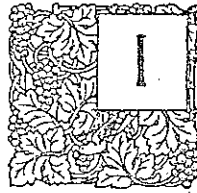


A TRIP ON A GREAT LAKES FREIGHTER

By JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD



IN my previous articles* I have described nearly every phase of Lake shipping, with the exception of one, which, while not vitally concerned with the story of our freshwater marine, is still one of the most interesting, and perhaps the least known, of all. That is the "inner life" of one of our Great Lakes freighters; the life of the crew and the favored few who are privileged to travel as passenger guests of the owners upon one of these steel monsters of the Inland Seas. In more than one way our Lake marine is unusual; in this it is unique.

Recently one of the finest steel yachts that ever sailed fresh water came up the St. Lawrence to the Lakes. Its owner was a millionaire many times over. With his wife he had cruised around the world, but for the first time they had come to the Lakes. I had the fortune to converse with him upon his yacht about the craft of other countries, and as we lay at anchor in the Detroit River there passed us the greatest ship on the Inland Seas—the *Thomas F. Cole* of Duluth; and, addressing his wife, I asked, "How would you like to take a cruise on a vessel like that?"

The lady laughed, as if such a suggestion were amusing indeed, and said that if she were a man she might attempt it, and perhaps enjoy it to a degree; and when I went on to describe some of the things that I knew

about "those great, ugly ships," as she called them, I am quite sure that all of my words were not received without doubt. This little experience was the last of many that proved to me the assertion I have made before—that to nine people out of ten, at least, our huge, silent, steel ships that bring down the wealth of the North are a mystery. They are not beautiful. Freightened low down, their steel sides scraped and marred like the hands of a labourer, their huge funnels emitting clouds of bituminous smoke, their barren steel decks glaring in the heat of the summer sun, there seems to be nothing about them to attract the pleasure-seeker. From the distance at which they are usually seen their aft and forward cabins appear like coops, their pilot-houses even less.

Yet fortunate is the person who has the "pull" to secure passage on one of these monster carriers of the Lakes; for behind all of that uninviting exterior there is a luxury of marine travel that is equalled nowhere else in the world except on the largest and finest of private yachts. These leviathans of the Lakes, that bring down dirty ore and take up dirtier coal, are the greatest money-makers in the world, and they are owned by men of wealth. The people who travel on them are the owner's guests. Nothing is too good for them. Each year the rivalry between builders is increasing as to whose ships shall possess the finest "guests' quarters." Behind the smoke and dirt and unseemly steel that are seen from shore or deck, a fortune has been spent in those

* See PUTNAM'S for June, July, August and September, 1908

ooms over the small doors of which one reads the word "Owners." You may climb up the side of the ship, you may explore it from stem to stern, but not until you are a "guest"—not until the "key to the ship" has been handed to you—are its luxuries, its magnificence, its mysteries, clearly revealed.

My telegram read: "Take my private room on the *Harry Berwind* at Ashtabula."

It was signed by G. Ashley Tomlinson, of Duluth. The *Berwind* is one of the finest of Tomlinson's sixteen steel ships and is named after one of the best known fuel transportation men on the Lakes: it is a vessel that can carry eleven thousand tons without special crowding and makes twelve miles an hour while she is doing it. I reached the great ore and coal docks at Ashtabula at a happy moment.

The other guests had arrived, seven in all—four ladies and three gentlemen; and we met on the red and black dock, with mountains of ore and coal about us, with the thundering din of working machines in our ears, and out there before us, enshrouded in smoke and black dust, the great ship that was to carry us for nearly a thousand miles up the Lakes, and back again. It was a happy moment, I say, for I met the seven guests in this wilderness of din and dirt—and six of them had never been aboard a freighter in their lives. They had heard, of course, what lay beyond those big steel walls. But was there not a mistake here? Was it possible—

