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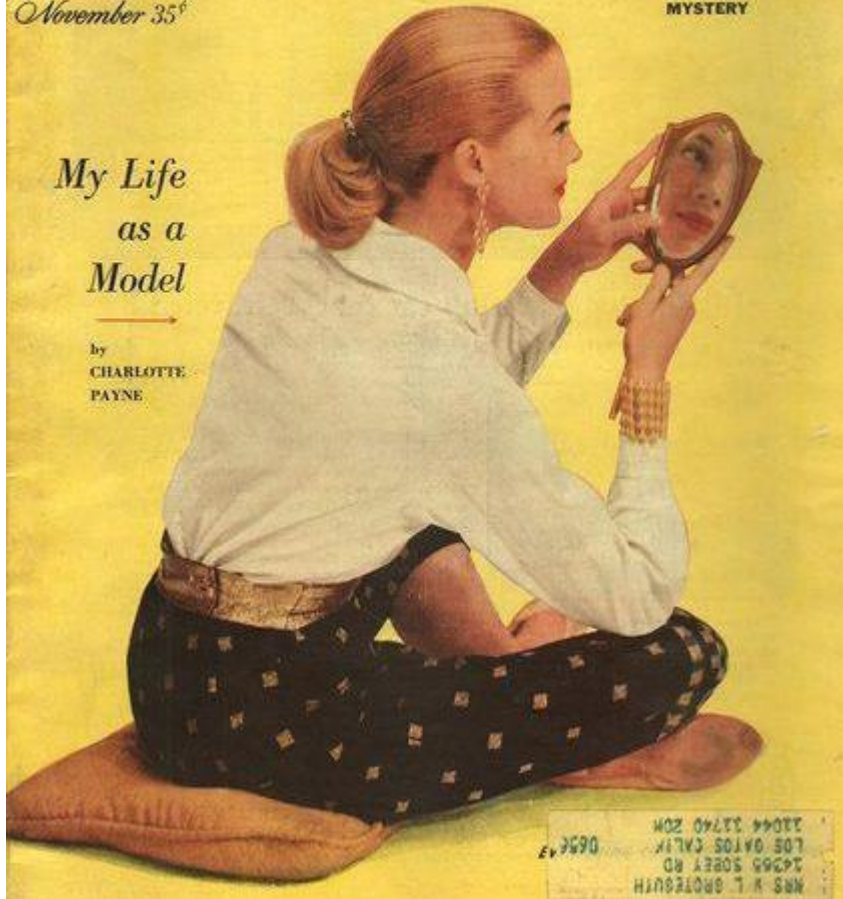
MAGAZINE

November 35¢

TROUBLE? IT'S WONDERFUL!
by **DANNY THOMAS**
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WHAT MAKES PEOPLE FIGHT?
*
A COMPLETE
NERO WOLFE
MYSTERY

My Life as a Model

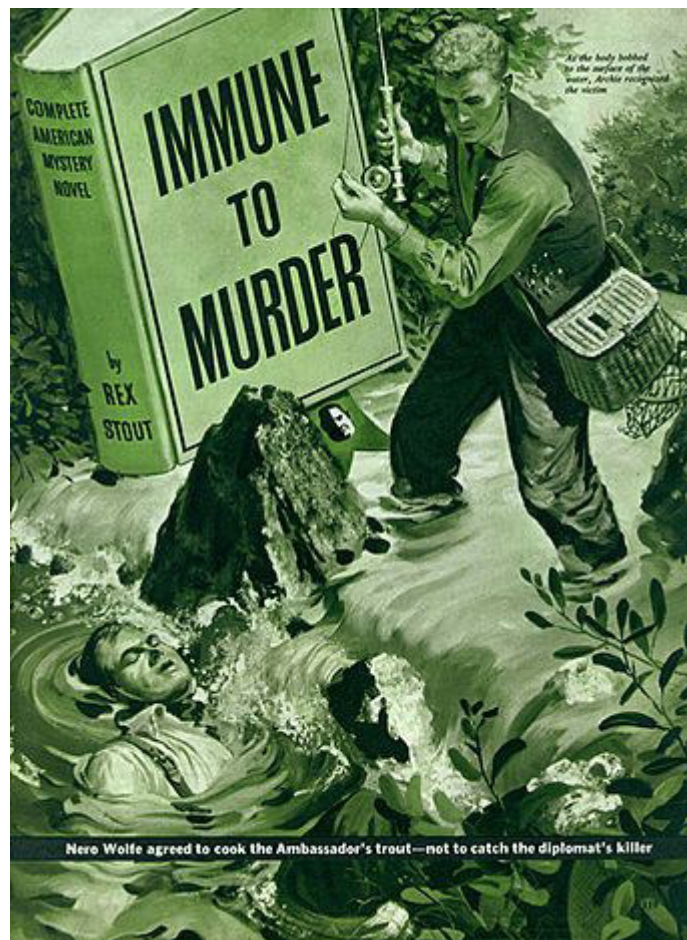
by
**CHARLOTTE
PAYNE**



MRS. T. GROTEBUSH
14265 SOBET RD
LOS ANGELES CALIF
90044 32740 ZOM
0696 13

Rex Stout

Immune to murder



I stood with my arms folded, glaring down at Nero Wolfe, who had his 278 pounds planted in a massive armchair which was made of heavy pine slats, with thick rainbow rugs draped over the back and on the seat for a cushion. It went with the rest of the furniture, including the bed, in that room of River Bend, the sixteen-room mountain lodge belonging to O. V. Bragan, the oil tycoon.

“A fine way to serve your country,” I told him. “Not. In spite of a late start I get you here in time to be shown to your room and unpack and wash up for dinner, and now you tell me to go tell your host you want dinner in your room. Nothing doing. I decline.”

He was glaring back. “Confound it, I have lumbago!” he roared.

“You have not got lumbago. Naturally your back’s tired, since all the way from Thirty-fifth Street, Manhattan, to the Adirondacks, three hundred and twenty-eight miles, you kept stiff on the back seat, ready to jump, even with me at the wheel. What you need is exercise, like a good long walk to the dining room.”

“I say it’s lumbago.”

“No. It’s acute mooditis, which is a medical term for an inflamed whim.” I unfolded my arms to gesture. “Here’s the situation. We were getting nowhere on that insurance case for Lamb and McCullough, which I admit was a little annoying for the greatest detective alive, and you were plenty annoyed, when a phone call came from the State Department. A new ambassador from a foreign country with which our country wanted to make a deal had been asked if he had any special personal desires, and he had said yes, he wanted to catch an American brook trout, and, what was more, he wanted it cooked fresh from the brook by Nero Wolfe. Would you be willing to oblige? Arrangements had been made for the ambassador and a small party to spend a week at a lodge in the Adirondacks, with three miles of private trout water on the Crooked River. If a week was too much for you, two days would do, or even one, or even in a pinch just long enough to cook some trout.”

I gestured again. “Okay. You asked me what I thought. I said we had to stay on the Lamb and McCullough job. You said our country wanted that ambassador softened up and you must answer our country’s call to duty. I said nuts. I said if you wanted to cook for our country you could enlist in the Army and work your way up to mess sergeant, but I would admit that the Lamb and McCullough thing was probably too tough for you. Days passed. It got tougher. The outcome was that we left the house at eleven-fourteen this morning and I drove three hundred and twenty-eight miles in a little under seven hours, and here we are. The setup is marvelous and very democratic. You’re just here as a cook, and look at this room you’ve got.” I swept a hand around. “Not a hardship in sight. Private bath. Mine is somewhat smaller, but I’m only cook’s assistant, I suppose I might call it culinary attaché. We were told dinner at six-thirty because they have to get up early to go fishing, and it is now six-thirty-four, and I am instructed to go tell Bragan you’ll eat in your room. Where would that leave me? They wouldn’t want me at the table without you, and when will I get another chance to watch an ambassador eat? If you’ve got lumbago it’s not in your back, it’s in your psyche. It is called psychic lumbago. The best treatment—”

“Archie. Stop gibbering. ‘Lumbago’ denotes locality. From the Latin *lumbus*, meaning ‘loin.’ The psyche is not in the loin.”

“No? Prove it. I’ll concede that yours may not be, but I have known cases – for example, remember that guy, I forget his name, that wanted to hire you to arrange a meeting of his first four wives and persuade them—”

“Shut up!” He put his hands on the chair arms.

“Yes, sir.”

“There are degrees of discomfort, and some of them stop short of torment, thank heaven. Very well.” He levered himself upright, making some faces, assorted, on the way. “It is lumbago. And

with it I am to sit at a strange table with a jumble of strangers. Are you coming?"

He headed for the door.

II

There was a hardship after all; the lodge had no dining room. Or maybe it did; but the assorted heads of deer and bear and moose on the walls, with planked fish here and there, made it also a trophy room; the billiard table at one end made it a game room; the cabinets of weapons and rods made it a gun-and-tackle room; the chairs and rugs and scattered tables with lights made it a living room; and the over-all size made it a barn.

There was nothing wrong with the food, which was served by two male experts in uniform, but I damn near roasted. There were nine of us at the big square table, with three seated at each of three sides, and no one at the side next to the fireplace. The fireplace was twelve feet wide, and from a distance it was cheerful and sporty, with flame curling around the eight-foot logs their whole length, but my seat at a forward corner of the table was not at a distance. By the time I had finished my clams I was twisting my legs around to the left to keep my pants from blazing up, and my right cheek was about ready for basting. As the soup was being served I twisted the legs still further, and my foot nicked the ankle of my neighbor on the left.

"Sorry," I told him. "What's the name of that animal that can live in fire?"

"Salamander." He was a gravelly tenor, a wiry little specimen with black hair slicked back and broad bulgy shoulders away out of proportion to the rest of him. "What," he asked, "are you doing here?"

"Frying." I turned my head square to him to give my cheek a break. "Please remember this, these may be my last words. My name is Archie Goodwin, and I came here by invitation to bring fourteen things: parsley, onions, chives, chervil, tarragon, fresh mushrooms, brandy, bread crumbs, fresh eggs, paprika, tomatoes, cheese, and Nero Wolfe. That's only thirteen, so I must have left out one. They are ingredients of baked brook trout Montbarry, except the last; Mr. Wolfe is not exactly an ingredient."

He giggled. "I hope not. It would be a very greasy dish, yes?"

"No. That's not fat, it's solid muscle. You should see him lift a pen to sign a letter, absolutely effortless. What are you doing here?"

He tackled his soup and kept at it, so I did likewise. I thought he had crossed me off as a delivery boy, but when his cup was empty he turned to me. "I am an expert, a financier, and a man of guile. I am here—"

"The name first, please. I didn't catch it."

"Certainly, forgive me. Spiros Papps. I am here with my friend, Mr. Theodore Kelefy, the ambassador, to advise him on technical aspects of his mission. I am also here, at this spot, to catch trout, and in the four days we have been here I have caught thirty-eight. Eleven this morning — much better than the ambassador, who got only three. It is claimed that your eastern brook trout, *Salvelinus fontinalis*, is the most savory of all on earth, but I am reserving my opinion until I have tasted one prepared by Mr. Wolfe. Did you say onions?"

"Don't worry," I assured him. "He just waves one at the pan. Do you give advice only to ambassadors, or could I have a little? About these people. The introductions were a little skimpy."

We were interrupted by a servitor with a platter of roast beef, and then one with vegetables, but after that had been attended to he briefed me around the table, keeping his tenor down. O. V. Bragan, the host, was at the best side in the center, the one farthest from the fire. He was a burly six-footer with cold and sharp gray eyes and a square bony chin, somewhere between Wolfe and me in age, and in our brief exchange with him on arrival I had felt no impulse to switch to Hemoco gas, a product of the Hemisphere Oil Company, of which he was it.

