

Father Marquette

Humanity is relentless in its quick forgetfulness of the dead, but more than two centuries have not dimmed the achievements of Father Jacques Marquette, nor obliterated the memory of the fine idealism of his life. Much of the wilderness in which he lived and worked has become peopled, the little mission of St. Ignace which he built has long since fallen to ruins, but Marquette's spirit is still felt by the hundreds of summer tourists who visit the monument at St. Ignace, Michigan, which marks the site of his former chapel.

Jacques Marquette grew to manhood in the shadow of dominant personalities and past glories of France. Born in Laon in 1637, he came of a family which cherished the memory of a long line of valiant warriors and distinguished statesmen. As a child he played among the crumbling ruins of walls and ramparts which had withstood the attacks of many foes of France; a dozen times a day he gazed upon the imposing cathedral built by the Church of Rome in the twelfth century; and his walks frequently led him among the ruins of an ancient leaning tower, built like that of Pisa.

The influence of the boy's mother, Rose de la Salle, together with a natural tendency toward a life of piety, soon made him determined to abandon the

traditions of his ancient house which marked its sons for statesmen and warriors, and to enter the service of the Cross. Shortly after he was seventeen, he went to the neighboring town of Nancy and entered the Jesuit college as a novice.

Beginning in 1632, the Jesuits had gradually penetrated far into the forests of North America and were attempting to spread Christianity among the Indians of lower Canada. During his long and tedious months of study in France, Marquette had, no doubt, read accounts of these Jesuit activities and pictured himself as a savior of the savages in this strange, far country. Whatever his hopes may have been, he burned with an intense desire to try his fortunes as a forest missionary in America.

For twelve years his ambition remained ungratified, but he did not lose his ardor. At last, in 1666, when he was twenty-nine years of age, the long-wished-for orders arrived and Marquette quickly embarked for the missionary field of New France. He reached Quebec in September of the same year and it was there, while he was gaining his first impressions of the New World, that he met Louis Joliet, with whom he was afterward to share one of the greatest adventures of his life.

After a rest of twenty days, Marquette was sent to Three Rivers, seventy-seven miles above Quebec, to become a pupil of Father Gabriel Drüillettes in the many-sided art of the Indian missionary. In marked contrast to the theological seminaries of Old

France, Three Rivers was a rude school in which the young priest learned to endure the hardships of toilsome journeys, to face the horrors of famine, pestilence, and war, and to speak the strange languages of the Indians. But Marquette's natural ability, coupled with his great zeal, seems to have overcome all obstacles.

Daily association for two years with the greasy savages of Three Rivers, constant observation of their manners and customs, and the mastery of six dialects was deemed to be sufficient apprenticeship, and Marquette was sent to the Ottawa mission at Sault Ste. Marie in the summer of 1668. There he was associated with "twenty or thirty Nations, all different in language, customs, and Policy." After his first winter's work, he wrote that the harvest of souls "is very abundant, and that it only rests with the Missionaries to baptize the entire population". He was skeptical of the sincerity of the Indian converts, however, fearing that they were "too acquiescent" and that after baptism they would still "cling to their customary superstitions." He gave especial attention to baptizing the dying, "who are a surer harvest."

Marquette remained only a year at the Sault and then he was sent on to the farthestmost corner of Lake Superior to take charge of the mission at La Pointe. Built on a narrow spit of sand and gravel some six miles long, the mission was surrounded by a wild and picturesque landscape of

steep cliffs of sandstone and dark pine forests. Marquette assumed his duties with a quaking heart for it was a hazardous undertaking, but it was exactly the opportunity for which he had been longing. He went at once to visit the neighboring Indians, and found them to be of the Huron nation and practically all baptized. Some of the other tribes, however, were found to be "very far from the Kingdom of God."

It was during his service at La Pointe that Marquette first heard of the great river which flowed so far southward that the nations about the Great Lakes had never heard of its mouth. He also learned of the Illinois Indians — a strange tribe of savages who raised maize and enormous squashes, and who did not know what a canoe was. Then and there Marquette conceived the ambition to explore the Mississippi and to carry the Gospel to the benighted Illinois who worshipped the sun and the thunder.

