

The Eden Mission by Anthony Wall

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For my dear seer, Vicky The Robinswood Press Stourbridge 1995

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"If all the beasts were gone, men would die from great loneliness of spirit. For whatever happens to the beasts soon happens to man. All things are connected ... The earth does not belong to man: man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood which unites one family ... Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth. Man did not weave the web of life: he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself."--Red Indian Chief Seathl in a letter to Franklin Pierce, President of the United States, 1855. extension

The book's background details are as accurate and authentic as I can make them. But, here and there, I have "played" with the facts for the sake of telling a dramatic story. For example, there is no Marine Mammal Center in Santa Barbara, though similar institutions do exist elsewhere. The ship Sea Shepherd is an invention, in no way linked to the conservation charity of that name or any of its vessels. A.W. extension

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extension

FOREWORD

The world--and it's the only one we've got--is in a terrible mess from misuse and neglect. Eco-terrorists and vested interests abound, polluting rivers, lakes and seas, draining wetlands, destroying ancient forests and trading in endangered species.

The Eden Mission, though a work of fiction, brings the real live world of conservation and the fight to save the planet to a whole new audience.

It also proves that it is not too late for us all to do our bit to save the Earth. David Bellamy The Conservation Foundation extension

PREFACE

Not so long ago, the term "greenhouse effect" meant little to most people. Something to do with gardening ...? How different now! Now that the environment is a matter of major concern, now that we are becoming ecologically educated.

But how much has changed, really changed, in recent years? Certainly politicians and scientists have made a start on trying to curb the worst abuses to our world. And, happily, some of those mentioned in my novel are declining. Others, though, are on the increase. So, far from being able to relax, conservationists are busier than ever.

Underlying all this are enormous problems: the widening gap between rich and poor, the fact that four-fifths of global resources are consumed by one-fifth of the population, the arrival each second of three new mouths to feed.

What of the solutions? Perhaps the main hope, idealistic though it may seem, is that humanity will see sense. The Earth, not money, is the only true wealth. It's our collective home to be shared with our fellows and fellow creatures.

Maybe the rich must become poorer, accept a lowering of their material standards, so that the poor can become richer. Maybe the technology that helped get us into this mess cannot get us out, and humankind will have to return to a simpler way of life. Maybe ...

What do you think? What you think matters--yours is the generation that will need to be wiser and more responsible than previous generations. In your hands may rest the fate of the whole planet. Anthony Wall, 1995

The Eden Mission

1. Victims

Suddenly the grasses shivered, but there was no wind. Silence, stillness, then

more movement and the sound of a soft, gargling growl. The tall stems parted ... and a fiery face thrust forward. Orange and white and black-barred, it was a face to strike terror into man and beast, a face like a warrior's daubed with war paint. A hungry tigress on the prowl. As fast, as fierce, but bigger and more beautiful than her tan-coloured cousin the lioness.

The great striped cat, perfectly camouflaged, crouched and stared intently at the lake. Her pale yellow-green eyes did not blink. Out there, under the water, lay the body of a deer she had chased, caught and killed. But then she had been robbed of her prize. She intended to get it back.

An hour earlier, just before dawn, the tigress had stalked a group of sambur deer filing down from the hills to drink at the cool lake and munch the green feast of water lilies spread over the surface. For twenty minutes the tigress crept closer and closer, soundlessly placing one huge paw in front of the other. Then, when she was forty feet away, she tensed her haunches like springs and exploded into a bounding charge.

Tail erect, ears forward, she crashed through the reeds, splashed through the water. Deer darted to right and left in a frenzy of white spray. But one stag, blindly panicking, turned towards the tigress. A fatal mistake. With a flying leap she brought the deer down, breaking his neck in a single bite.

The stag weighed 500 pounds, the tigress only 350, yet she would wade to land with him. She hauled her prey shorewards.

Then it happened. The tigress felt a sudden tug. The sambur slipped from her jaws ... and was dragged under water. Crocodile snouts nudged her heels. Wasting no time, she fled to the lake's edge--minus her meal.

Twice in the hour since then, she had paddled back to try to retrieve the deer, snarling and swatting the water. But on each occasion she had lost her nerve. Finally, with an echoing roar of fury and frustration, the tigress retreated to the high grass.

Now she watched and waited. She refused to surrender the hard-won meal, her first catch in many tries. The tigress was very hungry. But her three cubs, fidgeting beneath a saja tree, were hungrier.

Once, there had been four of them, born blind in a cave six months ago. They grew sleek and fat on their mother's milk until the day they were ready to venture out with her and start learning how to hunt for themselves. It was then that their father, a swaggering giant of 550 pounds, seized one of the cubs and devoured it behind a bush. He tried again--but the tigress was alert, and spat a challenge that froze him in his tracks. Though he outweighed her by 200 pounds, he knew she would fight to the death to defend her young. The tiger had backed down and slunk off.

Turning from the lake, the tigress checked that the three cubs were safe before resuming her long vigil. The sun was high and hot, and she panted heavily. All around could be heard the buzz, hum, click, fizz and rattle of insects.

Ranee, as she was known by the wardens of this Indian nature reserve, was a splendid specimen. Nearly nine feet long, seven years old, in her prime. She should live to the age of eleven, maybe twice that. For the next seventeen months she would devote herself to rearing and teaching the cubs. The wardens could easily recognise Ranee by the stripes and squiggles on her cheeks and eyebrows--as distinctive as human fingerprints--quite different from those of her massive mate and the five other tigresses in his scattered harem.

By now the temperature had soared to 110 degrees Fahrenheit in the shade. Raneer still watched and waited. A snake slithered past her paw. She recoiled slightly, remembering a painful incident as a cub, but the snake trickled away through a crack in the ground and was gone.

In the late afternoon Raneer's patience was rewarded. The sambar buck floated to the surface. But it was surrounded by crocodiles --their teeth, ideal for gripping, could not tear off the firm flesh. Raneer glared, summoning her courage. The deer's body beckoned, fifty yards from the rim of the lake.

Quivering with anticipation, Raneer dashed forward. She swam strongly, ignoring the crocodiles, grabbed the sambar by the throat and began her return journey. Their two heads bobbed up and down between the water lilies. At last Raneer landed her catch.

Laboriously she hauled the deer towards her cubs.

Crack!

Three small striped faces grimaced in alarm.

The bullet from the high-powered rifle entered through Raneer's right eye, ploughed on and shattered her brain. She moaned once, then collapsed over the body of the sambar. Suddenly she was devoid of grace and strength, her life switched off like an electric current.

The poacher lowered his gun. A pity to spoil the pelt with a second shot. He'd wait until he was sure the big cat was dead. But not too long--the wardens might catch him. Still, it was worth the risk when a tiger-skin coat could fetch £63,000 in a Tokyo shop.

That same day, eight thousand miles away, another armed man was preparing to pursue his quarry. He was perched on a boat's seesawing bow. Cursing the cold, he stared ahead at the sullen blue-black swell of the Southern Ocean. Sooner or later he would spot what he was looking for--a tell-tale spout that signalled the coming battle. Then there would be no time to feel cold, no time to feel at all. Meanwhile he should give thanks that he wasn't on the Antarctic mainland, where the temperature had been known to fall as low as minus 130 degrees Fahrenheit.

Far to starboard an iceberg loomed. Miles long, a hundred feet high, glittering like a gigantic diamond. The man still scanned the horizon. To help him locate his target, the boat had echo-sounders and a look-out up on the masthead, but the man trusted his own eyes and instincts more than anything else.

On a nearby ice-floe thousands of Adelie penguins, like spectators, stood in rows.

A shout came from the look-out. Already the gunner below was manoeuvring the harpoon cannon into position, his attention focused on the slanting jets that rose from the sea half a mile ahead. The whale had just surfaced and was spouting, at fifteen-second intervals, before taking breath for another deep dive.

With engine racing, the catcher boat closed in ... 800 yards, 400, 200. The gunner licked his lips. One good clean shot should do it. He looked down on the enormous wrinkled body, took aim--behind the head--and fired. A loud report was followed by a whine of running rope as the six-foot, 160-pound

steel harpoon arrowed through the air at sixty miles an hour. It hit home with terrific force. The tip exploded deep inside the creature, sending out barbs. Thrashing its tail flukes, the whale began an ordeal of panic and pain.

The gunner surveyed the red streamers trailing from his tethered victim. It would die soon enough.

But not everyone who witnessed the gory spectacle remained as unmoved as the harpoonist. The medical officer, watching from the factory ship where the carcass would eventually be processed, felt shame and disgust. A sperm whale, he noted, adjusting his binoculars. Officially protected by international agreement. That didn't stop these men. The whole business of whaling sickened him. As a doctor he was trained to save life, not take it, and he sympathised more with the whales than with the whalers whose health he was employed to safeguard.

The medical officer frowned, reflecting on what he knew about whales. Not fish but mammals: air-breathing, warm-blooded, bearing their young live, nourishing them on milk. A sperm whale had the heaviest brain of any animal--six times the weight of a human's. Did this mean high intelligence? Some scientists believed so. Certainly sperm whales were socially responsible creatures. When a calf was born, females would lift it to the surface for its first breath. They would guard the mother from attack during the birth, "baby-sit" the youngster while she went diving for food, even suckle a strange calf. If a whale had a deformed jaw and couldn't catch prey, other whales would feed it.

Peering through his binoculars, the medical officer grimly observed that the harpooned sperm whale kept up its hopeless fight.

What a cruel waste! he thought. Science could learn so much from an amazing mammal like this. How was it able to dive two miles deep and stay under for as many hours? The pressure down there would crush a man beyond all recognition. How did the whale communicate over hundreds of miles? How did it use echoes to find its prey in the ocean gloom, to stun fish, diagnose illness in another whale? Questions--to which the answers could prove invaluable. But instead of learning, men threatened to wipe the species out.

Aboard the catcher boat no such thoughts crossed the gunner's mind. He was busy trying to solve a sixty-foot, sixty-ton problem: a sperm whale that refused to give up. The harpoon had not found the vital spot--the gunner blamed the choppy sea for spoiling his aim--and now the whale was towing the 110 ton boat behind it. Even with the engine reversed, the craft kept moving forward. The gunner got ready to fire a second harpoon.

In the blood-stained water the mammoth beast continued its agonising struggle. He was a mature male, a bull. His slate-blue body bore scars, souvenirs of epic battles with giant squid he had hunted in the dark depths. The biggest of these pink monsters, whose human-like eyes were more than fifteen inches across, weighed 42 tons and measured 66 feet. But even their powerful beaks and ten suckered tentacles were no match for the whale's eight-inch teeth.

The gunner fired the second harpoon.

The whale gave a convulsive shudder. His life was nearly over. A life that had begun thirty years ago as a tiny calf in the sparkling Indian Ocean. At the age of five he had left his mother and joined other young males in a bachelor group. When his blubber thickened, he migrated to colder waters where food was more plentiful. At 25 he became master of a "pod" of twelve cows which remained with their calves in tropical seas.

Although he was dwarfed by the hundred-foot blue whale, could not sing like the sweet-voiced humpback whale--both of which fed on plankton--his sort were the largest of the toothed whales, the same majestic breed as Moby Dick.

Each year he made the long journey back from the Antarctic to mate. But not this year. For three decades, the bull had eluded harpoons. Now he died, spouting thick blood.

The gunner nodded with satisfaction. Soon the vast corpse was winched alongside. Then, swinging slowly, the catcher boat chugged towards the factory ship whose stern gaped open like a mouth to swallow the whale. Once inside, it was hauled up a ramp.

The whale was efficiently disposed of. Its domed head yielded fifteen barrels of spermaceti oil for use in cosmetics; its body, oil for lubricants and leather softening; its belly, ambergris (the residue of squids' beaks) for perfume. Other products would later include crayons, candles, soap, pet food, fertiliser, glue. All these could be obtained from vegetable sources. But as long as unscrupulous people paid, whalers would go on breaking the law.

Sadly, as he saw the mighty animal disappear, the medical officer walked away. Behind him a helicopter lifted off with a swish and swirl of blades. Whale-spotting? He wondered, not for the first time, what was really happening aboard the factory ship. Whaling was bad enough--but he suspected something still more sinister. However, he had learned that it wasn't wise to ask too many questions round here.

In the Antarctic, you could vanish without trace.

Far, far to the north, off the coast of Norway, an oil-tanker crawled through fog. Usually the captain loathed such conditions. But today he was pleased--for the clammy cloud would conceal his activities. Leaning forward on the bridge, he gave orders to wash out the ship's tanks. Within minutes a sticky stinking stream of brown liquid was gurgling into the sea. Even when unloaded, a tanker retains about 2,000 tons of oil at the bottom of its tanks. That sludge has to be removed before a new cargo is taken on. Why pay to have the tanks cleaned in port if you could do it for nothing yourself? The captain's action was irresponsible, illegal and punishable with a heavy fine. But who can arrest an invisible culprit? He blessed the fog as the ship stole away from the scene of the crime.

Hours later a violent storm blew up, clearing the fog. Buffeted by wind, sea-birds sought refuge on the calmest water--which was those patches slicked with oil. Not long after, the first grease-caked casualties started to stagger ashore. Guillemots, gannets, puffins, razor-bills, little auks, kittiwakes. The final death toll would be fifty thousand.

News of the pollution spread fast. People gathered on the beaches, but they were unable to help the birds--except by putting them out of their misery. As a naturalist explained to a tearful woman onlooker, oil often blinded birds. It burnt their skin, stomachs and livers. It also removed the waterproofing from their feathers, which insulated them against cold and wet, so they couldn't float properly or catch fish. And if the birds weren't poisoned by swallowing oil after preening, they would probably die of pneumonia.

Singly or in small groups the bedraggled creatures stumbled to land. A three-foot gannet, normally brilliant white, pecked feverishly at its ruined plumage until a rifle-shot rang out.

By nightfall a two-ton pile of dead sea-birds had been collected on the shore.

Someone set it ablaze. Sparks crackled amid whirling smoke. Excited, cherry-cheeked children ringed the bonfire; only the older ones understood that this was no celebration. For several nights to come there would be plenty of bodies to feed the flames.

Ninety miles inland, nothing broke the forest hush. A full moon silvered the treetops and light leaked down to the snow-covered floor beneath. Scraps of mist seemed caught on prickly branches.

From the shadows, a ghostly shape glided into a clearing. Two amber eyes searched the dappled darkness. Stealthily the wolf advanced. Hunger had driven him from his snug den. He knew where to find a good meal. Not the mice and birds he had lived on lately, but a hare he had killed and buried in the frozen ground to keep it fresh and safe from crows and ravens.

As the dog-wolf wound through the trees at an effortless lope, which could carry him as far as 120 miles in a single day, his thick brown-grey-yellow fur gleamed in the moonlight. He was a fine big dog: 5« feet from nose-tip to tail-tip, weighing a hundred pounds. In a pack he would have been leader. But there are no packs now--men had seen to that.

Wolves were regarded as enemies. Yet, like other predators, they performed a useful service by controlling the numbers of animals which destroyed farmers' crops. They made loyal pets if raised from cubs, and led a communal life that was a model of harmony and co-operation.

The wolf trotted on, nearing his food store. Strangely, since he was capable of detecting a smell from 1« miles and could hear loudish sounds more than four miles off, the wolf failed to notice a figure fifty yards away.

The man was half drunk, angry after a quarrel with his wife. He had stormed out of the house, taking a gun. He felt like shooting something. Suddenly the wolf appeared in front of him. The law said he must not pull the trigger. But he did--again and again. At that moment a cloud smothered the moon. The big dog dropped dead ... leaving just four wolves alive in the whole of Norway.

Five thousand miles to the south-west, on the edge of Newfoundland, great glistening rafts of ice jigsawed the Atlantic. From above, each piece revealed a pattern of dark clots. Harp seals. Mothers and babies.

At birth the pups had seemed too small for their baggy yellow coats. But a diet of rich, mayonnaise-like milk soon filled them out. Then they had changed their fur - to a dense woolly white. Dazzling. In all nature there could be few prettier, more appealing sights. The pups were curious and trusting.

Now hunters came, wielding wooden clubs, battering the babies senseless. Plaintive cries reached their helpless mothers. The clubbing continued for weeks. This yearly slaughter of tens of thousands must be finished quickly--before the "whitecoats" shed their beautiful fur. Sometimes, in the rush, pups were only wounded. They were skinned alive on the red ice.

The high price of unnecessary fur goods.

1. The Eden Mission

At the English port of Southampton it was raining, and had been for hours. A steady, soaking downpour. Water dripped from the dockside cranes; ran from the roofs of warehouses; washed the decks of liners, freighters, tugs and trawlers; spattered the windscreens of lurching launches. Seagulls sulked on the quay, or searched half-heartedly for food. The dingy sky showed no sign of brightening.

Not a day that promised excitement. Unless you happened to be young and about to set sail for faraway places and the adventure of a lifetime. Unless you were one of the lucky ones chosen to take part in The Eden Mission.

Sea Shepherd stirred at her moorings. The ship's steep side towered like a white wall above the clustering figures. A sailor peering down from the deck beheld a picture of marching mushrooms, as umbrellas formed into a line and began to advance. Now people were trooping up the gangway. Once on board they were conducted to a spacious, brightly lit lecture hall.

Wet umbrellas were put aside--and all thoughts of the weather. Parents, teenagers, teachers, ecologists and journalists settled in their seats. Press and TV cameramen took up position. Everyone's attention turned to the platform, still empty, at the end of the hall.

Elsewhere on the ship, bustling crew members made final preparations for a long voyage. Research vessel Sea Shepherd, clean-cut 5,000-tonner, looked like a small cruise liner. But she was equipped to carry out a special task, a serious task. Her reinforced bow could carve through ice, her diving-bell and miniature submarines explore the underwater world, her laboratories analyse everything from sea snake venom to marine nuclear contamination.

In the lecture hall, fifteen-year-old Susan Jenkins shifted impatiently. Why don't they get on with it? Susan's eyes roamed the walls. A black-and-white panda chomped a bamboo shoot, a gorilla pounded his chest, a leopard lolled on a tree branch. There were other posters too. She smiled at her friend Gary, sitting beside her, then started to read the names on a banner above the platform: The World Wide Fund for Nature, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, The Fauna and Flora Preservation Society, The People's Trust for Endangered Species ...

"Ladies and gentlemen."

At last!

The booming voice of Ben Bellingham, Britain's most famous naturalist. Susan stared in awe at the big burly man she had seen so often on television. His curly hair and beard were redder than she remembered.

"Sorry for the delay," Bellingham went on. "But at least it's given you a chance to dry off."

There was a ripple of laughter in the audience.

"Right," said Bellingham briskly, "down to business, the reason you and I are here. The Eden Mission."

Gary and Susan exchanged an amused look--they liked his no-nonsense approach.

The naturalist continued: "For those of you who don't know, I'll outline the mission's aims. Then I'll explain why it's vitally important, and I'll also be talking about the young people who are joining in this conservation crusade."

Susan felt a tingle run up her spine.

Bellingham strode across the platform to a huge colourful globe. He spun it vigorously and launched into his speech.

"Around the world, each day, at least fifty species of animal or plant

disappear for ever. By the year 2000, it may be a hundred a day. Some thirty per cent of all land is desert or semi-desert--the Sahara, for example, is spreading like an incoming tide--and more and more of the earth is crumbling to dust. The sea, which covers nearly three-quarters of our planet and on which we depend in countless ways, could become sterile."

Pausing, he took a sip from the glass in front of him, then added: "Who's to blame for all this? We are. Human beings. Greedy, ignorant, short-sighted humans. We're wrecking the world, robbing it, poisoning it, turning it into a rubbish dump. Unless we stop--and start respecting nature--there won't be much of a future for any of us ..."

Bellingham came to halt, as though he had been interrupted. After a moment's hesitation he resumed: "Er ... sorry. This is sounding like a sermon, I'd better get off my soap-box."

"The Eden Mission is an international campaign," he told his audience. "An all-out effort to save the environment from further destruction. Throughout Europe, America, Africa, Asia, Australia, teams of conservationists--professionals and volunteers--are working in round-the-clock relays. They have a tremendous fight on their hands, an army of enemies. Oil and atomic pollution, acid rain, pesticides--now found even in Antarctic penguins--the mindless felling of rain forests, whaling, the illegal wildlife trade ..."

A deep silence had fallen over the audience. Ben Bellingham concentrated on the rows of attentive faces. "This is the most urgent project of our time. A matter, literally, of life and death. The Eden Mission must succeed."

"And Sea Shepherd's role in the global operation? Crucial. The ship serves as an ocean-going headquarters - gathering data, via satellite, about the mission's many activities and acting as a link between the various task forces."

