



In the steps of the Bogey Man

by John Hooker

I ALWAYS thought of Casablanca as a romantic city with its dark and mystical souks, busy markets, veiled women as shy as new-born fawns. There was Ingrid Bergman and Bogart, his face shadowed by the large brim of his hat. Deep piercing eyes, steel cold and icy blue, the cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, a thin stream of smoke rising up past the contours of his face. The glass, the bottle; never far from his hand. The rain-soaked airport and the immortalised words, "Here's looking at you Kid."

With such a picture in my mind, I was delighted to have the chance to see for myself the Bogart world of Casablanca.

I walked into the office one Wednesday morning in February, cursing at the snow and ice that had soaked my shoes, now melting with the heat of the office. But soon the snow seemed far away. I was to join the Atlas, the Saga cruise ship, at her next port of call, Casablanca, and sail on her back to Southampton.

It took less than an hour to find a flight. An early morning departure from Gatwick to Amsterdam and then a KLM flight to the Moroccan city of my hero. I would be there early evening and, with a bit of luck, I would be able to see a little of the city; perhaps a bar where Sam plays it again.

The snow was falling still when I left the office at 6 that

evening. My head was full of reminders of what to take. Damn! I would have to go to the launderette. That's the trouble with cruising, you need all the bib and tucker. I was finally ready and packed by 8.30 pm leaving myself 10 minutes to walk to the station.

The wind was whipping up little piles of snow pushing them along the platform like a cat playing with a mouse. It was cold on platform two. There would be no seagulls tonight. I wondered where they'd gone.

The train arrived late at Charing Cross. The station was a deserted shell. Its litter waltzing the ground. I crossed the dance floor and made for the taxi rank. No queue, good. No taxis, bad.

I missed my train to the warm world of Gatwick with its bright lights, comfort and my hotel bed. Instead I had to wait until 1.20 for the next shuttle to the Sussex suburb. Victoria was one degree colder than Charing Cross. Its silence broken by the occasional bang of a door. Soon the messengers of news would be arriving to distress or delight the breakfast reader. But now it was the calm; I got to bed at a little after 2, tired and cold, numbed and yet relieved that the first part of my journey was over.

I awoke at 5 and was greeted by a cold dark stillness. No breakfast this morning. But at least I could get a coffee on the plane. Gatwick soon would be the ants' nest of Sussex.

I checked in, moved quickly through passport control and was soon sitting on cold but clean BAC 1-11 of British Caledonian.

Then delay number one. The wings of the plane had to be de-iced, requiring the services of

a large giraffe-like machine that hung over the plane like a mother hanging over her child to bathe it. We were fifth in line, being after a tired looking 707.

Schipol is one of the world's most advanced airports. It can cope with anything except a blizzard and that was what it was trying to do when we arrived. Massive yellow bulldozers pushed snow from the taxiways only to be followed by a new covering, fresh from the sky. Planes stood stranded. Oilskin men toiled with shovels, picking out the snow from the wheels being careful not to damage any part.

A warm blast of air hit my face when I walked in from the cold. I joined a long snaking queue and checked in for flight KL585 to Casablanca. The flight was delayed.

I was given a voucher to cash in at the restaurant. I had a good meal. Duty free shops are plentiful in Schipol. There is a street of them. Dutch cheese to Dutch cigars, I changed some of my fifty pounds into guilders and bought fifty good cigars.

A little after 5 and the departure board flicked up my flight number, indicating that I should go to gate 19. At last.

I was on my way. As we sat in the passenger holding area, I remember wondering if I would meet him in a smokey bar. "Sir." I looked up and the hostess smiled. "We are boarding, your ticket please." I had three seats to myself on the plane. The stewardess came and gave me a pillow. I sank my head into it, closing my stinging eyes and feeling sleep rushing over me.

We landed at 9 at night in torrential rain and a cold, chilling wind. A dimly-lit brick building lay in front of me, plastered with old timetables of ferry services to Marseilles: a reminder of the French colonial link. Inside there was a wooden bench running alongside one of the walls. A counter, worn away by countless elbows of enquiring passengers, ran across the back wall with a grey door at one end.

I banged on the counter. A Moroccan appeared, a Turkish cigarette between his lips. It took some time in pidgin French to find out that the Atlas had not yet arrived. I decided to find a hotel for the night. It was dark but the rain had stopped. Armed with directions I bade the man *au revoir*. He smiled revealing a black toothy grin. I felt lonely.

Ten minutes later I came across the hotel entrance. I almost missed it; the neon sign almost hidden by a clump of cypress trees. My eyes blinked in the bright lights of the hotel lobby. Opposite the reception, heavy Arabic furniture in gold and turquoise with small brass bells hanging between the back stays, made up a small lounge.

I checked in. The bedroom was more than I imagined, large with a lounge area. Tastefully furnished in classical French, clean and warm. I slept well.

I skipped breakfast. I could grab a bite on the ship. I paid my bill and retraced my steps back to the man with the black toothy grin. He was there but the ship was not.

