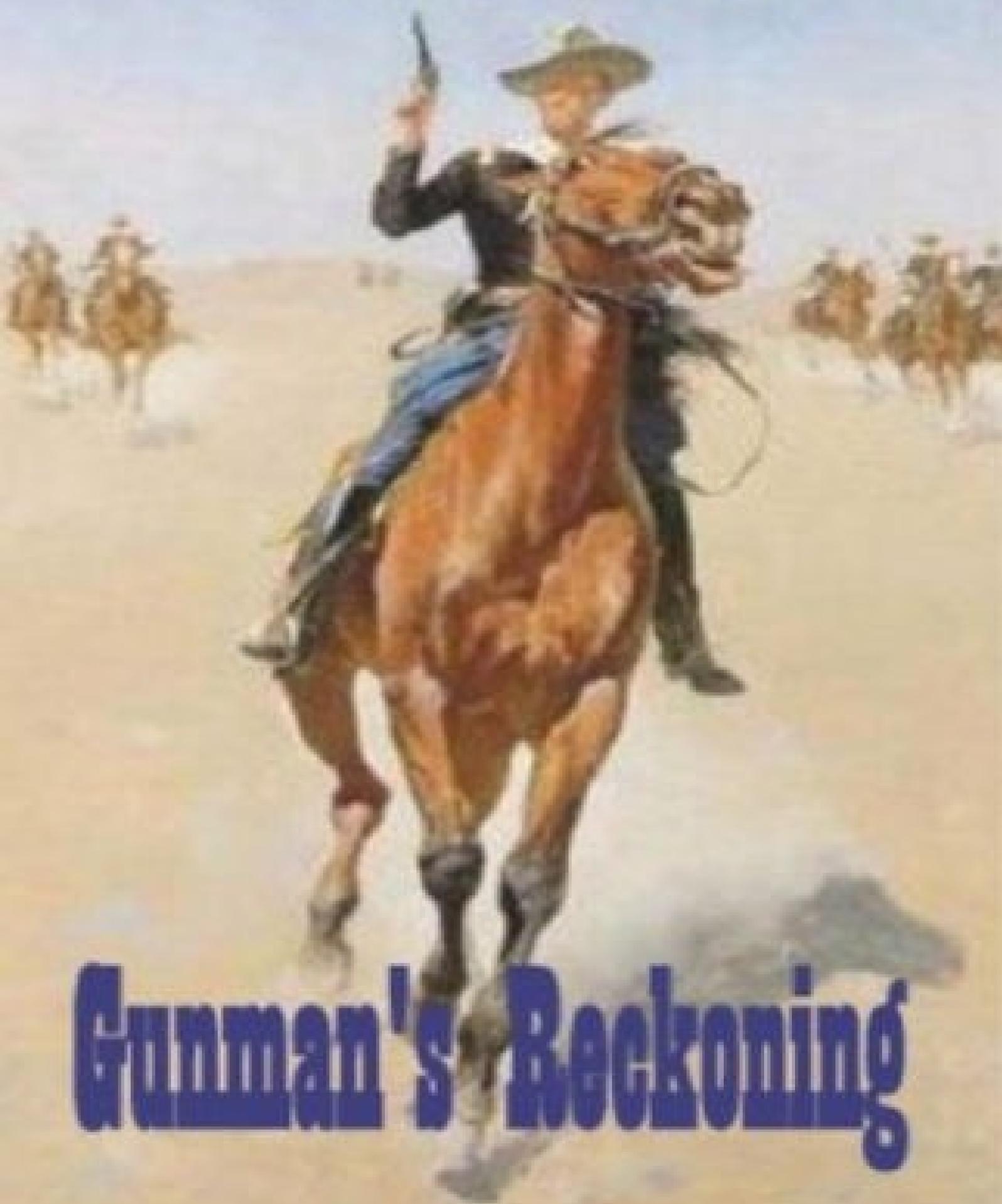


Max Brand's



Gunman's Reckoning

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Title: Gunman's Reckoning

Author: Max Brand

Release Date: November 22, 2003 [EBook #10066]

Language: English

*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK GUNMAN'S RECKONING ***

Produced by Suzanne Shell, Dave Morgan and PG Distributed Proofreaders



GUNMAN'S RECKONING

By

Max Brand

1921



GUNMAN'S RECKONING

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40
41	42	43	44						



1

The fifty empty freights danced and rolled and rattled on the rough road bed and filled Jericho Pass with thunder; the big engine was laboring and grunting at the grade, but five cars back the noise of the locomotive was lost. Yet there is a way to talk above the noise of a freight train just as there is a way to whistle into the teeth of a stiff wind. This freight-car talk is pitched just above the ordinary tone—it is an overtone of conversation, one might say—and it is distinctly nasal. The brakie could talk above the racket, and so, of course, could Lefty Joe. They sat about in the center of the train, on the forward end of one of the cars. No matter how the train lurched and staggered over that fearful road bed, these two swayed in their places as easily and as safely as birds on swinging perches. The brakie had touched Lefty Joe for two dollars; he had secured fifty cents; and since the vigor of Lefty's oaths had convinced him that this was all the money the tramp had, the two now sat elbow to elbow and killed the distance with their talk.

