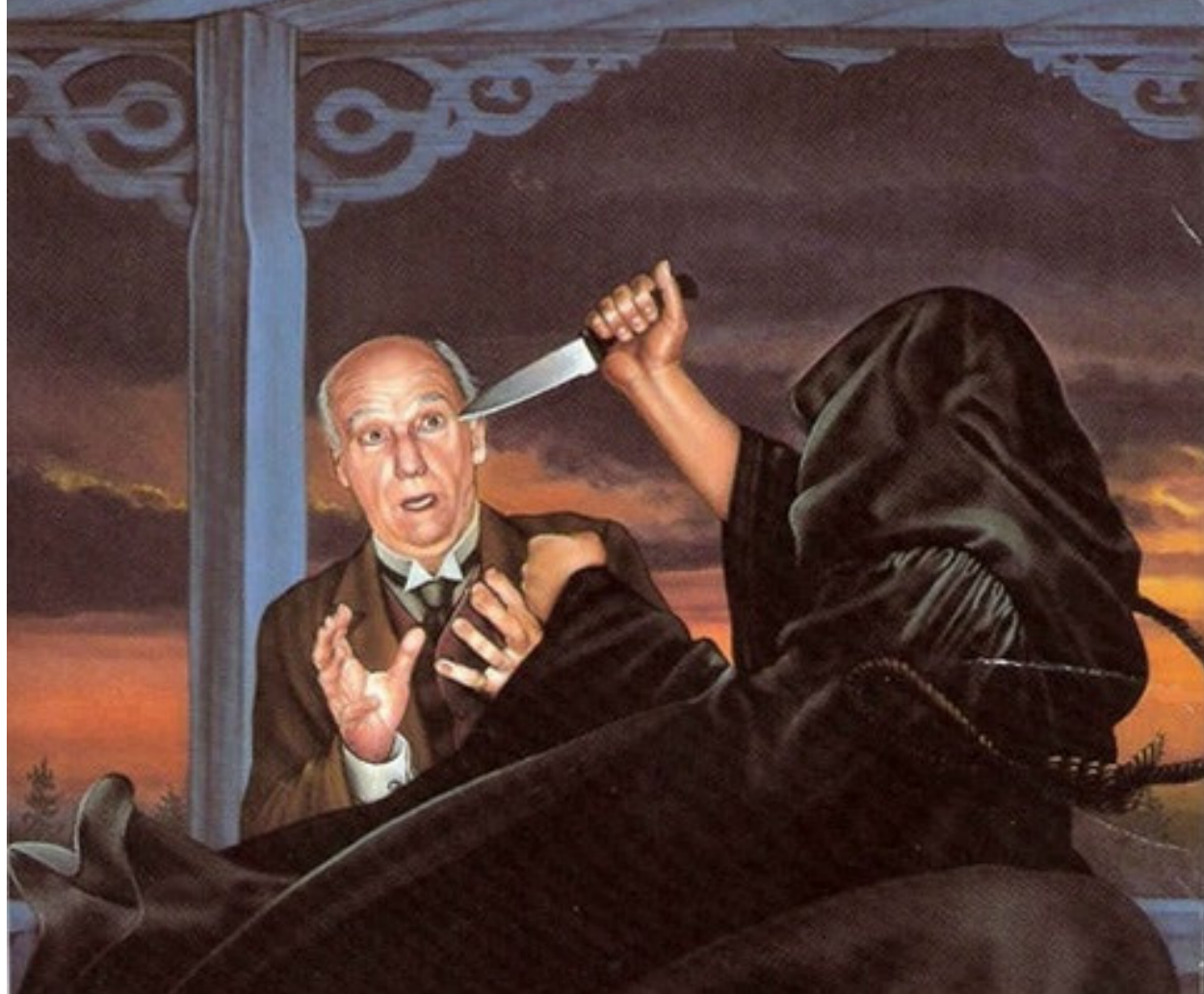


Diagnosis:

IMPOSSIBLE

The Problems of Dr. Sam Hawthorne

EDWARD D. HOCH



Diagnosis: Impossible

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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 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 CHRISTMAS STEEPLE

"Like I was say in' last time," Dr. Sam Hawthorne began, getting down the brandy from the top shelf, "the year 1925 was a bad one murder and other violent crimes. And just about the worst one o' them all came on Christmas Day, when the year was almost over. Here, let me pour you a small — ah — libation before I start..."

