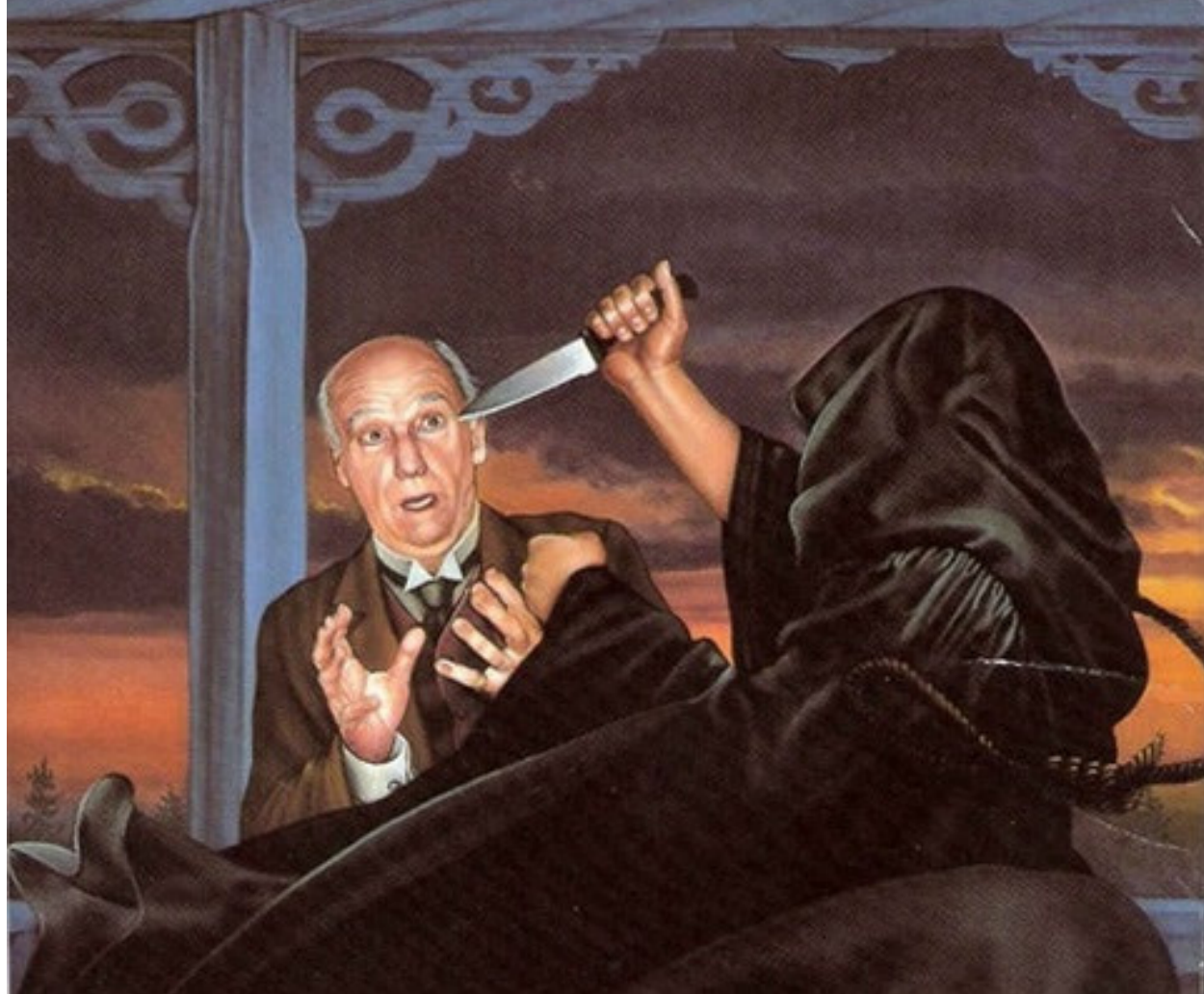


Diagnosis:

IMPOSSIBLE

The Problems of Dr. Sam Hawthorne

EDWARD D. HOCH



Diagnosis: Impossible

The Problems of Dr. Sam Hawthorne

EDWARD D. HOCH

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FOR MARV AND CAROL LACHMAN

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DR. SAM HAWTHORNE: A CHRONOLOGY OF HIS CASES

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Edward D. Hoch
Rochester, New York November, 1995

THE PROBLEM OF THE COVERED BRIDGE

You're always hearin' that things were better in the good old days.

"Well, I don't know about that. Certainly medical treatment wasn't better. I speak from experience, because I started as a country doctor up in New England way back in 1922. That seems a lifetime ago now, don't it? Heck, it *is* a lifetime ago!

