

The Bathroom Reader

**Six unrelated short stories;
Each of which can be read in one sitting.**

By Ruven Daud

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“Outside of a dog, a book is a man’s best friend. Inside a dog, it’s too dark to read.”

— Groucho Marx

Gambler's Lament Nebraska 1858

Robert Franklyn was a dapper twenty-seven-year-old who always wore the latest up to date, expensive men's fashions. He was just shy of six feet tall (three inches above the average adult male height for the time). He was a card player by profession and fancied himself adept with a pistol, and a knife if need be. He was good looking by the standards set in the era. He was a fair player although not at the level of Bat Masterson, Poker Alice, and Luke Short though he said that he was. It was an easy brag since he had never laid eyes on any of them, nor they him.

None of the well-known gamblers had an aversion to traveling hundreds of miles to sit in at a high stakes poker marathon. Masterson, Holiday and the Earp's adventures, and occasional gunfights were noted in newspaper accounts and dime novels of the time. Franklyn was low key but knew this had to change. Their names lived on while Franklyn's was mired in a cloud of comparative anonymity. When mentioned today to western history buffs the most immediate response is, "Robert who?" Followed by, "Never heard of him."

Franklyn was different from the other players; in that they did their best to avoid violence. Bat Masterson would say, "Nothing worse than having a decent poker hand," (by his definition one in which he was about to win) "interrupted by gun play or some fool wielding a knife." Such interruptions did include the offending individual being whacked over the head by the cane Bat carried, however.

Violence was not always avoidable. It was usually followed by a newspaper story which then gave way to a dime novel exploiting the latest and prior dustups involving the person pictured on the front cover. Franklyn was never caught up in any type of altercation at the card table or in the street. He was desperate to have his exploits, real or fictitious, heralded about by the likes of Ned Buntline and other famous writers of the time. He knew that would never happen without gun play and the requisite newspaper story that followed. He was determined to correct this oversight.

On his way to Lawrence County, Dakota Territory, he stopped in a small Nebraska town close to the border. He was pleased to discover that, although the town was small, it had a saloon and gambling hall. He thought this would be the perfect place for the event that would set in motion the legend of Robert Franklyn.

He watched the card players in the saloon for a week before asking for a seat. The town was perfect. Most folks passed through on their way to the Dakota Territory. The town itself had no attraction beckoning them to stay beyond a night or two. It had no store from which to buy general goods and therefore give pause to anyone looking for a place to settle. Except for the one gambling hall and saloon, the town was as electrifying as a Sunday sermon. Most importantly, he had never been there before and he was certain no one would recognize him. The town had one business that fit nicely into his scenario. The Times was a weekly newspaper that was not informative or especially entertaining. It occasionally printed excerpts from dime novels and that made it almost worth the two-cent purchase price. Most of the paper's revenue came from selling ad space to the many businesses across the Dakota border catering to prospectors and trappers.

The ability of the current gamblers at the poker table was of no interest to Franklyn. Observing two hands from each new player that sat down told him he could clean them out by the third. He carefully made mental notes of the weapon or weapons, if any, each was carrying. Were they concealed, open, left or right-hand draw, gun belt or shoulder holstered? He placed each player that he determined had a weapon in several categories: those he thought would probably not draw their weapon, those that would draw but use it as a threat and not fire and those that would draw and fire. All this was conjecture. Who could be certain how anyone would react in a given situation? A man that would draw and fire had the look in his eyes, however. Easier to spot than the others, Franklyn thought. He had seen enough gunfights in saloons and could recognize the look. The eyes were calm and steady almost dead to the situation. He heard stories that Doc Holiday had the look. He was dying of consumption and didn't hesitate that split second it took to draw and shoot, as most men did, and he'd prevail. He had nothing to lose.