Besides that, Bellingham explained, the experts aboard Sea Shepherd were conducting their own research and protection programme ... "a programme our younger passengers can help with." Gary caught Susan's eye and grinned.

"Sea Shepherd sails in an hour," Ben announced. "She'll be gone for a year. First stop Florida, then on to the Amazon, then Antarctica."

He crossed the platform. "Ladies and gentlemen, I want to show you some slides which illustrate why The Eden Mission cannot be allowed to fail. First, though, we'll take a short break ..."

Susan's cheeks were flushed, Gary noticed. He felt it too--exhilaration. They'd soon be off!

The dark-haired boy, a few months older than his blonde friend, tended to make rather a point of appearing cool. Unlike Susan. Her blue eyes shone now as she enthused. The voyage, Ben Bellingham, the other teenagers travelling with them, the cabin where her luggage had already been stowed ... it was all so exciting. Gary nodded eagerly, swept along by Susan's happy chatter.

A journalist in front of them mumbled to his colleague: "Why's it called The Eden Mission anyway?" Susan, who had just finished a sentence, answered before she could check herself. "Easy. After The Garden of Eden. The perfect place for people and animals and plants--living together." The journalist didn't respond.

Suddenly the lights in the lecture hall dimmed. "Your attention, please." Bellingham again. Time for the slides. Up on the screen came a picture of a spotted ocelot fur coat, an elephant-ivory ornament, an ostrich-feather hat, a striped zebra rug, a crocodile-skin handbag and snake-skin shoes.

"A few of the frivolous luxuries we make from wild animals," he commented.

The next slide showed a selection of poachers' weapons: rifles, machine-guns, poison arrows, wire snares. "An arrow can kill an elephant in twelve hours--but sometimes death takes months. Poachers may even poison the beast's food with sulphuric acid from car batteries, causing slow and agonising torture. Wire snares often catch large antelope. If they do break free, the wire cuts into their flesh and they die later of infection."

The screen went blank and a spotlight fell on Ben. "We should all be ashamed of ourselves for letting this happen. More than a thousand animals--including leopards, gorillas and rhinos--face the threat of extinction today because of human callousness. Not only do we slaughter our fellow creatures for pleasure and profit, we also destroy their habitat and capture them for zoos, the pet trade and vivisection ..."

The spotlight faded and another picture appeared on screen. A rhinoceros.

One of fewer than 10,000 left alive, Bellingham reported. In 1970 there were 100,000. But ruthless hunting drastically reduced the population ... and the carnage was continuing. Poachers killed rhinos for their horn. Some of it went to North Yemen to make dagger handles, the majority to East Asia to be ground into medicine. The Chinese believed that powdered horn cured colds, measles, nosebleeds, vomiting, heart weakness. The Japanese claimed it fought fever. Certain people even swore by it as a love potion.

"Most poachers are poor. So the temptation to earn money by any means, however risky, is very strong. They may work as farmers for £400 a year - less than they'd be paid for a single horn. A merchant will sell it to consumers for £95,000 and upwards."

More slides followed.

A chimpanzee. Valued at £3,300 on the black market. Much in demand for bio-medical research, travelling acts, photography, tourist attractions and the television and film industries.

A hyacinth macaw. Going price £8,500 to an avid collector.

A peregrine falcon. Bought by Arab falconers for £1,000 each. Seeing the peregrine, Gary forgot everything else. His favourite bird! It could swoop at over two hundred miles an hour, spot its prey more than five miles away. Peregrines had once nearly died out in Britain through eating pigeons which had fed on grain sprayed with pesticides ...

Bellingham's voice broke into the boy's reverie. He was talking about Amazon dolphins. These gentle creatures, already threatened by pollution and river-damming schemes, were being killed--their eyeballs sold as ornaments and lucky charms in cities such as Rio de Janeiro.

Gary grunted disgustedly, and Susan's face showed her feelings.

The naturalist then mentioned another "charming practice": eating bear paws. Considered a delicacy in Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore, the paws of hunted bears are imported from China.

"The wildlife trade is a worldwide business, worth billions of pounds. There are strict rules to control that trade. However, some countries don't agree to them. Others say they do, but allow crooks and cheats to get away with murder--animal murder. That's just one of the reasons why The Eden Mission is a top priority ..."

Bellingham glanced quickly at his watch. "I see time is running out. A few final words. Sea Shepherd's programme includes trying to save grey whales and sea otters from oil pollution off California; manatees from being chopped up by speedboat propellers in Florida's waterways; Amazon dolphins from extermination. We have other tasks too, which I can't go into now. The six youngsters sailing with Sea Shepherd, all keen conservationists, will make a valuable contribution. But they'll also have to continue their school studies ..."

Someone in the audience groaned.

Ben grinned broadly. "Thank you for listening, ladies and gentlemen. Wish us luck!"

Loud applause. Then he answered last-minute questions from journalists. The audience--clad once more in raincoats, and clutching umbrellas--began to file out. Parents hugged their children, whom they wouldn't see again for twelve months, and gave good advice that would probably be forgotten or ignored. There were some tears.

Neither Gary's nor Susan's parents were present. They had already said their goodbyes at home and were glad to be spared emotional partings aboard Sea Shepherd.

By now the lecture hall was empty - except for six young people, eyeing each other somewhat warily, and the three teachers responsible for daily lessons.

Bellingham greeted them. "Welcome to the team. I know we're going to get along fine ..."

His next words were drowned by a sudden blast from Sea Shepherd's horn. Almost imperceptibly the ship started to move. Ben's steady gaze rested on the group.

"Well ... this is it."

2. Shipmates

After the lecture, a tall, ferret-faced man had pushed people aside to be first down the gangway. He didn't look like someone much concerned with conservation. He wasn't. Splashing through puddles, he hurried to a phone box on the quay. He dialled a number. His boss would find the report very interesting.

Waving parents watched Sea Shepherd glide away between lines of moored vessels, like a guard of honour. Her bright white hull shone luminously against sea and sky, both the same shade of grey. The teeming rain had stopped.

Leaning on the ship's rail, Susan was surprised by a twinge of sadness--she had nobody to wave to. Gary, sensing this, patted her on the back. Although they'd been friends for only three years, it often seemed they could read each other's minds.

Casually, so as not to draw attention to themselves, they turned sideways and observed their fellow passengers ... to find that they themselves were being scrutinised. An attractive girl in expensive leisure clothes peeked back at Gary. Vanessa--he remembered the name from their brief meeting earlier. Sixteen years old; blonde, like Susan.

Her hair's dyed, I bet, Susan thought. She had already nicknamed the older girl Vanessa and decided she was a flirt. Gary nodded, a little self-consciously, but Vanessa was now studying the passing port scene--as though the ships hooting farewell were paying tribute to her.

Susan's eyes flitted rapidly over the other teenagers. All boys. Yves, good looking, half-French; Norman, solemn and bespectacled; and Darren, with the discontented face. Beyond them the three teachers talked earnestly. Planning lessons, guessed Susan.

Soon after, the passengers went below, leaving Gary and Susan alone on deck.

"They seem quite a nice lot," said Gary cheerfully.

Susan made no comment, then: "S'pose you've gone soft on that girl--what's-her-name--Vanessa? I saw you ogling her."

Gary laughed. "Rubbish. And you're a fine one to talk--don't pretend you aren't keen on Yves."

Susan stuck out her tongue. "Anyway, what do you care? You're not my guardian."

He shrugged good-naturedly.

Susan was beginning to feel ashamed of her mean thoughts, and changed the subject. The Eden Mission, that's what really mattered. They both knew it. And if she hadn't won an ecology essay competition and a prize of places for two aboard Sea Shepherd, neither of them would be here.

She rested her hand on Gary's shoulder and looked at him cheekily. "You may be a pain in the neck sometimes, but I'm glad you're coming with me."

As Southampton slid astern, Sea Shepherd nosed into the thumping waters of the English Channel. At that moment the sun squinted through a crack in the cloud. On the horizon the sky's grey paint was peeling, revealing blue. A good omen?

Gary followed Susan down the companionway. "See you at dinner," he said, before entering the cabin he shared with Norman. As one of the girls, Susan had Vanessa for a room-mate. Next door were Yves and Darren.

Susan hesitated outside her cabin, fiddled with her cardigan, ran a comb through her hair. Then, head held high, she made her entrance. Vanessa wasn't there. Susan relaxed, smiling at herself.

The smile faded fast. She's taken the bottom bunk! I was here first. Susan stared, glared at the fancy nightdress laid out on the pillow. Did she have the nerve to move it? No, not quite.

Fuming, she started to unpack. Sweaters, T-shirts, jeans, shorts and a dress. She yanked open the wardrobe door. A row of eye-catching outfits hung neatly on hangers. "It's like a fashion store," Susan muttered, shoving the hangers aside to make space for her own clothes.

In the bathroom she opened the mirror-fronted cabinet on the wall. It was crammed with bottles and jars. Perfume, shampoo, creams ... Susan slammed the cabinet shut and pulled a face in the glass.

Meanwhile Gary was trying to make friends with Norman. Hard work. Norman proved to be a very serious young man, much given to using long words. Must've swallowed a dictionary, Gary thought. But he kept up the conversation. Then the studious teenager produced a pack of cards and proceeded to do a series of conjuring tricks that made Gary gasp. Norman might be fun after all.

Checking her watch, Susan confirmed what her stomach was telling her--dinner-time. She left the cabin and saw Gary and Norman emerging farther down the corridor. Yves and Darren also appeared. Already it was clear that when food was involved the teenagers wouldn't find it too difficult to be punctual. But where was Vanessa? Susan glanced at Yves and Darren - Darren deliberately looked away. Gary introduced her to Norman, who blushed. They climbed the stairs.

Appetising smells wafted from the ship's galley. The five youngsters almost broke into a trot as they neared the dining-room. Suddenly the riddle of Vanessa solved itself; she was talking to a sun-tanned sailor. Susan sniffed. Yves mouthed the word "Dinner" as they passed Vanessa, and she arrived in the dining-room soon after.

There were thirteen seats at the captain's table--Gary counted them. Isn't that supposed to be unlucky? He wasn't superstitious, but ... Susan prodded him. "Gary, sit by me, Norman on the other side." The boys grinned as Susan, the youngest of the three, bossed them about.

Vanessa grandly took her place opposite, between Yves and the uncommunicative Darren. At one end of the table, near Ben Bellingham, the trio of teachers huddled--Geoffrey Baggalley (Geography and History), Maude Mimpriss (English and French), Peter Stokes (Maths and Science). At the other end of the table the captain and two officers completed the party.

Ben Bellingham rose to his feet. His eyes twinkled as he started to address the young conservationists. "Hello again. You know most of the people here, including your teachers." He made a sweeping gesture in their direction. For some reason they reminded Susan of sheep--and she bit her lip to stop herself giggling.

"But," Bellingham added, "there's one very important person you haven't met ... Captain James Alexander."

A lean, distinguished-looking man with grey hair, kind but shrewd brown eyes and a firm jaw raised a hand in greeting.

Bellingham continued: "Captain Alexander--Jim to his friends, which you will all become if you follow orders--is the master of Sea Shepherd. As far as everyone on board is concerned, he's Alexander the Great ... his word is law."

Captain Alexander laughed, then introduced the two men with him. They were First Officer Philip Grant and Radio Officer Leslie Curtis.

Bellingham sat down, reaching for the menu. "I dunno about you lot, but I'm starving."

Two white-coated stewards padded in and began to circulate around the table.

Gary ordered mushroom soup, quiche and salad, and fruit salad for dessert. Susan asked for the same, except that she wanted mixed ice-cream. Vanessa dithered daintily over the menu, seeking Yves' advice. She also consulted Darren, whose only retort was "Please yourself".

Soon the six were tucking in as though they hadn't eaten for a week. When appetites were satisfied, the clatter gave way to chatter.

Dinner over, some of the youngsters were now looking round rather restlessly. Bellingham called for quiet, then said: "Before you leave, a couple of points. Tomorrow's schedule is on the notice-board outside. Do read it. I don't know what time you usually go to bed, but I suggest you turn in early. We've got a heavy programme ahead--and this isn't a joy-ride."

Catching sight of Darren's miserable countenance, the naturalist hastily added: "It isn't a funeral either, so there's no reason why we shouldn't enjoy ourselves."

"Oh, and one more thing. If you have any questions, feel free to come and ask me. Sleep well, shipmates!"

Saying goodnight to the others, Gary and Susan slipped out of the dining-room. They paused at the notice-board, then went up on deck.

A simmering sun was just sinking into the sea. Gary strained forward, as if expecting to hear a hiss, and watched the waves which seemed to be on fire. Beside him Susan said nothing. Her eyes were drawn to the new moon, a hammock slung at an impossible angle between two clouds, and the first blooming of stars. Gulls mewed and snickered around the ship's stern. The lightest of breezes tiptoed across the water.

Gary took a deep breath. "Beats being at home, eh?" Susan sighed in agreement, forgetting that sooner or later she always felt homesick.

"Damn!" Susan was scowling.

Gary stared. "What's wrong?"

"Vainessa--I've got to put up with her in my cabin. For months and months and months."

"It's her cabin too," Gary pointed out.

"Whose side are you on, Gary Izzard?"

"Yours, of course. But Vanessa may not be crazy about sharing with you either."

Susan pouted. "Huh!"

Gary put his arm through hers. "Anyway, count your blessings. Imagine being Yves--with doleful Darren as a room-mate."

She giggled. "Yeah ... things could be worse. I suppose I'll survive."

They went on talking for a little longer. When Gary mentioned the thirteen chairs at the captain's table, Susan snorted. "Don't believe that stuff, do you?" He reddened slightly. "No, I ... I just ..." She interrupted: "I liked the captain and the first officer. Not so sure about the radio officer though ... Leslie Curtis. Gave me the creeps. Dunno why."

Gary shrugged. "He seemed OK to me."

Crossing the deck, they started down the companionway. "Get some beauty sleep--you need it," said Gary. He ducked. "And good luck with Vanessa!"

Susan dawdled in the corridor. Then, straightening her back, she walked briskly to the door, turned the handle and stepped inside the cabin. It was empty but the sound of running water came from the bathroom. Susan glanced at the bottom bunk; yes, the nightdress was still there.

Vanessa emerged from the bathroom, a fluffy pink towel wrapped round her head. "Hi." She treated Susan to a brilliant smile.

Vanessa sat down decorously on the bunk and began to dry her hair. Susan stood, hands in pockets, uncertain what to say or do. She shuffled across the cabin and peered out of the porthole.

The silence lengthened. Susan felt more and more uncomfortable. At last, turning, she blurted: "Um, Vanessa ... About the bunks. You weren't here when I moved in, and I meant to leave my stuff on the bottom bunk. The thing is ... would you mind changing?"

Susan waited, heart thumping.

Vanessa arched her carefully plucked eyebrows and said: "Of course I don't mind. I only took this bunk so as not to disturb you if I came in late."

Susan smiled. Maybe Vanessa was a natural blonde.

Tucked up in the bottom bunk, Susan lay awake. Her brain buzzed with the day's events. Such a lot. And the voyage was only just starting. She pictured Gary, who always made an effort to be fair.

He's probably right about that man Curtis. Why had she disliked the radio officer ...?

Susan's eyelids drooped. She thought she heard the click of a cabin door. Yves or Darren going for a midnight stroll? Her curiosity stirred. Funny ... Susan fell asleep.

She woke to find herself bathed in a buttery light, pouring through the porthole. Drowsily she wondered what she would do today. Then she noticed the bunk above her--like a low narrow ceiling--and realised where she was. At sea! Bound for adventure!

Susan sat up, swung her legs sideways and stood stretching for a moment. No trace of sleepiness now. A series of purring snuffles rose from Vanessa's bunk. Susan chuckled. So glamour girls snored, did they?

Ten minutes later Susan was on deck. She shivered with pleasure. The sun-spangled water folded and unfolded to the far horizon. The Atlantic, unimaginably wide and deep. Not a sign of land anywhere. Nice to be alone ...

"Hello, Susan. Sleep well?"

She frowned at Gary. "Wish you wouldn't creep up on me like that."

Norman, who had been hidden by Gary, stepped into view. "Oh ... Good Morning," Susan said sweetly.

Norman peered over the ship's side. "Sea's green," he commented. "That means it's murky with plants, rich feeding for fish. Blue water is poor in marine life."

He took off his spectacles and began polishing them on a huge red handkerchief. Rather vaguely he added: "And did you know that barnacles, like those clinging to the bottom of this ship, might prove valuable to man? Their adhesive properties are being investigated to see if they can be used in tooth fillings and to mend bone fractures."

Susan stifled a yawn. "Fascinating. By the way, Gary tells me you're an ace conjurer."

Norman beamed.

Just then Yves joined them.

"No Darren?" queried Gary.

"No, he's still fast asleep in his bunk."

"Best place for him," muttered Susan. Immediately she felt guilty, and quickly went on: "That reminds me, did either of you go out late last night? I'm sure I heard your cabin door."

Yves shook his head. "Not me. I couldn't wait to turn in. Dropped off straight away. But I can't answer for Darren. Hey, maybe he's a sleepwalker."

Susan looked thoughtful, then laughed with the others.

They were half-way through breakfast before Vanessa put in an appearance and nearly finished when Darren, puffy-eyed and grumpier than ever, slouched into the dining-room. No one even tried to engage him in conversation.

At 9#15 the six youngsters filed into the lecture hall. Back to school! First lesson, French. Darren skulked at the rear--until Maude Mimpriss, in a voice like chalk on a blackboard, ordered him to sit behind a desk at the front. Susan, although not a fan of Darren's, stared coolly at the shrill teacher. Silly old ... Yves, who spoke and wrote French fluently, was naturally the star pupil. But Vanessa did well too.

When the English lesson came it was Susan's turn to shine. She warmed a little to Miss Mimpriss after her praise.

Peter Stokes, a dominoes fanatic, taught maths. Norman proved brilliant at the subject. A real genius, Gary thought admiringly.

Then geography and history master Geoffrey Baggalley took over. He had once been a physical training instructor--and it showed. As he talked, he walked up and down and waved his arms as if doing exercises. Mr. Baggalley caught Susan giggling, but Gary put him in a good mood again by answering all the geography questions correctly.

At lunch the unsupervised teenagers were rather noisy, cracking jokes about their teachers. It was harmless fun among new-found friends. Only Darren remained remote, cut off from the lively talk. Now and then Susan glanced in his direction. He seemed unhappy rather than disgruntled, and she felt sorry for him. Once, their eyes met. Susan couldn't be sure, but she thought she saw a slight response before he looked down.

A quick breath of fresh air, then the youngsters returned to the lecture hall. Ben Bellingham was waiting for them.

"Please take your seats in the front row. OK, who cares about conservation? Hands up."

Everybody reacted.

Bellingham pointed to Vanessa. "Why?" he demanded. Vanessa opened her mouth in surprise. "Er ..."

The naturalist repeated his question, more gently. "Why, Vanessa? Why should you care what happens in Africa, the Amazon, the Antarctic or anywhere else that isn't your home? What's it got to do with you?"

He nodded encouragingly. "Well?"

Vanessa stuck out her chin. "Animals have as much right to be on earth as we have. More--they were here first. And if we're the most intelligent creatures, the only ones that are moral, it's our duty to look after the environment. Besides, nobody owns the world. All living things are part of nature. So in a way nature owns us ..."

Blushing, Vanessa tailed off. Without thinking, Susan started to clap.

Bellingham: "Bravo! You convinced me--and at least one other person." Now Susan went pink.

Walking along the row, Bellingham added: "Anybody else want to speak up for conservation? Yes, Gary."

"Well, Mr. Bellingham, I was just wondering about the Amazon. The way the trees are being cut down--fifty thousand acres a day. Don't half of all plant and animal species live there?"

The naturalist leaned towards him. "Quite right. Oh, and call me Ben."

Gary went on: "I've read that a lot of industry, agriculture and medicine is based on jungle products--rubber, coffee, bananas, quinine and so on. Also that the Amazon is a botanical treasure-house we've barely begun to explore. It needs to be protected for everyone's sake. Another thing--people are upsetting the world climate by felling those trees ..."

Bellingham chipped in. "Right again, Gary. But the situation is even worse than that, I'm afraid, as you'll see for yourselves on this trip."

Norman put his hand up. "No one has mentioned the gene pool. If the number of species keeps falling, the planet may not be able to evolve to meet changing conditions--and life could die out."

Ben rubbed his chin. "Certainly done your natural history homework, haven't you?"

