

Man with the Iron Arm

The One Arm Man

by Elmore Leonard, 1925-2013

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Chapter 1

CHRIS AND KITE and Vicente were already half down the slope when we came out of the trees—three riders spread out and running hard, waving their sombreros like they could smell the mescal we'd been talking about all morning. This new man, Tobin Royal, was next to me holding in his big sorrel I think just to show he could hold himself, too, if he wanted. He was smoking a cigarette and squinting through the smoke curling up from it. At the bottom of the grade, looking bleached white in the big open sunlight, were the adobes of Brady's Store: one main structure and a few scattered out-buildings and a corral. Brady's served as a Hatch & Hodges stage-line stop, besides being a combination store and saloon for the half dozen one-loop ranchers in the vicinity. The one we worked for—the El Centro Cattle Company—was bigger than all of them put together twice and just the eastern tip of it came close to touching Brady's Store. Chris and Kite and Vicente and this Tobin Royal and I were gathering stock from the east range, readying for a trail drive and we felt we deserved some of Brady's mescal long as it was handy.

By the time Tobin and I rode into the yard, the others had gone into the saloon side of the adobe and I saw a bare-headed, dark-haired man leading their three horses over to the open stable shed that attached to the adobe. He looked around, hearing us ride in, and I saw then that he had only one arm. For a moment he stood looking at us; then he turned, leading the horses away, moving slow like he either had all the time in the world or else his mind was on something else. As we swung off, this Tobin Royal called over to him, "Hey, boy, two more here!" But the one-armed man kept going like he hadn't heard.

Tobin stood looking at the rumps of the three horses moving into the stable. He let his reins drop and he moved a half dozen slow strides toward the stable. A quirt was thonged to his left wrist and it hung limp at his side opposite the long-barreled Navy Colt on his right hip.

He was a slim, good-looking boy, but he never smiled unless he said something he thought was funny, and he liked to pose, as he was doing now with the quirt and his hat tilted forward and the low-slung Navy Colt. In the few weeks he'd been with us I'd learned this about him.

I started to bring the horses and he turned his head. "You keep them horses over there."

"What's the difference? I'll take them over."

"Just stay where you are." His gaze went back to the stable as the one-armed fellow came out of the shadow into the sunlight again, and for a moment Tobin just stared at the man.

"Are you deaf or something?"

THE MAN TURNED to Tobin and his eyes looked tired. They were watery, and with the bits of straw sticking to his shirt and pants he looked as if he'd just slept off a drunk in the stable. He was about thirty, a year one way or the other. He didn't answer Tobin, but came on toward me.

"I asked you a question!"

He stopped then and looked at Tobin.

"I asked you," Tobin said, "if you were deaf."

"No, I'm not deaf."

"You work here?"

The man nodded.

"You're supposed to answer when somebody calls."

"I'll try to remember that," the man said.

The temper rose in Tobin's face again. "Listen, don't talk like that to me! I'll kick your hind end across the yard!"

The tired eyes looked at me momentarily. He came on then and took the reins and started back toward the stable with the horses. Tobin called to him, "Water and rub 'em down now... you hear me?" He stood looking after the horses for a time, then finally he turned and started for the adobe as I did.

"You didn't have to talk to him like that."

Tobin shook his head disgustedly. "Judas, I hate a slow-moving, worthless man."

"He had only one arm," I said.

"What difference does that make?"

"Maybe it makes him feel bad."

"It don't make him walk slower."

"Well maybe some men it does."

Tobin opened the door and walked in ahead of me over to the bar that was along the left-hand wall where Chris and Kite and Vicente stood leaning and drinking mescal, and he said, "Whiskey," to Brady standing behind the bar.

Brady was looking toward me, waiting for Tobin to get out of the way. "How you been, Uncle?" Brady said to me.

"Fair," I told him. "How've you been?"

"Good." He smiled now, that big, loose-faced, double-chinned smile of his. "It's nice to see you again."

"I want whiskey," Tobin said.

