

CARNIVAL OF YORE

CANBOULAY AND STICK FIGHTS WERE ONCE CARNIVAL JOYS

By Mask

CARNIVAL is the national holiday of Trinidad and Trinidadians. It is, as far as we are concerned, an institution; and one which cannot be separated from our lives. We Trinidadians would rather be extinct, than have our Carnival taken away from us.

Trinidad Carnival is different from Carnival celebrated in any other part of the world. It is something peculiar to Trinidad and its people; and only the people of this island know how to celebrate, and let themselves go thoroughly in it.

All sorrows, pain, and other undesirable things are forgotten on the two days of Carnival; and Trinidad gives itself entirely to unrestricted pleasure.

There are first of all, the recognized bands, or "Social Unions" as they are called. Each of these bands have a king and queen, and a chantrelle or songster. In the good old days of which I am now writing, there were many of these "Social Unions" in Port-of-Spain.

There were the "White Rose" whose colours were Sea Green and White; "Brigade" sky blue and white; "Artillery," pink and white; "Sweet Morning Belle," old gold and white, and many others. The rivalry between these was very keen, and the money spent by them on their various costumes, in their attempt to outdo each other, was considerable.

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The principal merchants of those days supported the Carnival. They offered valuable prizes for the best dressed bands, and the best local ballads [sic]; and they personally attended on practice nights at the various tents.

Each band had its own tent, which was generally erected two or three weeks before the Carnival. There they assembled to practice the songs, which were composed for them by their respective songsters, and which had to be sung on the days of Carnival.

The songsters of the various bands would exchange visits. One night all of them would be assembled at one tent; a second night at another tent and so on.

On these occasions, there would be competition between the songsters.

It is certainly wonderful to hear these young men, singing impromptu verses, composed by them on the spur of the moment.

I have often thought, as I listened to them, that Trinidadians must be born poets, and that if instead of looking down on these boys for singing calypsos, as the local ballads are called some sort of dignity were attached to those with ability to compose verses some of them might some day develop into poets of distinction.

There used to be the stick fighting bands, or "Negre Jardin." These were men versed in the art of crossing sticks.

It is a manly art, and required more than average courage and skill.

To be able to indulge in the arts of offence and defence with a stick, one must be athletic, quicksighted and limbed and have a rapid brain, as the slightest opening given your opponent is sure to send you either to the surgery or the grave.

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Those men practised in certain yards, where ample space could be had. A large ring was enclosed by a bamboo fence.

Within this the stick fighters fought their tournaments to the accompaniment of bamboo orchestras.

A bamboo orchestra is a marvel. There is science and technique in it. Bamboos are cut of various lengths and diameters, each producing a different note.

There is first of all the bass; which is the largest, and is generally long enough for the operator to stand while beating it on the ground.

There are the "fullers," and then the small treble bamboos. The whole orchestra, when beaten by experts, gives an harmonious effect; and is the natural accompaniment for the "Kallendar" or war song, to which the stick fighters dance and play.

Holes about 9 inches in diameter were dug all around the fighting arena; and liberal supplies of ordinary table salt placed around each. These were the blood holes. As soon as a combatant received a cut on the head or face, he went to one of these holes, and let the blood flow into it. He would then apply a handful of the salt to the wound, tie it up, and return to the ring for revenge.

There was a most dangerous game played by these men, in which only experts could participate.

A coin would be placed on the ground, and about 6 or 8 of the most expert stickmen in the island, would surround it with their sticks in position.

The object was to pick the coin up.

I have stood for fully half a day, watching these men cutting at each other; and parrying blows, without any of them being able to pick the coin up.

It is a magnificent sight to watch them crossing sticks; and—dangerous as stick-playing may be—it would be a pity if the art were allowed to die out.

There used also to be bands upon bands of clowns, devils, bats, etc., besides thousands of individual masqueraders, in original costumes; representing everything, from the Pharoahs of Egypt, to the Flapper of the day.

Traffic had to be held up on these two days, and the town handed over to the revellers.

Everyone in the Colony; from the highest to the lowest took part in the celebrations. Hundreds of vehicles, beautifully decorated in various designs, carrying the most happy people in the world formed an endless [procession] through the city.

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Trinidad Carnival is a wonderful sight, and one that is never forgotten by those who have had the privilege of seeing it once.

I know from experience that Trinidadians abroad, so long as they can afford it, always make every effort to return to "La Belle Trinidad" in time for the Carnival.

The whole Colony is "en fete" on these two days. Every dancing hall and hotel is packed beyond the limit; and it is difficult to get served at the public saloons.

The richest, the poorest, the sick, the well; all make merry, and forget their

miseries, trials, and differences on these two days.

I remember a friend of mine, who had been suffering from severe rheumatism for about six months before Carnival. He was really ill, and could not even bring his hand up to his mouth.

Carnival Monday duly came around, with the bands of morning masqueraders dressed up in all sorts of funny old rags, and up to all sorts of amusing antics.

As the day wore on, one by one bands of music started to invade the streets.

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At about 11 a.m. when music and singing were the only things to be heard from one end of the town to the other my friend could bear it no longer.

He crawled out of bed, and peeped out by the gate. Two other friends, filled with the spirit of carnival, passed by.

Seeing him peeping out by the gate, these two took him, one by each arm, dragging him along as they danced down the street.

The poor fellow screamed and howled with pain, until a band, with full orchestra, and a large following of women, with the sweet voices of the Trinidad woman, passed by, singing a refrain in the melodious "mi minor."

There is something in the tune of the calypso, and "Kallendar" which the average creole cannot resist.

Well, would you believe it, intoxicated by the strains of his native music, my rheumatic friend, pulled himself free of his two pals.

He jumped behind the band, as though nothing was wrong with him; and from that day on, he recovered from the pains, from which all the medicines in the world could give him no relief.

Trinidad, the land of plenty, and of joy and happiness, what does your annual Carnival teach?

All social differences are cast aside for two days. One spirit only prevails, the spirit of merriment and goodwill. Is there nothing to be learnt from this?

On Ash Wednesday, the fun is over. Lent commences, and with it, mankind automatically falls back into its thousand and one social, religious, and other divisions.

Then all of us again take on our bagful of worries and miseries.