

Tsar Trek

(Being the eighth section of the diary of Amelia Bourne-Phipps, currently a long way from the Songmark Aeronautical Boarding School for Young Ladies, as she's heading out with her friends on a diplomatic mission to Vostok, the only "Unoccupied" piece of Tsarist Russia in 1935. Amelia writes as always in the never-popular Lexarc School Shorthand, which she hopes folk this far east of Siberia are unlikely to know ...)

Sunday 18th December, 1935

Dear Diary – I have written from some interesting places in this past year and a half, but this looks like it might quite take the biscuit. I am looking out at the gas flares of the refinery across the bay, over the streets and rooftops of "Benzeenagorod" as this city is semi-officially called by the locals (Some say "Petrologorod").

Our flight from Spontoon to Tkiatko Island yesterday was long but uneventful, and indeed Molly and I spent much of it asleep after Lars' wonderful party which we had left almost at dawn after taking necessary Precautions, complete changes of costume and in my case a thorough removal of fur dye. But I digress. We were quite well rested when the big Sikorski landed in the harbour, taxiing up past lines of oilers tied up on the quays and a grim and elderly Imperial Russian Navy cruiser watching over them at the entrance as it has done since 1917.

The cabin crew did not seem too enthusiastic about our destination, and warned us to have all our papers ready, and not to "get smart" with the officials, who are famous worldwide even amongst other police and bureaucrats for their lack of humour. Spontoon is a friendly and popular holiday destination, but Vostok is not – and they hardly seem to be trying.

It is a good thing Maria is coming here as an invited guest of the Government who deeply respect and admire her Uncle Il Puce, as I shudder to think what Customs would be like for an average customer! They kept us nearly an hour, asking us all sorts of questions, including some that might have been simple mistranslations or random demands just to throw us off guard. ("Will no one help the widow's son?" – what sort of question is that?) There were questions about our politics, which I had no trouble with, being a staunch King and Empire girl. The one on religion was easy enough, as I could quote Church of England attendance both at home and on Spontoon. Molly had the hardest time, not being able to give any religious references (the Vostokites associate atheism with Bolshevism) though wisely refrained from mentioning her "Church" on Casino Island, the Temple of Continual Reward. The officials would either be prejudiced against that establishment because they have never heard of it, or even worse if they have. Her Macao passport held up to scrutiny, which gives me confidence in my own "second face" should I ever need to use it.

Maria of course sailed through and Tatiana seemed to have her papers all in order. She whispered that the officials had been debating whether Molly was Jewish – which she is not, but it is a hard thing for a girl to disprove. Having that prejudice just because Trotsky and Vladimir Illych Lemur were, and were Bolsheviks, hardly seems to hold water considering that Ioseph Starling himself is not! I hardly think "better safe than sorry" applies when a rule that could have the Red Bird himself strolling through Customs along with his trusty minister Comrade Bearia, is hardly safe at all.

Anyway, the four of us at last were through and were after a long wait reunited with our baggage. We spent the time looking at the list of things that are forbidden to import or possess. Happily our baggage had not included any "Scurrilous or seditious writings, films, records, Edison cylinders, drawings, photographs, oleographs, monographs, mimeographs, holographs, pantographs, zoetrope slides, engravings or embroidery" as it looked as if folk had taken everything apart down to the seams. I am glad my Krupmark dress stayed with the cleaners on Casino Island, I hardly like the idea of the officials pawing over it.

We were introduced to our official guide, a very elegant young Borzoi called Olga Kuriyakin. She is dressed for the season here – a waterproof fur cape and rather nice practical high boots, of the polo style. Her English is quite flawless, better I must say than Maria's, let alone Molly's. With a bow and a sweep of her hat, she welcomed us to Vostok, announcing it as a stern shield for the Pacific against the tidal wave of Red barbarism and hoping we understood the reasons for the thorough questioning on the borders. She noted with pride that in the last week alone, Customs had spotted, detained and shot on the spot six definitely suspected Bolshevik infiltrators.

I could see Tatiana behind her looking daggers already – it has not taken her long to lose her poise. Happily she kept her snout shut, or Olga's count of infiltrators terminated would very probably have now reached seven. We followed her without incident to a big black official saloon car, and off to the hotel.

It is quite a place, the "Novy Moskva Hotel" – built in 1910 in the grand style with the money from the first oil boom. From what I have read, Vostok was developed just in time from its current rulers' perspectives – the oil wells opened at the start of the century, just when the Navy was switching away from coal and needed somewhere to resupply the fleet. Having a military fuelling station led to a naval base, then the facilities attracted trade and industry – where twenty years earlier there had been only a few prison camps and fishing villages, by 1917 the economy was booming and the export trade was opening up to the rest of the Pacific.

Our rooms are basically part of Maria's suite – in fact they are nothing but chambermaid's cots handy for Maria's grand room; comfy enough and equipped with massive feather quilts. Maria is looking distinctly happy now, and obviously takes delight in the luxury – something we are short of in our Songmark dorms, which are Spartan in the extreme. One almost forgets what she gave up to come to Songmark – a carefree life of balls and parties enlivened by enough dashing escapades with motor-boats, motor bicycles and high-powered aircraft to make her Uncle lose the last of his head-fur.

Despite all the luxury, Tatiana keeps finding fault. She looked through all the rooms like a hunting dog, and meaningfully pointed out that in every chandelier, one of the bulbs is not working. Rather petty, I thought, we have quite enough light anyway.

A restful night's sleep had us all ready to see the sights – alas, Benzeenagorod is no Casino Island, and by the scent from the refineries it almost rains petrol – every puddle has a rainbow sheen of pollution. It is rather as Helen describes the oilfield towns of Texas, except that it rains here. The streets are well laid-out and tidy, the people heavily and soberly dressed and a policeman standing vigilant on most major corners – a perfectly respectable looking city, in fact. Our translator Olga was at the door as soon as we opened it, indeed she almost fell into the room when Tatiana jerked the door open. Rather prompt service, I must say.

Breakfast was rather fine, on the Continental lines with pastries that Maria and Molly fell upon like starving troopers, with a big samovar of tea steaming away on the table. I went for more wholesome fare, there being a hefty loaf of totally tar-black rye bread and some local butter. I noted Olga rather looking down at her snout at such a rustic choice, though the other staff seemed very pleased and hastened to cut me more with something like a culinary hacksaw. It is very tasty I must say, and no doubt perfect for those on a reducing diet – just chewing and digesting it would consume most of the calories.

Tatiana whispered when Olga was out of earshot, that Olga was muttering about my being “Ny Kultorny”, or uncultured. Well! Just because one has caviar available, hardly means one needs to eat it at every breakfast. I recall at Hendlesham Castle two years ago meeting the Marquis of Clackmarrickshire, who makes it a rule to breakfast on plain water and oat porridge every day. The old hound is ninety and still rides to hunts and runs his estates in person, so there can be nothing much wrong with plain diets for even the highest in the land.

Our itinerary today, Olga explained, was to view the splendid city (her words) of this Free Russian Province and meet the Foreign Affairs secretary Count Domodevo for luncheon. The rest of the suggested week's diary she passed to Maria, who nodded sagely and ticked off her approval. Breakfast over, off we went for a limousine tour of the finer parts of the city. We head over tomorrow to see the court in the capital of Tsarogorod, on Romanov Island. Molly wonders if we are being investigated carefully before we are let out into the main area as they do on Ellis Island, under the famous Statue of Usury. She has mentioned it has sometimes taken a fortune in bribes to get some of her Father's Associates cleared through Immigration.

The actual sights, one might get better described from the official handbook, as we had a real “Baedeker tour” of the standard famous bits of the industrial town. All the streets we went on were well-maintained, with a small army of sweepers (there is no unemployment allowed, Olga tells us) and indeed the rest of the population seemed quite well-dressed, if a little thin. Tatiana whispered they have strict local dress laws in the main cities and anyone found being down-at-heel in public is sent off to work camps to make new boots and such for richer people to wear. I assume she exaggerates.

A rather wearing afternoon kicking our heels outside the office of the Foreign Affairs Minister while Maria chats with him. The Minister has laid hold of a diplomatic Russian/Italian translator, so there would be little point in us listening in on the conversation anyway. We passed the time looking through the brochures of local scenery, of which we could at least admire the pictures. It is a very different sort of island to Spontoan, more like Rain Island with its great forests of cedars and Pacific Redwood shrouded in mist and rain. The weather looks just like home, as does much of the scenery unless one counts the onion domes on the churches.

Although we have looked hard for two days, we have seen no sign of Vostok's famous natives, the Sasquatch ape-like folk who appear in all the books. But then, by all accounts they prefer a rustic life in the highlands and rarely mix with folk of other species. Molly whispered there must be a lot of girls wanting to collect that final tick box in their secret diaries, with very little chance of ever filling it even if they get here. Certainly, I have never seen any of the Sasquatch folk on Spontoan, and we are only ten hours flight away.

Back at the hotel, we were glad of a hot shower to wash the scent of petrol fumes out of our fur. Interestingly, Tatiana only became talkative once the doors were shut and the shower running full blast. She had been sounding me out earlier as to my politics – and though I may be a hopeless case in terms of being a convert, she seems to trust me an atom or so more than Molly or Maria. Anyway, she was rather sniffy about all the heavy industry we had seen, and mentioned “Potempkin villages” which folk used to build like film-sets to impress the Tsar on his rare visits. I can hardly believe in a Potempkin Petrol refinery, the sight and scent is just too unmistakable to fake. Besides which, the Vostokites obviously have to get their fuel from somewhere.

Tatiana is unconvinced – and as I pointed out, she is bound to give the place a bad review whether it is true or not – I may not be much into politics, but I can imagine Comrade Starling's reaction if Tatiana reported Vostok was a thriving and prosperous nation full of contented citizens who love their rulers.

Tatiana's ears went right down at that idea – possibly the next travel guide she would get to write would be the guidebook for the lowest level of a Siberian lead mine.

Monday 19th December, 1935

Back on our travels – and quite an experience! An early breakfast (Nimitz Sea caviar again) and out to the harbour. Being an island group with little flat land, it makes sense to rely on sea-planes for internal flight; looking on the map one can see that every point is within twenty miles of the coast or a respectable lake. I would have sworn the aircraft we took off in was a Short “Cockle”, but all the signs and instruments were in Russian and our guide told us it was of entirely local manufacture. Perhaps they think design patent laws, too, are part of some sinister Bolshevik plot.

The short cut across Tkiatko Island was stunning, with deep wooded valleys cloaked in massive primordial forest trees, and glimpsed down through the mist into deep gorges full of roaring torrents. The islands are certainly well-off for hydro power, having a dozen big dams marked on the map and five more rapidly under construction. When I think of the trouble the engineers on Casino Island go to in squeezing a few more watts of power from their bio-reactors, the scale of the Vostok projects makes their efforts look silly.