"It's like old times to have you here," said the brakie. "You used to play this line when you jumped from coast to coast."

"Sure," said Lefty Joe, and he scowled at the mountains on either side of the pass. The train was gathering speed, and the peaks lurched eastward in a confused, ragged procession. "And a durned hard ride it's been many a time."

"Kind of queer to see you," continued the brakie. "Heard you was rising in the world."

He caught the face of the other with a rapid side glance, but Lefty Joe was sufficiently concealed by the dark.

"Heard you were the main guy with a whole crowd behind you," went on the brakie.

"Yeh?"

"Sure. Heard you was riding the cushions, and all that."

"Yeh?"

"But I guess it was all bunk; here you are back again, anyway."

"Yep," agreed Lefty.

The brakie scratched his head, for the silence of the tramp convinced him that there had been, after all, a good deal of truth in the rumor. He ran back on another tack and slipped about Lefty.

"I never laid much on what they said," he averred. "I know you, Lefty; you can do a lot, but when it comes to leading a whole gang, like they said you was, and all that—well, I knew it was a lie. Used to tell 'em that."

"You talked foolish, then," burst out Lefty suddenly. "It was all straight."

The brakie could hear the click of his companion's teeth at the period to this statement, as though he regretted his outburst.

"Well, I'll be hanged," murmured the brakie innocently.

Ordinarily, Lefty was not easily lured, but this night he apparently was in the mood for talk.

"Kennebec Lou, the Clipper, and Suds. Them and a lot more. They was all with me; they was all under me; I was the Main Guy!"

What a ring in his voice as he said it! The beaten general speaks thus of his past triumphs. The old man remembered his youth in such a voice. The brakie was impressed; he repeated the three names.

"Even Suds?" he said. "Was even Suds with you?"

"Even Suds!"

The brakie stirred a little, wobbling from side to side as he found a more comfortable position; instead of looking straight before him, he kept a side-glance steadily upon his companion, and one could see that he intended to remember what was said on this night.

"Even Suds," echoed the brakie. "Good heavens, and ain't he a man for you?"

"He was a man," replied Lefty Joe with an indescribable emphasis.

"Huh?"

"He ain't a man any more."

"Get bumped off?"

"No. Busted."

The brakie considered this bit of news and rolled it back and forth and tried its flavor against his gossiping palate.

"Did you fix him after he left you?"

"No."

"I see. You busted him while he was still with you. Then Kennebec Lou and the Clipper get sore at the way you treat Suds. So here you are back on the road with your gang all gone bust. Hard luck, Lefty."

But Lefty whined with rage at this careless diagnosis of his downfall.

"You're all wrong," he said. "You're all wrong. You don't know nothin'."

The brakie waited, grinning securely into the night, and preparing his mind for the story. But the story consisted of one word, flung bitterly into the rushing air.

"Donnegan!"

"Him?" cried the brakie, starting in his place.

"Donnegan!" cried Lefty, and his voice made the word into a curse.

The brakie nodded.

"Them that get tangled with Donnegan don't last long. You ought to know that."

At this the grief, hate, and rage in Lefty Joe were blended and caused an explosion.

"Confound Donnegan. Who's Donnegan? I ask you, who's Donnegan?"

"A guy that makes trouble," replied the brakie, evidently hard put to it to find a definition.

"Oh, don't he make it, though? Confound him!"

"You ought to of stayed shut of him, Lefty."

"Did I hunt him up, I ask you? Am I a nut? No, I ain't. Do I go along stepping on the tail of a rattlesnake? No more do I look up Donnegan."

He groaned as he remembered.

"I was going fine. Nothing could of been better. I had the boys together. We was doing so well that I was riding the cushions and I went around planning the jobs. Nice,

clean work. No cans tied to it. But one day I had to meet Suds down in the Meriton Jungle. You know?"

"I've heard—plenty," said the brakie.

