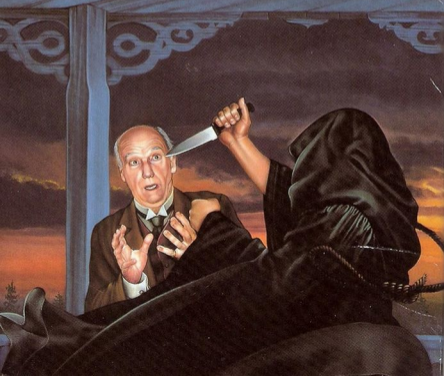


Diagnosis:
IMPOSSIBLE

The Problems of Dr. Sam Hawthorne

EDWARD D. HOCH



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FOR MARV AND CAROL LACHMAN

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INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Edward D. Hoch

Rochester, New York November, 1995