In the spring of 1671 the Hurons near La Pointe were threatened with an attack by the warlike Sioux, and fled to Mackinac Island. Marquette abandoned the mission and went with them. There, at the junction of lakes Huron, Superior, and Michigan — the gateway to the land of the Illinois in the great valley — the shrewd Jesuit took his post and bided the time when he could fulfill his desire.

Meanwhile he was kept very busy, ministering to the religious needs of the Indians, baptizing the infants, and making excursions into the surrounding

country by canoe and on foot. Near the edge of the island he established the little mission of St. Ignace, which was later transferred to the mainland. Its site is to-day marked by an imposing monument, a shrine for hundreds of tourists.

Scarcely more than a year had elapsed before Marquette's dreams came true. It was in December, 1672, when his friend Joliet arrived from Quebec with orders for him to join in exploring the Mississippi River and to spread the faith among the natives of that country. It was a momentous occasion in the little settlement, and during the winter months Marquette and Joliet were busy collecting information about the great western country, drawing maps, and preparing for the long journey in the spring.

On the seventeenth of May, 1673, the two Frenchmen, together with five boatmen, set out in two small birch-bark canoes. By way of the Fox and Wisconsin rivers, they reached the Mississippi just a month from the time they started, and eight days later paid their first visit to the people who then lived in Iowa.

After two days of feasting with the Illinois Indians, the party proceeded on down the river. Various thrilling adventures convinced the explorers that they were in a strange land indeed. They had not gone far when they saw, painted high upon the smooth surface of a cliff, two hideous monsters, the work of some imaginative Indian artist. "They are

as large As a calf'', writes Father Marquette. "They have Horns on their heads Like those of deer, a horrible look, red eyes, a beard Like a tiger's, a face somewhat like a man's, a body Covered with scales, and so Long A tail that it winds all around the Body, passing the head and going back between the legs, ending in a Fish's tail."

While still discussing these pictured rocks they heard the rush of a rapids and in a few moments they were in the muddy and turbulent waters of the Missouri River. "An accumulation of large and entire trees, branches, and floating islands, was issuing from the mouth of the river, with such impetuosity'', says Marquette, that they could not pass through without great danger.

Going farther to the south, the explorers encountered great swarms of mosquitoes near the broad mouth of the Ohio. The heat and the insects made life miserable until the men hoisted canvas tents over their canoes, after the manner of the southern Indians.

A few days later, as the *voyageurs* approached a village of Mitchigamea Indians, they saw the savages preparing for battle. "They were armed with bows, arrows, hatchets, clubs, and shields'', relates Father Marquette. "They prepared to attack us, on both land and water; part of them embarked in great wooden canoes — some to ascend, others to descend the river, in order to Intercept us and surround us on all sides. Those who were on land came

and went, as if to commence The attack. In fact, some Young men threw themselves into The water, to come and seize my Canoe; but the current compelled Them to return to land. One of them then hurled his club, which passed over without striking us. In vain I showed The calumet, and made them signs that we were not coming to war against them. The alarm continued, and they were already preparing to pierce us with arrows from all sides, when God suddenly touched the hearts of the old men, who were standing at the water's edge."

The elders succeeded in checking the ardor of the young braves and invited the Frenchmen to their village. The Indians could not understand Marquette's Algonquin dialects, but they told him that another tribe farther down the river near the mouth of the Arkansas could give what information they desired.

The Arkansas Indians received the explorers with unmistakable demonstrations of friendship. The white men were feasted until nightfall, while the Indians told of the dangers of the river below, of the fierce tribes that inhabited the country, and of the murderous Spaniards not far away. Pondering upon these warnings, convinced that they were within three days' journey of the sea, and anxious to report their discoveries, Marquette and Joliet decided to turn their canoes northward.

The trip home was begun on July seventeenth. Paddling against the stream was far different from

floating with it, the boatmen soon discovered. They were forced to thread their way back and forth across the river to avoid the swiftest currents. As if to multiply their woes, the heat became almost unbearable and the mosquitoes were a constant irritation. Camping in the damp night air, without fire to avoid attack, and sleeping in cramped positions in the canoes were unhealthy practices which would harm the health of any man, and Marquette, being naturally of a delicate physique, began to show signs of collapse.

