

## **The Violin**

Darien Chapman laid the jacket of his Italian suit, made to measure by his tailor in Milan, across the backseat of his car. Damn fools, he thought, as he slipped behind the wheel and slammed the door.

He started the engine of his fully restored 1955 Bentley S1 and pulled out.

Those cretins, wasting his entire afternoon. He should have known it was too good to be true. A 17th-century Italian marquetry table by Lucio de Lucci. Like hell. It was a 19th-century reproduction. And to think those idiots couldn't even tell the difference. That was the last time he would drive an hour and a half to Folton to appraise anything for them.

A dealer in high-end antiques and art as well as a widely recognized expert, Darien often responded to requests by members of the trade to authenticate and evaluate their rarest and most precious acquisitions.

Now that he had left Folton and driven through the countryside for some thirty minutes, still fuming and muttering to himself, he turned on the classical radio station to calm himself down. Ah, his favorite. Solo violin. A historic recording by David Oistrach of Locatelli's

“Harmonic Labyrinth.” He recognized the opening phrases immediately and let himself be carried away by the rippling flow of arpeggios. Another world.

Coming out of his reverie when the piece ended and the announcer spoke again, Damien saw a sign that said, “Entering Geigersville.” He realized he had overshot by a couple of exits the turnoff to the highway that led back to his upscale home in the suburbs of Hamstead. Great. Just what he needed. This was really not his day. At least he could take the next exit and make a U-turn to get back on the highway going the other direction. It would only cost him fifteen minutes. Twenty at the most.

Once Darien had exited and turned left under the overpass, however, the road did not curve back to the highway but continued straight. He had no choice but to follow it. At the first opportunity he took a left in the hope of meandering back to the freeway.

Oh, my God, where had he ended up? Look at those run-down little shops. Bars on the windows. Steel gratings over the doors . . . Broken streetlights . . . Garbage on the sidewalks . . . Trash in the gutters . . . People with clothes from the Salvation Army, probably unemployed, maybe homeless . . . A drunk sitting on the curb with a bottle of wine in a paper bag . . . He had to get out of there.

In the next block Darien saw a shabby street musician standing on the corner playing a cheap fiddle for spare change. He couldn’t imagine what a horrible screech was coming from that thing. What was he fiddling? “Old MacDonald Had A Farm”? He was glad he couldn’t hear it.

As soon as he passed the fiddler, Darien ran over a broken beer bottle in the street and blew out his left front tire. He couldn’t believe it. What else could go wrong today?

He pulled over to the curb, got out of his car, and opened the trunk. Then he took the jack and set it down by the flat tire. When he stood up and turned around, he saw a man in front of him, holding a gun.

“Gimme your wallet.”

Oh, no. This was it. What chance did he have? The great Darien Chapman gunned down by a street punk in a trashy neighborhood. His forehead broke out in a sweat; his heart pounded in his chest. Steadying his trembling hand, Darien reached back for his wallet, which held several hundred dollars in cash and four or five credit cards. If he was going to die, he would die with dignity. He refused to show a common thief his fear.

When Darien stretched out his arm to hand his wallet to the robber, his watch showed from under the cuff of his shirt—a Patek Philippe World Time, 33-jewelled, 18k rose-gold timepiece with a silver dial and sapphire crystal, worth upwards of forty thousand dollars.

“Gimme the watch too, or I’ll put a bullet through your head.” The robber raised his gun to eye level.

Just as Darien started to unfasten his watch, someone snuck up to the robber from behind his car, clutching the tire iron from the open trunk. The robber spun around, and the stranger dealt a sharp blow to his wrist, fracturing it and sending the gun flying.

“Get the hell out of here before I crack your skull open.” The stranger held the tire iron high, ready to strike a second blow.

The robber ran off clutching his right wrist with his left hand.

“Thank God you were there,” said Darien, as relieved as he was stunned. He now recognized the stranger as the street musician. With his eyebrows raised a bit, Darien stared at

the man's torn gray knit cap, his dirty red flannel shirt, his quilted brown vest, his tattered blue jeans, and his boots with duct tape wrapped around the toes.

"Here, let me pay you something for your trouble," Darien finally said, still holding his wallet.

"No time for that. We gotta fix your flat and get you out of here fast. You're a sitting duck. What were you thinking coming into this neighborhood in a car like that and dressed in those clothes? Were you trying to get yourself killed?"

