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PART ONE

THE BRITISH AT THE NORTH POLE

I

The Forward

‘TOMORROW, on the ebb tide, the brig the *Forward*, captain KZ* and second-in-command Richard Shandon, will leave New Prince’s Docks; destination unknown.’

Thus read the *Liverpool Herald* of 5 April 1860.*

The sailing of a brig is not an event of any great importance for the busiest port in Britain. Who would notice such an occurrence amongst the ships of every size and nationality* that can hardly fit into the five miles of docks?

Nevertheless, a large crowd covered the quaysides of New Prince’s Docks from the early morning of 6 April, as if the city’s corporation of naval workers had arranged a meeting there. The dockers from the nearby wharves had abandoned their work, the tradesmen their dark counters, the merchants their deserted stores. Each minute a new cargo of sightseers poured out of the multicoloured omnibuses skirting the dock walls. The city appeared to have but one aim: to watch the *Forward*’s departure.

The *Forward* was a vessel of 170 tons, with a propeller and a boiler producing 120 horsepower. She might easily have been confused with the other brigs in port. But if she did not look at all special to the public, experts noticed several characteristics that were clear to sailors.

On board the *Nautilus*,* at anchor nearby, a group of sailors were deep in a thousand conjectures as to the *Forward*’s destination.

‘What d’you make of her masts?’ said one. ‘It’s not normal, I tell you, for steamers to carry so much sail.’

‘That ship’, answered a quartermaster with a broad ruddy face, ‘must use her masts more than her boiler, and if her topsails are so big, the lower ones must often stay furled. So obviously the *Forward*’s

heading for Arctic or Antarctic seas, where the icebergs get in the way of the wind more than is healthy for such a fine, solid ship.'

'Dead right, Master Cornhill,'* said a third. 'And did you see how vertical her bow is?'

'Not to mention that she has a steel cutting edge as sharp as a razor, that could split a triple-decker in two by taking her broadside at full speed.'

'Definitely,' answered a Mersey pilot; 'and her screw produces a nice fourteen knots. A sight for sore eyes she was, cutting across the water in the trials. Trust me, a fast ship.'

'Her sails are fine as well; she can sail close to the wind and heed the tiller straightaway. Mark my words, that boat will taste polar seas, or my name isn't Cornhill. And something else. Did you notice the broad trunk holding her rudder head?'

'Aye! But what does that mean?'

'It means, my boys,' retorted the bosun with contemptuous glee, 'that you lot don't use your eyes or heads; it means that the rudder head needed more play, so it could be set or moved easily. Don't you know how often you have to do that sort of trick in ice-packs?'

'Good thinking,' replied the *Nautilus's* sailors.

'And besides,' one of them ventured, 'the bill of lading confirms Master Cornhill's theory. I got it from Clifton, who's signed on without more ado. The *Forward* has got food for five or six years, and the same amount of coal. Fuel and grub are all she's carrying, with bits of wool and sealskin clothes thrown in as well.'

'Well then,' said Cornhill, 'it's crystal clear. But, since you seem to know Clifton, didn't he say where she was going?'

'He didn't, because he's in the dark as much as anyone; the crew've been taken on just like that. They won't know till they get there.'

'Unless they go to Davy Jones's locker,' chipped in one sceptic, 'as is most likely.'

'But think of the pay,' added Clifton's friend excitedly, 'think of the money! Five times the usual on that sort of trip! Ah, without that, Richard Shandon wouldn't have had many takers. A ship with a strange shape, going the devil knows where, and apparently not planning to come back! That doesn't sound my cup of tea.'

'Whether it does or not, mate,' retorted Master Cornhill, 'the *Forward* wouldn't have had you.'

'And why ever not?'

‘Because you don’t fit the requirements. It seems that married men are out. And you fall into the great unwashed majority. So there’s no point in looking down your nose, which would be a major achievement for you anyway.’

The sailor, trapped in this way, burst out laughing with his companions, showing the joke was right.

‘Even the brig’s name’, Cornhill continued smugly, ‘is pretty bold: forward to where? Without mentioning that we don’t know who the captain is.’

‘But we do,’ responded a young sailor with rather a naive face.

‘We do?’

‘Yes.’

‘My lad,’ said Cornhill, ‘are you so addled you think Shandon is captain of the *Forward*?’

‘But . . .’

‘I’m telling you that Shandon is the commander,¹ nothing else; he’s a brave sailor, a tough whaler who’s been through it, a solid fellow fitted for command in every way. But he’s not in charge; he’s no more captain than you or me, begging your pardon! And Shandon doesn’t know who’s going to be second only to God,* either. In his own good time and way, the real captain will appear, hailing from some shore of the Old or New World. And Richard Shandon didn’t say which corner of the globe he’ll be pointing his ship at—because he’s not allowed to.’

‘All the same,’ the young sailor persisted, ‘I do assure you that someone was conducted on board, and announced in the letter offering Mr Shandon the position of second-in-command.’

