

# MISS GREY OF MARKET STREET

*Robert Nisbet*

It was around three o'clock on a Saturday afternoon and Market Street lay grey and wet under the half-hearted shafts of sunlight which only occasionally broke the cloud. A tentative snowfall that morning had turned to slush, and splashed up now and again from passing cars.

The shop fronts were bright enough though, and the delicatessen at the bottom end of the street sparkled just a little with the warming ranges of spirits, liqueurs and chocolates stacked along the window, with the cheese, yogurt, teas and coffees behind. Miss Grey, pecking, tripping, daintily white-haired, made her way towards the shop.

She fluttered into it in a rather delicate way, a slight presence, her sharp, bird-like features softening just occasionally. Now, as habitually, she stepped neatly and precisely over to the stacked rows of Oriental teas, where she potted long and quietly, in a rapt and quizzical absorption.

It was nearly fifteen years since she'd retired as founder and principal of a small prep school in the town. And more than that, she was Miss Grey, one of the Greys of Market Street, and the Greys had been for many years one of the more prosperous local business families. The grocery had been founded by her father before the First World War.

Continued and expanded by Miss Grey's brother Denzil, it survived into the age of the supermarket as, to quote Denzil's official designation, 'the quality grocery'. Only with Denzil's retirement in the mid-70s did the shop pass to a Swansea firm who, much to Miss Grey's relief, had preserved Denzil's original byline: 'quality grocery'.

Miss Grey was shopping for tea. To the girl at the counter, this was all part of a rather quaint ritual, conducted regularly once a fortnight. Around three o'clock on a Saturday afternoon the old lady would wander in, her main shopping for the week being done in the morning, and would gaze along the rows of Oriental teas. She'd turn the small wooden boxes, read from their inscriptions, linger for quite a while before eventually selecting one and proceeding with it to the counter. It was all so habitual and so harmless as to create little, if any attention.

But to Miss Grey it was important. She was shopping for tea. She wasn't that well off: the prep school had left her with little by way of profit, and, despite Denzil's devotion to the idea of quality – or perhaps because of it – the business hadn't thrived. Miss Grey had inherited little on Denzil's death a couple of years earlier. But still, cramped though she was by a genteel poverty, she looked for quality, and was satisfied, in the last resort, if she could find it in just one area of her domestic life. Her gaze ranged over the titles on the boxes: Keemun China, Russian Caravan, Earl Grey, Gunpowder Green, Orange Pekoe, Ceylon Breakfast. There was a whole wealth there, of dreams and suggested gentility. After some thought, or some dreaming, she picked down a box of Russian Caravan, and made her way to the counter. She wanted a good blend. Terry would be coming to tea again, and she wanted things nice for him.

Terry, Miss Grey's nephew, arrived about five o'clock, spruce in his Saturday suit, just back from the football match, scrupulously wiping the mud from his shoes in the doorway, before perching on the edge of a stiff and ancient armchair.

He looked like her relative. The same bird-like features were exaggerated by soft pecking movements of his head, a slight squint and an occasional nervous twitch. He would jab and squint a curious half-quizzical assent to everything Miss Grey said, but he was still ill at ease in the gentility of her drawing room. It was only six months since he'd started going there, since his return from Margam. And yet: he had come home, he'd wanted to come home, and Miss Grey was part of home. He wanted to get to like it there.

After they'd finished the cakes and sandwiches and were drinking tea, Miss Grey motioned to Terry to stay where he was and went to the kitchen. She came back with the wooden box of Russian Caravan tea which she'd emptied into a tea caddy.

'I thought you'd like to see this, Terry.' She passed it over. Terry's large and rather clumsy hands fumbled the box awkwardly as he gazed at it in determined concentration.

'It's the box the tea was packed in,' said Miss Grey. 'Russian Caravan. Do you see?'

Terry's reply was stammered and clumsy. 'It's nice. It's nice tea.'

Miss Grey smiled with a pecking eagerness. 'There's a story about the tea, on the side of the box. Shall I read it to you?' Terry blushed, but nodded.

Miss Grey was suddenly self-conscious, but caught by a gust of enthusiasm at the same time. She told him the story of the Empress Elizabeth of Russia who in 1735 had set up the first caravan tea trade between Russia and the Far East.

Terry broke into a happy grin. 'That's a nice story.' He looked in awe at the fragile little box in his large and clumsy hands. 'It's a nice box.'

Miss Grey flushed a little with excitement. 'Would you like it, Terry? Or the label, perhaps? Would you like to collect them?' Terry nodded eagerly, fired vaguely with the feeling that this was something personal, a family thing. 'I wouldn't mind,' he said. 'I wouldn't mind saving them. Some of the

boys saves cards from the Corn Flakes, and things like that. One boy's got some beer mats.'

'Terry,' Miss Grey was suddenly excited and insistent. 'We're a trading family, the Greys. And trade is travel, Terry, very often. Foreign places, strange places. You could collect these labels. There are lots of different ones, with stories of where they're from. Ceylon and India. Russia.' She paused. 'I get a new box every fortnight. When you come, after the football match, you can have the labels.'

