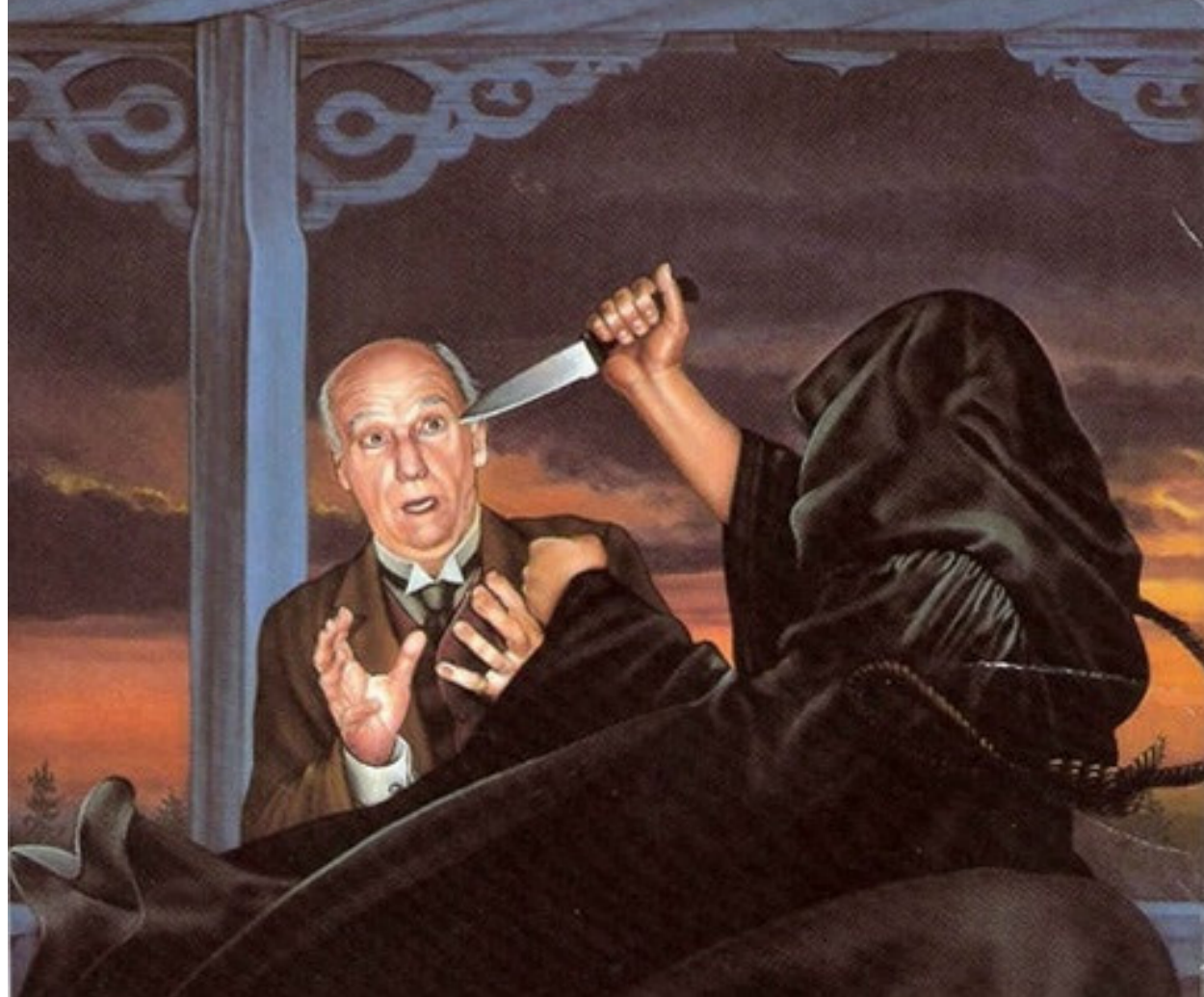


Diagnosis:

IMPOSSIBLE

The Problems of Dr. Sam Hawthorne

EDWARD D. HOCH



Diagnosis: Impossible

The Problems of Dr. Sam Hawthorne

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ISBN: 0-7394-1896-3

Printed in the United States of America

Crippen & Landru, Publishers P. O. Box 9315 Norfolk, Virginia 23505-9315 USA

FOR MARV AND CAROL LACHMAN

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DR. SAM HAWTHORNE: A CHRONOLOGY OF HIS CASES

INTRODUCTION

Sometimes it's not easy to remember the origins of a series character, but in the case of Dr. Sam Hawthorne I remember the circumstances quite well. It was in January of 1974 and I'd just gotten a new wall calendar to hang by my typewriter. The page for each month showed a different watercolor painting of country life in the past, and the January illustration was of a covered bridge in winter.

I stared at that illustration all through January, and pretty soon I got to wondering what would happen if a horse and carriage went in one side of the bridge and never came out the other side. Some pondering over the next day or two produced a solution and a plot to go with it. All I needed was a detective.

Since the story had to be set in the past, I needed a new sort of sleuth, a new series character. I decided on a country doctor named simply Dr. Sam, probably with memories of the recently notorious Dr. Sam Shepherd still in mind. My Dr. Sam was young, just a year out of medical school, and his prized possession was a 1921 Pierce-Arrow Runabout that his folks had given him as a graduation gift. The story went off to *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* as virtually all of mine do to this day. Frederic Dannay, who was half of "Ellery Queen" and who edited the magazine, liked it immediately but suggested a couple of changes.

First, my Dr. Sam would need a last name to avoid confusion with Lillian de la Torre's Dr. Sam Johnson series, something which had never occurred to me. Fred suggested two or three names and I immediately chose Hawthorne. What better name for a New England sleuth? His second suggestion was a bit more unsettling to me. He wanted old Dr. Sam, in narrating the story, to speak more in a country dialect, dropping his final letters and such. Although I'd had some of the other characters doing this, especially Sheriff Lens, I'd avoided it with Dr. Sam. Finally I agreed, and most of these changes were made by Fred Dannay himself. Gradually over the next several stories the use of this country dialect decreased, and finally Fred told me he thought the stories worked just as well without it.

