

KEYHOLE MYSTERY

Magazine

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When the rich old gentleman decided to cut his five shiftless relatives out of his will, he was simply asking to become ...

A

CASE

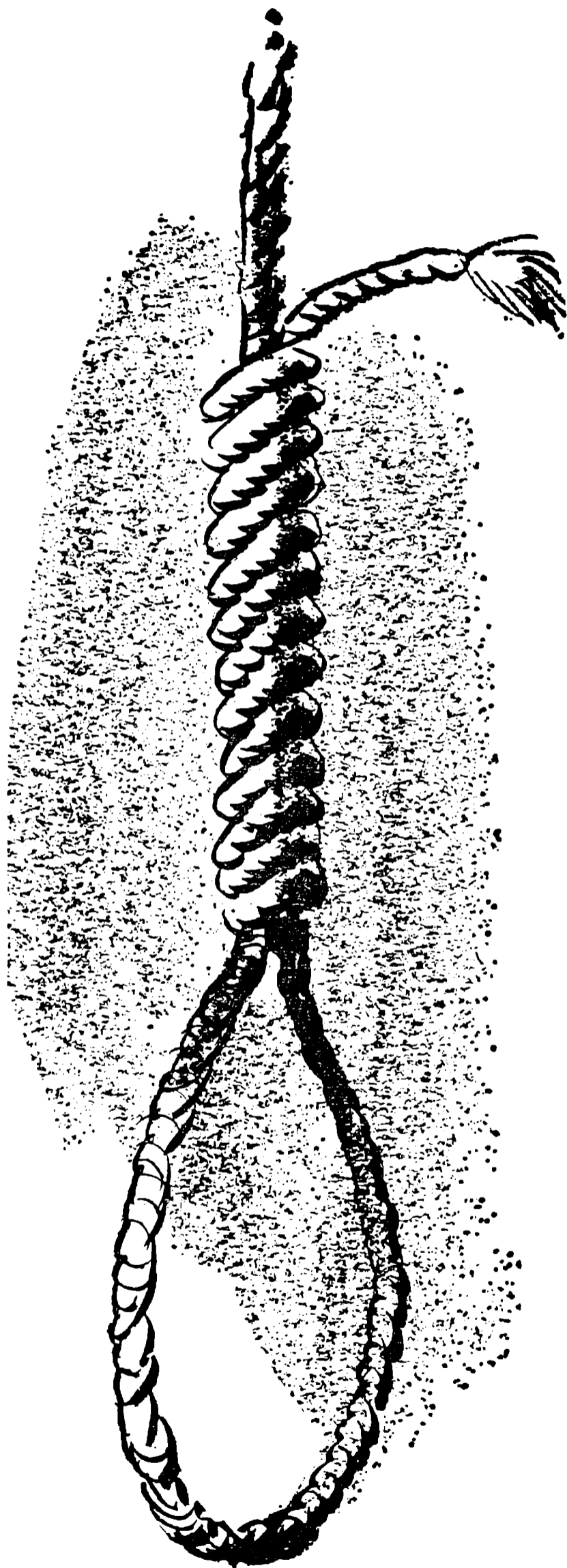
OF

HOMICIDE

by **ROG PHILLIPS**

HENRY WAS BEGINNING TO REALIZE the price all successful murderers must pay. Silence. He found it extremely difficult to restrain himself from shouting his success, from jumping up and down with glee, from taunting Captain Bonner.

It was a perfect murder. It had



gone off with only one hitch, and that had really made it more perfect, Uncle Fred having that seizure during dinner and having to be helped up to bed where the murder weapon was already set. That way, all five suspects were present when Fred Granview died.

In fact, they were all in the bedroom or standing in the doorway when the knife came through the mattress and through his chest, to protrude startlingly into sight through his shirt front. They all gasped at the same time. A second or two later Audrey screamed. During Audrey's scream Margaret fainted, and while her husband, Theodore Hanson, bent over her Reggie suggested nervously that the police ought to be called—which was really a laugh because Reggie was the one Henry had chosen to be the fall guy.

A perfect murder. The rich uncle who was going to change his will in the morning leaving all his money to charity, and the five heirs, invited by the uncle for a Last Dinner during which he officially announced to all of them that in the morning they would be disinherited.