‘What,’ Cornhill replied raising his eyebrows, ‘you mean a captain’s already on the *Forward*?’

‘I do, Master Cornhill.’

‘You’re telling me that!’

‘Since I got it from Johnson, the bosun.’

‘From Master Johnson?’

‘Face to face.’

‘Johnson told you?’

‘Not only that, he showed me the captain.’

‘He showed you!’ repeated Cornhill in amazement.

¹ Second-in-command on a British ship.

‘Yes.’

‘And you saw him?’

‘With my own eyes.’

‘And who was it?’

‘A dog.’

‘A dog with a leg at each corner?’

‘Yes!’

General stupefaction amongst the sailors of the *Nautilus*. In any other circumstances they would have been in fits of laughter. A dog, captain of a 170-ton brig! You could gag on less. But the *Forward* was such an extraordinary ship that you needed to think twice before joking or arguing. And Master Cornhill himself was not smiling.

‘So it was Johnson who showed you this newfangled sort of captain, this dog?’ he asked the young sailor. ‘And you saw him?’

‘Like I see you, begging pardon!’

‘Well, what do you make of it?’ asked the sailors.

‘I don’t make anything of it,’ Master Cornhill answered curtly, ‘except that the *Forward* is a ship of the devil, or of lunatics fresh out of Bedlam!’

The sailors continued to silently study the *Forward* as her preparations came to an end; and not one dared claim that Bosun Johnson had been making fun of the young sailor.

The dog story had already spread across town, and amongst the crowd of bystanders many hoped to see this dog-captain,* almost believing him to be a supernatural creature.

The *Forward* had in fact been in the public eye for several months; the unusual features of her construction, the veil of secrecy, the incognito of the captain, the way Richard Shandon took up the position as ship’s commander, the way the crew were chosen, the mysterious destination hardly guessed at by some—everything contributed to giving this brig an extraordinary aura.

For a thinker, a dreamer, a philosopher, nothing is as moving as a ship about to sail; one’s imagination gladly follows her fights against the waves, her struggles with the wind, her perilous course that does not always end up in port. Should an unusual feature emerge, the ship may take on a fantastic form, even to minds resistant to the imagination.

The *Forward* was no exception. And if the common run of

spectators could not produce erudite observations like Master Cornhill, the rumours built up over the last three months were still enough to keep Liverpudlian tongues wagging.

The brig had been built in Birkenhead, a veritable suburb on the left bank of the Mersey, linked to the port by the ceaseless to and fro of the steamboats.

Scott and Co.,* perhaps the most accomplished manufacturers in Britain, had received the specifications and blueprints from Richard Shandon, with the tonnage, dimensions, and floor-plan indicated down to the last detail. An experienced navigator's knowledge could be sensed in this project. Since Shandon had considerable means at his disposal, work had started, and proceeded, quickly, as requested by the unknown proprietor.

The brig was of a solidity to withstand any force. She had clearly been designed for enormous pressures, since her frame of teak, a sort of Indian oak renowned for its exceptional hardness, was in addition reinforced with thick iron hoops. It was even wondered, in the world of sailors, why the hull of a ship built according to such specifications of resistance was not made from metal plate, like other steamships. To that it was replied that the mysterious engineer must have had good reasons for his decision.*

Little by little, the brig had taken shape in the shipyard, with her qualities of strength and elegance impressing the experts. As noted by the *Nautilus*'s crew, her stem was at right angles to the keel, and was not protected by a ram, but a steel cutter cast in the foundries of R. Hawthorn of Newcastle.* This metal prow, shining in the sun, gave a particular air to the ship, even if in other ways she did not appear very military. However, a sixteen-pound cannon had been set up on the fo'c'sle; mounted on a pivot, it could easily be pointed in any direction. It should be added that the cannon was like the stem: in spite of everything it did, it could not manage to look warlike.

On 5 February 1860, this strange ship had been launched in the midst of an immense crowd of spectators, her first contact with the water being entirely successful.

But if the brig was not a warship, nor a merchant vessel, nor a pleasure-yacht—for one does not sally forth on excursions with six years of provisions in the hold—what was she?

A ship designed to look for the *Erebus* and *Terror* and Sir John Franklin? Not that either, for in 1859, the year before, Captain

McClintock had returned from the Arctic Ocean, bringing back incontrovertible proof of the loss of the unhappy expedition.*

So did the *Forward* want to attempt the famous Northwest Passage? What was the point? Captain McClure had found it in 1853, and his second-in-command, Lieutenant Cresswell,* had the honour of being the first to sail round the American continent from the Bering Strait to the Davis Strait.

What seemed clear, however, and even indubitable to people qualified, was that the *Forward* was preparing to take on one of the polar regions. Was she going to push towards the South Pole, further than the whaler Weddell, a greater distance than Captain James Ross* had gone? But why, with what purpose?

