

GREAT DETECTIVES

SEVEN ORIGINAL INVESTIGATIONS

BY
JULIAN SYMONS



ILLUSTRATED BY TOM ADAMS

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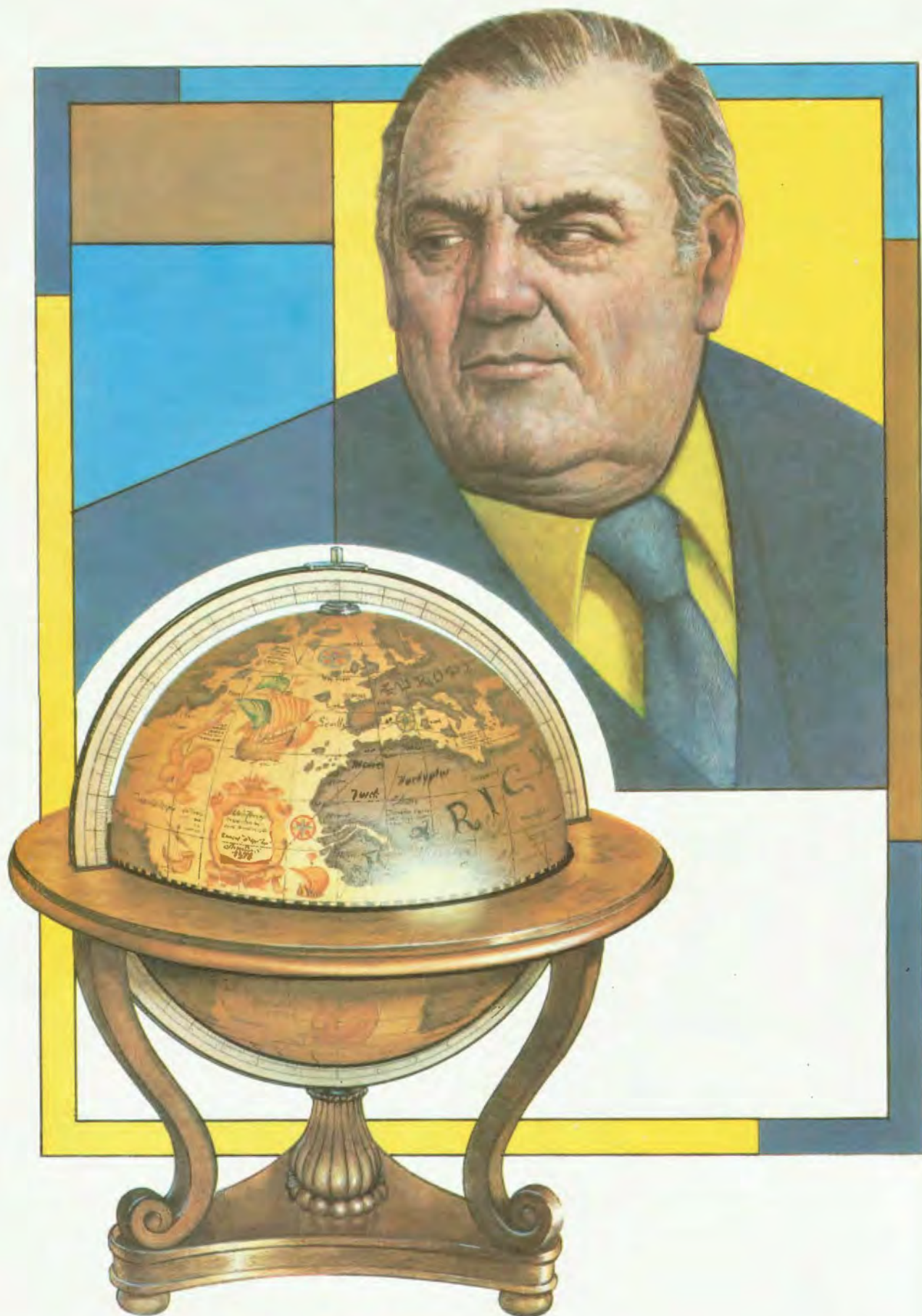
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IN WHICH ARCHIE GOODWIN REMEMBERS

IN HIS EARLY THIRTIES, FROM ALL THE descriptions I had read, Archie Goodwin was attractive rather than handsome, a big, muscular six-footer with the light-coloured hair that is almost red, and regular features saved from being conventionally good-looking by the short broad-ridged nose which gave him an air of independence and slight cockiness. That had been a while ago, but although the hair was grey now he still gave the impression of physical power kept nicely under control to be expected of Nero Wolfe's close associate. The handshake was firm, the grey eyes gave me a searching, but not unfriendly look. There wasn't much those eyes failed to notice, and they took in now my rapid inspection of the room. There were things I'd read about in twenty books, but never seen. As I walked over to the big globe standing in one corner, he nodded approvingly.

