

A Perfectly Fair Business Deal

by Chris Rose

It was like a piece of amber. It was like a warm, wine-red jewel. As soon as I saw it, I knew it had to be mine.

It was a Giordano, of course. I knew it was a Giordano as soon as I saw it. There are very few Giordano violins left in the world. An expert in New York said that there were twelve. Now I knew that the expert was wrong. I had just found the thirteenth.



But let me start from the beginning. A story should start at the beginning, not in the middle, or at the end. My name is Geoffrey Hobbes-Smith. I am an expert in antique musical instruments. I live in Oxford, where I have a small but important business. I buy and sell antique musical instruments. It is necessary for me to travel a lot because of my work. I frequently visit France, Italy and Germany, and sometimes I go as far as America or even Japan. I don't like travelling, but it is necessary.

Six months ago, I was in Italy. I had been invited to attend a festival of early music on the island of Ischia. Ischia in the spring was beautiful. An island as green as an emerald, and around it, a sea as blue as the sky above. I stayed in an enormous villa, which once belonged to a famous English composer. It had a huge garden, with hundreds of lemon trees. The lemons in Ischia

were as big as footballs. I don't like travelling, but sometimes being in a different place is a pleasure.

The music festival was very boring. There were a lot of enthusiastic students there, but there weren't any famous or important musicians. I only like listening to famous and important musicians. Students should stay at home and practise – not play their instruments in public! After one or two concerts, I was bored. I preferred to stay in my lovely garden and look at the deep blue sea and the dark green trees.

When the last night of the festival arrived, I was happy. "Tomorrow, I will be able to go back home!" I thought. But unfortunately, things became more complicated. Because I hadn't been to many of the concerts, I thought that I should at least attend the final one. I arrived when the small orchestra were tuning up, and mentally prepared myself for another boring evening. I even closed my eyes and thought about sleeping.

The orchestra began to play. As I expected, it was nothing remarkable. They played pieces by Bach and Purcell which were nice enough, but nothing special. After about an hour, I looked at my watch and thought about leaving. I had made a mistake. I shouldn't have come. Perhaps it would be impolite to leave? I don't care, I thought, I'll leave after the next piece.

It was when the next piece started that I saw it. I don't know how I had missed it before. Perhaps it was because the violin had a more important part in this piece. This time, however, it was unmistakable. It was the sound that I noticed first. A Giordano violin has a pure, rich, deep tone, quite different from other old violins. Giordano violins are not as famous as Stradivarius violins, but they are more interesting for an expert. As well as the particular tone they have, they are constructed in a very interesting way. The Maestro Giordano, it is said, had a special secret method for constructing his violins. He had a workshop in Naples where he made musical instruments at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Everybody who entered his workshop had to promise to keep the secret for the rest of

their lives. I don't believe this story. I think it's superstitious nonsense. However, I must say, this story is the reason why some people pay a lot of money for Giordano violins.

Excuse me, I am forgetting the story. I was there, at a small, unimportant concert by a small, unimportant orchestra at a small, unimportant music festival on a small island – and I was looking at a Giordano violin! One of the rarest antique musical instruments in the world! I couldn't believe it!

I looked at the musician who was playing the violin. He was only a boy – probably a student who didn't even know what he was playing. I looked carefully at the amber-coloured instrument. The long neck, the large body, the sound as rich and as warm as summer nights on a Mediterranean island. There was no mistake. It was definitely a Giordano, and I definitely wanted it. It was frustrating: I could see it, but I couldn't have it. The concert seemed to go on for hours – and I couldn't wait for it to finish!

As soon as the piece ended, the audience started to applaud. The musicians stood up and bowed. The audience applauded more, and the musicians bowed again. I thought it would never finish! Finally, the applause stopped and the musicians started to leave the stage. I couldn't wait any longer. I walked up to the stage and went up to the young violin player. I didn't look at the violinist, I looked at the violin.