Sharing the best side with him, on his right, was Theodore Kelefy, the ambassador. Short but broad, a little pudgy, with no neck to speak of, he looked as if he had been taking on a deep tan for ten years, but it could have been for ten generations. He thought he spoke English, and maybe he

did know the words, but he could have used some advice from Spiros Papps on how to pronounce them. On Bragan's other side, his left, was David M. Leeson. If you had looked him over and listened to him – his cool professional smile, his cool cultivated baritone, his cool well-kept and well-handled face – you would have guessed that he was a career diplomat who had worked up to Assistant Secretary of State before he was forty, and you would have hit it right on the nose. It was he who had phoned Wolfe to ask him to cook for his country. One of his footholds on the way up, Spiros Papps told me, had been a couple of years as secretary of the embassy in the capital that Ambassador Kelefy came from.

It helps a career diplomat to have a helpful wife, and, according to Papps, Leeson had one. Papps spoke highly of her, keeping his voice down because she was there on the other side of him, between him and the ambassador. I had no serious objection to her looks, but she had too much forehead for a top rating. Smooth fair skin, light brown hair in a bun, quick brown eyes – that was all very well, but another trouble was the mouth. It had probably started out all right, but something had pulled the corners down. Either she had got bitter about something or she was working too hard on the career. If she had been a little younger I wouldn't have minded finding out which it was and suggesting steps. If Wolfe could serve his country by cooking trout for an ambassador, why couldn't I serve it by perking up the helpful wife of an Assistant Secretary of State?

The other woman at the table didn't need any perking. At the opposite side of the table, kitty-cornered from me, was Adria Kelefy, not the ambassador's daughter, as might have been thought, but his wife. She didn't look especially helpful, but she certainly looked. Small and dark and dainty, with sleepy dark eyes and silky black hair. She was unquestionably fit to pick up and carry somewhere, if only to a drugstore to buy her a Coke, though I doubt if that would have been her idea of a treat. Assistant Secretary Leeson was on her right and Nero Wolfe on her left, and she was going great with both of them. Once she put her hand on Wolfe's arm and kept it there ten seconds, and he didn't pull away. Considering two of his strongest feelings, one about physical contacts and the other about women, I decided it was my duty to get close enough to study her.

But that had to wait. Next to Wolfe, across from me, was the ninth and last, a tall skinny guy with a perpetual squint and a thin tight mouth that was just a hyphen between his bony jaws. His left cheek was four shades redder than his right one, which I understood and sympathized with. The fireplace, on my right, was on his left. His name, Papps said, was James Arthur Ferris. I said he must be something scrubby like a valet or a varlet, since he had been stuck in the other baking seat.

Papps giggled. "Not a valet, not at all. A very important man, Mr. Ferris. I am responsible for his presence. Mr. Bragan would as soon have invited a cobra, but since he had maneuvered to get the ambassador and Secretary Leeson here I thought it only fair that Mr. Ferris should be invited too, and I insisted. Also I am a man of malice. It entertains me to see big men displaying bad blood. You say you are frying. Why are you frying? Because the table is too close to the fire. Why was it placed too close to the fire? So Mr. Bragan could seat Mr. Ferris where he would be highly uncomfortable. No little man is ever as petty as a big man."

My plate empty, I arranged my knife and fork on it according to Hoyle. "Which are you, little or big?"

"Neither. I am unbranded. What you Americans call a maverick."

"What makes Ferris big?"

"He represents big interests – a syndicate of five great oil companies. That is why Mr. Bragan would like to scorch him. Hundreds of millions are at stake. These four days here, we have fished in the morning, squabbled in the afternoon, and fraternized in the evening. Mr. Ferris has gained some ground with the ambassador, but not, I fear, with Secretary Leeson. I find that entertaining. In the end the decision will in effect be mine, and I invite a situation that should mean another ten or twenty million for the government that employs me. If you think I am indiscreet you are wrong. If you repeat what I have said to Mr. Wolfe, and it goes from him to any or all of the others, including Secretary Leeson, I would not reproach you as a chatterbox. I am a man of simple candor. In fact I would go so far as—"

I didn't get to hear how far a man of guile and malice and simple candor would go, on

account of an interruption. James Arthur Ferris suddenly shoved his chair back, not quietly, left it, marched the length of the room to the far wall, a good twenty paces, and took a billiard cue from the rack. All heads turned to him, and probably I wasn't alone with my notion that he was going to march back and take a swing at our host, but he merely put the cue ball on the head spot, and, not bothering with any sawing, smashed it into the cluster. The heads turned to Bragan, and then to one another, in dead silence. I grabbed the opportunity. Bragan's scorching Ferris was nothing to me, but scorching me too was uncalled for, and here was my chance. I got up and went to the billiard table and asked Ferris politely, "Shall I rack 'em up and we'll lag for the break?"

He was so damn mad he couldn't speak. He just nodded.

A couple of hours later, going on ten o'clock, Nero Wolfe said to me, "Archie. About your leaving the dinner table. You know what I think of any disturbance at a meal."

"Yes, sir."

We were in his room, bound for bed. Mine was down the hall, and I had stopped in at his by request.

"I concede," he said, "that there may be exceptions, and this was one. Mr. Bragan is either a dunce or a ruffian."

"Yeah. Or both. At least I wasn't tied to a stake – I must remember to thank him. You going fishing tomorrow?"

"You know I'm not." Seated, he grunted as he bent over to unlace his shoes. That done, he straightened. "I inspected the kitchen and equipment, and it will serve. They'll be back at eleven-thirty with the morning's catch, and lunch will be at twelve-thirty. I'll take over the kitchen at ten. The cook is civil and fairly competent. I wish to make an avowal. You were right to oppose this expedition. These people are engaged in bitter and savage combat, with Ambassador Kelefy at the center of it, and in his present humor I doubt if he could distinguish between trout Montbarry and carp fried in lard. As for the others, their mouths would water only at the prospect of long pig. Do you know what that is?"

I nodded. "Cannibal stew. Only each one would want to pick the pig."

"No doubt." He kicked his shoes off. "If we leave immediately after lunch, say three o'clock, will we be home by bedtime?"

I said sure, and told him good night. As I opened the door he spoke to my back, "By the way, it is not lumbago."

III

The next morning at nine-thirty Wolfe and I had breakfast together at a little table in the big room, by the only window that the sun was hitting through a gap in the trees outside. The griddle cakes were not up to Fritz's by a long shot, but they were edible, and the bacon and maple syrup and coffee were admitted by Wolfe to be a pleasant surprise. The five fishermen had gone off before eight o'clock, each to his assigned stretch of the three miles of private water.

I had my own personal program and had cleared it with our host the evening before. Ever since I caught my first little shiner at the age of seven in an Ohio creek, at sight of wild water I have always had twin feelings: that there must be fish in it, and that they needed to be taught a lesson. Admitting that the Crooked River was privately stocked, the fish didn't know it and were just as cocky as if they had never been near a hatchery. So I had arranged matters with Bragan. The five anglers were due back at the lodge at eleven-thirty, leaving the whole three miles vacant. Wolfe didn't intend to join them at the lunch table anyhow, and certainly I wouldn't be missed. I would have two hours for it, and Bragan told me, though not very cordially, to help myself to tackle and waders from the cabinets and drawers.

After breakfast I offered to go and help in the kitchen, chopping herbs and mushrooms and doing other chores, but Wolfe said I would only be in the way, so I went to the cabinets and started poking around. That was quite a collection, considering that five men had already helped themselves, presumably to the best. I finally ended up with a Walton Special three-piece rod, a

Poughqueag reel with a seven-taper Maxim line, tapered leaders, a fly box with two dozen assorted flies, a 14-inch willow creel, an aluminum-frame net, and Wethersill waders. Assaying at around four hundred bucks on the hoof, I went to the kitchen and got three roast-beef sandwiches and a pair of chocolate bars and stowed them in the creel.

Not bothering to take off the waders, I moseyed outdoors for a look at the sky and a feel of the wind. It was a fine day, maybe too fine for good fishing, with a few white clouds floating high above the pines, not enough to discourage the sun, and a baby breeze sliding in from the southwest. The river curved around the lodge in almost a full semicircle, with the lodge's main veranda, about the size of a tennis court, facing the big bulge of the curve. I found myself faced with a problem in etiquette. Toward one end of the veranda, ten yards to my left, was seated Adria Kelefy, reading a magazine. Toward the other end, ten yards to my right, was seated Sally Leeson, her chin propped on her fist, gazing across the veranda rail at nature. Neither had paid me any visible or audible attention. The problem was, should I wish them good morning, and if so, which one first, the ambassador's wife or the Assistant Secretary of State's wife?

I passed. If they wanted a snubbing contest, okay. But I thought they might as well realize the kind of man they were snubbing, so I acted. There were no trees between the veranda and the river, which wasn't a river at all, merely a creek. From the assortment on the veranda I took an aluminum chair with a canvas seat and high back, carried it down the steps and across the clearing, put it on a level spot ten feet from the creek's edge, got a Gray Hackle from my fly book and put it on the leader, sat in the chair, leaning back to rest my head comfortably, whipped a little line out, dropped the fly onto the ripples, let it float twenty feet downstream, whipped it back gently, and put it out again.

If you ask whether I expected a hit in that unlikely piece of riffle, the answer is yes. I figured that a guy who went to that much trouble to put on an act for the wives of two big men who had snubbed him deserved some co-operation from a mature male trout, and if he deserved it why shouldn't he get it? I might have, too, if Junior hadn't come along and spoiled it. About the twentieth cast my eyes caught a tiny flash and my fingers felt the take, and there I was with Junior on. I gave him the air immediately, hoping he would flop off, but he had it good. If it had been Daddy I could have tired him out, swung him in to me, and taken him off the hook with a dry hand, since he would soon be on the menu, but that little cuss had to be put back with a wet hand. So I had to leave the chair, to dip a hand in the creek before I touched him, which ruined the act.

As I put him back where he belonged, having taught him a lesson, I was considering my position. To return to the chair and carry on as if nothing had happened was out of the question. That damn minnow had made a monkey of me. I might back up in the clearing and do some serious practice casting – but then the sound of steps came, and a voice. "I didn't know you could fish like that from a chair! Where is it?" She said "feesh."

"Good morning, Mrs. Kelefy. I put it back. Too small."

"Oh!" She had reached me. "Let me." She put out a hand. "I'm going to catch one." She looked fully as portable in the strong daylight as she had at night, and the dark eyes just as sleepy. When a woman has eyes like that, a man with any scientific instinct at all wants to find out what it takes to light them up. But a glance at my wrist told me I would be shoving off in eighteen minutes, not time enough to get acquainted and start on research, especially with Sally Leeson sitting there on the veranda gazing, apparently now at us.

I shook my head. "It would be fun to see you catch a fish," I told her, "but I can't give you this rod because it isn't mine. Mr. Bragan lent it to me, and I'm sure he'll lend you one. I'm sorry. To show you how sorry I am, would you care to know one thing I thought as I looked at you last evening at the dinner table?"

"I want to catch a fish. I never saw a fish caught before." She actually reached to close her fingers on the rod.

I held on. "Mr. Bragan will be here any minute."

"If you give it to me I'll let you tell me what you thought last evening."

I shrugged. "I'm not sure I remember it anyhow. Skip it."

No spark in the eyes. But her hand left the rod and her voice changed a little, person to person. "Of course you remember. What was it?"

