

R E X S T O U T

N E R O

W O L F E



T O O M A N Y C O O K S

**Rex Stout**

**Too Many Cooks**

## FOREWORD

I USED AS FEW French and miscellaneous fancy words as possible in writing up this stunt of Nero Wolfe's but I couldn't keep them out altogether, on account of the kind of people involved. I am not responsible for the spelling, so don't write me about mistakes. Wolfe refused to help me out on it, and I had to go to the Heinemann School of Languages and pay a professor 30 bucks to go over it and fix it up. In most cases, during these events, when anyone said anything which for me was only a noise, I have either let it lay-when it wasn't vital-or managed somehow to get the rough idea in the American language.

ARCHIE GOODWIN

### 1

WALKING UP AND DOWN the platform alongside the train in the Pennsylvania Station, having wiped the sweat from my brow, I lit a cigarette with the feeling that after it had calmed my nerves a little I would be prepared to submit bids for a contract to move the Pyramid of Cheops from Egypt to the top of the Empire State Building with my bare hands, in a swimming-suit; after what I had just gone through. But as I was drawing in the third puff I was stopped by a tapping on a window I was passing, and, leaning to peer through the glass, I was confronted by a desperate glare from Nero Wolfe, from his seat in the bedroom which we had engaged in one of the new-style pullmans, where I had at last got him deposited intact. He shouted at me through the closed window:

“Archie! Confound you! Get in here! They're going to start the train! You have the tickets!”

I yelled back at him, “You said it was too close to smoke in there! It's only 9:32! I've decided not to go! Pleasant dreams!”

I sauntered on. Tickets my eye. It wasn't tickets that bothered him; he was frantic with fear because he was alone on the train and it might begin to move. He hated things that moved, and was fond of arguing that nine times out of ten the places that people were on their way to were no improvement whatever on those they were coming from. But by gum I had got him to the station twenty minutes ahead of time, notwithstanding such items as three bags and two suitcases and two overcoats for a four days' absence in the month of April, Fritz Brenner standing on the stoop with tears in his eyes as we left the house, Theodore Horstmann running out, after we had got Wolfe packed in the sedan, to ask a few dozen more questions about the orchids, and even tough little Saul Panzer, after dumping us at the station, choking off a tremolo as he told Wolfe goodbye. You might have thought we were bound for the stratosphere to shine up the moon and pick wild stars.

At that, just as I flipped my butt through the crack between the train and the platform, I could have picked a star right there-or at least touched one. She passed by close enough for me to get a faint whiff of something that might have come from a perfume bottle but seemed only natural under the circumstances, and while her facial effect might have been technicolor, it too gave you the impression that it was intended that way from the outset and needed no alterations. The one glance I got was enough to show that she was no factory job, but hand-made throughout. Attached to the arm of a tall bulky man in a brown cape and a brown floppy cloth hat, she unhooked herself to precede him and follow the porter into the car back of ours. I muttered to myself, "My heart was all I had and now that's gone, I should have put my bloody blinders on," shrugged with assumed indifference, and entered the vestibule as they began the all aboard.

In our room, Wolfe was on the wide seat by the window, holding himself braced with both hands; but in spite of that they fooled him on the timing, and when the jerk came he lurched forward and back again. From the corner of my eye I saw the fury all over him, decided it was better to ignore realities, got a magazine from my bag and perched

on the undersized chair in the corner. Still holding on with both hands, he shouted at me:

**“We are due at Kanawha Spa at 11:25 tomorrow morning! Fourteen hours! This car is shifted to another train at Pittsburgh! In case of delay we would have to wait for an afternoon train! Should anything happen to our engine-”**

I put in coldly, **“I am not deaf, sir. And while you can beef as much as you want to, because it’s your own breath if you want to waste it, I do object to your implying either in word or tone that I am in any way responsible for your misery. I made this speech up last night, knowing I would need it. This is your idea, this trip. You wanted to come-at least, you wanted to be at Kanawha Spa. Six months ago you told Vukcic that you would go there on April 6th. Now you regret it. So do I. As far as our engine is concerned, they use only the newest and best on these crack trains, and not even a child-”**

We had emerged from under the river and were gathering speed as we clattered through the Jersey yards. Wolfe shouted, **“An engine has two thousand three hundred and nine moving parts!”**

