

# KEYHOLE MYSTERY

## *Magazine*

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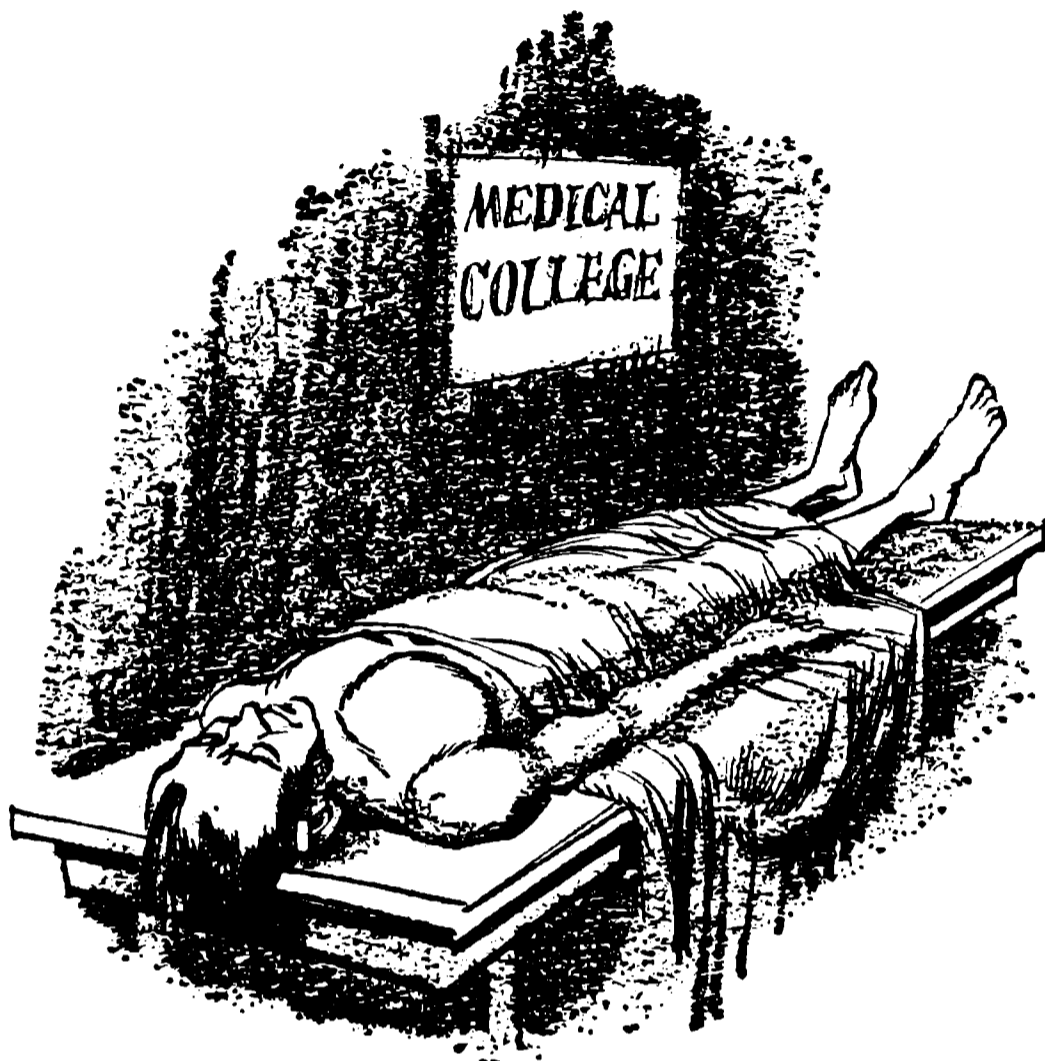
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*Such a well planned murder that nothing could go wrong. Well, hardly anything.*



## REST IN PEACE

*by AVRAM DAVIDSON*

**W**HEN THE LONG DISTANCE OPERATOR informed Henry Sloucomb of what was perfectly obvious—"Your party does not seem to answer, sir"—he cleared his suddenly tight throat.

