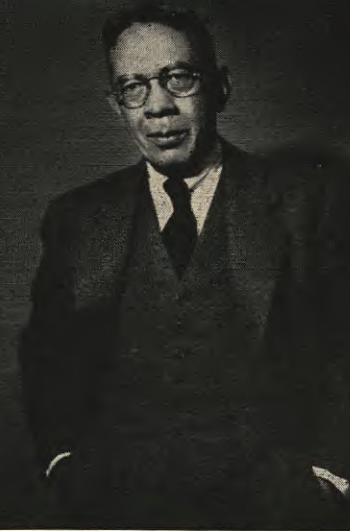


# The Easy Chair

by

Bernard DeVoto



## *Alias Nero Wolfe*

ACCORDING to a friend of mine who belongs to the Baker Street Irregulars, a paper by one of his colleagues suggests that Nero Wolfe may be the son of Sherlock Holmes's brother Mycroft. I cannot find the treatise that contains this absurdity and mention it only as an example of the frivolous speculation tricked out to look like scholarship with which the Holmes cult defrauds the reading public. In stating here the insoluble problem which will always frustrate biographers of Nero Wolfe I confine myself, as a member of the American Historical Association in good standing, to examining the source documents according to the approved methods of historical research. I construct only one hypothesis and I make no use of that one, leaving it for other scholars to test and apply as they may see fit.

As I proceed to show, a hypothesis is necessary. The documentary record contains statements about Wolfe's early life and his experiences in Europe so contradictory that they must be intended to conceal the facts. The record opens in 1933 and is clear from then on. But also it is our only source of information about Wolfe's earlier years, whether in statements by Archie Goodwin or in statements he reports as having been made by Wolfe or by his oldest and closest friend, Marko Vukcic. Moreover, there is a similar and parallel concealment of Archie's own age, his birthplace, and the date when he began to work for Wolfe. We must remember that both Wolfe and Archie have extraordinarily good memories and that their profession requires them to be precise in statements of fact, though it also requires them, on occasion, to lie convincingly.

Here is my hypothesis. At some time between 1913 and 1916 Wolfe was involved in an episode of so desperate a nature, or involving such important international secrets, that connecting him with it must be made forever impossible and his true identity must be forever concealed. Some danger of exposure still existed when Archie went to work for him in 1928. (I have established this date and guarantee it, though the record tries to suggest one earlier year, 1927, and half a dozen later ones.) Whatever the danger consisted of, it came to involve Archie as well as Wolfe. It continued for several years after 1928 and then lapsed but something revived it briefly just after the end of the second world war. On the assumption that there was such an episode, the record could be read in either of two ways. The episode occurred in Egypt in 1913 or shortly afterward, in which case it was in the service of Austria. Or, and this is more likely, it occurred in Montenegro or elsewhere in the Balkans in 1916, in which case it was probably a betrayal of Austria. That is the hypothesis in full; let us turn to the record.

WOLFE lives and has his office in an old brownstone house on the south side of 35th Street, between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues. (His bedroom is the second floor back and Archie's the third floor front but for a time Archie occupied the second floor front.) The address is 506 W. 35th and the telephone Bryant 9-2828. Nevertheless in March 1946 something impelled Archie to report the address as 922 West 35th and the telephone as Proctor 5-5000, and even to have these falsifications printed on his business card. Whether or not this forgery bears on our central problem, we touch a sensitive spot when we inquire how long Wolfe has



owned the house and lived in it. In the summer of 1933 Wolfe investigated the death of President Barstow of Holland College. (The year is not stated explicitly in the record but 3.2 beer is legal and Repeal has not yet come.) In 1933, so the record says, Wolfe had lived in this house for twenty years. The statement is obviously false. It would mean that he acquired the house in 1913 and lived there continuously during the next few years. But in 1913 he was in Europe and had been for a long time, and he did not return to the United States till at least 1919 and possibly not till 1921.

This confusion must be deliberate. It now becomes germane to ask if Wolfe, whose apparent insensitiveness to women he himself says is counterfeit and self-protective, was ever married.

