

SCRIBE

'A madcap, witty delight — it's like Oscar Wilde  
or Noel Coward, but naked.'

TONI JORDAN, AUTHOR OF *DINNER WITH THE SCHNABELS*

# Robert GOTT

# Naked AMBITION

'A wickedly fun comedy full of larger-than-life characters,  
plot twists, and sharp one-liners.'

GRAEME SIMSION, AUTHOR OF *THE ROSIE PROJECT*

The package that emerged from the back of the delivery van was much larger and heavier than Gregory Buchanan was expecting. Well, he knew it was going to be big — this wasn't the first time he'd seen it — but he didn't remember it being *this* big. It was awkward manoeuvring it into the house, with the help of the van driver. Later, of course, its size would prove to be the least awkward thing about it. He thanked the delivery chap and leaned the great object against the wall of the dining room. It was wrapped in protective layers of opaque plastic, which Gregory removed, strip by strip, until the object was revealed. He stepped back from it and worried that his initial response was trepidation. This was quickly suppressed in favour of celebration. Yes, he thought, it's beautiful, and to reassure himself that this was true, he said it out loud.

'It's beautiful.'

When Phoebe saw it, she'd be bowled over. Gregory was confident that she wouldn't just like it; she'd admire it.



When Phoebe first met Gregory, it wasn't love at first sight. An accumulation of sightings led finally to marriage. Phoebe couldn't say for certain that this slow accretion had also led to love. She wasn't sure what love was, or what it might feel like. She had always assumed that one of its hallmarks was constancy, and there was nothing constant about her feelings for Gregory. He was attractive. She liked touching him, and liked being touched by him. There were aspects of Gregory, however, that even after eight years of marriage she found unappealing.

One of Gregory's idiosyncrasies — the one that really got up her nose — was his belief that Phoebe's mother liked him, and that she was a perfectly reasonable woman, if a bit unmoveable on questions of religion. Phoebe's mother, Joyce, was not a reasonable person and she loathed Gregory. His inability to see this made Phoebe wonder sometimes if he wasn't a little bit stupid. It wasn't stupidity, though. She'd come to realise over time what it was. It was vanity. Gregory was constitutionally incapable of grasping the idea that anyone could dislike him. His failure to notice his mother-in-law's disdain was astonishing to Phoebe. She'd grown up in its chilly atmosphere. She'd known from an early age that Joyce's love of Jesus was so exhausting that only unpalatable

scraps of love were available for her, and, she presumed, her father. He'd died when she was just ten years old, and she had no real sense of him. When she thought about him, she wondered if he'd accepted the cancer that killed him as a medical ticket-of-leave. He went swiftly and didn't put up a fight.

Her mother's ministry, as Joyce liked to call it, swept around and over Phoebe, but it was a miasma, not a flood, and it failed to sweep her away. She grew up, therefore, with daily reminders that she was not only a disappointment, but proof that the devil was abroad in the world. Joyce came to accept Phoebe's early-onset atheism as a cross that tested her and secured her own faith. When faced with Phoebe's defiance, she learned to meet it with a dead bat. When truly exasperated, she would say, 'You have been sent to test my endurance, but if He can lead me to it, He can lead me through it.' And so Phoebe's difficult teenage years weren't as explosive as they might otherwise have been. Mother and daughter assumed a sort of *détente*. They were mostly civil to each other. Phoebe moved out of home as soon as she turned eighteen, and Joyce even helped her along with a large gift of money.

'Your father and I put this aside for your eighteenth birthday.'

Phoebe had been unexpectedly touched by this, and she'd hugged her mother. Joyce had been so surprised by this sudden expression of affection that she'd become

rigid. Phoebe later recalled that it was like wrapping her arms round a telephone pole, and it quickly became the subject of an anecdote she called the 'hugging incident'.

In the course of their courtship, Phoebe and Gregory had decided that, on balance, they were sufficiently compatible to risk marriage. The decision to marry puzzled many of their friends, but what these friends didn't know was that Gregory and Phoebe shared a secret conservative bent. It wasn't conservative enough to frighten the horses, but it was definitely there. They lived together for two years before they got married, so it wasn't *that* kind of conservatism. Indeed, it was the decision to live together in a de facto relationship that permanently alienated Joyce from Gregory. Two years of obliging her daughter to live as the Whore of Babylon would require a lifetime of hard penance, and Gregory showed no inclination towards contrition. He was among the damned. Well Phoebe was among the damned too, of course, but Joyce held onto an unexpressed hope that her own fierce faith would go some way towards softening the Lord's treatment of Phoebe on Judgement Day.

