

The Corsair

by Davis Cavanagh

Sitting across from him now, Michel Durand looks more like a young actor on the eighth day of an opiate binge than the well-groomed young man from the picture that graced news sites nationwide when The Corsair was revealed as an elaborate hoax, with Durand at the center. Durand, or Captain Kidd as he became known soon after the start of the game, is shaggy haired and unkempt, hastily clothed in a black hoodie and black jeans, eyes red with caffeine. Although he invited me here, he doesn't look particularly pleased to see me. In fact, he will spend the whole day I spend in his bare New York studio apartment evasive. He is man who was out of the spotlight when the public adored him, and in it when they abhorred him. He is man dethroned.

Early this year, a note appeared on a notice board of a small coffee shop in Portland, Oregon. Three days later, the same note appeared on 4chan, an online message board. It read:

*The pirate treasure of Captain Kidd,
For many centuries laid hid,
Now by the most ingenious one,
This pirate's treasure may be won*

44 23 42 15 15 34 11 25 43 44 23 15 33 52 11 44 15 42

It was a fairly simple Polybius cipher. The numbers at the bottom, when decoded, read *three oaks, then water*. It led to a cluster of three trees next to a lake just outside of Portland. A seemingly random location, found only by happenstance. Buried under the tree was a booklet, containing the next clue. Three days later, this booklet appeared on 4chan. So began The Corsair, a massive treasure hunt that would soon captivate the world.

The story that Durand created for the game was complex and spanned generations, but the premise was thus: In the 1600's, infamous pirate Captain Kidd was said to have buried his treasure, but was executed before he could retrieve it. Kidd left a complex game leading to the treasure, to be carried out amongst his descendants to determine which was the most worthy. Failing that, the game would be carried out amongst the public. Durand posed as a representative of the Kidd estate, finally bringing the Captain's wishes to fruition.

The game functioned simply enough, no more complex than a children's treasure hunt. Each clue would lead to a new location, where there would be another clue. The first person to find the clue would have a three day heads start. After that, the next clue was posted online for all to see.

Right now, however, Durand doesn't want to talk about The Corsair. He wants to talk about his childhood. He was born in the French countryside in the late 1980's. He wouldn't give me a year. (Unsurprising - he's worked very hard to avoid giving out personal information after

the vitriol he received after he revealed that the mysterious prize at the end of The Corsair didn't exist. Durand claims he received death threats by the minute). He fell in love with art as a young boy. He began as a painter. Landscapes mostly. According to Michel, he got tired of the lack of artistic agency he perceived in a form focused on replication. But as a teenager, he discovered conceptual art, and he was entranced. "I fell in love with the art of the idea, rather than of the canvas," says Michel, "I suddenly and vividly saw the path of my life laid out before me."

It was during this time that he met Sophie Martin. Sophie was an artist too. Durand calls her "the only other artist in France." He fell for her instantly. Michel speaks of her with the same reverence as he did of his artistic puberty. Durand offers details of her in snippets. Sophie was a photographer. Sophie liked puzzles, riddles. Sophie loved her dog, fittingly named Chien.

Durand stops for a moment. His apartment is freezing. He is hunched over with his knees pulled tight against his chest, but I can't tell if this is for warmth or some protective infant instinct. His apartment is almost entirely empty. A bedroll and a blanket sit on the corner of the room, a laptop in the opposite corner. There is a kitchen, but it looks unused. In fact, none of his apartment seems like it's being lived in full time. There are no traces of food, no laundry, nothing. For a moment I wonder whose apartment this really is. He notices I'm uncomfortable and offers me the blanket from his bedroll. Then he continues:

They spent their teenage years together. Happy. Michel remembers fondly those late nights where they would stay up on the roof of her house and discuss his wild plans for global art projects: grand designs for the whole of humanity. As Michel remembers it, it was Sophie's idea for them to go to art school. She thought it would enable them to make a career together, doing what they loved doing. She helped him apply, applying to all the same schools, musing all the while about their future together. But they got accepted to schools across the country. So, in 2014, Michel Durand moved to New York to go to art school, and Sophie moved to Portland.

Michel stops his story here and pours himself a mug of vodka. He offers me a drink. It's 10AM. "I've kind of lost track of time," he says when I decline. Since Michel unveiled The Corsair, he says he's spent all of his time here. He tells me he contemplated suicide after the public response to the reveal that it was all a piece of art. "I felt horrible. I was just trying to make something cool and these people were investing their whole livelihoods into this dumb f—king game."

