

Flying Solo

(Being the tenth part of the aeronautical and otherwise adventures of Amelia Bourne-Phipps. Currently she's studying at the Songmark Aeronautical School for Young Ladies – and part of the course involves getting her official pilot's license. The trouble is, through no fault of her own she lost her passport, and is falsely accused of being an enemy Agent, so can't get another. Not in her own name, that is ...)

Saturday 16th March, 1936

(Written much later). Dear Diary – the Songmark course certainly emphasises thinking for ourselves, and all I can say is it is just as well we have already had plenty of practice.

The first leg of my trip was easy enough, as apart from showing my ticket and passport I strolled through customs at the Shawnee Pacific Airpaths terminal. It is easy to leave Spontoon, as long as the authorities are not actively watching out for you – and though my original British passport would have been no problem on this outward flight, the officials on the Gilbert and Sullivan Isles might already have it on their list. Drat that Sobby Forsythe; she might have ruined my reputation permanently with one stroke of a pen.

I was determined to stay in my new character as thoroughly as possible – or the folk on the seats next to me would have seen me looking out longingly at Eastern Island as we taxied out to the main seaplane way and took off very smoothly in the license-built Short Cockle. I also kept resisting the temptation to check in the mirror that my fur dye was convincing. Saimmi had helped me apply it first thing in the morning after leaving Songmark and she assures me that I make a very fetching Eurasian girl. The Siamese fur markings are less pronounced than those of a purebred, but without having the right colour eyes or snout shape, I am better off with this design.

The Cockle is a very comfy aircraft for fourteen passengers, with one steward and two crew; just as well as we were thirteen hours in it! Most of the other passengers were tourists, laden with cameras and loud shirts, eager to head down to the Marquesas and Ponape to study the wonderful ruins and interesting folk rituals there. I had not thought about it much, but the tourist world is mostly in “circuits”, with American circuits staging through Wake and Midway, French ones through Tahiti and the like. I am the odd one out, heading from an independent state on Spontoon, bouncing from French to British territories on a Macau passport written in Portuguese.

Prudence Akroyd will be taking this trip on Monday, and I remembered her motto of “If in doubt say nowt.” Some of the other passengers did ask me where I was going – I explained I was “touring”, which seems to cover most possibilities. One of them, a matronly Canadian sea otter who had been behind me coming through Customs, was rather inquisitive and asked where I had learned to speak English so well, without an accent. Without lying, I could tell her I have one English parent (simply not mentioning my other one) and went to school in England.

I think the pair of elderly canines behind me must have been half deaf, or at least they assumed I could not hear their shocked whispers over the noise of the engines. At any rate, they were scandalised about the idea of bringing a half-native girl back – India and most of the Colonies are full of Eurasians of various mixes, but they tend to stay there unacknowledged and not embarrass the folks back home. I don't see why the folk in Barsetshire waiting for the “Sahibs” and “Mem-sahibs” to return should be so surprised - after all, folk sent out on military and civil service postings are away for at least three years, which is a long time in a hot climate.

From what I have seen on Spontoon, a lot of “Euro” folk come home having served their posting or made their money, and settle down without telling anyone of their other “family” left behind. Our regular Civil Service posting is five years, but one hears of ladies staying the extra year to make it a “round half-dozen” – in some cases to make sure they are not embarrassingly round on their return, I should think! Some of the Hoele'toemi clan are very happily adopted that way, but I can imagine not everywhere is as relaxed about it.

The flight passed quite well, with not too much turbulence and a fine view of the Pacific. I would have liked to navigate this route with a map handy – indeed, I have a big brass reflector compass in my luggage, but it is hardly “In Character” for Kim-Anh Soosay, the entertainer from Macau on holiday. It was getting dark when we sighted the twin islands of Croque-Monsieur and Croque-Madame, the Northernmost of the French Sandwich Isles with the only major paved runways in the group.

Ten minutes later we alighted very smoothly off the seaplane terminal of Ile de Croissant for the overnight stop. One can hardly expect tourists to sleep in an aircraft seats; there are sleeper services on the bigger flying boats, but those hardly carry a quarter of the day passengers and the Cockle would never make any money carrying just four people.

Quite an experience, being a tourist abroad – we see so many on Spontoon; it is odd to be one myself now. I had worried briefly about what to say to Customs, but in fact we were just waved through to a hotel and café within the seaplane base perimeter. I can see this is much easier on the airlines, as our bags are stored in the hotel and go straight out the next day, so visas and customs are hardly needed.

After thirteen hours in a wicker seat I felt like a jolly good run, or better still a swim as it is getting distinctly hot as we go South (the French Sandwich isles are quite toasty at 12° North, and the Gilbert group straddles the equator.) But nobody else was doing that, and I definitely did not want to stand out – so while everyone else headed out to the hotel bar I had half an hour of vigorous dance exercises and a very necessary cool shower.

I decided to make the most of the free time and catch up with my books – every little helps and I was relaxing under the protection of the great travel system, like a parcel being passed across the planet with no need to work at it. Actually I had rather a shock when I opened the bedroom – at first glance there was what looked like someone asleep in there already! I advanced very quietly, trying to work out who it might be by the scent – but I laughed and pulled the sheets off, when all I could scent of the intruder was laundry starch. I doubt anyone would cause me much trouble after being boil-washed.

I have heard of these before in stories of tropical climes. The lump under the sheets was actually a full-length bolster padded with cotton, to soak up the sweat. They are called “Dutch Wives” or alternatively “Dutch Husbands” – presumably something of solid qualities always there when needed, but not expected to be particularly interesting. Actually, the only Dutch folk I know are the van Hoogstraaten family, at least one of whom is “interesting” to the police of many nations and the other is in the Spontoan Olympic rowing team. Whatever you may say about that family, you cannot call them dull (and if one believes a tenth of what Beryl says of Piet, rather livelier to share a hotel suite with than a bolster.)

A quiet evening inside the mosquito net, with my textbooks and notebooks for navigation exercises – and unlike the dances, one can do the physical exercises Mrs. Hoele'toemi taught me without breaking out in sweat and even while reading. Actually, one could do them in an aircraft seat as well – but one's fellow passengers might misinterpret things, which could be embarrassing. I remember Maria being about to throw a bucket of water over me the first time I practiced without telling her beforehand.

Sunday 17th March, 1936

It gets definitely hot down here, even though it is still March – certainly without the “Dutch Husband” my fur would have been even stickier than it was. A mercifully cool shower improved matters, as even at seven in the morning the humidity was what one sweltering Radio LONO weather announcer last year called “One hundred percent and rising fast.”

