

"What was it you said — that you want to prove?"

"Why, about time, you know. About time fixing everything right."

"Oh, yes!" said the agent, busy at his relaying. "Perhaps. And then again, perhaps not. Where was this here case? Let's have it."

The traveler interlocked his fingers over his flat waistline and gazed reflectively at the ceiling, mouthling his cigar.

"It was over in New Mexico, all this happened. About eighty miles from where Roswell is, this was. There's some plains, and then mountains, and a busting big valley on the other side of the mountains. It was on the old Blocks range — you've heard of that outfit? Sure! You must have handled a lot of their stuff through here. They brand three blocks. Well, along early in this century — or perhaps it was late in the nineties — a couple of young fellers done blew in there from Louisiana and took to running a few sheep. How they got 'em is neither here nor there. About all they had was a spare shirt between the two of 'em, a side of bacon and a conscience that didn't keep 'em from working Sundays. So far, so good. They'd been bring up together back there and was thicker'n thieves, those two. Everything they did, they done together, sharing equal. No matter who them two cheated, they never cheated each other. Dink — he was the oldest —"

"Dink? Dink what?"

"Dink Gober. That was his name. The other feller's name was Campbell — his given name don't matter now, but everybody called him Floss. A chunky, bullet-headed man he was.

"Well, those two done put up a shack there in that busting big valley and grazed their baa-baas on the slopes of the hills. They didn't have many, and after a cattle outfit had got through a round-up they had less still. Them cowboys just run off a bunch and never even said they were sorry.

"However, two or three fat years come along and things looked up. Dink began to feel right prosperous. He was a great, long slob of a man, who had n't never been more'n two meals ahead of starvation, so when wool touched twenty-four cents and mutton brought four dollars a head, Dink sure got restless. First Floss noticed it was when he begun to kick about the house they was living in and the way Floss cooked the meals when it was his turn. Of Dink, he said the natives lived as good as they did; and what was the use of having money if you could n't spend it.

"I'd sure like to change some of this," he'd say, jingling the money in his pocket. "I'd like to trade a fist full of this for a can of oysters, before it gets wore out."

"Floss, he didn't say anything, of Floss didn't, hardly ever — unless he wanted to raise a row about the way the forks was washed. He was awful particular about them forks. But I reckon it was getting some lonely for him, too. Herding sheep ain't a job for a white man. Anybody'll tell you that. You get out there on top of a hill and listen to the doggone fools bleat their heads off and you never see a thing, month in and month out, but just plain sheep. First thing he knows, a feller gets feeling terrible mean. He'll take to remembering all the things he's done in his life which he should n't ought to have done, and then he'll get kind of low-down in spirits, and start figuring what's the use.

"Often, of Dink would come in with a funny stare in his eyes, and then Floss would watch him mighty careful for a day or two. Usually they played casino at nights; or, if they didn't do that, Floss would bear down on a of concertina he'd bring with him and set the dogs to howling.

"One day Gober came down from Capitan, which was way up in them mountains, and was an awful solemn place if it hadn't of been for the saloon. There're peaks all round, and the lush is enough to make a man feel awful small. He'd went there to buy some flour and canned goods and to get some dip, Dink had. But when he got in that night, what he talked about most was a girl he'd met up in Capitan. She was staying with her sister, who was wife to the storekeeper, and Dink said he'd never seen a prettier woman. That woke Floss up considerable, and he asked a whole lot of questions, until

Gober got mad at something he done said and wouldn't say another word. So they went to bed. Floss grinning to himself and Dink mighty thoughtful. He dreamed about that yellow-haired girl most of the night, and when he got up in the morning he done looked so consarned mournful that Campbell up and asked him what ailed him.

"Well, a couple of days went by, and Dink was sure enough dreamy. On the third morning, when he was out on top of a mesa, he give a grunt and threw down his pole and started for home. The dog aimed to follow, but he done told him to watch the flock, and when he got home he saddled a burro. You'd ought to've seen Dink on a burro, with his stork legs dangling. And up he went again into them mountains.

"All Floss knew about it was what he found writ on a piece of paper under the sugar bowl: 'Wan't he back for a week.'"

"Hold on a minute," the agent interrupted; "I got to answer this."

The traveler waited while he fingered the key. Then:

"Well, sir, in eight days back come Dink. Floss says to him: 'How do you do?' he says. 'How long do you aim to stay this visit?'"

"Gober did n't try to smooth things over; he was feeling far too solemn for that. All he said was that personal business of a private character done took him up to Capitan, and he hoped the sheep was all well. So they went along for a week or two like they'd done before. Then Dink says:

"Say, Floss, I've got to go up to Capitan again. It's awful important."

"Campbell just went on whittling a stick, and waited. They'd got so used to each other, those two, that one of 'em could tell almost to a 'T' what was in the other's mind. Why, would you believe it, those two were so thick that Floss had given Dink a plugged quarter to keep, and he carried a nickel Dink done give him."

"What the tarnation did they do that for?" queried the agent.

"You see, they used to get into jackpots frequent, along of Dink being partial to living high when he could. Floss, too, he was awful apt to load up in town, and then there was n't a city in them parts that didn't cramp his feelings.

