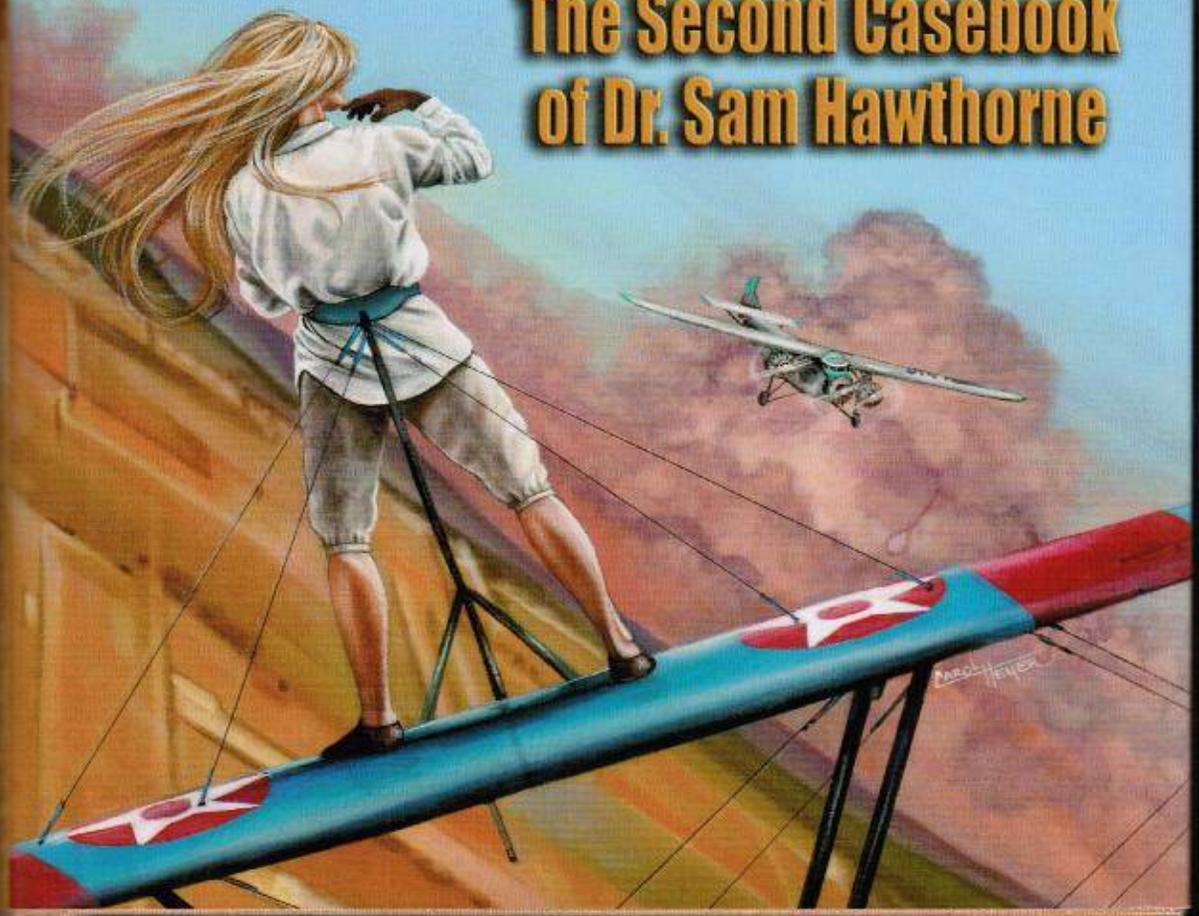


**Edward D. Hoch**

*More Things*  
**IMPOSSIBLE**

**The Second Casebook  
of Dr. Sam Hawthorne**



Edward D. Hoch

# More Things Impossible



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## INTRODUCTION

I'm always pleased when I meet readers at Bouchercons or other fan gatherings who tell me that one or the other of my series characters is their favorite. It doesn't really matter to me which one they mention, and I've become aware over the years that a difference of opinion exists. Many people choose Nick Velvet, my most profitable series, as their favorite, while others prefer the intricate locked rooms and impossible crimes of the Dr. Sam Hawthorne tales. I usually hear from someone when it's been too long between my Captain Leopold stories, even though the good Captain has been trying to retire for years. And some old-time fans have stuck with Simon Ark almost from the very beginning — not easy to do since the character, and my professional career, are 50 years old this month.

