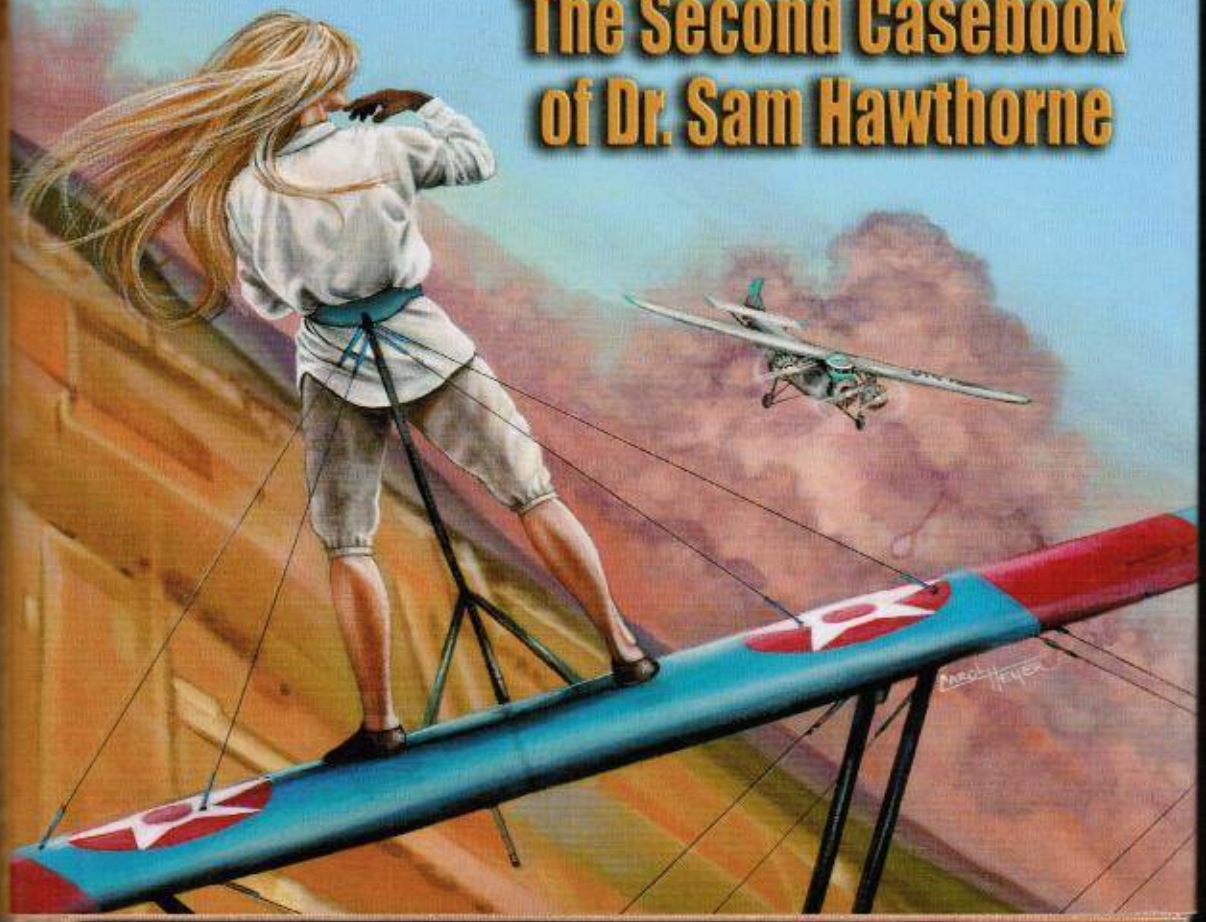


Edward D. Hoch

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 BOOTLEGGER'S CAR

“Wait till I open a new bottle,” Dr. Sam Hawthorne was saying. “We can’t have a story without a small—ah—libation. You know, looking at this bottle brings back so many memories. You were too young for Prohibition, of course, but I was around for it. You might think we’d escaped the worst of the gang wars up in Northmont, in the peaceful New England countryside, but let me tell you—in the spring of 1930 we had a dilly of a one! It was all over a shipment of empty barrels—yes, I said empty—and it involved an impossible disappearance from a bootlegger’s car that I had to solve, quite literally, to save my own life.”

“But it all began with my kidnaping . . .”

It was a Saturday morning in early May (Dr. Sam continued), and I was down at my office getting out some bills. My nurse April had gone off to visit her sister in Florida—a journey of some magnitude in those days—and I’d been left to cope with things as best I could for three weeks’ time. I was just finishing up my chores, putting stamps on some of the bills I wanted to mail out, when I heard the little bell on the outside door signal the arrival of a patient. Since none was scheduled, I went to see who it was.

