

CHRISTOPHER COOL / TEEN AGENT

in

HEADS YOU LOSE

By JACK LANCER

Adventure #5 in the Christopher Cool series



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CHRIS COOL, TEEN's brilliant secret agent, investigates international intrigue around the world

In their latest adventure, Christopher Cool, Geronimo, Spice and Yummi work behind the scenes as a revolution in South America threatens stability in the region.

They work with the CIA trying to find a couple of mission CIA agents. But what they find and the places they go along the way...!

Heads You Lose

by JACK LANCER

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1. Operation Shrink

“WE’LL BE THERE, sir. In two hours. Sorry to hear about Grandma’s operation. What’s the trouble?”

Christopher Cool doubted he’d get an answer over the new two-way radio concealed in the steering column of his Jaguar. Geronimo Johnson, his Apache Indian buddy, grinned in the bucket seat beside him.

Over the radio a crisp metallic voice with an English accent said, “Grandma’s shrinking. Urgent. Out.”

“Shrink-shrank-shrunk,” Chris said as he gunned the Jag along the rural New Jersey road.

“The boss isn’t playing games, *choonday*, old buddy,” said Geronimo. Suddenly he gasped. “Look out!”

The bullet-like black car slewed to the side of the road, missing a fractious chestnut pony by the width of a hair.

Nearly splattered that baby all over Middlesex County!” said Geronimo. He leaped to the blacktop road and grabbed the reins of the beautiful animal. Agilely the Indian sprang into the horse’s English saddle.

“Careful, Gerry, she’s skittish.” Chris, a sophomore at nearby Kingston University, was handsome, blond, and well muscled. “Look for a polo field,” he went on, “and you’ll find the owner.”

“Not necessary. Here he comes.”

A man wearing jodhpurs and boots trotted down the road toward them. “*Muchas gracias, señores*. I’ll take my mount.”

“Our pleasure,” Geronimo said, and stepped from the saddle.

“A truck backfired,” the man explained, “and Batalla bolted. I must say, you are good with horses. I have never seen him so calm with a strange rider.”

The man, darkly handsome with a slim mustache, introduced himself as Fernando Rios.

“Christopher Cool,” Chris said. “And Geronimo Johnson.” The Apache nodded.

“Do you ride as well as your friend, Mr. Cool?”

“I ride.”

“Then please join us for a chukka or two. We would be honored by your company.”

Chris and Geronimo exchanged glances. They were both members of TEEN, Top-secret Educational Espionage Network. This was an undercover arm of U. S. Intelligence, composed of brilliant young college students.

At the moment they were en route to TEEN’s headquarters, responding to a summons from Q, the eccentric and harried guiding force of the organization.

“What do you think?” Geronimo asked, hopefully glancing at his watch.

No can do,” Chris replied.

The poloist smiled. “*Adios, señores.*” He waited until the Jaguar roared off before mounting.

“A Latin playboy, I would judge,” said Geronimo. “Very good friends of my ancestors.” He motioned a sweeping cut across the throat.

Delayed by the near-accident, Chris swept onto the New Jersey Turnpike as quickly as possible and tooled along at five miles above the speed limit. "Grandma's shrinking," he mused. "Gerry, when did you last see your shrink-head?"

Geronimo stared impassively at the whizzing traffic. His high cheekbones, long hair, and obsidian eyes reflected his stoic Apache heritage.

"My psychiatrist couched me when I was a freshman," he replied. "Got rid of ten percent of my hostilities."

"Suppose the boss wants us for psychological warfare?"

"Psychiatry isn't my line." Geronimo grunted and lapsed into silence.

The Jag threaded its way through heavy traffic on the parkway. Soon the Jersey Meadows exuded a dubious aroma, and the TEEN agents welcomed the Lincoln Tunnel entrance which carried them under the Hudson River.

They emerged in Manhattan and headed directly for the Luxury Motors Building on Broadway near Fifty-sixth Street.

Chris pulled into the service garage. He went through the standard routine of turning the Jag over to a mechanic and stepping into the manager's office to discuss a tune-up. A pretty secretary glanced at them, then pressed a button. The boys walked into a secret elevator, spoke into an intercom grille, and were zipped silently to the top floor.

A guard with a submachine gun covered them when they stepped out.

“Kingston One and Two to see Q,” Chris said.

A Positive identification flashed on a screen mounted on the wall. The guard motioned them past. The boys walked down a long corridor flanked by laboratories and rooms of clattering teletypes and typewriters. They stopped before a flush-paneled door at the end and were scanned by an electronic eye. A green light blinked and the door opened.

“Come in,” Q growled.

He was seated behind his massive walnut desk. His customary beat-up yachting cap was jammed on his head. Q wore a dark blazer over an open-necked white shirt. The unlit pipe that usually jutted from his mouth was laying on the desk. His grayish-blond beard glistened with droplets of milk, and he was pouring another glass from the half-filled bottle near the phone.

“Ulcer acting up, sir?” Chris asked.

“Now what gave you that idea?” He downed the milk.

“A wild guess, sir.”

Q glared at him. Q rarely looked at anyone with anything less than a glare. “Are you familiar with C. G. Northgate?”

“One of the top men in the CIA,” Chris answered.

“He’s on his way here. Arriving any minute now. Says he wants to see some of my brats. His term. Brats. Humph! What nerve. I don’t reveal my agents’ identities to *anyone*. While I talk to Northgate, you two sit in the observation chamber and—”

The intercom buzzed. “Northgate’s on his way up,

sir.”

“Good,” Q answered. “All right, boys, in you go.” He motioned toward a bookcase.

The TEEN agents pulled the case away from the wall and passed through a narrow, low door. Then they closed the opening.

They were in a small room, dimly illuminated by a red bulb. Easy chairs were arranged in front of a one-way mirror which looked onto Q’s office. They sat down and made themselves comfortable.

“Wonder what Northgate wants,” Chris mused. “We’ll see,” Geronimo replied stoically. “There he comes.”

Northgate entered the office. He was a man of medium height, with a gray crew cut. Without preamble he asked, “Where are your agents?”

“They’ll be found when they’re needed,” Q replied evenly.

The CIA man glanced around with icy blue eyes. “They are probably watching right now. What is it—TV monitor? Or one-way glass?”

“You’ve got a suspicious nature.”

“So I have. Well, you play your little game. I’ll come right to the point. You have seen, of course, the interagency file on Cascabel?”

Q stroked his chin. “The Rattlesnake.”

“That’s what it means.”

“Wanted in the States for murder and mail fraud,” Q continued. “A West Indian bloke. Currently thought to be stirring up revolution in South America. Considered highly dangerous. Your people are

working on his case.”

“At least you keep up to date,” Northgate muttered. “Well.... we had two good men on him. They’ve disappeared. We can’t find a trace. Our sources say that Cascabel is on to us. One of the higher-ups decided your brats might have a better chance—less liable to suspicion. I don’t agree, but orders are orders. So it’s your baby now.”

“That’s everything?”

“Everything but a final bit of advice.”

Q arched his eyebrows.

“Pick a couple of smart ones. Otherwise you won’t see them again. Cascabel doesn’t play games.”

“Neither do my agents.”

“I wish them luck. They’ll need it.” Northgate stalked out of the office.

Q sat alone a moment, staring at the door and stroking his beard. Then he said, “All right, you two, come out now.”

The agents pushed the bookcase aside and stepped from their concealment. In front of Q’s desk again, Chris said, “Too bad about those missing CIA men. Does anyone have an idea what happened to them, sir?”

Q picked up a lighter and held it horizontally while a flame snaked into the black bowl of his pipe. “Matter of fact, yes,” he said after a thoughtful puff. “Really didn’t have the courage to tell Northgate, though.”

Geronimo shifted uneasily in his chair. His black eyes flitted from Chris to Q, who bent over to open his lower left desk drawer.

From it he removed two objects, which at first glance looked like old hairy apples. He placed them solemnly on his blotter and sat back.

Geronimo let out a low whistle.

Chris looked startled. “Those...” he began, “those are...”

Q nodded. “Quite right. They’re shrunken heads!”

2. Welcome to Haiti

DESPITE HIS SOPHISTICATION in the craft of espionage, Chris gulped at the sight of the shrunken heads.

Geronimo's face remained stony.

"These are our missing men?" Chris asked.

"Without a doubt." Q tossed two glossy eight-by-ten photographs on the desk. "Make a comparison. Obviously the shrinking process distorts some of the features, but the basic facial structure remains unchanged."

The TEEN agents glanced from the photos to the grisly objects that once had been the heads of two men.

"Pick them up," Q ordered. "Study them carefully."

Chris and Geronimo obeyed. Each turned a hideous head over in his hands for a minute examination. The hair seemed absurdly long and the skin, turned black, was leathery to the touch. The eyes were closed and the lips sewn shut with three wide, looping stitches.

"Are they fixed in your minds?" Q asked. "We're not likely to forget them," Chris answered stiffly.

"Good." Q took back the trophies. "Two reasons for remembering them. One, so your own heads don't show up on this desk. Two, so you can recognize the legitimate article—not be duped by a fake."

Geronimo answered with a slight movement of his eyes. Chris said, "Northgate doesn't know of this, sir?"

"No. I received the heads this morning. They had

been delivered to one of our field men by messenger. I wanted to keep the specimens until you had a chance to study them.”

“Thank you, sir,” Geronimo said finally. “You’re always thoughtful.”

“Briefly,” Q continued, “the rundown on Cascabel is this. He’s a West Indian. Wanted here for murder and mail fraud. Now fomenting revolution in South America. Concentrating on Ecuador. He’s working primarily among Indians and peasants. Cascabel is a high practitioner of voodoo. Terrifies the natives with it. Learned head shrinking from the Jivaros. Voodoo and head shrinking. A one-two punch that keeps the poor devils under his control in perpetual fear.”

“Can we expect any help from the South American governments?” Chris asked.

“Yes. You have permission to operate in any of the countries. But don’t reveal yourselves unless it’s absolutely essential.”

“Our mission is to stop Cascabel,” Geronimo said. “Any way we can?”

“Wrong. We want him alive—captured—delivered to our government.” Q pointed to the heads. “He has a lot to pay for, an awful lot.”

“Understood,” Chris said.

“Once you have him in custody, contact local authorities. They’ll blast” through red tape and have an extradition agreement set up in a matter of hours.”

“Our first destination?” Chris asked.

“Howell Mansion. You’ll be briefed there and given instructions.”

“Right.”

“Get him. Get him fast.”

“Yes, sir!” Geronimo said. They turned to go. “One more thing...”

The TEEN agents looked back. Q appeared to be struggling with himself.

“Sir?”

“Be careful.” Were it not a known fact that Q was incapable of blushing, the boys would have sworn that his face reddened! He stood, looking somewhat embarrassed for a moment, then continued in his usual precise manner, “Yes. Be careful. The government has a big investment in you and doesn’t want to lose it. On your way!”

They hurried out, picked up the Jag, and drove through the Midtown Tunnel to Long Island. Then Chris zoomed off toward the North Shore and arrived at Howell Mansion.

It was located on Long Island Sound, behind the walls of a vast estate. The showplace had been built four decades earlier by a millionaire who later lost his fortune in the stock market. Now it served as a secret TEEN training center.

They checked in at the registration office and were told that Mr. and Mrs. Howell were in conference. They would call the boys as soon as they were free.

Chris and Geronimo decided to stroll down toward the water. En route, they passed well-concealed groups of sweating recruits being trained in judo, karate and aikido exercises, physical endurance courses and weapons familiarization.

A feminine voice lilted from behind a tall hemlock hedge. “Well, if it isn’t the Kingston Duo!”

“Spice! Yummi!” Chris said happily at the sight of two bikini-clad girls approaching.

“A hundred points for proper identification,” Spice said.

Yummi made a little bow. “Humble servant so happy to see honorable masters.”

Chris groaned. They had double-teamed with Spice and Yummi to work on their last case, in Bavaria, which was now filed under the title *Ace of Shadows*.

Yummi Toyama was a small Japanese-American girl from Berkeley University with golden skin and jet-black hair that reached to her waist.

Spice Carter was a tall, pretty, green-eyed redhead from Vassar, known in TEEN circles for her quick temper and her sharp tongue.

Both girls were topnotch agents and the boys were genuinely pleased to see them.

“What brings the Lone Ranger and Tonto out to Howell Mansion?” Spice asked.

“Careful, squaw,” Geronimo growled, “or there’ll be a red scalp hanging from my teepee.”

“Easy now. Don’t you forget what happened to your namesake.”

“Someday vengeance will be ours,” Geronimo replied without a change of expression. “We will ride free over the plains and hunt groovy buffaloes.”

“Seriously,” Spice said, “what’s the drill?”

“Subversion,” Chris replied. “With voodoo. And

shrunken heads.”

“My, my! You boys do get mixed up in the nastiest things.”

“Far too distasteful for such gentle souls,” Yummi said. “Lest you be corrupted, Spice and I will sacrifice ourselves and switch assignments with you.”

“Thank you,” Geronimo said. “I’m moved. And what are you doing?”

Spice made a face. “There’s a security leak in one of the government’s East Coast ‘Think Tanks.’ “

“Our job,” Yummi explained, “is to question the hundred and some odd people involved and feed all the data into a computer. We’re glorified technicians.”

“Is that a job for a spy?” Spice lamented.

“I think it’s very nice,” Geronimo said. “Feminine, dull, and appropriate.”

Spice aimed a karate blow at the Apache, which he parried easily and with a laugh. “Temper, temper.”

A new recruit in a black sweat suit trotted up and told Chris and Geronimo that Mr. Howell was waiting for them in his study. They took leave of the girls and jogged back to the mansion.

Howell was a tall, gaunt man with a jolly air. He and his wife, both retired CIA agents, were in charge of the training estate. Their two college aged children provided excellent cover. Arriving and departing agents and trainees could be explained as their classmates and weekend guests. “Cool, Johnson—good to see you again.”

Howell shook their hands and motioned them to take chairs beside a slide projector aimed at a wall

screen. He was businesslike as usual, and reviewed all the information which the combined intelligence agencies had gathered on Cascabel. It was not much.

“He’s clever,” Howell said, “and covers his tracks well. With a large bribe, however, we bought this from one of his henchmen. Observe.”

He flicked off the lights and thumbed a stud on the projector. A photograph illuminated the screen. It was a double shot, showing front and profile views of a dark-skinned man. He had tiny, cruel eyes, a large hooked nose, and a narrow chin. The slide was labeled Cascabel.

“I realize Q told you to get him fast,” Howell continued, turning the lights back on. “But I don’t want you to sacrifice caution for speed. Be methodical and keep your wits. This man is as deadly as any you’ll ever face.”

“Understood, sir,” Chris said, and Geronimo nodded.

“All right, then. I want you to spend this evening in the library. Absorb as much as you can about voodoo and head shrinking. Textbooks are fine, but nothing beats practical experience, so you’re booked on a charter flight to Haiti tomorrow, via Miami. You’ll have plenty of opportunities to study voodoo first hand there.”

“How long do we stay there, sir?” Chris asked.

“As long as you think the situation warrants. By the way, our friend Pomeroy has come up with a little magic that might help you two.”

Pomeroy was the fussy bald little gnome in charge of TEEN’s Special Projects Department—sometimes

referred to as the Department of Dirty Tricks.

“What is it now?” Chris grinned. “A do-it-yourself zombie kit?”

“Pretty close,” Howell said. “Alakazam!” He gestured dramatically and suddenly a large white mist appeared in the center of the room. “I summon the spirits of the underground. Appear!”

Vague undulating shapes of fantastic colors formed in the mist.

“Pretty neat, huh?” said Howell.

“I’ll say,” Chris answered. “How’s it done?”

“These tiny capsules and this matchbox. Toss a capsule. It’ll break and emit a mist screen, which lasts about three minutes. The matchbox is a miniature projector.

“There are a dozen slides with it—various monsters and weird psychedelic shapes, colors, and designs. Also a shot of Haiti’s Le President and one of his arch foe Ramon Guerra. Might come in handy.”

The boys thanked Howell, went to the well stocked kitchen for a snack, then headed for the library and the reference works on voodoo and head shrinking.

They studied late into the night, grabbed four hours of sleep, had breakfast in the mansion’s high-ceilinged dining room, then drove to Kennedy International Airport.

A commercial airliner whisked them to Miami. There they transferred to a multiengine job that carried four passengers and one crewmember. Chris and Geronimo’s companions on the flight were two middle-aged schoolteachers. The TEEN agents

themselves posed as students on a holiday. The teachers thought they were “simply darling young boys.”

Shortly after take-off from Miami the plane began to encounter severe turbulence.

“What’s happening?” one of the women screamed.

“I’d say we’re flying through an air pocket!” the other cried shakily.

“Take it easy!” Geronimo pleaded. “There’s no such thing as pockets. It’s just a bit of rough air.”

Suddenly the air outside became a caldron of churning black clouds. Rain began to splash against the windows with terrific force.

“We’re passing through the edge of a storm,” the pilot announced finally. “Nothing to worry about. We should be through it in a few minutes.”

The women didn’t believe the pilot. They were convinced all were about to die. Chris and Geronimo did their best to calm them.

The plane was tossed violently about like a cork in a windswept sea. Then, after several anxious minutes, it broke out into clear air.

“Wow, I’m glad that’s over,” Chris sighed.

The passengers looked toward the ground to see that they were flying over a carpet of thick green jungle.

“We’re pretty far off course,” the pilot declared, “we won’t have any problem, unless Le President thinks we’re...”

Wham! Wham! Two black clouds burst in front of the airplane.

The teachers screamed.

“It can’t be!” the pilot cried in disbelief. “*Wham! Wham! Wham!*”

“Anti-aircraft fire!” Chris gasped.

The plane shuddered violently.

“We’ve been hit!” the pilot shouted. “Tighten your seat belts and hang on! We’re going down!”

3. Jungle Magic

THE AIRPLANE WAS losing altitude fast. “We don’t have any choice,” the pilot said. “I’m going for the trees. Brace yourselves!”

Chris and Geronimo helped the sobbing women tighten their seat belts, then buckled their own.

The vast, unbroken carpet of green drew closer. The pilot flattened out his glide. The tops of trees became visible. The air-speed indicator dropped rapidly.

“Here we go!” Scant feet above the trees, the pilot yanked the control wheel all the way back. The plane’s nose came up. The craft shook heavily, then sunk in a blurred sea of foliage.

The passengers were thrown back, forward, side to side, amid fierce cracking and wrenching sounds. Broken branches tore through the wings and the fuselage.

Then all was still. The dazed pilot looked back at his passengers. They responded weakly, shaken but miraculously unhurt.

The TEEN agents assisted the women from the wreckage, then Chris and the pilot spread a map on the ground and set about pinpointing their position while Geronimo assured the teachers they would not be eaten by wild tigers.

One of the major reasons he could make such a promise, he explained, was that there were no tigers in Haiti.

But suddenly a short burst of fire from an automatic weapon split the air. “Stick hands up! Quick! Quick!”

Half a dozen men with burp guns appeared from the foliage. The two women screamed, then promptly fainted. The armed men jabbered to each other.

“What are they speaking?” Geronimo whispered.

“A kind of French Creole.” Chris was majoring in languages at Kingston. He was a brilliant linguist and could speak fluently most of the world’s major tongues as well as several of the lesser known dialects.

“Who are they?” the pilot asked.

“Insurgents. They’re going to take us to a guy named Belmont, evidently their leader. They’re arguing about the best way to transport the women.”

“If we draw them off,” Geronimo asked the pilot, “can you get away with the two beauty queens?”

“I think so. The map shows a fair-sized village about two miles due west. But what about you guys?”

“We’ll take our chances. Think we can swing it, Chris?”

“There’s a possibility. They seem pretty confused and agitated.”

One of the teachers opened her eyes, saw the guerrillas standing over her, shrieked, and fainted again. The men jumped at the sound of her voice.

“*Deeka!*” Chris whispered. “Let’s go!”

He and Geronimo dove into the brush and rolled over while machine-gun bullets tore through the leaves above their heads. They gained their feet and were off and running, but the jungle was thick and the going tough.

They stumbled over logs, were tripped by hidden vines, splashed across small streams. Still the voices

of their pursuers could be heard close behind them.

“It worked,” Chris gasped. “They’re all after us.”

“Great!” Geronimo panted. “But what do we do now?”

“Run like devils.”

“I knew you’d come up with something clever.” Their enemies, more at home in the jungle, gradually closed in. “Split up!” Chris yelled. “Maybe we can divide them.” Geronimo rocketed off to the side and disappeared.

