

BE MY VALENTINE?

A Bonanza Tale

by

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Little Joe Cartwright leaned on his elbow, cupping his chin in his hand, and scowled at the open page of the book propped on his desk. He enjoyed reading, but he had definite opinions about what made a story interesting and what defined sheer drudgery. Today's lesson from McGuffey's Eclectic Fourth Reader definitely fell into the latter category. In fact, it had been better than a week since his teacher, Miss Abigail Jones, had seen fit to assign any reading material Little Joe considered worth the time and effort it took to keep still and concentrate. He flipped back a few pages and read once more the "Speech of Logan, Chief of the Mingoes." Now, that was a story! It told of robbery and massacre and Indian war, and even the speech itself stirred Little Joe's emotions, especially its poignant ending: "Logan never felt fear. He will not turn on his heel to save his life. Who is there to mourn Logan? Not one." Little Joe could picture the chief, standing with arms folded and chin defiantly raised, as he defended his people, and the picture was an appealing one.

By contrast, today's lesson had to be the most boring and meaningless Little Joe had ever been assigned in all his twelve years of life. With a sour expression he turned back to "Elevated Character of Woman" and forced himself to read section seven, where he'd left off. His frown deepened as he read the author's question, "What constitutes the center of every home?" Given the title of the article, the answer was obviously supposed to be woman, but Little Joe intended to dispute that point vigorously if given the chance. There was no woman at the center of his home, but that didn't mean his home wasn't just as good as any that still had a mother.

Joe glanced out the frosty windowpane and sighed, wishing he were home now, instead of trapped in the overly warm schoolroom. Miss Jones always kept the fire stoked hot during winter, and that made it even harder for Joe to concentrate. All he could think of was getting out of here and into the crisp outdoors. It was still an interminable time until recess, however, so he once more stared at his reader, trying to formulate answers to the questions at the end of the article. With a topic like this one, Miss Jones was bound to explore every query in mind-numbing detail.

The teacher's shrill voice interrupted the boy's musing. "Children, you may put away your readers now," Miss Jones directed. "We will discuss the readings tomorrow, but today I've planned a special art project I'm sure you'll all enjoy. Could I have two volunteers to pass out some paper?"

Almost every hand in the room went up, Little Joe's included, and he was thrilled to be one of the two chosen—anything to get out of his seat for a few minutes. Joe grinned at his friend Tuck, who was walking to the front of the class from the opposite side of the room. Tuck and Joe were as different as night and day, Tuck easy-going and rarely riled, while Joe had a hair-trigger temper that frequently landed him in hot water. They had become friends on Tuck's first day at school when a bunch of rowdies had made fun of the shy boy's front name, Aylsworth, which his mother had picked from some storybook she was fond of. Joe had stopped the taunting with a few well-aimed

blows, then aided the newcomer's acceptance by promptly dubbing him Tuck, a shortened version of his last name, Tucker. Nowadays, only Miss Jones called him Aylsworth.

Miss Jones handed a stack of white paper to Tuck and one of red to Little Joe. "Please give each student a sheet of each color," she directed. Little Joe led off, with Tuck, as always, following in his wake like a faithful puppy. Once the papers were distributed, Miss Jones thanked the boys and they returned to their seats. Then the teacher smiled at the roomful of wondering eyes. "Who can tell me what holiday we'll be celebrating in just two days?"

Several hands were quickly raised, not Joe's this time. He knew the answer as well as any of the others, but he wasn't about to bring up that subject! Instead, he groaned and slid down in his seat, trying to look invisible. Across the aisle to his right, another friend, Seth Pruitt, did the same. It was Sally Morris the teacher called on, and the blonde ringlet-crested girl giggled out her answer, "Valentine's Day, Miss Jones."

"That's correct," Miss Jones responded, barely keeping a girlish giggle out of her own voice. But her tone sharpened immediately as she spied two examples of inappropriate posture at the back of the class. "Seth and Joseph, sit up straight, please, and pay attention."

Exchanging a look of commiseration, both boys complied. Miss Jones' pointed chin nodded in satisfaction and she continued. "Now, as a special treat, I'm going to allow you to take some class time to make and exchange valentines. Let me show you an example of the kind we'll be making."

She held up a red heart with a border of white. "Now, look closely," she instructed as she bent back two cut-out flaps in the center of the red heart to reveal a drawing of a dark-haired, handsome man on the white paper underneath. Little Joe couldn't be sure from his seat near the back of the room, but, to him, that picture looked an awful lot like his oldest brother Adam. He moaned softly. It would be just his luck for the schoolmarm to get a crush on Adam. Little Joe figured life couldn't get much worse than having the two most bookish people he knew gang up on him.

"We'll only be cutting out the hearts today," Miss Jones continued, "so you'll have until tomorrow to decide whose picture you'll draw."

A girl's hand waved through the air. "How do we know who to draw?" she asked.

Miss Jones smiled in response and held up her valentine. "I know most of you can't see this example clearly, but there are words written above and below the doorway." She pointed to the words. "They say, 'This is who sits on the throne of my heart,' so you'll draw a picture of the person that describes, and that's the person who will receive your valentine when it is completed. Won't that be romantic?"

Little Joe buried his face in his hands and moaned again, audibly this time. Even reading "Elevated Character of Woman" hadn't been as horrible as this mushy-gushy assignment!

"That will be enough, Joseph," Miss Jones dictated sternly. "Do you wish me to send another note home to your father?"

Little Joe's head jerked up at once. "No, ma'am." He hadn't forgotten the consequences Pa had meted out after reading that note last week.

"Then I will expect you to give this assignment your best effort, young man."

The boy's hand shot up. "Will it be graded?" There was no missing the obvious plea that the answer would be no.

Miss Jones sighed. "Yes, of course, it will be graded, Joseph. How else would I get you and your less-than-illustrious cohorts to complete it?"

A brown-eyed girl raised her hand. "Miss Jones," she called, successfully diverting the teacher's attention from her friend Joe.

Miss Jones turned to face the girl. "Yes, Sara, did you have a question?"

Sara Edwards nodded briskly. "I was wondering if the valentine was supposed to go to someone here at school. You said we'd be exchanging them."

"Well, I won't restrict you," Miss Jones replied. "You may address your valentine to whomever you please, but I feel confident most of you will choose a classmate to receive your tribute."

Another hand was shyly raised. "May we use colored pencils, Miss Jones?" Laura Jenkins queried. "I have a set of Faber's pencils at home that I could bring."

"Certainly, bring them, and I hope others will do the same," Miss Jones said. "I've purchased two sets for classroom use, but the more we have, the more can work at once." She passed out scissors and stiff paper hearts to the first person in each row. "I'm afraid you'll have to share these, as well, the school budget being what it is. Draw around the patterns to make a red heart and a larger white one, then pass the patterns to the next in line before you begin to cut. When you've cut both hearts and the doorway in the red heart, neatly letter the words above and below it."

She picked up a book from her desk. "I'll read as you work, so those of you who are waiting your turn for the patterns and scissors won't be bored, just sitting there. In honor of the season, I've chosen one of the immortal bard's most famous plays, *Romeo and Juliet*."

Forced into silence by the threat of a note to his father, Little Joe settled for rolling his eyes in utter misery. He'd only thought "Elevated Character of Woman" was the most boring and meaningless reading material Miss Jones could come up with. A love story by Shakespeare was definitely worse!

As Miss Jones droned away at the tale of the star-crossed lovers, Little Joe stared at the sheet of red paper on his desk. He knew he had to wait his turn for the patterns and scissors since, without them, his chances of constructing a heart that would earn him anything better than a failing mark were absolutely nil. But he couldn't stand the enforced idleness with nothing to do but listen to that romantic drivel gushing from his teacher. To occupy his time, he pulled out his pocketknife and began to whittle tiny pieces off the corners of the red paper. He'd visually sized up the valentine he was supposed to copy and was sure he had plenty of paper to spare.

Joe had amassed quite a pile of shavings, a good quantity spilling over onto the floor, when a soft snore made him glance to his right. He grinned as he saw Seth, head resting on his folded arms, snoozing away. A better choice than whittling paper, Joe thought, as long as you didn't get caught. As the volume of the snoring increased, however, Joe knew his friend was crossing a line where getting caught was almost a certainty. Wanting to spare Seth one of Miss Jones' more unique brands of discipline, Joe started to reach across the aisle to shake him awake.

Too late! Miss Jones had stopped reading and was already making her way down the aisle toward the slumbering scholar. Little Joe hastily withdrew his hand. No sense in both of them getting into trouble.

"Seth Pruitt, you wake up this instant," Miss Jones ordered, bending over to grasp the boy's shoulder and shake him when mere words did not rouse him. As she leaned over, however, she caught sight of the red paper shavings littering the floor, and her eyes shot across the aisle to a new target. "Little Joseph Cartwright, what is the meaning of this?" she demanded stridently. At the loud voice, Seth jolted awake and gazed blearily at the drama unfolding to his left.

