

BY HIS OWN HAND



Rex Stout

I

WHEN Alphabet Hicks got home a little before midnight that Thursday evening in October, he found a man waiting for him at the top of the second flight of stairs in the dingy old brick building on East 29th Street.

"Where've you been?" the man demanded, confronting him.

In the dim light from the one little bulb at the end of the narrow hall, Hicks peered at him with yellow-brown cat's eyes. "I don't believe—" he began, and stopped. "Wait a minute. Sure. Sergeant Purley Stebbins, who used to be on Homicide."

"I still am. Let's go in and sit down for a little talk."

"What about?"

"Homicide. Adam Nicoll."

Hicks nodded. "I rather expected one of you, but not a sergeant. I'm flattered. Also I'm tired and sleepy, and if we go in my room I'm stuck with you until you're ready to go, but I'm all for sitting down." He moved to the stairs, descended two steps, and sat on the landing. "What's wrong with this?"

Stebbins suggested a couple of things wrong with it, lost the argument, and propped himself against the newel. He was a big, broad bulk, towering above his target. "Where've you been?" he asked.

"Today and tonight, at Democratic campaign headquarters."

"Doing what?"

"Deciding how to vote. I'm a serious voter. I volunteer for two days' work at Democratic headquarters, and two days at Republican, and then decide. Responsibilities of a citizen."

"Yeah, I know, you're a card. How's the detective work coming?"

"Not coming." Hicks tilted his head back against the plaster to look up at the tower. "Let's get through with me and go on, so I can get to

bed. I've never solicited detective work and I never will. The Harley case got me some notoriety, and the Brager thing some more, and a couple of others you know about, and that's all. R. I. Dundee still pays me a hundred dollars a week to think up things for him to worry about in his business, and I spend around ten minutes a day thinking. The rest of the time I look on."

"At what?"

"Life and death." Hicks gestured. "Come on, Sergeant, I'm not worth it. All I have is life, and you've got death on your hands. What do you want to know?"

"How long have you known Paul Griffin?"

"Four years. He came to see me. The publicity I had got had given him the idea I was full of remarkable notions, and he wanted me to hatch plots and stunts for his Kevin Kay. It didn't appeal to me and I turned him down, but he has kept after me and I've seen him off and on—maybe four or five times a year. Does that get us to Tuesday evening?"

"We can go back if we need to. What happened Tuesday?"

"He phoned that afternoon and said he had to see me—that was day before yesterday—and I went up to his apartment on Central Park West. He said he and his associates were in a jam, and lawyers had only made it worse, and they wanted me to meet with them that evening—not the lawyers—and see if I could iron it out. Do I need to tell you what the jam was?"

"We've had it from five angles." Stebbins shifted against the newel. "We want yours."

"I'm tired and sleepy," Hicks objected, "but sooner or later, I guess, so why not sooner? Okay. Griffin first put his Kevin Kay into a couple of novels, that was some twelve years ago, and then movies, and then television. Forty million people think he's a wonderful character, and why should I argue? After Adam Nicoll played the part in eight or nine movies, and on TV for a couple of years, it was another case of Joseph Jefferson and Rip van Winkle, or William Gillette and Sherlock Holmes, you couldn't tell 'em apart, and it was hard to say who it was that had the forty million by the tail. As you know, Sergeant, that's not an angle, it's an open chapter in the history of contemporary American culture."

"Go ahead."

"Of course another element in the chapter, maybe minor and maybe not, is another character who appears in all the Kevin Kay stories,

called the Cricket, and in movies and TV Amy Quong has become the Cricket just as Adam Nicoll has become Kevin Kay. For the forty million Amy Quong is the Cricket. If you want my angle, one reason I shy off is all the damn K sounds. Not only Kevin Kay, which is more than enough, but the Cricket too. I deplore it."

"Thanks." When Stebbins was sarcastic he growled. "You said you're tired and sleepy."

