LOW TIDE IN SHEMOGUE

GRACE TOMKINSON

EVERYONE has some excuse for pride in his birthplace, if it is only for growing the biggest pumpkin. Nothing ever happened to put mine on the map, except for the one memorable time when the *Montreal Star* gave it an unexpected burst of publicity with illustrations.

We had tried to persuade ourselves that we were important by digging up, with fierce devotion, something that was the biggest or best. We had our oysters, but Buctouche was a serious rival there. Near as we were to the famous battleground of the Chignecto Isthmus, our part of the coast had just missed being fought over. Our only link with the past was the Old Shipyard, where my great-grandfather had laid the foundation for a pioneer industry. Unfortunately he had done just that. After building one vessel in his dooryard and hauling it down to the water on runners when the snow came, he had, with no consideration for his descendants, let the industry expire.

We cherished dreams of some miracle which would yet make our village what he had foreseen it would be. He must have foreseen something, for he had moved in and absorbed such a stretch of the wilderness from the French settlers that he was eventually surrounded by the farms of eleven of his twelve children. We used to speculate, my second cousins and I, on what it would be that would send the world beating a path to our doors. We had been inoculated with such reverence for the great-grandfather legend that we knew something had to happen to justify his choice. We fondly pictured ourselves being lifted on a flood-tide of prosperity as a result of a belated awakening of the higher powers to our possibilities. In the meantime the place went on preparing to dry up and blow away.

When we did find ourselves in the spotlight, we were not sure how to take it. We never learned how it happened. Perhaps some commercial traveller, selling goods to our two general stores, had landed among us on the first of December when the smelt-fishing season opened. I wonder now why he considered our business worth going after. Theoretically we had a railway. It was surveyed regularly before every Election. The stakes were always there to show where the road-bed was to be. But once the Government was safely in power it was forgotten. And a drive of nine miles behind a horse in December could be an Arctic exploit.

The visitor may have felt that he owed himself some compensation, so he had written us up to amuse the city people. It was a jolt to find ourselves in a class with the Katzenjammer kids. But no one actually believes he is comic or picturesque. We had not even thought of ourselves as back-country. We, on the salt water, felt privileged to pity the poor wretches cooped up inland.

The staff artist's pictures saved us face. His fishermen capering about in ridiculous *toques*, with sashes tied about their floppy tunics, might be Quebec *habitants*. They were certainly not our Acadian French, who wore plain, gray homespun, tailored by their *femmes* to fit closely, wasting no cloth. It just went to prove how benighted the people we called "Upper Canadians" must be.

No one had ever paid much attention to the issuing of the smelting licenses, except the men concerned. Now, like many ordinary events in those days of innocence, it takes on the quality of an idyll. A few of our fishermen were English, but most of them were our French neighbors living in sea-bleached boxes of houses strung around the shore of Little Cape. They depended on fish for their living; herring in the spring, lobsters in summer, smelts in winter and oysters when they needed extra cash. That left comfortable interludes when they could tinker with their boats and traps, plant their little crops of staples like potatoes and buckwheat, and fertilize their strips of stony land with herring and lobster bodies. The perfume wafted on the spring breezes along that shore is not compounded of violets and apple-blossoms.

It took less to satisfy them than the English. They could relish salt fish and potatoes three times a day, and be thankful that the *patates* had not been frost-bitten or given out entirely. If they could have dark bread made from their own wheat, ground by local mills into a coarse flour, and molasses to spread on it, what more did they need? It was poverty, but of a hardy pioneer type, without the squalor which is often a part of meagre living.

They were self-sufficient like pioneers. Their women made almost everything they wanted, including dyes, candles and soap. They carded and spun yarn from wool stripped off their shivering sheep, and wove it into blankets and cloth to cover the whole family. They knitted it into socks, mittens and long underwear. They grew flax and wove it into a coarse linen which wore forever. When their clothing was beyond

patching, they dyed it and hooked it into mat-bottoms made from burlap bags. They covered the floors of their best rooms, if they had any, but the kitchens where they lived were bare and sand-scrubbed to a creamy whiteness.

The English had big white houses with picket-fences, orchards, and lilacs by their front doors. The French had nothing to guard with picket-fences. It was a feather in one's cap on that bleak point to own even a spruce tree. They banked their houses with seaweed in November to keep out the frost. The winter was so long that they might not get around to taking it away before it was needed again. But it was not a colorless existence. Instead of flowerbeds they had the rich, salty smell of the flats, the sun on a gull's wing and the blinking of Sea Cow Head Light, at night, across the Strait.

