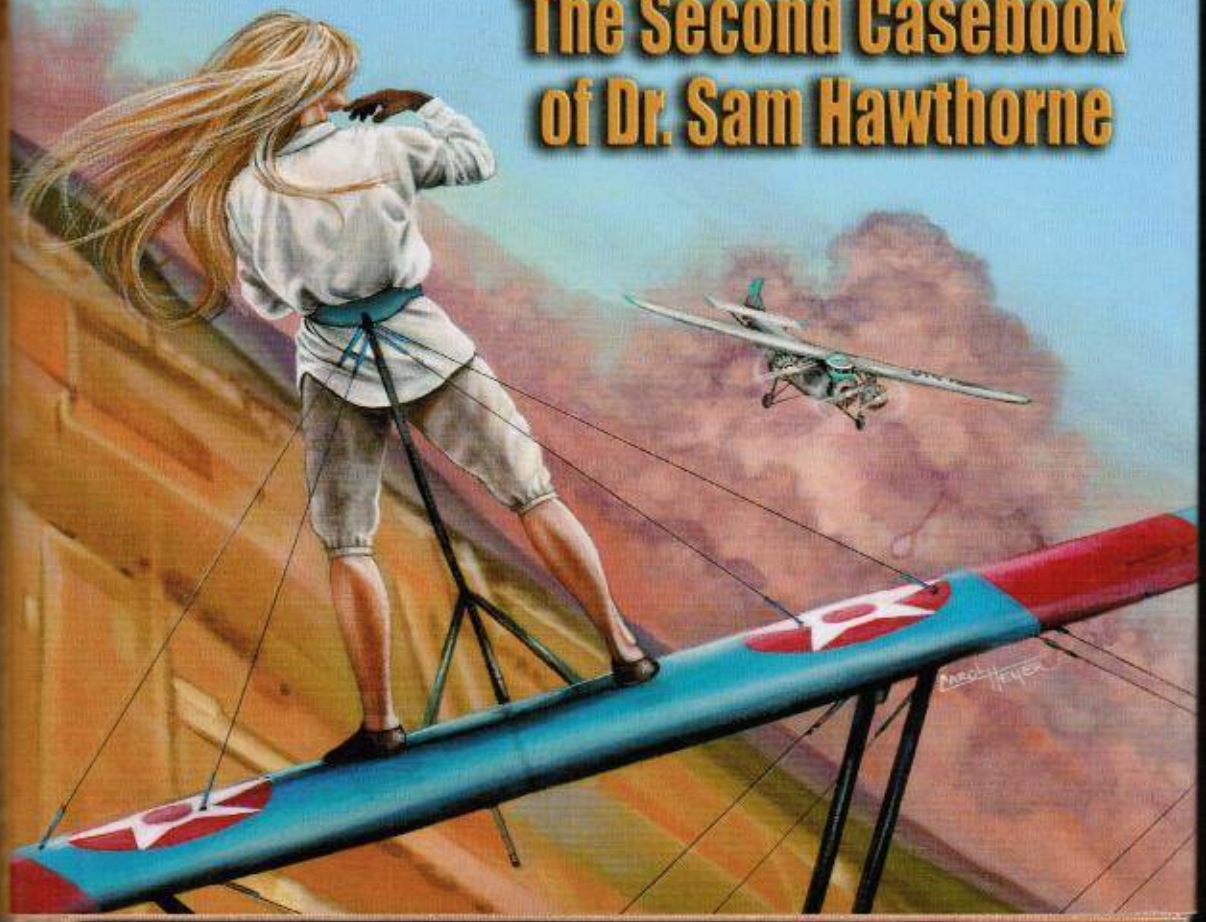


Edward D. Hoch

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 HUNTING LODGE

"I think I promised to tell you about the time my folks visited me here in Northmont," Dr. Sam Hawthorne said as he poured the brandy. "It was the start of deer-hunting season in the autumn of 1930, and I was thirty-four years old. I'd been practicing in town for eight years and it had become more of a home to me than the Midwestern city where I grew up. That was a difficult thing to explain to my father . . ."

We'd always done a great deal of hunting in my youth (Dr. Sam continued), and I suppose it was only natural that my father, Harry Hawthorne, who had retired from the profitable dry-goods store that was his life for nearly forty years, would decide to visit his only son in New England and get in a bit of deer hunting at the same time. My mother came with him, of course, and I was happy to see them both. I hadn't made a trip back home since the previous Christmas, just after Sheriff Lens' marriage, and this was only the second time in my eight years here that they'd come to Northmont.

I met them at the train station and went to help Dad with their baggage.

"You'd think we were staying a month instead of five days," he grumbled. "You know what your mother's like when she travels."

Though it was white now, he'd kept most of his hair, and he still had the vigor of a much younger man. My mother, by contrast, had always been on the frail side.

I led them to my new *Stutz Torpedo* and listened to my father's words of grudging approval.

"The doctoring business must be pretty good these days for you to afford a car like this."

"I got a good deal on it," I explained, "from another doctor who needed the money."

"It's too bad about the car we gave you for a graduation present," my mother said, climbing in the front seat.

"It burnt up. I was lucky I wasn't in it," I said, shutting the passenger door and going around to the other side.

We stopped by the office first and I took them inside.