The Airline companies these days do think of everything! As soon as the breakfast gong sounded, we were informed there would be a half-hour service held by a padre attached to the seaplane base. Everyone went along, and I joined in. Having a random selection of “Euros” of all sorts coming through on each trip, the service was rather blandly generic, but everyone there can say they did (somewhat) attend Church. It might be a good pitch for that Unitarian fundamentalist who annoys folk on Casino Island, to get the chance to preach to such a wide audience.

Of course, some people are never satisfied. One stout couple in front of me grumbled that the Airline should have a proper Western Anabaptist Kingdom Hall, as the price of their round-trip tickets could pay to build half a dozen out here. “Out here” was illustrated with an expansive wave, as if they expected everything outside the airport to be palm-thatched reed huts. If these isles are anything like Spontoan, there would be a good reason for that; the nearest factory for things like screws and nails is probably in Japan or New Zealand and a month away on a cargo steamer!

It was with rather a lump in my throat that I saw the Shawnee Pacific Airpaths flight take off and head back north, leaving me on the dockside terminal to wait for my connection. Of course, in most circumstances I have the protection of my passport anywhere in the world – the newspapers make much play of tales such as “*Kidnapped British lady traveller found unharmed: public demand punitive raids by gunboat regardless.*” But my current status is rather more precarious: I am a suspected Enemy Agent in disguised fur carrying forged papers, and any police force that catches me will get an official pat on the back rather than a Royal Navy gunboat offshore.

Being so near the equator, being only March hardly helped matters and my tongue was almost hanging out like a canine's by the time the big Moraine-Saulnier amphibian landed and I could wave farewell to French territory. The Gilberts are served by French routes on the North to South directions, and Imperial Airways East and West – which is the main direction of Empire trade. It was a vast relief to get to five thousand feet and have some cooler air at last – I can hardly forgive the missionaries around here for making once-comfortably clad native girls wear calico dresses, even if they do look more presentable to Euros on the postage stamps.

Another eight hours brought us to the Gilbert and Sullivan chain, with the familiar sight of Mount Mikado looming over the mainly flat coral atolls. Quite a sight! The top was wreathed in clouds but the main harbour of New Penzance was clear and it was just approaching supertime when we finally touched down outside the harbour.

From what I had read, these islands are not a major tourist destination: they grow copra, mine phosphates and act as a nice red pin on the map without which the map might fall down. They have fine coral beaches and a balmy climate outside typhoon season – but that is true of most of the Pacific isles, and they are much too far from any population centres to attract extensive holiday custom. Being four days in a cruise ship further than the Spontoon group from the cities of Japan and the Americas, they are rather emptier.

I fear I have not picked the best character to slip easily through Customs. Ahead of me were a family of missionaries, an anthropology professor and a pair of grizzled explorer hounds who were recognised by type and waved through despite having rifle cases strapped to their luggage and a total lack of big game around here. Coming from Spontoon, naturally I thought of presenting myself as a tourist, which is the default type of visitor – but not here.

Although I have passed through immigration on Vostok where they have good reasons to be suspicious, at least there they were expecting us. Heaven preserve me from keen young Customs officers fresh from training, out to impress their boss and with few chances to do so! I was singled out by a Border collie officer, his official cap gleaming new and his nose shiny with good health – I knew I was in for trouble when his tail wagged uncontrollably at the sight of my Macao passport. From everything I have heard of my assumed country, showing that is like waving a red flag in front of Maria's Uncle.

Fortunately, my passport held up to scrutiny and the name Kim-Anh Soosay is not on the long list he consulted under the counter. I would have liked to see if my real name actually was. I got through after five minutes of grilling, remembering Madame Maxine's advice of how to stay elegantly relaxed under pressure. The name badge on my questioner's cleanly pressed uniform read "L. Leamington", possibly one of the Warwickshire Leamingtons. At any rate, I could tell my explanation that I was looking for ideas from the Native dances for a show held about as much water with him as a sieve after a gunfight.

At the end of it, my passport was stamped and I was blinking in the evening sunlight of New Penzance, just ten miles and two days from my date with the Test School. All I had to do was change fur and costume and get over there on the day, I told myself – there should be no trouble with that.

I must remember not to listen to my own advice sometimes. I was awfully wrong.

Monday 18th March, 1936

One of the things about having a generously sized Empire is it offers so many vacancies for every kind of administrator. From what I heard, the Gilberts used to have rather a problem with the natives brewing up huge quantities of coconut toddy, date and palm wine, and never showing up in the morning for work. This might have been well enough when all they did was fish and plant taro, but there are businesses to run and phosphate to dig, and the islands' balance sheets were looking somewhat hung-over as well.

Normally I would have thought that appointing Sir Dai Evans as Governor would be a good move, as even I have heard of him as a strict teetotaler. Possibly too crusading – which might be why he was sent out here on the far side of the planet from the Llandudno Temperance Hall from which he attempted to launch a political putsch last year (other nations choose places such as beer cellars as a venue, generally more successfully.) Normally I would hardly care one way or another if he had banned the public sale of all alcohol, including methylated spirits stove fuel. Beryl will probably complain, but even she would hardly risk running into legal trouble this week, and so far from home.

Of course, normally I am not wearing waterproof fur dye that needs alcohol solvent to take off! It was going to be so simple – find a hotel, pay in advance for a night, retire to my room with my grooming kit, a litre of any strong spirit and a good mirror – the Siamese guest vanishes for a week, while I cheerfully hitch a ride or walk across the island to the airfield where Amelia Bourne-Phipps is expected.

I have the hotel room booked, and now would be a very good time for Kim-Anh to vanish in a whiff of brandy fumes. There is a certain young Mr. Leamington sitting in the hotel bar downstairs, happily sipping iced sarsaparilla while he leafs through the guest register and chats with the staff. He is out of uniform right now, but there is no mistaking that fur pattern. One supposes he is a good choice for a customs or police officer – every time he looks in the mirror he sees things in stark black and white.

(Later) Although I rarely agree with much of Beryl's advice, she certainly has survived a lot of fur-raising adventures, and in the right circumstances she might occasionally be right. "If you can't get out of their way, get right in close where they can't hit you", is something she has often proclaimed, and being a mouse at Saint T's must have been a ruthless testing ground for defensive ideas.

Really there is little point in trying to evade Mr. Leamington without getting his suspicions even further aroused, so instead I decided to get in closer instead. I smoothed down my fur, scented it very lightly as Madame Maxine suggests, and by tiffin time I was sitting at the same hotel table, with a tall glass of ginger beer. Lovely stuff, we used to drink it by the gallon back at Saint Winifred's in summertime, but not something I have found much of on Spontoon. Nootnops Red is probably even nicer.

