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REX STOUT



A NERO WOLFE MYSTERY
THE LEAGUE OF
FRIGHTENED MEN

INTRODUCTION BY ROBERT GOLDSBOROUGH

Rex Stout

The League Of Frightened Men

Wolfe and I sat in the office Friday afternoon. As it turned out, the name of Paul Chapin, and his slick and thrifty notions about getting vengeance at wholesale without paying for it, would have come to our notice pretty soon in – any event; but that Friday afternoon the combination of an early November rain – and a lack of profitable business that had lasted so long it was beginning to be' painful, brought us an opening scene – a prologue, not a part of the main action – of the show that was about ready to begin.

Wolfe was drinking beer and looking at pictures of snowflakes in a book someone had sent him from Czechoslovakia. I was reading the morning paper, off and on. I had read it at breakfast and glanced through it again for half an hour after checking accounts with Horstmann at eleven o'clock, and here I was with it once more in the middle of the rainy afternoon, thinking halfheartedly to find an item or two that would tickle the brain which seemed about ready to drop up on me. I do read books, but I never yet got any real satisfaction out of one; I always have the feeling there's nothing alive about it, it's all dead and gone, what's the use, you might as well try to enjoy yourself on a picnic in a graveyard. Wolfe asked me once why the devil I ever pretended to read a book, and I told him for cultural reasons, and he said I might as well forgo the pain that culture was like money, it comes easiest to those who need it least.

Anyway, since it was a morning paper and this was the middle of the afternoon, and I had already gone through it twice, it wasn't much better than a book and I was only hanging onto it as an excuse to keep my eyes open. •Wolfe seemed absorbed in the pictures.

Looking at him, I said to myself, "He's in a battle with the elements. He's fighting his way through a raging blizzard, just sitting there comfortably looking at pictures of snowflakes. That's the advantage of being an artist, of having imagination." I said aloud, "You mustn't go to sleep, sir, it's fatal. You freeze to death."

Wolfe turned a page, paying no attention to me. I said, "The shipment from Caracas, from Richardt, was twelve bulbs short. I never knew him to make good a shortage.";

Still no result. I said, "Fritz tells me that the turkey they sent is too old to broil and will be tough unless it is roasted two hours, which according to you will attenuate the flavor. So the turkey at* forty-one cents a pound will be a mess."

Wolfe turned another page. I stared at him a while and then said, "Did you see the piece in the paper about the woman who has a pet monkey which sleeps at the head of her bed and wraps its tail around her wrist? And keeps it there all night?"

Did you see the one about the man who | found a necklace on the street and returned it to its owner and she claimed he stole two pearls from it and had him arrested? Did you see the one about the man on the witness-stand in a case about an obscene book, and the lawyer asked him what was his purpose in writing the book, and he said because he had committed a murder and all murderers had to talk about their crimes and that was his way of talking about it? Not that I get the idea, about the author's purpose.

If a book's dirty it's dirty, and what's the difference how it got that way? The lawyer says if the author's purpose was a worthy literary purpose the obscenity don't matter. You might as well say that if my purpose is to throw a rock at a tin can it don't matter if I hit you in the eye with it. You might as well say that if my purpose is to buy my poor old grandmother a silk dress it don't matter if I grabbed the jack from a Salvation Army kettle. You might as well say -"

I stopped. I had him. He did not lift his eyes from the page, his head did not move, there was no stirring of his massive frame in the specially constructed enormous chair behind his desk: but I saw his right forefinger wiggle faintly – his minatory wand, as he once called it – and I knew I had him. He said: "Archie. Shut up."

I grinned. "Not a chance, sir. Great God, am I just going to sit here until I die? Shall I phone Pinkertons and ask if they want a hotel room watched or something? If you keep a keg of dynamite around the house you've got to expect some noise sooner or later. That's what I am, a keg of dynamite. Shall I go to a movie?" N»

Wolfe's huge head tipped forward a sixteenth of an inch, for him an emphatic nod. "By all means. At once." I got up from my chair, tossed the newspaper halfway across the room to my desk, turned around, and sat down again.

"What was wrong with my analogies?" I demanded.

Wolfe turned another page. "Let us say," he murmured patiently, "that as an analogist you are supreme. Let us say that."

"All right. Say we do. I'm not trying to pick a quarrel, sir. Hell no. I'm just breaking under the strain of trying to figure out a third way of crossing my legs.

I've been at it over a week now." It flashed into my mind that Wolfe could never be annoyed by that problem, since his legs were so fat that there was no possibility of them ever getting crossed by any tactics whatever, but I decided not to mention that. I swerved. "I stick to it, if a book is dirty it's dirty, no matter if the author had a string of purposes as long as a rainy day. That guy on the witness-stand yesterday was a nut. Wasn't he? You tell me. Or else he wanted some big headlines no matter what it cost him. It cost him fifty berries for contempt of court. At that price was cheap advertising for his book; for half a century he could buy about four inches on the literary page of the Times, and that's not even a chirp. But I guess the guy was a nut. He said he had done a murder, and all murderers have to confess, so he wrote the book, changing the characters and circumstances, as a means of confessing without putting himself in jeopardy. The judge was witty and sarcastic. He said that even if the guy was an inventor of stories and was in a court, he needn't try for the job of court jester. I'll bet the lawyers had a good hearty laugh at that one. Huh? But the author said it was no joke, that was why he wrote the book and an obscenity in it was only incidental, he really had croaked a guy. So the judge soaked him fifty bucks for contempt of court and chased him off the stand. I guess he's a nut? You tell me."

