

“FIRECRACKERS”

by Archie Goodwin

XIV

FRITZ AWAKENED ME AT 4 PM. ALTHOUGH I LIKE MY FULL EIGHT HOURS, I felt remarkably refreshed. My rented tuxedo was a little the worse for wear but it was all I had so I climbed into it. I left off the spats. Fritz met me downstairs and politely asked if I'd like something to eat. I told him I'd settle for a glass of milk and followed him into the kitchen. I didn't object when he added a plate of sandwiches, thin slivers of ham topped with pineapple rings on thin toast, warm from the broiler. After putting away two of them, I figured I could easily get used to Fritz's larder. Thus fortified, I decided to walk to The Gazette building at the address Foster had given me in the upper Forties near First Avenue. I walked through huge revolving doors into a spacious lobby, lavishly decorated with Christmas trees and greenery, dominated by an enormous Gazette sign high up on the marble wall. As I'd been instructed, I took the express elevator to the 20th floor and walked through the open office door that was simply labeled Lon Cohen. If he ever had a title, I don't know to this day what it could be. Yet, I was soon to learn that this office, just two doors down from the publisher, is the unquestionable command center of The Gazette. You'd never know it from the tiny 9 x 12 area with its cluttered desk. And you'd never take Lon Cohen for the top executive he is, judging from his dark complexion, black hair slicked back on his head, neat appearance and quiet manner. He was talking on one of three phones on his desk but waved me to a vacant chair. I swept some newspapers on the floor, hung up my hat and coat, and sat down.

1990, Edited By Charles E. Burns, Charter Member, The Wolfe Pack, P. O. Box 221, Sturbridge, MA 01566, Phone: (508) 347-3373.

"I take it you're Mr. Goodwin," he greeted me as he cradled the phone. "My, aren't we fancy? Do you always make your calls in formal clothes?"

I replied in kind. "Not always," I said. "But I was given to understand that you were a real big shot around here so I decided to arrive in style instead of in my usual crummy old work clothes."

He smiled. "Mr. Goodwin," he began but I interrupted him. "I wish you'd call me Archie," I said. "Even in my expensive rented tuxedo, I still think of Mr. Goodwin as my father."

"OK, Archie," he continued. "You seem to have a penchant for turning up at the scene of the crime. First, at Pier 64, now at Rusterman's." So he was well informed. I decided to level with him. "I never planned to be at the scene of a crime when I took a job at Pier 64. But being at Rusterman's was no coincidence. Nero Wolfe, a private detective and friend of Mr. Vukcic, had an inkling that trouble was brewing at the restaurant. He hired me to help him investigate. Unfortunately, I was unable to prevent Mr. Rusterman's death. Now, Mr. Wolfe and I intend to prove Mr. Vukcic's innocence."

Cohen's eyebrows lifted in obvious surprise. "Archie, I appreciate your candor. It's not often I experience that quality. Seems to me I've heard of Nero Wolfe. Doesn't Saul Panzer do some work for him?"

"Never heard of him," I replied.

"Now I remember," continued Cohen. "Isn't Wolfe supposed to be some kind of genius?"

"He must be," I answered. "He sits at home playing with his orchids and eating gourmet meals while I do all the work."

"OK," said Cohen, "How can I help?"

"We figure that someone tried to shake down Rusterman, lost his head, and ended up killing him. I'm sure you're aware that The Angel controls the bootleg business in this area but this doesn't sound like his racket. It's probably some small-time hood trying to muscle in. Harry Foster thought you might have some idea of what's going on."

Cohen thought for a moment. "For the last few weeks, we've been aware that someone was playing the protection racket with some of the small businesses in midtown Manhattan. Frankly, it didn't interest us as any great scoop. More lurid crimes are committed here every day. And they're the kind that sell newspapers."

"However, perhaps I can give you one lead. I happen to know that Dopplemeyer's Delicatessen was recently scared into paying protection money. Jacob Dopplemeyer, whom I've patronized for years, told me about it in confidence. I suggested he go to the police but, like so many immigrants, he doesn't trust them. I don't have the time, the staff or the inclination to look into such a small-time story but I do feel sorry for Dopplemeyer. Maybe he might give you some helpful information." He picked up one of the phones, instructed someone to get Dopplemeyer, then held a brief conversation. He wrote down an address and handed it to me. "He's still scared to death but agreed to see you. Try not to frighten him more." Then, he added, "I'd appreciate getting the inside dope if it's at all newsworthy."

I picked up my hat and coat. "You'll be the second to know - after Mr. Wolfe."

As I headed out the door, he seemed to have an afterthought. There was a twinkle in his eye as he remarked with studied casualness, "By the way, Archie, as I said, I like a man with candor. Especially in a card game. Do you by any chance ever indulge in the lucrative game of poker?"

With a straight face, I replied, "You never heard of Riverboat Goodwin, the scourge of the Mississippi? Let me say that while I am indeed a man of candor, don't count on that to give you the slightest hint as to whether my hand's full of aces or an absolute bust. In addition to candor, I also have some expertise in dissembling. I just learned that word from Mr. Wolfe, but I learned to dissemble long ago. Sure, I play poker, as long as the stakes aren't too high."

