



The Mother Hunt

Rex Stout

REX STOUT

The Mother Hunt

Introduction
by Marilyn Wallace



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Introduction

I can't help it: I'm a sucker for quality and an admirer of someone who can take a set of basic materials and use simple tools to transform them into something vibrant, unique, and enduring. And that's exactly what Rex Stout has done in the Nero Wolfe series.

Even before I met him on the pages of a book fifteen years ago, I knew quite a lot about Nero Wolfe. His reputation had preceded him: he was an imposing giant of a man who hauled up in a spectacular midtown Manhattan brownstone, grew orchids, was a beer aficionado ... and he was distinctly uncomfortable in the company of women.

Despite some initial reluctance to spend a whole book's worth of time with a man who flirted with misogyny, I took the plunge. Wolfe, after all, had the good sense to live in Manhattan, and besides, you had to like a man who surrounded himself with exotic tropical plants, consumed epicurean meals, and had the chutzpah to make the universe conform to his rules. And when I met Archie Goodwin, his ebullience and his earthy, rakish charm won me over.

Hooked, I devoured as many Nero Wolfe books as I could find in one gluttonous wintertime reading orgy. Toward the end of the tenth book I realized that, cabin fever aside, I was getting impatient. I wanted to see Wolfe shaken up a little; the man was becoming downright complacent. And in *The Mother Hunt* that's exactly what happens: Nero Wolfe not only leaves his brownstone, he actually sleeps in a strange bed in a different house. And to make matters more tenuous for the great man, he's forced into several face-to-face meetings with women.

Delicious! With these challenges to the known and predictable world, Wolfe is thrown off balance. Will he wobble into ineffectiveness? Will the resounding fall make front-page headlines in all of New York City? Devoted readers of the series grow breathless wondering about the effects of everything tossed topsy-turvy. Suspense abounds as the bodies pile up and Nero Wolfe is forced to search for a solution without the solace of his orchids and his routine, his so-very-rational thought processes in danger of being corrupted by close contact with a woman.

Wolfe, of course, declines to be undone and he triumphs. Critical to solving the case is Archie's delight in the company of women, in direct proportion to the discomfort his body feels. From the vantage of the 1990s, Archie seems especially astute. Following a conversation with a woman, Archie observes, "Her reaction to the report had been in the groove for a woman. She had wanted to know what Carol Mardus had said, every word, and also how she had looked and how she had been dressed. There was an implication that the way she had been dressed had a definite bearing on the question, was Richard Valdon the father of the baby? but of course I let that slide. *No man with any sense assumes that a woman's words mean to her exactly what they mean to him.*"

The italics are mine but the observation is pure Archie and way ahead of its time. Not until the nineties did gender differences in communication styles become a hot topic. I wonder whether Rex Stout considered himself a pioneer.

Despite Wolfe's daring foray beyond Thirty-fifth Street, *The Mother Hunt* is really vintage Rex Stout: lots of grumbling and fine dining and brilliant thinking on Wolfe's part, while Archie

has a grand old time out and about in the world. Rex Stout made the most of the contrast between thinker and doer, achieving a delicate, ever-changing balance between the curmudgeonly detective and his bubbly assistant. Yet just when Wolfe seems a pure cerebral being, his physical bulk and the very corporeal acts of eating and drinking remind you that he is indeed a creature of the flesh. Whenever Archie appears to be all action, chasing from button manufacturer to baby-sitter to a beachfront rendezvous with the shapeless client in the name of detection, he comes up with a brilliant ploy proving that he is no slouch in the thinking department.

Between them, Wolfe and Archie ensure that justice will ultimately prevail, and they do so within a classic structure. The reader in me recognizes that the opening of *The Mother Hunt* is a staple of private-eye fiction, the ending a fixture of the “cozy village” mystery. The book begins with a client coming to Wolfe for help, and at once questions arise. Is she all that she seems, or is there a womanly abundance of secrets lurking in her past? Does she really want a solution to the question she hired Wolfe to answer, or is she after something else? Given Wolfe’s feelings about women, it’s easy to project duplicity all over the place. And after Wolfe-thinks-Archie-does investigation, the final scene gathers the suspects together for a drawing-room confrontation/revelation.

The writer in me admires Rex Stout’s ability to shape those elements into something uniquely his.

I understood something about Rex Stout’s skill as a writer when I had the personal good fortune to meet one of his daughters, Rebecca Stout Bradbury, a warm, intelligent woman with a forthright gaze and a gracious charm that immediately put me at my ease. During the morning I spent with her, we talked about her father, our own children, and the state of the American economy. And she showed me several pieces of furniture—a desk and a dresser stand out in my memory—that her father had made.

The wood was so smooth it glowed with a burnished light. Strong and true joints (no nails used here!) held together the graceful, sturdy pieces, carefully crafted and lovingly made. When I was in school, girls took home ec. while boys went to shop. Harder, more mysterious than French toast, for sure, making furniture still seems to me to be just short of magic. The rightness of each element contributes to a whole somehow greater, more pleasing in its finished state than its parts would suggest.

The same can be said of Rex Stout’s mysteries, I realized on my way home that day. He chose his materials with care—characters with zest and a good share of quirky charm; setting so palpable and familiar you can practically smell it; plots that play on reader assumptions—and he crafted them with the same attention to detail, sure hand, and joy in the act of creation that it takes to make fine furniture.

Lingering visions of rolltop desks and dressers with hidden jewelry compartments danced in my head as I drove home. And inspiration struck as I walked in my front door and nearly tripped over one of the piles of books that seem to sprout everywhere in my house.

Aha, I thought, maybe Rex Stout would have suggested a little extracurricular woodshop to learn how to make mortise-and-tenon joints for a new set of bookcases and thicken my planks at the same time....

Chapter 1

When the doorbell rang a little after eleven that Tuesday morning in early June and I went to the hall and took a look through the one-way glass panel in the front door I saw what, or whom, I expected to see: a face a little too narrow, gray eyes a little too big, and a figure a little too thin for the best curves. I knew who it was because she had phoned Monday afternoon for an appointment, and I knew what she looked like because I had seen her a few times at theaters or restaurants.

