



The Wolfe Pack
The Nero Wolfe
Literary Society

The Female of the Species . . .

By Charles E. Burns

WARNING! DO NOT READ THIS ARTICLE if you haven't read the Corpus at least once, because here plot points will be revealed! Considering the inherent qualifications of readers of *The Gazette*, these concerns are doubtless frivolous, for we are all very familiar with Rex Stout's 72 novels and novellas. It is my hope that the following remarks may lead you to re-visit some old favorites.

While working on a previous piece for this journal ("Charlie's Angels"), which detailed the characters of the many women who helped Wolfe, despite himself, throughout the Corpus, I was reminded by old friend John McAleer that, where there are angels, so too can the opposition be found. In fact, women committed 22 murders in Wolfe's world.

Considering the casualty rate, it seems appropriate to examine the sinister side of the gender, if only because villains are usually so much more interesting than the virtuous. Do the "bad girls" share common characteristics to which the alert crimestopper might tumble? Are their motives similar? Do they share a "look," perhaps? Do they annoy Wolfe even more than the usual species of their gender? Are they especially appealing to Archie? Best strike that one. Do they share a count-the-house quality in their eyes, are they meek and mild or bold and assertive in their dealings with the residents of the brownstone on West 35th Street? Or, and you'll recognize foreshadowing for what it is, variations on a theme?

Despite their individual fascinations, it would be unwieldy here to examine each and every one of the "anti-angels." After careful evaluation, we present a selection the very best, and hope to guide you back to the stories you love so well.

The Red Box (1936)

It was, you recall, "one damned client after another," according to Archie. Actually, there were only two—Lewelleyn Frost and Helen Frost, the only time I recall Wolfe changing clients in midstream.

Hired by Lew to investigate the death of model Molly Locke, who died by sampling poisoned candy, Wolfe soon learns that the dose was misdirected. In one of the great man's most embarrassing moments, designer Boyden McNair, whose safety Wolfe had assured, expires of aspirin and cyanide before the detective's eyes.

In the course of events, Wolfe demonstrates that Calida Frost, Helen's "mother" killed the model in error but McNair a-purpose when it appeared that her inheritance would be forfeit should the truth of Helen's parentage become known. Along the way, she had also disposed of another threat, Perrin Gibert, in a manner much more akin to the frivolous Rube Goldberg than to the mature Rex Stout.

Calida did commit a final "murder," too, with Wolfe a not too reluctant accessory. Faced with her guilt and the inevitable punishment in the form of the inexorable Inspector Cramer, she tosses back a vial of poison provided by Wolfe simply, he alleges pretty lamely, to help set a realistic scene for her exposure and confession.

Early in the Corpus, *The Red Box* features Wolfe, perhaps not yet wholly set in his ways as an eccentric, leaving the brownstone to accommodate a client, and Cramer actually firing up his perpetually unlit cigar. And the red box, as you know, turned out to be a red herring.

Over My Dead Body (1939)

Take two lovely immigrants from Montenegro, Carla and Neya, fencing teachers in New York City. When student Percy Ludlow is stabbed to death in the studio (a lethal location!) and another, Rudolph Faber, falls to a dagger thrust in a school with a very strict pass-fail policy, the plot spins close to parody.

Hidden documents, secret agents, international intrigue, the Nazis, the FBI, Balkan royalty, and more combine to confuse (or convulse) the reader . . . but not Wolfe. He proves Neya the murderer — and that she is actually the Princess Vladanka Donevitch!

A moment of bad judgment nearly costs Wolfe his life as the princess bursts into the office with a gleaming knife. His skill with unlikely weapons — here, a pair of beer bottles — leaves the murderous royal unable to make her point for a third time.

Wonder of wonders, Carla turns out to be Wolfe's adopted daughter, the mysterious and elusive "Madam Zorka" is in reality a farm girl named Pansy Bupp, and a far better title for this tale would be *Too Many Women*.