'That's the three-foot globe that stood in one corner of the office, right.'

'It was a two-foot globe in the early days, or so I read.'

He said with a touch of sharpness, 'We didn't get around to measuring it. What else?'

'That red leather chair. Perhaps the sofa, although if so you've had it re-covered because it should be bright yellow. That petrified wood paperweight. Oh yes, and one or two of the engravings, like the one of Brillat-Savarin. And some of the books, I suppose, because I know you're not a great reader. At least, that's what you say, though I noticed that you knew what "apodictical" meant. I had to look it up in the dictionary.'

'Mr Wolfe used it and then I looked it up, thought I'd slip it into a story.' He grinned. 'Not bad, Mr Symons, you might make a detective.'

You've missed the massaranduba table there in the corner, the perforated picture of Washington Monument over there which used to serve as a listening panel, and one or two other things. Still, not bad. Would you like a drink? Mr Wolfe used to keep port, Dublin stout and madeira to hand, but I don't fly so high, with me it's beer or white wine.' I said white wine, and he filled a glass for me, a glass of milk for himself, and dropped into the chair opposite me. He did so easily, gracefully, as though he were moving on the balls of his feet all the time. 'You're writing this article and you want to ask questions about Mr Wolfe, have I got it right?'

I produced the little tape recorder. He gave it a sideways glance.

'I'm not sure I trust those gadgets. Let's just bat it around a bit first about this piece.'

We talked for half an hour in the handsome apartment on the upper East Side, about my book on great detectives, who was going into it, whether they'd be compared with each other (he said, as he had done once before, that Nero Wolfe was 'the best detective north of the South Pole'). I stressed that my purpose was to give accounts of the lives and characters of my subjects, not to make comparisons. I sensed that I had passed some kind of test when he grinned, and said: 'There's no comparison. He was a genius, the rest were detectives. Would you like to see a photograph?'

I don't know exactly what I had expected, a monstrously fat man I suppose, since Wolfe at his heaviest weighed more than twenty stone. Anyway, I was surprised. The face was large and squarish, but not jowly or pudgy, the face of a big rather than a fat man. Brown hair and heavy-lidded brown eyes, a full mobile mouth, the expression amiable enough but a little threatening, not the face of a man who suffered fools at all, let alone suffering them gladly. It was the face of a heavyweight man, and if you liked heavyweights he could even have been called handsome. There were three photographs, all very similar, except that one showed him bending over an orchid, and revealed large shapely hands. None of the photographs was full length, so

perhaps I didn't get the full impression of his bulk. I handed them back without comment.

Now, Mr Symons, let's get down to cases. You've got questions you want to ask. Okay, I'll go along with you, but if there's anything I don't want to answer I'll say "No comment" like a politician, and you leave it at that. Or I'll ask you to stop the tape. If I say something I shouldn't and want it wiped, you wipe it there and then. Not that I don't trust you, just that being certain beats trusting people any day. Agreed?

I agreed, and what follows is the text of our question-and-answer session. It suggests an explanation to the often-asked question 'What became of Nero Wolfe?', although the answer leaves an element of mystery.

JS I'd like you first to sketch verbally the lay-out at West 35th Street, what the place looked like and how it worked.

AG Okay, I'll try it. The house was an old brownstone, the number, well, it was somewhere between the 500s and the 900s. There were reasons for not giving the exact number then, and I guess they still apply. It was —

JS Excuse me. This book will be published in Britain and other countries besides the USA, and there are a lot of readers who don't know what a brownstone is. Even detectives. Like Hercule Poirot who asked "Enfin, what is a brownstone mansion? I have never known?"

