MADELEINE *Takes* COMMAND

by

ETHEL C. BRILL

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I wish to express to Miss Jeanette Eaton my appreciation of the interest she has taken in this story and of her valuable criticisms and suggestions.

Most sincerely,
ETHEL C. BRILL

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Foreword

THIS NOVEL'S historical setting, based firmly on fact, compels our admiration for the bravery, honor and quick wit of the early French Canadians, and for one young woman in particular. Madeleine de Verchères, at 14, is the oldest daughter of a titled family living in "New France" in 1692. The Verchères wear moccasins and live in a log fort, but despite this frontier setting their pride and sense of honor stem from the French civilization they have brought with them, including its commission to plant Christianity in the New World. Madeleine's remarkable ability to "take command" shows a character shaped by the standards and wisdom of the Old World, vigorously tempered by the challenges and dangers of the New. This blending of the best of two worlds is demonstrated in Madeleine's own grasp of the situation at hand and in the way she manages to win the respect of the entire seigneury: young and old, men and women, soldiers and *habitants*.

Ethel C. Brill wrote this story in 1946—before the time when writing about either Native Americans or "old-fashioned" feminine virtues became so ticklish a business. The conflict between the French and the Iroquois, which forms the core of the plot, could be told in all its simplicity; Madeleine could be shown as a courageous female who had no time to lament that she was not a man. Yet, by dealing conscientiously with her material, Mrs. Brill, even in the face of today's politicized movements, powerfully and accurately captures a moment in history for the modern reader. *Madeleine Takes Command* is a stirring tale of suspense and fortitude, and a fine exemplar of a young girl's wisdom.

Early in the story we learn that the Iroquois killed the oldest of the Verchères sons. Now his younger brother Louis is filled with hatred towards the Iroquois and expresses his feelings with vehemence.

Madeleine tempers this hot mood. She reminds Louis that the Indians, despite their misdeeds, are God's creatures too, on whom she prays God's grace. She goes on to remonstrate, "Do you think the white man has always been kind or even just to the red man?" They discuss the previous governor's cruel and unwise policies. "Anyone can see why [the Indians] hate us and want their re-

venge," remarks Madeleine. Louis still thinks the Indians deserve to perish. "Even the Christian Indians?" he is asked. But in Louis' eyes, the mission Indians are worst of all.

This little verbal conflict, between the voices of reason and hasty judgment, in the persons of sister and brother, provides the framework for the events that fill the remainder of the story. We can never forget the distinctions Madeleine has made. And in the book's epilogue we learn that mission Indians in historical fact did play an important role in rescuing settlers whom the raiding Mohawks, in the course of events, had captured.

In the midst of a suspenseful trial of nerves with the Indians, Madeleine simultaneously exercises her reason and her charm on another front, that of her own family. She brings to bear her ideals, her womanly ways and good sense upon her younger brothers. And they respond. Under the force of extreme pressures Madeleine proves that authority and a tender family intimacy need not exclude each other. This likable girl, often at the end of her wits and bone-weary, shows us all how that combination is achieved. The touchy, argumentative Louis honors his older sister in the end with a gallant gesture. She has brought out the best in all those around her, even her younger brothers. Her life and her courage, revealed against an exciting historical background, have yet much to say to young people of today.

Lydia Reynolds • North Dakota, 1996

Statue of Madeleine de Verchères
from a photograph, Canadian Railway Systems

1. 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 seigneury. 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 seigneury."

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 seigneury. 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.

"I trust not, Madame. So far as I know, there are no signs of trouble at present. But here on the upper river we must be on the alert always. You have a garrison?"

"His Excellency the Governor has given us a few men of the militia and has supplied us with ammunition enough to withstand any ordinary attack."

"Then I think you have no cause for fear."

They were nearing the group by the river's edge when two boys scrambled up the bank and ran toward them. The taller, who was about twelve, wore a leather hunting shirt over his breeches. His younger brother wore the blue blouse of a peasant. Although their brown legs were bare, moccasins protected their feet.

"Oh, Mother," cried the elder, "can't we go too? There is room in the canoes."

"No, Louis, you must stay here and help Madeleine take care of the seigneury."

The boy's face fell, and he kicked at a pebble with his moccasined toe. "There's not a bit of danger here now," he muttered. "The sergeant says so."

"My boy, here in New France there's always danger," put in the seigneur a little severely. "You wouldn't desert the garrison, would you?"

Louis glanced up at him and stopped kicking at the stone. "I didn't mean to desert," he protested. "I meant, couldn't we all go?"

His mother laid a hand on his shoulder. "Not this time, my son. If your father were here, it would be different. Don't you remember what he always said—that one cannot put too much trust in strange soldiers? That's why there must always be some member of the family left in charge. So—be good, Louis. Obey your sister just as you would your father or me. Remember you must uphold the honor of the Verchères."

While she spoke, the seigneur had been staring impatiently in the direction of the canoes. "Madame," said he, "I do not like to press you, but the hour grows late."