Also I had known enough about her, part public record and part hearsay, to brief Ned Wolfe without doing any research. She was the widow of Richard Valdon, the novelist, who had died some nine months ago—drowned in somebody’s swimming pool in Westchester—and since four of his books had been best sellers and one of them, *Never Dream Again*, had topped a million copies at \$5.95, she should have no trouble paying a bill from a private detective if and when she got one. After reading *Never Dream Again*, five or six years ago Wolfe had chucked it by giving it to a library, but he had thought better of a later one, *His Own Image*, and it had a place on the shelves. Presumably that was why he took the trouble to lift his bulk from the chair when I ushered her to the office, and to stand until she was seated in the red leather chair near the end of his desk. As I went to my desk and sat I was not agog. She had said on the phone that she wanted to consult Wolfe about something very personal and confidential, but she didn’t look as if she were being pinched where it hurt. It would probably be something routine like an anonymous letter or a missing relative.

Putting her bag on the stand at her elbow, she turned her head for a look around, stopped her big gray eyes at me for half a second as she turned back, and said to Wolfe, “My husband would have liked this room.”

“M-m,” Wolfe said. “I liked one of his books, with reservations. How old was he when he died?”

“Forty-two.”

“How old are you?”

That was for my benefit. He had a triple conviction: that a) his animus toward women made it impossible for him to judge any single specimen; that b) I needed only an hour with any woman alive to tag her; and that c) he could help out by asking some blunt impertinent question, his favorite one being how old are you. It’s hopeless to try to set him right.

At that, the way Lucy Valdon took it was a clue. She smiled and said, “Old enough, *plenty* old enough. I’m twenty-six. Old enough to know when I need help—and here I am. It’s about—it’s *extremely* confidential.” She glanced at me.

Wolfe nodded. “It usually is. My ears are Mr. Goodwin’s and his are mine, professionally. As for confidence, I don’t suppose you have committed a major crime?”

She smiled again. It came quick and went quick, but she meant it. “I wouldn’t have the nerve. No, no crime. I want you to find somebody for me.”

I thought, uh-huh, here we go. Cousin Mildred is missing and Aunt Amanda has asked her rich niece to hire a detective. But she went on; “It’s a little—well, it’s kind of fantastic. I have a baby, and I want to know who the mother is. As I said, this is confidential, but it’s not really a secret. My maid and my cook know about it, and my lawyer, and two of my friends

but that's all, because I'm not sure I'm going to keep it—the baby.”

Wolfe was frowning at her, and no wonder. “I'm not a judge of babies, madam.”

“Of course not. What I want—but I must tell you. I've had it two weeks. Two weeks ago Sunday, May twentieth, the phone rang and I answered it, and a voice said there was something in my vestibule, and I went to look, and there it was on the floor, wrapped in a blanket. I took it in, and pinned to the blanket inside was a slip of paper.” She got her bag from the stand and opened it, and by the time she had the paper out I was there to take it. A glance was enough to read what was on it, but instead of handing it to Wolfe across his desk she circled around to him for another look as he held it. It was a four-by-six piece of ordinary cheap paper, and the message on it, in five crooked lines, printed with one of those rubber stamp outfits for kids, was brief and to the point:

MRS RICHARD VALDON THIS BABY IS FOR YOU BECAUSE A BOY SHOULD LIVE IN HIS FATHERS HOUSE

There were two pinholes near a corner. Wolfe put it on his desk, turned to her, and asked a question. “Indeed?”

“I don't know,” she said. “Of course I don't. But it could be true.”

“Is it likely or merely credible?”

“I guess it's likely.” She closed the bag and returned it to the stand. “I mean it's likely that it could have happened.” She gestured with the hand that sported a wedding ring. Her eyes came to me and back to Wolfe. “This is in confidence, you know.”

“Yes.”

“Well ... since I'm telling you I want you to understand. Dick and I were married two years ago—it will be two years next month. We were in love, I still think we were, but I admit that for me there was this too, that he was a famous man, that I would be Mrs. Richard Valdon. And for him there was my—well, who I was. I was an Armstead. I didn't know how much that meant to him until after we were married, when he realized that I was sick and tired of being an Armstead.”

She took a breath. “He had a sort of a Don Juan reputation before he married me, but it was probably exaggerated—those things often are. For two months we were completely ... She stopped and her eyes closed. In a moment they opened. “There was nothing for me but *us*, and I think for him too. I'm *sure*. After that I simply don't know, I only know it wasn't the same. During that year, the last year of his life, he may have had one woman, or two, or a dozen—I just don't know. He *could* have had, I know that. So the baby—what did I say? It is likely that it could have happened. You understand?”

Wolfe nodded. “So far. And your problem?”

“The baby, of course. I intended to have one, or two or three, I sincerely did, and Dick wanted to, but I wanted to wait. I put it off. When he died that was hard, maybe the hardest that he had wanted me to have a baby and I had put it off. Now there is one, and I have it. She pointed at the slip of paper on Wolfe's desk. “I think what that says is right. I think a boy should live in his father's house, and certainly he should have his father's name. But the problem is, was Richard Valdon this baby's father?” She gestured. “There!”

Wolfe snorted. “Pfui. Never to be solved and you know it. Homer said it: no man can know who was his father. Shakespeare said it: it is a wise father that knows his own child. I can't help you, madam. No one can.”

She smiled. "I can say 'pfui' too. Of course you can help me. I know you can't prove that Dick was the father, but you can find out who put the baby in my vestibule, and who the mother is, and then we can—Here." She got her bag and opened it. "I have figured it out. She produced another slip of paper, not the same size or kind. "The doctor said the baby was four months old, that evening, the day it came, May twentieth, so I used that date." She looked at the paper. "So it was born about January twentieth, so it was conceived about April twentieth, last year. When you know who the mother is you can find out about her and Dick how sure it is, or anyway how likely it is, that they were together then. That won't prove the baby is his son, but it can come close—close enough. And besides, if it's just a trick, if Dick wasn't the father and couldn't have been, and you find that out, that would help me, wouldn't it? So the first thing is to find out who left it in my vestibule, and then who the mother is. Then I may want to ask her some questions myself, but I don't— Well, we'll see."

