



Fredric Brown
The Shaggy Dog and Other Murders

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First Edition

Fredric Brown

Whistler's murder

The ancient but highly polished automobile turned in at the driveway of the big country house. It came to a stop exactly opposite the flagged walk that led to the porch of the house.

Mr. Henry Smith stepped from the car. He took a few steps toward the house and then paused at the sight of a wreath on the front door. He murmured something to himself that sounded suspiciously like, "Dear me," and stood for a moment. He took off his gold-rimmed pince-nez glasses and polished them carefully.

He replaced the glasses and looked at the house again. This time his gaze went higher. The house had a flat roof surmounted by a three-foot parapet. Standing on the roof behind the parapet, looking down at Mr. Smith, was a big man in a blue serge suit. A gust of wind blew back the big man's coat and Mr. Smith saw that he wore a revolver in a shoulder holster. The big man pulled his coat together, buttoned it shut, and stepped back out of sight. This time, quite unmistakably, Mr. Smith said, "Dear me!"

He squared his gray derby hat, went up onto the porch, and rang the doorbell. After about a minute, the door opened. The big man who had been on the roof opened it, and frowned down at Mr. Smith. He was well over six feet tall, and Mr. Smith was a scant five-six.

"Yeah?" said the big man.

"My name is Henry Smith," answered Mr. Smith. "I would like to see Mr. Walter Perry. Is he home?"

"No."

"Is he expected back soon?" asked Mr. Smith. "I ... ah ... have an appointment with him. That is, not exactly an appointment. I mean, not for a specific hour. But I talked to him on the telephone yesterday and he suggested that I call sometime this afternoon." Mr. Smith's eyes flickered to the funeral wreath on the open door. "He isn't... ah—"

"No," said the big man. "His uncle's dead, not him."

"Ah, murdered?"

The big man's eyes opened a little more widely. "How did you know that? The papers haven't—"

"It was just a guess," Mr. Smith said. "Your coat blew back when you were on the roof and I saw you were wearing a gun. From that and your ... ah ... general appearance, I surmise that you are an officer of the law, possibly the sheriff of this county. At least, if my guess of murder is correct, I hope that you are an officer of the law and not... ah—"

The big man chuckled. "I'm Sheriff Osburne, not the murderer." He pushed his hat back farther on his head. "And what was your business with Walter Perry, Mr... uh-?"

"Smith," said Mr. Smith. "Henry Smith, of the Phalanx Insurance Company. My business with Walter Perry concerned life insurance. My company, however, also handles fire, theft, and casualty insurance. We're one of the oldest and strongest companies in the country."

"Yeah, I've heard of the Phalanx. Just what did Walter Perry want to see you about? Wait, come on in. No use talking in the doorway. There's nobody here."

He led the way across the hall, into a large, luxuriously furnished room in one corner of which stood a mahogany Steinway grand. He waved Mr. Smith to an overstuffed sofa and perched himself on the bench of the piano.

Mr. Smith sat down on the plush sofa and placed his gray derby carefully beside him. "The crime," he said, "I take it, would have occurred last night. And you suspect Walter Perry, are holding him?"

The sheriff's head tilted slightly to one side. "And from what," he wanted to know, "do you take all that?"

"Obviously," said Mr. Smith, "it had not occurred when I talked to Walter Perry late yesterday, or he would certainly have mentioned it. Then, if the crime had occurred today, I would expect more activity

about, coroners, undertakers, deputies, photographers. The discovery must have occurred no later than early this morning for all that to be over with, and the ... ah ... remains taken away. I take it that they are, because of the wreath. That would indicate that a mortician has been here. Did you say we had the house to ourselves? Wouldn't an estate of this size require servants?"

"Yeah," answered the sheriff. "There's a gardener somewhere around and a groom who takes care of the horses —Carlos Perry's hobby was raising and breeding horses. But they aren't in the house—the gardener and the groom, I mean. There were two inside servants, a housekeeper and a cook. The housekeeper quit two days ago and they hadn't hired a new one yet, and the cook— Say, who's questioning who? How did you know we were holding Walter on suspicion?"

