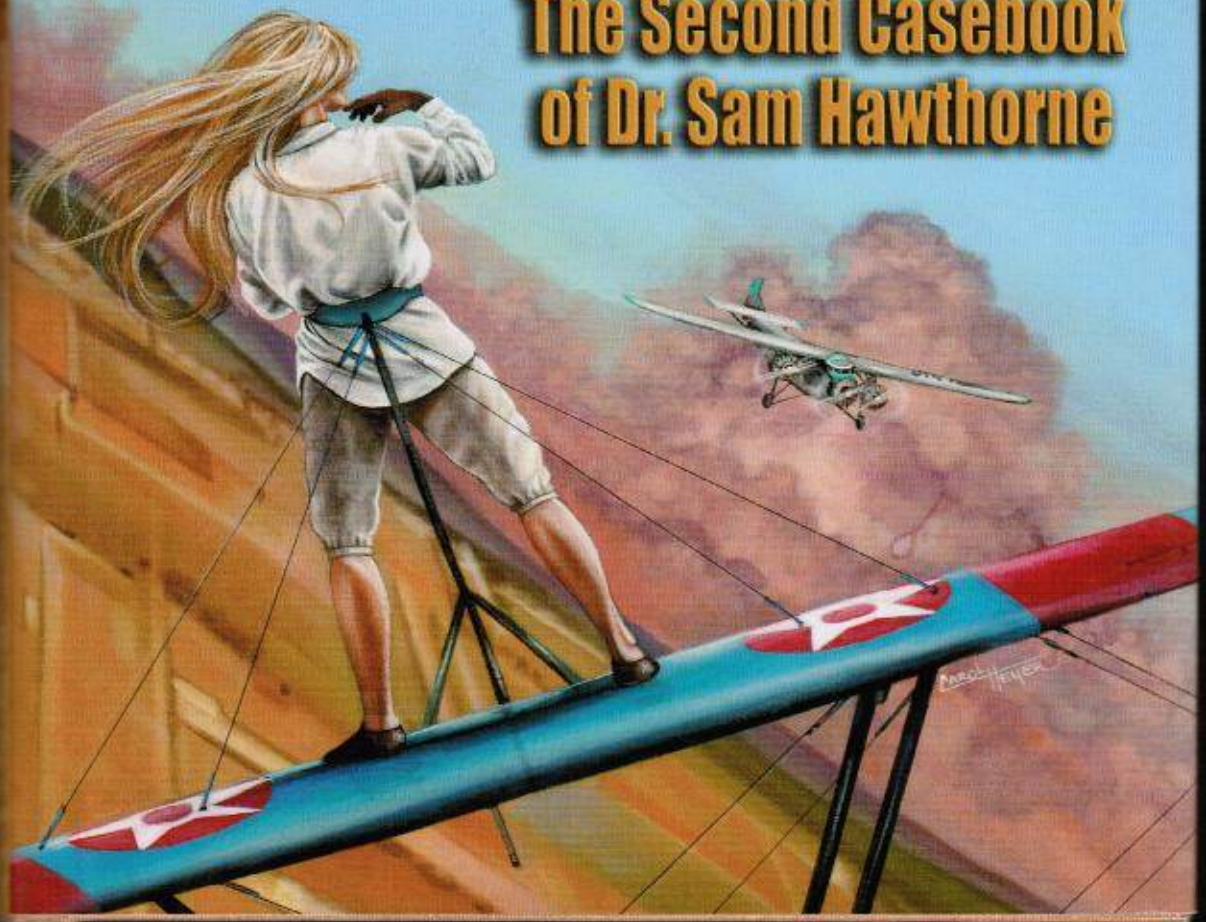


**Edward D. Hoch**

*More Things*  
**IMPOSSIBLE**

**The Second Casebook  
of Dr. Sam Hawthorne**



Edward D. Hoch

# More Things Impossible



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## INTRODUCTION

I'm always pleased when I meet readers at Bouchercons or other fan gatherings who tell me that one or the other of my series characters is their favorite. It doesn't really matter to me which one they mention, and I've become aware over the years that a difference of opinion exists. Many people choose Nick Velvet, my most profitable series, as their favorite, while others prefer the intricate locked rooms and impossible crimes of the Dr. Sam Hawthorne tales. I usually hear from someone when it's been too long between my Captain Leopold stories, even though the good Captain has been trying to retire for years. And some old-time fans have stuck with Simon Ark almost from the very beginning — not easy to do since the character, and my professional career, are 50 years old this month.

I believe the stories about Dr. Sam Hawthorne have remained popular for two reasons. First, of course, is the eternal fascination with locked rooms and impossible crimes. When Fred Dannay, the legendary editor of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, suggested that all the Dr. Sam stories feature some sort of impossibility, I readily agreed. I've now published 68 of them, and I don't believe I've ever duplicated an idea, or a solution. In fact, I sometimes find it easier coming up with a new impossible crime for Dr. Sam to solve than a new valueless object for Nick Velvet to steal.