I believe the stories about Dr. Sam Hawthorne have remained popular for two reasons. First, of course, is the eternal fascination with locked rooms and impossible crimes. When Fred Dannay, the legendary editor of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, suggested that all the Dr. Sam stories feature some sort of impossibility, I readily agreed. I've now published 68 of them, and I don't believe I've ever duplicated an idea, or a solution. In fact, I sometimes find it easier coming up with a new impossible crime for Dr. Sam to solve than a new valueless object for Nick Velvet to steal.

A second reason for their continued popularity is that, taken together, they relate the life and times of my main character and tell the reader something of the world in which he lived. My previous volume of Dr. Sam stories, *Diagnosis: Impossible*, began with the good doctor's arrival in Northmont in January of 1922 and carries us up to September 1927. The present collection of fifteen stories begins in the Fall of 1927 and ends in December of 1931. Eight of these stories have been reprinted in anthologies — "The Whispering House," "The Boston Common," "The Pilgrims Windmill," "The Pink Post Office," "The Octagon Room," "The Tin Goose," "The Hunting Lodge" and "Santa's Lighthouse." I have no special favorites among them, though it should be noted that "The Octagon Room" takes place on the day of Sheriff Lens's wedding, and "The Hunting Lodge" is the only story in which Dr. Sam's parents appear.

I do enjoy writing about Dr. Sam Hawthorne and Northmont's impossible crimes, and plan to continue the series for as long as I, and my computer, hold up. In later stories Sam finally finds a wife, just as the nation plunges into the Second World War. His 68th adventure is set in September of 1943.

For readers who wonder what Dr. Sam did after he finally retired: well, he poured himself a small libation and told these stories to his friends.

*Edward D. Hoch  
Rochester, New York  
September 2005*

## THE PROBLEM OF THE PINK POST OFFICE

“Now this is what I call a summer’s day!” Dr. Sam Hawthorne said as he poured the drinks. “Makes me feel young again! We can sit out here under the trees without a care in the world and reminisce about the old days. What’s that? I promised to tell you about the Northmont post office and what happened back in 1929 on the day of the stock market crash? Well, I guess that was a memorable affair, all right—and it presented me with a problem unique among all the cases I helped investigate during those years. Unique in what way? Well, I suppose I should start at the beginning . . .”

The date, I well remember, was Thursday, October 24, 1929, (Dr. Sam continued), and in future years it would be known as Black Thursday, though several of the days that followed were even worse for the stock market. In the morning, though, it was just another autumn day in Northmont. The sky was cloudy, with the temperature in the low fifties, and there was a threat of rain in the air.

It was the day that Vera Brock finished painting her new post office, and since business was slow at the office my nurse April and I strolled down to see it. Until now the post office had always been located in the general store, and we viewed it as a sign of progress that the old sweet shoppe opposite the town square had been taken over by the government for a post office.

“Now we’ve got our own hospital and our own separate post office!” April exclaimed. “We’re growin’ bigger all the time, Dr. Sam.”

“Boston better start worrying,” I said with a smile.

“Oh, now you’re makin’ fun of me, but it’s true. Northmont’s going to be on the map.”

“The post-office map, at least.” I spotted our postmistress, Vera Brock, hurrying along the street with a can of paint. She was a solid woman in her forties who’d run the post office in the general store for as long as I’d been in Northmont. “Vera!” I called out to her.

“Morning, Dr. Sam. You an’ April coming for your mail?”

“We wanted to see the new post office.”

She hefted the can of paint. “This is opening day and I discovered one whole wall I forgot to paint! Can you believe that?”

She unlocked the post-office door and we followed her inside. “It’s pink!”

April gasped, and I don’t think she would have been more startled if the walls had been covered with tropical vines. “A pink post office!”

“Well, the paint was cheap,” Vera Brock admitted. “Hume Baxter ordered it by mistake and he gave me a good price on it. I figured I’d save the government some money. Just last month the Postmaster General estimated this year’s deficit at a hundred million dollars and said the cost of a first-class letter might have to go up to three cents.”

“I can’t believe that,” April scoffed. “The two-cent letter is a tradition.”

“We’ll see. Anyway, I figured a cheap coat of paint wouldn’t do any harm.”

“But pink, Vera!” April exclaimed.

“It don’t look so awful to me, but then I guess I’m a bit color blind anyhow.”

The new post office was a good-sized room about twenty feet square, which had been split across the middle by a counter where people could go to pick up their mail or purchase stamps and post-cards. The back wall was lined with the usual wooden pigeonholes where the mail was sorted for pickup. In those days, of course, there was no home delivery. Everyone had to come to Vera Brock’s post office for their mail.

“Well, I don’t think it looks half bad, Vera,” I said. “This town could stand some perkin’ up.”