From the beginning I'd planned the Dr. Sam series as one frequently involving locked rooms and other impossible crimes. Fred Dannay thought the same way, and when I submitted the second story in the series he suggested that all of them involve some sort of impossible crime. I was only too happy to oblige. There are all sorts of crime stories, but in the sub-species of the detective story there is nothing more intriguing, or more challenging, than a good locked room or impossible crime.

The stories collected here are the first twelve of Sam Hawthorne's fifty-two cases to date. They were originally published in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* between December 1974 and July 1978. I set the first story in March of 1922 and they continued chronologically, except for one instance which may have been caused by a typographical error. The setting is the vaguely located town of Northmont which is most likely in eastern Connecticut though it's been known to wander a bit. We do learn in a later story that the neighboring town is Shinn Corners, setting for Ellery Queen's novel *The Glass Village*.

In those days each story opened with old Dr. Sam welcoming a drinking companion for another narrative of his early years in Northmont, and most ended with a hint of the next case. Again, this was Fred Dannay's idea and it worked well for a long time. Finally, in an attempt to speed up the stories a bit,

I greatly shortened the opening and eliminated the closing preview entirely. These days I only write about two Dr. Sam stories each year and there seems • little point in coming up with the next idea six months before I'd be writing it.

Although just about all of my numerous series sleuths have tackled impossible crimes at one time or another, I think the best of my work in this sub-sub-genre is in the Dr. Sam series. Looking over these first twelve, I note that "The Problem of the Covered Bridge" has been the most reprinted story in the series. And locked room expert Robert Adey has cited "The Problem of the Voting Booth" as "one of the most satisfying of the Hawthorne stories." They seem to be good stories to include in this first collection of Dr. Sam's cases.

I hope you enjoy reading these stories of a past era as much as I enjoyed writing them.

Edward D. Hoch

Rochester, New York November, 1995

THE PROBLEM OF THE VOTING BOOTH

"Well, it's another Election Day," Dr. Sam Hawthorne said, pouring the drinks. "Elections always remind me of the voting booth murder back in Northmont. It was November of 1926, and Sheriff Lens was runnin' for re-election. I suppose it was about the most impossible-seemin' murder I ever came up against. A little— ah—libation before I start? . . ."

I remember it rained on Election Day that year and Sheriff Lens was worried the weather might keep a lot of his supporters at home. He'd waged a hard-fought campaign against a challenger named Henry G. Oatis — a newcomer to Northmont who'd had some law-enforcement experience down south but then moved north after the death of his wife. Of course we still used paper ballots in those days. Only a few of the big cities had voting machines back in '26, though they'd been authorized for use in elections since 1892. You know, it was Thomas Edison who invented the voting machine back in 1869—the first invention he ever patented—though it was lots different from the machines they use today.

Anyway, Northmont still used paper ballots. You gave 'em your name, signed the voting book, and they handed you a ballot. You went into the curtained booth to make your marks, then deposited the ballot in a slotted box just outside the booth. It was a simple system and it worked just fine, 'cept when the polls closed it sometimes took half the night to count all the ballots accurately and come up with a winner.

This day, as I said, it was raining. Not a gentle spring-like rain, but the sort of drivin' New England rain that comes so often in the fall, bringin' down what's left of the leaves and being generally unpleasant. Because of the rain I'd driven April, my nurse, to the polling place in the back of Whitney's Barber Shop. Truth to tell, even if it hadn't been rainin' she'd have wanted me to come along.

"Imagine it, Dr. Sam! They give women the vote and then make us go to a barber shop to cast our ballot!"

I smiled and tried to calm her down. "Well, April, it's not that bad. The north end of town's votin' in the schoolhouse, and we'd be votin' in the Town Hall if it wasn't for all the repairs going on. Will Whitney's a selectman and it was mighty nice o' him to let the town use his barber shop for a polling place."

"It's not just here, Dr. Sam. I read in the papers that women in New York and Chicago often have to vote in places like barber shops."

"At least they don't have to vote in saloons. Prohibition took care of that." We pulled up in front of Will Whitney's shop and April put up her umbrella against the driving rain. I drove around back and parked in a lot already pockmarked with puddles. Then I ran for the back door, hoping I wouldn't get too wet.

"Need an umbrella this mornin'," a voice greeted me as I came through the door. It was Sheriff Lens himself, looking fat and happy and trying not to show his nervousness.

"What you doing here, Sheriff?" I asked. "A little illegal electioneerin'?"

"Naw, this fella from the newspaper wants a picture of me and Oatis shakin' hands outside the votin' booth. Silly idea, but I gotta go along with it."

The fella from the newspaper was a young photographer named Manny Sears, recently come to town, whom I'd encountered of late taking pictures of everything from prize steers to Mrs. Kelly's triplets. I shook his hand and watched while he went about the business of loadin' flash powder into its holder. It reminded me of the bandstand killin', where flash powder had played so important a part.

"Don't you ever get tired of snapping pictures, Manny?"

He grinned boyishly at me.

"Sure don't, Dr. Sam. Photographs in newspapers are the coming thing. Even *The New York Times* is using them on their front page sometimes, in place of drawings."

"So you're going to have the winner and the loser shakin' hands."

"That's right. Friendly enemies, you might say."

April had taken off her raincoat and was shaking the moisture from her umbrella. Both the party workers behind the desk were friends of hers, and she was settling down for a chat. One of them, Mrs.

Morgano, was an occasional patient of mine. I knew she was a Republican like Sheriff Lens. The other woman, Ida Fry from the dry-goods store, must have been the Democrat.

We seemed to be the only ones who'd arrived to vote, though Will Whitney was busy cutting the hair of a customer in the front of the shop. The customer was a man I didn't know, and I wondered what brought a stranger to Northmont on a rainy Election Day.