In ten minutes the street musician had put the spare tire on, given Darien directions back to the highway, and picked up his violin. Fifteen minutes later Darien was taking the cutoff back to Hamstead. He suddenly realized that he hadn't even gotten the street musician's name.

Where in the world had he come from? He must have heard the blowout and seen the robber approaching. Then he probably packed up his fiddle and crept towards the car, staying hidden by the open trunk lid. He would have set his fiddle in the trunk, picked up the tire iron, and tiptoed up to the robber. Did he retrieve the gun from the sidewalk afterwards or leave it there for someone else to find? Well, it didn't matter to Darien.

Even if the fiddler didn't know how to play the violin, it was awfully nice of him to help. That street musician probably saved his life. After the crook got his wallet and his watch, he would have just shot him and stolen his car. In fact, that little fiddler risked his life for him. Going up against a gun with a tire iron. That guy had some nerve. What if he had gotten killed? Darien didn't think he would have done the same for him. No, he felt sure he wouldn't have.

Darien would not admit to himself his sense of shame that he had held in contempt, because of his appearance, the man who saved his life.

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The next morning at nine Darien unlocked the door to his shop, entered, and locked the door behind him. His store was not open to the general public. Appointments only, and only for the wealthiest clients. He was greeted by a marble statue of a male warrior, a 2nd-century Roman copy of a lost Greek original by Polyclitus. Just past it there stood an intricately carved 12th-century baptismal font from a Gothic church in Champagne-Ardenne, France. A hunting-scene tapestry from the Este court, woven in Ferrara, Italy, in the 1530s, hung on the wall behind it. To the left of the tapestry was a small 17th-century Flemish painting, a minor allegorical work by Jacob Jordaens. The entire showroom overflowed with such treasures. Scarcely was there anything in the whole store on sale for under a hundred thousand dollars, and some items ran into the millions. Darien didn't even consider anything made after 1800 a real antique.

Strewn on his desk lay trade magazines in Italian, French, Spanish, German, and Russian—languages that Darien had mastered fairly well, doing much of his business in the major cities where they were spoken. He took a seat and began leafing through this month's *Zeitschrift für Kunst und Antiquitäten*.

Good Lord, why hadn't he seen this before? How in the world did he miss it?

His eyes had alighted on the notice of a recently discovered and just authenticated 1649 Jacob Stainer violin to be auctioned at the Dorotheum in Vienna.

He banged his fist on the desk. That violin was his. He had to have it.

Darien picked up the phone and called Otto Kaufmann, one of his agents, a native German naturalized as an American citizen.

“Ja, hallo.”

“This is Darien. I need you to book a flight to Vienna as soon as possible. A Jacob Stainer violin is coming up for auction at the Dorotheum in less than a week. Get there and check out the competition. Let me know what we’re looking at. Got it?”

“Yeah, I got it.”

Roughly forty-eight hours later Darien received a call back from Otto.

“The competition is pretty stiff. A couple of private collectors are looking at it, a bank, and even the Wiener Kunsthistorisches Museum.”

“How high do you think they will go?”

“It’s hard to say. How high are you willing to go?”

“Mmm, let’s say an even million. That should come to about 750,000 Euros, give or take.”

“Okay. I’ll see what I can do. Bye.”

The thought of the Stainer violin reminded Darien of the nameless street musician who had saved his life. For the rest of the day the image of that mendicant fiddler kept returning to his mind. He felt as though he had a debt to pay.

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The next morning Darien had no appointments. He put on some jeans, a T-shirt, and a pair of old jogging shoes from the back of his closet. Then he rented a low-budget car for the day since he didn’t own anything inconspicuous in his fleet of collector’s cars. After about an hour’s drive he arrived at the scene of the mugging in Geigersville. The street musician was nowhere to be seen. So Darien circled the block, and still no sign of him. Against his better judgment, he parked the rental car and went into a tobacco shop. The syrupy-sweet smell of flavored pipe tobacco sickened him.

“Excuse me, sir. Do you happen to know a street musician, a fiddler, who sometimes plays on the corner here?”

“Oh, you mean Theodorus Mousa, the violinist,” the portly, bald shop owner said. “Why, everybody knows him. He plays like an angel! That’s heavenly music there.”

“Uh, yes, if you say so. Do you know where I might find him?”

“Well, I can’t rightly say. Our corner is just one of the places he plays. But he has others. He goes wherever the spirit moves him. He’s divinely inspired, you know.”