"I am. Last winter Barry Maddox, the well-known producer, told Griffin he wanted to put a Kevin Kay play on Broadway, and after a lot of palaver Griffin agreed to write one. He finished it in May, and after a series of battles with Maddox about rewrites they were finally ready to start casting in August, two months ago. I can't tell you who it was who first suggested having the part of Kevin Kay played not by Adam Nicoll but by someone else, because I don't know. Anyhow, Griffin and Maddox agreed on it, and the someone else was Ernest Levitan, and Levitan read a script and was engaged for the part. However, they couldn't find anyone around to play the Cricket, or maybe they didn't try. Maddox flew to the Coast and proposed it to Amy Quong, and she jumped at the chance to appear on Broadway, and last week she came East."

Hicks twisted his wrist around to get the light from the one little bulb on his watch. Ten minutes of tomorrow were already gone. "Rumblings had been heard for some time from Adam Nicoll in Beverly Hills, and Sunday, four days ago, he arrived in New York and phoned Griffin from a hotel. He had his wife along. For several years it has been customary for Nicoll and his wife to put up at Griffin's apartment when they come to New York, and Griffin went to the hotel for them and took them to his place. Then the fur began to fly. Nicoll wouldn't stand for Levitan playing Kevin Kay, but he couldn't do it himself, anyhow not this season, because he was scheduled for a Kevin Kay picture to start shooting in December, and also he had his TV contract. Barry Maddox insisted on going ahead with Levitan. Amy Quong wanted to be on Broadway and to hell with everything else. Griffin, who owns the characters and could have Jimmy Durante play Kevin Kay if he wanted to, couldn't tell Nicoll to go climb a tree because of the possible effect on the forty million. That was the jam Griffin told me about Tuesday afternoon."

"And wanted you to iron out."

Hicks nodded. "That evening after dinner."

"And you went. Who was there?"

"Paul Griffin, Barry Maddox, Ernest Levitan, Amy Quong, and Adam Nicoll and his wife. I didn't think there was much chance of ironing it out, but it would be fun to try, and besides, I wanted to meet Amy Quong. I have always wondered if the Oriental slant of my eyes had any genetic basis, and I wanted to see how I reacted to her."

"What was said? By everybody."

"My God," Hicks protested, "have a heart. I was there nearly two hours."

"Yeah." Stebbins shifted position. "Let's go in and sit down."

"Nothing doing." Hicks was firm. "You'd stay all night."

"I haven't got all night. When and how did you hear of Nicoll's death?"

"Early this afternoon at Democratic campaign headquarters. Someone had heard it on the radio."

"Has any of those six people been in touch with you today?"

"No."

"You've heard nothing from any of them, directly or indirectly?"

"Yes. Nothing."

Stebbins shifted again. The newel was not an ideal prop for a prolonged stay. "Nicoll was poisoned with cyanide. At nine o'clock this morning he ate breakfast at Griffin's apartment, alone. His wife and Griffin weren't up yet. Orange juice, toast, and coffee. It wasn't in them, as it stands now. Immediately after breakfast he swallowed a large vitamin capsule, which he always does. In less than ten minutes he was sick. In five more he was in convulsions. By the time a doctor arrived it was too late to pump him, and at ten o'clock he was dead. So it was in the capsule."

"You can't buy cyanide capsules at a corner drugstore."

"No, but you can buy it in a lot of forms for a lot of purposes, for instance a photographers' supply shop. You make a hole in the end of a vitamin capsule with a needle, squeeze out the paste, insert the needle of a hypodermic syringe loaded with hydrocyanic acid, squirt it in, and heat the end of the needle to seal the hole."

"I don't."

"Somebody must have."

"To one of Adam Nicoll's vitamin capsules?"

"Right."

