

# **The Widow's Clock**

Bernard Capes

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I was moved to pause outside the premises of Bull Hacker, auctioneers. Unaccountable excitement exhaled from their very windows, grew intricate on their steps, congested at their doorway. Something out of the common, it was evident, was passing within.

I accosted a young man who was battling his way forth at the moment. The young man's face was a red mask of hilarity.

"What's up?" said he. "Oh, Lord! go and look. Old Bull's took mad, and he's knocking down the lots like skittles. There's some stuff goin' cheap there, there is."

He was borne past me, and I fought my way into the auction-room. I had a hard struggle to get within view of the rostrum; and then I saw a figure, with eyes like a Cheshire cat's, standing or rather dancing therein. It (the figure) was that, assuredly, of the urbane Mr. Bull; but he had put a copper saucepan on his head, and tied up his side-whiskers with ribbons.

Two grinning, embarrassed-looking men in shirt-sleeves had just placed upon the long table under the pulpit a very presentable plaster cast of the Capitoline Venus. The auctioneer addressed the company with quite exaggerated suavity.

"Look at that, gentlemen," said he: "pray don't look at me! My better half, gentlemen, and much better worth your consideration. A little stiff and cold, but a rare bargain if you keep her from putting rat poison in the soup. How much for Mrs. Bull, now? how much for the hard, unsympathetic lady? She's given me many a dressing, gentlemen, or she'd be better accommodated in that respect herself. A charitable soul indeed."

Here he cocked his saucepan over me eye, folded his arms, and ogling the company insinuatingly suddenly bent down and bonneted with his hammer an old white-hatted broker who sat chuckling just underneath.

"The property of a gentleman going abroad!" he bellowed, recovering himself. "Must sell must sell! Start your bids, and earn a reputation for gallantry in the Babylonian marriage market."

"A shillun," sniggered a sheepish-faced individual at the table.

Mr. Bull snatched off his saucepan and beat it flat on the desk.

"Gone for a shilling!" he roared, "and dear at the price."

There had been a flank movement up the room. Blue-coated figures now rose from the crowd and seized the madman. A scene of wild uproar and confusion ensued. Presently I found myself in the street.

"How did it come about?" I said to a neighbour, as I endeavoured to coax the creases out of a crumpled tile.

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"Drink," said he laconically. "Old Bull was always a soaker, he was."

"The sales won't hold, I suppose?" said I.

"They'll hold tight enough for them as cut their lucky with the stuff afore he was found out,"

answered my friend gruffly. "Why, he was a—selling things for songs at first rail good things, mind you," he said.

I departed, wondering; and certain inquiries I prosecuted set me wondering yet more.

The following day I made occasion to call upon my acquaintance Aubrey Standish. He is a curioso, and a young man of a most fastidious and delicate dilettanteism of Catholic taste also, within the liberal limits of Art. At the same time he holds (or held) it his particular principle that, given such tact and knowledge as his own, an extreme virtuosity could be indulged on nothing larger than an ordinary household income, so to speak; in illustration of which his rooms (he had but three) were shrines containing treasures of heavenly marqueterie and bijouterie. Enamels, by Jean Pctitot; cinquecento intaglios in amethyst, and earlier cameos by Dioscorides; unique bits of gomron porcelain ware from Chelsea; pot—pourri in old Nanking vases; fragments of tapestry; exquisite painted fans from the studios of M. Duvelleroy; swords in niello; a bronze fish, presumptively by Benvenuto Cellini, such and varied bric—a-brac, sleeking from the chestnut glooms of Chippendale corner cupboards, disposed with a crafty affectation of insouciance on Louis XV commodes, blinking soft slumberous eyes from green plush—lined showcase tables, was the practical expression of Aubrey's boasted principle. And he would assure you, with all the enthusiasm of a nervous, lispng speech, that it needed but the knowledge of how to sit effectively in the sunshine for the rarest butterflies of Art to settle on one's hand. That was his rendering of the *Tout vient à qui sait attendre*, which was a proverb too much in the common way for one of his ultra—refinement; yet he was not exalted above the exercise of some particularly mean qualities or, at least, so my Philistinism interpreted him.

Now he came skipping, in a Japanese silk dressing—gown, from his bedroom, and put a thin, scented hand on each of my shoulders.