"Mom, this is my nurse, April. As I've told you, she's a great help to me."

April had never met my parents and she fussed over them in her best manner. Sheriff Lens dropped by just as we were leaving and gave my father a vigorous handshake.

"I'll tell you, Mr. Hawthorne, that son o' yours would make a fine sleuth. He's helped me out on more cases than I care to count."

"Oh?" My mother looked alarmed. "Do you have much crime here, Sheriff?"

"More than you'd think possible," he said with something like pride in his voice. "We needed the gumption of somebody like Doc here to deal with 'em. He's got a mind like that fella Einstein!"

"We'd better be going," I mumbled, embarrassed as always by the sheriff's praise.

"What're you goin' to do while you're here?" he asked my father.

"Oh, a little deer hunting, maybe."

"Good weather for it."

"There's a fellow lives near here that I've been corresponding with," my father said. "Ryder Sexton. I thought we'd drive over and see him one day."

"Oh, Sexton's a hunter, all right! You should see his collection o' weapons!"

"I'm anxious to. He's written me about them."

Sheriff Lens licked his lips. "I'll give you some advice. Go see Ryder Sexton right away — today or tomorrow. Maybe he'll invite you to hunt on his property. He's got some woods an' a pond that're the best deer-huntin' spots in the whole county. He's even got a little huntin' lodge built back on his land, near the pond. He uses it for duck huntin' too."

"Thanks for the tip," my father said. "Be seeing you, Sheriff."

I'd planned a quiet evening for them, but after the sheriff's advice Dad insisted that I phone Sexton after we'd had dinner at my apartment. I knew the man only slightly, though when I put my father on the line it was clear that they were excited at the prospect of a first meeting. The upshot of it was that I agreed to drive my parents over to Sexton's house the following morning.

"I have to see a patient at nine," I told them as I prepared the bed in my spare room, "but I'll be back here to pick you up around ten. Sexton's place is about a twenty-minute drive from here."

Ryder Sexton was the last of our county's old land barons, if the term could ever be used properly in this area of New England. He owned some three hundred acres of property. There were farms that large, of course, but Ryder Sexton was no farmer, not even the gentleman sort. He'd made his money in munitions during the war, and though he no longer had an interest in the *Sexton Arms* empire his name was still linked to it.

The following morning was crisp and unusually clear for mid-November. I drove along the rutted back roads, pointing out the farms and landmarks.

"This fenced-in property is the beginning of the Sexton place," I said.

"It certainly is large," my mother remarked. "Harry, you always knew how to make friends with rich folks."

Father sputtered in mock protest. "I read a letter of his in the *American Rifleman* magazine and wrote him about it. I never knew if he was rich or poor, and I sure never connected him with *Sexton Arms*."

"He bought this place a few years ago after he sold the company," I explained. "He spends part of the year in Florida and in New York, but he's always up here during hunting season. Sheriff Lens told me about his collection of primitive weapons."

Ryder Sexton himself came to the door to greet us, wearing a fringed deerskin jacket and riding britches. He was a tall, imposing man with a ruddy complexion and steel-gray hair worn in a short military fashion.

Seeing him with my father made me think somehow of a reunion of Army officers from the last war, though I knew that Sexton had been busy on the home front and my father's military service had been confined to the local draft board.

Sexton nodded a greeting to me, but he seemed genuinely pleased to meet my father.

"I look forward to your letters, Harry. They're more sensible than most of the stuff in the daily papers. And this must be Doris," he said to my mother. "Welcome to Northmont, both of you. Come in, come in!"

I'd never met any of Sexton's family and I was surprised when a young woman appeared with an armload of fall flowers and was introduced as his wife. "There's supposed to be a frost tonight," she explained, "so I've been gathering up the last of them."

Her name was Rosemary, and I guessed her to be maybe thirty years younger than her husband, who was pushing sixty. She was probably a second wife, and attractive, with a direct, friendly manner. I tried to remember if I'd seen her about town, but I didn't think I had — which wasn't surprising, since the Sextons were here only part of the year.

"How's the deer hunting in this area?" my father asked when we were settled down in the paneled living room before a large open fire. "I'd like to give it a try while I'm visiting."

"Fine right now," Ryder Sexton assured him. "Couldn't be better. In fact, I'm going out with a few people tomorrow morning, if you'd like to join us. We hunt here on the property, down by the pond. I have a bit over three hundred acres, with lots of woods. I even have a small hunting lodge down there."

"That's mighty generous of you," Father answered with a smile, quickly accepting the offer.

"You too, Sam," Sexton added, including me as an afterthought. "Your mother can come and stay here at the house with Rosemary while we're out." I mumbled something about appointments with my patients, but I knew I'd be able to arrange it. The idea of hunting with my father again, as we'd done so many years ago, overcame my momentary distaste for slaughtering deer.

"What time will you be starting?"

Sexton thought a moment. "Early. Be out here by seven if you can. My neighbor, Jim Freeman, is joining us and Bill Tracy is coming out from town. Maybe I'll invite Sheriff Lens too. That'll make six of us in all."

Bill Tracy was a real-estate man who'd had some dealings with Sexton, and Jim Freeman was a successful farmer. I knew them both quite well, and had recently doctored Freeman's daughter for the usual childhood illnesses.

