

Reading Sign

by Kenneth B. Clarke

The Man From Arizona and the Girl From New York Couldn't See Around the Big Bend in the Trail, But They Read the Clew and They Took the Chance Together.

LANHAM, the owner of the Broken Trigger, sat by the lamp on the big table sewing. It was an incongruous business, for Lanham was tall and large-handed and the thing he was bent upon so seriously was repairing a ridiculously little pair of overalls.

His foreman leaned over the back of a tilted chair watching the operation intently. Across the big knee was spread the seat of the diminutive garment, scarred with a three-cornered tear which had been raised into hard white by overhead strokes with saddle thread, pulled tight.

"She reads like a Lazy L brand," the foreman declared. "An' she sure sets in the right place."

Lanham went on with his task, unresponsive. He was pushing the needle through a puckered ridge of the coarse material with the end of an empty rifle cartridge.

"You're off your gait, you're off to feel like he's settin' on a rawhide rope," the foreman suggested. "Let me take 'em down to the blacksmith shop and flatter 'em some on the anvil."

A jerk of the thread loosened an avalanche of assorted stuff from the small pocket into Lanham's lap. Curiously he fingered the collection and spread the exhibits upon his broad palm. There was a little wad of red wool yarn, the wheel from a broken spur, the dried head of a horned toad, a Mex silver dollar, and a cutglass stopper from a bottle.

Lanham's interest centered upon the stopper. "I wondered what had become of that," he said quietly. "It was here, you know." There was a peculiar gentle emphasis in the way he said "here." "Belongs to a bottle that always stood on her bureau. It held lilac water."

His big hand closed tightly upon the boy's treasure. The foreman lowered his eyes and stared at his boots. "Lilacs grew where I brought her from—and were sort of strong along with our courting."

Lanham rocked the bit of glass on his palm and watched the changing colors gleaming from its facets.

"Little Don probably hooks her memory up pretty close to that bottle. Like a pup holding a scent. She used to let him wet his nose with the stopper."

He restored the stuff to the boy's pocket when his sewing was finished, and, taking the lamp with him, went off to his bedroom. Standing over the cot in a corner across from his own bed, the father lowered the lamp beside the gleaming boy's face. An anxious frown clouded the little lad's expression, as though he were not resting peacefully. Lanham crouched down, upon his heels and softly touched the small hand flung limply across the blanket. At once the child's tightened upon his finger, the child's happy surprise and the smiling lips droopedly whispered, "Muvv'!"

"Two years of solely masculine attention had mounded domestic matters at the ranch crudely awry. Lanham noted that the little hand about his finger was grimy in its creases, that the corners of the boy's mouth were caked with dried sputum, that the tucking of the bed covers was bunched and haphazard. The whole room had an air of dispirited uncleanliness. Lanham's steady gaze roved over the desolate, silent place. They came to rest again, tenderly, upon the boy's face. He gripped the small hand softly and rose to prepare for sleep.

The regular ranch routine went on with unchanging demands upon the father's attention and with unrelieved monotony for the boy until, early in December, a sudden impulse seized upon the cow hands to "make a Christmas for the kid." It caught them collectively. Like a spreading epidemic, and a stir of stalking mystery enveloped the outfit.

By day the brawny, bowlegged horsemen trailed little Don off, singly, and with studied and cunningly indirect questioning sought to arrive at conclusions as to the small lad's secret longings. By night, baffled and uncertain, they secretively tumbled over the bulky mailorder catalog from Chicago, straining for suggestions. The spirit of competition was rife.

Eventually, one by one, they sent away letters with enclosures of money as each narrowed a list of tentative selections to his final choice of a gift preeminent—and each with an enlarged air of elation. Then, as certain notices began to arrive in the mail, they stole away one by one to the express agent at the railroad, a half-day's ride out, and rode in after dark, each craftily hiding a package in a place of inviolate seclusion.

