

A Swimm

On the morning of the third day, the sea calmed. Even the most delicate passengers – those who had not been seen around the ship since sailing time – came out of their rooms and made their way slowly onto the sundeck and sat there, with their faces turned to the pale January sun.

It had been fairly rough for the first two days, and this sudden calm, and the sense of comfort that came with it, made the whole ship seem much friendlier. By the time evening came, the passengers, with twelve hours of good weather behind them, were beginning to feel more courageous. At eight o'clock that night, the main dining room was filled with people eating and drinking with the confident appearance of experienced sailors.

The meal was not half over when the passengers realized, by the slight movement of their bodies on the seats of their chairs, that the big ship had actually started rolling again. It was very gentle at first, just a slow, lazy leaning to one side, then to the other, but it was enough to cause a slight but immediate loss of good humour around the room. A few of the passengers looked up from their food, waiting, almost listening for the next roll, smiling nervously, with little secret looks of fear in their eyes. Some were completely calm; others were openly pleased with themselves and made jokes about the food and the weather in order to annoy the few who were beginning to suffer. The movement of the ship then became rapidly more and more violent, and only five or six minutes after the first roll had been noticed, the ship was swinging heavily from side to side.

At last, a really bad roll came, and Mr William Botbol, sitting at the purser's table, saw his plate of fish sliding suddenly away from under his fork. Everybody, now, was reaching for plates and

wine glasses. Mrs Renshaw, seated at the purser's right, gave a little scream and held onto that gentleman's arm.

'It's going to be a rough night,' the purser said, looking at Mrs Renshaw. 'I think there's a storm coming that will give us a very rough night.' There was just the faintest suggestion of pleasure in the way he said it.

Most of the passengers continued with their meal. A small number, including Mrs Renshaw, got carefully to their feet and made their way between the tables and through the doorway, trying to hide the urgency they felt.

'Well,' the purser said, 'there she goes.' He looked round with approval at the remaining passengers who were sitting quietly, with their faces showing openly that pride that travellers seem to take in being recognized as 'good sailors'.

When the eating was finished and the coffee had been served, Mr Botbol, who had been unusually serious and thoughtful since the rolling started, suddenly stood up and carried his cup of coffee around to Mrs Renshaw's empty place, next to the purser. He seated himself in her chair, then immediately leaned over and began to whisper urgently in the purser's ear. 'Excuse me,' he said, 'but could you tell me something, please?'

The purser, small and fat and red, bent forward to listen. 'What's the trouble, Mr Botbol?'

'What I want to know is this,' The man's face was anxious and the purser was watching it. 'What I want to know is: will the captain already have made his guess at the day's run – you know, for the competition? I mean, will he have done so before it began to get rough like this?'

The purser lowered his voice, as one does when answering a whisperer. 'I should think so – yes.'

'About how long ago do you think he did it?'

'Some time this afternoon. He usually does it in the afternoon.'

'About what time?'

'Oh, I don't know. Around four o'clock I should think.'

'Now tell me another thing. How does the captain decide which number it will be? Does he take a lot of trouble over that?'

The purser looked at the anxious face of Mr Botbol and smiled, knowing quite well what the man was trying to find out. 'Well, you see, the captain has a little meeting with the second officer, and they study the weather and a lot of other things, and then they make their guess.'

Mr Botbol thought about this answer for a moment. Then he said, 'Do you think the captain knew there was bad weather coming today?'

'I couldn't tell you,' the purser replied. He was looking into the small black eyes of the other man, seeing two single little spots of excitement dancing in their centres. 'I really couldn't tell you, Mr Botbol. I wouldn't know.'

'If this gets any worse, it might be worth buying some of the low numbers. What do you think?' The whispering was more urgent, more anxious now.

'Perhaps it will,' the purser said. 'I doubt whether the captain allowed for a really rough night. It was quite calm this afternoon when he made his guess.'

The others at the table had become silent and were trying to hear what the purser was saying.

'Now suppose *you* were allowed to buy a number, which one would *you* choose today?' Mr Botbol asked.

'I don't know what the range is yet,' the purser patiently answered. 'They don't announce the range until the auction starts after dinner. And I'm really not very good at it in any case. I'm only the purser, you know.'

At that point, Mr Botbol stood up. 'Excuse me, everyone,' he said, and he walked carefully away between the other tables. Twice

he had to catch hold of the back of a chair to steady himself against the ship's roll.

