

WINNING OF THE WEST

A Fragment from the Memoirs of Joseph Scalade, Member of
Laclede's Expedition.

IT WAS a cold day, even though Baptiste Riviere did take off his jacket, when my teeth were clicking as hard as a galloping horse, and shake it defiantly in the face of the wind. It was cold, though M. Laclede had called it the first day of spring and ordered us to these yellow cliffs to lay foundations of what he called "the future metropolis of this virgin country." Ugh! How the wind sweeps down this crevasse, where we have a fire built, and are trying with numbed fingers to unlace our packets and get a little food. I thought I was tough and seasoned and my blood young enough to stand a bit more of the cold than those old boatmen, but how Pradeaux had laughed at me when he saw the blue of the cold on my nose and heard the chatter of my teeth! I'd like to souse him in the river for that, and I will yet when I get warm enough. I don't think I shall ever forget that trip up the river in the very breath of a bitter wind. It was all right for the fellows at the oars, but for Chouteau, Maxim, Pollette, and myself, huddled up in the stern, without our cloaks, it was a hard journey.

"The ice is broken up and gone and you'll have an easy trip up the river," Laclede had said to us as we started from our warm quarters at Fort Chartres to lay the foundations of this "future metropolis," but I wish he could have seen it after we got our boat out of the little cove and had her nose headed upstream. There was a heavy fringe of ice all along the shores, and the surface of the stream was as freckled with floating pieces as the face of a young girl after her first outing in June. "Looks as though we'd have to build the foundations of Pierre's town of ice," old Jean Lacroix had said as we pulled out of the neck of the cove and got a good view of the river. The boatmen had howled with delight over that sally, for Laclede's ideas about the prospects of this trading post he was to build for M. Maxent had caused even Gov. de Villers to laugh when he unfolded them at Fort Chartres. All the way upstream they had made merry over Laclede's "future metropolis," and at times in such a way that I saw Auguste's lips tighten and his cheeks flush a little, but, fortunately, he held his tongue. The floating ice played merry tunes on the hull of our boat while we pulled up stream, and two or three times had it not been for the skillful management of old Lacroix and Roblet I'm sure we should have been stove in, but God smiled on this mad enterprise, and after three days we came in sight of the yellow cliffs with no greater damage than two broken oars and a couple of bruised fingers for Bollette.

For nearly an hour we pulled along the river under the shadow of the high cliffs and dangerously close to the fringe of ice before we caught sight of the trees that Laclede had blazed in November to mark the site he had selected for the trading post, and then what a yell of derisive laughter went up from the men. "A 'future metropolis' in the air," Lacroix shouted—he was always the comedian—and then they all laid back on their oars and cracked their stupid wit over Laclede's selection of a site. "When the ships Laclede expects come up here we'll have to feed the furs to their holds through the masts," Pradeaux had roared between a laugh and an elephantine wink at me, when the drifting boat brought up with a crash against the drifting ice, and Chouteau, with his hand on his pistol, jumped to his feet, his boy's face white with rage, ordering the men to be at their oars and forget their clumsy humor. For a moment I trembled for Auguste, and my hand sought the little knife I had taken from a Spaniard one night in New Orleans after an affair that had terminated his interest in any further material things. Pradeaux's face had an ugly gleam in it for just a minute, but there was something about Chouteau that checked any inclination to rebellion, and, boy though he was, in a trice he had the men pulling at their oars and afraid even to mumble among themselves.

The boatmen had played with Chouteau all the way up stream and had grown bolder in their remarks and conduct because he paid small attention to them, but now they saw that if they had reckoned with a boy they must count with a man, and they were silenced. Something of Laclede's quiet, stern demeanor had slipped into the appearance of Chouteau's face for a moment, and I chuckled over his easily bought triumph. Had Laclede been in the boat some of these fellows would have long since paid for their freedom of speech with a sousing in the river, and, perhaps, they recollected that Chouteau stood for the judgment to come if they were not up and doing.

