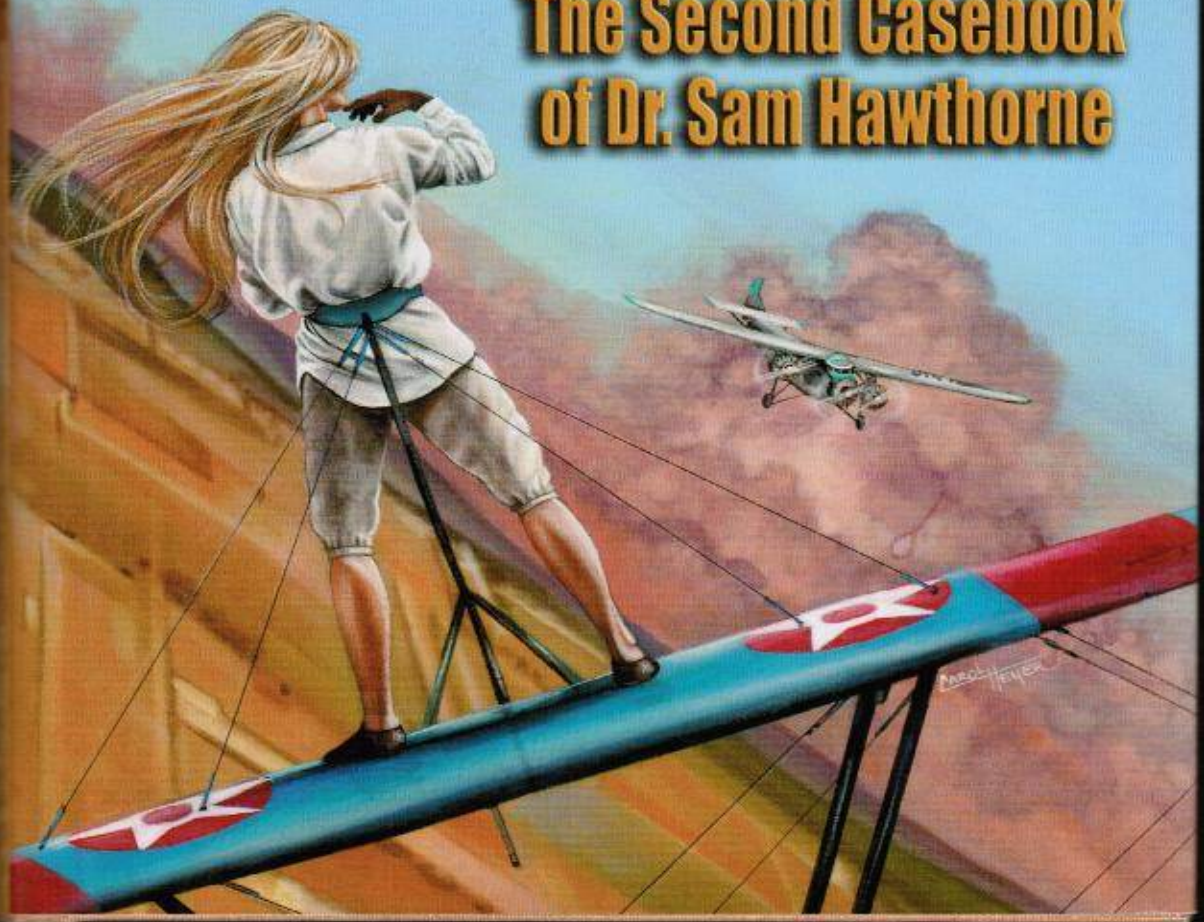


**Edward D. Hoch**

*More Things*  
**IMPOSSIBLE**

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



Edward D. Hoch

# More Things Impossible



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# Table of Contents

## Front Matter

### INTRODUCTION

THE PROBLEM OF THE REVIVAL TENT

THE PROBLEM OF THE WHISPERING HOUSE

THE PROBLEM OF THE BOSTON COMMON

THE PROBLEM OF THE GENERAL STORE

THE PROBLEM OF THE COURTHOUSE

GARGOYLE

THE PROBLEM OF THE PILGRIMS WINDMILL

THE PROBLEM OF THE GINGERBREAD

HOUSEBOAT

THE PROBLEM OF THE PINK POST OFFICE

THE PROBLEM OF THE OCTAGON ROOM

THE PROBLEM OF THE GYPSY CAMP

THE PROBLEM OF THE BOOTLEGGER'S CAR

THE PROBLEM OF THE TIN GOOSE

THE PROBLEM OF THE HUNTING LODGE

THE PROBLEM OF THE BODY IN THE HAYSTACK

THE PROBLEM OF SANTA'S LIGHTHOUSE

A DR. SAM HAWTHORNE CHECKLIST

# 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 GYPSY CAMP

“I promised you another story today, didn’t I?” old Dr. Sam Hawthorne told his visitor, rising to refill their glasses. “About the medical mystery at Pilgrim Memorial Hospital, and the man who died of a bullet in the heart but had no wound on his body. Really, though, it’s also the story of a gypsy curse—and of a weird mystery that confronted me with not one but two impossibilities . . .”