"Let's see, how did it go? Oh yes. That big green thing in the ring on your husband's left hand – is it an emerald?"

"Certainly."

"I thought it might be. So I was thinking your husband should display his assets more effectively. With those two assets, the emerald and you, he should have combined them. The best way would be an earring on your right ear, with nothing on the left ear. I had a notion to suggest it to him."

She shook her head. "I wouldn't like it. I like pearls." She reached again for a hold on the rod. "Now I'll catch a fish."

It looked as if we were headed for a tussle, with a good chance of breaking the Walton Special, but an arrival broke it up. James Arthur Ferris, his lanky length fully accoutered, stepped into the clearing and approached, speaking. "Good morning, Mrs. Kelefy! A glorious day, glorious!"

Snubbed again. But I understood; I had beaten him 100 to 46 at the billiard table.

"I want to catch a fish," Mrs. Kelefy told him, "and this man won't give me his rod. I'll take yours."

"Of course," he gushed. "With great pleasure. I have a Blue Dun on, but if you'd rather try something else—"

I was on my way.

The general run of the creek – all right, river, then – was to the north, but of course it did a lot of twisting and dodging, as shown on a big wall map at the lodge. The three miles of private water were divided into five equal stretches for solo fishing, with the boundaries of the stretches marked by numbered stakes. Two of the stretches were to the south from the lodge, upstream, and the other three to the north, downstream. As arranged the evening before, for that day Spiros Papps and Ambassador Kelefy had the two to the south, and Ferris, Leeson, and Bragan the three to the north.

I am not a dry-fly man, and am no big thrill with a wet fly, so the idea was to start at the upper end and fish downstream, and I headed south on the trail, which, according to the map, more or less ignored the twists of the river and was fairly straight. Less than fifty paces from the lodge I met Spiros Papps, who greeted me with no apparent malice or guile and lifted the lid of his creel to show me seven beauties averaging well over ten inches. A quarter of a mile farther on here came Ambassador Kelefy, who was going to be a little late getting back but nevertheless also had to show me. He had eight, and was pleased to hear that he was one up on Papps.

Starting at the southern boundary of stretch one, I fished back down to the lodge in forty minutes. I prefer to report that forty minutes in bare statistics. Number of flies tried, three. Slips and near-falls, three. Slip and fall, getting wet above the waders, one. Snags of hooks on twigs of overhang, four. Caught, one big enough to keep and five put back. When I reached the lodge it was just twelve-thirty, lunch time, and I detoured around it to hit stretch three a hundred yards down – the stretch Ferris had fished that morning. There my luck picked up, and in twenty minutes I got three fat ones – one over twelve inches and the other two not much under that. Soon after that I came to a stake with a "4" on it, the start of Assistant Secretary Leeson's stretch. It was a nice spot, with a little patch of grass going right to the edge of the rippling water, and I took off my wet jacket, spread it on a rock in the sun, sat down on another rock, and got out my sandwiches and chocolate.

But I had told Wolfe I would be back by two o'clock, and there was still more than a mile of water to try, so I crammed the grub in, took a couple of swallows of water from the river, which was a creek, put my jacket on, and the creel, and resumed. For the next couple of hundred yards the growth on the banks made it all wading, and the water wasn't the kind trout like to loaf in, but then came a double bend with a long eddy hugging one shore, and I took a stance in the middle, got forty feet of line out, dropped the fly – a Black Gnat – at the top of the eddy, and let it float down. It hadn't gone two feet when Grandpa hit, and I jerked, and I had him on, and here he came upstream,

straight for me, which is of course one of the disadvantages of working downstream. I managed to keep line on him, and when he was damn near close enough to bite me he suddenly made a U turn and off he went, back into the eddy, right on through it, and around the second bend. Not having a mile of line, I went splashing after him without stopping to test footholds, up to my knees and then to my thighs and then to my knees again, until I could see around the bend. It was a straight piece of rough water, thirty feet wide, dotted with boulders, and I was heading for one to use as a brace in the current when I saw something that halted me. A boulder near the bank was already being used as a brace if my eyes were any good, and they were. Keeping a bent rod on Grandpa, I worked over to the boulder near the bank. It was Assistant Secretary Leeson. His feet and shanks were on the bank; his knees were at the edge of the water; and the rest of him was in the water, lodged against the upstream side of the boulder. The force of the current was gently bobbing him up and down, so that one moment his face was visible and the next moment it wasn't.

Even one brief glimpse of the face was enough to answer the main question, but there is always the chance in a million, so I straightened up to reel my line in, and at that instant the fish broke water for the first time. He came clear out and on up to do a flip, and I couldn't believe it. There was a smaller one than him on a plank displayed in the lodge. Instinctively, of course, I gave him line when I saw him take the air, and when he was back under I took it in and had him bending the rod again.

"Damn it," I said aloud, "it's a dilemma."

I transferred the rod to my left hand with the line pinched between the tips of the thumb and index finger of that hand, made sure of good footing, stooped and gripped the collar of Leeson's jacket with my right hand, lifted his head clear of the water, and took a look. That was enough. Even if he wasn't drowned he wasn't alive. I backed up slowly out onto the bank, taking him along, and as I let him down and his shoulders touched the ground the trout broke water again.

Ordinarily such a fish would rate fifteen or twenty minutes of careful handling, but under the circumstances I was naturally a little impatient, and it wasn't more than half of that before I worked him in to where I could get him in the net. He was seven inches longer than the width of the creel, and I hated to bend him but had to. I took another look at Leeson's head, and, when I moved him a little further from the water, I put my handkerchief under it so it wouldn't be in contact with the ground. I covered the upper third of him with my jacket, took my rod apart, and looked at my watch. Twenty past one. That was all right; the trout Montbarry would be gone by the time I got there. Wolfe would be sore enough as it was, but I would never have heard the last of it if I had arrived in the middle of that particular meal to announce a corpse. I hit the trail, with the rod in one hand and the creel in the other.

It was a lot quicker to the lodge by the trail than it had been wading down. As I emerged from the trees into the clearing I saw that lunch was over, for they were all out on the veranda having coffee – the four men and two women. Mounting the steps and heading for the door, I thought I was going to be snubbed again, but O. V. Bragan called to me. "Goodwin! Did you see Secretary Leeson anywhere?"

"No." I kept going.

"Didn't you fish his stretch?"

"Only part of it." I halted long enough to add, "I got wet and need a change," and then went on. Inside I made for the kitchen. The cook and two waiters were seated at a table, eating. I asked where Wolfe was, and they said in his room, so I backtracked, took the hall to the other wing, found Wolfe's door standing open, and entered. He was putting something in his suitcase, which was open on the bed.

"You're early," he grunted. "Satisfactory."

"Yes, sir. I've got four trout and one supertrout to take back to Fritz, as promised. How was the lunch?"

"Passable. I cooked twenty trout and they were all eaten. I'm nearly packed, and we can go. Now."

"Yes, sir. First I have a report. About three-quarters of a mile downstream I found Secretary

Leeson against a boulder near the bank, his feet out of the water and the rest of him in. He had been there some time; his armpits were good and cold.”

“Good heavens.” Wolfe was scowling at me. “You would. Drowned?”

“I don’t know. I—”

“You have told Mr. Bragan.”

“No, sir. I’m reporting to you. I removed it from the water to the bank. His skull was smashed in, back of the right ear and above it, by a blow or blows, I would say with a rock or a heavy club. Not from a fall, not a chance, unless he climbed to the top of a high tree to fall from, and there’s none there high enough. Somebody clobbered him. So I thought you should be present when I announce it, preferably with your eyes open.”

“Pfu. You think he was murdered.”

“Twenty to one, at least.”

His lips tightened and the scowl deepened. “Very well. They’ll find him soon. They thought he was being stubborn about filling his creel and decided to go and look for him after lunch. Since he was mostly under water you didn’t have to see him – no, confound it, you took him out. Even so, get those things off and dress. We are leaving. I don’t intend—”

“No, sir.” I was firm. “As you say, I took him out. They know I fished that stretch. We probably wouldn’t even get home. We’d get stopped somewhere around Albany and brought back, and then where would we spend the night? One guess.”

He took in air, a sigh that filled him clear down to his waistline. When it was out again he blurted savagely, “Why the devil did you have to go fishing?” He sighed again. “Go and tell Mr. Bragan.”

“Yes, sir. You’re coming along?”

“No! Why should I? I am not concerned. Go!”

I was sweating under the waders, so I peeled them off and slipped my shoes on before I went. When I got to the veranda three of the men – Bragan, Ferris, and Papps – had left it and were crossing the clearing to the trail, and I sung out, “Bragan! You three come back here please?”

He called, astonished, “What for? We’re going to find Leeson!”

“I already found him. Come here and I’ll tell you.”

“Found him where?”

“I said come here.”

Wolfe may not have cared about seeing their faces as I gave them the news, but I did. All of them. I ignored Bragan’s demands until the three of them had mounted the steps and were facing me in a group that included Ambassador Kelefy and the two women.

“I did see Secretary Leeson,” I told them. “I went to tell Mr. Wolfe first because I thought he might want to tell you, but he leaves it to me. Leeson is dead.” I stopped.

Spiros Papps, standing next to Sally Leeson, took hold of her arm. She just stared at me. Adria Kelefy’s mouth fell open. Ferris and Ambassador Kelefy made noises, and Bragan demanded, “Dead? How? Where?”

“I found his body on the river bank with most of him in the water, including his head. I lifted him out, but he had been dead some time.” I focused on Bragan. “You’ll get a doctor of course, but also you’ll have to get the police, and the body must not be moved again until they come, because—”

Sally Leeson pulled away from Papps and made a dash for the steps. I jumped and grabbed her and got my arms around her. “Hold on a minute,” I told her, “and I’ll take you there if you have to go. Just hold on.”

“Why the police?” Bragan demanded.

“His skull is smashed. Don’t argue with me, save it for them. I’m going back to the body and stay there till they come. Shall I call them first?”

“No. I will.”

“And a doctor.”

“Yes.”

“Good. It’s at the double bend two hundred yards below the number four stake.” I loosened

my grip on the widow, and she was stiff and straight. "You'd better stay here, Mrs. Leeson."

"No. I must... take me."

"Then I'd just as soon have someone along. Ferris?"

"No."

"Kelefy?"

"I think not."

"Papps?"

"Certainly," he said politely, and the three of us went.

IV

Two hours later, at a quarter to four, it was a convention.

Two state troopers had been the first to arrive, and Bragan had brought them down to us at the double bend. Soon after, the doctor came, and, while he was no metropolitan medical examiner, he did have his head along. When he asked me why I had put my handkerchief under Leeson's head, and I said because I thought the water might not have washed away all evidence of what it was that had smashed the skull, he said that was very sensible and it was too bad he didn't have a good glass with him. But his main contribution was to make it official that Leeson was dead, and to insist that Mrs. Leeson let Papps take her back to the lodge. The body couldn't be moved until the sheriff came.

When the sheriff arrived he had two county detectives along. Then more troopers, including a lieutenant. Then the district attorney, a bouncy bald guy named Jasper Colvin, with rimless spectacles that he had to shove back on his nose every time he took a step. He had two underlings with him. Then a couple of journalists, one with a notebook and one with a camera. They all got around to me, and they all seemed to have the idea that I was leaving something out, but that was nothing new. Any officer of the law would rather be caught dead than admit he believes that you're telling him the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but.