He grinned. "We always leave the suckers enough for carfare," he said. "Call me after Christmas and we'll arrange for a game. But, in the meantime, get rid of that damn' tux. It ain't your style."

"My monkey suit?" I said. "That's my gamblin' outfit. The cut of the coat is just right to hide a few aces up the sleeves."

He waved me away. "So long, sucker," he said. I saluted and left.

XV

It was just after 6 o'clock when I left The Gazette. I debated whether to call Wolfe. I'd learned enough about his habits to know he'd be down from the plant rooms but not yet at the dinner table. Still, the next step seemed obvious. I looked at the slip Lon had given me. It showed an address on 39th Street near Lexington. As it wasn't much out of my way, I decided to see what I could learn from Dopplemeyer before making my report.

The aroma as I entered the delicatessen, a blend of all those wonderful delicacies, made me forget I'd eaten just a few hours before. It seemed that all of New York was rushing in and out, departing with last-minute supper selections of fresh bread, cheese, meats, pickles, dumplings, lox and bagels. They were keeping the two counter people busy, a short, roly-poly character, with Dutch-Boy blonde hair and a bushy blonde mustache, whom I took to be Dopplemeyer, and a pretty blonde fraulein who was also on the roly-poly side but with all the rolies and polies in all the right places.

A couple of small tables in the rear, presently unoccupied, were evidently for customers who couldn't wait to get home with their purchases. I decided I was one of them. When I had a chance, I introduced myself to Dopplemeyer, told him I'd wait 'til he had a few minutes, and ordered a glass of milk and a pastrami on rye. He suggested I take a seat and in a few minutes the fraulein brought my milk and sandwich to the table. I was glad to see that the lower portion of her anatomy, which had been hidden behind the counter, was every bit as shapely as the upper region. The sandwich, served with a huge saltwater pickle right out of the barrel, was every bit as delicious as I'd anticipated.

After about ten minutes, when the last customer had finally left, Dopplemeyer closed and locked the door and sat down at the table. I was surprised and not at all displeased that he brought the fraulein with him and introduced her as his daughter, Frieda. On closer inspection, she was even more shapely than I thought.

She gave me a big dimpled smile, which I returned, but Dopplemeyer was all business. He was nervous and fidgety, frequently darting glances around as if he were fearful of finding a spy in every corner. I tried to calm him by assuring him I intended to find out who was extorting money from him and put a stop to it. I told him not to worry. He said he wasn't afraid for himself, only for his daughter. I asked him to describe how he got into this fix, starting from the beginning.

It was pretty much the same story as with Vukcic. He was a little vague at first but with a little encouragement from me, and Roly-Poly chiming in now and then, I was able to extract a few details. Last week, just as he and Frieda were closing, a shabbily dressed man with a stocking cap obscuring half his face barged in and offered to supply bottled booze for him to sell to his customers. Dopplemeyer wanted no part of it. Then, the intruder offered protection. When Dopplemeyer protested that he didn't need protection, the bootlegger made it clear that unless he went along with it, bad things could happen to Frieda. He would have resisted but Frieda was the light of his life and he'd do anything to keep her safe.

The booze was delivered by arrangement late the next night by a couple of nondescript workmen. Word quickly got around among the customers. His business actually picked up. However, Dopplemeyer was scared out of his wits. He didn't know whether he was more frightened of the gangster or the cops. In Berlin, where he came from, the German police weren't exactly friends of the little man.

So far so good. But I didn't get what I wanted most, a good description of the mobster. Dopplemeyer and his daughter had seen him only that one time in a darkened delicatessen. I kept probing but the most I learned was that the man was big. Dark. Rough. Tough. Wore a stocking cap. Had a mustache. Needed a shave. Smelled bad. That about narrowed it down to half the population of Manhattan.

Finally, I asked if he knew when the first payment was due. His angry response was interspersed with a few choice Teutonic curses I'd never heard but were clearly not meant for polite conversation. Even if I could, I wouldn't translate. After all, this is a family narrative. Anyway, you get the idea.

"Ja!" he sputtered. "Dot scum! What time do I close Christmas Eve, he asks. Like a dumkopf I tell him vier - four o'clock. He orders me to wait after closing time 'til he comes to collect. Then, he laughs in my face and says, 'Be sure to have my Christmas present ready!' He was still laughing when he left."

All kinds of possibilities were running through my mind; I thought it best to check them out with the genius. I told Dopplemeyer that he'd hear from me the next day. I wasn't quite as confident as I made out. As I was leaving, Frieda wished me Auf Wedersehen and insisted on giving me a piece of her very own apple strudel. I chewed on it as I walked toward 35th Street. I also chewed on the information I'd gathered. The information wasn't entirely digestible. The strudel was delicious. About the only thing I decided was that I'd like to have another piece of Frieda's strudel.

XVI

Wolfe was in his office reading one of three books on his desk. I noticed the title, "The Sun Also Rises" by Ernest Hemingway. I hoped it would rise and shed a little light on our problem. Wolfe looked up and asked if I'd had dinner. I told him I'd had deli delicacies topped off with roly-poly strudel. He frowned, placed a bookmark carefully between the pages, laid down the book and asked, "Well?"

