

Perils of Omnipotence

THE NATION

Omnipotence is a rich but fragile garment—give it a tweak and the seams split. J. Edgar Hoover and his minions are presently suffering this dishevelment at the hands of Rex Stout, whose Nero Wolfe detective stories have entertained the American reading public since well before World War II. In *The Doorbell Rang* (Viking), the twenty-second novel in the series, a woman who has distributed copies of Fred J. Cook's *The FBI Nobody Knows* among her friends finds that she is being harassed by the G-men and hires Wolfe to rid her of the nuisance. This he does with a thoroughness so humiliating that Hoover himself is goaded into seeking a private interview with the obese sleuth. Alas, he has forgotten that Wolfe

November 1, 1965

(FBI)

sees strangers only by appointment and he is turned away at the door.

Lest anyone think that he is hiding behind the notoriously autocratic manners of his hero, Stout gave a prepublication interview to the *Sunday Herald Tribune* in which he called the FBI "an outrageous outfit" and termed their censoring of movie and TV scripts "goddam impudence and arrogance." He also characterized Hoover as a megalomaniac "enemy of democracy" who grows "sillier and sillier." Asked whether he expected "trouble" as a result of *The Doorbell Rang*, Stout guessed that the FBI hadn't yet become that silly.

This sort of thing is devastating to a man like Hoover who has presumed to place himself and his organization beyond criticism. When *The Nation* originally published Fred Cook's study as a special issue, Hoover may have smarted in private, but publicly he could save face among his admirers by implying that he would not take notice of a journal whose political views he deplored. That tack will scarcely work in this instance. Stout has not attacked Hoover; he has simply called him down as he would any servant (in this case a public servant) who had forgotten who employed him (in this case all of us). Omnipotence cannot survive such treatment. And yet we predict that nothing will happen to Rex Stout (except that his new book will sell very well indeed), and America may now awaken to the fact that J. Edgar Hoover bears a striking resemblance to King Log of the fable.