"I'll tell you one thing that was better, though — the mysteries. The real honest-to-goodness mysteries that happened to ordinary folks like you an' me. I've read lots of mystery stories in my time, but there's never been anything to compare with some of the things I experienced personally.

"Take, for instance, the first winter I was up there. A man drove his horse and buggy through the snow into a covered bridge, and never came out t'other end. All three vanished off the face of the earth, as if they'd never existed!

"You want to hear about it? Heck, it won't take too long to tell. Pull up your chair while I get us — ah — a small libation."

I'd started my practice in Northmont on January 22, 1922 (the old man began). I'll always remember the date, 'cause it was the very day Pope Benedict XV died. Now I'm not a Catholic myself, but in that part of New England a lot of people are. The death of the Pope was bigger news that day than the openin' of Dr. Sam Hawthorne's office. Nevertheless, I hired a pudgy woman named April for a nurse, bought some second-hand furniture, and settled in.

Only a year out of medical school, I was pretty new at the game. But I made friends easily, 'specially with the farm families out along the creek. I'd driven into town in my 1921 *Pierce-Arrow Runabout*, a blazin' yellow extravagance that set my folks back nearly \$7,000 when they gave it to me as a graduation gift. It took me only one day to realize that families in rural New England didn't drive *Pierce-Arrow Runabouts*. Fact is, they'd never even seen one before.

The problem of the car was solved quickly enough for the winter months when I found out that people in this area lucky enough to own automobiles cared for them during the cold weather by drainin' the gas tanks and puttin' the cars up on blocks till spring arrived. It was back to the horse an' buggy for the trips through the snow, an' I figured that was okay by me. In a way it made me one of them.

When the snow got too deep they got out the sleighs. This winter, though, was provin' unusually mild. The cold weather had froze over the ice on Snake Creek for skatin', but there was surprisin' little snow on the ground and the roads were clear.

On this Tuesday mornin' in the first week of March I'd driven my horse an' buggy up the North Road to the farm of Jacob an' Sara Bringlow. It had snowed a couple of inches overnight, but nothin' to speak of, and I was anxious to make my weekly call on Sara. She'd been ailin' since I first came to town and my Tuesday visits to the farm were already somethin' of a routine.

This day, as usual, the place seemed full o' people. Besides Jacob and his wife, there were the three children—Hank, the handsome 25-year old son who helped his pa work the farm, and Susan an' Sally, the 16-year-old twin daughters. Hank's intended, Millie O'Brian, was there too, as she often was those days. Millie was a year younger than Hank, an' they sure were in love. The wedding was already scheduled for May, and it would be a big affair. Even the rumblings 'bout Millie marryin' into a non-Catholic family had pretty much died down as the big day grew nearer.

"'Lo, Dr. Sam," Sally greeted me as I entered the kitchen.

I welcomed the warmth of the stove after the long cold drive. "Hello, Sally. How's your ma today?"

"She's up in bed, but she seems pretty good."

"Fine. We'll have her on her feet in no time."

Jacob Bringlow and his son entered through the shed door, stampin' the snow from their boots. "Good day, Dr. Sam," Jacob said. He was a large man, full of thunder like an Old Testament prophet. Beside him, his son Hank seemed small and slim and a bit underfed.

"Good day to you," I said. "A cold mornin'!"

"'Tis that. Sally, git Dr. Sam a cup o' coffee—can't you see the man's freezin'?"

I nodded to Hank. "Out cuttin' firewood?"

"There's always some to cut."

Hank Bringlow was a likeable young chap about my own age. It seemed to me he was out of place on his pa's farm, and I was happy that the wedding would soon take him away from there. The only books an' magazines in the house belonged to Hank, and his manner was more that of a funlovin' scholar than a hard-workin' farmer. I knew he and Millie planned to move into town after their marriage, and I 'spected it would be a good thing for both of 'em.

Millie always seemed to be workin' in the kitchen when I made my calls. Maybe she was tryin' to convince the family she could make Hank a good wife. By the town's standards she was a pretty girl, though I'd known prettier ones at college.

She carefully took the coffee cup from young Sally, an' brought it to me as I found a place to sit. "Just move those magazines, Dr. Sam," she said.

"Two issues of *Hearst's International*?" It wasn't a magazine frequently found in farmhouses.

"February and March. Hank was readin' the new, two-part Sherlock Holmes story."

"They're great fun," I admitted. "I read them a lot in medical school." Her smile glowed at me. "Mebbe you'll be a writer like Dr. Conan Doyle," she said.

"I doubt that." The coffee was good, warming me after the cold drive. "I really should see Mrs. Bringlow an' finish this later."

