

II

THE LAST EXPEDITION AND THE DEATH OF CAVELIER DE LA SALLE

1684-1687¹

*"We were the dreamers, dreaming greatly, in the man-stifled town;
We yearned beyond the sky-line where the strange roads go down.
Came the Whisper, came the Vision, came the Power with the Need,
Till the Soul, that is not man's soul, was lent us to lead."*

NO words, I believe, could express better than these few lines from Kipling's *Song of the Dead*, the great and secret incentive which accounts for all the expeditions undertaken by Cavalier de La Salle on this continent, and notably the last and fateful venture which brought him to the shores of Texas where he found his death two hundred and fifty years ago, on the 19th of March 1687.

Many have been the explorers of this continent of America. Many were the motives by which they were actuated; some came urged on by a most worthy zeal dictated by profound religious convictions, others were allured by visions of untold wealth, others by a tamer but saner spirit of commercial enterprise. But of all the men who "cleared the path" or "blazed the trail" of this huge country, till it could be developed, de La Salle, "The Prince of Explorers," as some of his historians have called him, stands apart. He brings to a close, at the end of the 17th century, "the heroic period of

¹ A public lecture delivered in the Physics Amphitheatre of the Rice Institute, March 7, 1937, in commemoration of the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the death (March 19, 1687) of de La Salle, by Marcel Moraud, Agrégé de l'Université, Docteur ès Lettres, Professeur au Rice Institute.

Spanish and French exploration in North America," and yet he does not—in spirit at least—belong to the seventeenth century. To understand him we have to go back to the days of the Renaissance, days of physical and intellectual expansion, of untiring energy, and of bold enterprise, days of great expectations, boundless dreams, at a time when to dream was to act.

Having come to America in 1667 "with the purpose of making some discovery," by the ninth of April, 1682, when he was only thirty-eight, Cavalier de La Salle had completed the discovery of the huge and then mysterious river of the Mississippi. He had taken formal possession, in the name of the King of France, of the vast country, which he called Louisiana, with its "seas, harbors, ports, bays . . . and all its nations, peoples, provinces, cities, towns, villages and rivers . . . from the mouth of the great river Saint Louis, otherwise called Ohio, as also along the river Colbert or Mississippi and its affluents . . . as far as its mouth at the sea or Gulf of Mexico and also to the mouth of the river of the Palms." By so doing de La Salle had added to the crown of Louis XIV and to the already explored portions of this continent a tremendous domain, a huge empire comprising, in the words of de La Salle's great historian and admirer, Parkman, "the fertile plains of Texas, the vast basin of the Mississippi, from its frozen northern springs to the sultry borders of the Gulf, . . . a region of savanna and forests, sun cracked deserts and grassy prairies, watered by a thousand rivers, ranged by a thousand warlike tribes."

Had de La Salle never accomplished anything else, his name would nevertheless survive among those of the great explorers of this continent. But with tireless energy, spurred on by success and never daunted by reverse, de La Salle went back to Canada and then to France where we find him

laying before the Minister of the Navy, Seignelay, and then before the King himself, not so much the results of his recent discovery as plans for a new and bolder venture. Once more de La Salle had yielded not so much to the call of the unknown, for he knew the region to which he proposed returning, but to the call of adventure, or better still the call of great enterprise. He proposes going back to the mouth of the Mississippi, by way of the Gulf of Mexico, and founding there, sixty leagues above the mouth of the river, a permanent settlement which if necessary could serve as a base to conduct an expedition into Northern Mexico, should the war with Spain continue.

In the two Memorials which he presents to Seignelay, we see de La Salle growing more and more enthusiastic over the enterprise and setting forth all the good reasons why it should be promptly undertaken. Among the chief of these we find:

- 1) The service of God . . . the need of preaching the gospel to the numerous nations to be found in these parts.
- 2) The desirability of occupying a tremendous territory whose fertility and resources seemed boundless.
- 3) The necessity of forestalling the Spaniards in parts to which their attention had been called by de La Salle's recent discovery.
- 4) The possibility of seizing provinces of Northern Mexico rich in silver mines and "defended only by a few indolent and effeminate Spaniards." Equally appealing to the King of France was the cleverly exploited necessity of providing an outlet for the trade of Western New France, already hemmed in by the British and the Dutch establishments in the East.

To accomplish such vast ends de La Salle was asking merely for a vessel of thirty guns, some cannon for his forts,

the permission to raise two hundred men in France, fifty buccaneers at Santo Domingo—and he required no more than a maximum delay of three years, after which he would refund his Majesty all the expenses incurred and forfeit the possession of the ports he might have established.