Christmas does not come to the high, horizon-wide mesas of Arizona—it has to be intrigued. Three days before Christmas little Andy Ames, the runt of the outfit, rode away toward the mountain, an unladen packhorse trailing behind him. He returned after dark on Christmas Eve to find that his bunkmates had plucked the cotton stuffing of his quilt all into little pieces to make snow for the tree he was bringing back.

The Chinaman's kitchen mirror had been broken into small bits and tied into a festoon of glittering brilliants. Empty brass shells of assorted calibers, with tin stars and hearts and crescents fashioned from cans, had been strung into dangling garlands.

Candles had been spiked to nothings, and their fervor had become so emotional that a suit of underwear of Bud Sellers had been sacrificed in an attempt to extract the dye to stain the candles red.

After the boy had been herded to bed and the tree had been set up and dressed, the men disappeared in a body only to return, one at a time, with cautious backward glances and hoarse whispers. Each slipped a package from under his coat and passed it to Lanham in suppressed excitement. They gave their varied instructions:

"Open her up, Clint, an' stick her under the tree for His Nibs."

"Peel her down, quiet, an' set her where the light will hit her good."

"Be sure an' tell him this here's from me."

The instructions differed, though all bore the same note of unbecomingly called pride, but the packages were strangely alike in shape and size and weight. Eight of them lay in a row, and Lanham curiously tore open the ends of the wrappings, one after another, and peeked in.

Before going to bed he dug out a package of his own, tossed it on the table, and stared at it in helpless perplexity. It varied from the eight others in no particular of shape, size or weight. He held it in his hands, and he held it in his hands, and he cast it idly into the cobwebbed space behind the doorway and crossed softly to the doorway of the bedroom. For ten minutes or longer he stood somber and quiet, gazing toward the shadowy corner where the little boy lay asleep.

In the morning, when word came to the bunkhouse that little Don was finishing his breakfast and that the big moment of showing him the tree was at hand, the punchers softfooted through the kitchen and dining room, there, by kneeling, crouching, leaning, and tip-toeing they contrived to align their eight heads vertically with the door frame, and at the sound of Lanham's voice calling to Don they opened the door a crack.

Slowly the expectant grins on the brown faces slackened and hung loosely like silts in mail pouches. Their eyes, glinting in the candlelight, widened and remained fixed in fishlike stares. For there, ranged upon the tree like a rack in an armory, stood eight small rifles—eight little .22 Winchesters, as alike as gauge teeth could make them.

The boy came in with Lanham's hand on his shoulder. For a long moment his gaze took in the lighted sea with its barbaric adornments. The surprise was complete, but mostly fixation was his outstanding emotion. And then his eyes dropped to the array of small arms.

The spread of gifts began and ended with rifle. There was naught beside. The effort to play up to his father's expectations was first and firm, but no word or action came to ally the rising lump in his throat. In the end the child in him won over the insecure groundings of manhood. His arms went about the long leg at his side. His face dropped against Lanham's hip, and the stroked touch upon his shoulder loosed a desolate sob from his quivering lips.

The door closed silently before the string of masks peering from the gloom of the dining room. And silently the men straggled back to the bunkhouse, noticing anything but one another.

In the big room, with their backs to the tree, Lanham and little Don sat entwined together in a great leather chair. The lingering last shudders of long sobbing were still shaking the little frame encircled in Lanham's arm.

"What did you want? What would you like, my old son?" he asked gently.

"I don't know. I don't know what," the child quavered. "Only—something."

Late one evening of the following spring, when the checking over the herds had been completed and the range was promising fair, Lanham sauntered over to his foreman's small cabin and asked him to step outside a minute.

The two men leaned over a gate in the faint light from the open door, Lee Winton waiting for Lanham to speak. A horse whickered softly across the corral, and a dark body loomed toward them through the cool dusk. Presently the nibbling lips of a great brown head were thrust into Lanham's hand and the confiding animal nudged him to provoke a fondling. Lanham stroked the velvety nose intently.

"I want to speak of something I've been thinking about since last Christmas," he said, and seemed to be choosing a beginning with especial care. "About my boy," he added. Winton smoothed a cigarette paper in regardful silence.