We saw few signs of habitation in the centre of the island, apart from a few plumes of smoke rising where villages and logging camps lie deep in the forest – but a wood of two hundred foot redwoods can hide an awful lot from the air. Maria looked down and commented that one could conceal a complete factory town down there, and went into a reverie about hidden aircraft assembly-lines in the pine forests and mines turning out world-beating designs day and night unknown to their enemies. I was tempted to playfully slap some sense into her with a wet towel as we frequently have to do at Songmark, but she is now an Ambassador and I doubt it would be proper etiquette.

A breathtaking swoop down a wooded valley at two hundred miles an hour followed, our pilot loudly singing what sounded to me like a drinking-song – and then we were out over the straits heading to Romanov Island where the smoke of Tsarogorod could just be seen in the distance. I fear our guide Olga is no pilot; she was gripping the seat and praying loudly while the rest of us had our snouts pressed tight to the windows wishing we were in open cockpits with the slipstream in our fur. Aircraft of the future, I am certain, will have only the cheap seats hidden away like steerage passengers deep in the fuselage, while the first-class tickets ride in the splendid fresh air and sunshine above the clouds on open-air seating.

Tsarogorod at last! By ten in the morning we had to go through Customs all over again, as Olga explained, the Bolsheviks have been known to impersonate regular passenger transport. Molly had the foresight to bring along a ham sandwich and munch it in front of the officials, which probably cut half an hour off our processing time. As I told my own questioners, I am still a King and Empire girl, not having radically changed my politics or religion since Saturday.

I must say, although a petrol refinery is a jolly useful thing for Vostok to have, it is better kept in Benzeenagorod rather than the capital, which is a lot nicer without one; when it rains here one need not worry about lighting a match. Olga showed us to a waiting black limousine (do the Government have any other colours?) and we were whisked off to the Baikal Prospekt Hotel. It was really very like the Novy Moskva Hotel we had just left – great sweeping marble staircases, high rooms that look impossible to heat, and our own bedrooms obviously servant beds in Maria's suite.

Maria gave a most contented sigh and fell luxuriantly backwards onto the main bed, which was thankfully just as deep and soft as it appeared. Had she done that on one of our beds, she would have definitely regretted it. Looking at our schedule, we are to meet the effective day-to-day ruler Admiral Verechagin tomorrow, and possibly Maria might be presented to the Grand Duchess herself.

From the newspapers we have read here (or rather, looked at the pictures while Tatiana gives her highly flavoured translation) the “Grand Duchess” is not some grim and terrible old lady as one might expect, but not much older than we are! Being the last survivor of her family has had the same effect as for many a subaltern in the Great War, who at the end of an attack found themselves effectively in charge of the remains of the brigade. And both have ended up with a decidedly “take no prisoners” approach.

There is no pleasing Tatiana – again, she silently pointed out that in all our rooms there is one light bulb that is not working. This seems awfully important to her, somehow. I explained that it was better than having all the dead ones in one room with no light at all, but she did not seem to take the point. Possibly it is a local Vostok tradition from before they built all those dams, reminding everyone of the need to save energy.

Tuesday 20th December, 1935

A red-letter day, which proved to be red in more ways than one. Dressed in our best, we trooped out behind Maria to the (ever-present) black limousine. Do Ambassadors ever get to walk anywhere? We had been hoping for a chance to wander around town on our own and practice our Russian – I have memorised a dozen or more useful phrases, and am starting work on understanding the likely replies.

Quite a sight; we headed towards the Ural Hall, a big new red-brick commercial building where the Admiral contracts a lot of his day-to-day business. I noticed that unlike in Benzeenagorod, there seemed to be some folk with leisure time to be spectators, at least they were watching the streets intently while smoking odd paper cigarettes or reading newspapers. Maria pointed her horns at them and nodded to me significantly – what it did signify, I had to wait till later to ask.

We arrived there to find a junior aide being most apologetic, and through Olga announced that the Admiral was unexpectedly delayed – we would have gone straight in, but protocol dictated we enter after him.

Just as we were turning away from the building – the world seemed to turn upside down. All I knew at first was a roaring noise and a sensation as if someone was breaking planks over my head – some time later I picked myself out of a flower bed with my ears ringing and the stink of smoke everywhere. I could see Maria and Helen getting to their feet – and Tatiana lying flat, not moving.

Dear Diary: the Vostoknikites do not all seem pleased to see us. As we were told later, someone had substituted a set-piece “Salad Russe” dessert for twenty pounds of Kropotkinite, a high explosive favoured by the classical Nihilists for its exceedingly faint scent making it difficult to detect. Had we gone in on time after the Admiral – it would have been a major coup for whoever planned it, and instead of a state banquet it would have made a hash of us.

But first things came first – though I was stone deaf for the minute, our first-aid training kicked in and I checked over Tatiana, finding some minor flesh wounds and a nasty lump on the head. Maria and Helen were making Olga comfortable, then we headed into the building to do what we could for the folk inside.

Oh my. It is just as well we have had realistic accident and first-aid drills, and went about doing what we could before the place filled up with Agents and trained doctors (happily there is a hospital just two streets away.) The aide we had been chatting with had taken a direct hit in the head with a splinter – there was nothing we could do for him, and had to leave him to work on the others.

It was half an hour before my hearing started to come back, and we took stock. About thirty folk of various predator species surrounded the building, all of them lean and tough-looking; more could be seen sifting through the wreckage. If this is the sort of thing they have to put up with, it would explain a lot about the attitudes on Vostok!

I’m not sure what the locals must think of us – from all the films I have seen, Ambassadors are suave and sophisticated types most at home in a glittering crowd of dignitaries. When the Admiral did arrive flanked with a dozen fierce-looking Cossack wolverines, it was to see Maria and the rest of us soaked in the casualties’ blood and busily applying tourniquets and squeezing pressure points on our “patients”. The local doctors took over from us, and we followed the Admiral back across the street to a hopefully bomb-proof cellar while the area was secured. It is quite the end of our formal dresses, I fear.

Admiral Verechagin is a most imposing gentleman, a tall and gaunt wolf with half of his right ear missing, a casualty of the 1905 war with Japan that really put Vostok on the strategic map. He speaks very good English, having actually attended Dartmouth Naval College as a cub and been on various ill-fated liaison missions for the Imperial Navy. From the biographies we swotted over before leaving Spontoon, he was in these waters taking charge of the supply routes from the Americas supporting the White Russian forces when the final collapse came at Vladivostok and the last convoy sailed. “The Last Convoy from Vladivostok” is a popular subject for paintings and statues over here, and seems as much a piece of national pride as the Boers’ Great Trek; young nations have to manage with whatever history they can get hold of.

Anyway, the Admiral apologised profusely and swore somewhat savage vengeance on the villains who had done this – commenting gallantly that it would have been bad enough to attack his loyal forces, but far worse to target such lovely young ladies on a peaceful mission. (Flattery will get you everywhere. But I didn’t hear him mourning much about any of the servants, some of whom had been quite as pretty as any of us. And though our mission might be peaceful, anything he arranges through Maria with her Uncle might well not be.)

The upshot was, he offered us rather a change in the schedule he had planned – for one thing, the Bolsheviks have obviously got hold of the timetable rendering it dangerous, and for another he commented that it had been drawn up to suit more conventional diplomats. Maria volunteered us right away, rather liking the sound of it – instead of diplomatic galas, being attached to some of his Irregular forces, who see a lot more of the islands than any Palace-dweller.

(Later) The doctors have news of Tatiana, who is rather concussed but should be back with us in a few days. Olga is sadly rather more seriously injured (fractured skull) but they have every hope she will make a full recovery. Still, it leaves us without any translators.

I am writing this as we hurriedly pack our field knapsacks at the Baikal Prospekt Hotel, as the Admiral hopes to give the revolutionaries the slip by getting us out of Tsarogorod and amongst irreproachably loyalist folk before nightfall. What little finery we had with us that did not get ruined today, is being shipped back to Spontoon – we are not going to want silk dresses where we are going. I for one am glad of it – though I could wish it had a happier cause. This trip may be more interesting than I thought.

Wednesday December 21st, 1935

The shortest days in this part of the world definitely seem to have a lot packed into them. This time last year we were exploring the secrets of South Island, just Helen and me against the watchful Spontoonies. Today was rather different, but equally memorable.

I am writing this from a rather less luxurious “suite” than the last few nights in grand hotels – we are deep in the forest in a military camp, a basic but quite well-built complex of a dozen huts about twenty miles from the outskirts of Tsarogorod. Finding a translator was not as hard as we feared; we have been introduced to Starpom * Alex Gregorovich, a young Armoured Marines officer who grew up in the shipping trade and speaks what I believe is Russian with a strong Rain Island accent. He is grateful for the chance to practice his English, as the Rain Island trade collapsed completely when for some reason Vostok decided that having close links with an anarcho-syndicalism based regime was probably a bad idea.

Molly and Maria are out and about exploring the camp – the troops are a rather wild-looking lot, Siberian loyalists who chose to go into exile rather than face life (or more probably death) under Comrade Starling’s regime. Sergeant Alex tells me there are scattered units from all over the vastnesses of Russia who made it here in the Revolution or filtered out in the confused months just after. There are Siberian irregular troops like these who are named after some local version of a Cornish Pasty, there are Cossack units who he says will surprise us greatly, and a whole mini “Foreign Legion” of assorted folk who gathered here in strange circumstances and stay for the pay and the chance to do some serious Red-hunting. It is a good thing Tatiana has not yet rejoined us.

We arrived here this morning after a rapid midnight departure from Tsarogorod in the back of an Army lorry, hopefully throwing pursuit off our tails. Sergeant Alex showed us around the rather nicely constructed camp – everything looks definitely over-engineered, but he assures us the climate is rather savage at times when the typhoons collide with the winds off Siberia. The roofs are held down with one-inch steel cables tied to boulders a yard across – I would think that was being overcautious except that one of them snapped in a storm last week. There is a bath-house and sauna, a cook-house and store, a general briefing and radio hut and eight accommodation blocks, one of which we have to ourselves. A big porcelain stove keeps the place warm, and there is definitely no shortage of firewood around here.

I am not too sure what orders these folk have concerning us – and to look at them, they are not exactly parade-ground soldiers – bears, wolverines and two Siberian Tigers, all looking in rather prime condition, unlike the somewhat gaunt citizens of Benzeenagorod. Possibly the petrol fumes back there depress the appetite. Only two of them are female, but they are the biggest and fiercest bears I have ever seen – it seems this group attracts dedicated folk, no average troopers apply to join. They were introduced to us as Privates Svetlana and Natalia, who are the sole survivors of their old regiment after a Bolshevik crewed destroyer torpedoed the troop ship and they spent twenty hours in the icy water. I can see this regiment is not short of motivation.

The cleaning, cooking and other household tasks are done by Natives, the “Djilaguns” who live in the forest. From what we hear, the government has difficulty getting folk in the deep woods to pay taxes, mostly since they use barter and have very little actual money – so they pay “tax” in the form of labour, which is a perfectly good and Feudal way of doing things. It explains how Vostok managed to afford so many big dams and the like, if they avoid wage bills! The Djilaguns we have seen are mostly rodents of various sorts, and we have yet to see any of the Sasquatch folk. I would like to talk with them, but unfortunately their language is nothing like Spontoonie, and the only other thing they speak is (reportedly) very bad Russian.