"I saw them Tuesday evening. His wife asked him if he had remembered to take one after dinner, and he said no, and she went and brought the bottle from the dining room and he took one. The bottle

had a blue label and the capsule was dark blue. Ernest Levitan asked to see the bottle and passed it on to Barry Maddox, making some crack about getting some since he was going to do Kevin Kay, which didn't help any with the ironing out. Did the capsule this morning come from that bottle?"

"Yes. It was there on the sideboard in the dining room."

"Then that should simplify it. Griffin or Mrs. Nicoll could have had a chance to take one and doctor it and put it back, but surely not Maddox or Levitan or Amy Quong."

Stebbins grunted. "No, but one of them could have bought a bottle of the capsules at any drugstore, and practiced the operation until he got one that looked right, and then all he had to do was sneak it into the bottle. Maddox and Levitan were there again all yesterday afternoon, and Amy Quong was there yesterday evening. You haven't been there since Tuesday?"

"Nope. Also I have no hypodermic syringe. Not to mention hydrocyanic acid."

"Yeah. We're on the routine on that, but you know how that is." Stebbins shifted his rump again. "We want a full statement from you about Tuesday evening, and you can make it at the DA's office tomorrow morning at ten o'clock. Right?"

"Right. So now I'll turn in."

"In a minute. You can tell me now anything that anybody said that might help. Anything at all."

"Let's see." Hicks yawned. "They were all more or less on Nicoll's neck, one way or another. His wife kept insisting that he should do Kevin Kay on Broadway himself, and was a little nasty about it, but that's somewhat personal because women who don't care how much they drink annoy me. I gathered that she doesn't like Hollywood. Nicoll said his lawyer had advised him that he had established a property right in common law in the part of Kevin Kay, and if Maddox went ahead and cast Levitan for it he would throw the book at him, including an injunction and a suit for damages. Maddox said he had invested a lot of time and money in the play, and signed up Levitan and the rest of the cast, and contracted for a theater for a December opening, and Nicoll could go choke himself. I suppose Nicoll and Maddox were both somewhat affected by a complication which you probably know about."

Stebbins nodded. "Mrs. Nicoll was formerly Mrs. Maddox. She left him for Nicoll three years ago. Does he still want her back?"

"I don't know."

"Does she want him back?"

"I don't know that either. It didn't come up Tuesday. Paul Griffin said he would have been glad for Nicoll to do Kevin Kay on Broadway if movie and TV commitments hadn't made it impossible. Maddox said he wouldn't. Griffin said he would contract to pay Nicoll the same salary that Levitan would get, during the entire run of the play, and also he would guarantee Maddox against any loss through any kind of action brought by Nicoll, which I thought was damn generous. Nicoll accused Levitan of wanting to horn in on the part, not only for Broadway, but also later for the movies and TV. Levitan said, in a tone meant to leave scars, that that hadn't been in his mind at all, but of course it might work out that way, since it was the finest part in the whole entertainment field and people were already saying that Nicoll was lousing it up and would ruin it for good in another year. Amy Quong said—by the way, I reacted to her normally, a beautiful little creature—she said she loved everybody and everybody was wonderful, and she was sure Adam Nicoll would quit being mad at her because she was going to do the Cricket on Broadway with Ernest Levitan, and he wouldn't do what he had threatened to do, and anyway she didn't care for money so she had turned over all that she had saved to her father and mother. I got the impression that she had saved around two million dollars and it was in good hands."

Hicks got upright and, stepping up to the landing, was on a level with Stebbins. "That's the best I can do, Sergeant." He yawned. "Excuse me. I'll go down in the morning and fill it in. Good night."

Stebbins asked a few more questions, not cordial but not contentious, and tramped down the old wooden stairs. Hicks went along the narrow hall to a door, let himself in with a key, and was in the room he had occupied for more than a decade. Flipping the switch brought light from a lamp on a table by the far wall and a floor lamp off to one side next to a big easy chair. With the bed and dresser and bookshelves, and a few pictures and another chair, the room still looked somehow bare, which was how he liked it. He had hung his topcoat in the closet and started for the bathroom when the phone rang, and he went to the table and got it and said hello.

