

## A CHRISTMAS STORY OF OLD ST. JOHN'S.

By H. F. SHORTIS.

CHRISTMAS again! Another year has almost rolled away, and 1921, with its record of good and evil deeds done, prepares to recede and give place to the untold year of 1922. Old Father Time will score another notch in the cycle of the ages, reverse his glass, and announce the advent of the New Year. Christmas! Christmas! What magic is in the word, recalling dead friends, perhaps lost opportunities, and regrets that we did not follow more closely the strict line of duty in the years that are gone. Forms long laid away walk again by our side, or join with us in the sports and pastimes of the long ago. Christmas is the season of love and joy in every clime in Christendom, but in no country in the world was it enjoyed as much as in Newfoundland fifty years ago. This was more especially the case in the outposts, where mirth sat enthroned amongst the simple rustic revellers from Christmas Eve until Twelfth Day. The religious aspect of the festival remains unchanged, but a tinsel civilization has driven many of the old games out of the lives of the people. Mrs. Grundy has, within recent years, invaded even the remotest hamlets of Newfoundland, and an unreal and decorous regard for the village proprieties prevents the present generation from indulging in the simple pastimes of their fathers.

Where is the person who has had the pleasure of joining in the old-time Christmas games, who does not recall them to memory with a pang of regret? Who is there who does not conjure up visions of the days when he went "summing" in Newfoundland, accompanied by a crowd of grotesquely-attired male and female friends, with the popular fiddle bringing up the rear, and announcing the approach of the "jannies" with some gay and inspiring air; and the dance in every house in the place, from the floors of which the sand had long ago been swept, in anticipation of the arrival of the mimmers: Alas! many laughing voices that broke the stillness of the frosty air during the gay rambles through the town or settlement on the starlit Christmas nights long ago, are hushed forever. Some are mutely pleading from the wooden crosses in the quiet churchyard for the prayers of the passers-by, while others have found nameless graves beneath the blue waves of the stormy Atlantic. But, at Christmas, these forms come trooping up to memory, and stand by our side as we keep our vigil to await the ringing of the bells that announce the hour of the birth of the Child-God.

The cheery, red-faced planter, who dispensed his hospitality with as much lordly magnificence as a feudal baron, has long ago been gathered to his fa-

ther, his place being poorly supplied by his son de siècle grandson, who, though better educated than his ancestors, is not half as happy or content. The Christmas season is peculiarly susceptible to retrospection, and no matter how completely our environment may have changed, each recurring return of the festival brings us back to the pleasures in which we joined at Christmas are the stern realities of life darkened the rose-tinted dreams of early youth.

## AN EVENT ALMOST FORGOTTEN.

One of the greatest annual events in the city of St. John's in the fifties of the past century was the Great Haul of Wood for the Roman Catholic Cathedral and the Presentation Convent. Of course the most energetic and conspicuous persons amongst the great assemblage were our Vikings—the skippers of our famous Sealing Fleet. They were foremost in every good cause, and were noted for their unostentatious charity and benevolence. Their hospitality was unbounded, and their solicitude for the well-being of their less fortunate neighbors was another of their noble and unselfish characteristics. Their cheerful fire-place and well-spread table always had a chair or more for the wanderer who might drop in, and rarely these chairs were unoccupied. Such were the class of men we had in St. John's in those days, of which Capt. Din Mealey was a typical specimen. About January (according to the condition of the streets and sufficient snow down) all the great sealing masters, planters and public generally, of all classes and creeds, assembled in their respective localities; those of the Cross Roads led by Capt. Din Mealey and Capt. Pat Ryan—at Brennan's Corner, nearly opposite Job's Bridge, was another assemblage under Thos. Brennan, (father of Mrs. Thos. Fitzgibbon), skippers Wm. Coady and Thomas Duff; and another at the foot of Queen's Street, Rogerson's Corner, now Connors' well-known Drug Store; and another at Cochrane Street under the immediate command of the Pilot; and still another at the Queen's Bakery, near Fort William, composed of the Maggotty Cove men—now known as Hoylstown. Those who could afford to do so, such as the merchants and independent citizens, would purchase loads of wood from the farmers—some five, others two, etc., according to their means. The order was that nothing but large spruce would be accepted. By far the great majority of the citizens and those of the suburbs would get their dogs and sleds, three or four men to each team, and proceed to Deer's Marsh, Topsail Big Pond, Rocky Pond, Neil's Pond; and the East Enders to Twenty Mile Pond, each carrying having their favorite place to cut the spruce of a specified size. When they returned to town with the wood each stick of which was about 16 feet in length, it was cut in two parts 8 feet long, so that it would fit on the dray. On arrival at the Cross Roads, River Head, Skipper Din Mealey's gang would unload. When they had sufficient wood out to fill the great drays they started loading up. This dray was made of eight-inch square timber, with three runners bolted together with cross-bars, sufficient to stand the great weight of from 1800 to 2000 sticks.