To understand the boldness of this venture we must remember that Spain and France at the time were at war. Now, war in such distant parts as the West Indies or the Gulf of Mexico was conducted in the most merciless manner, ending generally in the complete destruction of one or the other of the adversaries. Moreover the territories in which de La Salle proposed to settle were claimed by the King of Spain.

Without going back to a royal decree of April 30th, 1492, by which Columbus had been appointed Admiral, Viceroy and Governor of the discovered and undiscovered lands and seas of the Indies, the Spaniards had what they considered better titles to all the territories bordering the Gulf of Mexico. A bull of Pope Alexander the sixth had conferred upon Ferdinand and Isabelle in 1494 “all the territories discovered and to be discovered in the West Indies, and forbidden all other Kings to occupy them under threat of excommunication.”

This grant, the validity and the sanctity of which were unquestionable in the eyes of the Spaniards, had been strengthened by a decree of Philip II enjoining the extermination of all foreigners who should dare to penetrate into the Gulf of Mexico. The Gulf of Mexico in reality was then a closed sea into which foreign ships ventured at their own risk, the risk of imminent capture or destruction.

These facts were well known in France and had called forth vigorous protests, particularly since 1672, from Louis XIV, who wanted no compromise and insisted that the principle of the freedom of the seas should be maintained.

Cavelier de La Salle, 1684-1687 147

In 1679, six years before de La Salle landed in Texas, a French frigate having been captured in the Gulf of Mexico, Louis XIV sent a small fleet under Admiral d'Estrées with orders to find out the whereabouts of Admiral Quintana (the Spanish admiral) and to sink his ships. Again in 1682 the French, ignoring Spanish orders, had entered the Gulf of Mexico with a fleet under the command of Gabaret in order to curb the activities of the Spanish, to investigate the situation in the Mexican ports and also to draw a map of the northern shore of the Gulf.

The situation in 1684 stood thus, the Spaniards considered the Gulf of Mexico a closed sea and all the territories extending from Florida to the northern part of Mexico as strictly Spanish possessions, from which they wanted to bar all foreign nations rigorously, although they neither occupied them nor thought of doing so, as long as they were left alone. The expedition of de Narvaez in Florida, in 1528, and the march of Cabeza de Vaca had aroused in Spain great expectations, but these had been shattered by the fateful expedition of de Soto, whose body lay in the Mississippi. The Spaniards had lost all interest in Texas and Louisiana which were considered as lands of misfortune. They had turned their efforts to the colonization of Florida but entirely neglected Texas and Louisiana. The few survivors of de Soto's expedition, Moscoso and his companions, escaped in hurriedly built boats, down what they called the Rio Grande (but which really was the Mississippi), without ever wanting to see it again and never pausing a moment to consider its value as a great waterway. "They had fled," in the words of Parkman, "from the Eldorado of their dreams," which had been "transformed to a wilderness of misery and death."

For over a hundred years the Spanish government had remained deaf to all suggestions of colonial expansion in the

Mississippi Valley. The Mississippi itself assumed no more importance on Spanish maps than other smaller rivers such as the Rio Escondido or the Rio del Oro. They had remained indifferent even to humbler projects of occupation of the Bay of Espiritu Santo, as had been recommended for instance by Father Benavides in 1630 and later by Echagaray.

De La Salle on the contrary instantly realized the possibilities offered by the huge stream. In this he merely followed the French tradition which one of the ablest historians of European explorations and settlements in America, Winsor, stresses in the following words: "Throughout their efforts in North America the French showed a capacity for understanding the large question of political geography, a genius for exploration, and a talent for making use of its results."

Here, it is not in the least a question of praising the men of one nationality at the expense of others.

The Spanish explorers, on this continent, have shown qualities of energy, courage and endurance which redeem whatever geographical mistakes they may have made. In fact all explorers in these days made mistakes in one way or another. The point which I want to bring out, as it will reappear later, is the real character and the novelty of de La Salle's enterprise. De Soto was unquestionably a great figure as an explorer. Upon landing near Tampa Bay, he began inquiries about "any country where gold and silver might be found in plenty," but he never intended settling down in the territories where, by an irony of fate, his body was to remain. De La Salle, on the contrary, having once discovered the mouth of the Mississippi decided of his own will to come back and to found an establishment which was to be the first step in the economic development of this portion of the United States.

Cavelier de La Salle, 1684-1687 149

De La Salle has been severely taken to task for undertaking with a few men an expedition in which de Soto with vaster numbers had failed.