"You'll find her in good spirits."

Sara Bringlow's room was at the top of the stairs. The first time I went in, back in January, I found a weak, pale woman in her fifties with a thickened skin and dulled senses, who might have been very close to death. Now the scene was different. Even the room seemed more cheerful, an' certainly Sara Bringlow was more vividly alive than I'd ever seen her. Sittin' up in bed, with a bright pink shawl thrown over her shoulders, she welcomed me with a smile. "See, I'm almost all better! Do you think I can git up this week?"

Her illness today would probably be classed as a form of thyroid condition called myxedema, but we didn't use such fancy words back then. I'd treated her, an' she was better, an' that was all I cared about.

"Tell you what, Sara, you stay in bed till Friday an' then you can get up if you feel like it." I winked at her 'cause I knew she liked me to. "If truth be known, I'll bet you been sneakin' out of that bed already!"

"Now how would you know that, Doctor?"

"When Sally met me at the door I asked how you were and she said you were up in bed but seemed pretty good. Well now, where else would you be? The only reason for her sayin' it like that was if you'd been up and about sometime recently."

"Land sakes, you should be a detective, Dr. Sam!"

"I have enough to do bein' a doctor." I took her pulse and blood pressure as I talked. "I see we had some more snow this mornin'."

"Yes indeed! The children will have to shovel off the ice before they go skatin' again."

"The wedding's gettin' mighty close now, isn't it?" I suspected the forthcomin' nuptials were playin' a big part in her recovery.

"Yep, just two months away. It'll be a happy day in my life. I s'pose it'll be hard on Jacob, losin' Hank's help around the farm, but he'll manage. I told him the boy's twenty-five now — got to lead his own life."

"Millie seems like a fine girl."

"Best there is! Catholic, of course, but we don't hold that agin' her. 'Course her folks would rather she married Walt Rumsey on the next farm, now that he owns it an' all, but Walt's over thirty — too old for a girl like Millie. I 'spect she knowed that too, when she broke off with him."

There was a gentle knock on the door and Susan, the other twin, came in. "Momma, Hank's gettin' ready to go. He wants to know about that applesauce for Millie's ma."

"Land sakes, I near forgot! Tell him to take a jar off the shelf in the cellar."

After she'd gone I said, "Your daughters are lovely girls."

"They are, aren't they? Tall like their father. Can you tell them apart?"

I nodded. "They're at an age where they want to be individuals. Sally's wearin' her hair a mite different now."

"When they were younger, Hank was always puttin' them up to foolin' us, changin' places and such."

Then, as she saw me close my bag, her eyes grew serious for a minute. "Dr. Sam, I *am* better, aren't I?"

"Much better. The thickenin' of your skin is goin' away, and you're much more alert."

I left some more of the pills she'd been takin' and went back downstairs. Hank Bringlow was bundled into a fur-collared coat, ready for the trip to Millie's house. It was about two miles down the windin' road, past the Rumsey farm and across the covered bridge.

Hank picked up the quart jar of applesauce and said, "Dr. Sam, why don't you ride along with us? Millie's pa hurt his foot last week. He'd never call a doctor for it, but since you're so close maybe you should take a look." Millie seemed surprised by his request, but I had no objection. "Glad to. I'll follow you in my buggy."

Outside, Hank said, "Millie, you ride with Dr. Sam so he doesn't get lost." She snorted at that. "The road doesn't go anywhere else, Hank!" But she climbed into my buggy an' I took the reins. "I hear tell you've got yourself a fancy yellow car, Dr. Sam."

"It's up on blocks till spring. This buggy is good enough for me." Mine was almost the same as Hank's — a four-wheeled carriage with a single seat for two people, pulled by one horse. The fabric top helped keep out the sun and rain, but not the cold. And ridin' in a buggy during a New England winter could be mighty cold!

The road ahead was windin', with woods on both sides. Though it was nearly noon, the tracks of Hank's horse an' buggy were the only ones ahead of us in the fresh snow. Not many people came up that way in the winter. Before we'd gone far, Hank speeded up and disappeared from sight round a bend in the road.

"Hank seems so unlike his pa," I said, making conversation.

"That's because Jacob is his stepfather," Millie explained. "Sara's first husband — Hank's real father — died of typhoid when he was a baby. She remarried and then the twins were born."

"That explains the gap."

"Gap?"

"Nine years between Hank and his sisters. Farm families usually have their children closer together."

Hank's buggy was still far enough ahead to be out of sight, but now the Rumsey farm came into view. We had to pause a minute as Walt Rumsey blocked the road with a herd of cows returnin' to the barn. He waved and said, "Hank just passed."

