

Gone With the Wind-Chill

Being the Eighteenth part (Golly!) of the diary of Amelia Bourne-Phipps, in her third year at Spontoons' Songmark Aeronautical Boarding School for Young Ladies. The dear girls are off on a jolly field trip; the Aleutian Islands in mid-winter. Presumably their Tutors have a warped sense of humour...

Monday 2nd December, 1936

(Transcribed from waterproof field notebooks, much later)

Dear Diary: all this Autumn we have been watching wild sea-birds passing Spontoon bound for warmer climes, leaving the Arctic and not heading North till Spring. They certainly had the right idea.

Everything started off well, with nine hours' sleep in our now rather unfamiliar beds, which did feel rather strange after weeks outdoors. I must say, when I first sat down on a Songmark bed in September 1934, I was sure it was a mistake and there was a mattress still to be added! Maria's comments were mercifully in Italian, but they were quite heartfelt. She had more to get used to after all; I had come from the rather bleak but jolly St. Winifred's school and she had become used to top hotels with feather mattresses and room service. She is used to sleeping on bare ground or tarmac now, like the rest of us. I must say, our Tutors have a useful way of economising. Anything we complain about, be it the food, the accommodation or the weather, they do not spend our tuition money on improving. They take it away and give us something much worse, until we better appreciate the original. Li Han calls this "Grandmotherly kindness."

I was quite right; they did give us a hearty breakfast. The condemned fur generally gets one before being taken out to be hung, or probably frozen in our case. A full "Flight Breakfast" with ham and eggs in fact, with about a bucket per dorm of breadfruit mash to fill in any gaps. Even Madeleine X cleaned her plate, and she hates breadfruit mash more than I ever disliked poi. I could see everyone getting more nervous all the time as they ate. When our Tutors seem to be gratuitously generous to us like this it only means they have calculated exactly what we will need and are providing it, like calculating an aircraft's fuel consumption. If an aircraft was intelligent, it would probably dread having its fuel tanks filled to the load limit, knowing there was some desperately long mission ahead its navigator was not letting on about.

Ada Cronstein naturally passes on the bacon, but swaps it for any spare eggs and most of us are very happy to oblige, the Spontoon farming system being what it is. Actual meat is rare! None of us in the year are vegetarian; even those with ancestry pointing that way had families who could afford to bring us up with some meat in the diet – but then, we are a rather richer section of society than the average to be able to afford Songmark fees. In the first-year we have that swan maiden Inga Ledasdottir from Vanierge, who presumably is no great admirer of people eating other avians' eggs.

One final kit check and we were off – the junior years waving us au revoir, though from Red Dorm it was more like wishfully thinking "goodbye." If anything happens to us they become the seniors two terms early! And there is a lot that can happen in the Arctic, by all accounts. I remember us waving the third-years off to the Arctic last year, and I remember what they looked like on their return. As we trooped out carrying our equipment, everyone was running through mental lists of just how warmly they had built their clothing and shelters; too late now if anyone was planning final improvements. Of course everything had passed inspection already; early in her first year a Songmark girl learns that however tired one may be at the end of the day, there is always enough time to re-wax one's boots and sew on that missing pocket button. Our Tutors teach that very comprehensively.

Off to the air terminal! As the first-years waved us farewell I found myself humming that poem by Mr. Kipling, the one that Father's butler and ex-regimental Sergeant-Major McCardle used to keep quoting;

*"The new recruit is silly. 'E thinks o' suicide.
E's lost 'is gutter-devil, 'E hasn't got 'is pride
But day by day they kicks 'im, which 'elps 'im on a bit
Till 'E turns out one mornin' with a full and proper kit
Getting' shut o' dirtiness, getting' shut o' mess
Getting' shut of doing things, "rather more-or-less."*

Our tutors manage without kicking us, to be sure, but the sentiments seem very familiar. If anyone has left anything "rather more-or-less" on this trip, they have only themselves to blame and nobody will be providing much help or sympathy. We have all looked up what we can about our destination, desolate islands in the sea called "The Mother of Storms" by the locals, and we are about as insulated and waterproofed as we can manage. Modified leather Sidcot flying suits are the order of the day; after all, an open cockpit at altitude and sea level in the Aleutians have a lot in common as regards expected temperature and wind speed.

Songmark's library is very low on entertainment, but heavy on things one needs to know. It is quite comprehensive too – although nobody has admitted to having ever read it, there is a very well-thumbed copy of "Modern feminine hygiene and safer motherhood" on the shelves, along with all the first aid and expedition guides. Still, goodbye for awhile to sitting down to read in a dry room while the rain hammers down outside in the darkness; we will be out in it very comprehensively!

Our aircraft was the familiar Lockheed Lamprey, which indeed is one of the few Spontoon resident flying boats that can comfortably carry a whole Songmark year complete with tutors and equipment. Last time we used it everyone complained about there being no view out of the cargo hold (our Tutors sit “upstairs” with the pilot) but now everyone just made as comfortable nests as could be arranged from the equipment, and settled down to relax in the relative warmth. We were warned it is a ten hour flight to the first landfall, and certainly the trip will be the last comfort we can expect. Being crammed in a rather ill-lit aircraft hold with eighteen other furs and all their kit is hardly the sort of comfort a five-star hotel puts on the brochures, but none of us were inclined to disbelieve it. If this is comfort, we are making the most of it.

Miss Devinski and Miss Wildford are the tutors along for the Aleutians; Jasbir whispers she overheard Miss Blande saying she was getting too old for these trips. After all, she did last year's equivalent and they say resilience is one of the first things to suffer with age. She has no problems with demonstrating her prowess on the firing range, and indeed has no lack of gentlemen admirers of her other charms. Possibly she will be spending the December evenings with more pleasant company than a wet bivouac shelter and a class of third-years.

Miss Devinski naturally put us through a full “Customs Search” before boarding; she found and confiscated the flat hip flask Molly had concealed in the small of her back. Actually, once onboard Molly whispered that had been an expendable decoy filled with cheap pineapple brandy; she has specially modified her water-bottle so that only the top pint is a container with water in it. The compartment in the lower end is accessed by unscrewing the bolt that holds the felt insulating cover on, and is full of something more saleable. Molly comments that she will be accepting I.O.U's this trip (apart from our emergency gold coins nobody is carrying much money as there seems little prospect of spending it) and looks forward to doing business based on supply and demand. The bar will not be open till she thinks the market is high enough, she adds. Definitely not on the first day, if even the first week.

(Later) Eight or ten hours is an awfully long time to spend in a freighter aircraft piled up like cargo, especially one with no windows. Strictly speaking there is a loader's window near the front but that place is hotly contested and I will be waiting till other folk are tired out before making an attempt at it. At least on my trip to the Gilbert and Sullivan Islands, it was a well-appointed passenger aircraft with a proper lavatory and not the makeshift arrangements we have. I have done my best to break Molly and Helen of calling it a restroom or a bathroom, by always asking them where the bath is or the beds to rest in. It is an uphill struggle. It took me three years to persuade them that buildings start on the ground floor, not the first floor. Apart from that, everyone is in waterproof suits that have been gone over again and again with wax, dubbin and rubber solution till they gleam. The scent in the crowded cargo hold is scarcely that of a fashionable boutique. Jasbir's dorm won the coin toss to get the last go at the third-year hot bath before we left, and indeed it is something we are liable to miss before long.

I remember what our friend Noota told us about her home islands; she has graduated and been gone more than two years now, and we have hardly heard from her since. Our Tutors sometimes pin up postcards from successful graduates as they keep us inspired with what they are doing around the world - at least, some of them. Helen points out that anyone proving an abject failure will probably not be writing to tell about it. We have heard nothing from our senior Zara in the Albanian South Indies, though that may be due to her lack of opportunity to post a card if she is shuttling between uninhabited islands. I wonder just how she did fail her third-year? It would be something to know how to avoid.

The Aleutians are a place where aircraft need to be lashed down as soon as the prop stops spinning, by all accounts - and ships use quadruple mooring cables the minute they hit port, even if it is one of the few calm afternoons of the year. The local storms are called “wirriways” or something like it, which resemble tornadoes in effect but are more likely to sneak up on one as they can strike through cloud cover. Noota told us about the sad case of her uncle who froze to death in a blizzard going the fifty yards from the house to the barn. He was only found in Spring, lying a quarter of a mile away having been totally disorientated - and he was born on the islands. And to think in England the newspapers call it a “blizzard” when we have six inches of snow.