A man in a pin-stripe suit and a brown fedora hat stood in the center of my waiting room, pointing a long-barreled revolver at me. “Dr. Hawthorne?”

“That’s right. What’s the gun for?”

“You’re comin’ with me, Doc. We got an injured man.”

“If there’s an injured man you don’t need a gun. I’ll get my bag.”

He followed me into the inner office, the gun still in his hand. I collected some extra rolls of bandages and stuffed them into my bag, having a pretty good idea of the nature of the injury. But I asked anyway. “What’s the matter with him?”

“Gunshot wounds.”

“More than one?”

“Just one that’s bad. Come on, cut the talk!”

I snapped my bag shut and walked out the door in front of him. “Make sure you lock it,” I cautioned him. “There are lots of crooks around these days.”

“You being a wise guy?” he asked.

“Not a bit.”

There was another man waiting outside at the wheel of the car, a closed black sedan. I could see that his right hand was inside his jacket, no doubt clutching another gun. I didn’t feel scared. I felt more like a character in a Class B gangster movie.

“Get in!” the one behind me ordered, giving me a shove.

I glanced around, but the alley behind my office was deserted on a Saturday morning and I didn’t really expect anyone from the nearby houses would notice my predicament. I slid into the back seat of the car as ordered, and said to my captor, “Do you have a name I can call you? It looks as if we’ll be together for a few hours.”

“Phil,” the man with the gun said. “That’s Marty behind the wheel. He don’t talk much.”

“Where are we going?”

“A farmhouse just outside of town. Fat Larry rented it.”

“Fat Larry?”

He nudged me with the revolver. “Your patient. But don’t ask too many questions, Doc. It’s not good for your health.”

I remembered a name from the newspapers. “Would that be Fat Larry Spears? The bootlegger?”

“I told you not to ask questions, Doc. You want to come back from this trip alive, don’t you?”

I fell silent, thinking about Fat Larry Spears. He controlled most of the illegal whiskey flowing into Boston and Providence, according to the press, and was rumored to have killed a half-dozen men. His own life had been on the line countless times, and it was a known fact that the New York mobs had a price on his head. They wanted control of bootlegging in the entire northeast, with no interference from independent operators like Fat Larry.

We were some miles out of town, bumping along the Old Ridge Road in the spring sunshine, when Marty finally turned off into a weed-choked

driveway. I recognized the farmhouse at once as the old Haskins place, abandoned since the death of the last unmarried brother a year earlier. If Fat Larry Spears was renting it he probably wasn't paying much. The house was near a crossroads, and I supposed it might make a good meeting place for bootleggers.

I entered the place between Marty and Phil, with the gun still at my back. As we approached, the door was flung open by a slim dark-haired woman with a pretty face. "He still won't let me look at the wound," she told them, "but there's blood all over! Is this the doctor?"

"I'm Sam Hawthorne," I said. "How long ago did it happen?"

She glanced at the gunman. "What was it, Phil? Around nine?"

"Yeah. They were waiting for him in the bushes near the road. When he came out the door they started firing. We came for you right away."

"Let's see him." I was already opening my bag as I followed her into a first-floor bedroom.

It was Fat Larry Spears, all right, though at the moment he didn't look much like the dapper newspaper photos. He was curled into a ball on the bed, clutching at his stomach and abdomen, writhing in pain. There was blood on the sheets and on his shirt, and I could see an additional flesh wound in his upper left arm.

"I'm the doctor," I announced. "Let's take a look at you."

He rolled over, grimacing, and told the woman, "Leave us alone, Kitty. I don't want you to see it."

"For God's sake, Larry—"

"You heard me!" he shouted. "Out!"

She went out with the two men and closed the door, leaving me alone with my patient. "Take your hands away and let me see it," I instructed him.

He straightened out at once and his shirt fell open, revealing a hairy but unmarked stomach. There was no wound.

But there was a little .22 automatic just inches away from my head.

"Don't make a sound," Fat Larry Spears cautioned me. "No yelling."

"I didn't intend to," I answered quietly. "I came to fix your wounds."

"There's one in my arm, that's all. It's just a flesh wound. Take care of that and then we'll talk."

"You don't need that gun."

But he kept it there. "How do I know you're a doctor?"

“Hell, how do I know you’re a bootlegger?”

“Wise guy, huh?”

“No wiser than you.” I went to work on the arm. “You’re thinner than you look in the papers. How come they call you Fat Larry?”

“I used to be fat. I lost weight. That’s what saved my life this morning.” He rolled over on the bed, revealing a thickly padded vest he’d hidden beneath his body. “I started losing weight a year ago, but I decided to keep it a secret. In this business, with half the guns in New York after me, I figured I might need to change my appearance in a hurry some day. So I started wearing padding around my stomach and stuffed a little cotton into my cheeks. I looked about like I had before, except that I was fifty pounds lighter.”