It had been a quiet fall in Northmont since the kidnaping and recovery of little Tommy Belmont. In fact, about the biggest news around town was that the new Ford dealer over in Middle Creek would soon be selling dark green and maroon cars along with the traditional black ones.

"You see, Dr. Sam," my nurse April said, "pretty soon you won't be the only one round these parts with a bright yellow car."

"Dark green and maroon are a long way from yellow," I reminded her. Kidding me about my 1921 *Pierce-Arrow Runabout* was one of her favorite sports. My first winter in Northmont I'd put the Runabout up on blocks and driven a horse and buggy on my calls, but now I was gettin' a bit more venturesome. As long as the roads were clear I drove the car.

This day, which was just two weeks before Christmas, April and I were drivin' out to visit a small gypsy encampment at the edge of town. The traditionally cold New England winter hadn't yet settled in, and except for the bareness of the tree limbs it might have been a pleasant September afternoon.

The gypsies were another matter, and there wasn't much pleasant about their encampment. They'd arrived a month earlier, drivin' a half-dozen horse-drawn wagons, and pitched their tents on some unused meadowland at the old Haskins farm. Minnie Haskins, widowed and into her seventies, had given them permission to stay there, but that didn't make Sheriff Lens and the townsfolk any happier about it. On the few occasions when gypsies had appeared at the general store to buy provisions they'd been treated in a right unfriendly manner.

I'd gone out to the encampment once before to examine a sick child, and I decided this day it was time for a return visit. I knew there wasn't much chance of gettin' paid, unless I was willin' to settle for a gypsy woman tellin' April's fortune, but still it was somethin' I felt bound to do.

"Look, Dr. Sam!" April said as the gypsy wagons came into view. "Isn't that Parson Wigger's buggy?"

"Sure looks like it." I wasn't really surprised to find Parson Wigger visiting the gypsies. Ever since comin' to town last spring as pastor of the First New England Church he'd been a controversial figure. He'd started by reopening the old Baptist church in the center of town and announcin' regular services there. He seemed like a good man who led a simple life and looked for simple solutions—which was why so many people disliked him. New Englanders, contrary to some opinions, are not a simple folk.

"'Mornin', Dr. Sam," he called out as he saw us drive up. He was standin' by one of the gypsy wagons, talkin' to a couple of dark-haired children. "'Mornin', April. What brings you two out here?"

"I treated a sick boy a while back. Thought I'd see how he's coming along." I took my bag from the car and started over. Already I recognized my patient, Tene, as one of the boys with the parson. "Hello, Tene, how you feeling?"

He was around eleven or twelve, and shy with non-gypsy *gadjo* like myself.

"I'm okay," he said finally.

"This the boy who was sick?" Parson Wigger asked.

I nodded. "A throat infection, but he seems to be over it."

At that moment Tene's father appeared around the side of the wagon. He was a dark brooding man with a black mustache and hair that touched the top of his ears, leaving small gold earrings exposed. Though Parson Wigger was the same size and both men looked to be in their mid-thirties, they could hardly have been more different. Except for an old arm injury which had left him with a weak right hand, Carranza Lowara was the picture of strength and virility. By contrast Wigger gave the impression of physical weakness. The Parson's hair was already thinning in front, and he wore thick eyeglasses to correct his faulty vision.

"You are back, Doctor?" Tene's father asked.

"Yes, Carranza, I am back."

He nodded, then glanced at April. "This is your wife?"

"No, my nurse. April, I want you to meet Carranza Lowara. He is the leader of this gypsy band."

April took a step forward, wide-eyed, and shook his hand. "Pleased to meet you."

"I'm trying to help these people get settled for the winter," Parson Wigger explained. "These wagons are hardly good shelter for twenty people. And the two tents are not much better."

"We have lived through the winters before," Carranza Lowara said. He spoke English well, but with an accent I hadn't been able to place. I supposed it must be middle European.

"But not in New England." The parson turned to me and explained. "They came up from the south, as do most gypsies. I've encountered them before in my travels. Spain deported gypsies to Latin America hundreds of years ago and they've been working their way north ever since."

"Is that true?" I asked Lowara. "Do you come from Latin America?"

"Long, long ago," he replied.