Minutes later, Chris knew he couldn’t outrun them. He flung himself down and crawled to cover. He waited, scarcely daring to breathe while the rebels beat the brush with angry curses.

Suddenly a thin voice called, “Meestair Cool! Surrender! You have six seconds. Then we kill your friend.”

Chris smiled grimly. That was the oldest trick in the world. But then he thought, “How do they know my name?”

“Don’t do it, Chris!” Geronimo yelled.

“Six... five... four... three...” Chris heard the man order an underling in French Creole to prepare to fire. They weren’t bluffing. “two ...”

Chris leaped to his feet. “I surrender.”

The guerrillas circled him quickly. Geronimo had a hangdog look. “Sorry, *choonday*,” he mumbled. “Ran smack into a branch and they jumped while I was down.” There was a purple bruise on his forehead.

The TEEN agents’ wrists and ankles were lashed. Then they were slung from poles, like deer, and

carried into the jungle. Unaware that he spoke their language, the men talked freely and Chris was relieved to find out that the insurgents had no knowledge of their true identities.

Finally they came to a tiny settlement peopled with armed men. The huts were arranged around a larger structure, which Chris and Geronimo immediately recognized as a voodoo temple. It served as home for both the priest and the gods.

The agents were thrown to the ground and Belmont, the priest, was summoned. He came from the temple, a dark-complexioned man with a look of madness in his eyes. Belmont listened to his men, then exploded in anger. Chris whispered a translation to Geronimo. One of Guerra's arms caches was located on the coast. Their plane had flown over it. A rebel gun crew panicked, thinking it was a government observation plane, and opened fire. Belmont tongue-lashed his men for their stupidity. Then he barked orders.

"Brace yourself," Chris murmured. "We're going to be put to death at the fangs of Damballah-wedo's rattlesnake. Afterwards he'll raise us from the dead as zombies."

"I should have stayed on the reservation," Geronimo grunted.

"Can you start Pomeroy's projector with your hands tied? I'll put on an act so they won't watch you."

"No problem. But paleface's magic had better work!"

"Cross your fingers, here goes." Chris stood up and shouted, "*Houngan!*" The priest whirled about at the sound of his formal title. "Do you speak English?"

Belmont nodded haughtily.

“Then summon your *hounsi*, your assistants, and all true believers in hoodoo” —Chris made sure to use the true word hoodoo known to initiates of the cult—“and I will show you magic beyond compare. I will show you that the gods Damballah-wedo, Ogu, Aida-wedo, and even Baron-Samedi himself do my bidding.”

“The gods of hoodoo will strike you dead for your blasphemy, white man!”

“Do not trifle with me, *houngan!*” Chris roared. “If I lie, my soul, my *loa*, will be the slave of you and your descendants for all eternity. Now beat the drum tattoo.”

Belmont was skeptical and wary, but his superstitious fear was more powerful. He gave the signal. Two men began pounding on large deep throated drums. Slowly the believers gathered. Doubt and apprehension were plainly visible in their expressions.

Chris spoke to Geronimo in Apache, a language they often used when they wished to converse in private. “Give them a shot of colors and shapes first, then two monsters—and the president.”

“Check.”

“Silence!” Chris bellowed.

The drums stopped. All eyes were riveted upon Chris. He raised his tied hands above his head, hesitated, then made a violent chopping motion. As he did, he flung one of the mist capsules.

It burst fifteen feet away and swelled into a large white shimmer. “*Aaaahhh!*” the natives murmured.

Belmont looked disconcerted, but he said, “That is not much magic.”

Chris garbled out some mumbo jumbo, then cried, “I call the *loa*, who are my servants!” He paused while those who spoke some English translated for the rest, then shouted, “Now!”

Tall, brightly colored shapes materialized. The wavering mist made them quiver with life. Most of the villagers gasped and fell to their knees. Belmont appeared shaken, but was still standing.

“Back to oblivion,” Chris commanded. They disappeared. “And now, one of my pets from the dark regions.” Chris waved his hands. A scaly beast with three rows of teeth and bulging eyes appeared. One of the natives screamed and fired his weapon at it.

“Fool!” Chris yelled. Belmont fell to his knees.

Chris dismissed the demon and called forth another with the words, “Behold the Eater of Hearts and Souls who awaits my bidding!”

A giant toad-like creature with huge horns and saliva-wet fangs appeared. The voodoo worshipers covered their eyes and shrieked. Chris laughed wickedly and commanded the apparition to be gone.

“And now,” he said, “I will bring forth your enemy, Le President, and I will kill him before your eyes!”

Belmont and his rebels stared at Chris with stunned disbelief.

Le President flashed on the screen at Chris’s command. Calculating that the mist would evaporate in some fifteen seconds, Chris stalked Le President with menacing gestures. Then he shouted and attacked the image ferociously.

The mist swirled into nothingness. Le President vanished.

Belmont rushed to Chris, flung himself at his feet, and kissed the earth.

“Man, we rolled ‘em in the aisles!” Geronimo said in Apache.

The ropes were quickly cut, whereupon Belmont begged the boys to summon up Sulato, the hated chief of Le President’s secret police, and to kill him also.

“Later,” Chris said.

Belmont smiled. “Not too much later, or he will already be dead. We have put the fifteen-day curse on him. Only two days remain.”

The chieftain displayed a three-eyed coconut which had been drained of its milk and into which had been inserted a paper coffin containing Sulato’s name. Beef gall and vinegar then had been poured in. The priest had set the coconut in the sand and placed a black candle atop it. As the candle burned down, it was replaced. Thirteen marks in the sand, each made at midnight, indicated how many days had passed.

The boys spent some time talking to Belmont. Chris told him he wanted to make sure the chief was performing the rituals properly and asked him to detail his practices.

Belmont eagerly explained his handling of Wonder-of-the-World-Root, Goofer *Dust* from graves, War Water, Fast Luck Oil, the choreography of the hoodoo dances he led, the special dance of the Nine-Day Death and other rites.

Then he took the agents into the darkened *houmfo*, the temple, the “House of Mysteries.” All the

trappings were there, the *poteau-mitan*, the bright sacred center pole, brick altars with jugs containing souls, the bowls of the Sacred Twins, thunders tones in oil, Ogu's sword, and calabashes with god-food.

What interested Chris and Geronimo most, though, was a drawing of a rattlesnake with the name *Cascabel* beneath it. A shrunken head lay beside it! Close at hand was a modern and most unvoodoo-like gray metal file box.

"Pay dirt," Chris said in Apache. "These are Cascabel's rebels." Geronimo nodded.

They had free run of the village. The natives treated them with cautious reverence, as if the youths were gods themselves! The TEEN agents were given the cleanest hut to sleep in. They lay awake and listened to the village settle dawn far the night. When all had been quiet for an hour, they crept out and made their way stealthily to the temple.

Quick escape was essential. The rebels would soon learn that Le President was still very much alive...

The beam from Chris's pencil flashlight stabbed through the darkness of the temple and illuminated the file. The blond agent stood watch while Geronimo jimmied the lid. "Bundle of papers in here," the Apache announced.

"Take it and let's go. If these jokers catch us in the jungle at night, we've had it!"

They were only a few minutes out of the camp when someone shouted. The shout turned to a scream, then furious raving.

"Belmont," Chris panted as the bays poured on the speed, "has discovered the papers are missing. He's

calling us traitors and false magicians. He's whipping his bays into a frenzy."

A roar of many voices rose into the night. "Sounds like the whale camp's after us," Gerry said.

With no hope of outdistancing their pursuers, Chris and Geronimo headed far the beach. They held their zip pens in their hands—slim pneumatic weapons that fired tiny anesthetic darts.

"Made it!" Geronimo gasped when they burst from the foliage into the sand. "But we haven't gat enough of a lead. They'll gun us dawn."

Two rebels crashed through the brush. The TEEN agents fired simultaneously and bath guerrillas went dawn, knocked out by the sleepy slivers.

"Wrist radio," Chris said. "Continuous emergency broadcast."

The bays twirled the stems of their watches.

"No good, *choonday*," Geronimo said. "There isn't any help within hearing distance."

The shouts of the rebels were drawing nearer. Running, the boys would be shot in the back.

So they threw themselves into the sand, with their zip pens ready to face the enemy.

4. Pins and Girls

GERONIMO WHISPERED TENSELY, “Hey, *choonday*, dig the sound.”

“Helicopter!”

“But whose?”

Their watch radios crackled. “Little brothers, little brothers. This is the cavalry. Am homing on your signal, but have no visual contact.”

Chris adjusted his watch to open channel. “Beau, you beautiful son of a gun! We’re on the beach. Watch the pencil flashes.”

The chopper’s running lights were visible now, skimming low and fast over the water. “Beau,” Chris transmitted, “there’s a hostile reception party with automatic weapons approaching on the double. I...” Chris’s heart sank. “Better scram. Here they come.”

“Don’t sweat, brothers. This beautiful machine’s equipped with a riot siren. Plug your ears and grit your teeth.”

A line of machine-gun bullets stitched across the sand. Chris and Geronimo jammed their fingers into their ears. The roaring helicopter reached the foliage and hovered.

A wild ululating shriek began, climbing up to ultrasonic levels which could hardly be tolerated by the human ear. The TEEN agents writhed about on the sand. It seemed their brains were being torn to pieces.

Then suddenly it ceased. The enemy had vanished. Chris and Geronimo staggered to their feet as the

chopper dropped gently down beside them. A massive figure in a flight suit leaped from behind the controls.

Beauregard Tatum, a Negro from Mississippi and currently a student at Harvard, wrapped each of the boys in one of his huge arms and helped them to the aircraft. He was six-foot-four and two hundred seventy pounds of slab like muscle.

“I’m sure glad to see you,” he boomed. “I tell you, though, it’s been a mean hot flight. What say we go for a fast swim before we take off?”

Chris’s mind was still reeling, but he managed to mumble, “Someday, Beau, I’m going to break your neck.”

Beau shook his head. “I am not appreciated. That is the bane of my existence.”

The towering agent actually was one of the most brilliant students ever recruited by TEEN. His intelligence quotient was astronomical, but he was embarrassed by it and often tried to disguise his brainpower by flamboyant foolery.

After they were airborne, the effects of the siren slowly wore off the jangled nervous systems of the harried spies.

“Tell us, big daddy,” began the Indian, “how come you were so handy just at the right time?”

Beau turned his head and grinned. “When the boss received the sweet message that you hadn’t arrived on schedule, he sent me special delivery from Puerto Rico.”

“Sorry to interrupt your vacation,” Chris said dryly.

“It wasn’t exactly a vacation, so don’t let it bother

you. How come you had to start a fight with the natives?”

Chris filled Beau in, and Geronimo said, “Let’s have a look at the *booty*.” He pulled the file papers from his pocket and shook out the sand.

A memo revealed that Cascabel was indeed the power behind the Haitian rebels and was presently in New Orleans. It gave an address.

Beau transmitted the intelligence to TEEN’s Puerto Rican contact and received an order. Minutes later a voice crackled radio.

“Proceed directly to the new house of Aunt Louise. Try to talk Uncle Rattler into visiting the family in New York.”

Beau let out a big whoop. “Man, do I dig the Mardi Gras!”

After a short stop in Florida to refuel, they arrived in New Orleans early in the morning. A CIA man met them at the airport and took over the chopper.

The trio had breakfast at the airport restaurant, then took a taxi and drove past the address. It was a medium-sized cellar club, located a block and a half from Bourbon Street, jazz capital of the world.

“Red Horn,” Geronimo read the name aloud. “Good place to go if you like jazz,” the taxi driver commented.

“Thanks. We’ll keep it in mind.”

The boys asked the driver to let them off at a rooming house frequented by vacationing college students, checked in, and flopped into bed.

They met in the lobby at seven, spent a couple of

hours sightseeing, had dinner, then separated and made their individual ways to the Red Horn.

Geronimo and Beau were there when Chris arrived, seated at small tables at opposite ends of the stage. Chris took a round table dead center, laid with a checkered cloth, and a tiny Flamenco doll as centerpiece.

A quartet was playing old honky-tonk stuff, and they were good. It was still early and the place was only half full. There was little conversation. Cigarette smoke was thick and swung lazily in great, blue-gray layers. Occasional glasses clinked, but other than that the music held sway. The patrons were true aficionados.

Chris ordered *cate au lait*, and looked for anything suspicious in the Red Horn. Nothing so far.

The quartet ended its gig and left the stage to a burst of applause. People began to talk. Chris was jolted to hear a heavy spatter of Spanish words and phrases.

He beckoned a waiter. "Senior, I'm looking for a friend," Chris said. "Jose de Valle-Inclan. A *sudamericano*. Medium height, stocky, a mustache, swarthy skin."

The waiter shrugged. "I'm sorry, but I don't know him. Many *sudamericanos* come here."

"*Gracias*," Chris said.

"*De nada*."

The clincher came with the next act. It was a Flamenco dance troupe—also unusual for a jazz club. The dancers were talented, particularly a dark-haired beauty who performed with fiery gusto.

Chris was swept up in the wild, bitter-sweet sad dance and music.

While he listened, he looked over to Geronimo and saw the Indian's hand go to his lapel. Geronimo slipped out the pin all TEEN agents carried for short-circuiting electrical systems. He rolled it between his thumb and forefinger, then tapped it against the doll dancer before him, keeping time with the music.

The black-haired girl on the stage appeared to grow nervous. She lost her timing, but managed to regain it. The number was a violent one, spiraling up with increasing frenzy. At its crescendo, the Apache jabbed the pin into the doll.

Instantly the dancer screamed. She stared at the centerpiece with bulging eyes before collapsing on the floor.

Waiters, patrons, and musicians rushed forward. But the three agents slid out quietly. They rendezvoused in an alley around the corner from the Red Horn.

“What happened?” Beau asked.

“Gerry played a little voodoo trick,” Chris explained. He turned to the Apache. “I saw you, *choonday*. Confess.”

“I was playing with the pin absentmindedly, then I noticed her watching me. So I decided to try. It was really a shot in the dark.”

“She must be a hard-core believer in voodoo,” Chris observed. “There are actually cases where people have died from that sort of thing. Their belief is so strong that what they fear will happen, actually does happen. Of course it's all in their own minds.”

“You think this chick is in with Uncle Rattler’s crowd?” Geronimo asked.

Chris shrugged.

“Let’s go back,” Beau suggested. “There’s a combo coming up next. I know the cat on the trumpet. Used to play trombone with a bunch in my high school. Maybe he can fill us in.”

“Worth a try,” Chris agreed.

They entered the club singly, just as the band took the stage. Chris and Geronimo kept on the alert for any sign of the dancer, but she did not show herself.

The musicians, meanwhile, began their rhythmic beat. They were competent, but nothing special.

When they finally headed toward the dressing room, Beau got up and intercepted the trumpet player. They shook hands vigorously, both wearing wide smiles.

The trumpeter motioned toward the backstage area. Beau nodded, gave Chris and Geronimo a secret high sign, and walked off. Chris watched Geronimo, who was nearest, follow the pair at a discreet distance.

Chris bided his time, hoping Beau’s contact would prove fruitful.

Suddenly Geronimo reappeared. His face was stony as usual. He went directly to Chris’s table.

“Get a taxi fast. Have it wait by the alley at the end of the block.”

Chris shot to his feet. “*Naha’ ashla?* What’s the drill?”

“Beau’s old buddy set him up. They kayoed him with a sap. He went down like a tree.”

5. The Snake Himself

THE THUGS HAD dragged Beau to the alley door and were waiting for a confederate in a car. Geronimo went back to keep them under surveillance, while Chris hurried to the street and flagged down a cab.

“Where to?” the driver asked.

“End of the block,” Chris answered. “Turn the corner and park near the alley with your lights *off*.”

The taxi remained motionless. “Buddy, sounds like whatever you got in mind ain’t legal. I don’t want no part of it.”

Chris thrust a ten-dollar bill into the man’s hand. “Park by the alley.”

“Yes, sir!” Moments after Chris and the driver took up their position, a black sedan came into view, paused at the rear of the Red Horn, then rolled away.

Geronimo burst from the shadows and sprinted toward the taxi. Chris flung open the door and the Indian jumped in.

“Follow that car!” Chris snapped.

“Look, you guys... I don’t want no trouble.”

“No trouble,” Chris said. “There’s ten bucks more if you don’t lose them and keep them from spotting us.”

The taxi driver pulled hastily from the curb. Money seemed to inspire him. “Don’t sweat it, mister. I know this town better than anyone alive.”

The black sedan headed north, and the taxi followed like a homing pigeon. The driver remained two hundred feet behind and was careful to keep several

other cars between himself and his quarry.

At that distance, it was hardly possible to distinguish features, but the boys could see three figures in the car besides Beau—two men and a woman driver.

The sedan slowed, then pulled to the side in front of a renovated old town house.

“Keep going,” Chris ordered.

They passed the sedan, from which Beau was being dragged by the two thugs, went halfway down the next block, and stopped. Chris paid the driver.

Then he and Geronimo worked their way back, keeping to the shadows. The goons carrying Beau were singing in boisterous, slurred voices. A passer-by might have thought they were a trio of friends returning home after a high night on the town.

The front door opened. The boys glimpsed two guards in the foyer. “We can’t go in that way,” Chris murmured.

“I’ll circle round and check out the back,” Geronimo whispered.

A few minutes after the Apache had left, Chris’s watch radio buzzed. “Kingston One,” he answered.

“Two here. I’m afraid she’s sealed tighter than a voodoo drum, *choonday*. I’m heading back.”

“Roger.”

Chris studied the building while he waited. Suddenly there was a rustle beside him. He whirled with his zip pen poised.

Geronimo threw up his hands. “Peace, pale face.”

“Any brainstorm?”

“Let’s try the roof.”

Geronimo eyed the house. “Good ledges.

Shouldn’t be too bad. But we’ll need a rope.”

“There must be a clothesline in one of these back yards.”

They found fifty feet of rope coiled around a tree hook a few houses down. Geronimo slung it over his shoulder.

“The grate over the rear window on the second floor,” Chris said. “What do you think?”

“Made to order.”

All the windows were faced with grilles, but on some of them the top bars projected a few inches. Geronimo weighted the end of the rope with a small stone, twirled it around his head, then let it fly. It caught one of the bars.

“Nice going,” Chris said.

The Apache fed rope until the weighted end was in his hands. Now they held a double length, firmly anchored. Geronimo started first, walking up the wall at a 45-degree angle. Chris followed. They crouched on the second-floor sill while Geronimo made a toss over a grate on the fourth story. Five minutes later they were on the roof. The Indian reeled up the line, while Chris scouted the area.

“Corner near the rear,” the blond agent said.

A yellow glow mushroomed into the night from that corner. The boys dropped to their bellies and crawled forward silently to a skylight. It looked down into a high-ceilinged room, which was rigged as a voodoo

temple.

On a black-draped throne stood a crude wooden statue of Death, red crown set upon its head. Seven slips of paper—on which were scrawled Beau’s name—protruded from Death’s mouth. Seven black candles were burning in front of the god, and loud, wailing music filled the room.

Beau’s huge form was spread-eagled on the floor, held by the two men who had kidnapped him from the Red Horn.

A priest was holding a sacrificial knife.

“By the door, *choonday!*” Geronimo hissed. Chris looked. “Cascabel!”

The hook-nosed man surveyed the room with satisfaction, then nodded to the priest and left.

The man raised his knife and approached Beau, who seemed to be coming to.

“Zip pens,” Chris said crisply.

He took off a shoe and raised it above the sky light. Geronimo nodded. With a crash, the shoe came down on the glass, showering it inside the room.

Phfft! Phfft!

Sleepy slivers crumpled the two thugs. Geronimo dropped the priest just as he looked up.

Beau scrambled to his feet and stood back while Chris smashed out the remaining glass. Geronimo lowered the rope. Then he and Chris braced their heels against Beau’s weight as the big agent climbed to the roof.

“Man oh man! I’ve never seen two more beautiful cats in my life!”

“We thought you might be about ready to leave the party,” Chris said.

“Baby, you really tell it like it is. I don’t dig their games at all. Look! Another one!”

A bearded man entered the temple. He gaped in amazement at the unconscious guards, before his eyes flicked to the skylight. He jerked a gun from his waistband.

“Let’s go!” Chris commanded.

The TEEN agents sprinted across the roof and leaped over a six-foot chasm to the adjoining building. Two shots sounded from the darkness behind them.