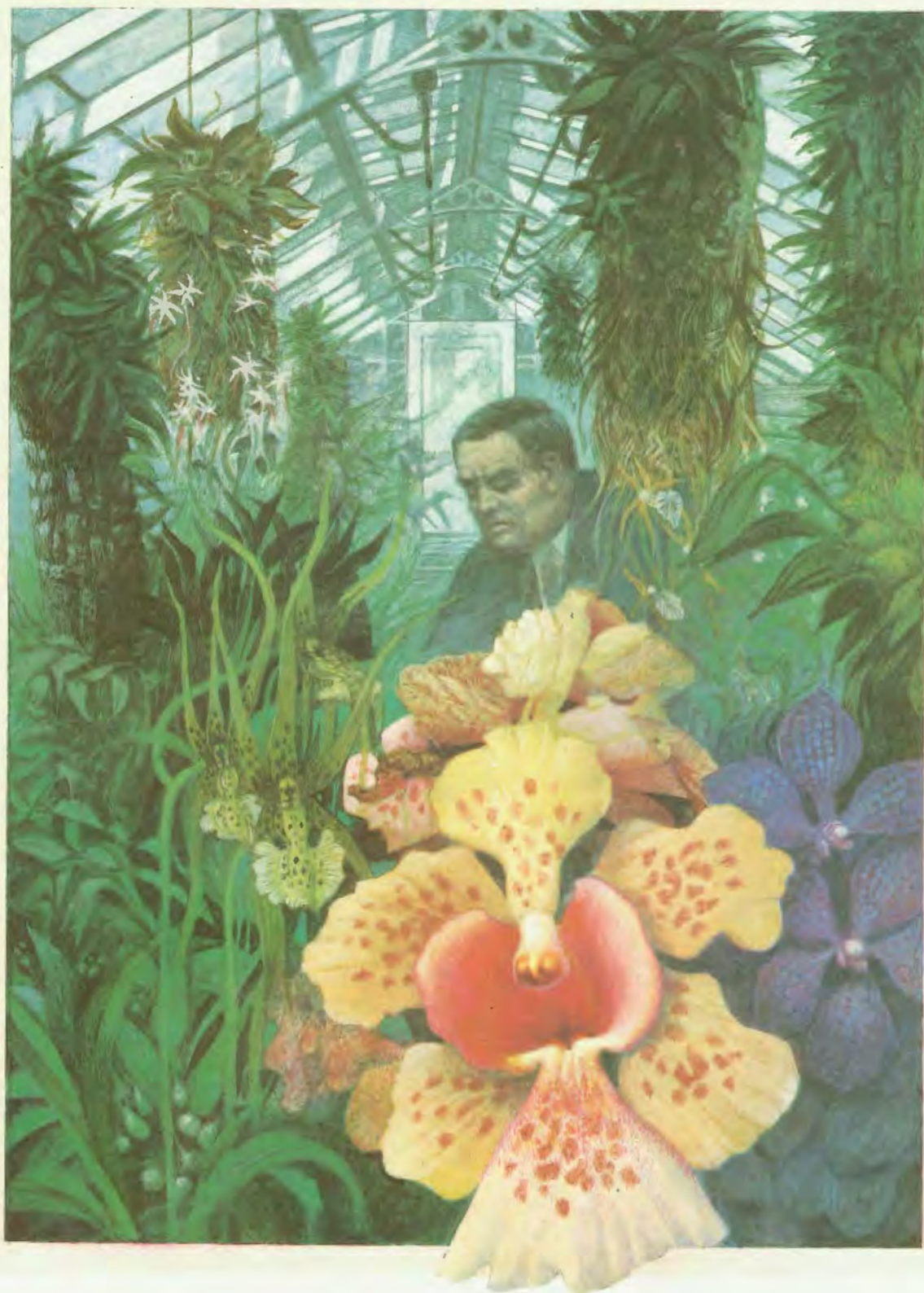
AG I never thought those French detectives were much good. Okay, Belgian, I knew he was Belgian. If he was such a hot shot, why didn't he try his luck here in the States?

JS I couldn't tell you.

AG I could, but I won't. What's a brownstone? I never majored in architecture, but they're saying now that these brownstones are the city's pride and joy and so shouldn't be knocked down, the way almost everything in New York gets knocked down and replaced every twenty years or so. A brownstone is—well, most of them were put up around the turn of the century and they got the name because they were faced with sandstone. Mostly

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JS And how right you were.