It is an inescapable assumption that a professional detective tells the truth about himself when interrogated by the FBI. (Before the second world war Wolfe did confidential work for the State Department, and during the war was consulted professionally by the FBI on at least two occasions and by G-2 repeatedly. His reliability must have been established by investigation.) Well, in October 1938 an FBI agent named Stahl questioned him about his early life. In the course of the inquiry, Stahl asked whether he had been married. Wolfe said, "No. Married? No."

The flat, emphasized negative is final; we cannot go beyond it. Wolfe thereupon began but broke off a sentence apparently intended to explain some circumstance which might have suggested that he once had a wife, but this is irrelevant. (Perhaps the circumstance is hinted at in a remark of his to Archie, "I have skedad-dled, physically, once in my life, from one person, and that was a Montenegrin woman.") But in 1936, while exploring the murderous fantasies of the novelist Paul Chapin, he told Archie that he had once known a woman who devised an ingenious method of poisoning her husband with a decoction which she made from herbs. "The man on whom she tried the experiment," he said, clearly meaning her husband, "was myself."

**T**HIS woman lived in Hungary. Our biographical data contain one additional item relating to Hungary: in 1933 Wolfe's mother was living in Budapest. Apart from this, all we know about his family is that either a nephew or a niece of his was living in Belgrade in 1936. Much of his boyhood was spent in Europe, though "boyhood" is an elastic term, for he calls himself a boy at the time of his employment as an agent of the Austrian government and even at the time when he was in the Montenegrin army. He moved about Europe extensively and was already a gastronome in 1913

but his boyhood home is easily determined. Marko Vukcic, a Montenegrin, is one of three people who call him Nero and one of the two people, not employees, whose first name he uses. (The other is Professor Martingale of Harvard, to whom in August 1941 Wolfe sent a letter about corned beef hash beginning, "Dear Joseph.") In April 1937 when the masters were meeting at the Kanawha Spa, Wolfe said that he had "hunted dragonflies with him in the mountains"—which I take to be a folk saying or proverb. And in April 1950, when an encounter with the mysterious Zeck made it necessary for Wolfe to disappear, Vukcic was specific. "We knew each other as boys in another country," he told Archie. It could only have been Montenegro.

In 1913 Wolfe was an Austrian agent, certainly not less than eighteen years old or more than twenty-one. His job took him to Figueras, in Catalonia, where he tasted the sausage that Jerome Berin was to make famous as *saucisse minuit*, and from there to Algiers and on to Egypt. The reason for suspecting that the mysterious episode of my hypothesis may have taken place in Egypt is the conflict in statements about a house which Wolfe owns there. In 1933 he told Archie that he had never seen it and that a man had given it to him a little more than ten years ago, that is in 1922 or 1923. (Wolfe himself was not abroad in either year.) Three years later, however, talking to Helen Frost, he described the Rhages and Veramine tiles on the doorway and said, "I own a house in Egypt which I haven't seen in twenty years." Twenty years would be 1916; that he was then in the Balkans does not preclude the possibility of his having made a trip to Egypt too, as the statement suggests he did. Several later allusions to the house shed no light on this conflict.

**F**ROM a remark Wolfe made in 1937, I infer that in 1913 or 1914 he went on from Egypt to Arabia. At any rate, he was in Albania in 1915. (Statement to Anne Tracy in 1940.) It seems certain that he went from there to Bulgaria, presumably in 1916, and that this dates the occasion when he was put in jail. If so, then he was still an Austrian agent. But by now the first war was well along and, perhaps following this experience, his loyalty to Montenegro asserted itself. He went to Montenegro—he was in Zagreb in 1916—and, "still a boy," joined its army. Against the Austrians his organization "fought machine guns with fingernails." When organized opposition was crushed, I infer, he joined a band of guerrillas.

When the AEF reached Europe (the First Division landed at St. Nazaire in late June of 1917) he walked six hundred miles to join it, presumably making his [Continued on page 12]



# The war isn't over for Mignon



Mignon doesn't know the horror of battle, but she does know the misery and privation that come afterward. In a little French town near Boulogne, mother Duval tries desperately to keep body and soul together for herself and three daughters, against overwhelming odds. The father came back from a war prison camp, broken in health, and later died at the age of 31, the result of inability to obtain treatment for his diabetic condition. The family of four exists on a total income of \$50 a month, including the mother's pension.

