

Bill Kaye, a California beach lover and sailing fanatic, had a happy life making movies, until a new contract turned it all into a nightmare. As a boy, Bill helped his father with a bloody secret op. Now living and dead come to settle up.

Evil's Virtue

By D.W. Holmquist

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EVIL'S VIRTUE

The creation of weapons, lies,
hilarity and fear.



D.W. HOLMQUIST

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This is a work of historical fiction, based on actual persons and events. The author has taken creative liberty with many details to enhance the reader's experience.

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Chapter 4

My name is William James Kaye, I remind myself, and there are several reasons I'm thinking back to my earlier years, when my father Colonel James was still alive, and there were adventures still to play out with him. I suppose I was a good son, in as much as I allowed him to finish his days racing his sailboat, and acting as his permanent deck-hand and sailing master. I always found it ironic a fighter-pilot would, in the end, fall in love with the slowest form of racing there is.

Many of the memories came up in a place I would call a difficult version of paradise, complete with birds of paradise blooming most of the year, the inevitable palm-trees and bathing nymphs in the cracked and ageing pool. The difficult part came from my being myself, and Los Angeles being Los Angeles.

I was able to see my mother more often. She lived nearby, having dumped my father and his fate, and continued on like a Grande dame that she was, I had come to believe in time. Indeed, she had come to shun dad's adventures, and dropped believing in the righteous cause of the week, with which he endeavored to nourish both his soul and his bank account.

My mother was beautiful in a way that was legendary among those who knew her. She must have been a handful for my father, and upon reflection, her beauty would have explained the seething midnight brawls of my childhood, and dad's stoic grins. He would always grin the next morning, when

he discovered how empty his bank account was, and how he had contributed to the Dior, Givenchy crowd.

I liked mornings in a café, in a yacht harbor near Los Angeles, where you could have breakfast by the pool, or lunch or dinner, for that matter. It was like a club which attracted misfits fleeing the city but not yet ready for the full-on bohemian, druggie, starving screen-writer life-style of those who lived in their cars, and expected their masterpiece to be funded any day now. Not those people. The people who came to the Parrot Café had some scratch. Many were the remnants of LA's aircraft industry, had real jobs, and some contempt for the movie factories in town.

Looking out from my table, across the pool, beyond the palm trees and the beach, down the yacht basin and beyond to the snow-covered San Bernardino Mountains, I could reflect on the pact I was making with the devil, if indeed that's what it was. Last week I was a yachtsman, and this week I was a filmmaker again, which allowed me to be a yachtsman. My boat lay not four hundred yards down the channel from where I sat. Debbie refilled my coffee cup, smiled, and returned into the diner which had kept some of its Sixties Charm. If one can find charm in Formica and red vinyl upholstered booths. I still could. It seemed everything had become Globo-chic these days, had reached new depths of pretense and Hideosity. Thus, my mind wanders now and then in an arc of artistic offense, over to noticing with fondness the cracked pink concrete terrace, the tired white paint on the posts and beams

holding up the ramada. I checked my watch, eight-thirty, and the devil hadn't appeared.

Inside the café the usual morning crew had assumed their positions in various booths. Al and Michael who knew everything, Harry the classic car man, Dietrich the German stock-broker, who was being dumped by Susan, the ageing femme fatale in the next booth. She was happily being courted by Stew, the Jewish, newly ordained Baptist minister. I was avoiding all of this at the moment. I was expecting the devil. I was joking to myself. The gentleman I expected, was coming to talk about finalizing a deal for a promo film for a particularly nasty weapons system. This was the kind of deal I was making lately and I wasn't sure it was any less virtuous than some of the tripe they called art in Hollywood. At least what I was doing was honest propaganda, in that sense I was the virtuous one. you, see? I have many ways to console myself.

"How about a warm-up." Debbie said holding the coffee pot ready to pour.

"Sure Deb. Thanks. And here's the devil." I whispered to her before she retreated to the diner. At that moment a distinguished looking, greying gentleman, carrying a briefcase approached my table.

"Mr. Kaye," he said, "I hope I'm not late. I'm Alistair Linder." Mid-sixties, I guessed, noting that he puffed as though short of breath.

“You’re not late at all.” I stood and shook his hand and waved him to sit opposite me at my table. He pulled his lap-top from the brief-case and put it on the table.

“There.” He said with a sigh. “So much for the technological concession. It’s quite scenic here, your office so to speak.” His accent was distinctly English, public school, thought Bill. “I had a devil of a time driving here, the traffic is appalling... But then it’s like that everywhere isn’t it?”

“It’s the usual gripe around here. Sorry I put you through it, but I thought it was the best place. The airport isn’t far so when we get into production, it will be easy to get together.”

“I never imagined your office was so close, when our financial man Duffy signed last week.”

“Ah the mysteries of LA traffic. Sometimes what seems only five minutes away can take an hour, or the opposite could be true. My office is over there,” I pointed to a row of buildings lining the side of the yacht basin. “As you can see it’s walkable. We’ll go there after breakfast, and I’ll show you our latest wonder the Handicapped Toilet, required to qualify for any government contract.” I was enjoying the small talk but now there were some questions. “I realize the production will be kept confidential per contract, but there are some details we’ll need to elaborate on for sales purposes.”

“Certainly. There’ll be no problem with our sharing those confidential details with you, but here’s where your expertise comes in, you will need to sell some of the characteristics of

the system without revealing what they are. Does that make sense?"