The bullet had passed through the fleshy part of his arm, and it was only a matter of taking a couple of stitches. “This’ll hurt,” I warned. “You should go into the hospital.”

“Go ahead and do it, Doc. I won’t shoot you.”

“I certainly hope not.” I went to work as he gritted his teeth. “But why keep your weight loss from those people outside?”

“Because one of them is an informer. One of them has been tipping off the New York mob to everything I do. That’s why there was a gunman waiting in the bushes this morning. Only those three knew I was up here. Luckily my stomach padding stopped the bullet, but the impact knocked me over and I decided to pretend I was badly wounded. If they think I’m on the way out I might be able to catch the guilty one off guard. Understand?”

“Kitty must know you’ve lost weight,” I said.

He snorted. “You think I sleep with her? That was over a year ago. She just hangs around now for what she can get outa me. Maybe she decided she can get more outa the New York boys.”

“All finished,” I announced, patting his arm. “You were lucky. When you get back to Boston or wherever, you should have that checked by your own doctor.”

“One more thing, Doc.”

“What’s that?”

“I gotta keep you here with me, till tonight.”

“What?”

“You heard me. You know I’m here and you know I’m not badly wounded. The police would be interested in the first fact, and the people who shot me would be interested in the second. You’ve got to stay here till my business is finished tonight.”

“What business is that?”

“I have to take delivery of a shipment of barrels.”

“Booze?”

“No, just barrels. All I’m promised is that they’ll be here by sundown.” He paused and looked at me. “They’re valuable.”

I buttoned his shirt up again and remarked on all the blood. “Did this all come from your arm?”

The familiar waxen face actually smiled. “Yeah. I soaked the blood into my shirt so it would look more like a chest wound. That was fast thinking if I say so myself.”

“If it keeps you alive I won’t disagree.”

“What’s the local police setup here, Doc?”

“Sheriff Lens has a few deputies, but they never patrol up this way. You shouldn’t be bothered.”

“Good! Now you tell the others I’m gonna pull through but I’ll have to stay in bed. Got that?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll tell them not to let you go till the truck gets here. You play your cards right and you’ll get out of this alive.” He raised his voice and shouted, “Marty! Phil!”

The driver and the gunman immediately appeared. “How you feelin’, Larry?”

“I’ll live, the doc tells me.”

I nodded, getting to my feet and starting to gather up my equipment. “He’s a lucky man. He’s very weak and he’d better stay in bed, but the bullet missed any vital areas. If he doesn’t develop an infection he should be back on his feet in a month or so.”

“Keep the doc here till the truck arrives,” Spears told the two men, making his voice sounding suddenly weak. “I said we’d let him go after that.”

“Right, Larry,” Phil said. “Let’s go, Doc.”

“And send Kitty in here,” the man in the bed ordered.

The farmhouse was sparsely furnished, but there were a table and chairs in the front room. Phil motioned me to sit down and then said to Kitty, “Your turn. He wants you.”

She turned to me. “How is he?”

“Weak, but he’ll live.”

Her face was a mask as she turned and went into the bedroom, closing the door behind her. Phil sat down at the table. He’d taken off his suit coat and returned the revolver to its shoulder holster. “How about some cards, Doc? You play gin rummy?”

“Sure,” I replied, “but what about Marty?”

“He don’t play.”

“Does he ever speak?”

Phil looked up at the burly driver. “Say something for the doc, Marty. He don’t think you can talk.”

“I can talk,” a voice rasped.

“My God, what’s the matter with his throat?”

“He got some bad booze. Burned his throat and nearly killed him. Back in the early days they were selling anything they could put in bottles. Some still do, for that matter.”

I couldn’t help wondering if Marty might blame Fat Larry Spears somehow for the booze that had ruined his throat. Had he kept on working for Spears only until he could get his revenge by betraying Fat Larry to the New York crowd?

But here I was acting like a detective again, and there was no reason to. The truck loaded with the mysterious barrels would arrive soon and then everyone would depart. Since they hadn’t killed me yet I was pretty sure Spears meant it about letting me live.

As Phil dealt the cards I asked, “Who do you think shot Larry?”

He shrugged. “Some hired gun from the New York mob.”

“How would he know Larry was up here?”

“Followed us, I suppose. Or else he heard it from Tony Barrel.”

“Who?”

“Tony Barrello. Everybody calls him Tony Barrel because that’s what he sells—barrels. He’s makin’ the delivery today.”

“Tell me, what’s in these barrels?”

“Nothing. Nothing but air.”