(Later) A quiet evening, listening to the troops singing in the other huts, with the occasional soft tread of the sentries patrolling outside while we gather round the stove. Folk here take their security seriously. I suppose Helen is Tailfast now – I have told Molly and Maria about the Midsummer ceremony, though not about the participation of the “Natives of no Island”. My tail drooped somewhat – even if I had not lost my Tailfast necklace at Lars’ party, I would have to take it off today. Having six months of being Tailfast has been a wonderful experience, although I have hardly been a perfect Tailfast girl. At least I am now “free” that way, though I could not blame Jirry if he looked elsewhere next Midsummer!

(* “Sergeant” in Russian – Editor’s rough translation.)

Thursday 22nd December, 1935

A strenuous day, from dawn to dusk we have been on patrol with the squads, looking for signs of Bolshevik raiding parties. Sergeant Alex is really in his element in these woods being a pine marten – he can absolutely blend into the woods and stay without moving a whisker for an hour. Unfortunately, as he points out, the Reds have pine martens too. It is a rather awkward problem they face with Bolshevik infiltrators, who do not wear uniforms and look like anyone else – any logging party or group of fishermen might not be what they seem.

Anyway, it was a fine trip through the misty woods carrying light packs. We three were all issued with old but very clean Mosin-Nagant long rifles of Great War vintage, in case we did come under attack. A bit of

practice on these would certainly be appreciated, but right now we are trying to stay quiet and keep our ears open. We are well-supplied all round, for luncheon there is a sort of crescent-shaped pasty they call a "Pelmeni" – a Siberian speciality that I rather liked.

Sergeant Alex translated what some of the troops were saying, that the Reds would really like to get their teeth into the Pelmeni around here. I suppose that's like the odd phrase Molly has used about her family business squeezing out competition and "eating their lunch." Still, I wish Tatiana was back; though one could not quite trust her version it would at least be a second opinion.

There was little to see, though we covered a lot of territory and checked several million pine trees before we returned to camp. The Djilaguns serving the camp had been very prompt, and after dinner (kebabs of some game animal, and an awful lot of spiced cabbage, plus a loaf apiece of black bread) we had a real Russian treat, as they had got the sauna all ready for us!

The two lady troopers Svetlana and Natalia were in there already – Maria got to practice her basic Russian, but it was extremely basic and a long way short of a real conversation. We started off in our bathing-costumes, but the two bears were in nothing but their fur, and soon followed suit. Unlike what we have heard of group baths in Japan, this is not a mixed event, which privately I thought was something of a disappointment. My opinions that way seem to have changed a lot in the past year, having seen acres of very fine fur displayed on Spontoon and come to appreciate the view – certainly it would shock my chums at St. Winifred's.

Anyway, it was a most refreshing experience and steamed the mud off most effectively, though the cold pool plunge was perhaps more bracing than I had expected. Maria says they traditionally finish with a roll in the snow, but it rarely snows much in Vostok and outside is currently mud. Not quite the same effect.

Friday 23rd December, 1935

Tatiana is back! She arrived in an army lorry after breakfast, very relieved to see us. Maria comments quietly that in Tatiana's experience, folk who get driven out in the woods with armed soldiers are hardly ever heard of again – especially in her position. Still, she is back and doing her best to look cheerful about being surrounded by dedicated counter-revolutionaries on an island of such.

We immediately headed off on a long exploration towards the coast, some ten miles away. The two tigers went ahead, moving almost silently despite their size. Just when I was about to privately agree with Tatiana that this whole mission might be a "Potempkin village" or wild goose chase planned just to impress us, they actually did find something. A deflated rubber raft had been hidden near the shore, though there were no pawprints surviving anywhere near it – Sergeant Alex explained that it would have had no scent when it was dragged up the beach fresh from the water, but rubber dries out and smells quite powerful after a few days.

I rather doubt fishermen use rubber rafts around here, or they feel the need to hide them.

Shipwrecked survivors use them, but they tend to be bright safety colours of orange or yellow, not midnight black and without even a serial number to identify them. So – somewhere on this coastline are two or three infiltrators, probably folk Tatiana would be very happy to meet and pass on her information to. I noticed Tatiana looking at the boat and then out towards the horizon with a definitely calculating gaze.

Maria had the same idea, and whispered that although she may be our Songmark school chum, we were official guests of Vostok, and ought to stop her by any means short of blowing her cover. I must say, Maria is really coming into her own on this trip, and not just because she is the one whose name is on the official invite – the rest of us are just the supporting party "Maria Inconnutia + 3", and along for the ride.

The general impression we got was the boat had been there two days, which could put the intruders anywhere within forty miles even if they were still on foot. However, we had to check the obvious and headed South along three miles of rocky beaches and narrow trails coast to the nearest Djilagun village. It was a fascinating place indeed, about thirty houses sheltering behind a rugged crag, all built of rough stone and heavily carven wood with roofs of cedar tiles. The only sign of civilisation was a tiny church with an onion dome about the size of some engine cowlings we have seen, and a single brass bell hardly big enough to wear as a helmet. Looking at it, one got the impression that it could have been salvage from an unlucky ship, as the village seems too poor to really afford even that luxury. The combination of rocky shores, frequent thick fogs and a definite shortage of lighthouses have given Vostok a bad reputation for shipping, and unlike Spontoon the Government are not so keen on inviting all visitors.

I must say, our friends were a bit rough about making their enquiries with the natives – I know there are unfriendly forces about, but as a matter of common courtesy the least the troops could do was to unfix bayonets when searching people's houses. We met the "Hetman" of the village, an elderly muskrat with one of the odd oriental straw hats one sees the Djilagun folk sporting. He swore they had seen no strangers for a month, and indeed by land the village is half a day's walk from any sort of motor road. I think Sergeant Alex could at least have thanked him for the information.

We hurried back to our camp, to radio out our findings. It might have been a coincidence, but just an hour later there were aircraft heading towards the beach, though I doubt they have a chance of seeing much in

these woods. Just before dark, something very strange flew over indeed – an airship. But it was no ordinary cigar-shaped airship; it was flattened rather like a pumpkin seed with engines on stub wings at the sides, very like one of the fighter dirigibles we had in the Great War. Fascinating! The overall colour was dull silver, quite without markings, and it must have easily been doing sixty miles an hour. Even my crudest Flying Flea models could beat that (albeit in a dive) but sixty is awfully speedy for a gasbag.

Tatiana's ears went right down and she growled something in Russian that sounded very impolite. Evidently she recognises this design, and is not inclined to sneer at it. Maria commented that the Vostokites seem to be well on top of things, except for that blast at the Ural House when the Bolsheviks nearly got us.

Our Red chum looked around for eavesdroppers, bristled her fur somewhat and asked in a rather snooty tone if we had realised the whole affair was a set-up. None of the ranking nobility were even scratched, only workers were killed and injured for whom they care nothing (she says) and real Bolsheviks do not make timing mistakes like that (she says) – they would have handled the job efficiently. But by sacrificing a few hapless Workers the Tsarist government have made willing dupes of us – that is, even more willing than before.

I would normally say everyone is entitled to their opinion, but in Tatiana's case I am starting to think of making an exception.

Tuesday 27th December, 1935 (back-dated)

Dear Diary – life does keep on getting Interesting in this part of the world. We have found a few things on this “fact-finding trip” that we would not get from reading the official tourist guides to Vostok (assuming there was one, which I somehow doubt.)

We started off on Saturday (Christmas Eve) going back on patrol, an early start and out with our Pelmeni hosts with Mosin-Nagant rifles ready on their slings and a jolly good packed lunch of black rye bread and smoked sausage in our knapsacks. This time we headed deeper into the woods, climbing into the highlands. A fascinating experience – in the redwood forests one can go for half an hour without a sight of the sky, and the trees are so huge one could easily drive lorries around on the forest floor between their trunks.

We found our first Sasquatch camp just after luncheon, in a clearing where some forest giant had fallen years ago and torn a huge swathe of destruction all around. Sergeant Alex is a mine of information, and explained that living under the trees is a rather dangerous thing to do – they shed branches in storms, and a redwood branch can be awfully heavy with a long way to fall. There were garden plots and quite neat wooden huts, rather primitive-looking but nothing we have not become accustomed to on Spontoon. I must say, it was a bit over the top the way the Pelmeni first surrounded the clearing and closed in with weapons drawn and fixed bayonets – though of course there are Red infiltrators somewhere around, and they might have been holding the locals captive.

Anyway, there turned out to be nothing more sinister than two families of Sasquatch, very impressive at nearly seven foot tall for the adults, and even the children were taller than me. They are rather ape-like, with shaggy winter fur coats and simple hide clothing – the huts could have been a little cleaner, but obviously they were not expecting visitors. From what we heard (and for once Sergeant Alex's accounts and Tatiana's roughly coincided) they had seen no strangers for weeks, but had heard a lot of aircraft noise, some of which were autogiro rotors. Sergeant Alex seemed rather startled, and demanded exactly when and where our hosts had heard them. He made careful notes in the notebook he always carries – he is a meticulous note-taker, and writes down almost everything we say. He says he hopes to write a book one day.

Another surprise came when one of the Sasquatch ladies turned out to speak English! Her name is Tamahuatipa, and she too had been in the Rain Island trade, some sort of agent for gathering interesting local mushrooms that various Pacific Island shamans speak of highly. Churchmen always do enjoy their food, at least all the ones I have met. She seemed very surprised herself to see us, noting that there are few visitors to Vostok, and indeed the Authorities hardly encourage them. On telling her where our camp is (no great secret as the local Djilaguns are let off paying tax by supporting it) she nodded and promised to meet us again.

I asked Maria about our schedule, having recalled that we would be going back after Xmas – and received another great surprise. Unlike the rest of the world (except the Albanian Empire) on Vostok they still use the old Gregorian Calendar, that we dropped a century and a half ago! It has drifted severely out of joint, making the local Xmas January the Sixth – so we will be here a lot longer than I thought.

We said farewell to the locals and headed out, but had only gone half a mile when Svetlana called a halt and pointed at the trail. Both the tigers and a mastiff trooper came forward and sniffed the ground and all around – and when they had done, Sergeant Alex invited us forward to take a look. It was a boot print, but we had noticed the Sasquatch were all bare-pawed or wore plain bark moccasins, not nail-studded military boots.

Quite a dilemma – by all account the “Djilaguns” know almost every leaf that falls in their forest, but Tamahuatipa and her family had sworn there had been no strangers around. Either the prints were very new, or they belonged to some local trader or woodsman quite innocently passing through, or the Sasquatch were fibbing to us. If I had to wade ashore from a rubber boat on a rocky coast with tough territory to cover, I would wear something better than moccasins myself.