He showed me a Telex. The Atlas had cancelled her call and was now en route for Southampton. I found out later that a ship had sunk in the

harbour that night, colliding with an entrance pier; a result of high winds and rough seas.

I don't think I have ever felt so lonely. Was this to be my destination, to be stranded in Casablanca, left to search for my hero, to walk this sprawling city, searching every dark and shady dive until I found him against some beer-stained bar, a drooped figure shadowed by the blue heavy smoke of the endless cigarettes."

An address, a contact.

That was all I had.

I turned and thanked my grinning friend with a shrug of the shoulders, and walked back to the entrance of the docks. I hailed a small red taxi and showed the driver the piece of paper with the address. He opened the door and I climbed in. We stopped outside a small, dirty building on the other side of town. The driver pointed to the door.

"How much?" I asked looking into my nearly empty wallet. "45 Dirham," he replied.

"I've only got sterling pounds, you take?" I pleaded with him.

"45 Dirham," he was adamant.

I looked again in my wallet, knowing that I did not have any Dirham, the local currency, but silently praying that some would appear. I found none. I did have a 5 gilder note, a bright green, clean new crispy note. How good was his exchange rates, I wondered.

"Here, I give you this Hollander, good, worth 40 Dirham." I was trying to hold back the desperation in my voice. His acceptance seemed an eternity. He nodded and his grubby hand snatched the note from me as though the rate might change. I bet he was quids in.

The steps were wooden and steep. There was no handrail and crumbling plaster hung from the walls held only by fine strands of silk-like thread. Dark green doors were at the top of each flight. The corridor opened out and a reception area lay in front of me like a plain stretching out from the narrow mountain pass.

I looked around. A group of uniformed messengers were talking in one corner interrupting their conversation to answer the call of a bell; walking through the building to deliver notes. All were smoking fat home-made cigarettes. I moved towards the group and handed one of them my piece of paper with the note on it. He took it and disappeared returning with a neatly dressed young man who introduced himself as the assistant manager.

He ushered me into his office and offered me a seat. I sat down taking a cigarette and lit it, inhaling the acrid smoke which burned my throat. He confirmed my worst fears. Atlas had gone on to Southampton. I inhaled again and marshalled my thoughts on what action to take. I had no air ticket and only £15 in my wallet. True I had a company cheque book but would he accept it?

I asked to use his Telex. He was most helpful.

"Attn. Mr S. D. De Haan.

Atlas has gone on to Southampton as ship sank in harbour last night. Can you please arrange air ticket to UK. Regards John Hooker."

I waited in the plains. The reply was prompt asking the agent if he would accept one of my cheques. The agent said no, but he was an understanding man. He would arrange for me to fly home and we could pay him when the Atlas next called at Casablanca. I felt relieved.

The rest didn't matter. Was it this suddenness of change from bad to good that made Bogart stay in Casablanca when Bergman left him at the airport that rainy night? Her pleas, her eyes did not convince him or move him. He would go back to his bar. I would be Bergman.

I was given another address and told to find a Mr Hajouji. He would give me a flight ticket. I left the building and decided to walk as I didn't want the same problems with the taxi driver. I asked for directions many times before I found the other building. It was large, like a bank. Open fans swirled the stagnant air. I expected to find red-faced, pot-bellied, tropical-suited Americans with handkerchiefs mopping their faces to be at the counter.

I found Mr Hajouji in an upstairs room. He was talking to a German sea captain who was complaining about the time it was taking to unload his cargo.

Mr Hajouji introduced himself and offered me an American cigarette. I took it and sat back feeling relaxed.

By 11 am we were in his car driving through the city centre, a modern place full of European French influence with large department stores, airline offices and modern shops. We stopped outside a modern travel office and entered. The shop was plush with tropical plants and comfortable well-upholstered seats built on chrome tubes.

I was still admiring the modern ways of the West when he returned and handed me an air ticket for Paris; flying Royal Air Maroc.

Casablanca airport is part of the Second World War American airbase, the African foothold from where the Allied push started.

I checked in, he bade me farewell and I gave him a box of good Dutch cigars the least I could do. Homeward bound at last, I enjoyed a beer and sandwich.

The 727 of Royal Air Maroc rose gracefully in the air, leaving a green blotched landscape below. My first real meal in 24 hours. Cold beef, mustard and a bottle of mineral water. I ate heartily.

Paris was dull and grey, the cold held back by the organic glow of the airport. I took the transfer bus from Orly to Chembre de Gaulle. I was late. It was late. I missed my connection to London and I lost my case.

How many more times would the despair rise inside me? But it always seemed to urge me on. I had to win.

I entered the challenge like a gladiator entering the arena. Why me?—Always me.

I won. They found my bag. At last the final fence, the end of the race was in sight. I was now on the last flight to Gatwick. I would be the crusader returned. I had gone, conquered Goliath. David had returned to his people.

I know Casablanca was never like this in Bogart's time. So don't play it again Sam.