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1 - A NEW MAN

The evening when we first heard Sparsholt's name seems the best place to start this little memoir. We were up in my rooms, talking about the Club. Peter Coyle, the painter, was there, and Charlie Farmonger, and Evert Dax. A sort of vote had taken place, and I had emerged as the secretary. I was the oldest by a year, and as I was exempt from service I did nothing but read. Evert said, "Oh, Freddie reads two books a day," which may have been true; I protested that my rate was slower if the books were in Italian, or Russian. That was my role, and I played it with the supercilious aplomb of a student actor. The whole purpose of the Club was getting well-known writers to come and speak to us, and read aloud from their latest work; we offered them a decent dinner, in those days a risky promise, and after dinner a panelled room packed full of keen young readers—a provision we were rather more certain of. When the bombing began people wanted to know what the writers were thinking.

Now Charlie suggested Orwell, and one or two names we had failed to net last year did the rounds again. Might Stephen Spender come, or Rebecca West? Nancy Kent was already lined up, to talk to us about Spain. Evert in his impractical way mentioned Auden, who was in New York, and unlikely to return while the War was on. ("Good riddance too," said Charlie.) It was Peter who said, surely knowing how Evert was hoping he wouldn't, "Well, why don't we get Dax to ask Victor?" The world knew Evert's father as A. V. Dax, but we claimed this vicarious intimacy.

Evert had already slipped away towards the window, and stood there peering into the quad. There was always some tension between him and Peter, who liked to provoke and even embarrass his friends. "Oh, I'm not sure about that," said Evert, over his shoulder. "Things are rather difficult at present."

"Well, so they are for everyone," said Charlie.

Evert politely agreed with this, though his parents remained in London, where a bomb had brought down the church at the end of their street a few nights before. He said, rather wildly, "I just worry that no one would turn up."

"Oh, they'd turn up, all right," said Charlie, with an odd smile.

Evert looked round, he appealed to me—"I mean, what do you make of it, the new one?"

I had *The Gift of Hermes* face down on the arm of my chair, about halfway through, and though not exactly stuck I was already alternating it with something else. It was going to break my daily rhythm, and was indeed rather like tackling a book in a foreign language. Even on the wretched thin paper of the time it was a thick volume. I said, "Well, I'm a great admirer, as you know."

"Oh, well, me too," said Peter, after a moment, but more warmly; he was a true fan of A. V. Dax's large symbolic novels, admiring their painterly qualities, their peculiar atmospheres and colours, and their complex psychology. "I'm taking the new one slowly," he admitted, "but of course, it's a great book."

"Any jokes in it?" said Charlie, with a hollow laugh.

“That’s never quite the point,” I said, “with a Dax novel.”

“Anyway, haven’t you read it?” said Peter, going over to the window to see what Evert was looking at.

Poor Evert, as I knew, had never read more than the opening pages of any of his father’s books. “I just can’t,” he said again now, “I don’t know why”—and seeing Peter join him he turned back into the room with a regretful look.

After a moment Peter said, “Good grief . . . did you see this, Dax?”

“Oh . . . what’s that . . . ?” said Evert, and I was slow to tell the new confusion from the other.

“Freddie, have you seen this man?”

“Who is it?” I went across. “Oh, the exhibitionist, I suppose you mean,” I said.

“No, he’s gone . . .” said Peter, still staring out. I stood at his shoulder and stared too. It was that brief time between sunset and the blackout when you could see into other people’s rooms. Tall panes which had reflected the sky all day now glowed companionably here and there, and figures were revealed at work, or moving around behind the lit grid of the sashes. In the set directly opposite, old Sangster, the blind French don, was giving a tutorial to a young man so supine that he might have been asleep. And on the floor above, beneath the dark horizontal of the cornice and the broad pediment, a single window was alight, a lamp on the desk projecting a brilliant arc across the wall and ceiling.

