

With
Sword and Crucifix

*Being an Account of the Strange Adventures of
Count Louis de Sancerre, Companion of Sieur
de la Salle, on the Lower Mississippi
in the Year of Grace 1682*

BY
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Table of Contents

- CHAPTER I IN WHICH A GREAT EXPLORER LISTENS AT
MIDNIGHT TO A TALE OF LOVE
- CHAPTER II IN WHICH DE SANCERRE IS CONFRONTED
BY A MYSTERY
- CHAPTER III IN WHICH A MAIDEN SHOWS HER HEART
- CHAPTER IV IN WHICH DE LA SALLE REACHES A
FATEFUL DECISION
- CHAPTER V IN WHICH A DAUGHTER GRANTS A
FATHER'S WISH
- CHAPTER VI IN WHICH JUAN RODRIQUEZ UNDERGOES
AN UNPLEASANT HALF-HOUR
- CHAPTER VII IN WHICH JUAN RODRIQUEZ TAKES HIS
REVENGE
- CHAPTER VIII IN WHICH SATAN HAS HIS WAY WITH THE
CONCEPCION
- CHAPTER IX IN WHICH TWO CHILDREN OF THE SUN
ASTONISH A SCOUNDREL
- CHAPTER X IN WHICH THE CROSS IS CARRIED TO A
CITY OF IDOLATERS
- CHAPTER XI IN WHICH THE BROTHER OF THE SUN
WELCOMES THE CHILDREN OF THE
MOON

- CHAPTER XII IN WHICH CHATÉMUC FINDS THE
INSPIRATION WHICH HE LACKED
- CHAPTER XIII IN WHICH DE SANCERRE RUNS A
STUBBORN RACE
- CHAPTER XIV IN WHICH THE RESULTS OF CHATÉMUC'S
ENTHUSIASM ARE SEEN
- CHAPTER XV IN WHICH THE GRAY FRIAR DONS THE
LIVERY OF SATAN
- CHAPTER XVI IN WHICH A SPIRIT SAVES DE SANCERRE
FROM DEATH
- CHAPTER XVII IN WHICH DE SANCERRE BREAKS HIS
FAST AND SMILES
- CHAPTER XVIII IN WHICH DE SANCERRE HEARS NEWS
OF THE GREAT SUN
- CHAPTER XIX IN WHICH COHEYOGO EXHIBITS HIS
CRAFTINESS
- CHAPTER XX IN WHICH A WHITE ROBE FAILS TO
PROTECT A BLACK HEART
- CHAPTER XXI IN WHICH DE SANCERRE WIELDS HIS
SWORD AGAIN
- CHAPTER XXII IN WHICH THE CITY OF THE SUN ENJOYS
A FÊTE
- CHAPTER XXIII IN WHICH DE SANCERRE UNDERGOES
MANY VARIED EMOTIONS
- CHAPTER XXIV IN WHICH SPIRITS, GOOD AND BAD,
BESET A WILDERNESS

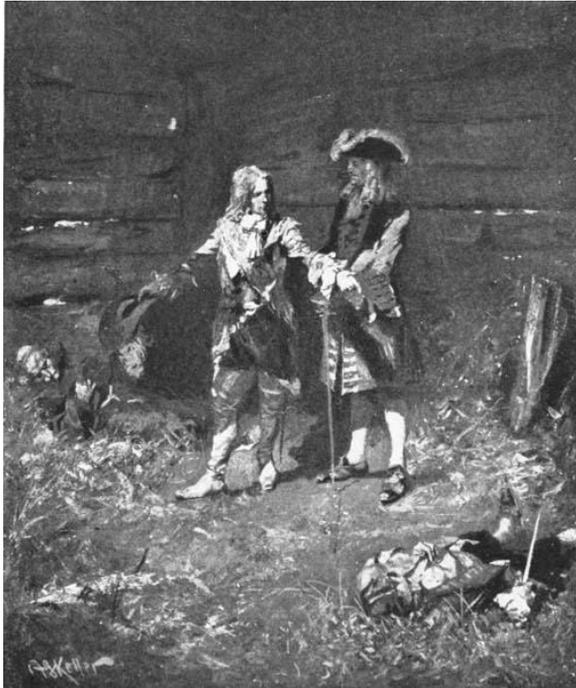
CHAPTER XXV IN WHICH DE SANCERRE WEEPS AND
FIGHTS

