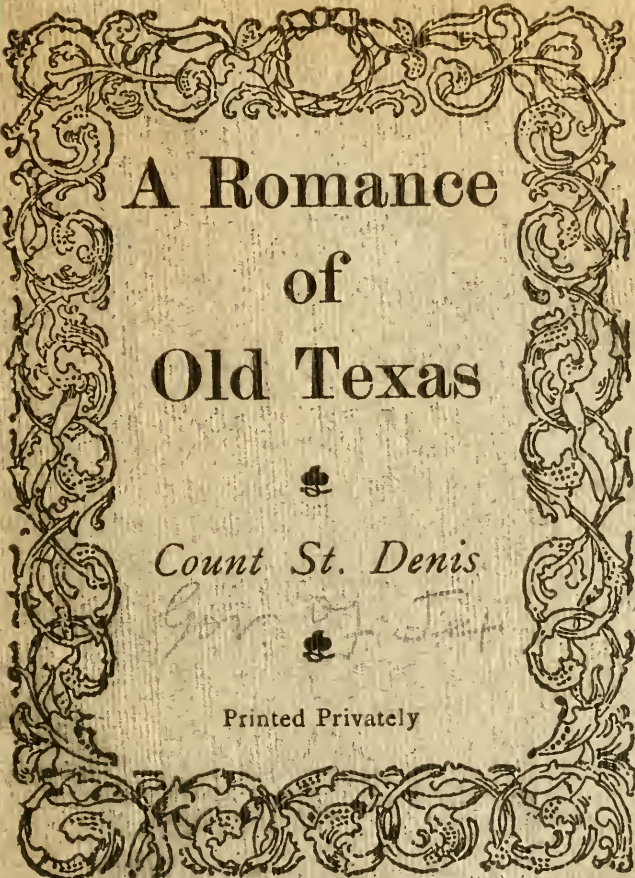


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A Romance of Old Texas

Count St. Denis

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Caldwell, Tex.



HERE is much well-authenticated material for the historian in the minds of the old veterans of the border that will soon pass beyond the reach of all writers. Few people know anything of the very first settlements in Texas, and, doubtless, many will be astonished to learn that the business of creating republics in that country commenced nearly 200 years ago. There were filibusters who dreamed of carving out for themselves an empire in the great Southwest long before even Aaron Burr was born. Others in the ranks of the most careful readers of history will possibly be surprised to learn that the old San Antonio road, which is one of the best known landmarks in the Southwest, was laid off and carefully mapped just 182 years ago. It was at one time regarded as the longest highway in the world. It was longer than any of the old Roman roads—longer than the great military way that lead from the gates of the Eternal City to Constantinople and the Asiatic provinces. The San Antonio road proper ran

from San Augustine to San Antonio, and the long road extending south of the Alamo Mission across the Rio Grande to the City of Mexico, a distance of more than 1,000 miles, was also called the San Antonio road. It was originally laid off 100 feet wide. It is a road yet. This great road, over which Spanish viceroys and richly laden caravans traveled, over which countless thousands crowded their way to Texas battlefields for more than 100 years, was laid off by men who were talking of republican institutions before the ideas of Jefferson or the triumphs of Washington had ever entered the minds of the wildest dreamers

Spain and France both claimed the country. France based her claims on the discoveries of La Salle. This great explorer, in searching for the mouth of the Mississippi, sailed too far west, and finally landed on the shores of Matagorda Bay. Here he built a fort, and called it Fort St. Louis, in honor of Louis XIV of France. Realizing that he had made a mistake, La Salle, accompanied by

a few followers, attempted to march across the country, hoping to reach a French fort on the Arkansas River, where he had instructed De Tonti to keep a small body of soldiers. He lost his life through the treachery of his own comrades, and it is supposed that his bones repose somewhere on the shores of the Neches River. Exaggerated reports concerning the rich country west of the Mississippi River, which bordered on the Gulf of Mexico, reached France. The soil was said to be the richest in the world, the climate was salubrious, like that of southern Spain, the mountains were full of gold and silver, and the rivers ran over golden sand. Among the hundreds of adventurous and warlike spirits that surrounded the throne of Louis XIV, none listened to these stories with more eagerness than Count St. Denis. He was a brave, energetic and handsome youth, who had inherited a great name and many heavily mortgaged estates. The opportunity which he eagerly sought, to draw his sword and make an effort to fill his purse on the plains of the Rio Grande, soon presented itself