"What a sweet tie!" said he. "Permit me. It tones, with your face, into the very aurelian tints of Giovanni Bellini."

"Oh, go to the devil!" said I crossly. "If I'm jaundiced, I'm jaundiced, that's all."

"My dear friend," said he, releasing me, "you're fretful. You take life at too high a pressure.

You exhale a humanity before which I seem to shrink like a sensitive plant. I can never escape the feeling when you visit me, that my little museum will fly into prismatic splinters, like an opal too rudely unearthed."

I wanted, of course, to kick him; but bethought myself that this was scarcely the way to enforce a certain mission on which I had entered.

"Standish " said I.

"Now, now," said he, lifting his hands, palms to me, and closing his eyes; "not the Charity Organisation again, my very sweet fellow! Not some malodorous citizen with a compound fracture of his tail, or a widow respectable in everything but the possession of twins. You wouldn't besmirch my preserves with such smut?"

"I'm to be bought out."

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"Oh dear!" he said, with a little deprecating smile. "This is terrible. Do let me entreat your attention to that exquisite Bartolozzi. I picked it up last week for a mere song literally, the merest swan-song of a dying consumptive."

"Standish, I want to put it to you "

He sank upon an Adams settee, sniffed at a tiny filagree vinaigrette, and fluttered a whisp of a handkerchief.

"I have learned to gather flowers of the wilderness. I have made a rose-crown of patience, till it blossoms about my head. Go on!" he murmured faintly.

"Standish, I will take no denial that you were at Bull Hacker's sale yesterday."

"The subtlest penetration!" he whispered. "Were you there too?"

"Yes."

"Then," said he, "you were witness of a strange seizure."

"Not of yours," said I "for it amounts to nothing else." He only shrugged his eyebrows a momentary spasm of astonishment.

"Was it not?" said I. "There is the very article, I see."

I had already 'spotted,' standing in the corner, what I sought a lank "grandfather" clock in a Chippendale case. I nodded towards it significantly.

"It's by Smith of Crowland," said Standish, rallying, in the excitement of the collector. "His work was unique the best of kind. I assure you, I cannot recall a more vital illustration of principles than is presented in that bargain."

"It is unique, you say?"

"I believe entirely. My one regret is, it doesn't go or at least, as yet I haven't been able to make it. And it was the durable quality of the Crownland clocks that gained them their reputation."

"Shall I examine it? I have a clever mechanical turn."

"By all means. I can trust you to handle it, I am sure."

He did not look as if he meant it; but I went and unbuttoned the door in the belly of the thing, and felt with my hand up along the pendulum.

"What would you say," said I, as I was thus engaged, "that this have fetched under favourable conditions?"

"Eighty pounds," said Standish, with all the decision of a dealer.

"And you gave for it yesterday?"

"Eighteen pence."

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His whole face creased with goblin merriment. His laugh was always a little hoarse, as if it were only the broken-out expression of what had been choking him for some time internally.

Suddenly he came to his feet.

"You have set it going?" he cried.

"The pendulum was merely wired high up to the case. What time is it?"

He affected a fob, with dangling seals. He drew out what the Regency bucks called a warming-pan.

"Twenty minutes to twelve," he said.

Fortuitously, I had but to move the hands of the bargain a minute or two.

"There's your clock going," said I, and shut the case.

"You are a genius!" he cried. "My happiness is complete. What an engaging possession is a practical head!"

"I'm glad you think so. It can always command its price, you mean; and so I may as well state it."

"Ha, ha! to be sure. The service of a friend is beyond price."

"Not in the least. I want eighty pounds for mine."

"Oh! of course. You're rating yourself higher than you do to the Income Tax assessors."

"I'm perfectly serious. I want eighty pounds less eighteen-pence."

He was beginning to laugh checked himself, and stared at me in amazement, already with a touch of anger in it.

"Are you daft?" he said.

"Not in the least. I'll explain myself. In taking advantage of that man's madness yesterday, Standish, I'm not at all sure you didn't give your economic principles an ugly look of felony."

His lip lifted, and he did not answer for a moment. Then said he, in a straitened voice: "I see, I see. This is a blackmailing affair."

I kept my temper royally.

"No," I said. "And I shan't be at the trouble to refute such a charge. I appeal only to your sense of fair-play. You must have it, Standish, for all your virtuosity. Will you listen while I tell you the facts of the case?"