Doubt filled their faces. High above them towered the straight wall of the ship with a narrow ladder reaching down to them. At the huge coal derricks whole cars of coal were being lifted up as if they were no more than scuttles in the hands of a strong man and their contents sent thundering into the gaping hatches; black dust clouded the air, settling in a thousand minute particles on fabric and flesh; black-faced men shouted and worked at the loading

machine; the crash of shunting cars came interminably from the yards; and upon it all the sun beat fiercely, and the air that entered our nostrils seemed thick—thick with the dust and grime and heat of it all. A black-faced, sweating man, who was the mate, leaned over the steel side high above us and motioned us aft, and the seven guests hurried through the thickness of the air, the ladies shuddering and cringing as the cars of coal thundered high over their heads, until they came to the big after port with a plank laid to the dock. Up this they filed, their faces betraying more doubt, more uneasiness, more discomfort as hot blasts of furnace air surged against them; then up a narrow iron stair, through a door—and out there before them lay the ship, her thirty hatches yawning like caverns, and everywhere coal—and coal-dust. The ladies gasped and drew their dresses tightly about them as they were guided along the narrow promenade between the edge of the ship and the open hatches, and at last they were halted before one of those doors labelled "Owners."

Then the change! It came so suddenly that it fairly took the breath away from those who had never been on a freighter before. The guests filed through that narrow door into a great room, which a second glance showed them to be a parlor. Their feet sank in the noiseless depths of rich velvet carpet; into their heated faces came a refreshing breeze from electric fans; great upholstered chairs opened to them welcomingly; the lustre of mahogany met their eyes, and magazines and books and papers were ready for them in profusion. To us there now came the thunder of the coal as if from afar; here was restfulness and quiet—through the windows we could see the dust and smoke and heat hovering about the ship like a pall.

This was the general parlor into which we had been ushered; and now I hung close behind the ship's guests, watching and enjoying the amazement that continued to grow in them.

From each side of the parlor there led a narrow hall and on each side of each hall there was a large room—a guest's chamber—and at the end of each hall there was a bathroom; and in the bed rooms, with their brass bedsteads, rich tapestries and curtains, our feet still sank in velvet carpet, our eyes rested upon richly cushioned chairs—everywhere there was the luxury and wealth of appointment that a millionaire had planned for the favored few whom he called his guests.

Now I retired from the guests' chambers to my own private room. I am going a good deal into detail in this description of the guests' quarters of a great freighter like the *Berwind*, for I remember having been told by a shipbuilder of the Clyde that he could hardly believe that such a thing existed, and I know there are millions of others who have the same doubts. The forward superstructure of a Great Lakes freighter might be compared to a two-story house, with the pilot-house perched on top of it; and from the luxurious quarters of the "first story," which in the *Berwind* are on a level with the deck of the vessel, a velvet-carpeted stair led to the "observation room"—a great, richly furnished room with many windows in it from which one may look out upon the sea in all directions except behind. And from this room one door led into the captain's quarters, and another into the private suite of rooms which I was fortunate enough to occupy on this trip. The finest hotel in the land could not have afforded greater conveniences than this black and red ship, smothered in the loading of ten thousand tons of coal. In the cool seclusion of its passenger quarters a unique water-works system gave hot and cold water to every room, an electric-light plant aft gave constant light, and power for the fans. Nothing was wanting, even to a library and music, to make of the interior of this forward part of the ship a palace fit for the travel of a king. Within a few minutes we had all plunged into baths; hardly were we out and

dressed when the steward came with glasses of iced lemonade; and even as the black clouds of grime and dirt still continued to settle over the ship we gathered in the great observation room, a happy party of us now, and the music of mandolin and phonograph softened the sounds of labor that rumbled to us from outside.

Then, suddenly, there fell a quiet. The ship was loaded. Loud voices rose in rapid command, the donkey-engines rumbled and jerked as their cables dragged the steel hatch-covers into place, and the freighter's whistle echoed in long, sonorous blasts in its call for a tug. And then, from half a mile away, came the shrieking reply of one of those little black giants, and up out of the early sunset gloom of evening it raced in the maelstrom of its own furious speed and placed itself ahead of us, for all the world like a tiny ant tugging away at a prey a hundred times its size. Lights sprang up in a thousand places along shore, and soon, far away, appeared the blazing eye of the harbor light; and beyond that stretched the vast opaqueness of the "thousand-mile highway" that led to Duluth and the realms of the iron barons of the North. Once clear, and with the sea before us, the tug dropped away, a shudder passed through the great ship as her engines began to work, our whistle gave vent to two or three joyous, triumphant cheers, and our journey had begun.