At the center of The Corsair was the mysterious prize, known as "Captain Kidd's Treasure." Durand, whose identity was at this point unknown, became known Captain Kidd. The Corsair didn't have a name, not at first. It was only when it gained mainstream success that people needed something to call it, thus: The Corsair. Durand picked the name, after French pirates, perhaps alluding to his own identity. The exact contents of the buried treasure were never explicitly named, only alluded to. Many dismissed the idea of a real money prize, choosing instead to play for the fun and adventure of the game. Others, however, became attached to the idea of riches at the end of Durand's rainbow.

The accessibility of the clues set The Corsair above other games of its ilk. Unlike complex Alternate Reality Games like Cicada 3301, which involved complicated encryption and

knowledge of obscure literature, the Corsairs clues, at least ostensibly, could be solved by anyone. As long as they knew where to find the clues once posted, anyone could participate in the treasure hunt of a lifetime. Anyone could live out their Indiana Jones fantasy.

Soon after the game started, certain players gained pseudo-celebrity status among the player-base. These were people who were consistently the first to find the next clues. The Belazs twins were among the first, finding an astonishing seven of the clues. Rodrigo Callet was close behind. The Corsair gained mainstream attention when Nico Vitál, tech billionaire and media pariah, became involved in the game. One tweet from Vitál and the player-base skyrocketed.

While a small piece of the player base believed the game was entirely authentic (the legitimate continuation of Kidd's legacy), Vitál's involvement led many to believe that he was Captain Kidd. The fact that he was pouring so many resources into finding a prize he clearly did not need, a treasure that had become bigger and bigger in the internet zeitgeist, heaped suspicion onto Vital. And with Vitál's involvement, the supposed value of that fabled treasure grew even more. And with the word of the grand vision of treasure came more players. Michel Durand was experiencing the success as an artist he always dreamed of. And nobody knew who he was.

When Michel starts talking again, he doesn't talk about Sophie. He talks about New York, and about arts school. He stayed for a year, and according to his friends, was fantastically successful. But in 2016, he dropped out and moved to Portland. He cites "unbearably pretentious professors" for the decision, but he was soon living with Sophie. Durand takes another gulp. I wonder for a moment if the mug is filled with water, and if this gulp is part of constructing some character. His breath quickly shuts down that theory.

His time in Portland was the happiest of his life, says Michel. He felt he was where he was always supposed to be. He and Sophie were finally happy together. They lived together for two years. Michel blames his jealousy for their break up. Sophie's career as a photographer was thriving, with a small gallery show already under her belt, but Michel was working two jobs to make his part of the rent. He began to lash out, envious of her success. The day before Sophie Martin's 26th birthday, she kicked Michel Durand out of her apartment. They had been separated for 6 months when The Corsair began.

The last clue of the game was perhaps the most simple. It read:

Uif pme qmbdf.

It is a simple Caesar Cipher: every letter in the phrase shifted over one position in the alphabet. Decoded, it reads:

The old place.

Although the code itself was immediately solved, the riddle proved indecipherable. More people than ever had their full attention glued to the game, and yet nobody could solve it. And so, at the peak of The Corsair's popularity, Michel Durand was faced with a dilemma: The fans demanded a prize, and he had nothing. And Vitál, The Belasz twins, and Callet, were nearing the end, but were coming up against this supposedly unsolvable riddle. Durand could have just let the game fizzle out, allowing the impossible clue to be the end of it. But instead, he did what he

thought was right: He revealed himself as Captain Kidd, revealed that there was no prize, and that The Corsair was simply an elaborate art project. Durand thought that this solution would serve the dual purpose of allowing people to move on with their lives, and to give him the credit he was due. Instead, overnight, he became the most hated man on the internet. The death threats didn't stop. Some had poured their life savings into travelling all over the country to find the next clue, believing that they would be reimbursed tenfold at the end. And he was just an arts student, creating. He bought this apartment, the apartment in which I speak to him now, and hasn't left since.

It soon becomes clear that Michel is ready for me to leave. He is falling asleep in his chair, and constantly looking at his watch. I pack up my laptop and recorder and he walks me out. He's only mentioned The Corsair twice throughout the hour I've spent here. He thanks me for my time. I came expecting him to defend his actions, probably hoping I would write a piece that would exonerate him in the eyes of the public. Instead, he has spent the day talking about a girl he hasn't seen for over half a year. He nearly closes the door, pauses a moment. Then, he speaks:

"For Sophie's 23rd birthday, I made her a treasure hunt. I made little clues that led her from the foot of the bed all around our apartment until she finally found her present. Every year, I kept making these bigger and bigger treasure hunts. The second year, clues led her around the neighborhood. By the third year, they were all over the city. Sophie loved them. These silly little games became the gift itself, rather than whatever trinket was at the end of it.

"This year, I had one all planned out before it ended between us. It was going to be pirate themed."

And with that he shuts the door.

I wonder now if there really was no prize, or if the right person just never found it.

Ms. Martin did not respond for a request to comment.