

April 2011 Raspberry & Vine Short Story Competition Winner

The Clock by Dorothy Martin

Gloria Baker gazed admiringly at the new lounge suite. Upholstered in gold Italian leather, it blended beautifully with everything else in the room...except... that mantel clock. She'd never liked it—dark, ugly, squat thing. She couldn't understand why Charlie hadn't sold it long ago. He said it was a family heirloom but he was usually quite unsentimental about such things.

I'm going to get rid of it, she decided impulsively. When he gets back from his trip tomorrow, he won't even notice it's gone. Quickly, she looked up the phone number for Newman's Antiques.

Half an hour later, George Newman arrived at the house. 'Hmm...quite a nice piece,' he told her, 'English, early twentieth century—mahogany with a rosewood inlay, French movement. Unfortunately, there are signs of some restoration work on the base which detracts from its value.' With just the right note of regret in his voice, he added, 'I'm afraid I can only offer you three hundred dollars.'

'Fine,' replied Gloria, not even attempting to haggle. She just wanted to see the last of that damned clock.

George wrote her a cheque and carried his new acquisition out to his car, well satisfied with his bargain. As he drove off, he decided to put a thousand dollars on the clock—a very nice profit.

That afternoon, Mary Bassett, a sprightly seventy-five year old widow, walked purposefully into George Newman's shop. She loved antiques—especially clocks—and often browsed among George's wares, never able to afford the items she fancied. But today was different; she had just inherited a legacy of two thousand dollars from an aged aunt. Her heart leapt as she spotted the Edwardian mantel clock and she headed straight for it.

George Newman had recognised her as she entered the shop but knew she was a browser, not a buyer. Today, however, he noticed that she was paying considerable attention to his new clock, not even flinching when she read the price tag.

George smelled a sale. 'Are you interested in the clock, Madam? It's beautiful, isn't it?' He pointed out all its features, omitting to mention the restoration work.

Mary wasn't a haggler either, and paid the price without a quibble. George was elated as he asked for her details.

'Mrs Mary Bassett,' she answered, '19 Waratah Court.'

George promised to have the clock delivered early the following day.

At 9.45 the next morning, Tom Williams parked Newman's delivery van outside 19 Waratah Street, carried the mantel clock up to the front door of the house and rang the bell. After a few moments, the door opened to reveal a rather nervous, frowzy-looking woman.

'I'm delivering the clock you bought yesterday at Newman's. You're...Mary Bassett?' he asked, after checking the delivery docket.

The woman hesitated as if she didn't quite know who she was, then said, 'Yes, that's right.'

'Just sign here, thanks,' said Tom, thinking that he'd never seen a more unlikely antiques collector. 'I'll just carry the clock inside for you.' He placed it on a small gate-leg table in the hall then headed back out to the van. It takes all sorts, he thought to himself as he drove off.

The woman hurried out to the kitchen and fished her mobile phone out of her handbag. 'It's finally on, Stan,' she said breathlessly. 'Mrs Harding's just gone out—some family emergency—decided she could actually trust me to be here on my own. Back the van into the carport when you come. Nobody's home next-door. Hurry—I don't know when she'll be back...Oh, and I've got an extra bonus for you!'

Rose took a deep breath. She'd been cleaning this house every Friday for six weeks now. She'd worked hard at gaining Mrs Harding's trust and it had at last paid off. Having had ample opportunities to check out everything of value in the house, she knew exactly what she wanted to take. She started in the master bedroom, tipping all her employer's jewellery into a bag. By the time her husband arrived, she'd added several Dresden figurines from the lounge room, all carefully wrapped in hand towels from Mrs Harding's linen cupboard and had filled another bag with silver pieces.

Stan whistled when she showed him the clock. 'So that's the bonus. How did that get here?'

'Delivered from Newman's just before I called you. The driver must have had the wrong address. He was after a woman called Bassett.'

‘And you obliged him by saying that you were her,’ grinned Stan. ‘That’s my Rosie. You always could think on your feet.’

He carried the bag of silverware out to the van and came back for the clock. Rose followed him with the other bag, shutting the back door behind her. Stan closed the doors of the van and they drove off, feeling very pleased with themselves.

