The Violins of Saint-Jacques

Patrick Leigh Fermor

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A TALE OF THE ANTILLES

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Contents

Title
Copyright
Dedication
By the same author
Map

Chapter 1
About the Author

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THE TRAVELLER'S TREE
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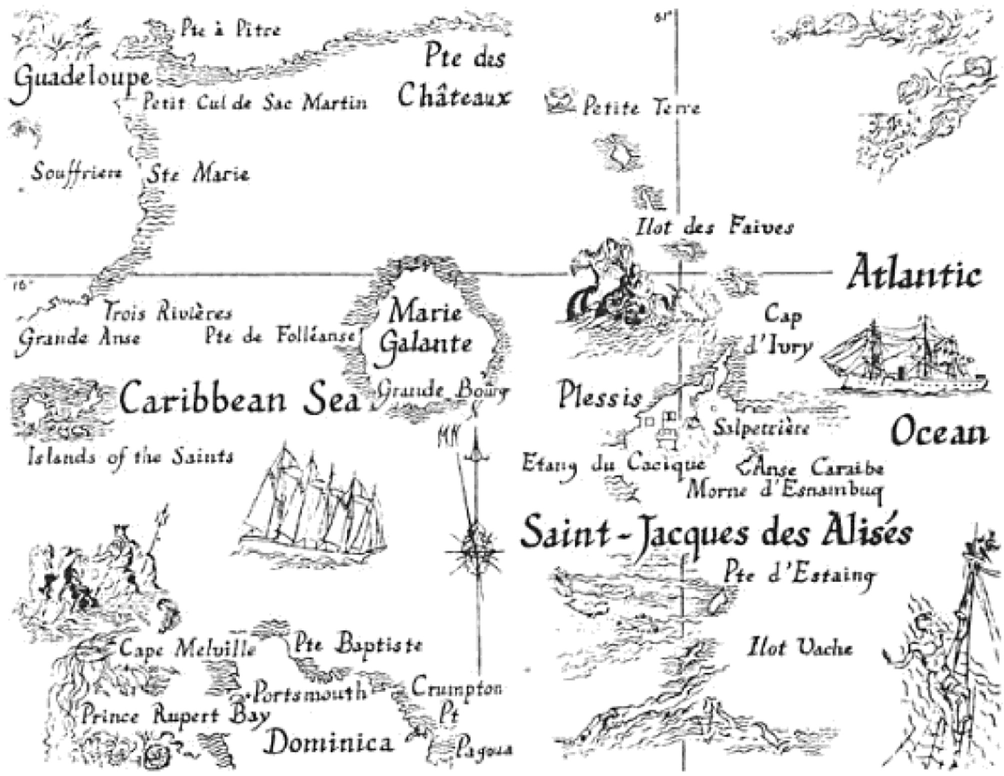

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Infelix domus … sonitu tremibunda profundi.

Valerius Flaccus

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Little distinguishes the history of the small island from that of the other French Windward and Leeward Isles except that less is known about it. Saint-Jacques was originally inhabited by the Arawak Indians, later by the fierce Caribs who mounted the island chain in dugout canoes, defeated and devoured the Arawak men and then married their widows in their usual brisk way. Columbus discovered it on his second voyage and annexed it to the Spanish crown. The Carib name of Twahleiba – the Snake – derived from the terrible trigo-nocephalus that infested it in swarms – was changed, and the island was christened in honour of the great Spanish saint of Compostella on the vigil of whose feast the island was captured. *Santiago de los Vientos Alicios*, they pricked it down on those early charts; Saint James of the Trade Winds. (Later on it was facetiously known, in the cant of the English filibusters who haunted the inlets of the northern coast, as Jack of All Trades and occasionally, in chanties that are seldom heard nowadays, as Tradey Jack.)

The name appears on few of the old Spanish charts preserved in the archives at Seville, and on French and English maps of the time even less. Cartographer and historian unconsciously conspired to ignore it. Father Labat never called there and the only monkish chronicler to mention it is an obscure Franciscan missionary from Treviso, Father Jerome Zancarol. The Father enlarges in queer jargon on the island's richness in sugar-cane, rum, molasses and indigo but says little that is complimentary to the inhabitants. *Insula Sancti Jacobi*, he writes, *tantis opibus, tanta copia, tantaque pulchritudine ornata, sicut angulus coeli ipsius videtur, sed, ob mores improbos pravosque incolarum, ob jactanciam, luxuriam et gastrimargiam et Gallorum et nigrorum, insula Sancti Jacobi pessimam insularum aliarum omnium justius, immo, verum angulum Gehennae putanda est;*[1] and no more.