"A not illogical inference, Sheriff," said Mr. Smith. "His absence, your manner, and your interest in what he wanted to see me about. How and when was Mr. Carlos Perry killed?"

"A little after two o'clock, or a little before, the coroner says. With a knife, while he was in bed asleep. And nobody in the house."

"Except Mr. Walter Perry?"

The sheriff frowned. "Not even him, unless I can figure out how— Say, who's questioning who, Mr. Smith? Just what was your business with Walter?"

"I sold him a policy—not a large one, it was for three thousand dollars—a few years ago while he was attending college in the city. Yesterday, I received a notice from the main office that his current premium had not been paid and that the grace period had expired. That would mean loss of the policy, except for a cash surrender value, very small, considering that the policy was less than three years old. However, the policy can be reinstated within twenty-four hours after expiration of the grace period, if I can collect his premium and have him sign a statement that he is in good health and has had no serious illness since the policy date. Also, I hoped to get him to increase the amount... ah— Sheriff, how can you possibly be certain that there was no one else in the house at the time Mr. Perry was killed?"

"Because," said the big man, "there were two men on the house."

"On the house? You mean, on the roof?"

The sheriff nodded glumly. "Yeah," he answered. "Two private detectives from the city, and they not only alibi each other—they alibi everybody else, including Mr. Addison Simms of Seattle." He grunted. "Well, I hoped your reason for seeing Walter would tie in somewhere, but I guess it doesn't. If anything comes up, I can reach you through your company, can't I?"

"Of course," said Mr. Smith. He made no move to go. The sheriff had turned around to the keyboard of the Steinway grand. With a morose finger, he picked out the notes of "Peter, Peter, Pumpkin Eater."

Mr. Smith waited patiently until the concert was finished.

Then he asked, "Why were two detectives on the roof, Sheriff? Had there been a warning message or a threat of some sort?"

Sheriff Osburne turned around on the piano bench and regarded the little insurance agent glumly.

Mr. Smith smiled deprecatingly. He said, "I hope you don't think I'm interfering, but can't you see that it's part of my job, part of my duty to my company, to solve this crime, if I can?"

"Huh? You didn't have insurance on the old guy, did you?"

"No, just on young Walter. But the question arises—is Walter Perry guilty of murder? If he is, I would be doing my employer a disservice to go out of my way to renew his policy. If he is innocent, and I do not remind him that his policy is about to lapse, I am doing a disservice to a client. So I hope you see that my curiosity is not merely ... ah ... curiosity."

The sheriff grunted.

"There was a threat, a warning?" Mr. Smith asked.

The sheriff sighed deeply. "Yeah," he said. "Came in the mail three days ago. Letter saying he'd be murdered unless he made restitution to all the people he'd gypped out of money on songs he'd stolen—pirated, I think they call it in that game—from them. He was a song publisher, you know."

"I recall his nephew having mentioned it. Whistler and Company, isn't it? Who is Mr. Whistler?"

"There ain't any," replied the sheriff. "It's a long— All right, I might as well tell you. Carlos Perry used to be in vaudeville, a solo act, whistling. Way back when, when there was vaudeville. When he took on a girl assistant, he billed himself as Whistler and Company, instead of using his name. See?"

"And then he got into song publishing, and used the same name for a company name. I see. And did he really cheat his clients?"

The sheriff said, "I guess he did, all right. He wrote a couple songs himself that went fairly well, and used the money he got from 'em to set himself up in publishing. And I guess his methods were crooked, all right. He was sued about a dozen times, but usually came out on top and kept right on making hay. He had plenty. I wouldn't say he was a millionaire, but he must have been half of one, anyway.

"So three days ago, this threatening letter comes in the mail, and he showed it to us and wanted protection. Well, I told him we'd work on finding out who sent the letter, but that the county couldn't afford to assign anybody to permanent protection duty at his place and if he wanted that, he'd have to hire it done. So he went to the city and hired two men from an agency."

"A reputable one?"

"Yeah, the International. They sent Krauss and Roberts, two of their best men."

The sheriff's hand, resting on the keyboard, struck what he probably intended as a chord. It wasn't. Mr. Smith winced slightly.

