

1960

Adam Had Three Brothers

R. A. Lafferty

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq>

Recommended Citation

Lafferty, R. A.. "Adam Had Three Brothers." *New Mexico Quarterly* 30, 3 (1960). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol30/iss3/21>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Mexico Press at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Mexico Quarterly by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

In THE TOWN there are many races living, each in its own enclave, some of many square miles, some of a few acres only, some of but one or two streets. Its geographers say that it has more Italians than Rome, more Irish than Dublin, more Jews than Israel, more Armenians than Yerevan.

But this overlooks the most important race of all.

There is the further fact (known only to the more intense geographers): it has more Rrequesenians than any town in the world. There are more than a hundred of them.

By the vulgar the Rrequesenians are called Wrecks, and their quarter is Wreckville. And there is this that can be said of them that cannot be said of any other race on earth: Every one of them is a genius.

Adam Had
Three Brothers

a story

R. A. LAFFERTY

These people are unique. They are not Gypsies, though they are often taken for them. They are not Semites. They are not even children of Adam.

Willy McGilley, the oldest of the Wrecks (they now use Gentile names) has an old baked tablet made of straw and pressed sheep dung that is eight thousand years old and gives the true story of their origin. Adam had three brothers: Etienne, Yancy, and Rreq. Etienne and Yancy were bachelors. Rreq had a small family and all his issue have had small families; until now there are about two hundred of them in all, the most who have ever been in the world at one time. They have never intermarried with the children of Adam except once. And not being of the same recension they are not under the same curse to work for a living.

So they do not.

Instead they batten on the children of Adam by clever devices that are known in police court as swindles.

Catherine O'Conneley by ordinary standards would be reckoned as the most beautiful of the Wrecks. By at least three dozen men she was considered the most beautiful girl in the world. But by Wreckian standards she was plain. Her nose was too small, only a little larger than that of ordinary women; and she was skinny as a crow, being on the slight side of a hundred and sixty. Being beautiful only by worldly standards she was reduced even more than the rest of them to living by her wits and charms.

She was a show girl and a bar girl. She gave piano lessons and drawing lessons and tap-dancing lessons. She told fortunes and sold oriental rugs and junk jewelry, and kept company with lonely old rich men. She was able to do all these things because she was one bundle of energy.

She had no family except a number of unmarried uncles, the six Petapolis brothers, the three Petersens, the five Calderons, the four Oskanians, and Charley O'Malley, nineteen in all.

Now it was early morning and a lady knocked at her door.

"The oil stock is no good. I checked and the place would be three hundred miles out to sea and three miles down. My brother says I've been took."

"Possibly your brother isn't up on the latest developments in offshore drilling. We have the richest undeveloped field in the world and virtually no competition. I can promise we will have any number of gushers within a week. And if your brother has any money I can still let him have stock till noon today at a hundred and seventy-five dollars a share."

"But I only paid twenty-five a share for mine."

"See how fast it has gone up in only two days. What other stock rises so fast?"

"Well all right, I'll go tell him."

There was another knock on the door.

"My little girl take piano lessons for six weeks and all she can play is da da da."

"Good. It is better to learn one note thoroughly than just a little bit of all of them. She is not ready for the other notes yet. But I can tell you this: she is the most intelligent little girl I have ever seen in my life and I believe she has a positive genius for the piano. I truly believe she will blossom all at once and one of these days she will be playing complete symphonies."

"You really think so?"

"I do indeed."

"Well then I will pay you for six more weeks, but I do wish she could play more than da da da."

There was another knock at the door.

"Honey Bun, there was something wrong. I give you ten dollars to bet on Summertime in the first race at Marine Park; you say it's a sure thing and fifty to one. But now I find there isn't any such track as Marine Park and nobody ever heard of the horse. Huh, Honey Bun? What you do to your best boy friend?"