“I spotted him the other day,” I said. “He must be one of the new men.” Peter waited, with pretended patience; and Evert, frowning still, came back and looked out as well. Now a rhythmical shadow had started to leap and shrink across the distant ceiling.

“Oh, yes, him,” Evert said, as the source of the shadow moved slowly into view, a figure in a gleaming singlet, steadily lifting and lowering a pair of hand-weights. He did so with concentration though with no apparent effort—but of course it was hard to tell at this distance, from which he showed, in his square of light, as massive and abstracted, as if shaped from light himself. Peter put his hand on my arm.

“My dear,” he said, “I seem to have found my new model.” At which Evert made a little gasp, and looked at him furiously for a second.

“Well, you’d better get a move on,” I said, since these days new men left as quickly and unnoticed as they came.

“Even you must admire that glorious head, like a Roman gladiator, Freddie,” said Peter, “and those powerful shoulders, do you see the blue veins standing in the upper arms?”

“Not without my telescope,” I said.

I went to fill the kettle from the tap on the landing and found Jill Darrow coming up the stairs; she was late for the meeting at which she might have liked to vote herself. I was very glad to see her, but the atmosphere, which had taken on a hint of deviancy, rather changed when she came into the room. She hadn’t had the benefit of ten years in a boys’ boarding school, with all its ingrained depravities; I doubt she’d ever seen a naked man. Charlie said, “Ah, Darrow,” and half stood up, then dropped back into his chair with an informality that might or might not have been

flattering. “We want Dax to ask his father,” he said, as she removed her coat, and took in who was there. I set about making the tea.

“Oh, I see,” said Jill. There was a natural uncertainty in Evert’s presence as to what could be said about A. V. Dax.

At the window Evert himself seemed not to know she had come in. He and Peter stood staring up at the room opposite. Their backs were expressive, Peter smaller, hair thick and temperamental, in the patched tweed jacket which always gave off dim chemical odours of the studio; Evert neat and hesitant, a strictly raised boy in an unusually good suit who seemed to gaze at pleasure as at the far bank of a river. “What are you two staring at?” Jill said.

“You mustn’t look,” said Peter, turning and grinning at her. At which she went straight to the window, myself close behind. The gladiator was still in view, though now with his back turned, and doing something with a piece of rope. I was almost relieved to see that the scouts had started their rounds. At one window, and then the next, a small black-coated figure appeared, reached up to close the shutters, and removed all sign of life. Across the way the scout came into Sangster’s room, half-hidden by the oblong screen he carried through into the bedroom, and after a minute reappeared, edged round the two occupants, and kneeling on the window seat gazed out for a curious few seconds before pulling the tall shutters to. By dinner time the great stone buildings would be lightless as ruins.

“Ah, Phil,” said Charlie—behind us my own scout had come in to do the same for us.

I said sternly, “Do you know who this fellow is, Phil?”

Phil had fought at the Battle of Loos, and after that earlier war had spent fifteen years in the Oxford police. He was affable and devoted to the College, but seemed sometimes to regret that he’d ended up in an apron, dusting and washing dishes for young men he was powerless to discipline. “What was it, sir?” He propped his screen against the wall, and came over eagerly, as if I’d spotted a miscreant. I noticed now that our own reflections were hanging very faintly between us and the view of other windows. I pointed upwards.

“This . . . ridiculous fellow,” I said.

“Oh, him, sir,” said Phil, a bit disappointed but trying for a moment to share our own interest in the luminous figure. “I happen to know there was a bit of trouble there.”

“What sort of trouble?” said Peter.

“Well, the noise, sir. Dr. Sangster’s been complaining about it.”

“Oh . . . ?” said Evert. “Noise . . . ?”

“Rhythmical creaking, apparently, sir,” said Phil, with a grim look.

“Oh, goodness . . .” said Evert.

“He’s not one of ours, though, in fact,” said Phil.

“Ah,” I said.