A second reason for their continued popularity is that, taken together, they relate the life and times of my main character and tell the reader something of the world in which he lived. My previous volume of Dr. Sam stories, *Diagnosis: Impossible*, began with the good doctor's arrival in Northmont in January of 1922 and carries us up to September 1927. The present collection of fifteen stories begins in the Fall of 1927 and ends in December of 1931. Eight of these stories have been reprinted in anthologies — "The Whispering House," "The Boston Common," "The Pilgrims Windmill," "The Pink Post Office," "The Octagon Room," "The Tin Goose," "The Hunting Lodge" and "Santa's Lighthouse." I have no special favorites among them, though it should be noted that "The Octagon Room" takes place on the day of Sheriff Lens's wedding, and "The Hunting Lodge" is the only story in which Dr. Sam's parents appear.

I do enjoy writing about Dr. Sam Hawthorne and Northmont's impossible crimes, and plan to continue the series for as long as I, and my computer, hold up. In later stories Sam finally finds a wife, just as the nation plunges into the Second World War. His 68th adventure is set in September of 1943.

For readers who wonder what Dr. Sam did after he finally retired: well, he poured himself a small libation and told these stories to his friends.

*Edward D. Hoch  
Rochester, New York  
September 2005*

## THE PROBLEM OF THE OCTAGON ROOM

Old Dr. Sam Hawthorne answered the door on the second ring, and stood blinking into the harsh afternoon sun. He recognized at once the person who stood there, even though they hadn't seen each other in fifty years. "Come in, come in!" he urged. "It's been a long time, hasn't it? A long time since that day in Northmont. No, no, you're not disturbing me. I was expecting someone else, though—a friend who often drops by to hear my stories of the old days. Funny thing, I was going to tell him about you, and about all the others and what happened on the day Sheriff Lens was married. I often think about it, you know. Of all those old mysteries I helped solve back then, the business with the octagon room was unique. Would you like to hear about how it seemed from my viewpoint? Fine, fine! Settle down there and let me pour you— ah—a small libation. We're both old now and a little sherry is good for the circulation. Or would you like something stronger? No? Very well. As you know . . ."

It was December of 1929 (Dr. Sam Hawthorne began), and a mild December it was in Northmont. By Saturday the 14th, the day of the wedding, we'd had no snow at all. In fact, it was a sunny day as I remember it, with the temperature hovering around sixty. I was up early, because Sheriff Lens had asked me to be his best man. We'd grown to be close friends during my years in Northmont, and even though he was nearly twenty years older than me he still liked the idea of me being at his side during the wedding service.

"Sam," he'd told me earlier, "it was back in October, that day at the post office, when I realized how much I really loved Vera Brock." Vera was our postmistress, a spunky, solid woman in her forties who'd run the post office in the general store and now had a building of her own. Vera had never been married, and Sheriff Lens was a widower without any children. They'd drifted together out of companionship more than anything else, and now it had blossomed into love. I couldn't have been happier for them both.



Vera Brock, it turned out, had a hidden streak of sentimentality. She told Sheriff Lens that more than anything else she wanted to be married in the famous octagon room at Eden House, because her mother and father had been married at an octagon house on Cape Cod forty-five years earlier. Now the sheriff was a religious man, even if it didn't show too often, and he wanted to be married at the Baptist church just as he'd been the first time. They had a little disagreement about that until I solved the problem by talking to the minister, Dr. Tompkins, who reluctantly agreed to perform the ceremony in the octagon room.

Eden House was a fine old place on the edge of town. It had been built by Joshua Eden in the mid-1800's, during the so-called "octagon craze" that swept the nation and was especially prevalent in upstate New York and New England. His fascination with octagon houses caused him to install a mirrored octagon room on the main floor of his new home. Its construction had been quite simple. He'd taken a large square room, originally designed as a study, and cut off each of the four corners with a mirrored cabinet that reached from floor to ceiling. The width of the mirrored doors was the same as the sections of wall between them, so the shape of the room was a true octagon. When you entered through the room's only outer door you faced the large sunny window on the south side of the house. The walls to the left and right, between the mirrored segments, were hung with 19th Century sporting prints. It was an odd but cheerful room, if you didn't mind the mirrors.

Behind each of those mirrored doors was a cabinet with shelves reaching from floor to ceiling. There were books and vases and tablecloths and silverware and china and every sort of knickknack crowded onto the shelves. The room itself was almost bare, with only a small table by the window holding a vase of fresh flowers.