When a stretcher finally came for the remains most of the public servants were scattered around looking for the weapon or other relevant items, and my offer to help carry was accepted. It was quite a load and quite a portage. After we had lifted the stretcher into an ambulance that had squeezed onto the edge of the crowded parking space back of the lodge, I circled around to the veranda and found no one there but a trooper standing biting his lip. Inside, in the big room, Ferris and Papps were on chairs by a window having a conversation, and a stranger was at a table using the phone.

Papps called to me. "Anything new?"

"Not with me," I told him, and crossed to the inner hall.

Wolfe was in his room, in the chair with rainbow rugs, with a book. He shot me a glance as I entered and then went back to the book. I stood. "Do you want a report?"

His eyes stayed on the page. "Not unless it bears upon our leaving here."

"It doesn't. Any questions or instructions?"

"No."

"You know damn well," I said pleasantly, "that you approved of my going fishing. Where are my trout?"

"In the kitchen in the large refrigerator. Cleaned."

"Thank you very much." I left him and went to my room.

I was there an hour later when a trooper came to tell me I was wanted. I supposed it was for more of the same, but Wolfe was in the hall outside his door, and started off as I approached, and led the way to the big room, with the trooper in the rear.

It looked as if something was stewing. The five guests were in a group, seated, in the middle of the room, and Bragan was standing nearby talking with District Attorney Colvin. The sheriff and two troopers were over near the door, and one of the pair the DA had brought with him was seated at a little table with an open notebook before him. Three paces in Wolfe stopped and raised his

voice. "You sent for me, Mr. Bragan?"

Colvin answered. "I did. I'm Jasper Colvin, district attorney of this county." He pushed his specs back up on his nose. "You're Nero Wolfe, a private detective?"

"Yes."

"You will sit here, please. You too, Goodwin. I have something to say to all of you."

I wouldn't have been surprised if Wolfe had about-faced and marched out, since he had had three provocations: first, Colvin's tone of voice; second, his saying "*a* private detective," not "*the* private detective"; and third, the size of the chair indicated, at the rear of the group of guests. But after a second's hesitation he went and sat, and I took the other vacant chair next to him.

The DA stood facing his audience. He cleared his throat. "I am sure, ladies and gentlemen, I don't need—"

"Want me to take this?" It was the man at the table with the notebook.

Colvin turned his head to snap, "Yes, everything!" and turned back. He pushed the specs back and cleared his throat again. "I don't need to tell you, ladies and gentlemen, how painful I find my duty today. But just as Assistant Secretary of State Leeson, at his high level, always put his duty as diplomat and statesman first, so must I, in my much humbler capacity, do likewise. I know you all appreciate that."

They didn't say. He went on. "When I arrived here on this tragic mission, two hours ago, I found that Sheriff Dell and Lieutenant Hopp were already here, and I consulted with them. We agreed that there was no point in harassing you until certain lines of investigation had been tried, and you were merely asked a few routine questions and requested to remain on the premises for possible further inquiry. In that connection I wish to convey the sincere thanks of myself personally, and of the people of the state of New York, to Ambassador Kelefy. He and his wife, and Mr. Spiros Papps of his staff, are protected by diplomatic immunity from arrest or detention, but they have made no objection to our request. I may say that I have phoned the State Department in Washington for advice in this matter."

"That wasn't necessary," Kelefy assured him. "Even diplomats are human occasionally." His pronunciation was no better under stress, but I won't try to spell it.

Colvin nodded at him, and down came the specs. After pushing them up the DA resumed. "But now it is my painful duty to tell you that we will have to go further than routine questions, on account of certain aspects the matter has taken on. We have had to reject the idea that Secretary Leeson's death was accidental. Two doctors agree that the injury to the skull could not have been caused by any conceivable accident at that spot. They also agree that it couldn't possibly have been self-inflicted. Therefore it was homicide."

Since Wolfe and I were in the rear I couldn't see their faces, and the backs of their heads weren't very expressive. The only one that moved was James Arthur Ferris. He turned his head for a glance at Sally Leeson.

O. V. Bragan spoke up. "I'd like to comment on that."

"Go ahead, Mr. Bragan."

"I told you when you got here it might be murder. I reminded you and the troopers that I've been bothered with poachers on my water, and I suggested that you immediately start your men investigating the possibility that Leeson came on one at the river and was attacked by him. Did you do that?"

Colvin cleared his throat and had to push the specs. "We didn't overlook that possibility, Mr. Bragan, but permit me to finish. An examination of the skull wound with a magnifying glass disclosed three particles of wood bark that had not been dislodged by the water. That justified the assumption that the blow or blows had been struck with a wooden club. If so, where was it? It wasn't at or near the spot. It seemed unlikely that the assailant had carried it away. Probably he had thrown it from him, and most probably, he had thrown it in the river. And it has been found – or I should say, a club has been found. Bring it here, Nate."

The sheriff walked over to him and held it up. It was three feet long, maybe a little more, as thick as my arm.

"It was found," Colvin said, "in the river five hundred feet downstream from the bend, wedged between two rocks where the current had carried it. It's ash. The water was playing over it, but the bark wasn't soaked through, so it hadn't been there very long. As you see, it was sawed off at both ends. Near one end the bark is bruised for three or four inches as if it had hit something hard. It will take a microscope to find out if the water left any evidence in the bruised bark, but we think we are justified in assuming that that club was the weapon. And you must permit me, Mr. Bragan, you must permit me to say that if Secretary Leeson surprised a poacher on your water, I can conceive of no reason why the poacher was carrying such a club. Sheriff Dell and Lieutenant Hopp agree with me."

"You don't have to conceive his reason," Bragan rumbled. "Find him and ask him."

"That is a possibility," the DA conceded. "Two of the sheriff's men and two troopers are now exploring it. But one more fact. There are two large stacks of firewood outside on your premises. One of them is eight-foot logs for your big fireplace. The other is shorter and smaller logs for the smaller fireplaces in your other rooms, and in it are scores, hundreds, of pieces of ash similar to the one the sheriff has just shown you. There is no stack of wood like that within two miles or more. So believe me, Mr. Bragan, we have been forced to our conclusion, we don't like it, we don't like it at all, but duty is duty no matter how painful it is. Our conclusion is that Secretary Leeson was killed with that club by premeditation, that the club came from your woodpile, and that it was used by someone here at your place. Is that right, Nate?"

"That's the way I see it," the sheriff declared.

"Right, Lieutenant?"

"It seems," the trooper allowed, "to fit the facts as a basis for inquiry."

Bragan was leaning forward. "You're actually saying that I or one of my guests murdered Secretary Leeson? And you know who my guests are?"

"I certainly do." Colvin pushed the specs. "I'll only mention it every fourth or fifth time. "But there are two of them who may have reason to—" He stopped. "No." He turned to the man with the notebook. "Strike that last sentence."

"Okay." The man scratched with his pen.

Colvin resumed. "I am keenly aware of the situation, Mr. Bragan, but the inquiry must be proper and of course unprejudiced. It may be necessary later to talk with one or more of you privately, but I think it's better to start this way, with you first, naturally. For the record, I ask you, did you strike Leeson with that club or any other weapon?"

"No. Good God. No."

"Have you any reason whatever to suspect any person present of having done so?"

"No. None."

Colvin's eyes moved. Specs back. "Those two questions are pro forma for each and all of you. You have heard them and will please answer them. Mrs. Leeson?"

"No." Her voice was low but firm. "To both."

"Mrs. Kelefy?"

"One moment," Ferris put in. "To put such questions to the wife of a distinguished foreign ambassador is highly improper."

I would have liked to ask if it would be okay to put them to the wife of an undistinguished foreign ambassador, but skipped it. Anyway, the distinguished ambassador was speaking. "This is no time to seek refuge in propriety. Answer, my dear."

"But of course," she said. I would have liked to see her eyes. "Certainly no to both questions."

"Ambassador Kelefy, if you wish to answer?"

"I do. I answer no."

"Mr. Papps?"

"No and no."

"Mr. Ferris?"

"No to both."

"Nero Wolfe?"

“No.”

“To both?”

“Yes.”

“Goodwin?”

“I’ve been asked before. No again, twice.”

Colvin’s eyes went right and left. “You were asked previously when and where you last saw Secretary Leeson alive, but under the present circumstances I would like to verify it. Ambassador Kelefy and Mr. Papps, whose stretches were south, upstream, last saw him when they parted from him on the veranda shortly before eight o’clock this morning. Mrs. Leeson last saw him when he left their room this morning to go to breakfast. Mrs. Kelefy last saw him last evening when she and her husband left this room to go to bed. Mr. Ferris last saw him on the trail, when Mr. Ferris left the trail to strike the river and start fishing his stretch, number three, upstream. Secretary Leeson and Mr. Bragan continued on the trail, and Mr. Bragan last saw him when he left the trail for the river at the beginning of his stretch, number four. Mr. Bragan continued on the trail to the boundary of his water, to fish stretch number five. Wolfe and Goodwin last saw him last evening in this room. That’s the way we have it, that’s what you’ve told us. I now ask each and all of you, is that correct in every particular? Correct not only as regards yourself, but as regards the others? If not, tell me.”

Not a peep. Colvin took a breath. Specs. “Mr. Bragan, it is necessary to ask you this. There was a piece in the paper day before yesterday, a dispatch from Washington, about this fishing party at your lodge. Naturally I read it with interest, since this is my county. It said that Ambassador Kelefy’s chief purpose in his new post would be to carry on negotiations regarding oil rights in his country, that vast sums were involved, and that he had brought Mr. Spiros Papps with him for that purpose; that Assistant Secretary Leeson was included in the party because he knew Ambassador Kelefy, having formerly been secretary of our embassy in the ambassador’s country; and that the negotiations might be brought to a conclusion on the bank of this trout stream, since the two chief bidders for the rights were both here. The article named them: O. V. Bragan of the Hemisphere Oil Company and James Arthur Ferris of the Universal Syndicate.”

“Well, what about it?”

“It was an Associated Press dispatch, so it went all over the country. It said the rivalry between Hemisphere and Universal was intense and bitter – yes, it said bitter. I don’t imply anything, anything at all, but you must see that this is going to cause immediate and widespread speculation. Do you want to comment on that?”

“I do not.”

“It might be helpful for you to give me some idea, privately if you prefer, of the state of the negotiations. Of the nature of the relationships of all those concerned. It might help to eliminate that as – uh – as a factor.”

“It’s already eliminated. You’re beyond your depth, Colvin.”

“You certainly are.” Ferris was supporting his bitter rival. “This is preposterous. Go find the poacher.”

“If I may,” Ambassador Kelefy put in diplomatically. “I agree with Mr. Bragan and Mr. Ferris. Americans do not fight even for millions with clubs.”

I could have named him an American who had used a blackjack on a fellow citizen to relieve him of \$2.38, but of course he wasn’t an oil tycoon.

“You’re not only beyond your depth,” Bragan told the DA, “but you’re too free with conclusions. Even if that club was the weapon and it came from my woodpile, and therefore it was premeditated, why was it one of us? Anyone could sneak in through the woods and get a stick from the woodpile.”

“True,” Colvin agreed. “Quite true. But it must have been premeditated, and Secretary Leeson must have been a chosen target. As I said, four trained men are exploring that possibility. But the laws of probability compel us to center our attention on this place and the people here. By no means exclusively on you and your five guests; there are five others. Wolfe, Goodwin, and your three servants. The three servants have been questioned, and we’re certainly not through with them. I

want to ask you about them. The cook's name is Michael Samek?"

"Yes. This is ridiculous. Mike has been with me for fifteen years – at my home in New York, in Florida in the winter. The other—"

"Isn't that a Russian name? Is he a Russian?"

