

*A
Decline
in
Prophets*

A note from the publisher

Dear Reader,

If you enjoy riveting stories with engaging characters and strong writing, as I do, you'll love *A Decline in Prophets*. Historical crime fiction at its best, Sulari Gentill brings together art, money, crime, religion and... murder in an extraordinary tale set in 1932 on the luxury cruise liner *RMS Aquitania*. The second book in the Rowland Sinclair Series, it's the sequel to *A Few Right Thinking Men*—which was shortlisted for the 2011 Commonwealth Writer's Prize for Best First Book in our region. She had me hooked from her very first page, and I couldn't put the story down.

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Happy reading,

Alison Green

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Book 2 in the Rowland Sinclair Series

SULARI GENTILL





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To all the prophets and profiteers I have known.

Prologue

DEATH WORE A DINNER SUIT

His manners were perfect. Murder made sophisticated conversation while dancing the quickstep. He was light on his feet.

Annie Besant shuddered and closed her eyes. How clearly she saw the spreading crimson stain on the starched white dress shirt. That much was revealed... but no more. She surveyed the room. So many immaculately tailored men—all dashing, some charming, at least one was dangerous.

An old woman now, her celebrated clairvoyance was not what it once had been. The foresight was vague, useless for anything but tormenting her with a premonition of violence. The feeling was furtive, an occasional glimpse of a deep predatory darkness that lurked amongst the gaiety and cultured frivolity of the floating palace. A cold creeping certainty that one of the elegant gentlemen who gathered to dine, intended to kill.

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RMS AQUITANIA



The RMS *Aquitania* is like an English country house. Its great rooms are perfect replicas of the fine salons and handsome apartments that one finds in the best of old English manor halls. The decorations are too restrained ever to be oppressive in their magnificence. There is no effort to create an atmosphere of feverish gaiety by means of ornate and colourful furnishings. The ship breathes an air of elegance that is very gratifying to the type of people that are her passengers.

The Cunard Steam Ship Company Ltd

It was undeniably a civilised way to travel... particularly for fugitives.

Overhead, crystal chandeliers moved almost imperceptibly with the gentle sway of the ship. If the scene over which they hung had been silent, one may have noticed the faint tinkle of the hand-cut prisms as they made contact. As it was, however, the Louis XVI Restaurant was busy, ringing with polite repartee and refined laughter as the orchestra played an unobtrusive score from the upper balcony.

The tables in the dining room were round, laid with crisp white linen and a full array of cutlery in polished silver. Each sat twelve, the parties carefully chosen from amongst the first class passengers of the transatlantic liner. Waiters wove efficiently and subtly through

the hall. Though neither as large nor as fast as the newer ships in the Cunard Line, the RMS *Aquitania* boasted a luxury and opulence that was unsurpassed. Her passengers cared less about arriving first than they did about doing so in the most elegant manner possible.

Rowland Sinclair, of Woollahra, Sydney, hooked his walking stick over the back of his chair before he sat down. He dragged a hand through his dark hair, irritated with the inordinately long time it seemed to be taking his leg to heal. It had been over seven months now since Edna had shot him. Early in the mornings the limp was negligible, but after a day contending with the constant roll of the deck, the damaged muscles in his thigh ached and he relied on the stick.

His travelling companions, who had come with him into temporary exile, were already seated.

Rowland glanced across at Edna. She sparkled, perfectly accustomed to the many admiring eyes that were upon her. Her face was rapt in attention to the man seated beside her, the fall of her copper tresses accentuating the tilt of her head. Rowland considered the angle with an artist's eye. The creaminess of her complexion was dramatic in contrast to the chocolate skin of the man upon whose conversation she focussed.

Jiddu Krishnamurti had dined with them before, and with him his eminent—perhaps notorious—entourage. Rowland found the man intriguing—it was not often that one broke bread with an erstwhile messiah.

On the other side of Edna, leaning absurdly in an attempt to enter the intimacy between her and Krishnamurti, sat the Englishman, Orville Urquhart. A consciously elegant man, he had been solicitous of their company since he first encountered Edna on board. Rowland regarded the Englishman with the distance he habitually reserved

for those who vied for the attentions of the beautiful sculptress. Urquhart was broad-shouldered and athletic, but so well groomed that it seemed to counteract the masculinity of his build. His hands were manicured, his thin moustache combed and waxed, and even from across the table, his cologne was noticeable. Despite himself, Rowland shook his head.

He turned politely as the elderly woman in the next seat addressed him. “Tell me, Mr. Sinclair, will you be staying on in New York?”

“Not for long I’m afraid, Mrs. Besant. We shall embark for Sydney within a week of our arrival in New York.”

“I take it the Americas do not interest you?”

Rowland smiled. “We have been abroad for a while,” he said. “We’re ready to go home.”

Annie Besant, World President of the Theosophical movement, nodded. “I have travelled greatly through my long life,” she said. “First, spreading the word of intellectual socialism, and then, when I found Theosophy, promoting brotherhood and the wisdom of the Ancients. It was always the greater calling... but I do understand the call home.”

