

## **The First Two Pages: “The Black Drop of Venus”**

By Mark Thielman

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Art, thank you for the opportunity to discuss “The Black Drop of Venus.”

The story was a submission for a writing contest, and the goal of winning influenced much of what I was trying to accomplish in the early pages. I wrote “Black Drop” for the Black Orchid Novella competition. The Wolfe Pack, the Nero Wolfe Appreciation Society, and *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine* jointly sponsor the award.

The Black Orchid Award celebrates the novellas of Rex Stout. The contest by its rules gave me a longer form. I did not have to jump into the action as quickly as I might have with a shorter story.

The final prefatory comment I would make is that I like sea yarns. I have had some success writing them in the past and they allow this flatlander to place himself far from home. They compel me to learn some things—a great part of the fun of writing.

“Pass the preserves, will you Jim?” I asked.

I received the reply I intended.

Bent over the cramped table, the Captain lowered his chin slightly and stared at me, his fixed gaze crossing his lined forehead, mouth set in a scowl. He made no effort to push the compute my direction.

Fortunately, the close quarters of the HMS Endeavour allowed me to reach across the table and retrieve the jar myself.

“You know, Mr. Banks, were you in the navy, I would have you flogged for insubordination,” the captain said as I dropped a bit of jam onto my morning biscuit.

“If, through some sad state of my affairs, I found myself in the navy,” I replied, “it seems highly unlikely that I would be sharing sleeping quarters with the esteemed captain, James Cook.”

Much of the delight in the Nero Wolfe stories derives from the relationship between the two principals, Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin. To be successful in the contest, I felt that my story early on needed to hint at this relationship, but in a way that was not derivative.

Captain James Cook of the British Navy sailed to Tahiti in 1769 on a scientific expedition. Among his company was Joseph Banks, a member of the Royal Society and his principal scientist on the expedition. Banks shared the great cabin with Cook during the journey. Thus, many of the Wolfe elements arose quite naturally—the shared living space, the autocratic nature of one principal character and the tendency of the other to observe and to report.

I wanted my opening to hearken to familiar elements within the Wolfe canon. I chose to begin with a meal. A shared meal is an integral part of many of the Wolfe stories. It also served to make Banks more than a mere visitor to the great cabin.

I've always enjoyed reading Archie Goodwin; the characteristic which the Wolfe Pack identifies as his "wit and jocosity," my family describes as "smart ass."

I hoped to capture that quality by using Banks' lack of naval acumen as a tool and having him refer to the captain as "Jim." In doing so, I touched upon one of the genuine problems of the voyage, the clash between the co-sponsors, the British Navy, with its history of discipline, and the Royal Society. ("Curse the Scientists and all science into the bargain," Cook allegedly declared about the experimental gentlemen crowding his vessel.)

A conversation about food with a bit of a barb to it would, I hope, incorporate both the Nero Wolfe/Archie Goodwin relationship as well as some of the tensions in the actual expedition.

"Please," he said, "finish the breakfast which I have arranged for you."

"A truly gracious host," I continued, "would not demand that his guests consume a morning serving of sauerkraut."

A bemused smile replaced the Captain's earlier scowl. His morning never seemed quite complete until he had elicited my tirade against the required dose of pickled cabbage.

"Mr. Banks," he replied, "I should demand that you and I stand upon the quarterdeck as we consume our sauerkraut. In this way, we set an example for the sailors and civilians alike."

Since I was borrowing the outlines of an actual journey, I wanted, early on, to insert some authentic elements of the voyage to Tahiti. Cook's requirement that the men consume sauerkraut to avoid scurvy on a long sea voyage I found to be a

fascinating aside that I wanted to share. The reference again, I thought, grounded the story in the details of the actual expedition. It also, however, allowed me to let Cook regain the upper hand in the relationship with Banks, much as Mr. Wolfe never surrendered to Archie. The scene, I thought, brought back a comparison to the Rex Stout books where Nero Wolfe's chef, Fritz, is continually preparing dishes full of exotic ingredients. (Wolfe once solved a case to secure a sausage recipe.)

I wanted to respect Mr. Stout's work, I didn't want to mimic him. One distinction between Mr. Wolfe and Captain Cook had to be vocabulary. Wolfe frequently dispenses a word that sends most of us thumbing through the dictionary. Cook was an autodidact, self-taught in mathematics, astronomy and navigation, but with little formal education. Concrete instructions, devoid of complex vocabulary, seemed a more accurate picture of the man. *Insubordination* in the opening paragraphs is about as polysyllabic as I got.

At the beginning of page three, a sailor knocks on the door of the great cabin, gains admission, and reports finding a body. The murder investigation begins and consumes the bulk of the remaining pages. My goal in the first two pages was to prepare for the investigation by introducing the two principal characters, establishing their relationship not only to each other but also to the

actors in the Rex Stout novels. Finally, I hoped to offer a few historical facts about the actual voyage as a further inducement to continue reading.

I wrote a story for my audience. Like a Venn diagram, I viewed my audience as two distinct yet overlapping groups. I wrote for readers who wanted a traditional whodunit as well as competition judges who wished to see a tribute to Rex Stout reflected within the pages. I am profoundly grateful that the Black Orchid Novella judges found the story successful.

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