At least that's how it looked when I came to inspect it a few days before the ceremony. My guide was young Josh Eden, grandson of the builder, a handsome young man well aware of the family's tradition in Northmont. He unlocked the thick oak door of the room and pulled it open. "As you know, Dr. Sam, we occasionally rent out the octagon room for weddings and private parties. A lovely place like this should be shared by the community, and the sheriff's marriage is an event that deserves the best setting."

"I'm too young to know much about octagon houses," I admitted.

He grinned at that. "I'm younger than you by a year or two, but I'll try to enlighten you. The eight-sided shape was both functional and efficient, but superstition had something to do with it too. Evil spirits were believed to lurk in right-angled corners, and an octagon house without right-angled corners was believed to be free of them. For this reason the houses were popular with spiritualists. In fact, it's said that seances were held in this very room by friends of my grandfather. Seems to me the spirits they conjured up might have been just as bad as the ones they were avoiding."

I glanced at him. "The room is haunted?"

"Some old ghostly stories," he said with a chuckle. He showed me the crowded cabinets and the view from the window as we discussed the wedding. Before we left I noticed him check the window to make sure it was latched on the inside. The heavy wooden door had a key lock and an inside bolt. He couldn't work the bolt from outside, but he did turn the lock with a long slender key.

"Keeping the ghosts locked in?" I asked with a smile.

"There are some valuable antiques in those cabinets," he explained. "I keep the room locked when it's not in use."

Josh's wife Ellen met us at the front stairs, coming down with a load of laundry to be washed. Her blue eyes sparkled as she greeted me. "Hello there, Dr. Sam. I was wondering when you'd come by. Good to see you again!"

She was flushed with the health and beauty of youth, and a bright cheerfulness that always made me envious of Josh Eden. They'd met at college and married soon after, and though they were both a few years younger than me they seemed somehow to be in full charge of their lives. Josh's father Thomas deserted the family after the war, preferring to remain in Paris with a dancer he'd met there. The shock had been too much for Josh's poor mother, who'd died from it, and from the influenza outbreak of 1919.

Josh went on to college and in time the courts ruled his father was dead too, though there was no evidence of it except his continued silence. Eden House had passed to Josh, along with a small inheritance. He'd wisely invested in land rather than stocks, and the recent Wall Street crash had left him virtually unscathed. Still, there was money to be made from renting out the octagon room on occasion. Ellen even talked of converting the entire

house to a restaurant if an amendment to repeal Prohibition was ever passed. There was already talk that mounting unemployment might be countered by the jobs created through the rebirth of the liquor industry.

“We’re getting ready for the big day on Saturday,” I told Ellen. “I just came over to look at the room.”

“I’ll bet Sheriff Lens is nervous,” she said with a grin.

“Not so’s you could notice. After all, he’s been through it before. It’s the first time for Vera.”

“I know they’ll be very happy,” Ellen said.

She seemed quite pleased by the prospect of the wedding, and when we trooped over for the rehearsal on Friday evening she surprised Vera and the sheriff with a hand-made quilt as a wedding present.

“That’s so nice!” Vera exclaimed. “We’ll have it on our bed!”

“It’s just a little something from Josh and me,” Ellen murmured. She seemed more subdued than on my previous visit, possibly because of the intimidating presence of Dr. Tompkins.

The minister arrived dressed in a gray suit, greeted Sheriff Lens and Vera with somber good wishes, and then turned to me. “You understand, Dr. Hawthorne, that the service tomorrow morning must be at ten o’clock sharp. I have another wedding over in Shinn Corners at noon. In a church.”

“Don’t worry,” I assured him, beginning to feel a bit sorry I’d ever become involved with such a pompous man.

We ran quickly through the rehearsal in the octagon room, with Josh and Ellen Eden watching from the doorway. The sheriff and Vera had wanted only two attendants. I was the best man and Vera’s close friend Lucy Cole was the maid of honor. Lucy was a charming Southern girl in her late twenties who’d moved to Northmont a year earlier. She helped out sometimes at the post office and had become a close friend of Vera’s in the past year.

“You know, Sam,” Vera had told me earlier, “if it wasn’t for Lucy’s encouragement I never could have agreed to marry the sheriff. Once you pass forty, gettin’ married for the first time is an awesome decision.”

“But she’s never been married, has she?”

“No, not unless she’s got a husband down south she’s not talkin’ about.” Lucy was an open, attractive young woman—not unlike Ellen Eden in some ways. I couldn’t help feeling they were the vanguard of a new age. The

books and magazines might be filled with stories of big-city flappers, but I preferred women more like Lucy Cole and Ellen Eden.

After the rehearsal Josh carefully locked the door of the octagon room and walked out with us to my car. "We'll see you all in the morning," he said. A wedding breakfast for a few close friends would be held nearby, followed by a reception later.

I drove the wedding party back to my apartment and opened a bottle of genuine Canadian whiskey. Sheriff Lens sputtered some about breaking the law, but after all it was the night before his wedding. We toasted the bride, and we toasted the groom, and then we toasted Lucy and me for good measure.

