

Parson's Pleasure

BY ROALD DAHL

Boggis gasped, not daring to believe what he saw before him. It *couldn't* be true!

MR Boggis stopped the car just short of the summit, got out and looked around. It was perfect. He could see for miles.

Over on the right he spotted a medium farmhouse. Beyond it was a larger one. There was a house that might be a Queen Anne, and there were two likely farms over on the left. Five places in all. Then he drove to the other side of the hill, where he saw six more possibles—five farms and one big Georgian house. He ruled out the latter. It looked prosperous, and there was no point in calling on the prosperous.

Apart from the fact that he was at this moment disguised as a clergyman, there was nothing very sinister about Cyril Boggis. By trade a dealer in antique furniture, with a shop in the King's Road, Chelsea, Boggis had achieved a considerable reputation by producing unusual items with astonishing regularity. When asked where he got them, he would wink and murmur something about a little secret.

Boggis's little secret was a result of something that happened on a Sunday afternoon nearly nine years before, while he was driving in the country. The car had overheated and he had walked to a farmhouse to ask for a jug of water.

While he was waiting for it, he glanced through the door and spotted a large oak armchair. The back panel was decorated by an inlay of the most delicate floral design, and the head of a duck was carved on either arm. *Good God*, he thought. *This thing is late seventeenth century!*

He poked his head in further. There was another one on the other side of the fireplace! Two chairs like that must be worth at least a thousand pounds up in London.

When the woman of the house returned, Boggis asked if she would like to sell her chairs. They weren't for sale, she said, but just out of curiosity, how much would he give? They bargained for half an hour, and in the end, of course, Boggis got the chairs for less than a twentieth of their value.



Returning to London in his station-wagon, Boggis had an idea. If there was good stuff in one farmhouse, why not in others? On Sundays, why couldn't he comb the countryside? The isolated places, the farmhouses, the dilapidated country mansions, would be his target. But country folk are a suspicious lot. Perhaps it would be best if he didn't let them know he was a dealer. He could be the telephone man, the plumber, the gas inspector. He could even be a clergyman . . .

Boggis ordered a large quantity of superior cards on which the following legend was engraved:

The Reverend
Cyril Winnington Boggis
President of the Society
for the Preservation
of Rare Furniture

In association with
The Victoria and Albert Museum

From now on, every Sunday, he was going to be a nice old parson travelling around on a labour of love for the "Society," compiling an inventory of the treasures that lay hidden in country homes. The scheme worked. In fact, it became a lucrative business.

And now it was another Sunday. Boggis parked some distance from the gates of his first house, the Queen Anne. He never liked his car to be seen until a deal was made. A dear old clergyman and a large station-wagon never seemed quite right together. But there was nothing of value in the house.

At the next stop, no one was home. The third, a farmhouse, was back in the fields. It looked rambling and dirty. He didn't hold out much hope for it.

Three men were standing in the yard.

When they caught sight of the small, pot-bellied man in his black suit and parson's collar, they stopped talking and watched him suspiciously. The farm owner was a stumpy man with small shifty eyes, whose name was Rummins. The tall youth beside him was his son Bert. The short man with broad shoulders was Claud, a neighbour.

"And what exactly might you be wanting?" Rummins asked.

Boggis explained at some length the aims and ideals of the Society for the Preservation of Rare Furniture.

"We don't have any," said Rummins. "You're wasting your time."

"Now just a minute, sir," 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 kitchen that 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."

Rummins shifted uneasily on his feet. "Well," he said, "there's no harm in you taking a look." He led the way into an exceedingly filthy living-room.

And there it was! Boggis saw it at once and gasped. He stood staring for ten seconds at least, not daring to believe what he saw before him. It *couldn't* be true!

At that point, Boggis became aware of the three men watching him intently. They had seen him gasp and stare. In a flash, Boggis staggered to the nearest chair and collapsed into it, breathing heavily.

"What's the matter?" Claud asked.

"It's nothing," he gasped. "I'll be all right in a minute."

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

135 "No, no," Boggis said. "It's just my heart. It happens every now and then. I'll be all right."

He must have time to think, he told himself. *Take it gently, Boggis. Keep calm.*
140 *These people may be ignorant but they are not stupid. And if it is really true . . .*

To a layman, what he had seen might not have appeared particularly impressive, covered as it was with dirty white paint. But it was a dealer's dream. Boggis knew that among the most coveted examples of eighteenth century English furniture are three pieces known as "The Chippendale Commodes."

150 A trifle unsteadily, Boggis began to move around the room examining the other furniture, one piece at a time. Apart from the commode it was a very poor lot.