“To London?” Rowland asked, knowing that the city was where the renowned activist’s work and legend had begun.

“No, my dear... I belong to India where mysticism has long been accepted.”

“Indeed.”

“I was in Sydney before the war, you know.” She looked at Rowland critically. “You would have still been in knee pants I suppose, so you wouldn’t remember. I’m afraid I was considered somewhat controversial.” She smiled faintly, a little proudly.

“And why was that?” Rowland asked, expecting that she wanted him to do so.

“Free thought, and those who espouse it are always the enemy of those who rely on obedience and tradition for power,” she replied.

Rowland raised a brow.

“I gave a lecture... *Why I do not believe in God.*”

He nodded. “That would do it.”

Annie Besant smiled. She liked the young Australian. Clearly, he was a man of means, old money—well, as old as money could be in the younger colonies, but his mind was open despite a certain flippancy. His eyes were extraordinary, dark though they were blue. There was an easy boyishness to his smile and, she thought, a strength. He had often stayed talking with her when the other young people got up to dance. She put a hand on his knee—Annie Besant was eighty-five now—she could take certain liberties.

“Tell me, how did you hurt your leg, Mr. Sinclair?”

“Ed... Miss Higgins shot me.” He glanced towards Edna, still talking deeply with Krishnamurti.

“A lovers’ tiff?”

“Not quite. She wasn’t aiming at me.”

“So fate misdirected the bullet?”

He grinned. “Not fate—Ed. She’s a terrible shot, I’m afraid.”

“And her intended victim?”

“Oh, she missed them entirely.”

“I see.” Annie placed her hand over his and gazed into his eyes. “You have an interesting aura, Mr. Sinclair. I have been clairvoyant for some years you know, but still, you would be difficult to read, I think.”

Rowland was a little relieved. He was less than enamoured with the idea of being read.

Annie Besant smiled again and whispered conspiratorially. “I would not be offended, Mr. Sinclair, if you were to take out that notebook of yours.”

Rowland laughed. It was his tendency to draw whatever caught his interest... it was not always appropriate to do so and he regularly checked the impulse to extract the notebook from the inside pocket of his jacket. Whether or not she was clairvoyant, Annie Besant was perceptive.

“I should rather like to draw you, Mrs. Besant,” he said as he opened the leather-bound artist’s journal. “Actually I’d very much like to paint you, but I’m afraid my painting equipment is in the ship’s hold.”

“You must call me Annie. I think we are well enough acquainted now... Besant is just the name of the man who took my children.” She sighed. “Of course that was well before you were born.”

Rowland was already drawing. He was aware that Annie’s activism had seen her lose custody and contact with her children. He was not really sure why he knew that—it was one of those snippets of information told in hushed tones that came one’s way from time to time.

“Not that old line again, Rowly.” Milton Isaacs leant in from his seat on the other side of Annie Besant. “Not every beautiful woman can be seduced with a portrait, mate.”

Rowland ignored him but Annie chuckled. Milton and Annie Besant got on famously. Her past as a socialist agitator and reformist made her a hero to Milton, whose politics were definitely, and at times awkwardly, Left. She in turn was intrigued by the brash young man who called himself a poet, and made no effort to hide the letters of the word ‘Red’ which disfigured his forehead. Being too old to wait upon niceties, she had asked him about it on their first introduction.

“Are you particularly fond of the colour red, Mr. Isaacs?”

“It is a perfectly acceptable colour, Mrs. Besant,” he had replied smoothly. “But it does not appear on my face with consent.”

“Then why is it there?” she had persisted, looking carefully at the faded but readable letters.

“I came across some men who took exception to my political persuasion and who decided that I should wear it.”

It was not entirely true. Milton left out that the right-wing vigilantes who had branded him with silver nitrate, had done so thinking he was Rowland Sinclair. That was several months ago now—before they’d fled Sydney.

Rowland sketched, listening vaguely as his friend gave Annie the benefit of his considerable charm. Annie Besant’s face was strong, her forehead broad, and the set of her mouth determined. She wore a fashion of her own creation, a kind of anglicised form of Indian dress, in white and blue. He drew her with definite lines, concentrating on capturing both the wisdom and hope in her face, as she spoke to Milton of international brotherhood. Her eyes were farseeing, as if her focus was on something in the distance. The Theosophical movement was now in decline, but at its height it had counted powerful men amongst its number. Prime ministers, men of letters. Indeed, it was rumoured that Australia’s new national capital had been designed by Burley Griffin as a monument to Theosophical symbolism. And all these men had been led by Annie Besant.

“Rowly,” Clyde caught his attention from across the table. A fellow artist, Clyde Watson Jones had, like Edna and Milton, accompanied him from Sydney on a tour that had taken them to Egypt, the Continent and England. In London, Rowland had attended to some of his family’s extensive business interests. It was of course Sinclair money that had paid all their passages and accommodated and attired them in a manner befitting. Rowland Sinclair was a wealthy man, but he chose his friends from among those who were not—not consciously of course. It just so happened that the bohemian set of

poets and artists to whom he naturally gravitated were not often from the elite and conservative circles into which he was born.