Tatiana whispered rather smugly that some of our companions were debating whether to go back and ask some more pointed questions – but Sergeant Alex overruled them, and we set off along the tracks in cautious pursuit.

I had tracked folk around South Island last Summer holidays, but this was rather different, acutely aware of the rifle bumping on my back and the savage good humour of our Siberian chums. One would think they had been invited to a party, to look at the expressions on their faces. Molly seemed quite in her element, jogging along with bayonet fixed and a look of unholy glee on her features – I stayed behind her, as she had a clip in her rifle and scorns safety catches. Maria seemed quite uneasy, looking around into the trees, where indeed one could have hidden a company of tanks behind the twenty foot boles of the giant redwoods.

For about an hour we carried on, deeper still into the forest – before one of the tigers in the lead gave a paw gesture and everyone suddenly froze in place. From the growing daylight we were obviously coming into another clearing, where the trail had led us. One of the troopers, a rather battered-looking ermine Corporal, was waved forward and vanished quite soundlessly into the bushes - it actually gets harder to see near old clearings, as new trees make a tangled burst of low growth very different from the clear aisles between the forest giants.

In three minutes he was back and whispering urgently to Sergeant Alex. That worthy came over silently and informed us that they had found what they were looking for – an actual Bolshevik camp. This left him with a problem, as he had been tasked to show us the day-to-day life of his group, not put us in the firing line of an infantry assault with no quarter given or asked for. If we were Vostok citizens it would of course be quite another matter.

There was very little time to discuss it – but I had a hurried whisper with Molly and Maria. Maria's mission comes first to report on what she finds here and as obviously someone had to send back the news to the camp, she should be the one. But we were easily a dozen miles from "home" through the woods, and she could not go alone, nor could Sergeant Alex really spare any men. Some of us would have to go back and some forward, if we were to witness the events here. Molly and I played our usual fast "Paper-scissors-rock" to decide – and much to her delight, she got to stay and "watch the action" as she put it. Tatiana was not asked, not being exactly an unbiased witness.

We dropped our packs, had a whispered word with a suddenly very relieved Sergeant Alex and set off the way we had come, first at a walk then at a jog as we cleared the area. It seemed very quiet for a few minutes, and then a volley of shots and various confused noises rang out in the distance behind us.

Although by tradition a Bourne-Phipps does not willingly run from a fight or leave friends behind, it is not strictly speaking our fight and Molly was keen to stay. In the meantime Maria and I made good time along the pathway for about a mile, and were running through what we would try and say to the folk at the camp radio without our interpreters.

And then – it looked for a second as if one of the trees had come to life, as six figures clad in bark-brown clothing jumped out in front of us. One of them pointed at Maria and shouted something commanding – with a rather sinking feeling I realised we had run into a trap. Our rifles were slung across our backs out of immediate grabbing range, and before we could think to use them there were four pistols trained on us. Captured by Bolsheviks!

Of the six brown-clad figures five were some sort of rodent and the sixth was a canine, a bristly-furred mastiff who seemed to be the leader. He strode up to Maria, who was admirably calm, and looked at a photograph in a green notebook – by the way he nodded with an unpleasant curl of his lip, I definitely gained the impression that they were specifically looking for her in these woods and not just any Loyalist citizens who blundered into them. In about five seconds we were disarmed and standing with our paws up.

Oh dear.

After a brief flurry of orders, one of the rodents was dispatched off one direction while we were shepherded off in the other, the five surrounding us with pistols ready and looking as if they needed no excuses to use them. We were hurried down a maze of minor trails, changing direction all the time and with the setting sun invisible through the forest canopy I quite lost track of our direction.

About forty minutes later we arrived at what was obviously a lumber camp, with a great pile of cut logs seasoning under cover and two office buildings. Our captors evidently took stock, and took the time to search us more thoroughly, relieving us of our watches, documents and pocket-knives. They herded us into one of the unlit offices and slammed the door, two of them visibly standing guard outside.

At last, we had time to talk. Maria was looking not unnaturally pale-nosed at our situation, but held up pluckily. It was full dark outside, and we were quite lost in the woods, not even having a map position of our base camp. We could hear the sentries outside talking quietly and laughing, which boded no good for us.

I pointed out that as one of the Reds had obviously gone to tell someone senior that we were captured, the sooner we could get away the better before someone who speaks English or Italian shows up and starts asking us pointed questions (probably assisted by pointed objects). Maria quite agreed, adding that there was no future in staying where we were – especially for me. We set to work in the dim light quietly looking at the

office, which had only the one door, narrow windows and was very sturdily built – from an empty cash-box, evidently it had been used as the administrative block handling the lumberjacks' pay.

For a few minutes it looked fairly hopeless, until I looked up at the ceiling – a rough-hewn truss structure studded with the pegs holding on the cedar roof tiles. It was ten feet up, but I was soon standing on Maria's strong shoulders examining it more closely – and I could see definite possibilities. Each tile was pegged to every other and to the supporting frame, except at the very top where a V-shaped tile sat on the roof ridge holding everything else in place.

I would have given worlds to have a pocket jemmy kit like Molly's with me, but with enough desperate strength and a lot of damage to my claws I managed to work the first peg loose. For a second I thought the tile was going to roll down the roof and alert the guards – I managed to grab it with the tips of my claws and pass it down to Maria waiting inside. The other tiles were easier after that, and in ten minutes I had removed a dozen of them leaving a hole about two feet square, with a view over the dripping trees behind the hut.

With my head outside I made an unpleasant discovery – there were two guards at the front, and one wandering around at the back! He seemed to be strolling quite randomly, pistol in paw – if I had not heard his breathing under the eaves I might have hurried straight out of the hole and dropped right onto him. Fortunately he must have been at the other end of his patrol when I was dislodging tiles, or he would have heard me for certain.

I very quietly slid back inside and whispered the bad news to Maria. Still – we had a way out, and only needed a chance to use it. We took stock of what we had, as our captors had not searched beyond the obvious. Our jackets have tiny glass button compasses built in – that is, Maria's had, but she had swallowed hers for concealment at the first opportunity, though mine was available for immediate use. As we have heard time and again at Songmark, there is no point in having tools and equipment so comprehensive you cannot take it everywhere with you. We both have wire rope woven as draw-cords into the seams of our jackets, fish-hooks in our lapels and a few other odds and ends that only someone specifically searching for would be likely to discover.

Our chance came two hours later, when I heard more voices outside. Quickly getting up again on Maria's shoulders to hear better in the open air, I spotted some different voices talking with the canine leader – and the sentry around the back went around the front to see what was happening. We were very glad of our rock climbing practice as I pulled Maria up to join me on the roof truss, and I inched my way out of the hole, barely hanging on till I could grasp the side of the roof. It was a desperate move, but I dropped into the dark behind the hut fearing it could be a pile of noisy rubbish – but to my relief it was deep, silent leaf-mould. A quick mew of encouragement and Maria joined me – we stood for a few seconds not breathing, listening for approaching footsteps before stealthily heading into the darkness.

We were in luck, in that the logging camp was new and there had been no time for the ground vegetation to spring up – in the pitch darkness bushes and creepers would have slowed us and made too much noise. I had to lead Maria, my night vision being far better than hers, though even I found it hard work to avoid fallen branches and the like. The only thing that kept us going straight was my little button compass, its single luminous speck pointing our way. Hurrah for Radium paints! Maria had done the right thing with hers, as in this sort of situation we are taught to swallow the compasses against any search short of an X-ray. Certainly, some of the things we have learned at Songmark are turning out to be very useful.

In most circumstances we would have stopped to take shelter rather than groping our way in the dark, but at least one of the Reds had looked as if he had a keen nose and we were determined to give him as long and cold a trail as possible. So we just kept moving all night, carefully stepping around giant trees and mounds of fallen timber, making perhaps one mile an hour until the dawn came. We were jolly hungry by then, our last meal having been the packed lunch with the Pelmeni the day before.

Standing panting against a huge root buttress for a minute's break in the silently dripping forest, I realised something – it was Christmas Morning! The official Vostok calendar might not agree, but Maria and I wished each other a heartfelt Merry Christmas. We may have no standard gifts to exchange, but having a staunch friend with me right now was as welcome a gift as anything I have ever unwrapped under the Christmas tree. Shafts of light shone through the leaves ahead as dawn came as if the whole forest was a great cathedral of pillars and green stained-glass windows – an awe-inspiring sight, and one we looked at with muzzles bowed for a few minutes until we had to press on.

This time of year and this far North there is barely eight hours light on a good day, and when the clouds came over I believe it could not have been much after four. A whole day of dodging pursuit by heading up or down shallow streams, walking over bare rocks where possible and other tricks made us feel warily confident that we had shaken off our pursuers. One thing we did not have time to do was to stop and forage for food, so as we piled up dry pine-needles under a forest giant for the night, we went to bed with our stomachs complaining loudly and insistently. Folk say civilised folk are “two missed meals away from barbarism”, and by the time we had missed four, I can quite understand it. Happily, another useful saying is “The forest is the poor man's jacket” – there is a lot of mileage to be got out of folk sayings even in these days of radio.

So that was our Christmas Day, 1935! We had matches sealed in wax in the lining of our jackets, but dared not risk a fire. It was a long, chilly night even under a foot of pine branches and needles, and I was glad of Maria's warmth – we had to press tight for any sort of heat, and I was glad it was not Ada Cronstein or Prudence I was sharing such close quarters with (though to be fair they are hardly evangelical about their tastes.) Dawn came with a gloomy grey tinge and we were up brushing off the pine needles from our fur as soon as we could make out the trees around us.

Another two hours of stiff walking brought us to the coast, with the forest behind us and the grey wintertime waters of the Nimitz Sea stretching ahead as we discovered we were on the Eastern side of Romanov Island. With no map we had no idea whether the Djilagun Village was North or South of us, but it was the only landmark we knew on the coast. There were great towering cliffs we did not recognise off to the South, so after a rest we headed North. I can confirm what we have read in the books, about how tired one gets exercising on an empty stomach; one hears of people fasting for weeks, but they rarely attempt to cover rough countryside at the same time. At least we have been full of good Songmark meals this year, and Maria had been saying she wanted to lose some weight. She at least retrieved her compass, one might say.

One advantage of reaching the coast was being able to gather a light breakfast of shellfish knocked off the rocks, not exactly a gourmet treat raw (more like eating fishy India-rubber full of sand and shell fragments) but very welcome. I agonised briefly over whether to feast on a rather deceased washed-up fish – had I time to cook we might have risked it, but the consequences of food poisoning was just too great in our situation.

It was two p.m. by the sun when at last we reached familiar territory, and flopped down just below the skyline to observe the village half a mile further on. The idea of a rest by a fire and a meal was very tempting – but Maria was thinking cautiously, and wondered out loud if the locals really had known nothing about the rubber boat on their beach. Having run slap-bang into one nest of Bolsheviks we were not about to repeat the experience. As she pointed out, the sensible thing would have been for them to secure a beachhead for the quite substantial force of infiltrators we had met (thirty or forty, is my guess.)