As he stepped out onto the sundeck, he felt the full force of the wind. He took hold of the rail and held on tight with both hands, and he stood there looking out over the darkening sea where the great waves were rising up high.

'Quite bad out there, isn't it, sir?' said a waiter, as he went back inside again.

Mr Botbol was combing his hair back into place with a small red comb. 'Do you think we've slowed down at all because of the weather?' he asked.

'Oh, yes, sir. We've slowed down a great deal since this started. You have to slow down in weather like this or you'll be throwing the passengers all over the ship.'

Down in the smoking room people were already arriving for the auction. They were grouping themselves politely around the various tables, the men a little stiff in their dinner jackets, a little pink beside their cool, white-armed women. Mr Botbol took a chair close to the auctioneer's table. He crossed his legs, folded his arms, and settled himself in his seat with the appearance of a man who has made a very important decision and refuses to be frightened.

The winner, he was telling himself, would probably get around seven thousand dollars. That was almost exactly what the total auction money had been for the last two days, with the numbers selling for about three or four hundred each. As it was a British ship the auction would be in pounds, but he liked to do his thinking in dollars, since he was more familiar with them. Seven thousand dollars was plenty of money. Yes, it certainly was! He would ask them to pay him in hundred-dollar notes and he would take them off the ship in the inside pocket of his jacket. No problem there. He would buy a new car immediately. He

would collect it on the way from the ship and drive it home just for the pleasure of seeing Ethel's face when she came out of the front door and looked at it. Wouldn't that be wonderful, to see Ethel's face when he drove up to the door in a new car? Hello, Ethel, dear, he would say. I've just bought you a little present. I saw it in the window as I went by, so I thought of you and how you always wanted one. Do you like it, dear? Do you like the colour? And then he would watch her face.

The auctioneer was standing up behind his table now. 'Ladies and gentlemen!' he shouted. 'The captain has guessed the day's run, ending midday tomorrow, at 830 kilometres. As usual, we will take the ten numbers on either side of it to make up the range. That means 820 to 840. And of course for those who think the true figure will be still further away, there will be "low field" and "high field" sold separately as well. Now, we'll draw the first number out of the hat . . . here we are . . . 827?'

The room became quiet. The people sat still in their chairs, all eyes watching the auctioneer. There was a certain tension in the air, and as the offers got higher, the tension grew. This wasn't a game or a joke; you could be sure of that by the way one man would look across at another who had made a higher offer – smiling perhaps, but only with the lips, while the eyes remained bright and completely cold.

Number 827 was sold for one hundred and ten pounds. The next three or four numbers were sold for about the same amount.

The ship was rolling heavily. The passengers held onto the arms of their chairs, giving all their attention to the auction.

'Low field!' the auctioneer called out. 'The next number is low field!'

Mr Botbol sat up very straight and tense. He would wait, he had decided, until the others had finished calling out their offers,

then he would make the last offer. He had worked out that there must be at least five hundred dollars in his account at the bank at home, probably almost six hundred. That was about two hundred pounds – over two hundred. This ticket wouldn't cost more than that.

'As you all know,' the auctioneer was saying, 'low field covers every number *below* the smallest number in the range – in this case every number below 820. So if you think the ship is going to cover less than 820 kilometres in the twenty-four hour period ending at midday tomorrow, you'd better buy this ticket. What are you offering?'

It went up to one hundred and thirty pounds. Others besides Mr Botbol seemed to have noticed that the weather was rough. One hundred and forty . . . fifty . . . There it stopped. The auctioneer waited, his hammer raised.

'Going at one hundred and fifty . . . ?'

'Sixty!' Mr Botbol called, and every face in the room turned and looked at him.

'Seventy!'

'Eighty!' Mr Botbol called.

'Ninety!'

'Two hundred!' Mr Botbol called. He wasn't stopping now – not for anyone.

There was a pause.

'Any more offers, please? Going at two hundred pounds . . . ?'

Sit still, he told himself. Sit completely still and don't look up. It's unlucky to look up. Hold your breath. No one's going to offer more if you hold your breath.

'Going for two hundred pounds . . . ? Mr Botbol held his breath. 'Going . . . Going . . . Gone!' The man banged the hammer on the table.

Mr Botbol wrote out a cheque and handed it to the auctioneer, then he settled back in his chair to wait for the finish.

He did not want to go to bed before he knew how much money there was to win.