It has been claimed that his enterprise was based on a "geographical blunder." Unquestionably he did not know, any more than his compatriots and most of the Spaniards of the time, the distance between the Mississippi River and the province of New Biscaye in Mexico. The best maps of the time are very misleading in that respect. But it would be a mistake to imagine that he would have been deterred by a few hundred miles more or less. He had come down all the way to the Gulf of Mexico from the Great Lakes, with eighteen men only, and he should not be too lightly criticized for attempting what other men did not dare to think of.

Louis XIV and his excellent Minister Seignelay, having been won over by the arguments of de La Salle, an expedition was fitted out in great secrecy. Not only did the King give de La Salle the patent or permission requested and the command of the expedition and establishment to be founded, he also provided four ships, which were more than what the explorer had asked for: a man-of-war, the "Joly," carrying 36 guns, a frigate, the "Belle," armed with six guns, his personal gift to de La Salle, a fly boat of 300 tons, the "Aimable," and a small transport ship or ketch, the "Saint François."

De La Salle arrived at La Rochelle, the great Atlantic port, by the end of May, 1684, to superintend the necessary preparations. Sergeants were sent out to gather recruits. Unfortunately, since France was at war, 32,000 men had been levied in the district shortly before. A hundred soldiers were finally enrolled. Mechanics, laborers, gentlemen who had volunteered to go, and a few families joined the expedition. Arrangements were made to carry one hundred and

eighty-nine passengers besides the one hundred and forty-one members of the crews—all told 340 people.

The arrangements made for the conduct of the expedition were the following: Captain Beaujeu of the "Joly" was in command of the small fleet, while at sea. He was to take de La Salle where the latter wished to go and to assist him in every way, upon reaching their goal. De La Salle was to have full control of the troops, the settlers and the whole expedition on land. This system of divided responsibility, although perfectly plausible, was the source of friction and conflicts.

Beaujeu had been in the service of the King for thirty years. As a man of the world and an experienced sailor he resented the position in which he was placed and above all, what he called "the reserve" and "the impenetrability" of the explorer. While admitting that de La Salle was "a learned man," "well read," and well informed on many subjects, Beaujeu, who to tell the truth talked and wrote too much, gave too free expression to his doubts about the success of the expedition. "I do not approve of his plans," he wrote once, and later at Santo Domingo, he explained that M. de La Salle "ought to have been satisfied with discovering his river without undertaking to conduct three vessels with troops two thousand leagues away, through so many different climates and across seas entirely unknown to him."

On the other hand, de La Salle, whose temperament was the opposite of Beaujeu's, had seen some of his letters. Besides, he suspected Madame Beaujeu of being entirely under the domination of the Jesuits and in order to be sure that she would not reveal his secret to them, up to the very moment of their departure he refused to let Beaujeu know the object of his expedition and even their destination. The Jesuits, as is well known, considered that the two domains

Cavelier de La Salle, 1684-1687 151

of exploration and of conversion belonged to them. De La Salle was a layman, who had left the fold of their powerful organization, and he never called on them. They had tried to forestall him in his discoveries, and rightly or wrongly he dreaded their machinations.

The expedition sailed none the less on July 24th, 1684, but owing to an accident, the "Joly" having broken her "bowsprit," the little fleet had to put back to port, and, after the necessary repairs, sailed again on August 1st. On August 16th they reached Madeira and after a very trying voyage made worse by severe storms, the "Joly" entered Petit Goave at Santo Domingo on September 27th. The "Belle" and the "Aimable" arrived five days later on October 2nd, but the ketch, the "Saint François," had been captured by Spanish buccaneers, a severe loss to the expedition as it carried a great deal of ammunition and stores.

After considerable delay, due to de La Salle's illness, the voyage was resumed on November 25th. On November 30th Cuba was sighted and on December 13th they entered the Gulf of Mexico but had to put to port again at Cape San Antonio, owing to severe storms. Their objective was what the Spaniards called the Bay of Espiritu Santo. In Santo Domingo, they had been told that a strong current in the Gulf of Mexico would drive them eastward. In consequence they bent their course more to the west, and thus missed the mouth of the Mississippi. Thinking that they had been carried to the east, they went on westward following the shore as closely as they could, taking soundings and looking for the famous bay of Espiritu Santo, till one day, noticing a great change in the latitude, they realized that they had gone too far south and west, and decided to retrace their steps. They had gone almost as far as Corpus Christi. On the way back, a group of 130 soldiers was landed on Feb-

ruary 4th, and followed the shore till they came to what they took to be a vast river, but which was no other than Matagorda Bay which the "Belle" and the "Aimable" reached on February 13th. On the 14th, the "Belle" entered the bay, and a first temporary camp was established at the extreme end of Cavallo pass, on the left side. On the 20th, Captain Aignon of the "Aimable" trying to bring his ship in, ran it aground, whether intentionally or not we do not know. The loss proved a very serious handicap, as the ship was laden with most of the food and other stores for the little colony.