“Larry said they were valuable.”

Phil scooped up his cards, but Marty was standing there peering over his shoulder. “Go outside, Marty,” he ordered. “Watch for the truck.” When the burly man had gone, he said, “Guy gets on my nerves. Always so damned quiet. Never know what he’s thinkin’. Where were we?”

“The barrels.”

“Yeah.”

“Larry said they were valuable.”

“Well, they cost sixty bucks each and there are supposed to be two hundred of them on the truck. That’s twelve thousand dollars.”

“Sixty dollars each for empty barrels?”

“These are special,” Phil said with a smile. “You’ll see.”

We played two games of gin and he won both times. We were just starting a third game when Kitty came out of the bedroom. “He’s hungry,” she said. “I’m going to make him a sandwich.”

Phil glanced at me. “You’re not supposed to eat with a stomach wound, are you?”

“Well, the bullet didn’t actually hit his stomach. It’s all right if he eats a little.”

She went off to the kitchen, where they apparently had a small stock of cold meat and bread. “Make me one too,” Phil yelled to her. “And Marty’s probably gettin’ hungry. It’s after one already.”

Kitty brought in a plate of sandwiches, moving with a languid grace that made me guess she’d once been a cocktail waitress. “Where were all of you when Larry was shot this morning?” I asked casually.

“Kitty was fixin’ breakfast,” Phil replied, studying his cards with a frown. “Marty and I were still in bed. We didn’t get in till past midnight. I was just wakin’ up when I heard the shots.”

“How many?”

“Three or four, I guess.”

“Four,” Kitty said. “There were four shots. By the time I got to the door Larry was down on the steps, trying to crawl back inside. There was no sign of the gunman. Larry said the shots came from the bushes near the road.”

“He must have been expecting trouble if he brought you guys along,” I commented.

“Larry always expects trouble,” Kitty agreed. “Especially when he’s dealing with people like Tony Barrel. Tony deals with the New York mob. You never know whose side he’s on.”

As the afternoon wore on I began to get restless, wondering if anyone had yet noticed my absence. Probably not, I decided. It was a Saturday, when I only had limited office hours, and April was on vacation. Sheriff Lens might drop by to see me, but he’d think nothing of my absence.

At three o’clock I got to my feet, saying, “I’d better have a look at my patient.”

“I think he’s sleeping,” Kitty said. “I’ll just peek in.”

I opened the door and looked in. Fat Larry was in bed with his eyes closed, but they snapped open at once. I knew his hand beneath the covers would be clutching the .22 automatic. “What is it?” he asked. “Is the truck here?”

I stepped inside and shut the door behind me.

“Not yet. I just wanted to see how you’re getting on.”

He gave me a hard smile. “Pretty good for a man with a bullet in his belly. Are they suspicious?”

“They don’t seem to be. But where is all this leading? Do you think one of them might try to finish you off?”

“Might be. Let’s see what happens when Tony Barrel arrives.”

I went back out to join the others. By that time I think we were all getting tired of waiting, but before Phil could deal another hand of gin rummy Marty came in from outside.

“Car and truck coming,” he said in his raspy voice.

Phil was on his feet at once, reaching for his holstered weapon. “Cover the back, Marty—just in case it’s some sort of trick.” Then, to Kitty, “Tell Larry they’re coming.”

Kitty went into the bedroom and returned at once with a message. “He says we’re to bring Tony Barrel in there so he can close the deal and give him the money for the shipment.”

Phil nodded and went to the door. I looked through the window, watching a rise of dust approach us along the dirt road. A car pulled into the driveway first, followed by a large long truck with a tarpaulin-covered cargo. Interested as I was in this mysterious cargo of empty barrels, it was the car that caught my attention. It was a black Packard limousine with shades

drawn on the rear windows. A thin man of medium height with a pock-marked face slid out from behind the wheel. Like Phil, he wore a dark suit and a wide-brimmed fedora, but the suit seemed somehow too big for him.

“That’s Scoop Turner, Tony’s driver,” Phil told me. “And there’s Tony Barrel himself.”

Scoop opened the rear door and a stout bearded man emerged. If he wasn’t quite shaped like a barrel, he was certainly large, and somehow the bushy black beard and slouch hat gave him an undeservedly squat appearance. While his driver lounged against the car, Tony Barrel walked quickly up the steps to the front door.

Phil holstered his gun and opened the door. “Hello, Tony. Good to see you again.”

Tony Barrel’s steel-gray eyes covered the room at a glance, passing quickly over Kitty and stopping at me. “Who’s this?” he asked.

“A local sawbones. Larry got hurt.”

I extended my hand. “Dr. Sam Hawthorne. Pleased to meet you, Tony.”

