

## ACHIRRA'S DREAM

by Susan Rita Ruel (descendant of Guillaume Couture, "hero of Nouvelle France")

From St. Isaac Jogues' account of the events of early August, 1642, in *JESUIT RELATIONS of 1653*, p. 18:

*There was finally led in among the captives... Guillaume Couture, who had come with me from the Huron. This man, seeing the impossibility of longer defending himself, had fled with the others into the forests; and as he was a young man not only of courageous disposition but strong in body and fleet in running, he was already out of the grasp of the one who was pursuing him. But having turned back and seeing that I was not with him, "I will not forsake," he said to himself, "my dear Father alone in the hands of enemies." And immediately returning to the Barbarians, he had of his own accord become a prisoner. Oh, that he had never taken such a resolution! It is no consolation in such cases to have companions of one's misfortunes. But who can prevent the sentiment of charity? Such is the feeling toward us of those laymen who, without any worldly interest, serve God and aid us in our ministrations among the Hurons. This one had slain, in the fight, one of the most prominent among the enemies; he was therefore treated most cruelly. They stripped him naked, tore off his nails with their teeth, bit his fingers, and pierced his right hand with a javelin; but he suffered it all with such invincible patience -- remembering the nails of the Savior, as he told me afterward. I embraced him with great affection and exhorted him to offer to God those pains, for himself and for those who tormented him...*

**Eleven generations and almost four centuries later, I reflect on what's known of this episode, preserved down to the details of words, deeds, and even facial expressions by the quill pens of Jesuit missionaries. These events led to the 1930 canonizations of my forefather's companions, Père Isaac Jogues and René Goupil, and would have made Guillaume Couture himself a Catholic saint, had he died of his wounds. In that case, of course, I, his descendant, would never have had the chance to imagine that he may have felt guilt at taking the life of an Iroquois chief while his companions gave their lives in the act of baptism, a sacrament they believed would save souls. Or to reflect on Guillaume's capacity not only to forgive his tormentors (who killed his friends), but actually go on to join the Iroquois nation not long thereafter. This latter act seems a prime example of his behaving in a Christ-like manner, of identifying with his persecutors, or perhaps of waging an oedipal struggle with the memory of his forbears or with France itself.**

**After killing the chief in self-defense, perhaps Guillaume felt unworthy of the priesthood, or perhaps his faith wavered – or both. Not long after he'd arrived in Quebec, the death of his father back in Rouen may have triggered the first seeds of religious doubt. True, one of Guillaume's few public acts, performed legally and preserved on record, was signing over to his mother and sister the land he inherited at his father's death. Giving up one's earthly possessions was required of those who had taken the vows of a *donné*. Yet by then it might have seemed almost ludicrous to him how jealously small plots of land were valued back in Europe; in Quebec, land stretched in all directions, rocky but fresh soil that did not hold the debris and bones of a thousand prior generations. Here was soil enough to feed a whole gang of offspring, food enough to survive to adulthood, as so few babies did in Europe at that time.**

**Anachronistically, I imagine his doubt being triggered by culture shock. The shameless way the *sauvages* cursed, fought, and mated semi-publicly must have stunned and scandalized a pious youth. He may even have been unnerved or disillusioned by the extreme devotion Père Isaac showed him. This I do know for certain, however: when he appeared in Iroquois dress and headdress, blue paint on his face, his blond hair cropped in a stripe across the middle of his skull, his old friends in Quebec scarcely recognized him.**

I don't know why his life so fascinates me that I find myself imagining – projecting would be a more accurate term, I suppose – what his feelings might have been on that day in August:

After a second strangely dark, seemingly endless Quebec winter, summer daylight was indescribably welcome and precious. Yet, on this second morning of August anno domini 1642, Guillaume Couture felt almost frightened of the exposure that daylight afforded their convoy of canoes carrying 19 Huron and a couple of his fellow *Normands* (as the Huron called the French) north to supply a remote Jesuit mission that had been ominously silent for months.

