

## Death Times Three

Rex Stout

### Introduction

During the last years of Rex Stout's life, as his authorized biographer, I received numerous letters from well-wishers and, on occasion, not-such-well-wishers, offering me advice. "Is it true," one of the latter asked, "that Stout has a secretary who writes all his stuff for him?" I showed the letter to Rex, then in his eighty-ninth year. He scanned it and said, "Tell him the name is Jane Austen, but I haven't the address." The joke was on the letter writer. Rex was classing himself with the best. Not long before that he had told me, "I used to think that men did everything better than women, but that was before I read Jane Austen. I don't think any man ever wrote better than Jane Austen."

It was no coincidence that, when I asked after Wolfe a few days before Rex died. Rex confided, "He's rereading Emma." Rex ranked Emma as Jane Austen's masterpiece. In the last weeks of his life he also reread it. That a book could be reread was to him solid proof of its worth. Thus it pleased him when P. G. Wodehouse, whom Rex admired, declared, at ninety-four, in a letter that he wrote to me, "He [Rex Stout] passes the supreme test of being re-readable. I don't know how many times I have reread the Nero Wolfe stories, but plenty. I know exactly what is coming and how it is all going to end, but it doesn't matter. That's writing."

Since Rex's death, on October 27, 1975, the radiant host that constitutes his loyal following has reread many times the thirty-three novels and thirty-eight novellas believed to make up the entire corpus of the Wolfe saga. How jubilant must be this worldwide audience to learn now that many new pages of reading pleasure await it - a thirty-ninth novella, "Bitter End," known only to a smattering of readers; "Frame-up for Murder," a substantially expanded rewrite of "Murder Is No Joke," the existence of which has gone unsuspected by most Stout readers since it has never before appeared in book form; and a fortieth novella, the original version of "Counterfeit for Murder," which, after the first seven pages, pursues a plot line that differs markedly from that followed in the version eventually published in *Homicide Trinity* (1962). The existence of this unpublished

manuscript was unknown, even to members of Rex Stout's own family, until 1972, when Rex furnished me a handwritten copy of his personal "Writing Record," in which the facts relating to its composition were recorded. A diligent search among his voluminous papers, at Boston College's Bapst Library, when they were delivered to the college following his death, disclosed that, contrary to his remembrance, he had not destroyed this manuscript and that there was, therefore, a seventy-third Nero Wolfe story that had never seen print. This discovery surpasses in significance the publication - in 1951, for the first time in the United States - of the fifty-first Father Brown story, "The Vampire of the Village," and the publication - in 1972, for the first time anywhere - of "Talboys," a hitherto unknown Lord Peter Wimsey story; it is on a par only with the discovery of an eightieth Sherlock Holmes story - an event which has not yet occurred.

For admirers of Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin, in the years between 1934 and 1975, the advent of a new Nero Wolfe story was ever an occasion for rejoicing. However, because the stories appeared with unfailing regularity (save for the years of World War II, when Rex Stout was heading up America's propaganda effort as chairman of the Writers' War Board), the thrill probably came to be regarded by many as theirs by right of entitlement. For a bona fide new story to come to light, after every legitimate hope for such an event had been relinquished, constitutes an occasion that must set the firmament ablaze with pyrotechnical wonders. What a windfall! What a gift from the stars! Yet, here we have, in this single volume, not only such a treasure, but two other Nero Wolfe tales largely new to us. None of the three, moreover, can be dismissed as a mere practice exercise, sketched out and flung aside by Rex Stout as beneath his standards. Each piece is carefully wrought; each is from a period when he was in top writing form; each contains incomparable moments, insights, and sallies of wit that will take their place in the memories of votaries of the corpus as new pinnacles in a landscape already wondrously sown with pinnacles. Let us consider each in its turn.

### ***BITTER END***

"Bitter End," published in *The American Magazine* in November 1940, was the first of what we now know to be forty Nero Wolfe novellas. But it began life not as a Nero Wolfe novella but as a Tecumseh Fox novel. In 1939, to accommodate his publishers, who had asked him to create another detective to spell Wolfe, Rex introduced Tecumseh Fox in *Double for Death*. Fox was not the superman Wolfe was, nor did he have Archie's panache, but he did have brains and muscle and, without the advantage of a dogsbody to assist him, he worked out the solution to an intricate case. Rex's friends thought Fox was rather like Rex himself. Certainly, like Rex, he was on the move a lot. That was inevitable. Rex said he had made Wolfe housebound because other people's detectives "ran around too damn much." Yet he realized that two sedentary detectives would be too limiting.

