

Beware of Greeks Bearing Gifts

Before we begin, I want to say that it is important to keep track of the names involved in this story. The book thief used several aliases.

As you know I am a specialist, dealing in antique books in the history of science and medicine. I work from my apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, near the Natural History Museum, and have never really considered owning an open shop. The main reason for this is because of book thefts. Walk-in bookshops have a large problem with theft and this is something that I have always wanted to avoid. I have a policy that the only visitors I receive are those whom I know personally or by reputation or through introduction.

So, one day in March several years ago, I received a telephone call from a Mr. John Papas. Mr. Papas was calling to ask about the value of a rather obscure but interesting 17th century book on Copernicus by a Jesuit scientist named Polacco. Now this is a rare and little known book but I was familiar with it and the only reason I was familiar with it was because I had bought a copy for a client the year before at the Honeyman auction of the history of science books at Sotheby's in London. I told Mr. Papas I had bought a copy about six months previous for 850 pounds. I also said that I no longer owned it. He expressed absolutely no interest in the possibility of buying a copy; he was only interested in its value. Booksellers often receive calls from individuals seeking free appraisals and I was slightly annoyed by Mr. Papas' attempt to fish free information out of me. I also thought it a remarkable coincidence that although Mr. Papas had never heard of the Honeyman sale (which was one of the greatest collections of old science books ever formed) he had chosen to call me, the buyer at the Sotheby's auction of this rare and little-known book. But, as booksellers are the true optimists of this world, I thought he might be a potential customer and asked whether he would like to be put on my mailing list to receive catalogues. Mr. Papas said that he would and gave me a Riverside Drive address in Manhattan. As it turned out, this card became a crucial bit of evidence. We got off the phone and while the conversation had been slightly peculiar, I went back to work and thought nothing more of it.

I might add here that Mr. Papas had a very distinctive accent - it was not French, not Italian, not Spanish but yet something quite Mediterranean. He also had a very distinctive timbre to his voice and a certain urgency in his manner of speaking.

About a month later I was sitting at my desk when I received a telephone call from a Dr. Roberts. I could not help but notice that Dr. Roberts' accent and timbre were exactly like those of Mr. Papas from the month before. I also could not help but mention this, to which Dr. Roberts responded that he was Mr. Papas' cousin. This

seemed quite remarkable to me but he quickly changed the subject by asking me questions about the values of old books in fields in which I had no knowledge. I wasn't in the mood to be bothered by yet another member of this tiresome family, so I told him to call another colleague who did have the relevant expertise.

So, by now I had received two quite peculiar telephone calls but I thought nothing more about them.

We now move forward by five months to September. In the middle of that month I received a telephone call from a colleague and friend - Roger Gaskell - who was working at the famous antiquarian bookselling firm of Quaritch in London. Roger told me he was calling because a very suspicious man named Dr. French had come into their shop with a list of many important books in the history of science which he wanted to sell. While Roger was impressed with the list of titles he was suspicious of Dr. French and began asking him questions. After all, such great books do not often walk in off the street like that without an introduction. One of the questions posed by Roger was, obviously, where did Dr. French buy all these books? Dr. French reeled off a series of names, mostly of firms then no longer in business, but he did mention the name of Jonathan A. Hill as one of his sources. So Roger was calling me from London to ask whether I had ever sold a Dr. French any science books. I told Roger that the answer was no and that I had never heard of a Dr. French. Roger replied, saying that Dr. French was not only suspicious but now a liar. We got off the phone and again I did not think much more about this. Roger, however, tried to lead Dr. French on by asking to see certain books from the list. Dr. French returned the next day to show the books and Roger noticed that while many of them had had bookplates removed and old library stamps bleached out there was one book where the stamp was still visible and it said "University College London." Roger confiscated this book, literally wrenching it from Dr. French's hands and called the police. But before the police arrived Dr. French had fled the book shop. While Roger never called back to tell me what had happened, the police reported the theft to the University College Library (instead of the other way round as is normal). A check of their rare book shelves showed that a great many important books, about 250, were missing. They were almost exclusively in the history of science, including many of the classics.

