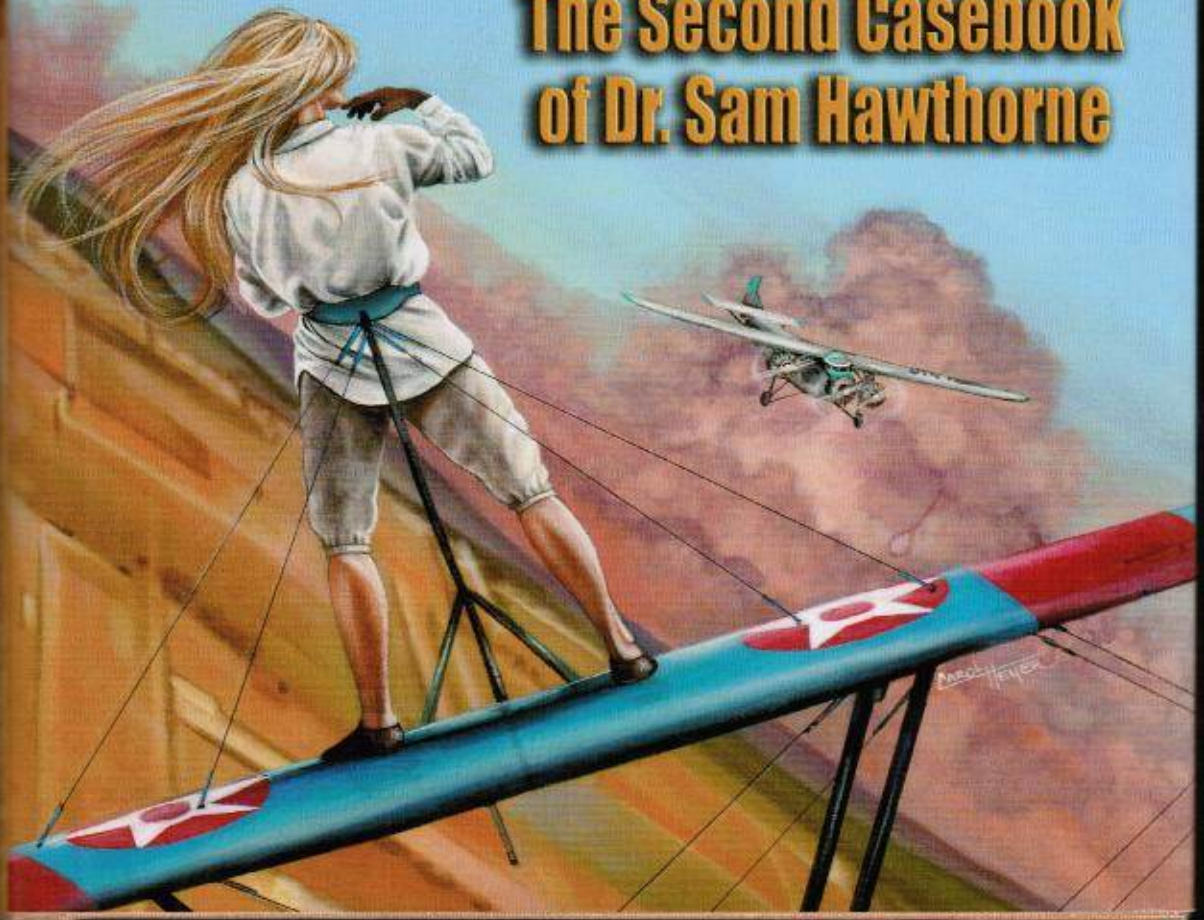


**Edward D. Hoch**

*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 GINGERBREAD HOUSEBOAT

This was in the summer of 1929," Dr. Sam Hawthorne began, warming to the subject as he always did. "My leg's bothering me a bit today, but you can help yourself to a small libation. Oh, and fill my glass again too, will you? Thanks. Now where was I? Oh, yes, the summer of '29. I suppose in a way it was the end of an era, because the country was never really the same after that summer. October brought the stock market crash and the beginning of the Great Depression. But for that summer, life went on as it always had . . ."