As they leaped to the next roof, a bullet chipped stone from a chimney close to Chris, and the dust blew into his face.

“We’ve got to get street side,” Geronimo gasped.

“And fast,” Chris agreed. A stone fragment had ripped a stinging wound in his arm.

Beau leaned over a retaining wall. “Open window here, cats.”

“Go!” Chris hissed.

Beau went over the ledge, hung by his hands, and swung into the window. Chris and Geronimo followed. They landed on the plush carpet of a dimly lighted living room.

Before them, with her back to the window, sat a woman in hair curlers watching television. The volume was up. Cowboys were chasing a runaway stagecoach. It careened off the road and into a gully, the splintering carriage providing sound cover for the three agents.

Beau led the way. He crept behind a sofa and made, catlike, for the door. Chris and Geronimo followed, carefully watching the woman.

She reached for a piece of candy while the TV camera zoomed in on one slowly turning stagecoach wheel. The *cowboys* on the hill looked down in silence.

The next sound came from the outside. The woman spun around to see two feet hanging halfway to her window ledge. She rose and made for the open window, her housecoat brushing past Chris's sweaty face as he crouched beside a chair.

The woman shrieked, pounded with her fists at the dangling feet, which disappeared roofward. A split second side-glance told Chris that the woman was big, firm of arm, and weighty.

"Humph!" She slammed the window shut and turned back toward the TV—just in time to come face to face with Geronimo in a ballet leap toward the door!

Shock caused the woman to clutch at her throat. "An Indian!" she croaked hoarsely. She grasped an end table for support and the lamp wobbled. Chris caught it in time.

"Evening, ma'am," he said. "I'm the rental agent for the building."

"Door's over there," Geronimo hissed, heading toward it.

"Just showing these two prospects what our apartments look like," Chris went on.

The woman's mouth moved, but no words came out.

Beau and Geronimo were already in the hall. Chris made a quick bow to the terrified tenant. “Lovely place you have here. Thanks for your cooperation.” Then he was out of the apartment, closing the door behind him.

The TEEN agents raced down the four flights of stairs. They gained the street, pounded to the corner, then cut to the right.

They spied a bus taking on passengers and jumped aboard. Chris dropped their fares into the box and they took seats in the back. The bus pulled away.

“We’re home free!” Chris said.

“Only one drawback,” Beau muttered. “My cover’s blown.”

“Mine too,” said Geronimo. “That dancing girl saw me.”

6. A Feminine Assist

“IT’S DOUBTFUL SHE really glanced you,” Beau said.

“Why?”

“Any chick so hung up on voodoo probably had eyes only for the doll and pin. Ten to one, she couldn’t tell whether you were male or female.”

“Thanks a lot,” Geronimo said, stroking his long hair.

“It’s possible,” Chris put in. “We’ll have to put it to Q.”

The three agents returned to their rooming house, checked out, then called Q from a payphone.

“Hi,” Chris said. “This is Wunny.”

“Are Tooeey and your cousin with you?”

“Yes. We’re having an exciting time and an instructive one, too.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“Had a disappointment, though.”

“Oh?”

“Afraid we can’t talk Uncle into visiting the family after all. Some of his associates recognized Big Cousin B. They might have spotted Tooeey also.”

“That’s too bad. We’ll have to call it off.

Wouldn’t be the same if it weren’t a surprise.”

“Sorry.”

“Yes. Why don’t you all come home and spend the

rest of your vacation here? We'd love to have you."

"We'll catch the next plane."

"Good. You do that." Q hung up.

Chris turned to Geronimo and Beau. "Q's not happy. I have the feeling we're in for a bad time, buddies."

They went to the airport, got reservations on a dawn flight, and touched down in New York three hours later. As they left the terminal, Chris said, "Notice anything unusual?"

"Cat in the brown sports coat," Beau replied. "Exactly. Let's split. The two who aren't shadowed will play double tag."

They stopped, shook hands, and moved in different directions. The tail hesitated, then went after Beau. Chris and Geronimo rejoined a few minutes later.

"Beau's probably the only one our friend knows for sure," Chris said.

Beau stalled long enough for Chris and Geronimo to pick up the Jaguar and circle around. He contacted them by watch radio.

"Picked up a second bogey—both of them on me now," he transmitted.

"We've got you and bogies in sight," Chris replied. "Get a taxi. See if you can lose 'em. We'll follow."

"I got my car here. Blue Pontiac. In Lot Eleven."

"Okay, we'll tail you."

Beau got his car. A hundred feet behind him his two shadows flagged a taxi. The cars sped off, Chris and Geronimo after them.

Once the vehicles had crossed the Triborough

Bridge, Beau went into an evasive pattern. But the taxi stuck like glue. Near the Midtown area, Beau transmitted, “No good this way. I think we’ll have to —”

He was interrupted by a familiar female voice, “Hello, sweethearts. I thought you were digging New Orleans.”

It was Spice. Yummi was with her. They were having brunch at Rockefeller Center. Chris filled them in on the situation.

“They’d recognize us,” Chris said. “Do you think you two could decoy them?”

“How?”

Chris thought a moment. “Beau, head for the Museum of Modern Art. Spice and Yummi, rendezvous with him there. Intercept and detain his shadows while Beau takes off. And see if you can get anything on them. Okay?”

Beau and Spice agreed. The girls left their watch radios on Transmit so Chris and Geronimo could follow the action.

Twenty minutes passed. Chris and Gerry went on and pulled into a parking spot near the museum. They received the sounds of pedestrians, honking horns, then “Two, please,” as the girls paid their admissions. The sound of their high heels on the stairs were sharp.

“Second floor,” Chris muttered. Geronimo nodded.

Silence, then a soft rustling of clothes and scraping of feet.

“Do you like Seraut?” Spice asked brightly.

“Uh, yeah, sure,” came a man’s voice.

“Don’t you think pointillism creates a certain element of disharmony, though?” Yummi asked.

“Well, uh, maybe. Look! Nice to have met you. G’bye.”

“No, wait!” said Spice. “I don’t agree with her at all. Please, it is—”

“Hey, let go of my arm!”

“Is it disharmonious or not?”

“Girls, we gotta go. Now get out of our way!”

“Oh, really!” Yummi was indignant. “One simple question.”

“I said *move!*”

“Well, if you’re going to be that way...” Beau’s voice came through on closed channel. “It worked. I’m out and moving fast. See you at headquarters.”

“Understood,” Chris said.

“We’re on the way.” Spice came in. “Our two art experts are racing down the stairs. Sorry, chums, we couldn’t hold them any longer.”

“It was enough,” Chris said. “Beau’s free. Think you can tail the tails and find out where they go next?”

“We’ll try.”

“Good girls. We’re heading for Luxury Motors. Dig you there.”

On the top floor of TEEN headquarters Q growled at his agents for having risked their covers. Then he calmed a bit.

“Must say,” he mumbled, “the Red Horn intelligence is quite welcome. Gives us a lot more to work with. Well... yes. Cool, you think there’s a good chance you

weren't spotted?"

"Yes, sir."

"Johnson, you're not positive?"

"No, sir."

Q swigged down a glass of milk and brooded a moment. "I *would* like to keep you two on this case. How do you lads feel?"

"I think we can still be effective, sir," Chris said. Geronimo agreed.

"All right. We'll proceed by original plan. Tatum, it's back to Puerto Rico for you. Cool and Johnson, next stop Ecuador. Arrange with your dean for a leave of absence. Right now go to the mug room. See if you recognize anyone from the Red Horn."

They hastened to the fourth floor, where the photo books, dossiers, and fingerprint files were kept. After two hours' work they had selected five photos. Q was pleased.

"All South Americans. All of them loyal to nothing but money," Q said. "All of them guns for hire, posing as liberators, and all Cascabel's henchmen. I'll have them put under surveillance at once." Q paused momentarily, then asked, "Nothing on the dancer?"

"No, sir. Looks as if she's got nothing to do with them," Chris reported.

"I wouldn't be too sure. I have a hunch..."

"Sir?" Geronimo asked.

"Ah, nothing." Q dismissed his agents with a wave of his hand, and they left his office.

Outside they met Spice and Yummi. Their morning

had been fruitful. They had taken pictures of the two suspects with concealed mini cameras and had followed them to a sleazy hotel west of the theater district.

TEEN technicians speedily processed the film, identified the men as fugitives from California, where they were wanted on charges of extortion and felonious assault. The New York police had been notified and picked up the surprised criminals within half an hour.

“Well, I call that a good day’s work,” Chris said. “How about some lunch?”

“If it’s an invitation, we’ll be delighted,” Spice quipped.

“Sure it is. On the expense account,” Chris replied with a grin.

The five agents headed for the elevator. They were intercepted by a technician in a white coat.

“Mr. Cool?”

“Yes?”

“Dr. Pomeroy wants you to have this. He thought it might be handy in the jungle.”

The man handed Chris a small object, about the size of a cigarette pack. It was cased in aluminum. An oscillograph was set in the face plate.

“Thanks. What is it?”

The technician grinned. “We call it Little Cupid. It can record a human heartbeat within a radius of a quarter mile.”

“Very neat. Thank you and the good doctor.”

Chris slipped the gimmick into his pocket.

Ten minutes later the five ordered lunch in a nearby restaurant. Relaxed and enjoying themselves, they decided to test Little Cupid.

Switched on, the oscillograph registered several pulsating lines—the heartbeats of nearby patrons. Chris chuckled. “Very nice.”

“You have an admirer, *choonday*.” Geronimo indicated a pretty dark-haired girl at a nearby table.

Chris looked across to the girl and winked. She turned her eyes away, but Chris saw the comers of her mouth quiver.

“I like people who smile,” Chris said to nobody in particular.

The girl could not hold back. She broke into a grin, looking from the corner of her eye at Chris.

“Why, you old Juan!” Spice said. “You did it again.”

She grabbed Little Cupid and aimed it at the brunette. The line’s pulsations suddenly doubled, and its peaks and lows became incredibly pronounced.

“Hey, what’s the funny line right here?” Geronimo asked. “Just below the girl’s? She doesn’t have two hearts, does she?”

“The other one’s beating for you,” Chris quipped.

“Sorry, chum, but that one’s not human. It’s a pooch!”

“What?” Geronimo looked bland.

“She’s got a dog on her lap!”

“I can see why this little instrument might be a lifesaver,” Chris declared. “Good old Pomeroy. He’s a

real genius.”

When they had finished their lunch, Chris and Geronimo dropped Beau off at the airport, then they went directly to Kingston. They entered the dean’s office.

Dean Hendricks was a stately man with graying hair and a genial manner. He was always pleased to see the boys. They were both among Kingston’s top ten students and he was proud of them.

“Welcome back,” Hendricks said. “I had a message left for you at your dormitory. Is that why you’re here?”

“Message, sir? We haven’t been to the dorm yet,” Chris replied.

“Oh. Well, there was a gentleman here looking for you this morning. A Latin-American fellow. Said the matter was quite urgent.”

7. End of the Line

“A LATIN-AMERICAN?” Chris asked.

“Yes. Swarthy skin, rather neatly trimmed beard, accented English.”

“Did he give any indication of what he wanted?”

“No. He just said that it was most important to see you, and gave me this.” The dean handed Chris a paper on which was written *Gerardo-KI 7-3956 Cabin Three*.

Chris scanned it impassively and gave it to Geronimo. “Thank you,” he said abstractedly to Dean Hendricks.

“Is anything wrong?”

“No, sir. But it is connected with something we wanted to speak to you about.”

Hendricks cleared his throat and shuffled some papers on his desk. “Not another leave of absence, I hope.”

“Well, sir, now that you mention it, that’s exactly what we had in mind.”

Hendricks sighed and shook his head. “This is quite irregular. You applied for three leaves last year, and four so far this year. Well... what is it now?”

“We’d like to go to South America for a week or so—field work for our political science and international relations course.”

“Most, *most* irregular,” the dean said slowly. “But then again, your academic records are excellent.”

“We appreciate your understanding,” Geronimo

said gravely.

The dean scribbled a memorandum to himself. "All right. Permission granted. I'll notify your professors."

The boys stood up and shook hands. "Thank you," Chris said.

"Not at all. Just keep your scholastic record at its present level. That will be thanks enough."

The TEEN agents returned to their dormitory room, speculating on Gerardo as they went. Was he one of Cascabel's men? Was there a trap waiting? Had their cover been blown after all?

While Geronimo set about packing two light suitcases for them, Chris called the number Gerardo had left. A woman's voice answered. "King's Inn Motel. May I help you?"

"Yes," Chris said. "please connect me with Cabin Three."

"Just a minute." There was a pause, then, "I'm sorry, the party in Cabin Three has checked out."

"When?"

"About an hour ago."

"Did he leave a forwarding address?"

"No. But he did inquire about the train schedule to New York. I told him there was an express departing from Kingston at five-fifteen."

"Thank you. Good-by." Chris hung up and checked his watch. It was four forty-five.

He briefed Geronimo. The boys snatched up their suitcases, ran down the stairs, and out to Chris's car. A minute later they were roaring toward Kingston

station.

The train was already there when they screeched to a stop in the parking lot. The boys grabbed their bags, sprinted to the platform, and swung aboard.

“Made it by a hair,” the conductor said. He pulled a sheaf of tickets from his pocket. The train lurched forward. “Where to?”

“New York.” The TEEN agents stowed their bags in a luggage compartment at the front of the car, then made their way slowly through the train, looking for anyone who might answer the description of Gerardo.

The wheels clacked rhythmically and the train swayed gently from side to side. There was no sign of the South American. They entered the last car and scanned it quickly.

“Looks like a wild-goose chase,” Geronimo said glumly.

Chris was about to agree when he spotted a clean-shaven, dark-complexioned man reading the Spanish edition of *Life* magazine. He nudged Geronimo, who nodded. “The beard might have been a disguise.”

“Let’s try,” Chris said.

They sauntered down the aisle and took seats directly across from the man. Presently they started a lively conversation in Spanish. After a while Chris addressed their quarry. “*Por favor, señor. Cuantos minutos a Nueva York?*”

The man winced. “*Yeinte,*” he replied, without looking up from his magazine.

Still in Spanish, Chris and Geronimo discussed their plane crash in Haiti. The man stole furtive glances at

them from behind his magazine. “Excuse me. You are the American students who were captured by Guerra the rebel?”

“Yes, we are. How do you know about it?” The man looked around nervously. “My name is Gerardo. It is important I talk with you. Not here; here is danger. Meet me tonight in Central Park. By the weather station. Seven-thirty.”

“Why?”

“Please. *Luego*. Go from me now. We cannot chance being seen together.”

Since Gerardo refused to say more, the agents returned to the car where they had left their luggage.

“This might be a big break for us,” Chris said as they waited impatiently for the train to reach its destination. New Brunswick station flashed by, then the long line of factories—Newark’s ugly welcome mat.

The TEEN agents took their bags and went into the car next to the Latin-American.

“Beware the sidewinder,” Geronimo said dourly as they swayed through the blackness beneath the Hudson River. “Is Gerardo still with us?”

Chris glanced into the next car. The South American was pushing through with his suitcase.

When the train came to a stop in the Manhattan terminal, the boys stepped off first. They had intended to track Gerardo, but whoever he was, he knew the techniques of escape and evasion well.

Chris and Geronimo glimpsed him in the crowd on the platform. Then he moved behind a policeman and

slipped in back of a metal column.

“Where’d he go?” Chris turned on his heel, eyes roving like a periscope.

Their man seemed to have evaporated in the stale-smelling air.

“He’ll show up at seven-thirty,” Geronimo said. “Come on.”

Since they had left the Jaguar in Kingston, they went directly to Luxury Motors and were given a sleek red Ferrari. A message from Q apprised them that additional information had come in on one of the men they had identified in New Orleans—Joselito Gonzales.

Gonzales had worked six months before as a waiter in a private Manhattan sporting club—the Port de Paix. Intelligence agencies had nothing on the club, but Gonzales’s association with it was sufficient reason for suspicion.

The boys were to stay on the alert for any references made to the club.

At seven they parked the Ferrari on Columbus Avenue near the Museum of Natural History, one block from Central Park. It was an unusually clear day over New York and the sky was brilliantly fired by the setting sun. They crossed Central Park West and entered the park itself.

The weather station was a curious, tiny model of an old Norman castle. It was set high upon an outcropping of rock, overlooking the Greek-like bowl of the Delacorte Theater.

Gerardo had not yet arrived. Would he come? Alert to every passer-by, the TEEN agents braced their

elbows on the railing, waiting in silence. They dropped pebbles down the hundred feet of sheer rock to the water basin below.

At eight-thirty Gerardo appeared. Without preamble, he said, "I work for the government of Haiti. We are vitally interested in any information you can give us concerning the rebels who captured you, and their leader Guerra."

"How do we know you work for Le President?" Chris asked. "And why should we tell you anything?"

Gerardo smiled. "You should tell because I will pay well. As far as Le President is concerned—" He shrugged. "Take my word. The money is the same in any case."

Chris and Geronimo spoke rapidly in Apache. They had come to get information, not to give it. But they felt there was value in fencing with the Haitian. They told him briefly about Belmont and the rebel camp.

"They were doing some voodoo," Chris put in innocently. "Put a curse on a guy named Sulato, used a coconut—"

"Sulato?" Gerardo interrupted. He obviously was very excited. "Tell me more of this! Please. Everything you can remember! I'll pay you anything!"

The TEEN agents exchanged glances. "All right," Chris went on. "But first we want to know more about you!"

Gerardo did not seem to hear. "It's the fifteen day curse, is it? Is it?"

"Exactly *who* do you work for and what are your duties?"

The man paled and began to tremble. “*Senior! Por el amor de Dios!*”

“Calm down,” Geronimo said.

Gerardo opened his mouth to speak. But suddenly he clutched his chest, doubled over, and slumped to the ground.

“What’s wrong?” Chris asked. He bent down and put his ear close to the pale, twitching lips. “Tell me, what’s the matter?”

“*Sangre,*” Gerardo mumbled. “Blood.” He shuddered. His eyes rolled up, so that only the whites were visible. Then his body went limp.

8. Death in the Pit

CHRIS LISTENED FOR a heartbeat, felt the wrist for a pulse, then placed a small pocket mirror under Gerardo's nostrils. No sign of life! The TEEN agent whipped out Little Cupid. Not even a flurry of cardiac activity!

"He's dead," Chris said.

"Probably heart attack," Geronimo mused. "*Sangre*—blood. What do you think it means?"

Chris went on.

"Maybe his papers will give us a clue."

The boys went through the dead man's pockets.

They removed his wallet and passport.

Chris gasped with surprise. "Gerry! This is Sulata himself! The head of Le President's secret police!"

"What?"

"Look!" The papers were well documented. "That explains his keen interest in Guerra and the rebels." Chris reflected silently a moment.

"Gerry, you know what day this is?"

"Sure, Tuesday."

"Uh-huh, And it's also the final day of the death curse Belmont leveled against Sulato."

"Ai!"

"Voodoo seems to work"

"Purely psychological," Geronimo said. "The victim has to believe in it, or no go."

Chris looked down soberly at the body, “Poor guy doesn’t believe in anything now. What’ll we do with him?»

Geronimo shook his head. “I don’t know. I’ve been thinking about the hundreds Sulato has sent to the happy hunting grounds.”

The TEEN agents pondered. Something had to be done, and quickly, Turning the body over to the police was out of the question. They could not afford to become involved in a grand jury inquiry. Their cover must be kept intact at all cost.

“We’ve got to get going, Gerry, Got any ideas? Come on, Think!”

“I am thinking...I am... Wait a minute! I have it! Why not use Le President’s late executioner to our own advantage?”

“How?”

“Easy. A *presente* to the Port de Paix Sporting Club.”

Chris whistled. “To see if we can smoke anything out?”

“*Gonzone*, Right.”

“Okay. Let’s take him to the side of the road that cuts through the park I’ll bring the car around. If everything’s clear we’ll load him in.”

The agents picked up the dead man and cautiously carried him to the road. Twice they had to leave the path and wait in the shadows while evening strollers passed them. Then they hid the corpse in the bushes. Geronimo waited while Chris went for the car.

He returned, parked, and unlocked the trunk,

letting it hang inches open. A patrolman stopped on his scooter.

“Need help?”

Chris smiled and waved him off. “Thank you. It’s all fixed.” He wiped his hands on a cloth as the policeman left, then whistled to Geronimo.

Ten minutes later they were heading east on Fifty-ninth Street, with Sulato’s remains locked in the trunk. They passed Fifth Avenue, then rolled through the intersection of Madison and Fifty ninth.

