

## Not the Four aces in Your Head

By James Arnold

### Joint Third Place 2018

Straight off I didn't like him. We were at the reception desk of the Pensión Vitoria on Calle Espoz y Mina in the centre of Madrid. He was about eighty, dressed in a dandruff spattered dinner suit and arguing with the owner about payments. We talked a bit anyway.

I was back in the city and looking for work teaching English, trying to get started again. It wasn't easy though. I'd fallen for a Spanish girl, taken her to England and then screwed up. After that I was out of the picture for a couple of years and my mental state deteriorated.

I didn't even know why I'd come back to Madrid. I just couldn't make sense of anything. I was also skint. I'd hang around the *pensión* most of the day and Bill would come looking for me with his Chivas bottle filled with cheap whisky and start talking crap; he'd invented cling film, had a dozen plays on Broadway, sparred with Mohammed Ali, invited to Buckingham Palace for tea with the Queen, stuff like that. I played along; I had nothing better to do.

His latest thing was that he was an independent film producer.

'Wait till I introduce you to Francisco!'

'Who?'

'Francisco. The co-producer of the goddam movie. Come on! What's wrong with you?'

'A Spaniard? I thought this was an American flick.'

'Fuck America! It's a fucking *me* movie bud, ok!'

'Right.'

‘Hey, fuck American movies! And *marica* fucking spick flicks. . .’

‘Ok, all right’

‘...and cheesy, made for America Brit flicks. Fuck the lot of them! It’s a *me* movie, a *you* movie, a whoever gets on the ride movie, ok?’

‘Ok!’

‘Listen, you wanna be in the movies? You wanna be a big hot-shot, have a bunch of sexy *señorita* ass chasing you round, or you wanna teach dumb tight-ass mother-fuckers to speak English?’

He could go on like that all day if you let him. One day it would be movies, the next we were going to be running a counterfeiting operation together or pimping out some girl in the *pensión*. The weirdest thing was that he thought I had golden balls. He’d say I had this incredible presence. I felt so crap about myself I couldn’t relate, but that stuff mattered to him; looking the part, having presence, and coming across like a hotshot. Gett that stuff right he seemed to think and the birds, movies, and a shit-load of gelt would just follow on.

Anyway, we had a fall out. He accused me of theft. I told him I’d only just opened his door for a chat. I thought he was in. But just as I closed it he’d come in the main door and seen me. Next thing most of his dough had gone, apparently. Suddenly we were enemies.

Then a few days later I’m just walking back towards the *pensión* when a plastic bag with a blanket inside comes out of Bill’s window. And I feel bad. You know, I’d . . . somehow just come in to a bit of money, so I pick this bag up and go inside.

A moment later Bill comes clattering down to the bottom. His suitcase goes flying and this clothing, bird seed, a copy of Don Quijote and an almost empty bottle of Chivas fall out. Amazingly, none of Bill’s bones are broken too, but he’s more concerned about the whisky bottle that’s cracked.

‘Are you ok mate?’

‘Don’t you mate me, you fucking *cabron!*’

I offer him some dough, but he’s still calling me all the names under the sun five minutes later back in his room. At last he calms down a bit, but he’s still pissed off.

‘Your conscience get the better of you, ass-hole?’

‘Fuck you, Bill. You spent too long in the nick. Not everyone’s a crook!’

‘You’re full of shit. You *chorizo*, you fucking reek of the can!’

‘Bollocks!’

‘Don’t fuck with me! You lousy lying limey, you robbed me!’

‘No, I didn’t!’

There’s a long silence before he turns to me again.

‘Listen, you planning to just bum around on your ass all morning?’

‘No, but . . .’

‘Appeasing your goddam conscience...’

‘You want a drink, is that it?’

‘Big guy!’

‘Ok, a bottle of whisky DYC.’

‘You ass-hole, I thought you was broke!’

‘I just got lucky . . .’

‘Get down the goddam store! Get some bread and cheese too. You think I wanna drink on an empty stomach like a bum?’

Five or ten minutes later I’m back.

‘You reckon I’ve been banged up then, Bill?’

‘I don’t reckon nothing. I’ve seen the way you walk into a bar. . . checking it out, giving every bum you seen maybe once the nod. All right *amigo?* ¿*Que pasa tio?*’

‘I’m friendly!’

‘You aint friendly you tight-assed limey, you’re scared. That’s the joint! 24/7 mind games. Some ass hole blanks you on the aisle, you get thinking, why? What’s he got on me? Will it stick? If you don’t wanna fuck with no-one, you don’t blank them. It becomes a habit. You know!’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Don’t come on the wise-guy, kid!’

‘So what about you then? All that stuff about visiting the Queen and films you’re directing.’

‘Producing.’

‘Whatever. It’s bollocks.’

‘That aint no excuse for inaccuracy. I said producing, co-producing.’

‘Why d’you do it?’

There’s a long pause.

‘Listen . . . it’s a very impoverished and futile existence inside. What d’ya do to escape? Drugs? Suicide? Religion?’

‘Or create a fantasy world?’

‘Maybe. Mainly though I just got sick of little lies. In the can some schmuck has a stupid pussy fight with some other faggot - the next day he’s saying he creamed the guy’s ass or he just held back because he’s got his remission up for assessment. I got sick of hearing that shit. I’m too classy for little lies. I prefer big whoppers, it’s more entertaining, more honest.’