“Is he now? Well, thank you for your time.”

There was no point in driving around. That poor fiddler could have been anywhere, so Darien headed home. Divinely inspired! He shook his head and chuckled.

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Within a week Otto returned from his trip, violin in hand. The other bidders had stalled out at 950,000 dollars; he got it for 975,000. When Darien lifted it from the case, he thrilled at the sight of it. In rapturous silence he contemplated the delicately warm, orange-chestnut varnish. Next he lightly ran his hand over the highly arched belly and back, which gracefully scooped and then rose to the handsomely rounded rim. He felt the silky smoothness of the grainless ebony fingerboard. Finally, he gently kissed the exquisitely carved face of a woman in place of the usual scroll. He was in love. Peering through one of the elegant, almost vertical, and slightly asymmetrical f-holes, which ended in circles, he could see the label inside with the Latin inscription:

*Jacobus Stainer  
Absam prope Oenipontum  
fecit Cremonae  
1649.*

“Jacob Stainer, from Absam near Innsbruck, made this at Cremona in 1649,” he translated with deep satisfaction. Darien envisioned exhibiting his new purchase at a major world museum, which would place a sign next to it that said, “From the Private Collection of Darien Chapman,” or loaning it to a world-renowned virtuoso and having his name figure largely in the program acknowledgments for every concert he or she gave: “X plays a Jacob Stainer violin on generous loan from Darien Chapman.” Ah, what glory would be his.

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A week later, business again took Darien to Geigersville, where he was mugged, though to nicer part of town. After his appointment he was making his way back to the highway when he passed a city park filled with booths and stands and crowded with people. Apparently they were holding a festival of some kind.

There he was. There on the sidewalk stood Theodorus Mousa playing his fiddle. Open on the ground in front of him lay an instrument case with a dollar bill or two and some loose change inside of it. A small crowd had gathered around him. What the . . . ? It looked as though some of the listeners had tears streaming down their cheeks. Less than a half a block ahead a car pulled out, and Darien parked his vehicle in its place. When he got out, he stopped, transfixed.

He was hearing Bach’s “Fugue in G Minor.” True, because of the cheap instrument the tone sounded a little thin, and the outdoor acoustics could not match those of a concert hall. But the intonation remained absolutely perfect throughout, the phrasing exquisitely elegant, and the dynamics minutely precise. As though two or three violins were playing at once, the separation of the voices came through limpidly clear. Darien found the tempo exhilarating, the feeling and passion soul-rending, and yet the entire execution seemingly effortless. Overwhelmed, Darien was shaken to his core. Had he not been in a hundred of the finest concert halls in Europe and



America, where he had listened to the performances of the greatest virtuosi of our times? Yet he had never heard anything like this. The final note sounded, and Darien remained breathless. Once again he felt ashamed that he had disdained the musical ability of a man whom he had never heard play.

Theodorus now took a bow to acknowledge the applause of the small crowd. Just as he was rising, a jogger accidentally bumped into him. The blow knocked Theodorus to the ground and sent the violin soaring straight up into the air. Landing on the sidewalk, it shattered to pieces.

Theodorus crawled over to it and gathered up the fragments, clutching them to his breast like a mother holding a child who had just died in her arms. He knelt there and wailed.

Everyone, including the jogger, stood there in stunned silence. Eventually Theodorus rose to his feet and headed off, tenderly cradling the remains of his broken instrument. When the jogger tried to apologize and see what he could do about the violin, Theodorus appeared not even to hear him and did not respond.

Darien hurried into a submarine sandwich shop across the street. When he opened the door, the smell of greasy meatballs slapped him in the face.

“Say, do you know the violinist who was playing out there?” he asked the young man behind the counter.

“Theodorus Mousa? Why, sure. Who doesn’t?”

“Do you happen to know where he lives?”

“He stays in a tenement just a couple of blocks up the next side street.”

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After a bit of detective work Darien Chapman succeeded in locating the street musician’s exact address. He arrived there the next morning around 10:15. Outside, apparently unemployed

men leaned against the walls, smoking and passing a bottle back and forth. The building had no security, and Darien was able to open the door and step into the trash-littered corridor. From behind closed doors he could hear babies crying and mothers screaming at children. Darien shuddered in disgust at the whole filthy, chaotic sight. When he rang the doorbell of apartment nine, Theodorus Mousa opened the door but showed no signs of remembering the man whose life he had saved just a couple of weeks earlier.

