Rex Stout

PROFILES

ALIAS NERO WOLFE—I

NERO WOLFE, the fat detective of Rex Stout's novels, towers over his rivals in one respect: he is a superman who talks like a superman. It is a very tough literary trick to make a mastermind sound like a mastermind. Most of the storybook detectives are too much like the new ultra-scientific calculating machines, which have gorgeous electronic brains for solving problems but no particular talent for dialogue. Genius is the curse of the mystery story. It tends to destroy individuality and drag everybody down to the same level. It is harder to tell intellectual giants apart than Hollywood blondes. Nero, however, is an exceptional character creation—a genius who rises above mediocrity.

Circulating-library detectives can generally be traced to distinguished antecedents—Napoleon, Robin Hood, Frank Merriwell, Jehovah, Howe & Hummel, Galahad, Houdini, Sam Spade. Nero is different. He has no resemblance to any of the eminent men of action. His specialty is fallacy-detecting; he solves mysteries by spotting bad logic and exposing it in choice English. He is a born debater, a distant cousin of Parliamentary fighting cocks like Pitt, who ran men out of public life for uttering fallacies in his presence. He is a curiously elegant and luminous talker for a foul-play investigator. His outbursts have a faint flavor of the great days of word-bandying, when men paid thirty guineas a seat to hear the metaphors whistle past Warren Hastings.

Nero has always been such an excellent talker that Alexander Woollcott regarded himself as the original of the fat detective. Nero has none of Woollcott's filigreed prose. He is not exactly a wit or a master of repartee, but he is a pulverizing arguer. He overpowers opposition with the savage glare of reasonableness. It was this characteristic that Woollcott considered to be an unquestionable steal from him. The critic felt that he alone could pounce on a man for a slight error in thinking and make him feel that he had blown out the fuse of civilization and hurled the human race back into the Stone Age. It was useless for Stout to protest. Nothing could convince Woollcott that he had not been plagiarized bodily in the Nero Wolfe stories, as he was in "The Man Who Came to Dinner." His case was strengthened by the fact that he and Nero Wolfe resembled each other in physique and in their dislike of physical exertion. Woollcott fell into the habit of referring to himself as Nero. As millions are aware, Nero Wolfe's assistant is Archie Goodwin. In the last few years of his life, Woollcott had a close friend and companion whom he nicknamed Archie.

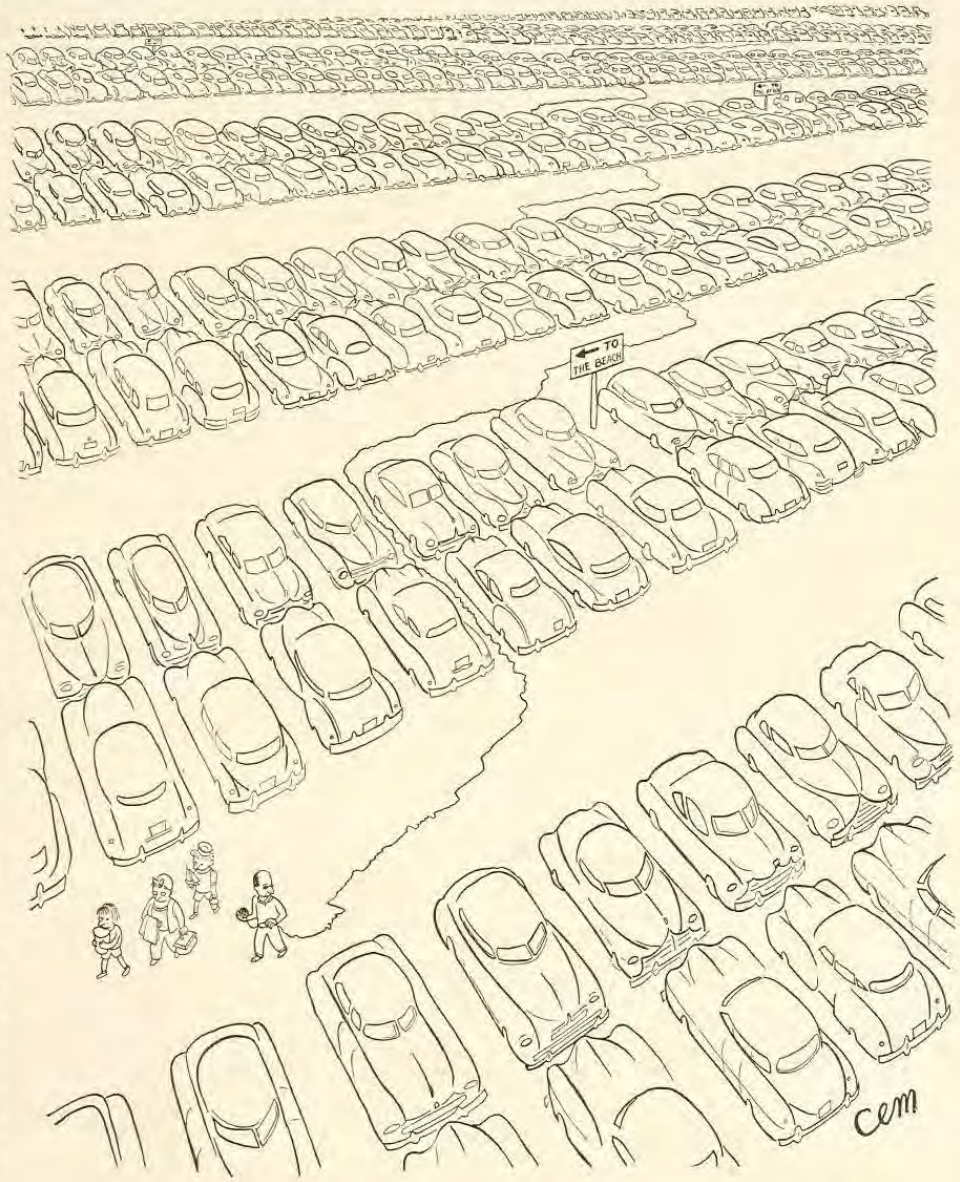
Christopher Morley has backed another candidate for the original of Nero Wolfe. His entry is Mycroft Holmes—the brighter of the two Holmes boys, according to Sherlock. Mycroft was a fat, sedentary mastermind, so gifted that he was called on for help when Sherlock found himself engaged on a case that was too much for his strength. Doyle never, however, pictured Mycroft as a born debater, like Nero. Mycroft didn't specialize in unnerving clients, culprits, witnesses, and police inspectors by the sheer lucidity of his exposition.

Rex Stout himself has been accused of being the original of Nero Wolfe. At first sight, he is an unlikely candidate, for he bears no physical resemblance to his hero. Stout is a sort of dual personage. He has one public consisting of Nero Wolfe fans; he also has a public of his own, developed by his activities as a platform orator and radio debater, as chairman of the Writers' War Board, president of the Authors' Guild, and leader of many causes, particularly that of world federation. He is the head of the recently formed Writers Board for World Government. Mystery readers generally assume that Rex Stout looks like Nero Wolfe, and they are sometimes much taken aback when they confront the author in person. It is on record that Nero Wolfe weighs two hundred and eighty-two pounds; Stout weighs a hundred and fifty. The detective is smooth-shaven; Stout has a square-trimmed grayish beard of moderate length. The beard, however, happens to be a bit of evidence that the author and the character are fundamentally alike. The ruling principle with Nero Wolfe is economy of effort; Stout's beard is a protest against wasting time and energy on shaving. He first let it grow when he was on a three months' vacation in the Rocky Mountains. A hater of lost motion and foolish repetition, he refused to become a razor slave again. The Stout beard has its place in history. It became the text for a speech before a television convention at the Hotel Commodore in 1945. The speaker was a technician who had been assigned to handle the television camera at a Town Hall debate. The assignment threw him into despair. Surveys had proved that nothing repelled television audiences like the vociferating, perorating human face. But after discovering the Stout beard, he kept the camera trained on it incessantly, even when Stout's opponents were talking, and a poll of the television public showed that the evening was considered a distinguished success. This secret of hogging the television camera has since become widely known, and the old-fashioned political whiskers are coming back.