Mignon, only 10, is already an important and useful member of the little household. As soon as she comes from school to the bare two-room "home," she helps her mother with housework, and minds her two younger sisters. Shown here in a borrowed dress, Mignon makes an appealing impression, looking like the little mother that she actually is. She plays with her doll, but seldom smiles. For her, life is a matter of grim survival.

Mignon's clothes and shoes are tattered, outgrown, they need replacement at once, as do those of her sisters. And food is so scarce that it must be carefully rationed. New clothes and shoes now for Mignon would be a blessing for this wonderfully patient and gentle family. For us it is so little but for her and her mother, it is everything, and would give them new faith and courage to face the future with confidence in human kindness.

## HOW YOU CAN HELP

You can help Mignon or another needy child by a contribution in any amount, or by the Federation's CHILD SPONSORSHIP plan. For just \$10 a month, \$120 a year, SCF will send "your child" warm clothing, sturdy shoes and other needed items—delivered in your name in Austria, Finland, France, Western Germany, Greece, Italy, Lebanon, Korea, or Yugoslavia. A gift in any amount will help at least one child.

### SCF NATIONAL SPONSORS (a partial list)

Faith Baldwin, Mrs. Mark Clark, Mrs. J. C. Penney, Mrs. Earl Warren, Norman Rockwell, Dr. Ralph W. Sockman, Gladys Swarthout, Herbert Hoover, Henry R. Luce, Thomas J. Watson.



**SAVE THE CHILDREN FEDERATION**  
Carnegie Endowment International Center  
United Nations Plaza, New York 17, N. Y.

Established  
1932

• I would like to sponsor a child in ..... (country) for one year. I will pay \$120.00 for one year (or \$10.00 a month). Enclosed is payment for the full year..... first month..... Please send me the child's name, story and address, and picture, if available.

• I cannot sponsor a child, but I want to help by giving.....

Name .....  
Address .....  
City ..... Zone ..... State .....

*Contributions to Save the Children Federation are deductible from income tax.*

You may help a needy child in Austria, Finland, France, Western Germany, Greece, Italy, Lebanon, Korea, or Yugoslavia.

H-6

## THE EASY CHAIR

way through the chaos of northern Italy to southern France. He was, as he says, thinner in those days, and an athlete. Note that he is a veteran of the American as well as the Montenegrin army. He saw much action with the AEF, for in 1943 he told Theodore Horstmann that he killed two hundred Germans.

Most of this summary of Wolfe's military career comes from his statement to the FBI agent, Stahl. He added that at the end of the war (presumably having been discharged in France) he "returned to the Balkans, shed another illusion, and came back to America." Note: *came back*. His return may have been in 1919 or he may have stayed in the Balkans till 1921. At any rate, as he told the girls who called themselves Carla Lovchen and Neya Tormic, he was in Montenegro in 1921. At that time he adopted a three-year-old orphan girl. Leaving her in the care of Pero Brovnik and his wife, he returned to America. Brovnik was shot as a revolutionist in 1926 but the money for the girl's support which Wolfe continued to send was "appropriated" for three more years. In 1929, "no longer lean," Wolfe went to Zagreb to look for her. He could not find her and was put in jail. (Has this some bearing on the mystery?) The American consul got him out and he was given ten hours to leave the country. He has not visited Europe since 1929.

CARLA Lovchen was that orphan girl. In 1938, when these facts came out, she was twenty years old. At the end of the case in which she was involved her intention was to remain in the United States. She had only a visitor's visa but Wolfe's State Department connections would have enabled him to get her admitted permanently. He told her that she was entitled to call herself Carla Wolfe and I assume that she stayed and soon married well, for there is no record of further expenditures on her behalf. She may have occupied for a short time the spacious rear room on the third floor, but certainly not for long. In 1945 Archie made a casual allusion to her, the only additional one in the record, but it tells us nothing.