"I find the little fellow is not part of us here. He is lonely, Lee—damned lonely. He does not listen to the life on the ranch. He needs something to direct his interests—or rather some one to direct them; and pretty soon he will need book schooling."

Another silence followed, and the foreman rolled and rerolled the tobacco of his cigarette.

"If we were to have a woman here," Lanham continued, and handed, "the right kind of a woman—one to take the place of the mother that left him—"

His fingers slowly combed through the tangled mane of the big roan, and he abandoned this beginning as too involved.

"What I've had in mind," he continued presently, "is some one young enough to be understanding and companionable to him—some one interested enough to love him—some one nice in the ways that this outfit lacks. But there's an obvious difficulty."

The foreman ground the glowing end of his match into the gate rail and reflectively exhaled a thin drift of smoke.

"I reckon any female old enough to escape the stigma of we-all-cow waddlers," he commented, "would of pretty nigh outlived her usefulness to little Don." He glanced toward the sound of men's low laughter beyond a lighted doorway at a little distance.

"If there were another way to secure the right person for the boy I would choose it in preference," Lanham stated after several minutes, and

his voice came strangely devoid of its usual gentle modulation. "As it stands, I am going to ask a young woman to marry me, to meet any suggestion of expectation."

"O, I can't tell you how much, dad! She just makes you feel glad, sort of."

About this racket tomorrow, son—did you speak of it first, or did she?"

"Well, I don't know exactly. We stood looking back toward where the monkeys were, and then she looked at me and I looked at her, and then she laughed that glad way and I laughed—and then I reckon we both said it right together, sort of—'Let's come again tomorrow'."

At their meeting to start the expedition the following day Lanham asked to join them. At the zoo he loaded Don with peanuts and turned him loose upon the monkeys, taking before speaking until a jumpsy pulse had seized him, to have the affair over with as quickly as possible; either to declare himself fairly and squarely before this unsuspecting young creature and to face her probable amazement, or to abandon the thing forthwith. He had decided, abruptly, to see it through.

Leading her to a bench in the open, where the least attention would be attracted, he leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and waited for the girl to speak. He was not to remember little things he runs across on a trail. The depth of a hoof print, the way a twig has been bent, the look in a man's eye—anything may be sign to him and tell him things he needs to know. From sign he comes to pretty definite conclusions about the world and the people in it. And that must be the way of his answer. The girl's hands were clasped tightly upon her knees and again she looked over her treetops.

"Six years ago, when I was 20," she continued, "with one quick thrust Fate struck at me to crumple up my happiness—look away a father, home, comfort and a carefree sense of trust—and a man who had talked love, but who disappeared when it was found there was no wealth. And now it is mine to strike back and retake the gladness of living."

At 26 with disillusionment behind one—well, one is content to find happiness in simpler realities. You bring those to me, honestly, generously—and love is neither offered nor asked. I could feel honored and safe in your care always. So let me have my big moment of decision now. She dropped her hand in Lanham's and their fingers closed together. "I will go with you—around the bend," she said.

The handclasp between them had only the solid quality of binding an agreement, but it was not until the girl released her fingers that Lanham relaxed his hold upon her hand and roused from unnoticing abstraction.

At the close of the day Lanham brought back confused impressions in which monkeys and elephants and his boy's laughter and the girl's flushed cheeks were intermingled as in a dream. It seemed as though their talk on the bench must be a dream also, and that he must await some confirmation from her before accepting it as a reality.

At the apartment steps again at parting Lanham watched the girl as she knelt before little Don with his arms about him to say good night—and then he knew.

"You will have many things to do, of course. How long—do you think?" he asked her.

"A few clothes, some books to pack—a week, ten days—what does it matter? Why wait?" she asked.

And when she was gone, Lanham faltered and stood confused. But the girl answered lightly and steadily.

"On the day you may plan to leave. At least I will hold to that much woman reserve."

From the pastor's study in an inconspicuous little church they went directly to the train; and in the early evening—three days later, Lanham brought the buckboard around to the adobe station for the drive to the ranch.