I happened to glance back at my car and saw a gypsy woman in a long spangled skirt and bare feet. She was examining my car intently. I'd seen her on my previous visit, and suspected she was Lowara's wife or woman.

"Is she of your family?" I asked.

"Come here, Volga." The woman came over promptly and I saw that she was younger than I'd first supposed. Not a child, certainly, but still in her twenties. She was handsomer than most gypsy women, with high cheekbones and slightly slanted eyes that hinted at a mixture of Oriental blood. I introduced her to April and they went off together to visit the other wagons.

"She is my wife," Lowara explained.

"Tene's mother?"

"Yes."

"She seems so young."

"Gypsy women often marry young. It is a custom. You should come to a gypsy wedding sometime and see the groom carry off the bride by force. It is not like your Christian weddings, Parson."

"I imagine not," Parson Wigger replied dryly. "But I will come to a gypsy wedding only if you honor me with your presence at my church."

The gypsy shook his head. "Your townspeople do not like us."

"They might like you more if they saw you attending Christian services."

Lowara shrugged. "We have no religion. We would as soon go to your church as any other."

"Come, then, on Christmas Day. It's just two weeks away. Once you know the people and are friendly with them, you might even find an old barn to stay the winter."

"Would a barn be any warmer than our tents? I think not."

"Come anyway," the Parson pleaded. "You won't regret it."

The gypsy nodded. "I will talk to the others. I think you will see us in two weeks."

Parson Wigger walked me back to my *Runabout*. "I think their appearance on Christmas morning will have a good effect on the townspeople. No one can hate a fellow Christian on Christmas."

"Some call them beggars and thieves. They say the women are good for nothing but telling fortunes."

"They are human beings with souls like the rest of us," Parson Wigger reminded me.

"I agree. You only have to convince a few hundred of your fellow citizens." I didn't have to remind him that his own popularity in Northmont was not too high at that moment.

April came back from her tour of the wagons and we drove away with a wave to Parson Wigger. "He's really tryin' to help those people," she said. "That Volga thinks highly of the Parson."

"She's Lowara's wife. She must have been a child bride. I treated her son and never even knew she was the mother."

"There's an old woman in one wagon who tells fortunes," April said with a giggle.

"She tell yours?"

April nodded. "Said I was gettin' married soon."

"Good for you." April was some years older than me, in her mid-thirties, and not the most beautiful girl in town. I figured the old gypsy woman was a good judge of human nature.

On Christmas mornin' it was snowin' gently, and from a distance down the street Parson Wigger's church looked just the way they always do on greeting cards. I wasn't that much of a churchgoer myself, but I decided I should show up. Last Christmas I'd spent the entire day deliverin' a farm woman's baby, and an hour in church sure wouldn't be any harder than that.

Parson Wigger was out front, bundled against the cold and snow, greetin' the people as they arrived. I waved to him and stopped to chat with Eustace Carey, who ran one of Northmont's two general stores.

"How are you, Doc? Merry Christmas to ye."

"Same to you, Eustace. We've got good weather for it—a white Christmas but not too white."

"Folks say the gypsies are comin' to the service. You heard anything about it?"

"No, but it is Christmas, after all. Nothin' wrong with them comin' to church."

Eustace Carey snorted. "What's wrong is them bein' here in the first place! I think they hexed old Minnie to get permission to camp on her land. These gypsy women can hex a person, you know."

I was about to reply when a murmur went up from the waiting churchgoers. A single crowded gypsy wagon pulled by a team of horses was comin' down the center of the street. "Looks like they're here," I remarked to Carey.

It was obvious then that Parson Wigger had been standin' in the snow for exactly this moment. He hurried out to the wagon and greeted Lowara and the others warmly. It seemed that all the gypsies had come, even the children, and after the Parson shook hands with them, they filed into church.

"I don't like 'em," Carey said behind me. "They look funny, they smell funny, they got funny names."

"Oh, I don't know about that, Eustace."

We followed the gypsies into church and took our seats in one of the front pews. I glanced around for April, then remembered that she'd be at the Catholic church on the other side of town.

After a few moments' wait Parson Wigger came out wearin' his traditional long black cassock and white surplice. He carried a Bible in one hand as he mounted the pulpit and then began to speak.

"First of all, I want to wish each and every one of my parishioners — and I feel you are *all* my parishioners — the very merriest of Christmases and the happiest of New Years. I see 1926 as a year of promise, a year of building our spiritual lives."

