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ROALD DAHL

PARSON’S PLEASURE

MR BOGGIS was driving the car slowly, leaning back comfortably in the seat with one elbow resting or the sill of the open window. How beautifu the countryside, he thought; how pleasant to see a sign or two of summer once again. The primroses especially. And the hawthorn.71e hawthorn was exploding white and pink and red along the hedges and the primroses were growing underneath in little clumps, and it was beautiful.

He took one hand off the wheel and lii himself a cigarette. The best thing now, he told himself, would be to make for the top of Brill Hill. He could see it about half 2 mile ahead. And that must be the village 01 Brill, that cluster of cottages among the tree right on the very summit. Excellent. Not mans of his Sunday sections had a nice elevation like that to work from.

He drove up the bill and stopped the car jusi short of the summit on the outskirts of the village. Then he got out and looked around. Down below, the countryside was spread out before him like a huge green carpet. He could see for miles. It was perfect. He took a pad and pencil from his pocket, leaned against the back of the car, and allowed his practised eye to travel slowly over the landscape.

He could see one medium farmhouse over on the right, back in the fields, with a track leading to it from the road. There was another larger one beyond it. There was a house surrounded by tall elms that looked as though it might be a Queen Anne, and there were two likely farms away over on the left. Five places in all. That was about the lot in this direction.

Mr Boggis drew a rough sketch on his pad showing the position of each so that he’d be able to find them easily when he was down below, then he got back into the car and drove up through the village to the other side of the hill. From there he spotted six more possibles-five farms and one big white Georgian house. He studied the Georgian house through his binoculars. It had a clean prosperous look, and the garden was well ordered. That was a pity. He ruled it out immediately. There was no point in calling on the prosperous.

In this square then, in this section, there were ten possibles in all. Ten was a nice number, Mr Boggis told himself. Just the right amount for a leisurely afternoon’s work. What time was it now? Twelve o’clock. He would have liked a pint of beer in the pub before he started, but on Sundays they didn’t open until one. Very well, he would have it later. He glanced at the notes on his pad. He decided to take the Queen Anne first,

the house with the elms. It had looked nicely dilapidated through the binoculars. The people there could probably d? with some money. He was always lucky With Queen Annes, anyway. Mr Boggis climbed back into the car, released the handbrake, and began cruising slowly down the hill without the engine.

Apart from the fact that he was at this moment disguised in the uniform of a clergyman, there was nothing very sinister about Mr Cyril Boggis. By trade he was a dealer in antique furniture, with his own shop and showroom in the King's Road, Chelsea. His premises were not large, and generally he didn't do a great deal of business, but because he always bought cheap, very very cheap, and sold very very dear, he managed to make quite a tidy little income every year. He was a talented salesman, and when buying or selling a piece he could slide smoothly into whichever mood suited the client best. He could become grave and charming for the aged, obsequious for the rich) sober for the godly, masterful for the weak, mischievous for the widow, arch and saucy for the spinster. He was well aware of his gift, using it shamelessly on every possible occasion; and often, at the end of an unusually good performance, it was as much as he could do to prevent himself from turning aside and taking a bow or two as the thundering applause of the audience went rolling through the theatre.

In spite of this rather clownish quality of his, Mr Boggis was not a fool. In fact, it was said of him by some that he probably knew as much about French, English, and Italian furniture as anyone else in London. He also had surprisingly good taste, and he was quick to recognize and reject an ungraceful design, however genuine the article might be. His real love, naturally, was for the work of the great eighteenth-century English designers, Ince, Mayhew, Chippendale, Robert Adam, Manwaring, Inigo Jones, Hepplewhite, Kent, Johnson, George Smith, Lock, Sheraton, and the rest of them, but even with these he occasionally drew the line. He refused, for example, to allow a single piece from Chippendale's Chinese or Gothic period to come into his showroom, and the same was true of some of the heavier Italian designs of Robert Adam.

During the past few years, Mr Boggis had achieved considerable fame among his friends in the trade by his ability to produce unusual and often quite rare items with astonishing regularity. Apparently the man had a source of supply that was almost inexhaustible, a sort of private warehouse, and it seemed that all he had to do was to drive out to it once a week and help himself. Whenever they asked him where he got the stuff, he would smile knowingly and wink and murmur something about a little secret.

The idea behind Mr Boggis's little secret was a simple one, and it had come to him as a result of something that had happened on a certain Sunday afternoon nearly nine years before, while he was driving in the country.

He had gone out in the morning to visit his old mother, who lived in Sevenoaks, and on

the way back the fanbelt on his car had broken, causing the engine to overheat and the water to boil away. He had got out of the car and walked to the nearest house, a smallish farm building about fifty yards off the road, and had asked the woman who answered the door if he could please have a jug of water.

While he was waiting for her to fetch it, he happened to glance in through the door to the livingroom, and there, not five yards from where he was standing, he spotted something that made him so excited the sweat began to come out all over the top of his head. It was a large oak armchair of a type that he had only seen once before in his life. Each arm, as well as the panel at the back, was supported by a row of eight beautifully turned spindles. The back panel itself was decorated by an inlay of the most delicate floral design, and the head of a duck was carved to lie along half the length of either arm. Good God, he thought. This thing is late fifteenth century!

He poked his head in further through the door, and there, by heavens, was another of them on the other side of the fireplace!