The small island was neglected by Spain, settled by a certain chevalier Hippolyte-Hercule du Plessis, an illegitimate kinsman of Richelieu, and annexed to France. Plessis, after whom the capital was named, exterminated the stiff-necked Caribs, imported the first slaves from Africa and summoned and enfeoffed a swarm of penniless cadets of noble French families from Normandy, Brittany, Gascony and the Vendee to colonise the island; and, in its small way, Saint-Jacques soon rivalled Sainte-Domingue and Martinique in prosperity. Rumbold and his West Indian Light

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Fencibles captured it in the Seven Years' War, and, until the Revolution, the Union Jack flew from a beautiful little Palladian government house, built by Sir Probyn Scudamore and later enlarged by Governor Braithwaite, in the capital which was now re-baptised Jamestown. The English were thrown out at the time of the Convention. During the Terror the guillotine was set up in the Place Hercule, but, when the bright blade descended and the first royalist head fell into the basket, a cry of horror burst from the silent throng of negroes. Breaking through the cordon of guards, they tore the instrument to bits, and the guillotine was never re-erected in Saint-Jacques.[2] A tumultuous period ensued. Order was restored during the Consulate and Saint-Jacques des Alisés thereafter followed the same quiet course as the other French Antilles.

The islet seems to have been less affected than its larger neighbours by the decline of the sugar plantations after the Emancipation Act of' 48 – perhaps because of its remoteness, perhaps because the island squirearchy lived on better terms with the negroes. At all events, by the turn of the century, Zancarol's accusations of wickedness would have seemed exaggerated. Little was known about Saint-Jacques in the rest of the archipelago, in fact the very name – except for the fabulous beauty of its mountains and forests, the elegance of the old buildings, the charm of the inhabitants and the brio with which they availed themselves of the slightest pretext for enjoyment and celebration – seems to have slipped the attention of travellers. It also appears that Saint-Jacques was distinguished by more than a tincture of polite learning. The works of Aimable Bruno, the mulatto poet of the island, are unfortunately lost to us. Lost too are the many portraits of Jacobean notables by Hubert Clamart (a pupil of Liotard), which adorned the private houses and the public buildings of Plessis. It is a little mysterious, all this being so, that Lafcadio Hearn should never have visited Saint-Jacques during his Caribbean sojourn. How brilliantly he would have described those vanished Jacobean festivities! As it is, alas, the data are few. About the absence of the name of Saint-Jacques from the atlas page – a few leagues windward from the channel that flows between Guadeloupe and Dominica and well to the south-east of Marie Galante, where it hung like a bead on the sixty-first meridian – there is, tragically, no mystery at all. But so formidable are the obstacles in the path of research and so complete the decay of the archives in the European Capitals that writers on the Caribbean have all been forced, through ignorance of its history and, all too often, of its former existence, to omit it.

* * *

It was in another island, thousands of miles from the Antilles, that I met the person who was to bring to life this vanished world, and especially that baleful and culminating night that singles it out from oblivion.

I first came upon Berthe de Rennes under an umbrella pine on a headland in Mitylene two years ago. She was sitting on a rock with a cigarette in one hand and in the other a brush with which she painted the blue-veined shadows of the Asia Minor coast (which lay just over the water) on a block of cartridge paper propped on an easel. She wore a blue cotton dress and sandals, and her grey hair was uncompromisingly arranged. Her intelligent, hawkish and most distinguished face was shaded by one of those broad wicker-hats the Ægean peasants wear in summer. I assumed she was somewhere in her fifties and was surprised to learn, later on, that she was well over seventy. Seeing me hunting in vain for a match, she threw me her

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lighter to catch – a rough peasant one with a dangling foot and a half of orange wick – almost without looking away from her picture. We were soon in conversation. She talked a lively, descriptive, rather racy French, and her English was of a fluent Edwardian kind scattered with expressions obsolete long enough to be full of charm. Her tales of life in Mitylene, of brushes with the nomarch and the bishop, and, later on, her reminiscences of Fiji and Rara Tonga, Corsica and the Balearics and finally, to my redoubled interest, of the Caribbean from which I had just come back, were interjected every now and then by a deep and oddly attractive laugh with a slight rasp in it, and it soon became clear that she was an excellent mimic. She had a very beautiful voice.