"I know," Millie called back. "He goes so fast we can't keep up with him." When the cows were gone I speeded up, still following the track of Hank's buggy in the snow. As we rounded the next corner I thought we'd see him, 'cause the road was now straight and the woods on both sides had ended. But there was only the covered bridge ahead, and the empty road runnin' beyond it to the O'Brian farm.

"Where is he?" Millie asked, puzzled.

"He must be waitin' for us inside the bridge." From our angle we couldn't yet see through it all the way.

"Prob'ly," she agreed with a chuckle. "He always says that covered bridges are kissin' bridges, but that's not true at all."

"Where I come from —" I began, and then paused. The interior of the bridge could be seen now, and no horse an' buggy were waitin' inside. "Well, he certainly went in. You can see the tracks in the snow."

"But—" Millie was half standing now in her seat. "Something's there on the floor of the bridge. What is it?"

We rode up to the bridge entrance and I stopped the horse. There were no windows cut into the sides of this covered bridge, but the light from the ends and from between the boards was enough to see by. I got down from the buggy. "It's his jar of applesauce," I said. "It smashed when it fell from the buggy."

But Millie wasn't lookin' at the applesauce. She was starin' straight ahead at the unmarked snow beyond the other end of the fifty-foot bridge. "Dr. Sam!"

"What is it?"

"There are no tracks goin' off the bridge! He came into it, but he didn't leave it! Dr. Sam, *where is he?*"

She was right, by gum! The tracks of Hank's horse an' buggy led into the bridge. Fact is, the damp imprint of the meltin' snow could be seen for several feet before it gradually faded away.

But there was no horse, no buggy, no Hank Bringlow. Only the broken jar of applesauce he'd been carrying.

But if he hadn't disturbed the snow at the far end of the bridge, he must be — he *had* to be — still here! My eyes went up to the patterned wooden trusses that held the bridge together. There was nothing — nothing but the crossbeams and the roof itself. The bridge was in remarkably good shape, protected from weathering by its roof. Even the sides were sturdy and unbroken. Nothin' bigger than a squirrel could've fit between the boards.

"It's some sort of trick," I said to Millie. "He's got to be here!"

"But *where?*"

I walked to the other end of the bridge and examined the unmarked snow. I peered around the corner o' the bridge at the frozen surface of Snake Creek. The skaters had not yet shoveled off the snow, and it was as unmarked as the rest. Even if the horse an' buggy had passed somehow through the wooden floor or the sides o' the bridge, there was no place they could've gone without leavin' a mark. Hank had driven his buggy into the bridge with Millie an' me less than a minute behind him, dropped his quart jar o' applesauce, and vanished.

"We've got to get help." I said. Instinct told me I shouldn't disturb the snow beyond the bridge by goin' forward to Millie's house. "Wait here an' I'll run back to Rumsey's farm."

I found Walt Rumsey in the barn with his cows, forkin' hay out of the loft. "'Lo, Doc," he called down to me. "What's up?"

"Hank Bringlow seems to have disappeared. Darnedest thing I ever saw. You got a telephone here?"

"Sure have, Doc." He hopped down to the ground. "Come on in the house."

As I followed him through the snow I asked, "Did Hank seem odd in any way when he went past you?"

"Odd? No. He was bundled up against the cold, but I knew it was him. I kept my cows to the side o' the road till he passed."

"Did he say anything?"

"No, just waved."

"Then you didn't actually see his face or hear his voice?"

Walt Rumsey turned to me. "Wae-el, no. But hell, I've known Hank mosta my life! It was him, all right."

An' I s'pose it had to be. No substitution o' drivers could've been made anywhere along the road, and even if a substitution had been made, how did the substitute disappear?

I took the phone that Walt Rumsey offered, cranked it up, and asked for the Bringlow farm. One of the twins answered. "This is Dr. Sam. We seem to have lost your brother. He didn't come back there, did he?"

"No. Isn't he with you?"

"Not right now. Your pa around?"

"He's out in the field somewhere. You want Momma?"

"No. She should stay in bed." No need to bother her yet. I hung up an' called the O'Brian farm with the same results. Millie's brother Larry answered the phone. He'd seen nothin' of Hank, but he promised to start out on foot toward the bridge at once, searchin' for buggy tracks or footprints. "Any luck?" Rumsey asked when I'd finished.

"Not yet. You didn't happen to watch him after he passed, did you?" Rumsey shook his head. "I was busy with the cows."

I went back outside and headed for the bridge, with Rumsey taggin' along. Millie was standin' by my horse an' buggy, lookin' concerned. "Did you find him?" she asked.

I shook my head. "Your brother's on his way over."