"O, we use code names. What if all these hot tips ever got out? Summertime of course was Long Day and Marine Park was Jamaica. And he only lost by about six noses. Wasn't that good for a fifty to one? And now I have an even better tip. It's so hot I can't even tell you the name of the horse, but I feel sure that twenty would get you a thousand."

"All the time I give you money but never I win yet, Honey Bun. Now you give a little kiss and we talk about another bet."

"I had surely thought our attachment was on a higher plane."

"Words, Honey Bun, always words. But you give, um, um, um, that's good. Now I bet again, but I bet I better win someday."

There was another knock on the door.

"How come you let my brother-in-law in on a good thing and never tell me? For a hundred he'll have two hundred and fifty in a week, and you never tell me, and I'm your friend and never persecute you when you don't pay your bill."

So she had to give her caller the same deal she had given his brother-in-law.

After that she went out to take the game out of her traps. She had set and baited them some days before. She had gone to see five hundred people, which took quite a while even for one with her excess of energy. And to each she said this:

"I have just discovered that I have an infallible gift of picking winners. Now I want you to give it a test. Here is a sure winner I have picked. I ask

you bet it, not with me, not with one of my uncles, but with a bookie of your own choice. I prefer not to know with whom you bet."

Of the five hundred there were a hundred and forty-four winners, very good. So the next day she went to the hundred and forty-four with even more assurance and offered them the same proposition again. And of the hundred and forty-four there were fifty-six winners. Very good, for she really could pick them.

To these fifty-six she went the third day and offered them the third sure bet free. And incredibly of the fifty-six there were nineteen winners.

This was repeated the next day, and of the nineteen there were seven winners.

Now she went to talk money. The seven lucky clients could not deny that she indeed had the gift of picking winners. She had given them all four straight in four days and her secret should surely be worth money. Besides, they had all let their bets ride and they had won a lot, an average of more than six hundred dollars.

But she would give no more free tips. She would only sell her complete and exclusive secret for a thousand dollars. And she collected from six of them. The seventh was Mazuma O'Shaunessey.

"I have given you four straight winners, but I cannot give you any more free tips. We will now talk cold turkey."

"O, put it in a basket, Katie."

"Why, what do you mean, sir?"

"I learned it in my cradle. The Inverted Pyramid. You tapped five hundred, and you got besides me how many? Five?"

"Six besides you, seven in all."

"Very good. You pick them nice for a little girl. But isn't that a lot of work for no more than a hatful of money?"

"Six thousand dollars is a large hatful. And there is always one smart alec like you who knows it all."

"Now Kate dear, let's look at it this way. I can really pick all the winners, not seven straights in five hundred, but all five hundred if I wished."

"O bah, you can't fool this little goose."

"O, I could prove it easily enough, but that's showy and I hate to be a show-off. So I suggest that you take my word for it and share my secret with me and give up this penny ante stuff."

"And all you want for your sure thing secret is five thousand dollars or so?"

"Why Kate, I don't want your money. I have so much that it's a burden to me. I only want to marry you."

She looked at him and she was not sure. O, not about marrying him, he was nice enough. She was not sure, she had never been sure, that he was a Wreck.

"Are you?"

"Why Kate, does one Wreck have to ask another that question?"

"I guess not. I'll go ask my uncles what they think. This is something of a decision."

She went to see all her bachelor uncles and asked them what they knew about Mazuma O'Shaunessey.

He was known to all of them.

"He is a competent boy, Kate," said Demetrio Petapolis. "If I do not miscount I once came out a little short on a deal with him. He knows the Virginia City Version, he knows the old Seven-Three-Three, he can do the Professor and His Dog, and the Little Audrey. And he seems to be quite rich. But is he?"

He meant, not is he rich, but—is he a Wreck?

"Does one Wreck have to ask another that question?" said Kate.

"No, I guess not."

Hodl Oskanian knew him too.

