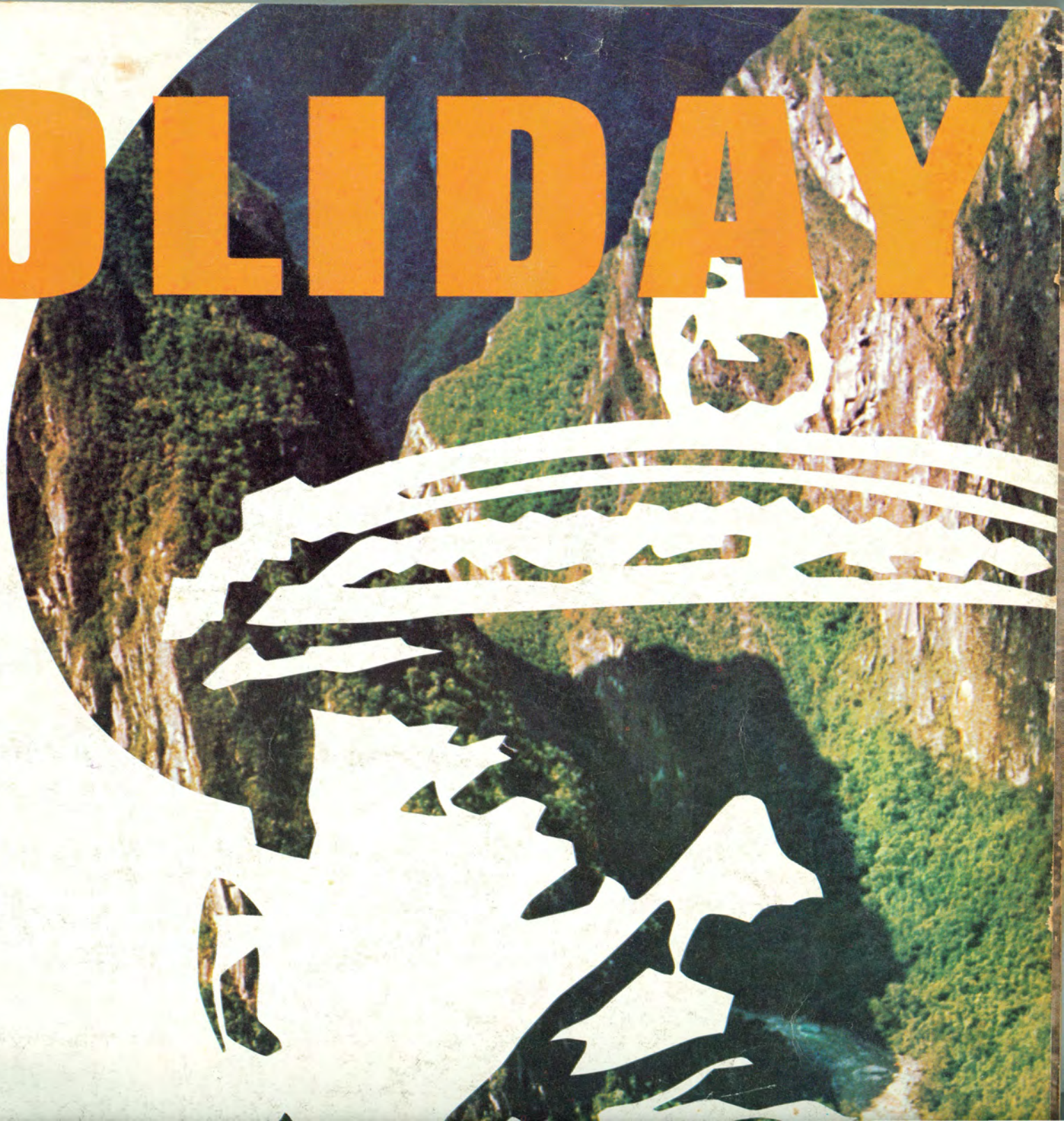
HOLIDAY

NOVEMBER 1969 75c



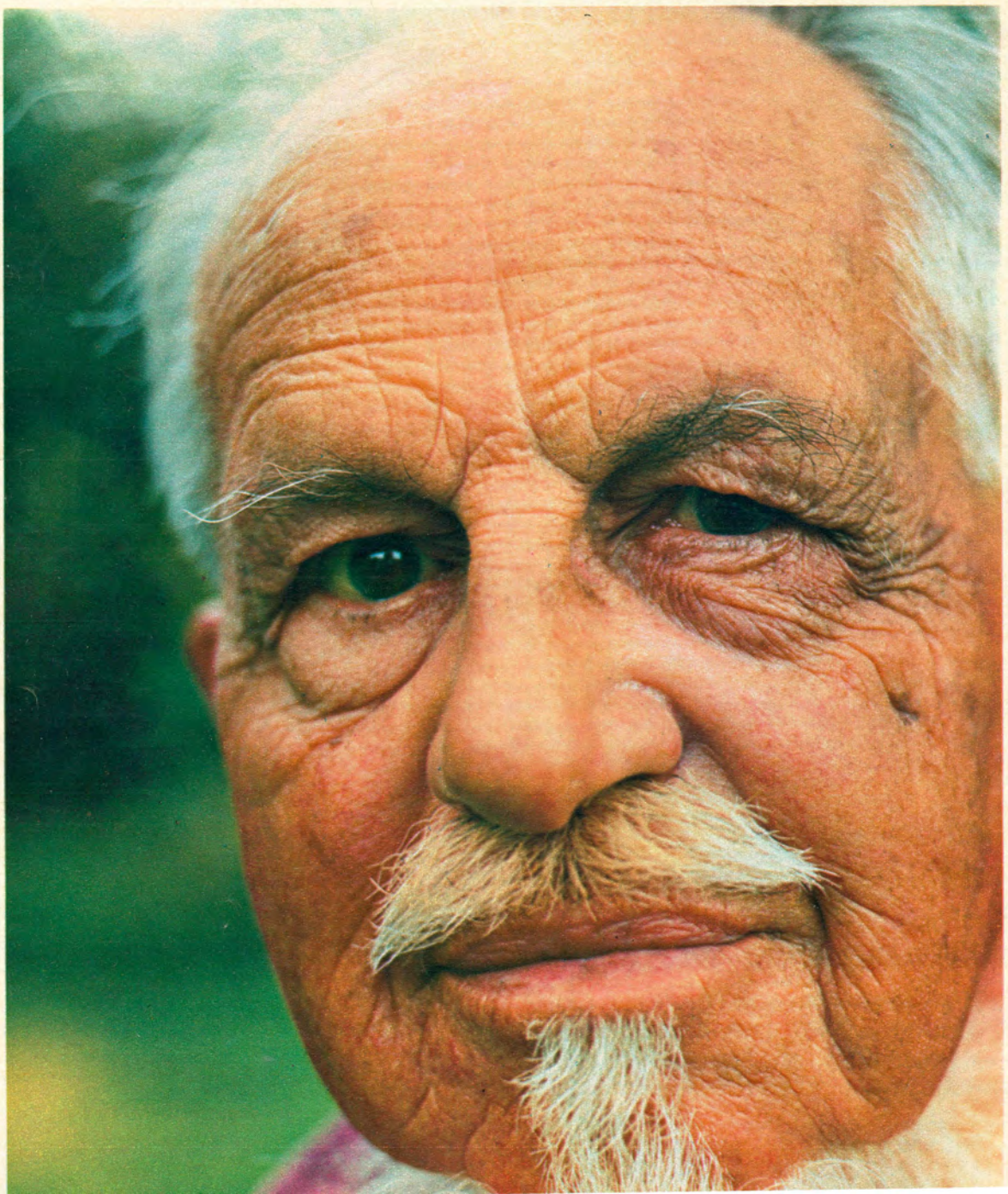
BEAUTIFUL COUNTRIES— UNPOPULAR GOVERNMENTS

CONVERSATION WITH

Rex Stout

"Excellent!" I (Dr. Watson) cried.
"Elementary," said he (Holmes).

by ALFRED BESTER



Edgar Allan Poe started it all with Auguste Dupin, who solved *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* and located *The Purloined Letter.* The mystery story was born and, more importantly, the detective hero was invented. Mystery writers soon discovered that although puzzles intrigued readers, the people who solved them were the main attraction.

Hundreds of popular detective characters have been created: Nick Carter, Philo Vance, Charlie Chan, Miss Marple, Philip Marlowe, Sam Spade, Hercule Poirot, Ellery Queen, Inspector Maigret. And please, no arguments. I admit that there are many others equally popular. But two alone tower over all the rest: the immortal Sherlock Holmes and the all-too-mortal Nero Wolfe.