"Well, I'm gonna vote," April said, accepting a lengthy ballot from the ladies behind the desk. Besides the candidates for sheriff and selectmen, there were a number of local ordinances to be voted on. And at the top of the ballot, ahead of everything, were the statewide offices. It wasn't a presidential year, but we were electing a governor and a senator, as well as our local congressman.

Reading and marking the paper ballot was time-consuming, and April was in there a full two minutes before emerging to drop her folded paper into the slotted box on her left.

"Did you vote the right way?" I asked with a smile.

"I voted against everyone who was in now — 'cept Sheriff Lens, of course."

The sheriff beamed and started to thank her, but was interrupted by the arrival of his opponent. Henry G. Oatis stormed in like the wind-driven rain behind him, stamping soggy shoes on the barber-shop floor. He removed his glasses to wipe them, squinting nearsightedly at the gathering.

"I'm here to take your picture, Mr. Oatis," the young photographer announced, holding his camera and flash high. "I want the two of you together here by the booth."

For the moment Henry Oatis ignored him, turning instead to Will Whitney by his barber chair. "Don't let that razor slip, Will. I can't afford to lose a single vote today." But when he replaced his glasses and saw the man in the chair more clearly, he seemed startled.

"You're not from Northmont!"

"Just passin' through," the man mumbled, with what sounded to me like a southern accent.

Oatis turned away quickly and I wondered vaguely if he knew the man. Will Whitney flayed the air with his razor and bent once more to his task. And Ida Fry broke off a gossip conversation with April to wave a ballot in the candidate's direction.

"Henry, you come over here this instant and do your votin'! There's plenty of time for picture-takin' afterwards."

He gave a little bow in response. "Always willin' to bend to the will o' the party, Ida. How are you, Sheriff? Enjoyin' your last week in office?"

Sheriff Lens sputtered a bit. It had been a rough campaign, with Oatis charging Lens was "a do-nothin' country hick," and the Sheriff responding by branding Oatis as a carpetbagger in reverse. I could see their tempers hadn't mellowed any at the voting booth. The whole scene embarrassed me because I considered myself a good friend of the sheriff's and hated to see the degradation the campaign had brought upon him. Maybe it happened to all politicians when they had to go out and scrounge for votes, but it hit home with Sheriff Lens. He was a man afraid of losin' his job. It was as simple as that.

Oatis had slipped off his raincoat for the picture, but he still held the ballot that Ida Fry had handed him.

The photographer was fussing at the booth, gettin' everything ready, but Oatis merely brushed by him.

"Like I said, votin' first, pictures later."

He drew the heavy black curtain closed behind him and I could imagine him bending over the ballot, pencil in hand.

"You want some coffee, Dr. Sam?" Mrs. Morgano asked, already pouring a cup.

"Don't mind if I do. It'll take the chill out of my bones."

Manny Sears had posted himself about ten feet in front of the voting booth, waiting with his camera and flash for Oatis to come out. Up front, Will Whitney left his barber chair and walked back to watch, leavin' his customer unattended for a moment. Sheriff Lens tried to ignore the whole thing by chatting with April and the other ladies. Outside, a shift in the wind had brought the rain beatin' against the barber-shop windows.

I could see Henry Oatis' legs beneath the black curtain as he marked his ballot, and after a few minutes it seemed he was taking unusually long with it. "How you comin' in there, Henry?" Ida Fry called out at last, when nearly five minutes had elapsed. "Need any help?"

"I'm just about finished," he called back. "Damned long ballot!"

There was another moment's wait and then he pushed the curtain aside to come out. He was holding the folded ballot in his left hand and the pencil in his right, and there was a look of immense surprise on his face.

He took two uncertain steps forward and I saw the blood on his shirt front. "Oatis, what is it?" I asked, springing forward to catch him as he started to fall. Behind me, young Manny Sears ignited his flash powder and got the picture.

I lowered Oatis gently to the floor and started rippin' open his shirt. "Murderer . . ." he managed to gasp. "Stabbed ..."

Then he relaxed and his head fell to one side. I knew he was dead. "Everyone keep back," I said. "This man's been murdered."

Despite his dying words, my first thought was that he'd been shot, maybe by one of those guns equipped with a Maxim silencer. But as soon as I uncovered the wound I saw that he'd been stabbed without doubt.

The hole in his shirt front, and in the flesh beneath it, was nearly an inch long and quite narrow. It was a typical knife wound, in the region just below the heart. If the thrust was upward, the blade could easily have reached the heart.

"He was alone in the booth!" Sheriff Lens exclaimed. "No one coulda killed him in there!"

"I know." The others were crowding around and I motioned them back. "We have to find the knife," I said, "and I'd better do the lookin'. Sheriff, you stay at the front o' the shop with the others."

"Why can't I—?"

"Because somebody might think you killed him," I explained.

That shut him up, and I pulled the curtain wide to examine the voting booth. There was nothing inside except a wooden shelf with a couple of pencils on it — identical with the pencil Oatis still clutched in his right hand. I looked under the shelf and on the floor. I felt the black curtain to make sure a knife wasn't concealed in it, and then went around the back of the booth to look for a hole through which a knife blade could have thrust.

There was nothing.

The booth was solid wood on three sides, with the curtain on the fourth side, facing everybody. Inside there was nothing but the shelf for marking the ballot.

"All right," I said finally, stepping around the body on the floor. April had covered it with an extra piece of black curtain, but even that did not prevent Mrs. Morgano from drifting off into sobbin' hysterics.

"You'd better take her out to my car," I told April, "till she recovers. The rain's let up now."

April helped the woman to her feet and Sheriff Lens lent a hand.

"April," I said, calling her aside. "Sort of go over her dress and make sure she doesn't have the knife on her."

"You think—?"

"No, no! But we have to cover everything." After they'd gone I said to the others, "We've got to search every inch of this place for the knife that killed him. We're not goin' to know who or how till we find that knife."