One thing we had a chance to do was to catch up on each other's Sunday adventures. Maria had a lot to say about the “Parade of Nations” on Meeting Island that she attended to represent her country along with many Songmark girls such as Reet from Estonia and Morag from Scottish Darien; of course a nation the size of Spontoon does not have consulates of every country in the world. Some of the embassies sent over “approved” parties of representatives, who set up their stalls and carried on bickering with their neighbours as an accurate scale model of the world. Just as classically pups and kits played Cowboys and Indians, the youth of many nations now grow up playing Bolsheviks and Blackshirts - at least they do in Vostok, Italy, Starling's Russia and New Haven. The difference presumably is the side that is supposed to win.

Maria says there were several representatives from Austria, a nation whose leadership her uncle is cultivating. Their leader Doctor Dogfuss is proving a durable leader having survived numerous assassination attempts, notably by the Germans (so Maria says.) Austria, Hungary and Romania seem to have similarly inclined leaderships that “Il Puce” is doing his best to bring together in a common pact. If his “Arch of Steel” project comes to fruition there will be quite a power-block all the way from North Africa through the Alps to the Black Sea.

She also had a lot to say about the Czecho-Slovak leader, the tubby and genial Mr. J. Hasek from Prague who has ruled benevolently for the past decade. She is quite baffled by it; his “Party Of Peaceful And

Moderate Progress Within The Bounds Of The Law” is hardly something she predicted would have held up against the Reds on one side and the various jolly stern corporatist types that are their neighbours. Apparently the policy of providing free beer at the elections, no matter who folk voted for, works even better than one might have thought. Then, he is certainly a respected scientist in his field, being the founder of the Cynological Institute which discovered things about animals unknown except possibly on Cranium Island. Nobody else believed him, but now he is President he can declare anything to be true and enforce it, however bogus. Belle Lapinssen says one of her home states in the last century declared by law that the mathematical value of Pi was exactly three, and no engineers were allowed to complain about it. One hopes the aircraft’s engines were not designed and built there.

I had heard from Jasbir about that Parade of Nations, with Maria going snout-to-snout against Liberty Morgenstern in a debate. Our Trotskyite half-coyote lost the argument and made the mistake of trying to regain points in a public brawl – not something it was wise of her to try with Maria. She was lucky Maria did not make the experiment of breaking her in bits to see which half actually is coyote.

(Later) I can feel us descending, and see flakes of snow on the loading bay window. The first snow we have seen since January in Vostok, and we are further North than that now. Time to put the notebooks away and get the woolly gloves on!

Tuesday 3rd December, 1936

Well, here we are. We arrived last night, or more accurately just at last light, on one of the very few places with a seaplane jetty – “Dutch Harbour” according to the navigator. The place is no Casino Island, to be sure – our first impression was a cluster of limpets on the hillside, the houses being mainly smoothly curved roofs that are criss-crossed with steel cables braced to boulders or rock bolts. Seeing that some of the cables were broken gave us a clue as to what the storms are like here. The landscape is bleak and treeless, looking like some bits of Scotland I have seen; hill slopes vanishing into the mist that makes Spontoon even in Winter seem truly tropical. The Lockheed Lamprey was refuelling even as we were unpacking, and by the time we were off the jetty it had turned round and departed, taking advantage of the break in the storms. Aircraft and ships have been known to get stuck here for a week in the storms, if indeed they are not pounded to scrap.

Our first view of the islands was about twenty yards of jetty; fortunately we just found a clear spot in the weather before the next cloud bank rolled in. Miss Devinski had briefed us to stick together – if a Songmark third-year is likely to get lost in the fog or blown away in the wind it must be severe indeed.

Though none of us were expecting luxuries, our first night was decent enough – there is no hotel (not that we would expect to use it) but our Tutors had arranged us to stay in a sort of combined warehouse and bunk-room. It seems that apart from water and fish there is very little in terms of resources to be found around the island chain and almost everything has to be brought in. Certainly the Authorities seem to trust us with their year’s supply of lumber; the storage rooms were packed with everything from plywood sheets to bundles of stove kindling. Then, it is December and no more supply ships are expected till Spring – if the locals need anything this Winter they have to already have it in stock.

While Miss Wildford and Miss Devinski went out to arrange transport for tomorrow, the rest of us managed to make ourselves comfortable. A lot of stretching and exercises first helped keep us warm and shake the kinks out of legs and tails after the long and cramped trip. It is very much as one hears old soldiers reminiscing; we rapidly found the toilet, a place to eat and a place to sleep, and declared all right with the world. It was rather drafty, but looking up at the stout cedar roof over our heads we were very glad to be out of the weather for one last night.

Although we are not expected to put our equipment out for inspection like in our dorms, everyone was taking the time for one last re-packing and such. Apart from our Sidcot suits, the four of us have modified parachute harnesses worn over the top like those climbing shorts that have stood us in good stead, in case we have to haul each other up things or out of things. It is scarcely high fashion, but listening to the wind howling outside we hardly care. This is not a good part of the world to be wearing the Countess Rachorska’s elegant creations! I believe Beryl has a silk dress packed on the grounds that it weighs almost nothing, and one never knows who one is going to meet. I would agree, but even in the first year we are taught that a lot of the weight of the average pack is items taken along “because they weigh nothing.”

Miss Wildford came in with a hurricane lantern around eight, looking keen and brisk despite the snow clinging to her fur. Our transport has been arranged (weather permitting) for tomorrow, and we will be scattered amongst the smaller uninhabited islands. After which we are decidedly on our own, to sink or swim until we are picked up at the end (again, weather permitting.) One thing these islands are not short of is weather. One wonders how Noota’s family could afford to send her to Songmark, as the only thing these islands have in abundance nobody wants.

Although we were surrounded by firewood, for safety there was no stove in the main warehouse; fortunately there was one in the “office”, which was immediately pressed into service. We had brought with us from Spontoon some hotel catering sized cans of food, which were on the stove top about as soon as the first match was struck. Definitely warming, and the first gallon did not last us long between us. As third-years we had planned our own food supplies, and this time I doubt our Tutors have a ready supply of Maconochie to help out

if we make a mess of our calculations. The soup was calculated to be our first meal, in that it is heavy stuff and we would not be carrying it very far from the aircraft.

Some rapid improvisation with the island's plywood supply built us a group mattress that was at least marginally softer than the stone floor, and not quite as cold. One learns to make the best of things. Everything that could be piled over us was pressed into service, with even our packs (sturdy Canadian style wood and rawhide affairs) built up as an extra wall against the drafts. The warehouse keeps its contents dry and snow-free, but it is zero starts out of ten on the usual hotel scale. The softest things to lie on are each other; not that a third-year girl is the tenderest object around even dressed in a padded suit. Still, it is better than we will probably manage later on, and we made the most of it!

After a decidedly long and chilly night (there is about seven hours of daylight on a good day in December, and in December the Aleutians have no good days) we put the warehouse back the way we found it and found out more details of our trip. Miss Devinski and Miss Wildford had slept in the office by the stove; rank hath its privileges after all. Outside there was a break in the weather and we could see the distinctly chilly mountain slopes mostly snow-covered except where the wind had blown it off the rocks. It does not look like the Aleutians will ever have much of a tourist industry unless wind-blown fur becomes a fashion to replace sun-bleached.

Nobody goes outside much this time of year if they can help it, and last night we had seen almost nobody around but some muffled figures hurrying between buildings. In the brief sunshine we were introduced to Captain Anuninjac, a short and definitely round rodent of some species that I hardly recognised. He looked rather like those Arctic marmots that I met on Vostok, though with everyone so bundled-up there was little fur exposed to judge by. The Captain has a vessel that cannot hold us all at once (internally, that is – there would be room if we all stood on deck but that is not really an option. Spontoon central waters in Touristy Season, this is not.) So we will have to make three trips, and let the return voyage take care of itself. As Captain Anuninjac told us, there is little point in making firm plans for travelling in this part of the world as conditions can blow any plans to tatters like a wet map in the storm.

Madeleine X muttered "l'homme propose, le Dieu depose", which is about the first sensible thing I have heard out of her. Still, after all she is a Songmark third-year.