"Of course not. But that's my profession, it's what we do at FM motion Pictures." I laughed. "We take secrecy, scramble it into nonsense and have it come out like the absolute truth with the authority of the ten commandments. Pardon my blasphemy."

"Very impressive Mr. Kaye."

"Bill."

"Bill it is then."

"How much coordination can I expect from your offices in Massachusetts?"

"We'll be wanting daily updates on the script and, when you start shooting, either I, or one of our people will be with you at all times." Alistair gazed at me with watery blue eyes, as though assessing a new member at the yacht club. "With regards to the confidential stuff, we'll be watching very closely, and a couple of experts will also be sent out from time to time."

"I figured. We're doing something real here, so we'll need guidance. We're not very used to "real". This is a town where the most expensive writers are employed writing people's lives for them, clearing them from the septic tinges of reality, at least enough to avoid their own mediocrity, and to carry on through the desert their lives have become, courtesy of those same writers."

“You combine candor with depression with quite some skill, Bill, an admirable trait.” He really didn’t know how to take my little philosophical excursion. He probably thought me crazy.

“Yes, well, you signed the contract so now, we’ll make the film, and so I don’t have to hide my madness from you any longer.” I laughed.

“Sailors are all a bit mad, aren’t they? But I can understand it, the beauty of some of the boats is a tip-off, jolly lovely.” After a synthetic smile and a brief pause, Alistair was back in business. “I assume you’ve procured the security clearances for your people.”

“Last month. The applications went out as soon as we got the request for a bid. I think Wendy has all of the clearances now. We’ll see when we go to the office.”

Wendy is my office manager, vice president, accountant and beloved, but I never let on. She knows, but never lets on, until we long to end up in bed on rare occasions, fleeing our former disappointments in love, generally self-inflicted. But we never do.

After breakfast we walked to the office, past the beach at the head of the yacht basin, and the rows of docks to our right and some privileged office buildings to the left. The morning winter sun added sparkle to the water and magically removed blemishes even from the derelict boats which lay among the “gold platers” out on the bay. My office is on a corner, blinds

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open door ajar and proudly displaying my logo. Wendy is waiting with coffee and doughnuts and a smile, which comes naturally. She's a tall healthy girl but she's always smiling as though embarrassed by her own existence.

I introduce Alistair around to the crew, Bob and Dan, the editors, Kevin in the camera department, along with Dora and Margie who is the chief recording engineer. All smiles on with a new contract and possible paychecks continuing for a while. We check out the editing rooms and introduce Alistair to our new handicap toilet. The small talk and banter continue while Alistair verifies the security clearances, and I zone out.

I'm actually wondering what to do next. How in hell am I going to make some sense of this project? I catch myself going over the possible shots, sounds and narration in a panic. You see in spite of all indications to the contrary, I am a conscientious, though plodding person. I have to remind myself I don't have all the data required to generate a script about which to actually panic. I only know I'm dealing with a truly awful weapons system and I should be feeling guilty for having anything to do with it, let alone worrying about the script.

There is a crew here, a business with doors to keep open and payroll to meet, so where does the nobility of spirit lead, I wonder, and thank heaven for Wendy cutting me off from my petty torments.

"We could take Mister Linder up to the projection room and show him a show we did for a similar product." She says

flipping her dark blonde hair, engaging her “I’m not-really-here” smile.

Kevin from camera swings by the conference room with and offers his two bits worth: “It’s got some great shots of breaking things. If you like things breaking, you’re going to love it.”

“Kevin shot it.” I say. “He has a fascination with destruction, which I wonder about sometimes.”

* * *

Later, Wendy and I are the last to leave. We’re standing by the front door while she rummages in her purse for the office keys. “It went pretty well, considering half the time I’m not convinced we really exist as a company.” I say, and she laughs.

“You’ll be convinced tomorrow when you have to sign all the checks I’ve written in the last couple of days.”

“Well, before I sign away all the money, I’ll take you out to dinner to celebrate having any money to sign away.”

“Thank you, Bill, but I can’t. Not tonight.” I expected her answer, so I took a cruel shot. “What’s up Wendy? Do you have a new lover?” She locks the office door. We cross the street and start walking toward the beach, passing the boat slips as we go. She smiling as usual, as though enigma is her natural dwelling place.

“Of course, I don’t have a lover, Bill, you know better.”

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“So, what do you do at night, that’s so important, so sacred?” She stops and I stop with her. She takes a breath and suddenly kisses me on the lips, just quickly like a peck but on the lips.

“I read paperbacks.” She says. “Goodnight Bill, I’ll see you tomorrow. There’re lots of tomorrows.” With that she recrosses the street and heads for the garage. I continue on toward the beach, thinking what a strange flirt this Wendy is, and that just makes her more attractive. Oh well, I’m thinking, there are still the evil weapons, and the strange Englishman, working for an East Coast guidance company, to contemplate.

But as I walk to the Parrot, I shelve the weapons show, give up Wendy as a riddle I’m reluctant to deal with. She is my employee and my job is to look beyond her lovely body, her deep blue eyes and be a complete professional about the whole natural unnatural thing. I call out march cadence across the sand to the café.