The new decade of the 1930s dawned in Northmont (Dr. Sam continued) much as the old one had ended. It was an especially mild winter in the northeast, with some days warm enough even for an afternoon ball game at the new field in Pilgrim Park. Sheriff Lens was just back from his honeymoon, and I hadn’t even seen him since the happy day. There were the usual wintertime complaints among my patients but by and large it was a quiet time, both medically and criminally, in our town.

“I never felt so lazy,” I told my nurse April one fine January morning. “I think spring fever’s starting early this year.”

She was busy sorting through the inactive files. “That’s not the only thing that’s starting early. The gypsy camp is back at the old Haskins place.”

“It is?” Somehow the news surprised me. It had been just over four years since the gypsies were last in Northmont, and I’d assumed they were gone for good after that Christmas steeple murder. But here they were back again at their old campsite. Mrs. Haskins had died a year or so earlier, at the age of eighty, but her property was still in litigation. Meanwhile, the fields had become overgrown and the old barn was sagging dangerously on one side. It had become something of an eyesore for the town, but apparently the gypsies didn’t mind. “When did they show up?”

“I drove in that way this morning and noticed their wagons. Mrs. Peachtree down the road said they came over the weekend. She’s trying to get Sheriff Lens to evict them, but I guess there’s some legal problem unless the owner of the land requests their removal.”

“And the courts can’t decide who the owner is.”



“That’s the trouble.”

I got to my feet and stretched. “Well, April, I’ve got to get moving before I fall asleep. I think I’ll take a run over to Pilgrim Memorial and check on Mrs. Ives.”

“Good luck,” she called after me, knowing I’d need it. Mrs. Ives was a grouchy woman in her sixties who was convinced all doctors were trying to poison her.

I thought about stopping by to see Sheriff Lens on the drive over, but decided that could wait till later. It was his first full day back in the office and I knew his work would be piled high. Besides, I really did want to speak with Abel Frater about the future of Pilgrim Memorial Hospital. Opened in March of the previous year with much fanfare, the eighty-bed facility had never been more than one-quarter full, and now an entire wing had been closed off to save fuel and electricity.

There were three doctors on the staff now. The hospital’s founder, Dr. Seeger, and its black resident, Lincoln Jones, had been joined by Dr. Abel Frater, a skilled surgeon out of Boston. Seeger had given over the business end of things to Frater and it was his reluctant decision to close a wing of the building. Even a non-profit hospital had to watch the pennies.

Frater saw me as I entered the building and called out, “Making your morning rounds, Sam?”

“I have to check on my patients, Abel. Can’t just abandon them to your care forever.”

Abel Frater was a tall slender man who walked with a slight limp, the result of a leg wound suffered in the trenches of France during the war. He had a little mustache that was beginning to gray, and a way of smiling that made even the most pessimistic diagnosis somehow acceptable to the patient. “Who is it this time?” he asked. “Mrs. Ives?”

“The one and only.”

“Better you than me. The woman accused us of neglecting her yesterday.”

“I’m not surprised.” I dropped my voice a bit so we wouldn’t be overheard by the nurse at the front desk. “How are things going here, now that you’ve cut back to forty beds?”

“Oh, a little better. We have sixteen patients today, and that’s about average for the past few weeks. I think Seeger’s resigned to the fact that he

built too large a facility for present needs. Still, who knows what tomorrow holds, eh?”

“Any danger of closing entirely? I’d hate to see Northmont lose this place.”

“Oh, we’ll be around. I—”

He stopped suddenly, staring over my shoulder at the hospital’s entrance. I turned my head and saw a black-haired, mustached man coming through the door. He wore a short dark jacket that hung open to reveal a colorful sash around his middle in place of a belt. And as he drew closer I could see a single gold earring worn in his left lobe. It was one of the gypsies from the encampment.