The words were hardly out of my mouth when the door opened and in came Miranda Grey, the perkier thing to hit Northmont in many a moon. I’d met Miranda the previous summer, during the business on Chester Lake, and we’d dated regularly for a few months. With the coming of autumn and the reopening of school, there was the usual increase in illness, and in my house calls. What with one thing and another, Miranda and I saw less of each other, though I suspected the fact that she’d stayed on in Northmont past the end of summer meant she had serious intentions. Maybe they were more serious than mine.

“Hello, Sam, how are you?” she greeted me. “I haven’t seen hide nor hair of you since last Saturday night. I was beginning to think you’d moved to Boston.”

I tried to see if her eyes were laughing as she spoke to me, but they weren’t. She was downright upset at my not having called her for five days. “This damp weather’s brought on a lot of illness, Miranda. I’ve been busy day and night.”

“I thought the new hospital was taking some of the load off you.”

“It is, for serious illness. But they still call on me for the flu and the chicken pox. I just don’t have as much free time as I had in the summer, Miranda.”

Through all this exchange April stood to one side, eyeing Miranda with something like apprehension. I think April saw her as a threat to the office, and to my ability to devote all my time to our patients. For whatever reason, Miranda was a danger in April’s eyes, and I’d become increasingly aware of it with each passing month.

About that time Vera Brock must have realized she wasn’t going to get any painting done on the opening day of her new post office. We were there and more people were coming by all the time, no doubt attracted by the pink walls seen through the front window. She stood for a moment contemplating the unfinished job—the right-hand wall as you entered was still a dull yellowish-tan from the counter to the front. “I’m gonna ask Hume Baxter if he can close up his store for an hour and come paint this for me,” she said. “I just don’t have time to do it today.”

“I can’t believe you forgot to paint that whole part of the wall,” April said.

“This big cabinet with all its pigeonholes was out there against the wall when I painted. They moved it back here yesterday and I discovered I’d forgotten to paint behind it.”

“Wish I had the time, Vera,” I said. “I’d do it for you.”

“No, no, Dr. Sam, I wouldn’t hear of it! Hume can be over here in ten minutes if he’s not busy.”

The idea of Hume Baxter ever being busy almost made me chuckle. He’d opened his paint, hardware, and farm-supply store right in the center of town about a year earlier, but how he managed to keep going with the small amount of business he did was more than I could figure out. Farmers didn’t

like to get all dressed up for a trip into town when they needed supplies in a hurry, and the amount of business he got from the townsfolk was minimal.

Still, everyone liked Hume Baxter because he tried so hard to please. And sure enough, within ten minutes he appeared at Vera's post office, paint brush in hand. He was a sandy-haired fellow in his mid-thirties, just a little older than me, and he was barely in the door when Miranda began flirting with him.

"Oh, Hume, I'll bet you have plenty of time for your lady friends, don't you?"

He blushed and glanced around, as if seeking a quick exit. "Well, now, sometimes it gets busy at the store."

"Don't pay any attention to her, Hume," I told him. "That's just for my benefit. I've been neglecting her lately."

Hume Baxter spread out his drop cloths and opened the can of pink paint. "Well, now," he replied, entering into the banter, "I don't rightly see how anyone could be too busy for you, Miss Miranda."

"Thank you, Hume. You're a sweetheart!"

"You send me a bill for this paintin'," Vera told him. "I'll see to it the government pays."

"Sure will, Vera. I pay enough taxes. If I can get something back from them I'll take it."

He set to work with his paint brush while Vera opened the sack of morning mail and began sorting it into the pigeonholes behind the counter.

"Guess we'll be going along," I said, "and leave you to your work, Vera."

"Might as well wait another few minutes, Doc, and you can take your mail along."

"That's a good idea," I said, "if you don't mind us cluttering up your new place."

"I think I'll wait for my mail too," Miranda decided. She was working afternoons at the hospital as a nurse's aide, but I knew her mornings were free.

Hume Baxter had started painting at the front, working back toward the counter. "What did you think of the World Series, Doc?" he asked. "Never thought them Athletics would beat the Cubs." Philadelphia had defeated Chicago in four out of five games the previous week.

“I only got to hear part of one game on the radio,” I admitted. “It was a busy week for me.”

Our conversation was interrupted by the sudden arrival of Anson Waters, the town banker and one of our most distinguished citizens—except that he wasn’t looking too distinguished at the moment. He carried a thin manila envelope as he hurried up to the counter.

“Land sakes, Mr. Waters,” Vera Brock said, “you certainly look flustered this morning.”