"No. He's an American. You certainly are seeing things, Colvin. He was born in Buffalo. The other two men are from an agency in New York and I have used them many times. For years. Do you want the name of the agency?"

"We got it from them. Have you any reason whatever to suppose that one of those three might be involved in this?"

"I have not. I have every reason to suppose they aren't."

"All right, but you understand they have to be thoroughly checked. Now about Wolfe and Goodwin. The newspaper article said that Wolfe was coming to cook trout for Ambassador Kelefy. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Did you arrange that?"

"No. Secretary Leeson did."

"When did they get here?"

"Late yesterday afternoon, just before dinner."

"Why did Goodwin come along?"

"I suppose to drive the car. Ask him."

"I intend to. But first please tell me – to your knowledge, was there anything behind that arrangement? Some other reason for getting Wolfe and Goodwin here?"

"No. Not to my knowledge."

"Then if there was some secret reason, some ulterior motive, for the arrangement, it was known only to Secretary Leeson, who is now dead?"

"I can't say. It wasn't known to me."

Colvin's eyes went to Wolfe, and he raised his chin and his voice. "I ask you, Wolfe. Goodwin says that the arrangement for your coming here was made on the telephone with Secretary Leeson. Have you any record other than your own memory of what was said on the telephone?"

If he had worked at it for a week he couldn't have thought up a worse approach.

V

Wolfe, beside me, sat slowly moving his head from side to side, and I thought he was simply going to clam up and let it go at that. But no. He spoke. "It's too bad, Mr. Colvin."

"What's too bad?"

"That you're spoiling it. You people have investigated promptly and efficiently, and you have expounded the situation admirably – though I think 'assumptions' would be a better word than 'conclusions' at this stage. You even show—"

"I asked you a question! Answer it!"

"I shall. You even show commendable spunk in dealing with two billionaires and an ambassador, and I can't blame you for wanting to impress them by using a sharper tone and a more pugnacious manner for me. Though I don't blame you, I would certainly tell you to go to the devil but for the fact that my one desire is to leave here and go home. So I suggest a *modus operandi*. I will make a statement – you have a stenographer there. When I'm through you may ask questions, and I may answer them."

"I've asked one. You can answer that."

Wolfe shook his head patiently. "I've offered a statement. Isn't that accepted procedure?"

The sheriff, who had returned to the group by the door, called over, "Maybe he'd like it better at the courthouse!"

The DA ignored it. He pushed his specs back up. "Go ahead and make your statement."

"Yes, sir." Wolfe was trying not to be smug. He did want to go home. "Eleven days ago I had

a telephone call from Washington and was told that Mr. David M. Leeson, Assistant Secretary of State, wished to speak with me. Mr. Leeson, whom I had never met, told me that a fishing party was being arranged for Ambassador Kelefy, newly arrived in this country, and that the ambassador had expressed a desire to eat fresh trout cooked by Nero Wolfe, and would I oblige him. Mr. Leeson said it would be deeply appreciated. I was engaged on a difficult job and reserved my decision. Mr. Leeson phoned me again two days later, and again three days later, and I agreed to go, and he gave me the necessary information. No other matter was mentioned by either of us in any of the conversations.”

“Did Leeson write you about it?”

“No. It was all arranged on the phone. Yesterday morning Mr. Goodwin and I left my house in New York and drove here in my car, arriving around six o’clock. He accompanied me because he always does, and I had so stipulated with Mr. Leeson. He and I dined in this room with the others, and went to our rooms and to bed about ten o’clock. Neither of us had ever before met any of the people here, and neither of us had any private conversation with any of them yesterday or during the night. This morning we arose rather late and breakfasted together in this room at half past nine; we were told that the others, the five men, had all gone fishing before eight o’clock. After breakfast I went to the kitchen to start preparations for cooking lunch, and Mr. Goodwin got himself outfitted for fishing. From that point the account of Mr. Goodwin’s movements will come from him; no doubt he has already furnished it. I stayed in the kitchen until luncheon had been cooked and served; I ate mine in the kitchen; and a little after one o’clock I went to my room and remained there until Mr. Goodwin arrived and told me he had found Mr. Leeson’s body.”

“What time was it—”

“If you please. A little more. You hinted at the possibility – delicately, but you did hint it – of a connection between the attack on Mr. Leeson and the contest for the oil rights which Ambassador Kelefy is negotiating. As the investigation gets hotter I suppose you’ll return to that, in private interviews, and sooner or later someone will certainly mention an incident that occurred in this room last evening at the dinner table. Mr. Goodwin might, since he was casually involved. So I mention it now. Mr. Bragan placed the table, and arranged the seating, so that Mr. Ferris and Mr. Goodwin were toasted before our eyes. Their only alternatives were discourtesy or cremation, and they chose the former; they left the table and played billiards. I don’t suggest that this has any bearing on the murder; I report it only because it was a notable incident and I don’t want to be reproached later for leaving it out.”

Wolfe closed his eyes and opened them again. “That’s all, I think, except to add that I fully realize the pickle you’re in. You are driven to the hypothesis that someone on these premises is a murderer. Eleven of us. The three servants are probably hopeless. Leaving eight. Mrs. Leeson seems highly unlikely. Leaving seven. Ambassador Kelefy, his wife, and Mr. Papps are beyond your reach even for inquisition, let alone indictment. Leaving four. Mr. Bragan and Mr. Ferris are mighty men of great wealth, dangerous to offend without the most conclusive grounds; you will provoke them at your peril. Leaving two, Mr. Goodwin and me. So I understand your eagerness to impeach us, but it’s no good. Don’t waste time and energy on us.”

“Are you through?”

“Yes. If you wish a statement from Mr. Goodwin also, he—”

“We already have Goodwin’s story. Naturally it agrees with yours.” The DA’s tone indicated no desire for peaceful coexistence. “For the record, I deny your allegation that we are eager to impeach you, as you put it. We are eager for only one thing, the truth about the commission of this crime. You say you went to the kitchen, parting from Goodwin, immediately after breakfast?”

“Yes.”

“And that was around ten o’clock?”

“Almost precisely at ten.”

“When did you see him next?”

“Shortly before eleven o’clock he came to the kitchen and got sandwiches for his lunch, and left. The next time was when he came to my room and told me of finding Mr. Leeson’s body.”

Colvin nodded. "Around one-thirty." Specs. "Goodwin admits he was alone for forty minutes or more after you went to the kitchen. He says he was in this room, looking over the tackle and getting himself equipped, but he had ample time to slip out the side door, make his way to stretch four, find Secretary Leeson and deal with him, return, and proceed to the veranda to register his presence with Mrs. Kelefy and Mrs. Leeson. Or, as an alternative, he had reason to suppose that Secretary Leeson would stay out beyond the appointed hour, and, after starting south and meeting Mr. Papps and Ambassador Kelefy on the trail, he doubled back through the woods, detouring around the lodge, found Secretary Leeson, even possibly by previous arrangement, and killed him."

Wolfe's brows were up. "Had he gone mad? I grant that Mr. Goodwin sometimes acts impulsively, but that seems rather extreme."

"Murder is extreme." Colvin's voice went up a notch. "You can save your sarcasm, Wolfe. I understand it goes over big in New York, but here upstate we don't appreciate it. If Goodwin did it he had a motive, sure, and I can't produce it now, but there are plenty of possibilities. You like money. What if Secretary Leeson was in somebody's way, and that somebody came and offered you a big sum to help dispose of him? He knew you had been asked to come here, and that would give you and Goodwin a perfect opportunity. So you decided to come, and you did. It doesn't have to be that Goodwin suddenly went mad, or you either."

"Pfu!" Wolfe sighed. "Wild conjectures have their place in an investigation, Mr. Colvin, no doubt of that, but it is better not to blab them until they are supported by some slender thread of fact. That's mere moonshine. You have my statement. You may indulge yourself in fantastic nonsense, but don't pester me with it. Let's be explicit. Are you calling me a liar?"

"I am!"

"Then there's no point in going on." Wolfe left his chair, which had been supporting about 80 per cent of his fanny. "I'll be in my room, with no interest in any further communication except word that I may leave for home. Since you already have Mr. Goodwin's story, you won't need him either. Come, Archie." He moved.

"Wait a minute!" Colvin commanded. "I'm not through with you! Is your statement absolutely complete?"

Wolfe, having taken a step, halted and turned his head. "Yes."

"You included a notable incident. That's what you called it. Was there any other notable incident that you didn't mention?"

"No. None that I know about."

"None whatever?"

"No."

"Then you don't call it notable that you came here to cook trout for Ambassador Kelefy, that's what you came for, and when they brought in their creels today and you and the cook cleaned the trout, you did not include the trout in Ambassador Kelefy's creel? The trout he had caught himself? You don't call that notable?"

Wolfe's shoulders went up a quarter of an inch and down again. "Not especially."

"Well, I do." Colvin was bearing down, quite nasty. "The cook, Samek, says that the creels were tagged with the names. You selected the fish from them. Bragan's had ten and you used nine of them. Ferris's had nine and you used six. Papps's had seven and you used five. Ambassador Kelefy's had eight, all of good size, and you didn't use one of them. They were still there in the kitchen and Samek showed them to me. Nothing wrong with them as far as I could see. Do you deny this?"

"Oh no." I caught a little gleam in Wolfe's eye. "But will you tell me how it relates to the crime you're investigating?"

"I don't know. But I call it a notable incident and you didn't mention it." Colvin's head moved. "Ambassador Kelefy, if you will permit me, did you know that Wolfe didn't cook any of the fish you caught?"

"No, Mr. Colvin, I didn't. This is rather a surprise."

"Do you know of any reason for it? Does any occur to you?"

"I'm afraid not." Kelefy swiveled his head for a glance at Wolfe, and back to the DA. "No doubt Mr. Wolfe can supply one."

"He certainly can. What about it, Wolfe? Why?"

Wolfe shook his head. "Relate it to the murder, Mr. Colvin. I shouldn't withhold evidence, of course, but I'm not; the trout are there; scrutinize them, dissect them, send them to the nearest laboratory for full analysis. I resent your tone, your diction, your manners, and your methods; and only a witling would call a man with my conceit a liar. Come, Archie."

I can't say how it would have developed if there hadn't been a diversion. As Wolfe made for the door to the hall with me at his heels, the sheriff, the lieutenant, and the other trooper came trotting across to head us off, and they succeeded, since Wolfe had neither the build nor the temperament to make a dash for it. But only two of them blocked the doorway because as they came the phone rang and the lieutenant changed course to go to the table and answer it. After a word he turned to call to the DA. "For you, Mr. Colvin. Attorney General Jessel."

Colvin went to get it, leaving the two groups – the six on chairs in the middle of the room, and us four standing at the door – stuck in tableaux. The conversation wasn't long, and he had the short end of it. When he hung up he turned, pushed back the specs, and announced, "That was Mr. Herman Jessel, attorney general of the state of New York. I phoned him just before calling you together here and described the situation. He has talked with Governor Holland, and is leaving Albany immediately to come here, and wants me to postpone further questioning of you ladies and gentlemen until he arrives. That will probably be around eight o'clock. Meanwhile we will pursue certain other lines of inquiry. Lieutenant Hopp has established a cordon outside to exclude intruders, especially representatives of the press. You are requested to remain inside the lodge or on the veranda."

He pushed the specs back up.

VI

Wolfe sat in the rainbow chair in his room, leaning back, his eyes closed, his lips compressed, his fingers folded at the apex of his middle mound. I stood at a window, looking out. Fifty paces away, at the edge of the woods, a trooper was standing, gazing up at a tree. I focused on it, thinking a journalist might be perched on an upper branch, but it must have been a squirrel or a bird.

