

Booked for Travel

Edited by David Butwin

The 68,500-Lire Misunderstanding

ROME.

AMERICAN WOMEN have always been drilled in self-defense tactics before doing battle with Italian men. It's time we long-neglected American men were briefed on the wiles that await us even in floodlit piazzas. I think our women have it easier, for the attack is usually frontal and the casualties only flesh wounds. Our men are the victims of guerrilla assault and the losses are counted in thousands of lire.

On a comfortably warm night in early August, while waiting out a thirty-hour stopover on the long haul from New York to Japan, I decided to walk off the pasta with a stroll to the Trevi Fountain; then to bed. My path led through the Piazza della Repubblica, astir with band music and pressing humanity. On a corner by a newsstand I was checking my map to pick up a more direct route to the well-concealed fountain, when a swarthy young man in a garishly striped sport jacket volunteered his aid. He told me, in middling English, how to find the fountain and then asked to look at my map to see if he was on the right track to a bar his hotel had recommended. He said he was a visitor from France. He said his name was Marcel.

"Marcello" was more like it. He sounded about as French as Mastroianni. My guard went up, but not high

enough: Recent travels to northerly lands had left me defenseless to flim-flammy Italian style. I turned down his several soft-sell invitations to join him at the bar he was seeking, and finally gave in to walking along with him since we were going the same way. On a side street a few blocks from the piazza, Marcel, with masterful innocence, pointed through the darkness to a yellow neon sign. "I think that is the bar," he said. As we drew closer, the words took form: TAVERNA PICCOLO FIRENZE. AMERICAN PIANO-SNACK BAR.

I ask myself as I put this down why I followed Marcel through the door, and only one answer comes forth: to see what was inside. It is the eternal quest, I think, that haunts every traveler; fortunate is the one who learns to sense which doors to leave unopened.

What happened inside probably went like clockwork to the *taverna's* well-trained team, except that after Marisa and her friend had coaxed us from the immense piano bar to a table on the side, and the Italian singer had extended his microphone cord to our corner where he warbled a medley of drippy Italo-American love ballads, and the waiter had uncorked a half dozen bottles of what Marisa called sparkling wine—he dancing a little jig before each ceremonious POP!—and Marcel had gone down on all fours to

claw his way around the floor like the striped animal he resembled ("Tigre! Tigre!" he growled in French to remind me of his heritage), and I had drained the last of my second beer and asked for the check so I could be on my way to the Trevi Fountain—after all that I took a close look at the bill and spat out my favorite eight-letter word.

That destroyed the cultivated bowing courtly manner of the tuxedoed manager, who suddenly turned into an Italian truck driver caught in a mid-day traffic snarl. At first glance I had taken the check to be L6,000-and-something and handed over the L5,000 in my wallet, preparing to break an American bill to pay the rest. As my eyes danced over the numbers again and came to rest on the total, I felt my knees go weak. It was L68,500—more than \$100. Marcel was standing next to me raising a mock storm over the slightly lower bill he had been charged, and then he peeled off the Italian currency with a studied reluctance (no doubt to be repaid shortly). I looked to Marcel and then to Marisa for help, but they were lions pitying a lamb who had stumbled into their den.

When the manager and I had ceased our shouting match, I told him to call a cop. He and the owner, a burly young man named Tony, led me to a rear cubicle "to talk things over," as they put it. They wanted to know how much I was *willing* to pay and I said money wasn't the point, I wanted a cop. Moments later an Italian man I'd seen at the bar pushed through the curtained stall. He was wearing a tee shirt and chinos. He was the cop. He showed me an ID card to prove it. "He is police," said the owner. "He is narcotics police."

"I want a cop in uniform," I insisted.

"Okay, then, you get a cop. But you get in plenty deep trouble."

"So do you."

While we waited at the bar, the manager continued to drive home the grave consequences of my failing to compromise on the bill. "Why," I asked, "didn't somebody tell me that Marisa was drinking \$30 Dom Perignon champagne?"

"It's on the menu."

"But the menu wasn't on the table."

"I want to help you tonight, but I was too busy. Always I help American customers. If they are students and cannot afford, then we charge nothing."

I sat slumped at the bar, musing over the American Express ad propped on the counter, glancing now and then at the expressionless Marisa sitting nearby, and then the cop came through the door, a strutting *carabiniere* in black boots and tan riding outfit. In



Piazza della Repubblica—Beware of innocent young men in striped sport coats.

Rome the joke is that *carabinieri* always go about in pairs—one to read and one to write. He seemed patient enough, but he didn't speak English, so I had to rely on the manager to pass on my plea. In the midst of it all Tony the owner offered to cut the bill in half. "I give dees-count," he said. The *carabiniere* approved of that, and the manager assured me I'd end up in the police station if *some* agreement weren't reached. With excruciating submission, I surrendered two twenties and a ten.

"One more thing," I said. "Can I have this for a souvenir?" I picked the menu off the bar, Tony took it back. Then the *carabiniere* snatched it from Tony and handed it to me, the game ensuing for two more rounds until Tony started flying around the room pointing to the tables without menus. "He thinks we don't have enough menus to give away," the manager told me. Then Tony stopped and said, "I give you this," and handed me the bill.