Little Joe swiftly swept his hand across his desk, sending the telltale scraps cascading to the floor on the opposite side, then immediately realized what a futile attempt at concealing the evidence that was. *What kind of fool pulls a stunt like that right under the teacher's nose?* he chided himself. Unable to come up with an adequate excuse for his actions, he gave Miss Jones a sheepish grin and shrugged. "I don't know," he mumbled.

"Well, then, I'll provide you some time to think about it, young man!" the teacher announced as she pointed to the front of the classroom. "March! You, too, Seth."

"Wh-what'd I do?" Seth asked, standing drowsily to his feet. A wave of titters rippled across the classroom.

"You will have plenty of time to ponder that," Miss Jones declared. "To the blackboard, both of you!"

Joe moaned softly and led the way. He had a strong suspicion that today's discipline would take a form he'd experienced before, and the suspicion was confirmed when Miss Jones drew two circles, one at each end of the chalkboard stretching across the front of the room. With a sigh he pressed his nose into one circle as Seth took his position at the other. Like Joe, Seth had been here before and knew what was expected. As Miss Jones' rules required, both boys stared straight ahead, hands at their sides, and, thus held captive, listened without respite or remedy to the continuing saga of Romeo and his beloved.

When everyone in the room except the two culprits at the blackboard had finished cutting out their hearts, Miss Jones dismissed the students for recess, telling them to leave all their scraps of paper on their desks. She said nothing to Seth or Little Joe for the first five minutes of recess, then told Seth to go to his desk and complete the assignment he had missed, due to what she called his sluggishness. Seth took patterns and scissors to his desk and began to cut.

"Come here, Joseph," Miss Jones said next.

Little Joe obediently came to her desk and stood with his hands behind his back, his expression that of a prisoner awaiting sentence.

"I want you to turn and look at this classroom," Miss Jones directed.

Joe did as he was told.

"Do you notice anything out of place?"

Joe cocked his head at her. "Well, there's a lot of paper layin' around."

Miss Jones gave a curt nod. "Precisely. It will be your task to pick up every piece, Joseph."

"But I didn't do all that!" Joe protested.

"No, but you have an obvious need to overcome slovenly habits, young man," Miss Jones smirked, "so I intend to give you ample practice. Begin at the front of the classroom and work your way back. Pick up each scrap individually and carry it to the waste can."

Little Joe's face flushed scarlet with anger. For a moment the boy considered defying what he thought a most unfair penalty for his misdemeanor, but remembered just in time the dim view his father took of disrespecting his elders. There'd be an even more severe punishment awaiting him at home if Pa learned he had disobeyed his teacher. Without a word he turned and began to pick up the paper strewn on the desks, taking each piece to the waste can, then walking back to pick up the next.

Seth raised his hand. "I'm finished, Miss Jones."

"Very well, Seth," Miss Jones said. "You may enjoy the remainder of recess, but before you go outside, put your work away and leave the scraps on your desk. I'm sure Joseph will be glad to clean them up for you, won't you, Joseph?"

Little Joe turned, a stubborn look in his eye. "No, ma'am."

Miss Jones frowned severely. "What?"

"I'll clean it up," Joe sputtered, "but I won't say I'm glad about it 'cause I ain't. I don't lie!"

Miss Jones nodded primly. "As I wouldn't want to discourage any virtue in you, Joseph, I will accept your explanation. Back to work now."

Joe continued his dreary task, made all the more irksome now by the knowledge that he alone would be deprived of the afternoon recess. The way Miss Jones had him doing this job it would likely take the entire period, probably even longer. If she didn't change her mind, he'd be entertaining the entire room with this performance, and while most of the students would sympathize with him, there were others who'd relish his misery. He had finished clearing the large scraps from the other students' desks when he saw Miss Jones head to the door to call them in. "Ma'am, can I use the broom to sweep up what's in the floor? It's the only way I can get it done before the others come in."

Miss Jones shook her head, giving the boy a smile that, to Joe, looked utterly malicious. "No, Joseph, I said each piece by hand, and I meant by hand."

"But they're so tiny," Little Joe whined, looking at the pieces he had whittled. "It'll take forever and I'll miss some of my lessons."

Miss Jones almost laughed. She knew exactly how concerned Little Joseph Cartwright was about missing his lessons! "You'll simply have to stay after school, to complete whatever work you miss and to cut out your valentine," she said, then opened the door and rang the bell to signal the end of recess.

While the other students recited their lessons, Little Joe kept up his endless trek to and from the waste can. As he had predicted, most of the girls cast sympathetic smiles at him each time he passed, but a few of the boys, even some he counted friends, grinned at his discomfort. Others, those who took periodic delight in setting off Joe's well-known temper, made faces and snickered so loudly they earned their own share of Miss Jones' displeasure. Joe finally finished and returned to his desk, just in time for the arithmetic lesson. He found it hard to concentrate on the problems in his book, however, when all he was truly interested in calculating was how long he'd have to stay after school to make up the missed work and how many minutes late he could be without inciting his father's wrath.

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Joe came charging into the yard on his black and white pinto and all but flew from the saddle. His big-in-every-way brother Hoss, who'd come out of the barn when he heard the thundering hooves, immediately grabbed his younger brother by both shoulders. "How many times you got to be told not to run that pony so hard? It's dangerous to you and her both."

"Sorry," Joe replied by rote.

"I hear that 'most day, Little Joe," Hoss complained, "but I don't see you changin' your ways, boy."

"I'm sorry, honest, Hoss," Little Joe said more contritely, "but I'm in an awful hurry today. Is Pa home?"

"Yup," Hoss said, grinning at his younger brother's crestfallen face, "and if you're wonderin' whether he's noticed you're late, the answer's yes. He ain't worked himself into a full fret yet, but he's headed there." He reached for the reins of Joe's horse. "Get on inside and get warmed up, youngun. You've had a long, cold ride, and puttin' off what's waitin' for you won't make it any easier."

Joe ran a loving hand over the pinto's mane. "Give her a bait of oats and brush her down real good, you hear?"

Hoss chuckled. "Ain't you forgettin' who taught you all you know about groomin' a horse?" He lifted Joe's hat and tousled the boy's curly brown hair. "Don't worry; I'll treat Cochise like she's a princess."

"She is," Joe grinned and ran for the house. He headed straight for the fireplace and stretched his hands toward the warmth of the flames.

"Joseph," his father called ominously from the alcove behind him.

Joe sighed and approached the gray-haired man cautiously, hoping it wasn't his backside that was about to be warmed. "Yeah, Pa?"

"You're late," Ben said sternly.

Little Joe decided he might as well own up to his offense right away. Pa'd worm the truth out of him one way or another, and the consequences tended to be lighter when he confessed quickly. "I got kept after school, Pa. I'm sorry if I worried you."

Ben took a deep breath. "Again? What was your offense this time, you young scamp?"

Joe looked down at his boots. "I—uh—I made a mess with some paper we were cutting, and Miss Jones made me clean it up. I missed some lessons while I did that and had to stay after to make 'em up."

Ben tilted his head to examine his son's face. No obvious signs of prevarication, but with Little Joe it paid to double check. "Is that all?" he demanded.

Little Joe looked steadfastly into his father's eyes. "Yes, sir. That's all I did, honest."

Ben smiled. "All right, Joe, I believe you. Just don't let it happen again. Hop Sing's got some fresh cookies and cocoa for you in the kitchen. Then hurry around and get your chores done."

Joe back-peddled toward the kitchen. "Sure thing, Pa. Cookies, cocoa and chores—I can handle all that in record time."

"No need to set records. I'd prefer you chewed the food." Chuckling, Ben shook his head and returned to his desk, secretly wondering how Miss Jones could put a roomful of children together with paper and scissors and not expect a mess. Well, Joseph could be sloppy and careless about his chores, so he probably had created enough clutter to deserve the discipline he'd received. Ben felt he could afford to be tolerant this time; at least, the boy hadn't been fighting.

The chores were finished and the rest of the family had gathered around the dinner table when Adam came in, placed his black hat on the peg by the door and laid his holster and gun neatly on the cabinet to his left. Sliding into his place at the foot of the table, he apologized. "Sorry I'm late, Pa."

Ben acknowledged the words with a nod and motioned for Hoss to pass his older brother the meat platter. Little Joe wondered, not for the first time, why Adam almost never had to explain his tardiness. Pa just seemed to trust that his oldest son would have a good reason for any delay, and while Joe had to admit that was usually true, he thought, in simple fairness, Adam should have to account for his movements just like his youngest brother did.

After filling his father in on the work he'd accomplished that afternoon, Adam turned amiably to the boy seated on his left. "How was your day, Little Joe?" he asked. "School go okay?"

"Well, the morning went fine," Little Joe acknowledged, then frowned. "Things got kind of rocky in the afternoon."

"Got kept after," Hoss informed their older brother.

"Ah, a typical day, then," Adam laughed and grinned even wider as he saw Joe scowl.

"Miss Jones has come up with the worst assignment ever," Little Joe confided.

"And what's that?" Adam queried, amusement lacing his voice. "Arithmetic or history?"

Little Joe slumped in his chair. "Worse," he groaned. "Valentines."