Brady looked at him. "I heard you, Sonny. You can't wait till I tell a friend hello?"

I got to the bar before Tobin could say anything. "Joe, this is Tobin Royal, a new man with us."

Tobin nodded and Joe Brady said glad-to-meet-you, because he was a businessman. He sat the whiskey bottle on the bar and poured a drink out of it. Tobin emptied the hooker, and touched the bottle with the glass for another. But this one, after Brady poured it, he took to one of the three tables that were along the other wall, where the stage passengers ate. He sat down with the drink in front of him and started making a cigarette.

Joe Brady nudged the mescal bottle toward me. "What's he trying to prove?"

"That he's older than he is," I answered. I could hear Vicente telling a vaquero story and Chris and Kite were listening, knowing what the ending was, but waiting for it anyway. They didn't have much to say to Tobin, because the first day he joined us he had a fight with Kite. Kite had been a Tascosa buffalo skinner, a big rawboned boy, but Tobin licked him good. Tobin always stayed a few steps out from them, like he didn't want to be mistaken for just an ordinary rider.

"I see you got a new man too," I said to Brady.

"That's John Lefton," Brady said. "He came here on the stage a few weeks ago... got off like he expected to see something. As it turned out, he'd paid the fare as far as his money would take him... which was to here."

"What's he running away from?"

"Did you see him close?"

"You mean the one arm?"

Brady nodded. "That's what I think he's running from."

"Well, it's too bad. How'd he lose it?"

"In the War."

"Well," I said again, "it's better to lose it that way than, say, in a corncrusher. What side was he on?"

"Union."

"Don't hold it against him, Joe."

"Hell, the War's been over for eight years."

"You felt sorry for him and gave him a job?"

Brady shrugged. "What else could I do?"

"He looks like he drinks."

"He about draws his wages in mescal. But he does his work... better'n the Mex boy and even took over the bookkeeping."

"It's a terrible thing to see a man down like that."

I heard the screen door open behind me and Brady mumbled, "Here he is."

Chapter 2

I HALF TURNED as he went by, walking to the back part of the adobe where Brady's rolltop desk was next to the door that led to the store part. He was carrying a push-broom. Brady called over the bar, "John, you don't have to do that now."

"It's all right," he answered. His voice sounded natural, but like there wasn't a speck of enthusiasm in him if he ever wanted to bring it out.

"No," Brady said. "Wait till later. These people will just mess up the place anyhow."

He nodded, then leaned the push-broom against the wall and stood at the desk with his back to us.

"I never know how to talk to him," Brady half whispered.

"Mr. Brady—"

Brady looked up and saw John Lefton at the end of the bar now. As he walked down to him, Chris and Kite and Vicente stopped talking.

They stood at the bar pretending like they weren't trying to hear what was said, as Brady and the one-armed man talked for a minute. Then Brady came back for the mescal bottle and poured him a good shot of it.

"I wonder what he's trying to forget," I said, when Brady was opposite me again.

"His wife," Brady said, and didn't add anything to that for a minute.

Then he said, "He's been here three weeks and he's gotten three letters from her, forwarded from the last town he stayed in, but he hasn't answered one."

"How do you know it's his wife... he told you?"

Brady hesitated. "I read one of the letters."

"Joe!"

He gritted his teeth, meaning for me to keep my voice down. "After he got the last one he started drinking and kept it up till it put him asleep. He was sitting

at that table there and the letter was right in front of him. Listen... I just stood there trying to figure him out, wanting to help him, but I couldn't help him till I knew what his trouble was. Finally I decided, hell, there's only one way to do it, read the letter."

"Go on." "She asked him why he never answered any of her letters and when he was going to send for her, and telling how much she loved him,"

Brady paused. "You see it now?"

I COULD SEE IT all right. Him coming back from the War lacking an arm and somehow figuring he'd be a burden and being sensitive about how he looked. Then running away to prove himself... then doing more running than proving. Promising to send for her at first, but each day knowing it would be harder as the time passed. Her at home waiting while he wanders around losing his self-respect. That would be eight years of waiting now.