While Rumsey and I went over every inch of the covered bridge, Millie simply stood at the far end, watchin' for her brother. I guess she needed him to cling to just then. Larry O'Brian was young, handsome, an' likeable — a close friend of both Hank Bringlow an' Walt Rumsey. My nurse April told me

that when Walt inherited the farm, after his folks' death, both Larry and Hank helped him with the first season's planting. She'd also told me that despite their friendship Larry was against Hank marryin' his sister. P'raps, like some brothers, he viewed no man as worthy of the honor.

When Larry arrived he had nothing new to tell us. "No tracks between here an' the farm," he confirmed.

I had a thought. "Wait a minute! If there aren't any tracks, how in heck did you get over here this mornin', Millie?"

"I was with Hank at his place last night. When the snow started, the family insisted I stay over. We only got a couple of inches, though." She seemed to sense an unasked question, and she added, "I slept with the twins in their big bed."

Larry looked at me. "What d'you think?"

I stared down at the smashed quart of applesauce which everyone had carefully avoided. "I think we better call Sheriff Lens."

Sheriff Lens was a fat man who moved slowly and thought slowly (Doctor Sam continued). He'd prob'ly never been confronted with any crime bigger than buggy stealin' — certainly nothin' like the disappearance from the covered bridge. He grunted and rasped as he listened to the story, then threw up his hands in dismay. "It couldn'ta happened the way you say. The whole thing's impossible, an' the impossible jest don't make sense. I think you're all foolin' me — maybe havin' an April Fool joke three weeks early."

It was about then that the strain finally got to Millie. She collapsed in tears, and Larry and I took her home. Their pa, Vincent O'Brian, met us at the door. "What is this?" he asked Larry. "What's happened to her?"

"Hank's disappeared."

"Disappeared? You mean run off with another woman?"

"No, nothin' like that."

While Larry helped Millie to her room, I followed Vincent into the kitchen. He wasn't the hulkin' ox of a man that Jacob Bringlow was, but he still had the muscles of a lifetime spent in the field. "Hank wanted me to come along," I explained. "Said you'd hurt your foot."

"It's nothin'. Twisted my ankle choppin' wood."

"Can I see it?"

"No need." But he pulled up his pants leg reluctantly and I stooped to examine it. Swellin' and bruisin' were pronounced, but the worst was over.

"Not too bad," I agreed. "But you should be soakin' it." Glancing around to be sure we weren't overheard, I lowered my voice and added, "Your first thought was that Hank Bringlow had run off with another woman. Who did you have in mind?"

He looked uneasy. "Nobody special."

"This may be serious, Mr. O'Brian."

He thought about it and finally said, "I won't pretend I'm happy about my daughter marryin' a non-Catholic. Larry feels the same way. Besides, Hank fools around with the girls in town."

"For instance?"

"For instance Gert Page at the bank. Wouldn't be surprised he run off with her."

I saw Millie comin' back downstairs and I raised my voice a bit. "You soak that ankle now, in good hot water."

"Has there been any word?" Millie asked. She'd recovered her composure, though her face still lacked color.

"No word, but I'm sure he'll turn up. Was he in the habit of playin' tricks?"

"Sometimes he'd fool people with Susan an' Sally. Is that what you mean?"

"Don't know what I mean," I admitted. "But he seemed anxious for you to ride with me. Maybe there was a reason."

Gert Page was a hard-eyed blonde girl of the sort who'd never be happy in a small New England town.

She answered my questions 'bout Hank Bringlow with a sullen distrust she might have felt towards all men.

I stayed for lunch, and when no word came I headed back to town alone. The Sheriff and some others were still at the covered bridge when I rode through it, but I didn't stop. I could see they'd gotten nowhere toward solvin' the mystery, and I was anxious to get to the bank before it closed.

"Do you know where he is, Gert?"

"How would I know where he is?"

"Were you plannin' to run off with him before his marriage?"

"Ha! Me run off with him? Listen, if Millie O'Brian wants him that bad, she can have him!" The bank was closin' and she went back to countin' the cash in her drawer. "B'sides, I hear tell men get tired of married life after a bit. I just might see him in town again. But I sure won't run off with him and be tied to one man!"

I saw Roberts, the bank's manager, watchin' us and I wondered why they kept a girl like Gert on the payroll. I 'spected she was most unpopular with the bank's lady customers.

As I left the bank I saw Sheriff Lens enterin' the general store across the street. I followed and caught him at the pickle barrel. "Anything new, Sheriff?"

"I give it up, Doc. Wherever he is, he ain't out by the bridge."

