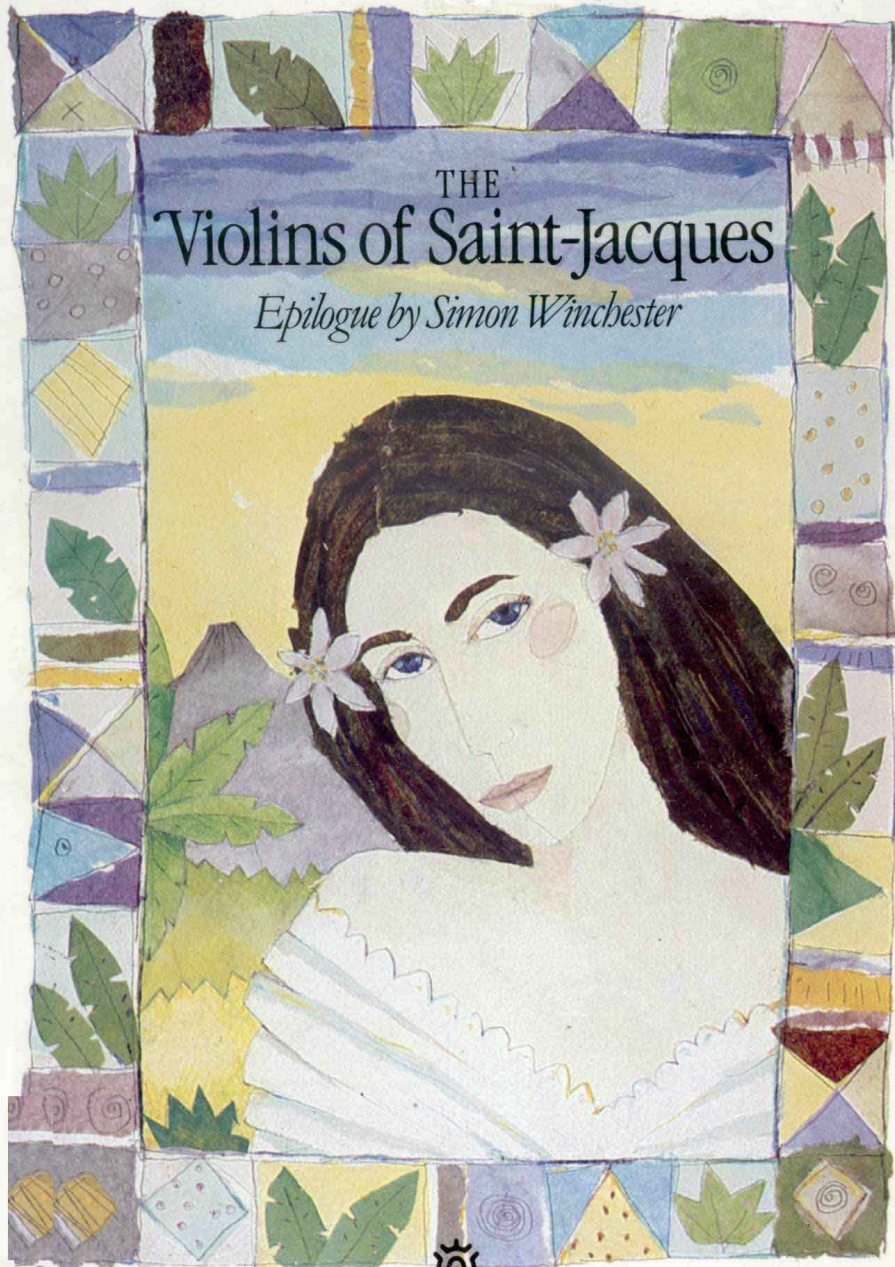


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PATRICK LEIC FERMOR

THE
Violins of Saint-Jacques

Epilogue by Simon Winchester



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The Violins of Saint-Jacques



EPILOGUE BY
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TO
DIANA COOPER

Infelix domus . . . sonitu tremibunda profundi.

Valerius Flaccus



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 trigonocephalus 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 Vendée 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 Fencibles captured it in the Seven Years' War, and, until the Revolution, the Union Jack

1. *De Rebus Insularum Indiarum Occidentis quae Charaebae vel Karaibi Dicuntur*. Rev P. Heiron. Zancarolus, O.S.F., 7 Vols. Venice, 1723.

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.¹ 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

1. The same phenomenon occurred in Haiti.

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 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 caique 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 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 Salpêtrière, 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 Salpêtrière'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.

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