

MADELEINE *Takes* COMMAND



ETHEL C. BRILL

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by

ETHEL C. BRILL

Illustrated by Bruce Adams

BETHLEHEM BOOKS • IGNATIUS PRESS
BATHGATE, N. D. SAN FRANCISCO

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Originally published by Whittlesey House, 1946

Cover art © 2001 by Louis Glanzman

Foreword and special features

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First Bethlehem Books Edition, April 1996

ISBN 978-1-883937-17-1

Library of Congress: 96-83472

Cover design by Davin Carlson

Bethlehem Books • Ignatius Press

10194 Garfield Street South

Bathgate, ND 58216

www.bethlehembooks.com

1-800-757-6831

Printed in the United States on acid free paper

Manufactured by Thomson-Shore, Dexter, MI (USA); RMA22JM38, September, 2014

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I

Left to Hold the Fort

ALTHOUGH IT HAD been fifteen minutes since Madame de Verchères had put on her bonnet and fur cape, she found excuses to linger in the big living room of the manor house on the St. Lawrence River. Now she changed the position of a candlestick. Now she shifted a log in the blazing fireplace. Once she tried the bolt on the heavy door, and once she straightened a stack of snowshoes in a corner of the room.

Gravely her fourteen-year-old daughter followed these movements. Madeleine understood perfectly why her mother could not make up her mind to go. At last she came over and put a hand on the woman's arm.

"*Maman*," she said in a low tone, "you cannot pretend any longer that there is a single thing to do here."

"I hesitate to leave, Madeleine. If I had not promised your father, I would not go one step."

"Of course you must go, *Maman*. You will not be away long, and we shall be quite safe, the boys and I."

"I wish I could be sure of that. The business must be attended to, and I may not have another opportunity to make the journey. But I cannot help feeling that it might be better to take all of you with me."

"The canoes will be crowded, *Maman*. And I couldn't go to Montreal like this." Madeleine glanced down at her Indian moccasins and a skirt of coarse homespun woolen no better than that worn by the poorest girls in New France. "There is no time now to make ready. And who would command here? Is there anyone we could trust? No, Mother dear, the boys and I must stay."

Madame de Verchères put both arms around her daughter and held her close. "You are brave, my Madeleine. We must be brave in this dangerous country of New France."

"It is our own country, *Maman*," the girl said softly. "Don't be anxious about us. I will take good care of the boys."

"I know well that I can trust you, my daughter, but you must be careful and discreet as well as brave. I have told the boys they are to obey you in everything, as they would your father or me. Keep them close. Do not let them wander in the woods. Alexandre will make you no trouble, I think, but Louis is more reckless. You must be firm with him. Where are the little ones?"

As she spoke, a door was thrown open and a chorus of childish voices cried, "Hurry, *Maman*, the seigneur is waiting."

Madame de Verchères smiled down at her three youngest children—two small girls in bonnets and cloaks and a boy of five obviously very proud of his blue hooded coat, a miniature of the capote worn by Canadian soldiers. Then she raised her eyes to a shaggy, weather-beaten figure behind them, a man in homespun and buckskin who bowed low before her.

“Pardon, Madame,” he said in a low apologetic voice, “but the seigneur bids me ask you to make haste. We must leave at once or night will overtake us.”

“Indeed, yes, I will be with you in a moment. You may take my portmanteau.”

He shouldered a worn leather bag that had been brought from France many years ago. Madame de Verchères gave a quick glance around the big room. Then, linking her arm through that of her daughter, she followed him into the open.

It was on an October afternoon in 1692 that mother and daughter stepped out of this home which, though built of roughhewn logs, was nevertheless known as a manor house. It belonged to an estate that King Louis XIV of France had granted to Sieur François Jarret de Verchères, the father of Madeleine, in return for his military services. Like other estates on the upper St. Lawrence, it was known as a military seigneurie. And, like his neighbors, Madeleine's father was called a seigneur.

This estate of eighteen square miles was more than a home. It was a fort thrown up against the Iroquois

nation. Those five tribes of Indians, headed by the ferocious Mohawks, were forever invading Montreal and the country around it. Therefore, when Madame de Verchères and her daughter left the manor house, they were not in the open. They were in an enclosure known as the stockade.

A gate that was always bolted at sunset led from the stockade to the banks of the St. Lawrence. Careless of the stumps and stones that roughened the ground, the three younger children of Madame de Verchères ran along up to this gate and soon they were lost from view. Their mother, however, picked her way. It was not until she had passed through the gate that she lifted her eyes. She could see the St. Lawrence flowing swift and mighty about the sharp point of land on which the seigneury was built.

“Look, Madeleine, look!” she cried, stopping short and pointing to the river. “Ah, is it not beautiful, *chérie*, our land of New France?”

“Yes, *Maman*,” returned the girl solemnly. “I always feel that, no matter how hard our life is, our country is worth it all.”

As soon as they passed through the gate, they could look down on the dock at the edge of the river. Two canoes rested beside it, and on the shore directly in front of it a group had gathered to watch them depart.

A tall elderly man separated himself from the group and scrambled up the bank of the river. Although he wore buckskin breeches and moccasins over his hose

of home-knit wool, his faded coat was of fine material and good cut. Plainly here was not one of the lesser folk clustered about the dock. Here was a seigneur.

He raised a broad-brimmed hat of beaver felt. "I am honored, Madame de Verchères," he said, "to have the privilege of escorting you today."

"You are kind, Monsieur. My business in Montreal is urgent or I would not trespass on your kindness. I am sorry if I have kept you waiting."

"Not at all, Madame. Mademoiselle Madeleine is to accompany you?"

"If only she could!" sighed the mother. "But, as you know, she is the eldest of my children at home and she must take charge of the seigneurie."

The seigneur made a deep bow to Madeleine. "So Mademoiselle holds the fort. How I regret that I cannot have the pleasure of serving under such a charming commandant!"

Madeleine's cheeks reddened. Except for a few months now and then in the convent school of the Ursuline nuns in Quebec and for rare visits to the fur-trading and mission center, Montreal, she had spent her fourteen years in the isolated seigneurie. She was little used to courtly speeches.

"I fear I am a very inexperienced one, Monsieur," she replied.

"Do you think there is any real danger now?" the mother inquired.

Trouble in NEW FRANCE



WORKING with feverish haste, Madeleine selected muskets, pistols, powder, and bullets. The sight of a man's hat, an old one that had belonged to her father, lying on a powder cask, gave her an idea. She pulled off her linen cap and put on the hat. It was not too large over her heavy hair, and, seen above the pickets, it would deceive the Indians. She was adjusting powder horn and bullet pouch when Louis and Alexandre ran in with Laviolette at their heels.

"Arm yourselves quickly," Madeleine ordered.

"What is your plan, Ma'm'selle?" the old soldier inquired.

"To defend the seigneurie to the last. The little children must stay in the blockhouse and their mothers with them. That leaves only six of us to guard the palisades. We must try to make the Mohawks believe that we have a strong garrison. If they attack, we can only do our best. We are fighting for our people—what there are left of them—for our country and our faith. Let us fight to the death if need be."

AND SO MADELEINE and her small force begin their harrowing vigil—hoping against all hope that help will come in time.



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