“Can I help you?” Dr. Frater asked the man.

“I have been cursed,” he told us, looking terrified. “I will die of a bullet in the heart—”

“You need the sheriff,” I suggested, “not a hospital.”

But the words were hardly out of my mouth when he clutched his chest and toppled over. Frater was at his side at once. “Get a stretcher, Sam! It looks like a heart attack!”

We rushed him to the nearest empty room while one of the nurses came to assist us, but it was too late. Frater had bared the man’s chest and was massaging his heart when suddenly he stopped and said, “It’s no use. The man is dead.”

I placed my stethoscope to the hairy chest and listened. There was no heartbeat. Remembering a time when I’d once been fooled into thinking a man was dead while he was still alive, I performed a number of other tests. I even held a mirror to his nostrils, but it did not cloud.

“Trying to bring him back to life, Sam?” Dr. Frater asked.

“No, just making sure he’s dead. He went pretty fast, even for a heart attack. It was almost as if he’d been shot as he seemed to fear.”

“You believe in gypsy curses now, Sam?”

“Hardly. There’s no wound on the body—not even a scar from an old wound.” Abel Frater corrected me. “Knife scar on his arm, but it’s an old one. That certainly didn’t kill him.”

“Could I be present when you do the autopsy?”

“Certainly. But first we’d better notify his family, if he had one.”

The dead man had carried no identification, but I quickly established his identity at the gypsy camp. There were about twenty brightly decorated wagons drawn up in the field at the old Haskins place, about a mile from the house and barn which were now deserted. The horses had been tied to a line at one end of the camp, and as I arrived a young man in his early twenties was feeding them. He'd seen my car drive up and asked, "Are you a lawyer?"

"No, I'm a doctor. We have one of your people at the hospital."

His eyes widened in panic. "Edo Montana! He feared the curse!"

"Does he have relatives here?"

The young man nodded. "I will take you to his sister, Teres."

Teres Montana was a tall angular girl about the same age as the young man. When she saw us approaching her wagon she jumped to the ground to confront us. "What is it, Steve? Who is this man?"

"I'm Dr. Sam Hawthorne. Your brother is Edo Montana?"

"Yes."

"A man died at the hospital this morning, apparently of a heart attack. I'm sorry, but it might be your brother."

She let out a long high-pitched wail, and I feared she might topple over as her brother had. Others came running at the sound, and one powerful gypsy grabbed me in a bear hug. "Did he offend you, Teres?" he asked.

"Release him, Rudolph—you have done enough already! Your curse has killed my Edo!"

My arms were freed at once and I turned to stare into Rudolph's stricken face. "How is that possible?" he asked. "I did not shoot him!"

"But did you threaten him?" I asked.

"I heard him," Steve said. "It was only this morning that they fought, and Rudolph told him, 'May you die with a gypsy bullet in your heart!'"

"Shut up, you!" Rudolph snarled. "I did not kill him!"

"We need someone to identify the body," I said. "The hospital will have to do an autopsy."

"I will go," the girl said quietly.

We left the others and walked across the field to my car. To put her at ease I asked about the others in the camp, mentioning names of those I remembered from previous visits of the gypsies to Northmont. But she

seemed to know none of them. “Edo and I only joined this tribe recently, near Albany,” she explained.

“Who is the king of this tribe?”

Teres took a deep breath. “Rudolph Roman. That is why his curse carried such power.”

“Why did he curse your brother?” I asked, but she did not answer. The hospital came into view and she was reminded of her task. It had only been a few minutes’ drive from the Haskins place, with its overgrown fields surrounded by woods, but overland it would have taken Edo Montana ten minutes of running to reach Pilgrim Memorial.

I escorted her through the front door and back to the autopsy room where Dr. Frater awaited us. He shook hands solemnly with the girl and offered his sympathy. Then he lifted the sheet from the dead face just enough for her to see it and cry out, “Edo, Edo!”

I took her by the arm, steadying her. “Come on, I’ll drive you back.”

She stared as if she’d forgotten who I was. “There is no need. The gypsies will come for me.”

I wondered why she said “the gypsies” rather than “my people,” but I had no time to think about it further. Dr. Seeger burst into the room, looking anxious. I could see drops of sweat on his bald head.

“There’s fifty or sixty gypsies outside, heading toward our front door. Should I get the gun from my office?”

“I hardly think that’s necessary,” I told him.

Seeger had been the founder of Pilgrim Memorial, and in that instant he must have feared they were storming his building to destroy it. Teres Montana turned to him and said, “They come to honor the dead.”