A few hundred feet beyond the blazed trees we sighted a little bay extending back beyond the line of yellow cliffs, and

down to its level the ground above sloped somewhat gradually. This was clearly the landing place Laclede had spoken of, and, with scarcely any need for the shout from Auguste, the men were working at their left oars and soon had the nose of the boat grating against the solidly packed ice. The bay was full of it, and Auguste called to Maxim to seize a rope and run to the shore to tie her up. The current wasn't very swift, but Lacroix, with his legs locked under one of the seats and his right arm thrown around a hummock of ice, had all he could do to keep the boat from drifting downstream. Maxim fell once or twice, and that cut on his right cheek tells how severe one of the falls was, but he had soon crawled over the rough ice and had the rope tightly tied around a stump on the bank.

The sun was already very low when we reached the bank and the trees on the cliff top stood out like the spines of a porcupine against the evening sky, so we lost no time in casting about for a suitable resting place. It wasn't hard to find. On the side of the bay a part of the cliff had been worn away by running water and as it was sufficiently big enough and offered shelter from the hard, cold wind, Chouteau indicated that as the proper place. How they ever managed to do it so quickly I don't know, but in a couple of minutes the boatmen had a fire going in the crevasse and had dragged our blankets and food bags from the boat. Auguste feared the boat would suffer from the running ice if it were left out in the stream, so while Maxim and I were set to collecting more firewood the others busied themselves with dragging the heavy boat up on the hummocks in the bay. It was hard work, but at last it was accomplished, and then after a supper that I was almost too cold to eat we lay down with our feet to the big fire, one great circle of tired and cold men, and even my shaking teeth did not keep me from drifting off to sleep before I had counted a dozen of the stars shining brightly in the February sky.

"Well, this is our first day at Laclede's 'future metropolis,'" were the words I heard coming to me as though from across the river, just before something that felt like the fall of a ton of rock against the soles of my boot, jarred me into complete consciousness, and I opened my eyes to see Bollette standing over me with a grin on his face and his foot raised as though about to kick me again. I gave a shout and jumped to my feet to give him a tussle, but forgot about the coffee boiling over the fire, and in a moment a battery of oaths from nearly thirty throats had tamed my exuberance as I knocked over the tripod and the coffee was only saved from spilling in the fire by the activity of Pradeaux. I forgave him his wards of the day before for that, because it saved me a rough-and-ready scrimmage with a score and more of hungry men, and with only a few jokes flung at me derisively, I sat down on a rock, reached for my food bag and prepared for breakfast.

I looked around for Chouteau, but he was in none of the groups about the fire, and Maxim, interpreting my glance, told me he had risen earlier and gone off into the forest alone. "That was rather dangerous for him to do, wasn't it?" I asked, but Maxim only shrugged his shoulders and said he'd come back all right. It was still dark while we ate breakfast, but there was a gray light filling the sky above the eastern bank of the river, and before I had finished my last cup of coffee it had grown strong enough for me to see the buttons on my coat. I was a little alarmed over Auguste's solitary excursion into the forest in the darkness of that early morning. No one knew what savages or wild beasts lurked there, and I was mentally saying things about his foolishness in not waiting until full daybreak and taking some of us with him, when there came a faint crackling of twigs from the dense growth of trees, and in a few minutes Auguste stood before us. "I've found the place M. Laclede wants us to clear," he said. "It's back there," waving his arm in the direction of the blazed stumps, "and we want to get at it in a hurry."

"Had any breakfast?" I asked. "No; give me a cup of coffee, and you fellows who've finished eating get down to the boat and begin bringing the tools and supplies up here." Nearly the entire party were quickly on their feet, and with Lacroix at the head singing a snatch of rollicking song, began scrambling down the bank toward the boat resting on the ice in the bay.

"I've been all around this place," said Auguste to me after the men had marched away. "It was much lighter than you'd have thought sitting here at the fire, and I tell you it's a fine site for a post. I think with Laclede that it will grow into a city some day, and I feel

more certain of it now that the news has come of the British taking in all that territory over there. Laclede told me just before we started that he was sure all the people at Fort Chartres and Kaskaska would fly to this post as soon as the British arrive to raise their flag over them, and he feels certain that we will have a town here as big as New Orleans before he is twenty years older."

"Nonsense," I replied; "this site is too far away from the sea, and I don't think even the post will be maintained before long. Think of what a journey it is from here to New Orleans, and if we have so much trouble with our boats, how can we ever expect ships to come up this river, as Laclede thinks they will. I feel pretty sure the whole thing is a mistake, and that the people of Fort Chartres and Kaskaska will go to New Orleans, if they go anywhere, and not spend their lives in such a wilderness as this."