Wolfe was leaning back, scowling at her. It was beginning to look like a job he could refuse only with a phony excuse, and he hated to work, and the bank balance was fairly healthy. "You're assuming too much," he objected. "I'm not a magician, Mrs. Valdon."

"Of course not. But you're the best detective in the world, aren't you?"

"Probably not. The best detective in the world may be some rude tribesman with a limited vocabulary. You say your lawyer knows about the baby. Does he know you are consulting me?"

"Yes, but he doesn't approve. He thinks it's foolish to want to keep it. There are laws about it and he has attended to that so I can keep it temporarily, because I insisted, but he's against my trying to find the mother. But that's *my* business. His business is just the law."

Though she didn't know it, that was a hit. Wolfe couldn't have described his own attitude toward lawyers any better himself, with all his vocabulary. He let up a little on the scowl. "In doubt," he said, "if you have sufficiently considered the difficulties. The inquiry would almost certainly be prolonged, laborious, and expensive, and possibly fruitless."

"Yes. I said, I know you're not a magician."

"Can you afford it? My fees are not modest."

"I know that. I have an inheritance from my grandmother, and the income from my husband's books. I own my house." She smiled. "If you want to see a copy of my income-tax report my lawyer has it."

"Not necessary. It could take a week, a month, a year."

"All right. My lawyer says keeping the baby on a temporary basis can be extended a month at a time."

Wolfe picked up the slip of paper, glared at it, put it down, and moved the glare to her. "You should have come to me sooner, if at all."

"I didn't decide to until yesterday, definitely."

"Possibly too late. Sixteen days have passed since Sunday, May twentieth. Was it daylight when the phone call came?"

"No, in the evening. A little after ten o'clock."

"Male voice or female?"

"I'm not sure. I think it was a man trying to sound like a woman or a woman trying to sound like a man, I don't know which."

"If you had to guess?"

She shook her head. "I can't even guess."

"What was said? Verbatim."

"I was alone in the house because the maid was out. When I answered the phone I said, 'Mrs. Valdon's residence.' The voice said, 'Is this Mrs. Valdon?' and I said yes, and the voice said, 'Look in your vestibule, there's something there,' and hung up. I went down to the vestibule, and there it was. When I saw it was a live baby I took it in and called my doctor and—"

"If you please. Had you been in the house all day and evening?"

"No. I had been in the country for the weekend. I got home around eight o'clock. I had Sunday traffic after dark."

"Where in the country?"

"Near Westport. At Julian Haft's place—he publishes my husband's books."

"Where is Westport?"

Her eyes widened a little in surprise. Mine didn't. What he doesn't know about the metropolitan area would fill an atlas. "Why, Connecticut," she said. "Fairfield County."

"What time did you leave there?"

"A little after six o'clock."

"Driving? Your own car?"

"Yes."

"With a chauffeur?"

"No. I have no chauffeur."

"Was anyone with you in the car?"

"No, I was alone." She gestured with the wedding-ring hand. "Of course you're a detective, Mr. Wolfe, I'm not, but I don't see the point of all this."

"Then you haven't used your brain." He turned. "Tell her, Archie."

He was insulting her. Not caring to bother with something so obvious, he switched it to me. I obliged. "You've probably been too busy with the baby to go into it," I told her. "Say it was me. I put the baby in the vestibule before I phoned you. I wouldn't have done that if I hadn't known you were there, that the phone would be answered. It's possible that I had hurried around until I saw you come home or until I saw a light in the house, but it's even more possible that I knew you were away for the weekend and would get home by dark. I might even have known what time you left Westport. Take the last question: was anyone with you in the car? That would have been the simplest and surest way for me to know when you got home, to be with you in the car. So if you had said yes, the next question would have been, 'who?'"

"Good heavens." She was staring at me. "Someone I know well enough to ..." She let her head hang and turned to Wolfe. "All right. Ask anything you want to."

He grunted. "Not want. Must—if I take the job. You own your house. Where is it?"

"Eleventh Street near Fifth Avenue. I inherited it. My great-grandfather built it. When he said I was sick and tired of being an Armstead I wasn't just talking, I meant it, but I like the house, and Dick loved it."

"Do you share it? Have you any tenants?"

"No. Now I may—I don't know."

"Do the maid and the cook live there?"

“Yes.”

“Any others?”

“Not living in. A woman comes five days a week to help.”

“Could the maid or the cook have had a baby in January?”

She smiled. “Certainly not the cook. Nor the maid either. She has been with me nearly two years. No, she hasn’t had a baby.”

“Then a relative of one of them. Perhaps a sister. An ideal arrangement for an inconvenient infant nephew.” Wolfe moved a hand to put it aside. “That will be routine.” He tapped the slip of paper with a fingertip. “The pinholes. Was it a safety pin?”

“No, it wasn’t. Just an ordinary pin.”

“Indeed.” His brows went up. “You said inside the blanket. Where? Near what part of the body—feet, middle, head?”

“I think the feet, but I’m not sure. I had the baby out of the blanket before I saw the paper.”

Wolfe swiveled. “Archie. You like to give an opinion in terms of odds. What odds that a woman would so expose a baby to a bare pin?”

I took three seconds. “Not enough data. Exactly where was the pin? What did the baby have on? How accessible was a safety pin? Roughly, say ten to one, but that doesn’t mean that one will get you ten that it was a man. I’m merely answering a question. No bet.”

“I didn’t invite one.” He swiveled back to her. “I don’t suppose it was naked in the blanket?”

“Oh no. It was dressed—too much. A sweater, a corduroy hat, corduroy overalls, a T-shirt, an undershirt, rubber pants, and diaper. Oh, and booties. It was dressed all right.”

“Any safety pins?”

“Certainly, in the diaper.”

“Was the diaper—uh—fresh?”

“No. It was a mess. It had probably been on for hours. I changed it before the doctor came, but I had to use a pillow case.”

I cut in. “A bet, since you asked my opinion. One will get you twenty that if a woman pinned the paper to the blanket, it wasn’t the one who dressed him.”

