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A Bantam Crime Library Book

REX STOUT



A NERO WOLFE MYSTERY
**THE LEAGUE OF
FRIGHTENED MEN**

INTRODUCTION BY ROBERT GOLDSBOROUGH

Rex Stout

The League Of Frightened Men

1

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 dry up on me. I do read books, but I never yet got any real satisfaction out of one; I always have a 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 pains, 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?”

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's 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 it 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 any 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 lop; 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.

2

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 any 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. This Saturday morning I finally had to admit that Fritz's good humor was too much for me. By eleven o'clock I 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, I won't hold out for a real case with worry and action and profit in it, just give us any old kind of a 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?”

“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, 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 — pointed nose, dark eyes — “Enough. For that I 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.

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 Misters.”

“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: