

The Tale of Five Points

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Denny Meehan was a smart man, not smart in the sense of academics, but in almost any situation he knew the correct thing to say to turn the tables in his favor.

This innate skill, and the fact that he was more ruthless than anyone else in New York, helped him survive at the bottom of the barrel in Five Points as leader of the fearsome Forty Thieves gang in what was, indisputably, the roughest part of the city.

When Frankie Yale, and his *Mano Nera* mafia, made a move on the Brooklyn docks - after 15 years of Irish control - Meehan called in his second in command - 'Wild' Bill Lovet.

"What happened?"

"Yale's mafia came down to the docks. They had more men than Friday night in Murphy's pub. They just started shooting." Bill said.

"Bill, I can't handle another war."

The two men sat in silence. Eventually, Meehan broke it,

"After my father left us, my mother died. I was just a boy trying to survive, desperate for my next meal. Sometimes, I still feel like that boy. No matter what I do I can't escape this place. There are still signs saying "no Irish allowed." Will I always be that young boy with no control?"

“Denny, you’ve always done your best by the men. You’ve given them everything: more money; more power; more food on their tables; and finally some dignity, and respect.” said Bill.

“We both know our cause is just. But we’ve paid a high price. How many more kids will end up in Sacred Heart orphanage because of us?”

Meehan swigged from the whiskey bottle at the side of his desk. He handed the bottle to Bill.

Before Bill could even take a drink Meehan sat up straight.

“Okay. If they hit Pier Seven they'll be coming for that new shipment of whiskey at Pier Six next. Prepare the men. Double our guards. Send out the debt collectors. Tell Peg Leg to set up an ambush at Pier Six.”

“Sir, Yes Sir.” Bill offered a fake salute.

“No joke. If we’re gonna win this war we need to act more like soldiers and less like a scruffy rag-tag gang with drinking problems. Now, get going!”

Bill walked to the door, feeling dismissed, sometimes Meehan was his best friend, and sometimes just his commander-in-chief.

Denny sat alone. He didn’t like treating his friends like soldiers. But sometimes a job just needs to get done. Now, he had to face reality: they were at war, again. Even after all the things he had done, all the people he had killed, he was still no closer to escaping this hell hole.

He took another swig from the whiskey bottle. He could taste the burn as it rolled down to his stomach.

Even though he had Bill it still felt like there was no one he could really talk to. He just wanted to be done with it all. He felt like a prisoner. Even with fifty men under his command, even with all this power and money he still couldn't escape.

He sighed.

He was a young man but, for a moment, he slumped like a man twenty years older.

Maybe this time will be different. One last war. If he won this one he could finally rest.

Denny stood up. He didn't need to become a better person, but he'd never be that desperate boy again. He headed to the docks with a strong sense of resolve.

When Meehan arrived at Brooklyn's docks there was far less bustle than usual. Word of what had happened at pier seven was out. Even if he was able to put this war with the Black Hand gang at rest quickly it would still hurt his business badly.

Meehan marched to the Dock Master's office. There, he found Peg Leg Lonergan addressing two of their sharpshooter gangsters – Patrick Malone and Jimmy Duggan – about the ambush.

“If we get this right you fellas can kill nine or ten of them before they even know who's shooting.” Peg Leg spoke in a heavy New York accent.

“Oh, Mr. Meehan, sir. I wasn't expecting you.”

“I’m not gonna sit around and let these Italians take our territory.” Meehan snarled “How many men have you brought in from other areas?”

Peg Leg paused before he responded. He could see that Meehan was in a sharp mood and might take any excuse to dole out the punches.

“Well, chances are, they’ll go for Six because of the whiskey. So, I put the neighbourhood guards and debt collectors there. But, they might attack Pier Nine or Pier Three instead to catch us by surprise. So, I didn’t take anyone from Nine or Three. In total we have forty fellas ready to fight, including these two, who can do the work of ten men.” Peg Leg gestured to the two men beside Meehan.

“Right, good thinking...He was just about to issue more orders when he was interrupted by a young boy rushing through the door. He was panting hard but seemed to be trying to say something.

“Mikey, take a breath” said Lonergan “what do you need to tell us?” Mikey was still out of breath but he started to talk,

“Dock number two. We were unloading a shipment of grains, off the big schooner from Jamaica.” He stopped to catch his breath.