"That you, Hicks?"

"Right."

"This is Paul Griffin. You've heard about Nicoll?"

"Yes."

"We've had one awful day. Terrible. Will you come up here to my place? Now?"

"What for?"

"We want to ask you what to do. You know about things like this and God knows we don't."

"Ask your lawyer."

"We have. To hell with lawyers, all they do is— Damn it, we want to talk with you!"

"Who does?"

"All of us! We're all here. Amy Quong suggested it, and Maddox—all of us! We need a man with a head on him to tell us what to do in a mess like this. You'll come?"

"Okay. With my head on."

"Right away?"

"Yes."

Hicks hung up, muttered with feeling, "Of all the nerve," went to the bathroom, came out again, and crossed to the closet for his coat.

II

Even if you are a professional story teller who, by luck or inspiration or both, has created and exploited a pair of gold-mine characters like Kevin Kay and the Cricket, you will do better on the West Side of the park if you want an apartment with a living room you can take walks in and a dining room big enough to feed twenty guests. That was why Paul Griffin's address was the big old stone pile on Central Park West. For a bachelor his tenement on the fifth floor was quite a place. Taking a walk in the living room was not actually practical because of the clutter of chairs, tables, statues on pedestals, couches, cabinets, musnuds, and enormous portraits in oil of Kevin Kay and the Cricket on easels; but it would have been perfect for a steeplechase.

When Alphabet Hicks was led in and through the clutter by Paul Griffin to where the group was gathered around the fireplace, he stood and looked around at them. They were a dismal sight. Ernest Levitan, sprawled on a couch, might have been cast for a lost soul headed for hell instead of Kevin Kay on Broadway. Cynthia Nicoll, at the end of the couch with a drink in her hand, her corn-silk hair frowzy and her blue eyes puffy, tried to focus on the newcomer and couldn't make it. Amy Quong, a dark compact figurine cross-legged on the rug, was staring at the fire and didn't move. Barry Maddox, the producer, normally big and broad and genial, was a vague, sagging mass propped against

the high back of a teakwood chair. Paul Griffin, usually meticulous of manners, collapsed his lanky frame onto a chair while his invited guest still stood.

"So," Hicks remarked, "it's been a hard day."

"Good God," Maddox muttered. "Hard?"

"I think," Levitan said wearily, "I've got the record. Eleven hours straight. I've been questioned by five detectives and two assistant district attorneys. One of the detectives was an inspector. Griffin is the runner-up with four and two. Tomorrow will be another day."

"It hazh been—" Cynthia Nicoll began, stopped, and set her jaw.

"It hazh been what?" Levitan demanded.

She wobbled her head. "We ought to be in bed, resting up for tomorrow," Levitan said tragically. "But Maddox insisted on getting you up here. What for? You tell us."

Barry Maddox grasped the top of the chair back and straightened up a little. "Don't mind him, Mr. Hicks. He's an actor. We all wanted to consult you, knowing of your past exploits. We are under suspicion of murder, and you know what that means. My lawyer has given me certain advice as to what I tell the police, and he has also advised me to have no contact whatever with any of these four people because one of them is a murderer and I might compromise myself. That's not the way I like to act and I want to know what you think of it. Also we want to tell you all about it and ask you if you think the police are justified in limiting their suspicion to us. Why couldn't it have been someone else? Why couldn't the poisoned capsule have been put in the bottle a week ago, out West? Why couldn't Nicoll have killed himself, and did it that way to throw suspicion on someone? We want to ask you, Mr. Hicks. You didn't get us out of our jam Tuesday evening, God knows you didn't, but you impressed us."

Amy Quong had pivoted on the rug to give Hicks her black eyes. "You impressed me here," she hissed, placing the fingertips of both hands delicately between the famous little breasts of the Cricket. "Won't you sit? Near me where I can feel you?" She patted a musnud beside her. "Here?"

