

The Eden Mission by Anthony Wall in two volumes (youth project)

Volume 2

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9. Revelations

It took a lot to annoy Yves, who would rather forgive and forget than let resentment fester. Despite everything, he'd been willing to tolerate his unco-operative room-mate. But that was before Darren stole the pen. A thief, there could be no doubt.

"Why didn't I punch him on the nose?" Yves was still fuming as he passed Vanessa and Susan's door. Shall I tell them about Darren? He kept moving. Tell one of the teachers, Ben or the captain? He couldn't think straight.

Five minutes later he was back in the cabin. Darren had retreated beneath a bunk blanket. Yves said nothing, biding his time.

The time to speak out came next day. After breakfast, ingeniously prepared in the post-hurricane galley, Darren rose and left the others. Now, having considered carefully, Yves produced his pen. Vanessa reached for it. "Where ...?"

"Darren's bag. He said he found it."

Susan kicked Gary under the table.

"Maybe he did find it," Vanessa offered weakly.

"Yeah, in my drawer!"

Norman toyed with a spoon. "What are you going to do, Yves?"

"Search through his belongings, that's what. And I want you all to be there."

Vanessa protested: "We can't. It's not right."

But Yves' mind was made up. "Suit yourselves. I'll just have to handle this alone." Taking the pen from Vanessa, he stalked out of the dining-room. As he expected, four figures followed him.

Darren was absent from the cabin. While Norman stood guard outside, Yves emptied the hold-all on to the bottom bunk. Vanessa exclaimed, identifying her

watch. There was more "loot": a pocket calculator, a lighter, officers' brass buttons, ship's cutlery, a bundle of ten-dollar bills, a sealed packet, an orange pennant bearing the words "FRIENDS OF THE SEA OTTER". Seeing this last item, Susan had to giggle. "How on earth ...?"

Three sharp raps at the door. Norman. Soon after, the door swung open - and in walked Darren. He froze. Only his eyes moved, missing no detail. Then, defiantly, he advanced to the bunk. "Hands off! That stuff's private, personal. I'll ..."

"Report us?" Yves jeered. "Go ahead. You can explain how Vanessa's watch jumped into your bag."

Darren wheeled, as if to break away, but the escape route was barred by Gary and Norman.

"Sit down!" An authoritative Yves.

A deflated Darren sat beside the objects laid out like exhibits in a courtroom. The trial was due to commence.

Yves picked up the first "exhibit" - knives and forks inscribed with Sea Shepherd's name. "You stole these, didn't you?" He tossed them back on to the bunk. "And the buttons. And this." He waved the pennant.

Susan interrupted: "Why, Darren? I thought you liked Rhonda." Any possibility of a reply was curtailed by Yves, determined to complete his case. One by one he held the confiscated possessions under Darren's nose. The calculator - whose?

"Hey, I bet it belongs to Peter Stokes," Vanessa piped up, remembering that the maths master had "mislaid" his.

The lighter. Yves continued remorselessly. Next he riffled the wad of notes. "Rob a bank?"

Finally Yves came to the brown-paper packet. He kneaded with inquiring fingers, then passed it round to the others. "What's inside, I wonder? Something secret. Give it here, Gary."

He started to tear the paper.

"No!" The anguished yell shook Yves rigid. Darren was trembling. "Please ... Don't ..."

The semicircle of accusers changed conspicuously. Nobody wanted this - Darren in tears. Susan wished she were somewhere else.

Gary, who'd begun to think Yves was relishing the role of prosecutor, intervened: "OK. Enough's enough. Darren, we'll wait outside and leave you in peace for a bit. But we'll be back for some answers."

Whether or not whole-heartedly, Yves accompanied them. Gary expressed concern that they all keep their heads. "He's entitled to a fair hearing." Norman nodded.

After a short interval the five re-entered the cabin. Darren was dry eyed, on his feet. An air of challenge hung about him, like a boxer ready to counter-punch. Gary took over. "Well, what've you got to say for yourself?"

Darren glowered, his mouth a thin hard line.

"Not talking, eh?" Gary said mildly. "I can understand that, in a way. You'd probably prefer to answer to someone else - Ben Bellingham, for example."

Darren jerked forward a pace, driven to respond. "Drop dead, busybody! You're bluffing. Can't prove a thing."

"Oh no?" Gary side-stepped him and snatched up the orange pennant.

"Rhonda gave it to me," Darren retorted.

"That's a lie," Susan declared. "Rhonda told Vanessa and me they didn't have a spare flag."

While this was going on, Norman examined the lighter. "L.C." he uttered. "What do those initials stand for? L.C." Without wanting to, he'd become the focus of attention. "I know...Leslie Curtis! He's a smoker."

Darren's denial was emphatic. "Rubbish! Just a coincidence."

Gary shrugged, seeming not to care. "It's easy enough to check. We'll ask him."

Suddenly Darren lost his cockiness, the boxer's nerve had gone.

Sensing victory, Yves returned to the attack. Before Gary could stop him, he was undoing the packet. Darren surrendered at once, pleading with his hands. Yves relented. The torn paper revealed a flat, black book cover? "What is it, Darren? And why are you so scared?"

"I don't know. Really...honestly...I promise. It's Curtis's. I'm to look after it. If anything happens to him, I've got to give it to the captain."

Sceptical, contemptuous, Yves widened the hole in the paper. "Expect us to believe that? Who'd trust you?"

"It's the truth! Please don't open it. Curtis will...My dad ..." Darren was reduced to incoherence.

Gary regained control of the situation. "OK, OK, nobody's gonna lynch you. But you must come clean, tell us everything."

Drawing a deep breath, Darren recounted his story - falteringly at first and then with a kind of feverish fluency. The revelations could hardly have been more startling.

He recalled Sea Shepherd's departure, from Southampton, seven months ago, when he'd joined the fortunate few on a voyage of discovery that his schoolmates envied. It should have been the best day of his life. Instead it was one of the worst. Thanks to Curtis!

Soon after boarding, Darren was singled out by the radio officer, whose apparent kindness proved false. And then the blackmail began.

"Curtis knew all about me - and my family. Said he'd make trouble, big trouble, if I didn't do exactly as I was told. He knew that I, well, I...take things. Can't help it. It's like an illness."

"Kleptomania," Norman supplied.

Vanessa: "Klepto-what?"

"Kleptomania. A compulsive urge to steal."

"That's the word," Darren confirmed. "That's what the doctor called it."

He resumed his narrative, which grew stranger by the minute. His father was serving a prison sentence for theft - and would not come out alive, Curtis had sworn, unless Darren "obeyed". The boy gestured helplessly. "He means it. I daren't cross him."

Outraged, Susan interjected: "The swine! I never liked him. But I don't understand what use you are to him."

Darren lowered his head guiltily. "I, er, spy and eavesdrop on people. Anybody, everybody. And whatever I find out, I pass on to Curtis. He says I can go places he couldn't without causing suspicion."

Yves' budding sympathy withered at this confession. "A nasty little tell-tale, aren't you?"

Darren didn't try to excuse himself but proceeded with the story. Guarding the packet was his most important job, he said, and no one must learn of the contents - except in an emergency. Curtis had paid him, in dollar bills. Darren owned up to further "crimes", even to the fire he hadn't meant to start.

His painful explanation over, he awaited their verdict in a lengthening silence. Yves broke it. "We'll have to see Ben or the captain right away. There's no choice."

Darren's face contorted. "But ..."

Gary cut across him. "Hang on, Yves. If his father's in danger... Curtis can't be operating alone and could have heavies to do his dirty work. This needs thinking about."

"What's behind it all?" Susan was bewildered.

"Your guess is as good as mine," said Gary. "But Curtis and Co. are no supporters of The Eden Mission."

The debate ebbed and flowed until they reached a provisional agreement. They'd leave Stokes's calculator on his desk at the next opportunity, and find a way of replacing other stolen items.

"As for Curtis," added Gary, "we'll watch his every move. You, Darren, will be our undercover man." He jabbed a finger. "And remember, you're on probation. No more thieving - or else!"

Two thousand miles to the west, in his Houston office, Art Benton sat stiffly. "Call from Zurich, Switzerland," his secretary announced. Benton felt his stomach tighten. Zurich, home of ... The Director.

Benton listened to the unmistakable tones - soft, lisping, mid-European - of a man he had never seen, whose name he did not know, immensely powerful and influential.

"That fiasco off Santa Barbara!" The Director simmered. "Who authorised the

ramming of the ecologists' boat? You?"

"I'm not that dumb."

"Who, then? It was clumsy, rash and pointless."

Benton answered slowly: "I've a hunch, no more."

"Yes!"

"My money's on Max Kruger."

"Kruger, hmmm," The Director mused. "Possible. An overambitious hothead who employs crude methods and cruder operatives. Quite possible."

"So what shall I do?" queried Benton.

"Do? Absolutely nothing. Leave Kruger to me."

The line went dead. Benton hung up. He dried his damp palms on a handkerchief.

Seconds later, in Zurich, The Director's phone rang. Maximilian Kruger calling.

Though the hurricane had long abated, every hour brought fresh evidence of Hannah's handiwork. Captain Alexander felt downright pity for Sea Shepherd, mauled, maimed and sorely in need of rest and recuperation. He and his company were busier now than at the height of the storm. Mopping up and running repairs disrupted normal schedules. Other matters, such as finding the saboteur, must wait.

On deck, two ratings cleaned out the swimming-pool - in which the corpse of a large sea-bird appeared to be browsing among assorted junk.

Below, lab scientist Frederick Cairns talked to and fed his surviving fish. In the ship's hospital an orderly tended the helmsman, whose stitched face would heal and whose eyes, by God's grace, had not been punctured.

It was a starry night with a lemon-slice moon when Sea Shepherd finally found a berth - and a deserved respite - at Port of Spain, Trinidad. Crowding the rail, the teenagers gazed across the multicoloured scribble of harbour lights on the water to the inviting island beyond. While the ship underwent a three-week refit, including a period in dry dock to attach a new propeller, they vowed to take full advantage of this unplanned pause in the voyage.

The days dissolved into each other. For a few of the crew there was the luxury of a little shore leave. For most, however, the stay meant work and more work.

Varied messages poured in through the radio and satellite receivers. Ben Bellingham was delighted to hear that the otters had eluded the oil's slimy embrace and that some were being relocated in less hazardous areas.

But this was his sole cause for rejoicing.

Next he learned about the mini-submarine, still missing. Not so the two men with it. Their mutilated bodies, washed up on a beach, lay in a California morgue. Soon after, another bombshell - a radio call from the abducted trawler skipper, freed so he could deliver a short speech from his captor: "We'll meet

again, Bellingham. And then you die."

During these weeks Leslie Curtis gained the distinct and disquieting impression of being shadowed. Also that someone had been snooping in his cabin. He was right on both counts.

Ashore, Susan and Gary sampled the pleasures of sugar-cane and calypso music. But, unable to forget recent events, the pair made apathetic tourists.

Returning to ship, Gary looked up at the cloudless sky. A red seaplane was circling the harbour.

10. Jungle

Darren padded along a ship's corridor. Since "owning up", he didn't feel quite so alone, so oppressed. Maybe things would turn out all right...

"Urrrrgh!" He was wrenched violently sideways. A hard and heavy hand transferred itself from his collar to the scruff of his neck. Curtis slammed the store-room door behind them and released his grip. Darren spun around. Curtis had never looked more menacing.

"I wanna word with you, sonny. Been shooting your mouth off, haven't you?"

"No." Darren stepped back. "I dunno what you're on about."

Curtis closed in. "Yes you do. Blabbing our business to those other brats."

The boy's heart missed a beat. "No, I couldn't. You know I couldn't - even if I wanted to."

With slit eyes the radio officer weighed him up. Each second seemed a minute.

Eventually Curtis spoke: "Then why've they been following me? Sniggering, whispering. There's always one of 'em around."

Darren wrinkled his forehead, as if pondering the puzzle. "I've no idea," he lied again. "It's not my fault none of my friends like you."

"Friends!" Curtis guffawed. "You haven't got any friends."

"Well, they like me better than you." Now Darren was telling the truth.

Curtis's rage fizzled out into irritable uncertainty. He began to pace, wondering aloud. Who'd searched his quarters? Darren was unable to help here either. Next Curtis complained: "Ever since the fire, the captain's had it in for me."

Darren displayed fresh interest. "How did the blaze start? Are you sure you didn't leave a cigarette burning?"

"That s'posed to be funny?" snarled Curtis. "Don't get lippy with me, kid."

"Sorry." Darren adopted a conciliatory expression. "I just thought...you've, um, had a lot on your mind." Slyly he added: "And perhaps you're imagining things - about the others, I mean."

Curtis conveyed his contempt, but confusion was detectable too. "OK, that'll do for now." Darren turned to the door.

A parting demand from Curtis: "Bring the packet. Tomorrow, 8#30 a.m. sharp."

After lessons and a rushed lunch, Susan, Gary, Vanessa, Yves and Norman headed across the deck to an out-of-the-way corner by the stern. Darren was already there.

"Well?" Curiosity and eagerness mingled in Susan's voice.

Darren divulged the details of his unceremonious encounter with Curtis. Despite himself, Yves felt a sneaking admiration.

"So he's asked for the packet?" Gary checked.

Darren nodded. "He borrows it from time to time, don't know why. When I get it back it's been newly wrapped and sealed."

Vanessa: "Good thing Yves didn't tear the paper to shreds. But how will you explain the hole?"

"I'll think of something... Storm damage?" A hint of humour, the first they'd ever discerned in Darren.

"Of course!" Norman took off his glasses. "What fools we've been!"

The rest of them were accustomed to occasional outbursts from their "eccentric professor".

"The sabotage," Norman babbled on. "Don't you see? Curtis - he's the perpetrator."

Gary's jaw dropped. "Old Norman's right. Curtis could be the one, prob'ly is. Why didn't it dawn on us before?"

"I vote we go to the captain," said Yves.

"Not yet," Gary cautioned, "not without evidence."

Norman again: "Bet there's evidence in the packet - in the book."

"Maybe," conceded Gary. "But we've got Darren to think of. Besides, from what he's told us, Curtis is clearly getting rattled. Let's pile on the pressure."