CHAPTER XXVI IN WHICH DOÑA JULIA IS REMINDED OF
THE PAST

CHAPTER XXVII IN WHICH ST. EUSTACE IS KIND TO DE
SANCERRE

CHAPTER XXVIII IN WHICH DE SANCERRE'S ISLAND IS
BESIEGED

CHAPTER XXIX IN WHICH THE GREAT SPIRIT COMES
FROM THE SEA TO RECLAIM COYOCOP



**“‘THE SWORD AND THE CRUCIFIX,’ WHISPERED DE
SANCERRE,
POINTING TO THE SOLDIER AND THE PRIEST”**

WITH SWORD AND CRUCIFIX

CHAPTER I

IN WHICH A GREAT EXPLORER LISTENS AT MIDNIGHT TO A TALE OF LOVE

“LOUIS LE GRAND, King of France and Navarre, has deserted pleasure to follow piety—and times are changed, monsieur.”

The speaker, Louis de Sancerre, of Languedoc, descendant of a famous constable of France, leaned against a tree near the shore of a majestic river, and musingly watched the moonbeams as they chased the ripples toward an unknown sea. A soft, cool breeze, heavy with the odor of new-born flowers, caressed his pale, clear-cut face, and toyed with the ruffles and trappings of a costume more becoming at Versailles than in the mysterious wilderness through which its wearer had floated for many weeks.

On the bank at the exiled courtier's feet lay reclining the martial figure of a man, whose stern, immobile face, lofty brow, and piercing eyes told a tale of high resolve and stubborn will. Sieur de la Salle, winning his way to immortality through wastes of swamp and canebrake and the windings of a great river, had made his camp at a bend in the stream from which the outlook seemed to promise the fulfilment of his dearest hopes. On the crest of a low hill, sloping gently to the water, his followers had thrown up a rude fort of felled trees, and now at midnight the adventurous Frenchmen and their score of Indian allies were tasting sleep after a day of wearisome labor.

De la Salle and a hapless waif from the splendid court of Louis XIV., more sensitive than their subordinates to the grandeur of the undertaking in which they were engaged, had felt no wish to slumber. They had strolled away from the silent camp; and, for the first time since Count Louis de Sancerre had joined the expedition, its leader had been learning something of the flippant, witty, reckless, debonair courtier's career.

“Beware the omnipresent ear of the Great Order, Monsieur le Comte!” exclaimed La Salle, rising to his elbow and searching the shadows behind him with questioning eyes. “Think not, de Sancerre, that in the treacherous quiet of this wilderness you may safely speak your mind. I have good reason to distrust the trees, the waters, and the roving winds. Where I go are ever savages or silence, but always in my ear echoes the stealthy footfall of the Jesuit. And this is well, monsieur. I seize this country in the name of France; the Order takes it in the name of God!”

“In the name of God!” repeated de Sancerre, mockingly. “You know Versailles, monsieur? There is no room for God. Banished once by a courtesan, the Almighty now succumbs to a confessor.”

“Hold, monsieur!” cried La Salle, sternly. “This is blasphemy! Blasphemy and treason! But enough of priests! You tell me that you loved this woman from the court of Spain?”

“How can I say? What is love, monsieur?” exclaimed de Sancerre, lightly, throwing himself down beside his leader.

It was as if a butterfly, born of the moonbeams, had come to ask a foolish riddle of the grim forest glades. The incarnation of all that was most polished, insincere, diabolical, fascinating at Versailles had taken the form of a handsome man, not quite forty years of age,

who reclined at midnight upon the banks of an unexplored river, and pestered the living embodiment of high adventure and mighty purposes with the light and airy nothings of a courtier's tongue. How should Sieur de la Salle know the mystery of love? He who had wooed hardship to win naught but the kiss of disappointment, he who had cherished no mistress save the glory of France, no passion but for King and Church, was not a source from which a flippant worldling could wring a definition of the word of words.