AG You could say that. Fred Durkin was Irish, and I've mentioned his eating habits. Bill Gore and Johnny Keems were all right as long as you spelled out what you wanted in words of one syllable. Then there were the cops. Lieutenant Rowcliffe always thought my permanent home should have been a prison cell, and I loved him too. Purley Stebbins was the kind you feel, well, you can take him or leave him, and on the whole I preferred to leave him. Most of the the top brass were energetic, and that's the best you could say for them. Wolfe popped one of them named Ash on the jaw, when Ash laid a hand on him. That leaves our Fergus, Fergus Cramer, onetime head of the Homicide Bureau. It could be there was a lot to be said for Fergus, though I didn't often get around to saying it. He was chunky, about my height, wrinkled pink skin which could look bright red when he lost his temper, sharp grey-blue eyes. He wasn't too bright, but he shone like an arc-lamp compared to the rest of them. He was honest. And he respected Wolfe, I'd even say he knew Wolfe was a genius. That was Fergus's saving grace. How am I doing?

JS Wonderful. It all helps to fill the picture, even when you may feel I should know it anyway. There's another thing. You went around with all sorts and sizes of women, and obviously they all found you attractive from Lily Rowan downwards if that's the right word, but there's no mention of one ever staying the night in your room. Or of you renting a room to carry on an affair. You make it clear in twenty different books that Wolfe didn't like women. He said once, "They are astounding and successful animals," and that's a typical comment. I'd say he was afraid of them at heart. But what I'd like to know is whether at West 35th Street he absolutely forbade you to have women staying the night. And if so, what did you feel about it?

AG Turn that damned thing off.

* * *



I did so. Archie Goodwin got up, walked up and down the room a couple of times with his fists clenched. He did not look at me, and I felt a little nervous. Then he asked if I would like another glass of wine, and I said yes. When he'd brought it, and more milk for himself, he sat down again and looked at me, frowning. When he spoke, though, the words were mild.

I hoped you wouldn't put that kind of question. I asked around about you when I had your letter saying you'd like to see me, because frankly your name didn't mean a thing to me.' He gave his engaging grin.

I'll tell you what I learned. You're a hot-shot British crime writer, and they say a kind of crime historian too. Got a lot of prejudices, though, and sometimes you make allegations that give offence. Here's something I'd like you to explain.' He took a piece of paper from his pocket, and read: "There seemed something sexually ambiguous about the

called something just as fancy, the Spirit of the Black Mountain.) Its leader's name was Popovic. Wolfe would be in touch with an important Government official named Vizin, which as their names go is an easy one to pronounce. Vizin was Number Five or Six in the régime, and wanted to become Number One. If you think that's a cynical view, well, it's the view I took. The way Vizin had sold it to our VIP, the country was ripe for a change of Government as soon as he dropped his hat.

All this condenses hours of briefings, and about a hundred memos marked "Top Secret", "Eat When Read", and so on. I must say Wolfe survived them well.

In fact, it wouldn't be too much to say he amazed me. Of course we'd done most of the routine before, on the previous trip, but I never thought he'd do it again. He left the house on his own without complaint, cut out carbohydrates and root vegetables, and told Fritz that where possible all main dishes were to be served plain broiled, with no sauces. In the week before we left he took off twenty pounds. Mind you, there was still a lot left.

A couple of cases we had on hand were given up, and he did one thing he hadn't done before. He drew up a will. I won't go into all the details, but the brownstone was left to me outright, with any of the things in it that I wanted. Fritz got enough to start his own restaurant, or retire if he felt like it. Everyone was remembered, from Theo, Saul Panzer and Fred Durkin, to Charley the cleaning man. Cramer, who was suffering badly from arthritis, was left his Montenegrin applewood cane. Wolfe had Fritz and Theo in tears when he told them of the bequests. I stayed dry-eyed, because I knew he'd like it that way. When he said he was glad I had avoided any embarrassing display of sentiment, I told him I couldn't understand why he was making such a to-do.

