

# THREE DEAD MERCHANTS

By FRANK GRUBER

*A Killer's Trail*

PRIVATE DETECTIVE Sam Smith deposited his battered grip on the floor of the dingy hotel lobby and approached the desk. Joe Brumm, proprietor of the Brumm Hotel, held out a pen with one hand and with the other whisked the register around to face the prospective guest.

"How do you do, sir," he greeted the newcomer pleasantly.

Smith grunted as he wrote his name on the register. "With bath."

The hotel man cleared his throat. "The rate for a room without bath is \$1.25, but I'm afraid I'll have to charge you \$1.75 for a room with a private bath." His tone was apologetic.

Smith's sober face almost widened into a grin. "Well, maybe I can go that high—I'm not going up to my room just now. Can you direct me to the business establishment of Morton Hadley?"

Joe Brumm dropped the grip which he had just picked up. His jaw gaped for a moment, then he swallowed hard. "You can't see Morton Hadley. He's dead. Murdered!"

SMITH caught his breath and for just a second his blue eyes glinted. "Murdered!" he repeated. "When?"

"Last night, or rather early this morning," replied the hotel keeper. "He was—" He stopped in the middle of the sentence.

Smith turned to face two men who had just entered the hotel. They were huge men, as alike physically as it was possible for two men to be. Together they must have tipped the scales at close to four hundred and fifty pounds. One had a flattened nose. He addressed Smith.

"You Sam Smith?"

Smith glanced at the nicked stars on the left breasts of the men. "John and Richard Law!" he said, evading the question of his identity.

"No; Dick Coe is my name," said he of the battered nose. "The boys call me Hefty. This is my partner, Russ Wall. His nickname is Lefty."

"Hefty and Lefty, eh?" Smith could not quite restrain a grin.

Pride showed on Hefty's face. "You bet," he

said. "Lefty is the day constable and I'm the night man. Only now we're both working on this case."

Lefty had not spoken a word, as yet. He stood on one side, grinning foolishly. It was evident that Hefty was the leader of the two.

"I asked if your name was Sam Smith," suddenly popped out Hefty, remembering his first question.

"Well, I see no harm in admitting it," replied Smith, easily. "But you're probably mistaking me for some other Smith. You know there are a lot of us."

Hefty frowned. "No, you're the Smith we want to see. Morton Hadley sent for you, didn't he?"

"And what if he did?"

"He shouldn't ought to have done it," said Hefty. "He's dead now. The next train leaves in a half-hour."

Sam Smith's eyes suddenly narrowed. "Yeah? Well, I'm afraid I can't quite make it. I've a job here."

Hefty shook his head. "No use hanging around. Hadley's dead. Me and Lefty can take care of things."

The smile left Smith's face. "It's no use. Hadley sent me a check. I accepted it and because he's dead doesn't mean that I should lay down on the job. No, I'm going to get his murderer."

Hefty bared his teeth. "We don't want you here. Get out of Webster while the getting is good. We're running things here."

"Yes? What about the sheriff?"

"The sheriff lives in Grove City, thirty miles from here. He's a former Webster man. His name is Bates and he's my brother-in-law."

"I'm staying," said Smith, and turned his back on the village policemen.

FOR a moment it looked as if Hefty would throw himself upon the slender private investigator. Then he suddenly changed his mind, wheeled and stalked out of the hotel. Lefty Wall followed him.

"You made enemies, Mr. Smith," said Brumm, the innkeeper, shaking his head.

"The hell with 'em!" snorted Smith. "Listen, have you got a newspaper in this burg?"

"We certainly have," replied the hotel man, with a glow of pride. "And a darn good one. *Webster Herald*. Henry Allen owns it. Office is half a block up the street, on this side."

"Thanks, and how about the mayor's office?"

"Right here. Attorney Peters is the mayor. He's in the dining room right now, having his breakfast. Bachelor. Lives at the hotel. Want me to introduce you?"

"I'd appreciate it."

He followed the hotel man into the small dining room. There was only one diner in it at this time, Attorney Peters. He was a shriveled-looking man of about sixty.