No comment. He turned his head for a look at the wall clock. An hour till lunch. He took a breath through his nose all the air he had room for, which was plenty, let it out through his mouth, and turned to her. “It would be necessary to get more information from you, much more, and Mr. Goodwin can do that as well as I. My commitment would be to learn the identity of the mother and establish it to your satisfaction, and to demonstrate the degree of probability that your husband was the father, with no warranty of success. Is that correct?”

“Why ... yes. If you—No, I’ll just say yes.”

“Very well. There’s the formality of a retainer.”

“Of course.” She reached for her bag. “How much?”

“No matter.” He pushed back his chair and rose. “A dollar, a hundred, a thousand. Mr. Goodwin will have many questions. You will excuse me.”

He crossed to the door and in the hall turned left, toward the kitchen. Lunch was to be shad roe in casserole, one of the few dishes on which he and Fritz had a difference of opinion that had never been settled. They were agreed on the larding, the anchovy butter, the chervil.

shallot, parsley, bay leaf, pepper, marjoram, and cream, but the argument was the onion. Fritz was for it and Wolfe dead against. There was a chance that voices would be raised, and before I got my notebook and started in on the client I went and closed the door, which was soundproofed, and on my way back to my desk she handed me a check for one thousand and 00/100 dollars.

Chapter 2

At a quarter to five that afternoon I was in conference, in the kitchen of Lucy Valdona's house on West Eleventh Street. I was standing, leaning against the refrigerator, with a glass of milk in my hand. Mrs. Vera Dowd, the cook, who evidently ate her full share of what she cooked, judging by her dimensions, was on a chair. She had supplied the milk on request. Miss Marie Foltz, the maid, in uniform, who had undoubtedly been easy to look after ten years ago and was still no eyesore, was standing across from me with her back to the sink.

"I need some help," I said and took a sip of milk.

I'm not skipping my session with the client before lunch in order to hold something back, but there's no point in reporting everything I put in my notebook. A few samples, taking her word for it:

No one hated her, or had it in for her, enough to play a dirty trick like saddling her with a loose baby—including her family. Her father and mother were in Hawaii, a stopover on a around-the-world trip; her married brother lived in Boston and her married sister in Washington. Her best friend, Lena Guthrie, one of the only three people to whom she had shown the paper that had been pinned to the blanket, the other two being the doctor and the lawyer, thought the baby looked like Dick, but she, Lucy, was reserving her opinion. She wasn't going to name the baby unless she decided to keep it. She might name it Moses because no one knew for sure who Moses' father was, but a smile went with that. And so on. Also a couple of dozen names—the names of the five other weekend guests at the Haft place in Westport on May 20, the names of four women, which I had to drag out of her, with whom Dick might possibly have played house in April 1961, and an assortment of names, mostly men, who might know more about Dick's personal diversions than his widow did. Three of those were marked as the most promising: Leo Bingham, television producer; William King, literary agent; and Julian Haft, publisher, the head of Parthenon Press. That's enough samples.

I was having my conference with Mrs. Dowd and Miss Foltz in the kitchen because talking comes easier to people in a room where they are used to talking. When I told them I needed some help Mrs. Dowd narrowed her eyes at me and Miss Foltz looked skeptical.

"It's about the baby," I said and took another sip of milk. "Mrs. Valdona took me upstairs for a look at it. To me it looks too fat and kind of greasy, and its nose is just a blob, but of course I'm a man."

Miss Foltz folded her arms. Mrs. Dowd said, "It's a good enough baby."

"I suppose so. Apparently whoever left it in the vestibule had the idea that Mrs. Valdona might keep it. Whether she does or not, naturally she wants to know where it came from, so she has hired a detective to find out. His name is Nero Wolfe. You may have heard of him."

"Is he on TV?" Miss Foltz inquired.

"Don't be silly," Mrs. Dowd told her. "How could he be? He's real." To me: "Certainly I've heard of him, and you too. Your picture was in the paper about a year ago. I forget your first name—no, I don't. Archie. Archie Goodwin. I should have remembered when Mrs. Valdona said Goodwin. I have a good memory for names *and* faces."

“You sure have.” I sipped milk. “Here’s why I need help. In a case like this, what would a detective think of first? He would think there must be some reason why the baby was left in this house instead of some other house, and what could the reason be? Well, one good reason could be that someone who lives here wants that baby to live here too. So Mr. Wolfe asked Mrs. Valdon who lives here besides her, and she said Mrs. Vera Dowd and Miss Marie Foltz, and he asked her if one of them could have had a baby about four months ago, and she said —”

They both interrupted. I raised a hand, palm out. “Now you see,” I said, not raising my voice. “You see why I need help. I merely tell you a detective asked a natural and normal question, and you fly off the handle. Try being detectives yourselves once. Of course Mr. Valdon said that neither of you could have had a baby four months ago, and the next question was, did either of you have a relative, maybe a sister, who might have had a baby she couldn’t keep? That’s harder to answer. I’d have to dig. I’d have to find your relatives and friends and ask a lot of questions, and that would take time and cost money, but I’d get the answer, that’s sure.”

“You can get the answer right now,” Mrs. Dowd said.

I nodded. “I know I can, and I want it. The point is, I don’t want you to hold it against Mrs. Valdon that she asked you to have a talk with me. When you hire a detective you have to let him detect. She either had to let me do this or fire Nero Wolfe. If one of you knows where the baby came from and you want it to be provided for, just say so. Mrs. Valdon may not keep it herself, but she’ll see that it gets a good home, and nobody will know anything you don’t want them to know. The alternative is that I’ll have to start digging, seeing your relatives and friends, and finding out—”

“You don’t have to see *my* relatives and friends,” Mrs. Dowd said emphatically.

“Mine either,” Miss Foltz declared.

I knew I didn’t. Of course you can’t always get a definite answer just by watching a face, but sometimes you can, and I had it. Neither of those faces had behind it the problem: to consider the offer from Mrs. Valdon, or to let me start digging. I told them so. As I finished the glass of milk I discussed faces with them, and I told them that I had assured Mrs. Valdon that a talk with them would settle it as far as they were concerned, which was a lie. You can’t know what a talk is going to settle until you have had it, even when you do all the talking yourself. We parted friends, more or less.

