The Fishy Tale of

Victor Lustig

Tutor: He was a conman.

*Student: A what?*

A conman.

*Oh. What’s a conman?*

Someone who tricks people.

*Oh.*

For money.

*Oh.*

A thief, really.

*A thief?*

But a clever one.

*And he was a clever one, was he?*

Victor Lustig?

*Yes, him.*

One of the best.

*One of the best?*

One of the very best.

*And he’s famous?*

Well, people don’t remember his name.

*Oh?*

But they do remember what he did.

*Oh. And what did he do?*

He’s the man who sold the Eiffel Tower.

*Sold the Eiffel Tower?*

Twice.

*Sold the Eiffel Tower twice?*

Well, he was a very good conman.

*But it wasn’t his, was it?*

The Eiffel Tower?

*It wasn’t his, was it?*

Oh no. It belonged to France. The government of France.

*How could he sell it then?*

Quite easily, as it turns out.

*How did he do it?*

Well, it was a long time ago.

*When?*

About 1925.

*Soon after the First World War.*

Yes. And Mr Lustig was living in Paris.

*Capital of France, right?*

Yes.

*Where the Eiffel Tower is?*

Yes.

*And?*

Well, the French government was in a pickle.

*In a pickle?*

Yes.

*Why?*

They didn’t know what to do with it.

*They didn’t know what to do with the Eiffel Tower?*

Well, it cost a lot to maintain.

*Doesn’t it make a lot of money?*

From tourists?

*Yes.*

It does now.

*But not then?*

No.

*So it was no use at all.*

No use at all.

*Back then, anyway.*

No.

*It’s made of iron, isn’t it?*

Yes. And it has to be maintained properly.

*Painted, you mean.*

Yes. Otherwise it’ll rust.

*And it wasn’t used any more.*

No. So the government was thinking of pulling it down.

*Pulling down the Eiffel Tower?*

And selling it for scrap.

*Scrap? Just scrap?*

Scrap iron is worth a lot of money.

*Is this where Victor Lustig comes in?*

It is.

*He’s going to sell the Eiffel Tower for scrap.*

He is.

*How?*

Well, he pretends to be a government minister.

*OK.*

And he finds a scrap metal dealer.

*Who might buy the Eiffel Tower.*

A gullible scrap metal dealer.

*One who will fall for a good story.*

His name was Mr Poisson.

*The gullible scrap dealer?*

Yes.

*Mr Poisson?*

Means fish.

*In French. Yes, I know.*

Mr Lustig sells Mr Poisson the Eiffel Tower.

*And he buys it, does he?*

He does. For cash. Loads of cash.

*Mr Lustig must have been clever.*

Yes, he was.

*What about Mr Poisson?*

What do you mean?

*He must have realised.*

Yes. He did.

*After a bit.*

It was his wife, really.

*Mrs Poisson?*

She realised it was a trick.

*After Mr Poisson had paid for it.*

Yes.

*Bought the Eiffel Tower.*

In cash.

*I bet he felt silly.*

Well, yes.

*I bet he felt really silly.*

Yes. So silly he didn’t tell the police.

*Ah.*

He was too embarrassed.

*So Mr Lustig sold it again, did he?*

Well, he read the papers every day.

*And they didn’t report anything.*

So Mr Lustig knew he had got away with it.

*With selling the Eiffel Tower.*

So he thought he’d have another go.

*Right.*

He found another victim.

*Another scrap dealer.*

Another gullible scrap dealer.

*And sold him the Eiffel Tower.*

Right.

*Another silly man.*

But not quite as embarrassed as Mr Poisson had been.

*He went to the police, did he?*

Yes.

*What happened to Mr Lustig?*

And all that money.

*Yes. What happened?*

Well, Mr Lustig read the papers every day.

*And one day they reported the sale of the Eiffel Tower.*

But nobody knew where Mr Lustig was. Or who he was.

*Not yet, anyway.*

No. So he had a little time.

*So what did he do?*

He ran.

*Ran?*

Took the money and ran.

*Where?*

America.

*Right.*

In America he sold money boxes.

*Money boxes?*

These are really clever.

*What are money boxes?*

Boxes which print money.

*Another trick?*

Yes. Of course.

*How did that one work?*

Well, first you make a really nice box.