"Jake, I want you to shake hands with Mr. Smith, the detective from the city. Mr. Smith, Mayor Peters."

Smith took the clammy hand of the mayor for a brief instant. "How do you do, Mr. Peters," he said, and dropped into a chair opposite the mayor.

"Fine, Mr. Smith," said Peters. "I've been expecting you. Poor Mort Hadley told me yesterday that he had sent for you. And now he's dead."

Smith looked at Joe Brumm. That worthy hastily excused himself and retreated to the hotel lobby. Then Smith turned to the attorney-mayor.

"Hadley is the third man in this village to be murdered within a week, isn't he?"

A pained look crossed Mayor Peters' face. "Yes, it's the worst outbreak of crime in Webster in the sixty years I've lived here. And no strangers have been in town for whom we can't account."

"Home talent, eh? That's what I'd figured," said Smith. "There must be some connection between the murders of these three men—all local businessmen I understand."

"I didn't know what connection there could possibly be. My opinion is that there's a madman in the community. Although it's strange that all three of the victims should be prominent businessmen. Looks like someone wants to kill off our businessmen."

"In what line of business were the three men?"

"Well, Julius Finn owned Finn's Furniture Mart. Tad Lynch owned The Busy Bee, the biggest general store in town. Morton Hadley owned a hardware store. Finn was the first to get killed. Shot with a shotgun as he opened the door of his house, Monday night. Lynch was next. His car was found,

in a ditch, a mile out of town. Lynch was in it, with half of his head blown off. Hadley was shot through the window of his home last night. Our local police force has been unable to find a single clew so far."

"Well, why the devil doesn't the county sheriff come in on the thing. I've just met your police force. Plenty of brawn, but not much brain, was my impression."

"Oh, Hefty and Lefty are all right. Sheriff Bates was down here until yesterday. He'll probably be over again today. Don't know what good it'll do though. Well, what more can I tell you, Mr. Smith?"

"Tell me why your police force just tried to give me the bum's rush a few minutes ago?"

"Professional jealousy, that's all. You're a well-known detective, Mr. Smith, and the boys are afraid maybe you'll take a little credit away from them. That's all, Mr. Smith."

"THE hell with the credit. It's just a job of work to me. Morton Hadley paid me money and I'm going to give him service for it, even if he's dead. By the way, you haven't told me anything about the personal affairs of the three dead men. Have they families?"

"Julius Finn was a widower, no children. Tad Lynch leaves a wife and two children, a boy about eight and a girl of about eleven. Morton Hadley never married. Incidentally the three men were cronies. All about the same age, between forty-five and fifty, and all came to Webster within one year of another. Fourteen or fifteen years ago, I'd say."

"That's interesting," said Smith, biting his lip. "Well, I won't bother you anymore just now. I'll probably see you again though before I leave town."

"Yes, of course. Good luck, Mr. Smith. I certainly hope you apprehend the murderer or murderers. We'll all breathe freer if you do."

Smith left the hotel and walked up the street to the newspaper office. The place seemed quite busy. Two men and two girls were working in the small office. One of the men was Henry Allen, the publisher. He was a keen-looking man of about forty-three or forty-four. He shook hands heartily with Sam Smith.

"I've heard a lot about you, Mr. Smith. And I certainly want to welcome you to Webster, and wish you the best of success in clearing up the

atrocious murders which have cast a black cloud over our town.” Allen had an oratorical voice and liked to hear himself talk. He motioned to the other male in the office, a youth of twenty-two or twenty-three. The latter came over.

“Tom, this is Mr. Sam Smith, the famous detective. Mr. Smith, shake hands with Tom Ballinger, our reporter. Tom, I’d like to have you take a few notes for the paper.”

Smith frowned, but saw that he could not avoid the interview; so he sat down and tried to look as if he enjoyed it.

“Do you care to make any—ah—guesses as to how long it’ll take you to solve the—ah—murders, Mr. Smith?” in his large manner.

“No, I haven’t formed any theories as yet,” replied Smith. “As a matter of fact, I merely stepped in here to ask a few questions. I worked on a country weekly myself once—about ten or eleven years ago. Knowing the ropes, I figured you would probably know more about people and things in this town than any man in it.”