Now the action moves back to New York. One day, later in September, I received, as a sort of formal chain letter issued by Scotland Yard, a list of science books stolen from an anonymous London library. I browsed through it with interest and filed it away. At the end of that day, I received a telephone call from a Mr. John Acunas (spell it). As soon as I heard his voice, I knew it was, first of all, Mr. Papas and Dr. Roberts, the people who had called me earlier that year, and as soon as Mr. Acunas began to tell

me about the four books he wanted to sell me I knew he was the book thief from London. Mr. Acunas told me he had four important science books which he wanted to sell including the first edition of a book by Galileo. My response was that of course I would love to see his books and asked when we could arrange a time for him to come to my apartment to show them to me. We agreed for him to come the following Tuesday, Sept. 29th at 2 pm. Before he came, I told my assistant Ellen - now former assistant - that a person whom I believed to be a book thief was coming to the apartment. I told Ellen that she should join us during the meeting and not take her eyes off Mr. Acunas and especially to keep her eyes riveted on his hands. I said I didn't care whether it made him uncomfortable. My chief concern was that Mr. Acunas might steal a book from me.

So promptly at 2 pm, Mr. Acunas arrived. He looked to be about 35 years old, with black hair and was fairly well dressed (although he had a big stain on his white shirt). He brought the books along in a black leather bag and the three of us sat down at my table with Ellen staring at Acunas's hands the whole time. Acunas pulled out the books and I noticed that they were wrapped up in newspaper of the Times of London dated the 15th of September. This was further evidence to me that Mr. Acunas was also the Dr. French who had visited Quaritch and that he had stolen the books from the University College London Library. I began to look at the books which were all quite splendid. I made careful notes about each, noting that they all had bleached out library stamps and in two cases one could see that bookplates had been removed. Mr. Acunas was quite nervous as I slowly examined the books. I went slowly because he kept on talking and I hoped to gain some information from his chatter. He mentioned that his family had many more precious books. After ten minutes I said that I was definitely interested in these books and wanted to know what the price was for the lot of four. He asked 12,000 dollars which, if I paid in cash, would be reduced to 11,000 dollars. Now these four books which I had examined had a retail value of about 25,000 dollars so this would have been a wonderful purchase for me. I told him I was very interested in these books and that the price was possible but I needed to have the books for two or three days in order to collate them to make sure that all the pages were present. Mr. Acunas would not agree to this and so we compromised by arranging another meeting a few days later during which I would collate the books and, if they were without problems, I would pay him his cash. He wasn't particularly happy about this but I insisted that this was the only way I would deal with him and he finally accepted. He left me a telephone number and said that he lived in Fort Lee New Jersey. When I pointed out the he had given me a Manhattan number, he said that messages could be left at this number and that he would then call me back. We said farewell and both of

us expressed hopes of doing much big business together in the future.

As soon as he went down the elevator, I called my London colleague at his home and explained what had happened. He promised to call Scotland Yard the next day.

The next morning I received a telephone call from a Dr. Gregory Jestiko. Now it was immediately clear to me, by his voice, that this Gregory Jestiko was Mr. Papas, Dr. Roberts, and John Acunas. However, Gregory Jestiko was employing the sly ruse of talking through a handkerchief in order to muffle his voice. Jestiko told me he was a professor of economics at Lehigh University at Bethlehem, Pennsylvania (and then later in the conversation he told me he taught at Bethlehem University at Lehigh, Pennsylvania). He said he collected books by, amazingly enough, Galileo. Now Acunas just the day before had tried to sell me a book by Galileo. I told Dr. Jestiko that this truly was his lucky day, that I was in the midst of negotiations to purchase a wonderful copy of Galileo's greatest book. Jestiko was very excited by this news and said that he would call back in a week to find out what the price was. He wouldn't leave an address or telephone number. After hanging up and laughing for a few seconds, I went back to work.

That evening I received a telephone call from US Customs Agent Andrew Garlisch. He said that they had just received a cable from Interpol about stolen books and asked whether I knew something about it. I said that I did and he suggested that perhaps he might come up with a colleague to talk to me. I said yes, thinking they would come the next morning but they said they would be there in ten minutes. Agents Garlisch and James McNamara arrived within the time they specified. I might point out that these gentlemen really looked like American law enforcement agents, big and beefy. If they were scattered in a crowd of 1000 people, one could pick these two out as agents in a minute. They also carried enormous revolvers strapped to their sides underneath their jackets. The two agents began querying me about what had happened and it was soon clear, based on their additional information, that this really was the book thief from London. We began to plan a strategy for me to meet Mr. Acunas again. I didn't want Mr. Acunas to come back to my apartment again because I didn't know what might happen. I was beginning to get quite paranoid about what was going on. The agents agreed and we tried to think of a place. We finally agreed to leave it up to Mr. Acunas to suggest a public place. If Mr. Acunas suggested his apartment, I should make up some excuse to avoid that situation. So we planned that I would suggest that Acunas and I meet at some sort of public place midday on Friday - the next day - and that I would tell him I would be accompanied by a financial backer (who would actually be another customs agent). So with the agents present, I called Acunas. I told him that I could meet him the next day around noon but preferred that it not be at my apartment