I'd never been a great one for listening to sermons, and I found my eyes wandering to the double row of gypsies down front. If the sermon was boring them too, they were very good at masking their feelings. Sitting right behind them, and none too happy about it, was old Minnie Haskins who'd given them permission to use her land.

Later, when Parson Wigger had concluded his sermon and prayer service, and we'd sung the obligatory Christmas hymns, I sought out Minnie Haskins in the back of the church. Despite her years she was a spry little woman who moved about with remarkable agility.

"Hello there, Dr. Sam," she greeted me.

"Merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas to you, Minnie. How's the leg?"

"Fit as a fiddle!" She did a little kick to show me. "A touch o' rheumatism can't keep me down!" Then she pulled me aside as the others were leaving and whispered, "What're all them gypsies doin' here, Doc? I'm in enough trouble with folks for lettin' them camp on my farm. Now they come to church!"

"It's Christmas, Minnie. I think they should be welcomed at church on Christmas Day."

"Well, lots o' folk are upset with Parson Wigger for invitin' them, I'll tell ye that!"

"I haven't heard any complaints yet except from Eustace Carey."

"Well, him an' others."

Carey joined us then, still grumbling. "Soon as I can get the Parson alone I'm goin' to give him a piece o' my mind. Bad enough fillin' the church with gypsies but then he takes 'em right down front."

"Where are they now?" I asked.

"Would you believe it? He's taken them up in the steeple to show them the view!"

I followed them out to the sidewalk and we looked up through the fallin' snow at the towerin' church steeple. Though each of its four white sides had an open window for the belfry, no bell had rung there since its days as a Baptist church. The Baptists had taken their bell with them to a new church in Groveland and Parson Wigger hadn't yet raised enough money to replace it.

As we watched, the gypsies began comin' out of the church and climbin' back onto their wagon.

"They can't read or write, you know," Carey said. "No gypsies can."

"Probably because they haven't been taught," I replied. "A little schoolin' for the youngsters like Tene would help."

"Well," Carey said, "I'm still goin' to talk with the parson about this, soon's I can catch him alone."

I glanced around for Minnie but she'd disappeared, swallowed up by the failin' snow. We could barely see across the street now as the fat white flakes tumbled and swirled in the breeze. I could feel them cold against my face, dingin' to my eyelashes, and I decided it was time to go home. Just then Volga Lowara came out of the church and climbed into the wagon. The driver snapped the reins and they started off.

"I'm going in to see the parson now," Carey said.

"Wait a minute," I suggested. I could have been wrong but I didn't remember seeing Carranza leave the church. He might have stayed behind to talk with Parson Wigger.

"The heck with it," Carey decided at last, his hat and coat covered with fat white snowflakes. "I'm goin' home."

"I'll see you, Eustace. Wish the family a Merry Christmas." It was somethin' to say, avoidin' obvious mention of the fact that his wife hadn't accompanied him to Christmas services.

I decided there was no point in my waitin' around, either. As Carey disappeared into the snow I started in the opposite direction, only to encounter Sheriff Lens.

"Hello there, Dr. Sam. Comin' from church?"

"That I am. A snowy Christmas, isn't it?"

"The kids with new sleds'll like it. Seen Parson Wigger around?"

"He's in the church. What's up?"

"Funny thing. I'll tell you about it."

But before he could say more the familiar figure of Parson Wigger appeared in the church doorway, still wearin' his long black cassock but without the white surplice. For just an instant a stray beam of light seemed to reflect off his thick glasses. "Parson Wigger!" the sheriff called out, startin' through the snow for the church steps.

Wigger turned back into the church, bumpin' against the doorjamb. It was almost as if the sight of Sheriff Lens had suddenly terrified him. The sheriff and I reached the back of the church together, just in time to see Wigger's black cassock vanish up the stairs to the belfry.

"Damn!" Lens exploded. "He closed the door after him. Is he running away from us?"

I tried the belfry door but it was bolted from the other side.

"He'd hardly run up there to get away from us. There's no other way out."

"Lemme at that door!"

It was an old church, and a powerful yank by Sheriff Lens splintered the wood around the loose bolt. Another yank and the door was open.

Lens led the way up the wooden steps. "We're comin' up, Parson," he called out.

There was no answer from above.

