

The English at the North Pole

By

Jules Verne

CHAPTER I

THE "FORWARD"

"To-morrow, at low tide, the brig Forward, Captain K. Z---, Richard Shandon mate, will start from New Prince's Docks for an unknown destination."

The foregoing might have been read in the Liverpool Herald of April 5th, 1860. The departure of a brig is an event of little importance for the most commercial port in England. Who would notice it in the midst of vessels of all sorts of tonnage and nationality that six miles of docks can hardly contain? However, from daybreak on the 6th of April a considerable crowd covered the wharfs of New Prince's Docks--the innumerable companies of sailors of the town seemed to have met there. Workmen from the neighbouring wharfs had left their work, merchants their dark counting-houses, tradesmen their shops. The different-coloured omnibuses that ran along the exterior wall of the docks brought cargoes of spectators at every moment; the town seemed to have but one pre-occupation, and that was to see the Forward go out.

The Forward was a vessel of a hundred and seventy tons, charged with a screw and steam-engine of a hundred and twenty horse-power. It might easily have been confounded with the other brigs in the port. But though it offered nothing curious to the eyes of the public,

connoisseurs remarked certain peculiarities in it that a sailor cannot mistake. On board the Nautilus, anchored at a little distance, a group of sailors were hazarding a thousand conjectures about the destination of the Forward.

"I don't know what to think about its masting," said one; "it isn't usual for steamboats to have so much sail."

"That ship," said a quartermaster with a big red face--"that ship will have to depend more on her masts than her engine, and the topsails are the biggest because the others will be often useless. I haven't got the slightest doubt that the Forward is destined for the Arctic or Antarctic seas, where the icebergs stop the wind more than is good for a brave and solid ship."

"You must be right, Mr. Cornhill," said a third sailor. "Have you noticed her stern, how straight it falls into the sea?"

"Yes," said the quartermaster, "and it is furnished with a steel cutter as sharp as a razor and capable of cutting a three-decker in two if the Forward were thrown across her at top speed."

"That's certain," said a Mersey pilot; "for that 'ere vessel runs her fourteen knots an hour with her screw. It was marvellous to see her cutting the tide when she made her trial trip. I believe you, she's a quick un."

"The canvas isn't intricate either," answered Mr. Cornhill; "it goes straight before the wind, and can be managed by hand. That ship is going to try the Polar seas, or my name isn't what it is. There's something else--do you see the wide helm-port that the head of her helm goes through?"

"It's there, sure enough," answered one; "but what does that prove?"

"That proves, my boys," said Mr. Cornhill with disdainful satisfaction, "that you don't know how to put two and two together and make it four; it proves that they want to be able to take off the helm when they like, and you know it's a manoeuvre that's often necessary when you have ice to deal with."

"That's certain," answered the crew of the Nautilus.

"Besides," said one of them, "the way she's loaded confirms Mr. Cornhill's opinion. Clifton told me. The Forward is victualled and carries coal enough for five or six years. Coals and victuals are all its cargo, with a stock of woollen garments and sealskins."

"Then," said the quartermaster, "there is no more doubt on the matter; but you, who know Clifton, didn't he tell you anything about her destination?"

"He couldn't tell me; he doesn't know; the crew was engaged without knowing. He'll only know where he's going when he gets there."

"I shouldn't wonder if they were going to the devil," said an unbeliever: "it looks like it."

"And such pay," said Clifton's friend, getting warm--"five times more than the ordinary pay. If it hadn't been for that, Richard Shandon wouldn't have found a soul to go with him. A ship with a queer shape, going nobody knows where, and looking more like not coming back than anything else, it wouldn't have suited this child."

"Whether it would have suited you or not," answered Cornhill, "you couldn't have been one of the crew of the Forward."

"And why, pray?"

"Because you don't fulfil the required conditions. I read that all married men were excluded, and you are in the category, so you needn't talk. Even the very name of the ship is a bold one. The Forward--where is it to be forwarded to? Besides, nobody knows who the captain is."

"Yes, they do," said a simple-faced young sailor.

"Why, you don't mean to say that you think Shandon is the captain of the Forward?" said Cornhill.

"But----" answered the young sailor--

"Why, Shandon is commander, and nothing else; he's a brave and bold sailor, an experienced whaler, and a jolly fellow worthy in every respect to be the captain, but he isn't any more captain than you or I. As to who is going to command after God on board he doesn't know any more than we do. When the moment has come the true captain will appear, no one knows how nor where, for Richard Shandon has not said and hasn't been allowed to say to what quarter of the globe he is going to direct his ship."

"But, Mr. Cornhill," continued the young sailor, "I assure you that there is someone on board who was announced in the letter, and that Mr. Shandon was offered the place of second to."

"What!" said Cornhill, frowning, "do you mean to maintain that the Forward has a captain on board?"

"Yes, Mr. Cornhill."

"Where did you get your precious information from?"

"From Johnson, the boatswain."

"From Johnson?"

"Yes, sir."

"Johnson told you so?"

"He not only told me so, but he showed me the captain."

"He showed him to you!" said Cornhill, stupefied. "And who is it, pray?"

"A dog."

"What do you mean by a dog?"

"A dog on four legs."

Stupefaction reigned amongst the crew of the Nautilus. Under any other circumstances they would have burst out laughing. A dog captain of a vessel of a hundred and seventy tons burden! It was enough to make them laugh. But really the Forward was such an extraordinary ship that they felt it might be no laughing matter, and they must be sure before they denied it. Besides, Cornhill himself didn't laugh.

"So Johnson showed you the new sort of captain, did he?" added he, addressing the young sailor, "and you saw him?"

"Yes, sir, as plainly as I see you now."