"Oh, no," Hoss commiserated. "Miss Jones' favorite holiday. I should've known."

Feeling he'd found an ally, Little Joe expanded on the topic. "Yeah, we had to cut out these sappy-looking hearts with doors in 'em and write 'This is who sits on the throne of my heart' on it, and tomorrow we're supposed to draw somebody's picture inside. Isn't that the stupidest schoolwork you ever heard of?"

"Just about," Hoss agreed. He'd always hated to see Valentine's Day come around when he was in Miss Jones' class, but at least she hadn't made her students do anything but listen to boring love stories in his day. "She didn't read about Sir Walter Raleigh and Queen Elizabeth, did she?" Hoss asked, suddenly remembering one of Miss Jones' favorite examples of romantic chivalry.

"Worse," Joe groaned. "*Romeo and Juliet*."

Adam arched a black eyebrow at his youngest brother. "I'll have you know, young fellow, that *Romeo and Juliet* is a classic piece of literature, one with which you should certainly make acquaintance."

"Although perhaps at a later date," Ben suggested with a smile that moved from his youngest to his eldest.

Adam shrugged, conceding the point. Little Joe probably was too young to appreciate Shakespeare's craftsmanship.

Taking courage from his father's demeanor, Little Joe decided to risk begging off from the assignment. "You don't really think I ought to have to make that silly valentine, do you, Pa? I mean, it's not like I'll find any use for that around the ranch or anywhere else."

Ben tried to adopt a serious expression. "Now, Joseph, I'm sure Miss Jones has a good reason for that assignment. She's probably trying to develop hand coordination, an area in which you could use some work, son."

Little Joe shook his head in complete rejection of his father's theory. "Oh, no, Pa. She trying to make me like girls, and I don't see a bit of use in 'em, Pa."

Ben grabbed a napkin to cover his failure to keep a straight face. If he were honest, he was quite content to keep his third son young and innocent awhile longer. Having two boys who were giddy over girls was quite sufficient, but he knew he had to support the teacher's authority. "Now, Joseph, I'm sure you can find one of your schoolmates deserving of your admiration. Did Miss Jones say the valentine had to go to a girl?"

Little Joe thought carefully, then smiled, certain he'd found the way out of his dilemma. "No, Pa. No, she didn't."

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Most of Joe's friends were already in the schoolyard when he arrived the next morning. He'd wanted to be there early, but Pa had insisted on his eating a solid breakfast since he'd mostly played with his food the night before. Still, Joe calculated that he had time for a little earnest conversation, so after stabling Cochise in the small barn the school provided for out-of-town students, he gathered his closest companions in the shadow of the building. "Look, fellas, you're not any more excited about this valentine business than I am, are you?"

"Nope," Mitch Devlin readily agreed, while Seth Pruitt merely shrugged and Tuck nibbled his lower lip.

"Okay," Little Joe announced. "I've thought of a way to get us out of drawing some girl's picture. See, we band together and give the fool card to each other. All for one, one for all, like the Musketeers. I figure me and Seth can trade off and Mitch and Tuck can do the same. How's that sound?"

"I can't," Tuck said, flushing with embarrassment.

"Why not?" Little Joe demanded.

"Well, I was complainin' to Ma last night about havin' to make the thing," Tuck stammered, "and she said she'd treasure gettin' a card like that from me, so I gotta do it. You can see that, can't you, Joe?"

Though clearly disappointed that his plan wasn't working quite the way he'd envisioned, Little Joe nodded. "Yeah, Tuck, I can see that. A fellow can't disappoint his ma, I reckon. Okay, so it's just the three of us. The Three Musketeers."

"Unh-uh," Seth grunted. "I got other notions."

Joe's green eyes narrowed. "Girl notions?" he demanded hotly.

Fire flashed in Seth's eyes. "Yeah, girl notions! Just 'cause you don't like 'em, don't say I got to feel the same. I mean, I'm a year older than you, Joe, and I'm startin' to think kindly on the fillies."

Little Joe gave his best friend a look of supreme disgust, then turned hopefully to Mitch. "Well, that just leaves the two of us, I guess."

Mitch waved his hands before his face and shook his head vigorously. "Not me, no way. Maybe if we was all goin' along, but not just you and me. No, sir! I ain't lookin' to be the laughingstock of the whole blame school."

"You said you didn't want to make that valentine!" Joe accused at the top of his lungs.

"I don't!" Mitch yelled back, "but if there's one thing worse than givin' one to a girl, it's got to be givin' one to a boy! I ain't gonna do it, Joe, and I'd better not get one from you, either. So help me, I'll punch you if you pull that on me!"

Loud laughter interrupted the boys' discussion and the quartet turned to face a trio of cackling older boys. "What's the matter, Little Joseph Cartwright?" Horace Webber, the biggest of the bunch, snickered. "Ain't you growed up enough to spark a filly?"

"Naw, that ain't it," Pete Perkins, the leader's only slightly smaller cohort, snuffled disdainfully. "He just knows any girl with sense wouldn't put up with a little runt like him!"

A mocking sneer enveloped Horace's face. "You got it, Pete." He leaned his face close to Joe's. "Ain't that right, runt?"

Seeing Little Joe's fists tighten, Seth grabbed his friend from behind. "Don't let him rile you, Joe," he urged as the younger boy struggled to break free.

"Yeah, Joe, he's just tryin' to make trouble," Mitch said, "and you've already had a plateful this week."

"Let me go!" Joe hollered, kicking at Horace with the only weapons still at his disposal.

Horace backed up two steps. "Ooh, hold him back fellas; don't let the runt punch me in the shin with them teeny weeny fists of his." With a taunting laugh, the bully started to walk away, then turned back as a new jibe struck his funny bone. "Shucks, Little Joseph, I got the perfect answer to your problem. You can make a valentine for Old Maid Jones."

"Yeah," Pete hooted. "Bet she won't get no other, which makes them two of a pair. 'Course, she'd probably rather get one from his big brother, but beggars can't be choosers."

"Hey, everybody!" Horace yelled across the schoolyard in a singsong voice. "Little Joseph Cartwright's sweet on Miss Jones. He's gonna give his valentine to her!"

By this time Little Joe's face was blotched red and purple with anger and he was jerking as hard as he could against the hands pinioning his arms behind him. Seth looked at Mitch and, when Mitch reluctantly nodded, turned loose of Little Joe. They both agreed that their friend couldn't possibly let Horace get away with that kind of talk, even though, given the difference in their sizes, Little Joe was undoubtedly headed for a beating.

Little Joe dove for Horace's knees, and the surprise attack took the larger boy off guard for a moment. Horace recovered quickly, however, and began to land blow after blow on Joe's face and stomach. Joe fought back stalwartly, but he only managed to

strike Horace about once for every five punches he received. Joe's three friends hated to see him hurt, but they felt compelled to let Joe fight his own battle, as long as the fight was a fair one.

It stopped being fair when first Pete and then the third ruffian began to pummel the Cartwright boy. After only a second's hesitation, Mitch, Seth and even shy, gentle Tuck flew into the fray, in defense of their friend.

"Fight! Fight!" some boys not involved in the original argument yelled, and everyone within earshot came running. Soon all the children surrounded the seven boys scuffling on the ground in the free-for-all. The boys watching shouted encouragement to one side or the other, while the girls, except for tomboy Sara, shrieked in horror at the sight of blood.

A ruckus like that was bound to draw the attention of the teacher sooner or later, and she came running down the steps from the school to break apart the battling boys. Although Abigail Jones looked prim and ladylike, she had an iron grip, and whenever any boy felt her fingers tighten on his arm, the fight washed right out of him. It took her awhile to work her way down to the bottom of the pile, where Horace and Little Joe continued to pound each other. "Horace! Joseph! Stop at once!" she screamed at them.

Joe did stop, but Horace managed to elbow his opponent once more as he stood up in apparent response to his teacher's command.

"Everyone not involved in this fight is to enter the classroom at once," Miss Jones announced. Though they would have liked to stay to learn the outcome, the boys who had not been fighting and all the girls obeyed at once.

"Now, what is this about?" Miss Jones demanded with one hand on Joe's shoulder and the other on Horace's. Years of teaching experience had fine-tuned her instincts, and she could usually pick out the instigators of any schoolyard brawl. When neither boy answered, she decided to direct her question more specifically. "Joseph, what is this about?" she demanded.

"Valentines," Little Joe muttered.

"Valentines! That is the most ridiculous excuse for fighting I've ever heard. Horace, what do you have to say?"

A wicked gleam entered Horace's eye, but he pasted on a contrite façade and said quietly, "I'm sorry, Miss Jones; it was all my fault. I told everyone how Little Joe was planning to give his valentine to you, and I guess it embarrassed him for them to know he's sweet on you. I shouldn't've let the cat out of the bag, but I never thought he'd punch me for that."

Miss Jones flushed with pleasure. She'd secretly hoped some of the youngsters would address their valentines to her, but she'd certainly never considered Little Joseph Cartwright one of her admirers. Looking at the smaller boy with his mouth hanging open, she noticed how red his face was and concluded he must truly be embarrassed at having his boyish sentiments voiced abroad. "Is that correct, Joseph? Is that why you were fighting?"