Itse! Geronimo yelled suddenly, “Watch it!” A blue Ford ran the light, Chris hit the horn and jerked the wheel to the right.

Krr-rrranng!

The Ford crashed into the Ferrari’s left rear fender.

“Great!” Chris muttered. “The cops’ll be here in no time.” He pulled to the curb.

“Choonday—the trunk!”

Chris whirled around and froze for an instant. The trunk lock had been sprung, and the lid hung open!

A police car whizzed by and pulled to the side in front of the Ford.

“You see the law; I’ll cover up our friend,” the Apache hissed and the two jumped out of the car.

Chris walked up to the Ford. A policeman had just taken the license of the driver, a young man in his early thirties. He was handsome in the nondescript manner of rising junior executives and appeared terribly upset.

“I’m so sorry. Didn’t see the light was red until it

was too late.”

“You’re the one who got hit?” the policeman addressed Chris.

“Yes. We were coming down over there—” Chris gave a detailed account of what happened trying to keep the policeman’s attention away from the Ferrari. He did not dare turn around to see how Geronimo was protecting the trunk.

“All right let’s have a look at the damage,” the officer said finally.

Chris managed to walk ahead of him. Geronimo he noticed, had not finished with the trunk yet.

Chris talked rapidly. “I don’t think there’s much damage to our car. He turned to the other driver. “This fender is smashed pretty badly.” He stopped next to the Ford and touched the crumpled metal with both hands.

The policeman wrote in his notebook.

After a few moments, he said, “Okay,” and walked on to the Ferrari. Chris broke out in cold sweat. Geronimo still stood behind the trunk. His face was expressionless.

“It’s bashed in,” he said casually to the officer, who walked around the car, then kneeled down to inspect the rear end.

“Were you a passenger in the Ferrari?” the policeman asked, eyeing the copper-skinned Apache curiously.

“Yes, sir.” Suddenly life came into Geronimo’s countenance. Seriously and with great vividness he repeated what happened, underlining his speech with

floating motions of his hands.

The cop looked at him, spellbound. He did not notice that the Apache's body was pressed rigidly against the trunk.

When Geronimo was almost finished, Chris took over with perfect timing. While talking to the policeman about his insurance, he turned and they walked back to the police car. Finally the cop drove away, and the junior executive returned to his Ford.

Chris's shoulder muscles ached from sheer tension. He slid into the Ferrari, next to Geronimo.

"Man, you were glued to that trunk!" Chris observed.

"The lock was busted. I couldn't get it back into shape, and before I could tie it together, you cats came dancing over."

"It's tied now?"

"Yes, indeed, with twenty-four inches of brown shoelace."

Chris started the Ferrari and pulled away from the curb. They finished the short trip to the Port de Paix Sporting Club in silence. Geronimo scouted the place while Chris remained in the car with the engine idling.

The Apache returned. "We can get into a basement next door and out to the rear of the club. There's an exit in back where we can leave our friend."

The boys waited several minutes until the sidewalk was free of pedestrians. Then they leaped out, speedily removed Sulato's body, and plunged into the basement.

Five minutes later they were back on the street,

empty-handed. They drove two blocks away and stopped at a phone booth.

Chris got out. He dialed the number of the club.

“Hello,” a man answered.

“There’s a guy at your rear entrance, and he’s rather knocked out,” Chris said. “Better have a look.”

“Who are you?”

“A patron.” Chris slammed the receiver down. Then he called the police, reporting that a dead man could be found at the Port de Paix Sporting Club. He hung up before the number could be traced.

“Where to now?” Geronimo asked.

“How about dinner?”

“Best idea you’ve had all night.”

After they had eaten, they called Q over their car radio and reported what had happened.

“I’ll check on your cold playmate,” Q said.

“Stand by.”

A few minutes later his voice came over the radio. “The police didn’t locate him, and the club denies finding the body. I suggest you pay them a visit. Check with me later.”

The boys drove back to Port de Paix. Geronimo remembered a basement window. “Target for tonight,” he grunted. “Out with the tools.”

Chris pressed a suction cup to one of the panes, while the Apache circled it with a glass cutter. Chris removed the glass, reached in, and probed with his fingers. As expected, he found a burglar alarm wire. This he snipped in two. Then the latch was raised and

the window entered easily. They found themselves in a small dark storage room, into which filtered sounds of a hubbub beyond the partition.

Amid lusty shouting came the name Cascabel, over and over. Chris and Geronimo advanced quietly, turned the door handle slowly, pushed the door open a crack, and peered out.

They were looking into a large room, thick with smoke and crowded with excited men. A bright spotlight illuminated a wooden pit in the center.

“Kill him!”

“Come on, Cascabel!”

“Cut him to ribbons!”

A bloodied, red-and-green gamecock hurtled into the air, then dived down with a screech. The men cheered.

“A cockfight club,” Chris whispered.

Cascabel’s opponent was named Vengador, a fierce-looking black-and-white bird. Through the blue haze, the TEEN agents could see that both had been wounded badly and the dirt floor of the pit was stained with blood.

The spectators cheered and the birds rallied. They flew into the air and drove the long, razor-sharp spurs attached to their legs into each other’s breasts. They went down, locked together, the spurs slicing and tearing.

Cascabel, insane with agony, could take no more. He disengaged and dragged himself to the end of the pit. Vengador rushed to the attack and went into the air again.

In desperation Cascabel fell to his back and stiffened his legs. It was too late for Vengador to stop, and when he descended, one of Cascabel's spurs pierced his neck.

The patrons backing Cascabel cheered the half-dead cock and thumped each other enthusiastically on the back.

"The rattlesnake won," Geronimo muttered.

"Do not move!" said a rough voice behind him. At the same instant, the agents felt the sharp points of knives pressed at the base of their skulls.

9. Piranha Bait

THE BOYS FROZE. “A very intelligent response,” growled a second voice.

Out in the larger room a man raised his hands and said, “Gentlemen. Gentlemen, your attention please. For our next event we have scheduled a match between the famous Frijoli Chiquita from Brazil and the well-known Osuro from Peru.”

Raucous applause greeted the announcement, after which two attendants sprinkled fresh sand across the pit floor.

“Close the door. Gently,” said one of the knife wielders. “Good. Now walk very slowly toward the door at the other end of the room.”

The TEEN agents obeyed, and were directed into a large office. It was furnished with a massive desk, oversized leather armchairs, and a couch. Crude spears and other hand weapons were mounted on the walls as decorations.

The boys were frisked quickly, then the taller of their captives said, “Sit down on that couch!” He lowered himself into the chair behind the desk and produced a .32-caliber revolver, waving it casually in their direction. His companion, a broad-shouldered, ugly-faced man, evidently a bodyguard, took up a flanking position.

“Now, my friends,” said the man with the gun, “you will tell me please what you were doing in our storage room.”

“Uh, we wanted to see the cockfights,” Chris said.

“How did you know we hold such events here?”

“Hearsay.”

“And where did you come across this ‘hearsay’?”

Chris shrugged. “Around.”

“I am afraid you must be more specific than that.”

Chris furrowed his brow, pretending to search his memory. “A coffeehouse. Yeah, I think that was it. down in Greenwich Village, wasn’t that it, Gerry?”

Geronimo gave a stony nod.

“From whom?”

“Man, I don’t remember the cat’s name! Some swinger we met. Said we could see some action here.”

“If that is true, why did you not use less secretive means?”

“Oh, come off it,” Chris said, warming to the part. “This sort of bit is illegal as the devil. You wouldn’t let us in. No one but regulars.”

“Quite so. But if your mysterious friend has been here, he could very easily have vouched for you.”

Chris feigned exasperation. “Man, I told you! We met this guy just once. We were all stoned. I never saw him again.”

“Carlos,” said the man behind the desk, “what do you think of their story?”

Carlos snorted. “*Ellos son de la polida.*”

“Carlos thinks you are from the police. I agree Detectives most likely.”

Geronimo glared.

Chris made a disgusted gesture. “You guys are too

much. The fuzz don't sit any better in my stomach than arsenic."

"You fail to convince me."

"Look, pal. If we were screws we just would have raided the joint, not snuck in through a back window."

"Perhaps you had suspicions, but no evidence. Then certainly you would have acted as you did."

"Sure, baby, sure. Anything you say. We're the cops and we've got the joint surrounded. Yeah!"

"It would behoove you to be less lighthearted."

"Why?"

"Carlos." The man flicked his hand.

Carlos walked to the far wall and drew back a thick green curtain. He switched on a light which illuminated a large glass tank. A dozen compact, powerful fish swam nervously in the water. They ranged in length from eight inches to a foot and their mouths were studded with long, pointed, slightly curved teeth.

Chris recognized the fish and a chill went down his spine. "Goody for your goldfish."

"They are not goldfish."

"Carp?" Geronimo inquired innocently.

"They are piranhas. From the Rio Napo."

Both boys knew the Rio Napo to be an Ecuadorian river that flowed into the Amazon. There was little doubt now in either of their minds that the Port de Paix Sporting Club was indeed linked to Cascabel.

"I never cared much for fish myself," Geronimo said.

“That is not the point. My fish will care for you.” The man turned to his bodyguard. “Carlos, *carne*.”

“*Si*.” Carlos left the room and instantly returned with a pork chop.

“Watch closely,” said the man with the gun.

Carlos tossed the pork chop into the tank. The piranhas rocketed toward it and instantly the water turned to boiling froth. It cleared a few seconds later. Nothing remained of the meat except a gleaming white bone settling slowly to the bottom. The piranhas were again flitting nervously through the water.

“Now... we wish to know precisely who you are and why you are here.”

“We already told you,” Chris answered.

“I will ask you one more time. If you do not give us the correct answer, we will insert your hand into the fish tank. There will be nothing left of it but very clean bones. Be careful—who are you?”

In Apache Chris murmured, “Gas masks and a knockout grenade.”

Geronimo nodded.

“What?” Their captor asked angrily.

Chris scratched his throat. Doing so, he secretly removed nose-plug gas masks that were disguised as cuff buttons. He feigned a sneeze and inserted them into his nostrils. “I’ve nothing new to tell you.”

The two men grabbed Chris and hauled him roughly toward the fish tank.

“You can’t do this!” Chris screamed in fake terror.

Geronimo stuffed his own nose plugs in place, then

whipped a “curfew” gas grenade from the concealed pocket in his sleeve. He hurled the slim vial to the floor. *Phtt!* It burst with a soft sigh. Immediately the odorless and colorless gas filled the room.

Carlos and his employer coughed. They released Chris and took a couple of staggering steps, then slumped to the floor.

“Thanks, Redskin,” Chris said. “Shall we head for the hills, as the saying goes?”

“My friend gives good counsel.”

The boys left the office hurriedly, passed through the storage room, and went out through the open window.

Sirens were wailing, drawing closer each second.

“Do you think...?” Chris mused.

“Let’s stick around and see.”

They heard the sound of tires screeching to a halt in front of the club. There were shouts. The amplified voice of a bullhorn roared, “This is a raid by the police department of the city of New York. We request all those inside the Port de Paix Sporting Club to cooperate and thus avoid further difficulties. We ask all pedestrians to clear the street.”

“What a fine sense of timing,” Geronimo said.

“Any link to TEEN is buried. This will convince those goons that we were with the police.” Chris grinned.

The boys ducked into the shadows as a squad of policemen rushed to the back entrance to prevent anyone from escaping the club.

The TEEN agents bided their time, watching with

amusement until the excitement had died down. Then they slipped away unnoticed and contacted Q by radio.

His report completed, Chris said, "With these men in custody, you can make identification and run down their connections with Cascabel."

Q was delighted. He congratulated his agents, whereupon his voice took on a more somber tone. "It looks as though things are coming to a climax in Ecuador."

"Oh? May we hear the details, sir?"

Q told of confirmed reports that a large shipment of arms was being moved up the Amazon River toward Ecuador. "We believe they're destined for Cascabel. The arms must be stopped—you must stop them!"

"And we leave...?"

"Tomorrow. There are two reservations for you on a Pan Am five-thirty P.M. flight to Ecuador. You will arrive in Quito at eight the next morning. Tonight stay at the Americana Hotel."

"Will further instructions be delivered to us there?"

"If we had all the answers," Q said coolly, "we wouldn't need agents."

"Yes, sir."

"We're blank on this one. Just stop that shipment."

"Yes, sir."

"The next time I hear from you, I want it to be a report of a successful mission. Over and out."

"Yes, sir," Chris said to a blank channel.

The TEEN agents arrived at Kennedy International

Airport at four-thirty the next afternoon. They were about to enter the passengers' waiting area adjacent to the boarding gates, when Chris grabbed Geronimo's arm and yanked him to one side.

“Over there!” he whispered urgently.

Sitting on one of the chairs, skimming a magazine, was the dancer from the Red Horn!

10. Slip-Up

“THERE’S A DEVELOPMENT to unsettle the old White Father,” Geronimo muttered.

“*Touché*. The kind of stuff they never mention in the training manuals. We could take a later flight.”

“Negative. We might pick up something useful if we tail our girl friend.”

“Like why she doesn’t like you to pinprick her via mental telepathy?”

“*Gonzone*. Right. Let me put on a Spanish look while we’re waiting.” Geronimo disappeared toward the rest rooms and came back with a mustache and sunglasses.

“*Ole*.” Chris grinned.

Ten minutes passed before the P.A. speaker announced that the plane was ready for boarding. The passengers queued up and began filing through the mobile passageway into the aircraft.

The TEEN agents checked in and went to the rear of the line. Their tickets were tourist class. The girl was in the same compartment. She had taken a seat next to a rather elegantly dressed woman of middle age.

With their faces averted, the boys hurried past her and took seats in the rear.

“So far so good,” Chris said, buckling his seat belt.

“It’s a long flight, though.”

“We’ll just have to be careful.”

“Wish we could get a bug on her seat.”

“It might help,” Chris said. “Recognize the woman next to her?”

“No. You?”

“Uh-uh. They don’t seem to know each other.”

“But on this case we can’t take anything at face value.”

One by one the pilot switched on the powerful jet engines. The plane swung gently away from the terminal, rolled to a runway, and lifted off. It climbed steeply, banked, and headed south.

While one stewardess used the intercom to explain the details of the emergency oxygen mask, another stood in the aisle to demonstrate with a model.

They had only been airborne a short while when Chris said, “Duck, Gerry. She’s on the way back.”

As the dancer stepped gracefully down the aisle toward the washrooms in the rear, the agents lowered their heads behind newspapers. They listened intently. When a lavatory door clicked shut, Chris got up. “I’ll install our telephone.”

He walked forward with exaggerated unsteadiness, pretending to steady himself by grasping the tops of seats. When he reached the dancer’s place, 5C, he planted a tiny, transistorized bug on the seam, then continued up to the stewardess.

She flashed a smile, and asked, “May I help you, sir?”

“I hope so. There’s a chance that a friend of mine might be on this flight, but I don’t see him. I wonder if his name is listed on your manifest.”

“I’ll gladly check for you. His name?”

“Uh, Kingston. John Kingston.”

The girl picked up a clipboard and quickly scanned the list of names. At the same time, Chris looked at the notation after 5C and saw that the girl had given her name as *Mrs. A. Zenker*.

“I’m sorry,” the stewardess said. “We don’t have any Kingston aboard.”

Chris shrugged stoically. “Well, I guess I’ll have to catch up with him in Quito. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Chris hastened back to his seat. “She’s listed as Mrs. Zenker,” he told Geronimo.

“Probably fictitious.”

“No doubt.”

They heard the washroom door open. “Señorita Z is on her way back,” Chris hissed, and picked up the paper again.

They were flying south over the Atlantic now. In little more than an hour they would skim the tip of Florida, bear to the east to avoid flying over Cuba, then turn south again toward Ecuador.

The boys tilted their heads, bringing an ear close to the collar-button mikes to which the bug would transmit. The receiving aerials were thin strands of wire woven into their collars.

For several minutes they heard nothing but the sound of pages being turned and the low murmur of conversation from passengers around Seat 5C. Then, clear and distinct, Señorita Z addressed the woman beside her.

“Ha estado en Ecuador antes de este viaje, señora?”

The woman replied in French, saying she did not speak Spanish.

“*Connaissez-vous Ecuador?*”

Chris and Geronimo were astonished to hear Señorita Z switch to a flawless French. The two women chattered away in a friendly manner, but the TEEN agents were disappointed by the general and impersonal tone of the conversation.

At one point, Señorita Z said she lived in Quito. The boys’ interest picked up, but their suspect volunteered no further information.

The flight was fruitless and uneventful. Chris napped while Geronimo monitored the conversation. Midway to Ecuador, the Apache awakened Chris to spell him with the eavesdropping.

Geronimo dozed lightly—as always—ready to spring awake at the first sign of any change in his environment. When the aircraft passed over the Ecuadorian border, the pilot switched on the intercom to inform his passengers of that fact.

Geronimo’s eyes opened at the sound of the click, and he was fully awake before the captain began his announcement. “Any action, *choonday?*”

“Lots of gaff about hemlines and what length gloves to wear to evening functions, but that’s about it.”

“Sounds deadly.”

“It was.”

Then the plane banked to begin its long approach to the Quito airport. Señorita Z’s voice crackled over their mikes. In French she pointed out to her companion the shining expanse of Yaguarcocha,

which, she explained, meant Lake of Blood.

Chris raised his eyebrows and looked at Geronimo.

“Lake of Blood,” the Apache said. “Blood? *Sangre*? Could that be what Sulato was trying to tell us?”

“Possible,” Chris said.

“Maybe that’s Cascabel’s base of operations.”

“If it is, we’ve had more than our share of luck

Speaking low, they evolved a plan of action. First, separate departure from the airplane. After their passports were stamped, Chris would take only his briefcase through customs, Geronimo the bags. Chris would shadow Señorita Z while the Indian checked their luggage for later pickup. They would stay in radio contact and Geronimo would join Chris as soon as the luggage was stashed.

The aircraft winged downward. As they neared the ground, the boys saw a mosaic of red-tiled roofs grown mossy with age, small sun-drenched plazas, steep and winding cobblestoned streets and the spires of ancient churches.

The plane touched down, taxied to the terminal, and came to a halt. Chris was up and out of his seat instantly, one of the first to disembark. Geronimo followed four passengers behind Señorita Z. Chris reached the bottom of the stairs and strode toward the terminal.

Señorita Z was halfway down the stairs when a woman behind Geronimo tripped and stumbled forward, striking him square in the back.

“*Ai!*” The Apache flailed his arms in an attempt to regain his balance, but his foot had been lifted to take

the next step. Down he went, crashing into startled passengers in front.

Señorita Z turned, just as the hapless Geronimo banged directly into her. He lost his glasses and the mustache came off. Regaining his balance, he tucked his head down and mumbled, "Sorry, excuse me."

But at that instant the dancer recognized him. She paled and a hand flew to her throat. With a look of fear in her flashing dark eyes, she backed down the remaining stairs, screamed, whirled, and fled into the Arrival's entrance. A man gazed at the Indian curiously.

"Must've startled her," Geronimo said with a weak smile.

Chris had seen the mishap and kept the girl in sight until she folded herself into a telephone booth.

He waved Geronimo on ahead through passport control, then lingered to watch the frightened dancer. After she emerged from the booth, the blond agent resumed his surveillance.

Fifteen minutes later he and Geronimo were together again, hiding in an archway.

"How'd it go?" the Apache asked.

"She panicked after spotting you, slipped some money to a customs man, and they passed her through on the double. I had to do some fancy footwork to keep up with her."

"You radio good instructions. I came right to the spot like a homing pigeon. She still in the glove shop?"

Chris was about to nod when the girl emerged from a small boutique. She walked briskly down the street.

The TEEN agents followed her.

She covered two blocks, then turned into an alley. The boys allowed her to take a slight lead. They entered the alley, keeping close to the rear walls of shops.

“Oh-oh,” Geronimo said suddenly. “Trouble. She’s got two more tails.”

Chris glanced behind. Two men in white Panama hats had entered the lane, one on each side. Seeing the woman, they slackened their pace, tried to proceed casually.

They were no private eyes, Chris felt sure. Their expressions were killer—ruttled, their eyes death—intent. The boys conferred rapidly in Apache.

“Maybe I’m too jumpy, Gerry, but I think these goons are out to get our señorita. We’ll give’ em the act.”

“Topsy tourists?”

“Gonzzone.”