"Oh, it ain't so bad—the Meriton. I've seen a lot worse. Found Suds there, and Suds was playing Black Jack with an ol gink. He was trimmin' him close. Get Suds going good and he could read 'em three down and bury 'em as fast as they came under the bottom card. Takes a hand to do that sort of work. And that's the sort of work Suds was doing for the old man. Pretty soon the game was over and the old man was busted. He took up his pack and beat it, saying nothing and looking sick. I started talking to Suds.

"And while he was talking, along comes a bo and gives us a once-over. He knew me. 'Is this here a friend of yours, Lefty?' he says.

"'Sure,' says I.

"'Then, he's in Dutch. He trimmed that old dad, and the dad is one of Donnegan's pals. Wait till Donnegan hears how your friend made the cards talk while he was skinning the old boy!

"He passes me the wink and goes on. Made me sick. I turned to Suds, and the fool hadn't batted an eye. Never even heard of Donnegan. You know how it is? Half the road never heard of it; part of the roads don't know nothin' else. He's like a jumpin' tornado; hits every ten miles and don't bend a blade of grass in between.

"Took me about five minutes to tell Suds about Donnegan. Then Suds let out a grunt and started down the trail for the old dad. Missed him. Dad had got out of the Jungle and copped a rattler. Suds come back half green and half yellor.

"'I've done it; I've spilled the beans,' he says.

"'That ain't half sayin' it,' says I.

"Well, we lit out after that and beat it down the line as fast as we could. We got the rest of the boys together; I had a swell job planned up. Everything staked. Then, the first news come that Donnegan was after Suds.

"News just dropped on us out of the sky. Suds, you know how he is. Strong bluff. Didn't bat an eye. Laughed at this Donnegan. Got a hold of an old pal of his, named Levine, and he is a mighty hot scrapper. From a knife to a toenail, they was nothing that Levine couldn't use in a fight. Suds sent him out to cross Donnegan's trail.

"He crossed it, well enough. Suds got a telegram a couple days later saying that Levine had run into a wild cat and was considerable chawed and would Suds send him a stake to pay the doctor?

"Well, after that Suds got sort of nervous. Didn't take no interest in his work no more. Kept a weather eye out watching for the coming of Donnegan. And pretty soon he up and cleaned out of camp.

"Next day, sure enough, along comes Donnegan and asks for Suds. We kept still—all but Kennebec Lou. Kennebec is some fighter himself. Two hundred pounds of mule muscle with the brain of a devil to tell what to do—yes, you can lay it ten to one that Kennebec is some fighter. That day he had a good edge from a bottle of rye he was trying for a friend.

"He didn't need to go far to find trouble in Donnegan. A wink and a grin was all they needed for a password, and then they went at each other's throats. Kennebec made the first pass and hit thin air; and before he got back on his heels, Donnegan had hit

him four times. Then Kennebec jumped back and took a fresh start with a knife."

Here Lefty Joe paused and sighed.

He continued, after a long interval: "Five minutes later we was all busy tyin' up what was left of Kennebec; Donnegan was down the road whistlin' like a bird. And that was the end of my gang. What with Kennebec Lou and Suds both gone, what chance did I have to hold the boys together?"



2

The brakie heard this recital with the keenest interest, nodding from time to time.

"What beats me, Lefty," he said at the end of the story, "is why you didn't knife into the fight yourself and take a hand with Donnegan"

At this Lefty was silent. It was rather the silence of one which cannot tell whether or not it is worth while to speak than it was the silence of one who needs time for thought.

"I'll tell you why, bo. It's because when I take a trail like that it only has one end I'm going to bump off the other bird or he's going to bump off me"

The brakie cleared his throat

"Look here," he said, "looks to me like a queer thing that you're on this train"

"Does it" queried Lefty softly "Why?"

"Because Donnegan is two cars back, asleep."

"The devil you say!"

The brakie broke into laughter

"Don't kid yourself along," he warned. "Don't do it. It ain't wise—with me."

"What you mean?"

"Come on, Lefty. Come clean. You better do a fade off this train."

"Why, you fool—"

"It don't work, Joe. Why, the minute I seen you I knew why you was here. I knew you meant to croak Donnegan."

"Me croak him? Why should I croak him?"

"Because you been trailing him two thousand miles. Because you ain't got the nerve to meet him face to face and you got to sneak in and take a crack at him while he's lying asleep. That's you, Lefty Joe!"

He saw Lefty sway toward him; but, all stories aside, it is a very bold tramp that cares for argument of a serious nature with a brakie. And even Lefty Joe was deterred from violent action. In the darkness his upper lip twitched, but he carefully smoothed his voice.