Like Nero Wolfe, Stout is a fallacy-detector. He has been spotting non sequiturs since infancy. He loves argument, and no man's major or minor premises are safe from him. Ordinarily amiable and gregarious, he is a dangerous antagonist in any kind of word battle. On one occasion, a difference of opinion arose between Stout and Max Eastman over a point of Greek philosophy. In a short time, the going was so rough that Eastman jumped up, shook his fist in Stout's face, shouted "You can't talk that way about Plato to me," and bolted out of the house. In a radio debate between Stout and Senator Rush D. Holt, of West Virginia, the Senator became so enraged that he screamed. Stout asked for a little more dignity. "This is not a hog-calling contest, Senator," he said.

Stout hates to be beaten in an argument. When cornered, he is capable of odd maneuvers. He tampered with the laws of nature once to save himself

from defeat in a dispute about the number of rows of kernels on an ear of corn. During a pause in a conversation at a social gathering, a Middle Westerner stated that no ear of corn had ever been known to have anything but an even number of rows—usually twelve. "Oh, no," said Stout. "They sometimes have eleven and sometimes thirteen." This was a wicked invention on Stout's part. An old Middle Western corn grower himself, he knew that nature always makes a point of fixing up an ear of corn with an even number of rows of kernels, but the spirit of contradiction had seized him. He felt that the man was shoving people around with unnecessary and irrelevant information. He is a sworn foe of the Johnny Appleseeds who go about donating little facts to comparative strangers. He had a special reason for being in a fanatical mood at that particular time. Scores of his fellow mystery writers had fallen into the habit of dosing their readers with horse pills of miscellaneous erudition. The pattern had been set by S. S. Van Dine, who peppered the old cops-and-corpses formula with quaint learning. Readers who desired only an honest bath in blood found themselves wallowing in ceramics, mosaics, sphragistics, metaphysics, and other matters totally unrelated to who croaked Cock Robin. Van Dine's stories were good in spite of their dogged informativeness. His popularity produced imitators, and manslaughter was largely taken over by twittering dilettantes. You could hardly read a crime story without being briefed on what gave in 1066 and which came first, the Greeks or the Romans. The average mystery writer disregarded the sage words of Uriah Heep, who said, "I won't provoke my betters with knowledge." Then a reaction set in. Stout and many others rebelled against uncalled-for culture. It was during this trying period that Stout was suddenly stung to the quick by the gratuitous information about corn. He couldn't bear the man's wanton instructiveness. He felt absolutely driven to contradict him and to fight the issue to the last ditch of prevarication. In desperation, he finally bet a hundred dollars that he could furnish ears of corn with an odd number of rows of kernels. The argument took place in the winter. Stout was allowed a reasonable time to search for evidence. He seemed face to face with certain defeat, but he couldn't let down his crusade against unsolicited information. He brooded and meditated. One spring morning, he took a safety-razor blade and slipped out to his corn patch. Peeling back the husks from an ear that was about the size of his middle finger, he removed a row of kernels and carefully replaced the husks. He repeated this on a hundred other ears. At harvesttime, he found that the operation had been a success in a dozen instances. He mailed four perfect eleven-row ears to the corn-belt man, who immediately sent his check for a hundred dollars. Stout returned it, saying that he wouldn't collect a bet on a sure thing. Nero



Wolfe's methods are sometimes slightly irregular, and it is easy to see where he gets them.

ELOQUENT speakers have learned their trade in different ways. Senator Roscoe Conkling arraigned his father's cows for plotting the overthrow of Rome; Martin W. Littleton declaimed against stumps; Senator Henry Fountain Ashurst shouted reproaches at the Rocky Mountains; Henry Grattan harangued corpses on the gibbet; Nero Wolfe got his early training in battles of wits on the plains of Kansas. John Wallace Stout, who had a farm near Topeka, was indirectly responsible for Nero Wolfe. John Wallace Stout was the father of Rex and eight other children. He was a Quaker, and he would never punish a child until the child had said everything he could think of in his own defense. At a very early age, Rex learned all the arts of demagoguery pleading cases before his father. At seven or eight, he could claim black was white in a voice choking with emotion. John Wallace Stout drove up one day just as Rex was violating a family rule by sliding down a haystack. "I saw thee," said the parent. "No, thee didn't," said the son. That raised a clear-cut issue, and it was two hours before Rex had exhausted all the arguments for the defense. He argued to get mental exercise rather than to escape punishment, as the penalty was always an anticlimax after the strenuous litigation. The father adhered to the doctrine that a child should not be punished except with a rod of the child's own selection. The Stout children all became sufficiently good woodsmen to choose anesthetic twigs. The mother's thimble had far more authority on the farm than the father's devitalized whacking.

The Stouts were intellectual and, in a way, aristocratic people. The mother, Lucetta Todhunter Stout, taught Greek and was related to Tod Sloan. The father taught mathematics and was related to a seventeenth-century Richard Stout, who married Penelope Van Princes, a Colonial heroine, who was kidnapped by the Indians and is said to have been held in reverence by them on account of her notable beauty. One of Rex's great-grandfathers was a member of the three-man commission that obtained statehood for Indiana. All Rex's grandparents and great-grandparents were Quakers. John Wallace Stout published a weekly newspaper in Noblesville, Indiana, where Rex was born, on December 1, 1886. In 1888, the elder Stout moved, with his family, to a forty-acre farm nine miles from Topeka. He taught in the Topeka High School, dabbled in politics, and eventually became County Superintendent of Schools. He lent twenty-five dollars to Arthur Capper, the former Senator from Kansas, to help him start the Topeka *Mail & Breeze*. Education was a family monopoly in School District No. 40, where the Stouts lived. May, the oldest Stout girl, taught the only school there, and her only pupils were Rex and his sisters and brothers.

When he was eight or nine, Rex became a public character in Kansas, as the result of an instinct for arithmetic. His teachers starred him in mathematical shows. They blindfolded him, while he stood with his back to a blackboard, and chalked up a formidable column of figures. Then they removed the blindfold and turned him around to face the blackboard. Within a second or two, he would give the total. It was not believed possible for the eye and brain to work that fast, and Rex was thought to have some unorthodox method of absorbing figures. The editor of the *Western School Journal* discovered the small two-footed comptometer and exhibited him all over Kansas. The boy's parents became nervous about having an infant prodigy in the family, and his arithmetical performances were discontinued. Rex was glad to retire to private life. He was then and still is slightly annoyed by his odd little endowment. He has stated that, to the best of his recollection, he has never made a mistake in arithmetic in