I was up early in the morning because I'd promised my nurse April that I'd drive her to the wedding in my car. She was chatty and excited, as she always was at the prospect of weddings and parties. We picked up Sheriff Lens on the way, and I had to admit I'd never seen him dressed so handsomely. I adjusted his formal morning coat and straightened his tie.

"Keep your stomach in and you'll be fine," I said as we walked to the car. "You look great."

"You got the ring, Doc?"

"Don't worry." I patted the pocket of my own coat.

"You both look handsome enough to be on the wedding cake!" April exclaimed as we climbed in the car. "Can I marry the one that's left over?"

"Being a doctor's wife is even worse than being a doctor's nurse," I told her with a chuckle and started the car.

As we pulled up to Eden House, Vera was just getting out of Lucy Cole's little sedan. "Oh, look!" April pointed. "There's the bride!" Then, remembering our passenger, she quickly added, "Don't you look, Sheriff Lens. You're not supposed to see her till the ceremony."

Vera Brock was all in white, with a fancy lace wedding gown that trailed to the ground. She held it up with both hands as she ran to the door of Eden House. In that moment she was a girl again, half her age, and I could see why Sheriff Lens loved her. I parked the car and walked over to meet Lucy.

"Beautiful day for it," I remarked, looking at the cloudless sky. "Maybe this'll be the year without a winter."

Vera had reappeared at the front door, looking slightly exasperated. "They can't get the door of the octagon room open. It's stuck or

something.”

This seemed to be yet another job for the best man. “I’ll go see about it,” I said.

Inside I found Ellen Eden and her husband standing together at the thick oak door of the octagon room, looks of bafflement on their faces. “The door won’t open,” Josh said. “This has never happened before.”

I took the key from him and tried it in the lock. It turned, and I could tell the lock was working properly, but still the door would not open. “There’s a bolt inside, isn’t there?”

“Yes,” Josh replied, “but it could only be worked by someone inside the room. And there’s no one inside.”

“Are you sure about that?”

Josh and his wife exchanged glances. “I’ll go around and look in the window,” she said.

At this point Dr. Tompkins walked in, already glancing at the large gold pocket watch in his hand. “I hope we’re on schedule. As you know, I have a noon wedding in—”

“Just a short delay,” I told him. “The door seems to be stuck.”

“That doesn’t happen in churches.”

“I’m sure not.”

Ellen hurried in through the back door, out of breath. “The shade is drawn, Josh! You didn’t leave it like that, did you?”

“Certainly not! Someone’s in there.”

“But how could they get in?” I asked reasonably. “I saw you lock up and latch the window.”

“The window’s still latched,” Ellen confirmed.

The minister began to sputter and Josh said, “Please bear with us. We’ll break down the door if necessary.”

I tapped it with my fist. “That’s pretty thick oak.”

Josh joined me and pounded on the door. “Open up in there, whoever you are!” he shouted. “We know you’re there!”

But there was only silence from behind the door.

“A burglar, probably,” Sheriff Lens reasoned. “Trapped and afraid to come out.”

“We can break in the window,” I suggested.

“No!” Ellen said. “Not unless we have to. We couldn’t replace it before Monday and it’s December, after all. A sudden storm could damage the room. Look, can’t you all pull on the knob? That bolt on the other side of the door isn’t very strong.”

We followed her advice, turning the knob and yanking. The door seemed to move a fraction of an inch. “April,” I called over my shoulder, “bring the tow rope from the trunk of my car.”

She returned with it in a few moments, grumbling about getting her hands dirty. We attached the stout rope to the doorknob, made sure again it was unlocked, and Josh and I tugged.

“It’s giving!” he said.

“Sheriff,” I called out. “I know it’s your wedding day, but could you lend us a hand?”

The three of us gave a mighty pull on the rope. It was like the games of tug-of-war I’d played as a child, and we were rewarded by the screeching of screws being pried from wood. The door sprang open, sending us backward, off balance for an instant. Then Josh and I ran into the octagon room together, with Ellen close behind.

Even in the dim light from the shaded window we could make out the man in the center of the floor, arms and legs thrown wide. His clothes were the shabby costume of a tramp, and I’d never seen him before. But with a slim silver dagger in his chest, I had no doubt that he was dead.

Behind me, Lucy Cole screamed.

I stepped around the dead man and crossed the dim room to raise the shade. The single window was indeed latched, and though it was only turned halfway that was enough to lock it firmly. The latch turned easily and I tried to see if it could have been operated somehow from outside, but the window frames fit together snugly, leaving no gap. The panes themselves were unbroken.

I turned back to the room. The door had opened outward, so there was no hiding place behind it. The mirrored cabinets—

“Aren’t you going to examine the body?” Josh asked.

“I can see he’s dead. Right now it’s more important to examine the room.”