"It's a nice violin, isn't it?" he said to me. I was surprised - he spoke English very well.
"How did you know I was English?" I asked him.
"You're Mr. Hobbes-Smith, aren't you? From London?"
"Well, no. Actually I'm not from London, I'm from Oxford. But, yes, I am Mr. Hobbes-Smith." I'm quite famous, I thought to myself.
"My name is Giuseppe."
"Pleased to meet you, Giuseppe. Now tell me about your violin. Where did you get it from?"
"Oh, I can't remember. It's my father's. He's got lots of old instruments. I think this violin is quite old, but I'm not sure. It's very nice, isn't it?"
"Er, yes, yes. It is very nice. Very nice indeed."

I couldn't believe it! I was so lucky – the young man, who I thought seemed quite stupid, had no idea that the violin he was playing was an incredibly rare, incredibly valuable antique!

"May I have a look at it?" I asked him.
"Certainly." He gave the violin to me, and for the first time I held it in my hands. It was incredible – the violin actually felt as warm as it looked. It seemed to be almost alive. I held it up to the light to see it better. Yes, the work was definitely Giordano's. And on the back of the neck, in very very small writing, I found the inscription in Latin *Jordanus Neapolis Faciebat Annus 1722*. It was certain! I was so excited, I didn't know what to do. I tried to control myself, and asked Giuseppe some more questions.
"Would it be possible to meet your father?"
"Certainly. Why don't you come to dinner with us?"
"That would be very nice, thank you."

Five minutes later, I was in Giuseppe's car and together we were driving through the narrow, curving roads across the island to his father's house. While he was driving, Giuseppe was talking on his mobile telephone all the time. I thought it seemed dangerous, but I didn't say anything. I think he was talking to his father – perhaps he was telling his father that I was coming to dinner. I don't know – I don't speak Italian! He was talking for a long time, and it all seemed very serious. Finally, we arrived at the house. It was an incredible place – another villa as big as the house where I was staying, but it seemed to be a lot older. Giuseppe's father was a charming old gentleman with elegant clothes and a long white moustache. He seemed to live in the place all alone. There was nobody else there that evening – only Giuseppe, his father and myself.
"Hello, father. This is Mr. Hobbes-Smith, from London. I told you about him!"
"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Hobbes-Smith."
"Pleased to meet you, Mr..."
"Call me Franco!"
"Pleased to meet you Franco! And, actually, I'm not from London, I'm from Oxford."

We had a lovely dinner of baked fish and drank lots of white wine. The conversation continued until it was very late. I was very tired when Giuseppe's father finally showed me his collection of antique musical instruments. His collection wasn't very interesting. There was only one thing that I was interested in – the Giordano violin. Finally, I started talking about it.
"The violin that Giuseppe was playing tonight - is that an old instrument?" I was trying to hide my interest and excitement. Giuseppe's father was

silent for some time, and then he said, "Yes, I think it is. But to be honest, I'm not sure if it's valuable, or interesting."

"I think it's quite interesting – but I don't know anything about it!"

I know it's not right to tell lies. But sometimes you have to do everything you can to get ahead in this world.

"I'd like to buy that old violin from you!" I continued. "Let me make you a generous offer."
"Well, Mr. Hobbes-Smith," replied the old man. "I am an amateur in this field. I'm not an expert. I don't really know a lot about antique musical instruments."

"I am an expert in this field, though," I told him, "and I think that this old violin is interesting, but perhaps not very valuable. I think £200 would be a fair price."

The old man started talking to his son Giuseppe. I think they were calculating how much £200 was in Italian money. The old man was shaking his head.

"My father doesn't want to seem impolite," said Giuseppe, "but he thinks that £200 is perhaps not quite generous enough!"

We all laughed.

"I can see that your father is a clever man, Giuseppe," I said. "He knows how to do business! I'll offer £250, but no more!"