Wolfe's great chest went up and out in a sigh; he put a marker in the book and closed it and laid it on the desk, and leaned himself back, gently ponderous, in his chair. He blinked twice

"Well?"

I went across to my desk and got the paper and opened it out to the page.

"Nothing maybe. I guess he's a nut. His name is Paul Chapin and he's written several books. The title of this one is Devil Take the Hindmost. He graduated from Harvard in 1912. He's a lopsided, it mentions here about his getting up to the stand with his crippled leg but it doesn't say which one."

Wolfe compressed his lips. "Is it possible," he demanded, "that lop is an abbreviation of lopsided, and that you use it as a metaphor for cripple?" "I wouldn't know about the metaphor but lop means cripple in my circle."

Wolfe sighed again, and set about the process of rising from his chair. "Thank God," he said, "the hour saves me from further analogies and colloquialisms." The clock on the wall said one minute till four – time for him to go up to the plant-rooms. He made it to his feet, pulled the points of his vest down but failed as usual to cover with it the fold of bright yellow shirt that had puffed out, and moved across to the door.

At the threshold he paused. "Archie."

"Yes, sir."

"Phone Murger's to send over at once a copy of Devil Take the Hindmost, by Paul Chapin."

"Maybe they won't. It's suppressed pending the court decision."

"Nonsense. Speak to Murger or Ballard. What good is an obscenity trial except to popularize literature?"

He went on towards the elevator, and I sat down at my desk and reached for the telephone.

After breakfast the next morning, Saturday, I fooled with the plant records a while and then went to the kitchen to annoy Fritz.

Wolfe, of course, wouldn't be down until eleven o'clock. The roof of the old brownstone house on West Thirty-fifth Street where he had lived for twenty years, and me with him for the last seven of them, was glassed in and partitioned into rooms where varying conditions of temperature and humidity were maintained – by the vigilance of Theodore Horstmann – for the ten thousand orchids that lined the benches and shelves.

Wolfe had once remarked to me that the orchids were his concubines: insipid, expensive, parasitic and temperamental.

He brought them, in their diverse forms and colors, to the limits of their perfection, and then gave them away; he had never sold one. His patience and ingenuity, supported by Horstmann's fidelity, had produced remarkable results and gained for the roof a reputation in quite different circles from those whose interest centered in the downstairs office. In all weathers and under all circumstances whatever, his four hours a day on the roof with Horstmann – from nine to eleven in the morning and from four to six in the afternoon – were inviolable. 4 Tj This Saturday morning I finally had to admit that Fritz's good humor was too much for me. By eleven o'clock he was back in the office trying to pretend there might be something to do if I looked for it, but I'm not much good at pretending. I was thinking, ladies and gentlemen, my friends and customers, won't hold out for a real case with worry and action and profit in it, just give us any old kind of break. I'll even tail a chorus-girl for you, or hide in the bathroom for the guy that's stealing the toothpaste, anything this side of industrial espionage. Anything...

Wolfe came in and said good morning.

The mail didn't take long. He signed a couple of checks I had made out for bills he had gone over the day before, and asked me with a sigh what the bank balance was, and gave me a few short letters. I tapped them off and went out with them to the mailbox. When I got back Wolfe was starting on a second bottle of beer, leaning back in his chair, and I thought I saw a look in his half-closed eyes. At least, I thought, he's not back on the pretty snowflakes again. I sat at my desk and let the typewriter down.

Wolfe said, "Archie. One would know everything in the world there is to know, if one waited long enough. The one fault in the passivity of Buddha as a technique for the acquisition of knowledge and wisdom is the miserably brief span of human life. He sat through the first stanza of the first canto of the preamble, and then left for an appointment with... let us say, with a certain chemist."

"Yes sir. You mean, we just go on sitting here and we learn a lot."

"Not a lot. But more, a little more each century."

"You maybe. Not me. If I sit here about two more days I'll be so damn goofy I won't know anything."

Wolfe's eyes flickered faintly. "I would not care to seem mystic, but might not that, in your case, mean an increase?"

"Sure." I grunted. "If you had not once instructed me never again to tell you to go to hell, I would tell you to go to hell."

"Good." Wolfe gulped beer and wiped, his lips. "You are offended. So, probably, awake. My opening remark was in the nature of a comment on a recent fact.

You will remember that last month you were away for ten days on a mission that proved to be highly unremunerative, and that during your absence two young men were here to perform your duties."

I nodded. I grinned. One of the men had been from the Metropolitan Agency as Wolfe's bodyguard, and the other had been a stenographer from Miller's.

"Sure. Two could handle it on a sprint."

"Just so. On one of those days a man came here and asked me to intercept his destiny. He didn't put it that way, but that was the substance of it. It proved not feasible to accept his commission..."

I had opened a drawer of my desk and taken out a loose-leaf binder, and I flipped through the sheets in it to the page I wanted. "Yes, sir. I've got it. I've read it twice. It's a bit spotty, the stenographer from Miller's wasn't so hot. He couldn't spell-

"The name was Hibbard."

I nodded, glancing over the typewritten pages, "Andrew Hibbard. Instructor in psychology at Columbia. It was on October twentieth, a Saturday, that's two weeks ago today."

"Suppose you read it."

"Viva voce?"

"Archie." Wolfe looked at me. "Where did you pick that up, where did you learn to pronounce it, and what do you think it means?" kj "Do you want me to read this stuff out loud, sir?"

"It doesn't mean out loud. Confound you." Wolfe emptied his glass, leaned back in his chair, and got his fingers to meet in front of his belly and laced them.

"Proceed."