Readers around the world know Wolfe and his obstinate habits as intimately as The Baker Street Irregulars know Holmes. One seventh of a ton of intransigence, tart and thorny, a confirmed misogynist, immured (except on extraordinary occasions) in his old brownstone house on West 35th Street in New York City, a thousand rare orchids in the greenhouse on his roof, a thousand books in his office, a *chef extraordinaire* in his kitchen, and Archie Goodwin for his confidential assistant.

meetings in New York and chat with him afterwards. He has a massive calm, is dedicated to his craft and fellow craftsmen, is cool toward publishers and agents, and quietly angry with the U.S.S.R., which has pirated him and so many of his colleagues.

He dislikes coming to Manhattan and prefers to stay home in Brewster, New York, where he owns a hill overlooking miles of countryside. He makes a quaint sight pacing slowly through the elaborate gardens, rake or hoe in hand, amusedly surveying his flowers, arbors and fruit trees, wondering what to do with the old swimming pool that has been dry since his two daughters married and left home. He told me, rather proudly, that he'd just become a grandfather for the fifth time.

He sits in a deep chair in the old-fashioned *avant garde* modern home that he designed and built himself in the 1930's. There is a sunken living room, with an off-center fireplace, Rockwell Kent paintings on the walls, and large windows overlooking the countryside. There's a good working kitchen but nothing elaborate. Upstairs the house is a mishmash of corridors and bedrooms and studies (a large one for his wife, a small one for himself). The exterior is painted a rather unpleasant blue-green.

It's Archie who narrates the stories in a typical New York style, even though he was born and raised in Ohio: hip, tough, witty, cocky and yet often as perceptive and intuitive as a woman. And he can be a perfect bitch with Wolfe. In *And Be A Villain* there is an exchange between Wolfe and Archie that typifies them and their colorful relationship. Archie becomes exasperated with Wolfe, as usual, glares at him and says, "I resign as of now. You are simply too conceited, too eccentric and too fat to work for."

"Archie, sit down."

"No."

"Yes. I am no fatter than I was five years ago. I am considerably more conceited, but so are you, and why the devil shouldn't we be? Some day there will be a crisis; either you'll get insufferable and I'll fire you, or I'll get insufferable and you'll quit. But this isn't the day and you know it."

Thirty-five years have passed since the first Nero Wolfe mystery, *Fer-de-Lance,* appeared in 1934, and though they have bickered and feuded through forty-two books, that day has never come. Like Huck Finn and Miss Watson's Jim, floating down the Mississippi in a perpetual summer, Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin live their independent bachelor lives in a perpetual youth: ageless, fearless, assured, poised, fixed in amber forever by their author, Rex Stout.

Readers often wonder how much of the author goes into his characters. Much of Stout goes into his novels, but his characters do not reflect him. There is absolutely no resemblance between him and Wolfe, either in appearance or character, though both have the identical broad cultural background. Archie Goodwin's poise and sophistication are the author's, but it's doubtful whether Mr. Stout (5′ 9″—139 lbs.) ever delivered a right hook to the kidney, which is Archie's best punch. Actually, it's the ambience of the books that is pure Stout—humor, experience, energy and a robust love of life.

It's always a delight to meet him at authors' Mr. Stout smokes thick cigars placidly, often letting them go out. During the day he drinks a horrendous mixture of Earl Grey tea and grapefruit juice, half and half, unsweetened. He's a slight man with a big head and cherubic face decorated with a curious white fluff under his chin. His voice is a beautiful bass. He's a little hard of hearing.

"I built this house in 1930. I worked fifteen hours a day for seven months, with some outside help but no experts because experts always disagree with each other. Somehow I can't visualize drawings or blueprints, so I made seven plywood models of the house before I was satisfied. The general layout is a copy of the palace of a Bey which I saw in Tunis, with one exception; he had a eunuch well and we don't have any eunuchs around here."

"What on earth is a eunuch well?"

"They didn't like eunuchs to come too close to the house, so they used a well to mark the point in the courtyard beyond which eunuchs couldn't approach. I have fifty-eight acres here, just enough so I'll never have to put up window curtains because, goddam it, windows are made to see out of.