"This is a barber shop," Will Whitney reminded us. "It's full o' razors an' scissors and the like. I couldn't work without 'em."

I agreed. "But I don't think any of 'em would have a blade wide enough to make this wound. Let's take a look."

We searched the place for twenty minutes, pulling open every drawer, measurin' the width of every pointed instrument we could find. We searched each other and we searched the corpse. We even looked in the hamper where Whitney threw his used towels after giving customers a shave, but there was no weapon hidden among the linens.

In the meantime voters were arriving again now that the rain had stopped. We had to keep them waiting outside, at least until the body could be removed, but the news of the candidate's death was soon spreading across town. There was a call from the mayor, and another from the county's election commissioner, and for a time the ringing of the telephone was like a discordant hymn in the background.

"He musta committed suicide," Sheriff Lens announced at one point. "There was nobody near him."

"If he did he had to stab himself with this pencil," I said. "It's the sharpest thing he had on him. Besides, it's hardly likely he'd kill himself on the day he might be elected sheriff. He didn't enter that booth like a man in a state of depression."

"Okay," the sheriff agreed, "but, then how'd anyone get near enough to stab him? We were all out here — Will Whitney with his customer, Mrs. Morgano and Ida behind their table, you and me and April in front of the booth, and that photographer waitin' to take his picture. None of us was anywhere near the booth."

"Knives can be thrown," I pointed out, "though it beats me how a thrown knife could have remained invisible to us all."

"Mebbe he was stabbed before he ever entered the votin' booth," Will Whitney volunteered, wiping the dried soap from one of his razors. "Knew a fella over in Shinn Corners once got knifed in a brawl an' didn't even realize it at first."

But I couldn't go along with that.

"Oatis stood in that booth almost five minutes markin' his ballot. He couldn't have lived that long with a wound to the heart — and besides, there'd have been a lot more blood than there was. No, he was stabbed either just before or just after leavin' that booth. He didn't live more than a minute."

"We was all lookin' right at the booth, though!" Sheriff Lens argued. "Sears here was even goin' to take a picture."

I suddenly remembered something.

"You *did* take a picture, didn't you? Just at the instant he started to fall!"

The young photographer nodded.

"Sure, I got one. That was before I realized he'd been stabbed."

"How long would it take you to develop it?" I asked.

"Oh, I could have a print in an hour or so."

"Then why don't you do just that? The picture could contain a valuable clue."

"You really think so?" He seemed excited for the first time since the killing. "I'd better get back to the paper with it."

April signaled me from the other side of the shop, where she was picking through the wet umbrellas lined against the wall.

"I was just thinkin' the knife coulda been dropped in a folded umbrella, Dr. Sam."

"I already thought the same thing, but there's no knife there."

"You looked?"

"Sure. Now what was the signal for?"

"You're lettin' Manny Sears walk outa here without checkin' his camera."

"Camera? You mean—?"

"Couldn't he have a spring device to fire a knife through the lens openin'? Somethin' like that?"

"Then what happened to the knife?"

"It coulda been made of ice and melted."

"Not in two seconds, it couldn't. And no ice would be sharp enough to go through his shirt and skin like that. My God, April, what have you been readin'?"

"Nothing more violent than *Show Boat*," she insisted.

"Sounds more like Fu Manchu to me."

"No, really, Dr. Sam — haven't you noticed Manny's odd behavior?"

"He's done nothing that I could see."

"Exactly!" she exclaimed. "And *that* is his odd behavior!"

"Now I know what you've been reading — Sherlock Holmes!"

"Seriously, wouldn't he have raced back to his paper with that picture right away? Why's he hangin' around here?"

I had to admit she had a point. I went over and checked out his camera, but it was real enough — no openings for darts or knives. And when I asked him why he'd hung around this long he had an answer for that.

"I thought Sheriff Lens might want some photographs of the scene of the crime, before they took the body away."

The sheriff heard him and nodded agreement.

"Yeah, sure, take me a couple of pictures, son. They might come in handy."

I'd talked to everybody in the place except Will Whitney's strangely silent customer, and I wandered over to the barber chair where he was still sitting.

"What'd you say your name was, mister?"

"Didn't say." He was maybe 35 or 40, with the look of an outdoorsman about him. "But it's Crocker. Hy Crocker."

"You live around here?"

"Nope."

"Just passin' through?"

"Might say that."

"You didn't know the dead man, did you? Henry Oatis?"

"How'd I know him? I only just got to town this mornin'."

"Most people like to be home to vote on Election Day."

"Never paid much mind to politics down my way."

"And where would that be, Mr. Crocker?"

"South o' here."

"You in business?"

He nodded.

"Dogs. I raise and train dogs."

"For hunting?"

"Yeah. And watchdogs. Keeps trespassers off your land."

He took out a thin foreign-lookin' cigar and lit it, making no effort to leave the barber chair though Whitney had finished with him long ago.

"Bloodhounds too. Maybe Sheriff Lens could use a bloodhound."

"I'll ask him, Mr. Crocker."

But I had more important things to ask the sheriff just then. They were finally removing the body, carefully edgin' the stretcher through the narrow front door, and the people waiting outside were crowdin' close.

"Better clear them out of there, Sheriff," I warned. "This isn't a sideshow."

But when Lens yelled at one of the farmers from the hill, the man yelled right back.

"That's one way to win an election — right, Sheriff?"

Lens was not a man to let an implication like that go unchallenged.

"I'll find the man that killed Oatis, never you fear!"

"What if you lost the election, Sheriff?" another heckler joined in.

"If I lost the election I'll resign and let them call a new election to fill the spot. I don't want the job if the people don't want me."

That seemed to quiet 'em for the moment, and the ambulance pulled away with the body of Henry G. Oatis inside. With its departure the place returned to a semblance of normality. The voters, impatient from their long wait, crowded into the shop, keeping Ida Fry and Mrs. Morgano busy with the registration-books.