The two men in white advanced, paying scant attention to the TEEN agents. The girl was still in sight, oblivious to any of them.

Chris and Geronimo separated, weaving uncertainly into the paths of the stalkers. They tried to sidestep. Chris lurched into one; the Apache banged the other.

“Sorry, señor,” Chris said with a quick on and off smile.

“Pig! Out of my way!”

Chris patted the fellow friendlily while his fingers ran like radar over the man’s outline. *Shoulder holster!* Chris hiccupped the information in Apache.

“This one, too,” Geronimo replied in dialect. Apologizing profusely, the boys teetered between the men and their quarry.

“When’ll we take’ em, Gerry?”

Señorita Z, however, suddenly whirled about, a slim automatic in her graceful hands. The two men, in lightning moves, unsheathed their shoulder guns.

“Flatten!” Chris yelled. As the TEEN agents dived to the cobbled street, the men snapped off a round at the señorita. She fired back.

Chris and Geronimo were caught in the middle!

11. A Señorita's Spell

THE TEEN AGENTS rolled over and over, pressing themselves as tightly as possible against a shop wall as the firing continued.

Señorita Z had dropped to one knee, aimed the automatic with her right hand, and used her left to grip the other wrist, steadying her weapon. She seemed unruffled by the bullets ricocheting around her.

Wham!

One of the assailants dropped his gun, clutched his stomach, and pitched over.

Wham!

The other shuddered and staggered backward.

He struck a wall, then slid down to the stone pavement.

Señorita Z sprang up from her firing position and raced out of the alley. Sirens sounded in the distance.

Chris and Geronimo leaped to their feet and rushed to the fallen men. Both were unconscious and badly wounded. Their pockets were empty of any identification, but Geronimo noticed a tattoo on the inside of the wrist of one man—a coiled rattlesnake.

Chris hastily checked the other thug as the sirens wailed louder. He spotted an identical tattoo. “Cascabel’s men,” he muttered.

“It doesn’t make sense. Why did our chick gun them down?” Geronimo asked.

Chris shrugged. “*Deeka*. The local police will be

here in no time.”

The other end of the alley opened onto a narrow market street. The merchants’ stalls pressed in from each side, leaving only a small passageway through which no more than three people could walk abreast. There was no sign of Señorita Z.

The TEEN agents separated. Walking fast, they kept in touch by radio. Finally Geronimo’s voice came over. “Chris, she’s getting on a bus!”

“Where are you?”

“A block west of the Plaza.”

“I’m grabbing a taxi. Stay there.”

In less than two minutes Geronimo hopped into the cab alongside his partner. The driver was told to follow the bus. It was already out of sight, but Geronimo had seen the number.

“Where does it go?” Chris asked the taximan. “To Ibarra, señor.”

“Is that far from here?”

“About fifty miles.”

The bus, of ancient vintage, growled and groaned through the rolling countryside. The equally rickety taxi lagged behind at a prudent distance. Even though it was early in the morning, the trip was hot and uncomfortable.

Finally Señorita Z alighted in Ibarra. The TEEN agents paid the driver and followed her on foot. But after a while in the crowded streets they lost sight of her again.

Chris approached a stand at which an Indian was offering bright red and black shawl blankets.

“Pardon, señor. Did you see a young lady in a red dress walk by here recently?” he asked in Spanish.

The Indian stared at him with no sign of understanding.

“What’s with him?” Geronimo inquired in Apache.

“I don’t know.” Chris shrugged. Then he reached into his pocket and dug out a few coins. He held them under the man’s nose.

The Indian took them and nodded. “Yes. I saw her.”

“Where did she go?”

“Down there, to the left.”

“I don’t get it,” Geronimo said. “We’re on the outskirts of the city now. Where in the world is she going?”

Chris asked the man what lay beyond the city. “*Nada. Todo.*” The native shrugged.

“Nothing. Everything,” Geronimo translated. “Now there’s a helpful answer.”

Chris thought a moment. “I know what’s out there.”

“What?”

“Yaguarcocha, the Lake of Blood.”

Chris asked the Indian about trails leading to Yaguarcocha. There were three, one of which was steep and rocky.

The TEEN agents conferred. “Let’s trail her,” Geronimo suggested.

“Got any more mustaches?”

The Apache winced, then pointed to the native’s wares. “Think I could pass for a *sudamericano*?”

Though most Ecuadorian Indians tended to be lighter skinned and more round-faced than *Geronimo*, the country's history of racial mixture was such that he could pass for a native without much difficulty. The boys bought a blanket and a large round hat for him.

"I got some cheek pads in that briefcase," Chris said. "You can have those. Can you speak without an accent?"

"No, but I could be mute!"

"Good idea."

At different stalls they also purchased a hundred-foot coil of rope and an iron grappling hook. They set off with their gear and in five minutes were beyond the city limits. A short time later, the signs of civilization began to disappear. Patches of cultivated land dwindled, while brush and foliage thickened. Chris turned to glance back on the city, retreating in the distance.

A feeling of solemnity overcame the boys, but they did not let it blunt their sense of urgency.

On the first trail they found two native children who said, Yes, they had seen a pretty señorita dressed in red.

They remembered her quite well because of her strange actions. She had left the trail and ducked into the undergrowth, emerging a few minutes later in pants, blouse, and hiking boots.

"Can you show us the spot?" Chris asked in Spanish.

The children were happy to help. Behind a fallen log the TEEN agents found Señorita Z's discarded dress! They delighted the children by giving them each a couple of new, shiny coins, then pressed on.

Once in a while they passed signs of their quarry's passage—a crushed cigarette butt, snapped twigs, heel marks. But soon the trail became hard to follow and finally it disappeared altogether.”

“She must have taken another trail,” Chris muttered. “What do you think?”

“I’ve lost her tracks. Nothing but rock here. But we’re going in the right direction. Let’s just continue and see what happens.”

Forty-five minutes later they were close to the edge of Yaguarcocha. The trail had descended gradually. Now the boys were faced with scaling a high precipice before they could reach the lake itself.

They climbed some thirty feet before they ran out of handholds. Geronimo craned his neck and looked up. “I’d say about eighty feet, *choonday*. What do you think?”

“That sounds about right.”

Geronimo fixed the grappling hook to the rope, then twirled it in an ever-lengthening circle. When he had built up enough momentum, he let fly. The hook soared upward and the line unwound from the coil around his arm. Then the grapple went over the top with a muffled *clink*.

The Indian tugged the line gently. It gave. He tugged it again. This time the hook found a grip and the line went taut. He tested it with his full weight. It held.

“Here goes, *choonday*. See you on the top.” Geronimo locked his ankles around the rope and began climbing hand over hand.

Chris anchored the bottom and watched his pal rise.

Geronimo's progress was quick. He paused for a breather on a narrow ledge fifteen feet from the top, gave Chris the okay sign, and started up again.

The Apache's hand was reaching for the cliff edge when Chris gasped in horror. A man with a cruel smile had appeared above Geronimo's head. "*Iltse, Gerry!*" Chris yelled.

At the same moment, the stranger kicked loose the grappling hook. The Indian shouted and plunged down!

He landed on the small ledge and was knocked unconscious. Chris watched in helpless rage as two more figures darted from a crevice, seized the injured TEEN agent, and dragged him off.

It was over in a matter of seconds. The cliff stood silent and empty, as if nothing had happened.

The grapple had fallen to the earth. Chris retrieved it, his stomach in a tense knot. He spun the hook and flung it upward.

Geronimo was racked with pain. His consciousness was drowning in a sea of agony. He fought to come awake, fought as if his life depended on it. He opened his eyes and blinked to bring the sky into focus. Carefully he tested his body, moving his fingers, then his wrists, then his arms...Nothing was broken. A miracle! His eyes roved to take in a cluster of three tents, neat and obviously new. He was lying before the largest one.

"So you are awake," said a voice in English. Señorita Z moved into his vision. She smiled with satisfaction.

She fired a series of questions at him. Geronimo

looked at her in pretended ignorance.

“Who are you? Why are you here? What do you want with us? Who do you work for?”

Geronimo touched his lips and shook his head. It hurt, and he suddenly realized that he was covered with cuts and bruises.

“Don’t be ridiculous. You are not an Indian, and you are not mute. Answer my questions!”

The Indian touched his lips again and looked helpless.

“Perhaps this will loosen your tongue. Ramon!”

A man appeared with a flaming brand. Two other thugs pinned the prisoner securely to the ground. Ramon jammed the burning stick onto Geronimo’s arm. The Apache writhed in torment, but did not utter a sound.

“Enough,” said Señorita Z. The torture was stopped. “Now will you speak?”

Silence.

“You only make it difficult for yourself.”

She sighed and was about to signal Ramon again when another man sprinted up and drew her off to the side. She returned a few moments later and ordered her men to prop Geronimo up so he could watch.

“You will regret not having spoken,” she said. “Observe your fate!”

She bent down and with fire ash drew a pentagram on the ground. One of her men brought her a doll figure which resembled Geronimo. This she placed within the design. Then she took a vial out of her hip pocket, uncapped it, and poured the liquid over the

doll.

“Voodoo,” Geronimo thought grimly. Now she was doing it to him. How fate had reversed his role!

He smoldered as he watched the woman rise. She stood perfectly still for a moment, then turned to the Apache.

“That was Four Thieves Vinegar,” she explained, pointing to the empty vial. “Once I recite the formula, your destiny will be sealed. You will sicken and die within days!”

Señorita Z closed her eyes and raised her hands. Slowly she mumbled a spell, then turned to Geronimo once more.

“And now I must leave. Farewell, doomed one!” To her men she said, “Guard him well.”

They trussed their prisoner with ropes, then settled down and lit pipes. Geronimo watched them regard him slyly-smiling and whispering out of earshot. Where was Chris? he wondered. What had happened to old *choonday*?

A strange feeling started to overtake Geronimo.

He tried to hold it back, but no luck. He grew sick to his stomach!

You will sicken and die! Geronimo shook his head. No, it was ridiculous. It was the effects of the fall that were making him sick, nothing more...

12. Odd Coincidence

CHRIS HAD FOLLOWED the ledge to a small, open area on the plateau. He skirted the clearing and found a footpath that led to the top of the cliff.

Flat on his stomach, he peered through the undergrowth. There was Geronimo, lying near one of the tents, eyeing a small doll. Two guards lazed against nearby trees, puffing contentedly on pipes. Experience told Chris there should be more of the enemy present, that it should not be that: simple.

He waited and listened. There was not a sound, and nobody emerged from the tents.

He crawled soundlessly around the clearing, perplexed by the absence of trap or ambush.

Footprints indicated, however, that people had been there and left.

Chris slipped his zip pen from his pocket and moved into range of the guards. He looked around a final time, aimed the pen, and depressed the clip in quick succession twice. Both guards slumped to the ground.

Quickly Chris crawled to Geronimo, cut his bonds with a penknife, and helped him to his feet. After a minute or so the Apache could negotiate on his own.

Silently they moved out of the clearing and did not pause until they were a good distance away from Señorita Z's campsite.

"You feel okay?" Chris asked Geronimo. "Yeah, outside of about ten million bruises and gashes I'm in great shape."

"What was the dolly all about?"

“That was poor, cursed me!” Geronimo told him about the ceremony put on for his benefit.

“Our girl is behaving in her usual charming manner,” Chris muttered.

“A real homecoming queen, no doubt. Man, I must’ve knocked my head in that fall! For a while there, I thought the curse was working.”

“If it affected you that way, just think about how it works on the natives!”

“I’d rather not.”

They climbed down from the plateau and headed back to Ibarra. They made frequent stops to allow Geronimo to rest.

“You know,” Chris said, “I can’t get out of my mind the thought that things were too easy. You should have been better guarded.”

“I’m just as glad I wasn’t, thank you.”

“Well, that aside—how did it look to you?”

Geronimo shrugged. “Don’t forget their strong belief in voodoo, *choonday*. I’m as good as dead no matter if I stay there or escape. The curse will work within days. So why bother with guards.”

It was late in the evening when they reached Quito. The city sounded as if it were one huge bell. *Bong, bong, bong!*

“*Ai*,” Geronimo said, holding his ears. “What a reception.”

“The guidebook said there are fifty-six churches here—they cut loose with their bells every hour.”

Ecuadorians passed by without seeming to notice

the incredible reverberations or the TEEN agents, who headed for a poor and slightly rundown section of town. The Apache's injuries had to be treated by a doctor, but they did not want to answer any questions. The man they found was quite competent and seemed accustomed to dealing with wounds of various types without making any inquiries.

He cauterized the cuts and applied an unguent-soaked compress to the burn and the worst of the bruises. The patient would be uncomfortable for a while, he said, but there was nothing serious.

The boys checked in at an old, but nicely kept hotel, not far from the doctor's office. Chris bought a couple of newspapers in the lobby, then entered the small cage elevator with Geronimo.

Their room was on the fifth floor. The elevator stopped on Two. There a tall handsome man with a pencil-thin mustache entered. His eyes lit up when he saw Chris. "Señor Cool! What a pleasure to encounter you."

Chris stared for a moment before recognizing the man. It was Rios, the South American who had claimed the polo pony in New Jersey. He shook hands.

"Where is your friend, Señor Johnson?"

"Back in the States. Visiting his family."

"Ob. And you are... what? Vacationing?"

"Yes. And you?"

Rios laughed. "Life is one *grande*, one huge vacation for me. I am here now checking on the hotel. A friend of mine owns it, and I promised I would look in while I was in Ecuador."

Geronimo, still wrapped in his Indian blanket and wearing his large hat, managed to press the button to the fourth floor. When the elevator stopped, he got out. Rios and Chris continued on up to Five.

“Are you free tomorrow about noon?” Rios asked. A friend, at whose farm I am staying, has a *fantastico* string of polo ponies. We would be honored if you would play with us.”

“I think I’ll be free. I’d enjoy a game.”

“*Muy bien!*” Rios gave Chris directions, shook his hand lightly in the Latin custom, and rode down with the elevator.

Geronimo was waiting for Chris in their room. “For something so simple,” he said, “this disguise is a four-star job. Rios didn’t give me a second look.”

Chris told him of the invitation.

“I don’t go for it. Smells as if there’s a rat some place.”

“It is rather a coincidence that we ran into him again,” Chris mused. “That’s why I accepted. Of course it might just be a waste of time.”

“Well, I’m going along, in the background of course. Just as a precaution.”

“Okay.”

Chris had paid a porter to pick up their bags at the airport. Now they lounged on their beds and read the newspapers. Both noted the abundance of articles and editorials detailing the Indian uprisings and reporting the large number of tribes being organized by revolutionary leaders.

The government did not take this lightly. High

officials stated bluntly that with proper leadership and sufficient arms the Indians might well be able to topple the political structure of the state.

The boys had to find their man, and find him fast!

Before retiring for the night, Chris checked in with their Quito CIA contact and informed him of their whereabouts.

The next day Chris discovered that Don Manuelo de Garcia-Vega's farm was a farm in name only. Actually, it was a sprawling and luxurious estate, dominated by a palatial mansion artistically set off by arcades and arbors. Paths about the estate were lined with lush eucalyptus trees, even to the horse barns behind the white hacienda.

The polo ponies were indeed as fine as Rios had claimed. And the wealthy Latin-American gentry with whom Chris played were skillful.

The first two chukkas left the score tied at four to four. It was a hard, fast game and Chris enjoyed himself. He wished Geronimo were playing, too. At least the Indian was watching from some hidden vantage point.

Midway through the third chukka, Chris drove his pony in for a shot that would mean a sure goal. An opponent raced neck and neck with him and swung first. He missed the ball, but on the follow-through, his mallet struck Chris's pony in the face. The horse shied to the side, only to be smashed into by another charging player!

Chris and his horse were bowled over. For a moment everything was confusion. Shouts, whickers, rearing horses, and flashing hoofs. Chris summoned

all his agility, dived under one of the panicky horses, rolled in a somersault, and emerged safely on the other side.

With the game stopped, nearly everyone apologized to Chris. He brushed them off, saying no harm had been done.

“You are a brave man,” Don Garcia-Vega said, and suggested they withdraw for refreshments. As they lounged in wrought-iron chairs on one of the verandas, conversation was informal and free flowing.

One of the major topics was the possibility of an Indian uprising. Rios knew Ecuador well, particularly the Indian area in Oriente, and he disagreed with the government’s concern.

“Many of these tribes are traditional enemies,” he said. “It would be *muy dificil*, very difficult to join them in a common cause. Who would provide the leadership? From where would the arms come? What would the natives—uneducated and ignorant as they are—hope to gain?”

Others agreed with Rios. It did not seem plausible to them at all.

Chris mentioned that he had overheard two chambermaids speaking of a man called Cascabel. According to them, he said, the brains behind the uprisings was this ruthless, power-hungry man.

Señor Garcia-Vega chuckled indulgently. “Peasant fantasy,” he said.

“Nothing more than a nonexistent bogeyman,” Rios agreed.

Chris said nothing.

When Chris and Geronimo met later that evening at their hotel, they found a telegram waiting. Chris took it, thanked the clerk, and moved off to a corner of the lobby.

While Geronimo kept alert for eavesdroppers, he tore open the envelope and read the message:

POLO PONY BITTEN BY SNAKE IN RIO.
CAREFUL. HOWL.

SPICE

13. Hypos for Jivaros

DECODED, THE MESSAGE cautioned the boys to beware of Rios and to call Spice at Howell Mansion.

They went up to their room. "I told you, *choonday*," Geronimo said, "there's something not right about that cat. It looks as if your accident this afternoon was not so accidental after all."

"Far as Rios goes, you might be right. But that spill—well, I don't know how to explain it. Let's get through to Spice."

Chris raised their CIA contact on his watch radio. Among other pieces of espionage equipment, the man possessed a phone scrambler. If he put the call through to Howell Mansion—which also had a scrambler—he could relay the cleared conversation to the boys over their watch radios. This way they eliminated any chance of eavesdroppers.

It took ten minutes for international operators to complete the call. Then, "Hello, Spice Carter here."

"Hi, sweetheart. It's the Lone Ranger."

"And his faithful Indian companion Tonto," Geronimo put in.

"You received my smoke signal, I see."

"Our eagle eyes never miss," the Apache said. "Been heading them off at the pass?" Spice asked coyly.

"Matter of fact, it's been the other way around, but things are picking up," Chris said. "What's the drill?"

"You know a man named Rios?"

"Uh-huh, Played polo with him this afternoon."

“My, my. And here I thought you were working, Just goes to show.”

“I repeat, sarcastic one, what’s the drill?”

“Well, from the top. Yummi, myself, and our three huge but lovable computers have proved conclusively that no one at the Think Tank is responsible for the security leak.

“Ideas and plans from the Tank go directly to our mutual friend Northgate, And that’s the point at which the Russians are picking them up.”

Chris whistled, “Northgate’s pretty high on the ladder. If he’s selling out, we’re in trouble.”

“He’s not, We’ve had him checked and rechecked, forwards, backwards, and side to side. At this point I can even tell you the number of hairs on the back of his left hand.”

“Now there’s a useful bit of information,” Geronimo said.

Spice ignored the gibe. “We did come up with one very interesting fact, though. An old classmate and friend of his—one Fernando Rios, well-known Argentine playboy and polo enthusiast—has a key to his apartment.”

“Aha,” Chris said, “The plot thickens.”

“Like pudding, chum. Now Rios checks out pretty well, No communist affiliations that we can find and enough money so that he doesn’t have to work in the spy business. Nevertheless, I’ll stake my reputation on the fact that he’s our boy. Q agrees, so Rios is suspect number one.”

“What does this have to do with us?” Chris asked.

“Nothing, directly. Rios has no reason to think you two might be agents, but if something suggests the idea to him, he might be dangerous.”

“Thanks for the tip. We’ll be careful.”

“Also, any info you can get on him while you’re hunting Cascabel would be appreciated.”

“Can’t tell you much at the moment,” Chris said, “Except that he’s a good polo player, and he thinks Cascabel is a myth.”

Spice sighed. “You’re always so helpful.”

“Glad you appreciate us. Seriously, if we do come up with anything pertinent, we’ll let you know.”

“Thanks, chums. Good luck”

They ended the conversation and Chris signed off with the CIA man.

The TEEN agents discussed Spice’s information and tried to figure out how much time, if any, they could devote to Rios.

There was a knock on the door. They were expecting no one, and they had Spice’s warning fresh in their minds. Geronimo pointed to the window. Chris nodded.

They got up quietly and padded across the room. Geronimo looked out and saw a stout and well-braced drainpipe close to the window. He stepped to the sill and tested the drain, then committed himself to it and began sliding down. Chris followed.