"Once Frank Lloyd Wright came out here to spend a weekend a couple of years after it was built, and naturally I was anxious for his opinion. After a few hours of walking around and looking, he stood out there on the front terrace and made his only comment. 'Very nice. Very nice. I would have liked to have built a house here.' Oh boy! Did that put me in my place."

Stout smiled and shook his head. "But here's a funny thing. The first time my wife, Pola—you know she's Polish—saw the place, she stood out on the terrace on the very same spot and said, 'Very nice. Very nice. Of course copied after Poland.' " He laughed and re-lit his cigar. "But that's better than the opinion of the people around here. When I was building the place they called me 'the guy that's *(Continued on page 65)*

Rex Stout

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building the Monkey House.' Have you been reading those underground newspapers?"

"Yes, with a sort of horror and disgust."

"That's very interesting." He contemplated me. You're a writer and a reporter. Nothing should horrify you."

"It's visualizing the kind of people who read and enjoy them that sickens me."

"Well, it's like the story about the two psychiatrists who pass in a corridor and one gooses the other. The guy who's been goosed turns around indignantly. Then he shrugs and says, 'What the hell, it's his problem.'"

Stout has always been an independent, an original, a man who knew his own mind. In a way it's sad to converse with him because he reflects the best of a 19th Century which no longer exists, which, indeed, is unjustly scorned today. He is all interest and tolerance. Once during an intense discussion of the Vietnam war, a neighborhood boy who was present became angry with Stout because he felt he wasn't being included in the debate. "I don't see why you can't discuss it with me," he said. Stout smiled. "Because I know what I was like at your age, but you don't know what you'll be like at mine."

He was born Rex Todhunter Stout in Noblesville, Indiana on December 1, 1886, one of four brothers and five sisters. He is the third in three solid generations of Quakers. "I went to public schools in Topeka, and then went to the University of Kansas at Lawrence, Kansas. I stayed two weeks, decided I knew more than the whole damn faculty, quit and joined the Navy because I wanted to see the real color of the ocean.

"I was assigned to Teddy Roosevelt's yacht, *Mayflower,* as pay-yeoman. I saw a lot of the Caribbean and became a good whist player. I was promoted to warrant officer because there were seven commissioned officers on board and they needed an eighth for two tables of whist. I earned $26.20 a month in salary and made up to $400 a month playing whist."

After he left the Navy, Stout spent five years roaming around the country. "I saw every goddam state and must have had at least 150 jobs in 150 different cities. I never had any adventures but I had a lot of episodes. It was not only a good preparation for a writer, but also for life.

"I began writing in 1912. I wrote fiction and sold it to *Argosy, Munsey's* and a few others. Edgar Rice Burroughs was doing his Tarzan stories for *Argosy* then. I never had any trouble selling what I wrote, but I saw after four years that I'd never get anywhere that way."

"Why not?"

"I'd write a 20,000-word story and then spend the money taking girls to concerts and the opera and the theater. I wouldn't write again until I needed money to get my shirts out of the laundry for another date. Then I'd dash off 8,000 words and run up to *Argosy* for the check. I decided to make enough money in business to support myself and then write. So I invented a new accounting system."

"You? Invented an accounting system?"

Stout smiled. "I just love figures. That's why I do my own books and act as my own agent. When I was a kid they used to stand me with my back to a blackboard. Then someone would write random numbers, eight across, four tiers of them. They'd turn me around and I could get the total in a minute."

"That's fantastic."

"No, it's just a kink, the same thing that makes a chess player or a Willie Mays or a Joe DiMaggio, which is a shame because he was a goddam Yankee. They can hear the crack of the bat and move at once to where the ball will be."

"What have you got against the Yankees?"

"I've been a Giant fan for so many years. I still see their games; baseball's the only thing I use television for. I used to go quail-hunting with Christy Mathewson. Once we took Chief Bender along . . . I don't suppose you know who he was."

"I do. He was a great Giant catcher."

"Right. Bender had never been quail-hunting before, and when we sighted a covey on the ground he raised his gun and took aim. Matty said, 'You aren't going to shoot them while they're running on the ground, are you?' And the Chief said, 'Hell, no! I'm going to wait until they stop.' How about another drink? Help yourself."

"What happened with the accounting system?"

"It was quite a success. By 1928 I'd made half a million dollars and retired to write."

"Marvelous!"