Cordially Invited to Meet Death (1942)

When Beth Huddleston, arranger of society parties, receives poison-pen letters, she comes to the brownstone for help. She wants Wolfe to find the sender, and to get proof that the four people who resided in the Riverdale mansion could be considered suspects. These included her assistant Janet Nichols, her secretary Maryella Trimm, research chemist Daniel Huddleston, and fellow party-

arranger Lawrence Huddleston. Dr. Brady, a frequent visitor, might also be included.

After a brief and seemingly superficial examination, Wolfe concluded to Mrs. Huddleston:

"By elimination — the culprit is Miss Nichols."

"Yes."

"But you have no proof."

"I have a feeling."

Had the great man paid more attention to that "feeling," he might have solved the case with ease. Soon, a small cut on Mrs. Huddleston's toe turns deadly, and Daniel the research chemist proves that it was murder — tetanus had been planted in an iodine bottle. The poison-pen letters had become lethal.

The case becomes a mish-mash of motive and murder — with a chimpanzee and a pair of bears roaming the grounds, broken fragments of glass which might be poisoned, a picture inside a watch, blackmail, romance, unrequited love, and the guilty one faking an attack on herself. The murderer was, of course . . . Miss Nichols.

And Be a Villain (1948)

On first hearing Madeline Fraser's radio broadcasts, Wolfe remarked, "That's an extremely dangerous woman." A prescient comment indeed, for Wolfe soon accepts a \$20,000 fee to discover the murderer of Cyril Orchard, done in by cyanide-laced Starlite coffee, a major sponsor of Fraser's show, which has millions of eager listeners.

Needing money now that his obligations to the Internal Revenue Service are temporarily satisfied, Wolfe maneuvers to obtain extraordinary assistance from both Inspector Cramer and the entire New York Police Department.

Orchard had been involved in a convoluted blackmailing scheme based on the publication of a racetrack tip sheet and a political and economic newsletter. Fraser subscribed to both. More murders follow — the radio star's manager and scriptwriter.

In a complex denouement, Wolfe proves that Fraser's late husband was not, in fact, a suicide but was actually the first of her four victims. The state tried and convicted this "extremely dangerous woman" for only one of these, the death of her manager. In the background of the story lurks Arnold Zeck, of whom, as you know, more later.

Instead of Evidence (1949)

Eugene Poor suspected his partner Conroy Blaney of planning to kill him. He'll pay Wolfe \$5000 — not to keep Blaney from murdering him, but to be sure that he doesn't get away with it.

Eugene's premonition of death was right on the money. The ink was hardly dry on the receipt when Poor was killed . . . by an exploding cigar! Naturally, though the client is dead, Wolfe is determined to solve the murder and earn the fee.

Conroy Blaney claims his innocence. Helen Vardis claims that the newly widowed Martha Poor had killed her husband because she was jealous of their relationship, but Joe Groll was also very interested in Helen. A brutal hit-and-run claims Arthur Howell. All these people had connections with Blaney and Poor.

A case of exploding cigars was found in an abitory (you can look it up!), and Wolfe's experiment with one of them brings him close to death.

At the end, with an impersonation and a motive of half a million bucks, Wolfe proves that Mrs. Poor has been responsible for the deaths of three men — and one suicide, scripted by Wolfe.

Disguise for Murder (1950)

Hosting the Manhattan Flower Club for a tour of the orchids at West 34th Street was an unusual event, but murder made it memorable.

A young woman calling herself Cynthia Brown wanders into the office where Archie is hiding out, asks for a drink, and announces that she must see Wolfe. Some five months before, a man had strangled her friend Doris, and was never caught. Today, in Wolfe's house, she had seen him again, and feared for her life.

Before Archie could act, Wolfe demanded that he finish his tour of duty with the flowers. Telling Cynthia to wait in the office, Archie went upstairs. As the guests were leaving, Mrs. Carlisle peeked into the famous office — and there was Cynthia, dead on the floor, strangled.

One little clue sets Wolfe in the right direction. His elaborate scheme puts Archie at risk, but unmasks the culprit, who was not a man but a woman in disguise. Mr. Carlisle was paying the rent for Doris's apartment, and apparently for Doris as well — and Mrs. Carlisle knew it. From a motive of jealousy, she had disguised herself as a man to kill Doris.