It can be seen that, although the field of conjectures was extremely limited, imaginations still found a way of getting lost there.

The day after the brig was launched, her boiler arrived from the workshops of R. Hawthorn of Newcastle.

This engine, of the power of 120 horses and with oscillating pistons, was relatively small; but its force was considerable for a ship of 170 tons, in any case amply equipped with sails and benefiting from a remarkable seaway. Her tests had left no doubt on this subject, and even Bosun Johnson couldn't resist giving his opinion to Clifton's friend:

'If the *Forward* uses her sails and propeller at the same time, it's with the sails that she'll get there fastest.'

Clifton's friend had not understood a single word in this proposition, but believed everything possible for a ship personally commanded by a dog.

After the boiler was fitted, the loading of provisions could start; and this constituted no mean task, for the ship was to carry six years' worth of food. There were dried and salt meats, smoked fish, dried biscuit, and flour; mountains of coffee and tea also poured into the holds in enormous avalanches. Richard Shandon supervised the loading of the precious cargo like a past master; it was all stowed, labelled, and numbered in perfect order; a huge provision of the Indian product called pemmican¹ was also taken on board, for it contains many nourishing constituents within a small volume.

¹ A preparation of condensed meat.

The nature of the victuals left no doubt as to the duration of the voyage; an experienced observer would have realized at once that the *Forward* was going to sail for polar seas. He just had to see the barrels of lime juice, the lime pastils, or the packets of mustard and sorrel and Cochlearia seeds*—in a word the profusion of powerful remedies against scurvy so vital in sailing to the furthest south or north. Shandon had clearly been advised to pay particular attention to this part of the cargo, because he took extreme care of it, as he did of the ship's medicine chest.

If there were not many guns on board—reassuring timid spirits—the powder-hold was overflowing—a feature sure to frighten them. The single gun on the fo'c'sle could hardly claim to require such amounts, and this gave food for thought. There were also gigantic saws and powerful tools, such as crowbars, sledgehammers, hand-saws, enormous axes, etc., without counting an impressive array of blasting-cylinders, enough to blow up Liverpool Customs-House. All that was strange, if not alarming, without mentioning the rockets, signals, flares, and lamps of a thousand kinds.

The many spectators on New Prince's Docks stopped to admire a long mahogany whaleboat, a ship's boat of tin-plate covered with gutta-percha, and a number of Halkett boats,* sorts of rubber overcoats that could be transformed into vessels merely by blowing into their linings. Everyone felt more and more intrigued, and even excited, since at ebb-tide the *Forward* was going to set sail for its mysterious destination.

2

An Unexpected Letter

THESE are the contents of the letter received by Richard Shandon eight months previously:

Aberdeen

2 August 1859*

Mr Richard Shandon
Liverpool

Dear Sir,

Please be informed that a sum of £16,000 sterling has been placed in the care of Messrs Marcuart and Co., bankers of Liverpool.* Enclosed is a series of banker's orders signed by myself, which will allow you to withdraw from the above-mentioned Messrs Marcuart sums amounting to the £16,000 in question.

You do not know me. This is of no consequence. I know you. That is what counts.

I offer you the place of second-in-command on board the *Forward* for a campaign which may be long and dangerous.

If not, everything is cancelled. If you accept, you will be paid £500 as salary, and at the end of each year during the whole campaign, your salary will increase by one-tenth.

The brig the *Forward* does not exist. You will have it made so that it can go to sea at the beginning of April 1860 at the latest. Attached is a detailed plan with a quotation. You will adhere to it scrupulously. The ship will be built in the workshops of Messrs Scott and Co., with whom you will deal directly.

I recommend that you take special care over the crew of the *Forward*; it will be composed of a captain, myself, a second-in-command, you, a third officer, a bosun, two engineers,* an ice-master, eight sailors, and two stokers—a total of eighteen men if Dr Clawbonny* of this city is included, who will present himself to you at the appropriate time.

Those invited to participate in the campaign of the *Forward*

should be British,* free, without family, single, sober—the consumption of spirits or even beer will not be allowed on board—and they must be ready for any endeavour or any hardship. You will preferably choose them with a sanguine constitution and thus carrying within them to the utmost degree the generating principal of animal heat.

You will offer them five times their usual pay, with an increase of a tenth for each year of service. At the end of the campaign, each of them will be guaranteed £500, and £2,000 for you. These funds will be payable at Messrs Marcuart and Co., as mentioned above.

This voyage will be a long and painful one, but honourable. You should not hesitate, therefore, Mr Shandon.

Reply to KZ, Poste Restante, Gothenburg, Sweden.

PS On 15 February next you will receive a great Dane with hanging lips, of blackish-brown colour with black horizontal stripes. You will settle him on board and have him fed with barley bread in suet bread soup.¹ You will send confirmation of receipt of the aforesaid dog to the same initials as above, Livorno (Italy).