"Not too well," I replied, "but at least a start." I then gave him a full report. As before, he sat back, eyes closed to narrow slits, sat up and uttered one word, "Satisfactory." I didn't realize then that this was about the highest praise he ever offered.

As I was about to make a suggestion, the doorbell rang. Fritz answered it and ushered in a dignified looking gentleman, well groomed, nattily dressed in a blue pinstripe suit. Wolfe shook hands with him and introduced him as Henry Barber, the lawyer he'd engaged for Vukcic. Barber told us that Vukcic was being held without bail. Barber had to pull a few strings but was finally allowed to see Vukcic as long as Rowcliff and Cramer were present. Wolfe asked for a full report. I must admit that I was secretly pleased as, unlike my report, Wolfe had to keep interrupting and asking questions to keep him on track and get the information he wanted.

Barber won my approval by declaring that Rowcliff was an idiot and that Cramer was not nearly as convinced as he pretended regarding Vukcic's guilt. Vukcic had evidently calmed down since I last saw him, and gave Barber a fairly lucid account of what had happened, along with a few details I hadn't extracted. My attention perked up when he began to relay Vukcic's description of his assailant. It sounded very much like a description I'd heard just a couple of hours before - large man, dark complexion, mustache, stocking cap, dirty, smelly. I really became excited when he mentioned a slight facial scar.

Without saying a word, I got up abruptly, walked over to the empty desk, looked up a telephone number from a book in the drawer and gave it to the operator. When it was answered, I asked one question, listened a moment and hung up. Wolfe, evidently furious at my seeming impertinence, was glaring at me without a word. Even that couldn't spoil my moment of triumph. "Mr. Wolfe," I cried, "I believe I know who killed Mr. Rusterman!"

Both Wolfe and Barber looked at me as though I'd lost what few marbles I might have possessed. I hastened to explain. "That description which Mr. Barber elicited from Mr. Vukcic fits the description of a man I know all too well, one Mike Jablonski! When he turned up missing after that warehouse fiasco, I assumed that The Angel had sent him to a watery grave. But . . ."

If I thought Wolfe would be pleased with this information, I couldn't have been more mistaken. He interrupted in a tone that cut like a knife. "Who," he asked icily, "or what is The Angel?"

For an expert engaged in criminal investigation, there were astonishing gaps in Wolfe's knowledge of the criminal element in Manhattan. I quickly explained about my meeting with Giuseppe DeAngelo and how he had told me he'd take care of Jablonski. "Why," Wolfe asked in a voice that dripped venom, "was I not

told about your meeting with this so-called Angel?" I stammered that I didn't think it had anything to do with my assignment.

"Mr. Goodwin," he retorted, "you are not paid to think. Confound it, you are paid to provide information – in its entirety! I shall decide what is and isn't relevant. Bah! With the facts you have just disclosed, this investigation might well have taken an entirely different tack. Now, please continue."

Thoroughly chastened, I went on. "Mr. Vukcic's description of his assailant pretty closely matches the description of the hoodlum who pulled the protection racket on poor Dopplemeyer. I just phoned him and asked if the man who shook him down had a facial scar. That evidently jogged his memory. His answer was, 'Ach der lieber! Ja!' I took this for an affirmative. Now all we have to do is catch him. And I think . . ."

I never got to tell him what I thought. Maybe it was because he'd just told me I wasn't paid to think. In any event, he was no longer with me. Slumped in his chair, with his eyes completely closed, his lips began to move slowly in and out. For a moment, I thought he might be having a stroke. I started to rise from my chair. Barber, who knew him well, stopped me. He put his finger to his lips, leaned close to me and whispered, "Shhh. You are witnessing genius at work. Wait."

We waited about twenty minutes. Wolfe slowly opened his eyes and said simply, "Instructions." He then talked for another twenty minutes while I made a few notes on a piece of scrap paper from the desk. When he had finished, he picked up a book, not the one he'd been reading. Does the man read three books at once? I have trouble enough with one. Maybe he is a genius after all.

As I was leaving, he called, "Archie!" I was relieved to be on a first-name basis again. He continued, "I usually do not offer free advice but I shall make an exception that might just save you a little of your hard-earned wages. I doubt very much that you would make a good poker player."

While I pondered this, he added, "And, Archie, get rid of that fool . . . monkey suit."

XVII

Early Thursday morning, I was at the delicatessen when it opened. Dopplemeyer greeted me with a hearty "Guten Morgen". I explained the program of the day to him and Frieda. We agreed that I would sit at one of the back tables, with a cup of coffee and a newspaper as props, where I could keep my eye on anything that went on.

With one exception, it was an uneventful day. Frieda kept me well supplied with hot coffee, freshly ground at the counter, and later with a continuing parade of knockwurst and sauerbratten and liverwurst and sauerkraut and, of course, strudel. From time to time, I got up and walked around, taking inventory inside and outside. Early in the morning, I noticed a car parked across the street a little way down from the deli. I couldn't get a good look at the driver who was slumped down behind the wheel. An hour later, he was still there. I checked again just before noon and he still hadn't moved. It looked like time to investigate.