It was our luck to be in the first load out, with Prudence's dorm. Our bad luck in that our testing started first, but our good luck in that at least we did not have to wait around freezing our tails off waiting. Everyone triple-checked each other's supplies and equipment then we were all aboard and heading out of the harbour as fast as the engines could shove us. The shore is the dangerous bit after all; as the saying goes, sailors don't fear the deep seas nearly as much as the hard bits around the edges.

The waters around the dock were calm enough but as soon as we got into the open seas, the boat pitched most alarmingly – in fact the only reassuring sight was the Captain looking quite unconcerned as if it was a perfectly normal day. We got the first use out of our climbing rigging, with Helen having to belay herself to the side of the boat to be predictably sick. She was not the only one, Belle and Carmen were decidedly unwell – and it was rather like doing a difficult climb, securing themselves step by step across the very slick and pitching deck. Every step of the way they had to be belayed to at least two points, a difficult thing to do in a hurry.

Two hours of slow progress found us in the lee of an island perhaps a mile across, rising treeless and windswept to perhaps six hundred feet in the middle. Our hearts sank as Miss Devinski indicated this was our stop – and as there was no habitation there was no dock or even a decent beach to land on. Saying our farewells to our Tutors and Prudence's dorm, we grimly grabbed our supplies and went over the side. We had decided not to wear the Sidcot suits but to tow them in our supplies bundles – so in just our oilskins and mesh vests we took a dip in the waters fresh from the Bering Sea.

Dear Diary: we thought the Spontoon waters were cold enough in Winter, and indeed they are. This was painful! Fortunately it was only about sixty yards to the shore and the sea was calm – but the water almost paralysed us and by the time we got ashore I was gasping in shock.

Despite everything, the first thing we did on landing was to get out of our soaked clothes and try to break the record for grooming the salt water out of each other's fur in the slight shelter of a black crag just above the tide line. I had remembered our first ever survival swim ashore, two years ago on Main Island – and the Sidcot suits are heavy and padded unlike the flight suits we wore then which made such clumsy bathing costumes. Although they would have kept us warmer for the swim to shore, they would have been almost impossible to dry out with a couple of gallons of the Bering Sea in them.

Helen was in a particularly bad way, having lost her breakfast. Molly winced slightly, then handed her the deceptive water-flask having unsealed the end holding the brandy. She shamefacedly commented that her schemes of selling it rather fundered when she realised we were all going to be on separate islands and she was hardly going to charge us. There goes her market.

Anyway, in half an hour we were no more than damp, dressed in the Sidcot suits (happily kept dry in oilcloth bags like the rest of the supplies) and had a reviving snack of dried pineapple inside us. Our supplies are lashed to the pack-frames, and being mostly canned they survived the swim unscathed. Still, there is little enough for the four of us in this climate, and food is going to be tight. As will our belts be by the end of this. "Frozen Arctic Waists", indeed.

Exploring the island only took about four hours; in a depressingly short time we had summed up what was available to sustain us for a fortnight. True, we did not search every rock but having seen one ten-acre expanse of muskeg swamp (frozen on the top, swampy underneath) there is little to be gained from doing more than noting and mapping the next dozen such. The island was almost blown free of snow, being rarely more than knee-deep except for around the crags of black volcanic rock. We hopefully searched for the entrance to lava tubes, but found none. That would have been too easy, I suppose.

Despite the howling wind, we took advantage of a brief clear spell to scramble up to the top of the central hill. There is another much bigger island about two miles away, which looks more promising – but it is utterly outside swimming range in these waters and we have not seen much driftwood around for raft-building.

Wednesday 4th December, 1936

A chilly start! Last night we found shelter in the lee of a twenty foot crag, and were even grateful for a foot of overhang. Not much of a roof, and indeed we were very glad there was no heavy rain. Sleeping out in our clothes just will not do; today we set to and started building.

I have seen pictures of turf huts, but they must have been built somewhere with more agreeable materials. The soil here is full of rocks, making it hard to dig, and the peat turfs fall to pieces when one tries to stack them. Our first night's crag was turned down as a spot from a house; it is too far from the beach and that is our only supply of driftwood. On the other paw, getting too near the sea would be even worse when the real storms sweep in, as I expect they will soon and often enough.

Molly was keen on building an igloo, and indeed the books recommend it. Unfortunately that needs the right kind of compact snow, which we cannot find! It is all either dry spindrift blowing around the rocks or heavy porridge lying above the swamps, neither of which are much good for putting a roof over our heads.

It is definitely a test of our training. We could wander round the islands for days trying to find a perfect site, but as they say "the best is the enemy of the good" and we needed to get into some sort of shelter soonest. A seven-foot rock overlooking a narrow inlet provided one wall for us, and there were enough weathered boulders around to get some foundations laid before lunchtime. Nothing too big; there is very little sound driftwood to support the tarpaulin we have for the roof, and indeed a small structure will be easier to heat. Maria and Helen built while Molly and me scoured the coast for driftwood or anything else, having a thin time of it. There are a few shellfish on the rocks and we can see great drifts of kelp washed ashore further down the coast, but neither have much energy in them. Eating kelp might be like eating celery; one expends more calories chewing and digesting than it actually provides!

As to driftwood, we had to look jolly hard to find enough. I suppose the nearest actual forests must be either Siberia or Alaska, at any rate nowhere near here. Any currents coming from the North will not be bringing any timber, or anything except icebergs with them. There were some big logs washed up by storms high above the tide line, but they were soaked and so rotten they were half-way to being peat, and not much use for building either. Although some parts of Scotland and Ireland use peat for all their cooking and heating, it has to be dried out first – not something so easily done around here.

A definitely cheerless place, not that we expected much else. The frame packs came in handy for carrying back what firewood we could find. Food is less of a priority for today, as until our shelter is finished we will be in far greater risk of freezing than starving. My paws have been numb since we got here, and the drafty warehouse at Dutch Harbour is starting to feel like Shepherd's Hotel already.

With driftwood we could at last get a fire going, a great comfort. Molly's supply of Extreme Danger matches came in handy; they are something more like small flares than matches in the usual sense. Actually we only had the walls shoulder-high by sundown but that was enough to shield it from the wind. With my aluminium kettle steaming away over the coals we soon had the first hot drinks in nearly two days, a great morale boost of instant chocolate from our small supply. Just having an open fire-pit is not good enough, and I am going to try to build a stove with the materials available. We have clay and fire, and I recall enough of my pottery from school handicraft lessons to make a start.

A more comfortable night than before, but with only a tarpaulin over our heads that is relative. With the reflector fire, at least we could re-warm our paws enough to get the circulation back, which hurts. Spontoonie style oiled fur might have been a good idea after all.

Thursday December 5th, 1936

Another hard and chilly day. I recall our Domestic Science lessons back at St. Winifred's, where we learned the skills needed to be a home-maker. Today has been home-making of a more basic sort, and although somewhat primitive we now have one to be fairly happy with. That is, it is big enough for us all to stand up in, lie down in out of the wind and the rain mostly goes outside the walls rather than inside. There is no window and the door is tarpaulin lashed to the door frame, but millions of furs around the world live in little better. By cutting the tough heather-like plants that grow on the ridges between the swamps, we have made a sort of raised bed on a two foot shelf of rubble; it is not exactly a feather-bed but water falling on it drains away and at least we are not lying in

pools any more. Plus cold air sinks – not that there is much hot air in the hut to lose, with all the chinks in the wall still to plug and the wind screaming through them.

While Helen and Maria went off to scour for driftwood (we have decided that out here, nobody goes anywhere alone – not even when answering the calls of nature) Molly and I worked on plugging the gaps in the wall with moss and smaller stones. Mud would last until the next rainstorm; if it was a purely snowy landscape things might be easier. A wall of snow should at least keep the wind out better, and we have heard good things of snow caves.

Around lunchtime Helen and Maria came scrambling in laden with wood, and panting for us to seal the door and lash down the roof. We did so just in time – as we saw on Vostok last year, the storms have a standing start from breeze to full gale in about a minute flat. It was lucky that the exposed side was the solid natural rock face, as the storm absolutely screamed around us and our best efforts at building suddenly seemed awfully flimsy, with the tarpaulin above us flapping and thundering despite being lashed and weighted down. It is a good thing we were not depending on tents, as they would probably be at ten thousand feet half-way across Alaska by now.