We had a little lake not far from Northmont (Dr. Sam continued), and some of the people had cottages where they went in the summer. It was called Chester Lake, after one of the area's early landowners, and it was about a mile wide by maybe five miles long. As it happened, that was the summer I fell in love—with a dark-haired girl named Miranda Grey who was just out of college and spending the summer with her aunt and uncle.

It was my eighth summer in Northmont, my ninth since getting out of medical school, and as my nurse April kept reminding me at every opportunity, it was about time I settled down and got married. The trouble was, in a town as small as Northmont where most families were my patients, it was difficult to work up any romantic interest in someone I'd treated for mumps or chicken pox just a few years earlier. I suppose that was why Miranda's arrival became such a big event in my life. The fact that she was ten years younger than me didn't seem important at all.

Her aunt and uncle, Kitty and Jason Grey, spent the summer at their Chester Lake cottage. Jason was a teacher over in Shinn Corners, so he had the whole summer off. I knew them slightly, though they'd never been my patients. Not, at least, until that day in late June when April announced that Kitty Grey was in my waiting room with her niece Miranda. She'd been giving Miranda a quick tour of Northmont when a windblown speck landed in the young girl's eye. My office was close by and they'd come to me for relief. I was glad to give it. Miranda's big brown eyes teared up as I rolled back the lid and removed the offending speck. I guess it was pretty close to being love at first sight, at least on my part. "Thank you, Doctor," she said, and her voice was like music.

During the next few weeks I saw a great deal of Miranda Grey. I took her for rides in my tan Packard Runabout, and even escorted her to a barn dance on the weekend following the Fourth of July. On Sundays we picnicked at the lake and I found myself becoming a familiar figure at the Grey cottage.

The identical cottage next door was owned by a rather odd but friendly couple, Ray and Gretel Hauser. I knew little about them except that they were from Boston and had some money. Ray was a handsome man in his early forties who dabbled in real estate and stocks. His wife was small and flighty and a bit overweight. They were friends of the Greys and the two couples often dined together. But the Hausers' chief claim to fame was a flat-bottomed houseboat, the *Gretel*, which they launched each spring on the lake's placid waters. It had a shingled roof, fancy windows, and all sorts of gaudy ornamentation on the outside. The first time Miranda saw it she'd remarked, "It looks just like a gingerbread house!"

Mrs. Hauser liked that. "Ray and I are like Hansel and Gretel. When my money runs out we'll start eating the houseboat."

Her husband merely scoffed. "The way the market is climbing we won't have to worry about that!"

On that first day Miranda and I strolled down to the dock to get a better view of the houseboat. Of course Kitty and Jason had been on it plenty of times before, but Miranda hadn't, and Kitty urged Ray to take her aboard.

"Come on, Ray, I want Miranda to see the inside!"

Jason, wearing a red jacket that seemed to be his summer uniform, tried to quiet her, but Kitty was insistent. She was a pretty brown-haired woman in her late thirties, with a sparkling smile, and not at all shy. Despite her age she was closer to the twenties' idea of a flapper than her niece Miranda. Ray Hauser smiled obligingly, as if he was used to her demands, and said, "Sure, let's all go for a cruise."



I followed along, feeling just a bit like an outsider. A month earlier I hadn't known any of these people, except for a nodding acquaintance with the Greys. Suddenly I was like one of the family. "Watch your step," Jason Grey instructed, guiding me up the wobbly wooden gangplank. Even on summer vacation he seemed like a slightly stodgy teacher.

I had to admit the houseboat's interior was impressive. A large central room had comfortable chairs and a table, plus a small pot-bellied stove for chilly evenings. There was a galley for preparing light meals, and a smaller room with bunk beds and a closet. "We can sleep four on board," Hauser said, "though we don't take many overnight cruises on Chester Lake."

"What kind of motors do you have?" I asked.

He led me to the stern.

"Here—twin outboards. I did most of this work myself, a few years back. Bought a used flat-bottomed barge in Boston and built this on it. Picked the motors myself too. I have to keep extra gasoline on board, and they don't push it very fast, but it's better than being towed everywhere. I figure if you own a houseboat you're not out to break any speed records."