"No!" Joe protested, then became confused. "I mean yes—well, sort of, but—"

"Joseph, you are not making sense," Miss Jones scolded, but her tone was gentle this time. "Now, did Horace tell the other children that you were making a valentine for me?"

"Yes, but—"

"Yes or no will do, Joseph," she said. "And did you hit him first?"

"Yes," Joe said, casting hostile eyes at Horace.

Miss Jones sighed. "Then, much as I hate to punish a boy for defending my honor, I'm afraid you will have to be disciplined, Joseph. In fact, everyone involved in the fight will receive some punishment, but since I consider you and Horace the instigators, you will each be given a stiffer penalty."

"But he hit first," Horace whined. "I was just defending myself, Miss Jones."

Miss Jones spun on him, wagging her skinny, freckled finger under his nose. "I have only to look at the degree of damage to each of your faces to know how ridiculous that is, Horace. Self-defense, indeed! Your taunting words were as much a precipitator of the fight as Joseph's fists, so you will both be treated alike. Now, all of you, clean your faces and get inside as quickly as possible. To prevent a further outbreak, I suggest you and your friends use the pump first, Horace, then Joseph's followers, but no dawdling. It's already past time for class to begin."

Joe and his friends kept well away from the pump until Horace and his partners had gone inside. "I'm sorry, fellas," Joe said. "I didn't mean to drag you down with me."

"Don't mention it," Mitch muttered, dousing his head beneath the pump.

"Yeah," Seth assured him. "He pushed you to the limit."

"Weren't nothin' else you could do," the ever-loyal Tuck added.

"What do you reckon she's gonna do to us?" Mitch asked.

None of the boys ventured a guess. "Well, you could probably get off easy, Joe, if you really did give Miss Jones your valentine," Seth suggested.

Joe doubled his fist and stuck it under his best friend's nose. "You tryin' to start this thing up again?" he demanded. "'Cause I'm willing if you say that again."

Seth waved him off. "No, no, it was a stupid idea, and I admit it. Even if she let you clean off, it wouldn't be worth that."

Joe lowered his fist. "I ain't so much worried about her as I am about what Pa'll do if he finds out." He wiped his face dry on his shirt tail, then stuffed it in his pants again and lifted his chin to present his face for inspection. "What do you think? Is it gonna show?"

"Oh, yeah," Seth said, shaking his head, "and you know your pa's opinion about fighting at school. You're in for it, Joe."

"Me, too," Tuck sighed morosely. "My Pa feels the same as Joe's. I reckon neither of us is gonna sit comfortable tonight."

"Or tomorrow, either," Joe groaned.

"We better get inside," Mitch urged, "before matters get worse."

Shaking his head, Joe led the way. He didn't see how matters could possibly get worse. And he still didn't know what to do about that valentine.

Nothing more was said about the incident as the lessons progressed that morning. The boys who had been fighting seemed to give extra diligence to their studies, no doubt in hopes that Miss Jones would forget to assess their punishments. When recess arrived, however, they learned their fate. "Everyone except Joseph, Seth, Mitchell and Aylsworth is dismissed for recess," the teacher announced.

Horace stood up, smirking with glee at the miserable quartet.

Miss Jones saw his expression. "You needn't look so pleased with yourself, Horace Webber. You and your friends will be missing the afternoon recess, and you and Joseph will be joining me after school for that extra discipline I mentioned."

Horace slumped and shuffled outside, while Joe's three friends breathed a sigh of relief. Evidently, their only punishment was missing one recess, and that would be over early. Joe, on the other hand, laid his head on his desk and fought hard against the temptation to bawl like a baby. He'd be arriving home late again and with a face that plainly tattled why. Pa was going to kill him.

Joe and his friends rejoiced when lunchtime arrived and they could finally get out of the classroom for half an hour. They settled down at the opposite end of the schoolyard from Horace's gang, but the other boys didn't seem intent on making more trouble. At first, the rest of the students left the miscreants alone. Then Sara ambled by to offer her condolences to the boys who sometimes included her in their fishing or exploring ventures. Knowing the boys didn't like her hanging around them at school, she didn't stay long, but her visit seemed to embolden a few other girls.

Sally Morris sauntered over and swished her blue calico skirts in what she intended to be an enticing manner. "I'm hoping you'll pick me for your valentine, Little Joe," she said suggestively. "I'm going to draw you." Sally wasn't alone. One by one, girls came tittering by to declare their hopes that one of the boys would be her valentine. By far, the lion's share of the hints was thrown in Little Joe's direction.

"So, who you gonna pick, Little Joe?" Mitch asked. "I gotta pick one, too, and I don't want to horn in on your territory."

"Pick who you want," Little Joe grunted. "I ain't drawin' any of 'em!"

"Not even Sara?" Seth asked, his voice shaky.

Mitch laughed. "That's who you've got your eyes on, ain't it, Seth?"

"What if it is?" Seth snarled. "Who's talkin' to you, anyway? I was askin' Joe."

Joe looked sharply at his friend. From the look on Seth's face, Mitch had hit the nail on the head. Seth was sweet on Sara. Well, he could do worse. Of all the girls Joe knew, Sara was the only one with sense, the only one who preferred riding and fishing and traipsing through the woods to the downright silly things girls did when they got together. In fact, Joe'd given passing thought to solving his problem by drawing a picture of Sara sitting by the creek bank, pole in hand. One look at Seth's face, though, told him he'd better not take that trail. The older boy obviously wanted assurance that he wouldn't be in competition with his best friend. "No, not even Sara," Joe said firmly.

"Then, who, Joe?" Tuck asked.

"I don't know," Joe sputtered, "but not a girl!"

"Not a boy, either," Mitch reaffirmed.

"No!" Joe snapped the lid on his lunch pail and stalked off. Given his obvious distemper, none of his friends followed.

Joe walked into the barn and began to stroke his pinto's mane as he tried once more to figure a way out of the corner he'd hemmed himself into. He refused to give the valentine to a girl; he couldn't give it to a boy, either, without incurring that fellow's wrath or ridicule, and he'd rather die than pick Miss Jones. As far as Joe could see, that left him without options. He rubbed his cheek lovingly against Cochise's flank. "You're the only girl I care about," his whispered. "You're the one who sits on the throne of my heart." Slowly Joe lifted his head and smiled. Why not?

Little Joe could hardly wait now for the art period to arrive. He knew he wasn't a talented enough artist to do justice to his subject, but he was determined to do his best. Finally, Miss Jones told them to take their hearts from their desks and begin to draw the pictures on the white hearts. "Center the red one over it to make sure you position your picture where it can be seen through the doorway," she said with a smile, then sat down to continue her reading of *Romeo and Juliet*. Joe followed her advice carefully. He wanted every line of this drawing to show.

He was so intent on his work he didn't see the little girl who came to stand at his side. "Little Joe," she whispered.

Little Joe looked up to see Laura Jenkins smiling shyly at him. She wasn't one of the girls who had pestered him at noon, so he wasn't immediately put off. "Yeah?" he asked. "What you want?"

"Nothing," Laura said, "but I finished my valentine, and I thought you might like to use my colored pencils."

"Well, yeah, thanks," Joe said. She held out the box to him, but Joe just selected the black and white pencils and returned the rest.

"Is that all?" Laura asked, disappointed. Her hair was blonde.

"Yeah, that's all. Thanks, Laura," he said and favored her with one of his charming smiles, the one he tried to shine at his pa whenever he was in trouble.

Blushing with satisfaction in the exchange, Laura returned to her seat.

Joe was pleased. Now his portrait would look even better. When Miss Jones came to the end of an act, she began to walk the aisles of the room, bending to look at each student's work as she passed. As she looked at Seth's drawing, Little Joe bent over his work, not wanting anyone to see it until it was complete. Seeing him protecting his tribute from her eyes, Miss Jones smiled. Of course. That was one valentine she really shouldn't see until it was delivered. She continued on without giving her little admirer a second glance.

When Miss Jones saw that everyone appeared to have finished his or her work, she told them to put the hearts away. "We'll paste them together tomorrow, and if any of you want to add lace or other trim, you may bring it from home."

The girl seated in front of Little Joe turned around. "I could bring you some lace from home," she offered with a coy smile. "My ma's a seamstress, and we've got tons."

"I don't need none," Little Joe hissed. The very idea! His valentine had better sense than to favor lace.

School ended, and all but two boys left joyfully. Miss Jones looked sternly at the two chief culprits from the morning's debacle. "I ought to take a hickory switch to both of you," she declared.

Little Joe wasn't frightened for a minute. Miss Jones had never been known to even ferule a boy's hand, much less whack his backside. She had others ways of a making a fellow miserable, as she proceeded to prove.

"Each of you will sit at your desk and complete an essay before you leave today," she announced. "The essay is to be your answer to the question asked in the reading lesson we discussed this afternoon: 'What constitutes the center of every home?' I will expect your response to be well-structured, grammatical, accurate in spelling and written with your best penmanship. A failure in any area will result in your being required to

repeat the assignment. You will each read your essays before the class tomorrow morning. Is that clear?"