"You don't know nothing, pal," he declared.

"Don't I?"

"Nothing," repeated Lefty.

He reached into his clothes and produced something which rustled in the rush of wind. He fumbled, and finally passed a scrap of the paper into the hand of the brakie.

"My heavens," drawled the latter. "D'you think you can fix me with a buck for a job like this? You can't bribe me to stand around while you bump off Donnegan. Can't be done, Lefty!"

"One buck, did you say?"

Lefty Joe expertly lighted a match in spite of the roaring wind, and by this wild light the brakie read the denomination of the bill with a gasp. He rolled up his face and

was in time to catch the sneer on the face of Lefty before a gust snatched away the light of the match.

They had topped the highest point in Jericho Pass and now the long train dropped into the down grade with terrific speed. The wind became a hurricane. But to the brakie all this was no more than a calm night. His thoughts were raging in him, and if he looked back far enough he remembered the dollar which Donnegan had given him; and how he had promised Donnegan to give the warning before anything went wrong. He thought of this, but rustling against the palm of his right hand was the bill whose denomination he had read, and that figure ate into his memory, ate into his brain.

After all what was Donnegan to him? What was Donnegan but a worthless tramp? Without any answer to that last monosyllabic query, the brakie hunched forward, and began to work his way up the train.

The tramp watched him go with laughter. It was silent laughter. In the most quiet room it would not have sounded louder than a continual, light hissing noise. Then he, in turn, moved from his place, and worked his way along the train in the opposite direction to that in which the brakie had disappeared.

He went expertly, swinging from car to car with apelike clumsiness—and surety. Two cars back. It was not so easy to reach the sliding side door of that empty car. Considering the fact that it was night, that the train was bucking furiously over the old roadbed, Lefty had a not altogether simple task before him. But he managed it with the same apelike adroitness. He could climb with his feet as well as his hands. He would trust a ledge as well as he would trust the rung of a ladder.

Under his discreet manipulations from above the door loosened and it became possible to work it back. But even this the tramp did with considerable care. He took advantage of the lurching of the train, and every time the car jerked he forced the door to roll a little, so that it might seem for all the world as though the motion of the train alone were operating it.

For suppose that Donnegan wakened out of his sound sleep and observed the motion of the door; he would be suspicious if the door opened in a single continued motion; but if it worked in these degrees he would be hypersuspicious if he dreamed of danger. So the tramp gave five whole minutes to that work.

When it was done he waited for a time, another five minutes, perhaps, to see if the door would be moved back. And when it was not disturbed, but allowed to stand open, he knew that Donnegan still slept.

It was time then for action, and Lefty Joe prepared for the descent into the home of the enemy. Let it not be thought that he approached this moment with a fallen heart, and with a cringing, snaky feeling as a man might be expected to feel when he approached to murder a sleeping foeman. For that was not Lefty's emotion at all. Rather he was overcome by a tremendous happiness. He could have sung with joy at the thought that he was about to rid himself of this pest.

True, the gang was broken up. But it might rise again. Donnegan had fallen upon it like a blight. But with Donnegan out of the way would not Suds come back to him instantly? And would not Kennebec Lou himself return in admiration of a man who had done what he, Kennebec, could not do? With those two as a nucleus, how greatly might he not build!

Justice must be done to Lefty Joe. He approached this murder as a statesman

approaches the removal of a foe from the path of public prosperity. There was no more rancor in his attitude. It was rather the blissful largeness of the heart that comes to the politician when he unearths the scandal which will blight the race of his rival.

With the peaceful smile of a child, therefore, Lefty Joe lay stretched at full length along the top of the car and made his choice of weapons. On the whole, his usual preference, day or night, was for a revolver. Give him a gat and Lefty was at home in any company. But he had reasons for transferring his alliance on this occasion. In the first place, a box car which is reeling and pitching to and fro, from side to side, is not a very good shooting platform—even for a snapshot like Lefty Joe. Also, the pitch darkness in the car would be a further annoyance to good aim. And in the third and most decisive place, if he were to miss his first shot he would not be extremely apt to place his second bullet. For Donnegan had a reputation with his own revolver. Indeed, it was said that he rarely carried the weapon, because when he did he was always tempted too strongly to use it. So that the chances were large that Donnegan would not have the gun now. Yet if he did have it—if he, Lefty, did miss his first shot—then the story would be brief and bitter indeed.

On the other hand, a knife offered advantages almost too numerous to be listed. It gave one the deadly assurance which only comes with the knowledge of an edge of steel in one's hand. And when the knife reaches its mark it ends a battle at a stroke.

