

TUPENNY BLUES

by

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“How much?” Marnie’s scream shook the walls of their tiny antique shop.

“Er— Forty-five quid.” Sid mumbled, as if saying it quietly would make it sound less.

“You paid forty-five quid for a black slate clock? You’re off your head. Who brought it in?”

“That Mrs. Consett.”

“Oh, well. That explains it. Big boobs and a pelmet for a skirt and your brains drop into your bleedin’ boxer shorts. You styoopid old man.”

Sid looked sheepish as his wife continued to glare at him.

“I’m going shopping. I need some money,” she snapped.

He reached in his pocket and pulled a couple of twenty pound notes from a wad held together by a silver clip. Marnie snatched them from him and stormed out of the shop, slamming the door behind her.

Sid sighed, sucked at his grey toothbrush moustache, picked up the heavy clock and carried it into the workroom at the back. A key was sorted out and drops of clock oil applied with a fine brush. He wound it carefully and set the pendulum swinging. There was a healthy tick and the main spring was intact. He wound the striker spring and set the minute hand to twelve o’clock. The clock struck four, and after a second’s pause, struck five. The bell sounded muffled, too.

Sid peered inside the back. There was something interfering with the notched wheel, which controlled the striker mechanism. It seemed to be coming from inside the dome of the bell. He unscrewed it and found a small packet wrapped in waterproof paper stuffed behind it. He opened

it to reveal a block of eight first issue twopenny blue stamps, mint and in perfect condition with the head of the young Queen Victoria as bright and clear as it had been when they were printed in 1840.

He was looking at a fortune. Perhaps hundreds of grand. It was the big tickle. The antique dealer's dream. They must be hidden away until he could decide what to do with them. If he sent them to auction, the tax would be enormous. How could he sell them privately? He would 'phone Stanley Gibbons and get some idea of the value.

The shop bell rang. He looked for somewhere to hide the stamps temporarily. Rolling them into a tube, he slid them into the spout of the teapot of the Royal Doulton tea set he had bought in that morning: only twenties but quite pretty with one chipped cup that he must strop up.

It was Mrs. Consett: she of the big boobs and the micro miniskirt. She smiled at him wanly.

"Oh, Mr. Perks, that clock I sold you, I'm terribly sorry. I thought I was clearing out some unwanted rubbish and that clock doesn't work. It's been in the attic for years gathering dust. My husband says it belonged to his great grandmother and it's a family heirloom. He's very upset. Can I possibly buy it back from you?"

Sid thought quickly. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Consett. I've already taken a deposit on it. It's virtually sold."

Tears flooded the woman's big blue eyes. She put her head on one side in appeal. "Suppose I pay you more for it so that you can give the other person back their deposit. How much did you sell it for?"

Sid thought quickly. He couldn't quote too high a price or it would seem as if he had swindled her. Seventy-five would do. "Well - er - seventy five pounds."

"If I give you a hundred, would that be all right?"

"Well yes, I suppose so."

She counted out five twenties while he went for the clock.

"Here's a key," he said. "I think you'll find it works quite well."

She put the clock in a canvas holdall and hurried from the shop barging in to a young woman who came in, looked round suspiciously, and carefully unwrapped four tiny wine glasses engraved with a key pattern.

"How much will you give me for these?" she asked. They're very old. They belonged to my great grandmother."

“I’m sorry, my love.” Sid was being avuncular. “Great grandma bought them in Woolworth’s in about nineteen thirty-eight. They’re no use to me.”

The woman scowled and began wrapping the glasses again. Sid wished she would hurry up. Since ‘Going for a Song’ and ‘The Antiques Road Show’ the private punters thought that everything more than fifty years old was worth a fortune. They dreamed of appearing on the tele while an expert said ‘D’you have any idea of the value? Well, the last one went for ten thousand pounds.’ They even practised the modest smile they would assume while swearing that this piece of family history would never be sold.

At last the woman left and Sid was about to return to his stamps when a burly man in a well cut business suit came rushing in.

“All right. Where is it?” he demanded.

“Where’s what?”

“The packet from the back of the clock.”

This must be Mr. Consett, beneficiary of the big boobs and provider of mini-skirts.

“What packet? I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Sid looked the picture of outraged innocence.

“There was a package in waterproof paper hidden behind the bell of that clock my wife sold you. Where is it?”

“I’ve told you. I don’t know anything about it. I only had the thing for half an hour. If anything’s missing, ask your wife where it is.”

The man paused, almost convinced. “The bitch. She must have known they were there. That’s why she pretended to sell it to you.”

“Known what was where?” asked Sid innocently. But the man had already run out of the shop.

Sid still could not get to the back room. Perks Antiques had never been so busy. A fat man in a camel hair coat strolled in. Ginger Marks was from the better end of town with a shop that was slightly up market from Sid’s. He was still called Ginger although the few hairs he had left were grey.

“Got anything for me?” he puffed through a fat cigar.

“There’s a few new things. Have a look round.”

The fat man picked up a set of silver plated condiments, looked at the price ticket and put them down again. A pair of cased silver and mother 'o pearl fish servers were more interesting.

“What can you do on these, Sid?”

“A ton?”

“Make it ninety.”

“Ninety-five.”

Ginger stuffed the case into his pocket and blew out a stream of cigar smoke as Marnie came back to the shop carrying two heavy shopping bags. She went into the back room and came out again.

“Where’s the clock ?”

“Sold it.”

“How much?” she mouthed at him.

“Sixty-five.” he mouthed back.

She pursed her lips. Sid had justified his purchase from big boobs. She could no longer use it to make him feel guilty. She returned to the back room.

Ginger Marks was still peering at some porcelain in a china cabinet.

“Is that Meissen?” he asked, pointing to a cup and saucer.

“No. It’s a Sampson copy.”

“Show us.”

Ginger looked at the cup carefully then gently bit round the edge with his teeth.

“Restored,” he said and put it back in the cabinet.

Marnie came in bearing a lacquer tray. “Cup of tea, Mr. Marks?” She put the tray down. “I like this Doulton tea set, Sid. I’m keeping it for us.”

The tea pot stood steaming on the tray. Sid went white. Marnie frowned.

“What’s the matter with you? It’s a perfectly good tea set. I washed the teapot out with soda and boiling water like you showed me. It’s quite clean.”

The words went spinning round in Sid's head. "It's quite clean, quite clean, quite clean."

Marnie could not understand what was up with Sid. 'What fiddle has he been up to now?' she wondered. Whatever it was, obviously it hadn't worked. No doubt she'd find out in good time.

Anyway, she was more concerned with the roll of blue Victorian stamps which had fallen out of the teapot spout when she picked it up to wash it; the stamps now hidden in her underwear drawer upstairs. They must be worth a bit.

She would pop in to the library when she went shopping the next day and look them up in the catalogue. Meanwhile, she turned to Ginger Marks with an ingratiating smile. "Jaffa cake, Mr. Marks?"