On the 12th of March Captain Beaujeu with his ship, the "Joly," left for France taking to Seignelay a report in which de La Salle explained the difficulties encountered, described the situation of the colony, and announced that to keep out of reach of Spanish ships he was going to move up the river, and finally that he would go to Illinois to obtain the latest news from France before undertaking anything further. Beaujeu had intended looking for the Bay of Espiritu del Santo, on his way back, but owing to contrary winds he had to change his course and make for Cape San Antony at the western end of the island of Cuba. He was delayed there a few days because of the capture of his launch by Spanish buccaneers, then he met a British ship the captain of which advised him to go to Virginia to get the water and food he needed, which he did, and finally he set sail once more for France where he arrived on the 5th of July 1685, after a voyage of nearly one year.

The news that de La Salle had not found his river soon filtered out. No doubt, the number of those who as Beaujeu had written a year before, in July, 1684, thought the explorer "slightly unbalanced," and considered him as somewhat "visionary" increased. Then for three years, no more was heard from the expedition. Still, the government had not

Cavelier de La Salle, 1684-1687 153

lost confidence in de La Salle and was obviously making efforts to obtain information from Cadiz in Spain, from the West Indies, and also from Canada, as we may infer from a letter written in March, 1686, and in which Seignelay, the Minister of the Navy, declares that "His Majesty is surprised that Denonville (the governor general of Canada) and Champigny (the general superintendent) should have no news from the Sieur de La Salle, since he reached the shores of Florida." "And yet (adds Seignelay, in an almost reproachful tone), news does come concerning this expedition, lately it was reported in Cadiz that the French allied with the natives of the Bay of Spiritu Santo had defeated eleven hundred Spaniards." The sad truth presented, as we shall see, an altogether different tale, but it was not going to come out yet.

Finally a letter of August 8, 1688 reached Versailles, coming from Canada, and announcing that de La Salle's brother, Abbé Cavelier, had arrived from the South, and that he was about to return to France to give a full report on the discoveries of M. de La Salle. The same letter voiced the anxiety of many people lest the discoveries of de La Salle should cause colonists to leave Canada to go and live on his new settlement.

The answer was an undated letter from Seignelay, very likely written in October, 1688, in which he notifies the Governor of Canada of the death of the explorer, just learned from his brother, Abbé Cavelier, and asks that steps should be taken to bring to Canada the survivors of the expedition who no doubt would be attempting to reach the Mississippi.

A report still kept in the archives in Paris indicates that Abbé Cavelier pleaded with the King the necessity of maintaining the establishment founded by his brother. But

through some letters written by Abbé Tronson, the superior of the order to which Cavalier belonged, we hear that "the government is not disposed to keep the establishment up," that the "death of de La Salle has put an end to all the measures which were being taken,—that Cavalier himself has given up the idea of going to the rescue of the unfortunate colony left at Matagorda Bay,—that he will await more favorable circumstances and take advantage of any opening that Providence may offer." Nothing further was then attempted by the government, but the fate of the colony remained for a long time a matter of investigation judging from reports which were sent to the court up to 1698 and even to 1704.

The unfortunate expedition had entered the domain of history and once more went through another long ordeal. The first printed account of de La Salle's last venture was written in 1690 by a Jesuit, a certain Don Carlos de Sigüenza y Gongora, professor of cosmography and mathematics at the Academy of Mexico. The book, recently discovered, had never been used by the historians of de La Salle, indeed its existence had not even been suspected. It is based on such information as could be gathered from a few survivors of the expedition and also from Father Massanet who had accompanied Alonso de Leon to Camp Saint Louis, and witnessed its destruction. The book has no historical value and is interesting only as a document of a mentality which one seldom finds today, a combination of fanatic hatred for foreigners and of the most servile flattery for the authorities that be.

Thirty-three years later, in 1723, a Spaniard, Barcia, in his *Chronological Essay on the History of Florida*, published another account of de La Salle's expedition, giving very valuable information on the fate of the French settlement after

Cavelier de La Salle, 1684-1687 155

the death of its founder. Barcia, whose book was written in an entirely different spirit, long remained the great Spanish authority for American and French historians. In 1827, a translation into Spanish of the Diary of Joutel, de La Salle's faithful lieutenant, was published in Mexico, and that was all, as far as Spain and Mexico went, almost to the end of the nineteenth century.