As Hicks went and lowered himself onto the big fat cushion, Paul Griffin spoke. "It's worse than a jam now," he said. "It's a calamity. What the devil do we do, just wait until they clamp onto one of us? Damn it, we can't! I know I can't! Of course you probably don't know—ask us anything you want to."

"Don't ask me!" Cynthia Nicoll blurted, and put her glass down.

Hicks felt something on his knee and looked down to see Amy Quong's lovely little dark hand resting there. He sent his eyes around. "As for telling you what to do," he said, "that's a big order and I can't fill it. I was rather expecting you to ask me to find out who killed Adam Nicoll, but that's not it?"

"We couldn't ask you to pass a miracle, could we?" Levitan demanded.

"No, I suppose not, but it's a pity that's not what you want, because I already know who killed Nicoll."

They goggled at him. Ernest Levitan sat up. Amy Quong's fingers on his knee closed into a fist. Barry Maddox said, "That's a good line, Hicks. You ought to use it in a play, end of the second act. See the audience reaction?"

Hicks shook his head. "It's not a line, it's a fact, only I exaggerated a little. I should have said I'm pretty sure I know—say, ten-to-one sure. Get the same effect. Right now one of you is having a hard time with his face, and also inside his skull. Am I bluffing or have I really got something? Wouldn't he—or she, since I mustn't slight the ladies—like to know?"

"We all would." Maddox had released his hold on the back of the chair and quit sagging. "Suppose you tell us."

"It's a good gag," Levitan said, but not wearily.

"Not a gag," Hicks declared. "When I was here Tuesday evening one of you said something that struck me as pretty remarkable, but I skipped it. People do say remarkable things. Today at lunchtime—yesterday now—when someone told me the radio had said that Adam Nicoll had died suddenly and the police were investigating, I wasn't reminded of it because I didn't know enough. But when I got home a couple of hours ago a Homicide detective was there waiting for me, and he told me the details, and naturally I remembered. Among other things he asked me to tell him anything that was said here Tuesday evening that might help him, and I did so, including the remarkable item I have mentioned. If he spotted it he gave no sign. I'm to go down to the District Attorney's office in the morning and make a full statement, and of course that item will be in it, and no doubt sooner or later someone will notice it and come to the same conclusion I did, that the one who said that remarkable thing killed Adam Nicoll. If they miss it I might even call their attention to it, but I wanted to chew on it first. Right after the detective left the phone call came from here, and I chewed on it coming uptown, and decided I might as well spring it."

"I never said a remarkable thing in my life," Levitan asserted.

They looked at him, and then at one another, in tense collective vigilance. "Who said what?" Paul Griffin asked quietly.

Hicks, not wanting the distraction of the soft touch of Amy Quong's little hand, lifted his knee and clasped his fingers on it. "First," he said, "I ought to check a little. After all, a ten-to-one shot is not always a shoo-in, and I could be wrong. For all I know, one or more of you may be already ahead of me. Of course I saw the bottle of capsules here Tuesday evening when the rest of you did, and Nicoll took one. Afterward, as I remember it, Levitan asked to see it and Nicoll handed it to him. Levitan took a look at it and handed it to Maddox, who also gave it a look and then handed it to Mrs. Nicoll, and she put it down on that little table." Hicks pointed. "It was there when I left. Then what happened to it? Of course you've been over all this with the police."

"We certainly have," Griffin said with feeling. "It was there on the table when Levitan and Maddox and Amy left and Adam and Cynthia and I went to bed. When the maid cleaned up in the morning she took it to the dining room and put it on the sideboard. Adam was alone at breakfast, but the maid saw him take a capsule from the bottle and leave it on the sideboard, and as far as anybody knows it was on the sideboard all day Wednesday. After dinner Wednesday, before we came in here for coffee, Adam himself went to the sideboard and got out a capsule, and presumably the bottle was on the sideboard throughout Wednesday night. Next morning after breakfast Adam took another capsule, and that—" Griffin swallowed with apparent difficulty, as if he too were trying to down a capsule. "That was the one."