“Yeah.” He took my hand and gave it a limp shake. I couldn’t help noticing that he wore a diamond ring shaped like a barrel. “What’s the matter with Larry?”

“Somebody shot him,” Phil answered before I could reply. “But the doc says he’ll pull through. We got him in the back room here and he wants to see you about the shipment.”

“He better do more than see me. He better give me twelve grand plus the fee for the truck.”

“He’s got it for you.”

“He bring a driver?”

“Marty’s around back.”

Tony Barrel snorted. “That hophead!”

“Is your guy any better?” Phil glanced out the window. “What in hell’s he doin’ wavin’ that shotgun around?”

“Protectin’ the cargo,” Tony Barrel said.

I went to the window to take a look. The driver of the truck had gotten out and was standing like a soldier on guard with a double-barreled shotgun. Kitty came over to my side. “That’s Charlie Hello with the gun. He’s part Indian or something. About like Marty. They’re good with a gun and that’s all.”

“What makes those barrels so valuable?”

“Come on out and I’ll show you.”

We waited while Tony Barrel was shown into Larry Spears’s sick room. I heard Larry greet him in a weak voice. “Tony, my old friend! They tried to kill me but I’m a tough one.” Then Tony closed the door.

I followed Kitty outside while Phil went around back to get Marty. Barrel’s driver, Scoop Turner, was still lounging against the Packard, but he stirred as we approached. “Why do they call him Scoop?” I asked Kitty.

“He used to be a reporter out in Chicago, but he decided he could make more money working for the mob. He’s always after the bucks.” Then, in a louder voice, she greeted him. “How’s tricks, Scoop?”

He gave her a sleepy grin. “Hello, Kitty. Still knocking them dead?”

“Sure, Scoop.” She explained to me, “I was in burlesque for a while in Chicago. Scoop reviewed my act one night, didn’t you, Scoop?”

“I loved it.”

“Can we look at Tony’s car?”

He shrugged and opened the back door. With the shades drawn the interior was dim, but there was a ceiling light that cast a soft glow over the fancy leather upholstery. Tucked into the pocket behind the front seat was a sawed-off shotgun. Scoop opened the driver’s door and rested his arms on the back of the front seat, watching Kitty’s reaction. “Pretty classy, huh?”

“Why does he ride with the shades down?”

“Too many people tryin’ to get a shot at him. This way they can’t tell if he’s in the car or not. See, my side glass in front is smoked too. Only the front windshield is clear glass.”

“Bulletproof?”

“So they say, but I wouldn’t like to try it with a Tommygun.”

Kitty and I continued walking toward the truck and Scoop Turner closed the car doors. He wandered off toward the side of the house. “I’m sorry you had to get involved in this business,” Kitty told me as we walked. “But I made Larry promise you wouldn’t be harmed. We’ll release you as soon as Tony Barrel and his men leave.”

With Phil and Marty both around the back of the house, I wondered if I could make a run for it then, but I decided against it. The truck driver, Charlie Hello, still had his shotgun out and I didn’t know when he might decide to use it. He might like to practise on a running target.

“It’s me, Charlie—Kitty. You remember me, don’t you?”

If he did he showed no sign of it. Instead, he slipped his finger through the trigger guard of the shotgun and said, “Stay away from the truck.”

“We just want to look at the barrels, Charlie. We won’t hurt anything.”

His eyes were sleepy, possibly from drugs. They followed our movements around the truck but the warning was not repeated. Kitty lifted the tarpaulin and showed me the wooden barrels. One row was upended and I could see they were empty. “They’re not even new,” I commented. “The insides look like they’ve been charred.”

“Of course they’re charred, silly! That’s what makes them so valuable. Tony Barrel buys them from distilleries in Canada. They’re charred barrels in which whiskey has been aged. You fill them with denatured alcohol and let it stand for a few weeks. It absorbs the flavor of the whiskey and comes out tasting like Scotch or rye or bourbon or whatever was in the barrels originally.”

“Where does the denatured alcohol come from?”

“The government allows it to be sold to certain manufacturing firms. In some cases poisonous chemicals are added, but the alcohol used in making hair tonic—for example—is nauseating but not deadly. A chemist can rectify or purify it by repeated distillation, removing the nauseating substance. The pure alcohol is left in these barrels a few weeks, and it tastes just like the real thing.”

“Amazing!”

“Just one of the tricks of the trade.”

“I thought Larry Spears was selling whiskey he smuggled across the border.”

“He is, but demand is outstripping his supply. Besides, he needs more money, the way his gambling debts keep rising.”

“There comes Tony Barrel,” I said. The door of the farmhouse had opened and the stout bearded man emerged just as Phil and Marty came around the corner of the house.

“Get the money, Tony?” Phil called out.