Wolfe's voice sounded behind me. "What time is it?"

"Twenty after five." I turned.

"Where would we be if we had left at two o'clock?"

"On Route Twenty-two four miles south of Hoosick Falls."

"Bosh. You can't know that."

"That's what I do know. What I don't know is why you didn't let the ambassador eat his trout."

"Thirty-four were caught. I cooked twenty. That's all."

"Okay, save it. What I don't know won't hurt me. I'll tell you what I think. I think the guy that sent us here to kill Leeson was sending you messages by putting them inside trout and tossing the trout in the river, and some of them were in the ones Kelefy caught, and you had to wait for a chance to get them out when the cook wasn't looking, and when—"

There was a knock at the door and I went and opened it, and O. V. Bragan, our host, stepped in. No manners. When I shut the door and turned he was already across to Wolfe and talking. "I want to ask you about something."

Wolfe opened his eyes. "Yes, Mr. Bragan? Don't stand on ceremony. Indeed, don't stand at all. Looking up at people disconcerts me. Archie?"

I moved a chair up for the burly six-footer, expecting no thanks and getting none. There are two kinds of executives, thankers and non-thankers, and I already had Bragan tagged. But since Wolfe had taken a crack at him about ceremony I thought I might as well too, and told him not to mention it. He didn't hear me.

His cold and sharp gray eyes were leveled at Wolfe. "I liked the way you handled Colvin," he stated.

Wolfe grunted. "I didn't. I want to go home. When I talk with a man who is in a position to give me something I want, and I don't get it, I have blundered. I should have toadied him. Vanity comes high."

"He's a fool."

"I don't agree." Obviously Wolfe was in no mood to agree with anyone or anything. "I thought he did moderately well. For an obscure official in a remote community his stand with Mr. Ferris and you was almost intrepid."

"Bah. He's a fool. The idea that anyone here would deliberately murder Leeson is so damned absurd that only a fool would take it seriously."

"Not as absurd as the idea that a poacher, with a club from your woodpile as a cane, was struck with the fancy of using it as a deadly weapon. Discovered poachers don't kill; they run."

"All right, it wasn't a poacher." Bragan was brusque. "And it wasn't anyone here. But God knows what this is going to mean to my plans. If it isn't cleared up in a hurry anything can happen. With Leeson murdered here at my lodge, the State Department could decide to freeze me out, and not only that, Ambassador Kelefy could decide he'd rather not deal with me, and that would be worse."

He hit his chair arm with a fist. "It has *got* to be cleaned up in a hurry! And God knows it won't be, the way they're going at it. I know your reputation some, Wolfe, and I just spoke on the phone with one of my associates in New York. He says you're straight, and you're good, and you charge exorbitant fees. To hell with that. If this thing drags along and ruins my plans I'll lose a thousand times more than any fee you ever charged. I want you to go to work on this. I want you to find out who killed Leeson, and damned quick."

"Sitting here?" Wolfe was bored. "Confined to the lodge and veranda? Another absurd idea."

"You wouldn't be. Jessel, the attorney general, will be here in a couple of hours. I know him well, I made a little contribution to his campaign. After I talk with him and he reads your statement, and questions you if he wants to, he'll let you go. I've got a plane at a landing field twelve miles from here, and you and Goodwin will fly to Washington and get busy. I'll give you some names of people there that can help, and I'll phone them from here. The way it looks to me, somebody that wanted to finish Leeson decided to do it here. You find him and pin it on him, and quick. I'm not telling you how; that's your job. Well?"

"No," Wolfe said bluntly.

"Why not?"

"It doesn't appeal to me."

"To hell with appeal. Why not?"

"I am responsible for my decisions, Mr. Bragan, but to myself, not to you. However, I am your guest. I would ride in an airplane only in desperation, and I am not desperate. Again, I want to go home, and Washington is not my home. Again, even if your assumption regarding the murder were correct, it might take so long to find him and expose him that your plans would be beyond salvage. There is a fourth reason even more cogent than those, but I'm not prepared to disclose it."

"What is it?"

"No, sir. You're an overbearing man, Mr. Bragan, but I'm a dogged man. I owe you the decent courtesy of a guest, but that's all, and I decline the job. Archie, someone at the door."

I was on my way to answer the knock. This time, getting adapted to the etiquette of the place and not wanting to be trampled, I backed up with the door as I opened it, and sure enough, he breezed right in and on past me. It was James Arthur Ferris. Bragan was sitting with his back to the door. When Ferris got far enough to see who it was, he stopped and blurted, "You here, Bragan? Good."

Bragan blurted back, "Why is it good?"

"Because I was coming to ask Wolfe and Goodwin for a little favor. I was going to ask them to come with me to your room and be present while I said something to you. I've learned from

experience that it's advisable to have witnesses present when I'm talking with you."

"Oh, for God's sake come off it." Bragan was fed up. First Wolfe turning him down flat, and now this. "There's been a murder. A statesman has been murdered. On every radio and TV network, and tomorrow on the front page of a thousand papers. Pull in your horns!"

Ferris, not listening apparently, was squinting down at Wolfe. "If you don't mind," he said, "I'll say it here. There's no danger that you'll ever have to testify to it or even furnish an affidavit, because Bragan hasn't got the guts to lie when he knows it's three to one. I'll appreciate the favor." He turned the squint on Bragan, and you wouldn't think his thin little hyphen of a mouth was much to show hate with, but he certainly managed it. "I just want to tell you what I'm going to do, so you can't say afterwards that it hit you without warning."

"Go ahead." Bragan's head was tilted back to face the squint. "Let's hear it."

"As you know, the attorney general is on his way here. He's going to ask about the status of our negotiations with Kelefy and Papps, and where Leeson stood. He may not think that had any connection with the murder, but he's certainly going to ask about it, and not in a meeting like that Colvin, but each of us privately. When he asks me I'm going to tell him."

"What are you going to tell him?"

"I'm going to tell him the truth. How you had your Paris man working on Kelefy and Papps before they even left home. How you tried to get something on Papps. How you had that woman on the plane with them to try to work on Mrs. Kelefy, only it didn't go. How you had two men I can name trying to put screws on Leeson, and—"

"Watch it, Ferris. I advise you to watch it. We're not alone. You've got your witnesses."

"You bet I have. I'll probably have more when I'm talking to the attorney general. I'm going to tell him how you tried to buy Papps – buy him with cash, your stockholders' cash. How you finally swung Leeson and had him eating out of your hand. How you got him to arrange this little fishing party, here at your place, so you'd have Kelefy and Papps all to yourself. How Papps didn't like that and got me invited. And then after we got here, how I worked you into a corner with the dirty swindle you thought you had all set, and yesterday afternoon Leeson began to see the light. It didn't need much more to cook you good – one more day would have done it. This is the day. This is the day, but Leeson's not here. That's what I'm going to tell the attorney general, and I didn't want to spring it on you without warning. Also I didn't want you to claim I had, with a big whine, so I wanted witnesses. That's all."

Ferris turned and was going. Bragan called to him but he didn't stop. Bragan got up and made for him, but by the time he reached the door Ferris was through it, pulling it shut as he went. Bragan looked at me without seeing me, said, "By God, and he bought Papps himself!" and opened the door and was gone. I closed it and turned my back on it, and asked Wolfe, "Do I go and warn somebody? Or wait a while and then go find the body?"

"Pleistocene," he growled. "Saber-toothed hyenas."

"Okay," I agreed, "but all the same I think you missed a bet. That gook might actually be able to talk us out of here. If so, consider this. Driving time from here to Thirty-fifth Street, Manhattan, seven hours. Plane from here to Washington, three hours. I take a taxi to the city and start operating, and you hop a plane to New York. Flying to La Guardia, an hour and a quarter. Taxi from La Guardia to Thirty-fifth Street, forty-five minutes. Total traveling time, five hours. Two hours less than it would take to drive there, not to mention the fact that they won't let us. And in addition, bill Bragan for at least ten grand. You could tell him—"

"Archie."

"Yes, sir."

"There's a book on a shelf in that room – *Power and Policy*, by Thomas K. Finletter. I'd like to have it."

It had long been understood that at home he got his own books off of shelves, but I had to admit this was different, so I humored him. Going down the hall I kept my ears open for sounds of combat, but all was quiet. In the big room a trooper sat over by the door. I found the book with no trouble, and returned to Wolfe's room and handed it to him.

"It occurs to me," he said, "that a little later there'll probably be some fussing in the kitchen. They may even undertake to gather at a table for a meal. In the refrigerator are a third of a Ryder ham, half of a roast turkey, tree-ripened olives, milk, and beer. The bread is inedible, but in a cupboard there are some Caswell crackers, and in another cupboard a jar of Brantling's blackberry jam. If you see anything else you think desirable, bring it."

He opened the book and settled back in the chair. I wasn't through with him on the notion of letting Bragan spring us and commit himself to a fee, partly because I had a suspicion that Bragan's slant on the murder was the best bet in sight, but I thought half an hour with a book might make him more receptive to the idea of a plane ride, so I took to the hall again and on through to the kitchen. The cook, Samek, was there, with an array of dishes and trays and assorted grub scattered around. I said if he didn't mind I'd cater with a pair of trays for Wolfe and me, and he said go ahead. As I got out a bottle of milk I asked casually, "By the way, I intended to take a look at the trout the ambassador caught. Where are they?"

"They're not here. The cops took 'em."

The loaded trays called for two trips. The second trip, with mine, I met Papps in the hall and exchanged nods with him. Our meal, in Wolfe's room, went down all right, except that Wolfe drank beer with it, which he seldom does at home, and ruined his palate for the blackberry jam, so he said. I had had milk and my palate let the jam by without a murmur.

After returning the trays to the kitchen I headed back for the room, all set to tackle Wolfe on Bragan's proposition. My chances of selling him were about one in fifty, but I had to do something to pass the time and why not that? Keeping him stirred up was one thing he paid me for. However, it had to be postponed. As I approached I saw that the door was standing open, and as I entered I saw that we had more company. Adria Kelefy was sitting in the chair that I had moved up for Bragan, and the ambassador was getting another for himself, to make it a trio.

I closed the door.

VII

I got snubbed again. As I stepped around to a chair off to one side, Wolfe and Mrs. Kelefy merely glanced at me, and the ambassador didn't even bother to glance. He was talking.

"I am well acquainted," he was saying, "with Finletter's theory that in the atomic age we can no longer rely on industrial potential as the dominant factor in another world war, and I think he makes his point, but he goes too far. In spite of that, it's a good book, a valuable book."

Wolfe placed a slip of paper in it to mark his place – he dog's-ears his own books – and put it down. "In any event," he said, "man is a remarkable animal, with a unique distinction. Of all the millions of species rendered extinct by evolution, we are the only one to know in advance what is going to destroy us. Our own insatiable curiosity. We can take pride in that."

"Yes indeed." Evidently Kelefy wasn't too upset at the prospect. "I had hoped, Mr. Wolfe, to offer you my thanks in happier circumstances. The death of Mr. Leeson has turned this little excursion into a tragedy, but even so, I must not neglect to thank you. It was most gracious of you to grant my request."

"It was a privilege and an honor," Wolfe declared. No diplomat was going to beat him at it. "To be chosen as an instrument of my country's hospitality was my good fortune. I only regret, with you, the catastrophe that spoiled it."

"Of course," the ambassador agreed. "I thought also to tell you how I happened to make the request of Secretary Leeson. There is a man who operates a restaurant in Rome, where I was once stationed, by the name of Pasquale Donofrio. I praised his sauce with grilled kidneys, and he said you originated it. I had a similar experience in Cairo, and one in Madrid. And from my friend Leeson, when he had a post in my own capital, I heard something of your exploits as a private detective. So when, here in your country, I was asked to express a personal desire, I thought of you."