“We have to do an autopsy before we can release the body,” Dr. Frater said. “Go talk to them and calm them down.”

“They are calm,” she replied, but she went out as instructed.

“They’ll probably stay outside till we release the body to them for burial,” I said. “Maybe we’d better get to that autopsy, Abel.”

Seeger followed the girl outside and Frater and I slipped into surgical gowns and masks. He pulled on his rubber gloves and selected a scalpel for the initial incision. I rolled back the sheet from Edo Montana’s naked body.

As soon as Frater parted the flaps of skin and exposed the chest area I saw the torn tissue and muscle. The heart itself had been pierced, and we

only had to probe a few seconds to discover the small-caliber bullet that had done the damage.

I let out my breath slowly, not believing what I was seeing.

“You’d better phone your friend Sheriff Lens,” Frater said quietly. “This is murder—the man was shot through the heart.”

Sheriff Lens began grumbling as soon as he saw the autopsy room. “You might know I’d just be back from my honeymoon when you’d get yourself involved in another impossible murder, Doc! What is it this time?”

“The impossibility seems to be more medical than anything else. If there’s a locked room in this killing it’s the skin of the victim. Dr. Frater and I both examined the body at the time of death. There was no wound on it, front or back, and the only scar was that old one on his arm. I was here when Dr. Frater cut into the body, and I saw the damage caused by the bullet. I helped him probe for the slug myself.”

Sheriff Lens stared distastefully at the body with its unveiled chest cavity. “Not much blood.”

“He’s been dead over an hour,” Abel Frater explained. “The blood seeks the lowest level after death, like any liquid.”

“So somebody murdered him?”

“It seems so,” I agreed. “All we have to figure out is who and how.”

“You mentioned something about a gypsy curse. Are those the gypsies standing around outside? The ones Mr. Peachtree phoned about?”

“That’s right. They’re camped over on the old Haskins place, just like last time. Apparently the one who cursed the dead man is their leader, Rudolph Roman.”

Sheriff Lens nodded. “I’ll go get him. I always believe in starting with the most likely suspect.”

A few moments later he reappeared with the powerful gypsy who’d grabbed me in the bear hug. He identified himself as Rudolph Roman, leader or king of this gypsy tribe since the death of his father. He admitted to having heard from other gypsy tribes that the old Haskins land was good camping ground, free from police harassment.

“But Mrs. Haskins is dead now,” I informed him. “That land is in litigation.” I wasn’t too familiar with the court case, but I knew it involved a

nephew who claimed the land should go to him rather than to charity. Mrs. Haskins' will had been ambiguous.

Rudolph Roman merely smiled at my words. "We recognize no litigation. The land is for the people's use. We camp there, but we do not damage it."

"What about Edo Montana?" Sheriff Lens asked. "You sure damaged him!"

"I spoke without thinking," the gypsy leader admitted. "We were having a violent argument and I spoke the curse. 'May you die with a bullet through the heart!' I shouted. He turned pale at my words, and ran off."

"And died with a bullet through the heart," the sheriff said. "Are your curses always that effective?"

Rudolph Roman sighed. "I am the leader of this tribe, as was my father before me. My people expect me to do as my father did. He once cursed a man who died the following day. That curse has become a legend with us, and when I spoke those words unthinkingly my people remembered. They warned Edo of my power."

I nodded. "And he ran."

"But I did not kill him! I did not mean to kill him!"

"What did you do after he ran away?" I asked.

"Went back to my wagon to be alone."

"And why did the two of you argue?"

"I—I cannot say."

"This is a murder investigation," Sheriff Lens reminded him.

When Roman answered his voice was very soft. "It was about the girl Teres," he told us.

"What about her?"

"I wanted to take her for my wife. My request threw Edo into a rage. He called me vile names, and that was when I cursed him."

"I'd think he would have considered it an honor to have his sister wed to the leader of the tribe."

Roman started to reply but then thought better of it. His mouth closed and he would say no more. "We should talk to Teres again," I suggested.

While Sheriff Lens went to get her, I returned to the autopsy table where Frater was preparing to sew up the body. "The sooner we turn it over to them for burial, the sooner they'll be gone," he said. "We can learn nothing more by keeping it here."

But something in the dead and torn heart caught my eye. I slipped on a rubber glove and extracted a thin sliver of wood. “What’s that?” Frater asked.

“I don’t really know. Looks like a tiny piece of wood, but I can’t be sure.”