In the summer of 1940 Rex was ready with a second Fox novel - *Bad for Business*. Farrar & Rinehart scheduled it for publication in November of that year in its Second Mystery Book, where it was to be the culminating tale in a volume that would include stories by Anthony Abbot, Philip Wylie, Leslie Ford, Mary Roberts Rinehart, and David Frome (a Leslie Ford alias) - *Bad for Business* though, weighing in at two hundred and five pages, was far and away the longest. As was customary, the story was offered to *The American Magazine* for abridged publication before the book itself appeared. To Stout's surprise, Sumner Blossom, publisher of *The American Magazine*, refused to pursue the Fox piece but offered Stout double payment if he would convert the story

into a Wolfe novella. To Blossom's surprise, and maybe his own, Rex effected the transformation in eleven days. As he explained to me later, by then he had already become deeply committed to the war against Hitler and needed the money.

Thus "Bitter End," Rex's first Wolfe novella, appeared in *The American Magazine* in November 1941 - and on November 28, *Bad for Business* appeared in the Second Mystery Book. Those who read both stories at that time must have been perplexed. The plot was basically unchanged. The names of the principal characters likewise were the same. This was true as well of many lines of dialogue and of many crucial expository passages. Yet, Tecumseh Fox's labors had been portioned out between Wolfe and Archie; Fox's nemesis from Homicide, Inspector Damon, had been supplanted, inevitably, by Inspector Cramer; and Dol Bonner, whose path occasionally crossed Fox's in *Bad for Business*, had been dispensed with entirely.

These changes were by no means matter-of-fact substitutions. Although the new story was only a third as long as the original, compactness actually gave it a snap and purpose that it lacked before. Most of the members of the supporting cast were enhanced. They were not on stage as long as they had been before, so the moment an opportunity came their way, they made their presence felt. By dividing Fox's responsibilities between Wolfe and Archie, Rex showed how incomparable and how indispensable were the distinctive attributes of each member of his sublime duo. Each does superbly what Fox was able to do merely adequately. Working once again with the characters he loved best. Rex found ways to involve them intimately in events as they unfolded.

In *Bad for Business*, Tecumseh Fox learns secondhand that someone (in a prefiguration of the Tylenol tragedy of later times) is adulterating, apparently with sinister intent, Tingley's Tidbits, a liver pate. In "Bitter End," Nero Wolfe actually partakes of the pate, which is laced with quinine, and all but explodes at the dinner table, splattering a landscape that includes Archie. Predictably, and reminiscent of his duel to the death with Arnold Zeck, he commits himself to seeking out and revenging himself on the adulterator. Furthermore, Cramer abducts a guest from Wolfe's brownstone, simultaneously giving new scope to Wolfe's vendetta and a scope to Cramer's own performance that, by contrast, diminishes Inspector Damon's role. In *Bad for Business*, Tecumseh Fox learns secondhand of a bloody murder.

In "Bitter End," Archie arrives on the murder scene as one of the first witnesses. Surprisingly, though' Fox openly romances the heroine in *Bad for Business*, in "Bitter End," Archie, though solicitous, keeps his distance. This enables Archie to give needed support to Amy's true suitor, the inept Leonard Cliff.

The viewpoint in *Bad for Business* is that of the omniscient author. In "Bitter End," naturally, Archie is the narrator. Rex Stout had proven that he could bring startling piquancy to a plot by relinquishing control of it to Archie, and we must concede that Stout showed excellent judgment in letting Archie be his spokesman throughout the Wolfe saga. When "Archie took control of the narrative," he said, he himself was no longer responsible for what Archie said and did. And he meant it. So successful were the results in "Bitter End" that we must regret that Rex was never motivated to rewrite each of the Fox stories as Wolfe stories, with Archie narrating. Let those who may undertake to continue the saga not leave that avenue unexplored. In "Bitter End," Rex Stout showed that it can be done with complete success.

It was not by chance that *Bad for Business* was never given separate hardcover publication in the United States or that Rex Stout dropped Fox after a few appearances. "Fox wasn't a created character, like Wolfe," Rex conceded. "He was put together piece-by-piece and wasn't worth a damn." Nonetheless, Fox's precedence as the sleuth who unknotted the tangled Tingley fortunes (in *Bad for Business*) made Rex reluctant to include "Bitter End" in his volumes of Wolfe novellas. Stout never went back and reread the story because he could not forget that Wolfe had been called in on the case as someone from whom a second opinion was sought. It was not becoming to Wolfe's dignity to sit him down to another man's leavings.