"I am gratified, sir. I am lifted."

“And my wife joins me in my thanks.” He smiled at her. “My dear?”

Her dark eyes were as sleepy as ever. Apparently it would take more than a murder to light them up. She spoke. “I insisted on coming with my husband to thank you, Mr. Wolfe. I too had heard much about you, and the trout was delicious. Really the best I have ever tasted. And another thing, I wanted to ask you, some more of our insatiable curiosity, why didn’t you cook the ones my husband caught?”

“Oh yes,” Kelefy agreed. “I wanted to ask that too.”

“Caprice,” Wolfe said. “Mr. Goodwin will tell you that I am a confirmed eccentric.”

“Then you really cooked none of mine?”

“That seems to be established.”

“But it’s rather fantastic, since it was at my request that you were here. Even a caprice must spring from something.”

“Not necessarily, sir.” Wolfe was patient. “A whim, a fancy, a freakish dart of the mind.”

The ambassador persisted. “I apologize for dwelling on this, but I would like to avoid any chance of embarrassment. Mr. Colvin made rather a point of it, probably in his eagerness to get at you, and it would be most unfortunate if it got into the public reports. In a *cause célèbre*, and this will certainly be one, any unexplained fact gives rise to all kinds of wild rumors, and in this instance they will concern me, only because it was the trout I caught that you didn’t cook! It’s true that that has no conceivable connection with the murder of Secretary Leeson, but the gossips will do their best to invent one, and the position of an ambassador is extremely delicate and sensitive, particularly mine at this moment. You know that, of course.”

Wolfe nodded. “I do.”

“Then you realize the difficulty. If you refuse to furnish any explanation, or if you only call it the caprice of an eccentric, what will be thought? What will not be thought?”

“Yes.” Wolfe pursed his lips. “I see your point.” He heaved a sigh. “Very well. It’s not too hard a nut. I can say that my sense of humor is somewhat unorthodox, as indeed it is, and that it amuses me to twist the tails of highly placed persons; that since you had said you wanted to catch a trout and have it cooked by me, and I had traveled here for that express purpose, I thought it would be a nice touch of mockery not to cook any you had caught; and that with me to think is to act. Will that do?”

“Excellently. You will say that?”

“At the moment I see no objection to it. Some unforeseen contingency might of course provide one, so I can’t make it a commitment.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to.” He was unquestionably a diplomat. “And I must thank you again. There was another little matter – but am I imposing on you?”

“Not at all. Like the others, I am merely waiting for the arrival of the attorney general.”

“Then I’ll mention it briefly. Mr. Ferris has told me of his conversation with Mr. Bragan in your presence. He told me of it, he said, because my name came into it and it concerned my mission to this country. I told him that I deeply appreciated his telling me, and I also expressed a hope that he would abandon his intention of repeating it to the attorney general. We discussed the matter at some length, and in the end he agreed with me that his intention was ill-advised – that it would be greatly prejudicial to the negotiations in which we are both interested. He regretted the hot impulse that led him to come to you, and, finding Mr. Bragan here, to proceed as he did. He now feels compunction. It is not an exaggeration to say that he is in some despair because he thinks he has compromised himself by speaking to Mr. Bragan before witnesses, and he thinks it would be futile to come now and ask you and Mr. Goodwin to erase the episode from your memories. I told him it is never futile to ask honorable men to do an honorable thing, and that I would ask you myself. I do so. Believe me, it will serve no useful purpose for Mr. Ferris’s outburst to Mr. Bragan to be repeated to anyone anywhere.”

Wolfe grunted. “I do believe you. On this the commitment can be as firm as you like.” He turned. “Archie?”

“Yes, sir.”

"We remember nothing of what Mr. Ferris said to Mr. Bragan this afternoon, and no provocation by anyone will refresh our memory. You agree to that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Our honor has been invoked. On your word of honor?"

"Check. On my word of honor."

He turned. "And mine, sir. Is that adequate?"

"It is indeed." Kelefy said it as if he meant it. "Mr. Ferris will be delighted. As for me, I cannot properly express my appreciation, but I hope you will permit me to proffer a slight token of it." He lifted his left hand, and with the fingers of his right one began working at the ring with the emerald. It was a little stubborn, but after some twisting and tugging he got it off. He rubbed it on the sleeve of his jacket, and turned to his wife.

"I think, my dear," he said, "it would be fitting for you to present this to Mr. Wolfe. You wanted to come with me to thank him, and this is the symbol of our gratitude. Please beg him to accept it."

She seemed to hesitate a second, and I wondered if she had cottoned to my suggestion of an earring and hated to give it up. Then she took it without looking at it and extended her hand to Wolfe. "I do beg you to accept it," she said, in so low a voice that I barely caught it. "As a symbol of our gratitude."

Wolfe didn't hesitate. He took it, looked at it, and closed his fingers over it. I expected him to do it up brown, to come out with something really flowery, but he surprised me again, which wasn't surprising. "This is quite unnecessary, madam," he told her. He turned. "Quite unnecessary, sir."

Kelefy was on his feet. He smiled. "If it were necessary it wouldn't be so great a pleasure. I must go and see Mr. Ferris. Thank you again, Mr. Wolfe. Come, my dear."

I went and opened the door for them. They passed through, with friendly glances for me but no emeralds, and I shut the door and crossed to Wolfe. The light from the windows, which were some distance from him, had started to fade, and he had turned on the reading lamp by his chair and was admiring the emerald under it. I admired it too. It was the size of a hazel nut.

"My word of honor may not be as good as yours," I said, "but it has some value. You wear it Monday to Friday, and I'll wear it Saturday and Sunday."

He grunted. "You brought your working case in, didn't you?"

"Yes. My gun's in it."

"I want the best glass, please."

I went to my room and unlocked the case and got the glass and returned. With it he gave the emerald a real look and then handed them to me. That seemed to imply that I had an equity, so I inspected the green symbol of gratitude from the front, back, and all sides.

"I'm not an expert," I said, returning it to him, "and it may be that little brown speck near the center adds to its rarity and beauty, but if I were you I'd give it back to him and ask for a nice clear one like some I saw not long ago in a window at Woolworth's."

No comment. I went to my room to return the glass to my working case. If I was going to try to sell him on Bragan's offer I'd have to step on it, for time was closing in. I had my opening gun ready to fire as I re-entered his room, but after a couple of steps toward him I stopped dead. He was leaning back in the chair with his eyes closed, and his lips were working. He pushed them out, pulled them back in... push... pull... push... pull...

I stood and stared at him. He did that only when his brain was going full tilt, with all the wheels whirling and all the wires singing What now? What about? I couldn't suspect him of faking because that was the one phenomenon I had never seen him use for putting on an act. When his eyes were closed and his lips were moving like that he was really working, and working hard. But on what? No client, no evidence, no itch whatever except to get in the car and start home. However, it was well established that when that fit took him he was not to be interrupted on any account, so I went to a window for another look out. The trooper was still on post, with his back to me. The sun had gone behind the trees, maybe even below the rim, and dusk was coming on. I couldn't see the light going if I kept my eyes on one spot, but I could if I kept them there for thirty seconds, then

shifted to another spot for thirty seconds, and then back again. I had caught on to that out in Ohio about the time I was catching my first shiner.

Wolfe's voice turned me around. "What time is it?"

I glanced at my wrist. "Twenty minutes to eight."

He had straightened up and was stretching his eyes open. "I want to make a phone call. Where?"

"There's one in the big room, as you know. There must be extensions, surely one in Bragan's room, but I haven't seen any. I understand that phone calls are being permitted, but they're monitored. There's a cop in the big room, and not only that, you can bet they've tapped the line outside."

"I must phone. It's essential." He put his hands on the chair arms and levered himself up. "What is Nathaniel Parker's home number?"

"Lincoln three four-six-one-six."

"Come on." He headed for the door.

I followed him down the hall and into the big room. The trooper was there, going around switching lamps on. He gave us a glance but no words. On the table with the phone there was a tray with an empty plate and coffee cup, so apparently he had been foddered. When Wolfe picked up the phone he moved in our direction, but uttered no protest and didn't draw his gun. Wolfe had taken out his notebook and opened it on the table, and from across the table the trooper focused on it, but all he saw was a blank page.

Wolfe was speaking: "Person-to-person call to a New York City number. This is Whiteface seven-eight-oh-eight. My name is Nero Wolfe. I wish to speak to Mr. Nathaniel Parker in New York, at Lincoln three four-six-one-six."

I thought the trooper looked as if he would enjoy a bone, so I told him, "Parker's our lawyer. A reputable member of the bar and a very fine man. He's got me out of jail three times."

He was in no humor for conversation. He stood. I stood. At that time of evening it didn't take long for the call to get through, and soon Wolfe was telling the receiver, "Mr. Parker?... Yes, Nero Wolfe. I hope I didn't interrupt your dinner... I'm calling from Mr. Bragan's lodge in the Adirondacks... Yes, of course you've heard... I need some information from you, *mais il faut parler français exclusivement. Vous comprenez? ... Bien ...*"

He went on. The trooper was up against it. The phone calls were probably being recorded out at the tap, but no doubt he was supposed to stand by and note the substance, and he couldn't note meaningless sounds. The changes on his face kept me informed. First, he didn't know French, that was obvious. Next, he had an impulse to reach and cut the connection – he even started a hand out – but voted it down. Next, he tried looking intelligent and superior, indicating that he understood it perfectly, but gave it up when he glanced at me and met my eye. Next, he decided to pretend that there was no problem involved at all, that he was standing there only to see that Wolfe didn't twist the phone cord. Going through all the phases took a lot of time, a quarter of an hour or more, and he was doing pretty well with the last one when Wolfe did him a favor by getting out his pencil and starting to write in the notebook. That gave the cop something to look at, and was a big relief to both of us, though I doubted if he could read Wolfe's fine small handwriting upside down at a distance of five feet. I was closer, and, stretching my neck, saw that he was writing the same lingo he was speaking. Since I don't know French either, I just looked intelligent.

Wolfe filled a page of the notebook and part of another, and then suddenly went back to English. "Thank you very much, Mr. Parker. Satisfactory. I apologize for interrupting your dinner, but it was urgent... No, I have nothing to add and nothing more to ask... Yes, I shall, but I doubt if I'll need you again. Good-by, sir."

He hung up, put the notebook in his pocket, turned to me, and opened his mouth to speak, but didn't get it out. The door to the veranda swung open and people entered – first District Attorney Colvin, then a medium-sized guy with a round red face and big ears, and last Sheriff Dell.

Colvin, seeing us, stopped and turned. "That's Nero Wolfe. Wolfe and Goodwin." He came on. "Wolfe, this is Mr. Herman Jessel, attorney general of the state of New York. I've told him how

things stand, and he'll talk with you first. Now."

"Excellent," Wolfe declared. "I'm ready, and it shouldn't take long. But not privately. If I am to disclose the murderer of Mr. Leeson, as I now intend, it must be in the presence of everyone concerned. If you'll please have them gathered here?"

They goggled at him. The sheriff said something. Colvin's specs slipped to the tip of his nose, but he ignored them.

Jessel was confronting Wolfe. "Will you repeat that, please?"

"It was clear, I thought. I am prepared to identify the murderer. I will do so only in the presence of the others. I will say nothing whatever, answer no questions, except with them present. And when they are here, all of them, and of course you gentlemen too, I must first speak to the Secretary of State on the telephone. If he is not in Washington he must be located. I assure you, gentlemen, it is useless to start barking at me or haul me off somewhere; I'll be mute. There is no acceptable way to proceed other than the one I suggested."