The French establishment had caused the Spanish authorities both in Spain and in Mexico a great deal of alarm. At a meeting of the Council of the Indies it had been proclaimed "a thorn that had been thrust into the very heart of America" and which had to be "plucked out" by all means. Once plucked out, the thorn was forgotten.

In France de La Salle fared somewhat better, not at first however. Not only did his enemies put all the blame on him for the failure of his expedition, but they attempted to take away from him the credit for his previous discovery. In 1691, Father Christian Leclercq published under the title *First establishment of faith in the New World*, two small volumes, extremely rare today, containing among other things, the Relation of Father Anastase Douay, who had witnessed the assassination of de La Salle by two of his men. In 1697, two books came out: one by a well known author, Father Hennepin, whose *Discovery of Louisiana*, published in 1683, had been translated into English, German, Dutch, and Italian and had had thirty-six editions. Hennepin, taking advantage of the death of de La Salle, was now boldly and brazenly posing in his *New Discovery of Louisiana* as the first discoverer of the Mississippi. The same year under the name of Tonti, one of de La Salle's faithful lieutenants, another book was published: *Last discovery in North America of M. de La Salle*, by Chevalier de Tonty, governor of Fort Saint Louis in the country of the Illinois. Tonty himself

declared that the book had been written by a "Parisian adventurer" and was unreliable.

In 1703, de La Salle reappears once more but less prominently in the very popular book of a famous traveler, Baron de la Hontan, *New Voyage in Northern America*, which had five successive editions and was translated into English, German and Spanish. It seems that after 1703 the interest in the fateful Mississippi expedition went waning till 1713, when it was suddenly revived by the publication of the most reliable and the best document so far available, the *Diary or Journal of the last voyage performed by M. de La Salle*, written by de La Salle's faithful lieutenant and companion, Joutel. Once again in the middle of the century the story of de La Salle was related by the Jesuit Charlevoix in his *Historical Journal of a voyage made by order of the King to North America*, which was published in 1744.

The name of de La Salle however was not forgotten any more than his great dream. In 1698, the two brothers Iberville and Bienville set sail for the Gulf of Mexico with two frigates and 200 settlers. They reached this continent on January, 1699, and a new chapter began in the History of the United States, or rather the closed book was opened again and at the very page that de La Salle had left unfinished. The foundation of New Orleans and the development of Louisiana are but the resumption and continuation of the attempted colonization of Texas in 1685.

Then events moved rapidly; in 1762, by a secret treaty between the court of Versailles and that of Madrid, Louisiana was ceded to Spain, in spite of the vigorous protests of its inhabitants, some of whom went so far as to try to establish an independent Republic of Louisiana. In 1800, it was retroceded by Spain to France and finally sold by Napoleon to the United States in 1803.

Cavelier de La Salle, 1684-1687 157

And suddenly we see de La Salle and his last expedition reappearing on the horizon. No sooner had the government of the United States acquired Louisiana than the famous question of its frontiers arose. Till then the United States had paid little attention to the struggles and adventures of the French on a territory which after all did not belong to them. But having bought Louisiana, the government of the United States felt that it was entitled to all the territories claimed and partly occupied by the French in the seventeenth century under the name of Louisiana. Hence the indignant protest from the Spanish authorities who began gathering all available documents establishing their rights over Texas, the territory contested. The American government did not remain idle, either—and a vigorous diplomatic controversy arose which went on till 1819, when the cession of Florida, which was surrendered by the Spaniards so as to keep Texas, brought it momentarily to an end. The chief exponent of the American claim was no other than the Secretary of State, John Quincy Adams. Through his correspondence with de Onis, the Spanish Ambassador at Washington, we find that if previously the American authorities had not fully realized the import of de La Salle's last expedition, they unquestionably did so between 1803 and 1819. The whole claim of the United States was based exclusively on that one expedition of de La Salle. It was then studied in Washington as it had never been anywhere else, France included. The Spaniards tried to represent de La Salle's expedition as "a transient venture" an "incursion" into the territory of another nation. To this John Quincy Adams, who had become a great admirer of de La Salle, retorted, "Of all heroic enterprises, which in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries signaled the discoveries by Europeans upon this continent, there is not one of which the evidence is more certain,

authentic and particular than that of de La Salle." Having summed the story of de La Salle's expedition as accurately as it could be done at the time, John Quincy Adams went on—"On this journey he was basely assassinated on the 19th of March 1687 by two of his own men, and left a name, among the illustrious discoverers of the New World, second only to that of Columbus, with whose story and adventures, his own bear in many particulars, a striking resemblance."