The captain of the *Forward* will appear and make himself known in due course. At the departure, you will receive new instructions.

KZ

Captain of the *Forward*

3

Dr Clambonny

RICHARD SHANDON was a good sailor; for he had commanded whaling ships in the Arctic seas many years, with a solid reputation throughout Lancashire. Such a letter could legitimately surprise him; he felt therefore astonished, but with the self-control of the man who has seen it all before.

He satisfied the conditions: no wife, no child, no relatives—a free man if ever there was one. Having no one to consult, he headed straight for Messrs Marcuart and Co., bankers.

If the money's there, he said to himself, the rest will take care of itself.

¹ Suet bread or dog biscuit ideal for feeding dogs.

He was received in the banking house with the respect due a man for whom an account of £16,000 is quietly waiting; this point settled, Shandon asked for a blank sheet of paper and in his large sailor's hand sent his acceptance to the address indicated.

The same day he contacted the shipbuilders in Birkenhead, and twenty-four hours later the keel of the *Forward* was already being laid on the blocks of the workshop.

Richard Shandon was a fellow of about forty—robust, energetic, and brave, three qualities useful in a sailor, for they give confidence, vigour, and self-control. He was known to have a jealous, difficult character, so he was never liked by his sailors, but feared. This reputation was not in any case going to make finding a crew difficult, because he was known to be good at coming out the winner.

Shandon was afraid that the mystery attached to the expedition might reduce his room for manoeuvre.

So, he told himself, it's best to keep it quiet; there are sea dogs who would certainly want to know the why and the wherefore of it all, and as I have no information I wouldn't be able to reply. This KZ is certainly a queer fish; but at the end of the day he knows me, he's counting on me; that's enough. As for his ship, she will be finely turned out, and if she isn't heading for the Glacial Sea* my name is not Richard Shandon. But let's keep that to my officers and myself.

Upon which Shandon set about recruiting the crew, adhering to the captain's conditions concerning family and health.

He knew a very devoted, brave fellow, a good sailor, James Wall by name. Wall was about thirty and had already been to the northern seas. Shandon offered him the place of third officer and James Wall accepted without a moment's hesitation. His only wish was to sail and he loved his profession. Shandon told him everything, as he did a certain Johnson whom he made his bosun.

'Not knowing where you're going,' said James Wall, 'is no harm. If we are to look for the Northwest Passage, some do survive.'

'Not always,' replied Master Johnson, 'but that's not a good reason for not going.'

'Anyway, if we've put two and two together,' responded Shandon, 'then we have to admit that the trip will be well organized. This *Forward* will be a fine ship and you can go far with a good engine. Eighteen crewmen is all we need.'

‘Eighteen men,’ replied Master Johnson; ‘as many as the American Kane had for his famous advance towards the Pole.’*

‘It’s strange’, Wall carried on, ‘that someone is still trying to sail from the Davis Strait to the Bering Strait. The expeditions sent in search of Admiral Franklin have already cost Britain more than £760,000, but without producing any practical result! Who the devil can still risk his fortune on such a venture?’

‘First of all, James,’ replied Shandon, ‘we are arguing from a mere hypothesis. Are we really going to the northern or southern seas? I’m not so sure. It’s perhaps an attempt to make some new discovery. Anyway, a certain Dr Clawbonny will have to turn up sooner or later, and he will undoubtedly know what is what, having been instructed to tell us. So we’ll just have to see.’

‘Let’s just wait then,’ said Master Johnson; ‘for my part, commander, I’ll come up with some solid fellows; and I can already guarantee their animal heat, as the captain says. You can count on me.’

This Johnson was a good man to have; he was familiar with navigation at extreme latitudes. He was quartermaster on the *Phoenix*, which took part in the 1853 expeditions in search of Franklin; this honest sailor even witnessed the death of Bellot, the French lieutenant,* having gone on his excursion across the ice. Johnson knew the Liverpool sailors, and immediately set about recruiting the men required.

Shandon, Wall, and he managed so well that the crew was complete by early December; but the work had not progressed without difficulty; the lure of high pay had attracted many who were at bottom frightened by the plan of the expedition, and more than one resolutely enlisted, only to later go back on his word and his advance, dissuaded from such a venture by his friends. All tried to solve the mystery, overwhelming Commander Shandon with questions. He passed them all on to Master Johnson.

‘What can I say, mate?’ the bosun invariably answered. ‘I don’t know any more than you do. But anyway you’ll be in the company of lads who are afraid of nothing; that’s something! So not so much thinking: take it or leave it!’

And the majority took.

‘You understand’, the bosun sometimes added, ‘that my only difficulty is in choosing. High pay, higher than any in living memory,

and then the guarantee of a fine capital sum when we get back: it's a good offer.'

'The fact is', answered the sailors, 'that it's very tempting! Enough to live on for the rest of our lives!'