Rex ought to have remembered that a good story always stands the test of rereading. And "Bitter End," like the other seventy-two stories in the corpus, passes that test beyond quibble or sneer. Perhaps if Rex had remembered that it was this story that had shown him that Wolfe and Archie could thrive in a novella quite as well as in a novel, he would have given it due acknowledgment. Actually, in the last year of his life he may have come to that realization when he gave Michael Bourne permission to bring the story out in a limited edition of five hundred copies. Bourne conceived of this edition as a tribute to mark, in 1976, Rex's ninetieth birthday. Plans for it were still afoot when Rex died. In 1977, it appeared instead in the volume called *Corsage*, as a memorial tribute. Although its publication brought joy to those who were aware of it, the restriction Rex had placed on the number of copies to be printed resulted in a volume known to few readers who were not avid bibliophiles.

### ***MURDER IS NO JOKE / FRAME UP FOR MURDER***

The entry in Rex Stout's Writing Record for "Murder Is No Joke," appears between the entries for *If Death Ever Slept* and *Champagne for One*. It reads: "Murder Is No Joke" - 48 pp. Began 8/5/57, finished 8/15/57. 1 day out, 10 days writing time." Rex's breakdown, reporting his day by day output, shows that he worked on the story on eleven different days but counted two days as half days because he did not put in a full nine hours at his desk. On the thirteenth he had been interrupted by the arrival of a visitor. On the fifteenth he quit early because half a day's work brought him to the end of his labors. As usual, of course, he did no revision. Whatever had to be done was always done in his head. The first draft was always the only draft. "Murder Is No Joke" was the fourth story Rex worked on that year, because, in addition to *If Death Ever Slept*, which he had begun in mid-May and finished in mid-June, he had finished "Easter Parade" in the first days of the new year, and then in March, in nine days, had written "Fourth-of-July Picnic." All were Nero Wolfe stories. Indeed, after World War II he wrote nothing else.

Notations in Rex's file on "Murder Is No Joke" disclose further writing labors for that year that were not entered in the Writing Record. On November 23, to oblige *The Saturday Evening Post*, he began work on an expanded version of "Murder Is No Joke."\* Taking only two days off, Sunday the twenty-fourth and Saturday the thirtieth, to celebrate his seventy-first birthday (when family and friends gathered at High Meadow, his eighteen-acre domain at Danbury, Connecticut), he completed the rewrite in thirteen days, having increased the original forty-eight pages to seventy-nine. Characteristically (Rex found holidays disruptive and, within reasonable limits, preferred to ignore them), he had written five pages on Thanksgiving Day and four on his

birthday. Typically, also, he had not merely padded the old manuscript. He had thought the story through again, adding much that was new and enhancing what he kept. Now two different versions of the story existed, the latter clearly the superior of the former. Since that fact was self-evident, it should logically have followed that the original was suppressed in favor of the rewrite.

Yet that is not what happened. On February 14, 1958, as "Murder Is No Joke," the original was published in *And Four to Go*. On June 21, June 28, and July 5, 1958, as "Frame-up for Murder," the rewrite was published in three installments in the *The Saturday Evening Post*. Those who owned the book probably never compared their version to the Posts version. Those who read the Post's version probably never compared it to the version in *And Four to Go*. Thus no one complained that thirty-one pages of vintage Stout were buried in back issues of *The Saturday Evening Post*. But they were, and that was deplorable. Here, after a twenty-eight-year delay, as "Frame-up for Murder" achieves publication in book form another injustice is swept away.