because it was about to be painted and the place was a mess. He suggested the Princeton Club on 43rd St. Now this was quite a surprise to me and the agents. After all, what is a criminal doing being a member of the Princeton Club? Perhaps the Harvard Club or the Yale Club, but certainly not the Princeton club! I told Acunas that I would have the cash ready for him and that everything looked fine. We agreed to meet in the downstairs lobby of the club, do our business over a drink at the bar, and then have lunch. When I finished the conversation and hung up, we talked over what had transpired and we were really perplexed about what to do about the Princeton Club. The agents were worried about not being able to penetrate the club so they could monitor the meeting. They made a quick call to their downtown headquarters and were told there was absolutely no problem with the Princeton Club. Apparently the law enforcement agents have a good relationship with this club and had executed many operations there. At this point the agents said that I would be picked up by them the next morning at about 9 o'clock and would be taken down town for a briefing and preparations. I must say that I did not sleep very well that night.

The next morning Agent Garlisch came for me and before we left the lobby of my building, he told me that he would leave first and that I should go to such and such a corner, about two blocks away, and he would pick me up. Now the real world of cloak and dagger was beginning. Also beginning was a very pleasant two weeks of having a chauffeur. The agents picked me up, drove me home, and in fact made a number of pick ups and deliveries on my behalf.

We drove down to their headquarters at Seven World Trade Center, which tragically no longer exists. I was introduced to about 20 agents, all of whom would be working on the operation. The head of the operation, Mr. Ben Van Inwegen, told me that while it was important for me to consummate the deal, I should also try to find out where the rest of the books were and whether Mr. Acunas had any partners in the theft. Then began my selection of another agent to act as my financial backer. Van Inwegen told me that I could have any type of person I wanted: male or female, young or old, fat or thin, black or white or Asian - they had a whole menu of agents for all occasions and I had only to name my preference. I said that someone in his sixties who looked prosperous and somewhat scholarly would be the best and within two minutes I was introduced to Agent John Shea. He fit the bill perfectly. We then went into the electronics room where I got wired. I don't know how many of you have ever been wired but it hurts. They shave your chest and strap on with masking tape a box containing a tape recorder. The box becomes very warm when it is turned on. A wire antenna ran down my pants leg. They then insisted I wear a bullet proof vest, which really worried me. What did they know that I didn't about the thief? The vest was a

white flexible affair covering the body from the groin to over the shoulders. This was a modern version and quite light weight. There was only one problem: it made me look as if I had suddenly gained 20 pounds of muscles in my chest and shoulders. I was quite worried that Acunas would immediately notice the drastic change in my physique. Then we went to the cash room where they opened up an enormous safe absolutely stuffed with cash and they pulled out 12 thousand dollars in cash - all in fifties and hundreds. They had thoughtfully given me an extra thousand dollars for spending money and incidentals during the day.

Next we went downstairs to the garage where the Customs Service kept it fleet of cars. Just as with agents, I had my choice of car. They had a great range of cars - all confiscated from drug dealers - including Rolls Royces to old beaten up Volkswagen beetles. I decided we should look prosperous in case Acunas saw us driving up the street and so chose a Mercedes. My backer John Shea and I got in the car and drove off with approximately 20 other agents following us in various cars. Agent Shea turned on my wire - and the box strapped to my chest became quite hot - and we started to make small talk, chatting about baseball and the owner of the Yankees baseball team, George Steinbrenner. I said something quite profane about him (as so many people do). When we got off the FDR drive at 34th Street, the chief agent pulled us off the road and made us stop. He came over, leaned in the window, and told me to watch my language. He said he was monitoring our conversation and that he wanted a nice clean tape for a future judge and jury to listen to. Properly chastised, we resumed our trip and parked down the street from the Princeton Club which is between 5th and 6th avenues on 43rd street, right next to another distinguished club, the Century Association. I should add here it was about noon now and the streets were filled with people. I could not help but notice that I knew everybody on the street. The place was filled with agents. The off duty taxidriver taking a break was an agent. The young woman waiting to meet a friend for lunch was an agent. The people simply walking down the street were agents. EVERYONE was an agent.