"Look here, Operator," he said nervously, "this is the third time in an hour that I've tried to get my uncle on the phone. He's an old man and he's not been well and he *never* goes out at night. I'm

afraid—his not answering—”

There was a second's pause, during which he could clearly hear the voices of the other women at the switchboards; then the operator said, "Well, I could contact his local exchange and have *them* contact the police there—"

"Please. I'd appreciate that very much. And have, well, somebody, call me back. Reverse the charges." And then there was nothing to do but wait.

The doctors had warned old Jacob Sloucomb after his first heart attack, and they had warned him after his first stroke. Henry had added his voice to theirs:

"It's dangerous for you to be living alone, Uncle, in your condition, in this house that's so isolated out here beyond the edge of town. I'd stay with you if I could. But since I can't, why don't you do the sensible thing? Come stay with me. I'll take a larger apartment."

But old Jacob had been stubborn—as usual.

"I've never been greedy," Uncle Jacob had answered. "And I won't be greedy now." His smile deepened the lines in the corners of his eyes. There were surprisingly few lines in his face, considering his age and illness; and his hair was still thick and dark. Henry, though only half his uncle's age, had long been bald and now was going grey.

"Greedy?" Henry asked, puz-

zled.

"Greedy for life. No, I don't mean 'life.' *Time*. Why should I be greedy for mere time? My life is here, in this house, in this town. My books, my memories are here. My friends, those who are left, are here. And the University is here. I'm not lonely, but I'm used to the measure of solitude I have. It's kind of you, Henry, to offer to let me live with you. In all probability I would be in this world for a few years more if I accepted. But I'd just be gaining time. It wouldn't really be life, not for me, not in new surroundings, strange ones, in the city. I'm grateful for the life I've had—and have. I don't think it would be at all becoming for me to be avid, at this late date."

And nothing Henry had said would sway him. So Henry returned to his small apartment in the city, and his small business there. Both were enough for his needs. It was odd, in a way, when Henry came to think about it—there had been a time when he'd considered making his own life in the small University town. His Uncle Jacob had been teaching there then, and Henry's father (before his death) had also taught there. But Henry had been ambitious. Had wanted to make money, lots of it, and fast. See the world. Live well. Not poke along

on faculty salaries.

In a way it was ironic. Because out of the dark old library in Uncle Jacob's house had come a series of books, most of them written with the leisure of retirement. They had sold well, very well, and in fact were still selling well. Whereas Henry's business had never gone beyond its first decade's growth. Ironic? It was ridiculously unjust.

Henry's nervous waiting was interrupted by the ringing of the telephone.

"Mr. Sloucomb? Mr. Henry Sloucomb? The operator tells me you've been trying to get your uncle on the phone, is that right?" A man's voice, a strange voice: somewhat tired, but authoritative. Whose? Almost as if the question had been spoken aloud, it was answered.

"This is Police Captain Todd, down in—"

"Were you able to get in the house?" Henry asked, nervously. "Is my uncle all right?"

But Captain Todd was not to be hurried. "I understand that Professor Sloucomb wasn't well this past year, is that right? Had a heart attack, then a stroke, and . . . Oh, I see . . . . You came out here after both times? Well. It can hardly come as too much of a shock to you—"

"Oh, Lord, no!"

"I'm afraid so, Mr. Sloucomb. The doctor says he's been dead for

about two days. Died in his own bed. No pain. Looks very peaceful. *And*, of course, he was an old man."

The amenities dispensed with, Captain Todd went on briskly: "The Medical Examiner has spoken with Dr. Hendriks, the Professor's own doctor, and they're making out a certificate of natural death right now. I expect you'll want to get on out here as quickly as you can. Well. Sorry to have been the bearer of bad news."

Henry's hand trembled just a bit when he hung up. One corner of his mind noted this, but the rest of his mind was busy with other thoughts. Had Uncle Jacob accepted the invitation to come live with Henry, he might be alive today. On the other hand, he might have died some time ago. At any rate, he had died where he wanted to, and quickly, too. No painful lingering on with tubes in his nose and oxygen tents . . . .

"Bad news," Captain Todd had said. Ah, but he was wrong. It was good news, as good as could be. For now Henry Sloucomb could close up the drab little flat and the dingy little office. Now he'd have money, lots of it, and fast. He could see the world. Live well. At long, long last.