An animated conference ensued, hatching several schemes to make life intolerable for the radio officer.

As the group dispersed, Susan put her arm round a suddenly crestfallen Darren. She guessed the reason. "Don't worry, we won't let anything happen to your dad."

Sea Shepherd--four hours out from Port of Spain and four days away from the Amazon - should be bravely buoyant, not trailing her troubles like wake. James Alexander loved his ship as if she breathed, thought, felt. Sometimes he fancied they were partners who "understood" each other. This was such a moment. In his cabin, flanked by Bellingham and Masterson, Alexander tried to sound positive. Quite a challenge, given the facts. Fact One: the deceased submariners, both good men. Letters of condolence to their relatives had been sincere but inadequate. Fact Two: the death threat to Ben. Fact Three: the saboteur Still at large. Still free to plot and execute another, perhaps a more destructive, strike. Exasperated, Alexander rounded unfairly on Johnny Masterson: "Some security officer!"

Early next morning Darren approached the radio room with trepidation. Casually confident when he'd answered Vanessa, he was by no means certain of conning Curtis about the torn paper. He must be utterly convincing.

Here goes! Darren tapped on the radio room door. It opened at once. Curtis bundled him inside. "Let's have it." Darren unbuttoned his shirt and pulled out the packet.

"What's this?" Curtis's reaction was predictable. "I warned you!"

Fortunately for Darren the radio receiver intervened. While Curtis was taking down the message, Darren deftly pocketed a couple of cigarettes from the pack on the table beside him.

Curtis signed off. "Right ..."

Darren's chance. "The hurricane, it made a pigsty of our cabin. Everything was flying around, including my hold-all. I'm surprised the paper isn't more badly ripped."

So plausible and unrepentant was the boy that his inquisitor soon seemed satisfied. He dismissed Darren, but only after a pointed reference to his father.

The remark would have a profound effect, the opposite of what was intended. Something inside Darren had snapped. An icy resolve crystallised in his mind, colder by far than any fear. For his own sake, for the sake of his mum, for the sake of his dad, he'd "fix" Curtis.

Darren became the keenest member of the youngsters' team, playing a cat-and-mouse game with Curtis. Three days' sailing lay between them and the Amazon. You could do a lot in three days.

Throughout lessons that morning, Darren made a poor pupil. But he was wholly attentive when maths master Peter Stokes stood up, looking ridiculously pleased, and addressed the class. "I've found my calculator! Darndest thing is, I searched for ages and it was buried under these files." Of all Darren's mixed and complicated emotions, happy relief predominated.

In the afternoons the youngsters often went their separate ways, pursuing individual interests. But today they shared a common purpose: to bait and bamboozle the radio officer. And they wouldn't relent. Not today, not tomorrow, not the day after.

Darren and Norman were of similar build with brownish hair. From behind, each could be mistaken for the other. Darren owned a lurid-green, white-striped anorak - a familiar sight around the ship and an eyesore to somebody who had Vanessa's dress sense. This garish garment added brilliance to the team tactics. First Darren wore it, then Norman, as they presented their backs to Curtis, disappearing round corners and reappearing tantalisingly out of range. At one stage the radio officer hailed Darren in a corridor and "gave chase", only to unhand a politely forgiving Norman.

Before long Curtis glimpsed the anorak again. Darren briefly showed his face. Later, sporting a cap to conceal his darker hair, Gary joined in the charade.

By evening Curtis's nerves were ticking under a skin that felt too tight. Knocks at the door, and nobody there...his name called repeatedly...Darren, everywhere. A rational man, Curtis didn't doubt his own logic. The brats, they

were fooling around. He decided to ignore them and their adolescent pranks.

But as he retired for the night, he noticed - on the bunk-side table - a cigarette-stub and burn mark. Did I ...? No. And his shaving kit, always methodically stowed above the wash-basin, now sat on a chair. What the hell's going on?

Darren might have enjoyed sweet dreams had he known that the radio officer was tossing and turning through a nightmare peopled by figures in green anoraks.

Next day dawned bright and innocent and full of promise - another golden opportunity to torment Curtis!

Whispering over breakfast, within earshot of the adults, Gary let his voice rise: "I wouldn't want to be in his black book." Curtis flinched, as though pricked by a pin. He quickly regained his composure. Several minutes later, with elaborate unconcern, he got up and left the dining-room.

It was afternoon before they were able to resume their game of psychology. Again Gary led the team into action. By telling a joke - "A magician and his parrot are adrift on a raft after their ship sinks. Eventually the sulky parrot squawks: 'OK, I give up. WHAT'VE YOU DONE WITH THE SHIP?'" The punch line, followed by forced laughter, was timed to coincide with Curtis's arrival on deck. He scowled. A saboteur's scowl?

Never tiring, never growing bored, the six kept on "playing". At dusk, after dinner, Vanessa deliberately walked into Curtis outside his cabin. Her smile was particularly beguiling and held him long enough for her to indulge in some girlish chatter. His hostile stare softened. Vanessa's charm, like her perfume, was strong stuff.

Bending forward confidentially, she said it was a shame he was unpopular with the other officers. Curtis bristled. "What?" Vanessa's hand flew to her mouth. "Oh...forgive me. I shouldn't have spoken." She peered past him, ill at ease and reluctant to say more; or apparently so. But Curtis insisted. Sighing, Vanessa was persuaded to disclose: "I heard Captain Alexander and First Officer Grant talking about you. Called you," she hesitated, "incompetent. I didn't catch everything, but I think they mentioned putting one of your deputies in charge of the radio room."

Curtis's face was a picture. Vanessa's, too, though artfully contrived. "Never mind," she uttered. "They probably don't mean it."

Only one day off, the Amazon began to exert a magnetic pull on crew and passengers alike. Thoughts and talk were already being borne along the river's broad waters, which would carry Sea Shepherd deep into the jungle. But the teenagers had not finished with Curtis yet. Sufficient time remained to give him an extra sharp prod before the ship docked at Belem in Brazil.

This was masterminded by Darren and Norman. Its success depended on the unwitting co-operation of Curtis. Would he wear his uniform jacket to the meal table?

Yes, he obliged.

During the meal suspense mounted. Coffee came. Now, Curtis fumbled for a cigarette, asking the Chief Engineer for a light and grumbling yet again about his lost lighter. The youngsters watched.

Curtis was jittery and obviously too warm. Perspiration beaded his brow. He

tugged at the white handkerchief in his breast-pocket... and out fell, clattering on to the table, his initialled lighter.

There was a lull in proceedings at that moment. Nobody missed the incident - or the sight of a totally baffled radio officer. "The man's cracking up." An audible comment from Grant.

Afterwards Susan caught herself feeling sorry for Curtis and more than a little guilty. "Are we being fair?"

"Fair?" Gary was incredulous. "Has he been fair? To Darren, to his father, to us, to Captain Alexander, to Ben, to The Eden ...?"

"Do leave off, Gary! I only asked."

He apologised, adding: "Anyway, let's forget Curtis for now."

Belem beckoned, the Amazon's Atlantic port. Beyond, through the infinite emerald forest, flowed a river wider than the English Channel, deep enough for an ocean-going vessel to sail 2,300 miles inland, so long that it traverses almost all of South America.

On deck, in a balmy breeze, the students strained their senses - as if to pick up the first scent and song of the jungle. Ben Bellingham ambled over, joining in. "It's a bit early yet. We're still miles offshore."

With Ben's permission Norman fetched a bucket and rope to conduct an experiment. He lowered the bucket into the sea, hauled it up and invited his friends to dip their fingers. "Taste."

"Nothing special." Vanessa's verdict. "It's like tap-water."

Norman beamed triumphantly. "But we're at sea! Should be salty."

Vanessa tut-tutted. "I fell for that one, didn't I?"

"I did too," Susan admitted under her breath. Then, speaking up, she inquired: "How do you account for the phenomenon, Professor?"

Norman was ready to enlighten them. "Well, because it's discharged with such force from the Amazon's mouth, fresh water extends for a hundred miles."

Ben departed, chuckling. "Quite a river, eh?"

The Brazilian coast, once a sketched suggestion, was taking on colour and contours. Sea Shepherd beelined for Belem. "Soon be there," Gary told Susan, trying to sound casual. But the ship crawled to a halt and dropped anchor some distance from the port.

Susan groaned comically. What now? A boat zipped towards them - the start of a tedious round of formalities. Customs declarations, health clearance, checking and re-checking immigration papers. Although Alexander knew he could short cut the process by giving the Customs men "presents" of whisky and cigarettes, he stubbornly refused. The questions, in passable English, kept coming. Occasionally Grant introduced a Portuguese phrase in an attempt to disarm the inspectors. They remained stony faced.

After two hours, and considerable haggling, Sea Shepherd was allowed to berth.

While the ship loaded fuel and stores, a party went ashore - Ben Bellingham to consult a leading Amazon environmentalist, teenagers and tutors as sightseers.

Late that night Susan lay staring into the dark. I've just got to talk. She found the cabin carpet with her bare feet and stood up.

"Vanessa?" The softly snoring form didn't budge.

"Vanessa!"

"Uhhh..."

Susan shook her gently. "You awake?"

"I am now." Her petulance was understandable. "Whatever's the matter?"

"I can't sleep."

"So you decided to wake me!"

"I'm really sorry, Vanessa, but I keep thinking about what we saw today in the market. Those dolphins' eyes, used for brooches and voodoo rites...the poor little monkeys in cages...and the spotted animal skin that horrible man was selling secretly behind his stall..."

"I know what you mean. Sickening - and spooky." Vanessa reached out and touched her. "Still, the day wasn't all bad. I enjoyed walking round the church, even Mimpriss's commentary. And the market full of medicinal herbs from the forest was interesting too. Don't dwell on the unpleasant things." She yawned. "Now I'm going back to sleep."

Susan withdrew. "Yes...thanks." Suddenly she felt very drowsy.

There were two new faces at breakfast - pilots who, taking turns on the bridge for four days and nights, would guide Sea Shepherd a thousand miles up river to a heart-of-the-jungle city with 1- million inhabitants. Manaus.

Goodbye Belem, and good riddance! Susan, leaning against Gary, watched Sea Shepherd untied and set free.

Some hours later the ship swung to starboard - entering the aptly named Narrows. No more than a hundred yards or so wide. Bordered by jungle. Vanessa, Norman, Yves and Darren darted to and fro across the deck. Gary could almost believe Sea Shepherd was parting the trees with her bow. Susan studied the green wall of forest, longing to see beyond, be beyond in a creation tumultuous and alien ...

Darren brought her back with a bump. "Look!" Along the bank, huts on stilts. Children, copper-skinned and laughing, launched their dug-out canoes.

"Caboclos the water people," Darren said, surprising Susan. "Descendants of mixed marriages between the Portuguese settlers and Amazon Indians. They live by fishing."

Joyful hoots as the canoes cavorted in Sea Shepherd's wash.

Philip Grant and Johnny Masterson appeared, carrying customary plastic bags of gifts. These were lobbed astern to the Caboclos children.

Regretfully Susan left her chosen post on the starboard rail. Arm in arm with Gary, she made for Bellingham's lecture.

A row of canvas chairs had been set out near the stern, Susan and Gary took the last empty places. The teachers sat with Ben at a table. "Right," he said. "Now we're all here, I'll begin. Or rather, Mr. Baggalley will. He's going to tell you a bit about the Amazon's geography and history."

Geoffrey Baggalley rose. Yves slumped in his chair, resigned to a dull discourse. But, like the others, he was soon listening to every word.

"Nothing about the Amazon is average," Baggalley asserted. "It deserves a record book all to itself. The Equator runs through the river's mouth - 200 miles from side to side - which also accommodates an island the size of Switzerland. A long way inland, the banks are still forty miles apart. Water-levels vary by an astounding 45 feet, depending on the season. And although we've arrived during the dry season, you'll be glad you packed your plastic raincoats."

He paused, mopping his forehead in the muggy heat. "I won't stifle you with statistics. The Amazon is born as a humble brook high in the snow-capped Andes, only 120 miles from the Pacific, and steadily swells for 4,000 miles to push back the Atlantic. Seventeen of its tributaries are greater than the Rhine..."

A clink of glasses as iced lemonade was distributed by a steward, thanks to thoughtful Philip Grant.

With refreshed energy the speaker proceeded. "So much for this remarkable river. But even that is put in the shade, if you'll pardon the pun, by the Amazon rain forest. It's the world's largest, spreading 2½ million square miles across two-fifths of South America and into eight countries. Brazil claims most of it; Bolivia, Peru, Colombia, Venezuela, Surinam, Guyana and Ecuador share the rest."

He helped himself to more lemonade from a jug.

"As you know, rain forests play a key role in regulating regional and global climate. And they're very old. Europe's forests, for instance, have existed a mere 11,000 years - one ten-thousandth of the Amazon's age!" Baggalley scratched his head. "I promised to go easy on statistics, didn't I?"

However, nobody in the audience felt hard done by. Gary wished all lessons could be like this. Utterly absorbed he let the teacher take him back hundreds of millions of years...when the Amazon was part of Gondwanaland, a super-continent including South America, Africa, India, Australia and Antarctica. Then, flying through time, Gary alighted in the "recent past"--just 25,000 years ago - trekking south with the Indians, over land that spanned the Bering Straits, to colonise their present jungle home. "There are 250 known tribes, but maybe more will be discovered. For the Indians' sake I rather hope not."

Susan: "Will you tell us the story of how the Amazon got its name?"

Starchy Maude Mimpriss registered disapproval at the interruption, but Baggalley always welcomed a spontaneous question.

So he began the tale of Spanish captain Francisco de Orellana, the first European to travel the river's full length. In 1541 Orellana and sixty men set out from the west. Soon they were suffering starvation. They raided native

villages for provisions. On one such foray they were confronted by warriors armed with bows and arrows, and a battle ensued. These frightening foes were ... female. Later described as white and tall and very robust, they reminded Orellana of the warrior women of Greek mythology. "The Amazons!" Norman exclaimed.

"Exactly," said Baggalley.

Concluding his talk, the teacher handed over to Ben. But almost immediately, the ship's loud-speakers boomed out "MR. BELLINGHAM TO THE DATA-CONTROL CENTRE, PLEASE...MR. BELLINGHAM TO DATA-CONTROL ..."

