

## Man Overboard

I stood on the deck of S.S. Rajula. As she slowly moved out of Madras harbour, I waved to my grandparents till I could see them no more. I was thrilled to be on board a ship. It was a new experience for me.

"Are you travelling alone?" asked the person standing next to me.

"Yes, Uncle, I'm going back to my parents in Singapore," I replied.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Vasanth," I replied.

I spent the day exploring the ship. It looked just like a big house. There were furnished rooms, a swimming pool, a room for indoor games, and a library. Yet, there was plenty of room to 11111 around.

The next morning the passengers were seated in the dining hall, having breakfast. The loud-speaker spluttered noisily and then the captain's voice came loud and clear. "Friends we have just received a message that a storm is brewing in the Indian Ocean. I request all of you to keep calm. Do not panic. Those who are inclined to sea-

sickness may please stay in their cabins. Thank you."

There was panic everywhere. An old lady prayed aloud, "Oh God! Have mercy on us. My only son is waiting for me in Singapore."

A gentleman consoled her, "Don't worry, Madam, it's only a warning. We may not be affected at all."

Another lady, who was sitting beside me, looked very ill. "Not rough weather! I'm already seasick. A rough sea will be the end of me!"

I could not understand why all the elders were so upset. I remembered the several sea adventures I had read. Excitedly, I turned to the elderly gentleman sitting next to me. "Uncle, won't it be thrilling to face a storm on board a steamer? Have you ever been on a ship during a storm?"

"It can be quite unpleasant, you know," he replied rather severely. "I remember a time when the ship on which I was travelling ran off course. We were wandering on the ocean for a couple of days."

I remembered my class teacher, an English woman, telling us in class one day, "When I crossed the English Channel on my way to Singapore, there was a big storm near Gibraltar. The ship rocked to and fro. Everything in the cabins rolled up and down. Even the heavy pianos in the lounge went crashing against the walls."

This made my imagination run wild. Turning to 'Uncle' again, I said, "Wouldn't it be fun if the storm broke when we have lunch? Then the tables, with all the food on them, would run away from us. And the chairs, with us sitting on them, would be a merry-go-round."

Everyone round the table stared at me in horror. I thought to myself, 'Oh, these adults, they've no sense of adventure. How dull they are!'

The storm didn't break, but in the evening a strong wind started blowing. The ship rocked to and fro, rocking and rolling to the music of the wind. Huge waves were dashing against it. Even though the deck was slippery, I was running around. That's when I noticed Uncle leaning over the railings. I ran up to him, thinking he too, was enjoying the experience. "Good morning, Uncle, isn't it lovely?" I asked him.

But he wasn't well at all. He was retching over the rails and looked rather blue about the mouth. I felt sorry for him. "Can I be of any help? Shall I call the doctor?" I asked him.

He couldn't reply, but only held up his hand. As another bout of retching shook him he leaned over the railings. At the same time a huge wave lashed the ship. It lurched violently and the man tumbled over the railings into the wild sea. For a second I stood rooted to the spot. Then I ran like someone possessed, shouting, "Help! Help!

Man overboard! Save him!" I must have made a lot of noise. I heard footsteps hurrying even that early in the morning.

Tears streaming down my face and shouting incoherently, I ran full pelt into an officer.

"What's the matter? Why are you making so much noise?" he asked in a stern voice, I was surprised to see it was the captain.

"Oh Sir!" I blurted out in relief. "A man fell into the sea. Please save him."

"Where?" he asked, immediately on the alert. "There," I said pointing a finger.

He did not wait for more details but ran at once to a room full of officers. "Man overboard," he cried. "Stop ship. Drop anchor. Quick!" His instructions were immediately obeyed. The captain then raced to the upper deck. I kept trailing behind him. "Lower the life-boats and crew into the sea towards the helm," he said. "There is a man overboard." Here again the men quickly obeyed him.