I was especially interested in the inside bolt which had been pried from its wooden moorings by our tugging. It hung now from the door jamb, the twin screws having been pulled from the door itself. But examining the holes and the traces of wood shavings on the screw threads, I was convinced the bolt had been firmly screwed into the wood of the door.

I noticed a piece of string knotted around the doorknob and tried to remember if it had been there the previous evening. I didn't think so, but I couldn't be sure.

"He's dead, all right," Dr. Tompkins was saying.

I turned from the door. "Dead several hours, judging by the color of his skin. I didn't mean to seem heartless but sometimes you can tell by looking. Does anyone know him?"

Ellen and Josh shook their heads and the minister grumbled, "A tramp passing through town. Sheriff, you shouldn't allow—"

"I recognize him," Lucy Cole said quietly from the doorway.

"Who is he?" I asked her.

"I didn't mean I knew him, just that I recognized him. There were two of them yesterday, walking near the railroad tracks. Both hobos, I suppose. I remember that long stringy hair and the dirty red vest, and those little scars on his face."

Josh Eden came forward to kneel beside the body. "That dagger looks like a silver letter opener from one of our cabinets. Ellen, see if it's missing."

She walked carefully around the body and opened the mirrored door to the left of the window. After rummaging for a moment she said, "It's not here. There may be other things missing too. I can't be sure."

"While we're at it," I suggested, "we'd better check all four of these cabinets."

"What for?" Josh asked.

I was staring down at the body. "Well, unless the killer is hidden inside, on one of those big shelves, it looks like we've got ourselves a murder committed in a particularly impenetrable locked room."

So many things happened in those next few hours that it's hard now to remember them all. But we searched each of the four mirrored cabinets with care and found no one hidden there. I also took measurements to make sure

no cabinet had a false back. When we finished I was convinced the killer was not hiding in the room—nor was there any secret passage or trap door out of the room. There was only the single door, bolted from inside, and the single window, latched from inside.

I'd already studied the window latch. Now I went and knelt on the floor by the door, examining the piece of string I'd found knotted around the knob. "Is this string usually here?" I asked Ellen Eden.

She stared at it. "No, it's not ours—unless Josh tied it there for some reason."

But he hadn't. That left the killer or the victim as the likely possibilities. A year or two earlier I'd read S.S. Van Dine's mystery novel, *The Canary Murder Case*, which included a diagram of how a pair of tweezers and a piece of string could be used to turn a door handle from outside a room. It was a clever idea, but it didn't apply to this situation.

I tried to imagine a way in which the string could have been looped around the bolt and pulled to close it, but for one thing the string wasn't long enough. And for another, the door fit so snugly to the jamb that there was not even room for a string to pass through. Even on the bottom, a small strip of wood was nailed to the floor inside the door, apparently to cut down on drafts. I found a longer piece of string and tried shutting the door on it. The fit was so tight the string could not be pulled.

My preoccupation with the locked room had made me forget everything else. Sheriff Lens came to me presently and said, "Doc, it's almost eleven o'clock. The minister's about to leave for Shinn Corners."

"My God! The wedding!"

For all Vera's enchantment with the octagon room, she refused to be married in a room where the blood was not yet dry on the floor. The wedding guests, kept waiting in the cool outside air, were told of the change in plans. We all piled into cars and drove to the nearby church. Though he was miffed by the delay, Dr. Tompkins felt some sort of triumph in getting the ceremony moved to the church. He hurried through the ceremony, paused long enough to shake the groom's hand and peck at the bride's cheek, then vanished toward his noon appointment in a cloud of dust.

"How's it feel to be married again?" I asked the sheriff.

"Wonderful!" he said, hugging his bride with an uncharacteristic display of emotion. "But it looks like we'll have to delay the honeymoon."



“How come?”

“Well, I’m still the sheriff here, Doc, and I got a murder on my hands.”

For the moment I’d forgotten about that. “You go ahead on your honeymoon, Sheriff. Your deputies can handle things.”

“Them two?” he snorted. “They couldn’t find a skunk in a suitcase!”

I took a deep breath. “Don’t you worry, I’ve got it under control.”

“You mean you know who killed that guy? And how it was done in a locked room?”

“Sure. Don’t you worry about it. We’ll have the killer in a cell by nightfall.”

His eyes widened in admiration. “If that’s true we can leave on our honeymoon right after the reception.”

“By all means. Don’t give the murder another thought.”

I turned away, wondering how I’d go about fulfilling that promise.

I started out by taking the maid of honor for a ride in my car. “This isn’t the way to the reception,” Lucy said after a few minutes. “You’re heading back toward town.”

“Right now this is more important than the reception,” I told her. “You said you saw the dead man walking with someone else.”

“Another hobo, that’s all.”

“Would you recognize the other man if you saw him again?”