Wolfe's two periods in Montenegro are the core of the mystery,



## THE EASY CHAIR

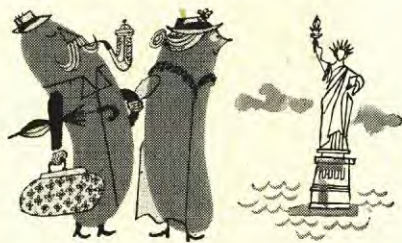
though the undisclosed episode may not have occurred there. The spelling "Montenegro" is the Venetian variant of the Italian name, Monte Nero. The inescapable conclusion is that "Nero Wolfe" is a pseudonym, an alias. He must have assumed it because of the mysterious, concealed episode of my hypothesis. He speaks Serbo-Croat so well that he must have learned it young, perhaps in the years when he hunted dragonflies in the mountains with Vukcic, perhaps earlier in the United States. The two girls, both Montenegrins, assume that he is one and declare that he acts like one. But he is not a Montenegrin by birth.

We have reached the obfuscation that is the basis of the whole elaborately constructed mystery. Wolfe was born in the United States: we cannot impeach his answer to Stahl's question, "Are you a citizen of the United States?" He says, "I am. I was born in this country," and a moment later he speaks of the United States as "my native country." But seventeen months earlier he had said to the colored cooks and waiters of the Kanawha Spa, "You gentlemen are Americans, much more completely Americans than I am, for I wasn't born here." This direct, calculated conflict is exactly paralleled by another one. As late as 1952 Wolfe says to Archie (who by this time, surely, needed no reminder of the necessity for equivocation), "I got my naturalization papers twenty-four years ago." That is, in 1928. Nevertheless, in 1946, in a revealing moment of exasperation, he had said, "And I have dared for nearly thirty years to exercise my right to vote!"

**T**HOUGH this last quotation establishes a conflict, it also gets us farther forward with another question. Wolfe was old enough to vote nearly thirty years before 1946, perhaps in 1917. But he is not likely to have voted before 1920, and from 1913 to 1919, if not 1921, he was not in the United States. Though there is nowhere any clue to his birthplace, this does establish something about his age. If he was twenty-one in 1917, as he must have been in order to vote, then he was born in 1896. But I am unwilling to believe that he could have been an Austrian agent

# How the WIENER won its way!

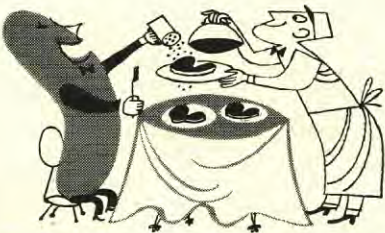
or the summarized story  
of the friendly frank



1. The first frankfurter emigrated to this country from the old German city of Frankfurt am Main. On the boat he met Fräulein Wiener from the city of Wien (Vienna).



2. Today the descendants of these sturdy sausage pioneers—6½ billion a year—are typically American in every way. They go to ball games, picnics, barbecues.

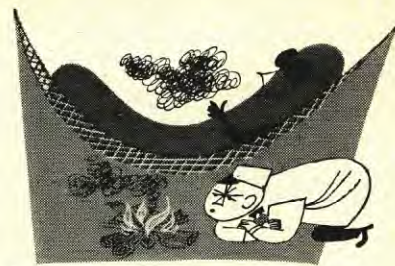


3. In the meat packer's sausage kitchens where they are born, modern franks are stuffed with selected lean beef, and some have pork, too, delicately blended with just the right amount of spices.

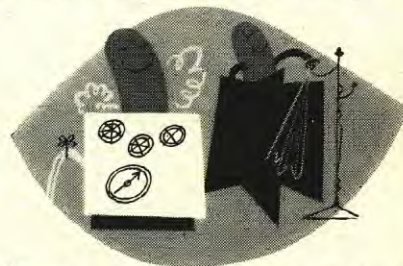
*Moral:* Only 4 kinds of meat animals are grown on American farms. But American appetites call not just for meat, but meat in dozens of different processed forms. There are more than 100 kinds of sausage products alone. That's why a meat packer is also a chef—with more specialties than you'll find in a cookbook.

**AMERICAN MEAT INSTITUTE**

Headquarters, Chicago • Members throughout the U. S.



4. Franks get their ruddy tan from hanging around a smokehouse. The smoke, which is apt to be from hickory or applewood fires, is carefully measured and actually filtered.



