

A stylized, graphic illustration of a Hollywood hillside. The background is a bright yellow-orange gradient. In the foreground, there are dark green, rounded shapes representing trees and bushes. A white building with a red roof and a prominent white tower with a clock face is the central focus. The word 'HOLLYWOOD' is written in white, block letters at the top left.

HOLLYWOOD

MAX
IN FILMLAND

A Lively Tale of '70s Euro Hollywood

by Kia McInerny

MAX IN FILMLAND

A Fictional Memoir

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MAX IN FILMLAND

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First Edition, 2017

*For My Friend Patrick, Whose Irrepressible Spirit
Inspired Max's Adventures,
and
for Gary & Teddy,
Who Share Max's Interest in the Unconventional*

FOREWORD

This book is a fictional memoir, written for my enjoyment, and to document my earliest days in Los Angeles. Like Max, in 1979, I was fortunate to be tossed in with a collection of charming originals, some who had arrived from Europe to enjoy the fresh spirit of LA, and others of purely domestic issue. As other writers have more eloquently admitted, I have chosen to enhance and embellish these events, even to the point of creating villains and heroes. To those early friends who are made villainous or too heroic, please forgive me. My imagination and the interests of storytelling shaped these digressions. Know that, in my true memory, I don't forget your indelible contributions to the fun and vivacity of those days.

Montecito, 2016

Alex at the Chateau Marmont

It was the time of Europeans coming to LA. Nineteen seventy-nine and I was twenty-six. That's when I met Alex des Prairies at the Chateau Marmont. Perhaps you were raised as I was in New England in the 1960s, accustomed to hotels that were clean, or new. At least not tattered, neglected, with the run-down ambiance of an Irish country estate sold for taxes.

The Chateau's lobby was dark. Beyond thick faded panels of silk and velvet, French doors led to the lawn, while tapestry scenes of lute-strumming dandies and precious coquettes covered the walls. Fat implacable sofas and baronial chairs had been there since Don Quixote's time, in the depths of which wizened screenwriters and New York actors had seated themselves and then disappeared.

"Maxwell Rider to see Alex des Prairies," I said. "The international filmmaker," I added importantly. Alex had acquired a minor reputation as Europe's bad-boy of cinema before Roman Polanski's dark presence swept everyone from the field.

"Count des Prairies," I repeated, only too glad to use a real title for a real Count. But the pea-headed man behind the desk had been carefully trained to ignore the guests. Visitors too. My companion and I were on our own. And that, as Hemingway might say, was good.

I guess I didn't understand old wealth at that time, although I admired it. The desire for ancient dust and aristocratic decay unknown to me, unknown in the States, seemed a matter of

essential comfort to the Europeans.

Anyway, we were there, cooling our heels for Alex des Prairies, a Belgian count from an established family. Alex's distant cousin (from his great-uncle's marriage to an Austrian princess) brought me along on a Saturday morning with the idea I might find gainful employment consulting upon the reshoot of Alex's film, *Danse du Sang*.

We stumbled onto the house phone and Alex himself, sounding bluff and surprised, assured me forcefully of his imminent appearance. "Rider? Here already—Christian, too? Be right down."

We shuffled around the lobby a bit more. I found myself kicking the threadbare border of its Aubusson carpet. And Alex, in due time, another half hour or so, appeared from the hotel's obscure elevator and strode with great energy to us.

Alex's hair was dark, slicked back wet, streaked with treads from one of those sterling silver brushes that lie on lowboys in antique stores. His oxford-cloth shirt was starched so firmly even the frayed threads at the collar stood at attention. A paisley ascot ballooned at his throat, striking a dubious note of controversy against the dull green plaid of his jacket. His trousers were made of heavy worsted wool in brown tweed.

As a child, I'd followed the line of thinking of the Esquire man—navy blazer, gray flannels, regimental tie. But my eyes soon learned to keep their counsel because my European acquaintances, and Alex in particular, never gave up on a perfectly good suit or trousers even if it had seen better days at university.

Alex shook hands with me, and greeted Christian, then excused himself to use the public phone.

"My car took fire," he said into the receiver, after a brief

interval in which his call was connected.

The pay phone that Alex addressed with precise arrogance was out of place among the other artifacts in the somber lobby, and barely ten feet from where we stood like bookends, uncertain how to disguise the fact we could hear every word and were obviously fascinated.

“My rental car,” he said with impatience. “Ignited. Took fire. Burned up.” I could only imagine the effect this statement had on the Hertz representative at the other end of the line.

“It’s useless to ask me to drive it over there. Don’t you understand? The machine is charred. A blackened crisp. My own car won’t arrive for days. Please deliver another to the Chateau Marmont, that’s where I’m staying.”

He listened. “The burned one? You can collect it at 301 North Larchmont. Do I know who lives there? Well, not really. I can’t really say I know her.”