And a freak weapon. An invention.

What made it perfect was that Reggie, one of the five suspects, was the only one who could be called an inventor. Plus the fact

that when the police investigated Reggie's basement machine shop they would find plenty of evidence that the murder weapon had been made there.

Right now the police were in the dining room, Uncle Fred's bedroom, all over the house, and even searching the grounds, judging from the occasional flashlight beam that cut across the library curtains from outside.

In the library Henry and the other four suspects, and Margaret's husband, Ted, waited under the watchful eye of a uniformed policeman who stood by the door to the hall.

Captain Bonner had told them that as soon as he and his men finished their preliminary investigation he would question each of them. That had been almost an hour ago. The questioning should begin soon.

Henry had been a little in doubt about himself before the murder. He had been half afraid he might get nervous and panicky when the deed was actually done. Instead, he had felt a surge of triumph, an almost orgiastic pleasure at seeing the knife leap into sight and Uncle Fred jerk spasmodically in death.

Henry actually looked forward to answering Captain Bonner's questions when the time came. Meanwhile, to pass the time, he reviewed again and again every step of the crime, looking for a

possible flaw that he knew couldn't be there.

The murder was perfect.

And why shouldn't it be? Henry had planned the murder of his uncle for over a year. He had made the spring-knife in Reggie's shop six months ago when Reggie was away. It had been in the back of his mind to use it when he got sick of always having to beg Uncle Fred for more money to pay his gambling debts. Uncle Fred always ranted and threatened to cut off his allowance altogether, but he also invariably relented and wrote out a check to cover each emergency. Even so, it was always a nuisance to have to ask, and to maintain one's dignity while waiting out the insults and the inevitable lecture.

In his secret heart Henry had always known that someday he would be forced to murder his uncle.

Then—only that morning, but how long ago it seemed!—Uncle Fred had called him on the phone.

"I want you over for dinner tonight, Henry," Fred Granview had said, his voice quavering from old age. "My doctors tell me I don't have long to live, so I'm changing my will tomorrow. Something I should have done long ago. I want you and the rest here to listen to what I have to

say, Henry."

"I'll be there, Uncle Fred," Henry said. Then, belatedly, "I'm sorry to hear you aren't well."

"Oh, I'll live to make a liar out of my doctors yet," Uncle Fred snorted. "But Henry..."

"Yes, Uncle Fred?" Henry had said.

"If you have anything left out of your allowance this month, Henry," Uncle Fred had said, "hang onto it. It's going to have to last you longer than you think..."

Henry's mind had rejected the sense of the words. He said inanely, seizing upon the single concept, *allowance*, "I'm glad you mentioned it, Uncle Fred. I simply have to have another hundred right away—"

"Didn't you hear me?" Fred Granview's voice came in a shout. "Tonight you get a free meal—the last one. In the morning I'm changing my will, cutting off all my worthless relatives without a dime."

The phone had gone dead, and Henry had stood there, starting to tremble—not with fear, but with the realization that the time had come. The time to kill.

He lowered the phone gently to its cradle, went swiftly to the bedroom of his penthouse apartment and pulled the bottom dresser drawer completely out. Taped to the back of the drawer was the weapon. He pulled it free and

held it reverently in his hands.

The weapon was the ultimate in simplicity. A length of half-inch steel tubing fourteen inches long, capped at one end, a powerful compression spring, a slim sharp blade twelve inches long with a round base two inches long, just big enough to fit loosely into the tube, and a trigger mechanism that could release the knife when touched lightly.

For the purpose of carrying it safely the knife blade was narrow enough to slip down inside the coiled spring until its tip touched bottom. Then the round handle served as a top cap.

To load, all that was needed was to reverse the knife and rest the point against the floor and push the tube down until the knife handle caught on the trigger catch.

Henry had not invented the thing himself. At college his room mate had been an engineering student who was always experimenting. The room mate had built it, hoping to design a successful hunting device. There had been something about not being able to get the right balance in the knife for accurate shooting, and the device had gathered dust in a closet.

Henry's room mate later was killed in an auto accident, and Henry had "inherited" the thing.

The only change he had had to make in it was an extension to the trigger to bring it up high enough so that a depressed bed spring would set it off.

