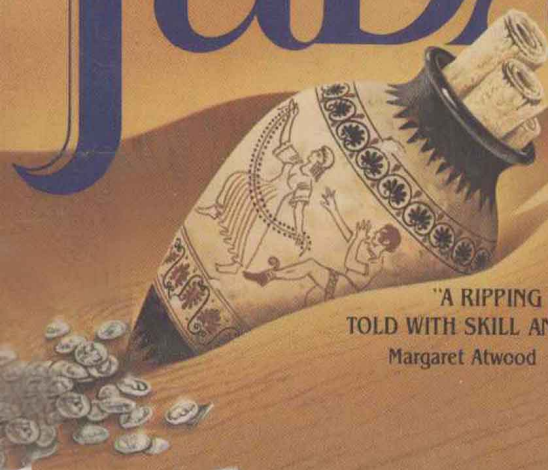


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Remembering Owen Spencer Davies

A TIME FOR JUDAS

FOREWORD



Here is how I came upon Philo's story. Across the road from this television station was a bar where I often sat late in the afternoon, and I knew that at five o'clock a smooth man with thinning hair, wearing an expensive dark suit, would come hurrying in for a straight gin which he would gulp down; he would sit for a little while as if listening raptly to some enchanting, far-away wild music and then hurry out again. The bartender told me that his name was Owen Spencer Davies and he was a television producer.

One day Spencer Davies spoke to me. Two days later he wrote me a long letter about my work, which he seemed to know very well. The letter was full of insights, some of them downright embarrassing, and so charmed was I that I asked him to lunch with me. After that we had lunch once a week and I grew very fond of him. He told me he came from a monied old Welsh family, had spent a year at Cambridge, then had joined the Benedictine order and gone to Rome to study. Having a talent for Greek and Latin, he had found himself working in the Vatican library, where he had remained until he left the church. After he came to Canada everything had gone well for him until a year ago, when everything began to go wrong. The pretty young actress he had married died suddenly of pneumonia, and a month later he discovered that he had leukemia. Now he was taking chemotherapy treat-

ments, was losing his hair, and was floating in gin.

Those dashes across the street from the television station to the bar finally did him in. When he was fired I began to see more of him. He had bald patches now. He was thinner, too. But there was another change in him; his eyes, turning inward, would shift around restlessly. Finally he told me he wanted to go to Rome and write a book, a job he had kept putting off; the long delay was driving him crazy and making him feel ashamed. He knew he could only do this book in Rome, he said, but he didn't have the money to go there. Owen's sense of desperate urgency, and the failing health that brought a wild glint in his eyes, began to depress me. Finally I loaned him five thousand dollars, which he was to repay me when a rich old uncle died, and off he went to Rome.

For months I didn't hear from him. Then around Christmas time I got a letter. He had good news, he said in the letter. He had had a remission of the leukemia. His health was good now. He was working furiously. His rich uncle, unfortunately, was still alive. The address he gave me was "Father Coutreau, the Canadian College at the Vatican." This father, I remembered, was the Québécois priest who had first talked to him about Canada.

The news of the remission so delighted me that I wrote saying that I had long planned to go to Rome to see my publisher and to meet my translator, and why shouldn't it be soon, so in no time we might be together again. I got a postcard in return asking when I was coming. What could I say? I was working on a book myself and it wasn't going well.

For a year I did not hear again from Owen Spencer Davies. Sometimes I wondered if he ever would be able to repay the loan. Then late in the fall, when I was thinking of the blue skies of Rome, I got a short letter from him. He wrote: "It has been set in my mind that you are coming here. Am I wrong? If you are coming make it soon — very soon. I must see you. I know I will, but please, come very soon." The plea in this letter upset me. I wrote to my translator, and to the Father Coutreau address; then within two weeks I set out for Rome.

