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INSTANTLY

I'LL NEVER FORGET WHAT'S 'ISNAME

Oliver Reed dropped **DEAD** in a bar in Malta, in May of 1999, after spending several hours arm wrestling with sailors. **SURROUNDED** by friends and drinking mates, he took a last **SWIG OF HIS RUM**, uttered the challenging remark, "I'll fight any **WOMAN** in this room!" and then pitched forward into the sawdust, poleaxed by a **MASSIVE** heart attack.

Text MAX BLAGG

ALISTAR/SEVEN ARTS

REED SUCCUMBED the way he would have wanted it, while filming a halfway-decent movie, *Gladiator*, downing a skinful with a bunch of like-minded thespian hooligans. His genial spirit appeared to me for this interview as I stood admiring the massive, mausoleum-quality porcelain urinals of the Princess Louise in High Holborn.

OLIVER REED: "They don't make toilets like this anymore, do they? The tourists come here and think, 'This is London!'"

MAX BLAGG: "Yes, this place is a bit classier than that pub in Valletta, an establishment that I'm reliably informed now sells beer mugs with your name and likeness etched upon them. By the way, is it true you left 10 grand to your drinking mates at your local in Guernsey, to buy them a round, on the condition they were seen at some point crying their eyes out over your demise?"

OLIVER REED: "Yes, it's true. Well, I thought it was only fair that the people who really cared about me got a drink, not just the professional mourners who gather like vultures around every celebrity-death location."

MAX BLAGG: "Did you know there are still professional mourners in Ireland, who get a few quid for showing up at the funerals of the friendless?"

OLIVER REED: "It's a job, I suppose. No need for extras at my sendoff. Here, let's take one of these quaint little Victorian bar booths and get some drinks in. Barman, a Bacardi 151 here and something for my friend."

MAX BLAGG: "I quit drinking actually, Oliver."

OLIVER REED: "What? I'm supposed to chat with some teetotal twat?"

MAX BLAGG: "Listen, matey, I did more than my share when I was a practising piss artist, so don't take that attitude with me."

OLIVER READ [MENACINGLY.]:

**"WELL, WELL, WELL. DID YOU
COME HERE FOR THE GBH,
SUNSHINE? ARE YOU A
MASOCHIST OR SOMETHING?"**

Because, talking like that, you may well encounter, initially, a custom-made boot to the groin, with my initials on it, followed by a veritable storm of fisticuffs. 'I shall raise such outcries on thy clatter'd iron –'

MAX BLAGG [CONDESCENDINGLY.]: "Listen to her. That was Samson Agonistes, that last bit, wasn't it? The dead can't scuffle, Ollie, and I have found, over many years of visiting low dives, that them who run off at the gob while in their cups tend to not be quite as physically challenging when the beer mugs start flying."

OLIVER REED: "Why, you snotty little pipsqueak –" [ENTER, STARK NAKED, MICHAEL PARKINSON, MICHAEL ASPEL AND MICHAEL WINNER.]

MICHAELS: "We are the three Mikes, and we insist you lads keep it civil and not let this chat degenerate into another 'Ollie on telly'-style debacle."

MAX BLAGG: "Okay, Oliver, you heard your friends. Hark unto these TV personalities, they only exploited your drunkenness for the public good."

OLIVER REED: "Yes, not bad lads really, and Winner kept me in work for a few years, before he buggered off to America. It was Ken Russell who got me started, though, God rest his soul. He popped his clogs a few months ago, wasn't it? Eighty-four, if he was a day."

MAX BLAGG: "With a constitution like yours, you could have easily gone another 20 years if you had knocked off the booze."

OLIVER REED: "Why on earth would I want to go 20 years without a drop of booze?"

MAX BLAGG: “Because it would seem like 40, for one thing! Tell us about filming with Ken – was that fun?”

OLIVER REED: “Those early biographical melodramas he did for the Beeb were actually marvellous. Probably his best work, apart from *The Devils*.”

MAX BLAGG: “I always remember that one about Delius, who got carried about by some effete young lad. Were you in that one?”

OLIVER REED: “No, that was *Song of Summer*. Max Adrian was a marvellous Delius, and his amanuensis, Eric Fenby, was played by Chris Gable. They’re dead now. I was in the one about Debussy.”

MAX BLAGG: “I used to think ‘amanuensis’ was a codeword for homosexual. Speaking of homosexuals, can we talk about the nude wrestling scene in *Women in Love*? I just watched it again and it really is rather touching and truly bromantic.”

OLIVER REED: “Well, it was common knowledge that Alan Bates secretly bowled from the gasworks end, and of course the script-writer [Larry Kramer] was a practising shirt-lifter, but mainly I was worried that my wedding tackle would swing as low and heavy as Alan’s, because he had quite the elephant trunk hanging there. But in the end we just stripped down and got on with it. We were professionals, after all, though it did get quite slippery in front of the fire, but Alan wasn’t my type anyway. Lovely chap, but very troubled about his sexuality, and a terrible hippie wife he had, too. They had twins and she neglected those kids something terrible. She went mad eventually, I think.”

MAX BLAGG: “You’re still the embodiment of Bill Sikes, a true English villain, who you memorably played in the musical version of *Oliver*, directed by your uncle Carol Reed. Nepotism, anyone?”