He strode to the table behind him, on which stood a glass jar. Turning, he said: "I think you and I agree conservation is worthwhile."

There was a loud murmur of assent.

Bellingham picked up the jar, full of cloudy liquid. Something was floating in

it. "Know what this is?" He unscrewed the lid and, taking a pair of tweezers from his shirt pocket, fished out the mysterious object. "Open your hand," he said to Susan. She squealed as he dropped what he was holding into her palm. Slimy and spotted ... frog's legs!

"Won't hurt you," he reassured her. "Just the legs of some unlucky Indian bullfrog which didn't hop off in time to save itself."

He retrieved the exhibit, passed it round, then put it back in the jar. "The reason I have shown you this is to illustrate a story. A horror story."

In Asia, each year, 250 million frogs are killed. For their legs. To make delicate snacks, eaten by spoilt customers in Europe and America.

Hunted at night with lamps, the frogs are collected from ponds and rice fields and taken away to be "processed". This involves immersing the frogs in salt water to numb them. Next they are sliced in two, the top halves thrown aside. The maimed frogs crawl off to die, many minutes later.

"Not very pleasant, is it? But that's not all.

"Frogs feed on insects, which spread fatal diseases and ruin crops. By killing the frogs, Asian villagers have brought on an insect population explosion. The result: catastrophe. What to do? Farmers bought pesticides to combat the menace. The pesticides cost more than the income from frogs' legs ..."

Yves raised his hand.

"Just a minute," said Ben. "There's another episode to the story. The main pesticide is DDT--banned in Europe and America but sold to developing countries. Asian people were soon suffering from chemical poisoning. And, ironically, the contaminated crops are exported to Europe and America. Meanwhile the insects have grown immune to pesticides. So higher and higher doses are used, further endangering human health and wildlife--including those poor frogs."

Ben Bellingham folded his arms and concluded: "Greed, ignorance and failure to respect the balance of nature have caused a disaster. It will take years to put right. Roll on The Eden Mission!"

When the youngsters left they were curiously quiet. Ben had given them plenty to think about.

Half an hour after, Gary and Susan were strolling on deck. "Fancy a dip?" he asked. "Yeah!" They raced each other to their cabins and grabbed their bathing things.

Lolling in the ship's pool, Susan remembered how Gary had taught her to swim on holiday three years ago. She splashed him playfully. Later, dry and changed, they set out to explore Sea Shepherd thoroughly.

In one of the corridors they spotted Darren emerging from a door marked "Radio Room". He didn't see them. Suddenly Leslie Curtis, the radio officer, appeared in the doorway. He glowered at Gary and Susan. "What are you doing here? This section's out of bounds to you kids."

Gary, with an eye on the retreating back of Darren, started to protest. "But ..."

Then he felt a sharp pinch from Susan--and had the sense to shut up.

3. Enemies

The big black Mercedes, driven by a broad-shouldered chauffeur, slid like a shark through Hamburg's traffic. The driver was skilful--and ruthless. He forced other cars to give way.

From the back seat, his cigar-smoking passenger growled: "How much longer?"

"Only five minutes, Herr Kruger." The voice was meek, almost nervous.

"Well, put your foot down, man." Kruger flicked cigar ash on to the floor.

Less than five minutes later the Mercedes drew up in front of a towering office block. The chauffeur hurried round and opened the passenger door.

"Wait here," Kruger ordered. Carrying a document case, the immaculately dressed businessman strode into the entrance hall. A commissionaire, who had been reading a newspaper, sprang to attention.

"Good evening, sir."

Kruger nodded curtly. "Sixth floor."

The commissionaire summoned the lift. When the chief of Anilux Trading told you to do something, you did it. Fast.

Riding up in the lift, the commissionaire stared at his shoes and said nothing. How he hated Kruger! A tyrant. Yet he had a beautiful young wife. Married him for his money, must have. Money. If I didn't need this lousy job I'd quit Anilux right now.

The lift arrived at the sixth floor. Without a word, Kruger hastened away. In an outer office a secretary stood up as he approached. "Ah, Herr ..."

Kruger cut in: "Are they all here?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well, Fraulein. Send in some coffee."

Maximilian Kruger entered the boardroom.

"Be seated, gentlemen." He leaned forward in his chair at the head of the polished mahogany table and peered disdainfully at the anxious faces around him. Unzipping his document case, he pulled out a sheaf of papers and slapped them down on the table.

"Bad news. Reports that our business is being jeopardised--not by competitors but by interfering outsiders. No doubt you've heard of The Eden Mission ..."

A knock at the door. The secretary brought in coffee. "Leave it," said Kruger. "We'll serve ourselves." The secretary crept out.

"As you know," he continued, "most of the company's trade in furs and wildlife products is not permitted by the law. And if we let those lunatic ecologists have their way, it could ruin everything."

Kruger poured himself a cup of black coffee. Then he looked up. "They've got to be stopped."

Houston, Texas. In a penthouse apartment with a spectacular view of the city, a telephone rang ... and rang. Uttering a swear-word, a woman in high heels teetered across the thick carpet towards the relentless ringing. She wore a fur coat, jewellery, and could have passed as a starlet.

"Yeah?" she drawled into the receiver. A pause. "Hold on."

Covering the mouthpiece, she yelled: "Honey, call for you. German guy. Says it's urgent."

A tanned, middle-aged man in a dinner-jacket appeared. The woman handed him the phone. "Please be quick--we're late for the party already."

Her husband raised the receiver. "Art Benton speaking. That you, Max ...? Hi. What's the problem?"

Benton sat down, motioning his wife to get him a drink. Several minutes ticked by. Benton had drained the glass. He stretched and said: "Take it easy, Max. The organization isn't gonna let a bunch of nature freaks louse things up. There's more at stake here than a few goddam animal skins. There's the entire global enterprise. Oil, timber, mining, property--and other interests we'd better not talk about over the phone ..."

Benton listened to Kruger's comment, then added: "This Eden Mission doesn't stand a hope in hell. The organization will take care of that."

As the light aircraft began its descent, law officer Miguel Osuna took in a view he had seen a hundred times before. But each time was like the first. From 3,000 feet, the bright-green forest treetops reminded him of curly hair, parted by a straight red road that marched on and on and out of sight. Here and there parakeets, as common as sparrows, swirled colourfully. Near the road, water winked in the early morning sunlight. A river. The river, compared with which most other rivers were mere streams. The Amazon! Four thousand miles long, two hundred miles from bank to bank at its widest, fed by ten thousand tributaries. One-fifth of the world's fresh water flowing through a jungle bigger than Europe.

The plane dipped as it approached the uneven landing strip.

Law officer Osuna checked his revolver and concentrated on the assignment ahead.

Splutter-splutter ... the aircraft dawdled to a stop. Osuna thanked the pilot. Jumping to the ground, he gave his colleague the thumbs up sign, then half ran to a waiting Jeep.

The engine responded immediately. Osuna spun the wheel and headed for an appointment with Carlos Mendoza, as nasty a piece of work as you were ever likely to meet. At this moment he was under arrest for killing jaguars, ocelots and margays and selling their spotted skins. A murderer, gun-runner and drug smuggler.

Osuna must take him into custody but clever lawyers, themselves as crooked as criminals, had always managed to save Mendoza's neck. Sometimes Osuna wondered whether it was worth trying to enforce the law.

On his left, like floating flower petals, a dazzle of butterflies danced. Red dust spurted from the Jeep's humming tyres. Osuna swerved. An armadillo scuttled across the road. This place belonged to the old jungle inhabitants,

not to modern men and cars. Osuna had inherited a love of the natural world from his father and was passing it on to his own children. He found himself whistling, entranced by the forest's magic tune--whoops, howls, screeches, chirrups, twitters that rose and fell amid the unending green.

A gentle wind unravelled the last of the mist from the branches of tall trees, some soaring nearly 200 feet.

Suddenly darkness enveloped him. He looked up. His cheerful mood evaporated. High above, casting exaggerated shadows, vultures circled on eight-foot wings. Watchful scavengers, never far from the dead or those about to die.

His mind returned to Mendoza and the animal skins. The Amazon's pretty little ocelots and still smaller margays face possible extinction--a threat hunters repeatedly level at jaguars, the top cats here. Brawnier than leopards, swift, cunning, power-packed. One blow from a paw, so soft while stalking, could smash a man's skull, bring down an ox. A jaguar might attack any animal, however large, and drag it through dense undergrowth for a mile to share the feast with mate and cubs.

They're crafty fishermen, too. Sitting on a log, a jaguar taps the water lightly with his tail--a plop like the sound of falling fruit or insects. Expectant fish rise to the bait. A flash and slash of claws, and he has hooked a scaly snack.

It is also said that he can imitate the voices of almost all the forest creatures, luring them into a trap.

King Jaguar. You paid him respect. Men who hadn't, had died or been maimed. Some who survived tell of being paralysed with fear, nailed to the spot by the golden spikes of his eyes.

At night his reverberating roar, a coughing "Uh-uh-uh-uh-uh", rings faster and faster, louder and louder up to a thunderous climax which fades into muted grunts. When the jaguar speaks, other beings tend to fall silent.

The Jeep sped on in the mounting heat. Miles to go before Osuna reached the makeshift wooden jail where Mendoza was held prisoner.

On the road in front he saw a mushrooming puff of red dust. A lorry swayed towards him. He heard the tinny blare of pop music and a jeering chorus of shouts. Miners? Lumberjacks? Probably drunk after an all-night binge in one of the local settlements.

Passing them, Osuna glanced at the driver and the other men in the lorry. All wore the same mindless expression. But why were they shouting insults?

Then he noticed a group of Amazon Indians standing dejectedly by the roadside. A man, woman and child, nearly naked. Thrown off their land, he guessed, by "superior" white men. South American governments have insisted they need the money from timber, farming and mining. Trees are felled to make luxury furniture and paper; to clear space for cattle that will be turned into hamburgers; to open up the deposits of tin, iron, diamonds. In thirty years this whole vast primeval forest could be reduced to a bald wasteland.

Osuna knew what so-called civilised people had done to the Indians--and he felt ashamed. In Columbus's day there were nine million Amazonian Indians. Over the centuries they have been poisoned, bombed, shot and struck down by deliberately-introduced diseases against which they have no resistance. Now there are fewer than 200,000. Much of the remnant population has retreated to

remote corners of the jungle or ended up in squalid city slums.

Osuna ground his teeth. He couldn't help comparing the Indians, dignified even in defeat, with the lorry-load of rowdy drunks. If either were savages, it wasn't the Indians. They are the only ones who understand the forest, treat it with respect, harvest its treasures wisely. They know the secrets of the plants that can be used for food and medicine. The rain forest is sacred to them. They believe it holds up the sky.

Beautiful, dangerous, mysterious. A hundred million years it has stood. Osuna's reverence was akin to the Indians.

In there, steeped in a stagnant and steamy atmosphere, you imagined you had travelled back to the beginning of the world. In there live iguanas, like scaled-down prehistoric monsters; brash gangs of parrots; slow, upside-down sloths; grotesque vampire bats; tiny monkeys, three inches high, chirping like birds; frogs that can secrete enough poison to kill 2,000 people; spiders with leg-spans of more than ten inches; army ants advancing in foot-wide, mile-long columns, flanked by officers, eating everything in their path; twenty-stone tapirs which look part pig, part horse, part elephant. In there too flourish flowers of every shape, size and hue--such as orchids--and bamboos sprouting 65-foot leaves, and plants with marvellous medical properties. And the Amazon itself, mightiest of all rivers, is home to no less an exotic array of species. Thirty-foot snakes, electric eels that can shock the life out of you, three-foot lizards walking on water, sting-rays, massive alligators typified by stitched teeth until the jaws yawn and snap, dragonflies hovering on seven-inch wings, shoals of savage fish that are capable of stripping a body to the bone in minutes ...

The Jeep lurched as it hit a pothole, jolting Osuna's thoughts back to his assignment. Not long now.

He double-checked the safety-catch on his revolver and patted the pocket which contained the warrant for Mendoza.

Shadows fell over Osuna again. More vultures. Despite the warmth, he shivered. The jail was in sight at last.

Slowing the Jeep, he drew up at the wooden shack. Seconds later a man in uniform led out the handcuffed prisoner. Osuna showed his papers, and the two law officers exchanged a few words. Then, with evident relief, the other officer handed over Mendoza. He looked every inch the villain he was, his brutal air emphasised by a scarred cheek and murderous eyes.

Saying nothing, Osuna guided his charge to the Jeep. He chained Mendoza to a fixed metal bar beside the driver's seat - and began the return journey.

They were about four miles from the jail when Mendoza doubled up, clutching his stomach. Osuna immediately suspected a trick, but Mendoza kept on groaning. He blurted that he was in agony, had to vomit. Still wary, Osuna pulled off the road and on to a clear patch by the river. With a warning that he would shoot Mendoza if he tried to escape, Osuna unlocked the handcuffs.

The prisoner stumbled out, heaving. He took two or three steps before collapsing on his back. Osuna loosened the revolver in its holster--he wasn't going to be fooled. A minute passed, and Mendoza remained motionless. Osuna leaned over him.

Like lightning, Mendoza's hand snaked to his boot. A knife flashed. He stabbed once, twice, three times. Osuna reeled backwards, blood welling between the

fingers he held to his chest. Mendoza seized the revolver. He kicked Osuna, rolling him to the river's edge. As he entered the water, close to death, Miguel Osuna's last thoughts were of his family.

Mercifully he did not feel the razor teeth of the seething piranhas that would soon reduce him to a skeleton.

Aboard Sea Shepherd the days slipped smoothly by, like the ocean. The youngsters had settled down to a regular routine: sleep, food, lessons, emergency drills, experiments in the ship's laboratories--and always some fun. Friendships deepened, but Darren remained the outsider.

Gary and Susan still talked about the time they had seen him leaving the radio room, and they hadn't forgotten the ticking off from Leslie Curtis. But neither of them mentioned the incident to anybody else. Since then Curtis had gone out of his way to be pleasant. He even apologised for speaking sharply, explaining that he had been busy and harassed. Darren too seemed to be making an effort. It was quite a surprise when he greeted Gary with a mumbled "Hello" on deck.

Although puzzled by the radio room affair, Gary thought little of it. Not so Susan. She wasn't one to bear a grudge, and had accepted Curtis's apology; but however hard she tried, she just could not bring herself to like the man. She didn't trust him either. His switched-on smile and strained good humour made her wince.

Now the students were crowding eagerly into Sea Shepherd's main laboratory.
9mid-sentence

They goggled ... weird and multicoloured specimens in tanks, underwater viewing windows, microscopes, purring machines, boffins wearing long white coats.

Ben beckoned Yves and Vanessa, who appeared more interested in each other than in what he was saying. "Take a look at this." He lifted the lid of a huge tank. All the youngsters pressed forward. "We caught that yesterday," Bellingham added. "Anyone tell me what it is?"

Norman's answer was blotted out by a loud exclamation from the naturalist. "Don't touch!" He grabbed Yves' wrist. "If that thing stings you, you'll be hopping up and down for a week. More than one swimmer has been stung to death by a Portuguese man-of-war."

They all stared at the foot-long, bright-blue body with its yards of tentacles. "The blue bit is a gas-filled float," Bellingham told them, "and the long poisonous tentacles are for fishing. There are two shorter sets of tentacles--one used to digest food, the other in reproduction. Actually it's not a single creature but hundreds working together."

Then, unexpectedly, the normally silent Darren asked: "Why's it called a Portuguese man-of-war?"

"Good question," Ben replied. "See the sail on top of the float? It reminded old-time mariners of the Portuguese man-of-war sailing ship."

Norman spoke up again, contributing the information that a gaudy little fish named Nomeus lives among the tentacles, immune to their sting, and shares its host's food. Ben confirmed this. "But if the fish is wounded, it too gets eaten. By the way, there's just one other animal which dares to tangle with the Portuguese man-of-war--that's the loggerhead turtle. I've seen a turtle,

its eyes swollen shut from stings, munching away at its attacker as if it were a salad."

Next their attention turned to a row of large jars. The faces leering back at them through the glass resembled something out of science fiction. Susan felt her flesh creep, and moved closer to Gary. Pickled in alcohol were the grisly remains of carnivorous creatures from the "abyss"--the darkest deepest realms of the sea. Creatures that were never meant to see the day. Some were snake-like, others round as plates, most had long needle-sharp teeth and mouths that were enormous compared with their bodies.

In the eternal night of the abyss, certain inhabitants are blind. But many are equipped with bulging eyes or wear luminous spots. This light attracts their food and their mates. Sometimes sailors find strange corpses floating on the waves--fish swept up from the deep, possibly by an underwater eruption. Often they burst as they rise to the surface. The gases in their bodies expand when the pressure is reduced. "Down there, the pressure is thousands of times greater than on the surface." Ben's audience was spellbound.

"The underwater world has hardly been charted--less so than the moon. We know startlingly little about the 310 million cubic miles of ocean covering seven-tenths of the globe."

He went on to describe some of the marvels man had discovered: mountains to match Everest, valleys that would swallow the Grand Canyon six times over, plains carpeted in 12,000 feet of mud.

"The sea's average depth is 2½ miles, but in places it is seven miles. These trenches, unchanged for millions of years, each contain unique life forms. And that's where governments want to dump toxic chemicals and radioactive waste!"

Bellingham looked heavenwards.

After responding to their comments, he ushered the youngsters out.

A few minutes later Ben joined Captain James Alexander on Sea Shepherd's bridge to discuss the next day's schedule. They were soon so engrossed that they didn't spot Curtis hovering in the background.

When Alexander caught sight of the radio officer he broke off in mid-sentence ... Alexander:

"Yes, Leslie?"

"Message for you, Captain."

Alexander scanned the paper he was handed. "Dammit! What are they playing at?"

Bellingham cocked an inquiring eyebrow.

The captain took his arm. "Better come with me, Ben. This affects you too."

In the radio room, Bellingham struggled to keep a straight face. Mild-mannered Alexander could be very outspoken at times--as someone at the other end of the radio already knew. That someone was Sir Charles Fotheringay, chairman of the Conservation Committee in London.

Alexander's tone conveyed a mixture of irritation and disbelief: "Let's get this straight, Sir Charles. You want to fly out a security specialist ... not

even a navy man ... to protect us on the voyage. From what? Think we're going to be mugged by a sea monster? I'm master of this ship, responsible for safety. I don't need help--particularly from intruders."

Sir Charles sighed. The sound was quite audible over the radio. He respected Alexander, a first-rate captain. If only he weren't so stubborn. "Look, Jim. The committee has heard rumours, nothing definite, that certain commercial groups are set on thwarting The Eden Mission. And they may not be too fussy about how they do it ..."

Alexander: "Sabotage, you mean?"

Fotheringay: "It's possible. So we mustn't take any chances, must we? Hence the security man. He's ex-SAS, a top operator. I can personally vouch for him. Incidentally, I gather you've got young Vanessa Pilgrim on board. Her father is Leonard Pilgrim, the financier, a prominent member of the committee who has been extremely generous to the conservation cause."

Alexander glanced quickly at Bellingham.

Fotheringay added: "I hope you'll co-operate, Jim. Otherwise the students and teachers will have to come home ..."

Up on deck, Susan pointed in delight. "Oh ... how lovely! Dolphins!" Gary, Norman, Vanessa and Yves followed her as she ran. Riding the ship's bow wave were a dozen or more of them--black with white chins, chests and bellies, bands of grey and yellow on the flanks. Water sprayed from their long beaks and dorsal fins as these enchanting acrobats arced through the air.

"Delphinus delphis," Norman observed, "the common dolphin. One of the whale family."

Susan hung over the ship's rail. "They're jumping for joy." Her blue eyes danced.

"Not really," corrected Norman. "It's a way of saving energy."

For a moment Susan contemplated pushing him overboard. Know-all!

Gary put his arm round her waist. "Super, aren't they? Shame so many have to die. Drowned in tuna nets, hunted for food, killed to stop them eating fish."

Vanessa chipped in: "We studied dolphins at school. They're supposed to be very kind to each other--especially if one's in distress--and they've been known to save swimmers from drowning ... What do you think, Yves?"

Yves went on watching the acrobatics display. "Wish I knew more about them. All I remember is dolphins can sleep with one eye open, and they get stomach ulcers if they worry."

Susan, speaking up for Norman's benefit, announced: "A dolphin's brain weighs 1,700 grammes, 250 more than a human's. Some scientists claim dolphins are at least as intelligent and ethical as we are."

She waited, hoping Norman would react. He did: "I doubt it."