"Well, the people of Ste. Genevieve are satisfied with this wilderness, and some of them have been there thirty years, long before you and I were born."

"Yes, and their town is just what it was when it was founded, not even big enough to give us room for the storage of our goods. That's the way it'll be here, too, if any people remain at the place at all. Is M. Laclede going to give it a name?"

"He's thinking of calling it after Louis IX.—St. Louis. You know he's the one Laclede used to tell us last winter was the greatest King of them all."

"Named after a saint who lost his life in a crazy undertaking. Well, I expect it's appropriate enough, for I'm sure this plan is quite as mad, and it will come to an end just as Louis did on his crusade."

"Foolishness! You haven't gotten over your trip yet," and Auguste smiled as he answered my gloomy prediction. "Come and take a walk with me toward the hills; you'll have a better opinion of the place then."

Stopping only long enough to give some necessary directions to the men, who were singing at their work, a good angry for the beginning of Laclede's enterprise, Auguste said, he turned, and, taking me by the arm, started for the heavy forest just in our rear. The trees in this patch of woods were of noble and majestic appearance, and excited my admiration, but the underbrush was thick and matted, and it was hard work pushing through. Luckily, the strip of forest was not very wide, and we soon came out on a level, though rock-strewn, space, which ended in a natural terrace at the rear, and beyond this I saw other terraces rising like steps toward the western sky. To the north there were a number of hills on these terraces of singularly regular formation, and I remarked to Auguste that it was seldom, indeed, nature cast things with such smooth and even outlines. Little did I think when I gazed at them that they were relics of a race that inhabited this country ages before. Indeed, so much did they excite my curiosity, standing there like silent sentinels overlooking the river and the plains to the east, that I expressed a desire to approach them closer, but Auguste pointed out that we had not the time, and must presently rejoin the men to see that they did not shirk at their tasks.

We were soon on the second terrace sufficiently high to look over the tops of the trees growing on the edge of the cliffs, and I gave an involuntary cry of pleasure at the beauty of the picture that unrolled itself before my eyes. The river rushing by like a great yellow snake at our feet, the cliffs and forest-clad hills about us and the rolling plains on the opposite side, still bare from the breath of winter, stretching away toward the horizon until at last the haze caught the land and joined it to the sky. It was so fascinating that I must have shown my appreciation of it in my eyes, for Auguste laughed and said: "You see, Laclede hasn't made such a mistake after all. I don't believe there is another place in the world so beautiful for a trading post, town, or city, and the more I look at it the more I agree with Laclede that there may yet be another Paris here, teeming with more people than half a dozen New Orleanses."

I felt it was a splendid place, but that it would ever outgrow Ste. Genevieve I couldn't understand. I was ready to grant now that we might eventually have a town here, but where Laclede would gain one inhabitant for his town, providing there was any growth in store for these places so far from New Orleans at all, Ste. Genevieve would get a score. It was so much nearer to the sea, and therefore better situated. No; I couldn't agree with Auguste's optimism at all.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," said Auguste, after I had finished my observations. "I'll wager my pistol against your silver-handled dagger that in less than twenty years St. Louis will be larger than Ste. Genevieve."

"That's too long a time to wait for a decision," I answered, smiling at the lad's enthusiastic outlook on the future. "We might both be dead long before that, but I'll make you the wager that the people from Chartres don't come, and that can be decided within a year."

"Done," said Auguste, and he grasped my hand.

A heavy crashing in the forest, and Baptiste Riviere's barytone ringing out in a splendid marching song roused us from our prophesies, and gave warning that the men had finished unloading and were on their way to make the clearing. In a

few minutes we had joined the file of boatmen pushing themselves through the woods with their heavy packs on their backs, and after a brief conversation with Maxim to assure himself the boat had been unloaded properly, Auguste put himself at their head and led the way to a little eminence just back of the blazed stumps. This was the place indicated on the rough map drawn by Laclede, that Auguste had with him, for the clearing to be made, and though I wondered why he had not selected some of the clear spaces on the terraces, it looked like quite a fit place for the post.