Of course these doubts and considerations pro and con went through the mind of the tramp in about the same space of time that it requires for a dog to waken, snap at a fly, and drowse again. Eventually, he took out his knife. It was a sheath knife which he wore from a noose of silk around his throat, and it always lay closest to his heart. The blade of the knife was of the finest Spanish steel, in the days when Spanish smiths knew how to draw out steel to a streak of light; the handle of the knife was from Milan. On the whole, it was a delicate and beautiful weapon—and it had the durable suppleness of—say—hatred itself.

Lefty Joe, like a pirate in a tale, took this weapon between his teeth; allowed his squat, heavy bulk to swing down and dangle at arm's length for an instant, and then he swung himself a little and landed softly on the floor of the car.

Who has not heard snow drop from the branch upon other snow beneath? That was the way Lefty Joe dropped to the floor of the car. He remained as he had fallen; crouched, alert, with one hand spread out on the boards to balance him and give him a leverage and a start in case he should wish to spring in any direction.

Then he began to probe the darkness in every direction; with every glance he allowed his head to dart out a little. The movement was like a chicken pecking at imaginary grains of corn. But eventually he satisfied himself that his quarry lay in the forward end of the car; that he was prone; that he, Lefty, had accomplished nine-tenths of his purpose by entering the place of his enemy unobserved.



3

But even though this major step was accomplished successfully, Lefty Joe was not the man to abandon caution in the midst of an enterprise. The roar of the train would have covered sounds ten times as loud as those of his snaky approach, yet he glided forward with as much care as though he were stepping on old stairs in a silent house. He could see a vague shadow—Donnegan; but chiefly he worked by that peculiar sense of direction which some people possess in a dim light. The blind, of course, have that sense in a high degree of sensitiveness, but even those who are not blind may learn to trust the peculiar and inverted sense of direction.

With this to aid him, Lefty Joe went steadily, slowly across the first and most dangerous stage of his journey. That is, he got away from the square of the open door, where the faint starlight might vaguely serve to silhouette his body. After this, it was easier work.

Of course, when he alighted on the floor of the car, the knife had been transferred from his teeth to his left hand; and all during his progress forward the knife was being balanced delicately, as though he were not yet quite sure of the weight of the weapon. Just as a prize fighter keeps his deadly, poised hands in play, moving them as though he fears to lose his intimate touch with them.

This stalking had occupied a matter of split seconds. Now Lefty Joe rose slowly. He was leaning very far forward, and he warded against the roll of the car by spreading out his right hand close to the floor; his left hand he poised with the knife, and he began to gather his muscles for the leap. He had already taken the last preliminary movement—he had swung himself to the right side a little and, lightening his left foot, had thrown all his weight upon the right—in fact, his body was literally suspended in the instant of springing, catlike, when the shadow which was Donnegan came to life.

The shadow convulsed as shadows are apt to swirl in a green pool when a stone is dropped into it; and a bit of board two feet long and some eight inches wide cracked against the shins of Lefty Joe.

It was about the least dramatic weapon that could have been chosen under those circumstances, but certainly no other defense could have frustrated Lefty's spring so completely. Instead of launching out in a compact mass whose point of contact was the reaching knife, Lefty crawled stupidly forward upon his knees, and had to throw out his knife hand to save his balance.

It is a singular thing to note how important balance is to men. Animals fight, as a rule, just as well on their backs as they do on their feet. They can lie on their sides and bite; they can swing their claws even while they are dropping through the air. But man needs poise and balance before he can act. What is speed in a fighter? It is not so much an affair of the muscles as it is the power of the brain to adapt itself instantly to each new move and put the body in a state of balance. In the prize ring speed does not mean

the ability to strike one lightning blow, but rather that, having finished one drive, the fighter is in position to hit again, and then again, so that no matter where the impetus of his last lunge has placed him he is ready and poised to shoot all his weight behind his fist again and drive it accurately at a vulnerable spot. Individually the actions may be slow; but the series of efforts seem rapid. That is why a superior boxer seems to hypnotize his antagonist with movements which to the spectator seem perfectly easy, slow, and sure.

But if Lefty lacked much in agility, he had an animallike sense of balance. Sprawling, helpless, he saw the convulsed shadow that was Donnegan take form as a straight shooting body that plunged through the air above him. Lefty Joe dug his left elbow into the floor of the car and whirled back upon his shoulders, bunching his knees high over his stomach. Nine chances out of ten, if Donnegan had fallen flatwise upon this alert enemy, he would have received those knees in the pit of his own stomach and instantly been paralyzed. But in the jumping, rattling car even Donnegan was capable of making mistakes. His mistake in this instance saved his life, for springing too far, he came down not in reaching distance of Lefty's throat, but with his chest on the knees of the older tramp.