Frowning, he expressed his regrets and strode off. Susan and Gary rose, stretched and sauntered to the rail. The tawny water rolled by between them and the jungle. They returned to their seats as a rating brought word from Ben - the lecture was postponed.

Disappointed but pleased to be at liberty, the students chatted for a while and then divided into pairs. Norman, however, scurried away to write up his notes. Darren disappeared too. In the cabin he undid his hold-all and removed a freshly wrapped packet, fondling it as though it were a precious possession. Perhaps it was. Perhaps it was worth Curtis's neck.

Daylight dimmed; darkness would descend abruptly. Before that, though, a brief and vivid interlude. Trees silhouetted against a marmalade sky...a pink dolphin somersaulting to say hello...the spine-tingling start of a symphony of night noises.

Peter Stokes nearly flattened Vanessa in the dash to fetch his camera. "And they tell us to mind our manners," she remarked to Yves with mock indignation. Yves moved closer, enjoying her company at least as much as the tropical vista.

Minute by minute the symphony gained volume and variety. Trills, cackles ... What a hullabaloo! Susan thought. Like nothing she'd ever heard. But one discord dominated, made her shiver: a penetrating chorus pouring from the forest, up to the sunset and across its mirrored embers. Howler monkeys. Their voices carried three miles, more mournful than wolves, more unearthly than a flight of phantoms. Putting a curse on trespassers? Susan's reference book, although comprehensive, hadn't prepared her for this. She could well believe that men lost in the green gloom sometimes went mad.

Stokes materialised, delayed by having to load a film. He was too late. The sky had been wiped like a blackboard. "At the Equator night falls fast," Philip Grant informed him, unnecessarily.

Dinner was a strangely muted meal. In addition to their food the youngsters had a banquet of impressions to digest. But they stirred themselves during the second course. What nobody suspected was that the bunch of bananas at Maude Mimpriss's elbow harboured an uninvited guest. It - a hairy tarantula the diameter of a soup-plate - advanced diffidently over the white tablecloth. Too shocked to scream, she sat petrified. Susan and Vanessa, neither enamoured of spiders, pushed their chairs back sharply. The boys were hardly more composed - except Norman, who seemed genuinely curious. Ben Bellingham acted promptly. Manipulating a glass bowl and a tray, he imprisoned the intruder, and laboratory scientist Freddie Cairns was sent for. Relieved applause around the table.

In the small hours, while most slept, Sea Shepherd emerged from the Narrows ... and out into the sweeping expanse of the river.

At ten o'clock next morning Susan led her class-mates to the stern. Ben was waiting. He held up crossed fingers. "With a bit of luck I'll be able to complete my lecture. Trouble is, where to start? You met one local resident at dinner last night, a cuddly customer compared with the Brazilian wandering spider, most poisonous of all arachnids."

Maude Mimpriss closed her eyes.

"Maybe you should follow Miss Mimpriss's example and close your eyes. It might help you to visualise the abundance of living things.

"In the river there are 2,000 fish species, with possibly another 1,000 to be identified - more than in the Atlantic, ten times more than in Europe's rivers. And in or around the forest are 900 bird species - including a hundred kinds of humming-bird; 95 reptile species; 46 species of bat - among them the vampire bat, inspiration for radar; frogs as big as bulldog puppies; miniature marmosets; plants that cure leprosy and could combat cancer and Aids; 6,000 tree types - such as the Brazil nut tree, producing milk that is better for babies than cows' milk, and the copaiba which yields four gallons of diesel-like oil in a tapping, used instead of petrol for trucks ..." Ben broke off to gather his thoughts.

"A tenth of the world's bird species inhabit the Amazon. And what birds! The diminutive horned sungem, whose wings beat ninety times a second. The brilliant manakin - bouncing, cart-wheeling and dancing during courtship. The Andean condor ... I know, I know, Norman, it's found on the fringe of the Amazon. But some neighbours warrant attention. So, the condor - all 25 pounds of it - can glide sixty miles on air currents with its ten-foot wings, can go without eating for forty days if it has to, but gorge 18 pounds of meat at a single sitting. It will even attack an ailing horse, and may reach the ripe old age of 72."

Equally extraordinary: the fish. Ben elaborated. Lord of the freshwater fraternity is the pirarucu. Fifteen feet long, must surface regularly to breathe. Then there's the amana, which leaps high out of the water to snatch beetles from branches. And the tambaqui, 600-pound big brother of the piranha, with nut-cracking jaws. Related is the electric eel, capable of delivering a 650-volt charge (a household socket puts out 240 volts).

"Open your eyes now," Ben said. "Don't want you dropping off." A remote risk, to judge from expressions. After describing an anaconda, the giant water snake that hugs crocodiles to death, he wound up the preliminary part of his lecture. "Take a spin round the deck," he advised, "get some exercise. See you back here in quarter of an hour."

Well before time, every seat was filled again. "Thank you," Ben said solemnly, resuming the lecture. "Many of the creatures I've mentioned have a price on their furred, feathered or scaled heads.

"Each year the fashion industry demands 10 million reptile skins. They may be smuggled to Panama and shipped to Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Japan... It's a dirty business, with Mafia connections.

"Exotic birds - toucans, parrots, macaws - are persecuted too. Captured alive, those that don't starve or suffocate in transit often end up in private collections. Brazil's Spix's macaw, a blue-plumaged beauty, is now virtually extinct in the wild because the last nestlings have been taken.

"In certain places jaguar shoots are laid on for tourists..."

He stared at the deck. "I sometimes think humanity has a suicidal streak. We slaughter each other, slaughter the animals and then, to finish the job, we try to put paid to the planet."

As if to provide proof, dark clouds billowed from the distant bank. Smoke. "By burning the trees - at up to an acre a second - man is literally playing with fire," Ben declared.

Pacing back and forth, he continued: "That sounds melodramatic, I know, but I'm not exaggerating. Rain forests are the cradle of our past, present and future. Covering just six per cent of all land, they contain well over half the species. Until recently botanists and biologists believed there were three million life forms, of which 1.6 million have been classified. Now it's thought there are 30 million species of tropical insect alone!"

He checked his watch.

"By 2050, assuming we survive, the human population will have doubled to 10.5 billion. Yet even today, one-quarter of us go hungry. The Amazon rain forest could supply at least a thousand plants for vegetable crops to boost the small number already cultivated. But ..." Ben pointed to the drifting smoke.

"The deforestation of Amazonia - through ranching, road building, mining, oil drilling, logging, iron ore smelting - is an unparalleled crime against nature. Soil bakes tough as concrete. Rivers run foul with toxic substances.

"Take a long hard look, so you can tell your children what the jungle was like. Unless sanity prevails, this leafy luxuriance will become as desolate as a moonscape."

Yves got to his feet. "Excuse me, Ben. I don't mean to be rude, but surely the Brazilians and others won't listen to countries that don't practise what they preach? Besides, these schemes must offer some advantages."

Ben responded instantly. "Advantages? Yes. Money, mainly, to make the rich richer. The poor, a vast majority, stay poor. And prowling gunmen - the notorious pistoleiros--are hired to 'take care of' anybody who doesn't co-operate."

He drew nearer. "My answer over-simplifies the problem, which is complicated by foreign debts. But no nation has the right to destroy an asset vital to the health of the whole planet. You see, Yves, the few advantages are outweighed by one disadvantage. It's a dreadful disadvantage. And it's this: if we lose the rain forests, as we could by the year 2020, a billion-plus people who depend on them for water will be enduring hellish conditions. By then, of course, the world's weather would have gone completely haywire."

Yves didn't speak again.

Ben puffed out his cheeks. "Which brings me to the hottest ecological topic - global warming, result of the greenhouse effect."

Rapidly he summarised the unwelcome facts. Forty gases are steadily building up in the atmosphere to trap the sun's heat and raise temperatures. The principal culprit: carbon dioxide (CO₂), a by-product of the fossil fuels coal and oil.

"Trees absorb CO₂. By felling the forests, man is removing an essential air-filter. Burning them releases even more of the gas. It's a vicious

circle," said Ben, "and I mean vicious."

Another glance at his watch. "So what can humanity look forward to. Worse and wider-spread droughts, floods, famine, hurricanes far fiercer than Hannah. And God knows what else.

"The most disturbing prospect is a rise in sea-levels as polar ice-caps melt. A 26-foot rise, according to the gloomiest prophecy. If warming isn't halted, much of our coastal land will be inundated during the next century - and some of the world's major cities ..."

Susan mumbled in Gary's ear: "Don't fancy scuba-diving to the shops." His own mind was awash with images of London under water.

Ben had moved on. "To absorb the annual output of man-made CO₂," he was saying, "we'd need to plant a forest twice the size of Australia. And that's at today's rate. Thirty years from now, developing countries like China and India could be adding as much again to the CO₂ total. Together we've got to beat this environmental crisis."

Half to herself, Vanessa remarked: "Seems hopeless." In the silence, she blushed.

"Not quite," Ben pointed out. "We can change, find solutions. Use less coal and oil, for instance. Harness wind, solar and tidal power. Protect and extend the forests.

"However, let's suppose we do nothing. What then? I suspect our weakened world will heal itself - and the cure would be drastic. Planet Earth will keep revolving and life will go on. But not necessarily human life.

"Mankind, I believe, has a choice: either act responsibly or perish. If we perish, maybe we deserve to."

A final glance at his watch.

"And here - forgive the gaps - I must end my lecture. It won't be long before you're in the jungle," Ben reminded them, "experiencing for yourselves. See you later. Ah, I almost forgot. Details of the essay competition based on your field-work. I think you'll approve of the prize."

Geoffrey Baggalley handed out envelopes.

11. Face to face

The radio room door wouldn't open. Leslie Curtis barged against it; bounced back, rubbing his shoulder. "Bloody thing's jammed," he muttered, "can't be locked."

From a recess in the corridor, partly concealed by shadow, Darren delighted in this performance like a toddler at the circus. Except that he dare not call out. Curtis the clown merited a wider public.

Darren was convinced his thoughts had travelled when James Alexander marched past and up to the perturbed radio officer. "Mr. Curtis, I need to speak to London."

"Of course, Captain, but there's a temporary problem."

Darren's signal brought Norman from another hiding-place. Nonchalantly he

rambled towards the radio room.

"The door's locked itself," Alexander said, "and the key's inside. Have I got it right?"

Behind them Norman bent to tie his shoe-lace.

"Borrow Philip Grant's master-key," the captain commanded tersely.

On deck, for the first time in many hours, Ben Bellingham filled his lungs with Amazonian air and listened to the rippling river Manaus was not far off. He shifted position. Since the lecture, days ago, he'd been compelled to neglect the students.

Ben felt regret - followed, unaccountably, by a sense of foreboding. Why? Memory gave him the reason: We'll meet again, Bellingham. And then you die. A crook's cheap talk? It could cost Ben dear to find out ...

On the opposite side of the ship, Darren and Norman were jostled by clustering companions. "Don't keep us in suspense," Vanessa pleaded. For once Norman was speechless - the limelight belonged to Darren. With glowing satisfaction he related every move in the radio room farce. Then, delving into his trouser pocket, he produced a key. A skeleton key. "My dad's. Knew it'd come in handy." They all stared down at his palm. "That's just where I've got Curtis."

Now Norman butted in, though not to remark on Darren's exploits.

"Look, the river! Have you ever seen anything like it?"

A collective rush to the rail.

Susan's mouth formed a perfectly round O. "It's striped, two-tone. Ben ... Ben ..."

Clearing his troubled mind, he answered the excited summons. "Ah, the Wedding of the Waters. I wondered when you'd notice. Black and white coffee flowing side by side. The dark water enters from the Negro, a tributary, but doesn't merge with the paler Amazon for miles."

On the bridge a pilot yawned, his navigation duties nearly over. Sea Shepherd altered course, branching off into the Negro.

What an anticlimax! Gary's reaction to a sprawl of industrial structures and a power-station belching fumes. Manaus, jewel of the jungle?

In 1900 Manaus had been a world centre, a kind of Eldorado where fabulous fortunes were made. Rubber, rather than gold, was the source of this wealth; an exclusive gift from the jungle trees. But Manaus's rubber boom ceased when seeds were "smuggled" out and plantations established in Asia.

Sea Shepherd docked...in a floating harbour, which rises and falls with the wet and dry seasons.

Most passengers took a guided tour of the city, at least as bustling as Belem. Office blocks, well-stocked shops, get-out-of-my-way traffic. However, here and there, more ornate architecture - notably the magnificent opera-house - hinted at bygone glory.

Their tour done, all returned to Sea Shepherd. Just time for a cool cabin

shower and a bite to eat before disembarking again. A grey coach stood ready on the quay, idly observed by loafers.

As the coach pulled away, the loafers dispersed. With the exception of one man, a scar-faced man. He spat.

The National Institute for Amazon Research, five miles out of town, is not as grand as it sounds. An informal arrangement of low wooden buildings in forest that peeps from every side. Flags hung on tall poles: the Brazilian flag, the flag of the State of Amazonas and, in honour of Ben Bellingham and company, the Union Jack. Crossing the campus, the visitors were introduced to ethnobotanists. "Scientists who study how tribal people use plants as medicine," Yves translated. "Correct," Norman conceded.

These new acquaintances, destined to become trusted friends - Vanessa had already picked her favourite - would lead teams on far-ranging expeditions.

Later, aboard Sea Shepherd, Gary and Susan lingered over dinner. "Prob'ly the last decent grub we'll get for weeks." He was thinking of the jungle safaris, due to depart at dawn. Who'd be going where and with whom? Susan and Gary...together or apart?

Morning, five o'clock. Susan fastened the straps of her bulging rucksack and laid it on the bunk. Wails from a not-yet-dressed Vanessa. "Too much stuff. Boots, bath-cap, beastly insect repellent! There's no space for my clothes. And I must take shampoo... Help me pack, please." Susan weeded out the inessential items; first, a cosmetics case. "You get dressed, I'll finish off."

They descended the gangway to a quay wreathed in rosy mist. The party was complete. Susan swallowed hard - she and Gary had been assigned to different teams. But not permanently.

