



The MYSTERY of the STOLEN da VINCI

ADVENTURES OF
CLARE KENDALL,
WOMAN DETECTIVE

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OUT FROM the frame, the most precious treasure of my whole collection — da Vinci's lost Ginevra Benci." Lawrence Osgood, the American Medici, as the press called him, was standing with Clare Kendall in his private gallery, ruefully regarding a heavy gift frame which now enclosed nothing but jagged ends of canvas fringing the careful backing on which had hung the famous portrait.

"And today I received this letter," he added, spreading out on a Sixteenth Century table a note in a cramped foreign script. "What do you make of it?"

It bore neither date nor heading, but as Clare read the signature, she exclaimed, "La Mano Nera — the Black Hand!" Hastily she ran through it:

"We have heard," it read, "that you have lost a famous painting. It can be restored to you if you will see Pierre Jacot of Jacot & Cie, the Fifth Avenue dealers. Jacot knows nothing of it yet. But this afternoon a woman will let him know how the picture can be secured. It will be returned on payment of \$50,000 as we direct. It is useless to try to trace this letter, the messengers we employ or any other means we take to communicate. Such an effort or any dealings with the police will provoke a tragedy and the picture will be lost to you forever. — La Mano Nera."

"A woman will let him know," repeated Clare, turning the letter over and looking at it carefully. "Apparently there is nothing about this note that gives a clue, not even the postmark."

"Do you think Jacot himself could have anything to do with it?" asked Osgood slowly. "I have known Jacot a long time, but I didn't think he knew I owned La Ginevra."

"What do you mean?" asked Clare in surprise.

"It was the companion picture to Mona Lisa, painted about the same time," explained Osgood thoughtfully. "It disappeared a few years after da Vinci died and was only recently discovered, after centuries, in an old chapel in Italy. Mona Lisa was stolen; now Mona Ginevra is gone also."

"WAS anything else taken?" asked Clare surveying the rich store of loot collected from all ages.

"I don't know yet. Until my curator, Dr. Grimm, and his assistant, Miss Latham, have gone over the catalogue and checked things up. It looks now as if the thief, whoever he was, had confined his attention to this Fifteenth and Sixteenth Century Italian corner. The modern crook, you know, has an eye for pictures. Anyhow, this one went straight for the da Vinci which cost me a quarter of a million at a secret sale in London."

"Secret?"

"Yes, that is why I didn't say anything to the police or the newspapers. The crook must have known the facts. It was smuggled out of Italy by a London dealer after its discovery; they have very strict laws there about taking such things out of the country. You see, I hoped in some way to have it fixed up so that I could get a clear title in the end, for I can't afford to have people make me out a pirate. I could have fixed that, all right. Here's a photograph of the canvas."

Clare swiftly studied the face which the master had painted as a companion to the famous portrait which had hung so long and attracted so many worshippers at the Louvre. There was a hard, cruel sensuousness about the beautiful mouth which the painter seemed to have captured beneath the very oils. Masked cleverly in the penetrating hazel eyes was a sort of Medusa-like cunning, a cunning which combined with the ravishing curves of the neck and chin transfixed the observer even of a photograph.



The Signora and Dr. Vaccaro quietly moved toward the carriage entrance . . . To follow them would have been fatal

OSGOOD saw that Clare, with her woman instinct, had caught the spirit of the portrait, as that subtle fascination over the human mind which is exercised by the art relics of the past.

"What crimes a man might commit under the spell of a woman like that!" he mused, then added, half smiling, "Even for her portrait I was ready to risk a certain degree of reputation. Now some one risks his own liberty to kidnap her."

"The infatuation in this case," commented Clare quietly, scanning the letter again, "is of the kind that holds for ransom, not for love. I should like very much to look over your museum. Have you any idea how the thief gained entrance?"

"No, that is another inexplicable feature. Apparently everything was safely locked, and as for Dr. Grimm, I would trust him with the whole collection. Shall I ask him to accompany us about?"

"By all means."

Narrowly she watched the curator as they proceeded, chatting, from room to room of wonders. Dr. Grimm was a middle-aged man, rather good-looking in spite of his huge tortoise shell spectacles and the slight stoop to his shoulders. He had an air that suggested the savant and epicurean combined.

CAREFULLY Clare went over every lock and bolt of the big private gallery. At last in the basement, after what had seemed a fruitless search, they came to a strong door by which rubbish was removed to the street. A low exclamation from Clare called attention to some steel filings which had collected in a corner and had evidently been overlooked by some one in cleaning.

She began tapping the door. Suddenly with her nail she dug directly into what looked on the surface

like painted steel. There, over the lock, was a little hole in the heavy door, puttied up and carefully painted over.

"How could that have been done?" exclaimed Osgood.

"By an electric drill," she answered, glancing about. "It must have been attached to that light socket up there outside the door. Very clever, too."

Dr. Grimm said nothing, but it was evident from his face that he felt relieved that the robbery had no longer the appearance of being an inside job.

"What would you advise me to do?" inquired Osgood, as they retraced their steps.

"NEGOTIATE," decided Clare tersely. "Offer half the demand at first. Only, don't pay — yet."

"I wonder if Jacot did have anything to do with it?" reiterated Osgood.

"I should like to see him before you begin negotiations," answered Clare noncommittally. "By the way, from your end I would suggest that it is safer to put the matter in the hands of Dr. Grimm and let him manage it with Jacot."

That afternoon Clare and Billy Lawson, with a small grip, sat in the lobby of the Prince Henry, just around the corner from Jacot's. She had telephoned hastily to Lawson and had briefly stated the facts in the case.

"You will stay here, Billy," she planned in conclusion. "Keep this grip of mine. I will call up from Jacot's, if I need you; and will have you paged as Mr. Winterhouse. Then bring the grip over."

Jacot's, enjoying an excellent patronage, opened on Fifth Avenue just a few feet below the street