“Haven’t you heard the news? The stock market is collapsing again! My broker just telephoned me from New York.”

I was vaguely aware from the newspaper that there’d been heavy losses in the market on Monday, and again on Wednesday, but it had seemed then to be a world apart from my existence. I couldn’t help thinking that while Baxter talked of the World Series and Waters of the stock market, my world was different from theirs.

“What’s happening?” Miranda asked him.

“It’s a panic down on Wall Street,” the banker informed her. “The scene on the stock exchange floor is so wild they’ve closed the visitors’ gallery. And the ticker tape is so far behind actual sales that nobody knows what’s happening. My broker needs cash from me to cover some stock I bought on margin.”

“I can’t help you there,” Vera told him in her joking way. “This here’s just a post office. Unless maybe he’ll take stamps.”

“It’s nothing funny, Vera.” He handed her the envelope. “This is addressed to my broker. It contains a railroad bearer bond in the amount of ten thousand dollars. I want to register this and mail it. He must have it by tomorrow—”

“I can’t promise that,” Vera told him.

“—or by Saturday morning at the latest. It’s a short session on Saturday, so he’d need it before noon.”

Vera was busy stamping the envelope and making an entry in her register. “This bond is negotiable?”

“That’s right. My broker can cash it at once.”

“Dangerous thing to send through the mails.”

“That’s why I want it registered.”

“You said the value was ten thousand?”

“That’s correct.”

She totaled up the postage and registry fee and he paid them. Then Vera turned and placed the envelope on the desk behind her for special handling.

“You think the panic will last?” I asked Waters.

“If it does the whole country’s in trouble. It could even throw us into a depression. The banking structure of this country is in bad shape, and I’m the first to admit it.”

“I hope you’re wrong,” I said.

“I hope so too.” He pocketed his registry receipt and headed for the door. “I have to get back to the telephone. I only pray things haven’t gotten worse in the last half hour.”

Vera bustled around behind the counter, sorting more of the morning’s mail. “Land sakes, people like Anson Waters spend so much time watchin’ their money they don’t have time to enjoy it.”

“That’s the most unsettled I’ve ever seen him,” April admitted. “In the bank he’s usually like an iceberg.”

“Maybe we should be glad we’re not rich,” Hume Baxter said. He was making good progress with the painting and was over half finished already.

Vera completed the last of the sorting. “Well, now, I can give you your mail, Doc. And yours too, Miranda. Just one letter for you today.”

I took the little stack she handed me and glanced through it. There was nothing of importance, only a couple of bills and an announcement that a new salesman would be calling on me from one of the pharmaceutical houses. “This too,” Vera said, and reached across the counter with a weekly medical journal to which I subscribed. My parents had given me my first subscription when I graduated from medical school, and I’d been getting it ever since.

April and Miranda and I were starting for the door when it opened to admit the formidable bulk of Sheriff Lens, carrying a large cardboard box tied with stout cord. “Morning, folks,” he greeted us, making for the counter. He stopped almost at once and stared at the walls. “Pink?” he asked of no one in particular.

“Yes, pink!” Vera shot back. “I’m not taking any guff from you today, Sheriff. State your business and be gone!”

“I gotta mail this box off to Washington,” he said meekly. “It’s got some bottles in it that’re evidence in a bootlegging case.”

Vera lifted the middle section of the counter and opened a doorway that allowed him to pass through.

“Bring it back here,” she ordered. “I’m not goin’ to be lifting heavy boxes around.”

He did as he was told and set the box on her desk. “This okay?”

“Not on my desk, you old fool!” Her voice was so sharp that Sheriff Lens jerked the box off her desk and took a few steps back the way he’d come, almost tripping over Hume’s drop cloth. Vera sighed and said, “I’m sorry. Put it on this back shelf, Sheriff.”

He followed her instructions and deposited his burden on the shelf by the pigeonholes. “Sorry I offended you, Vera. I’m just tryin’ to do my job.”

“I’m too edgy this morning,” she admitted. “Opening this new place and all is a lot of work.”

“That’s all right, Vera,” Sheriff Lens told her with uncharacteristic restraint. “I understand.”

“I finished your paint job,” Hume Baxter announced, gathering up his drop cloths. “Don’t get too near the wall till it dries.” He bent to touch up a spot that he’d missed just above the floor level and near the counter as Vera came out to inspect his work.

“A right fine job, Hume, and much faster than I could ever have done it. What does the government owe you for it?”

“Couldn’t charge more than five dollars, Vera. I was here less than an hour.”