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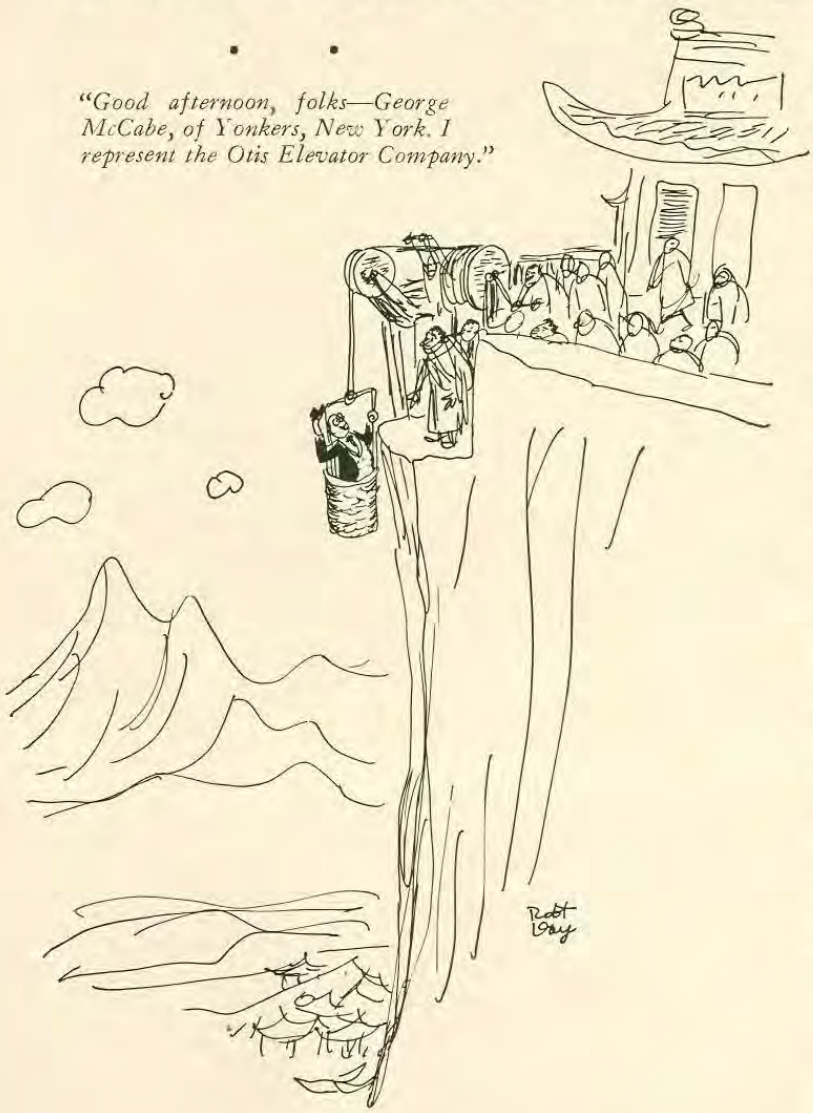
"Good afternoon, folks—George McCabe, of Yonkers, New York. I represent the Otis Elevator Company."



his life. It is a kind of psychological skeleton in the closet. He has no interest in telepathy, clairvoyance, or ouija boards and other games that rest on a dubious scientific foundation. It is a nuisance for a realist to possess a knack that he doesn't quite know how to explain. Stout was cured of credulity in early childhood by one massive dose of disillusionment. He was once a stalwart believer in ghosts. He often suspected that they lurked in the brush he passed each night as he carried two buckets of milk from a neighboring farm to his home. One evening, two white figures came flapping at him out of a clump of bushes. He fled in terror, leaving one bucket behind and arriving home with the other half empty. His parents tried to reason him into thinking it was all imagination; it is a well-established fact that ghosts don't travel in pairs. But Rex couldn't reject the evidence of his senses. He was still shaken by his experience when, through an open door, he happened to hear his two older brothers discussing the best location for haunting him on the following night. Rex devoted a portion of the next day to collecting rocks, which were rather scarce in that part of Kansas, and putting them in his pockets. That evening, instead of running away, he pretended to be petrified with fright, allowed the ghosts to approach, and let them have it at close range. The phantoms broke for cover, yelling with pain. In routing the ghosts, Rex routed the entire supernatural world. Since that time, he has never had any use for mysticism or spiritualism or any other sort of pseudo-scientific phenomena.

Rex was good in other subjects besides arithmetic and was able to skip grades. But, according to educational theory at that time, it was well to retard a forward child, and the family kept the boy out of school for whole terms to slow him down. John Wallace Stout had an extraordinary library. It consisted of about twelve hundred volumes of biography, history, fiction, philosophy, science, and poetry. Rex had read them all by the time he was eleven. The things that the books said were often in conflict with the considered judgments of the Great Plains, and the boy was provided with the constant practice that at a later period made Nero Wolfe a master of argumentation. Rex was handicapped at first, since book learning is no match for horse sense and folklore, but he gradually acquired skill in spotting fallacies and shattering them like clay pigeons. Along with a happy, sociable Quaker temperament, he developed a love of verbal contention. His fondness for debate forced him to be open-minded. In order to scrape up an argument, he had to be ready to take the affirmative or the negative to suit the convenience of his adversary. He was compelled to see two sides to nearly every question, because he never knew which side he was going to be on.

There was no Quaker meetinghouse near the Stout farm, so Rex was sent to the Congregational church in Topeka. His Sunday-school teacher was a dogmatic man with a long mustache. Rex took exception both to the dogmatism and to the length of the mustache. He was particularly aggrieved that the teacher regarded the pupils as memorizing rather than reasoning animals. Rex never tucked anything away in his memory without first examining the pros and cons. He regarded all statements, Biblical and otherwise, as propositions tossed into the arena of knock-down-and-drag-out argument. One Sunday, the teacher told his side of the miracle of Cana. Stout promptly rose to tell the other side of it. He was severely squelched. On the following Sunday, he handed in a statement, signed by five of the seven apothecaries of Topeka, affirming that it was impossible to turn water into wine. Rex was incensed when the Sunday-school teacher suppressed the documentary evidence and refused to let the matter be settled by free and unlimited debate.

WHEN Rex was twelve, his family moved into Topeka. The boy knew Paris backward and forward from steeping himself in Balzac, and he had a bookworm's knowledge of many other proud capitals. Topeka was not a glittering metropolis, but it would do till a real one came along. All the road shows played Topeka. Rex became an usher at the theatre and had appetizing glimpses of the world. In high school, he made various contacts with fame. He won the spelling championship of Kansas. He was poet laureate of the senior class and crashed the local newspaper with his verses. At the age of sixteen, he sold a poem, for twelve dollars, to the *Smart Set*. It was about a village priest in Brittany who, having been missed from his accustomed haunts, was found dead in his tiny cabin, one cold hand clutching a locket that contained a strand of a lady's hair. On

the lifeless breast sat a lizard, switching its tail to and fro.

Although he planned eventually to enter the University of Kansas, Rex went to work immediately after graduating from high school. He was a good man at bookkeeping and accounts. A controversy over five cents when he was a small child had equipped him with most of the qualifications of an auditor or bank examiner. One winter day, when he was seven or eight, he asked his parents for a nickel. They were somewhat upset. It was a physical impossibility for him to spend a nickel in the winter. It would have been an understandable request in summer, when balloons and lemonade were on sale at the Fourth of July celebration at Snyder's Grove. Rex couldn't explain what he wanted the nickel for, because he didn't exactly know. It was the sort of yearning that only a numismatist understands. His parents, feeling that the proposal lacked sobriety and realism, decided in the negative. The boy sulked. To put his grievance on a sound mathematical basis, he analyzed the entire financial structure of the family. As everything was discussed at the dinner table, he was able to develop a complete statement of all outgoing and incoming money. He learned that his parents had a net income of sixty-six nickels and three cents, or $3.33, a day, and had only nine children to support. Before he had got over his sense of injustice, he was practically an expert accountant.

Rex was nineteen when he finally went to Lawrence, Kansas, in 1906, to enter the university. He was discouraged when he found himself still surrounded by monotonous landscapes, which had not yet been glamourized by Grant Wood and other artists of the Middle Western school. He longed to look at the cities and other scenes he had been reading about for years. He had a special craving for a glimpse of the ocean. The ocean had been the subject of an argument in his geography class twelve years before. Rex hadn't studied his lesson, and when he was unexpectedly asked "What color is the ocean?," he said, "Pink."

"No," said the teacher. "The ocean is blue."

That was a flat, dogmatic statement. It was the kind of thing that aroused the spirit of opposition in Rex. "How do you know it's blue?" he asked.

"It says so here in the book," said the teacher.

The boy was already a fallacy-spotter. He had caught the teacher

committing the old fallacy of saying that everything in a book is true, and he made the most of it. The argument became warm.

"Have you ever seen the ocean?" asked Rex, at last.

"No," admitted the teacher.