In the notes that Rex Stout kept for this story - as always, on 5-1/2 a by 8-1/2 s goldenrod sheets - he recorded the following facts about eight of the characters: "Alec Gallant, 38, of Gallant Inc., 54th St. East of 5th. Bianca Voss, 37, who has taken charge. Cart Drew, 40, business manager & buyer. Anita Prince, 34, designer & fitter. Emmy Thorne, 26, contacts & promotion. Flora Gallant, 26, Alec's sister & handy woman. Sarah Yare, 35, has-been actress. Doris Hoft, 29, at phone." To readers of either version of the story the name Doris Hoft will come as a surprise. While Doris does have a small part to play in both versions, in neither does Rex mention her by name. More surprising to readers of "Murder Is No Joke" must be the revelation that Flora Gallant is twenty-six. In that story we are assured that she was twenty-five when she came to the United States from France, twenty years earlier, in 1937, and thus is forty-five. Rex's initial description of Flora bears this out. Archie relates, "When I opened the door to admit his sister Flora that Tuesday morning, it was a letdown to see a dumpy middle-aged female in a dark gray suit that was anything but spectacular. It needed pressing, and the shoulders were too tight, and her waist wasn't where it thought it was." In short, Flora is a frump who has seen her best days and these not lately. Nor does the ensuing dialogue encourage us to mellow toward her. She seems to be a bitter, spent woman who has outlived whatever romantic feelings she once had. With clinical detachment she dismisses the possibility of Wolfe's having a mistress, almost as one might rule out the likelihood of his catching whooping cough or breaking out in pubescent acne. We resent this woman who addresses Wolfe as though she were a case-hardened clinician talking to a eunuch. And Flora is similarly dispassionate when she says of brother Alec, " 'He has an amie intime, a young woman who is of importance in his establishment.' " The name Flora Gallant has encouraged us to expect something more. In "Murder Is No Joke" Flora is no flower. She is more of a nettle. That fact serves at least one good purpose. It makes it easy to believe that she is capable of skullduggery or even murder.

In "Frame-up for Murder" we must begin all over with Flora. She first catches Archie's eye in the lobby of the Churchill "because she rated a glance as a matter of principle - -the principle that a man owes it to his eyes to let them rest on attractive objects when there are any around." Her chin was, Archie acknowledged, "slightly more pointed than I would have specified if I had had her made to order," but otherwise her ranking is high among the women who have intrigued Archie Goodwin over the years. A shoulder spread of mink, a floppy-brimmed hat, which is at Archie's ear level - so that, as he notes, her hair might graze his chin if she removed it - and a trace of a beguiling foreign accent, are all that this Flora needs, in addition to her beauty, to intrigue

Archie. When she accosts him on the uptown side of Thirty-eighth Street, he confesses, "If she had been something commonplace like a glamorous movie star," he might have gone on his way without further interest. But that does not happen. Flora's game is to get to know Archie so that he will gain her an audience with Nero Wolfe. She dines with him and dances with him to assure the success of this stratagem. Her kisses are prologue to inquisitions. Yet, she is naively obvious in her intrigues, and Archie, never for a moment taken in, finds her simple, obvious machinations (embarked on for no more sinister a purpose than to protect her brother and his business) a source of unmitigated delight. This new Flora burgeons in the opening pages of "Frame-up for Murder." Her subsequent pursuit of Archie through the streets of Manhattan and her success in bringing him down, on the whig, so to speak, stirs our interest in a way that totally eclipses the opening of "Murder Is No Joke."

Rex Stout enjoyed portraying beautiful foreign women of fierce integrity whose hearts are set on realizing some laudable goal that they pursue with a tenacity that gives consequence to their obvious ploys when they try to enlist the services of those who can get them the results they want. In his beautiful wife, the Polish-born Pola Hoffman, their friends recognized the prototype of these women. Here, in a story set in the world of high fashion, the identification is more easily made, for Pola Stout was one of America's foremost designers of woolen fabrics and her fabrics were much in favor with top fashion houses both in the United States and Europe. It was Pola's calling that gave Rex the setting and plot for several other stories, most notably *The Red Box* and *Red Threads*, and made him always attentive to the clothes his characters were wearing.

In "Murder Is No Joke," Flora Gallant offers Nero Wolfe a hundred dollars as a retainer. In "Frame-up for Murder," as befits her upgraded status, the sum increases to three hundred, still not a princely offering from someone swathed in mink, but enough, Archie says, either to pay his salary for two days or to keep Wolfe in beer for three weeks. That Archie has mellowed toward Flora since her transformation from frog to princess is evident. In "Murder Is No Joke" he had calculated that her hundred-dollar deposit would, at most, buy beer for Wolfe for four days. But more than pecuniary advantages attach to Flora's new appearance. Her metamorphosis generated most of the new pages that expanded "Murder Is No Joke" from forty-eight pages to seventy-nine. In "Murder Is No Joke," after murder was committed it was not worth anyone's bother to bring Flora on the scene when Archie visited the offices of Gallant, Inc., to interview the chief suspects. In "Frame-up for Murder" Flora is prominently visible, and her presence makes Archie's day. At the close of this interlude, moreover, Archie struts into Alec Gallant's office and speaks his mind with a bravado remarkable even for Archie. One has to assume that his recent smooching with Flora has produced such a rush of adrenaline that he is ready to take on the world. Perhaps that also accounts for his boast to Emmy Thorne that he can chin himself twenty times.