"Okay. First there's a description of

Mr. Hibbard. Small gentleman, around fifty f pointed nose, dark eyes -ff "Enough. For that can plunder my memory."

"Yes, sir. Mr. Hibbard seems to have started out by saying, How do you do, sir, my name is -"

"Pass the amenities."

I glanced down the page. "How will this do? Mr. Hibbard said, I was advised to come to you by a friend whose name need not be mentioned, but the motivating force was plain funk. I was driven here by fear.

Wolfe nodded. I read from the typewritten sheets:

Mr. Wolfe: Yes. Tell me about it.

Mr. Hibbard: My card has told you, I am in the psychology department at Columbia. Since you are an expert, you probably observe on my face and in my bearing the stigmata of fright bordering on panic, o Mr. Wolfe: I observe that you are upset. I have no means of knowing whether it is chronic or acute.

Mr. Hibbard: It is chronic. At least it is becoming so. That is why I have resorted to... to you. I am under an intolerable strain. My life is in danger... no, not that, worse than that, my life has been forfeited. I admit it.

Mr. Wolfe: Of course. Mine too, sir.

All of us.

Mr. Hibbard: Rubbish. Excuse me. I am not discussing original sin. Mr. Wolfe, I am going to be killed. A man is going to kill me.

Mr. Wolfe: Indeed. When? How? ^

Wolfe put in, "Archie. You may delete the Mistfers."

"Okay. This Miller boy was brought up right, he didn't miss one. Somebody told him, always regard your employer with respect forty-four hours a week, more or less, as the case may be. Well. Next we have: i§1 • • Hibbard: That I can't tell you, since I don't know. There are things about this / do know, also, which I must keep to myself. I can tell you... well... many years ago I inflicted an injury, a lasting injury, on a man. I was not alone, there were others in it, but chance made me chiefly responsible. At least I have so regarded it. It was a boyish prank... with a tragic outcome. I have never forgiven myself. Neither have the others who were concerned in it, at least most of them haven't. Not that I have ever been morbid about it – it was twenty-five years ago – I am a psychologist and therefore too involved in the morbidities of others to have room for any on my own. Well, we injured that boy. We ruined him. In effect. Certainly we felt the responsibility, and all through these twenty-five years some of us have had the idea of making up for it. We have acted on the idea – sometimes. You know how it is; we are busy men, most of us. But w

have never denied the burden, and now and then some of us have tried to carry it. That was difficult, for pawn – that is, as the boy advanced into manhood he became increasingly peculiar. I learned that in the lower schools he had given evidence of talent, and certainly in college – that is to say, of my own knowledge, after the injury, he possessed brilliance. Later the brilliance perhaps remained, but became distorted. At a certain point – Wolfe interrupted me. "A moment. Go back a few sentences. Beginning that was difficult, for pawn – did you say pawn?"

I found it. "That's it. Pawn. I don't get it."

"Neither did the stenographer.

Proceed."

At a certain point, some five years ago, I decided definitely he was psychopathic. v Wolfe: You continued to know him then?

Hibbard: Oh yes. Many of us did. Some of us saw him frequently; one or two associated with him closely. Around that time his latent brilliance seemed to find itself in maturity. He... well, he did things which aroused admiration and interest. Convinced as I was that he was psychopathic, I nevertheless felt less concern for him than I had for a long time, for he appeared to be genuinely involved in satisfactory – at least compensatory – achievement. The awakening came in a startling manner.

There -was a reunion – a gathering – of a group of us, and one of us -was killed – died obviously, we unanimously thought, by an accident. But he – that is, the man we had injured was there; and a few days later each of us received through the mail a communication from him saying that he had killed one of us and that the rest would follow; that he had embarked on a ship of vengeance.

Wolfe: Indeed. Psychopathic must have begun to seem almost an euphemism.

Hibbard: Yes. But there was nothing we could do.

Wolfe: Since you were equipped with evidence, it might not have proven hazardous to inform the police.

P Hibbard: We had no evidence.

Wolfe: The communication?

Hibbard: They were typewritten, unsigned, and were expressed in ambiguous terms which rendered them worthless for practical purposes such as evidence. He had even disguised his style very cleverly; it was not his style at all.

But it was plain enough to us. Each of us got one; not only those who had been present at the gathering, but all of us, all members of the league. Of course -Wolfe: The league?

Hibbard: That was a slip. It doesn't matter. Many years ago, when a few of us were together discussing this, one -maudlin, of course – suggested that we should call ourselves the League of Atonement. The phrase hung on, in a way. Latterly it was never heard except in jest. Now I fancy the jokes are ended. I was going to say, of course all of us do not live in New York, only about half.

One got his warning, just the same, in San Francisco. In New York a few of us got together and discussed it. We made a sort of an investigation, and we saw – him, and had a talk with him. He denied sending the warnings. He seemed amused, in his dark soul, and unconcerned. | Wolfe: Dark soul is an odd phrase for a psychologist? H Hibbard: / read poetry weekends.

Wolfe: Just so. And?

Hibbard: Nothing happened for some time. Three months. Then another of us was killed. Four dead. The police said suicide, and it seemed that all indications pointed in that direction. But two days later a second warning was mailed to each of us, with the same purport and obviously from the same source. It was worded with great cleverness, with brilliance.

Wolfe: This time, naturally, you went to the police. \ **Hibbard:** Why naturally? We were still without evidence.; iy **Wolfe:** Only that you would. One or some of you would. \ **Hibbard:** They did. I was against it, but they did go – **Wolfe:** Why were you against it?

Hibbard: I felt it was useless. Also... well... I could not bring myself to join in a demand for retribution, his life perhaps, from the man we had injured... you understand...