There was an elevator, smoother and quieter than the one in Wolfe’s old brownstone on West 35th Street, but it was only one flight up to where Mrs. Valdon had said she would be, and I hoofed it. It was a large room, bigger than our office and front room combined, with nothing modern in it except the carpet and a television cabinet at the far end. Everything else was probably period, but I am not up on periods. The client was on a couch, with a magazine and nearby was a portable bar that had not been there an hour ago. She had changed again. For her appointment with Wolfe she had worn a tailored suit, tan with brown stripes; on my arrival she had had on a close-fitting gray dress that went with her eyes better than tan; now it was a lower-cut sleeveless number, light blue, apparently silk, though now you never know. She put the magazine down as I approached.

“All clear,” I told her. “They’re crossed off.”

“You’re sure?”

“Positive.”

Her head was tilted back. “It didn’t take you long. How did you do it?”

“Trade secret. I’m not supposed to tell a client about an operation until I have reported to Mr. Wolfe. But they took it fine. You still have a maid and a cook. If we get any ideas I may phone you in the morning.”

“I’m going to have a martini. Won’t you? Or what?”

Having looked at my watch as I left the kitchen, and knowing that Wolfe’s afternoon session with the orchids would keep him up in the plant rooms until six o’clock, and remembering that one of my functions was to understand any woman we were dealing with, and seeing that the gin was Follansbee’s, I thought I might as well be sociable. I offered to make, saying I favored five to one, and she said all right. When I had made and served another, I sat, on the couch beside her, and we had sampled, she said, “I want to try something. You take a sip of mine and I’ll take a sip of yours. Do you mind?”

Of course I didn’t, since the idea was to understand her. She held her glass for me to sip and I held mine for her.

“Actually,” I said, “this good gin is wasted on me. I just had a glass of milk.”

She didn’t hear me. She didn’t even know I had spoken. She was looking at me but not seeing me. How was I to understand that? Not wanting to sit and stare at her, I moved my eyes to her shoulder and arm, which weren’t really skinny.

“I don’t know why I suddenly wanted to do that,” she said. “I haven’t done it since Dick died. I’ve never done it with anybody but him. All of a sudden I knew I had to try it, I don’t know why.”

It seemed advisable to keep it professional, and the simplest way was to bring Wolfe in. “Mr. Wolfe says,” I told her, “that nobody ever gets to the real why of anything.”

She smiled. “And upstairs, when you were looking at the baby, I nearly called you Archie. I’m not trying to flirt with you. I don’t know how to flirt. I don’t suppose— You’re not a hypnotist, are you?”

I sipped the martini. “What the hell,” I said. “Relax. Exchanging sips is an old Persian custom. As for calling me Archie, that’s my name. Don’t call me Svengali. As for flirting, let’s discuss it. Men and women flirt. Horses flirt. Parakeets flirt. Undoubtedly oysters flirt, but they must have some special—”

I stopped because she was moving. She left the couch, went and put the glass, still half full, on the bar, turned, and said, “Don’t forget the suitcase when you go,” and walked out.

That took some fancy understanding. I sat and worked on it while I finished the martini. After four or five minutes, got up and put my glass on the bar, touching hers to show I understood, which I didn’t, and departed. In the lower hall, on my way out, I picked up the small suitcase which she had helped me pack.

At that time of day getting a taxi in that part of town is like expecting to draw a ten to a eight, nine, jack, and queen, and it was only twenty-four short blocks and four long ones, and the suitcase was light. Anyway I’m a walker. I wanted to make it before Wolfe got down from the office, and did; it was 5:54 when I mounted the stoop of the old brownstone, used my key, entered, went to the office, put the suitcase on my chair, and unpacked. By the time the sound of the elevator came, all the items were spread out on Wolfe’s desk, just about covering it, and when he walked in I was at my desk, busy with papers. When he stopped and

let out a growl I swiveled.

“What the devil is this?” he demanded.

I arose and pointed. “Sweater. Hat. Overalls. T-shirt. Undershirt. Blanket. Booties. Rubber pants. Diaper. You have to hand it to her for keeping the diaper. The maid wasn’t there and she didn’t get a nurse until the next day. She must have washed it herself. There are no laundry marks or store labels. The sweater, hat, overalls, and booties have brand labels, but I doubt if they will help. There’s something about one item that might possibly help. If you don’t spot it yourself it may not be worth mentioning.”

He went to his made-to-order chair and sat. “The maid and the cook?”

“We had a conference. They’re out. Do you want it verbatim?”

“Not if you’re satisfied.”

“I am. Of course if we draw nothing but blanks we can check on them.”

“What else?”

“First, there is a live baby. I saw it. She didn’t just dream it. There’s nothing unusual about the vestibule; the door has no lock and it’s only four steps up, anyone could pop in and out trying to find someone who saw somebody doing so seventeen days ago after dark would be a waste of my time and the client’s money. I didn’t include the cleaning woman in the conference because if the baby was hers it would be a different color, and I didn’t include the nurse because she was hired through an agency the next day. There’s a fine Tekke rug in the nursery, which was a spare bedroom. You are aware that I know about rugs from you, and about pictures from Miss Rowan. There’s a Renoir in the living room, and I think a Cézanne. The client uses Follansbee gin. I am in bad with her because I forgot she’s an Armstead and used a little profanity. She’ll sleep it off.”

“Why the profanity?”

“She jiggled my arm and I spilled gin on my pants.”

He eyed me. “You had better report verbatim.”

“Not necessary. I’m satisfied.”

“No doubt. Have you any suggestions?”

“Yes, sir. It looks pretty hopeless. If we get nowhere in a couple of weeks you can tell her you have discovered that it’s my baby, I put it in the vestibule, and if she’ll marry me she can keep it. As for the mother, I can simply—”

“Shut up.”