“So you’re an ex-newspaperman! Well, that makes it all the more interesting. Tom, make a note of that. The famous detective was once a newspaperman. What paper did you work on Mr. Smith?”

“The Mallory, Iowa, *Gazette*. It wasn’t much of a paper,” replied Smith. “Only had about a thousand circulation.”

“*The Herald* has only 1,200 circulation, Mr. Smith,” said Allen, “but we get out a pretty good paper.”

Smith picked up a copy of *The Herald* from Allen’s desk, and fingered it musingly. “Only 1,200 circulation,” he commented. “Judging from all the advertising you’re carrying I’d have guessed you had three thousand circulation at least.”

Allen glowed with pride. “Ordinarily one would think so, but this a mighty live little community. The issue you’re holding is a small one, only sixteen pages. Sometimes we run as high as twenty-four pages.”

“That’s fine,” said Smith, rising. “I must run along now. See you again later.”

Henry Allen protested loudly that his reporter hadn’t secured enough information for a good story, but the detective evaded the protest and made a rather hurried exit. He bumped into Lefty Wall, outside.

“What the hell?” snapped Smith. “Don’t tell me

you’re shadowing me?”

Lefty grinned foolishly, but said nothing.

SMITH snorted in disgust and turned on his heel. At the corner he stopped and surveyed the main street of the village. A square with the usual small-town cannon was opposite. The business section of the town consisted of two blocks of stores, all on the one side of the street, facing the square.

A two-story frame building with a sign, “The Busy Bee,” was in the center of the first block. The late Tad Lynch’s store.

Smith crossed the street, started to enter The Busy Bee, then changed his mind and went into the store next door, a notion store. A wispy looking man of fifty or so came up to him.

“I’m Sam Smith, the detective,” Smith began bluntly, and grinned inwardly as he saw the man recoil. “I’d like to ask you some questions.”

Panic shot into the eyes of the merchant.

“What sort of a man was Tad Lynch who had the store next door?” continued Smith.

“A fine man, a very fine man, indeed,” was the hurried reply.

“Oh, yeah? Well, how about Morton Hadley and Julius Finn?”

“Both fine men, very fine men,” chirped the storekeeper.

“Oh, hell!” grunted Smith, and left the store. He asked the same questions in the grocery store next door and got similar answers. The killing of the three merchants in the village had frightened the other merchants in town.

He returned to the Brumm Hotel and selected an easy chair by the window. A last week’s copy of the *Webster Herald* lay on a stand beside the chair and he picked it up.

He was chuckling over the small-town local news items, a half-hour later, when Hefty and Lefty, the police team of Webster, entered the hotel. A lanky stranger, with a black felt hat, was with them.

The trio descended upon Smith. “Here’s the sheriff, Smith,” announced Hefty, the spokesman.

Smith lowered his newspaper, but made no motion to rise. “Hello, Sheriff,” he said laconically.

“Thought you were working on these killings,” said the sheriff, a trifle testily.

“I am,” yawned Smith.

“You don’t look it,” replied the county law-and-

order man. "Have you seen the latest corpse?"

"Nope, and I don't intend to. He's dead and can't tell me who killed him."

Hefty Coe cut in. "You're a helluva detective," he sneered.

Sam Smith looked at him thoughtfully. "How'd you get the busted beezee, Hefty?" he asked innocently.

Hefty snarled and took a step forward. The sheriff caught his arm. "Easy, Hefty. Remember you're a law officer."

"I'd like to forget it for a minute," rasped Hefty throatily. "I'd enjoy mauling this wise big-town dick."

Smith grinned at him, then winked at the left-handed partner of Hefty, who was standing to one side with his perpetual vacant grin.

Sheriff Bates was backing away. "All right, Smith, you can loaf around here if you want. I was going to cooperate with you, but I see I overestimated you. Come on, boys."

Smith was still reading the newspaper ten minutes later when Brumm, the hotel proprietor, called to him. "Telephone for you, Mr. Smith."

Smith walked long-legged across the lobby. The phone was on the desk.

"Hello," he barked into the mouthpiece.