In the house behind Hardings, Albert Ingram put down his binoculars He’d been watching these proceedings, first with curiosity, then with suspicion. His hobby was bird-watching but since his retirement, he had branched out to include neighbour-watching. Gaps in the foliage gave him a reasonable view of the back of the Harding house.

He’d recognised the woman—she cleaned house for Mrs Harding every Friday. Albert had immediately trained his binoculars on the van’s number plate, and hastily scribbled down the licence number. Then he dialed the number of the police station.

The van was registered in the name of Stanley Clark, a villain well-known to the police. He and his wife had pulled all sorts of scams on an unsuspecting public but nothing could ever be proved against them. Two uniformed police officers were immediately dispatched to Stan’s address with orders to stay out of sight until the van arrived.

Meanwhile, Detectives Jamieson and Bowen were on their way towards the Harding house along the main road, hoping to intercept the Clarks. ‘Praise be for nosy neighbours, Harry,’ said the Inspector. ‘I don’t know where we’d be without them.’

‘Look sir,’ said his Sergeant excitedly. ‘There’s the van.’ He pointed to the vehicle coming towards them.

‘My God, you’re right, Harry. Get after them.’

After Stan passed the detectives’ car, he saw it start a U-turn. ‘They’re following us,’ he moaned, glancing in the side mirror. ‘It’s the cops. I recognise Jamieson.’

‘Are you sure?’ Rose asked in panic.

‘Of course I’m bloody sure. I’ve been grilled by ‘im enough times.’

‘Try and lose them.’

Stan made a frantic left turn at the next corner and raced across the first intersection, totally ignoring the give-way sign and having to swerve violently to avoid a collision. He tried to get the van back in control but ended up on the footpath, with the front bumper buried in a tibouchina bush. He threw the gear-stick into reverse but by then the detectives’ car had pulled up alongside and he knew the game was up.

Highly pleased, Jamieson looked in the driver’s window. Stan had a bruise on his forehead and Rose seemed a bit dazed. ‘Well, if it isn’t Stan Clark—and Rose too. Now, why were you trying to give us the slip? Got something in the back that you don’t want us to see?... Keys!’

With a resigned look, Stan handed them over. The Detective Inspector threw them to his junior officer, who opened up the van. He lifted up a blanket, revealing an antique clock and two bulging bags. Unzipping one of these, he saw the glint of silver.

‘Looks like the loot from a burglary, sir,’ he called.

‘All right,’ said Jamieson. ‘Get out, both of you. You’re under arrest. Hands on the vehicle.’

By now, a squad car had arrived, into which the dispirited Clarks were bundled. The detective sergeant followed it in the van, with Jamieson bringing up the rear.

At that moment, Charlie Baker unlocked the front door of his imposing brick home, deposited his case in the master bedroom and called out to his wife. Gloria emerged from the TV room.

‘I didn’t hear you come in, Charlie. How was the trip?’ she asked, giving him a kiss.

‘Very satisfactory. Hell, I need a beer. Get me one, will you, doll?’ he asked, tugging at his tie. Gloria brought the beer and he gulped it down thirstily.

‘Did the new lounge suite come?’

‘Oh, yes. Come and have a look at it, Charlie,’ she answered, with a just a tiny flutter of apprehension.

Her husband surveyed the new purchase from the lounge room archway. ‘It looks good.’ His eyes roved round the room until they reached the mantelpiece. Suddenly, his face went white. ‘Where’s the clock?’ he demanded, his voice threatening.

Gloria put on a defiant air. ‘I sold it, if you must know. It looked so dreadfully out of place with the new lounge suite...and I didn’t think you’d care!’

‘You stupid cow!’ yelled Charlie, his face livid with rage. ‘Who’d you sell it to?’

‘Oh – er – Newman’s Antiques,’ stuttered Gloria, alarmed at her husband’s furious reaction.

‘Get him on the phone! Tell him you’ve changed your mind and want the clock back!’

‘It’s sure to be still there. I only sold it yesterday,’ Gloria said in a shaky voice.

‘It better be!’

To her horror, George Newman told her that the clock had been sold yesterday afternoon and delivered this morning.

‘I need to know who bought it. I really want to get it back,’ said Gloria frantically, her eyes fixed on Charlie’s grim face. He looked ready to explode.

