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## JEANNE MANCE . . . PIONEER MEDICAL MISSIONARY\*

BY SOEUR MONDOUX

The name — Jeanne Mance — reminiscent of so much generosity and heroism, has become an ensign, as it were, for the nursing profession in Canada. More than that, its fame has extended to other lands even beyond the sea, and it is with pride that the mission nurses and women doctors of our own day look to this valiant Frenchwoman for courage and inspiration.

Scarcely half a century had passed since Jacques Cartier had raised the first cross on the shore of Gaspé Bay when a little girl — Jeanne — was born in the household of Pierre Mance in Langrès, a city of old Champagne. No doubt her father, an attorney in the service of the royal court, was well aware of the happenings — the strategies, the struggles, the deeds of valour — then taking place in that New France so far across the sea. But there is no reason to suppose that any of these events particularly impressed the mind of his little daughter, as she grew up peacefully and ordinarily under the strict and well-ordered tutelage of the Ursuline Sisters of Langrès.

Even when she had completed her studies, the regularity of her life remained unbroken by anything beyond the ordinary — for she slipped quietly and unobtrusively into the performance of the

regular household tasks of the day, becoming a "little mother" to her younger brothers and sisters who had been prematurely orphaned. Nor does even the slightest idea of any other vocation seem to have occurred to her. Providence, it appears, was keeping her for another mission — one which would demand all the liberty of action a woman could muster in those days.

Thus — as housekeeper and as foster-mother — Jeanne Mance spent the early years of her womanhood — until the wars between France and Spain, and the epidemics which inevitably followed, interrupted the quiet life of the people of Langrès. Plague swept the countryside, and Jeanne Mance, already somewhat experienced in nursing through the care she had given her younger brothers and sisters, now turned to the task of tending the many sick of the neighborhood. She nursed the suffering, consoled the dying — meditating daily on the struggle between death and life she saw constantly enacted before her.

Jeanne was now thirty-three years old, and having thus tasted the joy of devoting herself wholeheartedly to the work of nursing the sick, she felt that a life without some definite aim — some goal — was after all but pale and meaningless. Her brothers and sisters no longer needed her — but what was she to do?

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It was then the year 1640. There were great comings and goings between the rough and savage lands far across the sea and the mother-country. The old France thrilled to the tales of her explorers, her *coureurs de bois*, her missionaries, the Jesuits and the Recollets. A receiver of taxes in Anjou, Jérôme le Royer de la Dauversière, was just then dreaming his dream of planting a mission in New France, and the young priest, Jean Jacques Olier, the future founder of the Seminary of Sainte Sulpice, was helping him to realize his vision. Not even a year had passed since six nuns, among them Mère Marie de l'Incarnation, and three Jesuit fathers had left their pleasant homeland in the service of the Canadian missions. Is it any wonder then, that those who remained behind were full of hopes and dreams for the New France?

It so happened that while she was questioning her future, Jeanne met a cousin, a chaplain of the Sainte Chapelle of Paris, who was more than ordinarily interested in these courageous endeavors. Filled with zeal and enthusiasm, he spoke to her of the heroism of the sisters who had just embarked for Quebec. No doubt he told her, too, of the vision of the mystic, de la Dauversière, and of the Society of Notre-Dame de Mont Royal which was engaged in raising funds and organizing an expedition to build the mission of Ville-Marie, the future Montreal.

Immediately Jeanne was won

over to the cause—she would join these pioneers. In the meantime she prayed that God might give her the light and strength to do whatever was asked of her; for to sacrifice the persons and things she held most dear—to depossess herself of all these—did not this require a supernatural strength—a special grace? And, moreover, how could her poor, frail body ever endure the adversities of the pitiless climate of the new country? In her dreams she saw wild wastes of ice and snow—so different from the pleasant warmth of her dear Champagne. Jeanne saw all these obstacles—but her decision was irrevocable. She had found her vocation; she would follow it, and this despite the immediate and the unbelievable difficulties which each in their turn would try to paralyze her work.

Thus placing her confidence in God and remaining faithful to the counsel she had received, Jeanne went to Paris. Paris presented to her Father Saint Jure and Father Charles Lalement, both of them Jesuits. The latter had returned from New France only two years ago and at that very time was in communication with Jérôme de la Dauversière concerning the foundation of the mission of Ville-Marie. At Paris also, she met another missionary, Father Charles Rapine of the Recollets, who introduced her to a certain Madame de Bullion. This generous woman was afterwards to give her the necessary funds with which to erect a small hospital in Mont

Royal.

