

The Rancher's Lady

The Woman from Tascosa

by Elmore Leonard, 1925-2013

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THEY CAME TO Anton Chico on the morning stage, Willis Calender and his son, Jim; the man getting out of the coach first, stretching the stiffness from his back and squaring the curled-brim hat lower over his eyes, and then the boy, hesitating, squinting, rubbing his eyes before jumping down to stand close to his dad. It had been a long, all-night trip from the Puerto de Luna station and a six-hour ride in the wagon before that up from the Calender place in the Yeso Creek country.

Willis Calender had come to Anton Chico to marry a woman he'd never met except in letters. Three letters from him—the first two to get acquainted, the third to ask her to be his wife. She'd answered all of them, saying, yes, she was interested in the marriage state and finally she thought living down on the Yeso would be just fine. Which was exactly what the marriage broker said she would

say. Her name was Clare Conway and she was to come over from Tascosa and meet Willis.

He brought Jim along because Jim was eleven, old enough to make the trip without squirming and wanting to stop every second mile, and because he was anxious for Jim to meet this woman before she became his mother. Then, the trip back to Yeso Creek would give the boy time to get used to her. Just bringing her home suddenly and saying, well, Jim, here's your new ma walking in the door, would be expecting too much of the boy; like asking him to pretend everything was still the same. Jim had been good friends with his mother—though he didn't cry at the funeral with all the people around—and he had a picture of her in his mind as fresh as yesterday. Willis Calender knew it, and this was the only thing about remarrying that bothered him. Little Molly was different. Molly was three when her mother died, and Willis wasn't sure if the little girl even remembered her still. The first few days with the new mother might be difficult, but it would only be a matter of time. It didn't require the kind of getting used to her that it did with Jim; so Molly had been left home with their three-mileaway neighbors, the Granbys. Molly was four now, though, and she needed a mother. She was the main reason Willis Calender had written to the Santa Fe marriage broker, who was said to have the confidence of every eligible woman from the Panhandle to the Sangre de Cristos.

The boy looked about the early-morning street and then to his dad, who was raising his arms to take the mail sack the driver was lowering.

He saw the dark suit coat strain across the shoulders and half expected to hear it rip but hoped it wouldn't, because it was his father's only coat that made up a suit. Usually it was hanging with mothballs in the pockets because cattle aren't fussy about how a man looks. It was funny to see his dad wearing it. When was the last time? Then he remembered the bright, silent afternoon of the funeral.

Maybe she won't be here, the boy thought, watching the driver come down off the wheel and take the mail sack and go up the steps of the express office. A man in range clothes was standing there against a post, and as the boy looked that way, their eyes met. The man said, „Hello, Jimmy,” his mouth forming a funny half-smile in the beard stubble that covered his mouth and jaw.

As Calender looked up, surprise seemed to sadden his weathered face. He put his big hand behind the boy's shoulder and moved him forward toward the steps and said, „Hello, Dick.” Only that.

Dick Maddox was still against the post, his thumbs crooked in his belt. Another man in range clothes was on the other side of the post from him. Maddox nodded and said, „Will.” Then added, „I'm surprised you brought your boy along.”

„Why would that be?” Calender said.

„Well, it ain't many boys see their dad get married.”

„How'd you know about that?”

„Things get around,” Maddox said easily. „You know, I was surprised Clare didn't ask one of us fellas to give her away.”

CALENDER LOOKED at the man steadily, trying to hide his surprise, and hesitated so it wouldn't show in his voice. „You know Miss Conway?”

Maddox glanced at the man next to him. „He says do I know Miss Conway.” Both of them grinned. „Well, I'd say anybody who's followed the Canadian to Tascosa knows Miss Conway, and that's just about everybody.”

The words came like a slap in the face, but Calender thought: Hold on to yourself. And he kept his voice natural when he said, „What do you mean by that?”

Maddox straightened slightly against the post. „You’re marrying her, you must’ve known she worked at the Casa Grande.”

Calender was suddenly conscious of his boy looking up at him. He said, „Come on, Jim.” And, glancing at Dick Maddox: „We’ve got to move along.”

They started up the street toward the two-story hotel, and Maddox called, „What time’s the wedding?” The man with him laughed. Calender heard them but he didn’t look around.

When they were farther up the street, the boy said, „Who was that man?”

„Maddox is his name,” Calender said. „He used to be old man Granby’s herd boss. Now I guess he works around here.”

They were silent, and then the boy said, „Why’d you get mad when he started talking about her?”

„Who got mad?”

„Well, it looked like it.”