We reached the belfry and pushed open the trap door above our heads. The first thing I saw was Parson Wigger outstretched on the floor a few feet away. He was face up, and the jeweled hilt of a small gypsy dagger protruded from the center of his chest.

"My God!" Sheriff Lens gasped. "He's been murdered!"

From the trap door I could see the entire bare belfry and the snow swirling around us outside. It seemed there was not another living creature up there with us.

But then somethin' made me turn and look behind the open trap door.

Carranza Lowara was crouched there, an expression of sheer terror on his face.

"I did not kill him," he cried out. "You must believe me — *I did not kill him!*"

It was the damnedest locked-room mystery I ever did see, because how could you have a locked room that wasn't even a room — that was in fact open on all four sides? And how could you have a mystery when the obvious murderer was found right there with the weapon and the body?

And yet—

First off I'd better tell you a bit more about that belfry itself, because it was the first time I'd ever been up there and some things about it weren't obvious from the ground. The big bell was gone, all

right, though the wooden frame from which it had hung was still in place. There was also a round hole cut in the floor, maybe four inches in diameter, through which the heavy rope for ringing the bell had passed.

But the thing that surprised me most about Parson Wigger's belfry was the thin wire mesh fencing tacked up over all four open windows. It was like chicken wire, with gaps of a couple inches between the individual strands. Since it obviously wasn't meant to keep out flies it took me a moment to figure out its purpose.

"Birds," Sheriff Lens explained, noting my puzzlement. "He didn't want birds roosting up here."

I grunted. "You can't even see it from the street, the wire's so fine."

Wigger's body had been taken away, and the gypsy had been arrested, but we lingered on, starin' through the wire mesh at the street below.

"The news has really spread," Lens observed. "Look at that crowd!"

"More than he had for services. Tells you somethin' about people, I guess."

"Think the gypsy did it, Doc?"

"Who else? He was alone up here with Wigger."

Sheriff Lens scratched his thinning hair. "But why kill him? God knows, Wigger was a friend o' theirs."

There was a sound from below and Eustace Carey's head emerged through the open trap door.

"I just heard about the Parson," he said. "What happened?"

"He was showin' the gypsies the view from up here. They all came down except Lowara, an' I guess he musta hid in here. We saw Parson Wigger down by the front door, lookin' out at the gypsies gettin' ready to leave, and I wanted to talk to him. He seemed to run away from us, almost, an' bolted the steeple door after him. By the time Doc Sam and I got up here, he was dead with the gypsy's knife in his chest."

"No one else was up here?"

"No one."

Carey walked over to the west side of the belfry, where the wind-driven snow covered the floor. "There are footprints here."

"He had a lot of gypsies up here lookin' at the view. Footprints don't mean a thing."

Sheriff Lens walked over to the open trap door.

Suddenly I remembered something.

"Sheriff, we both agree that Wigger looked as if he was running away from you. What was it you were so anxious to see him about?"

Sheriff Lens grunted. "Don't make no difference, now that he's dead," he replied, and started down the stairs.

The next mornin' at my office I was surprised to find April waitin' for me. It was a Saturday, and I'd told her she needn't come in. I'd stopped by mainly to pick up the mail and make sure no one had left a message for me. Most of my regular patients called me at home if they needed me on a weekend, but there was always the chance of an emergency. But this time the emergency wasn't the sort I expected.

"Dr. Sam, I've got that gypsy woman, Volga, in your office. She came to me early this mornin' and she's just sick about her husband bein' arrested. Can't you talk to her?"

"I'll see what I can do."

Volga was waitin' inside, her face streaked with tears, her eyes full of despair. "Oh, Dr. Hawthorne, you must help him! I know he is innocent! He could not kill Parson Wigger like that — the Parson was our friend."

"Calm down now," I said, taking her hands. "We'll do what we can to help him."

"Will you go to the jail? Some say he will be lynched!"

"That can't happen here," I insisted. But my mind went back to an incident in Northmont history, after the Civil War, when a black man traveling with a gypsy woman had indeed been lynched. "Anyway, I'll go talk to him."

I left her in April's care and walked the three blocks through snowy streets to the town jail. Sheriff Lens was there with an unexpected visitor — Minnie Haskins.

"Hello, Minnie. Not a very pleasant Christmas for the town, is it?"

"It sure ain't, Dr. Sam."