"And Maddox and Levitan were here all Wednesday afternoon, and Miss Quong that evening. Right?"

"I wasn't in the dining room," Amy Quong declared in her high, thin voice that always had a suggestion of a tinkle.

Hicks nodded. "I know how that is. But you can prove a negative only by proving a positive, and I don't need that. I do need to know whether the police have got a real pointer. That Maddox or Levitan went alone into the dining room for something Wednesday afternoon wouldn't be enough. If one of them was seen with the bottle in his hand I might want to chew some more. If he was seen unscrewing the cap and putting something in, I'll go home and leave it to the law. Is there anything like that?"

"Not on me," Maddox snapped. "I never saw the damn bottle after Tuesday evening."

"Nor me." Levitan was not cocky. "I was in the dining room, certainly. We had lunch there."

Hicks got up and stood with his back to the fire, his hands in his jacket pockets. "Then I'll give it a try. I want you to know that I wouldn't be doing this if I hadn't been asked to come up here. I thought it was nervy to ask me, but maybe not. Who suggested it?"

"I did," Barry Maddox said. "And I think you've done enough stalling."

"Did anyone oppose it?"

"I don't think so. No."

"Even so, it may not have been nerve, merely discretion. I'm not stalling, Mr. Maddox. I'm just making it a little harder for a murderer to hang on after the hard day he's had. I can't indict him, since I have no evidence, but I know him and think I can crack him. If I have this right, and I think I have, it's a strange business. In a way, a man has died by his own hand. In a way, it wasn't Adam Nicoll that was murdered, it was Kevin Kay. Kevin Kay was murdered because there had to be a death before there could be a resurrection. I admit I had—"

"Skip the goddam riddles!" It was Ernest Levitan, not acting. "If you've got no evidence, what have you got?"

"I'm telling you." Hicks' voice sharpened. "I admit I have an advantage on the police, since I was told of the plans for the resurrection long before the death was plotted, and possibly before it was contemplated." His eyes went to Griffin. "You remember, Paul, telling me of the projected play? And later that Levitan would do Kevin Kay in it?"

"Of course." Griffin was undisturbed. "I told several people."

"No doubt. And some of them may have thought as I did. What I thought was that you had been driven to desperation. You had finally found it intolerable that a mere movie actor had usurped the glory and acclaim rightfully due to the creature of your own brain, your Kevin Kay. To millions of people Adam Nicoll was Kevin Kay, the two were indistinguishable, and since for years you had identified yourself with Kevin Kay, that was insufferable. You were in an agony of resentment and rancor. You did your best to conceal it, and it may even be that I was the only one who noted the glint in your eye and the strain in your voice when you spoke Nicoll's name, though I doubt it. You never put it into words. At your trial for the murder of Adam Nicoll, I doubt if a single witness can be produced who will say that he heard you speak spitefully of Nicoll."

"For God's sake." Griffin snorted. "Me on trial? Me?"

"You're already on trial, and you know it. So when Maddox asked you to put Kevin Kay in a play you saw your chance. By putting another actor in the part, the hold of Nicoll on the public mind and heart as the one and only Kevin Kay would be loosened and eventually broken. Two Kevin Kays would be too much for idolatry, and it would all come back to the true Kevin Kay, you. This is not a mere surmise; no other motive could have impelled you to write the play and let Maddox put another actor in the part. You knew it would infuriate Nicoll. You didn't do it for money, because you wouldn't get it anyway; you were already above the eighty-per-cent income-tax bracket. I know you said you wanted Kevin Kay on Broadway, but that wasn't good enough, at least not for me after I had heard you trying to control your voice when you spoke of Adam Nicoll. That's a good idea—clasp your hands to keep them from trembling. But remembering how you felt about Nicoll, you can't keep from trembling inside. You're going to crack, Paul, you're bound to crack. That may sound brutal, but it isn't. I'm deliberately trying to break you down because it will save you harder days than today. If you tell us now where you got the syringe and the poison and the capsules to practice with, it will soon be over. If you don't, if you try to hold on, it may take the police weeks to find out, months even, but sooner or later they'll get it. Do you want to live through those weeks and months? Can't you feel them now?"