Instantly Susan retorted: "Well, Norman, obviously no animal could be as brainy as you ..."

Meanwhile, in the radio room, Alexander and Bellingham concluded a hasty

conference. Ben considered it wise to have a security specialist aboard. Alexander grudgingly agreed that it couldn't do any harm, and contacted London. "You win, Sir Charles. But I expect everyone on Sea Shepherd to obey my orders. When does he arrive?"

The unseen Fotheringay grinned wolfishly. "Thank you, Jim. Johnny Masterson was flown in to the Azores today. He'll be helicoptered out to you by late afternoon."

A cabin was prepared for the new passenger, whose coming presence caused lively speculation throughout the ship.

On his way back from checking the helicopter landing pad, First Officer Philip Grant bumped into a startled Curtis and Darren as they emerged from behind a lifeboat. The pair had been lost in conversation.

Grant walked on. He thought about the radio officer, not an easy person to get to know. Still, Curtis seemed to have made a friend in that boy--and, by all accounts, Darren was a bit of a loner. So it was good the two hit it off. Grant rubbed his cheek, cold and wet. A gusty wind was snatching handfuls of white from the wave-tops and herding clouds across the sombre sky. Rough weather ahead?

In the next hour the sea grew surlier. The ship began to pitch and roll. Susan, never the best of sailors, retired to her bunk. Vanessa visited the cabin. She was sympathetic, covering Susan with an extra blanket and giving her an anti-seasickness pill. When she was sure Susan was as comfortable as possible, Vanessa left. First, though, she put on an anorak.

Susan missed the excitement of Johnny Masterson's arrival. But the others gathered to see the helicopter clattering out of the gloom. For several minutes it hung in the air, like an indecisive insect. Too risky to land, the pilot must have judged.

The spectators craned their necks, then cheered as Masterson appeared, a kit bag over his shoulder, and was winched down on to the deck.

Vanessa eyed the newcomer approvingly: tall, dark, rugged. Noting her expression, Yves regarded Masterson with less enthusiasm. But he had to admit there was something instantly likeable about the man, something strong and reassuring.

The helicopter departed.

Captain Alexander shook Johnny's hand, and First Officer Grant showed him to his quarters.

Ben Bellingham was absent from the welcoming party, busy with grimmer matters. Satellite bulletins from around the world indicated that The Eden Mission was running into trouble. Various conservation teams reported the loss of movie cameras, a near-fatal mishap to two divers when their breathing apparatus failed, unexplained fires on boats and in observation huts ... Accidents? Some, maybe. But surely not all.

That evening, on the bridge, Bellingham voiced his misgivings to Alexander. The captain nodded gravely. Perhaps Masterson would prove useful.

As Alexander went off duty he noticed the bobbing flicker of ships' lights far to port and starboard.

Sea Shepherd ploughed on towards Miami.

4. All ashore

Susan opened her arms, as if to greet a long-lost friend. The sun had returned--not the half-hearted, hide-and-peek sun of recent weeks. No, this was the real thing, pure gold pouring out of a perfect sky. She felt the warmth seeping deep into her skin.

Slowly the shore floated forward to meet them, or so it seemed. Miami! Without asking, she helped herself to the binoculars hanging round Gary's neck. Fumbling, she adjusted the focus. She wanted to see everything.

Susan gave a little grunt of pleasure: white sand, palm trees, high hotels whose reflecting windows signalled like lighthouses, elegant yachts leaning on the wind and combing creamily through the smooth blue water.

Blue! The sea was so blue! Travel brochure-blue. Susan gazed in wonder. Could this be the same Atlantic whose grey-green waves had made her stomach churn and driven her into her bunk?

She handed back Gary's binoculars. Both were shading their eyes. The sun shone everywhere, from above and from below, sparking silver on the water, teeming and gleaming like a shoal of surfacing fish ...

"Warm enough for you?" Ben Bellingham stood between them. "Temperature's in the nineties on the mainland."

They chatted for a minute or two. "Look, there's a pelican." Ben pointed. "A brown pelican, quite common around the Florida coast. People love watching their antics."

The big bird, which reminded Gary of a pterodactyl, was making a reconnaissance flight parallel to Sea Shepherd. Suddenly the pelican plunged. A splash, a quick gobbling movement, and another fat fish was stored away in the bird's expandable throat pouch.

"Pelicans use their elastic bills as scoop-nets," Ben explained. "And they vary the height of their dive depending on the depth of the fish. Eat two pounds a day, those fellas, a quarter of their body weight."

The bird came in to land on an old jetty. Now it looked clumsy, swaying and teetering down invisible steps to alight on flat webbed feet. Soon after, a dishevelled chick was rummaging in the adult's beak.

"Must have a nest nearby," commented Bellingham. He shook himself. "Well, gotta be going. I'll see you again before we disembark. By the way, better alter your watches--it's 9#10 local time, five hours behind England."

The bear-like naturalist shambled away. To think Susan had once felt shy, almost frightened of meeting him!

She sensed, rather than saw, a new presence and peeked sideways. It was Yves. He was draped over the ship's rail and looked about as happy as someone being seasick. Why so glum?

Susan's eyes took in the scene farther along the deck. Ah, that was it. Vanessa. Wearing a polka-dot sun-suit that showed off her slender figure and shapely legs. Talking to Johnny Masterson, the handsome he-man security officer, in khaki shirt and shorts. Obviously enjoying themselves. Poor Yves!

The pelican had resumed its patrol. Susan inched nearer to Yves. "Hello," she said lightly. "See the pelican? Betcha it catches something in a minute?" Yves lifted his head. Immediately the pelican obliged with a spectacular swoop. "Told you, didn't I?" Susan chirped.

Yves feigned interest, but his face let him down. Susan switched her gaze from the bird to Yves, from Yves to Vanessa, and back to Yves. The pelican flapped off. "Never mind," she murmured, "there are plenty more fish in the sea."

By now a pilot had come aboard and was guiding the ship into Biscayne Bay, Miami's huge harbour where the water traffic never stops.

Gary found ports irresistible: the sights, the sounds, the smells. Sniffing the salty sunshiny air, he revelled in a constantly changing panorama. Ships everywhere--arriving, departing, resting--flying a rainbow range of flags. Vessels from the seven seas. Tugs busybodied back and forth, clearing their throats self-importantly. Lines of luxury cruisers, tethered side by side, nuzzled and nudged in the soft swell. Contentedly Gary listened to the chorus of ships' horns ... mooing, bleating, catcalling.

A speedboat tore across the harbour in a flurry of foam. Another craft, slightly larger, charged after it. Gary watched.

On Sea Shepherd's bridge the pilot ceased chewing to observe:

"Drug boat. Being chased by Customs."

Captain Alexander spilt his coffee.

"Yeah," continued the pilot. "Welcome to Miami! Cocaine capital of the USA." He scowled. "Drug smuggling is Florida's number one industry, worth billions of dollars a year. I used to like living here. Not any more ..."

Alexander was all ears.

The pilot grumbled on, warming to his subject. Corrupt politicians and police as well as drug barons were growing rich from the illegal trade. Cocaine, processed in secret Amazon jungle laboratories, was flown or shipped out of Peru, Colombia and Bolivia. Often it reached Miami via the neighbouring Bahamas. A highly organized network, including "respectable" businessmen in both North and South America, ensures that the flow of cocaine never dries up.

"You can't trust anyone these days," the pilot concluded, "the world's gone money-mad."

What happened next brought a gasp from Alexander. A tug towing a tanker had shed its line, and the bulky vessel was veering round out of control. The pilot cursed. "She'll hit us for sure!"

Alexander's brain raced. He barked orders. Engines pounded.

The drifting ship loomed. There was some swift and skilful manoeuvring as Sea Shepherd took evasive action. In time? No ... Yes ... Just! Disaster averted by seconds.

The pilot thumped Alexander on the back. "Damn tanker coulda wrecked us. That tug-boat skipper better be a good talker."

Around Biscayne Bay many had witnessed the near collision. But none paid more attention than the man in the cockpit of a red seaplane. Now his curled lip registered contempt, frustration. He spoke rapidly into a radio. The aircraft taxied for take off; built up speed; then, as if the water were glue, finally wrenched itself free to gain altitude. Next stop: Houston, Texas.

Sea Shepherd started to sidle up to the quay. In the lecture hall, Bellingham addressed the assembled party.

"Our young conservationists will be assigned to project groups. We have a great deal to do and time is tight, so I'll need complete co-operation from all of you."

The ship would serve as a moored hotel. But when field-work took teams too far from Miami, they would stay in alternative accommodation.

Ben Bellingham made his last remarks to the youngsters, telling them it was vital to stick with their team-leaders. "Not least because there are some people about who oppose The Eden Mission ..."

Three million acres of squelchy marshland, under which an inches-deep river oozes to the sea. It doesn't sound very appealing. It doesn't look very appealing on the map. Yet, as Susan was soon to discover first hand, the Florida Everglades is a kind of paradise.

Sitting in a hut with the others--Norman, Darren, Maude Mimpriss and Johnny Masterson--Susan wriggled her toes impatiently. The wildlife warden's lecture was interesting enough, but she could hardly wait to get out and explore for herself.

Susan only half heard the warden's words, her imagination already running free ... Alligators basking on banks or staying submerged away from the midday sun, or bellowing in the mating season to attract females and warn off rival males. Aristocratic bald eagles whose nests could be 9« feet across, twenty feet deep and weigh more than three tons. Ospreys crashing down from the blue to hook fish on their talons. Venomous water snakes. Finicky racoons, with black rings under their eyes as though they'd had too many late nights, washing their food thoroughly before eating it. Rare Florida pumas, fewer than thirty left. And, of course, the threatened manatees which naturalists are fighting to safeguard ...

"Any questions?" The warden's gravelly voice. Susan blinked, hoping he hadn't noticed her daydreaming.

Relieved, she heard Norman ask: "Are there lots of conservation problems?"

The warden stuck his thumbs in his belt. "Yup. Plenty."

He drew their attention to the map on the wall behind him. "The shaded area at the bottom is a National Park, a wildlife sanctuary. But the rest of the Everglades, the bigger part, is unguarded." Men have wrought havoc there--draining the land for farming, industry, holiday homes and leaving a legacy of pesticides and pollution. Fires sometimes rage on the parched earth. And more and more animals are being killed in traffic accidents. "Alligator Alley, a 75-mile road that traverses the Everglades north of Miami, is a potential death-trap to any creature unwise enough to cross it."

Then he added: "Even here, drug smugglers operate. Guys landing in private planes, full of the stuff, where they can't be seen."

He hitched up his trousers. "We're gonna change all that, clean the place up."

The warden outlined a multi-million-dollar, government-sponsored plan to restore the Everglades to their former wild wet splendour. The plan includes re-flooding thousands of acres and building a special highway--with underpasses just for the pumas!

"People will be paid well when they have to move. Some of 'em hate the idea. They'll try to make it tough for us. But, heck, we'll win."

Miss Mimpriss put on her sun-hat--which made her look like an overgrown baby, Susan thought. Mimpriss led the visitors outside.

Their two-day tour of the Everglades was beginning.

Later the memories would be mounted like snapshots in Susan's mind. But now events moved as fast as an adventure film.

First there was the trip on an airboat, beyond the Park boundaries. A real Red Indian, a Miccosukee from the local reservation, helped them aboard the flat-bottomed craft. Although he wore a check shirt, jeans and sneakers, Susan had a fleeting vision of him proudly riding a bare-backed pony across a great plain browsed by huge herds of buffalo. What days those must have been ...!

A piercing shriek brought back the present. Maude Mimpriss had somehow managed to lose her footing and get her feet wet. Susan was racked by giggles, which set Norman off. Even dour Darren sniggered. The youngsters took their places at the front of the boat. Johnny Masterson sat behind them, trying to console a damp and displeased teacher.

The Indian, perched high in the stern, started the aero-engine whose powerful propeller blast would blow them like the wind over the shallow water.

With a roar and a whoosh they were under way!

Hair streaming, Susan stared ahead. The marshy landscape rushed towards her, then passed in a dizzying blur. Reeds fell back as if scared by the boat's bullying approach. She was tempted to reach out and touch them, but she knew they could cut her hands badly.

On impulse, Susan swivelled round--and saw Miss Mimpriss squirm. A little green lizard, flung up from the water, was scrabbling for a hold on her bare arm. The startled teacher let go of her sun-hat. It flew away like a paper bag in a gale. She was not having a good day!

The boat slowed and with it the sliding scenery: trees, islands, stretches of dry ground.

A deer showed its face for a second, then its tail, then vanished. The Indian cut the engine. Nearby, alighting ducks skidded across the shiny surface like water-skiers. And great white herons stalked the shallows, gulping and guzzling molluscs.

Turning carefully, Susan surveyed this strangely enchanted wilderness through binoculars. A roseate spoonbill! Wow! Tall and stately, white head, body beautifully tinted pink and red, waggling its broad grey bill in the mud and water until touch told it to snap shut on shrimps or fish. How could people have hunted such birds, just to make fans from their wings?

A sudden growl--the boat's engine leapt to life. Off again. Though she couldn't see them, Susan imagined the cold coils of water snakes winding and unwinding in a remote mangrove swamp ...

Someone, something touched her. She flinched, as if she'd been bitten. "Norman!" He grinned behind those familiar glasses. Meant no harm. Just being friendly, sharing his pleasure in today's excursion.

Up ahead Susan spotted a falcon. Yes ... a peregrine falcon, beginning its deadly dive, unerring as a guillotine. She pitied the doomed prey. Gary was nuts about peregrines. Why wasn't he here now, instead of with another team? She missed him. Still, they'd be together before long.

The Indian switched off the noisy engine, letting the boat drift along a channel of deeper water. He pointed. Two alligators, one making a meal of a green turtle. Susan looked away. Norman reached for his camera.

Of all those on board, only Susan noticed they were not alone. A second airboat had silently appeared. Standing in the bow was a man with a video camera. He seemed to be filming them, not the wildlife. Odd. For some reason, Susan felt uneasy ...

Abruptly the other airboat powered off, disturbing the alligators. The Sea Shepherd party headed back to base--and a late lunch--soon after.

Now for the next Everglades experience: puma tracking. Susan knew Norman could hardly wait, and she assumed Darren was equally keen. But, of course, he hadn't said so. If only Darren would speak ... Susan sensed that he wanted to, but something was stopping him.

Maude Mimpriss displayed no enthusiasm for pumas. She didn't care that they were endangered. What about her? She was clearly nervous of coming within a mile of the carnivorous cats--which measure five feet if you don't add on their thick, twitching tails. Then Johnny Masterson promised to protect her, and she bravely agreed to accompany the group.

She needn't have worried. Nobody saw so much as a whisker of the cats. Not even the naturalists who were keeping an eye, or rather an ear, on them through radio receivers. Bouncing along in a Jeep, Susan and the others heard how the pumas were tranquillised with drugged darts before being fitted with radio collars. Afterwards they could be tracked on the ground and from the air. Susan longed to catch just a glimpse ...

That evening, she yawned her way through supper in Sea Shepherd's dining-room. What a day! Sleepily Susan said goodnight and shuffled to the cabin. She'd have it to herself until Vanessa and company returned. Vanessa was quite nice--very nice, really. Funny how people grow on you. Susan gave her teeth the briefest of brushings, slipped into her night things and flopped down on the bunk. Soon be seeing Gary.

In her jumbled dreams, the man with the video camera stuck out his tongue. Suddenly it became a snake. The picture haunted her when she woke. But a bright new morning--plus a packed programme--banished gloomy thoughts.

Within two hours Susan was enjoying the view from an observation platform above the Everglades National Park. Open-mouthed she watched an osprey in action. Claws dug deep into his captured prize, the dripping fish-hawk struggled skywards. Not far off, his mate and ravenous chicks waited restlessly in a leaf-lined nest the size of a double bed.

The warden beside Susan chuckled. "Worth coming, uh?" She nodded. "See how he holds the fish's head forwards," said the warden. "To reduce air resistance."

Then, out of nowhere, an enormous white-helmeted bald eagle burst on to the scene. "Hey, that's not fair!" Susan exclaimed. "He's pinched the osprey's fish!"

Norman protested too. The warden shrugged. "Sorry to say America's national bird--our emblem--is a lazy, bad-tempered bandit."

But soon Susan was cheering. Undeterred, the osprey had plummeted again--splashed, struck, and ferried the catch safely home. His mate tore it into strips and fed the young.

Norman and Susan asked the warden for more information. "Sure! Ospreys occasionally drown when they sink their talons into big fish and are pulled under ... they build their nests high to try to foil egg-thieving rats and racoons ... and they were once almost wiped out by pesticides.

"DDT was the culprit, sprayed on marshes to control mosquitoes. It led to the ospreys laying thin-shelled eggs which wouldn't hatch. The pesticide doesn't dissolve in water but concentrates in fatty tissues. Microscopic organisms absorb it, then plants, then the fish that eat them and so on. At each stage of the food chain, the effect multiplies dramatically. The DDT dose in ospreys was 100 million times greater than in the water ..."

Reluctantly the youngsters left, boarded a boat and set out to search for manatees. Would the shy aquatic mammals show themselves? The guide promised nothing. But in the late afternoon, a bristly grey head popped up amid some weeds. Susan nearly fell overboard. It was so ...ugly!

Never win a beauty contest--that's for sure, Gary decided. He was peering down from an anchored launch 250 miles away. The manatee, which had surfaced for air, promptly submerged into the clear green waters of Crystal River. Gary felt slightly embarrassed, as though the unlovely beast could read his thoughts. Besides, looks aren't everything--and Gary had grown quite fond of manatees in the last couple of days while working with Ben Bellingham's group.

Has Susan seen one yet? he wondered. If not, how would he describe it to her? An overstuffed, ten-foot-long sausage with flippers and a flat tail. Beady-eyed, snub-nosed, hare-lipped, moustached, no external ears, no front teeth, forever feeding its funny face. A 2,000-pound specimen will tuck away as much as 200 pounds of water plants each day. Elephant-coloured, it belonged to jumbo's tribe, so scientists said.

Were these the animals that sailors, including Christopher Columbus, had called mermaids? Must've needed their eyes tested. Gary could find no resemblance whatever between a manatee--helpless on land--and a seductive creature, half woman, half fish, sitting on a rock combing her hair and suckling a child. Other mariners had referred to manatees as sirens--sweet-singing temptresses who lured ships to destruction. Again, hard to imagine, since manatees can only squeak and croak. But even now, they are officially classified as "Sirenians". Maybe mermaid legends came about because the female of the species sometimes sits up in the water with a nursing calf supported by her flipper ...

Gary stretched. He'd got a lot to tell Susan. Yesterday morning Gary and the team had helped save a "mermaid" from dying. At least, he hoped so. With the Florida Marine Patrol, they had gone to the aid of an injured mother manatee

off the coast. Blood was gushing from deep gashes in her back, caused by a speedboat propeller. If she died, the baby swimming beside her would perish too.

Four men succeeded in netting her; the calf was caught by hand. A crane hoisted the haemorrhaging manatee on to a stretcher. While a biologist gave her antibiotics injections, Yves and Vanessa bathed the wounds. Gary noted approvingly that Vanessa wasn't squeamish, and he was glad that she and Yves were good friends again. Before long, mother and baby had been lifted into a truck--bound for an oceanarium. There, with luck, they would both survive and thrive.

"I've seen worse," said the biologist. "A head blow ... fatal. And a ship's propeller could have cut her almost in half."

Throughout that day the marine patrol performed more rescues. Two young bullies in a boat were found tormenting a manatee calf with metal poles. As soon as they sighted the patrol, the youths jettisoned the evidence of their cruelty and tried to act innocent. But they'd been photographed. No escaping a stiff fine. "Serves 'em right!" Gary had muttered as their boat was towed to shore.

Later, in a quiet estuary, the patrol surprised a poacher intent on killing his cornered victim. The man got away, but so did the manatee.

Gary, Vanessa and Yves were learning a good deal about manatees, also known as sea cows. They have suffered severely at human hands. Hunted for meat, oil and hides, they make easy targets. Only three species--the Caribbean, the West African and the South American River Manatee--still exist; as well as the closely related dugong, which inhabits the Indo-Pacific region. All are in decline. One of their kin, a 24-ton giant named Steller's Sea Cow, was discovered in 1742 when Russian navigator Captain Vitus Bering was exploring what is now the Bering Sea. Just 27 years later, the whole population had been slaughtered--Steller's Sea Cow gone for ever.

"Florida has a thousand or so manatees. We intend to look after them ..."