I am sure that Beryl's idea of a good plan would be to take him for a moonlight stroll, apply the Roedean Nerve Pinch, steal his keys and raid the Customs shed for confiscated liquor. Not my style at all, and

Mr. Leamington (Lionel, as I discover) is a loyal official doing his job and the last person I would want to harm. In Molly's "Extra-Spicy Pacific Yarns" pulp fiction books, a true Adventuress would seduce him and persuade him to obtain a bottle for her – vanishing into the night with it before actually granting him any favours. I would deserve that "Hunting license" Nuala issued in error, if I ever did a thing like that.

I admit I did pump him for information somewhat, while trying to allay his suspicions. I told as much as the truth as I could, that I had been on Spontoon previously learning the dances, and had come here looking for more qualifications. I did ask if there was anywhere on the islands where one might find a glass of wine – there is, in the Golf Club, the Civil Service Club and two of the top hotels. One assumes this is to prevent the rest of the administration declaring civil war on their Governor, and that no natives are allowed at the bar.

It seems that official life here is rather dull, with a rather restricted round of social events on the calendar and about five clubs that are more or less compulsory to join unless one wants to be considered a bad sport. I picked up the hint that the new Governor is a tireless worker and reformer, and expects all his staff to be the same. I am not sure which church he attends, but he sounds very methodical.

Of course, the more I managed to get Mr. Leamington to talk about himself, the less he was asking about me – a good thing, considering I could trip myself up in any number of ways. It is a good thing the border policeman is a border collie and not one of those star-nosed moles who can spot whether or not one is telling the truth.

I promised to be in the hotel bar the next evening, which allayed his suspicions a little – though just what crimes he thinks I am here for, is hard to say. My luggage is as minimal and bland as I could make it, and I am hardly going to be inciting Native revolts or spreading subversion. I almost wished I had Liberty and Tatiana here – in fact that dorm alone could attract the attention of every police, customs and Political Officer in the island, leaving the path clear for me. I knew there had to be a good use for Brigit Mulvaney somewhere on the planet.

A stroll around New Penzance in the moonlight showed it to be a very sombre place, with several shuttered cafes and taverns mostly empty as their customers try to get used to ginger beer. There were a few soldiers around, and with a thrill I recognised their regimental badge from Father's charts at home. I know we send out small detachments of every regiment all over the Empire to acclimatise – but here in the Gilbert and Sullivan islands, I hardly expected to bump into the Yeoman of the Guard.

Tuesday 19th March, 1936

A scorching hot day, mercifully less humid, but still as pitiless as Spontoon in midsummer. I was out early to look around in my quest for a way to un-Siamese myself, having just one day left. I looked at the two fine hotels, the Utopia and the Savoy, and thought longingly of their locked cellars full of high-test Bombay gin. Awful stuff, but like most of the locals I would dearly love to get hold of a bottle. The difference is, I have no intention of drinking it!

It would be awfully embarrassing to be turned away from the door of the Savoy, even though I am respectably dressed. My flying kit was sent direct to the test centre and awaits me there under my own name – it would have been rather suspicious to carry it through Customs as Kim-Anh, and a far less eager officer than Mr. Leamington would have pounced on it.

The main commercial and shopping area is by the port, and many of the enterprises were run by Indians, the commercial backbone of small trade through the Empire. Whether in far Africa or the South Seas, there are two near certainties – the army officers came from Home, and the warehouse owner came from Bombay or nearby. I could see turbans and scent the spices from two hundred yards down the street, and was soon in the middle of the trading bazaar, with Oriental felines buying and selling at top speed regardless of the heat. The Spontoonies would call them all "Euros", but nobody else would – certainly, nobody expects to see large Tigers and Panthers coming out of the mists of a European forest.

There is certainly an advantage with having this fur pattern. I might not get served in the Utopia, but in the bazaar people talk to me a lot more freely than if I was in my respectable clothes and pith helmet (the officials really do wear them as standard here!) It did not take long to hear that the new local laws were proving rather unpopular with everyone – even the Indians who never drink alcohol like selling it to us. The actual locals are less of a market, as in this climate any sort of fruit juice ferments almost overnight and they simply hide a jar in the forest – no doubt still turning up half wrecked in the morning with the effects of exceedingly bad wine.

The only "Euros" I saw were two soldiers who were loudly ordering "Fizzy mango." I could scent those myself from one stall, which were simply very ripe mangoes injected with yeast and left to ferment in the sun. I doubt the local laws cover this – they were being sold as reject fruit so nobody can even complain they are over-ripe! Given a few days I would try to refine this myself, but I am short of time and equipment; presumably the local police are primed to spot anyone buying pressure vessels, thermometers and yards of copper piping. Molly has told me dozens of tales of ingenious "stills" put together in suitcases and built into cars to run off the radiator heat, and for once I wish I had one.

There was a tea-house near the corner of the bazaar which had a few shelves of snacks for sale, giving me an idea. While I sipped a cooling tea and munched a chilli bhaji, I sketched out a shopping list including a bottle of neat spirits (preferably “Absolut” vodka or “Relativ” gin, as I would hate to waste something drinkable) and quietly handed it to the turbaned proprietor, asking him where would be the best place to fill the list.

Not surprisingly, he pointed out just as quietly that it was no longer available for sale. But he did say that it had been known for people to obtain it – and he presented me with a white hibiscus flower that he motioned I should wear by my left ear. It was a jolly expensive flower, five shillings worth! He suggested I take a walk through the bazaar and keep my eyes and ears open.

I spent the next hour slowly shopping, remembering to haggle appropriately. I was starting to think I had bought nothing but an overpriced bloom when a native kitten dashed past me, pressing a folded note in my paw and vanished into the crowds without even slowing down. Opening my compact I groomed my whiskers while reading the note – just a time, a place and a price. Ten shillings for a bottle of spirit! I suppose this is what they call a seller’s market, and the merchants are charging danger money on top.

There is a fine open garden looking out over the harbour, where I managed to find shade and a breath of cooling wind. The view was stunning, looking over the island chain with a few phosphate carriers just visible on the horizon. A relaxing spot, and a nice place to watch the daily seaplane coming in on the East-West route. Hopefully Prudence and Beryl are on time for the evening flight, and hopefully we will all meet up at the Test Centre.

A polite cough made me turn around, to see a very striking gentleman standing behind the bench with a picnic hamper. Very striking indeed – no taller than me, but exceedingly athletic, looking like a dancer – and a very genuine Siamese. He asked if he might have the other end of the bench – and though in my pith helmeted guise I might have hesitated, today I smiled and happily let him.

This was just as well – he looked around at the park and opened his picnic basket. There was a stack of those split level “Tiffin Carriers” one sees in the bazaars, and next to those, wrapped securely in towels – three square bottles of spirits! He apologised for being early, but gallantly added that he had been told of my beauty and had to see if the story was true.

