

The Case of the Dancing Cowboy

By

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Chapter One

Slim Hauls Garbage



It's me again, Hank the Cowdog. It all began in June, as I recall. Yes, because we'd just come through a dry winter and the spring rains didn't start until May 15.

After a few warm days, little shoots of grass had sprung up in the draws and along the creek, and the cottonwoods, elms, and hackberries had put out their leaves.

That green tint in the countryside had made everybody on the ranch feel better about things. Loper and Slim had stopped feeding the cows and Sally May was planning to host a dance in her yard. To prepare for that big social event, she had launched a major Spring Cleaning Offensive.

And since Slim didn't have to make a feed run, she drafted him to carry garbage down to the burn barrel. He didn't like that. I know, because I heard him grumbling about it as he struggled down the hill with a sack of garbage in each arm.

"A guy spends a whole lifetime training horses and learning to rope. He gets himself a ranch job and takes some pride in his work, but what does he do on the first pretty day of spring? He gets to haul garbage down to the burn barrel!" He threw the sacks into the barrel and stormed over to the overhead gas tank. He drew a can full of gasoline and threw it into the barrel.

Hmmm. It appeared that he planned to toss a match into the gasoline-soaked barrel. I had watched him do this on other occasions, and I seemed to remember that he always ended up regretting it. And saying, "Oops, I forgot to mix that gas half-and-half with diesel, so's it wouldn't explode."

But he was on a snort about injustice in the world and he wasn't paying attention to his business. He went on with his speech and seemed to be addressing me and Drover, as though we might be interested.

We weren't. We were merely there, and once trapped into listening to the sermon, we could hardly get up and leave. That would have been impolite and would have made him even madder.

See, your older and more experienced ranch dogs realize that part of our job is listening

to the complaints of our masters. It's just something we have to do.

And also, I wanted to see what happened when he flipped his match into that garbage barrel. I had reason to suspect that it would become the most exciting event of the morning.

He fished a book of matches out of his shirt pocket and went on.

"If Sally May wants to have a yard dance, that's fine with me, but why do I have to haul the dadgummed trash and help clean up for it? I ain't going to the silly dance. There's fifty-seven things I'd rather do."

He tore a match out of the book and ran the paper-end through his teeth. "A cowboy hauling trash! Times have sure changed, dogs, and not for the better. These outfits today, they've got no appreciation for what a cowboy can do or how much money he's got tied up in leather and horseflesh.

"Next thing you know, she'll want to me haul manure and spread it in her flower beds. Well, when that day comes, boys, old Slim'll sack his saddle and move on to a real horseback outfit that knows how to treat a cowboy."

Boy, he was sure worked up, and I could tell that he'd forgotten all about that can of gasoline he'd poured into the barrel.

I turned to Drover, who was staring up at the clouds. "Son, pay close attention to this."

"What?"

"I said, pay close attention to this."

"Oh. Okay."

"Why are you staring at me?"

"I don't know. You said to pay close attention and that's what I'm trying to do."

"Pay close attention to the garbage barrel, Drover, not to me."

"Oh. Did it say something?"

"No. Garbage barrels don't talk."

"I didn't think they did."

"But this one is fixing to explode."

"No fooling?"

"Just watch." Sure enough, Slim struck the match and pitched it into the barrel and...you'll see.