Darkness fell before they reached the ranch, and as they drew into the fold of some low hills they encountered a blackness of light that made Helen wonder at the calm assurance with which Lanham sent the horses on at an unchecked rapid pace. She could hear the slap and crack of harness ahead of her, but not a thing could she see of the team or the road. Instinctively she cowered low on the seat and clung closely to the little lad beside her as though to ward off a mysteriously palpable something that threatened to close in and immerse her.

Quietly Lanham's voice came out of the dark to soothe her unspoken misgivings.

"Another mile and you will see our lights at the Broken Trigger, but it will take us more than half an hour to reach them. You will find all of this very beautiful in the morning light."

The foreman and the Chinaman were the only ones to offer a welcome when they arrived; the men reticently kept to the bunkhouse. To Helen it was as though she had been carried blindfolded and placed upon a dimly lit stage, strangely set and cast for some fantastic pantomime.

The Chinaman grinned and ducked and hurried away with a slap-slap of cushioned feet to prepare a supper. Lee Winton carried the trunk to Helen's room and shyly gave her hand one mighty pump in acknowledgment of his introduction; then his high heels clacked woodenly across the veranda floor and he slipped away into the dark. And so Helen Lanham found herself around the great bend, with her heart beating queerly.

Coming from her room the next morning, she found Lanham waiting for her, standing before the wide fireplace.

"It looks pretty rough and tumbled," he said, indicating the big room. "I'm seeing it through your eyes, and I'd

no idea it was quite so awful. But you will know what it needs. When you are ready I'll give you a few of the boys and you can hold a little round-up in here."

But Helen was not noticing the room. Her eyes were upon Lanham, bright with wonder. Booted and clothed for the saddle, he seemed to be even broader of shoulder and taller by inches. In her gray doekin breeches and a soft leather vest edged with a narrow band of Indian beadwork, a dull blue scarf knotted loosely about his throat, and silvered spurs at his heels, he seemed to have regained his native element. The little power and gentle, dominant taste of the man stood forth with a touch of primitive splendor. She had not thought of him as handsome until this moment.

Feeling her gaze upon him, he glanced down at his boots and explained:

"I've been trying out a horse I wired Lee to break in for you. After he had fast well see if you are pleased with him. There is a little butte three miles from here where I would like you to meet 'Arizona'."

"I feel that I am just meeting you," Helen answered. "I wonder if I, too, can ever belong like you do to this land."

The following day Helen held her round-up. She could wait no longer to lay her hands upon the possibilities of the big room with its Navajo rugs and its general spirit of frontier homeliness and rugged comfort. The boys came at Lanham's command, alert and blundering before the sweet voice and laughing dark eyes of the little "herd boss." Their embarrassment took the form of wild-eyed, plunging rushes to do her will. They saluted upon furniture and upon the ground, and a great bend in the trail. To stake one's whole fortune on a single act of judgment!

"But I never meant—you do not have to decide—"

"No, I don't want it spoiled by waiting. I wonder over in our trails crossed but once, and now as they cross again you bail me and beckon to follow on. Something in me cries out to just the way of it. I didn't know anything ever could be like that. It's a feeling, a feeling that I can't describe, but it's the way of my answer. The girl's hands were clasped tightly upon her knees and again she looked over her treetops.

"Six years ago, when I was 20," she continued, "with one quick thrust Fate struck at me to crumple up my happiness—look away a father, home, comfort and a carefree sense of trust—and a man who had talked love, but who disappeared when it was found there was no wealth. And now it is mine to strike back and retake the gladness of living."

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"I fear I put it badly."

"I think you put it gloomily. Now, assuming you wish to induce me to come, why not meet me in the morning instead of dispiriting me over the prospect?"

Lanham looked up quickly. There was no flippancy in the girl's quietly humorous gaze. After all, his suggestion was obviously logical; he was not presumed to be making love to her.

"I really mean to offer all that I have to give," he said. "You would be leaving every familiar association and giving your life's happiness into my keeping. I would try to make it secure. Love you would have, I know, from little Don. I would give you every material comfort and all kindly consideration in my power. I would protect you in every way. And you would have the feel of sweeping deserts, the clear air and light, and the sweetness of purple evenings—the things I believe you said must mean to you 'Arizona.' I'm afraid this is all."