Franklyn's weapon of choice, a Colt 1849 .31 caliber pocket piece with custom ivory grips, was always prominently displayed in his shoulder holster. In every gambling establishment with a card game, before sitting down to play a hand, he would carefully remove his frock coat and drape it over the back of his chair. It remained there until he chose to leave. In the towns he frequented it was well known when anger overtook a particular loser, Franklyn would sit back in his chair and tap his fingers on the Colt's ivory gun butt. He would repeat the man's name several times for emphasis then he'd mockingly ask, with a nudge toward agitation, "Are we cross? We're not, are we? I thought we were friends." The player would back off, rise and leave the table. Franklyn's credibility as a gunfighter increased even though no one got shot. No one was ever shot by

Franklyn; he never drew his weapon; hence the lack of dime novels with his picture on the cover. His most fervent wish was that he'd devise an event that could alter his public persona. It was time. This event would then be written about in newspapers and dime novels. Then, he thought, his life would be complete.

The setup he envisioned this time would be different. Franklyn had been playing for over two hours and no one qualified for a gunfight. He was winning and decided to give those at the table a few more hands to try and recoup some of their losses. Two men walked in and asked if anyone objected if they sat in. No one did and after the men were given table stakes, ante and betting limit instructions, play resumed.

The two men had walked in together but, apparently, were not familiar with each other or anyone at the table. One was short with a full beard and ruddy complexion, wearing a beaver skin hat and looked about forty. He smelled like a trapper and the other players wished he had first made a stop at Sid Boland's Bath House and Tonsorial Parlor before joining the game. His only weapon was a large Bowie knife. Its sheath was hooked to his belt and supported by a leather strap slung diagonally over his shoulder for additional support.

The other man was a complete contrast. He was in his early twenties and over six feet tall. Slender but muscularly built. He had shoulder length, wavy dark red hair parted in the middle and a large mustache which favored a downward slope at its ends due to the length. His eyes were deep set, piercing and showed no sign of emotion. He wore a tanned skin, knee length coat open at the collar. His two pistols were holstered and secured at the waist with a large, buckled gun belt.

Franklyn was pleased to see that the weapons were facing backwards (gun grips forward) meaning the man would have to cross draw or turn his hands outward from his hips to draw and fire. This made a quick response very difficult and easy to beat. Franklyn thought, Stranger this will be the best and the worst day of your life. You're about to become the cornerstone from which a legend will grow and sustain itself for the next hundred years.

It was the younger of the two new players that took his turn to deal as per table rules. The older man would deal next. The game was Draw poker and five hands were distributed around the table. The dealer dealt the sixth for himself. After the ante three players drew two cards each and the older of the two new participants took one.

Possibly drawing to an inside straight, always a sucker's play, Franklyn thought as he discarded two.

The dealer kept a pat hand.

Interesting play, Franklyn thought. He was watching the other players closely when he should have given more attention to the young stranger. The only way he could have dealt himself a pat hand on his first deal was to stack the deck as he shuffled, cut and dealt.

Franklyn mentally reprimanded himself for not paying special attention to the dealer. Did he underestimate the stranger's ability? If so, it was an error he would not repeat.

The play was to the older stranger who passed. Franklyn bet and the remaining players folded. The young stranger met Franklyn's bet and doubled it.

He did stack the deck, Franklyn thought. No one has that kind of luck the first hand they deal after sitting down unless there's cheating involved. Franklyn reprimanded himself once more for not paying closer attention to the deal.

Franklyn saw the young man's bet and called, laying out his hand of three sevens, an ace and a three. The redheaded stranger smiled and laid out his hand. He had a jack high, diamond flush which beat Franklyn's three of a kind.

"A well-played hand," Franklyn said. "An even better hand you dealt yourself from the previous hand's discarded cards. You skillfully placed the discards, as you gathered 'em up, shuffled, and then dealt 'em to us and yourself."

None of this was true, of course. Franklyn was making a move that would end in a shootout with the young stranger dead and Franklyn's reputation elevated to that of dime novel hero quality.

The young man's eyes narrowed as he looked directly at (seemingly through) Franklyn and said, "You accusing me of cheating mister?"