The sheriff and the DA looked at each other. Jessel looked at Wolfe. "I've met you once before, Mr. Wolfe. You've probably forgotten."

"No, sir, I haven't."

"And I know your record, of course. You say you can identify the murderer. With evidence?"

"To convict, no. To indict, yes. To convince all who hear me, including you, beyond question."

"What's this about the Secretary of State?"

"I must begin by speaking to him. The reason will be apparent when you hear me."

"All right. We can reach him. But I have a must too. I must first hear from you privately what you're going to say."

"No, sir." Wolfe's tone was final. "Not a word."

"Why not?"

"Because I have a score to pay, and if I told you first you might somehow interfere with the payment." Wolfe turned a palm up. "What is so difficult? Get them in here. Get the Secretary of State on the phone. I speak to him. You can stop me at any point, at any word. Stand beside me, ready to snatch it from me. Station a policeman behind me with a club."

"I'll take it as a great personal favor if you'll talk with me first."

Wolfe shook his head. "I'm sorry, Mr. Jessel. I'm far too pigheaded. Give it up."

The attorney general looked around. If for suggestions, he got none. He shoved his hands in his pockets, wheeled, and walked toward the fireplace. Halfway there he turned abruptly and came back, and asked Colvin, "They're all here?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Send for them, please. I'll put in the call."

VIII

Attorney General Jessel, standing, was speaking into the phone. "Then you understand the situation, Mr. Secretary. One moment. Here is Mr. Wolfe."

He handed the instrument to Wolfe, who was seated. Bragan and the ambassador and Mrs. Kelefy were on a divan that had been turned around. Mrs. Leeson was on a chair at the end of the divan. Spiros Papps, the man of guile and malice and simple candor, was perched on a big fat cushion in front of Mrs. Leeson. Ferris and the sheriff had chairs a little to one side, with Lieutenant Hopp and two of his colleagues standing back of them. District Attorney Colvin stood by the table, practically at Wolfe's elbow, and Jessel, after handing Wolfe the phone, stayed there at the other elbow. I was on my feet too, at Wolfe's back. I hadn't a glimmer of an idea where he was headed for, but he had said he was going to identify a murderer, so while they were arranging things I had gone to my room, got my gun, and put it in my side pocket.

Wolfe's tone was easy. "This is Nero Wolfe, Mr. Secretary. I should have asked Mr. Jessel to say that this will take some time, ten minutes or more, I'm afraid, so I trust you are comfortably

seated... Yes sir, I know; I won't prolong it beyond necessity. You already know the details of the situation, so I'll go straight to my personal predicament. I know who killed Mr. Leeson. It would be pointless to denounce him to officers of the law. But I want to denounce him; first, because if I don't I'll be detained and harassed here interminably; and second, because he has foolishly wounded my self-esteem... Yes sir, but if I tell it at all I have to tell it my way, and I think you should hear it first...

"Today I was to cook trout for lunch. Four creels, tagged with the names of the fishermen, were brought to me. The fish in three of the creels were perfectly fresh and sweet, but those in Ambassador Kelefy's creel were not. They were not stiff or discolored, nothing so obvious; indeed, the cook apparently saw nothing wrong with them; but they had not been caught this morning. It would take too long to explain how an expert tells exactly how long a fish has been dead no matter how carefully it has been handled, but I assure you I can do it infallibly. Of course I decided not to include them in my dish. The cook asked why, but I didn't explain, not wishing to embarrass the ambassador. Naturally, I supposed either his luck or his skill had failed him this morning, and he had somehow procured those dead trout to cover his deficiency.

"I am making this as brief as I can. The news of Mr. Leeson's death by violence put a different face on the matter. The inescapable presumption was that Ambassador Kelefy had killed him, and it was indeed premeditated. He had caught those eight trout yesterday in addition to what he brought in – I haven't bothered to inquire about that – and had secured them at the edge of a pool in the river, immersed in the water. Probably they were alive when he did that, but I am not sufficiently expert to name the precise hour when they died. Also he probably secured his weapon from the woodpile yesterday and hid it somewhere. So today, having to spend no time fishing in order to bring in a satisfactory creel, he had four hours for another matter – the murder of Mr. Leeson. Getting through the woods unobserved presented no difficulty.

"That was my presumption, but I would have been an ass to disclose it. It was only a presumption, and I was the only witness of the condition of the trout in his creel. Officers of the law have examined them without seeing what I did – though in fairness it must be considered that when I saw them they were supposed to have just come from freedom in the river, and the officers saw them some four hours later. Even so, when the district attorney asked me why I had not cooked the ambassador's trout I might have told him, privately, but for his gratuitous spleen.

"Now, however, it is more than a presumption. The ambassador has not explicitly confessed to me, but he might as well have. A little more than an hour ago he came to my room, with his wife, ostensibly to thank me, and asked why I had not cooked the trout he caught. From my reply, and the sequel, he understood what was in my mind. At his suggestion I concocted a bogus explanation. He asked me to commit myself to it, and I straddled. He then made another request, no matter what, which he knew quite well to be unnecessary, since we understood each other tacitly or he thought we did, and when I granted it freely without hesitation he offered me a token of his gratitude by taking an emerald ring from his finger and telling his wife to present it to me. She did so, and it is now in my vest pocket.

"That, Mr. Secretary, was the wound to my self-esteem. The emerald was not a token of gratitude for anything I had done; it was a bribe to keep my mouth shut. Had it measured up to my conceit – had it been the Kohinoor or the Zabara – it might have served its purpose; but it is merely a rather large emerald with a noticeable flaw. So naturally I was piqued. When the ambassador left me I sat and considered the matter. Not only was I piqued, I was menaced, and so were others. Unless the ambassador were exposed we would suffer prolonged harassment and probably lifelong suspicion, and only I could expose him. I decided I must act, but first I needed to know what was feasible and what was not, so I telephoned my lawyer in New York.

"From books in his library he supplied the information I wanted, and I wrote it in my notebook. To make this report complete I must read it to you.

"From Section Twenty-five of the Penal Code of New York State: 'Ambassadors and other public ministers from foreign governments, accredited to the President or Government of the United States, and recognized according to the laws of the United

States, with their secretaries, messengers, families, and servants, are not liable to punishment in this State, but are to be returned to their own country for trial and punishment.'

"From Section Two-fifty-two of Title Twenty-two of the United States Code: 'Whenever any writ or process is sued out or prosecuted by any person in any court of the United States, or of a State, or by any judge or justice, whereby the person of any ambassador or public minister of any foreign prince or state, authorized and received as such by the President, or any domestic or domestic servant of any such minister, is arrested or imprisoned, or his goods or chattels are distrained, seized, or attached, such writ or process shall be deemed void.'

"From Section Two-fifty-three – I'll condense this: 'Anyone who obtains a writ or process in violation of Section Two-fifty-two, and every officer concerned in executing such writ or process, shall be deemed a violator of the law of nations and a disturber of the public repose, and shall be imprisoned for not more than three years and shall be fined at the discretion of the court.'

"That last, Mr. Secretary, explains why I insisted on speaking to you. If I had reported to the officers of the law who are here, and if in their zeal for justice they had maltreated the ambassador, not only would they have been subject to prosecution under federal law, but so would I. I don't want to be imprisoned for three years, or even to risk any hazard of it, and I chose the expedient of reporting directly to you. I am of course leaving one question unanswered: What was his motive? Why did he kill? I haven't the answer, but I do have a conjecture. You will like to know, I think, that it is unlikely that his motive had any relation to his public mission or the negotiations he was engaged in.

"As I told you, he didn't give me the emerald himself; he had his wife present it. His exact words were, 'I think, my dear, it would be fitting for you to present this to Mr. Wolfe,' and not only were the words suggestive, but so were his tone and manner. He was giving me the emerald as a bribe not to divulge my surmise that he had murdered Mr. Leeson. Then why was it fitting for his wife to present it to me? Because she had herself been involved? Because she had supplied either the impulse or the motive? Because, in short, she was responsible for his having resorted to the extremity—"

So it was Wolfe, not I, who found out what it took to light up Adria Kelefy's eyes. She came off the couch and through the air like a wildcat, and with a sweep of her hand knocked the phone, the whole works, off the table onto the floor. Colvin and Jessel dived for the phone. I took on the wildcat, grabbing her arms from behind, and she tugged and twisted and kicked my shins. Jessel got the phone and was telling it hello hello hello, when another voice broke in.

"Yes, she was responsible." It was Sally Leeson. She had left her chair and circled around Papps to come within arm's length of Adria Kelefy. I tightened up on Adria's arms. Sally went on, in an even, dead, flat tone that froze the air and all of us breathing it. "You're not even a snake, Adria. I don't know what you are. You seduced my husband in your own home, your husband's home. I knew about it. He told me he couldn't tear away from you, so I tore him away and got him called back home. I suppose you told your husband about it – I think you would. After we had left, I suppose, in one of your big fits. Then he was sent over here, and the day you got here you were after my husband again. I knew it and I tried to stop you, and I failed. Your husband hasn't failed. He has succeeded. He killed Dave. Why didn't he kill you?" She tightened her fists, hanging at her sides, stiffened, and then started to tremble. "Oh God," she cried, "why didn't he kill you?"

She stopped trembling, turned to the district attorney, and was stiff again. "I told you a lie," she said. "When I said I didn't suspect anyone. Of course I did. But I knew you couldn't arrest him – and I didn't want to tell you what a fool my husband had been – and what good would it do? What good will anything do now?" She started to tremble again.

The ambassador had left the couch to come to us, and for a second I thought he was actually going to answer her. But he spoke, not to her, but to his wife. He put a hand on Adria's shoulder, and I stepped back. "Come, my dear," he said. "This is distressing." She moved, and he turned his head and called sharply, "Spiros!"

That was a sight I had never expected to see and don't expect to see again. Standing there were an attorney general, a district attorney, a sheriff, and three state troopers in uniform, not to mention, a pair of private detectives; and none of them moved a muscle while a murderer calmly walked out of the room, taking with him his wife, who had driven him to murder, and a member of his staff, who had certainly known he was guilty.

But Wolfe moved his jaw muscles. He spoke sharply to their backs. "Mr. Kelefy! If you please. A purely personal point. Was it also a stab at my self-esteem that you arranged for me to be here? For the added fillip of gulling me?"

"No, Mr. Wolfe." The ambassador had turned at the door. "When I expressed a desire to eat a trout cooked by you I had not yet contemplated an action that might arouse your professional interest. I had not forgotten the past, but I had accepted it. When events caused me to contemplate such an action it would have been imprudent, I thought, to ask you not to come."

Turning, he touched his wife's elbow and they disappeared into the hall, with Spiros Papps at their heels.

The tableau broke up. Jessel muttered something about the Secretary of State and went at the phone. Colvin pushed his specs back. The sheriff and the lieutenant exchanged words. The troopers stood looking dazed.

Wolfe, on his feet, took the emerald ring from his pocket and handed it to the DA. "Dispose of this as you see fit, Mr. Colvin. You were right about the notable incident, of course. Mr. Goodwin and I will be packed and ready to go in five minutes. If you will kindly pass the word? Come, Archie."

He headed for the hall and I followed.

IX

Of course you would like to know if Kelefy paid for it, and so would I. He left for home the next day, taking his wife and Papps along, and a month later they shot him, but whether it was for the murder or for ruining the negotiations I can't say. Diplomatically speaking, I doubt if he cared much.