“Yeah,” he mumbled. “The truck’s yours.” His bare right hand reached out and opened the limousine’s rear door. He climbed inside.

“Take the truck, Marty,” Phil ordered, and Marty started trotting toward it.

Then something happened.

Charlie Hello, his mind fogged with drink or drugs, saw Marty running toward him and must have thought he was being attacked. He swung the shotgun around and fired in Marty's general direction. Marty hit the ground, skidding in the dust, and pulled a snub-nosed revolver from under his coat. He fired three fast shots from the ground as another booming roar came from Charlie's shotgun.

Then Charlie Hello toppled backward against the fender of the truck and went down. "Stop shooting, for God's sake!" Phil yelled, running forward with his own gun drawn. Kitty and I were still on the far side of Tony Barrel's limousine, between it and the farmhouse. Scoop Turner was coming out from the driver's seat, pulling a gun of his own. For an instant I feared he'd open fire on Phil and Marty from behind, but he hesitated, unsure of what to do. He was staring down at the left hand front tire of his car, and I could see from my side that it was flat. One of Charlie's shotgun blasts had hit it.

"Doc, I think he's dead," Phil yelled at me. "Come take a look."

"Stay here," I cautioned Kitty and started forward.

Marty was still standing with his gun out, staring at the body on the ground. "He shot first," he rasped. "He tried to kill me."

"All he hit was my tire," Scoop Turner said. "Let's everybody put the guns away."

I confirmed that Marty's bullets had killed Charlie Hello and then straightened up. I was staring at the limousine, but Tony Barrel hadn't yet emerged. Remembering the shotgun he had in the back seat, I decided we should speak to him before he did something foolish over the death of his truck driver.

"Where you goin'?" Phil asked me.

"Just to see Tony," I answered, and opened the rear door of the car.

The back seat of the limousine was empty.

The front seat was empty.

While Charlie Hello and Marty were shooting it out, Tony Barrel had disappeared.

"Where is he?" Kitty asked. "He didn't leave the car."

"He left it, all right," I said. "He's gone."

“He can’t be gone!” Scoop Turner insisted. He pushed by me and looked for himself. Phil and Marty came up for a look too.

“He musta gone back in the house when the shooting started,” Phil suggested.

“He didn’t go in the house because I’d have seen him!” Kitty insisted. “So would the rest of you, shooting or no shooting! It’s thirty feet to the house and Tony’s not exactly the invisible man, you know.”

“I’ll settle this by taking a look inside,” I said, and ran toward the house. I went in through the front door, fully expecting to see Tony Barrel cowering behind a chair. But the front room was empty.

I went into the ground-floor bedroom, wondering if Larry Spears would be among the missing too. But he was sitting up in bed, pointing his little .22 at the door. He looked pale and frightened. “What was that shooting?” he asked. “Cops?”

“No such luck. Marty killed their truck driver, Charlie Hello.”

“Small loss.”

“But this is a big loss. During the shooting Tony Barrel vanished from his car.”

“What do you mean, vanished?”

“Just that. We saw him get into the car and now he’s gone.”

Larry Spears lowered his gun. “Well, go find him. I can’t come out and let them know my stomach wound was a fake. One of them is still trying to get me.”

“I’ll be back,” I promised.

Outside, Kitty was pawing at the car’s upholstery, looking for any sort of hidden compartment large enough to hide a man. But the limousine seemed solid enough. I had Scoop unlock the trunk but there was nothing in it except a spare tire and some tools.

“Where is he?” Phil asked me.

“I wish I knew. He’s not inside the house and Larry doesn’t know a thing.”

We walked around the house and then around the truck, looking for a clue, but there was none. We searched Larry’s car and then began looking through the empty barrels on the truck. There was no way he could have gotten inside them without someone seeing him, but we looked anyway.

Twenty minutes later we were ready to admit defeat. Tony Barrel was gone.

“I know the fast way to find out where he is,” Phil said, drawing the gun from his shoulder holster. He turned and pointed it at Scoop. “We all saw him get in the car, Scoop. You gotta know what happened.”

“Nothing happened!” the ex-reporter insisted.

“Did he say anything to you?” I asked.

“He just told me to pick up Charlie and get moving. But then the shooting started and my tire got hit.”

“Charlie was going back in the limousine?”

“Sure, up front with me. Spears bought the truck and everything.”

“For twelve thousand dollars cash,” I reminded them all. “Tony Barrel had that money in his pocket, and it might have been enough of a motive for any one of you.”

“You’re saying one of us killed him?” Kitty asked. “But how?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted.

“To hell with Tony,” Phil decided. “Whether he’s dead or alive, Charlie Hello is dead. And we’ve got to make tracks out of here before someone comes along. That truckload of barrels is still worth money.”