On the street they decided that Chris would go into the lobby while Geronimo remained just out of sight in case of trouble. They circled the building. Chris stepped to the hotel’s entrance, and came face to face

with Rios, who was carrying a large attaché case.

“Senior Cool! How fortunate I encounter you. I have just come from your room.”

“Good evening,” Chris said. “Is there something I can do for you?”

“Quite possibly. Do you have a few moments?”

“Yes.”

“May we go up to your room to discuss the matter?”

Chris thought of their suitcases. So far as Rios knew, he was alone. He decided to keep it that way. “Actually I was going to have a snack before going upstairs.”

“Good. There’s a spot not far from here where we can talk in private.”

En route to the cafe, which was only a few blocks distant, Chris was aware of a dark form occasionally flitting from shadow to shadow. Geronimo was staying with them.

The cafe was dimly lighted and a small band was playing soft Bossa Nova music. Rios slipped a bill to the waiter, who led them to a table for two in a small alcove.

They placed their orders, then Chris leaned back in his chair. “What is it you wanted to talk over, Mr, Rios? You seem to be very mysterious.”

Rios leaned forward and spoke in a low voice, “The government has many informants.”

“What does the government have to do with this?”

“I will explain in a moment. First, you strike me as quite an independent young American with a strong taste for adventure. Is this so?”

Chris shrugged. "I get my kicks where I can."

"Good. And you are not opposed to a little danger?"

"That depends. Not if I like the proposition."

"All right. You are familiar with the Jivaros, at least by reputation, yes?"

"Head-hunters. Pretty fierce warriors."

"That is true. But they are also a proud, intelligent tribe trying to cope with the inroads civilization is making upon them."

"So?"

"At the moment they are suffering a severe epidemic, a deadly disease that attacks the lungs. The government of Ecuador fears the Jivaros and would like to be rid of them."

Chris knew better, but said nothing. "Without medicine, great numbers of the Indians will die. I represent an international humanitarian organization that is determined to get the necessary medicine to the Jivaros. Here."

Rios looked about before carefully opening the attaché case. Inside were a dozen hypodermic needles and two to three hundred glass cartridges filled with a colorless liquid.

"If you will take this to Dr. McHenry, who's with the Jivaros now, countless lives will be saved. I might also add that the pay is very good."

"The Jivaros are in the Oriente, aren't they?"

"Yes."

"How am I supposed to get to them?"

"You will be landed by plane on a small strip near

the Rio Napo. There you will be equipped with maps and survival equipment. I will give you the coordinates of the village. It is only a few hours from your landing point.”

“How good is this ‘very good’ pay?”

Rios smiled. “I see I was not mistaken. You have a strong sense of self-interest. That is good. This mission requires will and determination.”

“What about the bread?”

“Two hundred and fifty dollars.”

“No thanks.”

“Let us not haggle. The medicine is needed. Five hundred even.”

Chris was thoughtful. “Half now and half when I return.”

Rios stroked his jaw. “You are no one’s fool.”

“Somebody say I was?”

“No.” The Argentine removed his wallet.

“In American dollars,” Chris said.

“Of course.” Rios counted out five fifty-dollar bills.

Chris took them, recounted the bills, and placed them in his wallet.

“When will you be able to leave?” Rios asked. “I took your money. *You tell me.*”

“Tomorrow morning?”

“Where and at what time?”

“At the airport, the runway for private planes. Eleven-thirty.”

“Fine.”

“I think I have made a wise choice in you, Mr. Cool.”

Rios signaled the waiter, paid the bill, and walked outside with Chris. The street was alive with figures in blankets and ponchos and Chris knew Geronimo was concealed somewhere in the shadows.

“I will bid you good night here,” Rios said. He shook hands with Chris, then handed over the attaché case. “Good luck.”

“Thanks. I’ll be back to pick up that other two-fifty soon.”

Rios walked away. Chris stood and watched him until he had turned a corner. Then the TEEN agent started back to his hotel. Five minutes after he had arrived at their room, Chris answered a soft, coded knock on the door.

Geronimo slipped in. “No tails, no shadows. What did he want?”

Chris explained and showed him the case. “I figured delivering this would put us closer to Cascabel—and give us a good cover at the same time.”

Geronimo raised his eyebrows. “What’s the medicine, really?”

Chris shrugged, saying there was no time for an analysis. “We’ll have to play it by ear.”

For an hour they mulled over a way for Chris to take Geronimo along without revealing the Apache’s identity to Rios. They were stumped and decided to sleep on it.

In the morning they still had no plan. They didn’t like it, but it appeared as if Chris would have to make the trip alone.

Chris left the hotel with the attaché case at ten O'clock. Geronimo, in disguise, followed a couple of hundred feet behind.

The blond agent raised his hand to flag down a taxi. As he did, two policemen burst suddenly from a shop. They grabbed Chris, pulled his arms behind his back, and slapped handcuffs about his wrists.

The taller one said, "You are under arrest, señor!"

14. The Bodyguard

“WHAT FOR?” CHRIS said. “This is absurd. I demand to see the American Consul.”

“Your bluffs will accomplish nothing.”

“I’m not bluffing, I’m demanding. Take me to the American Consul!”

The officer behind Chris applied painful pressure to his arms. “Silence!”

A small black van pulled up to the curb. A blindfold was tied over Chris’s eyes, and he was hustled roughly into the vehicle. The door slammed shut.

“What is this all about?” Chris asked as the truck roared away.

No one answered.

Chris’s temper soared. “You can’t just grab a guy off the street like this. It’s—”

Someone struck him hard on the side of the head. “*Silencio!*”

Something was terribly wrong. The Ecuadorian police, Chris knew, did not use Gestapo techniques. The manhandling he had received, the blindfold, the unmarked van—all these spelled *phony*. But what was the purpose? Who was behind it?

They were in the van for perhaps twenty minutes. Chris had the impression that they took a zigzag course to confuse him, or to throw off anyone who might be following.

They had succeeded in at least the first; after five minutes his sense of direction failed. He had no idea

where they were.

Chris hoped Geronimo had been able to commandeer a taxi. Once the Apache was on the trail, he was a hard man to shake. Chris attempted to reach the stem of his watch radio, to activate it on the signal *Listen—don't talk*, but his hands were cuffed in such a way that he couldn't.

The van stopped. As Chris heard the rear door open, someone jerked him to his feet. "*Afuera—outside.*"

Trying to step out, he stumbled. Someone cursed and kicked him. He struggled to stand, and a hand closed about his elbow, directing him forward. All at once the noise of the city dimmed. A feeling of confined space tingled his skin. They had taken him into a building.

Footfalls sounded only a little ways, around two comers, then stopped. There was the sound of a door being unlocked. Footsteps drew closer. "*Teniente,*" said one of Chris's captors, "*aqui esta el norte americano.*"

"*Bueno. Traigale dentro.*"

Chris was steered forward into what he assumed was an interrogation room of some sort.

"*Sientese,*" the lieutenant said.

Chris saw no point in letting them know he spoke Spanish.

"Sit down," the man said with irritation.

Chris was shoved into a chair.

"Who are you, Mr. Cool?" the lieutenant asked.

"My first name's Christopher."

“Do not joke with us. Things could go very badly with you.”

“I’m not joking. My name is Christopher Cool. Check my passport if you like.”

“We have done so already.”

“Good. That’s one question answered. Now, who are *you*?” Chris could see nothing from beneath the blindfold.

“I am not here to answer your questions. You are here to answer mine.”

“Seems pretty one-sided to me.”

“Enough!” Chris was hit in the mouth. “I will not warn you again.”

“What do you want to know?” Chris asked stiffly.

“That is better. First, who do you work for?”

“I don’t work. I’m a sophomore at Kingston University back in the States. New Jersey.”

“And for money, you do ... what?”

“My father left me a small inheritance. I make extra money in the summer sometimes by day work on construction gangs—stuff like that.”

“What are you doing in Ecuador?”

“Look. You’ll notice that I’m trying to cooperate. But frankly, being snatched off the street, handcuffed and blindfolded is pretty upsetting, not to mention uncomfortable. I’m sure there’s been a mistake. If you’d take off the cuffs and the blindfold, maybe we could talk this thing over, whatever it is, and get to the bottom of it.”

There was an interval of silence in which the

lieutenant evidently signaled one of his subordinates. The blindfold was stripped off.

“Thank you,” Chris said. “The handcuffs?” The lieutenant was a man of medium height. His police uniform looked brand new. “The handcuffs will remain,” he said smugly.

“Well, could you fasten my hands in front, then? My shoulders are strained.”

The man nodded with a smile. A motion of his hand and a policeman stepped behind Chris to unlock the cuffs. The agent sighed and moved his hands to his lap, managing to activate his watch radio to the *Listen* signal. The policeman refastened the steel manacles.

“This isn’t a police station,” Chris said, looking around the room and hoping that Geronimo was listening.

“No,” said the lieutenant, “it is an area we use for questioning of a special nature.”

“Looks like an old, abandoned building to me. And what’s that? A street market out there by that church... Saint... Saint...?”

“San Bartolomeo.” The lieutenant laughed uproariously. “It serves no purpose for you to determine your location, Mr. Cool. It will do you no good.”

“That may be,” Chris thought, “but it’s going to do a certain Apache a lot of good.”

“To return to the matter at hand, why are you in Ecuador?”

“Vacationing. Classes get pretty dull sometimes. A guy’s got to get away now and then.”

“With all your innocence, Mr. Cool, how do you explain this?” With a flourish the lieutenant snatched up Rios’s attaché case. His face was flushed and his nostrils quivered.

Chris faked a look of naive surprise. “The case? Is that what this is all about?”

“Yes I You will wish you had never been born if you fail to cooperate!”

“Sure. I’d be happy to. It doesn’t mean anything to me.”

The man looked startled, then recovered his poise. “You are, of course, familiar with the contents.”

“I guess it’s medicine. Some hypodermics and bottles. I looked inside trying to find the owner’s name. Must be a doctor or something.”

“The *owner’s* name?”

“Yes. I found the case when I left the hotel this morning. I was just on the way to the police station to turn it in when your men jumped me.”

“Liar!” The lieutenant stormed and raged about the room. He had fired questions for nearly twenty minutes when the door was suddenly flung open. In strode Rios, with a friendly grin on his face.

He walked straight to Chris and clapped him on the shoulder. “*Bueno. Muy bueno*, Mr. Cool. Your loyalty and tenacity delight me.”

While Chris gaped, Rios introduced the so called policemen. They were all his confederates.

“Please forgive this little test—and the roughness necessary to make it seem real. But we had to find out if you were truly as dependable as I thought.”

Chris exploded. "Rios, I don't like to be played with!"

Rios unlocked the handcuffs. "Don't be rash, *amigo*. Secrecy is absolutely essential. We had to make sure." A rapid command dismissed his men, who hastened out, leaving the pair alone.

Chris stood up. "Well, make sure with someone else. I'm through!" He stalked toward the door.

"Wait!" Rios called. "I am sorry. My judgment was poor. I will add an extra hundred dollars to your fee."

Chris hesitated. "My discomfort's going to cost you an extra *two* hundred."

"Agreed. The fault is mine."

"All right. Let's get going then." Chris snatched up the case and walked out of the building. Rios followed.

"Let me drop you at the airport," the Argentine said. "My car is two blocks from here."

They were approaching Rios's car when three shabby toughs emerged from a door and blocked their way. Chris's peripheral vision recorded a brief flash of movement on a one-story building over the toughs. He glanced up to the roof and saw Geronimo in his Indian disguise.

"This another one of your tests?" Chris snapped at Rios.

"No. I swear on my mother's grave I have never seen these men before."

"Then it's your fancy suit and the attaché case that attracted them. They smell money."

The glint of knife blades flashed in the folds of the thugs' serapes. "*La cartera grande y su dinero,*" the

leader growled.

“He wants our money and the attaché case,” Rios said nervously.

Now Geronimo was poised on the roof’s edge—ready. He swooped down in silence, crashing on the heads of the bandits and sending them sprawling.

Then the Apache cut loose. He was using karate and judo, Chris saw, but doing an excellent job of concealing it—making it seem that he was a tremendously good street fighter. In less than two minutes the battered thugs lay unconscious.

“*Madre de Dios!*” Rios exclaimed. “Such a fighter! But why did he help us?”

“Probably for a reward. Say, Rios, I’ve just had an idea...” Chris talked fast. The gist of it was that he thought this Indian would be a handy guy to have around in case of trouble. He was willing to offer him thirty-five dollars, a huge amount to an Ecuadorian Indian—to act as bodyguard.

Rios agreed it was a good idea. Trying to get the Indian to understand was painfully slow, but the mute flashed an ear-to-ear smile when he was made to accept his new job.

The three of them piled into Rios’s car, sped out to the airport, where the Argentine said *adios*.

Chris was told that his pilot was already on the field, giving his aircraft a preflight check. Master and bodyguard left the hangar and began walking toward the single-engine plane, which was standing off the runway a quarter mile away.

Suddenly Geronimo cried out, in pain, and staggered forward. Then he pitched headlong to the

ground.

Chris knelt beside his stricken pal. “Gerry, what’s the matter?”

“Shot—shot in the back,” the Apache gasped.

15. A Horrible Discovery

CHRIS WHIPPED OUT his zip pen. The sniper was probably out of range, but the pen was better than nothing. His practiced eyes skimmed in a 360-degree circle.

But there were no hidden figures, no telltale reflections of a telescopic rifle sight in the sun. He searched again. Nothing. And no second shot. It didn't make sense.

Still alert for any sign of an assailant, he gave part of his attention to Geronimo. "How bad are you hit?"

"Could be a lot worse," the Apache said with pain in his voice. "Just below my right shoulder."

Chris probed Geronimo's back gently. He did not feel anything. There was no hole, no blood. Slowly Chris returned his pen to his pocket.

"Redskin, old buddy. There's no evidence of a bullet."

"Crazy, man! And the pain's disappearing. *Choonday*, the natural order of things has blown its mind."

Chris pulled aside Geronimo's blanket and hiked up the Apache's shirt. "No wound," he said. "That is, nothing but the abrasions you picked up on the ledge. Tell me where you thought the bullet hit." He touched Geronimo's back lightly in four different spots.

"Right there."

"Thought so. That's one of the nastier cuts you got in the fall. It appears to be healing nicely, not infected at all. But maybe it was hurt again in the fight with

those toughs.”

“Guess so.” Geronimo was doubtful. Feeling stronger, he stood, walked a few steps, then looked at Chris with perplexity. “Feels fine now. Well, let’s get going.”

Their pilot, Mulligan, was a soft-spoken man who often flew missionaries and supplies into the Oriente. He gave the impression of being a loner, whose sole solace and concern was with his old four-seater, single-engine craft. He took off without much ado.

The view of the distant snow-topped towering peaks of Mount Antisana and Mount Coto paxi was exhilarating. So beautiful were the mountains that there was a feeling of loss, some forty-five minutes later, when the plane cleared the range and left it behind, heading east.

Their destination was a narrow landing strip midway between Rio Curaray and Rio Napo, a point fifteen miles from the nearest Jivaro village to the east, and from the closest Auca village to the west. Their estimated flying time was two hours and forty minutes.

But after two and a half hours the engine began to choke and snarl, and the plane lost altitude. Mulligan was more annoyed than concerned. He diagnosed the trouble as a bad fuel line and told the boys he couldn’t risk trying for the landing strip.

“What then?” Chris asked.

The pilot thought for a moment, his mouth in a grim line. Finally he said it would be safer to nurse the plane to a flat, shallow stretch of the Rio Curaray where he could make an emergency landing.

This would put them just outside an Auca settlement, where they could lay in some supplies for the twenty-mile trek to the Jivaros. Their mission would not be aborted, merely delayed.

Chris felt a knot in his stomach. The arms shipment was getting closer to Cascabel. When it arrived, the rebel would be more formidable than ever.

The river, where the pilot set down, was gravel-bedded and no more than a few inches deep. The plane bucked and bounced roughly, sending up a fine spray of water, but all in all it was quite a skillful landing.

“Nice going,” Chris said as they climbed out. “Got company,” Mulligan grumbled, motioning toward the bank. “Tread softly with the Aucas. They’re getting friendlier by the day, but still, it was less than ten years ago they slaughtered five missionaries.”

A dozen Indians were watching them. Armed with nine-foot feathered spears and blowguns, they were tan-skinned and naked except for loincloths. Their hair was jet black and shoulder length, cut in bangs across the foreheads. With the Indians was an extremely tall white man with a mane of silver hair.

“That’s Dr. Birchwood,” said Mulligan. “He’s been with the Aucas a couple of years now, a fine gentleman.”

The pilot exchanged greetings with Birchwood and introduced Chris and Geronimo, who continued to maintain his role as a mute. They shook hands while the Indians looked on suspiciously, ready to spring into action at the first sign of a hostile move. The doctor invited them back to camp.

They followed him in single file, with the natives bringing up the rear. Presently the village appeared. It was composed of two dozen huts and several houses, which were nothing more than four posts covered with roofs of woven palm.

Some of the women had simple skirts and blouses, but most wore nothing but loincloths. Naked children cavorted about the village with rangy, yapping dogs. Here and there tame parrots preened.

Activity stopped as the strange white men entered camp. The Indians stared at the boys with silent and unconcealed dislike.

The physician raised his hands and addressed the Indians in a booming voice. He thumped his chest, then pointed to the TEEN agents. When he had finished, he invited all three into his house.

“What did you say to them?” Chris asked.

Birchwood filled a pipe from a leather tobacco pouch. “I told them you were very good friends and that you were to be made welcome. And I said that Our Lord and myself would be most displeased if one of you were speared or brought down by blowgun.”

“Our Lord and you aren’t the only ones,” Chris said dryly.

Birchwood lit his pipe, took a couple of puffs, and smiled. “I’m afraid to say that they’re more concerned with my displeasure than with the Lord’s. Nominally, most of them are Christians. But the old tribal laws are still strong.”

“Maybe it’s just my imagination, Doc,” said Mulligan, “but they looked a lot less friendly today than I’ve seen them in years.”

“Unfortunately, it’s not imagination,” the physician replied. “They’re upset and restless. The Rattlesnake has been frightening them with voodoo.”

“The Rattlesnake?” Chris asked.

“They call him Cascabel. What he’s up to, I don’t know. But he’s been making things difficult for me.”

“For you and a lot of others,” Mulligan said. “If the rumors I hear are right.”

They spent an hour in pleasant conversation with the TEEN agents. Chris mostly was listening. Then Dr. Birchwood said humorously, “Come now. I’ll give you the guided tour.”

They set out through the village. In a clearing, boys were hunting toads and frogs with miniature spears.

“So much of the food supply is dependent upon the meat the men bring in,” the doctor said. “The boys develop their skills early.”

They watched other youths busy with diminutive blowguns, using hard jungle berries in place of darts. Birchwood stopped a sinewy man, took his adult blowgun, and explained it.

True blowguns, he said, were eight to nine feet long and composed of two hollowed pieces of palm, fitted perfectly together and bound with a fine bark. The poison—curare—was prepared from the bark of a jungle vine.

“The juice,” he said, “is made into a paste, then dabbed onto the points of thin foot-long darts.”

“We’ll behave, Doc,” Chris bantered as they returned to the physician’s quarters.

The three outsiders feasted with Birchwood and the

Aucas that evening on a menu of fish, squirrel, and howler monkeys.

Chris and Geronimo sampled everything, and Chris complimented the Indians on their fare. This delighted the Aucas, for, as Birchwood told him, most visitors turned green at the first sight of roasted monkey.

Shortly after they had finished, a shout went up at the edge of the village. “Ai! Ai! Ai! A man came running in, brandishing a small dark object in his fist. As the Indians clustered excitedly around him, Birchwood’s eyes went cold.

“It’s a shrunken head,” he said, and shoved his way to the center.

A few moments later he returned, a strange expression on his face—almost as if he wished to be pleased, but really couldn’t allow himself the delight.

“It’s Cascabel’s head!”

“What?” Chris couldn’t believe it.

“Yes. The Jivaros must have turned on him.” Chris and Geronimo looked at the grisly souvenir. It was, indeed, the work of Jivaros, complete with the three looping stitches through the lips. As for identity, there was the large hooked nose and narrow chin. The shrunken head looked like Cascabel, all right.

“Heads you lose!” Chris told the cadaverous relic.