"You visitin' the prisoner?"

"I'm tryin' to find out when they'll be off my land. I was out there to the caravan this mornin' and all they'd say was that Carranza was their leader. They couldn't go till Carranza told 'em to."

"I thought you gave them permission to stay."

"Well, that was before they killed Parson Wigger," she replied, reflecting the view of the townspeople.

"I'd like to speak with the prisoner," I told Sheriff Lens.

"That's a bit irregular."

"Come on, Sheriff."

He made a face and got out the keys to the cell block. We found the gypsy sitting on the edge of his metal bunk, staring into space. He roused himself when he saw me, somehow sensing a friend.

"Doctor, have you come to deliver me from this place?"

"Five minutes," Sheriff Lens said, locking me in the cell with Lowara.

"I've come, Carranza, because your wife Volga asked me to. But if I'm going to help you, I have to know everything that happened in the belfry yesterday."

"I told the truth. I did not kill Parson Wigger."

"What were you doing there? Why didn't you leave with Volga and the others?"

He brushed back the long raven hair that covered his ears. "Is it for a *gadjo* like yourself to understand? I stayed behind because I felt a kinship for this man, this parson who had taken the *roms* unto himself. I wanted to speak with him in private."

"And what happened?"

"He went down after the others had left the belfry and stood in the doorway looking after them. Then he came back upstairs, quite quickly. I heard him throw the bolt on the door below, as if he feared someone might follow him. When he came up through the trap door my back was turned. I never saw what did it. I only heard a slow gasp, as of a deep sigh, and turned in time to see him falling backward to the floor."

"You saw no one else?"

"There was no one to see."

"Could he have been stabbed earlier?" I asked. "Down in the church?"

"He could not have climbed those steps with the knife in him," Lowara said, shaking his head. "It would have killed him at once."

"What about the knife? You admit that jeweled dagger is yours?"

He shrugged.

"It is mine. I wore it yesterday beneath my coat. But in the crowd after services I was jostled. The knife was taken from me."

"Without your realizing it? That's hard to believe."

"It is true, nevertheless."

"Why would anyone want to kill Parson Wigger?" I asked.

He smiled and opened his hands to me.

"So a gypsy would be blamed for it," he said, as if that was the most logical reason in the world.

The snow stopped falling as I walked back to the church. In my pocket, neatly wrapped in newspaper, was the jeweled dagger that had killed Parson Wigger. The sheriff had given up any hope of finding fingerprints on the corded hilt with its imitation ruby, and had allowed me to borrow it to conduct an experiment.

It had occurred to me that the knife could have been thrown or propelled from some distance away, and that it might be slender enough to pass through the chicken-wire barricade. To test my theory I entered the unguarded church and climbed once more to the belfry in the steeple.

But I was wrong.

True, the knife could be worked through the wire with some difficulty, but coming at it straight ahead or even at an angle, the width of the crosspiece — the hilt guard — kept it from passing through. It simply could not have been thrown or propelled from outside.

Which left me with Carranza Lowara once more. The only possible murderer. Had he lied?

Remembering that moment when Sheriff Lens and I found him standin' over the body, rememberin' the terror written across his face, I somehow couldn't believe it.

I went back downstairs and walked around the pews, hopin' some flash of illumination would light up my mind. Finally I stuffed the dagger back in my coat pocket and went outside. It was as I took a short cut across the snow-covered side yard that somethin' caught my eye, as white as the snow, and half buried in it.

I pulled it free and saw that it was a white surplice like the one Parson Wigger had worn during the Christmas service. There was a dark red stain on it, and a tear about an inch long. I stood there holding it in my hand, and then turned to stare up at the steeple that towered above me.

"I reckon we gotta ship the gypsy over to the county seat," Sheriff Lens was saying when I returned to the jail and placed the dagger carefully back on his desk.

"Why's that, Sheriff?"

"Eustace Carey says there's talk o' lynchin'. I know damn well they won't do it, but I can't take no chances. It happened fifty years ago and it can happen again."

I sat down opposite him.

"Sheriff, there's somethin' you've got to tell me. That man's life may depend on it. You sought out Parson Wigger on Christmas Day for some reason. It was somethin' that couldn't even wait till after the holiday."

Sheriff Lens looked uneasy. "I told you — it don't matter now."