"We'll be here," Father assured Sexton. "Now what about your collection? I'm itching to see it."

Ryder Sexton chuckled and led us to an adjoining den where two walls were almost covered by tall glass-doored cabinets. Inside were a number of items, mainly made of wood, and our host gave us a quick description of each.

"I've been collecting primitive weapons for years, and though we're here for only a portion of the year I decided this was the best place to house my collection. This first is a cord sling. One of those stones was placed in that pouch and the thing was whirled over your head and released. That's how David killed Goliath. This pellet-bow from India has the pouch fixed between its two strings."

"Unusual," my father murmured. "I never saw one of those."

"These are throwing-sticks used by Australian aborigines. And of course you're familiar with the boomerang. Here's a collection of darts, javelins, and throwing spears. Jim Freeman next door will tell you how he dropped darts from airplanes during the war."

"Notice this wooden spear-thrower from the South Pacific. The spear fits into this socket and the thrower acts like an extra joint in the arm. Eskimos use something similar for harpoons. Here we have some Patagonian bolas, with three balls connected by thongs to a common center. They're generally used to entangle the prey."

I looked ahead at the next cabinet.

"These swords seem more recent."

"They're ceremonial swords from the western Pacific islands," Sexton explained. "Notice this club. It's been edged with sharks' teeth to make it quite deadly. I sometimes use it to dispatch wounded deer. And here are some shields of coconut fiber from the same area." He might have gone on for another half hour if his wife hadn't interrupted to say, "Here's Jennifer!"

Out the window I saw a young woman in her twenties walking a bicycle into the side yard.

"Come on," Mrs. Sexton urged us, "I want you to meet my sister."

We trooped outside and she introduced us as her sister stowed the bike away in an unused henhouse.

"Jennifer, this is Harry and Doris Hawthorne — and their son Dr. Sam Hawthorne, from town. They're visiting him this week, and Harry is a friend of Ryder's."

Jennifer seemed delighted to meet us.

"Rosemary insisted I come and stay with them for a month, but I really like to see people around. After living in New York, I've become too much of a city girl, I guess."

"You seem quite at home with that bicycle," I remarked.

"Ryder says I mustn't take it on the trails back in the woods. He's afraid a hunter might mistake me for a deer." She pouted prettily. "Would you mistake me for a deer?" she asked me.

"I might," I conceded.

Our departure was delayed by the arrival of Jim Freeman from the neighboring farm. He'd walked over through the fields, a big lumbering man who'd always reminded me more of a wrestler than a farmer.

"Weather forecast says we might get a little snow tonight," he told Ryder Sexton.

"You gonna run the hose out to your huntin' lodge to keep your water from freezin'?"

Sexton nodded.

"I suppose I should."

He turned to my father and explained. "I have a tank of water in the lodge for necessities. It comes in handy for brewing coffee or mixing drinks, doing dishes or even flushing the outhouse."

"All the comforts of home," my mother remarked drily. She'd never thought much of hunting, and I remembered how in my youth she'd badgered my father for taking me out to shoot pheasants on a Sunday afternoon.

Ryder Sexton kept a hundred yards of hose coiled around a drum out in back of the barn and he started dragging one end with him as we walked down to his lodge.

"I'll show you where we'll be in the morning," he said. "I'll leave the water running slowly all night and then my tank won't freeze up."

He turned to his neighbor.

"There'll be six of us in the morning, Jim. Harry and Sam are joining us, and I thought I'd invite Sheriff Lens too."

"Fine."

We strode between two oaks and over the crest of a small hill. Below us, some fifty yards away, was a crude shelter made of rough boards with a roof of tree branches. It stood near the edge of a pond, still and quiet in the morning sun. Sexton gave a yank on the hose and pulled it down the hill, trailing it after him through the short grass. It wasn't much thicker than a garden hose but many farmers bought it in hundred-yard lengths for irrigation purposes.

The hunting lodge was larger inside than it had first appeared, with room for all of us to crowd in easily. Rosemary Sexton and her sister Jennifer had followed along, and with Sexton, Freeman, my folks and me, that made seven of us. The ceiling was low above our heads, but I could stand and walk without stooping. There were firepots, crude chairs, and a table, together with gun racks and even a small icebox where food and beverages could be kept. A metal tank full of water was attached to a shelf along one wall. Sexton ran the end of his hose into it.

"It holds thirty gallons — almost the size of a barrel," he explained, directing his words to my father. "The hose goes in the top. I'll turn the water back on at the pump, just enough to keep it flowing all night. And I'll open this faucet a dribble. The drain empties into the pond."

"There are quite a few holes in your wall," I commented.

"Those are gun holes, Sam," my father was quick to explain. "Right, Ryder?"

"Sure are! Tomorrow morning a couple of us will wait here while the rest of you drive the deer toward us. Then we'll fire through these gun ports and catch 'em as they cross that open space."

"Sounds good to me," Father said enthusiastically.

"It would," my mother muttered.

Jennifer gave a little groan.

"Looks as if you and I are going to be cooking venison, Rosemary."

Sexton's wife snorted.

"They haven't killed them yet. My money's on the deer."

We strolled back up the hill and watched while Sexton turned on the pump and regulated the flow of water through the hose to the crudely built hunting lodge. Then Freeman headed back across the field toward his farm and I got my folks back to the car.

