



The Skipper's Black Valise

WHEN the Annie B. docked at Kingston, Ontario Captain John Blake left the wheel, walked to the cabin and calmly took from the wall the small framed picture of her who had been first lost to him—the one-time Annie Benton of the flesh after whom the powerful North Shore tug was named. He glanced apprehensively to the cabin door, pushed it shut and slipped the spring catch. Then he took from a cubby the old-fashioned black valise that had long been the mystery of his ship, no boat-hand had dared touch under pain of dismissal and none had ever seen him open. It was a great square affair of polished black leather with slender, fantastic flower shapes embossed upon it, a type of traveller's portmanteau obsolete for many years.

Captain John Blake inserted an ancient brass key into the lock of the valise. He opened the jaws just wide enough to slip the framed picture within, then grimly snapped it shut, and locked it without glancing inside. With well-assumed unconcern he picked up the valise, uncatched the door and walked without. As resolutely he descended the narrow, steel-plated stairway to the deck.

Dempsey, the engineer, himself trying to swallow a lump of lonesomeness, watched the Captain covertly. "Caution how cool the Old Man takes it," he remarked huskily to the cook standing on the engine-pit stairway beside him. "Not even a cussword out of him all morning, and I'd been lookin' for a real blow."

Captain Blake heard every word of it. His ears were unusually alert that morning. But he looked neither to right nor to left and he spoke to none as he passed on over the side to the dock. He had the brisk, abstracted air of a businessman. There was no routine to be attended to in connection with the delivery of the tug to the representatives of her new owners. Also, he must pay his respects to the sea captain who would now take his place at the Annie B.'s wheel. He would not come back to see the Annie B. leave for her new salt water home. He could never trust himself to do that. He might do something soft and make a laughing-stock of himself, and even before strangers that would never do.

It was remarkable how he was now holding up, as his engineer had observed. Captain Blake did not himself quite understand the show of indifference he had been able to assume. Here he was calmly walking away for the last time from the ship he had sailed almost half of his lifetime without even a glancing back. He reached to his vest pocket for a cigar.

"Woo-oo-oo-oo! Woo-oo-oo-oo! Woo-oo-oo-oo!"

The blast from the Annie B.'s siren—her farewell cry to her veteran master—brought taut every nerve in Captain Blake's being. He whirled in his tracks like a soldier called to attention. The Annie B.'s high, fighting, steelshod bow was toward him. Every clean line of her seemed to cry out to him as a child taking leave of a father. He felt like a caloused deserter—one who forsakes his truest friend without one kind word in parting. Dempsey, the engineer, with his whistle-cord had called the stern old man's bluff.

The thing that came into his mind as he stood there was a message from a sweetheart twenty-one years ago, a last farewell that had remained in John Blake's memory as fresh as springtime violets: "I'll be watching for you on that further shore, John—just as I have watched for your smoke over the lake



CAPTAIN BLAKE, Rover of the Canadian Great Lakes, thought he was used to all kinds of storms. But there was one that he had never met—and this is the story of it.

By C. C. JENKINS

these years—and you'll come to me, John, aboard the Annie B."

Captain John Blake remained rigid a moment, then the storm broke. Something within him that he had till now suppressed with main force of will seemed to burst under sheer pressure of aroused emotions. Ludicrous he probably appeared to passersby who did not understand; this tall, broad-shouldered old man with the slight stoop who stood holding the odd-looking black valise while great tears rained down his rugged, honest face. But those who may have scoffed at Captain Blake's silent farewell to his ship had not felt the lift and fall of a gallant craft beneath their feet for a quarter of a century, had not listened to the groan and cry of her timbers as she labored mightily through wild, North Shore tempests when the merciless Superior was at its worst. They had not known what it was to have been the heart, the soul and the will of the most noted storm-fighter on the inland seas.

Captain Blake had been taken unawares by that farewell blast. It had been merely a matter of termination for him to walk away from his ship for the last time with a show of his usual poise the while he kept duties and routine uppermost in his thoughts. It was a different thing to be brought suddenly face to face with the future—the years of idleness ahead—and to contemplate the wrenching from his hands forever of this great noble plaything of oak and steel. For him there could not be another ship. He had grown too old in the service on this one. From the wheelhouse the drone of no alien propeller would sound as the one-time music to him. Another's engines would but remind him of the purposeful throb of the Annie B.'s in those grand old days when they raced out into the teeth of howling twisters off Thunder Cape to succor ships in distress, her back decks awash and her great fighting bow flung high in brazen challenge to the mountainous rollers of the

wrathful Superior. Man, man, how that ship could fight!

They had literally sold the tug from under his feet. Though himself a modest stockholder in the North Star Towing & Wrecking Company, Captain Blake had raised no word of protest when the directors had unanimously agreed on the Annie B.'s sale. War-time needs called her to take the place of failing shipping on the Atlantic coast. In his simple, clean manner of reasoning the Captain had accepted the situation as one inevitable and without resentment to human ruthlessness abroad and money greed at home.

Captain Blake swung on his heel and walked rapidly away. In those few moments had been born a distinct conviction that a part of him—a sort of intangible element of his being—was left behind on the ship. There was something of a mournful satisfaction in this persuasion he was not entirely a deserter; that though in the flesh he never more would guide her through calm or storm, something of his personality would cling about the Annie B. to her last cruise.

The crew of the Annie B. secured ready jobs to work their way back to the Upper Lakes, but the Captain went North by rail. With the departure of his tug he felt like one whose days of usefulness had ceased. His former poise and resolute air were gone; he no longer had aggressive excuse for existence, for encumbering the world. Already the old challenging spirit that had been wont to look the world in the face with an easy jest for the day's possibilities was dying within him. He found it difficult to smother irritation at the curious stare of strangers. The air of this fed-up, smug-looking, land-travelling public was so different from the free, man-to-man atmosphere of his former associations. Yet this was the new world to which he must try to adapt himself. It would be hard, hard going for a time, and he was mightily relieved when the long journey by rail was ended.

At home at least there would be no curious stares, no prying curiosity even with regard to the black valise which he brought with him. Captain Blake lived with a married sister whose house was on a terraced hill. He had a bright front room that overlooked the harbors and the lake beyond. From there he could watch on a clear day the activities of the little marine world below—the world from which he was now a detached part—and note the lazy-looking grain-carriers standing out to sea with their long black plumes and the little dock tugs and supply boats speeding in and out with all the exaggerated fuss and concern of their kind.

Captain John Blake spent as little time as possible mooning over the past and the fields of endeavor from which he was now an exile. He would not let the world see if he could help it that lonesomeness was eating the heart out of him. He busied himself with a war garden and otherwise sought to keep his mind engaged. But his friends noted that he was failing rapidly. He was getting up in years and the past years of toil and exposure when he had never spared himself began to take their inevitable toll. His one-time clear eye grew dim, his step less brisk and steady. His customary jest was not so ready and his visits to old haunts along the waterfront grew less.

Thus summer wore on. Came a day when the evening papers were not left in their usual place for him. His sister first tactfully broke the news to him. The Annie B., so a brief despatch in the