Out on the street at last, I was soothed somewhat by the cooling night air and a perfect half-moon. Nearing the American sanctuary that is Via Veneto, I was approached by a curly-haired young man with a sweater thrown rakishly over one shoulder. "Do you speak English?" he asked with a winning white smile. "Can I show you very nice bar? Italian girls, English girls, French girls. . ."

I laughed aloud. "Look, I got robbed by one of your nice bars just a few minutes ago." His questions flew: "When? How much? Where?"

"Do not worry," he said at last, "at the place we go, you can use American Express."

"Tell me one thing and I leave," I told him. "Which way is Via Veneto?"

ROME TO TOKYO.

FROM TAKEOFF to landing, it is a nineteen hour journey that gives a hint of what Marco Polo must have endured. Yet Alitalia cuts down the fatigue and ennui by rolling out the kind of meals you have to stay awake to appreciate. It's tea from Rome to Athens, dinner from Athens to Karachi, breakfast from Karachi to Bangkok, lunch from Bangkok to Hong Kong, and dinner again on the last leg to Tokyo. The Oriental flavor is evoked with *sushi* and other Japanese tidbits, but the main courses run to *scaloppine* and *filetto* of beef. One stewardess on each flight is a Japanese girl in kimono. Alitalia, as it was explained, would like to hire only homegrown stewardesses, as other national airlines prefer to do, but somehow in Italy the girls who are bright enough to speak a foreign language such as Japanese are usually too socially prominent or



otherwise too particular to work as flying waitresses. Soon, for the first time, the airline will begin recruiting girls from northern Europe.

We came to Athens in a golden twilight, the dying sun flashing off the handsome new angular beige stone airport that opened earlier this summer. In the transit lounge was an even healthier, tanner assemblage than I had seen in Stockholm's airport in late June. Many were Americans. U.S. tourist traffic to Greece had dropped off by 18,000 in 1967, the year of the coup, but in 1968 we flooded back at a record 202,000.

"Hey, Spiro!" I heard a man shout toward a row of people standing on a balcony above the transit lounge. I scanned the faces for America's No. 2 used car salesman, but this Spiro was a lean Greek with glasses.

Out of Bangkok I was reading an *Esquire* article about an American Marine squad that had ravaged a family of South Vietnamese villagers, when the pilot's voice came on: "Ladies and gentlemen, we are cruising at 29,000 feet, about to pass over Danang, South Vietnam." He might have said Sioux Falls, South Dakota. I could see dense green foliage broken now and then by red mounds and meandering brown rivers. The stewardess and I talked about the war. "You Americans," she said, "always discuss war and the military with such great interest, so much passion, so much humor. I think it is very good. Always the Italians are so sad"—she made a long face—"when they tell about World War II."

TOKYO.

AN OFFICIAL of the Japan National Tourist Organization took the tale of my Roman fiasco with an understanding little grin. He said his countrymen have been preyed upon by the same vultures recently. "One Japanese tourist," he said, "was charged \$500 for a little champagne."

"What did he do about it?" I asked. "It was all right. He got to take the girl home."

KYOTO.

THERE IS a fascinating side to this ancient Japanese city far removed

from the splendor of its shrines and temples. The cramped Shijo Kawaramachi district throbs with the nighttime frenzy of a miniature Times Square, without the pathetic vulgarity. For an hour or more I explored the narrow lanes alive with streams of people and flashing lights. I was about to walk back to my inn when two young Japanese men hailed me. They were students and they wanted to practice their English on an American. My guard went up again.

"Could you join us for a cup of tea so we can talk?" one of them asked. Something told me he wasn't acting, and yet I followed them down the lane with tender steps, a soldier picking his way through a mine field. There seemed to be nothing predetermined about the café they chose, and we sat in a booth for a long time, drinking fruit juice and talking mostly of writing. We swapped Styron for Akutagawa. When the check for \$2 or so came, Hiroyuki Kuwano and Naoto Hirai wouldn't let me pay. "At least we can . . . what do you say . . . have a Dutch treat?" said the intense Hiroyuki, who did most of the talking on his side.

Before we got up from the table Hiroyuki addressed me in slow, precise English, working his jaws to pronounce each syllable. "I wish to thank you . . . earnestly . . . from the bottom of my heart . . . for talking with us." They walked me back to my inn, and outside the door, after we had shaken hands, Hiroyuki spoke again in his measured way. "I hope that . . . someday . . . somewhere . . . we will all meet again." Inside the door I almost cried.

—D.B.

WIT TWISTER #129

Edited by ARTHUR SWAN

The object of the game is to complete the poem by thinking of one word whose letters, when rearranged, will yield the appropriate word for each series of blanks. Each dash within a blank corresponds to a letter of the word.

"It's vulgar to _ _ _ _ _ ,
you clod," she said,
And cast the _ _ _ _ _ at
his handsome head.
"You're _ _ _ _ _ than I
am," replied her flame,
"But make a _ _ _ _ _ !
I have a better aim!"

—A. S.

(Answer on page 48)