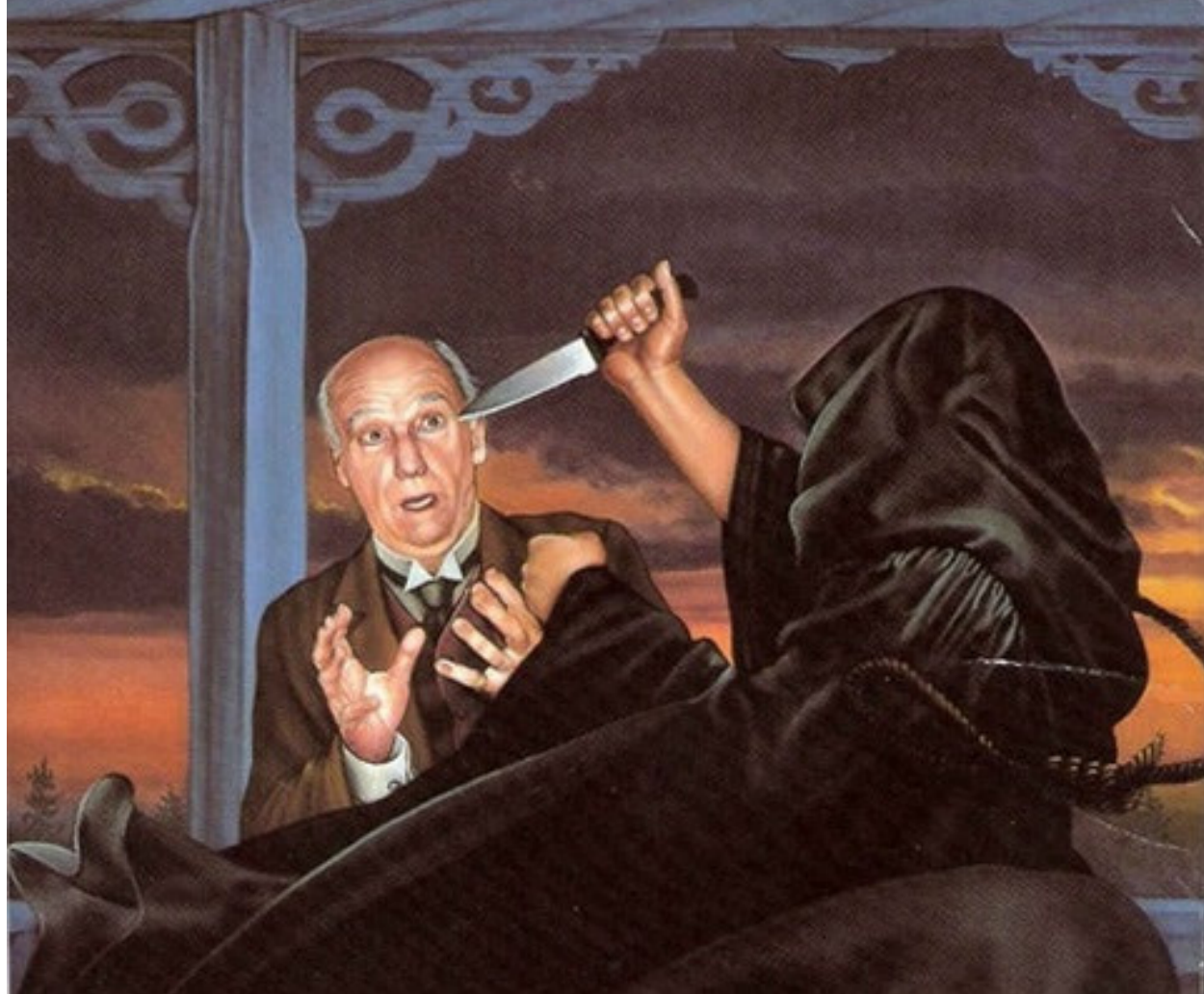


Diagnosis:

IMPOSSIBLE

The Problems of Dr. Sam Hawthorne

EDWARD D. HOCH



Diagnosis: Impossible

The Problems of Dr. Sam Hawthorne

EDWARD D. HOCH

BOOKS BY EDWARD D. HOCH

The Shattered Raven
The Judges of Hades
The Transvection Machine
The Spy and the Thief
City of Brass
Dear Dead Days (editor)
The Fellowship of the Hand
The Frankenstein Factory
Best Detective Stories of the Year 1976-81 (editor)
The Thefts of Nick Velvet
The Monkey's Clue & The Stolen Sapphire (juvenile)
All But Impossible! (editor)
The Year's Best Mystery and Suspense Stories 1982-95 (editor)
The Quests of Simon Ark Leopold's Way
Great British Detectives (coeditor)
Women Write Mysteries (coeditor)
Murder Most Sacred (coeditor)
The Spy Who Read Latin and Other Stories
The Night My Friend
The People of the Peacock
*Diagnosis: Impossible, The Problems of Dr. Sam Hawthorne
Twelve American Detective Stories (editor)
*The Ripper of Storyville and Other Ben Snow Tales
*The Velvet Touch

*These three books are available from Crippen & Landru, Publishers.