"That boy is real cute. It seems in the last deal I had with him he came out a little ahead. It seems that in every deal I have with him he comes out a little ahead. He knows the Denver Deal and the Chicago Cut. He does the Little Old Lady and the Blue Hat. He knows the Silver Lining and the Doghouse and the Double Doghouse. And he seems quite likeable. But is he?"

He meant, not was he likeable, but—was he a Wreck?

"Cannot one Wreck always tell another?" said Kate loftily.

Lars Petersen knew Mazuma too.

"He is a klog pog. He knows the Oslo Puds and the Copenhagen Streg. He knows the Farmer's Wife and the Little Black Dog. He can do the

Seventy-Three and the Supper Club. And he runs more tricks with the Sleepy River than anyone I ever saw, and has three different versions of the Raft and four of Down the Smoke Stack. And all the officers on the bilk squad give him half their pay every week to invest for them. He seems quite smart. But is he?"

He meant, not was he smart, but—is he a Wreck?

"Should one have to ask?" said Kate haughtily.

Her uncle Charley O'Malley also thought well of Mazuma.

"I am not sure but that at last count he was a raol or so ahead of me. He knows the Blue Eyed Drover and the Black Cow. He can do the Brandy Snifter with the best of them, and he isn't bashful with the Snake Doctor. He does a neat variation of the Bottom of the Barrel. He can work the Yellow Glove and the Glastonburry Giveaway. And he seems affable and urbane. But is he?"

He meant, not was he affable and urbane (he was), but—is he a Wreck? Ah, that was the question.

"How can you even ask?" said Kate.

So they were married and began one of the famous love affairs of the century. It went on for four years and each day brought new high adventure. They purged for the good of his soul a Dayton industrialist of an excessive sum of cash and thus restored his proper sense of values and taught him that money isn't everything. They toured the world in gracious fashion and took no more than their ample due for their comfortable maintenance. They relaxed the grip of tight-fisted Frenchmen and retaught them the stern virtues of poverty. They enforced an austere regime of abstinence and hard work on heretofore over-wealthy and over-weight German burghers and possibly restored their health and prolonged their lives. They had special stainless steel buckets made to bury their money in, and these they scattered in many countries and several continents. And they had as much fun as it is allowed mortals to have.

One pleasant afternoon Mazuma O'Shaunessey was in jail in a little town in Scotland. The jailer was gloomy and suspicious and not given to joking.

"No tricks from you now. I will not be taken."

"Just one to show I have the power. Stand back so I can't reach you."

"I'm not likely to let you."

"And hold up a pound note in one hand as tightly as you can. I will only flick my handkerchief and the note will be in my hand and no longer in yours."

"May I defy you. You cannot do it."

He held the note very tightly and closed his eyes with the effort. Mazuma flicked his handkerchief, but the Scotsman was right. He could not do it. This was the only time that Mazuma ever failed. Though the world quivered on its axis (and it did) yet the note was held so tightly that no power could dislodge it. But when the world quivered on its axis the effect was that Mazuma was now standing outside the cell and the Scotsman was within. And when the Chief came some minutes later Mazuma was gone and the Scotch jailer stood locked in the cell, his eyes still closed and the pound note yet held aloft in a grip of steel. So he was fired, or cashiered as the Old Worlders call it, for taking a bribe and letting a prisoner escape. And this is what usually comes as punishment to overly suspicious persons.

Katie still used the Inverted Pyramid and very effectively. Mazuma did not really have an unfailing talent for picking winners. He'd only said that to get Kate to marry him, and it was the best lie he ever told. But he did have an infallible talent for many things, and they thrived.

The first little cloud in the sky came once when they passed a plowman in a field in the fat land of Belgium.

"Ah, there is a happy man," said Mazuma. "Happy at work."

"Happy at work? O my God, what did you say? What kind of words are these, my husband?"

But in the months and years that followed, this frightening incident was forgotten.

The couple became the pride of Wreckville when they returned as they did several times a year and told their stories. Like the time the state troopers ran them down and cornered them with drawn guns.