"Mr. Smith, the detective?" asked a shrill voice.

"Yeah. Who's talking?"

"You don't know me, Mr. Smith, but I understand you're working on the murder cases. I can give you some valuable information if you'll promise not to reveal the source."

Smith screwed up his lips. "Where are you?"

"Out in the country. Come out here and I'll tell you what I know."

"I HAVEN'T got a car," said Smith. "Can't you come into town?"

The voice on the wire sounded agitated. "I should say not. I don't want to be seen talking to you. . . . If you want to learn what I've got to tell you, come out here. You can rent a flivver at Baker's Garage in town. I'm a mile east of town. Drive out on highway 218 until you come to a red filling station. Turn right there on the dirt road. I'll be parked up the road a ways."

Smith hesitated for just a second. "All right," he said then. "I'll be along in fifteen or twenty minutes."

He jiggled the hook and the operator spoke.

"Operator."

"Listen, operator," Smith began. "This is police business. Where did that call just come from?"

Her reply surprised Smith. "Why from here. We have a pay booth out in the hallway and the call was put through from there."

"Thanks," said Smith, and hung up.

He had no trouble renting an old battered flivver at the Baker Garage. News of him had already reached the garage man and that worthy did not even ask for a deposit to insure the safe return of his mechanical relic.

Ten minutes later Smith turned the corner at the red filling station. The road was a narrow winding one and ran through a patch of woods. A quarter mile from the main concrete highway, a slightly younger relative of Smith's flivver was parked by the side of the road. Smith braked his car to a stop beside it.

The flivver was empty.

"Stick 'em up!" commanded a harsh voice from the other side of the road.

Hefty and Lefty, the police force of Webster, had stepped out from behind two trees. Both held pistols aimed at Smith.

"Hello, Detective Smith," said Lefty Wall, in a high falsetto voice. It was the second time Smith had heard that voice. The other time had been over the telephone. Smith understood now why Lefty usually left the talking to his partner. A big man with a shrill voice saved himself a lot of kidding by keeping his mouth shut.

Smith cursed the two policemen roundly.

"O.K., big shot," said Hefty. "Now get out of that can and come along. It's our turn."

Smith climbed out of the flivver. Lefty stepped behind him cautiously and removed the .45 from his shoulder holster. He prodded Smith in the back with it. "March!" he piped.

Hefty fell in beside Lefty and the two forced Smith into the woods. Five minutes from the road, they came to an old log cabin. Following instructions Smith entered. The others followed.

Hefty turned the key in the rusty lock and dropped it into his pocket.

"Now, wise dick, let's get down to business," he said, with an air of satisfaction. "We're outside the town limit so we're not cops now— We don't like you."

"That makes it mutual," replied Smith. "I don't like either of you."

Hefty bared his teeth and clouted Smith on the side of the head with a ham-like fist. "Just a sample," he said. "Do you go back to the city or do you want more?"

"Who's back of you?" parried Smith.

"No one," said Hefty. "This is our own idea." He punched Smith again, playfully.

Smith stepped back, then suddenly sprang forward. His right fist swung viciously and caught the big policeman in the stomach.

Hefty gasped and sat down on the floor. Smith whirled to attack Lefty and received the butt of his own .45 squarely between the eyes. His knees buckled and he dropped to the floor. Lefty kicked him in the ribs and chuckled gleefully.

Hefty climbed to his feet, reached down and picked up the lean detective by the coat collar. He smashed his fist into Smith's face. The latter would have fallen, but the big policeman held him up. He smashed him again.

This time Smith slipped from his grasp and fell to the floor. He did not move.

Hefty picked up a bucket of water standing beside the brick fireplace and dumped it on Smith. The detective stirred and after a moment sat up.

"Had enough, city detective?" sneered Hefty, the genial guardian of small-town law and order.

Smith shook his head to clear the haze from his brain. Hefty took the shake to mean that Smith hadn't had enough and kicked him in the face.

**W**HEN consciousness returned Smith was still lying on the dirty floor of the cabin. He opened his eyes. Lefty Wall sat on a stool beside the door. Hefty was not in sight.