He couldn't be sure, but two chairs like that must be worth at least a thousand pounds up in London. And oh, what beauties they were!

When the woman returned, Mr Boggis introduced himself and straight away asked if she would like to sell her chairs.

Dear me, she said. But why on earth should she want to sell her chairs?

No reason at all, except that he might be willing to give her a pretty nice price.

And how much would he give? They were definitely not for sale, but just out of curiosity, just for fun, you know, how much would he give?

Thirty-five pounds.

How much?

Thirty-five pounds.

Dear me, thirty-five pounds. Well, well, that was very interesting. She'd always thought they were valuable. They were very old. They were very comfortable too. She couldn't possibly do without them, not possibly. No, they were not for sale but thank you very much all the same.

They weren't really so very old, Mr Boggis told her, and they wouldn't be at all easy to sell, but it just happened that he had a client who rather liked that sort of thing. Maybe he could go up another two pounds-call it thirty-seven. How about that?

They bargained for half an hour, and of course in the end Mr Boggis got the chairs and agreed to pay her something less than a twentieth of their value.

That evening, driving back to London in his old station-wagon with the two fabulous chairs tucked away snugly in the back, Mr Boggis had suddenly been struck by what seemed to him to be a most remarkable idea.

Look here, he said. If there is good stuff in one farmhouse, then why not in others? Why shouldn't he search for it? Why shouldn't he comb the countryside? He could do it on Sundays. In that way, it wouldn't interfere with his work at all. He never knew what to do with his Sundays.

So Mr Boggis bought maps, large scale maps of all the counties around London, and with a fine pen he divided each of them up into a series of squares. Each of these squares covered an actual area of five miles by five, which was about as much territory, he estimated, as he could cope with on a single Sunday, were he to comb it thoroughly. He didn't want the towns and the villages. It was the comparatively isolated places, the large farmhouses and the rather dilapidated country mansions, that he was looking for; and in this way, if he did one square each Sunday, fifty-two squares a year, he would gradually cover every farm and every country house in the home counties.

But obviously there was a bit more to it than that. Country folk are a suspicious lot. So are the impoverished rich. You can't go about ringing their bells and expecting them to show you around their houses just for the asking, because they won't do it. That way you would never get beyond the front door. How then was he to gain admittance? Perhaps it would be best if he didn't let them know he was a dealer at all. He could be the telephone man, the plumber, the gas inspector. He could even be a clergyman.

From this point on, the whole scheme began to take on a more practical aspect. Mr Boggis ordered a large quantity of superior cards on which the following legend was engraved: THE REVEREND CYRIL WINNINGTON BOGGIS President of the Society In association with for the Preservation of The Victoria and Rare Furniture Albert Museum.

From now on, every Sunday, he was going to be a nice old parson spending his holiday travelling around on a labour of love for the "Society', compiling an inventory of the treasures that lay hidden in the country homes of England. And who in the world was going to kick him out when they heard that one?

Nobody.

And then, once he was inside, if he happened to spot something he really wanted, well

he knew a hundred different ways of dealing with that.

Rather to Mr Boggis's surprise, the scheme worked. In fact, the friendliness with which he was received in one house after another through the countryside was, in the beginning, quite embarrassing, even to him. A slice of cold pie, a glass of port, a cup of tea, a basket of plums, even a full sit-down Sunday dinner with the family, such things were constantly being pressed upon him. Sooner or later, of course, there had been some bad moments and a number of unpleasant incidents, but then nine years is more than four hundred Sundays, and that adds up to a great quantity of houses visited. All in all, it had been an interesting, exciting, and lucrative business.

And now it was another Sunday and Mr Boggis was operating in the country of Buckinghamshire, in one of the most northerly squares on his map, about ten miles from Oxford, and as he drove down the hill and headed for his first house, the dilapidated Queen Anne, he began to get the feeling that this was going to be one of his lucky days.

He parked the car about a hundred yards from the gates and got out to walk the rest of the way. He never liked people to see his car until after a deal was completed. A dear old clergyman and a large station-wagon somehow never seemed quite right together. Also the short walk gave him time to examine the property closely from the outside and to assume the mood most likely to be suitable for the occasion.

Mr Boggis strode briskly up the drive. He was a small fat-legged man with a belly. The face was round and rosy, quite perfect for the pan, and the two large brown eyes that bulged out at you from this rosy face gave an impression of gentle imbecility. He was dressed in a black suit with the usual parson's dog-collar round his neck, and on his head a soft black hat. He carried an old oak walking-stick which lent him, in his opinion, a rather rustic easy-going air.

He approached the front door and rang the bell. He heard the sound of footsteps in the hall and the door opened and suddenly there stood before him, or rather above him, a gigantic woman dressed in riding-breeches. Even through the smoke of her cigarette he could smell the powerful odour of stables and horse manure that clung about her.

"Yes?" she asked, looking at him suspiciously. "What is it you want?"

Mr Boggis, who half expected her to whinny any moment, raised his hat, made a little bow, and handed her his card. "I do apologize for bothering you," he said, and then he waited, watching her face as she read the message.

"I don't understand," she said, handing back the card. "What is it you want?"

Mr Boggis explained about the Society for the Preservation of Rare Furniture.

“This wouldn’t by any chance be something to do with the Socialist Party?” she asked, staring at him fiercely from under a pair of pale bushy brows.

