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A STOLEN STRADIVARIUS, A 51-YEAR OLD SECRET

By RICHARD L. MADDEN, Special to the New York Times
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By his widow's account, Julian Altman was something of a scoundrel - a womanizer and gambler who made a living playing the violin at restaurants and society functions.

He never paid any special attention to his violin, she said, often leaving it wherever he had an engagement, even at other people's apartments.

But as he lay dying in a hospital in Torrington, Conn., Mr. Altman called his wife, Marcelle Hall, to his side with a confession: "I want you to do something about that violin. That violin is important."

Back at their home here, Ms. Hall looked inside the canvas cover of the violin's case and found newspaper clippings about a Stradivarius violin that was made in 1713 - and stolen in 1936 from a dressing room in Carnegie Hall. Inside the case was the violin. According to Ms. Hall, her husband told her he had bought the violin in 1936 for \$100, apparently from the man who had stolen it.

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"Maybe for once in his life he was telling the truth," Ms. Hall said in an interview today, as a dealer who authenticated the violin last week for its insurer, Lloyd's of London, was flying to England with it.

Ms. Hall said that after years of what she described as a turbulent relationship with Mr. Altman - who was jailed for molesting her granddaughter - her story now has a happy ending.

"The whole reward to me," she said, "is to bring this beautiful instrument back to the world."

It is also, of course, a happy ending for Lloyd's, which paid Bronislaw Huberman, the Polish virtuoso, \$30,000 for the loss of his violin and whose underwriters are to pay Ms. Hall a reward of an undisclosed amount. The Stradivarius is now insured for \$800,000.

Charles Beare, the dealer who identified the instrument for Lloyd's, plans to refurbish it and display it this summer at a festival in Cremona, Italy, marking the 250th anniversary of the death of the renowned violin maker, Antonio Stradivari. 'One of the Great Stradivaris'

Mr. Beare eventually expects to sell the violin for Lloyd's, either at an auction or a private sale, according to his associates in London. They declined to estimate its value but noted that some Stradivarius violins have sold for as much as \$1 million. Stradivari made more than 1,000 violins, violas and violoncellos; some 600 are known to survive.

Marianne Wurlitzer, a New York dealer in antique musical instruments and manuscripts who talked with Mr. Beare before he left New York, said, "This was one of the great Stradivaris."

Some Stradivarius violins, according to dealers, are named for their former owners, and this one was

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known as the Gibson, for George Alfred Gibson, a professor of violin at the Royal Academy who died in 1924.

According to newspaper accounts, the Gibson was bought early in the century by Mr. Huberman, an internationally known master and teacher of the violin. And it was stolen from him twice.

The first theft, in 1919, was in Vienna, and the violin was recovered a few days later. The second theft, on Feb. 28, 1936, was from a dressing room in Carnegie Hall while Mr. Huberman was giving a recital with a Guarnerius violin one floor below.

According to an account in The New York Times the next day, a secretary told Mr. Huberman between pieces that his violin had been stolen.

"It is insured; do not worry," he was quoted as telling her. "Tell me about it when I have finished the program. But go now and call the police the first thing you do."

Lloyd's paid Mr. Huberman for his loss that year. In 1947, Mr. Huberman died at his home in Switzerland at the age of 64. And the theft remained unsolved until Mr. Beare went to Ms. Hall's house in this suburban town in western Connecticut last Friday. 'I Became Smitten'

Harold M. Foster, a lawyer and cousin of Ms. Hall, said that after Mr. Altman's death on Aug. 15, 1985, he helped trace the underwriters who had paid Mr. Huberman. "They, of course, are the owners of the violin," he said, referring to Lloyd's. Ms. Hall, 69, said she met Mr. Altman in Washington in 1968 while awaiting a divorce from her first husband. They met at a restaurant where Mr. Altman was entertaining, she said, and he played "Lara's Theme" for her.

"He played it like a dream," she said. "I became smitten. It turned out to be a long love affair. I call it now an obsession I had."

She said Mr. Altman had been a first violinist with the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington and had played the violin at many social gatherings. She showed copies of autographed pictures to Mr. Altman from President Richard M. Nixon and Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey. A Guilty Plea

Ms. Hall said she married Mr. Altman in Las Vegas in March 1985, two days before he was to be sentenced in State Superior Court in Danbury, Conn., for sexually molesting one of her granddaughters. She said she married him, in part, because she wanted to regain ownership of her house, which was in Mr. Altman's name. "I had nothing," she said.

He was sentenced to a year in jail on a charge of risk of injury to a minor. His attorney, Ralph Friedland, said Mr. Altman accepted the sentence to avoid putting the granddaughter through the trauma of testifying at a trial.

Four months later, Ms. Hall said, her husband was diagnosed as having stomach cancer and was moved from the Litchfield County jail to a hospital in Torrington, where he died.

At his direction, she said, she looked under the canvas cover of his violin case and found the news clippings about the theft of the Stradivarius in 1936. "My God, what have I got here?," she recalled saying.

She said she confronted Mr. Altman, who told her that while working in February 1936 at a New York restaurant called the Russian Bear, a friend came in with the violin under his coat and asked Mr. Altman and his boss to buy it for \$100. She said Mr. Altman did not identify the friend or "the boss."

She said that Mr. Altman paid the \$100 but that "the boss" called the violin "too hot for me."

Ms. Hall said: "Julian didn't get rid of it. He played it for 50 years."

Until Mr. Beare took it from her house last Friday, Ms. Hall said, she was worried that something might happen to it. "I never let it out of my sight," she said.

Ms. Hall said she was not proud of all the details of her story, but that she was telling it because "it's a thrilling story" and other people will now "hear the beauty of the violin."

"All's well that ends well," she said. "It's a good ending."

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