

One-Eyed Jack

By Connie Wilkins, illustration by Noel Bebee

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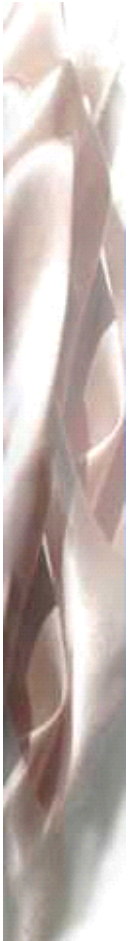
He might have been reduced to one eye, one arm, and scarcely more than one good leg, but Lightning Jack lacked nothing in between. Nothing at all. Half a man? Miss Lily's first impression had been wildly off target. Two or three men put together (and of course you never could put the good bits together) couldn't equal his endowment.

No one judged better in these matters than Miss Lily, better known as The Schoolmarm.

Not that she often took gentlemen into her own bed these days. She might, for a substantial fee, apply her other, very specialized skills where they would do the most good; but any customer with the fortitude to seek a bedmate after Miss Lily had latticed his hairy butt with her lash could make do with one of her girls.

Jack, though, was an investment. An unwise one, she had feared, watching him hobble from the train; but an investment nonetheless. And rumor insisted that he still possessed that legendary aim and speed, and a gun with new notches earned only weeks ago.

More certain was the cold fire of revenge consuming him. Miss Lily understood the power of that fire. And, since his enemy was her enemy, she had welcomed his written offer and guaranteed his personal safety up until the shoot-out, as well as a handsome fee upon completion, payable to an address in San Francisco in the event that he was unable to collect it himself.



Jack's personal safety was best guaranteed in The Schoolmarm's well-guarded establishment. That it required sharing her own opulent rose-and-ivory bedchamber was less self-evident, but Miss Lily had acquiesced. Something in his blend of frailty and rage recalled men she had nursed in the war, long ago, before she had come west to teach and learned a lesson or two herself, the foremost being that she might as well make men pay for what they were determined to get anyway, the second that there was no limit to what some men would pay for.

Miss Lily would have drawn the line at taking her whip to Jack's already-ravaged body, but she was expert at reading men and doubted that he wanted anything more than the softest bed in the Territories and maybe a little womanly comfort. It came as no surprise that before dawn he was sobbing into her ample breasts. The surprise was that those breasts were heaving as though the Grand Tetons had been tossed on the waves of an earthquake. It seemed forever until she could catch her breath, and even then she was still shaken by the best time she'd had since . . . since . . . but there was no comparison in all her years of experience.

Lily stroked his scarred face and made soothing sounds and let him fall asleep atop her, then gently eased him off. She tried to lift the bedclothes just enough to get a glimpse of what she'd been enjoying, but he gripped the satin comforter and muttered, "No . . . no . . . please . . .," so she let him be.

In the morning Jack accepted a hot bath, but refused assistance, even from Slow Joe the bouncer, who carried the steaming buckets up from the kitchen. Only when fully dressed did Jack re-enter her boudoir.

"Miss Lily," he said, sitting awkwardly on the slippery rose satin edge of the bed, "there's one more thing I'd like to ask of you."

"No harm in asking," she said, feeling an urge to ask for a little something herself but knowing that what lay ahead would require all his concentration. She hoped he hadn't already lost the edge he was going to need.

"Well, it's just, if it should turn out . . . if you should feel you could handle it . . . I'd appreciate if you'd look after that." He nodded toward the long gun-case sitting on the marble-topped bureau.

"Don't you worry any about that," Miss Lily said. She decided it was time to fan fires that might have got a little dampened last night. "You just fix your mind on dealing with Rigby. Is it true what they say? He's the one who tied you to that railroad track like a dime-novel virgin?"

Jack's smile would have been grim even without the scars. "Is it true what they say, Miss Lily, that you near to killed Rigby with a bullwhip after he and his boys cut up one of your girls, but you weren't tough enough to finish the job?"

"True enough," she said. "I stopped too soon."

"I won't." He stood and limped to the bureau. Lily heard him opening the gun case.

"Jack," she said over her shoulder as she slipped on a lacy peignoir, "should I . . . if there's a need . . . should I send your things on to that San Francisco address?"