"Bushwah! I got expert advice, invested everything, and by 1930 I was broke, so I went back to 'serious' fiction and wrote five novels. They got some recognition but didn't make enough money to live on comfortably. I realized that I was a good story-teller but would never make a great novelist, so I decided to write detective stories. You just tell stories and you don't have to worry about making new comments on life and human beings. That's when I started Nero Wolfe for *American Magazine.*"

He doesn't remember how he came up with the idea for Wolfe and Archie; it's too long ago. His working technique is interesting and rather unusual. "I write afternoons and evenings. My mornings are just God-awful. I'm not miserable and unhappy; I'm just not alive yet. I'm in a fog."

"That seems to have a familiar sound."

"Yes, it does sound like Archie Goodwin, doesn't it? I'm a one-job man. No matter what I'm doing, by God that's what I'm doing and nothing else. When I'm writing a story I don't do anything else. I don't go out for dinner; I don't have anyone to dinner; if a leg falls off a piece of furniture I don't give a damn. I will after the story's finished, but not while I'm writing."

"How do you outline your stories?"

"I never outline a story. Sometimes the idea will come from a *milieu.* Once I wanted to get Wolfe connected with a baby, and that turned into *The Mother Hunt.* In my latest, *Death of a Dude,* I wanted to get Wolfe out of New York again, so I took him to Montana, naturally." (Fans will understand the "naturally." Lily Rowan, Archie Goodwin's extra-special girl, is a high-spirited, wealthy young lady who owns, among other things, a ranch in Montana.)

"When I start at the typewriter I have a slip of paper with the names of

the people, their ages and what they do, and that's all the outline I have. You see, in my life I've done maybe a thousand interesting things, and I think that nine hundred and thirty-seven of them happened in my subconscious. I remember when I was writing *How Like A God* I had a scene where the hero's son comes into his office and talks to him for two or three pages. Suddenly I pushed back from the typewriter, jumped up and said, 'Jesus Christ! I didn't know he had a son!' "

I was incredulous. "But Mr. Stout, if you sit down at the typewriter without an outline, what happens?"

"You know very well what happens. First you hit one key and then you hit another, and as far as I'm concerned that's all that happens. The things that people say and do in the stories I write, I make up one-third of them, but the rest I have nothing to do with.

"I have two categories for writers; Supremely Great and Great. I think what makes a Supremely Great writer is the assurance of knowing all about your characters, of being sure of them. Balzac had that. Shakespeare did. Tolstoi did. The most important goal for a writer is to get and keep a firm, unalterable conviction, and that's what all the great writers had. The uncertainties of a writer come from a lack of this conviction, and that's why so many writers today are unwilling to make a statement and unwilling to tell a story.

"I don't know what John Updike thinks he's doing. Does he like words? Yes. Does he think he's using words? Yes. But he's not telling a story. Does he think he's revealing something about psychology and human nature? I don't know. I don't know what he's doing. I know what Balzac and Homer and Norman Mailer are doing. I know what Malamud is doing. But I don't know what Updike is doing.

"Take Hemingway. He wanted to prove that if a man thinks he's strong he is strong. To me this is nonsense, and I think Hemingway knew it was nonsense, which is why he kept writing the same thing over and over again to convince himself. He was a good writer, at times a great writer, but this is why *Across the River and into the Trees* is so sad. It was a kind of half-assed admission that he was wrong."

Stout grinned. "I kind of insulted Philip Roth the other day. I told him he gave the wrong title to *Portnoy's Complaint*. I told him he should have called it *Penrod Revisited*. He got mad. He didn't think it was funny. Have you read it?"

"Not yet. My wife says it's very witty."

"I'm thinking of writing a book; not a mystery, not a great novel, a trilogy similar in treatment to *Portnoy's Complaint*. Portnoy had a lot of trouble getting into women. Well, my trilogy will be about a man's trouble with a catheter."

He arose suddenly and came over to my chair so purposefully that I was alarmed.

"Have I done anything wrong, Mr. Stout?"

"No, no. I just wanted to see how you were taking your notes. Shorthand?"

"Longhand."

"May I see? Oh, yes. When you write do you write in longhand?"

"No, I've learned to think at the machine, except when the going gets tough. Then I revert to pen and ink."

"Yes. Anything to keep the story going."

"Is it the fact that mysteries are story-telling that makes them so popular?"