I helped him sew up the autopsy incision. “What are you going to list as the cause of death?”

“Hell, Sam, the man had a bullet in his heart! That’s the cause of death. It’s not up to me to figure out how it got there.”

Sheriff Lens took Teres Montana to one of the offices for questioning, so she would not be confronted with her brother’s body again. I joined them as he was saying, “Rudolph Roman has admitted he fought with your brother when he asked to marry you, but he would say no more about it. Were you present when this happened?”

“Yes,” she admitted, with head bowed.

I decided to ask a question of my own. “There was a great age difference between you and your brother, wasn’t there? He appears to have been in his late forties.”

She hesitated. “Yes, he was forty-seven. I am twenty-two. He was my stepbrother, really.”

“Was he your brother at all?” I asked. “Or was he something more?”

“What do you mean?”

“His anger at Rudolph’s offer of marriage makes me wonder. What was your true relationship, Teres?”

She burst into tears then, and Sheriff Lens looked dumfounded. He started to speak but I waved him to silence. “Tell us the truth, Teres,” I said softly. “You and Edo were married, weren’t you?”

She nodded, trying to control her tears. “We were married last summer in Albany, before we joined Rudolph’s tribe. Because we had not gone through the traditional gypsy wedding ceremony, Edo wanted to keep it secret.”

“It seems you kept the secret too well, at least from Roman. But why couldn’t you simply tell him the truth and have a gypsy ceremony?”

She merely shook her head, unable to answer for a moment. Finally, bringing herself under control, she told us in a soft voice, “I’m not one of them. I’m not a gypsy. I ran away from home and met Edo in Albany. He

said I was dark enough to pass for a gypsy and so we joined the caravan. He told them I was his sister, so no question would arise about my blood. He was known to some others of the tribe, and nobody questioned it until Rudolph decided he was in love with me. If Edo told the truth about our relationship it would have come out that I wasn't a gypsy, and I would have had to leave the camp."

"Do you have any idea how Roman might have killed him?"

"No—unless it really was a curse."

"Did Edo run away from the camp immediately after his argument with Roman?"

"I think so, yes. I tried to get Steve to find him—you remember, the young man you met this morning?—but he couldn't. Steve said once he had a capsule containing a potion that could be taken to ward off curses."

"A capsule?" Something stirred in my brain. "How large a capsule?"

"He showed it to us once. It looked big enough to give to a horse."

The door opened and Dr. Frater stuck his head in. "Thought you'd want to know that I've finished with the body and turned it over to the gypsies. They're going back to their camp."

I turned to Teres. "Will you go with them?"

She lifted her head, brushing the hair from her eyes. "I don't know."

In that instant she looked very young indeed. "You said you ran away from home. You're not twenty-two, are you? People who are twenty-two don't need to run away from home."

"I'm seventeen," she admitted.

"Damn!" Sheriff Lens was on his feet. "And you were livin' at that gypsy camp with a man thirty years older than you? I'm takin' you into custody till we can get you back to your parents!"

Abel Frater was still in the doorway. "What should I tell them outside?"

"She's detained for questioning," the sheriff responded. "Don't tell them anything else."

I walked to the window and watched as the men of the gypsy tribe hoisted Montana's body onto a stretcher and started off the way they had come. "I hope we did the right thing releasing the body," I said. "We've no idea how he was killed."

"A bullet in the heart." Sheriff Lens answered. "That's good enough for Frater and it's good enough for me. I told him he could release the body,



just to get rid of them.”

I went in search of Dr. Seeger and found him by the front door, watching the gypsies depart. “Thank God they’re gone, Sam. If I never see them again it’ll be too soon.”

“Maybe you can answer a question for me.”

“Sure. What is it?”

“Those gelatin capsules they’re starting to use for drugs—is it possible a small bullet could be placed in one and swallowed without the person realizing it?”

“Sure, but the bullet would just pass through his stomach and out the intestinal tract. It wouldn’t end up in the heart, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“I know that much. I was just wondering about it. How about this—is it possible an old bullet could remain in the body for years, lodged near the heart, and finally kill a person after some exertion or fright?”

“It’s possible, but not in this case, Sam. Frater showed me the body before he sewed Montana up. There’s no doubt a bullet was fired into the body. The damage was too recent and too extensive to have been caused by an old wound. Besides, the only scar was on his arm.”

“I know. Don’t mind me. I’m just trying to rule out every possibility.”

“And whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth?” Seeger asked with a smile.