"Jesus," Levitan whispered, and asked aloud, "Do you have to? Look at him!"

Amy Quong, on her feet, went to Griffin and put her hand on his shoulder. The Cricket would have done that.

"Go on," Griffin told Hicks in a thin, tight voice. "What did I say Tuesday evening?"

"Not much, but enough for the purpose. In a moment. All that about putting Levitan in the play, I thought all that months ago, and it was nothing in my soup. I wished you luck, but I wasn't surprised when you phoned Tuesday and told me Nicoll had come to New York and fur was flying. After an hour here that evening it looked to me as if you were cornered. If you dropped the play your whole plan was sunk, and if you didn't Nicoll was obviously going to raise a stink that might tie up Kevin Kay for years. When you said you would pay Nicoll the same salary that Levitan would get for the run of the play, and that you would guarantee Maddox against any loss that might result

through any action brought by Nicoll, I thought you were cuckoo. It might ruin you and Kevin Kay both, and I couldn't see how you were figuring it. I didn't ask you, because the others were here, and by that time I had about concluded you were no longer capable of figuring."

Hicks stepped two paces away from the fire at his back, which took him closer to Griffin. "But when I heard from Sergeant Stebbins tonight how Nicoll had died, I realized that you had figured plenty. If Nicoll was going to die in a day or a week—exactly when didn't matter—your offer to pay him and guarantee Maddox risked nothing and would cost you nothing, even if it had been drafted by lawyers and signed. So it looked to me as if you knew Tuesday evening that Nicoll was going to die. I said before it was a ten-to-one shot, but now, looking at you, it's a thousand to one. Your two big mistakes were making that offer when I was present to hear it, and just dropping the capsule in the bottle. With the bottle right here in your dining room, you must have had ample opportunity to shake out some of the capsules, put yours in, and return the others. Then Nicoll would have died days later, probably after he had returned to the Coast, and that would have been different. Now it's this way. You understand what I meant, Paul, when I said that Kevin Kay was murdered by his own hand."

Griffin nodded. "Yes," he said clearly. "I understand."

"And you see how it is. There's not a glimmer of a chance. Are you going to try to fight it? Are you going to hang on until they get enough to lock you up?"

"No. I might if I thought I could get you to drop it and if these people hadn't heard it. No." Griffin left his chair and was upright, straight, tall, and lanky. He looked around at them. "It's all over, my friends. Amy, you little devil. Cynthia, you poor neurotic souse. Barry and Ernest, you lucky slobs, this will make the play, it will run forever. All right, Hicks, what?"

"You can tell me things. Or I can take you downtown in a taxi. Or I can phone and they'll come."

"Just a moment." He turned and grasped the arms of the chair he had occupied, a chair so big and heavy that it took a man to lift it and raise it above his head, which he did. With it aloft, he went across to the easel which held the life-size oil of Kevin Kay, and hurled the chair straight at its middle. The chair went right on through, making tatters of the canvas, and the easel toppled and crashed to the floor.

Griffin turned and told Hicks, "All right, phone."



I still think it was a neat and original idea. A writer creates a fictional character and makes him famous, and in time the writer identifies himself with his character. And when a movie actor becomes identified with the character by the public, the writer regards it as intolerable usurpation and is driven to remove the actor by killing him.

I think that is the best thing about the story—the idea that started it. The worst thing about it is that I nearly smothered the idea with too much fuss—too many characters, too elaborate a set-up, too long an approach—so that the idea almost gets lost in the shuffle. Good conception, I still think, but bad execution.

REX STOUT