"But don't you see it *does* matter — now more than ever?"

The sheriff got to his feet and moved to the window. Across the square we could see a small group of men watching the jail. That must have decided him. "Mebbe you're right, Doc. I'm too old to keep secrets, anyway. You see, the Hartford police sent through a report suggesting I question Parson Wigger. Seems he wasn't no real parson at all."

"What?"

"He'd been passin' himself off as a parson down Hartford way for two years, till somebody checked his background and they run him outta town. Some said he was runnin' a giant con game, while others thought he was more interested in the parish wives. Whatever the truth, his background was mighty shady."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"Like I said, the man's dead now. Why blacken his character? He never did no harm in Northmont."

The door opened and Eustace Carey came bargin' in, followed by a half- dozen other local businessmen.

"We want to talk, Sheriff. There's ugly words goin' around. Even if you keep that one safe, there might be an attempt to burn the gypsy wagons."

I knew then that I had to speak out.

"Wait a minute," I said. "Settle down and I'll tell you what really happened to Parson Wigger. He wasn't killed by the gypsy, and he wasn't killed by any invisible demon, unless you count the demon within himself."

"What do you mean by that?" Carey demanded.

I told them what I'd just learned from Sheriff Lens. "Don't you see? Don't you all see? The Parson was standin' there in the doorway and he saw us comin' for him. It was the sight of the sheriff that frightened him, that told him the jig was up. Why else would he run into the church and up the belfry stairs, boltin' the door behind him? It was fear that drove him up there, fear of Sheriff Lens and the truth."

"But who killed him?"

"When he heard that bolt break, when he heard us on the stairs and realized his masquerade was about to be uncovered, he took the gypsy's dagger and plunged it into his own chest. There was never any invisible murderer or any impossible crime. Parson Wigger killed himself."

It took a lot more talkin' after that, of course, to convince them it was the only possible solution. You see, I had to get Carranza out of his cell and demonstrate that he couldn't have stabbed the parson with his right hand because of that old arm injury. Then I showed, from the angle of the wound, that it had to be done by a right-handed person — unless he'd stabbed himself.

"There was no one else up there," I argued. "If Carranza Lowara didn't kill him, he must have killed himself. It's as simple as that."

They released Lowara the next mornin', and Sheriff Lens drove him out to the gypsy encampment in the town's only police car. I watched them go, standin' in the doorway of my office, and April said, "Can't you close that door, Dr. Sam? Now that you've solved another case can't you let the poor man go home in peace?"

"I have something else that must be done, April," I told her. "See you later."

I got into the Runabout and drove out over the snow-rutted roads to Minnie Haskins' place. I didn't stop at the farmhouse but continued out around the back till I reached the gypsy encampment. When Volga saw the car she came runnin' across the snow to meet me.

"How can we ever thank you, Dr. Hawthorne? You have saved my husband from certain imprisonment and even death!"

"Go get him right now and I'll tell you how you can thank me." I stood and waited by the car, venturing no closer to the wagons where I could see little Tene playing in the snow. Presently Carranza joined me, with Volga trailing him.

"I owe you my thanks," he said. "My freedom."

I was starin' out across the snowy fields. "I owe you somethin' too. You taught me something about the different types of deception — deception as it is practiced by the *gadjo* and by the *rom*."

As I spoke I reached out and yanked at his long black hair. It came away in my hand and Volga gasped. He was almost bald without the wig, and seemed at least ten years older. I stripped the mustache from his upper lip too, and he made no effort to stop me.

"All right, Doctor," he said. "A little deception. Will you have me arrested again because I wear a wig and false mustache? Will you say after all that I killed Parson Wigger?"

I shook my head. "No, Carranza. This doesn't tell me that you killed Wigger. But it does tell me that Volga killed him."

She gasped again, and fell back as I'd struck her.

"This man is a demon!" she told her husband. "How could he know?"

"Silence!" Carranza ordered. Then, turning to me, he asked, "Why do you say these things?"

"Well, I proved for myself that you didn't kill Wigger. But I didn't for a minute believe that such a man would kill himself simply because the sheriff wanted to talk to him. And yet he had run away from us. That was the key to it — the key to the crime and the key to the impossibility. I was lookin' around in the church yard and in a snowbank I found this." I drew the bloodstained surplice from under my coat.

"And what does that prove?"