Alex returned to us smiling, rubbed his palms together. “There, that’s finished,” he said. “Let’s take lunch, shall we Max? You’ll have to drive.”

We dined at the El Dorado, a place everyone goes and no one mentions. Located in a shack on Melrose, with no sign or other identity, it’s packed with people who require the best flamed steak in town in an atmosphere that hasn’t changed since Raymond Chandler breezed east from Westwood Village along Sunset Boulevard.

Slightly cold that morning in February. So we began with pink bisque and a claret that put us right there on the damp green turf of Waterloo. I don’t know where he’d got them—this was 1979 in Los Angeles—but the chef served delicate emerald-headed sprouts like I’d only seen in the cafés of Amsterdam, and sheaves of endive unknown in California at that time. My entrée was a flame-seared entrecote, with the

crispest pommes frites nine hours from Brussels.

I'd read of Alex's one and only film in the trades, they heralded his arrival in the States as if he were Fellini. *Danse du Sang* was a huge commercial success in Italy, due to one obvious marketing detail which evolved purely from luck and fortuitous timing. Gina Paloma, who played the lead became, by the time of the film's opening in Rome, an international film star, the Sophia Loren of her generation. And Alex had filmed her in the nude.

Another aspect of the film ensured its Roman triumph. In one scene Catholic priests leered at Gina's perfect form. Who cared? This was America. We enjoyed, theoretically, separation of church and state. But twenty years ago in Italy, a Catholic country, a film's denouncement by the Church assured its success.

As for Alex, Christian filled me in. The family enjoyed the kind of wealth only a few names conjure. Alex himself had a formal moniker that could fill two lines of gothic type. His mother was a stunning British beer heiress, his father titled nobility for whom diplomatic appointments stretched the limits of suitable work.

Twenty million dollars Alex had received on his thirty-third birthday from his grandmother, and was just about down to nothing, although no one suspected it, including Christian. And you couldn't tell it by the ease with which he'd pick up the check.

Through fromage and blush pears we lingered. The topic was philosophy. Over double espressos, Alex held forth eloquently concerning the nobility of inherited wealth.

"It allows man to reach for perfection," he said, while I wrestled Nietzschean nuggets from faint recollections of my boarding school classes in Connecticut.

Dark eyes shining with European certitude, Alex listened intently to an occasional protest by Christian or me, then brushed our remarks aside cheerfully.

“You must be serious, Max, that is not how it is at all, not at all. It is the most aggravated bad taste to be accomplished at making money—one of man’s most vulgar interests. Tons more vulgar than prurient sex.”

He tossed two fingers in the direction of the gods. “Really not worthy of the basest man’s attention.”

Alex’s manner conveyed a robust vitality, an assurance about his position in life that imprinted itself upon me more powerfully than any person I’ve ever met, with the exception of my father.

Alex, Christian and the other Europeans who included me in their society for that brief time, could afford to elevate wealth to the level of style. A luxury I coveted, while I played an American game—Monopoly. Roll the dice, buy up the board, try to stay out of jail if you can. Really not worthy of any but the basest man’s attention.

As I struggled with forming my reply: ‘Even Michelangelo accepted commissions,’ Alex bolted upright, his dark eyes lit with fury.

“That blackguard owes me \$10,000!”

Alex lunged immediately from his chair into a table of two men who had just been seated not three feet from us.

“You are—not—a gentleman!” he sputtered at one of them, an effete fellow I knew vaguely as one of Hollywood’s A-list directors. I’d gathered from the trades he’d abruptly left Alex’s picture after accepting a \$10,000 fee.

Alex threw his strong torso onto the man, pinning him to the table. The white cloth slid to one side like a toupée off a domed pate. The man’s neck strained with the effort to

throw Alex off. His face burst red and his eyes bulged from his skull. But it was hopeless.

“Presumptuous scoundrel, conniving rat, you double-crossing crook, I’ll kill you!” Alex said.

By this time the chef had rushed from the kitchen still in his apron and hopped about the periphery of the scene like an amphetaminated frog.

“Count! Get hold of yourself!”

Christian and I stepped in, grappling with Alex’s arms, which repulsed our hold like reptiles.

“There are other ways to settle this,” I said, alarmed.

“You’re absolutely right, Max,” Alex panted. He abruptly raised himself from the trembling figure who lay half on, half off, the table.

Alex straightened his jacket. Then tucking his ascot and smoothing his hair, he resumed his seat with exaggerated dignity.

The director, who turned out to be so insignificant I can’t recall his name, heaved onto one elbow and glowered at Alex. He was not given a chance to compose himself, for the chef, with an amusing series of Gallic gestures and shrugs, implied that he should leave.

“I think now,” Alex said to the chef, “the cognac.”