The old man and his son started talking again. "It is a very generous offer, Mr. Hobbes-Smith," said the old man, "and I am happy to accept it!" I couldn't believe how lucky I was! I was paying only £250 for a violin which I could sell for £25,000! I quickly wrote a cheque, took the violin and called a taxi to take me home before they changed their minds.

"Goodbye! Goodbye Giuseppe! Goodbye Franco! Nice meeting you!"

"Goodbye, Mr. Hobbes-Smith! Have a good journey back to London!"

"Oxford!"

"I hope to see you again," said Giuseppe. I hope I never see you again, I thought.

The next morning I woke up early, packed my suitcases and went to the airport. I was extremely happy about the incredible bargain I had found, but at the same time I was a little worried. Let me explain why. Even though Europe is now a single market, there are some things which it is still not possible to take from one country to another. Anything which we call 'artistic or cultural

heritage' - works of art, or antiques, for example – are restricted by a lot of legal bureaucracy. This is why I was worried when I arrived at the airport. I checked in my suitcases, and took the violin as hand luggage. I didn't want to put the valuable violin through the X-ray machine at the security check. I had to open the case and show the instrument to the customs officers.

Three customs officers took the violin and looked at it very carefully. They were all talking very seriously. They called a more important officer. The important officer looked at the violin very carefully. Then he looked at my passport. Then he looked carefully at me. He talked with the other customs officers some more. Finally he put the violin back in its case and told me to get on the plane. Again, I couldn't believe my luck. I breathed a sigh of relief and thought I was the luckiest person in the world. But the problem hadn't finished yet! Now I had to go through British customs.

When I got off the plane my heart was already beating very quickly. It sounded like a drum – I thought that everybody could hear it. I waited for my suitcases at the baggage reclaim point and thought that police or customs officers were going to arrest me at any second. Because it was a European flight, I could decide if I wanted to declare anything I was bringing into the country. There were two exits. If I take the green exit, I thought to myself, I can leave the airport without saying anything – even though it is illegal! If I take the red exit, it will be necessary to show the violin, and I could be arrested!

I took the green exit. I walked out of the airport without saying anything. I went to get a taxi. When I was getting into the taxi, I felt a hand on my shoulder.

"Excuse me, Sir" a voice said. It's over! I thought, I'm going to be arrested and put in prison!

"I think you've forgotten your suitcase." I turned round and saw that one of my suitcases was still on the ground.

"Thank you!" I said.

I was certainly the luckiest person in the world.

I don't really think that I did anything illegal. I'm not sure that I was even dishonest. The old man got £250. He doesn't need a lot of money. The young violin player has another violin he can play. I made a clever business deal. That's all.

Sometimes you have to do everything you can to get ahead in this world.

When I finally arrived home, I felt relieved. I took my key out of my pocket to open the door...and found that the door was already open.

"Oh no!" I said to myself. "Burglars!"

I walked into my flat slowly and carefully. I was worried that there was somebody still in the flat. I was right. There was somebody still in the flat. There were two people in the flat. The young violinist Giuseppe and his old father were sitting in my living room.

"Hello again, Mr. Hobbes-Smith!" they said. "We were waiting for you."

I was horrified. It was incredible. How was it possible that they were already here? What did they want? How did they know where I lived?

"We must say thank you again Mr. Hobbes-

Smith," said the old man, "but not for the £250!

Did you really think I was so stupid?"

I didn't say anything. I couldn't speak.

"We already knew that you have a good business dealing in antique musical instruments. We knew that you were not always completely honest in your business dealings! We wanted to bring the Giordano violin into Britain. Here we can sell it to a rich collector. But we knew it was dangerous to take it through customs. Thank you again, Mr. Hobbes-Smith, for the favour you did for us. Don't worry! We won't tell anybody about what you did! Now we know how well you work, we can ask you to do more favours for us in the future."

I was starting to think that perhaps I wasn't as lucky as I thought.

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