Crippen & Landru Publishers Norfolk, Virginia © 2000

Copyright ©1974, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1996 by Edward D. Hoch

“Dr. Sam Hawthorne: A Chronology of His Cases” copyright © 1996 by Marvin Lachman

Cover copyright © 1996 by Crippen & Landru, Publishers

Cover painting by Carol Heyer; cover design by Deborah Miller

Crippen & Landru logo by Eric D. Greene

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

Table of CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

THE PROBLEM OF THE COVERED BRIDGE

THE PROBLEM OF THE OLD GRISTMILL

THE PROBLEM OF THE LOBSTER SHACK

THE PROBLEM OF THE HAUNTED BANDSTAND

THE PROBLEM OF THE LOCKED CABOOSE

THE PROBLEM OF THE LITTLE RED SCHOOLHOUSE

THE PROBLEM OF THE CHRISTMAS STEEPLE

THE PROBLEM OF CELL 16

THE PROBLEM OF THE COUNTRY INN

THE PROBLEM OF THE VOTING BOOTH

THE PROBLEM OF THE COUNTY FAIR

THE PROBLEM OF THE OLD OAK TREE

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 CELL 16

"Sure," Dr. Sam Hawthorne began, filling the glasses, "there was a time when Northmont made the front pages of papers all across the country. Another small—ah—libation? And some of the stories even mentioned my name. They called me a young New England doctor and that's what I was, back in the late spring o' 1926 when The Eel came to our town. . ."

It was a warm day for May (Dr. Sam remembered), and I'd gone out to Jeff Whitehead's farm to treat a gunshot wound. That in itself was unusual because we didn't get many gunshot wounds in Northmont 'cept durin' huntin' season. Jeff and Mrs. Whitehead had 40 acres of good farmland that he worked with their two teen-age sons. I'd never treated the family for anythin' more serious than the flu, though I'd visited the farm the previous summer to see some giant mushrooms that had sprouted in a back pasture. I wasn't an expert on the subject—mycology, I think it's called—but I was able to confirm they were safe to eat.

This day Matt, the older son, met me at the farmhouse. He was the one who'd telephoned me, and he called out, "This way, Dr. Sam. He's bleedin' bad!"

"Who is?"

"Eustace Carey. He's been shot in the left thigh." Carey owned one of Northmont's two general stores and he was somethin' of a troublemaker. Still, that didn't explain what he was doin' bleedin' from a gunshot wound in Jeff Whitehead's pasture. "How'd it happen?"

"Don't know, Dr. Sam."

I left my yellow Runabout parked by the house and walked back through the fields carryin' my medical bag. We came over a slight rise and there they were—Jeff Whitehead and a man from town named Henkle, both standin' over Eustace Carey. They'd tried to fashion a maskeshifit tourniquet around his upper thigh, but it hadn't done much good. I could see at a glance that the wound itself wasn't too serious, though he'd lost a good deal o' blood and that was always dangerous.

"I think I'm dyin', Doc," he said to me.

"Nonsense, Eustace!" I started cuttin' away the trouser leg. "How in hell did this happen?"

"I was walkin' with that gun an' I tripped over a root."

The gun, a long-barreled Colt revolver, lay on the grass nearby. "This is hardly the huntin' season," I commented, going to work on the wound.

"We were shootin' at woodchucks," Jeff Whitehead volunteered. I turned to look at his son Matt and at Rudy Henkle. "All four of you? Where's your wife an' younger boy, Jeff?"

"In town, doin'the shoppin'."

"You know I gotta report gunshot wounds to the sheriff."

"Sure," the wounded man said. "Report it."

On the way back to town fate played one of its crazy tricks.

When I finished patchin' him up the best I could, I suggested we ride into my office where I could try to probe for the bullet. "We may have to put you in the hospital over in Felix for a few days, but you'll pull through all right." As I was talkin' I picked up the revolver and took it along, and while the other three were busy carryin' Eustace to my car I broke open the weapon and examined the cartridges. The gun was fully loaded. It hadn't been fired. Whoever shot Eustace Carey, it wasn't Eustace himself.

I was just approachin' the county road intersection, castin' a glance at my patient to see how he was managin' the trip, when a tan Packard traveling at high speed cut across my path. I tried to slam on my brakes, but it was too late. The front of my Pierce-Arrow hit the right front fender of the Packard with a crunch.

