

An excerpt from
With Pipe, Paddle and Song
by Elizabeth Yates

Chapter One

Guillaume Puissante stood on the wharf and watched the wind fill the sails of the great ship as she headed her prow east and into the widening river, into the wider ocean, and so to France. France! He knew the land as he knew the back of his hand, but in all his sixteen years he had not seen it; and though he might live to be many times sixteen he doubted that he would ever see it.

As long as the small group of people remained on the deck waving, he would stand on the wharf. Even when he could see the people no longer, he would still stand there. He would leave only when the white sails disappeared into the broad blue beyond and the tie that held him to *Le Cygne Chantant* had snapped.

"Adieu, Monsieur le Comte!" He shouted into the wind. He could not say "a bientôt" or even "Au revoir"; he could only wish well to the journey. "Bon voyage, Monsieur le Comte!"

The wind that whipped around him carried an echo of Monsieur le Comte's farewell words: "Allons, mon grand; we must go forward. It is the only place to go."

Guillaume shivered, partly from the chilling lash of the wind but more from pride as he recalled the time when Monsieur le Comte had first called him "mon grand."

He had always known there would be a time when Monsieur le Comte would return to France. That was the way of life in New France. Chevaliers and soldiers, men of business and profession, adventurers, came to live in the New World for a while; sometimes their ladies came with them, and they remained long enough to establish their families; but for most of them, their ladies and families remained on the far side of the ocean and were rejoined after a few years of service or business had been accomplished in Montreal or Quebec or one of the smaller settlements.

The ice had moved out of the river early in that spring of 1750; and when the first news came with the first ship, it had been received with grave concern. "I fear for New France," Monsieur le Comte had said to Guillaume. "There are strange things happening in the world, and we may not be able to hold our position here for many more years, and there is so much wealth." He told Guillaume that he had been recalled by the King and that he could not be sorry. He had been away from the court for a long time and he would be glad to live again as a Frenchman in France.

Guillaume's dark eyes, fixed upon Monsieur le Comte's face, were filled with wonder. On his lips trembled a question he dared not ask.

Monsieur le Comte said: "When *Le Cygne Chantant* is loaded with furs for the markets in Europe, and sets sail again, I shall go with her. You are a man now, Guillaume; you will find your own work."

The expression in the dark eyes turned to sadness.

"You are strong, you are clever, you are brave, Guillaume," Monsieur le Comte went on, accenting his words carefully; "there are fortunes still to be made in New France by young men such as you. Only remember, Guillaume, that you are French, and enjoy what you have and do. It is a mistake to work only for a tomorrow that may never come."

"Mais oui, Monsieur le Comte."

"Perhaps, someday, we shall meet—" and there the words stopped.

Guillaume found it hard to reply. When he could trust himself to speak, he could not trust himself to look into Monsieur le Comte's face so he turned his head away and said, "Not someday, Monsieur le Comte, but in heaven."

The mere utterance of the words gave Guillaume confidence and fanned the flame of pride that burned within him. Free now to face the future without commitment or promise, he turned to face Monsieur le Comte, and smiled up at him. So doing, he made himself available to the older man's benison: a kiss, first on the left cheek, then on the right. After bestowing it, Monsieur le Comte laughed as if a game had been played at which each had won. Then he asked Guillaume to pour a glass of wine for him and sing to him.

Not one song but many were sung, and with them Guillaume felt more sure of the life that was before him, and eager to pursue it.

Standing alone on the wharf and waiting for the ship to disappear, he remembered that night. Only the white sails could be seen now, and they were mere tips on the distant blue. The wind was serving *Le Cygne Chantant*. The first day of her long journey was going well. Guillaume started to sing aloud one of the songs Monsieur le Comte had taught him, the one about the swallow who was the messenger of love. By the time he came to the end of the seventh verse, the end of the song, the sails had disappeared.

He watched the river, its surface ruffled by the wind. The sun that wrapped him in its light was warm, warm enough to release the pungent fragrance of pitch from the pines along the river, warm enough to turn into rivulets the few remaining snowbanks; but the wind was sharp, and its edge would be even keener by sundown. When night came, winter's legacy of cold would still be apparent. But word had come down from the pays d'en haut—the upper country, the wilderness—that rivers and lakes were free of ice, and that meant the roads were open for the canoes. Guillaume had known all along what he would do when the ship finally went from his sight and the tie that bound him to Monsieur le Comte was severed: he would follow the river, too, but the other way. Into the unknown he would go as he made the life of a voyageur his. What did it matter that he had never been to the pays d'en haut? He knew what was required of a voyageur, and what he did not know he could soon learn.