Wolfe: Quite. First, the police could find no proof. Second, they might.

Hibbard: Very well. I was not engaged in an essay on logic. A man may debar nonsense from his library of reason, but not from the arena of his impulses.

Wolfe: Good. Neat. And the police?

Hibbard: They got nowhere. He made total asses of them. He described to me their questioning and his replies – ^ **Wolfe:** You still saw him? ^ r **Hibbard:** Of course. We -were friends.

Oh yes. The police went into % it, questioned him, questioned all of us, investigated all they could, and came out empty-handed. Some of them, some of the group, got private detectives. That was two weeks, twelve days ago. The detectives are having the same success as the police.

I'm sure of it.

Wolfe: Indeed. What agency? ^ . ^ "•l•t **Hibbard:** That is irrelevant. The point is that something happened. I could speak of apprehensions and precautions and so forth, I know plenty of words of that nature, I could even frame the situation in technical psychological terms, but the plain fact is that I'm too scared to go on.

I want you to save me from death. I want to hire you to protect my life.

Wolfe: Yes. What happened? **Hibbard:** Nothing. Nothing of ^ significance except to me. He came to i; and said something, that's all. It w^ula^ of no advantage to repeat it. My shame admission is that I am at least completely frightened. I'm afraid to g^ bed and I'm afraid to g up. I'm afraid to eat. I want whatever measure of security you can sell me. I am accus^tor^ to the arrangement of words, a^ ± necessity of talking intelligently to you ^ enforced a semblance of orde^- ^ urbanity in a section of my brain ^ around and beneath that order the^e is veritable panic. After all my explorations scientific and pseudo-scientific, of ^ extraordinary phenomena of the human psyche, devil-possessed and h^av^ soaring, I am all reduced to this simple primitive concern: I am terrified afraid of being killed. The friend ^ suggested my coming here said thc^f ^ possess a remarkable combination ^ talents and i\ that you have only ^

[weakness. She did not call it cunning]

I forget her phrasing. I am not \\ millionaire, but I have ample private means besides my salary, and I am in no state of mind for haggling.

Wolfe: I always need money. That is of course my affair. I will undertake to disembark this gentleman from his ship of vengeance, in advance of any injury to you, for the sum of ten thousand dollars.

Hibbard: Disembark him? You can't.

You don't know him. y

Wolfe: Nor does he know me. A meeting can be arranged.

Hibbard: I didn't mean – hah. It would take more than a meeting. It would take more, I think than all your talents.

But that is beside the point. I have failed to make myself clear. I would not pay ten thousand dollars, or any other sum, for you to bring this man to – justice? Ha!

Call it justice. A word that reeks with maggots. Anyway, I would not be a party to that, even in the face of death. I have not told you his name. I shall not.

Already perhaps I have disclosed too much. I wish your services as a safeguard for myself, not as an agency for his destruction. **Wolfe:** If the one demands the other?

Hibbard: I hope not. I pray not... could I pray? No. Prayer has been washed ' from my strain of blood. Certainly I would not expect you to give me a warrant | of security. But your experience and ingenuity – I am sure they would be worth whatever you might ask -, **Wolfe:** Nonsense. My ingenuity would be worth less than nothing, Mr. Hibbard.

Do I understand that you wish to engage me to protect your life against the unfriendly designs of this man without taking any steps whatever to expose and restrain him? ^01 ^ a.

Hibbard: Yes, sir. Precisely. And I have been told that once your talents are – committed to a

enterprise, any attempt to circumvent you will be futile. Wolfe: / have no talents. I have genius or nothing. In this case, nothing. No, Mr.

Hibbard; and I do need money. What you need, should you persist in your quixotism, is first, you have dependents, generous life insurance; and second, a patient acceptance of the fact that your death is only a matter of time. That of course is true of all of us; we all share that disease with you, only yours seems to have reached a rather acute stage. My advice would be, was neither time nor money on efforts at precaution. If he has decided to kill you, and if he possesses ordinary intelligence – let alone the brilliance you grant him – you will die.

There are so many methods available for killing a fellow-being! Many more than there are for most of our usual activities, like pruning a tree or threshing wheat or making a bed or swimming. I have been often impressed, in my experience, by the ease and lack of bother with which the average murder is executed. Consider: with the quarry within reach, the purpose fixed, and the weapon in hand, it will often require up to eight or ten minutes to kill a fellow-being, whereas the average murder, I would guess, consumes ten or fifteen seconds at the outside. In cases of slow poison and similar ingenuities death of course is lingering, but the act of murder itself is commonly quite brief. Consider again: there are certainly not more than two or three methods of killing a pig, but there are hundreds of ways to kill a man.

If your friend is half as brilliant as you think him, and doesn't get in a rut as the ordinary criminal does, he may be expected to evolve a varied and interesting repertory before your league is half disposed of. He may even invent something new. One more point: it seems to me there is a fair chance for you. You may not, after all, be the next, or even the next or the next, and it is quite possible that somewhere along the line he may miscalculate or run into bad luck, or one of your league members, less quixotic than you, may engage my services. That would save you.

I took my eyes from the sheet to look at Wolfe. "Pretty good, sir. Pretty nice. I'm surprised you didn't get him, he must have been tough. Maybe you didn't go far enough. You only mentioned poison really, you could have brought in strangling and bleeding and crushed skulls and convulsions -"

"Proceed."

I Hibbard: / will pay you five hundred dollars a week.

Wolfe: I am sorry. To now my casuistry has managed a satisfactory persuasion that the money you have put in my bank has been earned. I dare not put this strain upon it.