Gretel brought out a bottle of good Canadian whiskey and mixed drinks for everyone. A bit to my surprise, Miranda declined. "I don't think we should be violating the law," she said, and her primness was something new to me.

"Oh, come on," I kidded. "Prohibition is ignored by everyone these days."

"Then it should be repealed, shouldn't it?"

I felt oddly embarrassed disagreeing with her in front of her aunt and uncle. Somehow I was too old to be having a lovers' quarrel with this girl just out of college. But I pressed on nevertheless. "Didn't you ever break the law in your whole life?" I asked.

"Oh, everyone's broken the law," Aunt Kitty said, jumping to her defense, trying to soothe things before a real argument developed. "But I can see Miranda's point. She has a principle and she should stick to it."

Hauser changed the subject. "Come on, we'll go out for a little ride."

I helped him start the motors and cast off the lines, and the gingerbread houseboat drifted away from the dock. He'd been right about its slow progress. It took us a good fifteen minutes to cross the lake to the other side.

But I was enjoying it, and so was Miranda.

"I'm sorry I kidded you about not drinking," I told her when we were seated alone on the deck. The others were inside, having another round.

"I went through four years of college confronting things like that, Sam. I didn't think I'd have to face it with someone as mature as you."

"You won't, ever again." I took her hand and held it. We'd started back across the lake and the breeze was in our faces. "Too cool for you?"

"No, I like it."

"Your aunt and uncle are fine people, Miranda. I wish I'd known your dad before he died."

"I was only ten when he went off to war," she said, looking away toward the shoreline. "Some day I hope you can meet my mother in Chicago."

"I hope so."

"Wouldn't you like to sail away like this on a boat some day, and just disappear?"

"What do you mean? Like the people on the *Mary Celeste*?"

"Who were they?"

"It's a famous unsolved mystery—I read about it just recently. It seems that back in 1872 a small sailing ship was found adrift in the Atlantic. Though the seas were calm and there was no evidence of damage or violence on board, the captain, his wife and child, and the crew of seven had all vanished. The mystery of what happened to them has never been solved."

"I think I did read about it once."

"I've helped the local sheriff with a few crimes that were every bit as strange. Sometime I'll tell you about them."

Kitty came out to join us. "You two all friendly again?" "Sure," I told her. "Your niece is going to make me stop drinking."

"Good! Maybe we should all stop."

When Hauser docked the houseboat we thanked them for the ride and went ashore. I watched Gretel Hauser go up to their cottage and push open the door. Then Miranda and I followed her aunt and uncle up to their cottage for dinner.

In those days April had started to question me about Miranda. Especially on Monday mornings, after my weekends at Chester Lake, she'd ask, "Any wedding bells in the future, Dr. Sam?"

"Too soon to tell, April. I got called out twice over the weekend for emergencies. Plays havoc with my love life!"

"Come on, now. I think you like doctoring even more than women!"

"Maybe so. Maybe I should find me a woman doctor."

In truth Northmont's new hospital had taken some of the pressure off my weekends. If people couldn't reach me, there was always someone to help them at the hospital. So on Saturday afternoon, seeing my last patient and closing the office for the weekend, I was ready to drive up to Chester Lake and visit the Greys' cottage again.

Miranda met me at the door, and seemed really glad to see me. "Sam, it seems we've been apart forever!"

"It was a busy week at the office. I'd hoped to drive up and surprise you on Wednesday, but Mrs. Rodgers decided to have her baby."

"Come in. Aunt Kitty and Uncle Jason are next door with the Hausers."

"Good. I'd rather be alone with you anyway."

We settled down to flirtatious small talk, and the next half hour passed quickly. It was nearly six o'clock when the screen door opened and Aunt Kitty came in. She was wearing a colorful summer dress and carrying a sweater. "Miranda," she said breathlessly, "your uncle and I are going out on the houseboat with the Hausers. Can you and Sam find yourselves something to eat?"

"Sure, Aunt Kitty."

I glanced out the door and caught a glimpse of Jason's bright red jacket vanishing inside the houseboat. There was no sign of the Hausers.

"We'll walk down with you and say hello," I suggested.