“Hu reckons there’s a game of baccarat going in the Smoking Room tonight,” Clyde said hopefully. Originally from the country, his rugged, weather-beaten face looked a little out of place in the dinner-suited grandeur of the restaurant.

Hubert Van Hook was the other man at their table. He had occupied himself that evening exchanging suggestive witticisms with the Hoffman sisters, who were cruising to celebrate their recently acquired status as widows. There were four Hoffmans, so their simultaneous bereavement seemed an alarming coincidence, but by all accounts it was a happy one. In his mid-thirties, Van Hook was a native of Chicago, and one of the Theosophical movement’s inner circle, though he seemed to prefer his spirits in a glass. He had a fondness for cards and consequently, was often in their company.

“I’m in,” Rowland replied with a quick glance at Milton. Baccarat was a habit they had picked up on the Continent where it was a most fashionable pastime. Milton looked towards Edna who was speaking to Jiddu Krishnamurti of her work. The sculptress liked to go dancing in the evenings. As Rowland was still unable to do so, and Clyde loathed dancing, she relied on Milton to escort her... initially at least.

Milton’s eyes moved briefly to Orville Urquhart. “I’m coming,” he announced, deciding that Urquhart could take Edna onto the dance floor if she really had to go. Otherwise she could spend the evening counting chakras with the once World Prophet.

“I demand that we be relocated, forthwith!”

Rowland’s head snapped up towards the minor commotion at the next table.

A heavy-set man of the cloth was remonstrating with the harried purser who was doing his best to minimise the unfortunate scene.

“It’s bad enough that his kind is allowed aboard, but I will not dine within arm’s reach—it is an affront... to me and the Church!”

The purser tried valiantly in the awkward silence that followed to resolve the issue with the least amount of fuss and embarrassment. The bishop and his party were directed to an alternative table well on the other side of the dining room.

Annie Besant was the first to speak. “Ignorant buffoon!”

“Come now, Amma,” Jiddu Krishnamurti soothed. “The ignorant are more in need of understanding than those whose minds are open...”

Annie Besant snorted. “You are right of course, Jiddu.”

Krishnamurti expanded and expounded on his message of tolerance and love for one’s fellow man, regardless of whether it was reciprocated. Milton caught Rowland’s eye and grimaced. They all liked the Indian holy man, but he did have a tendency to go on. Annie Besant noticed Rowland’s fleeting smile and returned her hand to his knee.

“Jiddu is a good man,” she said quietly. “In the end he was too good to fulfil his destiny.”

Rowland turned towards her once again. He knew that Krishnamurti had been the Theosophical movement’s anointed world leader, thought to be a reincarnation of Christ. He had been discovered in India as a small boy and raised by Annie Besant herself. And then, just a couple of years before he was expected to take the mantle of world teacher, he had repudiated the title and left the movement, though apparently his ties with its leaders were still strong.

“Jiddu feels that the individual must come to enlightenment through his own realisation and not through the teachings of another. For this reason he walked away from the Society.” She sighed as she reflected. “Not everyone took it well.”

Rowland nodded. Few religions would take the loss of their prophet well. “It must have been disappointing,” he muttered.

Annie nodded and patted his knee. “We had been preparing for so long, you see. Even in your Sydney, our Mr. Leadbeater had everything ready. But perhaps that is what Jiddu had to teach us... that we must go on ourselves.”

Suddenly she gasped. The hand on his knee clutched. Rowland stiffened in response and regarded the matriarch with concern. The colour had drained from her face.

“Are you unwell, Annie?”

She said nothing for a moment, breathless, and then, “The veil was opened again... just briefly... so briefly. I caught a glimpse of what your life holds, dear boy,” she said, fortifying herself from the wineglass before her.

Rowland smiled. “Oh?”

Annie Besant looked at him, composing herself now. “You must be careful, Rowland. I see trouble ahead for you.”

“What kind of trouble?” he asked, still smiling.

Annie shrugged, clearly frustrated. “I don’t know,” she sighed. “There is power in your presence but it is guarded.” She regarded him almost accusingly. “As I said earlier, you are hard to read.”

“Did you see any beautiful women?”

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. “You think I am a mad old lady getting carried away by my own fancies?”

“A little,” he admitted. “But I rather like mad old ladies. It’s the young ones that are problematic.”

Annie Besant followed his gaze to Edna who was explaining Cubism to Krishnamurti. “Miss Higgins is a very rare young woman, an irrepressible life force.”

Rowland’s right brow rose. “Repressed, she is not,” he agreed.

Annie chuckled. She patted his leg again and leant in to confide, “I have no doubt that there will be beautiful women in your future, dear boy.”

“That’s a relief.”

Milton, who had been listening, laughed. “What do you see for me, Annie?” he asked, offering her his palm.

She slapped his hand away. “I am not some carnival gypsy, young man!” But she wasn’t offended.

“You be careful,” she said quietly to Rowland once again.