

The Missing Stradivarius

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Published in *The Formidable Scrap-Book of Baker Street*, 1997, Classic Specialities Books, Cincinnati; *Baker Street West 1*, .12 (1): 14-20, (Winter) 2006

To the few relaxed diners enjoying a late, mid Sunday morning breakfast in the revolving restaurant that towers over the Renaissance complex and overlooks the Detroit River, the day promised to be without any noteworthy events. As the viewing window turned to reveal Atwater Street below, all appeared to be normal. The nondescript, old, red brick warehouses and small manufacturing plants lining the northern side of this most southern street of the city of Detroit were deserted, with the exception of a few security guards and one or two type “A” executives getting an early start on the week to follow. The parking lots were virtually empty and no automobile traffic could be seen.

However, this day in 1995 promised to be a momentous one for Emile Vernet. As the tall, thin, blonde-haired man in his mid-20's rose from his customary corner table, a look of resolve covered his strong, hawk like face. After lighting his ever-present pipe, he donned his customary cloth driving cap and carefully wrapped his white silk scarf around his neck. The turtle-necked sweater, suede leather windbreaker, and buttoned driving gloves completed his appearance as an aficionado of the British sports car era of the mid-1950's. He carefully checked for onlookers before taking the private express elevator to the personal parking corral. Mr. Vernet completed the picture of elegant affluence as his British racing green Lotus Elan roared out into the waiting street. The trip was not a long one as the sleek sports car approached one of the old warehouses and disappeared through a door that briefly and noiselessly revealed itself in the back side of the building.

As Emile's eyes became accustomed to the dim interior light of the huge, concrete-floored main room, an expected scene was revealed. In the far right hand corner of the red brick wall, a few empty cartons supported a broom and dustpan. In the center were twenty to thirty very large wooden palettes holding what looked like machinery covered by clean tarpaulins. And covering the entire left hand wall were uniformly arrayed boxes whose labels indicated the presence of such mundane items as wheel locks, mufflers, nuts and bolts. All in all, it had the characteristic look of a reasonably busy facility awaiting Monday's shipment of goods for temporary storage. Emile walked to the opposite wall, advanced to the corner, and carefully lifted the face of a brick to reveal an electric panel with myriad lights and control switches.

“It will not be necessary to announce your presence, Emile, or to ring the bell,” a slightly British-accented voice gently sounded through quadri phonic speakers embedded in the wall. “The door

to my studio is open. Please do come in. Due to a series of events, and the messages from my stalwart agents, I fully anticipated and prepared for your very welcome visit.”

“Cut the Sherlock Holmes routine Uncle! You do not need to impress me with your sleuthmanship. Stick to your painting and leave the intrigues to James Bond or The Saint,” the younger man replied. I only came here to tell you that I have been successful in my quest for Grandfather’s violin, that I initiated at your request.”

With that, a large door slid open to reveal a square brightly lit and well equipped artist’s studio. Oil canvases and water colors lined one 45 foot wall, while the wall opposite served as a backdrop to a series of bronze and marble statues. The works spanned all time frames and styles, from neo-classic to incomprehensible abstracts. Most noteworthy was the fact that they all bore the names of different artists, none the name of the person to whom Emile Vernet addressed his comments: “I see that you have sold several pieces since last I was here. I trust that they brought in a pretty penny. I do admire your creativity, but cannot comprehend why you insist on never using your real name. You have made many pseudonyms famous by now. Is it not time to reveal your heritage and allow the world to revere yet another great Horace Vernet?”

“Dear Emile,” the older man responded, “Some day soon, you will realize why our family has kept our identity secret all of these years. We have many enemies that have pursued us over the generations. If they understood who we really are, our usefulness would cease. Besides, since our cadet branch of the Vernet family has been in the United States, we have been going by the surname of Vernor, although our British cousins have retained the French pronunciation, but have decided to end the name with an ‘er’ rather the ‘et’ of our French ancestors.”

“Well Uncle, enough of this silly genealogical discourse. I merely came to you to tell you that I will soon have in my hands the violin that once belonged to my grandfather, and which was missing all of these years.”

“Most interesting, Emile, please tell me how you were able to accomplish this. But first, let us go into the parlor and relax with an early pre-lunch aperitif, if that does not shock your often too conventional sensitivities.”

Both men walked through yet another opening in the wall that led to a sumptuous drawing room with a large billiard table and a well equipped bar.

“Uncle, it is still too early for me to imbibe alcoholic beverages, but I would be pleased to enjoy one of your fine cigars and a cup of coffee imported from one of your South American plantations.”