Nero Wolfe likewise appears to better advantage in the rewrite of "Murder Is No Joke," and not solely because a younger, demure Flora declines to speculate in jaded tones on his sex life. A vital Flora generates more excitement all around. Archie cares more about the case that evolves out of her visit to the brownstone, and so, inevitably, does Wolfe. Wolfe's speculations concerning the authenticity of the phone call made to Bianca Voss come forth more promptly and do not seem, as in "Murder Is No Joke," arrived at through the instigation of Inspector Cramer. The lively exchange of comments between Wolfe and Archie when Bianca's visit ends is also one of the high moments of the rewrite since it has no counterpart in "Murder Is No Joke." One detects,

too, that, once drawn into the ease, Wolfe becomes, on learning of Alec Gallant's resistance activities in World War II, allied to him in sympathies. Certainly Rex's own commitments in the war years assured both his allegiance to Gallant's principles and his tacit approval of Gallant's initiative taken when the niceties of the law raised the possibility that heinous crimes against humanity would go unpunished.

At one point in "Murder Is No Joke," Nero Wolfe is grossly insulted. He is told, "You are scum, I know, in your stinking sewer! Your slimy little ego in your big gob of fat!" Even Cramer is nonplussed when these phrases are repeated to him. It is easier to believe that the drab and hostile Flora scripted these lines in "Murder Is No Joke" than to attribute them to the vivacious Flora of "Frame-up for Murder." But happily they survived the rewrite, and that kept in the marvelous scene in which Wolfe shows how the word "gob" made him aware that "the extraordinary billingsgate ... spat at me" was a prepared text. To know the words were spoken only for calculated effect makes everyone feel better - Wolfe as well as the reader. And, really, we could not spare that moment when, after Wolfe's explanation is forthcoming and he gestures at the conclusion, Archie complacently observes, "He waved 'gob' away."

In "Frame-up for Murder," Inspector Cramer is given more to do than he was given in "Murder Is No Joke." We may commend him, perhaps, for his restraint in not pointing out that this attempt to deceive Wolfe repeats an episode from *The Rubber Band*. Perhaps it was Cramer's prudence on this occasion that induced Rex Stout to allow him to speak the words "Murder is no joke," which gave the story its title and accounts, as well, for Wolfe's generous reiteration of these words at a crucial moment in the story. It is surprising to observe, in scrutinizing the original manuscript, that Rex Stout once marked these words for excision. It is more surprising yet, to discover from his notes that originally he had settled on a different murderer. No harm can come from mentioning the name now, because no reasonable reader will see him as a possible suspect. We are referring to Carl Drew! It was a good day's work when Rex changed his mind.

### ***COUNTERFEIT FOR MURDER / ASSAULT ON A BROWNSTONE***

While odd circumstances attended the writing of "Bitter End" and "Frame-up for Murder," the history of one other Wolfe novella is even more unusual - that is, the story serialized as "The Counterfeiter's Knife" in *The Saturday Evening Post*, in the issues for January 14, 21, and 28, 1961. Unaltered, the same story was published the following year as "Counterfeit for Murder" in *Homicide Trinity*, one of the tripartite Wolfe volumes. Rex's Writing Record for this story reads: "73 pp. Began 3/6759, finished 3/31/59. 9 days out, 17 days writing time." His breakdown of days shows that he actually worked on it on twenty-three different days, but sometimes only for short intervals, which he recorded as fractions of days. Only on the nineteenth and twentieth, when he was in New York, and on the twenty-ninth, Easter Sunday, was he away from his desk entirely. For Rex to give so much time to a single novella was unusual. But we do not have to look far for an explanation. As he noted in his writing record, underlining the word twice for emphasis, the story he wrote in that twenty-six-day interval was a "Rewrite." Just ahead of the entry given above he had recorded these particulars concerning the original version of the story: "'Counterfeit for Murder' - 74 pp. Regan 1/22/59, finished 2/11/59. 3 days out, 18 days writing time." Only on two days did he do no writing at all, the twenty-ninth and thirtieth of January, when he had to be in Providence. Fractions of days show that he could have reduced the total of working days