I put down the magazine and grinned at him, thinking I might as well. He had enginephobia and there was no sense in letting him brood, because it would only make it worse for both of us. His mind had to be switched to something else. But before I could choose a pleasant subject to open up on, an interruption came which showed that while he may have been frantic with fear when I was smoking a cigarette on the platform, he had not been demoralized. There was a rap on the door and it opened to admit a porter with a glass and three bottles of beer on a tray. He pulled out a trick stand for the glass and one bottle, which he opened, put the other two bottles in a rack with an opener, accepted currency from me in payment, and departed. As the train lurched on a curve Wolfe scowled with rage; then, as it took the straightaway again, he hoisted the glass and swallowed once, twice, five times, and set it

down empty. He licked his lips for the foam, then wiped them with his handkerchief, and observed with no sign at all of hysterics:

“Excellent. I must remember to tell Fritz my first was precisely at temperature.”

“You could wire him from Philadelphia.”

“Thank you. I am being tortured and you know it. Would you mind earning your salary, Mr. Goodwin, by getting a book from my bag? *Inside Europe*, by John Gunther.”

I got the bag and fished it out.

By the time the second interruption came, half an hour later, we were rolling smooth and swift through the night in middle Jersey, the three beer bottles were empty, Wolfe was frowning at his book but actually reading, as I could tell by the pages he turned, and I had waded nearly to the end of an article on Collation of Evidence in the *Journal of Criminology*. I hadn't got much from it, because I was in no condition to worry about collating evidence, on account of my mind being taken up with the problem of getting Nero Wolfe undressed. At home, of course, he did it himself, and equally of course I wasn't under contract as a valet-being merely secretary, bodyguard, office manager, assistant detective, and goat-but the fact remained that in two hours it would be midnight, and there he was with his pants on, and someone was going to have to figure out a way of getting them off without upsetting the train. Not that he was clumsy, but he had had practically no practice at balancing himself while on a moving vehicle, and to pull pants from under him as he lay was out of the question, since he weighed something between 250 and a ton. He had never, so far as I knew, been on a scale, so it was anybody's guess. I was guessing high that night, on account of the problem I was confronted with, and was just ready to settle on 310 as a basis for calculations, when there was a knock on the door and I yelled come in.

**It was Marko Vukcic. I had known he would be on our train, through a telephone conversation between him and Wolfe a week before, but the last time I had seen him was when he had dined with us at Wolfe's house early in March-a monthly occurrence. He was one of the only two men whom Wolfe called by their first names, apart from employees. He closed the door behind him and stood there, not fat but huge, like a lion upright on its hind legs, with no hat covering his dense tangle of hair.**

**Wolfe shouted at him, "Marko! Haven't you got a seat or a bed somewhere? Why the devil are you galloping around in the bowels of this monster?"**

**Vukcic showed magnificent white teeth in a grin. "Nero, you damn old hermit! I am not a turtle in aspic, like you. Anyhow, you are really on the train-what a triumph! I have found you-and also a colleague, in the next car back, whom I had not seen for five years. I have been talking with him, and suggested he should meet you. He would be glad to have you come to his compartment."**

**Wolfe compressed his lips. "That, I presume, is funny. I am not an acrobat. I shall not stand up until this thing is stopped and the engine unhooked."**

**"Then how-" Vukcic laughed, and glanced at the pile of luggage. "But you seem to be provided with equipment. I did not really expect you to move. So instead, I'll bring him to you. If I may. That really is what I came to ask."**

**"Now?"**

**"This moment."**

**Wolfe shook his head. "I beg off, Marko. Look at me. I am in no condition for courtesy or conversation."**

**"Just briefly, then, for a greeting. I have suggested it."**

**“No. I think not. Do you realize that if this thing suddenly stopped, for some obstacle or some demoniac whim, we should all of us continue straight ahead at eighty miles an hour? Is that a situation for social niceties?” He compressed his lips again, and then moved them to pronounce firmly, “To-morrow.”**

**Vukcic, probably almost as accustomed as Wolfe to having his own way, tried to insist, but it didn't get him anywhere. He tried to kid him out of it, but that didn't work either. I yawned. Finally Vukcic gave it up with a shrug. “To-morrow, then. If we meet no obstacle and are still alive. I'll tell Berin you have gone to bed-”**