Phoebe had a talent for PR and she exercised this talent in an unofficial capacity by overseeing Gregory's move from an Arts degree into the more practical, if drab, world of local politics and then into state politics, where Gregory's election took even him by surprise. She hadn't exactly supervised his campaign, but she'd

double-checked all of his speeches and managed his wardrobe and haircut. He'd wanted to grow a moustache for Movember, and Phoebe reminded him that he'd grown a moustache when they'd first got married and that they'd agreed that he looked like a sex offender and that they'd never revisit the experiment or speak of it again. This became known as the 'moustache incident'.

Gregory worked hard in his first two years in parliament, although he was conscious of the fact that he was too young to be taken seriously. His party was also in opposition, so his profile was low. Nevertheless, with Phoebe at his side, they worked for his electorate assiduously, turning up at every frightful community event to which they were invited. They were an attractive couple, and Phoebe taught Gregory how to lean towards the person who was speaking to him, hold his or her eyes, and create an effective illusion of engaged listening.

'If you simply repeat something they say, they think they've won you over.'

Gregory got so used to doing this that he occasionally fell into doing it at home. Whenever this happened, Phoebe would leave off what she'd been saying, walk into the kitchen and return with a jug of water, which she would empty into Gregory's lap. He was a slow learner, so the lesson didn't take until the third dousing, even though Phoebe had said, 'Every time you do that to me, the water will get hotter.'

An early election was called during Gregory's third

year in parliament, the fixed term of four years having been altered with bipartisan support. Both major parties preferred to re-arm themselves with the weapon of an expedient and sudden election. And not only was Gregory returned to office, though the margin was tight, but he found himself in government, his party having snatched the prize after preferences. He was now seen as someone to watch. He won his seat in the subsequent election too, although with an even tighter margin. Once the business of government was underway, people tended to forget about margins, at least until they were reminded of it at the next election.

So, in the eighth year of their marriage, and in another election year, Gregory had been promoted to the position of minister for transport, which was something of a poisoned chalice. People blamed you for traffic. Still, it was generally agreed that he was doing a good job. And despite the demands of the job, Phoebe and Gregory's partnership was solid.

The first real test of their marriage arose out of the 'portrait incident'.

On the morning the object arrived, they stood in front of where Gregory had hung it on the dining-room wall. He had in mind that this would be its temporary home. Ultimately, it would hang in the living room. Just at the moment the hook in the dining room was the only one able to accommodate its size and weight. Phoebe stared up at it and for far too long failed to say anything.

Eventually, she said, 'You're a politician, a public figure. What on earth were you thinking?'

Gregory had been expecting enthusiasm, and he was, frankly, a little miffed.

'I was thinking that I'd like an honest portrait of myself. What I didn't want was a flattering, obsequious, bland job.'

'Well full marks for honesty, darling, only I don't think you mentioned that you were commissioning a nude portrait.'

'I wanted that to be a surprise.'

'We've been married for eight years. The element of surprise is somewhat muted.'

Gregory stood back from the painting and ran his eyes over it, from top to bottom. Phoebe stepped back to stand beside him.

She said, 'It's much larger than I expected. The scale I mean. Obviously.'

'Portraits have a way of making the familiar unfamiliar, don't you think? She's a great admirer of Sir Joshua Reynolds, and Bronzino. It's sort of an homage to Bronzino's *Portrait of a Young Man*. Sophie talked a lot about Bronzino during our sessions.'

Phoebe turned to Gregory and found him lost in admiration of the painting. She stepped in front of him and stared into his face. He was bewildered by this sudden severing of his connection with the portrait.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'What did you just say?'

‘Bronzino. Sophie admires Bronzino.’

‘I see. And which of those two names do you think I might be interested in knowing about?’

‘Have you heard of Bronzino?’

Phoebe remained calm. She turned, walked to the painting, leaned down to examine the bottom, left corner, and read, ‘Sophie White.’ She smiled at Gregory. ‘Sophie White. I’ve heard the name, but not from you. You didn’t actually mention that you were being painted by a woman.’

‘I’m sure I must have mentioned it.’

‘No, darling, you didn’t. So when you went off to her studio, that’s how each sitting went, with you, stark naked and standing like that.’

Gregory skirted the issue.

‘It mimics the Bronzino pose. Sophie White is an artist, Phoebe. That’s like being a doctor. It’s what she does, all day, every day. She doesn’t see bodies the way civilians do.’

‘Civilians?’

‘Sophie sees non-artists as civilians. She sees a lot of other artists as civilians too. She has high standards.’

‘Oh, well, that’s all right then.’

Gregory, perhaps as proof that his astuteness was unpredictable — or more correctly, unreliable in its application — could not understand his wife’s tepid response.

‘You haven’t actually said what you think about it,’ he said.