“Bill me for ten—it’s worth it. I’ll see that you get it.”

Once more the women and I started to leave, but this time we found the doorway blocked by the return of Anson Waters. The little banker seemed even more distraught than before. “I’m being wiped out!” he screamed. “U.S. Steel’s down twelve points!” In his hand he carried an engraved bond of some sort.

“You need an envelope to mail that,” Vera pointed out.

He looked at it in surprise. “No time for another envelope! I’ll put it in the first one. I have to send my broker another ten thousand.”

“Can’t,” Vera said simply. “The first one’s been mailed.”

“It’s still here, isn’t it?”

“Well, yes.”

“Then I’ll add this to it. It’s my own envelope. These people are witnesses.” He turned to us for support, and Vera turned to Sheriff Lens.

“Don’t you have some sort of form he can fill out to retrieve an envelope he’s mailed?” the sheriff asked.

“Well, yes,” Vera Brock admitted.

“Then have him fill it out, give him the envelope so’s he can add to it, and then take it back again.”

“All right,” she agreed, turning toward the desk. “Except—”

“Except what?” the banker wanted to know.

“Except where in heck is that registered envelope?”

“You put it right on your desk,” I said. “I saw you do it.”

“I know I did, and I didn’t move it off of there.” She bent to peer under the desk, then straightened up. Her face was white as chalk. “It’s gone!” she said, her voice breaking.

“Now wait a minute,” I said, trying to calm everybody down. “If it is gone it’s not gone very far because nobody’s left this post office since you mailed it, Mr. Waters.” I turned to look at April and Miranda and Vera and Hume and the sheriff and Waters. “There are seven of us here. Either the envelope got misplaced somehow or one of us has it.”

“I was never anywhere near it,” Miranda protested. “You certainly can’t include me as a suspect, Sam.”

“None of us are suspects,” Sheriff Lens decided as Vera filled him in about the missing envelope. “It’s gotta be here someplace.”

The rest of us just stood there while Vera and the sheriff conducted a careful search, but the missing envelope was nowhere to be found. Anson Waters watched it all with growing impatience, glancing from time to time at the big clock on the wall. “Now it’s noon—I’m probably ruined by now! You can be darned sure the Post Office Department owes me ten thousand dollars!”

“It’ll turn up,” Vera said, though she didn’t sound too certain.

Finally Sheriff Lens turned to me. “Doc, what do you think?”

“We have to go about this systematically,” I decided. “The envelope was either stolen or misplaced. What was the size of it, Mr. Waters?”

“About nine by twelve inches, I think. It contained a bearer bond just like this one, with a covering letter. I wanted to send them flat, so I used a big

envelope.”

“So it’s too big to have fallen into a drawer or behind the desk without being seen. The floor is covered with brand-new linoleum, so it couldn’t have fallen through a crack or anything like that. We’ve just finished searching for it without turning it up anywhere. I think we can conclude that it wasn’t misplaced. It was stolen.”

“The purloined letter!” Miranda exclaimed, though I could see the reference meant nothing to the others.

“That’s right,” I agreed. “In the Poe story the letter was in plain view all the time, only nobody noticed it. If, as Chesterton wrote, a wise man hides a leaf in a forest and a pebble on a beach, what better place to hide a stolen letter than in a post office?”

“Look here,” Vera said, “only the sheriff and I were behind the counter with that letter. Are you saying one of us must have stolen it?”

“You were sorting the morning’s mail, Vera. It would have been a simple task for you to slide the letter into one of those pigeonholes, to be retrieved later.”

April unwrapped a stick of chewing gum and popped it into her mouth. It was her one bad habit, but I usually let it pass. “You really think that’s where the missing letter is, Dr. Sam?”

“I think it’s worth a look.”

So we looked.

But we didn’t find the letter. It wasn’t with any of the other mail, either in the pigeonholes or the incoming and outgoing sacks.

“I told you so,” Vera announced, restored to grace. “I wouldn’t steal my own letter.”

“It’s my letter, not yours!” Anson Waters insisted.

“While it’s in this post office it’s mine,” Vera responded. “Even if I don’t know where it is.”

“All right, Sheriff,” I said. “You’re next.”

“What? Me?”

“Vera’s right, you know. You were the only other one to step behind that counter, and none of us could have reached the desk from this side.”

“But how could I have—”

“With that box. I read somewhere that the police in New York caught a shoplifter using a special box with a false bottom. You set your box on that

desk, right on top of where the letter was.”

“I didn’t see no letter!”

“Nevertheless, I’m going to have to ask you to unwrap your box.”

“Come on, Doc!”