I was out of the car in an instant, runnin' to see if the other driver was injured. He was a short slim man wearin' a drivin' cap to shield his eyes from the sun. He lifted his head as I approached and muttered somethin' in a language that sounded like French. I had the distinct impression he was cursin' me.

"Sorry about this," I told him. "I'm a doctor. I have an injured man in the car."

Without a word he tried to back his car and go around me, but his front fender was so badly crumpled that the wheel wouldn't move. Jeff and his son and Henkle were followin' me in the

Whitehead car and now they piled out to see if they could help. The arrival of these others seemed to further disturb the driver. "Look here," he said finally, speakin' English with a thick accent, "get me out of this. I must be on my way!"

I turned to Jeff Whitehead. "My car will still run. Can you tow him into town with yours while I get Eustace to my office? I'm concerned about his leg."

"Sure, Dr. Sam. You go ahead."

I left them at the crossroads, and it was obvious the Frenchman didn't like the idea at all. I figured they'd tow him to Russell's Garage and look over the damage. Meanwhile, I drove Carey to my office and did a better patch job on the wound, but couldn't remove the bullet. I told April to report the gunshot wound to Sheriff Lens, and before long the sheriff hobbled down the street to my office.

I'd grown quite friendly with Sheriff Lens durin' my four years in Northmont, and just a few weeks earlier I'd had to treat him for a sprained ankle suffered when he slipped on a wet spot and fell durin' the ceremonies openin' the new jail. It had been an embarrassin' moment for the sheriff, and the embarrassment was goin' to last till he could walk without that slight limp to remind everyone of his accident.

But the new jail had opened on schedule, the best and biggest in the county, and Sheriff Lens was as proud as he would have been of a new daughter. "Fifteen cells," he'd bragged the day of the openin'. "That's more than the jail at the county seat. You need 'em these days with all the bootleggers around."

Now, as April showed him into my treatment room, he took one look at Eustace Carey and exclaimed, "My God, Eustace! Shot yourself in the leg! You sure the woodchuck didn't pot you from its hole?"

"It ain't funny, Sheriff! I lost a lot o' blood out there—mighta bled to death!"

"You're too mean to bleed to death. Hell, the way you an' Jeff Whitehead been fightin' I'm surprised you'd even set foot on his property." The sheriff squinted. "You sure you weren't trespassin' and Jeff took a shot at you?"

"I shot myself," Carey insisted. "It was an accident."

I finished rewappin' his bandages and remembered the gun I'd picked up. There was no point in keepin' it quiet. I'd brought it in from the car and now I handed it to Sheriff Lens. "Here's his gun. Don't look to me as if it's been fired."

The sheriff sniffed the barrel and then broke open the cylinder. "Oh, sure. Doc. Here's an empty cartridge. And you can still smell the powder."

"Let me see that." I couldn't believe my eyes. Where there had been six unfired bullets before, now there was a recently fired cartridge under the firin' pin. "I don't understand this. I could swear it hadn't been fired when I first examined it."

Sheriff Lens chuckled. "You leave the firearms to me, Doc. You just patch 'em up."

"I'm not crackin' up, Sheriff. I know what I saw." But we were interrupted by the arrival of Jeff Whitehead's older boy, Matt.

"Doc, Sheriff," he said, "I think you should come down to Russell's Garage. That fellow you ran into is causin' quite a rumpus. Hank Russell says he can't fix the car before tomorrow an' the fellow wants another car. Says he's in a hurry. Mebbe he's a gangster or somethin'."

"Never heard of a French gangster," I commented, and Sheriff Lens perked up.

"You say he's French?"

I shrugged. "Seems so to me, but I wouldn't swear to it."

"Let's go see."

I left Eustace in April's care and we accompanied Matt back to Russell's Garage. The Frenchman was arguin' vigorously with Hank Russell when we entered, apparently tryin' to rent a car with which to continue his journey. But cars weren't all that plentiful in Northmont and big Hank Russell just kept shakin' his head.

"What seems to be the trouble here?" Sheriff Lens asked.

The little Frenchman turned and saw the badge pinned to the sheriff's chest. It seemed to throw him into a momentary panic and he looked as if he was about to take off. Then, to my complete amazement, Sheriff Lens had his gun out, pullin' back on the hammer and aimin' it at the little guy in dead earnest.

"Guess you'd better stand right there," he said in a soft voice I hardly ever heard him use.

"What's all this, Sheriff?" Hank Russell asked. "Who is this fella?"

"Unless I'm very much mistaken, he's the notorious Georges Reme, otherwise known as The Eel, a confidence man wanted by the police of two continents. An' I've got him, right here in Northmont!"