That little clue? Cynthia had told Archie (who had naturally reported verbatim to Wolfe) that she would not have recognized "him" if he hadn't kept his hat on. It was in the plant rooms that she had seen him that afternoon — and no man had worn his hat up there.

Omit Flowers (1950)

Wolfe's old friend Marko Vukcic, proprietor of Rusterman's, appeals for help. Virgil Pompa of the upscale chain of Ambrosia restaurants,

has been arrested for murder, and it looks bad. Solely on Marko's word that the man is innocent, Wolfe goes to work.

The Ambrosia Restaurants are a family affair. Almost before Wolfe gets started, company head Floyd Whitten is killed with an eight-inch kitchen knife, and his widow assumes control. Her career is nearly cut short, too.

Of course, everyone lies. The break in the case comes when Julie Alving, the late Mr. Whitten's girlfriend and Mrs. Whitten's assailant, persuades Archie that she was attempting to avenge her lover. Using her information, Wolfe proves that Mrs. Whitten killed her husband.

Why? As Wolfe concluded, "Not only love rides with pride — but hate also does."

Home to Roost (1951)

While Wolfe and Archie (praise be!) never seem to change, many of the novels and stories reflect the world in which Rex Stout lived. The Cold War is much in evidence in *Home to Roost*.

Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Rackell hire Wolfe to investigate the murder of their nephew Arthur. He died of cyanide poisoning while dining at a restaurant with five (well, probably only four) friends. As an aside, you may have noticed that eating and drinking are not all that healthy in the presence of the anti-angels!

According to Mrs. Rackell, Arthur was apparently pretending communist sympathies but actually working for the FBI — with considerably less success than Herb Philbrick, who was doing the same in real life at about this time. As a result of Arthur's double life, the chief suspect was Henry Jameson Heth, trustee of a communist bail account worth nearly one million 1951 dollars.

Navigating the obstacles of an uncooperative Cramer and an equally obstructive FBI, Wolfe concludes that the aunt is the guilty party. A communist herself, she murdered her nephew for fear of his FBI connections — which, ironically, prove loose indeed.

Wolfe's final judgment provides the title — "This will be by no means the first time that an act of misguided zeal came home to roost."

The Golden Spiders (1953)

"Tell Nero Wolfe he got me . . .", said young Pete Drossos with his dying breath. That message, and all the boy's money, \$4.30, brings doom to another murderess.

From his previous talks with Pete, Wolfe knew that this could not be a random hit-and-run. His investigations bring to the office Laura Fromm, executive director for the Association of Displaced Persons, who had been once seen driving the same car that killed Pete and which had later killed an attorney named Matthew Birch. She was an unlucky client, for the next day she was a victim to vehicular homicide.

Stout juggles many, many complications — crooked lawyers, hidden rendezvous, passwords ("said the spider to the fly"), underworld characters with Damon Runyon names like "Lips Egan," women disguised as men, and the combined machinations of Cramer, Saul, Fred, and Orrie — as Wolfe reaches his conclusion.

Bad folks had been using the Association as a cover for a widespread blackmailing scheme, and the late Ms. Fromm's secretary, Jean Esty, almost got away with murder.

If Death Ever Slept (1957)

The \$10,000 Otis Jarrell offered probably tempted Wolfe to a case he would not usually consider — to "get a snake out of my house." This particular snake was Jarrell's daughter-in-law Susan, and Archie was to be the exterminator — or perhaps the snake charmer.

Pretending to be the millionaire's secretary "Alan Green," Archie moves into the 20-room Fifth Avenue penthouse—and it begins almost immediately. James Eber, Alan Green's predecessor, is shot dead. The same happens to friend-of-the-family Corey Bingham. Wolfe is concerned about Jarrell and those who surround the client — "every one of these people would profit by his death."

In the traditional all-together scene, Wolfe assembles the law, the suspects, and the helpers, the latter of whom include the too seldom seen detective Dol Bonner and her assistant Sally Colt. These two "angels" have found the missing murder weapon, and Wolfe provides the motive.