Each group began to assume an independence, each contemplating the great road and river journeys ahead.

After one week, Gary and Yves regarded themselves as veteran explorers. They wore the badges of their apprenticeship - scabs, scratches, insect bites - with manly pride. Maude Mimpriss, less stoical, was tolerated and frequently teased. A beefy German named Helmut (Vanessa's favourite) presided over the threesome and, without seeming to, imposed a necessary discipline. Helmut spoke English well.

Venturing into the jungle, the boys had known only vaguely what to expect. Not an animal reception committee; surely, though, some creature would deign to put in an appearance. Nothing. Neither parrot nor monkey anywhere. But you could hear them, like musical instruments being tuned.

Helmut, dripping in the sauna-bath atmosphere, pointed upwards with a machete. "That is where most live. At three levels." Trees of varying height create distinct layers, which house separate communities. The canopy layer at 100 to 130 feet, he explained, is the most densely populated. "Sloths, snakes, eagles, cats ... all coexisting in a twenty-foot-thick habitat."

Mimpriss tripped on a tree root, one of dozens wriggling across the forest floor. Gary and Yves hauled her up. They were getting used to the daytime twilight, growing more observant. It would have been a pity to miss seeing the myriad leaf-cutter ants, each bearing a leaf fragment aloft like a banner. "Everything here is recycled fast," said Helmut.

As time passed, the team adapted to a strict schedule. Up at 5.30 a.m., back in hammocks by 8#00 p.m.

Mint-fresh mornings, sweltering afternoons, chilly nights. Gary and Yves had lots to discuss: the red-crested lizard, a basilisk, scampering upright on two large flat feet over the surface of a secluded stream ... a crocodile skeleton picked gleaming white by piranhas ... torrents, ripped by rocky rapids or tumbling from on high in rainbow-straddled waterfalls ...

Maude Mimpriss matched their wonderment, which surprised the boys. And they surprised themselves by liking her more and more. But that didn't stop the teasing.

One evening, as Helmut tended the cooking fire under a magnified moon, Yves and Gary "entertained" her with true tales of eighteen-inch leeches and blood-sucking bats. She shuddered. Helmut grinned and dished out the food, a rather dreary diet based on provisions brought by boat and supplemented with forest produce. However, none of the three complained. Helmut served up mugs of tea and - from a hitherto absent tin - "Kuchen. German cake. You will enjoy."

They retired to their hammocks, strung between trees and sheltered by palm fronds. Beneath the mosquito-net, Gary tried to envisage Susan's day. How she would have gobbled up Helmut's cake! Ku ... Kuchen.

During the night he was woken by a yell. Yves. A rope supporting his hammock had parted. The work of some sharp-toothed rodent - or Mimpriss's revenge? While Gary shone a torch, Helmut spliced the rope and did repairs that he hoped would hold till dawn. Soon all were asleep again.

Before they broke camp next morning, Yves sounded another alarm. Near him leaves were rustling.

A dog-like head came softly to rest on the ground. Above, secured by the tail to a branch, stretched fifteen feet of supple body. Unwinding its tail, the boa constrictor performed an unbelievable balancing act, standing in a muscular column, defying gravity. Mesmerised, Yves and Gary watched the brown-patterned body "flow" slowly down.

With weaving grace the snake went on its way.

Helmut told them how Indian villagers keep young boas as pets to dispose of rats, mice and bats. "It is the second biggest Amazonian snake. The anaconda is the biggest. No one would make a pet of an anaconda. No one ..."

Far from Gary, though not in spirit, Susan was astir too. She tiptoed past the sagging hammocks and still-snoozing occupants. Alone! Her and the jungle. By the river, birds hurled streamers of song from highlighted treetops. Closer, a brrrr-ing, like Morse code. Must be a woodpecker.

Spreading her cardigan on a dewy log, Susan sat and flicked through her notebook. Plenty there, but which bits shall I use in my essay? She started to read.

"'Juan, our nice Brazilian ethno, says an Indian child has 50 names for a bee. Yet an insectologist was unable to distinguish between certain species without examining them in the Institute lab.' Indians, primitive? They could teach us a thing or two.

"'Over a quarter of all medicines are derived from rain forest plants.' Yes,

but how much more is going up in smoke? Five times as much? I'll have to check with Juan.

"Humming-birds can fly backwards, and they build their nests partly from spiders' webs.' Spiders' webs. Clever. I bet Norman doesn't know that."

"I do." Norman's voice, behind her.

Susan shot into the air. "You... you... Scared the daylights out of me. You've got less common sense than this log. And why don't you mind your own business?"

Norman wisely avoided an argument. Straightening his glasses, he said: "Breakfast is ready."

Susan sulked throughout the meal, barely responding to a polite inquiry from the fourth member of the team - Peter Stokes. Afterwards, as Juan led them off, she was acutely aware of Norman following in her footsteps.

Juan helped each into the moored canoe and roused the outboard motor. In such vastness, wooded and watery, the craft seemed very small.

During a break for lunch, Norman mystified the men with card tricks. Susan, despite herself, was captivated. Norman "plucked" a joker from the pack. She didn't look away but jabbed him in the stomach: an ungentle gesture of forgiveness.

The overcast sky made her suddenly homesick for England. Don't rain ... How silly! Dry season or not, a rain forest ought to be - well - rainy.

By four o'clock it was. A perpetual bombardment from bulging clouds. Juan had deciphered the omens. Before the first rumble, he steered for the bank. His general dislike of machines turned into something stronger when the motor coughed and cut out. They were adrift. Susan and Norman donned wet-weather gear; Stokes, scrabbling in his rucksack, uncovered a box of dominoes and the trusty calculator ... but no raincoat.

It was then that the purple heavens opened and a deluge beat down on them, pitting the water like pellets, threatening to swamp the boat. While Juan cursed and tinkered, the others frantically bailed or paddled. Beyond, the jungle was being bleached by lightning.

Rrrrum ... rrrrum. Juan took the tiller again and got them to land. Eventually the rain relented.

They camped early at a new site, and Juan somehow kindled a blaze. Peter Stokes, sodden and snuffly, crouched almost on top of it.

After eating, Susan delayed her date with the hammock. She could have stood for hours gazing up at the litter of stars - if Juan had let her. He didn't.

Rocking herself to sleep, she dreamt that a jaguar lay by their all-night camp-fire, warming its spotted bulk like any hearth-side moggie.

Juan brewed morning coffee. Nobody appreciated it more than Stokes. "I'm an idiot, fancy leaving my raincoat aboard Sea Shepherd." His glance strayed to the shirt he'd draped, airing, on a bush. "Oh, no..." It was unrecognisable. Scraps, a few buttons. "Leaf-cutter ants," Juan pronounced. He maintained a deadpan expression - too great an effort for Susan and Norman.

From now on they would spend their days with the Indians. Page after page of Susan's notebook was given over to descriptions and drawings of village huts, painted bodies, unusual foods and proud hunters bearing blowpipes.

Juan had rightly said that the Indians live in the Stone Age and the 20th century. Ancient traditions combined with modern technology; feathers and beads for some, snazzy shirts and shorts for others.

Koita, the village shaman or healer, wore a red loin-cloth and ear-rings. Susan showed him instant respect; not because of his seniority - he was 70 - but because he obviously deserved it.

Shamans such as Koita, dotted across Amazonia, are a vanishing breed. They alone know and can unlock the "magic" in each plant. That knowledge, not written down, will pass away with them. They have no successors. Which is why ethnobotanists, racing against the clock and forest fires, are trying to record as much as possible.

Did plant constituents really cure snakebites, make you lose weight, promote fertility? Susan accepted it, Norman was dubious.

But later, hollering from wasp stings, he changed his mind. Koita rubbed a ground-up leaf on Norman's skin. Within five minutes the pain had gone - and any sign that he'd been stung.

When the time came to leave the Indians for good, Koita offered Susan a job as his assistant. Whether or not the medicine-man was serious, Susan believed she would never be paid a finer compliment.

Meanwhile, what of the third party: Darren, Vanessa, Baggalley and their leader, Brad? At first both students treated each other with reserve. Too dissimilar to be natural buddies. And neither could quite forget Darren's thieving.

However, weeks of joint endeavour, pleasures, hardships and occasional laughter brought the pair closer to affection. Deprived of make-up, with unkempt hair and broken fingernails, Vanessa looked decidedly unglamorous. Darren found he preferred her that way. She preferred him to his usual self.

He was keeping a detailed list of every animal sighted.

Although Darren hadn't actually seen a vampire bat, he had received a visit from one. At midnight, appropriately. If not for a warm trickle of blood down his arm - protruding from the mosquito-net - he might have slept on unaware.

By firelight Brad applied iodine to the wound and bound it tightly. The American spoke in unflattering terms about vampire habits. "An evil guy, like something hatched by Satan. Only three inches of 'im, but he can do a lotta damage. Two long incisors to chisel holes, and saliva that contains an anaesthetic and anti-clotting agent." Would Darren add the vampire to his list?

He would certainly include four giant otters - rare Amazon residents - which the group came across on a languid afternoon. The experience was to affect him deeply.

It all began with a muffled bang. A gunshot? Brad strode out to investigate, ordering the others to stay well back. Vanessa and Darren disobeyed, arriving at the river bank as Brad drew near to a startled peasant. In his right hand, a rifle. In his left, a net stuffed and straining with captive cubs. Beside

him, the seven-foot corpse of an adult otter.

Vanessa reacted instinctively, running forward. "Let them go!" Darren joined her. Brad and Baggalley were too slow to intervene. The peasant, puzzled and defensive, tightened his grip on the gun. "Let them go...please." Vanessa undid her wrist-watch. "I'll give you this." The peasant took it and dropped the net. Grabbing the dead otter's tail, he beat a retreat.

"Forgive me, Mother," Vanessa said tearfully. "I know you'd understand."

With Geoffrey Baggalley's aid, Brad released the cubs. A scream rent the air. Another fully-grown otter was lolloping towards the cubs. "Let's get out of here, pronto!" Brad urged. "Unless you wanna lose a limb."

His object achieved, he wagged an admonishing finger at the teenagers. "Do as I say in future." Vanessa wept. "OK," Brad sighed. "As a conservationist what you did was kind and brave. Too brave."

Darren kept very quiet. Guilt, shame, sympathy were swirling in his mind. Vanessa's watch, that meant so much to her, sacrificed!

The watch he had robbed her of. Just as he'd taken the pennant from his otter-loving friend, Rhonda. He must make amends, and soon.

For Ben Bellingham, today would also prove fateful - perhaps fatal. But, so far, there was no hint of this.

Leaving the field station, Ben whistled as he walked a leafy path between machete-marked trees. Surely The Eden Mission could spare him for a while.

He reached the river. Removing his hat, he halted.

"Bellingham!"

Ben twisted, heart hammering. Close behind him, a black-clad figure. Where had he come from? Ben focused on the face: scarred cheek, penetrating eyes. Then he saw the knife.

"Who are you?" Ben demanded. "What do you want?"

The man grinned insolently, in no hurry to reply. He was revelling in the situation.

Ben racked his brain. The scarred face. Familiar? Yes - on the quay at Manaus. But that wasn't all. He recollected the trial, the description of the trawler hijacker. It fitted ... him. And then you die.

"You know me now, Bellingham? Uh?" The blade glinted.

"Not your name or why you're doing this."

"It is safe to tell you - I am Mendoza. And why I kill you? Because I am paid, because you are in the way, because I like to." Suddenly he lunged.

Pivoting, Ben deflected the thrust with his canvas shoulder-bag. Mendoza circled, grinning. He charged in again, and the silver blade slashed. Ben gasped. His wrist bubbled red. He swung the bag wildly. It caught in a branch. Defenceless! Flinging aside his hat, he squared up like a prize-fighter, before backing away ... only to stumble.

Mendoza pounced, but Ben's fingers closed on a lump of wood. As his adversary stooped to finish the job, Ben clubbed him.

Mendoza pitched forward, dazed. Ben rolled, then struggled to his feet - the unlikeliest of victors. However, celebration was premature.

Mendoza's mad eyes were staring at him, their lethal message reinforced by the revolver in his hand.

And there it should have ended.

Neither man had seen the anaconda cruising through the water or ascending the bank. An olive-green gargantuan intent on feeding. Mendoza shrieked as six sets of teeth buried themselves in his neck. It was the last sound he ever made. The 35-foot snake whipped its coils around him in a suffocating crush. Ben's heroic efforts to stage a rescue were thwarted by the reptile's lashing tail. In any case, it was too late.

Falling to his knees, he saw the anaconda take Mendoza's head into its own.

12. Curtis

Ben...in hospital. He'd outmanoeuvred an assassin. Sea Shepherd hummed with rumours, embellished by each telling.

Of the students, Susan and Vanessa were most worried about his welfare. How badly hurt was he? Would he get better soon? And when would he be back among them? But to the others, Ben now seemed invincible.

He probably hoped for a discreet return to ship - no fuss - and to resume work at once. Not likely, under the circumstances. Even James Alexander's obsession with finding the saboteur temporarily abated. Ben was on his way! From bridge and engine-room, galley and laboratory, well-wishers converged near the top of the gangway. "There he is!" Susan squeaked.

A law officer accompanied him. Limping slightly and with his arm in a sling, Ben peered up at the uneven line of faces and waved his free hand. Sea Shepherd sounded a siren salute as he mounted the gangway. The police inspector or delegado, a short, moustached man, boarded too.

Clapping and cheering.

Johnny Masterson thumped Ben's shoulder. He grimaced. "Go easy on me, still a bit sore."

The delegado waited patiently for several minutes, then announced: "Senhor Bellingham, I am going to your captain's cabin. Please come, and we will try to conclude this distressing affair."

Around Ben the crowd thinned to six. Boldly Vanessa stretched and gave him a kiss. Norman had appointed himself spokesman. "We're just grateful you're here, because you are... the Eden Mission."

Ben cleared his throat. "Well, life's full of surprises and not always unpleasant. It's so nice to see you all again. Now then, what about those essays? Finished yet? I need a good read."

With feelings they couldn't express, they watched him hobble off.

Next, a get-together in Yves and Darren's cabin. "Poor Ben," said Susan, "he

looks ill." Gary agreed. Norman and Yves started to talk at the same time.