It was a most interesting luncheon, as I gladly accepted his offer of sharing the less clandestine contents of the hamper (and at fifteen shillings a bottle he can surely afford to be generous with the snacks.) His name he gave as Prad Phao, though in the circumstances I would not bet a farthing on that being what his family call him. I can hardly complain, being as genuinely oriental as Chop Suey myself. His fur markings are very clear and distinctive, and his snout is much finer than mine with wonderful blue eyes, unlike my own green ones. Though not as solidly built as some Spontoonie cats I know to my delight, he looks as if he has steel cable and whipcord under his very glossy fur.

Actually, he was quite apologetic about what he was selling, explaining that it was a local product of dates fermented in oil drums and cautioned me to mix it with plenty of water before drinking – and implored me not to drink too much of it. I could reassure him on that point, though I think he might have been surprised at just how well I would take his advice. Molly has told me quite enough of the hazards of crude spirits, though in her stories it is only her competitors’ brands that make customers go blind.

It was a work of an instant to drop a bottle into a padded Tiffin Carrier under the cover of the hamper, and pass it to me – one sees locals with them at all times of day, and they attract no comment.

By mid-afternoon the breeze had sprung up and we had been having a most enjoyable conversation when he looked at his watch, apologised and explained he had to meet less charming customers in town. Prad Phao (I am not sure which way round the name goes in Siam) raised his hat and departed with the hamper. A very interesting encounter, to be sure – I doubt Molly’s family employed drinks salesmen with such style.

I was in two minds what to do – return to the hotel straight away, remove the fur dye and head straight across the island, or stick to my first plan. But that would mean breaking my promise to see Mr. Leamington, and given a choice I would hardly want to do that. I might be forced to look like two different people, but I only have one honour underneath it. So after another leisurely look around town I returned to the hotel with my tiffin carrier swinging nonchalantly by its handle, and put in another three hours with my textbooks. It was swelteringly hot, so I was completely down to my fur under the mosquito netting.

Actually, looking at myself in the mirror I felt a slight pang at the thought of taking the patterning off; Saimmi did a very artistic job. After the exams I hope I can apply it as well, though it should just be a matter of stepping onto an aircraft and making sure my muzzle matches the passport photograph.

When I started to dress for the evening it had been broad daylight – but by the time I had finished grooming it was pitch dark, the sun going down in about fifteen minutes flat! When night falls on the Equator, it has a very impressive diving speed. I felt something of a pang at leaving the bottle in my room, but I could hardly take it with me – we wear full or empty knapsacks at Songmark almost as part of the uniform, but one would never go with my current outfit.

Having done my duty to my textbooks, we were always told to relax the night before an exam, as staying up half the night cramming at the last minute rarely helps matters – as with a heavy meal, one needs time to digest things.

Mr. Leamington was already at the bar with a fresh sarsaparilla on plenty of ice when I arrived; it is impressive how folk react to seeing me in this fur style. I could see his tail wag as he caught sight of me, though of course he soon stilled it – and he seemed very interested in hearing how I had spent my day. Fortunately I had dropped the wilting white flower before returning to the hotel – it would not amaze me if it was a code that changed daily.

Lionel did insist on buying me a ginger beer, commenting that he regrets he could not show me the Savoy where they have a wider choice. I doubt he meant more brands of ginger ale or dandelion and burdock. I could quite understand his problem, as a fresh-faced young officer can hardly walk into a club full of his seniors with a mysterious Eurasian girl and expect folk to cheer him. Of course, investigating me here off-hours could be explained as dedication above and beyond the call of duty – quite another matter.

I rather regretted telling him I would be away studying any dances I could find (quite true, if I do see any on the way to the Test centre) and might not see him before I leave. It turns out he actually is one of the Warwickshire Leamingtons, and the kind of gentleman I might meet at tennis parties and weekend house parties back home perfectly respectably. Pleading tiredness, I left him to the remains of a lukewarm Sarsaparilla and the prospect of a return to the duty rooms of Government House.

Dear Diary: in Molly's pulp fiction books, this is not how the evening generally ends with the exotic and not necessarily respectable lady of mystery heading back to look at a textbook before turning in early and alone. Of course, most of those tales are wishful thinking written for folk such as Lionel. I have enough complications as it is, and with all the windows open to flush out the scent of the raw spirit, I spent half an hour in the bathroom painstakingly removing the popular entertainer Kim-Anh from the face of the earth. It seemed a pity.

Actually, I had about half a glass left over, and while my fur dried sampled it in a toast to getting this far. Prad Phao was quite right, it was awful stuff and went straight down the drain after one sip. I am sure it has its uses in cocktails – one Schneider Trophy fuel cocktail I memorised was sixty percent fine Romanian benzole, thirty percent ethanol, ten percent furfuran and five teaspoonfuls to the gallon of tetra-ethyl lead. Shaken not stirred, naturally.

Wednesday 20th March, 1936

Quite a day! Last night a half Siamese retired to Room Fifteen, and this morning a plain English cat quietly slipped out without being seen. Kim-Anh had paid everything in advance, so nobody should be wondering too much where she vanished to. "Down the drain" sounds rather sinister, and I would be hard put to explain matters if stopped by a hotel detective.

By the time I walked round the corner I was quite a different person; wearing my neat Songmark shirt and a pair of cycling trousers in the heat, I had native policemen stopping the traffic unasked to let me cross the road. I enquired as to buses across to Jury Point where the airfield is, but it seems there is no public service. Folk who have vehicles here have drivers assigned to them.

All I carried was my overnight bag with the fur dye and costume for the return trip: stocking up on the way through town for two quart bottles of ginger beer, I decided ten miles along a plain track marked on the map would be three and a half hours brisk hike, getting me there in time for luncheon. In fact it took me five, as the humidity reached a hundred and the temperature overtook it by ten in the morning – rather than my striding in smartly, it was more like a steaming rag-doll of a trainee pilot that arrived at the main gate. At least my Songmark tutors would be happy I had not drunk all my liquids in the first hour, much though I wanted to.

Anyway, at long last I was signing my real name in to register at Jury Point, where my "Trial by Jury" could begin. I noticed in the register that Beryl and Prudence had already arrived, and ten minutes later we were all in one of the bungalows at the end of the officer's compound, comparing notes on our trip over. There are about fifteen other pilots here to take the tests this week: mostly private local flyers from the surrounding colonies, with a couple of commercial types who have been flying self-taught for years and need official paperwork.

Looking at the map on the wall, Jury Point might not have a mile of paved runway to match Eastern Island, but it does have three adequate strips in a classic "A" pattern, always giving one of them a decent headwind without too much drift (landing on Eastern Island in a gusting Northerly is an education in side-slipping.)