by another three, making, in all, five days out. But, all things considered, the work had gone well; so that, quite up to his usual average, he had written four or five pages on twelve of the nineteen days he had written. Nothing in his notes suggests that he was dissatisfied with the results. Yet, less than a month later, he discarded all but the first seven pages of this story and, starting again at that point, took events in a direction so contrary to that in which they had moved before, that the lady who quickened Archie's heartbeat in the original is here hastily dispatched with a bread knife, and the dowdy boardinghouse keeper, who had promptly fallen prey to a hit-and-run motorist in the first version, here escapes with a grazing, is reanimated, and given liberty to engage Wolfe as well as Archie in some of the liveliest dialogue to be found anywhere in the corpus. She, Anthony Boucher said of Miss Hattie Annis, "is the most entertaining client to visit West Thirty-fifth Street in some time." And indeed she was.

A perusal of the two versions of "Counterfeit for Murder" shows that Hattie Annis's reappearance is so thoroughly desirable that it completely justifies Rex Stout's repudiating his folly in snuffing out a character that was endowed with her remarkable vitality. But was that the actual reason for his decision? We can only conjecture because, on July 11, 1972, when I asked Rex why he had rewritten this story, he said, "There must be a reason, but I have forgotten what it was." We know, at least, that Rex was not acting on the advice of anyone else, either editor or friend, because, in the twenty-three-day interval that elapsed between his completing the original and beginning the rewrite, he had shown the manuscript to no one. He arrived at the decision entirely on his own. Only one possible explanation can be offered. In that interval Rex had spent a fishing holiday, at Paradise Island, Florida, with his friend Nathaniel Selleck (the second of the three Nathaniel Sellecks who were Rex's physicians successively over a forty-five-year period). On the day that Rex returned from Florida, word reached him that Dr. Selleck had dropped dead moments after his departure. On receipt of the news Rex resumed writing at once, perhaps, in the creative act of calling back to life someone who had died, resorting to a form of therapy mysterious to some but not at all mysterious to those who write.

Hattie Annis is the most successful of several characters Rex based on his mother's sister, Alice Todhunter Bradley, who as a young woman, in the 1880s, traveled through the West alone, lecturing, serving as schoolmistress to Brigham Young's kin and, eventually, as a confidante to Eugene Debs. In the original "Counterfeit for Murder" Hattie does not meet Nero Wolfe. In the rewrite she not only meets him, she flabbergasts him by asking him for "lamb kidneys bourguignonne" when he invites her to lunch. This scene alone justifies the rewrite. Rarely is Nero Wolfe ever put out of countenance by anyone. By story's end Wolfe is won over by Hattie's homely candor and integrity. No mistake about it, Hattie is a straight-arrow.

If it is incumbent on us to ask what else readers gain in the rewrite of "Counterfeit for Murder," the question can at least be speedily answered. Wolfe is given more to do here. Once again he is able to utilize, to good advantage, the services of Saul, Fred, and Orrie, and to stage one of his revealing assemblies. We also learn the source of the counterfeit bills, a detail skimmed on in the original story. And, finally, Wolfe is able to compromise severely the dignity of Albert Leach (that his surname recalls a parasite is not accidental), a T-man whose patronizing attitude has awakened his indignation. This scene foreshadows Wolfe's brilliant coup in humbling J. Edgar Hoover, six years later, in *The Doorbell Rang*.



We need not suppose that the rewrite of "Counterfeit for Murder" cannibalized the original, stripping from it its most meritorious parts. Tamaris Baxter, who changes roles with Hattie in the rewrite, to become the needed corpse, is intelligent and resourceful but a bit starchy, probably because she is not the person she pretends to be. To dispense with her is no hardship. But the original story has several wonderful scenes that can ill be spared. The restoration of them to a place in the corpus is a gain that all discriminating Neronians will applaud. Early in the story tensions run high between Wolfe and Archie. Archie comes upon Wolfe studying a terrestrial globe, "probably picking out a place for me to be exiled in." Wolfe ires Archie, and Archie reports, "I turned and marched out, chin up, with my ego patting me on the back, and mounted the stairs to my room." It is a joy to see Wolfe later weasel out of this commitment when he realizes he needs Archie after all.