“I don’t know. I might. He had a bald spot on the back of his head. I remember that much. And a plaid scarf wrapped around his neck.”

“Let’s go looking.”

“But the reception—”

“We’ll get there.”

I drove down by the railroad station and then followed the street that ran parallel to the tracks. Chances were the dead man’s friend was miles away by now, riding some fast freight, especially if he’d been involved in the killing. Still, it was worth the time to try to find him.

A few miles the other side of Northmont we came upon a hobo camp in among the trees. “Wait here,” I told Lucy. “I won’t be long.”

I made my way down the worn path, moving openly through the trees in hopes that the men around the campfire wouldn’t panic and flee. One of

them, warming his hands near the flames, turned as I approached. “What you want?” he asked.

“I’m a doctor.”

“Nobody sick here.”

“I’m looking for a man who passed this way yesterday. Wearing a plaid scarf, with a bald spot on his head.” I added, “No hat,” since that seemed obvious.

“Nobody like that,” the man by the fire said. Then he asked, “What you want with him? He ain’t got a disease, has he?”

“We don’t know what he’s got. That’s why we’re trying to find him.”

One of the other men came over to the fire. He was small and nervous and spoke with a southern accent. “It sounds like Mercy, don’t it?”

“Shut up!” the first man growled. “This might be a railroad dick for all we know.”

“I’m not any sort of dick,” I insisted. “Look here.” From my pocket I produced a pad of blank prescriptions with my name and address printed across the top. “Does this convince you I’m a doctor?”

The first man looked suddenly sly. “If you’re a doctor you could write us a prescription for some whiskey. They sell it in drug stores.”

“For medicinal purposes,” I said, beginning to feel a bit uneasy. A third man had appeared and was moving around behind me.

Then suddenly Lucy began blowing the horn on my car. The three men, realizing I wasn’t alone, backed away. One of them broke into a run toward the tracks. I grabbed the little one, nearest to me, and asked, “Where’s Mercy?”

“Let go!”

“Tell me and you’re free. Where is he?”

“Down the tracks by the water tower. He’s waiting for his friend.”

“You know who the friend is?”

“No. They’re just travelin’ together.”

I let go of his collar. “You’d better clear out of here,” I warned. “The local sheriff’s a mean one.”

I ran back to the car and climbed in. “Thanks for blowing the horn,” I told Lucy.

“I got scared when they started circling you.”

“So did I.” We drove down the road along the tracks. “The man we want may be at the water tower.”

The tower came into view, outlined against the sky, and suddenly we saw a man in a long shabby coat break from cover and run toward the woods. “I think that’s him!” Lucy exclaimed.

I followed after him as far as I could in the car, keeping the bald spot and the flapping plaid scarf in sight. Then I was out of the car and chasing him on foot. I was a good twenty years younger than he was, and I ran him down quickly.

He squirmed in my grip and whined, “I didn’t do anything wrong!”

“Are you the one they call Mercy?”

“Yes, I guess so.”

“I’m not going to hurt you. I just want to ask some questions.”

“What about?”

“You were seen with another man yesterday. He had long stringy hair, turning gray, and was wearing a dirty red vest. Man in his fifties, about your age, with some scars on his face.”

“Yeah, we rode up from Florida together.”

“Who is he? Tell me about him.”

“Name’s Tommy, that’s all I know. We shared a boxcar from Orlando to just outside New York, then we hopped another train up here.”

“Why’d you want to come here?” I asked. “Why travel from Florida to New England in December? Do you like snow?”

“He wanted to come here, an’ I didn’t have anything better to do.”

“Why was he coming here?”

“Said he could get a lot of money up here. Money that belonged to him.”

“And he told you to wait here?”

“Yeah. He left me last night. Said he should be back by noon, but I haven’t seen him.”

“You won’t be seeing him,” I said. “Someone murdered him during the night.”

“God!”

“What else did he say about the money that belonged to him? Where was it?”

“He didn’t tell me.”

“He must have said something. You were with him all the way from Florida.”

The man called Mercy looked away nervously. “All he said was that he was coming home. Coming home to Eden.”

I dropped Lucy Cole at the restaurant where the reception was being held and then drove back to Eden House. It was almost dark when I pulled up in front, the brief December sun already vanished beyond the line of trees to the

west. Josh Eden came to the door, looking tired and troubled.

“How did the wedding go?” he asked.

“Very well, all things considered. They’ll be leaving on their honeymoon soon.”

“I’m glad this terrible event didn’t ruin the day for them.”

“I was wondering if I could see the octagon room again. Sheriff Lens asked me to assist his deputies in the investigation.”

“Certainly.” He led the way into the house. The door stood open and I could see he’d been working on repairing the damaged wood-work where the bolt had been torn loose. The room itself was in semi-darkness, with the drawn shade admitting only a single spot of fading light through a pinhole in its middle.