"Last night," the sheriff went on, "as it happened, nobody was in or around the place here except the boss—I mean, Carlos Perry—and the two International ops. Walter was staying overnight in the city, went to see a show and stayed at a hotel, he says. We've checked. He went to the hotel all right, but we can't prove he stayed in his room, or that he didn't. Checked in about midnight, and left a call for eight. He could've made it here and back, easy.

"And the servants—well, I'd told you the housekeeper had quit and not been replaced yet. Just coincidence the other three all happened to be away. The cook's mother's critically sick; she's still away. It was the gardener's night off; he spent it with his sister and her husband in Dartown, like he always does. The other guy, the horse trainer or groom or whatever the devil you'd call him, went to town to see a doctor about an infected foot he'd got from stepping on a nail. Drove in in Perry's truck and the truck broke down. He phoned and Perry told him to have it fixed at an all-night garage, sleep in town, and bring it back in the morning. So, outside of horses and a couple cats, the only people around last night were Perry and the two private ops."

Mr. Smith nodded gravely. "And the coroner says the murder happened around two o'clock?"

"He says that's fairly close, and he's got something to go by, too. Perry turned in about midnight, and just before he went to his room, he ate a snack out of the refrigerator. One of the ops, Roberts, was in the kitchen with him and can verify what he ate and when. So—you know how a coroner can figure time of death, I guess—how far digestion has proceeded. And—"

"Yes, of course," said Mr. Smith.

"Let's go up on the roof," suggested the sheriff. "I'll show you the rest of it, easier'n I can tell you."

He got up from the piano bench and went toward the stairs, Mr. Smith following him like a very small tail on a very large comet. The sheriff talked back over his shoulder:

"So at midnight Perry turns in. The two ops search the place thoroughly, inside and out. There ain't nobody around then. They'll swear to that, and like I said, they're good men."

"And," said Mr. Smith cheerfully, "if someone was already hiding on the premises at midnight, it couldn't have been Walter Perry. You verified that he checked in at a hotel at midnight."

"Yeah," the sheriff rumbled. "Only, there wasn't nobody around. Roberts and Krauss say they'll turn in their licenses if there was. So they went up, this way, to the roof, because it was a moonlight night and that's the best place to watch from. Up here."

They had climbed the ladder from the back second-floor hallway through the open skylight and now stood on the flat roof. Mr. Smith walked over to the parapet.

Sheriff Osburne waved a huge hand. "Lookit," he said, "you can see all directions for almost a quarter of a mile, farther than that most ways. There was moonlight, not bright enough to read by, maybe, because the moon was low in the sky, but both the International men were on this roof from around midnight to half past two. And they swear nobody crossed any of those fields or came along the road."

"They were both watching all that time?"

"Yeah," the sheriff answered. "They were gonna take turns, and it was Krauss's turn off first, but it was so nice up there on the roof, and he wasn't sleepy, that he stuck around talking to Roberts instead of turning in. And while they weren't watching all directions every second—well, it'd take anybody time to cross the area where they could've seen him. They say it couldn't have been done."

“And at two-thirty?”

The sheriff frowned. “At two-thirty Krauss decided to go downstairs and take a nap. He was just going through the skylight there when the bell started to ring—the telephone bell, I mean. The phone’s downstairs, but there’s an extension upstairs and it rings both places.

“Krauss didn’t know whether to answer it or not. He knew out in the country here, there are different rings for different phones and he didn’t know whether it was Perry’s ring or not. He went back up on the roof to ask Roberts if he knew, and Roberts did know, and it was Perry’s ring on the phone, so Krauss went down and answered it.

“It wasn’t anything important; it was just a misunderstanding. Merkle, the horse guy, had told the all-night garage he’d phone to find out if the truck was ready; he meant when he woke up in the morning. But the garage-man misunderstood and thought he was to call when he’d finished working on the truck. And he didn’t know Merkle was staying in the village. He phoned out to the house to tell ‘em the truck was ready. He’s a kind of dumb guy, the one that works nights in the garage, I mean.”

Sheriff Osborne tilted his hat back still farther and then grabbed at it as a vagrant breeze almost removed it entirely. He said, “Then Krauss got to wondering how come the phone hadn’t waked Perry, because it was right outside his bedroom door and he knew Perry was a light sleeper; Perry’d told him so. So he investigated and found Perry was dead.”