The biologist's words came back to Gary next day, aboard the anchored launch in Crystal River. Everybody here sought to save manatees, but it was no easy task. These vulnerable creatures face a variety of hazards. Pollution, dredging and waterside building developments rob them of their food supply; drainage schemes destroy their habitat; canal locks can trap them. They may also die from drowning or starvation when flippers become entangled in crab-pot lines.

Gary picked his way across the launch's deck and went below. Through the boat's glass bottom he kept watch on four manatees snoozing by a warm-water spring that bubbled from the river bed. A big male rolled over for a scratch. A calf woke its mother to play and hitch a ride upwards for another breath. Mermaids or not, they weren't short of charm.

Gary returned to the deck. Ben Bellingham stood alone several yards away. He had been unusually subdued lately, worried and withdrawn. What was bothering him? Gary guessed, correctly ... The Eden Mission and its enemies.

5. Sharks

Gloria Benton closed the sliding glass door and tip-tapped to the balcony's edge. Kicking off her high-heeled shoes, she inhaled deeply and gazed out over the prosperous city of Houston. Phew! She needed a break from the angry men in

the smoke-filled apartment behind her. Art, her husband, had lost his temper. And so had more than one of his business associates, gathered for a hastily called meeting. She didn't understand what was going on. But if it caused Art to shout, it must be serious.

Indoors, Maximilian Kruger pointed an accusing finger at Benton. "You told me we had nothing to fear from The Eden Mission, said it was no match for the organization. Why are these do-gooders still nosing around, stirring things up, spoiling trade? It's time they were squashed."

A fat Brazilian cocaine-dealer named Gomez echoed the German's sentiments: "Yeah. Stop pussyfooting, get rid of the snoopers for keeps."

Benton's knuckles went white as he fought to take a grip of himself. "We've gotta be careful," he warned. "Look, this is a global game, spreading as far south as Antarctica. The organization holds all the high cards. It's playing them one by one, and it's winning. Our people are everywhere--even in the ecologists' camp--watching, reporting, telling us where and when to strike next. There's no way we can lose."

Be patient, he urged Gomez, reminding him of future assaults on the conservation movement.

Gomez remained unconvinced. Sneering, he referred to the bungled collision attempt in Miami harbour.

Benton's control snapped. He banged the arm of his chair. "OK, the crash failed. What do you suggest--blow up the ship?"

"Sounds good to me," Gomez retorted.

Benton smiled mirthlessly. "Great! Make heroes of the creeps ... all those dead kids ... bring the press and police swarming like flies. Just what the organization needs! The Eden Mission is attracting enough publicity already."

He added in a calmer tone: "And remember, not everyone on board is Bellingham's ally."

Gomez dropped the argument, but Kruger took it up. Benton gritted his teeth.

When Kruger had finished, Benton replied quietly: "Please listen to reason, Max. We've got the money, the power, the spies, the muscle. The conservationists don't know what's hitting 'em, and nobody can prove a thing against the organization. Let's keep it that way. If we have to get really rough, we will. Believe me."

However, Kruger still wasn't satisfied, and a Japanese businessman made further objections.

Benton passed Kruger an ashtray. "The Director has given specific instructions. Do you want to oppose his wishes?"

A hush descended on the meeting. Benton waited. "Right, we'll vote. Those in favour of pursuing the present policy raise your hands."

All but Kruger responded. Benton glanced at the German. "I'm sure Max will abide by the majority decision," he purred.

"WELCOME TO SEA WORLD." Glimpsing the sign, Susan felt her heart skip. Pleasure ... and a thrill and chill of anticipation. How often do you come

face to face with bloodthirsty sharks--even if they're mouthing at the four-inch-thick glass that holds them back in a gigantic aquarium? Scary. A birthday treat to treasure. But what pleased Susan most was the prospect of seeing Gary again.

While the other youngsters criss-crossed Florida on conservation projects, she had been allowed to join her friend for a short visit to Sea World in Orlando. Gary and teachers Peter Stokes and Geoffrey Baggalley were already there, awaiting Susan and Johnny Masterson.

Johnny made some remark, which Susan rather rudely ignored. Her eyes searched the crowd at the pre-arranged meeting point. "There he is!" She broke into a run. "Gary!"

"Hello, Susan...Happy birthday!" To her surprise she was tongue-tied. Both had so much to say, so much news to share, but the words wouldn't come. He's brown, she thought, a tan suits him. Gary was thinking the same of her--the sun had given her skin a honey hue. I've never noticed how pretty she is.

"This is daft!" Susan declared. "Behaving like strangers." She threw her arms round Gary's neck and he hugged her. After that they couldn't stop talking.

Side by side, the three adults following, Gary and Susan set out for the aquarium and a promised "Shark Encounter". An accurate description, as Gary knew, but he wasn't going to tell Susan anything that might spoil the shock.

The friends fell silent. Did she share his vision of triangular fins cutting through the water towards them? Sharks--the perfect predators, lethal lords of the ocean for 300 million years. Fast, streamlined, relentless as homing torpedoes. Some species so aggressive they attack one another in the womb. Born ready for action, each equipped with 24 teeth to tear flesh. Later their fully-grown jaws can exert a pressure of twenty tons per square inch.

Sharks. They fascinated Gary. As a seven-year-old he had seen photographs of them, and ever since had shown a shark-like appetite for any book or film that would tell him more about the big "bad" fish. But not all of the 370 species are big or bad. The smallest measures under three inches, and the largest--the sixty-foot whale shark--is harmless. Though most are cannibals. And a dozen, notably the gruesome great white, are man-eaters ...

A tug at his sleeve. Susan--radiating excitement. "SHARK ENCOUNTER" was straight ahead. With Messrs. Masterson, Baggalley and Stokes close behind, the teenagers went in.

Susan "goose-pimpled". Any moment now! Then, to her disappointment, she discovered she must delay saying a breathless hello to the sharks. First there was an information film to sit through. However, the disappointment didn't last. The pictures and commentary were to cast a spell over Susan--and would nearly put her off swimming in the sea for life ...

Enter the arch-villain, expressionless eyes, two-inch teeth exposed in a cruel crescent sneer, undisputed champion of terror. The great white. No other creature can rival it for sheer ferocity. Nothing but death will halt its headlong charge. A thirty-foot great white strikes with the full force of its 8,000 pounds, ripping chunks from its victims or biting clean through. Its hunger--or greed--seems insatiable. A horse has been found in a great white's belly. Another's contained two seven-foot sharks, and a third the remains of a thirsty elephant which ran into Kenyan coastal waters.

Susan squeezed Gary's hand. Not simply out of affection, he knew, smiling to

himself in the dark.

The film rolled on. For some great whites, apparently, human flesh is top of the menu--an acquired taste they keep trying to satisfy.

Sharks are at their most ravenous when the water temperature reaches 70 degrees Fahrenheit. It's then that they may go on the rampage in a "feeding frenzy", triggered perhaps by bait or entrails dumped overboard from a fishing boat. At such times the sharks' blood-lust knows no bounds as they snap and slash at anything--each other, even a whirling propeller. Any person caught up in this dance of death can only pray for a swift end.

Gary recalled stories he had read of shark attacks, stories he would never tell his soft-hearted friend. Like the night the Nova Scotia, a troop-ship, was sunk off South Africa in 1942. A thousand men perished, and dawn revealed the legless bodies of many of them floating on the surface. And in 1930, spectators at a yacht race in Port Phillip Bay, Australia, watched helplessly as a shark savaged nineteen-year-old Norman Clark. Clark had dived off a pier. He was immediately seized by the shark, which hurled him into the air, bit off his legs and played with him like a cat with a mouse. Finally, tiring of its game, the shark grabbed Clark round the waist and disappeared with him ...

The on-screen drama was as gripping as any thriller. Beside Gary, Susan sat enthralled. A tiger shark produces and sheds 24,000 teeth in ten years, a blue shark can travel at over forty miles an hour, a mako shark will sometimes chase boats and jump on board. Then came the information that sharks will swallow seals, turtles, birds, lobsters, rubbish and coal. Biologists, dissecting one bloated brute, pulled out three overcoats, a car number-plate and a chicken coop ...

Although Susan's enthusiasm would never equal Gary's, she now understood why he was hooked on the fearsome fish. Almost indestructible, even after being disembowelled they are still dangerous, still programmed to attack and kill. A particularly voracious man-eater has established itself in Central America's Lake Nicaragua, migrating from the Caribbean.

They are found everywhere. In warm or cold seas, deep or shallow waters, rivers ... Men, women and children have all fallen victim to those terrible teeth.

Sharks have few enemies: other sharks, swordfish, killer whales - and, of course, man who hunts them for food and sport.

"Just a few more minutes," Gary whispered in Susan's ear. "Then you'll see the real thing."

Suddenly her concentration began to waver. She'd taken in so much--surprising, shocking, sensational. Now her thoughts focused on the waiting aquarium.

Conveniently the screen turned black. The lights rose. Susan stood and breathed out a soundless whistle. Then, dragging Gary with her and unceremoniously treading on toes, she hurried from the cinema. Masterson, Stokes and Baggalley could barely keep up.

Shark Encounter would be everything Susan imagined--and more. Standing on a "people-mover", like a conveyor belt, they travelled slowly along a glass tunnel at the bottom of the aquarium. Surrounded by sharks. Beside you, above you, behind, ahead. You're in their domain. Lemon sharks, sand tigers, bull sharks, brown sharks, nurse sharks--some fierce, some placid--cruising and banking with effortless magnificence through three million litres of man-made

salt water. Well fed, they don't turn on each other. "They're ... beautiful!" Susan exclaimed. Gary obviously agreed. He reminded her that Jaws 3 was filmed here. This caused her to think again of the shark as merciless aggressor. But she still marvelled at its beauty ...

Eventually, dazed and dazzled, Susan emerged into Sea World's sunshine. Crowds of tourists swarmed as thickly as ever. She walked ahead of Gary and the adults, her mind swimming with the sharks. Gary quickened his pace. He drew near ... then choked. A shout stuck in his throat.

Somebody--a swarthy man--had jumped out at Susan and was bundling her off.

Johnny Masterson swore, rushed forward. The kidnapper and the girl were lost in the throng. "Out of my way!" Masterson bellowed. He dodged and weaved between the dawdling visitors, shoved some aside, spied Susan for a second, started to gain ground.

Then Masterson went sprawling. A foot had shot sideways and tripped him. Not caring whose, he was up immediately. Save Susan. No sign of her. Masterson barged on, Gary and the teachers bringing up the rear.

At this point Susan took a hand--her kidnapper's hand--and bit it hard. The man yelped as she wriggled free. He managed to recapture her, but not without difficulty.

Catching sight of them, Masterson put on a final spurt. He vaulted a low wall. They were right in front of him.

As Gary arrived on the scene he saw Masterson's arm lunge--a punch? a chop?--and the swarthy man tumbled backwards. He lay very still, unconscious. Gary stared at Masterson admiringly, and embraced a sobbing Susan.

Curious onlookers began to gather. Masterson bent down and, none too gently, tried to revive the unmoving kidnapper. A uniformed patrolman appeared and wanted to know what had happened. Why was the guy on the ground? Masterson rose and turned to explain. Susan, her nerves now steady, filled in the story.

Left out of things, with only the sheepish-looking teachers for company, Gary glared at the circle of tourists. He vaguely registered a grey car in the background. It was rolling closer. A saloon, its passenger door open. Suspicion sparked in his mind.

The kidnapper had recovered, was on his feet! He dashed through the bystanders like a sprinter. Masterson and the patrolman spun round. The car engine revved. Susan's assailant scrambled into the seat beside the driver. With tyres squealing, the saloon accelerated away--and nobody could stop it.

Several hundred miles to the east, off the Bahamas, a fishing boat's bows breasted the tinsel strips of sunlight strewn like decoration on a calm and cheerful sea. An ideal day for diving. The two men in wet-suits preparing to take the plunge were ecologists, whose boat had been specially adapted for survey duty. With a casual wave to their team-mates the black-clad figures dropped over the side. One carried an underwater camera.

Kicking their flippers and trailing a string of bubbles from their oxygen tanks, the divers descended deeper into a blue-green realm of light and shade and flitting shadows. Around them vivid platoons of fish wheeled and scattered. Below, throbbing with luminous colour, stretched the coral reef. Soon they would find the answer to an important question.

On the silver-streaked surface the boat swayed lazily, but those aboard were far from idle. Like the exploring frogmen, they too had only one concern: the coral reef. In the wheel-house, three conservationists pored over maps and charts whose dark markings represented ruined reefs around the world. The thought of it made the experts fume. Coral collecting for the souvenir trade, mining for construction material, pollution, nuclear testing ... all agents of death among these living masterpieces. Reefs support a third of fish species, guard the land from erosion--and are more breathtaking than any work of art. Leaving the wheel-house, the naturalists went to help colleagues who were busy in other parts of the boat. Every mind pictured what was happening eighty feet beneath the water ...

The leading diver gestured to his partner. Yes, the reef had been raided by coral hunters--a discarded net bag was evidence of that. The second man closed in with his camera. Farther on, the swimming investigators found traces of chemical and sewage pollution. Then they came upon a desert-like tract where mining had torn up the reef, carving jagged gaps. A graveyard that was once a pulsing rainbow of life.

The divers felt despondent. One of them leaned against a rock. Instantly a squat head shot out from a crevice. A moray eel, ten feet of steely sinew with teeth and jaws that can crack clams and pin a diver in an unbreakable grip. The frogman was not slow to vacate the eel's territory.

As the rubber-suited men swam on, they became aware that they were being tracked by an interested spectator: a sleek barracuda, perhaps six feet long. Not the friendliest of fish. Always hungry, it is attracted by bright flashing objects. Barracudas may steal the catch from a fishing spear, or zero in on an unsuspecting swimmer wearing a wrist-watch or a bracelet. And legs dangling from a raft can prove irresistible. Even beach-side waders have been ambushed. A barracuda bites only once, unlike a shark, and inflicts a clean straight wound quite different from the shark's ragged tear.

However, the divers were not alarmed. They halted. Their escort halted too, fixing them with a glassy stare. They stared back--until the barracuda, bored or bewildered, withdrew. But not far. Fascinated, the men watched the predator herding fish to the surface, and before long a faint rain of silver scales began to fall. Pretty, but slightly sad.

By now the reef explorers had almost completed their survey. A couple more minutes' filming, then they could ascend to the boat. In unison they propelled themselves forward ... and together saw a totally unexpected sight.

Festooned in weed and ravaged by time and salt water, the dim outline was unmistakable. A ship. An old sailing ship. A Spanish galleon? Perhaps one of thousands lost in the Caribbean between the 16th and 18th centuries when the conquistadores plundered the vast wealth of Central and Southern America and were themselves robbed by storms, reefs and buccaneers? If so, tons of treasure worth a fortune might still be on board.

The divers wanted to investigate further. But they were not the first to discover the wreck. Indeed, twenty or more frogmen were circling it in a ballet of bubbles. Beyond could be seen several indistinct shapes ... containers, crates.

Intrigued, the cameraman let his film run. Was this a legal salvage operation? Or were these the modern-day pirates he'd heard of, some funded by the Mafia?

He was not left wondering long. Half a dozen figures detached themselves from

the salvage group and advanced in formation, like a fighter squadron. The leader held a spear gun. Any doubts about his intentions were swiftly and violently dispelled. The spear pierced the cameraman's hand, the attacking force only yards away. Aiding his unconscious partner, the other diver tried to make an escape. Hopeless!

Then ... a slow, rolling rumble. The seabed shook. Sand swirled, turning the water opaque. An earthquake beneath the waves.

Groggy but desperately determined, the diver struggled upwards, towing his friend and the camera. Would both reach the surface alive?

Good old Sea Shepherd! Susan led Gary, Stokes, Baggalley and Johnny Masterson up the ship's gangway. She'd had her fill of adventure; all she wanted now was a quiet life.

At the top of the gangway Radio Officer Leslie Curtis stepped smartly forward and saluted. Was he mocking her? Susan regarded him neutrally, unsure whether she would ever quite trust him. But his grin was broad and his handshake firm when he expressed relief at her safe return. "Mr. Masterson phoned the captain with the news." Susan summoned some insincere words in response. Curtis explained that her parents had been contacted and told the danger was past.

"He certainly seems pleased to see you," murmured Gary as they moved on. Susan said nothing.

Moments later she was caught up in a scrum. The other youngsters, back from their field trips, mobbed her like a pop star. Susan the heroine! Intrepid survivor of the Orlando ordeal.

They demanded details. First, though, there were happy hellos. Vanessa kissed Susan's cheek, Yves ruffled her hair, Norman patted her on the back. But, oddly, it was the mumbled "Glad you're all right" from Darren that meant most to her.

Meanwhile, in the captain's cabin, Alexander paced up and down while Ben Bellingham and First Officer Philip Grant sat conversing seriously. A rap at the door. "Enter." Alexander wasted no time on pleasantries as Masterson and the three teachers filed in. "Please sit." He glanced at his watch. "Gentleman ... and madam"--he nodded in the direction of Maude Mimpriss--"you know why we're here. A nasty business. Could've been a lot nastier but for the prompt action of Mr. Masterson. Congratulations! Perhaps you'd bring us all up to date."

Masterson stood and gave a brief summary of events at Sea World. "I blame myself," he concluded. "If I'd been more alert ... the kidnapper should never have got away. The police have his description and the car's, but I don't hold out much hope."

Alexander spoke again: "No need to reproach yourself, man. You did well. The thing is, what are we going to do now?"

Ben Bellingham's face was drawn. "I'm worried," he admitted. "Very worried. I'll risk my neck for The Eden Mission any day, but I won't gamble on the safety of innocent young people. Who can tell what's in store? Our opponents are stepping up the pressure--I had a report from Australia just an hour ago. Yes, I'm worried. Maybe the youngsters should go home."

A heavy silence. Alexander ended it. "Excuse me, Ben, there's nothing to connect this kidnapping with The Eden Mission. Why would anybody pick on her?"

The man who grabbed Susan, and his accomplice, may be nutcases."

Bellingham took no part in the discussion which followed. Unlike Maude Mimpriss. In extremely agitated tones she aired her own anxieties.

Captain Alexander intervened. "Let's not panic. I see no reason to send any of our passengers back to England. That would make us look stupid, weak --as though we can't cope. We can cope. By being extra vigilant. Mr. Masterson and I will work out a plan, a tight security system that everyone must stick to." Alexander inclined his head towards Bellingham. "What do you say, Ben?"

The naturalist's expression underwent a subtle change and the corners of his mouth twitched. "You may be right, Jim. Anyway, I didn't fancy breaking the bad tidings to the youngsters--they'd probably have mutinied!"

On deck, Susan sprawled in a canvas chair next to Gary and closed her eyes. Too much, everything was a bit too much. Even the boisterous reunion had tired her out. Gary, she knew, understood this without needing to be told and she was grateful. Sleep began to wrap Susan like a cosy blanket.

Relaxing, Gary let his mind drift across Miami harbour--carried by the swelling sails of yachts or borne away on a luxury liner, stylish and spick and span, for a Caribbean cruise ...

"Gary." Susan's drowsy voice. So she hadn't dropped off. "Gary." More insistent.

"Uh-huh." Regretfully he disembarked from his daydream and rejoined her. "Well, go on then."

Susan took her time. "Er, remember what I said about the Everglades and the man in the airboat? You know, the one with the video camera?"

Gary quipped: "Oh, yeah. He thought you were so gorgeous you ought to be in films."

"Shut up, Gary, and listen. Suppose he was taking pictures of me, and suppose he passed them on to somebody else ...?"

"Like who?"

"Like that thug at Sea World."

There was no humour now in Gary's demeanour. "Hmmm...I wonder. Not funny, is it?"

Susan laid her hand on his arm. "Shall I tell Ben?"

Gary considered before replying: "I dunno. Might be a false alarm. Besides, he's got plenty on his plate already. No, I don't think we should bother him."

A resonant moan from Sea Shepherd's funnel put an end to the conversation. They sauntered to the other side of the ship. On the quay, ropes were being cast off. The gangway had been hauled up. Gary recognised three crew members--boffins from the laboratories--who would be staying behind to play their part in the Save the Manatee project. Susan gave an unladylike holler and waved. The trio waved back.

Sea Shepherd was under way, beginning the next leg of her journey.

Destination: San Pedro, California.

While Gary remained on deck, determined it seemed to count every ship and boat in Biscayne Bay, Susan went below for a nap. Two hours later, after a shower and a change of clothes, she made straight for the dining-room with Vanessa. Dinner. Susan's tummy rumbled; she'd never been hungrier.