The time for action had come. In the springtime of 1641 she left Paris for the port of La Rochelle whence the ships were to set sail for New France. The meeting with la Dauversière, who had come to survey the departure of his first expedition, with Paul de Chomedey, Sieur de Maisonneuve, who was to lead it, but served to confirm her convictions and strengthen her courage. Did not the former himself explain to her the designs with which Providence had inspired him for the establishment of the future colony of Montreal? Did he not foretell the role she must fulfill in the new mission—that of caring for the sick, be they French or Indians—of building a hospital which would later receive the help of the Hospitalers of St. Joseph who had been especially founded for this work at La Flèche in Anjou? Yes, indeed, it was to New France that she must go.

At last, after long and tiresome weeks of sailing, the ship bearing Jeanne Mance to the country of her mission dropped anchor at the foot of the ramparts of Quebec. Although it had been no more than late spring when they left France, the pilgrims found the autumn already too far advanced to risk the ascent of the Saint Lawrence to the Isle of Mont Royal. Accordingly they decided to spend the winter of 1641 in the settlement of Quebec, where they received the hospitality of their friends.

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It was already springtime—the early flowers could be seen peeping up here and there in the meadows, when Maisonneuve and his party finally embarked at St. Michel and nosed their large flat-bottomed boat and their two canoes up the Saint Lawrence towards the Isle Jacques Cartiers had discovered some seventy-odd years before. Ten days later—on the 17th of May, 1642—the pioneers sighted the rocky eminence overhanging the island which the same explorer had named Mont Royal. They landed near a green meadow—and while the men under the direction of Maisonneuve erected a platform, the women, Jeanne Mance and her companion, Charlotte Barré, together with Madame de la Peltrie who had joined them in Quebec, prepared an altar. On the next day, which was a Sunday, the Jesuit, Father Vimont, offered the first Holy Mass on the site of Montreal. Thus the colony was born.

For some thirty years Jeanne Mance shared in the struggles which accompanied the foundation of Montreal. Often, from her small Hôtel-Dieu, constructed not far from the entrance of the surrounding forest, she could see the savage Iroquois gliding stealthily through the deep woods beyond. To live in that rough country that she might win for God the souls of these savages and bring closer to Him the handful of French colonists—surely this was an exalted purpose—but what courage did it not demand!

Together with the ordinary events accompanying her work among the sick, Jeanne Mance was also to experience the vicissitudes of almost continual warfare. Very often—in fact practically always—the hospital of Ville-Marie bore the appearance of a military establishment. There was constant danger of attack, and in the frequent encounters with the Iroquois many were severely wounded. These she nursed, encouraging them in their struggles.

Certainly her work for the sick and suffering would suffice to establish the heroism of Jeanne Mance. But the misfortunes continually besetting the colony offered an opportunity to display in various other aspects her marvelous strength of will and her astonishing initiative. When death visited the new-born settlement, Jeanne raised up the torch of life. When, after three serious setbacks, the post was almost ruined from lack of help and lack of funds, she herself journeyed to France seeking aid—and three times she saved the colony. It is no wonder that historians link her name with that of Maisonneuve as the co-foundress of Montreal.

Throughout all these years she was very much concerned with the future of the settlers. She sought for priests who were to remain to minister to the spiritual needs of the colonists; she asked for teaching sisters to instruct their young sons and daughters; she desired above all the arrival of the Hos-

pital Sisters who were to continue the work with which she had been charged in their name. Today the task thus begun by Jeanne Mance is carried on by these same sisters—the Hospitalers of St. Joseph—in many hospitals throughout Canada and the United States—among them the famous Hôtel-Dieu of Montreal.

Her beneficence extended also to the children of Ville-Marie whom she regarded as her god-children—to the orphans, for whom she secured instruction and whom she assisted in establishing themselves in life. After she had relinquished the care of the sick to the sisters, these various tasks, together with the administration of the hospital which she retained, occupied her for several years until her death on the 18th of June, 1673. Her life, so extraordinarily fruitful, was indeed one of the greatest moments for the establishment of the little city which was to become one of the most important metropolitan centers of Canada.

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In the history of North America there is perhaps no other heroine better suited to serve as a model for the young women of our own day than Jeanne Mance. She reaches out to them from beyond the distance which separates the conditions of our time from those under which she carried on her work—the medical missionary of Ville-Marie. A nurse she heeded the needs of the suffering;

as a missionary she sacrificed family and country for the good of souls; as a leader of Catholic Action, she burned with living ardor for the good of all, losing herself only to find a better life in the service of her neighbor—in that rugged land of her adoption so different from the dear France of her forefathers.

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