

Dying for smokes, that desperate gang would go to any extreme to get them, including . . .

Coffin Nail Piracy

By Neil Moran



“TRY THIS store,” said Butch. He stopped the car and Dugan got out. He went into the store, looked at the sign, but that didn’t stop him.

“Any cigarettes?” he asked.

“No cigarettes,” said the man behind the store counter, shaking his head.

Dugan went out and reported to Butch. “They keep them for their friends,” Butch growled. “For people they know.”

“Not always,” said Dugan. “Sometimes they haven’t got them.”

Butch roared, “Here, I’ve been going two hours without a smoke! We’ve been going through one town after another. What do these guys tell us? No cigarettes. All right. I’m going to stage a holdup!”

Dugan looked at him, so did the three men in the back. Of course, they got it. Butch’s idea was to walk into a store and demand cigarettes at the point of a gun.

“Don’t do it, Butch,” said Frenchy. “It’s screwy. It ain’t worth it.”

“Don’t do what?”

“Walk into one of these hick stores and ask the guy to come across with a pack of cigarettes with a gun pointing at him.”

“Who said anything about a hick store?” said Butch. “And who said anything about a pack? You guys don’t get it. I ain’t runnin’ no chances of sticking up a hick store. And I ain’t after only one pack. Look, you bums.” He turned and scowled at them. “A half mile from here

we’re out on the open road. A bus comes along. The bus is filled with passengers.”

“You mean to hold up a bus!” said Dugan.

“That’s exactly what I mean,” said Butch. “Plenty of people and we’ll go by the law of averages. Some will have cigarettes and some won’t. But those that have we take.” The men in the back leaned back and stared at him. Dugan kept his mouth open. He knew that Butch had all kinds of ideas but this was a little different. This was so different that he let out a laugh suddenly. Butch kicked him.

“Don’t laugh,” he said. “Ain’t it practical? Ain’t it all in the kind of work we do?”

“But holding up a bus,” said Dugan, “to get— Suppose we’re caught?”

“How can we be caught? A lonely road. I know this place. A bus comes along. The driver slows down when he sees us. Thinks we’re passengers. We board the bus. ‘Stick ‘em up,’ we say. ‘All we want are cigarettes.’ Ain’t it a break for the passengers?”

By now, Dugan was holding his sides to keep from laughing. Of course, he could see what Butch meant. But he still didn’t like it. Something told him that no good would come of it, and here they had started on their way to Fairview to crack a safe. An inside job with another man to help them.

“Can’t you do without a smoke?” Dugan said. “Until we get there? Maybe this guy will have some—”

“All right. Say, that Rogan has a pack. A half pack. How long will that last? With six men dipping their fingers. And on the way back, what do we do? Go in and look at those signs? And have those guys tell us—”

By now, the other men were working up a little enthusiasm. After all, they liked a smoke, too. It was something novel so far as they knew, and should be easy to accomplish. They passed through the town and soon were on the open road. Dugan began to feel better about the idea.

“Sure,” Butch said, “what could we get for holding up a bus and robbing the passengers of cigarettes? Have you thought of that, Dugan?”

“We’d get plenty with our records.”

“Not if guys who sat on the jury tried to get cigarettes and couldn’t,” said Butch. He let out a guffaw, and even Dugan laughed with the others.

The car sped along, rolling smoothly over the road. Butch looked at the sky and nodded. “I was just thinkin’,” he said. “We’d better bandage our eyes with our handkerchiefs. We’ll park the car on the side of the road, of course. Then after we clean up, we’ll get it. It’ll take us another hour to get to Fairview, but we don’t want any hick cops stopping the car and looking for guys fitting our descriptions.”

“Some of the passengers might drop dead,” said Dugan.

“From fright?” said Butch.

“No, when we only take cigarettes.”

“Say, as long as it’s a holdup,” said one of the men, “why not make a clean sweep of it?”

“No, only cigarettes,” said Butch. “A quick getaway and leave the passengers laughing. You know, I like this idea more and more,” he went on, as he leaned back and steadied his hand on the wheel. “It’ll be something to tell the other boys about. I’ll go down in history. A gang leader who

staged a cigarette holdup and wouldn’t even take a dime from a passenger.”

DISTANT lights of a bus showed, put an end to talk. Butch, alert, realizing that the moment had come, slowed down the car and gave the order, “All out. Get over on that corner. There’s a bus stop there. He’ll see you. Quick, now!”

Out they sprang. Butch drove the car to the side of the road. He jumped out and rejoined the men, just as the bus came lumbering along within a short distance. The driver saw them and stopped.

The men had put on their handkerchiefs. The driver stared at them. He saw guns flashing, and was about to start the bus, but Dugan and one of the other men were already on with Butch and the others following.

“Holdup?” gasped the driver.

“Yeah, how are you fixed for cigarettes?” Butch asked.

“Oh, I—I got cigarettes,” said the driver, his teeth chattering. “But—”

“Hand them over.”

“You want only my cigarettes?”

“That’s all. Nickels and dimes don’t interest me.”