The TEEN agents drew off to the side and spoke unobserved in Apache. If Cascabel was dead, their mission was finished. Only one thing to do, abort and return to the States.

“Doctor, your troubles are over,” Chris said finally.

“I hope so. There’s much work to be done with these people.”

The Aucas mounted Cascabel’s head on a pole, and raced in circles, pausing only to hurl insults at the object of their fright. Strong, native liquor was passed around. The celebration was in full swing.

Dr. Birchwood was not altogether happy. “It’s a pagan rite they’re observing,” he told Chris. “I shouldn’t allow them to do it. But then, how can I deprive them of their satisfaction?”

“I’m sure the Lord understands,” Mulligan said sympathetically.

Birchwood sighed. Finally the village quieted.

Chris was given a bunk, and his faithful Indian bodyguard lay down on a blanket. Minutes later Geronimo became racked with chills. His hands trembled. In whispered Apache he told Chris of terrible shooting pains in his back.

Chris was worried. The Apache was a stoic, and if something made him complain, you *knew* it was bad. Dr. Birchwood was called and gave Geronimo a thorough examination.

“Hm! That’s strange,” he told Chris. “I can’t find a thing wrong with your servant.” A twinkle entered his eye. “Perhaps our little feast upset him.”

“I don’t think so,” Chris said.

“Then perhaps he’s had enough of your junket and wishes to return to Quito. Some of these natives are pretty cute, Mr. Cool.”

Chris stared down at his partner, lying impassively on a cot and taking in every word of the conversation.

Chris wished he could say, “Doctor, this native is different. He’s...”

Geronimo turned his head and looked at Chris. No. This mission was top secret. They’d work it out. But what was wrong? Could it possibly be the—the curse? Nonsense! There must be a logical explanation!

“Thanks for your help, Doc,” Chris said.

“Not at all.” The physician turned to a basin to wash his hands. In doing so, he accidentally knocked over Chris’s attaché case. It fell flat and clicked open.

“Oh, sorry.” The doctor knelt to help Chris put things back together.

Suddenly a strange look iced his features and he stiffened.

“Mr. Cool,” he said sharply, “just what is the purpose of this material?”

“It’s medicine,” Chris replied. “We’re taking it to the stricken Jivaros.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about this?”

“Really didn’t think it necessary.”

Dr. Birchwood unstopped a bottle and sniffed the liquid. “Medicine? Really, Mr. Cool. I have seen bottles like this before!”

“Well?”

The missionary rose and looked Chris squarely in the eyes. His voice cut like a knife. “These contain poison for darts and arrowheads!”

16. Midnight Stalkers

“POISON!” CHRIS GASPED.

“You heard me,” the doctor replied. “Don’t play naive, Mr. Cool.”

Chris was shaken by the terrible accusation and fought to regain his composure. “I’m telling you the truth, sir,” he said.

“And are you a qualified doctor? Did you intend to do the inoculating yourself?”

“Of course not. I’m taking the case to Dr. McHenry.”

“Nonsense! I’ve lived in this area three years. I know every missionary, medical and otherwise, in a radius of a hundred miles. There is no Dr. McHenry.”

“Look,” said Chris. “I don’t know what’s going on, but—”

“I think you have an excellent idea.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I believe you and your friend were in the employ of the late and most unlamented Cascabel!”

“For a man of God,” Chris said sharply, “you seem quick to condemn!”

Dr. Birchwood was taken aback by this statement. He was about to reply when five grim Indians rushed the house with spears and knives. Birchwood tried to stop them, but they had seen the confrontation and decided to rid their benefactor of his “enemies.”

Chris and Geronimo retreated. The Aucas charged. A spear whizzed by the Apache.

“*Choonday*,” he muttered, “those cats are going to make pincushions out of us.”

The agents raced to the edge of the jungle, but the natives were closing in fast. Three of them cocked back their spear arms.

“Rocket hoppers!” Chris yelled.

The boys jumped straight and clicked their heels hard together. This impact activated powerful miniature propulsion jets in the heels of their shoes. They shot into the air with a blast of smoke.

Terrified by this display of magic, the Indians threw down their weapons and flung themselves to the ground. They had already been intimidated by Cascabel’s voodoo, and were convinced this was yet another sign of such power.

The boys soared up to treetop level, then several yards across the dense foliage and came down carefully between the tangle of branches.

Once back to earth, they walked as fast as the dusky jungle would allow.

“How long do you think that little show will keep them in check?” Geronimo asked.

“Long enough to give us a decent lead, I hope.”

Geronimo nodded. Chris saw his buddy’s face was strained and pale.

“How are you holding up?”

“I’ve been better, *choonday*. I’ve been better.” They pressed on steadily for half an hour, but then it became so dark they could not continue.

“We’ll have to stay here until morning,” Chris decided, seeing that Geronimo’s movements had

become ragged and the Apache was breathing hard.

“And then what?” Geronimo murmured.

“Go north and try to reach the Rio Napo. Maybe we can pick up a jungle patrol boat.”

“It’s about eighteen miles from here to the river in my estimation,” Geronimo pondered. “And those government launches don’t pass every day, either.”

They fell into silence, sensing that their situation was almost hopeless. Geronimo was weak. His vision blurred and he began to mumble. He was running a fever.

Chris made a pallet of leaves for him and the Apache fell into a fitful sleep. Chris stood guard and listened.

The jungle night was filled with rustlings and snaps, shrieks of monkeys, the dry coughs of hunting cats. Chris put Little Cupid beside him. The machine recorded a glut of life about them, but none of the heartbeats registered as human.

Geronimo mumbled and twisted in his sleep. Chris wondered what awful malady he had picked up and whether he would survive the stifling jungle night. It was obvious that his condition was worsening.

Shortly after midnight, Chris was alerted by Little Cupid. A human heartbeat! Then two more! Somebody was stalking them.

He roused Geronimo, cautioning him to be quiet. The Apache could hardly move, but Chris helped him as they slipped away from their campsite.

They used evasive tactics for five minutes, then checked Little Cupid again. Their enemies were right

on their trail. The boys circled, but the tracking trio stayed with them.

“I can’t believe it,” Chris whispered. “Nobody can track that well.” Under other circumstances he would have suggested an ambush. But Geronimo was close to delirium. Chris could not risk his friend’s life.

“Gerry,” he said. “Gerry, listen. We can’t shake these guys and we’ve got to get back to Birchwood. You need help. You understand?” Geronimo nodded, his eyes glazed.

They started back to the Auca village, still unable to lose the heartbeats of their pursuers. Suddenly two Aucas rose from the shadows at the edge of the village. Spears were pressed into the boys’ throats.

Chris stood perfectly still. No chance to reach his zip pen. He sighed with relief when one of the Indians made a guttural sound and gestured toward Birchwood’s house.

The missionary doctor was still awake. Mulligan was with him. Both men’s eyes were hostile.

Birchwood saw, however, that Geronimo was seriously ill, and helped him to lie down. “It was foolish of you to run away,” he said angrily.

“Your Indians didn’t exactly invite us to stay.”

Chris said. He was very tired.

“Now that your leader is dead, what do you intend to do?” Birchwood went on.

“I told you before, we’re not connected with Cascabel. We were hired by the same man who hired Mulligan to fly us out there to deliver the case to Dr. McHenry. He paid us for the delivery.”

The pilot spoke up. "As far as I know that's true."

"What's more," Chris said, "somebody was hot on our trail. Your Aucas, I presume."

"No. I ordered them not to chase you," the missionary said.

"Then who was it?"

Chris pondered the mystery of the three pursuers. They had been virtually upon them, but had made no move to capture them. Why? And how could they tail their quarry in utter darkness?

His reverie was broken by Mulligan. "Now that I think of it, Mr. Rios hired me to fly another young man with a similar attaché case a couple of weeks ago. He was a vacationing Canadian. I was supposed to bring him back, but he never showed up."

Birchwood mused for a moment, then turned to Chris. "If you are speaking the truth, you are obviously being used as dupes. Better go back to Quito."

Chris put on an indignant act. "No! I want to get to the bottom of this, and find out who's behind this whole scheme. Even if Cascabel is dead, I'm sure his men are still at work."

He thought for a moment. "Can the poison be exchanged for, let's say, water?"

"We've already done that," Mulligan put in.

"Will you take us then, as planned?"

"It's dangerous. You may be killed."

"I'll take that chance. My mute guide will protect me—that is, once he is well again."

Birchwood could find nothing wrong with Geronimo, but since the Indian, after a short period of recovery, suddenly ran a fever again, it was decided that they should fly back to Quito in the morning. The Apache had to get to a hospital.

The TEEN agents were awakened shortly after dawn by a deep, rhythmic chant. Chris opened his eyes and looked out of the hut. He noticed that the missionary was up, staring worriedly at a column of his Indians moving toward a large fire.

The chant came from the massed Aucas. They were led by a huge man with numerous battle scars on his body. His right hand was raised high, and in it he held Cascabel's head!

Chris rose and went to stand with Dr. Birchwood.

"This is my week for setbacks," the physician said sadly.

"How do you mean?"

The missionary pointed to the excited Aucas.

"This is another pagan ritual—the final disposal of the enemy."

The Indians now stopped twenty feet from the fire. Their chanting grew to a crescendo when their leader flexed his muscles—ready to fling the trophy into the flames.

Geronimo had pushed through the crowds and was now standing beside Chris. Fascinated, the TEEN agents watched the ritual.

As the shrunken head flew toward its mark, a sudden chilling thought struck Chris.

He streaked toward the fire and leaped high. With a

spectacular one-hand catch, he snatched the head out of the air just as it came arching down over the flames.

At first the natives were confused and silent. Then they began to mutter ominously, and like a rising wind, their voices soared into a furious crescendo!

17. Dangerous Transmission

BIRCHWOOD RAN UP to Chris. “For the love of God, what are you doing?” he demanded. “They’ll kill you for this!”

The Aucas moved in, weapons in hand.

Chris pulled out his penknife and dug at the shrunken head. “There!” he cried triumphantly. The head now lay in two pieces, and Chris removed a metal object slightly larger than a golf ball.

Birchwood’s mouth dropped open in amazement.

The Aucas stopped short.

“What is that?” Mulligan asked, who had pushed his way through to Dr. Birchwood.

“A grenade.” Chris squinted at it. “And a rather powerful one. Rigged for heat detonation.”

“But the head...” Birchwood began.

“Was a phony. Clever, but a phony.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Simply stated, Cascabel was trying to kill you and the Auca warriors.”

“Why me? I hold no governmental position. I have no authority.”

“You’ve evidently been doing a great job of countering the influence of the rebels. You were in their way, slowing their timetable.”

Birchwood was grave. “I see. The man is every bit as ruthless as he’s rumored to be. And he’s still alive.”

Chris nodded.

The Aucas were growing impatient, beginning to grumble again.

“I’m afraid we have a problem,” the missionary said. “They know nothing of explosives. We’re going to find it very difficult to convince them that this little round piece of metal could have killed.”

Chris thought a moment. “Explain it to them as best you can, then tell them I’m going to give them a demonstration.”

“Won’t that be dangerous?”

“Not if they do as you say.”

While Birchwood spoke to the Indians, Chris walked to the most distant end of the village, and down a well-cut trail. In plain sight of the tribesmen, he set the grenade in the crotch of a low sapling. Then he piled twigs and dead branches at the foot of the tree. When all was ready, he set the fire.

Chris ran back and ordered the Auca men to lie prone on the far side of the clearing. Women and children were told to hide in the forest.

If they considered this an odd ceremonial, the Indians hardly protested. Now every male, including the white men, lay down and watched. The fire crackled. Flames tongued higher toward the grenade. Then finally –

Boom! Shock waves rocked the ground. Screams came from the unseen women and children.

Down the trail, a large pall of black smoke hung in the air. Chris got up and walked to the site of the explosion. Dr. Birchwood accompanied him. The Aucas followed timidly, only Geronimo was too weak to move.

A deep crater had been gouged into the ground, and the surrounding trees and foliage lay ripped and shredded.

The Aucas poked into the smoking sides of the crater with wondrous expressions on their faces.

“Mr. Cool,” Dr. Birchwood said somberly, “I am in your debt.”

Since Cascabel was still alive, the primary mission remained unchanged. Certain that Birchwood could be trusted, Chris asked a favor—have the Aucas spread the word that Cascabel’s head “spat fire” and the missionary had been killed. This, Chris hoped, might bring the Rattlesnake into the open.

Dr. Birchwood was pleased to help. The Aucas were grateful and helped carry Geronimo to Mulligan’s plane, which had been repaired and was ready for take-off. Soon they were airborne, heading for Quito.

The altitude seemed to have a salubrious effect on the Apache. His strength returned and he seemed normal enough when the plane landed at the Ecuadorian capital.

“Straight to the hospital with you,” Chris ordered.

Geronimo had never been in a hospital, and was reluctant to go. He had been born in an Apache hogan, reared on goat’s milk, and hardened by the outdoors life.

“An Apache in a hospital! Ugh.”

“Something’s ailing you—bad,” Chris said.

“You’re no good to anyone, shaking with fever.”

“It’s the curse,” Geronimo replied. “Señorita Z has put the Indian sign on me.”

Geronimo discarded his disguise for the moment and entered Quito's most modern hospital for a complete physical. X rays showed what looked like a metal object in his back. The doctor would operate.

"I told you I was shot," Geronimo said to Chris. "*Choonday*, I'm going to the happy hunting ground."

The operation was very short. "Mr. Cool," said the doctor, "we have removed the object. I have never seen anything like it, but here it is." He dropped a metal cartridge, half the size of a walnut, into Chris's hand.

The TEEN agent spent half an hour examining it before going to his buddy's room. Geronimo was in fine spirits. He felt good, healthy, eager for action despite the four stitches in his back.

Chris sat in a chair beside the bed and explained the cartridge. "You were bugged," he said with a grin and handed the Indian the tiny transceiver. "It broadcasts a continuous signal, allowing trackers with the proper equipment to home in on it at will."

"No wonder we couldn't lose those shadows in the jungle!" Geronimo said.

Chris told him that in addition to that an electronic pulsator in the cartridge could be activated on signal, blanketing the victim's nervous system. This was the cause of the Apache's "sickness."

"The ingenious work of Señorita Z!" Geronimo fumed. "She planted it in me when I was kayoed."

"Her curse," Chris said wryly.

"I still don't get it," the Apache went on. "She could have killed us when she had the chance. Why go through this elaborate setup?"

“To track us *to* Cascabel, that’s the only explanation,” Chris replied.

“In that case our assumption that she’s in league with him was wrong.”

“Most likely. She shot at his men when they tailed her in Quito, remember?”

“But then who *does* she work for?”

“I’m afraid we’ll have *to* ask her that personally one day.” Chris grinned.

They decided their best course of action would be *to* deliver the attaché case as planned. First, though, they would spend a day trying *to* dig up something concrete on Rios.

Chris left the hospital and returned the next morning when Geronimo was scheduled *to* be discharged. He had done *some* investigating during the night and discovered that Rios was *no* longer staying with his friend at the farm. The Argentine had all but vanished from the scene.

“There might be a way *to* find out where he is, though,” Chris told Geronimo. “How would you like to go to a very fashionable party?”

“Didn’t bring my tux,” the Apache grumbled. “And what’s that got to do with Rios?”

“The party is being given by a friend of his.”

“Oh, I see.”

“I know too many of his buddies, but perhaps you could sneak in and see if you can pick up *some* info. I’ll *cover* on the outside.”

Geronimo grinned. “What’ll I go as? A diplomat from the reservation?”

“Who cares? Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

By the time the hour of the party rolled around, the boys had purchased a tuxedo, lace shirt, and patent leather dress shoes for Geronimo. Glasses and cheek pads completed the outfit.

“Man,” Chris said, “do you look snazzy! Ten *to* one you could walk into the White House without being questioned.”

“We’ll soon find out, *choonday*.”

The sartorially correct Apache waited outside the mansion until a knot of guests arrived. He joined them, walked into the entrance hall, paused long enough *to* mumble a double-talk name *to* the harried butler and slipped smoothly into the ballroom.

He wandered through the thickest concentrations of guests for several moments—until he was sure that the butler was not going *to* notice the lack of a *Mr.* Whozis on the list and *come* looking for him.

It was a talkative gathering with at least half a dozen languages being spoken. Luckily, the main body of guests was composed of several cliques that appeared not *to* know each other. The fact that the TEEN agent’s face was unfamiliar did not surprise anyone.

Geronimo searched for half an hour, but saw no sign of Rios. He stuck within earshot of the host, figuring that one of the guests might inquire as to the Argentine’s whereabouts.

No such luck.

But Geronimo’s pulse quickened an hour later when a servant approached the host and whispered furtively, “He’s made contact. Wants you in the radio room.”

The man nodded, began heading out of the ballroom, but was stopped by an elegant couple whose Spanish was thickly accented with French nasal tones. His impatience was poorly concealed as he spoke with them. A few minutes later he pretended that some minor disturbance across the room required his attention and excused himself.

Geronimo followed him unobtrusively. When the Ecuadorian left the ballroom and strode down a long hall, the Apache was twenty feet behind, dropped in a semicrouch, moving lightly, catlike on the balls of his feet.

The man stopped before an iron-plated door. Geronimo pressed himself into a wall niche containing a marble statue, waited until he heard the door open and close, gave his quarry a few seconds, then went after him again.

The door led onto a flight of dimly lighted stone stairs. Geronimo descended cautiously, listening to the Ecuadorian's footsteps echoing ahead of him.

The basement was huge. It comprised a maze of corridors that opened onto storage rooms, air-conditioning and heating equipment, and some of the best-stocked wine cellars Geronimo had ever seen. The TEEN agent was reluctant to risk visual contact. He relied upon his keen sense of hearing to keep track of his man.

At the end of a blind corridor, the Ecuadorian stopped and gave a coded knock. A door was unlocked, opened, closed, and relocked. Geronimo waited a while, then stole up to it and pressed his ear to the wood. He caught his breath and listened. It was Rios all right, and undoubtedly he was in radio

contact with Cascabel!

The Apache could not overhear everything, but the snatches of conversation he caught were more than enough.

Cascabel: "...finally got that missionary, Birchwood ... grenade killed him and a dozen of his Aucas..."

Rios: "How soon is the big push?"

Cascabel: "A week with luck. Arms shipment arrived yesterday... my men are distributing the guns. Still don't have the poison for my Jivaros..."

Rios: "... must be some sort of delay... be there soon, though. American adventurer bringing it..."

Cascabel: "We have moved to a new campsite. I'll station an Indian at the old spot to pick up the poison. Will radio you immediately when it arrives."

Rios: "What is your new location?"

Cascabel responded with the map coordinates in good detail.

Geronimo had what he needed. Silently he backed off a little way down the corridor, ducked into a niche again, and set his watch radio to Transmit. "Kingston Tooey to Wunny," he said and gasped.

His words came loud and clear over Rios's radio!

What incredible rotten luck! The same wave length. Geronimo was trapped!

18. Jaguar Decoy

RIOS AND THE Ecuadorian shouted in alarm. Geronimo's brain spun. There was no way out. Unless...

The Apache bolted down the corridor and ducked into a storage room. He held the watch radio to his lips. "Wunny," he transmitted, "I move queen's knight to king's four. I have captured your bishop." He laughed. "Your move."

Come on, Chris, he thought desperately, hoping his partner would realize something had gone wrong and would remain silent.

Several seconds passed. Chris did not answer. Rios and the Ecuadorian were in the corridor.

"Wunny," Geronimo said. "Wunny, are you there, old chessmate?"

"*Que pasa?*" Rios asked, bewildered.

Geronimo heard the confusion in the Ecuadorian's voice as he answered in Spanish, "It sounds like a game."

Now was the moment that would decide Geronimo's fate. He forced a tone of irritation into his voice, tried to sound as a man would who had just caught himself in a stupid mistake.

"Oh, what an idiot I am! Knocked my band selector off center." He switched off his watch radio and held his breath.

"Do you think...?" The Ecuadorian left his question hanging in the air.

There was a moment of silence, then Rios's laugh boomed hugely in the corridor. "A ham operator! It was some bumbling fool of a ham playing a chess game by radio."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course. Queen's knight to-whatever he said. Capturing one of his opponent's pieces. Those are chess moves. But the player was probably so involved with his game that he hit his wave-length control with an elbow."

The Ecuadorian laughed along with Rios. "It gave me quite a start for a moment."

"Me too. Let's go back and sign off."