‘I’m afraid I can’t disclose that information,’ replied George primly.

‘Please, Mr Newman...’

Charlie grabbed the phone. ‘Listen to me, Newman!’ he snarled menacingly. ‘You cough up that name and address right now or I’ll come round and beat it out of you.’

At the other end of the line, George broke out in a cold sweat. ‘All right, all right,’ he cringed, moving to the computer and bringing up Mary Bassett’s transaction onto the screen. He read out her details in a trembling voice.

‘Now that wasn’t so hard, was it?’ growled Charlie and hung up.

George sank down shakily onto a nearby Queen Anne chair.

‘You all right?’ asked Tom, coming in from the back room.

‘No, I’m not all right. I was just threatened with violence by some brute on the phone demanding the name and address of the buyer of that mantel clock’

‘What did he want to know that for?’

‘The woman who sold me the clock called. She wanted to buy it back. I told her it had been sold and that I couldn’t divulge any details. She was all upset, then this lout—

her husband I suppose—came on and said he'd beat me up if I didn't give him the information.'

'And did you tell him?'

'Of course I did. I'm no hero. And I can't imagine why that wretched woman would want the clock back after just selling it to me yesterday. Go and make me a cup tea, Tom, would you? I feel quite shaken up. Oh, and add a little something medicinal – you know where the bottle is.'

Mary Bassett looked at her watch for the umpteenth time. It was 11.35. The mantel clock should have been delivered long before this. She looked up the number for Newman's Antiques and dialled it.

'George Newman speaking.'

'It's Mrs Bassett, Mr Newman,' said Mary, thinking that he sounded rather flustered. 'It's about that clock I bought from you yesterday. You said it would be delivered first thing this morning but it hasn't come yet.'

'Not come? But Tom did the deliveries early and I know he took the clock. Just hold on while I talk to him.'

After a chat with Tom, George came back to the phone. 'Tom says he definitely delivered the clock. The lady said she was Mary Bassett and signed for it. Your address is 19 Waratah Street, isn't it?'

'No, no!' cried Mary, in agitation. 'It's Waratah *Court*.'

'Oh, dear... I guess Tom couldn't read my writing.' So the clock had ended up at the wrong house, thought George, and into the hands of some quick-thinking opportunist.

‘I’m very sorry about the mix-up, Mrs Bassett,’ he said aloud. ‘I’ll send Tom straight back there to sort things out and get the clock.’

‘I hope he *can* get it, Mr Newman,’ said Mary curtly. ‘I’ll be waiting.’

George swore under his breath. *I hope so too*, he thought glumly. He was absolutely fed up with this clock. It had brought him nothing but trouble. Tom came in just then with the cup of fortified tea and George explained the mix-up, sending him off to retrieve the clock and deliver it to its rightful owner.

He felt very uneasy though. What if the woman denied all knowledge of the clock? He’d have to get the police involved then, he supposed. He sighed and sipped his tea.

At the police station, Jamieson and Bowen had just finished making an inventory of the items retrieved from Stan Clark’s van, when the desk sergeant called the Inspector to the phone. ‘It’s a Mrs Harding, sir,’ he grinned, ‘reporting a burglary.’

‘Detective Inspector Jamieson here, Mrs Harding... Well I can put your mind at rest about your stolen property. We have it here and have arrested and charged the felons involved. Could you come down to the station right away and identify the items? ...Thank you... Goodbye.’

A few minutes after Mrs Harding had backed out of her driveway en route to the police station, Tom Williams pulled up in front of her house. He had in fact passed her car on the road. Discovering that no one was home, he called George to report the fact.

‘Well, you may as well come back here and have your lunch, Tom, then try again later.’

At 12.10, Charlie Baker stopped his car in front of 19 Waratah Court. He had instructed Gloria to put on a good act and offer the woman a tempting sum for the clock. If she proved obstinate, he would have to apply a little persuasion. Gloria walked up to the front door, which opened at her ring.

‘Mary Bassett? My name is Gloria Baker. May I come in?’

Mary opened the door wide. ‘When I heard the bell, I thought it was going to be the man from Newman’s bringing my clock.’