"Do shut up!" Darren, squatting on his bunk, cut in with a newly acquired directness. "Yap, yap, yap. We've got more important stuff to discuss. Curtis - remember?"

No one contradicted him.

Vanessa: "I wonder. You know what happened to Ben. Could Curtis be involved?"

Darren: "I wouldn't put it past him, the rat." Abruptly he stood. Crossing to the cupboard, he dug out the packet. Every eye was on him as he tore it open.

"Stop!" Susan looked frightened. "Darren, don't you realise ...?"

"Yeah, I realise a lot. I've done some pretty rotten things--stealing and lying. Maybe it wasn't all my fault, but I've got to change. Or - Curtis wins."

"And your dad?" Gary put the crucial question.

"He told me to stick up for myself, used to say bullies are really cowards."

Sunlight slanted through the porthole. The black book gleamed invitingly.

Darren didn't resist.

In Alexander's cabin, the delegado placed two objects side by side on the desk. "The weapons," he said simply. Ben, who had seen them before, showed less interest than either the captain or Masterson.

"The knife, senhores, is the trademark of Carlos Mendoza. Note the notches on the handle. Eight notches, eight murders. And yours, Senhor Bellingham, would have been the ninth."

Ben sat down.

"You OK?" Masterson checked. Ben nodded.

The delegado continued: "Now to the gun. It did not belong to Mendoza. It belonged to - a friend of mine. A policeman, Miguel Osuna. I sometimes visit his widow and children ...

"We never recovered Miguel's body, but this revolver is proof enough.

"Justice. How strange! For years Mendoza defied it. And then an anaconda carries out the death penalty."

Back in the boys' cabin. "Carlos Mendoza, hired killer for Maximilian Kruger." The black book entry leapt from the page. "Mendoza!" Darren exclaimed. "Isn't that ..." he recalled the rumours "... the name of the man who tried to murder Ben?"

A half-gasp from Susan.

The book had yielded ample information - names, business interests, connections. An international syndicate, pursuing partly or wholly criminal activities on a scale quite beyond the teenagers' comprehension. But the reference to Mendoza was more easily understood. It linked Curtis to this network.

"As good as a signed confession!" Darren was grimly exultant.

Norman: "So what's our next move, Darren?"

"I'm going to give the book to Ben."

Vanessa: "What'll you tell him?"

"The truth - about a saboteur who just happens to have the name of Ben's attacker written down in black and white."

With a trace of embarrassment, Yves pointed out: "Ben's bound to ask how you got the book, why Curtis chose you. Which will lead on to other things ... like your, um, kleptomania."

An uneasy hush enfolded them. Darren held his head in his hands. Eventually Gary spoke up: "We're with you all the way." Norman added: "Your probation's over."

On deck, the delegado took his leave of Alexander. "Adeus, Captain, safe voyage!" Shortly afterwards Sea Shepherd set sail for Antarctica.

By the time Alexander returned to his cabin, Ben had summoned and fully briefed the teachers. Maude Mimpriss was in a motherly mood. "You must rest, Ben. Otherwise you'll suffer and so will The Eden Mission. What do you think, Captain Alexander?"

"Couldn't agree more. In fact, I insist he takes a break. If necessary I'll use the anchor chain to tie him down!"

Ben shrugged, wishing he hadn't as the pain throbbled.

A timid knock at the door.

Alexander: "Someone see who that is." Baggalley tugged the handle smartly. Darren almost fell into him, closely followed by Susan and troupe. Darren blurted: "We - I - need to talk to Ben. Urgently."

"Sorry. Not now, I'm afraid." Baggalley was emphatic.

But Ben prevailed. "Let 'em in."

Exposed to the adults' view, Darren lost his tongue. Ben smiled. "Say your piece, son, I'm listening."

Darren hesitated. "It's, er, sort of confidential, if you know what I mean."

Lethargically Ben lifted himself from the chair. "Let's go outside."

In the corridor he kept his promise and listened. Until then he'd thought events had made him shock-proof. Nonplussed, he questioned Darren. "Are you certain? These are very serious allegations." A chorus of confirmation. Darren thrust the black book at Ben, drawing attention to the most incriminating entry. Ben leaned against a bulkhead. "Incredible! You did right to come to me, Darren." He ushered them into the adjoining cabin and told them to stay put. "I'll be back in a while."

For half an hour, Alexander's cabin resounded to intermittent utterances of astonishment and anger. Assessing each page, Ben spotted Anilux, an old foe.

And he was more than intrigued by a schedule of his movements near Santa Barbara. A blueprint for the ramming.

Suddenly it all began to make sense, sickening sense. The kidnap attempt...the sabotage...the submariners' fate...the worldwide disruption of conservation projects...

"Good God!" Ben paled. "Curtis is perfectly positioned to feed out classified data to our enemies. It's at his fingertips, literally.

"Their own agent in our midst, at Mission HQ, the nerve-centre. Clever. No wonder they're always one jump ahead. Who knows what harm he's done? We can guess from some of the reports."

James Alexander erupted. "I want that traitor off my ship!"

Masterson: "He ought to be held here and thoroughly interrogated."

Alexander restrained his rage, conscious that Masterson had a point - and that Sea Shepherd could be delayed for months once the Brazilian authorities were brought in.

Recovering his self-control, the captain spoke again: "Mr. Masterson, we have a distasteful task to perform."

Peter Stokes rose. "Geoffrey and I were half-way through a game of dominoes, perhaps we can finish it now?" Maude, also uncomfortable at this stage, mentioned: "And I've lessons to prepare."

Abstracted, the captain did not even acknowledge their departure. Ben went next door, leaving Alexander and Masterson to act.

Ben's brief appearance failed to allay the students' restlessness. "The captain can't see you yet, it shouldn't be much longer." Only Gary and Vanessa, chatting quietly in a corner, seemed not to mind the wait. Susan found it harder and harder to pretend she didn't feel jealous.

In the radio room, Curtis was taken unawares, his back to the door. "What the blazes! Bursting in like that!" He assumed a respectful expression. "Ah, Captain, it's you. And Mr. Masterson. How can I help?"

Alexander jerked his thumb like a hitch-hiker. "To my cabin. Immediately."

"But who'll man the radio?"

"A trustworthy deputy."

"Why? Is there an emergency?"

"You'd relish it, wouldn't you?"

The respectful expression vanished. "What are you getting at?"

"Sabotage. Now, move!"

Ben was already seated when they arrived. Curtis and Masterson remained standing, Alexander went directly to his desk. In clinical tones he read out the charges. Predictably Curtis denied everything and declared himself baffled; he'd been framed, victimised, made a scapegoat.

Ben had heard enough. Brandishing the book, he advanced on Curtis. "Save your breath - you can't explain this away."

The radio officer grunted. "Am I supposed to know what that is?"

Ben rubbed his eyes. "I'm tired, Curtis. Tired of having my work undone, tired of dodging killers, tired of you." He tapped the book. "You're as guilty as they are."

Curtis blustered for a few seconds, then cracked. Defeated by months of pressure - and damning evidence. His confession came quickly.

Without looking up, as though he couldn't endure the sight of him, Alexander pronounced: "You are relieved of duties and will be confined to quarters under guard." He reached for the intercom on his desk. "I'll arrange an escort."

A cowed Curtis interjected: "There's no need, I won't cause trouble. I'll tell you whatever you want. Let's just ... get the record straight." Alexander removed his finger from the button. Curtis kept talking. "The organization spares nobody. The book was my insurance policy. But now, my days are numbered."

Ben attracted the captain's attention. "The students, Jim. When?" Alexander considered. "Tomorrow, early." With no regrets Bellingham left.

"Tomorrow!" Darren stared miserably at Ben. "Yes, you'll just have to sweat it out." By chance, they emerged into the corridor at the same moment as Masterson and Curtis. Darren nearly choked. Curbing the instinct to run, he stood his ground and braced himself for, at the very least, a verbal assault. However, when Curtis did speak it was in a sneering undertone: "Stupid kid. We couldn't have touched your father."

He turned to Masterson. "Mind if I smoke?"

Dad, safe! Darren rejoiced silently. His next thought was less pleasing. He'd been duped.

Curtis had found his cigarettes but no lighter.

"Try your top-right pocket," Darren suggested.

The lighter was there. Curtis blinked, then glowered with all his old menace, stung by the memory of too many humiliations. "So it was you...playing dirty tricks!"

Yves, not Darren, made the obvious retort: "You're a fine one to talk!"

Ben broke up what might have developed into a slanging match. "That'll do."

Gripping Curtis's arm, Masterson steered him towards the spare cabin - sparsely furnished and without a porthole. His cell for the remainder of the voyage.

Sea Shepherd's engines drummed through another Amazon day. Dusk. On deck, Gary tried to embrace Susan. She side-stepped, in a huff. "What will your sweetheart say?" Gary was taken aback.

"My what?"

"Your girlfriend - Vainessa." He gestured, exasperated.

"You're being silly."

"No I'm not. I saw you together, behaving as if I didn't exist."

"I was only giving her some advice about her essay."

"Pah! Can't you do better than that?" Susan flounced off.

Later, undressing for bed, she muttered insults at the bathroom door. Behind it Vanessa was preening in the mirror. Susan hurled a pillow across the cabin.

In her own good time Vanessa reappeared, resembling a model from a toothpaste commercial.

"Is anything the matter, Susan? You seem rather broody."

Susan didn't want to reply, nor did she. She looked down at her bunk, to the space where the pillow had been. A small red box lay there. "This yours?" she asked curtly, eyes still averted.

"No, not mine."

Frowning, Susan lifted the lid and unwrapped some tissue-paper to reveal a gold locket and chain. She unfastened the catch. Inside, a colour photograph of her and Gary.

She swung sideways to face Vanessa. "How did it get there?" Vanessa's smile broadened. "Guess. I wish someone loved me that much."

Susan took her hand. "So you and Gary aren't...?"

"Listen, Gary's great. But he's your boyfriend."

Feeling foolish, repentant and happy, Susan willed away the hours till morning.

At breakfast she learned that Gary had bought the gift in Manaus and recruited Vanessa to "plant" it. Susan smothered him with affection. "Sorry I doubted you, but you almost made me jealous." Gary kept mischievously mum.

Opposite, Darren was also quiet - though for totally different reasons. Very soon he must justify himself to Captain Alexander. His heart pattered as Ben approached.

Outside Alexander's cabin, Ben told Darren and the others what to expect.

Gruffly the captain received them. Then, with Ben and Johnny Masterson, he sat back to hear Darren's account.

That account left out no detail of his shameful past, his collaboration with Curtis or why it had occurred. At the end of what was a courageous speech, Darren stepped forward and passed over to Alexander a bundle of dollar bills - "wages" from Curtis. "I haven't spent any."

"Tell me," Alexander inquired, "what's the pay for aiding and abetting a saboteur, cheating on your friends? You're a disgrace- -and a fool. I can't think of a single reason why you shouldn't be sent home."

Impulsively Susan protested: "That's unfair. Darren couldn't help doing what he did. And it's thanks to him you caught Curtis."

James Alexander regarded her frostily. "When I want your opinion, young lady, I'll ask for it." He rose, adding: "To a certain extent you're all to blame."

Ben's turn. "I can understand why they kept their secret, Jim. Besides, would you have believed them - about Curtis?"

Encouraged by this, Norman joined in. "It's true. Our word against an officer's. We had no proof, not until Darren opened the packet."

Alexander paced from behind his desk, nearer to Darren. "Why wasn't I informed of your kleptomania before the voyage? Eh?"

Darren, earlier so articulate, floundered. "My mother...I...you'd have stopped me coming."

"Yes, I would," Alexander admitted. He resumed his seat and conferred with Ben and Masterson. Gary winked at Darren, whose shirt was sticking to him.

The captain coughed, his decision made. "Your conduct, to say the least, has left a lot to be desired. But you've got guts, lad, I'll give you that - and one more chance. Don't disappointment me!"

Darren's spontaneous reaction was to salute. "No, sir!"

A whoop from Yves as Darren was mobbed.

Their voices echoing along the corridor, the teenagers went gladly to lessons. Before entering the lecture hall, Gary gave Susan a squeeze. "Quite bright, aren't you?" he said. "You mistrusted Curtis from the very beginning."

For several days, while Sea Shepherd drew ever nearer to the Atlantic, Johnny Masterson spent time in the uncongenial company of Curtis. Cooped up, with guards outside. But Masterson was making progress, assembling facts that might be used to counter the organization.

How did Curtis, a minor syndicate employee, know so much? He bragged of having many sources. "Chauffeurs, secretaries, people their bosses treat like dirt. And I learned a lot from the odd bit of computer-hacking."

Masterson was impressed. He leafed through the black book, pausing at an entry in capital letters. "Who's Rod Garston?" he queried. Curtis's confidence waned. Absurdly, as if afraid of being overheard, he whispered: "The Director's personal trouble-shooter."

"What does this Rod Garston look like?"

"Dunno - and I hope I never find out."

Curtis refused to say more on the subject. However, he did confide that he had once feverishly imagined Garston stealing aboard at night. "I even thought he'd searched my cabin. Should've realised it was those snotty-nosed brats."

After the latest session with Curtis, Masterson conveyed his findings to a busy Alexander.

Dinner that evening had a special flavour, added spice. Not because of the food but because of an announcement Ben would make. Ting. Ting. Ting. Spoon

and glass called a halt to every conversation. Ben stood, no longer wearing his sling. "Thank you for your attention. It is my pleasant duty to declare the results of the essay competition. The judges - Maude Mimpriss, Geoffrey Baggalley, Peter Stokes and I - offer congratulations to all six students for work of an exceptionally high standard. Each of you can be proud."

From under the table, Ben produced a copy of Conservation, the magazine that regularly featured his articles. "The winner's essay will appear in the next issue.

"So, who is it? A very difficult choice. But the panel is unanimous...Darren!"

Noisy and prolonged applause. Flabbergasted, cheeks burning, Darren walked up to collect a cash prize of £500.

He examined his shoes as Ben heaped praise on him. The essay was "a model of clear thinking and deep feeling, expressed in a style that bowled your teachers over. Miss Mimpriss, in particular, expects more from you in future."

