

The Vicar's Pleasure

Mr Boggis was driving the car slowly, leaning back comfortably in the seat with one elbow resting on the open window. How beautiful the countryside is, he thought, how pleasant to see signs of summer again.

He took one hand off the wheel and lit a cigarette. The best thing now, he told himself, would be to drive to the top of the hill. He could see it about a kilometre ahead. And that must be the village at the top of it.

He drove up the hill and stopped the car just before the top of the hill on the outskirts of the village. Then he got out and looked round. Down below, the countryside was spread out in front of him like a green carpet. Perfect. He took a notebook and pencil from his pocket, leaned against the car and allowed his eyes to travel slowly over the landscape.

He could see one medium-sized farmhouse over on the right. There was another larger one beyond it. There was a house surrounded by tall trees that looked rather old, and there were two possible farms away on the left. Five places in all.

Mr Boggis drew a quick sketch in his book 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 saw six more possibles – five farms and a big white eighteenth-century house. He studied the house carefully. It looked very grand. That was a pity. He excluded it immediately. There was no point in visiting the rich.

In this area then, there were ten possibles in all. Ten was a nice number, Mr Boggis told himself. Just the right amount for a relaxing afternoon's work. He decided to take the old house with

the trees first. It looked dilapidated. The people there probably needed some money. Mr Boggis got back into the car and began driving slowly down the hill.

Apart from the fact that he was at this moment disguised as a vicar, there was nothing very strange about Mr Cyril Boggis. By trade he was a dealer in antique furniture, with his own shop in London. The shop wasn't large, and generally he didn't do a lot of business, but because he always bought cheap, very cheap, and sold at very, very high prices, he managed to make quite a good profit every year. It was said of him by some people 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 piece might be. His real love was for the work of the great eighteenth-century designers, Chippendale, Robert Adam, Inigo Jones, Hepplewhite, Sheraton and the rest of them.

During the past few years, Mr Boggis had achieved great fame among his friends in the trade by his ability to find unusual and often rare items with amazing regularity. Apparently this man had a source of supply that was never-ending. It seemed that he only had to drive out to it once a week and take what he wanted. Whenever they asked him where he got the things, he would smile and say 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 one 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 and on the way back, in the countryside, his car had broken down, causing the engine to get too hot and the water to boil away. He had got out of the car and walked to the nearest house, a small farm building about fifty metres off the road, and had asked the woman who answered the door if he could have a jug of water.

While he was waiting for her to fetch it, he had glanced in through the door to the living room and seen, not five metres away, something that made him so excited that sweat began to pour down his face. It was a large armchair of a type that he had only seen once before in his life. Each arm of the chair was beautiful and delicate and the back of the chair was decorated with flowers made of wood. The top of each arm was made to look like the head of a duck. Good God, he thought. This chair is late fifteenth century!

He looked further through the door and there was another of them on the other side of the fireplace!

He couldn't be sure, but two chairs like that must be worth thousands of pounds up in London. And how beautiful they were!

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

Why would she want to sell her chairs? she asked.

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

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

Thirty-five pounds.

How much?

Thirty-five pounds.

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

They weren't really very old, Mr Boggis told her, and they wouldn't be easy to sell, but he did have 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 car with the two wonderful chairs in the back, Mr Boggis suddenly had the most brilliant idea.

If there is good furniture in one farmhouse, he said to himself, then why not in others? Why shouldn't he search for it? He could do it on Sundays. In that way, it wouldn't interrupt his work at all. He never knew how to spend his Sundays.

So Mr Boggis bought maps of all the countryside around London, and with a pen he divided each of them up into a series of squares. Each of these squares covered an actual area of ten kilometres by ten, which was about as much territory as he could cope with on a single Sunday. He didn't want the towns and villages. It was the isolated places, the large farmhouses and the old country houses, that he was looking for; and in this way, if he did one square each Sunday, he would gradually visit every farm and every country house around London.

But obviously there was another problem. Country folk are full of suspicion. You can't ring their bells and expect them to show you around their houses, because they won't do it. That way you would never get inside the house. 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 repair man, the gas inspector. He could even be a vicar...

From this point, the whole plan began to become more practical. Mr Boggis ordered a large quantity of cards on which the following was printed:

THE REVEREND
CYRIL WINNINGTON BOGGIS

President of the Society
for the Preservation of
Rare Furniture

Every Sunday, he was going to be a nice old vicar spending his

holiday travelling around for the 'Society', making a list of the antique furniture that lay hidden in the country homes of England. And who was going to throw him out when they heard that?

Nobody.

And then, when he was inside, if he saw something he really wanted, well - he knew a hundred different ways of dealing with that.

