Rendezvous in Haiti

ME

Stephen Becker

A RENDEZVOUS IN HAITI

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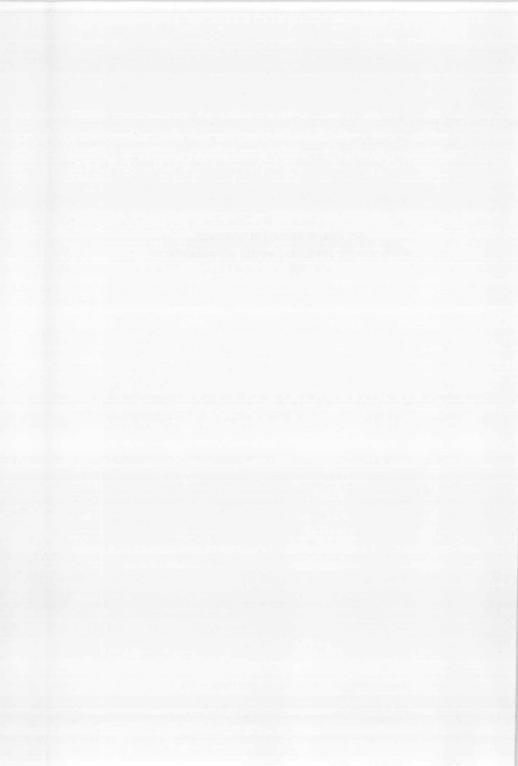
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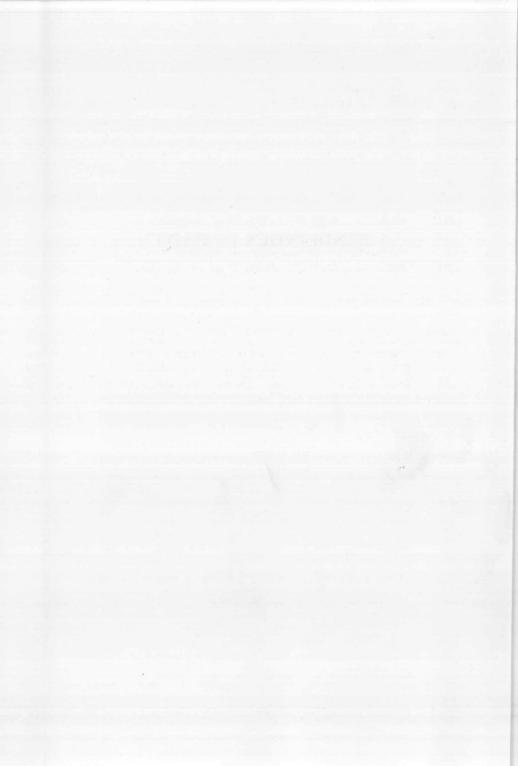
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W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 500 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10110 W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., 37 Great Russell Street, London, WC1B 3NU 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 To Mary after forty years, with much love and some astonishment



A RENDEZVOUS IN HAITI



MANAMA I MENENEN

Flanders two thousand survivors doggedly obeyed bawled orders: boots and rifle butts clashed like iron on the frozen ground. They were two British battalions and one colonial, and their field was bordered by rows of tents, wooden sheds and low ramshackle barracks. Four armored cars abreast. Autos and motorcycles. A lot full of field pieces. Beyond the artillery, a corral: horses and mules, the shuffle and whinny lost in gusts of winter wind.

Directly before the soldiers, as they came now to parade rest, stood a score or more of Allied officers—a monocled brigadier and his aides, a kepi'd general and his aides, several colonels, the usual junior officers. All

but a handful were British, and only two were American, both Marines: Second Lieutenant Robert Alexander McAllister, unblooded, attending his much decorated Colonel George Barbour.

Frigid air boomed across the field from Belgium; McAllister observed moist eyes and red noses. He observed the sun too—a pale, hostile silver disk, low in the west behind sullen sheets of cloud.

There was more to notice. Foreign regimental patches, British weapons and decorations and insignia of rank. The third battalion here was motley—a sprinkling of outlandish hats, caps, scarfs, fourragères. And off to the left was a band: trumpets, trombones, a small fat man laboring under a bass drum, a severe, nervous bandmaster. A most unmilitary trumpeter warmed his mouthpiece in the armpit of his greatcoat. A drummer boy was just that: a boy.