April came up to me holding a pencil. "You want this, Dr. Sam? I pried it outa the dead man's hand before they took him away. No sense his bein' buried holdin' a pencil."

"No sense indeed." I turned it over between my fingers, but it was just an ordinary wooden pencil identical to the one I'd used to mark my own ballot. It could not have been used to stab a man to death.

"Who do you think killed him?" April asked. "An' how?"

"An invisible man with an invisible knife."

"Sheriff Lens?"

"No. Lens wouldn't commit murder. He may not be the smartest sheriff in the state, but he stands for law and order above all else. Besides, I think he honestly expects to be reelected today."

"Who else is there?"

"The mysterious dog trainer, Mr. Hy Crocker."

"Why him?"

I shrugged.

"He's a stranger in town. There had to be a motive for Oatis' murder and the most likely time for that motive is in the past. Oatis hasn't been here long enough to make enemies in Northmont — not the sort of enemies who'd kill him in such a devious way, anyhow."

April took up the suggestion of Crocker's involvement enthusiastically.

"Should I follow him an' see where he goes?"

"Don't we have any patients today?"

"Only old Mrs. Foster an' when she saw the rain this morning she called in to postpone it for a week. Said her wagon would get stuck in the mud."

"All right," I agreed. "Keep an eye on Crocker and see where he goes. I'm going to stroll over to the newspaper and see if Manny Sears has those pictures developed yet."

Though the rain had stopped, the skies that Tuesday afternoon were a long way from clearing. Great gray clouds hung on the horizon, thrustin' their thunderheads at us from the west. It would rain again, I knew, and soon.

The office of the *Northmont Bee* was busier than I'd ever seen it. Men were on the phones, spreading details of the murder to the big-city dailies in Boston and New York. The publisher, Ed Andrews, was looking over the headline for the evening edition. Generally the *Bee* appeared only three times a week, on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, but the murder of a candidate for sheriff in a town voting booth rated a special edition.

"Howdy, Doc," Andrews said. "You were on the scene agin, weren't you? Gonna come up with a solution this time?"

"We'll see."

"Manny says he got a flash picture."

"I hope he did. Is it ready yet?"

"They're developing it now."

I remembered Hy Crocker and my theory of something from the past.

"Tell me about Oatis, Ed. What's his background?"

The publisher shrugged.

"Come up here from North Carolina 'bout a year ago. He was police chief down there, in a town a little bigger than this. His wife died and he wanted a fresh start, wanted to get away from his old memories."

I grunted. Oatis hadn't seemed too old. "How'd she die?"

"Who?"

"Mrs. Oatis. Professional curiosity. If she was his age she wasn't very old."

"You're right," he agreed, consulting a printed obit. "She was thirty-eight. Killed in a house burglary two years ago. They caught the guy — a tramp passin' through — and hanged him. He broke into the house lookin' for food and stabbed her."

"Did the tramp confess?"

"How the hell do I know if he confessed? I'm just readin' you what's here, Doc."

I saw Manny Sears coming across the room with a couple of wet prints, holding them gingerly by the edges.

"Here are the pictures."

I glanced casually at the one he'd taken at Sheriff Lens's request, showing the sprawled body of Oatis, then turned my attention to the picture taken as Oatis left the voting booth. The black splotch of blood on his chest was just beginning to form, and his face was frozen into that surprised look I remembered so well. The knees seemed to be saggin' just a bit, and the fingers of his left hand were thrown wide as if he was grabbin' for support.

It was the moment before death, the moment just after the knife had penetrated — and yet there was no knife visible anywhere in the picture.

Our eyes had not deceived us. Henry G. Oatis had been stabbed to death while alone in the voting booth, with no less than eight people watching from outside, and with a knife that seemed to have vanished into thin air.

I went back to Will Whitney's barber shop and waited till there was a lull in the voting. Then I asked Ida Fry and Mrs. Morgano if I could examine the voting booth again.

"Don't know what you expect to find in there," Ida Fry said, pulling the curtain open for me. "We even mopped up the blood so's it wouldn't upset anybody."

I bent to examine the wooden shelf on which the ballots were marked. It was about the height of my stomach, and I could imagine a knife blade springing out of it to stab Henry Oatis and then being pulled back into its secret slot by some mechanical device.

It was a good idea but a wrong one. The shelf was solid wood.

I was leavin' the barber shop by the back door when I heard the growling of dogs and a woman's scream. I couldn't be sure, but it sounded like April. I ran across the rutted parking area, jumping puddles of muddy water, and came out of the back street.

April was on the ground about halfway up the block, tryin' to fight off two ugly German shepherds.

I yanked off my raincoat and wrapped it around my left arm as I ran, then waded into the thick of it, using my padded arm to ward off the lunges of the dogs. April had all but given up the fight, crawling away to protect herself from the snapping jaws. I dragged her free, fighting back the dogs, until suddenly a sharp whistle called them off.

April lifted her tear-streaked face from the ground and I saw the marks of the dogs' savage attack. "I have to get you to a hospital."

"It was Crocker's truck, Dr. Sam! I was tryin' to see what was inside and the dogs got loose."

"I'll take care of Crocker later," I told her. I could see him standin' across the street, putting a leash on the dogs.

I helped her to her feet and washed off the teeth marks, treatin' them with an antiseptic till I could get her to the hospital. My first thought was for April, but then I wanted to get back and take a look at Hy Crocker's truck.

By the time I returned from the hospital the rain had started again — a fine annoying drizzle that seemed to soak through to the bones. April was restin' comfortably at the hospital, where they'd decided to keep her overnight in case she had any bad reaction to the treatment. I was sure the dogs weren't rabid, and I hated to subject her to the long and arduous series of inoculations with Pasteur serum unless it was necessary. But I did want to have another look at those dogs, preferably when they were standin' still.

Crocker had made no effort to leave town after his dogs attacked April, and I found him over at *Dixie's* lunch counter drinkin' a cup of coffee. The coffee at *Dixie's* was often spiked with some good Canadian whiskey, but I couldn't tell about his cup.