From then on, it was easy. A Tory in ridingbreeches, male or female, was always a sitting duck for Mr Boggis. He spent two minutes delivering an impassioned eulogy on the extreme Right Wing of the Conservative Party, then two more denouncing the Socialists. As a clincher, he made particular reference to the Bill that the Socialists had once introduced for the abolition of bloodsports in the country, and went on to inform his listener that his idea of heaven-“though you better not tell the bishop, my dear”-was a place where one could hunt the fox, the stag, and the hare with large packs of tireless hounds from morn till night every day of the week, including Sundays.

Watching her as he spoke, he could see the magic beginning to do its work. The woman was grinning now, showing Mr Boggis a set of enormous, slightly yellow teeth. “Madam,” he cried, “I beg of you, please don’t get me started on Socialism.” At that point, she let out a great guffaw of laughter, raised an enormous red hand, and slapped him so hard on the shoulder that he nearly went over.

“Come in!” she shouted. “I don’t know what the hell you want, but come on in!”

Unfortunately, and rather surprisingly, there was nothing of any value in the whole house, and Mr Boggis, who never wasted time on barren territory, soon made his excuses and took his leave. The whole visit had taken less than fifteen minutes, and that, he told himself as he climbed back into his car and started off for the next place, was exactly as it should be.

From now on, it was all farmhouses, and the nearest was about half a mile up the road. It was a large half-timbered brick building of considerable age, and there was a magnificent pear tree still in blossom covering almost the whole of the south wall.

Mr Boggis knocked on the door. He waited, but no one came. He knocked again, but still there was no answer, so he wandered around the back to look for the farmer among the cowsheds. There was no one there either. He guessed that they must all still be in church, so he began peering in the windows to see if he could spot anything interesting. There was nothing in the dining-room. Nothing in the library either. He tried the next window, the living-room, and there, right under his nose, in the little alcove that the window made, he saw a beautiful thing, a semicircular card-table in mahogany, richly veneered, and in the style of Hepplewhite, built around 1780.

“Ah-ha,” he said aloud, pressing his face hard against the glass. “Well done, Boggis.”

But that was not all. There was a chair there as well, a single chair, and if he were not mistaken it was of an even finer quality than the table. Another Hepplewhite, wasn’t

it? And oh, what a beauty! The lattices on the back were finely carved with the honeysuckle, the husk, and the paterae, the caning on the seat was original, the legs were very gracefully turned and the two back ones had that peculiar outward splay that meant so much. It was an exquisite chair. “Before this day is done,” Mr Boggis said softly, “I shall have the pleasure of sitting down upon that lovely seat.” He never bought a chair without doing this. It was a favourite test of his, and it was always an intriguing sight to see him lowering himself delicately into the seat, waiting for the “give’, expertly gauging the precise but infinitesimal degree of shrinkage that the years had caused in the mortice and dovetail joints.

But there was no hurry, he told himself. He would return here later. He had the whole afternoon before him.

The next farm was situated some way back in the fields, and in order to keep his car out of sight, Mr Boggis had to leave it on the road and walk about six hundred yards along a straight track that led directly into the back yard of the farmhouse. This place, he noticed as he approached, was a good deal smaller than the last, and he didn’t hold out much hope for it. It looked rambling and dirty, and some of the sheds were clearly in bad repair.

There were three men standing in a close group in a corner of the yard, and one of them had two large black greyhounds with him, on leashes. When the men caught sight of Mr Boggis walking forward in his black suit and parson’s collar, they stopped talking and seemed suddenly to stiffen and freeze, becoming absolutely still, motionless, three faces turned towards him, watching him suspiciously as he approached.

The oldest of the three was a stumpy man with a wide frog-mouth and small shifty eyes, and although Mr Boggis didn’t know it, his name was Rummins and he was the owner of the farm.

The tall youth beside him, who appeared to have something wrong with one eye, was Bert, the son of Rummins.

The shortish flat-faced man with a narrow corrugated brow and immensely broad shoulders was Claud. Claud had dropped in on Rummins in the hope of getting a piece of pork or ham out of him from the pig that had been killed the day before. Claud knew about the killing-the noise of it had carried far across the fields-and he also knew that a man should have a government permit to do that sort of thing, and that Rummins didn’t have one.

“Good afternoon,” Mr Boggis said. “Isn’t it a lovely day?”

None of the three men moved. At that moment they were all thinking precisely the

same thing that somehow or other this clergyman, who was certainly not the local fellow, had been sent to poke his nose into their business and to report what he found to the government.

“What beautiful dogs,” Mr Boggis said. “I must say I’ve never been greyhound-racing myself, but they tell me it’s a fascinating sport.”

Again the silence, and Mr Boggis glanced quickly from Rummins to Bert, then to Claud, then back again to Rummins, and he noticed that each of them had the same peculiar expression on his face, something between a jeer and a challenge, with a contemptuous curl to the mouth and a sneer around the nose.

“Might I inquire if you are the owner?” Mr Boggis asked, undaunted, addressing himself to Rummins.

“What is it you want?”

“I do apologize for troubling you, especially on a Sunday.”

Mr Boggis offered his card and Rummins took it and held it up close to his face. The other two didn’t move, but their eyes swivelled over to one side, trying to see.

“And what exactly might you be wanting?” Rummins asked.

For the second time that morning, Mr Boggis explained at some length the aims and ideals of the Society for the Preservation of Rare Furniture.

