**Parson’s Pleasure (part 1)**

*Roald Dahl (1958)*

MR. BOGGIS was driving the car slowly, leaning back comfortably in the seat with one elbow resting on the sill of the open window. How beautiful the countryside, he thought; how pleasant to see a sign or two of summer once again. The primroses especially. And the hawthorn. The 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 lit 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 a mile ahead. And that must be the village of Brill, that cluster of cottages among the trees right on the very summit. Excellent. Not many of his Sunday sections had a nice elevation like that to work from.

He drove up the hill and stopped the car just 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 practiced 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 do with some money. He was always lucky with Queen Annes anyway. Mr. Boggis climbed back into the car, released the hand brake, 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.

Undoubtedly there was a touch of the clown about Mr. Boggis. But he was certainly 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 British designers: Ince, Mayhew, Chippendale, Robert Adam, Manwaring, 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 last 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 fan belt 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 living room, and there, not five yards from where he was standing, he spotted something that made him so excited that 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 seen only 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 straightaway had 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 had 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 had bargained for half an hour, and of course in the end Mr. Boggis had got the chairs and had 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 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 BOGGISPresident of the Society for the Preservation of Rare FurnitureIn association with the Victoria and Albert Museum

From now on, every Sunday, he was going to be a nice old parson spending his holiday traveling around on a labor 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 county of Buckinghamshire, in one of the most northerly squares on his map, about ten miles from Oxford, and as he headed for his first house, the dilapidated Queen Anne, he began to get the feeling that this was going to be his lucky day.

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 part, 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 was 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 horses and stables 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 riding breeches, male or female, was always a sitting duck for Mr. Boggis. He spent two minutes delivering an impassioned eulogy on the extreme Right Wing 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 when he was in 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 cow sheds. There was no one there either. He guessed that they all must be in church still, 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 saw a beautiful thing, a semicircular card table in mahogany, in the style of Hepplewhite, built around 1780.

“Ah-ha,” he said aloud. “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 Prince of Wales’ feathers and the wheat ear, 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 shrinkage that the years had caused in the mortise and dovetail joints.

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

The next farm was situated 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, rambling and dirty, and some of the sheds were clearly in need of 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 watched 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 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 report to the government.

“What beautiful dogs,” Mr. Boggis said. “I must say I’ve never been greyhound racing, but they tell me it’s a fascinating sport.” Again the silence, and Mr. Boggis noticed that each of the men 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 swiveled 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 the aims and ideals of the Society for the Preservation of Rare Furniture.

“We don’t have any,” Rummins said. “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.”

Rummins shifted uneasily. “You mean to say all you want to do is go inside and stand 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 stuff 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, I might 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 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.

There it was! Mr. Boggis saw it at once and he stopped dead in his tracks and gave a shrill little 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 be stripped off. But good God! Look at it! And in a place like this!

At that 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 goddam 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 and stayed close beside him, staring down at him with a fatuous leer.

“I thought maybe you were looking at something,” Rummins said. The wide, frog mouth 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 backward—that the first was “discovered” in 1920, in a house at Moreton-on-the-Marsh, and was sold at Sotheby the same year; that the other two turned up in the same auction rooms a year later, both coming out of Rainham 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 3,900 pounds. 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 Rainham Commode; The Second Rainham 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, Mallett, 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!