

Prologue: Global Criminal Kingpin, Long Held in Secret U.S. Custody, Makes First Court Appearance

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March 2, 2016 — Early yesterday, in a federal courtroom in St. Paul, Minnesota, a defense attorney named Robert Richman uttered a sentence he once thought he might never get to say, and one that I thought I'd never hear. "Your honor, we call Paul Calder Le Roux."

For the past three years, the idea of anyone summoning a person held in such secrecy to a witness stand, in an open courtroom, seemed even more fantastic than Le Roux's own incredible story. Yet there he was, entering through a side door to the courtroom: a large man with buzzed, gray hair, in a billowy lemon yellow t-shirt and orange correctional pants, escorted by two plainclothes United States Marshals. He wore a thick beard, and seemed heavier than in the last surveillance photos I'd seen of him, taken in a Brazilian mall in 2012.

The Marshals unshackled his arms. Le Roux scanned the courtroom as he lumbered across to the witness stand, his bulk settling into the leather backed chair. It was the first time since his arrest, three and a half years ago, that he had been seen in public.

Richman began by asking Le Roux's profession. He thought for a moment. "Essentially," he finally said. "I worked as a programmer for many years."

That was certainly one way to put it. I knew from digging into Le Roux's background that he was indeed a programmer, largely self-taught. That he was 43 years old, born in Zimbabwe and raised in South Africa. That he had carried a real Australian passport, by dint of a residence there in the late 1990s, and a fake Zimbabwean one, by dint of his broader profession, that of a prolific international criminal.

I also knew that Le Roux was once known online for helping build one of the world's most significant pieces of encryption software, and then, in the mid-2000s, he poured his technical talents into an Internet pharmacy business, selling prescription drugs to Americans. That operation, according to the Department of Justice, earned hundreds of millions of dollars. Le Roux then directed his money into a broad portfolio of criminal concerns around the world: cocaine dealing, arms dealing, gold and timber smuggling, money laundering, and selling technology to pariah states. In the course of business, he'd arranged the murder of at least half a dozen people that I could name.

For two years, I have been following the strange saga of Le Roux and the constellation of criminal prosecutions that surrounds him. I have traveled to the Philippines and Israel, connected with sources deep within Le Roux's former criminal empire, and obtained

exclusive documents revealing Le Roux's background, his operations, and his cooperation with U.S. authorities.

On March 10, *The Atavist Magazine* will launch "The Mastermind," a seven-week series following Le Roux's rise, his downfall, and his turn as a U.S. informant.

"The Mastermind" is a story about a new kind of internet-enabled cartel and its machinations, from murder in the Philippines, to gold smuggling in Africa, to drug shipments from South America, to money laundering in Hong Kong. But it's also an examination of the power of the D.E.A., and the strange ways that justice becomes muddled in the momentum of a criminal prosecution. It contains characters that at first sound unreal: a man found dead at the helm of a capsized yacht containing \$100 million worth of cocaine; another imprisoned for 18 months because authorities cannot determine his name or country; ex-special forces soldiers guarding bags of gold in Hong Kong; a fugitive animal behaviorist who once trained the whale in Free Willy. Looming above them all is Paul Le Roux, a criminal figure who could only exist in the networked world of the 21st century, now returned in the flesh.

In September 2012, after a six-year investigation into the online pharmacy world that eventually led to Le Roux, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency lured him to Liberia. "I was there to conclude a deal," he said on the stand. Undercover agents convinced Le Roux to provide chemical agents to a Colombian cartel looking to set up a methamphetamine lab, in exchange for cocaine. Instead, he was arrested by Liberian police. Le Roux tried to bribe them, but they handed him over to five D.E.A. agents, who put him on a chartered plane to New York. A D.E.A. special agent named James Stouch testified that he was present in Liberia and that Le Roux had waived his Miranda rights and turned informant midflight.

"It was obvious that my situation was a bad situation," Le Roux said in court, by way of explanation. Exactly what he was promised for his cooperation, however, has been a mystery to everyone connected with the more than a dozen cases that sprang from Le Roux's arrest. The documents around Le Roux's detention, and indeed his very existence, have been held in close secrecy by the Department of Justice. For his appearance in St. Paul, in fact, the D.O.J. seemed to have concocted a fake local arrest record as cover for his presence there. Even the name of Le Roux's attorney is sealed in court documents out of fear for his or her safety. That attorney filed a last-minute motion to close the St. Paul hearing to the press. The judge denied it.

Le Roux had assisted the agency in a series of elaborate sting operations against his employees and associates. One scheme ensnared Joseph Hunter, one of Le Roux's former enforcers, in a plan to kill a D.E.A. agent. Another set up a group of former associates in a scheme to ship meth to the U.S. Then, in 2014, Le Roux helped the D.E.A. arrest an Israeli national named Moran Oz, by luring him to Romania with the promise of unpaid wages.

Prosecutors allege that Oz, along with three other Israelis and two Americans, managed the logistics of Le Roux's online pharmacy, which at its height employed hundreds of workers in Israel and the Philippines.

Le Roux's testimony yesterday was part of a pre-trial hearing in Oz's case. After his arrest, Oz was extradited to Minnesota, where he was charged with conspiracy to illegally distribute prescription drugs, wire fraud, mail fraud, and distributing controlled substances. He is scheduled to go to trial this June. Richman, Oz's co-counsel along with a prominent Minneapolis lawyer named Joe Friedberg, have signaled their intention to offer, among other arguments, a "duress" defense. Oz only worked for Le Roux, they assert, because Le Roux had threatened to kill him.

The judge had ordered Le Roux to appear yesterday for the nominal purpose of establishing whether Le Roux, after his own arrest, had consented to monitored phone calls with Oz. The U.S. Attorney planned to introduce those calls at trial, and Richman had filed a motion to keep them out. But in the courtroom, Richman seemed to be poking at something larger.

"You ordered the murder of multiple individuals, is that correct?" Richman asked.

"That's correct." On the stand, Le Roux seemed to alternate between placid and dismissive, sitting back and occasionally folding his arms.

"And you ordered the murder of a customs agent, is that correct?"

"That is not correct."

"What part of that was not correct?"

"She was not a customs agent."

The correct answer was that the victim was a real estate agent. It was also correct, as Le Roux acknowledged a moment later, that he had ordered the murder of a second real estate agent.

Despite these admissions, Le Roux's ultimate legal fate remains uncertain. At the hearing in St. Paul, the court unsealed a document in which Le Roux admitted that for three years he had sold technology to the government of Iran. It also states that Le Roux ordered or participated in seven murders. But his full plea agreement remains sealed, one black box within the larger mystery that is the story of Paul Le Roux.