Then he points out to the Spaniards who had belittled the expedition, that "de La Salle's undertaking has every characteristic of sublime genius, magnanimous enterprise, and heroic execution. To him, and to him alone, the people of this continent are indebted for the discovery, from its source to the ocean, of the Mississippi, the father of the floods; and, of the numberless million of freemen destined in this and future ages to sail, on his bosom, and dwell along his banks, and those of his tributary streams,—there is not one, but will be deeply indebted for a large portion of the comforts and enjoyments of life, to the genius and energy of La Salle."

The words of John Quincy Adams represent, I believe, the first tribute of the American nation to de La Salle's Texas expedition, and they were pronounced at a time when Texas was not even a part of the United States.

One of the results of the long controversy between the two governments was to attract the attention of diplomatic and intellectual circles to the accomplishments of de La Salle on this continent. Then, as historical societies were formed in the different states of the Union, Massachusetts, Illinois, Louisiana and much later Texas, matters of interest to each individual state were studied and de La Salle gradually came into his own.

Cavelier de La Salle, 1684-1687 159

As late as 1844, however, he was not fully known either in the United States or in France. The town of Rouen, which is so proud of him today, did not suspect that it could claim him as a distinguished son. But about the middle of the nineteenth century great interest developed in the United States, in England, and in France, in the life and explorations of Cavelier de La Salle. A keen competition started which is still going on today, each nation generously bringing its contribution to the intangible but undying monument which has been erected to de La Salle by American, English and French scholars, among whom are Falconer in England, Jared Sparks, at one time President of Harvard University, French, Gilmary Shea, Parkman in the United States—Gravier, Margry, Guénin, Chesnel, de Villiers, de la Roncière in France. With a grant of the American Congress a magnificent collection gathered in France with infinite pains and great scholarship by Margry was published in 1878. It contains some of the most valuable documents on de La Salle's last expedition, including some of his family papers. Strangely enough these were not discovered by a scholar but by a manservant, who with a discretion not unusual in his calling spent his evenings reading the family papers of his master and having found them of some interest called his attention to them. To the above names we must add those of the standard historians of Texas, whose studies I need not mention here, as they are well known to you, and also a group of Texas scholars led by Professor Bolton, who in the last thirty years have brought out many valuable documents from Spanish and Mexican archives, and given a new impulse to the de La Salle studies on this continent.

Having followed the fate of de La Salle's expedition through its inception, its first stage, and then through two hundred and fifty years of history, we will now try to see,

in the light of available documents, how we stand today, what we know more or less accurately, what remains uncertain or even altogether unknown for the present.

I will not attempt to relate the life of the French settlers at Camp or Fort Saint Louis, although it would make a wonderful tale. It can be read in the Diaries of Abbé Cavalier, Father Douay, Joutel, and in many novels and stories on the subject, some of which are in fact extremely well written and most entertaining.

One of the problems which have been most discussed is the reason why de La Salle and his companions failed to reach the mouth of the Mississippi. Of course everyone realizes that, had they succeeded, the expedition might have taken an altogether different turn. Some have attributed this failure to the ignorance, the stubbornness of de La Salle; others to a lack of cooperation from Beaujeu, to his disloyalty. Some historians have even gone so far as to charge him with downright treachery. With the documents now available it seems that a different and more plausible explanation might be given. The Spaniards having heard in September, 1685, of the French expedition, through a servant of de La Salle who had deserted at Santo Domingo, and was later captured at Vera Cruz, sent four different expeditions by sea to discover the French settlement. They used their best pilots, some of whom were very familiar with the Gulf of Mexico. Every one of them looked for the mouth of the Mississippi or as they called it the Rio del Espiritu Santo. Every one went by and failed to identify it. On the other hand we find, in studying the expedition of the brothers Bienville and Iberville, that when they sailed for the Gulf of Mexico in 1798, after examining all the maps and documents available, they declared that they would recognize the mouth of the river "by its muddy waters," a detail

Cavelier de La Salle, 1684-1687 161

which they drew from de La Salle's notes and on which he had depended himself. But it must be remembered that these notes had been taken in the spring, in April, 1682, and that de La Salle reached the Gulf of Mexico early in January in 1685, during a period of great storms and at a time when the whole shore, as we know, would be muddy. It can therefore be suggested that, deceived by the information he had received at Santo Domingo, where he had been told that a strong current carried ships to the east, he would naturally have directed his course slightly to the west, looked in vain for the muddy current of the Mississippi, and finally failed where the Spaniards could not succeed.