People started crowding the deck. "What's happening?" somebody asked me.

Word soon went round. Everyone was tense. Only an occasional, "There he is!" could be heard.

Someone asked, "Who is he?"

Another replied, "Don't know."

Meanwhile two life-boats moved towards the man. I stood close to the captain. In his anxiety,

he gripped my shoulder tightly and I winced.

"You're hurting me Sir," I protested.

"I am sorry, my dear. The sea is very rough today. I hope my men can reach him in time. My ship has never lost a passenger before," he said crossing himself. He was watching the rescue operations through a pair of binoculars that hung round his neck.

The boat was too far for me to see what was happening. I tugged at the Captain's sleeve. "What are they doing, Sir? Have they rescued the man?" I asked him.

"They've caught him by the arms and are pulling him towards the boat." He was giving me a running commentary. "Oh what bad luck! A sudden current has swept the man away dragging two of the sailors with him." He sounded nervous. Just then he noticed the passengers crowding against the railings. "Keep away from those railings!" he shouted. "We don't want another accident." The ship had dropped anchor but was heaving up and down.

I borrowed the captain's binoculars. Now I could see the rescue operation clearly. The crew in the rescue boats threw a strong rope to the two sailors in the sea and shouted, "Catch". Both of them were good swimmers and soon had caught hold of the rope. Then, with powerful strokes, they swam towards Uncle. One of them caught hold

of him, while the other tied the rope round his waist. With Uncle between them and the rope secure, the sailors swam back to the life-boats. The rescue team in the boats leaned over and heaved the three men into it. In a jiffy the boats were heading back to the ship.

"Thank God!" muttered the captain making the sign of the cross again, "They've managed to save him." He turned to the passengers thronging the railings. "Please do not crowd round the man when he is brought up. He will need immediate medical care." Then he saw the ship's doctor standing with a couple of nurses. A stretcher was also being brought close to the railings.

"Doctor! Is everything ready for the patient?" the captain asked.

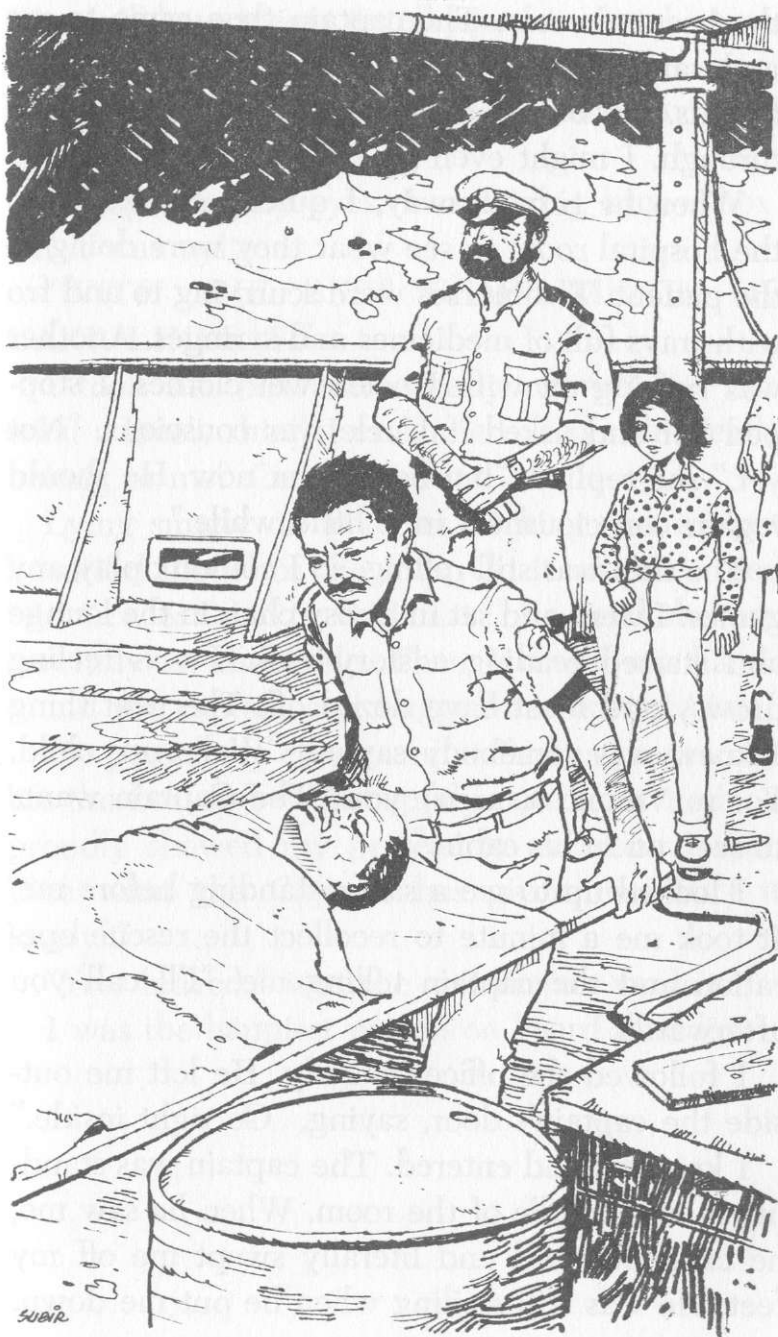
"Aye, aye, Captain," nodded the doctor.

