

LEWIS GRASSIC GIBBON

Grey Granite

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To

HUGH MacDIARMID

I

All around her the street walls were dripping in fog as Chris Colquhoun made her way up the Gallowgate, yellow fog that hung tiny veils on her eyelashes, curled wet, and had in her throat the acrid taste of an ancient smoke. Here the slipper-slide of the pavement took a turn that she knew, leading up to the heights of Windmill Place, and shortly, out of the yellow swath, she saw come shambling the lines of the Steps with their iron hand-rail like a famished snake. She put out her hand on that rail, warm, slimy, and paused afore tackling the chafe of the climb, breathing deeply, she could hear her heart. The netbagful of groceries on her arm ached--she looked down through wet lashes at the shape of the thing--as though it was the bag that ached, not her arm. . . .

Standing still so breathing that little while she was suddenly aware of the silence below--as though all the shrouded town also stood still, deep-breathing a minute in the curl of the fog--stilling the shamble and grind of the trams, the purr of the buses in the Royal Mile, the clang and swing of the trains in Grand Central, the swish and roll and oily call of the trawlers taking the Forthie's flood--all pausing, folk wiping the fog from their eyes and squinting about them an un-eident minute--

Daft, she said to herself, and began climbing the stairs. Midway their forty steps a lamp came in sight, at last, glistening, it flung a long dirty hand down to help her. Her face came into its touch, it blinked surprised, not expecting that face or head or the glistening bronze coils of hair that crowned them--hair drawn in spiralled pads over each ear, fog-veiled, but shining. Chris halted again here under the lamp, thirty-eight, so she couldn't run up these steps, stiff's an old horse on a Mounth hill-road.

Old at thirty-eight? You'll need a bath-chair at fifty. And at sixty--why, as they'd say in Segget, they'll have carted you off to the creamery!

Panting, she smiled wry under the lamp at the foul tale told of Duncairn crematorium--the foul story that had struck her as funny enough even hearing it after the burning of Robert. . . . Oh, mixed and queer soss that living was, dying, dying slowly a bit of yourself every year, dying long ago with that dim lad, Ewan, dying in the kirk of Segget the time your hand came red from Robert's dead lips--and yet midmost the agonies of those little deaths thinking a foul tale flouting them funny!

Daft as well as decrepit, she told herself, but with a cool kindness, and looked over the Steps at the mirror hung where the stairs swung west, to show small loons the downward perils as they pelted blue hell on a morning to school. She saw a woman who was thirty-eight, looked less, she thought, thirty-five maybe in spite of those little ropes of grey that marred the loops of the coiled bronze hair, the crinkles about the sulky mouth and the eyes that were older than the face. Face thinner and straighter and stranger than once, as though it

were shedding mask on mask down to one last reality--the skull, she supposed, that final reality.

Funny she could stand here and face up to that, not feel sick, just faintly surprised! Once it had been dreadful and awful to think of--the horror of forgotten flesh taken from enduring bone, the masks and veils of life away, down to those grim essentials. Now it left her neither sick nor sorry, she found, watching a twinkle in sulky gold eyes above the smooth jut of the wide cheek-bones. Not sad at all, just a silly bit joke of a middle-aged woman with idle thoughts in a pause on the Steps of Windmill Brae.

Below the quiet broke with the crunch of a tram wheeling down from the lights of Royal Mile to the Saturday quietude of Gallowgate. Chris turned, looked, saw the shiver of sparks through the fog, syne the sailing brute swing topaz in sight, swaying and swearing, with aching feet as it ran for its depot in Alban Street. Its passage seemed to set fire to the fog, a little wind came and blew the mist-ash, and there was Grand Central smoking with trains. And now, through the thinning bouts of the fog, Chris could see the lighted clock of Thomson Tower shine sudden a mile or so away over the tumbled rigs of grey granite.

Nine o'clock.