The general store, which was right next to my office, was a cozy place with great wheels of cheese, buckets o' flour, an jars o' taffy kisses. The owner's name was Max, and his big collie dog always slept on the floor near the potbellied stove. Max came around the counter to join us and said, "Everyone's talkin' about young Hank. What do you think happened?"

"No idea," I admitted.

"Couldn't an aeroplane have come over an' picked up the whole shebang?"

"I was right behind him in my buggy. There was no aeroplane." I glanced out the window and saw Gert Page leavin' the bank with the manager, Roberts. "I hear some gossip that Hank was friendly with Gert Page. Any truth to it?"

Max scratched the stubble on his chin and laughed. "Everybody in town is friendly with Gert, includin' ol' Roberts there. It don't mean nothin'."

"I guess not," I agreed. But if it hadn't meant anything to Hank Bringlow, had it meant somethin' to Millie's pa an' brother?

Sheriff Lens and I left the general store together. He promised to keep me informed and I went next door to my office. My nurse April was waitin' for all the details. "My God, you're famous, Dr. Sam! The telephone ain't stopped ringin'!"

"Hell of a thing to be famous for. I didn't see a thing out there."

"That's the point! Anyone else they wouldn't believe — but you're somethin' special."

I sighed and kicked off my damp boots. "I'm just another country doctor, April."

She was a plump jolly woman in her thirties, and I'd never regretted hirin' her my first day in town. "They think you're smarter'n most, Dr. Sam."

"Well, I'm not."

"They think you can solve this mystery."

Who else had called me a detective that day? Sara Bringlow? "Why do they think that?"

"I guess because you're the first doctor in town ever drove a *Pierce-Arrow* car."

I swore at her but she was laughin' and I laughed too. There were some patients waitin' in the outer office and I went to tend to them. It was far from an ordinary day, but I still had my practice to see to. Towards evening, by the time I'd finished, the weather had turned warmer. The temperature hovered near 40 and a gentle rain began to fall.

"It'll git rid o' the snow," April said as I left for the day.

"Ayah, it'll do that."

"Mebbe it'll uncover a clue."

I nodded, but I didn't believe it. Hank Bringlow had gone far away, and the meltin' snow wasn't about to bring him back.

The telephone woke me at four the next mornin'. "This is Sheriff Lens, Doc," the voice greeted me. "Sorry to wake you, but I gotta bad job for you."

"What's that?"

"We found Hank Bringlow."

"Where?"

"On the Post Road, about ten miles south o' town. He's sittin' in his buggy like he jest stopped for a rest."

"Is he—?"

"Dead, Doc. That's what I need you for. Somebody shot him in the back o' the head."

It took me near an hour (Doctor Sam went on) to reach the scene, drivin' the horse an' buggy fast as I could over the slushy country roads. Though the night was mild, the rain chilled me to the bone as I rode through the darkness on that terrible mission. I kept thinkin' about Millie O'Brian, and Hank's ma only just recoverin' from her lengthy illness. What would the news do to them?

Sheriff Lens had some lanterns out in the road, and I could see their eerie glow as I drove up. He helped me down from the buggy an' I walked over to the small circle of men standin' by the other rig. Two of them were deputies, another was a farmer from a nearby house. They hadn't disturbed the body — Hank still sat slumped in a corner o' the seat, his feet wedged against the front o' the buggy.

I drew a sharp breath when I saw the back of his head. "Shotgun," I said curtly.

"Can you tell if it happened here, Doc?"

"Doubtful." I turned to the farmer. "Did you find him?"

The man nodded and repeated a story he'd obviously told 'em already. "My wife heard the horse. We don't git nobody along this road in the middle o' the night, so I come out to look around. I found him like this."

In the flare of lantern light I noticed somethin' — a round mark on the horse's flank that was sensitive to my touch. "Look here, Sheriff."

"What is it?"

"A bum. The killer loaded Hank into the buggy an' then tied the reins. He singed the horse with a cigar or somethin' to make it run. Could've run miles before it stopped from exhaustion."

Lens motioned to his deputies. "Let's take him into town. We won't find nothin' else out here." He turned back to me. "At least he's not missin' any more."

"No, he's not missin'. But we still don't know what happened on that bridge. We only know it wasn't any joke."

The funeral was held two days later, on Friday mornin', with a bleak winter sun breakin' through the overcast to throw long March shadows across the tombstones of the little town cemetery. The Bringlows were all there, 'course, and Millie's folks, and people from town. Afterwards many of us went back to the Bringlow farm. It was a country custom, however sad the occasion, and many neighbors brought food for the family.

I was sittin' in the parlor, away from the others, when the bank manager, Roberts, came up to me.

"Has the Sheriff found any clues yet?" he asked.

"Nothin' I know of."