“We don’t have any,” Rummins told him when it was over. “You’re wasting your time.”

“Now, just a minute, sir,” Mr Boggis said, raising a finger. “The last man who said that to me was an old farmer down in Sussex, and when he finally let me into his house, d’you know what I found? A dirty-looking old chair in the corner of the kitchen, and it turned out to be worth four hundred pounds! I showed him how to sell it, and he bought himself a new tractor with the money.”

“What on earth are you talking about?” Claud said. “There ain’t no chair in the world worth four hundred pound.”

“Excuse me,” Mr Boggis answered primly, “but there are plenty of chairs in England worth more than twice that figure. And you know where they are? They’re tucked away in the farms and cottages all over the country, with the owners using them as steps and ladders and standing on them with hobnailed boots to reach a pot of jam out of the top cupboard or to hang a picture. This is the truth I’m telling you, my friends.”

Rummins shifted uneasily on his feet. “You mean to say all you want to do is go inside and stand there in the middle of the room and look around?”

“Exactly,” Mr Boggis said. He was at last beginning to sense what the trouble might be. “I don’t want to pry into your cupboards or into your larder. I just want to look at the furniture to see if you happen to have any treasures here, and then I can write about them in our Society magazine.”

“You know what I think?” Rummins said, fixing him with his small wicked eyes. “I think you’re after buying the sniff yourself. Why else would you be going to all this trouble?”

“Oh, dear me. I only wish I had the money. Of course, if I saw something that I took a great fancy to, and it wasn’t beyond my means, 1 might be tempted to make an offer. But alas, that rarely happens.”

“Well,” Rummins said, “I don’t suppose there’s any harm in your taking a look around if that’s all you want.” He led the way across the yard to the back door of the farmhouse, and Mr Boggis followed him; so did the son Bert, and Claud with his two dogs. They went through the kitchen, where the only furniture was a cheap deal table with a dead chicken lying on it, and they emerged into a fairly large, exceedingly filthy living-room.

And there it was! Mr Boggis saw it at once, and he stopped dead in his tracks and gave a little shrill gasp of shock. Then he stood there for five, ten, fifteen seconds at least, staring like an idiot, unable to believe, not daring to believe what he saw before him. It couldn’t be true, not possibly! But the longer he stared, the more true it began to seem. After all, there it was standing against the wall right in front of him, as real and as solid as the house itself. And who in the world could possibly make a mistake about a thing like that? Admittedly it was painted white, but that made not the slightest difference. Some idiot had done that. The paint could easily be stripped off. But good God! Just look at it! And in a place like this!

At this point, Mr Boggis became aware of the three men, Rummins, Bert, and Claud, standing together in a group over by the fireplace, watching him intently. They had seen him stop and gasp and stare, and they must have seen his face turning red, or maybe it was white, but in any event they had seen enough to spoil the whole goddamn business if he didn’t do something about it quick. In a flash, Mr Boggis clapped one hand over his heart, staggered to the nearest chair, and collapsed into it, breathing heavily.

“What’s the matter with you?” Claud asked.

“It’s nothing,” he gasped. “I’ll be all right in a minute. Please-a glass of water. It’s my

heart.”

Bert fetched him the water, handed it to him, and stayed close beside him, staring down at him with a fatuous leer on his face.

“I thought maybe you were looking at something,” Rummins said. The wide frogmouth widened a fraction further into a crafty grin, showing the stubs of several broken teeth.

“No, no,” Mr Boggis said. “Oh dear me, no. It’s just my heart. I’m so sorry. It happens every now and then. But it goes away quite quickly. I’ll be all right in a couple of minutes.”

He must have time to think, he told himself. More important still, he must have time to compose himself thoroughly before he said another word. Take it gently, Boggis. And whatever you do, keep calm. These people may be ignorant, but they are not stupid. They are suspicious and wary and sly. And if it is really true-no it can’t be, it can’t be true.

He was holding one hand up over his eyes in a gesture of pain, and now, very carefully, secretly, he made a little crack between two of the fingers and peeked through.

Sure enough, the thing was still there, and on this occasion he took a good long look at it. Yes-he had been right the first time! There wasn’t the slightest doubt about it! It was really unbelievable!

What he saw was a piece of furniture that any expert would have given almost anything to acquire. To a layman, it might not have appeared particularly impressive, especially when covered over as it was with dirty white paint, but to Mr Boggis it was a dealer’s dream. He knew, as does every other dealer in Europe and America, that among the most celebrated and coveted examples of eighteenth-century English furniture in existence are the three famous pieces known as “The Chippendale Commodes’. He knew their history backwards that the first was “discovered’ in 1920, in a house at Moreton-inMarsh, and was sold at Sotheby’s the same year; that the other two turned up in the same auction rooms a year later, both coming out of Raynham Hall, Norfolk. They all fetched enormous prices. He couldn’t quite remember the exact figure for the first one, or even the second, but he knew for certain that the last one to be sold had fetched thirty-nine hundred guineas. And that was in 1921! Today the same piece would surely be worth ten thousand pounds. Some man, Mr Boggis couldn’t remember his name, had made a study of these commodes fairly recently and had proved that all three must have come from the same workshop, for the veneers were all from the same log, and the same set of templates had been used in the construction of each. No invoices had been found for any of them, but all the

experts were agreed that these three commodes could have been executed only by Thomas Chippendale himself, with his own hands, at the most exalted period in his career.