It was a moment of triumph for Sheriff Lens, but it was to be short-lived.

As I learned later from the sheriff and from newspaper articles, Georges Reme was a con man who'd worked various swindles in Europe before comin' to America. But the exploits that had earned him the nickname of "The Eel" involved several daring escapes from police captivity. He boasted that no jail could hold him, and he seemed well on the way to provin' it.

The exploit that made the front page of *The New York Times* involved his most recent arrest in Paris. Transported to the Palais de Justice with a dozen other offenders, he managed to separate himself from the adult criminals and hover by a bench where a number of juvenile delinquents were waitin' to be questioned. When one of them was called, Reme took him by the arm and marched him out of the room, posin' as a detective. Once in the Juvenile Court he abandoned the youth and passed a police guard by claimin' he was a secret-service inspector.

The Eel had dropped from sight after that, only to reappear in Boston several weeks later. Posing as a French count with a collection of valuable paintings, he'd fleeced a leading museum out of a large amount of cash. And just a few days ago, according to Sheriff Lens, the Boston police had cornered him in an apartment house where he was staying. Though every exit was guarded, he escaped by posin' as a mailman, after he'd knocked out the real mailman and stolen the uniform.

"Sounds like something out of G. K. Chesterton," I commented.

"Who?"

"A writer. You wouldn't know him, Sheriff."

"Well, I know about The Eel, sure 'nuff! The Boston police say he stole a car from a salesman of carnival supplies an' high-tailed it outa town. They alerted every police department in New England."

Georges Reme merely looked at me and the sheriff an' said, "I will be gone from this town by morning."

"Darned right!" Sheriff Lens agreed. "I already called Boston an' they're sendin' two detectives to take you back tomorrow. I'll just have to put up with you overnight."

"No jail can hold The Eel," he boasted, soundin' very French.

"We'll see." The sheriff took a ring of keys from his pocket and motioned toward the stairs leading up from his office. "Come on."

I followed along, through a heavy barred door that Sheriff Lens unlocked and left open, and then down a passageway lined with empty cells. These cells occupied the entire second floor of the jail, with 11 of the 15 bein' along three outer walls. The buildin' was almost square and the jail corridor ran in an inner square, with the center portion containin' four holdin' cells for overnight drunks and the like. These inside cells, without windows to the outside world, were numbered 1 through 4, with the other numbers alternatin' left and right till they reached, number 16 in the far outer corner.

Sheriff Lens unlocked the door and motioned Reme inside. "This'll be your home till mornin'. I'll bring your supper later."

The cell was about ten feet deep by six feet wide, with a single cot bolted to the wall. There was a toilet and sink and stool, but nothin' else. The glass was raised on a small barred window some six feet off the floor, lettin' in the warm May air. I knew it looked out on the back of Russell's Garage where the blacksmith shop used to be.

As Sheriff Lens pulled the cell door shut and the lock clicked into place, I asked, "How come number 16? You've only got 15 cells."

"Well, yeah, but I skipped 13 'cause it's unlucky."

"Seems to me any cell would be unlucky to a man in jail."

"Yeah, but 13 is unluckier than most. People are funny."

"There was a story by a man named Jacques Futrelle called 'The Problem of Cell 13'."

"Another of your author fellas! You do a peck o' reading, Doc."

"It was about a professor who escaped from a prison cell in a bafflin' manner."

"Huh! 'Nother good reason for not havin' a cell numbered 13!"

I couldn't beat that logic, so I didn't try.

Back at the office my nurse April was all ears. "Tell me what happened, Dr. Sam. I hear tell Sheriff Lens captured a master criminal."

Somehow the idea of little Georges Reme bein' a master criminal brought a chuckle out of me. "Well, it wasn't all that excitin'," I said, but I went on to tell her the details of the automobile accident and the trouble they'd had towin' Reme's car into town with that dented fender. Russell was goin' ahead with the repairs, even though no one knew who'd be payin' the bill.

Later that day I sent Eustace Carey over to the hospital in Felix so they could remove the bullet. I was still puzzled about that revolver, though I thought I had an idea. I was thinkin' it through later that night in my apartment when the telephone rang just after midnight. I thought about Mrs. Hitchins pregnant out at her farm, and about old man Aarons hovering near death. Whoever it was, a phone call that late usually meant a trip out.

But it was Sheriff Lens, more excited than I'd ever heard him before. "Doc, can you come over to the jail right away? I just went back to check the cells an' The Eel is gone!"

"You mean escaped?"

"I don't know what I mean, Doc—he's just gone!"

"I'll be right over," I told him.

