All the Tears in China
Book 9 in the Award-Winning Rowland Sinclair Mysteries
SULARI GENTILL
BOOKS BY SULARI GENTILL

The Rowland Sinclair Series

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Paving the New Road
Gentlemen Formerly Dressed
A Murder Unmentioned
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A Dangerous Language
All the Tears in China

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DEAR READERS OF MINE
Though eavesdropping as a habit is not regarded with favour in the best society, it is an amusing and sometimes instructive occupation when the matters overheard are of a general and not a personal nature. Indeed, if one’s sense of hearing is acute it is almost impossible not to collect a few items of other people’s business when going about the city even if they are not sought deliberately. As the poet might have said: ‘A little eavesdropping now and then is relished by the wisest men…’

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Rowland Sinclair’s Chrysler Airflow was prone to attract attention, both admiring and aghast in equal measure, and so the presence of three men loitering curiously by the motorcar was not particularly unusual. The automobile’s revolutionary design and all-metal body, not to mention its yellow paintwork, made it distinctive amongst the black Austins and Ford Tudors also parked in Druitt Lane.

Rowland handed his seven-year-old nephew the key to the Airflow’s door. “Let yourself in, Ernie, while I have a word with these gentlemen.”
Rowland had become accustomed to explaining his automobile to inquisitive strangers. He was, himself, still enamoured enough with the vehicle not to find the interest tedious. Still, on this occasion, he was in a hurry, and the men in question had placed themselves in the way of the car. They’d probably want him to show them the engine.

Ernest Sinclair ran directly to the driver’s side door with the key clutched tightly in his fist while Rowland strode over to the men leaning on the Airflow’s bonnet.

“Afternoon, gentlemen.”

“Flash car. She yours?”

“She is.”

The man who’d asked glanced at his companions. “You Sinclair?”

At the mention of his name, Rowland tensed instinctively. Apparently this reaction was reply enough. They fell upon him, fists leading. In the face of the onslaught, Rowland gave no quarter and responded in kind. The situation was not one with which he was unfamiliar and he knew to keep the three men in front of him—if one was to grab and hold him from behind, the scenario would become grim indeed. His assailants, too, were clearly not novices in the dubious arts of street fighting. They forced him away from the car, raining blow after blow and using their number to bypass his defences. Eventually Rowland went down.

The surface of Druitt Lane was warm and hard against his face. He used it to steady the world, to focus on fighting back. Rowland wanted to shout at Ernest to run, but he was not sure if that would simply alert what might be a band of kidnappers to the boy’s location.

He was almost relieved when one of the men—he could not see which—called him a “Commie-loving traitor”. This was about him, not Ernest. Whatever their purpose, it was probably not child abduction. The jagged impact of a boot against his ribs drove the breath from his lungs. And then another.
“Oi! What the hell’s going on here?”

From the ground, Rowland knew only that it was a voice he’d not heard before. In the moments that followed, he could almost hear the indecision, and then the pounding feet of men in flight.

“Are you all right, mate?” A concerned hand on his shoulder.

Rowland pushed himself gingerly off the road. “Yes, I think so.”

“Mongrels! Bloody mongrels! Did they rob yer?”

Rowland shook his head slowly.

The Samaritan—a large man with a strong and steady grip—helped him stand. “They were giving you one hell of a kicking, you sure you’re—”

Rowland’s head began to clear. “Dammit! Ernie!”

“I beg yer pardon, mate?”

“Ernie, my nephew. He was…” Rowland stepped unsteadily towards the Airflow, panicked now. He couldn’t see the boy. “Ernie!”

A tousled head rose hesitantly above the dash, blue eyes wide.

Rowland stopped to breathe. He opened the front passenger door.

“Ernie, thank God!”

Ernest was pale and obviously shaken. “I wanted to help, Uncle Rowly, but you told me to stay in the car.”

“I’m glad you did, mate.” Rowland leaned against the doorframe, still trying to get his breath.

“You’re bleeding, Uncle Rowly.” Ernest remained in the protection of the Airflow’s cabin.

“It’s just a scratch, Ernie. I’ll be all right.”

“Who were those men?”

“To be perfectly honest, I’m not really sure.”

“Why were they cross with you?”

To that, Rowland did not respond. He could guess why, but there was no point frightening Ernest. “We should get home to Woodlands.”
“Are you up to driving that contraption, mate?” The man who’d stopped the attack regarded first the Airflow then Rowland Sinclair with equal scepticism, before drawing back sharply. “Hold your horses there a minute…” He rummaged inside his jacket to extract a newspaper.

Rowland sighed. He really didn’t want to get into another fight, but at least there was only one man this time.

The man held the front page beside Rowland’s face. “That’s you!” he said. “That’s you with that fella, Keesch.”