As it happened, we had been right to worry about being followed – there was a quiet hail from behind us and we recognised the large and shaggy form of Tamahuatipa, the Sasquatch girl we had met the day we were captured. The path behind her was clear of any brown-clad figures, but we stayed wary until she came to meet us – and we stayed wary after that, “grilling” her rather sharply as to how she had found us.

By her account, some of her people had come across the track of the Reds a few minutes after we had left the clearing, and hurried back to report. She had followed, but been forced to hide and lose our track by a much larger force that she eventually tracked to the logging camp, but hit our scent trail leading away. So despite not having much of an outstanding muzzle she tracked us all the way through the forest – an impressive feat and for us rather an alarming one! If she can scent our trail through the dark and the whole of the day despite our attempts at breaking it with crossing streams and such, either our escaping skills are sadly lacking or the Sasquatch should take Olympic gold in tracking events.

Tamahuatipa offered to escort us back to our base camp and act as interpreter – the two things we most needed, despite what our empty stomachs were telling us. A quick whisper with Maria and we agreed, despite having no evidence whose side Tamahuatipa is on. After all, if we told her to go away she could simply keep tracking us, and if she was a Red she has no need for subtlety – she could have brought the rest of the infiltrators along with her. If she decided to tackle us I would not give sixpence for our chances, as she is seven feet tall and we were worn out and feeling faint with hunger. She gave us what food she had, a handful of some dried berry apiece – and no chef's confection has ever tasted so good at the time.

We did ask about the village ahead of us, but to our surprise she agreed with Maria about not strolling casually in without backup. Although many of the Djilaguns are perfectly loyal to their government (she says), the Pelmeni are rather disliked for their heavy-handed approach and they tend to have the feared Cheka secret police working with them. To my surprise she casually named Sergeant Alex as a salaried Cheka agent who had first appeared at the camp just an hour before we did, with instructions to look after us!

Maria rounded on that statement in a flash, asking just how Tamahuatipa knew it. Tamahuatipa smiled and told us that although Vostok was not the largest or wealthiest of nations, it could afford more than one secret police – there is the Cheka who the place “inherited” from Tsarist Russia, and the other one. She refused to say what the “other one” was called, and hinted that it was not called anything at all.

From the various stories we have heard, I would not be a bit surprised if the Cheka and its rival enlivened many a dark winter evening by infiltrating each other and chasing each other's “Agents Provocateurs” around the island, just to keep in practice.

Indeed, as we bypassed the fishing village, Tamahuatipa told us a story of how Vostok also has a modern legend of a quite different sort of agent to anything modern Governments usually employ. She told it as a folk tale, of mysterious figures known as Akula * who are usually chosen from good families and officially die, often being “lost at sea” or something equally untraceable. They take on new identities, but unlike other Agents they are given no orders and send no scheduled reports, acting as their principles dictate and answerable only to the Tsar in person. So if we can believe her, we have two Secret Police agencies and some

sort of modern Knight Errant running around these islands, about the ultimate in “loose cannon” with tacit approval of a Government who take the credit but accept no responsibility for their actions.

This might explain why Vostok is the sort of place it is.

Whatever else Tamahuatipa might be, she was perfectly honest about leading us back to our camp, taking us by a short cut no wider than a wild animal trail. We found the place in an uproar, a dozen lorries parked at the roadside and about a hundred heavily armed troops forming up. Evidently we were not the first to get back with the news of the encounter.

If the scene had been frenzied when we first saw it, it became doubly so when we walked in through the main gate and a much-bandaged Sergeant Alex spotted us (Tamahuatipa had vanished very silently into the forest.) He gave a shout and Molly came running over, much to our delight.

An hour later we had finished a combined breakfast, luncheon and explanation, with Sergeant Alex scribbling at good shorthand speed and handing over page after page to his radio clerk for immediate transmission. We rather simplified our account, mentioning meeting a Djilagun by the coast who pointed us in the right direction, but not naming Tamahuatipa or repeating anything she said.

Molly’s own account was quite a ripping yarn – the Pelmeni had surrounded the forest camp, counted the infiltrators and decided to tackle them with the most sophisticated military manoeuvre known to them. A headlong bayonet charge while yelling ferocious war-cries, to be precise. This actually worked rather well at first, but it got rather unfortunate when the Reds received an unexpected reinforcement – six unmarked black autogyros dropped spiralling into the clearing, all of them heavily armed twin-seaters!

The trouble with fighting Revolutionaries, Sergeant Alex complained, is that one never knows if they will be some disgruntled lumberjack who barely knows one end of a rifle from another, or hardened troops sneaked in off a boat or submarine. In this case, although none of the opposition was wearing Soviet uniforms, he is sure most of them have been issued with one at home. The Pelmeni were split and pinned down for half an hour, and he regrets that Tatiana was captured – she was bundled into the back seat of one of the three autogyros that got away.

Molly recounted with shining eyes how the affair finished, suffice it to say our Pelmeni hosts won the day at the cost of half their number and were none too fussed about taking prisoners. I had imagined her being shocked and distressed at seeing the reality of what we have practiced on the target ranges on Spontoon – it turned out quite the other way. Self-defence is one thing, but Molly seemed rather too keen describing how she took part in the “mopping-up” and setting fire to all the buildings, a life-long ambition of hers. Being surrounded by folk who praised her for it and offered handy hints and tips would not help matters. All this time I have been trying to teach her civilised manners, but this looks like a big step backwards.

(Later) We rested all afternoon, enjoying an extra meal and a most welcome visit to the sauna. Both Natalia and Svetlana survived the raid, and were in bounding high spirits – it is equally impressive and alarming to see two jovial bear girls equipped with about half a gallon of vodka and in festive spirit – they made Maria look like a gentle flower-spirit, as they roared and bellowed some stirring songs and splashed like icebergs in the plunge pool.

Molly needed no encouragement to share their local potato brew – I had one sip, and that was quite enough for me. The bottles looked definitely industrial, and tasted like something made in a refinery. I would hesitate in pouring that fiery mixture into the fuel tank of my Sand Flea, let alone into my digestion. I had been under the impression that she stayed well clear of the sort of home-brewed paint stripper her Family fortune had been built on, having seen what happened to a lot of their steady customers.

We left them to it, returned to our hut and there received the news that our itinerary had changed again, now the Bolsheviks had caught up with us. Tomorrow we head out again, leaving Tatiana in (hopefully) friendly paws. We can hope that she had some sort of password or hidden document to help in this sort of situation – and more so, that the local Reds recognise it! After all, if she can persuade them what she really is, she is safer with her current company than she would be with our Pelmeni hosts.

- Akula = Shark, in Russian (Editor’s hasty translation.)

Thursday 29th December, 1935

On the move again – six hours in an army truck brought us to the far side of Romanov Island, out of the forests and onto a wide rolling landscape, rather bleak with outcrops of rock that had my paws itching to get out and climb them. Certainly, we have acquired some new habits in the past year.

Sergeant Alex has stayed with us, acting as translator. He says he received new orders last night and has been posted away from his Pelmeni unit while we are in the field. Actually, it is looking rather as if he really is a Cheka agent as Tamahuatipa told us – but there is nothing much wrong with that, really. I assume we have the best Secret Police in the world, back in Britain, as everyone “knows” we have none at all. That’s my idea of Secret.

At last we arrived and could stretch the kinks out of our tails (sometimes I envy Molly her short tail) after a definitely Economy-class ride. The weather was definitely chilly, a North-West wind blowing right down from Siberia making it the coldest I have been outside a cockpit since I first arrived at Songmark.

Our new “home” is rather more like it, an airfield! When we arrived there was nothing to be seen except the runways, and some very large hangars that are dug flush with the hillsides. Looking out over the sea, it is very impressive, realising the next landfall is the Soviet Union, somewhere I suppose on the Kamchatka Peninsular. Considering that a Kalinin K-7 reached Spontoon last year on a one-way flight, one can certainly imagine all the Vostok being within bomber range, especially if they got that trick of mid-air refuelling working.

The hangars were not the only things built into the hillsides – the entire airfield looks like a rabbit warren, with doors and windows looking out of smoothly curved turf mounds. We are told it is for protection against the elements as much as for fortification and concealment – although when we arrived it was no more than breezy, it is a giveaway that nothing is out in the open without being securely lashed down.

We had just been shown to our billet, a rather generously sized underground hut like a buried pipe with doors and windows in each end, when we saw just what sort of aircraft called this place home. A great shadow passed over us – we looked up to see one of the silver airships wheeling like a fighter, on a tight spiral onto the runway! It must have been a hundred feet in span, but pulled up in a perfect “flare” landing, running to a halt in hardly fifty yards on aircraft type undercarriage. Fascinating.

Of course, one would hardly be a Songmark girl and not want to go straight out and take a look. I bet most Vostok citizens have never seen a “Balalaika” up close (which is its unofficial name, and indeed the airship is shaped rather like the body of that musical instrument) but Maria’s name and Sergeant Alex’s papers worked like magic and we got the ten-shilling tour.

If someone had talked to us about finding armoured airships, we would have filed them along with the left-handed spanners, elbow-grease cans and other fictions newcomers are told to go and look for. But we are assured (and we have examined the dents) that against small-calibre weapons the lower sides of a Balalaika are bullet-proof at most ranges! They are built of a Vostok patent Magnesium alloy nearly an inch thick, and are welded together without any inner skeleton being needed. The radiators are inside the shell, immune to battle damage and dumping their heat into the hydrogen for added lift effect – in fact the Balalaikas are only lighter than air when half their fuel and all the bomb load is gone, and they have to take off like regular aircraft.

We are impressed. Although the exact performance is classified, we are told a Balalaika has reached the Spontoon group and returned unrefuelled still carrying five thousand pounds of ballast. That would put it over Vladivostok with no trouble, though I doubt it would be carrying sand ballast on that trip.

Maria wanted to go up on the very next flight, but there is severe weather forecast and the airships were all heading for land as we arrived. We did get to help taxi the first one in, and took a look around the crew compartment, something like a glass-fronted torpedo slung under the main lifting body. Some of the flight has recoilless cannons in the stub wings and some have open crates of rockets, depending on the mission. As we watched, the rest of the squadron arrived, wheeling in like great plump vultures – actually more like slightly squashed oven-ready birds wrapped in metal foil, to be brutally honest.

The local weather forecasts must be better than usual; for just as the last hangar doors were shutting and locking tight (they have five-inch steel locking posts) the weather broke with a roar of wind that set my fur quite on end. Looking out onto the concrete outside, I could see the rain splashing back ankle-high, and almost going sideways in what had gone from a fresh breeze to a full gale in ten minutes flat.

I asked the flight crew (through Sergeant Alex) and they replied the weather at this time of year was rough – but nothing like as bad as in the Aleutian Isles, where one of them had worked as a whaler. The Aleutians are where we are one day scheduled to go for two weeks “training” with Songmark, and I remember the shell-shocked expressions of the third-years coming back from that little excursion. Help!

Saturday 31st December, 1935

After two days of absolutely howling gales and lashing rain, the weather cleared up as quickly as it had broken. In fact, the sudden calm woke us up just after dawn; we had become so used to the roaring outside our snug burrow that it was as if a ship’s engines had just shut down outside.

Yesterday we spent indoors, looking round the cavernous hangars and exploring with voracious interest the squadron of Balalaikas. It seems that Vostok is trying its hardest to work on its strengths – oil and electric power. They can export both, in a way – they use their huge hydroelectric plants to make aluminium (importing the ore from Kuo Han in exchange for oil) and increasing quantities of magnesium, which they extract from sea-water. Anywhere with a coast could do this, but it is awfully dear on electric current, and only Vostok has decided to go for it in a big way. So we have magnesium girders in the hangars, magnesium furniture in the rooms, magnesium left right and centre on this airfield, even the pots and pans on the stoves are magnesium. Having only seen it in flash-bulbs and fireworks at home, I was a little wary of using it at first, but was reassured it would have to be finely ground or molten to actually catch fire.

There are large buckets of sand in the corner of every room and detailed fire notices next to them, just the same.

I fear we gave Sergeant Alex a hard time yesterday, with Maria insisting on a flight in one of the Balalaikas, and he having evidently been briefed after our experience with the Reds to see no further harm comes to her. We reached a compromise that had Maria tossing her horns in impatience, but grumblingly accepting the result – as an Ambassador she may be too valuable to risk, but Molly and I are not. It suddenly makes being just “Plus 3 on the Guest List” seem all worthwhile.

Quite a trip! We had to do without Sergeant Alex, there being only room for us plus the crew even if Molly lay flat on a sort of horizontal couch the crew showed us under the main cabin floor, which had a good view ahead and forwards through an optically flat porthole. There is also a rather good set of built-in binoculars rigged with her position, which the mostly mustelid crew explained in gestures was for navigation and tourism use. I rather think they were fibbing. We borrowed flying kit (rather worn but freshly washed) and squeezed on board just after luncheon with Maria looking up at us from her volunteer job of helping the ground-crew.

The Balalaika was chained down till the last minute, while both engines were run up to full power and the crew watched the strain gages relax on the undercarriage, the engines heating the hydrogen in the great metal shell above us. The stub wings swivelled to about ten degrees and the chains let go with a rattle – and we were off! It seemed an impossibly bulky craft to get in the air, and indeed without hydrogen it would be. We raced down the runway, bumped a few times and were very smoothly in the air – the Flight Engineer calling out from two instruments our mass and buoyancy, starting at fifty tonnes and thirty-eight respectively as we left the runway. So in effect we had twelve tons of aircraft flying with the biggest “wing” any aircraft has ever had, the whole top curve of the airship shaped for lifting.

I must say, it was amazingly quiet in flight. We were a long way from the engines, and they had great slow-turning propellers the size of autogyro rotors that hardly made a whisper. I can quite believe some of the tales of the Dirigible Fighters in the Great War, “loitering” behind woods and houses in ambush a few feet off the ground, before suddenly dropping ballast and leaping over their cover like a wild beast (they scored a few notable successes at first, but would have been better for ground-attack had they been bullet-proof like the Vostok models.)

Romanov Island was soon far behind us, lost in the grey haze as we climbed steeply. The air speed indicator was reading eighty as we climbed; only kilometres an hour to be sure but very respectable for a gasbag. I watched the wings and engines swivel as we levelled out at three thousand metres, glad of my warmly padded flying jacket. Molly and I kept up a running conversation through the speaking-tube, much to the amusement of the rest of the crew: from her position she has a great view of the ocean but none of the cockpit, whereas my view was the other way round.

One hour and ten minutes from the Vostok coast we slowed and changed course, swinging North at about a quarter engine power. Indeed, looking at the gages we were only four tonnes “heavy”, and hardly needed much air speed. The crew’s mood changed, very markedly. They stopped chatting and voices became tense, the Flight Engineer manning a sort of periscope that came out on the top of the shell some five metres above us.

I wriggled forwards to get a look at the map, just as we changed course. Molly had been reporting a chain of tiny rocky islands below us, the map describing them as the Strely Visetski Islands, though “shoals” might be a better word – the rocks being only occupied by sea-birds as far as Molly’s sights could show her.

We were slowly moving back along the line of the islands when the Pilot gave a terse exclamation and pointed off to starboard. My eyesight is good, but his must have been amazing, as with binoculars it took me half a minute to see what was out there. By that time the fore and aft gunners were swinging their twin machine-gun mounts (good British Lewis’s, I was glad to see) and the Pilot had the cover off what was obviously an arming switch.

Dear Diary. It was quite a scene that afternoon, all the more so for us being unprepared for it. The only land visible was the Strely Visetski Islands, as desolate a bunch of rocks as any castaway could fear to find. There is nothing down there – except a line on the map, which neither side are likely to agree about. Behind us lay the Vostok group. Ahead of us, a hundred and fifty miles of frigid ocean and Siberia.

But it was not what was down on the water that worried me. Our Balalaika was hovering over the islands, just holding position against the wind with its big propellers flicking round lazily – and slung under the wings, two twenty-packs of rockets primed and ready to fire. Because just a mile away, we had company. There were three Soviet aircraft on their side of the line, giants of the skies flying in a “racetrack” pattern at the holding point just outside Vostok waters, two of the huge eight-engined troop carrying “Maxim Gorky” whose civilian variants carry cinemas, radio stations and printing presses on board, and a Kalinin K-7 just like the one that buzzed Spontoon in front of the world Press in the Schneider Trophy competition. To be accurate, there were six aircraft; the Kalinin had three of those unknown Polikarpov fighters slung on “trapeze” mounts under its huge oval wing, their pilots looking extremely chilly and probably relishing the chance of some excitement.

I can see why Maria was not allowed on this trip. And I can see why the Vostok authorities were keen that we should go, to report back to her on just what is out there. We stayed on station two hours, while a big Beriev flying boat arrived and went into its own holding loop about two miles away. As I watched through binoculars, one Soviet aircraft after another broke ranks to join it in formation, and in the low evening light I just make out a hose glinting with ice in the sun which each connected to. It looks as if the Soviets actually have got in-flight refuelling working now – a fact that is NOT in “Jane’s All The World’s Aircraft.”

Just as the sun was setting, another Balalaika turned up for the standing patrol and we turned for home. I must say, as long as they are facing nothing more manoeuvrable than a K-7, the airships do make super patrol aircraft, with great range and endurance. If a swarm of parasite fighters decided to enter the contest though, it would be just too bad – and even if the Americans would let the Vostokites have some of their helium, it would hardly improve matters. I had been having as much of a conversation as I could manage with the Flight Engineer, who had pointed to the arming switch and traced a wire leading to the radio. I gathered that if Ioseph Starling had decided to cross the line today, the Balalaika has neither the speed nor inclination to run away – the pilot would expect to knock a Maxim Gorky or two out of the sky with his shotgun scatter of forty rockets, but having done so would not expect to last long enough against the fighters to radio base in the normal way and tell them about it. Hence the automatic switch leading to the radio, no doubt triggering some special signal that will tell the base what has happened and what to expect overhead in forty minutes time.

It was a great relief to see the coast looming up in the last of the light and the familiar pattern of landing lights switch on as we were identified approaching. We were thoroughly chilled, and as soon as we staggered out of the aircraft the ground crew were on us like returning heroes, thumping the pilot on the back and offering us great steaming flasks of hot coffee. I prefer tea myself, and from the scent this coffee was about a quarter added plum brandy – but I drank it very gratefully, my nerves being rather shaken. I must say, about a quadruple measure of “Slivovitz” actually helped them a lot.

(Later) Maria was very keen to hear everything, and indeed we had a lot to tell her. I never thought I would be the one to dissuade her from taking a flight, but playing “Russian Roulette” at the holding point over the Arctic Ocean is rather too much excitement to be a healthy habit.

Still, if there is one thing the Vostokites do well apart from making Magnesium and recruiting excessive numbers of Secret Police, it is to throw a good party. About ten, we realised it was New Year’s Eve – in all the travelling and excitement we had forgotten. (For some reason they celebrate New Year tonight along with the rest of the rest of the world, though by my reckoning on their calendars it should be “our” January 12th.) There is an Officer’s Mess on the base, to which we were invited by a rather clumsily spelled (but exquisitely written) note that looked as if it had been put together using nothing but a Russian-English dictionary – and I think we shall attend. Good night, 1935!

Monday January 1st, 1936

Dear Diary – I now know why the locals celebrate New Year at the same time as the rest of the world, despite their calendar otherwise being twelve days out of joint. If Ioseph Starling decided to invade right now, he could stroll straight in to a nation of extremely sick and hung-over Russians, most of whom will not be up till midday – but as by all accounts most of his own troops are in the same state this morning, and he probably has too few teetotal troopers to do it with.

Anyway, last night was a rather fine party if one stayed off the vodka (the Officer’s Mess alone must have got through enough to fill a Tiger Moth’s fuel tank) and concentrated on learning the dance moves. Just before midnight there was a roaring of engines outside, and about twenty fierce-looking boars in round steel helmets burst in through the door. Our ears went right down for a second, but from the roars of welcome around us we deduced they were not a Soviet parachute squad invading but some folk that had been expected – Motor Cossacks, as it turned out.

The Vostokites seem rather old-fashioned in that nine tenths of their troops were male, but at least that put us in great demand as dance partners. I stuck to a glass of rather sweet champagne * and refused anything more inflammable – then I all but danced my paws off, being taught a sort of Cossack “Sitting-down dance” just as one sees in the films. It is remarkably strenuous, even for folk as fit as we are and with our dance experience. I would rather have sore paws than a sore head, any day.

Last year we saw out on the hilltop with our Spontoonie friends, casting their ritual sacrifices into the bonfire on top of Casino Island. This time round, midnight came as we listened to the great church bells of Tsarogorod over the radio – and joined in with cheerfully hurling emptied tumblers of vodka to smash into the roaring open fire. Wasteful but fun.

I retired about two in the morning, but I think some folk were up celebrating till dawn. If this is a front-line airfield, I hate to think what the cities are like right now.

(Later) I recall being told that the Cossacks would surprise us, and their mounts certainly do. They ride tankettes! Rather interesting designs, obviously inspired by Mr. Martel’s ideas (one hopes they pay him royalties) and obviously designed with speed in mind. In fact, one can see that they asked for an armoured

horse with about the same performance as the ones they were unable to bring with them on the legendary Last Convoy from Vladivostok. There are two models parked outside our hangars, a single-seater and a twin seater, the single seater being powered by a recognisable rotary aircraft engine amidships.

After luncheon (breakfast for most of the base) about half of the Cossacks surfaced. They still seemed quite capable of showing off to their flying comrades and their guests, and roared around the base proving their prowess. One hardly thinks of armoured vehicles as being fast or agile, but the single-seaters certainly were. They are scissors-jointed in the middle around the engine housing, and I found out why. Watching one dashing Motor Cossack heading at full speed towards a four-foot boulder, I waited for him to swerve aside – and was amazed when there was a loud bang and the vehicle jackknifed two feet shorter as it leaped over the obstacle! One supposes the gyro action of the rotary engine keeps it upright in the air.