With this dialogue, the two men sat across from each other in luxurious bronze leather recliners enjoying their respective drinks, the younger man his huge mug of life-instilling highly caffeinated coffee and the older with his very dry sherry. Both drew heavily on their massive, dark brown double corona cigars, after which Emile commenced a continuation of their conversation, “I did as you suggested, Uncle. I scoured all of the English and French language newspapers and musical publications that I could get my hands on, from the date of loss of the instrument to the current year, even though that meant many miles of travel to locate some of the less available sources.

Eventually, I subscribed to a broad gamut of representative publications, and constantly perused the Internet. I followed all of the news services for any sign that might prove useful. Then, one day the break came. There was a small article in the *St. Petersburg Times* of January 8 of this year. The item stated that more than 1,000 stolen violins and cellos were found in the home of a second-hand dealer in Paris. The instruments were on display at an exhibition space on Avenue Montaine.”

“So, Emile, you went to Paris to look for the violin.”

“No Uncle, I did not want to tip my hand. Even though I do not believe all of your tales about ancient enemies, I thought that to satisfy you it would be better that I go through an intermediary. Thus, I contacted our old friend Inspector François le Villard. I believe you stated that our families have had a relationship going back several generations, and that he could be trusted completely.”

“Good plan, Emile; although you do not believe me, it could have been a carefully planned effort to reveal our current identities and locations. These people are very clever, and they will stop at nothing to take their revenge on us.”

“Yes, so I have heard before, from my poor dead father, and now from you. Anyway, I went to France and made Montpellier my headquarters. We have old and dear friends in that beautiful city. That is where I first examined the beautiful Stradivarius brought to me personally by M. Le Villard. I examined it and the case very carefully with the powerful hand lens given to me by Father. Some very pertinent clues revealed that I was on the right track.”

“My dear nephew, how did you proceed?”

“Well, I knew that it would be necessary to convince M. Le Villard that I could describe features of the violin that only its true owner would know. Once I had enumerated these features in advance, he allowed me to examine the instrument to determine if they were indeed present.”

“And Emile, I trust from your claim of success that you were able to predict very special features of the instrument that only its true owner would know. I am curious as to what you found.”

“As I predicted to M. Le Villard, there were several almost imperceptible scratches under the strings and on the inside of the case. The hand lens revealed four lines of scratches. Each line bore several numbers followed by some letters that I was at first unable to decipher. Upon further inspection with the lens, the numbers revealed themselves to be several dates during the late 1870's. Also, as I expected, the script was in the Jewish language. These supported my predictions that the violin had been purchased from a pawnbroker of the Jewish persuasion. Needless to say, M. Le Villard was flabbergasted by my uncanny ability to describe the instrument, and without further ado he handed it to me for my further disposition. It is very nice to have friends in important positions, is it not, Uncle Horace? ”

“Is that the only evidence that you have?” asked the uncle.

“Not exactly,” the nephew replied. “I also directed his attention to the interior of the instrument. As I had predicted, there was a large accumulation of rosin inside. That could only have come from

holding it flat, say on the knees, while bowing. That was the last piece of evidence that the Inspector required.”

“Were you satisfied as to the authenticity of the instrument? How do you know that our enemies, in whom you do not truly believe, did not disguise another violin to trap you? All of this information could have been garnered from well-recognized literary sources.”

“Interesting question. I brought the violin back to Detroit and had it subjected to chemical analysis to complete its authentication. I assure you that I know the chief chemist very well. Here is the report of the analytical laboratory for your edification. I am now completely certain that we have finally located our precious family heirloom that we were deprived of for all of these many years.” And with that, the younger man handed the laboratory report to his uncle:

PRIVATE CONSULTING ANALYSTS, INC.
No job too large--No job too small!!!
P.O. Box 221, Oak Park, MI 48237

Chemical analysis of the following object: One Stradivarius violin

Procedures: Scrapings of the interior of the object were carefully made to avoid any alteration of the violin. The material thus derived was separated in five (5) equal-weight samples which were dissolved and analyzed according to standard protocol 5789.21 (see addendum for detailed procedures).



Results: It would appear that said object resided for many years in a chemical laboratory. Analysis of the obtained samples revealed the presence of small amounts of the following compounds: several unidentifiable vegetable alkaloids, several closely related coal-tar derivatives, bisulphate of baryta, several unknown hydrocarbons that proved to be very difficult to dissolve, a variety of acetones (ketones), and traces of hydrochloric acid, iodoform, carbolic acid (phenol), amyl nitrate, prussic acid, and vitriol.