Joe nodded and, though he refused to give Horace Webber so much as a glance, he suspected his fellow sufferer had done the same. Joe went to work on the hated topic, wanting to write quickly, but knowing he didn't dare. If he turned in his usual sloppy penmanship, Miss Jones would just hand it back and tell him to do it over, and he didn't want to be later than he was already destined to be.

Across the room Horace sat nibbling the end of his pen and staring with malice at the boy he blamed for his present predicament. Then a naughty grin slid over his teeth. He knew just how to make Joe Cartwright pay for getting him in this fix. He'd have to word it carefully, though, so Miss Jones didn't guess his intention. Certain he could do it, Horace began to write.

Horace finished long before Little Joe, and after a quick perusal of his paper, Miss Jones dismissed him. "Do you expect to be much longer, Joseph?" she sighed when another fifteen minutes had passed.

"Not much, ma'am," Little Joe replied respectfully. "I'm trying to do it right, the way you said, Miss Jones."

"Yes, I can see that, Joseph," she smiled. My, he was certainly trying to impress her today! Obviously, the boy thought he'd found the key to her heart in his newfound studiousness. She wouldn't hurry him. Finally, Joe thought he'd done the best he could with a topic he considered distasteful to start with. Miss Jones frowned slightly as she read the first two or three sentences, then her expression softened as she continued. "Yes, that's good work, Joseph. You've taken a different approach to the question, but it's well defended. I'm sure the class will benefit from hearing you read this."

Joe wasn't looking forward to that. He didn't fancy sharing his innermost thoughts with the other kids, and he'd poured them out pretty freely in that essay. Still, he'd just received the closest thing to a compliment Miss Jones had ever paid his work, and that made him feel good. Not for long, however. Soon he was on the road home, contemplating the fate that awaited him there.

* * * * *

Little Joe was almost late to school the next morning. Last night's assault on the seat of his britches had made sitting a saddle so painful that he had ridden slowly, wanting to jostle his bottom as little as possible. Joe hurriedly tended to Cochise's needs and managed to make it into the classroom just before Miss Jones shut the door.

Determined to stay out of trouble today, the boy paid painstaking—or, rather, pain-preventing—attention to his lessons that morning. Finally, the moment he'd dreaded arrived, however, and Miss Jones announced to the class that both he and Horace would be presenting essays for the edification of the other scholars. Joe breathed a sigh of relief when Horace had to go first. Maybe he'd get lucky and the signal for a mine disaster would go off or, better yet, the alarm sound for a fire in town—catastrophes guaranteed to drawn every resident of Virginia City to the streets, including the captives of the classroom. Joe sighed, wishing with all his heart he hadn't expressed himself quite so personally in his essay.

Horace, however, didn't look at all disturbed at having to read his. In fact, to Joe's amazement, Horace was smiling, as though genuinely pleased to be sharing his thoughts with a roomful of people. Holding his paper before him, Horace began to read:

"What constitutes the center of every home? The answer to this question is so obvious that a fool could see it, even if the author hadn't spelled it out so clearly." Horace gave Little Joe Cartwright a significant glance as he uttered the word 'fool,' then continued. "At the center of every decent home is a mother, the only person who can ensure that her children are raised to become the kind of people they should be. Boys forced to live without a mother's influence are the most unfortunate wretches on earth. They generally turn out to be the worst sort of brawlers and ruffians, constantly looking for and finding trouble. Other unfortunate boys do not thrive physically without a mother's care and become sickly, undersized runts, unable to defend themselves."

Little Joe's eyes narrowed. He did not like the direction this essay was taking or the way Horace kept looking his way as he droned on about how horrid it was to be without a mother. He was hitting a sore spot in Joe's heart, and Joe had a feeling Horace knew it and was, in fact, hammering that spot on purpose. Determined to hang onto his temper, Joe set his jaw and waited for Horace to stop spewing hot air.

"In conclusion," Horace finished, "I can only say that when I count my blessings, I list at the top the fact that I am not, like some, a poor, unfortunate, undersized, trouble-making, motherless wretch, for it is mother who constitutes the center of every true home."

Little Joe was seething now. Horace had delivered that conclusion from memory, his eyes locking with the emerald ones of his opponent, so there'd be no missing who the words were intended to describe. Mitch, Tuck, Seth and Sara all glanced uneasily in Joe's direction, and Sara, in particular, prayed that Little Joe would have sense enough not to take the bait. It was obvious to all Joe's friends and to a number of the other students, as well, that the real trouble-maker in that room was Horace Webber.

It was obvious, in fact, to almost everyone except the teacher, who was listening only for content and construction. "That was excellent, Horace," Miss Jones said as the boy took his seat. "Some rather superfluous use of adjectives, but on the whole, a well-rounded essay." She did not see the tongue Horace covertly thrust out at Little Joe, but Joe did, and it took all his willpower to stay in his seat and not allow the volcano boiling within him to erupt all over the classroom.

"Now we will hear from Little Joseph Cartwright," Miss Jones announced.

Joe felt another burst of irritation. Why did Miss Jones always have to refer to him as *Little* Joseph Cartwright? He was Little Joe to his friends, sure, but when someone like Miss Jones used the word, it was always a reference to his size. It never failed to irk him, but after listening to Horace's remarks about undersized runts, the words prickled more than usual. Determined to set the record straight, Joe snatched his paper from his desk and marched forward to do battle with words this time, instead of his fists.

Joe unfolded his essay and began to read in urgent, emotional tones: "What constitutes the center of every home? The author of 'Elevated Character of Woman' answers that question with this phrase, 'the heart of a fond and devoted mother.' However, this is simply not true! Sure, mothers are good to have. They cook and clean and care for their children when they are sick, but mothers are not the only ones who can do these things. In our home it is a man who cooks the meals, and they are great ones.

Just ask my brother Hoss if you doubt it! Hop Sing also keeps our house spotless, as good as any woman ever could. And when one of us boys is sick, we don't have to send for some woman to take care of us. Our pa is always right by our side, spooning broth into us and washing us down with cool water when we have fever. No matter how much work he has to do, he drops everything when we need him. He would let the whole ranch run to ruin before he'd stay away from a sick son. No mother could do better.

"The author says that it is in a mother's heart that a child finds pardon and forgiveness for his sins and follies. That's probably true, but that's not the only place to find those things, either. There've been plenty of times I needed pardon and forgiveness for my follies, which my pa would tell you pile high as Mount Davidson, and I found them in the heart of my father. After all, isn't God Himself a Father? Next to the Almighty, there's no one more forgiving than my pa. Sure, I wish I still had a mother, but since that wasn't meant to be, I'm thankful that I have the best father in the world. That is why I cannot agree that a mother constitutes the center of the home. For me, it has always been and always will be my father."

There wasn't a dry female eye in the room. Even Miss Jones dabbed at her eyes with a dainty, lace-trimmed handkerchief. Every girl there was certain that, despite the brave words, Little Joe Cartwright did indeed need a woman's influence in his life, and equally certain that she was the best woman to provide it.

* * * * *

The school day was drawing to a close, and Little Joe was starting to breathe easier. So far, he'd managed to stay out of trouble, although he'd been sorely tempted to take up his quarrel with Horace over the lunch hour. His friends had done their best to act as a barrier between the two, and, other than a brief exchange of hot words, Joe had had no contact with that provoking individual. The way things were going, he'd be getting home on time today, and that was a good thing, considering what Pa'd said he would do if Joe were late one more time this week. If there was one thing Joe wanted to avoid, it was another conversation between his buttocks and his father's belt, the kind Ben Cartwright liked to refer to as "a very necessary little talk."

Miss Jones finally said the words all the children had been waiting for when she told them to put away their books and take out their valentine projects. Last duty of the day and Little Joe was actually looking forward to it, now that he had found someone deserving of his tribute. When his turn to use the paste came, he carefully placed the red heart over the white one and sealed the two together. Then he opened the doors of the heart and smiled with satisfaction at the picture inside. He'd considered pasting sugar cubes around the outer edge instead of the lace some of the girls were using, but decided against it. He didn't really want his valentine eaten, and paste probably wasn't safe to eat anyway.

Miss Jones finished *Romeo and Juliet* and gave a deep sigh of romantic fulfillment that was echoed only by a few of the older girls. She knew most of the little wretches in her classroom cared nothing for the classics, but she refused to let that affect her today. Today had gone so well that she was feeling magnanimous, even toward the perpetually ignorant. "Now, the moment I'm sure you've all been waiting for," she announced, her voice almost a giggle. "We're going to exchange valentines, and after

that I have some cookies from the bakery for each of you. Then, as a special treat, I will dismiss class early." A shout of approval met those words, and Little Joe glowed. Not only on time, but early—Pa would be impressed!