Mr. Smith nodded. He said, “Then, I suppose, they searched the place again?”

“Nope. They were smarter’n that. Good men, I told you. Krauss went back up and told Roberts, and Roberts stayed on the roof, watching, figuring maybe the killer was still around and he could see him leaving, see? Krauss went downstairs, phoned me, and while I was getting around here with a couple of the boys, he searched the place again, Roberts watching all the time. He searched the house and the barns and everywhere, and then when we got here, we helped him and went all over it again. There wasn’t nobody here. See?”

Mr. Smith nodded again, gravely. He took off his gold-rimmed glasses and polished them, then walked around the low parapet, studying the landscape.

The sheriff followed him. He said, “Look, the moon was low in the northwest. That meant this house threw a shadow across to the barns. A guy could get that far, easy, but to and from the barns, he’d have to cross that big field as far as the clump of trees way down there at the edge of the road. He’d stick out like a sore thumb crossing that field.

“And outside of the barns, that there chunk of woods is the nearest possible cover he could’ve come from. It’d take him ten minutes to cross that field, and he couldn’ta done it.”

“I doubt,” observed Mr. Smith, “that any man would have been so foolish as to try. The moonlight works both ways. I mean, he could have seen the men on the roof, easily, unless they were hiding down behind the parapet. Were they?”

“Nope. They weren’t trying to trap anybody. They were just watching, most of the time sitting on the parapet, one facing each way, while they talked. Like you say, he could’ve seen them just as easy as they could’ve seen him.”

“Um-m-m,” said Mr. Smith. “But you haven’t told me why you’re holding Walter Perry. I presume he inherits— that would give him a motive. But, according to what you tell me about the ethics of Whistler and Company, a lot of other people could have motives.”

The sheriff nodded glumly. “Several dozen of ‘em. Especially if we could believe that threatening letter.”

“And can’t you?”

“No, we can’t. Walter Perry wrote it and mailed it to his uncle. We traced the typewriter he used and the stationery. And he admits writing it.”

“Dear me,” declared Mr. Smith earnestly. “Does he say why?”

“He does, but it’s screwy. Look, you want to see him anyway, so why don’t you get his story from him?”

“An excellent idea, Sheriff. And thank you very much.”

“It’s all right. I thought maybe thinking out loud would give me some idea how it was done, but it ain’t. Oh, well. Look, tell Mike at the jail I said you could talk to Walter. If Mike don’t take your word for it, have him phone me here. I’ll be around for a while.”

Near the open skylight, Mr. Henry Smith paused to take a last look at the surrounding country. He saw a tall, thin man wearing denim coveralls ride out into the field from the far side of the barn.

"Is that Merkle, the trainer?" he asked. "Yep," said the sheriff. "He exercises those horses like they was his own kids. A good guy, if you don't criticize his horses—don't try that."

"I won't," said Mr. Smith.

Mr. Smith took a last lingering look around, then went down the ladder and the stairs and got back into his car. He drove slowly and thoughtfully to the county seat.

Mike, at the jail, took Mr. Smith's word that Sheriff Osburne had given permission for him to talk to Walter Perry.

Walter Perry was a slight, grave young man who wore horn-rimmed glasses with thick lenses. He smiled ruefully at Mr. Smith. He said, "It was about renewing my policy that you wanted to see me, wasn't it? But you won't want to now, of course, and I don't blame you."

Mr. Smith studied him a moment. He asked, "You didn't ... ah ... kill your uncle, did you?"

"Of course not."

"Then," Mr. Smith told him, "just sign here." He produced a form from his pocket and unscrewed the top of his fountain pen. The young man signed, and Mr. Smith folded the paper carefully and put it back in his pocket.

"But I wonder, Mr. Perry," said Mr. Smith, "if you would mind telling me just why you ... ah— Sheriff Osburne tells me that you admit sending a letter threatening your uncle's life. Is that right?"

Walter Perry sighed. He said, "Yes, I did."

"But wasn't that a very foolish thing to do? I take it you never intended to carry out the threat."

