AUSTRALIAN JOURNEY

(Prize winning article by Ben Scheelings)

It was a warm, peaceful night. Warm and peaceful as only a tropical night can be. The moon hung like a fairy lantern in the sky, reflecting its light on to the quiet waters of the Indian Ocean. When walking on the deck of the M.S. Johan van Oldenbarnevelt you could only hear the faint voices of the people inside, the rhythmic monotone of the ship's turbines and the rushing of the water rolling past after it had been disturbed and pushed aside by the acute angle of the ship's bow. Standing on the aft of the ship you could hear and see the tormented brine turn and twist around in a turmoil, boiling like a dark hell of angry water and froth. The white foam formed a trail behind the ship and could be seen for quite a distance before disappearing before one's vision.

Slowly this mighty ship, although small compared with the gigantic regions of King Neptune, struggled through the Indian Ocean. At 11.10 that night she would cross the Equator.

It was around-about eight o'clock and the passengers, mostly migrants, had just finished their tea. Many of them were still sitting at their tables smoking and chatting with their fellow travellers.

Suddenly attention was called for by the operator over the air. The clamour stopped, conversations came to an abrupt end and waiters stood silently. Everyone listened carefully.

"Personnel concerned with lifeboat operation 'Man Overboard' are required on the Bridge! . . . I repeat . . . Personnel concerned with lifeboat operation 'Man Overboard' are required at the bridge! That is all."

For a few seconds there was a dead silence. Then everyone came to life. Women jumped up from their seats and ran out of the dining-room in search of their children. Men also got up but in a much more controlled manner. Although the waiters reassured everyone (or at least tried to), and told them to take it easy, the big dining-room was soon evacuated.

On deck everything was in a disorder. Mothers were running around calling for their children, children were searching for mothers, men peered over the gunwale into the semi-dark night in the faint hope of seeing a waving arm or a bobbing head. Boys stood fascinated around six sailors who were preparing a lifeboat to descend on to the mysterious Indian Ocean.

I watched the churning water at the back of the ship. The dark-green there below me seemed to boil triumphantly with browns and bluish-whites, twirling through one another while roaring a sadistic song.

The ship had slowed down considerably and was now cruising around in a wide circle.

The din on the decks had also died down since all the mothers had put their children safely in their cabins. Those standing on the decks were piercing the darkness till the tears sprang in their eyes and they had to shut them for a few seconds to ease the pain.

The two big search-lights were sweeping over the silent ocean like two light-green eyes floating on the surface of the water. The time was now 9.27.

"I heard a cry!" someone called shrilly from the starboard. With one mighty sweep the two search-lights swung starboard. Everybody ran to the starboard side, but nothing could be seen—nor heard. Was it a false alarm? Imagination? There was only one person who could tell and that was the one we were looking for.

A Catholic priest stood in the centre of the deck with people around him praying aloud.

Sweat could be seen on many a forehead, especially on those belonging to the six crew members who were by now ready to descend in their little boat onto the deep greenness below. It was well known to them, as to only a few passengers, that this was a shark area.

"Oh Lord above, we pray thee let this man be re-united with us . . ." To be re-

united with us. Fat chance he has, Frank, one of the sturdy sailors thought.

The time was now 10.03, two hours since the disappearance. To swim for two hours in open sea with sharks all round is not easy.

"Over there, quick!" Again the lights danced over the water. People rushed to that side to see.

The priest stood alone, praying continuously. Had he not heard that cry? Wasn't he interested?

Again it turned out to be a false alarm given by a nervous passenger . . . or wasn't it false? The people walked back to their former places. The priest stood again with his little crowd around him.

The lights again returned to their rhythmical sweep of the wide ocean. The ship kept on its circular path through the quiet tropical waters. A stifling atmosphere reigned over the ocean, the ship and its decks.

"What was that?" The search-light floated back to the spot which it had just passed, but this time much more slowly. "There, there it is again!" It seemed like a crumpled piece of cellophane, far away, reflecting the bright rays of the search-light. "Was that an arm waving frantically?"

Then the light lost it. Everyone aboard did not dare utter a sound, no, not even breathe. About sixteen hundred pairs of eyes followed the circular greenish-yellow disc which seemed to flit nervously over the water. By this time, the second search-light had joined the first one.

"There it is again!" a man yelled from the upper deck. Yes, there it was. A white object bobbing up and down close above the surface of the water about two miles away. "Was that an arm waving again?" The only sound which broke the suffocating silence was the hum of the ship's twin engines.

"Lifeboat away!" a voice on the bridge bellowed. Immediately following that order the little fragile boat commenced its journey downwards to meet the unknown. As a result of the big ship's steady rocking the little lifeboat swayed to and fro, meeting the side of the mother ship with a heart-breaking thud. After a trying three minutes the lifeboat met the water with an easy splash. The little engine was started and away she puffed, a small nut-shell crawling over the water.

The spotted thing by this time, had come close enough to be recognised. It appeared to be a human being, swimming. As the swimmer noticed the lifeboat coming towards him he began to swim with renewed power sending sprays of pearly-white drops of water flying everywhere.

It took the lifeboat about ten minutes to reach the lone swimmer, but to those watching on the ship it seemed an eternity. Soon the man was pulled aboard the lifeboat and collapsed in the arms of his rescuers. A tremendous cheer went up from those watching as the sturdy little boat returned home.

Through all the excitement you could hear the voice of the priest mingle with that of the crowd; "Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy Name . . ."

The time was now 11.23, four hours after the first alarm.

By some miracle we had rescued a soul from the deep.

The ship turned about and we resumed our Australian Journey.

MOON ENSLAVED

You are no longer
Food for the poet's pen,
You who were white
Now are red.
Your secrets are told
We know all about you.
We've seen the unseen.
You're mapped now.
And named.
You are Man's slave,
He will callously labour
To utilize you—
Our newest wronged neighbour!

Melva K. King