As the other students began to move around the classroom, handing out their valentines, Little Joe rose from his seat and headed toward the front. Abigail Jones felt a warm blush rising up her neck. Here he came, tribute in hand. Of course, the Cartwright boy couldn't draw very well, so his valentine wouldn't be a work of art, but it was the thought that counted. Miss Jones smoothed her skirts and folded her hands demurely in her lap as she awaited the arrival of her valentine.

Hearing the door to the schoolroom open, Miss Jones looked up and her smile turned upside down. "Where are you going, Joseph?" she demanded.

"To deliver my valentine, Miss Jones," Joe replied readily.

"What?" Miss Jones sputtered. "But I thought"—her facial color deepened. Obviously, she'd misunderstood the boy's intentions, but, then, he'd never actually said he was making a valentine for her. Embarrassed by her misconception, Miss Jones spoke primly. "I see, Joseph, but if your card is intended for someone outside the classroom, you will have to wait until we dismiss to deliver it."

"Oh, okay," Little Joe said, immediately walking back toward his seat. "I didn't know."

"Wait a moment, Joseph," Miss Jones called as he reached his desk. "I just remembered I haven't graded your project yet. Please show it to me now."

"Oh, yes, ma'am," Joe replied, coming forward. He handed the card to his teacher and nibbled nervously on his lower lip. He'd done his very best and knew that was all Pa would require, but he still hoped for a favorable mark. He needed one to offset certain others in the grade book.

Miss Jones accepted the valentine and opened the doors to evaluate the picture inside. Suddenly her eyes flew wide. "What is the meaning of this, Little Joseph?" she demanded hotly, pointing to his drawing.

Little Joe cocked his head and turned puzzled eyes on his teacher. "Can't you tell what it is?" he asked earnestly. While he was no artist, Joe didn't think his work was bad enough to be unrecognizable.

"Of course, I can tell what it is, Joseph!" Miss Jones screeched. "It's obviously a picture of your horse. You were told to draw a person!"

"But—but that is who sits on the throne of my heart," Little Joe insisted.

Horace Webber stood up and faced the class, a taunting smirk on his face. "Hey, everybody! Little Joseph Cartwright's in love with a horse! You reckon he's gonna marry Cochise?" The room erupted with laughter, and Little Joe felt his cheeks growing hot with both embarrassment and anger.

"Sit down, Horace," Miss Jones ordered sharply, "and the rest of you quiet down this instant! This is not a laughing matter." She turned back to Little Joe. "Well, I see you cannot be content to let one day go by without causing problems, young man." She was beginning to think that the boy had deliberately led her to believe he would be paying tribute to her when all the time he was plotting this piece of mischief, and she had had her fill of dealing with Little Joseph Cartwright for one week.

"No, ma'am," Little Joe protested. "I'm not causing problems. I did the assignment, just like you said."

"You have made a deliberate mockery of the assignment," Miss Jones snapped, "and I will not tolerate such a disrespectful attitude."

Little Joe blanched. Disrespect was a crime his father felt merited the severest punishment, and if Miss Jones told Pa he'd been showing that attitude, he'd be lucky if he didn't get tanned morning and night for a month of Sundays. "No, ma'am," he choked out. "I—I swear I didn't—"

"Swearing will scarcely elevate my opinion of you, young man," the teacher declared. "I will not listen to another word. Since you wish to play the fool, sir, you will wear the dunce cap and stand before the class while the rest of us enjoy our cookies." A wave of titters ran across the room, and Horace grinned from ear to ear.

Little Joe started to protest, but remembered just in time that he'd been ordered to keep his mouth shut. Still, as Miss Jones grabbed his elbow, turned him to face the other students and slammed the conical hat onto his head, he couldn't help feeling he was being treated unfairly. He hadn't done anything wrong! He would have been perfectly willing to take whatever discipline the teacher laid out, so long as he felt he deserved it, but this time he knew he was innocent.

He stood there, shifting from foot to foot, feeling foolish, while the rest of the students laughed with one another over the valentines they were sharing. Miss Jones passed out the cookies, and all he could do was stand there and watch the others eat the pink-iced hearts. He didn't care about the food so much, though the cookies looked tasty, but he hated feeling left out.

At last the party ended, and the other students were dismissed with a reminder to study hard for the next day's history test. When they were alone, Miss Jones came to stand in front of him. Palms resting on her hips, she asked, "Are you ready to behave yourself, young man?"

Little Joe felt he'd already been behaving himself, but didn't deem it prudent to say so. Instead, he quietly replied, "Yes, ma'am." Since class had let out early, he still had a chance to make it home on time if he didn't further antagonize the teacher.

"And are you prepared to complete the assignment properly this time?" Miss Jones pressed.

The accusation incensed Joe's sense of fairness, and he lost sight of the consequences as he shouted, "I did it properly the first time!"

"Not to my satisfaction!" Miss Jones declared, her voice rising in response to his elevated tone. "Go to your desk at once and make another valentine, addressed to a person this time."

Having taken all he felt he could tolerate, Little Joe's jaw locked in characteristic stubbornness. "I won't do it. You can't make me."

Miss Jones responded by taking his elbow once again, propelling him down the aisle to his desk and pushing him into it. "You will not leave your seat until you complete that valentine. I would advise you to stop resisting my authority, young man, for I am prepared to wait here until your father comes to fetch you and give him a full and vivid description of your disruptive behavior this week."

Little Joe raised pleading eyes to his teacher's irate face. "Please, Miss Jones," he begged, almost whimpering. "I tried my best. Please don't tell Pa I've misbehaved."

Miss Jones turned a deaf ear to his pleas. Noticing the pile of valentines the other students had delivered to Little Joe's desk, she snatched them up and carried them to her

own. Then she brought fresh sheets of red and white paper, scissors, drawing pencils and paste and laid them before him. Returning to the front of the room, she began to read *Romeo and Juliet* from the beginning. She felt certain Little Joe hadn't paid much attention the first time around, and a repeat reading would do him no harm.

The minutes dragged past, the room silent but for the sound of the teacher's voice and the ticking of the clock on the wall. Little Joe sat staring at the tools before him, but he didn't touch them. Even if he had known what to do about the assignment, he gained nothing by completing it now. Pa had said if he was late one more time this week, he'd receive double the punishment already administered, and Little Joe saw no way of avoiding that at this point. Doing the assignment would make him late, and he'd get his britches blistered. If he refused, he'd be sitting here even longer, and he'd get a seat-burning for that. Same result either way, so why bother doing something he hated to begin with?

Miss Jones looked up from her reading and frowned when she saw that the boy had not begun to work. She glanced at the clock, wondering how long it would be before Ben Cartwright realized his son had been detained and came looking for him. It was a long ride from the Ponderosa, so she'd obviously be spending hours in Little Joseph's sullen company unless he gave in. Appraising the stubborn set of his chin, Miss Jones considered that unlikely. She took a breath and began to read Act II.

* * * * *

Feeling mildly irritated, Adam Cartwright carried the final crate of supplies to the buckboard, climbed into the seat and picked up the reins. The merchant had been slower than usual about gathering the supplies, so Adam was getting away from Virginia City later than expected. He'd planned to be done in time to pick Little Joe up from school and have the boy ride home with him. Having checked the time with the storekeeper, however, he knew his little brother should have been released some ten minutes ago, and there'd be no catching up with Joe's fleet mare in a loaded buckboard. Adam grinned wryly. That was assuming, of course, that the boy hadn't gotten himself kept after a third day in a row, but Adam was pretty certain even Little Joe had more sense than to antagonize their father again this soon. Judging by the yelps he'd heard emerging from Joe's room the night before, Pa's "very necessary little talk" had been a particularly unpleasant one.

On second thought, Adam decided, Little Joe's quota of common sense had always seemed a brick shy of a full load, so it wouldn't hurt to swing by the school and make sure. The schoolyard was empty, but through the window Adam spotted a solitary figure, sitting near the back of the classroom, dunce cap on his curly head. Adam shook his head in disgust. Would the boy never learn? He pulled the wagon to the side of the school and jumped off to investigate the cause of Joe's latest detention and smooth over the situation if he could.

Abigail Jones felt her heart flutter when the ebony-haired man with eyes to match walked through the door. What good fortune that it was Adam Cartwright who had come to discuss his brother's malfeasance! Not that she minded conferring with Ben Cartwright. He was the boy's father, after all, but Adam was so well-spoken, a product of his eastern education, that it was a delight to converse with him. Miss Jones found his

voice hypnotic, even when Little Joseph and his seemingly inevitable mischief was the topic, rather than the erudite subjects she'd prefer to discuss with one of the most handsome and eligible bachelors in Nevada.

Miss Jones smoothed her skirts and stood to greet her visitor. "Oh, Adam," she gushed. "I don't know how you got word of this situation so quickly, but I'm glad you're here."

"Actually, I hadn't heard," Adam admitted. "I just came by and saw Joe through the window and deduced there'd been a problem."

"One after another, all week long," Miss Jones sighed, casting frustrated eyes toward the back of the room, "and now he's decided to rebel against my authority, so I felt compelled to keep him here until I could discuss the situation with someone."

Adam gave Little Joe a hard look. "I'm sorry to hear that, Miss Jones. My father definitely disapproves of showing disrespect to a teacher. What exactly has he done?"