"No, I didn't. Of course it was foolish. It was crazy. I should have seen that it would never work. Not with my uncle." He sighed again and sat down on the edge of the cot in his cell. "My uncle was a crook, but I guess he wasn't a coward. I don't know whether that's to his credit or not. Now that he's dead, I hate to—"

Mr. Smith nodded sympathetically. He said, "Your uncle had, I understand, cheated a great many song writers out of royalties from their creations. You thought you might frighten him into making restitution to the ones he had cheated?"

Walter Perry nodded. "It was silly. One of those crazy ideas one gets. It was because he got well."

"Got well! I'm afraid I don't—"

"I'd better tell you from the beginning, Mr. Smith. It was two years ago, about the time I graduated from college—I worked my way through; my uncle didn't foot the bill—that I first learned what kind of an outfit Whistler and Company was. I happened to meet some former friends of my uncle—old-time vaudeville people who had been on the circuits with him. They were plenty bitter. So I started investigating, and found out about all the lawsuits he'd had to fight, and—well, I was convinced.

"I was his only living relative, and I knew I was his heir, but if his money was crooked money—well, I didn't want it. He and I had a quarrel and he disinherited me, and that was that. Until a year ago, I learned—"

He stopped, staring at the barred door of the cell. "You learned what?" Mr. Smith prompted.

"I learned, accidentally, that my uncle had some kind of cardiac trouble and didn't have long to live, according to the doctor. Probably less than a year. And—well, it's probably hard for anybody to believe that my motives were good, but I decided that under those circumstances I was missing a chance to help the people my uncle had cheated—that if I was still his heir, I could make restitution after his death of the money he had stolen from them. You see?"

Walter Perry looked up at the little insurance agent from his seat on the cot, and Mr. Smith studied the young man's face, then nodded.

"So you effected a reconciliation?" he asked.

"Yes, Mr. Smith. It was hypocritical, in one way, but I thought it would enable me to square off those crimes. I didn't want his money, any of it. But I was sorry for all those poor people he'd cheated and—well, I made myself be hypocritical for their sake."

"You know any of them personally?"

"Not all, but I knew I could find most of the ones I didn't know through the records of the old lawsuits. The ones I met first were an old vaudeville team by the name of Wade and Wheeler. I met a

few others through them, and looked up a few others. Most of them hated him like poison, and I can't say I blame them."

Mr. Smith nodded sympathetically. He said, "But the threatening letter. Where does that fit in?"

"About a week ago, I learned that his heart trouble was much better. They'd discovered a new treatment with one of the new drugs, and while he'd never be in perfect health, there was every chance he had another twenty years or so to live—he was only forty-eight. And, well, that changed things."

The young man laughed ruefully. He went on, "I didn't know if I could stand up under the strain of my hypocrisy for that long, and anyway, it didn't look as though restitution would come in time to do any good to a lot of the people he owed money to. Wade and Wheeler, for instance, were older than my uncle, a few years. He could easily outlive them, and some of the others. You see?"

"So you decided to write a letter threatening his life, pretending to come from one of the people he'd cheated, thinking it might scare him into giving them their money now?"

"Decided," said Walter Perry, "is hardly the word. If I'd thought about it, I'd have realized how foolish it was to hope that it would do any good. He just hired detectives. And then he was murdered, and here I am in a beautiful jam. Since he knows I wrote that letter, I don't blame Osburne for thinking I must have killed him, too."

Mr. Smith chuckled. He told him, "Fortunately for you, the sheriff can't figure out how anybody could have killed him. Ah... did anyone know about your hoax, the threatening letter? That is, of course, before the sheriff traced it to you and you admitted writing and sending it?"

"Why, yes. I was so disappointed in my uncle's reaction to receiving it that I mentioned it to Mr. Wade and Mr. Wheeler, and to a few of the others my uncle owed royalties to. I hoped they could suggest some other idea that might work better. But they couldn't."

"Wade and Wheeler—they live in the city?"

"Yes, they're out of vaudeville now, of course. They get by doing bit parts on television."

"Um-m-m," said Mr. Smith. "Well, thank you for signing the renewal on your policy. And when you are out of here, I'd like to see you again to discuss the possibility of your taking an additional policy. You are planning to be married, you mentioned yesterday?"