As a result, Donnegan was promptly kicked head over heels and tumbled the length of the car. Lefty was on his feet and plunging after the tumbling form in the twinkling of an eye, literally speaking, and he was only kept from burying his knife in the flesh of his foe by a sway of the car that staggered him in the act of striking. Donnegan, the next instant, was beyond reach. He had struck the end of the car and rebounded like a ball of rubber at a tangent. He slid into the shadows, and Lefty, putting his own shoulders to the wall, felt for his revolver and knew that he was lost. He had failed in his first surprise attack, and without surprise to help him now he was gone. He weighed his revolver, decided that it would be madness to use it, for if he missed, Donnegan would instantly be guided by the flash to shoot him full of holes.

Something slipped by the open door—something that glimmered faintly; and Lefty Joe knew that it was the red head of Donnegan. Donnegan, soft-footed as a shadow among shadows. Donnegan on a blood trail. It lowered the heartbeat of Lefty Joe to a tremendous, slow pulse. In that moment he gave up hope and, resigning himself to die, determined to fight to the last gasp, as became one of his reputation and national celebrity on "the road."

Yet Lefty Joe was no common man and no common fighter. No, let the shade of Rusty Dick, whom Lefty met and beat in his glorious prime—let this shade arise and speak for the prowess of Lefty Joe. In fact it was because he was such a good fighter himself that he recognized his helplessness in the hands of Donnegan.

The faint glimmer of color had passed the door. It was dissolved in deeper shadows at once, and soundlessly; Lefty knew that Donnegan was closer and closer.

Of one thing he felt more and more confident, that Donnegan did not have his revolver with him. Otherwise, he would have used it before. For what was darkness to this devil, Donnegan. He walked like a cat, and most likely he could see like a cat in the dark. Instinctively the older tramp braced himself with his right hand held at a guard before his breast and the knife poised in his left, just as a man would prepare to meet the attack of a panther. He even took to probing the darkness in a strange hope to catch the glimmer of the eyes of Donnegan as he moved to the attack. If there were a

hair's breadth of light, then Donnegan himself must go down. A single blow would do it.

But the devil had instructed his favorite Donnegan how to fight. He did not come lunging through the shadows to meet the point of that knife. Instead, he had worked a snaky way along the floor and now he leaped in and up at Lefty, taking him under the arms.

A dozen hands, it seemed, laid hold on Lefty. He fought like a demon and tore himself away, but the multitude of hands pursued him. They were small hands. Where they closed they tore the clothes and bit into his very flesh. Once a hand had him by the throat, and when Lefty jerked himself away it was with a feeling that his flesh had been seared by five points of red-hot iron. All this time his knife was darting; once it ripped through cloth, but never once did it find the target. And half a second later Donnegan got his hold. The flash of the knife as Lefty raised it must have guided the other. He shot his right hand up behind the left shoulder of the other and imprisoned the wrist. Not only did it make the knife hand helpless, but by bearing down with his own weight Donnegan could put his enemy in most exquisite torture.

For an instant they whirled; then they went down, and Lefty was on top. Only for a moment. The impetus which had sent him to the floor was used by Donnegan to turn them over, and once fairly on top his left hand was instantly at the throat of Lefty.

Twice Lefty made enormous efforts, but then he was done. About his body the limbs of Donnegan were twisted, tightening with incredible force; just as hot iron bands sink resistlessly into place. The strangle-hold cut away life at its source. Once he strove to bury his teeth in the arm of Donnegan. Once, as the horror caught at him, he strove to shriek for help. All he succeeded in doing was in raising an awful, sobbing whisper. Then, looking death in the face, Lefty plunged into the great darkness.



4

When he wakened, he jumped at a stride into the full possession of his faculties. He had been placed near the open door, and the rush of night air had done its work in reviving him. But Lefty, drawn back to life, felt only a vague wonder that his life had not been taken. Perhaps he was being reserved by the victor for an Indian death of torment. He felt cautiously and found that not only were his hands free, but his revolver had not been taken from him. A familiar weight was on his chest—the very knife had been returned to its sheath.

Had Donnegan returned these things to show how perfectly he despised his enemy?

"He's gone!" groaned the tramp, sitting up quickly.

"He's here," said a voice that cut easily through the roar of the train. "Waiting for you, Lefty."

The tramp was staggered again. But then, who had ever been able to fathom the ways of Donnegan?