The captain moved away to restore order on the ship. I edged close to the doctor and asked, "What will you do to him, doctor? Will he be all right?"

"Aye, I think so. All the water will have to be pumped out of him. He'll have to be given artificial respiration and kept warm."

"How do you pump the water out?" I asked. "We put him on his stomach and massage him until he brings it all up," he replied.

As soon as the rescue team reached the ship, Uncle was placed on the stretcher and rushed to



the hospital room. The captain then came to me and said, "Run along now and play with your friends. I'm busy, but will send for you when I'm through. I might even have a surprise for you."

When he turned away, I quietly sneaked into the hospital room to see what they were doing to the patient. Two nurses were scurrying to and fro with trays full of medicines and syringes. Another was rushing off with Uncle's wet clothes. I stopped her and asked if Uncle was conscious. "Not yet," she replied, "but he's better now. He should regain consciousness in a little while."

The ship was still rolling, so I couldn't play any games. I went and sat in a cosy chair in the lounge and started reading a story-book. I was feeling drowsy and must have dozed off. The next thing I knew was somebody saying, "Wake up, child. You're Vasantha, aren't you? The Captain wants to see you in his cabin."

I looked up to see a sailor standing before me. It took me a minute to recollect the rescue operation and the captain telling me, "I'll call you afterwards."

I followed the officer eagerly. He left me outside the captain's door, saying, "Go right inside."

I knocked and entered. The captain was standing in the middle of the room. When he saw me, he came forward and literally swept me off my feet. He was still smiling when he put me down.



"You will have plenty to tell your friends, eh? Now close your eyes."

I did so. Seconds later, I heard him say, "See what I've got for you."

On opening my eyes, I saw a big brown box. On it was written:

"WITH THE BEST COMPLIMENTS OF  
CAPT. LINDSAY."

I took the box and eagerly opened it. "Oh, what a lovely ship!" I exclaimed. "Does this really belong to me? Can I keep it?"

Lying snugly on a velvet backing was a most beautiful model of the ship. On it was inscribed "B.I.S.N. & Co. S.S. RAJULA." I placed the box carefully on the table. Then I threw my hands round the captain and hugged and kissed him.

He patted my cheek and smiled as he saw me lift the box and walk happily out of his room. I proudly showed my present to everyone I met. "See what the Captain has given me. Isn't it lovely?"

"Yes, indeed," was the unanimous verdict.

I was the happiest person on board that day.