"O, we don't want to take you in. We'll report that we couldn't catch you. Only tell us how you do it. We don't want to be troopers all our lives."

And the time they ran a little house in Faro Town itself. It was a small upstairs place and Katie played the piano, and they had only one bartender, a

faded little blonde girl with a cast in one eye, and only one table where Mazuma presided. And this where all the other Casinos were palaces that would make Buckingham look like a chicken coop.

And the funny thing is that they took in no money at all. The barmaid would always say all drinks were ten dollars, or failing that they were on the house; as they used no coin and had trays in the register for only tens, fifties, hundreds and thousands. It was too much trouble to do business any other way.

Katie would bait her money jar with several hundred dollar bills and one or two larger, and demurely refuse anything smaller for selections as she didn't want the jar filled up with wrapping paper. So she would tinkle along all night and all drinks were on the house, which was not too many as only three could sit at the bar at once.

And Mazuma never shook or dealt a game. He had only blue chips as he said any other color hurt his eyes. And no matter what the price of the chips, it was legendary and gained zeros as it was retold.

Several of the larger sports came up the stairs out of curiosity. And their feelings were hurt when they were told they were too little to play, for they weren't little at all. So Mazuma sat all night Monday through Friday and never cut a hand or shook a bone.

Then on Saturday night the really big boys came upstairs to see what it was about. They were the owners of the nine big Casinos in town, and six of these gentlemen had to sit on boxes. Their aggregate worth would total out a dollar and thirteen cents to every inhabitant of the U.S.

Katie tinkled tunes all night for a hundred to five hundred dollars a selection, and Mazuma dealt on the little table. And when the sun came up they owned a share of all nine of the big Casinos, and had acquired other assets besides.

Of course these stories of Katie and Mazuma were topped, as about half the Wrecks went on the road, and they had some fancy narrations when they got back to Wreckville.

And then the bottom fell out of the world.

They had three beautiful children now. The oldest was three years old and he could already shake, deal, shuffle, and con with the best of them. He knew the Golden Gambit and the Four Quarters and the Nine Dollar Dog

and Three Fish Out. And every evening he came in with a marble bag full of half dollars and quarters that he had taken from the children in the neighborhood. The middle child was two, but already she could calculate odds like lightning, and she picked track winners in her dreams. She ran sucker ads in the papers and had set up a remunerative mail-order business. The youngest was only one and could not yet talk. But he carried chalk and a slate and marked up odds and made book, and was really quite successful in a small way. He knew the Four Diamond trick and the Two Story Chicken Coop, the Thimblorig Reverse and the Canal Boat Cut. They were intelligent children and theirs was a happy home.

One day Mazuma said, "We ought to get out of it, Kate."

"Out of what?"

"Get out of the business. Raise the children in a more wholesome atmosphere. Buy a farm and settle down."

"You mean the Blue Valley Farmer trick? Is it old enough to be new yet? And it takes nearly three weeks to set it up, and it never did pay too well for all the trouble."

"No, I do not mean the Blue Valley Farmer trick. I don't mean any trick, swindle, or con. I think we should get out of the whole grind and go to work like honest people."

And when she heard these terrible words Katie fell into a dead faint.

That is all of it. He was not a Wreck. He was a common trickster and he had caught the sickness of repentance. The bottom had fallen out of the world indeed. The three unsolvable problems of the Greeks were squaring the circle, trisecting the angle, and re-bottoming the world. They cannot be done.

They have been separated for many years. The three children were reared by their father under the recension and curse of Adam. One is a professor of mathematics, but I doubt if he can figure odds as rapidly as he could when he was one year old. The middle one is now a grand lady, but she has lost the facility of picking track winners in her dreams and much else that made her charming. And the oldest one is a senator from a state that I despise.

And Katie is now the wisest old witch in Wrecktown. But she has never quite been forgiven her youthful indiscretion when she married an Adamite who fell like his ancient father and deigned to work for a living.