Kitty smiled at me. "We'd ask you along, but I'm sure you love-birds would rather be alone."

Miranda and I strolled along as Kitty hurried nervously out on the dock and up the gangplank. Ray Hauser came to the ornate latticework door and waved. Then he called to me, "Sam, help me with these mooring lines, will you?"

"Sure thing!" I unhooked the lines and tossed them aboard while Hauser started the engines. I thought I heard Gretel's laugh from somewhere on board, and I imagined they were going out on the lake to do some more drinking — free of Miranda's criticism.

Kitty turned to wave at us once more and then went inside to join the others. Ray Hauser stayed on the deck until finally we waved goodbye and strolled back to the Greys' cottage.

"The four of them seem to be getting on well," I said, holding open the screen door.

"Aunt Kitty could get along with anyone, she's so friendly. I am a bit surprised that Uncle Jason likes them too."

I stood at the front window watching the houseboat drift slowly near the middle of the lake. There were no other boats nearby, though a couple of sails could be seen far down at the other end of the water. "Well, they've pretty much got the lake to themselves. Everyone else must be eating dinner."

"Is that a hint, Sam Hawthorne?"

I laughed and tossed a pillow at her. "Unless you'd rather smooch for a bit."

"Oh — you!"

She busied herself preparing something to eat, while I continued watching the Hausers' houseboat.

I noticed a pair of binoculars hanging from a hook by the window and tried them out. They were powerful ones, army issue from the war, and I could see the houseboat easily with them. No one was on deck, though I could see Jason's red jacket through the window.

"That's odd."

Miranda came up beside me, resting her hand on my back. "What is?"

"The motors are off and they're just drifting."

"They often do that. I think they go out there to drink."

One of the sailboats from the other end of the lake had come up this way, and as I watched, the drifting houseboat seemed to head straight for it.

Through the binoculars I saw the man on the sailboat maneuver it away just in time, then stand up to shout and shake his fist as the *Gretel* passed him by.

"Could they all be drunk on there?" I wondered. "Hardly! They've only been out for fifteen minutes."

"Still . . ." I took the binoculars and went outside, walking out to the end of the Hausers' dock. As I watched the houseboat turn slowly in the water I could see that no one was steering or controlling it. And there was no sign of any of them.

Miranda came out to join me. "What's the trouble, Sam?"

"I don't like it. There's something wrong. That day we were out Hauser seemed very careful about handling the boat. Today he's just letting it drift."

"They're busy drinking," she scoffed, dismissing my concern.

"Could they all be swimming?"

She shook her head. "My uncle doesn't swim a stroke."

"And there's no sign of them in the water." I lowered the binoculars and glanced over at the Greys' own dock where a little motorboat was tied up.

"Let's take a ride out there and see. You're probably right that they're just sitting around with drinks, but I'd feel better taking a look."

"Oh, all right. Let me turn off the stove."

I started the motor with some difficulty and we headed out toward the houseboat. We still had about two hours of daylight and a few more boats were taking advantage of it. None had come near the Hausers' craft, though, except for the sailboat which brushed by it. I said nothing as we approached, but Miranda spoke softly.

"It seems deserted. Do you think they're . . . in bed?"

"You stay here. I'll go on board for a look."

I got a grip and boosted myself on board. Glancing through one of the windows I could see Jason Grey's red jacket draped over the back of a chair. The door was unlatched and I stepped inside. Surprisingly, there were no glasses or liquor bottles in evidence. Nothing seemed to be disturbed. I had an awful feeling that Miranda had been right. I would find them in the bunk beds.

But these were empty too, as was the little galley and the toilet. The entire houseboat was empty.

The Greys and the Hausers had vanished, leaving the *Gretel* to drift aimlessly in the center of Chester Lake.

We covered the lake, back and forth, for the next hour. I was certain we'd find swimmers or bodies or something that would furnish a clue, but there was nothing. It was as if the lake, or the sky, had swallowed them up.

"Four people! Miranda, what happened to them?" I was pacing the deck nervously. "It's like another *Mary Celeste*!"

"You're letting your imagination run wild, Sam. I'm sure they'll turn up. Let's tow the houseboat to shore and wait."