As she talked she went on painting with an unerring competence, screwing her eyes up in aquiline glances at the fading Lydian hills. There was nothing vague or old-maidish about the picture. Bold, fluid pen-strokes outlined the trees and the mountains, the forest of caïque masts below and the distant villages. They were depicted with a swift and out-of-date precision and then filled in with sweeping washes of water-colour rather in the manner of Edward Lear. When it became too dark to paint, an antelope-eyed girl approached on bare feet over the pine needles and began to collect her painting things. ‘What a goose that girl is!’ Mademoiselle de Rennes sighed. ‘I tell her every day not to come, but she turns up just the same. She seems to think I’m a hundred.’ Our paths lay in opposite directions but before we separated she asked me to come to luncheon at her little house next day and ‘take pot luck’. I watched them disappear through the olive groves. Mademoiselle de Rennes was taller standing than I had suspected. Phrosoula padded beside her holding the Asia Minor landscape as though it were a processional ikon.

Drinking a last ouzo before a lonely dinner on the waterfront, I asked the waiter about the French lady who lived outside the town. He sat down at once. ‘Kyria Mpertha? She has travelled the whole world over and seen everything. It must be about twenty years ago that she settled here to teach the young ladies of the island French and how to draw and play the piano.’ His fingers rattled along an imaginary keyboard. ‘She was very poor then, but she still does it a bit, out of pleasure, as it were. And they say she is a wonderful teacher. And intelligent and energetic! Like gunpowder! Everybody likes her, from the governor to the bootblack. And she won’t stand any nonsense. We had a bad town clerk here once who quarrelled with her, the fool. You should have seen how quickly she got rid of him! *Po, po, po!* He vanished faster than the dew. She has got more to her than most of the people you see about the place in trousers.’

* * *

Mademoiselle de Rennes lived in a white, thick-walled island house surrounded by flowers in ribbed white amphoræ and by pots of marjoram and basil. The headland on which it rested overlooked a steep bay and a wide stretch of the Ægean bounded on the east by the watersheds of Anatolia and to the south by the floating ghosts of Samos and Chios. Mademoiselle de Rennes, with heavy horn-rimmed glasses across the high bridge of her nose, was reading in a deck-chair under a vine trellis. Phrosoula, the girl of the evening before, soon appeared carrying a table that was already laid, and ‘pot luck’ turned out to be the best meal I had eaten for months. The wine, too, from the surrounding vineyards which Mademoiselle de Rennes had tended for years, was excellent. The conversation ranged all over the world once more and ended with a long and diverting account of some pre-fascist elections in

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Cagliari. She asked me for news of the French West Indies, but she herself was less expansive about them than the many other islands in which she had lived. Even under the shade of the trellis, the afternoon was soon so hot and sleepy that I gratefully accepted my hostess's offer of a room for a siesta.

After the sunlight the inside of the house seemed pitch dark and it took a minute for my eyes to acclimatise themselves. My room was empty except for a bed and a large, faded painting, obviously by my hostess. It was the picture of a volcanic island painted from a ship or a raft a few furlongs out to sea. Beyond the swarming sloops and schooners and a white paddle steamer, a long quay stretched, where turbaned negresses presided over stalls of tropical fruit under brilliant awnings. Beyond this lay a main street where carriages of every kind plied up and down. Women with parasols and men in boaters and top hats were poised in cushioned aloofness over thin-spoked wheels. Below them bustled a swarm of negroes with pyramids of fruit or bright green sheaves of sugar-cane on their heads. All were dominated by a scattered population, hoisted high on their rococo pedestals, of grey and gravely gesticulating statues. Further back still, beyond a row of elaborate gasoliers, arcaded streets receded in vistas that climbed the hillside through successive strata of eighteenth-century terraces. Their balustrades were lined with urns and statuettes, and awnings shaded many of the windows. The bells of half a dozen church towers were suspended in wrought-iron hampers above roofs of semicircular rose-coloured tiles, and at the summit of the little metropolis, corresponding to a bastion and a lighthouse at the end of the mole, the round tower of a fort aimed cannon from its battlements like the truncated radii of a compass. A tricolour fluttered from the flag-pole; slender palm stems raised pretty pale green mops; a froth of creeper and hibiscus overflowed the walls. Above the town, a tropical forest rose in a cone, hiding to its crater the steep and concave flanks of a volcano from whose blunt apex curled a languid blue-grey banner of smoke.

'It's the last thing I painted in the Antilles,' said Mademoiselle Berthe as she closed the shutters. 'It's not too bad.'