OLIVER REED: “Yes, we like to keep it in the family. Of course I wasn’t a classically trained actor like most of these pouffes I worked with, but my Bill Sikes was an interpretation that Charlie Dickens himself would have loved. I nailed that part to the wall! [SINGS.]

Strong men tremble when they hear it!

They’ve got cause enough to fear it!

It’s much blacker than they smear it!

Nobody mentions...!

My name!

Rich men hold their five-pound notes out!

Saves me emptying their coats out!

They know I could tear their throats out!

Just to live up to...!

My name!

Biceps like an iron girder!

Fit for doing of a murder!

If I just so much as heard a!

Bloke even whisper...!

[SPOKEN.] My name! Bill Sikes...!

[© Oliver]”

MAX BLAGG [APPLAUDING.]: “That was bloody marvellous, Ollie. Brought tears to my eyes, it did. It hardly matters that the director was your uncle. You sang again in *Tommy*, right? Which is how you met Keith Moon, The Who’s drummer, and had a brief disastrous affair of the spirits with him, correct?”

OLIVER REED: “Careful what you say about Keith. He was one of the greats, that lad, a kindred spirit. He died too soon, but the fact was he couldn’t be saved. By God, we had some laughs though.”

MAX BLAGG: “But can you actually remember anything the two of you did apart from get pissed up and break stuff?”

OLIVER REED: “That was the joy of it, smashing up hotel rooms, drinking, shagging stewardesses, talking shite into the wee hours. Of course, no matter what transpired I was always on set at 6am, ready to shoot. Keith didn’t manage to wake up so easily. He was frequently carried there by his minders. Ken Russell was very tolerant, though. He even rented a sedan chair for the boy.”

MAX BLAGG: “That story of how Keith came to your house in the helicopter, to me that has a Freudian subtext, sort of like Rapunzel letting his hair down for you to climb up. But he didn’t actually let down a ladder, did he?”

OLIVER REED: “What is it with these constant dark hints at mutual carnal attraction, sunshine? What happened was I was in my bath, late morning, and this bloody chopper came buzzing round, frightening the horses, so I took the Purdey onto the roof and fired a couple of rounds in their direction. They landed quite rapidly after that in a field next door. Keith came and introduced himself. It was Platonic love at first sight.”

MAX BLAGG: “Was it only Platonic, though? That picture of you and Keith playing sandcastles on the Isle of Wight, when you were supposed to be schmoozing in Hollywood, that looked like love.”

OLIVER REED: “No, I’m a vadge man, always was. That’s as well known as my proclivity for strong drink. Cuntstruck from birth. I like the hair pie, the harbour of hope, the heavenly hatch, the holiest of holes, the horse collar, the kipper trench, if you will...”

MAX BLAGG: “What did you have for breakfast – an erotic dictionary? You mean the map of Tasmania, the moneybox, the mouse’s ear, the pink petunia, the punani, the quiff, the quim... Bartender, more rum for my friend here.” [MORE DRINKS ARE SERVED.]

MAX BLAGG: “What everyone knows, though, Oliver, is that you could have been a contender, a serious actor, bigger than Burton, as big as Brando, but you somehow literally pissed that all away. Was it the booze or were you simply afraid of being exposed as an untrained actor? Was it the scripts, the directors?”

OLIVER REED: “There you go with the booze again. I think it was the producers mostly. A soul-sucking crowd of yes men. I was invited to Hollywood many times. I was up for *The Sting*, *Jaws*, you name it. But the American film industry was – and indeed is – filled with such preposterous idiots, charlatans and fakes. I simply could not bring myself to kiss their arses. To ‘schmooze’, as you put it.”

MAX BLAGG: “I detect a certain anti-Americanism in your general tone. And in your appearance on the David Letterman show in 1987, real physical aggressiveness. David was ready to bolt when you removed your glasses. But talk shows in general have not helped your career. Appearing on that terrible show *The Word* in a leather jacket, with a Disney logo on the back of it and no shirt under it, and your belly sticking out like the great white whale... That was a definite low point. And when those fawning presenters showed the secret cam of you trying to get dressed in the green-room, you looked like you’d been harpooned. It’s awful that all this stuff is on YouTube for any arsehole to sit in his nightie and watch.”

OLIVER REED: “The English especially like nothing better than seeing people fail. And I was hitting the fail button that night. The hosts were quite inane, it’s true, and the questions weren’t exactly conducive to good repartee anyway.”

MAX BLAGG: “Do you think with the right management and less booze you might have been one of the great actors? You never did Shakespeare, did you, or any kind of stage work, as most English actors tend to do?”

OLIVER REED: “Will you stop with the fucking teetotalitarianism! No, I didn’t do any real stage work, always too busy making films. Unfortunately, in the later years, I rarely looked at the script until the cameras were rolling.”

BARKEEP: “Time, gentleman, please... Time...”

MAX BLAGG: “Ollie, thanks for your frankness and the constant underlying threat of violence. I’ll always think of you stroking that bunny in *Women in Love* while Glenda Jackson gazes at you from a balcony, doubtless peeing her panties in anticipation...”