The colonel and his lieutenant, latecomers to this war, were on a round of courtesy calls, or, as the colonel phrased it, "Damn nonsense." They visited, conferred, learned, made polite murmur, shared tasteless dismal messes. They were welcome, and the invitation to this ceremony had been proffered in hearty solidarity: Americans were fresh and well-fed, pink-cheeked early risers, and the war was as good as over.

The band tore into "God Save the King", and McAllister saw that the bandmaster lacked a left arm. He inspected the musicians more carefully. One-eyed, a couple of them; a wooden leg; and of all things a missing ear.

A mile to the east, the twin spires of a stone church,

perhaps an abbey, dominated the long pocked slope that had once been farmland.

"This is a grey country," McAllister murmured to his colonel. "Paris is grey and the sky is grey and my God sir look at these men. Their souls are grey."

"Belay that," Colonel Barbour growled. "It is January at home too, and these men have fought in the trenches—for three years, some of them. And the Marine Corps does not chatter on parade."

McAllister shut up. He was more than merely deferent to this colonel, who was not merely a hero with a kaleidoscope of ribbons, but also a diplomat, perhaps a future commandant, or proconsul. Also McAllister was not sure precisely what tone one took with a colonel whose daughter one had fondled.

The music trailed off: a squeak, a thump, silence. The bandmaster smiled fiercely. McAllister murmured, "And our song?"

Colonel Barbour turned flat blue eyes upon McAllister. "The British have lost a million men. They're awarding plenty of medals and playing plenty of anthems. All they want from you is courtesy."

At a sharp, incomprehensible command, the parade snapped to attention. The brigadier stepped forward, and a French general beside him. To one side, a mustachioed major called out names one at a time, and one at a time men marched stiffly front and center.

The names meant nothing to McAllister. He was large and in rude health; his blood beat hot and vigorous. At a bitter gust he huddled absently against the wind, but quickly he recovered and braced: these men must be honored. Far up the slope the abbey seemed to sorrow, even to disapprove. And here was a corporal who had led a charge and disabled a machine gun. McAllister had done the same in a field exercise, in North Carolina. This corporal won the Conspicuous Gallantry Medal, and a handshake; and the Croix de Guerre, and two kisses.

McAllister had chosen the military as other men chose medicine or the law, and now a small exaltation welled up. The heroes advanced, were decorated and saluted, returned to the ranks. The wind sang, and stung. A lance corporal. An Indian, in full turban; was this a Sikh? The Distinguished Conduct Medal. McAllister was without decorations; but for the heavy green greatcoat, he would stand revealed, callow among the scarred veterans. The brigadier called another name, the sixth or seventh.

For a long moment no one stirred. Then from the third battalion, the motley battalion, a figure emerged, ambling as much as marching, insolence in his very stride but nothing to define, nothing to rebuke. The man was black-browed, pallid, with a strong nose and thin lips. He stood just under six feet and was of unremarkable build. Some might notice him; no one would remember him but for his brows. He wore no greatcoat; an overseas cap; three previous decorations; and a fourragère. He was a sergeant.

He marched to the generals, faced left, grounded his rifle and came to moderate attention.

The brigadier deferred to the French general, who addressed the men at some length in an accented, wind-blown English. McAllister gathered that the sergeant had served in two of the three Battles of Ypres. Any one

Wipers was sufficient butchery for a lifetime. Tens of thousands to buy a quarter-mile dear; tens more to sell it back dearer. Ypres twice! And now the French general awarded a Croix de Guerre and an embrace, and deferred to the brigadier.

The brigadier raised his monocle and stared frankly at this sergeant's face. So did McAllister, who noted the brows, the lax stance, and then sensed more: nothing flowed from the man. This sergeant was not present. He barely acknowledged the brigadier; coatless, he seemed impervious even to the freezing wind, himself a block of ice. Officers whispered. Colonel Barbour and Lieutenant McAllister exchanged a puzzled glance.

The brigadier spoke. McAllister heard "Passchendaele." Bloody Passchendaele: useless slaughter, men on both sides blown to bits by their own artillery, and the generals on both sides saying, "Dirty job." The brigadier now said, "Victoria Cross," and McAllister glanced again at Barbour: the V.C. was their equivalent of the Medal of Honor, which Barbour had earned in China; the colonel's face was stony and proud.