STYLE IN CONSTRUCTION. There were great long sticks used for "horns," three on each side, to keep the wood in position. Every four or five feet, according as the load was piled up on the dray, was spanned from one horn to the other on each side with chains, topsail sheets and tacks, borrowed from the merchants and sealing masters to prevent the wood from spreading from the tremendous strain owing to the heavy load. The load would be about 25 feet high, gradually tapering as it went up, so as to prevent it from "tipping." Capt. Din Mealey's big load at the Cross Roads was built wharf-fashion that is—the lower tier was placed fore-and-aft, the next placed cross-ways and continued so until all was finished. It was built different from the other loads, which were built fore-and-aft up to the top. Mealey's method prevented his load from being too high. When all the loads in the different parts of the town (as specified above) were built up and well secured, the hauling hawseers, which were procured from the merchants and sealing masters, were placed in position for the grand "tow." There were two six-inch ice-lines, which were used for moving the sealing vessels at the fishery, fastened to each load, sufficient to bear the tremendous pulling of two thousand men, and there were three guys of strong rope, with twenty-five men on each side, who were picked men, and knew what to do to prevent the loads from toppling over. The great loads were decorated with numerous flags of the different merchants, such as Baine Johnston & Co., P. Rogerson & Sons, P. & L. Teasler, J. & W. Stewart, Bowring Brothers, McBride & Kerr, W. H. Thomas & Co., Lawrence O'Brien, Brooking, Barnes & Co., Kavanagh, Quick, in fact, the flag of every merchant in the city. The late Hon. J. J. Rogerson, father of the genial W. P. Rogerson of the Lighthouse Department, took the deepest interest in the load of wood built up at the foot of Queen's Street (Rogerson's Corner) and left an open order with his employ-

ees to give all the lines, ropes, chains, etc., that were required to any responsible person connected with the great haul of wood.

## FULL SPEED AHEAD.

When all was ready the order was thundered forth to "man the ropes" and headed by Bennett's famous Band and other Bands of Music, which discoursed good lively old-time airs, supplemented by the old chanty songs of "Haul on the Bowline," "Good-bye, fare ye well," "Shenandoah," "I love you Daughter," "Young Girls, where are ye bound to" and many other favorites of those days, and then off she goes. What a pleasure it would be to-day to hear those old "chanties" sung, as only the Newfoundland sailors and sealers knew how to sing them! All started in their turn, the great crowd pulling the East End Load (Pilots) to the Cathedral ground, and coming back to give a helping hand to the next in turn. It took two days to complete the "great haul"—Skipper Din Mealey's big load being left for the next day. On one particular occasion Skipper Din Mealey's big load went through the Brewery Bridge while being hauled down, and they had to unload it to get it clear, and build it up again. The bridge was broken by the great weight, and the fore-part was brought up against the bank. Fortunately no person was injured except James Fardy, and his injury was only somewhat slight. The decorations were really artistic and beautiful, consisting of the "burgess" with the different vessel's names on them, young white coats, models of all kinds of ships (particularly the sealing fleet) pictures, etc. There was a large steering-stick built into the load, with some seven or eight men, specially selected, on hand for guiding the huge mass of wood along the line of road. The guy-men and steering-men held the whole responsibility when once the loads were started—the leading man, such as Capt. Din Mealey, Capt. Thomas Duff and several other ship masters, issuing their orders, couched in nautical phraseology, as was their custom, even in common conversation. It was always their favorite mode of expressing themselves, and they neither knew nor cared for any other. When all had arrived at the Cathedral ground every crew would unload their own dray and stow the wood away, after which they would look after the hawseers, chains, ropes, etc., and see that they were returned to the right owners. When all was finished they retired to the different hotels, or the hospitable residences of the famous sealing masters, where they discussed the events of the day—more particularly as to who had the largest load, and I can assure you there were some tough arguments entered into before a decision was arrived at. But it was, in the end, unanimously agreed upon that Skipper Din Mealey carried off the honors of the day.

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## CHRISTMAS TIME.



Again the Christmas season brings gladness to the land, and he is fit for reason whose soul does not expand; who does not feel like rising to altitudes surprising and loudly advertising his joy, to beat the band.

Old Santa Claus is freighted the present on his sleigh, and little kids are waiting the dawn of Christmas day; and though my years are eighty, and I have burdens weighty, I'd think myself cheap-skatey if I could not be gay. At Christmas time we hunger for chances to be kind, and all the world is younger, and grouches fall behind; and every normal chappie would make some fellow happy, and Christmas is a snap he is mighty glad to find. My years are nearly ninety, and I have many ills, but while I drink my pine tea, and take my beeswax pills, I hear the Christmas singing; my crutches from me flinging, I rise and go a-swinging to coast down icy hills. This is the merry season when lights are all aglow, and Christmas gifts, the trees on, make such a gaudy show; and in the frosty weather the whole bunch gets together, and then, with lungs of leather, sing carols in the snow. And now we're all forgiving the grudges of the past, and we are glad we're living amity at last; and if there is a fellow whose Christmas doesn't mellow, his heart is surely yellow, and he should stand aghast!



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