Hibbard: But... you -wouldn't refuse.

You can't refuse a thing like this. My

God. You are my only hope. I didn't realize it, but you are. < Wolfe: I do refuse. I can undertake to render this man harmless, to remove the threat – Hibbard: No. No!

Wolfe: Very well. One little suggestion: if you take out substantial life insurance, which would be innocent of fraud from the legal standpoint, you should if possible manage so that when the event comes it cannot plausibly be given the appearance of suicide; and since you will not be aware of the event much beforehand you will have to keep your wit sharpened. That is merely a practical suggestion, that the insurance may not be voided, to the loss of your beneficiary.

IBHibbard: But... Mr. Wolfe... look here... you can't do this. I came here ... I tell you it isn't reasonable – I Wolfe stopped me. "That will do, Archie."

I looked up. "There's only a little more."

"I know. I find it painful. I refused that five hundred dollars – thousands perhaps – once; I maintained my position; your reading it causes me useless discomfort. Do not finish it. There is nothing further except Mr. Hibbard's confused protestations and my admirable steadfastness."

"Yes, sir. I've read it." I glanced over the remaining lines. "I'm surprised you let him go. After all -" 4 Wolfe reached to the desk to ring for Fritz, shifted a little in his chair, and settled back again. "To tell you the truth, | Archie, I entertained a notion."

"Yeah. I thought so."

"But nothing came of it. As you know, it takes a fillip on the flank for my mare to dance, and the fillip was not forthcoming. You were away at the time, and since your return the incident has not been discussed. It is odd that you should have innocently been the cause, by mere chance, of its revival." <I don't get you."

Fritz came with beer. Wolfe took the opener from the drawer, poured a glass, gulped, and leaned back again. He resumed, "By annoying me about the man on the witness-stand. I resigned myself to your tantrum because it was nearly four o'clock. As you know, the book came. I read it last night."

"Why did you read it?" ^

"Don't badger me. I read it because it was a book. I had finished *The Native's Return*, by Louisa Adamic, and *Outline of Human Nature*, by Alfred Rossiter, and I read books."

"Yeah. And?"

"This will amuse you. Paul Chapin, the man on the witness-stand, the author of *Devil Take the Hindmost*, is the villain of Andrew Hibbard's tale. He is the psychopathic avenger of an old and tragic injury."

"The hell he is." I gave Wolfe a look; I had known him to invent for practice.

"Why is he?"

Wolfe's eyelids went up a shade. "Do you expect me to explain the universe?"

"No, sir. Retake. How do you know he is?"

"By no flight. Pedestrian mental processes. Must you have them?"

"I'd greatly appreciate it."

"I suppose so. A few details will do."

Mr. Hibbard employed the unusual phrase, embark on a ship of vengeance, and that phrase occurs twice in Devil Take the Hindmost. Mr. Hibbard did not say, as the stenographer has it, that was difficult, for pawn, which is of course meaningless; he said, that was difficult, for Paul and caught himself up pronouncing the name, which he did not intend to disclose. Mr. Hibbard said things indicating that the man was a writer, for instance speaking of his disguising his style in the warnings. Mr. Hibbard said that five years ago the man began to be involved in compensatory achievement. I telephoned two or three people this morning. In 1929 Paul Chapin's first successful book was published, and in 1930 his second. Also, Chapin is a cripple through an injury which he suffered twenty-five years ago in a hazing accident at Harvard. more is needed..."

"No. Thank you very much. I see. All right. Now that you know who the guy is, everything cozy. Why is it? Who are you going to send a bill to?"

Two of the folds in Wolfe's cheeks opened out a little, so I knew he thought he was smiling. He said, "But you may just be pleased because you know it's corn fritters with anchovy sauce for lunch and it's only ten minutes to the bell."

"No, Archie." The folds were gently closing. "I mentioned that I entertained a notion. It may or may not be fertile. As usual, you have furnished the fillip."

Luckily our stake will be negligible. There are several possible channels of approach, but I believe... yes. Get Mr. Andrew Hibbard on the phone. At Columbia, or at his home."

"Yes, sir. Will you speak?"

"Yes. Keep your wire and take it down as usual, "s I got the number from the book and called it. First the university. I didn't get Hibbard. I monkeyed around with two or three extensions and four or five people, and it finally leaked out that he wasn't anywhere around, but no one seemed to know where he was. I tried his home, an Academy number, up in the same neighborhood. There a dumb female nearly riled me. She insisted on knowing who I was and she sounded doubtful about everything. She finally seemed to decide Mr. Hibbard probably wasn't home. Through the last of it Wolfe was listening in on his wire."

I turned to him. "I can try again and maybe with luck get a human being."

He shook his head. "After lunch. It is two minutes to one."

I got up and stretched, thinking I would be able to do a lot of destructive criticism on a con-

fritter myself, especially with Fritz's sauce. It was at that moment that Wolfe's notion decided to come to him instead of waiting longer for him to go to it. It was a coincidence, too, though that was of no importance; she must have been trying to get our number while I was talking.

The telephone rang. I sat down again and got it. It was a woman's voice, and she asked to speak to Nero Wolfe. I asked if I might have her name, and when she said "Evelyn Hibbard," I told her to hold the line and put my hand over the transmitter.

I grinned at Wolfe. "It's a Hibbard."

His brows lifted.

"A female Hibbard named Evelyn.

Voice young, maybe a daughter. Take it.