"Oh! I'll listen," he said.

"Very well. Now, I'll explain. That clock was the property of a wretched widow a woman once in decent circumstances, but at last reduced to the hardest necessity. I've come across her way of my work on behalf of the Society; and a certain association of guess and inquiry had led me to the truth. Her husband was a Liverpool-Irish 'patriot' of '81. I believe he was mixed up in the dynamite business. He died, however, years ago in prison. Piece by piece she has parted with every stick of their common property, till at last only the clock remained. That she

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could not find it in her heart to sell. He had always shown such an affection for it. No doubt even the worst of us have our little emotional associations. Perhaps it had once stood in his father's cottage. And so though from the date of his arrest it had proved useless as a timepiece" ("Ha!" murmured Standish, with a happy nod to me) "she stuck to it. Then, at last, hunger and the devil broke her loyalty. Mr. Bull happened on the relic in a professional way, presumed its value, and being for all his sins something better than a collector, didn't offer to buy it for eighteenpence, but proposed, like an honest man, to include it, with a reserve, in one of his sales."

I came to an end, and looked at Standish.

"Without reserve, I think," said he.

"With," said I. "The man was as mad as a hatter. He had to be removed in the end."

"You greatly interest me," said Standish. "I assure you that though, of course, I thought there was something a little exceptional about our friend's conduct I had no inkling, at that early stage, that things would reach so disastrous a climax."

"I am quite ready to believe it. And, now you know, you will draw the widow a cheque for eighty pounds."

Standish shook his head, with quite a rippling little laugh.

"You are a sweet, droll fellow," he said: "the dearest utilitarian, by way of your friends' pockets. If I could materialise such a rare piece of Quixotism and put it in a case, I would give you the money on the spot if I had it."

"At least send back the clock and let it be re-sold."

He looked at me, as if politeness alone restrained him from a positive guffaw.

"Unconscious humourist!" he murmured thickly. Then he explained very kindly. "The whole text of my capital is sunk in these things these glorious trifles, every one of which represents an opportunity most patiently coveted. The margin only stands for my living expenses. Now, do you really imagine I will forego the little rewards, when they reach me, of such devotion? and for the benefit of a dead savage's widow?" he added, with an irrepressible laugh.

"It was an accident, Standish."

"Such is our chance.

"Is it hopeless my trying to move you?"

"You have moved me already, my dear soul. Positively, a new value attaches in my eyes to this bargain in the knowledge that it is pronounced, in a certain sense, historical. Pray look at the matter impartially. Why should all the unselfishness be demanded of me who make no profession of dealing in these common virtues? Probably your bombazine widow is much better equipped with the article than I am. Comfort her with the Christian assurance that my expectations are realised, if hers are not. Now, pray don't say any more. It is painful and unprofitable to both of us. Let me show you an almost perfect example of a gemma potaria a sardonix drinking-cup that I picked ".I burst out, without more ado.

"Hang your drinking-cup!" I shouted; "you're just an inhuman swindler. Hang your drinking-cup, I say!" and I made for the door.

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Standish followed me, with imperturbable unconcern, down the stairs. At the moment, the liberated clock above began to strike midday.

"Hear it!" he cried triumphantly, pausing on a step. "It proclaims its emancipation! It speaks to its deliverer with a voice of silver! 'A bargain is a bargain,' it shrills. 'A ' "

Where was I! My brain was stuffed with wool, it seemed, and my eyes were mere balls of smoked glass. In a moment I staggered to my feet. Another shape was poised tottering just above me. The stairway rolled with choking vapour, through which as it slowly dissipated by way of an open skylight a wreck of burst paper and broken banister rails was revealed.

As sight returned to me, I stared up at Standish. He looked like nothing so much as a torn Japanese doll. Then with one impulse we laboured up through the inferno, and stood at the doorway of the shattered museum.

I think there cannot have remained two consecutive inches of sound material anywhere in the room. The entire show was exploded into shivers. Porcelain, tapestry, enamels, with the cabinets that had enshrined them all were committed in undistinguishable fragments to a common ruin.

Tout vient à sait attendre: Everything comes to him that knows how to wait even a very lively retribution for his sins.

"Standish," I said (I could only speak in croaks) "the patriot's clock, Standish it must have been set to midday! Standish you have been a good angel to the bombazine widow."