It was then that our steward's pretty little wife, Mrs. Brooks, appeared, smiling, cool, delightfully welcome, and announced that dinner was ready, and that this time we must pardon them for being late. Outside, men were already flushing the steel decks from huge lengths of hose, the ship's lights were burning brilliantly, and from far aft, nearly a tenth of a mile away, there came the happy voice of a deckhand singing in the contentment of a full stomach and the beautiful freshness of the night. Not more than a dozen paces from our own quarters was a narrow deck-house which ran the full width of the

hatches—the guests' private dining-room. It was now ablaze with light; and here another and even greater surprise was in store for those of our party who were strangers to the hospitality which one receives aboard a Great Lakes freighter. The long table, running nearly the length of the room, glittered with silver, and was decorated with fruits and huge vases of fresh flowers, and at the head of the table stood the steward's wife, all smiles and dimples and good cheer, appointing us to our seats as we came in. On these great ore and grain and coal carriers of the Inland Seas, the stewards and their wives, unlike those in most other places, possess responsibilities other than those of preparing and serving food. They are, in a way, the host and hostess of the guests, and must make them comfortable—and "at home." On a few vessels, like the *Berwind*, there are both forward and aft stewards, with their assistants, who in many instances are their wives. The forward steward, like our Mr. Brooks, is the chief, and buys for the whole ship and watches that the aft steward does his work properly. In addition to this he devotes himself loyally to the vessel's guests. He is paid about one hundred dollars a month and all expenses, while his wife gets thirty dollars for assisting. So he must be good. The stewards of Lake freighters are usually those who have "graduated" ashore, for even the crews of the Lakes are the best fed people of their class. Mr. Brooks, for instance, had not only won his reputation in some of the best hotels in the land, but his books on cooking are widely known, and especially along the fresh-water highways. I mention these facts because they show another of the little-known and unusual phases of life in our Lakes marine. For breakfast, dinner, and supper the tables in the crew's mess-room are loaded with good things; and very few hotels give the service that is found in the passengers' dining-room.

Thus, from the very beginning, one meets with things unusual and sur-

prising on board one of these big steel ships of the Lakes. While towns and cities and the ten thousand vessels of the seas are sweeping past, while for a thousand miles the scenes are constantly changing—from thickly populated country to virgin wilderness, from the heat of summer on Erie to the chill of autumn on Superior,—the vessel itself remains a wonderland to those who have never taken the trip before. From the huge refrigerator, packed with the choicest meats, with gallons of olives and relishes, baskets of fruits and vegetables—from this to the deep "under-water dungeons," where the furnaces roar night and day and where black and sweating men work like demons, something new and interesting is always to be found.

For the first day, while the steel decks are being scrubbed so clean that one might lie upon them without soiling himself, the passengers may spend every hour in exploring the mysteries of the ship without finding a dull moment. Under the aft deck-houses, where the crew eat and sleep, are what the sailors call the "bowels of the ship," and here, as is not the case on ocean craft, the passenger may see for the first time in his life the wonderful, almost appalling, mechanism that drives a great ship from port to port; for it must be remembered that the "passenger" here is a guest—the guest of the owner whose great private yacht the great ship is, in a way, and everything of interest will be shown to him if he wishes. On the bottom of this part of the ship the "brussels-carpet guest"—as sailors call the passenger who is taking a trip on a freighter for the first time—stands half in terror. There is the dim light of electricity down here, the roaring of the furnaces, the creaking and groaning of the great ship; and high above one's head—an interminable distance away, it seems—one can see where day begins. Everywhere there is the rumbling and crashing of machinery, the dizzy whirling of wheels, the ceaseless pumping of steel arms as big around as trees; and up

and up and all around wind narrow stairways and gratings, on which men creep and climb to guard this heart action of the ship's life. The din is fearful, the heat in the furnace-room insufferable, and when once each half-minute a furnace door is opened for fresh fuel, and writhing torrents of heat and glare illumine the gloomy depths, the tenderfoot passenger looks up nervously to where his eyes catch glimpses of light and freedom far above him. And then, in the explanation of all this—in the *reason* for these hundreds of tons of whirling, crashing, thundering steel—there comes the greatest surprise of all. For all of this giant mechanism is to perform just one thing—and that is to whirl and whirl and whirl an insignificant-looking steel rod, which is called a shaft, and at the end of which, in the sea behind the ship, is the screw—a thing so small that one stands in amazement, half doubting that this is the instrument which sends a ten-thousand-ton ship and ten thousand tons of cargo through the sea at twelve miles an hour!