"Well, the children have been working on a valentine project this week," the teacher explained, "but your brother decided to make a mockery of the assignment. Just see for yourself."

Adam took the valentine and examined it. It looked fine to him. The hearts were neatly cut and the lettering, though a little crooked, seemed acceptable. Then he opened the doors and almost laughed as he saw the picture of Cochise. Adam looked up at Miss Jones. "I'm sorry, but I don't see the problem. In fact, the quality seems better than his usual work."

"Well, it is," Miss Jones agreed, "but he was told to draw a person. A horse is not a proper recipient for a valentine, Adam."

"I see your point," Adam said, "but I doubt he intended to mock your instructions. I happen to know that Little Joe found this assignment particularly frustrating."

"Well, there's no reason it should be," Miss Jones sputtered, growing red in the face. "It was intended to be something the children would enjoy, a welcome break in the more structured routine."

"Oh, I'm sure of that," Adam said soothingly, "but he is only twelve, much too immature to feel anything but dislike of romantic ideals, Miss Jones." He favored her with his most persuasive smile. "Would you mind if I spoke to my brother? Perhaps I can clear up what I'm certain is just a misunderstanding."

Abigail Jones looked at him with starry eyes. "Oh, Adam, if only you could."

For good measure, Adam bestowed another smile on her and moved toward Little Joe. Seeing the boy's lower lip trembling, Adam knew this wasn't the time to take a hard line, so he squeezed in next to his brother and wrapped an arm around the boy's slender shoulders. "Okay, what's the trouble, little buddy?"

Little Joe responded to the unexpected gentleness by burying his face against Adam's black shirt and releasing the tears he'd been holding back. As he moved into his brother's embrace, the pointed dunce cap fell to the floor, and Adam began to stroke the golden brown curls that crowned his sobbing brother's head. "Hey, it's okay," he whispered. "Just tell me what went wrong."

"I—I tried my best, honest I did," Joe whimpered, "but nothing went right, and now she says I gotta do it over and I just can't."

"Sure you can," Adam said. "Just pick a person this time, instead of your horse." He couldn't keep an amused smile from his lips. He secretly thought Joe's original choice

was the most appropriate one he could have made. Anybody who'd ever seen the way the boy pampered that horse should have realized Cochise was the only female he cared about.

"I won't draw a girl," Little Joe declared firmly. "I don't like girls!"

Adam frowned. "We've already discussed that." He looked up and called to the teacher. "Miss Jones, it isn't necessary that he give this valentine to a girl, is it?"

Looking surprised, Miss Jones headed down the aisle. "Well, no, I suppose not. It would be the more normal choice, of course, but if he'd prefer to give it to one of his little male friends, I couldn't object."

Adam turned backed to his brother. "There, you see. It doesn't have to be a girl, just like Pa said the other night. Pick one of your other friends."

"No, I tried that," Little Joe wailed, tears still flowing freely down his cheeks. "None of the fellows would go along, and Mitch even said he'd punch me if I picked him, and then Pa'll blister me for fighting again and——and——"

"I get the picture," Adam said, thumbing away the tears.

"Oh, my," Miss Jones murmured, sitting in the desk in front of the two Cartwright brothers, facing them. "I had no idea. You really weren't being disrespectful, were you, Little Joseph?"

Little Joe shook his head vigorously, although he didn't trust himself to respond verbally.

Miss Jones reached over to pat his soft curls. Poor motherless lad. That was the seat of the problem, to begin with. If the boy had had a mother, he'd undoubtedly have chosen her for his valentine, just as several of the other boys had. An idea sparked in the teacher's mind. "But there is someone you have great affection for, isn't there, Joseph?"

When Joe shook his head again, Miss Jones ran her smooth fingers down his cheek and raised his chin so he was forced to look at her. "Yes, there is. Remember the essay you read this morning?"

Little Joe nodded and slowly understood what she meant. "You mean I could pick——"

"Yes," she smiled. "Isn't that who really sits on the throne of your heart? And don't you really care more for that person than you do your horse?"

"Yes, oh yes!" Little Joe cried, then turned shining eyes on his brother. "I can do it now, Adam. I can!"

"Good," Adam said, although he wasn't sure what had produced the sudden transformation. "You get to work then."

"Thank you so much for your help, Adam," Miss Jones said as they left Joe to work alone.

"It was nothing, really," Adam replied.

"Oh, but it was!" the teacher insisted. Her eyes brightened as another thought crossed her mind. "Why, Adam, I've just had the most marvelous idea! I've been reading *Romeo and Juliet* for Joseph, but now that you're here, we could enact the play for him. Shall we start with the balcony scene?"

Catching the amorous gleam in the teacher's eye, Adam started backing toward the door. "Uh——sorry, Miss Jones. That would be——uh——most beneficial to him, I'm sure, but I just remembered I need to——uh——pick up a couple more items at the mercantile. By the time I'm back, I'm sure Little Joe will have finished his assignment."

Adam was positive his invented errand would take that long because he intended to make certain it did! He was out the door and on the buckboard before Abigail Jones knew what hit her.

Little Joe looked up and grinned. Adam sure was a slick one! Joe knew he would never have been able to get himself out of an awkward situation as smoothly as his big brother did. Figuring it was up to him to make sure Adam wasn't forced to hone his skills again later, Little Joe went to work with the scissors.

As Adam turned the buckboard back onto C Street, he wasn't sharing his brother's exalted opinion of how he'd handled the situation. He'd given the first excuse that came to his mind, but now, for honesty's sake, he felt obliged to return to the mercantile and there was really nothing there he needed. He entered the store and stood looking around aimlessly while the storekeeper totaled another customer's purchase.

When that transaction was completed, the man turned with a smile. "What is it, Adam? You forget something?"

"Not exactly," Adam mumbled. He still hadn't decided what to purchase, but when his eyes fell on the jars filled with candy, a notion took root. "I wanted to get some lemon drops for Hoss——about two bits' worth."

The storekeeper laughed as he reached for the jar of lemon candy. "That Hoss sure likes his sweetening, doesn't he? Never could figure why the young one doesn't favor sweets much."

"Oh, he does," Adam chuckled. "It's just that his sweet tooth runs more to pie and cakes and cookies."

"None of that here," the merchant grinned. "Have to visit the bakery for that, I reckon, though I guess that cook of yours keeps you well supplied, judging by the amount of sugar he orders."

"Yeah," Adam acknowledged, then smiled as another idea struck his brain. Little Joe rarely made a trip to town without begging for a piece of gingerbread from the bakery, and a trip there would burn up a little more time. As the storekeeper handed him the sack of lemon drops, Adam suddenly decided it might be prudent to take a gift to his father, as well. "Give me a pouch of Pa's favorite tobacco, too, will you, Sam?"

"Sure, sure. Know just the kind he takes," Sam said and reached behind him to fill the order.

Adam dropped the two small packages in the buckboard, then walked the short distance to the bakery, where he purchased a square of gingerbread. It was usually iced in white frosting, but in honor of the holiday, the icing was pink today. Joe wouldn't be impressed by that, but since the color wouldn't affect the flavor, he'd enjoy the treat anyway. Adam smiled. Poor kid, he could use a treat after all he'd been through the last few days. But, then, only Little Joe could turn a simple valentine assignment into a major conflict.

Calculating that enough time had passed for Joe to make that silly valentine, Adam drove back to the school and walked inside. His face fell as he saw his little brother still bent intently over his desk, drawing pencil in hand.

Little Joe looked up and saw the desperate look on his older brother's face. "I'm almost done," he called out, "just gotta paste it together."

"Okay," Adam said, then mouthed the word 'hurry.'

Little Joe grinned and nodded. As soon as he finished the project, he tucked his history book under his arm for a quick getaway and carried the valentine to his teacher. "Is this better, Miss Jones?"

Miss Jones smiled as she opened the door of the heart. "This is excellent, Joseph. Don't you agree, Adam?" She held the valentine out for Adam's inspection.

Adam took one look and a wide grin split his face. "I couldn't agree more. Good work, Little Joe."

"Yes, indeed," Miss Jones bubbled. "I'm going to put an A in the grade book, Little Joseph."

"Oh, thank you, ma'am!" Joe cried, not even irritated this time that she'd called him little again.

"Come on; let's get home," Adam suggested. "We're gonna be late as it is."

Joe's happy expression faded at the words, but he nodded and followed his brother to the door.

"Oh, just a moment, Little Joseph," Miss Jones called. She stood and picked up a pile of valentines from her desk. "These were addressed to you."

Joe blushed, walked back to receive the valentines and slammed them inside his book. Just as he started to turn away again, Miss Jones touched his shoulder and held out a pink sugar cookie. When he took it, the teacher bent over and dropped a light kiss atop his curly head, only regretting that she had no cause to do the same for his older brother. Face flaming, Little Joe ran for the door.

Sharing the boy's sentiments, Adam hastened his exit, too, and both brothers climbed onto the buckboard with record speed. "I bought you a piece of gingerbread at the bakery," Adam said as he drove off. "You can either eat that or the cookie, but not both. Pa and Hop Sing will both have my hide if I let you spoil your dinner."