She lowered the netbag and stretched her arms, saw herself wheel and stretch in the mirror, slim still, long curves, half-nice she half-thought. Her hands came down on the railing and held it, no need to hurry to-night for a change, Ma Cleghorn would have seen to supper for them all--the nine o'clock Gallop to the Guts as she called it. No need to hurry, if only this once in the peace of the ill-tasting fog

off the Forthie, in the blessed desertion of the Windmill Steps so few folk used in Duncairn toun. Rest for a minute in the peace of the fog--or nearly a peace, but for its foul smell.

Like the faint, ill odour of that silent place where they'd ta'en Robert's body, six months before--

She'd thought hardly at all what she would do after Robert's funeral that so shocked Segget, she'd carried out all the instructions in the will and gone back with Ewan to the empty Manse, Ewan made her tea and looked after her--cool and efficient, only eighteen, though he acted more like twenty-eight--at odd minutes he acted eighty-two she told him as he brought her the tea in the afternoon stillness of the sitting-room.

He grinned the quick grin that was boy-like enough, and wandered the room a bit, tall and dark, unrestlessly, while she drank the tea. He hated tea himself, with a bairn-like liking for bairny things--milk and oatcakes would have contented Ewan from breakfast to dinner and some more for his supper. Ayont the windows in the waning of the afternoon Chris could see the frozen glister of night on the Grampians, swift and near-moving, Ewan's shoulder and sleekèd dark head against it. . . . Then he turned from the window. Mother, I've got a job.

She'd been sunk in a little drowse of sheer ache, tiredness from the funeral and the day in Duncairn, she woke stupid at his speak and only half-hearing: A job?--who for?

He said Why, for little Ewan Tavendale all by his lone. But you'll have to sign the papers first.

--But it's daft, Ewan, you haven't finished college yet, and then there's the university!

He shook the sleekèd head: Not for me. I'm tired of college and I'm not going to live off you. And thought for a minute and added with calm sense, Especially as you haven't much to live off.

So that was that and he fetched the papers, Chris sat and read the dreich things appalled, papers of apprenticeship for four years to the firm of Gowans and Cloag in Duncairn. Smelters and steel manufacturers--But, Ewan, you'd go daft in a job like that.

He said he'd try not to, awfully hard, especially as it was the best job he could come by--and I can come out in week-ends and see you quite often. Duncairn's only a twenty miles off.

--And where do you think I am going to bide?

He looked at her curiously with cool, remote eyes, black didn't suit him, hair and skin over dark. Eh? Oh, here in Segget, aren't you? You used to like it before Robert died.

Sense the way he would speak of Robert, not heartlessly, just with indifference, as much as to say what did it matter, would a godly snuffling help Robert now? But a queer curiosity moved Chris to ask Does anything ever matter to you at all, Ewan?

Oh, lots. Where you're going to stay, for one thing, when I've gone.

He'd slipped out of that well, Chris thought with a twinkle, sitting in the deep armchair on her heels, her head down bent, he ran his finger along the curve of her neck, coolly, with liking, as she looked up at last:

I'm coming to bide with you in Duncairn.

When they'd sold the furniture and paid off the debts there was barely a hundred and fifty pounds left, Segget took the matter through hand at the Arms, the news got about though both Chris and Ewan had been secret about it and never let on. But Segget would overhear what you said though you whispered the thing at the dead of night ten miles from a living soul in the hills. And it fair enjoyed itself at the news, God man! that was a right dight in the face for that sulky, stuck-up bitch at the Manse, her with her braw clothes and her proud-like ways, never greeting when her man died there in the pulpit, just as cool as though the childe were a load of swedes, not greeting even, or so 'twas said, when they burned the corp in there in Duncairn. And such a like funeral to give a minister, burning the man in a creamery!

And the Segget Provost, Hairy Hogg the sutor, said the thing was a judgment on the coarse brutes both, he never spoke ill of the dead, not him, but what had his forefather, the poet Burns, said?--

Ake Ogilvie the joiner was having a dram and he sneered real coarse: You and your Burns! The gawpus blethered a lot of stite afore they shovelled him into the earth and sent all the worms for a mile around as drunk as tinks at Paddy Fair. But I'm damned if he'd