“That’s just the trouble—nothing remains! But I did find a tiny splinter of \_\_\_”

“Doc! Help me!”

We turned and saw Sheriff Lens staggering down the corridor toward us. There was blood on his nose and face.

“What happened?” I asked, running to him.

“He punched me and took the girl! They ran out the back way.”

“Who punched you?”

“One of them gypsies! I heard her call him Steve.”

It was late afternoon, beginning to grow dark, by the time I’d stopped the sheriff’s nosebleed and accompanied him to the gypsy camp. Steve and Teres were nowhere to be found, and Rudolph Roman denied any

knowledge of where they might be. “You’d better turn them up by morning,” Sheriff Lens told him, “or I’m arresting everyone here!”

Roman merely smiled. “You believe you can do that?”

“Damn right I can do it! And I’ll get the state police to help me!”

“Gypsies can fade away with the night.”

“You just try it! I want that girl back, and I want Steve too, for assaultin’ me!”

The others in the camp merely watched us as we walked back to the car. Already some men and boys were gathering wood for evening bonfires to ward off the chill of the January night. “I wasn’t fooling, Sam,” the sheriff told me. “I’m calling the state police.” He started the car and headed back to town.

“Roman implied they might be gone by morning.”

“They’re not goin’ nowhere till I get my hands on that Steve and the girl! I’ll make sure of that if I have to watch the camp all night!”

I could see he was furious, considering the attack on him to be a personal affront. He telephoned the state police from the jail and requested that three cars be sent to help him round up the gypsies in the morning. Then he called his deputies and ordered them in too.

I checked with April and learned I had a patient to see on the way home. I drove out past the Haskins place and saw the silhouettes of the caravan wagons against the glowing gypsy bonfires. They seemed to be settling in for the night. Lens and one of his deputies pulled up behind me and parked off the road with a good view of the camp. I waved a good night to him and continued on my way.

I’d always been an early riser, and the following morning I came awake while it was still night, not much after five a.m. The gypsy camp was very much on my mind, and although there were still a couple of hours before daylight I decided I should get dressed and drive over to the Haskins place. I didn’t want Sheriff Lens, or the gypsies, doing anything foolish.

Downing a cup of coffee and a piece of toast quickly, I went out to the car, shivering a bit in the morning air. It took me ten minutes to reach the old farm, and I saw the sheriff’s car still where I’d last seen it. A state police car was parked down the road about twenty feet away. I tapped on the glass and opened the door. “Keeping awake, Sheriff?”

“Oh, it’s you, Sam. I was hoping it was more state police. It’ll start gettin’ light any minute now, and I want to move in on them.”

“You been awake all night?”

“All night,” the deputy with him confirmed. “Sheriff don’t want any of them slippin’ away.”

I stared through the darkness in the direction of the campsite, wondering if any of the bonfires were still burning. But there was nothing to break the curtain of night. Headlights appeared on the road in front of us and I saw another state police car pull up and park. Sheriff Lens got out to greet them.

“They’re trespassing and possibly harboring a criminal as well,” I heard him explain. “One of them punched me yesterday afternoon and helped a suspect escape. There’s also been a killing that almost certainly involves them.” He led them back to the car and I shook hands with the uniformed officers. I wasn’t happy to see their hands resting on the butts of their service revolvers, or to note that one of the men in the other car had produced a shotgun from the trunk.

“I don’t think guns will be necessary,” I told them.

“We heard somebody got shot yesterday.”

“Well, yes,” I admitted. “But—”

I stopped talking as my eyes became more accustomed to the gradual approach of dawn. A mist seemed to hang over the fields, and I saw now that a bit of smoke still rose lazily from one of the almost dead campfires. But more than that I saw something that boggled the mind.

Where last evening twenty wagons had stood with their horses, now there was nothing. Only the remains of the bonfires testified to the fact they’d ever been there. Somehow during the night, with Sheriff Lens and his deputy standing guard all night, the gypsy camp had vanished.

“It’s the devil’s work!” Sheriff Lens growled, striding back and forth across the empty field. The rising sun had only confirmed what they could already see—somehow the entire caravan of gypsies had disappeared during the night.

“Or another gypsy curse,” I suggested quietly, only half in jest. Looking at our surroundings, I had to admit the thing seemed impossible. The Haskins field was bordered on three sides by tall stands of trees, and fenced to keep cattle from wandering too far. The only exit to the highway was the

narrow rutted lane where the sheriff's car had been parked. "Could you have dozed off?"