“Look, Sheriff, we’ve been friends a long time. But you’re a suspect like everyone else this time. I’m sorry about it.”

Sheriff Lens continued to grumble but he unwrapped the package. A close examination showed there was no false bottom, and nothing inside but some carefully wrapped jars that had contained moonshine liquor. There was no envelope.

“What does that do to your theory?” Waters asked, growing impatient. “You’ve offered two solutions but I haven’t seen you produce my missing envelope yet.”

I was still young and cocky in those days, and very sure of myself. “Don’t worry, Mr. Waters. There are seven of us here, and I can offer seven solutions. If Vera and Sheriff Lens didn’t steal your envelope we’ll have to look further afield.”

“But they were the only ones behind the counter,” Hume Baxter protested.

“But not the only ones who could have stolen the envelope. Let’s take you next, Hume. Suppose the sheriff pulled that envelope onto the floor when Vera yelled at him and he retreated a few steps with his box. It could have fallen just outside the counter opening, onto your drop cloths.”

“I didn’t—”

“And it could be hidden in one of the folds of those drop cloths right this minute. Suppose we have a look.”

So we searched the drop cloths, and just for good measure we had a careful look at his brushes and paint bucket too.

There was no envelope.

“This gets more impossible all the time,” April observed. “You think I might have stolen it too, Dr. Sam?”

“I’m afraid you’re a suspect with the rest of us, April. Once again, if the envelope fell just outside the counter opening, you might have picked it up while our attention was distracted by the sheriff and Vera.”

“And did what with it?”

“You’re chewing gum, April. You might have stuck the envelope to the underside of the counter with a wad of gum.”

It was such a likely explanation that they all bent down to look at once. But there was no envelope under the counter. There was nothing under the counter.

The little banker snorted. “You’re striking out every time, Hawthorne. Who’s next—your girl friend?”

I’d avoided looking at Miranda till now, but there was no way out of it now. “You could have picked it up and hidden it under your skirt, Miranda,” I said very quietly.

“Sam, the very idea! What do you intend to do, search me?”

“I want April and Vera to search you.”

“Sam!” She seemed close to tears. “Sam Hawthorne, if you make me do this I’ll never speak to you again!”

“I’m sorry, Miranda. I have to rule out every possibility.”

“Come on,” Vera suggested. “The three of us womenfolk will search each other. Then it won’t be so bad. You men turn your backs!”

Miranda calmed down a bit and we did as Vera suggested while the women carefully searched each other. Miranda wasn’t hiding the envelope and neither were the others.

“That’s everybody,” Anson Waters said. “Now what, Hawthorne?”

“It’s not everybody, it’s only five people. There’s still you and me, Mr. Waters.”

“You think I stole my own letter?”

“You registered the letter, insuring its value for ten thousand dollars. Now suppose there was never a bearer bond in it. Suppose it was just an empty envelope and the only bond was the one you brought in to add to the envelope. The post office loses ten thousand dollars, which could be a big help to you with the market plunging.”

“An empty envelope! That’s absurd! Even if it were true, how would I make an empty envelope disappear?”

“You might have written the address with disappearing ink. If Vera noticed an empty envelope on the floor with no address on it, she might have put it in a drawer or thrown it away.”

But of course Vera spotted the flaw in my reasoning at once. “Even if the address faded away, it would still have its stamps on it, and the registry

notice. I'd have known it was the same envelope."

She was right and I had to admit it. "That still leaves me," I said. "I know I didn't steal the envelope, but the missing bond could have been removed and folded into a small packet. It might have been slipped into my pocket without my knowing it. I think it's time somebody searched me, and I guess you're the most likely one, Sheriff."

While he was at it Sheriff Lens searched Hume Baxter and the banker too. There was no envelope and no bearer bond, except the second one Waters had brought with him. I searched the sheriff in turn, with the same result.

"Seven people," Anson Waters snorted, "and seven solutions to the mystery! Only trouble is, all seven of them are wrong! What do you do next, Hawthorne, examine us with a stethoscope? Maybe one of them ate my bond."

"I hardly think so," I answered seriously. "Paper would dissolve in the stomach acids and the bond would be destroyed."

Waters turned toward Vera. "I'm holding you personally responsible for my bond!"

"Do you want to mail the other one to your broker?"

"I wouldn't trust you with it! I'll take the train to New York tonight and deliver it personally!"

With those words the banker stormed out, leaving the rest of us standing there. For the first time the strain of the morning began to show on Vera Brock. She seemed close to tears as she said, "And I wanted my opening day to be such a success. Now it's ruined."