I successfully avoid Mike who-knows-everything, manage to extract a beer from Mario the bartender, without engaging in a conversation, and thinking back on my father’s drinking record as a shared habit, I manage to make it to a solitary bench overlooking the beach and the water. I shall drink alone, unlike Colonel Jim who needed troops around, fellow boozers. I sit, take a sip, and count the aircraft landing lights several miles away, as they approach LA International. I can see nine planes right now. This will go on until past midnight, eight, nine, ten, visible at once. Two things come to mind, first the notion that

isolation is impossible, unless these planes are stopped by flak or worse, second, the escape from Stanleyville of mercenaries in a botched operation was rendered impossible, but some of them made it anyway.

I notice the wavelets in the marina basin glinting, sparkling like a subtle light-show with the reflection of city lights and harbor lights all around. I wander back to my last meeting with René which took place some years after the botched operation, thinking weapons, wars, Alistair, and a new hush-hush contract. What is it with this strange fate of mine? I haven't the least interest in wars and clandestine peccadillos, outside of an entertainment value which some people may or may not share. I like a good story but I don't need to live it. Yet here I am forcing myself to grapple with how to propagandize some minor weapons system, because that's what I'm paid to do.

The last time I met René it was in a Parisian bar, of course with dad, this setting being *de rigeur*. I had hopped a flight from LA to Paris exploring a business prospect, some movie about a vineyard. Of course, I'd see my father and meet his new mistress, and celebrate the reunion with a drink.

René had been patched up after his fight down the Congo River and salvation by a fishing boat. This was some twenty years after the Stanleyville debacle. He talked about the "tourist bullet", the one that had entered his right neck and exited his left hip. He pointed at the oblong scar in his neck, cracked a big smile, hoisted up his shirt to show off the big gash on his left hip, the exit wound.

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"Hey René, when do you figure you've had too many lives?" I asked.

"Plus tard filston," he said, "later, little son." He turned to Colonel Jim. "He grew up okay, the little son."

"What have you been up to?" I asked René as a matter of conversing. Dad injected: "You know about Dragon Rouge, son, well he missed that."

"There are things I did later, René said, but for Dragon Rouge I was still too messed up. Lately I've been doing some jobs in Aden and Yemen. Your papa tells me you're making movies." The old mercenary said, still trying to be suave and charming in his business suit and behind his broad, scarred up face. I smiled then, "No drama, no glamour, just propaganda of one kind or another. I don't even get to work with pretty girls, except at the office."

"Quel drame! I feel for you, my son." René said. The Colonel laughed. "See! He's a smart son he's stayed out of our monkey business. There should be a medal for that." Dad held up his hand for a waiter. We were in the restaurant and bar of the American Legion Post number 1, a cheap but elegant place to eat and drink and recruit mercenaries, in one of the most beautiful neighborhoods in Paris. The French had given the building to the American Army as a token of gratitude, for helping fight World War One; they had named the soldiers who had fought in the trenches, the American Legion.

I knew about the Stanleyville disaster, and about “Dragon Rouge” red Dragon, which was the operation which shortly followed. I knew there was a relationship between rescuing my father from the Cambridge nightclub and rescuing hostages in the Congo operation. The second operation, Red Dragon, when the Belgian government, the CIA, the US Air Force stepped out of the shadows to rescue six hundred colonials from death and worse. What remained a mystery was why the first operation was compromised, why the most fundamental element of surprise had been squandered from the beginning.

“Why such a modest operation in Stanleyville to begin with?” I found myself asking. René was happy to answer. “The Belgians didn’t want to appear to be messing with their former colony. The NATO people including the States, didn’t want anyone to believe they were acting against a new independent country, and so they pretended nothing was happening. But they did feel pity for the civilians caught there and the Belgians knew they were responsible for their own people, the Congo had been theirs after all, they also knew Moscow was backing murderers and thieves.”

“Murderers and thieves cloaked in the most humanitarian respectability.” Jim chimed in. “And, of course the Simbas were portrayed as innocent, exploited victims of the evil capitalists. You got all that stuff in college.”

“Some of it is right.” I said in defense of my college debt, and unwilling to concede some of my education was wasted.

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"Some of everything is right." Dad said, somewhat irritated. "When the Wehrmacht was shooting at me, they knew they were right, same with the commies in Korea."

"Oh la! Are we going to have a family fight?" René said. "Eighty hostages or more were killed in Stanleyville, civilian guys, women, and children. That's all real. The rest I don't know." There were no more "33 Export" beers to be had, so René was on red wine then. He had a sip and sat back to let Dad and I go at it.

Dad wanted to enlighten me on the purpose of the operation. "We had thought we could infiltrate our men, enough men, to protect the hostages until, working through the UN, a more important evacuation could be mounted. We could get them all out while covering for our sponsors. We could bring out all of the foreign nationals without being accused of Belgian or American aggression. We were betting on surprise, and that was blown."

I nodded yes Dad, and turned to René.

"Well at least you made it out, down the river." I said changing the subject away from ideological conjecture. I remembered the Dragon Rouge stories, how Belgium had sent paratroopers in their old DC-6's and the US Airforce had helped out with C-130's, and had pulled off a near miracle in rescuing six hundred civilians in a matter of hours. "How did you get down the river?"

“René’s adventure from the “Heart of Darkness.” Dad said with his “Peace” smile.