Through Spanish documents which have been put to excellent use by Professor Bolton, and through French documents and maps, we know pretty certainly today where the main camp of de La Salle, known as Camp or Fort Saint Louis, stood. Documents gathered by a Mexican scholar, Garcia, in 1909, give us the plan of the fort and the very inscriptions to be found on the gate, to such an extent that it could easily be reconstructed today and at small cost.

Historians of de La Salle have been very much perplexed over the different expeditions which he undertook after building his fort and providing for the safety of his colony. Some have wondered if the first of these was not towards the mines of Santa Barbara in northern Mexico. Their unique documentation to this effect is the Diary of Abbé Cavelier who declares that in the course of that first expedition they "reached a village enclosed with a kind of wall made of clay and sand, and fortified with little towers at intervals, where they found the arms of Spain engraved on a copper plate, with the date 1598, . . . two small pieces of iron cannon, a small brass culverin" and other unmistakable signs of Spanish occupation. Parkman, who had bought

Cavelier's manuscript in England, declares that such a statement, which reappears in the latest study on de La Salle in this country, needs confirmation. Indeed it does. There is in the Archives of India at Seville a copy of the report brought by Abbé Cavelier to Seignelay (the French Minister of the Navy) for the King. In this report, a copy of which I have been able to obtain, the whole episode entirely disappears. We can readily assume that the report to the King is the correct one. Why then should de La Salle have invented this and other incidents? He tells us, for instance, that in the course of the second expedition, which he attempted to the west, his brother, de La Salle, reached the Mississippi, that he built a temporary fort and left some of his men there. The truth is that before leaving on that second expedition, de La Salle, who did not like writing, prepared a report for Seignelay with the idea of sending it by his brother. No doubt had he reached the Mississippi the document would have been sent.

Abbé Cavelier has been called by some historians undependable, most untruthful, to put things mildly. Others, on the contrary, have accepted his statements as fully reliable and used them at length in the writing of the story of de La Salle. A few lines from each manuscript, Parkman's and the official unused report now in Spain at Seville, will suffice to give an idea of the discrepancies which they offer.

"July 1684."

"Monseigneur: Here is the relation of the voyage undertaken by my brother to discover, in the Gulf of Mexico, the mouth of the Mississippi. . . . In the month of July we left La Rochelle in four vessels with very fine weather. The season seemed to promise us a continuance thereof, and should not in all probability lead us to fear either a calm or great heats."

Cavelier de La Salle, 1684-1687 163

And now here is the official report:

“Monseigneur, I François Cavelier, priest and brother of Sieur Robert de La Salle hereby relate to your Excellency the true story of the deplorable voyage which we made in 1684, of which we could have foreseen the fatal issue by the difficulties which we encountered as soon as we left the harbor of La Rochelle. For it is not usual that the weather should be stormy at the end of July any more than in September, and yet there was a storm which broke one of our masts and compelled to put back to port. . . .”

The author is the same, the expedition is the same, and yet all historians have made use of the first document without taking the trouble to compare it with the second, the only dependable one.

And now, how are we to account for the first story? The only plausible explanation which, I believe, can be offered, has to be inferred from a practice which was not infrequent at the time, and which had brought a predecessor of Abbé Cavelier, Father Hennepin, a tremendous reputation as a writer. Hennepin, after giving a fairly accurate description of Louisiana, in 1683, had later written other books based on a certain number of accurate facts and for the rest on details drawn from his imagination. It is very possible that the Parkman manuscript, which has been translated so carefully and used so freely by historians as well as novelists, may only be the first draft of a book meant for publication and which therefore would have needed a little filling. We can also easily surmise that as a novice, Abbé Cavelier would have imagined that his story would read much better if it began, “We started on a beautiful day—” and if later by way of contrast, he could bring out the tragic end of his tale.

Many other problems confront us as we study the last expedition of de La Salle. I mention a few just to show that

in spite of a most friendly and active cooperation between American and French students of de La Salle, and of thousands and thousands of hours spent to bring out his last expedition from the mists of the past, we have not come to the end of the trail yet, although we have gone a long way.

At least three different places have been indicated as being without a doubt the spot where de La Salle was murdered. The very details of his assassination, related many times, remain uncertain, although reported by a very reliable eye-witness.