And here, Mr Boggis kept telling himself as he peered cautiously through the crack in his fingers, here was the fourth Chippendale Commode! And he had found it! He would be rich! He would also be famous! Each of the other three was known throughout the furniture world by a special name-The Chastleton Commode, The First Raynham Commode, The Second Raynham Commode. This one would go down in history as The Boggis Commode! Just imagine the faces of the boys up there in London when they got a look at it tomorrow morning! And the luscious offers coming in from the big fellows over in the West End -Frank Partridge, Mallet, Jetley, and the rest of them! There would be a picture of it in The Times, and it would say, “The very fine Chippendale Commode which was recently discovered by Mr Cyril Boggis, a London dealer… ” Dear God, what a stir he was going to make!

This one here, Mr Boggis thought, was almost exactly similar to the Second Raynham Commode. (All three, the Chastleton and the two Raynhams, differed from one another in a number of small ways.) It was a most impressive handsome affair, built in the French rococo style of Chippendale’s Directoire period, a kind of large fat chest-of-drawers set upon four carved and fluted legs that raised it about a foot from the ground. There were six drawers in all, two long ones in the middle and two shorter ones on either side. The serpentine front was magnificently ornamented along the top and sides and bottom, and also vertically between each set of drawers, with intricate carvings of festoons and scrolls and clusters. The brass handles, although partly obscured by white paint, appeared to be superb. It was, of course, a rather “heavy’ piece, but the design had been executed with such elegance and grace that the heaviness was in no way offensive.

“How’re you feeling now?” Mr Boggis heard someone saying.

“Thank you, thank you, I’m much better already. It passes quickly. My doctor says it’s nothing to worry about really so long as I rest for a few minutes whenever it happens. Ah yes,” he said, raising himself slowly to his feet. “That’s better. I’m all right now.”

A trifle unsteadily, he began to move around the room examining the furniture, one piece at a time, commenting upon it briefly. He could see at once that apart from the commode it was a very poor lot.

“Nice oak table,” he said. “But I’m afraid it’s not old enough to be of any interest. Good comfortable chairs, but quite modern, yes, quite modern. Now this cupboard, well, it’s rather attractive, but again, not valuable. This chest-of-drawers”-he walked casually past the Chippendale Commode and gave it a little contemptuous flip with his fingers-“worth a few pounds, I dare say, but no more. A rather crude reproduction, I’m

afraid. Probably made in Victorian times. Did you paint it white?”

“Yes,” Runimins said, “Bert did it.”

“A very wise move. It’s considerably less offensive in white.”

“That’s a strong piece of furniture,” Rummins said. “Some nice carving on it too.”

“Machine-carved,” Mr Boggis answered superbly, bending down to examine the exquisite craftsmanship. “You can tell it a mile off. But still, I suppose it’s quite pretty in its way. It has its points.”

He began to saunter off, then he checked himself and turned slowly back again. He placed the tip of one finger against the point of his chin, laid his head over to one side, and frowned as though deep in thought.

“You know what?” he said, looking at the commode, speaking so casually that his voice kept trailing off. “I’ve just remembered…I’ve been wanting a set of legs something like that for a long time. I’ve got a rather curious table in my own little home, one of those low things that people put in front of the sofa, sort of a coffee-table, and last Michaelmas, when I moved house, the foolish movers damaged the legs in the most shocking way. I’m very fond of that table. I always keep my big Bible on it, and all my sermon notes.”

He paused, stroking his chin with the finger. “Now I was just thinking. These legs on your chestof-drawers might be very suitable. Yes, they might indeed. They could easily be cut off and fixed on to my table.”

He looked around and saw the three men standing absolutely still, watching him suspiciously, three pairs of eyes, all different but equally mistrusting, small pig-eyes for Rummins, large slow eyes for Claud, and two odd eyes for Bert, one of them very queer and boiled and misty pale, with a little black dot in the centre, like a fish eye on a plate.

Mr Boggis smiled and shook his head. “Come, come, what on earth am I saying? I’m talking as though I owned the piece myself. I do apologize.”

“What you mean to say is you’d like to buy it,” Rummins said.

“Well… ” Mr Boggis glanced back at the commode, frowning. “I’m not sure. I might and then again…on second thoughts no…I think it might be a bit too much trouble. It’s not worth it. I’d better leave it.”

“How much were you thinking of offering?” Rummins asked.

“Not much, I’m afraid. You see, this is not a genuine antique. It’s merely a reproduction.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Rummins told him. “It’s been in here over twenty years, and before that it was up at the Manor House. I bought it there myself at auction when the old Squire died. You can’t tell me that thing’s new.,, “It’s not exactly new, but it’s certainly not more than about sixty years old.”

“It’s more than that,” Rummins said. “Bert, where’s that bit of paper you once found at the back of one of them drawers? That old bill.”

The boy looked vacantly at his father.

Mr Boggis opened his mouth, then quickly shut it again without uttering a sound. He was beginning literally to shake with excitement, and to calm himself he walked over to the window and stared out at a plump brown hen pecking around for stray grains of corn in the yard.

“It was in the back of that drawer underneath all them rabbit-snares,” Rummins was saying. “Go on and fetch it out and show it to the parson.”

When Bert went forward to the commode, Mr Boggis turned round again. He couldn’t stand not watching him. He saw him pull out one of the big middle drawers, and he noticed the beautiful way in which the drawer slid open. He saw Bert’s hand dipping inside and rummaging around among a lot of wires and strings.