When she had left I looked at it more closely. In one corner the signature was neatly inscribed in ink: *B. de Rennes*, 1902, and in the other, to my suddenly heightening excitement: *Fort de Plessis, Le Mouillage et la Salpetrière, Saint-Jacques des Alisés.* Outside, the scraping of the cicadas rose and fell and a single arrow of sunlight, penetrating the cool shuttered gloom, sent a bright shaft across the towers and statues of Plessis. By the time that I fell asleep in a mood of vague conjecture about the mysterious little town, the trajectory of its aim had slanted upwards to the Salpetrière's smoking cone.

* * *

During the next two weeks, not a day passed without my calling at least once on Mademoiselle Berthe. I would walk along the shore and bathe in the late afternoon and climb to her terrace at ouzo time. Often I stayed to dinner and we would talk till late. She was delightful company and the distant Caribbean island I had never seen, but which she described so lucidly, remains far clearer in retrospect than the beautiful Ægean one in which we were sitting. Berthe seemed to enjoy these long sessions and the chance of talking to someone who had a slight knowledge of the distant waters where much of her youth had been spent. She had a gift for conversational autobiography and I soon had a clear outline of her life.

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She belonged to an old and impoverished *chouan* family of the lower Vendée. An only child, she was brought up in a semi-castellated manor house in that flat green region. Her father, an ex-colonel in the colonial cavalry, died before she had grown up and left her in the care of an equally impoverished aunt, a lay-canoness living in Paris. Unwilling to be a burden on her she accepted the offer of a distant relation to act as governess to his children in the faraway Caribbean island of Saint-Jacques. She had never met these *cousins à la mode de Bretagne*, but she made ready without hesitation, caught the packet from le Havre to Guadeloupe, where she took the fortnightly paddle steamer – the same that appeared in the picture – to Plessis: no mean feat for a girl of eighteen in the 1890's. The entire Serindan family were waiting for her on the quay: a handsome middle-aged couple, a tall boy in his early teens, three girls in huge hats ranging downwards at varying intervals and a little boy. A voluminous negress held him by the hand and a mongoose's head peered out of the collar of his sailor suit. They all kissed her and called her 'Cousine Berthe' and the little boy gave her his mongoose to hold. Negro servants hoisted her meagre luggage on to their heads and trotted away, and the party piled into an immense landau. A smart negro coachman cracked his whip and away they bowled up the steep main street.

I could never tire of hearing her stories about the life of the island. She stayed in Saint-Jacques six years and, had the fortunes of the island turned out more propitiously, she might have been there still. She was entirely happy. Her descriptions were illustrated by a number of commonplace-books and albums of sketches and paintings which she had filled, apparently, for the amusement of her old aunt in Paris, despatching each one on its completion, and receiving them all back years later on her aunt's death. There were about a dozen, and, at my entreaty, she had fished them out of a trunk and lent them to me. How much more alive and revealing they were than the single photograph-album which had also survived! There was one photograph, however, to which I often turned back: one of Berthe herself, a slim girl in a riding habit buttoned up to the neck in the fashion of Winterhalter's heroines of a few decades earlier. Her gloved hands were folded over an elegant riding switch. A preposterous curly-brimmed billycock, nesting behind on a heavy golden coil of plaits, was tilted forward over slightly frowning brows and wide eyes set in a grave and lovely face. The photograph had faded to the pallor of khaki drill and insects had freckled it with little holes; yet the fine bone-structure was unmistakably that of the slightly sardonic but still rather beautiful features opposite, which the summer sun of Greece had burnt to an almost Red Indian hue and made her large grey eyes seem still clearer and more luminous.

The sketch-books covered the entire life of the island. All the fine buildings of the capital were there, the statues of Plessis and Rumbold and Scudamore and Braithwaite and Schœlcher[3]; views of savannah and volcanic ravine and stifling forest; punctilious flower-paintings of hibiscus and balisier, of looping lianas, tree-ferns and dark branches where the Night Flowering Cereus grew. Even the monuments and inscriptions of churches were copied down. There was an abundance of negroes and negresses in their brilliant village costumes and flamboyantly disguised for carnival. There were indentured Hindu labourers in saris and many silver bracelets; scenes from the markets and the plantations among lakes of plumed sugar-cane; the estates and the curiously named *gentilhommières* of the island's creole oligarchy, and their inhabitants. As I listened and slowly turned the pages, the life of this happy, patrician, slightly provincial minority, into the heart of

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which Mademoiselle Berthe had suddenly been propelled, took shape. How leisurely and remote it all sounded! The cohorts of negro servants, the balls and the races, the long rides in cavalcades twenty or thirty strong; the picnics by the ever-smouldering cone of the Salpetrière, the love-affairs and quarrels and duels and reconciliations and marriages; the glimmering indoor life of the rainy season; the lazy afternoons in hammocks slung between mango trees and the hot nights under milky pavilions of muslin.