She was about to sit beside Gary when Ben Bellingham claimed her. "The captain and I would like the pleasure of your company," he said, bowing. Wide-eyed she meekly accompanied him to the top of the table where he politely pulled out a chair and seated her by Captain Alexander, who soon insisted she call him Jim.

The meal had a festive atmosphere, and Susan was treated as guest of honour. Maude Mimpriss shed her inhibitions, for once.

A steward entered, bearing a silver bucket in which nestled a large green bottle. Gradually the hubbub subsided. Ben was on his feet. "How about some champagne?" Another steward brought glasses. Alexander opened the bottle with a pop and a cascade of bubbly froth. The glasses were quickly filled, and Bellingham proposed a toast. "Susan!" "Susan!" they all repeated. Blushing, she tried her first taste of champagne. The bubbles tickled.

Gary watched her proudly before noting that there were fourteen chairs at the captain's table; the extra one was for Johnny Masterson. Silly to be superstitious, but Gary felt relieved--and optimistic about the coming days.

He slept soundly that night, waking in a sun-splashed cabin. A puddle of light lay on the floor by his bunk. Gary grunted. He could get up... Why rush?

"Hello there." Two feet poking from pyjama trousers jerked into view, then the rest of Norman. "We start lessons again today."

"Terrific!" Gary burrowed under the sheets. "I can't wait."

By mid-morning he had decided school was OK. The teachers weren't bad either--considering they were teachers. But he was not sorry to put away his books.

When Gary took a pre-lunch stroll, Norman tagged along. Talk, talk, talk. The bespectacled boy made Gary's head ache. Would nothing stop him? As if in answer to a prayer, the words dried up. Norman gaped, pointing. An enormous silver-blue fish had rocketed out of the sea near the ship's bow. It "swam" in the air for what seemed an age, burst back into the water and flung a glittering plume high over its shoulder.

A tuna. Plump but athletic on a diet of garfish, mackerel and squid--which gives it the unique taste so sought-after by humans. This one, if it evaded fishermen's nets and hooks, might build its weight to as much as a ton and its length to fourteen feet. Yet a tuna could outpace a flying fish.

Norman's tongue got back to work. "Tunas, you know, never really stop moving. They can swim indefinitely. Biologists estimate that a fifteen-year-old specimen must have covered a million miles." Gary laughed--Norman was impossible. "Thank you, Professor." In the data-processing centre, a large cabin next to the radio room, green-printed messages flickered on screens: information about The Eden Mission's worldwide progress, or lack of it, sent by satellite. Ben Bellingham turned away from the screens and stared at First Officer Philip Grant. Both men were frowning. Grant shut the door behind them, and they set off along the corridor.

"Treasure hunters!" Bellingham almost spat. "The two divers could've been killed. Thank God they escaped."

Grant nodded. "I can understand the salvors wanting to protect their haul. But murder ...?"

They walked on, Bellingham trying to make sense of it. He couldn't. Maybe the divers' video would.

Sea Shepherd carved purposefully through the Caribbean, gobbling up the miles. Day soon faded into dusk and dusk into night. After dinner, Gary and Susan promenaded round and round the deck, reluctant to turn in. The sky was daisied with stars and moonlight meandered across the waves. How romantic! Perhaps it was this that inspired Susan to give Gary a more than affectionate kiss before parting.

In the cabin, she found her room-mate emptying drawers amid a litter of clothes. Vanessa, normally poised in all situations, looked flustered.

"What is it?" Susan asked, concerned.

"My watch--have you seen it?"

Susan visualised the delicate gold wrist-watch. "No." Her cheeks burned, as though she were being accused.

Vanessa took in Susan's discomfort. "Oh, I didn't mean ... you didn't think ..." The older girl sighed. "I don't know where it could have got to."

Susan smiled. "I'll help you."

On their knees they sorted out the piles of belongings. The watch, Vanessa confided, was a present from her mother, who had died in a car crash.

Their search proved fruitless. Susan held Vanessa's hand. "Never mind, it'll turn up." Vanessa put on a brave face. "You think so? Yves lost his pen--and that's still missing."

Both girls remained kneeling. The idea of a thief on board was too unpleasant to contemplate. "Let's tidy the cabin," Susan suggested brightly.

It wasn't long before their quarters were shipshape again and Vanessa's composure returned. They sat down on the bottom bunk. "Thanks," said Vanessa. "You know, you're nice-looking. Why don't you make more of yourself? A new hair-style, pretty dress, touch of make-up--you'd be quite a knock-out with all the boys." Susan shrugged.

Vanessa regarded this as a challenge. "It's true. I'll show you." For the next hour she had Susan changing clothes like a model. Vanessa's outfits were too big for the younger girl. But some of them, Susan saw in the full-length wardrobe mirror, did make her look ... attractive. When Vanessa got busy with a comb and makeup, Susan didn't recognise herself. She giggled. Maybe she should take greater care over her appearance, but it was such a lot of bother.

Talk turned to boys. Was Gary Susan's boyfriend? Vanessa insisted on knowing. Susan gave a confused reply. No ... yes ... sort of. He was certainly her best friend. "How about you and Yves?" Vanessa yawned. "We'll see."

The conversation continued in their bunks, and next morning they were both reluctant risers.

However, they weren't too late to witness the start of Sea Shepherd's passage along the Panama Canal. Without this man-made short cut, linking Atlantic and Pacific, the ship would have had to keep on steaming for thousands more miles--right round Cape Horn.

A pilot came on board to supervise the jerky journey. There were stops in half a dozen giant locks, through which Sea Shepherd was pulled by four electric locomotives called "mules". So slow! Even Gary, watching each ship snail by, grew restless.

After nine hours and fifty miles, the canal trip ended at Balboa. Geoffrey Baggalley, having been defeated at dominoes by Peter Stokes for the umpteenth time, seized the opportunity to give the teenagers a lightning geography lesson. "We are now entering the Pacific Ocean," he announced, "65 million square miles of it. The Atlantic is vast, but the Pacific"--he spread his arms--"is by far the broadest and deepest of the world's oceans, bigger than all the land put together."

Sea Shepherd pushed on into evening, then dawn, then another evening and another dawn. A smooth voyage which soothed away worries. Off Acapulco, Mexico, ever-observant Gary spotted a red seaplane that had crossed the ship's path several times since she left Panama. Now he remembered where he'd first seen the aircraft, or one like it: in Biscayne Bay, when Sea Shepherd arrived at Miami.

But soon the thought was wiped from his mind by the most astonishing spectacle. Luckily Susan, Norman, Vanessa, Yves and Ben Bellingham were there to share it with him. Out of the bright blue water, close to the ship, soared one ... two ... three immense creatures. Up and up. Like bats or birds grown to a phenomenal, freakish size. Twenty feet across.

"Manta-rays, also known as devil-fish," Bellingham contributed, not hiding his elation. The mantas, each weighing 3,500 pounds-plus, belly-flopped into the waves with three foam-fountaining smacks.

"Why do they do that?" incredulous Susan asked.

"Nobody can really say," Ben replied, "but probably to get rid of parasites."

After that, further wildlife sightings--flying fish and the Californian sea lions--seemed rather ordinary.

Susan felt sorry that Darren had missed the show, especially when she happened to see the scarlet-cheeked boy being told off by a furious Leslie Curtis. She liked the radio officer less and less.

The ship neared San Pedro--en route to helping the whales and sea otters.

Then, without warning, disaster struck. Sea Shepherd lost speed. Electronic equipment began to blink and break down. Captain Alexander hastened below from the bridge. He almost collided with the Chief Engineer stomping up from the engine-room. The engineer's face was streaked with sweat and grime, and veins stood out on his forehead. "Some swine has put sand in the oil. It'll ruin the engines, cripple the ship."

Alexander clenched his fist ... "Sabotage!"

6. Black death

Willed on by her crew and passengers, Sea Shepherd limped the last miles to San Pedro. In the juddering din deep below decks, the engineer let loose a stream of oaths and vowed vengeance. No torture was excruciating enough for whoever had harmed his precious machinery.

Captain Alexander's feelings were hardly more moderate, but he wore a cool mask as he issued clipped orders to the men around him on the bridge. Only his posture betrayed the boiling anger inside. Who did it? How? When? The questions pounded in his head. He needn't ask why. That was obvious - to scupper The Eden Mission.

With a slight pressure on the wheel, Alexander eased Sea Shepherd through the San Pedro Channel. The ship's engines made a rasping noise. An expert job of sabotage, the captain conceded bitterly. Done by somebody who knew where to cause most damage. Somebody who had access to the engine-room. Somebody on board at this moment.

An anchor clanked from the bow, broke the water and sank to find a firm hold on the ocean floor. Tugging tightly at her chain, Sea Shepherd came to rest off San Pedro, the port of Los Angeles.

Alexander's anger subsided; now dread took its place. Perhaps the engines were beyond repair, maybe the voyage--not half-completed--was over. Bracing himself for the worst, he strode unseeing to his cabin and a meeting with the engineer. Sea Shepherd's fate was all that concerned him. Later he would decide the fate of the person, or people, who'd struck at her heart.

The youngsters, gossiping and gesticulating, assembled on deck. Was the rumoured sabotage true? Debate died down when Ben Bellingham approached. "We've suffered a setback," he said, "a severe setback. But The Eden Mission continues - and you're part of it. So be ready to disembark in five minutes, as planned."

Susan sighted a pert little boat rounding the harbour wall. The yellow launch swaggered towards them. Sea Shepherd's gangway had been lowered to within a foot of the softly undulating water. A sailor tied the launch to the bottom of the gangway. Led by Bellingham and followed by Masterson and Baggalley, the six teenagers began their cautious descent to the boat. Susan grasped the rope handrail.

All aboard--without mishap. Gary winked at Susan and sat next to her in the stern. The launch grew friskier each moment, like a playful pony eager to be free. Then she was off, bucking to shore. Too short a ride for Gary's taste, but he realised they were not on a pleasure spree.

At San Pedro the party boarded a mini-bus which was soon speeding north to Santa Barbara--and the Marine Mammal Center.

The youngsters trooped out of the bus and into an impressive white building. Ben was hustled away by a secretary for a discussion with the center's top official. The rest of the party stood around. What now?

"Howdy, folks." A man of about 30, with long hair and sporting a gaudy cowboy shirt, introduced himself. "I'm Professor Kelsey ... call me Joss. Please come this way."

A professor, eh? He didn't fit Susan's idea of an egghead. If this was California style, she liked it. Vanessa evidently agreed, linking her arm

through Susan's. The group gathered in a hall lined with photographs and diagrams. At one end lay a colossal skeleton--the length of two railway carriages.

Joss Kelsey spoke up: "Mr. Bellingham will be back before long, which means I won't bore you with too many details about the center's work. Just to say that this place is devoted to the study and protection of marine mammals. From the largest to the smallest. From that guy there"--he pointed to the skeleton--"the blue whale, to the pint-sized sea otter."

Kelsey loped over and patted the bones affectionately. "Mightiest creature God ever made, nothing to match it in the whole four-and-a-half-billion-year history of the world. And it's probably doomed to extinction. Thanks to a pushy newcomer known as homo sapiens, alias man. Whales have been roaming the oceans for 45 million years, whereas our ancestors hadn't learned to walk upright until a few hundred thousand years ago."

The professor, noticing Darren's expression, tried to strike a cheerier note. "The blue's heart is heavier than all of you put together, beats like a giant kettledrum and is the height of this gentleman"--he indicated Johnny Masterson. "Hot blood is pumped around the whale's 170-ton bulk, along arteries so big that you"--Kelsey grinned at Darren - "could've swum through them as a kid. Maybe, with a lotta luck, it will survive."

If Kelsey needed encouragement to carry on, his audience provided plenty. The facts flowed. Among those lodging in Gary's mind was that a full-size blue whale can generate one thousand horsepower with its twenty-foot tail flukes. But when he heard that a baby blue increases in weight 30,000 million times during the first two years, Gary doubted his ears. Then Kelsey elaborated. Starting as a barely visible egg of 0.000035 ounces inside its mother, the calf is born nearly eleven months later. It measures 23 feet and weighs 2« tons. A year after that, it has expanded to a fifty-foot, 26-tonner--nourished for seven months on one-ton daily intakes of nutritious mother's milk. With this start, it may live to be 120.

Norman asked: "Whales aren't as intelligent as humans, are they?" Kelsey chuckled. "Maybe they're brighter. When I think of some people I've met, that's not claiming much. For one thing, whales don't destroy their environment. For another, they co-operate with each other, even different species. Their brains are bigger than ours, particularly the parts associated with intelligence. The truth is these majestic leviathans are still something of a mystery."

Susan caught the professor's attention. "Joss, is the blue whale really doomed? Can't it make a come-back now hunters have promised to leave it in peace?"

Kelsey put his hands together. The blue's future is doubtful, he explained. Since the 1870s, war on whales has been waged from steamships armed with harpoon guns. In this century, all-out war was declared. Many species suffered horrendous casualties--and the blue, too big and swift for earlier whalers, became a prime target. The survivors were few and scattered. Could they find partners in the wide oceans? And if they did and mated successfully, would the cows' offspring--a single calf every two or three years--be enough to boost a population with an annual death rate from natural causes of four to eight per cent?

Kelsey added: "Even without harpoons, man goes on stabbing the whale in the back. How? By turning its home into a dirty, poisonous place. Pollution ... that's humanity's latest gift to marine creatures. A foul river of

agricultural pesticides and herbicides, industrial chemicals, sewage and nuclear waste flows from the land into the sea--to circulate like bad news around the globe."

But the worst curse off California's coast, said Kelsey, is oil. Not far from shore an ever-lengthening line of oil platforms marches along past scenery as beautiful as any on earth. Accidents happen. A minor oil spill is serious enough, "as you'll soon see for yourselves. But a major blowout, a full-scale flood--it'd be ecologically devastating ..."

A pause. Ben Bellingham had returned. He apologised for interrupting, and shook Kelsey's hand. Time to move on. Everyone thanked Joss and, with final farewells, the party filed out.

The mini-bus was waiting, engine ticking over. A brief trip through sunlit streets would end at a pier where a boat stood by to take the visitors sightseeing--sights they'd never want to see again.

Ninety-five miles to the south, beyond San Pedro harbour wall, Sea Shepherd floated at elegant ease; a fine vessel in first-class condition. Or so a casual observer might think.

After the Chief Engineer had delivered a damage report to Captain Alexander they toured the engine-room. It was still and silent. The men spoke quietly, as if in the presence of a sick friend. Only when they left did Alexander ask: "What's your verdict, Chief? Any hope?"

The engineer looked like a doctor about to announce tragedy. Alexander stiffened his back. "Not good, uh?"

"There's still a chance, Jim. A slim chance. Won't know till the engines are stripped down. Just possible they can be repaired--if we can get the spare parts. Otherwise the machinery might as well be scrap-metal."

Little to celebrate, but enough to lighten Alexander's leaden spirits. "Right, Chief, let's give it a go. We're not beaten yet."

But the engineer didn't stir. Glowering, he muttered: "If I ever get my hands on the scum that did this, God 'elp him!"

Alexander: "Don't worry--I'll take care of the culprit. First things first, though. Our job now is to bring Sea Shepherd back to active life ..."

Farther up the coast, the Santa Barbara launch continued her putt-putt-putting progress out to sea, leaving the pier behind in a paper-chase of foam. Gary and Susan huddled in the bow by Ben and a local naturalist. Scanning the horizon, Susan saw the smudged shapes of islands gradually sharpening into focus. Gary counted the nearer oil platforms, like tin Titans wading in the water.

"Eleven," commented the naturalist. "Quite awe-inspiring in their way, aren't they? From shore, all lit up at night, they look pretty. Remind me of Christmas trees."

This was his only favourable remark about the platforms. He disapproved of contraptions that could go wrong and spew black death into the ocean.

Animals were what excited him--such as the whales which paraded in frolicking convoys past the windows of his beach-side house each Christmas. Grey whales, forty-foot migrants from the frozen north, make a 12,000-mile round trip to

winter off Lower California where cows give birth to their calves in warm and shallow lagoons.

"Year after year they return. It's always a thrill."

His gaze clouded and he gestured contemptuously at a nearby oil platform. "Spills can choke a whale. This applies particularly to baleen whales--the blue and the grey, for instance. They feed by filtering water through their baleen, a hanging fringe of a substance similar to fingernails, and licking off the trapped plankton. If the filter is clogged the whale starves."

Gary, Susan and the others sat in wordless contemplation, scarcely aware of the island until the boat bumped ashore.

The naturalist led them over grass-tufted sand to a calm cove, the perfect picnicking place. But not today. Not since oil had stained and smeared the beach. And who wanted to picnic beside two dead bodies?

A grey whale and her calf, pecked at by birds, were already rotting. Susan's tears welled. The calf, though at least twelve feet long, looked fragile and pathetic. It seemed to be cuddling up to its mother. Both were coated in glutinous oil.

Gary squeezed Susan's arm, but he could no more comfort her than he could the lifeless carcasses. The cow's slightly curved mouth suggested a sad smile.

Trying not to tread in the oil, Gary, Susan, Darren, Vanessa, Yves and Norman shuffled past the beached whales. Bellingham, Masterson, Baggalley and the naturalist tagged on behind. A procession of mourners paying their last respects.

No one regretted being aboard the launch again, bound for Santa Barbara. After a while the naturalist observed: "That cow and her calf should've migrated north weeks ago, like the other greys ..." He broke off, then resumed: "S'pose we should be grateful the oil's out of range of the sea otters--so far."

On the bus to San Pedro, the students made mumbled conversation or napped. An exhausting day. It was night when they mounted Sea Shepherd's gangway. Appetites were keen, but dinner just wasn't the same without Ben, Johnny Masterson and Alexander--all engaged in a conference about the battered engines.

After the meal the youngsters ambled to their cabins, too tired to talk. They would need to be fresh for tomorrow.

As if by arrangement, Gary and Susan both rose extra early and emerged into the corridor at almost the same moment. Such "coincidences" no longer surprised them.

They walked the deck. A gilt-edged mist was playing tricks with the sea view, gull-noisy, veiling and unveiling ships and buoys.

"Will you miss me, Gary?" Susan's head was turned away.

"Er ... yes. 'Course I will."

"Really?"

"Really!"

Susan hugged him. "Wish you were coming too."

"I know," said Gary. "But it's only for a few days."

"You will miss me though?"

"Very much, stupid."

Reassured, Susan could now do full justice to her breakfast. The mood among the young passengers at the captain's table was a curious mixture: good-humoured and gloomy. Soon the group would be divided. Yves obviously didn't like the prospect of parting from Vanessa, any more than Susan wanted to leave Gary. But The Eden Mission, as Ben frequently repeated, must go on.

Susan, Vanessa and Darren went below to collect their luggage. Masterson already had his beside him. Effortlessly he swung the kit bag over his shoulder and strolled out on deck. He peered through the mist, a blanket slowly tearing into bigger and bigger holes. Masterson discerned the approaching shuttle boat.

Without looking round, he sensed the presence of the three teenagers. What was delaying the fifth member of the shore party--Stokes? Masterson's brows knit. A real tough guy, Susan thought. Just as well he's on our side.

By now the launch beneath was fidgeting at her moorings. Still no Stokes. Ben Bellingham sent a sailor to find the tardy teacher, and eventually the man returned with an apologetic Stokes. "So sorry, didn't mean to hold you up. I seem to have mislaid my pocket calculator. Always take it with me ..."

Vanessa sighed sympathetically as the maths master shifted from foot to foot. Masterson showed less understanding. "Perhaps we can get going--if everyone's ready."

Captain Alexander, Bellingham and the trio of youngsters who were staying behind said goodbye and good luck to the departing group. Also present was Curtis, his grin as phoney as ever. Susan noted the cold hard stare he gave Darren.

Gary kept waving until the boat edged round the harbour wall and out of sight. Susan would be back in no time, he told himself. Meanwhile the shipboard contingent had plenty to do.

There was a different driver at the wheel of the mini-bus, young and fair haired. Vanessa adopted a provocative pose, which Susan ruined by shoving her forward. The shore party settled down for a longish journey. North to Monterey, where surf-riding sea otters play off the coast.

The bus moved briskly through the Hollywood district of Los Angeles. Vanessa put on a film star act--for the benefit of the driver and Johnny Masterson. Susan watched, half amused, half irritated. In the rear seat pasty-faced Darren crouched with a hold-all clutched to his chest. Across the aisle Peter Stokes emptied his pockets. Searching for the calculator?

As the bus passed beyond the city limits, Susan got up to stretch her legs. She lurched towards the rear and, apparently by accident, flopped beside Darren. "Mind if I sit here?" He didn't actually object, so she stayed.