'I will not hide from you that the voyage will be long, difficult, and dangerous; that is formally stated in our instructions; so you should be aware what you're signing up for; most likely to try all that is humanly possible, and maybe more! As a result, if you don't feel you have a strong heart, a temperament to withstand anything, if you don't have a screw loose, if you don't tell yourself that you have one chance in twenty-two of coming back, if in sum you prefer to bury your bones in one place rather than another, here rather than there, then show me a clean pair of heels and give your place to a braver man!'

'But at least, Master Johnson,' the sailors would persist, their backs against the wall, 'at least you know the captain?'

'The captain is Richard Shandon, my friend—until another one appears.'

Now, it must be said, this really was what the commander thought; he easily ceded to the idea that at the last moment he would receive detailed instructions concerning the purpose of the voyage, and remain chief of the *Forward*. He even liked to spread this opinion when chatting with his officers or monitoring the building of the brig, whose first struts were rising from the Birkenhead yards like the ribs of an upside-down whale.

Shandon and Johnson had strictly followed the recommendation concerning the health of the crew members; all had a reassuring appearance, as well as a principle of heat capable of fuelling the boiler of the *Forward*; their supple limbs and clear and rosy complexions meant they were suited to resisting the intense cold. They were confident and resolute men, energetic and solidly built; but they did not all share an equal vigour; Shandon had even hesitated about taking on some, such as the sailors Gripper and Garry, or the harpooner Simpson, who seemed a little thin; but at least their bones were good and their hearts warm, so their contracts were duly signed.

All this crew belonged to the same variety of Protestantism; during the long campaigns, collective prayer sessions and the reading of the Bible often have to bring together varied souls, sustaining them at times of discouragement; it is thus essential to avoid disagreements.

Shandon knew from experience how useful these practices are, and how much they influence the morale of a crew; so they are always employed on board ships over-wintering in the polar seas.

The crew chosen, Shandon and his two officers turned to the provisions; they strictly followed the captain's instructions, clear, precise, and detailed ones in which the least items were noted in both quality and quantity. Thanks to the bankers' orders at the commander's disposition, all were settled in cash, at a discount of eight per cent, which Richard carefully added to KZ's credit.

Crew, provisioning, cargo—all were ready by January 1860; the *Forward* was already taking form. Not a day passed that Shandon did not visit Birkenhead.

On the morning of 23 January, he was as usual on one of these broad steamboats which have a helm at each end to avoid tacking and thus ensure rapid service between the banks of the Mersey;* there was at that moment one of those frequent fogs, which oblige the river sailors to navigate by compass, although the journey lasts hardly ten minutes.

However thick the fog, it could not prevent Shandon from spotting a short man, rather fat, with a fine and merry face and a pleasant expression, who advanced towards him, took both his hands, and shook them with a warmth, an exuberance, a familiarity that were completely meridional, as a Frenchman would have said.

But if this character was not from the south, it was by a hair's breadth; he spoke, he gesticulated with volubility; his thought had to emerge at any cost, or run the risk of making him blow his top. His eyes, small like those of witty men, and his mouth, large and mobile, were three safety valves which enabled him to let out this overflow of himself; he talked, so much and so fast admittedly, that Shandon could not understand a single word.

The second of the *Forward* did not take long to recognize this small man he had never seen; he had a brainwave, and when the other paused to breathe, Shandon quickly placed these words:

'Dr Clambonny?'

'Himself in person, commander! I've been looking for you for almost half a long quarter of an hour, asking everyone everywhere! You can imagine how impatient I feel! Five minutes more, and I'd have lost my head! So it's really you, Commander Richard? You really exist? You're not a myth? Your hand, your hand! So that I can

take it in mine again! Yes, it really is Richard Shandon's hand! Now if there is a Commander Shandon, there is a brig called the *Forward* he commands; and if he commands her, she will leave; and if she leaves, she will take Dr Clawbonny on board.'

'Eh well, yes, doctor, I am Richard Shandon, there is a brig the *Forward*, and she will leave!'

'That's logical,' answered the doctor, after taking in a generous provision of air; 'it's logical. So you see me happy, every last wish granted! I've been waiting for such a circumstance for a long time, for I wished to undertake a voyage of this sort. Now with you, commander . . .'

'Allow . . .'

'With you,' Clawbonny carried on, not hearing him, 'we're sure to go far, and not retreat an inch.'

'But . . .'

'Because you are tried and tested, commander, and I know your service record. Ah, you are a fine sailor, you are a fine sailor!'

'If you would like to . . .'

'No, I won't have your audacity, your bravery, and your ability doubted one moment, even by you! The captain who chose you for second is a man who knows what he's about, I can tell you!'

'But that is not the point,' said Shandon impatiently.

'And what is the point? Don't keep me hanging on a second longer!'

'You don't give me time to speak, heck! Tell me please, doctor, how you come to participate in the expedition of the *Forward*?'

'But by a letter, a good letter which is here, a letter from a good, honest captain, very laconic, but quite adequate!'