He took his receiver off and I put mine back to my ear and got my pad and pencil ready. As Wolfe asked her what she wanted I was deciding again that he was the only man I had ever met who used absolutely the same tone to a woman as to a man. He had plenty of changes in his voice but they weren't based on sex. I scribbled on the pad my quick symbols, mostly private, for the sounds in the receiver:

"I have a note of introduction to you from a friend, Miss Sarah Barstow. You will remember her, Mr. Wolfe, you... you investigated the death of her father.* Could I see you at once? If possible. I'm talking from the Bidwell, Fifty-second Street. I could be there in fifteen minutes."

"I'm sorry. Miss Hibbard, I am engaged. Could you come at a quarter past two?"

"Oh." A little gasp floated after that.

"I had hopes... I just decided ten minutes ago. Mr. Wolfe, it is very urgent.

If you could possibly..."

"If you would describe the urgency."

"I'd rather not, on the telephone – but that's silly. It's my uncle, Andrew Hibbard, he went to see you two weeks ago, you may remember. He has disappeared."

"Indeed. When?"

"Tuesday evening. Four days ago."

"You have had no word of him?"

"Nothing." The female Hibbard's voice caught. "Nothing at all."

"Indeed." I saw Wolfe's eyes shift to take in the clock – it was four minutes past one – and shi

again towards the *See Fer-de-Lance, by Rex Stout. door to the hall, where Fritz stood on the threshold, straight for announcing. "Since ninety hours have passed, another one may be risked. At a quarter past two?

Will that be convenient?"

"If you can't... allright. I'll be there."

Two receivers were returned simultaneously to their racks. Fritz spoke as usual:

"Luncheon, sir."

I'm funny about women. I've seen dozens of them I wouldn't mind marrying, but I've never been pulled so hard I lost my balance. I don't know whether any of them would have married me or not, that's the truth, since I never gave one a chance to collect enough data to form an intelligent opinion. When I meet a new one there's no doubt that I'm interested and I'm full of life to all the possibilities, and I've never dodged the issue as far as I can tell, but I never seem to get infatuated. For instance, take the women I meet in my line of business – that is, New York's business. I never run into one, provided she's not just an item for the cleaners, without letting my eyes do the best they can for my judgment, and more than that, it puts a tickle in my blood. I can feel the nudge on the accelerator. But then of course the business gets started whatever it may happen to be, and I guess the trouble is I'm too conscientious. I love to do a good job more than anything else I can think of, and I suppose that's what shorts the line.

This Evelyn Hibbard was little and dark and smart. Her nose was too pointed and she took too much advantage of her eyelashes, but nobody that knew merchandise would have put her on the bargain counter. She had on a slick gray twill suit, with a fur piece, and a little red hat with a narrow brim on the side of her head. She sat straight without crossing her legs, and her ankles and halfway to her knees«was well trimmed but without promise of any plumpness.

I was at my desk of course with my pad, and after the first couple of minutes got only glances at her in between. If worry about her uncle was eating her, and I suppose it was, she was following what Wolfe called the Anglo-Saxon theory of the treatment of emotions and desserts: freeze them and hide them in your belly.

She sat straight in the chair I had shoved up for her, keeping her handsome dark eyes level with Wolfe but once in a while flapping her lashes in my direction. She had brought with her a package wrapped in brown paper and held it on her lap.

Wolfe leaned back in his seat with his chin down and his forearms laid out on the arms of the chair; it was his custom to make no effort to join his fingers at the high point of his middle mound sooner than a full hour after a meal. She said that she and her younger sister lived with their uncle in an apartment on One Hundred Thirteenth Street. Their mother had died when they were young.

Their father was remarried and lived in

California. Their uncle was single. He,

Uncle Andrew, had gone out Tuesday evening around nine o'clock, and had not returned. There had been no word from him. He had gone out alone, remarking casually to Ruth, the younger sister, that he would get some air.

Wolfe asked, "This has no precedent?"

"Precedent?"

"He has never done this before? You have no idea where he may be?"

"No. But I have an idea... I think ... he has been killed."

"I suppose so," Wolfe opened his eyes a little. "That would naturally occur to you. On the telephone you mentioned his visit to me. Do you know what its purpose was?"

"I know all about it. It was through my friend Sarah Barstow that I heard of you.

I persuaded my uncle to come to see you.

I know what he told you and what you said to him. I told my uncle he was a sentimental romantic. He was." She stopped, and kept her lips closed a moment to get them firm again; looked up to see it. "I'm not. I'm hard-boiled. I think my uncle has been murdered, and the man who killed him is Paul Chapin, the writer. I came here to tell you that."

So here was the notion Wolfe had entertained, coming right to his office and sitting on a chair. But too late? The five hundred a week had gone out to get some air. n Wolfe said, "Quite likely. Thank you for coming. But it might be possible, and more to the point, to engage the attention of the police and the District Attorney."

She nodded. "You are like Sarah

Barstow described you. The police have been engaged since Wednesday noon.

They have been willing so far, at the request of the president of the university, to keep the matter quiet. There has been no publicity. But the police – you might as well match me at chess against Capablanca. Mr. Wolfe..." The fingers of her clasped hands, resting on the package on her lap, twisted a closer knot, and her voice tightened. "You don't know. Paul Chapin has the cunning and subtlety of all the things he mentioned in his first warning, the one he sent after he killed Judge Harrison. He is genuinely evil ... all evil, all dangerous... you know he is not a man..."

"There, Miss Hibbard. There now."

Wolfe sighed. "Surely he is a man, by definition. Did he indeed kill a judge? In that instance the presumption is of course in his favor. But you mentioned the first warning. Do you by any chance have a copy of it?"

She nodded. "I have." She indicated the package. "I have all the warnings, including..." She swallowed. "... the last one. Dr. Burton gave me his."