The bare cold facts of the story of this young man's adventures read so much like the dreams of a romancer that they would be rejected by all historians if they were not supported by indubitable records. Count St. Denis and a young Frenchman of equal rank of the name of Belisle were both violently in love with the same young lady. Their rivalry ended in a quarrel which led to a duel. The antagonists met and fought a terrible battle with swords, which terminated, as St. Denis supposed, in the death of his rival. He at once fled from France, and after a series of narrow escapes from arrest and death he finally landed in America and joined the great Louisiana Company. His countrymen received him with open arms, and immediately offered him employment. All Spanish territory at that time north of the Rio Grande was ruled by a Governor appointed by the Viceroy of Mexico. The Louisiana Company was anxious to possess the country, and the authorities sent St. Denis at the head of a little army of less than 100 men to plant the flag of France upon the domes of the Spanish

forts and missions. He marched through a region of country that literally swarmed with hostile savages and established himself in Northern Texas without ever firing a shot. He must have been an extraordinary young man, possessing many of the traits of a leader, not the least among which were his masterly accomplishments as a diplomat, for he not only made an alliance offensive and defensive with the powerful, warlike Natchez, but he soon won the friendship of the Spanish settlers who lived in the territory. Intoxicated with his success, he boldly cut loose from the Louisiana company and set up a government of his own. This was in the year 1714, and it was the very first attempt to establish an independent government ever made on the North American continent

It was a curious kind of a government. St. Denis was at the head of it under the modest title of Governor, and by the provisions of the Constitution, which he drafted himself, he possessed in his limited realm just about as much power as the Autocrat of all the Russias. Leaving a trusted subaltern in

command, St. Denis set out for the City of Mexico on a mission that has never been thoroughly understood. He either hoped through his shrewd power of diplomacy to get the Spanish Viceroy to recognize his government, or, failing in this, he expected to turn everything over to Spain and get himself appointed Governor of the territory. When he arrived at the Presidio San Juan, near the Rio Grande, the Governor received and entertained him in a most hospitable manner. The polished address and courtly military bearing of the bold young adventurer almost instantly won the head of the old Governor, and at the same time the heart of his beautiful daughter. It was a case of mutual love at first sight. St. Denis almost forgot the empire that he had been dreaming of, while enjoying the hospitality of Senor Villesecas and basking in the smiles of Donna Maria

There was another suitor for the hand of this young lady, and this was no less a personage than Governor Anaya of Coahuila. This official no sooner heard of St. Denis and

his attentions to Donna Maria than he ordered his arrest. St. Denis was loaded with chains and thrown into the fortress of Monoclava. Donna Maria continued to assure young man of her devotion and of the friendship of her father. After St. Denis had been confined a month or more his powerful rival appeared one fine day at the door of his cell, followed by a file of his guards, and told St. Denis that if he would instantly surrender all claims to the hand of Donna Maria that he would release him and give him letters that would assist him in the prosecution of his plans in the City of Mexico. St. Denis, with flashing eyes, scorned the offer, and his reply was worthy of one of the old knights of chivalry

“Tyrant, you may load me with chains, but so long as Donna Maria honors me with her love and confidence, so long shall that love and confidence be guarded as my most sacred treasures. You may take from me my life, Senor, but you cannot take from me my honor.”