‘Yeah but...’

‘Sometimes good strategy too. Listen, I had a cell-mate. He was fucking *loco*. Used to walk his imaginary dog round, even stopped to let it do its necessities.’

‘This another bullshit story?’

‘How d’ya talk to a guy like that?’

‘God knows.’

‘You tell him you’re fucking Napoleon. You speak to a guy on his own terms.

I got to miss that son-of-a-bitch in the end after he hanged himself.’

‘Christ!’

‘So they moved in Torchy. A real small guy, but he acted tough. Used to go *loco* every now and then, attack the guards. He wanted a reputation, self- protection on account of he was so small. “I’m a loose cannon”, he used to say, “I’m fucking dangerous, I admit it.” The only thing he ever talked about was his stupid faggot brawls. I had to broaden his horizons a little. I’d tell him about the Queen of England, crap like that. He loved that shit. “Tell me about the cucumber sandwiches again Bill”, he’d say. “don’t go missing nothing out.” It was a shame...’

‘Don’t tell me. He killed himself?’

‘He got a battery stuck up his ass, one of them long lasters. Everready I think it was. No, Duracell . . .’

‘Never mind the brand!’

‘Duracell. Anyway, when he came out he had a tough time. I tried real hard to look after him, but...’

‘Yeah?’

‘He killed himself.’

‘Jesus!’

‘Yeah.’

‘And the bird seed on the window ledge. Did that start in the nick?’

‘We bust out the windows behind the bars when it got too goddam hot. Birds was my only visitors after a while.’

‘That’s nice.’

‘There was this broad that used to visit me too, but I drove her away. You lose the art of civilised conversation when you’re surrounded by saps and fall guys all day or banged up in solitary. I couldn’t think of nothing to say.’

‘She must have loved you.’

‘She was a sweet kid, beautiful, and patient. She wasn’t no hooker neither. But I got to dread her visits, the silences. Birds was less demanding. I got to love birds cos they was free. They’d come to me...fly away...then they’d come back. I loved that. They’d fly away...they’d come back. That’s beautiful.’

‘How many years d’you do Bill?’

‘Plenty. I’ve shared a stinking cell with just a bucket to crap in and had my own cell. Pink walls.’

‘Yeah!’

‘They was trying to turn us into faggots. That joint was the worst, apart from Mellila, in with all them Martyrs for Morroco saps. Most of them guys had given less praise to Allah than my ass-hole before they got canned. They just got roped in first day. What a hole!’

‘Sounds it.’

‘Turned half of one wing into a mosque, this is *fucking Spain* for Christ’s sake!’

‘Well, sort of. . .’

‘There aint no sort of about it!’

‘Didn’t you ever . . .work out, or study.’

‘Listen, them faggots building up their muscles all day, or their brains, they can explain the theory of relativity in six different languages standing on their head or doing

one armed push-ups. Does it get them any pussy?’

‘.....’

‘Well does it? All fucking day . . . day after day after fucking day, you never hear the sound of a woman or a child, you know . . . you just, you know. . . ’

‘Yeah, I know.’

There’s a silence.

‘Books can help sometimes, Bill.’

‘I read a book!’

‘A book. *One* book?’

‘The Quijote. I read it a hundred times, maybe.’

‘Jesus Christ! Try another one, dickhead! God! If you’d ever got stuck on a woman, you’d have got stuck good. You should have hooked up with that bird, mate. I mean it, I wish . . . ’

‘What a pearl of wisdom. I can die now.’

‘Nah, but...’

‘Listen, broads aint books! El *Quijote* is always *el Quijote*. You read it the ninety-seventh time and you still find new stuff, but it goes on being *el Quijote*. Broads though . . . listen, I aint pretending to be a piece of stone neither. I screwed up plenty...’

‘Me too, mate. I . . . ’

There’s a horrible croak in my voice as I say it, like I’m about to start crying.

‘Let’s not get sentimental’, Bill says, ‘sentimental is stupid. The past is dead. Gone!’

‘....’

‘Do you hear me? Gone!’

‘Not for me.’

‘It aint *nothing*, the past! Nothing! Nor the future...and for sure as hell there aint no happy ever after neither. The road is everything. *Everything!*’

‘I wish I could think like that, *really*, I mean...I try....’

It’s terrible. I’m almost crying.

‘Stupid....stupid. Listen, you want a piece of the truth?’

‘Go on!’

‘Nothing matters very much.’

‘That it?’

‘That’s it. Now give yourself a fucking break! Look, you know who my best buddy is, right now?’

‘Who?’

‘The goddam limey that robbed me. Can you believe that hand?’

‘I’m not your best mate, I’m shit...’

‘You’re the only guy sat here chewing the fat with me.’

‘Well, thanks mate, you know...’

‘Sharing my whisky.’

‘Yeah, well . . .’

‘You goddam limey! First you rob me, then you start calmly laying into my booze!’

‘Oh Jesus!’

‘Kid . . . I’m trying to learn you something! Help you!’

‘What?’

‘You take the hand they deal you. Sometimes it’s good, most the time it’s lousy, and even when it’s good you probably still fuck up plenty. But you play the hand all the same. Not the four aces in your head, the hand. You can still have a lot of fun with a lousy

fucked up hand.'

Did I say I didn't like him? I guess I got to. I often think of him now.