I put on my hat and coat, walked slowly across the street, and strolled casually past the parked car. As far as I could see, it was occupied by a nose, attached to a

little man in a shabby brown suit, no overcoat in spite of the below freezing weather, and an old brown cap on his head. He was smoking a cigarette. The smoke, drifting through a partially opened window, brought an aroma that reminded me of the stuff we used to put in the fields back home to help the crops grow.

I knocked on the window and he rolled it down without hesitation. My right hand had a firm grip on the automatic in my coat pocket. In my most polite voice, I asked, "Would you mind explaining why you're parked here with your eye on the delicatessen?"

He wasn't the least perturbed. "Please don't misunderstand this next motion, Mr. Goodwin," he said. So he knew who I was. My hand tightened on the automatic. "I am going to reach slowly into my breast pocket for identification."

I followed his movement closely, ready to act at the first wrong move. But he simply pulled out a leather wallet and handed it to me. I opened it and observed a private investigator's license in the name of Saul Panzer. The name seemed to ring a bell. Then I remembered it was mentioned by Lon Cohen. I handed it back and asked again what he was doing here.

"Mr. Wolfe explained your assignment to me," he replied, "and asked me to provide backup in case you needed it."

"Why the hell should I need it?" I asked irritably. "I'm only after one man, not an army! And why in hell didn't Wolfe tell me?"

"You'll have to ask him," replied Panzer. "But I can tell you this. I've done work for him before and he frequently operates on the theory that the less anyone knows, the better he'll perform. I don't necessarily subscribe to that theory but it's hard to quarrel with the success Mr. Wolfe always has. My guess would be that he believed you would be more efficient if you felt the entire responsibility was on your shoulders."

I was still mad so I took it out on him. "Well, you're one hell of a detective!" I exclaimed. "A baby could have spotted you casing the joint."

"Archie," he said quietly. "Neither you nor anyone else would have noticed me unless I wanted to be noticed. In spite of Mr. Wolfe's theories, I thought it best if you knew you could count on help if you needed it. This way we have both inside and outside surveillance. "Otherwise," he assured me, "I wouldn't be out here freezing my butt off and starving to death."

I couldn't stay mad at the little guy. "Stay here." I said, "and I'll get you some of the best knockwurst and sauerkraut you've ever tasted. And maybe you can get the fraulein to warm you up." We shook hands. I returned to the deli and asked Frieda to bring him a hearty meal.

Dopplemeyer closed up shop about 6 PM. I waved good-bye to Panzer and walked to West 35th to make my report. I arrived just at dinner time and was pleased when Wolfe asked me to join him. We sat down in the dining room. As I dug into a heaping plate of savory pork fillets, braised in spiced wine, and salad with a delectable dressing that Fritz called "Devil's Rain", I began to report. He stopped me with, "Archie, there is little enough leisure time to relax and enjoy the bounty of this great land, enhanced by the culinary skills of a master chef. Let us not spoil it by talking business."

He then asked if I'd seen an item in the paper about a Dr. Robert H. Goddard who had fired the first liquid fuel propelled rocket in some obscure little town in Massachusetts. "It rated just one small paragraph in **The Times**," he said. "They have no realization of its tremendous significance. Within our lifetime, the invention of this rocket will enable us to place a man on the moon and to learn more about this universe than we have learned in the entire history of time." He then discoursed for an hour on the exploration of interplanetary space. I thought again about the logician who could infer an entire Atlantic from a single drop of water. But a man on the moon because of a dinky Fourth of July skyrocket? Horse Apples! But I had the good sense not to say anything.

After dinner, we retired to the office. I gravitated to the empty desk as if I belonged there. Over coffee, I gave Wolfe a brief report on the day's surveillance, including my meeting with Panzer. I was careful not to express my initial feelings about having backup. Anyway, by this time, I kind of liked the little guy with the big nose, and agreed to myself that he might be helpful.

Wolfe had no comment except to say that Saul must have felt it would be beneficial for us to work together. This merely confirmed the fact that I hadn't spotted him due to any carelessness on his part.

Wolfe repeated his instructions for the next day, then added, "I have no intention of having Marko languish in jail over Christmas. This holiday means a great deal to him. Therefore, I am determined to exonerate him before the day is over tomorrow. In all probability, I can accomplish this only if two of our assumptions are correct: first, that the man who killed Rusterman is the same hoodlum that's harassing Dopplemeyer; second, that you bring him to me tomorrow. Otherwise, I shall look like a complete witling to the law and everyone else. More important, we shall have failed. Archie, I am counting on you."

I assured him I'd do my best, and went back to my rooming house. I needed a good night's sleep.

XVIII

Friday. Christmas Eve. What a way to spend it! Yet, it was filled with anticipation. Although I had promised Dopplemeyer no involvement on his part, it wasn't quite working out that way. However, as he could see the possible end to his trouble, he didn't seem to mind. In fact, if anything, he had begun to overcome his fear.

Saul was already parked across the street when I arrived at the delicatessen. As we waited through that long day, time seemed to stand still. There were few customers, most evidently busy with last-minute Christmas shopping. The few who did come in were usually after a last-minute bottle of Christmas cheer.