Darren relaxed a little at the general laughter, until Ben insisted on quoting the final paragraph from the essay: "Like a tolerant parent, the Earth has permitted us to misbehave, sometimes wildly. But it has been warning us to mend our ways. Dare we go on disobeying, draining every last drop of tolerance? If we do, the punishment will be almighty. And for ever."

Darren, still shaken, rejoined his friends - and pressed the prize-money into Vanessa's hand. "You keep it, divide it with the others." Before she could dissent he was gone.

Soon Sea Shepherd would dock to load fresh supplies, ready for an Antarctic odyssey.

13. Last frontier

Hamburg. From the cruising Mercedes, Maximilian Kruger made a transatlantic phone call to Houston. "Yup." Art Benton. Without preliminaries, Kruger demanded: "What's going on? I haven't heard from Curtis for over a week. Have you?"

"No, Max, I haven't."

"I don't suppose it occurred to you his cover has been blown."

"It did, but ..."

"Does The Director know?"

"No. I'll speak to him."

"Do it. Right away."

"Look here, Max..." Kruger rang off.

Benton shook his head. "One day, you arrogant slob, you'll go too far."

Maybe I should have phoned Zurich earlier, he thought. Apprehensively he dialled the private number. Before Benton had finished relating the news he was cut short by The Director. "Do not concern yourself further. The matter will be dealt with. I suggest you and Kruger keep in closer contact; he

reported this to me yesterday."

Benton replaced the receiver slowly. "Get me a drink," he snapped at his secretary, "and block all calls. No more interruptions - from anyone."

By now, steaming south, Sea Shepherd had put a thousand briny miles astern. To starboard, the Brazilian coast would eventually give way to that of Uruguay, then Argentina. Then...out into Antarctic waters and on to an ice-capped continent, as big as China and India combined, clinging to the bottom of the globe.

Gary and Susan strolled in step across the deck. Both felt a kind of sadness, and wondered why. Because Amazonia was behind them? Because, soon, the voyage must end? He squeezed her hand. "There's still Antarctica before we head home."

On the bridge, Ben grinned crookedly. "Never knew you had such a devious mind, Jim." Beside him Johnny Masterson mulled over the captain's plan - use Curtis to transmit bogus "news" to the organization. "It's worth a try," said Johnny. "I'll tell Curtis he's got his job back, but working for us!"

On deck, Susan and Gary paused by an off-duty Philip Grant stretched out in a chair near the bow. "Of course you're not intruding," he assured Susan. "Glad of your company."

Grant began to talk about Antarctica. "This'll be my fifth trip." They sat at his feet as he reminisced ...

Cliff-like icebergs, some the size of small countries, sailing sedately west. Mini bergs, craggy and sapphire-blue, which crackle. Water so cold the fish are equipped with their own anti-freeze - "but hot enough, in one volcanic spot, to blister a ship's paint". Air of such crystal purity that distant mountains seem a short walk away. Albatrosses, awe-inspiring as angels, circumnavigating the world. And leopard seals more vicious than you'd believe. Yet singing appears to soothe them, and shouting should scare them off. "But don't think you can outpace 'em on snow. I've tried." He rolled down his sock, exposing an old scar.

Neither Susan nor Gary showed any inclination to move. Grant, however, had to. He stood up. "Oh, and you'll love the penguins. Unfortunately so do the leopard seals."

At dinner, Darren's prize-money became the main issue. Despite amiable coaxing and cajoling, no one could persuade him to take it back. His wish was respected.

The bridge, an enclosed domain with its green-lit instruments, created a sense of calm. Philip Grant preferred night-watch. The men around him spoke seldom, sparingly. And he enjoyed being awake - like Sea Shepherd - while others slumbered, on board and on the invisible land sliding by. Yes, life was good...

Masterson crashed in, distraught. "Curtis!" he panted. "Over the side."

"Christ! How long?"

"Three ... four minutes."

The ship was doing fifteen knots. Curtis might be a mile astern, Grant calculated. He strode to the chart table, fixed their exact position. "Rouse

the skipper." His next order was to the helmsman: "Hard a-port."

Maintaining speed, Sea Shepherd came about and commenced retracing her course.

Loud-speakers in the crew's quarters blared "MAN OVERBOARD". All hands rallied on the rails as look-outs. Preparations were made to lower lifeboats.

Alexander arrived, no less authoritative for his pyjamas and dressing-gown. He rapidly assessed the situation, then took Masterson aside. "What the bloody hell happened?"

Sea Shepherd's powerful searchlight punctured the darkness, probing each wave. "We'll be lucky to find 'im," Grant murmured. "Very lucky."

Masterson explained to the captain. "Curtis had asked to see me, late, and away from any eavesdroppers. He said he trusted me and would reveal new facts, vital facts. I went to his cabin. Foolishly I agreed to walk him round the deck. I had no idea, no reason to suspect...suicide. He jumped before I could stop him. I threw a lifebelt..."

Sea Shepherd completed her initial run, in vain. Curtis. Drowned? Drifting? Philip Grant plotted a fresh course, taking account of wind and currents, and turned the ship again.

Throughout the night Sea Shepherd traipsed to and fro - "Dead Slow" - as if in memory of a man who must surely have perished.

At daybreak a sailor sighted a floating lifebelt. But that was all. The search was abandoned.

On deck, Captain Alexander and Johnny Masterson surveyed the spot where Curtis had plunged to oblivion. Alexander said, softly: "He knew he couldn't win. One thing's clear - he wasn't gonna wait for the organization's revenge."

When Susan and friends gathered at breakfast, they were aware of having slept badly but unaware of the drama in the dark. It was Ben Bellingham who told them about Curtis "falling" overboard. A half-truth that would be expanded later.

Almost angrily Susan fumbled for her handkerchief. Why should she care? Then she noticed Darren's face and realised she was not the only one beset by inexplicable emotion. The conversations which followed were stilted, the silences full of unasked questions.

Meanwhile Alexander radioed London and wrote another bleak chapter in the ship's log.

With time to make up, Sea Shepherd quickened her pace - an increased tempo matched daily by those readying themselves for a frozen wilderness beyond the far horizon.

The students, lounging in the lecture hall, wished they were more than passive passengers. Little to do but read and re-read the background brochure issued by Ben. Norman seemed to have memorised nearly every word and was starting to sound as though he trekked regularly to the South Pole. Susan gave him a superior smile - she'd had the benefit of Philip Grant's personal experiences. And if Norman wanted to show off, why not?

"I say, let's have a quiz," he suggested. The others played deaf. Norman,

however, wouldn't be deterred. "I'll start. Who is Emilio de Palma? Hey! Come on, you lot."

Feigning indifference but unable to resist the challenge, Yves drawled: "He was the first person born in Antarctica - in, er, 1977, I think."

Norman: "The year was 1978 and the place Esp..."

His words tailed off when the rest sang out mockingly: "Esperanza base, Hope Bay."

A sulky Norman blinked. "Well, if you're going to be stupid."

"OK, Prof," Gary responded, "answer this one. What's the largest penguin found in the Antarctic?"

Norman regained his cocksure manner. "The emperor penguin, at 37 feet, two inches taller than the king penguin."

"Wrong," said Gary.

"I'm not!"

"Oh yes you are, Norman. You've forgotten that fossilised penguin scientists discovered, all 66 feet of it."

"Trick question," Norman fumed. "Doesn't count."

The quiz ground to a halt. But minds had been stimulated and, not surprisingly, general discussion developed (of Sea Shepherd's polar assignment).

Their journey, which began on a grey English day nearly ten months ago, was drawing to a conclusion. And a climax? They were bound for the last frontier, a beautifully blank land where international specialists are studying the all-important mechanisms of nature. A peaceful continent "belonging" to no one - though some nations had claimed a slice of the icing-covered cake, poised to exploit its rich ingredients. Already Antarctica is being soiled at the edges by pollution. Is this the future? Another man-made mess? Will maverick miners move in to wrench out coal and minerals? Will oil companies drill offshore until an inevitable spill spreads across the ocean?

Sometimes the teenagers lost touch with their ideals, their commitment to The Eden Mission, but not now.

In crisper air Sea Shepherd drove on past the tip of South America's tail. All anticipated a rough ride through Cape Horn with its notoriously wrathful winds; instead the ship met untroubled waters.

Escorted by albatrosses, she entered Drake Passage. Two days to go!

Onwards. Half-way. Temperatures plummeted - a chilly breath from the coming continent. They had reached Antarctica's threshold, the "Polar Front". Here, Atlantic and Southern Oceans dissolve into each other, causing an upsurge of plankton. Countless birds descend to feed and share the bounty with marine mammals.

It was Darren who spotted three or four butting whale snouts. Warmly wrapped, he and his fellow students eagerly noted every change in the seascape.

Glimpsing their first iceberg was a thrill. Captain Alexander felt differently about this mostly-submerged menace - too many vessels had been sunk. And bergs, melting faster below the surface than above, could roll over on top of you. Best to steer well clear.

Ahead, the waves subsided to become a flat white plain. Pack ice.

Crushing into it, Sea Shepherd soon found watery paths between the separate floes. Vanessa pointed to a chain of footprints, which Grant identified as penguin tracks. The furrows, though, were made by seals.

Gary and Susan shivered, feeling colder as a stiff breeze blew up. Everyone trooped inside to the comparative cosiness of the lecture hall, where observation continued from behind windows.

Dinner came and went. Time to think of bed. But, tired or not, who wanted to sleep while the sun shone as bright as ever on an ice-shimmering ocean?

10.00 p.m. Still broad daylight. Only at midnight, when Sea Shepherd was nearing land, did the sun dip, painting the peaks of piebald mountains in glorious reds and golds. Even then, it wasn't dark.

Two hours later, preceded by lavender shadows, the sun swiftly reappeared with flooding radiance.

Summer in Antarctica! Gary pitied his parents at home, enduring the drabness of an English winter.

Badgered by Maude Mimpriss, the students retired to their cabins. In the radio room, Ben notified scientific bases of Sea Shepherd's presence. Most pleased to hear from him was the Greenpeace station on Ross Island.

Three Zodiacs, flat-bottomed landing-craft, ferried a party from the ship. Hard to tell who's who, Susan thought, eyeing her identically clad comrades. Scarlet expedition parkas, woolly hats, gloves, boots. And everybody's nose was greased against sunburn - mainly from snow-reflected light.

The leading Zodiac scrunched on to a gritty beach. Who'd be first ashore? Susan dutifully made way for Maude, but the teacher gave her a gentle shove. She hopped forward.

Oddly, in the remotest and loneliest place on earth, they would meet many people: Russians, Poles, Chinese, Koreans, Chileans, Britons, Americans ... a veritable United Nations of experts conducting varied research projects.

Several stations monitor the Ozone Hole, which opens each spring like a gigantic gash in Antarctica's sky.

At a British base, an affable meteorologist told his young guests: "Between ten and thirty miles up, a gassy layer of ozone screens out the sun's harmful ultraviolet rays. So when we discovered the Hole, in 1984, it came as a global shock. Ozone is thinning everywhere, and doctors predict a steady rise in cancer and other serious diseases."

Chemicals are the root cause of this damage, "as I'm sure you know. Especially chlorofluorocarbons, chlorine-producing CFC's used in things like aerosols and refrigerators."

Such chemicals disperse gradually, and most have yet to reach the ozone layer. Even if industry stops manufacturing them now--and it should--the depletion of

ozone will continue for decades.

"Ultraviolet radiation is killing phytoplankton in the sea. These microscopic plants absorb CO₂, as do the rain forests. And, of course, CFC's and similar chemicals add considerably to the greenhouse effect."

He folded his arms.

Yves asked: "Why does the Hole open in spring and close in summer?"

The meteorologist leaned back. "I'll try to put it simply. During Antarctica's bitter cold months of darkness, the chlorine I mentioned undergoes a peculiar change. When daylight returns, it triggers complex chemical reactions which result in the Ozone Hole. Later, as the atmosphere 'thaws', those reactions cease and the Hole disappears."

Yves nodded, half understanding. "Exactly how safe is it outside?"

"Oh, safe enough - provided you take sensible precautions."

After all they had heard, Yves was left wondering.

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday: Skidoo (snowmobile) trips to collect fossils, and having to adapt to camping in tents with penguins as noisy neighbours.

Thursday: The students helped to launch weather balloons.

Friday: Weighed albatross chicks to assess growth.

Saturday: Out on the ice among snoring Weddell seals. No resistance offered by bulky bull when zoologists checked breathing rate, heartbeat, and attached a harness with electronic sensor to trace his movements.

Sunday: Finally, by boat to visit penguin colonies, called rookeries. Hundreds of thousands of braying birds - Adelies, gentoos, chinstraps.

"Poooh!" A fishy whiff hit Vanessa's nostrils. But the penguins were adorable. The chicks gulped shrimp-like krill as fast as their parents could catch and disgorge it. Again and again the adults dived for more. Many, though, dithered at the floe's edge...got ready to leap, then withdrew. Susan was puzzled.

Suddenly she understood. Right in front of the boat a penguin was struggling for survival, clamped by a leopard seal's jaws. Susan turned abruptly, burying her face in Gary's chest.

The marine biologist attempted to put matters into perspective: "It's only doing what it was born to do."

Nobody minded going back to base that day, certainly not Susan.

25 December. A morning lovelier than any they'd seen in Antarctica, a morning magically made for such an occasion. Aboard Sea Shepherd the mood among crew and passengers was as jolly as the multi-hued streamers that decorated corridors, dining-room, lecture hall and even the bridge. Though thoughts flew to families ten thousand miles away, the youngsters did not fret for home. This was their second home, their second family. And they were guaranteed a White Christmas!

The ship ghosted through drifting scenery.

She anchored off Deception Island, an active volcano with a sea-filled crater. Several Zodiacs skimmed shorewards. Soon after landing, Yves gave in to a mischievous impulse; but the snowball, dispatched with unintended force, missed Norman and caught Johnny Masterson smack on the ear. A delayed reaction before Johnny comically keeled over.