Geronimo heard the door to the radio room close. He breathed a sigh of relief. He'd won on two counts. Chris had been alert enough to sense danger and remain silent, and his enemies had fallen for the ruse.

Rios and his friend broke contact with Cascabel and left the radio room. Geronimo waited several minutes to make sure there was no one else around, then pried open a window in the storage room and wriggled out.

In a clump of shrubbery a familiar voice whispered, "What happened down there?"

"I'll tell you on the way, but let's get back to Mulligan now, and fast!"

Three hours later Chris Cool and his native bodyguard were winging back to the Auca village. The sun was setting when they touched down. Again, Birchwood and the Aucas met them.

"It worked, Dr. Birchwood," Chris said. "There was a report of your death in Quito."

“Was my demise properly appreciated?”

“It was a howling success.”

“My corpse is pleased to hear.” Birchwood chuckled. “You’ll be spending the night with us, won’t you?”

“Yes. We’ll strike out toward Cascabel’s camp at dawn.”

“How is your mute friend feeling?” the physician asked curiously. “I’d like to know the hospital’s diagnosis. I’m still troubled by the fact that I could find nothing.”

“Nerve pressure from an old wound,” Chris said. “He’s good as new again.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” the doctor said, smiling at the mute Geronimo wrapped in his blanket. He turned to Chris. “I take it you’re still going after Cascabel?”

“Yes. And you could be a big help.”

“I’d be happy to oblige. How?”

“Doctor,” Chris said, “do you think the Aucas could capture a jaguar, a big one—alive and unharmed—by tomorrow morning?”

“A jaguar? How would that help you?”

“That’s a secret. I’d rather not divulge it at this point.”

The physician shook his head. “That’s a tall order, but let me ask them.” He spoke to the Indians.

They seemed boyishly enthusiastic about the chore. Chris was told that they would hunt all night.

Since they had a long day ahead of them, the boys went to sleep shortly after dinner. The missionary

awakened them, according to plan, at the first signs of dawn. The boys pulled on their clothes and boots and splashed cold water on their faces.

“Did they have any luck?” Chris asked. “Come. They’re waiting to show you,” Birchwood replied.

A dozen Aucas stood in a solid line at the edge of the village. Their arms were folded and their faces reflected pride. One man’s arm was swathed in a white bandage. This one barked an order. The Indians drew off into two groups revealing a cage of stout bamboo.

Inside it skulked a large, heavily muscled jaguar.

“Great!” Chris said. “He’s perfect. Tell them they’re the best in the jungle!”

Birchwood translated and the Aucas grinned their pleasure. The missionary said that Kumi, the man with the bandage, had been badly clawed by the animal. Chris was deeply regretful and wanted to give the hunter something to compensate for his injuries.

“No, no,” Birchwood said. “The jaguar is their gift to you. Payment would demean it.”

When their gear and the food packs were assembled, the TEEN agents put their plan into action. An Auca lassoed the jaguar’s head and snubbed the beast while Geronimo and Chris attached a collar around the animal’s neck. To it they fastened the transceiver that had been planted in Geronimo’s back, then had the jaguar taken a short way into the jungle and released.

“I—I can’t figure it out,” Dr. Birchwood said. “Why did you do it?”

“Just a little magic,” Chris replied.

Cascabel's old camp was on the north bank of the Rio Napo, some eighteen miles away, and not too far from his new hideout. A mile from the Auca village was a narrow and shallow river that fed into the larger Rio Napo. Birchwood suggested that the boys travel by water.

"It will be just as fast as if you flew to the spot Mulligan was to drop you off," he said. "Besides, Cascabel might have a not-too-friendly reception party there."

"Good idea," Chris agreed. "This way we can approach the camp from another angle and play it by ear."

The missionary and a handful of Indians accompanied them to the river and supplied a dugout canoe. Dr. Birchwood saw them off with a wave of his hand, then turned back to the village.

With Chris in the front, keeping a sharp eye out for rocks and submerged trees, the TEEN agents paddled with a steady easy rhythm. The canoe went gliding down the river as smoothly as if on silicone.

"You know, I'm starting to enjoy this little boat ride," Geronimo said, grinning.

"It is rather peaceful here," Chris had to admit.

The river was narrow and frequently turned and twisted. Tree branches extended over it, heavy with moss, vines, and broad shiny leaves.

Here and there creatures slithered into the water, or went crashing away through the foliage. As the boys rounded one bend, there was a rustling in the branch above Chris's head.

Geronimo looked up. "*Iltse!*" he yelled, and dug his

paddle deep into the water.

At the same instant a giant anaconda, easily forty feet long, dropped from concealment into the canoe. The spotted serpent wrapped its massive body around Chris.

19. Up from the Grave

CHRIS WAS THROWN to the bottom of the canoe, his arms and legs pinned by the anaconda.

Geronimo sprang forward, his hunting knife in hand. He hacked at the black-spotted monster, which seemed oblivious to the blade. The snake was as thick as a man's thigh and the tightening muscles beneath its skin were as hard as bands of steel.

"Can't take... much... more," Chris panted. "Crush... ing..."

The Apache reached behind his ear and snatched off the flesh-colored strip of explosive tape all TEEN agents carried. It was a powerful piece of equipment. The full charge, he knew, would make Cascabel's grenade look like a toy. He did some desperate mental division and tore off a small corner of the tape. The anaconda's head was toward Chris's feet, its tiny black eyes looking like evil beads, its forked tongue flicking rapidly.

Geronimo lunged and slapped the piece of tape against the snake's head. Then he drew back. His fingers went to the ruby ring he wore on his right hand. It contained the detonating trigger.

But what about the rest of the tape? The Indian wrapped it quickly around his key ring to give it weight, then hurled it as far as he could into the jungle.

Chris was already unconscious, smothered by the undulating muscles of the serpent. Was it too late? Geronimo twisted the ruby with a savage motion.

Wham! And from the jungle: *Bo-o-om!*

The snake's head was blasted out of existence. So was a hundred square yards of jungle foliage.

The anaconda's great body shuddered and went limp. The Indian hastily unwound it from Chris and dumped it overboard.

But his friend was not breathing! Mouth-to-mouth resuscitation! A tense minute passed. Then Chris began to cough and Geronimo sighed with relief.

Chris's eyelids fluttered open. "Oh, man!" he groaned. "It was a truck, a very big truck, and it ran right over me."

"Well, we took away the driver's license."

Chris sat up and rubbed his aching body. "How'd you do it?"

Geronimo told him.

"Glad you remembered to ditch the rest of the tape," Chris said.

"Look at it this way. If I hadn't, we wouldn't be around to regret it."

"That's what I like about you," Chris said. "You're such a positivist."

"Of course. That's the only way to get *ahead* in this business."

"Ahead? A head? If that's a pun, I choose to ignore it."

"My genius always goes unrecognized." The Apache grinned ruefully as the craft drifted downriver.

"Well, genius, are you up to continuing our trip? I am."

"I'd rather tell jokes."

“Paddle!” Chris said.

They arrived at the edge of Cascabel’s camp in the late afternoon. Both became aware of this fact by a submachine gun which opened up from the bank and stitched a line of bullets into the water across their bow.

A harsh voice in Spanish told them to stop paddling and raise their arms.

“*Que pasa?*” Chris demanded indignantly. “*Tenemos medicina para el Dr. McHenry y los Jivaros enfermos.*”

“Bring your canoe into shore.”

Geronimo and Chris complied. A South American stepped from the brush, his weapon held loosely in the boys’ direction. “Let me see this medicine,” he demanded.

Chris showed him the attaché case. The man smiled. “You must excuse my suspicion. The rebel Cascabel is in this area and I thought you might be some of his men. Especially since we expected you sooner.”

“And who are you?”

“I am one of Dr. McHenry’s assistants. He had to change his headquarters in order to flee from the rebels. I was left here to meet you and bring you to the missionary.”

“Is it far from here?”

“About an hour down the river.”

“Well, we’d like to get back before it gets dark. Why can’t you just take the stuff so we won’t have to stay all night?”

“Dr. McHenry wishes to see you in person.” The

man's voice was threatening. "He expected you to be alone."

"I hired this man to accompany me. He is a mute but very good as a guide."

"Then you will both come with me."

Chris heard a few rustles in the dense foliage and saw something move that looked very much like the front end of another gun. He decided it was best to follow quietly.

The man led them to a larger canoe, manned by two Indians, who rowed silently down the river. Finally they reached the campsite. It was a cluster of army tents and lean-tos built of brush.

There were a dozen South Americans present and an equal number of Jivaros. The Indians all carried spears, bows, blowguns, and wicked-looking instruments the boys recognized as headsmen's swords. The South Americans carried side arms, and rifles and automatic weapons were stacked near the tents.

"Why all the armament?" Chris asked innocently.

"I told you, Cascabel is around. We have to be sure we can protect ourselves."

"Looks to me as if you have enough guns to protect a small army."

"Yes. Yes, that's right." The man grinned.

Chris was told that Dr. McHenry was off in another village and would not be back until nightfall.

"You will wait here," advised the man, and led the TEEN agents into a small tent. Then he left, with the attaché case. Chris noticed that he had seen to it that

two guards were posted outside.

Geronimo shrugged. It would be too dangerous even to whisper. He pointed through the opening and the boys witnessed a strange scene.

Outside, the Jivaros had gathered around the man with the “medicine.” They were whooping with excitement. He opened the case, and they yanked the stoppers from the bottles and poured the contents into shallow dishes. The natives then jostled each other for a chance to dip arrowheads, spearheads, and dart tips into the liquid.

Chris and Geronimo waited impatiently until dark for Dr. McHenry. As they had expected, he arrived looking the very image of Cascabel.

The revolutionary was flanked by two bodyguards with submachine guns. The boys recognized him instantly as he strode across the camp to greet them, his sharp features seeming satanic in the firelight.

He played his role well. After thanking them graciously for delivering the vital medicine, he said, “My only regret is that by entering this camp you too have been exposed to this virulent lung disease. To be on the safe side, I advise inoculation.”

“A good idea,” Chris said. He rolled up his sleeve and bared Geronimo’s brown arm from beneath his serape.

Cascabel took one of the syringes and filled it with the liquid. He poised the needle over Chris’s arm.

“Aren’t you going to swab our skin with alcohol, Doctor?”

Cascabel smiled. “That won’t be necessary.”

He jammed the needle into Chris's flesh and shot home the water. An assistant handed him a second hypodermic. He injected its contents into Geronimo.

"That's funny," Chris said. "I... don't feel—"

Cascabel leered. "Yes?"

"It's... aahhr!" Chris faked a convulsion. He staggered toward Cascabel, grasped him as if to maintain his balance, and planted a listening bug on the guerrilla's shirt. Then he fell to the ground and feigned death. He heard a thud as Geronimo slumped beside him.

"So much for those two. Take them to their graves. We have no time to shrink their heads now."

The TEEN agents were picked up and carried away. Chris was grimly amused by the fact that their grave had been dug before they had even arrived.

The agents were dumped unceremoniously into a shallow pit. Cascabel's henchmen dumped a few shovelfuls of loose earth over them, then left.

When they were gone, Chris and Geronimo squirmed out of their grave and scuttled into the brush. Chris tuned in his collar-button mike. For a while they picked up nothing but laughter.

Then came the boasting voice of Cascabel, reveling in what the rebels were going to do to the government.

"Once Ecuador is ours," the guerrilla said, "we begin in Peru. There is no one, no one who can stop us!"

A few minutes later Cascabel called a conference with his lieutenants. He briefed them on their plans for the next few days.

"On Wednesday," he said, "we strike Quito itself.

Rios says he has bribed the commandant of the main arsenal. The gates will be open to us.”

“A good man, Rios,” came another voice. “He fooled everybody!”

Cascabel chuckled. “Yes. The Russians have paid Rios well for the information stolen from Northgate, and he spent the money wisely.”

“But what about Maria?”

Cascabel spewed a stream of oaths. “Maria, the traitor! She is a double agent for Le President—in Ecuador to—”

Suddenly he was interrupted by rifle and automatic fire which shattered the night. Shouts and cries of alarm and rage rang out. A grenade exploded.

Cascabel’s camp was under attack!

20. Victorious Zombie

A FLARE ILLUMINATED the jungle, catching Cascabel's men in its yellowish glare. Several sprawled on the ground, dead or wounded, unable to cope with the firing from concealment.

The Jivaros were quickest to spot the assailants, but their harmless water-tipped missiles merely wounded the foe.

"*Itse!*" Chris hissed above the cry of battle. "Here comes our boy!"

Seeing his forces being devastated, Cascabel raced for the jungle and headed unknowingly toward the TEEN agents. He passed by their hiding place. Chris sprang up and kayoed him with a karate blow to the back of the neck.

"Down!" Geronimo pulled Chris to cover.

Two of the attackers had seen Cascabel run and were coming in hot pursuit. They showed surprise to find their quarry unconscious. Grabbing his ankles, they hauled him back to the camp.

Soon the fighting was over. Only a handful of Cascabel's men were left alive. Six members of the assault force herded them together under the muzzles of submachine guns.

The leader now stepped into sight. Chris and Geronimo gasped at the trim figure of a woman clad in a camouflage suit. Her dark hair glistened from under a fatigue cap. She stepped gracefully into the circle of her fighting men.

"Señorita Z!" Geronimo whispered.

“Maria!” Chris replied. “One and the same. What a two-timer!”

“Le President sent her to crush his opposition,” the Apache hissed. “*Ai!* So that is why she planted the transistor in my back!”

“Right. To lead her to the elusive Cascabel. Good Indian. First you led her three thugs to Rios in Quito, then they tailed us through the jungle.”

“The witch! No wonder Cascabel’s agents tried to execute her.”

“Now the shoe’s on the other foot.”

Maria nudged Cascabel with her toe, rolled him over, and studied his face. She smiled.

“Yes,” she said to her followers. “This is the man we seek. You have done well.”

They cheered.

“Tie his hands. Then revive him.”

Cascabel’s hands were bound behind his back.

A man stepped forward and dumped a bucket of water in the rebel’s face. The Rattlesnake sputtered as he regained consciousness. He was jerked to his feet.

He looked around in bewilderment until his eyes came to rest on the woman. “Maria!” he screamed. “I will kill you for this!”

“My dear Cascabel,” she answered, “please restrain yourself. You are hardly in a position to make such threats.”

Cascabel glared at her.

“Tell me,” she went on, “what happened to the two American agents?”

“What agents?”

“Come now. There’s no sense in being coy. The two young men making the delivery from Rios.”

“The adventurer and the mute Indian?”

Maria laughed, and Chris had to admire the animation in her classic face. “They were very clever to fool you!”

“They did not fool anybody. They are dead. I killed them myself.”

“A pity,” Maria said. “I had a score to settle with them. Two of my men were hurt by a jaguar.”

“What?”

“Never mind. It’s a long story,” she said mockingly. “You do not have time to hear it all”

“How did you find me?”

“Simple.” Maria looked down on her prey. “We raided a Jivaro village and captured one of your lieutenants there. Offered him a large bribe or slow death.”

Cascabel spat. “The traitor!”

“Do not concern yourself with him. His reward was not money, but a quick death.”

“Maria.” Cascabel’s voice became smooth and friendly. “We are two of a kind. You are as ruthless as I am. Why can we not join forces and conquer South America?”

“Save your breath, scum! Yes, I am ruthless, but only because one must be as savage as one’s opponent” She snapped her fingers. “Pio!”

One of her men flourished an official-looking

document and laid it across Maria's palm. She opened it without taking her eyes from the rebel, then read it slowly.

It was from Le President in Haiti. In legalistic jargon it enumerated the charges against the Haitian rebel Guerra and the man behind him, Cascabel, sometimes referred to as the Rattlesnake. Both of these criminals, the document stated, had been tried *in absentia* and had been found guilty of plotting the violent overthrow of the legal government.

"Therefore," Maria read, "the sentence of death has been passed upon the aforementioned defendants and I do hereby direct and order all legally constituted authorities of the Republic of Haiti to seek out, apprehend, and to execute said criminals." "

Maria smiled at her hapless victim. "And I am a legally constituted authority!"

There was a moment of silence, then Cascabel whimpered, "Don't. Don't do it to me."

Maria turned to Pio. "Select a firing squad!"

Pio barked an order. Chris nudged his buddy. "We are to bring him back alive."

"*Choonday*, I suggest we come up with something brilliant."

Cascabel was led to a tree, cursing Maria in a low voice. Pio selected six men with rifles and arranged them in the proper position.

"Geronimo!" Chris whispered. "I've got it. Voodoo! They're all believers. What if..."

Chris sketched his idea in a few quick sentences. Geronimo nodded. "It might work."

Chris spied a rotted tree stump nearby, plunged his hands into its bowels, and came up with two fists full of white powdery dust. He smeared it over his face, throat, and hands.

“Keep a sharp eye,” he hissed. “Our timing has to be perfect.” With that, he rose and walked into the clearing.

He had advanced several steps before someone saw him and shouted. Weapons were trained on him instantly. He knew that fingers were already beginning to squeeze triggers.

In Spanish, and his lowest voice, he moaned, “I am a zombie.”

Cascabel screamed in terror. “It is the American! He has come back from the grave! He was dead. I know. I killed him myself!”

Maria shuddered. Several of her men dropped their weapons, flung themselves to the ground, and shrieked in terror. Others were paralyzed with horror, their eyes bulging and their jaws hanging wide.

Chris moved forward with drifting movements. He pointed to Cascabel. “That man took my life. Vengeance will be mine.”

He reached out and grabbed a revolver from the hand of a man who was quaking and sobbing. He aimed the pistol over Cascabel’s head and fired. *Geronimo’s sleepy sliver should be on its way*, he thought.

Cascabel pitched forward and did not move.

Chris tossed aside the revolver and walked to the rebel’s figure. He knelt down and pretended to listen for a heartbeat. Doing so, he clipped a collar-button

mike to Cascabel's shirt.

Then he rose. "I am satisfied," he intoned. "I have taken the life of my murderer." He beckoned the mercenaries to gather around the body. They came, reluctantly.

"Listen!" Chris commanded.

In the brush, Geronimo spoke into a transmitter. His words came through the mike.

"This is Cascabel speaking," said the thin, tinny voice. "My soul now is the slave of the zombie Christopher Cool. Maria, your voodoo and the voodoo of all others is powerless before him. Bow to the zombie!"

Tears ran down Maria's face. "Yes, yes!" Sobbing, she went down on her knees before Chris, and all the others followed her example.

"And now..." Chris said. *Now what?* he thought. "What am I going to do with these jokers?"

The answer came from the sky—the sound of a big helicopter approaching. Chris looked up, saw the chopper's running lights, and the insignia of the Ecuadorian Army.

"And now my enemies approach," Chris said hastily. "Be gone! All of you! Far away, or the voodoo I am about to use will kill you, too!"

The helicopter was over the clearing and dropping fast. Maria, her men, and what remained of Cascabel's force needed no further prompting. Screaming, they fled into the jungle.

The big troop-carrying chopper hovered a few feet above the ground. Combat-equipped soldiers leaped

out and moved quickly to secure the area.

“That won’t be necessary,” Chris said.

Geronimo rushed from cover. “What about Maria?”

“We don’t need her,” Chris replied. “Let her go.”

An army lieutenant covered the boys with an automatic. “And who are you?” he demanded.

“Friends of mine,” called a familiar voice.

Chris and Geronimo looked up to see Spice and Yummi jump from the helicopter.

“Man,” Chris said, “you sure pick some awfully strange places to hold reunions!”

“What are you doing here?” Geronimo asked.

“Well,” Spice began, “we pinned the security leak on Rios without a doubt. So Yummi and I flew down to Quito to put the arm on him ourselves.”

“Which worked very smoothly,” Yummi went on. “Once he was in custody, he started to worry about his future, so he spilled the beans in the grandest manner possible—including the info about this camp and what Cascabel intended to do with you two superspies.”

“So figuring you wouldn’t object to having your neck saved, even by your little sisters,” Spice said, “We went to the government, and here we are. I see, however, that you have the situation well in hand.” She pointed to Cascabel. “That him?”

“In the flesh, one defanged Rattlesnake,” Chris replied.

“Groovy.” Spice’s eyes twinkled. “But when we were coming down I noticed that you let an awfully pretty brunette slip through your fingers. Who was she?”

“Maria? Oh, just a girl,” Chris said. “She had a first-class crush on Gerry. We met her first in New Orleans, then saw her again in Quito. From there she followed him all the way through the jungle!”

Then, to Spice and Yummi’s bewilderment, the boys filled the night with their laughter.