Before he could answer, the young man slid his chair back to the wall and the other players hurriedly left the table.

“That’s what I’m saying sonny,” Franklyn replied in a condescending tone. “If you don’t understand what’s happening, try this; leave your money on the table, go home and let us men continue with our game.”

The redhead remained calm, emotionless and silent. Maybe he didn’t understand, Franklyn thought. He was about to clarify by prodding him again when Able Fernandez, bartender and owner, injected himself into the proceedings. Standing behind the bar he reached down and retrieved a 12-gauge, short, double barrel shotgun and placed it on the bar resting his index finger just outside the trigger guard.

“If anyone shoots up my bar it’s gonna be me,” Able said for all to hear as he cocked one barrel of the shotgun. Then directing his anger at the two gamblers about to have it out he said, “If there be blood in my bar it’s gonna be your’n.” He cocked the weapon’s other barrel.

Franklyn stood slowly and held his hands waist high with open palms facing the young man and said, “I’ll be out front waiting. Makes no sense putting a man’s place of business in harm’s way over the likes of you,” he sneered as a parting insult to the redhead as he left the saloon.

When he got to the middle of the street, Franklyn turned right and walked fifty feet or so then stopped. He turned one hundred and eighty degrees in place and waited for the redhead to appear. He positioned himself exactly as he had planned and waited. The sun, though clouded, was at his back and the distance his adversary had to cover to get in range would give him time to make his move.

The tall redhead stood in the entranceway of the saloon and looked up the street to where Franklyn was waiting. Then he looked at the sky. The sun, still partially obscured, would soon bathe the street in bright light as the clouds continued to drift by. He stepped off the wooden walkway and continued toward Franklyn.

Franklyn was ready. He widened his stance slightly and dropped his right foot back six inches to maintain stability. Fifteen to twenty feet more, Franklyn thought. He’ll stop and I’ll drill him where he stands.

August 9, 1876, eighteen years later.

Article from:
“Sergeant Conroy’s Military Gazette”

Of all the exploits in his early days, the gunfight in a small Nebraska border town had to be his most unusual.

As of this writing, all that remains of the would-be hamlet is dust, tumbleweed and a few abandoned buildings. Its name is as obscure as the transients that passed through and settled further north in Dakota.

That day in 1858 there was no shortage of onlookers. They lined the wooden walkways on both sides of the only street in town and watched two armed men face each other. The gambler stood fast. His feet were shoulder width apart and his left foot was just a bit ahead of the right for balance. The younger man was twenty-one-year-old James Butler Hickok. He began walking toward the gambler, the man who had called him out. The crowd expected Hickok to stop when he got within that self-determined range of accuracy, then, draw and shoot. His adversary expected the same. Long before he reached that point, long before anyone assembled had ever seen anyone shoot before reaching it, Hickok drew one of his pistols as he kept moving. He cocked his weapon, aimed, fired and shot the man dead. He continued walking and stopped at the body. He looked down at the hole he had put in the middle of the man’s forehead, then returned to the saloon and finished his game.

The man Hickok shot was a gambler, later identified as Robert Franklyn. The story is in this week’s Military Gazette because one week ago today on August 2nd, thirty-nine-year-old James Butler (Wild Bill) Hickok, soldier and lawman, was shot in the back and killed by the coward Jack McCall.

[End of article]

Robert Franklyn’s fervent plan, that never came to pass, was to gain a reputation and be remembered, not only as a legendary gambler but a gunfighter as well. The bitter irony is that the poker hand Wild Bill Hickok was holding when he was killed so many years later (aces over eights) is remembered to this day and is known as The Dead Man’s Hand. Franklyn’s existence is barely an historical

footnote. He died violently without a legacy or a nickname. Wild Bill's poker hand had both.

There were many stories circulated about Wild Bill Hickok throughout the years of his life. Unraveling truth from fiction has contributed to the mounting uncertainty that exists to this day. The story you have just read does nothing to clarify any of that confusion.

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