

The First Two Pages: “The Chinese Dog Mystery”

By James Lincoln Warren

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Before directly launching into how I put the first two pages together, let me take a short detour.

I suspect that many readers of this blog are looking for advice on how to write a story that they can get somebody else to pay for. At Bouchercon 2017 in Toronto, I moderated a panel on that very topic, and it was a big hit. One of my inestimable gems of advice to the audience was, “There are no magic bullets.” I even reiterated it online, more than once.

But now I realize I was half wrong. There are no bullets, true, but there absolutely *is* magic. The ancients knew this, and attributed the invention of writing to the same gods who invented sorcery. Writing is all magic. The problem with it is that, (a) it is not fake stage magic, or at least mostly not stage magic, because admittedly it does require some sleight of hand here and there; and (b) there is no grimoire.

Legerdemain you can learn. But where do you look for the actual magic you need?

Well, in the case of “The Chinese Dog Mystery,” it came from P.G.

Wodehouse: in a nutshell, the concept of the story is “Bertie Wooster as the Green

Hornet.” (Although my Bertie isn’t named Bertie and my Green Hornet isn’t the Green Hornet.)

So the Wodehousean ingredients are all there: the foolish but amiable protagonist, the sensible and pretty female foil, the servant-savant, and hijinks. A note here: sometimes I think aspiring writers spend too much time worrying about getting off the starting blocks, and not enough time worrying about crossing the finish line. From the onset I was more concerned about the latter than I was about the former, because most of the aforementioned ingredients are in the body of the story, and not in its start. But a good beginning helps set the pace.

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The first thing I needed to do was set up the humorous tone. In this case, it was easy, because in Wodehouse I had a perfect model of how to do it. Write something foolish and amiable. And gently farcical.

This entailed beginning with my hero doing something very stupid but completely harmless, as a preliminary step toward doing something very stupid and extremely dangerous, while still keeping the tone light and amusing:

Why is it that pretty girls always show up unexpectedly at the worst possible time? Is it some natural law, like Newton’s rule about apples bonking you on the noggin with an equal and opposite force in the opposite direction? (Which frankly I never really understood either.) Or is it the ancient Curse of the Cramburys, of which we never speak? Although if I were to expect a pretty girl unexpectedly at the worst possible time, it would have to be Nola Channing, who never bothers to knock in the first place. She just swings the door open, her

dark wavy hair bouncing and her agate eyes gleaming, and proclaims her presence like a fearless goddess descending from Olympus. Usually with words along the lines of, “It’s Nola! Where are you, parasite?”

Only this time, she said:

“Benjamin! Why are you trying to wrap a tea towel around your head?”

Much of the fun for me was in having the hero relate a dialogue with a much smarter and attractive woman, and providing the reader’s perspective through her acute observations instead of through his self-delusions. This was also a very natural and convenient way to deliver most of the exposition for the adventure that follows, avoiding the usually dull alternative of having the protagonist baldly explain it, which frankly would have been very much out of character, as he has a tendency to boast:

“My name,” I replied, struggling with the towel, “isn’t Benjamin.”

“Then why does everybody call you Bennie?” she asked, her perfect heart-shaped face shining with dubiousness or dubiety or whatever it’s called. “Benedict? Benson? Surely not Benvenuto.”

“None of the above,” I replied, suppressing a sneer.

“But don’t you sign your checks, when you have enough money in the bank to actually write checks, ‘B. Cowes Crambury’?”

“No, I sign them ‘*E. Cowes Crambury*.’” This was pronounced with my signature soupçon of *savoir faire*.

“E? Are you sure? What’s it stand for?”

“I’ll never tell,” I said. And I never will, because it stands for Ebenezer.

“Of course you won’t. But you still haven’t explained the towel.”

“You’ve hardly given me a ch—”

“Whatever it is, it’s bound to be ridiculous.” She plopped down on the sofa next to me. “I had a bear of a day at the studio. Rewrites for ‘Bells on Her Toes,’ our latest screwball comedy, ugh. I wish they’d assign me something with a little more oomph. Now. The towel.”

“The thing is, it’s a secret. Life and death. You understand.”

“Yeah, I understand that everybody at the party tonight is going to hear about how I found you wrapping a tea towel around your head, unless you spill the beans.”

“Party?” I sat up straight.

“At the big house. The one your aunt is throwing in honor of Dante Quintana for starring in ‘The Burglar of Basra.’ Remember?”

This was Oakes Bros. Pictures’ latest big box office costumer, which I had seen four times.

Finally, when the main action begins (frankly a little later than is usual in a story of mine, and well beyond the two page mark) the reader has already learned enough that the female foil can fade into the background for a while. The reader is already thinking like her, and not like him, and that helps maintain the humor.

At least I hope it does.

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