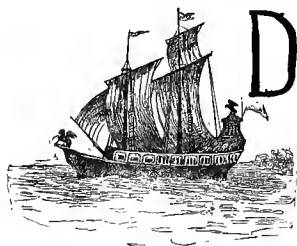


II

THE BAPTISM OF LAKE SAINTE CLAIRE.

A Legend of the Griffin's Voyage.



DURING the long winter months of 1678-9 there might have been witnessed on the banks of the Niagara River, some five miles above the Falls and near the mouth of what is now known as Cayuga Creek, an undertaking new and unheard of in that locality, and well calculated to excite the wonder and amazement of the savage denizens of the surrounding forests.

It was the building of a ship by the daring band of French explorers under the Sieur de La Salle—the first sailing vessel that ever navigated Lake Erie and the upper lakes, and the pioneer of the vast commerce that now plows these waters.

Through the dreary winter the little band of

workmen toiled assiduously, though their food at times was only parched corn, and they had to depend to a great extent on the uncertain supplies of fish and game furnished by the Indians, while spikes, chains, anchors and even cannon had to be carried up the rocky steps from the level of Lake Ontario. The undaunted energy and iron courage of their commander, La Salle, aided by the pious exhortations of the Recollêt Chaplain, Louis Hennepin, bidding them to labor for the glory of God and the honor of France, made them indifferent to the taunts and jeers of the jealous Indians. Their imaginations were inflamed and their enthusiasm aroused by glorious pictures of the new discoveries to be made in the far West; of the great honors and fortunes all were to acquire; of the new traffic that was to be opened in the hides of the wild cattle that roamed in countless numbers over the plains; of the inexhaustible supply of ores they could draw from the rich mines of Mexico, and of the outlet for all this wealth which was to be found at the mouth of the great Mississippi that La Salle was to open to the ships of France.

The shadows of the summer of 1679 had deepened before the little brigantine of forty-five tons approached completion. The commander had decided to name her the "Griffin," in allusion to

the arms of the Comte de Frontenac, whose supporters were "Griffins." An expert wood carver from Rouen had carved for the ship's bows a wonderful image of the fabled monster, half lion and half eagle, with ears erect, emblematic of strength, swiftness and watchfulness. But among the more pious of the band the name was deemed an evil one, and their superstitious natures conjured up disasters to come, "For," they said, "a vessel constructed for such an enterprise ought to be named after the Blessed Lady, or at least after one of the saints." La Salle laughed at such notions, and tried to impress on the minds of the Frenchmen and Indians that the Griffin was a powerful Manitou, who would protect them from all harm, and guide them safely to their destination.

At last all was ready for the launch—the crew were assembled and the notes of the "Te Deum" floated on the air. A bottle of brandy was broken over the bows of the vessel, and liberal potations distributed among the Indians. A salute was fired from the seven guns ranged along the decks, and amidst the enthusiastic shouts of "vive le Roi," the vessel glided from her ways, and floated on the waters of the Niagara River. The indignation of the Indians who were watching, and who had never dreamed it possible to launch her, knew no bounds. At last she was

beyond their power to destroy by fire, which they had several times attempted. La Salle, with a number of his men, had returned to the shore and noticing the chagrin of the savages, pointed to the flag with a Griffin emblazoned thereon, proudly waving from the masthead, and tauntingly exclaimed :

“Now you can see the eagle flying above the crows,” alluding to the black-gowned Jesuits whom he deemed his enemies and what was worse, entirely too friendly with the Iroquois.

On this the noted Prophet Metiomek could no longer contain himself, and exclaimed : “Great Chief, you are too proud. You have shown contempt for the Great Spirit who rules all things, and you have set up an evil spirit on His throne. You seek the tribes of the west to trade with them and to destroy them with your cursed fire-water. You sneer at the ‘black gowns’ Onontio sent us, who have taught us to worship the Great Spirit and till the ground. But Metiomek, the prophet of his race, bids you beware ; darkness, like a cloud, is ready to envelop you—the Christian Indian’s curse rests on you and on your great canoe. She will sink beneath the deep waters and your blood shall stain the hands of those in whom you trusted !”

As Metiomek gave utterance to this prophecy

in deep and impressive tones, amidst the most solemn silence, Fathers Hennepin and Zenoble looked serious, and the sailors ominously whispered to each other their apprehensions, but La Salle, with his usual exuberance of spirits, carelessly laughed away the rebellious mutterings which fluttered like a light cloud over the assembly.

