

CHAPTER IV

DOG-CAPTAIN

The day of departure arrived with the 5th of April. The admission of the doctor on board had given the crew more confidence. They knew that where the worthy doctor went they could follow. However, the sailors were still uneasy, and Shandon, fearing that some of them would desert, wished to be off. With the coast out of sight, they would make up their mind to the inevitable.

Dr. Clawbonny's cabin was situated at the end of the poop, and occupied all the stern of the vessel. The captain's and mate's cabins gave upon deck. The captain's remained hermetically closed, after being furnished with different instruments, furniture, travelling garments, books, clothes for changing, and utensils, indicated in a detailed list. According to the wish of the captain, the key of the cabin was sent to Lubeck; he alone could enter his room.

This detail vexed Shandon, and took away all chance of the chief command. As to his own cabin, he had perfectly appropriated it to the needs of the presumed voyage, for he thoroughly understood the needs of a Polar expedition. The room of the third officer was placed under the lower deck, which formed a vast sleeping-room for the sailors' use; the men were very comfortably lodged, and would not have found anything like the same convenience on board any other ship;

they were cared for like the most priceless cargo: a vast stove occupied all the centre of the common room. Dr. Clawbonny was in his element; he had taken possession of his cabin on the 6th of February, the day after the Forward was launched.

"The happiest of animals," he used to say, "is a snail, for it can make a shell exactly to fit it; I shall try to be an intelligent snail."

And considering that the shell was to be his lodging for a considerable time, the cabin began to look like home; the doctor had a savant's or a child's pleasure in arranging his scientific traps. His books, his herbals, his set of pigeon-holes, his instruments of precision, his chemical apparatus, his collection of thermometers, barometers, hygrometers, rain-gauges, spectacles, compasses, sextants, maps, plans, flasks, powders, bottles for medicine-chest, were all classed in an order that would have shamed the British Museum. The space of six square feet contained incalculable riches: the doctor had only to stretch out his hand without moving to become instantaneously a doctor, a mathematician, an astronomer, a geographer, a botanist, or a conchologist. It must be acknowledged that he was proud of his management and happy in his floating sanctuary, which three of his thinnest friends would have sufficed to fill. His friends came to it in such numbers that even a man as easy-going as the doctor might have said with Socrates, "My house is small, but may it please Heaven never to fill it with friends!"

To complete the description of the Forward it is sufficient to say

that the kennel of the large Danish dog was constructed under the window of the mysterious cabin but its savage inhabitant preferred wandering between decks and in the hold; it seemed impossible to tame him, and no one had been able to become his master; during the night he howled lamentably, making the hollows of the ship ring in a sinister fashion. Was it regret for his absent master? Was it the instinct of knowing that he was starting for a perilous voyage? Was it a presentiment of dangers to come? The sailors decided that it was for the latter reason, and more than one pretended to joke who believed seriously that the dog was of a diabolical kind. Pen, who was a brutal man, was going to strike him once, when he fell, unfortunately, against the angle of the capstan, and made a frightful wound in his head. Of course this accident was placed to the account of the fantastic animal. Clifton, the most superstitious of the crew, made the singular observation that when the dog was on the poop he always walked on the windward side, and afterwards, when the brig was out at sea, and altered its tack, the surprising animal changed its direction with the wind the same as the captain of the Forward would have done in his place. Dr. Clawbonny, whose kindness and caresses would have tamed a tiger, tried in vain to win the good graces of the dog; he lost his time and his pains. The animal did not answer to any name ever written in the dog calendar, and the crew ended by calling him Captain, for he appeared perfectly conversant with ship customs; it was evident that it was not his first trip. From such facts it is easy to understand the boatswain's answer to Clifton's friend, and the credulity of those who heard it; more than one repeated jokingly that he expected one day to see the dog take human shape

and command the manoeuvres with a resounding voice.

If Richard Shandon did not feel the same apprehensions he was not without anxiety, and the day before the departure, in the evening of April 5th, he had a conversation on the subject with the doctor, Wall, and Johnson in the poop cabin. These four persons were tasting their tenth grog, and probably their last, for the letter from Aberdeen had ordered that all the crew, from the captain to the stoker, should be teetotallers, and that there should be no wine, beer, nor spirits on board except those given by the doctor's orders. The conversation had been going on about the departure for the last hour. If the instructions of the captain were realised to the end, Shandon would receive his last instructions the next day.

"If the letter," said the commander, "does not tell me the captain's name, it must at least tell me the destination of the brig, or I shall not know where to take her to."

"If I were you," said the impatient doctor, "I should start whether I get a letter or no; they'll know how to send after you, you may depend."

"You are ready for anything, doctor; but if so, to what quarter of the globe should you set sail?"

"To the North Pole, of course; there's not the slightest doubt about that."

"Why should it not be the South Pole?" asked Wall.

"The South Pole is out of the question. No one with any sense would send a brig across the whole of the Atlantic. Just reflect a minute, and you'll see the impossibility."

"The doctor has an answer to everything," said Wall.