It was such a relief to have actually arrived, that I felt like collapsing in one of the veranda chairs and falling asleep. But of course the hard work has just started – we are invited to dine with the base commander tonight, which is the same sort of "invitation" to being asked to a ship's Captain's table: when he calls, you go.

Friday 22nd March, 1936

Dear Diary: if you had asked any of us a year ago if we were ready to take the official exams and pass them, we would all have agreed – and almost all of us would have been sadly mistaken. There was no time or energy yesterday to record the grilling we went through: I was extremely glad that I took my books along with me this trip.

Anyway, we were put through the mill in a very comprehensive fashion, starting with textbook exercises such as landing speeds, permissible loads and things that only need a good memory. The next step was to get us in a Link trainer and throw problems at us – some of which had no perfect solution. I was shivering with shock having crash-landed a theoretical aircraft full of passengers after the theoretical starboard engine seized up half a mile after takeoff. It came as a great relief to be told that was the best solution: trying to turn back to the runway at that speed and altitude would have almost certainly stalled and spun us into the ground.

That sort of thing went on all day – but as soon as the sun set, we dived through the showers, changed into our formal costume and were allowed through the hallowed gates of the Officer's Mess. As probationary pilots and guests we had to be on best behaviour, and I was amazed how well Beryl managed it. She can play the part of a keen yet demure mousie of good family, without even having her fur dyed; the kind that sweet old ladies show their jewels to, and never suspect when they go missing. It is somehow rather sinister to see Beryl being a polite and well-behaved girl making small-talk with the base commander's wife and daughters.

Today, we took our first practical examinations. These are not lessons, but strictly exams: it is taken as read one is an excellent pilot already, and the only question is, am I good enough for a company to entrust with its aircraft and the lives of the passengers. I sincerely hope Maria has kept quiet about her air adventures before she got to Songmark.

Our teachers are mostly retired or part-time RAF officers, who are the cautious survivors of both the War and nearly twenty years of pioneering flying all over the place since then. It is hard to impress them with our good sense and reliability, but that is our target here. Still, after the tests we all gathered in the mess to watch the moon coming up over Mount Mikado, where one of the instructors jokingly commented on being impressed by us "three little maids from school".

Well – Songmark is a school of course, but only Beryl can be called little. As for being maids in the old sense of the word – none of us are, not even Prudence, given her friend Tahni's "distinctive" physique. Still, we can all look respectable and pass as Officers and Ladies, though I wonder how long Beryl really can keep it up without "finding" the mess silverware in her suitcase.

Saturday 23rd March, 1936

We made it! All three of us are looking at our results in glee and awe, having passed with distinction. The full certificates will be drawn up and posted to us, with our paw prints on them and our photographs fresh from developing. Fortunately they go on the paw prints Songmark sent, rather than passport numbers, or I would be in some trouble.

I have my "B" Pilot license at last. Though I would have to be qualified "on type" on each aircraft before anyone would think of letting me fly commercially, I have the basic qualifications, signed and sealed in my own name. We celebrated with one of the few bottles of champagne to be found on the island (the test centre is run by pilots after all, even if they mostly fly desks these days) and relaxed in the sun for a few hours while our nerves calmed down. Beryl whispered her plans to celebrate properly back at Songmark next weekend, mostly involving a certain rat gentleman.

Although I have a room booked in for tonight at Jury Point, I decided to head back to New Penzance and change my appearance – after all, as Amelia I am not supposed to be here and every minute is another risk now the exams are done. My flight suit I entrusted to Prudence to get back to Songmark, and I headed straight into town on an official transport – definitely, not on foot this time.

I had thought it was a good idea to use the same hotel as before, the Grand Duke. First I found a public baths with a lockable grooming room and large mirrors giving all-round coverage, and used the last of the fur dye changing back to Siamese form. Making sure to drop the empty packages in a public rubbish bin, I registered again for a night as Kim-Anh Soosay, and relaxed on the balcony feeling very pleased with myself.

I really should have allowed for Mr. Leamington's persistence. Just before dinner there was a polite knock on the door and a native chambermaid handed me a large bouquet of flowers, with a card inviting me to dine. A shilling's worth of intelligence data from the maid revealed that Lionel has been checking every hotel register in New Penzance every evening since I vanished – with a giggle, she added the information free that he was totally head-over-tail smitten by me.

Oh my. There was nothing for it but to go downstairs and meet him – and I must say, he was impeccably brushed and turned out as if for inspection. He almost knocked the table over with the speed he

stood up, and his tail was blurring like a propeller as it thrashed. Actually, it was very nice to see him – even though I knew I had to tell him farewell.

Really, Lionel is a very presentable canine, and for once he was someone the folks back home could approve of – though some folk might think he was aiming rather high for a General's daughter, his family is very well respected. It felt quite strange really, sharing dinner while he hung on my every word. I did ask if he had a sweetheart waiting for him at home – but apparently not. It seemed rather a pity.

Actually, it was awfully hard to keep my tail from going sideways by the end of the evening. I kept wondering what the rest of his fur pattern looked like; very neatly brushed and absolutely clean for certain. Catching sight of us in the mirror, we made a very striking couple, both being two-tone in bold patterns. A lot of film stars and starlets have clear, distinctive two-tone patterns that look good on camera – if colour film ever gets cheap enough for general use they might regret it, like stars with stammers or strong accents did when “talkies” appeared.

The hotel had a small dance floor, and the rest of the evening passed very nicely with neither of us complaining it was only a gramophone rather than a live band. At the end, I had to say farewell, and lingeringly kissed him goodbye – the effect was quite electric, rather like those amazing matinee cartoons one sees. It was with rather a drooping tail that I returned to my room alone, threw myself under the mosquito netting and contemplated my ticket back – consoling myself with the thought that at least I had provided Lionel some interest in a rather dull posting.

Even though he is a canine, his scent was very nice. As for his fur pattern, it is very distinctive indeed – not quite as much as our tutor Miss Wildford, but I think her parents must have been two different species, and nobody thinks any less of her for that. It is certainly something to think about.

Sunday 24th March, 1936

Disaster!

Everything started off so well. I was out of the hotel just after a good breakfast and down to the harbour in plenty of time, my ticket and my light valise all ready for the eleven o'clock Aero Frantique flight back North. I queued up with a dozen other travellers, watching the flying boat swoop in to take me home, when I presented my ticket and passport – only to be told my papers were “not in order”.

It jolly well floored me. I tried to point out they were good enough to get me here, and tried to find out exactly what was wrong with them – but although he was unfailingly polite, debating with the bear on Customs duty was like arguing with a brick wall. My papers are Not In Order, and that is that. I was firmly escorted out of the building and left on the pavement, my tail dragging on the pavement and a hollow feeling in my stomach. Ten minutes later I heard the engines start up, and my stomach felt as if it was tying in knots as I watched my flight home leaving without me.