"I was, yesterday," replied Walter Perry. "I guess I still am, unless Osburne pins a murder on me. Yes, Mr. Smith, I'll be glad to discuss another policy, if I get out of this mess."

Mr. Smith smiled. He said, "Then it seems even more definitely to the interest of the Phalanx Insurance Company to see that you are free as soon as possible. I think I shall return and talk to the sheriff again."

Mr. Henry Smith drove back to the Perry house even more slowly and thoughtfully than he had driven away from it. He didn't drive quite all the way. He parked his ancient vehicle almost a quarter of a mile away, at the point where the road curved around the copse of trees that gave the nearest cover.

He walked through the trees until, near the edge of the copse, he could see the house itself across the open field. The sheriff was still, or again, on the roof.

Mr. Smith walked out into the open, and the sheriff saw him almost at once. Mr. Smith waved and the sheriff waved back. Mr. Smith walked on across the field to the barn, which stood between the field and the house itself.

The tall, thin man whom he had seen exercising the horse was now engaged in currying a horse.

"Mr. Merkle?" asked Mr. Smith, and the man nodded. "My name is Smith, Henry Smith. I am ... ah ... attempting to help the sheriff. A beautiful stallion, that gray. Would I be wrong in guessing that it is a cross between an Arabian and a Kentucky walking horse?"

The thin man's face lighted up. "Right, mister. I see you know horses. I been having fun with those city dicks all week, kidding 'em. They think, because I told 'em, that this is a Clyde, and that chestnut Arab mare is a Percheron. Found out yet who killed Mr. Perry?"

Mr. Smith stared at him. "It is just possible that we have, Mr. Merkle. It is just barely possible that you have told me how it was done, and if we know that—"

"Huh?" said the trainer. "I told you?"

"Yes," returned Mr. Smith. "Thank you."

He walked on around the barn and joined the sheriff on the roof.

Sheriff Osburne grunted a welcome. He said, "I saw you the minute you came out into the open. Dammit, nobody could have crossed that field last night without being noticed."

"You said the moonlight was rather dim, did you not?"

"Yeah, the moon was low, kind of, and—let's see, was it a half moon?"

"Third quarter," said Mr. Smith. "And the men who crossed that field didn't have to come closer than a hundred yards or more until they were lost in the shadow of the barn."

The sheriff took off his hat and swabbed at his forehead with a handkerchief. He said, "Sure, I ain't saying you could recognize anybody that far, but you could see— Hey, why'd you say the men who crossed that field? You mean, you think—"

"Exactly," cut in Mr. Smith, just a bit smugly. "One man could not have crossed that field last night without being noticed, but two men could. It seems quite absurd, I will admit, but by process of elimination, it must have been what happened."

Sheriff Osburne stared blankly.

"The two men," said Mr. Smith, "are named Wade and Wheeler. They live in the city, and you'll have no difficulty finding them because Walter Perry knows where they live. I think you'll have no difficulty proving that they did it, once you know the facts. For one thing, I think you'll find that they probably rented the ... ah ... wherewithal. I doubt if they have their own left, after all these years off the stage."

"Wheeler and Wade? I believe Walter mentioned those names, but—"

"Exactly," said Mr. Smith. "They knew the setup here. And they knew that if Walter inherited Whistler and Company, they'd get the money they had coming, and so they came here last night and killed Mr. Carlos Perry. They crossed that field last night right under the eyes of your city detectives."

"I'm crazy, or you are," declared Sheriff Osburne.

"How?"

Mr. Smith smiled gently.

He said, "On my way up through the house just now, I verified a wild guess. I phoned a friend of mine who has been a theatrical agent for a great many years. He remembered Wade and Wheeler quite well. And it's the only answer. Possibly because of dim moonlight, distance, and the ignorance of city-bred men who would think nothing of seeing a horse in a field at night when the horse should be in the barn. Who wouldn't, in fact, even see a horse, to remember it."

"You mean Wade and Wheeler—"

"Exactly," said Mr. Smith, this time with definite smugness in his voice. "Wade and Wheeler, in vaudeville, were the front and back ends, respectively, of a comedy horse."