We attached a tow line and brought it, with some difficulty, back to the Hausers' dock. The little motorboat wasn't built for that sort of work but somehow we managed. The Hauser cottage was locked and there was no sign that any of them had returned.

"I'm going to search the houseboat one more time while it's still daylight," I decided. "Maybe there's a hiding place we missed."

I quickly discovered that the high ceiling of the main room left no space unaccounted for beneath the roof. There was some storage space below the deck, but in the dim light I could find nothing except a half-dozen cans of fuel and some old rags. I checked the narrow closets but they were empty.

There were two half-empty bottles in the whiskey cabinet — apparently the same ones we'd used on my earlier visit. A little icebox in the galley was empty. Except for Jason's red jacket there was not a sign that any of them had been on board the *Gretel*.

I came down the gangplank just as the sun was setting.

"I think I'd better telephone Sheriff Lens," I said.

"Do you really think that's necessary?"

"They're gone, Miranda. Your aunt and uncle, and the Hausers. And I don't know what happened to them. If they're in the lake we have to get a search party organized."

"I suppose you're right," she admitted reluctantly. "I just can't bring myself to believe any of this. It seems they must be playing a joke on us."

"I hope so. But they've had plenty of time to show up if it is a joke."

Very few of the cottages had telephones, but there was one at the Greys'.

I used it to call Sheriff Lens and tell him what had happened.

Chester Lake was nearly 20 miles from Northmont but it was still in the county, and therefore still the province of Sheriff Lens. He responded to my call with two cars full of deputies and townspeople ready to join in the search. Despite the darkness one boatload set out immediately, lighting its way with lanterns, to search the shoreline for washed-up bodies.

"They musta gone swimmin' and got cramps," the sheriff speculated, staring down at the shoreline as the lanterns moved along it in the dark.

"We'll find their bodies."

Miranda, who'd stood up amazingly well to all this, shuddered at his words. She shook her head and argued doggedly, "My uncle doesn't swim. And my aunt is too good a swimmer to drown on a calm lake like this. Besides, Sam was watching the boat through binoculars. He'd have seen them in the water."

"You wasn't watchin' it every minute, was you, Doc? You couldn't see the other side of it now, could you?"

"No," I admitted. "I suppose they could have sneaked off. I suppose a submarine could have surfaced and taken them off the other side when I wasn't looking, but I doubt if that happened. I'll grant you there are ways the four of them could have gotten off that houseboat without attracting attention, but why would they do it? Why would four perfectly normal, sensible, middle-aged people want to disappear and hide from us? It isn't April Fool's Day, you know."

"They'll turn up," Sheriff Lens assured me. He dropped his voice a bit so as not to upset Miranda again. "Or their bodies will."

I stayed up most of the night with the others, until the search parties had covered the entire shoreline. There were no bodies. Around midnight we forced open the door of the Hausers' cottage, searching for a note or clue of some sort, but there was nothing. Everything had been left in perfect order for their return.

Finally, toward dawn, I wakened Miranda long enough to kiss her and say, "I'm going home for some sleep. I'll be back before noon."

It was the sheriff who awakened me a few hours later. I stood aside to let him enter my apartment, at the same instant remembering what he must be there for.

"You've found them!" I said.

"No such luck, Doc. I had people searchin' again first thing this mornin', but there's no sign of them. We went over the houseboat again too."

I sank into a chair, not fully awake yet. "It really is beginning to look like another *Mary Celeste*."

"What's that?"

"A ship that was found in the middle of the ocean, drifting without its crew. No one ever discovered what happened to them."

Sheriff Lens grunted. "Was this recent?"

"No, a long time ago."

"And they never solved it, huh?"

"Something drove the people off the ship, but what? The sea was calm, just as the lake was calm yesterday."

"Could another boat have attacked 'em?"

"A ship might have attacked the *Mary Celeste*, though there was no evidence of it. I don't see how another boat could have gotten close to the *Gretel* yesterday without my noticing it."

"Come on, Doc. I'll drive you back up there. Maybe in the daylight we'll get an idea."