5. After an invigorating steam bath (franks always come to you ready-cooked), some shed their skins. Others are remarkably thin-skinned. Some like 'em with, some without.



6. They graduate with the highest degree in nutrition. For protein, B vitamins and digestibility, franks are in the same class with that noblest of cuts, the steak.



7. If all the franks Americans eat this year were laid end to end they would reach to the moon and back with enough left over to encircle the world 5 times. Most folks, however, prefer just to lay them in a bun.



# MORE THAN \$22,000 FOR YOU AT AGE 65

ONE OF THE MOST FAR-SIGHTED PLANS ever designed for the wise use of savings is offered for your earnest consideration by the SUN LIFE ASSURANCE COMPANY OF CANADA, a leading world organization in its field. By means of the plan, regular amounts of savings can be applied to provide, at age 65, a lump sum of more than \$22,000 plus accumulated dividends...

## OR AN INCOME OF \$150 MONTHLY FOR LIFE

according to your choice.

**IF YOU DO NOT LIVE TO AGE 65, THEN AN AMOUNT OF AT LEAST \$22,000 WILL BECOME IMMEDIATELY PAYABLE TO YOUR FAMILY OR YOUR ESTATE.**

By the way, the plan can be easily tailored to the amount of regular savings you can afford, with corresponding adjustments in the sums payable.

*Details are yours without obligation by just mailing the coupon below:*

### SUN LIFE ASSURANCE COMPANY OF CANADA

607 Shelby Street, Detroit 26, Michigan

I should like to know more about your Special Income Plan, without incurring any obligation.

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

Date of Birth.....

*Amounts quoted above are for men. A similar plan is available for women.*

### Rosemoyne Irish Linens

FROM THE GLEN OF THE ROSES

*Rich in beauty and pleasing in price. Rosemoyne the supreme authority in linens, invites you to send for their Illustrated Catalogue.*

ROSEMOYNE LINENS  
Jordanstown, Co. Antrim, N. Ireland

Whether you are changing your address for a few months or permanently, you will want to receive every issue of Harper's promptly. When advising us of a change of address please indicate both the old and new address. Please allow eight weeks for effecting this change.

#### HARPER'S MAGAZINE

49 East 33rd St.

New York 16, N. Y.

## Coming in August in Harper's Magazine—

Remember Cholmondeley, the gentlemanly chimpanzee who appeared in these pages last September? Next month we present the first installment of **The King and His Beasts**, a new serial by the same author, **Gerald M. Durrell**, describing the hilarious and hazardous adventures he met on his latest expedition to Africa to collect wild animals.

A brisk survey of the basic issues, implications, and probable results of this fall's major Senate campaign races, by Washington reporter **William S. White**, author of *The Taft Story*.

**Notes on a Red Neighbor**, a revealing and amusing report on one of the most complex—and certainly most Communist—of the Latin American countries: Guatemala, by **Keith Monroe**, a recent visitor who really got around the country.

## THE EASY CHAIR

at seventeen; I arbitrarily assume that he was at least eighteen, which moves the year of his birth back to 1895. But it is possible that he did not exercise his right to vote at the earliest opportunity he got. He may not have voted till, say, 1922—and that is not almost but exactly thirty years earlier than 1952, when he made the statement. Giving his phrase "still a boy" a flexibility of three more years, we may conclude that he could have been not eighteen but twenty-one in 1913. The limits are established: Wolfe was born between 1892 and 1895.

How will a biographer interpret these facts? I submit a reading which does not conflict with anything that is known. Wolfe's parents came to this country from Montenegro before he was born, both leaving relatives behind them. His father died when Wolfe was very young and his mother thereupon returned to Montenegro. There was at least one other child, but whether a boy or a girl and whether older or younger than Wolfe it is impossible to determine. His mother had relatives in Hungary, too, and at some time moved to Budapest, but Wolfe and his brother or sister grew up in the vicinity of Zagreb. The brother or sister was killed in the war or died during the famine and epidemics that followed it, but left at least one child who was brought up by the relict or by relatives in Belgrade. It is a guess, not part of my hypothesis, that Wolfe became an Austrian agent through the influence of his mother's relatives in Hungary. But anyone who adopts the hypothesis which I have stated may add another guess: that the mysterious episode was the cause of his leaving the Austrian service, that it occurred in revulsion against the enemies of his ancestral country, and that it was a very important betrayal of the Austrian cause. (Warning to the Baker Street Irregulars: if so, it occurred at least two years after June 28, 1914.)

