

COURTING JOE

An episode of rivals on the LAZY K Ranch. 3000 words.

Synopsis of the plot.

Bones and Shorty come to the Lazy K and become friends.

They fight over the question of whether a girl can disguise herself as a man and get away with it.

The Boss hires a new transient puncher to decide the question.

The boys recognize the new hand as girl in disguise.

Dave and Pete are rivals for the favor of a neighbor's daughter.

Joe, the supposed girl, brings peace on the Lazy K by slipping away and marrying the neighbors daughter, Annie.

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Every ranch I ever worked at had a SLIM. And every time I got along side of the elongated puncher that boasted the cognomen I immediately annexed the name of "Fatty." Just because a guy is built a little plump don't give every crummy horse wrangler and roundup cook licence to call him Fatty. Any way they did it.

I am known on about every ranch between Canada and the Mexican Border by that disagreeable appellation. Whenever I got a job I stayed with it as long as I could stand the name then moved on hoping that luck would be with me and lead me somewhere where I could shake off the disgrace. The last place I worked at before coming here I had a little disagreement with the foreman over the same old question.

Now if punchers wish to pass out a name to one of themselves it is their own affair but if the foreman tries it it is a steer of a different brand. Well, at this place I'm telling you about I hired out at seven o'clock one night and worked til after breakfast next morning. I might have stayed my average length of time or may be even two weeks but I had the dispute with the foreman. We had just packed our breakfast away and was starting for the corral when the foreman said:

"Slim, you take Fatty with you today. Ride over the Bear Creek salt grounds and come back by Brushy."

"Are you calling me Fatty," I asked.

Don't ask me if I hit him. That will never be known. The next thing I remember is of reaching the Norton Ranch twenty miles away. One eye was shut and my nose shifted well off to the east. Right then I decided not to work any longer for such a foreman.

Three days later I rode in here. I felt almost human when the Boss said: "You're hired, Shorty." That was two years ago and they've called me Shorty ever since.

Bones came last fall. Long, lean, hungry Bones -- running away from a name like I had been from mine. He had been called "Slim" until he hated it worse than I hated the name Fatty. So when the Boss called him Bones he felt he had found his home. Bones and me have been pardners ever since except for a few months last summer. But our split was all bones fault.

Before he had been here two weeks he ordered one of them magazines that comes every week and has a lot of stories in about men and girls and other things. Instead of playing cards with the rest of us he would set and read stories and a lot of other pieces about different things. The other boys didn't pay much attention to him but Bones and me got along fine. Sometimes I borrowed his books and looked at the pictures or maybe read a little. The rest didn't care neither of us being very popular with them.

We got to be real pardners. Every thing belonging to Bones belonged to Shorty and versa vice. It wasn't til May we had our fight. It was this way:

I was reading one of his books and I come to a story about a girl that dressed up like a ^{man} ~~girl~~ and got a job and worked with the men for a year before anybody found out the difference. I told Bones that it was nothing but a damn lie. Any HE man could tell a girl a mile away even if she was dressed up like one of these society what-you-may-call-ems. At first Bones just told me, quiet, that tho this was only a story, such things could happen, alright. But when I kept after

him he says, " I seen girls could pass off for cowpunchers let alone men.

That made me laugh, and I come back, "Tell that to the Soldiers of the Sea, you poor sap."

Then Bones got mad and said, "There aint no use arguing with you, Fatty, you're too bull headed."

When the boys separated us a little later we was both well bruised but the question was still unsettled. Of course we had our fight because he called me Fatty but the real question was about the story. We decided to leave it to the rest of the boys, as a jury, to decide who was right.

By Sunday things was getting warm. The jury was hung. Alf and Rosy agreed with me and Pete and Dave voted for Bones. The Boss refused to vote. The Lazy K was in for a lively time.

You will have to hand it to the Boss. He got us to suspend hostilities for a week promising to hire the first puncher he saw out of a job to make an odd number in order to decide the question. Things was in this shape when we came in Wednesday night. As we rode toward the corral we met a rider afoot leading his horse. In the dusk we couldn't see much of the man. We rode on to take care of our horses and left the Boss to do the honors of greeting the stranger. Fifteen minutes later we was introduced to him at supper. The Boss brought him in. "Boys," he said, "here is Joe."

We all stared. Here was a boy maybe five feet five inches tall and slim. His hair was curley and chestnut color, his cheeks smooth and pink. The boots he wore was too little for any half grown kid.

We welcomed the new hand about like you would welcome an icicle down
your
your back some nice warm day in January

Joe took us all in with his big brown eyes but never spoke. He took the seat pointed out by the Boss and we began the meal. That was once when Rosy forgot to talk. Bones kept his glum pose according to form. Joe spoke once. In a timid voice he said, "Will you pass the cream, please?" like a man.