As the clock wound down toward closing time, I retired to the small back office where I would be out of sight but still able to keep my eye on the front door. I thought it best for Frieda to come with me. Ordinarily, I would have welcomed the close quarters away from the watchful eye of Dopplemeyer but my mind was on other things. At 4 o'clock, Dopplemeyer closed and locked the door, pulled down the shades on the windows that fronted the street, and dimmed the interior lights. Still we waited. 5 o'clock. 6 o'clock. 7 o'clock. The tension mounted with every slow minute.

Suddenly, the silence was shattered by a loud knocking at the door. In the stillness and semi-darkness it sounded like thunder. The figure outlined in the doorway couldn't have been more unexpected, even if it was Christmas Eve. I nodded to Dopplemeyer to open the door. Santa Claus walked in!

As he entered, I could see that Saul was crossing the street. Santa swaggered in, reeling slightly. He evidently had a head start on the Christmas cheer. He took a small sack from his shoulder and held it out toward Dopplemeyer.

"Ho! Ho! Ho!" he roared. "It's old Santa. This old Santa don't give no presents. This old Santa takes. Time to pay old Santa for whiskey and protection. Time to fill up the old sack. Hurry!" I felt a tingling up my spine as I recognized the voice.

Dopplemeyer played his part well. He mumbled that he had to open the cash register. As he moved toward the counter, Santa turned to accompany him. That's when I broke quickly from the office, gun in hand. At the same time, Saul rushed in through the front door. Old Santa didn't stand a chance. I jammed my gun, none too gently, into his back. Saul quickly frisked him and retrieved a fully-loaded revolver and a wicked-looking knife. I reached over, pulled off his whiskers, and grinned at Saul. "Saul, meet Santa Claus, otherwise known as Mike Jablonski!"

Jablonski didn't recognize me at first. Then, it dawned on him. "Goodwin!" he exclaimed. "Yeah!" I replied. "That hick hayseed from the country! Let me assure you this gun is in perfect working condition. I have a score to settle with you and I'd like nothing better than to put a slug in your fat gizzard right here and now. Make just one funny move and you're gone!"

I told Saul to keep him covered. Then, I went to the phone in the back room and made two calls. The first was to a number I had locked in my memory. The second was to Wolfe. I filled him in quickly. For the second time since I'd met him, I heard one word, "Satisfactory."

By this time, the street was pretty well deserted. Making sure no one saw us, we hustled Jablonski into Saul's car. Dopplemeyer and his daughter came with us. In a few minutes, we pulled up in front of the old brownstone. Fritz let us in. As instructed, Saul led Jablonski into the front room and closed the door behind them. The Dopplemeyers and I entered the office.

Quite a sight greeted us. Wolfe, seated at his desk, loomed like some Far Eastern Sultan holding court. Seated in yellow chairs before him were Barber, Vukcic, Morley, Rowcliff, Cramer, Stebbins, Felix and Antonio. I finally admitted to myself that Wolfe must be a genius to get this gang there on Christmas Eve. And don't think he ever let me forget it, as he frequently reminded me, on the many occasions he gave me the impossible task of getting people to his office for one of his charades. But that was in the future. As soon as Vukcic saw me, he jumped up and embraced me like a brother.

I made sure that Dopplemeyer and Frieda were comfortable, then took the chair at the empty desk. Wolfe made the introductions. Nothing like old world courtesy when you're after a murderer!

The introductions, however, were the full extent of courtesy, old world or any other kind. From here on in, Wolfe was in complete control and he let everyone know it. "With the exception of those kindly assisting me in this case," he began,

"I make no apologies for this gathering on Christmas Eve. Each of you here tonight is motivated by one reason only, that of self interest.

"One who has been outrageously accused and imprisoned is as innocent as that Babe who was born nearly two thousand years ago tonight, and who was later just as falsely accused and crucified. Even after that mockery of a trial so long ago, it seems that civilization has progressed no further. A man must prove his own innocence rather than rely on the wheels of justice to provide proof, beyond any doubt, of his guilt.

"This farce has gone on long enough. Tonight, I intend to prove conclusively that Marko Vukcic is innocent of the ridiculous charge of murder. In doing so, I shall provide sufficient evidence for the arrest of the culprit who did kill Mr. Rusterman. I warn you, this session may last well into the night. I have many questions to ask and will not desist until I have satisfactory answers to them all."

Here Rowcliff intervened. "I wish to state unequivocally that this is not an official investigation. It is not sanctioned by the Police Department or by the District Attorney's office. No one is under compulsion to answer this man's questions and you are all free to leave at any time."

There was a general stirring among the group but no one made any move to leave. Wolfe glared at Rowcliff. "Thank you, Lieutenant," he said with thinly disguised sarcasm. "I was about to add that clarification. May I point out that the freedom to leave applies most sincerely to yourself."

Rowcliff started to reply. I put in my two cents worth. "L-l-lieutenant," I drawled, "Sh-sh-shut up!" He turned almost white with rage but he had the good sense to shut up.

Wolfe then continued, "I understand that the evidence against Mr. Vukcic consists primarily of the flimsy motive of greed and the testimony of a so-called eyewitness. Neither of these is valid. The supposed motive of greed is so absurd that it hardly needs examination. Let us dispense with it once and for all. "Marko," he asked, "what is your position at Rusterman's?"