“Suddenly, I saw Giovanni Mangini and another man from the Black Hand walk right beside the ship. Eddie, Edward O’ Sullivan I mean... He was in charge this afternoon because Mr. Coleman was sick... Eddy ran to me and told me to come here to tell Mr. Lonergan all of this.”

Meehan was already out of his seat, red with fury.

"We can't let them walk all over us like this!" he said, his fist slamming the wall of the office.

Lonergan replied with exasperation

"We can't afford to lose any men to the other docks, what are we supposed to do?"

Meehan replied with ruthless determination.

"We can't sit here like ducks so we'll hunt them like lions. We'll be up at the crack of dawn and hit them where it hurts. Right in their own homes."

Lonergan, unsure that offence was the right decision, protested.

"What if they attack while we are gone in the morning? We hardly even have enough men to guard ourselves, much less enough for a proper attack as well."

"We don't have enough men but others certainly do." said Meehan.

"Others?" Lonergan questioned.

"Yes, others, Peg Leg. The Irish gangs have been separated for far too long. We need to unite against a common enemy." Lonergan tried to hide his skepticism.

"Send out messages to Jimmy Coonan that we need the Westies, to John Morrissey that we need the Dead Rabbits, and to Paul Kelly that we need the Five Points Gang. Tomorrow, we unite under the flag of the White Hand Gang, and we strike as one!"

"But, we've never been able to unite the gangs. The White Hand gang is the dream of idealistic Irish mothers, not the reality of our lives" Lonergan said.

Meehan aimed a swipe at the side of Lonergan's head. But when he spoke his voice was pure calm.

“Well, they have a choice. Unity. Or destruction. All we need is for the messages to reach their intended recipients. Send them now”

It was five o'clock on a chilly winter's day in New York. Thirty men from the Dead Rabbits gang walked along Cross Street to the intersection that gave Five Points its name. Soon enough, the whole Forty Thieves gang came along Mulberry Street, then forty more gangsters from the Westies came to the crossing from Little Water street. Finally, ten men dressed in black shimmied down drainpipes from rooftops on the houses by Orange Street.

The leaders of the respective parties all came to the middle of the intersection, while their men blocked off the streets.

Meehan spoke first

“I'm glad that you all came here today despite the many doubts I am sure you held. It is time for us to unite as Irishmen and take out the Italians who think of the streets as theirs.”

Lew Baker, lieutenant from the Dead Rabbits stepped forward. He was dressed in a scruffy but expensive looking velvet smoking coat.

“Mr. Meehan, it's a pleasure to be here” Lew said “I have a personal vendetta against Frankie Yale. But more importantly it is time to unite the gangs like never before.”

Meehan responded so all the men could hear clearly

“Our gangs are here to make sure our people don’t starve. If we don’t unite today then the Italians will take food from our tables. And tomorrow they will take everything else. So - today - we fight as one.”

All the men broke into raucous cheers.

After the cheers died down Mickey Featherstone, first lieutenant of the Westies, spoke up.

"Right then let’s stop chattering like old ladies. We came to fight. Let’s get going before it gets bright out.”

With that they all set off down Orange Street to attack the *Mano Nera*, or as the Irish called them the Black Hand gang.

There was chaos in the air when the attack started, and the Irish gangsters were swarming into the warehouse that the Italians used as a headquarters. Fists flew, shots fired, pithforks were used as javelins, like someone had given cavemen weapons and put them in an arena to fight.

The Irish outnumbered the Italian gangsters two to one. Even though the Italians were individually stronger they were no match for the huge numbers.

Meehan, leading from the front as always, was with Bill, both part of a circle of Irish fighting in the center of the warehouse. He spotted the leaders of the Black Hand gang, Frankie Yale and Al Capone, standing on a crossbeam above them. Meehan yelled over the noise

"Bill, come with me. We can end this once and for all if we kill them now!"

"I'm always with you Denny!"

The two of them raced together towards the stairs and ran straight up to a series of crossbeams above the ground floor of the warehouse. Meehan saw Frankie and Capone run to a far corner by the offices. He signalled Bill and they gave chase. Below, men were getting their heads blown off, limbs chopped off, ears bitten off - he only caught a glimpse, but it was gruesome. Suddenly, Meehan tripped, almost falling off the crossbeam. Bill stopped to help him but Meehan began to pull himself up.