"This isn't like the other cases I've helped you with, Sheriff. In the past there's always been a body, or a crime of some sort. This time we just don't know what happened! And there aren't even any suspects — they've all disappeared!"

"All but one. Miranda Grey's still around."

I glanced at him, thinking he must be kidding me, but his face was dead serious. "Miranda was with me the whole time! How could she have caused their disappearance?"

"Don't know *how*, Doc. But I know *why*. The word is that she stands to inherit a tidy sum with her aunt and uncle both dead. They had some stocks that're showing a good profit these days, an' they got no family. I hear that Miranda is the only heir."

I tried to keep my temper under control. "Sheriff, even if that's true, Miranda couldn't collect a cent unless their bodies were found. Otherwise she'd have to wait years for them to be declared legally dead. It makes no sense to suspect her, even if she hadn't been with me all the time. I think you're jumping to the conclusion there's been foul play when all we really know is that they've disappeared."

"Maybe so," Sheriff Lens admitted. "Anyway, let's get goin'. My deputies might have turned something up."

But when we reached the lake it was much as it'd been the previous night. Miranda came running out to meet me, and I thought for an instant she might throw her arms around me.

"Have you heard anything?" she demanded of the sheriff.

"Not a thing, Miss. We got more people comin' in today to search the shoreline, an' we're going to start dragging the lake."

"I can't believe they're dead!"

We went through the Hausers' cottage again, searching for anything that might be a clue to the mystery. I examined bills from Boston department stores and a Cape Cod tourist court and even one from a plumbing-supply house, but I came up with nothing.

Sheriff Lens, looking over my shoulder, asked, "What sort of plumbing supplies?"

"A hot-water heater they installed themselves."

He grunted and went on with his own searching. The cottage's tiny rooms yielded nothing, and there was no basement to be searched. We trooped back to the place next door more dejected than ever.

"There are no clues," I complained to Miranda. "Nothing I can get my teeth into! They're simply gone!"

All afternoon long deputies and other searchers brought back reports, but they always added up to the same thing. No bodies had been washed up on shore and the men in the rowboats with their grappling hooks had snagged nothing but a fisherman's wading boot and a splintered beer keg.

Finally Sheriff Lens said, "Miranda, we should have photographs of your aunt and uncle to send around to the newspapers. Do you have any good ones?"

She thought for a moment, then her face brightened. "Aunt Kitty showed me a picture of them with the Hausers. It was taken last summer at that amusement park down near Winslow."

"Could you find it?"

"I'll see."

She searched around in the Greys' house without success, then suddenly remembered an attic crawlspace that was reached through a trap door in the bedroom ceiling. "They used it for storage," she explained. I stood on a chair and lifted down a cardboard box as she directed. Inside we found a photograph of the four missing people, smiling at the camera and standing before a sign that read *Sea Serpent Ride — 1001 Thrills!*

I showed it to the sheriff and he gave a customary grunt. "You think a sea serpent swallowed them up?"

"No. The picture was taken last year at an amusement park. But it's a good likeness of all of them."

He took it and promised to give it to the papers. I noticed that Miranda seemed a bit more cheerful, as if finding the picture had given her renewed confidence that the four of them would be found as well. Maybe she was right. I just didn't know.

Late in the afternoon I telephoned April at home, just in case some patient had been trying to reach me with an emergency. But everything was quiet. "Any sign of the missing people?" she asked.

"Not a trace."

"Dr. Sam, I happened to think of something I read in one of them magazines we got around the office. Don't remember if it was true or not, but it was about people jumping overboard from a motorboat for no reason at all and drowning. Turned out there was a big spider hidden on the boat that came out and scared them into jumping."

"A spider?"

"That's right. You think there's something like that hidden on board the *Gretel*?"

"April, it's worth thinking about. Thanks for the tip."

I hung up and went outside, standing there staring at the fancy houseboat and thinking about a horrible creature that might be lurking somewhere inside. I turned and hurried back to the cottage.

"What's up, Doc?" Sheriff Lens asked.

"Sheriff, I need some heavy gloves and a canvas sack. And a flashlight."

"Won't a lantern do?"

"A flashlight would be better. I'll be in cramped quarters."

