

## MEET ME AT THE CHURCHILL

by Robert Lopresti

The Hotel Churchill is almost as much a part of the Wolfe epic as the old brownstone itself. It appears in the corpus twenty-one times: in thirteen novels and eight short stories. Although we don't know if Wolfe has ever been there, Archie can often be seen there, usually with female company.

The Churchill is fourteen short blocks north and six long blocks east of Wolfe's house, a thirty-one minute walk for Archie [eeny]. That puts it at 49th Street and either Fifth, Madison, or Park Avenues, depending on the exact location of the brownstone, and Archie's definition of a long block.

The location is confirmed in [BEST]. Archie says that the Hotel is "a few blocks" walk from the Romance Bar on 49th Street, and a few blocks from the office on Madison Avenue in the 40's which he occupied during Wolfe's exile.

Considering how often Archie has been in the Churchill, we know very little about its physical design. It has a tower (towers?) at least thirty-two stories high [wind], and it would take "four men at least" to cover it properly for a tail [BEST].

In 1937, Ralph Liggett was a co-owner of the hotel [COOK], but circumstances at that time probably led to a change of hands. Since the hotel is well-known for its cuisine its best-known employees must be its chefs. Leon Blanc was once head chef, but Philip Laszio stole the job from him. According to Archie, Laszio was paid the enormous sum of \$60,000 a year.

After Laszio's murder, Liggett tried to corral Jerome Berin as a replacement but failed. We know that the job was promised to Albert Malfi, the Corsican entree man at the hotel, but we don't know if he eventually got it.

Paul Rago, who urged Wolfe to speak at a meeting of the United Restaruant Workers of America, was a sauce chef at the Churchill. His employment ended in 1957 [july].

The relationship between our heroes and the employees of the Churchill has been pretty good. In 1954, when Wolfe needed money fast, the assistant manager cashed a check for \$10,000 [BLCK]. Unfortunately, we don't know whether Wolfe or Archie brought the check, so we can't be sure whether Wolfe has ever been in the hotel.

Naturally, Archie has had dealings with the security staff. In 1954 [when] and 1955 [MIDN] and [wind] Tim Evarts was the first assistant house dick "only they don't call him that" [when]. Their relationship was friendly enough for Evarts to supply information on the hotel's guests. By 1965, Evarts had either left or been promoted. William Coffey held the position, and Archie trusted him enough to use him as go-between for Wolfe and Mrs. Bruner [RANG].

With the exceptions of Rusterman's and the Flamingo Room, the Churchill appears to be Archie's favorite place to interrogate a suspect, especially a female one. He mentions a number of the hotel's rooms and bars, but since the mentions are spread out over twenty-five years, it's unlikely that all the establishments existed at the same time.

First and foremost is the Churchill Bar. Archie describes it this way in 1949, when he meets Clara Jones there for a drink: "It was spacious, air-conditioned, well-fitted in all respects, and even in the middle of August, well-fitted also in the matter of customers, male and female [gunw]."

Later, Achie had a drink in the bar with Carol Berkin [home]. In 1957 and 1958, he refers to a separate men's bar, which apparently didn't last very long [SLPT], [CHAM]. There is also a Tulip Bar [when], and in 1962 Archie met Anne Tenzer at the Blue Alcove and bought her a drink at the Admiralty Bar [MAMA]. Cocktails are available in the Calico Room [befo].



If you want more than a drink, the Churchill offers several alternatives. The Resort Room features waiters in the liveries of world-famous resorts [COOK]. The Silver Room, where Archie spent an evening with Gwynne Ferris, features food and music; tuxedo is required [WOMN]. The Troubadour Room is apparently a favorite dancing spot for Lily Rowan [BEST]. The Mountain Room features tanks of live trout; choose your own [CLIE].

If you want a private dinner for a few friends, you may arrange a private room, as Louis Dahlmann did in [MIDN]. At the other extreme, there is a ballroom large enough to hold banquets such as the one at which Thomas G. Yeager spoke in 1958 [CLIE].

Of course, we think of a hotel primarily as a place to house people temporarily, and the Churchill does indeed do that. In 1958, Sidney Karlow rented Room 2318, and met his death there [when]. Four of the finalists in the Pour Amour contest had rooms at the Churchill: Philip Younger (Room 1826), Gertrude Frazee (Room 1814), Carol Wheelock and Harold Rollins [MIDN].

One may also live in the Churchill on a permanent basis, in a section known as the Churchill Towers. The relationship between the Towers and the hotel is not very clear, and it isn't helped by Archie's habit of simply referring to "the Churchill."

Apparently, until the 1950's, the Towers were not considered a separate entity (perhaps they weren't built yet). In 1944, Vic Talbott was living in the hotel on a permanent basis, with room service and a wake-up call available [bult]. In 1947, Wáldo Wilmot Moore lived in the hotel [WOMN].

The first mention of the Towers appears to be in 1950 [BEST], when we're told that Barry Rackham moved into the Churchill, where he had "an air-conditioned suite in the tower." From Archie's description, we know that this tower has a setback, providing terraces at the level of Rackham's apartment.

By 1955, the apartment section had become "the Towers." A name change, or new construction? We don't find out. We do know that phone calls for the Towers go through the hotel switchboard [wind], so the connection between the two sections must be rather intimate.

In [eeny] Archie says, "when you leave the elevator at the lobby floor of the Churchill Towers you have three choices. To the right is the main entrance. To the left and then right is a side entrance. To the left and left again is another." This sounds to me more like a hotel lobby than that of an apartment house, so perhaps the entrance to the Towers is directly through the hotel proper.

Bertram Fyfe had a room on the 32nd floor of the Towers, and he died there of exposure [wind]. Corey Brigham was living in the Towers at the time of his death [SLPT].

After that, the residents take on a more violent hue. Mrs. Rita Sorell, a murderess, moved there in November 1958 [eeny]. Julian Haft, president of Parthenon Press, lived in the Towers while committing his murders in 1962 [MAMA].

There are a few other mentions of the hotel [SLNT], [GOLD], [MIGH], but not in any of the books after 1965. This sudden disappearance suggests a depressing possibility: perhaps the hotel is no more, or at least has lost its glamorous image.

I prefer to think that the disappearance from the last few books was a coincidence. I'm sure that right now, somewhere near 49th and Madison, Archie is escorting a lovely young suspect to a booth in the Calico Room...

