

The Crooked Travel Agent

I'm at my desk in the Travel section of Bootles Bank; Bootles is very pukka and old money and lots of new money. Old Sir Featherstone Hugh Bootle started this in 1830 and its growth really started and grew to tremendous heights in Victorian England. It's got a Branch operation still in Inja (don't you know). I run the travel and have built this up enormously in the five years I've been on the desk. I also organise finance for Europeans buying into the U.K. The buyers are large equity people and it's not hard to end finance their purchase costs. The Bank is not to know that I look after the interests of the mob and by what I do I legitimise bad money and also launder by this means bad money. Bootles have a real estate arm and I give them bags of work, they love me in that Department.

I got sucked into all this when putting the finishing touches to a holiday package built around two months by Lake Como. Vincenzo Mercuri is sitting across the table from him. He's buying the package for his aunt Nancy and paying in folding ones.

'I wonder Francis,' he says, 'do you tell the Bank you own this villa you are renting to Aunt Nancy at such handsome rates.

'What an imagination you have Mr Mercuri,' I say.

'Oh you own it all right,' this slick Northern Italian replies.

'How would you know such a thing?' I ask.'

'Oh Francis,' he says, 'we're like Colonel Klink in Hogan's Heroes, and taking off Klink's Teutonic accent he says, 'Ve haff our vays and means, Hein?'

'You've got me, Vincenzo,' I say, 'is this deal to proceed and if so what do you really want?'

'Yes,' he says, 'it's a goer. Now let's meet for lunch Sunday at Alfredos, it's near Kingston-on-Thames.'

I know and he knows I go there a bit on weekends.

'Fine, what time?' I ask.

'Noon, and Francis do be there.'

I ride my motor bike up to Kingston-on-Thames I live in the City and a car isn't practical due to parking. I keep a motor bike in the basement and hire a car when I need one which isn't often.

Vincenzo gives me a wave from the riverside deck as I walk along. We sit and enjoy a Bass and look at the activity on this pleasant stretch of river. We order oysters, garlic prawns and then have the English Roast Beef and finish on coffee and Calvados.

'Lets take a walk, Vincenzo says, too many ears here.'

So we walk the old tow path along the offshoot canal and he outlines the deal he has in mind.

'First, Francis you will appreciate that we can ruin you over renting out your own property to Bootles' customers despite how well hidden it is, and it certainly is. But if we want it to come out it will.'

'So what do you want?' I ask.

'Well, at this stage,' Vincenzo says, 'just low percentage property loans to buy London property, later when we've established ourselves with your bank we'll want to ramp up these loans a bit, buy more property, later again we have another angle that will perhaps make you rich or if you're foolish perhaps dead.'

'OK,' I say, 'bring on the property propositions.'

We set it up, it's just normal banking and it produces very good business for the Bank. The Property department finds Investment properties for them and get real estate commissions and valuation fees and the bank gets prime rate interest. They don't seem to care what interest rate we charge them. We do an awful lot of business with them. They are seen as my clients and I sometimes go to Europe to confer when setting up deals. I meet only and solely with Vincenzo who is the conduit to the entire operation.

Things flow along amicably and profitably for several years when Vincenzo rings. 'Lunch at the same pub, don't be late etc.'

We lunch and walk.

As we pull on our Cuban cigars I ask, 'What now, Vincenzo?'

'Francis,' he says, 'we're going into discount kidnapping. The set up's in place, safe houses, all mod cons, every kindness to the kidnapped, good life style when held, immediate release of one of the party to carry the ransom demand and so on. In short something frightening but absolutely nothing nasty.'

'Where will the business come from?' I ask.

'Hah, he says, 'I thought you'd never ask. We just want the travel itineraries you do every day for your well heeled customers, we do the rest.'

'And the money?' I ask.

'Oh yes, standard rate to release, gross 1.3 million pounds, anyone can afford that. We take .3 mil for expenses then another .6 million and to you, well hidden in a Swiss Bank account, .4 of a million for each deal. We expect you will net about 4 million in year one and it will increase exponentially after that.'

'Shit!' I say.

'Oh no, it's money,' Vincenzo says.

His logic is unassailable.

I supply itineraries and next Saturday they snatch a lord and lady and an honourable daughter at Charles De Gaulle. They dump Mum back next day to the same place with note and travel ticket. By Thursday the dosh is in the Swiss bank divvied up and the family are totally unhurt and loose again, bemused by their kind and generous treatment. Nothing, absolutely nothing hits the press.

They play it cool for a while and snatch other agents' customers. Then in a continuous run they do four more of mine. My bank account in the Cantonment of Switzerland now stands at two million pounds. I read the papers to see what I can buy through my hidden business companies that only the Mafia seem able to find out about.

Then I decide that cash is nice too and leave it all stand for the moment. Then they bag up a garrulous old Scots hardware tycoon who sells his story to Rupert Murdoch, complete with documentary evidence of the snatchers letterhead "Cut Rate Blackmailers". Up until now nothing has hit the press.

The Comissioner of the Metropolitan Police, the top cop, now comes out and slams what he calls European crooks who are victimising Pommy travellers mercilessly. Sir James Ilberry that same week books through Bootles for he and his wife to visit Florence on the start of annual holidays. Vincenzo, who is one of the most charming chaps I've ever met, straight or bent, bags up the pair in sight of the Cathedral. They let the wife go at Charles De Gaulle complete with note and tuck Sir



James away in quite pleasant quarters complete with sky channel in the Ardennes. They are most kind; the hooded cook knocks up whatever he asks for. The Scotch they provide him with is Glenfiddich single malt which he also asks for; they keep him generously supplied with shag tobacco and the best briar they can

find in a curio shop. He so takes to this that he asks them to post it on to him later and they do.

Vincenzo, who tells me all this much, much later, says that their standard practise is to dump every thing the visitors have with them and put them into new tracksuits so they have nothing of their own with them. They impound watches and jewellery, shoes, everything. They are scared of one of the catches having a tiny beacon on them. These are in common use in Europe both on people and cars against snatchers.

The money again is in their account by the end of the next week. Nothing appears in the press. Vincenzo decides to hold him for another week just for fun and they kit him out with a fair suit, shirt and tie and then used shoes. The former from a suit shop in Paris and the latter from an Italian recycling shop. The Commissioner seems to like the suit and the boys get a laugh when he is pictured wearing it months later and sucking on his kidnappers' Briar.

They dump him in a country lane near Amsterdam and tell him to walk away smartly as the van is primed to blow up. He does and it does. They have left a hundred pounds in his pocket. Nothing comes out until Xmas when he writes a short best seller on his hi-jacking, complete with photos. It's



quite interesting reading, especially when he says he was held in Germany (the boys gave him German papers every day to foster the illusion). The kraut Police get antsy, especially when the Comish refuses them an interview.

Vincenzo and Co. now get even smarter, and start bagging up European tourists and Yanks in England. Boy, do the Yanks sound off.

'Full of shit, the Yanks,' Vincenzo says. He later tells me that they hold the detainees at a house in Stratford-on-Avon, they certainly are flexible.

I got a bit better than the forecast four million pounds into my Swiss accounts and then Vincenzo turns up very dead on a Rome street near the Trevi fountain.. A sad finish for such a pleasant crook.

The mob business in the property field is still bubbling along nicely and the Discount Kidnapping seems to have disappeared. Probably all for the best I think as I count my money.