They added it up after the last number had been sold and it came to two thousand one hundred pounds. That was about six thousand dollars. He could buy the car and there would be some money left over, too. With this pleasant thought, he went off, happy and excited, to his bed.

When Mr Botbol woke the next morning he lay quite still for several minutes with his eyes shut, listening for the sound of the wind, waiting for the roll of the ship. There was no sound of any wind and the ship was not rolling. He jumped up and looked out of the window. The sea – oh, God! – the sea was as smooth as glass, and the great ship was moving through it fast, obviously regaining the time lost during the night. Mr Botbol turned away and sat slowly down on the edge of his bed. He had no hope now. One of the higher numbers was certain to win after this.

'Oh, my God,' he said out loud. 'What shall I do?'

What, for example, would Ethel say? It was simply not possible to tell her that he had spent almost all of their two years' savings on a ticket in a ship's competition. Nor was it possible to keep the matter secret. To do that he would have to tell her to stop writing cheques. And what about the monthly payments on the television set? Already he could see the anger in the woman's eyes, the blue becoming grey and the eyes themselves narrowing, as they always did when there was anger in them.

'Oh, my God. What shall I do?'

It was no use pretending that he had the slightest chance now – not unless the ship started to go backwards.

It was at this moment that an idea came to him, and he jumped up from his bed, extremely excited, ran over to the window and looked out again. Well, he thought, why not? Why ever not? The sea was calm and he would have no difficulty in swimming until they picked him up. He had a feeling that someone had done

something like this before, but that did not prevent him from doing it again. The ship would have to stop and lower a boat, and the boat would have to go back perhaps a kilometre to get him, and then it would have to return to the ship. That would take about an hour. An hour was about forty-eight kilometres. The delay would reduce the day's run by about forty-eight kilometres. That would do it. 'Low field' would be sure to win then – just so long as he made certain that someone saw him falling over the side; but that would be simple to arrange. And he had better wear light clothes, some-thing easy to swim in. Sports clothes, that was it. He would dress as if he were going to play deck tennis – just a shirt and a pair of shorts and tennis shoes. What was the time? 9.15. The sooner the better, then. He would have to do it soon, because the time limit was midday.

Mr Botbol was both frightened and excited when he stepped out onto the sundeck in his sports clothes. He looked around nervously. There was only one other person in sight, a woman who was old and fat. She was leaning over the rail, looking at the sea. She was wearing a heavy coat, and the collar was turned up, so Mr Botbol couldn't see her face.

He stood still, examining her carefully from a distance. Yes, he told himself, she would probably do. She would probably call for help just as quickly as anyone else. But wait one minute, take your time, William Botbol, take your time. Remember what you told yourself in your room a few minutes ago when you were changing.

The thought of jumping off a ship into the ocean hundreds of kilometres from the nearest land had made Mr Botbol – always a careful man – unusually so. He was not yet satisfied that this woman in front of him was *sure* to call for help when he made his jump. In his opinion there were two possible reasons why she might not. First, she might have bad hearing and bad eyesight. It was not very likely, but on the other hand it *might* be

so, and why take a chance? All he had to do was to check it by talking to her for a moment. Second, the woman might be the owner of one of the high numbers in the competition; if so, she would have a very good financial reason for not wishing to stop the ship. Mr Botibol remembered that people had killed for far less than six thousand dollars. It was happening every day in the newspapers. So why take a chance on that either? He must check it first, and be sure of his facts. He must find out about it by a little polite conversation. Then, if the woman appeared to be a pleasant, kind human being, the thing was easy and he could jump off the ship without worrying.

Mr Botibol walked towards the woman and took up a position beside her, leaning on the rail. 'Hello,' he said pleasantly.

She turned and smiled at him, a surprisingly lovely smile, almost a beautiful smile, although the face itself was very plain. 'Hello,' she answered him.

And that, Mr Botibol told himself, answers the first question. Her hearing and eyesight are good. 'Tell me,' he said, 'what did you think of the auction last night?'

'Auction?' she asked. 'Auction? What auction?'

'You know, that silly thing they have after dinner. They sell numbers that might be equal to the ship's daily run. I just wondered what you thought about it.'

She shook her head, and again she smiled, a sweet and pleasant smile. 'I'm very lazy,' she said. 'I always go to bed early. I have my dinner in bed. It's so restful to have dinner in bed.'