"Seven o'clock," Ryder Sexton called out after us.

That night over dinner my mother admitted that Ryder and his wife seemed nice enough. "For deer hunters," she added.

Father laughed. "I don't think the wife hunts, Doris. Don't tar her with the same brush as him."

"I have to stop by the office," I told them, "in case April left me any messages."

"You go ahead." Mother started gathering up the dishes. "Your father and I better get to bed early anyhow if we're supposed to be up with the chickens."

"Before the chickens, Doris," he corrected her.

I drove down to the office and found only one message of any importance. A farm injury had hospitalized one of my patients, and I drove over to *Pilgrim Memorial* to see how he was doing. As I was leaving, I ran into Bill Tracy. Bill was always well dressed, with a stiffly starched collar that made him look more like the town banker than a real-estate man. I'd never known him to hunt before, and I had to mention it to him.

"My hunting's no stranger than yours, Sam. How come you're going out there?" he countered.

"My folks are visiting and Dad's corresponded with Sexton. He invited us both to come along. We were out there looking around this morning. It's quite a place."

"Is his sister-in-law still there?"

"Jennifer? Yes, she was around. Lovely girl."

Bill Tracy slid a finger beneath his starched collar. "I think I saw her over at the Freeman place one afternoon last week as I was driving by. I couldn't be sure, though. It might have been Mrs. Sexton. They look a little alike."

"Not close up. Maybe it was one of Freeman's daughters."

"Naw, I recognized that bike Jennifer rides, parked around the side of the house." He winked at me. "And she told me she was bored with country life."

"She implied that much today," I admitted.

"Well, I'll see you in the morning, Sam. Keep your eyes open and you might spot something more interesting than deer."

I was still thinking about that when I got home and found my mother sitting up by the window with a cup of hot chocolate.

"I need to relax before I can sleep," she told me. "Not your father, though. He's already snoring in there."

"How's his health, Mom?" I asked, settling down on the sofa by her side.

"Good enough for his age, I suppose. He saw his doctor about some heart palpitations last month. Keep an eye on him during the hunt tomorrow, Sam."

"Of course."

She sipped her hot chocolate and sighed. "I've never liked him hunting. You neither!"

"I haven't hunted in nearly twenty years — not since the last time with him. I'm going along tomorrow because I think he wants me to."

"He likes to think you're still his boy, Sam."

"I guess I always will be. And yours too."

"No, no." She shook her head. "You're a man now. You should be married, with a family."

"I know, Mom."

"When you wrote me about that wedding last Christmas I thought for a minute it was yours."

"Sheriff Lens got married. And he's a lot older than me."

"Don't let it slip by you, Sam. Don't spend all your time treating ill people and doing this detective work of yours and wake up one morning to find you're an old man without anyone to love you."

"Hey," I laughed, "this is pretty serious stuff! Come on, it's off to bed for both of us. I've got the alarm clock set for five-thirty."

"All right," she agreed, and gave me a kiss on the cheek. "But think about what I said."

I lay awake for a time after that, listening to the snoring from the next room and wondering if my mother had anyone to love her.

The morning alarm wakened me from a deep dreamless sleep, and I peered out the window to see a thin coating of snow over the landscape. It was still dark as I heard my folks moving to and from the bathroom and getting dressed.

"Good morning," I called out to them, "we got about a half inch of snow overnight!"

"Good deer-tracking weather!" my father called back.

"Sure is! I'll get us some breakfast."

The road to the Sexton place was virtually deserted as we drove out an hour later. Only a few tire tracks had broken the white mantle of snow, and when we turned into the Sexton driveway I realized that one set of these belonged to Sheriff Lens, who'd arrived ahead of us. The sun was up now, and the sheriff stood by his car with a deer rifle at his side, chatting with Sexton and Jim Freeman.

"Isn't this snow-cover great?" Ryder Sexton exclaimed as he greeted us.

"The deer won't have a chance!"

Jennifer came out of the house with wrapped sandwiches for everyone and Rosemary Sexton hurried out behind her to welcome my mother.

"Come in the house where you'll be warm — and safe."

Another car pulled into the driveway behind my *Stutz* and Bill Tracy climbed out, carrying his rifle in a fancy leather case.

"Good morning, all!"

I introduced him to my parents and he accepted a sandwich from Jennifer.

Then Sexton began issuing orders. "You'll spread out in a half circle with the pond and the hunting lodge as the focus. Stay clear of each other so's you can cover a wider area, then start converging toward the lodge, driving the deer that way. Sam, how about if you stay in the lodge with me?"

I remembered my promise of the previous night to keep an eye on Dad. "I think I'd rather be out in the field if it's all the same with you."

Ryder Sexton shrugged. "Sure. I'll stay down there alone and pick 'em off like in a shooting gallery. Five of you can probably cover a larger circle anyhow."

We tramped back through the shallow snow to the pump house, where he turned off the water he'd had running since the previous night. "Jim, stay here till I disconnect the hose and then reel it in for me. I don't want no one tripping over it and spoiling a good shot."

While Freeman stayed, the rest of us headed for the lodge. Jennifer, wearing only a thin jacket over a sweater and men's workpants, was in the lead with Sexton.

"Are you hunting too?" I called out to her.