Rowland glanced back at Ernest in the car. Egon Kisch was regarded as either a peace advocate, or a dangerous Communist subversive. The three men who’d just tried to pound Rowland into the ground were indisputably of the latter opinion. Still, Rowland had never been a man to deny his friends. “Yes, that’s me.”

“Well, whaddaya know, from the front page! The wife will never believe it.”

Rowland relaxed. He put his hand and introduced himself, relieved that the gentleman seemed more starstruck than offended by the picture. “I appreciate your assistance, sir.”

“Barry Love,” he said, shaking Rowland’s hand solemnly. “Always pleased to help a gentleman. You’d best be on your way lest those jokers come back. There’s some folk pretty worked up over your mate Keesch.”

“It would seem so.”

Rowland farewelled Love with more thanks and slipped behind the steering wheel, wincing as he settled.

Ernest watched him intently.

“I’m sorry you had to see that, Ernie. But I’m fine, you know.”

“You were on the ground.”

“Yes, that was a little undignified—but I was about to get up.”

“Pater said that half of Sydney wants to kill you.”
Rowland smiled faintly. Wilfred hated being called “Pater” but Ernest was rather enthusiastic about learning Latin. “He told you that?”

“He told Dr. Maguire. I was leavesdropping.”

“I believe the term is eavesdropping, Ernie.”

“Even if we were in the garden?”

“Even then.”

“Oh.”

“And eavesdropping is not generally the done thing, old boy, not if you’re a gentleman,” Rowland added, keen to distract Ernest from the subject of who might want to kill his uncle.

“You’re not going to tell Pater, are you?”

“No, I won’t tell your father. But perhaps you should try to do less of it anyway.”

“What if they’re talking about me?”

“Especially if they’re talking about you.”

“What if I was there first and they walk in talking afterwards?”

“Well you should leave or let them know you’re there.”

“Pater says I shouldn’t interrupt.”

By the time young Ernest Sinclair had thoroughly defined the parameters of eavesdropping, the Airflow had turned into the long drive of Woodlands House and pulled up at perhaps the most grand and stately home in Woollahra, which was not a suburb lacking in magnificent abodes. Ernest jumped from the car to greet the misshapen, one-eared greyhound that leapt down the entrance stairs to greet them.

“Sit, Lenin, sit, sit, sit!” Ernest shouted. The greyhound licked his face but otherwise ignored him.

Rowland climbed out of the motorcar and called his dog to heel. He was only slightly more successful than his nephew. The emergence of two men from the house did little to abate the hound’s excitement.
Milton Isaacs threw open his arms and declared, “I am sir Oracle, and when I ope my lips, let no dog bark.”

Lenin barked.

“Clearly Len has no respect for Shakespeare,” Rowland reflexively attributed the words. A self-proclaimed poet, Milton seemed to consider that repurposing the verse of the great bards with passion was creative effort enough. To Rowland’s knowledge, his friend had only ever composed one original line—more akin to a nursery rhyme than verse—though that was not something that bothered any of them unduly.

“Lay down, Len!” Clyde Watson Jones’ attempt to silence the hound was more effective if less elegant. Raised in the country, Clyde was as direct and practical as Milton was theatrical. Years on the wallaby track, scavenging for work and survival, had infused a necessary pragmatism into his otherwise romantic soul. Lenin settled beside Rowland’s feet, eyeing them all resentfully.

Clyde turned to Rowland, his arms folded across his chest. “What’s happened? You look like you’ve gone a couple of rounds.”

Rowland glanced uneasily at his nephew who was, as usual, listening intently. “Ernie, why don’t you be a good chap and take Len into the kitchen? I’m certain Mary was saving a ham bone for him.”

“Yeah, go on, mate,” Clyde added. “She’s been baking those little jam cakes.”

Any reluctance to leave thus overcome by jam cakes, Ernest set off into the house with Lenin in tow.

“So?” Milton asked as they watched boy and dog disappear.

“Three chaps grabbed me as I was getting into the car. They must have been waiting.”

“Ernie?”

“He was already in the car. I don’t think they realised he was there.”

“So they just gave you a kicking?”
“Yes,” Rowland admitted ruefully.
“Do I need to ask why?”
“The gentlemen objected to my association with Egon Kisch, I believe.”
“God, if Egon knew—"
“There would be nothing he could do, so telling him would be pointless,” Rowland said firmly.
“You’re going to have one hell of a shiner,” Milton observed.
“I suppose I should clean myself up. I promised Ernie we’d—"
“Hello!” Milton interrupted as a racing-green Rolls Royce Continental came through the gates and negotiated the sweeping drive. “Isn’t that your brother’s motor?”
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