Having had an anxious hour worrying about the roof staying on, we managed to relax a little and take stock of our supplies and such. We have twelve days scheduled here, and the food will not last. At least, not more than one meal a day apiece, and in this climate that will not do. Plus, there is no guarantee that Captain Anuninjac can get to us on time – in these waters he could be days late and think it only par for the course.

Still, for tonight we are well-fed and the roof seems to be holding up. The nights are awfully long and our supply of kerosene for the lamp definitely limited, so once we are sealed in for the night there is little to do but talk and try not to worry about our predicament. Nobody applies to Songmark expecting a fun time on the Casino Island beaches, and if they do I doubt our Tutors would do more than chuckle before giving the waste paper bin a snack.

Helen at least has quite a bit to look forward to: this month she and Marti will be Tailfast again and no doubt they will be spending the Christmas holidays in the Høele'toemi compound guest hut. This time next year she should be the newest (if she beats me to it) Mrs. Høele'toemi and settling into wedded life. Alternatively she may be busy establishing her Adventuring career, with South Island as a home base to return to between trips. Spontoon is a fine base for such, but as we have often been told by our Tutors, not everyone can set up office on Casino Island.

I suppose it is only like Father's career; he was posted around all parts of the Empire at generally short notice. He built roads up by the Khyber Pass, flood defences near the Mekong river in Burma, and fortifications everywhere. Of course, that did mean my brother and I spent most of our early years at boarding school – but most parents who can afford it do that anyway regardless of whether they are at home or abroad.

Helen has never quite appreciated that tradition; her Father took her everywhere since she was a most tender cub, even to rough oilfield boom towns and prospector's camps. She has often said no parent ought to pack their children off to boarding school, and indeed she got more of a Family life than I managed despite having only one parent. Mind you, she did get rather pensive when I asked if she planned on copying her Father and heading out Adventuring in a few years with a cub or two in tow to Krupmark or Cranium Island and points further afield. Adventuresses are meant to go and find treasures, not to risk losing them.

The only cub I recall seeing on Krupmark Island was definitely an orphan child of her neighbourhood – a curly red-furred girl with eyes that looked as if they had cataracts, being blank and milky – but apparently she could somehow see perfectly well and seemed quite unnervingly cheerful. She had a pet that was rather hard to describe, called "Rocky" or similar – it was something I only caught a few glimpses of and I did not like the look of at all, reminding me too much of that shadow which follows Kansas Smith's servant Half Ration. When I asked Lars at the time he whispered that this small orphan Anneka lives up near the church on the hill above Fort Bob, and the less anyone has to do with her the better for them.

Maria says she will have to take at least one return trip to Italy, to check in with her Uncle and probably argue with him about her career. A roving reporter is not the best paid of professions to rely on, if she gets cut off without a lira. Still, with Songmark training none of us are too likely to want for funds. She has speculated that her Uncle might find her more useful abroad than in Italy; she is rather out of touch with the inner workings of her homeland these days and says that in politics an up-to-the-minute firm grasp of who is doing what and why, is crucial. Having spent three years understanding this side of the world she would be rather wasted back in Europe.

It seemed a million miles away, discussing such things in the chilly darkness while pressed together for warmth in a crude stone shelter, and indeed Italy is just about on the opposite side of the globe. But there was little enough to find comfort in with discussing our immediate surroundings – we do not need to dwell on the poor supply of lamp oil and firewood, and any first-year could tell at a glance that our collection of pemmican, chocolate and tinned oatcakes (the standard Arctic ration) will not hold out for the whole trip even if we are picked up exactly on schedule.

At least we are keeping cheerful so far; Maria mused that the wind screeching and howling through the stones rather reminded her of some popular Futurist music from her homeland, which makes a start at being bold and ground-breaking by being played on bold and radical instruments, pieces of industrial pipework and such. The Germans have a similar idea, with their electrical Theremins and trautioniums replacing what they see

as symbols of corrupt and decadent musical culture. Jazz or “slanted music” as Eva calls it, is utterly beyond the pale these days unlike the decadent days of the Weimaraner Republic (says Eva.) Only music of proper boldness and purity is played on Berlin Radio these days. Two whole years now since we saw V-Gerat play on Casino Island!

Maria keeps up with what artistic news she can, and says the avant-garde styles continue to flourish in her homeland. Of course, not everyone likes it – there was a suspicion that the latest exhibition of Dadaist Art had been vandalised, but being Dadaist it was really impossible to be sure. I have seen Italian newsreels of unwanted munitions arranged artistically before demolition being touted as a “self-deconstructing artwork” – indeed, the only art exhibition I ever saw Molly enthuse over.

Friday December 6th, 1936

Almost a unique day in our Songmark careers – a day we stayed indoors and scarcely ventured out all day. The storm was absolutely savage and screamed non-stop, spindrift piling up in eddies behind our crag to at least fill some of the chinks in the wall with snow. As the day went on the snow level began to rise; looking out on one of our hasty and necessary trips outside we could see the sea was a flat sheet of foam with the waves almost hidden. Searching for driftwood would just have to wait; getting anywhere near the shore would be awfully dangerous and anything washed ashore would be covered in snow in minutes anyway.

I hope the other dorms are all right. Of course we have trained and equipped for this, but seasoned explorers perish too when the conditions pile up against them or their luck runs out. It is best not to think too much about what could happen to poor Adele Beasley out here. Molly has muttered darkly about how Prudence and co. will be staying warm and occupied.

Although our hollow is relatively sheltered, we had little chance to improve our hut as all the stone around was either buried in snow or frozen solid to the swamp. Even the snow itself was no use, dry powder that will not stick together enough to make a decent snowball, let alone an igloo. I have not been in snow for nearly three years apart from a few flakes on Vostok, and I thought I had missed it. But willingly heading out through paw-deep drifts for a snowball fight at Saint Winifred’s with a roaring fire (well, at least a warmish radiator) to return to is rather different from this.

Despite everything, we needed to keep exercising somehow just to keep warm. There is little enough room in the hut, but we took turns to do sit-ups and press-ups and kept tolerably warm. What fuel we have is reserved for the evening when it really gets colder and we need the light as well as heat.

Even those exercises Mrs. Hoele’toemi taught us can be pressed into service, needing no room to practice. They are most healthy, and all the Spontoonie girls are taught them. I recall Mrs. Oelabe our Matron referring to the locals as typically having “a pelvic floor you could bounce a cannonball off” and indeed hula dancing is not the only way they get that way. For once, Maria was not threatening to dump a bucket of water over us – if we had that much unfrozen it would be far too precious to waste.

One thing I managed today was to complete the stove. A “coil-pot” construction may be made in almost any shape, and if it has a few cracks after drying out it will still be better than the open hearth we have been smoking ourselves out with. Next project, a clay chimney!

Sunday December 8th, 1936

Dear diary – the storm is over! After three days at full throttle the winds slackened to be no more than a gale, the sort where folk usually start worrying about slates coming off the roof and branches falling on the greenhouse. Compared to the days before, it felt like a flat calm.

We have made use of the time; I have built with Maria’s help a pottery stove, rather a crude affair but at least it now has a chimney and gives a lot more heat from the fuel and less smoke. The fire keeps in half the night, and if we had more fuel I think it would keep alive till breakfast and save having to be re-lit. Matches are in limited supply like everything else.

Another idea is a sort of ladder of stone shelves or racks built out from the wall near the door. There is peat around if nothing else – stacking it up out of the rain and getting some heat from the stove just might dry it enough to burn in a few days; at least we will make the experiment. Even if it is only ready on our final day, that will be worth having – by that time we might have picked the beaches clean of driftwood. This is not a large island, and most of the shore is totally inaccessible cliffs rather than handy beaches. There is not a path, trail or cairn anywhere on this island that we can see; getting from A to B is neither quick nor easy with many bog-holes with overhanging edges mostly hidden by the snow.

(Later) Our luck has changed! On the windward side of the island there is a narrow cove that faces North, and we had almost given up on exploring for driftwood. But Molly noticed a flock of seabirds circling there, and twenty minutes of slogging across the swamp showed us why. The arctic terns and skuas were feasting on a drift of washed-up fish, some of which had been flipped clear ashore by the waves and were already frozen solid. We decided that the seabirds had already had their share and mostly drove them off, filling our packs with the frozen fish and basically grabbing everything else in sight. They say half a loaf is better than none, and the

same definitely goes for half a fresh Pacific Saury. Our food having a few beak-shaped bite-marks taken out of it will not discourage us.