At last they reached the Illinois River, where friendly Indians told them of a shorter way to Lake Michigan than the route by which they had come. In the course of their journey up the Illinois, they came one day to a village in whose lodges lived the same Indians they had visited in Iowa. The tired *voyageurs* were welcomed with such hospitality that they remained three days in the village. Marquette told the Indians of the God who had protected him on his long voyage, and before he departed he promised to return some day and establish a mission among them.

Reaching Lake Michigan, probably by way of the Chicago River, the weary explorers pushed their sadly worn canoes on toward the Jesuit mission of St. François Xavier at De Pere, where Marquette had been assigned for service. There he arrived at the end of September, ill and exhausted, just four months after he had started on his journey.

During the long and tedious winter which followed, Marquette's mind was busy making plans to return to the Illinois tribes and establish a mission near Kaskaskia. In the early autumn he believed himself well enough to accomplish this task and he started from De Pere in October, 1674. Two French servants accompanied him.

Along the shore of Lake Michigan the travellers encountered cold and stormy weather. Constant exposure to wind, rain, and cold so weakened Father Marquette that, upon reaching the Chicago River in December, the two boatmen were forced to build a rude hut and there, amidst the great silences of the wilderness, the three men spent the winter. The black-gown struggled through the strain of the cold season and in March the three men pursued their journey toward Kaskaskia.

Marquette's health failed rapidly but they reached the Indian village on the eighth of April where Marquette "was received as an angel from Heaven." A tabernacle of saplings covered with reed mats and bearskins was built close to the village and in it were hung "several pieces of chinese taffeta, attached to these four large Pictures of the blessed Virgin, which were visible on all Sides." There the priest spoke eloquently to more than a thousand braves who listened "with universal Joy", and prayed that he might return to them again as soon as his health would permit.

Marquette's illness grew steadily worse and,

realizing that death was not far distant, he started north with the hope of reaching the mission of St. Ignace before he died. His two faithful servants, taking advantage of the northward current, pushed the little canoe along the eastern shore of Lake Michigan, but April and early May were cold and stormy, and the two boatmen despaired of being able to reach their destination in time. Marquette, preparing to die, reclined upon the reed mats in the bottom of the boat.

At last, perceiving a high eminence which he deemed well-suited for his burial, Marquette directed his servants to stop, for he had selected that spot as the place of his last repose. It was early in the day and the boatmen wished to go farther, but "God raised a Contrary wind", and they were compelled to turn back to the place which Marquette had pointed out. There they built a little fire, made a wretched cabin of bark, and the dying missionary was laid beneath the humble roof. While the men were tearfully engaged in making camp, Marquette spent his last hours in prayer, and on the eighteenth of May, 1675, "with a countenance beaming and all aglow, he expired so gently that it might have been regarded as a pleasant sleep."

The two servants buried their master as he had directed, and placed a large cross to mark his grave. In the spring, some Kiskakons carried his body to St. Ignace and lowered it into a small vault in the middle of the church. The little mission was burned

in 1700 and for more than one hundred and seventy-five years his resting place was unknown. In 1877, Father Edward Jacker discovered the grave and Marquette's remains now rest in the church of St. Ignace and at Marquette University in Milwaukee.

Marquette was never a man of great strength; he was unfitted for the rough life of the wilderness. His gentle manner and frail physique, however, concealed a will of iron. Earnest, kind, and sincere, the model of his whole life was Saint François Xavier, probably the greatest of all Jesuit missionaries, who extended the faith through fifty-two kingdoms in Asia. In many respects, the incidents of Marquette's life ran parallel to those of his great predecessor. When death overtook him, alone in the wilderness, he spent his last few hours giving thanks to God that he could die "as he had always prayed, in a Wretched cabin in the midst of the forests and bereft of all human succor", exactly as Saint François Xavier did many centuries before him on the other side of the world.

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