

## LONESOME JACK

The noise in the room was close to what one would call a din. The incessant honky-tonk piano was accompanied by the jingle of spurs as new customers entered, and the grating of chairs across the rough wooden floor by restless occupants. It was hard to talk in normal tones.

"One more hand", Jack said as he looked across the table at the other three players.

Though Jack had little call to patronize The Golden Nugget, not being a hard drinker, he accepted the invitation to sit in on the poker game. After all, he'd punched cows with these fellows for the K-BAR ranch, shared the same grub and bunkhouse for over a year. Ben Kane had been like a father to Jack. He'll sure miss Ben but was it Ben's daughter Sally he'd miss the most. Jack never stepped out of his place as a hired hand. Yet, there were times when Sally seemed to pay him more attention than she did to others. Her smiles never failed to warm his heart and even make it skip a beat now and then. What had been the use of dreaming? She was in a different world. What did he have to offer her?

He had some time to kill while Jake Sponsor was filling out his list of the things he would need for the trail. It was time to pull out; Jack was not one to put down roots when there was still mountains to cross and rivers to swim. He was a drifter, proud of his independence yet there was always some little thing in the back of his mind that made him feel there was something else, something else to complete that inside straight he considered his life.

"Lonesome Jack" he called himself.

The shuffling sound of the cards brought his mind back to the game. They were playing draw poker with a three card limit on the draw.

With the cards having been dealt the four players examined what they had to work with.

Too bad! Jack mused to himself as he fanned his hand to see what he had. He was staring at a deuce, a trey, a ten and a Jack of clubs, accompanied by a useless four of diamonds.

Charley asked, "Openers, anyone?". Wilkins proudly announced having the required pair to open.

After the first bet Charley began answering the request for more cards. Pete took two, Mingo was satisfied with what he had and said, "I stand pat".

"How many, Jack?" Some quick calculating revealed limited possibilities. The highest card he held was the Jack. What could be built on that? A Jack high straight? A club flush? It was no use. "I'm folding."

Jack pushed his chair back and stood up. Stretching he said, "That's enough for me pals. Sponsor must have my pack ready by now. Time to hit the trail." He Shook hands with the men he'd shared so much with and pushed his way out through the bat wing doors of the saloon. He stood on the board walk waiting for the gust of wind to pass and the swirling dirt

devils to collapse. With squinting eyes to avoid the flying dry dust he started across the street. The music symbolically faded behind him. There was a wagon in front of the store half filled with supplies for the coming month. A family with four young ones, two boys and two girls, were cheerfully completing the task. He waited, experiencing some of their joy, though vicariously.

With the family's business completed Jack entered the store to get his pack. "Here' your pack. We had everything you asked for. Sorry to see you're moving' on. We'll sure miss you 'round here, Jack," said Jake Sponsor. This town's startin' to 'mount to something. Be a good place to settle down."

"Thanks, Jake. I guess I' m just not the settling' kind. How much do I owe you?"

As Jack reached into his pocket he was surprised to find he'd absentmindedly kept that lone Jack of Clubs. Having paid Sponsor, Jack walked out into the bright sunlight, looked to the calling distant mountains. Then at the card he still held in this hand. It was like looking at himself, the lonesome Jack. But which one? There was the Jack of diamonds looking for a big stroke of luck and fortune. There was the Jack of clubs and he had no problem recalling all that meant. He'd been town marshal for a year over at Broken Bow City where he tangled with a gang intent of robbing the bank. He still walked with slight limp from the wound in his left leg. I guess the next Jack will be the Jack of Spades. There's no question of what that one means.

But , there's one more, the Jack of Hearts. He chuckled at that thought. At the same time, the vision of Sally Kane entered his mind. Could it ever be? He wondered. Naw!. With that he stepped into the stirrup of the waiting roan, mounted, gave it a nudge and began toward the far mountains.

At the top of the rise he paused to look back at the peaceful town below and the ranch beyond. He couldn't help picturing Sally busy there doing all the things a woman does to make a house a home.

The sky was a bright blue from horizon to horizon except for one small, white puffy cloud. Jack wasn't one to gaze at clouds but for some reason this one fascinated him. He wondered about the cloud where was it going? What will become of it? Will it just fade away into nothing or perhaps grow, combine with others and amount to something, perhaps bring life giving rain to a thirsty field. It began to make sense, The Jack he'd held in his hand amounted to nothing without the right cards with it. Maybe the the Jack of Hearts is the one I've been searching for.

He slowly turned the roan back toward the town to which he thought he'd said "good bye".

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