The others agreed, but Scoop Turner asked, “What about the body?”

“We’ll take it with us,” Phil decided. “Inside one of the barrels. It’ll be a lot easier to dump along the way, off a bridge somewhere.”

Turner pointed at me. “And what about him?”

“I guess he knows a little too much,” Phil said bluntly.

“Wait a minute!” Kitty spoke sharply, stepping in front of Phil before he could draw his weapon, if that was his intention. “Larry promised he wouldn’t be harmed!”

“For all we know Larry might be dying. And where will that leave us?”

“The doc doesn’t know anything. He doesn’t even know our last names.”

“He knows mine,” Scoop Turner said. “What am I supposed to do? Charlie is dead and the boss has disappeared.”

“What are you supposed to do?” Phil said. “Tell us what you did with him, that’s what!”

I held up my hands to quiet them. “You won’t get anywhere fighting among yourselves. The way things stand now, the police would probably

arrest the whole bunch of you. They've got Charlie's body and they might come up with Tony's too if they look hard enough."

"Is he dead?" Kitty asked.

"I expect he is. Now do you all want to go to prison for it or do you want me to name the murderer?"

"It's one of us?"

"It's the same person who shot Larry Spears at that front door this morning. In fact, you might say that Larry's shooting was part of the same crime."

"Do you know where Tony's body is?"

"Yes."

"All right," Phil agreed. "You produce Tony's body and tell us who killed him—and how—and we'll let you go. How's that for a deal, Doc?"

I nodded. "Let's go into Larry's room. He's well enough to hear this too."

They all followed me inside, leaving Charlie Hello's body sprawled where it had fallen. There hadn't been another car along the road all afternoon, but I knew that Sheriff Lens sometimes drove up this way late in the day. There was always a chance someone might have heard the shooting and called in a report of illegal hunting.

Larry Spears brought his gun out as we entered. "What is this? What do you all want?"

"We made a bargain," I explained. "I go free if I can produce Tony Barrel's body. And his murderer."

"How can you be sitting up with that terrible wound?" Kitty asked him. "When I was in before you were half dead."

"There's a lot of things that need explaining," Phil agreed. I could see his fingers twitching to draw his gun. "But if Tony Barrel is dead this is the only person who could have killed him." He pointed at Scoop Turner, who was beginning to look frightened.

Larry Spears shifted his gun in Turner's direction. "And he could have driven up here this morning and taken that shot at me!"

I saw his finger whitening on the trigger and knew I had to move fast. I threw myself on the bed, knocking his arm aside just as the gun went off. The bullet hit the ceiling and I wrested the gun free before he could fire again. "Phil!" Spears shouted from beneath me. "Kill him! Kill them both!"

“Oh, no!” I said. “Phil won’t kill me or Scoop, because he wants to hear where the body is.”

“Where is it?” Kitty demanded.

I kept a firm grip on Larry Spears. “Under this bed, and Spears is the one who put it there!”

As I spoke, Scoop Turner was edging toward the door. But Marty moved in silently to block his passage. “That’s right,” I said. “Hang onto him. We’ll be needing him.”

“Then Scoop is involved too?” Kitty asked.

I nodded, pulling up the rumpled bedclothes to reveal Tony Barrel’s body where I said it would be. “Larry killed him, but he couldn’t have worked it without Scoop’s help. You said Scoop was always after the bucks, and Larry must have bought him out some time back. Tony Barrel was murdered in this room.” I looked more closely at the newly revealed body. “Strangled with a thin wire. He never left the house. It was Scoop, wearing a false beard and stomach padding, who walked to the car and got in. He and Tony were wearing a similar suit and hat, and I’d noticed earlier how loose-fitting his clothes were.”

“I don’t understand this at all,” Kitty protested. “You said the same person killed Tony that shot Larry this morning.”

“Exactly! Larry shot himself. I’ve known since I first arrived that there was no stomach wound, but I didn’t guess until a short time ago that the arm wound was self-inflicted. There never was any gunman in the bushes.”

“But why?” Kitty asked. “What was his motive in shooting himself, killing Tony, and arranging this vanishing-man act?”

“He shot himself as a means of luring Tony to the bedroom where Tony could be killed. Otherwise they would most likely have met outside or in the company of the rest of you. And he killed Tony, quite simply, because he didn’t have the twelve thousand dollars to pay for the shipment of barrels, which he desperately needed. As for the vanishing man, it was never planned that way.”

“What do you mean, never planned that way?” Phil wanted to know.