A quick checkup showed that nobody in the school had ever seen the ocean. "And," inquired Rex triumphantly, "how do we know that the man who wrote the book ever saw the ocean?" The argument was continued intermittently for several days. Rex read up on the color of the ocean. Unfortunately, he missed Tom Moore, who called it "rosy," or he might have won a complete victory on the spot. As it was, he found no support for his contention that the ocean was pink, but he was able to throw considerable doubt on his teacher's contention that it was blue. Some authorities called it green or gray. The argument was practically a draw. Rex struggled vainly for years to find out what color the ocean really was. The classical writers are on every side of the question; they call the ocean, among other things, pale, dark, bright, emerald, violet, amber, silver, lead-colored, iron-bosomed, wine-dark, and dragon-green. Tired of getting the run-around from literature, Rex planned to settle the matter once and for all by seeing the ocean for himself. It was twelve years, however, before he made a first-hand investigation. Learning that there was a naval recruiting station in Pittsburg, Kansas, he wrote home from Lawrence that he was going to join the Navy, instead of entering the university.

Rex's parents were disappointed, but they did not try to stand in his way. They held the Quaker doctrine that everyone should be allowed to lead his own life. At the recruiting station, the medical examiner objected to Rex's tonsils and said he couldn't join the Navy until they were out. Rex had only two dollars, but he found a young Pittsburg doctor who was willing to perform the tonsillectomy at a bargain rate. There was no operating room available. The local barber, as a courtesy from one professional man to another, let the doctor use one of his chairs during a lull in business. It was a gorier bit of surgery than the barber had anticipated. He remonstrated with the patient for bleeding unreasonably and asked him to go away. Rex felt too sick to leave; he had barely strength enough left to point out the fallacy of the barber's position in sanctioning the operation but not the consequences. "I'll give you two bits

to go away," said the barber. Rex rallied sufficiently to accept the offer. After lying down awhile in a vacant lot, he went around to the recruiting office, where he was accepted.

Rex was placed on board a train for New York that night with sixteen or seventeen coal passers who had joined the Navy in Pittsburg. Being the only man in the outfit who could read and write English, he was put in charge of the expedition. He was entrusted with the coupons that were used to pay for meals. Each man was allotted seventy-five cents in coupons for dinner. "Are you the officer?" asked the steward of the diner. "Yes," said Rex. "Then you don't have to bother about that seventy-five-cent limit. You can have anything you want, free," the steward said, handing him an old-fashioned gold-embossed menu, with page after page of the high-sounding rhetoric of gastronomy. For years, Rex had feasted mentally on the enchanted food he had read about in novels of high life. He was already a literary, or theoretical, gourmet, with a highly educated imagination and an illiterate palate. In the diner, he was confronted for the first time with a genuine à-la-carte menu, with a gorgeous catalogue of dishes named in honor of royalty and nobility, great actresses, celebrated chefs, and improper women of court memoirs. His book learning had come to life. He ordered a meal named after some of the biggest people in history. But in his exhilaration over becoming a commanding officer and a gastronome all at once, he had forgotten about his throat. At the first taste of food, he was in agony. He couldn't swallow at all. He went back to his berth and cried bitterly.

Arriving at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, Rex was sent to the school for yeomen to learn Navy bookkeeping. Always a whirlwind at figures, he quickly finished his course and then was called on to aid in revising the curriculum of the school for yeomen. After that, for meritorious paperwork at the Navy Yard, he was assigned to the distinguished post of yeoman on the President's yacht, the Mayflower. In the Navy, he sought without success to solve the old puzzle about the complexion of the ocean. The first time he gazed at the Atlantic, he found that all the authorities were wrong. It was mud-colored near shore, rusty-looking farther out, and a kind of gun metal in the distance. Later, from the deck of the Mayflower, he saw blues and greens and a bewildering variety of other hues and tints. The question was as debatable

on the high seas as it had been on the prairies.

It was a satisfying sensation to be Yeoman Stout of the Mayflower. For years, he had dreamed of mixing with moderately grand people, but he had never expected to find himself yachting with Theodore Roosevelt, Cabinet members, diplomats, and ladies of the Presidential circle. The inconvenient side of the thing was the harsh discipline. Fearful that any laxity would make a bad impression on T. R. and his official family, the officers of the Mayflower were martinets. Stout received a terrific reprimand because, during a review of naval maneuvers off Cuba, Kermit Roosevelt snatched the silk hat from his father's head and crammed it over the President's ear at a Bowery angle. It was nowhere stated in the articles of war that Yeoman Stout was responsible for the young Roosevelts, but somebody had to be reprimanded, and it fell to him. The excessive discipline on the Mayflower produced one picturesque protest—the great monkey conspiracy. Resolving to show that they couldn't be pushed around too much, half the members of the crew returned to the yacht at a Caribbean port with monkeys concealed under their jackets, and let them loose—eighty of them—all at once. It took ten acrobatic hours to bag them, and the officers talked of reviving the cat-o'-nine-tails and keelhauling, but they finally decided that it was wiser to forget the incident. Another time, the sailors and petty officers felt certain that they were in for a long period of savage discipline. A Shakespearean-and-burlesque actor who had joined the Navy to cure his alcoholism fell off the water wagon on the day of the Mayflower crew's own annual Gridiron Club entertainment for the President. He mimicked T. R.'s peculiar speech, exaggerated the Taft waddle, and caricatured the whole Cabinet. The crew members were horrified at the outrage to national dignity. T. R. and his guests laughed heartily, all apparently suffering from the public man's deadly fear of being suspected of lacking a sense of humor. Stout saw T. R.'s composure ruffled only twice—once when a drunken sailor broke in upon an important midnight conference to present him with a pig that had been smuggled aboard, and once when a Cabinet member, after a few highballs, started to amuse himself by endorsing ladies of the White House set with surreptitious little pats and pinches.

Rex had the distinction of being wounded in action at a time when the

United States was at profound peace with the world. On a foraging expedition into the interior of Santo Domingo, during a languid civil war in that country, one of Rex's companions tried out a few new Spanish insults on some insurgents who were taking their ease in a ravine below a road. The insults made no impression, so he dropped a bunch of green bananas on them. Rifles began to crackle, and Rex caught a bullet in the calf of one leg. He was in considerably greater peril on another occasion, when a companion who had heard that flamingos brought enormous prices in New York zoos induced him to lie in ambush under burlap in shallow water, in order to collect a few. Stout grabbed a flamingo by a leg. Having one set of claws free, the bird cut deep gashes in the Yeoman's face and flew away. Experts said that it was pure luck that Rex had been able to seize only one leg, since if he had seized both of them, the huge bird would have attacked his eyes with its bill.

The most agonizing moments Rex had during his service in the Navy came at a race track in Maryland. On an inside tip, the crew of the Mayflower had raised eleven hundred dollars to bet on a long shot in a steeplechase, and Yeoman Stout was sent to the track with the money. Winnings of eleven thousand dollars were to be collected on the horse if he won. But before the race Stout received new inside information. He was told that the horse was not as good as represented. He decided not to risk the eleven hundred dollars. The Mayflower's choice jumped into the lead at the start and ran far ahead of the field. Rex suddenly realized the plight he would be in if he came back to the yacht with eleven hundred dollars saved instead of eleven thousand dollars won. He had terrifying visions of what his comrades would think of him and what they would do to him. In a few harrowing seconds, he learned more than the Harvard Law School could have taught him in four years about the principles that should govern a man acting in a fiduciary capacity. The horse fell and broke his leg at the last barrier. The Mayflower men received their money back with joyful surprise, but for months Stout shuddered every time the race was mentioned.

Rex had enlisted for four years. He had expected to check up on his literary impressions of the six continents and the seven seas, and he grew discontented with the little White House picnics on the Potomac and in the Caribbean. He was disgruntled for another rea-

son. The Navy was no place for a logician. His career as a fallacy-detector had terminated on the day he joined the Mayflower. His immediate superior on the yacht was the most disorganized thinker he had ever encountered. He never opened his mouth without begging a question, arguing in a circle, or uttering non sequiturs. Yet Rex could do nothing but grin and bear it. In 1908, it was possible for an enlisted man in his second year to buy his discharge by paying the Navy two months' pay, and after two years Rex quit the Navy, in order to see the world and say what he liked.