Well, fortunately they teach you about this sort of thing at Songmark. I felt a plan coming together: first I headed over to the park to put my thoughts in order and take stock of what I have. Literally I have the clothes I stood up in, my overnight bag and a pocket full of shillings, plus four pounds sterling as emergency reserve sewn into the valise handle.

Whatever else happens, one needs food – so I headed to the bazaar and haggled for fruit and roast fish, though I hardly felt like eating. The next step was to look for another way out: I checked in the Native section to see if there was any regular shipping heading to the French Sandwich Islands, but without success. It seems that although there are plenty of small craft plying the local islands like Gondoliers, there is nothing regularly making the three day sea crossing – and I would need ten times the money at hand to persuade any seaworthy enough boat to take me there specially.

It had taken all day to ask through the bazaars, and by the time I had received my last disappointment the sun was getting awfully low. Though in Spontoon I could vanish into the jungle and put up a leaf hut, it was all civilised gardens and plantations here and I had no desire to add to my troubles by being arrested for vagrancy. There was little time to think of finding a cheaper hotel before dark, so I returned to the rather boastfully named Grand Duke and checked in for a third time. I can afford to stay here a week, with adequate meals from the bazaar – but that would be the end of the line.

As it happened, I did not have much time to sit and plan, before there was a cautious knock on the door. I was not at all amazed to see Lionel there – but he was in a rather different mood to last night. His ears and tail were drooping to match my own, and his expression was definitely woebegone. He hesitantly asked if he might buy me dinner, and in the circumstances I scarcely could refuse to save my money.

We had the table out on the balcony away from prying eyes, as it looked as if he was about to burst with news; he did so as soon as the waiter was back indoors. It is generally a bad sign when folk start off asking you to forgive them, before saying what they have done.

Oh dear. Lionel started off making official enquiries about me when I arrived on the island, before he was hopelessly smitten by me as Kim-Anh. When I vanished completely for three days, his superiors asked him what he was spending all his time searching for, and he had to tell them. They were rather alarmed that

someone already under observation could simply vanish into thin air (or alcohol fumes, had they but known) on their well-regulated island, and took the investigation out of Lionel's paws. It looks as if they will not be happy until they find out just what I am here for, and have decided the best way is to keep me here until they do. I suppose from their point of view my behaviour does look rather suspicious.

Talk about being sunk by one's own torpedo! Lionel looked as if he wanted to dig a hole and pull it in after him – but he made a clean breast of it with me, and is eager to do what he can to make up. I suppose I should have been furious – but he was only doing his job to start off with, and I can hardly complain if he appreciates my carefully planned Siamese looks.

If I had been surprised before, I was totally staggered when he went to one knee and begged me to stay, promising he would do his best by me. If "Euros" had the idea of being Tailfast, I think that is what he was proposing – and from his point of view it is the best he can offer me. Officers on Imperial service simply do not marry Natives (only Euros in the Spanish and the Portuguese empires do that) and no missionary or padre would ever consent to it, even if I wanted to.

I had to turn him down of course – having other places to be and other folk waiting for me. Anyway, he would have an awful shock when my dyed fur grew out and he found out who he had really got. I can imagine Beryl laughing her snout off at that sort of trick, but it would be a terribly shabby thing to do to an honourable gentleman.

Anyway – at least I know the problem now, which is always a help. And I have a willing ally, who is in a position of some importance here – sadly, not enough to dissuade his superiors. I thought (very briefly) of telling him the complete truth about who I am, but that could do a lot more harm than good; even if he believed me, I imagined what would happen if his superiors found my name on the list of Enemy Agents. As Tatiana translated the motto of the Cheka on Vostok, "The truth would devour you."

Still – there was no reason why I should not kiss him goodnight, and take a weight off his shoulders by forgiving him. In fact, we stayed outside till the hotel was ready to close for the night, forgetting my troubles for the evening. He dances well, and really does smell very pleasant.

I retired to Room Fifteen alone again, and decided to sleep on it. Plan A and Plan B had failed, but there will be more tomorrow. As Miss Wildford points out, there are advantages in having a good education; when even Plan Z fails, a Songmark girl switches to the Greek or Russian alphabets and carries on!

Tuesday 26th March, 1936

Well, I am still stuck in New Penzance, while the days go by and my return ticket gets faded in the humidity. I took the chance to get to know the bazaar folk, some of whom speak Polynesian languages near enough to Spontoonie to get by in, when they do not want to speak English.

I am sure in Vostok or similar places, the local Police would have lost patience by now and extracted the truth from me with customised kitchen utensils – happily, round here folk are rather more subtle. Still, I get the feeling that a lot of eyes are watching me, and noses following my trail as I explore the island looking for a way off.

Lionel has dined and danced with me the past three nights and I get more than the occasional pang that I have to disappoint him. For a real Kim-Anh he would be quite a catch, just as in other places low-caste girls with nothing in life to look forward to "upgraded to first class" by marrying Euros and becoming socially higher than everyone who had been treating them like dirt. But there is nothing to be done except disappoint him – I have to get back to Songmark, and my fur dye will not hold up forever in this climate.

Someone who has no need of cosmetics is Prad Phao, whom I met again at lunchtime. He politely asked if I had kept well, as I can imagine some of his other customers drinking that raw spirit regretted it. I expected him to try and sell me some more, but he seemed to be on lunch break as his tiffin carriers contained nothing stronger than vegetables stewed with Thai bonnet peppers. (On the other paw, there IS nothing stronger than Thai bonnet peppers.) As we sat in the park, he surprised me by pointing out various innocent looking figures, beggars and sales folk, as being watchers. Whether they were watching me or him I could hardly tell, except that either way it is hardly going to reassure the Authorities to see us together.

One sees all sorts of things on these islands. The original plantations here were not copra but oil palms, and there is quite a lot of that still grown – the road past the Savoy hotel is usually full of what the locals fondly call "D' Oily Cartes" in their accent. They are proud of their early traditions, claiming that it built the Gilberts up as a trading centre as if a Sorcerer had waved his wand over the territory – certainly, the wealth that generated must have greased a lot of palms.

Wednesday 27th March, 1936

It is amazing how fast things change around here. As I write, I am out on the open ocean heading Northwards in a fishing boat – working my passage as cook in the galley true enough, but I would happily row in an ancient galley if it got me off Pinafore Island.

Last night I had retired to bed, rather dispirited with having started on the second of my four gold sovereigns paying for another night at the Grand Duke. I was about to fall asleep when a handful of gravel hit the window outside – and I looked out to see a slim two-tone feline figure in the moonlight below. Of course I was cautious, sliding down the veranda to the ground with my ears and nose ready for trouble and a stocking full of beach sand at my belt; I am absolutely on my own here after all.