Lefty grinned pleasantly as he saw the open eyes of the detective on him. "You can sure take it," he cackled in his shrill voice. He playfully waggled Smith's gun.

Smith rose to his feet and walked shakily to the fireplace across the room from the big policeman. Two or three loose bricks were lying on the mantelpiece. He picked one up.

"Hey, drop that!" cried Lefty in alarm.

Smith threw the brick with all his might. Lefty fired but the bullet missed the detective by three feet. The brick caught Lefty square on the forehead. He went down like a log. Smith picked up his gun which had dropped from the policeman's hand. Then he opened the door of the cabin.

Hefty Coe was lumbering toward him, attracted

by the pistol shot. Smith shot him through the shoulder. The bullet, although it did not knock Hefty off his feet, took all the fight out of him. He whimpered as Smith relieved him of his gun. Smith threw it far into the woods, then strode past the cowed bully.

Five minutes later he clambered into the rickety flivver which had brought him out to the woods. He turned around in the narrow road and started back for town.

Joe Brumm exclaimed in horror as Smith entered the lobby of the hotel.

"Good God, man!" he cried. "What happened?"

"A couple of the local playboys and myself had some fun out in the country," said Smith grimly. He went into the washroom before Brumm could question him further.

When he returned to the lobby ten minutes later, Sheriff Bates was waiting for him.

"Got a warrant for your arrest, Smith," he said brusquely.

"That's fine," replied the detective. "But don't try to serve it on me just now. I'm in no mood for jokes."

"What do you mean?" blustered the sheriff. "You shoot a policeman and then call it a joke."

"Oh, they got back, did they? Well, your sweet brother-in-law wasn't a cop out there in the woods. He had no license to try any third degree stuff on me. . . . Wait! You try to pull a gun on me and I'll blow your head off, sheriff or no sheriff."

"What! You resist arrest!" hollered the sheriff. "I'll get a posse!" He started for the door but stopped when Smith roared at him.

"Listen, you fool!" said Smith savagely. "There's been enough bloodshed in this little burg for one week. You wait one hour and if you still want to arrest me then I'll go with you peaceably."

"You won't leave town meanwhile?"

"No. Now be good and wait here for an hour. Then I'll bring in your triple murderer and toss him into your lap."

Smith brushed past the sheriff and clumped outside. He went straight to The Busy Bee store. He passed several male clerks and came to a pause before a middle-aged woman behind a cage—in the rear of the store.

"You the cashier, ma'am?" he asked.

"Yes; Myra Hinson is my name. You're the detective investigating the—killings?"

"Yes, Sam Smith is my name. I'm trying to run

down the murderer of your former employer, Thaddius Lynch. Every man I've talked to in this town is scared stiff to tell me anything. I think you can help me if you will. How long have you worked for Mr. Lynch?"

"Fourteen years, Mr. Smith. I'll be very glad to help you in any way I can."

"That's fine, Miss Hinson; I'll appreciate any assistance you can give me. How was Mr. Lynch's business, prosperous?"

**T**HE cashier hesitated for a moment. Then she threw up her head and spoke defiantly. "No, it wasn't. As a matter of fact, The Busy Bee is heavily in debt."

"Ah! I thought so. Now, Miss Hinson, you've been with this store a long time and know the ins and outs of things pretty well. Just why is this store in debt? Is it because business has fallen off so much?"

"Partly, but the main reason is that for the past four years Mr. Lynch has spent too much money to get business. Everybody in the trading area knows The Busy Bee, but still Mr. Lynch carried a full-page ad in every single issue of *The Herald*. Sometimes even two pages. Our volume of business does not justify that much advertising."

Smith nodded. "Thanks, Miss Hinson. Just one more question. I've written a name on this card. Is this the man who swings this town politically. Gets his own men elected to local offices, and so forth?"

Miss Hinson looked at the name on the card, then replied in a whisper, "Yes."

Sam Smith spent fifteen minutes in the pay-booth of the telephone company putting in a call to the city. Then he came out and headed for the office of the *Webster Herald*. He found Henry Allen there, but the publisher was no longer the jovial man he had been earlier in the day.