They all hiked to the crater...and looked down upon an eight-mile-wide lake, fed by the Southern Ocean. Then they descended inside, to the bottom of the crater, blinking in a humid haze. The black volcanic sand beneath their boots steamed like newly poured asphalt. And the green water beyond, bubbling with thermal springs, would be equally warm.

Gary, Susan and Yves stripped to their swimsuits, putting on canvas shoes, and scampered in.

Susan did an involuntary dance between hot and cold currents, trying to find just the right temperature.

Meanwhile, with the aid of thermometer, compass and other "accessories", Norman was carrying out tests on everything in sight. "Yep, that tallies." He consulted his notes, aiming to impress Darren and Vanessa. But their sole interest was in the fun they were missing; both wished they'd been bolder and brought bathing-costumes. Norman again: "Do you realise this volcano could erupt at any moment?" Vanessa: "Thanks, Norman, you're such a comfort!"

A frogman emerged on to the sand and approached Johnny Masterson. Darren had noticed him earlier, exploring near Sea Shepherd. Johnny and the diver, "an old chum", spoke briefly to each other.

Back on board for Christmas dinner. Turkey, plum pudding, crackers, paper hats, hugs, kisses, jokes - and a dignified toast to absent friends. Although she couldn't know it, Susan was not alone in including Leslie Curtis. Ben, temporarily free of worry and responsibility, made a superb gift-bearing Santa.

Sea Shepherd hooted farewell - to Deception Island and to Christmas.

Now they headed for a second British base, where the students would stay overnight. The ship dropped anchor and a boat was lowered. "OK everybody?" Masterson started the motor. "We're under way."

For the teenagers, tomorrow held a full field schedule. No let up from work. But after a wonderful day like today, who could grumble?

14. Double-cross

"BOOOOOOOOOOM." A pulsating blast lifted the youngsters and their sleeping-bags off the floor.

Susan cried Gary's name.

All tried to clear their fuddled senses.

Norman talked excitedly: "Deception Island! The volcano's going up! I knew it."

"BOOM...KABOOM...BOOM." Three more explosions sent tremors through the whole base, rattling walls and shattering glass. Shouts, running feet.

Gary kicked aside the sleeping-bag and piled on polar gear over his

night-clothes. The others dressed hurriedly, too.

Before long, unsupervised but following the general rush, they were outdoors.

Dank fog laced with sleet had shut down every view.

Norman and Susan intercepted one of the shadowy figures darting in and out of sight. The man, an engineer, leaned closer. "Who's that?" Then he recognised them. "Isn't Mr. Masterson with you?"

Norman: "We haven't seen him since last night. He, er, went drinking with a friend. But what about the eruption?"

"Eruption?"

"Yeah, the volcano." He gestured impatiently.

A fainter blast reached them.

When the engineer spoke again, his voice had changed. "That's no volcano, I'm afraid. It's...your ship."

"Liar!" Susan blurted. "You've made a mistake. Not Sea Shepherd. It can't be true, can't be."

The others echoed her desperate denial.

They surrounded the engineer. "I'm sorry - but look, out there..." The fog itself, orange-flecked, seemed to be aflame. "Oh God!" Susan sobbed. "What can we dooo?"

"Nothing." The man peered over their heads. "Go back inside and wait for Mr. Masterson. He's probably at the jetty - which is where I should be. Go inside, eh?"

But, of course, they didn't. Numbly, Gary leading, they stumbled to the shore. Sea Shepherd was engulfed in fire, a floating inferno that burnt away the cloud.

"Don't let them die," Darren whispered. Yves heard him and said his own prayer.

At that instant, Sea Shepherd gave up the unequal fight. With an almost human moan she split amidships, bow and stern moving apart.

Regal even in ruin, her voyaging done, she peacefully went under. Vanessa screamed. "All drowned!"

But in the light of blazing oil on the water, Gary could make out familiar shapes. Small craft, fleeing. Two, three, five ...

The first Zodiac landed, its passengers dishevelled and disorientated. "Maude!" Susan ran forward and embraced the trembling teacher. And there was dear old Peter Stokes. And Geoffrey Baggalley.

One by one the boats came in, materialising out of a white-grey swirl. Above, a helicopter hovered.

The base was filling up fast. Priorities: medical treatment, blankets and plenty of hot drinks.

Captain James Alexander, gaunt and sunken eyed, waited for the last stragglers to assemble before conducting a roll-call. Most accounted for. Seven missing. Five crew, Senior Laboratory Scientist Cairns - and Ben Bellingham.

"Ben?" Vanessa swayed dizzily, but Yves caught her. Maude Mimpriss took over.

Feeling sick himself, Yves turned away and stood beside a desolate Norman to hear Captain Alexander say: "The helicopter's still searching. There's still time. Don't give up hope."

They wanted to believe him.

Sea Shepherd's chief engineer succumbed to rage. "Cowards! Murdering bloody cowards!"

Alexander: "The bomb, Chief. Planted underwater?"

"Yeah. I'd bet on it - Christ, the hull cracked like an eggshell."

Susan's mind flipped. The ship gone ... Ben gone...and now bombs. Too much to grasp, too much to bear.

Darren, however, was thinking about yesterday's occurrence on Deception Island.

Philip Grant joined them. Alexander unfolded a piece of paper, the message he and Grant received via the ship's radio less than an hour ago: "ALEXANDER, YOU'RE A FOOL. YOU CHOSE TO IGNORE PREVIOUS WARNINGS. YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE CONSEQUENCES. SEA SHEPHERD IS DOOMED. IMPOSSIBLE TO TAKE EVASIVE ACTION. THERE IS A BOMB ON BOARD. YOU'VE 20 MINUTES TO ABANDON SHIP. OR, IF YOU WISH TO DEFY US YET AGAIN, STAY PUT AND GO DOWN WITH IT...19 MINUTES... "Garston."

Alexander stuffed the paper in his pocket. "Nineteen minutes, Phil, not even that. I tried to get everyone off..."

"Don't blame yourself. If you do, you are a fool. No better skipper has ever sailed, or ever will sail." The captain perked up a little. "By the way," Grant added, "have you seen Masterson?"

"Good point. He was around earlier."

As Vanessa reappeared, pale but self-possessed, Alexander's attention shifted to the students. "Phil, perhaps you'd take our young friends somewhere quieter? And thanks."

Grant found an unoccupied room. "You won't be left alone for long." He returned to the crowded lounge.

Susan fussed over Vanessa, but soon both were in tears. The boys conferred miserably. Only Darren remained separate, plagued by thoughts he'd rather not utter. An underwater bomb, a frogman swimming by Sea Shepherd, the same diver who'd surfaced in the volcano's crater - any connection? If so...

The door slowly opened and Johnny Masterson entered. "Johnny!" A relieved-sounding Vanessa.

For a moment he seemed to stiffen, as though startled.

She came nearer. "Isn't it terrible?"

He nodded gravely.

Gary and Norman began quizzing him about Ben's chances. But before Johnny could respond, a stubble-chinned man, panting, stuck his head round the door. "Ten-fifteen minutes, Garston, and the 'copter's ours." Then he caught sight of the teenagers. "Ah - you've got company. I'll push off."

"Do that."

Garston? Susan stared at Gary. Had she heard correctly? A hush, profound and intensifying. Who was this Garston? Darren knew.

He remembered what the rest had forgotten: "Rod Garston", printed in capitals, in Curtis's black book. Could he be sure Masterson and Garston were one? Yes...the facts drove Darren to an inescapable conclusion. Johnny Masterson, their trusted protector, was a fraud, a dirty double-crosser.

Darren sprang across the room. "Get him! Garston - in the book! He's killed Ben!"

Bemused, not yet understanding, Gary, Yves and Norman hesitated. But the casual blow that winded Darren dispelled doubt.

They pitched in, Susan and Vanessa too. A melee of arms, legs, fists.

Garston grunted and, with a sudden surge of strength, heaved himself free of the attacking pack.

He drew a gun. "Keep back!"

Darren was rubbing his stomach. "Pity your frogman chum didn't blow himself up with that bomb."

Garston jerked the automatic. "In the corner, all of you!"

At first Susan did not obey. Part of her, against reason, clung to a shared past. "Oh Johnny ..."

Darren intervened sharply: "Don't call 'im that."

Garston looked almost uncomfortable under Susan's steady blue gaze. "In the corner, I said!"

She retreated. "You must really hate us. But you saved me from the Sea World kidnapers. Why?"

Holding the pistol on them, he uncovered his watch.

"Why?" Susan persisted.

Unexpectedly Garston gave her an answer. "It was meant to scare Alexander off home. And even if it didn't, we knew it would establish my character. It was a set-up. Satisfied?"

Susan was lost for words, not so Gary. Recent events took on a new significance. "God, I've just thought ... Leslie Curtis didn't fall overboard, didn't jump either. You pushed him!"

Vanessa gasped. Yves wished the Christmas snowball he'd hurled had contained a

rock.

No comment from Garston, who referred again to his watch.

Pressing their luck, the students discussed him with obvious contempt. Norman: "Maybe he's the saboteur, eh Darren?" "Very likely. And he let Curtis take the rap." "Shhh!" Gary whispered. "Somebody's coming."

Garston moved swiftly as the handle twisted. The door opened, concealing Garston behind it.

Geoffrey Baggalley strode in. "Behaving yourselves?" His hearty manner softened before their strained faces. "Try not to worry--things'll work out..."

He would have continued but for a hard prod in the back.

Meanwhile, bound for base, the helicopter banked steeply, its rescue mission completed. Not a total failure. Behind the pilot a medical orderly squatted by four blanketed forms - two dead, two alive.

Groaning, one of the survivors sat up and demanded to use the radio. The orderly restrained him gently. "Relax and count your blessings." He focused on the two fatalities, prey to the freezing ocean. "Could easily have been you." But Ben Bellingham felt no gratitude, not yet, only an urgent need to contact Alexander. "I must use the radio. Now!"

Ashore, Philip Grant called Captain Alexander to the radio. "Listen to this." Amid a commotion Ben's voice came over the receiver loud and clear. An astonished Alexander. "Well, I'll be ..." But his good cheer was brief, his greeting brushed aside by brusque inquiries. "Is Masterson within earshot? Are the youngsters safe?"

Anxiously Ben waited, willing the right replies. Then: "Jim... Masterson is an infiltrator from the organization..."

"A what?" Alexander pounded the desk. "J-e-s-u-s!"

Bellingham: "Jim...Jim. Are you still there?"

"Yeah, go on."

"OK. Don't tangle with him - he's armed. We've gotta play it cagey. He thinks I'm dead, so let's keep it that way."

Stretched from the helicopter, Ben lay motionless beneath a blanket until - in a small office - he arose to shake Alexander's hand. Elsewhere, following strict orders, Grant and several other officers had to locate Masterson - no more.

Bellingham read the bomb warning, twice; Alexander pressed him for his part of the story. It proved an extraordinary account, which commenced after the Christmas celebrations aboard Sea Shepherd.

A problem involving revised schedules had led Ben to the captain's cabin. There, however, he had encountered not Alexander but Johnny Masterson, riffling through a stack of official documents. "He was as surprised as I was, Jim. Why wasn't he at the base? He said he'd come back for some gear. Which didn't explain what he was doing in your cabin. I questioned him, civilly, in case you'd given him permission. He stalled. By now I was prepared for

anything - except the gun."

Forced along corridors at pistol-point, Ben had wound up in the deserted ship's laboratory. A crack on the head put paid to his protests. When he regained consciousness, bound and gagged, he heard lab scientist Frederick Cairns talking to his pampered fish.

Cairns untied him, and broke news of the bomb, the countdown well advanced. "He gave me the only inflatable jacket." It was just then that the bomb went off.

"Freddie staggered backwards. Water gushed from everywhere. The whole lab started to break up. I saw an oxygen cylinder working loose from the rack. I yelled, but it was too late. I couldn't get to him, Jim - there was nothing I could do."

Somehow Ben had reached the steadily submerging deck, his last recollection.

"I tell you, Jim, I owe my life to poor Freddie."

Alexander exhaled heavily. He paused, a mark of respect.

"Ben...what the hell was Masterson after?"

"Curtis's book. Have you got it?"

The captain glowered. "No."

Throughout this period, with a rifle issued by Base Commander Trent, Philip Grant and station personnel hunted high and low, in and around the complex.

A quick look into the students' room. No sign of Masterson. Grant asked: "Where's Baggalley?" "He's gone to the lavatory," Yves lied. Grant nodded, closing the door. Garston had kept the gun on Baggalley.

Captain Alexander compiled a list of the deceased - five, including Cairns. Next, another grim duty. He picked up a phone, called London and reported to Conservation Committee chairman Sir Charles Fotheringay. Appalled beyond words, Sir Charles took several moments to respond. "Masterson's clean, I guarantee it. We're talking about two different people...They must have used their own man!" Signing off, he vowed to trace the real Johnny.

Alexander prowled the office. "So Masterson isn't Masterson. The stink gets worse."

A pencil snapped between Bellingham's fingers. "An impostor! Yes...of course...and Curtis found out who the impostor was and what he was up to. It's starting to fit together."

"I'm not with you, Ben."

"Look, we've been thinking of separate individuals: Johnny Masterson and Rod Garston. We were duped. It's Garston ... masquerading as Masterson!"

Piece by piece, Bellingham attempted to put the puzzle in place. What was Garston's role? To abort The Eden Mission. Also to spy on Curtis, a valuable agent but - perhaps - dangerously disloyal to the organization. "Garston needed proof, and we provided it. The book alone was enough to seal Leslie Curtis's fate. But when he discovered Masterson's true identity...he had to be eliminated."

Alexander: "I suppose, in a way, Curtis unwittingly bought us time. The bastards couldn't have destroyed Sea Shepherd before they'd sorted out the Curtis affair. Ironic, really."

Commander Trent knocked and entered to update Alexander and Bellingham on developments at the base. The helicopter had been grounded and was under surveillance. Trent asked: "Your shipwrecker, Masterson, was he operating solo?" The captain considered: "We've no reason to believe otherwise." "Then the backup team is here on the base." "Team?" "Afraid so. Two or three, I'd guess. I'll root 'em out."

As Commander Trent left, he indicated the walkie-talkies. "Stay in touch."