—ALVA JOHNSTON

(This is the first of two articles on Mr. Stout.)

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THERE'LL ALWAYS BE AN ISLAND

Once more, once more to these resorts
we turn our steps, and nothing alters:
the little backsides in their shorts,
the little bosoms in their halters.

Once more, for four refreshing weeks,
we watch the playful upper brackets:
the ladies looking for antiques,
the brown old men with tennis rackets.

A siren from an ancient prow
outside a teashop stares and wobbles
as through the town, with puckered brow,
I steer the car among the cobbles.

The houses, with their widows' walks,
where wives looked out for captains whaling,
provide a thrill for him who gawks
at history from the sidewalk railing.

Once more, once more to these abodes
we come (it must be to our liking)
where down the middles of the roads
the giddy little girls go biking.

We lift wet fingers to the wind
and choose our beach by surf and tide-rate,
then, bitten, scorched, and oily-skinned,
we lunch on sand and carbohydrate.

Again we sojourn, I and mine,
to cast our annual load of worry
by sniffing salt and iodine
and jouncing in a fringe-top surrey.

Next year, I'll plead some other spot.
I'll argue that it's time to chuck it.
My menfolk will exclaim, "What rot!"
And where d'ya think we'll go? Nantucket.

—DILYS BENNETT LAING

Rex Stout

PROFILES

ALIAS NERO WOLFE—II

OLD Nero Wolfe, the fat, sedentary detective invented by Rex Stout, is an interesting fellow because the author is an interesting fellow. Nero has a certain resemblance to Ajeeb, the sensation of the eighteen-nineties. Ajeeb was a sedentary colossus who beat all comers at chess. He was thrown open from time to time so that the public could peer into his interior and convince itself that his genius consisted solely of springs and wheels, gears and wires. But in spite of every appearance of being an honest, clean-living machine, Ajeeb had a guilty secret. He had a little man concealed about his clockwork person, the little man being the Great Pillsbury, one of the chess masters of the period. The Great Pillsbury had an undersized, jackknife physique and could be folded up and tucked out of sight, on the principle of the magician's trick of sawing a woman in two. The colossal Nero Wolfe is like Ajeeb in that he gives the impression of being a completely independent identity but actually has Stout concealed about his person all the time. Nero is a unique personality because Stout is. Nero is odd and a trifle grotesque because he has all the foibles and peculiarities of the man inside of him. Nero can tackle a problem from forty angles because Stout is a man of forty occupations, avocations, and hobbies. The fat detective can't help being a knowing and versatile operator, since he gets his stuff from the variegated experience of the author, who has been, among other things, banker, barker, bookworm, bookkeeper, yeoman on the Presidential yacht Mayflower, boss of three thousand writers of propaganda in World War II, gentleman farmer and dirt farmer, big businessman, cigar salesman, pueblo guide, hotel manager, architect, cabinetmaker, pulp and slick magazine writer, propagandist for world government, crow trainer, jumping-pig trainer, mammoth-pumpkin grower, conversationalist, politician, orator, potted-plant wizard, gastronome, musical amateur, president of the Authors' Guild, usher, ostler, and pamphleteer.

Stout was nineteen years old and just emerging from the bookworm stage when, in 1906, he first saw New York, the future theatre of Nero Wolfe's operations. As a boy in Kansas, he had read and reread books by the thousands. At nineteen, he became dissatisfied with his typographical acquaintance with the world and joined the Navy to check up on his booklearning. On his first leave from the Brooklyn Navy Yard, he checked on the Great White Way, and found that it was just as represented. Saturated with reading, he could hardly distinguish an experience from a literary allusion, and as he strolled up Broadway, he got himself slightly mixed up with Balzac's character Lucien de Rubempré, the hero of "Lost Illusions." He was partly Rex Stout entering New York and partly Lucien de Rubempré entering Paris. He couldn't quite ferment himself into the wild emotions of the Balzac man, but as he walked into Times Square, he was conscious of at least a subdued excitement and a modest sense of ownership. That was forty-three years ago, and he still has the same enthusiasm for New York and an obscure sense that the place belongs to him by right of discovery and exploration. In his first prolonged stay in New York, he began systematically testing literary impressions against actual experience. He went to the Philharmonic to investigate the statements he had read in a biography of Beethoven—a book that had given him an appetite for classical music before he knew what it sounded like. He then went to the Met to see how the real thing compared with what he had read about opera. In his opinion, the books were vindicated all along the line. From a musical ignoramus, he became a Toscanini and Caruso fan overnight. Later on, he got a chance to go regularly to the Philharmonic and the opera, and for one stretch of three years he never missed an appearance of either Toscanini or Caruso. He became so taken with music that he hired a vocal teacher, and would have gone in for a singing career except that his voice had gaps in it.

After leaving the Navy, in 1908, Stout answered want ads in New York papers and got a position as bookkeeper for *Pharmaceutical Era and Soda Fountain*, at eighteen dollars a week. Finding that the magazine's advertising man made eighty dollars a week in commissions, Stout hustled for advertising in his spare time and increased his income considerably, but this was discovered by the regular adman, who regarded it as the blackest event since the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre. It seemed to him that when such things were tolerated, anarchy was just around the corner. He demanded to know where *Pharmaceutical Era and Soda Fountain* stood. *Pharmaceutical Era and Soda Fountain* stood for the established order, and the new bookkeeper was thrown out on his ear.

Still eager to check the books against the facts, Stout spent the next four years roaming around the country, seeing the places he had read about and testing out the statements of literature. It was the day of the tramp printer and the tramp reporter; Stout was more of a rarity—a tramp bookkeeper. With an instinct for figures and a Navy training in accounts, his brain power multiplied whenever he found himself perched on a high stool. Once, when he had a thirty-dollar-a-month job checking over transfers and conductors' reports for a Cleveland street-railway company, he went to his boss and said, "There are six of us getting a total of a hundred and eighty dollars a month for this work. If I do it alone, will you double my salary?" The answer was yes. Stout did six men's work with ease. It had been the practice to mix up all the transfers and reports and use six men to straighten them out. Stout's stroke of genius was the conception that if they were not mixed up in the first place, it wouldn't take six men to straighten them out. But he didn't profit from his inspiration. The five discharged bookkeepers waylaid him in the dark and beat him up, and he was afraid to go back to the office. He became a salesman for Louis Klein, the owner of a chain of cigar stores in Cleveland. Klein liked satisfied, happy

employees. He told Stout to help himself to the cigars and smoke all he felt like. What Klein didn't know was that Stout, while on the Mayflower, had cultivated a taste for sixty-cent cigars, which he bought for a dime in Havana. The new employee smoked Klein's choicest brands incessantly. When an inventory was taken at the end of the month, it looked as if the store had been sacked by an invading army. Klein called the new employee on the carpet. Stout, a skilled reasoner, completely discomfited his boss in a verbal fencing match. He won the argument but lost the job. Klein was willing to overlook the onslaught on his Coronas but not on his logic. Stout was puzzled by the experience. With his orderly mind, it was hard for him to understand how the conclusion could go against him when the major and minor premises were in his favor.

Quitting Cleveland, Stout became an Indian-basket salesman in Albuquerque, a guide to the Indian pueblos near Santa Fe, a barker for a sightseeing bus in Colorado Springs, a bookstore salesman in Indianapolis, Milwaukee, and Chicago, a stable hand at Durland's Riding Academy in New York, and a bookkeeper in various cities. He never at any time in his life saw a set of books that didn't, in his opinion, need immediate reorganization. During one stay in New York, he made friends with some people who were so impressed by his eloquence on the prevalence of bad accounting systems and other bad business methods that they made him the manager of a hotel. He reorganized the hotel's accounting system but disorganized the rest of the establishment. Within a week, he was looking for another job.