I hadn’t decided how to handle the mother question anyway. He picked up the sweater and inspected it. I sat, leaned back, crossed my legs, and looked on. He didn’t turn the sweater inside out, so this was just a once-over and he would go back to it. He put it down and picked up the hat. When he got to the overalls I watched his face but saw no sign that he had noticed anything, and I swiveled and reached to the rack of phone books for the Manhattan Yellow Pages, formerly the Red Book. I found what I was after, under Children’s & Infants’ Wear-Whol. & Mfrs., which filled four and a half pages. I started a hand for the phone, but drew back. He might spot it the second time around and should have the chance without a tip from me. I got up and went to the hall and up two flights to my room, and at the phone on my bedstand I dialed the number, but got what was to be expected at that time of day, no answer. I tried another number, a woman I knew who was the mother of three young ones and got her, but she was no help; she said she would have to see the overalls. So it would

have to wait until morning. I went back down to the office.

Wolfe had turned his chair and was holding the overalls up to get the full light, and in his other hand was his biggest magnifying glass. He was examining a button. As I crossed to him he asked, "Find something?"

He swiveled and put the glass down. "Possibly. The buttons on this garment. Four of them."

"What about them?"

"They seem inappropriate. Such garments must be made by the million, including thousands of buttons. But these buttons were surely not mass-produced. The material looks like horsehair or white horsehair, though I presume it could be one of the synthetic fibers. But there is a considerable variation in size and shape. They couldn't possibly have been made in large quantities by a machine."

I sat. "That's very interesting. Congratulations."

"I suggest you examine them."

"I already have, not with a glass. Of course you saw that the brand label of the overalls says Cherub. That brand is made by Resnick and Spiro, Three-forty West Thirty-seventh Street. I just dialed their number but got no answer, since it's after six. A five-minute walk from here in the morning, unless you want me to find Mr. Resnick or Mr. Spiro now."

"The morning will do. Should I apologize for pulling a feather from your cap?"

"We'll split it," I said and rose to get the overalls and the glass.

Chapter 3

The Manhattan garment district has got everything from thirty-story marble palaces to holes in the wall. It is no place to go for a stroll, because you are off the sidewalk most of the time, detouring around trucks that are backed in or headed in, but it's fine as training ground for jumping and dodging, and as a refresher for reflexes. If you can come out whole from an hour in those cross streets in the Thirties you'll be safe anywhere in the world. So I felt I had accomplished something when I walked into the entrance of 340 West 37th Street at ten o'clock Wednesday morning.

But then it got complicated. I tried my best to explain, first to a young woman at a window on the first floor and then to a man in an anteroom on the fourth floor, but they simply couldn't understand, if I didn't want to sell something or buy something, and wasn't looking for a job, why I was in the building. I finally made it in to a man at a desk who had a broad outlook. Naturally he couldn't see why the question, had those buttons been put on those overalls by Resnick & Spiro? was important enough for me to fight my way through 37th Street to get it answered, but he was too busy to go into that. It was merely that he realized that a man who had gone to so much trouble to ask him a question deserved an answer. After one quick look he said that Resnick & Spiro had never used such a button and never would. They used plastic almost exclusively. He handed me the overalls.

"Many thanks," I said. "Why I'm bothering about this wouldn't interest you, but it's not just curiosity. Do you know of any firm that makes buttons like these?"

He shook his head. "No idea."

"Have you ever seen any buttons like them?"

"Never."

"Could you tell me what they're made of?"

He leaned over for another look. "My guess would be some synthetic, but God only knows." Suddenly he smiled, wide, human, and humorous. "Or maybe the Emperor of Japan does. Try him. Pretty soon everything will come from there."

I thanked him, stuffed the overalls back in the paper bag, and departed. Having suspected that that would be all I would get from Resnick & Spiro, I had spent an hour Tuesday evening with the Yellow Pages, the four and a half pages of listings under Buttons, and in my pocket notebook were the names of fifteen firms within five blocks of where I was. One was only fifty paces down the street, and I headed for it.

Ninety minutes later, after calling on four different firms, I knew a little more about buttons in general, but still nothing specific about the ones on the overalls. One of the firms made covered buttons, another polyester and acrylic, another freshwater and ocean pearl, another gold and silver plated. Nobody had any notion who had made mine or what they were made of, and nobody cared. It was looking as if all I would get was a collection of negatives, which was all right in a way, as I walked down the hall on the sixth floor of the building on 39th Street to a door that was lettered: EXCLUSIVE NOVELTY BUTTON CO.

That was where I would have gone first if I had known. A woman who knew exactly what was after before I said ten words took me to an inner room which had no racks on the wall and not a button in sight. A little old geezer with big ears and a mop of white hair, sitting at

table looking at a portfolio, didn't look up until I was beside him and had the overalls out of the bag, and when his eyes moved they lit on one of the buttons. He jerked the overalls off of my hands, squinted at each of the buttons in turn, the two on the bib and the two at the sides, raised his eyes to me, and demanded, "Where did these buttons come from?"

I laughed. It may not strike you as funny, but that was the question I had been working on for nearly two hours. There was a chair there and I took it. "I'm laughing at me, not you," I told him. "A definite answer to that question is worth a hundred dollars, cash, to anyone who has it. I won't explain why, it's too complicated. Can you answer it?"

"Are you a button man?"

"No."

"Who are you?"

I got my case from my pocket and produced a card. He took it and squinted at it. "You're a private detective?"

"Right."

"Where did you get these buttons?"

"Listen," I said, "I only want to—"

"You listen, young man. I know more about buttons than any man in the world. I get them from everywhere. I have the finest and most comprehensive collection in existence. Also I sell them. I have sold a thousand dozen buttons in one lot for forty cents a dozen, and I have sold four buttons for six thousand dollars. I have sold buttons to the Duchess of Windsor, the Queen Elizabeth, and to Miss Bette Davis. I have given buttons to nine different museums in five countries. I know absolutely that no man could show me a button that I couldn't place, but you have done so. Where did you get them?"

"All right," I said, "I listened, now it's your turn. I know less about buttons than any man in the world. In connection with a case I'm working on I need to know where those overalls came from. Since they're a standard product, sold everywhere, they can't be traced, but it seemed to me that the buttons are not standard and *might* be traced. That's what I'm trying to find out, where they came from. Apparently you can't tell me."