Meehan said "I'm okay, keep going, I'm right behind you."

Bill got to the room that Frankie and Capone were in seconds before Meehan.

But those seconds changed everything.

By the time Meehan arrived Al Capone had a knife to Bill's throat and Frankie was leaping towards Meehan. Meehan put Frankie in a chokehold,

"Let Bill go - or your boss dies." said Meehan.

Capone just laughed,

"Do you know what your problem is Meehan? It's that you care. You see, you could slit Mr. Yale's throat and I wouldn't care at all. Whereas if I were to slit your friend's throat you would never be the same."

Meehan was furious.

“Let him go or I will kill every Italian in this building including you.”

But Capone was unperturbed.

“You call off your men and leave my survivors alone, or I slit his throat.”

Meehan paused. He was back at that same question, just as he had been that morning when he had realised they were going to war: just how much was he willing to sacrifice to win?

Apparently not this, he found his limit. He would stop the fighting to save Bill’s life.

Meehan stepped out of the office, dragging a struggling Frankie Yale with him. He came onto the crossbeams and screamed

“Everyone, listen.”

When nobody did he reached to his belt, pulled out a knife and slit the throat of Frankie Yale, notorious gangster and leader of the *Mano Nera*. Ex-leader, that is.

First, people noticed the blood dripping from the beams. Next they saw the body of Frankie Yale fall as Meehan dropped it off the edge.

All fighting stopped.

Meehan used the chance to speak,

“We will fight no more! The Italians will give back all taken territory and possessions. The Irish will let them go without more bloodshed. Clear?”

The battered men below him nodded. The Italians were leaderless and didn't know what to do. The Irish stopped because they trusted Meehan.

All the gangsters quickly gathered their dead, not wanting to be near the other side any longer than they must. But, meanwhile on the crossbeam an exchange took place.

"Let him go. Now. I told them not to harm your men." Meehan shouted to Capone.

"Yes." replied capone "But you made some rules of your own and I didn't appreciate them much. So why should I let him go?" Meehan replied "because we had a deal and if you don't uphold your end then I will hunt and kill you." Capone let go of Bill but instead of just walking away he shoved him forward. Bill teetered on the edge of the crossbeam and Meehan lunged forward but it was of no use. Bill fell off the edge and fell to his death.

Meehan had done all he could but still his best friend would never survive that fall.

"You'll be dead within the month too." Al Capone threatened Meehan.

Meehan was still in shock and was slow to do anything but then he pulled together a little composure and managed to call the two sharpshooters from earlier.

"Patrick, Jimmy, shoot him!"

But Capone was too fast. Before the sharpshooters could get more than a shot off he was down a ladder, off the crossbeam and running.

Meehan cried out after him

"A third of your gang is dead, and the rest is leaderless, so you can't touch me. You're the one who'll be dead within the month."

“You just killed the one man that stood in the way of my control of all of Brooklyn and Manhattan so enjoy your next few weeks alive.” said an undeterred Capone as he exited the warehouse, somehow unscathed.

The rest of the Italians ran after him not wanting to face the fury of the Irish gangs alone.

Both sides of the fight went home furious. The Irish felt that they had come out on top. But Meehan’s decision to end it early left morale low. Saving Bill’s life made him seem less ruthless, and the Italians were hungry for revenge.

The peace held for three weeks when a bomb went off at Murphy’s pub. Luckily, Meehan was not there when it blew up. He had just left and was on his way home. Sadly, the attempt on his life was watertight. When the men that planted the bomb realised he had escaped they went to his house, where they shot him. The man to fire the gun was unknown, but he was paid by Al Capone. Meehan had united the Irish gangs but it didn’t help him live any longer. Nor did it secure a legacy because rather than rallying around a new leader, and exacting revenge, the White Hand gang fell apart, forming new gangs who fought each other, and still struggled against the Italians.

So, that was the end of Denny Meehan.

Quick afternote

While the story was completely fictional and the time line wildly inaccurate, many of the characters were based on real people with the same names. All the names of places and gangs were also real.