The majestic silence of the night was broken by the raucous muttering of some restless dreamer within the confines of the camp. An owl hooted, and far away a wolf bayed at the moon. La Salle arose, climbed the bank to see that his sentries were attentive at their posts, and then returned to Count de Sancerre's side.

"You do not answer me, Sieur de la Salle!" exclaimed the latter, testily. "I have sought the answer from La Fontaine, from Molière, Racine; aye, from Bossuet and Fénelon. 'Twas all in vain. They were men, you say, and did not understand? But I have asked the question of de Montespan, la Vallière, la Fayette, Sêvigné. One was witty, another silent, and all were wrong. There remained, of course, de Maintenon. Her I never asked. She would have said, I doubt not, that love is a priest who leads by prayer to power."

"You wander far afield, Monsieur le Comte," remarked La Salle, coldly, after an interval of silence. "The night grows old, and still you have not told me why you left the splendors that you love, to risk your life in this fierce struggle in an unknown land."

"To risk my life?" cried the Count, laughingly. "If that were all! To tear my velvets where no draper is, to see the gay-plumed birds laughing at my plight, to long in vain for powder for my wig, to

find my buckles growing red with damp—all this is worse than death. But still, I bear it bravely, do I not? Ah, well, Turenne—God rest his soul!—taught me the lessons of a hard campaign. What is this voyage in a bark canoe upon the peaceful breast of yonder stream? A pleasure-jaunt, monsieur, to one who fought with France against the world—who sheathed his sword at Nimeguen. Once only were we beaten, de la Salle. The Dutch let in the sea, and, lo! his Majesty and Luxembourg, Turenne and Condé, Vauban and the rest, were powerless against the mighty ally of the foe. I say to you, Monsieur le Capitaine, beware the sea! You seek it in your quest. 'Tis full of treachery.”

The Count had arisen and drawn his sword, which gleamed in the moonlight as he turned its point toward the unknown mouth the roving river sought.

“This blade,” he said, reseating himself and patting the steel with affection, “flashed gayly for the King upon the Rhine. Alas for me, it drove me at the last to seek my fortunes in a weary land.”

“You drew it, then, for something other than the cause of France?” remarked La Salle, suspiciously.

“For that of which we spoke, which no tongue voices but all hearts have felt. I drew it once for love—*et voilà tout!*”

“You killed a Spaniard, then?”

“They speak the truth, monsieur, who say your mind is quick. She—as I told you—came to France with Spain’s great embassy. He, a strutting grandee, proud and bigoted, came with the suite, holding some post that made his person safe. The tool of diplomats, the pet of priests, my rival—as he was—defied my hate. 'Tis said

they were betrothed, Don Josef and— But hold! her name I need not speak.”

The Count remained silent for a time, watching the moon-kissed waters at his feet. La Salle, grim, reticent, but not unsympathetic, gazed steadfastly at his companion’s delicately-carved face. A stern knight-errant, who sought to win an empire for his king, lay wasting the midnight hours to listen to a love-tale from a flippant tongue.

“’Twas with this blade,” went on de Sancerre after a time, waving his sword from side to side in the moonlight, “that I pierced his heart—and broke my own. For which all praise be to Saint Maturin, who watches over fools.”

“He was no coward, then?” questioned La Salle.

“Not when his pride was pricked,” answered de Sancerre. “Great wars have been begun with less diplomacy than I employed to make my insult drive him to his steel. But, Spanish blood is hot, and, truth to tell, my tongue can cut and thrust. Her eyes were on us at a *fête champêtre* when, standing by his side, I spoke the words that made him mine at midnight—’neath a moon like this. There’s little left to tell. He knew a Spanish trick or two, but, monsieur, he was a boy! In the moonlight there his eyes were so like hers I lost all pity—and—so—he died.”

“And then?”

“And then I vowed a candle to St. Christopher and sailed across the sea. Breathe it not, monsieur—I bore a letter from de Montespan to Frontenac.”