John Shea and I entered the ground floor lobby of the Princeton Club and there was Mr. Acunas waiting for us with two shopping bags. I introduced Shea as my backer and Acunas took this very well. Nor did he seem to notice that I had put on 20 pounds of muscles in three days. Acunas suggested we go up stairs to the lobby which would be a little more quiet. We agreed and went up and sat down in the small lobby facing the elevators. We chatted for a minute or two and I said that I would like to check the books now. Acunas pulled them out and I pretended that I was collating them. To be honest, I really didn't care whether they had all their pages or not. I even gave one to John Shea to collate who certainly didn't know the difference between a folio and an

octavo. Anyway we pretended to check the books and then I said that they were fine and I was prepared to pay him the money. I pulled out the wad of cash as discretely as I could - we were by no means without observers. There were many people walking past us on the way to the dining room. As I said I pulled out this big wad of cash, peeled off 10 100 hundred dollar bills and handed Acunas the rest. I said that he should go ahead and count it, but since it seemed hardly appropriate to count 11,000 dollars in 50s and 100s in the upstairs lobby of the Princeton Club, I suggested that we go into the men's room. He agreed and off we went. In case you don't know the upstairs men's room of the Princeton Club, I can tell you that it is very small and little used. We entered and I stood against the door so that no one could come in without a little delay. Acunas began to count the money and after about two minutes he looked up at me and said that it appeared to him that the money had been marked. And of course he was right! After suffering two seconds of extreme emotional distress, I countered by suggesting to him that the bank where I had gotten the money did give me a funny look when I asked for all that cash and that they very well might have marked it for their records. This seemed to appease Acunas and he went on counting. It was clear to me after another minute that he had lost count but he nevertheless went through each bill. When he was satisfied, we went outside to the lobby where we had left John Shea waiting. I again noticed that half of the people passing us as we sat there were agents. Since I had been instructed by the Chief Agent to find out more about Acunas and where the rest of the books were, I suggested that we might all have lunch as a sort of victory celebration. After all, he had just sold me some great books for a good price. Naturally, I thought we would then go to the dining room of the Princeton Club which was just ten paces away but Acunas suggested that he knew a very nice restaurant nearby. The fact that he did not want to use the dining room made it clear to me that he was not really a member of the Club. We left the building and, heading west, crossed the street to a sort of greasy spoon restaurant just short of 6th avenue. We went in and the three of us sat down at a booth. We all ordered sandwiches and I began to ask him a lot of questions. He was quite evasive and told several conflicting stories about the location and availability of the other books in his collection. When lunch came to an end, we got up. I could not help but be shocked by the fact that it was I who got stuck with the bill. Here I had just handed this guy 11,000 dollars in cash and he avoided paying a 30 dollar tab for lunch. As I went to the cash register to pay the bill, Shea and Acunas walked ahead toward the front door, chatting. Agent Garlich magically appeared at my side and told me that when we went outside Shea and I were to say farewell to Acunas and go to the west towards 6th avenue. This we did and walked about five steps away to the left. We then turned around and I saw a sight I will never

forget. Suddenly it seemed like all the pedestrians on the street (and there were many) became agents with guns drawn. They all descended on Acunas who was about thirty feet from us and made him drop his bag with the cash. They then manhandled him against a wall and frisked him and handcuffed. Several hundred spectators, on their lunch breaks, gathered to watch the drama. After a minute or two, several agents came over to us, and whispered that in order to confuse Acunas we had to be arrested as well. So they threw us over the hood of a parked car more or less in front of the Century Association and, in front of hundreds of people, began frisking us. Now, some of my best clients and friends eat their lunch every day at the Century and it did worry me if several of them saw me being frisked by men carrying guns. Would they come to my rescue or have another cocktail and mutter that they always thought I was always a little suspicious. But soon enough I was hand cuffed and thrown in the back of a waiting car. We went a couple of blocks and the agent pulled over, took off the cuffs and immediately asked for my unspent cash (actually the governments cash) and the receipt from the restaurant.

This concludes the exciting part of my story. The rest consists of much waiting around the customs offices surrounded by lawyers being prepared to give testimony. As it stands now John Acunas whose real name is truly John Papanastasiou has been convicted and sentenced to three years in prison. This story made the front page of the New York Times and in other newspapers around the world, made the evening news on the main television channels, and was broadcast on the radio for some days afterwards.