Before noon I left the Excelsior and went along the Via

Veneto to the office of the publisher Montedori, where I learned that my translator had set out for Paris a week earlier: Disappointed, I got a taxi and headed for the Canadian College at the Vatican. A housekeeper took my name to Father Coutreau, who came to the door himself. A stocky, affable French Canadian, he asked me to have a cup of tea and some biscuits with him. For almost a year, he said, Owen had enjoyed the remission from the leukemia and had actually looked healthy. He had never told anyone what the book was about. A few months ago, unfortunately, the remission had ended, but Owen had gone on working, refusing to go to the hospital, and now was in bad shape. He was waiting to see me. When and where? I said that at five o'clock that afternoon I would be sitting at that café on the Piazza del Popolo, the one where you can sit and look up at the Pincio.

I was there, as I said I would be, and the soft bluish mist was touching all the hills of Rome. Within ten minutes a taxi pulled up almost in front of my table and a gaunt, thin man got out. I mightn't have known Owen if he hadn't smiled at me. In spite of his suffering, some serenity in that faint smile held me speechless. Shaken, wondering where I had seen that head before and that thin face with the haunting smile, I thought of the sculptured head in the Cathedral at Chartres held in the light of those glorious blue windows. After we had shaken hands he said, "Ah, these remissions. A sick man begins to believe he has won out. Now it has to be more of the damn chemotherapy." And while asking about people in my home town he kept smiling at me approvingly. That I was there at last seemed to be giving him immense satisfaction.

He had a Cinzano with me; then after a little small talk which only seemed to deepen his sense of urgency he told me the story of an Italian professor whom he had met and grown to love when he was working in the Vatican archives. This sixty-five-year-old professor was considered to be the best of all the Middle East archeologists and scholars of biblical times. He had a white pointed beard and a bald head and a limp in his left leg from a war wound, and was supposed to be cold and disdainful and aloof. "But I remember the day he got talking

to me about Elizabethan love lyrics," Owen said, "and then invited me to dinner." At dinner Owen discovered that this apparently austere man had lost his son in a drowning and now was lonely, and dreamed of being in the company of a young man he could talk to as freely as he had once talked to his own son. He had eyes so shrewd and intelligent they could make you feel uncomfortable, but if he were suddenly pleased, the eyes would be full of warmth and laughter. One night he said, "I find it strange I talk to you as I would talk to my own son, and yet I've known you such a little while. What is this recognition?"

He said this about the time the manuscripts written by a certain Philo of Crete were brought to him for verification of their authenticity.

This happened just after the Turkish sweep into the island of Cyprus, when Greek Cypriots were driven out of a whole section of the island and many of their villages were levelled. Someone digging around one of the ruined villas unearthed a sealed jar. The Greek jar, elegant and slim, had figures inset around it, a maiden in happy flight from a youth reaching out for her. Inside were manuscripts. Whoever had found the jar knew how valuable the manuscripts were to the Vatican theologians. Who put up the money to acquire them was hard to say. Anyway, they were brought to the professor.

At one of their dinners, Owen said, he found the professor in a state of feverish excitement. The professor wouldn't tell what had happened, yet he acted like a stunned or dazzled young scholar. All he would say was that he had been asked for his opinion on the authenticity of certain manuscripts from the first century, and, oh, they were authentic all right! There was no question about their authenticity, and he had made his report to certain powerful churchmen.

Within a week, while the manuscripts were still in his possession, the professor had become another man, nervous and worried. One night he wanted Owen to come to his house, and at first it was like any other evening. But in the long silences he seemed to be reaching out for intimacy and trust. Finally tears came to his eyes. Well, Owen said, the tears running

down his cheeks were simply shattering. It was plain he had to talk to someone who was young and close to him.

He had been advised, the professor said, that the Philo manuscripts were to be regarded as the work of Gnostics, those early heretics who had come up with such things as the Gospel according to Thomas, and a Gospel according to Mary. "Owen, you're much younger than I am," he kept saying, as if youth in someone offered him a hope, a possibility of a way out of his terrible distress and his tears. The battle was in his own heart, the battle between the great scholar and the good church soldier. The scholar, in spite of all his integrity, knew he was losing, and in his despair he sought a strange satisfaction; he hoped that someone much younger would take the story of Philo of Crete and carry it around in his heart. Though hidden in the heart, it would still be alive in this younger man.