**“Berin?” Wolfe sat up, and even relaxed his grip on the arm of his seat. “Not Jerome Berin?”**

**“Certainly. He is one of the fifteen.”**

**“Bring him.” Wolfe half closed his eyes. “By all means. I want to see him. Why the devil didn't you say it was Berin?”**

**Vukcic waved a hand, and departed. In three minutes he was back, holding the door open for his colleague to enter; only it appeared to be two colleagues. The most important one, from my point of view, entered first. She had removed her wrap but her hat was still on, and the odor, faint and fascinating, was the same as when she had passed me on the station platform. I had a chance now to observe that she was as young as love's dream, and her eyes looked dark purple in that light, and her lips told you that she was a natural but reserved smiler. Wolfe gave her a swift astonished glance, then transferred his attention to the tall bulky man behind her, whom I recognized even without the brown cape and the floppy cloth hat.**

**Vukcic had edged around. “Mr. Nero Wolfe. Mr. Goodwin. Mr. Jerome Berin. His daughter, Miss Constanza Berin.”**

**After a bow I let them amplify the acknowledgments while I steered the seating in the desired direction. It ended with the three big guys on**

the seats, and love's dream on the undersized chair with me on a suitcase beside it. Then I realized that was bad staging, and shifted across with my back to the wall so I could see it better. She had favored me with one friendly innocent smile and then let me be. From the corner of my eye I saw Wolfe wince as Vukcic got a cigar going and Jerome Berin filled up a big old black pipe and lit it behind clouds. Since I had learned this was her father, I had nothing but friendly feelings for him. He had black hair with a good deal of gray in it, a trimmed beard with even more gray, and deep eyes, bright and black.

He was telling Wolfe, "No, this is my first visit to America. Already I see the nature of her genius. No drafts on this train at all! None! And a motion as smooth as the sail of a gull! Marvelous!"

Wolfe shuddered, but he didn't see it. He went on. But he had given me a scare, with his "first visit to America." I leaned forward and muttered at the dream-star. "Can you talk English?"

She smiled at me. "Oh yes. Very much. We lived in London three years. My father was at the Tarleton."

"Okay." I nodded and settled back for a better focus. I was reflecting, it only goes to show how wise I was not to go into harness with any of the temptations I have been confronted with previously. If I had, I would be gnashing my teeth now. So the thing to do is to hold everything until my teeth are too old to be gnashed. But there was no law against looking.

Her father was saying, "I understand from Vukcic that you are to be Servan's guest. Then the last evening will be yours. This is the first time an American has had that honor. In 1932, in Paris, when Armand Fleury was still alive and was our dean, it was the premier of France who addressed us. In 1927, it was Ferid Khaldah, who was not then a professional. Vukcic tells me you are an agent de surete. Really?" He surveyed Wolfe's area.

Wolfe nodded. "But not precisely. I am not a policeman; I am a private detective. I entrap criminals, and find evidence to imprison them or kill them, for hire."

"Marvelous! Such dirty work."

Wolfe lifted his shoulders half an inch for a shrug, but the train jiggled him out of it. He directed a frown, not at Berin, but at the train. "Perhaps. Each of us finds an activity he can tolerate. The manufacturer of baby carriages, caught himself in the system's web and with no monopoly of greed, entraps his workers in the toils of his necessity. Dolichocephalic patriots and brachycephalic patriots kill each other, and the brains of both rot before their statues can get erected. A garbageman collects table refuse, while a senator collects evidence of the corruption of highly placed men—might one not prefer the garbage as less unsavory? Only the table scavenger gets less pay; that is the real point. I do not soil myself cheaply; I charge high fees."

Berin passed it. He chuckled. "But you are not going to discuss table refuse for us. Are you?"

"No. Mr. Servan has invited me to speak on—as he stated the subject: *Contributions Americaines a la Haute Cuisine.*"

"Bah!" Berin snorted. "There are none."

Wolfe raised his brows. "None, sir?"

"None. I am told there is good family cooking in America; I haven't sampled it. I have heard of the New England boiled dinner and corn pone and clam chowder and milk gravy. This is for the multitude and certainly not to be scorned if good. But it is not for masters." He snorted again. "Those things are to la haute cuisine what sentimental love songs are to Beethoven and Wagner."

"Indeed." Wolfe wiggled a finger at him. "Have you eaten terrapin stewed with butter and chicken broth and sherry?"