Although the longest Russian phrase I have memorised is “No more vodka, please”, I hardly needed to read the manual to see how this worked, looking at one of the parked single-seaters. They are armed with something like a one-pounder cannon that can be loaded with a blank cartridge and configured with a flick of a lever to become an instant gas cylinder. The tankette jerks itself into the air like a leaping cricket, being much lighter than it appears and mostly built from (surprise surprise) Magnesium.

I would hate to think how few miles to the galleon these do, but if they have two things in plenty on Vostok it is petrol and light alloy.

We were all invited for rides on the two-seater models, which proved to be fur-raising experiences. The way the Cossacks ride, they are pulling “G” almost all the time in one direction or another – having perhaps two hundred horsepower with a vehicle about the mass of two large horses is rather a treat. I had to hold on tight to Nicolai, the driver who seemed to be competing with his friends to see how much of our route we could do in mid-air. Quite a ride, indeed.

(Memo to myself – Cossacks are reputed to be dashing and highly honourable types, even if they are famed as totally pitiless enemies. I can vouch for the first two – we stopped for a breather a few miles out on the rolling hills, and I found myself wishing I was in my Siamese guise; the Cheka and whoever else will be no doubt printing detailed descriptions of everything we did on Vostok. Still – if one falls scandalously in a forest and nobody is there to see it, does it make a scandal? Molly seems to think not.)

* Editor’s Note: in the diary is a plain-text notepad page that looks like part of an abandoned food and drinks guide in Amelia’s writing. Part of it reads: “Molly tells me the Russians were great fans of peculiarly sweet champagne, at least the ones who headed out to winter in Monte Carlo and similar places. Until 1917 that is, when they stopped coming for evermore and the ones who had stayed in Europe could no longer pay their hotel bills. The story is famous to everyone in the wines and spirits trade even twenty years after, as the warehouses are still full of it and nobody much wants to drink it!”

Thursday 4th January, 1936

Farewell to the airfield! It has been a super trip, and we have flown every day on training and supply flights. I can even put six hours certified dirigible “solo” in my logbook, when I get back to Songmark, as the base commander has stamped and signed certificates for us. At least our logbooks are safe at home – Maria and myself lost all our papers when the Bolsheviks robbed us, including our passports. Maria has already received a Diplomatic replacement one from her embassy – I have enquired, but there is no word from the British Consul in Tsarogorod.

We piled into an unarmed Balalaika that was heading back for major maintenance, and within five minutes were soaring over the rugged coast heading back to the capital. It was rather a relief that we stayed fairly low, as the past few days have had us thinking hard about aeronautical diets. The Mess serves the food that local folk seem to like most, including lashings of cabbage of all varieties and big bowls of hearty pea soup that are very welcome against the cold. Perfect for ground crew, indeed – but shooting up to twenty thousand feet in five minutes has rather unfortunate consequences. The cabins are not pressurised, but our digestions are – excessively and painfully so.

With luck, the Bolsheviks should have been shaken off our tails by now. A splendid view that made me wish we had our cameras with us, not that we had been allowed to bring them into the country. Still – if I had been taking pictures of this trip, they would probably have gone the same way as my passport. All very annoying. It was farewell to Sergeant Alex, who is presumably going to write up his notes. He did claim he was planning on writing a book, even if it goes straight into the Cheka archives and nobody ever reads it except the Other Secret Police who will probably obtain a copy.

Unlike our previous arrival in Tsarogorod, this time we were not grilled to a turn by customs interrogators; arriving in a Vostok Air Fleet Balalaika has that effect. We were whisked away from the runway in a plain omnibus, and headed out to something like a mansion-house about ten miles from the capital in quite capital grounds. Maria says it is a “Dacha”, something all the best Russians aspire to; so good in fact that even

in Comrade Starling's "classless" Soviet Union the top Party Officials get to use them. It is a very nice country house with a full complement of servants; unlike Comrade Starling's drab nation, these Russians have class.

Anyway, this is more like it. We all get proper rooms, with hot deep baths of the sort I have dreamed about. Showers are good enough for washing salt and engine-oil off one's fur, but hardly relaxing – and though the game is quite fun sometimes, it is a relief to know that nobody is sneaking up behind with a knotted wet towel.

(Later) The only person around here who speaks more than a few words of English is a servant who seems to be the head butler. Of course, Butlers normally know everything. He is Boris Davenitska, a tall goat gentleman with a most impressive set of horns and a patrician-style beard, quite impeccably dressed (hence we are sure he is the butler, who can be relied on to define "impeccable".)

Mr. Davenitska informs us (Butlers never just talk, they inform) that we are expecting distinguished company for Christmas, and that suitable clothing will be provided. As we arrived dressed in flying kit, it came as a great relief: walking along elegantly panelled halls wearing the local version of a Sidcot Suit was getting rather embarrassing.

Indeed, when we gathered again at Maria's room after luncheon there were half a dozen maids, two mouse-like rodents, "Pikas" I believe they are called and four Siberian Marmots. They were all over us with tape measures, chatting excitedly in Russian as they showed us sample books of rather fine and bang up-to-date Euro dresses. It seems as if Admiral Verechagin wants to make up for us having our originals ruined by the Bolshevik bomb attack on our arrival, which is very nice of him. Molly's idea of sending a claim form to Comrade Starling was rather unrealistic.

We have really fallen on our feet here; the Officer's Mess was very fine of its kind but hardly up to this – and most of the food came out of catering-sized tins, I had never seen tinned whole chickens before. There is a definite lack of black bread and cabbage here. Ironically, here we have a better "high-altitude diet" than the crews on the airbase, with as much white bread, butter, ham and eggs as we want for the first time in weeks.

I have been assigned my very own maid (or possibly she comes with the room), which is a new experience for me. Laika is her name, a young Pika girl with very nice silver-grey fur. She seems very thin for her species and rather nervous – I wonder what folk have been telling her about us?

Friday 5th January, 1936

I seem to be making some progress with Laika – our breakfasts are sent up to our rooms, and through the dressing mirror I noticed her looking rather hungrily at mine. I ate half and gestured for her to take the rest – rather tearfully she moved to carry it out of the room. Eventually I got through to her that I wanted her to eat it, not send it back to the kitchens. She accepted somewhat fearfully, as if half sure it was a trick.

Laika speaks no English, but it turns out she does know about as much French as I do, and we managed to converse after a fashion. From what I could gather, she was born in Russia but brought here as a very young cub with the owner of the Dacha, a Count Zilgor. The way she said it, he moved his estates to Vostok during the Revolution with all he owned, the furniture and fittings and servants that belonged to the estates. I am sure she must mean he offered to evacuate them all, but my French is no better than hers. After all, if there is one thing country houses always complain about, it is managing to keep servants – "She was a brilliant cook as cooks go, and as cooks go, she went" is the usual lament one hears.

She looked definitely happier with even half a good breakfast inside her, and before luncheon was assisting Molly, Maria and I with the first fittings of our Christmas dresses. I must say, Molly is looking very elegant these days – she has remembered everything she was taught back at Madame Maxine's about poise and bearing, and our past two weeks of strenuous living have toned us all down like racehorses.

While our party dresses were being worked on, we went for a stroll in the grounds, with Mr. Davenitska trailing unobtrusively in case anything was wanted. The Dacha is laid out very like a European country house, with all the features one might copy from a tourist guidebook – there is a rose terrace, a gazebo and a Ha-ha * of positively tank-proof size. I pointed out its original job, of keeping grazing animals in the outer farmland from climbing up to snack on the flower beds. Molly of course had her own interpretation – the abrupt drop being there so the nobility can sit on the edge sipping champagne, look down their snouts at all the peasants toiling away below and bray "Ha-ha! Ha-ha! Ha-ha!"

I hate to say it, but on Vostok she might actually be right.

(Later) We had just returned from our walk when there was a great commotion outside, and we looked out to see a small but expensive convoy of five large motor cars, the front one being a silver Rolls Royce. I heard the name "Zilgor" in hushed tones from one of the staff, so it seems that the Count is home.

Fortunately, by the time we returned to our rooms we could dress for the formal occasion, with Laika very happily assisting me at my toilette and proving very useful in grooming. My new dress is a rather conservative design (showing less fur than others I have worn) but at the same time extremely elegant in cut. Molly's is quite like it, she says she "feels like a million dollars", though with the state of her finances she generally does.

We had caught a glimpse of Count Zilgor as he left the cars; he is a very striking and surprisingly young wolf (the Russian nobility are mostly wolves) for his rank, in his late twenties I would say. Maria is of the opinion that only the younger and more athletic nobility managed to escape the Revolution.

Anyway – we were presented to our host, who speaks English and French both, and regretted to Maria he only spoke a little Italian – before launching into an eloquent flood of that language that had her ears blushing. I must say, he seems very charming, and looks one of those rare folk who could play themselves on film. Most of the gentry I have met back Home tend to be tweed clad types who dress rather like their gamekeepers – but then, I hardly see them in their town houses where the white tie and tail bows are worn.

A fascinating evening in the Great Hall, lit by a roaring log fire with a couple of wild looking four-legged hounds stretched in front of it. The Count is a most distinguished speaker, and I could see him quite charming Maria. He tells us he has some novel ideas for social reform that would solve most of the world's problems if properly carried through. They seem to be based in providing most of the population with lifelong security, the lack of which he blames for most of this century's upheavals.

I noticed the servants rather wince behind his back as he said that – he is definitely a major employer, never having less than half a dozen folk in attendance all the time. They were very smart and served us promptly, with quite impeccable technique. Still, I could tell things were definitely tense in the household staff.

(Later) Christmas Eve, Vostok style! The seasonal dish is a rather odd cold soup, with yellow pickled fish, mixed with peculiar gelatine and drifts of crushed ice. Not my idea of a festive treat, but it was definitely distinctive. We finished up the evening just before midnight with a glass apiece of that somewhat sickly champagne – although the vintage was older than I am, it had retained its particular hints of barley-sugar.

Laika was at hand to help me out of the unfamiliar dress afterwards – it being the only costume I have worn that needs a maid to get into and out of. She seems rather awed of us still, and looking at my flying kit hanging up, asked if it was really true that we flew our own aircraft. Having Sand Flea 1 awaiting me back on Spontoon, I could certainly confirm that we do!

* (Editor's note: no proper stately home is complete without a Ha-ha. You might as well build it without a drawing room or a library, and then where would all the murders take place?)

Saturday 6th January, 1936

Merry Christmas – again. It seems very odd to have two Christmases, but remembering what we were doing on December 25th one hardly feels greedy. A fine day in front of the fire, with Count Zilgor at his most expansive, being the perfect host to us.