The murders hinged on secret business deals, and Susan killed both Eber and Bingham before they could implicate her. The gun had been found at her locker at the athletic club, and even her husband couldn't swallow her alibi when she couldn't remember where the \$200,000 in her safe deposit box had come from.

She was convicted, and Wolfe earned a fat fee — but he was unsatisfied. Yes, she was a murderess and a hellcat and a wretch — but "you had furnished no evidence that she was a snake." Nonetheless, he added, "I will be glad to get the check."

The Squirt and the Monkey (1957)

The Squirt and the Monkey is another fine example of how much Stout could pack into a novella, whose format itself is a seductive invitation to oversimplify.

Harry Koven, creator of the fabulously successful comic strip "Dazzle Dan," wants Wolfe to learn who stole the artist's pistol, a Marlin .32. Suspects abound, including entrepreneur Adrian Getz, who seems to be the "squirt" in the strip. Rookalo, the monkey, fortunately was not a suspect.

When Getz "getz it" — with Archie's gun — the plot takes off, and so does Archie, straight to jail. For good measure, Cramer maneuvers to suspend Wolfe's license, provoking suits and countersuits.

The furious detective deduces the solution in the "Dazzle Dan" strip itself, learning that Getz, not Koven, was the real creator, and that the latter was entitled to only 10% of the profits. Koven's wife had done the deed, in hope of increased income.

Champagne for One (1958)

Where did Archie find a "friend" like Dinky Byne? Ask yourself.

As a favor, he agrees to take Byne's place at a casual dinner party in the Grantham mansion on Fifth Avenue. Having had some dealings with the hostess Mrs. Robilotti in the past, Archie agrees to use tact, discretion, and refinement. He will need them all.

The late Mr. Grantham had established a home for unwed mothers (now, that's a period touch!), and, on his birthday, his widow, though now remarried, continues a tradition. Four of the "girls," having delivered their children up for adoption and now established in the working world, are invited for a night in high society, escorted by the most eligible of bachelors. This is Archie's task.

While sipping champagne, one of the women collapses and dies — cyanide and champagne don't mix well. Because she had been rather frank about her suicidal tendencies, it was easy to assume that Faith Usher did herself in. Easy — except for the observant Archie, who winds up in hot water with Cramer for insisting that she could not have killed herself, thus turning a tidy suicide into messy murder. Why was he so sure? Because he was watching her, and she did not put anything into her champagne.

Wolfe acquires a client, Edwin Laidlaw, another of the "groomsmen" at the party. Laidlaw fears what might happen if it is learned that he is the father of the victim's child, and wants Wolfe to keep that fact quiet.

Instead of the normal everyone-in-Wolfe's-office, *Champagne for One* has a twist. This time, it will be a re-enactment! When Wolfe cunningly introduces Faith Usher's mother into the mix, Mrs. Robilotti comes apart. Her first husband, the sainted Mr. Grantham, was Faith's father — and Mrs. Robilotti had learned this fact and deliberately invited Faith to the party to kill her.

Wolfe earns the fee, the murderer is convicted, and Archie's reputation as an eagle-eyed observer is confirmed.

Plot It Yourself (1959)

Having reviewed mysteries for more than 20 years, and attempted a plot or two myself, this title should be right up my alley. Wrong! This is perhaps the most complicated case that Wolfe and Archie ever tackled.

The perpetrator, tagged "X" by Wolfe, wrote "novels," which turned out to be almost exact copies of current best sellers. Then, X secured the cooperation of writers who, for a price, would claim that their work had been stolen. It was up to Wolfe to expose the swindler, and also a murderer.

Around the brownstone swirls a covey of authors, publishers, agents, dramatists, poets, and, of course, lawyers. A frustrated Wolfe (who can blame him?) swears, "I shall drink no beer. And I will eat no meat until I get my fingers around that creature's throat." Open season on authors — three corpses, few clues.