Gloria went pale. ‘What do you mean? Don’t you have it?’ she asked in agitation.

Mary frowned. ‘How does that concern you?’

Recovering her composure, Gloria forced a smile. ‘Well, you see, it’s the clock I’ve come about. I was the one who sold it to George Newman. My husband was *so* upset and angry with me when he found out and said I had to get it back. I didn’t realise he was so attached to it.’ Gloria pretended to be near to tears. ‘I’d be willing to offer a lot more than you paid for it...But you say the clock isn’t here yet? George Newman said it was delivered this morning.’

‘It was,’ replied Mary, ‘but to the wrong address—Waratah *Street* not Court. I waited all morning then I finally called Newman’s a little while ago. The delivery man is getting it.’

‘Would you consider selling it back to me then?’ pleaded Gloria. ‘I’d make it really worth your while.’

‘I really fell in love with that clock as soon as I saw it...but... if it means so much to your husband... well, I suppose I *could* part with it.’

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‘Oh, thank you, Mrs Bassett,’ grovelled Gloria, while wondering how anyone could possibly love that hideous clock. ‘You’re very kind. I’ll phone at 2.00 to see if the clock’s been delivered.’

Gloria simpered her way to the front door but her expression quickly changed to apprehension as she walked to the car.

‘Where’s the clock?’ demanded Charlie.

‘Not here yet,’ Gloria replied tensely. ‘It was delivered to the wrong address. Newman’s are sorting it out. I’ll call Mary Bassett at 2.00.’

When she arrived at the police station, Mrs Harding was shown the recovered goods. She was greatly relieved to see them, was full of praise for the efficiency of the police and shocked at the deviousness of her cleaning lady.

‘What about the clock?’ asked Jamieson.

‘Oh, no. That isn’t mine. I’ve never seen it before.’

The Inspector was puzzled. He’d just assumed it was part of the haul from the house. Assuring Mrs Harding that her property would be released to her as soon as possible, he showed her out then went to have a word with Rose Clark. She admitted the truth about the clock, deciding that lying about it would only make things worse for her.

Jamieson then took a closer look at the clock and noticed a sticker on the back with a number and Newman’s Antiques printed on it. He immediately called George Newman, asking him to come down to the station to identify the clock. A relieved George arrived a few minutes later but was aghast to find that the clock was part of a robbery haul and would be held at the station for the time being.

He related the whole saga of the clock, including the threat of physical violence. The Inspector was becoming very interested in why this clock seemed to be so important to certain people.

‘What was the name of the woman you bought the clock from, Mr Newman?’

George thought for a moment. ‘Gloria Baker,’ he said, ‘Bellevue Avenue.’

‘So—she sold the clock to you yesterday and today, she is desperate to get it back,’ mused the Inspector, as pieces of the puzzle slid into place in his mind. ‘All right, Mr Newman. Thank you very much for your help. We’ll be in touch.’

‘Interesting, eh, Harry?’ said Jamieson after George left. ‘Gloria Baker, Bellevue Avenue—you know who her husband is, don’t you?’

‘Yes, of course—Charlie Baker—our prime suspect for the diamond heist.’

‘His wife wants the clock back right after selling it. And Charlie threatens to beat Newman up when he won’t supply the buyer’s name... You know what I think?...The diamonds are in that clock.’

Harry whistled. ‘And he’d kept Gloria in the dark about it. Then for some reason, she decided to get rid of the clock without consulting Charlie. He must have gone ballistic when he found out!’

‘Well, let’s take another look at this clock.’

When the back was opened, however, there was no sign of any diamonds.

‘They’ve got to be in here somewhere,’ muttered the Inspector.

‘What about a secret compartment? There’s enough room in the base.’

‘Yes, and if you look closely, you can see that some work has been done on it.’

The two detectives both tried their hand at manipulating every likely spot but to no avail.

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‘My God, Harry! The Bakers have the buyer’s name and address now—this Mary Bassett.’ He looked at his watch. ‘1.15. They would’ve contacted her as soon as they got her address. I’d better give her a call. Hope they didn’t threaten her.’