Comment: The presence of these chemicals indicate that this instrument was possessed by an individual who performed a variety of chemical experiments over a prolonged period of time. It is highly unlikely that such a mixture of compounds could have been obtained in recent times, since many of the organic compounds are not listed in any compendia and are, thus, very obscure. We thus conclude that this is a unique article unlike any other. It is interesting to note that most or all of the items extracted from the scrapings were predicted in the request for service. For an additional fee of \$50,000, we can provide more extensive analyses in an attempt to define the chemical structures of the unknown substances.

Certification: I certify that the above report and attached addenda are accurate and that the analyses have been performed as described J. H. Watson, Ph.D.

Please make all checks for services payable to Private Consulting Analysts, Inc.

“My dear nephew, let me present you with the violin that you have so nicely discovered and identified.”

“Uncle!”, exclaimed the now excited younger man, “How could you possibly have possession of the violin!? Where did you get it!?”

“Well, my dear nephew, I too have a few tricks up my sleeve. I am the Private Consulting Analyst known to you as Dr. John H. Watson. The gentleman you know as an agent for that firm is an employee of mine in our consulting detective agency. His real name is not Mr. Barker, as you thought. That was only a little joke of mine. Now that you have passed the final test to join the family business, I will be able to explain the significance of the names Watson and Barker, and the true identity of the original owner of the violin, and the name of our long time nemesis.”

With that, the older man handed the precious violin to his stunned nephew and escorted him into a chamber whose opening appeared in the floor in response to a low whistling sound from his pursed lips.

“Once this was a secret chamber utilized by the bootleggers who brought their cargo across the River from Walkerville. There is also a passage leading under Atwater street to an old abandoned dock several feet out into the water. This room is now my secret headquarters. Come take a look. I expect that you will be spending a lot of time here now that you will be the fourth generation in the family agency that was started by my first cousin thrice removed. It is unfortunate that your father did not live to see this day. However, you will have the opportunity of helping me to finally avenge his untimely death at the hands of our enemies, by bringing them and their minions to justice.”

“My dear Uncle, I think that I would like that drink now. A nip from the tantalus and gasogene, that I note to be in possession of the side table in your hideout, would be very welcome indeed.”

[The scene switches to Sherlock Holmes’ retreat in Sussex sometimes after 1903]

Do come in, Watson. I am so happy that you have finally had the chance to come again to my refuge in Sussex. Your visits are much too infrequent. But you could not have come at a more propitious time. Please help yourself to a cigar and the fruits of the vine that I have only now opened for our enjoyment.”



“But Holmes,” said the good doctor, “I note that you have three wine glasses on the table. Is this to be a reenactment of our adventure regarding Sir Eustace Brakenstall?”

“No, my good fellow. I know how curious you are about my relatives. I have desisted in introducing you to any more since the time that you revealed this private information about my grandmother in the narration involving our Greek friend Mr. Melas. However, since you have agreed to not produce any more narrations of our adventures together, I feel that it will now be appropriate for you to meet my cousin’s grandson, Michael Verner. He will be here soon to share the wine. You might recall his father, Dr. Verner, who bought your practice.”

“So, Holmes, it really was as I suspected. I thought that I was too fortunate in selling my declining practice for such a good price. Why did you trick me that way?”

“I knew that you eventually would see through my subterfuge and realize that I was behind the entire transaction. I so missed my partner, and had a very difficult time concentrating on the boring intervals between challenging cases without you to prod me into action on the mundane activities required to keep up my activity logs and reference works. Also, you took the death of your wife very hard, and I knew that the activity would bring you back out of your state of funk. Some of our best cases, and, I might say your very interesting accounts, came after that diabolical transaction. I hope that you can forgive me for tricking you once again. But wait, here comes my distant cousin. Let me introduce him to you.”

Now entering the room was a 25-year old blonde-haired man, but as tall, thin, and hawk faced as his older cousin, wearing a fashionable tweed hunting suit with the obligatory knickerbockers and deerstalker cap. Mr. Holmes continued, “Come in Michael. I would like you to meet my old friend and comrade in arms, Dr. John H. Watson. Watson, this is my young cousin Michael Verner of whom I was speaking. Michael, please come join us in some fine claret while we discuss the violin that you will soon possess.”

At that comment, Dr. Watson’s eyes looked at the customary resting place of Holme’s prized Stradivarius.

“Watson, I can tell by your expression that you are surprised that I am willing to part with my musical companion that has both plagued and charmed you over the many years of our association. As you mentioned in the preface of your most recent book, I now suffer from rheumatism and am no longer capable of doing justice to such a fine instrument. Michael is an accomplished musician and, in addition to many other activities, will carry the tradition that I began many years ago.”

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