"Hello there, Dr. Hawthorne," he greeted me. "Sorry about your nurse. How is she?"

"Alive, no thanks to those hounds of yours."

"They're trained to guard my property. I called them off as soon as I saw what was happening."

"I'd better take a look at them. They could be rabid."

"My dogs?" He laughed at me. "Healthiest animals around. But come on, look all you want."

He finished his coffee and went outside, leading me around the corner to the lot where the truck was parked. The dogs were back inside now, growlin' and snappin' as I approached.

"What's in the truck that's so valuable?" I asked.

"Nuthin'." But he made no effort to unlock the door.

I was losing my patience with him.

"Look here, Crocker, I could have Sheriff Lens arrest you on an assault charge right now! My nurse is in the hospital thanks to those dogs of yours. She could have been killed."

"No, no, these dogs aren't trained to kill."

"But maybe their master is. Maybe you followed Henry Oatis up here from the south and killed him."

"He wasn't killed by no dogs. He was killed by a knife." He smiled slyly at me. "And don't forget I was sittin' in that there barber chair all the time."

"I'm rememberin'."

I was rememberin' something else too — about Henry Oatis' murdered wife. She'd been stabbed like him, and I wondered if today's crime was tied in somehow with that one two years back.

"Open up the truck," I told Crocker. "I still need to examine your dogs."

"They got no rabies."

"I'll be the judge of that. Open up or I'll have the sheriff arrest you and shoot both your dogs."

He opened the door reluctantly, bringing out the two big German shepherds. They gave a couple of low growls in my direction, but I could see he knew how to control them. I could also see, with a sudden flash of illumination, the reason for Hy Crocker's mysterious behavior. The front end of the truck was piled high with cases of bootleg whiskey, thinly disguised in boxes marked *Maple Syrup*.

"Wrong time of the year to be runnin' maple syrup," I told him with a knowing smile.

"What you goin' to do about it?"

"Nothing."

The dogs seemed healthy enough, and I was no defender of the 18th Amendment. As long as the attack on April hadn't been intentional I saw no reason to involve myself in his affairs. Besides, the sight of that whiskey had just about flip-flopped me on the subject of Crocker's involvement in the murder. A man arriving in a strange town to do a killin' doesn't run the risk of fillin' his truck with bootleg hooch.

I'd have to look elsewhere for Oatis' killer.

The rain fell in a maddening drizzle throughout the early evening hours, discouraging many voters who'd delayed their trip to Will Whitney's barber shop. There was no way of knowin' how many stayed away because of the killing, but when the polls closed at nine o'clock and Ida Fry unlocked the ballot box in the presence of Mrs. Morgano and the county elections inspector, there were only 197 ballots.

"That's less than last year," Mrs. Morgano remarked, checking the number against the voter list she'd been keeping.

"Bad weather," Sheriff Lens suggested.

"And murder," Ida Fry added. Her face had gone suddenly white, as if the memory of the day's events had finally drained the life from her.

"Count 'em," the sheriff urged. "I want to see if I got beaten by a dead man."

"We'll need the votes from the schoolhouse too," Mrs. Morgano reminded them. "They usually get a bigger turnout from the north end o' town."

Though the barber shop itself had been closed since six o'clock, Will Whitney had come back after dinner to lock up the building after the women completed their ballot counting. He stood now near the front of the shop, leaning on the barber chair where Hy Crocker had been seated during the killin'.

Certainly Will couldn't have done it. Not from that far away.

I tried to focus my mind on the problem. Forget the invisible knife, forget everything else except who was closest to Oatis at the moment of death. And hadn't Will Whitney taken a few steps toward the booth?

Manny Sears, raising his camera and flash. Ida Fry and Mrs. Morgano, behind their table. Sheriff Lens with April and me. Will Whitney givin' a shave to Hy Crocker.

"Here's the results," Ida Fry announced. "It's 133 for Sheriff Lens, 61 for Henry Oatis, and 2 invalid."

I remembered the photograph Sears had taken of Oatis as he emerged from the booth and started to fall.

"That's only 196, Ida," Mrs. Morgano said,

I remembered the thing that was missing from the photograph, the thing I should have noticed at once.

"Sure, 196." And I knew in that instant how Henry G. Oatis had been killed.

"But there were 197 voters. We've got them all numbered."

"I don't care," Sheriff Lens said. "I'm just happy I won. I'd 'a been spooked if Oatis come out ahead of me!"

The election commissioner reached for the telephone to check with the other polling place while Ida Fry and Mrs. Morgano disputed the missing ballot.

"I think I can help you find it, ladies," I said.

"You can?" Mrs. Morgano said, seeming surprised.

I turned to Ida Fry. "Ida—"

"It's official!" the election commissioner shouted. "Final totals are 345 for Sheriff Lens and 228 for Oatis!"

"Ida," I said, repeating her name. "You've got to give us the knife. You can't protect him any longer. There's no reason to protect him any longer."

"I—" Her face had gone dead-white again as I spoke, and I could see she was near to breaking.

Sheriff Lens was by my side, and every eye in the place was on me. "You mean Ida killed him?"

"Of course not. I mean that Henry Oatis committed suicide, and hid the knife in the one place we never looked."

"We looked everywhere!" Sheriff Lens insisted. "In fact, we looked everywhere twice!"

"We looked everywhere except one place — a place where we were forbidden by law to look."

"Where in hell was that?"

"The ballot box."

Sometime in the midst of it all Manny Sears returned to take pictures. Everybody was talkin' at once, trying to sort out what must have happened, and Ida Fry brought a moment of silence when she reached under the table to produce a short, wide-bladed hunting knife with a flat hilt covered by tape.

"Ida!" Mrs. Morgano screeched. "Where'd you get that?"

I answered the question for her.

"Out of the ballot box. I saw Ida's face go white as she was takin' out the ballots, but it didn't occur to me that she'd felt the knife inside one of 'em and realized what had happened."