"I might have, once or twice, but my deputy Frank was awake the whole time. Besides, we were parked right across the end of the lane. Even if we were both asleep they couldn't have gotten twenty horses and wagons past us. There's no room. They'd have ended up in the ditch!"

I had to admit he was right. I strolled past the ashes of the bonfires and made a circuit of the field, inspecting the fence for signs of passage. "A man could go over that easy," Frank said to me, a bit sheepish about the whole thing.

"Sure," I agreed, "but what about the horses and wagons? There aren't any breaks in the fence, and the wagons couldn't get through those trees anyway."

The state police were taking a dim view of the entire matter. "You sure they were here in the first place?" one officer asked the sheriff.

"Sure, I'm sure! And Doc here saw them too. You think we're crazy or something?"

I poked around at the charred remains of the fires. They had been here, all right, and now they were gone. They had vanished as easily as that bullet had appeared in Edo Montana's heart.

"Where you goin', Doc?" Sheriff Lens called to me as I headed back to my car.

"To work. And I'm going to make a phone call or two."

"Can't you help us out on this? We got two impossibilities in this case, Doc!" His voice was pleading.

"Go back home to your new bride, Sheriff. You shouldn't have left her alone last night anyway. I'll phone you when I have something."

"What about the gypsies?"

"Have the state police send out a general alarm. Vanishing from this field might have been easy for them, but staying out of sight on the public highways will be a real miracle if they can pull it off. Look for them about a hundred miles from here, possibly heading northwest toward Albany."

"But how—?"

"Later, Sheriff."

It was still early when I reached my office, and I was able to catch up on the previous day's mail before April arrived. She looked startled when she saw me already at my desk. "You been here all night, Dr. Sam?"

"Not quite. I wanted to stop by the gypsy camp on my way in."

"I heard the sheriff was going to run them all in."

"They beat him to it. They up and vanished."

"The whole camp?"

"The whole camp."

"What are you going to do?"

"Make a phone call," I said. I flipped through the address book on my desk, searching for a number I'd called once, two years earlier, when I was treating old Mrs. Haskins.

I caught her nephew as he was about to leave home for his Boston office. Explaining who I was, I told him about the gypsies that had camped on his aunt's land. "I know about them," he answered curtly. "My lawyer says to leave them there."

"Why is that?"

"We're trying to convince a judge the property should come to me instead of some charity. My lawyer figures as long as the gypsies are camped there it creates a bad impression. I promise to use the land, while the charity would let it stand idle for future use, attracting more gypsy caravans."

"What sort of will did Mrs. Haskins leave?"

"The land was to be left to me or to the charity, whichever could demonstrate its use was in the best public interest of the citizens of Northmont. A crazy will, but the judge has to decide the issue. Which is what he's doing right now."

"Well, I can tell you the gypsies are gone, as of this morning."

"What?"

"You heard me. They just vanished overnight."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Tell me something, Mr. Haskins—which charity was mentioned in your aunt's will?"

"Some non-profit hospital you got there. Pilgrim Memorial?"

"Yes," I said quietly. "That's the name."

"I have to go to work now, Dr. Hawthorne. Just what was it you called about?"

“You’ve answered all my questions, Mr. Haskins.”

I was driving toward the hospital ten minutes later when I passed the sheriff’s car on the road. He honked at me and I pulled to a stop as he backed up. “That was a good guess, Doc,” he yelled out the window. “The state police picked up the gypsy caravan just this side of the New York state line. How’d you know?”

“As you said, it was a good guess. Follow along with me to the hospital and we’ll wrap this thing up.”

Things had quieted down considerably at Pilgrim Memorial from the previous day. Dr. Seeger was anxious to see us, and when I asked that Dr. Frater be present too he buzzed him immediately. “What is this?” Frater asked as he came in. “A final confrontation, the way it happens in mystery novels?”

“Something like that,” I admitted.

As usual, Sheriff Lens was more direct. “We’ve got the gypsies in custody and now we’ve come to arrest a murderer,” he announced.

“Not quite, Sheriff,” I corrected. “There’s no murderer here.”

“Huh?” His mouth dropped open. “Doc, you told me—”

“That we’d wrap this thing up, and that’s exactly what I intend to do. But there’s no murderer simply because there was no murder. And we’ve had two impossible crimes without any real crime at all.”

“No crime?” Frater asked. “But what about the bullet in Edo Montana?”

“The closest thing to a crime might be the desecration of a dead body. And I doubt if the sheriff will bother to charge you with that, Dr. Frater.”

