

# Ben Clarone: Prologue Part 3

*by* Daniel Harris

**July 4, 1976, Canarsie, Brooklyn**

Dan Sarras, dressed in a chauffeur's livery, turned off Foster Avenue onto East 86th street in Canarsie, Brooklyn. He pressed a garage door opener and entered a service garage. He parked the Cadillac next to a 1969 Chevy Bel Air. He slid the keys under the front seat, removed his coat and hat and threw them in the back seat of the Chevy. The urban-abused Chevy looked older than its seven years. Sarras backed it out of the garage, closed the garage door with the remote and headed down 86th street. He squinted his eyes fighting a screaming headache. Every time he had to meet with his parole officer, he got a headache. Fortunately, this was their last meeting. His parole was over. Fitting it happened on Independence Day. When he arrived at Avenue N, he parked the car. He entered an attached red brick house that served as his home and studio.

Dan Sarras's meetings with his parole officer were fencing matches. He told his parole officer he was a car service driver, which was a charade that he was sure didn't fool his parole officer. Sarras's resume included currency forgery, espionage, double agent, art forger, dealer in stolen antiques and art dealer. He was suspected of being the mastermind behind the murder of two British double agents. He had forged 100-dollar bills for the Soviet Union. He worked for the CIA and the KGB. He had even informed for MI6. He was apprehended when a Soviet mole ratted him out to Treasury Department agents. He was charged with forgery in the service of a foreign power, but the Justice Department dropped the charges when he exposed a Soviet double agent in the upper echelons of the State Department. The Treasury Department agreed if he would reveal how he identified his bills from legal tender. When he showed

them his cleverly disguised initials, the Treasury Department immediately began a microscopic examination of all circulating 100-dollar bills. It was estimated that in six months seven percent of all 100-dollar bills returning to the Treasury Department were minted from Sarras's engraved plates. In homage to Sherlock Holmes, Sarras called it his 7% solution to poverty.

After changing clothes and pouring himself a generous Scotch, Sarras entered the basement of the house, moved a bookcase, opened a trap door in the floor, and descended to a well-lit artist's studio. Three identical paintings on three identical easels were in the studio. The studio resembled an operating theater rather than a typical artist's atelier. He donned a battery-powered headlamp and surgical gloves. A six-foot glass topped table served as a palette. In addition to paint, brushes, and palette knives, a variety of calipers, rulers, and dividers covered the table.

Sarras sat quietly studying the three paintings: the original and two copies of *The Unfaithful Wife*. Finally, he took a twenty-power magnifying glass and examined the finials on the bedstead of the original. There was a confusion of brush strokes on the finials. He would make a leftward stroke on the near side finial at the head of the bed on one copy and a rightward brush stroke on the near side finial at the head of the bed on the other copy. He carefully matched the colors and added the brush strokes. Unless one knew where to look and had seen the original, it would be impossible to identify the copies without comparing them to the original. Since no art historian, curator or Gorky expert had ever seen *The Unfaithful Wife*; the copies would easily pass as originals. At this point, only Sarras knew which paintings were copies and which copy was which.

When the two copies were dry, he would age them. Gringovitch had given him vacuum cleaner dust from his Rome studio. Sarras would carefully apply the Roman dust to the copies until they looked like the original, which had hung in Matta's Rome studio for 25 years.