Mr Botibol smiled back at her and began to walk away. 'I must go and get my exercise now,' he said. 'I never miss my exercise in the morning. It was nice seeing you. Very nice seeing you...'

He took a few more steps and the woman let him go without looking around.

Everything was now in order. The sea was calm, he was lightly dressed for swimming, there were almost certainly no man-eating

fish in this part of the Atlantic, and there was this pleasant, kind old woman to call for help. It was now only a question of whether the ship would be delayed for long enough to help him win. Almost certainly it would.

Mr Botibol moved slowly to a position at the rail about eighteen metres away from the woman. She wasn't looking at him now. All the better. He didn't want her to watch him as he jumped off. So long as no one was watching, he would be able to say afterwards that he had slipped and fallen by accident. He looked over the side of the ship. It was a long, long drop. He might easily hurt himself badly if he hit the water flat. He must jump straight and enter the water feet first. It seemed cold and deep and grey and it made him shake with fear just to look at it. But it was now or never. Be a man, William Botibol, be a man. All right then... now...

He climbed up onto the wide wooden rail and stood there balancing for three terrible seconds, then he jumped up and out as far as he could go, and at the same time he shouted '*Help!*'

'*Help! Help!*' he shouted as he fell. Then he hit the water and went under.

When the first shout for help sounded, the woman who was leaning on the rail gave a little jump of surprise. She looked around quickly and saw — sailing past her through the air — this small man dressed in white shorts and tennis shoes, shouting as he went. For a moment she looked as if she were not quite sure what she ought to do: throw a lifebelt, run away and find help, or simply turn and shout. She stepped back from the rail and swung round, and for this short moment she remained still, tense and undecided. Then almost immediately she seemed to relax, and she leaned forward far over the rail, looking at the water. Soon a small round black head appeared in the water, an arm raised above it, waving, once, twice, and a small faraway voice was heard calling something that was difficult to understand. The

woman leaned still further over the rail, trying to keep the little black spot in sight, but soon, so very soon, it was such a long way away that she couldn't even be sure that it was there at all.

After a time, another woman came out on deck. This one was thin and bony and wore glasses. She saw the first woman and walked over to her.

'So *there* you are,' she said.

The fat woman turned and looked at her, but said nothing.

'I've been searching for you,' the bony one continued. 'Searching all over the ship.'

'It's very strange,' the fat woman said. 'A man jumped off the deck just now with his clothes on.'

'Nonsense!'

'Oh, yes. He said he wanted to get some exercise, and he jumped in and didn't even take his clothes off.'

'You'd better come down now,' the bony woman said. Her mouth had suddenly become firm, her whole face sharp, and she spoke less kindly than before. 'And don't you ever go wandering about on deck alone like this again. You know you're meant to wait for me.'

'Yes, Maggie,' the fat woman answered, and again she smiled, a kind, trusting smile, and she took the hand of the other one and allowed herself to be led away across the deck.

'Such a nice man,' she said. 'He waved to me.'

Mrs Bixby and the Colonel's Coat

Mr and Mrs Bixby lived in a smallish flat somewhere in New York City. Mr Bixby was a dentist, who earned an average income. Mrs Bixby was a big, active woman with a wet mouth. Once a month, always on Friday afternoons, Mrs Bixby would get on the train at Pennsylvania Station and travel to Baltimore to visit her old aunt. She would spend the night with the aunt and return to New York City on the following day, in time to cook supper for her husband. Mr Bixby accepted this arrangement good-naturedly. He knew that Aunt Maude lived in Baltimore, and that his wife was very fond of the old lady, and certainly it would be unreasonable to refuse either of them the pleasure of a monthly meeting.

'But you mustn't ever expect me to come too,' Mr Bixby had said in the beginning.

'Of course not, darling,' Mrs Bixby had answered. 'After all, she's not *your* aunt. She's mine.'

So far, so good.

As it turned out, though, the aunt was only a convenient excuse for Mrs Bixby. The real purpose of her trips was to visit a gentleman known as the Colonel, and she spent the greater part of her time in Baltimore in his company. The Colonel was very wealthy. He lived in an attractive house on the edge of the town. He had no wife and no family, only a few loyal servants, and in Mrs Bixby's absence he amused himself by riding his horses and hunting.

Year after year, this pleasant friendship between Mrs Bixby and the Colonel continued without a problem. They met so rarely – twelve times a year is not much when you think about it – that there was little or no chance of their growing bored with one