It seemed to us, as youngsters, that there was always hilarity in the little houses. When our parents visited each other, it was an occasion. They sat up stiffly, sipping dandelion or rhubarb wine and making talk. If they had pianos, they had excuses for not playing them. The French gathered every evening in each other's kitchens. They had mouth-organs, Jew's harps and fiddles sawing out lively tunes like *The Irish Washerwoman*. Someone would be quite ready, without wine, to contribute a step-dance or a song. All were starved for music. They belonged by race and temperament to a place where warmth and gaiety were abundant. Yet they had been planted, by some blunder of their forebears, in this bleak Northland where they could enjoy only the little they provided for themselves.

The first of December was one of their gay days. Long before it came, they were putting their heads together, secretly plotting. The ice was open to all, but some fishing-places were luckier than others. That was due to the peculiar habits of our Shemogue River. It was an unimportant waterway two miles long. Its meandering channel, which each fisherman knew like his own dooryard, held some five feet of water at low tide. Over this the smelt-nets were let down through holes cut in the ice. The favored spots were deeper places in the river-bed, where the smelts were left stranded by the tide.

The only way one might claim a location was by driving a stake in the ice marked with his license number. He had no means of knowing that until it was issued, so he had to contrive a plan for getting it there ahead of his rivals. That was where the fun came in.

There was usually snow on the big day that opened the season. The space between the stores at "the Corner" was hard-packed with moccasined feet. Horses (inclined to be sway-backed and bony) stood hitched to the fences, before bob-sleds, ancient pungs and brightly painted sleighs. The ones from Little Cape would be in working-harness, often held together with bits of rope. The sun caught their gleaming brass rivets and the upstanding brass tips on their hames. They were covered with blankets or ragged patchwork quilts, but they had frosted ears and forelocks, and sweat turned to rime on their coats. There was sure to have been some hard driving that morning. No one wanted to miss any of the show. There was often a lonely ox among them. Not everyone could afford to keep a horse, or even a yoke of oxen. Each animal had his small haystack on the snow before him on which he patiently lunched.

Weather-tanned Frenchmen stood in the snow, swinging their arms, stamping their feet and exuberantly gesturing. They were well-padded figures with trousers tucked into layers of socks, mufflers wound about their necks and caps down to their eyes. An occasional English farmer strode among them prosperously in a long coat of racoon or wombat, or a fur-lined one, which was considerably more elegant.

This was a day when French and English mixed sociably, chaffing each other and bragging a little. Relations between the two races were invariably friendly, but with that undercurrent of distrust bred of any two peoples living together.

The French had never caught up with the present. They cherished folkways and songs of mediaeval France long forgotten by France herself. They thought in mediaeval patterns. They remembered how their forefathers had been driven from their homes by the English, without realizing that it had happened a century and a half before. They retold pitiful tales of how they had buried their copper kettles in their gardens and taken to to the woods, as if it had been their own grandparents who had watched the soldiers driving off their cattle and burning their homes.

It was not an active grievance, but a smouldering resentment, convenient to dig up if things went wrong. Their real and understandable grudge was against contemporary English arrogance, and what they took for affluence. We had all the privileges. When we wanted to assert our rights, we sat down and wrote a blistering letter to our county member, threatening

to vote him out at the next Election unless he made a law. The French had no rights. Their vote was worth nothing more than a dollar bill or a swig of whiskey on Election Day. The fact that one of their downtrodden compatriots was, at the time, Canada's popular Premier, did bolster their morale. But Sir Wilfred Laurier, up there in Ottawa, was of about as much practical use to them as the Pope.

The English had no thought of the French as a conquered people. We blamed their circumstances on their illiteracy, their utter lack of that admirable virtue we called "push", and their blind obedience to the leaders of their Church. The chief barrier between us was not racial but religious.

The Expulsion of the Acadians was an ancient legend which had happened to take hold of a poet's fancy and become very useful in attracting tourists. Otherwise it was well forgotten. Marking historic sites was a profitable business, but one could not live in yesterdays. So our past, which kept impinging so insistently on our present, was more remote than the Peloponnesian War. We could at least read about that. The French had their memories. We had a brief note in our schoolbooks, which left us suspended between compassion for the peaceful Acadians, hatred of the Abbé Le Loutre and some shame for our own indirect share in the affair. War was a phenomenon that, from any point of view, was quite incomprehensible.