When I arrived he had every light in the jail on, and had summoned his two deputies to help in the search. But it was a hopeless task from the beginnin'. There was only one other prisoner in the jail that night—Rudy Henkle, Carey's friend. After Carey had gone off to the hospital Rudy had started drinkin' heavily. He'd broken a window at Dixie's, where they served bootleg whiskey in coffee cups, and generally made a nuisance of himself till Sheriff Lens was forced to arrest him.

Rudy had been given Cell 1, at the opposite end of the building from Cell 16, and he'd slept through the whole thing anyway. Now, sobering up, he called through the bars, "What's goin' on? How's a man to sleep with all the lights on in the middle of the night?"

"Calm down, Rudy," I said. "I'll be in to talk with you later." Then I followed Sheriff Lens along the corridor between the cells to the one where I'd last seen Georges Reme. Cell 16 was empty now like the others, without any evidence that it had ever been occupied, except for a wrinkled blanket on the floor.

"There it is, Doc. He's just vanished!"

"All right," I said. "Now tell me everything that happened since I left you this afternoon."

"Well, not much of anything happened, to tell the truth. I had some food sent in for the prisoner at suppertime and I took it up to him myself 'cause all my deputies had gone home. I tried talkin' with him, but all I got was more of the same—about how he'd be gone by mornin'."

"Exactly how did you bring him the tray? Get one and show me just what you did."

Sheriff Lens grumbled but he went back downstairs for the metal tray on which he brought the food. "I set it on the floor here an' unlocked the cell door. Then I picked it up again and went in."

"Did you lock the cell again once you were inside?"

"No, I left it standin' open. He wasn't goin' anywhere. I had my hand on my gun the whole time an' besides, the barred door at the top of the stairs was locked."

"He could have overpowered you and taken your keys."

"That little squirt?"

"He could have thrown food in your face and been on top of you before you knew it."

"He'd of ended up dead for his trouble, I'll tell you that!"

"All right," I said. There was no use speculatin' on it, since The Eel hadn't escaped that way anyhow. "Then what did you do?"

"Sat there an' watched him eat. Oh, he was a slippery one, all right! No doubt about that! Once when he edged too near the cell door I had to draw my pistol. But he settled back down and finished his food."

"And then?"

"Hell, then I picked up the tray with both hands, swung the cell door shut behind me, and left. These cell doors lock automatically when they're closed, with a latch bolt, but they need a key to re-open 'em. The door at the top o' the stairs has a dead bolt, and I had to unlock it and then lock it again."

"All right. Then what happened?"

"Nothin' much. I already told you about arrestin' Rudy Henkle."

"Tell me again. Tell me about bringin' him to his cell."

"Well, that's just what I did. I had to half carry him up the stairs an' dump him on the cot. I s'pose that's why I put him in the first cell inside the door, so I wouldn't have to lug him too far."

"And The Eel was in Cell 16 at that time?"

"Sure! I didn't turn the lights on down that end because it was after ten an' I figured he was sleepin'. But after I had Rudy stowed away an' locked up tight I took a stroll down there. I could I see him huddled under his blanket."

"But he didn't move or speak?"

"No. I told you he was asleep. Anyway, I went back an' snapped off the light an' locked the door at the top o' the stairs. And then I stayed in my office the rest of the evenin'."

"Is there any other way out of the cell block except through your office?"

"No, sir! Fire Department wanted a back stairs for emergencies, but I told 'em the building is fireproof—it's all brick outside. Besides, a back stairs would have to be locked all the time, so it wouldn't much help in a fire."

I walked to the window and reached up to tug at the bars. They were all firmly in place, and even a man as small as Georges Reme couldn't have wiggled between them. I stooped to pick up the blanket from the floor. "You say he was sleepin' under this?"

"That's right."

An idea struck me. "When you went back to check on him, did you try the cell door to make sure it was locked?"

"'Course I did! It was locked, all right, and he was inside."

"All right. When did you go up again?"

"Henkle started raisin' a fuss about a half hour ago. I could hear him 'cause he was right at the top of the stairs. I went up and he said he'd been havin' a nightmare. This time when I checked The Eel's cell it was empty."

"Let's look outside," I said.

The second-floor cell overlooked the lot behind Russell's Garage, but this late at night there was no one around. I found a lantern sittin' on a barrel and lit it, throwin' an eerie glow on the hard earth.

"One thing, Sheriff," I said. "Was the cell door still locked when you noticed that Cell 16 was empty?"

"Sure was!"

"Any chance Reme was hiding under the bunk?"

"Impossible. I turned on all the lights right away, and I made sure the cell was empty before I unlocked the door. That blanket was on the floor and he was gone."

I bent and picked up something from the ground directly under Reme's cell. "What is it?" Sheriff Lens asked.

"A long piece of string."

"String?"

"It's as if The Eel made himself small enough to fit between those bars and then lowered himself to the ground on this piece of string."