"Adieu!" He raised his hand in farewell to the past and salute to the future; then he turned and walked rapidly to the small building that stood a short distance back from the wharf. His fingers made a *rat-a-tat-tat* on the door; his hand pushed it open, and he walked in.

The room was filled with wares—piles of cloth, cooking vessels, iron axes, chisels and spears, knives, guns, and boxes containing musket balls; there were many kegs, some holding gunpowder; others, high wine; there were bags of sugar and flour, trays holding beads, buttons, thimbles and trinkets. The smell of tobacco made the air rich. There was enough vermilion paint in dried blocks to cover a church. Guillaume stared. So much there was, it was hard to find his way among the bales and kegs and trays. Through and around them all he went to the far end of the room. There, by the one window, a man sat at a table, his gray head bent over the lists he was making, his hand moving occasionally to enter an item in a ledger beside him.

Guillaume waited until Benedict Beaulieu, clerk-agent of La Compagnie Pelleterie, had finished one of his notations; then he made his presence known. "Bonjour, Monsieur."

Benedict looked up at him. "Who are you and what do you want?"

Guillaume smiled. Dare the most or lose all, he told himself. Speaking more loudly than was called for, to give him confidence, he said: "Me? I am a voyageur! I would go to the pays d'en haut when the canoes go." He held his breath, hoping the agent would believe what he had yet to prove.

"They are going now," Benedict replied as he reached under the ledger for a particular piece of paper.

Watching him, Guillaume let his breath out slowly, relieved that he had apparently persuaded the agent of his ability and his intent.

"Already we are loading at Lachine, and we need more men," Benedict went on. "Never have there been so many wares to go north or so many furs to be brought back. The winter was good." He looked up from the paper and at the new recruit.

The young man standing by the table appeared to be small in size, but that was no disadvantage. His slight, wiry body looked strong, and he was deep-chested. He did not have the stooped shoulders and bandy legs of a true voyageur, but that would come in time. His eyes were sharp, and that was an asset as much as his strong arms. His coppery skin and dark, silky hair told of his mixed parentage. Benedict nodded. "What's your name?" he growled, as he dipped his quill into the inkpot and held it poised over the paper.

"I write my own name, s'il vous plait."

Benedict pushed the paper toward Guillaume. "Read the conditions, then sign."

Guillaume read the terms of the engagement that held him to three seasons at a pay of four hundred livres a season. By signing, he agreed not to desert or give aid to any rival company. Taking the quill, he dipped it again; then, in the fine French hand he had learned from Monsieur le Comte, he wrote *Guillaume Puissante*.

Benedict studied it. "A voyageur who can write his own name! That's a new one. Where's your mother from?"

"She was a Chippewa, but she went back to her own people many years ago."

"And your father?"

Guillaume shrugged his shoulders, opened his hands wide, and smiled.

Benedict nodded sympathetically. "Eh bien, he gave you his name; that's more than many of them do. You half-breeds are all the same, but you make the best canoemen. What can you do besides paddle?"

"I can sing."

"So!" Benedict sat back in his chair and crossed his legs comfortably. "Chantez-moi."

Guillaume backed away from the table and leaned against a pile of blankets waiting to be baled. As a lover going through a garden would pick a rose for his beloved, he drew from memory the song that spoke as no other song to the heart of a voyageur, *En Roulant Ma Boule*.

He hummed through the tune once; then, in an easy, almost conversational way he began the story of the three white ducks who were swimming on a pond and of the prince who came riding by and with his silver gun shot one of the ducks. Melancholy began to tinge his tone when he sang of the diamonds that gleamed in the duck's eyes and of the blood that dripped from its wings, but gaiety returned as he sang of the three ladies who came across the field to gather the white duck's feathers and make them into a bed. Then laughter, sly but irrepressible, rippled through his singing as he hinted of the purpose to which the feather bed would be put and of what would sometime come from it, " 'Children big and children small.' "

Whenever he reached the chorus, he paused for a quick indrawing of breath; then the beat became more vigorous, as if he were calling to others to join in with him:

" *Roulite roulant*
Ma boule roulant
Roulite roulant

*Boule roulant,
En roulant ma boule
Qui roule,
En roulant ma boule.' "*

Benedict, leaning far back in his chair with half-closed eyes, saw it all as he had seen it when he sang the song as a child with other children in the sunny courtyard of his home in France. He smiled as he recalled the first kiss he had ever given to a little girl. His feet began to tap to the tune of the game he had played long ago. He closed his eyes as the song went on, for he was a child no longer, but a young bourgeois in New France on his first trip into the pays d'en haut. The men had sung as they paddled in calm weather or gales, over smooth water or rough, in blazing heat or biting cold, at the start of a long day and at its dusky end, and the singing had given them endurance. It was not the words or even the tune, but something else that lifted their spirits and kept them soaring.