“You mean this?” Bert lifted out a piece of folded yellowing paper and carried it over to the father, who unfolded it and held it up close to his face.

“You can’t tell me this writing ain’t bloody old,” Rummins said, and he held the paper out to Mr Boggis, whose whole arm was shaking as he took it. It was brittle and it cracked slightly between his fingers. The writing was in a long sloping copperplate hand: Edward Montagu, Esq. Dr To Thos. Chippendale A large mahogany Commode Table of exceeding fine wood, very rich carvd, set upon fluted legs, two very neat shaped long drawers in the middle part and two ditto on each side, with rich chasd Brass Handles and Ornaments, the whole completely finished in the most exquisite taste £87 Mr Boggis was holding on to himself tight and fighting to suppress the excitement that was spinning round inside him and making him dizzy. Oh God, it was wonderful! With the invoice, the value had climbed even higher. What in heaven’s name would it fetch now? Twelve thousand pounds? Fourteen? Maybe fifteen or even twenty? Who knows?

Oh, boy!

He tossed the paper contemptuously on to the table and said quietly, “It’s exactly what I told you, a Victorian reproduction. This is simply the invoice that the seller the man who made it and passed it off as an antique-gave to his client. I’ve seen lots of them. You’ll notice that he doesn’t say he made it himself. That would give the game away.”

“Say what you like,” Rummins announced, “but that’s an old piece of paper.”

“Of course it is, my dear friend. It’s Victorian, late Victorian. About eighteen ninety. Sixty or seventy years old. I’ve seen hundreds of them. That was a time when masses of cabinet-makers did nothing else but apply themselves to faking the fine furniture of the century before.”

“Listen, Parson,” Rummins said, pointing at him with a thick dirty finger, “I’m not saying as how you may not know a fair bit about this furniture business, but what I am saying is this: How on earth can you be so mighty sure it’s a fake when you haven’t even seen what it looks like underneath all that paint?”

“Come here,” Mr Boggis said. “Come over here and I’ll show you.” He stood beside the commode and waited for them to gather round. “Now, anyone got a knife?”

Claud produced a horn-handled pocket knife, and Mr Boggis took it and opened the smallest blade. Then, working with apparent casualness but actually with extreme care, he began chipping off the white paint from a small area on the top of the commode. The paint flaked away cleanly from the old hard varnish underneath, and when he had cleared away about three square inches, he stepped back and said, “Now, take a look at that!”

It was beautiful-a warm little patch of mahogany, glowing like a topaz, rich and dark with the true colour of its two hundred years.

“What’s wrong with it?” Rummins asked.

“It’s processed! Anyone can see that!”

“How can you see it, Mister? You tell us.”

“Well, I must say that’s a trifle difficult to explain. It’s chiefly a matter of experience. My experience tells me that without the slightest doubt this wood has been processed with lime. That’s what they use for mahogany, to give it that dark aged colour. For oak, they use potash salts, and for walnut it’s nitric acid, but for mahogany it’s always lime.”

The three men moved a little closer to peer at the wood. There was a slight stirring of

interest among them now. It was always intriguing to hear about some new form of crookery or deception.

“Look closely at the grain. You see that touch of orange in among the dark red-brown. That’s the sign of lime.”

They leaned forward, their noses close to the wood, first Rummins, then Claud, then Ben.

“And then there’s the patina,” Mr Boggis continued.

“The what?”

He explained to them the meaning of this word as applied to furniture.

“My dear friends, you’ve no idea the trouble these rascals will go to to imitate the hard beautiful bronze-like appearance of genuine patina. It’s terrible, really terrible, and it makes me quite sick to speak of it!” He was spitting each word sharply off the tip of the tongue and making a sour mouth to show his extreme distaste. The men waited, hoping for more secrets.

“The time and trouble that some mortals will go to in order to deceive the innocent!” Mr Boggis cried. “It’s perfectly disgusting! D’you know what they did here, my friends? I can recognize it clearly. I can almost see them doing it, the long, complicated ritual of rubbing the wood with linseed oil, coating it over with french polish that has been cunningly coloured, brushing it down with pumice-stone and oil, bees-waxing it with a wax that contains dirt and dust, and finally giving it the heat treatment to crack the polish so that it looks like twohundred-year-old varnish! It really upsets me to contemplate such knavery!”

The three men continued to gaze at the little patch of dark wood.

“Feel it!” Mr Boggis ordered. “Put your fingers on it! There, how does it feel, warm or cold?”

“Feels cold,” Rummins said.

“Exactly, my friend! It happens to be a fact that faked patina is always cold to the touch. Real patina has a curiously warm feel to it.”

“This feels normal,” Rummins said, ready to argue.

“No, sir, it’s cold. But of course it takes an experienced and sensitive finger-tip to pass a positive judgement. You couldn’t really be expected to judge this any more than I

could be expected to judge the quality of your barley. Everything in life, my dear sir, is experience."

The men were staring at this queer moonfaced clergyman with the bulging eyes, not quite so suspiciously now because he did seem to know a bit about his subject. But they were still a long way from trusting him.

Mr Boggis bent down and pointed to one of the metal drawer-handles on the commode. "This is another place where the fakers go to work," he said. "Old brass normally has a colour and character all of its own. Did you know that?"