"On the houseboat?"

"Yes, I'm going on a spider hunt."

The sheriff and Miranda stood on the shore and watched as I boarded the houseboat once more, carrying the flashlight and sack in my gloved hands. I made my way directly to the back of the boat and opened the access door to the storage space in the hull. The gasoline cans and old rags were still there, and at first my slowly moving flashlight picked out nothing else.

But then I saw it, slim and still and very deadly.

I reached out a careful hand, hardly daring to breathe. Another inch — I had it, and I placed it carefully in the canvas sack.

"You find somethin'?" Sheriff Lens asked as I came ashore with my prize.

"I found something."

Miranda stared at the sack in my hand, unable to tear her eyes away.

"What's in there, Sam?"

"The solution to the mystery. And I'm afraid it isn't a very pleasant solution." I opened the sack carefully and showed them what I'd found.

"You see, we had the wrong legend. It wasn't the *Mary Celeste* after all. It was *Hansel and Gretel*."

The hours that followed were sad and distasteful. There was business to be done at the cottage, and when that was over Sheriff Lens had to find a judge to swear out a warrant. Then we drove half of the night to rendezvous with other law officers at a town hall on Cape Cod.

We reached the tourist court just before dawn. There was enough light already to make out the semicircle of little white cabins grouped around the central kitchen and bathroom facilities. As we parked on the road and fanned out across the grass, one officer asked me, "Are you armed, sir?"

"No, I'm just along for the ride."

Saying it, I wondered why I had come all this distance just to see the sad conclusion of a sad story. Then I stood aside as Sheriff Lens pounded on the door. "Police! Open up in there!"

After a few minutes the door of the little tourist cabin opened and a tired face peered out at us in the dawn light. He seemed to recognize me rather than the sheriff. "Hello, Sam," he said quietly. It was Ray Hauser.

"We have a warrant for your arrest," Sheriff Lens announced.

I didn't wait for the rest. I already heard the window squeaking open at the rear of the cabin. I sprinted around in the direction of the sound and caught her as her feet touched the ground.

"I'm sorry," I said. "You didn't make it."

"Oh, Sam —" She collapsed sobbing against my chest as Sheriff Lens came up behind us.

"I have a warrant for your arrest," he intoned, "on two counts of first degree murder. Do you have anything to say?"

Miranda's Aunt Kitty shook her head. "Take me back," she told us. "I'm ready."

Later, at the local police station where we waited out the legal formalities, I talked with Ray Hauser. He sat handcuffed and grim on a hard wooden bench, occasionally taking a puff from a cigarette someone had given him.

"We found their bodies last night," I said. "Your wife Gretel and Kitty's husband Jason, both in the attic crawl-space of your house, where you'd hidden them."

"Yes," he said simply. "You're a smart fellow, Sam. When it didn't work we knew it was only a matter of time, but somehow we were hoping for more time than this."

"When it didn't work," I repeated. "I found it yesterday on the houseboat, and that told me the whole story. We thought it was another *Mary Celeste*, with everyone disappearing from the houseboat, but it was only Hansel and Gretel all over again. Or Jason and Gretel. Remember how the wicked witch tried to bake them in the stove? That was the whole plan. The houseboat wasn't supposed to be found deserted at all — it was supposed to explode and burn and sink. What I found yesterday was a single stick of dynamite with a fuse that had sputtered out before it did its job. Had it gone off as planned, it would have blown a hole below the waterline and ignited those six cans of gasoline you'd stored there. The *Gretel* would have sunk in flames."

"It would have been so simple that way," Hauser said glumly.

"The people from shore, searching for survivors, would have pulled you and Kitty Grey from the water. There'd have been no sign of Jason or your wife Gretel, but their bodies would have washed ashore after a few days. The key to it all, of course, was that Jason and Gretel were never on the houseboat Saturday afternoon. You and Kitty killed them—"

"I did it," he insisted. "Kitty had nothing to do with the actual killings. I gave them a sleeping powder in some whiskey and smothered them. It was supposed to happen on the houseboat, so their bodies would be found soon after the explosion, but Jason drank the whiskey at the cottage and fell asleep. We couldn't carry them onto the boat, so we hid the bodies. After we were rescued we planned to dump the bodies out in the lake in the middle of the night, to be found later."