At this point in the conversation, I decide to try to remember as much as I can. It occurs to me, that there’s no record of all of this, and I feel duty-bound to record as much as I can in my memory, given I never have a tape-recorder when I need one. I’m convinced this piece of history is of some value, and preserving history is a fundamental characteristic of any civilization.

“It wasn’t too bad, René said. “There were nine of us left behind. We put as much ground between us and the airport as we could before sunup. After that we were hiding in the jungle while we worked something out. We had no way to communicate, so we were on our own. I decided the best way was to use the river and float away, but first we needed a boat, a pirogue of some kind. So, we marched on along the road following the river, hoping to come across such a thing. I put Bongrain on point, about fifty yards ahead. It’s jungle. You can’t see much. On we go. A couple of fellows with a cartload of mangoes and butter fruit heading for market in Stanleyville pass us by. We smile, keep the weapons down. ‘Bonjour.’ I ask about a boat and both fellows, wearing huge smiles, probably scared out of their wits, tell us to keep going, there’s a small village, and boats maybe. We continue on the road, and as it turns North, leaving the river, we march on straight, following a tight jungle path which continues along the river. There’s a small clearing near the water’s edge where we decide to stop. It’s late afternoon, and we’re all exhausted.”

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We take inventory of what we have: A few cans of corned beef and old American C-rations in the three packs thrown out of the last Dakota to take off. There were some medical supplies which came in handy later for my tourist bullet, and then plenty of ammo, a few grenades, smoke grenades. We weren't completely without resources." He emptied his wine glass. "Is it boring?" He says looking at me.

"Not at all. On the contrary, you don't hear stuff like this anymore." I took in the surroundings. This first post of the American Legion was called Pershing Hall. It reminded me how a General, a World War were easily forgotten, now betrayed by the lack of maintenance over the intervening years, a sad lack of interest in a once proud edifice. The dining hall, pale green in color, and very much a product of La Belle Epoque with an ornate arched ceiling and crystal chandeliers, though still lively, felt like a coffee shop had moved into space from another century.

Dad waved over the waiter and indicated another round of drinks was in order. I figured we were settling in for René's story which I was happy to hear. I had been acquainted with some of René's stories before. They belonged to Colonel Dad's history and legends repertoire.

René took a sip from his re-filled glass. "The next morning, the sun poked under the clouds, glinting on the muddy river, and woke us up. We gathered up our gear and moved on down the track, which got narrower and narrower as we went. It would drop down to the river's edge now and then, and then it

would plunge back into the jungle, so thick that only a few meters were necessary for the river to disappear completely. I put Pichard on point this time and he had an awful time of it. There were stretches where he had to use a bayonet to slash through vines and brush to keep going.

That afternoon we were moving along slowly, thinking we were still at least fifty meters behind him, when suddenly we caught up. His hand was raised to stop us. He indicated silence, finger to lips, and pointing up ahead with his rifle. We crouched silently on either edge of the track. I wondered what could possibly be up ahead. It was unlikely there would be patrols looking for us out here. There was little to hear other than gray parrots and guineafowl, but I thought it best to find out what would happen if... Next to me on the track, was Bongrain. I pointed at the sky, and jabbed at it and mouthed "one". Bongrain slipped off the safety and squeezed one round into the sky.

The response was Invisible, but up ahead of us the whole jungle erupted in gun-fire. Automatic weapons, single shots, pistols, the whole damn symphony orchestra, with stray bullets whizzing nearby and everywhere, and then one last crescendo, and that was it. They were out of ammunition.

We waited while the birds became more comfortable singing again. It seemed like an eternity. My legs were becoming numb from crouching, you know, pins and needles. I'm supposed to be the patient one, I'm thinking, and yet the

sweat dripping off my nose and down my cheeks is like a age of my shrinking patience.

We rose to our feet and continued on slowly at first, listening to the swishing of twigs and branches as our invisible opposition dashed away out of there. I was thankful that, although they had gotten the weapons, order and discipline hadn't come with. I had observed this before in Africa. You can't blame 'em. One day they're carrying spears, the next day Kalashnikovs."

It was here, watching Rene leaning back, completely relaxed and having another sip of wine, that I remember thinking, we're all stuck in roles and unaware of it. We're there because we've come to think of those roles as given unavoidable fates, and we've accepted them to the point where questions never arise, and so nothing can change.

I pick up my empty beer glass from the sand and head up to the Parrot.

"I know, I'm not supposed to take my beer to the beach." I'm speaking to Mario. "But I need to. Only at the beach can I absorb your language lessons. Mario."

"A Second beer on the beach! "He shakes his head while pouring the beer. "No tienes verguenza

senor Bill. Pero recuerdate que yo no se nada. Okay?"

"Okay." I say. "Si señor Mario." I smile and move out of the teaming bar as quickly as possible. Thinking "Verguenza,"

shame, I have no shame asking for another beer to take to the beach.

On the beach I return to the American Legion bar and Rene's trek through the Heart of Darkness, down the Congo. But wait, I read the Joseph Conrad novel, *The Heart of Darkness*, and it portrayed Europeans going UP the Congo, Rene's adventure takes place nearly a century later and he's fleeing down river. In a hundred years paradigms shift and I vaguely wonder what the shift is now. Is it a shift that moves us forward, or backward, as when Rome fell and the dark ages were upon us and took nearly a thousand years to move on. Judging by the smart weapons I was peddling and the rising numbers of naïve humans as evidenced by the monosyllabic dialogue in the media, we were returning to a feudal era, where the nobility had the swords and the armor and the peasants had sticks.