The Serindans were drawn so often and Berthe described them in such lucid detail that I soon felt I had known them all for a long time. The family, and indeed the whole of Saint-Jacques, was benevolently dominated by her distant cousin, Count Raoul-Agénor-Marie-Gaëtan de Serindan de la Charce-Fontenay (Berthe smiled as she repeated the prodigious name), the owner of Beauséjour, which was the richest and largest of the Jacobean estates. The Count de Serindan was a descendant of Plessis in the female line, and, though a scorner of Napoleon (and, for that matter, of the Orléans family, which, he often declared, were a band of upstarts and a disgrace to the House of France), he would frequently mention his kinship with Josephine de Tacher of nearby Martinique, the victim of that lamentable Corsican *mésalliance*; and old prints of the ruins of La Pagerie hung on the walls. The news of the death of the Comte de Chambord had struck the Count's ears like a knell and a black crape ribbon still adorned a lilied shield in his study.

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The Serindans were related to all the French families of the archipelago and their affiliations spread as far afield as the Guianas and Louisiana and Quebec; even to Nova Scotia – or rather, as he still insisted on calling it, to Acadie. Their position in Saint-Jacques was Olympian. The church at Beauséjour, which had been unroofed by a score of hurricanes and a score of times roofed over again, was walled and paved with memorial slabs, each topped by a stone helmet with its frozen foliage of mantelling and the emblems of dead Serindans. The orgulous record of their gestures – the carnage they had wrought among the Caribs and the English, their Christian virtues, the multitude of their progeny, their valour in attack and their impavid patience in adversity, the suavity of their manners, the splendour of their munificence and their pious ends – was incised with a swirling seventeenth-century duplication of long S's and a cumulative nexus of dog-Latin superlatives that hissed from the shattered slabs like a basketful of snakes.

In company with the other creole landowners the Count was not only exaggeratedly vain of his family's long history in the island and its total freedom from any coloured admixture – though not all of them, Berthe darkly interjected, could be equally sure on this head – but of its freedom from unarmigerous alliances. Again like his Jacobean compeers, he had frequent outbursts against the Third Republic – a band, he would affirm, flinging both hands into the air, of robbers, atheists, freemasons, Jacobins, traitors, and, at the beginning of the *Affaire*, filthy Dreyfusards. He had been known to box one of his children's ears for whistling the Marseillaise, a tune which sounded as balefully to him as *Ça ira* or the *Carmagnole*. The revolution alone, he would thunder, was to blame not only for the atheism and what he termed the empty radicalism of the Third Republic, but for the vulgar cynicism, the bad manners, the corruption and the blackguardism that had fallen on France like a plague. But both his sons were destined for the army, and he himself had achieved some distinction in the Franco-Prussian war. He had finally, at the unanimous insistence of his fellow islanders, accepted the position of mayor of Plessis; but he had only given in after a siege lasting half as long again as that of Troy, and he had always managed, somehow, to avoid donning the tricolor sash. (His first action as mayor had been to design and erect a row of magnificent gasoliers along the arcaded waterfront. Each little quincunx of white glass globes was held aloft by the spiralling and intertwining tails of five cast-iron dolphins: a measure which, in the eyes of his all proud fellow islanders, converted their little capital into the glory of the Antilles.) Fountains and drinking troughs rose in abundance, Jacobean holidays assumed a new momentum and the life of the island profited by numerous solid benefits to which the Count himself liberally contributed. But his many pictures by Berthe – on horseback, asleep in a rocking-chair with a cigar and a wide hat tipped over his nose, and, once, slightly absurdly, in a tail coat with a Knight of Malta's cross round his neck – depicted someone different from the forbidding traditionalist one might suppose. Page after page revealed a tall handsome man with a forked beard and hair growing thin on top, often in disorder; loose tropical clothes, a flowing lavallière tie and an expression of candid and almost childish good humour. For, when nothing occurred to arouse his political bias, all rancour would deflate and the most transparent benignity would take its place. All his life, indeed, had been devoted to pleasure, and his passion for every kind of sport, his skill at light verses and his mania for amateur theatricals made him the natural centre of the island festivities. He performed competently on half a dozen instruments, on the violin almost with virtuosity. He grasped any

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