After this first day of exploration, the real joyous life of the ship comes to one. Every hour of every day is one of pleasure. You are on the only ship in the world into every corner of which a passenger is allowed to go. You are, in so far as your pleasure and freedom go, practically the owner of the ship. The crew and even the captain *may not* know but what you *are* one of the owners, for nothing but your name is given to the officers before you come aboard. Of course, the steward has the privilege of telling you to keep out of his kitchen, and the captain of ordering you out of the pilot-house—but they never do it. That guest, for instance, who haunts the pilot-house almost from morning to night, who insists upon taking lessons in steering, and who on any other craft in the world would soon be told to remain in his cabin or mind his business, may be a millionaire himself—a millionaire who is giving this line of ships many thousands of dollars'

worth of freight each year. So the captain and the crew *must* be affable. But, as I have said before, this is accepted as a pleasure and not as a duty on the Inland Seas. I have taken trips on a score of vessels, and it means much when I say that never have I encountered an unpleasant captain, and that only once did I meet with a mate who was not pleasant to his passengers.

So, from the first day out, the big steel ship is an "open house" to its guests. Forward and aft of the cabins, great awnings are stretched, thick rugs and carpets are spread upon the deck, and easy chairs are scattered about. The captain and his mates are ready with the answers to a thousand questions. They point out objects and locations of interest as they are passed. There, in the late storms of last autumn, a ship went down with all on board; on yonder barren coast, five or six miles away, the captain guides your glasses to the skeleton of a ship, whose tragic story he tells you; he names the light-houses, the points of coasts, and tells you about the scores of ships you pass each day. He shows you how the wonderful mechanism of the ship is run from the pilot-house, and he gives you lessons in the points of the compass, and perhaps lets you try your hand at the wheel. And each hour, if you have been abroad, you see more and more how an ocean trip cannot be compared to this. In a preceding article I have described what you see and what you pass in this thousand-mile journey to Duluth; how you slip from summer to autumn, from the heart of the nation's population to vast, silent wildernesses, where the bear and the wolf roam unmolested; how great cities give place to mining and lumber camps, and you come into the great northern lake where darkness does not settle until after nine o'clock at night.

But these are not the only things which make a trip on a Great Lakes freighter interesting. It is what you can *do*. There are a dozen games you

can play, from hatch-bag to shuffle-board; there is music and reading, eating and drinking—for the steward is constantly alive to your wants, always alive to add to your pleasures. And there is excitement—if not of one kind then of another. You may be thrilled by the sudden alarm of fire aboard ship, and find yourself burning with relief when you discover that you are witnessing nothing but an exciting fire drill; it may be a wrestling or boxing match between two of the ship's champions, a race over the steel hatches, or—something like the following incident.

One of the greatest sources of entertainment for guests aboard a Lake freighter is in the study of the men and boys of the crew, for the average crew of twenty-five or thirty always possesses some odd characters. Our party was very much amused by one individual, a youth of about twenty, large, round-faced, full-fed, a young man of unbounded good humor whose two great joys in life were his meals and—sleep. This youth never lost an opportunity to take a nap. After his dinner in the mess-room, he would promptly fall into a doze in his chair, to be aroused by a dash of cold water or some other practical joker's trick; if he sat down on a hatch he would sleep; he would fall asleep leaning against the cabin. His actions caused no little uneasiness on the part of the captain, who liked the boy immensely. "Some day he will fall asleep and topple overboard," he said.

We had come into Lake Superior, where the clear, dry air exerts a peculiar influence. Coming suddenly from the warm atmosphere of the Lower Lakes, a person has difficulty in keeping his eyes open half the time up there. We were off Keweenaw Point when the thrilling alarm was spread that "Dopey," the sleepy youth, had fallen overboard. The aft steward brought the news forward. Billy had eaten a huge dinner and was taking a comfortable siesta *standing*, half leaning over the aft rail. A moment after passing him

the steward, returning, bent upon stirring him from his dangerous position, had found him gone. The vessel was searched from stem to stern. Even the passengers joined in the hunt. But there was found no sign of the missing youth, and a deep gloom fell upon the people of the ship. An hour later, one of the young ladies approached the steep, narrow stair that led down into the forward locker. The mate himself had searched this gloomy nook for Billy. I was a dozen feet behind the girl and she turned to me with a white, startled face.