Prad Phao whispered that he had spent the last two days making sure of me; anyone asking around for black-market ways out of a country may always turn out to be working for the Government. But he had asked on the grape vine, and it had bourn fruit – servants overhear things outside offices, and pass them on. There is a new police chief due to arrive on the flying boat Princess Ida tomorrow, and the customs police had planned to pull me in for questioning as proof of their zeal.

He has his own reasons for needing to be elsewhere, which he assures me are nothing to do with selling extremely bad gin substitute in the bazaar. Sometimes one has to take things on trust; in three minutes I had collected my things and was quietly slipping through the shadows with him, our eyes at their night-widest and ears raised for the expected blast of a police whistle.

It was nearly an hour through the plantations before we arrived at an old dock, obviously too small for any of the commercial phosphate or copra carriers. There was a two-masted sloop there, its name “Ruddigore” just visible in the moonlight, and we seemed to be expected.

Even if I did urgently need to get off the island, there is such a thing of getting out of the frying pan and into the fire – so before setting paw onboard or emptying my sand sock, I asked Phao exactly what he was doing and where he was going. Vanishing into the night on a strange ship with nobody in the world knowing what happened to me, is potentially an exceedingly bad idea!

To give him credit, Phao did take time to sit on the dock and explain for five minutes, even though the local police might have stepped out of the plantation at any second. As he explained before, his family has been in exile since the French took Indochina into their empire, and has been looking for support for his folk to throw off the “invaders”. Happily, he is not a Bolshevik, coming as he does from a noble family.

Unfortunately, he says, there is very little interest from the Natives over here liberating Natives in someone else’s Empire on the far shore of the Pacific. As for a general revolt against “oppressing powers”, the Bolsheviks have rather cornered the market in that line of work, and would not be interested in restoring his family to their pre-colonial status. From what I read in “International Geographic” about the great ruined naval city of Anchor What, the Khmer had their own empire once, with presumably their own unhappy Natives somewhere around.

Well, it was good enough for me. I suppose if Barsetshire was ever oppressed by foreign powers, imposing rules made in Belgium or similar, I might be slinking around the woods of Luxembourg myself trying to contact locals in the same situation. Another five minutes had us all aboard and casting off from the jetty, heading out into the night.

The sloop is a forty-footer, nothing one would like to sail into a typhoon with but good enough for the open ocean. Accommodation is in hammocks, something I am quite used to – I even have a small partitioned part of the hold to myself, while Phao and his three crew have the one real cabin. After all the excitement, I found myself falling asleep like flipping a light switch, regardless of my position. I have made my hammock, and must lie in it.

(Later) A whole day at sea, heading straight on course Northwards. I was rather uneasy at first, but we are going where Phao promised we would, as near as the wind can take us. I volunteered to help out, running the galley and the like (not reading Thai script or numerals would make helping to navigate rather tricky) and things are working out rather well.

I remembered what happened to poor Molly the last time she took an unscheduled passage back to Spontoon, stowing aboard that tramp steamer. One can be outwardly “reasonable” and exceedingly cruel at the same time, as that Captain was when Molly was found onboard at sea. She told Molly that it had been her choice to join the ship – and it would be her free choice to “work her passage” or get off and swim any time she wanted to. So Molly blames herself mostly, especially since our Tutors have always told us to avoid getting into that sort of situation in the first place.

The rest of the crew are civet cats, and speak very poor English: they understand my French but understandably do not like to talk in it. I cook for them, work the bilge pump and do anything else to help out – as for working my passage, I am perfectly happy with this version of it. Phao is very much a gentleman, which seems to be much the same for a Khmer as any squire back home. And exceedingly handsome, besides.

Thursday 28th March, 1936

A fine day on the open seas, hardly a sail or island spotted as we headed steadily North. Once the sails are set and the tiller locked, the boat almost sails itself, with one of the civets keeping an eye on the wind. I had plenty of time to talk with Phao, who sympathises with me as a fellow victim of Colonial Oppression.

Well, I don't know about that. I was entering the country on false papers after all; my real name officially listed in the same category as real Bolshevik Agents. Everyone knows about Macao as a place where false papers can be practically bought as easily as newspapers, and I hardly gave a good reason to be nosing around Pinafore Island. I think the most democratic governments imaginable would have reason to keep an eye on me, until they knew what I was up to. Still, I was hardly going to argue the point with Phao in the circumstances.

The wind dropped away around noon, leaving us almost stranded on a calm and glassy ocean, no sign of land around us. The crew retired for a siesta, and I decided a swim would be very welcome. For half an hour it was very pleasant to keep pace with the ship's slow progress, with the waters around me almost crystal clear so far from land.

It was a very good thing the waters were so clear, and that I had dived to look underwater at the minute. Though without swimming goggles everything was blurred, I spotted three lean shapes coming straight at me, when I was fifty yards from the ship! I surfaced like a cork and yelled for help as I struck out for the ladder at top speed, realising things underwater are often closer than they look and a barracuda can swim much faster than I can.

I was ten yards away when the first one brushed past me, giving me a glimpse of narrow jaws packed with teeth. They circled round and I was sure I was done for – when Phao dived in next to me, a long wavy-bladed Malay *Kris* in his paw. He was amazing in the water, and managed to slice into the first barracuda coming for me – filling the waters with fish blood, the other two turning on their comrade in a foaming frenzy while we lunged for the ladder and hauled ourselves up to safety on the deck while the rest of the shoal arrived and the water fairly boiled with thrashing fins.

We collapsed, panting, our fur soaking the deck and the sounds of the feeding barracudas just two yards away over the side. Phao was bleeding slightly along his thigh where a barracuda's teeth had raked him and I put my first-aid training to good use bandaging him. I started checking him over for any additional damage, and found my paw tracing the contours of his Siamese markings ... the next thing I knew, my tail had gone sideways and the rest of me was being very grateful to be rescued.

Dear Diary – just as our Tutors keep telling us hunger is the best appetiser, I had heard before of what surviving extreme danger can do. I had thought Phao was a perfect gentleman, and now I can be sure he is, in more ways than one. Either the crew were fast asleep still on siesta or they were suitably discreet – whichever, we had the deck to ourselves the rest of the afternoon. By the time the breeze sprung up again an hour before dusk, I fear we were more scratched by each other than the barracuda ever managed.

A fine starry night followed, navigating by the pole star as we headed towards the French Sandwich Islands. Phao calculates it will be another thirty hours with the same winds, but one can never tell. As the famous song has it, it could be a “slow boat to China” – or possibly Indochina, though I am not going all the way. In some senses, at least.