He had done that in Reggie's workshop when Reggie was away, and also made some crude parts vaguely similar to the five parts that comprised the weapon. He had left the disassembled pieces in the heaps of assorted scraps that cluttered Reggie's workshop. To the police, with a murder weapon in their hands, those innocent scraps would spell the gas chamber for Reggie.

Henry put the drawer back in place and took the weapon to his small kitchen to thoroughly clean it. Not a fingerprint must be on it!

The phone rang. When he answered it, it was Audrey. She was in tears, having just heard uncle Fred's terrible announcement.

"If only he had waited!" she cried. "In another two years my voice would be ready for the Met!"

"It's terrible," Henry soothed.

"I'm not going tonight," Audrey said. "I couldn't bear it."

Henry's blood froze. If none of them showed up—especially Reggie—how could he kill Uncle Fred and have a convenient set of suspects for the police to choose from?

"But you must!" Henry blurted.

"We all must. We mustn't give him the satisfaction..."

A deep contralto sigh sounded over the phone.

"You're right, of course, Henry darling," Audrey said.

During the remainder of the day while Henry carefully cleaned the weapon and sharpened knife blade to a razor's edge, Margaret called and moaned about poor Ted not being able to finish his novel now unless she found a job to support him, which she would do of course. Her husband had spent three years on his novel now and hoped to finish it in another year or two, so she would be brave...

Henry convinced her she should be brave enough to attend the dinner. Then Reggie called.

"...just as I'm on the point of breaking through to an invention that will make millions!" he groaned. "I'm not going tonight. If I went I would strangle him with my two hands!"

Henry finally convinced Reggie he must go.

Even Paul had called, drunk as usual. Paul had always been the smartest one of them, when he was sober. He had talked Uncle Fred into setting him up in the hardware business.

"Uncle Fred is doing this to deliberately bankrupt me, Henry," he had wept over the phone. "I have a note to meet the first of the month. If I can't meet it I'm

through."

Paul, at least, was determined to show up at the dinner, and was hoping he could talk Uncle Fred into relenting.

Paul had called at three. From then until six-thirty had seemed a century to Henry. At six-thirty he eagerly left his penthouse apartment and drove to uncle Fred's empty mansion.

From long experience in timing, they all arrived at the same time. Martha, the gray-haired housekeeper, let them in as usual, and greeted them as usual.

Henry delayed going upstairs to wash up until almost the last moment before dinner, so that he would have a clear field to slip into Uncle Fred's bedroom and plant the spring-knife under the bed.

It fitted perfectly as he knew it would. Only when Uncle Fred's full weight was directly over it would the springs sink deep enough to release the knife. Then the powerful spring would drive it up through the mattress—and through Uncle Fred.

Henry went down to join the others in the front room with a feeling of contentment. His share of Uncle Fred's estate was as good as in his hands already.

When dinner was announced Uncle Fred had moved grudgingly into the dining room and the

others had followed. All except Reggie.

Reggie had run upstairs, taking the steps two at a time. Henry had nudged Paul and whispered, "What the heck is Reggie going upstairs now for?"

It had been perfect. Paul would remember that.

For the first few minutes at dinner everything was the way it had always been. Audrey pushed forward to help the housekeeper put the soup at each place, Margaret fussed with the salad dishes. Reggie appeared through the door to the kitchen, having come down by the back stairs. Paul helped Uncle Fred get seated at the head of the table.

Then everyone seemed to remember.

Silence settled over the room, broken only by the sounds of dinner.

With the first taste of soup Henry had become very depressed. He realized it really was the last dinner with Uncle Fred. He had loved Uncle Fred as a father.

In a sense Uncle Fred had created him. From the innocent ten-year-old boy he had been when Uncle Fred took him, he had become an incurable gambler, and Uncle Fred had had a lot to do with it.

There had been that first gambling debt six months after college. Henry had been terrified when the gambling syndicate gave

him twenty-four hours to pay up—or else.

He had gone to Uncle Fred and blurted the whole sorry mess, expecting Uncle Fred to kick him out. Instead, Uncle Fred had chuckled!

"Henry," he had said, "they played you for a sucker. But I have to admire your guts, bucking a gambling syndicate." He had written out a check for the full amount and given it to Henry with the mild admonition, "I hope this teaches you a lesson."