As soon as we got back to the hut we changed shifts – Helen and Maria grabbed their packs and headed out to pick up anything left; we set to work preparing the first fresh meal in quite awhile. Plain fish grilled on skewers of driftwood over the coals has rarely smelled or tasted so good. Nothing goes to waste; even the fish guts we have frozen outside in the snow for fishing bait should we get the chance, or until we get really hungry.

Quite a celebration! When Maria and Helen got back they reported the birds had got most of the remainder, but still retrieved a dozen whole fish and a few pounds of fragments plus a bundle of driftwood. The fragments would not keep so they went to make a second course; fish stew thickened with biscuit. With a tot of Molly's precious brandy apiece, by far the best meal we have had since Songmark – and actually better than most there especially at weekends. Not that we would complain if a twenty pound catering tin of Poi washed ashore, right now.

Now we have a fire going, we can get out of the suits enough to groom a bit. Having damp, salt-soaked matted fur is awfully demoralising and uncomfortable as well as poor insulation. We still had the salt in our fur from our swim ashore, as the stream water is far too chilly to bathe in. Still, it is a relief to get sealed up again afterwards; one feels a little like a deep-sea diver surrounded by extremely hostile elements. At least there is plenty of air, in fact too much so – I would be happy if it slowed down somewhat.

(Later)

A day of surprises – it looks as if we are not utterly alone out here after all. The weather is freezing cold, ten degrees of frost – but the morning was as clear as we have seen, so we took another stroll up to the hilltop. The hut is not bad, but being about the size of the average garden shed to hold us and our equipment, we are glad to be out of it for awhile.

Helen was looking out towards the nearest island when she saw what she thought was a school of dolphins or seals near its shore; they were vanishing underwater and returning. She passed me the telescope, asking me if I thought they might be like Moeli's Husband - the Natives of No Island might well have a colony around here, as they need no houses and normally there is nobody around to see them. But I watched some of them wading through the surf and walking ashore, and though I could not make out any other details they were certainly walking.

When Molly and Maria had taken a look, as if on cue another belt of snow swept in from the North and we had to hurry back to the hut before the "white-out" hit us. Ten minutes after we were indoors, the world outside was as white as a whitewashed window, and with about the visible range. Molly had tales to tell of being caught out in Chicago winter storms like that – it is like being inside a ping-pong ball, with the ground and sky blending into each other indistinguishably. So indistinguishably that furs have been known to walk off cliffs and onto thin ice simply unable to tell ground from sky.

Anyway, we had enough to do in the afternoon with sacking piles of wet peat like soggy loaves on shelves, hoping they are ready to burn before we are ready to leave or run out of driftwood completely. For a change I dipped into our emergency kit's supply of curry powder to enliven the meal – we will need it if everything else except the fish-guts runs out. Still, a spiced stew of fresh fish with pounded kelp and a sprinkling of biscuit on top is a better meal than we might be eating later on. Definitely hunger is the best sauce – Molly and Maria are doing their best to eat the kelp raw, but claim it is like chewing through sea-boot leather, though they might be able to digest it given time. Helen and me hardly have the digestions to even try.

By my best reckoning, the fish has brought us about three full days of food. We will certainly scour the beaches for more, but hardly hope to find a bounty like that again. The chances are just as good (or bad) that the next three-day storm will hit the day we are due to be picked up, when we have finished our last bar of pemmican and are looking forward to ship's biscuit and naval grog.

Monday, December 9th, 1936

Disaster! Everything they told us about these islands is looking painfully true. We had a fine enough morning with just a few snow flurries, then the wind died away and it was almost pleasant in a Christmas-card sort of way. Helen and I were out collecting driftwood and seaweed on the Eastern coast, when we saw what looked like another white-out snow storm coming – but from the South, not a direction we have had weather from before. We hurried back – and in a minute we dropped our loads and dived for shelter behind a boulder, as the weather went from calm to about ninety knots! We know just what ninety knots feels like, from three years of open cockpits in the Tiger Moths.

Helen yelled that it felt like a tornado coming – and just then a "wirraway", the local version hit us. In the open we would have been picked up and thrown bodily across the island; it was deafeningly loud and we were pelted with stinging ice chips and gravel for a minute as it went over us. We stayed in shelter for another five minutes before poking our snouts out and taking a look at what was left outside. The snow had been sculpted as if by a plough, with a sharp-edged cut through the drifts – and it became obvious why the only trees we have seen here are Arctic willows about a yard wide and an inch high, hugging the ground.

We had an awful shock when we got to the hut – it was no longer there. There was only a pile of stones, with Molly and Maria sorting through the snow and rubble. As one reads about tornados, it had almost exploded

the building and taken everything portable with it. The tarpaulins that we had depended on for the roof and door were somewhere over the Bering Strait, and our fairly cosy shelter gone with them.

The one bright side was that nobody was more than bruised; the walls had fallen outwards and the inside filled with snow in an instant, covering the fire and stopping it spreading. Molly says she had thought a shell had hit the place – and indeed it looked like that.

Our first job was to salvage everything we could; some of the contents were strewed around the island downwind. My kettle I retrieved, dented but still watertight. The frozen fish in the snow outside we recovered, but without the tarpaulins we had little chance of rebuilding the hut.

As soon as we had gathered up what we had, we had to decide what to do for the night. It was much colder than our first nights in the open, and snowy rather than sleeting. The best bet seemed to be to rebuild the walls as best we could, at least getting us some shelter from the winds. Going elsewhere would only mean having to pick up and carry our supplies, and indeed we had seen nowhere more promising on the island.

Tuesday, December 10th. 1936

Freezing. New “shelter” is not keeping us warm, and firewood is getting hard to find under fresh snow. We can only eat to keep warm, and our supplies will not last at this rate. Getting hard to write. Am rather worried about Molly’s ears, and Helen’s tail. My own feels like an icicle.

(Later) We are rescued! Just in time too. We looked over our supplies and decided that whatever it may cost us in points, we would rather lose points in our survival test to ear tips to frostbite. Molly still had most of her pack of Mortal Danger matches; we had been saving those as they are too valuable when ordinary matches can light the stove. Maria and Helen came steaming back from the beach waving the telescope, Helen panting that there were swimmers in the water about a mile away.

In five minutes we were up on the headland facing there, Molly improvising a sling from rope and half an empty pemmican tin. She lit a match (they need disturbingly little triggering and are likely to ignite if dropped) and dropped it in the tin – two quick swings and she launched it high above us, spotting magnesium fire and leaving a clear trail of white smoke. It took another three launches, but the distant swimmers evidently saw us – through the telescope I saw them pointing our way, then four of them struck out for “home” assuming they live on the bigger island. An hour later a powerful launch hove into view, evidently a converted fishing-vessel.

We are certainly trained to be cautious about accepting lifts from strangers, having experienced the local customs of Krupmark and Cranium Island. But “any port in a storm” as they say, and we were all definitely willing to take a risk.

A muffled-up figure in Oilskins hailed us in English and Russian, and a small whale-boat was launched with half a dozen rowers towards the nearest beach. The crew were all some type of oversized otter, surprisingly scantily clad for the climate but not looking too unhappy about it. By the time the ship’s boat had rounded the point we were waiting for them, our essential kit there (and our food supplies of frozen fish cached in a snowdrift for possible future needs.)

I had expected some grizzled Alaskan crab fisherman of arctic fox or moose stock – I was quite surprised to hear decidedly cultured American tones from the captain, a grey fox who greeted us and asked if we needed a ride. Molly’s ears pricked up and she whispered “Old Alabama”, but Helen thought Louisiana more likely. At any rate, it was not what one expects to hear in the Sub-Arctic.

Half an hour’s boat ride took us across the straits to the main island, where we navigated a fjord-like inlet that opened up after a hundred yards into a surprisingly good natural harbour that there is no sign of from the open sea, where one can only see a high rift in the cliffs like many others on that coast. There was a substantial stone jetty there bigger than anything we saw at Dutch Harbour, and looking rather older.

The captain had introduced himself as Beauregard J. Pennington the Fourth, and welcomed us to the plantation. As the landscape around looked just as bleak as the island we had just left, it was rather a mystery what except icicles they could grow there. (The place must be austere indeed if his family even have to use the same name for four generations rather than being able to afford a new one!) He clapped his paws and barked orders to the crew in a language I did not recognise, then bowed and told us the family would be honoured to receive guests.

