

The First Two Pages: *Mornings in London*

By Janice Law

Horses hooves in the dawn—my father’s third-rate string headed off for the morning gallops. That was my first thought, before I woke up enough to realize that my old life was mercifully long gone. I was grown up and far from Ireland and my father and all attendant miseries. No, even with my eyes still shut, I knew that I was a coming designer in London, my favorite place, and that any minute, I would hear Nan rattling in our small kitchen. She’d be filling the kettle and starting a rasher of bacon—if we were flush—and a couple of boiled eggs—if we were not.

That’s the opening of *Mornings in London*, the latest—and last—of my Francis Bacon mysteries. Rather a “quiet” opening as one of my former editors would say, but I think that the discovery of a corpse or the flashback to brutal violence has become a cliché. As this series of mysteries relies heavily on character, and because Francis is the main driver of the story, I thought it proper to introduce him straight away.

Of course, this was not really planned. In my case, the opening of a novel appears mysteriously and then either begins to grow—or not. If I am lucky, the initial paragraphs escape the delete button and survive for the printed copy.

In retrospect, I think the opening paragraph works hard. We have a hint of the countryside that awakens unhappy memories for Francis; we learn his present profession, and, most important, the fact that he has succeeded in his long-held dream of setting up housekeeping with Nan, his old nanny.

The second paragraph brings him fully awake, but not in his studio in London. The third graph clarifies the situation.

No! I wasn't in Ireland, but I wasn't in London, either. I was in a big four-poster with a moth-eaten canopy and the handsome haunch beside me under the blanket belonged not to Maurice, my Aussie lover, but to—oh, yes, now it all came back to me—the agreeable footman who had looked so handsome in knee breeches. Pity they ever went out of style. I'd given him a wink as he served the soup and met him at the kitchen garden while the rest of the company played charades.

We are in a country house. It is not the Duke of Omnium's, by any means—check that moth-eaten canopy—but the family has certain pretensions with a footman, in knee breeches no less. More important, we get a little insight to Francis's character. He's not up for charades and society games—indeed, in the next paragraph we find that he detests the whole scene—and he is happier with the footman than with the fancy crowd in the drawing room.

So why is Francis off in the country where the plants and animals kick up his asthma, and the guests bore him with rural pursuits? A question he promptly asks himself—and answers for our benefit. He has only ventured away from Soho and Piccadilly at the behest of his favorite cousin. In due time, a compromising corpse will appear, and Francis will embark on what I conceived of from the first as a little bow to the traditional country house mystery, this one set in the politically dangerous and turbulent 1930s.

I must confess that neither I, nor Francis, was entirely happy with this plan. I'm not good at puzzle mysteries and I'm well aware that my preferred genre is the picaresque chase. As for Francis, his natural habitat is London with his studio, Nan, and his painter lover, and he proved resolute in escaping back to the metropolis.

Nonetheless, the country setting itself was a pleasure to write. I don't share Francis' distaste for gardens and animals—indeed, imagining that distaste that has been the hardest thing about writing him—and horses hooves in the morning awaken not a dread of Ireland and a bullying father, but happy childhood memories. The result was not finally a traditional country house mystery, although I think I managed the traditional gallery of eccentrics, but a mystery in a country house with a distinctly urban and unconventional detective.

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Janice Law is an award-winning writer who has published two mystery series, contemporary novels, short stories, and both popular and scholarly articles. Her most recent books are *Mornings in London* (mysteriouspress.com) and *Homeward Dove* (Wildside Press). She is a retired college English teacher married to a sportswriter. Find out more at www.janicelaw.com.