To Mr Boggis's surprise, the scheme worked. In fact, the warmth with which he was received in one house after another was, in the beginning, quite embarrassing, even to him. Sooner or later there had, of course, been some unpleasant incidents, but nine years is more than four hundred Sundays and all that adds up to a lot of houses visited.

Mr Boggis continued to drive, and now it was all farmhouses. The nearest was about a kilometre up the road, set 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 metres along a track that led directly into the back yard of the farmhouse. He always parked his large car away from the house he was visiting. He never liked people to see his car until after the deal was completed. A dear old vicar and a large, modern car somehow never seemed quite right together. Also the short walk gave him the opportunity to examine the property closely from the outside. This place, he noticed as he approached, was small and dirty and some of the farm buildings were in a very bad state.

There were three men standing in a close group in a corner of the yard. When these men saw Mr Boggis walking forward in his black suit and vicar's collar, they stopped talking and became absolutely still, three faces turned towards him, watching him with suspicion as he approached.

The oldest of the three was Rummins and he was the owner of the farm.

The tall youth beside him was Bert, Rummins's son.

The short flat-faced man with broad shoulders was Claud.

'Good afternoon,' Mr Boggis said. 'Isn't it a lovely day?'

None of the three men moved. At that moment they were all thinking the same thing – that somehow this vicar, who was certainly not the local fellow, had been sent to look into their business and to report what he found to the government.

'May I ask if you are the owner?' Mr Boggis asked, addressing himself to Rummins.

'What is it you want?'

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

Mr Boggis handed his card and Rummins took it and held it up close to his face.

'And what exactly do you want?'

Mr Boggis explained the aims and ideals of the Society for the Preservation of Rare Furniture.

'We don't have any,' Rummins told him when he had finished.

'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 in Sussex, and when he finally let me into his house, do you know what I found? A dirty-looking old chair in the corner of the kitchen, and it was worth *four hundred pounds*! I showed him how to sell it and he bought himself a new tractor with the money.'

'What are you talking about?' Claud said. 'There's no chair in the world worth four hundred pounds.'

Rummins shifted from one foot to the other. 'Do you mean that you just want to go inside and stand in the middle of the room and look round?'

'Exactly,' Mr Boggis said. 'I just want to look at the furniture to see if you have anything special here, and then I can write about it in our Society magazine.'

'You know what I think?' Rummins said. 'I think you want to buy the stuff yourself. Why else would you take all this trouble?'

'Oh, I only wish I had the money. Of course, if I saw something I liked, and if I could afford it, I might be tempted to make an offer. But, sadly, that rarely happens.'

'Well,' Rummins said, 'I don't suppose there's any harm in you taking a look if that's all you want.'

He led the way to the back door of the farmhouse, and Mr Boggis followed him; so did the son, Bert, and Claud. They went through the kitchen, where the only furniture was a cheap table with a dead chicken lying on it, and they entered a fairly large, extremely dirty living room.

And there it was! Mr Boggis saw it immediately, and he stopped and gave a little cry of shock. Then he stood there for five, ten, fifteen seconds at least, staring like a fool, 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. There it was standing against the wall right in front of him, as real and as solid as the house itself. And who could possibly make a mistake about a thing like that? Yes, it was painted white, but that didn't make the slightest difference. Some fool had done that. The paint could be removed. But good God! Just look at it! And in a place like this!

At this point, Mr Boggis became aware of the three men standing together in a group watching him carefully. They had seen him stop and stare and they must have seen his face turning red, or maybe it was white, but anyway they had seen enough to spoil the whole business if he didn't do something about it quickly. Mr Boggis put one hand over his heart, fell into the nearest chair and breathed heavily.

'What's the matter with you?' Claud asked.

'It's nothing. 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.

'I thought maybe you were looking at something,' Rummins said.

'No, no,' Mr Boggis said. 'Oh, no. It's just my heart. It happens every now and again 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 importantly, he must have time to calm down before he said another word. Go slowly, Boggis. And whatever you do, keep calm. These people may be uneducated, but they are not stupid. And if it is really true – no it *can't* be, it *can't* be true ...

He was holding one hand over his eyes in a gesture of pain and now, very carefully, he looked through two of his fingers.

The thing was still there. Yes – he had been right the first time! There wasn't the slightest doubt. It was really unbelievable!

What he saw was a piece of furniture that any expert would have given almost anything to have; it was a dealer's dream. Among the most important examples of eighteenth-century English furniture are the three famous pieces known as 'The Chippendale Commodes' and 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. This one would be called 'The Boggis Commode! Just imagine the faces of the dealers in London when they saw it tomorrow morning! There would be a picture of it in the newspapers, and it would say, 'The very fine Chippendale Commode which was recently discovered by Mr Cyril Boggis, a London dealer ...' What excitement he was going to cause!