"Well, we'll say north," continued Shandon. "But where north? To Spitzbergen or Greenland? Labrador or Hudson's Bay? Although all directions end in insuperable icebergs, I am not less puzzled as to which to take. Have you an answer to that, doctor?"

"No," he answered, vexed at having nothing to say; "but if you don't get a letter what shall you do?"

"I shall do nothing; I shall wait."

"Do you mean to say you won't start?" cried Dr. Clawbonny, agitating his glass in despair.

"Certainly I do."

"And that would be the wisest plan," said Johnson tranquilly, while the doctor began marching round the table, for he could not keep still; "but still, if we wait too long, the consequences may be deplorable;

the season is good now if we are really going north, as we ought to profit by the breaking up of the ice to cross Davis's Straits; besides, the crew gets more and more uneasy; the friends and companions of our men do all they can to persuade them to leave the Forward, and their influence may be pernicious for us."

"Besides," added Wall, "if one of them deserted they all would, and then I don't know how you would get another crew together."

"But what can I do?" cried Shandon.

"What you said you would do," replied the doctor; "wait and wait till to-morrow before you despair. The captain's promises have all been fulfilled up to now with the greatest regularity, and there's no reason to believe we shan't be made acquainted with our destination when the proper time comes. I haven't the slightest doubt that to-morrow we shall be sailing in the Irish Channel, and I propose we drink a last grog to our pleasant voyage. It begins in an unaccountable fashion, but with sailors like you there are a thousand chances that it will end well."

And all four drank to their safe return.

"Now, commander," continued Johnson, "if you will allow me to advise you, you will prepare everything to start; the crew must think that you know what you are about. If you don't get a letter to-morrow, set sail; do not get up the steam, the wind looks like holding out,

and it will be easy enough to sail; let the pilot come on board; go out of the docks with the tide, and anchor below Birkenhead; our men won't be able to communicate with land, and if the devil of a letter comes it will find us as easily there as elsewhere."

"By heavens! you are right, Johnson!" cried the doctor, holding out his hand to the old sailor.

"So be it," answered Shandon.

Then each one entered his cabin, and waited in feverish sleep for the rising of the sun. The next day the first distribution of letters took place in the town, and not one bore the address of the commander, Richard Shandon. Nevertheless, he made his preparations for departure, and the news spread at once all over Liverpool, and, as we have already seen, an extraordinary affluence of spectators crowded the wharfs of New Prince's Docks. Many of them came on board to shake hands for the last time with a comrade, or to try and dissuade a friend, or to take a look at the brig, and to know its destination; they were disappointed at finding the commander more taciturn and reserved than ever. He had his reasons for that.

Ten o'clock struck. Eleven followed. The tide began to go out that day at about one o'clock in the afternoon. Shandon from the top of the poop was looking at the crowd with uneasy eyes, trying to read the secret of his destiny on one of the faces. But in vain. The sailors of the Forward executed his orders in silence, looking at him all

the time, waiting for orders which did not come. Johnson went on preparing for departure. The weather was cloudy and the sea rough; a south-easter blew with violence, but it was easy to get out of the Mersey.

At twelve o'clock nothing had yet been received. Dr. Clawbonny marched up and down in agitation, looking through his telescope, gesticulating, impatient for the sea, as he said. He felt moved, though he struggled against it. Shandon bit his lips till the blood came. Johnson came up to him and said--

"Commander, if we want to profit by the tide, there is no time to be lost; we shall not be clear of the docks for at least an hour."

Shandon looked round him once more and consulted his watch. The twelve o'clock letters had been distributed. In despair he told Johnson to start. The boatswain ordered the deck to be cleared of spectators, and the crowd made a general movement to regain the wharves while the last moorings were unloosed. Amidst the confusion a dog's bark was distinctly heard, and all at once the animal broke through the compact mass, jumped on to the poop, and, as a thousand spectators can testify, dropped a letter at Shandon's feet.

"A letter!" cried Shandon. "He is on board, then?"

"He was, that's certain, but he isn't now," said Johnson, pointing to the deserted deck.

Shandon held the letter without opening it in his astonishment.

"But read it, read it, I say," said the doctor.

Shandon looked at it. The envelope had no postmark or date; it was addressed simply to:

"RICHARD SHANDON,

"Commander on board the brig

"Forward."

Shandon opened the letter and read as follows:--

"Sail for Cape Farewell. You will reach it by the 20th of April. If the captain does not appear on board, cross Davis's Straits, and sail up Baffin's Sea to Melville Bay.

"THE CAPTAIN OF THE 'FORWARD,'

"K. Z."

Shandon carefully folded this laconic epistle, put it in his pocket, and gave the order for departure. His voice, which rang above the east wind, had something solemn in it.

Soon the Forward had passed the docks, and directed by a Liverpool pilot whose little cutter followed, went down the Mersey with the current. The crowd precipitated itself on to the exterior wharf along the Victoria Docks in order to get a last glimpse of the strange brig. The two topsails, the foresail and the brigantine sail were rapidly set up, and the Forward, worthy of its name, after having rounded Birkenhead Point, sailed with extraordinary fleetness into the Irish Sea.