None of us, French or English, living on the spot, knew much more about the tragedy, which became one of the familiar chapters in North American history, than any school child, nurtured on Evangeline pap, in Spokane or San Antonio. Le Loutre, for instance, had come down to the French as the devoted patriot and man of God. He was to us the arch fifth-columnist (though the word would have astonished us) who, by continually inciting the French and Indians to sabotage and worse, had been the cause of the Expulsion. None of us had been told that it was he who actually began turning his people into refugees.

When what is now Nova Scotia came under British rule, he forced many of the French to abandon their homes and cross the Missiquash into what was still French territory. The prospect of being deprived of the sacraments of the Church was enough to terrify those simple peasants without his added threat of setting the Indians on them. The letter from his Bishop, rebuking him for this particular "meddling in temporal affairs", was dated two years before the Nova Scotia Govern-

ment felt compelled (wisely or not) to remove the potential saboteurs (who refused to take the oath of allegiance) from their midst.

This fact, along with others which would have helped us to understand our current problems and each other, had been lost as far as we were concerned. The French continued to remind each other of a day that would come when their wrongs would be avenged, when the last *anglais* would be driven from the country and the French would get back their own.

The English knew of their boast. They were also aware that the stork paid more attention to the little houses on the shore than to ours. As our population dwindled, our abandoned farms were passing quietly into French hands. It troubled my father's generation, who had their roots deep in this particular strip of land. But their children were already scattering.

The French minority had been granted special privileges of retaining its own language and religion when the Canadian Provinces united. Free speech went with it. But there was no hint of disloyalty to the Dominion or to the British flag. That emblem was less in evidence with them on national holidays than the tri-color of France. But that was not due to nostalgia for the seventeenth-century France their fathers had left, nor any leaning toward the contemporary one which would have seemed infinitely more foreign. It was thrift. A Union Jack cost money. Anyone could sew three strips of cotton together to make the other. As long as it was red, white and blue, what did it matter?

There was no personal malice on either side. The French had their differences, which they settled with lively blows and forgot. The English had feuds over line-fences and stray cattle, but not with fists or shot-guns. They barricaded themselves behind ramparts of silence and remained there. We said of them, not without respect: "They don't speak. Been that way twenty years."

The French and English were always hail-fellow-well-met, calling each other Jim and Alphée. They were mutually dependent. The English could never have done their farming without the men from Little Cape. They had worked beside each other all their lives, in the red ploughed fields in spring, through the heat of haying, on the dusty threshing-floor and cutting ice on the pond in winter. They enjoyed each other's company. The French were never dull, mixing a comical impudence with just enough deference to satisfy.

Now they were all united in the excitement of seeing the smelting season open. The French were making good use of their English, and the others were graciously airing fragments of what they mistook for French. Afterwards the French would bang their thighs and shout with laughter, mimicking the Englishmen's efforts.

"Coo six saw?" they would say, or "Vay cit!" and chortle loudly. They would rub their hands together in polite English fashion and greet each other unctuously, as storekeepers did: "Bow shore!" Comossy vaw?" and roar again.

The English, at the same time, would be amusing themselves more heavily, by taking off the French saying "toofs", "wifes" and "curly hairs". They would laugh at the way Sylvan Paul yelled: "Bodderation!" in a rage, under the impression that he was delivering himself of a powerful English oath.

The French women, who had come along, got out stiffly from under lap-robes and hurried into the warm stores, dragging children bundled into such lumpy shapes that they could barely stagger. They paused to study the cluttered, fly-specked windows, lifting their shoulders and wrinkling their dark faces expressively under their knitted hoods.

The windows were a mild sample of the interiors, crammed to the ceiling with a fascinating hodge-podge, ranging from dried apples and stuff-goods to Burdock Blood Bitters. The conglomeration of aromas was even more extraordinary. Beside the regular blending of onions, smoked fish, kerosene, shoe-leather and spices, there were now all the cumulative odors of a French house, hermetically sealed against the winter. The fumes of steaming wool, not long off some sheep's back, moccasins drying, mittens scorching, were superimposed on rank cabbage, tobacco, perspiration and baby smells, drawn out by the red-hot stove.

Everyone was in high spirits over getting out together. They stood thawing themselves out while the storekeeper weighed tea and prunes and tumbled bolts of flannelette on the counter. They kept up a clatter of talk. The long winter was about to close in on them, and some of them would not see each other until the roads dried up the next spring. While they traded out their eggs and community gossip, they kept one eye on the main act outside.