You could sense the roar of the cornered lion behind Marko's response. "Nero," he growled, "you know very well that I am Master Chef and also Manager of the restaurant."

"And do you consider yourself well-paid?"

There was the hint of a sob in Vukcic's voice as he answered calmly but proudly. "Herman Rusterman was the most generous man I have ever known. My salary as Master Chef was as high as any of those in the largest restaurants in New York! When old age prevented Mr. Rusterman from continuing active management, he insisted on, what you call, profit sharing? This more than doubled my salary. I have all the money I need."

"And now that he has so sadly left us," continued Wolfe, "I understand that his will bequeathed ownership of the restaurant entirely in your hands. How does this affect your position and income?"

Vukcic looked at Wolfe with amazement. "Why, of course, I continue as Master Chef and Manager. That's all I ever wanted. I do not need ownership. Believe me, I would rather have his friendship and guidance. He was an old man, with not much longer to live. But he should not have died in this way!"

His voice broke and a lone tear rolled down his cheek. No one in that room could doubt his sincerity. Wolfe allowed the silence to remain unbroken for a full minute. "I believe we can now dispense with greed," he continued in a voice so low it was almost a whisper. He slowly looked around the room. No one uttered a word. Abruptly, he turned his icy glare on Antonio. "You," he snarled, "tell us exactly what you claim to have seen the night Mr. Rusterman was killed."

Antonio's shifty eyes darted around the room as if seeking help. He got none. He wet his lips and, without looking at Wolfe, began almost in a monotone. "I am cleaning in dining room when I hear sound of loud argument upstairs. I go up to see what is happening. Door to Mr. Rusterman's office is part open. I hear Mr. Vukcic make threats. I stay back in hall where I am not seen but can peek in. I see Mr. Vukcic take out gun and shoot Mr. Rusterman."

Wolfe regarded him coldly. "That," he remarked, "is a most interesting story, especially considering that every word you uttered is a blatant lie."

Wolfe turned to Felix and asked, "From the dining room downstairs, is it possible to hear anything in the floor above?"

"Absolutely not," replied Felix. "If that were possible it would disturb the diners. We cannot have that. The walls upstairs are soundproof. And the door from the stairs is always left closed. Furthermore, no one except myself is ever allowed upstairs under any circumstance. Antonio lies."

Wolfe turned again to Antonio. "Is it not true," he continued, "that you were recently given your notice for incompetence and insubordination? That you held Mr. Vukcic responsible? That you saw the shooting as your opportunity to get back at him? That . . ."

Antonio kept interrupting each question with "No! No! No!" But each answer carried less conviction. He kept looking at Felix with both resentment and fear. Finally, Felix spoke directly to him. "Antonio," he said quietly, "you are no damn good. You know perfectly well that Mr. Vukcic ordered me to fire you two weeks ago. I should have kicked you out right then. Instead, in the spirit of the Christmas Season, I said you could stay until the end of the year. This is the way you repay!"

As Felix was speaking, Antonio had shrunk further back in his chair. Wolfe's steely glare pierced him like a pin through an insect. "There's no place to hide," he declared. "Admit your malfeasance!"

Antonio had had enough. With downcast eyes, he stammered, "Yes, yes! I lied."

"So much for your eyewitness," Wolfe said with disgust. He addressed the District Attorney. "Inasmuch as his accusations were not made under oath, I suppose you can't charge him with perjury. Archie, get him out of my sight, and bring in the guest in the front room."

I grabbed Antonio and propelled him into the hall, handed him his hat and coat, and booted him out the front door. Then, Saul and I brought Jablonski to the office. As soon as we entered, Vukcic jumped to his feet and shouted, "That's him! That's the scum who murdered Mr. Rusterman! Let me at him!" He lunged forward and it took both Cramer and Stebbins to hold him back. We seated Jablonski away from Vukcic. Saul remained standing behind his chair. I returned to the desk.

Wolfe continued, "Gentlemen, and Lady," he conceded, "in spite of the gay red and white costume, this is not Santa Claus. Rather than a saint, it is a devil

named Michael Jablonski. He attempted to murder Mr. Goodwin. He attempted to extort money from Mr. Dopplemeyer." He paused. "And he murdered Mr. Rusterman."

The proverbial pin dropping would have sounded like a thunderclap in the deadly silence that pervaded the office. There was not only a complete absence of sound but also of movement. Both were finally broken by Rowcliff. He stood up and sputtered, "Those are serious charges. If any of them are true, you are guilty of withholding evidence and obstructing justice. I'll have your license!"

"Pfui!" interrupted Wolfe. "Sit down. All we have done is unearthed evidence and identified a criminal, something the police should have accomplished long ago."

District Attorney Morley spoke for the first time. "This is all very interesting, Mr. Wolfe, but you still haven't proved any of these charges."

"Must I do everything?" growled Wolfe. "Archie, is this the man who gave you a defective gun and set you up to be killed?" I assured him it was. "Mr. Dopplemeyer," he continued, "is this the man who tried to extort money by threatening the life of your daughter?" "Ja!" was the answer. "Mr. Vukcic, is this the man you encountered in Mr. Rusterman's office moments after he was murdered?" "Just let me at him!" roared Vukcic. Wolfe spoke to Morley. "There are three legitimate eyewitnesses," he declared.