The passengers, some gasping, others frantic—two women began tittering hysterically—were told by Dugan and two of the other men, not to worry, that they could keep their shirts, their jewelry, and even their money, but they had to come across with their cigarettes.

“Do you mean that’s all you want?” said a man, his pupils dilating.

“That’s what I mean,” said Butch, striding through the bus. “Now everybody be calm. This must be unusual to you, but all we want are your cigarettes.”

Some of the passengers started laughing, for despite the seriousness of the situation, they saw an amusing side. All of them were relieved to know that all that

Butch and his men wanted, were cigarettes. They kept staring at Butch, as if they couldn't make him out.

"The guy is screwy," whispered the driver to a passenger near him. "Nuts."

"I don't know," said the passenger. "Not that I approve of what he's doing. But when you get desperate for a smoke—"

Cigarettes, a couple unopened packs, a few half-filled packs were dropping into hats. Dugan and the other men were going through the bus. Butch kept his eye on the driver, twirling his gun in his fingers.

For a moment, he wanted to laugh himself. It was an extraordinary adventure. It was what only he, Butch, would think of and execute. A cigarette holdup and getting results.

A little man in the rear of the bus looked up furtively. He was the last person to be reached. Dugan stood looking at him and worked his fingers.

"Come across, Pop," he said. "Got any cigarettes?"

"No cigarettes," said the man.

"Yeah, well, suppose I find out."

"All right," said the man. He put his hand into his pocket, and reluctantly handed over a cheap tin cigarette case.

Dugan opened it and saw that it was filled. He slipped the case into his pocket.

THE holdup had been completed. Butch and his men left as quickly as they had come. Laughing, with laughter following them, for the incident had created an air of hilarity, they jumped off the bus, hurried to the car and sprang into it.

"Well, wasn't it easy?" said Butch.

"Too easy," said Dugan. "I still say—"

"All right. You say the robbery will be reported. It'll take that driver some time to get to a phone. It'll take the road birds time to pick up the call. And we're breezing along. Like this." Butch gave the car the gas and it lunged forward. "So

we're stopped. What do we say? We don't know nothin'."

"But all these cigarettes!" said Dugan.

"All right. Can't we have cigarettes? How many packs have we got, anyway?"

"About fifteen," said Dugan.

"Most of them not full packs. Now, you guys be smart and start filling up the spaces. Throwaway the empty wrappers. Then see how many full packs you have. About seven."

The men began filling up the partly filled packs with cigarettes from other wrappers. Dugan, still dubious, took out the tin cigarette case. "That old guy," he said, "thought he was foxy. I wonder what kind of butts these are. They look imported. Well, it doesn't matter. Have a coffin nail?" He turned to Butch.

"O. K.," Butch said, "this one I got don't taste so good. I never did like those Zebras. What brand you got there?"

Dugan tried to read the brand but the car lurched. Some of the cigarettes spilled on the floor.

"Here, only a few spilled," said Dugan.

"Let them lie. Have one, Frenchy?" He turned. "How do you like it?" Dugan asked, as Frenchy began puffing.

"Swell! Let Butch try one."

"So it's good," said Butch. "O. K., shove it into my mouth." Dugan did and gave Butch a light. He gave the other men some of "Pop's" cigarettes.

"When I think of that old guy—" said Dugan.

Butch had taken a few puffs, smiled, and the car began to swerve.

"Hey, steady it," said Frenchy.

"The trouble with you guys," said Butch, talking out of the side of his mouth, "is that you don't wear diamond shirts. I'm fed up with bums that only go in for high hats."

"Who ain't got a diamond shirt?" said Frenchy. "Hey, listen, Dugan—"

“You listen to me,” said Dugan. “You think this guy is Butch. He’s the District Attorney.”

“Hey, what the hell is this?” said one of the other men. “Is this car on fire?”

“Who said anything about a fire?” said Butch. “I’m cold. We’re passing over a mountain.”

Butch suddenly stopped the car and sprang out. He began reeling. He did a little shadow boxing, and fell right on his face.

At the count of nine, which he counted himself, he got up. He swung at Frenchy. Dugan didn’t like a pal being treated this way, and he swung at Butch. He missed him, spun around like a top and met Frenchy, who was going around the other side of Butch. The other men were reeling deliriously.

Then a police car drew up. A half dozen detectives in it looked at the brawling holdup men in amazement.

“What is it?” said one. “Are those guys drunk? Or are they—”

Butch turned. He walked over to the detective and shoved out his hand. “My pal!” he said.

“Your pal?” said one of the detectives. “What is—”

“Have a cigarette?” said Dugan, walking over. “Boy, oh, boy! One puff and—”

“Marijuana!” shouted one of the detectives. “These must be the guys who—the driver said that a little old guy had got off the bus saying that he’d fix them. These guys are smoking marijuana cigarettes!”

“Would you like to waltz?” said Butch, reeling over. “Who put that piece of tripe in the piano?”

“You’ll waltz,” said the detective. “All of you. I was just thinking, men, that there certainly was a joker in the pack!”