

PARIS BUNCO ARTISTS

By James Collins

I was walking down the Rue de Rochambeau on an autumn morning from the Arc de Triumph toward the Paris Opera House. Thieves in Naples robbed my Paris marketing agent, who was to be my interpreter, and without papers, he was having difficulty getting back to Paris. I was on my own and decided to see the sights. While I was walking on the sidewalk, a car pulled over alongside me and started beeping the horn. I was expecting someone from the office might be looking for me, so I walked over to the car. This young intense man behind the wheel was leaning over so he could look out the side window.

"American, American, I have a cousin who works in New York City in the Italian Embassy. I love Americans and I am so happy to meet one here in Paris." He parked the car and ran around to my side babbling on as he opened the rear door and took out a garment wrapped in blue plastic on a hanger.

"I'm in the high-fashion industry and have just finished a big show here in Paris. I have a lot of garments left over and would like to make this one a present to you because you are in American." With that, he handed me the hanger with a garment attached. I immediately handed it back. Slightly stunned, he handed it back to me again. "Really, this is just a gift; there is nothing else involved."

I handed it back a second time and said, "I don't want anything. I do not plan to carry anything. And if you give it back to me again, I will put it over here on this park bench and walk away."

"No, no, don't get upset. This is just a gift. Let me give you my business card so you know who I am."

With that, he took out a French business card, which is about double the size of an American business card. In large bold, embossed letters was the name **Rudolph Valentino**. I knew Valentino was a famous actor from the 20s and this was not Rudolph Valentino. However, I had the day to kill so I figured I would have some fun.

"You are Rudolph Valentino? I heard of you. You are someone famous in the movies. How can I help you?"

"Look here, look here," he said as he climbed back into the car pointing at the dashboard. I'm out of petrol – gazolene as you call it."

"I'm sorry I don't know where a gas station is. I can't help you."

"No, no I know where a gas station is but I don't have any money. I need Fr.480 (\$80) for two tanks of gas so I can get back home to Naples."

Now I knew what the con was and figured his little game was over. "Sorry I can't help you. You know I come from New York, and I don't fall for any con games from Italians or Frenchmen."

With that he shrugged his shoulders, picked up his garment threw it in the backseat of the car and drove off. I figured that was the end of it, but I was mistaken.

Later that night I was eating at a small French restaurant, two blocks from the hotel I was staying at, on their recommendation. Like all local French restaurants, the tables are butted together and pulled out for customers to get in to be seated. As a result, you are sitting cheek by jowl with people you have never met before. Two seats away were a pair of young American men I did not know, but their conversation indicated, they came from Chicago. The redheaded one talking loudly to his friend described a Frenchman coming up to him in a car and attempting a similar fraud. The description of the driver was very different from the one I encountered. It was interesting to hear a duplicate attempt and a duplicate turn down.

The next day, I continued with my tour and headed for the Louvre. As I walked across the island in the Plas De Concorde, a Citroen drove up on the sidewalk, stopped next to me, and a tall Italian in a trench coat rushed up and grabbed my hand to shake it. I figured this might be my contact for the business meeting. The first words out of his mouth were, "I have a cousin who works in the Italian Embassy in New York."

Déjà vu, I figured I have to get rid of this clown right away. "That's neat; I also come from New York City."

"What part of New York city you come from?"

"The South Bronx, have you ever heard of it?"

"The South Bronx!" He paled, turned, rushed into the car, gunned the engine and sped away. Apparently, the South Bronx has quite a reputation in Paris. It must be the movies. Again, I was alone.

Midafternoon I came to a large window, which overlooked a major thoroughfare. I looked down and saw three Japanese in conversation with a European man. The Japanese were each holding a garment in a blue wrapper on a hanger. One of the Japanese had his wallet in his hand and was counting out bills, which he handed to the European. The window was closed. I was two stories up and I am sure the Japanese spoke little or no English. There was no way I could warn them and I watched the European, with Italian plates on his car, drive off enriched by three generous people who did not know they had been scammed.

That night I related to the concierge the four events and he said, "Those are Italians mostly from Naples who come up here to get money. Parisians know who they are and would not give them a sou. Therefore, they rob from tourists who come to visit Paris such as Americans, English and Germans. I guess the motto is "Beware of Italians bearing gifts in Paris."

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