Henry had paid off the gambling syndicate feeling a little proud of his manliness. And he had worshipped Uncle Fred...

A different Uncle Fred from the one now slurping his soup noisily and glaring around the table contemptuously. This one was no more than a cantankerous old man. Little more than leathery skin, and bones.

At that moment Uncle Fred exploded into a fit of coughing.

While Henry and the others looked on, Uncle Fred half rose, still coughing. He clutched at his throat ineffectively, then fell forward on the table.

Audrey and Paul, who were sitting at either side of Uncle Fred, took hold of him and helped him back into his chair.

"My heart!" Uncle Fred choked out.

"Call the doctor, somebody!" Paul had said. "Come on, let's get

Uncle Fred to bed!"

"I'll call the doctor!" Henry shouted.

He rushed into the hall and dialed the number quickly. The doctor himself answered the phone, and promised to come at once.

Henry caught up with the others at the top of the stairs. Reggie and Paul were practically carrying Uncle Fred now. Audrey and Margaret were fluttering. Ted was clutching at his wife Margaret.

The death march continued down the hall to the door of Uncle Fred's bedroom. Ted opened the door. Reggie and Paul helped Uncle Fred through.

But it was Reggie who lifted Uncle Fred in his arms, seemed to hesitate, then dropped him in the exact center of the bed.

A second later the sharp point of the knife materialized through Uncle Fred's chest, glistening pinkly in the light of the ceiling globe someone had turned on from the switch by the door.

Henry forced his mind back to the present. He looked around the library at the books, the policeman sitting by the door. Audrey and Paul had already been called for their interview by Captain Bonner. His turn would come soon.

It would not *do* to keep think-

ing about the murder. He was "innocent"! He would have to concentrate on that, get into that frame of mind. If he didn't, Captain Bonner might suspect.

The door opened again. The same policeman came in and looked around questioningly.

"Mr. Reginald Granview?" he said.

Reggie stood up looking very pale. He opened his mouth twice like a fish gasping for breath, then followed the policeman from the room.

Henry looked at the closed door with just the hint of a smile on his face.

Henry felt Margaret looking at him. He looked at her with his eyes out of focus, and looked away.

He sensed that Margaret was still looking at him. Damn her, did she suspect the truth?

"You think I killed him, don't you, Henry?" she said.

"Meg!" her husband Ted whispered. "The policeman!"

"Ted's right," Henry said. "Besides, it's absurd. You?" He shook his head, smiling.

Margaret opened her mouth to say something more, then closed it and turned away.

How was Reggie faring? Had Captain Bonner leaped on him? Captain Bonner, Henry realized, was the real enemy. He had sensed it from the first moment he saw the man.

After Henry had called him, old Dr. Ingersoll, the family doctor, arrived within five minutes of Uncle Fred's death. He had taken one look at the knife protruding upwards from Uncle Fred's chest and turned angrily to Henry.

"I thought you said he had a heart attack, Henry," he said.

Henry shrugged apologetically. "He did," he said. "Downstairs at dinner. They were taking him up to bed when I called you."

Dr. Ingersoll had herded them out of the bedroom and closed the door. He undoubtedly used the bedside telephone to call the police, because it seemed only a minute to Henry before the first faint sound of a distant, approaching siren crept into the silence of the hall. From that moment, Captain Bonner of the police had taken over.

Forcing his thoughts back to the reality of the library, Henry took out his handkerchief and dabbed at his forehead.

Margaret was looking at him.

"Hot in here, isn't it," he said weakly.

"Did—?" Margaret blurted. "Did—?" She put her hand over her mouth, but her eyes were suddenly round.

Henry stole a glance toward the policeman guarding the door. The man was watching them with keen interest.

Tension grew. In another mo-

ment Margaret would ask the question. Henry held his breath, waiting.

The door opened. The familiar figure stepped in, looked around, and said, "Henry Granview?"

With a sense of relief Henry stood up. He didn't look back as he followed the policeman out into the hall.

"Captain Bonner wants to see you in the dining room," the policeman said.

Henry steeled himself. Bonner, he knew, was very intelligent. But intelligence could carry one only so far. Reasoning could only be applied to evidence.

All he had to do, Henry was sure, was play innocent. Not be sure of anything, really.