"Maybe," I said, "he don't want her anymore."

Brady shook his head. "You never saw him read the letters."

About a minute later, this Tobin Royal came up next to me and slapped his left-handed quirt down on the bar. "Give me another one," he said.

Brady said civilly, "You haven't paid for the first two yet."

"We'll settle when I'm through," Tobin told him. He drank off part of the whiskey that Brady poured and stood fiddling with what was left, turning the glass between two fingers. His eyes lifted as Brady moved down the bar to where John Lefton was standing and poured him another mescal.

Tobin leaned away from the bar to look at Lefton. He came back then and said, loud enough for everybody to hear, "I guess even a man without all his parts can drink mescal."

I couldn't believe he'd said it, but there it was and at that moment the room was quiet as night. I half whispered to Tobin, "What'd you say that for?" But he didn't answer me. He moved from the bar the next moment and went down to stand next to Lefton who glanced at him, but looked down at his drink again.

"Before you go sloppin' up the mescal juice," Tobin said, "I want to understand my horse is cared for. You rubbed him good?"

Lefton was raising the mescal glass, ignoring Tobin, and suddenly Tobin's quirt came up and lashed down on Lefton's arm and the mescal glass went slamming skidding over the bar.

"I asked you a question," Tobin said.

For a shaded second Lefton's face came alive, but as fast as it came the anger faded from his eyes and he looked down at his wrist, holding it tightly to his stomach. "No," he answered then. "I didn't rub down your horse."

"Do it now," Tobin said.

Brady moved toward them. "Wait a minute! You don't order my help around!"

"He wants to do it," Tobin answered. "Don't you?"

Lefton's eyes raised. "It's all right, Mr. Brady."

"I'll tip him something," Tobin grinned. He looked at Lefton again.

"One hand's as good as two for rubbing down a horse, ain't it?"

Lefton hesitated. Before he could answer Tobin's quirt came down cracking against the bar edge and Lefton went back half a step.

"You're not much for answering questions, are you?"

Lefton's eyes raised momentarily. "I'll tend to your horse."

Tobin grinned. "I want to ask you something else." He waited to make Lefton speak.

"All right," Lefton said.

"Where did you leave your arm?"

Again Lefton hesitated and you had the urge to poke him to make him hurry up and answer. "On Rock Creek," he said then. "East of Cemetery Ridge."

"What was your outfit?"

"Seventh Michigan."

Tobin's face brightened. "Damn, I thought you looked like a bluebelly! One of Wade Hampton's boys cut you good, didn't he?" He looked around at the rest of us and said, "A brother of mine was with Wade, all the way to Yellow Tavern."

Lefton didn't say a word and Tobin studied him. "What rank did you hold?"

"Lieutenant."

"From lieutenant of cavalry to rubbin' down horses," Tobin said. He stuck out his quirt as Lefton started to walk past him. "I didn't say you could go!" The quirt moved across Lefton's chest and the tip of it poked at the empty right sleeve.

"Above the elbow," Tobin said. "Were you right-handed or left?"

"Right."

"Now that'd be a hardship," Tobin said. "Teaching the left what the right used to know." The quirt end kept slapping gently at the empty sleeve as he spoke. "But the left's good enough for sloppin' mescal juice, huh?"

Lefton did not answer.

"You hear me?"

"Yes... it's good enough."

"I thought stable boys were supposed to say yes sir. "

"That's enough!" Brady said. His big face was red and had a tight look about the mouth. "You leave him alone now!"

Tobin looked at Brady. "You ought to learn your stable boy proper respect."

"This man isn't a stable boy!"

"Then how come he wants to rub down my horse?"

This was carrying it too far. I knew Tobin could lick me eight ways from breakfast with one hand, but now I could feel the anger up in my throat and I had to say something.

"Tobin... you stop that kind of talk and act like a human being for once in your life!"

He took the time to look my way. "Uncle, are you telling me what to do?"