155 "Nice oak table," he said. "Not old enough to be of any interest. This chest of drawers"—Boggis walked casually past the commode—"worth a few pounds, I dare say. A crude reproduction, I'm afraid."

160 "That's a strong bit of furniture," Rummins said. "Some nice carving on it too."

"Machine-carved," Boggis replied, bending down to examine the exquisite craftsmanship. He began to saunter off, frowning as though in deep thought.

"You know what?" he said, looking back at the commode. "I've wanted a set of legs something like that for a long time. I've got a table in my own home, and when I moved house, the movers damaged the legs. I'm very fond of that table. I keep my Bible and sermon notes on it."

He paused, stroking his chin. "These legs on your chest of drawers could be cut off and fixed on to my table."

"What you mean to say is you'd like to buy it," Rummins said.

180 "Well . . . it might be a bit too much trouble. It's not worth it."

"How much were you thinking of offering?" Rummins asked.

185 "Not much, I'm afraid. You see, this is not a genuine antique."

"I'm not so sure," Rummins said. "It's been in here over 20 years. I bought it at the Manor House when the old Squire died. Bert, where's that old bill you once found at the back of one of the drawers?"

190 "You mean this?" Bert lifted out a piece of folded yellowing paper from one of the drawers and carried it over to his father.

"You can't tell me this writing ain't bloody old," Rummins said, holding the paper out to Boggis, whose arm was shaking as he took it. It was brittle and it crackled slightly between his fingers. The writing was in a long sloping copper-plate hand.

*Edward Montagu, Esq
Debtor To Thos Chippendale:*

205 *A large mahogany Commode Table of exceeding fine wood, very rich carved, set upon fluted legs, two very neat shapd long drawers in the middle part and two ditto on each side, with rich chased Brass Handles and Ornaments, the whole completely finished in the most exquisite taste . . . £87*

BOGGIS was fighting to suppress his excitement. 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?

215 He tossed the paper contemptuously on to the table and said quietly, "It's exactly what I thought, a Victorian reproduction. This is simply the invoice that the seller gave to his client."

"Listen, Parson," Rummins said, "how can you be so sure it's a fake? You haven't even seen it underneath all that paint."

225 "Has anyone got a knife?" asked Boggis.

230 Claud produced a pocket-knife. Working with apparent casualness, Boggis began chipping the paint off a small area on top of the commode. "Take a look."

235 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.

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

"It's processed! 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. Look closely. That touch of orange in among the dark red-brown is the sign of lime."

"How much would you give?" Rummins asked.

250 Boggis looked at the commode, frowned, and shrugged his shoulders. "I think ten pounds would be fair."

"Ten pounds!" Rummins cried. "Don't be ridiculous, Parson. Look at the bill! It tells you exactly what it cost! Eighty-seven pounds! Now it's antique, it's worth double!"

255 "If you'll pardon me, no, sir, it's not. It's a second-hand reproduction. But I'll tell you what, I'll go as high as fifteen pounds."

260 "Make it fifty," Rummins said.

"My dear man," Boggis said softly, "I only want the legs. The rest of it is firewood, that's all."

265 "Make it thirty-five," Rummins said. "I couldn't sir, I couldn't! I'll make you one final offer. Twenty pounds."

"I'll take it," Rummins snapped.

270 "Oh, dear," Boggis said. "I shouldn't have started this."

"You can't back out now, Parson. A deal's a deal."

275 "Yes, yes, I know. Perhaps if I got my car, you gentlemen would be kind enough to help me load it?"

Boggis found it difficult not to break 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!*

Back in the farmhouse, Rummins was saying, "Fancy him giving me twenty pound for a load of junk like this."

285 "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."

290 "And what if it won't go in the car?" Claud asked. "He'll just say to hell with it and drive off."

Rummins paused to consider this alarming prospect.

"I've got an idea," Claud went on.

295 "He told us that it was only the legs he was wanting. So all we've got to do is cut 'em off, then it'll be sure to go in the car. All we're doing is saving him the trouble of cutting them off when he gets home."

300 "A bloody good idea," Rummins said, looking at the commode. Within a couple of minutes, Claud and Bert had carried the commode outside and Claud went to work with the saw. When all the legs were severed, Bert arranged them carefully in a row.

Claud stepped back to survey the results. "Just let me ask you one question, Mr Rummins," he said slowly. "Even now, could you put that enormous thing into a car?"

"Not unless it was a van."

315 "Correct!" Claud cried. "And parsons don't have vans. 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."

320 "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. So why don't we give him his firewood now and be done with it."

325 "Fair enough," Rummins said. "Bert, fetch the axe."

It was hard work, and it took several minutes before Claud 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."

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