



CHAPTER 1

Shipwreck & Desertion

Our ship had been storm-tossed for six days. The raging sea had increased in fury each hour until, by the seventh day, all hope was lost. Constant struggle had exhausted the men. Their yells of frustration and anger had turned to prayers for mercy, with strange and often silly vows to behave better if spared. We had no idea where we were, no way to navigate. The masts had splintered. New leaks opened faster than any crew could have mended them.

We huddled below in our cabin, as if to shut out the sounds of doom. My heart sank as I looked upon my wife and my four terrified young sons. “Dear children,” said I, “if the Lord wishes, He can save us. If not, remember that we will all be reunited in Heaven.”

My dear wife, Elizabeth, looked bravely up from her tears. The boys clustered around her, and she began to reassure them in calm tones. I

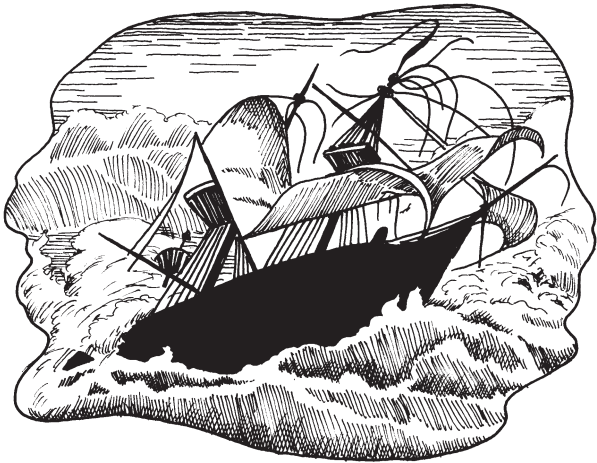
led us in prayer, and each person prayed aloud in turn. Fritz, the eldest, prayed for the rescue for his dear parents and brothers, with hardly a thought for himself. My children's simple, honest prayers gave me heart: I felt they would be answered.

Amid the roar of storm and breakage I suddenly heard the cry of "Land! Land!" At that instant, the ship trembled with a dreadful *crash!* The impact tossed us across the cabin; we heard the sounds of splintering timber and water roaring in. The captain's voice rose above the devastation: "Lower the boats! We are lost!"

"Lost!" I exclaimed. Then, for my family's sake, I forced cheer into my voice. "Take courage, my boys! Land is near, and we shall do our best to reach it. God helps those that help themselves! Stay with your mother while I investigate." With that I went above.

On deck all was chaos. Every wave that slammed over the ship's side threw me down. Reaching the stub of a broken mast, I managed to stand and look around. One side of the hull was bashed in. The bow was awash and coming apart. Ignoring us, their only passengers, the crew had hurried into lifeboats. "Please!" I cried out. "Wait for my family!" There was no answer as the last boat descended into the sea.

I could only watch the crew row away. Calling to them was a waste of breath. In those



heavy seas, they could not have returned even if they had suddenly remembered their duty. We were deserted.

Even so, I saw reasons for hope. The ship's stern was jammed between two high rocks, partly above the waves that were battering the bow to pieces. My family's cabin was in the stern, safely above the waterline. Through the pelting rain, I could make out a line of rocky coast. My heart leaped, yet I was deeply concerned as I returned to my family.

Five pairs of eyes looked to me for news. I forced a smile. "Courage, dear ones! Although our good ship will sail no more, neither is she likely to sink; she is wedged. Land is in sight.

Tomorrow, if the storm eases, I see no reason we cannot get ashore.”

My children’s spirits rose immediately. Such trust they had in my words, such optimism! They acted as though our escape was certain. The ship’s position also helped; while we could still feel the impacts of waves, they no longer tossed us like stones in a box.

My wife saw through my forced cheer, though, and I answered her questioning look with the grim truth: we were abandoned. Her brave reply inspired me. “We must find some supper,” said she. “We will need all our strength tomorrow. No use being hungry as well as abandoned.”

Night drew on with no letup in the storm. Each crash announced new damage to our ship. I thought of the lifeboats; I doubted the crew had survived.

“God will help us soon, won’t He, Father?” said my youngest child, Franz.

“You silly little thing,” said his brother Fritz, too sharply. “It is up to God to decide what and when to do for us. We must have patience.”

“Well said, Fritz, had you said it kindly,” I said. “You often speak more harshly to your brothers than you truly feel. Let your words reflect what is in your heart.”

After my wife prepared a hearty supper, my three youngest went directly to sleep. Fritz, who was old enough to understand our danger, kept

watch with us. After a long silence, he spoke: "Father, we could make swimming belts for mother and the boys. Since you and I can swim, those might enable us all to reach land."

"Your idea is so good," I answered, "that we will do it right now, in case something happens tonight." We found a number of empty flasks and tin canisters, which we connected with rope to make floatable belts. My wife put hers on, and I wakened my younger sons to equip them. I then gathered up matches, tinder, knives, cord, and other small useful items. If the vessel fell apart that night, and we reached shore, we would have a few tools.

Now Fritz joined his brothers in sound sleep. My wife and I kept watch all night, dreading some fatal shift in the wreck with each new sound.