„Most of the time that man doesn’t know what he’s talking about,”

Will Calender said. „Maybe I looked mad because I had to stand there and be civil while he wasted air.”

„All he said was other people knew her,” the boy said.

„All right, let’s not talk about it any more.”

„I didn’t see anything wrong in that.” Calender didn’t answer.

„Maybe he was good friends with her.”

Calender turned on the boy suddenly, but his judgment held him, and after a moment he spoke quietly: „I said let’s not talk about it any more.”

But it stayed in his mind, and now there was an urgency inside him, an impatience to meet this woman face to face and try to read there what her past had been. It was strange. From the letters he had never doubted she was anything but a good woman, but now—And with this uncertainty the fear began to grow, the fear that he’d see something on her face, some mark of an easy woman.

Damn Maddox! Why’d he have to say it in front of the boy! But he could be just talking, insinuating what isn’t so, Calender thought. A man like that ought to have his tongue cut out. All he’s good for is drink and talk. Ask old man Granby, he got his bellyful of Maddox and fired him.

They went into the hotel, into the quiet, dim lobby with its highbeamed ceiling. Their eyes lifted to the second-floor balcony which extended all the way around, except for the front side, so that all of the hotel’s eleven rooms looked down on the lobby, where, around the balcony support posts, were cane-bottom Douglas chairs and cuspidors and here and there parts of newspapers. The room was empty, except for the man behind the desk who watched them indifferently. His hair glistened flat on an angle over his forehead, and a matchstick barely showed in the corner of his mouth.

„Miss Conway,” Will Calender said. The name was loud in the highceilinged room, and he felt embarrassed hearing himself say it.

„You’re Mr. Calender?”

„That’s right.” Calender thought: How does he know my name? He stared at the room clerk closely. If he starts to grin, I’ll hit him.

„Miss Conway is in number five.” The clerk nodded vaguely up the balcony.

Calender hesitated. „Would she be—up yet?”

The clerk started to grin, and Calender thought: Watch yourself, boy.

But the clerk just said, „Why don't you go up and knock on the door?”

The boy frowned, watching his father climb the stairs and move along the balcony. He was walking funny, like his feet hurt. Maybe she won't be there, the boy thought hopefully. Maybe she changed her mind. No, she'll be there. He pictured her coming down the stairs, then smiling and patting his cheek and saying, „So this is Jimmy.“ A smile that would be gone and suddenly come back again. „My, but Jimmy is a finelooking young man. How old are you, Jimmy?” She'll be fat and smelly like Mrs. Granby and those other ladies down on Yeso Creek. How come all women get so fat? All except Ma. She wasn't fat and she smelled nice and she never called me Jimmy. He felt a funny feeling remembering his mother, the sound of her voice and the easy way she did things without complaining or getting excited. What did Molly have to have a mother for? She's gotten along for a year without one.

He saw the door open, but caught only a glimpse of the woman. His father went inside then, but the door remained open.

The room clerk grinned and winked at the boy. „Now, if that was me, I think I'd close the door.”

A moment later they came out of the room. The boy watched his father close the door and follow the woman along the balcony to the stairs and then down. The woman was younger than he'd imagined her, much younger, with a funny hat and blond hair fixed in a bun. And she wasn't fat; if anything, skinny. Her face was slender, the skin pale-clear and her eyes seemed sad. The boy looked at her until she got close.

„This here is my son,“ Will Calender said. „We left Molly at the Granbys'. She's only four years old”—he smiled self-consciously—„like I told you in the letters.”

The woman smiled back at him. She seemed ill at ease but she said, „How do you do?” to the boy, and her voice was calm and without the false enthusiasm of Will Calender's.

The boy said, „Ma'am,” not looking at her face now but noticing her slender white hands holding the ends of the crocheted shawl in front of her.

A silence followed, and Will Calender suggested that they could get something to eat. He had intended mentioning Maddox's name up in the room then watch her reaction, but there hadn't been time. She didn't look like the kind Maddox hinted she was, did she? Maybe Maddox was just talking. She was better-looking than he'd expected. Those eyes and that low, calm voice. Dick Maddox better watch his mouth.

They went to the cafe next door for breakfast. Calender and the boy ordered eggs and meat, but Clare Conway just took coffee, because she wasn't very hungry. Most of the time they ate in silence. Every now and then Will Calender could hear himself chewing and he'd move his fork on the plate or stir at his coffee with the spoon scraping the bottom of the cup. Clare said the coffee was very good. And, maybe a minute later: It's going to be a nice day. It's so dry out here you can stand the extra heat. Then it was Will's turn. Where you from originally? ... New Orleans... I never been there but I hear it's a nice town... It's all right... Silence... How long'd you live in Tascosa? ... Five years. My husband was with one of the cattle companies... Oh... He died three years ago... Silence... That's right, you told me in your letter...