They stared at him, hoping for still more secrets.

"But the trouble is that they've become exceedingly skilled at matching it. In fact it's almost impossible to tell the difference between "genuine old' and "faked old'. I don't mind admitting that it has me guessing. So there's not really any point in our scraping the paint off these handles. We wouldn't be any the wiser."

"How can you possibly make new brass look like old?" Claud said. "Brass doesn't rust, you know."

"You are quite right, my friend. But these scoundrels have their own secret methods."

"Such as what?" Claud asked. Any information of this nature was valuable, in his opinion. One never knew when it might come in handy.

"All they have to do," Mr Boggis said, "is to place these handles overnight in a box of mahogany shavings saturated in sal ammoniac. The sal ammoniac turns the metal green, but if you rub off the green, you will find underneath it a fine soft silvery-warm lustre, a lustre identical to that which comes with very old brass. Oh, it is so bestial, the things they do! With iron they have another trick."

"What do they do with iron?" Claud asked, fascinated.

"Iron's easy," Mr Boggis said. "Iron locks and plates and hinges are simply buried in common salt and they come out all rusted and pitted in no time."

"All right," Rummins said. "So you admit you can't tell about the handles. For all you know, they may be hundreds and hundreds of years old. Correct?"

"Ah," Mr Boggis whispered, fixing Rummins with two big bulging brown eyes. "That's where you're wrong. Watch this."

From his jacket pocket, he took out a small screwdriver. At the same time, although

none of them saw him do it, he also took out a little brass screw which he kept well hidden in the palm of his hand. Then he selected one of the screws in the commode-there were four to each handle-and began carefully scraping all traces of white paint from its head. When he had done this, he started slowly to unscrew it.

“If this is a genuine old brass screw from the eighteenth century,” he was saying, “the spiral will be slightly uneven and you’ll be able to see quite easily that it has been hand-cut with a file. But if this brasswork is faked from more recent times, Victorian or later, then obviously the screw will be of the same period. It will be a mass-produced, machine-made article. Anyone can recognize a machine-made screw. Well, we shall see.”

It was not difficult, as he put his hands over the old screw and drew it out, for Mr Boggis to substitute the new one hidden in his palm. This was another little trick of his, and through the years it had proved a most rewarding one. The pockets of his clergyman’s jacket were always stocked with a quantity of cheap brass screws of various sizes.

“There you are,” he said, handing the modem screw to Rummins. “Take a look at that. Notice the exact evenness of the spiral? See it? Of course you do. It’s just a cheap common little screw you yourself could buy today in any ironmonger’s in the country.”

The screw was handed round from the one to the other, each examining it carefully. Even Rummins was impressed now.

Mr Boggis put the screwdriver back in his pocket together with the fine hand-cut screw that he’d taken from the commode, and then he turned and walked slowly past the three men towards the door.

“My dear friends,” he said, pausing at the entrance to the kitchen, “it was so good of you to let me peep inside your little home-so kind. I do hope I haven’t been a terrible old bore.”

Rummins glanced up from examining the screw. “You didn’t tell us what you were going to offer,” he said.

“Ah,” Mr Boggis said. “That’s quite right. I didn’t, did I? Well, to tell you the honest truth, I think it’s all a bit too much trouble. I think I’ll leave it.”

“How much would you give?”

“You mean that you really wish to part with it?”

“I didn’t say I wished to part with it. I asked you how much.”

Mr Boggis looked across at the commode, and he laid his head first to one side, then to the other, and he frowned, and pushed out his lips, and shrugged his shoulders, and gave a little scornful wave of the hand as though to say the thing was hardly worth thinking about really, was it?

“Shall we say…ten pounds. I think that Would be fair.”

“Ten pounds!” Rummins cried. “Don’t be so ridiculous, Parson, please!”

“It’s worth more’n that for firewood!” Claud said, disgusted.

“Look here at the bill!” Rummins went on, stabbing that precious document so fiercely with his dirty fore-finger that Mr Boggis became alarmed. “It tells you exactly what it cost! Eightyseven pounds! And that’s when it was new. Now it’s antique it’s worth double!”

“If you’ll pardon me, no, sir, it’s not. It’s a second-hand reproduction. But I’ll tell you what, my friend-I’m being rather reckless, I can’t help it-I’ll go up as high as fifteen pounds. How’s that?”

“Make it fifty,” Rummins said.

A delicious little quiver like needles ran all the way down the back of Mr Boggis’s legs and then under the soles of his feet. He had it now. It was his. No question about that. But the habit of buying cheap, as cheap as it was humanly possible to buy, acquired by years of necessity and practice, was too strong in him now to permit him to give in so easily.

“My dear man,” he whispered softly, “I only want the legs. Possibly I could find some use for the drawers later on, but the rest of it, the carcass itself, as your friend so rightly said; it’s firewood, that’s all.”

“Make it thirty-five,” Rummins said.

“I couldn’t sir, I couldn’t! It’s not worth it. And I simply mustn’t allow myself to haggle like this about a price. It’s all wrong. I’ll make you one final offer, and then I must go. Twenty pounds.”

“I’ll take it,” Rummins snapped. “It’s yours.”

“Oh dear,” Mr Boggis said, clasping his hands. “There I go again. I should never have started this in the first place.”

“You can’t back out now, Parson. A deal’s a deal.”

“Yes, yes, I know.”