That would be working up to a climax. The fishermen were herded into a small room where the Fishing Officer was giving out licenses. When he had finished, the door was unlocked and the men turned loose. There was a mad stampede, a leaping into sleds and laying of whips on astonished horses, a squealing

If the English had had the handling of it, it would have been a less sparkling affair. The French had to turn it into a game.

It was a game of chance. Every man had a partner stationed on the spot where he hoped to fish, waiting to label it with his number. Each had his own private scheme for conveying it in the least possible time. Some hurried to a pre-arranged spot to shatter the air with gun-shots. If another near by had the same idea, it was bad luck for both. A man with a fast horse might race to a point where the channel ran to within a hundred yards of the land and wave flags. Or, if the partner had a spy-glass, he could read numbers at that distance, printed on the shore side of a building. Some took to the water where they knew that the channel, so early in the season, was still open, and rowed furiously. Altogether it must have been quite an experience for the gentleman from Montreal.

It was good-humored rivalry, but there were often hot words. The Fishing Officer expected to make at least one extra trip in from town to settle a dispute. His strongest weapon was the threat: "If you fight, the fish will never bite."

There were enough comical tales of the day to keep the French laughing all winter. One man worked out an ingenious device for signalling which could not be confused with any other. He was to raise a barrel by a pulley, to the top of a spar high enough to be seen from the ice. His number proved to be ninety-six. Instead of hoisting the barrel nine times and six, he lost his head and undertook to do it ninety-six times. Before he was half through, someone else had taken his choice place.

When these absorbing preliminaries were over, the men settled down to fish. The season lasted until February, though most of the smelts were caught by Christmas. It was not the kind of ice-fishing done in some places for sport. These men counted on the little they made to keep their families through the lean winter. They were prepared for hardship. The work had to be done when the tide was out, which often meant turning out of bed in the middle of the night. Sometimes they put up shelters of old sailcloth or spruce trees, to keep off the wind, but it was still cold. The ice early in the season was thin, and safe to cross only at low tide when it rested on the flats. Someone who had been tempted to stay too long was always breaking through. It was not dangerously deep, but scrambling through, breaking ice, mud and water in December, with a handsled loaded with fish, was not agreeable.

The smelts were caught in bag-nets set in holes about thirty feet long (the width of the mouth of the net) and two

feet wide. They were anchored to the muddy bottom with poles and weights, while the ice supported the top. When the tide came in strongly, the tail of the net opened and it floated upstream as a large bag. After fifteen minutes or so it was hauled in and its contents dumped on the ice to freeze. Later the exquisite little silver fish were packed, glittering with frost, in neat rows and shipped to Boston or New York. The biggest hauls were made early in the season. The first might be a ton, the last not over fifty pounds. The price was about four cents a pound, but that was real money. Farm produce brought only credit.

My great-grandfather's dreams, for the patriarchal community he founded, have not come true, though the French prophecy has—in that locality. The place has cast off the name he bestowed on it, in honor of his home in England, and reverted to the ugly one given it by the original settlers, the Micmacs. His substantial, green-shuttered house and the homes of some of his children still stand. They are comfortably occupied by French-Canadians born in the cabins perched on the sandy shores of Little Cape.

The church he built, to perpetuate the doctrines of his friend John Wesley, has been replaced by a humbler chapel, in which the present population worships to a man. His descendants have carried the memory of lilacs and sweet-syringas to the ends of the earth, and left their desks in the old schoolhouse to black-eyed children, who drone out sing-song French as wearily as we did English.

No one now foresees a future for the place. It is content to be a backwater. Not even the summer people, who have spread themselves over that gentle coast, have found it yet. A railway no longer matters. People go to town in cars, dressed in store clothes. But many of them have not yet stepped out of their Never-never Land into to-day. Wrinkled *grandmères*, with their heads tied up in black *mouchoirs*, still remember the sorrows of their forefathers, though, in the light of some current fashions in dealing with the conquered, those days seem almost humane.

The smelt-fishing has changed. Box-nets are in vogue now, set all around the shore from Shediac to Baie Verte. The fish can be caught anywhere, so there is no rivalry for places and no excitement at all, when the licenses are sold. The fishermen make more money than their fathers, but they have less fun, which, to a Frenchman, is not unimportant.