"In what you called your mortal encounter with Arnold Zeck you disappeared, took off over a hundred pounds and acquired a new personality, but I don't recollect you making a will. And you didn't make one when we went out to this



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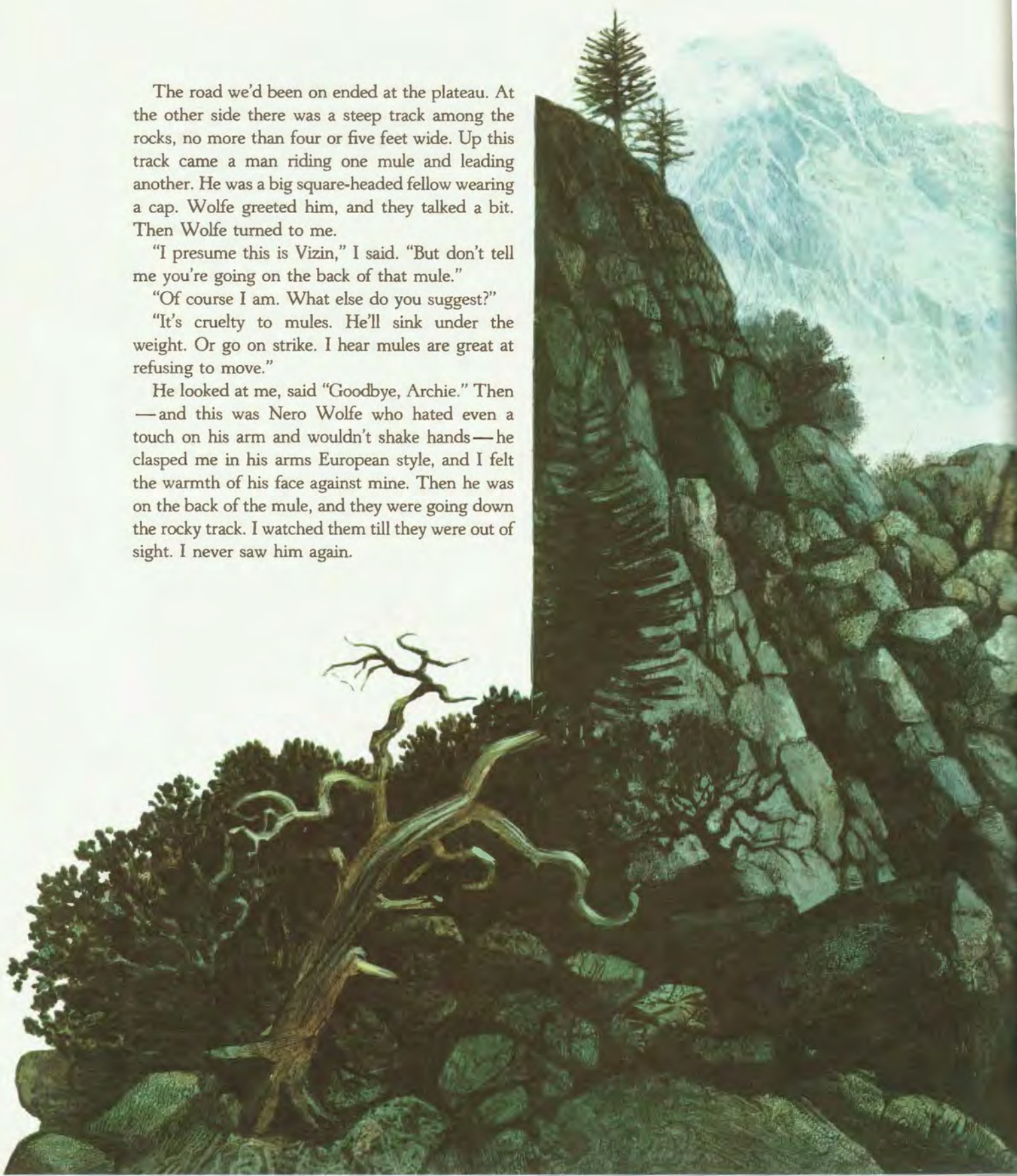
The road we'd been on ended at the plateau. At the other side there was a steep track among the rocks, no more than four or five feet wide. Up this track came a man riding one mule and leading another. He was a big square-headed fellow wearing a cap. Wolfe greeted him, and they talked a bit. Then Wolfe turned to me.

"I presume this is Vizin," I said. "But don't tell me you're going on the back of that mule."

"Of course I am. What else do you suggest?"

"It's cruelty to mules. He'll sink under the weight. Or go on strike. I hear mules are great at refusing to move."

He looked at me, said "Goodbye, Archie." Then—and this was Nero Wolfe who hated even a touch on his arm and wouldn't shake hands—he clasped me in his arms European style, and I felt the warmth of his face against mine. Then he was on the back of the mule, and they were going down the rocky track. I watched them till they were out of sight. I never saw him again.



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