

## VI

### TRAGEDY AND DEATH OF DE LA SALLE

**O**N April 14, 1684, the King signed the letters patent appointing de la Salle governor of all the territory of northern America conquered or to be conquered, beginning with and including Fort St. Louis of the Illinois (of which Tonty was in command) down to New Biscay, with power of commanding the French natives, and of appointing governors and commanders under him. De la Salle is the Viceroy of half of the French Empire in America.

He left La Rochelle on July 24, 1684, but not until February, 1685, did he reach the channel of a lake which is identified today as being to the west of Matagorda Bay on the Texas coast.

In any case, this bay was very far from the mouth of the Mississippi, which Beaujeu sought in vain, or at least pretended to seek. As everything seems to conspire against success, we may easily believe that Beaujeu, Aigron, and Minet are the instigators of this plot. Aigron, captain of the "Aimable," which carried munitions and supplies, either permits his ship to run aground on a sand bar, or deliberately scuttles it. The cargo is almost entirely lost. Minet, the only civil engineer of the expedition, refuses to go ashore, and Beaujeu will not compel him to do so. De la Salle asks for cannon and cannon balls which are aboard the "Joly." Beaujeu refuses and sets sail for France, March 12, 1685.

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Therefore de la Salle is left with his companions, many of whom are to die in a few weeks. He has no cannon balls, no iron for building. He is on a fever-ridden coast, with no drinking water save that of the swamps and with just enough food to last one month instead of ten. He is in an unknown country, knowing not which way to turn. Leaving Joutel in an improvised camp, he reconnoitres the surrounding country and discovers a bluff which he considers a favorable site for the establishment of a fort, which will be known as "Fort St. Louis."

He builds the fort in June, 1685. It is situated about twenty leagues from the landing-place, on a river which flows to the southwest of a bay called St. Louis Bay, and which he calls, because of the great number of bison which come there to drink, "Rivière aux boeufs" (probably the Garcitas). From the fort extended a panorama, including the expanse of St. Louis Bay, two leagues to the east. This was the "Great Camp." Two houses, one of four rooms, the other of two, were constructed. This temporary fort was placed under the orders of Joutel, and in October, 1685, de la Salle set out with half of his men to attempt to reach the Mississippi by land. It seems that at that time there remained less than a hundred of those who had landed. About the middle of February, 1686, according to his brother, Jean Cavalier, it appears that he reached the great river and met there two Indians from the friendly tribe who had accompanied him in 1682 on his descent of the Mississippi and who received him with great demonstrations of joy. At any rate, he returned to his main camp, Fort St. Louis, in March, 1686, and left again almost immediately to look for his ship, "La Belle," which he had left in a cove and with which he intended to go back to the Mississippi. During his absence, his only ship had been wrecked by a blunder

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of the crew. It was a total loss, as well as its cargo, and fifteen men of the twenty had disappeared. From that time the expedition was without communication with the outside world and it was impossible to go back to the Mississippi.

The situation appears hopeless; but it would be utter ignorance of the heroic character and indomitable energy of de la Salle to believe for one minute that he was going to give up. For a whole year, from April, 1686, to March, 1687, he will strive to find a way out, and to take back the survivors to Fort St. Louis of the Illinois where Tonty was in command. De la Salle knows the fidelity and the zeal of his lieutenant, but he is unaware of the efforts of the latter to find him, though he has an intuition of it and desires to go to meet him.

In April, 1686, de la Salle with twenty companions sets out again from his main camp in a new attempt to reach the Mississippi. He reaches the Cenis tribe,<sup>17</sup> where he is well received, but several of his men desert him and remain among the natives, others fall ill as he does himself, and he has to return to Fort St. Louis with eight men only. Tired, and exhausted, he falls ill again. As soon as he has recovered, he celebrates the Epiphany, and in January, 1687, with the courage which never failed him, he announces that he is going to seek help. On January 12 he starts. Out of the three hundred original members of the expedition, but forty remain. Twenty stay behind at the camp with Lieutenant Barbier and Father Zénobe; sixteen accompany de la Salle, among them, Joutel, Father Anastase Douay, and his brother, Jean Cavelier. In March they are again among the tribe of the Cenis, not far from the Red River.