“Then cut your tongue out ere you tell the tale,” exclaimed La Salle, gruffly. After a moment’s silence he went on, more gently: “But, Monsieur le Comte, I cannot understand the ease of your escape. You’ve roused the anger of the King, de Maintenon, the Jesuits, and Spain. Such foes could crush an empire in a day.”

“But you yourself, monsieur, have stood against them all.”

“I?” exclaimed La Salle, musingly. “You may be right, my friend. I sometimes wonder if my life is charmed. Whom can I trust, monsieur? Allies false when the hour of danger came, assassins at my bedside, and poison in my food—all these I’ve known, monsieur. And still I live.”

The two adventurers had arisen and were facing each other in the moonlight. La Salle, tall, commanding—a king by the divine right of a dauntless soul—stood, with head uncovered, looking down at the slender, graceful patrician confronting him.

“You strive for France, Sieur de la Salle,” exclaimed de Sancerre, the mocking note gone from his voice—“for the glory of dear France—and France will not destroy you.”

“For France!” repeated La Salle, solemnly. “For France and for the Church! *Vive le Roi!*”

Silently they turned and, mounting the hillock, made their way toward the sleeping camp, while the Mississippi rolled on beneath the moon to tell a strange tale to the listening waters of the gulf.

CHAPTER II

IN WHICH DE SANCERRE IS CONFRONTED BY A MYSTERY

LIKE a statue done in bronze stood Chatémuc before a hastily-constructed hut at the rear of the log fort in which the rank and file of the explorers lay sleeping. La Salle had chosen the sentry as his special body-guard, for at many a critical juncture in his long years of exploration—menaced at all times, as he had been, by a thousand lurking perils—the daring Frenchman had tested the loyalty and courage of this stalwart Mohican, who, for love of a white man, had wandered many weary miles from his tribal hunting-grounds.

Within the rude but spacious hut over which the phlegmatic Indian stood guard lay sleeping, as La Salle and de Sancerre entered the enclosure, two men who had found rest upon heaps of leaves and grass, and whose strangely-contrasted outlines, emphasized by the errant moonbeams that penetrated the chinks between the logs, called attention to the curious mixture of unrelated nationalities of which La Salle's expedition was made up. In one corner of the hut reclined the slender form of the Franciscan friar, Zenobe Membré. Upon his placid, smiling face—a countenance suggestive of religious enthusiasm even while he slept—rested a ray of silvery light, as if the prayer that he had uttered ere he fell asleep had transformed itself into a halo to glorify his pillow through the night. His thin hands were crossed upon his breast, and showed white and transparent against the gray background of his garb.

Within the shadows at an opposite corner of the apartment lay the lithe, muscular figure of a man whose costume made it difficult for the observer to determine whether the wearer was a foot-soldier from the Low Countries or a Canadian *coureur de bois*. The truth was that Henri de Tonti's experiences as an Italian officer in the Sicilian wars had left their impress upon his attire as an explorer under de la Salle. As he lay, fully dressed, in the moonlight that night he might well have been a sculptor's dream, representing in his outlines the martial genius of the Old World, bringing "not peace but a sword" to the New. A bare hand rested lovingly upon the cross-piece of his rapier, which he had unfastened from his waist and tossed upon the dry grass of his couch. His other hand was covered by a glove.

tempting beds of leaves, La Salle and de Sancerre stood side by side in the centre of the hut for a moment, gazing thoughtfully at the weird tableau that their slumbering comrades made.

"The sword and crucifix!" whispered de Sancerre, pointing from the soldier to the priest. "Strange allies these, monsieur."

"But one without the other were in vain! They serve together by the will of God. Good-night, Monsieur le Comte."

How long de Sancerre had slept before he was awakened by a light touch upon his shoulder he never knew. It must have been a considerable time, for, as he opened his reluctant eyes, he saw that the moonlight no longer gleamed in all quarters of the hut, but dimly illumined only one corner thereof. Inured though he was to perils of all kinds, the Count felt a thrill of dismay as his eyes rested upon a hideous, grinning face leering at him from the shadows close at hand. He sat up hurriedly, uttering no sound, but

fumbling in the leaves and grass for his rapier. A glance assured him that his comrades had been undisturbed by the intruder at his side.