Carefully, she peeled the Russian Caravan label from its place and gave it to him. He folded it up, slowly and carefully, and put it neatly into his wallet.

After he'd gone, Miss Grey let her mind run on: Russian Caravan, Gunpowder Green, Formosa Oolong, Earl Grey, Queen Mary, Ceylon Breakfast. A delicate strangeness lay about her mind, the thoughts of the quality grocery between the wars, of the times as a little girl when she'd played in her father's storeroom behind the shop, looking at the labels on the packagings: London, Bristol, Manchester, a strange wide world stretching its beckoning call into the little market town. Phrases and images spun through her mind: of tea merchants in the Strand, established in 1788. Quality grocery: London and Bristol. This was what it meant to Miss Grey to be part of a trading family.

Terry was Denzil's son and had been mentally retarded since an attack of meningitis early in life. His mother had died when he was still in his teens, so that neither Denzil who had the business to run nor Miss Grey, with her prep school, had been able to keep him at home. For over twenty years, he'd been in Margam hospital. It was only recently, with the opening of a residential home for the handicapped in the town, that Terry had come back.

Margam loomed still, in Miss Grey's mind, as something ugly. The residents in the home where Terry was now staying were variously odd, shambling and confused, but the mood was different to Margam. To her, Margam was part of a

harsh and howling urban landscape. Patients had been howling, very often, in Terry's ward, when she and Denzil had driven him back after short stays at home. The place was cramped and understaffed – perhaps it was that; perhaps it was the sheer fact of its urban setting. Cities, in Miss Grey's mental romance of trading forays and travellers' tales, meant India and Ceylon, the Empress Elizabeth linking Russia with the Far East; at the very least, the London and Bristol her father had traded with. But the urban world of Margam, the first-hand contact, was a howling, baying nightmare. There'd been that sad and sour journey across South Wales to take Terry back. And then, quite recently, after Denzil's death a couple of years before, the new home had been opened in Haverfordwest, and Terry had come home.

Terry used to come regularly now, on Saturday afternoons, after his trip to the football match. Regularly, once a fortnight, Miss Grey would peel the label from a small wooden tea box and read him the story before passing on the label for his collection. He must have felt by now the need to reciprocate, for the next Saturday, just before leaving, he passed a small leaflet across to Miss Grey, saying, blushing, 'Got you something.'

She looked. It was a football programme. Haverfordwest versus Ammanford Town. As she gazed in puzzlement, Terry crowded in his clumsy explanations. 'See. It shows you who they was playing.' He blushed. 'I thought you'd like them. Save them up, like.'

Miss Grey could only wonder at the strangeness of the thing. Of course it was nice of the boy, it was kind. So, scrupulously and carefully, she assembled, week by week, her collection of football programmes, read them even, puzzling a little over the names and the jargon. She was touched and pleased by the gesture.

But lurking underneath it was an odd, irrelevant undercurrent of discomfort. In her mind Miss Grey would

roll out lists of names of Oriental teas: Gunpowder Green, Darjeeling, Russian Caravan, Earl Grey – lists replete with a magical aura of distant strangeness. But as she collected her football programmes, another list assembled itself: names of opponents and other towns. Carmarthen Town, Llanelli, Ammanford, Briton Ferry, Swansea City, Port Talbot. This list made Miss Grey unhappy. At first she thought it was simply due to how mundane a list it seemed. And then, shuffling a few programmes casually one Saturday, just after Terry had left, she realised the reason for her unease. Carmarthen, Swansea City, Port Talbot. It was the very road to Margam. She realised herself it was a silly objection, no sort of objection at all. She went on saving the football programmes just the same. And all the time she was fighting down her sense of the drabness of the whole affair.

Unease with Terry's visits to the football ground crept upon her in another way. He was getting used to the team and its players by now, and had for a while enthused about a goalkeeper called Cy Morgan, at first perhaps because, as goalkeeper, Cy wore a differently coloured jersey and was easier to identify. Then, one Saturday, he burst out excitedly.

'Auntie. That Cy Morgan. In goal. He's my cousin. I never knew, till today.'

Miss Grey puzzled. 'Cy Morgan? Oh. Cyril. Good heavens. Does Cyril play football? I hadn't realised. Good heavens, yes. Cyril's father is your mother's brother. I honestly hadn't realised Cyril played football. I'm a little out of touch with that branch of the family.'

Terry pressed on eagerly. 'I never knew, like. Not till today. That bloke told me. Uncle Randall. Bloke that sells the programmes.'

Miss Grey nodded. 'That's right. Your Uncle Randall. He did go to the football club quite a bit. He was quite keen on football, I believe. Dear me. I just hadn't realised.'

Her unease deepened at this piece of news. There was no rancour, no family feud, simply the feeling there'd always

been, among the Greys, that when Denzil had married one of the Morgan girls from Castle Back, he'd rather married beneath him. But Helen Morgan had been loyal and considerate enough, in a rather humdrum and inconspicuous way, and even her brother Randall, known though he was as something of a town loafer, had little that could seriously be levelled against him. Denzil had employed him briefly, as a storeman, and Randall had effectively drifted out of the job rather than actually getting fired. He was a plump, sandy, faded sort of man with sleepy eyes, lounging around town without doing any particular harm. Perhaps Miss Grey just felt that he wasn't ideal as a relative for the Greys, not ideal company for Terry. But there it was. He liked the football matches, and they were probably kind enough to him down there.