"I wish they'd let me!"

I fell in step with Sheriff Lens while Bill Tracy brought up the rear with my father.

"How's the wife, Sheriff?"

"Good, Doc. I'd better bring home some meat for the table, though, or she'll never forgive me for takin' a whole day off!"

"Damn," Sexton grumbled from up ahead. "I'd forget my head if it wasn't screwed on!" He muttered some instructions to Jennifer and then paused at the top of the rise overlooking the hunting lodge. "And, Jennifer, on your way back tell Jim to start winding up the hose when I give the signal."

"Sure," she said, and started back.

"I like your boots," I told Sexton, admiring the sleek glisten of the new leather.

"Bought 'em in New York. Look at the tread on them!" He showed me the soles, then for the first time he noticed my rifle, an old Winchester I'd had for years. "If you don't mind my saying so, Sam, that's not much of a weapon for deer. I've got an extra up at the house if you'd like it."

"No, no, this is fine for me. I leave the fancy shooting to my father."

"All right, if you say so." He turned to Dad and Bill Tracy and the sheriff. "Look, this little rise pretty much protects the house from stray shots, but even so let's try to keep from firing in that direction. A rifle slug carries a long way and I don't want any broken windows. Or dead wives." He chuckled a bit at the last, to show it was meant as a joke. Then we waited at the top of the rise as he walked down across the virgin snow toward the lodge. He carried the rifle in his right hand and one of Jennifer's sandwiches in his left, stepping over the hose to enter the doorway.

I could see him through some of the gun ports in the lodge walls, pulling the hose from his water tank and dropping it in the doorway. "Pull it in!" he shouted, and I relayed the signal back to Jim Freeman at the pump house.

Freeman started turning the drum, collecting the hose as it snaked back through the snow.

When Sexton saw that Freeman had rejoined us, he called out, "Start your circle now. Watch for deer tracks, and drive 'em this way. I'll be ready, and I'll have the coffee brewing too!"

We headed off across the fields, with Tracy and Freeman moving out to the east while the sheriff, Dad, and I fanned out in the opposite direction. I managed to keep my father in sight, and once when he spotted deer tracks I ran over to check them out.

"It's a deer, all right," I agreed. "A big one too, from the looks of it." I trudged along at his side, not bothering to resume my former position. We were on the trail together now, as we'd been so many times in my youth.

He must have been thinking the same thing. "Brings back the old days, don't it?"

"Sure does, Dad."

"Your mother tell you about my heart?"

"She said you've had a few problems. Are you taking some pills?"

"Sure, sure. I'll live to be a hundred. After all, my son's a doctor, isn't he?"

"I only wish I lived nearer to you. What would you think of moving east?"

"To New England? Not a chance! We're Midwesterners. You were too, once."

"I know. But it would be hard to go back now."

"I don't know. Do you think your life is any better here?"

"I enjoy it."

"You like men like Sexton for patients? Rich men?"

"He's not my patient. He's your friend, remember."

"Your mother thinks his wife's not happy."

"Why's that?" I asked, guiding our route through the woods so we stayed in line with the deer we were tracking.

"Oh, Rosemary Sexton made some remark about hunting, and about how her whole life seems to be lived around her husband's whims. Doris thought she sounded a little bitter."

"Most women in Northmont would love to trade places with her."

We came upon fresh deer droppings in the snow and my father signaled for silence.

"Quiet now," he whispered. "We're not far behind him."

We came out of the woods, moving around a clump of underbrush, and I saw Sheriff Lens off to the left. He waved and pointed straight ahead, at something we couldn't see. Then suddenly a deer broke from cover about two hundred yards ahead of us, running in the general direction of Sexton's lodge.

"Look at the rack on him!" my father breathed. "Might be a twelve pointer!"

The deer started to turn toward us and Sheriff Lens raised his rifle for a quick shot. The range was too far for any accuracy, and he must have realized that. He lowered his weapon as the deer changed direction again.

"The wind is from our direction," my father said. "He probably scents us."

"If Tracy and Freeman are in position we've got him trapped. The only way out is past the lodge where Sexton will nail him."

We hurried now, breaking into a trot to keep up with the fleeing animal.

Presently the pond came into view, and then the lodge. I could see Freeman just coming over the hill on the other side, and after a moment Bill Tracy appeared too, back toward the house. Both men had seen the deer and had their weapons raised.

"Why don't they shoot?" Sheriff Lens wanted to know, trotting over to join us.

"The buck is so near the lodge Sexton can kill it with an easy shot," my father said. He had his own rifle ready, but the deer kept running, straight as an arrow. It scooted across the clearing, passing not twenty yards from the lodge.

There was no shot.

Then, before anyone realized what was happening, the big buck ran through the shallow water at the edge of the pond, outflanking Freeman.

The farmer turned, dropped to one knee, and fired a quick shot. We saw the spout of water where the bullet hit beyond and behind the fleeing deer's path, then it was gone, into the woods beyond the pond.

"What in hell happened?" Tracy yelled, coming down to join us. Freeman hurried over too. "Why didn't Sexton get him?"

"I don't know," my father replied, and I didn't know either. We all just stood there, staring down at the hunting lodge. There were still only Ryder Sexton's footprints leading into it, but a little column of smoke showed that he'd started the fire for coffee.