"I admit I can't!"

"Okay. Obviously you know about unusual buttons, rare buttons. Do you also know about ordinary commercial buttons?"

"I know about all buttons!"

"And you have never seen buttons like these or heard of any?"

"No! I admit it!"

"Fine." I reached to a pocket for my wallet, extracted five twenties, and put them on the table. "You haven't answered my question, but you've been a big help. Is there any chance that those buttons were made by a machine?"

"No. Impossible. Someone spent hours on each one. It's a technique I have never seen."

"What are they made of? What material?"

"That may be difficult. It may take some time. I may be able to tell you by tomorrow afternoon."

"I can't wait that long." I reached for the overalls, but he didn't turn loose.

"I'd rather have the buttons than the money," he said. "Or just one of them. You don't need all four."

I had to yank to get the overalls. With them back in the bag, I stood. “You’ve saved me a lot of time and trouble,” I told him, “and I’d like to show my appreciation. If and when I’m through with the buttons I’ll donate one or more of them to your collection, and I’ll tell you where they came from. I hope.”

It took me five minutes to get away and out. I didn’t want to be rude. He was probably the only button fiend in America, and I had been lucky enough to hit him before lunch.

A question about lunch was in my mind as I left the building. It was ten minutes past noon. Did Nathan Hirsh lunch early or late? Since I could walk it in twelve minutes I decided not to take time to phone, and again I was lucky. As I entered the anteroom of the Hirsh Laboratories on the tenth floor of a building on 43rd Street, Hirsh himself entered from within, on his way out, and when I told him I had something from Nero Wolfe that shouldn’t wait he took me in and down the hall to his room. A few years back, the publicity from his testimony in court on one of Wolfe’s cases hadn’t hurt his business a bit.

I produced the overalls and said, “One simple little question. What are the buttons made of?”

He went to his desk for a glass and inspected one of them. “Not so simple,” he said, “with all the stuff there is around. It looks like horsehair, but to be sure we’d have to rip into one of them.”

“How long will it take?”

“Anywhere from twenty minutes to five hours.”

I told him the sooner the better and he knew the phone number.

I got to 35th Street and into the house just as Wolfe was crossing the hall to the dining room. Since mention of business is not permitted at table, he stopped at the sill and asked, “Well?”

“Well so far,” I told him. “In fact perfect. A man who knows as much about buttons as you do about food has never seen anything like them. Someone spent hours on each one of them. The material had him stumped, so I took them to Hirsh. He’ll report this afternoon.”

He said satisfactory and proceeded to the table, and I went to wash my hands before joining him.

With all the trick gadgets they had hatched, there may be one you could attach to Wolfe and me and find out if he riles me more than I do him or vice versa, but we haven’t got one so I don’t know. I admit that there are times when there is nothing to do but wait, but the point is how you wait. In the office that day after lunch I riled Wolfe by glancing at my watch every few minutes while he was dictating a long letter to an orchid-hunter in Honduras, and then he riled me by settling back, completely at ease, with *Travels with Charles* by John Steinbeck. Damn it, he had a job. If he had to read a book, why not get *His Own Image* by Richard Valdon from the shelf? There might be some kind of a hint in it somewhere.

It was 3:43 when the phone call came from Hirsh. I had my notebook ready in case it was complicated with long scientific words, but it took only common ones and not many of them. I hung up and swiveled, and Wolfe actually moved his eyes from the book.

“Horsehair,” I said. “No dye or lacquer or anything, just plain unadulterated white horsehair.”

He grunted. “Is there time for an advertisement in tomorrow’s papers? *Times* and *News and Gazette*.”

“*Times* and *News*, maybe. *Gazette*, yes.”

“Your notebook. Two columns wide, four inches or so. At the top, one hundred dollars, figures, thirty-point or larger, boldface. Below in fourteen-point, also boldface: will be paid cash for information regarding the maker, comma, or if not the maker the source, comma, buttons made by hand of white horsehair. Period. Buttons of any size or shape suitable for use on clothing. Period. I want to know, comma, not who might make such buttons, comma, but who has actually done so. Period. The hundred dollars will be paid only to the person who first supplies the information. At the bottom, my name, address, and telephone number.”

“Boldface?”

“No. Standard weight, condensed.”

As I turned and reached for the typewriter I would have given a dozen polyester buttons to know whether he had planned it while he was dictating letters or while he was reading *Travels with Charley*.

Chapter 4

The house rules in the old brownstone on West 35th Street are of course set by Wolfe since he owns the house, but any variation in the morning routine usually comes from me. Wolfe sticks to his personal schedule: at 8:15 breakfast in his room on the second floor, on a tray taken up by Fritz, at nine o'clock to the elevator and up to the plant room and down to the office at eleven. My schedule depends on what is stirring and on what time I turned in. I need to be flat a full eight hours, and at night I adjust the clock on my bedstand accordingly; and since I spent that Wednesday evening at a theater, and then at the Flamingo with a friend, and it was after one when I got home, I set the pointer at 9:30.

But it wasn't the radio, nudged by the clock, that roused me Thursday morning. When it happened I squeezed my eyes tighter shut to try to figure out what the hell it was. It wasn't the phone, because I had switched my extension off, and anyway it wasn't loud enough. It was a bumblebee, and why the hell was a bumblebee buzzing around 35th Street in the middle of the night? Or maybe the sun was up. I forced my eyes open and focused on the clock. Six minutes to nine. And it was the house phone, of course, I should have known. I rolled over and reached for it.

"Archie Goodwin's room, Mr. Goodwin speaking."

"I'm sorry, Archie." Fritz. "But she insists—"

"Who?"

"A woman on the phone. Something about buttons. She says—"

"Okay, I'll take it." I flipped the switch of the extension and got the receiver. "Yes? Archie Goodwin speak—"

"I want Nero Wolfe and I'm in a hurry!"

"He's not available. If it's about the ad—"

"It is. I saw it in the *News*, I know about some buttons like that and I want to be first—"

"You are. Your name, please?"

"Beatrice Epps. E-P-P-S. Am I first?"