"It's a real baffler. Not just the *how*, but the *why*."

"The *why*?"

He nodded. "When you're goin' to kill someone you just do it. You don't rig up some fantastic scheme for them to disappear first. What's the point?"

I thought about that, and I didn't have a ready answer. When Roberts drifted away I went over to Sara Bringlow and asked how she was feelin'. She looked at me with tired eyes and said, "My first day outta bed. To bury my son."

There was no point arguin' with a mother's grief. I saw Max bringin' in a bag of groceries from his store and I started over to help him. But my eye caught somethin' on the parlor table. It was the March issue of *Hearst's International*. I remembered Hank had been reading the Sherlock Holmes story in the February and March issues. I located the February one under a stack o' newspapers and turned to the Holmes story.

It was in two parts, and called "The Problem of Thor Bridge."

Bridge?

I found a quiet corner and sat down to read.

It took me only a half hour, and when I finished I sought out Walt Rumsey from the next farm. He was standin' with Larry O'Brian on the side porch, an' when he saw me comin' he said, "Larry's got some good bootleg stuff out in his buggy. Want a shot?"

"No, thanks, Walt. But you can do somethin' else for me. Do you have a good stout rope in your barn?"

He frowned in concentration. "I s'pose so."

"Could we ride over there now? I just read somethin' that gave me an idea about how Hank might've vanished from that bridge."

We got into his buggy an' drove the mile down the windin' road to his farm. The snow was melted by this time, and the cows were clustered around the water trough by the side of the barn. Walt took me inside, past empty stalls an' milk cans an' carriage wheels, to a big shed attached to the rear. Here, among assorted tools, he found a twelve-foot length of worn hemp. "This do you?"

"Just the thing. Want to come to the bridge with me?"

The ice of the creek was still firm, though the road had turned to mud. I handed one end o' the rope to Rumsey and played out the other end till it reached the edge of the frozen creek. "What's this all about?" he asked.

"I read a story 'bout a gun that vanished off a bridge by bein' pulled into the water."

He looked puzzled. "But Hank's buggy couldn'ta gone into the crick. The ice was unbroken."

"All the same I think it tells me somethin'. Thanks for the use o' the rope." He took me back to the Bringlow house, puzzled but unquestioning. The mourners were beginning to drift away, and I sought out Sheriff Lens. "I've got an idea about this mystery, Sheriff. But it's sort of crazy."

"In this case, even a crazy idea would be welcome."

Jacob Bringlow, tall and unbent from the ordeal of the funeral, came around the corner o' the house with one of the twins. "What is it, Sheriff?" he asked. "Still searchin' for clues?"

"We may have one," I said. "I got an idea."

He eyed me up an' down, p'raps blamin' me for what happened to his stepson. "You stick to your doctorin'," he said with a slur, and I knew he'd been samplin' Larry's bottle. "Go look at my wife. She don't seem right to me."

I went inside and found Sara pale and tired-looking. I ordered her up to bed and she went without argument. Max was leavin', and so was the O'Brian family. The banker had already gone. But when I went back on the porch, Jacob Bringlow was still waitin' for me. He was lookin' for trouble. Maybe it was a mixture of grief and bootleg whiskey.

"Sheriff says you know who killed Hank."

"I didn't say that. I just got an idea."

"Tell me. Tell us all!"

He spoke loudly, and Larry O'Brian paused with Millie to listen. Walt Rumsey came over too. In the distance, near the buggies, I saw Gert Page from the bank. I hadn't seen her at the funeral, but she'd come to pay some sort of last respects to Hank.

"We can talk about it inside," I replied, keepin' my voice down.

"You're bluffin'! You don't know a thing!"

I drew a deep breath. "All right, if you want it like this. Hank was reading a Sherlock Holmes story before he died. There's another one he prob'ly read years ago. In it Holmes calls Watson's attention to the curious incident of the dog in the night-time. I could echo his words."

"But there was no dog in the night-time," Sheriff Lens pointed out. "There's no dog in this whole danged case!"

"My mistake," I said. "Then let me direct your attention to the curious incident of the cows in the daytime."

It was then that Walt Rumsey broke from the group and ran towards his buggy. "Grab him, Sheriff!" I shouted. "He's your murderer!"

I had to tell it all to April, back at my office, because she hadn't been there and wouldn't believe it otherwise. "Come on, Dr. Sam! How did the cows tell you Walt was the killer?"

"He was bringin' them back to the barn, across the road, as we passed. But from where? Cows don't graze in the snow, and their waterin' trough is next to the barn, not across the road. The only possible reason for the cows crossin' the road in front of us was to obliterate the tracks of Hank's horse an' buggy."