"No need," he said, closing the case and turning back. "If you don't mind keeping them." She noticed the single holster slung low on his right hip, empty sleeve dangling above it. "There's somebody in 'Frisco I owe, but it's not what you'd call personal. Old Chinaman there fixed me up about as well as anybody could, after the train crew got me that far. I couldn't pay him right then, but he seemed to think my reputation was guarantee enough." He twitched his shoulders to adjust the fit of his shabby black coat. "Amazing what those pig-tailed doctors can do, what they've got, dried stuff hanging on the walls, pickled stuff in bottles, live things in big jars and baskets. Truly amazing." He avoided her eyes; she figured those memories must be hard to handle.

"I'll see your debt paid," she assured him. "I might go to San Francisco myself, one of these days. Once I know Rigby won't be carrying out his threats against my place and my girls." She let her peignoir fall open, and was only mildly disappointed that her rose-and-ivory charms sparked no interest in Jack's dark, single eye. His focus should be on the coming confrontation, the bizarre, balletic ritual wherein men could kill with honor, publicly, face to face in the dusty arena of Main Street under the blazing sun of high noon.

"Go on down and have breakfast with the girls, Jack, while I take my bath," Miss Lily said. "Slow Joe won't let anybody in, and I have men outside on watch."

"Just some of that coffee I smell, Ma'am," Jack said. "That's all I'll need. But thanks, Miss Lily. Thanks for everything."

Then he was gone. Miss Lily listened to the uneven thumps of his progress down the stairs. When the dining room door swung shut she crossed to the bureau and opened his unlocked case.

A strange, musky odor, not unpleasant, rose from the interior. Maybe some oriental perfume. The single revolver-shaped niche was empty, but the case could hold a good deal more, and clearly had. A channel coiled through the jade-green satin lining, looping around the perimeter and inward toward the center. A perfect whip-case, she thought automatically, not big enough for a standard bullwhip, but fine for her own customized instrument. Was that why he wanted her to have it? If he didn't survive?

She bathed and dressed slowly and meticulously. Jack had no expectation of surviving. She knew that. Remembering last night, the tears as well as the delight, she was more than willing to call the whole thing off, find another way to deal with Rigby; but Jack's own rage for vengeance drove him now, holding him together just long enough to satisfy it.



Any aftermath would be Miss Lily's to deal with. She smoothed the lines of her long, elegant skirt, arranged the lace at her neckline to reveal just the right swell of bosom, and hung her neatly coiled whip from the belt that cinched her waist. Then she went down to face the day.

As the sun neared its zenith Miss Lily's girls clustered on the verandah, designed to give her establishment a touch of elegance. Their seductive gowns and poses were good advertising; folks had crowded into town for the upcoming spectacle, and business would boom tonight. If the business survived.

Slow Joe and two hired hands manned the roof with an arsenal of shotguns. The girls had derringers tucked in amongst their ruffles, and knew how to handle them. But Jack was Lily's best hope.

Jack sat stiffly in the parlor, expressionless, barely breathing. Miss Lily didn't intrude. She trusted him by now to know his own business best. Maybe he'd learned some kind of concentration trick in the alleys of Chinatown.



She stepped out onto the verandah, adjusted her chiffon-swathed hat at just the right tilt, then moved down to the board walkway along the street. As though he'd been waiting for her appearance, a horseman left the milling throng in front of the general store and approached her. Henson, Rigby's mouthpiece. She waited calmly for his opening gambit.

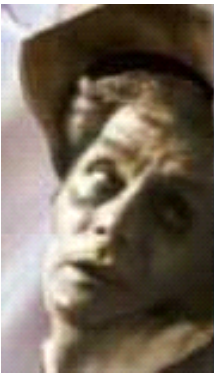
"So, Miss Lily," he said, glancing around to make sure of his audience, "you finally allowed as how that whip ain't enough to make a man of you. Heard you

brought in a hired gun, or more like half a gun. What's that make him, a firecracker?" This drew a few laughs, at which he bowed and preened, but most folks waited to hear Miss Lily's reply.

"If your yellow-bellied boss would rather face a woman, I'd be happy to oblige," she purred huskily, fondling the tip of her lash. "If not, he's about to get a firecracker up his ass."