"That's crazy!"

"You got any better idea?"

"No," Sheriff Lens admitted.

"Did he have any string in his pockets when you arrested him?"

"He might have," the sheriff said. "I frisked him for weapons, but I didn't make him empty his pockets. I figured he was only bein' held overnight."

"Then he might even have had some picklocks."

"No, no—anything metal like that I'd have felt when I searched him. Besides, these new jail locks are supposed to be pickproof."

I rolled up the string and slipped it into my pocket. "Then what are we left with? The Eel was in Cell 16 at ten o'clock with two locked doors between him and freedom. Two hours later he was gone, with the doors still locked and the window undisturbed. No one else was even on the same floor with him except Rudy Henkle, and he was asleep in his own locked cell."

"That story you mentioned, Doc, about Cell Number 13—how did the guy escape in that one?"

"It was a complicated method, but basically he managed to get a message to a friend on the outside who helped him."

"Think The Eel had friends on the outside?"

"I don't know what to think right now," I admitted. "Ask me in the mornin'."

"By mornin' The Eel will be halfway to Chicago!"

"I don't think so," I said, studying the back end of Russell's Garage.

April came bustlin' into the office a little after eight the next mornin'. "My, aren't we early this morning!"

"I didn't get much sleep," I told her.

"Did you hear the news about The Eel escapin'? Sheriff Lens will be laughed outa town."

"It'll be too bad if he is. I like the sheriff. He's a good man."

"His spankin'-new, escape-proof jail with fifteen cells! The first real prisoner he gets walks away like the jail was made of paper."

"Do I have any patients this mornin', April?"

"Mrs. Bassett's stoppin' by to get a new prescription, that's all."

"I'll write it out and you can give it to her. I'm goin' out."

"Down to the jail?"

"No. To Russell's Garage."

Though the hour was early, Hank Russell was already smeared with axle grease and crankcase oil. His father before him had been a blacksmith, and when he died Hank had seen the handwritin' on the wall and turned the shop into a garage. He was a good mechanic for a town like Northmont, and it made us feel we were keepin' up with the automotive age.

"Hello, Dr. Sam. How's your patient doing?" he asked me as I entered the garage.

"Which one?"

"Eustace Carey, o' course!"

Carey's wound had completely left my mind. "Oh, I'm sure he's comin' along. They'll probably let him out of the hospital today."

"That's good. Foolish accident."

If it was an accident, I thought. Aloud I asked, "How soon will you have that car repaired?"

"Just finishin' it up. Guess The Eel won't be needin' it now, though. He's probably far away from here."

I walked over and looked at the car. Russell had hammered out the dented fender and the wheel turned freely now. "Anybody else been around?" I asked. "Whitehead's son, maybe?"

"Haven't seen him since yesterday."

I walked over to the jail and found Sheriff Lens on the telephone to the Boston police, tryin' to explain what had happened to his prisoner. When he'd finished, sputterin' and embarrassed, I asked, "Have you released Rudy Henkle yet?"

"Hell, no, Doc. If I have my way he'll stay there till he rots."

"The judge might have somethin' to say about that."

"I been thinkin' about it all night, and I figured out how The Eel escaped. It's the only way he coulda got out! It was like that Cell 13 story you told me about. He took the string from his pocket an' lowered a note out his cell window. Hank Russell saw it from his garage an' come over to read it. The Eel promised money in return for help. So Hank got Rudy Henkle, who was still hangin' around, to help. Rudy pretended to be drunk an' smashed that window so I'd have to arrest him. Once in his cell he managed to get a picklock to The Eel, an' that Frenchman used it. I know our locks are supposed to be pickproof, but who in hell knows what Frenchmen can do?"

"How did Rudy get the picklock to The Eel?" I asked.

"Well, I suppose he slid it along the floor," Sheriff Lens answered, a bit uncertainly.

"But The Eel's cell was in the opposite corner of the building. It was down the corridor and a sharp left turn from Henkle's. There's no way Henkle could have reached it or even seen it from his cell."

"Yeah," the sheriff muttered. "I suppose you're right. But I still think Henkle's involved."

"Suppose you let me talk to him, Sheriff. I might learn something."

He took me up and opened the cell door. Rudy Henkle was seated on the cot, holding his head in his hands. "Hello, Rudy," I said. Behind me, Sheriff Lens had relocked the door.

"When are they goin' to let me outa here, Doc? I don't know nothin' about The Eel's escape."

"But you got drunk and broke a window, Rudy."

"Well, sure ..."

"Why?"

"What do you mean, Doc?"

"Why'd you get drunk? It's not like you."

He looked away. "I don't know."

"Want me to tell you, Rudy? Want me to tell you what happened out at Whitehead's farm yesterday?" Sheriff Lens had walked around the corner to look into Cell 16 again, but I dropped my voice anyway so he wouldn't hear.