"Well, that night I read all the writings," Owen said softly. "The manuscript was in good condition, and my Greek was good enough. I read and read and read again, and I made notes as I read. When I got home, that great old man's tears began to outrage me. I sat down and made more notes. Fresh from the reading, I made note after note as stuff came back to me. I sat up all night, living in Philo's meditations, and at dawn, exhausted on the bed, I wanted to know why it was enough for the professor to know that the story still lived in the mind of someone much younger.

"Well, within a week I learned why he had wept. The manuscripts were taken from him. Word had gone out that they were to be pronounced forgeries, and that in any event their age could not be authenticated. That was the word. So they were to be destroyed. And that great old man accepted this judgment. My God, he accepted it! What do you do with a great and fine old man who permits a thing to be done as the good right thing in the service of an institution which has been his whole life, when he knows that in acquiescing he'll be haunted and ashamed the rest of his life? Ashamed of doing the right thing."

Anyway, right away the professor had gone into complete retirement in a hill town in northern Italy. "As for me," Owen

said, "I kept all the notes. Pages and pages of the notes. I put them away. Time passed, but I think Philo, always in the back of my mind, was nagging away at me and driving me crazy."

The high, unnatural color had vanished from his cheeks; they now had an awful gray shade as he leaned over the table. He said he had made a book out of the notes, a story, because Philo believed so much in legends and storytelling. It was everything to him. "I've written the story," he said. "I should have gone to the hospital three weeks ago, but I had to finish the whole story. I want to get it to you . . ." But the utter exhaustion so apparent in him after his sigh of relief frightened me. "Come on, Owen, I'll get you home," I said.

He lived in the Via Margutta, where so many painters lived. At the house he wouldn't let me help him climb the stairs. The young woman he lived with, a painter, would be waiting for him, he said, and I embraced him and we parted.

Entering my hotel around midnight, I saw an elegant tall girl in a leather jacket leaving the desk. The desk clerk, calling out to me, gave me a big manila envelope. I opened it there in the lobby — a manuscript entitled "According to Philo of Crete." There was also a note from Owen. He wrote, "My dear friend. About the language I've had Philo use! I feel I know him well, and I couldn't bear to try and have him sound stiff and archaic. So the language here is direct — as in natural speech — sometimes even verging on the colloquial." That was all.

Just before noon the next day Father Coutreau called to say that Owen had been taken to the hospital in a coma. He died in the hospital.

But here is the manuscript.

I

Not far from the Jerusalem wall are vineyards with grapes of a very special flavor, and that first time in Judea when I was the senator's agent buying wine and olives for shipment to Rome, I used to think the Jews were like these grapes. These hook-nosed people had their own flavor, their

own spiritual isolation, their own barbaric splendor, and it fascinated me that they had been able to hold on to these things in spite of the Greek and Roman influences. Yet as I had soon learned when I was there as a merchant, nothing in Judea is as it appears to be. The story is in those Judean hills. In the springtime those hills have a beautiful lush greenness slashed with the purple of the valleys, and then, as the light changes, the purple slashes become golden bands, binding the hills in an enchanting peacefulness; yet those hills are filled with bandits, waiting to raid caravans, and men who would be kings, dreaming of swooping down on Jerusalem, and of course these patriotic kings are just bandits too. It was a wild time, my time as a merchant.

Since I had taken the trouble to learn the language, I had many Jewish friends and spent more time with them than with the Romans. Soon the pretty wife of a dull but politically ambitious priest told me she was lonely. She liked listening to me talk about Athens, Rome, and Egypt, even my home in Crete, saying wistfully that she kept seeing herself in those places with me. I liked undoing her waist-long shiny black hair, and when it fell around her naked shoulders, curling around her breasts, she had mystery for me — all of a woman's mystery in her hair.