My father started down across the snow, following the deer's trail till it passed the lodge, then dropping off to enter through the doorway.

He reappeared almost at once, calling up to me. "Come quick, Sam, something's happened! I think he's been murdered!"

I warned the others to stay where they were and went to have a look. Ryder Sexton was sprawled in the center of the lodge, near the table. He lay on his face and the back of his head was bloody. Nearby was one of the clubs edged with sharks' teeth, from his collection of primitive weapons.

"He's dead, all right," I confirmed. "That thing probably killed him instantly."

"But who, Sam?" my father asked.

I walked to the doorway and called to Sheriff Lens. "I need you, Sheriff, but walk carefully. We don't want to disturb any footprints."

"There aren't any footprints, Doc — except Ryder's own. I been all around the cabin. And the outhouse is empty."

I looked out on the pond side and confirmed what he'd said. The lodge was near the water here, but there were still some ten yards of unmarked snow separating them. Despite my warning, Tracy and Freeman had followed us down, but it didn't really matter. Ryder Sexton's were the only tracks into the lodge, and there were no tracks going out. Whoever had killed him with that primitive club had done it by remote control.

"Someone will have to tell his wife," Jim Freeman said, staring down at the body.

"Who could have done it?" Tracy asked. "A tramp passing through the woods?"

"A tramp who didn't leave footprints?" I asked. "All we saw were the tracks of the deer. Did any of you see footprints?"

They all shook their heads. None of them had. I went outside and knelt in the snow, examining the tracks that Sexton had left. Then we all went back up to the house together, where Sheriff Lens broke the news while we stood grimly by.

Rosemary Sexton simply stared at us, uncomprehending. "Dead? What do you mean *dead*?"

"We heard a shot," Jennifer said. "Was it a hunting accident?"

"He was killed by a blow on the head," I said. "We don't know who did it."

Rosemary Sexton collapsed.

When Jennifer and Jim Freeman helped carry her to her room, I got my bag from the car and gave her a mild sedative. Sheriff Lens was already on the telephone, instructing the operator to ring his deputies and have an ambulance sent out for the body.

I came back into the living room and went over to my mother, who was sitting white-faced in a chair. "What happened, Sam?" she asked me.

"I'm trying to find out," I replied. "Tell me, were either of the women out of the house while we were gone? Mrs. Sexton or Jennifer?"

"No," she answered, then immediately corrected herself. "At least I don't think they were. Rosemary was baking a cake for later and she was in the kitchen part of the time. Jennifer was upstairs for about ten minutes. I suppose either of them could have been out without my realizing it."

I squeezed her hand and went upstairs. Jennifer and Freeman were still with Rosemary. I found another bedroom at the back of the house that faced in the direction of the hunting lodge, but a big red barn stood between the house and the lodge, blocking my view of it.

"Trying to figure out how it was done?" a voice behind me asked. It was Jim Freeman.

"I know it seems impossible, but he is dead. I had a nice theory that the club might have been fired from here, like some sort of mortar shell."

Freeman came over to the window. "This is Jennifer's room. Do you think she did it?"

"I have no idea. I was just checking the view."

Freeman nodded. "During the war I was with the Air Corps in France. They were actually dropping darts, called *fléchettes*, out of planes onto enemy soldiers."

"That's what I mean. Darts can be dropped from planes, people can be stabbed with arrows. Perhaps clubs can be fired from mortars."

"Not too likely, though," Freeman said.

"No," I admitted, "especially since the roof of the lodge has no large openings in it." I thought of something else. "Have Mrs. Sexton or her sister ever visited your place?"

"Why do you ask?"

"It would be natural, since you're neighbors. Bill Tracy told me he thought he saw one of them over there last week."

Freeman snorted. "Bill Tracy's a gossipy old woman. Sure, Jennifer took a ride over one day. Why not? As you say, we're neighbors."

"But Rosemary Sexton has never been to your place?"

"Can't say never. She may have come with Ryder one evening. But she never came alone, if that's what you're driving at. You think I killed him to get at his wife?"

"I don't think anything right now, Jim. I'm just asking questions."

"Well, ask some others."

He turned and walked from the room. I went back downstairs and found Sheriff Lens conferring with two deputies who'd just arrived.

"They're gonna take some flashbulb photographs of the lodge and then remove the body. Is that okay, Doc?"

"Sure. You're in charge."

We walked back through the woods to the hunting lodge with the deputies. The snow was starting to melt in places, but Ryder Sexton's single set of footprints was still clearly visible.

"You know, Doc," Sheriff Lens began slowly, "I figure there are just three ways it coulda been done."

I was used to this by now. But Sheriff Lens was generally triumphant when he offered me a possible solution, and there was no triumph in his voice today.

"What are those, Sheriff?" I asked.

"The club was thrown or catapulted across the snow somehow."

"He was inside the lodge when he was killed," I pointed out. "Even if we accept the theory that he stuck his head out at the moment the club was thrown and then fell back inside, the club still would have fallen outside in the snow. Besides, those sharks' teeth are what did the damage. A club hurled through the air wouldn't have hit him at that angle with enough force to kill him."

"You thought on that already."

"Yes," I conceded.

"Okay, possibility number two. The murderer walked across the snow in Sexton's footprints, then walked out backward the same way."