When we came up from the docks I think all four of us stood stock-still in amazement. There was a cliff some three stories high, and in it was carved a house. Cut in the living rock was the front of a pillared classical mansion, with veranda and porch with elegant balustrades. The windows looked normal till one noticed that not all the panes were glass, but the rest were solid dummies carved in the rock to preserve the classical symmetry of the design. I have seen pictures and newsreels of thousand-year old churches in Italian East Africa (Maria does not like to hear anyone using the name Ethiopia any more) that were carved similarly with every detail hewn from solid rock.

Mr. Pennington The Fourth bowed and waved us forward. Our ears and tails were freezing and we would have probably walked into a house on Krupmark Island prepared to handle whatever threats were inside once our paws had thawed out a little.

I had not expected to find a fully furnished mansion house out here. The whole place must be built into the mountainside, going back room after room, all brightly lit with electric bulbs. We felt like Great War soldiers coming across an intact and inhabited Chateau full of elegant furs of quality, embarrassed to be mostly wearing mud and battledress rather than evening wear. At least the snow had cleaned our Sidcot Suits to an extent, but it was an awful shock to hear a piano played (quite badly, I thought) from a distant room and realise just how big this place must be.

A uniformed butler and two maids appeared from a side room, all sea-otters and dressed in rather old-fashioned outfits. Mr. Pennington said something elaborate and we were escorted by the maids to a large bathroom, hardly believing our eyes.

Half an hour later we were feeling and scenting rather better; there were plain but comfortable frock dresses that Maria thought might be maids' Sunday best; although we tried all the local languages we know the two otter maids did not understand any of them. The language sounded a bit like they speak in Tillamook, but not quite. If it is one of those Amerindian languages I have heard that they are ferocious things to learn.

Getting circulation back in our paws and ear-tips was definitely painful, but hopefully we should be spared trench paw. Molly's ears responded to rubbing, and according to the books should make a full recovery. It is a good thing none of us are of tropical stock; I pity Carmen or Jasbir who are somewhere out in these islands' weather. Getting clean again was a welcome relief; it would be embarrassing to trail mud through such a nice house.

Then it was time to meet the Penningtons. We were received very graciously – I thought it best to use my title as Lady Allworthy, while I still have it. The family comprised Mr. Beauregard Pennington, his grizzled father Rhett, and four sisters Lucille, Blanche, Emily and Cindy. They were all very surprised to see us, and were full of questions. Nobody had heard of Songmark, which was not surprising right up here.

I had not expected to be sitting down under a chandelier drinking tea, this time yesterday! We managed to pick up a surprising story, from what our hosts let slip. Apparently the Penningtons were a prosperous family of plantation-owners seventy years ago, but it was ruined in their Civil War and burned to the ground. Old Mr. Rhett asked Molly and Helen if they were “Yankees” which sounded odd coming from him. Helen seemed to pass the test being mostly from Texas, and Molly quick-wittedly remembered that at that time her mother's father was in Tennessee. (By her account he was a “road-agent” but she sensibly did not mention that bit. Since first)

Having lost everything, the family headed West, following gold rushes to Alaska, where they had some luck and accumulated a modest fortune. The life of a mining camp was not to their tastes, and having made money they wanted to get back to the lifestyle they had lost. Unfortunately (so said old Mr. Rhett) the “damn Yankees” had made that quite impossible in their old neighbourhood, so they searched for several years for somewhere suitable.

Well! I was wondering what a Plantation here could grow, and where the fields were. We had already passed over them without noticing – the crop is kelp, harvested by the sea-otters (“poor benighted heathens” according to Missy Blanche) who are looked after and supported by the Penningtons. Exactly how much support they get for their labour, I did not really like to ask our gracious hosts. Mr. Beauregard mentioned that his family's know-how made it possible to turn a profit even here; there are caves used to dry the kelp after harvest (a steady wind is guaranteed, after all) and watermills grind it ready to be sold on the open market for all sorts of uses ranging from chicken feed to ice-cream. Apparently they can sell it cheaper than anyone else; one wonders why.

I could see Helen was having difficulty stopping her ears going flat as she listened. She managed to ask politely what the local Government thought of the arrangement. Old Mr. Rhett gave a wheezy laugh and explained that the Government they agreed it with was the Imperial Russian one! When they first arrived Alaska was still ruled from Moscow, and he has inherited a contract “in perpetuity”. When the Americans bought Alaska they hardly thought about the Aleutians at all, and had happily signed a deal promising all existing businesses should continue “without let or hindrance”. Presumably they thought there were only a few fishermen and prospectors out here, and wanted to encourage them to carry on rather than spend money dealing with revolts in such inaccessible places.

Helen did ask innocently enough if the Natives moved around to other islands a lot, or if the schools and churches the Penningtons doubtless provided were enough to keep them close. Old Mr. Rhett snorted, and claimed that schools and churches had been the ruination of the old Plantation. Presumably they do not want folk learning about Bolshevism (or voting, for that matter) and as long as they stay “poor benighted heathens” they are looked on as fair game. Giving them preachers and teachers would “give them ideas”.

That said, the sea-otters were not exactly starving or particularly downcast-looking – I gathered that they did get decent food and medical care, but that might just be a matter of keeping them working efficiently. One wonders if it would be a good plan to tell (say) Liberty Morgenstern about the place. Not everyone was contented before the revolution in New Haven either, but hearing about the place now I hardly see an improvement.

Supper was a lively affair, a huge platter of roast fish with (recognisably bottled) peas and carrots, neither of which are likely to grow around here. The Misses Pennington quizzed us eagerly about fashions and life outside; they were frankly amazed at our accounts of Songmark life. I think I was right to pull on my Lady

Allworthy title, as they were much into respectability. I did not mention how I got that title. That might have rather spoiled the effect.

What with trying to keep our paws and tails from freezing, none of us had been too well rested the last couple of nights, and the sudden warmth and fine meal had us all yawning politely (even Molly tried to be on her best behaviour.) Our hosts were quite attentive; Mr. Beauregard clapped his hands and three sea-otter maids popped out of the side-room to take us to basic but well-appointed guest chambers. One gets the idea that there were once far more Penningtons than there are now, but this is a dangerous place to live.

At least last year in Vostok I could talk to the servants, even though I had to use my poor French. But it was rather difficult to have a conversation with these when we had only about ten words in common we both recognised from the Tillamook languages – we gave up in the end and retired for the night. Even their names were difficult to pronounce, if indeed they were their personal names; one could have been pointing to herself and saying “I’m in charge of the hot water supply” for all I could tell.

Helen was extremely unhappy with the situation; though she is far from being a Red she thinks something ought to be done about this. I agreed, but reminded her that we are well-treated Guests here having been rescued from a bad situation and it would be rank ingratitude to our hosts to send trouble their way. Besides, it is hardly as if the locals labour under teams of whip-cracking overseers (that we have noticed, anyway); they work on their own and seem fairly cheerful. More so than the workers filing out of one of Henri Fnord’s car factory in Detroit at the end of a shift, Molly says.

Caution would have had one of us awake at all times on shifts watching in a strange place while we slept, but there was a substantial bolt on the door and we trusted in that. Besides, we were all worn out and unarmed anyway. Molly had been griping about this all trip, although when Miss Devinski put the question to her before we left Songmark, she gritted her teeth and admitted that for once forty pounds of pemmican might be more use than forty pounds of anti-tank rifle.

Wednesday, 11th December 1936

A strange day, even for a Songmark education. We had a leisurely morning after an excellent night’s sleep, waking when the otter servants tapped on the door carrying breakfast (fish and rice) and our Sidcot suits, which had been cleaned though there was a limit to what could be done for them. They are our only outdoor clothing, after all.

As soon as we were dressed, all four of the daughters of the household came in as a pack, and carried on where they had left off last night quizzing us about life outside. Fortunately my dorm has seen quite a bit of the world between us, as there was just no end to their questions. It seems they have never left the island, having been educated by their grandmother Scarlett and a since-departed Governess. One gets the impression they have been given a rather partisan view of the world outside. The idea that we are training to be Adventuresses is a rather new one to them – fortunately the idea that Maria is not far off a Princess (something she denies furiously and tried to point out how Italy is actually run, to little comprehension) and I am technically a Lady (right this minute, until I can arrange otherwise) rather helped settle their minds.