The broad river glittered like a monstrosity. Within the endless forests encircling them like the upper reaches of a cathedral, here and there a few maples had started to redden. Ordinarily, he would have gazed tirelessly on such beauty, as he had on the gleaming waves that carried him to *Nouvelle France* with these same traveling companions, René Goupil and *Père* Isaac Jogues. Guillaume yearned to behold the landscape before him, if only for the mood of freedom and serenity it could inspire.

But knowing the threat that lurked in any corner, behind any tree, made him wish them all invisible and quiet, quiet. Each time an infant wailed or the braves guffawed, he actually caught himself shutting his eyes for a moment, out of a primitive urge to shield them all from view. The murmuring of the *sauvages* (as the French called the Huron) and his own uneasiness made him long secretly to paddle even closer to the riverbank, ideally under cover of night.

The *sauvages* rowed on, never seeming to get winded. But who could breathe easily when every passing second portended the whoops of roving Iroquois? The Huron deemed Guillaume the palest *Normand* of their party. Considering his height and brawn, some said they thought him equal in hardiness to their own braves. They'd paid him the compliment of christening him *Ihandich*. It was one of the few Huron words he hadn't found a satisfactory translation for, during the months he'd spent at the eel fishery, learning their tongue and building a chapel from choicer virgin lumber than the forests of Europe had yielded in centuries.

To be sure, he was younger and stronger than the other *Normands* in the convoy, which wasn't saying much. Back in Rouen, René's scrawniness and ill health had kept the Jesuits from admitting him to the priesthood. Instead, they'd sent him to Paris for training in surgery. Like Guillaume, René was a mere *donné*, or lay missionary, the two of them pledged to shield *Père* Isaac with their very hides.

Guillaume shuddered to think what René or *Père* Isaac might think were they to know of his fears. It would be better to keep silent. *Père* Isaac had nothing but praise for him, a reservoir of warm approval that Guillaume contrasted with harsher memories of his own late father in France and hoped the priest's approval would endure. But René would probably scold that he should offer up his fear or place it in the hands of God.

Worst of all, were they to know his hidden feelings, he would be the ridicule of the Huron braves, who even now were working themselves up into a frenzy of masculine bravado. Perhaps that was the best way to steel oneself in the face of the legendary cruelty of the Iroquois. In this show of bravura, without even knowing it, the Huron aped their dreaded foe.

Who wouldn't be filled with dread of these bizarre *sauvages*, whose actions were guided not by Scripture or fealty to a king but chiefly by their own nocturnal visions? Nightmares of unspeakable heartlessness and sadism, dreams that may have been brought on -- *Père* Isaac joked -- by their atrocious food, they regarded as portents to be followed to the letter. Guillaume's shock at encountering this whole strange, empty world of *Nouvelle France*, by turns beautiful and hellish, was as overpowering as religious experience. He could not deny that he loved the bizarreness and even the fear. It elevated his daily life and gave it the quality of waking dream. He felt alive, more than he'd thought possible back in France, mired in the chaos and want mixed with weighty solemnity. Already, he was beginning to suspect that he wouldn't go back.

*Au nom du Père et du Fils et du Saint-Esprit, Ainsi soit-il...* As if in answer to the opening words of his silent prayer, the lead scout steered their convoy closer to shore. They followed the broad rivulet as it poured into a wider lake, named for St. Pierre. A pretty Huron girl who looked to be about 14, daughter of Chief Eustache Ahatsistari, dipped her hand in the river and crossed herself as if with holy water in childish mimicry of her father, a notably devout convert. Then she teasingly shook the droplets off upon

Guillaume's musket. Perhaps she'd noticed how carefully he sought to keep the gun dry, propping the barrel on his hip.

Was he imagining things, or was she testing his proprietary sense of his possessions, which the *sauvages* found so irreligious in the French? (Already, she'd been chastised for trying to turn one of *Père Isaac's* pewter chalices into a plaything.) In fact, what most stirred Guillaume's admiration --- and planted the earliest seeds of doubt about his religious vocation -- was the generosity of these *sauvages*, and their lack of attachment to material objects. And then there was the beauty of their daughters...

He smiled inwardly, imagining his mother or his sister Marie being introduced to Chief Ahatsistari, whose baptismal name was Eustache, of all things! A huge cathedral to St. Eustache had been under construction in Paris on and off for about 100 years. The idea of how his female relatives might react to this painted *sauvage* bearing such a proper Catholic name caused him to chuckle to himself. Doing so, he caught the eye of the Huron paddling in front of him, and the brave returned his pleasant expression.