"Well, and what do you think about it?" asked the sailors of the quartermaster.

"I don't think anything," he answered shortly. "I don't think anything, except that the Forward is a ship belonging to the devil, or madmen fit for nothing but Bedlam."

The sailors continued silently watching the Forward, whose preparations for departure were drawing to an end; there was not one of them who pretended that Johnson had only been laughing at the young sailor. The history of the dog had already made the round of the town, and amongst the crowd of spectators many a one looked out for the dog-captain and believed him to be a supernatural animal. Besides, the Forward had been attracting public attention for some months past. Everything about her was marvellous; her peculiar shape, the mystery which surrounded her, the incognito kept by the captain, the way Richard Shandon had received the proposition to direct her, the careful selection of the crew, her unknown destination, suspected only by a few--all about her was strange.

To a thinker, dreamer, or philosopher nothing is more affecting than the departure of a ship; his imagination plays round the sails, sees her struggles with the sea and the wind in the adventurous journey which does not always end in port; when in addition to the ordinary incidents of departure there are extraordinary ones, even minds little given to credulity let their imagination run wild.

So it was with the Forward, and though the generality of people could not make the knowing remarks of Quartermaster Cornhill, it did

not prevent the ship forming the subject of Liverpool gossip for three long months. The ship had been put in dock at Birkenhead, on the opposite side of the Mersey. The builders, Scott and Co., amongst the first in England, had received an estimate and detailed plan from Richard Shandon; it informed them of the exact tonnage, dimensions, and store room that the brig was to have. They saw by the details given that they had to do with a consummate seaman. As Shandon had considerable funds at his disposal, the work advanced rapidly, according to the recommendation of the owner. The brig was constructed of a solidity to withstand all tests; it was evident that she was destined to resist enormous pressure, for her ribs were built of teak-wood, a sort of Indian oak, remarkable for its extreme hardness, and were, besides, plated with iron. Sailors asked why the hull of a vessel made so evidently for resistance was not built of sheet-iron like other steamboats, and were told it was because the mysterious engineer had his own reasons for what he did.

Little by little the brig grew on the stocks, and her qualities of strength and delicacy struck connoisseurs. As the sailors of the Nautilus had remarked, her stern formed a right angle with her keel; her steel prow, cast in the workshop of R. Hawthorn, of Newcastle, shone in the sun and gave a peculiar look to the brig, though otherwise she had nothing particularly warlike about her. However, a 16-pounder cannon was installed on the forecastle; it was mounted on a pivot, so that it might easily be turned in any direction; but neither the cannon nor the stern, steel-clad as they were, succeeded in looking warlike.

On the 5th of February, 1860, this strange vessel was launched in the midst of an immense concourse of spectators, and the trial trip was perfectly successful. But if the brig was neither a man-of-war, a merchant vessel, nor a pleasure yacht--for a pleasure trip is not made with six years' provisions in the hold--what was it? Was it a vessel destined for another Franklin expedition? It could not be, because in 1859, the preceding year, Captain McClintock had returned from the Arctic seas, bringing the certain proof of the loss of the unfortunate expedition. Was the Forward going to attempt the famous North-West passage? What would be the use? Captain McClure had discovered it in 1853, and his lieutenant, Creswell, was the first who had the honour of rounding the American continent from Behring's Straits to Davis's Straits. Still it was certain to competent judges that the Forward was prepared to face the ice regions. Was it going to the South Pole, farther than the whaler Weddell or Captain James Ross? But, if so, what for?

The day after the brig was floated her engine was sent from Hawthorn's foundry at Newcastle. It was of a hundred and twenty horse-power, with oscillating cylinders, taking up little room; its power was considerable for a hundred-and-seventy-ton brig, with so much sail, too, and of such fleetness. Her trial trips had left no doubt on that subject, and even the boatswain, Johnson, had thought right to express his opinion to Clifton's friend--

"When the Forward uses her engine and sails at the same time, her

sails will make her go the quickest."

Clifton's friend did not understand him, but he thought anything possible of a ship commanded by a dog. After the engine was installed on board, the stowage of provisions began. This was no slight work, for the vessel was to carry enough for six years. They consisted of dry and salted meat, smoked fish, biscuit, and flour; mountains of tea and coffee were thrown down the shafts in perfect avalanches. Richard Shandon presided over the management of this precious cargo like a man who knows what he is about; all was stowed away, ticketed, and numbered in perfect order; a very large provision of the Indian preparation called pemmican, which contains many nutritive elements in a small volume, was also embarked. The nature of the provisions left no doubt about the length of the cruise, and the sight of the barrels of lime-juice, lime-drops, packets of mustard, grains of sorrel and cochlearia, all antiscorbutic, confirmed the opinion on the destination of the brig for the ice regions; their influence is so necessary in Polar navigation. Shandon had doubtless received particular instructions about this part of the cargo, which, along with the medicine-chest, he attended to particularly.

Although arms were not numerous on board, the powder-magazine overflowed. The one cannon could not pretend to use the contents. That gave people more to think about. There were also gigantic saws and powerful instruments, such as levers, leaden maces, handsaws, enormous axes, etc., without counting a considerable quantity of blasting cylinders, enough to blow up the Liverpool Customs--all that

was strange, not to say fearful, without mentioning rockets, signals, powder-chests, and beacons of a thousand different sorts. The numerous spectators on the wharfs of Prince's Docks admired likewise a long mahogany whaler, a tin pirogue covered with gutta-percha, and a certain quantity of halkett-boats, a sort of indiarubber cloaks that can be transformed into canoes by blowing in their lining. Expectation was on the qui vive, for the Forward was going out with the tide.