"I can't talk any plainer!"

He grinned... didn't get mad... just grinned and said, "Uncle, you know better than that. You don't tell me what to do. Not you or any man here." He turned to Lefton again. "I'm the only one doing any telling, ain't that right?"

He poked Lefton with the quirt and Lefton nodded, though he was looking at the floor.

"Let me hear you say it."

Lefton nodded again. "Yes... that's right."

Tobin waited. "Yes... what?"

Then it was like seeing this Lefton give up the last shred of pride he owned, and you had to turn your head because you knew he was going to say it, and you didn't want to be looking at him because you weren't sure if you'd feel sorry for him anymore.

We heard it all right, the hollow sounding, "Yes sir—"

And after it, Tobin saying, "Now you find your left-handed currycomb and go on out and rub my horse."

Chapter 3

ALL THE WAY back to our headquarters, later on, with the two-hundredodd head we'd gathered, not one of us said a word to Tobin, though he made some remarks when we stopped that night as to how fine his big sorrel looked even if it had been curried by a left-handed stable boy. As I said, we'd come over to the east range to gather and by the time we'd got back to the home ranch the trail drive was about to get under way and, thank the Lord, we saw little of Tobin for the next forty-someodd days. Chris and Kite and Vicente and I were swing riders when we were on the move; but Tobin, because he was a new man, had to ride drag and eat dust all the way.

We left Sudan, where the El Centro main herd was headquartered, about the first of May, and it wasn't till the middle of June that I had my bath in the Grand Central Hotel in Ellsworth.

I'll tell you the truth: I thought of that one-armed man about every day of the drive, though I never talked about him to the others.

Still, I knew they were thinking about him the way I was. Picturing him standing there with his one arm held tight against his belly after Tobin had quirted him—holding it like that because he didn't have another hand to rub the sting with. Maybe we should all have jumped Tobin and beat his hide off, but that wouldn't have proved anything. I think we were all waiting to see this one-armed man stand his ground and fight back, and though he wouldn't have had a chance, at least he would have felt better after.

Why did Tobin lay it on him? I don't know. I've seen men like Tobin before and since, but not many, thank the Lord. That kind always has to be proving something that other people don't even bother about. Maybe Tobin did it to show us he had no use for a man who couldn't stand on his own two feet. Maybe he did it just so he could see how low a man could slip. Then he could say to himself, "Tobin, boy, you'll never be like that, even if both your arms were gone."

And probably Tobin would be judging himself right. No one could say that he wasn't like a piece of rawhide. He was hard on himself even, would take the meanest horse in the remuda and be the last one in at night just so he could say he worked harder than anybody else. But that's all you could say for him.

And why did John Lefton, a man who had been a cavalry officer and gone through the war, stand there and take it? That I don't know either.

Maybe he had too much pride.

After running for eight years, it was a long way to look back to what he was. And the mescal would blur it to make it farther. I remember sitting in the tub in the Grand Central Hotel and saying, "The hell with him," like that was final. But it wasn't that easy. There was something about him that told you that at least one time he had been much man.

We did see John Lefton again.

No... I don't want to jump to it. I'll tell it the way it happened.

We came back from Ellsworth and most of that fall Chris and me worked a company herd up on the Canadian near Tascosa. Then toward the middle of November we were ordered back to Sudan. One day, right after we were back,

the company man, C.H. Felt, said he was sending us over to the east range with a wagon full of alfalfa to scatter for the winter graze. I asked him who was going and he said Chris and Kite and Vicente... that's right, and Tobin Royal.

THAT'S HOW THE same five of us come to ride down that gray windy grade into Brady's yard that November afternoon.

No one was in sight, not even the dog we could hear barking off somewhere behind the adobes. Kite swung down and took my reins as I dismounted. Vicente took Chris's. That left Tobin Royal to care for his own. He was still riding that big sorrel.

Chris and I went inside the adobe and right away Chris said, "Something's different here."

"You just never seen the place empty, is all."