“How’re you going to take it?”

“Well, let me see. Perhaps if I were to drive my car up into the yard, you gentlemen would be kind enough to help me load it?”

“In a car? This thing’ll never go in a car! You’ll need a truck for this!”

“I don’t think so. Anyway, we’ll see. My car’s on the road. I’ll be back in a jiffy. We’ll manage it somehow, I’m sure.”

Mr Boggis walked out into the yard and through the gate and then down the long track that led across the field towards the road. He found himself giggling quite uncontrollably, and there was a feeling inside him as though hundreds and hundreds of tiny bubbles were rising up from his stomach and bursting merrily in the top of his head, like sparkling-water. All the buttercups in the field were suddenly turning into golden sovereigns, glistening in the sunlight. The ground was littered with them, and he swung off the track on to the grass so that he could walk among them and tread on them and hear the little metallic tinkle they made as he kicked them around with his toes. He was finding it difficult to stop himself from breaking into a run. But clergymen never run; they walk Slowly. Walk slowly, Boggis. Keep calm, Boggis.

There’s no hurry now. The commode is yours! Yours for twenty pounds, and it’s worth fifteen or twenty thousand! The Boggis Commode! In ten minutes it’ll be loaded into your car-it’ll go in easily and you’ll be driving back to London and singing all the way! Mr Boggis driving the Boggis Commode home in the Boggis car. Historic occasion. What wouldn’t a newspaperman give to get a picture of that! Should he arrange it? Perhaps he should. Wait and see. Oh, glorious day! Oh, lovely sunny summer day! Oh, glory be!

Back in the farmhouse, Rummins was saying, “Fancy that old bastard giving twenty pound for a load of junk like this.”

“You did very nicely, Mr Rummins,” Claud told him. “You think he’ll pay you?”

“We don’t put it in the car till he do.”

“And what if it won’t go in the car?” Claud asked. “You know what I think, Mr Rummins? You want my honest opinion? I think the bloody thing’s too big to go in the car. And then what happens? Then he’s going to say to hell with it and just drive off without it and you’ll never see him again. Nor the money either. He didn’t seem all

that keen on having it, you know."

Rummins paused to consider this new and rather alarming prospect.

"How can a thing like that possibly go in a car?" Claud went on relentlessly. "A parson never has a big car anyway. You ever seen a parson with a big car, Mr Rummins?"

"Can't say I have."

"Exactly! Arid now listen to me. I've got an idea. He told us, didn't he, that it was only the legs he was wanting. Right? So all we've got to do is to cut "em off quick right here on the spot before he comes back, then it'll be sure to go in the car. All we're doing is saving him the trouble of cutting them off himself when he gets home. How about it, Mr Rummins?" Claud's flat bovine face glimmered with a mawkish pride.

"It's not such a bad idea at that," Rummins said, looking at the commode. "In fact it's a bloody good idea. Come on then, we'll have to hurry. You and Bert carry it out into the yard. I'll get the saw. Take the drawers out first."

Within a couple of minutes, Claud and Ben had carried the commode outside and had laid it upside down in the yard amidst the chicken droppings and cow dung and mud. In the distance, half-way across the field, they could see a small black figure striding along the path towards the road. They paused to watch. There was something rather comical about the way in which this figure was conducting itself. Every now and again it would break into a trot, then it did a kind of hop, skip, and jump, and once it seemed as though the sound of a cheerful song came rippling faintly to them from across the meadow.

"I reckon he's barmy," Claud said, and Bert grinned darkly, rolling his misty eye slowly round in its socket.

Rummins came waddling over from the shed, squat and froglike, carrying a long saw. Claud took the saw away from him and went to work.

"Cut "em close," Rummins said. "Don't forget he's going to use "em on another table."

The mahogany was hard and very dry, and as Claud worked, a fine red dust sprayed out from the edge of the saw and fell softly to the ground. One by one, the legs came off, and when they were all severed, Bert stooped down and arranged them carefully in a row.

Claud stepped back to survey the results of his labour. There was a longish pause.

"Just let me ask you one question, Mr Rummins," he said slowly. "Even now, could you

put that enormous thing into the back of a car?”

“Not unless it was a van.”

“Correct!” Claud cried. “And parsons don’t have vans, you know. All they’ve got usually is piddling little Morris Eights or Austin Sevens.”

“The legs is all he wants,” Rummins said. “If the rest of it won’t go in, then he can leave it. He can’t complain. He’s got the legs.”

“Now you know better’n that, Mr Rummins,” Claud said patiently. “You know damn well he’s going to start knocking the price if he don’t get every single bit of this into the car. A parson’s just as cunning as the rest of “em when it comes to money, don’t you make any mistake about that. Especially this old boy. So why don’t we give him his firewood now and be done with it. Where d’you keep the axe?”

“I reckon that’s fair enough,” Rummins said. “Ben, go fetch the axe.”

Bert went into the shed and fetched a tall woodcutter’s axe and gave it to Claud. Claud spat on the palms of his hands and rubbed them together. Then, with a long-armed high-swinging action, he began fiercely attacking the legless carcass of the commode.

It was hard work, and it took several minutes before he had the whole thing more or less smashed to pieces.

“I’ll tell you one thing,” he said, straightening up, wiping his brow. “That was a bloody good carpenter put this job together and I don’t care what the parson says.”

“We’re just in time!” Rummins called out. “Here he comes!”