There wasn't any doubt about it, Henry thought happily. One

day during his last visit to the old man, Henry had come back from a walk to find both Dr. Hendriks and Uncle Jacob's lawyer, a fusspot named Calhoon, preparing to leave.

"Made my will, boy," Uncle Jacob had said, with a faint smile. "The University will get my books. I'm also giving them their choice between the house for faculty use or a flat sum in cash for the scholarship fund, and, well, one or two other items."

Again, the faint smile. Then Uncle Jacob continued, "Don't concern yourself about all that, Henry. The bulk of the goods goes to you. Bank accounts, bonds, stock—so on. I've been fortunate in my investments, as they say, and the books are still selling. You'll be able to travel, as I know you've wanted to. Drink a toast to my shade in some appropriate Grecian vale."

And then, saving Henry from remarks which could only be awkward and sentimental, Uncle Jacob had deftly changed the subject.

It was towards the close of that visit that Uncle Jacob had made his remarks about not wanting to be greedy for time. So be it. Neither would Henry be greedy for him. His last visit? Well, his last *official* visit.

Once he'd made up his mind, Henry hadn't wasted many days. No one in the busy city had

noticed his departure. No one in the small town had noticed his arrival, for the old house lay on the very outskirts, and it was late, very late, by the time Henry parked his car. He placed it out of sight up a lane leading to a house torn down years before, about a quarter of a mile from the professor's home. In a way, it was like a scene from Poe...

...Or Wilkie Collins. Clouds scudding across the moon. Quietly opening the door with the key he'd had for so many years. The small creaks and snaps of the old house. The silent approach to the bedroom. First the pillow. Then, gentle but firm, the hands. And away as silently and as unseen.

And now, the seal of security, as it were: "*Certificate of natural death*"!

Henry Sloucomb didn't need to strain to assume the air of gravity he wore when he arrived at his uncle's home the morning after the long distance calls. He knew what Society expected of a man in his position. Fussy Old Lawyer Calhoon was waiting for him in the living room. A senile moisture seeped from his eyes as he muttered of his fondness for old Professor Sloucomb. Then he pulled himself together.

"Your uncle, rest his soul—did he tell you what's in his will, Henry?"

"Generally speaking, yes."

"Hem. Well. Have to read it

anyway. Let's sit down. Got it here, in—"

"Isn't it customary to wait till after the funeral?" Henry asked. But the old man didn't seem to hear him.

"—in my portfolio," he mumbled, and took it out. With a mental shrug Henry fell silent, settled down to hear. The list of properties was longer than he had expected. A warm glow filled him, he scarcely heard the latter part of the will as the lawyer's cracked voice sing-songed about the library, the house, the scholarship funds...

Finally the voice stopped. Henry snapped out of his golden glow as Old Calhoon folded up the will. Time to think of travel later on.

"Yes, yes," Henry sighed. "Poor Uncle Jacob. More than generous... Now, about the funeral—"

Calhoon shook his head. "Can't say for sure about that, Henry. Have to consult the Dean, I suppose."

Henry was honestly puzzled. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"What do you mean, 'What do I mean'? Didn't you hear what I was reading?" He clicked his

tongue, opened the will - again, testily. "'—and all the rest and residue of my estate—' No, not there. Mmm. Hmm. *Here*: 'And it is my further desire and I do so stipulate, that my body be turned over immediately after death to the College of Medicine of the said University, for purposes of medical research.'"

"No!" said Henry.

"Yes," the old lawyer said, while Henry's mind picked at the possibility that the medical men might not find evidence of strangulation, though logic told him they couldn't possibly miss. "Not my idea, but—Jacob wanted it that way. They took him early this morning. Said they'd not be too long with him, but just when the funeral— Who is that at the door? Ringing and knocking so— Don't they know there's been a death in the— Oh. My word. The police. Wonder what *they* want?"

Henry had a rather good idea about why the police were here, and, as it happened, he was absolutely right.

It was an hour's journey to the State Prison, and, after that, only a short walk to the small room, which was all the traveling poor Henry got to do. ■ ■