In his mind's eye Henry anticipated what line Bonner would take.

"You went upstairs alone, didn't you?" Bonner would say.

"I don't know!" Henry would answer. "I may have. I thought Paul was with me. No, that was last time we were here. I just don't remember." And then, half angrily, "Good lord, man, you act as though I anticipated that Uncle Fred would be murdered and I would remember everything I did so as to have an alibi!"

Just the right shade of defiance, just the right shade of vagueness. That was the best line to take.

The line he really hoped he would get a chance to use was

a stroke of genius.

"So what!" he would say if he had the right opportunity. "So what if Reggie is an inventor! You can probably buy trick knives that would stab through a mattress almost anywhere—can't you?" He would laugh skeptically and add, "Reggie invent something that actually worked?" He would chuckle. Then he would say, "Reggie's workshop is full of his failures. He must have several tons of them laying around..."

The policeman led the way across the edge of the huge living room. It was empty now, and silent. At the door to the dining room he paused until Henry caught up with him. Then he opened the door. Henry stepped past him into the room.

Captain Bonner was sitting on the other side of the table. On either side of him, sitting at the table, were men in ordinary clothes but with the indelible stamp of Police on them.

Bonner and his men were looking at Henry as a spider might look at a fly caught in its web.

Henry blinked nervously. Suddenly his attention was caught by a cluster of familiar faces over in the corner. Audrey and Paul and Reggie.

For the first time doubt—genuine doubt—entered his mind. The expression on their faces was al-

most predatory. Their eyes gleamed with sadistic anticipation. It was almost as though they were sure he was guilty.

Madness! How *could* they know?

Had someone seen him go into Uncle Fred's bedroom to plant the weapon, or when he left? If so, it would be damaging, but not fatal. One person's word against another's.

"Sit down, Henry," Captain Bonner said, pointing to a chair directly opposite him at the table.

Henry took the seat warily, alert to everything around him.

"Now, Henry," Captain Bonner said, "we know you are guilty. No, no!" He waved Henry to silence. "We aren't interested in your protestations of innocence. We know beyond a shadow of doubt that you are guilty of murder. We can prove it in any court of law."

It was a trap!

Henry blinked his eyes innocently. He looked from one face to another, hoping to find doubt. He saw nothing but complete conviction in the eyes of everyone.

What had he done wrong? He had been so sure of success!

"You committed a perfect crime," Captain Bonner said. "You overlooked only one small thing. Something you could not have foreseen or you would have abandoned your plan to kill your uncle."

Henry wanted to blurt, "What was that?", but he clamped his lips together. They weren't going to trap him into talking.

"It was perfect," Captain Bonner repeated, flavoring the words. "Five suspects and a rich uncle who was going to change his will in the morning. All five suspects had the same motive. All five suspects were present, with equal opportunity to commit the crime. Our investigation is less than two hours old, but already I'm inclined to believe you were smart enough and careful enough to make it impossible for us to obtain proof of your possession of the instrument of murder you employed. So . . ."

Captain Bonner smiled blandly.

"Although we can prove to any jury in the world that you *did* kill your uncle," he said, "we'll have to remain ignorant of one small detail of your crime—unless you choose to tell us. Which of the five methods of killing him was yours?"

"The spring-driven knife under the bed? The sugar of lead in his glass of wine before dinner? The arsenic in his soup? The strychnine in his coffee? The cyanide?"

Captain Bonner tabulated each of them with a finger.

Henry's eyes grew very round as the meaning of Bonner's words sunk in. He turned his eyes toward Audrey, then Paul, then Reggie. Now he understood why they had looked at him the way they did.

And suddenly a new thought struck him. There was still Margaret. Right now she was sitting in the library feeling secure.

What a shock it must have been to her for that knife to appear after she had poisoned Uncle Fred! The shock of all four of them as they helped Uncle Fred up to his room, dying or already dead from the poison each one had given him!

"Which was yours?" Captain Bonner asked.

"Does it matter?" Henry grinned, going over to join Audrey and Paul and Reggie. "Aren't you going to send for Margaret now?"

At a nod from Captain Bonner the policeman left the room. And Henry sat on the edge of his chair, leaning forward, eagerly watching the door Margaret would come through. ■ ■

