Start in Life

I was born the youngest of three sons in 1632, in York, England. My father was an industrious German immigrant named Kreutznauer; my mother came from the prominent Robinson family. Following English custom, "Kreutznauer" became shortened to "Crusoe." My eldest brother was killed in battle against the Spaniards near Dunkirk. I never learned my second brother's fate, just as my parents never learned mine.

By the time I arrived, my father had made enough money to retire from business. I remember him as old and wise. He groomed me to study law, but I had a wandering spirit. I wanted only to go to sea. Father strongly objected; my mother and friends all implored me not to. Even at that stage of life, I seemed destined to disregard all good advice and take a self-destructive path.

One day Father made a determined attempt to talk some sense into me. His tone was kind

and reasonable. Why, other than youthful impulse, would I want to leave my family and native land? I had been born with advantages; if I worked hard in England, I might enjoy a comfortable, successful life. Adventures, he said, were for two types of men: desperate men with no hope at home, and great men in search of fame. I was neither, and I should be grateful, for life had taught him that this middle station was the safest and best. I would suffer neither the endless toil of the poor, nor the worrisome sorrows that come with riches and fame.

If I heeded his words, he promised to help me find my way in life; if I did not, my suffering would be my own fault. He wept as he spoke of my oldest brother, with whom he'd had the same sort of discussion years ago. He had risen to the rank of lieutenant colonel—only to die in combat. My father said he would always pray for me, but that if I took this foolish step, God would not bless me. I would regret at length what I had decided in haste, with no one around to help me out of trouble. With that, which in light of later events was quite prophetic, he grew too sad to continue the discussion.

I was deeply moved—how could I not be? My initial reaction—to take his advice and stay—wore off after a few days. To avoid another discussion like that, I resolved to run away, but not before trying some persuasion of my own. I waited until

my mother was in a good mood, then took her aside. I was determined to see the world, I told her, and would accept no less, so my father had better not try to force me to stay. If he did, I would run away; the same if he placed me as a law apprentice. But if she would ask my father to consent to one voyage, and I found it not to my taste, I would come home and work doubly hard to make up for lost time.

Agitated, my mother flatly refused. My father would never agree to something that was against my best interests, nor would she lobby him to do so. How could I even think of such a thing after the kind, loving way he had sat me down? I would never be able to say that she had connived in any way at my ruin.

Though she refused to make my case to him, I did hear afterwards that she reported the discussion to him, and that Father said to her with a sigh: "That boy might be happy if he would stay at home. If he goes abroad, he will be the most miserable wretch ever born. I will never agree to that."

Nearly a year passed with no solution. My father proposed numerous ways to get me started in business, but I remained deaf. Instead, I complained that my parents didn't understand or care what I wanted out of life. One day I was down by the port in Hull, with no particular plans, when I met a friend about to sail to London in his father's ship. Would I like to come

along? I didn't even send word to my parents. It was an ill hour on the 1st of September, 1651, that I boarded a ship bound for London.

I doubt any young adventurer's misfortunes ever began sooner than mine. The moment we were out to sea, the wind and seas began to rise. I became miserably seasick. Perhaps it had been an awful mistake, and this was God's penalty for my careless disobedience. Thinking of my father's tears and my mother's pleas, I was as sad as I was ill. Later in life—in fact, very soon—I would see much worse conditions at sea, but right then it was the worst I knew. I expected every wave to swallow us up. I made a desperate vow: if God would spare my life, and I ever set foot on land again, I would go directly home to my father, take his advice, and never again go to sea.

These wise and sober thoughts continued while the storm lasted, and indeed some time after. The next day the wind abated and the sea calmed, and I felt better if not fully recovered. By evening all was quite calm, and the next morning the sun rose on a smooth, beautiful sea with a gentle wind. It was the loveliest thing I'd ever seen. I had slept well, my sickness had passed, and I was in excellent spirits. What had been violent was now peaceful. I might have acted on all my vows, but my friend came to me that afternoon.

"Well, Bob," said he, clapping me upon the shoulder, "how're you doing? That bit of wind

last night frightened you, didn't it?"

"Bit of wind?" I asked. "What a terrible storm!"

"A storm? You fool, do you call that a storm? It was nothing. Give us a good ship, and we think nothing of such piddling weather. But you're a freshwater sailor. Let's make a bowl of punch, and we'll forget about all that and enjoy the day."

The short truth is that, like many sailors, I had a little too much punch. It drowned all my repentances and resolutions, no matter how hard they tried to return. I began calling them "fits," and did my best to shake them off. After five or six days of good weather I had overcome (or drenched) just about all of my own good sense.

As it turned out, God wasn't done with my lessons. If I wouldn't take a hint, the next one would be so powerful it would put my shipmates into similar "fits."

On our sixth day at sea there was too little wind to sail; we anchored off Yarmouth Roads to wait out the calm. A great many other ships also came to anchor and await a helpful wind, either to go upriver or out to sea. In hindsight, we ought to have worked our way to a more sheltered anchorage upriver. After four or five days, the wind came up, but too strong and not favorable to our destination. No one worried then; but on the eighth day, the wind grew so powerful we had to take down all sail and ride it out. By

noon the sea was coming over the side; fearing for our anchor cable, we dropped a second. I watched both cables pulled full length, hard as long iron bars with the ship's entire weight straining against them.

Even the hardened seamen began to look afraid, but the worst was still to come. One time, as I was going on deck, I passed the captain and heard him say softly to himself: "Lord have mercy! We'll all be lost!" I spent most of my time in my cabin, unsure what to think. I could hardly go back and remake the vows I'd already violated. Through the spray of the sea I could see that two nearby ships had cut away their masts. My comrades cried out that another ship a mile ahead of us was foundering. Two more were completely dismasted, their anchor cables snapped, blown out to sea to their fates. Only the lighter ships could do anything more than hunch down and hope.

Toward evening, the mate and boatswain begged the captain to let them cut away the foremast. He was very unwilling, but the boatswain insisted that it was our only hope. At length the captain agreed. When they had sawed away the foremast, the mainmast stood so loose it too had to come down. Our decks were clear. The storm's fury grew, and even the old sailors said they had never seen worse; now and then one cried out that we might "founder." Good thing

for me I didn't know what that meant, but I did know that the captain, boatswain, and a few of the more sensible hands were actively praying. That frightened me even worse.

Around midnight, a man came up from the hold crying that we had sprung a leak and taken on four feet of water. All hands were called to the pump. My heart sank and I went to my cabin, where the men quickly intruded on my despair. "You're not much use on deck, but you can pump as well as another," said the boatswain, escorting me below. Glad to be able to do something useful, I worked heartily.

While I was helping at the pumps, I heard a cannon shot topside. I later learned that the captain had simply fired a distress signal to a couple of passing coal haulers, but right then I thought the ship had broken, or some other calamity had done us in. I was overcome by the stress and I fainted away. Most likely someone just pushed me aside with his foot and took my place, thinking me dead. Who could be bothered to care about my situation, with every man in fear for his life?

It took me a long time to come around. When I did, I saw that the pumpers were losing the struggle. The ship would indeed "founder," said the men, even though the storm eased a little. The captain continued to fire guns for help, and a light ship that had just ridden out the worst of the storm sent a boat over to help us. This was very