Time passed, and Terry seemed to be settling ever more contentedly into the rhythm of his new life at home. The summer brought the football season to an end, but on one occasion Randall Morgan took Terry down to Milford on the bus to see Glamorgan seconds playing cricket, and Terry brought Miss Grey back a programme from that match. It was signed by a couple of Glamorgan players. As the new season got under way, Miss Grey became aware that the Haverfordwest football team were in a different division or something – Terry said they'd been relegated – and the names on the programme now were of more obscure little townships, off the main road to Margam. Names like Abercynon, Blaenavon and Lewistown were hardly exotic, but had at least the neutral virtue of being unknown.

At Christmas approached, Miss Grey felt she'd like to buy Terry something to do with football for a Christmas present. It would be the right thing to do. By now she'd exhausted the range of Oriental tea labels and she felt there was something a shade selfish in expecting the boy to get involved in her own rather esoteric preoccupation. She couldn't buy him an actual ball: he didn't play himself, as far as she knew;

child though he seemed, in many ways, he was a man of over forty, after all. Then she thought of a football scarf, a supporters' scarf. She asked Terry about the colours.

'They're blue, they wear. Blue and white. Only Cy don't, he wears green. He's the goalie.' He blushed with pleasure. Miss Grey nodded. Blue and white. She'd have to see. Terry went on talking excitedly about Cy. 'He done well today. Stopped a penalty. This bloke shot, like, smacked it, and Cy dived right over. Dived across. Knocked it away, like. They won two-nothing, after that.'

Miss Grey had never taken to knitting, although latterly, in her retirement, she'd often wished she had some such attainment as an interest. Somehow though, it had seemed vaguely at odds with her picture of herself: *Headmistress, Miss Grey of Market Street*. So she searched the shops until she did in fact find a blue and white supporters' scarf. She wrapped it carefully and put it away until Christmas time.

On the Saturday afternoon directly before Christmas, Terry was a little late arriving after the football match. When he arrived, a little breathless, he pushed a parcel clumsily wrapped in untied brown paper, into her hands. 'I got you something. A present, like. For Christmas.' It was a wooden box of Russian Caravan tea. Miss Grey was startled. 'Terry. How kind. That really is nice. But it's expensive, dear, very expensive.'

She wondered vaguely how he could have afforded it on the limited pocket money he had at the home. It was only when the man from the social services department called the next day that she found out that Terry had stolen it.

The same man called again, a week later, to explain the transfer. Terry would be going back to Margam, for an indefinite period, but she mustn't distress herself. Perhaps three months, maybe six. They'd have to see how things worked out. No, it wasn't a punishment, exactly. And yes, he did realise that Margam was different from the residential home. Well, that was the point in a way. Less freedom. Well,

yes, that was the point. The need for supervision. You see, the point with fairly easy access to the community was that they had to feel they could trust a patient. Or resident. But the scheme depended on its not being abused. They'd see how he settled down. He should be able to come back. Three months. Six months. She mustn't distress herself.

The following Saturday, at the football ground, Randall Morgan was casting a pale and amiable gaze about him, when he was aware of a quiet voice, and Miss Grey beside him.

'Good afternoon, Randall. Have you a programme you could sell me?'

'Well, by damn. Miss Grey. Long time, no see. Programme? Sure.' She'd always called him 'Randall'; he'd always addressed her as 'Miss Grey'. It was something quite expected and accepted between them. They were left standing side by side for about half an hour, saying little, shuffling uneasily from time to time. Once Randall spoke, to enquire awkwardly after Terry.

'I'm sure he's settling down,' said Miss Grey. 'I'll be writing to him tonight.'

'Send him my regards,' said Randall.

'Surely.'

It was the sort of wet, heavy January day which gets dominated, at football grounds, by the dank smell of mud. Miss Grey, perky still, quite strikingly white-haired, looked cold and out of place, incongruously genteel amidst the confused and sporadic noise of about 150 supporters. She turned to Randall after a while: 'How is Cyril playing, would you say?'

'Boy's doing well. Dominating the box today. Caught everything this side of the six-yard line.'

Miss Grey nodded.

'Where can I find out the result of the match, Randall?'

'Be on the Welsh news, half past six. Or you could phone the clubhouse, like. 3511. They'd tell you.' He gazed in bewilderment at her.

Miss Grey nodded politely and, shortly afterwards, left for home. She listened to the news at six-thirty, to get the result, then settled down to write a letter to Terry. One of the nurses could read it to him, if some of it was a little difficult.

*My dear Terry. I hope you're settling into your new way of life. We all hope, dear, very much, to have you back home soon. I saw your Uncle Randall this afternoon and he sent his regards. The football team played Treharris today and won two-nil. Cyril played a very good game in goal. He was dominating the box, and catching everything this side of the six yard line. I'm sending you a programme for you to look at...*

She would be back there, at the football ground, at every match, till Terry came home.