

V'la le bon vent, ma mie m'appelle

a tale of how the Qu'Appelle River got its name



Retold by Lynn Noel as Lisette Duval Harmon (1791-1862)

*adapted from trad. Québécois & Franco-manitoban legends
and from historical accounts of Métis womens' relations
with fur traders in the Upper Great Lakes*

CROSSCURRENTS: Sense of Place in Song and Story

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The Legend of Lac Qu'Appelle

Simon told her he would come back to her in the spring, and they would be married by the priest at Mackinac in the custom of his people. He gave her a bolt of red calico to make herself a wedding dress, and told her to wait for him at her father's cabin, there on the point in the Rainy River country. But first, Simon said, he must make his fortune as a *coureur de bois*, far up in the Athabasca where the winter beaver grew six feet long with pelts thick as buffalo hide. No more the life of the *milieu* as a slave of *La Compagnie*. He would be his own master, and trade with her father and brothers from his own post with the goods he would buy with this summer's worth of furs.

And she stood at the door of her father's cabin on the bank of the Rainy River, tall and proud with her hair black—no, blue, blue as a raven's wing—loose to her waist, and waved him farewell as he paddled upriver with a song on his lips.

*V'la le bon vent, v'la le joli vent
V'la le bon vent, ma mie m'appelle
V'la le bon vent, v'la le joli vent
V'la le bon vent, ma mie m'attend.*

Ah fair wind, ah, lovely wind,
Ah fair wind, my love calls to me
Ah fair wind, ah lovely wind,
Ah fair wind, she waits for me.

And he bent his back to his paddle, for the summer was short and the Athabasca weeks away. But the wind whipped him across the great grey face of Lake Winnipeg, and the rain came in sheets across the wide backs of the prairies, and he came late to the *pays d'en haut*. Nowhere were the beaver plentiful; the few that came to his traps were thin and starved, and too many traps sprung. Trapped out, said some, and starved, said others, and wolf and bear and *coureur de bois* hunted alike in vain.

So it was late in the season, with the leaves falling from the poplars like gold and silver coins, and ice forming like diamonds on the riverbank, when Simon at last had filled five *pièces*, enough to carry on the portage, and turned his face to the south. And as he paddled through the late golden days of the Indian summer, he sang of the *Métis* girl who waited for him on the banks of the Rainy River.

*V'la le bon vent, v'la le joli vent
V'la le bon vent, ma mie m'appelle
V'la le bon vent, v'la le joli vent
V'la le bon vent, ma mie m'attend.*

One night Simon made his camp in a deep and hidden valley, where the river runs through the heart of the prairie. If you look across the land, you see nothing but the vast expanse of

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waving grass, but the valley is there, sheltered from the wind and rain. And Simon made his fire, and roasted his fish, and smoked his pipe and counted his riches, turning over the pelts in his mind like coins. And as he gazed into the coals, there came a voice calling to him on the wind.

"Simon! Simon!"

"*Qui appelle? Qui appelle?* Who calls? Who calls?"

Aucune réponse. No answer.

Simon rolled up beneath his canoe with an uneasy heart and a glance over his shoulder, but he could see nothing in the darkness. The next night, he camped again in the hidden valley, and it seemed to him that the wind howled down the valley with a woman's voice.

"Simon! Simon!"

"*Qui appelle? Qui appelle?* Who calls? Who calls?"

Aucune réponse. No answer.

This time, Simon flung himself into the canoe and paddled until daybreak, and through the day, but still the valley walls rose high and he camped again below the wind. And the voice came again, crying as if to break her heart.

"Simon! Simon!"

"*Qui appelle? Qui appelle?* Who calls? Who calls?"

Aucune réponse. No answer.

Simon neither slept nor ate, but paddled as a man possessed. He snatched a nap or a bite of pemmican, and sang until his voice was raw to keep the voices silent on the wind.

*V'la le bon vent, v'la le joli vent
V'la le bon vent, ma mie m'appelle
V'la le bon vent, v'la le joli vent
V'la le bon vent, ma mie m'attend.*

At last he came to the Rainy River country. It was late in the day, the sunset like molten gold through the trees, when he rounded the last bend in the river. There was her father's cabin on the point, and a great fire burned as the People of the Forest made in the old times to welcome a visitor—or to announce a death. And as Simon ran his canoe up on the beach, he saw a dark shape behind the fire, stretched out on a bier. In the shadows he could see the red pattern of the calico he had bought her to wear before the priest at Mackinac.

Simon rushed into the cabin. But he found her father's face turned to the wall.

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"She could not wait for you, Simon! You broke her heart, you and your faithless friends. Each moon she grew more sure you would come, and as each moon waned so her faith waxed stronger. She would hear the singing of the canoes and rush down to the bank to greet you.

"And they laughed at her, my strong and beautiful daughter. "*Bois-brûlée!* Brown girl!" they jeered at her. "Wait for you? He's gone back to the farm! Didn't you know he has a wife and five children back in Quebec? White children, and a lily-white wife who wears fine linens and sews his clothes. What does he want with a Métis half-breed to raise his half-breed young?"

"It broke her heart, my girl. For the child in her belly was yours, and she longed to share him with you. But the fever took her, and for three days and three nights she moaned and tossed and cried out your name. "Simon! Simon!" she cried, until it broke my heart to hear her. And in the blackness of her fever came the blackness of reason, and she could no longer bear the pain of the knives in her belly and the pain of waiting for your canoe.

"Last night I awoke and her bed was empty. I walked in the forest, and there I found her hanging. *Gitchi-Manitou* has come for her, Simon. She has gone to walk with the Great Spirit where no man will ever find her."

"*Va t'en, Simon.* Get out of my cabin. I have no furs to trade with a man who breaks his promise."

Simon turned on his heel and rushed from the cabin. He stood for a long moment in the blaze of the firelight, with his back to the still figure in the shadows.

Then he leaped for his canoe, and flung himself upstream where the light of the rising moon turned the track of his paddle on the water as cold and silver as the barrel of a gun.

No one ever saw or heard of Simon again. But they say, in the autumn, when the leaves are falling from the poplars like gold and silver coins, and the ice is sparkling like diamonds on the banks of the rivière, that you may go to the banks of the Qu'Appelle River where it flows in a hidden valley across the prairies, and make your camp there on the riverbank, you may hear a woman's voice on the wind. The voice of a Métis woman—a *femme du pays*, a woman of the country.

And in the still breath after, the dip of a paddle in the water.

Ah fair wind, ah, lovely wind,
Ah fair wind, my love calls to me
Ah fair wind, ah lovely wind,
Ah fair wind, she waits for me.