Now the vessels veered even closer to the reeds along the shore. He heard *Père Isaac* try to recount the story of baby Moses, struggling to render it in the Huron language. Guillaume piped up with an Algonquin word that approximated "swaddling clothes," and the priest graciously thanked him. He flushed with pleasure, marveling at how easily he'd picked up the rudiments of these *sauvage* tongues. It was a gift he'd never known he had, back home in Rouen. Still, at times his command of Huron seemed scarcely better than that of a child much younger than Ahatsistari's daughter. Nevertheless, he'd managed to talk his way onto this expedition.

Guillaume slapped at a mosquito on his neck, feeling the warmth of his scorched skin. Giggling, the girl mimicked him. He marveled at how she managed to retain her femininity, even in these base circumstances. During their last mission, ended but two weeks earlier, she'd kept up with her father and the other men for 35 days of walking and portage, covering fully 300 leagues. In fact, she'd handled it all with far more fortitude than René.

A shriek pierced the air, and their scout slumped forward, struck in the head by a musket ball. The Huron leapt and splashed in all directions as a seemingly endless tide of Iroquois swarmed their convoy. They became visible now as a blur of outrageous color: reds, yellows, and blues that they'd miraculously managed, in hiding, to obscure and make part of the landscape. Ahatsistari and his daughter dashed into the weeds. *Père Isaac* followed, as did Guillaume, hunched over and wading downstream. Miraculously, they made it to shore, crashing through the obstacle course of the forest, war cries and musket fire at their back.

The priest was astonishingly fast on his feet. But in a moment, Guillaume heard his unmistakable scream. It would never do for a *donné* to save his own skin and leave the priest to these wolves. He turned back and collided with a small gang of warriors, one already in the act of firing a musket ball that whizzed passed his ears. Swinging his own firearm to the ready, Guillaume yanked the trigger. The brave was struck in the chest and fell where he stood. Horrified by his own murderous act, Guillaume froze. In a fury, the dead Iroquois' compatriots swarmed, pummeling, punching, and even biting him. When they forced a spear through his hand, in insupportable agony he nearly passed out. Tearing off his garments, they dragged him to his feet and led him in the direction of the main battle. There, in a clearing, Guillaume saw *Père Isaac* and René being beaten and tortured, as well. It seemed these devils were enacting their vilest and most violent nightmares...

Years later, far closer to death than birth, and for the rest of his days until he died at 82, Guillaume was still being visited by the same recurrent dream.

He dreamt it first during the three hellish winters of captivity, enduring privation, blizzards, enslavement, gauntlets and other tortures of the Iroquois. During this time, René was scalped for baptizing a feverish infant and *Père Isaac* escaped, returned to France, met the Queen and received the Pope's own dispensation to keep celebrating Mass despite his mangled fingers, only to come back to Quebec and sojourn twice more among the *sauvages*, who martyred the black robe at last;

The dream recurred all through the years during which Guillaume was inducted into the tribe as the sole *Normand* so trusted and honored, conferred the name *Achirra* (Superman) for his bravery and stoicism, and dispatched to Quebec with an Iroquois delegation, only to be restored to his people and his faith, give up his vows as a *donné*, then his desire to marry Ahatsistari's daughter, and finally go on to father 10 sons and daughters with his *Normand* wife Anne Esmard; He was visited by this nightmare during the many treaties he negotiated with the Iroquois and other *sauvages*, with whom he was dispatched by the governor to lead expeditions to the far north (where several lakes still bear the name Couture) in search of a route to the North Sea; and even after he led a local militia at Lauzon that fought off the 1690 attack of Sir William Phipps in the long struggle with the British that would end with the trading of *Nouvelle France* for the cane of Martinique and Guadeloupe. For the rest of his life, the dream persisted:

*He paddled in a convoy much like the one on that August morning. But in this ambush, he was set upon and tormented not by his Iroquois brethren, but by his own people: Normand donnés, priests, bishops, coureurs du bois, his own family...*