Midway in the story we are treated to two superb scenes, one treading close on the heels of the other. Albert Leach, accompanied by a team of four other T-men, invades the brownstone and conducts an inch-by-inch search, even to sifting through the files in Wolfe's office and the osmundine in his plant rooms. " 'My house has been invaded, my privacy has been outraged, and my belongings have been pawed,' " Wolfe declares. He locks himself in his bedroom and refuses to emerge until the T-men are gone. Unfortunately, for himself, Inspector Cramer chooses this disagreeable hour - it is eleven thirty at night - to call, and Wolfe, with unprecedented vigor, uses his physical bulk to block his entrance, in what surely is one of the great moments of the saga.

Archie's witty sallies and disclosures, as usual, are sprinkled through the story and add to its zest. It is intriguing to learn that he once spent nine rainy hours in a doorway on a stakeout. At one point he tells us, too, "I no longer had any illusions about dimples. The most attractive and best-placed ones I had ever seen were on the cheeks of a woman who had fed arsenic to three husbands in a row." The invasion of the brownstone by the T-men sparks some of his most audacious quips. He asks one of them, " 'Did you find the snow in the secret drawer?' " And he also asks the man to turn his mattress because it's due for a turning. He explains further that FBI stands for "Foiled By Intelligence." We cannot pass from the subject of Archie without noting one curious detail attaching to the original manuscript. Archie's crucial maneuver of leaving his hat and coat in Hattie's parlor was, for Rex, an afterthought. He actually taped that detail over the passage it replaced. For Rex such backtracking in his manuscripts was unprecedented.

William S. Baring-Gould surmised that the events recounted in "Counterfeit for Murder" occurred on a Monday and Tuesday in the winter of 1960-1961. He was wrong. Rex's notes show that they occurred in 1959, on Monday, January 26, and Tuesday, January 27. These dates, used in the original, were retained in the rewrite.

The year in which Rex wrote his two versions of "Counterfeit for Murder" was, for him, an *annus mirabilis*. He wrote three stories in 1958 and three again in 1960. In 1959 he worked on five. "Eeny Meeny Murder Mo," was finished in January. Between January and March he produced his two versions of "Counterfeit for Murder." Plot It Yourself was begun in May and finished in July. "The Rodeo Murder" was begun in September and finished in October. A suggestion that he wrote "Counterfeit for Murder" twice because he was unsure of himself can have no validity. Rex was far from being written out. Indeed, he would write another seventeen

Nero Wolfe stories, eleven of them novels, before he racked up his quill at eighty-nine. That he could do a second version of "Counterfeit for Murder" and come within ten lines of making it exactly the same length as its predecessor bespeaks a virtuosity that confirms that his mastery over his material was unimpaired. While Rex was writing "Counterfeit for Murder," his grandsons, Chris and Reed Maroc, aged three and five, were living at High Meadow. When their mother, Rex's daughter Barbara, told them not to bother their grandfather because he was "busy with a counterfeiting plot," they took this literally and invaded Rex's study to confront him with drawn, toy pistols. "They had a point," Rex conceded. "It could be argued that all fiction writing is counterfeiting." When "The Counterfeiter's Knife" was published in *The Saturday Evening Post*, the boys, clad in, respectively, Superman outfit and western gear, restaged their stickup for a photograph to accompany the story. This, Rex explained, did not make them liable to charges of false arrest. "A reconstruction," he said, "is no good as evidence." As encountered in this volume. Rex's own reconstructions, however, are excellent evidence of the fecundity of his genius.

John J. McAleer - Mount Independence - March 25, 1985

### Mystery Writer Reaches for the Sky

Now that Rex Stout's current Nero Wolfe whodidit, *THE COUNTERFEITER'S KNIFE*, is drawing to a conclusion (page 38), the time is ripe for our tale of two young gunslicks who jumped to a conclusion. They are Chris and Reed Maroc, aged three and four and a half. We find them (right) in grandfather Stout's study in Danbury, Connecticut. (The house is in Danbury; its mailbox is across the state line, in Brewster, New York.) The boys' mother had told them not to bother grandpa because he was busily involved in a counterfeiting plot. The boys deduced that he was making bogus currency and decided to apprehend him. "They had a point," says Stout. "It could be argued that all fiction writing is counterfeiting."

Grandpa had the scene re-enacted, with authentic costumes. But the photograph won't make the youngsters liable to charges of false arrest. "A reconstruction," says Nero Wolfe's creator, "is no good as evidence."

*Saturday Evening Post*, Jan. 28, 1961



Rex Stout and his grandchildren.