she would have to leave them out of it for their own safety. The trouble is, it looks as if this a trip calling for two vastly different sorts of protection; whatever natural and engineered hazards we face on the island are a real physical threat she admits we will need all the help we can get against. But if we get past all that there is the fragment itself – which could be something a respirator or steel helmet will not help against in the slightest.

I did mention Maria is a very devout church-goer and always carries her protective crucifix with her, at which Huakava laughed sadly, explaining it was quite the wrong pantheon – about as effective as trying to jam a radio transmitter with a foghorn, entirely different things. (Li Han has told us about the Chinese vampires who do not fly but bounce, and are defeated not with crucifixes but by slapping them on the forehead with sacred scrolls, like issuing parking tickets.) And there is still the problem of Molly, who believes in no sort of real religion and has flatly refused to attend any of our meetings with the local priestesses. It seems that disbelieving in some things will not help matters, just as one can disbelieve in gravity and still fall off a cliff.

Huakava added that the present inhabitants of Krupmark Island would probably laugh to scorn the idea of being influenced by any ancient Polynesian religious seepage, but it happens anyway. She is not sure if the reputed inhabitants of Cranium Island would notice and understand exactly what they have, and sincerely hopes not; just as the local Priestesses have successfully restrained the power of the Fragment in Crater Lake, it would not be impossible to aggravate and boost the potential of the others if one knew or developed the right techniques. It would be a mad thing to attempt, but this is inhabitants of Cranium Island we are thinking of.

The trouble with Molly is that once she gets an idea into her head it is rather hard to shift it. Her idea of a tropical paradise is one with no police and plenty of opportunities to use her special interests in a good cause; happily since we first met I have managed to persuade her to add the "good cause" bit. Cranium Island sounds as if it decidedly fits the bill, and she has already put

together a list of equipment she wants to take, with my T-Gew as the first essential before little things such as food, water and clothing. When I objected she did at least point out we have been trained to forage for food anywhere but the chances of finding working 1918 vintage 13 mm Mauser ammunition lying about the islands are rather remote. Her list now has two days of food and rather less heavy metal, although the food is iron rations. She also has a few things on her wants list she is unlikely to get; when Molly talks about "Soup" she does not mean minestrone, and "Jelly" or "pineapples" does not mean the dessert.

At last, a relaxing afternoon with Jirry and family – something I have been missing. Their garden plot delivered the first crop of the year of that branched tuber some folk call "Chinese keys" which was quite delicious. I have heard it has a reputation as an aphrodisiac; when I asked Mrs. H she just laughed and asked if that was anything we were short of. I can ask Mrs H anything.

Actually, with or without any help from the local recipe, Jirry and I had an exceedingly ... enjoyable afternoon. Absence makes the heart grow fonder!

Tuesday 14th July, 1936

Quite a day for aircraft; the British team have arrived with their Hawker "Seaspout" which is a developed Hurricane fighter prototype on floats. It really looks very impressive, and has a three-blade variable pitch propeller which should make taking off (the dangerous bit of a Schneider race) so much easier, with less chance of spinning the aircraft one way while engine torque goes the other. With a fixed prop it is awfully inefficient taking off, if it is tuned for high-speed performance.

The Italian Pegni hydrofoil aircraft actually flew! On the third attempt the pilot managed the very tricky quadruple declutch and spun up the airscrew before it lost too much water speed and sank. It seemed exceedingly speedy, not held back by the drag of bulky floats like all the competitors.

I was just leaving Superior Engineering after my engine maintenance classes when I noticed Major Hawkins, who was evidently waiting for me. He was very polite, and asked me if I had a few minutes to spare – which strictly speaking I did, as classes rarely finish quite when my Songmark schedule believes.

Oh my. I should have known I was in trouble when he (still politely) asked me what the daughter of a General was doing turning against her country, especially having gone through such a fine school first. I could put my paw on my heart and swear I had turned against nobody, and guessed that he had seen whatever report Soppo Forsythe had made of us last year. As he had said before he had not come via Spontoons' embassy, I said I expected he had seen my name in Whitehall, but asked if there was any evidence apart from Soppo's say-so. Of course, I hardly expected him to say what was or was not in Secret files, but it did give him pause for thought.

Having seen something of what Mr. Sapohatan can do, I was hardly surprised at what Major Hawkins came up with. He reminded me of various things I had done for the Spontoons Islands, and noted with some humour that I had managed to gain my Pilot's License in the Gilbert and Sullivan Islands without apparently entering or leaving the country. (I would have been more worried by far had he revealed he knew how I managed that; for the moment it looks as if only the locals know about Kim-Anh Soosay and me.)