“Mr. Mousa, my name is Darien Chapman. I saw what happened to you yesterday, and I have brought something for you.” He handed him a violin case.

Theodorus took the case, walked over to the worn couch, and set it down. When he opened it, his eyes grew big. “Whoa, I ain’t never seen nothing this pretty before.”

Darien followed him in. “Well, it’s a very old and very expensive instrument. Why don’t you take it out and give it a try?”

Theodorus did just that. After adjusting the tuning pegs a bit, he closed his eyes and launched into Paganini’s “Caprice No. 1,” playing at a dizzying speed yet articulating every note distinctly. Darien felt as though he were riding in a race car driving 200 mph, it was that exciting.

“Amazing! Simply amazing!” Darien said when the last note faded away. “And you played the whole thing from memory.”

“That’s because I ain’t never learned to read music. I ain’t never had a teacher or took no lessons.”

“What? How did you learn to play then?”

“My uncle had a pawnshop, and he gave me a violin and a bow when I was seven. Can’t rightly say how I learned to play it, though. It just come natural to me. Sort of like talking.”

“But how do you learn a new piece if you can’t read music?”

“I just hear it once on a CD or a radio, and I know how to play it. And then I never forget it”

Darien sat down on the couch, stunned. Had he not just witnessed it himself, he never would have thought such a thing possible. “Listen, I have connections in the music world. I can get you booked with the best symphony orchestras in the world. Just think, you’ll be playing at Carnegie Hall in New York, the Royal Albert Hall in London, the Salle Pleyel in Paris, the Konzerthaus in Berlin, the Parco della Musica in Rome. You’ll be rich and famous.”

“Naw, that’s all right. I’m happy just playing on the street corners around here.”

“But you deserve to be heard.”

“The people who go to all them fancy places you just said are rich. They can hear good music anytime they want to. If it wasn’t for me, the people around here wouldn’t never hear nothing. This is where I belong.”

Darien was even more stunned now than just a minute ago. “There’s nothing I can say to persuade you?”

“Fraid not.” Theodorus put the violin back in its case, latched the lid, and handed the instrument back to Darien. “Thank you for letting me see your violin. It sure is a nice one.”

“No, it’s yours to keep.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No, I’m quite serious. No one deserves it as much as you.”

“But I can’t—“

“My decision is final. Now there’s nothing *you* can say to persuade *me*.”

Darien shook the hand of the astonished musician and opened the door to leave. Just before he stepped out, he turned and said, “I’ll be back before long to listen to you play on the street corner.” Then he closed the door behind himself.

“I’ll be there,” Theodorus called after him.

Darien walked through the corridor rubbish a humbled man: he had just come face to face with genius. All his breeding, studies, travels, accomplishments, success, affluence, taste, refinement, reputation—what were they worth in comparison? Nothing. He had just given away a million-dollar violin, and no one would ever know. Or if they found out, they would think he had lost his mind. His name would never figure prominently on a museum plaque or in the program notes for a concert given by a world-famous musician. No matter. Although he had given the instrument to someone who didn’t even know what he had, the gift counted as his tribute to genius. This was his moment of glory after all, a private glory to be sure, but a glory nonetheless. Perhaps it would serve as atonement for the contempt in which he had first held Theororus Mousa.

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Theodorus opened the case again, took out the violin, and gazed at it. Wow, what had he done to deserve this? He started playing and didn’t stop till dinner time. Then he played for the rest of the night. None of the neighbors complained.

### *Glossary of Names*

Darien: wealthy (Irish)

Chapman: a buyer and seller (Old English, related to the German “Kaufmann”). Darien

Chapman is an art and antiquities dealer.

Fulton: fool’s (*fol*) town (*ton*) (Old English). Darien considers the antique dealers in that town fools.

Hamstead: home (*ham*) place (*stede*) (Old English). Hamstead is the place where Darien lives.

Geigersville: violinist's (*Geigers*) (German) town (*ville*) (French). Geigersville is where the violinist lives.

Theodorus: gift of God (*Greek*)

Mousa: muse (Greek). Theodorus Mousa is divinely gifted with inspiration from the muse of music.

Otto: wealth, fortune (Germanic)

Kaufmann: buyer, trader, dealer (German). He is Darien Chapman's purchasing agent for items of great value.