Benedict opened one heavily lidded eye and watched the young man who was leaning against the pile of blankets. Because the words of the song had all been sung Guillaume hummed the tune by way of ending while his gaze roamed around the crowded warehouse. Benedict took his time to open his eyes fully and then respond.

"Eh bien, bravo, mon voyageur. Your breath serves you well."

A smile, born of pride and pleasure, swept Guillaume's face. "In the tribe they used to call me Brother-of-the-Beaver because I could swim underwater for so long." He tapped his chest with the fingers of his right hand. "It is good, too, for singing."

"So!" Benedict exclaimed, "you are a voyageur who can swim, too! Not all can do that."

"C'est trop fort! That is hard to believe."

Benedict leaned forward and made a notation under the name on the paper. "Those who sing can always paddle; it is not so that those who paddle can always sing."

Guillaume smiled politely.

"How long have you been holding a paddle?"

Guillaume's shoulders went up expressively. "Can I say? In the tribe I was given one very small, and then ones that were bigger. All my life, m'sieu."

"All your sixteen years?"

The question required no answer.

"Eh bien, you know the conditions to which you have signed your name. You must also know that for your singing you will receive double, but on your return."

"C'est entendu. It is understood."

"You have your possibles?"

"No, Monsieur Benedict, I—" Again he resorted to a gesture.

"'a va!" Benedict exclaimed good-humoredly. "You voyageurs are all the same. You wear so little that you wear it out and return almost in the state in which you were born. You gave your cap, I'll wager, to the first Indian maid who looked at you. But your sash, Guillaume Puissante, a voyageur never parts with his ceinture flechee."

Guillaume put his hands on the table and looked earnestly at Benedict Beaulieu. "Shall I tell you, m'sieu, what became of my sash? Shall I sing you my song about it?"

"Another time. The hour is late, and I have many lists still to make." He picked up the quill and waved Guillaume away with it. "On the bench near the door is a bundle wrapped in a capote. It will provide you with what you most need. Go now, and sing me your song some other day."

"And when do I leave, Monsieur Benedict, for the pays d'en haut?"

"Tomorrow, from this office. The next day, or the day after, from Lachine. The canoes were brought there from winter storage a week ago and they have been in the water for repair, then loading. The first brigade has already left; you will be in the second. It leaves when loaded, and at dawn, always at dawn."

Guillaume bowed slightly, "Merci, m'sieu." He had accepted his work as a voyageur, its conditions and duration. At the door, he picked up the small bundle on the bench and tucked it under his arm.

Outside and on the wharf again, he did not look east up the river to where it led to the sea, but west to where it came out of the wilderness. Then, turning swiftly away from the river to the city growing toward the slopes of Mount Royal, he ran up the steep cobbled street to the chateau where Monsieur le Comte had so recently lived when commandant. Past the sentries, who knew him well, and in the rear entrance he went, then down the curving stone stairs to the kitchen to share his good fortune with the servants who were his friends.

"C'est moi," he announced, as he set his bundle down by the great fireplace. Impatient as he was to tell them his news, they had some for him that was even more urgent.

"Where have you been so long, Guillaume? The new commandant is giving a dinner tonight, and he wants you to sing for him."

"I have been at the wharf to watch *Le Cygne Chantant* sail away to France."

"But that was this morning!"

"When she sailed, yes; but it was long past noon when the white sails disappeared into the blue."

The cook came up to him with a cut from the roast that was slowly turning on the spit; with it was a generous piece of bread. "You must be hungry, Guillaume. Eat this, and you shall have more if you wish, for you have work to do."

"Yes, now that there is food, I am hungry and I shall eat."

While he ate they told him more of what was expected of him, not on this night only but for many nights. "There will be feasts and dancing and gaiety for weeks to come. That is always the way when a new commandant comes to the chateau. You will be called on to sing to them every night."

Guillaume shook his head, laughing. "Moi!" he said, as soon as he had finished eating, "I shall sing to them all night long—of France till their eyes swim with longing, of love till they melt like the wax in a candle with desire. I shall sing till they fall asleep over their wine cups; then no more shall I sing."

"No more? But he will ask you again; he will command."

"Ca ne fait rien. I am my own master now. I am a voyageur!"

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