That's right, I did... Silence... What've you been doing since then? ... I took a position... Calender's jaw was set... At the Casa Grande? ... Clare Conway blushed suddenly. She nodded and took a sip of coffee in the silence.

There were two men at a table near them and Will Calender had the feeling one nudged the other, and they both grinned, looking over, then looked away quickly when Calender shot a glance toward them.

Calender passed the back of his hand across his mouth and cleared his throat. „Miss Conway, I planned on ordering some stores this morning, long as I was here. They're hauled down to Puerto de Luna, and I pick 'em up there. Some seed and flour“—he cleared his throat again—„and I have to speak to the justice yet.“ He looked quickly toward the front window, though it wasn't necessary because Clare's eyes were on her coffee cup.

„Jim, here, will stay with you.“ The boy looked at him with a plea in his eyes, and Will scowled. Then he rose and walked out without looking at the woman.

Standing in front of the hotel, Dick Maddox looked over toward the cafe as Calender came out, putting on his hat. Maddox glanced at the three men with him, and they grinned as he looked back toward Calender, who was coming toward them now.

„You married yet, Will?“

Calender glanced at Maddox's closed face, at the beard bristles and the cigarette and the eyes in the shadow of the hat brim. „Not yet,“ he said, and looked straight ahead again, not slowing his stride.

Maddox waited until he was looking at Calender's back. He drew on the cigarette and exhaled and said slowly, „Some men will marry just about anything.“

Calender's boots sounded on the planking one, two, three, then stopped. He came around. „Do you mean me, Dick?“

A SMILE TOUCHED the corner of Dick Maddox's mouth. „Old man Granby used to have a saying: If the shoe fits, wear it.“

„You can talk plainer than that.“

„How plain, Will?“

„Talk like a man for a change.“

„Well, as a man, I'm wondering if you're going to go ahead and marry this—Miss Conway.“ One of the men behind him laughed but cut it off.

„What if I am?“

Maddox shrugged. „Every man to his own taste.“

Calender stepped closer to him. „Dick, if I was married to that woman and you said what you have—you'd be dead right now.“

„That's opinion, Will.“ Maddox smiled because he was sure he could take Will Calender and he wanted to make sure the three men with him knew it.

Calender said, „The point is, I'm not married to her yet. Not yet. If you don't come out with what's on your mind now, you better not come out with it about two hours from now.“

Maddox shook his head. „You're a warnin' man, Will.“

„What did she do in Tascosa?“ Calender said bluntly.

Maddox hesitated, grinning. „Worked at the Casa Grande.“

„And that's what?“

„You never been to Tascosa?“

„I just never saw the place.“

„Well, the Casa Grande's where a sweaty trail hand goes for his drink, gamblin', and girls.” Maddox paused. „I could draw you a picture, Will.“

„Dick, if you're pullin' a joke—”

„Ask anybody in town.”

Calender looked at the hat-brim shadow and the eyes, the eyes that held without wavering. Then he turned and went up the street. From his office window, Hillpiper, the Anton Chico Justice of the Peace, watched Will Calender cross the street. The office was above the jail and offered a view of sun, dust, and adobe; there was nothing else to see in Anton Chico, unless you were looking down the streets east, then you'd see the Pecos.

Hillpiper sat down at his desk, hearing the boots on the stairs, and when the knock came he said, „Come in, Will.”

„How'd you know it was me?”

„Sit down.” Hillpiper smiled. „You had an appointment for this morning, and I've got a window.” Hillpiper wore silver-rim spectacles for close work, but he looked over them to Calender sitting across the desk from him.

Calender said, „You know what everybody in town's saying?”

Hillpiper shook his head. „Not everybody.”

„They're talking about this woman I'm to marry.”

„I'll say it again. Not everybody.”

Calender's raw-boned face was tightening, and his voice was louder.

„How can they know so much about her—and me, the man that's to marry her, not know anything?”

„It's happened before,” Hillpiper said.

„You heard what they're saying?”

„I heard Maddox in the saloon last night. Is he the everybody you're talking about?”

„He's enough. But it's what she is!” Calender said savagely. „What she didn't tell in her letters!”