And saying this, the doctor handed Shandon a letter as follows:

Inverness

22 January 1860

Dr Clawbonny
Liverpool

If Dr Clawbonny wishes to embark for a long campaign on the *Forward*, he can present himself to Commander Richard Shandon, who has received instructions concerning him.

KZ

Captain of the *Forward*

‘The letter arrived this morning, and here I am ready to go on board the *Forward*.’

‘But at least’, Shandon tried again, ‘you know, doctor, what the purpose of the voyage is?’

‘Not at all; but what difference does it make? Provided that I go somewhere! I am said to be learned; that is a mistake, commander: I know nothing, and if I have published a few books that are selling not too badly, I was wrong; the public is very kind to buy them! I do not know anything, I repeat, except that I know nothing. Now someone has offered to add to or rather reconstitute my knowledge of medicine, surgery, history, geography, botany, mineralogy, conchology, geodesy, chemistry, physics, mechanics, and hydrography; well I accept, and I assure you that there’s no need to beg!’

‘Then,’ Shandon disappointedly began again, ‘you don’t know where the *Forward* is bound?’

‘I do, commander; it is bound where there is something to learn, discover, study, compare, where you can find other customs, other regions, other peoples to study in the exercise of their functions;* it is going, in short, where I have never been.’

‘But in particular?’

‘In particular, I have heard that it is to sail towards the boreal seas. Well, northwards!’

‘At least you know the captain?’

‘Not in the least! But he’s a good man, believe me.’

Once the two had got off at Birkenhead, the commander brought the doctor up to date, and the mystery enflamed his imagination. The sight of the brig caused him transports of joy. From that day on, he did not leave Shandon’s side, and came each morning to inspect the hull of the *Forward*.

He was in fact specially charged with supervising the installation of the ship’s medical kit. For he was a doctor, and even a good doctor, this Clawbonny, although not practising much. A doctor at 25 like everyone, he was a true scientist at 40; very well known throughout the city, he became an influential member of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Liverpool.* His private means enabled him to distribute some advice which was not any less valuable for being free; liked as an eminently likeable man must be, he never hurt a fly, not even himself; lively and talkative, admittedly, but ready to give the shirt off his back, and stand back to back with everyone.

When the rumour of his installation on board the *Forward* spread across the city, his friends moved heaven and earth to hold him back, which entrenched him even more in his idea; and when the doctor had entrenched himself in something, it took considerable skill to prise him out!

From that day on, the rumours, speculations, and apprehensions grew and grew; but that did not prevent the *Forward* from being launched on 5 February 1860. Two months later, she was ready to go to sea.

On 15 March, as announced in the captain's letter, a Great Dane had been sent by railway from Edinburgh to Richard Shandon's address in Liverpool.* The animal appeared surly, cowardly, even a little sinister, with a singular look in its eyes. The name *Forward* could be read on its copper collar. The same day the commander settled it on board, and confirmed receipt to the initials indicated in Livorno.

The crew of the *Forward* was thus complete, except for the captain. It read as follows:

KZ, captain
 Richard Shandon, commander
 James Wall, third officer
 Dr Clawbonny
 Johnson, bosun
 Simpson, harpooner
 Bell, carpenter
 Brunton, chief engineer
 Plover, second engineer
 Strong (black), cook
 Foker, ice-master
 Wolsten, armourer
 Bolton, sailor
 Garry, ditto
 Clifton, ditto
 Gripper,* ditto
 Pen, ditto
 Waren, stoker.

4

Dog-Captain

THE day of departure, 5 April, arrived. The inclusion of the doctor slightly reassured people. Where the worthy scientist planned to go, one could follow. However, most of the sailors remained anxious, and Shandon, fearing that some might desert and cause empty places on board, longed with all his heart to be at sea. Once the coast was out of sight, the crew would accept the situation.

Dr Clawbonny's cabin was at the end of the poop deck, and it occupied the whole stern of the ship.

The cabins of the captain and the second, placed slightly back, looked out over the deck. The captain's room remained hermetically closed, after being filled with various instruments, pieces of furniture, travel clothing, replacement garments, books, and utensils, as listed in a detailed note. As the stranger had requested, the key was sent to him at Lubeck; in other words, no one but he could enter his quarters.

This detail upset Shandon, reducing as it did his chances of being overall in command. As for his own cabin, he had perfectly adapted it to the presumed voyage, knowing by heart what was needed for a polar expedition.

The third officer's room was in the orlop deck, which provided a vast room for the sailors; the men were very comfortable, and would have been unlikely to find such accommodation on any other ship. They were looked after like precious cargo; a vast stove stood in the centre of the common room.

Dr Clawbonny was in his element; he had taken possession of his cabin as early as 6 February, the day after the *Forward's* first launching.

'The happiest animal', he said, 'would be a snail which could grow a shell when it wished, and I will try to be an intelligent snail.'

