

FRANCIS BLESSINGTON

The Clock

HE FIRST SAW IT in the window of Lodge Antiques among the pewter beer mugs and the silver tea sets and modernist paintings. He hadn't bought anything since coming to England. He prided himself on that. But it was so dull in Oxfordshire, the flat almost treeless land and the long cloudy intervals. Trying to write seventeenth-century history in the dark afternoons, while the twin copper beeches thrashed the rain across the fallen headstones of Kidlington Church, had cast a pall over his grant and respite from teaching.

One day in Carfax, Valerie, his young wife, looking in the shop window, said, "I like those mantle clocks. I grew up with one donging the hours and half hours and quarter hours." They went in.

Behind the counter was a thin prematurely grey man with a red handsome face. He spoke to Valerie after noticing her body. "Anything I can help with?" He had a Dutch accent, Arthur thought.

"Does the clock in the window work?" Arthur said.

The Dutchman looked at him as if he had just noticed he was there. "No, it doesn't. But it can be fixed up fairly easily, sir."

"How much, is it?" Arthur asked.

"Twelve pounds," he said.

"Why so cheap?" Arthur asked.

The Dutchman said, "It doesn't work."

"I can fix it up," Arthur said.

He said, "Do you know anything about clocks?"

"I have a friend who can help you," the Dutchman added.

So he bought the clock.

Before she left, Valerie noticed a Henri Michaux on the wall. It showed trees alive like Indians, dancing about in a psychological frenzy.

The Dutchman said, "Intriguing, isn't it?"

"I love Michaux," she said. "I've managed to buy one, but now I'm out of money."

"You are most fortunate, Madame, to own even one Michaux. I tire of all this old stuff, and modern art intrigues me."

The rainy afternoons now had a different cast. Overriding Valerie's objections, he set the clock on the dining-room table. Reading *Practical Clock Repairing* and *Clock-Cleaning and Repairing*, he began to take apart the complex of levers, hammers, and wheels that made up the three-dimensional puzzle of the clock. The impulse of the spring transferred to the wheel and arranged by the escapement fascinated him more than the battlefields of Oliver Cromwell. He felt more at one with the later deists who believed that the world was God's clock. The Westminster chimes provided the music in this little world.

"It's the secret of the universe," he joked to Valerie about the clock, who laughed and said he was spending even longer hours on the clock than he was on Bodleian documents. She was bored, she said, with old art and the even older masonry and spent her days reading art magazines and calling her mother in America. Because he said he liked it, she had bought the Michaux with the settlement from her first marriage.

One morning an inspector from Scotland Yard insisted on speaking to them. Valerie ushered in a middle-aged man with his hair parted in the middle. She told him Arthur hated being interrupted.

"Frightfully sorry to intrude, Professor Royce, but there has been a difficulty next door in the manor house. Someone broke in last night and stole the antique plate and other things. I thought that perhaps you may have noticed something."

No, neither he nor Valerie had heard or seen anything. Valerie said it must be heartbreaking, looking at the Michaux.

"I'm not surprised," Arthur said, looking up. "The way crime is increasing even in Britain these days."

"Yes," the inspector resumed, "People are not even civil here anymore, are they? No one does anything for anyone anymore. The whole social fabric is deteriorating. I hope it's not as bad in America."

"It's worse," Arthur said.

"I was afraid of that," the inspector said. "Force is the only thing that'll keep people in line now."

Arthur continued with the clock, but he got nowhere. Sometimes the gears momentarily worked, then died. He even managed the chimes, but something was always off. Either the damn machine didn't run at all or it was inaccurate, and he had to reassemble the forest of brass that began to tear his nerves.

Finally, at Valerie's instigation, he went back to Lodge Antiques.

"Sure, I'll take it back," the Dutchman said.

Arthur thought for a moment. He hadn't expected it to be so easy.

He changed his mind. "You said you had a friend."

Two days later, he walked down a cement walkway that covered up what is usually a vegetable garden. There was something sinister in these strip houses put up in tan stucco and black roofs after the war. An old Jewish man opened the door and said, "Hanson told me you were coming."