He simply stood there facing me, saying nothing. It was Seeger who finally spoke. “What do you mean, Sam?” he asked.

“We have to remember that Edo Montana came running to the hospital from the gypsy camp. Why? Because someone had uttered a curse? That’s not very likely, unless Montana was suffering some symptoms along with the curse. A chest pain, for instance, just after Roman’s words, might have scared him into seeking medical assistance. And then what did he do? He ran ten minutes to the hospital, the worst possible action if he was experiencing the beginning of a heart attack. He arrived here, collapsed, and died—a natural death.”

“But—”

“It was just before he died that Abel Frater heard his dying words about the curse, about the bullet in the heart, and decided to make it come true. He took the gun from your office, Seeger, and while I went off to visit the gypsy camp he fired a bullet into the dead man’s chest and heart.”

“There was no wound,” Sheriff Lens argued.

“I found a tiny splinter of wood in the heart. I think Frater fired through a thin board held against the dead man’s chest. This would have served two purposes—to slow down the small-caliber bullet enough so it wouldn’t exit through the back, and to shield the chest from powder burns that might have singed the hair and left other marks.”

“Firing through a board, Frater left only a small entrance hole which was easily hidden by flesh-colored putty or makeup. The body was covered by a sheet and I had only a glimpse of the chest before Frater cut into it—making his incision directly over the bullet hole, of course. The victim’s hairiness helped to hide the wound too.”

“Why would he do a crazy thing like that?” the sheriff asked.

“I think we should let him tell us that. It was the Haskins property, wasn’t it, Abel?”

His shoulders sagged a bit then. Perhaps he’d thought I was only guessing up to that point. After a moment he said, “I didn’t harm anyone. The man was already dead of natural causes. But here was a judge in Boston about to decide whether Mrs. Haskins’ nephew or the hospital got the land. I’d been on the phone to our lawyer just yesterday and he said the judge knew about the gypsies camped there. It looked bad for us. It looked as if the community would be better served by Haskins farming it than by our owning the land and letting it stand idle for another few years, attracting gypsies. I wanted that land, for the hospital’s future. By firing a bullet into a dead man’s chest I knew it would spread talk of the gypsy curse. They’d either be arrested or forced to make a quick exit from Northmont, which is exactly what happened. I wrapped the gun in a towel to muffle the sound, but a .22 doesn’t make much noise anyway. And I fired through a board just as Sam said.”

“How’d you know it all?” Seeger asked me.

“I eliminated the impossible, just as you said. And if the bullet was fired into the corpse after death, only Frater could have done it and hidden the wound.”

“What about the gypsy camp?” Sheriff Lens wanted to know. “How did that disappear?”

“The question really is *when* did it disappear, Sheriff. Roman moved his horses and wagons out quickly, between our late afternoon visit to the camp and your return in the evening to watch it.”

“But the wagons were still there! I saw them!”

“What we saw were *silhouettes against the campfires*. They were pieces of cardboard cut to the size of the wagons. It’s probably a trick Roman has used before in tight spots, and I imagine each wagon carries its own piece of cardboard for just such an emergency. A few of the gypsies stayed behind, tending the fires and giving evidence of normal activity so the caravan would have time to escape down the highway. Then after nightfall they simply burned the cardboard silhouettes in the bonfires and escaped over the fence to rejoin the caravan. If you look closely at the remains of the fires you’ll find evidence of the cardboard pieces.”

“I’ll be damned!” Sheriff Lens muttered. “But you knew right where to look for them, Sam.”

“A good guess, as I said earlier. If they left before dark last night I figured they could cover about a hundred miles in their wagons. Montana and Teres had joined them near Albany and I figured they might head back in that direction.”

The sheriff merely shook his head. “I still can’t believe it. Two impossible crimes, and yet there was no crime.”

“Some days are like that,” I said with a grin.

“So that’s the way it was (Dr. Sam Hawthorne concluded). Dr. Frater left the hospital staff the following week and moved out west somewhere. Roman’s gypsies were released without charges when the sheriff discovered that Teres and Steve had never rejoined them. The two ran off together, telling Roman they were getting married. I suppose you can say the story had a happy ending, though perhaps Rudolph Roman wasn’t too happy with the loss of Teres.

“I see our bottle is empty, and it’s past my bedtime anyhow. But come back again and I’ll have another story for you—about the time when gangsters and bootleggers fought a regular war in Northmont, and even a bizarre impossible crime seemed mundane by comparison.”



# 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.

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

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

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

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

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“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.

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

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