Throughout the knockabout part of his career, Stout dipped into journalism only once. One day, in New York, he was just about down to his last nickel when he happened to pass a shopwindow with a display of books on palmistry. A little later, he read in a newspaper that two important visitors were in New York—William Howard Taft, then the Republican nominee for President, and Tom L. Johnson, the famous mayor of Cleveland and a Democratic hope for the Presidency. Stout hurried down to the World Building and sold the Sunday editor on an idea for an article illustrated by the palm prints of the two men and calculating their White House chances from a scientific analysis of the lines of their hands. Going to the Hotel Manhattan, Stout telephoned to Taft's suite that former Yeoman Stout, of the Mayflower, wanted to see him on a matter of urgency. He was admitted at once. Taft, always ready to give his No. 20 shirt to an old acquaintance, immediately pressed his enormous palm on a piece of paper that Stout had coated black with camphor smoke. Taft was so eager to be of service that he persuaded everybody else in the suite to furnish a palm print. His helpfulness nearly ruined Stout, who had gone broke buying camphor and paper for the enterprise, and it was with difficulty that one sheet, needed for Tom Johnson's palm, was rescued. The Cleveland man, equally affable, also allowed himself to be palm-printed. With the help of a twenty-five-cent book on palmistry, Stout wrote the Sunday article and collected two hundred dollars for it—a remarkable price for a Sunday article in those days.

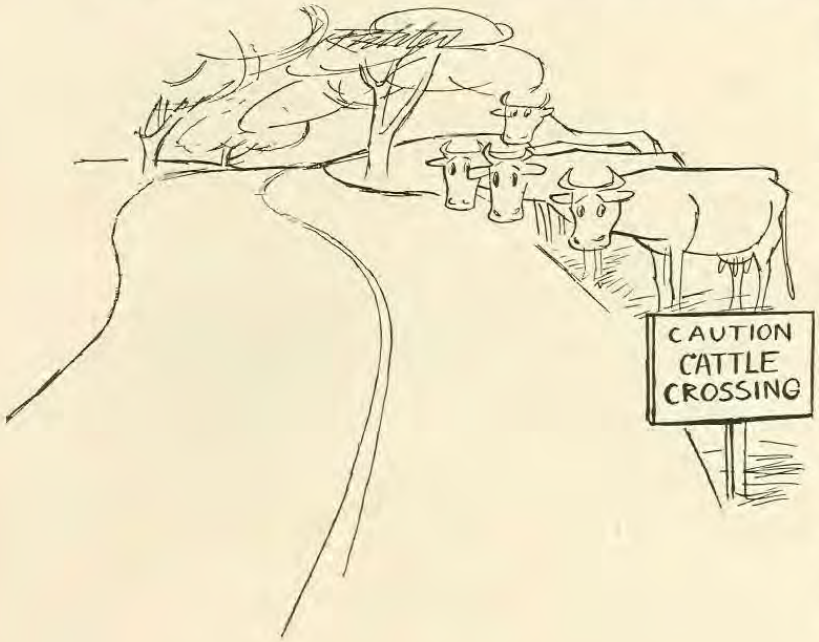
IN 1912, Stout decided to be a magazine writer. The same thought has occurred to millions. About one in a thousand has, after painful struggles, succeeded. Stout is among the rare exceptions who hit the bull's-eye at the first shot. *All-Story* bought his first tale, "Their Lady," a variation of the standard legend about a bunch of wise Broadway muggs who launch a manicure girl on a sensational career. Settling down in a cheap room in Burlington, Vermont, Stout spent the winter of 1912-13 grinding out fiction. Everything he wrote was accepted, including an eighty-thousand-word novel about a mining engineer who, in exploring an ancient mine in Peru, had bloodcurdling adventures with a fierce tribe of Incas living in a strange country a couple of miles underground. After saving up a few thousand dollars, Stout came to New York to spend it. As soon as he was broke, he began pounding the typewriter again, turning out as many as twenty-five thousand words a week, at two or two and a half cents a word. But his spending capacity instantly caught up with every increase in his earning capacity.

At the end of four years, Stout was dissatisfied with both the quality of his fiction and the size of his income. The idea occurred to him that an author ought to be endowed with a substantial

"You used 'between the Scylla of unbelief and the Charybdis of bigotry' three weeks ago."

fortune, so that he could escape from the literary treadmill and use his leisure for serious work. It was perfectly clear that if he was to have such an endowment, he would have to endow himself. He decided to acquire a business, make two hundred thousand dollars, and then devote himself to writing. It is a widely held doctrine that businessmen have no intelligence and that literary men and artists could all become millionaires if they would abandon their ornate minds to the sordid games of commerce. There are, however, some who hold the contrary, and even go so far as to assert that businessmen are smart and that America is great industrially and inferior artistically because business gets the cream of the talent while literature gets the skim milk. Stout's experience is a valuable contribution to this controversy. He resoundingly vindicated the writers and artists. He proved that a literary man can invent a big, profitable business on short notice and salt away a fortune.

The basic process by which Stout thought up a lucrative business is extremely simple and is open to anybody who has a few minutes to spare. It is the same kind of mental operation that is involved in playing parlor games and solving bar tricks. Stout had one important advantage. Like Nero Wolfe, he has complete confidence in his ability to accomplish anything that he undertakes. He was certain that the problem of acquiring wealth presented no real difficulty; he looked on it as merely a matter of getting out a road map and picking the royal road to riches. He fooled away some time in a couple of bypaths before he located the king's highway. Coming from a family of educators, he had long had a vague notion of starting a boys' school—a work-and-play shop in which education would spring incidentally out of tools, toys, games, and other diverting objects. Languages would be taught from things seen and handled. The teacher would produce a newly baked loaf and start an argument as to whether we were justified in calling it "bread" or whether the French were better advised in calling it "*pain*." The Shakespeare course was to begin with a broad treatment of the interesting subject of murder, using the corking homicides in "Hamlet" and "Macbeth" to illustrate it. As the great verse would be part of the crime background instead of a classroom chore, Stout hoped to bypass the almost universal prejudice against poetry among high-school and college students. But when he took a good look at the school project he saw that it was no short cut to wealth. He dismissed a couple of other possibilities for the same reason. Then he attacked the problem in a fundamental way. The thing that he needed was a business that would net at least forty thousand dollars a year, to enable him to save two hundred thousand dollars in what he considered a reasonable length of time. He counted up all the money he had—between forty and fifty dollars. These statistics gave him a practical grasp of his problem. It was a matter of creating an immensely profitable business without capital or credit. He paused briefly, hoping that an idea for reaping a golden harvest without sowing it would come to him by spontaneous inspiration. But it wasn't as easy as that. He saw that it would take a lot of thinking to arrive at a formula for inducing huge quantities of money to roll out of a vacuum. Then he suddenly hit on the basic process of inventing a business—it is the simple matter of taking the broad principles of commercial success and focussing them on a particular objective.



Stout worked the thing out by a cross-examination of himself, the interrogation proceeding in this fashion:

Q. What is the best way to make money?

A. Selling things.

Q. Who are the best people to sell things to?

A. People who always have money.

Q. What people always have money?

A. Bankers.

Q. What things can you sell to bankers?

Stout had been able to answer the first three questions right off the bat. The fourth stumped him for a minute or two. He was sure that all bankers needed to have their accounting systems reorganized, but on the spur of the moment he couldn't think of any way to get past the office boys in order to sell bankers improved accounting systems. He mulled over the question for a while. There was an annoying *x* factor in the problem; he had to sell the bankers an enormous amount of an unknown something that he didn't possess. Finally, he brightened up and answered, "I can sell them depositors." In chance conversations, he had heard educators deploring the failure of public schools to teach thrift to children. "I'll sell them child depositors!" exclaimed Stout to himself. That completed the plot. The rest was merely mopping up.