"It wouldn't have worked, you know. The time of death would have been correct, but an autopsy would have shown neither smoke nor water in their lungs."

"We figured after a few days in the water that wouldn't have mattered. We'd have scorched their clothes to make it look like they'd died in the fire." He took another drag on his cigarette. "Tell me how you know it all, Sam."

Kitty had collapsed and been given a sedative. Though I barely knew Hauser, he seemed to be the one to tell. "There was one thing bothered me from the start. You locked your cottage Saturday, but you hadn't bothered to lock it before when we all went out on the boat. I remember Gretel simply pushing the door open when you returned the day I was along. That got me wondering if the disappearance and the locked cottage were connected. Wondering if you'd planned to disappear all along, or if there was something in the cottage you didn't want found."

"I remembered the gasoline cans on the houseboat — far more than you'd need for extra fuel. I went searching and found the dynamite with its scorched fuse, and then I knew. We never actually saw Gretel or Jason board the boat. I caught a glimpse of Jason's red coat, which you could have been wearing. I thought I heard Gretel's laugh, but it could have been Kitty. We had only Kitty's word, and your word, that they were aboard when you cast off."

"Kitty was nervous and breathless when she told us you were all on the boat — not surprising since she'd just seen the murders committed. Jason and Gretel were already dead, hidden in your cottage crawlspace. We missed the trap door when we searched your cottage, because we weren't looking for it. But I knew it had to be there because the Greys' cottage had one and the two cottages were identical."

Hauser stubbed out his cigarette. "I lit the fuse and we went into the water on the side away from the cottage, in case you were watching. When the boat didn't explode we swam to the opposite shore. I had to steal a car."

He made it sound like the worst thing they'd done.

"Miranda told me Kitty was a good swimmer. But why didn't you just get back on the houseboat?"

"Kitty was still afraid it might explode any minute. Besides we couldn't have explained the absence of our spouses."

I nodded. "You and Kitty — the handsome man and the flapper. A better pair than the stuffy teacher and the overweight Gretel. I can understand your attraction to each other, but did it have to cause murder?"

He lifted his sad eyes to mine. "You have to realize we're deeply in love. We did this for love."

"For love and a bit of money too, I imagine. Gretel referred to it that first day as her money, and Jason had made money in the market. You and Kitty had to kill them both to inherit it from both sides, and a staged accident was the safest way to do that."

"I told you she had nothing to do with killing them."

“You never lifted their bodies into that attic crawlspace by yourself. She must have helped you with that part, at least.”

He didn't even argue the point. “How'd you find us at the tourist court?”

“I figured you two ran away after the boat failed to explode. The question was where. It wouldn't be too close because you had to know the bodies would be found within a few days, when the odor became noticeable. I remembered a bill I came across from the tourist court. You'd gone there once, and maybe you'd gone there again. The sheriff phoned and they confirmed there was a couple fitting your description. You know the rest.”

He shook his head sadly. “I don't know the rest. What happens to us now?”

But that was for a judge and jury to answer. Four months later Hauser was found guilty and sentenced to life in prison. Kitty was never brought to trial. She hanged herself with a torn bedsheet in her cell.

“You're wondering what happened with Miranda and me?” Dr. Sam Hawthorne concluded, pouring himself another drink from the bottle. “Well, that's another story — another mystery, really. It involved a strange happening at the Northmont post office on the very day of the big stockmarket crash. But I'd better save that one for next time.



# A DR. SAM HAWTHORNE CHECKLIST

## BOOKS

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

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

## INDIVIDUAL STORIES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“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.

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

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“The Problem of the Bootleggers Car” [May 1930]. EQMM, July 1982.

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“The Problem of the Santa’s Lighthouse” [December 1931]. EQMM, December 1983.

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

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

“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.

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

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

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

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

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

“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.

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“The Problem of the Vanishing Salesman” [May 1937]. EQMM, August 1992.

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“The Second Problem of the Covered Bridge” [January 1940]. EQMM, December 1998.

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