"How do you know?"

"I know. When I looked at that Colt revolver it hadn't been fired. But when Sheriff Lens examined it later, after the car accident, it smelled of gunpowder an' there was an empty cartridge in it. Now I know I wasn't blind, so that only left one explanation—there were two Colt revolvers out at Whitehead's farm yesterday, and you guys switched 'em on me while the car was parked right after the accident."

"I don't know what you're—"

"And what do two long-barreled revolvers suggest?"

"What?"

"A duel."

His shoulders slumped, but he said nothin'.

"Those crazy fools fought a duel out there yesterday, didn't they? Whitehead and Eustace Carey, settlin' their old grievances with pistols! Jeff Whitehead's son was his second and you were Carey's second. Only Carey never even got a shot off, did he? Jeff Whitehead plinked him in the leg and then you all suddenly decided you needed a doctor."

"We were damn' fools," Rudy admitted, lifting his head to look at me. "It's a wonder one o' them wasn't killed. When I had sense enough to think it through last night I went out and got good and drunk! But even that didn't help—I passed out here in the cell and dreamed about it all over again. I even heard the shot."

"Shot?"

"It woke me up durin' the night. It was as if a real shot had been fired. But I know I musta been dreamin' about the duel."

I patted his knee. "Don't worry, Rudy. I'll speak to the sheriff about gettin' you out of here."

Sheriff Lens returned and unlocked the cell door for me. I led the way through the second door and waited while he locked it behind us. "What did you find out?" he asked.

"It's just an idea—but I think I know how The Eel did it. I'm goin' to come back here tonight and show you what happened."

The rest of the day dragged on interminably. All the talk in town was about the escape, and even the State Troopers came by to question Sheriff Lens. There was talk of usin' bloodhounds to pick up The Eel's trail, figurin' he'd lit out across country, but as near as I could tell nothin' much was accomplished.

I went back to the jail at dusk and led Sheriff Lens down the street to Russell's Garage. "What we comin' down here for?" he asked. "We should be out chasin' The Eel!"

"I don't think The Eel ever left Northmont, Sheriff, and I'll try to prove it."

"Never left—"

"Keep your voice low," I warned as we moved through the gatherin' darkness at the side of the garage. On our right I could see the jail, and the barred window of The Eel's cell.

"I still say Henkle was in on it," Lens grumbled softly. "An' now I had to let him go."

"Henkle wasn't involved."

"Then how was it possible? There's no other answer!"

"There are at least two other answers, Sheriff."

"What?"

"You see, the whole impossibility is based solely on your testimony. If your story collapses, the impossible escape collapses."

"But—"

“Rudy Heinkle was awakened by what sounded like a shot. He thought it was part of a dream he was havin’, but what if it wasn’t? What if you went back to serve Reme his food and he tried to jump you? You pulled your gun and shot him, Sheriff. Then, terrified at what you’d done, you carried the body out and buried it back here in these weeds. And made up the whole story of The Eel’s impossible escape.”

Sheriff Lens was staring at me in the near darkness, and I could see that his hand had dropped to the gun he carried. “You believe that, Doc?”

“No, I don’t. If that was what happened, you’d have told the truth. Shootin’ a prisoner who’s tryin’ to escape is a lot less damagin’ to your reputation than lettin’ one escape! Besides, I told you there were two possible answers.”

It was then that we heard the noise—somewhere nearby, not 50 feet away—a gentle movement that might have passed unnoticed. Someone was at the side door of Russell’s Garage, workin’ on the lock.

I sprang forward. “Come on, Sheriff, it’s him!”

Georges Reme turned and tried to run, but we were on him in an instant. I held him down while Sheriff Lens got the handcuffs on him. “This time we’ll take better care of you,” I promised.

He was cursin’ in French when we took him inside, and I settled down in the sheriff’s office to explain the correct answer to the problem of Cell 16.

While Georges Reme smoked a cigarette with his cuffed hands, I said, “It was a complex escape method worthy of Futrelle’s ‘Cell 13.’ The Eel didn’t rely on outside help but simply worked from minute to minute, taking advantage of existing conditions. It’s a way of life for him, I imagine, and other criminals could duplicate it if they had skill and daring.”

Sheriff Lens was growing impatient. “How’d he get out of that locked cell?”

“Well, I suppose he had to start with the cell door. You showed me it had a latch bolt that snapped shut when the door closed. But you left the cell door open while he ate, and you even told me you had to draw your gun once when he got too close to it. In that instant, when he was at the open door, Reme managed to jam something—maybe a piece of bread or even a toothpick—into the bolt hole, preventing the bolt from latching completely when the cell door was closed. You were carryin’ the food tray with two hands, Sheriff, and you didn’t have a free hand to try the door and make sure it was locked properly.”