On that spot was enacted the tragic drama of March 19, 1687. According to the account of Jean Cavelier, the faithful Nica, de la Salle's friend and companion, had killed two

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bison. A quarrel over the division of the meat breaks out between Moranger, nephew of Cavelier on one side, and on the other side, the surgeon Liotot and a certain Duhault. During the night, the surgeon takes an axe and kills de la Salle's nephew, Moranger, and his two servants, Nica and Saget. When they fail to return, de la Salle leaves Joutel with the men and equipment and sets out with Father Douay to look for them. The two murderers are lying in ambush in the high weeds. De la Salle receives a bullet in his head and falls dead. The two murderers strip the body and with insulting words throw it into a thicket and leave it to the mercy of wild beasts. The drama is over.<sup>18</sup>

The fate of the companions of de la Salle was no less tragic. Liotot and Duhault then undertook to take charge of the expedition. One of the men, Hiems, wishing to remain with the Indians, asked for his share of the booty which they had taken from de la Salle, but they refused. Another man sided against them and the two murderers were shot point blank. Most of the remaining men then decided to remain with the Indians. A small number, however, moved on, attempting to follow the wise plan of de la Salle. They were well received by the Akansas, Illinois, and Chaouanon tribes, out of respect for the great French chieftain, whom the Indians believed was still alive.

De la Salle's death was kept secret. As if still alive, he continued to afford protection to the five survivors. They even kept the news from Tonty at Fort St. Louis of the Illinois, and from the governor of Canada at Quebec. Jean Cavelier, one of the five, returned to France and revealed the tragic secret to Signelay, November 10, 1688.

Of all the members of the expedition, only these five men returned, Joutel, de la Salle's brother, Jean Cavelier, his nephew, Nicolas Cavelier, Father Anastase Douay, and a

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certain Teissier. Those who had been left on guard at the main camp near St. Louis Bay were surprised by the Indians in January, 1689, and all killed except a few children, who were, as it is reported, found and rescued later by the Spaniards, who also took with them some of the other French who had remained with the Indians. Thus ends the great epic of Robert Cavalier de la Salle. His heroic lieutenant, Henri de Tonty, says: "Such is the destiny of the greatest man of this century."

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Père Charlevoix, *Histoire et description de la Nouvelle France*, t.I, p. 456, and t.II, p. 25.

<sup>2</sup>John Finley, *The French in the Heart of America*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1918, p. 105.

<sup>3</sup>P. Chesnel, *Histoire de Cavalier de la Salle*, Paris, Maisonneuve, 1901, p. 58.

<sup>4</sup>Lavisse, *Histoire de France*, Paris, Hachette, t.VII, 1906, p. 252.

<sup>5</sup>"You will do this at your own expense," stated the letter patent of 1678, including the construction of the new outposts "in the western part of New France, within the next five years." De la Salle had asked the minister for no credit. He was supposed to recover his expenses with the returns from his concessions of the Illinois. As these existed only on paper, he had to borrow, and it was with funds lent by personal friends that he covered the expenses of his great discovery of 1682. He lost everything, and his friends were never repaid. The sums which he borrowed in France have been estimated by some at 200,000 francs.

<sup>6</sup>Chesnel, *loc.cit.*, p. 80.

<sup>7</sup>Father Charlevoix said that Cavalier had several conversations with the Marquis de Seignelay, to whom he gave Frontenac's letter to Colbert (Charlevoix, *loc.cit.*, t.I, p. 457). It is true that Seignelay had been Secretary of the Navy since 1676, and, as he was called "Colbert," like his father, Cavalier might have been mistaken as to his identity, even if he was received by Seignelay. The decision was Colbert's, who followed with keen interest these colonial questions. Moreover, one may wonder if the Court did not intend to belittle the importance of the rejection of Louis Joliet's proposals, by involving only the son of Colbert. That is the rumor that Father Charlevoix seems to have accepted.