"The one after the apparent suicide." |

"No. The one... another one came this morning to them. I suppose to all of them; after Dr. Burton told me I telephoned two or three. You see, my uncle has disappeared... you see..."

"I see. Indeed. Dangerous. For Mr.

Chapin, I mean. Any kind of a rut is dangerous in his sort of enterprise. So you have all the warnings. With you? In that package?"

"Yes. Also I have bundles of letters | which Paul Chapin has at various times written to my uncle, and a sort of diary | which my uncle kept, and a book of records showing sums advanced to Paul Chapin from 1919 to 1928 by my uncle and others, and a list of the names and addresses of the members – that is, of the men who were present in 1909 when it happened. A few other things."

"Preposterous. You have all that?"

"Why not the police?"

Evelyn Hibbard shook her head. "I decided not. These things were in a very private file of my uncle's. They were precious to him, and they are now precious to me... in a different way.

"The police would get no help from them, but you might. And you would not abuse them. Would you?"

At the pause I glanced up, and saw

Wolfe's lips pushing out a little... then in, then out again... That excited me. It always did, even when I had no idea what it was all about. I watched him. He said, "Miss Hibbard. You mean you removed this file from the notice of the police, and kept it, and have now brought it to me?"

Containing the names and addresses of the members of the League of Atonement?"

Remarkable."

She stared at him. "Why not? It has no information that they cannot easily obtain elsewhere from Mr. Farrell or Dr.

Burton or Mr. Drummond – any of them -"

"All the same, remarkable." Wolfe reached to his desk and pushed a button.

"Will you have a glass of beer? I drink beer, but would not impose my preferences. There is available a fair port, Solera, Dublin stout, Madeira, and more especially a Hungarian vin du pays, which comes to me from the cellar of the vineyard. Your choice..."

She shook her head. "Thank you."

"I may have beer?" |

"Please do."

Wolfe did not lean back again. He said, | "If the package could perhaps be opened?"

I am especially interested in that first warning."

She began to untie the string. I got up to help. She handed me the package and I a put it on Wolfe's desk and got the paper off. It was a large cardboard letter-file, old and faded but intact. I passed it to | Wolfe, and he opened it with the deliberate and friendly exactness which his hands displayed toward all inanimate things.

Evelyn Hibbard said, "Under I. My uncle did not call them warnings. He called them intimations."

Wolfe nodded. "Of destiny, I suppose."

He removed papers from the file. "Your uncle is indeed a romantic. Oh yes, I say is. It is wise to reject all suppositions, even painful ones, until surmise can stand on the legs of fact. Here it is. Ah! Ye should have killed me, watched the last mean sigh. Is Mr. Chapin in malevolence a poet? May I read it?"

She nodded. He read:

Ye should have killed me, watched the last mean sigh
Sneak through my nostril like a fugitive
slave Slinking from bondage.

Ye should have killed me.

Ye killed the man,

Ye should have killed me!

Ye killed the man, but not

The snake, the fox, the mouse that nibbles his hole,
The patient cat, the hawk, the ape that grins
The wolf, the crocodile, the worm that works his way
Up through the slime and down again
to hide.

Ah! All these ye left in me,

And killed the man.

Ye should have killed me!

Long ago I said, trust time.

Banal I said, time will take its toll.

I said to the snake, the ape, the cat, the worm:

Trust time, for all your aptitudes together Are not as sure and deadly. But now they said:

Time is too slow; let us. Master.

Master, count for us!

I said no.

Master, let us. Master, count for us!

I felt them in me. I saw the night, the sea, The rocks, the neutral stars, the ready cliff.

I heard ye all about, and I heard them:

Master, let us. Master, count for us! / saw one there, secure at the edge of death, I counted One!

I shall count two I know, and three and four...

Not waiting for time's toll.

Ye should have killed me.

Wolfe sat with the paper in his hand, glancing from it to Miss Hibbard. "It would seem like that Mr. Chapin pushed the judge over the edge of a cliff.

Presumably impromptu. I presume also, totally unobserved, since no suspicions were aroused. "There was a cliff around handy?"

"Yes. It was in Massachusetts, up near

Marblehead. Last June. A crowd was there at Fillmore Collard's place. Judge Harrison had come east, from Indiana, for commencement, for his son's graduation. They missed him that night, and the next morning they found his body at the foot of the cliff, beaten among the rocks by the surf."

"Mr. Chapin was among them?"

She nodded. "He was there."

"But don't tell me the gathering was for purposes of atonement. It was not a meeting of the incredible league?"

"Oh no. Anyway, Mr. Wolfe, no one ever quite seriously called it a league. Even Uncle Andrew was not -" she stopped short, shut her lips, stuck her chin up, and then went on, "as romantic as that. The crowd was just a crowd, mostly from the class of 1912, that Fillmore Collard had taken up from Cambridge. Seven or eight of the – well, league – were there."

Wolfe nodded and regarded her for a moment, then got at the file again and began pulling things out of its compartments. He flipped through the sheets of a loose-leaf binder, glanced inside a record book, and shuffled through a lot of papers. Finally he looked at Miss Hibbard again:

"And this quasi-poetic warning came to each of them after they had returned to their homes and astonished them?"

"Yes, a few days later."

"I see. You know, of course, that Mr.

Chapin's little effort was sound traditionally. Many of the most effective warnings in history, particularly the ancient ones, were in verse. As for the merits of Mr. Chapin's execution, granted the soundness of the tradition, it seems to me verbose, bombastic, and decidedly spotty. I cannot qualify as an expert in prosody, but I am not without an ear."