“But I tried it later,” Sheriff Lens insisted.

“I’ll get to that later. My point is that yesterday evening just after supertime Georges Reme was free of his cell. Only the barred door at the top of the stairs stood between him and freedom.”

“But I was down here in the office. Even if he managed to get that door open somehow, he couldn’t of got by me!”

“He didn’t manage to open the door, Sheriff—you opened it for him.”

“When you brought in Rudy Henkle. Remember, Henkle was in Cell Number 1, nearest the stairs. It’s one of that center block of four cells, and it’s at the opposite end of the floor from Cell 16. In fact, as I pointed out earlier, you couldn’t even see Cell 16 from Cell 1. I can assume you left the door at the top of the stairs open, because you would have had your hands full with Rudy and because I’ve seen you leave that door open two times now when I was with you. You have to turn the key to lock it and you just didn’t bother. But for Reme here, hiding in the darkness around the corner of those center cells, it was the chance he was waitin’ for. While your back was turned gettin’ Rudy onto the bunk, he slipped past and went down the stairs to freedom.”

“But I saw him after that in his locked cell!” the sheriff protested.

“You saw somethin’ bulky under a blanket, and with the lights at that end of the floor off you just assumed it was Reme. But The Eel was clever. He couldn’t know you’d be comin’ up with a prisoner at ten o’clock. In fact, for all he knew he’d be alone up there till you checked him in the mornin’ and brought his breakfast. So he thought up an idea to give himself a few precious seconds of time. If you came up in the mornin’ and saw the cell empty, you’d raise the alarm instantly, probably even run back to the stairs before The Eel could escape down them. He needed you at the cell for thirty seconds to a minute while he sneaked around that center cellblock, through the open door and down the stairs.”

“So you knew I left it open. But how did he know?”

The Eel merely smiled, so I answered the question. “He saw you leave it open when you took him up to the cell yesterday, Sheriff.”

“Oh.”

Anyway, before he left his cell after dinner he prepared a dummy under the blanket and then locked it in the cell by simply removin’ the obstruction he’d put into the bolt hole and lettin’ the bolt snap shut.”

“What dummy? You’ve told me how The Eel could escape from a locked cell—now tell me how the dummy could escape!”

“Sheriff, the stolen car Georges Reme was drivin’ belonged to a salesman for carnival supplies. Of all the samples he might have had in that car, what would be the most likely?”

Sheriff Lens looked blank, but Georges Reme smiled. “I compliment you, Doctor,” he said. “I never expected such perception in a town like this.”

“Balloons,” I said simply. “You had a couple of balloons in your pocket, along with the string for them. You inflated them, placed them under the blanket, and dropped the string out the window. Once you were outside the jail, you tugged at the string, pullin’ the balloons through the bars. At least one of them burst, makin’ a noise that sounded like a gunshot to the half-sleepin’ Rudy Henkle.”

“Why’d he bother to pull the balloons out?” Sheriff Lens asked. “Why not leave them there?”

I shrugged. “I suppose he considered it a good trick he might want to use again. And with the balloons gone his escape was all the more bafflin’. That’s why he took the balloons with him, though he dropped a piece of the string.”

“I never saw the string runnin’ out that window.”

“It was dark, and you hadn’t turned on that light, remember? You had only the light by Henkle’s cell.”

Sheriff Lens shook his head. “A lotta things coulda gone wrong with it.”

“I told you The Eel worked from minute to minute. All his escapes have depended on luck and darin’. That’s why I figured he wouldn’t set out on foot across country. He’d already established there were no other cars available here, and if he stole one he might be unfamiliar with its operation. A car like mine is a bit tricky, for instance. So I took a chance that he was hidin’ somewhere nearby, waitin’ for Russell to fix his car so he could steal it a second time.”

“I’ll be damned,” Sheriff Lens said.

Then I turned to The Eel. “Tell me, Georges, where were you hidin’ for almost twenty-four hours?”

At first I didn’t think he’d answer, but then he did. Maybe he was proud of havin’ fooled me that much. “I was inside the barrel beside Russell’s Garage,” he said with a smile. “The one from which you lifted the lantern.”

“Well,” Dr. Sam Hawthorne concluded, “that’s how I solved the mystery an’ made the front pages of the New York papers. But it was all for nothin’, of course. Six months later The Eel escaped from a Boston jail and made his way back to France. He was always a slippery fellow. What about Whitehead an’ Carey and their duel, you ask? That part of the story was far from over. It led to an impossible crime involvin’ an old country inn. But the hour is late, and that’ll have to wait till next time. A small—ah—libation for the road?”

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.