We lingered a bit more, the cause of Alex’s grievance departed, and Alex offered a toast. “Let us drink to the re-shooting of *Danse du Sang* for Hollywood audiences,” he said. He raised his glass toward me. “And to Max, captain of my American team.”

A snapshot from that moment might have caught yours truly, slender, fair-haired man of medium height—his nose softened in a prep school scuffle—wearing an expression that bespoke anxiety. By the time of my meeting with Alex

des Prairies, I'd traded law for filmmaking and squandered my savings on a couple low-budget releases of my own. Thrilling as it might seem to produce the American version of Alex's film, I had self-doubts. As Alex tipped his tumbler and smiled radiantly in my direction, a strange maxim sprang into my thoughts: beware of toasts.

Two hours later, we burst onto the street into dizzying sunlight like three Tom Sawyers released from school. Exuberant with wine and cognac, Alex taunted a male hooker on Santa Monica Boulevard and ran down an androgynous young man in a ponytail to settle a gender bet.

I didn't see Alex for several months after that. He left for Italy the next day for a polo meet. And the pea-headed man at the Marmont—I assume it was he with whom I left my name and telephone number—expressed doubt as to the date when Alex would return.

I thought about his words concerning wealth. I didn't recognize it then, but our meeting kindled in me a spirit of keen longing, not for any person or thing, but for a coveted past.

It was Alex's childhood I envied, set among estates I later saw in photographs and mistook for Medici palaces, or viewed from Bentley automobiles of remote, heartbreaking perfection. With the yearning of a child I envied Alex—the ease of his philosophy, and the comfort of belonging to a lifestyle so rare it was, by the time of our meeting, extinct—although neither of us could know it.

Irving at Le Dôme

Shortly after my meeting with Alex, Irving Fain offered me a position with his bank.

We dined at Le Dôme. From that elegant shelf along Sunset Boulevard we could see the lights of Bunker Hill thirteen miles east. The Coconut Grove, Brown Derby and LA's old dowager, Perino's, lit up Wilshire Boulevard directly below. But I wasn't really looking at the view. I listened to Irving, and the siren call of my destiny.

"Banking's regulated, Rider," Irving said over dinner, "Regulated industry. I got something in mind that's gonna blow your socks off. That's why I need a good partner—a lawyer."

Irving Fain and I met each other in kindergarten. We parted at age six when my mother moved us to Greenwich from Brooklyn, then linked up again after a law degree from Yale propelled me to a New York firm known for its entertainment clientele.

Employed as a dungeon associate in the firm's library, I looked up from my law-texts one morning to find the senior partner introducing me to our "client" Irving Fain.

I found it unnerving. Irving was making it in Hollywood while I tiptoed the hallowed halls checking pocket parts for the latest legal citations. Irving moved to LA and I followed. And once I was here, I found I couldn't practice law any more. The success of Irving's venture, though nothing highbrow, had aroused my ambition. His first feature, made for \$15,000, was titled *Hot Dawg: A Boy's Adventure*—it

grossed \$10 million and made Irving's reputation among the studios.

The plan he proposed that night was heady. Perhaps you've heard of Filmland Credit. Not just a bank, Filmland became the ultimate source for film financing in the 1970s. Timing could not have been better. Tax write-offs for film investment had been revoked, money had dried up and Irving reckoned our venture would fill a niche, drawing players of global stature, from Francis Ford Coppola to Europe's top directors—Filmland would serve them all—for a price. Participations. Another word for sharing profits. For the first time in banking a lender would share in the up-side: The way Irving saw it Filmland would latch onto the producer's percentage of gross.

"But the government requires capital of \$3 million to finance a lending institution. I don't have that kind of money to put up, Irving."

"No problemo. I put up the cash. Two million. Courtesy of Hot Dawg. All you need to do is sign the note for \$1 million. Just sign a friggin' note."

Irving could talk and chew at the same time. I'm not saying it was pretty. He'd ordered *la spécialité de la maison*—rare sirloin the size of a heavyweight's fist.

My attention was riveted by his fork and knife, which he gripped so firmly his thumbs were pressed white. He literally savaged the steak into bloody clots, shoveling forkfuls into his mouth with the relentless stoking of the boilers of a freighter. Potatoes, peas, parsley, horseradish and meat—all transformed into a hulking gob of masticated grizzle. This hovered precipitously along his lower lip, suggesting at any moment to lurch onto his plate, while a delicate stream of spittle coursed toward his chin, forming perfect goblets of

grease on the white linen napkin spread like a drop-cloth over his lap.

“We’ll own the studios,” he said around the sickening gray blob. “When they come to us at the back-end, run out of dough, we’ll pillage them for profits. You just keep the government off our backs. And I promise you,” he fixed me with shrewd black eyes, “we’ll be the biggest player in Hollywood.”

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