"You are if it fits. Mrs. Epps, or Miss?"

"Miss Beatrice Epps. I can't tell you now—"

"Where are you, Miss Epps?"

"I'm in a phone booth at Grand Central. I'm on my way to work and I have to be there by nine o'clock, so I can't tell you now, but I wanted to be first."

"Sure. Very sensible. Where do you work?"

"At Quinn and Collins in the Chanin Building. Real estate. But don't come there, they wouldn't like it. I'll phone again on my lunch hour."

"What time?"

"Half past twelve."

"Okay, I'll be at the newsstand in the Chanin Building at twelve-thirty and I'll buy you lunch. I'll have an orchid in my buttonhole, a small one, white and green, and I'll have a hundred—"

"I'm late, I have to go. I'll be there." The connection went. I flopped back onto the pillow and found that I was too near awake for another half-hour to be any good, swung around, and g

my feet on the floor.

At ten o'clock I was in the kitchen at my breakfast table, sprinkling brown sugar on buttered sour-milk griddle cake, with the *Times* before me on the rack. Fritz, standing by, asked, "No cinnamon?"

"No," I said firmly. "I've decided it's an aphrodisiac."

"Then for you it would be—how is it? Taking coal somewhere."

"Coals to Newcastle. That's not the point, but you mean well and I thank you."

"I always mean well." Seeing that I had taken the second bite, he stepped to the range to start the next cake. "I saw the advertisement. Also I saw the things on your desk that you brought in the suitcase. I have heard that the most dangerous kind of case for a detective is a kidnaping case."

"Maybe and maybe not. It depends."

"And in all the years I have been with him this is the first kidnaping case he has ever had."

I sipped coffee. "There you go again, Fritz, circling around. You could just ask, is it a kidnaping case? and I would say no. Because it isn't. Of course the baby clothes gave you the idea. Just between you and me, in strict confidence, the baby clothes belong to him. It isn't decided yet when the baby will move in here, and I doubt if the mother ever will, but I understand she's a good cook, and if you happen to take a long vacation ..."

He was there with the cake and I reached for the tomato and lime marmalade. With it and butter. "You are a true friend, Archie," he said.

"They don't come any truer."

"*Vraiment*. I'm glad you told me so I can get things in. Is it a boy?"

"Yes. It looks like him."

"Good. Do you know what I will do?" He returned to the range and gestured with the calender turner. "I will put cinnamon in everything!"

I disapproved and we debated it.

Instead of waiting until Wolfe came down, to report the development, after I had done the morning chores in the office—opening the mail, dusting, emptying the wastebasket, removing sheets from the desk calendars, putting fresh water in the vase on Wolfe's desk—I mounted the three flights to the plant rooms. June is not the best show-off month for a collection of orchids, especially not for one like Wolfe's, with more than two hundred varieties. The first room, the tropical, had only a few splotches of color; the next one, the intermediate, was more flashy but nothing like March; the third one, the cool, had more flowers but they're not so gaudy. In the last one, the potting room, Wolfe was at the bench with Theodore Horstmann, inspecting the nodes on a pseudo-bulb. As I approached he turned his head and growled, "Well?" He is supposed to be interrupted up there only in an emergency.

"Nothing urgent," I said. "Just to tell you that I'm taking a *Cypripedium lawrenceanum*—one flower. To wear. A woman phoned about buttons, and when I meet her at twelve-thirty it will mark me."

"When will you leave?"

"A little before noon. I'll stop at the bank on the way to deposit a check."

"Very well." He resumed the inspection. Too busy for questions. I went and got the potting and on down. When he came down at eleven he asked for a verbatim report and got it, and

had one question: "What about her?" I told him his guess was as good as mine, say or chance in ten that she really had it, and when I said I might as well leave sooner and get the overalls from Hirsh and have them with me, he approved.

So when I took post near the newsstand in the lobby of the Chanin Building, a little ahead of time, having learned from the directory that Quinn and Collins was on the ninth floor, I had the paper bag. That kind of waiting is different, with faces to watch coming and going, male and female, old and young, sure and saggy. About half of them looked as if they needed either a doctor or a lawyer or a detective, including the one who stopped in front of me with her head tilted back. When I said, "Miss Epps?" she nodded.

"I'm Archie Goodwin. Shall we go downstairs? I have reserved a table."

She shook her head. "I always eat lunch alone."

I want to be fair, but it's fair to say that she had probably had very few invitations to lunch, if any. Her nose was flat and she had twice as much chin as she needed. Her age was somewhere between thirty and fifty. "We can talk here," she said.

"At least we can start here," I conceded. "What do you know about white horsehair buttons?"

"I know I've seen some. But before I tell you—how do I know you'll pay me?"

"You don't." I touched her elbow and we moved aside, away from the traffic. "But I do." I got a card from my case and handed it to her. "Naturally I'll have to check what you tell me and it will have to be practical. You could tell me you knew a man in Singapore who made white horsehair buttons but he's dead."

"I've never been in Singapore. It's nothing like that."

"Good. What is it like?"

"I saw them right here. In this building."

"When?"

"Last summer." She hesitated and then went on. "There was a girl in the office for a month on vacation time, filling in, and one day I noticed the buttons on her blouse. I said I had never seen any buttons like them, and she said very few people had. I asked her where I could get some, and she said nowhere. She said her aunt made them out of horsehair, and it took her a day to make one button, so she didn't make them to sell, just as a hobby."

"Were the buttons white?"

"Yes."

"How many were on her blouse?"

"I don't remember. I think five."

At the Hirsh Laboratories, deciding it would be better not to display the overalls, I had cut off one of the buttons, one of the three still intact. I took it from a pocket and offered it to her. "Anything like that?"

She gave it a good look. "Exactly like that, as I remember, but of course it was nearly a year ago. That size too."

I retrieved the button. "This sounds as if it may help, Miss Epps. What's the girl's name?"

She hesitated. "I suppose I have to tell you."

"You certainly do."

"I don't want to get her into any trouble. Nero Wolfe is a detective and so are you."

"I don't want to get anybody into trouble unless they have asked for it. Anyway, from wh

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