And, upon my word, his cabin was on track for being a shell he would not leave for a long time; the doctor took a scientist's or child's pleasure in arranging his scientific baggage. His books, his herbaria, his pigeon-holes, his precision instruments, his physics apparatus,

his collection of thermometers, barometers, hygrometers, pluviometers, telescopes, compasses, sextants, charts, and maps, the flasks, powders, and bottles of his very complete medical chest—all this was classified with an organization that would have shamed the British Museum. This space of six square feet contained incalculable riches; the doctor had only to stretch out his hand, to instantaneously become a doctor, a mathematician, an astronomer, a geographer, a botanist, or a conchologist.

He was proud of these arrangements, it must be admitted, and happy in his floating sanctuary, not able to hold more than three of his thinnest friends. In the event, his friends indeed rushed there in numbers which soon became awkward, even for a man as easygoing as the doctor; and, unlike Socrates, he ended up saying:

‘My house is small, but may heaven grant that it is never full of friends!’*

To complete this description of the *Forward*, suffice it to say that the Great Dane’s kennel was built right under the window of the mysterious cabin; but her wild occupant preferred to wander around the ship’s ’tween-deck and holds; it seemed impossible to tame, and nobody was able to get the better of its odd nature; it was heard making lamentable howls, especially at night, echoing through the spaces of the ship in a most sinister fashion.

Was it missing its master? Was it instinct on the eve of a perilous voyage? Was it a presentiment of the dangers to come? The sailors opted for this last reason; a few joked about it, seriously taking the dog for a member of a diabolical species.

One day, the brutal Pen ran after it to hit it, and fell so awkwardly on the edge of the capstan that it split open his skull. As can be guessed, the accident was ascribed to the fantastic animal.

Clifton, the most superstitious of the crew, pointed out that when on the poop, this dog always walked on the windward side; and later, when the brig was tacking on the open sea, the surprising animal changed position after each putting about, keeping to windward just as the captain of the *Forward* would have done.

Dr Clawbonny’s kindness and caresses would have tamed a tiger, but he tried in vain to get into the dog’s good books; he was wasting his time and pains.

Moreover, the animal did not answer to any of the names in the hunting calendar. So the men finished up calling it Captain, because

it appeared perfectly au fait with customs on board. The dog had obviously sailed. It was consequently easy to understand the bosun's pleasant response to Clifton's friend, and why this assumption did not find many disbelievers; several repeated it with a laugh, expecting one fine day to see the dog return in human form and start commanding operations in a resounding voice.

If Richard Shandon did not feel such apprehensions, he was not entirely free from worry, and on the evening of 5 April, the day before departure, he discussed the subject with the doctor, Wall, and Master Johnson, in the wardroom of the poop deck. These four characters were at the time enjoying a tenth tot of rum, undoubtedly their last, because the regulations in the letter from Aberdeen specified that the whole crew, from the captain down to the stoker, had to be teetotal, and would not find wine, or beer, or spirits on board, except in case of illness and on the doctor's orders. Now for an hour the conversation had centred on the departure. If the captain's indications were accurate, Shandon was to receive a letter the following day containing his final instructions.

'If this letter doesn't tell me the name of the captain,' said the commander, 'it must at least say the destination of the ship. Without that, where to sail for?'

'Well in your place, Shandon,' answered the impatient doctor, 'I would leave even without the letter; it will follow us, have no doubt.'

'You don't doubt anything, doctor! But what point of the sphere would you sail for?'

'The North Pole, it's obvious; no doubt is possible.'

'No doubt possible!' Wall retorted. 'And why not the South Pole?'

'The South Pole?' exclaimed the doctor. 'Never! Would the captain have had the idea of exposing a brig to sailing the entire Atlantic! So try to reflect a little, my dear Wall.'

'The doctor has an answer for everything.'

'Go for North,' said Shandon. 'But, tell me, doctor, Spitzbergen? Greenland? Labrador? Or Hudson Bay? If all roads lead to the same place, namely the uncrossable ice-barrier, there are a lot of them, and I would find it very hard to decide on one or the other. Do you have a clear answer you can give me, doctor?'

'No,' he answered, upset to have no reply, 'but to conclude, if you don't get a letter, what will you do?'

'I will not do anything; I will wait.'

'You won't leave!' Clawbonny cried, his glass shaking with his despair.

'Certainly not.'

'That's best,' quietly said Master Johnson, while the doctor paced round the table, unable to stay in one place. 'Yes, best; but waiting too long can have unfortunate consequences: first, the season is good, and if we are to head north, we must profit from the break-up of the ice to get through Davis Strait; besides, the crew are getting more and more worried; their friends and fellow sailors are pushing them to leave the *Forward*, and such opinions could play us a nasty trick.'

'It should be added that if panic set in among our sailors,' said James Wall, 'they'd desert us down to the last man; and I'm not sure, commander, that you'd be able to get a crew together again.'