It seems that the Pennington family have their own ships that can get as far as Dutch Harbour, where they offload the kelp meal and their agent handles the dealings with the rest of the world. So they are doubly insulated; nobody from the outside world comes to this island and very few even know they are there. Even with a detailed aerial survey only the dock is visible, and that would need one of the rare breaks in the weather to see it. In this part of the world I doubt anyone has ever bothered.

Before lunch we were taken on a tour of the “plantation” – in the same massif the house is cut into, there are enlarged natural; caves in which hundreds of tons of kelp dry. With these temperatures it does not spoil before the howling wind dries it pretty thoroughly. Two forty-foot waterwheels hidden in ravines power the grinding mills and are geared-up to run dynamos for lighting the house. Before that, Missy Emily recounted with a shiver her Grandmother’s tales of having to depend on whale oil and fish oil lamps.

Helen rather bore the brunt of their more social questions, having the nearest accent to their own. From what I gathered, their family had kept up a very long-distance correspondence with other grand old families in their homeland even though many were in “sadly reduced circumstances”. Via various involved routes, their mother and grandmother had come over to preside over the last plantation, and they were wondering when they would be allowed to “write away” for prospective suitors. Only grey foxes, one assumes.

Hmm. From what Helen has said of her countrymen, the chances of someone wanting to leave everything behind and colonise this island forever seem slim, no matter what the Depression is throwing at them. A life here could be depressing enough as it is, unless someone was keen on the rugged beauties of the landscape and the tender beauties of the Pennington girls. No wonder there are fewer Penningtons around than there used to be. For all the daughters’ charms and apparent wealth, anyone coming out here may have riches but nowhere to spend them. Their social graces do not seem to include dancing the Charleston or anything newer for that manner, and though they have mentioned jazz music (there is evidently a radio around here somewhere) it is in the same tones of pious horror Eva Schiller tends to use.

We asked to see the Aleut village, which caused some consternation and not a little puzzlement, as if we had asked to inspect the drains. Our spirits were actually lifted a little when we got to the far side of the island,

to find a well-built cluster of sturdy stone houses all very neat and tidy, with quite spacious and clean rooms filled with Native artwork, carvings and a few essentials brought in from outside such as paraffin lamps. Certainly the Penningtons put some of their wealth back into their workforce. On the other paw, most of the materials and all the labour was probably local so there might not have been too much wealth involved.

Luncheon was a brief affair with the menfolk away working at the docks and only the daughters there to quiz us. Helen rather staggered them announcing that she was Engaged – and they wanted to know all the details. Possibly it is just as well their brother and father were elsewhere, for Helen is quite forthright at times. I had whispered that it might not do to go into much detail about being “Tailfast” rather than what they think of as Engaged, as this family might get rather upset at the idea of a Euro girl wedding a Native in a Native ceremony. They would have been still more shocked to hear that I planned exactly the same.

Missy Blanche had been saying she hoped she could write off and get a handsome husband one day soon – I would have thought there were potentially plenty at the far end of the island, but if they had not thought of the idea I was not going to suggest it to our hosts! I remember our Albert Island trip back in Easter, where there was that pair of sea-otter brothers that Beryl happily staked a temporary claim on. There are various ways Nature has equipped sea-otters for life mostly in the water that we have heard of, and Beryl does occasionally tell the truth if it is alarming enough. We were certainly warned by Mrs. Oelabe that they are one of the species that the Spontoon Native style of Precautions will not work reliably against. It is not just their fur that is waterproof.

The day passed comfortably, and when Helen announced we were retiring for an afternoon nap it was accepted without comment. Actually as soon as the door was bolted she called an immediate “Chinese Parliament” as to how we should get out of here immediately. I had to agree – not because I have much to fear from our hosts (if there were four brothers rather than sisters contemplating matrimony in the family it might be different) but we are due to be picked up on the next island, and with the best will in the world we could get stranded here unable to cross in time. True, weather that bad would probably stop Captain Anuninjac being able to pick us up anyway, but we have to be there and waiting on time.

I can see what Helen means about this place – but unless we can talk to the locals we can hardly judge how happy they are with the situation. The Aleuts outnumber the Penningtons thirty to one and there is no Police, military or any other Authority supporting the status quo – so it can hardly be that bad or they would either have revolted or voted with their (swimming) paws to leave years ago. By repute the sea-otters can swim for days, and getting to other islands in the chain should be possible at least in Summer.

Actually, we did receive an offer at suppertime – old Mr. Rhett extended us the hospitality of the house till Spring, and hoped we could keep his grand-daughters company. I can see they need it, but we are not the ones. We have our Tutors awaiting us fairly shortly, and all of us have other folk waiting on Spontoon. Helen and I have our Warrior Priestess training to continue, even when we are not in term-time, and the Hoele’toemi brothers would wonder where we were.

I suppose it is a great complement that people keep wanting to retain our services – the Johnsons in (New) New South Zion wanted me to join their family back in September, and even in our first Easter holiday the Noenoke fisher clan gave us all a standing invite that one could indeed do worse than take up. But we had to respectfully decline, explaining we have a Duty to get back. The Penningtons put much store on Duty, and quite understood.

Still, we managed to do a few things for them. Missy Emily asked if we could teach them any new tunes, and indeed a lot of their music books must have been in the house when old Mr. Rhett was a cub. I sat down at the piano and discovered one reason it had sounded so bad – it had evidently not been tuned since it got here, whenever that was. Out here it is not a matter of leafing through the tradesman’s book and asking if they can come round on Tuesday, and presumably the climate is not kind to precisely shaped instruments.

Amazingly, Molly came to the rescue. She has mentioned her Father’s speakeasy chain always being loud with pianos (as well as gun-fire; on one occasion business rivals even shot the piano-player as an “asset to deny to the enemy”). She picked up a few technical tricks, and despite this pianoforte not having the loud pedal permanently wired down, she was familiar enough with the layout to improve matters greatly. It seems some speakeasies were highly secure places where it was bad policy to let an unknown workman turn up with supposedly a bag of tools that was likely to contain something more explosive.

It will be something Miss Devinski will certainly be checking up on when she reads Molly’s report – “*Aleutian Islands experiences: survived in Arctic waters, built rock shelter, foraged for food, tuned baby grand piano.*” Just as well the rest of us can vouch for it!

I played what old country songs I could remember from school, guessing that any attempt at the current swing and jazz based Hit Parade would not be well received. Neither do I know the chords for the latest film songs with “Wing” Crosby and Dorothy Llama that everyone is humming on Casino Island. Even some songs I knew in the nursery were new here, and I had to sing them several times while the four sisters eagerly made notes in quite accurate musical score. Evidently their Governess had taught them traditional social skills but very little “Realpolitik”. Though one part of me rather wishes they had more ... opportunities for agreeable company, another part rather winces at the idea of those four Misses on their own in any big city. It is just as well Beryl did not find them.

Still, we exchanged addresses, at least via their company Agent in Dutch Harbour. Molly whispered this may come back to bite us, and she has visions of seeing headlines “*Aleutian Indentured servants rise in Red Terror*”

revolt!” and finding the four camped on our doorsteps one morning with an undeniable claim on our Hospitality. As to their wondering if we knew any suitable gentlemen to correspond with, I had to disappoint them and confirm that although there are grey foxes in Spontoon, I rather doubted there are any with the long-established social rank and Pedigree they would be looking for. Actually, I doubt any Spontoonie would want to come here having seen the climate; Spontoon is famous for having no coconuts growing there but here the main vegetation is arctic willow, sphagnum moss and lichen with hardly a blade of grass to be seen, let alone a palm tree. The only grey fox on Spontoon of distinguished family I know originating from their part of the world is Spontoon’s Chief of Police, who is already a happily and faithfully married Todd by all appearances. Thinking of which, the ... social arrangements could get crowded if all four girls get husbands and bring them back here. It is a lot to hope that they would get on well together in the house, and there is little chance to go elsewhere in an Aleutian winter.

It is pitch dark here by four in the afternoon, which rather restricts the opportunities of crossing back to our original island. For all we know there may be a flat calm around midnight tonight, but with no lighthouses or accurate charts nobody in their right minds would risk night crossings in these waters. I am sure Krupmark and Cranium Island have captains who would do it and laugh, but those are places where nobody worries about their retirement bonus.

