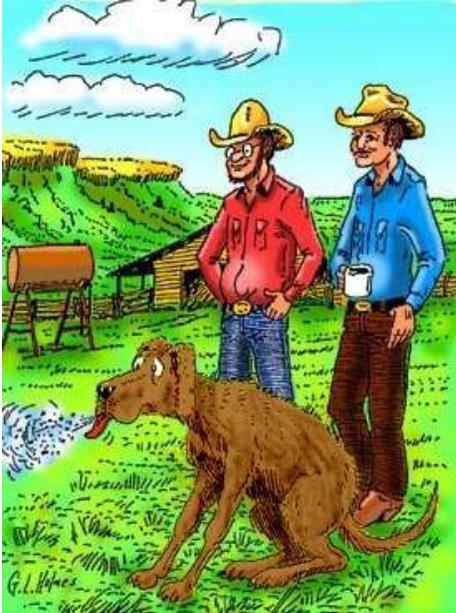


Chapter Three

No Dance for The Cowboy



Hey, let's get something straight right now. Just because a dog snaps at ashes, that doesn't mean...

One of the very most important functions of a Head of Ranch Security is research and development. Your R & D work (that's what we call it, R & D) your R & D work is terribly important to the overall security program of the ranch, don't you see.

We must constantly test new procedures and techniques, otherwise we would never know that some are better than others. All the great minds of science have taken the risk of testing new ideas.

Today, we remember only their successes. We forget that they had the courage to test bold concepts that others thought ridiculous and that they were laughed at and ridiculed.

Loper had a blue coffee mug hooked in the finger of his right hand. Written on the side of it—the mug, not the finger or the hand—written on the side of the mug were the words, "Team Roping: America's Favorite Way of Going Broke."

And he was pointing at me. "What do you reckon goes through a dog's mind that makes him want to chase ashes?"

"Mind? I wouldn't bet that Hank even has one. I think he was brain-dead at birth."

Very funny.

Certain people will laugh at daring ventures, and the bigger the laugh the smaller the mind.

Yes, Slim and Loper laughed at my latest experiment into Cinder Flotation and Airborne Ash Interception procedures, but that was a tiny price to pay for the...

Boy, those ashes really left a lousy taste in my mouth. I couldn't get rid of it. I licked and spat...spat...spot... sput..and pawed my tongue, and by George, the terrible taste remained. And of course the Small Minds loved it.

That was okay. I didn't need their approval. Their hooting and laughing didn't bother me

at all, and Drover would pay for luring me into this.

And don't forget that one of the Happy Cowboys had just blown up the garbage barrel, caught his hair on fire, and had come close to torching the entire ranch.

With that, I will rest my case.

Loper turned to Slim and studied his burned hair and whiskers. "Your hair got burned."

"I noticed."

"You look pretty silly."

Slim dug into his jeans pocket and pulled out a quarter. "Here. Go call someone who cares that I look silly, 'cause I sure don't."

Loper took a sip of coffee. "You should. You're going to a dance tonight."

"I can't come."

"Give me one good reason why you can't come."

Slim hitched up his jeans and glared at Loper. "No, I'll give you five reasons. First off, I can't dance. Second, I don't want to learn. Third, I don't have a date. Fourth, I couldn't get a date even if I wanted one, which I don't. And fifth, I just had a grass fire in my hair and I look goofy."

Loper took another sip of coffee. "I heard a rumor that Viola wants to come but doesn't have a date."

"I'm sorry to hear that. She's a fine lady."

"She could teach you the Two Step."

"No thanks."

"Sally May could trim up your hair."

"No woman has ever cut my hair and no woman is fixing to start. They don't know how to cut men's hair."

Loper rolled his eyes. "Who do you think cuts mine?"

"I thought you just stuck your head into the lawn mower. That's what it looks like half the time."

"Well, I don't know why I'm arguing. I don't care if you come to the dance or not."

"Good."

"We'll have twice as much fun without you."

"Good."

"You can just stay home with the dogs."

"Fine. Old Hank don't care what my hair looks like, do you Hankie?" He shifted his gaze to me. I, uh, lowered my head and turned away. "Dumb dog."

Loper burst out laughing and started back to the house. "See? Nobody wants to be around a crabby, gripey, ill-tempered old bachelor cowboy, and that goes double for me."

"Fine."

"I hope you're miserable all night."

"I'll be asleep, and I'll enjoy every minute of it."

Loper went into the house, muttering under his breath.

That left me and Slim. I turned my back on him and refused to look him in the eye. He noticed.

"Well, what's wrong with you?"

Nothing, nothing at all. I would get over it.

"Is it my hair?"

No. His hair meant nothing to me. It was just that...okay, maybe I was disappointed that he was passing up a chance to bring Miss Viola up to our ranch for the dance.

See, I'd been sweet on Miss Viola for a long time. Remember the Halloween night when Slim asked her over to his place for supper? We got along great that evening.

She liked dogs, and she especially liked ME. I won't say that we were exactly sweethearts me being a dog and all but by George, any cowboy who'd pass up a chance to take that fine lady to a dance was nuts.

And he didn't deserve to have a loyal dog as a friend.

I tried to communicate all these thoughts and feelings through slow wags of the tail and wounded looks. I don't think Slim got the drift.

He was such a brick-head.

"Well," he said at last, "I've done my duty as trashman. I'm going down to my place to fix what's left of my hair. You want to go?"

No.

"You can stay the night."

Not interested.

"You can sleep inside."

A ranch dog had no business...actually, that sounded pretty good, but I was still too angry and...

"Seems to me I've got an extra can of sardines that I've been saving for a doggie friend. What do you think?"

Sardines? Ha! No way. They gave me indigestion... although they sure tasted good, and it had been months since I'd had a whole can of...

Okay, what the heck. He needed a friend.