This commode was a most impressive, handsome piece, made in the French style with four elegant legs that raised it about thirty centimetres from the ground. There were six drawers: two long ones in the middle and two shorter ones on each side. The front was beautifully decorated along the top and sides and bottom. The handles, although they were covered with white

paint, appeared to be excellent. It was, of course, a rather 'heavy' piece of furniture, but it had been made with such elegant grace that the heaviness was not apparent. It was wonderfully beautiful.

'How are you feeling now?' Mr Boggis heard someone saying.

'Thank you. I'm much better already. It passes quickly. Ah yes.

That's better. I'm all right now.'

A little unsteadily, he began to move around the room examining the furniture, one piece at a time, commenting on it briefly. He could see that there was nothing of value apart from the commode.

'A nice table,' he said. 'But it's not old enough to be of much interest. Good comfortable chairs, but quite modern, yes, quite modern. Now this commode' – he walked past and touched it with his fingers – 'worth a few pounds, I'd say, but no more. A rather ugly copy, I'm afraid. Probably nineteenth century. Did you paint it white?'

'Yes,' Rummins said, 'Bert did it.'

'Very wise. It's less ugly in white.'

'That's a strong piece of furniture,' Rummins said. 'Well made, too.'

'Machine-made,' Mr Boggis answered quickly, examining the fine work. He began to walk away but then turned slowly back again. He placed one finger against his chin, laid his head over to one side and appeared deep in thought.

'You know what?' he said, looking at the commode. 'I've just remembered ... I've been wanting a set of legs like those for a long time. I've got an unusual little table in my own home, one of those low ones people put in front of the sofa and last year, when I moved house, the foolish removal men damaged the legs in the most shocking way. I'm very fond of that table. I always keep my books on it. Now I was just thinking. The legs on this commode might be very suitable. Yes, 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 with suspicion, three pairs of eyes, all different but all mistrusting.

Mr Boggis smiled and shook his head. 'But what am I saying? I'm talking as if 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. 'I'm not sure. I might ... but 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 just a copy.'

'I'm not so sure about that,' Rummins said. 'It's been in *here* over twenty years. It was old *then*. 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 those drawers? That old bill.'

Mr Boggis opened his mouth, and then quickly shut it again without making a sound. He was beginning to shake with excitement.

When Bert went forward to the commode and pulled out one of the big middle drawers, Mr Boggis noticed the beautiful way in which the drawer slid open. He saw Bert's hand go inside the drawer among a lot of wires and strings. 'You mean this?' Bert lifted out a piece of folded, yellow paper.

'You can't tell me this writing isn't old,' Rummins said, holding the paper out to Mr Boggis, whose arm was shaking as he took it. It said:

Edward Montagu to Thomas Chippendale
A large commode of extremely fine wood,
two very neat long drawers in the middle
part and two more on each side with handles
and decoration, all finished to the highest
standard £87

Mr Boggis was fighting to hide the excitement that was making him feel light-headed. Oh God, it was wonderful! With the original bill, the value had climbed even higher. What would it be now? Twelve thousand pounds? Fourteen? Maybe fifteen or twenty? Who knows?

He threw the paper on the table. 'It's exactly what I told you. A copy. This is simply the bill that the seller – the man who made it and pretended it was an antique – gave to his client. I've seen lots of them.'

'Listen, Reverend,' Rummins said, pointing at him with a thick dirty finger, 'I'm not saying you don't know much about this furniture business, but how can you be so sure it's false when you haven't seen what it looks like under all that paint?'

'Come here,' Mr Boggis said. 'Come over here and I'll show you. Has anyone got a knife?'

Claud gave him a pocket knife and Mr Boggis took it and opened the smallest blade. He scratched off, with extreme care, a small area of white paint from the top of the commode, revealing the old hard wood underneath. He stepped back and said, 'Now, take a look at that!'

It was beautiful – a warm patch of old wood, rich and dark with the true colour of its two hundred years.

'What's wrong with it?' Rummins asked.

'It's been made to look old! Anyone can see that!'

'How can you see that? You tell us.'

'Well, it's difficult to explain. It's a matter of experience. My

experience tells me that without the slightest doubt this wood isn't really old.'

The three men moved a little closer to look at the wood. There was an atmosphere of interest now. They were always interested in hearing about new tricks.

'Look closely at the wood. You see that orange colour among the dark red-brown? That shows that it's been made to look older.'

They leaned forward, their noses close to the wood, first Rummins, then Claud, then Bert. The three men continued to stare at the little patch of dark wood.

'Feel it!' Mr Boggis ordered. 'Put your fingers on it! How does it feel, warm or cold?'

'Feels cold,' Rummins said.

'Exactly, my friend! Really old wood has a strangely 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 fingertip to be positive. Everything in life, my dear sir, is experience. Watch this.'