So when one got into trouble, all he had to do was to send that keepsake and the other'd come and get him out. If he couldn't get him out, it's like he'd raise a ruction, maybe, and they'd run him in, too. So it had gone along for six years. Dink always knew where Floss was when he was needed bad, and of Floss sure knew that Dink would stand hitched.

"After a spell Dink coughed and told Floss he was fixing to get married.

"Is it the yellow-haired girl?" Floss says.

"That's her," says Dink.

"I'd sort of figured it was," Floss says.

"They sat down on a bench outside the door, there in front of the shack in that busting big valley, and talked it over. A

sight of men would have tried to tell Dink he was a fool. Did you ever notice how a feller's friends butt in when he sets to a girl? But of Floss was n't that kind. If Dink had fixed his mind on a wife, then the thing for him was to stand by and help. So they fixed it that Dink and his wife would live in the shack, and Floss he'd go up to a camp they'd done built in the side of the mountain.

"Of course," says Dink, "you'll spend most of your time here. You'll be able to get a square here. Gee, think of eating a square."

"You never clapped your eyes on a sweeter creature than the one Dink put his arm around up there in Capitan. She looked just like a picture; all pink and white, and her eyes were just as blue! She always looked so clean and nice that Dink was scared of her for a spell at first, but he'd soon got over that. Man alive, though, she was fearful young.

"Well, they done got married and Dink hoisted her on top of a burro and clumb up on another one, and off they went down the mountain side. They camped at noon beside a little spring, and Dink he was sure

careful to build the fire so the smoke would n't hit her, and do the cooking right. You've seen that picture of a girl hanging on to a cross that's on top of a rock right in the middle of the ocean, ain't you? They call it Rock of Ages. Well, that's her — she looked just like that.

"HE had n't told her any lies about the place she was a-coming to, because he did n't calculate on having her go straight back as soon as she got a head on the back yard. When they got home, Dink was that surprised he could n't speak. Floss had cleaned up that shack until you wouldn't have known it. He'd even sprinkled water on the floor, and there was wild flowers stuck in a can on the windowsill. And there was of Floss himself, standing at the door, all shaved and grinning from ear to ear.

"I reckon that about the happiest time of a man's life is when he's just married and they're getting to know each other good. Yes, sir; even if he's sorry for it afterward, he would n't never forget that time. And it's like if he had to do it over again, he'd do it, too.

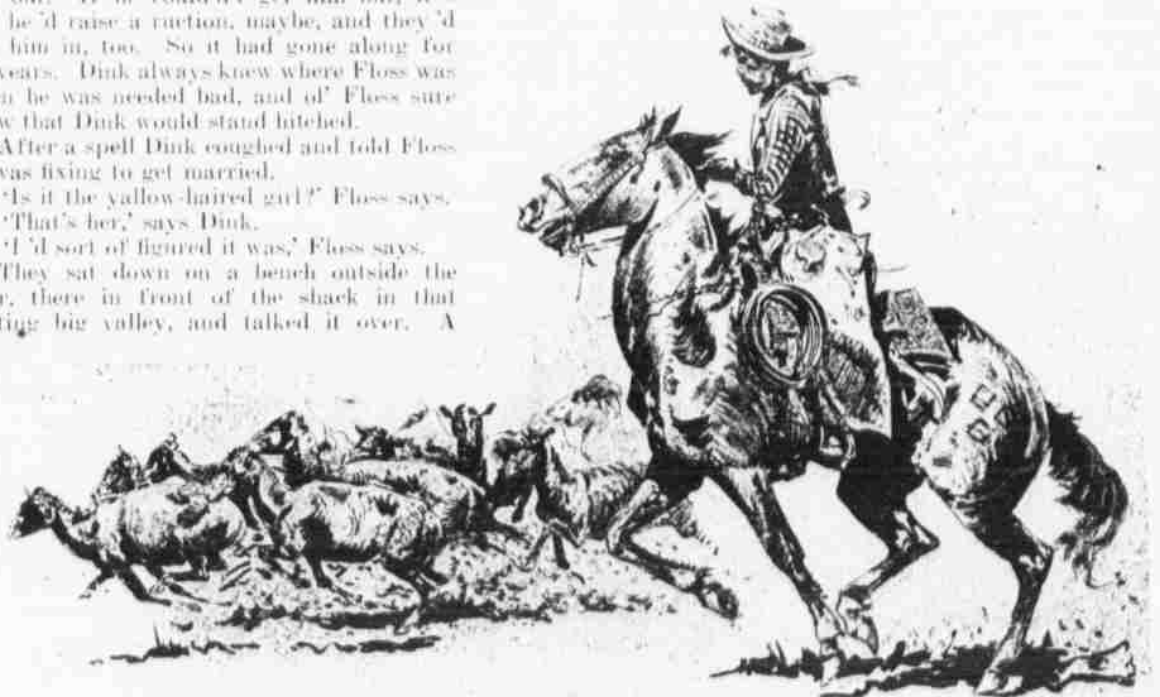
"Taking a wife you've knowed seventeen days ain't the surest way of picking one, I reckon. But Gober drew a prize. The girl's name was Jess, and she was always as neat and bright as a pin. She was some worker, too. The way she kept that house, and the way she fed that stringy rascal! And he never heard a single whisper out of her about the loneliness, or how hard it. (Continued on Page 16)



"Everybody called him Floss"



"Dink — he was the oldest"



"Them cowboys just run off a bunch and never even said they were sorry"