The laughter now was sly, muffled, nobody wanting to be identified. Rigby wouldn't take kindly to ridicule. Nobody was willing to bet on an outcome in which his petty tyranny would no longer be a factor.

The street emptied. Miss Lily glanced up at her own rooftop troops to be sure they noticed Rigby's henchmen up behind the general store's false front. Slow Joe jerked his head in their direction.



The sun was directly overhead. Shadows had been sucked back under whatever cast them. But Lightning Jack, when he stepped down into the street, was shadow itself, a bolt of blackness against the dusty, glaring light. His scarred face hid between the dark brim of his hat and the black neckerchief at his throat. You couldn't tell whether he had one eye, or none.

He walked slowly, scarcely limping, shoulders rigid, until he reached the point of least threat to bystanders from errant shots. Miss Lily followed along the walkway, hips swaying in their trademark undulation, the ultimate advertisement for her establishment. She sensed rather than saw Jack's admonitory frown but held her ground. No matter what happened, she would be the first to reach whatever was left of him.

Rigby moved out into the other end of the street. He took a few steps, then a few more, bravado growing as Jack swayed slightly. Lily braced herself to keep from running to prop her champion up.

Rigby held both hands curved tensely above the grips of his paired revolvers. Jack's left hand extended halfway across his sunken belly toward the double-action Colt on his right hip, but it didn't seem possible he could draw and fire in time to do any good.

Rigby made his move; all eyes swung toward him. All but Miss Lily's. She kept her gaze fixed on Jack's gun, and the empty sleeve above it. He had to have some good reason for slinging his gun on that side.

It happened too fast to be sure of anything, but Miss Lily could swear that something stiffened that empty sleeve, something drew and fired that Colt before ever Jack's left hand reached it, and kept on firing even as he fell.

Rigby was down, and so, with farther to fall, were the men he'd posted on the store roof. Miss Lily darted into the street and stood over Jack on guard. The right-arm-that-wasn't still raised the gun and swung it in short arcs, searching for more targets, jerking Jack's body from side to side, but Lily knew that Jack himself had finally left that ruined hulk.



"It's finished," she murmured. "You did it." The sleeve collapsed. Lily knelt in the dust, unmindful of her finery. With one hand she pulled the neckerchief up over the ruined remains of his face; with the other she gingerly lifted the edge of the empty sleeve and peered in. Her stomach lurched, but she refused to let her body jerk away. She stood, moved even closer, and raised the dusty hem of her skirt just slightly at the front. "Well, come on if you're coming," she muttered. For just an instant, before her skirt overlapped the threadbare cuff, she had another glimpse of that jade-green serpentine form, its blunt tip almost entirely taken up by a single, glistening eye.

As the creature coiled its way up her silk-clad calf, she stood unmoving, head bowed as though in grief, suppressing an almost overpowering urge to shudder and cursing Jack for not telling her what to expect. "Amazing what they've got," he'd said. "Live things in big jars and baskets." Hardly enough warning for this. But, as the sinuous pressure reached above her garter to her naked thigh, the creature's familiar touch ignited other, pleasanter urges.



Gundersen, the undertaker, approached Miss Lily warily, and she realized she was gripping her whip as though she meant business. "Give him your best coffin, Sam. I'm paying."

Then she walked, very slowly and carefully, out of the street and toward her verandahed haven. Her hips swayed only slightly, so as not to dislodge her passenger, but all male eyes were on her, and she knew she must be projecting a good deal of what she was feeling. "If you only knew it, fellows," she thought, with a sly inward smile in spite of genuine grief, "I've got more between my legs just now than any ten of you." Not that it made her feel in the least like a man. Far, far from it.

Walking up the stairs toward her room was . . . interesting.

Slow Joe burst through the front door just as she reached the landing. "Joe," Miss Lily said, "Get me a train ticket to San Francisco for tomorrow. And tell Annie to come up and pack for me -- but not for an hour or two yet. Make damn sure she knocks first!"

She'd more or less promised Jack to take care of his . . . whatever. In the long run she was going to need to find out more about its care and, well, feeding. For now, she knew all she needed to know.

"Thanks, Jack," Miss Lily murmured in the sybaritic privacy of her bedroom. Her breasts were beginning to heave again and her breathing was getting out of

control. "Thanks for everything."

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