

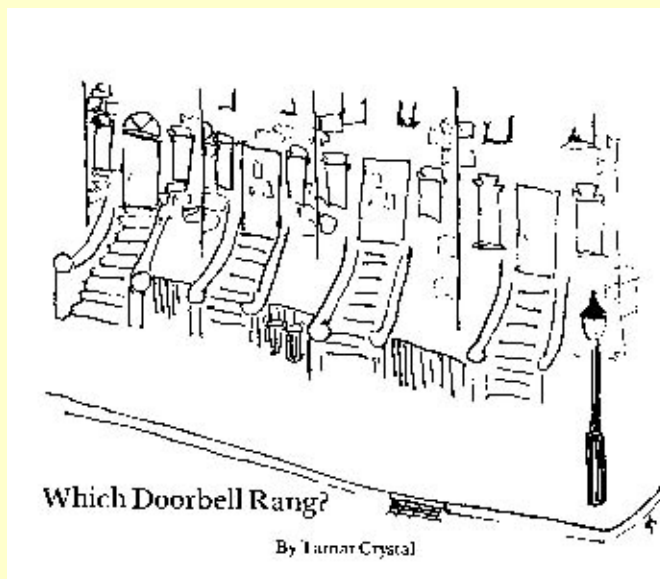
The Wolfe Pack

The Nero Wolfe Literary Society

WHICH DOORBELL RANG?

By Tamar Crystal

NO WONDER Nero Wolfe never wanted to leave his house. With the location of his old brownstone peripatizing amongst 918, 506, 922, 902 and 914 West 35th Street, he wasn't sure he'd ever find it again where he left it. In 1936, when Llewellyn Frost came seeking Wolfe's help in [RBOX], home was at No. 918.



Two years later, it had mysteriously shifted four blocks east, to 506 West 35th. At least, that's the address that Archie Goodwin gives John P. Barrett in [OVER]. Another shift, westward this time, brings the house briefly to rest at No. 922 in [SILN] in 1945, when Archie has this address engraved on his business cards.

The early 1950's witness a most un-Wolfe-like flurry of activity as he moves, brownstone and all, from No. 902 [BOOK] (1951) to No. 914 [BASE] (1952), and back to 918 [east] (1956). Apparently Wolfe found this location the most congenial: he was still there in 1960 when the corpse of a woman is found in a taxi in front of that address [meth].

Which address is the right one? We've no choice but to believe they all are, since the reports come from Archie Goodwin whose memory, we know, is never wrong. (It's interesting to note that the one address Archie never misses on is a certain penthouse between Madison and Park Avenues on 63rd Street.) One can only surmise that geography wasn't a required subject back in Archie's hometown of Canton, Ohio.

We've all heard of names being changed to protect the innocent, but changing addresses so often must have been hard on those delicate plants. Not to mention the strain on all those decorators who must

have been constantly employed making a series of brownstones completely identical. Each variation, of course, had to look as if it had been lived in for twenty years by four particular bachelors who just weren't too particular about the exact location of their house.

It sounds ludicrous, but so's the only other possible explanation: shifting the whole four-story structure-pool table, herb garden and all-four blocks or forty feet. At the very least it must have kept Archie footsore at the Flamingo finding plots with cunning little secret passageways to 34th Street. As well as finding a moving company which could move intact not only a whole house but Nero Wolfe as well.

Not that shifting the houses either way would have mattered much. It doesn't take a genius of Wolfe's stature to figure out that every address except No. 506 would be right in the middle of the Hudson River. Terribly convenient for fresh fish and for watering 10,000 orchids, but a bit chancy for asking in people and police. In fact, the real reason for the reluctance of most suspects to answer a summons to Wolfe's door only now becomes apparent. Any doubts about their riverbed living are removed by Archie's statement at the beginning of [FERD] that he "went out for ten minutes worth of air, hoofing it around the piers and back again."

I personally believe Archie's a bit more of a mammal than an amphibian and that those too west and too wet numbers were a blind to discourage women visitors and other unwelcome guests. But he goes to such pains otherwise to locate "the old brownstone house on West 35th Street not far from the Hudson River" that it's aggravating when he can't make up his mind which block it's on. No wonder Lt. Cramer is so annoyed every time he rings that doorbell. Each time he comes he has to check out an entire two blocks just to see where the house may have meandered. In [BEST] (1950) Archie's description places it about a block from the Hudson. "As I left the West Side Highway at 46th Street I had to cross to Ninth Avenue to turn south," he says. "Turning right on 35th Street, I went on across Tenth Avenue on nearly to Eleventh and pulled to the curb in front of Wolfe's brownstone." But in 1954 and 1974 deduction places the house farther from the river, between

Ninth and Tenth Avenues. In [next] Wolfe says, "To the garage for the car," and Archie reports they headed west to the garage "on Thirty Sixth Street near Tenth Avenue." And in [AFAM] Parker drops Archie off at Eighth Avenue so he can stretch his legs for a block and a half.

Nor is Archie satisfied with shifting houses and blocks; in 1953 he's also shifting the flow of traffic in Manhattan. As anyone who's ever been to Macy's can tell you, 35th Street is one way west for everyone -- but Archie's exception for Pete Drossos.

Working the wipe racket at Ninth and 35th, Pete is asked for help by the lady with The Golden Spiders. "I thought I might catch the car at Eighth Avenue and ran as fast as I could down 35th," he later tells Archie. One wonders just how fast that car must have been backing up to outrun a fleet street kid. A harder question is how the car managed to escape at all in the traffic-choked streets of the garment center from Seventh to Ninth Avenues and from 40th to 35th Streets.

I suppose we just have to hold the old brownstone firm in our affections. Trying to place it precisely on West 35th Street doesn't seem to figure in the general scheme of things.



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**Plaque placed at 454 W. 35th Street
by The Wolfe Pack and dedicated by The City of New York
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