It wasn't like Wolfe to babble when business was on hand, and I glanced up wondering where he thought he was headed for. She was just looking at him. I had to cut my glance short, for he was going on:

"Further, I suspect him specifically, in his second stanza – I suppose he would call it stanza – of plagiarism. It has been many years since I have read Spenser, but in a crack of my memory not quite closed up there is a catalogue of beasts – Archie. If you wouldn't mind, bring me the Spenser? The third shelf, at the right of the door. No, farther over – more yet – dark blue, tooled. That's it."

I took the book over and handed it to him, and he opened it and began • skimming.

"The Shepheardes Calender, I am certain, and I think September. Not that it matters; even if I find it, a petty triumph scarcely worth the minutes I waste. You will forgive me, Miss Hibbard. Bulls that bene bate... Cocke on his dunghill...

This wolvishe sheepe "would catchen his pray... no, certainly not that. Beasts here and there, but not the catalogue in my memory. I shall forgo the triumph; it isn't here. Anyway, it was pleasant to meet Spenser again, even for so brief a nod." He slid forward in his chair, to a perilous extreme, to hand the book to Miss Hibbard. "A fine example of bookmaking, worth a glance of friendship from you. Printed of course in London, but bound in this city by a Swedish boy who will probably starve to death during • the coming winter." I She summoned enough politeness to look at it, turn it over in her hand, glance inside, and look at the backbone again.

Wolfe was back at the papers he had taken from the file. She was obviously through with the book, so I got up and took it and returned it to the shelf.

Wolfe was saying, "Miss Hibbard. I know that what you want is action, and doubtless I have tried your patience. I am sorry. If I might ask you a few questions?"

"Certainly. It seems to me -"

"Of course. Pardon me. Only two questions, I think. First, do you know whether your uncle recently took out any life insurance?"

She nodded impatiently. "But, Mr.

Wolfe, that has nothing to do with -"

He broke in to finish for her, "With the totalitarian evil of Paul Chapin. I know.

Possibly not. Was it a large amount of insurance?"

"I think so. Yes. Very large."

"Were you the beneficiary?"

"I don't know. I suppose so. He told me you spoke to him of insurance. Then, about a week ago he told me he had rushed it through and they had distributed it among four companies. I didn't pay much attention because my mind was on something else. I was angry with him and was trying to persuade him... I suppose my sister Ruth and I were the beneficiaries." m "Not Paul Chapin?"

She looked at him, and opened her mouth and closed it again. She said,

"That hadn't occurred to me. Perhaps he would. I don't know."

Wolfe nodded. "Yes, a sentimental romantic might do that. Now, the second question. Why did you come to see me?"

What do you want me to do?"

She gave him her eyes straight. "I want you to find proof of Paul Chapin's guilt, and see that he pays the penalty. I can pay you for it. You told my uncle ten thousand dollars. I can pay that." "Do you have a personal hostility for Mr. Chapin?" . "Personal?" She frowned. "Is there any other kind of hostility except personal? I don't know. I hate Paul i Chapin, and have hated him for years, | because I loved my uncle and my sister Ruth loved him and he was a fine sensitive generous man, and Paul Chapin was ruining his life. Ruined his life... oh... now..."» I a^Then Miss Hibbard. Please. You did not intend to engage me to find your uncle? You had no hope of that?"

"I think not. Oh, if you do! If you do that... I think I have no hope, I think I dare not. But then even if you find him, there will still be Paul Chapin."

"Just so." Wolfe sighed, and turned his eyes to me. "Archie. Please wrap up Miss Hibbard's file for her. If I have not placed the contents in their proper compartments, she will forgive me. The paper and string are intact? Good."

She was protesting. "But you will need that – I'll leave it -"

"No, Miss Hibbard. I'm sorry. I can't undertake your commission."

She stared at him. He said, "The affair is in the hands of the police and the District Attorney. would be hopelessly handicapped. I shall have to bid you good day." -?

She found her tongue. "Nonsense. You don't mean it." She exploded, forward in her chair. "Mr Wolfe, it's outrageous!

I've told you all about it... you've asked me and I've told you... the reason you give is no reason at all... why -"

He stopped her, with his finger wiggling and the quality in his voice, without raising it, that always got me a little sore because I never understood how he did it.

"Please, Miss Hibbard. I have said no, and I have given you my reason. That is sufficient. If you will just take the package from Mr. Goodwin. Of course I am being rude to you, and on such occasions I always regret that I do not know the art of being rude elegantly. I have all the simplicities, including that of brusqueness."

But he got up from his chair, which, though she didn't know it, was an extraordinary concession. She, on her feet too, had taken the package from me and was mad as hell. Before turning to go, though, she realized that she was more helpless than she was mad. She appealed to him:

"But don't you see, this leaves me... what can I do?"

"I can make only one suggestion. If you have made no other arrangements and still wish my services, and the police have made no progress, come to see me next Wednesday."

"But that's four whole days -"

"I'm sorry. Good day, Miss Hibbard."

I went to open the door for her, and she certainly had completely forgotten about her eyelashes

When I got back to the office Wolfe was seated again, with what I suppose Andrew Hibbard would have called the stigmata of pleasure. His chin was up, and he was making little circles with the tip of his finger on the arm of his chair. I came to a stop by his desk, across from him, and said:

"That girl's mad. I would say, on a guess, she's about one-fifth as mad as I am."

He murmured, "Archie. For a moment, don't disturb me." u "No, sir. I wouldn't for anything. A trick is okay, and a deep trick is the staff of life for some people, but where you've got us to a present is wallowing in the unplumbed depths of – wait a minute, I'll look it up, I think it's

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