He then turned to Jablonski. Unlike Antonio, Jablonski stubbornly maintained his innocence. The warehouse robbery? He had no idea the gun he gave Mr. Goodwin was defective. The delicatessen? He was simply on a mission of good will in the spirit of Christmas. Mr. Rusterman? He never heard of him! He even had the audacity to accuse me of kidnapping him!

No matter how hard Wolfe pried, he couldn't shake him. Finally, the District Attorney intervened.

"Mr. Wolfe," he said quietly, "you have certainly provided enough evidence to charge Mr. Jablonski with extortion. I'm not sure there's enough evidence on the warehouse. As for the murder of Mr. Rusterman, we have only Mr. Vukcic's word. This is neither sufficient to charge Mr. Jablonski nor to exonerate Mr. Vukcic."

Jablonski sat there smirking. I felt like taking a poke at him and beating it out of him. But after having seen Wolfe in action, I knew he hadn't even begun. Like a maestro leading a symphony orchestra to a crescendo, he started probing, almost softly at first, then with increasing tempo and volume. Questions came thick and fast. You could sense Jablonski's confidence beginning to wane. Beads of sweat broke out on his brow. He started to hesitate more and more with his answers. Gradually, his shoulders slumped. His jaw started to sag. His lips quivered. His voice grew hoarse. Before our very eyes, he became a different person, obviously cracking under the strain of a master interrogator. Clearly, it was only a matter of time before he broke. However, just as it seemed to everyone that Wolfe was about to administer the coup de grace, the doorbell rang. Having arranged previously with Fritz, I went to answer it. I pulled back the curtain in the door window and peered out. I smiled to see not only The Angel but also Tweedledee and Tweedledum! I opened the door and spoke briefly to the two goons who immediately left. The Angel brushed aside my offer to take his hat and coat. I ushered him into the office. All eyes turned towards us.

XIX

The party was finally over. The minions of the law left with Jablonski in tow. The DA seemed pleased with the result. The Homicide cops were just pleased to get out of there. Vukcic, with bear hugs all around, couldn't wait to get back to his beloved restaurant to make sure it survived his absence. He left with Felix. Barber, who had performed a minor miracle in getting Vukcic, the DA, and the cops out on Christmas Eve, hurried to his own celebration. Saul said he'd drive the Dopplemeyers home. As Fritz and I escorted each group to the door, I could see it was beginning to snow. Perhaps Nature would cover the sins of the city for one brief period in time.

As the Dopplemeyers started the *Auf Wedersehens*, the clock began to strike twelve. We all just stopped and listened to the chimes usher in Christmas day. Mr. Dopplemeyer paused and, with slight embarrassment, stammered that he and Frieda always followed an old German tradition at Christmas. He put his arm around his daughter. Shyly, but with growing confidence, in a clear, sweet soprano voice, she began the most beautiful Christmas Carol in the world. The strains of "Stille Nacht" echoed throughout the hall. Dopplemeyer's tenor provided perfect harmony. I have never heard a more lovely rendition. It touched us all.

As I was helping Frieda on with her coat, she handed me a package. "Special Christmas strudel," she smiled. On impulse, I asked if she had a date for New Year's Eve. She smiled again and answered, "Nein." I couldn't resist hamming it up. "Nine?" I exclaimed. "You have nine dates?" She shook her head. "Nein. No. Is verboten. By der poppa." Der poppa, taking it all in, grinned broadly and said, "Mit Mr. Archie, is OK." So Frieda and I agreed to see in my first New Year in New York together.

Wolfe, standing in the hallway, didn't miss any of this. When they had left, he remarked, "Archie, you seem to have a way with young women." Then, almost to himself, "That could be an asset. Then again it could be a distraction." He continued, "Archie, your performance for the past few days has been satisfactory, with the exception of withholding information about that character you call The Angel. I don't like surprises. However, for the most part, you have acted reasonably. In time, with your native intelligence supplemented by experience, you might become quite useful.

"I need an assistant. Saul is the absolute best at what he does. But what he does isn't what I need full time. Besides, I do not believe he would want to relinquish his other clients completely. I am willing to offer you the position. We can agree on an adequate salary. The position would include the best meals in New York, served by a master chef, namely Fritz. Also, you could move into the spare room upstairs. I'll order furniture right after Christmas. In the meantime, you could stay in the guest room."

"No, Sir," I replied firmly.

"You do not accept my offer?" growled Wolfe.

"Mr. Wolfe," I replied, "I would indeed enjoy working for you. In addition to the leg-work you require, I can see several ways I could be helpful in the office. And while I am with you, I guarantee complete loyalty. At the same time, always remember that I am my own man, free and independent. For example, I shall se-

lect and pay for my own furniture. I shall choose what I want, not necessarily what you want. That way, too, you'll have to pay me at least enough to take care of the installments. If, to use your own word, this is satisfactory, you have an assistant. Otherwise, I might just marry Roly, or Frieda, and live on love and strudel."