Mary Bassett was quite relieved to hear the voice of the law. The clock still hadn’t arrived and she had been feeling more and more nervous since that woman’s visit. Mary had sensed an air of desperation underlying her words—even a hint of menace perhaps. She told the Detective Inspector about Gloria’s visit and that she would be phoning at 2.00.

‘I’ll come round straightaway,’ said Jamieson. ‘If she calls before we get there, tell her you’ll have the clock before 2.00.’

‘But how do you know that?’ asked Mary, puzzled.

‘I’ll be bringing it with me.’ Hanging up the phone, he turned to Sergeant Bowen. ‘Come on, Harry. There’s only one way to do this if we’re to catch Charlie Baker red-handed. It’s risky but we’ll have to let Mary Bassett sell the clock back to Gloria Baker.’

They reached Mary Bassett’s house at 1.50. She was very relieved to see the clock but puzzled. Jamieson explained how it had ended up at the police station and without being too specific, he told her of his suspicions. ‘Will you help us catch these villains, Mrs Bassett?’

‘Yes, if I can.’

‘Gloria Baker will call any minute. Tell her the clock’s been delivered.’

Before he could say any more, the phone rang and Mary passed on the news Gloria had been waiting to hear.

‘She said she’ll be here in fifteen minutes, Inspector.’

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‘Right. Now, Mrs Bassett, the Sergeant and I will remain out of sight across the hall. Act reluctant about parting with the clock. I’m sure Gloria will offer you a very tidy sum. Take it and hand over the clock. Their car will be kept in sight and I have men hidden outside the Bakers’ house. Hopefully, we’ll be able to catch Charlie Baker in the act of opening the clock’s secret compartment.’

The two detectives retired to the bedroom. When they heard a car pull up, Harry Bowen peeped round the edge of the blind. ‘Charlie’s with her.’

‘Maybe he’ll want to make sure the diamonds are still in the clock before he leaves here.’

‘That could be our chance then, sir.’

‘Exactly.’

The Bakers walked up to the front door. ‘This is my husband,’ explained Gloria to Mary, who smiled nervously and led the way to the lounge room.

‘You haven’t changed your mind, I hope,’ said Gloria, with an edge to her voice.

‘I suppose not,’ sighed Mary, ‘although it’s such a lovely clock.’

Charlie was barely holding himself in. He pulled a wad of notes from his pocket. ‘Here’s ten grand. Now let me have the clock!’

He slapped the cash down on the coffee table. Mary, dumbfounded, just gestured in agreement and Charlie swooped on the clock. ‘Stay there with her,’ he told his wife, heading out of their sight into the hall and placing the clock on a small table.

The two detectives had the door open a crack and watched Charlie Baker open the back of the clock and put his hand inside. There was a click and the sound of wood

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sliding on wood. He withdrew a small, soft bundle and unfolded it to reveal a heap of diamonds, which sparkled dazzlingly in the afternoon light.

Jamieson flung the door wide. It was all over in a few minutes. Charlie and Gloria were arrested and taken off in the squad car which Jamieson summoned from around the corner.

‘We’re very indebted to you for your assistance, Mrs Bassett,’ he said to Mary. ‘I have to go now but I’ll be back to talk to you later. Make sure you put that money out of sight!’

Back at the station, with the two felons under lock and key, Sergeant Bowen observed, ‘A good day’s work, sir.’

‘Yes, Harry—very satisfactory. All that remains now is to have another word with Mary Bassett. I’ll see you later.’

When Mary opened her front door to him, Jamieson said, ‘I thought I’d better escort you to the bank to deposit that money Charlie Baker gave you. I didn’t fancy the idea of you having that much cash in the house over the weekend.’

‘I don’t feel right about keeping all that money, Inspector,’ said Mary as she took down a ginger jar from the mantelpiece and pulled out the wad of notes.

Jamieson winced at her choice of hiding-place. ‘Better let me carry that,’ he said, ‘and don’t have any qualms about keeping it. It’s legitimately yours—the proceeds from the sale of the clock. You certainly earned it.’

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At the bank, he escorted her to the astonished teller, while she deposited the \$10,000. During the drive home, he said, ‘Now you can treat yourself to another antique clock—several in fact.’

‘I believe I’ve gone off antiques, Inspector—especially clocks. I think I’ll take an overseas trip instead.’

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