We all jumped. Pete nearly fell off his chair. Such a face, like such a man and such a voice asking for the canned cow and calling it cream! and from his face I knew that Bones and his side was due to win.

Right then and there I decided that the Lazy E would be short one puncher Sunday night. After supper Bones and me called the Boss aside: "Is that what you've hired and do you expect it to settle our dispute?"

Sunday morning we all congregated on the sunny side of the bunk house. We wanted to find out early who was right. We figured we needed the rest of the day to get settled down no matter who wins.

The "Alright, Boss," said Bones. "We don't know nothing about the judgment of this bird but we do know that YOURS is BUM." And walked away. After he acts as chairman and calls the meeting to order.

You boys is going to have your question settled this morning and no matter who wins I don't want any rough stuff," he says. The next day Joe was set to doing some repair work about the corral while the rest of us scattered over the range on different jobs. As Alf rode up a hogsback with me -- the Boss had kept Bones and me apart ever since our fight -- Alf bit off a huge hunk of Horseshoe and with his southwest cheek sticking out like a big jaw remarks: "Now aint that new puncher one Hell of a specimen off the Genius Hominy?" Joe becomes red and his big brown eyes get bigger as he looked us over.

"I don't know," I says, "He may be alright. Them rosy cheeks and that curly hair might be useful in the right place but something tells

me this ranch aint the right place especially since he's got to decide our question.

The other boys seemed to have similar ideas about the new man. They wasn't even interested enough to put him thru the regular program for new hands. The boss managed it so that the magazines are all out of sight except the with the story about the girl that went around dressed like a man.

That night Joe set on his bunk reading. I walked by casual like and saw that he was reading the right story. That boy would be ready Sunday and from his face I knew that Bones and his side was due to win. Right then and there I decided that the Lazy K would be short one puncher Sunday night.

Sunday morning we all congregated on the sunny side of the bunk house. We wanted to find out early who was right. We figured we needed the rest of the day to get settled down no matter who wins. The Boss come down after a little. He don't see Joe so he hauls him out of the bunk house. The Boss, being the only disinterested character he acts as chairman and calls the meeting to order.

"You boys is going to have your question settled this morning and no matter who wins I don't want any rough stuff," he says.

"Now, Joe," He says, "It was understood when I hired you that you were to decide a question that is the cause of a contention among my otherwise contented family of boneheads."

Joe becomes red and his big brown eyes get bigger as he looked us over. "You didn't tell ME that when I asked you for work," he says in that voice that always made Pete groan and Rosy snicker.

"No, I didn't" says the Boss, "But I'm telling you now."

Joe blushes again and finally stutters, "What would you like me to decide?"

And the Boss puts the question: "Two of these cayuse wrangling chimpanzees got to fighting over a story they been reading in one of them magazines. One of them says its nothing more than a corral full of lies and the other says that the things can happen and maybe the story aint such a herd of lies after all. I can't take sides with my men so I hired you to decide like I promised them. Now it's up to you, son, and God help you."

Joe gives us all the once over with them big brown eyes and decides that life is sweet so he says, "It isn't exactly fair to ask me to decide without even knowing what the story is. Perhaps you would let me read it before I give a decision."

Bones coughs a little and says, "You read it already. It's that one where a heifer dresses up like a man and goes and works and cusses just like the other men. But we don't aim to rush you and we aim to give you a fair whance so I'm agreeable if you want to go and look it over again."

The rest of us don't object. The kids almost human even if he don't look it, and, anyway we want him to know what he is going to die over. So the Boss leads Joe off to find the magazine and we set around rolling pills while the jury deliberates.

Some of the boys starts talking but everyone says nothing til Bones opens his mouth. "Did any of you notice" he says, "how that kid blushed when the Boss put the question to him? And just look at that hair and them eyes. Them pink cheeks aint never been cultivated

with no razor. Neither did I ever know a man with feet like what he wears. He reminds me of a rancher's daughter I knew once."

Then we see the point. He's trying to tell us that Joe's a female disguising its self as a HE!

Dave puts on his judicious face and remarks, "Since you suggest it I jest remember that the other night when we're about ready to hit the hay and Rosy begins to sing one of his immortal songs this Joe goes for a walk around the corral and don't come back til we're all in bed. I think that maybe this lad is a girl maquerading. And if he is he's a nice girl maybe looking for a little adventure as some of them call it."

Then Alf and Rosy swings over. That leaves me alone. I says, "Well since you look at it that way I don't want to discuss about it any more. We'll just let the matter drop."

The Boss and Joe come back right then so we all says nothing. The Boss starts to speak but Bones stops him. "We've been talking it over --" Bones begins, and blushes like a school girl. "We've been talking it over and decided there aint no question between us a-tall so we don't need no decision."