Stout became the Pied Piper of thrift, and rounded up more than two million child depositors. The only catch was that the plan was not self-executing. It required time, patience, and pottering around with detail. The great selling point of the project was the word "thrift." The year was 1916, and "thrift" was still a magical word in the land. Stout's idea was to symbolize thrift with what he called Bank Day, on which, each week, the children would have a period of fifteen minutes

when they could deposit pennies, other small change, or dollars with their teachers and have them solemnly written down in Stout's copyrighted bankbook. He offered the schools what would today be called a package deal—the teaching of thrift, responsibility, self-denial, and the decimal system, all in a lump. He chose Albion and Perry, two villages in western New York State, for his first experiments. The key man was the school principal. In each place, the principal was enthusiastic. The plan then had to be sold to the members of the school boards. They were equally enthusiastic. With official authorization, Stout next approached the bankers. He had developed elaborate arguments to use on them. He anticipated that they would be horrified at the notion of having their books messed up with hundreds of penny savings accounts. The first banker listened coldly for a time and then abruptly said, "I'll sign right now." The second banker also jumped at the idea. Nearly all the bankers who were later approached responded in the same way. Stout soon discovered why. The president of the First National, for example, would suddenly say to himself, "If I don't grab this idea, the cutthroats of the People's Bank, across the street, will." Stout's deal with the bankers provided that he was to be paid so much per child per year; in return, he had to furnish the children and the bankbooks. He was a trifle embarrassed because he was short of money, but, having the contracts with the bankers in hand, he had no trouble inducing a printer to turn out the books on credit. After the first joyous Bank Day, he got his money and started introducing his system in other places.

For a year or two, Stout handled most of the work personally. Every time the thrift system was installed, the students were called into assembly to learn about Bank Day from Stout. There was a ritual that went as follows:

STOUT: Now, children, if you put a dollar in a tin can and bury it in the ground, how much money will be there at the end of a year?

CHILDREN: One dollar.

STOUT: That's exactly right. But now, children, if you put a dollar in the bank, how much will there be at the end of the year?

CHILDREN: One dollar.

STOUT: No, children. One dollar *and four cents.*

After letting that sink in, Stout gave a little talk on the breeding habits of capital and the sublime mysteries of simple and compound interest. As a lawyer aims his summing up at one man on the jury, he would beam his startling statements at one alert-looking child. In the course of hundreds of addresses, he got the worst of it only once, and that was from a red-headed boy in Pittsburgh, who kept repeating, "If you put a dollar in the bank, you'll never get it back," and could not be argued into modifying his opinion. Now and then, Stout ran into opposition from teachers. There was some muttering to the effect that the ideal of the pedagogical profession was to cultivate the intellect of America, and not to raise a generation of little misers. But generally there was wholehearted support from teachers, parents, and bankers. In 1917, Stout volunteered to let the government use his system as a medium of selling war-savings stamps to school children, and for two years he ran it on a non-profit basis. After the war, the enterprise became a huge moneymaker for him. It demanded incessant attention, and for more than a decade Stout had no time for literature. There was a big thrift honeymoon in every school when the system was introduced, but the passion for hoarding pennies, nickels, and dimes tended to languish unless constantly stimulated. It was a ceaseless battle to prevent principals from cutting down or abolishing the fifteen-minute period of school time set aside for Bank Day. There are thousands of people who have schemes for making children learned or cultured in fifteen minutes, and they were always trying to steal the thrift system's time. Debacles occurred. In one school, the deposits dropped to nothing. It had been discovered that a bank clerk had made a mistake. He had entered a dollar deposit as a ten-cent deposit, and this caused children, parents, and teachers to believe everything they had heard of the wolves of Wall Street and the tigers of frenzied finance. Formidable competition arose. Other promoters were quick to see the merits of a system that could be launched without a cent of investment, and new organizations began hustling to build the characters of children and snatch millions out of a silk hat. Stout prospered, in spite of everything. The sum of two hundred thousand dollars did not look so big during the boom years, and he raised his sights to four hundred thousand. By 1927, he had piled his savings up to that figure, so he turned his business over to some of his associates, re-

tired from banking, and took up writing again.

STOUT has since interrupted his writing career twice—once when he took nine months out, in 1930, to build High Meadow, a dream house in Fairfield County, Connecticut, and again, between 1938 and 1946, when he devoted himself to propaganda work. Before 1938, he had been interested mainly in his own career, but the Munich episode got him excited about the perils to civilization, and he began to write and make speeches for preparedness, and, later on, lend-lease, the draft, and the war effort. He edited a book, "The Illustrious Dunderheads," which reviewed the records of isolationists and anti-preparedness members of Congress. He was chairman of the Writers' War Board from 1941 to 1946. In this position, he had to take the lead in coördinating the efforts of hundreds of more or less temperamental literary people, and he won praise for his tact, industry, and common sense. He was elected president of the Authors' Guild in 1943, and served for two years. Nero Wolfe vanished for the rest of the war, and he has appeared in print infrequently since, because of Stout's absorption in the work of putting out propaganda for world federation.

Nero Wolfe is a mountain mover, but none of his exploits equals Stout's performance in building High Meadow. During a vacation on the Mediterranean, Stout saw the palace of the Bey of Tunis and decided that he wanted something like it for a home. He made plywood models of a Moorish-modernistic edifice—a fortress with a glass front. He picked a site near Danbury with an elevation of exactly one thousand feet, according to the Geodetic Survey. From it you can look over several ranges of hills to Maxwell Anderson's High Tor and to other landmarks, forty-five miles distant, on the west bank of the Hudson. Stout's equipment at the beginning of the project consisted of only a slight knowledge of carpenter's tools, acquired, when he was a farm boy in Kansas, from his grandfather. To make sure that the especially thick walls of his house were constructed of the best possible concrete, he studied cement mixing and pouring, and directly supervised the work himself. He wouldn't hire men who had ever worked for contractors, fearing that they might have picked up short cuts and the just-as-good attitude. He built the house mainly with labor recruited from local farms. To assist him

in some extremely careful work on the interior, he employed an actor. He taught himself cabinetmaking, and one of his hobbies today is the construction of perfectionistic household furniture. High Meadow cost forty thousand dollars, and it looks as if it cost many times that amount. A large section of the ground floor of one wing is Stout's workshop. Above it is the studio of his wife, Pola Stout, who is an artist, a designer of fine textiles, and the operator of a small mill of her own in Philadelphia, which produces cloth. They were married in 1932 and have two children—Barbara and Rebecca. Stout is accountant for and adviser to the Pola Stout enterprise; the Pola Stout enterprise has reciprocated by furnishing the background for the latest Nero Wolfe book.

SOON after Stout retired from business, he wrote "How Like a God," "Seed on the Wind," and other serious novels. Some critics regarded them as notable productions, and they sold moderately well, but the retired thrift magnate's resumption of writing was not exactly a red-letter day in the history of literature. He may have been wrong in thinking that prose improves when it has capital behind it. The old theory is that literature flourishes best at or below the subsistence level; according to Rosebery, half the world's good literature has been produced by duns. Stout became a bigger figure on the popular literary map after his bonds took a lugubrious dive during the depression. He then needed to make literature pay. Starting in 1934, with "Fer-de-Lance," the first Nero Wolfe story, he began to sell the public goose pimples and death rattles, creeps and chuckles, the painful and the sunny side of murder, the blinding flashes of infallibility and then the sudden clarification of the whole razzle-dazzle and bamboozlement. Stout never bothered to read up on criminology or detective science. He avoids fantastic contrivances for taking life and strings along with the wisdom of the people, using the simple death-dealing ways that have the stamp of approval of experienced journeymen murderers—knives, bullets, blunt instruments, and ordinary poisons. He likes good old arsenic, the king of inheritance powders. Stout's adviser on poisons is his family doctor. There is no scent of the crime laboratory about Nero Wolfe. Like Lawyer Bohun, he specializes merely in being right when others are wrong. When Stout started writing mysteries, he had no idea of patterning his fat detective after himself. The autobiographical note came in unexpectedly. Even today, Stout will not admit that he and Nero Wolfe are identical twins.