*OK.*

It’s got to be really nice.

*OK.*

With a handle in one side.

*OK.*

You fill it with special paper.

*Special paper?*

Fancy paper the size of $1,000 dollar bills.

*Right. I can see where this is going!*

You tell your target the box prints $1,000 dollar bills.

*And you put one in beforehand. A nice new $1,000 bill.*

Yes. How did you know?

*I guessed!*

You tell your target that the box takes 6 hours to print a bill.

*And you have to leave it to do this.*

Yes.

*And after 6 hours you turn the handle.*

And out comes a nice $1,000 bill.

*It’s a money box! It makes money for you!*

A real money box!

*So you sell the box to your target.*

For loads of money.

*How much?*

As much as you think he will pay.

*How much did Mr Lustig get?*

Maybe $50,000 a box, although we don’t actually know.

*Big money.*

Especially in those days.

*Why don’t we know how much he got for a money box?*

Well, nobody is going to report him, are they?

*I suppose not.*

Nobody is going to tell the police they bought a money box!

*No. I suppose not!*

They’d look a bit silly.

*They would.*

And they’d be admitting to counterfeiting money.

*Well, they weren’t really doing that.*

Yes, they were!

*No, they weren’t!*

How do you mean?

*Well, the box didn’t work, did it?*

Oh.

*The box didn’t really print money.*

No, I suppose not.

*So he may have sold a lot of boxes?*

Well, yes.

*For all we know he may have sold a lot of them.*

Mmmm...

*What happened to him?*

In the end?

*Yes.*

Well, he began counterfeiting money.

*For real?*

Yes.

*Actually printing fake money?*

Yes.

*No more money boxes?*

Not as far as we know.

*Did they catch him?*

Yes they did, in the end.

*Oh.*

Put him on trial.

*Oh.*

Him and another man.

*For printing fake money?*

Yes.

*Oh.*

He escaped once.

*But they caught him again?*

Oh yes. They caught him again.

*Was he put in jail?*

Alcatraz.

*Oh.*

That big jail on an island.

*Yes.*

No escape from there.

*No.*

I don’t think anyone ever has.

*No.*

But then, he had been a naughty boy.

*I suppose so.*

He was sent to jail for 25 years.

*25 years!*

Yes.

*So he was an old man when he got out?*

He never did.

*He never got out?*

No.

*Oh.*

Died in jail.

*Oh.*

I wonder why he kept on doing all that stuff?

*All that bad stuff?*

Yes.

*What do you mean?*

Well, he must have made a lot of money.

*Selling the Eiffel Tower twice, you mean?*

Well, yes.

*I suppose that made him a lot of money.*

Must have done.

*It’s enormous.*

The Eiffel Tower?

*Yes.*

Must be tonnes of iron in the Eiffel Tower.

*Tonnes and tonnes and tonnes of it.*

So he must have made a fortune.

*Must have done.*

And then all those money boxes.

*They must have made him a lot of money.*

Why did he keep on going?

*Why not just stop?*

Yes.

*Live a quiet life.*

Yes.

*Maybe he couldn’t.*

How do you mean?

*Maybe he spent a lot of money?*

Lived a high life?

*Yes.*

I think he did.

*Maybe he was a big spender.*

Maybe.

*So maybe he had to keep going.*

Until they caught him.

*One day.*

Yes.

*Maybe he knew they would.*

One day.

*But maybe he enjoyed it.*

Enjoyed tricking people?

*Well, he was very good at it.*

Very.

*Selling the Eiffel Tower takes some doing.*

Well, it does.

*Maybe he found it fun.*

Exciting, you mean?

*Yes. Maybe he found it really exciting.*

Too exciting to stop.

*Selling a money box must be exciting.*

Fun. In a way.

*Yes, and selling the Eiffel Tower must be fun, too.*

Yes.

*It must be quite exciting.*

Especially if you get away with it.

*Yes.*

And he did.

*Most of the time.*

But that’s not like counterfeiting, is it?

*Suppose not.*

Maybe he got greedy.

*Maybe.*

Maybe he just had to have more.

*More and more and more and more.*

Maybe he never quite had enough.

*Perhaps.*

Always wanted more.

*Perhaps.*

Sad, really.

*Yes. Sad, really.*