Which was his favourite animal ... did he like the food on Sea Shepherd ... and what of the sabotage?

His answers were short, as grudgingly given as those of a prisoner under interrogation. But Susan persisted, determined to make friends.

Little by little the boy dropped his defences. It occurred to Susan that being on your guard all the time must be very tiring. Tentatively she asked about Curtis, wondering how Darren had become acquainted with him and what sort of person he was.

Darren raised his defences double quick. "Dunno what you mean. He's nothing to me. Just another big-head officer!"

Susan was sorry she'd mentioned Curtis. A mistake. She changed the subject--to herself, her school, hobbies, family. Darren relaxed; he even laughed at something Susan said.

"What are your parents like?" she inquired.

Darren hesitated. "Don't see much of my father--he's away a lot. But my mother ... she's great. I've got a picture." He undid his bag, felt inside and pulled out a perspex photograph holder. "That's Mum." He handed it to Susan.

"Nice," she murmured. "You look alike."

This seemed to please him.

The bus wheels whirred, carrying the five ever closer to Monterey and the sea otters. Stokes had nodded off, and Vanessa continued to flirt energetically. Susan sat back by Darren in companionable silence.

Santa Barbara's outskirts. Hillside houses, red-roofed, craned over each other's shoulders to get a better view of a too-blue-to-be-true bay below. On her first visit, Susan's mind was full of whales and so she had been blinded to the splendour of this lovely coastal town.

Lunch loomed--and before many more miles, the bus drew up at a diner. The party poured out. Everybody was empty-handed, except Darren. He insisted on taking his hold-all.

Susan downed a pizza, ice-cream and Coke as if competing against the clock, then had to wait for the others. They appeared to her to be chewing each mouthful with cow-like deliberation. Vanessa, predictably, was last to finish. Soon after, Stokes paid the bill.

On the bus, Susan chatted again to Darren. Now his frosty manner had thawed he was almost fun. Time and the landscape flitted by, and as the offshore oil platforms fell farther and farther behind so did the memory of them. Susan and Darren ran out of things to say, but there was no awkwardness between the two.

Susan thought she would write a postcard to her parents--she'd been putting it off--and foraged in her bag for a ballpoint. She wished she had packed properly instead of just throwing stuff in.

"Darren, have you got something I can write with?"

He produced a pen from his hold-all.

"Thanks," said Susan. "Hmmm...must've cost a bit. I'll be careful with it."

A sort of wariness crossed the boy's face, a reluctance to look at her. Shy

suddenly? Susan understood that problem from personal experience. She stared out the window, seeking words to begin the postcard. Ten minutes later she gave back the pen. Darren had become a stranger, stiff and spiky as an icicle. Susan tried and failed to restore their earlier intimacy. Had she said or done anything to upset him? He offered no clue. Sulk if you want, she thought. See if I care.

Huffily Susan reached for her book--you knew where you were with sea otters.

Very soon she was one, a furry sleeper adrift on her back in the rocking cradle of the ocean. Snoring gently, arms folded. Hardly waking, she covered her eyes with her paws. Pity about the sun's dazzle, but who could doze for long when there were games to play? She paddled towards the sound of chortling, cooing, whistling. Otters of all ages bent on sheer enjoyment. Joining in a game of catch, she tossed an empty shell to and fro. And when she tired of that she would play tug-of-war until the seaweed "rope" snapped, or hide-and-seek among the kelp beds where otter food is found. Food. She dived, came up with a flat stone and some mussels in a pouch under her arm. Rolling over, she laid the stone on her chest and hammered the shell against the hard surface. Rat-a-tat-tat. Every mussel was broken open and eaten. She cleaned the scraps from her fur--rinsed it, scrubbed it, smoothed it. For though she was a water creature, water must never touch her skin. She had seen what happened to otters when their coats became matted. The chilly sea killed them. Another snooze ...

Susan the otter abruptly resumed human form as the bus horn hooted at some motorist. A sideways glance confirmed that Darren was still doing his imitation of a sulky statue. Back to the book. Sea otters' coats are made up of 800 million hairs. The warmest and, many people think, the handsomest fur in the world. No wonder the poor things came within a hair's breadth of being hunted out of existence. But for a last-minute truce, they wouldn't be around now, splashing and bobbing in the shallows. Susan closed the book.

Twisting in her seat, she peeked out the rear window. A maroon pick-up truck was just rounding the curve behind them. It had been there when she last looked--hours ago. Susan shivered. A spasm of anxiety. Why? The Sea World thug? Nerves, jumpy. She shook her head. Don't be daft, Susan. But the spooky feeling, a sense of being pursued, wouldn't leave her.

"Johnny!"

Masterson abandoned the driver to Vanessa's undivided attention and swayed to the back of the bus. "Your humble servant, ma'm." His jaunty air vanished at the sight of Susan's distress. "What's up?" She blurted her fears. Masterson watched the truck for the next few miles.

Then it turned off at a side-road. Susan was contrite. But Masterson thanked her for alerting him. "It's better to be safe than sorry."

Highway One hugs California's coast, giving a grandstand view of the pounding Pacific, a bird's-eye view of birds such as the cormorants airing wet wings on the rocks or scudding the wave crests in a never-finished quest for fish.

Journey's end was near, nearer still. Bald-headed mountains cooled their feet in the sea. The bus seemed desperate to swallow the remaining road. Monterey. Hooray!

Some 350 miles away, Ben Bellingham rose from a padded leather chair in a Los Angeles television studio. The interview had gone well. Despite the hostility of one or two reporters who criticised him for minding other people's

business--just like you, he was tempted to say--Bellingham had broadcast his conservation appeal loud and clear.

Gary, Norman and Yves also participated. Treated more kindly, they were asked what The Eden Mission meant to them.

Cameras clicked as Bellingham and the boys made for the studio exit. "We certainly told 'em, didn't we?" Ben twinkled.

In the taxi to San Pedro, Gary mused happily. Susan'll be green with envy.

Aboard Sea Shepherd ... encouraging developments. Marine mechanics from Long Beach, in consultation with the Chief Engineer, had broken good news: the engines were not a write-off, could be revived. Work was already under way. Meanwhile the ship's midget submarines nosed out to explore, and further research projects went ahead on schedule.

Dinner proved a jollier meal than expected. Sea Shepherd's company retired to a comparatively untroubled sleep.

But in the small-hours of the morning, a nightmare that had haunted California's conservationists for years came horribly true. A drilling rig exploded, then an oil platform. Several men died instantly, while the gushing black tide slurped onwards.

Up north, in Monterey, breakfast TV and radio bulletins trumpeted the first headlines of death and destruction. The full story would emerge later. But no one could foresee the dire drama to come.

Unaware of events, Susan and the rest of the group set out from their lodgings at eight o'clock. They reached the wharf; now to find Lutris. Masterson asked for directions. A sour-faced fisherman jerked his thumb at a cruiser a few berths away. Johnny thanked him. The man slouched off, saying nothing. "Have a nice day," Susan called, not quite meaning it.

Lutris, with flaking white paint, was probably the shabbiest craft on the wharf. Her owners--husband-and-wife biologists--couldn't afford to spend money on anything but the necessities of their work. Susan saw, fluttering from the stern, an orange pennant which proclaimed "FRIENDS OF THE SEA OTTER".

"Hi there!" The big voice matched the figure at the top of the gangway. Even Johnny Masterson had to crick his neck. "Name's Hank," rumbled the straw-headed, ruddy-cheeked giant. "Come on up." Vanessa skipped forward to lead the climbing column.

Hank pumped each hand in turn, going easy on a grip that could be numbing. "This is Rhonda, my wife." A petite and vivacious woman, as brown as a nut, warmly welcomed them. Beside Hank she appeared tinier still. From the look in Darren's eyes, Susan could tell that Rhonda had won his heart immediately.

Soon Lutris was butting the waves beyond Monterey. The contrast between their hospitable hosts and the grouchy fishermen on the quay caused Stokes to mention the man's attitude. Hank expressed no surprise. "We're the sea otter's friends, but a lot of fishermen aren't. They'd kill every last one if they could. You see, shellfish are in short supply--and otters get the blame. Wrongly, I think."

Rhonda ushered the teenagers to the side of the cruiser. Her bronzed arm rested lightly on Darren's shoulder. "Use your binoculars," she advised. Vanessa spied the otter first. "Oooh ... sweet! He's half out of the water,

standing up. And look, he's shading his eyes with his paw ... like a sailor staring across the sea." Then Darren and Susan spotted two more of the chocolate-coloured creatures, which clung to each other tightly. "Pups," Rhonda explained. "They're scared because they don't trust us, yet. The adults get nervous too, and they vary in temperament; some are bold, some bashful. A bit like human beings." Darren met her gentle gaze.

Cutting the engine, Hank waited for Lutris to lose momentum, then lowered a mooring buoy. He and Rhonda boarded a rubber dinghy. "Room for three passengers," he said. Vanessa and Darren followed Susan down, steadied by Rhonda. Hank started to row.

"Rafts" of otters to right and left. Rhonda pointed out a pup wrapped in strands of kelp. "That's to stop it drifting off," she whispered. "It can float but not swim. So when Ma goes for food she ties the baby up." Nearby, a four-foot female lay back and suckled her new offspring in a loving embrace. Another mother patiently coaxed an older pup to make its first swimming movements. A third, combing with cat-like claws, groomed her baby, deaf to its waaah-waaahing protests.

Hank scooped something from the bottom of the dinghy--a cooked crab--and slipped smoothly overboard. Lolling on the water, otter-fashion, he began to tuck in to the crab. Before long, an inquisitive male approached. He studied Hank. An imploring paw reached out. Hank passed a piece of crab--and, side by side, man and otter enjoyed a floating snack.

Over years, Hank and Rhonda had forged an extraordinary bond with otters. The teenagers felt privileged to be included.

Returning to Lutris was like being dragged away from a fair. On board, Darren plied Rhonda with questions. Susan had never seen him so enthusiastic. She listened in. Sea otters, said Rhonda, were once common--from Japan to Mexico. But the fur trade altered that. Even today, under protection, they occupy only one-fifth of their original territory.

Otters, unlike other sea mammals, have no layer of fat to insulate them, relying instead on their coats ... and lots of food. They relish abalone--outsized salt-water snails. Unfortunately restaurant-goers also drool over this delicacy. "Which is why the fishermen get mad," Rhonda concluded.

But Darren wouldn't let her go. She laughed. "We'll talk again, maybe tomorrow. Meantime I'm proud to enrol you as one of the Friends of the Sea Otter."

Down south, there was no such leisurely pleasure for ecologists. Oil had overwhelmed the ocean around Santa Barbara's platforms. From a patrol boat Ben Bellingham tracked the darkly heaving invasion. The anti-pollution squads, locked in combat with a superior and ever-strengthening foe, were being beaten back.

Bellingham brooded on the carnage among fish and birds. A single consolation: the south-flowing current should sweep the oil far from shore--and from the otters. Unless the wind changed direction ...

7. Jinxed

Sea Shepherd was making a rapid recovery. At first her crew had rejoiced that she would not be permanently paralysed. Then the feeling turned into something else--suspicion. It infected the ship from bow to stern, from bridge to engine-room, like an epidemic. Nobody trusted anybody. Even close comrades

became uneasy with each other, unnaturally secretive. And tempers were fraying. The saboteur must be rooted out. The sooner the better.

"Bloody maniac! Get away! Get awaaaay!" Ben Bellingham yelled, arms flailing. He knew it was useless, but ... Seconds later, a shuddering crunch. The sky tilted crazily. He was flung headlong, the breath knocked from his lungs. The patrol boat's wooden hull split and splintered, axed almost in two by the prow of a trawler.

Bellingham heard faint groans. Of the shocked, injured, dying? He couldn't tell. Wrestling with giddiness, he somehow managed to stand. His fuzzy vision cleared. Chaos. Three or four of his companions--catapulted overboard--were floundering in oil, groping for bits of wreckage. Another figure floated face down. The remains of their craft sank beneath Bellingham's feet.

Swimming slowly, he took care not to swallow the poisonous black water. Bellingham caught sight of the trawler. She showed no sign of stopping, was blundering on as though nothing had happened! Around him the distressed men and women, some barely conscious, tried to stay afloat. A few were coughing up oil. For them, he feared, help would come too late. If it came at all.

Someone shouted. Bellingham searched in every direction--and saw ... Yes. Thank God! A coastguard cutter rip-roaring to the rescue at maximum revs.

On the cutter, hastily converted into a casualty station, Ben did what he could to aid his colleagues: giving artificial respiration, applying bandages, comforting the delirious. He was one of the lucky ones, escaping with only cuts and bruises. He felt strangely guilty. But other emotions rocked him too. Rage and a momentary desire for revenge. What a mess!

Eleven people--eight men, three women--had departed by patrol boat from Santa Barbara. The same number was returning. This time, though, two were dead and at least another three gravely ill. The sound of retching reminded Bellingham that oil might yet cause further fatalities.

How had the trawler come to hit the boat? Was the skipper insane? Drunk? Blind? And why hadn't the ship picked up survivors? The chief coastguard reeled off these queries, not expecting answers.

Ben Bellingham: "I'm beginning to think the ramming was deliberate."

The coastguard mulled over the possibility.

Elsewhere on the cutter, an officer had radioed emergency services to stand by and alerted law-enforcement vessels to detain the rogue ship.

He tried to contact the trawler. A fruitless exercise.

The trawler skipper stood stock-still, as if in a trance, and steered for the shore. He looked neither to right nor left, didn't speak, didn't twitch a muscle. The knife at his throat had transformed him into a submissive zombie. Beside him dangled the innards of the radio, like the entrails of a disembowelled animal, rendering the ship deaf and dumb. The man with the knife had sworn to do worse to the skipper if opposed. All on board believed him. So, powerless to prevent it, they'd allowed the trawler to be hijacked and used as a battering-ram.

Though literally scared stiff, the skipper could still think. He recalled the moment of impact and the hoarse utterance of his captor: "Adios, Bellingham! Adios!" What did he mean? Who was this psychopath, this ugly stowaway who had

plucked a knife from his boot? As long as he lived, the skipper would remember the man's face--scarred, with eyes that glittered like the knife ...

The point pressed into his throat. "We land soon," the hated voice told him in an accent that was either Spanish or South American. "Be ready. Any tricks--I kill you."

When the trawler ran aground, two figures clambered down a rope-ladder--hijacker and hostage--watched by sailors who wondered whether they would ever see their skipper again. Dead or alive.

Aching, worn out and depressed, Ben Bellingham trudged up Sea Shepherd's gangway. He needed a drink and a friend to share his troubles with. Curtis drifted into view, not a person Bellingham chose to confide in. He nodded at the radio officer and set course for the captain's cabin.

James Alexander, elbows on his desk, chin cupped in his hands, squinted irritably. Bellingham waited for the captain to say hello. He didn't. His grey hair, sleekly brushed on other occasions, was dishevelled. What do you want? The words weren't spoken, but Ben could hear them just the same.

Uninvited, he sat opposite Alexander. "Nice to be back, Jim," he said, a shade ironically. "You've obviously been having as much fun as I have." With belated good manners Alexander held out his hand. Soon Bellingham was reliving the trawler incident and its deadly aftermath. To his surprise, then annoyance, he found the captain indifferent.

"Must catch the saboteur," Alexander muttered. "And one of our submarines is overdue. I've notified the maritime authorities. Should've returned four hours ago ..."

Bellingham left the cabin, more downcast than when he'd entered. Just as well the youngsters were away. He thought of the Monterey party and of the three boys--Gary, Norman and Yves--touring schools in Southern California to talk about The Eden Mission. The Eden Mission! Bellingham sighed.

For an update on the global front, he dropped in to Sea Shepherd's data-processing centre. The experience did not hearten him. Among other things, he learned that police investigating the Bahamas spear gun attack had drawn a blank--as blank as the ecologists' film. Odd, Bellingham mused. He was growing accustomed to the inexplicable.

Dejectedly he descended to his cabin and his bunk. Sleep, Ben, sleep. He pulled off his boots, grunting with the effort. "Tired," he murmured, and fell back on the so-soft pillow. But he was not cushioned against memories. Shattering timbers, moans of the shipwrecked, reek of the tainted sea ... could he ever forget? The bereaved families--how many more before the night was through? Sleep, Ben. No chance. The trawler had him in a net.

Next morning, hardly rested, Bellingham forced himself upright. Perhaps today held happier events.

"The sub is still missing." Alexander squeezed past him in the corridor. "Navy's doing what it can." Bellingham lost all appetite for breakfast. He plodded up to the deck, thinking what he had not dared admit to himself till now: The Eden Mission is jinxed. Oh for better news!

Within minutes his wish was granted. A radio operator told him that the tide was turning in the oil battle. Fire-fighters had extinguished the blaze on the bent and blackened platform, and the process of "capping" the pipes had begun.

A cement and water mixture was being pumped down to seal off the erupting source.

Ben Bellingham gripped the operator's arm, grateful for even this partial reprieve from despair. But his new optimism did not last. Before long, the same man who'd lifted Ben's hopes dashed them by delivering another message. A message that chilled him to the bone. The wind had freshened, veered, reversed the current, and was thrusting the foul slick towards the beaches. Towards the sea otters.

South of Monterey the cruiser Lutris splashed past playing otters, through waves flecked with fizzy foam like lemonade. Susan's throat was dry. She had been looking too long and hard for tarry streaks, first marks of the oil that advanced inexorably beyond the horizon. Darren and Vanessa shared the anxious sentry duty.

In the cockpit behind them, Hank and his wife Rhonda prepared for a grade one emergency. Masterson and Stokes tried not to get in the way and awaited instructions as to what--if anything--they could do.

Hank lumbered forward to join the youngsters. He seemed stooped from carrying a heavy burden.

Susan bit her lip. "The oil will finish them, won't it?"

"No." Hank was determined. "We're not gonna let that happen."

"How can you stop it?" Darren spoke for the other two.

Hank hesitated ... "Those boats over there belong to the US Fish and Wildlife Service. They're well equipped and can transmit sounds to lure the otters closer or, in our case, drive them away. We'll move as many as we can out of danger."

Vanessa expressed scepticism.

"It's a fact," Hank insisted. "The sound of a killer whale will make otters flee, and a bawling pup will bring adults hurrying to tend it."

But Susan found no solace. The oil was bound to get some of them, then what? They'd have to be caught, drugged and kept in captivity. An inevitable process if they were to be cleaned and released where the sea was safe.

Susan dangled her hand over the side. "Hank ... my book says otters are very sensitive and mope when they have to leave their home or are separated from their families. They can die of stress. Is that right?"

Hank cleared his throat. "Er ... yes, Susan. 'Fraid so. Let's look on the bright side though. Maybe the wind'll shift."

Near Santa Barbara, a million slimy fingers were feeling for the shore. Appalled residents watched the fingers stretch and take hold, as if to haul the whole huge body of oil up and over the sand inch by inch until not a glint of gold showed through. And the stench!

An elderly, weather-beaten man shook his fist and said to those within earshot: "I've seen a spill one-tenth the size of this pollute a thousand square miles of ocean and bury a hundred miles of holiday beaches in gluey muck a foot thick."

Nobody responded - there was nothing to say.

Offshore the clean-up campaign was being conducted with frantic energy. Aircraft skimmed the sea surface, showering detergent. Abreast greasy waves, ships waged their own war. Some sprayed chemicals while towing a series of paddles. This broke the oil into droplets so that bacteria could "eat" it easily. Elsewhere, vessels encircled the oil with floating booms and sucked it aboard.

On land, truck-loads of detergent had been dispatched to besieged beaches. There, fire-engines pumped out countless gallons of the milky liquid, then "shampooed" the sand by hosing it with water. Meanwhile farm machinery ploughed up oil that had penetrated deep.

Throughout the days and floodlit nights to come, army, navy, air force and civilian personnel would keep up the fight against the wind-whipped slick.

Could they win? They must.

Lutris was just one of a widely spaced flotilla of boats "riding herd" on the otters along 230 miles of California's coastline. Assignment: to woo and shoo the creatures away to a secure place.

"It's for your own good," Susan said to the bemused bewhiskered faces of two otters that Lutris approached.

This was going to be even harder than she thought, as Hank already knew. He also knew that the oil, once it invaded otter country, could complete the annihilation begun by fur traders in the early 1700s. No more Californian sea otters.

He checked the radio reports. All too soon the water on every side would grow a scummy skin.

Bellingham felt as though he had been on the wrong end of an uppercut. "Right now, Ben, I don't give a damn about the otters, I've got other priorities. Like a lost submarine, and some Judas who's trying to disable my ship."