The brigadier did not pin this one to the blouse: he looped a crimson ribbon about the sergeant's neck, and stepped back, and saluted.

For some moments the sergeant did not stir. It became apparent then that he was in trouble. He swallowed, he twisted his neck, he sucked for air. At last he coughed. It was at first an unassertive cough, but then it insisted, swelling louder and hoarser. The sergeant gasped, and hawked strenuously, and coughed again, and this time spat up blood.

The brigadier recoiled a step and glanced at his boots. Blood had smeared the sergeant's chin. He mastered the cough but his chest went on heaving.

The brigadier resumed his rigid attention and his salute. The sergeant only coughed. Now it was a high strangled cough. He shouldered his arm, faced left coughing and marched back to the ranks coughing, and the sound of his cough carried far, a hoarse irregular shriek surging up the pitted slope toward the abbey as he marched along his rank and turned again, and took his place, and grounded his arm. The brigadier completed his salute sharply, as if the man were still at attention before him. When the convulsion subsided the sergeant stood calm; he seemed to be thinking of something else, to be standing in some other field, among other men. The silence was almost palpable; only when another blast howled down across the parade ground, as if to end the episode, did the major call another name.

Behind the officers the setting sun brightened for a moment, and the battalion cast long shadows, to the slope; to the abbey, McAllister decided; to Germany and Russia and around the world.

"Christ," the colonel said later. They had stood retreat with the British, and the French officers; the flags were furled for this night. Barbour and McAllister were crossing the parade ground toward the rickety Hotchkiss touring car lent by the French government to its new ally. "You want medals, do you? Remember what they cost."

McAllister could count on a victory medal sooner or later. He would surely see combat; perhaps there would be a special theater medal. At the moment he was cold and hungry. A soldier approached, walking and not marching, and when he crossed a patch of yellow light between two barracks McAllister saw that it was an enlisted man-other ranks, the British said-and waited, with a pleasure that never failed, for the salute. When the colonel came to a halt McAllister looked again: it was the tubercular sergeant with his Victoria Cross. Americans by tradition saluted the Medal of Honor regardless of rank: the colonel now saluted its equivalent, and so did McAllister.

The sergeant paused, puzzled or careless, and otherwise ignored them. The three men stood quietly in the deepening dusk. McAllister's first impulse was to reprimand the sergeant on behalf of the colonel; his second and better impulse was to silence: a colonel would need no help from a green lieutenant, and a V.C. no rebukes. Shortly Colonel Barbour, tolerating only so many seconds of indifference, perhaps of insolence, completed his salute, and so did McAllister. The sergeant peered closer, and registered the globe-and-anchor, the silver eagle.

"I'm Colonel Barbour of the United States Marine Corps. This is Lieutenant McAllister." The sergeant never glanced at McAllister, but the colonel held his attention briefly. "Congratulations, Sergeant. That's a damn fine row of ribbons, and a couple too many wound

stripes. You've fought a hard war."

The sergeant squinted at the colonel's shadowed fea-

tures. Their mingled breath steamed in the feeble yellow glow. The sergeant said without heat, "Fuck your war," and trudged past them.

The Americans turned to watch this phenomenon out of sight, and when he had melted into the darkness they resumed their march. "At least he didn't spit on my boots," the colonel said. "Too much time in the line, I imagine."

McAllister only said "Yes, sir." He was startled by his colonel's forbearance; he would remember it; rank; noblesse oblige.

"I'm sending you to Paris," Colonel Barbour said. "For a week or two only. You'll join General Harbord's brigade at the end of the month. Not staff: you'll take a platoon."

"It's what I want, sir." Paris. He would see Caroline. Perhaps the colonel would speak of her now.

"Of course. But let me tell you something. It's not only the British who've lost a million men; the French and the Germans and the Russians too. Colonels pay attention to such numbers. We do not enjoy sacrificing the flower of our manhood et cetera. Your job is not to win medals and lose platoons."

"I appreciate the advice, sir. But with permission, I don't believe it was necessary. I am not one of your glory hogs."

"You astonish me." The wind was slacking. "Harbord's setting up at Château-Thierry. You know the town?"

"Down on the Marne."

"Yes. Historical. It's . . . grey." After a pause the colo-