So began the afternoons with Ben Sherf, whose wife had recently died and who couldn't get around very well anymore. Each week he would go with the clock, and later without it, to talk to Ben. They talked about everything, everything but the clock, it seemed. Ben talked of Germany before the war, and Arthur spoke of Cromwell's allowing the Jews to re-enter England. They spoke of their universities, Wittenberg and Yale. Seldom they discussed the clock, and, when they did, Ben recommended some book or other or told Arthur what to do, but he often forgot by the time he got home to Valerie. Sometimes Arthur thought of bringing it up more often, but he was afraid Ben was going to charge him for all these hours. Yet he came.

As the year passed, resources dwindled, and he had to cut somewhere. He worried that Ben would ask a small fortune and

ruin him. But Ben never said anything, just provided a glass of sherry, or they shot pistols in Ben's yard.

"The professor is a good shot," Ben said.

"Just luck," Arthur answered, toasting with his glass.

"No, it's not luck, professor."

Something was wrong.

Why all the free hospitality?

One day passing in Carfax, he noticed that the Dutchman no longer worked in Lodge Antiques. The slim girl behind the counter said Hanson had bought the shop and had hired her to work it. No, she didn't know his friend, Ben Sherf.

Valerie had joined a book group and spent time away from the house with her new friends so that, she said, she wouldn't be in his way. Arthur noticed, however, that she often left at the same time as he went to Ben's. She went to Georgina's Coffee Shoppe to meet Geraldine for coffee or to The Ashmolean Museum with Vee.

One day he decided to check. He called Ben and said he was ill and could not come. He asked Valerie to go to The Ashmolean with him and postpone seeing Geraldine. But she said it was too late, that Geraldine would be counting on it.

He went outside and hid behind the beeches until she had passed and had taken the bus to Oxford.

Then he followed.

He walked into the Oxford covered market, heading straight for Georgina's.

He arrived faster than he thought and just had time to jump back before Valerie and Geraldine spotted him.

He caught the first bus back to Kidlington.

Walking down Church Lane, he could see that the door to the house was open.

Jesus, the painting!

He ran to the back door that opened towards the manor house where the robbery had occurred earlier.

It was locked.

He returned to the front door. He held his breath. He opened his jackknife and kept it ready. He could see the Michaux still on the wall: four yellowish heads with mouths fixed in silent screams like deranged peaches.

He walked in.

Then he saw the grey head of the Dutchman.

He tried to dart back, but the Dutchman saw him first.

“Professor Royce, terribly sorry for entering. My friend Ben said you were ill and he tried to ring you up but there was no answer. There had been some robbery, he said. So I said I would stop by. I saw the door open and was alarmed.”

As he closed the knife in his pocket, Arthur thought that Valerie couldn't have forgotten to close that door.

The phone rang.

It was Ben. “I hope you are well. I don't have many friends. Did Hanson?”

Yes, sorry. Good-bye.

“I hope you are better, my friend.”

He sat and waited at the dining-room table before the clock that sat like a walnut cat before him. He began to tinker. He reset the spring and began to screw in levers.

An hour later Valerie arrived.

She smiled, “Working? You and your clock.” She rubbed his back.

He snapped like a overwound spring, “The door was open when I came home.”

She said, “Oh, how stupid. I left it open. I saw you under the trees thinking something out. I left it open for you. I thought you might not have had your key. I didn't want to disturb you. You must have thought that someone robbed the house.”

“No. Well, yes, I did, but only for a moment.”

His heart was jumping, but he said nothing. He ground his teeth and put in a star wheel. Everything still didn't add up right: why would she leave the door open for him? The latch would open, wouldn't it? Wasn't *she* spying on him too? And the painting? Did she really buy that for him when she knew they would need money? The inspector was right. People didn't just do things for anyone. Even your wife. He would have to be more watchful in the future. He would follow her again till he knew everything. And Ben, what did he want? And that Dutchman, practically giving away his merchandise? And checking on his health! Come on! He could not be so easily taken in. The inspector was wrong in one thing: people were driven as much by lust and greed and fear as they were three hundred years ago, or even six thousand years ago.

He looked up. Valerie was reading *The Star*.

"I thought you may want to hear this," she said, holding her head down. "They caught the burglars of the manor house. It was the cobbler and his boy down the road."

"See what I mean. Even your neighbours will rob you," he said, listening to the spin of the gears.

"I don't know," she said, putting the paper down on the table. "People around here seem helpful and friendly enough."

"That's what you think," Arthur answered sharply.

"They've certainly been nice enough to us," she said.

"That's what you think," he repeated and turned away.

Now the clock began to tick perfectly.