I shook my head reluctantly. "His new boots had very distinctive treads. I examined those prints and the treadmarks haven't been blurred or obscured at all. Only Sexton walked across that snow, Sheriff, and he did it only once."

Sheriff Lens took a deep breath. "Well then, Doc, that only leaves my third possibility. Sexton was killed by the first person to enter the lodge, before the rest of us reached it."

"The first person to enter was my father."

"I know," Sheriff Lens said.

We said no more about it then, but walked across the stretch of slowly melting snow to the lodge where the deputies were finishing their work. The body was removed on a suitably covered stretcher, and one deputy moved his camera out to photograph the tracks in the snow before they disappeared.

"I found this on the floor," the other one said, holding out his hand to the sheriff.

"What is it? A feather?"

"Yeah."

Sheriff Lens grunted. "Looks old. Prob'ly left over from the last duckhunting season."

"Looks more like a chicken feather to me," the deputy remarked. "Maybe someone used it for an arrow."

"Except he wasn't killed with an arrow," the sheriff grumbled. He stuck the feather in his pocket.

When the second deputy had left and we were alone, I said, "My father didn't kill Sexton."

"I know how you feel, Doc, and I'd be the same way. I'll admit he doesn't seem to have a motive—"

"He *couldn't* have killed him. Think about it, Sheriff. How did that club, the murder weapon, get in here? It was up at the house, in Sexton's glass case, and he didn't bring it down. We saw him enter the lodge carrying his rifle and a sandwich and nothing else. I've already shown that he couldn't have left again, even walking in his own tracks, without blurring them."

"Hell, Doc, the killer brought the club with him. That ain't hard to figure out."

"Of course, the killer brought the weapon in. And that means my father is innocent. He certainly didn't walk through the woods with me, and enter this lodge in front of us all, with that long shark-toothed club hidden under his coat. There's no way we wouldn't have noticed."

Sheriff Lens relaxed visibly. "Sure, Doc, you're right. He couldn't have done it."

"Besides, if Sexton was still alive when we approached the cabin he wouldn't have passed up that shot at the deer. He didn't fire at it because he was already dead."

"But where does that leave us?"

"I don't know," I admitted.

"Maybe a bird killed him! That would explain the feather! Or maybe someone with big wings strapped to their arms, soaring over the snow! How's that sound, Doc?"

"Not very likely," I told him gently. We left the lodge and started back toward the house.

"But I might have touched on something when I mentioned concealing the weapon under a coat," I said. "How did the killer approach with that club? Why didn't Ryder Sexton realize what was happening to him in time to fight back?"

"It was concealed somehow."

I snapped my fingers. "In a rifle carrier!"

"Like Bill Tracy has!"

We found Tracy just putting his rifle and case into the car. Sheriff Lens went back for the club and we tried to fit it into the carrier, but without success. With the rifle inside it wouldn't fit at all, and even without the rifle it made a peculiar bulge.

"I didn't even have the case out in the field!" Tracy insisted. "I just had the rifle! You guys are nuts if you think you're pinning this on me!"

"We're not trying to pin anything on you, Bill," I insisted.

He climbed into his car.

"You know where to reach me if you got any more questions."

My mother came out of the house as Tracy drove away. "Sam, this whole business has upset your father terribly. I think we should leave as soon as possible."

"Of course," I agreed. "Just let me finish with the sheriff."

Sheriff Lens had gone into the house for a moment, but now he reappeared. "Except for the club none of his weapons are missing from their cases. But I have another idea, Sam. Suppose someone made one of them South American bolas with balls of ice? It coulda been hurled through the door of the lodge and wrapped itself around his neck, bashing his skull. Then the heat from the fire melted the ice balls."

"What about the cord, Sheriff? Did that melt too? And there were no puddles of melted ice on the scene. And what about the teeth marks from the club that really killed him? How do you account for them?" But the fire reminded me of the coffee, and that reminded me of something else. "The water tank!"

"Huh?"

"Come on, Sheriff! I'll explain on the way." He hurried after me as I bounded past the pump house and the barn and up the rise leading to the lodge. "Don't you see? The killer never crossed the snow because he was hidden in there all the time — since before the snow started! If that metal tank will hold thirty gallons of water it'll hold a small adult. He killed Sexton and then resumed his hiding place until it was safe to escape."

We were almost to the lodge now and Sheriff Lens had caught some of my enthusiasm. "Will he still be there?"

"Probably not, but the empty water tank is all the proof we need. The killer would have had to empty it down the drain in order to fit inside, and he couldn't have refilled it later because the hose to the pump house was already disconnected and rolled up."

I'd rarely been so certain of anything in my life. Entering the lodge, I lifted the lid from the tank and plunged my hand inside.

It was filled with water, almost to the brim.

Sheriff Lens tried to console me. "Look, Doc, he could still have hidden in the tank, and just refilled it afterward."

"There was no hose."

"Maybe it's pond water."

"The snow between here and the pond was undisturbed," I reminded him. But just to satisfy us both, I let some of the water run from the tank. It was crystal-clear well water, not from any half stagnant pond.

Back at the house, I began feeling as dejected as when Sheriff Lens had raised the possibility of my father's involvement. There had to be an answer to the crime, but I knew well enough that the longer it went unsolved the less likely a solution became. One suspect, Tracy, had already gone home.