"We found a pirogue the next day, and pushed out onto the muddy river. It was difficult to determine which channel was actually the river and which just led to swampy shallows." René was saying. "Whether we chose the right channel or the wrong one, and had to backtrack or not didn't matter, at least we were given a free ride with the current. We'd had enough walking through the jungle."

"You mean you weren't enthusiastic about your adventure hike through pristine nature?" I had said sardonically.

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"There're many things one gets over, and basic training is one of them. Even in the Legion enough is enough, unless you crave the oblivion physical agonies and exhaustion bring about, and then indeed you are ill with something evil in your soul... Did you ever go through basic, Bill?"

I shake my head. "No, but in my early twenties the devil did give me the grand tour of human depravity. Tattooed porn-queens, and former men who had grown up as appendages to their cocks."

"Now that sounds like training of a different kind." René said grinning at Dad.

I quickly shelve the subject. Embarrassed by my own shady past. "You were drifting down the Congo river, you were saying, and what happened?"

René reaches into his jacket pocket, extracts a pack of Gitanes, looks around, doesn't care and lights up. The bar's lunch crowd, by now was thinning out. Looking at René, I saw him blow a smoke ring and it was as though the exhaled smoke took René back to the river.

"We drifted for, I don't know, three days, rowing some of the time to keep us pointed downstream, and outside of a couple of villages, never seeing anyone, just some monkeys. It seemed like a long way between villages, and these were pathetic little places set back from the river and partially concealed behind trees. The bourgeois mud huts, those of the gentry, had galvanized iron roofs which stood out more than

the grass thatch on most of them. That way we could identify a village long before passing it. We established a routine for that. Two of us would row in the middle and I would pretend to steer in the back. The rest would try to lie on the planks on the bottom. It wasn't bad in the heat, to lie on the bottom, which was awash with water from the leaks. I must tell you of this pirogue. It was like an eighteen-foot box made of rough planks, no doubt hewn from jungle trees, probably iroko, caulked with I don't know what, monkey shit, judging by the general smell. In any case it leaked and, now and then we would bail with empty cans."

"The problem was, I didn't know what to do next. The river would take us to Brazzaville across from Leopoldville and then some rapids and waterfalls that I'd only heard of, and if we could survive that, the Atlantic some two hundred miles beyond."

René took a drag on the Gitane.

"I knew we were being watched as we floated along. There were eyes in that dense mass of trees and brush and vines, even though there was no sign of people. It was inevitable our presence was known, all along that green corridor we were forced to follow. So, the question was where do we turn to get away? Asking the locals wouldn't happen, because there was no way of knowing if the eyes were hostile, friendly, or indifferent, and finding out would be a game of Russian Roulette, I wasn't in the mood for."

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“What about Leopoldville?” I asked. “That was still the Capital, wasn’t it? It hadn’t fallen to the Simbas yet.”

“How was I to know?” René smiled. “On est bien confortable ici, non?” We’re all comfortable here aren’t we? He added with irony. “There, we didn’t even have a bloody transistor radio.”

He was silent for a moment, looking at Dad, le Colonel, with a “you-know-what-I-mean” look. He continued.

“I had a vague map of the river in my head, and Bongrain knew the Congo better than I did, having spent some time there in the colonial times. We spent a couple of days drifting along in the muddy stream, avoiding snags, and guessing which channel to take, avoiding dead ends, and all the unexpected obstacles on what I called the tropical river Styx, we spent that time considering a plan of action. At this juncture we had reached a point where the river turned distinctly South of West in direction, and it was in that area that it came closest to the border with Cameroon, no longer a French colony but still very much occupied by French troops. We ran it by our guys and everyone was on board with the idea of making for Cameroon. Better a trek through the forest to a known territory than surprises elsewhere, in the unknown.”

“What about the jungle trek. What was known about that?” I asked, imagining myself frightened by both alternatives.

“Bongrain knew there was a track heading North to Cameroon. It follows the Sanga River in some places. It was a little over two hundred miles to the border...”

“Holy crap! Two hundred miles!” I said, “Walking!”

“Basic training, filston, little son, remember basic training. The devil takes many forms...” I had a sip of beer, and I recalled how I loathed being referred to as ‘little son’, that was the one reserve I had in my affection for René. “The next day. Little before sundown, we beached the pirogue to spend the night, in a place where there was a clearing near the riverbank. Bongrain figured we were just North of where the Ubangi River met the Congo, and once past this confluence we could set out toward Cameroon on foot without having to cross a major river again.” René’s story and my thoughts were interrupted...

* * *

“You still out here Bill?” It was Mike who-knows-everything, ambling along the beach in the what passes for darkness in the city by the water.

“Present.” I say.

“You sober?” He asks looking me in the eye with his own dark eyes set in a broad round face and an ironic smile angled up to one side.

“What do you think, Mike?”

“You’re sober. You must be worried about something, out here, like this.”

"I'm thinking. I'm thinking about another story that took place many years ago. It's the kind of story I should be telling Wendy, but she wouldn't listen to it. It's way too exotic for anyone to grasp today except as a work of fiction, and I would be guilty of telling it as fact." Mike's intrigued by my ramblings and sits down in the sand facing the Marina basin, but turned subtly in my direction.