Geoffrey Baggalley was doing what he could to lift the teenagers' morale. "I'll never live it down - teacher stands in corner with pupils. And on my birthday, too!" Susan's own birthday memories were evoked. "Many happy returns!"

Garston gripped the pistol tighter, frustrated, confined like those he must keep captive. At last his unshaven accomplice arrived. "Trent's put the 'copter off limits. We're stranded!" Sneering, Garston raised the automatic. "Who's gonna argue with this? Come when you hear the chopper's engine." He glanced at the figures in the corner as though they were complete strangers. "Watch them. Use your gun if you have to."

Garston slipped from the room, towards a delayed getaway.

Only now did Darren recognise the man who had taken over as their jailer. Though he'd swapped wet-suit and flippers for polar parka and pistol, he was unmistakable: the diver. Darren taunted him. Anticipating retaliation, Baggalley tried to impose calm; but Darren grew bolder by the second.

Before Baggalley could stop him, he had stepped away from his friends and was advancing on the seated guard. "Gonna shoot me, are you? You haven't got the guts. Not as easy as planting bombs, is it?"

Susan called out to him, but he dismissed her plea as he dismissed the loaded gun. "Pull the trigger. Go ahead!"

The guard stood and aimed at the boy's head.

Darren thought of his father, of Curtis, of untold jungle fears, of choking guilt, of the person he once was ...

"Go on. Do it!"

Terrified, Susan and Vanessa closed their eyes. Yves too.

The gun was beginning to shake.

"Go on. Shoot!"

Gary and Norman took a pace forward, Baggalley blocked them. "Darren, shut up! He doesn't know what he's saying."

Lowering the automatic, the man backed off, feeling for the door handle behind him. He withdrew further, half out of the room... and into Bellingham's bone-crushing bear-hug.

They rocked. Ben, red faced: "Where's Garston?"

Zip! A bullet splintered the floor. Baggalley hollered: "He's heading for the helicopter!" Bellingham squeezed still harder. The pistol finally fell from a hand too feeble to hold it.

Alexander and Trent, soon there with reinforcements, required little briefing. Trent grabbed a walkie-talkie. "He's on his way, Grant."

The diver was carted off for questioning.

Darren approached Alexander. "Captain, you'd better have this." Gary goggled. "The book! How did you...?" All went quiet. "I picked his pocket. During the fight." Then, almost apologetically, Darren added: "I nearly didn't. It's the first time I've had to force myself to steal. I'm ... I'm not a thief any more."

The captain accepted the book. Darren looked up - and was the surprised recipient of a smart salute.

Alexander turned to address Bellingham. But he was gone, and so was the gun.

At Trent's suggestion Baggalley led the students back to the lounge, where they'd probably be safest. Darren would long cherish the captain's tribute. However, Geoffrey Baggalley expressed his views in a different manner. He admired Darren's courage, he couldn't deny that. But playing games with a gunman...

Susan gave Darren a smacking kiss.

Under interrogation, at which Alexander was present, the diver proved stubbornly un-communicative. Trent both appealed and threatened in an attempt to loosen the conspirator's tongue. No breakthrough.

Ben Bellingham trod lightly, with a stealth acquired from years of stalking wild animals. He had needed no weapon then. Releasing the automatic's safety-catch, he eased round a corner. Garston had passed this way. A sprawled body marked the trail. The man was dead, a broken neck. Ben weighed the pistol in his palm.

Creeping along, he came upon a second casualty - groggy but able to stand.

Through a window, Philip Grant's task force kept up observation on the helicopter and the guards posted by it. One spoke into a walkie-talkie; the other, carrying the only rifle besides that in Grant's charge, stared about him. When would Garston make his move?

Garston - nearby, nearer than any imagined - could also see the guards. And, from an adjacent room, he could hear Grant speaking with colleagues.

Coolly Garston calculated a risk. Instinct guided him into the corridor. He was making his move.

Booting open the door, he shouted: "Harris!" Grant levelled the rifle in Garston's direction...to find he himself was being targeted. Stalemate. But Harris, producing a pistol, tipped the balance. Grant had no option. Bitter, he surrendered the rifle to a person who, seconds earlier, had seemed as honest an ally as any.

Garston advanced menacingly on Grant. "Do exactly as I say. Your men, out

there, tell them the hunt's over. Tell them you've got me where you want me - all locked up." He tapped the gun under Grant's chin.

Grant deliberately dropped the walkie-talkie. "Forget it."

"Wise up, Phil. Gary and Susan would like you to...and Vanessa, Yves, Norman and Darren. Nice kids."

Harris: "Craig's not with the kids. Trent's got him."

Grant: "Not quite going according to plan, is it?"

Garston: "That's too bad." Viciously he floored Grant, the pistol butt striking his jaw. Garston stooped for the walkie-talkie and thrust it forward. "Get up and get talking!"

Grant stayed down. Garston kicked him. "Get up!" But still he wouldn't.

It was Harris's turn to apply pressure. He picked on someone he'd known and worked with for many months, first slapping, then punching.

Garston stood over Grant. "Harris doesn't know when to stop... Well?"

Wiping his mouth on a blood-spattered sleeve, Grant rose painfully. He contacted the unsuspecting helicopter guards.

As the two trooped into the room, they were seized and roughly disarmed. All prisoners were told to lie face down. "No, Grant," said Garston, "not you."

Harris and Garston pocketed their automatics and smashed every walkie-talkie. Now, with rifles at point-blank range, they shoved Philip Grant in front of them. A hostage.

From where he crouched, Bellingham had a clear view of the helicopter. He frowned. It was unattended. Did this mean Garston had been caught?

Muffled voices, away to his right, coming closer. Tense, ultra-cautious, he slipped into a doorway. He saw Alexander and Trent. They had hastened to investigate the walkie-talkie blackout, but didn't get that far. Unarmed, they were at Garston's mercy. Garston ordered: "Face the wall and put your hands up! Keep perfectly still." Grant winced as Harris clubbed both of them. "Sleep well!" Harris sneered.

Ben silently withdrew from the doorway, taking his chance to stay one step ahead.

Outside, the air was crisp, sun-bright, with not a shred of fog. Philip Grant might have savoured Antarctic summer on top form. But, hobbling through snow, goaded and jabbed by a pair of thugs, he could contemplate nothing except his plight.

Pitiless, Garston growled: "Faster!"

They reached the helicopter. Garston clambered in, stowing the rifle, and sat at the controls. Harris boarded next, an arm crooked round Grant's throat.

Garston pushed a button. Overhead the rotor blades stirred, whisked and whipped. Harris released his hold. "Bye-bye, sucker!" Grant fell to his knees and, fearing a farewell bullet, started to crawl away.

Garston scanned the instrument panel. A-OK. Ready for take off.

"You're not going anywhere...cut the engine!" Behind him: a voice from the past, a dead man's voice. "Drop your weapons!"

Garston felt a pistol digging into his cheek. "Bellingham?"

Recklessly Harris fired off two shots; snow spurted around Grant. Ben reacted fast, but not before Harris had fired a third shot. Grant ceased crawling.

Bellingham clumped Harris, who tumbled unconscious from the cockpit. An action that left Ben vulnerable.

Spinning in his seat, automatic aimed, Garston clicked his fingers. "Your gun! ... C'mon!"

Bellingham passed it to him.

Garston: "You've got more lives than a cat. If we weren't on opposite sides... You'd have made a fine partner. I like you, like your style. I'm gonna give you a break. Get out and keep moving."

However, Ben didn't shift. "It's over, don't you know that? You can't win, nor can the organization you kill for. Curtis's book will blow your sick and evil world apart."

Garston smirked. "You can't prove a thing without it." He patted his breast-pocket, fumbled, searched another pocket.

"Lost something?" Bellingham's tone stoked Garston's growing fury.

"Give me the book!"

"I haven't got it. You're a bungler, Garston...Ugh!" The pistol rammmed his ribs.

"Empty 'em, Bellingham! Your luck just ran out."

A zip on Ben's parka jammed. He tugged repeatedly, but it wouldn't budge. Garston, his patience spent, tore at the clothing...

Ben struck. Both hands grabbed Garston's wrist, wrenching his gun-arm upwards. Off balance, Garston clawed Bellingham's face and fought to retain possession of the pistol. They wrestled wildly, banging back and forth in the cramped cockpit.

Locked together they plunged outside. They rolled in the snow, intent on the quivering gun. Advantage swung one way, then the other. Until...the pistol flew from Garston's grasp.

Bellingham was up and scrambling for the pistol. But Garston caught and tripped him. Spread-eagled, his fingers inches from the gun, Ben saw Garston snatch it.

There would be no reprieve, no last words, no crowing speech. Garston pointed the pistol.

Defying authority, Gary and Darren charged pell-mell into the open.

The sound of a single shot reverberated.

A score of witnesses - including Alexander, Trent and the students stared in stunned disbelief. Disbelief deepened at fate unfolding before their eyes. Garston began to reel like a drunk. Crack! The fatal shot. Clutching bloody wounds, Garston collapsed. The bullets had come from a gun fired by First Officer Philip Grant.

Ben knelt to examine the still form of an enemy. Turning him over, he loosened the red-wet shirt and felt for a pulse that was no longer there.

Rod Garston was dead.

15. Round-up

And so ended one chapter in The Eden Mission story, a story that will continue as long as ecologists have a task to perform. Hope did not sink with Sea Shepherd. Instead her loss doubled determination among campaigners and drew new recruits to the conservation cause. Today, Sea Shepherd II plies the oceans, commanded by veteran James Alexander.

Philip Grant is sorely missed, invalided out of active service. Forever imprinted upon Ben Bellingham's mind will be Grant's courage in inching critically wounded through the snow to reach and use Harris's gun.

On the very day Rod Garston was buried, a solemn Sir Charles Fotheringay phoned from London to solve the Masterson riddle: Johnny had been murdered, his papers and identity stolen.

Craig and Harris had revealed the organization's audacious scheme to invade Antarctica and capitalise on the reserves of gold, platinum and uranium.

By then the students and teachers were back in England. Sighs, sometimes tears, had accompanied their parting from Ben and so many other comrades. The Greenpeace vessel Gondwana had carried them to Chile, where they boarded an aircraft for the flight home...sweet home!

As months passed, investigations based on Leslie Curtis's book resulted in the blackest future for all trapped between its covers. Law-enforcement agencies swooped on the organization's operations in Europe, America, Asia, Africa. Police raids ranged from Anilux headquarters in Hamburg to Colombia's jungle drug factories.

The Director, however, is still at large and rumours persist that he is the corrupt genius behind a revived organization. Nameless, elusive, a master manipulator, he made Maximilian Kruger a scapegoat - "arranging" his arrest as the man who had authorised Sea Shepherd's destruction. Kruger, believing arch-rival Art Benton to be responsible for this plot, incriminated him. Benton has sworn revenge...when both are free.

The youngsters, as promised, have kept in touch. Yves now lives in France, where Vanessa visits him every summer. Norman is studying to become a specialist on global population and associated problems. Gary and Susan, of course, see each other often. She particularly values a memento Darren gave her, something he'd detached from a ship's trunk barely 48 hours after embarking, a brass plaque engraved m.v. Sea Sheperd.

News of the teachers is relayed by Maude Mimpriss, who writes twice a year to her former pupils and takes more than a professional interest in them.

The six won't forget their unique adventure, their modest contribution to a worldwide crusade for change.

Thanks mainly to conservationists, concern about the living planet has never been greater. "Green" issues are fashionable. Governments and industry pledge reform to protect our environment. But, while man-made catastrophes recur and fresh follies loom, The Eden Mission cannot rest.

The David Bellamy Solar Study Centre Appeal

The Centre for Alternative Technology, Machynlleth, Wales was established in 1975 and has become one of Europe's leading centres demonstrating sustainable technology and ways of life. The difference between CAT and other centres is that technical progress is presented through a practical, hands-on environment built to encourage public participation.

The new Solar Study Centre is a state-of-the-art building project providing superb facilities for CAT's educational courses, conferences and seminars, for both residential and day visitors. The Centre will use modern technology to make maximum use of passive solar heating and generate electricity from the sun, so achieving major energy and CO2 savings with minimal environmental impact.

It will also provide a working display of these technologies for the visiting public and help to publicise, throughout Europe, the potential for sustainable building design and solar energy.

The Centre will feature unusual environmentally friendly characteristics such as central heating supplied by a woodchip boiler, toilets flushed by rainwater and electricity derived from renewable resources. Winter heating bills will be reduced by 87%. Green timber, from local sources, is used in the construction of the Centre for minimal ecological impact, and an innovative Reed Bed Sewage System will dispose of waste naturally.

The David Bellamy Appeal for the completion of the Solar Study Centre is helping to establish a fitting mile-stone for the 20th anniversary of The Centre for Alternative Technology.

Useful addresses

Wildlife Trusts, Witham Park, Waterside South, Lincoln, LN5 7JR.

Greenpeace, Canonbury Villas, London, NW1 2PN.

Friends of the Earth, 26 Underwood street, London, N1 7JQ

National Trust, 36 Queen Anne's Gate, London, SW1H 9AS.

Marine Conservation Society, 9 Gloucester Road, Ross-on-Wye, Herefordshire, HR9 5BU.

Born Free Foundation, Coldharbour, Dorking, Surrey, RH5 6HA.

Respect for Animals, PO Box 500, Nottingham, NG1 3AS.

Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, Richmond, Surrey, TW9 3AB.

Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge, Lensfield Road, Cambridge, CB2 1ER.

R.S.P.B., The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire, SG19 2DL.

World Wide Fund for Nature, Panda House, Weyside Park, Catteshall Lane,
Godalming, Surrey, GU7 1XR.

R.S.P.C.A., Causeway, Horsham, West Sussex, RH12 1HG.

Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society, Alexander House, James Street West,
Bath, Avon, BA1 2BT.

Centre For Alternative Technology, Machynlleth, Powys, Wales, SY20 9AZ.

Ark Environmental Foundation, Room 643, Linen Hall, 162 Regent Street, London,
W1R 5TB.

Animal Rehabilitation Centre, The Cottage, Hough-on-the-Hill, Nr. Grantham,
Lincolnshire, NG32 2BB.

Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, Woods Hole, Massachusetts, 02543,
U.S.A.