From his jacket pocket, Mr Boggis took out a small screwdriver. At the same time, although none of them saw him do it, he also took out a modern little screw which he kept well hidden in his hand. Then he selected one of the screws in the commode – there were four in each handle – and began removing all traces of white paint from its head. When he had done this, he started slowly to unscrew it.

'If this is a genuine eighteenth-century screw,' he was saying, 'it will be irregular and you'll be able to see that it has been hand-cut. But if this is nineteenth-century or later, it will be a mass-produced, machine-made article. We shall see.'

It was not difficult, as he put his hands over the old screw and pulled it out, for Mr Boggis to exchange it for the new one

hidden in his hand. This was another little trick of his, and through the years it had proved a most rewarding one. The pockets of his vicar's jacket always contained a quantity of cheap modern screws of various sizes.

'There you are,' he said, handing the modern screw to Rummins. 'Take a look at that. Notice how regular it is? Of course you do. It's just a cheap little screw you yourself could buy today in any shop in the country. My dear friends,' said Mr Boggis, walking towards the door, 'it was so good of you to let me look 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 truth, I think it's a bit too much trouble. I think I'll leave it.'

'How much would you give?'

'Shall we say . . . ten pounds. I think that would be fair.'

'Ten pounds!' Rummins cried. 'Don't be ridiculous, Reverend, please!'

'It's worth more than that for firewood!' Claud said.

'All right, my friend – I'll go up as high as fifteen pounds.

How's that?'

'Make it fifty,' Rummins said.

A delicious thrill ran all the way down the back of Mr Boggis's legs and then under the bottom of his feet. He had it now. It was his. No question about that. But the habit of buying cheap, as cheaply as possible, 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, as your friend rightly said, is 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 musn't allow myself to argue 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 answered. 'It's yours.'

'Oh dear,' Mr Boggis said. 'I speak before I think. I should never have started this.'

'You can't change your mind now, Vicar. A deal's a deal.'

'Yes, yes, I know.'

'How are you going to take it?'

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

'In a car? This thing will 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 few minutes. 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 laughing uncontrollably, and there was a feeling inside him as if hundreds of tiny bubbles were rising up from his stomach and bursting in the top of his head. He was finding it difficult to stop himself from running. But vicars 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!

Back in the farmhouse, Rummins was saying, 'Imagine that old fool giving twenty pounds for a load of old rubbish like this.'

'You did very nicely, Mr Rummins,' Claud told him. 'Do you think he'll pay you?'

'We won't put it in the car till he does.'

'And what will happen if it won't go in the car?' Claud asked.

'You know what I think, Mr Rummins? I think the thing's too big to go in the car. Then he's going to drive off without it and you'll never see him again. Nor the money. He didn't seem very keen on having it, you know.'

Rummins paused to consider this new idea.

Claud went on, 'A vicar never has a big car anyway. Have you ever seen a vicar with a big car, Mr Rummins?'

'I can't say I have.'

'Exactly! And now listen to me. I've got an idea. He told us that it was only the legs he wanted. Right? So if we cut them off quickly right here before he comes back, it will certainly 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?'

'It's not such a bad idea,' Rummins said, looking at the commode. 'Come on then, we'll have to hurry. You and Bert carry it out into the yard. Take the drawers out first.'

Within a couple of minutes, Claud and Bert had carried the commode outside and had laid it upside down in the middle of the yard. In the distance, halfway across the field, they could see a small black figure walking along the path towards the road. They paused to watch. There was something rather funny about the way the figure was behaving. Every few seconds it would start to run, then it did a little jump, and once it seemed as if the sound of a cheerful song could be heard from across the field.

'I think he's mad,' Claud said, smiling to himself.

Rummins came over, carrying the tools. Claud took them from him and started work.

'Cut them carefully,' Rummins said. 'Don't forget he's going to use them on another table.'

The wood was hard and very dry, and as Claud worked, a fine red dust fell softly to the ground. One by one, the legs came off, and Bert bent down and arranged them neatly in a row.

Claud stepped back to examine the results of his labour. There was a 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 vicars don't have vans, you know. All they've got usually is small cars.'

'The legs are 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.'

'You know very well he's going to start reducing the price if he doesn't get every bit of this into the car. A vicar's just as smart with money as everyone. Especially this old man. So why don't we give him his firewood now and finish it? Where do you keep the axe?'

'That's fair,' Rummins said. 'Bert, go and fetch it.'

Bert went and fetched the axe and gave it to Claud who then, with a long-armed high-swinging action, began fiercely attacking the legless commode. It was hard work, and it took several minutes before he had the whole thing more or less broken in pieces.

'I'll tell you one thing,' he said. 'That was a good carpenter who put this commode together and I don't care what the vicar says.'

'We're just in time!' Rummins called out. 'Here he comes!'