I briefly tell Mike of the Congo adventure, as related by René. I tell him I'm also celebrating in a way, the contract signed, that would keep me in business another couple of months, but there's a relationship between my contract and René's story which haunts me at the moment. René the weapons expert and my new film involving the sale of weapons. Obviously. But far too simple, I reply to myself and Mike.

"What happened to René after the trek through the jungle to Cameroon?"

"They continued on up that track, at times along the Sanga River, at times in deep jungle. René always with his sense of humor painted a picture of a raid on a village for its chickens, having been fed up with shooting monkeys for food, or eating bizarre fruit for diarrhea. He said he tried a few words in Bantou like please and hello, and thank you, on the locals and when that didn't work, he ordered a full-on infantry attack on the chickens. As he described it. It was all asses and elbows through the jungle, while the locals laughed. They finally understood

what these white men wanted, and offered to pluck and cook the chickens for a wilted fifty Franc note René had in his wallet.

“When they came to Cameroun, they didn’t know they had crossed the border until they came to what passed for a government building.

It was as dilapidated as it was imposing, with shutters hanging loose and akimbo from windows on the second floor, peeling pink plaster half covered with mold of a gray-green color decorated the ground floor. There were sentries posted by the entrance. That’s when René stopped the description.” I said.

“And?”

“That’s when he got shot. The “tourist bullet” he called it, came in here and out there.” I said, pointing at my neck and then my hip.

“I thought you said Cameroun was still occupied by French troops. So why the shooting?”

It’s late and I realize I need to be ready for business in the morning. I stand.

“So why the shooting?” I repeat Mike’s question. “Ah, Sherlock, that is the question.” I rise and step away, walking in the direction of “Taxi Dancer,” my boat and bunk, a quarter mile down the channel.

Mike yells after me: “You jerk! Why don’t you finish the story?”

“Another day.” I reply while picking up speed. The curious thing is that René’s story and the whole Congo operation no longer existed and would never exist again unless it was taken up as a movie project. In that case, actors could bring it back without suffering the physical dangers, the blood and grief of reality, and be seen as heroes without the agony. Perhaps the actors would reap rewards at expensive galas, and be worshipped by fawning crowds. The beauty of movies, I thought. Why I tried my luck in the desire to make movies, and found it all less glamorous than imagined, and my own talents in storytelling and persuasion lacking. Here I was on the movie fringe, with a storage locker full of un-produced dramatic screenplays, which I kept for reasons un-known. Oh yes, there was one script about René and the Congo operation. That was my first effort to record history.

Mike was another talent of another kind, wasting himself writing code for a main-frame, to help a bank with foreclosures, in such a way as to make it all seem like losing money is profitable. He looked un-suited for many of the occupations he had had. He was short, but well-proportioned save for his head, which seemed too large for his body. He had pale brown eyes which, at times, seemed to contain an entire universe of their own.

I remember crazy times with Mike and our conversations. It was all earth-changing fun, drug-free perhaps, but somewhat simmering in alcohol.

“At least if you’re selling weapons, there’s something real about the military, maybe even healthy in a perverse way. I mean, we don’t have guys worrying about their make-up or cross-dressing yet.”

“I don’t know.” I had replied.

“I mean, we aren’t in the final stages, in the Roman sense, we don’t have to hire our enemies to fight our wars for us, only to have them turn around and slaughter us. Do we?” This was a discussion we’d had on the beach the night before.

“I hope not. Not yet.”

“There was this general. He was a Roman general, toward the end of the Empire, the end of civilization in the West. His name was Stilicho. He was forced to induct Germanic barbarians to fill in the ranks of his legions. He was defending the city of Milan, about three hundred fifty miles North of Rome, parrying thrusts of the Gothic army heading South into Italy.” Mike seemed to enjoy talking about such things, not to impress but perhaps to invoke another era, and an excuse for telling a good story. He was sitting next to me on a bench, staring out at the yacht basin. He sipped his beer slowly.

“Anyway, Stilicho chased the barbarians around and defeated them several times over a period of years. But Honorius, the Emperor at the time, along with the Roman Senate, found Stilicho guilty of conspiring with the Goths because he had been forced to take on so many as legionaries.

Honorius had him beheaded. He had defended Rome. He had defended his Emperor, but; too many Goths.”

“Sounds pretty stupid.”

“That’s how things are when civilizations end. The General’s wife was a noblewoman named Serena. Like one of your friend’s boats out there.” He nodded toward the water. It was getting damp and the fog was moving in, you could see it in the increasing haloes around the Marina lights. The fog-horn began to moan in the distance.

“Serena, after her husband’s execution, went before the Senate and pleaded for his memory to be honored, his reputation to be restored, having saved Rome. For her troubles, she was strangled to death on the Senate floor.”

“Gee, Mike, you’re on a roll tonight. Hopefully this kind of thing can’t happen now.”

“No? No, it’s like the pyramids. I don’t think there will be any built like the old ones.”

“There’s no reason.”

“There are pyramids being built, many of them, but most are being built in peoples’ minds. They are the illusions we live by. At first money was gold and silver or pretty rocks or sea shells. Now money doesn’t exist at all. It’s just a bunch of digits perched atop a pyramid of abstractions and lies.”

“I get you, you’re Michael Morgan, the full faith and credit...”