**T**HE confusion deliberately created about the facts of Archie Goodwin's early life is too striking a parallel to be ignored. It is certain that he went to work for Wolfe in 1928, that he was born in Chillicothe, that his birthday is October 23, and



## THE EASY CHAIR

that he has at least one sister. But his age is flagrantly and repeatedly misstated in the record and there are conflicting statements about his birthplace. In 1947 Mrs. Jasper Pine, who had the most unmistakable intentions in regard to him and who described herself as a very careful woman, undertook to investigate the facts. She hired a detective agency but clearly it was one which Archie knew well enough, or had enough on, to get its report falsified. The report said that he was born in Canton in 1914, that his father was named James Arner Goodwin and was still alive, that (inferentially) his mother was also alive, and that he had two brothers and two sisters.

But this would require him to have begun working for Wolfe at the age of fourteen, which is an absurdity sufficient in itself to discredit the entire report. Archie himself says that his mother and father both died when he was "just a kid." At another time he suggests, though he does not say unequivocally, that his father's name was Titus Goodwin. At this same time he intimates that his mother is still alive, and on several occasions he refers to a living sister. Once, too, he intimates that he was born in Zanesville. Several times he says that he grew up on a farm. (There are a few items about his high school years, and his ambition was to be a second baseman.)

SO EXTENDED and thoroughgoing an effort to conceal the truth requires us to conclude that in some way Archie's birth and childhood are related to the mystery in Wolfe's life, or have some bearing on it. I leave the problem to other scholars but, in order to estop the fanciful, point out at once that the record contains nothing which connects Wolfe with either rural or metropolitan Ohio. If the Baker Street Irregulars care to turn their invention in that direction they will have to construct a long series of hypotheses. And they will have to begin with an entirely unknown brother or sister of Wolfe's father who emigrated from Montenegro to Ohio, or with an older and unrecorded third child of Wolfe's parents who remained in the United States when his mother returned to Europe. Or is Mycroft Holmes known to have visited Ohio?

## "OUR FIGHT MUST GO ON"



Polio is still a problem in 1954. This child is one of the 66,000 polio patients from past epidemics still needing help from the National Foundation. And there will be new victims in the months ahead...Here are **POLIO FACTS** for 1954:

**PRECAUTIONS**—When polio is around—



DON'T mix with new groups  
DON'T get overtired  
DON'T get chilled  
BUT DO keep clean

**GAMMA GLOBULIN**—This gives temporary protection. The National Foundation will spend up to \$19,000,000 for GG for the national stockpile in 1954. Health officials will distribute it.

**VACCINE**—A safe and promising vaccine is being tested now. But results will not be known until 1955.

## THE NATIONAL FOUNDATION FOR INFANTILE PARALYSIS

### Would you like to buy \$40 worth of General Electric every month?

Or General Motors? Or duPont? Or Standard Oil of New Jersey? Or any one of 1200 other stocks that are bought and sold on the New York Stock Exchange?

Well, now for the first time you can do just that.

Every month—or every three months if you prefer—you can put any sum you like from \$40 up to \$1,000 into the stock of your choice. Typically that might be some stock that has paid dividends every year for more than 20 years and that would now yield about 5% or 6% on your money.

Interested? We'll be glad to send you full information on our Monthly Investment Plan—the famous so-called "pay-as-you-go" plan. Just fill out this coupon and mail it back today.

Without cost or obligation, please send me your pamphlet and a membership blank for the Monthly Investment Plan, together with your special report on 20 stocks for long-term investment.

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

CITY & STATE \_\_\_\_\_ PHONE \_\_\_\_\_

**MERRILL LYNCH, PIERCE, FENNER & BEANE**

70 Pine Street, New York 5, N. Y.

Offices in 106 Cities

SW-42