"Donnegan!" he cried with a sudden recklessness.

"Yes?"

"You're a fool!"

"Yes?"

"For not finishing the job."

Donnegan began to laugh. In the uproar of the train it was impossible really to hear the sound, but Lefty caught the pulse of it. He fingered his bruised throat; swallowing was a painful effort. And an indescribable feeling came over him as he realized that he sat armed to the teeth within a yard of the man he wanted to kill, and yet he was as effectively rendered helpless as though iron shackles had been locked on his wrists and legs. The night light came through the doorway, and he could make out the slender outline of Donnegan and again he caught the faint luster of that red hair; and out of the shadowy form a singular power emanated and sapped his strength at the root.

Yet he went on viciously: "Sooner or later, Donnegan, I'll get you!"

The red head of Donnegan moved, and Lefty Joe knew that the younger man was laughing again.

"Why are you after me?" he asked at length.

It was another blow in the face of Lefty. He sat for a time blinking with owlish stupidity.

"Why?" he echoed. And he spoke his astonishment from the heart.

"Why am I after you?" he said again. "Why, confound you, ain't you Donnegan?"

"Yes."

"Don't the whole road know that I'm after you and you after me?"

"The whole road is crazy. I'm not after you."

Lefty choked.

"Maybe I been dreaming. Maybe you didn't bust up the gang? Maybe you didn't clean up on Suds and Kennebec?"

"Suds? Kennebec? I sort of remember meeting them."

"You sort of—the devil!" Lefty Joe sputtered the words. "And after you cleaned up my crowd, ain't it natural and good sense for you to go on and try to clean up on me?"

"Sounds like it."

"But I figured to beat you to it. I cut in on your trail, Donnegan, and before I leave it you'll know a lot more about me."

"You're warning me ahead of time?"

"You've played this game square with me; I'll play square with you. Next time there'll be no slips, Donnegan. I dunno why you should of picked on me, though. Just the natural devil in you."

"I haven't picked on you," said Donnegan.

"What?"

"I'll give you my word."

A tingle ran through the blood of Lefty Joe. Somewhere he had heard, in rumor, that the word of Donnegan was as good as gold. He recalled that rumor now and something of dignity in the manner with which Donnegan made his announcement carried a heavy weight. As a rule, the tramps vowed with many oaths; here was one of the nights of the road who made his bare word sufficient. And Lefty Joe heard with great wonder.

"All I ask," he said, "is why you hounded my gang, if you wasn't after me?"

"I didn't hound them. I ran into Suds by accident. We had trouble. Then Levine. Then Kennebec Lou tried to take a fall out of me."

A note of whimsical protest crept into the voice of Donnegan.

"Somehow there's always a fight wherever I go," he said. "Fights just sort of grow up around me."

Lefty Joe snarled.

"You didn't mean nothing by just 'happening' to run into three of my boys one after another?"

"Not a thing."

Lefty rocked himself back and forth in an ecstasy of impatience.

"Why don't you stay put?" he complained. "Why don't you stake out your own ground and stay put in it? You cut in on every guy's territory. There ain't any privacy any more since you hit the road. What you got? A roving commission?"

Donnegan waited for a moment before he answered. And when he spoke his voice had altered. Indeed, he had remarkable ability to pitch his voice into the roar of the freight train, and above or beneath it, and give it a quality such as he pleased.

"I'm following a trail, but not yours," he admitted at length. "I'm following a trail. I've been at it these two years and nothing has come of it."

"Who you after?"

"A man with red hair."

"That tells me a lot."

Donnegan refused to explain.

"What you got against him—the color of his hair?"

And Lefty roared contentedly at his own stale jest.

"It's no good," replied Donnegan. "I'll never get on the trail."

Lefty broke in: "You mean to say you've been working two solid years and all on a trail that you ain't even found?"

The silence answered him in the affirmative.

"Ain't nobody been able to tip you off to him?" went on Lefty, intensely interested.

"Nobody. You see, he's a hard sort to describe. Red hair, that's all there was about him for a clue. But if any one ever saw him stripped they'd remember him by a big blotchy birthmark on his left shoulder."

"Eh?" grunted Lefty Joe.

He added: "What was his name?"

"Don't know. He changed monikers when he took to the road."

"What was he to you?"

"A man I'm going to find."

"No matter where the trail takes you?"

"No matter where."

At this Lefty was seized with unaccountable laughter. He literally strained his lungs with that Homeric outburst. When he wiped the tears from his eyes, at length, the shadow on the opposite side of the doorway had disappeared. He found his companion leaning over him, and this time he could catch the dull glint of starlight on both hair and eyes.