“Oh yeah, and you can take it to the bank. The bank that’s surrounded by security all the way up to nuclear weapons guarding the holy secret, shh! The holy secret is that the security is guarding nothing. The security is there to make you believe that there’s something to guard.”

“That’s it ,” I say “and yet here we are, trying to make as much nothing as possible.”

“Well, I have the solution.” Says Mike with drill-sergeant conviction. “We fight nothing, with better nothing. I unveil for you, my latest masterpiece: THE CHURCH OF THE HOLY PARTICLE.”

“Ah. Another tax-exempt NGO;” I point out, with loathing and disgust in my voice.

“Precisely. We shall do everything in our un-elected power to make citizens of this country better. We’ll define better.”

“Sounds Marxian if not Martian say I.”

“Not at all. This is the Church of the Holy Particle! We define the Universe!”

“Where do I commune?”

“It’s the Modern World, Bill. We don’t commune, we buy shares. Your friend, Dieter the stock picker will attest to that.”

“Without this tool, any modern military will find itself in a hopeless situation on the new urban battlefield, where mass

destruction is precluded. While drones are excellent tools for target acquisition, the AV-409 is un-equaled in delivering devastating multiple punches to opposition targets while avoiding collateral damage.”

Cue music.

Here we go, I figure. This will be our bread and butter for the coming months, and Alistair will be our savior, in the devil's little play.

“Wendy's perfect.” I say, while Alistair pores over the script for the third time this week.

“This is rather good.” Alistair says. “You've done a fine job.”

“Mostly it's Wendy's fixing of what I wrote, so the narrator has a chance. He can go on eloquently without stumbling over awkward phrases.”

We're sitting in my office, a beige and charcoal study in run-down chic, left by the last tenant. Alistair pulls his lap-top from his brief-case and puts it on a corner of my desk as he faces me with the serious look of a tax accountant with bad news.

“We've located a place in the desert where we can demonstrate the AV in action. Have you made any progress yourself in that regard?”

Good, I think, at least no sign of bad news. “Yes, we have as a matter of fact. It’s an old airbase out in the Mojave. We can use it with some conditions, and for a reasonable amount.”

“Is it still US property?” Alistair cocks his head and adds to his look of serious concern.

“It is. Is that a problem? I thought you had Pentagon contracts.”

“We do, but it’s still a problem. You see this is something entirely new, and we want to present it as a fully developed package going in; we can’t have it spied upon, so to speak, by our most valued potential customer.”

“I see.” I say, embarrassed to have my client doing my job for me, “You have a location then, where you’d like to shoot most of this.”

“We found this large and barren cattle ranch up in the Tehachapi mountains. The proprietors say they haven’t run cattle on the place in forty years, and there are a few buildings we can destroy, which you agree is an advantage. Your script calls for the destruction of buildings. Does it not?” The serious look on his face seems to fade and be replaced a faint smile. He’s pleased with himself, I think.

“Yes, of course. But I didn’t know you had a location scout here on the West Coast.” I’m slightly angry at this and nervous. I pick up a pen and make a note, Tehachapi, a pause for thought. I’m also nervous because the usual deal with weapons involves at least some military cooperation, and then this

Englishman just adds to the mystery in which I want no part. "Well, we can re-work the logistics angle quickly, you know, the hotel accommodations the equipment requirements, the minimum crew required to shoot this thing and so on. But I'll need to have a look first."

"Right then." Alistair checks his calendar, his limpid blue eyes scanning his lap-top. "I shall delay my flight back to Boston for a couple of days. We can drive out there early tomorrow."

Bob Wilson comes by from the editing room, knocks, sticks his head in the doorway. "Bill, you've got to have a look at this." He notices Alistair, nods, "I'm sorry to interrupt. It's the "Plandome" project, no matter how you cut it it's dumb."

"Okay, we'll look at it in a moment."

Alistair is gathering up his affairs. "I think we've covered everything, so I shall be going. Meet here tomorrow morning around five?" "Fine." I say "Splendid," in my best angloid anglo, and with that he's on his way.

* * *

Bob Wilson is a tall healthy young man, half Jamaican, and half Norwegian, with an enviable head of hair consisting in tight blond curls. He occasionally offends me with the acrid smell of pot wafting from under the editing room door, but aside from that, he's a damn fine editor, and I'm happy to keep him going with money-losing jobs such as the Plandome project.

He pulls a chair over for me, sits us down before his screens and plays back the “dumb” part. “Dumb” is not an exaggeration, and as a second-rate filmmaker, there’s nothing I fear more than the ridicule in a snickering audience. “Who wrote this?”

“It’s in the script, and it was recorded by the CEO himself. Remember you told me to use it, per the client’s orders.”

I’m staring blankly at the screen, remembering having given the order to use the track, but admittedly not having listened to it. Plandome was a wildcat oil drilling company, and what they were selling here was a peculiar combination of drilling expertise and something akin to shares in a fiscal casino. On the screen I’m looking at a derrick supporting a drilling pipe as it bores into a pile of money.

“Money and oil, now there’s the most standard cliché in pop culture.”

“It’s in the script...” Bob shrugs. He runs it backwards at sound speed. “It’s saying something, the CEO’s narration is saying something in another language.” Bob says.

I have no doubt Wilson is capable of understanding such things. He has run sound backwards so many times, he can actually recite it as though it were some Chinese-Polish poetry.

“Maybe that’s why he insists we keep the stupid line: “Join us and prosper in a life beyond toiling in a miserable bidet.”