"That is much." The girl spoke with quiet feeling. She looked off over the treetops and color from aroused emotion tinged her cheeks. Silence fell between them, but it was a pause that held Lanham tense as he watched her.

"How strange," she said, speaking as in a reverie, "how different from any way I had thought of it as coming. She turned to face Lanham and the light of excitement was in her eyes. "The way of 'Arizona'!"

"You must see—"

"I do see. It isn't that I am confused, or bewildered; it is the thrill of having you. I don't know what it is, but I know it. And that must be the way of my answer. The girl's hands were clasped tightly upon her knees and again she looked over her treetops.

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away, Helen brought out the mysterious package and asked Lanham why Bud Sellers should have howled like a wolf when he discovered it. She mimicked Bud's actions, and Lanham found himself laughing woeheartedly for the first time in many years in his own house.

He untied the package and told Helen the story of their great Christmas fiasco of the winter before.

"It will help you to understand how much I appreciate all this," and he pointed about the room. "And you—and all you mean to us out here! This little gun marks the time when I first started to find you."

As the weeks of early summer slipped by on the Broken Trigger, Lanham watched with an indefinable sense of disturbance the transformation in Helen. He had wanted her to be happy for herself—his wish had been to have her reflect a spirit of warmth and light-heartedness about his boy; but it had not entered his calculations that he himself should be affected.

Into her eyes had come to stay something of the look they had held for a moment on the day he had first met her when she had spoken so bravely about the "Arizona" of her dreams. Her voice had become softer, as though toned to the pervading quiet of the hills, and yet there was about her an exultant note of unaltered animation. From morning until dark she was intently occupied, alert and responsive to every new impression. The varied activities of the men were her delight. The boy and the home were her charges, and both received a new burst of life under her guiding hand.

The boy was captivated by her. The old dog left his sunny spots by the kitchen and followed her about with fawning grin and waving tail. Her presence amongst the punchers incited them to breakneck capers of horsemanship. They yearned for dragons to slay at her feet. Not a creature on the home range seemed to be left unmoved by her blithe charm. But Lanham was stirred by vague resentment. It was not in the bargain that she should involve him. He had expected his interests to hold to general outer circle of guardianship—and it was not so.

Yet, attempting to define any overt attitude of attraction toward him, he was compelled to admit that she held unvaryingly to a plane of cordial impersonality. And this but added to his disquietude a querulous sense of pique. She seemed, in this light, irritatingly acceptant and content in their anomalous position.

Returning to the big room one evening after tucking Don into bed, Helen lingered by a piano. She trailed her fingers wistfully over the keys.

"Would you mind," she asked, "if I were to play a bit?"

"I didn't know you played," Lanham answered in surprise.

"There is no—it wouldn't spoil anything if I were to. It's just a hobby I've taken up. I haven't wanted to ask before."

"If there is any music in it—by all means. The old relic 'was just dumped on me in the cleanup of a bad debt. I'd been wondering what to do with it."

With a happy laugh Helen sat down and struck a series of low, blending chords.

"You don't know how afraid of you I've been since you came in," she smiled over her shoulder. "A funny old man with a wobbly wicker and two burros drove in today and asked if we had things to be mended or any pianos to be tuned. I let him go ahead. And then I was afraid." She lightly followed through an old melody as she talked.

Lanham watched her through the blue haze of his cigar smoke. A stock journal slid from his lap to the floor unnoted. In her dim corner the mellow light from the lamp, absorbed in the somber shadows, was reflected only by the gently awaying shoulders in light gown and scarf. She appeared as a phantom wrought by the spell of harmony—an evanescent figure of fancy that might vanish when the music ceased.

As her hand swung out to the lower keys Lanham's eye caught the golden glint of the ring he had given her. His attention became fixed in watching for the flicker of it. For a while the music was lost upon him as his thoughts held to the empty significance of the ring.

(Continued on Page 5.)

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