„Three letters,” Hillpiper said mildly. Calender had told him about it when he made the arrangements and set the date: the marriage broker in Santa Fe writing to him, then writing to the woman. Hillpiper had told him it was all right as far as he was concerned, since he didn't see why two people had to love each other to get along. Love's something that might come, but if it didn't—look at all the marriages getting on without it. And Calender had said, That's right. I never thought of that. See, my little girl's the main reason.

„In three letters,” Hillpiper went on, „a woman hardly has time to open up her heart.”

„She could have told me what she did!”

„Just what does she do, Will?”

„You heard Maddox.”

„I want to hear it from you.”

„She worked at the Casa Grande!” Calender flared. „How do you want me to say it?”

Hillpiper put his palms on the desk and leaned forward. „All right, Will, she worked in a saloon. She danced with trail hands, maybe sang a little and smiled more than was natural to get the boys to buy the extra drink they'd a'bought anyway. And that's all she's done, regardless of how Maddox makes a dozen words sound like a whole story. Why she did that kind of work, I don't know. Maybe she had to because there was nothing else for a girl to do and she still had to eat like anybody else. Maybe it killed her to do it. Or”—Hillpiper's

voice was quieter and he shrugged—„maybe she liked doing it. Maybe she forgot where she carried her morals—assuming what she was doing is morally wrong. By most men’s standards it is wrong for a female to work in a saloon, your standards too or you wouldn’t be here with your face tied in a knot. But those same men have a hell of a good time with the females when they’re at the Casa Grande.”

Hillpiper smiled faintly. „You were always a little stricter than most men anyway, Will. Seems like most of your life you’ve been a hardworking, Bible-reading family man, with no time for places like the Casa Grande. You’ve sweated your ranch into something pretty nice, something most other men wouldn’t have the patience or the guts to do. And I can see you not wanting to chance ruining all you’ve built—ranch or family. That’s why I was a little surprised when you of all people came in with this mail-order romance idea. I suspect, now that I think about it, you had the idea if a girl wants to get married she’s the simon-pure family type and nothing else. You had a good woman before, Will; so you expected one just as good this time.“

Hillpiper leaned a little closer, his eyes on Calender's weathered face. „Will,“ Hillpiper said. „You might be shocked a little bit, but when you get to heaven you’re going to see a lot of faces you never expected to see. Folks who got up there on God’s standards and not man’s. For all you know, you’re liable to even see Dick Maddox—though I suppose that would be stretching divine mercy a little thin.” Anton Chico’s Justice of the Peace leaned back in his swivel chair, his coat opening to show a gold watch chain across his vest. His hand came out of a side pocket with a cigar, and with a match from a vest pocket he lit it, puffing a cloud of smoke. When he looked up, Calender was standing.

„What’ve you decided, Will?“

„I’ve got my kids to think about.”

„It’s your problem.” Hillpiper said this in a kindly way, stating a fact. „If you’ve decided not to go through with it, that’s your business.”

Will Calender nodded. „I suppose I should pay her stage fare back to Tascosa.“

„That would be nice, Will,” Hillpiper said mildly.

Calender thanked him and went out, down the stairs and into the street. Crossing to the other side, he felt awkward and self-conscious.

The suit coat held tight across the shoulders and he could feel his big hands hanging too far out of the sleeves, and with nothing to hold on to.

It’s gotten hot, he thought, pulling his hat lower. Maybe the dryness makes it easier on some people, but it’s still hot. And then he thought: I’d better tell her before I buy the stage ticket.

DICK MADDOX was still in front of the hotel, but now more men were there. It had gotten around that Maddox was having some fun with Will Calender, so they drifted over casually from here and there, the ones who knew Maddox standing closest to him, laughing at what he said. The rest were all along the hotel’s shady ramada. One of the men saw Calender coming and he nudged Maddox, who looked up, then pretended he wasn’t concerned, until Calender was close to the hotel entrance.

„You change your mind, Will?“

Calender stopped and breathed out wearily, „If you showed as much concern for your own business, you’d be a well-to-do man.”

„You can’t take kiddin’, can you?“

„Why should I have to?“

„You got a lot to learn, Will.“

Calender shrugged, because he was tired of this, and went inside.

The boy was sitting alone, with his heels hooked in the wooden rungs of the chair. When he saw his father he jumped up quickly.

Calender looked about to be certain the woman was not in the lobby.

„Where is she?“ he asked the boy.

„She went upstairs. All of a sudden she just started crying and went upstairs.“

„What?“

„It was when they started talking. We were sitting here, and then her chin started to shake—you know—and then she run upstairs.“

„Who was talking? The men outside?“ The boy nodded hurriedly, and Calender could see that he was frightened and trying to hide it and at the same time was not sure what it was all about.