Rosemary Sexton seemed to have recovered somewhat and was back downstairs. She was pale and still a bit slow of speech, perhaps because of the sedative I'd given her.

"Tell me how it happened," she said quietly.

"We don't know," I admitted. "He may have been killed by a tramp who'd been sleeping in the lodge."

She dismissed that with a wave of her hand.

"Jim Freeman told me he was hit over the head with a club from his own weapons collection. That wouldn't have been a tramp."

My father came into the room in time to hear the end of this exchange.

"You mean you think someone he knew killed him? I can't believe that."

"We don't know anything yet," I said wearily.

"He was my friend. I'll do anything I can to find his killer."

My mother intervened. "I think the best thing we can do is go back to town, Harry. Sam will take us."

She was right. It was time to go. But I still couldn't quite let go. "I want to see that weapons case," I said.

"I already checked it out, Doc," the sheriff said.

But I went to the den with its tall glass-doored cabinets. Jennifer followed me there and I asked, "Where did he keep the keys for these?"

"They're open. They were never locked."

I stood and stared at the empty spot in the cabinet where the sharktoothed club from the Pacific Islands had rested, remembering Ryder Sexton's words as he'd shown it to us. Someone had taken that club, crossed the unmarked snow with the wings of a bird, and slain the man.

I stared into the glass, seeing my reflection and Jennifer's next to me.

"Let's walk outside," I said.

"The sun's gone in again. It's getting chilly," she said, opening the door.

I helped her down the back steps and we walked toward the outbuildings.

"Maybe it'll snow again tonight."

"I feel so helpless," she said.

"We all do. It wasn't until I was looking at that glass case just now that I realized how helpless I was. I suddenly knew who killed Ryder Sexton, but I've got no proof that would convince a jury."

"That case told you?"

I nodded. "I remembered what Sexton said when he showed us that club. It was good for dispatching wounded deer in the field, he said. He used it for that, didn't he? And when he said this morning that he'd forgotten something, he was referring to the club. He asked someone to get it and bring it to him at the lodge."

She looked at me questioningly.

"He asked you, Jennifer. You were walking with him and I heard him mutter something to you. Then you went back to the house and got the club for him. The rest of us were off out in the fields and woods by that time, so we never saw you go back out there. The sight of you with that weapon didn't alarm Sexton because he'd asked you to bring it. He even turned his back to you and gave you a perfect target. With those sharks' teeth it didn't take too hard a blow to kill him."

"You're accusing me?"

"It could only have been you, Jennifer. I suppose you did it for the money, so your sister would inherit his fortune and it would be yours too."

"No."

"Yes, Jennifer. My mother told me you were upstairs for about ten minutes — that would have been long enough."

"How did I cross the snow? There were no tracks."

We'd reached the top of the rise and stood staring down at the hunting lodge, peaceful in the autumnal setting. There was still enough of the snow remaining to show us Ryder Sexton's footprints.

"Oh, but there were tracks," I said. "There still are tracks, crying out at us to see them. But like Chesterton's postman they're so obvious they remain invisible. I refer, of course, to the track made by the irrigation hose that ran from the pump house to the lodge. Last night's half inch of snow fell on top of the hose, so when it was rolled up this morning the bare track of it remained across the field, running directly to the door of the lodge."

"You're mad! That hose is only about an inch and a half wide! Even walking on my toes, I couldn't follow its trail without leaving tracks!"

A cold wind was rising and I lifted the collar of my jacket. "You didn't walk on your toes, Jennifer," I said quietly. "You rode your bicycle."

If I had expected the fury of a trapped animal, there was none. She merely closed her eyes and swayed a bit. I put out a hand to steady her.

"You told me he didn't like you riding in the woods during hunting season," I continued, "so obviously it was something you'd done before."

Following that narrow line left by the hose wouldn't have been difficult, and if you did edge off it once or twice, the hose itself could have made the marks when it was being dragged back. And of course you carried the bicycle from the henhouse to the pump house where the track began, so it left no new tracks in the barnyard. You probably held the club under your arm as you pedaled, and you followed the

same track coming back. As long as you stayed in it there was no snow to record the tread of your bicycle tires. You left no clues, except for a single old chicken feather that must have stuck to the bicycle in the henhouse. That feather was all the confirmation I needed once I remembered you putting the bike away there yesterday.”

“It wasn’t the money.” She spoke at last. “That had nothing to do with it. He was damned cruel to my sister. You must have noticed how unhappy she is. Sometimes he even beat her when he was drunk. She wouldn’t leave him, so I did her the biggest favor I could. I killed him.”

“Will you tell the sheriff that? — If you don’t, I will.”

We went back to the house and I left with Mom and Dad while Jennifer spoke to Sheriff Lens. On the way to town we caught sight of that big twelve-point buck running at the edge of the woods. My father wanted me to stop so he could get a shot at it, but I kept on driving.

“That was the last time my parents visited me in Northmont,” Dr. Sam Hawthorne concluded. “They said city life was a whole lot safer. Look here — the bottle’s empty. But I’ll have a fresh one next time you drop by. I’ll tell you about the time Sheriff Lens finally solved a mystery all by himself.”

A DR. SAM HAWTHORNE CHECKLIST

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