“I had to draw the shade,” Josh Eden explained. “The neighborhood kids were all coming to look in at the murder scene.”

“Kids will do that,” I agreed. “But the shade was usually left up at night, wasn’t it?”

“Oh, yes—you saw me lock up yesterday. The shade was up.”

“Then either the victim or his killer had to lower it.”

“Seems so. If they had a light on they might not have wanted outsiders to see what they were doing.”

“Which was—?”

“Why, robbing me, of course! It seemed obvious enough. Lucy Cole said she saw the dead man with another tramp yesterday. The two of them got in here to rob me, had an argument, and the other one stabbed him with that dagger letter opener.”

“How’d they get in without forcing a door or window? More important, how’d the killer get out?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted.

“The dead man’s name was Tommy.”

Josh raised his eyes to meet mine. “How’d you find that out?”

“He traveled north from Florida to come here, to Eden House, to regain his fortune.”

“What are you saying, Sam?”

“I think the dead man was your father. The father who never came back from the war.”

It had grown so dark in the octagon room that we could barely see each other. Josh reached for the wall switch and snapped on the overhead light. Instantly our mirror images were reflected in the cabinet doors. “That’s insane!” he said. “Don’t you think I’d know my own father?”

“Yes, I do. You might have known him enough to kill him when he returned after twelve years to take back your house and inheritance. He wasn’t your father any more. He was merely the man who’d deserted you and your mother all those years ago.”

“I didn’t kill him,” Josh insisted. “I didn’t even know him!”

I heard a movement behind me in the hall. “I know you didn’t,” I said with a sigh. “Come in, Ellen, and tell us why you murdered your father-in-law.”

She stood there, pale and trembling, in the doorway of the octagon room. I had seen her reflection in the glass, knew she’d been listening to every word. “I—I didn’t mean to—” she gasped, and Josh ran to her side.

“Ellen, what’s he saying? This can’t be true!”

“Oh, it’s true enough,” I told him. “And she’d have had a much better chance convincing a jury it was an accident if she hadn’t gone to such lengths to cover her traces with this locked-room business. Your father, Tommy, came here last night to take back what was his. You slept through it all, but Ellen heard him at the door and let him in. I suppose she took him into this room so their voices wouldn’t awaken you. And there he was, this tramp insisting he was your father, saying he wasn’t dead at all and he’d come to take back Eden House. She saw her plans for the place—the restaurant and all the rest of it—going up in smoke. She went to the cabinet, seized that silver letter opener shaped like a dagger, and plunged it into his chest in a moment of insane fury.”

Josh was still shaking his head in disbelief. “How could you know that? How could she have killed him and left the room locked from the inside?”

“I didn’t know how it was done until I came back here just now, until we walked in here and I saw that pinhole of light in the center of the shade.”

“There is a hole in the shade! Funny I never noticed it before.”

“I’m sure it wasn’t there until last night. You see, this octagon room is different from many rooms in two respects—the door and the window are exactly opposite each other, and the door opens outward.”

“I don’t see—”

“Ellen tied a string to the doorknob and attached the other end to the window latch. Then she went out the window. When we yanked open the door this morning, the string turned the latch and locked the window. It’s as simple as that.”

Josh’s mouth fell open. “Wait a minute—”

“I examined the latch as soon as we entered the room. It worked very easily and it was only turned halfway—just enough to lock the window. She’d put a loose loop of string around it, and when the latch reached the halfway mark, pointing into the room, the string slid off just as she’d planned. Of course I never thought of anything like that because the shade was drawn. That’s why she made the tiny hole in the shade—for the string to pass through. After she climbed out the window she had to lower the window and the shade together to keep the string in position, but that wasn’t difficult. The slight slack in the string was taken up quickly enough when we opened the door.”

“If this is true what happened to the string?”

“The loop was yanked off the latch and through the hole in the shade. It probably trailed along the floor somewhere. We didn’t notice it in the dim light when we burst into the room. I went immediately to the window to examine it, and you two were right behind me. Ellen simply grabbed the string and snapped it off the doorknob. She’d have liked to get it all, but it broke and she had to leave the piece around the knob.”

“Even if I believe that, why does it have to be Ellen? There were several of us present. Myself, Lucy Cole—”

He wanted so much to believe in her innocence. I hated to shatter his last hope. “It had to be Ellen, Josh—don’t you see that? It was Ellen who went around the back of the house and told us the window was latched. It was

Ellen who persuaded us not to break in through the window but to pull on the door—that was the only way her scheme would work. It had to be Ellen and no one else.”

“But why make it a locked room in the first place? Why go to the trouble and risk?”

