

# Nero Wolfe Takes a Ghostly Client

By REX STOUT

"I HAVE NEVER had a ghost for a client," Nero Wolfe said testily. The ghost left the red leather chair to put a little stack of bills on Wolfe's desk, and returned to the chair. "I'm not just an ordinary ghost," he said, "I'm a political ghost. That thousand dollars is real money."

Wolfe darted a glance at the bills and back to the ghost. "What's your name?" he demanded.

"Harold Edward Stassen. Four inches in *Who's Who*. At the unprecedented age of thirty-one I was elected governor of—"

"What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to find out who murdered me."

"Pful. Weren't you there?"

The ghost pulled at his ear. "To tell the truth," he said, "I don't know. There was a time when I thought I knew where I was, but I must have been somewhere else. For instance, one day I thought I was in the White House talking with a certain man, and I thought he said he liked my plan for finding out whether it would be a good idea to sidetrack Nixon, but from the way he acted later I guess I dreamed it. Do you interpret dreams?"

"No," Wolfe was curt. "But if you tried to sidetrack Nixon he had an adequate motive." He reached for the bills. "The case is solved. Nixon murdered you."

"No, he didn't," the ghost declared peevishly. "I was murdered

in August, and by that time Nixon was the new Nixon. He swore off murder in the spring. He wouldn't kill a fly, not if anyone was looking, and all summer everyone was looking. At him."

"Then it was what's-his-name."

The ghost nodded. "You mean Leonard Hall. I suspected him myself at one point, but it's not logical. Look at the people he hasn't murdered—McCarthy, Jenner, Dirksen, Bricker—why would he let them live and pick on me? All I did was offer the party a chance for a candidate for vice-president who would attract voters instead of repelling them, after I had a talk that day at the White House—provided I was really there. Anyway, Hall's job as National Committee Chairman with party leaders like me is to praise them, not to bury them."

"Then you may not be dead after all."

"Certainly I'm dead." The ghost was indignant. "How could I be a ghost if I'm not dead?"

"That does seem conclusive." Wolfe straightened up in his chair behind his desk. "Very well. We'll have to go over the list of suspects in alphabetical order."

It took four hours. From memory, without referring to notes, the ghost presented 763 names for consideration. Nero Wolfe drank eleven bottles of beer and the ghost took 28 aspirin tablets, chewing them dry because, he explained, he was soluble in water and alcohol went to his toes and on out. As

they neared the end of the list Wolfe seemed to lose interest, leaning back with his eyes closed, and made no comment at all on the last name suggested by the ghost—one Montgomery Zalkk, an idea man in a big advertising agency. Instead of commenting, he moved. He came forward in the chair, stretched an arm to slide the bills to the edge of the desk, and spoke:

"Your money, sir. Take it."

"Then it's hopeless?" the ghost cried in despair. "You can't solve it?"

"I have solved it." Wolfe was bored. "It's quite obvious. Granting that many of the persons you have named would have liked to murder you, none of them was in a position to do so. Only one man, one you have not named, had both means and opportunity. True, he had no respectable motive, but he is so superhumanly respectable he doesn't need motives. I won't name him; it would be pointless, since he is notoriously impeccable. I advise you to forget your dream about a talk with a certain man in the White House, because—"

"My God!" The ghost was as pale as a ghost. "You don't mean—no, oh no—water! Give me water!"

Wolfe poured from a carafe on his desk and got up to hand the glass across, and the ghost drank. He downed it in three great gulps . . . and in a matter of seconds was gone. There was merely a wet spot on the seat of the chair.

What happened to the thousand dollars is Wolfe's affair.