There was no play for any of us now. All except Bollette and two of the men who remained at the boat were in Maxim's party, and I was detailed by Chouteau, with two others, to return to the boat and assist in bringing up the other supplies and find a better berth, if possible, for our craft.

The sun was well above the horizon by this time, and as the stiff breeze of the day before had died away completely, it was actually pretty warm work carrying sacks back and forth through the woods, while the men making the clearing were bathed in perspiration before they had been wielding their axes an hour. The growth of trees on the site selected by Laclede was all of the younger variety, and before noon, just when we got the last of the supplies and tools from the boat, they had cleared away a pretty good section of the forest.

My muscles were tired, but my appetite was in fine working order, and the luncheon and rest did me a lot of good. In the afternoon everybody was put at tree chopping except Maxim and I, who were detailed to take care of the boat and bring it nearer if we could.

After some little search we found a deep cut in the cliff leading down to the water line, a cut worn away by water evidently and big enough for us to bring goods from the boat to the cliff top with comparative ease. It was quite close to the spot where the men were at work, and we resolved to bring the boat from the bay to this spot. Returning to the barge, we got in and started her out toward the stream. The current and the sun's rays had worn away a good deal of the shore ice by this time and we knew that with some chopping of the remaining ice we could tie the boat directly at the bank and in an excellent position, but we had not counted on what an unwieldy craft the big barge would be for two men to handle. With a great deal of labor, however, we finally got the boat opposite the cut, but just as we had her nose headed for shore and the current coming against her broadside, a heavy piece of ice—it looked like a small floating island to me—bore down directly upon us, and in trying to knock it out stream with my oar I upset the boat and we both fell in the chilly water. Fortunately, we could swim, but the boat, we needed that, and how to save it was on my mind even before I came to the surface. Once up, I dashed the water from my eyes and saw that it was only a few yards away, with Maxim scrambling up to the keel. I struck out for it in a hurry, and soon joined Maxim, but what could we do? The oars were gone and the current was carrying us swiftly down stream. I was just about to shout in the hope that the men far back from the bank would hear me when I saw Pradeaux appear on the cliff top with a bucket in his hand to which was attached a rope. He had come down from the clearing to get water for the men and saw us as soon as we saw him. We yelled and tried to tell him what was the matter, but he realized that clearly enough, and with a great yell to the men started running along the bank toward us. He was soon opposite the boat, and I thought he was going to throw the rope attached to the bucket, but no, he dropped that, and steadying himself for a second on the bank leaped into the water. It was fully thirty feet from the cliff top to the surface of the stream, floating ice was plentiful, and I feared he would have an accident as I saw him jump, but he came up all right, and a few strokes brought him alongside.

"Jump in the water and help me push the boat to the bank," he called to us, and we were off the hull in a twinkling, I with a feeling of mortification that that simple expedient had not occurred to me before. A dozen men had now reached the river and were running along the cliff toward us, but we got the boat against a tiny strip of land that ran along the base of the bluff and soon had her righted. Shivering in our wet clothes, we clambered in, and with the aid of a rope tossed to us from above were towed back to the cut.

None of the men said a word, but Lacroix got a fire going in a hurry, made us all strip off our clothing and dance around the fire for a few minutes before we donned the dry garments Bollette brought us from the bags.

It was not long ere we were all right, and then Auguste set us to the delectable task of fashioning new oars out of some rough-hewn boughs. It was finished when we were called to supper, and we returned to the site to find that the men had cleared away nearly an acre of ground and erected a couple of "lean-tos" to serve as our shelter over night.

The spirit of derision over Laclede's projects that had been so pronounced the

day before had died away before this time, and after supper we sat around the fire discussing the prospects of the new town M. Pierre was so sanguine he would soon have here. Auguste waxed eloquent with the same enthusiasm he had shown to me in the morning, and just as Riviere began knocking the ashes from his pipe, preparatory to turning in, he called to me to get a bottle of liquor and some pannikins from the supplies. Then, when the pannikins had all been served, he rose, and raising his hand above his head, said, "Here's to St. Louis that we are just cutting out of the forest," and every man of us scrambled to our feet as though we were drinking the health of the king and tossed off the toast to Laclede's new town and its prospects.

So ended that 11th day of February, 1761, the first day in the history of St. Louis.