The tyrant ordered St. Denis to be treated as a common criminal, but when months

had passed and the brave young Frenchman showed no signs of yielding, the wretch sent a courier bearing this cruel message to Donna Maria : " Marry me, and St. Denis shall be released : refuse, and your lover shall surely die." The fearless young girl declined the tyrant's offer in emphatic terms, and at once applied to the Viceroy in the City of Mexico, telling him the story of their love. The Viceroy was moved by the piteous appeal of the beautiful girl, and he released St. Denis. As soon as St. Denis was liberated he married Donna Maria and resumed his journey to the City of Mexico. Here his pleasing address won all hearts. The Viceroy offered him a position under the Spanish Government and gave him full authority to punish his enemy. St. Denis showed that magnanimity was numbered with his many other fine traits of character, for he refused to make any trouble for the man who had so cruelly wronged him. After a short stay in the capital he returned to his Government in northern Texas.

It is not known as to what kind of au-

thority was granted to him by the Spanish officials in Mexico. He built a fort at Nacogdoches and laid off a city. He ordered the land surveyed, and granted titles to the settlers. He established trading post at various points in the interior and rapidly accumulated a large fortune. He possessed the happy faculty of making friends of every man who came in contact with him. He was called the "just chief" by the Indians, and his fame for fair dealing was well established with all the tribes within reach of his capital. While in the height of his power two Indians one day came to his house and told him that they had seen a white man with a tribe of coast Indians who held him as a prisoner. St. Denis at once offered them a large sum of money if they would go and rescue the white man and bring him to Nacogdoches. The Indians went away, and in a few weeks they appeared at St. Denis' house with a naked half-starved human being, who was besmeared with dirt and painted like an Indian. St. Denis ordered a bath for the poor shivering

creature, and sent a suit of his own clothes to the bath room. When the man had been washed and clothed he appeared, before his benefactor. St. Denis no sooner looked at him than he was struck dumb with amazement. The man was Belisle, whom St. Denis thought he killed with his sword in Paris. Belisle was equally as much astonished. They were Frenchmen, and they instantly embraced each other and buried all past differences. Belisle's story was a short one but full of sufferings. He had recovered from the wounds inflicted by the sword of St. Denis, and not long afterwards he joined a colony of adventurers who sailed to join the Louisiana company at the mouth of the Mississippi. Like La Salle they lost their way, and sailed too far west. Belisle, with two comrades, went ashore on the coast of Texas to enjoy a hunt. They got lost, and the ship sailed away and left them. After wandering through the forests for many days Belisle's two comrades perished from hunger. Belisle fell in with some coast indians, who treated him very

cruelly. They stripped him of his clothing, and would have tortured him to death with fire had not an old squaw interefered in his favor. He had been a prisoner with the indians for a long time. St. Denis gave Belisle an office in his government, and put him in the way of making money. St. Denis was slain in a battle with the Indians on the frontier of his country, and after his death the affairs of the colony fell into disorder. At the time of St. Denis' death there were about 300 white people who claimed the protection of his government and they were nearly all in prosperous circumstances. Many of them had accumulated fortunes, trading with the Indians, and St. Denis himself was said to have had in his possession more than \$100,000 in gold. Had he lived a few years longer he would have anticipated the work of Austin and Houston, and firmly established a government in Texas that Mexico could not have overthrown 100 years before the battle of San Jacinto was fought. He was a well balanced man and one born to command. No man

ever thought of disobeying his orders. Enough is known of his extraordinary career to force us to the conclusion that he was the greatest man that ever attempted to establish a government in Texas. There was no man in the government capable of succeeding him, and the colonists soon returned to the Louisiana possessions. The Natchez Indians furnished Donna Maria with a guard of honor that escorted her and her treasures to her father's home at the Presidio San Juan on the shores of the Rio Grande. Thus ended the first dream of empire in northern Mexico. It was 100 years before this dream entered the brain of other ambitious spirits. It was a fatal dream that ruined Burr and ended in the death of Nolan, Long, Edwards, Austin, Travis, Magee, Fannin and thousands of others who trod the pathway of glory which lead to the battlefield and Mexican prisons