"I'll have the gingerbread," Little Joe said. "Thanks, Adam."

"You're welcome, little buddy."

As the buckboard headed out of town, Little Joe nibbled at the piece of gingerbread, but didn't seem to be enjoying it as much as usual. "Isn't it good?" Adam asked.

"Huh? Oh, yeah, it's fine," Little Joe said quietly.

"Okay, what's wrong now?" Adam pressed.

Little Joe looked into his big brother's face. "I'm still in trouble, Adam. You know what Pa said he'd do if I was late again."

"Oh, maybe it won't be as bad as you think," Adam said, giving his brother's curls a tousle. "I can probably smooth things over for you."

"Would you, Adam? Would you, really?" The words were a plea.

"Yeah, I would," Adam chuckled, "so relax and eat that gingerbread before you smear the icing all over yourself."

Little Joe grinned and took a big bite.

* * * * *

Adam opened the front door at home, pulling Joe in behind him, and sauntered over to the fireplace, where both his father and other brother sat warming themselves after a day out on the cold range. He tossed the sack of lemon drops to Hoss.

"Hey, thanks," Hoss said. "What's this for?"

"To eat," Adam stated flatly, "preferably not all in one night." He walked over to his father and handed him the pouch of pipe tobacco. "This is for you, Pa, your favorite brand."

Ben arched an eyebrow. "I wasn't running low. You soft-soaping me because you've done something you shouldn't or because you want to do something you think I'll object to?"

"Neither," Adam said with mock offense. "You shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth, Pa."

Ben glanced over to the door, where Little Joe still stood. "Come here, boy. Don't think I haven't noticed you're late again."

Little Joe threw a suppliant look at his oldest brother. Now was the time for Adam to make good his promise to smooth things over with Pa.

Adam dipped his chin to let Joe know he'd gotten the message and motioned him forward. "It's all right, Pa," he said. "Little Joe rode home with me." He hoped his father wouldn't pursue the matter further.

Having a finely honed instinct for when the wool was being pulled over his eyes, Ben sat upright in his chair and eyed his eldest with severity. "Are you trying to tell me you made your brother late, Adam?"

Adam took a deep breath, knowing his father would accept nothing but the truth. "No, I waited for him."

Ben turned glaring eyes on his youngest son. "Then you were kept after school again! Evidently, last night's little talk wasn't painful enough to get your attention. I can see that I'll have to make my conversation longer and more compelling this time."

Little Joe began to tremble.

"No, Pa," Adam said firmly.

Ben flew from his chair. "You will not tell me how to discipline my own son!" he shouted as he reached out to grab Little Joe's arm.

Adam threw himself between them. "No, Pa!" he cried. "You'll regret that; I promise you will." He lowered his voice and said, "Pa, I'd let it ride this time. I really would."

Ben started to tell Adam to mind his own business when it suddenly struck him that maybe Adam was doing exactly that. Helping raise his two younger brothers had been Adam's business since the death of Little Joe's mother. If anything, Adam tended to be more severe with Little Joe than Ben himself, so if he said 'let it ride,' he probably had reason. "Just let it ride?" Ben asked, looking closely into his son's black eyes.

"Until you have all the facts," Adam said with a wink that clearly said he would communicate those facts to his father at a later time.

Suddenly, Ben's mood lightened. "Oh, all right," he said and reached around Adam to draw Little Joe closer. "I hope you appreciate your brother's intervention, boy, because, but for that, your backside would be burning by now." He gave the boy a judicial frown. "It still may."

"I know Pa," Little Joe whispered. "I'm sorry I'm late. Miss Jones wanted me to do my valentine over."

Ben sat down and pulled Joe between his knees. "And what exactly was wrong with the first one?"

Adam came to his brother's rescue once again. "Miss Jones felt he should choose a different recipient. It was just a misunderstanding, Pa. I was able to help clear it up and then Joe did the assignment the way she wanted. That's what took the extra time, but there wasn't really anything wrong with the first one."

"I see," Ben said, although he didn't, "and just who was this recipient Miss Jones found unacceptable?"

"Later, Pa," Adam suggested with a grin. "His second choice is more important. Show him, Joe."

Joe took the valentine from inside his history book, where he'd stored it along with the others for safe keeping and hesitantly handed it to his father. Ben read the sentiment lettered around the doorway, then opened it to reveal the picture of a silver-haired man puffing on a pipe. It wasn't a good likeness, but Ben knew it was meant to be a portrait of himself. He smiled and pulled the boy into his lap. "That's sweet, Little Joe. Pa loves you, too." He planted a kiss on his son's temple.

Joe sighed with relief and snuggled against his father's chest for a moment. "I gotta stable Cochise," he said as he stood up, "and I need to study for the history test tomorrow. It's gonna be a hard one."

"Better get started then," Ben said softly. As soon as Joe had left the house, Ben turned to his oldest son. "Now, just who is it I come in second to?"

Adam gave him wide grin. "Cochise, Pa. Who else?" Hoss doubled up with laughter and after the first shock Ben joined in.

* * * * *

Joe pulled his boots off so he could put his feet on the bed and grabbed his history book with a sigh. He was already dreading the history test tomorrow—too many dates to memorize, and Joe wasn't good at dates. Still, there was only one more school day left this week, and if he could stay out of trouble tomorrow, Pa'd wipe his slate clean and let him start fresh on Monday. Staying out of trouble definitely included passing the history test, so Joe opened the book, determined to pound those frustrating dates into his head.

The valentines he'd put inside the front cover fell out, and Little Joe decided he really ought to look at them. After all, mail was mail, even if most of it came from girls. He picked up the frilliest one first, just to put the worst behind him quickly. Like he'd guessed, it was from Sally Morris, and when he opened the doors to see if she drew any better than he did, Joe was shocked at the picture he saw. Although he'd expected to see only a sketch of himself, the valentine revealed a drawing of a boy in a green jacket being kissed by a blonde-haired girl. Joe tossed the card down in disgust and picked up the next one.

It was from one of the littlest girls in school, and the picture was awful, just plain scribbles, but Joe didn't mind being tolerant with a kid as young as Susie. He remembered sharing part of his lunch with her a few times when her pail looked nearly empty and figured the card was her way of saying thanks.

Joe worked his way through the pile. They were all from girls, of course—some from young ones like Susie and others, unfortunately, from older girls who really were trying to say they were sweet on Little Joe Cartwright. Joe scowled every time he opened one of those.

Finally, only two cards remained. One was plain, no lace trim, so Joe figured it must be from another little kid and, therefore, safe. Turning the card over to read the sender's name on the back, Joe was surprised to see Sara Edwards printed there. Boy, Seth would have his hide if he found out! Of course, Sara acted more like a boy than a girl, and she was a friend, so Little Joe intended to regard her card as a mere token of that friendship. He opened the doorway and laughed out loud at the picture of a boy pulling the granddaddy of all fish from a rippling stream. Joe set that valentine aside. It was worth keeping.

Only one remained, and Joe was intrigued by this one. Instead of the lace most of the other valentines had been trimmed with, whoever made this one had braided black and white yarn and pasted that around the outer edge. Joe thought that was a good idea. It fancied up the card without making it frilly. Then he opened the doors to the heart and gasped. Not only was the picture inside a good likeness of him from the shoulders up, but the artist had also drawn Cochise's beautiful head next to Joe's own.

Joe flipped the card over and read the name on the back—Laura Jenkins. Crossing one stocking-clad foot over the other, he leaned back against the headboard of his bed and gazed admiringly at the picture. He'd never dreamed Laura could draw this well, but the girl had real talent—and good sense, too. The trim, its colors chosen to highlight those of the horse in the drawing, showed that, as did the fact that she obviously had a good eye for horseflesh.

History test temporarily forgotten, Little Joe closed his eyes and pictured the girl in his mind. She was pretty, soft blonde curls cascading onto her shoulders and velvety brown eyes that hardly dared look up at him. Laura kind of reminded Joe of his brother Hoss with her shy, quiet ways. She was sweet-tempered and generous, too. Remembering how Laura had offered her colored pencils to him so he could make the picture of Cochise more realistic, Joe smiled and made a characteristically impulsive decision. Laura Jenkins just might be worth a closer look, especially if she liked horses as much as that drawing seemed to say she did. Joe found himself wondering what kind of rider Laura herself was. Maybe he'd just have to find out. He could slip her a note tomorrow.

Joe moved to his desk and, taking out a piece of writing paper, began to cover it with his distinctive, sloping scrawl:

Dear Laura:

Want to go riding with me tomorrow? I could meet you by the bridge and we could ride up to the lake if you're willing. I will have Hop Sing pack us a picnic lunch. If you like to fish, we could do that, too, or maybe you'd like to groom Cochise. What do you say? Is it a date?

Joe

He nibbled his pen for a moment, wondering if he dared write the words he was sure Laura would most like to see. Then, casting caution to the winds, he scrawled one more line:

P.S. Be my valentine?