Nero lives in a brownstone house on West Thirty-fifth Street, near the Hudson River. The roof is a hothouse, where he spends four hours a day cultivating orchids. Stout is a nature lover, so Nero has to be one, too. As the detective is too fat and lazy to leave his house, nature has to be brought to him. Nero's hobby is the counterpart of a long chapter of natural history in Stout's life. He started as a bird-nest investigator and amateur ornithologist in Kansas. One of his early feats was raising a giant white owl in the kitchen, in spite of its habit of sinking its beak into members of the Stout family. Later, he raised a jumping pig, which had been given to him as a present because it was an undesirable freak, its hind legs being of such exceptional length that it seemed like a cross between a pig and a kangaroo. It jumped higher every time Stout built its pen higher. In time, it grew famous for clearing barriers and was exhibited at the Kansas State Fair. Farmers were not enthusiastic about the possibilities of the new breed. They didn't care to raise livestock that vaulted over fences. But a travelling showman paid twenty dollars for the athletic animal—one of the highest prices ever paid in that era for a young Kansas pig. After leaving the Middle West, Stout had little chance to settle down and enjoy nature until the twenties, when his thrift system was running so well that he could have three-month vacations. Every summer for several years, accompanied by a couple of cowboys, he took a train of twenty pack horses to a spot on the Flathead River, near the Whitefish range of Montana. Isolated from newspapers and mail, he spent his vacation fishing, reading, and walking. After settling at Danbury, he tackled nature in a specialized way. He became a crow trainer, domesticating and educating young ones every spring. They perch on his table and breakfast with him. His most brilliant pupil was a contemplative young bird named Hamlet. It had unusually long feathers behind the ears and could be identified at a great distance. When it was soaring high in the air, Stout would shout "Hamlet," and it would spiral down and light on his shoul-

der. A touch on the beak is the only discipline a crow needs, and a few touches are enough to make a crow understand that it is not to eat Stout's bacon and eggs but only the bits of toast on its own plate, or to cure it of the habit of dipping its long beak into highball glasses. Stout once found Hamlet eating corn as it was being sown. A few touches on the beak stopped that. Later, Stout found Hamlet, wings belligerently outspread, dashing at other crows and driving them away from the newly sown patch. One day, when Stout's father was visiting in Danbury, the old gentleman, who had just sat down for breakfast, shouted for help. Four half-grown crows had descended on him, flapping their wings at him and apparently resenting the fact that he had taken a seat at his son's table. Stout made the proper introductions, and everything was all right from then on. Every November, wild crows come around cawing furiously at Stout's tame crows. After a few days of heated debate, the tame crows always join the wild ones and fly away, never to return.

Nero occasionally captures awards at flower shows for his orchids. Stout has taken blue ribbons at the Danbury Fair for giant pumpkins and strawberries. Some of his horticultural methods are questionable, but they seem to be within the law. Dog shows ban the use of belladonna to brighten the eyes of the entries; flower shows have condemned the dyeing of petals; stock shows prohibit the "unethical fitting of cattle," which is the process of injecting paraffin under the hide in order to add massiveness to their figures; but there is no code of morals for pumpkin raising. Stout's first maneuver is to pinch off all blossoms but one from a pumpkin vine, so that the plant will concentrate its energies on producing one super-pumpkin. That is legitimate enough. But his next move is somewhat dubious. When the pumpkin is a little bigger than his fist, he makes an incision in the vine and inserts a lampwick. The other end of the wick is kept in a jug of milk and sugar. The pumpkin from then on is force fed in this manner. Stout's masterpiece attained a weight of two hundred and ten pounds and swept the field at the Danbury Fair. The mammoth vegetable was all wood and water, and quite uneatable, but it made an unsurpassable Halloween lantern. Stout took a blue ribbon with a strawberry, named Fairfax, that measured three inches in diameter. It was raised by a method that is not open to criticism. He pinched all but one of

the strawberry blossoms off the vine and kept the roots moistened with a fifty-gallon barrel of liquefied manure. He has raised many of these giant berries, and they are of fine flavor and texture. They are cut up into slices and eaten like steaks. Stout is also a specialist in giant peaches. The giant peach is produced by picking all the young peaches except one from a branch and then cutting a ring in the bark between the peach and the limb of the tree to which the branch is attached. Leaves serve a double purpose; they furnish nourishment to the growing fruit and to the branches, trunk, and roots of the tree. When the branch is ringed, no part of the nourishment can be carried back to the roots, and it is all concentrated on feeding the peach, which reaches a prodigious size. Stout has more than four hundred potted plants in his house, the star of the lot being a Miss Burdett-Coutts geranium. The Miss Burdett-Coutts refused to grow for a long time. Suddenly, it caused amazement in geranium circles by developing one branch with leaves of a size and coloration not at all like the delicate Miss Burdett-Coutts type. It was not a product of Stout's sophisticated horticultural methods. Experts say they have never seen anything like it. Stout has refused two hundred dollars for it.

In some respects, Nero Wolfe is not a literal transcription of the author. As a gourmet, Stout is an amateur. He couldn't eat in the same league with the detective. Stout weighs a hundred and fifty pounds and hasn't gained or lost a pound in thirty years—proof that he is only a platonic admirer of food, a respectful, rather than a passionate, eater. The two-hundred-and-eighty-two-pound Nero Wolfe represents what Stout might have achieved if he had had the courage of his gastronomic convictions. Nero is furious with himself in the fine epicurean mystery "Too Many Cooks" because he misidentifies one of the thirteen or fourteen flavors in a new French sauce. That side of Nero is a development of Stout's remorseful contemplation of the kind of man that he might have been if he had not wasted his life on business and writing. At the age of forty, Stout tried to become a distinguished eater. He spent a year or so in France doggedly eating famous food. For four consecutive days, he devoured beans at Castelnaudary, a village in the south of France noted for *cassoulet Castelnaudary*, which is an intricate bean dish. He consumed quantities of *tripe à la mode de Caen* and later caused Nero Wolfe to proclaim it to be one of the great dishes of the world.

He also caused Nero to state that the two important contributions of the United States to cookery are the Georgia ham and the chicken fed exclusively on blueberries. There is a certain amount of literary license in this remark. Only a handful of people have ever eaten blueberry-fed chicken, and these are personal friends of Stout's. On his Montana vacations, he became convinced that he had never tasted anything equal to young grouse that had fed on blueberries. Blueberries being plentiful near Danbury, Stout fed them to young chickens, with sensationally successful results. At current market prices for blueberries, chickens could be raised on the blueberry diet for about a hundred dollars a head. Part of the action of "Too Many Cooks" revolves about a priceless secret for making partridge sausage. The recipe was thought up by Stout. To preserve his literary integrity, he procured partridges beforehand, made sausages of them, and served them to guests. The sausages cost eighteen dollars apiece and aroused no great enthusiasm. Nero Wolfe fans assume that Stout is a great gourmet. When Stout visited France in 1944, on behalf of the Writers' War Board, one mess sergeant organized a wild-boar hunt to provide fare worthy of the author. The chef at a St. Louis hotel once sent out couriers at three o'clock in the morning to bring in newly caught catfish for Stout's breakfast. According to the author, channel cat is the second-finest fresh-water fish in this country, perch coming first and trout third.

Because magazine editors like variety, Stout has written mysteries around Tecumseh Fox, Alphabet Hicks, and other beagle hounds, but they haven't achieved the stature of Nero Wolfe. One of the best known of Stout's writings is a short piece entitled "Watson Was a Woman." Originally an impromptu talk delivered before the Baker Street Irregulars, it was elaborated into an essay and printed in the *Saturday Review of Literature*. It has since been translated into six languages. It was a literary bombshell—a beautiful marshalling of proof that Dr. Watson was not only a female but the lawfully wedded lady of Sherlock Holmes.

—Alva Johnston

(This is the second of two articles on Mr. Stout.)

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REVISED COEDS TO BE READY FOR DISTRIBUTION IN 1950

—*Billings (Mont.) Gazette.*

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