A fine last evening! Mr. Beauregard promised the boat would be ready at first light, awaiting any chance to cross. In the meantime we did our best to repay their hospitality, being the only unfettered voices from outside they have talked to in a long time. Not that we were too unfettered; I had dire visions of Molly telling them about our exploits on the Parsifal fighting off the Moro pirates with pom-pom gun and tetryl explosive charges, or describing one of Lars’ parties in detail. Despite the dire things our Tutors hint, in fact Lars is not at all jealous and has frequently introduced her to various gentlemen of various species at his party who she has got on very comprehensively with (far more than I think looks fun, but Molly has a wider range of interests in some respects) Fortunately she kept her snout shut on such matters and I think we at least sounded respectable.

Helen did her best to communicate with the Aleuts, but I think we really would need to stay the winter here to make much progress on that language. I know some Tillamook languages have words that can have up to thirty independent prefixes and the same number of suffixes – which makes a comprehensive grammar rather complex. No wonder one rarely hears of them being touted as rivals to Esperanto and Volapuk as candidates to a world standard.

Molly speculated as to just who knows of this place; having been “grandfathered in” as residents, the plantation might not show up on anyone’s accounts. I doubt they are keen on being registered citizens ruled ultimately from Washington, having heard much fulmination about “damn Yankees.” Molly reflected that both her own Father and Mr. Capone (a fur she still admires for his style and ruthlessness) were brought down for not paying taxes, and as Mr. Rhett claims he has the lowest overheads in the kelp market I suspect he fills in no tax forms for anyone. To be fair, he gets absolutely nothing from any Government anywhere, but Inspectors never listen to that sort of excuse and one wonders what a seventy year tax bill with compound interest would look like.

Thursday December 12th, 1936

Back in the freezer. Maria grumbles that she knows how a side of beef feels when it is put into the cold store. We were called before dawn, there being a favourable wind (and not too much of it), and with Mr. Beauregard we hurried down to the docks clad in our Sidcot suits, grateful for the loan of ten square yards of industrial tarpaulin usually carried as a boat spare. We promised to leave it weighed down, and he assured us he would send the Aleuts out to find it at the end of the week. Of course, if we are still stuck on the island by then it is not just the tarpaulin that will need rescuing.

We were only just in time; by the time we were half-way across the straits when the wind-speed doubled. The nearest beach was suddenly far too dangerous to land on, and Mr. Beauregard had to circle round to the lee side to find anything remotely suitable. Even so we had to dive into waist-deep water and splash ashore, soaking our suits in the process. Actually it was a race to get ashore feeling the elastic bands tied tight around our boot-tops losing the battle of keeping the Bering Sea out – I was up to my waist but by the time I got onto dry (well, damp) land the water level inside the suit had barely reached my knees, which is better than it might have been. By the time we were ashore and turned to wave farewell the boat was already vanishing out of sight behind a snow squall.

Having dined well the previous day and with a hearty breakfast in us (in Helen’s case recently in her at least – she makes sure to swallow plenty of sugars in such cases as it is the only thing she has time to digest) we could make top speed across to our old hut site carrying the precious tarpaulin between us. Since leaving the winds had sculpted the drifts very differently, and in twenty yard visibility we hardly recognised the landscape at all. Great cornices and ice-sculptures clung to the crags, and we had to dig through four feet of snow to even find the floor of our hut.

A busy morning followed, mostly snow-clearing and hauling fallen stones back into place with exceedingly chilled paws. The snow was better for building than it had been; earlier it was fine, dry and as free-running as the sand in an hourglass, and just as hard to pile up into a wall. At last we could put into practice

some of the designs we have read of and by the end of the day we were back in shelter, with two feet of snow plastered on the outside of the wall keeping it windproof. With a little repair my clay stove was back in action and as night fell we could relax in some decent shelter again. Unfortunately the peat we had stacked was just a brown sludge, and we thought longingly of the drying caves the Pennington Plantation had available.

Having the stove working let us start to dry our Sidcot suits and get some warmth back into our paws as we took stock again of our provisions. If we could rely on being picked up on time I would think them ample – as it is, we will find out how adequate they may be when we are rescued. I think we all had visions of Captain Anuninjac being stranded somewhere in the Delarof Islands at the far end of the chain, waiting for a new crankshaft to be flown out from Anchorage (weather permitting, which means probably Not permitting, around here.) Of course we had a Plan B, C and D, especially as the Penningtons promised to send their Aleuts over here next week to retrieve the tarpaulin we borrowed. Maria says that one could do worse than being forced to accept their offer of hospitality over the winter, and if we tired of the Plantation-house company there is always “anthropomorphology research” to be tried with the locals. Although the Plantation folk may see them as untouchable, we could have our own opinions as to who is untouchable, socially and otherwise. Perhaps it is just as well Helen and I will be getting Tailfast to the Hoele’toemi brothers this Solstice, as all this Adventuring is having an ... effect on me. The nights are awfully long, and although Molly, Maria and Helen are excellent company – we could all wish for more variety.

Friday 13th December, 1936

(Written in Dutch Harbour, much to my surprise)

A surprising end to our trip! When we ventured out of our shelter at first light to collect snow for melting, there was a clear spell and in a trice Helen had the telescope out. It was Captain Anuninjac’s ship, rather early, heading towards us at top speed. There was a rapid breaking of camp and swallowing of pemmican, and with a brief but heartfelt backward glance we said farewell to our freshly rebuilt hut and headed towards the beach. One of Molly’s last Mortal Danger matches served as a flare again; it is a big enough island to spot four furs on and there is no one beach that a captain would automatically steer towards even if he knew the island well.

Captain Anuninjac hailed us at two hundred yards, and this time the ship’s boat was lowered. It was a great relief to see Prudence and co waving on the deck; they looked fit and well, and not as battered as I am sure we did. In two minutes we were onboard with all our kit (except the original tarpaulin we “wrote off”) and giving Miss Devinski a brief first report. She gave us a cursory look over, asked if we have any injuries needing treatment, and informed us we were the last to be picked up. The weather was even worse this year than last year, and it was getting plain dangerous. Having Songmark girls unable to fly an aircraft and graduate because of fingers lost to frostbite, would not look good on the prospectus next year.

Actually, Prudence and co. look quite sleek and well fed, while we have certainly lost a lot of weight. Prudence says they were lucky, having found a snug cave and the storm that washed up the fish to us brought them hundreds of Alaskan crabs! Better even than fish. Ada is limping with a sprained ankle, but otherwise they say they all managed to keep warm. I could see Molly’s ears going right down as she thought about that, although she generally gets on very well with that dorm. Not well enough to relish a fortnight with them in a snug cavern, though.

We counted out our remaining provisions under our Tutors’ watchful eye and ever-present notebook; two pounds of chocolate, six tins of pemmican and three pounds of dried manioc flakes. Not many days’ ration for the four of us, although we included about twenty pounds of cached fish guts that we could dig up if hard-pressed. All in all it is just as well Captain Anuninjac arrived on time.

(Later) A stormy crossing to Dutch Harbour, with us arriving just in time. An hour after we helped secure the ship, the visibility was down to nil. We could see the Lockheed Lamprey was already there, pulled out of the water on a landing-trolley and with two dozen battleship-sized cables lashing it to rock bolts that evidently get a lot of use. Everybody was back in the warehouse we had left nearly two weeks earlier, some looking far more battered than us, and Madeleine X’s four were wading into the first meal they had had for three days. I will have to ask Susan de Ruiz what happened there, rather than Madeleine or the other two. *

Just as we were settling down, Miss Wildford came in looking cheerful (her usual mood) and announced the weather has cleared, but we have to go instantly to stand much chance of getting away tonight. So a dozen half-eaten lunches were abandoned and we slung on our packs, heading back to the harbour to help release the Lamprey from its protective lashings. So assuming we get it in the water before the weather closes again – farewell Aleutians!

* (Editor’s note: although with the exception of the three-strong dorm headed by Missy K, every Songmark dorm has four junior Adventuresses in it. Who the other two in Madeleine X’s dorm may be, or even their species or nationality, comprises a surprising hole in Amelia’s diary – until this point their very existence has had to be inferred. There must be a reason, but as Amelia has said nothing more about it, it may remain lost to History.)

(And Amelia and Co will return.)