But one afternoon on the bed when she was twining her hair around my neck, her husband came in. I had to run. I had never really trusted the rich discontented young widow who had introduced us. And the young priest brought a charge of adultery against his wife, and proved it. She was to be taken to the east gate, stripped to the waist, and left there, tied up, to be mocked and degraded by any passerby.

It was a terrible time for me. But before these things could be done, the young wife got a congestion on her chest and a high fever from those damp Jerusalem stone houses. I heard about these things from the physician, my friend Ezekiel. They had prepared her for death, he said. As her husband watched her dying, he began to weep and to pray. Again and again he went to the temple, wailing and praying, fasting, throwing himself on the floor, and, according to the physician, keeping her alive with his prayers and loving her as he had never done before. She lived and was forgiven, with everybody wondering and rejoicing at the triumph of prayers and love.

I felt thankful and safe till the night when I was

stabling my horse and a man came out of the shadows, moonlight suddenly on his thick neck and contorted face and glinting on his knife, too. When I slashed at him with my short sword, he screamed. Both hands to his head, he kept on screaming. Then, dropping his blood-stained hands, he stared at them, then at the ground, and with a wild frightened yell, he ran. The knife was at my feet near the bloody ear. Stooping, I stared at the ear. I knew the young priest would not be satisfied till I was killed.

Next day I ran for my life — back to Rome.

For two days I was afraid to face the senator. Finally I went to him and told what had happened. He was generous in his understanding. He knew about these things. "These Jewish women seem exotic to us in their sensuality, don't they?" he said. For a week he let me sit around in the villa. Then he gave me a promotion. He sent me to Alexandria to oversee the wheat shipments to Rome. There I was given to understand that the wheat shipments were to be short in tonnage, to double our profit. This had been the custom. Well, finally someone talked; there was a scandal in Rome, and though the senator, who had great influence, began to hand out large bribes to complaining merchants and court officials, he thought it better I should not be questioned in a court. I should vanish until he could safely call me home.

Though only a year had passed since my flight from Jerusalem, I now found myself there again, but this time not as an affluent merchant; I was just a scribe for Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, a friend of the senator's. I was living in a little stone house high on the hill near the great Roman Antonia fortress. Every day I went to the fortress and worked as a scribe, watching and waiting for the letter from the senator that would

call me home. I was avoiding Jews who had been my friends. I stayed with Romans.

When my old friend Ezekiel, the physician, looked me up, I was moved. He told me the priest had taken his wife to Egypt, then he dropped the subject. "Come home with me," he said, and I went. His wife, embracing me, cried, "This is wonderful, Philo. Now Ezekiel can take you to his tailor and have you pick out some decent-looking clothes for him." Pear-shaped Ezekiel always looked sloppy no matter what he wore, but we went to the tailor together. After that day he began to take me to all the houses we used to visit. No one mentioned the priest's wife. It was unnatural, I thought. But I went on living alone in my little stone house, and by the spring-time when the rains came, I was feeling secure.

They say the city lacks water, that stone needs water, but when it keeps raining and rivulets flow down the hills, Jerusalem looks and feels like a big damp tomb. Then, when the rain stops and the dawn comes, the city is radiant in a pure white light. It was on these white mornings that the letters from Rome came every day to the fortress. No letter came for me. I was always there, showing my disappointment.

My friend Marcellus, the captain, who got many letters himself, tried gently to rid me of my faith in the senator's promises. Marcellus was a handsome, fastidious soldier with a distinguished air to go with his high forehead and cropped curling hair. He was the bastard son of a member of an old Roman family, and he could talk to me about the poets, preferring Propertius above the others, as I did too, and though he shaved his legs, no soldier dared taunt him. He was too brave, too ruthless a captain. I often rolled the dice with him. He would gamble