“Be not afraid, señor,” whispered a voice in broken Spanish. “The children of the moon have naught to fear from us.”

De Sancerre, to whom Spanish was like a native tongue, raised himself upon his elbow and gazed searchingly at the misshapen hag who had disturbed his sleep.

“I crave your pardon,” he murmured, with the air of a courtier addressing a coquette in the Salon de Venus, while the mocking smile that his face so often wore gleamed in the half-light. “Then I am of the children of the moon?”

“At night ye come from out the shadows of the distant lands, ye white-faced offspring of your Queen, the Moon. The Sun, our God, has told us you would come. Be not afraid. We have rare gifts for you—and loving hearts.”

The harsh, guttural voice in which the aged crone spoke these gentle words added to the uncanny effect of her wrinkled, time-marked face, peering at the smiling Frenchman through the gloom.

“I bring you this,” she went on, still speaking in a mongrel Spanish patois, which de Sancerre found it difficult to interpret. “Remember what I say. The children of the sun send greeting to their brothers of the moon.”

She laid upon the dried grass of his bed a piece of white mulberry bark, upon which de Sancerre’s eyes rested indifferently for an instant. When he raised them again the hag had left his side, and he saw her pushing her way through an opening in the tree-limbs at

the further end of the hut. For an instant her diminutive body stopped the gap in the wooden wall. Then, from where he lay, the Frenchman could catch a glimpse of moonbeams on the river through the opening that she had made.

For a moment this strange visitation affected de Sancerre unpleasantly. Surrounded, as their little party was, by unknown tribes with whom the wily Spaniards had had intercourse, the words of the old crone, cordial though they had been in their way, filled the Count with alarm. Furthermore, the ease with which she had made an undiscovered entrance to their hut emphasized the disquiet that he had begun to feel. Thorough soldier as he was, this seemingly harmless invasion of his leader's quarters became to his mind a more menacing episode the more he weighed it in all its bearings.

Rising noiselessly from his resting-place, de Sancerre made his way between his sleeping comrades to the entrance to the hut. Stepping forth into the white night, he confronted Chatémuc, who still stood motionless in the same spot that he had occupied when La Salle and his companion had returned from the river. The Mohican, from long service with the explorer, had acquired a practical knowledge of the French tongue, but, as a general rule, he made use of it only in monosyllables.

“Chatémuc,” said de Sancerre, sternly, “your eyes are heavy with the moonlight or with sleep. You keep indifferent guard. Did you not see an aged witch who even now stood within the hut and roused me from my sleep?”

The tall Mohican gazed down upon the Frenchman with keen, searching eyes, which glowed at that moment with a fire that

proved him innocent either of treason or stupidity. His stern, immobile face gave no indication of the astonishment which the Frenchman's accusation must have caused him.

"There's nothing stirring but the river and the leaves," said Chatémuc, with grim emphasis, turning his shapely head slowly to sweep the landscape in all directions with eyes for which the forest had no mysteries.

"*Ma foi*, my Chatémuc! You're as proud and stubborn as de Groot, the Hollander. But follow me. I'll show you a hole that proves I dreamed no dream."

De Sancerre, behind whom stalked the stately Mohican, made his way hurriedly to the further side of the hut. Pointing to an opening between the logs, through which a small boy might have crawled, the Count said:

"Behold, monsieur, the yawning chasm in your reputation as a sentry! 'Twould not admit an army, but it might serve for a snake."

Chatémuc had fallen upon his knees, and was examining the aperture and the trampled grass which led to it. Presently he arose and turned towards the Count.

"A woman," he muttered. "Small. Light. Old."

"Fine woodcraft, Chatémuc! You read the blazonry that crossed the drawbridge with great skill—after the castle has been captured. But let it pass. No harm's been done, save that your pride has had a fall. And so I leave you to your watch again. If you loved me, Chatémuc, you'd keep old women from my midnight couch. I fear my sleep is lost."

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