Friday 29th March, 1936

A fresh, breezy day for sailing – unfortunately not in quite the right direction so we spent most of the time tacking about, and Phao was hard at work on the extra navigation most of the day. Still, I greatly enjoyed the hard work on the boat and the time flew by all too soon as we headed in the general direction of the Spontoon islands.

Thinking of the folk awaiting me on Spontoon, it came as rather a shock that the folk there who would most approve of Phao are Wo Shin's dorm. Brigit, Tatiana and Liberty are raving anti-colonialists, and Shin hails from roughly his part of the world and might well list him as acceptable nobility. He may not be actually Chinese, but Indo-China is surely near enough.

Tatiana had been enthusing last month about the wonders of Soviet Science, which (she says) proves Darwin wrong – they think a lot of a young agriculturalist Lysenko, who claims you can change bloodlines of plants and people by what you do to them in their career – so if you work hard at being a ballerina, your children will be inherently better ballerinas. Heavens save us from dialectic-compatible science! It disproves, she claims, the whole notion of inherited Nobility – though she was rather floored by Beryl's response that any family who run a country for centuries must be therefore very good at it having acquired the right traits by experience. Tatiana loves to explain her politics as utterly logical, and hates being proved wrong.

As Phao traced the lines of my dyed fur, my ears blushed at the thought – Tatiana would think it perfectly believable that imitating a Siamese would lead to kittens with acquired Siamese features. Well, there could be other reasons for that. We rather swept each other off our paws yesterday, and hardly thought about the consequences. It would be ironic indeed if after me practicing being a Eurasian, I end up carrying a real one. Technically, that would also be true if I joined the Hoele'toemi family who are classed as Polynesians despite other strains including Barsetshire, but Phao is the absolute genuine Siamese article. Siamese even sound different, regardless of what language they speak; although he put it very politely Phao did say it was a pity my English side had come out in my yowl.

Still, by my calendar the risk is not too great and passing by the day especially as I am taking what Precautions I can. So the evening passed very pleasantly indeed. The wind picked up and changed to a more favourable quarter, and we fairly shot along under the starlight with the sail billowing out above us and the crew discreetly steering. Though it might be too chilly still to sleep under the stars in bare fur in the Spontoon group, here it seemed the perfect thing to do.

Saturday 30th March, 1936

A day of departures! The wind came round in the night to get us within sight of land by dawn: it was an impressive sight to see the crumbling peaks of the Iles de Brioché looming up against the first light. We passed a very fine early morning until the sun came up, when we had to consider parting. I refrained from asking him where he was going next, for as they say in the films, “what you don’t know you can’t tell.”

The good thing is, my ticket for the Shawnee Pacific Airpaths section of the trip back has survived intact, and is still valid. The bad thing is, folk might wonder how I got here – I have had enough trouble with Customs this trip without having the French end getting inquisitive.

At least Customs only applies to folk who actually come in from the landward side – so we worked out a plan to avoid that. Phao has very sharp wits as well as a nice figure, and between us we work very well. The morning passed in avoiding other vessels while rounding the capes of Ile de Croissant, which on the map rather resembles a much bigger version of Moon Island. By mid-afternoon we were laying fishing nets to divert suspicion just quarter of a mile from the seaplane terminal – and then the time came to say goodbye to Phao.

I must say, my “stage career” as Kim-Anh has its ups and downs. If I had my real name cleared and my British passport back, things would have been very different – I could have just relaxed as a tourist passenger on the way out to Pinafore Island, sweated a few days on the piloting exams then relaxed even more all the way home to Spontoon. On the other paw, I do get to meet some interesting people this way. Our Tutors do not seem to mind “adventures” as long as we conduct ourselves with style and skill, and I should be able to explain most parts of the trip when they ask why I am a week late returning. I hope that is the only thing that is late this month!

There was time for a lingering farewell, then with my papers and respectable clothes folded into a waterproof can I slipped into the sea on the far side of the boat and struck out for land. There were other swimmers in the water, folk diving for pearls and dropped tools from the seaplanes, so I managed to get within fifty yards of the customs fence without any trouble. The water was warm and I could have swam in it all morning, if not for the rather clumsy can floating on a tether behind me.

I had to wait half an hour before a seaplane taxied into the dock, grabbed a float and hung on as it pulled me into the secure area, keeping my snout low and trying not to choke on the spray the props were throwing back at me. While the engines were still running and covering me with their noise, I swam under the jetty to the other side and swarmed up a drainpipe onto the roof, remembering Beryl’s successful hideout on Eastern Island. Throwing myself flat I was invisible from below or in fact anywhere except the distant peaks of Cap Galette some five miles away.

After all the excitement, I had two hours of waiting in the sweltering sun. Quite sweltering in fact, and although my fur dried off in half an hour, after that I was regretting it as my last drink of water had been aboard the Ruddigore. I passed the time grooming, and smoothing out my respectable suit which happily had kept dry with my papers in the can. At last I heard aero engines, and my heart leaped at the sight of Spontoon registration on the Short Cockle as it roared by overhead and made a smooth touchdown in the bay.

As I had agreed with Phao, timing was everything. I waited till the passengers were boarding from the Customs house, slid quietly down the drainpipe and joined the end of the queue as if I had come in from the French land side at the last minute. The beauty of it is that the ticket office is inside the Customs perimeter – so the air crew just punched my ticket and never even asked for my passport at all!

It was a wonderful feeling to sit back in a wicker seat and hear the engines start up, the Cockle leaving the bay right on time and swinging North, home to Spontoon. Half an hour later I was looking down on the last sight of French territory, trying not to gulp my second iced Nootnops Red as I felt my frazzled nerves slowly relax. Though I could not see it, I knew the Ruddigore must be down there with Phao and his crew – it was with rather a pang that I realised we would probably never meet again, Spontoon being conspicuously short of oppressed Natives to liberate.

(Later) Thirteen hours is an awfully long time to sit in an airline seat, however glad one is to be onboard! Apart from about six trips to the smallest cabin (having shamelessly overindulged on the free supply of Nootnops Red) I was chafing with inaction by the time South Island appeared on the horizon, Mount Tomboabo rising as a welcome sight in the last rays of sunset. I braced for another ordeal at Customs, but hardly broke stride as they waved me through; entertainers from Macao must be a commoner sight at this time of year than I had supposed.

So, after everything I returned home to Eastern Island. But of course I was there as Kim-Anh, and hardly liked to stroll into Songmark as a Siamese – which meant another hour getting to Main Island, managing to buy a litre of industrial spirit before the public baths closed and watching as Kim-Anh vanishes down the plughole. It seems a shame to see her go – but I think I will meet her in the mirror again. As it was, I was a week late getting back – and I will have a lot of explaining to do to our Tutors!

(Which she did. As described in the next part, “Easter Eggs.”)