"See the tear made by the knife goin' in? And the blood? Parson Wigger had to be wearin' this when he was stabbed. Yet Sheriff Lens and I saw him without it in the church doorway. Are we to believe he went up to the belfry, put on his surplice, stabbed himself, removed it somehow, stuck the knife back in his chest and died — all while we were breakin' in the door? Of course not!

"So what is the only other possibility? If the body in the belfry was Wigger's, then the person we saw in the doorway was *not* Wigger. He fled from us simply because if Sheriff Lens and I had gotten any closer we'd have known he was not Wigger."

Volga's face had drained of all color, and she stared silently as I spoke. "If not Wigger, then who? Well, the man in the cassock ran up into the belfry. We were right behind him and we found two persons up there — the dead Wigger and the live Lowara. If the man in the cassock was not Wigger — and I've shown he wasn't — then he had to be you, Carranza."

"A good guess."

"More than that. I'd noticed earlier you were both the same size. At a distance your main distinguishing feature was your black hair and mustache. But I remembered that day two weeks ago when I was out here and noticed your earrings under your short hair. When I visited your cell, your hair was long enough to cover your ears. It couldn't have grown that fast in two weeks, so I knew you were wearing wigs. If the hair was false, the mustache could be too — mere props to add to your gypsy image. A bit of deception for the *gadjo*."

"You have proved I was Wigger for a fleeting moment. You have not proved Volga killed him."

"Well, what did you accomplish by posing as Wigger? From a distance with our vision blurred by the falling snow, the sheriff and I saw only a tall man in a black cassock, wearing Wigger's thick glasses. If we hadn't come after you we'd have gone away convinced that Wigger was still alive after Volga and the others had left the church. You did make two little slip-ups, though. When you turned away from us in

the church doorway you bumped into the frame because you weren't used to his thick glasses. And yesterday in the cell you told me how Wigger had stood in the doorway — something you couldn't have seen if you'd really been in the belfry all that time, as you said."

"That does not implicate Volga!" the gypsy insisted.

"Obviously you weren't doing this to protect yourself, because it gave you no alibi. No one saw you leave the church. The only possible purpose of your brief impersonation was to shield another person—the real killer. Then I remembered that Volga was the last gypsy to leave the church. She'd been alone in there with Wigger, she was your wife, and she was the most likely person to be carrying your little dagger. Where? In your stocking top, Volga?"

She covered her face with her hands. "He — he tried to —"

"I know. Wigger wasn't a real parson, and he'd been in trouble before because of his interest in parish wives. He tried to attack you up there, didn't he? You were only a handsome gypsy woman to him. He knew you could never tell. You fought back, and your hand found the dagger you always carried. You stabbed him up there and killed him, and then you found Carranza in the church and told him what you'd done."

"It would have been a gypsy's word against a parson's reputation," Carranza said. "They would never believe her. I sent her back with the wagon and tried to make it look as if he was still alive."

I nodded. "You put on his cassock because at a distance the bloody rip in the cassock wouldn't show on the black cloth. But you couldn't wear the white surplice without the blood showing. You barely had time I to get the cassock back on Wigger's body, stuff the surplice through the chicken wire, and push it out so it wouldn't be found in the belfry. You couldn't put that back on the body because you hadn't been wearing it downstairs."

Carranza Lowara sighed. "It was hard work with my weak hand. I got the cassock back on the body just as the lock gave way. Will you call the sheriff now?"

I watched his son playing with the other gypsies, and wondered if I had the right to judge. Finally I said, "Pack up your wagons and be gone from here by nightfall. Never come near Northmont again."

"But—" Carranza began.

"Wigger was not a good man, but maybe he wasn't bad enough to deserve what he got. I don't know. I only know if you stay around here I might change my mind."

Volga came to me. "Now I owe you more than ever."

"Go. It's only a Christmas present I'm giving you. Go, before it fades like the melting snow."

And within an hour the wagons were on the road, heading south this time. Maybe they'd had enough of our New England winter.

"I never told anyone that story," Dr. Sam Hawthorne concluded. "It was the first time I took justice into my own hands, and I never knew if I did right or not."

He emptied the last of the brandy and stood up. "It was in the spring of '26 that a famous French criminal sought shelter in Northmont. He was called the Eel because of his fantastic escapes. But I'll save that story till next time. Another — ah — libation before you go?"

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.