An Interview With Mister Rex Stout

The Author of the Nero Wolfe Detective Stories Discusses His Work and the War

By ROBERT van GELDER

WITH Rex Stout you have one certainty: that whatever you are you won't be misunderstood. The author of the Nero Wolfe detective stories is more articulate than are most writers and has more free energy. One has the impression that he has lived more and worked less than the majority of his peers. His beard is not a particularly good beard: it has rather the sparse look of barberry bushes that have been trampled by the house painters. The beard's purpose, probably, is to ambush one's attention from the eyes above it, which are not cataloguing eyes and seem to reflect open judgments, but are intent and observing to a rare degree.

Mr. Stout said that he writes detective stories because they pay well. Before turning to Nero Wolfe he wrote four novels; two had very good notices here and were even better received in England and in France.

"But I know of only three reasons why a man should write serious fiction. One, if you love words and want to put them together in a way that pleases you —that was my reason for writing the four novels. The second reason, if you're burning to tell other people what you think is wrong, that is, if you're the preacher type. Some of the best writers now are fundamentally preachers. Johnny Steinbeck, I think, is one. The third reason to write serious fiction is if you are a great writer. There are damn few great writers and I'm not one of them. While I could afford to I played with words. When I could no longer afford that I wrote for money."

Born in Kansas, the son of a superintendent of schools, Mr. Stout left the University of Kansas while in his freshman year and enlisted in the Navy. "I wanted to see the ocean." That was in 1906 and the term of his enlistment was four years. He was made yeoman paymaster on President Theodore Roosevelt's yacht. "As it happened there were only seven men in the wardroom and that left them one short for two tables of whist. So they fixed it up to make me a warrant officer, which would give me the freedom of the wardroom and would fill out the second table. After a time I got tired of whist and, as a warrant officer can resign, I resigned."

Then a succession of jobs, including clerking in a cigar store. Mr. Stout heard that an uptown New York hotel needed a manager. He bought some striped pants and a cutaway and applied. The costume clinched the job and the elevator man and the telephone girl—old hands in the hotel business—tutored him so that he could keep it. He left this post to write for a living.

"But if I was paid $18 for a short story, and it was Summer, I went to baseball games until I was broke again. If I got $3,000 for a 90,000-word story that Bob Davis had bought, and it was Winter, I went to the opera until I was broke again. Never even got my laundry out. I decided, hell, that life wasn't getting me anywhere. And the stories weren't any good. I made up my mind to go into business until I had $150,000 or was 40 years old. I was three months short of 40 when I had the $150,000. I wrote my novels, but in the depression I lost my money."

"What was the business?"

"I invented a system of accounting that I sold to banks."

"Had you ever worked in a bank?"

"No."

"Were you an accountant?"

"No." A pause. "You see, I have a—a sort of a trick mind for figures. When I was a kid, 9, 10, 11, along in there, I toured Kansas as a sort of exhibit. I'd stand in a schoolroom with my back to the blackboard, or blindfolded, and rows of figures—eleven or twelve across and eleven deep—were written on the board. I'd look at this block of figures for, well, six seconds, then turn my back again and give the total, the sum that they added up to.

Pirie MacDonald.

Rex Stout.

"My father didn't like it. You see, it made me a freak. I realized that too, and I didn't like it. No, I've lost the trick. I think I consciously lost it. But even now I find it impossible to make a mistake in addition.

"I turned to words instead of figures. I'd always loved words—had read the Bible through when I was 3½, read Macaulay when I was 3, and so on. But with words I wasn't a freak."

He said that until the war started he had thoroughly enjoyed writing stories about Nero Wolfe.

"I never worked more than three months a year. Not quite three months. Thirty-nine or forty days on each novel, and I'd do two a year.

"No, there's nothing much to planning them. Of course, I was lucky on having hit on the name —Nero Wolfe. Simple but odd, people remember it. And Wolfe was born; he wasn't synthetic. I didn't have to sit down and decide: 'What color will his eyes be? Well, they'll be blue. How much will he weigh? How will he walk? What expressions will he use?' He was born.

"I tried another detective later, Tecumseh Fox—because the Saturday Evening Post editors wanted a fresh detective—and he never was born. He was put together piece by piece and wasn't worth a damn.

"As for the story, you take a setting that interests you, think of what might happen in that setting, choose the most entertaining happenings, and then ask yourself: 'Well, why would a man want to buy that champion bull?

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Why would some one murder a man because of a bull?' The answers come right along. You have your plot. You write it.

"It was pure pleasure—a game.

"Then Munich gave me my first belly-ache. I'd always been healthy; I became dyspeptic. That's true. I had pains most of the time after Munich, a nervous stomach.

"I started making speeches, debating these America First fellows, going on the radio to answer them, doing all I could to wake people up to the danger.

"Listen, if we get in now, right now, 200,000 American lives and fifty billion dollars probably will be the cost of beating Hitler. If we listen to the isolationists and wait until Hitler is ready for us, until we are next on his timetable, we'll spend five million American lives and two or three hundred billion dollars. What in God's name is the sense of that?

"I'm not dyspeptic any more. The nervousness is all going out, you see, in these speeches. But Nero Wolfe gets smaller. Can't keep my mind on him."

Mr. Stout led the way onto the sunny roof of his house. The Stout place is called High Meadows. It is near the crest of one of the long slopes to the south of the Berkshires. Straight ahead a ten-mile view of meadows, trees and hills. Mr. Stout gestured toward Pawling.

"Quite a colony of the subversive element over there." He named a number of prominent isolationists. "With a 75-millimeter gun placed right here, I'll bet I could pot them."

The American Institute of Graphic Arts announces an exhibition of books made for children, Oct. 29 to Nov. 12, at 115 East Fortieth Street, New York City. The books to be shown will be chosen for their physical excellence rather than for literary merit. The literary content will be considered only as it relates to the problems of typographic design and production.

Harper & Brothers have placed on their rush list for Fall publication "Divided They Fall," by Richard B. Scandrett Jr. The author, a well-known New York lawyer, Republican candidate for Congressman at Large from New York in 1938, argues vigorously the case for our active participation in the war. His plea is especially interesting because of his strongly voiced repudiation of the views of his cousin-in-law, Charles A. Lindbergh.

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