“He was too big for her to carry the body off somewhere. Ideally she should have left the window open so he would look like a burglar killed by his partner. But you see Ellen didn’t know about any partner until Lucy mentioned seeing two hobos together. That convinced me Lucy wasn’t involved—because she surely would have left the window open to implicate the other hobo. No, Ellen had to leave the body where it was, so she wanted it locked away from the rest of the house, cut off from you and her. She bolted the door and set the string to latch the window, perhaps imagining the death would be blamed on the old ghostly stories about the room.”

Finally he removed his protective arms from his wife and stepped back to ask, “Is this true, Ellen?”

Old Dr. Sam Hawthorne leaned back in his chair and reached for his glass. “And of course it was true, wasn’t it, Ellen?”

The woman across from him was almost as old as he, but she held herself erect and proud. Her face was lined and her hair was white, but it was still Ellen Eden, not that much different, considering the passage of fifty years. “Of course it was true, Sam. I killed the old man then and I would do it again. I don’t blame you for helping send me to prison. They were long years but I never blamed you for that. What I blame you for is my loss of Josh.”

“I had nothing to do with—”

“I went to prison and after a time he divorced me. That was the blow—to know that I’d never be going back to Eden House. And then I heard he married Lucy Cole.”

“Those things happen. The two of you were very much alike. I’m not surprised he turned to her after you were gone.”

“But you see I killed the old man to save Eden House, to preserve my dream of its future. And that was what you took away from me—Eden House and Josh.”

“I’m sorry.”

“After I was released from prison I moved across the country. But I never forgot you, Sam. Sometimes I thought I wanted to kill you for ruining my life.”

“You ruined your own life, Ellen.”

She sighed and seemed to slump in her chair. The life, the fight, had almost gone out of her. But not quite. “I killed a man who deserted his family for another woman, who came back a bum to steal from his own son. Was that such a bad thing for me to do?”

Sam Hawthorne studied her face for a long time before replying. Then he said, very quietly, “Tommy Eden never left his family for another woman, Ellen. He stayed in France after the war because his face was terribly disfigured by a wound. To me as a doctor those little scars meant plastic surgery, and that explained why Josh didn’t recognize his own father’s body. I never mentioned it at the trial because Josh had enough grief already. But the man you killed didn’t deserve to die. And the sentence you served in prison was a just one.”

She took a deep breath. “Ten years ago I might have killed you too, Sam. Now I’m too tired.”

“We’re all tired, Ellen. Here, let me call you a taxi.”

“Well,” Dr. Sam Hawthorne said, “come right in! I was expecting you earlier. That old woman getting into the taxi? Funny thing, I’d planned to tell you about her this very day. Settle down while I pour us a little refreshment. If you’ve got the time, after I tell about the octagon room, I’ll give you another story that happened soon afterward—a baffling medical mystery at Pilgrim Memorial Hospital, about a man who died with a bullet in his heart but not a wound on his body!”



# A DR. SAM HAWTHORNE CHECKLIST

## BOOKS

*Diagnosis: Impossible, The Problems of Dr. Sam Hawthorne.* Norfolk: Crippen & Landru Publishers, 1996. Contains Dr. Sam's first twelve cases.

*More Things Impossible, Further Problems of Dr. Sam Hawthorne.* Norfolk: Crippen & Landru Publishers, 2006. Contains Dr. Sam's next 15 cases.

## INDIVIDUAL STORIES

All of Dr. Sam Hawthorne's reminiscences were first published in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* [EQMM]. Dates when the events took place are recorded below in brackets.

"The Problem of the Covered Bridge" [March 1922]. EQMM, December 1974.

"The Problem of the Old Gristmill" [July 1923]. EQMM, March 1975.

"The Problem of the Lobster Shack" [June 1924]. EQMM, September 1975.

"The Problem of the Haunted Bandstand" [July 1924]. EQMM, January 1976.

"The Problem of the Locked Caboose" [Spring 1925]. EQMM, May 1976.

"The Problem of the Little Red Schoolhouse" [Fall 1925]. EQMM, September 1976.

"The Problem of the Christmas Steeple" [December 25, 1925]. EQMM, January 1977.

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“The Problem of the Country Inn” [Summer 1926]. EQMM, September 1977.

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“The Problem of the Boston Common” [Spring 1928]. EQMM, August 1979.

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“The Problem of the Crying Room” [June 1932]. EQMM, November 1984.

“The Problem of the Fatal Fireworks” [July 4, 1932]. EQMM, May 1985.

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“The Problem of the Snowbound Cabin” [January 1935]. EQMM, December 1987.

“The Problem of the Thunder Room” [March 1935]. EQMM, April 1988.

“The Problem of the Black Roadster” [April 1935]. EQMM, November 1988.

“The Problem of the Two Birthmarks” [May 1935]. EQMM, May 1989.

“The Problem of the Dying Patient” [June 1935]. EQMM, December 1989.

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“The Problem of the Haunted Tepee” [September 1935]. EQMM, December 1990.

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