<sup>8</sup>His part is brought out by Father Marion A. Habig, *Franciscan Studies: a critical biography of Father Zénobe Membré*, New York, 1934, p. 301.

<sup>9</sup>Father Zénobe left three principal documents: (i) A letter dated "from the Mississippi River, June 13, 1682," to the Father Superior of the Recollets of Quebec. The letter was entrusted to Tonty, who had it carried along with his own to Governor Frontenac. The original document seems to have been lost, but a copy is available at the Bibliothèque Nationale. Cf. Margry,

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*Découvertes et établissements français dans l'ouest et dans le sud de l'Amérique septentrionale* (1654-1754), Paris, 1876, t.II, pp. 206-212. (ii) A journal of the explorations carried on between 1678 and 1682, which was remitted, November, 1682, to the Father Superior of the Recollets at Quebec. The original document is lost. It was partly reproduced in 1691, in Father Maxime Leclerq's book, *Premier établissement de la Foy*, 1691, t. II. (iii) An official account presented to the Court, 1683, still extant. Margry does not reproduce it, but it can be found in Thomassy, *De la Salle et ses relations inédites de la découverte du Mississippi*, Paris, Douniol, 1850. Gravier reprinted it in *Découvertes et établissements de Cavalier de la Salle*, Rouen, 1870, p. 371.

<sup>10</sup>The first story of the great expedition was written on the way back in a letter of July 23, 1682, from Tonty to Governor Frontenac. This document, unpublished till 1934, is printed in full as an appendix to Father Habig's book, cited above in note 8. It is on this document that our account is based.

<sup>11</sup>The original of Abbot Jean Cavalier's diary is lost. Extracts were published in three collections of documents: Shea, *Discovery and Exploration of the Mississippi Valley*, New York, 1852; Parkman, *Pioneers of France in the New World*, Boston, 1856; Margry, *loc. cit.*, t.II, pp. 501-509. Father Habig, in his recent book, says that a complete copy of the original in the hand of the well known Baron de la Hontan, has recently been discovered in the Archivo General de las Indias of Seville. A photographic reproduction of it has been made by the Newberry Library of Chicago.

<sup>12</sup>The official deed of the taking of possession of the country of the Akansas was drawn up by the notary of Fort Frontenac, La Métairie, who accompanied de la Salle, and was published by Margry, *loc. cit.*, t.II, p. 184.

<sup>13</sup>Cf. map, p. 9 of "La prise de possession de la Louisiane," *Revue historique des Antilles*, octobre, 1928.

<sup>14</sup>The official deed drawn by the notary, Jacques de la Métairie, was published by Margry, *loc. cit.*, t. II, p. 186.

<sup>15</sup>A detailed account of all these errors has been given by Chesnel, *loc. cit.*, pp. 182-208. Aignon and Minet were, on their return to France, imprisoned in La Tour de la Rochelle. Beaujeu, more clever, succeeded in escaping punishment, although he was perhaps the most guilty of them all. One can read, however, the defense presented in favor of the latter by M. Marc de Villiers. *L'expédition de Cavalier de la Salle dans le golfe du Mexique (1684-1687)*, Paris, Maisonneuve, 1931.

<sup>16</sup>E. Lauvrière, *Les premières explorations en Louisiane*, Paris, 1926, pp. 345-350. M. Marc de Villiers places the blame on de la Salle, *loc. cit.*, note 15.

<sup>17</sup>We may wonder if it was not the Red River which de la Salle mistook for the Mississippi, acting on erroneous information given him by the Indians. This error would be amazing if the information that we have on these explorations was not based almost entirely on the accounts written by Jean Cavalier, which are sometimes rather inexact.

<sup>18</sup>The scene of the tragedy seems to be near the present town of Washington-on-the-Brazos, Texas, not far from the junction of the Trinity River, then called "Rivière des malheurs," with Kickapoo Creek (see Lauvrière, *loc. cit.*, note 16, and Marc de Villiers, *loc. cit.*, note 15).