"You know goddam well why, of all kinds of stories, the detective story is the most popular. It supports, more than any other kind of story, man's favorite myth, that he's Homo sapiens, the rational animal. And of course the poor son-of-a-bitch isn't a rational animal at all. I think the most important function of the brain is thinking up reasons for the decisions his emotions have made. Detective stories support that myth. That accounts for the fact that that fantastic bloodhound, Sherlock Holmes, is known to more people around the world than any other character created in fiction."

"Were you ever a fan of Sherlock Holmes?"

"As a small boy I was impressed by Holmes, but even more impressed by Nick Carter . . . and Frank Merriwell. God! I thought Frank was a wonderful person."

"What about Poe?"

"He wasn't a story-teller at all. He was a manipulator and thinker and a wonderful user of words. The development of occurrences in a detective story should happen with as little contrivance as possible. The writer should not move the pieces around, but that goes for all writing. In the work of what writer does the least amount of contrivance take place?"

"I couldn't answer that."

"I would say Chekhov." He paused. "But it's silly of me to make a statement like that about any writer you read in translation. You've got to read a writer in the language he wrote in. But about Poe; he never created a character or a human being. He invented a technique that has been used by—how many thousands? He did for

the detective story what Petrarch did for the sonnet."

"Mr. Stout, why aren't good detective stories being written today?"

"The answer is simple: they're too goddam hard to write. Let's assume that you're a pretty good story-teller. Then you think of a difficult situation that arises among six people. The situation becomes so bad that the conflict forces one to kill another. Now, if you're a story-teller it isn't too difficult. You establish your characters, prepare the conflict, develop it, and in time build to the climax.

"But for a detective story writer it's much more difficult. The murder must come soon. The focus must not be on the people and their conflicts, but on an outside person, the detective who is finding it out. And the reader must not find out what the detective is finding out while he's finding it out. This is damned hard to do.

"Technically, *The Maltese Falcon* is the best detective story ever written. Do you remember that wonderful moment in the last chapter when Sam Spade says to Brigid O'Shaughnessy, 'Why did you shoot him?' My God! Those five words explain the whole thing. You say to yourself, 'Of course! That's it!' Have you read Josephine Tey? If you haven't read her you haven't read a detective story at all. Her *Daughter of Time* is superb."

"Yes, I've read it. That's the one about the murder of the young princes in the Tower."

"But what a magnificent device; to have a detective stuck in bed with a broken leg solving a five-hundred-year-old mystery. Didn't you like it?"

"It was all right, but it didn't fracture me. To tell the truth, I don't care much for women writers."

"I would have agreed with you until I read Jane Austen. If I were asked of all the dead women in the world who I'd rather have dinner with this evening, it would be Jane Austen. No, goddamit, first would have to be Sappho."

"And what about the male writers?"

"I've known a lot of them in the States and in Paris. I met Oscar Wilde a couple of times. I was very young and I remember I had the shootspa [sic.] to argue about his use of words. He was an enormous man and very flabby then, but his voice was beautiful, like low silk. But the most interesting talk I ever had was with Joseph Conrad, when I spent a week at his home. He didn't talk a lot but in a curious way the things he said were more intense and interesting than I'd ever heard from any other writer. And he was a hell of a good listener. He had an interest in anything anyone would say."

"You sound like you're describing yourself."

"Me?"

"Yes. You're an extraordinary man."

"Not at all. I know that in all aspects of life I'm really a very ordinary person. That's the way I feel. I'm not extraordinary; I'm very usual. Take flowers, for instance. Edward Steichen has specialized in delphiniums for years. He grows the most beautiful delphiniums in the world. Now *he's* extraordinary. I'm not. I just like to grow flowers.

"Take arguing. I like to argue, but in a perfectly ordinary way. Max Eastman was here one evening—in the most comfortable chair, as usual—and suddenly he jumped up and said to his wife, 'Come home. I won't stay in the same room with anyone who talks like that about Plato.' Now that was extraordinary. I'd never do a thing like that; get out of a comfortable chair and leave a house for that reason.

"I'm a very usual person. Am I pleased with myself? Yes, but anyone who lives long enough must be pleased with himself. I can't remember any five minutes of my life when I've been bored. I can't understand people who get bored. If you're alive, you can't be bored.

"I can't understand guilt, either. Can you? I learned this at an early age; never ask the question, Why? Especially of yourself. You can waste more goddam time. The silliest question a man can ask is, Does life have a meaning? And if there is an answer it's no good because it's like fingerprints; no two answers are alike." THE END