Wolfe puts the entire operation in gear — all the boys, and both Dol Bonner and Sally Corbett, too. Young writer Amy Wynn was entrapped and exposed as the killer. Her motives, which she willingly explained to Wolfe, are some of the most bizarre you will ever encounter.

A confession — I pine for Dol Bonner, and wish that Stout had told more of her tales. She did, of course, star in *The Hand in the Glove*. The novel was published in 1936. Because a Nero Wolfe had appeared earlier that year, and the publisher felt that two Wolfes in a year might lead to overexposure! Imagine — too many Wolfes! Actually, "Too Many Wolfes" might be a good title of Inspector Cramer's autobiography!

The Final Deduction (1961)

Unannounced and unexpected, Mrs. Althea Vail came to Wolfe's door. The detective thus read a note to Mrs. Vail signed by a "Mr. Knapp," alleging that her husband Jimmy was a kidnap victim. For \$500,000, he would be safely returned, and she should await further instructions by phone.

For a fee of \$60,000, Wolfe took the case, which involved travel to the far wilds of Westchester County, and, though the ransom was not recovered, husband Jimmy returned home in one piece. Case closed.

Or not.

Deduction No. 1 — the whole thing was a fraud, engineered by the Vails.

Deduction No. 2 — their secretary Dinah Utley was murdered because of her involvement in the plot.

Deduction No. 3 — Ben Franklin murdered Jimmy Vail. No, not that Ben Franklin — but a heavy statue which had been toppled on Jimmy.

Deduction No. 4 — for a fee of one-fifth the stolen amount (a tidy \$100,000), it was possible to recover the ransom. With the help of the usual suspects — Archie, Saul, Fred, Orrie — Wolfe earns the finder's fee.

Deduction No. 5 — Mrs. Vail had murdered both Dinah and Jimmy, not for money — oh, no! — but for love, when she learned that the two had a closer personal relationship than was proper.

A Right to Die (1964)

About 25 years ago (you surely recall!) a young black man was especially helpful to Nero Wolfe in *Too Many Cooks*. Now, Paul Whipple is an assistant professor of anthropology at Columbia, and his son Dunbar has been arrested for the bludgeon murder of his wealthy — and white — girlfriend Susan Brooke. Whipple comes to Wolfe, who, as we know, is a man who never forgets an obligation. Too, both father and son are involved in the struggle for civil rights, a cause for which both Wolfe and his creator expressed eloquent support.

Soon, there's a second victim. Peter Vaughn, one of Susan's suitors, tell Archie that he might have some important information, but a shot in the heart prevents its delivery.

The solution to the murders goes back to a suicide in the past relating to Marjorie Ault. A vital clue was a diphthong spotted by Wolfe, and which, no surprise, only he could interpret correctly. It lead to Marjorie Ault.

Motive is always an element of murder, and the two crimes in this story could be different. But the major motive here was simple, and Marjorie just couldn't understand why her own wasn't both reasonable and logical — "Susan was going to marry a nigger."

The Doorbell Rang (1965)

His publisher claimed that this was the finest detective story ever written by Rex Stout, and I agree. It is also Wolfe's most challenging, with the entire FBI as an adversary.

Wealthy Rachel Bruner claims that her liberal activities have drawn severe harassment from the FBI, and offers Wolfe the largest fee he has ever contemplated — if he can get the Feds to call it off.

The entire affair is a wonderful showpiece for Wolfe and Archie, but also for Saul, Fred, and Orrie, and even the redoubtable Cramer himself. Searching for a wedge to use against the Bureau, Wolfe settles on the unsolved murder of one Morris Althaus, an investigative journalist collecting material on the FBI for Tick-Tock Magazine.

Althaus, something of a ladies' man, had dumped Mrs. Bruner's secretary for another woman. Bad move. The slighted secretary plugged him, and this fact, in an intricate but convincing conclusion, is employed by Wolfe to solve all the problems on his doorstep.

In conclusion (must there be one?), I respectfully that the female of the species is more deadly (and entertaining!) than the male — at least when it comes to murderers in the vicinity of West 35th Street.

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