"Come here—quick!" she cried. "Listen!"

Together we bent our heads over the opening—and up to our ears there came a mysterious sound, now so low that we could hardly hear it, then louder—something that for a moment held us speechless and set our hearts beating at double-quick. It was the snoring of a sleeping person! In another instant we were down in that dingy hole of ropes and cables and anchor chains, and there, curled up in the gloom, we found Billy, sleeping a sleep so sound that it took a good shaking to awaken him. On deck he explained the mystery. The passing of the steward aft had aroused him from his nap against the rail, and he had wandered forward, seeking the cool seclusion of the locker.

While this little affair did not end in a tragedy, I give it as an illustration of the fact that *something* of interest, if not excitement, is constantly occurring to keep the guests of a Great Lakes freighter alive to the possibilities of the trip. The night following Billy's mysterious disappearance, for instance, the two young ladies aboard our ship nearly brought about a mutiny. Before going into the details of this incident, it is necessary for me to repeat what I have said in a preceding paragraph—that the seamen of our Lakes are the best-fed working people in the world. If a captain does not provide the best of meats and vegetables and fruits,

and in sufficient quantities, he may find himself minus a crew when he reaches port. One day as I was leaning over the aft rail, the steward approached me and said: "Do you see that ship off there?" He pointed to a big down-bound freighter. "Notice anything peculiar about it?" he continued. I confessed that I did not.

"Well, this is the noon hour," he went on, "and the sea-gulls always know when it's feeding time. But there are no gulls following that ship. There are a good many more ships in that same line—and there's never a gull behind them. Do you know why? It's because the grub on those boats is so poor. The gulls have learned to tell them as far as they can see 'em, and they won't have anything to do with 'em, and that's the Lord's truth, sir! Any man on the Lakes will tell you so, and the men on those boats most of all. They don't take a job there until they're down and out and can't get work anywhere else."

The more one comes in touch and sympathy with the lives of these men of the Lakes the more one's interest increases; and it is not until one eats and drinks with them aft, and secures their confidence and friendship, that he is let into the secrets of the inner and home life of these red-blooded people, which is unlike the life of any other seafaring men in the world. It is when this confidence and friendship are won that you begin to reap the full pleasure of a trip on a Great Lakes freighter; it is then that the romance, the picturesqueness and the superstition of the Lake breed peep out. Not until that time, for instance, will you discover that these rough, strong men of the Lakes are the most indomitable home-owners in the world. A home is their ambition—the goal toward which they constantly work. From the deck-hand to the young, unmarried mate it is the reward of all their labor—the end for which they are all striving. And there are good reasons for this—reasons which have made the "home instinct" among Lake sailors almost a

matter of heredity. The ships of the Inland Seas are almost constantly in sight of land. Now it is a long stretch of coast a mile or so away; again it is a point stretching out to sea, or the shores of some of the most beautiful streams in America. And wherever there is land within shouting or megaphone or "whistle" distance of the passing vessels, there nestle the little homes of those who run the ships of our fresh-water marine.

Perhaps for a whole season (seven or eight months) the Lake sailor has no opportunity of visiting his family. Yet every week or so he sees his home and his wife and children from the deck of his ship. It is easy for those ashore to learn from the marine officers when a certain vessel is due to pass, and at that hour wives and sweethearts, friends and children, assemble on the shore to bid their loved ones Godspeed. All of the vessels on the Lakes have their private code of signals. Perhaps in the still hours of night, the sleeping wife is aroused by the deep, distant roar of the freighter's voice. For a moment she listens, and it comes again—and from out there in the night she knows that her husband is talking to her; and the husband, his eyes turned longingly ashore, sees a light suddenly flash in the darkness, and his heart grows lighter and happier in this token of love and faith that has come to him. And in the hours of day it is more beautiful still; and the passengers and crew draw away, leaving the man alone at the rail, while the wife holds up their baby for the father to see, and throws him kisses, and there is the silence of voiceless, breathless suspense on the deck that the faint voice of the woman, or the happy cries of the children may reach the husband and father, whose words thunder back in megaphone greeting. It is beautiful and yet it is pathetic, this constant union of the people of the Lake breed. And the pathos comes mostly when there is no answer from the little home ashore, for it is then that visions of sickness, of misfortune or possibly of neglect cast their gloom