April seemed embarrassed by this sudden show of emotion. "I'd better be getting back to the office, Dr. Sam," she decided. "A patient might have been tryin' to reach us."

"Good idea," I agreed. It was time for me to leave too. There was no solution to this mystery of the missing envelope.

I fell into step beside Miranda as she walked along Main Street. "I'm sorry the way things went in there," I said quietly. "I didn't really think you stole the letter."

"Oh, didn't you? Your performance certainly fooled me! I felt as if I were on my way to jail."

“Miranda, I—”

“It’s all over between us, Sam. I think I knew it before today.”

“It’s not over unless you want it to be.”

“You’re not the same man you were last summer, Sam.”

“Maybe you’re not the same either,” I answered sadly.

We parted at the corner and I crossed over to my office. Sheriff Lens came around the back of the building and headed me off. “You got a minute, Doc?” he asked me.

“Sure, Sheriff. I just finished apologizing to Miranda, so I’d better do the same with you. I didn’t really think you hid that letter in your package, but I had to look everywhere.”

“I understand,” he assured me, “but Vera’s plumb upset about the whole business. She’s afraid Washington might even remove her as postmistress if she loses a ten-thousand-dollar letter on opening day.”

“Does it concern you that much, Sheriff?” I asked him.

“Well, yeah. You know, Doc, Vera’s a mighty attractive woman for her age. An old coot like me gets lonesome after all these years as a widower.”

A light began to dawn. “You mean you and Vera Brock—?”

“Oh, she loses patience with me sometimes, like this morning, but most times we get along fine. I been over to her house a few times . . .” His voice trailed off and then started again. “You know I’m not much of a detective, Doc. Not much of a sheriff, either, if the truth be known. Maybe the town’s gettin’ too big for the likes of me.”

“You’re an important part of the town, Sheriff.”

“Yeah, but I mean now Vera’s in trouble an’ I don’t know no way of gettin’ her out of it. Damned if I know who stole that envelope, or how. We searched everywhere.”

“Yes, we did,” I agreed. “We searched the floor and the desk and all those pigeonholes and the mail sacks. We searched Baxter’s drop cloths and painting gear. We searched under the counter and even under Miranda’s skirts. We searched every single one of us. I’m ready to swear there’s no place in that post office where the letter could have been hidden, and yet there’s no way it could have left the post office either. There were no mail pickups while we were there, and no one left the place during the crucial period.”

“Then you’re as baffled as I am, Doc?”

“I’m afraid so,” I admitted. “Maybe I do better with murder cases when you have a motive staring you in the face. This theft has a universal motive—anyone can use ten thousand bucks, even banker Waters.”

“Well, if you think of anything that might help her, Doc, we’d sure appreciate it. Both of us.”

“I’ll try, Sheriff.”

As I went on into my office I thought that was the most human moment I’d spent with Sheriff Lens in the seven years we’d known each other.

And maybe if one romance had died at the post office that morning, another had been strengthened.

The worst of the Wall Street panic was over by noon, as banks decided to pool their resources and support the market. Stock prices even rallied a bit in the afternoon, and April returned from a trip to the bank with the report that Waters was actually smiling.

I had only one appointment scheduled after lunch, and when my patient had been sent on her way I got my collection of Edgar Allan Poe down from the shelf and reread “The Purloined Letter.” But it told me nothing.

In Vera’s post office all letters were suspect and all had been examined. There was no letter in plain view that we had missed.

I’d failed Vera Brock and Sheriff Lens. Most of all, I’d failed myself.

At the end of the day April came in to say good night. It was starting to drizzle outside and I hardly recognized her in her new raincoat.

“You look so different,” I said.

“Coats do that sometimes.”

Coats.

After she’d gone I sat at my desk and thought about coats.

Was it possible?

Already it was growing dark outside, and night would fall within the hour. If I was right this time, there was an easy way to prove it before I told anyone else and made a bigger fool of myself. I locked up my office and walked down Main Street through the damp drizzle.

When I reached the post office I peered through the big front window and wondered how to go about getting inside. Vera had left a small light burning toward the back and it cast an eerie glow over the fresh pink walls. I supposed there might be an alarm system on the doors, though I could see no evidence of one.

But if I was right about the hiding place of the stolen letter, the thief would return tonight too. Maybe all I had to do was wait.

“Still looking for the thief, Hawthorne?” a voice behind me asked. I turned and saw Anson Waters, his collar up and hat pulled down against the rain.

“I had another idea I thought I’d check out.”

“I’ve already filed a claim for the missing bond.”

“I thought you were taking the train to New York tonight.”