"What d'you know?" asked Donnegan.

"How do you stand toward this bird with the birthmark and the red hair?" queried Lefty with caution.

"What d'you know?" insisted Donnegan.

All at once passion shook him; he fastened his grip in the shoulder of the larger man, and his fingertips worked toward the bone.

"What do you know?" he repeated for the third time, and now there was no hint of laughter in the hard voice of Lefty.

"You fool, if you follow that trail you'll go to the devil. It was Rusty Dick; and he's dead!"

His triumphant laughter came again, but Donnegan cut into it.

"Rusty Dick was the one you—killed!"

"Sure. What of it? We fought fair and square."

"Then Rusty wasn't the man I want. The man I want would of eaten two like you, Lefty."

"What about the birthmark? It sure was on his shoulder; Donnegan."

"Heavens!" whispered Donnegan.

"What's the matter?"

"Rusty Dick," gasped Donnegan. "Yes, it must have been he."

"Sure it was. What did you have against him?"

"It was a matter of blood—between us," stammered Donnegan.

His voice rose in a peculiar manner, so that Lefty shrank involuntarily.

"You killed Rusty?"

"Ask any of the boys. But between you and me, it was the booze that licked Rusty Dick. I just finished up the job and surprised everybody."

The train was out of the mountains and in a country of scattering hills, but here it

struck a steep grade and settled down to a grind of slow labor; the rails hummed, and suspense filled the freight car.

"Hey," cried Lefty suddenly. "You fool, you'll do a flop out the door in about a minute!"

He even reached out to steady the toppling figure, but Donnegan pitched straight out into the night. Lefty craned his neck from the door, studying the roadbed, but at that moment the locomotive topped the little rise and the whole train lurched forward.

"After all," murmured Lefty Joe, "it sounds like Donnegan. Hated a guy so bad that he hadn't any use for livin' when he heard the other guy was dead. But I'm never goin' to cross his path again, I hope."



5

But Donnegan had leaped clear of the roadbed, and he struck almost to the knees in a drift of sand. Otherwise, he might well have broken his legs with that foolhardy chance. As it was, the fall whirled him over and over, and by the time he had picked himself up the lighted caboose of the train was rocking past him. Donnegan watched it grow small in the distance, and then, when it was only a red, uncertain star far down the track, he turned to the vast country around him.

The mountains were to his right, not far away, but caught up behind the shadows so that it seemed a great distance. Like all huge, half-seen things they seemed in motion toward him. For the rest, he was in bare, rolling country. The sky line everywhere was clean; there was hardly a sign of a tree. He knew, by a little reflection, that this must be cattle country, for the brakie had intimated as much in their talk just before dusk. Now it was early night, and a wind began to rise, blowing down the valley with a keen motion and a rapidly lessening temperature, so that Donnegan saw he must get to a shelter. He could, if necessary, endure any privation, but his tastes were for luxurious comfort. Accordingly he considered the landscape with gloomy disapproval. He was almost inclined to regret his plunge from the lumbering freight train. Two things had governed him in making that move. First, when he discovered that the long trail he followed was definitely fruitless, he was filled with a great desire to cut himself away from his past and make a new start. Secondly, when he learned that Rusty Dick had been killed by Joe, he wanted desperately to get the throttle of the latter under his thumb. If ever a man risked his life to avoid a sin, it was Donnegan jumping from the train to keep from murder.

He stooped to sight along the ground, for this is the best way at night and often horizon lights are revealed in this manner. But now Donnegan saw nothing to serve as a guide. He therefore drew in his belt until it fitted snug about his gaunt waist, settled his cap firmly, and headed straight into the wind.

Nothing could have shown his character more distinctly.

When in doubt, head into the wind.

With a jaunty, swinging step he sauntered along, and this time, at least, his tactics found an early reward. Topping the first large rise of ground, he saw in the hollow beneath him the outline of a large building. And as he approached it, the wind clearing a high blowing mist from the stars, he saw a jumble of outlying houses. Sheds, barns, corrals—it was the nucleus of a big ranch. It is a maxim that, if you wish to know a man look at his library and if you wish to know a rancher, look at his barn. Donnegan made a small detour to the left and headed for the largest of the barns.

He entered it by the big, sliding door, which stood open; he looked up, and saw the stars shining through a gap in the roof. And then he stood quietly for a time, listening to the voices of the wind in the ruin. Oddly enough, it was pleasant to Donnegan. His own troubles and sorrow had poured upon him so thickly in the past hour or so that it