"Except for those cows, the snow was unbroken by anything but the single buggy track—all the way from the Bringlow farm to the covered bridge. We know Hank left the farm. If he never reached the bridge, whatever happened to him had to happen at the point where those cows crossed the road."

"But the tracks to the bridge! You were only a minute behind him, Dr. Sam. That wasn't long enough for him to fake those tracks!"

I smiled, runnin' over the reasonin' as it first came to me. "Roberts the banker answered that one, along with Sherlock Holmes. Roberts asked *why* — why did the killer go to all that trouble? And the answer was that he didn't. It wasn't the killer but Hank Bringlow who went to all the trouble.

"We already knew he'd fooled people with his twin sisters, confusin' their identities. And we knew he'd recently read 'The Problem of Thor Bridge,' which has an impossible suicide of sorts takin' place on a bridge. It's not too far-fetched to imagine him arrangin' the ultimate joke — his own disappearance from that covered bridge."

"But *how*, Dr. Sam?" April wanted to know. "I read that Sherlock Holmes story too, an' there's nothin' in it like what happened here."

"True. But as soon as I realized the purpose o' those noonday cows, I knew somethin' had happened to those tracks at the barn. And only one thing could've happened—Hank's buggy turned off the road and went *into* the barn. The tracks from the road to the bridge were faked."

"How?" she repeated, not yet ready to believe a word of it.

"*When* is the more important question. Since there was no time to fake the tracks in the single minute before we came along, they had to have been done earlier. Hank and Walt Rumsey must've been in cahoots on the scheme. Walt went out that mornin', after the snow had stopped, with a couple o' old carriage wheels linked together by an axle. On his boots he'd fastened blocks o' wood a couple o' inches thick, with horseshoes nailed to the bottoms.

"He simply trotted along the road, through the snow, pushin' the pair o' wheels ahead of him. He went into the bridge far enough to leave traces o' snow, then reversed the blocks o' wood on his boots and pushed the wheels back again. The resultin' tracks looked like a four-footed animal pullin' a four-wheeled buggy."

"But—" April started to object.

"I know, I know! A man doesn't run like a horse. But with practice he could space the prints to look good enough. And I'll bet Hank an' Walt practiced plenty while they waited for the right mornin' when the snow was fresh but not too deep. If anyone had examined the tracks o' the horse carefully, they'd've discovered the truth. Careful as he was, Walt Rumsey's prints comin' back from the bridge woulda been a bit different, hittin' the snow from the opposite direction. But they figured I'd drive my buggy up to the bridge in his tracks, all but obliteratin' them, which is what I did. They couldn't really be examined then."

"You're forgetting the broken jar o' applesauce," April said. "Don't that prove Hank *was* on the bridge?"

"Nothing of the sort! Hank knew in advance his ma planned to send the applesauce to Mrs. O'Brian. He prob'ly suggested it, and he certainly reminded her of it. He simply gave Walt Rumsey a duplicate jar a day or two earlier, an' it was that jar Walt broke on the bridge. The jar Hank was carrying went with him into Walt's barn."

"What if it hadn't snowed that mornin'? What if someone else came along first to leave other tracks?"

I shrugged. "They would've phoned one another and postponed it, I s'pose. It was only meant as a joke.

They'd have tried again some other day, with other witnesses. They didn't really need me an' Millie."

"Then how did it turn from a joke to murder?"

"Walt Rumsey had never given up lovin' Millie, or hatin' Hank for takin' her away from him. After the trick worked so well, he saw the perfect chance to kill Hank and win her back. Once I knew he was in on the trick, he had to be the killer — else why was he keepin' quiet 'bout his part in it?"

"Hank had hidden his horse an' buggy in that big shed behind the Rumsey barn. When we all went back to town, an' Hank was ready to reappear an' have a good laugh on everyone, Walt Rumsey killed him.

Then he waited till dark to dispose of the body on the Post Road. He drove the buggy part way, turned the horse loose to run, and walked home.

“This mornin’ after the funeral I made an excuse of wantin’ a piece of rope so I could see the inside of Rumsey’s barn again. He had spare carriage wheels there, and the shed was big enough to hold a horse an’ buggy. That was all the confirmation I needed.”

April leaned back and smiled, convinced at last. “After this they’ll probably give the you the Sheriff’s job, Dr. Sam.”

I shook my head. “I’m just a country doctor.”

“A country doctor with a *Pierce-Arrow* car!” . . .

“That’s the way it happened, back in ’22. I’ve often thought I should write it up now that I’m retired, but there’s just never enough time. Sure, I’ve got other stories. Lots of’em! Can I get you another — ah — small libation?”

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 Teepee" [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.