

Short story 6: Screen Test

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 28 Mar 2012

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Marc Aramini — 28 Mar 2012, 02:37

Screen Test was first published in 1967 in Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine. Wolfe's mysteries are usually far less mysterious than his SF/Fantasy. This one will be brief. If you have already read it you might want to skip the summary and go directly to the very brief commentary below.

SUMMARY: This begins with a description of a mist-shrouded Tang painting with Chinese motifs such as antlered stags and dragons. It is called "Peregrination of Three Philosopher", supposedly by Kou Yuan-Liang, who died before completing the lower corner and as a result the back was also never completed, leaving it blank, contrary to most art from the period, which was usually finished by an inferior artist. Miss Ambrose is selling it to Mr. Sawyer and his expert, Emile, who estimates that it is worth "whatever someone would pay for it."

Miss Ambrose has a serving girl, Clara, whom she berates. Miss Ambrose is described as blind, and looks to the side at her guests. Finally Mr. Sawyer offers to get a check, but Miss Ambrose says she has another buyer coming. To reserve it, he gives her 10 percent in cash, then she convinces him to sign the back so that he knows this is the painting his expert appraised — he should have some sign of good will and "knowledge" that it is the same painting with that signature. The two men leave. Miss Ambrose can see, and she accuses Clara of stealing some of the down payment money, and gives her a minute to figure out what those two gentlemen trying to buy the painting missed. The screen was of course doubled, and Mr. Sawyer signed the back of a forgery right behind the original. He will believe his signature, and the expert will never admit he was duped the first time. Miss Ambrose vows to teach Clara how to make much more than \$50.

COMMENTARY: This is thankfully straightforward. The only real idea of note here that will show up again and again in Wolfe is that of "doubling" and the "bait and switch", in almost everything Wolfe writes from Fifth Head of Cerberus to the girls in Castlevue to Fava and Mora in In Green's Jungles.

Also, the idea that a man will trust his own signature and that an expert will not admit to being duped once he has affirmed something shows the con-artist's view of human nature. Miss Ambrose is willing to go to great lengths to pretend to be helpless, and her sightlessness helps the men believe the painting is worthless to her and makes Clara think she can steal with impunity. It ends with the trite saying, good help is hard to find these days — Miss Ambrose needs a thieving prodigy. The cleverness of her ruse is that her disability makes the object seem worthless to her — she can't look at it, so this gives a viable reason for her selling the masterpiece at such a reasonable price.

ALLUSIONS: The name Kou Yuan-Liang appears in one of Robert Han van Gulik's mysteries, "The Emperor's Pearl", published in 1963, where Kou seems to be a criminal and murderer who absconds with curios. I don't think he is a real historical painter.

All in all this just tells us Gene is pretty savvy when it comes to the con game, but we knew that

already. The screen test is of course a test of the shrewdness of Miss Ambrose's prospective accomplice.