“Maybe I’d better describe the crime from the beginning,” I suggested, “so you can see what was planned and where it went wrong. Larry needed those barrels to manufacture artificial whiskey, which could be sold at a big

profit. He arranged to buy them from Tony, as we know, for twelve thousand dollars. But somewhere along the line he ran out of money—right, Larry? Kitty said you've been gambling heavily lately. There's no way you short-change a man like Tony Barrel without starting a gang war, so you knew you had to kill him—in such a manner that you'd be completely free from suspicion.

“You arranged to bribe Scoop at some previous time, probably for a thousand bucks or whatever you could scrape together. This morning you walked outside the door and shot yourself in the fleshy part of the arm with that .22. There was plenty of blood and you pretended you'd been hit in the stomach as well. It was easy to fire the pistol through a cloth of some sort so there'd be no powder burns around the wound. And you knew a .22 slug wouldn't do much damage.”

“He told you his stomach wound was a fake?” Kitty asked.

“He had to. There was no way he could keep you from summoning a doctor. The superficial arm wound alone wouldn't keep him in bed, and being in bed was essential to his plan. He had to lure Tony Barrel into this room, alone, to strangle him. Meanwhile he told me he suspected one of you three of tipping off the New York mob to his whereabouts, but that was just a red herring for my benefit. So Tony came in here alone to get his payment, and maybe Larry even asked him to bend over the bed to hear his whispered voice. He strangled Tony with this wire—”

“Strangled a strong man like Tony when he had a bullet wound in one arm?” Kitty asked.

“The wound is in his left arm, and he still had all the strength of his right arm. And with the element of surprise this wire noose wouldn't need that much strength.”

“Where did Scoop Turner come in?”

“Through the window, to give you a literal answer. Remember after he showed us the limousine he strolled around the side of the house. He came in through the window, put on a false beard and the padded vest that Larry wore to conceal his weight loss, maybe helped Larry slide the body under the bed, and then went out the door to the car. He only had to mumble a few words, you'll remember. Once in the back of the car he shed the beard and padding, probably stuffing them in the glove compartment. When we searched for Tony, no one bothered to look in so small a place.

“Scoop climbed over the front seat and started to drive away. He was going to pick up Charlie Hello and be gone from the scene. Later you people would leave and maybe Larry would arrange to burn down this house before Tony’s body could be found. But Charlie Hello spoiled the plan. He started shooting, blew out the tire on Scoop’s car, and we quickly discovered that Tony Barrel had disappeared. Otherwise, instead of an impossible disappearance here we’d have had Tony disappearing fifty or a hundred miles away. Maybe the car would have gone off a bridge into the water. In any event Larry would be in the clear. Charlie was so doped up he might not have even noticed his boss wasn’t in the back seat. If he did notice, Scoop probably could have convinced him he dropped Tony off somewhere.”

“How’d you know all this?” Phil asked.

“When Tony climbed back into his car, I noticed that he didn’t have the barrel-shaped diamond ring on his right hand. And though we all saw Tony get in, I hadn’t seen Scoop come back to the car. With that smoked glass we couldn’t tell if he was in there or not—but if he had been in there wouldn’t he have gotten out and opened the door for his boss, as he did when they arrived? If the bearded man wasn’t Tony it had to be Scoop, and if Tony hadn’t left the bedroom his body must be still here. Under the bed was the logical place, and Larry was the logical killer. Everything else, including the motive, sort of flowed from that.”

Phil looked down at the man on the bed. “You got anything to say, Larry?”

“So I killed him! He’s not the first person I killed. Let’s just get out of here like I planned.”

“What about the doc?”

“Kill him.”

“And Scoop?”

“Him too.”

“You tried that a few minutes ago,” I pointed out. “Tried to kill the only witness to your crime. And next you’ll have to kill Kitty and Phil and Marty, or the word will leak out and the mob will really be after you.”

Suddenly Marty stepped to the window and rasped, “Car coming.”

“That’ll be the police,” I said confidently, hoping I was right. “Someone must have heard the shooting and reported it.”

Then Scoop broke free and lunged for the door. He was already outside when I heard Sheriff Lens bellow. I relaxed and smiled. Everything was all right . . .

“Kitty and Phil and Marty had no desire to share the blame for Tony Barrel’s killing,” Dr. Sam Hawthorne concluded, “so they threw down their weapons and surrendered without a fight. The sheriff caught Scoop Turner outside and Scoop quickly confessed to his part in the killing. A few months later Fat Larry Spears, then thinner than ever, was tried and convicted of first-degree murder.”

“After that the bootleggers seemed to steer clear of Northmont, but we had other troubles. In the summer of 1930 a flying circus of barnstorming pilots came to town, one of our local girls fell in love, and we had ourselves a locked room in the sky! But that’s for next time. Another small—ah—libation before you go?”

A DR. SAM HAWTHORNE CHECKLIST

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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.

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