"Just what *did* happen?" Sheriff Lens asked.

"Henry G. Oatis went into that booth and stabbed himself, and maybe we'll never be sure of the real reason for it. Maybe he thought he was goin' to lose the election and couldn't face it. Anyway, he stabbed himself and slipped the knife inside his folded ballot. You'll notice the thick handle had been removed from the knife and the hilt covered with tape. And the long ballot was big enough, even when folded, to hide the length of this fairly short knife."

"And we never saw it?"

"We never *noticed* it," I corrected. "Everyone came out of that booth and dropped their folded ballot in the box. We saw Oatis with the ballot in his hand, but then our attention was distracted by the blood on his chest. We never saw what happened to the ballot, but since Manny Sears's photograph clearly shows the open fingers of his left hand an instant later, he could only have dropped it into the ballot box, along with the knife."

Actually we should have known there was something suspicious about Oatis right away. He came out of that votin' booth with the pencil in one hand and the folded ballot in the other. Now he had to put down the pencil to fold the ballot, so why'd he pick it up again? It could only have been to make it seem both his hands were occupied — to get us away from the idea he could have stabbed himself."

Manny Sears flashed his powder again, taking a picture of the knife.

"He musta known we'd find the knife when the votes were counted," Sheriff Lens said.

"I think he counted on Ida here behaving just the way she did. For the good of the party she hid the knife and said nothing. With Ida and Mrs. Morgano both removin' the ballots, he had a fifty-fifty chance she'd find the knife first."

But he forgot one thing — his ballot had bloodstains from the knife on it, and Ida had to hide it along with the knife itself. This made the count come out wrong — one too few."

"So there was no murderer," the sheriff said. "Just a bizarre suicide. But what about that Hy Crocker?"

"A bootlegger passin' through town. He had no connection with it."

They settled down after that, Ida Fry to a soft sobbing sound, the others trying to comfort her, Sheriff Lens to the quiet celebration of his victory. I left them and walked down the street with Manny Sears.

"You got some good pictures today," I said.

"You bet!"

"I have to ask you somethin', Manny."

He glanced up at the sky. The rain had stopped and I suppose he was searchin' for stars.

"What's that, Doc?"

"Did you know he'd kill himself when you left the knife there for him to find?"

"Huh?"

"A man doesn't commit suicide for no reason while in the act of voting for himself for public office. He commits suicide if he suddenly realizes his secret's been found out. That knife with its taped handle was a very special one, wasn't it? Without even checkin' the newspaper files I'll bet it's the knife that killed Oatis' wife two years ago in North Carolina — or one made to look just like it."

Manny Sears was silent for a time. Finally he said, "Oatis did it, Doc. He killed his wife and blamed it on a passing tramp who'd broken into the house looking for food. They hanged the tramp. He was my brother."

It was my turn to be silent. When I spoke, I said, "So you came up north after Oatis and confronted him with it on Election Day — the day he hoped to start a new career and a new life."

"How'd you know, Doc?"

"Oatis took a long time in that booth, decidin' what to do after he found the knife. It was unusual-lookin' with its taped handle and I figured it had a special meaning to him. If I was right and the knife was left on the shelf in that voting booth for him to find, only you could have left it there. I remembered you fussin' with the booth just before Oatis went in. And it explained why you were so anxious for a picture of Oatis as he emerged from the booth. The picture of guilt."

"I didn't think he'd kill himself, Doc. I was hopin' he'd go to pieces and confess."

"He almost did. The surprise of dying brought the words *murderer* and *stabbed* to his lips. He was talkin' about killing his wife." I shook my head wonderingly. "But his pride still made him hide the knife. He couldn't face the accusations, but even in death he tried to disguise his final despairing act."

"What will you do, Doc?"

The stars were coming out now. I could see them overhead. "Me? Nothing. Go to the hospital and see April. There's no need to tell the whole story to anyone."

"And so it never got told till now," Dr. Sam Hawthorne said. "It was one of our little secrets, up in Northmont. I see your glass is empty and it's gettin' late. Another little — ah — libation? No? But come by again next week and I'll tell you about another crime — an honest-to-goodness murder this time. It didn't happen till the summer after the voting booth affair, and I was just beginning to think crime had passed Northmont by at last. But then there was the county fair, and a time capsule with a body inside it....

DR. SAM HAWTHORNE: A CHRONOLOGY OF HIS CASES

[Updated, April 2000]

by Marvin Lachman

The publication of "The Problem of the Country Mailbox" in the Mid-December 1994 issue of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* marked the fiftieth Dr. Sam Hawthorne story published there by Edward D. Hoch. (His first, "The Problem of the Covered Bridge," had been published exactly twenty years before, in EQMM for December 1974.) At a time when historical mysteries are popular, most writers in that sub-genre have gone back into the distant past, with series set in Egypt and Rome and the London of Shakespeare, to cite just three examples. Hoch's stories are not often recognized as historical mysteries. They are better known as impossible crime stories by the modern master of the classic puzzle. Yet, they fit the basic definition of historical crime stories: mysteries written in the present and deliberately set in the past.

The first Hawthorne story takes place in 1922. In the twenty-six years of his EQMM literary life, eighteen and one-half years pass in the history of Northmont, the small New England town where Hawthorne is a physician in general practice. With three exceptions, the stories are in chronological order, i.e., the past years advance exactly as the series progresses in EQMM. "The Problem of the Sealed Bottle" (EQMM, September 1986) is about events of December 1933; "The Problem of the Invisible Acrobat" (EQMM, Mid-December 1986) is set in July 1933. "The Problem of the Miraculous Jar" (EQMM August 1996) is set in November 1939. It is followed by "The Problem of the Enchanted Terrace" (EQMM April 1997) which is set in the prior month, October 1939. "The Problem of the Unfound Door" (EQMM June 1998) is set in Midsummer 1940, while the next story, "The Second Problem of the Covered Bridge" (EQMM December 1998), is set earlier in the year, in January 1940.