'But what to do?' exclaimed Shandon.

'What you said,' said the doctor; 'wait, but wait until tomorrow before giving up. The promises of the captain have been kept up to now with a regularity that is a good sign; there is therefore no reason to believe that we won't be informed of our destination in due course; I do not doubt a single moment that tomorrow we'll be sailing through the Irish Sea; so, my friends, I propose a last grog to our happy voyage; it starts in a slightly inexplicable way, but with mariners like you it has a thousand chances of finishing well.'

And all four clinked glasses a last time.

'Now, commander,' added Master Johnson, 'if I have some advice to give you, it is to prepare everything to start; the crew must believe you certain of what you're about. Tomorrow, whether a letter arrives or not, get ready to sail; do not light your boilers; the wind seems to be holding up; nothing will be easier than to go free; have the pilot come on board; when the tide is right, leave the docks; go and anchor beyond the headland of Birkenhead; our men will have no communication with land any more, and if that diabolic letter finally arrives, it will find us there like anywhere.'

'Well spoken, my brave Johnson!' said the doctor holding his hand out to the old sailor.

'So be it!' answered Shandon.

All then headed back to their cabins, and in an agitated sleep waited for sunrise.

The following day, the first delivery of letters had taken place in the town and not one carried the name of Commander Richard Shandon.

Nevertheless, he made his preparations for departure, the rumour spread immediately through Liverpool, and, as we have seen, an extraordinary multitude of spectators rushed on to the wharves of New Prince's Dock.

Many of them came aboard the brig, some to embrace a comrade one last time, some to dissuade a friend, some to look at the strange ship, some to finally know the purpose of the voyage, and people murmured to see the commander more silent and reserved than ever.

He had his reasons for that.

Ten o'clock sounded. Even eleven o'clock. The tide was due to go down at around one in the afternoon. From the poop, Shandon cast an anxious glance at the crowd, seeking to surprise the secrecy of his destiny on an anonymous face. But in vain. The sailors of the *Forward* executed his orders in silence, not taking their eyes off him, still waiting for a message which did not come.

Master Johnson finished the preparations of the equipment. The weather was overcast, and the swell very strong outside the docks; the wind was blowing from the south-east with a certain violence, but it was still easily possible to leave the Mersey.

At midday, still nothing. Dr Clawbonny strode agitatedly, squinting, gesticulating, 'impatient for sea', as he said with a certain Latin elegance. He felt moved, no matter what he did. Shandon bit his lips to blood.

At this moment, Johnson approached and said to him:

'Commander, if we want to profit from the tide, we should not waste time; we will not be out of the docks for a good hour.'

Shandon threw a last glance around him, and consulted his watch. The time for the midday collection had passed.*

'Go!' he said to his bosun.

'Under way, you!' shouted the latter, ordering the spectators to empty the bridge of the *Forward*.

A certain movement occurred then in the crowd, heading for the ship's gangway and thence the quay, while the brig's sailors detached the last mooring ropes.

But the inevitable confusion of these bystanders, pushed back by the sailors without much care, was increased further by the dog's

howls. From the forecandle this animal suddenly sprang through the solid mass of visitors. It barked in a dull tone.

The crowd divided before it; it jumped on to the poop deck, and, incredibly, but as observed by a thousand witnesses, this dog-captain held a letter in its teeth.

‘A letter!’ Shandon cried. ‘So is he on board?’

‘He was surely here, but is not any more,’ answered Johnson, gesturing to the deck completely empty of the inconvenient crowd.

‘Captain, Captain! Here!’ exclaimed the doctor, trying to take the letter which the dog removed from his hand with violent leaps. He seemed to want to give the message only to Shandon himself.

‘Here, Captain!’ he said.

The dog approached; Shandon took the letter without difficulty, and Captain then uttered three clear barks in the midst of the deep silence which reigned on board and on the quays. Shandon held the letter without opening it.

‘But read it! Read it!’ the doctor cried.

Shandon looked. The envelope, without date or indication of place, only read:

Commander Richard Shandon, on the brig the *Forward*.

Shandon opened the letter, and read:

You will head for Cape Farewell. You will reach it on 20 April. If the captain does not appear on board, you will enter Davis Strait, and cross Baffin Bay to Melville Bay.*

KZ

Captain of the *Forward*

Shandon carefully folded this laconic letter, put it in his pocket, and gave orders for departure. His voice, which rang out alone amongst the whistling of the east wind, had something solemn in it.

Soon the *Forward* was out of the docks, and, directed by a Liverpool pilot, whose small cutter followed at a distance, it found the current of the Mersey. The crowd rushed on to the external wharf which surrounds the Victoria Docks, in order to glimpse this strange ship one last time. The two topsails, the foresail, and the brigantine were quickly hoisted, and, under this sail, the *Forward*, worthy of its name, after rounding the headland of Birkenhead, headed at full speed into the Irish Sea.