"Thank you," says Joe and gives us a smile we never noticed before.

That was when the Lazy K punchers begin to reform. Dave and Pete cussed a little but before noon they was both shaved and washed up. Rosy got out a new red and black shirt he had been saving since Christmas. Bones got glummer and hungrier than before. Alf disappeared with his horse and saddle and we aint heard from him since. I didn't get in for dinner but I wasn't hungry anyhow.

Things went to Hell from then on. Cussing stopped and we all acted like a bunch of Sunday School boys the week before Christmas. One day when Pete got spilled over the prairie he picked himself up and started to cuss in the good old way until he saw Joe. We thot he would choke before he got himself snubbed. Rosy got in the habit of taking Joe's turn at wrangling only to bask in the sunshine of Joe's smile and "thank you". We was all helping Joe do everything.

Joe was a good hand. She could ride as well as any of us and handle a rope too. We liked to watch her work. The Boss tells us he didn't expect to keep Joe on but since Alf is gone and then he sees how the rest of us has showed a little life he would keep her only to make men out of us.

We all decided that it wouldn't be right to let Joe know we was wise to her game seeing as to how she was supposed to be a man. But just the same we was all rivaling each other to get that smile. Bones and me seemed to be the favorites. The more she smiled at each of us the worse enemies we got to be til the Boss always sent us to opposite sides of the range. Pete and Dave kept spruced up til they looked like a pair of moving picture punchers. Rosy annexed a new line of songs among which was the late popular hits entitled "After the Ball" and "Down by the Old Mill Stream."

By the middle of June Pete and Dave had decided they was out of the race but they still had the fever. They was bit by the bug that gets most every healthy man. They was riding about six miles two or three times a week to see old man Hodges daughter. They hadn't noticed her before Joe come, but now most any day you could hear one or the other raving about her slender figure and blue eyes. Once Dave

Joe got to making the trip quite regular. She treated me and Bones square enough. One evening she left Bones scowling and mooning and again I was feeling like the boy that has lost his pet monkey. But we couldn't blame her. Here she had been cooped up with a gang of bachelors for months, no wonder she wanted the society of one of her kind.

Of the two girls Joe was the best. even without frills and fancy clothes she laid Annie in the shade. But they did make a nice pair when Pete and me takes them riding every other Sunday. Now there wasn't no love making no matter how we wanted to. One day when I did get a little sensational and tried to put my arm around Joe she just looked at me and says, "What's eating on you, Shorty?"

"Nothing," I says, "only I thot maybe you liked me and you know I like you a heap."

"Of course I like you," she answers.

Then I get real bold. I can feel myself blushing now when I think of it. "How would you like for you and me to be pardners?" I manage to ask.

Joe lets me look into them big brown eyes while she reads me the verdict: "No," she says, "that wouldn't do. You would be disappointed in me, Shorty. There are others that would make you much better pardners than I."

There I was -- throwed the first jump. It didn't make me feel any too good but I decided to ride that bronco before I quit.

Bones must of got the same dose for a few days later he didn't

come in for supper. About midnight he comes sneaking in and nobody has nerve enough to ask him where he's been.

Rosy was the only one of the bunch that acted like he was enjoying the situation. He was the only neutral puncher on the Lazy K. He could associate with both of the belligerent parties. I confided in him and I guess the rest did too for when it was over Rosy left between days. He knew too much for the good of us all.

Well things couldn't go on like this forever. The Boss was worried too. Here his gang was, allready to jump at each other at the first chance. If somebody had just said "sick 'em" there would of been the biggest dog fight on record. So we dwelt together in peace and animosity for a while longer. Then one day it happens:

The Boss sends us all to move a herd from the east range to the west side and repair the drift fence. I wait behind for Joe but she don't make a move to get her horse and I ask her why the delay.

"I'm not going out, today" she says. So I ride on and catch up to Pete who is lagging behind.

Pete opens his sober face and remarks, "There's somebody going to leave the Lazy K and it aint going to be Pete."

"Nor Shorty" I answers.

That night when we come in neither the Boss nor Joe is around. All we can get from the cook is that they rode to town together.

"So that is the idea" I remark to Pete. "So he thinks he can butt in and cart Joe around while the rest of is out working"

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About nine the Boss returns alone. He comes down to the bunk house to see how we got along with the cattle. After a little Bones asks about Joe.

"Joe aint working here any more," says the Boss.

Bones got white. "What did you fôre her for?"

"Just keep quiet a little," says the Boss. "Ive got some news for you boys. Joe bought the old Simpson place over Pine Ridge last winter. If you want to see him you can ride over there any time after two weeks. It's only twenty five miles. And you might take Dave and Pete along,too. They might like to see Annie. You see, Joe and Annie were married in town today and left for their honeymoon. They wont be back for two weeks.