Again Bellingham attempted to reason with Alexander. But the captain was in no mood for compromise. "I can't spare key men like Grant and Masterson. I want them and the kids back on Sea Shepherd. By tomorrow - at the latest."

Ben raised a placating palm. "OK, OK. Calm down, Jim. Our enemies would love to see us falling out. We're on the same side, remember?"

Alexander exhaled slowly. "You're right, of course. I apologise. Meant what I said, though, about recalling the groups."

With considerable restraint Bellingham closed the captain's door gently. He climbed to the deck, hoping fresh air would cure his headache.

Less than 48 hours later the ship was weighing anchor off San Pedro. Much had occurred in that time, including the reluctant return of the students. Cutting short their schools tour, Gary, Norman and Yves were the first to arrive, accompanied by Philip Grant, Geoffrey Baggalley and Maude. Not long after, Johnny Masterson and Peter Stokes led in Susan, Vanessa and Darren.

The reunited companions joked with each other, but the jokes were feeble and the laughter was hollow. Everyone felt a sense of failure at a project abandoned half-way through.

Ben Bellingham made a final trip ashore - to visit the still sick survivors of the ramming. Next, in court, he listened to the testimony of the hijacked trawler crew. Disbelief surrendered to sympathy for the abducted skipper whose throat might by now have been slit.

Boarding Sea Shepherd, Bellingham was informed of Alexander's decision to leave without the two-man sub. The US navy would continue its search. In the corridor, Susan blocked his path, fixing him with watery eyes. The otters! He offered a few weak words and concluded: "We'll just have to pray."

So, in brilliant sunshine but under a shadow, the ship sailed. The promise of seeing and exploring the wonders of the Amazon should have stirred the blood. Instead it seemed like a dreary duty.

By mid-morning, however, the wind had faded to a whisper. Which meant ... Susan hopped up and down. Which meant the current would reassert itself and carry the oil away from the otters.

A prayer answered? Susan was convinced of it. She wanted to run to Ben; but when she spotted him with Captain Alexander, both scowling, her happiness deflated like a leaking balloon. The shipboard atmosphere, tense and edgy, spoiled everything.

She latched on to Vanessa and the pair walked and talked listlessly. "What's the time?" Vanessa asked after examining a bare wrist. Susan told her. "Still can't get used to not having a watch," Vanessa complained.

Susan paused at the rail, pensive. "I wonder if it was stolen ... Did Yves find his pen?"

"No. Don't think so." Vanessa scuffed the deck. They moved on.

Some way off, by the bow, they identified the sulky silhouette of Darren. The person they had begun to get to know during the Monterey expedition might never have existed. Since setting foot again on Sea Shepherd, Darren had reverted to sullen silence. Susan didn't blame him - there was little enough joy around - but she did blame something, or rather someone, else. Curtis. Who at this moment seemed to have Darren cornered.

As the girls drew nearer they overheard the radio officer comment: "Like father, like son, eh?" It had the stinging feel of a taunt. Noticing them suddenly, Darren reddened. He needed no further excuse to detach himself from Curtis.

In his cabin, Alexander rose and subjected each of the three listeners to intense scrutiny. "So you see, gentlemen, the traitor is ever present. You may pass him a dozen times a day, eat with him, regard him as a friend. Could be anybody - even one of us."

This was too much for Philip Grant. "You're not suggesting ..."

Alexander waved him aside. "No, Phil. I'm assuming you, Ben and Mr. Masterson are as innocent as I am. Just wanted to make the point that there's no shortage of suspects. I'll start going through the list with Mr. Masterson. Lousy job. But we've got to get him. Keep your wits about you."

Vanessa parted from Susan, bored by the restless rambling, and left the younger girl alone with her thoughts - disturbing thoughts. Susan wished she could throw them overboard. Head down, mind threshing, she bumped into Yves.

He was in a daydream. "Sorry," both said simultaneously. They chatted for a bit.

"Not found your pen, Yves?"

"Nope ... How do you know about that?"

"Vanessa told me."

"Ah, Vanessa." Yves savoured the name in the way Susan reserved for her favourite food.

"What sort of pen was it?"

"Why? Have you seen it?"

"I can't say if you don't describe it!"

"Well, it's red - wine-coloured - with a gold top and a clip shaped like an arrow," Yves recited. "Does that ring a bell?"

"I'll go on looking, Yves. Bye for now."

As he slouched off, Susan resisted the urge to call him back. She was tempted to tell him that she had seen his pen, or its twin, but she couldn't. Not yet. Not until she'd talked things over with Gary.

Gary and Susan rendezvoused after lunch, behind some lifeboats. In one helter-skeltering sentence she recounted how Darren had lent her a pen - the pen? - on the bus to Monterey; how she had remarked upon it; and how Darren had soon become curiously cold. That abrupt switch in behaviour would make sense if--if he was a thief who feared being found out ...

"Did you hear me?" Susan's tone suggested a stamped foot.

But Gary refused to be rushed into replying. Several more seconds elapsed, then: "You were right to keep this to yourself. Could be a coincidence. And there's no proof."

"So you don't think Darren stole the pen?"

"I didn't say that."

"What about Vanessa's watch?"

"You're just guessing, Susan. I wouldn't be willing to sneak on somebody unless I was really sure, and you despise sneaks as much as I do."

"A fat lot of help you are!" Susan retorted, but secretly she agreed with Gary.

Gradually, day by day, all succumbed to the steady rhythm of an ocean voyage. Meals, lessons, lectures ... it was as if the youngsters had experienced no other life.

The hours hung heavy sometimes. One afternoon Susan nagged and wheedled Norman into displaying his conjuring skills. Yves, Gary, Vanessa and Susan squatted on deck-chairs and the impromptu show commenced. Shy Norman became a wizard. He was good, very good, brilliant. Vanessa aaahed as he flipped and shuffled cards like a gambler in a Western. Then he magicked a coin from behind her

ear.

Seeing Darren pass by in the background, Yves got up and went over to him. "Come and watch - it's great." But Darren shook his head. Yves retraced his steps. "What a room-mate! For months I've tried to be friendly. Let him rot ..."

Shoulders hunched, Darren traversed the deck, an apparently aimless figure. Aimless? He was far from that. He had an aim, a single aim: to get even with Curtis.

The radio room was always unmanned at this time. Still, he must be extra careful. Too many prying officers around lately. His senses, keen as a cat's, served him well. Only a few more yards. Darren twisted the door handle and slipped inside.

Curtis's jacket hung over the back of a chair. Darren worked quickly, rifling the pockets. Comb, diary, chewing-gum. Nothing worth having. Wait. A lighter, engraved with the initials L.C. That'll do. He tested it with a flick. The yellow jet surged, shot upwards, singeing his hair. And a wall-chart was on fire! Desperately he grabbed the jacket and beat out the flames. Tearing the charred corner from the chart, he dumped it in a waste-paper bin, then made his getaway with the lighter.

As Darren shut the door behind him, the paper in the bin glowed - breathed on by a breeze through the porthole.

Fifteen minutes later, an alarm sounded on the bridge. Water-sprinklers, triggered by heat, had been set off. Where? First Officer Philip Grant scanned the panel, found the flashing light. "Fire squad to the radio room." Loud-speakers relayed his instruction.

Kicking open the door, the men were engulfed in a searing acrid fog. Behind it smouldered the remnants of God-knows-what. "Masks on, bring extinguishers!" Frothing foam obliterated the last embers, and the fire combatants emerged sooty faced.

"What a bloody shambles!" Leslie Curtis amidst the sodden ruins - melted wires, discoloured metal, blistered paint - of his once orderly empire.

"I agree, Mister Curtis." Captain Alexander's voice was sword-sharp. "Find out if the radio can be salvaged. After that we'll go into the little matter of how this happened ..."

Alexander turned on his heel and marched away to conduct a series of meetings that would threaten to equal the fire in temperature.

Meanwhile Maude Mimpriss's lesson on medieval English poetry was failing to fascinate her pupils. Only later did they hear of the blaze, and, perhaps because mishaps had become almost common, reacted with comparative calm. Except Darren. His features, Susan noticed, fleetingly registered - shock.

8. Hannah

Susan and Gary mounted the companionway for their twice-round-the-deck evening walk. As usual Susan was doing most of the talking. Gary, slightly behind her and not paying full attention, took several seconds to realise that the words had stuck in her throat. Then he knew why: the high and wide heavens were flushed crimson, pink, orange. Susan imagined all the skies of the world draining through ruby rivers to flood this one sky. Even by Caribbean

standards it was an exceptional sunset.

They were not the only spectators on deck. The most unexpected people, seasoned mariners among them, had halted in mid-stride to stare. Gary's gaze shifted to the water - like everything else, that too seemed peculiarly altered. Its glossy surface reminded him of newly cut coal, or the rubbery skin of a sea lion.

From the bridge window, Captain Alexander regarded the sky more with wariness than wonder. Smearred blood was what he saw. Why so morbid? Absurd. The strain of command must be getting to him. No, it wasn't. Think. What had he forgotten, what warning was trying to break through the other layers of worry?

Alexander went off duty. At his cabin desk he thumbed the pages of the ship's log. A catalogue of misfortunes that an average seafarer might not meet in a lifetime. The fire was merely the latest blow. Alexander began to write. After half an hour he pushed the book aside. Undressing, he thought without sympathy of Curtis and his assistants labouring to resurrect the radio.

Around midnight a rating on the bridge took a routine barometer reading. The pressure was low, ominously low, and falling. He reported to Philip Grant. The first officer stiffened. Storm brewing. When the placid Caribbean lost its temper, no safe shelter could be found.

Before long Sea Shepherd started to rumba, wiggling her backside, wagging her head. Grant gave orders to extend the stabilisers, and two underwater "wings" slid out from the hull.

Below decks, Susan didn't need a barometer to predict dirty weather. She had got the message early and, while Vanessa fussed, was heaving into the sink.

Incredulously Grant traced the plummeting pressure - he'd never seen such a sustained dive. A rain-filled gust struck the window, like a giant paw cuffing with claws bared, and the wind sobbed as if in sorrow at what it was destined to do. Is the ship secure? Grant sent a patrol party to ensure all hatches were sealed and portholes covered. Sea Shepherd's rumba changed tempo. The roller-coaster ride was under way.

An experienced sailor, Philip Grant was not prone to panic. But his mouth had a sour taste, the taste of dread. He was bombarded by images of the ocean in outright rebellion - not real-life gales he had passed through, but illustrations of tempests from boyhood books. Though he busied himself with work, another vision possessed him: a snowy-maned wave rearing a hundred feet, astern, in the moonlight, to avalanche on a trapped vessel. It had happened once to a tanker in the Pacific.

Sea Shepherd climbed up and tobogganed down steepening slopes. Grant blinked as lightning fractured the sky, briefly illuminating a near and a far ferment of water. The waiting waves. Twenty-footers. Grant noted the wind speed - 50 m.p.h. - and rang the engine-room.

In the galley, piled plates teetered, tumbled and smashed to pieces. In the cabins hardly anybody slept. A solicitous Gary was helping Norman to his feet after he'd been tipped out of the top bunk; Vanessa was escorting Susan on her fifth visit to the bathroom; Yves was attempting to read, while Darren stowed his hold-all.

On the bridge Grant listened to the storm sounds - a yowling blast, rattling rain, the slapping thud of hundreds of tons of salt water which scaled the

ship's side like a marauding pirate crew. The wind had touched 60 m.p.h., and the barometric pressure was still plunging. Grant couldn't delay a moment longer. "Call the ol' man on the intercom."

"No need." Alexander stood there beside him. The first officer felt a surge of relief. James Alexander was back in charge. Grant briefed him.

Under beetling brows the captain's eyes flitted across panels and dials. Grant had followed proper procedures: reducing engine speed to seven knots and steering Sea Shepherd into wind and waves. "Good work, Phil. This one's gonna be real hell ..."

Dimly visible at dawn were thirty-foot waves, crowned by as much again in seething spray. Military-looking low clouds closed in, rank by rank, lancing rain on everything beneath. Soon the wind screamed past the 75 m.p.h. mark. Force 12. That made it official: a hurricane.

Alexander cursed himself. Fool! Why hadn't he interpreted the signs - lurid sunset, slick dark sea? A double-page advertisement for a hurricane! Up-to-the-minute weather forecasts must have alerted him, even before the radio was knocked out. Had he received but failed to heed them? Whatever the truth, he was responsible, he was to blame. If his ship foundered ...

He could only guess at the diameter of the hurricane - 50 miles, 100, 1,000 - and at its direction. Nor could he know how close Sea Shepherd was to the storm centre, a vortex where the all-powerful wind shrilled and shouted like a multitude of fiends.

By now Vanessa and Susan were taking turns at the sink. Next door, Yves and Darren collided involuntarily and gave up pretending to ignore each other. In the neighbouring cabin Gary ushered queasy Norman to the bottom bunk, then ventured into the corridor.

Cannoning off the metal bulkheads, he zigzagged a few bruising yards, determined to find someone - anyone - who could give him news. From every quarter came the unnerving noise of objects in the process of destruction.

Ben Bellingham tottered into sight. Maude Mimpriss, limp and ghastly white, hung on his arm. "Back to your cabin, young man!" Ben's gruffness didn't encourage discussion.

Captain Alexander felt old, too old for this. Hour after hour. The bridge floor had become an unyielding trampoline. Often Sea Shepherd was hidden. A rehearsal for the time when the wild water claimed her completely? He crumpled the thought like a ball of paper. The officer who'd relieved Grant on watch chanted statistics in the captain's ear. Wind speed: 120 m.p.h. Wave-height: 40 feet. Barometer reading: 903 millibars, down to a record low.

Johnny Masterson arrived on the bridge, bringing what information he could. "Curtis has had no luck with the radio...Baggalley and Stokes are supervising the teenagers."

Below and aft of them, the Chief Engineer nursed the engines, wincing whenever the ship's propellers were forced from the sea to thresh in deafening impotence.

Amidships, Senior Laboratory Scientist Frederick Cairns confronted different problems. His prized fish specimens, slopping against the tank walls, were suffering torment. Some, incredibly, were being seasick. He'd attend to them later. Such was his preoccupation that it never occurred to him there might

not be a later.

Alexander muttered, unable to see ahead. But when the curtains of spray parted, he wished they hadn't. Combers, peaking at fifty feet, were queuing up to board Sea Shepherd.

At 1#00 p.m. precisely, a hurricane squall topped 150 m.p.h. Could things get any worse? With a crack like a gunshot the bridge window shattered. Glass fragments flew, slashing flesh. The helmsman's gurgling shriek was swamped by a thousand-times-louder outcry as the wet wind ran amok. It set out to strip him, ballooning clothes, ripping seams. He staggered backwards, his face a horrific network of red rivulets.

Alexander fought to keep a clear head. Two priorities: look after that poor devil and regain control of the wheel. The wheel was the more urgent. Charts, papers spiralled in a bizarre blizzard. "Move, damn you!" The men with him seemed temporarily stupefied. Exerting every muscle against a solid stream of air, he led them across the treacherously pitching floor.

"She's broaching!" Alexander bellowed. All somehow found extra strength, well aware of the consequences if the waves caught Sea Shepherd broadside. Men grabbed the wheel, risking broken fingers. But the ship was too far gone, heeling more and more acutely to starboard as the heaped water leaned on her. Nobody remained standing.

The inclinometer, a device measuring the angle of roll, indicated 38 degrees ... 39 ... 40. No vessel could recover from a 45-degree list in weather conditions like these. James Alexander, defeated and belittled by self-loathing, prepared for the end. He was losing his ship. And he'd betrayed the trust of crew and passengers, who would pay with their lives.

The captain did not believe in God. But as the inclinometer edged towards 44 degrees, something was about to change his mind. At two hundred miles an hour a caterwauling gust slammed into the port side of the ship, shouldering her on to an even keel. Agile and adroit, Alexander recaptured the helm. He governed the engines, coaxing Sea Shepherd slowly, sluggishly, to obey. She was coming round! Ready and able to brave the storm's full onslaught.

Later Alexander would say his first prayer of thanks for forty years. Now he must act. While a rating tended the injured man, Alexander put out a call for the medical officer.

The below-decks scene suggested a visit by rampaging vandals. Buckled equipment, up-ended furniture, spattered provisions. Throughout the length and breadth of the vessel, people assessed the damage. To themselves included.

The thrust of providence that had saved Sea Shepherd also heralded a further twist in the hurricane's behaviour. Instead of charging head-on, the wind now withdrew for seconds at a time - to return on irregular raids. From all points of the compass. Drilling tunnels in the spume-laden atmosphere, it hit the ship like dynamite explosions.

Philip Grant, who had resumed bridge duties, was perplexed; Alexander less so. If his theory proved correct, those aboard were due for perhaps the eeriest experience on earth. He'd been told about the eye of the hurricane - an arena of supernatural stillness at the storm's dead centre. Were the accounts accurate?

Conjecture gave way to stunned disbelief as Sea Shepherd bore them into a slow motion dream. A spotlight sun shone on waters that were polished ebony yet

transparent. The air, warm and soggy and stationary, made skins prickle with perspiration. And the hush ... awesomely "loud". But beyond the borders of this bewitched haven - a fifteen-mile circle - the hurricane howled more malevolently than ever.

No longer cooped up, Gary and Susan embraced in the corridor. He wasn't surprised by her greenish complexion or the tale of woe that went with it. Yves and Vanessa, though less demonstrative, were clearly pleased to see each other. Darren and Norman stretched legs, stiff from lack of exercise.

Meanwhile, traipsing through debris, officers and maintenance personnel conducted a systematic inspection. The engine-room had escaped almost unscathed. Equally heartening, Sea Shepherd's hull was keeping the Caribbean where it belonged - outside. And what of the casualties? Astonishingly minor. Grazes, sprains, bumps. Apart from the helmsman, strapped down in the ship's hospital, no one was seriously hurt.

Ben Bellingham informed passengers that the rock'n'roll marathon would continue. "This is just an intermission, I'm afraid. Make the most of it."

As Gary rearranged their cabin, Norman felt fit enough to impart another portion of his knowledge. "A hurricane may discharge 1« trillion gallons of rain, you know. Once, in the Philippines, 42 inches fell in 24 hours." Gary stopped what he was doing. Hands on hips, he stared at Norman and laughed. Some things never change.

Not a hint of humour brightened the captain's countenance.

Alexander, sticky and panting in the humidity, stepped aside to let ship's carpenters block the holed window with planks. A wind-blown bolt was the missile that had caused the calamity. Morosely he took stock. Everything on the dented deck was bent or broken. Four of the eight lifeboats had gone.

"Radio's operating, Captain." A haggard Leslie Curtis. "We picked up Miami - US Weather Bureau. The hurricane's heading north-west. They've dubbed it Hannah. It's Category 5, severe ..."

"Severe, eh?" Alexander's mouth curved sarcastically. "I rather gathered that."

Curtis passed on the rest of the relevant data. If he expected congratulations, he was disappointed.

Hannah - so the bitch had a name. Alexander half suspected she had a mind too, a scheming mind. This notion seemed more probable when the hurricane renewed her assault and, amid mountainous waves, Sea Shepherd cast off a propeller.

Yet again the youngsters were toppled. They sat or lay now among their scattered possessions. At once Darren began to scoop up the spilt contents of his hold-all. Yves gawped, seized by sudden indignation. He lunged at Darren. "Hey, that's my pen!" "Is it?" "Yes, it is. Where'd you get it?" "Found it." "Where?" "C-c-can't remember." Retrieving the pen, Yves stomped out of the cabin.

Above deck, Alexander argued heatedly with the Chief Engineer via the telephone that connected bridge and engine-room. The engineer hadn't minced his words: on only one propeller and at four knots, Sea Shepherd was going nowhere - except to the bottom. Philip Grant, a fine officer whose courage could stretch no further, shared these fears and said so. Alexander faced him. Glaring, he bit back a scornful retort. "Come on, Phil, we weren't spared for

nothing. After fifteen hours I flatly refuse to become shark food."

Was the captain's faith genuine, or faked? Somehow his ship, twice as difficult to steer, clung for dear life to the switchbacking ocean. Hannah harried them until her very last gasp.

And then, quite suddenly, Sea Shepherd was tossing in water that was merely rough. From a rent in the clouds gold rays fanned across the sky and gilded the billows. It was over!

The captain retired to his cabin, where Ben Bellingham found him, hands clasped and apparently talking to himself. Ben crept away.

On deck that night, Susan said to Gary: "No wonder he's called Alexander the Great."