“No, he’s one of the Brasenose men,” said Phil. In the vast gloomy College, its staircases half-deserted since the start of the War, new members of requisitioned colleges had been slipped in

here and there, disoriented freshmen who found themselves also evacuees. Brasenose had been seized by a ministry of some kind, who according to my tutor were rather unsure what to do with it. “If you could just excuse me, Mr. Green?”

“Of course, Phil.”

“You don’t happen to know his name?” said Jill.

“He’s called Sparsholt, miss,” said Phil, with a small cough as he swung the shutters to and dropped the iron bar safely in its slot.

“Spar . . . sholt,” said Peter, weighing the word and smiling slyly at Evert. “Sounds like part of an engine, or a gun.”

Phil looked at him blankly for a second or two. “I dare say you’re right, sir,” he said, and went through into the bedroom. I set out my best Meissen cups, which I hoped might please Jill, and in the new closeness of the panelled and shuttered room we settled down to have tea.

Jill stayed on, as my guest, for dinner in hall, and afterwards I went down to the gate with her. “I’ll see you back,” I said. She was at St. Hilda’s, a fifteen-minute walk away, but in the blackout a bit more of a challenge.

“There’s absolutely no need,” she said.

“No, no, take my arm”—which she did, touchingly enough. We set off—I held the taped-over torch, which, with her elbow squeezed snugly against my side, we seemed to turn and point together. Even so, I sensed some reluctance in her. In a minute she freed herself to put on her gloves, and we went on like that past the tall railings of Merton, the great bulk of its chapel and tower sensed more than seen above us in the night. Jill glanced upwards. The darkness seemed to insinuate something between us, and though I think she was glad of my company it was awkwardly as though she had agreed to something. As I knew, it could be easier, once your eyes had adjusted, to walk without the startlements of the torch. Oddly, you moved with more confidence. All the same, we spoke nearly in whispers, as though we might be overheard. Often on those nights you did brush suddenly against other people passing or waiting entirely unseen.

Now the lane was a little black canyon, its gabled and chimneyed rim just visible to us against the deep charcoal of the sky. Clouds, in peacetime, carried and dispersed the colours of the lights below, but in the blackout an unmediated darkness reigned. I thought I knew this street I’d walked along a hundred times, but memory seemed not quite to match the dim evidence of doorways, windows, railings that we passed. I asked Jill about her work, and she at once grew less self-conscious. She was reading History, but her interests were in archaeology, and in the remarkable things revealed by the London Blitz. She explained how bombs that knocked down City churches sometimes cut through the layers below, Tudor, medieval, Roman, exposing them in ways no organized human effort could have done. The human aspects of the devastation, the loss of life and home, clearly struck her rather less. She spoke excitedly about coins, coffins, bricks, fragments of pottery. I said it must be frustrating for her that Oxford itself had barely been damaged, and watched, if one can watch in the dark, her recognition, and disposal, of a joke. From the start she’d been one of those who pass through student life with their eyes set firmly on the future: it was an urgent process, not a beautiful delay. Now the future for all of us had changed, the town pervaded by a mood of transience, and of near-readiness for action which it never saw. Did other friends share my feeling we might lose the War, and soon?—defeatist talk was rare, and censored itself as it began. Jill had made her choice, for the army, but her mind was on the great things she would do once the War was won.

At the gate of St. Hilda's I stood half-illuminating our parting. "Good night then," I said, with a humorous tremor.

Jill seemed to look over my shoulder. "I wonder if Peter will paint that man."

I turned. "Who's that?"

"The new man," she said, "Sparsholt."

"Oh, him." I laughed. "Well, Peter generally gets what he wants."

"A good subject, anyway, I'd have thought," said Jill, and we shook hands. It wasn't what I'd hoped for, and as I walked alone across the bridge, and then once more down Merton Lane, I worried at my own timidity and planned more confident advances when we met next time. I turned her face to mine, and found beauty in its symmetry. She had grey eyes, the strong chin of a Wagnerian soprano, and small white teeth. She gave off, close to, a tantalizing scent. For the moment, this would have to do.

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