"I don't want anything to do with you, Smith," he cried, as the detective came up to his desk. "You can't shoot policemen in this town and get away with it."

"And neither can you order your policemen to beat me up," retorted Smith, his face set grimly.

"What do you mean?" demanded the newspaperman, half rising from his chair.

"I mean that you ordered those two plug-uglies you call policemen to beat me up and run me but of town. Don't deny it. I know you run this town and that the policemen take their orders from you."

Allen swallowed hard, then attempted to bluster. "What of it? We don't like outsiders to come into this town and stir things up. Morton Hadley had no business sending for you. He paid dearly for it."

Smith leaned forward. "If Morton Hadley had sent for me sooner he might still be alive. Listen, Allen, I've got a story for your paper, the biggest one that will ever be printed in it. I'm going to tell you why Tad Lynch, Morton Hadley and Julius Finn were killed. And I'm going to tell you who killed them."

"Fifteen years ago four young men held up a train near Bison Junction, North Dakota. Three of the men got away with the loot. The fourth was captured and sent to prison. The three divided the loot and split. Later they gathered in this town and settled down. They went into business, each one for himself. The three men were the same three men who were murdered this week."

"The fourth member of the train robber gang was released from prison six years ago. It took him two years to run down his old partners, who had let him take the rap. He also settled down in Webster, and for four years he blackmailed Hadley, Lynch and Finn. He made paupers out of them and when they finally made a decisive stand and refused to pay another cent he killed them, one after the other. The murderer's name is Henry Allen!"

"You're crazy!" screamed the newspaperman, his face livid. "You can't prove it."

"No?" Smith sneered. "You didn't kill Morton Hadley soon enough. He didn't tell me over the phone of whom he was afraid but he wrote a letter last night and mailed it to me in the city. My office just called me on the phone and read it to me. The letter named you as the killer of Lynch and Finn."

Allen sprang to his feet, overturning his swivel chair as he did. He jerked out a drawer of his desk, but suddenly froze as Smith's automatic poked him in the chest.

"Let go, or I'll blow you to hell!" snapped the detective.

Allen collapsed into his chair as Smith snapped handcuffs on his wrists.

**P**EOPLE rushed out of stores as Sam Smith walked down Main Street herding his prisoner before him. By the time they reached the hotel half the town was crowding close behind.

Sheriff Bates met them at the door of the hotel. "Are you crazy, man?" he cried to Smith, as he saw

who the latter's prisoner was.

"Here's your killer, Bates," said Smith. He kicked shut the door of the hotel, to keep out the crowd.

"Allen just confessed the killings," went on Smith, "with his entire newspaper staff as witnesses."

The sheriff's jaw dropped. "Well, who'd have thought it? After that piece he wrote in this week's paper about what a shame it was for such killings to happen in this town."

"He had lots of stuff in his paper," grunted Smith. "It's a lucky thing for this town that I once worked on a newspaper myself, or Allen would have gotten away with it."

"What did the fact that you once worked on a newspaper have to do with unearthing Allen as the murderer?" asked the sheriff, incredulously.

"Everything. I never in my life saw a newspaper in a town this size which carried as much advertising as *The Herald* did. That's what first got me to suspecting Allen of blackmail.

"The three dead men were the biggest advertisers in the paper. They spent a minimum of

fifty dollars a week for advertising for four years, or more than \$10,000 each. None of them needed anywhere near that much advertising. It was blackmail, pure and simple. I'll wager that some of the other big advertisers in Allen's paper have been indiscreet at some time or another and Allen dug it up. . . ."

"But how did you ever get Allen to confess?" cut in the sheriff.

"I had the goods on him. I phoned the city police department and asked for dope on some crime pulled about fifteen years ago in which four men had taken part and only one was captured. They told me about a train holdup which seemed to fit. I was pretty sure of things then, particularly after I figured out that it was Allen who'd "sicked" Hefty and Lefty onto me. I went to him and told him that Morton Hadley had mailed a letter to my office in the city, naming him. Told him the office had just phoned me the dope. Bluff. When I'm away from my office the door is locked. Since the depression I haven't even been able to afford an office girl."