The alert reader, probing between Hoch's lines, will find, in addition to excellent mysteries, many examples of a living history of the United States during the 1920s and 1930s. This made me decide it might be useful to list the chronology of each story in the Hawthorne series.

When the series begins, the United States is in the midst of one of its great social experiments: Prohibition. Bootlegging is background for several of the stories. (Ironically, one of the features of the early tales was a present-day Hawthorne offering "a small libation" to the anonymous listener to whom he will narrate one of the "problems" he solved in the past.) A later story, "The Problem of the Protected Farmhouse" (EQMM, May 1990), about an athlete trying out for the 1936 U.S. Olympic team, has references to Nazism.

Still, what this series does best is to present a picture of small-town life in the United States during that period. We learn of the lives of the people who live in or near Northmont, as well as of outsiders who visit, usually for economic reasons. (They include gypsies, barnstorming pilots and salesmen.) Against the background of the New England countryside and history, we attempt to reach the solutions (before Dr. Sam) to crimes committed in various rural locations, including a covered bridge, a school, in church, in a barn, in hotels, in meeting houses, at the movies, and even in a voting booth. Taken as a whole, they give a splendid picture of rural America. Especially good, because of Hawthorne's profession, are changes in the way medicine is practiced. Then there are many references to transportation, especially the various cars Dr. Sam drove, including his beloved Pierce-Arrow.

As I write this in January 1995, World War II is on the horizon for the series. Hawthorne solves his fiftieth puzzle just after the Munich pact has raised hopes of "peace in our time" that are due to be dashed. Those of us who are old enough remember that World War II on the home front was one of the most interesting periods in recent U.S. history. I can hardly wait to relive it with Ed Hoch and Dr. Sam.

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.
- "The Problem of Cell 16" [Spring 1926], EQMM, March 1977.
- "The Problem of the Country Inn" [Summer 1926]. EQMM, September 1977.
- "The Problem of the Voting Booth" [November 1926], EQMM, December 1977.
- "The Problem of the County Fair" [Summer 1927]. EQMM, February 1978.
- "The Problem of the Old Oak Tree" [September 1927]. EQMM, July 1978.
- "The Problem of the Revival Tent" [Fall 1927]. EQMM, November 1978.
- "The Problem of the Whispering House" [February 1928]. EQMM, April 1979.
- "The Problem of the Boston Common" [Spring 1928]. EQMM, August 1979.
- "The Problem of the General Store" [Summer 1928]. EQMM, November 1979.
- "The Problem of the Courthouse Gargoyle" [September 1928]. EQMM, June 30, 1980.
- "The Problem of the Pilgrims Windmill" [March 1929]. EQMM, September 10, 1980.
- "The Problem of the Gingerbread Houseboat" [Summer 1929]. EQMM, January 28, 1981.
- "The Problem of the Pink Post Office" [October 1929], EQMM, June 17, 1981.
- "The Problem of the Octagon Room" [December 1929]. EQMM, October 7, 1981.
- "The Problem of the Gypsy Camp" [January 1930]. EQMM, January 1, 1982.
- "The Problem of the Bootleggers Car" [May 1930]. EQMM, July 1982.
- "The Problem of the Tin Goose" [July 1930]. EQMM, December 1982.
- "The Problem of the Hunting Lodge" [Fall 1930]. EQMM, May 1983.
- "The Problem of the Body in the Haystack" [July 1931], EQMM, August 1983.
- "The Problem of Santa's Lighthouse" [December 1931]. EQMM, December 1983.
- "The Problem of the Graveyard Picnic" [Spring 1932], EQMM, June 1984.
- "The Problem of the Crying Room" [June 1932], EQMM, November 1984.
- "The Problem of the Fatal Fireworks" [July 4, 1932], EQMM, May 1985.
- "The Problem of the Unfinished Painting" [Fall 1932], EQMM, February 1986.
- "The Problem of the Sealed Bottle" [December 5, 1933]. EQMM, September 1986.
- "The Problem of the Invisible Acrobat" [July 1933]. EQMM, Mid-December 1986.
- "The Problem of the Curing Barn" [September 1934], EQMM, August 1987.
- "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.
- "The Problem of the Protected Farmhouse" [August or September 1935], EQMM, May 1990.
- "The Problem of the Haunted Tepee" [September 1935]. EQMM, December 1990.
- "The Problem of the Blue Bicycle" [September 1936]. EQMM, April 1991.
- "The Problem of the Country Church" [November 1936]. EQMM, August 1991.
- "The Problem of the Grange Hall" [March 1937], EQMM, Mid-December 1991.

"The Problem of the Vanishing Salesman" [May 1937], EQMM, August 1992.
"The Problem of the Leather Man" [August 1937], EQMM, December 1992.
"The Problem of the Phantom Parlor" [August 1937]. EQMM, June 1993.
"The Problem of the Poisoned Pool" [September 1937], EQMM, December 1993.
"The Problem of the Missing Roadhouse" [August 1938]. EQMM, June 1994.
"The Problem of the Country Mailbox" [Fall 1938]. EQMM, Mid-December 1994.
"The Problem of the Crowded Cemetery" [Spring 1939]. EQMM, May 1995.
"The Problem of the Enormous Owl" [August-September 1939], EQMM, January 1996.
"The Problem of the Miraculous Jar" [November 1939]. EQMM, August 1996.
"The Problem of the Enchanted Terrace" [October 1939], EQMM, April 1997.
"The Problem of the Unfound Door" [Midsummer 1940]. EQMM, June 1998.
"The Second Problem of the Covered Bridge" [January 1940]. EQMM, December 1998.
"The Problem of the Scarecrow Congress" [late July 1940]. EQMM, June 1999.
"The Problem of Annabel's Ark" [September 1940]. EQMM, March 2000.
"The Problem of the Potting Shed" [October 1940]. EQMM, July 2000.