“He’s kidding,”

Evil's Virtue

"I called him yesterday and he insisted that was what he wanted. He wouldn't move on changing anything."

"He's Indonesian. Maybe he mis-pronounced something, like bidet." We both laugh.

Bob absently plays back the sequence this time in "forward," and we listen to the awful line in smooth Indonesian accented promo-English. He plays it backwards again.

"I swear it means something in some language I don't know." Wilson shakes his head; his curls bounce around like golden springs.

The march from innocence to enlightenment, can it really be called progress if the result is anguish and guilt? I ask myself. I'm in this business because I wanted to observe and learn, something like a voyeur, and now I felt I was becoming a participant, and I'm far too lazy for the part. I choose to leave Congolese rebels, secret operatives, and defense of empires in the hands of better qualified people like René and my late father. I stare at the screens on the editing bench, the silly visuals carrying the "dumb" narration, and I start to wonder just how dumb it is, in the context of my father reading dumb paper-backs, forty years ago, and finding out that in reality, they were all carefully planned and encoded messages.

"Leave it in there. Don't bother to read any more into it than what you hear. Call it comic relief provided as an additional client contribution."

“That’s a good one Bill, so it shall be. How about I drown it with the music track?”

I shake my head. “Nope, he wants it there for a reason.”

“What am I? Some easily had fall guy in a crappy plot?” I’m asking Wendy on the terrace of a local joint. She smiles, shakes her head. “I’ll have the salmon special.” She says looking out at the harbor’s main channel, the kids tacking back and forth in their little sailing prams. It’s early afternoon, and junior sailing classes are in full swing on the glittering wavelets in the California sun as it bores down through the oceanic haze.

“You’re just paranoid Bill,” she says, “with one loser project winding up, and another money-making show just starting, and with cash in hand, you can’t handle your luck, so you’re paranoid.”

“Oh, my goodness, words from the two-bit shrink.”

“Well, you take me out to lunch and you’re not doing very well if you’re trying to woo me, so I thought I’d be of service.”

I look around. Here on the terrace several tables are scattered about under a large awning. The two couples at the table closest to us rise to leave, a cloud of small talk and laughter trails them as they make their way out. I’m comforted there’s no-one within range of my conversation with Wendy.

“Here’s what we have that I want nothing to do with. An Indonesian drilling company which may be using promo-videos to communicate in code, and then this overly reserved mystery

Englishman working for a very large Pentagon contractor, where he appears to be almost completely un-known.”

“How do you know that?” She asks craning her head closer to mine over the table, visibly reading my concern.

“I Called. I talked to the Logitrope CEO this morning, ten AM his time, seven here. It’s Fred O’Graugh. You know him from a couple of years ago on the air defense show.” Wendy nods. The waiter comes, takes our orders, and walks back into the dark interior of the restaurant.

“O’Graugh says Alistair Linder is an excellent marketing director but that he’s only been with the company for a couple of months. In a way he was imposed upon us by an English investor group, he said, but he also came with a juicy contract for the Royal Navy.” Wendy leans back in her chair, cocks her head slightly, and with an ironic smile says:

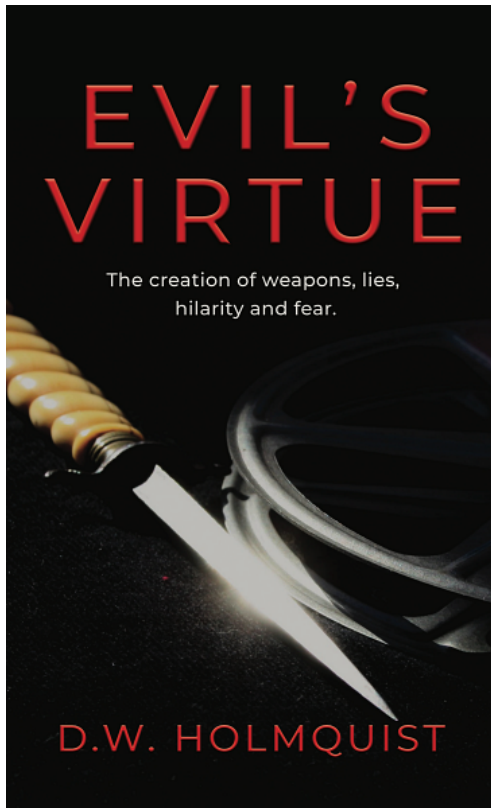
“Indonesian code is no more than a crazy line, and Mr. Linder is just another peddler of death-dealing hardware which hopefully will never be used. Just like the other stuff we’ve made films about. Like the missile system for the Saudis.”

“That one was used.”

“We know there was a war. Do we know if it worked, for sure?”

“Nope.” I had to admit.

D.W. Holmquist was born in 1947, educated in France and California where, in addition to college, he learned a trade working in boatyards up and down the Pacific coast, and became a successful shipwright. His media experience includes writing, directing, and filming several documentaries and propaganda pieces, for corporations and governments of the US, France, Oman, and Saudi Arabia. Mr. Holmquist became familiar with clandestine operations at an early age.



Bill Kaye, a California beach lover and sailing fanatic, had a happy life making movies, until a new contract turned it all into a nightmare. As a boy, Bill helped his father with a bloody secret op. Now living and dead come to settle up.

Evil's Virtue

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