

## Letter of Mesnard

135

### LETTER OF MESNARD.

[WRITTEN ON THE EVE OF EMBARKATION FOR LAKE SUPERIOR.]

In August, 1654, two young men went on a voyage from the settlements of Canada, to the far Northwest. After an absence of two years, they returned with interesting accounts of the inland seas, and of the Knisteneaux and Sioux or Dakota; and reported that the distant tribes demanded "commerce with the French and missionaries for the boundless West."

In accordance with their request, two missionaries were despatched from Quebec; but not far from Montreal, the Mohawks attacked the convoy and killed one of the priests, and the project for a time was abandoned.

In the year 1659, Charlevoix says that two traders passed the winter on the shores of Lake Superior. Filled with curiosity, they pushed beyond the confines of the Sioux. They saw some Dakota women with the tips of their noses cut off, and a portion of their heads scalped, and were told that this was the penalty inflicted upon adulteresses. They also learned that this nation were numerous, and roamed over a great extent of country.

In the summer of 1660, these two Frenchmen returned to Quebec with sixty canoes, manned by Algonquins and laden with furs. Their narrative again excited the zeal of the ecclesiastics, and Rene Menard , (or Mesnard , as Charlevoix and Bancroft spell it) who had for some years been a missionary among the Iroquois in the present State of New York, was elected as the bearer of the cross to the Lake of the Nadouessons, as it was sometimes called, or Superior.

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The night before he started, the eyes of the venerable priest were never closed. He knew that he was going to a savage land, and that one of those who had been previously selected, had been murdered on the route. He thought much of his friends, and among his last acts he wrote the following letter, for a copy of which, in the original, the Society is indebted to C. Woodman , Esq., of Mineral Point, Wis., and for the translation to the Rev. Mr. Ravoux , of Mendota:

“ Mon R. P.—Pax. Christi .

“Je vous écris probablement le dernière mot, que je souhaite être le sceau de notre amitié jusques à l'éternité *ama quem Dominus, Jesus, non dedignatur amare, quamquam maximum peccatorum; amat enim, quem dignatur sua cruce* : que votre amitié mort bon père me soit dedans les fruits souhaitables de vos saints sacrifices. Dans trois ou quatre mois, vous pouvez me mettre au memento des morts veu le genre de vie de ces peuples, mon âge et ma petite complexion: non obstant quoy, j'ay senti de si puissans instincts, et j'ay vu en cet affaire si peu de nature, que je n'ay peu douter qu'ayant manqué à cette occasion, je n'eusse dû avoir me remords éternel. Nous avons été me peu surpris, pour ne pouvoir pas nous procurer d'habits et d'autres choses; mais celui qui nourrit les petits oiseaux, et habille les lis des champs, aura soin de ses serviteurs; et quand il nous arriveroit de mourir de misère ce nous seroit un grand bonheur, Je suis accablé d'affaires: tout ce que je puis, c'est de recommander notre voyage à vos saints sacrifices et vous embrasser du même cœur que j'espère faire dans l'éternité.

Mon R. P. votre très humblement, et affectionné serviteur en Jesus Christ, R. MENARD.

Des trois Rivières ce 27 d'aoust à 2 heures après minuit. 1660.”

TRANSLATION.

My Reverend Father—The Peace of Christ be with you :

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I write to you probably the last word, which I hope will be the seal of our friendship until eternity. Love whom the Lord Jesus did not disdain to love. though the greatest of sinners. for he loves whom he loads with 137 his cross, Let your friendship, my good father, be useful to me by the desirable fruits of your daily sacrifice, In three or four months, you may remember me at the memento for the dead, on account of my old age, my weak constitution, and the hardships I lay under amongst these tribes. Nevertheless, I am in peace. for I have not been led to this mission by any temporal motive, but I think it was by the voice of God. I was afraid, by not coming here. to resist the grace of God. Eternal remorse would have tormented me, had I not come, when I had the opportunity. We have been a little surprised. not being able to provide ourselves with vestments and other things; but he who feeds the little birds and clothes the lilies of the fields. will take care of his servants; and though it should happen we should die with want, we would esteem ourselves happy. I am loaded with affairs. What I can do is to recommend our journey to your daily sacrifices, and to embrace you with the same sentiments of heart, as I hope to do in eternity.

My reverend father, your most humble and affectionate servant in Jesus Christ, R.  
MENARD.

From the Three Rivers, this 27th August 2 o'clock after midnight, 1660.

This letter is touching in its simplicity, and could hardly have been written by one who had not been filled with the spirit of Jesus . As soon as a Christian people begin to dwell upon the shores of Lake Superior, it will be embalmed in their literature, and read and admired by those whose tastes are refined. His anticipations were realized, and in a few months he was added "to the memento of deaths." Immediately after he penned the letter, he started, with a band of Ottawas, for Lake Superior. During his journey he was exposed to the ridicule of his wild companions, and obliged to subsist on the coarsest Indian fare.

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On the 15th of October, he reached a bay which he named Saint Theresa, and is supposed to have been the bay of Keweena. After a residence of eight months, amid piles of ice and snow, and with his life in his hands, he accepted the invitation of some Hurons, according to Charlevoix , and 138 proceeded to their island home at La Pointe, called by them Chegoimegon (by Mesnard , St. Michael) in spite of the remonstrances of the French traders, accompanied by a faithful man, named John Guerin , who had been in the service of the missionaries for many years.

On the 20th of August, 1661, he was obliged to walk some distance to avoid rapids; and while his old servant was occupied in making a portage with the canoe, he entered the woods and was lost.

Guerin , in much distress, called for him at the top of his voice, discharged his gun, and made several turns through the forest, but Mesnard made not his appearance.

A century ago, the report was current at Montreal, that some years after he disappeared in the wood, (as is supposed near Keweena portage) his cassock and prayer-book were found in a Dakota lodge, and were looked upon as “wakan” or supernatural.

To this day, it is unknown whether the aged man perished from starvation and exposure, or by violence from the savages. But there appears to be the well-grounded hope, that the “Providence which feeds the little birds of the desert, and clothes the wild flowers of the forests,” became his shepherd, and that when he came to die, he was enabled to dwell with profit on the following sentences of his well-thumbed breviary:

“The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of Death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.”

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St. Paul , 1852. N.