Wolfe carefully removed his seventh of a ton from his chair, approached me and looked closely into my eyes. "Archie," he said, "I can predict some stormy days ahead in our relationship. Nevertheless, I believe it can be mutually beneficial." He extended his hand and we shook warmly.

That brings me to the beginning, how it all started. But there were still a couple of surprises in store that I might as well share. Wolfe reached into his desk drawer, removed a brightly wrapped package, and handed it to me. I opened it carefully to expose a brand new Wembly automatic and shoulder holster plus a license for the gun.

Wolfe said, almost apologetically, "I realize that this hardly seems appropriate in the spirit of Christmas. Yet, in the future, it might help you keep the peace."

He then handed me an envelope. Inside was a private investigator's license issued by the State of New York in the name of Archie Goodwin. Wolfe explained, "Normally, there are tangled ribbons of red tape and interminable waiting periods in order to obtain a license for guns, even longer for a private investigator's license. I seldom ask for favors, especially from politicians. I despise bureaucracy. However, a powerful Tammany Hall district leader, a smart Irishman named Rowan, owes me several favors. In anticipation of your acceptance of my offer, I prevailed on him to cut through the red tape and procure these licenses."

I thanked him, then asked him to wait a moment while I went to the kitchen. When I returned, a smiling Fritz was with me, carrying a tray with glasses and a huge pitcher filled to the brim with beer. He carefully deposited it on the desk in front of Wolfe. That was one of the few times I ever saw Wolfe show surprise. He looked first at Fritz, then at me, then carefully poured beer into a glass and watched the foam settle to just the right level he liked. He raised the glass and drank deeply, wiped his upper lip, closed his eyes, leaned back in his chair and sighed.

"There's a keg cooling in the cellar," I explained. The two goons with The Angel brought it tonight. Seems like we're both calling in favors. You see, The Angel was grateful to me, first for preventing the robbery of his warehouse, and, second, for locating Jablonski and helping to make sure he'd end up in the pokey. He insisted on returning the favors. A fresh keg will be delivered here each week. And, as I'm sure you've discovered, this is the real stuff, not some watered down slop." Fritz, having been told I didn't much care for beer, had brought a bottle of pre-prohibition brandy. Wolfe insisted on pouring a drink for both me and Fritz. I opened the strudel. It tasted swell with brandy. It didn't seem appropriate with beer but Wolfe put away his share and suggested that Fritz obtain the recipe.

Wolfe raised his glass and remarked, "This has been a most satisfactory case. It is the first one I've ever undertaken where there was no fee involved. Yet, even without a fee, I have received the rich harvest of barley and hops. And, while I am always willing to give Uncle Sam his due," he made a sound that must have been intended for a chuckle, "I do not see how I could possibly list bootleg beer under "Income" on my tax form. "There is an old German proverb," he contin-

ued, "which, loosely translated, proclaims, 'In Heaven ain't no beer - gotta drink it here.' The grammar in the English translation is so atrocious it actually pains me - but the sentiment is sound. This is probably the nearest I shall ever get to Heaven."

He continued, almost dreamily, "I am not inclined to wax sentimental or to conjure up symbols where none exists. Yet, my dearest friend is home for Christmas. We have had a visit from an angel, albeit hardly one of the celestial variety. My cup runneth over with a hearty brew that to me is more valuable than frankincense or myrrh or even gold. It would not strain credulity too much to assume we are Three Wise Men, although with varying degrees of wisdom. And, among our blessings, there is plenty of room for all three of us here at the Inn.

"So, I say unto you, Merry Christmas!" Fritz solemnly echoed, "Joyeux Noel!" Wolfe continued, "While Peace on Earth may be an impossible goal, let us fervently hope that together we can at least bring some small measure of that priceless ingredient to our own little corner of the universe."

Looking back, I guess we accomplished that goal. But in so doing, we more often than not shattered the peace in the old brownstone. And I fervently hope we'll keep right on doing so.

Ed. (Mr. Burns) Note: Wolfe and Archie have certainly attained immortality, at least in our memories. Just as Holmes and Watson forever stalk criminals through the fog-shrouded streets of Victorian London, so, too, will Wolfe and Archie continue to bring some measure of Peace to New York - in our memory, in our hearts, and for all eternity.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

William S. Baring-Gould

Nero Wolfe of West Thirty-Fifth Street

Ken Darby

The Brownstone House of Nero Wolfe

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

A Study In Scarlet

A Scandal In Bohemia

The Adventure of the Empty House

Rev. Frederick G. Gotwald

The Nero Wolfe Handbook

The Nero Wolfe Companion

Clive Hirschmann

The Warner Bros. Story

Joel Levy

The Gazette

John McAleer

Rex Stout: A Biography

George T. Simon

The Big Bands

The Smithsonian Magazine

Dr. Goddard and the Magic Rocket

Rex Stout

Seventy-Three Novels and Short Stories

The Nero Wolfe Cookbook

Time-Life

The Fabulous Twenties

The Burns Family

Three Generations – for their interest, encouragement and critique

ED. – There you have it. Finally we learn of how Archie came to New York and of how he came to join with Nero Wolfe to form the second most famous fictional detective duo in history. It is a fascinating story and we thank Charles Burns for bringing it to us.