“I am. The 10:45 to New Haven. I’ll change trains there.”

He was starting to say something else when I thought I heard the muffled breaking of glass. The light in the post office had gone out. “Quick!” I told the banker. “Get Sheriff Lens!”

“What—?”

“Don’t ask questions!”

I left him standing there and ran around the back of the building. A pane of glass had been broken and a window raised. I climbed over the sill and searched around for the light switch. The overhead lights went on, blinding us both for an instant, but then I saw him.

“Hello, Hume.”

Hume Baxter stared at me, the stolen envelope in his hand. “How’d you know, Sam? How in hell did you know?”

“It took me a while, I’ll admit, but I finally tumbled to it. The only place we didn’t look. Like Poe’s purloined letter, it was right in front of us all the time and we didn’t see it.”

Later, after Sheriff Lens had arrived to take charge of Hume Baxter and the stolen envelope, I explained, “I got to thinking about how coats can cover up things and change their appearance, and that made me think of a coat of paint. You see, what happened was that you set your box right on top of Anson Waters’ envelope. When Vera yelled and you yanked it back up, the envelope got caught in the cord around the box and hung there. You stepped back a few paces, just outside the counter, and the envelope fell to the floor.”

“How could that happen without someone seeing it?” Sheriff Lens wondered.

“But someone did see it,” I reminded him. “Hume Baxter saw it. Think about our various positions in the room and you’ll realize he was in the best position to see it. You were holding a large box that blocked your view of the floor. And once you’d moved back a few paces the counter was between you and Vera, obstructing her view. Miranda, April, and I were near the door, on our way out, and your back was to us. Waters wasn’t present at that point. Only Hume Baxter, off to the side with his paint brush, was likely to see what happened. While you followed Vera’s instructions and carried the box to that back shelf, Hume tossed one of his drop cloths over the envelope and then managed to pick it up.”

“In a single quick gesture he stuck it to the freshly painted wall just above the floor level and near the counter, where the shadow of the counter top kept the light from falling directly on it. And then he painted pink over it. I remember him bending to touch up a spot by the counter. The face of the envelope was against the wall of course, so the stamps didn’t show through. And the buff color of the manila envelope wasn’t that different from the original yellowish-tan brown color of the walls before they were painted, so the pink was about the same shade on the envelope.”

“But how come we didn’t see it even so, Doc?”

“Several reasons. For one, Hume warned us not to get too close to the wet paint and nobody did. For another, down near floor level, partly under the counter, it didn’t show. A freshly painted wall is always wet and streaky looking till it dries, so the edges of the envelope weren’t noticeable. It was a large envelope but very thin, remember. There were only two unfolded sheets of paper inside—the bearer bond and a letter.”

“What about when the paint dried?”

“Exactly! The envelope might fall away from the wall, or at the very least its edges would come loose and be more visible. That’s how I knew he’d have to come back for it tonight. He’d even brought along a little pink paint to touch up the spot again after he removed the envelope.”

Sheriff Lens shook his head. “What people won’t do for money.”

“Or love,” I added and gave him a wink. Vera Brock was coming through the post-office door.

“I said at the beginning it was a unique case,” Dr. Sam Hawthorne concluded, “and it was. For one thing there was no murder, and for another

my solution showed that it was Sheriff Lens himself who actually aided the thief by snagging that envelope with his box. I guess in a way they both paid for their crime because Hume Baxter went to jail and Sheriff Lens went to the altar. That's right—it didn't work out for Miranda and me, but it sure did for Vera and the sheriff. It was one of the happiest weddings I ever attended, despite a locked-room murder on the very day of the ceremony that almost—but that's for next time!”

# A DR. SAM HAWTHORNE CHECKLIST

## BOOKS

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

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

## INDIVIDUAL STORIES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“The Problem of Cell 16” [Spring 1926]. EQMM, March 1977.

“The Problem of the Country Inn” [Summer 1926]. EQMM, September 1977.

“The Problem of the Voting Booth” [November 1926]. EQMM, December 1977.

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“The Problem of the Old Oak Tree” [September 1927]. EQMM, July 1978.

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

“The Problem of the General Store” [Summer 1928]. EQMM, November 1979.

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“The Problem of the Octagon Room” [December 1929]. EQMM, October 7, 1981.

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

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

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

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“The Problem of the Sealed Bottle” [December 5, 1933]. EQMM, September 1986.

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“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.

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“The Problem of the Haunted Tepee” [September 1935]. EQMM, December 1990.

“The Problem of the Blue Bicycle” [September 1936]. EQMM, April 1991.

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

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