He kept looking all around to see if he could place what it was.

Then I started looking around and it was an unnaturally long moment before it dawned on me what it was.

The place was clean. Not just swept clean and dusted, but there was wax on the bar and three tables and fresh paint on the places it belonged.

"Chris, the place is clean. That's what it is!"

He didn't answer me. Chris was looking down to the back end where the rolltop and the door was. A woman, a black-haired, slim-built, prettier-than-ordinary woman, closed the door and came toward us.

She came right up and gave us a little welcome smile, and said, "May I serve you gentlemen something to eat?" Her voice was pleasant, but she seemed to be holding back a little.

Chris said, "Eat?"

And I said, "We ate at camp, ma'am," touching my hat. "We were thinking of a drink."

She smiled again and you could tell that one was put on. "The bar is Mr. Brady's department," she said and started to turn. "He can't be far. I'll see if I can find him." She started to walk to the back, and that's when Kite and Vicente and Tobin Royal came in.

She looked around, but must have reasoned they were with Chris and me, because she went on then until Tobin called out, "Hey... where you going?"

She stopped, turning full around as Tobin brushed past us saying, "Now that old man's using his head," meaning Brady, I guess.

The smile didn't show this time, but she said, "May I serve you something to eat?"

Tobin grinned. "Not to eat."

"I don't serve the bar," the woman said. "Mr. Brady does that."

"Uh-huh," Tobin said. Then he laughed out loud. "Like you never been behind a bar before! What're you doing here then?"

"I'm here," she said quietly, "with my husband."

"You're married to Brady?"

"I'm Mrs. Lefton."

"Lefton!" Tobin's mouth hung open. "You're married to that onearmed stable boy!" The color came up over her face like she'd been slapped, but she didn't say a word. Tobin was grinning and shaking his head like it was the funniest thing he'd ever heard of. "Listen," he said to her. "You get me a whiskey drink and I'll tell you something about your husband you probably don't know."

Right then Brady came in behind us. His coat was on and he was breathing in and out like he'd hurried. From the look on his face you could tell he'd seen our horses and the El Centro brand and the chances were good he knew who he'd find.

The woman said quickly, "Is my husband coming?" and now sounded frightened and as if she were trying hard to keep from crying.

Tobin added, "Or is he busy cleaning the stable?"

"He's breaking a horse," Brady stated.

I said, "Breaking a horse?"

Brady turned on me. "That's what I said, breaking a horse!"

Tobin must have been as surprised as any of us; but he wouldn't show it. He just shrugged. "Well, I guess one wing's as good as two for that anyway." Without her expecting it he grabbed Mrs. Lefton's arm.

"Honey, your husband waits on me. Why shouldn't you?" He gave her a little push toward the bar and that snaky quirt of his slapped backhanded across where her bustle was.

Brady said something, but I don't know what... because I heard a step behind me. I just glanced, then came full around realizing who it was. John Lefton.

Chapter 4

BUT NOT THE John Lefton we had seen the last time. He didn't have on a hat and his wool shirt was dirty from sweat and dust. His hair was cut shorter than before and hung down a little over his forehead; his jaw was clean-shaved, but he was wearing a full-grown cavalry kind of mustache.

That's where the big difference was: the mustache, and the eyes that were dark and clear and looking straight ahead to Tobin.

He walked past us and as he did I saw the quirt hanging from his wrist. I remembered Brady saying that he'd been breaking a horse, but somehow you got the idea he was wearing it for another reason.

He walked right up to Tobin and said, without wasting breath, "Mr. Royal, I've been waiting some months to see you again."

Tobin was half smiling, but you could tell it was put on, while he tried to figure out the change in this man. Tobin moved a little bit. He cocked his hip and leaned his hand on the bar to show he was relaxed.

"First," John Lefton said, "I want to thank you for what you did."

Tobin frowned then. "What'd I do?"

"If you don't know," Lefton said, "I'm not going to explain it. But you must know what I'm going to give you."