When the day finally came, the storm had passed. We went on deck—or what remained of it—to see blue sky and a lovely sunrise.

Only then did my boys discover that we were alone. They all spoke at once:

"Papa, what has become of everybody?" "Are the sailors gone?" "Have they taken away the boats?" "Oh, Papa! Why did they leave us behind? What can we do by ourselves!"

"My good children," I replied, "we must not despair. The men may have abandoned us, but God will not. Let us all do our best. Does anyone have a suggestion?"

“The sea will soon be calm enough for swimming,” said Fritz.

“Very well for you, because you can swim,” exclaimed Ernest, my second eldest, “but think of mother and the rest of us! Why not build a raft and go ashore together?”

“It would be difficult to build a raft to carry all of us,” I answered, “but it’s the right idea. First, though, let us all look around for useful items.”

Away we all went. I checked on supplies of food and fresh water, while my wife and young Franz went to care for the animals, who were in a pitiful state. Fritz hastened to the arms-chest. Ernest searched for tools.

My second youngest, Jack, headed for the captain’s cabin. The moment he opened the door, two huge dogs bounded out in great joy, bowling him over. He cried out in surprise and protest, and the dogs apologized as dogs do, licking his face where he lay. I laughed, but warned him: “Remember, these are animals. They may be hungry. Be careful.” Jack nodded. “Even so,” I continued, “I’m glad you weren’t angry with them. They can not help their nature.”

When we reassembled in the cabin, we all displayed our treasures. Fritz had two guns, a belt with pouches, powder-flasks, and plenty of bullets. Ernest produced a can of nails, a pair of large scissors, an axe, and a hammer; his pockets were full of carpentry tools. Little Franz opened a large

box, eager to show us the “nice sharp little hooks” it contained. His brothers smiled scornfully.

“Well done, Franz!” I cried. “These fish hooks, which you—the youngest—have found, may be the most important find. Fritz and Ernest, you have chosen well too.”

“Will you praise me too?” said my dear wife. “I have found no tools, but I can give you good news. Some animals are still alive: a donkey, two goats, six sheep, a ram, and a cow and a fine sow, both pregnant. I was just in time to save them from starving. I milked the goats, though the milk will not keep in this dreadful heat.”

“Excellent,” I said. “My friend Jack, however, has presented me with a couple of huge, useless dogs, who will eat more than any of us.”

“Oh, Papa! They will be of use!” protested Jack. “They will help us to hunt when we get on shore!”

“No doubt they will, Jack, if we ever get on shore; but I’m not sure how we will.”

“Can’t we each get into a big barrel, and float there?” he asked. “I have often sailed like that around the pond at home.”

“A fine idea, my son!” I cried. “Ernest, give me your tools. Then let us gather the largest barrels we can find!”

We soon dragged four large barrels out of the hold onto the lower deck, which was barely above water. I sawed them across the middle,

converting them into tubs. After this hard work, we sat down to a lunch of goat's milk and biscuits. We also had wine, with that of my sons well diluted, as was the custom in our country.

My eight tubs now stood in a row near the water's edge. I was satisfied, but my wife was not. "I shall never," she said, "be brave enough to get into one of these!"

"Do not be too sure of that, dear wife, until you see the finished craft." I sorted through the ship's lumber supply and found some long, thin, flexible boards. These I nailed together in a long, narrow boat-shape. I then nailed the tubs to this frame, all in one long row of eight, to produce a sort of narrow boat. We tried to launch it and got a bad surprise: it was too heavy to move, even by all heaving together.

"I need a lever," I cried. "Run and fetch a capstan bar!"

Fritz ran to the capstan, a great horizontal wheel normally used to raise the anchor, and removed one of the heavy spoke-like bars. I sawed a spare mast into rollers, then put the capstan bar under our boat's bow and pried upward. Thinking quickly, my sons slipped a roller under the boat without my orders.

"Father," inquired Ernest, "how does that thing let you do more than all of us together?"

"Using this lever, the further I can stand from the object, the more weight I can lift," I

explained in haste. "But now we must hurry. We can have a longer talk about mechanics on land."

I tied a long rope to our boat's stern, then to the ship's side, and heaved the boat so that two more rollers could fit underneath. Again we all pushed and our gallant craft slid swiftly into the water. It was narrow and tipsy, so we nailed a pair of boards across it and attached empty barrels on each side, similar to the outriggers used to make sea canoes stable. Even so, we would have to distribute the weight very carefully.

I boarded our boat, both to test it and to cut away some wreckage blocking its exit. The boys brought oars and wanted to jump in, but it was too late in the day to try for land. We did not care to spend another night aboard the wreck, but we had no choice. My wife had prepared a good dinner, and we ate heartily after the day's hard work.

Before nightfall I made everyone put on a swimming-belt. I persuaded my wife, with difficulty, to change her dress for a sailor's clothing; surely she would find it more comfortable. She finally gave in and left for a short time. When she came back, she wore a seaman's shirt and trousers, blushing scarlet. At home she would have considered this indecent, for in Switzerland women always wore dresses. We all told her she looked splendid, however, and her embarrassment faded.

Nothing was left but to try to sleep. Tomorrow would be the crucial day.