„What did they say?“

„Just one of them, the rest were laughing most of the time. He was telling them—“the boy said it slowly as if he'd memorized it—„he said some women didn't know their place. They think they can live in the gutter then go out when they want and brush against people like nothing's coming off. He was talking loud so we could hear every word and he said a man would be a fool to marry a woman like that and have her brushing against his kids with her gutter ways. It was like that, what he said. Then he spoke your name and he said he'd bet anybody five dollars American you'd changed your mind now about getting married.“

„That's when she run upstairs.“

The boy frowned, looking at his father, watching his eyes go up to the room. „Why'd he have to say things like that? We were sitting here talking—getting acquainted.“

Calender looked at the boy and saw that he was grinning.

„You know she never once asked me how old I was or if I knew my reader or things like that. She talked to me about affairs and interesting things like I was grown up, like Ma used to do. And, Pa, she called me Jim! Can you imagine that? She called me Jim! If her hair was darker and her nose a little different, I'd swear she was Ma!“

„Don't say things like that!“ Calender was conscious of his voice, and he said quietly, „There's the difference of night and day.“

„Well, her voice is different too, and maybe she's a speck taller, though that could be the hat. I never seen Ma in a regular hat. But outside of that, they sure are alike.“

„You know what you're saying, comparing this woman with your mother?“

The boy looked at him questioningly, but the trace of a smile was still on his face. „I'm just saying they're alike, that's all. Maybe they don't look so much alike, but they sure are alike.“ The boy smiled; he was sure his explanation was clear because he understood it so well himself.

Calender was looking at the boy closely now. „What if she's done something bad?“

„Pa, little Molly's doing bad things all the time. That's just the way girls are. Most times they're not doing serious things, so they have more time to get themselves into trouble.“

Calender's eyes remained on the boy. Calender asked: „You think Molly will like her?“

„Couple of bad women like them will get along just fine.“ The boy grinned.

Calender left him abruptly, going up the stairs. In a few minutes he came back down, and in front of him was Clare Conway.

They walked across the lobby. Nearing the door, the woman hesitated and looked up at Will Calender. She was unsure and afraid. It was in her wide-open eyes, in the way her fingers held the ends of the crocheted shawl. Then she moved on again as if not under her own power—when Will touched her elbow and said to the boy, „Come on, Jim.“

And when they were out on the ramada the woman's eyes were looking down at her hands; she could feel Will Calender holding her elbow, she could feel the guiding pressure of his hand, and moved to the right along the ramada, along the line of silent men, hearing only her footsteps and the footsteps of the man at her side. The hand on her elbow tightened. She was being turned gently, and there was no longer the sound of footsteps and when she looked up a man was close in front of her, a man with heavy beard bristles.

„Miss Conway,“ Calender said. „This is Mr. Maddox. He's had such a keen interest in our business, I thought you might like to meet him.“

„Now, Will—“ Maddox said, looking at Calender strangely.

„And, Dick,“ Calender went on, „this is Miss Conway. Isn't there something you wanted to say to her?“

„Will—“

„Maybe you'd just like to tip your hat like a gentleman.“

Maddox was staring at Calender almost dumbfounded, but slowly his face relaxed as he realized what Calender was doing in front of all these men and he said mildly, grinning, „Now, Will, I don't know if I want to do that or not.“

Calender's fist came around suddenly, unexpectedly, driving against Maddox's jaw, changing the smile to lopsided surprise and sending him back off the ramada into the street. Calender followed, and hit him again and this time Maddox went down, his hat falling off in front of him. Maddox started to rise, but Calender came for him again. Maddox hesitated, then eased down and sat in the street, looking up at Calender.

„One other thing, Dick,“ Will said. „I hear you're taking bets there isn't going to be a wedding today.“ He glanced back at the crowd of men in the shade. „Who's holding the stakes?“

There was a silence, then someone called, „Nobody'd bet him.“

Calender beckoned to the man. „Come here.“ He brought a fivedollar gold piece out of his pants pocket and gave it to the man. „Dick Maddox'll give you one just like this. Now you add the two up and have that much ready for me when I get back.“

He walked to the ramada. The tension was gone. Some of the men were whispering and talking, some just looking out at Maddox still sitting in the street.

The boy's face was beaming as he watched his father. Clare came toward him.

„You ripped the seam of your coat up the back,“ she said.

He felt her hand on his back pulling the cloth together. „Gives me a little more room,“ he said, conscious of the men watching him.

„It's your good coat, though,“ the woman said. „I'll mend it soon as we get home.“