It was when Maria prompted him to explain his social visions that I got rather a shock. I hardly specialised in Russian history at school, but he gave us a potted version to set the scene. Before 1861 many of the countryside folk were serfs, legally bound to a piece of land and with no possibility of doing anything else. One could call it slavery, except that they belonged to the estate and only indirectly to whoever owned it at the time – and few objected (According to the Count), as they lived in a special state of grace, “Holy Poverty” (According to the Count, again) that freed them from material concerns – to hear him describe it, it was a more practical form of Socialism but better managed. When a well-meaning Tsar liberated them, many drifted to the towns and starved, emigrated or became mixed up in radical politics they could not understand (unquote.)

Count Zilgor's great scheme is to re-introduce Serfdom, preferably world-wide! He explained with great charm that most people feel dissatisfied with their lot – it hardly matters how much they have; if their neighbour has more and there is a way to get it, there will always be conflict. Only with a completely stable system of “Holy Poverty” can true contentment be found, with the mindless masses ruled wisely by their betters and saved from the conflicts and unhappiness caused by social climbing. Nobody was ever bankrupted, and no farmer ever evicted, as unlike the modern system they were part of the land itself. Unquote.

Ah. Well. Yes. This would explain a few things. Even Maria looked rather pale in the snout at the idea – her Uncle's regime has its critics, but they have never advocated returning to the feudal system. I did ask the Count just how he expected to run factories and modern industry under the system – traditional serfs can be “paid” in potatoes, but without a cash economy it might be a little tricky giving them aero-engine parts to take home at the end of the day.

Fortunately, we were spared more of his theories by the ringing of a gong announcing another visitor. The Count had been expecting her, but none of the staff had – they fell flat on their snouts most respectfully as four huge polar bears squeezed through the double-doors at the end of the room. Behind them came a slender, elegant silver fox whose portrait we have seen on walls and postage stamps here – and even Molly managed a quite respectable curtsy as we recognised Her Royal Highness, the Grand Duchess Alexandra.

Quite a day! Christmas in more exalted company would be hard to find in this part of the world – I have small chance of being “presented” at Court back home, but now I can say I have been introduced to royalty. I had wondered why she was not Tsarina, being the last known survivor of her branch of the family – but it seems there are four senior relatives “Missing” still since the Revolution, and until they are confirmed

alive or dead she cannot usurp their claim. If Ioseph Starling has any sense he never will release details of their fates. Further, Maria has mentioned that the Grand Duchess's title is not absolutely bomb-proof; as long as she rules well she is secure at home, but if she makes a play to be crowned Tsarina Of All The Russias, the prize might be worth her relatives risking another Civil War for. (It would be hard to claim to be Tsarina Of All The Russias anyway when she only controls Vostok, but it is a statement of intent. After all, the Tsar of the time hardly gave up the title just because Napoleon occupied Western Russia for awhile.)

At last, Maria got the chance to do what she came here for – have a long afternoon's talk with the Grand Duchess, the results of which will probably wait till she can get back to her code books and the telegraph on Spontoon. Molly and myself had no place in that meeting, not that we really wanted to – Count Zilgor's plans had rather disturbed us, especially seeing how well he and the Grand Duchess get along.

An excellent meal (roast goose) and farewell to Her Royal Highness. She did chat with us for ten minutes, asking how we had enjoyed our trip. The flying was rather fine, we could truthfully tell her – though our time with the Pelmeni was rather too rough for comfort. An Adventuress I might be, but I have no ambitions to be a soldier of fortune.

(Later) We were about to retire for the evening when Count Zilgor strolled in, his tail high and evidently in excellent mood. He has a late Christmas Present for us, he says, that should be arriving tomorrow with complements of the Grand Duchess. With that he bade us goodnight, and vanished in a swirl of cigar smoke.

Well! He has already been very generous, we cannot fault his hospitality whatever little quibbles we might have for his social engineering plans. Molly is hoping the present will be something saleable, and says she could quite fancy a nice diamond Faberge egg. She already has a few mementos from our trip, her Tankette riding Cossack friend having presented her with a very practical all-steel knout which she has been practicing with. Thinking of him, I know at least Molly will not be taking an unexpected souvenir home – it is rather a pain that it coincides with the local Christmas, but all three of us are ticking our diaries today. (I noticed this last year – since sharing a dorm and breathing each other's scents all the time, our calendars have moved to be in synch with each other, or specifically with me. Very odd, I thought at the time, but on enquiring of our Matron Mrs. Oelabe I discovered it is nothing at all uncommon.)

Sunday 7th January, 1936

Tatiana is back – again! She really has had bad luck this trip – one would say the Gods dislike her, except she is a loudly evangelistic Atheist. Perhaps that's why they dislike her. We were amazed, we were sure she would have left with her Red friends and return to Spontoon via the Russian Embassy.

Count Zilgor announced with a flourish that one of Vostok's finest had rescued her – he apologised for being late with the news, but it had been sent at first only to the Grand Duchess herself. He presented our companion, who looks pale and shocked but uninjured, bowed and left her to us.

We hardly liked to ask her what had happened – there are quite a few “fates worse than Death” and from the look of them Tatiana had seen several. In fact she hardly even waited till the shower was running full on before bursting into her tale – which was quite a shocker, indeed.

There are Reds and Reds, as Tatiana and Liberty Morgenstern keep reminding us – and though Tatiana is an Otzovist, that is officially accepted though thought a bit warped by Ioseph Starling. The folk who we met in the forest are a different bunch entirely – they are Mensheviks, who are the vilest heretics according to Tatiana! She had no idea any survived on Vostok, and assumed (as we all did) that they had come from her homeland – but as she used her passwords and such, they spotted right away just what she was. Naturally they played along with her for a week while she was “de-briefed” by a very convincing officer on everything she had seen on Spontoon and Vostok. Tatiana is a very conscientious girl, and left no secrets unspoken.

Of course, Reds are basically Reds to everyone else – and when they had squeezed her dry of information, the “officer” casually told her just who he was and what she had done. Typical. He also announced what they intended to do with her the next day – and unlike Maria and myself, the hut she was in was rather escape-proof. He left her there to think about it, rather typical cruelty if one believes the films.

Definitely, she has been through a lot. She told us that she deserved to be taken out and shot after having been taken in and betraying her Party – but there was worse in store. She was rescued that very night by a dashing figure that silently cut through the bars with acid and got her out through the Menshevik camp just before an artillery barrage flattened the place – I would guess her rescuer was one of the “Akula”, those anti-Bolshevik Knight-Errant types whom we have heard about! Certainly she was presented as a Rescuer to the Grand Duchess just the day before yesterday – such an honour, I would have thought. Tatiana sees it differently.

Poor Tatiana. Physically she came to no real harm, but her political conscience is in pieces. (Molly thinks it screamingly funny and almost choked trying not to laugh.) I consoled her with the thought that when the Vostokites flattened the camp they probably destroyed the evidence – but nothing seemed to cheer her up.

Still, we are all together again, alive and well and (Maria tells me) Mission Accomplished! One more day in Tsarogorod tomorrow and then back before we have a double ration of New Year, local style. Then – home to Spontoon, and not an hour too soon.

Monday 8th January, 1936

A day of travel and sightseeing, a little more relaxed than our first days in Vostok. As Maria says, the Authorities have been watching us carefully and are satisfied we are what we appear to be – even Tatiana, to her great annoyance. We had the added treat of realising it is the first day of term at Songmark, and while we were leisurely packing and dressing our chums would have already been up two hours and probably be double-timing it around Mount Tomboabo while our Tutors encourage them to burn off some of the Christmas turkey and pudding.

I must say, the one twinge about leaving was saying goodbye to Laika. She is a super girl when one gets to know her (though not in the sense Ada Cronstein would given the chance) and deserves rather better than to be Count Zilgor's twenty-third chambermaid. I breakfasted on toast, giving her everything else – one would think if the Count can afford to import Rolls-Royces all the way out here he could spend a few shillings more on feeding his staff as a common courtesy. Still, unless I someday head back this way there is very little I can do about it (and I hardly know what I could do, even then. I can hardly afford a maid even if Spontoon let her in.)

Off to Tsarogorod, shopping and sightseeing! We have the whole day before having to be at the airfield, and in one of the cars that took us from the Count's estate we met our original guide Olga, her head still bandaged but much recovered. Borzois must be tougher than they look, or the Vostok hospitals are less fussy about after-care treatment.

Anyway, we saw the sights in cold but brilliant sunlight, with relatively few (or very high calibre) secret police following us. Maria spotted a film poster for something she says she had heard of – and persuaded us to go and see the matinee. My first film in months, and though it was in German with Russian subtitles I had Olga doing a non-stop translation in one ear. I can trust her translation on this, or at least I well believe she and the subtitle translator have the same point of view.

Umm. I can see why the locals would like this one. On the face of it, it is a heart-rending tale of divided loyalties with a message of always doing as one's conscience tells you. A few of the Walt Ditzzy films have been on those lines, though perhaps not with this sort of slant. It was the tale of a young canine from a poor slum family, who joins the local sort of Boy Scout organisation they have these days and finds fresh air and loyal companionship. His family disapprove – and behind the scenes we see his Father is a secret Communist, plotting to bring down the forces of law and order in the town. I must say, it was rather harrowing, to see the young Quex discover his own family to be deep in dark designs, and go through Hamlet-like indecisions over what to do about it. It must be a terrible thing, to have to decide between one's family and one's Country.

(Memo to myself – I hope Father doesn't see this one, or he takes the more Walt Ditzzy view if he does. Unlike Quex Senior, I happen to be innocent of whatever Sopy Forsythe wrote about me!)

A rapid meal of Chicken Kiev (Or "Kneb" as they quaintly miss-spell it here) and we headed out for the airport, in one of the new "Elektro-drozhkys" or battery-driven taxis that quietly hum around the streets. They might not be able to make much over twenty miles an hour, but in cities as crowded as these one would hardly ever get the chance to go faster, even in a racing-car. Half an hour later we arrived at the airport to see a familiar shape looming in the dusk – they have laid on a Balalaika for us! Someone on Vostok seems to have liked us – a cheering thought.

Tuesday 9th January, 1936

Dear Diary – it is lunchtime, and we are back in our old dorm at Songmark. What a long, strange trip it's been. Rather severe head-winds stretched the flight to twelve hours, and we only arrived at the Eastern Island mooring mast at half past eight.

We had some trouble with Customs – at least, Molly and I did. I had lost my passport but had a certificate from the Vostok Foreign Ministry explaining the circumstances. Molly had no trouble getting into Vostok using her Macao passport (Songmark students famously come from all over) but had an awful job persuading folk on Spontoon she is who she says she is. Her fur is still dyed, which matches the new passport rather than the old one – and Customs have exact lists of permanent and semi-permanent inhabitants with their real nationalities. A few people were brought in to look and sniff hard at us before we were let in.

Anyway, we are back with a day and a half of classes to make up. All our year are away on South Island as I had thought; I am looking forward to hearing how Helen spent her holidays. Time to open another notebook for the new term!

(And indeed she did. The story continues in "Spring Chickens.")