On August 7, 1679, the great square sails of the brigantine were set, and La Salle, mounting the lofty stern, gave orders to take a course of west by south, and sailed away on the unknown waters.

Despite the prophecy, the voyage was most prosperous, and favorable winds carried them twenty leagues the first night. . On the 8th they made forty-five leagues and passed a point which they named St. Francis (now Long Point). On the 9th they passed Point au Pelée; and on the 10th, the feast of St. Lawrence, they saw the Trois Sœurs (Three Sisters' Islands), standing like the three Parcæ, guarding the terrestrial paradise of le Détroit.

As they sailed by Grosse Isle and the adjacent island, their spirits were wonderfully exhilarated.

“We found,” says Father Hennepin in his journal, “the country on both sides of this beautiful strait, adorned with fine open plains. Any number of stags, deer, bear (by no means fierce,

and very good to eat), poules d'indes* in abundance, and all kinds of game. The vessel's guys were loaded and decked with the wild animals our French and Indian hunters shot and dressed. The islands on both shores of the straits are covered with primeval forests, fruit trees, like walnuts, chestnuts, plum and apple trees, wild vines loaded with grapes, of which latter some were gathered, and a quantity of wine was made. The vast herds of deer surprised us all, and it appears to be the place of all others where the deer love to congregate." And so the pioneer ship sailed up "le Détroit," or the strait now called the Detroit River † and passed the site of the present great city. They noticed on shore the spot where ten years before Dollier and Gallinée (who had visited these regions in a birch bark canoe) had broken in pieces the painted stone idol, worshiped as a Manitou by the Indians. They saw on the border of the forests the Indian village of "Teuscha Grondie," and, to impress the fleeing savages, gave them a grand salute from the guns—but the boat glided too rapidly for them to hear the imprecations hurled after them by the Indians, and the winds kindly wafted them away from the

* Wild Turkey.

† Wa-we-a-tu-nong. Indian name for Detroit River.

European ears. "May the Manitou whom we worship," they shouted, "and Wis Kin, who guards the gates of the lakes, devour the evil pale face who comes among us with his white winged bird vomiting forth fire, smoke and thunder; and may the Manitou whom the black gowns cast in the lake many moons ago so trouble the waters, that their canoe shall find no rest thereon and be drawn down to the home of the evil spirit at the bottom of the lake." Unconscious of the malediction evoked by the savage foes, the Griffin passed Belle Isle into a circular-shaped lake at the head of the river.

The summer sun was setting and flooding the waters with its golden hues—the soft sound of the vesper bell died away in sweet cadences. The little band of hardy explorers fell on their knees giving thanks to Heaven for their prosperous voyage. On the lofty stern of the vessel was Robert Cavalier de la Salle, future explorer of the Mississippi; by his side Henri de Tonty his captain of brigade; near by, his partners in the enterprise, the Sieur de Boironde and the Sieur D'Autray, and also the notary Jacques La Meterie and Jean Michel the surgeon. Sixteen French voyageurs and a small number of Indians comprised the crew. As they rose from their devotions Father Louis Hennepin addressed them a

short discourse and concluded by saying: "This is the feast of Ste. Claire, let us commemorate it by bestowing her name on this beautiful sheet of water. I hereby solemnly baptize it Lac Sainte Claire, by which it will be henceforth known." Then all pledged the newly christened lake in many a bumper of wine made from the Detroit River grapes.

The Griffin's journey to Lake Michigan where La Salle left her in order to pursue his discoveries, his vain effort to find the mouth of the great river he had explored while on his second expedition from France, and the closing of his adventurous career by the murderous hands of his men are events which have illustrated many a glorious page of our history. The attempt of the vessel to return loaded with a precious cargo of furs is mentioned, but uncertainty throws its melancholy shadow over its subsequent fate and that of its daring crew. But Indian tradition sees the angry Manitous of the water surround the ill-fated ship and drift her into unknown realms, and on bright moonlight nights they hear a full chorus of manly voices* chanting the evening hymn, and frequently the image of a phantom ship is seen in the clouds.

* These voices are no myths. Science has examined into the cause and says they are produced by the beating of the waves on a peculiarly sonorous shingle. Along the northern coast of certain

islands in Lake Superior is a low cliff of compact, fine-grained limestone which clinks like steel under the hammer. When the wind blows from the northeast, the waves beating at the foot of the cliff dash the fragments of stone against each other, causing them to give forth peculiar sounds. It is an Æolian harp of stone.