The story as told by Father Douay, who was present when de La Salle was assassinated, runs as follows: "Our prudent commander, finding himself in a country full of game . . . sent Sieur Moranget, his lackey Saget and seven or eight of his people to a place where our hunter, the Shawne Nika had left a quantity of buffalo meat." Owing to a plot, on the 17th of March, Moranget was murdered "by one, whom charity does not permit to name."—Here is first, the story of the death of Moranget, de La Salle's nephew, as told by Father Douay: "The Sieur de Moranget lingered for about two hours, giving every mark of a death precious in the sight of God, pardoning his murderers and embracing them, and reciting his 'acts' of sorrow and contrition, as they themselves assured us, after they recovered from their unhappy blindness. He was a perfectly honest man and a good Christian, confessing every week or fortnight on our march. I have every reason to hope that God has shown him mercy."

Now we come to the death of de La Salle, who, uneasy, had gone out to look for his nephew: "We proceeded some steps along the bank to the fatal spot, where two of these murderers were hidden in the grass, one on each side, with guns cocked; one missed Monsieur de La Salle, the other

firing at the same time, shot him in the head. He died an hour after, on the 19th of March, 1687.

"I expected the same fate," goes on Father Douay, "but this danger did not occupy my thoughts, overcome with grief as I was at so cruel a spectacle. I saw him fall a step from me, with his face full of blood. I watered it with my tears, exhorting him, to the best of my power, to die well. He had confessed and fulfilled his devotions just before we started. He had still time to recapitulate a part of his life, and I gave him absolution. During his last moments he went through all the customary ritual of a good Christian, grasping my hand at every word I suggested, and especially at that of pardoning his enemies. Meanwhile his murderers, as much alarmed as I, began to strike their breasts and deplore their blindness. I could not leave the spot where he had expired without having him buried as well as I could, after which I raised a cross over his grave."

You no doubt notice the similarity in the two ends, although we know that Moranget was killed in the night by the blow of an axe, while de La Salle was shot. Father Douay was an honest and reliable witness but at the same time a man of the Church. We have to take into consideration the fact that he wanted at least to give both victims a good Christian end. Joutel, equally reliable, presents us an altogether different picture.

"M. de La Salle, suspecting nothing, asked for his nephew, Moranget, to which Larchevêque answered that he was along the river. At the same time the traitor Duhaut fired his piece and shot M. de La Salle through the head, so that he dropped down dead on the spot, without speaking one word."

"This," adds Joutel, "is the exact relation of that murder as it was presently after told me by Father Anastasius" (Douay). Joutel then proceeds to explain that the assassins

repaired to the place "where the wretched dead corpse lay, which they barbarously stripped even to the shirt, and then vented their malice in vile and opprobrious language. The surgeon, Liotot, said several times in scorn and derision, 'There thou liest, great pacha; there thou liest.' Finally they dragged it naked along the bushes and left it exposed to the ravenous wild beasts. So far was it from what a certain author writes of their having buried him and set up a cross on his grave." In these words I am afraid we have the naked and brutal truth.

Thus died at the age of 43, in the prime of his life, the man who had completed the discovery of the Mississippi and attempted the first European settlement on the shores of Texas. Pages and pages have been written trying to explain why he was murdered, many reasons have been advanced; his severity to his men, the resentment of one of the murderers for the loss of his brother for which he blamed de La Salle, their fear of meeting him after murdering his nephew. Tonti, the lieutenant, and one of the most faithful followers of de La Salle, has one sentence which in its terseness and simplicity is more eloquent than whole chapters. "In long journeys there are always discontented people." I believe that therein lies the secret of de La Salle's murder. He was asking for more than can be expected from men. There comes a time when human endurance will go no further unless it is sustained by some inner power, the religious faith of missionaries, or the great vision of de La Salle.

His story is one of the sad tales which had to be written in blood on the soil of this huge country before it could be developed—and once more we revert to the words of Kipling:

Then the wood failed, then the food failed, then the last water dried,
In the faith of little children we lay down and died.

Cavelier de La Salle, 1684-1687 167

The fate of de La Salle is a more tragic one, as we might add: "Then human endurance failed, then human loyalty failed." It is not without grandeur. He died at his post as an explorer, and in the fulfillment of his mission.

"It was in the order of Providence," wrote his great admirer, John Quincy Adams, "that he should not live to accomplish the whole of his undertaking but that he should so nearly accomplish it as to place it beyond the powers of events, that it should perish with him."

Two hundred and fifty years have passed and de La Salle still remains a great figure, as an explorer of this continent, and as the man who wrote some splendid pages in the history of the United States, and some of the earliest and yet most vivid pages in the history of Texas.

MARCEL MORAUD.