I pointed out that as a good guest of Spontoons I was naturally obliged to follow the local rules and lend a paw with whatever good works crop up – and I am hardly going to let them down considering the islands are my only home until someone lifts my name from the official blacklist! I think he took the point. At least, he said that any useful information I could give him would count in my favour – and that he was the only one who was liable to listen to me. With a tip of his hat he walked off, leaving me feeling rather flustered.

Dear Diary: I have heard enough from Maria what happens to Double Agents; the job suddenly has its danger level not doubled but squared. The Post Office was happily just a minute's walk away, and three minutes after that a card was on its way to Post Box Nine reporting the conversation in a roundabout way. It is bad enough with Major Hawkins thinking I am a Spontoone spy without the risk of Mr. Sapohatan suspecting I am a British one after all this time!

As soon as I returned to Songmark I noticed there was a locally delivered letter for me. My initial reaction was a certain ferret must have been hiding in the post office and broken all records getting his reply to me – but on the back of the envelope the return address was that of Nuala Rachorska. I had to sit down rather rapidly when I read what was inside it.

I have wanted some more identification documents for Kim-Anh, and in my situation can hardly object if people contribute to my finances. But this is not the way I wanted that to happen, someone sending in a fully-paid renewal form for my Hunting License for the year! Nuala writes that

it rather puzzled her seeing my reaction to it the first time round; she has looked at my signature on the application form and swears it would pass muster at any bank.

All in all, a rather worrying day.

Thursday 16th July, 1936

One more day to go! The first-years are busy with exams and are in no need of escorting, so after classes I braved Miss Devinski in her lair and begged permission to visit Nuala. It was less embarrassing than it might have been; she seems to have accepted the fact that there is one official qualification I am definitely not aiming to receive. Although she did fix me with a steely gaze and remind me that trying to double-bluff her was a very unwise thing to do.

As Nuala quite shamelessly works evenings, I headed out at teatime and found her at home. I must say she did look very striking, and being half civet cat she has a musk that perfumers would try long and unsuccessfully to copy. I had her letter with me and soon she was all business, taking me into the office she uses and showing me the application form.

Oh dear. I can quite see what she means. I would have said myself that was my own paw writing and signature, and it matches the details on the previous form last Autumn. I urged her to tear it up, and she looked rather uncomfortable – explaining the registration fees have already been paid, and like most semi-public organisations she has eagle-eyed accountants (literally in her case as it turns out) who would ask her where the money had gone to. My good health records are a matter of public record like any other citizens, and having apparently correctly filled in my form and anonymously paid the fee, folk would soon be asking sharp questions as why she was not doing her job and issuing a licence.

As she saw my ears and tail droop, she reassured me she would stand up to any trouble that way – but rather curiously asked why I was not Tailfast this season, as she had quite expected it of me (she says one day she hopes to be that herself, though not now for obvious reasons.)

It is no great secret that the Priestesses have the final say in who qualifies, and I explained matters – that Saimmi had regretfully blackballed me, rather unhelpfully explaining there is some shadow standing between my being Tailfast to Jirry. Nuala dipped an ear at that and noted that it seemed familiar.

At any rate, I cleared up one problem and hopefully averted our Tutors' wrath for the year. Getting thrown out of Songmark while not being Tailfast could be a very bad thing – unless I wanted to become Mrs. Amelia Hoele'toemi before they deported me. I hope to do that anyway, when the time is right. Nobody expects everything in their life to proceed exactly on schedule, but that is something I would rather not be rushed into by circumstances.

Friday 17th July, 1936

A great day – the end of term and our results are in, our year have all passed! Our Tutors are not looking at all pleased though, for the first time in Songmark's history they have had to decisively fail a third-year. It is rather an awful warning to the rest of us, and will be written down in large black letters in whatever official records the school keeps. Unlike a first or second-year exam, the final qualifications are just that, with no appeal or re-takes. We are not officially told who it is, but I am sure the news will leak.

That would definitely be nightmare; Songmark does not offer a "graduate or your money back" course. Three years of hard work, bills and sacrifice, and not to have the qualification at the end of it all. Still, our Tutors have often made it clear that the reputation of the school comes first; handing out a Pass mark to someone they cannot honestly say has earned it devalues the hard work of everyone else, like a forged bank note in circulation. Beryl says there are "Universities" which guarantee a degree if you pay them, but anyone with a degree from Oxfud Postal College is better off keeping quiet about it.

The rest of us are celebrating – a hard term, but it is over. Out to Bow Thai tonight, where the Nootnops Blue will flow!

(Amelia's adventures will continue, in "Monster Hash.")