Tobin still looked puzzled. He didn't say anything and suddenly Lefton's quirt slashed across Tobin's hand on the edge of the bar.

"You know now?"

Tobin knew. Maybe he couldn't believe it, but he knew and in the instant he was pushing himself from the bar, dipping that stung hand to get at the Navy Colt. The barrel was just clear of the holster when Lefton's quirt cracked Tobin's wrist like a pistol shot, and slapped the Colt right out of his hand. For a moment Tobin was wide open, not sure what to do. Then he saw it coming and

tried to cover, but not soon enough and Lefton's quirt lashed across his face cutting him from cheekbone to nose. The quirt came back, catching him across the forehead and his hat went spinning.

Tobin threw up his arms to cover his face, but now Lefton let go of the quirt. He came up with a fist under Tobin's jaw, and when Tobin's guard came apart, the same fist chopped back-handed, like a counterpunch, and smacked hard. This man knew how to fight. The fist swung low again, into Tobin's belly, and when he doubled up, Lefton's knee came up against his jaw. That straightened Tobin good. When he was just about upright the fist came around like a sledgehammer and the next second Tobin was spread-eagle on the floor.

He must have been conscious, though I don't know how; for then Lefton looked down at him and said, "You know what you're going to do now, don't you? As soon as you find a left-handed currycomb." We just stood there until he got Tobin to his feet and out the door; then Brady said, "Mrs. Lefton, you've got yourself a man." And the way he said man, it meant everything it could mean plus how Joe Brady felt about the matter.

Mrs. Lefton smiled. "I've known that for some time," she said mildly—to tell us that there had never been any doubt about it as far as she was concerned. She excused herself right after that.

As soon as the door closed behind her, Brady, like a little kid with a story to tell, filled in the part we didn't know about.

He said on that day last May, after we'd gone, Lefton came back in and poured himself a mescal drink. But he didn't drink it. He just stared at it for the longest time. Maybe fifteen or twenty minutes. Suddenly, then, he swept the drink off and brought his fist down on the bar hard enough to break a bone. He held on to the bar then with his head down and Brady said he thought the man was going to cry. But he never did, and after a minute he went outside.

THE CHANGE IN him began right after that, Brady told. It was as if Tobin's quirt had jolted him back to reality. He found himself at deep bottom and now there was only one direction to go, if he had the guts.

Not until a few days later, Brady said, did he realize that Lefton had stopped drinking. He started drawing his wages, did his work all right, and about the middle of July he disappeared for three days. When he came back he had four mustangs on a string. The next day he built a mesquite corral off back of the adobes and that night he wrote a letter to his wife.

By the time his wife arrived, the end of August, Lefton had broken and sold better than a dozen horses. Understand now, when he started this he didn't know the first thing about breaking horses. What happened was, the time he disappeared, he went to Sudan to find something to invest in with the money he'd saved. He happened to talk to a mustanger who told him there was money in horse trading if he could stand getting his insides jolted up.

Lefton hired a couple of Tonkawa boys to scare up green horses and from that day on he was in business. The mustanger in Sudan taught him a few things, but most of it Lefton learned himself. The hard way.

He took a beating from those horses, but he never quit and Brady said it was like watching a man do penance. Maybe Lefton felt the same way about it, I don't know.

Brady said that two weeks ago, when Lefton's count had reached forty sold he'd wondered why Lefton stayed around instead of expanding and locating

where business would be better. Brady said today, though, he understood why Lefton had wanted to stay.

We all agreed that what we saw that afternoon was one of the finest experiences of our lives. Still, neither Chris, Kite, Vicente or me ever talked about it to anyone. You couldn't tell the second part without telling the first, and we still didn't want to do that.

Tobin Royal stayed with us. I'll give him credit for that. Working with us after what we'd seen. After that day he didn't talk so much. But those times he did start, after a few drinks or something, I'd look at him and touch my cheek. His fingers would go up and feel where the quirt had lashed him and he would shut up. There was no scar there, but maybe there was to Tobin. One that would always stay with him.

